

Context Responsive: Intersections of Design and Improvised Music Practice

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Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed) _____

Clare Mary Cooper

04.09.19

MQU ethics approval number 5201400785

Field of Research Codes

1904 Performing Arts and Creative Writing

190406 Music Composition

190407 Music Performance

1203 Design Practice and Management

Abstract

Context Responsive: Intersections of Design and Improvised Music Practice

This thesis explores the practice of improvised music beyond its function as an experimental approach to music making. To date, little research has examined the specific nature of the creative music process in contemporary improvisation and its relational dimensions to audiences, time and space.

Through an analysis of music and interviews with performers and curators, the thesis theorises performance and social contexts as key compositional tools in practice. It identifies the ways in which a trans-local (Bennett and Petersen, 2004) improvised music scene disturbs increasingly codified and stabilised modes of presentation.

The thesis traces and shares examples of the way the artform has evolved via consciously context-responsive strategies across the trans-local scene over the last two decades. It proposes new models for understanding collaborative and iterative practice, drawn from progressive design scholarship, and presents two 'key concepts' - 'Contextual Variables' and the 'Context Responsive Improvised Music Practice Cycle' - to better understand the processes that are embedded within improvised music. The resulting investigation leads to new knowledge around forms of engagement, listening and collaborative authorship.

The thesis argues that context-responsive improvised music practice promotes and 'futures' a more interconnected set of artistic and community actors, by encouraging us to engage creatively with dissonance and to respond to uncertainty for what it teaches us about collaborative processes overall, rather than focusing solely on solving performance 'problems.'

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This is a work of love, inspired by grassroots collective action.

Introduction

Improvised music takes the materials of existence—knowing, community and instruments—and reshapes the possible relations they have with each other. Improvisation is the site at which possibility and potential are made real in an exemplary gesture of making.

—Daniel Fischlin, and Ajay Heble, *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*

.....

It's a humid Saturday afternoon and the third of a four-day-long annual festival of experimental music in Sydney – *the NOW now*. You enter the Marrickville Bowling Club, one of several venues for the event. To your right you hear beer after beer being pulled from taps, glasses clinking. There is a din of indoor sounds mixing with outdoor conversation and outbursts of laughter, sizzling hisses from the kitchen, all overlaid by the incessant digital melodies of the poker machines with coins dropping onto coins, and the occasional spitting chain of 20 cent pieces clanging back out onto the metal tray. A plane descends low overhead coming in to land, and as the roar of the jet engines recede you look around for the band.

You notice an audience moving about the space, some of whom are arranged in concentration around a quartet of performers improvising on the stage over to your left, with four more people at the foot of the stage producing some kind of noise you find a little difficult to make out. Listening closer, you can't quite discern what they are playing as an additional layer in the space. The group is improvising with homemade digital instruments, metal bowls, bags of coins, radios, and toy musical instruments. The composition they are playing is called *Odds & Influence*.¹ This composition specifies that the performers improvise for 20 minutes with the existing sound textures in the space—to play both with and around them, highlighting, amplifying, mimicking and masking them, challenging and

¹ Composed by the author (Clare Cooper) specifically for this venue and time of day, and performed on January 13, 2014. In addition to Cooper, the other improvisers were Rishin Singh, Kusum Normoyle, Sam Pettigrew, Daniel Green, Jean-Philippe Gross, Luke Callaghan and Matt Earle.

altering the way they would otherwise improvise, and the way that those gathered would otherwise engage with the sounds in and of the situation.²

.....

Improvised music is not simply an experimental approach to music making. It is a practice that argues for us (audiences and players alike) to listen openly, to trust one another, to decentre individual authorship, to dissolve dominant hierarchies and individual legacies, to engage creatively with dissonance, to respond to uncertainty for what it teaches us without the primary drive to solve a problem, and to see obstacles as reasons to come together—becoming more equipped to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016). In these ways, the performance of improvised music promotes and futures a more interconnected and empathetic society.

Improvisation can be understood at the meta-level of musical practice, where process is given preference over content; effort and intent over outcome. This is the critical anchor of the experimental nature of the practice. The performer is part of a complex system that involves audience, community, and a dynamic context. These elements are as vital to the musical outcomes of improvised music as the ability to play an instrument or to realise a score. To view, assess or appreciate the ‘pieces’ or performances in isolation would deny these vital active components.

Over the last four decades, two key factors have obscured the radical social propositions and expanded listening practices promoted by improvised music performance. The first of these is the tendency—by music reviewers and scholars—to assess singular pieces of music through traditional musicological language and mainstream metrics. Such an

² Author’s field notes.

approach does not take into account the significant evolving set of questions posed through the music and its community over time. The second factor obscuring the radical propositions of the music is a tendency—by organisers and the musicians themselves— to overlook context as a key compositional tool in the music, resulting in codified modes of performance styles, spaces, promotion and distribution.

This thesis is an attempt to respond to these obscurities and subsequent lacunae, to create new analytical tools and carve out a specific approach that gives weight to the contextual elements at play, and by doing so, examine the shared terrain between context responsive improvised music and design practices. The core research questions are:

- 1) What do improvising musicians articulate as the key elements of their practice, and how do these elements emphasise a community of practitioners and context-responsive performance while challenging conventional approaches to traditional musical idioms and languages?
- 2) How does a deeper understanding of context-responsive improvised music reflect and inspire new forms of engagement, listening and interaction not only in the music of practitioners but also in communal interactions beyond the music world?
- 3) What conceptual tools best allow us to understand how this practice operates?
- 4) In what ways can the theoretical frameworks for improvised music practice be enhanced through the adoption of theoretical models of emerging design practice?

This thesis takes cues from international practitioner-theorists for an expanded appreciation of the practice of improvised music as an open system—as a set of assemblages, as an ecosystem, as ill defined (as impossible to define, as beyond definition)—and reaches into design scholarship for an array of constructively critical creative models of co-creation. The research aims to contribute to understanding a practice and celebrating an approach, without creating categories of behaviour, or attempting to enforce or reinforce definitions. Similarly, it encourages a greater appreciation of a practice (respect, even) without reinforcing unhelpful institutional hierarchies.

To fully grasp and appreciate the radical propositions and practices at the heart of a context-responsive improvised music, new language, new frames, and a more context-conscious approach to the presentation and promotion of the music is required if it is to be better understood and appreciated. To this end, this thesis maps the dynamic contextual elements at play, and presents a graphic model that encourages those involved (as listeners, organisers and performers) to pursue a more context-conscious approach to the music.

This thesis spans musicology, cultural studies, performance studies and design studies. The variety of scholarly perspectives and frameworks I have drawn from have allowed me to zoom out from my experience as a performer, organiser, and designer over the last two decades, to view the community and system as a whole and to observe cultural patterns, curatorial trends and contextual tendencies from several angles. This has also enabled me to identify common principles and organisational practices across a variety of local communities with similar creative challenges and varying levels of resources, attention, scholarship and institutional support.

Every musical performance (regardless of genre) is informed and shaped by the context in which it is delivered: no two performances are exactly alike, just as no two contexts are exactly alike. A defining feature of a freely improvised performance is the

porous nature of the artist/audience/context relationship, and the performer's ability to respond, in real time, to unexpected events or shifts in that context. Using data collected via observation, interviews and participation, this thesis argues that context, whether engaged with consciously or unconsciously, is a compositional tool in all improvised music performance. Furthermore, this thesis will demonstrate that major differences in musical and listening experiences emerge when practitioners engage in a consciously context-responsive practice.

Firstly, it is necessary to clarify the often-slippery terminology used in the discourse around the performance of improvised music. I will do this below by mapping the salient features of the practice and tracing the historical discourse—from the inception of *non-idiomatic freely improvised music* (hereafter NIFIM) in the 1970s through to 2019. This is not a push for a greater categorisation of styles, but rather to acknowledge the co-existence of multiple forms of improvisational practice within a Western Art music context. Some of these styles operate with an increasingly codified set of parameters (what I refer to in the research as the genre of *Improv*), and others are consciously engaging context as a compositional tool so as to increase the opportunities to creatively respond to uncertainty in real-time (*context-responsive improvised music*, hereafter CRIM).

Clarifying key terms

The terminology commonly associated with improvised music practice, as well as with other musical genres and styles that use improvisation in different ways, is frequently confusing. Consequently, a number of key terms are worth clarifying here at the outset of the thesis. These definitions will also help to clarify the many apparent synonyms that appear liberally in quotes from a range of sources. More specific terms related to histories of practice will be

introduced in Chapter 2. I have also included a graphic representation (figure 1) of how the following key terms interrelate, highlighting the historical dimensions of distinct approaches that are associated with certain time periods, and often emerged as a reaction to the proliferation or popularisation of other musics or movements.

Improvisation³ This term refers to the practice as applied to a broad range of idioms and genres, most often contemporary Jazz. Improvisation is the core practice within Improv and context-responsive improvised music performance but as a term it is not, and does not define, a genre of music in and of itself.

Improvised music In my experience, this is the preferred term used to describe the practice to those outside or unfamiliar with it. Terms such as ‘improv’, ‘spontaneous music’, ‘spontaneous composition’ are used interchangeably by practitioners to describe music which is core to a NIFIM practice.

Non-Idiomatic Freely Improvised Music (NIFIM) (Circa 1970s-1990s) This is a term coined by British improvising musician Derek Bailey in the 1970s (Bailey 1992) and established by the first wave of practitioners who were consciously avoiding idiomatic styles of improvisation. Although some practitioners still regard their practice using this term (or ‘Free Improv’ for short), it could be argued that it became a genre in itself, defined both historically (over 40 years of practice) and by its clear differentiation from other idioms

³ In its broadest definition improvisation is understood to be music that has not been composed prior to playing.

where improvisation was a feature rather than the core ingredient, for example musical identifiable traditions such as jazz, Spanish flamenco, Indian raga, or a guitar solo in rock'n'roll, within which improvising is a feature and required skill of the music.

For the purposes of this thesis, I refer to this first wave of practice of non-idiomatic freely improvised music as NIFIM.

Improv (circa 2000s to current) may best be understood as a music genre that grew out of NIFIM.⁴ After three decades of NIFIM, performance, presentation and listening practices became (somewhat paradoxically) codified. Performers and organisers have been establishing reliable devices that mitigate risk, along with a tendency toward stabilising contexts, which has resulted in homogenous sonic and social outcomes. This has given rise to not only the Improv genre, but a range of subgenres. The stabilised modes, styles and tropes that have formed the Improv genre and subgenres (e.g.: reductionism and noise) are described and critiqued in this thesis.

Context-Responsive Improvised Music (CRIM) This is a neologism I have coined for the purposes of this doctoral research project. CRIM practitioners include improvisers and organisers consciously engaging with context as a core compositional tool. Many CRIM practitioners do this as a direct reaction to the tendency for codification in the Improv genre described above.

⁴ The term *improv* is also commonly used by improvising actors, comedians and other performers.

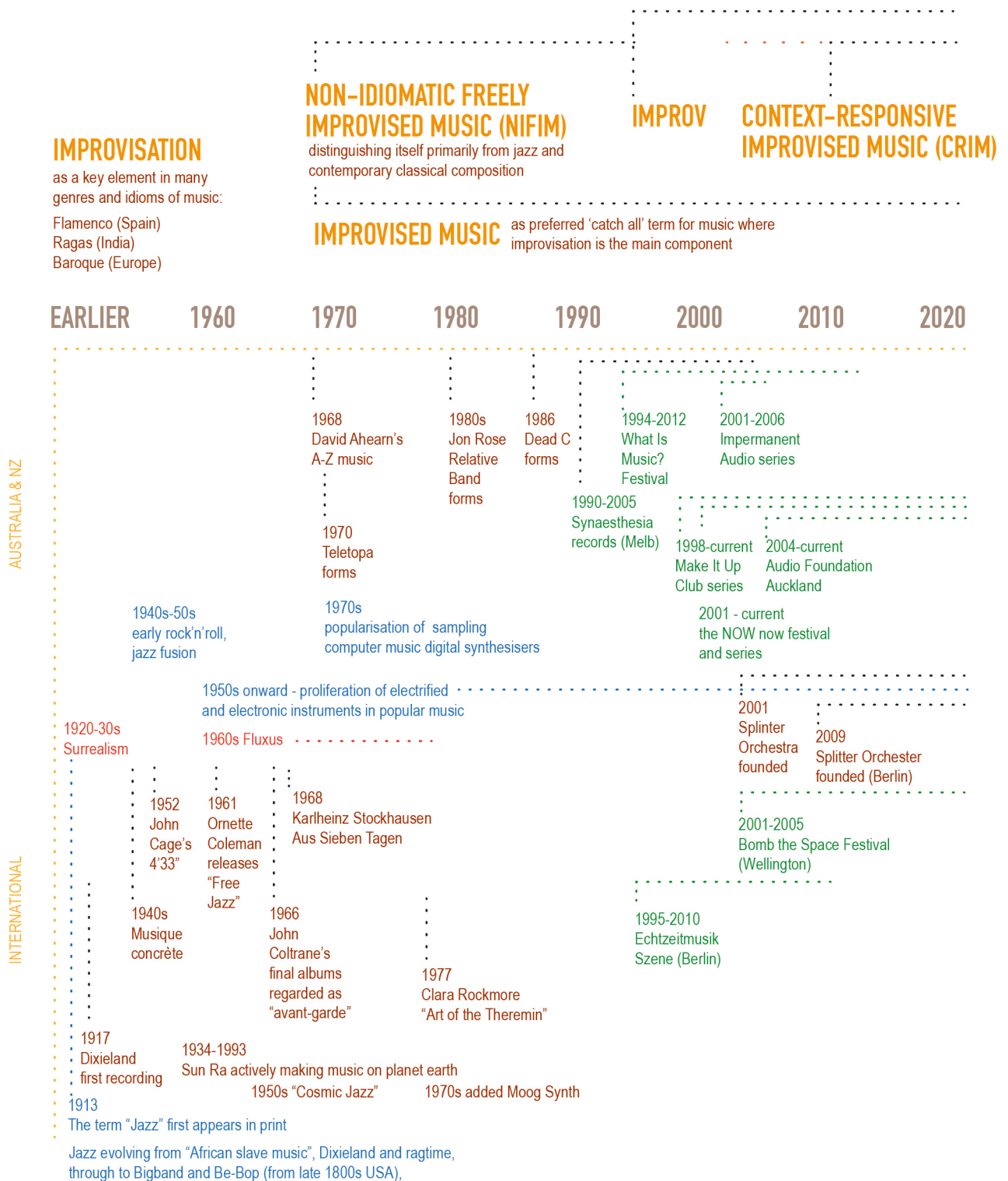


Figure 1. Timeline of key terms

The Improv Scene This refers to those performing and supporting improvised music and its culture through organising events, attending concerts and producing or buying recordings. In this thesis, I refer to both local and translocal improv scenes, drawing on the work of Andy Bennett and Richard Petersen (Bennett 2004). This international translocal scene is constantly cross-pollinated by practices, characters and approaches via a consistent international flow of nomadic players from community to community. ‘Scene’ in this thesis is frequently used to refer to the translocal, international Improv scene. I refer to community when articulating something specific to a geographic location (e.g.: Berlin or Sydney). When musicians engage in international touring of these local communities, as with other styles of music, this is often referred to as a ‘circuit’.

Practice This term is understood in this thesis as a set of consistent approaches that manifest themselves as an identifiable set of actions or activities, “configurations of cohesive activities that establish coordinated and collaborative relationships among the members of a community” (Zembylas 2014, 1). The term ‘practice’ suggests more than a single intent, as it can be driven by diverse motives. It implies action and engages human agency within social structures. Practice both defines and sits within a complex system of creation. Artists commonly use this term to describe their field of work, or what they do—their practice.

Praxis The concept of praxis is relevant to this study, as it concerns a creative practice that is research-based, and inquiry-driven as opposed to a product-driven practice. When improvising, the practice is the research. In the practice of improvised music, praxis comprises the combination of reflection and action from private research through to public performance. In each stage action is taken, impacts of the action are considered, revisions and alterations are implemented. Reflection and planning occurs at each stage in this cycle.

Experimental This term is used in this thesis in the way John Cage defines it: “the word ‘experimental’ is apt, providing it is understood not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure, but simply as of an [sic] act the outcome of which is unknown” (Cage 2010, 13). The majority of experimental music makes use of improvisation in some form, but not all improvisation is considered experimental. Practitioner-theorist Robin Fox argues that context is a major player in the study and performance of experimental music more broadly, in that it is the “physical, temporal, political and aesthetic geographies” (Fox 2002, 4) of the composition or performance that define the nature of the activity.

Composition I deliberately avoid the use of the term as it is conventionally understood in Western art music. Namely, I avoid the presumption that composition is predominantly associated with a predetermined musical work by a sole author. In this thesis I focus on sonic works with multiple authors and experimental processes that welcome real-time responses. When the term is applied to the making of music, the curatorial approach to an event, or the putting together of a band, I rely on Susan McClary’s definition, which references Jacques Attali, who reduces composition “to the literal components of the word, which quite simply means ‘to put together’” (McClary 1989, Attali 1977).

Futuring is mentioned throughout the thesis both as a research method and as an active state of engagement. When one *futures* an issue or field, one is working not only with the current state of being, but with what might be coming next in order to be more constructively critical of current approaches and trajectories. Belgian futuring collective FoAM state that as a verb, futuring “encapsulates the committed, active attitude that is essential when engaging with the unknown” (Kuzmanovic 2019).

Research Design and Methods

Research conducted for this thesis has been designed around my own extensive experience as a participant and observer of the international Improv scene over the last two decades. My first-hand observations of performances, performing musicians, curatorial practice and associated materials (scores etc.) are referenced throughout the thesis and are based on my intensive engagement with the translocal touring scene of improvisers over the period 2002 to 2013. In addition, during this period I worked as a practicing designer and design researcher and this background undoubtedly influenced my data analysis and creative practice.

The bulk of the research design, however, adopted an ethnographic approach based on participant observation. This approach was particularly influenced by American sociologist Danny Jorgensen (1990). As Jorgensen states, participant observation is ideal for “investigating the enormously rich, complex, conflictual, problematic and diverse experiences, thoughts, feelings, and activities of human beings and the meanings of their existence” (np). Consequently, the participant observation approach meant that I gained a deep understanding of the critical interactions, responses and behaviours of a key group of improvisors. As a practitioner I had privileged access to participants and materials at every step of the process of conceptualising a performance event—as an organiser with organisers producing the context for performance, as a performer with performers preparing in rehearsals and discussions, and as an audience member anticipating performances and discussing them at length afterwards.

Notwithstanding the centrality of observational notes, interview transcripts and scholarly sources to this project, my own reflections on my personal contribution to the process were also critical. The circumstances of my own contribution to, and agency within, a group of active improvisational performers were unique. On the one hand, my position allowed me to adopt an insider’s

perspective—one in which I influenced sounds, actions and results towards a particular collaborative creative end. On the other hand, my participation allowed me an insider's view of the actions and thoughts of others with whom I worked, thereby presenting a unique ethnographic opportunity for observing the actions and processes adopted by others. Ultimately however, my own actions and behaviours were intimately linked to the process of creative practice and ethnographic analysis. Consequently, the unique methodological tools of autoethnography were influential to the project and provided a distinct additional methodological framework for the thesis. As Chang (2016) outlines, these methods comprised collecting personal memory data, self-observational, self-reflective and external data for analysis (Chang, 2016). The self-reflexive process that is inherent to an autoethnographic approach provided a systematic means to evaluate my own perspectives and performance experiences as well as the social, curatorial and compositional challenges I faced as a practitioner. Ultimately, the methodology adopted here may best be described as a mixed-methods approach (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004) in which the subjectivity of autoethnography was supported by a level of objectivity achieved through the analysis of interview data and existing published research.

My research builds on work done by the 'new musicology' movement of the 1980s to address the lack of existing methods and models within musicology to embrace and analyse the contextual and relational elements of music making. I deal with this issue in greater depth in Chapter 5. Informed by sociological, anthropological and cultural studies frameworks, new musicology sought to understand the motivations, and social interrelations of composers, musicians and listeners. My research has identified a need to develop models that help us to understand the complex and dynamic set of relationships between performers, audience members and performance context. These models have been informed by my interviews, participant observation, and analysis of scores.

Approach to interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to draw on the rich oral history of the field. This approach was adopted due to its capacity for eliciting rich, spontaneous anecdotal material from interviewees (Brinkmann 2014). Case studies have been drawn on, in both performance and presentation, on organisational, ensemble and individual levels. In situating and paralleling the examples of the Berlin and Sydney local scenes, an understanding of the varied cultural motivations, funding situations, and performance opportunities has been taken into account.

In thinking about who I would approach to interview, I decided on a range of performers and organisers who are exploring the use of context as a compositional tool in the presentation and performance of improvised music. They are key international practitioners and organisers in the field today, selected for their breadth of experience, geographic position, level of resources and support (funded or unfunded), and operation beyond colloquial discourse, engaging in international touring and conversation. I consider their investigations bold and significant for driving the practice and evolution of the art form.

In order to understand the international zeitgeist unfolding contemporaneously across several organisations presenting sound-focused performance practice, I conducted semi-structured interviews with organisers who have been actively exploring models for engaging artists to connect with specific contexts or situations. This formal data collection process has been extended by my informal observations of international events I attended and by conversing with organisers and artists over the last nineteen years. These interviews and informal observations have enabled a close analysis of the different processes and outcomes when an organiser or artist specifies the context of an improvised music performance as opposed to simply pairing artists with spaces of convenience, tradition or economic necessity. These observations constitute the auto-ethnographic aspects of my approach.

One of the most important components of my fieldwork included a trip to Glasgow in 2015 to attend Arika's *Episode 7: We Can't Live Without Our Lives*. This trip included time together with the organisers and candid conversations with participants (invited artists and audience members). I also travelled to Hobart twice to attend the MONA FOMA festival in January 2016 and 2017, after identifying the event as one that was experimenting with context as a compositional tool in both curation and performance. I interviewed performer-percussionist Tony Buck and event producer Shelley McCluaigh (MONA FOMA, Hobart 2016) and conducted a follow-up interview with Buck on return to Sydney (Newtown, 2016), allowing for time to reflect on the results of choices made at the time of performance.

In 2016, I was commissioned by *Bomb Magazine* (US) to interview Australian improvising trio The Necks—Chris Abrahams, Tony Buck and Lloyd Swanton—parts of which are quoted in this study.⁵ I chose this trio as they are one of the world's best-known improvising ensembles, and three keen observers of the translocal Improv scene, who have been creating together consistently over the last thirty years.

The other key practitioners in the field who I interviewed (although not all have been directly quoted in this thesis) are Gregor Hotz, producer, Splitter Orchester (Berlin); Jim Denley, Splinter Orchestra, Splitrec label founder and West Head Project (Sydney); John Butcher, improvising performer and composer (London); Hermione Johnson, improvising performer and composer (Wellington and Auckland); Danni Zuvela, co-director of Melbourne-based Liquid Architecture; Jeff Henderson, director of Auckland's Audio Foundation, and previous director of Wellington Jazz Festival, founder of Wellington venues

⁵ Full interview published by *Bomb Magazine* 23/3/16, Accessed 2/3/17, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/the-necks/>.

Happy and The Space.⁶ These interviews serve as a point of comparison, indicating where there is commonality and divergence of opinion and experience between the subjects. The interviewees also test my own observations against responses from a range of key practitioners in the field.

The data collected in these interviews, and my attendance at these events, together with career-long autoethnographic reflections, provides a strong base from which to generate insights into the questions I ask. In addition to the broad reasons stated above, I also chose to interview these practitioners due to their experience in both organising and performing improvised music. The choices were also based on prior candid conversations with them, held in a professional context, in which it was clear that they all had strong opinions on the topic of context and the role it plays in the outcomes of improvised performance. All of them were capable of comparing their own local scene with that of others, and therefore had a broad understanding of the difference between the local and translocal manifestations of Improv.

In order to distil key themes from interview material, I engaged in a primary cycle coding process (Tracy 2012) using my own thematic codes throughout the transcriptions of the audio recordings to identify and link emergent themes across my interviews.⁷ During second-cycle coding, I employed constant comparative method (Charmaz 2007), revisiting interviews conducted during the years of fieldwork when new interviewees raised topics and

⁶ Both the Sydney-based Splinter Orchestra and the Berlin-based Splitter Orchester will be dealt with in detail in Chapter 6.

⁷ Some of the primary cycle codes included terms such as context, audience, curatorial, score, and scene.

observations that I had not as yet considered significant or common across the translocal network of communities.

In order to bridge the worlds of music and design, I applied Hallier & Forbes' concept of prospective conjecture (2004). This was especially useful when linking interview material with musicians and that of observations from the design field, in particular the observations of design scholar Kees Dorst, who observed many designers in the act of collaboratively designing.

My professional practice as a designer, organiser and improvising performer is core to this thesis. The subject of study is a research-driven practice, hence I have drawn on elements of practice-led research (Candy, 2006; Smith & Dean, 2009; Barret & Bolt, 2007)—including examples drawn from on a series of my own compositions, entitled *Mapped Intimacy*—to inform and discuss the investigative and experimental nature of the practice of improvised music performance. This approach differs from the autoethnographic data, as each of the performances and compositional challenges undertaken were directly linked to testing some of my theories regarding the influence of context on an improvising performer. As a practicing designer, visual thinker and communicator, my graphic diagramming of both the contextual elements and the CRIM Practice Cycle can also be considered as practice-led research. Iterations of both of these graphic works were shared and tested with my peers over the course of the research.

One of the core periods of practice-led research took place during an invited international artist residency at Auckland's Audio Foundation in 2015. During my time as performer and composer in residence, I composed a series of schematic scores that were

exhibited in the Audio Foundation gallery,⁸ and later as part of a group show on practice-based research at Macquarie University Art Gallery.⁹

All compositions and performances undertaken as works during the research period will be further discussed in the thesis.

Chapter overview: a map of thinking in the thesis

The first chapter of the thesis is a literature review, detailing the key practitioners, presenters, the literature of theorists in the field of improvised music performance, and the historical discourse relating to site and context. Evident in this is the recent increase in writings by improvising practitioners. The work of practitioner-theorists is more typically considered artist writings and receives little uptake and synthesis within academic literature. Whilst these anecdotes, provocations, and musings of aforementioned practitioners have been incredibly valuable to my research, they do not individually address key aspects of my research questions. Consequently, the gaps in knowledge are identified.

This chapter outlines the significant material exploring the practice of improvisation, context-responsive performance in other art forms, and expanded ideas of composition and

⁸ Clare Cooper: *Mapped Intimacy*, 2 April–2 May 2015.

⁹ *In the Loop: Feeding the Polyphonic Present*, 14 October–27 November, 2015. “This inaugural exhibition explores the diversity of arts practices within the Department of Music, Media, Communications and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University. It opens up a conversation about contemporary practice as research, its impact upon the broader community and examines how the work of artists as academics feeds into the wider discourse. Artists: Vanessa Berry, Clare Cooper, Wade Marynowsky, Alex Mesker, Terry Pelarek, Selina Springett, Clinton Walker and Danielle Zorbas.” Macquarie University Art Gallery web site, accessed 23/3/2019, <https://www.mq.edu.au/about/campus-services-and-facilities/museums-and-collections/macquarie-university-art-gallery/exhibitions>.

curatorial practice. It concludes with a review of literature informing the conceptual framework explored in this thesis, covering material from emerging and experimental design scholarship.

Chapter 2 maps the genealogy of improvised music performance and clarifies the three primary waves of the practice to date, acknowledging that improvisation is a practice that spans a range of musical traditions. This chapter characterises the field, establishes the salient features and dominant orthodoxies of improvised music practice in 2019 and articulates how the stabilisation and codification of the genre of Improv currently manifests for performers, audiences and organisers. This chapter also explores how the practice of improvised music forms the community around it.

Chapter 3 explores the role that the touring improviser plays in the cross-pollination and subsequent codification of modes of presentation and performance of what has become the Improv genre. This chapter explains the tendency within Improv to establish a style or approach to playing in a way that contradicts the motivating forces behind the music.

In Chapter 4 foundations are laid for a deeper investigation of the ways in which we might better understand and celebrate the practice of context-responsive improvisation. I explore the primacy of performance in the field of improvised music, as this determines the need to examine the role of audiences and sites and situations of performance. This chapter then articulates why it is more appropriate to talk about situation-specificity rather than site specificity when exploring the dynamic, complex system within which the practice operates. This chapter also investigates what it means to appreciate the music with an expanded sense of site and time (as historically cumulative) and argues that the implications of understanding the practice beyond the reception of single performances holds value beyond the field of music.

Chapter 4 presents a graphic diagram of the contextual variables at play when researching, collaborating and performing improvised music. I have created this so as to aid non-practitioners' and practitioners' understandings of where and how they might disturb reliable devices in the performance and reception of the music. The *Contextual Variables Diagram* makes visible the dynamic elements at play in CRIM practice as experienced by practitioners (performers and organisers) and listeners across five territories of practice (research, sonic materials, social materials, collaboration and live performance situation). After establishing that observation, intervention and disturbance are discussed as key concepts in CRIM practice, the chapter goes on to examine the various domains in which these concepts apply, driven by the question: 'How do practitioners evolve the art form of improvised music performance?'

In this chapter I begin to explain in detail how practitioners are evolving the art form of improvised music through a variety of disturbance strategies. I explain the key differences between individual, ensemblic and organisational approaches to employing what I have coined 'disturbance strategies' with regards to consciously context-responsive practice.

This chapter then asks: 'If existing framing in compositional practice and musicology is ill-equipped to explain and celebrate context-responsive performance practice, what conceptual tools best allow us to understand how this practice operates—a practice that simultaneously projects futures, recalls and envisions?' The discourse on improvised music practice cannot move forward if we are assessing each piece, each performance, by the metrics with which we measure other musics. To address this dilemma, the research explores how we might broaden what we understand as compositional practice by foregrounding the contexts that are mobilised in the creation and reception of improvised music—social, political, temporal, spatial—as key compositional tools.

Chapter 5 further investigates disturbance strategies in practice using many examples across individual, ensemblic and organisational approaches, highlight specific examples of practices that are disturbing the trend towards risk mitigation and predictable, homogenous outcomes. Although many of the practitioners' approaches span several of these categories, the examples are loosely organised into the following: unlearning tools; temporal disturbance (timing, duration and historically cumulative); spatial disturbance (location, proximity, acoustics, and expanded concepts of site); and social disturbance (behavioural, dialogic, relational).

In addition to these myriad examples of CRIM practice, this chapter asks how might we recognise greater value beyond the reception of single performances if we appreciate the music with an expanded sense of space and time—as cumulative and non-linear, as proposing and projecting rather than reflecting what is, and of appreciating performances not as singular works but as interventions with a historically cumulative translocal discourse.

Using significant ensemblic and organisational examples, as well as drawing from the practice of collaborative authorship and experimental score creation, Chapter 6 further illustrates the need for approaching these collective and cumulative forms of collaborative music-making with a new lens.

Building on the work done by new musicology theorists (Kerman 2009, Leppert 1989, McClary 1991) in their expansion of how and where value is attributed within the study of music and composition, I argue for shifting the emphasis from singular sonic works to the complex system of historically cumulative contextual elements that realise it.

Observing a marked difference between the intention to solve a creative problem (as in most artforms and traditional design practices) and the intention to inhabit an “endlessly variable” (Butcher 2011, np) and co-evolving problem/solution space (improvised performance), the final chapter of the thesis (Chapter 7) seeks a more fitting conceptual

framework for understanding CRIM practice, asking ‘what can we learn from the similarities between the problem-dwelling approaches and endlessly generative solution spaces of emerging design practice and CRIM practice?’

After presenting the relevant findings in emerging design scholarship that might bear upon this question in the field of music, I offer a new graphic model of the CRIM Practice Cycle (to be used in tandem the Contextual Variables Diagram presented in Chapter 4). This final chapter explains the CRIM Practice Cycle graphic and its application in detail.

Summary

This thesis argues that through an aversion to hyper-individualism and the promotion of collective creative responses to uncertainty, the field of improvised music is futuring a society which, if Attali (1985) and McClary (1989) are correct, will manifest in the rest of culture. This research focuses critical attention away from the singular or finished composition (improvised or otherwise) and towards an active appreciation of human and non-human contextual elements that expand and contract in subtle and complex ways in practice.

CRIM practitioners pursue public experimentation and amplify the interconnectivity between performer and audience, valuing endlessly generative approaches to creation over streamlined processes or marketable products.

Both design and music-making projects are often framed in terms of problem-solving. Consciously context-responsive improvised music performance is more specifically a process

of pursuing a fertile problem space¹⁰ and inhabiting co-evolving problem/solution spaces.¹¹ These are terms commonly used in emerging design methodologies that recognise that both problems and solutions sit in a field of possible approaches and are interconnected, in that a solution to one problem could cause a new problem, and so on.

Whilst within design the traditional idea of arriving at a ‘solution’ or ‘finished product’ is still an end goal, my research finds that for CRIM practitioners the goal is to produce a series of generative solution-spaces that have ripple effects beyond the point of performance, out into the community of practitioners. These solution-spaces propose new forms of engagement, listening and collaborative making: they prompt new investigations and therefore new problem spaces. The social, temporal and physical contexts of performance are not taken for granted, and the skill of asking fruitful and generative questions rather than arriving at definitive answers is honed. Here, then, is an energetic leap from didactic ideas about how music is created and received, to what music can be, and about delineations between performer and audience.

¹⁰ A problem-space is a situation that raises questions, but acknowledges that what constitutes a ‘problem’ is incredibly subjective and that where a problem begins and ends is always blurry, difficult to define, or in constant flux.

¹¹ See Mary Lou Maher’s articulation of this as observed in the field of design in “Modeling Design Exploration as Co-evolution” (Maher and Poon 1996).

Chapter 1

Literature Review

This review covers scholarly literature, artist writings, and pre-existing published interviews with artists and organisers. Over the course of the research it became clear that practitioner discourse was often more helpful and complete than the scholarly discourse. While it will be made evident that there is a range of relevant scholarly sources that might be drawn upon to assist in this study, I will indicate where they fall short of addressing the questions posed, and how artist writings further assist in providing an essential intellectual base for greater scholarly discussion.

I have organised the review into the following four sections. The first series of sources consulted were those contributing to understanding the practice of improvisation and the community that comprises it. These materials help to articulate what distinguishes improvisation from other practices and argue that it holds value outside of the scene within which it is produced. These sources also cover the role played by the scene from which the music emerges and how these scenes have identified and constructively criticised themselves.

The second section of this literature review examines sources that contribute to our understanding of the meaning of context-responsive performance. The literature explores the role that politics has played in the art-making process, the precedents of art and performance critiquing capitalism, and understanding physical space and situations as compositional parameters.

The third section covers literature dealing with expanded notions of composition and what it means to listen, as well as creative approaches to problem solving, and inhabiting problem spaces.

The final section of the literature review examines sources that might inspire new framing with regards to understanding emerging collaborative creative practices, expanded curatorial practices, design scholarship and futuring practices.

1.1 Understanding the practice of Improvisation

As in many fields of experimental music, scholarship on the subject of improvisation significantly lags in the field in terms of accounting for the nature of practice. As will be evident in this review, practitioners are key proponents for generating their own discourses on improvised music in the absence of scholarly work in the field. This literature and context review marks out the work of key practitioner-theorists, as well as academic scholars focused on the practice of improvised music and relevant performance-based fields in which similar issues and questions are at play.

The rich material generated by improvising practitioners who document the thinking behind their practice is drawn on throughout this thesis as practitioners explore context in their work, raising questions around the role of performance context in sonic arts. The main practitioner-theorists drawn upon are Derek Bailey (1992, 1996), Burkhard Beins (2011), David Borgo (2005), John Butcher (2011), Marcel Cobussen (2004), Jim Denley (1992, 2008, 2018), Daniel Fischlin (2005), Ajay Heble (2004, 2005), George Lewis (2004, 2016), Mattin (2009, 2014), Evan Parker (1994, 2014), Edwin Prévost (1995, 2014), Keith Rowe (1987, 2001, 2014) and Franziska Schroeder (2014).

There is evident desire in the work of all of these practitioner-theorists to elevate the reputation of the practice of musical improvisation. They each contribute to the discourse using their experience as performers, and also as active listeners within an international

community. The field has been, and remains, male-dominated and largely Eurocentric, and the literature reflects this, although I have attempted wherever possible to include the approaches, performances and theories of my non-male and non-European peers (performers, organisers, theorists) in the research.

The key point of departure when it comes to any discourse on improvised music is the writings and published works of British guitarist Derek Bailey (1930-2005). Bailey was arguably the most prominent practitioner-theorist to emerge from non-idiomatic freely improvised music (NIFIM) and was simultaneously a practitioner, historian, critic, scholar, record label director and internationally respected artist. In his book *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (Bailey 1992), penned in the 1970s and originally published in 1980, Bailey articulates the social practice and process of improvised music, identifying it as the basis of a range of other musical traditions and aesthetic approaches including Indian music, flamenco, baroque, rock and jazz.¹ This publication was not only a practical guide to improvisation for musicians of all levels and backgrounds but also a sort of compendium for those who have never come across the term or its practice in music at all. Almost forty years after its first publication, Bailey's book is still considered the essential text on improvised music practice.

Several of Bailey's contemporaries extoll the virtues of improvisation as a philosophy and pedagogic practice, drawing from their extensive performance experience as soloists, ad hoc collaborators and long-term band members. British ensemble AMM (founded in 1965,

¹ In addition to Bailey's own publications, this research project draws on interviews, articles from the *European Free Improvisation Pages*, anecdotal evidence from the writings of NPR's Lars Gotrich and fellow improviser John Butcher, and one personal phone conversation I had with Bailey in 2004, to piece together a full account of his thoughts and opinions about the evolving international Improv scene.

with a changing line-up of members still performing to this day) is a good example of this. Several of the members of this group have published thoughts on the practice and politics of collaborative improvisation. Percussionist Edwin Prévost continues to perform and publish thoughts on the politics of improvising, interpersonal working philosophies and the meaning of sound itself.² Prévost is the only other practitioner that I have identified who explores the notion of improvisation as problem-solving (Prévost 1995, 177). Guitarist Keith Rowe highlights the influence of the space of a performance on the resulting music (Gottstein 2010) as well as the relationship between visual arts practice and making music, observing that AMM members have “always worked more like painters” (Rowe, interviewed by Dan Warburton 2001, np). Cornelius Cardew actively problematised virtuosity, privileging instrumental technique (Cardew 1969).³ Beyond his work with AMM he also co-founded the Scratch Orchestra (1969–1974) with Michael Parsons and Howard Skempton, suggesting that successful improvisation could emerge from non-skilled musical performers, and disturbed traditional ideas of hierarchy by cultivating open membership and inviting the least experienced members of the ensemble to decide on performance programs. These concepts that have since been embraced by improvising ensembles such as Sydney’s Splinter Orchestra (2001– current). Like Bailey, Cornelius Cardew (Cardew 1971) and Wadada Leo Smith (Smith 2015) before him were drawn to improvisation as a way to escape “the rigidity and formalism” of their musical backgrounds in jazz (Smith) and European indeterminate composition (Cardew).

² See *No Sound Is Innocent: AMM and the Practice of Self-Invention* (Prévost 1995) and *The First Concert: An Adaptive Appraisal of a Meta Music* (Prévost 2011).

³ AMM co-founder and member 1966–1973, and later well-known for his public rejection of contemporary composition and improvisation after his adoption of Maoist philosophy.

Belfast-based practitioner-theorist Franziska Schroeder made a significant effort to address shortfalls in contemporary definitions of improvisation by including the thoughts of a variety of practitioner-theorists on the subject in her publication *Soundweavings: Writings on Improvisation* (2014). Schroeder's observations have been synthesised throughout this doctoral research, along with prominent African American practitioner-theorist George Lewis, Marcel Cobussen and David Borgo. Schroeder's book does not insist on a singular definition of improvised music practice, but instead presents an array of articulations of the practice, suggesting both that a singular definition is difficult to provide and also that there are many different strands of practice that sit under the broad banner of improvised music.

1.1.1 Unique nature of the practice of improvisation and radical acts of listening

George Lewis has written extensively in the broad field of improvised music (Lewis and Piekut 2016), articulating the complex system of shifting elements at play within the practice. Lewis argues that the study of improvised music performance delivers benefits to fields outside music, a claim supported by the scholarship of Prévost and also by criminal law scholars Sarah Ramshaw and Paul Stapleton (Ramshaw and Stapleton 2016), who draw comparisons to improvised music in their analysis of law firm practices. Ramshaw and Stapleton argue that the field of law can learn from improvisation as a social practice that embraces failure. Asking how critical legal theorists can learn from the failures of musical improvisation, or when the result is thought to be a “musical or aesthetic failure” they consider the “complex ways in which improvised musical practices ‘inhabit a social landscape’, and how problem-solving in improvised music corresponds with that in other areas of human experience” (50). They believe that the “implications of improvisational failure in music may be far more wide-reaching and profound than first imagined” (50).

UK-based practitioner-theorists John Butcher and Evan Parker, Dutch academic Marcel Cobussen and American ethnomusicologist David Borgo have all offered useful, personal definitions of improvised music practice and the international community that sustains it. Butcher's essay "Freedom and Sound—This Time it's Personal" (2011) draws on his direct experience as a performer of Improv as well as being an audience member, with his background in physics influencing his views on improvisation, offering great insight into a musician's relationship to space, acoustics, and the conscious physicality of playing.⁴ Butcher's views are useful as he has sought out spaces with acoustically challenging dynamics for a saxophonist, prompting him to play differently in each space. His writings on the subject of dealing with the property of sound in space and playing with instability, as well as the documentation of his work with Arika in their *Resonant Spaces* project across the UK, has also provided multiple perspectives on the practice and reception of this kind of highly sophisticated context-responsive improvisation.

Borgo and Cobussen have also looked to other disciplines to explain the practices and interrelationships of improvisation. Borgo draws on his interest in neocybernetics to discuss the self-organising aspects of improvised music and to explore interagency and the dynamic relationship between improvisers and "other technical agents in the environment and within the larger art world", thus supporting the argument that improvisation is inextricably linked to context (Borgo 2005, 34). In his essay "Steps to an Ecology of Improvisation" Cobussen argues that improvisation works as an ecological culture, mapping and tracking "various ecologies in which different actors play important roles, shaping and being shaped by

⁴ This essay was commissioned for the recently published *Aspekte der Freien Improvisation in der Musik* (Dieter Nanz, editor, Hofheim: Wolke Verlags GmbH), in German translation.

different interactions”, and that neglecting the complexity of the practice of improvisation would “do an injustice to the richness of this inextricable part of all musicking” (Cobussen, 2014, 27).⁵

In an attempt to better understand the motivations for why people play and listen to improvised music, this thesis has drawn from the anecdotal observations and informed speculations of many practitioners. The following practitioner-theorists foreground the social and communitarian aspects of the music, as well as echoing Bailey’s observations regarding the desire to break free from restrictive idioms. Prolific British improviser Evan Parker emphasises an improviser’s desire for “the freedom to behave in accordance with their response to the situations” (Corbett 1994, 203).⁶ Canadian practitioner-theorists Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (2003, 2004) draw on their experiences as players and listeners, as well as the work of many musicians, theorists and composers to support their argument that it is the communitarian visions, and the reshaping of relations through alternative performance modes of engagements common to the practice of improvised music, that attracts players and listeners alike.⁷

Since its inception, the Berlin-based Splitter Orchester has regularly invited musicologists and filmmakers to observe and respond to their rehearsal process. Some of these have been Björn Gottstein, Matthias Maschat, Carolin Naujocks, Steffi Weismann,

⁵ Musicking as defined by the Oxford Dictionary is “The action of ‘music’; the action of performing or setting to music.” <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/musicking> Accessed 6/4/16

⁶ Parker also refers to the influence of indeterminacy and the work of Cage and Tudor on improvised music. See Chicago music writer and critic Peter Margasak’s 2009 article “Evan Parker: Making Music From Music”. My research also draws on Evan Parker’s contributions to John Corbett’s *Extended Play: Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* (Corbett 1994), as well as my personal experience of Parker’s solo and ensemble improvisations, and subsequent conversations with him over the last sixteen years.

⁷ This is with particular attention to improvisation within a jazz festival context.

Helga de la Motte-Haber, Sabine Sanio Marta Blažanović, Nina Polaschegg.⁸ This has resulted in texts and footage that have detailed rare observations of collaborative authorship in the field of music. The various guests made observations of not only the sonic materials but the discourse that took place in rehearsals.

Musicologists Marta Blažanović and Björn Gottstein paid particular attention to the discussions and arguments that contributed to refining the collectively authored structures for the ensemble. Their observations have been vital to Chapters 6 and 7 of this thesis, where I detail some of the compositional strategies employed by this large improvising ensemble. The move to invite these practitioners and theorists to assist in documenting the progress and process of the ensemble is in itself a gesture towards elevating the reputation of, and discourse surrounding, the practice of improvisation and collaborative composition.

1.1.2 The role of the audience and broader community in improvised music

Fischlin and Heble (2004) highlight that improvisation at its core is a dialogic process and social practice, not just between the musicians, but between the listeners—comprising both the players and non-playing audience members—who are inextricably linked. Similarly, the literature that covers improvisation almost always refers to the ‘scene’ or ‘community’ of which it is a part. As noted in the introduction, this thesis adopts the terms established by Andy Bennett and Richard Peterson (2004) regarding local and translocal music scenes. The translocal Improv scene in Australia (for example, between the metropolises of Sydney,

⁸ All texts and video responses are available from www.splitter.berlin site (accessed 14/5/18).

Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth) functions differently to the translocal Improv scene in Europe (for example, between Warsaw, Nickelsdorf, Vienna, and Berlin), mostly due to the economic viability of touring in these continental circuits, but all local scenes are part of an international translocal network.

This doctoral research draws on the anecdotal stories and academic explorations of scenes and communities by activists, musicians, organisers, musicologists, sociologists and philosophers. There is consensus among these groups that experimental music attracts and is indebted to a community of risk-takers and risk-supporters (audiences). American sociologist Howard Saul Becker's well-known articulation of a multifaceted 'art world' (Becker 1982) that collaborates and cooperates to realise 'art works' has been drawn on in an attempt to articulate the authorial slippage in expanded compositional practice such as context-responsive improvised performance. Becker has traced the complex web of collaboration and collective activity behind the creation of artworks, inviting us to look beyond the finished product to the social systems necessary for art to function in society, including the vital role that audiences, listeners and supporters play in this complex ecosystem. His observation that the "existence of art worlds, as well as the way their existence affects both the production and consumption of art works, suggest a sociological approach to the arts" (64) is common to the international Improv scene. Becker suggests a pedagogical relationship between artists and their audiences, where "audiences learn unfamiliar conventions by experiencing them, by interacting with the work and, frequently with other people in relation to the work" (64).

1.1.3 Communities documenting and sharing vibrant, evolving, self-critiquing activity

Internationally, local scenes share a desire to document and share the vibrant activity taking place and to offer insights into their motivations, challenges and operations. The following two multi-author publications have had a profound influence on this doctoral research project, affirming substantial anecdotal evidence from my time working in the communities of Sydney and Berlin between 2001–2013. Both publications were driven by a community of practitioners formalising discourse around not only the music but the social, political and spatial contexts in which they occur.

Experimental Music: Audio Explorations In Australia (Priest 2008) is a collection edited by practitioner-theorist Gail Priest, which traces the manifestations of sonic experimentation in Australia from the 1970s to its publication in 2008.⁹ All of the contributors are practitioner-theorists, drawing on their own experiences, recollections and projections for their community, and the platforms, projects and sonic materials it generated. The key chapters for this doctoral research are those investigating the nature and operation of the multifaceted translocal experimental music scene by practitioner-theorist Julian Knowles, and the evolution of the Australian Improv community by practitioner-theorist Jim Denley.

Knowles outlines the dynamics of the ‘translocal’ experimental music scene, arguing that the term ‘scene’ has “moved from the vernacular into academic discourse through the disciplines of cultural and popular music studies [and] can be understood as a clustering of producers, performers, curators and audience members who share a sense of common or compatible artistic interests” (Knowles 2008, 10). His chapter establishes how the

⁹ Composer, performer and writer Gail Priest provides invaluable insights as editor and active historian not only through the editing and producing of this compilation but also through her tireless documentation of the Sydney experimental music scene in the arts magazine *RealTime*.

improvised music scene in Australia can be understood within a broader ecology of experimental music, and how we might understand the social and organisational aspects of the field as a series of scenes with translocal connections.

In addition to his chapter “Networks, Playfulness and Collectivity: Improv in Australia, 1972–2007” in *Experimental Music* (2008), Denley—also my collaborator and mentor since 2001—has written about collective creation and creating with a consciousness of ‘place’ in the Australian landscape (Denley 2013). He has articulated the motivations and social practice of improvising in a field where few practitioners attempt to define the ephemeral nature of improvised music performance, as well as the importance of the personal interrelations of players (Denley 2018). Tracing the history of free non-idiomatic improvised music in Australia, Denley outlines the intensely hybrid nature of Improv from the perspective of musical traditions and genres, and the difficulties in defining it as a consistent set of musical practices. In the article “Improvisation: The Entanglement of Awareness and Physicality” he notes that it is the “entanglement of levels of perception, awareness and physicality in the “now”, that makes improvisation, improvisation” (Denley 1992, 29).

Echtzeitmusik: Self-defining a Scene (Beins et al. 2011) was co-edited by four Berlin-based practitioner-theorists—Burkhard Beins, Christian Kesten, Gisela Nauck and Andrea Neumann;—and involved over fifty contributors (of which I am one).¹⁰ It is a historical summary of the local significance and international impacts of a musical community “shaped by the perspectives of participants and various observers [...] a phenomenon whose influence

¹⁰ These include musicians Rhodri Davies, Axel Dörner, Franz Hautzinger, Robin Hayward, Sven-Ake Johansson, Annette Krebs, and Ignaz Schick; and artists Johannes Bauer, Diego Chamy, Hanna Hartman and Antje Vowinkel, along with organisers, critics, and other related persons.

and meaning has effects that extend far beyond Berlin itself” (13). Through articulating its many voices and positions, this publication sought not only to achieve greater visibility and recognition for the field but, as Croatian musicologist Marta Blažanović states in her chapter to “establish a fertile common ground for new aesthetic developments” (Blažanović 2011, 32).

Echtzeitmusik “marked the evolution of a new, independent music scene, which in the meantime has gathered numerous musicians exploring musical limits in various genres within a free, non-institutionalised context” (29). The ideas presented in this volume are constructively critical of a music at odds with itself—caught in the act of defining itself as undefinable—fleshing out the tropes, trends and trappings of increasingly codified performance and presentation styles, welcoming the collaborative cross-pollination that (formerly East) Berlin fostered as an international city redefining itself provided. The sites and situations of concerts come to life in this compendium in the most personal and gritty descriptions, but so too does the historically cumulative nature of these events. The profound meaning of the musical investigations of this particular scene to the translocal community is laid bare here by the sheer number of events and participants over time.

Particular sites and situations are described in loving detail throughout the text, but it stops short of articulating the significant compositional role that context has played, and although some writers refer to different generations of players, there is no clarification of waves of practice that might help those outside of the scene to identify the shifting motivations and challenges faced over time that influence the sonic outcomes.

The Echtzeitmusik community meetings held at the Berlin venue Kule (2008-2011)¹¹, Trio Sowari's humorous and insightful "27 Questions For A Start" (Trio Sowari 2007), and Scottish organisation Arika's "Collective Manifesto—Attempt No. 1" (2010), are additional examples of the international scene's readiness to critique and challenge itself. These sources, and the edited volumes mentioned above, all present the consistent idea that the context and audience are inextricably linked to the resulting sonic materials in this field of practice.

In any investigation of public performance practice, the audience is tied into its machinations and affects. Most practitioner-theorists writing about audiences, write about experimental music audiences more broadly (rather than improvised music specifically). Australian practitioner-theorists Robin Fox (2002), Ben Byrne (2005, 2008) and Joel Stern (2017) have all written about (mostly Sydney and Melbourne-based) audiences and the influence of context on the resulting music.

Fox argues that "physical, temporal, political and aesthetic geographies" are major players in the study and performance of experimental music more broadly, and that the activity of making experimental music is "defined largely by its context" (2002, 4), but stops short of identifying those consciously engaging context as a compositional tool as an emerging wave of improvisational performance practice responding to the stylistic codifications apparent in Improv.

¹¹ These conversations led to the compilation of *Echtzeitmusik*.

Byrne (2005, 2008) and Stern (2017) articulate the sociality, established cultures, practice, obstacles and traps of experimental music performance and presentation in Australia. Byrne draws our attention to how “‘unwelcoming’ cultures around the auditory arts” (2008, 24) can be, and suggests methods for combating isolationist approaches adopted by many of those creating experimental music. Stern (2017) argues that experimental music has met with “what feels like a terminal impasse [and] desperately needs a turn to humour, satire, parody and, most of all, reflexivity, if it is to remain listenable [after] decades of concerts marked by near humourlessness” (78-81). In both cases there is a lack of attention to the role that context plays in setting up expectations between organisers, audiences and performers, as well as the way in which codes of behaviour are set up over time.

Audiences have the power to affect the results of an improvised music performance, perhaps more than any other style of performance. This may be owing to the highly porous nature of the creative process, but regardless there is high regard for the value of a loyal, adventurous and supportive audience.

1.1.4 Music beyond performers: the role of site and social context in improvised music

To explore the sociality of the Improv scene, this doctoral research draws on the research and publications of activists, musicians, composers, musicologists and sociologists. American sociologist John Shepherd’s *Music as Social Text* (Shepherd 1991) explores the “fundamental and inescapable relatedness of ourselves, other people and the environment” (3) through music. Citing the research of ethnomusicologists John Blacking, Charles Keil, Steven Feld and Catherine Ellis, he explains how music confronts us with the “conditions of our own sociality” (2) and that music being socially mediated is significant in this regard.

Affirming the efforts of practitioners who self-define and document their own practices and scenes, Shepherd also observes that “[f]ew sociologists feel themselves to be competent in a discipline which requires a significant degree of technical knowledge as well as, preferably, some first-hand experience as a practitioner” (12), a point I emphasise in prioritising the observations of practitioners in this thesis. Fischlin and Heble’s claim that the practice of improvisation can “facilitate new kinds of global and intercultural conversations [...] new models of human relationship [and] alternative kinds of pedagogical practice” (Heble 2005, 1) supports Shepherd’s observations and resonates with my experience as a practitioner in the field.

Many of those writing on improvisation highlight or struggle with the terminology available to describe the practice, calling it ‘slippery’ or ‘ill defined’. This thesis offers new terminology that recognises the three key waves of practice over the last 40 years, therefore allowing us to align our descriptions of the practice with the historical moments within which they were experienced or created.

Generally speaking, the arguments presented in these texts regarding appreciating the practice beyond those playing it, and for the value of the practice beyond simply an experimental approach to making sound, all fall short in offering tools or lenses for understanding the practice itself. These arguments in and of themselves are valuable, but this doctoral research offers a clear conceptual framework for understanding improvisation practices from a scholarly perspective.

Conversely, the literature dealing with the communities around the practice of improvised music is rich in descriptions of local and translocal behaviours and contexts, and documents the evolving self-critical practice within the scene. Specifically, this doctoral research expands upon what the implications are for active decisions made in regards to the presentation and performance of improvised music.

1.2 Understanding context-responsive performance: drawing from visual arts, theatre and contemporary performance scholarship

The recognition that performance is context-sensitive, and that the audience and the space in which performance occurs are critical elements in the act of performance, is grounded in the proliferation of consciously situation-specific contemporary performance works from the 1950s onwards. The key ideas in performing arts scholarship that relate to this thesis explore site specificity and relationality in theatre, performance art, dance works, and sound art. However, they do not specifically address the role of improvisation and responding to context in real time in the creation of a performance.

The creative investigations explored in this doctoral research project have been nourished by artworks, writings and actions from a variety of historical radical art movements over the last century. The following international movements and groups are relevant due to their investigation of the social function of art and the extra-musical considerations of performance and presentation, many of which were underpinned by explicit manifestos articulating critical standpoints. Among them are Futurists, Dadaists, Constructivists, Gutai Group, Letterist International, Nouveaux Realism, and Fluxus.

1.2.1 Art and performance drawing attention to context

Inspired by Marxism, Dadaism and Surrealism, were the young, radical interdisciplinary artists and political theorists of the Letterist International (1952-1957) and the later

Situationist International (1957-1972), both led by interdisciplinary theorist Guy Debord.¹² Their work was critical of advanced capitalism in the mid-20th century, which they commonly decried as the ‘Society of the Spectacle’, where social relations were mediated through images, objects and the market. They embraced directly-lived experience over mediated representations, and challenged society to seek out authentic desires, and to avoid mindless consumption or the fulfilment of happiness through commodities, which they viewed as toxic. Of particular relevance to this research project is Debord’s encouragement for the construction of situations that challenge social codifications. The initial focus of the group was artistic, but through their investigation of unitary urbanism and psychogeography, their motivations shifted to the more political and revolutionary.

Prolific Australian improviser Jon Rose argues that regulatory barriers limit engagement with diverse performance sites in Australia (Rose 2013), expressing the view that music should be in direct contact with the geographic and cultural sites in which it is produced. Interviewing Jim Denley and Brian Ritchie—curator of Hobart’s *MONA FOMA* festival—on this subject, Rose emphasises the importance of the recognition of place, the importance of intimacy, adventurous programming, and for the musicians themselves to be more open-minded about locations for performance. These calls to action are relevant to this research as they argue for a conscious engagement with context (ibid).

The following contemporary performance theorists argue that site and context are significant and are chosen on account of the ways in which their existing semiotics add to performance (Carlson 1993, 36). Although these choices provide opportunities to encounter

¹² See the two major texts of this movement: *The Society of the Spectacle* (Debord 1967) and *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (Vaneigem 2012).

and create “other maps of the cultural space” (Wilkie 2002, 140-160), a key difference lies in the fact that the theatre works discussed are preconceived based on prior responses to site and situation. Performance studies scholars Nik Kaye, Richard Schechner, Kevin Hetherington and Fiona Wilkie agree that the places and spaces where theatre is performed act as “maps of the cultures” (Schechner 1977, 12) and “sites for the performance of identity” (Hetherington 1998, 105). This is mirrored in the international improvised music scene but has not been explored to the degree that it has been in theatre and performance studies. Spaces and contexts in which improvised music is often performed help to define the identity of the community, and not always in a positive way as we can see in the increasing codification of these contexts.

The following performance theorists have reframed and recoded relationships to site and time within related artistic fields that are relevant to understanding the complex dynamic system of disruptable elements that makes up improvised music performance. Hans Thies-Lehmann’s historical survey of new forms of postdramatic theatre (Lehmann 2006) is relevant to this research topic, although not explicitly addressed by the author, it has been possible to draw strong parallels with the new forms and aesthetics evolving in improvised music, and the context within which it is performed. Claire Doherty’s study of situation-specificity and her reframing of time and site as cumulative interventions and Miwon Kwon’s problematisation of nomadism in place-making contemporary art and expanded definitions of ‘site’ have inspired me to explore not only the expanded compositional behaviours within the scenes themselves, but also across space and time. These ideas have not yet been tested with regards to improvised music practice. There is a significant gap in the research concerned specifically with artists using context as a compositional tool in the practice and performance of improvised music.

1.2.2 Understanding physical space as a compositional parameter

Space, site-specificity and the emergence of physical space as a compositional parameter in performance are central to this enquiry. Composition for specific sites, spaces or contexts sits within a rich lineage of interventionist styles of performance art, site-specific conceptual performance art and institutional critique (Kwon 2004) and post-dramatic theatre forms (Lehmann, 2006). There is a significant volume of scholarship concerning site specificity in theatre, dance works and sound art, including Marvin Carlson (Carlson 1993), Nik Kaye (Kaye 2000), Fiona Wilkie (Wilkie 2002), Kevin Hetherington (Hetherington 1998), and Brandon LaBelle (LaBelle 2010), but there is a significant gap in the research concerned specifically with artists using context as a compositional tool in the performance of improvised music.

In her book *One Place After Another*, Korean-American art historian Miwon Kwon outlines the origins of site-specific art and critically differentiates the site-specific art of the 1960s to 1980s as having a greater focus on the inseparability of the work and its context than the site-specific art of today. She observes the dominant modes of nomadic place-making artists, and draws on urban theory, art and architecture criticism, and public discourse to argue that site specificity is “a complex cipher of the unstable relationship between location and identity in the era of late capitalism” (Kwon 2004, i). Compositions that engage consciously with context belong to, as Kwon articulates, a different model of site specificity that implicitly challenges the “‘innocence’ of space and the accompanying presumption of a universal viewing [listening] subject [...] as espoused in the phenomenological model” (Kwon 2004, 13). Kwon’s expanded ideas of site, time and the role of art in critiquing identity and capitalism are all relevant to this study, but her exploration mostly focuses on individual artists and artworks and therefore does not address the political implications for a

community taking situation into account in performance over an extended period of time and across a multi-sited network of translocal communities.

1.2.3 Understanding politicised working processes and practices in performance: participation and socially engaged art

Scholarship on the subject of participation and socially engaged art has been growing in the field of visual and performance art. Initially referred to as ‘new genre public art’ by Lucy Lippard in the 1980s, this is largely a North American term that since the 2000s has evolved into the more recent ‘social practice’. In the UK, ‘live art’ is the term more commonly used to denote those practices that straddle contemporary performance and visual art worlds; it is also referred to as hybrid or interdisciplinary performance. Scholarship in performance studies (drawing from anthropological and sociological disciplines in the 1980s) and curatorial studies and cultural leadership also draw from this field.

Claire Bishop’s *Participation* focuses on socially-oriented projects and articulates the agenda of artists engaging in participation in terms of “the desire to create an active subject [determining] their own social and political reality” (Bishop 2006, 12). Bishop criticises traditional notions of authorship and explores emerging practices, and attributes the precursors for participatory arts to the Dadaists, Guy Debord and the Situationist International, Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and Antonin Artaud’s *Theatre of Cruelty*. She makes the point that “on a technical level, most contemporary art is collectively produced (even if authorship often remains resolutely individual)” (11)—an assertion also shared by Becker (Becker 1982), and exemplary of most contemporary music practice and production.

Bishop's more recent study into the art of participation, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Bishop 2012), defines participatory art as an act of theatre or performance in which "people constitute the central artistic medium and material" (2). She differentiates these ideas from those raised by French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* (Bourriaud 2002, first published in 1998), as the artists discussed by Bishop are less interested in a relational aesthetic in and of itself than in the creative rewards of participation as "a politicised working process"(2). Bourriaud highlights the role of nomadism in the arts—a key function in the vitally mobile sociability of the international improvised music scene. He observes that chaos and complexity serve a positive function in radical and emerging arts practices and that this continues the critical line of thinking asserted by activist artists of the 1960s and 1970s that art cannot be "reduced to the presence of an object in the here and now; rather, it consists of a significant network whose interrelationships the artist elaborates, and whose progression in time and space he or she controls: a circuit, in fact." (14).

Bishop and Bourriaud both explore the specific sociability resulting from attention to context in their work, the key difference being that where Bourriaud embraces the unique opportunities afforded the nomad, Bishop problematises the instrumentalised place-making trend of the nomadic artist engaged in site-specific creation by local governments and the broader arts market.

1.3 Expanding what is understood as composition

I have also drawn on research by political economist Jacques Attali (1985) and key exponents of 'new musicology'— Susan McClary (1989, 1991), Joseph Kerman (1985, 2009) and their contemporaries—to gain insight into the dialogic, political and social

elements of music composition. Their ideas and contribution to this research are vital as they have endeavoured to expand how we understand compositional practice through engaging with the context of its creation.

McClary has also made useful observations regarding the problematisation of the engagement of the music industry in the capitalist market, noting that “even among the disenfranchised, the values of capitalism are strong, and many groups have become absorbed by the recording industry” (McClary 1989, 157). Similarly, Eddie Prévost observes that the “social relations which emanate from the composition as private property have implications for the production of music” as well as our perception of music and the role it plays in our society (Prévost 2011, 171).

Echoing Attali, McClary heralds the resilience and realisation of the power of composition, and the “seeming spontaneous generation of ever more local groups” (McClary 1989, 157) as the antidote to this subsumption of grass-roots ideology into the mainstream market.

Joseph Kerman draws our attention to the ways in which musicology limits itself to understanding the technical components of a composition and a composer’s style, “restricted not only in the subject matter it covers but also in its approach to that subject matter” (Kerman 2009, 11). In calling for greater attention to be paid to social, political and non-technical aspects of music making, these theorists offer alternatives to the way we currently operate as creators and consumers of music, but it is noted that improvised music practice is absent from their scholarship.

1.3.1 Expanded ideas of listening

The consideration of context as a variable or compositional tool did not become a focus in Western music traditions until the 1940s-50s, when the concepts of practitioner theorists such as American composer-philosopher John Cage rose to prominence. Until this time, contemporary music was confined to the concert hall, with participants largely functioning under the assumption that music requires a formal space and traditional listening arrangement or ritual to appreciate pre-composed works by ‘masters’.

French composer and instigator of *musique concrète*, Pierre Schaeffer, and Cage were among those who challenged audiences to expand their concepts of music and listening through their research, compositions, interviews, writings and performances. These practitioners broke with the tradition of the assumed relationships not only between the ear and sound vibrations, but also challenged preconceived notions of the roles played by audience, composer, musical ceremony and hierarchy in the making and reception of work.

Schaeffer, Cage, and others prompted a significant shift in approaches to performance contexts as well as compositional methods, and performer/audience dynamics in sound. This initiated musical movements that have been loosely bracketed under the term ‘experimental music’, within which the practice of improvised music now resides. It is understood that experimental music is often associated with this break from the classical music tradition, but is clearly not defined by or limited by these roots. Similarly, many practitioners of improvised music do not identify with the classical music field, as the literature discussed above has shown.

In compositions, lectures and writings practitioner-theorist John Cage investigated the act of listening itself, questioning and encouraging audiences to allow sounds to be themselves (Cage 2011, 9). Cage’s significance can be traced beyond his own works to the ideas that he set in motion early in the twentieth century. His work radicalised many others who, like him, were trained within the western classical music tradition but found the concert

hall approach of Western classical music and the European avant-garde's focus on increasing control limiting, deciding instead to explore other modes of composition that were more listener-focused and open to context and chance.¹³ The experimental transdisciplinary art movement Fluxus is considered to have its origins in the theories and experimental music pedagogies of Cage.¹⁴ Many future Fluxus artists attended Cage's classes at the New School for Social Research, NYC between 1957-1959 and were influenced by the concepts of indeterminacy and chance, and the rejection of virtuosity and traditional artistic skill.¹⁵

The work of Cage not only inspired the American movement against the European mainstream (as far as composition was concerned) but, as this doctoral research will show, his concepts of expanded sound and listening have had ripple effects all over the world where experimental music is explored, celebrated and problematised.¹⁶

This thesis details a range of compositional strategies with regards to how improvising musicians might consciously respond to the contexts within which they perform.

¹³ Cage encouraged listeners (and makers) to consider music as a much larger, expanded concept than that of the Western classical music tradition. Through his use of principles from Zen Buddhism he argued for composers to remove ego from the act of composition, to radically reconsider sound and chance, and to consider the act of listening as an active part of the composition itself.

¹⁴ George Maciunas, La Monte Young, Marcel Duchamp, Nam June Paik and Yoko Ono were among the core practitioners at the height of Fluxus in the 1960s. The primary manifestations of this movement were 'anti-art' and anti-commercial events, realised in almost any possible way: music, performance, found object collections, ready-mades, fake newspapers and festivals.

¹⁵ For insights into the parallels between the provocations of Fluxus 'intermedia' artists and evolving improvised music performance strategies, this doctoral research has primarily drawn on Hannah Higgins' book *Fluxus Experience* (Higgins 2002). Other rich sources from a mix of practitioners, critics and arts historians are Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit* (Ono 1970), Gwendolyn Audrey Foster's research into the art of Yoko Ono (Foster 2010), Gillian Young's *The Score: How Does Fluxus Perform* (Young 2012), *Fluxus Codex* compiled by Jon Hendrix (Hendricks and Jon 1988), Natasha Lushetich's *The Performance of Time in Fluxus Intermedia* (Lushetich 2011b) and *Ludus Populi: The Practice of Nonsense* (Lushetich 2011a).

¹⁶ I acknowledge Cage did not single-handedly transform approaches to the performance and reception of music. Movements predating and contemporaneous to the extensive and highly influential lectures and writings of Cage, such as musique concrète, Dadism, Futurism, and Fluxus, also had (and continue to have) significant impact.

This includes the ways in which we listen to one another as well as the sounds and acoustic implications of the spaces in which we play. Beyond the work of Cage, American composer Pauline Oliveros called on audiences to “[n]otice when you feel sound in your body” (Oliveros 2005, 15).¹⁷ Her research is of relevance here as she stated that her improvised performances were informed by the ‘deep listening’ practice (xix) that she developed in late twentieth century, educating listeners to understand sounds as exciters of space, and to hear with their entire bodies (15). Extending these ideas to aural architecture, American acoustic ecologists Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter ask us to re-examine the social properties of sound. In particular, their book *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?* (Blesser and Salter 2009) is an invitation to pay closer attention to how the aural architecture of a space defines how we behave in it. Each of these invitations is useful in creating new compositional and listening experiences in contemporary music, but also for considering our roles as active participants in our environments in everyday life.

The above concepts of expanded listening and alternative compositional approaches have been applied to experimental music more broadly throughout its development. Each of the practitioner theorists listed here have challenged, disturbed and expanded our experiences of listening and of creating for new physical listening experiences, but these concepts have predominately emerged from and been applied to electroacoustic studio composition (Schaeffer 1966, Chion 1991, Lopez 1997); the theories of expanded sound and listening are therefore untested in the context of improvised music performance. Applying these concepts to the process of improvisation and composing—using context as a compositional tool—is

¹⁷ This research draws on Oliveros’ own compositions and writings (2005), and her preface to her peer and contemporary Alvin Lucier’s *Reflections* (Lucier 1995).

core to this inquiry, as is the role of improvisation in highlighting expanded listening practices.

1.4 Expanded Curatorial Practice: the development of critical meaning between organisers, artists and audiences

The majority of the research regarding expanded curatorial practice for this thesis has come from either first-hand experience experimenting with different modes of presenting performance, or from observing the curatorial experiments of my colleagues over the last two decades. This has allowed me to assemble a large body of artist and curatorial statements for analysis, and to develop primary case studies of four organisations: Arika (Glasgow), Liquid Architecture (Melbourne); *ausland e.v.* [sic] (Berlin); and the NOW now (Sydney). By their nature as registered organisations, they have tended towards articulating their curatorial visions and motivations alongside the presentation of their experimental programs.

Glasgow-based organisation Arika has presented hundreds of events and many festivals of experimental music, sound, film, image, art, ideas and conversation since 2001 in collaboration with musicians, artists, critics, philosophers, and activists.¹⁸ In addition to conducting field work at their 2015 event *Episode 7: We Can't Live Without Our Lives*, my research also draws on several texts published by the organisation: the liner notes for the *Resonant Spaces* project (Esson 2006); and their online archive of programs. In 2010, their

¹⁸ These include the *Instal* festivals, *Uninstal*, *Kill Your Timid Notion*, *Shadowed Spaces*, *Resonant Spaces* and their *Episodes* series, now in its 18th edition. See the Arika website www.arika.org.uk (accessed 1/3/17).

festival *Instal 10* explicitly set out to experiment with the format of public presentation and engagement and expand on concepts established by John Cage in the 1960s that explore expanded listening and the appreciation of sound. They delivered a manifesto to “get at what’s eating us with regards to experimental music, and what we think might be worth salvaging”, which has a tone that already indicates that experimental music is in a state of disarray or crisis. Basque performer and writer Mattin, who has been engaged with several of Arika’s programs over the last decade, applauds Arika’s approach in a short essay he contributed to the NOW now festival program catalogue (2014), and pertinent to the concerns of this thesis.

Observing emerging trends in curatorial practice, Claire Doherty, Mary Anne Staniszewski, Beryl Graham, and Miwon Kwon have all noted the shifts in curatorial manoeuvres and propositions that embrace or problematise site- and place-based events through their works *Situation* (Doherty, 2009), *The Power of Display* (Staniszewski, 1998), *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media* (Graham 2010) and *One Place After Another* (Kwon, 2004) respectively. Concentrating on the “practice and practicalities of contemporary curating” (11), Graham and Cook explore alternatives to the traditional market-driven role of the curator, reframing the role as filter and context provider, defining the curator as editor rather than “curator as connoisseur” (12), focusing on the process of art-making over the art object. In a similar vein, Barnaby Drabble is quoted as saying that curating is “not about the display of work [...] it is about the development of critical meaning in partnership and discussion with artists and publics” (Graham 2010, 10). These critiques and observations are relevant to this thesis in that they infer that those that organise events are engaged in the authorship of the contextual elements and therefore the resulting outcomes. They do not address the slippage in authorship prevalent in the presentation of improvised music performance resulting from this curatorial foregrounding of context and process.

1.5 Conceptual framework: Inspiration from other disciplines

This doctoral research project draws on emerging design scholarship as a conceptual framework to explore context-responsive performance. The physical, temporal, political and aesthetic contextual explorations are also core to innovative design practice, and several design scholars have taken great care to articulate the challenges and opportunities in ways that are deeply applicable to the practice of improvised music. The design field has developed both language and emerging methodologies that embrace ongoing observation, speculation, iteration and context as core to the creative process, hence their application here. The majority of design scholarship and research is directed at insights or case studies around business and marketplace contexts, yet also addresses developments in design more broadly.

To supplement my thinking on co-authored creative practice and process I have also drawn on the writings of prominent design theorists Peter Rowe (1987), American design scholar Mary Lou Maher, with particular attention to her article “Process Models for Design Synthesis” (Maher 1990), and Elizabeth B. N. Sanders & Peter Jan Stappers, who co-authored *Convivial Toolbox* (Sanders and Stappers 2012), primarily aimed at students of design and academic researchers. It collates descriptions and approaches in contemporary design as well as the underlying principles with specific relation to the *practice* of designing rather than the products that emerge from the field.

Sydney-based Dutch practitioner-theorist Kees Dorst acknowledges the role of context in the creative design process, and clearly articulates many stages of design practice. His co-authored journal article “Creativity in the Design Process: Co-evolution of Problem–Solution” (Dorst and Cross 2001) with Nigel Cross, and more recently Dorst’s publication *Notes On Design: How Creative Practice Works* (Dorst 2017) have been drawn on

throughout this doctoral research project as they articulate the creative challenges faced by an improvising performer—via the creative practice of a designer—better than most texts on music do.

Dorst's most recent articulations of 'frame innovation' and 'design abduction' (Dorst 2015) place the focus on "embracing the complexity of a situation [and] learning our way to a solution"(15). Dorst cites Louis L. Bucciarelli's *Designing Engineers* (Bucciarelli 1994) as a key example of the observation of the methods designers employ.¹⁹

I have contrasted the emerging design scholarship with more mainstream writings on the 'solution focused' design process from traditional design scholar Karl Aspelund (Aspelund 2014) to highlight how the framing of the creative process in design is also evolving to embrace creative responses to uncertainty.

Brian Lawson's *How Designers Think: The Design Process Demystified* (Lawson 2006), first published in 1990, observes designers' processes, techniques and engagement with changing technologies to provide an analysis of successful methods and proposals for more effective design education. Although more traditional in their approach, these publications are useful to this study as they are excellent examples of describing rather than prescribing a creative process or outcome.

As we will explore in the case of 'design thinking', articulations of design processes can produce problematic trends evident in their oversimplification through their uptake by product-focused business education. The term 'design thinking' has evolved from a broad

¹⁹ Bucciarelli includes entire team meeting conversations to illustrate the steps taken in decision-making within the engineering field, using these to illustrate some of the core interdisciplinary challenges of solving a design problem.

articulation of the ways in which designers approached a problem in the 1950s (for those outside of design), to a ‘must-have’ business course skill-set that everyone and anyone (read designers and non-designers) can attain, so as to realise more innovative, marketable and competitive products and services. Design thinking is not unproblematic, but it is a well-articulated critical and creative framework that embraces the co-evolution of problem spaces and solution spaces with a clear set of foci. For scholarship regarding design thinking, research for this thesis draws on arguably the movement’s main exponent, CEO of design firm IDEO, Tim Brown through his book *Change By Design* (Brown 2009) as well as current content from the IDEO website. Gavin Ambrose & Paul Harris’ *Design Thinking* (Ambrose and Harris 2010) is useful as an illustrated guide to the process of design thinking, with a focus on realising commercial briefs, while Nigel Cross’ *Design Thinking: Understanding How Designers Think and Work* (Cross 2011) and Lucy Kimbell’s *Rethinking Design Thinking* (Kimbell 2011) offer a more critical eye on this trending method.

Through their article “Transdisciplinary Research and Practice for Sustainability Outcomes” (Fam et al. 2016, 157) Sydney-based design theorists Dena Fam, Jane Palmer, Chris Reidy and Cynthia Mitchell have advocated for designers to “recover a criticality suppressed by the predominant market activity of reproducing and reaffirming the familiar” (157). They argue that transdisciplinary collaboration “supports new transdisciplinary thinking; it supports the transition to novel solutions” (158). Fam et al elucidate the current challenges and opportunities faced by the visual communications discipline within design in a way that aligns with the argument I am making here for improvised performance to move toward a more consciously context-responsive practice.

Speculative fiction and design futuring are of increasing relevance to composing music for situations around social questions.²⁰ The following thinkers use these critical research methodologies, arguing for a more widespread application across the design field: Sohail Inayatullah (Inayatullah 2005, 1990) uses futurology as an effective culture-maker; design philosopher Tony Fry posits that design, unsustainability and politics cannot be separated (Fry 2010); and Tony Dunne and Fiona Raby use design to provoke discussion around the ethics of emerging technologies and practices. This doctoral research uses their influential book *Speculative Everything* (Dunne and Raby 2013) as a springboard for discussion around composition as a speculative design practice.

Literature dealing with creative problem-solving in performance and design ranges from a celebration of the ‘problem space’ in design (Dorst, etc) through to sociological and art theories exploring consciously-sought solutions that alter our understanding of existing problems (Becker 1982, 303). The experimental fields of critical design, design fiction, speculative design and design futuring have much to offer in helping us understand the attraction of creative responses to uncertainty. I will only briefly refer to their application to improvisation; to fully explore and apply these to improvised music is beyond the scope of this particular research project. Material that brings together the fields of situation-specific performance, composition and speculative design has not been located in the process of this doctoral research.

²⁰ Design academic Tony Fry’s book *Design Futuring* (Fry 2008) explores in great depth the concept of futuring as applied to the field of design.

Summary

In summary, existing literature on improvised music is rich with descriptions of practice, process, presentation and performance but often treats the practice and practitioners as belonging to the same historical period, as opposed to an evolving series of waves of practice. This has resulted in practitioner-theorists noting their frustration with the lack of definitions associated with the practice, but not offering terms or delineations that might assist our understanding of the practice.

Material dealing with context-responsive performance, site-specificity, and actively political, relational and participatory performance is abundant in other fields of the performing arts, but does not deal specifically with improvised music as an art form. Attempts to expand what is understood as composition have also not dealt with collectively authored improvised works, and also continue to focus on singular sonic works rather than appreciate or assess a body or oeuvre of work co-created by a translocal community.

As a result, I have sought conceptual frameworks and approaches developed in other fields, looking to expanded curatorial practice and design scholarship. I have as yet found no literature that draws parallels between the critical collective practices of improvised music and emerging design practice. This research will contribute detailed knowledge regarding practice and frameworks for understanding them that are absent to date.

Chapter 2

Genealogy of Improvised Music

This chapter will trace the key points in improvised music performance genealogy in an attempt to describe the current landscape of practice. This is not only to assure that the reader understands the history of the practice, but also to show that it is a self-critical and evolving artform that has moved through several stages of development and could therefore welcome further evolution and challenge. This chapter will observe how audiences and performers find sites of performance and networks of support, and explore why the community around the music is inextricably linked to its sonic outcomes.

Improvisation is a practice that spans a range of musical traditions. Additionally therefore, this chapter will identify the field and attempt to clarify the terms used in the evolving discourse around improvised music performance. In pursuit of a stable unified definition of what it means to be an improvising practitioner, a range of dynamics and dominant orthodoxies need to be accounted for within the practice of improvised music performance, which tend towards a set of dispositions rather than absolutes. This chapter articulates some of the ways in which practices have been codified and stabilised to establish the recognisable genre (and subgenres) of Improv in its current form. It will demonstrate the shared sociopolitical interests and concerns that attract particular musicians to play this music and how in turn this contributes to determining the physical spaces these performances inhabit and therefore the resulting musical outcomes.

It is useful to divide the genealogy into three waves of evolution. The first wave consisted of self-identified non-idiomatic free improvising musicians (NIFIM) breaking from mainstream traditions, some of which included elements of improvisation (for example the term ‘free improvisation’ was originally coined in order to demarcate this genre of music

from mainstream jazz). The practices and motivations of this first wave are well documented by Derek Bailey.

The second wave cultivated a translocal network of performance venues, festivals and products that have come to be recognised as the genre Improv after forty years of shared practices and common contexts for presentation and promotion.

The current wave evolving the practice of improvised music is context-responsive improvised music (CRIM), and consists of improvising musicians and organisers proactively seeking out contexts that disturb reliable devices and avoid stabilising, commodifying tendencies. This chapter is concerned with the first two waves; CRIM practice will be examined from Chapter 4.

2.1 Origins of improvised music

Improvisation is at its roots an ancient practice that forms the basis of all music making (Bailey 1992, 83). Improvisatory musical elements were core to baroque music, and to music of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance before that. Incorporation of improvisation was revived and foregrounded by popular musical forms of the twentieth century, most notably in jazz from the 1950s onwards, rock and psychedelia of the 1960s, and by Western Contemporary Classical composers such as Earle Brown, David Tudor, La Monte Young, Morton Feldman, Karlheinz Stockhausen, George Crumb, and Cornelius Cardew.

Acknowledging that musicians have been improvising in performance for a long time before the establishment of Improv, it is clear that NIFIM was born from a reaction against dominant performance genres of the 1970s, most of which dictated a style or approach that almost always guaranteed a particular stylistic outcome: jazz, swing, bebop, rock'n'roll, classical, pop, acousmatic music (i.e., music for loudspeakers, often involving live diffusion

in the French tradition) and contemporary classical, and the beginnings of punk in popular music. Performance and social context minimised slippages from one genre to another—each of which having their roots in specific historical traditions and practices—and established a clear set of boundaries and expectations for the concert-going audiences.

No practitioner-theorist has articulated the social nature and practice of improvised music better than British guitarist Derek Bailey. In his book *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, Bailey makes an important delineation when he states that “freely improvised music is different to musics that *include* improvisation” [emphasis added] (Bailey 1996, np). Bailey argues that idiomatic improvised music (for example flamenco in Spain or raga in India) is tied to place, to a people and their culture, and that its main character is not the improvisation itself:

There are plenty of styles—group styles and individual styles—found in free playing but they don’t coalesce into an idiom. They just don’t have that kind of social or regional purchase or allegiance. They are idiosyncratic. In fact you can see freely improvised music as being made up of an apparently endless variety of idiosyncratic players and groups. So many in fact, that its simpler to think of the whole thing as non-idiomatic (ibid).

Bailey observed that the term *improvisation* was used reluctantly by performers due to its negative connotations as a music without preparation that lacks “in design and method,” and that such attitudes “completely misrepresents the depth and complexity” of their work. However, Bailey retained the term in his writings in the hope to redefine and reclaim it (xii), arguing that improvisation “is a creative force of incalculable power, not simply a way of achieving a more or less interesting set of instrumental devices” (75).

Scholarship on the subject of improvised music lags far behind the practice. This is largely due to the ephemeral and ineffable nature of improvisation—a practice and act that is negated by any attempt to articulate its process while being ‘in it’. Consequently,

determining the ‘success’ of these acts is highly subjective because of the level of uncertainty in what constitutes the aims of improvised music, and therefore the lack of a clear and unambiguous set of criteria with which it might be established. However, as evidenced by the literature review, practitioners have generated their own discourse on improvised music in the absence of the scholarly work in the field. I have privileged this scholarship over the available institutional discourse as it is where the superior and dominant ideas in the field are at play.

In her introduction to *Soundweavings: Writings on Improvisation* (2014) practitioner-theorist Franziska Schroeder notes that “‘improvisation’ (as a term and as a concept) must be understood as tricky, complicated and ill-defined” (x) and that the literature (Bailey 1992, Heble 2000, Borgo 2002, Lewis 1996, 2008, Ramshaw and Stapleton 2016) on the topic verifies that it is “highly contested and loaded with signification” (ibid). Schroeder acknowledges that we have come a long way in discussing improvisation since Derek Bailey lamented the lack of appropriate analysis of NIFIM in the 1980s. The lack of a clear delineation between the practice of NIFIM from the genre of Improv, and the misrecognition of its active subgenres, has contributed greatly to this misunderstanding.

Tracing the history of NIFIM and Improv in Australia, practitioner theorist Jim Denley observes that improvisation is “a global music methodology with a fast mutation rate” (Denley 2008, 135), and that it is so embroiled in “all forms of popular, traditional and art musics from around the globe” that it doesn’t easily “slot into any one category—there is a lot of methodological grey practice out there” (135). Consequently, aims to clarify some of ways in which we understand improvisation and its manifestations, tropes, genres and subgenres throughout this thesis are not attempts to police categories or argue for greater boundaries between practices, but are instead aimed at establishing how the lack of clarity around the current practice is one of the reasons why it is often misunderstood.

Schroeder notes that the “simplistic conceptualisation of improvisation as something unforeseen, eschewing all law, convention, structure or form has been criticised for some time” (Schroeder 2014, x), while Bailey suggests that it has “more to do with an instrumental approach or an attitude: a method of making music” (Bailey 1996, np). Bailey prefaces his book *Improvisation* as being “an attempt to cover the practice of improvisation in the main areas in which it is found and to reveal those features and characteristics common to all improvisation” (Bailey 1996, iv) noting that due to its widespread presence it “will inevitably be selective” (ibid).

Reaffirming improvisation as practice, Bailey insists that speculating about the future of non-idiomatic free improvised music and whether it would increase in popularity or become extinct fails to understand the function of the activity: “[I]t is basically a method of working [...] As long as the performing musician wants to be creative there is likely to be free improvisation. And it won’t necessarily indicate a particular style, or even presuppose an artistic attitude” (Bailey 1992, 142). Bailey’s observations of trends in improvised music are rooted in his lived (and performed) experience of the early NIFIM scene of the 1970s and 1980s in the UK, Europe and the USA. However, almost four decades of performance and practice have taken place since the publication of his seminal study, and practices and tendencies to codify and stabilise the practice have evolved during that time.

In order to explore how non-idiomatic free improvised music evolved from the 1970s into what is now widely known as Improv, I will describe how this manifested with particular attention to the Australian context, and then go on to outline the ways in which Improv has stabilised and codified itself over 40 years of international practice.

2.2 Non-Idiomatic Free Improvised Music (NIFIM) circa 1970s-1990s

As the NIFIM scene that Bailey describes did not expect to be popular (or to later become a genre), the community of players found small bars, squats, visual art spaces or private homes in which to share their music. Throughout the 1970s, the ethos of NIFIM found resonance with the public dialogues of Fluxus, performance art, and experimental rock. Festivals celebrating NIFIM began to emerge internationally from the 1980s onwards. Some of the earliest of these described themselves as festivals of experimental music but had a clear focus on free jazz. Examples include *Konfrontationen* (1980-present, Nickelsdorf, Austria)¹, *Musique Action* (1985-present, Nancy, France)², and *Vision Festival* (1996-present, New York).³

Two significant developments in the UK have inscribed NIFIM into the international performing arts/musical vernacular. Firstly, in 1977 Derek Bailey established the annual week-long festival of improvisation *Company Week* (which ran until 1994), recordings of which were broadcast on BBC radio; and more recently, the founding of Resonance FM by the London Musicians Collective in 2001, providing a platform for regular improvised live-to-air performances as well as a broader dissemination of NIFIM to virtual international audiences online.

It is important to acknowledge that, as with all artforms, each wave of improvised music has been influenced both by those who have gone before them and by other musics,

¹ <http://www.konfrontationen.at/ko2005/framesets/frames2/plakate2/k80.jpg> (accessed 22/2/18)

² http://musiqueaction.com/Musique_Action_2017/Edito.html (accessed 22/2/18)

³ <https://www.artsforart.org/vf22.html> (accessed 22/2/18)

even if that influence was one of antagonism, a reaction against the structures, rhythms and melodies of other genres. Some first wave European NIFIM performers were inspired by the free jazz movement in the USA (originally brought to Europe by Albert Ayler, 1960s France); extensions of the aleatoric music of John Cage, and the radiophonic works of the 1950s.

Berlin-based Australian percussionist Tony Buck acknowledges that whilst more recent waves of improvisers can freely draw on and collage elements of popular music (for example a rock beat), first wave improvisers viewed such references as restrictive.⁴ This is indicative of the evolution of the music and also the political, aesthetic and tacit agreements that exist within the scene. The first wave of European NIFIM performers were engaged primarily in improvisation as “a political statement and approach to life—improvising is a philosophy. It’s anti-establishment, anti-mainstream culture, looking for alternatives. It is a stance” (Buck 2016).⁵

2.3 The emergence of Improv circa 2000s-current

Throughout the 1980s and early ‘90s NIFIM was a niche practice that carried a negative stigma (Bailey 1992, xii). However, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, musicians were no

⁴ Buck is best known for his work with seminal Australian improvising trio *The Necks*, whose collective approach and tacit agreements will form the subject for discussion in chapter 7 of the thesis.

⁵ In the interview, Tony Buck refers to them as “Eddie Prévost’s generation”, mainly because of his book *No Sound Is Innocent* (Prévost 1995), which articulates much of the practice and motivations of improvisation in the 1960s and ‘70s.

longer shying away from calling what they did ‘Improv’. A resurgence in adopting and celebrating improvisation as core to music-making across many genres boomed, largely thanks to laptop glitch players emerging from electronic and dance music scenes, New Zealand’s post-Dead C ‘free noise’ community, and those exploring post-post-rock, such as Animal Collective, “a polyglot of cosmic music, particularly flexing its improv roots in concert” (Gotritch 2009).

It was around the early 2000s that the genre of Improv took over from NIFIM. At that point, improvisations were no longer being performed as non-idiomatic, and the genre and popularised term ‘Improv’ began to circulate more widely throughout the translocal scene. Throughout this thesis, my sources may continue to use the terms ‘Improv’, ‘improvised music’ and ‘free Improv’ interchangeably. Unless otherwise stated, the reader can assume that the source is referring to what I articulate here as the recognisable genre of Improv.

The performance of Improv is not new, but it would also be inaccurate to call it ‘established’. This would infer that there is an infrastructure of support systems, international and institutional recognition for its value. Improv remains (happily) dabbling on the fringe. Referencing Bennett and Peterson (2004), Julian Knowles, in his chapter “Setting the Scene: Developments in Australian Experimental Music Since the mid-1990s” (in Priest 2008), clearly outlines the dynamics of the established ‘translocal’ experimental music scene.⁶ In the years since its publication, the recognition from arts funding bodies and institutions has been steady, albeit sporadic (10).

⁶ Knowles argues that the term ‘scene’ has “moved from the vernacular into academic discourse through the disciplines of cultural and popular music studies’ and ‘can be understood as a clustering of producers, performers, curators and audience members who share a sense of common or compatible artistic interests.” (Knowles 2008, 10)

2.4 Improv in Australia

In Australia, the lines between Improv, free jazz, experimental music and new music (or contemporary composition) have been (and remain) particularly blurry. One contributing factor is the geographical distance from the bulk of activity occurring in the UK, Europe and the USA in the latter half of the twentieth century. Broadly speaking, the Australian and New Zealand Improv scenes welcome ‘the ferals’ and ‘the unclassifiable’. It is a scene where you fit in if you don’t fit in anywhere else—a space for hybrid artists refusing to be classified in a specific genre, as well as autodidacts and hobbyists keen (and relaxed enough) to share their experiments in performance.

Between the 1970s and 1990s a few organisations were active producing one-off events⁷, series and festival exploring (broadly) experimental music, such as the New Music Centre (Chris Mann et al.) and Watt in Sydney, and the Clifton Hill Community Music Centre in Melbourne. Between the mid 1990s and early 2000s, audiences for experimental performance were particularly enthusiastic. For example the audience numbers for *the NOW now* festival in 2006 reached over 500 people from diverse age groups and backgrounds. However, the audience numbers attracted to an annual spectacle do not translate to the regular attendance of a weekly or fortnightly series.⁸ Some of the enduring festivals and

⁷ For example, *New Directions* (Sydney, 1990) was a multispeaker immersive performance featuring US vocalist Diamanda Galas, installed in a dome outside the Seymour Centre as part of the Sydney Festival. This was organised by David Worrall and Kimmo Vennonen from Canberra.

⁸ This is common across the translocal scene, but I observed in Europe, for example, that government support for series and festivals attracted a more consistent following all year round.

series to feature Improv in Australia are *Totally Huge New Music Festival/TURA*⁹ (est. 1987, Perth), *What Is Music?* festival (1996-2012, national), *Improvised Tuesdays* series, later known as *Make It Up Club* (est. 1998, Melbourne), *If You Like Improvised Music, We Like You* and the *NOW now* festival (est. 2001, Sydney), and the *Audio Pollen* and *Small Black Box* series (est. 2003, Brisbane).

There was a “surge in improvisatory practice and exchange” (Denley 2008, 141) in Australia between 2003-2008. This exchange manifest not only on festival stages, but also smaller regular series gigs, record releases, zines¹⁰ and online platforms that elevated the practice through critical reviews and features. Denley observed that “Australians have embraced improvisation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries”, noting that the activity and public outcomes beyond the concerts themselves (record labels, radio broadcasts and some learning institutions) all contribute to a network of interstate activity and exchange where there previously was little to none. He credits this to the strong grassroots movement and exchange between the organisations:

Today, audiences for new music that are large or young are said to be rare, but What is Music?, Articulating Space, Electrofringe, Unsound, impermanent.audio, Liquid Architecture, Totally Huge, the NOW now and ROOM40 events disprove this. There is an interdependence between public outcomes and the development of communities of players. It needed to be a grassroots movement, and it has been. (Priest 2008, 152)

⁹ <https://www.tura.com.au/about/> (accessed 22 Feb 2018)

¹⁰ Realtime Arts <http://www.realtime.org.au/> and Cyclic Defrost <https://www.cyclicdefrost.com/> being the major print platforms – now both online only.

Denley notes that since 2008 this surge of activity and exchange has significantly reduced despite there being “many more musicians involved in experimentation and improvisation” (Denley, personal correspondence 10/2/18). He also observes that when he wrote the contributing chapter in 2008, it was informed by “years of positivity from *What Is Music?* and *the NOW now* that was very interested in interstate dialogue” (ibid) and that subsequently the increased difficulties living in cities due to inflated rents have resulted in an exodus of those who might otherwise still be facilitating this in-person exchange.

2.5 Current translocal manifestations of social politics

Whilst the radical bedrocks of DIY cultures support improvised music and CRIM practice due to its ongoing critique and exploration of alternative modes of being and creating together, there is a historical class, race and gender context for this. Improvisers also often share social and political motivations beyond the production of music. This section will describe how these currently manifest.

Musicians are drawn to Improv because it demands a level of ‘response-ability’ that composed music and traditional performance settings do not. Improvisers have a uniquely porous relationship with the music they create, their audience, and performance context. While the opportunity to take risks and to be acutely responsive is not unique to improvisation, it is uniquely a central tenet of the practice.

Many art forms in Australia are dominated by middle-class, educated, city-dwelling practitioners. Anecdotally, a number of these practitioners choose subcultural platforms as a reaction against their middle-class backgrounds. Due to the lack of necessary educational obstacles and accessibility and intimacy of the venues, Improv and experimental music can be regarded as more supportive of people who do not come from a wealthy or highly

educated background. This is distinct to the class-system more typically embedded in classical music, new music or contemporary classical music, which tends to recruit those from the upper classes.

African American improviser and scholar George Lewis writing in 2004 observed that improvisers can now draw from an “intercultural establishment” comprised of styles, aesthetics, and networks where the practice is best understood as “a social location inhabited by a considerable number of present-day musicians, [...] who have chosen to make improvisation a central part of their musical discourse” (Fischlin and Heble 2004, 3). Lewis suggests that we understand the complexities of improvisation as “networks of cultural and social practice” (ibid). Building on Lewis’ argument, Fischlin and Heble (2004) assert that “Improvisation, in the contexts in which we are discussing it, can provide a powerful form of rebellion against such exclusions, inviting potentially transgressive interventions and giving articulation to fractious or unheard community dissonances” (8). Improv attracts listeners and players “precisely because of its ‘otherness’” (Prévost, 1995, 172).

The common social politics of the translocal Improv scene currently manifest in a variety of ways. The ephemeral DIY culture of producing events (through to publications) with little-to-no institutional support in the form of artist-run record labels, publishing and distribution is dominant. Performances spaces are often volunteer-run with ad hoc technical infrastructure (often crowdsourced). Festivals and music series attract a core loyal following that have been ‘trained’ by the consistent events in how best to appreciate/listen and therefore pass this knowledge/behaviour on to new listeners, and the majority of the events communicate themselves as anti-establishment, anti-commercial, anti-idealist, and anti-ceremonial in style, setting and promotion.

In the UK, Bailey noted that most of the musicians he was improvising with were from working-class backgrounds and at times, anti-intellectual (Bailey 1996, np). This is not

the case in Australia, where a percentage of the performer-practitioners are teaching in academic institutions and articulating their practice through academic platforms. The Improv scene in Sydney is primarily made up of educated, white, middle socioeconomic status participants (both listeners and players) drawn to alternative modes of social organisation and music making, interested in outsider art but often holding significant social and cultural capital themselves.

Those performing Improv are often working non-music-related ‘day jobs’ or playing other kinds of music to earn a living. Reflecting the practitioner demographic, many of the audience-members for experimental performing arts are also university educated, differing from Bailey’s peers in UK in the 1970s perhaps by their alignment with an anti-*institutional* political stance (as opposed to anti-intellectual), as many of these listeners and players have helped to document and critique the practice and thus boosted its status in academic and professional circles (ironically, in institutions). For the first wave of improvisers, the most significant bodies of work in the field were developed outside the institution.

The Australian Improv scene can also be characterised by the figureheads who have aggressively or inadvertently mentored generations of players. In Sydney, the influence of artist-organisers such as Jim Denley¹¹, Jon Rose and Clayton Thomas has been significant, if

¹¹ Alongside longer-term projects like *Machine for Making Sense* (active 1994-2008), *Splinter Orchestra* (active 2002-current), and *West Head Project* (active 2005-current), Denley also established his own publishing label *Splitrec*, celebrating “Sydney’s vibrant exploratory/spontaneous music scene”. Releases to date include *Machine for Making Sense*, Amanda Stewart, Jim Denley, Germ Studies, Great Waitress, Peter Blamey, Clayton Thomas, *Splinter Orchestra*, Mike Majkowski, Dale Gorfinkel, Monica Brooks, Peter Farrar, Robbie Avenaim, Cor Fuhler, Teletopa, Truancy and *West Head Project* (<https://splitrec.com/> Accessed 13/3/18). Denley’s passion for collaboration and facilitating new environmental contexts for improvised performance, along with the absence of dogmatic rhetoric or reverence for a canon or restrictive legacy, has cultivated an environment of genuine intergenerational exchange between players of all ages, styles, backgrounds and availabilities. The influence of his consistently supportive and exploratory activity on the players who have come into the scene after him cannot be overstated.

only for their enthusiasm for ongoing intergenerational, interdisciplinary public exchange. In Melbourne, performer-organisers such as Will Guthrie and Ren Walters (who co-founded *Improvised Tuesdays /Make It Up Club* in 1998); Robbie Avenaim (*What Is Music?* festival); Robin Fox and Anthony Pateras (*Articulating Space* series, 2004-2006); and Tim O'Dwyer, Belinda Woods, Ned Collette, Sean Baxter, Lloyd Honeybrook, Annalee Koenig and Ari Sharp (all hosts of *Make It Up Club* over the last twenty years) have set up a powerful ethos of staunch DIY performance nights that unite a scene of live, regular experimentation. Sean Baxter's consistent, expletive-ridden punk-intellectual MC'ing of the *Make It Up Club* weekly concerts has been a powerful (and at times confusing) foil to anyone that would otherwise approach the music as one-dimensionally contemplative, humourless or devoid of personality.¹²

Improv, as a branch of experimental performing arts in Australia is often heavily conceptual and therefore sometimes elitist in nature, appearing to require an understanding of contemporary art history and practices in order to digest it fully (Byrne 2008). This has been shifting as each generation engages with the performance and critique of the music to the point where the discourse is now driven by the 'makers' and not the musicologists; where the practitioner-theorists are often testing their theories on stage with their peers.

In the 1970s, significant experimental musicians were denied entry or ejected from conservatoires (Philip Brophy, Ron Nagorcka, David Ahern and Chris Abrahams to name a few). In 2019 our conservatoriums and universities celebrate the contribution and works of

¹² A good example of Sean Baxter's style of commentary can be found in this short video, where he features as one of the musicians in Australian experimental performer/producer Erick Mitsak's three-part series 'Science of Music' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIXDh7zHzRo> Produced for ABC JTV 2008 (accessed 3/12/17).

experimental sound artists and improvisers¹³, as well as the academic writing exploring experimental music practice more broadly from a range of supportive theorists and historians who are regular members of the audience.¹⁴ Performers and theorists interested in experimental music, sound art and improvised music performance have fought their way through the academic system in Australia over the last three decades to the point where it is now possible to establish a legitimacy of inquiry and practice within these fields.

A generational turnover has meant that these academics now occupy positions that enable them to support others, thereby paving the way for the next generation to legitimise their practices.¹⁵ This is also due in no small part to Australian universities legitimising the practice-led PhD. Many of these artists engaged in practice-led work and have shifted to thesis-only (traditional scholarly) doctorates, which indicates the growing confidence in their contribution to the field beyond their own creative works.

The time has passed where only the contributions and observations of musicologists are taken seriously; this is a time of transformation and marks a turning point in Australian experimental music practitioner-theorist history. A critical mass of young, active performers is connecting with established institutional mentors to advance through the system, making significant observations and contributions to their field, fully supported, whilst remaining as active creators within it.

¹³ Including Prof. Cat Hope, Prof. Julian Knowles, Prof. Philip Samartzis, Prof. Warren Burt, Prof. Phil Brophy, Dr. Ben Byrne, Dr. Robin Fox, Dr. Gary Butler, Dr. Peter Blamey, Dr. Judith Hannan, Dr. Alex Davies, Geoffrey Barnard, Rainer Linz, Jon Rose, Jim Denley, and Gail Priest.

¹⁴ Prof. Douglas Kahn, Prof. Frances Dyson, and Dr. Caleb Kelly.

¹⁵ As of August 2019, experimental sound artists Pia van Gelder, Tom Smith, Emily Morandini, Kynan Tan, Anthea Caddy, Natasha Anderson and Heather Contant are all completing their higher research degrees.

The next section will explore how improvisers cross-pollinate styles and approaches across the international translocal scene, and that the settings, sites and situations for performance can dictate the behaviours of the performers and audiences. It will also draw attention to the way in which the scene mirrors mainstream practices when promoting shows.

2.6 Audiences

Audiences are a vital dynamic element at play in the context of an improvised music performance, but also vital to the evolution, feedback systems and survival of the music. The audience and listeners—whether attending concerts or buying records—share similar social politics and an attraction to responses to uncertainty in real time. This section explores the relationship between an improviser and their audience, how listeners are ‘trained’, and whether the character of the music can be seen to have become devoid of humour and self-reflexivity.

Those typically present at a performance of improvised music are usually other players, long-time devoted listeners (which includes the non-playing organisers, curators and publishers) as well as some listeners happening upon the music for the first time.¹⁶ As the details of Improv concerts are notoriously difficult to come across, many find out about them from the musicians themselves or word of mouth.¹⁷

¹⁶ This is often a make-or-break moment that will determine a long love affair or decisive rejection. The context in which the first improvised music performance is heard is particularly significant to a first-time listener.

¹⁷ This changed with the advent of Myspace in 2003 when performers could list performances (and even rehearsals) on an international calendar and also link to sound files to solicit gigs from organisers. Now, the far more widespread and integrated use of platforms such as Facebook (est. 2004) and Instagram (est. 2010) promote events and render visible the network of players, organisers and listeners.

The audience is always an active ingredient in the resulting sonic outcomes of improvised performance. In pre-composed, pre-scripted works, audience members are (mostly) directed, passive actors within the performance space. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule, such as when audiences erupt, heckle, boo, applaud, sing along or walk out. Whilst these moments inevitably affect sections of a performance, they do not do so to the degree that they shape an entirely improvised piece. The audience shares authorship over an improvisation in a way that they cannot in less porous musics. Andy Bennett observes that audiences have been considered to be “both powerless and unreflexive recipients of cultural products” and that more recently theorists are placing “much more emphasis on the notion of audiences as ‘active’ participants in the production and inscription of meaning in the products of the culture industries” (Bennett 2000, 54).

Long-running Australian experimental music festivals like *What Is Music?* and *the NOW now* operated on the basis of an established community of musicians and their friends who could fill a venue when the bill was packed with fifty or so performers. The ripple effect from community word of mouth also generated a respectful curiosity and a willingness to ‘sit through’ a performance that in any other context one might be alienated, confused or repelled by. This could also explain the prevalence and popularity of house concerts for improvised music, where people are invited into intimate settings—a lounge room, a backyard—to listen to a few pieces. This practice is commonplace in Berlin, and increasingly in Sydney, especially if a visiting musician is in town and there hasn’t been sufficient lead-time to organise a public venue.

Improv concert organisers anticipate (and perhaps at times seek out) a small, specialised audience. Many do not expect the music to appeal to most people, and the dedicated audiences that seek it out tend to have learned their nuanced listening practice (Becker 1982, 64, Ramshaw and Stapleton 2016, 50); one could say they are almost trained

for the collective listening space that the music often requires. Berlin-based organiser and artist Nicholas Bussmann recalls that the audiences of Anorak, a regular venue for experimental music performance in the 1990s, were “exquisite, highly concentrated, and prepared to engage sophisticatedly with what was offered” (Bussmann, 2011, 65) and that the venue attracted those who were “distinctly tolerant of noise-makers who either talked away themselves without interruption or timed their commentaries exactly to fit the smallest musical pause” (65).

In a critical appraisal of the performance culture, performer and co-director of Liquid Architecture, Joel Stern observes that audiences of experimental music have heard the music “ossify and settle before their ears” (Stern 2017, 78) and argues that musicians must embrace humour and reflexivity in order to counter this humourless ossification. Whilst appreciating the close analysis given to the genre, Stern’s critique cannot be applied across all forms of experimental music. In fact, I would argue it is only valid for specific subgenres of experimental music which cultivate this kind of ‘serious listening’ space, which is often required in order to hear it at all. Subgenres of Improv such as onkyô or reductionism, for example, tend towards a volume level so quiet that they can be literally inaudible if people are chatting, laughing or buying drinks during performances.

However, to counter Stern’s argument I can also refer to the many examples of improvisers who have used humour, satire, parody and sardonic elements in their performances in Australia over the last twenty years. Among them: choosing sex toys as instrumental preparations (Gary Butler, Sam Pettigrew, Robbie Avenaim); alternating vocal personas (Amanda Stewart switching between the voice of a rugby commentator and a little French girl, Rosie Dennis’ use of clipped and contrasting quotes); face slapping and balloon blowing (Jim Denley); weaving car number plates through strings (Clayton Thomas); foregrounding the drinking of strawberry-flavoured milk or serving fresh coconuts to the

audience (Samuel Pettigrew); and in many other subtle ways perhaps more to do with the character of the performer—Rik Rue, Jon Rose, James Heighway, Tony Osborne, Sean Baxter, Anthony Pateras, Robin Fox, Lloyd Honeybrook, Laura Altman, Rod Cooper, Anthony Magen, Jon Wilton, John Watts, Rishin Singh, Nicola Morton, Anthony Pateras, Chris Abrahams and many more. These more humorous approaches to Improv performance could be linked to early John Cage and Fluxus performance.

Research for this thesis also considered the set-up of audience expectation and the various ways the audience is directly informed and addressed before and throughout an improvised music performance. These observations were drawn from the charismatic MC'ing of Sean Baxter (drummer and veteran MC of the *Make It Up Club*, Melbourne), Lloyd Honeybook (also MIUC, Melbourne), Clayton Thomas (the NOW now, Sydney), Jon Rose and Stephen Adams (the ABC live recording/*Live at Peggy's* series, Sydney). Extensive material showing the humour, personality and conviviality of these public shared listening situations can be found.

Although it is not within the scope of this research to fully investigate their practice, it is worth mentioning the work of several performers who question the role of the audience in the self-important spectacle. Some of these are Basque artist/writer Mattin, Argentinian dancer/writer Diego Chamy, British artist Tim Goldie, and Australian (Berlin-based) artist Rishin Singh. Through their performances they actively leverage their audiences' assumed knowledge of and relationship to Improv and its more earnest social and aesthetic tropes. Chamy has repeatedly drawn attention to the tropes and clichés of improvised music performance. I was performing on stage with Chamy in Berlin in 2012, during which he performed a live commentary of the improvisation that was typed up on his computer and projected behind the five performers, anticipating moves and making personal statements

about the players. Offended by the personal nature of the comments, and the mocking tone of the commentary, one of the performers left the stage.

In many ways, a contract is established between the performer and the audience member. Criminal law researchers Sarah Ramshaw and Paul Stapleton turned to understanding musical approaches to improvisation in “Countering Law’s Archive—Improvisation as Social Practice” (Ramshaw and Stapleton 2016), exploring the “complex ways in which improvised musical practices ‘inhabit a social landscape’, and how problem-solving in improvised music corresponds with that in other areas of human experience” (50). They correctly observe the active listenership that audiences are required to take on when they note that improvised music might be seen to “fail when the audience does not have a context or experience to properly engage with the performance” and that audiences “also need to practice and hone their skills of listening” (50). In my experience as an audience member and performer, I agree with this observation. The first experiences of performances that are not motivated by ‘entertaining’ or ‘pleasing’ their audience can be incredibly jarring and take time to adapt to and appreciate.

More often than not it is the smaller-scale, regular Improv performance series that establish these performer-audience contracts. Often these carry through to festivals presented by and for the same community, but who also attract more first-time listeners/audience members not familiar with these hitherto tacit agreements. In the case of *the NOW now* festivals, there were enough people familiar with the ‘focused listening’ during performances

as set up by the *If You Like Improvised Music, We Like You* series and other experimental music series that preceded it.¹⁸

Sean Baxter, in his role as MC of the *Make It Up Club* weekly series in Melbourne, recently made a request of the audience that recognised that there were people in attendance who may not be aware of the “focused and joyous listening” and disciplinary practices that the organisers had “tried to cultivate over twenty years”¹⁹. To summarise it would be to do it a disservice, so I have included it here in full:

Alright, hey, can I make a fucking fascist announcement? I don't mind if you speak while I speak. But I *do* mind if you fucking speak when the music is happening *if you like* the music happening. If you *don't like* the music happening, then feel free to speak all the time. That's totally cool (ibid).

This edict assumes that if one was fully engaged, one would not be talking. Purpose-built spaces for ‘respectful listening’ such as a concert hall do not require this kind of announcement, although more recently audiences of mainstream music concerts are reminded to turn their devices to silent mode, and performers often interrupt their own performances to ask people to stop filming and taking photos, or shoving their camera phones in their faces, and to just be present at the show, often to applause from the majority of the audience.²⁰

Becker suggests that loyal attendees/audiences for new and experimental works are key to their survival and to their broader dissemination. They ‘stomach’ the unintelligible,

¹⁸ A quite different example is the *Impermanent.audio* series at the Frequency Lab, where the organiser Caleb.K used to berate those that dared speak during the performances.

¹⁹ ABC archive recording accessed 5/2/18, thanks to Stephen Adams.

²⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/feb/10/kendrick-lamar-bans-phones-photographers-from-concerts> (accessed 8/6/18).

indigestible until they are able to interpret it²¹ and until there is a kind of understanding of the materials. A good example of this within Improv performance is the use of EBows to play (excite) the inner strings of a piano.²² For experienced audiences, seeing a performer reach inside the piano to place these devices on the strings to elicit extended tones is no longer a surprise. When seeing this for the first time it could be viewed as a dramatic gesture, with the resulting extended tone causing some confusion as to what this device has done. These loyal audiences who encourage experimentation—the “steady patron” as opposed to the occasional member—are often students or former students of art or formal arts training (51), and, in Becker’s view, serve “as a distant, early-warning system for less advanced audience segments” (54) assisting newer audiences in the listening/reception experience (46).

2.7 How practice forms community

Understanding context-responsive improvised music practice is important because it connects to bigger questions, proposing radical ways of listening, creating with and being with one another, valuing community, being sensitised to context (and others experience of that context), and allowing tensions to creatively (and respectfully) co-exist in society.

As an exemplary form of urperformativity, improvisation, in short, symbolizes the recognition that alternatives to orthodox practices are available; this recognition we suggest, is an ideological position that has profound ramifications for thinking about one’s relation to the social sphere. Improvisation ramifies that sphere in the

²¹ “People who continue to attend to the new work, despite its initial unintelligibility, may learn enough to interpret it.” (Becker 1982, 64)

²² The EBow is a battery-powered electromagnetic device designed for playing the electric guitar, introduced into the market in 1976 and invented by American designer Greg Heet.

most concrete of ways, as a lived, enacted performance of being differently in the world. (Fischlin and Heble 2004, 11)

In addition to being attracted to the material experiments and sonic outcomes, listeners and players are attracted to the creatively critical community that forms around the performance of improvised music. African American activist and musician Horace Tapscott recalls some of the extra-musical motivations behind people joining the community-based improvising groups the Pan-African Peoples Arkestra and the Underground Musicians Association (UGMA). These groups met regularly and were committed to sharing, teaching, developing and speaking their minds, getting involved in the Arkestra as though “it was their life’s work” (Fischlin and Heble 2004).

In *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue* co-authors Fischlin and Heble draw attention to those, like Tapscott, who articulated a “musical philosophy in which both improvisation and community making are foregrounded” and that this suggests “that the politicized aesthetics of improvisatory ‘wild’ musical practices evident in UGMA were profoundly integrated with a unique and energizing communitarian vision” (4). It was not just the music, but precisely the opportunity to commit to engage with ones’ community and its problems that drew people to engage in intense musical and personal discourses of transgression:

“[M]usic is in a state of permanent revolution” Pierre Boulez, *Orientations*, 1971, p.71) [...] a recognition that music is revolutionary in its capacity to disrupt the smug notion that the present is an absolute horizon that defines the limits of knowing, musically or otherwise. But improvisation, commonly (and wrongly) thought of as a form of musical difference in which spontaneity is a dominant value (an art of the present), is, as we have seen, crucial to signifying how the space of the present can invoke spontaneity in the name of remembrance, in the name of lost practices and social formations that feed into the creative surge of energies that make the improvisational present. (Fischlin and Heble 2004, 9)

I concur with the thinking of Fischlin and Heble (2004), who argue that the history of jazz improvisation and NIFIM is inextricably linked with alternative social spaces and the “lost practices of communicating through music, and lost practices of building community through the discrepant engagement and play of consonance and dissonance insistently articulated by improvisatory practices” (10). My lived experience of the practice and scene has been in the primarily white, eurocentric cities of Sydney and Berlin. Pertinent to this, Fischlin and Heble also note that not all communities that engage in improvisation are aligned with activism, antihegemonic resistance or critical strategies of alternative community building (2) and exist in opposition to dominant social structures (10).

Bailey suggested that the political implications of Improv are “for most people quite frightening, quite drastic. I guess, for that reason they will always be ignored” (Bailey 1996). Regardless of socioeconomic standing, my experience is that the radical political aspects of the music are rarely ignored by the performers. The necessity for radical forms of self-organisation is just one of the points at which practitioners align themselves with alternative ways of being and creating together.

The breaking down of performer-audience relations to one of participation, dialogue and forms of co-authorship is key to understanding the dynamics of Improv performance. Denley articulates that one of the defining principles of Improv is the “willingness to share this playing/listening with others [...] this gives it a game-like quality, and the relationships within the game give the process political dimensions” (Denley 2008, 135).

Most other musics desire to minimise the impact of the social on the sonic outcomes. This aligns with a modernist idea of musical innovation that is almost entirely centred on the experience or ‘genius’ of the singular author/composer, while the audience is considered an irrelevance at best, or at worst, a distraction from the core research being undertaken entirely within predefined musical structures.

In his 1996 interview with Derek Bailey, Jean Martin asks if group improvisation is “an attempt to bring life and art together? It has a strong social or sociological aspect”²³ (Bailey 1996), to which Bailey responded: “Freely improvised music for all its faults, and it’s not short of those, is at least vulnerable to outside influences. One of its attractions, I think.” Using the word ‘vulnerable’ as a positive here, Bailey welcomes the audience as part of the complex system and cyclical praxis of improvising. Key improvisers, although involved in highly experimental music, welcome the audience as part of the ongoing creative process.

This thesis not only argues for a new appreciation of rich and radical collective compositional practices, but also for the ability of improvised music to foster, create and sustain audiences engaging in and honing their radical, focused listening practices. This is not applicable to all musics and scenes. Improvisation is uniquely placed to do this.

Summary

The practice of improvised music has gone through two key phases of development: NIFIM and Improv. Through this research I have identified CRIM as a third key development as a consciously context-responsive approach within the improvisation practice scene. By tracing the genealogy of improvised music performance, shared sociopolitical and economic motivations, the current manifestations of the practice across the translocal scene, audiences, and how these combine to form community, we can now explore the details and associated problems with the increasing stabilisation of these practices.

²³ Perhaps observing the influence of Fluxus.

Chapter 3

Stabilised modes and codified tropes of Improv

Each discernible school of contemporary improvisation (e.g. bebop, Free Jazz, swing, non-jazz improvised musics etc.) has over a period defined ‘agreed objectives’ to which musicians and audiences alike may relate. These ‘agreements’ tend to harden into conventions that reflect much more than mere procedures (Prévost 1995, 176).

Over the past eighteen years I have performed in eighteen countries, mostly concentrated between the years 2007-2011, during which time I was based in Berlin. My performance circuit traced an outline of translocal networks of connected organisations and venues, and therefore ongoing dialogues on improvised collaboration and performance. Whether you are a practitioner of improvised music performance, or a casual audience member, it is clear that there are common practices in the presentation and promotion of Improv. The context is often very similar whether you are at an Improv concert in Warsaw, London or Melbourne.

Acknowledging that each venue, series or festival may have defined their particular aesthetic or preferred approaches to Improv, I nonetheless have observed a common formula in the curation and presentation of the music internationally. In this chapter I establish how these reliable codes manifest across concert series and festival settings so as to explore how they can be disturbed.

3.1 Stabilisation of the presentation of Improv

Temporal, spatial and social dynamics are often unchallenged (undisturbed) by the presenters or performers of the music. This is not to say that the resulting music or social experience is of lesser value, but if this music is uniquely porous to context, and is played in a stabilised,

predictable context most of the time, practitioners are missing an opportunity to shift or energise their playing by remaining unconscious of this relationship.

Certain behaviours are expected or taken for granted based on the setting—whether the performance setting is part of a regular weeknight series event as compared to a festival for example. If there is only one band scheduled to perform during the evening, the group (or soloist) might play longer pieces or several sets. The styles and subgenres of Improv will more than likely vary from set to set. If there are several bands programmed it is more likely that each group will play a single piece. If the band is playing together for the first time—which is often the case in international touring settings and improvised music festivals—the musicians may not have even spoken before the set, the music being their first ‘conversation’. At times this results in a high-energy set of one-upmanship (Henderson 2016, Denley 2018), at other times it produces a set of delicate or overly polite gestures, full of observation and space.

In many ways, Improv enthusiasts—listeners, players and everything in between—are a self-exploitative community (Priest 2008, 141). The spaces for regular performance series are almost always small, shabby rooms in squat-style living spaces or bars, for example the Frequency Lab or Lamps¹ (both in Hibernian House, a multi-storey inner city block in Sydney), Sowieso (a former shopfront in Berlin)², ausland³(a repurposed bunker in Berlin), or the tiny Gallery Off Site⁴ (Tokyo). Some exceptions are where a popular or mainstream

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/Lamps-308025755880360/> (accessed 20/9/17).

² <http://www.sowieso-neukoelln.de/#home> (accessed 20/9/17).

³ <https://ausland-berlin.de/> (accessed 20/9/17).

⁴ <https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2014/10/off-site-improvised-music-from-japan> (accessed 20/9/19).

jazz club like Bimhuis⁵ (Amsterdam) or Porgy & Bess⁶ (Vienna) is used, or a white-walled contemporary art gallery fit-out for performances like Pelt⁷ (Sydney), Verge⁸ (Sydney), or Westspace⁹ (Melbourne). These concerts commence at conventional evening times (7-8pm), entrance is charged at either very low rates of between AUD \$10-15, or by donation.

The majority of performance sites are not purpose-built, official or regulated performance spaces. Extensive promotion of events might attract the attention of authorities who could penalise the organisers or shut the concert down for failing to comply with building code regulations (accessibility requirements, sound proofing, sufficient fire egress). Concerts are more often promoted by photocopied pole-posters, flyers, word of mouth, email lists, and more recently through social media.

Festivals are less self-marginalising than a series that features similar content. The festival is an opportunity for the Improv community to fill larger venues with the spectacle of a multi-day event that may attract support in the form of funding, partnerships, or sponsorship, and thereby afford the option to feature higher profile and established artists from overseas. Festivals also attract microscenes at a (trans)local level that bring different currents of practice into contact with one another as well as with a new listenership.

Festivals which feature Improv are often large-scale spectacles presenting primarily improvised, ‘experimental’ music and/or sound art/installation. In my experience, they vary little in format. There are four to six acts per night, following an established rock music

⁵ <https://www.bimhuis.nl/en/> (accessed 20/9/17).

⁶ <http://www.porgy.at/> (accessed 20/9/17).

⁷ <https://theartlife.com.au/2006/farewell-pelt/> (accessed 20/9/17).

⁸ <https://verge-gallery.net/> (accessed 20/9/17).

⁹ <https://westspace.org.au/> (accessed 20/9/17).

festival format.¹⁰ Some of these bands are well known as ensembles, others are meeting for the first time—a fact more often than not acknowledged by a charismatic Master of Ceremonies, such as Sean Baxter in Melbourne, Jeff Henderson in Wellington, or Clayton Thomas in Sydney.

There is an absence of experimental or communitarian thinking when it comes to marketing materials and promotional behaviour within the Improv scene. The same principles apply here when seeking attention (promotion) and affirmation (reviews) from the press as they do in other mainstream musical genres. For example, knowing that a band is making its ‘world premiere’ at a festival is at times a boon for the organisation, and often raises the stakes for the artists (and therefore for listeners). That is, if the artists enjoy a ‘high profile’—indicated by having the imprimatur of a record label, articles written about them in *The Wire*, high record sales, and so on—greater numbers are attracted to participate/witness. Festival ‘headliners’ or more well-known performers will often play with ‘locals’. These are examples of where alternative scenes and events mirror and adopt mainstream entertainment market practices to their detriment as it undermines the anti-hierarchical principles at the heart of the scene.

Like many, if not all, artist-led movements and spaces organised at the coal face of practice, it is common in the Improv scene for organisers to also be performers of the music. The directors of the following experimental festivals (that feature Improv) are also themselves performing artists: *the NOW now* (Sydney), *What Is Music?* (Australia/national) *Densités* (Fresnes en Woevre), *Musique Action* (Nancy), *High Zero* (Baltimore), *Vitamin S*

¹⁰ Occasionally a multi-stage format, also following established music festivals, is used, for example *What Is Music?* festival at Metro Theatre in 2006.

(Auckland), *Bomb the Space* (Wellington), *Liquid Architecture* (Australia/national), *Bend/Break* and *Splitter Festival* (Berlin), *Supersense* (Melbourne), and *MONA FOMA* (Hobart), to name just a few. This is due in part to the limited resources that this genre attracts, and also due to the lack of infrastructure and cultural kudos that organisers in a more established mainstream music scene enjoy. The intimate knowledge of capacities for invention, collaboration, styles and approaches held by improvisers of one another is yet another reason for organisers to also be players.

The Improv scene is largely itinerant as a translocal, international community of geographically dispersed musicians. Consequently, festivals are where most of the cross-pollination of specialists in the field takes place, as well as intensive research to further one's art form or listening practices.

The international translocal Improv scene is recognisable as a distinct community, with an international touring circuit that attracts practitioners and listeners who share a common set of questions and motivations with regard to alternate social structures, co-authorship and fluid collaborative possibilities. Its network of venues and festivals, shared concerns of its practitioner base, and increasing unity in approach suggest that improvised music has become a musical genre.

Whilst improvisation remains the core practice within Improv as a genre, it is also true that performances of Improv over the past two decades have developed a series of recognisable styles and sound palettes, and therefore a more homogenous set of sonic outcomes through increasing codification. This would suggest that it has evolved in a manner that has eroded some of its original intentions and contradicted some of its core motivations. Some responses to this situation where this tendency is being challenged have been the informal community discussions initiated by the Echtzeitmusik community in Berlin (at local venue Kule between 2008-2011), Trio Sowari's humorous but nonetheless insightful

published list “27 Questions For A Start” (*Trio Sowari 2007*), and the questions raised by Scottish organisation Arika’s manifesto (Glasgow, 2010)¹¹.

The established and codified practices that have emerged are at times at odds with the anti-establishment attitudes at the core of the translocal scene. Stabilising the practice has given rise to a number of tensions, specifically ones that contradict the stated aims of a ‘free’, non-hierarchical, communitarian, collectively composed musical form that defies genre.

Examples of this are:

- Common formulas for presentation and promotion
- Paradoxical replication of practices common to the market logic
- Thinly veiled traditional authorial hierarchies and compositional practices
- Dominant socialisations and habituations (for performers as well as audience)
- Long-time ensembles with a reliable style
- Recognisable subgenres and shticks (specialising in noise, reductionism, etc.)

I refer to genre both as a set of stylistic traits as well as recognisable practices around the performance of the music. I will go into greater detail regarding the styles and approaches that make up the genre (and subgenres) further on in this chapter. Across international annual festivals, performance series and record labels, the players and fans of Improv understand what it is and what it is not.

Improv as recognisable genre today was born out of Bailey’s articulation of NIFIM in the 1980s. As such, it is a genre that draws from, but is not the same as, NIFIM; it avoids

¹¹ This will be covered in more detail in Chapter 6.

adhering to musical idiom or genre, which makes it historically relevant to this research.

Bailey's focus was primarily on the nature and practice of improvisation and the interrelation of musicians and musics through spontaneous creation. Many of the ideas that Bailey attempted to legitimise in his book (1980) are now taken for granted by members of the international Improv scene.

In the 1980s, Bailey believed that diversity was freely improvised music's most consistent characteristic, observing that "it has no stylistic or idiomatic commitment. It has no prescribed idiomatic sound. The characteristics of freely improvised music are established only by the sonic-musical identity of the person or persons playing it" (Bailey 1992, 83). Although perhaps accurate in the 1980s when 'free Improv' was still enjoying its youth, four decades of the international performance practice of NIFIM has meant that it is now a recognisable genre. Of course, the details, colours, textures and shape of the music are always different, but the 'characteristics' of the music, as Bailey called it, are well established beyond the 'sonic-musical' identities of the performers.

The context in which Improv is performed is a defining feature of this music. Not only that, but the context has a significant impact on determining the approach or styles chosen by the performers, as well as the success or failure to connect or communicate with a broader audience. The following sections will interrogate this proposition and subsequent impacts for the practice.

3.2 The role of nomadism in cross-pollination of performance and presentation

Beyond any economic impetus, touring from venue to venue, town to town and festival to festival plays a vital role in researching and sharing styles and approaches across the

translocal Improv circuit. Nomadic behaviour is almost assumed. In addition to what can feel like a constant state of touring as an improviser, I am drawing on the concept of nomadism as framed by curator and art critic, Nicolas Bourriaud, who suggests that nomadism is a “technique for generating creativeness and deriving knowledge” (Bourriaud 2009, 13). His 2009 Tate Modern exhibition builds on the oversimplified understanding of nomadism by introducing the concept of the ‘altermodern’, which emphasises the nomadic nature at the heart of works that “eclipse static forms through which they initially manifest” in order to prioritise the unravelling, receding lines of movement and perspective—and that it is this unravelling, this movement and this shared line that is defining the creative time we find ourselves in currently.

What resonates in this research with Bourriaud’s framing is a recognition of nomadism as a creative force and a celebrated state of being, both in that it allows cross-pollination across the translocal scene, but also that it gives more import to the ‘line’ rather than the “points along its length” (Bourriaud 2009, 14). One of the contributing artists to the Altermodern exhibition, Seth Price, observes that our new cultural framework is defined by collective authorship and complete decentralisation. The constant movement of participants around the translocal scene is vital for the distribution of ideas not only of playing styles, but also benefits the use and uptake of new technologies. It is fitting for this research that in his description of the Altermodern, Bourriaud observes that “[t]he disappearance of [‘metanarratives’]...ushers in a culture of improvisation and time-loops: if there is no more script, we have henceforth to react to a ‘context’, or deal in short-term measures” (Bourriaud 2009, 17). Similarly, Improv performance is a genre where the “art occurs in realtime” (Butcher, 2011, np) but is borne from a broader understanding of being parts of a dynamic network, a complex system in constant flux, where we have shifted our focus from “structures to structuring and from content to context.” (Borgo 2005, 2).

Although part of the same complex system, musicians in the translocal Improv scene tend to operate between two modes. The first mode is rooted in a local community that explores a variety of contexts within its locality, its proximity ever-deepening its relationship to place and the sonic marks and memories of site and locality, consisting of a string of venues regularly attended by local musicians and their invited guests. The second is the mode of a nomadic, cross-pollinating situation-seeking performer. This mode is motivated by economics, but also indicates a practice that is constantly seeking new social, temporal and spatial interactions.

The rapid cross-pollination of performance styles within Improv is extraordinary. In the absence of hours and days of ceremonial and hierarchy-driven rehearsal of dictated composition material, the itinerant Improv community scatters itself around the planet to share, trade, mimic, sample, build, co-author, teach and learn from one another. We meet to perform in one another's community festivals, but also (and more often) one another's houses, yards, garages and artist-run galleries. Perhaps also due to the lack of pomp and ceremony, our audiences follow us into drains, caves, bushwalks, kitchens, disused sports clubs and construction sites.

Performances are also considered to be key spaces of research, however, it is the ability to respond to uncertainty together that is being honed, not the realisation of the score or the memorisation of a song. As cross-pollination of styles has always been prevalent in NIFIM/Improv, and it is almost expected that an improviser would play in several different ensembles, or not establish a working group at all.

Improvisers establish, re-establish and refine their sonic identities through their working ensembles, recordings, being event (concert/festival/series) organisers, or not. In repeating situational relationships, the clarity of this identity is affirmed. Some are constantly on the move and playing with different musicians as a matter of course. When we pursue

new or unknown situational relationships to disrupt our habits, or ‘known-knowns’, this triggers new creative responses, and has a powerful ongoing ripple-effect among the translocal community.

Improv performance explores what Miwon Kwon refers to as the “terrain between mobilization and specificity” (166). Most Improv musicians are not in powerful social positions, but mobility is a definitely a privilege enjoyed by many performers. Artists are invited (and paid) to travel from place to place thanks to a network of passionate advocates across the globe who support them to perform with those they may never have met, but whose music has connected them through other means. The refusal of the mainstream to embrace Improv signals a standoff with a practice that does not ‘fit’, or does not ‘belong’. Part of the attraction to the performance of Improv is an attraction to this tension and bearing witness to whether it will fit or work in a space, in an ensemble, or in a social environment.

This generative, iterative and translocal (Bennett and Peterson 2004) circuit of players and community of listeners can be mapped in real time through the sites of performance and the publishing of documented interactions (both public and private). Examples of mailing lists that keep audiences abreast of public performances in Australia are the EMUS¹², the NOW now¹³, and Experimental Melbourne¹⁴; in Berlin it is the Echtzeitmusik Kleiner Berliner Konzert Kalender¹⁵.

¹² <https://www.emus.space/about/> (accessed 3/4/17).

¹³ <http://www.thenownow.net/> (accessed 3/4/17).

¹⁴ <http://exp-melb.blogspot.com.au/> (accessed 3/4/17).

¹⁵ <http://www.echtzeitmusik.de/> (accessed 3/4/17).

3.3 Establishing styles and approaches

Echoing Bertolt Brecht's famous retort "when people no longer wished to call his new forms 'theatre', they could call them 'theatre' instead" (Lehmann 2006, 107), Bailey observes that when individual performers or working Improv groups arrive at a particular collective improvisation style with a "strong identity which is practiced, pursued and polished... then maybe it becomes something else. But very often the only appropriate name for it is free improvisation" (Bailey 1996, np)—it is still improvised music, just a "different version"(np) of it. The tacit agreements, rules and codified approaches are held together and made known by the complicity of those performing in the international Improv scene.

In festivals where the organisers also act as match-maker, these organisers will consider the individual players' 'tendencies' or 'sensitivities' when programming a particular grouping to come together for the first time as part of their festival line-up. Examples of this include Annalee Koenig and Ari Sharp of *Make It Up Club 20th Birthday Festival 2018* (Melbourne); Clayton Thomas of *the NOW now* festival in Sydney; Emmanuelle Pellegrini of *Densités Festival* in regional France, and the curatorial team behind *High Zero Festival* in Baltimore. For organisers such as these, they may have played with or seen the artists improvise before and therefore be able to foresee their compatibility with other improvisers.

However, do agreed aesthetic objectives render Improv prescribed, and therefore make of it a kind of (historical) hypocrisy? Prévost cautions against agreed aesthetic objectives turning into conventions when we mistake a mobile and inclusive 'otherness' for an exclusive and territorial 'ourness', "sometimes no better than the rigidities artists have striven to escape" (Prévost 1995, 176).

Depending on the context, it is not only the high standard of improvisation that secures a performance opportunity, but also what the organiser/curator knows of the 'style'

of playing and how that might ‘fit’ with the other sets on the bill. In this manner, the event exists as speculative design for the organiser or curator, and artists are chosen for their flexibility and ability to improvise with anyone, or for their established approach.

For many, this is where their latest publication or recording can function as a ‘calling card’, with a recent folio indicating that the improvisation is *likely* to explore the subgenre of X (‘lower case’) or Y (‘balls-to-the-wall free jazz’) and therefore ‘work’ or ‘not work’ in the speculative sonic offerings/field of that particular event. For example, the reliability of minimalist and cyclical nature of the performances of Australian trio The Necks is key to their success. Many ensembles have tried to replicate this deceptively simple concept. Perhaps the stabilisation of style is (for some) fuelled by the aim to secure performance opportunities. I am not arguing here that this stabilisation is negative or that it needs to be disturbed in order for the music to evolve; on the contrary, ensembles such as this are also able to consciously engage with context to energise the relationship between the players and audience as much if not more so than those playing together for the first time. There are obvious economic and professional benefits to working with a long-established group with a recognised style, as Bailey observed: “the longer you play something the more work you are likely to get for it” (Bailey 1996).

Tracing the Improv dialogue in Berlin between the 1980s to early 2000s reveals that within the Echtzeitmusik community, organisations and venues established their own specific aesthetic focus, listenership and listening practice due to the critical mass of improvisers based in Berlin as well as the steady stream of international players moving through the scene on the translocal circuit. An excellent example of this was the 2:13 Club, established in 1998 by musicians Burkhard Beins and Michael Renkel. It was an alternative to other spaces like Club Anorak, which celebrated ad hoc collaborations and had more of a punk/noise aesthetic approach to improvisation:

The focus of the 2:13 Club was rather on improvisational groups that worked together over longer periods of time and thereby gradually moved closer to composition. Also, the reflective work on the finest details of sounds and the development of personal sound identities through expanding instruments and playing techniques were very important. Given the clear profile of this venue, a lot of improvisers felt excluded as it did not correspond to their way of playing music. (Beins et al. 2011, 41)

From the great distance of Sydney, an improviser could discern where their improvisational vocabulary might ‘fit’ and which venues to approach based on online concert line-ups and records emerging from the local scene of that place—particularly if it was a live recording from one of these venues. It was also possible to trace the regular players (via online concert listings and printed concert listings in *The Wire* magazine) and organise to collaborate with them so as to ‘have an in’ with the organisers, if they were not familiar with your improvisations. Australian percussionist Tony Buck was the musician who introduced me to the Berlin scene (after coming to *the NOW now* festival in Sydney, 2003), inviting me to play in a small club with some collaborators of his. It was through this gig that I met other collaborators, and continue to do so, cued by this first performance opportunity.

The Necks are a particularly interesting group, having an established, simple set of approaches but with phenomenal variety within this agreed approach. Formed in 1987, they have developed an approach that has attracted a huge international following¹⁶, honing individual improvisational styles in tandem with a powerful collaborative (improvised)

¹⁶ One need only read Geoff Dyer’s *New York Times* review as an illustration of the cult following of The Necks. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/04/magazine/my-obsession-with-the-necks-the-greatest-trio-on-earth.html> (accessed 2/4/18).

compositional practice over thirty years. I interviewed the trio (Chris Abrahams, Lloyd Swanton and Tony Buck) about their approach before a concert in the Blue Mountains in 2016, during which Buck articulated several of the tacit agreements regarding the style and approach of the ensemble:

There are things I would not do in this group. It's not free improvisation in the sense that we're free to do whatever we want. I feel it's very specific. I think all groups, in a way, should have a reason to exist—and this one is very particular. I never do things in this group outside of cyclic playing, no matter what that means. I've given myself that obligation to keep within that parameter. [...] It's interesting and un-talked about—this tacit aesthetic or musical structural way, where we just have this thing that we've agreed on somehow. The functions we fulfil seem to have also come about organically, made themselves known without having to talk about them. (Buck 2016, np)

What Buck has articulated is common to long-working groups exploring improvisation, though deceptively simple (and not always as effective) as with The Necks. Improvisers create and to provoke different responses and fresher approaches when they observe that “improvising freely” is leading to homogenous outcomes, flows, forms, climaxes and codas.

3.4 Improv subgenres, styles, trends and arbiters of taste

This research highlights a great tension within improvised music performance: if one plays in a reliable, stabilised or codified way, audiences know that they can rely on a certain kind of response (regardless of who they are playing with). So, what does a performer prioritise? The freedom to draw on whatever they choose and to risk losing the support of their audience (and organisers who have enjoyed their approaches/instrumentation/ensembles of the past)? Or to maintain a line of sonic and textural inquiry with every performance much like a palette? Is this akin to a product? How much of this is a commercial reality for performers?

Improvised music performance has become highly professionalised over four decades. Like many other anti-establishment movements, it has adapted to institutional structures to gain status and benefits beyond ‘the joy of playing’.

Those that play Improv can identify styles, subgenres and trends. Actively performing across the translocal scene for four decades, Evan Parker confidently listed some of the recognisable subgenres of Improv that developed in “the intervening years” between the birth of NIFIM in the 1970s and performance and 2014:

In the intervening years various schools have come into being which are assumed from the outside to have dogmatic endorsement or rejection of this or that approach—“not too loud”, “not too fast” or proscribing by turns: tonality; atonality; metric elements; overt expressionism; reductionism; “lower case” and perhaps therefore “upper case”; a knowledge of, and overt reference to, the jazz tradition; a knowledge of and refusal to acknowledge the jazz tradition; no reference to because no knowledge of the jazz tradition; computers; no computers... and so on. ...Attempts at subgenre defining terms have perhaps reached a peak with “death ambient”. (Schroeder 2014, 6)

In addition to the observations of Bailey and Parker, I will draw on my own experience of decades-long observation as a performer and event organiser to list several in this section. An audit of international improvised music styles (what I refer to as subgenres of the Improv genre) has been sourced from mostly festival programs, series line-ups and hundreds of record releases (with their illuminating liner notes).

My participation in and observation of styles and scenes also coincided during the period of 2007-2013, which marked a time of intensive international touring and fieldwork. Some of the recognisable styles, schools and trends commonly observed and spoken about within Improv were: onkyô (also known as reductionism, Berlin silence, London silence, lowercase improv); Free Improv (also known as ‘plinky plonk’ or ‘scratchy’ music); electroacoustic improvisation, free jazz (also known as ‘balls-to-the-wall’); noise; glitch; sound collage; avant-pop Improv, and possibly many more since 2014. I have included a

table below that lists a breakdown of these subgenres, the regions they were most often played in and the context they were most often performed in, as well as some recognisable approaches and key practitioners.

3.4.1 Table of subgenres of Improv 2007-2013¹⁷

Subgenre common term/s and key characteristics	Main regions	Key practitioners	Common context for performance
Onkyô reductionism, lower case, Berlin silence, London silence Extreme minimalism. Acoustic, electronic and electro-acoustic combinations.	Tokyo, Berlin, London and Vienna. Related to Viennese Wandelweiser school.	See Robin Hayward, Axel Dörner, Annette Krebs, Toshimaru Nakamura, Mark Wastell, Rhodri Davies, Andrea Neumann	Intimate rooms or galleries, necessarily small, highly attentive audiences. Often electronic or electroacoustic combinations.
Free Improv, plinky plonk, hyperactive, scratchy Mostly prepared instruments and/or heavy reliance on ‘extended techniques’. Often characterised by a side table containing a range of ‘preparations’ including battery-operated fans, steel wool, alligator clips, sheets of metal or paper of varying thicknesses.	Ubiquitous on European Improv festival circuit, but also common in Wellington, Sydney, Melbourne.	See Madga Mayas, Christine Abdelnour, Clayton Thomas, Sean Baxter, Steve Heather.	Many long-running European festivals would present on formal purpose-built stages. A feature of this style is first-time or ad hoc ensembles. Popular in France and Poland.
Electroacoustic Improv A distinguishing feature of this subgenre was that it relied on high quality studio speakers or PA systems. Several proponents were known to bring their own studio monitors to gigs.	Europe	See Axel Dörner, Annette Krebs, Andrea Neumann, Werner Däfeldecker, often in combination with the Japanese minimalist electronic players such as Sachiko M ¹⁸ , Otomo Yoshihide, Toshimaru Nakamura, Tetuzi Akiyama. Erstwhile label founder Jon Abbey touted concerts as “world premieres” attempting (and succeeding) at applying prestige elements from other genres to what had always been a mainstay of the music.	Intimate rooms or galleries, necessarily small, highly attentive audiences.
Hyper-masculine free-jazz-inspired improv, ‘balls to the wall’, ‘noise Jazz’.	Mostly USA, but also European festival circuit.	German saxophonist and painter Peter Brötzmann is still the most recognisable performer and has had a huge influence	Many long-running European festivals would present on formal purpose-built stages. Audience was

¹⁷ I have collated this acknowledging these are not exhaustive nor definitive, but indicative of my own exposure and networks over the last two decades.

¹⁸ Sachiko M has never referred to herself as an improviser, instead insisting that she was playing “music from the future” (personal correspondence, 2004).

		on younger acoustic players as well as in the noise scene. The most well-known current proponents are Mats Gustaffsson, Ken Vandermark, Paal Nilssen-Love, and more recently Mette Rasmussen and Heather Leigh. In the USA the active key historical figures of Free Jazz Improv are African American: William Parker, Henry Grimes, Matthew Ship.	predominantly white, male 60-80-year-olds.
Noise	Worldwide	Anthea Caddy & Thembi Soddell duo, Robin Fox, Oren Ambarchi, Matt Earle, xNoBBQx, Peter Blamey (sonified copper wiring, mother boards and solar panels), Cat Hope, Lasse Marhaug, JP Gross, Jerome Noetinger, Kevin Drumm, Otomo Yoshihide,	Requires a large PA system most commonly found in rock venues internationally.
Sound collage, tape and vinyl sampling/mixing live	Worldwide, but with particular roots in the French musique concrète tradition.	Rik Rue, Jerome Noetinger, ErikM, Dieb13, Loop Orchestra,	No specific context.
‘Glitch’ and avant-dance	Australia	Naked on the Vague, Del Lumanata, Half High, Lucy Cliché	Warehouse parties, experimental music festivals ‘let your hair down’ section of the night.
Avant-pop	Europe, Scandanavia	Margareth Kammerer, The Magic ID, Myhr’s Trondheim Jazz Orkester with Jenny Hval, Love Chants	An awkward position in European contemporary Jazz festivals. Europe, mostly Scandinavia.
Outdoor Improv and “microphony” Live acoustic and electroacoustic playing is combined with an increased interaction with microphones and recording devices as extensions of the music.	Australia	Microphony is too niche to be a trope yet, practiced by the Splinter Orchestra in Sydney and performed publicly for the first time at Adelaide Festival (2014).	Often outdoor, bushland or desert settings.
Self-made instruments, Theatrical ‘Vaudevillian’, performativity of extended techniques	The Netherlands, Australia	Lucas Abela’s performance practice built on fear/danger/risk, Gary Butler’s use of sex toys on his guitar, Dutch school of Improv following drummer Han Bennink (for example setting fire to his drum kit), Cornelis Fuhler’s invented and hacked instruments.	Indoor theatres, traditional stages with theatrical lighting

In addition to one’s own experience as a performer or follower of the music, developmental changes and trends can be traced through published festival programs, series line-ups and record releases. A variety of motivations for establishing a recognisable style have been identified in the section preceding this table. The following section will explore the relationships between improvisation and the products that emerge from improvised performance, as well as their dissemination in an international market.

3.5 Improv documentation, products

Improvised performances are generative experiments. As the Improv scene is not primarily driven by the desire to create shiny, finished or complete objects, when it does produce marketable artefacts, it does so in ways that invariably result in them performing a different function to those of mainstream music industry. Rather, the published products or documents of Improv behave like calling cards, passports and scores in a translocal, international and itinerant network.

Capitalism requires that any craft or activity is pursued with the intention of accruing more capital in exchange value, making the performer complicit in systems that only understand value in terms of what it can be exchanged for, and which increases its capital value. Members of the Improv scene are no exception; of course, there are musicians who rely on income from gigs and record sales, but for many, unsurprisingly, Improv gigs are the least lucrative of the choices for employment.¹⁹ In comparison to the European market and their circuit of festivals and funded music series, Australia has limited opportunities for professionally paid concerts in this genre.²⁰

Presentation and distribution systems common to popular music markets have been adopted by improvised music promoters and practitioners. Adhering to some aspects of these systems has enabled performers to take part in a circuit of accessible cross-pollinating

¹⁹ Some examples would be performing in other “less-experimental” bands, teaching, composing for film, and composing for theatre or dance works.

²⁰ That is, being paid more than a share of the door takings, or more than AUD\$300 fee for a concert.

festivals, which then fosters and invites mutation. Becker has observed that artists who finance and determine the mode and distribution of their own work are freed from the rigid constraints and aesthetic standards of existing distribution systems, and from the pressure to distribute their work for financial return (Becker 1982, 96-97), and that this can be an experience of “liberation rather than deprivation” (97). With the advent of online distribution, this aspect is enhanced for musicians, providing a somewhat democratising effect in access to distribution.²¹

Basque practitioner/theorist and editor of *Noise and Capitalism* (2018), Mattin²² argues that Improv’s emphasis on risk-taking, agility, instability, resilience, innovation, and “embracing a constant sense of fragility and crisis” means that it has “more in common with contemporary capitalism than ever before” (Mattin 2014, 16). Practitioners need to be wary of how advocacy of these skills and traits might serve a system in direct conflict with their politics of radical egalitarianism. This is a key point underscoring my larger argument, that the translocal scene mirrors popular market practices via the materials produced beyond the live experience of the music.

Records simply supply a different listening experience to listening ‘live’; for the majority of people, apparently, a preferable one. Perhaps the debate over recording improvised music keeps rearing its head because, unlike other recorded music, there is no apparent economic justification for it. (Bailey 1992, 104)

²¹ Prior to internet file sharing, to distribute their own recordings musicians needed to pay for the production of records, tapes or CDs as well as postage if they were selling them beyond the merch desk at concerts, therefore limiting the scope to those that could afford the cost of doing this themselves as opposed to waiting on a label to produce and distribute on their behalf.

²² Reader should note that as a performer and writer, Mattin is known only as that single name.

The live experience of an Improv performance rarely translates to a recording, neither for the players or the audience (Bailey 1996, npp). All we can do is attempt a representation of sounds; capture, tag, edit, shine and describe the atmosphere after the fact. Mattin observed the futile practice of recording improvisations as though they were performances or as though the listener was “there with the players”, as there are “always decisions that mediate your relationship with the recording” (Mattin 2009).

It is clear for performers that playing live and making a recording are “two quite different things” (Bailey 1996, np). Bailey describes some of the typical differences between recording an improvisation in a studio in your own time, with that of performing an improvisation live where the social, economic and temporal performance contexts can mean that you must play in evening or stop mid-way while the audience gets food (Ibid). The document is a version of the sonic interaction that took place, not a replication of the experience. For many, recording a gig gives the event status beyond the performance, and that ‘moment’ can then be distributed to a wider, secondary audience and may also attract critical reviews, prompting more listeners to seek out the performances or recordings of that particular musician or combination of players.

One of the earliest Australian ensembles to document their improvisations was Sydney-based band Teletopa. They made the distinction that “Improvisation is in its purest form, unpremeditated; structured only in the moment of its occurrence in the instant of ‘now’ [...] Records and tape recordings become, in the case of improvisation, a score or a record of past achievement.”(Teletopa 1971, np). Denley notes that Teletopa’s tape library “became their notation, and freed them to indulge in the now” (Denley 2008, 137). In the ensemble’s own words: “the improvisation totality is then like a living organism, with a history and past of its own” (Teletopa 1971, np).

This paradox of recording improvisation is encouraged by Denley in the “interests of making some of this music available for listening” (Denley 2008, 136). Practitioner/theorist David Grubbs also notes that “what circulates in recorded form at a given time helps to delineate a historical landscape of musical activity,” which contributes to shaping the listenership, but that first-generation improvisers in particular regard them as “curiously incomplete representations of their efforts” (Grubbs 2014, ix).

When record labels feature Improv, they undoubtedly play a role in driving particular approaches to playing. The release can have the effect of a curatorial ‘seal of approval’ that might convince someone to book a band or musician that may not have occurred if the record was self-published. At experimental music festivals or series, it is common for performers to be selling CDs; these then act like calling cards for more gigs—a sonic CV. If the artist is on a recognisable or ‘significant’ record label it can also function as a public endorsement by an expert or connoisseur.

For the recent crop of improvisers, cultural capital was accrued and manifest mostly as status when playing concerts ranked with a certain calibre, or when asked to perform/record with significant figures and being published by a record label of a certain standing (indicated by popularity or distribution). The invitation to perform or to publish often acts as affirmation in a system that implies that playing and exploration is its own reward. Once ‘recognised’ by these ‘arbiters of taste’, an improviser will graduate to a level of performance where they are freer to experiment and hone their ideas, and are less bound to ‘prove’ their skills or be known for a particular ‘shtick’/style (for example the highly recognisable playing styles of guitarist Derek Bailey or German saxophonist Peter Brotzmann). Whilst this does not free them from the expectations audiences may have from years of exposure to their known or familiar modes of performance, it would be inaccurate to attribute the same freedoms to those just starting out, or who are attempting to be

recognised/able enough to join a festival line-up with people of greater expertise or reputation.

Improvisers (and their listeners) understand that the documents emerging from live improvisation perform a different function to the performances themselves. They have the ability to reach a wider audience but vary in their attempts to either replicate a 'live' experience or pressure the creators to create a 'good' piece of music. The recordings are used to promote certain styles, performers and ensembles in a way that is valuable but also needs to be problematised in replicating market practices if it is the dominant way in which the music is absorbed and distributed, and therefore understood.

Summary

Any new approach to creative practice or performance grows tired or familiar over time. It is inevitable that the freshness of the first wave of improvised music performance would lose its edge in some way, and evolve to birth new practices in other ways.

The next chapter will detail the differentiating features of CRIM practice as an evolutionary branch of this genre. It will also explore the radical bedrocks of DIY cultures that support improvised music and CRIM practice due to its ongoing critique and exploration of alternative modes of being and creating together, noting the historical class, race and gender context for its development. I will discuss the primacy of performance in improvised music practice and by extension, the necessity to examine its audience and the sites and situations of performance. Whether engaged with critically or unquestioningly, the audience and the sites of engagement with the audience are core to the sonic outcomes of Improv and CRIM.

Chapter 4

Context-responsive Improvised Music: Evolving the art form

This chapter explores some ways in which we might better understand and celebrate the practice of context-responsive improvisation. I explore the primacy of performance in the field of improvised music as well as articulating why it is more appropriate to talk about situation-specificity rather than site specificity when exploring the dynamic, complex system within which the practice operates. This chapter also asks ‘What does it mean to appreciate the music with an expanded sense of site and time?’ and argues that the implications of understanding the practice beyond the reception of single performances holds value beyond the field of music.

To navigate the above, I have drawn on visual thinking from design practice to present the first of two analytical tools presented in this thesis: a graphic diagram of the contextual variables at play when researching, collaborating and performing improvised music. The Contextual Variables Diagram (Fig. 3) developed throughout this research visualises the dynamic elements at play and also considers the role of the audience. As the sonic outcomes of Improv become increasingly homogenous, the practices of disturbance and disruption are becoming more widespread, signalling a new wave of improvising practitioners engaged in CRIM practice. This diagram makes visible the various territories of practice (research, sonic materials, social materials, collaboration and live performance) within which the dynamic elements at play are located.

After explaining the way the diagram can be applied, I will define what I mean by disturbance strategies and outline the subtle differences between individual, ensemblic, and

organisational engagement with these strategies. I will then identify the practices of the organisations, ensembles and individuals who are evolving the artform by disturbing the trend towards risk mitigation, homogeneity and predictable outcomes.

As articulated in chapter 2, performers committed to playing improvised music share broad sociopolitical goals: they are drawn to alternate social structures, co-authorship, fluid performance and collaborative possibilities, and personal expression; but those who choose a more consciously context-responsive practice are particularly interested in transparency of process, embracing failure, agitation and protest. Resistance and solidarity were common sociopolitical modes of the first wave of NIFIM practitioners. For improvisers now, it is the third wave of consciously context-responsive (CRIM) practitioners who, through avoiding standardised market practices and risk mitigation are engaged in a more radical process, resisting homogenisation. They are futuring alternative ways of organising for creative, collaborative co-existing ideas in society.¹

The most engaging improvised performances today consciously address their context, site and/or situation through decoding and/or recoding the meaning of sound and collective listening in a space, and through doing this offer alternatives. The practitioners find ways to make these relationships—or the tensions in and around them in that moment—more apparent, and therefore more potent. Over the next three chapters I will draw on significant examples from the international improvised music community to demonstrate the radical ideas that practitioners are proposing. They show alternate ways of relating to and creating with one another in a way that prioritises the ability to creatively respond to uncertainty in

¹ Further research into the fields of activism, resistance and solidarity are beyond the scope of this thesis, however, the relationship between these and collaborative composition practice deserves further attention.

real time above and beyond the production of shiny, polished, independently ‘good’ pieces of music. These examples combine to build a strong case for engaging a design lens as a more appropriate approach to fully understanding them.

4.1 Differentiating features of context-responsive improvised music practice

Having detailed the genealogy of improvised music, I can now explain the key difference between the now established genre of Improv and the core subject of inquiry—what I am calling CRIM practice. Improv as a genre has emerged from forty years of international cross-pollination and practice of improvised music. In my experience, and that of many of the practitioners I interviewed for this research, the majority of improvised music performance is not faithful to its founding motivations of responding to uncertainty in real time, and seeking what is endlessly variable. It has an established translocal scene and coherence across both sound materials and performative approaches, as well as shared political motivations. Furthermore, one can identify recognisable subgenres and styles with a stable set of presentation and promotional modes and contexts, resulting in a homogenous set of outcomes often contrary to the core motivations of the practice of improvisation.

On the basis of data collected from observation, interviews and participation, this thesis argues that whether engaged with consciously or unconsciously, context is a core compositional tool in improvised music performance. Practitioner-theorist Robin Fox argues that context is also a major player in the study and performance of experimental music more broadly:

The term experimental music is, in almost every sense, a metamorphic one. Any attempt to define its parameters seems to result in a series of qualifications that serve only to obscure the meaning of the term. This is primarily because the very nature of an activity is defined largely by its context, that is, a combination of its *physical, temporal, political and aesthetic geographies*. Also, and perhaps most importantly, what is considered experimental in one context is not considered experimental in another. Aside from these geographies, the term is equivocated further when questions are asked about the focus of the experimentation itself. [emphasis added] (Fox 2002, 4)

The international presentation and performance modes on the ‘Improv circuit’ have come to mirror the practices of popular music. This includes established styles of performance and approaches to presentation, adopting recordings as calling cards, and exhibiting many of the hierarchical and legacy-driven power dynamics that result in ‘big names’ on festival line-ups to sell tickets. These modes have value in their ability to attract and sustain niche practices and dedicated listenership but become problematic if they become the singular modes in which improvisation is experienced.

It is appropriate that one of the primary provocations for this research has emerged from an organisation intent on disturbing reliable outcomes and power dynamics associated with experimental music over the last two decades. The following quote is from a manifesto crafted by Glasgow arts organisation Arika, is attributed to co-director Barry Esson²:

Radical and experimental artforms have always come about as the product of some rich, radicalised and complex event within a social, political and philosophical situation. Pick an example and think it through: Dada, Situationism, Improvisation, the Delta Blues... Whether these movements say it out loud or not, all of them have made a claim for how to engage with, act against or oppose the

² Esson prefaces the manifesto acknowledging the provocations are a combination of others’ concepts and words.

dominant cultural forms of their time. This claim can be, in every case, boiled down to a central tenet: a new, core idea, a way in which to engage with the world or a way in which to take some kind of stance—a core idea that everybody following it understands and can use to decide about something that is otherwise undecidable. ...Musicians or artists, if true to such a radical core idea, are sort of then put in process: they are obliged to make art or music in a certain way, if they are to remain true to this idea. We could therefore say that the only way to measure the success of a music is whether it's produced in fidelity to the radical concept that put it in process. This seems to me to be more useful than saying whether something was good or bad, or some other vague and undemonstrable personal statement of taste. (Esson 2010, 3)

Drawing influence from Esson's statement, I posit that consciously context-responsive improvised music (CRIM) practitioners are proposing alternate ways of relating to and creating with one another through the active pursuit and foregrounding of a historically cumulative coevolving problem/solution space, in a way that prioritises the creative responses to uncertainty in real time above and beyond the production of singular, 'good' pieces of music.

To follow on from the provocation above, Esson asks "what would be an experimental music procedure that is not just a ghost of its conceptual core, but a process of fidelity to a radical proposition for how we all engage with the world?" (7). My response to this question (and the core offering of this thesis) is that it is a more consciously context-responsive improvised music that decentres the individual 'composer' and considers the expected and the habitual as impediments to a radical outcome—the CRIM practitioner's motivation lies in the creative process beyond premeditated action. Allowing for the creative process to unfold and be influenced by elements beyond our control in the moment often requires a highly interventionist approach, subverting commonly accepted approaches to performance that mitigate risk through preparation. Context-responsive improvised music practice embodies this process.

Improvised music performance adheres to a set of practices that free practitioners from the boundaries and constructions typically understood in Western Music traditions and idioms.³ Tacit understandings between players, organisers and devout audience members are at the foundation of these practices. Improvisers characteristically do not aim to realise the work of others in a manner consistent with a craft by devout artisans. Instead, performers are drawn to fertile problem/solution-spaces of mess, grit and surprise.

Practitioner theorist Eddie Prévost articulated two analytical propositions common to all improvised music: problem-solving and dialogical interaction. (Prévost 1995, 177) This is particularly applicable to CRIM practice, as it actively pursues fertile contexts in which the co-evolving problem/solution space and resulting dialogical interaction is foregrounded, and hence the inclusion of practitioners who actively engage with context as a compositional tool, and disturb the codified practices set up by the genre (and subgenres) of Improv. I will deal in detail with the concept of the problem space in chapter 7.

Improvisers assume that they are ‘battling against the Western musical canon’ and the heavily authorial ‘capital C composer’, but improvisers are not immune from these dynamics—many still compose using traditional Western notation, tune their instruments to pitch standard A440 and improvise chromatically (or adhere to Schoenberg’s twelve-tone serialism). The clichés of the Improv genre are well understood by practitioners and so a conscious engagement with performance context is an attempt to challenge, avoid and also embrace some of these.

³ For example, Prévost observes that “In the [Western] compositional approach, musicianship and rehearsing culminate in a definitive performance. Success is judged, mostly, by how well the performance represents a perfect execution of ideas and interpretation” (Prévost 1995).

Improvisers talk about being ‘free’ or ‘breaking with tradition’ but also adopt methods and mirror practices of mainstream entertainment (spaces, publishing, advertising, distribution, MCs, merchandise, grants, commissions, competitions and awards). In the face of a mainstream music market on the brink of self-implosion, CRIM practitioners are re-prioritising and making explicit efforts to subvert these adopted (and often contrary and unhelpful) dynamics between musicians, organisers and audiences.

These subversive acts of engagement with disturbance of contextual elements align with the historical interventions of the Situationist International and Fluxus movements, in the sense that the world is a spectacle of relations mediated by a series of images. Miwon Kwon refers to these critical performance practices as “demanding different kinds of public engagement” (Kwon 2004, 32)—in the case of CRIM performance—differing from the stabilised and codified presentation and performance modes of Improv.

As a contributor to the publication *Echtzeitmusik*, Berlin-based cellist, DJ, concert organiser and electronics musician Nicholas Bussmann traces his motivations for being drawn to perform improvised music in Berlin in the 1990s as an urgent response to the East Berlin context, to make a personal music that “defied classification” (Bussmann 2011, 64) and flew in the face of the “rules of bourgeois society [...] Anything but the conservatory. Anything but ‘you are standing on the shoulders of giants’. That was my feeling” (64). This is a motivation common to many of my European collaborators, but not one that I noticed with my Australasian collaborators. For example, Japanese no-input mixing board player Toshimaru Nakamura cites a more existential fixation in his contributing chapter to

Echtzeitmusik:

When you continue working in the practice of improvisation, you start questioning yourself about the relationship between your instrument and yourself, about the meaning of what you do, and eventually about who you are. ... The more you keep doing it, the deeper you go into a maze. (Nakamura, 2011, 57)

I would argue that the motivations of improvisers Bussmann and Nakamura, although different, are aligned more with CRIM practice than that of the increasingly codified genre of Improv, as they are not content to ‘arrive’ at a style or destination, but continue to question, and continue to pursue a co-evolving set of variables to ‘defy classification’ and to ‘go deeper’ into a practice.

Whether engaged with critically or unquestioningly, the audience and the sites of engagement are among many dynamic elements core to the sonic outcomes of Improv. The following section highlights the primacy of performance in the practice of improvised music and by extension the necessity to examine its audience and the sites and situations of performance; I frame this discussion with reference to *situation*-specificity rather than the contemporary art understanding of site-specificity. Through visual thinking and the process of diagramming the dynamic contextual variables at play—from private research through to public performance—it is clear that improvised music is uniquely porous to context due to its real-time authorship, and that it is in performance that musicians discover and develop their vocabularies.

4.2 Situation-specificity rather than site specificity

The reception of all performance is affected by the context within which it is performed, whether the performer acknowledges this or not. Improvisation is often practiced in private, but it is in public performance where individual and collective vocabularies are formed and forged (Butcher 2011, np). The context for these performances plays a major role in the creation and reception of an improvised performance. As a result, musicians’ endlessly

variable vocabularies are often (in)formed by the sites, localities and communities from which they spring.⁴

The key defining feature of an improvised music performance is the porous nature of the artist/context relationship, and the performer's ability to respond, in real time, to unexpected events or shifts in the environment. A situation exists within a context, and a situation can be designed or set up with some forethought to bring about or disturb certain codified behaviours. Each and every improvised performance is informed and shaped by the context within which it is heard: no two performances are exactly alike, just as no two contexts are exactly alike. The audience are also agents in activating the site through their engagement with/in a situation in a broader dynamic context. In an interview with German musicologist Björn Gottstein, British guitarist Keith Rowe describes the relationship as such:

I am thinking of that moment in the room, and the room being a very complicated concept. We have the history of all the people in that room. We have the room itself. The physicality of the room. And it changes from second to second. And as an improviser it is really checking those changes second by second by second by second, assuming nothing about the next twenty seconds. Playing in the atmosphere in that room, as it changes constantly. Absorbing it. Checking it.
(Gottstein 2010)

Contemporary artists have been overtly engaged with site specificity since the late 1960s, motivated by the desire to foreground the physical arenas of art and performance as politically, socially, and economically loaded. After fifty years of site-specific confrontation and investigation, contemporary art audiences have a more diffused, dispersed and

⁴ Butcher recalls that Bailey once stated that he was “involved with “a search for whatever is endlessly variable”” (Butcher 2011).

conceptual understanding of the ‘site’ of a work (Kwon 2004). These artists have more often than not created works that highlight, challenge or disrupt aspects of the site. As the quote above from veteran improviser Keith Rowe acknowledges, the bulk of the creation of the work for improvising musicians is specific to the site and to the situation shifting moment to moment. If, then, the sites and situations for performance are often the same, as is the case with Improv, it follows that the resulting music would share similar characteristics, arcs and outcomes.

Although the translocal Improv scene is disruptive across its spatial, technological and collaborative approaches, it is yet to explicitly challenge the social/power matrix to the extent contemporary performance artists have done. Performance artists have always foregrounded the explicit contract between performer and spectator. The performance of improvised music shares more with the interventions of minimalism, where the “idealist hermeticism of the autonomous art object”—performance of a piece of music—was challenged by “deflecting its meaning to the space of its presentation” (Kwon 2004, 13). For example, Splitter Orchester’s performance in Berlin Hauptbahnhof (Berlin Central Train Station), Museum Für Naturkunde (Berlin Natural History Museum), or Splinter Orchestra recording in Mungo desert (NSW, 2016).

A more consciously context-based performance practice desires to further complicate “the space of presentation itself” (Kwon 2004, 13) and to challenge the coded mechanisms of performance spaces that service to “actively disassociate the space of art from the outer world” (Ibid). The traditional purpose-built darkened performance space, complete with proscenium stage lights and tiered seating, acts as an “institutional disguise, a normative exhibition convention serving an ideological function” (Ibid). When Splitter Orchester and Splinter Orchestra have actively sought out more complex and unstable social and sonic situations within which to play, the focus has been on embedding, associating, and a kind of

playing *with* the context. When these same orchestras have played in purpose-built performance spaces, the resulting music had a much greater focus on the interplay of improvising musicians with one another on a stage, and the scores or structures they decided to work with addressed more strategic ways of disturbing the performers' interactions with one another's sounds as opposed to a focus on being porous and receptive to a highly unpredictable physical environment.

Many improvisers take the context for their performance (as well as the inherent porosity of the practice) for granted, but still do not consider their performances to be autonomous of context. However, like early modernist 'site-specific' sculpture, the relationship between situation and the resulting improvisation for many is at best incidental (Kwon 2002, 64).

Drawing comparisons between the 'white wall gallery' in visual arts and the traditional purpose-built music performance venues, Kwon notes that both have functioned as "uncontaminated and pure idealist space"; however, through engagement with site and context both have been "radically displaced by the materiality of the natural landscape [...] the impure and ordinary space of the everyday" (Kwon 2004, 12), spaces of mess, sweat and function rather than blank canvases. For example, hearing an orchestra improvise in the Australian bush, where all manner of other living creatures contribute to the soundscape, is a dramatically different experience to hearing an orchestra in a pit in the theatre, shut off from any sound that has not been pre-composed on the page.⁵ Audiences also become more aware of their bodies, their breath, where they sit in relation to the sound in a non-traditional

⁵ See, for example, the outdoor performances of both the Splinter Orchestra and West Head Project.

performance space. Due to the informal nature of many of the venues that support and present improvised music, the audience members are at times even seated (on chairs or on the floor) right beside one of the improvising performers due to the lack of delineation of roles or lack of space in a venue such as a warehouse or domestic setting.

British sociologist Kevin Hetherington asserts, “certain spaces act as sites for the performance of identity” (Hetherington 1998, 105); the spaces and contexts in which improvised music is often performed help to define the identity of the community—not always in a positive way, especially in the Improv scene’s tendency to self-marginalise. This cementing of identity—or genre—with a specific character of venue or space can limit the performance outcomes, accessibility and engagement of the public. Improvising musicians have always sought out alternative venues to mirror the alternative social structures at play. The common occupation of non-traditional performance spaces by improvisers is a form of “[mapping] the cultures where they exist” (Schechner 1998, 161) as articulated by prominent American performance theorist Richard Schechner. Initially, performers were challenging the notion that the built-for-purpose theatre or auditorium is a neutral vehicle in which the audience has a defined place and role to play, but eventually these ‘alternative’ spaces have become a predictable contextual element within which improvised music is performed.

In the case of the first two years of the regular performance series *If you like improvised music, we like you*, Australian double-bassist Clayton Thomas and I had the opportunity to run it repeatedly in the same dilapidated, urban, artist-run gallery (run by our

friends who lived upstairs) known as Space 3 (2000-2005) enabling both audience and returning artists to familiarise and embed themselves within the space and series context.⁶

American theatre studies scholar Marvin Carlson suggests that the repeated use of a particular site for performance allows the artist to “draw upon the same environmental semiotics and indeed develop new codes out of an accumulated performance experience” (Carlson 1993, 36). Indeed, over the years that we presented the fortnightly series in this space, we tested every possible physical arrangement. The doors opening and closing onto the busy inner city intersection during concerts also became an expected sonic ingredient, at times cueing the end to a piece.

What other meanings can be construed from the extended behaviours of audiences who attend these performances and the choices they make that perform the extra-theatrical space (the access to venue information, their arrival process, associated activities etc)? With specific attention to the Sydney Improv scene, the ‘alternative’ (read non-traditional, non-commercial, artist-run and often illegal) venues are an economical choice for two reasons: 1) there is no pressure to attract a ‘drinking’ audience as there would be in a commercially licensed venue reliant on bar takings to survive (Holland 2017); 2) the warehouse spaces and domestic settings (where the artists and organisers often live) and in which many of these gigs are held, are accessible at short notice and have a community of listeners already attached to them.⁷

⁶ See Jim Hancock, *SPACE3: An Australian Independent Creative Network 2000 – 2005* (Sydney: SPACE3 Gallery).

⁷ I cannot name these venues or artist/organisers here for obvious legal reasons.

Leading Japanese experimental composer/performer Otomo Yoshihide has speculated (personal correspondence, 2004) that it was the physical and acoustic limitations of Tokyo living spaces that had the greatest influence on the sounds that were explored and performed publicly; therefore Japanese artists generally chose one of two modes: to break free into a brutal noise that was not possible to rehearse privately (Tetuzi Akiyama, Keiji Haino, Merzbow and Yoshihide himself) or to adopt an approach that was possible to hone at home—minimal noise (Sachiko M, Takefumi Naoshima, and Taku Sugimoto among others). A tiny performance space like Gallery Off Site (Tokyo 2000-2005) became almost like church for the latter approach, (known as *onkyô* in Japan, and reductionism in Europe), a style that was later embraced by artists who were not restricted by the same living conditions as those in Tokyo.

Site is understood as only one of the elements at play within the ‘situation’ of situation-specificity. During my residency at Audio Foundation in Auckland in 2015, I developed a suite of what I called ‘schematic scores’ to test my ideas around situation-specificity. In composing some of these scores, I considered any instrumentation (indicated by a harp) in any space. The primary scored elements were the proximity of the improviser to the audience (indicated mostly by where the ‘chair’ stamps were positioned). Each score included cues for the improviser and for the audience, drawing attention to the inextricability of the audience in the resulting improvisation.

One of these scores directed the improviser to only improvise for as long as they could hear audience members ascending or descending the stairs nearby (*Mapped Intimacy: Stairwell* see appendix 2.). This score posed a critical listening challenge to both performer and audience member relating to volume and density. I recall that when I performed this score if I played too loud, I could not hear the footsteps of the audience (and therefore whether to stop playing), and if the audience stopped moving to listen more intently, this

decision could end the piece.⁸ This had a significant effect on the patterns, flow and dynamics of the resulting music, as well as on the power dynamics between performer and audience.

In the development of these schematic scores, visual thinking applied in the tradition of graphic notation was informed by visual thinking applied to the diagramming of the contextual variables at play. For *Mapped Intimacy: Stairwell*, the elements of audience proximity, acoustics, movement in space, and audience instruction were employed to influence the performative and musical choices made by the improviser.

⁸ Performed at the opening night of the accompanying exhibition, Audio Foundation, Auckland 2015.

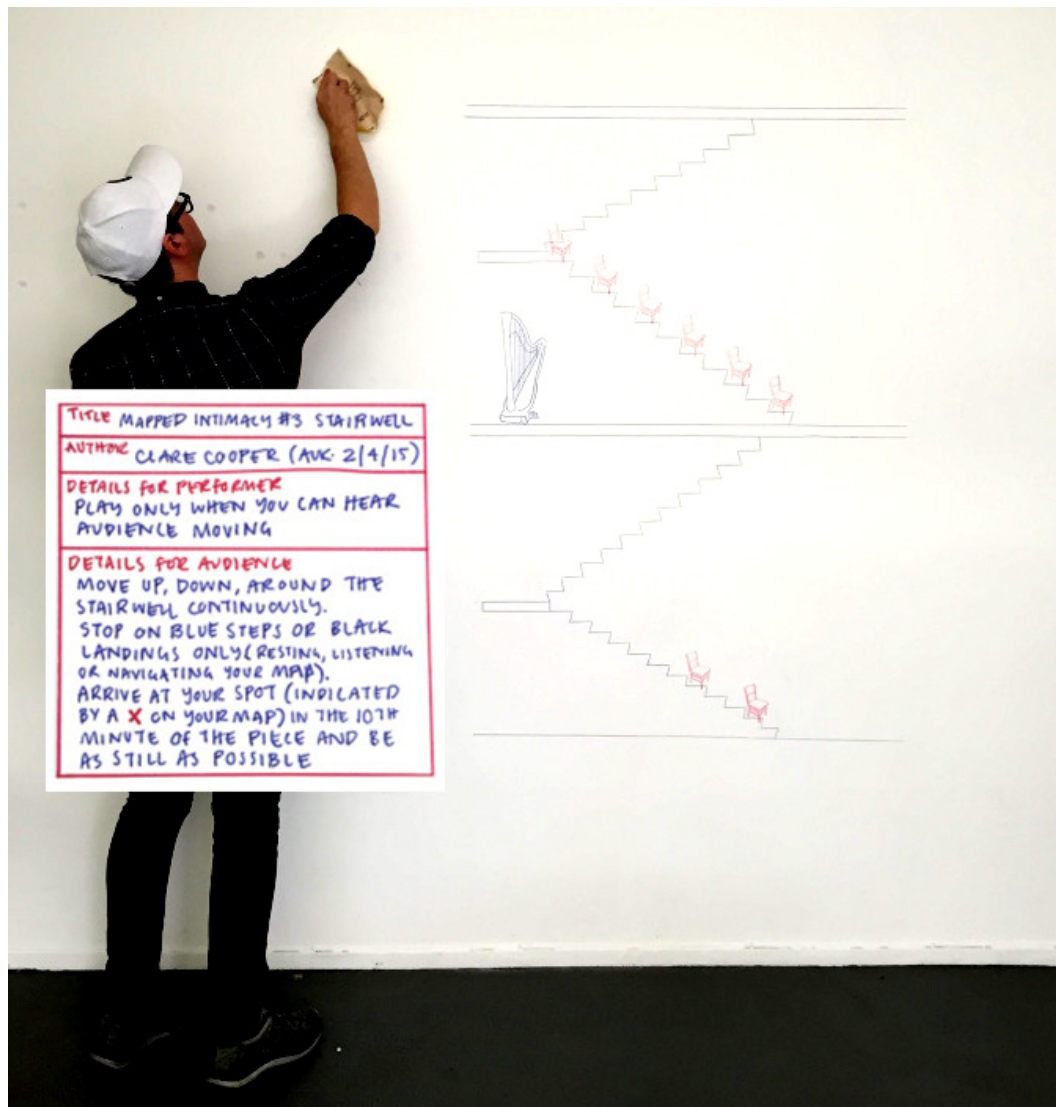


Figure 2. Clare Cooper, *Mapped Intimacy #3: Stairwell* (2015). The score was drawn on the wall in the Audio Foundation gallery. Each audience member received a small print of the score, with the score instructions on the back (inset).

As evidenced by this example, it is not only the sites of performance that need to be considered when actively engaging context as a compositional tool. The following section presents and explains a graphic diagram of the dynamic elements at play within the complex system that makes up improvised music practice (of which site and what combines to inform ‘situation’ are only a few).

4.3 Understanding the practice as a dynamic, complex system

In order to understand the practice of improvised music, we need to understand it as a dynamic and complex system of which the improviser is only one part. The varied contexts for improvised music performance, its sites and social listening practices are all vital components of the musical outcomes, as are the layers of research, sonic materials, social materials, and collaborative practices prior to the performance situation. To assess or appreciate the ‘pieces’ of music or performances in isolation is to deny the influence of the music’s most vital ingredients and active components. Improvisation is a practice that embraces uncertainty of outcomes. Accordingly, understanding this aim within the complex system from which the music arises, and the uniquely porous relationship the performances have to context—more so than simply the study of the musical outcomes themselves.

Improvisers purposely alter their environments to shape their behaviour by choosing where, what and with whom they improvise; however, I agree with practitioner theorist David Borgo that “we are not, nor could we ever be, the sole actors configuring the environment which configures us” (Borgo 2014, 37). In a similar conceptual vein, I also agree with Marcel Cobussen when he states that it is more pertinent to ask how improvisation works rather than what it is. He suggests that improvisation is determined by a large range of encounters and encourages us to view these interactions with “a more ecological approach”:

Improvisation... works as a complex network, as an ecological milieu, as a Deleuzian assemblage. It establishes ever-changing relationships between the actual sonic material (including aesthetic choices, technical abilities, formalistic features, intermusical knowledge), the environment (technology, acoustics, spatiality) and the social (including the artistic and even the ethical) behavior of the musicians mutually as well as that of performers and listeners. To regard improvisation as a network, a milieu, or an assemblage means shifting the focus from an overriding concern with isolated actors towards the fluctuating

relationships between these actors: a shift from structures to structuring and from content to context. (Cobussen 2014, 23)

As noted earlier, Cobussen argues that because improvisation works as an open system, neglecting the complexity of the practice of improvisation would “do an injustice to the richness of this inextricable part of all musicking” (27).

Recognising that there is limited research available on the complex system of dynamic elements at play in improvised performance, as well as the more specific dominant compositional and curatorial practices associated with CRIM, this doctoral project draws on Hans-Thies Lehmann’s thorough investigation into the new theatre forms that have developed since the late 1960s as well as the dominant practices and aesthetics that have evolved to encompass postdramatic theatre (Lehmann 2006). In his examination of emerging practices within theatre, Lehmann notes that the motivation and “energetic centre” has shifted from changing the world to social provocations via “the production of events, exceptions and moments of deviation” (105). He asserts that the new forms of theatre herald “the possibility of separating the new theatre from those political forms that had dominated the experimental scene from the historical avant-gardes until the 1960s: theatrical communication not primarily as a confrontation with the audience but as the production of situations for the self-interrogation, self-exploration, self-awareness of all participants” (105). Active audience members of new theatre and new music are drawn to the practice of performance in energised situations that communicate rather than simply confront or showcase.

Although the spectator’s reactions and responses have always been an “essential factor of theatrical reality”, avant-garde movements caused a “fundamental *shift from work to event* [that] was momentous for theatre aesthetics” and that it was through the work of these movements that audience responses became “an active *component* of the event” (Lehmann

2006, 61) [original emphasis]. The creators of these works sought ‘sympoetry’ with their audiences, just as CRIM practitioners are now doing. Not viewing their performance as a total work, but exploring the territories and energies of its inherent porosity.

Like the contemporary visual and performing artists discussed in Doherty’s *Situation*, CRIM performances can be regarded as situation-specific rather than site-specific. The distinction is in the conscious engagement with a broader social context and/or a series of related contexts, for example Kym Mhyr’s Trondheim Jazz Orkester performing a set structure that included improvised sections in churches across Norway as sites with shared acoustic, social and historical characteristics. Many of these improvised performances aim to raise more questions than to generate answers. They move from a speculative performance situation conceived by the organiser/curator and/or artist/organiser (based on their prior knowledge of the performers and site), which then becomes the context through which performers approach ‘problems’ in performance (either in the lack of a preconceived outcome or other tensions within the situation). This outcome may affirm or challenge what was expected by the curator/organiser. The sonic outcomes then feed back into this complex system in order to further inform future possibilities, and thus become an ever-changing system that adapts to feedback and outcomes. The elements are in constant flux. It is this system which becomes the site for various interventions and disturbances.

4.4 Diagramming Contextual Variables

Understanding how these interventions and disturbances operate requires a detailed understanding of how this complex system works. A straightforward listing of the dynamic elements does not communicate the animated interplay and potential influence of these elements at different moments in a process. Therefore I have used my training in visual

thinking as a designer to create a diagram of the dynamic elements at play for improvisers—whether they consider themselves CRIM practitioners or not—(See figure 3) in order to visually demonstrate how contexts are relational. Some of the ways in which improvisers and organisers design their contexts are prescriptive/proscriptive regarding audience behaviours, and all interventions embrace extra-musical elements as core compositional tools.

By indicating the elements that are particularly ripe for disturbance, this diagram invites improvisers and organisers to consider consciously disturbing elements categorised loosely across five territories of practice: research, sonic materials, social materials, collaboration (rehearsal and planning), and situation (live performance). This diagram has been developed over several iterations during the course of the research. It has, in a sense, fermented over my own career-long experiences as a practitioner and my in-depth observations of others practices and process from private research phases through to public performances. Over the course of the research, I have shared sketches of iterations with my colleagues who have given feedback regarding any missing or misplaced elements.

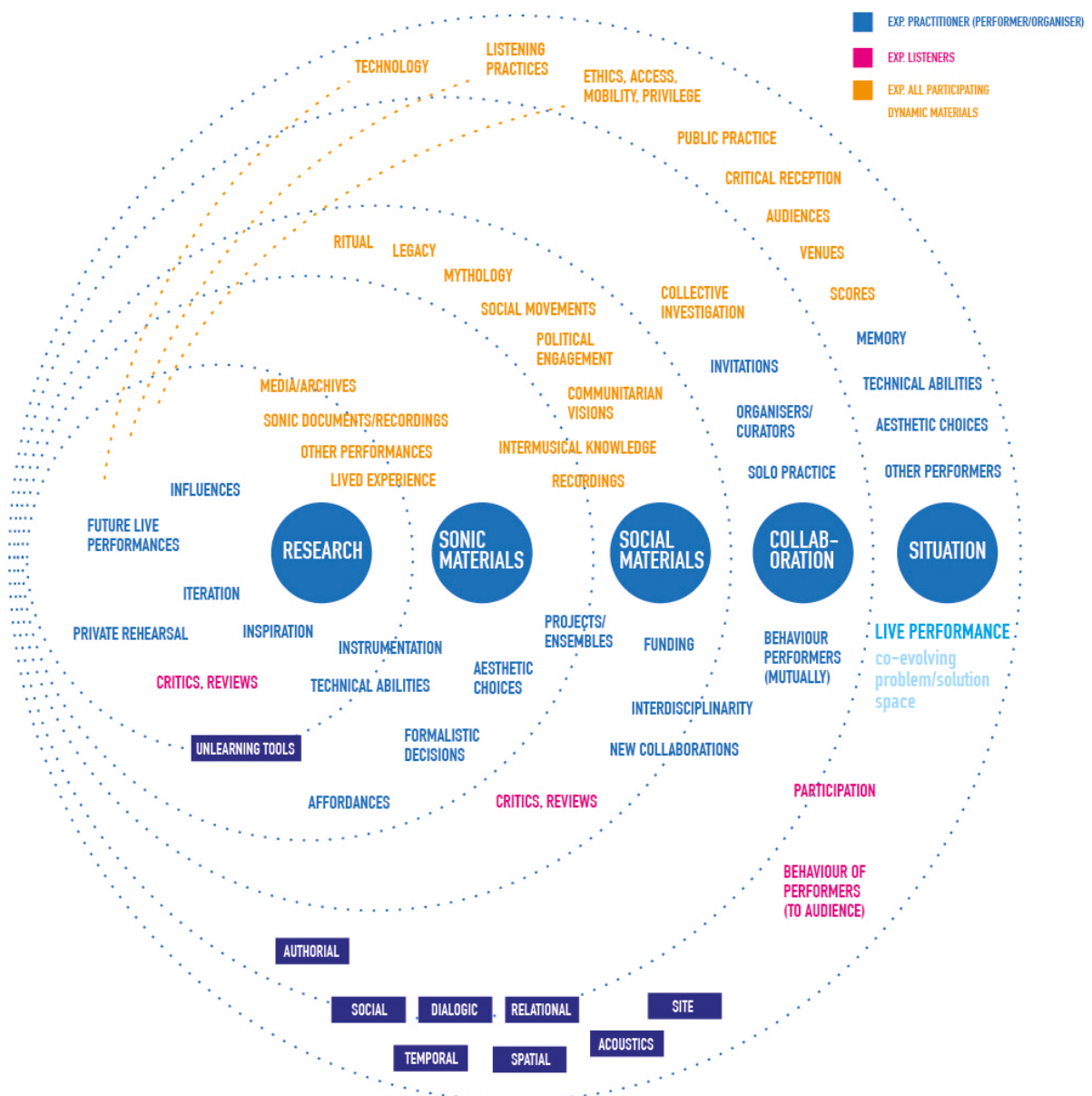


Figure 3. Contextual Variables Diagram.

The practice of improvisation relies upon the active and ongoing interaction with (and observation of) this complex system of dynamic elements. The graphic above is an attempt to chart the dynamic elements at play for the practitioners (blue), audiences (pink) and all involved (orange) through the five territories of research, sonic materials, social materials, collaboration and the live performance situation. Many of these contestable elements overlap several territories, and are visualised here in a manner representative of the ways in which

my interviewees and I have experienced them. The key elements being targeted for disturbance by CRIM practitioners are boxed.

The Contextual Variables Diagram details a complex system comprised of performers, organisers, instruments, technologies, affordances, venues, time, rituals, acoustics, audiences, social materials and collaborative performance, solo performance, public and private practice, reception, critique, recordings, desire and memory. This is not so much a model of practice as it is a visual articulation of the elements at play across territories of practice. In the final chapter I present the second visual tool: a practice model that “facilitates rather than prescribes” a creative process, inspired by the work of American design scholar Mary Lou Maher (1996).

4.5 Disturbance Strategies

Many design problems cannot be solved within the context in which they have arisen. And if they actually cannot be solved at all, they have to be *resolved*. The way designers deal with the paradoxes and conflicts in a design situation is considered to be rather special, and a core quality of good design. (Dorst 2006, 44)

Over the last two decades, individual performers, curators, ensembles and organisations have engaged with the active disturbance of contextual elements in a variety of ways within the performance of improvisation, purposefully creating instability so as to elicit different behaviours, responses and therefore different sonic outcomes. Until now, there has been no in-depth research into this growing practice. Insights into the significance of this practice relies on an understanding of the evolving translocal conversation occurring over decades.

Disturbance strategies are used in a variety of ways and often in combination of any of the following:

- the conscious decision to unlearn one’s tools/instruments;

- engaging in temporal disturbance by extending or reducing the expected duration of a performance or the time of day when it is performed;
- seeking sites, acoustics and spatial relationships that demand a different engagement with the audience or heightened awareness of space;
- seeking out and purposefully designing social/dialogic situations that challenge codified tropes of audience/performer relations, listening habits, physicality and pedagogy (relational/discursive).

The strategies employed by CRIM practitioners explore “alternatives to alternatives” (Fry, 2017) and are not ‘breaking’ or ‘destroying’ practices so much as they are challenging and interfering with the stabilisation of them. I have chosen to use the term ‘disturbance’ over ‘interruption’ or ‘disruption’ to reflect this. One disturbs or agitates to bring about surprise and change—a positive semi-controlled chaos. The challenges to established orthodoxies and codified practices more often than not invite or amplify the unknown. Engaging disturbance strategies sits within a rich lineage of interventionist styles of performance art and site-specific practices that have been documented and studied extensively in the Western canon.

As will become evident in the examples explored in chapter 5, CRIM practitioners consciously engage with context via temporal, spatial, technical, relational and curatorial disturbance strategies designed so that improvisers, organisers and listeners become more sensitised and responsive to context.⁹ The analysis in this thesis takes examples from the

⁹ I choose the term ‘organisers’ over ‘curators’ as some of the key organisations I refer to here disavow the term.

organisational (public curatorial practice), to the ensemblic (collective oeuvre/investigations over time), to the performer (from gig to gig). There is significant overlap in the concerns and approaches across all of these areas.

It is through the active pursuit and generation of co-evolving problem/solution spaces that we see how consciously context-responsive improvised music practice shares common approaches with emerging design methods. CRIM practice generates more questions and potentially more interesting creative outcomes.

4.5.1 Individual performers

When discussing the disturbance strategies for individual performers, I am referring here to both individuals playing solo, as well as to individuals playing within a new group of musicians who do not (as yet) consider themselves a group or ensemble. I use examples from practitioner-theorists Derek Bailey and Jim Denley, as well as concerts I have attended and compositions I have created over the course of this research to test some of the theories I have explored. Bailey observed that when improvising we are searching for “what is endlessly variable, the construction of a language, all parts of which are always and equally available.” (Bailey 1992, 106) The example explored in detail in chapter 5 show the various methods deployed by practitioners to unsettle themselves (mostly in performance situations) so that they cannot draw on reliable devices. Instead they must creatively respond to heightened uncertainty in real time.

4.5.2 Ensembles

Improvising ensembles are a distinct area of collective inquiry that sit somewhere between the longer-term generative public disturbance strategies employed by an organisation and the gig-to-gig strategies of individuals. Of course, ensembles are made up of individual improvisers who almost always work with other groups and as soloists, and are engaged with parallel and complimentary inquiries regarding collectivity, performance practice, honing their craft, and some concern with shaping a public profile/reputation for generating performance opportunities.

Ensembles, organisations and individuals employ disturbance strategies to increase the chance of endlessly variable outcomes. Of course, ensembles (and organisations) are made up of individuals, so there is some overlap when considering how these strategies are employed. The examples explored in chapter 5 include strategies employed by Splinter Orchestra and Splitter Orchester.

4.5.3 Organisations

Organisations, although not technically ‘performing’, consciously engage with context as a compositional tool (and move through the stages outlined in the CRIM Practice Cycle to be outlined in detail in chapter 7). As my research shows, there is an international zeitgeist unfolding contemporaneously across several organisations presenting sound-focused performance practice, demonstrating that these curatorial practices are self-reflexive, and diversifying modes of public engagement with sound over the last thirty years.

This open, public investigation has arisen out of shared dialogue and builds on restless concepts explored by the avant-garde since mid-last century. Organisations are

required to articulate their investigations and motivations beyond the presentations themselves in funding applications, programs, websites, annual reports and promotional material. Individuals are not (always) bound to do this. Organisations exploring sound, performance, and improvisation mirror many of the practices and processes of individual artists' ongoing explorations. For several of the examples explored, the organisational narratives provide more exemplary force than achievements of independent improvisational practitioners.

The new organisational and curatorial practices outlined in this thesis are disturbing the dominant ideas in circulation by pointing to their lack of plurality. This is a radical moment that marks new directions for organisations presenting improvised performance and discourse around experimental music and critical listening practice.

In order to understand the ways in which organisations, events and festivals operate in this area, I conducted interviews with organisers who have actively been exploring (and presenting) new models for engaging artists to connect with specific (at times predetermined, pre-designed) contexts or situations. This has enabled me to pay close attention to the dynamics of what is at stake when one specifies the context of an improvised music performance as opposed to pairing artists with spaces of convenience, tradition or economic necessity.

In Australia the current funding regimes and KPI-driven-climate are inherently hostile to arts organisations and experimentation. To stay slippery and prolific is difficult, and there is no certainty as to a supported future or even an audience when one is trading in uncertainties. With that said, organisations are more likely (than ensembles or individuals) to have the resources to support ongoing performative dialogues of this experimental nature.

Summary

This chapter has argued that the implications of understanding the practice of CRIM beyond the reception of single performances holds value beyond the field of music. Through a deeper understanding of the differences between Improv and CRIM practice, as well as understanding situation-specificity rather than site-specificity, we get closer to appreciating the dynamic, complex system within which the practice operates.

The Contextual Variables Diagram is timely, as we have enough evidence that these practices are becoming more widespread. The diagram makes visible the dynamic elements at play in CRIM practice as experienced by practitioners (performers and organisers) and listeners across five territories of practice (research, sonic materials, social materials, collaboration and live performance situation) aiding non-practitioners' and practitioners' understandings of where and how they might disturb reliable devices in the performance and reception of the music.

Engagement with disturbance strategies varies in subtle ways from individual to ensemble, to organisation. Now that the practice and motivations of CRIM have been articulated, the following two chapters will describe examples of how CRIM practitioners are evolving the art form through a range of disturbance strategies. Having mentioned some of the practitioners engaging in the evolution of this art form previously (John Butcher, Arika, Splinter Orchestra, Splitter Orchester, The Necks), the following chapters will further illustrate examples from these and other artists to show that there is a critical mass of practitioners engaging in these consciously context-responsive approaches, enough to warrant research into a more appropriate lens for understanding the practice.

Chapter 5

Disturbance strategies in practice

Non-idiomatic free improvised music and Improv practices have stabilised over the last 40 years, establishing reliable devices that mitigate risk and a tendency towards stabilising contexts, which has resulted in homogenous sonic and social outcomes. Observation, intervention and disturbance are key concepts in CRIM practice. This chapter will go into greater detail examining the various domains in which these concepts apply, detailing how these disturbances are executed and the results achieved from this process from organisational, ensemblic and individual perspectives.

The approaches explored in this chapter mark an energetic leap from prescriptive ideas about the creation and reception of music, what music can be, and of the clear delineation between performer and audience. If John Cage and his contemporaries indicated a paradigm shift in the work that has occurred since the mid-last century, what does a further paradigm shift look like in 2019? I argue that core to this shift will be a combination of unlearning the tools that restrict experimental approaches, and the disturbance of any temporal, spatial and social codes that hinder creative collaborative practice or prioritise individual authorship.

The disturbance strategies detailed here are extensions of concepts that have been part of the history of experimental music since the 1940s. John Cage encouraged listeners (and makers) to consider music as a much bigger, expanded concept than what had been set up in the Western tradition, arguing for people to remove ego from the work, to radically reconsider sound, and to consider the act of listening as an active part of the event.

The disturbance strategies employed by these performers, ensembles and organisations illustrate the many and varied ways in which improvisers observe and engage

with context as a compositional tool. After reading these examples, it becomes evident that the process is better understood via the lens of design, and that the cycle of observation and iterative engagement is also akin to a design process.

5.1 Unlearning tools

The way in which the use of ‘tools’ has been codified in Improv manifests as technical virtuosity resembling that which is prized in the Western Classical tradition, as well as employing reliable styles (as a result from knowing one’s instrument inside out). Improvisers will often short-circuit habitual playing through choosing unfamiliar, home-made, hacked or new instruments. An early example of this is African American improviser Ornette Coleman¹—best known for his ground-breaking improvisations on the saxophone—choosing to play the violin in order to render reliable devices unavailable (Corbett 1994, 203).

I agree with Jim Denley and Franziska Schroeder that improvisation is an embodied musicking marked by sensual and tactile engagement with tools (instruments). This intimate relationship is “marked by constraint and resistance”, and the improviser is simultaneously in constant struggle between honing instrumental technique and attempting to let go or unlearn knowledge so as to truly respond as improvisers. Schroeder draws our attention to the ongoing conscious attempt to “forget stored musical memories, previous experiences and consciously and unconsciously embodied acts and approaches to their materials” (Schroeder 2014, xv).

¹ The term ‘free jazz’ was popularised via the title of Coleman’s 1961 album *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation by the Ornette Coleman Double Quartet* (Atlantic Records).

The tools to which I am referring are not limited to the instrument itself, but also the tools or material ‘preparations’ introduced to play it. The percussionist Frank Perry, describing his kit, writes: “superimposed about these [drums and cymbals] are a variety of sound sources. These comprise small bells, wood blocks, cowbells—chimes, hubcaps. The various things hanging include: knives and forks, stones, plastic spoons, sea shells, brass fittings and bamboo. Wire knitting needles, chopsticks and other strikers obviously extend these characteristics” (Bailey 1992, 100). Twenty years ago, the appearance on stages of small side-tables holding an array of ‘preparations’ (anything from paintbrushes to steel wool) to extract fresh sounds and textures from instruments would have been considered a disturbance strategy. This approach became stabilised to the point where it was so common on stage in the years that I was organising concerts in Berlin (2007-2013) that they were almost a pre-requisite.²

We could view effects pedals or other effects units in the same vein as these ‘preparations’, in that they demand that the musician approach their instrument in an (initially) unlearned or unfamiliar way and also imply an incursion into established techniques and materials. These effects units too have become commonplace.

In seeking an “antidote to complacency” John Butcher writes that he prepares physically and psychologically for “everything except the details of what it is that one will actually play” but then plays in such a way that the material “exists right on the edge of instrumental stability and control” (Butcher 2011, np). This is apparent in his acoustic

² We had plinths or small tables at the ready without musicians needing to ask for them in their technical rider.

performances, but more so in his use of barely controlled microphone feedback when playing amplified.

The final two examples are less about the tools chosen, and more about unlearning virtuosity through encouraging a “semi-subconscious state” (Bailey 1996, npp), or through aligning the musical gestures you can make to another source. The first is a simple strategy for an individual improviser: Derek Bailey observed that for improvisation he found “conscious influences” to be unhelpful and in his later years he would arrange to sleep for between ten and thirty minutes just before a performance. The hour prior to performing is the time in which an improviser is most likely to attempt to pre-empt or plan a particular approach to performance, it is also the time in which a performer is pulled into conversations with organisers and the technical staff of a venue. Avoiding these two factors would have allowed Bailey a clearer mindset within which to play.



Figure 4. Screen shot from performance of *Splinter Orchestra* playing *Bikelights*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fe9mNNXwRwc> Accessed 1/4/19.

The second example is *Bikelights*, an electric light-based score for improvising ensemble, devised by the Splinter Orchestra in 2013.³ I have had the experience of performing this work as well as being an audience member for several of its iterations. With the space or venue darkened (or played outdoors in the evening), the instruction is for each player to respond musically to their own pulsating bicycle light (choosing from four variables: on, off, rapid pulse, or sustained light). Aligning ones' contribution to an electric flashing light shifts ones' relationship to the instrument, the ensemble and the performance site. Recording this piece with the band in Mungo ("Airstrip," *Mungo*, Splitrec 27), Denley recalls the orchestra sounding like "the love-calls of hundreds of frogs" (Denley, 2018, np) after heavy rain.⁴ This is an excellent example of unlearning, with purely habitual, sensual or instinctive gestures resulting in a new sonic landscape.

In the examples listed above, the improvisers are actively destabilising the terrain of their playing by individually unlearning their familiar tools through physical, instrumental, behavioural and technical means.

5.2 Temporal Disturbance Part I: timing and duration

Engaging time as material or medium is not new for performing artists. However, it becomes of specific relevance to this study when the timing or duration of an improvisation is a core component in the performer's compositional concept. At its most basic level, temporal

³ First performed at Lamps, Sydney, 2013.

⁴ "In the far west of NSW after heavy rain ephemeral ponds form, resonant with the love-calls of hundreds of frogs—this is the closest sound I can think of to the music we made at midnight on the airstrip at Mungo" (Denley, 2018, np).

disturbance occurs whenever a performance is not programmed to take place in the evening, or to have a duration of under 30 minutes or over 60 minutes. German improviser Annette Krebs has said that she attempts stop time in her pieces (Beins et al. 2011, 164). By operating outside of the temporal parameters imposed by zoning regulations, venue operators or concert organisers, the performances communicate or demand a different playing and listening experience.

Some of the most common disturbance strategies employed by performers and organisations are durational. The expectations set up by years of community engagement, and the (assumed) attention span of an audience is an interesting element to play with as a performer. The whiplash effect of a five-minute improvisation when the seasoned listener is settling in for a sonic journey of five times that length can be incredibly unsettling or energising. This is a technique employed by my Sydney-based *Germ Studies* project⁵, often performing 2-5min ‘studies’ digging deeper into two complimentary textures, rather than 30-40 minute evolving improvisations.

Keiji Haino’s Tokyo-based *Fushitsusha* project performed an annual four-hour long improvisation every November for fifteen years. The long form affords their ecstatic, immersive noise meditations an annual pivoting point or springboard for the following year when the band would more often than not only perform 60-minute sets in other contexts.

Trans-European ensemble *Music In Movement Electronic Orchestra* (formed in 1997 and better known as *MIMEO*) invite heightened improvisational responses through temporal experiments (duration as well as non-traditional performance times). In May of 2000 they

⁵ Improvised electroacoustic duo collaboration of keyboardist Chris Abrahams and Clare Cooper, formed in 2005.

experimented with a 24-hour set at the *Festival Musique Action* in Vand'oeuvre, which was later released as a DVD (Erstwhile records, 2001). When recollecting this endurance improvisation performance, *MIMEO* founding member Keith Rowe stated that the ensemble “reflects a world of differences, of complexity, not of simple solutions” and observed that the lengthy duration “gives opportunities that the conventional performance framework does not” (Keith Rowe, 2001, np)⁶.

As established in the chapter 2, there are two dominant durational modes of performance of improvised music—one befitting a multi-ensemble festival concert, the other a single ensemble/performer focus evening concert. It is generally regarded as inconsiderate to perform for longer than thirty minutes on a festival line-up where there are four or five other acts to perform on the same evening, where the time, space and energy of an audience are spread thin. Conversely, *What Is Music?* festival organisers invited Japanese noise legend Maso Yamazaki (performing solo as Masonna) to Australia, where he performed a total of sixteen minutes of sound throughout the entire national tour. This radical durational decision is possibly the reason this artist has gone down in Australian experimental music folklore.

Durational performance is not new by any means, but when applied to improvisation, the focus is on increasing the uncertainty as to how an improviser might creatively respond in the context of extreme exertion. Two Australian performers, double-bassist Clayton Thomas and artist/multi-instrumentalist Julian Day, both performed 24-hour durational improvisations in Hobart within a fortnight of one another in January, 2017. The context of Day's performance was a commissioned work for the Hobart Town Hall organ as part of the

⁶ MIMEO 2000 pamphlet of collected writings from participants and witnesses of this event.

MONA FOMA festival program. Day was seated with his back to his listeners. The space was sheltered, focused and meditative, complete with cushioning on the floor for those who chose to sleep in the space throughout the performance. In stark contrast, the context for Thomas' solo improvised bass marathon was as an endurance spectacle fundraiser for *the NOW now* festival set under the massive outdoor James Turrell skylight at Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art (MONA). Thomas not only battled the challenge of improvising for 24 hours without sleep or a proper meal, but also the Tasmanian elements. At the completion of the work he asserted that he had promised it would "not be the *best* bass solo, but the longest."⁷ The extreme temporal challenge to the performers undoubtedly shifted the ways in which listeners engaged with these two performances, whether they attended for ten minutes or several hours of the performance.

In Australia (and perhaps elsewhere in the world), standardised performance times have come about due to a combination of restrictive legislation (which includes sound restrictions, performance licenses and other municipal zoning issues), as well as the shifting demographic of a live music community (of both listeners and performers). Performer/organiser Nicholas Bussmann noted that improvised music concerts in Berlin used to start at around 11pm in the late 1990s, but as the main organisers and performers got older, had babies or "got real jobs" the concerts started earlier and earlier. (In conversation with Bussmann, 2008)

The timing of the performance is a different matter to the duration of an improvisation; if we accept that an endurance performance has a performance focus, then the

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCmlF0HrCxrrxnhNJ-bceslQ/live> (accessed 14/4/18).

choice of the time of day is a more listener-sided experiment. The other difference is that the disruption occurs before any sound is heard. The audience knowingly attends at the prescribed starting time and brings with them the inevitable temporal baggage associated with that time of day. The audience that attended the 5 am improvised solo percussion performance by Berlin-based Australian drummer Steve Heather at *the NOW now* festival (Wentworth Falls, 2014) either awoke at 4 am to ready themselves to attend or decided to stay awake all night after a day of listening to other performances at the festival. Heather himself was in the latter category and chose to perform in a found wedding dress—to add theatrical oddity to temporal and spatial disturbance.⁸

Japanese electronics duo Filament (Sachiko M and Otomo Yoshihide) were programmed to perform at 2 am as part of a full day of *Festival Musique Action* performances. The duo set up in the middle of the space surrounded by an audience strewn over the floors in varying states of wakefulness (some audibly snoring at times). Yoshihide and M are aware of the alternate listening state that sets in after a full day of listening to intense performances, and they played to this perfectly—the sound behaving like acupuncture pins, spacious and exacting.

Temporal disturbance can be something which is agreed upon in the set-up for a performance (as in most of the examples above); it can also occur during a performance when a player might decide to continue to play even though the consensus between the rest of the band has been to stop playing.

⁸ The Dutch improv scene in the 1980s and '90s embraced more theatrical almost Vaudevillian-style performance techniques than other local scenes active at the same time. For example, drummer Han Bennink setting fire to his drums during improvisations. Steve Heather was heavily influenced by this after fifteen years based in Amsterdam.

Alternate explorations of space, time and place are central dynamic elements for the music of Splinter Orchestra. This is best illustrated by their most recent box set of recordings, capturing their time together in Mungo in outback NSW, where they designed three explorations to explore morning, midday and evening as well as an old Woolshed, an airstrip and the desert respectively. Listening to these recordings we hear the country described by sound, lovingly traced and responded to by human and non-human improvisers throughout the day and the night.

One of my earliest experiences of a time-based collective improvisational score to disturb our reliable devices was in 2005 via guitarist Adam Sussmann's *Half-Half*. The Splinter Orchestra had been working together for over three years, and observed that they were often arriving at pieces of a similar shape and coda. We rehearsed Sussmann's concept for performance at *the NOW now* festival, Sydney in 2005. Musicians were instructed to play for up to half of the specified performance time (if the set is 40 minutes long, each musician can play for up to 20 minutes), musicians are to play gestures numbering half of that number (so if they are playing for 20 minutes, they can play ten gestures to fill that time). This score set up a strange credit system whereby each musician kept track of the time they had played and constantly weighed up whether to use up 'gestures' or time in relation to how the piece was flowing. This resulted in those who were used to playing constantly playing less, and those who were prone to sitting back actually playing more. This greatly shifted the character of the ensemble and its sonic territory.

As noted earlier, space, zoning and regulation have a profound influence on spaces available for live music performance. It is rare that the performers decide on the timing and proposed duration of a performance outside of these restrictions. Spaces sympathetic to experimental music communities (politically, affordably) might only be open to the public between certain hours. The next section explores strategies for disturbing codified trends

around spaces for performance, but also the disturbance of space, proximity and acoustic within these spaces.

5.3 Temporal Disturbance Part II: appreciating dynamic time in a complex system

...the moment... being aware of present time... this is something not so easy to grab. We mostly live in the past, or in the future. But [improvising] includes everything—past, future and present time. (Dörner 2012)

Improvisation is not simply a music intent on becoming a better version of itself. It is necessary to its core unifying principles to engage critically with its own living history and broader, dynamic context. In zooming out to appreciate the unified practices within improvised music as a complex system, it is also necessary to understand that the works in this system exist in time. By appreciating the practice as a cumulative series of events and interventions we can gain a greater understanding of the macro and micro responses within the complex system. We take iterative approaches and research into account. When we view these events as responsive to dispersed translocal locations and time as well as to the momentary materials within each performance we can appreciate the enormous complexity, interconnectivity and criticality of the scene.

Not all practitioners engage consciously with all elements of this complex system, and many are content to hone a singular approach to playing that is more akin to idiomatic music. Some performers deliver what they think audiences (or organisers) will find interesting, others look to existing record releases to cue which approaches have a kind of market traction for their own viability for publications, concerts or tours.

Critic and author Graham Lock⁹ asserts that music has played a crucial role in “articulating alternative visions of human possibility” where the musical practices are “envisionings [sic] of possibilities excluded from conventional systems of thought and thus as important locus [sic] of resistance to orthodoxies” (11). Inspired by these alternatives and utopian impulses, improvisation practice simultaneously futures, recalls and envisions. This supports the argument that we should appreciate the practice with a more creative understanding of time—as historically cumulative, as non-linear, as proposing and projecting rather than reflecting what is.

Individual improvisers, as well as the collective translocal Improv scene, are engaged in what Claire Doherty calls “historically cumulative” interventions where site is “dispersed across location and time” (Doherty, 12). The improviser herself is the only person to have experienced all parts of her own exploration, but the audience become part of a much larger viewing (hearing) of the work, experiencing only sections of the overarching investigation/oeuvre. As articulated earlier in this chapter, the broader community supporting the series of risks over time is an essential ingredient in this development. The performer admits that she is part of a large dynamic system and not in full control over the outcome. The social and dialogical aspects of the performative context continue to influence the momentary as well as the broader sonic output over time. To view, assess or appreciate the ‘pieces’ of music or performances across the translocal Improv scene is to elevate them above the music’s most vital ingredients/active components embedded in what the context occasions. The art of the improviser occurs in real time, but the improvising musician’s

⁹ Author of *Forces in Motion* (1988) and *Blutopia* (2000), and co-author/editor of *Thriving on a Riff* (2009).

expansive oeuvre “only falls into place over many years” (Butcher 2011) as a result of the cumulative efforts of nightly concerts and tours, all of which contribute to the honing, challenging and expansion of the music (Ibid).

There are correlations between an improvised embrace of the uncertain and unpredictable and the disruption to capitalist time. Sympathetic to this observation, Borgo argues that this “lifetime of engagement and expansion can show us a different way of being in the world, one in which our very notions of ourselves and our relationships with the socio-material world we inhabit are constantly in flux, under continual negotiation” (Borgo 2014, 48). Philosophically, improvisation welcomes disturbance rather than seeing it as a problem in the way that production and consumption under capitalism is contingent on reliable outcomes and products. This is foundational to the motivations that improvisers (and audiences of improvised music) share. It is as much about how we choose to exist in relation to our environment (embracing flux and creative responses to uncertainty) as a philosophical standpoint in relation to lived experience.

Australian musician Lucas Abela has built a reputation for shocking his audiences with his violent and self-harming instrumentation, namely large sheets of glass (as Justice Yeldham and the Dynamic Ribbon Device) or rapidly spinning splintering vinyl (as DJ Smallcock). Abela is an improviser, instrument builder, and organiser. He co-founded Australian record label Dual Plover, which has manufactured and published many of Australia’s experimental recordings as well as some international material—the revelatory tagline for Dual Plover’s aesthetic is “commercially challenged and destitute music since

1995”¹⁰. In conversation, Abela has insisted he is not a ‘performance artist’. After fifteen years of consistently shocking his audience, the most shocking thing he could now do is to perform a set of calming lullabies, to not hurt himself or endanger his audience in concert.



Figure 5. Lucas Abela performing as Justice Yeldham and the Dynamic Ribbon Device
<https://www.aec.at/ai/en/bigconcert-lucas-abela/> (accessed 28/2/18).

The results are a wild array of cacophonous noise that is oddly controlled and strangely musical. The instruments’ simple, original and effective premise is a welcome respite from the technically complicated musical performances of modern times. A unique act redefining the expression “don’t try this at home,” this show quite simply needs to be witnessed to be fully appreciated, let alone understood.¹¹

Contrary to his rejection of the category, Abela’s practice sits comfortably within the lineage of performance art and actionist interventions. Appreciating Abela performance-by-

¹⁰ <http://www.dualplover.com/> (accessed 28/2/18).

¹¹ <https://www.aec.at/ai/en/bigconcert-lucas-abela/> (accessed 28/2/18).

performance risks reducing him to a ‘shock artist’. However, understanding his cumulative explorations of violence, sound, endurance, iteration, his internationally dispersed but consistent practice, and tools (the glass, pick-up mic, effects pedals) over the past decade gives us greater insight into his inquiries. This performative intervention has now become expected to the point of being habitual and staid.

Over the course of thirty years improvising together, the aforementioned Australian trio The Necks agreed on a performance formula of two sets of one-hour improvisations. Each one-hour piece/performance presents a group working towards unity, completion, a marriage of three singular identities; but when one appreciates the cumulative oeuvre (and seemingly endless variation) over three decades of collective exploration, a deeper, more radical and profound contribution is recognised: that of the collective pursuit of the endlessly variable, shared with a translocal network of dedicated listeners across many contexts.

5.4 Spatial Disturbance Part I: Location, proximity and acoustics

Escaping the acoustic confines of conventional venues and codified spaces for alternative music (such as squats, small galleries and house concerts), players and organisers actively seek acoustically challenging spaces (with)in which to improvise. Some examples explored here are West Head Project (West Head, NSW); Splinter Orchestra (Mungo, NSW); Splitter Orchester (Hauptbahnhof train station and the Natural History Museum, Berlin¹²), Jim Denley (Budawang National Park, NSW), John Wilton (five-hour long drum solo in a Sydenham

¹² March 2014 as part of Maerzmusik Festspiel <https://www.naturkundemuseum.berlin/en> (accessed 20/9/17).

drain/tunnel, *the NOW now* 2013), Arika's 2006 *Resonant Spaces* project in collaboration with John Butcher and Akio Suzuki across the UK¹³, and soloists Will Guthrie, Bree van Reyk, Tony Buck and Mats Gustafsson in various unconventional spaces for *MONA FOMA* festival (Hobart, 2017).

Hans Thies-Lehmann's study of space in his chapter "Dramatic and Postdramatic Space" informed several of the compositions created during the research period that manipulate elements of proximity and therefore intimacy in a performance space. I have been exploring and applying Lehmann's observations of spatial options that are "tendentially dangerous", "centrepedal" or "centrifugal" for dramatic theatre, notably the huge space (solo harp in a cavernous city car park); the very intimate space (duo with Monika Brooks in the tiny rooms of the heritage-listed Woodford Academy in the Blue Mountains, 2014); and in a solo harp performance at Firstdraft gallery as part of *Liquid Architecture* program, 2016, where the audience was invited to lie on the floor around the instrument.

...If one reduces the distance between performers and spectators to such an extent that the physical and physiological proximity (breath, sweat, panting, movement of the musculature, cramp, gaze) masks the mental signification, then a space of a tense centripetal dynamic develops, in which theatre becomes a moment of shared energies instead of transmitted signs.¹⁴ ...Common to all open forms of space beyond drama is that the visitor becomes more or less active, more or less voluntarily a co-actor. (Lehmann 2006, 150)

¹³ http://www.johnbutcher.org.uk/Resonant_details.html (accessed 20/9/17).

¹⁴ (cont'd) "The other threat to dramatic theatre is the cast space with a *centrifugal* effect. This can be a space that outweighs or over-determines the perception of all other elements simply through its enormous dimensions (e.g. the Berlin Olympia Stadion in Grueber's *Winterreise*) or a space that eludes being mastered by perception because actions simultaneously take place in different locations, as in 'integrated' theatre" (Lehmann 2006, 150).



Figure 6. Jim Denley performing at Bogong AIR festival of site-specific sound art, Mt Bogong Village in the alpine region of Victoria. Photo by John Billan (2011).

Long before joining Splinter Orchestra, Jim Denley was fostering outdoor improvised music performances and intergenerational exchange in the Sydney improvised music community. In an interview cited in Jon Rose's essay "The Music of Place: Reclaiming a Practice" (2013, 29) Denley preaches what he practices by stating that "Australian culture needs to respond to land—opera houses and concert halls are anachronistic, colonial contexts. Once you are inside them they deny place and at this stage in our history, any sort of denial of where we are is salt in the wound." (29)



Figure 7. Monika Brooks performing as part of the West Head Project. Photo by Anthony Magen (2009).

Over the last decade Denley has initiated and presented unique, well-attended outdoor concerts on bushwalk trails, mountain tops, in caves and on unique rock formations around Australia.¹⁵ The core group realising these responses to land currently is West Head Project; a collaboration with fellow Australian musicians Dale Gorfinkel, Monika Brooks, Anthony Magen and guests. Their 2010 recording *A Closely Woven Fabrik*¹⁶ documents ten days playing on Maria Island off the east coast of Tasmania. Reviewer Ken Waxman calls it “Auditory transmogrification of Tasmanian terrain onto disc,” recognising the unique collaboration between the improvising musicians and recordist and soundwalk leader Anthony Magen, resulting in “a soundworld which is so complete unto itself that applause

¹⁵ Denley’s *Through Fire, Crevice and the Hidden Valley* is an extraordinary solo improvisation and a significant document recognising and respecting place—in this case, the Australian bush.

¹⁶ An exceptional example of their ‘site specific sound events and recordings at outdoor locations’ <http://www.splitrec.com/index.php?go=shop&id=323> (accessed 10 June 2014) is on their 2010 CD release *A Closely Woven Fabrik* (SplitrecCD21, 2010).

from the assembled audience, heard on the final track, comes as a shock.”¹⁷ I was an initial member of the project at West Head in Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park in 2006. We played together, spread across an acoustically unique corrugated rock plateau. We were called on to respond not only to the powerful sense of place, but to the ebb and flow of the winds, threatening rain, birdsong and ever-present insects sounding (and crawling) all around us.

Denley is continuously seeking deeper engagement with land, space, site and situation through sound, as evidenced by the above projects. Through improvisation on his chosen instruments (saxophones and flutes) he responds to nature and simultaneously questions and comments on his role within it. Denley was one of the few invited artists in residence at the inaugural *Bogong AIR* festival, 2011, set in the alpine regions of Victoria. Bruce Mowson observed that the festival “set sound within nature, the tension of this combination heightened by the intense weather conditions, as indicated by Denley’s performance” (Mowson 2011, npp).

Beyond an ever-shifting membership and their conscious seeking out of spatial and temporally destabilising sites, Denley describes two current strategies for ensemblic disturbance for Splinter Orchestra: one is *Microphony*, “the movement of microphones through and around the group” (Denley, 2018) allowing one member of the band to author an amplified layer of the sounds others are making; the other is *Air Hockey*. Both are “generative choreographic scores where the band moves physically through space/time” (np). The band has honed the methods over a few years and cannot recall who initiated them,¹⁸

¹⁷ <http://www.jazzword.com/one-review/?id=127536> (accessed 11/6/14).

¹⁸ “Both developed collectively over the previous few years, none of us can remember who initiated, possibly Peter Farrar (alto sax and drum machine) suggested *Microphony*” (Denley 2018, np).

which also speaks to the status of collective playing over any focus on authorship in this group. Denley adds that even though these methods might be considered ‘rules’—“if anyone wants to break off and follow their own interests, it’s entirely OK” (np).

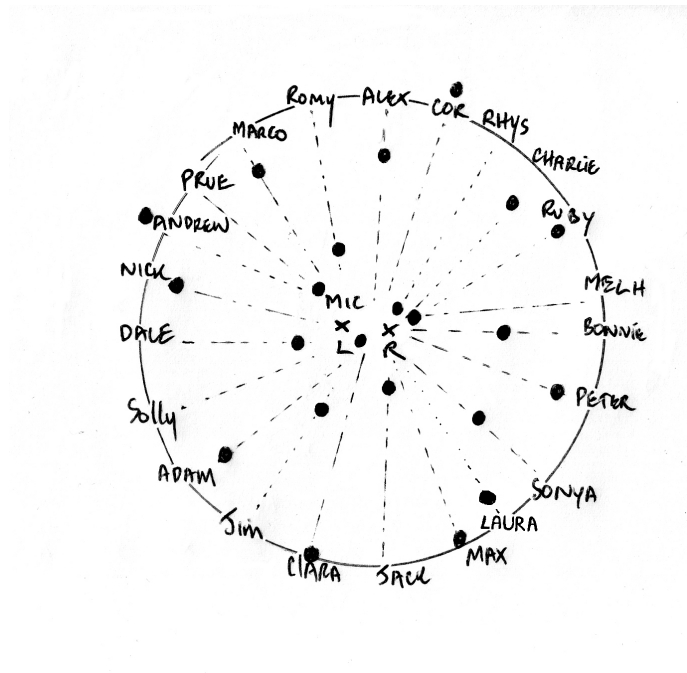


Figure 8. Splinter Orchestra mapping a version of “Air Hockey” during a residency in Bundanon (2017) (Denley, 2018, np).

In his contributing chapter to Priest’s *Experimental Music: Audio Explorations in Australia* (2008) Denley discusses Perth artist Ross Bolleter’s desert piano project—a major ongoing search to play, record, and collect¹⁹ pianos that had been aged, sun-damaged and water drenched, by being left in the Australian outback:

...Bolleter’s committed assaults on the ‘ruined piano’ has found a way of extracting the European tradition and translating it to an Australian context—the resonances are in a post-colonial dreaming. ...As he puts it, ‘the vastness and

¹⁹ Denley notes that to get to Bolleter’s kitchen sink, one had to squeeze past at least four of these rescued pianos (Denley 2008, 143).

emptiness of West Australia probably influences pieces like *Secret Sandhills*²⁰, but the environment also enters in a more active sense—the piano has been prepared by the desert.’ (Denley 2008, 143)



Figure 13. Jon Rose and Hollis Taylor performing the Great Fences of Australia project. Photo: Jon Rose.

Jon Rose’s major project with American practitioner-theorist Dr. Hollis Taylor, *Great Fences of Australia*, reimagines futile colonial divisions (fences, borders) as instruments on which to improvise. Like Bolleter’s pianos, the ‘strings’ connecting these fences have been ‘prepared’ by the harsh Australian sun, wind and sand, the main difference between the materials being that these fences were never intended to be instruments in the first place. Large-scale sound installation artist Alan Lamb’s regional wire works explore similar

²⁰ “*Secret Sandhills and Satellites* (CD, Warps 05/Emanem 4128, 2005) has [Bolleter] playing one [piano] near Alice Springs, creating one of Australia’s great keyboard pieces... It starts with an explosion of bass string rumbles followed by delicate broken-key tinkering. You can’t believe that the string bass atmospheres are not electronic music, and in a sense they are— this recording seriously zooms in. A flock of parrots enters and from then on it’s as much about the birds as the piano. Towards the end an Indigenous conversation can be heard passing by and off roars a car—this is also a field recording” (Denley 2008, 143).

territory to Rose and Taylor—wires stretched across vast, unforgiving landscapes, drawing the listener’s attention to the context within which these wires sit, trace, divide and sound physical space. The wires are played by the wind, or agitated by Lamb himself. In some installations the listener can lie on a metal plate, simultaneously hearing and feeling the vibrations through their skull. The examples of Bolletor, Rose and Lamb highlight not only the role played by an awesome and brutal ‘site’ such as the Australian landscape, but also the seeking out of materials for making sound that are formed and deformed by their sites and situations, making improvising with them impossible to fully control or master in the Western classical sense. A practitioner could not help but be fully context-responsive in these spaces, and with these materials.

Sydney-based percussionist John Wilton set up in the middle of a 200 metre-long local council utility tunnel for a five-hour solo set for *the NOW now festival* in 2014. Wilton simultaneously employed spatial, temporal and social disturbance strategies in this performance, which is perhaps why it is one of the most memorable sets of the festival in recent memory. Wilton set himself and his audience a physical challenge: for himself—to play constantly for five hours, and for his audience—to brave a dark tunnel so as to experience the shifting spatiality of the sound. Listeners’ experience of the sound shifted from the diffuse vibrations at the entrance, having to negotiate a dank, dark, unknown environment to listen closer to the performer, authoring their reception of the sound based on their proximity to Wilton as they approached and retreated.



Figure 14. Clare Cooper, *Mapped Intimacy #1: Carpark*. Photos: Clare Cooper

Wilton's tunnel performance was one of the works that inspired my composition *Mapped Intimacy #1: Carpark*,²¹ designed during this doctoral research period. Engaging

²¹ An excerpt from a recording of this performance can be heard as part of Miyuki Jokiranta's *Soundproof* program, on ABC Radio National, 2016.
<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/soundproof/julianday/7047938> (accessed 22/4/18)

with time, space, proximity and an explicit invitation to move towards and away from the performer, the audience was given a two-sided card score (see appendix 2) that asks each listener to “MOVE TO YOUR SPOT” on one side, with a map of the carpark on the other. Each card contained a coloured mark at a different ‘spot’ on the map. The spoken instruction was to spend the first five minutes of the performance “as close to the improviser as possible”. The only score for the improviser is to begin by playing acoustically and shift to highly amplified (using a volume pedal) over the 15-minute duration of the piece. The sound thus follows the audience as they move away from the sound source, and the gradual physical departure of the audience in turn affected the improvisation greatly.



Figure 15. Clare Cooper, *Odds & Influence*, 2014. Three screen shots of filmed performance at Marrickville Bowling Club.

In my attempts to disrupt habitual or ‘safe’ playing, I sought out a range of sites and composed the following works for particular spaces: *Oranges & Influence* (Marrickville flight path, *the NOW now*, 2013), *Odds & Influence* (Marrickville Bowling Club, *the NOW now*, 2014), *Mapped Intimacy: Carpark* (Alaska Projects, Sydney, 2014), *Mapped Intimacy: Stairwell* (Audio Foundation, Auckland, 2015), *Mapped Intimacy: Haunted House* (Woodford Academy, Blue Mountains, 2015). Each of these instructional, graphic scores (see appendix 2) took into account the existing semiotics of each space and were composed with knowledge of the space’s particular acoustics and tendency for disturbance, for example the freight trucks along the highway by Woodford Academy, the roar of the overhead planes

in Marrickville, the incessant poker machine, slot machine soundtracks and the clatter of coins at the Bowling Club. In each of these cases, the performers responded to and played with these sounds as much as we would have done when collaborating with another musician. It was not possible to use reliable performative devices in these situations due to the myriad other non-human sonic contributions filling the space at the same time. These compositions invited the audience to embrace what might otherwise be considered as unwelcome interruptions and to consider the unique path of their own audition in a space with many other listeners.²²

The examples explored here have all been situations in which the performing improviser or organiser has sought explicitly to bring about greater creative response to uncertainty. They have proactively disturbed the otherwise possible homogenous outcomes of performance by siting their performances in ways that defied codification or disturbed the possibility of drawing on reliable performative devices. They have all engaged in the politics of the site, proximity and therefore sociability whether consciously or unconsciously.

5.5 Spatial Disturbance Part II: Appreciating the music with an expanded sense of site (as dispersed across multiple locations)

Kwon argues that the nomadic movement of artists contributes to a dispersion and intertextual organisation where site operates “more like an itinerary than a map”:

²² It is amusing (at times hypocritical) how precious Improv performers can be about the existing sounds within a space. For example, German improviser Axel Dörner is notorious for seeking out the slightest hum in a venue—it could be coming from the lighting, or even a computer in the next room. He would wait until it was turned off (if that were possible) before playing.

[T]he site can now be as various as a billboard, an artistic genre, a disenfranchised community, an institutional framework, a magazine page, a social cause, or a political debate. It can be literal, like a street corner, or virtual, like a theoretical concept. (Kwon 2004, 4)

To view the itinerary of a nomadic improvising musician as a dispersed and (inter)textual site to which they respond is a fascinating concept.²³ It invites us to engage more broadly with the complex system around improvised music performance, acknowledging the extra-musical elements key to the scene's interest and existence. Improvisers are attracted to other improviser's and local dialogues that combine to form the broader translocal dialogue of what it means to improvise, but they are also drawn to sites of investigation that may be made up of a string of spaces or indeed a number of towns in a particular country—perhaps even across a continent. In the same way, an improviser might be attracted to responding to a particular mode of public presentation; festivals are the most common, but discourse across a music series that asks specific things/questions of/from performers might be the 'site' they are seeking out.

Whether the discourse within this complex system is formal or informal, public or private, itinerant, nomadic, collegial, understood as sited, spatial or intertextual, an expanded sense of site and time is common to its expression, historically cumulative and therefore

²³ Nomadic improvisers engage with site as a form of itinerary; the site "now structured (inter)textually rather than spatially" in the sense articulated by both Miwon Kwon (2004) and James Meyer (2000). This cumulative "fragmentary sequence of events and actions through spaces" engaged by touring performers is a "nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist" (29).

informed by the many explorations that we have witnessed, the current trends we are enthusiastic about or repulsed by, and the projections of what could be explored in our performed futures. The improvised music community experiences an ongoing and shared generative disorientation and is at its richest when appreciated as an historically cumulative and collective creation that futures and envisions, rejecting hyper-individualism, nostalgia and categorisation.

5.7 Social Disturbance: behavioural, dialogic, relational

The stabilised and codified social and relational practices within Improv have been established in the first chapters of the thesis. Emerging CRIM practice disturbing the trends of stabilised audience/performer power dynamics, listening practices and unquestioned modes of product manufacture and promotion manifest mostly as critical listening practices (Pauline Oliveros' Deep Listening Institute), 'unstaged' listening experiences (Anthony Magen's sound walks), alternate scoring and game-based conducting practices (John Zorn's *Cobra*, Butch Morris' *Conduction*), festival organisers handing over curatorial reigns to the audience (Arika), and substituting performances for critical listening workshops (Liquid Architecture), as well as some of the examples above where the performers have collaborated with organisers to design new contexts that destabilise staid behaviours.

Guy Debord's seminal work, *Society of the Spectacle*, continues to provoke the assumed passivity in our roles as performers, audiences and consumers in society. As Debord makes clear, spectacle "is the opposite of dialogue" (18); he encouraged us to be a *viveur* ("one who lives"), constructing situations that would produce new social relationships and "thus new social realities" (Bishop 2006). Debord identified inherent problems with the construction of situations recognising that the construction was not limited to alterations of

ambiance, but that a situation was also “an integrated ensemble of behaviour in time” composed of “actions contained in a transitory décor”—something of particular relevance when considering how improvisers play with the dynamic elements of context. He questioned social forces of change, asked how they might be oriented, and argued for the setting up of a temporary field of activity that encourages performers and audiences to seek and create what they desire (49-50).

Bailey observed that the reliable devices he developed over decades of playing became “offensive in some way” and that it was in playing with other people, unfamiliar people, that these devices were most effectively disrupted or given new context. He notes that in engaging with new players “Sometimes, of course, it’s a mistake, I mean this is a high risk business [but necessary] in order to keep the thing feeling fresh”. Bailey likens this to repetition in conversation where the same subjects occur and your response is the same: the “effect of endless repetitions is stultifying” (Bailey 1996).

Denley talks about the intimate and revealing nature of improvising with others:

It’s an intimate act improvising together, a revealing game we play—you can’t hide aspects of self within the swarm. Even if you play as quietly and minimally as possible—to be musically shy—you can’t hide. It may be a heavy statement—socially loud—to be silent. Everything we do has ramifications on the whole. (Denley 2018)

In most ‘first contact’ improvisational situations, musicians are attempting to listen to each other, contribute sound, contribute silence (and that being silent can be a loud social statement), and to find a combined/coherent voice/character simultaneously. Unlike most other forms of performed music, improvisers can meet for the first time on the stage of the gig. The tension, curiosity and excitement can be just as great when meeting in a private setting (in someone’s house or rehearsal room).

During rehearsals with Splitter Orchester the band spent many hours discussing ways to thwart predictable climaxes and codas, and both as an ensemble and in collaboration with our guest composers we formulated many strategies. The four that I will mention here are all incredibly simple social and behavioural ways to disturb habitual playing. *Enemy Mute* required that each player chose a band member to act as your ‘mute’, playing only when your ‘mute’ was not playing and to stop as soon as they make a sound or gesture. Players passed on their note, texture or sonic material in the piece *Eye Contact*, where Gottstein observed in rehearsal that “Eye contact is an important instrument of control. And all the same, here and there the individual musician remains stuck with their note because they fail to establish eye contact with another musician” (Gottstein 2010).

Two more compositions co-authored by Splitter Orchester are *Cross-fade* and *Five Sections*. In *Cross-fade* all players must attempt to begin playing (fade in) only when another instrument fades out (ceases to play). This strategy acknowledges that for some players the act of ‘fading’ in or out is almost impossible, but it shifted the playing and listening styles significantly. *Five Sections* is a humorous recognition that most members of the orchestra have never played in a traditional orchestra at all, organising ourselves into the sections common to a Western Classical orchestra (strings, brass, wind, percussion) with the addition of electronics. Sonically, in Splitter Orchester the clarinettist had more in common with those playing electronics, and some of the string players had more in common with the percussionists than each other. Playing together as ‘sections’ without a score required us to prioritise listening with more attention to those in our section in a way that we had never done before, therefore bringing out new sonic shapes and territories for the group.

Another way in which the otherwise ‘freely organising’ behaviour of a group might be disturbed is when a score is written for the personal vocabularies of specific improvisers.

Evan Parker observed a phase in the 1960s where composers were composing “works around particular techniques and for specific performers”:

And of course hybrid musical forms in which notated elements are combined with improvised elements are also very common. The whole notion of chance procedures, aleatoric structuring or sequencing of otherwise fixed elements and the tradition of text-based works, whether from the Fluxus direction or from Stockhausen’s intuitive music, occupies a place that is philosophically distinct from what we might call, without irony, the “mainstream” of free improvisation. – Evan Parker (Schroeder 2014, 3-4)

The best example of a score written for individual instrumental vocabularies that I have experienced was through working with the John Butcher Group (Chris Burn, John Butcher, John Edwards, dieb13, Thomas Lehn and Gino Robair) in 2007-2008.²⁴ Butcher composed a score with these specific musicians informed by their unique instrumental vocabularies. The score was commissioned by Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival and combined traditional notation and graphics interspersed with completely freely improvised duets. This was “an opportunity [for Butcher] to merge his usual improvisational practice with composed elements in such a way that composition might lead improvisation into new areas without inhibiting it” (Broomer, 2017).²⁵ This certainly brought about different kinds of improvised dynamics, but my experience of it was that I was so overly conscious of where the freely improvised ‘section’ began and needed to end as far as the score was concerned, that I didn’t feel fully present with the kinds of possibilities afforded by

²⁴ <http://www.johnbutcher.org.uk/group.html> (accessed 3/2/17).

²⁵ <https://johnbutcher1.bandcamp.com/album/somethingtobesaid> (accessed 4/4/18).

an open-ended structure. There seemed to be a very different character to the notated score parts and the ‘freely improvised’ score parts such that the work didn’t fit together.

Summary

Individual performers, ensembles and organisations have a range of ways in which to destabilise themselves, their collaborators and their audiences in order to increase the chances of uncertainty in a performance context. Improvisers are increasingly recognising their agency to author experience outside of their reputational ‘schtick’ or simply music-making. This chapter has demonstrated how CRIM practitioners are harnessing the power of sites, sociality, instruments, locations and timing to destabilise their creative playing field and intensify the relationships between them and their listeners.

Chapter 6

Collaborative disturbance, and the need for new lenses

Traditional musicological discourse and approaches are often not helpful when trying to understand the collaborative, iterative and exploratory and process-focused nature of context-responsive improvised music (CRIM) practice. This chapter will explore the founding motivations and practices of two large improvising ensembles who are collaboratively composing structures that disturb codified tendencies and seeking out situations that elicit new sonic materials, and three organisations collaborating with artists to disturb the ways in which improvised and experimental music is presented. This chapter will also show how performers have adopted and evolved the use of graphic scores and games to thwart and disturb codified and reliable devices in improvised performance, and highlight the clear relationship between the application of graphic scores and the visual thinking offered in this thesis.

Using these practices, ensembles and organisations as primary examples I will show the limitations of existing musicological approaches to fully understanding and appreciating the core dynamic elements at play in the resulting sonic outcomes, therefore proving that alternative lenses, approaches and models are needed.

6.1 Two orchestras: collaborative composition over time

Some large group improvisation is garbage. It is a high-risk activity and it's not just difficult, it's kind of impossible. But it still does happen that now and then, it's really successful. And then it's extraordinary. (Bailey 1996)

The two main examples discussed here are Splinter Orchestra (Sydney) and Splitter Orchester (Berlin), both of which I co-founded, played with and composed structures for in the early 2000s. The very existence of these two large working ensembles is a disturbance strategy in itself for all involved, whether playing, organising for them, or attempting to listen to all contributing performers in equal measure (as performer or audience member). These two ensembles employ collective strategies to help avoid homogenous improvisational performance outcomes; they range across temporal, ritualistic, and situation-specific, and involve working processes and, at times, tacit agreements.²⁶

[T]here are many moments playing with, or listening to large groups of improvisors where you have to abandon any notion of a full understanding of all the thoughts and streams that are going on. Ultimately there is inherent incomprehensibility as the intentional polyphony overruns your perceptive abilities. This mirrors a world-view that accepts multiplicity and complexity—a group like Splinter is a musical expression of the sort of world we all actually inhabit. This looks less like an aesthetics of imperfection, and more like an acceptance of current realities, with new global perspectives. (Denley 2018, np)

The reasons for forming an improvising group in the first place are varied: aesthetics, complimentary sonic vocabularies, or quite simply sociability (variation in numbers). For many improvisers, it is simpler to perform solo and tour collaborating with different people everywhere they go. Observing the field of play, an ensemble might explore ways of differentiating themselves from other musical groups. In offering something unique, their performance opportunities may increase. In the case of 20-plus player ensembles like

²⁶ For the other ensembles that I will use as examples throughout the thesis (West Head Project, Germ Studies, Fushitsusha, MIMEO, and The Necks) I will only mention a specific disturbance strategy that they have employed.

Splinter Orchestra and Splitter Orchester, the easiest (and perhaps most predictable thing) to do would be to play cacophonous noise. What both ensembles found in conversation was that there were predictable shapes, arcs and codas that could be disturbed by something as simple as eye contact, secretly choosing a member of the orchestra as your ‘mute’ (if they play, you don’t play) or as complex an approach to improvising amplification as *Microphony* (which will be described in detail later in the chapter). Each of these compositional strategies takes into account the working history of the players, and draws attention to the dynamic elements at play within the context within which the ensemble responds.

6.1.1 Sydney’s Splinter Orchestra



*Figure 9. Splinter Orchestra playing/recording in the desert around Mungo, NSW, 2016.
Photo: Splinter photo archive.*

Through the Splinter Orchestra we learned how to listen. It was almost as if we worked out what we needed most and, by funky miracle, it came into action.

Splinter taught us organisation on an ethical level and organisation on a functional level—the expressive nature of sound versus ‘music’, and how empathy and trust are vital to any act of music making. (Thomas 2009, np)

The goals motivating the inception of Splinter Orchestra alongside the first *NOW now* festival (2001) were partly pedagogical, and as the quote above from co-founder Clayton Thomas states, we came across some of the learning by accident. The group has always been intergenerational and open in order to introduce more players to this way of music making and to keep the group from settling into a style. In meeting regularly to ‘rehearse’ as opposed to performing, the stakes (to convince an audience? To make ‘good’ music?) were lower than those produced by the myriad extra-musical demands of public concerts. It also created an ideal environment for those who were interested in improvisation but who lacked confidence or experience improvising, at a time in Sydney when opportunities for this kind of collaboration was scarce.

We’ve never been interested in perfection or imperfection. But losing oneself in the collective—listening altruistically—can be magic. ...Artistically it’s always been a collective, with procedural ideas from many... It would be safe to say the group is political in its very being, although we’ve arrived at our structure not through overt discussion or manifestos but through playing music. It’s changed a lot over the years, things could change next week—everything remains negotiable. (Denley 2018, npp)

The Splinter Orchestra membership is intergenerational and fluid, with over eighty people having played with the band since its inception in 2001. Some musicians only performed once, whereas core members like Laura Altman, Jim Denley and Peter Farrar have

played consistently with the group for over fifteen years.²⁷ Indicative of the connection this group shares beyond performing for others, Denley asks “[Is] it too strong to say that creating music with others can be an act of love?” (Denley 2018, np) and has articulated some of the practices and processes of the current incarnation of Splinter Orchestra including one of the many in-performance questions asked by Splinters on a regular basis: “is the sonic material transparent enough to hear the world?” (Ibid). Denley describes collaborative authorship dynamics, sonic density, characters as positive viruses, the pursuit of inaudibility, transparency, impulses, balance, backgrounds and bodies. He invites the reader in to the experience of being in this warm community of players and states clearly that the process is more important than any product:

[R]efining and intuiting common and individual ways of listening/playing is a constant engaging ongoing negotiation amongst about 25 [musicians]. Although in this text I’ve laid out some principles, others in the band may have different perspectives—there’s never a fixed position, physically or conceptually to perceive the work or any fixed codes to create the music. Splinter will evolve and mutate as new members join, others leave and we encounter new landscapes. (Denley 2018, npp)

Over the past two decades of process and practice, Splinter Orchestra has often sought out a variety of non-traditional performance sites within which to improvise. At times this has been necessitated by the amount of people playing (as it’s not a simple task to fit twenty-five people with their broad array of instrumentation on your average stage). In my time with the Splinter Orchestra (2001-2007) we mostly gathered to rehearse or perform in

²⁷ Since July 2014, Splinter has met weekly to rehearse in a dedicated space at Tempe Jets, a former sports club in Sydney; it is these informal and regular exchanges, rather than public performance opportunities, that are at the heart of the band’s existence²⁷. If ever the band earns performance fees (often door takings), the money is pooled for future projects.

warehouses and share-house apartments on busy urban streets (Space 3 Gallery and Lanfranchi's Memorial Discotheque on Cleveland St; busking on King St, Newtown; and Café Church, a deconsecrated church in Glebe). The sound of the moving, bustling city was a given texture in the music; above and beyond this was the challenge to hear even the most minimal contributions. Learning to listen to one another in sites that were already loaded with sonic material had a significant impact on this ensemble—being precious about intentional and non-intentional sounds was not an option. It was always an exercise in responding to and creating with any and all of the sounds in the space.

I will draw on several specific context-responsive performance events and compositional disturbance strategies employed by the Splinter Orchestra in Chapter 5.

6.1.2 Berlin's Splitter Orchester



Figure 10. Splitter Orchester performing in the centre of Berlin's central train station (Hauptbahnhof), 2010. Photo: Gregor Hotz.

Unlike its older sibling in Sydney, Splitter Orchester's²⁸ origin story was not so much driven by pedagogy, but motivated by deepening our understanding of large-scale improvisational tropes so that we could collaboratively compose strategies to disturb them. I co-founded this 25-piece ensemble in 2009 with Clayton Thomas and Gregor Hotz after producer Hotz and I decided that we wanted to redirect the public presentation funds we had secured from Berlin State arts funding (attached to a concert series in the artist-run venue *ausland*) to form a large ensemble dedicated to improvisation. Large-scale improvising ensembles were not new to Berlin; groups like the Globe Unity Orchestra had been active from 1966 (Bakrigan 2003, 113) through to around 1987.²⁹ Since its inception, Splitter Orchester has had a mostly fixed membership of between twenty to twenty-five members hailing from ten different countries (America, Austria, Australia, UK, Germany, Italy, Israel, Lebanon, Mexico and Switzerland). The musicians were chosen by Clayton Thomas and me based on a mix of good-humoured characters, rather than a mix of instrumentation.

As noted in the literature review for this thesis, Splitter Orchester have invited musicologists and filmmakers to observe and respond to their rehearsal process, resulting in highly detailed accounts of suggestions, negotiations and arguments regarding which structures produced new sonic territories (or disturbed habitual playing). Croatian musicologist Marta Blažanović observed the “high level of mutual understanding and listening between members of the orchestra” as well as the lack of “pressure of progress” (Blažanović 2012). An in-performance question signalling the evident communitarian values of the ensemble was offered by German musicologist Björn Gottstein: “How can I develop

²⁸ *Splitter Orchester* is a direct German translation of Splinter Orchestra.

²⁹ Globe Unity Orchestra performed a reunion concert in Berlin in 2006.

and at the same time create the potential for others to develop?” (Gottstein 2010). Having these critical guests observe our process was incredibly valuable, as we were often too embroiled in the music or arguments to have any oversight that would contribute to charting the learning within the group beyond each rehearsal. Having the option to publish the observations of our guests in performance programs also provided a deeper engagement for audience members outside of the working process.



Figure 11. Axel Dörner playing amongst the exhibitions in the Berlin Museum für Naturkunde [Natural History Museum] as part of Splitter Orchester's collaboration with Øyvind Torvund for Maerzmusik, 17/3/14. Photo: Kai Bienert.

All of the improvisational scores collectively authored by Splitter Orchester illustrate the strategies designed by the group to encourage alternate approaches to listening and playing in a large collective, to become more porous to context, and in doing so invite a radical following whose listening practice has sharpened and shifted with exposure to these performances over the last eighteen years.

6.2 Three organisations: disturbing platforms for presentation

Organisations such as Arika (Glasgow), Liquid Architecture (Melbourne-based), and High Zero (Baltimore) have made explicit their aim to interrogate not only the practice of listening or the practice of improvising but also the process of organising and facilitating these platforms. Hand-in-hand with the performers and communities, the inquiries facilitated by these organisations are in constant and vigorous evolution. Each of them engages interdisciplinary authorship within the organisation, composition, and presentation of performance. Each of them acknowledges and encourages external influences and roles (organisers, performers, audiences) as significant in the resulting sonic outcomes. Examining the observation, planning, testing and evaluation of these disturbance strategies as design processes can help us to better observe an organisation's intentions as well as the role of the social materials they work with when planning their platforms and events.

It is mostly in the context of a festival that improvising performers seek out alternative situations—or audience/performer arrangements—in which to stage their performances. More often than not, the motivation for this is to break the monotony of a nightly staged offering (4-6 sets per night in the case of *the NOW now* or *What Is Music?* festivals in Australia). An Improv scene would distinguish between the regular performance series—which is reliant on a supportive, non-commercially driven space—and the spectacle of the festival 'feast' that invites a range of different sited engagements from organisers and players. However, the examples explored here are not presenting pre-crafted knowns, but are designing frameworks in which it is more likely that audiences and performers required to creatively respond to uncertainty in real-time.

The growing number of organisations presenting experimental performing arts festivals and series worldwide with a focus on sound and listening can be considered as building on the concepts of Cage, and of the Situationists, and Fluxus movements. Mirroring emerging practice in the field of design, in turning the attention of the audience from the “content to the context” (Borgo 2005, 2), and from the sounds (designed objects) to the situations and contexts in which they emerge, these encounters address everything from architecture, ecological imbalance, interspecies relations, and social inequality. Some examples are *Tuned City* (est. Berlin 2008, moving from city to city after this first incarnation), described as “a platform researching relations between sound and space in the urban context”³⁰; *MONA FOMA* (Hobart); *Dark MOFO* (Hobart); and *Unsound* (which has been held in Krakow, Warsaw, London, Adelaide and Wagga Wagga).

Other festivals consciously engage context as a compositional tool in their programming of improvised and experimental music, but to a lesser degree, such as *the NOW now festival* (est. Sydney 2001) with live film soundtracks, soundwalks, workshops and variety of spaces with loaded semiotics; *What Is Music? Festival* (est. Sydney 1998); *Musique Action* (est. in Nancy, France, 1985); *The Space/Bomb the Space/Happy* (est. Wellington, 1999) and *Audio Foundation* (established in Auckland 2004 by Zoe Drayton “to support, promote and preserve ‘Sound Art’/‘Experimental Music’/‘Noise’/‘Outsider Music’/‘Drone Music’ etc. in NZ”).³¹

³⁰ *Tuned City* “draws on the traditions of critical discussion about urban space within the architecture and urban planning discourse—as well as its strategies and working methods—into the context of sound and listening. This expanded discussion reenforces the potential of the spatial and communicative properties of sound as a tool and means of urban practice.” (http://www.tunedcity.net/?page_id=457 (accessed 19/3/18)).

³¹ <http://www.audiofoundation.org.nz/about> (accessed 2/4/18).

On emerging trends in curatorial practice, British curator and writer Claire Doherty (Doherty 2009) observes that the curatorial manoeuvre and “rhetoric of place-making has led to the dominance of place-based event-exhibitions and public art initiatives”(18).³² However, there has been a corresponding shift in these curatorial propositions “from a responsive to a productive mode, in the performance of the local by the international and the international by the local” (Ibid). This echoes the ideas raised earlier in the thesis regarding the nomadism central to current performing arts practices, but also highlights the curatorial drive to consciously engage with context as a compositional (curatorial) tool when engaging improvisers. Observing the activity of an organisation in isolation, we can glean how they have responded to the shifting landscape over time, but when we view their innovative trajectories together, we can see that there is a critical mass of organisations engaging in this consciously context-responsive practice, and that the flow of artists through the translocal improvising scene is driving the discourse.

6.2.1 Arika

Glasgow-based organisation Arika has achieved a level of prominence in their approach, influencing organisations worldwide to re-think and re-stage their presentations of sound as investigations of what it means to listen and to make sounds at all. Arika has made explicit their aim to interrogate the process of organisation. The move from a more traditional multi-

³² “The rise to prominence of such curatorial ventures can be traced to the early 1970s, from *Sonsbeek 71*, Arnhem, and the first *Sculpture Projects Münster* in 1977, through the mid 1990s with ... to the proliferation of place-based biennial or triennial exhibitions” (Doherty 2009, 18).

night arts festival to an episodic format embodies the iterative and interconnected nature of this commitment. These events are not expected to resolve, but to flow over to future collective enquiries as part of a constant evolution.

My lasting impression of the [Resonant Spaces tour] is that Henri Lefebvre is right. In understanding space and time we should not consider them as separate entities; they need to be thought of together. Sound articulates this quite well. (Esson 2006, np)

Although the organisation has evolved beyond presenting concerts, the example of their *Resonant Spaces* project of 2006 is an excellent one to draw on here with regards to a conscious engagement with context as a compositional tool, recognising and abandoning the conventions of live music (Lloyd 2006, np). As an organisation that had been engaging improvising musicians for years, they chose two highly responsive soloist improvisers (John Butcher and Akio Suzuki) to explore a variety of geographical locations and physical structures “which displayed extreme acoustic properties” (Esson 2006, npp). The artists were asked “to be informed by the acoustic space they found themselves in” (np)—which for an improviser is not a new brief—visiting “the more remote corners of Scotland...sites with specific acoustic properties” (Ibid). Butcher recalls that his experience of the tour highlighted the issues of “playing solo in extreme acoustics” (Butcher 2011, np).

We’ve all heard orchestral groups struggling to play compositions in rooms with the wrong acoustics for the piece chosen. ...Each space, including an underground reservoir, a sea-cave, and a giant oil tank, required a different approach. Something that worked in one could rarely be transplanted to another. In a way, this was an amplification of factors involved in more conventional settings. (ibid)

In 2010, their *Instal 10* festival explicitly set out to test the public platform they had developed and expand upon concepts established by John Cage in the 1960s with regards to expanded listening and appreciation of sound:

Music is about more than just music. In fact, any radical music has always been provoked by something from outside: by non-musical ideas, ideas from and about our situation. And it only stays radical if it keeps saying something back to that situation, if it tries to change it. ...An experimental festival of experimental music, INSTAL 10 addresses itself to these and subsequent concerns.³³

In the lead-up to this festival, Arika co-director Barry Esson gave a talk at Glasgow Art School sharing the ways in which the organisation was trying to make their festivals “experimental festivals of experimental music” (Esson 2010, np), where the structure of the program is “in itself, a way for people to get engaged”(Ibid).³⁴ As was becoming a tradition for the organisation, the final 3.5 hours of the public performance program would be handed over to approximately 60 audience members:

“[A]n autonomous group of people, who we have no control over [...] to do what they think should be done at the festival given the investigations that they’ve collectively had around the ideas that we might have suggested or the ideas that they’ve brought to it themselves, which in some way pertain to music even if they can’t be applied to music. [...] I don’t really like the word ‘participation’ but there’s levels of which you could get involved in the festival from simply coming

³³ <http://arika.org.uk/archive/items/instal-10> (accessed 1/3/2017).

³⁴ “I would like to encourage all of you to come to the festival this weekend, but to treat everything that appears to be happening on a stage, or appears to be happening by some invited artist doing something, simply as a schematic diagram, it’s a proof of concept, or a demonstration of an idea, and what I would really be interested in more and more would be the ability to have time, with people like yourselves, to talk about these ideas and whether they offer anything to the ‘real world’, not just the ‘refined world of aesthetic taste’, cultivating a sense of artistic distinction, but a set of tools to engage with the world” (Esson, Glasgow Art School Lecture Nov 2010 <https://vimeo.com/59651814> [approx. 9 min into video] (accessed 2/2/2016).

and watching and seeing these ‘proofs of concept’, reflecting upon them in the bath, when you have a quiet moment or there are some things that ask you, or require you to set up situations where you will have an ability to control what’s happening, and there are some situations where, as a collective, some people will entirely control what happens at the festival. (Esson 2010, np)

In their presentation of hundreds of events and numerous festivals of experimental music, sound, film, image, art, ideas, and conversation since 2001,³⁵ Arika has collaborated with a broad range of musicians, artists, critics, philosophers, community organisers, and activists.

They were invited to present *A Survey is a Process of Listening*, a weeklong program of events as part of the 2012 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, which drew international attention to their experimental curatorial approach.³⁶

Arika observes, designs, constructs and reconstructs an evolving frame through which their audience and community absorb and collectively digest carefully selected international fare. This frame, however, is not ‘demolished’ between events, but is iterated, amended, altered, adapted and tilted to view parallel themes and ask questions that attempt to flesh out an eternal/evolving conversation on *who* and *why* ‘we’ are. It is ambitious, to say the least.

The Arika team research, define and pursue a fertile problem space, iterate their public program over time, and take time to reflect, refine and restructure before implementing their next program. Their public programs have evolved from festivals of improvised music and film into ‘episodes’ interrogating urgent social justice issues. Arika’s

³⁵ These include the *Instal* festivals, *Uninstal*, *Kill Your Timid Notion*, *Shadowed Spaces*, *Resonant Spaces* and now their *Episodes* series, now in its eighteenth edition.

³⁶ <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2012Biennial> (accessed 01/3/17). This program incidentally, had a remarkable impact on the curatorial practices of Danni Zuvela and Joel Stern of Liquid Architecture, who were in attendance at the event (Dr. Danni Zuvela in conversation 2017).

public events are relentless, fiery, motivated and committed to a certain failure. They promise not to resolve themselves and to mutate to produce another level beyond the current concerns raised. There is absolutely nothing complete or whole about them—they are messy, gutsy and at times slow-paced and boring—very much like many improvised music performances.

Basque performer and writer Mattin has been engaged with several of Arika's programs over the last decade, and chose to reference their approach in a short essay he contributed to *the NOW now* program catalogue of 2014:

[Arika] has become increasingly wary of the supposedly self-inherent critical potential of improvisation and experimental music in general. They rightly claim that music is not just music and that it is always a product of rich and complex social philosophical, political, and economic factors. Some of their ideas point toward this negative improvisation in the sense that they not only question how the notion of value has produced a specific context, but also how our own process of subjectification is part of this valorization. In order to counter this, they suggest artists should “cultivate processes of uncreativity so as to guard against the production of selves as commodities. [...] Actions that seem to lack in any artistry whatsoever: uncreativity, unoriginality, illegibility, appropriation, plagiarism, fraud, theft, and falsification as your art or your own province and precepts; information management, databasing, and extreme process as methodologies; and boredom, valuelessness, and nutritionlessness as an ethos” (Esson 2010). (Mattin 2014, 22)

I agree with the points raised by Mattin in this statement regarding the need to interrogate the specific contexts produced by the lack of constructively critical discourse and action, however, the approach that this thesis argues for is not so much one of cultivating our personal ‘uncreativity’ as performers, but to actively sensitise ourselves to contexts and to acknowledge and welcome the influence of the dynamic elements at play (outside of our control) when we improvise. We are not the sole authors of the experiences within which we play.

I observed Arika's activity via their online programs and anecdotes from participants for thirteen years before traveling to Glasgow in 2015 to attend *Episode 7: We Can't Live Without Our Lives*. I had assumed much about how Arika events come into being, in part caused by the co-authorship and consultation with my own community of creators in Sydney, and in part due to the online rhetoric of the organisation in their regular mentioning of 'allies' and 'community' in their program texts. Until 2014, Arika was a curatorial team of two: Barry Esson and Bryony McIntyre. It has since expanded to include Glasgow-based Emilia Muller-Ginorio, New York-based prison abolitionist, activist and filmmaker Tourmaline³⁷ and Berlin-based artist Agnieszka Habraschka.

Contrary to my impressions before interviewing the Arika team on my 2015 field trip to Scotland, they confirmed that the curatorial decisions, platforms and concerns of the events were solely decided upon by the organisers, driven by their own political concerns and those of their international allies. The foci and frameworks were developed in conversation between public events over the years.

As part of *Instal 10*, Arika delivered a manifesto that they stated was an attempt to publicly address the growing concerns they had regarding the presentation and performance of experimental music.³⁸ The tone of the manifesto indicates that the international scene is in a state of disarray or crisis. The manifesto is comprised of three 'talks' stitched together.³⁹ It is punchy, informed and loving, but also sounds quite fed up. Arika include a disclaimer at

³⁷ Tourmaline changed her name from Reina Gossett in 2018.

³⁸ <http://arika.org.uk/instal/2010/event-talk-arika-manifesto.php> (accessed 19/3/2017).

³⁹ I have included the recapitulation of the talks that combine to form the 2010 Arika manifesto in the appendix to this thesis, as many of the points raised are pertinent to this doctoral research, with particular relevance to this chapter on disturbance strategies.

the end of the manifesto regarding them having intentionally obscured the sourcing, borrowing or restating of others' proclamations, research and philosophies.⁴⁰

The proposal presented in the third part of the talk (after recapitulation) sets up Arika's ethos for the 'episodes' that followed. Their stated preference was to "promote a qualitatively different process to the dominant mode of artistic production within experimental music today" (Esson 2010, 13). Tired of their role of "distribution of prefabricated sensations, habits and judgements and prejudices which are crystallised into tastes", Arika asked how they could have "some kind of real world and positive consequence?" (13) through their program.⁴¹ This then manifested in several authorial disturbance strategies that permeate their structure, operations, conversations, and productions.

Arika have explored numerous approaches for evolving their platforms and programs above and beyond the presentation of music and film into ongoing discourse with community on urgent themes, while still including performance and experimentation. As mentioned about, these have included handing over the curatorial reigns to the audience for the final hours of festival programs; inviting artists John Butcher and Akio Suzuki to respond to a series of locations with unique and unpredictable acoustic properties for their *Resonant Spaces* project, and inviting audiences to follow this tour throughout the UK; inviting artists

⁴⁰ The disclaimer reads "If you think it makes any difference as to who once said what, whether those proclamations could be said to be theirs and where exactly such and such is appropriated in the above text; we're happy to tell you or anybody else who asks" (Esson 2010, 16).

⁴¹ "We might argue about a notion of consequence for a long time, but I'd always start by saying that art in the UK today runs a country mile the very minute it looks like it might actually start to have any of the consequences for social benefit or radical action that it so often claims for itself" (Esson 2010, 13).

to perform their active critique of the format, styles and platform of improvisation (Mattin, Diego Chamy, Jean-Luc Guionnet, Terre Thaemlitz, Company Ueniz); and allowing (and encouraging) space for reflection *within* the public programs.

Arika end their manifesto with asking: “if we’ve had enough consumption and enough genuflection; then what is to be done?” (16). They highlight the need to “clearly measure success in stark terms” and identify naming “a force of thought at the core of music [which is] a process led by rational obligation to an idea” as a way of doing this (13).⁴² Thinking collectively has been central to their programs since they articulated these provocations. The metrics by which they measure the success of these events is unknown.

6.2.2 Liquid Architecture

Joel Stern and Dr. Danni Zuvela, the current co-artistic directors of Australia’s Liquid Architecture credit their experience of Arika’s curatorial provocations at the 2012 Whitney Biennial for much of their current curatorial approach.⁴³ The influence of Arika is evident in the organisational positioning statement found on Liquid Architecture’s website:

Liquid Architecture is an Australian organisation for artists working with sound. LA investigates the sounds themselves, but also the ideas communicated about,

⁴² “Maybe by a process that recognises and names a force of thought at the core of music, even after the fact. That excavates radical ideas, sees them as coming from and offering something back to our wider social situation and asks how we can think them now, and how doing that might require us to act. We consider this an act of fidelity, a process led by rational obligation to an idea, which (handily, you might say) allows us to clearly measure success in stark terms (rather than a vague language of the arts today), in direct relation between how we actually act and how we were obliged to” (Esson 2010, 13).

⁴³ Conversation with Dr. Danni Zuvela, 2017.

and the meaning of, sound and listening. ...Our program stages encounters and creates spaces for sonic experience, and critical reflection on sonority and systems of sonic affect. To do this, we host experiences at the intersection of contemporary art and experimental music, supporting artists to produce performances and concerts, exhibitions, talks, reading groups, workshops and recordings in art spaces, music venues and other sites.⁴⁴

I have worked with Liquid Architecture (LA) since 2004, when I first played on a bill in an improvised duo with Norwegian artist Inge Olmheim.⁴⁵ LA was co-founded and organised by Nat Bates and Bruce Mowson in 1999, and held a consistently close relationship with French funding bodies, supplying the annual rigorous, but mostly Eurocentric sound festival with significant French artists such as Bernard Parmegiani to headline their bills.⁴⁶

In its first iterations the organisations' curatorial focus was on composed music in the electronic or acousmatic tradition. Now in the hands of ambitious and investigative new directors, Zuvela and Stern (previously of Brisbane-based experimental film collective, Otherfilm)⁴⁷, the once annual sound art festival has evolved into a critical, iterative, generative, rolling program of social sound-centric dialogue. The events are at times co-presented, or simply supported by LA, but, like Arika, LA's core program is rigorously composed and co-authored by their community of investigative practitioners. It is an

⁴⁴ <http://www.liquidarchitecture.org.au/about/> (accessed 07/12/17).

⁴⁵ *Liquid Architecture* festival, Performance Space, Sydney, 2004.

⁴⁶ "National sound art festival, *Liquid Architecture*, has just completed its 4th incarnation at several Melbourne venues. Under the direction of Nat Bates and Bruce Mowson, the event featured 30 Australian and international artists, including French musique concrète/acousmatic pioneer, Bernard Parmegiani and San Francisco noise merchants, Scott Arford and Randy Hy Yau. Parmegiani's presence was a real coup, bringing into sharp focus the rich heritage of sonic art. But could the festival deliver on its claim that we would "hear the world through a different set of ears"? (Sellars 2003).

⁴⁷ <http://otherfilm.org/> (accessed 1/5/18).

experimental platform for experimental encounters. Thanks to multi-year arts funding (and the reputation LA has earned), they are testing new grounds with each program, and are not content with presenting readymade performance works.

Liquid Architecture is curatorially driven and our methodology embraces research, collaborations and imaginations. We want to echo beyond local conversations, problems, debates and questions, to reverberate across media and disciplines, and so to sound out new discourses about the audible world, and beyond.⁴⁸

Examples of some of LA's curatorial disturbance strategies to date have been: running radical feminist pedagogy workshops in place of concerts in Melbourne, 2018⁴⁹; producing intimate one-to-one experiences for artists and their audiences in domestic settings across several locations in Taiwan in 2017⁵⁰; staging raucous improvisational concerts within a formal symposium structure at the National Taiwan Museum of Contemporary Art⁵¹; and pairing artists with organisations to develop relationships as core to a multi-city tour of Taiwan in 2017.⁵²

The interventions listed above evidence an active disturbance of the stabilised modes of presentation, discourse and public investigation of sound-based art practices by an organisation perpetually rethinking and repositioning itself. It is also evidence of an

⁴⁸ <http://www.liquidarchitecture.org.au/about/> (accessed 7/12/17).

⁴⁹ Liquid Architecture presents *Polyphonic Social: Polythinking Unsingularity*, <http://www.liquidarchitecture.org.au/program/polythinking-2018/> (accessed 3/4/18).

⁵⁰ A collaboration with Taiwanese performance artist Betty Apple 迷幻水鄉 *Mirage City Under A Lake*.

⁵¹ Practicing Sound, Individually and Collectively symposium.

⁵² Liquid Architecture presents *Entering Tone*, Taiwan, 2017, in collaboration with Taiwanese organisations Ting Shuo, Acid House, and the National Taiwan Museum of Contemporary Art.

organisation recognising how important criticality and community are in a living music scene.

6.2.3 High Zero, Baltimore

Baltimore's High Zero Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation that presents the annual festival *High Zero*, runs The Red Room venue and regular performance series, and also publishes recordings of selected performances from these events.

Unlike many related festivals, High Zero is not narrow in terms of sensibility or subculture, but rather widely inclusive of all the different types of experimental music-making in the moment. The festival has a unique structure. HIGH ZERO is focused solely on new collaborations in freely improvised experimental music. Internationally famous musicians play side by side with younger “unknowns,” united by their commitment to the musical imagination. Each year, Baltimore becomes a fertile meeting-ground for a large group of inspired players, drawn from a fascinating international subculture. (High Zero 2017)

High Zero festival has built an international reputation via subversive curatorial strategies.⁵³ They invite international improvisers to collaborate in new groups with local artists (of the festivals' choosing), and in many cases, appear to test their guests' ability to creatively respond to uncertainty. In this way, their public platform is “a major challenge for the improvisors, who are put in contexts where their stock personal musical languages may not work, pushing them into terra incognita” (Ibid, np). The best example of this in the year that I attended (*High Zero* 2005⁵⁴) was the combination of German trumpet player Birgit

⁵³ Press for *High Zero Festival* http://www.highzero.org/2017_site/about/ (accessed 19/3/18).

⁵⁴ http://www.highzero.org/2005_site/the_musicians/index.html (accessed 3/4/18).

Uhler (known for her minimalist textural playing) who was curated into a large group that included a noise turntablist and a busker they just met on the street playing didgeridoo. This style is unique to *High Zero*, as all the other improvised festivals that I have attended or performed in strive to provide a forum in which the players can ‘do what they do best’ or to at least converge with a kind of unity or communion being the main artistic and social goal. The festival curatorial committee make their motivations explicit on their website:

The festival exposes large audiences to this radical music in its pure form. Large-scale public concerts, recording sessions, workshops, and guerilla street performances are all part of the heady mix. The players are carefully selected by the festival’s organizers for their intense, unique music, whether it is based around dramatic intensity, humor, specially designed instruments, original approach, raw sound, or nearly superhuman instrumental technique. The resulting collaborations challenge the limits of music and delight by their audacity, expressiveness, immediacy, and innovation. It isn’t about stars or established projects; it is about the most uncompromising and stimulating new improvised music we can bring together. (High Zero 2017)

High Jinx runs parallel to the festival and is a “schedule of site-specific street performances at numerous places about Baltimore city”⁵⁵.

These events are creative, musical and socially challenging. They are rarely obnoxious and never intended to do anyone harm. They are not officially sanctioned by the city, therefore you participate at your own risk. However, these events have been some of the greatest public art performances happening in Baltimore. (Ibid, np)

⁵⁵ http://www.highzero.org/2010_site/highjinx/ (accessed 11/11/17).

The tone of the promotional material recognises and celebrates that which sets the annual festival apart from their international counterparts. There is an inference of a kind of elitism or hypocrisy: if by engaging in improvisation, artists are saying they are open to anything, let's throw anything at them and hear what happens. *High Zero* is engaged in a constant process of observation and vigilant disturbance, prioritising the ethos of freedom and real-time creative response over aesthetics or reliably 'good' combinations of performers, and forging an international reputation through this.

6.3 Collaborative authorship, graphic notation and games reclaiming composition as 'recipes for possible music-making'

[A]s improvisation is essentially a collective form of music making, the creative emphasis is also determined by the dialogical interaction of musicians. The existence of other players enters the investigative perspective and becomes a crucial element in the musical environment. In the compositional mode the musicians relate to each other via the score—In other words communication is interposed by an external agency, independent of them all and therefore not in any composite sense dialogical. (Prévost 1995, 172)

The presentation and performance of improvisation draws from and shares common terrain with both DIY scenes and design studio practices, in that it relies on passion-driven transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary collaborations.⁵⁶ This terrain constructively forges

⁵⁶ “[P]erformers, composers, audiences, architects, acousticians, instrument makers and designers, sound technicians, promoters, and many others (often operating in more than one capacity at a time) also work in tandem with technical objects, hardware, software, and media, performance spaces, and institutional programs, among other things” (Borgo 2014, 36).

relationships and realises performances, and are also communities in and of themselves, built around annual events like festivals or ongoing concert series.

There will be inevitable cross-over in the demarcating of roles within this terrain as it is common in the Improv scene for organisers to also be performers of the music (Fischlin and Heble 2004). This is also due in part to the limited resources available to this genre as well as the lack of infrastructure and cultural kudos that organisers from a more established mainstream music scene enjoy. It can be considered typical of artist-led practices, which more often than not, operate on DIY models that espouse self-directed enterprise and run on collectivised sweat-equity structures.

It is also common to find artists who seek out the spaces to present the music of others, and organisers who select a particular artist or ensemble because of a specific location, acoustic qualities of a space, or the capabilities of a particular PA system; all of these decisions contribute to the sonic outcomes. My discussion as it relates to authorship in the performance of Improv when a non-performing organiser selects the physical site of performance is of less relevance in these instances—acknowledging instead that context is a powerful compositional tool, and arguing for attributing a traditional compositional credit for the organiser is not the point. However, recognising that this a widely accepted and growing practice in the performing arts, however, is key to this research.

The planning and execution of a performance of improvised music can be seen to be a speculative design and an extra-musical composition that influences the social and sonic outcomes. In this section I draw linear and chronological formulas to define the thread of extra-musical compositional practice towards a performance of improvised music.

As detailed below, the Improv scene is a fertile site for experimentation and sabotage with regards to traditional power structures and dynamics, and different projects have attempted to disturb codifying systems over time. These include the deliberate shuffling of

member ‘seniority’ (Scratch Orchestra); independent ensembles inviting composers in on their terms with their collective questions (Splitter Orchester with Matthias Spahlinger, George Lewis and Jean-Luc Guionnet); and compositional structures and games that offer players options for action in large ensembles (*Cobra*, Splinter Orcehstra, Splitter Orchester, London Improvisers Orchestra, and Auckland-based ensemble *Ten Acre Block*).

In the Scratch Orchestra’s “Draft Constitution” from 1969, Cornelius Cardew stated that they were engaging in “Improvisation Rites, Popular Classics, Compositions, and Research Projects” (Cardew 1969, 618-619).⁵⁷ Cardew controversially delegated the programming of their first concert to the most junior member of the orchestra with the least experience.⁵⁸ The ensemble eventually disbanded in 1974 due to the tensions that arose between the “musically trained and non-trained” members of the group, in addition to its increasing political motivations and splintering aesthetics. This is particularly interesting to note as these tensions are considered some of the major strengths of a large improvising ensemble such as the case with Sydney’s Splinter Orchestra. As Jim Denley notes:

Many of the players are highly trained in various genres of music practice and others are, to varying degrees, naïve Art Brut practitioners. Any imposition of an intonation system, (or any other code or idiom) on the whole would be inherently anti-ethical, as highly trained players swam while others, floundering without ‘the knowledge’, drowned. There would be ‘mistakes or errors’. This would be socially unbalanced. ...When it comes to pitch we exist in a fluid environment where every frequency is placed with no systematic assumptions. You would also say this about our metric and rhythmic structures. This refusal to measure or impose measure on others is fundamental to the band’s ethos. The danger would be that we might drift towards a well-tempered orthodoxy—that we get caught in

⁵⁷ The Scratch Orchestra was founded in 1969 by Cardew, Michael Parsons and Howard Skempton.

⁵⁸ The program was designed by Christopher Hobbs, an 18-year-old student of Cardew’s at the Royal Academy of Music (Nov 1, 1969 Hampstead Town Hall).

rips of normality. But in reality there's too much noise in the system—instruments like Prue Fuller's aluminium reindeer scratched on mirror produces an amazing set of tones but there's no way she can guarantee a D. (Denley, 2018, np)

The Splinter Orchestra is incredibly vigilant about their social dynamics, holding ethical behaviour, inclusiveness, and openness above and beyond any guarantees of sonic outcomes. As observed by Denley, any structure or metric that would pit a player above another in terms of skillset or theoretical knowledge would be dismissed.

Improv considers itself a non-text-based culture. This understanding can be aligned with the anarchic sociopolitical tendencies of its players (and also with its underlying mythology, emphasising the ephemeral). Edwin Prévost agrees with Bailey's assertion that the practice of improvisation has been an "almost universal norm for music-making" (Prévost 1995, 129) but goes on to suggest that it has been "superseded by the compositional mode" in Western industrial society (129) and is "certainly a form of private property [...]" consequently surrounded by all the institutions and mores necessary for the protection and exploitation of such rights" (171). Prévost observes that the "social relations which emanate from the composition as private property have implications for the production of music" as well as our perception of music and the role it plays in our society (171). Improvisation has been referred to as 'real-time composition', or has been differentiated from notated composition by referring to these works as 'pre-composed' music. Debates around the values attributed to pre-composed music as compared to improvised music can be tiresome, and often only serve to reduce the value of improvisation as an activity of lesser value.

When composers engaged in notation and more traditional western forms of composition have sought to include improvisation within their pre-composed works, the approaches, and differing value systems can be made more apparent, after all, it is one that frames the other, and the resulting composition remains the 'work' of the composer who has

invited the improviser to improvise in a particular section of the work. With regards to these discussions and tensions Bailey observed:

The debate about how composition can best utilise improvisation, while of interest to the composers concerned, is of only peripheral interest, not to say irrelevant, to some players...As Earle Brown says, “we all have blank pages”, and there are some of us who prefer filling our blank pages with our own signs rather than with those of other people. But we are a minority. Most improvisors do both. (Bailey 1992, 79)

What then of hybrid practices, such as an instrument builder designing tools for the improviser based on how they have played their instrument in the past (for example Melbourne’s Rod Cooper); the composer writing for an improvising musician with a unique extended vocabulary on their instrument (composer Liza Lim writing *Songs Found In Dream* for the unique vocabulary of saxophonist Tim O’Dwyer); or when resulting improvisations are shaped by signals (John Zorn’s *Cobra* or Butch Morris’ *Conduction* for example)? As Evan Parker notes:

[V]arious schools of conducted or signal-led improvisation are also in a sense philosophically distinct, but in practice many performers see practical and even aesthetic connections between these approaches and are often involved in the performance of concerts using, say, texts, conventional notation and free improvising perhaps even in the same piece. – Evan Parker (Schroeder 2014, 3-4)

For some, composition has become a dirty word. Steeped in the elitism of nineteenth and twentieth century commissioning practices, it is almost always compared with the works of the Western Canon, and, as McClary observes, “summons up the figure of a semidivine being, struck by holy inspiration, and delivering forth ineffable Delphic utterances” (McClary 1989, 156). Attali suggests that we reclaim the term:

But the very death of exchange and usage in music, the destruction of all simulacra in accumulation, may be bringing about a renaissance. Complex, vague, recuperated, clumsy attempts to create new status for music—*not a new music, but a new way of making music*—are today radically upsetting everything music has been up to this point. Make no mistake. This is not a return to ritual. Nor to the spectacle. Both are impossible, after the formidable pulverizing effected by the political economy over the past two centuries. No. It is the advent of a radically new form of the insertion of music into communication, one that is overturning all of the concepts of political economy and giving new meaning to the political project. The only radically different course open for knowledge and social reality. The only dimension permitting the escape from ritual dictatorship, the illusion of representation, and the silence of repetition. Music, the ultimate form of production, gives to this new emergence, suggesting that we designate it *composition*. (Attali 1985, 134) [original emphasis]

McClary extends upon Attali's cue to return us "to the literal components of the word [composition], which quite simply means 'to put together.'" (156) This resonates with our lens of design in that, as Dorst observes, "Designers make plans. They plan the behaviour of the design and its users and they plan the production of the design ... These plans, drawing and models are ultimately used as tools to interact with the people who are actually going to make the design" (Dorst 2006, 32)

One of the most developed strategies within CRIM practice for disturbing the homogenous sonic outcomes of improvised performance is that of composing structures within which to respond. In my experience, these are more often than not designed by the players themselves (rather than non-performing composers), in order to thwart or address a particular homogenous tendency. These compositional disturbance strategies can be categorised in the following ways:

- Interpretative graphic notation/scores
- Structures and games for large ensembles
- Compositions for an individual improviser's approaches to an instrument
- Compositions addressing context

I will address each strategy in the following sections.

6.3.1 Graphic notation, extra-musical structures and games

The saxophonist Evan Parker—who Bailey argues is “one of the most widely experienced musicians in the performance of ‘composed’ open form improvisation and also in ‘free’ open form improvisation” (Bailey 1992, 80)—argues that interpretive graphic scores and free improvisation are philosophically distinct practices that share practical and aesthetic connections in the performance of improvised music. Parker also observes that social and historical context plays a key role in the interpretation of notated composition as well as improvisation, and that this also extends to the techniques employed in performance as well as the design of new instruments: “Even the distinction between notated and improvised composition is rendered problematic by the issues of memorisation, material effectively embodied in each particular instrument.” (Schroeder 2014, 3). Parker goes so far as to suggest that if anyone is dispensable in the production of a music event, “[I]t is the score-maker, or the ‘composer’ as he is often called” (Bailey 1992, 80-81).

African American bass player and composer Butch Morris premiered his structural improvisation method of Conduction in a performance entitled *Current Trends in Racism in Modern America* at The Kitchen, NYC, 1985, with an ensemble including John Zorn and Christian Marclay. Morris described Conduction thus:

The practice of conveying and interpreting a lexicon of directives to modify or construct sonic arrangement or composition; a structure-content exchange between composer/ conductor /instrumentalist that provides immediate possibilities to alter or initiate harmony, melody, rhythm, tempo, progression,

articulation, phrasing or form by manipulating pitch, dynamics, timbre, duration and order in real-time.⁵⁹

It used a system of structured improvisation that relied on the hand and baton gestures of a prompter/director/conductor (many of which were inspired by the gestures of Horace Tapscott, Charles Moffett, Sun Ra, Lukas Foss and Larry Austin). Contrary to Bailey's assumption that these methods constituted a means of introducing coherence into improvised performance (Bailey 1996), they were developed so as to "shake players out of their old habits, or place a microscope on one aspect of a musician's artistry and build an orchestra fantasia around it" (Hazel 2005, np). Morris performed with many different musicians using this technique until his death in 2013.⁶⁰

Another excellent example of compositional games is *Cobra*, devised by improviser and composer John Zorn (first performed New York City in 1984); which is pertinent for the way it disturbed the homogeneous outcomes of freely improvised ensemble playing. *Cobra* is a system (sometimes referred to as a game) with detailed rules, where the prompter (rather than conductor or composer) could cue sequences of 'events'. These cues were notated on cards, with which the players are made familiar before performing. The system could be applied to ensembles of any size, and any combination of instruments.

⁵⁹ <https://www.conduction.us/about.html> (accessed 28/8/2018).

⁶⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/feb/04/butch-morris> (accessed 3/3/2015).

Cobra

MOUTH *yellow*

1. **P** POOL
2. **R** RUNNER
3. **S** SUBSTITUTE
4. **SX** SUBSTITUTE CROSSFADE

NOSE *white*

1. **D** DUOS
2. **T** TRADES
3. **E** EVENTS 1, 2 OR 3
4. **B** BUDDIES

EYE *orange*

1. **CT** CARTOON TRADES
2. **CO** ORDERED CARTOON TRADES
with guests

EAR *blue*

1. **GA** G = G M Δ
2. **GA** M = M G Δ
3. **VA** VOLUME Δ

HEAD *red*

1. **1** SOUND MEMORY 1
2. **2** SOUND MEMORY 2
3. **3** SOUND MEMORY 3

PALM *black*

1. **CUT**
2. **CODA**
3. **HOLD & FADE**

GUERRILLA SYSTEMS *Squad Leader + 2 Spotters*

TACTICS

1. Imitate
2. Trade
3. Hold
4. Capture
5. Switch/Crossfade

to next downbeat

OPERATIONS (Squad Leader ONLY)

I DIVISI Memory drone, squad leader tactics, and systems control

II INTERCUT Locus Unit return to same sound

III FENCING Unit with alternates

G. UNIT LIFE SPAN: 7 Downbeats

SPY may cut unit during OPERATIONS ONLY if unidentified.

Unit members may cut at any time

End of DIVISI superimposition

SOME LOCUS HAND CUES

thumb = stop back & forth = trade

hand = rhythm one = intercut

finger = pip cut = change

hand = drone

John Zorn, NYC © October 9, 1984

Figure 12 Cobra score of cues by John Zorn⁶¹

It would be overly simplistic to dismiss the above detailed compositional strategies as simply efforts to avoid failure. In my experience as a performer, these scores are valuable

⁶¹ <http://www.thenoiseupstairs.com/2010/02/john-zorns-cobra-workshop-11-february-2010/> (accessed 15/4/2018).

disturbances for those who have played hundreds of improvised concerts and find themselves relying on habitual gestures to shape the music. These scores and games can keep players on their toes much more than if they fall back into doing whatever they choose from moment to moment.

6.3.2 Listening practices

Composers and performers cannot dictate the experience of a performance. We have learned from the Situationists and Fluxus movements that situations can be constructed, and that temporal, spatial and social contexts can be manipulated. However, as Edgar Landgraf has noted, “All of us who have fallen asleep at the opera, were bored in a museum, distracted during a concert, or simply annoyed by a particular performance will know, no work of art and no performance can determine if and how it will be perceived by the psychic system it finds in its environment” (Landgraf 2009, 195).

Butcher observes that even the composition of an ensemble of humans on a stage is a stage overflowing with influences before and beyond the moment of co-creation; he acknowledges that improvisers bring to a performance their individual visions, idiosyncrasies and insights gained over their career (Butcher 2011, np). An improvised music performance is therefore an exercise in collective listening that connects both those on and off the stage. The audience is a key ingredient and contributing contextual element in the co-authored composition of a piece of improvised music. It is common in the performance of Improv and experimental music for the act of situational or behavioural audition to be paramount without it being stipulated or invited with an explicit prescriptive or proscriptive score. Butcher illustrates this in his observation of the “listener becoming the improviser” (Ibid) during a performance by Japanese performer Sachiko M, known for her extensive use and subtle manipulation of sine tones:

I've heard a [Sachiko M] solo performance where, for minutes at a time, the principle variation is achieved by the listener becoming the improviser, adopting different head positions to hear the complex ways a single pitch is being reflected within the room. This microscopic area of focus, space and silence is fascinating, generating fresh approaches to listening and concentration. But it is very fragile, and highlights the variable degrees to which different methods might actually serve an improvisational ethos, or not. (Butcher 2011, np)

Currently, contemporary performance is experiencing a resurgence of the presentation of a live experience with collective listening and participation as central components of the concept. For performers of improvised music, this practice is primarily informed by the historical precedents set by the Guy Debord and the Situationists, Fluxus events, Cornelius Cardew's work with the Scratch Orchestra, John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen and fifty years of large ensemble improvisation projects such as Sun Ra's Arkestra, The Globe Unity Orchestra⁶², London Improvisers Orchestra⁶³, Warsaw Improvisers Orchestra⁶⁴, Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra⁶⁵, and more recently Splinter Orchestra and Splitter Orchester.

In performance scenarios, audiences have more recently been instructed to listen blindfolded (Francisco Lopez), in complete darkness with the performers at the back of the room (Anthea Caddy & Thembi Sodell), lying on the floor (Francisco Lopez, Clare Cooper), while approaching at their own risk through a dark tunnel (John Wilton), ascending and descending staircases (Clare Cooper), moving through points on a map (Clare Cooper and Monika Brooks), seated at examination desks (Clare Cooper), or with the improviser

⁶² Formed by Alexander von Schlippenbach in 1996 with a commission from the Berlin Jazz Festival.

⁶³ Formed collectively in 1997 after a Butch Morris tour for the Contemporary Music Network.

⁶⁴ Established in 2013 by the saxophonist Ray Dickaty.

⁶⁵ <http://glasgowimprovisersorchestra.com/> Established in 2002 by Raymond McDonald.

performing within the audience (Clare Cooper).⁶⁶ With the exception of the acousmatic diffusion performances of Lopez, the aforementioned examples are performances of improvisations with a preconceived physical instruction or construction/composition for audition which feeds back to influence the improvisation.

6.4 The limitations of traditional musicological approaches

Drawing on the large-scale improvising ensembles and organisations above, it is evident that the porosity and responsivity of improvised music performance refutes the positivistic musicological theory that music has no meaning beyond its harmonic and formal structure, and is autonomous and “unrelated to the turbulence of the outside, social world” (McClary 1989, 149). The practice and development of improvised music performance and presentation does not follow a linear compositional mode. CRIM practitioners (performers and organisers) seek out new, energised relationships with other musicians and audiences, and also with sites, time and greater society. CRIM practitioners are uniquely positioned to form, reform, reflect, decode, and recode new relationships with potential publics; forms of authorship; and generative futures⁶⁷ in a way that does not proscribe or prescribe, but prototypes and iterates in real time, leaving the audience to decide what resonates with them.

⁶⁶ I will go into greater detail regarding some of these examples in the following section exploring individual disturbance strategies.

⁶⁷ The design research methodology of futuring will be addressed further on in this chapter. Futures is preferred to ‘future’ in this field as it acknowledges a variety of experiences of the present and by extension, multiple experiences of any future.

Understanding music as a cultural force within society has evolved multiple critical lenses over time. In his 1985 book *Contemplating Music*, American critic and musicologist Joseph Kerman problematises the state of musicology, asserting that it is essentially a process of music analysis anchored in understanding the technical aspects of a composer's musical style (Kerman 2009). The development of ethnomusicological frameworks from comparative musicology in the 1950s (Merriam 1977) helped people to understand music with a greater appreciation of context, in that the music was appreciated in relation to its cultural setting. However, this approach offers little insight into how music functions in context, nor does it shed substantial light on the processes and conditions of its creation.

[I]n academic practice, and in broad general usage, musicology has come to have a much more constricted meaning. ...It has come to mean the study of the history of Western music in the high-art tradition. ...Furthermore, in the popular mind—and in the minds of many academics—musicology is restricted not only in the subject matter it covers but also in its approach to that subject matter. ...Musicology is perceived as dealing essentially with the factual, the documentary, the verifiable, the analyzable, the positivistic. Musicologists are respected for the facts they know about music. They are not admired for their insight into music as aesthetic experience. (Kerman 2009, 11-12)

This reductionist view dominated the scholarship and formal appreciation of music over the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Whilst these traditional approaches helped people to understand the formalist and factual elements of a composition, and the organisation of these elements to create a piece of music, this approach is of little use to this study, principally because it offers nothing to music that is process driven or has relational aspects core to its creation.

Sociological, anthropological and cultural studies frameworks help us to understand the motivations, interrelations and behaviours of the artists and listeners. However, they are limited in how they are able to define the steps taken beyond these social roles and political standpoints of the participants within a creative process. Subsequently, there is a need to

understand the complex set of relationships between performers, audience and a given performance situation and the contextual elements at play—as visualised in the Contextual Variables Diagram (figure 3). An approach is needed that gives due consideration to all of these agents within the creative process so that we can fully grasp the nature of the practice as a profound agent of change in society.

One of the aims and contributions of this research is to broaden the lens for what is understood as compositional practice. It builds on the work done by new musicologists in their radical expansion of how and where value is attributed within the study of music and composition, and argues for shifting the emphasis from singular sonic works to the complex system of historically cumulative contextual elements that combine to realise it. It also advocates for an approach that would celebrate the working process as much as (or more than) the ‘product’ of a resulting piece of music. In doing so, my thesis not only considers the sociopolitical contexts of those who compose pieces of music, but also foreground the proactively shifting social, political, temporal and spatial contexts as key compositional tools in the creation and reception of improvised music.

6.5 New Musicology

New musicology emerged in the 1980s as a reaction to the positivism that marked its predecessor. Susan McClary’s observed that musicology “remain[ed] innocent of its own ideology” as it assessed pieces of music as artefacts within a “value-free laboratory” separated from chaos and social context. Instead, new musicology took the step of acknowledging the social context within which a composition was written to be core to our appreciation of the work, allowing it to speak its “narrative of violence and order” (McClary 1989, 149). However, this approach still falls short in appreciating an often collectively

compositional practice (illustrated by both Splinter Orchestra and Splitter Orchester) that is often staunchly averse to hyper-individualism and promotes the pursuit of mess and uncertainty. Although appreciative of the sociopolitical contexts in which music is written, new musicology still prioritises the singular composer, and the finished ‘work’.

Informed by gender studies⁶⁸, queer theory, postcolonial studies and critical theory, new musicology distinguished itself from the primarily audience-focused cultural studies and popular music studies, and expanded its analysis to include the extra-musical processes themselves and the act of composition in order to understand how these might relate to social and political factors of the time. Some of the key authors include Joseph Kerman (2009), Richard Leppert (1989) and Susan McClary (1991). Throughout the 1980s and 90s, McClary and her colleagues highlighted traditional musicology’s limited capacity to understand the social complexities of the process of making music, and the function of the act of making in a rapidly changing world.

In her afterword for Jacques Attali’s *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985), McClary articulates Attali’s central position: “music announces changes that only after are manifested in the rest of culture, and that it is in terms of the noise/order polarity that style define themselves ideologically against predecessors or contemporaneous rival practices” (McClary 1989, 156). Through its aversion to hyper-individualism and promotion of collective creative responses to uncertainty, the field of improvised music is futuring a society which, if Attali and McClary are correct, will manifest in the rest of culture.

⁶⁸ New musicology has been criticised for being overly essentialist in nature, in particular the feminist writings that ascribed gender-types to creative expressions.

Even the more radical forms of new musicological studies fall short of understanding the creative challenges and processes musicians move through when pursuing a collectively authored performance practice. Existing hermeneutics are inadequate for dealing with multiple authors and do not take into consideration the collective sociopolitical motivations present in different translocal contexts.⁶⁹ Improvised music performance sits within a complex social system that is constantly questioning and recoding itself. It is not driven by an interest in a finished product, and consequently has historically been dismissed as too slippery to assess. Therefore, an expansion of musicological hermeneutics applied to the creative process of making music is of particular interest to this doctoral research project.

Focusing on the performance of improvised music (over other forms of music) reveals the inadequacy of existing musicological frameworks to assess and appreciate improvised and context-responsive performance practice. New framing is required to truly appreciate the practice, dynamic system and compositional tools engaged in this internationally performed creative process. Dutch design scholar Kees Dorst observes that we need to dance around a problem to find a new way in, rather than attacking it head on (Dorst 2017, 15). Following this, my intention in the following chapters is to demonstrate how emerging design methodologies are better suited to do this than any existing musicological framing.

⁶⁹ See Margaret Walker's "Movement and Metaphor: Towards an Embodied Theory of Music Cognition and Hermeneutics" (Walker 2000).

Summary

Existing framing in compositional practice and musicology is ill equipped to explain and celebrate the highly porous and collaborative nature of context-responsive performance practice. CRIM practice actively futures compositional practice, while referencing and recalling the sonic and social investigations of the translocal community that has come before this emerging wave of practice. Therefore, new conceptual tools are necessary to take into account the nonlinear processes of composition in a music where relationships between performers and listeners within a dynamic context informs the resulting compositions.

It is clear that the discourse on improvised music practice flails when assessing each piece, each performance, by the metrics with which we measure other musics. We must broaden what we understand as compositional practice by foregrounding the contexts that are mobilised in the creation and reception of improvised music as key compositional tools.

Chapter 7

Design as lens

A design is made up of many of these chains of decisions, which are interconnected. Together these chains make up a very complicated network of interconnected decisions (or, not to put too fine a point on it—a giant knot). Weaving such a network takes a lot of thought, creativity and patience. As you start a project, you have nothing but loose ends, so you begin by combining all kinds of unconnected ideas into some sort of whole. You're never quite sure whether another starting point wouldn't have given you a better, simpler web of decisions. But you have to go on connecting problems and ideas with one another. This can make designing a restless dance from subject to subject. The evolving design solution has to be cross-checked continually, because a proposal that might solve a problem in one area of the design could aggravate others.

—Kees Dorst, *Understanding Design*, 47.

This chapter proposes alternative ways of understanding the field of improvised music, and more specifically CRIM practice, that draws upon design scholarship. It introduces the field of design to the reader and indicates where these ideas resonate, and how this amplifies my thesis on understanding the dynamic elements at play in CRIM practice.

Observing the shift from traditional discipline-focused design education (visual communication, industrial design, interior spatial design, architecture and interaction design) to the emerging design disciplines (experience design, service design, and design for innovation, transformation and sustainability) Sanders and Stappers note that “The education of designers is now moving from a preoccupation with the making of stuff to a preoccupation with the making of stuff for people in the context of their lives...there is the need for alternative forms of conceptualization beyond stuff” and list conceptual tools such as “stories, future scenarios, narratives, performance art, documentaries, timelines of experience and experience prototyping” as core to the new design domains (2012, 258). Language and

models emerging from design scholarship are able to be applied to any challenge or situation where many dynamic elements and forces of change are at play.

Models developed within design practice and scholarship are the most fitting critical lens for understanding context-responsive improvised music practice. Design methods such as visual thinking via diagramming have been employed earlier in the thesis, but this chapter will also reveal the strong intersections between a creative design process and CRIM practice, with the key difference being that the latter is performed in public. Recognising the common ground, it is clear that the lenses, models and language developed in design scholarship have some insight to offer CRIM practice in terms of contextual specificity, the diagramming of dynamic elements at play, and the active pursuit of a problem-space within which to create new material. This reflects a shift in design scholarship and design practice towards being considered as a more integrated and dynamic agent of change. This chapter will refer to some design practitioners who exemplify this shift. It will also raise concerns around the co-opting of agile creative practice models in both design and music by neoliberal discourses and pedagogy.

The most appropriate design lens is informed by a combination of the following critical design methods: an appreciation of a co-evolving problem and solution space emulated by models of design and creativity developed in interaction design (Mary-Lou Maher); promotion of active observation and iteration in design thinking (Tim Brown, Kees Dorst, Lucy Kimbell); embracing transdisciplinary collaborative practice (Dena Fam et al); the promotion of engagement in a non-product-focused collaborative practice in critical and speculative design (Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby); and engagement in alternative futures as well as productive non-normative notions of time in design futuring (Tony Fry, Sohail Inayatullah and Ivana Milojević). By combining the most resonant elements of the above concepts and models, I have created my own graphic models of CRIM practice.

7.1 Common ground between design and CRIM practice

Design has always dealt with open, complex, dynamic and networked problems. That is why people from all walks of life these days find inspiration in design practices and are adopting them in an effort to think differently. (Dorst 2017, 10)

The practice of context-responsive improvised music shares many of the physical, temporal, political and aesthetic contextual explorations core to innovative and emerging design methods, for example, the emphasis on active observation and iteration in design thinking. Similar to CRIM, the active observation of contextual elements in the process of designing helps to shape the outcome or outcomes of iterative creations. However, unlike improvised music performance, design iterations are rarely shared with a public audience. In improvised music, the manifestations of this process (be they gigs, albums or lifelong oeuvres) are potently and publicly negotiated, heard and felt. The field of design has developed a language that embraces ongoing observation, speculation, iteration and context as core to the creative process—it is this aspect that I am interested to bring to bear on my analysis here.

Both the lens and language of design aids our understanding of context-responsive practice in specific ways. Design has forged significant ground in building an expanded definition that reconfigures the designer as integrated, involved and leading interdisciplinary practitioners tackling major, complex problem spaces of sustainability and equity (Brown 2009, 7). Previously, a solution-driven mindset in traditional design crippled more adventurous and wide-ranging conversations; today, expanded understandings of design practice encourage unique and improvised approaches to being active, responsive and experimental observers of our world, embracing the process as much as the finished product

(or indeed, the process *as* product). Application to the field of improvised music performance is easily apparent.

A good example of a design theorist articulating the traditional and now staid product/market-driven design objective is Karl Aspelund in *Design Process* (Aspelund 2014) first published in 2006. In this publication he prescribes the steps required of a designer when realising a creative idea as a process moving “from the world of imagination to the world of objects” (1). Aspelund’s emphasis on the production/solution-focused stages of the design process are outdated. Dutch design scholar Kees Dorst acknowledges that there are no predefined moves that designers make: “there is no fixed playing surface in design [...] outside influences can disturb our plans at any time” (Dorst 2006, 22). To insist on a linear set of steps towards a solution is to ignore the dynamic field of elements and ‘outside influences’ at play. In contrast, to welcome disturbances is to encourage time and energy spent in an unfamiliar creative space, and therefore more time with a problem space, than arriving at a simple solution.

Sydney-based design practitioner-theorists Dena Fam, Jane Palmer, Chris Reidy and Cynthia Mitchell have advocated for designers to “recover a criticality suppressed by the predominant market activity of reproducing and reaffirming the familiar” (Fam et al. 2016, 157) rather than participating in the “limited act [of] delivering only an end product” (157). In the case of visual communication, the role extends from “representing knowledge [to] becoming instead an interpretive device” (158). It is in transdisciplinary projects where they see the greatest potential for speculative practice and novel thinking.

Whilst design language and the iterative creative process articulated by designers is useful for helping us to understand aspects of improvised music practice, we must however remain alert to the emerging neoliberal discourses of capital embracing ‘creativity’, ‘experimentation’ and ‘innovation’ as buzzwords and tools in the making of newer, shinier

products. These approaches and appeals to the market as the primary goal are still anathema to the improvising practitioner. On the contrary, this research focuses critical attention away from the predictable ‘product’ of the finished composition and towards an active appreciation of complex and ever-expanding/contracting subtle human and non-human contextual elements. CRIM practitioners pursue public experimentation and a radical interconnectivity between performer, audience and dynamic context. The goals of more streamlined processes or more ‘suitable products’ do not belong in a radical tradition that values uncertainty and an endlessly generative approach to creation.

At its core, this perspective zooms out from the individual performer to account for the collective and participatory nature of performance, and the temporally cumulative and porous nature of the practice. This way of viewing the object of enquiry decentres the singular author and extends authorship to not only the players but those present in the audience.

7.2 Moving beyond the drive to solve

A dynamic problem changes over time, with the addition of new elements and the shifting of connections (e.g., shifting priorities). To deal with such wildly dynamic problem situations you cannot isolate yourself, but must be in constant contact with the developing landscape while you work out what to do. (Dorst 2017, 6) [original emphasis]

Design scholarship has developed models that appreciate the problem-solving capacity of the discipline (primarily in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary projects that value the problem-space dwelling or problem understanding of an issue), and has evolved from focusing on problem-solving and singular, linear models of creation to models that sensitise designers to the complex context within which they are designing.

The creative practice models developed by Mary-Lou Maher facilitate design rather than prescribe a design process. The language employed by designers and improvising musicians when explaining their creative processes, including the concepts of surprise and disturbance relevant to both fields, is remarkably similar. As evidenced in previous chapters, CRIM practice thrives on instability and disruption; it follows that the sites in which it is performed invite or attract a kind social or political messiness in which to play. This practice can be best described as the ongoing pursuit of a speculative problem-space or co-evolving problem/solution-space (Maher and Poon 1996) within which to ask better questions, rather than to arrive at answers. There is a marked difference between the intention to solve a creative problem (many art forms and traditional design practices) and the intention to inhabit an “endlessly variable” (Butcher 2011, npp) co-evolving problem/solution-space (improvised performance). In this way, I agree with Basque practitioner-theorist Mattin’s suggestion that we could see improvisation as “a type of music making that takes activity as a starting point rather than focusing on a final product” (Mattin 2014, 16).

The following discussion draws on terminology from emerging design methodologies, such as design thinking (Rowe 1987)¹, critical and speculative design (Dunne 1999)², and in particular, design futuring (Fry 2008)³ in order to explore alignments with the core characteristics of improvised performance. The practice is also akin to “staying with the

¹ Dorst states that “the term ‘Design Thinking’ has been part of the collective consciousness of design researchers since Rowe used it as the title of his 1987 book” (Dorst 2011, np.) and that “The first Design Thinking Research Symposium was an exploration of research into design and design methodology, viewed from a design thinking perspective” (Cross, Dorst, & Roozenburg, 1992).

² The terms ‘critical design’ and ‘speculative design’ are often used interchangeably. The term ‘critical design’ first appeared in *Herzian Tales* (1999) by designer and researcher Anthony Dunne.

³ Design academic Tony Fry’s book of the same name explores the concept of ‘futuring’ as applied to design, in great depth.

trouble” as understood by prominent American scholar Donna Haraway, with its primacy of process over result, iteration and an awareness of ripe, disruptable social ecologies and evolving designs that maintain the necessity of persistence (Haraway 2016).

Understanding design as clean-cut problem-solving led to the widespread application of ‘limiting phase’ models of design processes. These centre on the ability to “define a problem, analyse it to formulate requirements and then generate solutions [...] choose between these solutions [...] and then implement the chosen solution” (Dorst 2006, 15). This model is similar to the “pose-search-generate-test [model and] highlights some aspects of design while neglecting others”. However this can only really be successful when the design brief and parameters are specific from the outset, as “design problems are not completely fixed, but are also not completely free”, and as with CRIM performance, aspects of the problem might “only emerge during the solution process” (23).

A design project can be seen as an accumulation of hundreds or thousands of these miniscule problem solving processes. ...In a design project these problem solving processes are nested: you have small, local cycles that take a couple of seconds, and bigger ones that take days or months, which consist of many smaller cycles. Each design phase is a cycle of its own. (Dorst 2006, 62)

When one examines the language used by improvisors in the literature reviewed and the interviews conducted for this doctoral research project, one is struck by the similarity of the language they contain to that used to describe the exploratory aspects of design. For example, practitioner-theorist Eddie Prévost offers two kinds of analytical propositions in an attempt to delineate improvisation from traditional composition: “1. The application of ‘problem-solving’ techniques ‘within’ performance [and] 2. The dialogical interrelations between musicians” (Prévost 1995, 172). These propositions play out in the approach, character, preparation and performance, but it is where the problem-solving takes place that

the first proposition has resonance here. Prévost argues that in other idioms and genres of music-making, most of the problems are solved prior to, rather than during, performance.

Building on this concept of problem-solving as key to improvised music performance, I draw on *Process Models for Design Synthesis* (Maher 1990), in which American design scholar Mary Lou Maher explores decomposition, case-based reasoning, and transformation in a design process. She adopted a structured approach to the overall process of design where it is comprised three phases: formulation, synthesis, and evaluation. Maher notes that prior to 1990, common design process models shared “the characteristic of prescribing a general set of tasks to be performed by the designer. A problem with design methodologies is that such approaches prescribe what a designer should do but not how” (Maher 1990, 49).

Human designers tend to not use such methodologies because they stifle creativity through a prescription of structured activities. There is a need to identify models of design processes that facilitate design rather than prescribe a design process. (Ibid)

The same can be said for context-responsive composition and performance. If we were to score the interaction between the dynamics, it would cease to be context-responsive. A model that shows the broad movement between spaces of observation, iteration and action inform both the listener, scholar and performer as to ways one could deepen their appreciation of the practice. Here, we draw from design scholarship to establish models of the compositional process that facilitate new approaches to creation and listening rather than to prescribe or limit a creative process. Dorst argued for new models and metaphors “to accurately capture design...[that] concentrates on the learning that takes place during the design projects.” (Dorst 2017, 20) I believe the CRIM Practice Cycle (to be introduced later in this chapter) designed in the process of this research does this for practitioners, not only performers, but also the audiences, organisers, and scholars of improvised music.

Dorst and fellow Design scholar Nigel Cross observed and assessed the role of creativity in the design process, concluding that creativity could be found in every design project—“if not in the apparent form of a distinct creative event, then as the evolution of a unique solution possessing some degree of creativity” (Dorst and Cross 2001, 426). Applying their observations to Maher’s model of creative design “as the co-evolution of problem/solution spaces” (Ibid, np), they observed students and professionals in the industrial design domain⁴ and conducted the experiments as “think-aloud” protocol studies.⁵ We could also view improvised music performance as akin to thinking (playing) aloud in their exploration of a co-evolving problem/solution space.

Creative design seems more to be a matter of developing and refining together both the formulation of a problem and ideas for a solution, with constant iteration of analysis, synthesis and evaluation processes between the two, notional design ‘spaces’—problem space and solution space. (Dorst and Cross 2001, 435)

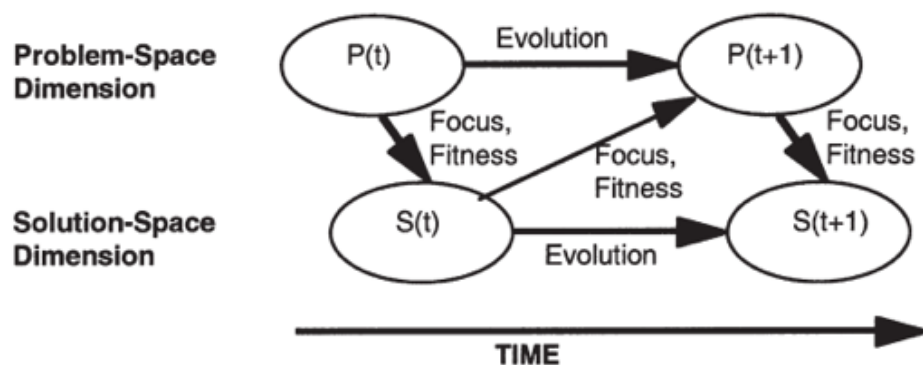


Figure 16. Co-evolution model, Maher, M L, Poon, J and Boulanger, S, 'Formalising Design Exploration as Co-evolution: A Combined Gene Approach', in J S Gero and F Sudweeks (eds) *Advances in Formal Design Methods for CAD*, Chapman and Hal.

⁴ Their reasoning for this was because they state that this discipline “calls for new, integrated solutions to complex, multidisciplinary problems” (Dorst and Cross 2001).

⁵ See Ericsson and Simon, 1993.

Building on Maher's model of creative design process based on the co-evolution and interchange of information between a problem space and solution space, Dorst and Cross concluded from their experiment that creative design was "not a matter of first fixing the problem and then searching for a satisfactory solution concept" (Dorst and Cross 2001, 435) and that "newness, novelty or creativity [was] being treated as only one aspect of an overall, integrated design concept" (431). They also concluded that "the 'creative' aspect of design can be described by introducing the notions of 'default' and 'surprise' problem/solution spaces" (436). (Applying this finding to CRIM practice, I substituted the term 'surprise' for 'disturbance' and have explored this in detail in the previous chapter).

CRIM practitioners consciously seek out contextual disturbances, embracing the complexity of a situation and learning their way to (and through) multiple solution spaces. By necessity, when the dynamics of context are primary in the performance of improvised music, one begins to think like a designer. Practitioners deploy the language of analysis and design when describing their approach to new performance contexts.

7.3 Articulating the initial problem space, and subsequent co-evolving problem/solution space within performance

Early hopes that by describing design as problem solving we had captured its essence were, in the end, not justified. The problem solving models of design are particularly helpful when you want to control a design process, or to make your design project run more efficiently. But the problem solving model is silent when we want to know more about design than just how to control and structure it. (Dorst 2017, 20)

In his book *Understanding Design*, Kees Dorst observes that many design problems "seem to have a triple nature" in that they are a combination of determined, *underdetermined*

and *undetermined* needs, requirements and intentions: determined in so far as there are elements that are ‘hard’ or unalterable; *underdetermined* in regard to those elements open to interpretation during the design process “on the basis of proposals made by the designer” with relation to the problem space and possible solutions; and *undetermined* “in the sense that the designer is, to a large extent, free to design according to his own taste, style and abilities”(Dorst and Cross 2001, 23). For performers, vital research and knowledge generation does occur before the performance event.

The most potent and intricate contextual elements are unknown until a performer is on the ‘stage’, in the space, face-to-face with other improvisers and their audience. Whether in private preparation, correspondence with organisers or in the moment of performance, the improviser asks: What are the key contextual elements? What are the physical, temporal, political and aesthetic geographies (Fox 2002, 4)? In a traditional design studio, the initiator of the process is more often than not a brief from a client. Briefs can vary from being incredibly specific and restrictive, to being incredibly open. The invitation (from an event organiser) to perform a set of improvised music can be as open as the date and venue, or as specific as the people you are to play with and the prescribed duration of the set. If the performer is also the organiser of the concert, a context-conscious research stage may involve testing the spaces for acoustic, social and temporal qualities to see which is the most potent for context-responsiveness/possibilities.

In a design discipline such as industrial design, this initial research stage might involve what is known as a ‘product autopsy’, a thorough physical/material investigation of successful (and unsuccessful) existing products on the market. The equivalent of a product autopsy for a musician might be the systematic breakdown of a recording of a live performance, or even composition, to determine its pivotal or strongest moments. However, this approach is more often than not a subconscious one and might even occur while listening

to the performance preceding the one about to be performed. The research design stage also requires the designers to identify the “drivers⁶ that stimulate [...] and the barriers⁷ that could impede the success of a design” (Dorst and Cross 2001, 36) as well as the drivers that “also act as barriers” (36). This also holds relevance for CRIM practitioners who are interested in foreseeing potential ways in which they might intervene or disturb contextual elements so as to increase stimulation and decrease barriers within performance.

Within CRIM practice, pre-performance questions (PPQ)—along with in-performance questions (IPQs)—are important tools used to research and define the initial problem space and negotiate its evolution throughout the performance process. These questions are grouped into sections that correspond to the design terrain explored in this chapter.

A set of common questions asked by an improvising performer before a performance (or PPQs) could be: What are the acoustics of the space like? Which instrument/tools best suit this space? Who else is playing on the bill? What else will the audience have been exposed to? Are they familiar with what I/we have done before? What kind of style will the performance before/after my/our set most likely be? What time of day is it? How has the concert been promoted? What has been promised by the promotional materials (mediums,

⁶ “Drivers are the knowledge and conditions that initiate and support activities for which the design was created. Knowledge and conditions can include such terms of reference as market forces, fashions and musical trends of the day. By identifying these drivers, the design team will have an appreciation of the stimuli that people are receptive to” (Dorst and Cross 2001)“

⁷ “Barriers need to be identified during the research stage in order to prevent work from being undertaken in a direction that has little chance of being implemented for technical, legal or market reasons. Barriers can be rules and laws about what product packaging can and cannot show, for example. Technical barriers might include systems of standards that exist in different countries. ... Market barriers include the purchasing and distribution power of key competitors, is something that might restrict access to outlets. Drivers can also act as barriers. By not following the driver, for example, the designer could be creating an obstacle that reduces the chance of success for a design” (Dorst and Cross 2001).

visual communications and text)? What are the practical parameters of the set? Who am I playing with? How much space do I/we need? Do I/we need to test our tools (soundcheck)? How long am I/are we able to play for (endurance-wise)? How long and loud am I/are we allowed to play (event restrictions-wise)? How intimate is the gig? What is the capacity of the PA system? Is the sound engineer sympathetic to improvised and experimental music?

A variety of these questions are posed to varying degrees depending on the performer and situation. A highly influential factor is the number of performance opportunities, which would affect the degree to which the performer/s would consider these factors in preparation for performance. The level of influence a performer has over many of these factors is also dependent on their status, as well as the scale and ‘stakes’ of the gig. These variables are beyond the scope of this thesis to explore in more detail, suffice to say they bear on the outcome.

Articulating common questions asked throughout a performance (in performance questions or IPQ) helps to substantiate the claims I have made earlier in this section. Some of these IPQs could be: What is the shape of this thing? Do I repeat what I just contributed? How will that affect the music? Can I be heard? Do I want to play something within/under someone else’s contribution? Does the piece need a shake-up? (What might this sound like? How might my collaborators respond?) Do I maintain the activity I am currently engaged in? Do I play silence? Over the course of the unfolding performance, have any of the physical, temporal, political or aesthetic geographies shifted? Are the audience engaged? Does it matter? Does this piece sound too much like the last set? Are we running out of time? Am I running out of energy? Am I running out of ideas?

Answering some or all of the questions in the previous stage, the performer either refines their approach and either recodes and restructures their contribution to implement, alter direction entirely, or maintains their approach. In a design studio, this stage is where the

observations of the designs ‘in use’, interacted with and tested, would be refined to create a more polished product or approach. This is where the two processes diverge in focus: the studio design team moves to refining a final product; the CRIM practitioner proceeds to an ongoing process of observation and iteration in performance.

Further evidence, and an excellent example of the significance of CRIM practice for political purposes, is found in the list “27 Questions For A Start” (2007) drawn up by Berlin-based ensemble Trio Sowari. The questions ranged from considering the compositional (“Is the group constellation already a compositional element?”), curatorial, ethical (“Can this music help to stop global warming?”), aesthetic (“Does it swing?”), political (“Does our musical scene simply reproduce capitalistic structures? Is it possible to have a non-hierarchical group interaction?”), philosophical (“Does music anticipate changes in society? Is it easier to play than not to play? Is music a language or something beyond?”), relational (“To what degree is this kind of music experimental? Are there preconceptions? Is there any ‘popular’ potential in this kind of music? Would it be a good thing if it became popular? Is our musical scene merely a resort for failed existences and dysfunctional people?”) and the practical (“Do we need a dedicated space?”) (Trio Sowari 2006). The publication of “27 Questions For A Start” kick-started a series of critical discussions regarding the state of improvised and experimental music in Berlin.

Language, framing and process models developed in design scholarship can be useful in understanding CRIM practice. The rich common ground in the approach to viewing a problem-space as positive fertile ground for exploration and innovation is clear, and is highlighted through the detailed questions practitioners might ask before and during a performance to articulate initial and co-evolving problem/solution spaces.

7.4 Surprise and uncertainty as fertile creative ground

CRIM practitioners actively seek out contexts where surprise and uncertainty are maximised, and problem spaces are framed as positive invitations to investigate and develop dialogue. Improvisers have been creating with uncertainty and dynamic, unpredictable elements for decades; informing and challenging each wave of improvisers with new explorations, textures, technologies, platforms, and relationships; co-authoring a series of solution spaces to commonly defined problem spaces in a historically cumulative investigation into (public) creative responses to uncertainty in real time.

Improvisors also welcome, and in a certain sense actively seek out, contingency. Creative use of the accidental or the unexpected—as comments from countless improvisors will attest—helps to keep the music fresh, to maintain the sound of surprise. It is worth noting that contingencies only exist in relationship to expectations of necessity. In other words, contingencies become apparent only when an observer identifies events that escape or disappoint expectations. (Schroeder 2014, 38)

Improvisers referred to in this thesis as CRIM practitioners proactively seek out surprise, uncertainty and dynamic contexts as compositional tools. They are actively engaged in a conscious drift away from homogenous outcomes that result from an unconscious engagement with performance contexts, improvised or otherwise. The artistic tradition of improvised musical performance is a connected series of solution-spaces to a commonly defined problem-space. In 1962, American art historian George Kubler described artistic traditions as “a connected series of solutions to a commonly defined problem”; Becker added to this that “each consciously sought solution alters the problem somewhat, if only by altering the range of possible solutions to problems of that kind.” (Becker 1982, 303) With this in mind, we can regard the practice of improvisation, like design, as a string of process-

based explorations, handed over from generation to generation—the major difference is the bulk of this creative process takes place in public.

If, like the majority of design projects, music making can be framed as a process of problem solving, then CRIM performance can be considered more specifically a process of seeking, converging on and inhabiting fertile initial problem spaces and co-evolving and iterative problem/solution spaces. These are terms commonly used in emerging design methodology.

Within design, the traditional idea of arriving at ‘solution’ or ‘product’ is still more often than not an end goal, but for improvisers, it is the production of a series of generative solution-spaces that have ripple effects beyond the point of performance, out into the community of practitioners. These solution spaces propose new forms of engagement, listening and making, and prompt new investigations and therefore new problem spaces. The social, temporal and physical contexts of performance are not taken for granted, and improvisors hone their skills of asking fruitful/generative questions, rather than arriving at definitive answers. Progressive practitioners and organisations in the field are pushing this to the fullest.

Designers (and design educators) are equipped with a skill set that appreciates and often expects the unexpected. Designing for the unknown and embracing complexity are now core elements of progressive and critical design education. This progression is attracting the attention of the business world, where ‘design thinking’ is now offered as part of an attempt to “revamp [the] curricula to meet the needs of business students who do not want to play the ‘business as usual’ game” (Dunne and Raby 2013, 16).

The following sections present how thinking like designers can aid in the appreciation of CRIM practice, and show the elements of design thinking, speculative design and futuring

strategies that can be combined to create new models for facilitating context-responsive and collective creation.

7.5 Thinking Like Designers

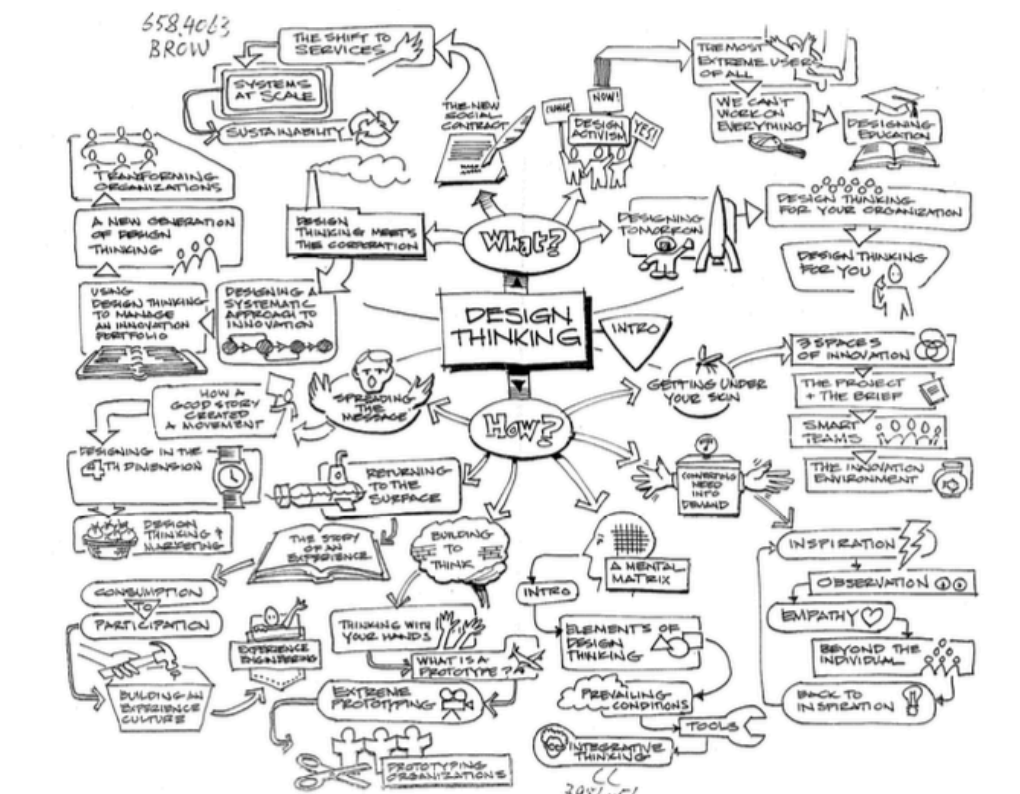


Figure 17. Inside cover illustration, Tim Brown, *Change By Design*. “Experienced design thinkers may find that the mind map is all you need to capture my point of view” (Brown 2009, 9-10).

Design thinking is a well-articulated—albeit not unproblematic—critical and creative framework that embraces the co-evolution of problem and solution spaces with a clear set of foci. The term itself evolved from a broad articulation of the ways in which designers approached a problem in the 1950s (for those outside of design), to a ‘must-have’ business course skill set that everyone and anyone (read designers and non-designers) should attain if they wanted to realise more innovative, marketable and competitive products and services.

In 2009, Tim Brown, CEO of experimental design agency IDEO, articulated design thinking as a set of principles. Brown's book (and much of the literature that followed) tells us that those engaged as 'design thinkers' are in a constant state of active observation, gathering inspiration/data, generating, iterating and testing ideas, and finally "crafting human stories that inspire action" (Brown 2009, np).

Designers often talk about their skills as a kind of toolkit—much like improvising musicians might talk about their sound palette, vocabulary or repertoire. In design thinking, sensitivity, empathy, experimentation, persistence and resilience are key. On the IDEO website, Brown states that design thinking "relies on our ability to be intuitive, to recognize patterns, to construct ideas that have emotional meaning as well as functionality, to express ourselves in media other than words or symbols." (IDEO 2018, np). Akin to the way in which Improv is promoted, design thinking is a practice and process with a goal to arrive at 'innovative solutions'. From the beginning, design thinking principles have been touted as a knowledge system that could (and should) be applied to other disciplines and/or interdisciplinary projects to "transform the way organizations develop products, services, processes, and strategy" and to give non-designers new tools "to address a vast range of challenges" (Ibid).

Both Lucy Kimbell (2001) and Kees Dorst (2017) are critical of the effects the broad uptake of design thinking within other industries and disciplines has had on designers and design education. Both observe that the business school style of design thinking is solution-oriented and built on three key points: simulation of creativity, human-centred design and the importance of early prototyping, and that this overlooks how much value comes from the time designers spend being focused on the problem. Dorst argues that this is not reflective of how successful designers behave:

Their designs are based on a very thoughtful process to create new approaches to problems. As Einstein once said, '*a problem can never be solved from the context in which it arose.*' ...This quote highlights the need for a problem solver to change the context in which the problem was formulated rather than confront it directly. (Dorst 2017, 22) [original emphasis]

Design scholars are arguing for a consciousness of context in creative processes and articulating new models and strategies for it. If we consider combining elements from design thinking with that of speculative design and futuring process, we arrive at something closer to what is being explored in CRIM practice.

7.6 Speculative Design and Futuring Practice

Arguing for speculative design as agency-building tool in their book *Speculative everything: design, fiction, and social dreaming* (2013) British critical design duo Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby state that:

We believe that even nonviable alternatives, as long as they are imaginative, are valuable and serve as inspiration to imagine one's own alternatives... Speculative design can inspire...a feeling that, if not exactly anything, more is definitely possible. (161)

Salient aspects of speculative design and design futuring that can be applied to CRIM practice, and help us to appreciate some of its more ambitious characteristics of proposing alternative ways of understanding time, co-creation, critical listening and community organisation. My intensive engagement with futuring as a critical, social, design methodology over the last five years has emerged from my work in the fields of both design and performance. It has illuminated the parallels of constructively creative improvisational co-authorship in a speculative design space. Context-responsive improvisations are filled with invitations to possible futures. At their most effective, they inhabit past, present and

future sonic territory. Through their offerings and invitations, they collect responses to possible futures that are actively critical of present practices. The critical listening situations generated by emerging context-responsive improvisation performance practices are aligned with futuring as design research method and warrant further investigation.

Designer Anthony Dunne argues that the role of design should shift from primarily being concerned with commercial marketing to a more provocative and intellectual role:

[Design] could place new technological developments within imaginary but believable everyday situations that would allow us to debate the implications of different technological futures before they happen. (Dunne 2007, np)

I posit that, by embracing performance contexts that encourage improvised creative responses to uncertainty and welcoming the public into these explorations, we enter into dialogue with our audiences about what it means to create, react, respond and remain open. Similarly, we are in direct and ongoing conversation with our environments; a trio of cello, laptop and aircraft noise, or a snare drum played in a drain for an entire afternoon. We are proposing futures where unity of vision or completion is not the ultimate goal, but rather by allowing tensions to coexist, ‘What if?’ is at the heart of CRIM practice, speculative design and futuring.

Like critical art praxis, design-as-critique is not new. Where contemporary arts critique has been focused on the institution, critical design’s prime target has been consumer culture and complacency around social and ethical issues. Often referred to as a research method, critical design is an incredibly effective disturbance strategy within interdisciplinary design practice. It throws designers, students, educators and the general public off their ‘business as usual’ course to rethink the way they interact with the objects (and wicked problems) around them. The responses to these provocations provide insight into the flaws of our current design processes, and also inject fresh energy into a problem space. Traditional

design processes are employed to produce many of the speculative objects⁸ in the work of critical design's main exponents, Anthony Dunne & Fiona Raby, in an effort to provoke and prompt critical and urgent futuring conversations regarding our complacency as consumers and inhabitants of a fragile planet. Critical design implicates designers as major agents of change, and echoes a tenet central to Improv and particularly CRIM practice with its focus on "crafting its coexistence in the here-and-now and yet-to-exist, and when done successfully, providing what author Martin Amis has called 'complicated pleasure'" (Dunne 2007, 44).

Prolific British improviser Evan Parker stated that improvisers have "the edge in situations where the performance concerns itself with what can be, rather than what ought to be" (Schroeder 2014, 6). The experimental fields of critical design, design fictions, speculative design and design futuring have much to offer in helping us to understand the attraction to creative responses to uncertainty.

Some manifestations of speculative design are the creation of speculative stories, props, prototypes, films and other media which help us explore potential futures in a more tangible way. Speculative design practice offers us a sharp insight into creative critique of our relationships to time, technologies, policies, politics, local as well as interconnected international communities, and the futures in front of us. As such, it is closely linked to improvisation as a practice that specialises in dealing with the unknown within the flux of the present, whilst simultaneously being informed by the past and projecting into futures.

⁸ These objects and situations are often referred to by Dunne and Raby as 'probes'.

7.7 CRIM Practice Cycle

Exploring the parallels between a creative and often collaborative design process and the creative process engaged by CRIM practitioners, I encountered a variety of articulations of stages within the design process. I found the greatest resonance between the two processes in the work of Kees Dorst and also Mary-Lou Maher.

Typically, a designer starts with a definition of the design problem, identifies one or more potential design descriptions, and then evaluates the design. The variation occurs in the revisions of the requirements or descriptions and the iterations of the various phases. (Maher 1990, 50)

There are aspects of the stages of the design thinking process as articulated by Ambrose (Ambrose and Harris 2010, 6) that have also been drawn on here in refining the CRIM Practice Cycle:

1. Define [the parameters, more often than not based on a client brief]
2. Research
3. Ideate
4. Prototype
5. Select [the ‘best solution’]
6. Implement [the product]
7. Learn⁹

⁹ “This book aims to present an overview of the design thinking involved at each stage of the design process: the methods used by designers to generate and refine creative ideas, the key considerations that help shape the and the feedback and review elements that allow design teams to learn from each job and contribute to future commissions” (Becker 1982, 303).

In a studio design process, it can take anything from one hour to one month (or even years) to move through these stages. The above definition of the design thinking process is useful as a starting point when attempting to detail the context-responsive creative process of a CRIM performer during live performance. Based on extensive immersion in both the practice of design and improvised music performance, as well as the observation and interviews with peers in these fields, I have proposed a few amendments to this sequence, and produced a graphic representation of the cyclical nature of praxis, the CRIM Practice Cycle (figure 18). It resembles the cyclical action research model also found in practice-led research, the main difference being that in this instance the research, observation and iteration is predominantly performed in public, and that after observation, the ‘researcher’ seeks out either to generate material which disturbs or commingles (or something in between) in each cycle of action. The other main point of difference with these models, and also that of most design projects, is that the ‘refined output’ is not included—the ‘output’ *is* the active exploration within the co-evolving problem/solution space itself.

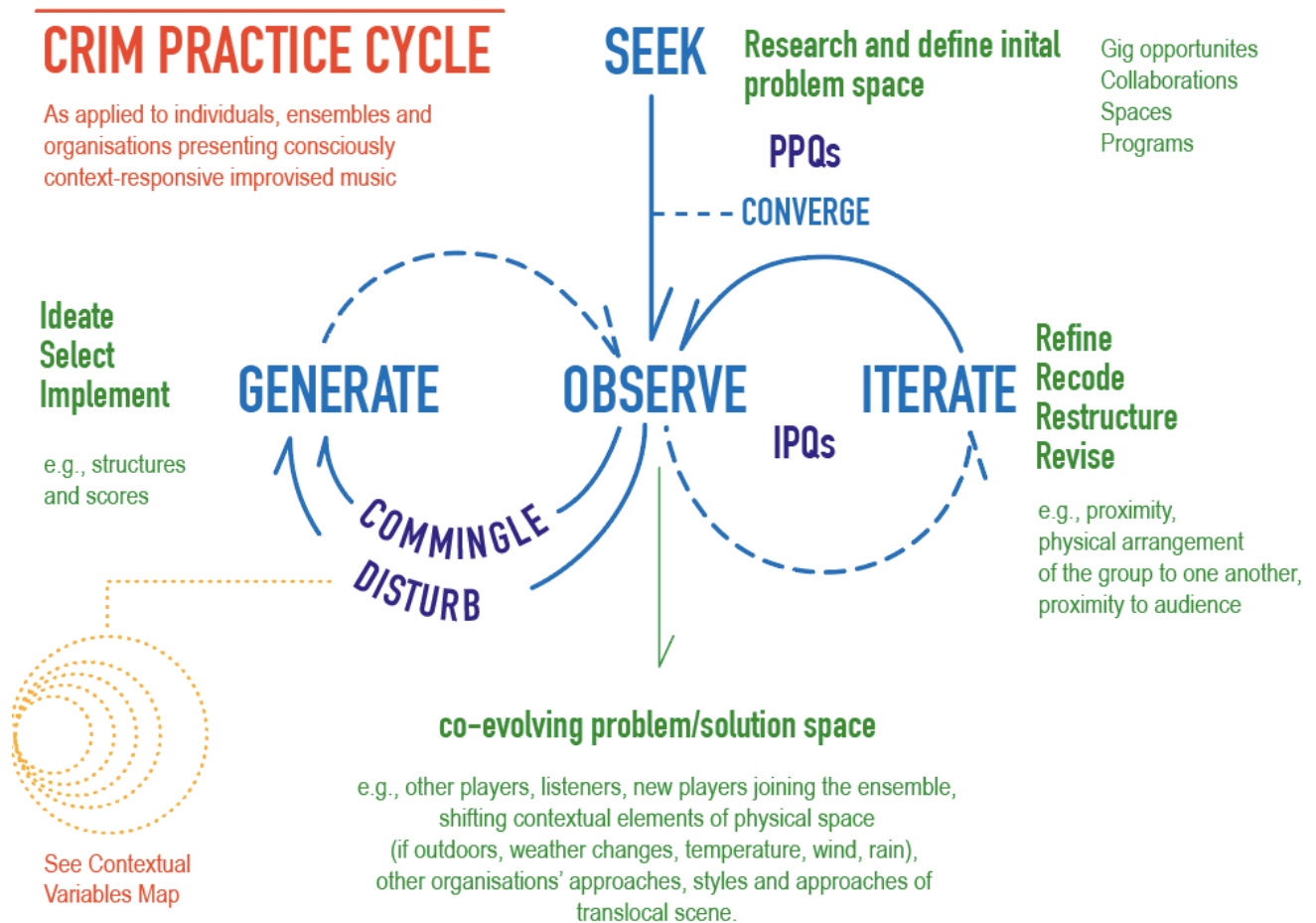


Figure 18. Graphic representation of the CRIM Practice Cycle.

The process the Crim Practice Cycle articulates can be outlined as follows:

1. **Seek:** research and define initial problem space—the who, where, what, and how—as well as engaging the pre-performance questions (PPQ).
2. **Converge:** performers, organisers, listeners come together in chosen presentation platforms for performance, where most of the dynamic contextual elements are set in motion.
3. **Observe** the co-evolving problem/solution space. The event/performance begins with observation, and here begins the endlessly variable ‘figure 8’ flow. Engage in-

performance questions (IPQ). Consider generating material that either disturbs the solution space or moves the event/performance/series towards commingling:

- a. **Commingle:** consider generating material (or silence/space) that stabilises connections, themes, understandings, threads of inquiry, or moves the co-evolving problem/solution space to more familiar playing/listening territory.
 - b. **Disturb:** consider generating material based on unlearning familiar tools, temporal, spatial or social disturbance strategies to move the co-evolving problem/solution space to unfamiliar playing/listening territory.
4. **Generate** ideas, sounds, silences, futures, curatorial modes, vehicles for programming/presenting, ways of co-existing. Ideate, select, implement. (Back to ‘observe’).
 5. **Iterate**, refine, recode, restructure, revise, then back to ‘observe’, ‘generate’ etc, until the piece/performance/event/collaboration ends—this could be two minutes or twenty years (in the case of a long running organisation or ensemble who observes, generates and iterates in the course of performance but also over years of reviewing their practice in broader context).

Within an improvised music performance, these stages are moved through within seconds. Ensembles and organisations might move through these stages over months or years of discourse, rethinking the way they engage their audiences in the presentation of experimental and improvised music performance.

During the ideate stage, the design team draws on the research gathered and the constraints established during the define stage. This information is used to create ideas with which to tackle the design brief. ...This experimental time can prove invaluable, allowing your mind to wander, and your hand to ‘doodle’. This period allows for experimentation, without considering what is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, rejecting preconceptions in favour of free-thinking. (Ambrose and Harris 2010, 36)

Designers Ambrose and Harris define the ideation stage as “creating potential solutions” (Ambrose and Harris 2010, 20). In performance, ideation occurs throughout the entire process, as the exploration of potential solutions as opposed to a finished product is core to the vitality of a CRIM performance. CRIM performers ideate, select and implement within seconds. Jim Denley observes that group improvisation embraces what he calls ‘intentional polyphony’—a state of constant multiplicitous ideation exemplified by the Splinter Orchestra:

There’s no one author, our co-creations often have multiple intentions co-existent. An idea you thought was important can be overwhelmed and swamped by others, can end down a blind alley, or can run in parallel with other events and trajectories that have awareness or perhaps no awareness of your contributions. As improvisors we come to embrace this multiplicity and as a consequence we have little interest in synchronicity. (Denley 2018)

In a design studio, ideation may take the form of critical conversations (as opposed to brainstorming (Dorst 2017, 26), sketches and mood board collages. In performance, this stage of the design process is public: the ideation of textures, timbres, tones, amplification, filters and approaches, the testing of sound clusters, and bodystorming are key¹⁰ and are possibly the reason why being in attendance at an improvised music concert feels different to other live music experiences.

¹⁰ Bodystorming is a technique commonly used in interaction design. A team physicalises the product/design in use so as to elicit creatively critical responses they may not come across when in discussion or simply sketching ideas.

Summary

This chapter has argued that lenses emerging from design practice are more appropriate to appreciate the complex system from within which this music is created, as well as the ever-evolving problem/solution space (both within each piece and over longer periods of time).

This lens also allows us to approach the music through an expanded understanding of site and time, where more radical and revelatory aspects to the cumulative investigations come to the fore, decentring the individual and the individual pieces of music, sensitising listeners to context and proposing (futuring) alternative ways of creating and being together.

The CRIM Practice Cycle proposed within this chapter is extending on the work done by new musicologists and design theorists in order to gain a greater understanding of co-authored and context-responsive creative practice. In partnership with the Contextual Variables Diagram (figure 3), it aimed at facilitating rather than prescribing a process or outcome. When these concepts are applied in situ to organisations, ensembles and individuals who are disturbing the trend towards risk mitigation and predictable, homogenous outcomes, they are evolving the art form of improvised music practice.

Conclusion

The tyranny of the quantifiable is partly the failure of language and discourse to describe more complex, subtle, and fluid phenomena, as well as the failure of those who shape opinions and make decisions to understand and value these slipperier things. It is difficult, sometimes even impossible, to value what cannot be named or described, and so the task of naming and describing is an essential one in any revolt against the status quo of capitalism and consumerism.

Ultimately the destruction of the earth is due in part, perhaps in large part, to a failure of the imagination or to its eclipse by systems of accounting that can't count what matters. The revolt against this destruction is a revolt of the imagination, in favour of subtleties, of pleasures money can't buy and corporations can't command, of being producers rather than consumers of meaning, of the slow, the meandering, the digressive, the exploratory, the numinous, the uncertain. ...[Virginia] Woolf gave us limitlessness, impossible to grasp, urgent to embrace, as fluid as water, as endless as desire, a compass by which to get lost.

—Rebecca Solnit, “Woolf’s Darkness: Embracing the Inexplicable”

In her 2014 essay “Woolf’s Darkness: Embracing the Inexplicable” American writer, historian, and activist Rebecca Solnit celebrates Virginia Woolf’s ability to invite us into ill-defined complexity and draws the reader’s attention to the value of the inexplicable. I share with Solnit the challenge of naming and describing phenomena that “cannot be named or described” in order to value it as vital in revolt against the status quo. I also share with Solnit the motivation to extol the virtues of getting lost in order to find new pathways.

If nothing else, I hope this research excites the reader about the value of spending time observing a dynamic complex system, collectively inhabiting co-evolving problem/solution spaces in order to explore new sonic and social territories. As sticky as the space may be, this research has shown that there is value in naming elements and territories of a practice to disturb and expand the possibilities that exist within these named components.

Throughout this thesis, I have shown that it is important to understand that improvised music has gone through several waves of evolution. Traditionally, historically flat readings of improvised music have ignored the increasingly stabilised modes and codes of presentation and practice that have occurred over the last 40 years, as well as the significant emerging responses to this stabilisation that are evolving the art form.

I have argued that we can only truly appreciate the practice of context-responsive improvisation in music via new models of understanding collaborative, iterative practice, and I have offered models that draw from progressive design scholarship. The visual thinking manifested in the diagrams and process models developed during this research are intended to help facilitate greater engagement with context for those who are active as performers and organisers. These diagrams and models also serve as an example of transdisciplinary learning—how music learns from design, and how society as a whole could learn from improvisation.

All improvising musicians engage in a process akin to a designer's engagement with a coevolving problem/solution space within both research practice and performance. Those that are consciously engaging with context as a core compositional tool were discussed here as CRIM practitioners (whether performers or organisers). CRIM been established in this thesis as my original conceptualisation of the most recent evolution of the art form. The many dynamic contextual variables were listed and plotted across four territories of performance practice: research, sonic materials, social materials (collaboration and organisation), and the live performance situation. By making these elements visible, the possibilities to engage them as interrelated compositional tools becomes tangible for practitioners.

It is important that I acknowledge that not all improvisers are interested in context, nor are they interested in viewing their music as part of a historically cumulative set of

interventions within a dynamic and complex system. Some improvisers intentionally avoid focusing on temporal and physical contexts in the belief that doing this detracts from the social and spiritual elements of the music. Many improvisers are also content to present and promote their pieces of music in the same manner as most other styles of music do: polished and packaged for the market.

CRIM practice is not simply an experimental approach to music making. It is a practice that argues for audiences and players alike to listen openly, to trust one another, to decentre individual authorship, to dissolve dominant hierarchies and individual legacies, to engage creatively with dissonance, to respond to uncertainty for what it teaches us without the drive to solve a problem, and to see obstacles as reasons to come together.

At this pivotal point in history, when we are not only recognising the interconnectivity and interdependency of species, as well as with our delicate and ever-shifting environments on a global scale, this research has implications for creative approaches to complex and dynamic problem spaces. We cannot appreciate the effects of a single act of kindness or destruction as having value or impact only in and of itself, and we cannot depend on our known approaches and devices to survive. They are not serving us. We must improvise, and those of us with the luxury to do so must collectively exist outside of our comfort zones and trust one another to respond creatively. This is not an echo of the neoliberal call for agility in an age of constant, rapid change, nor is it a celebration of instability as a hotbed for creative entrepreneurialism. Instead, this thesis argues for an acknowledgement of communitarian practice, of meaningful translocal exchange over global market circuits, and acknowledgement of the value of process as creative outcome over consumable products. If historically movements in music have projected and predicted social behaviours yet to manifest in the rest of culture (Attali 1985), the emerging practice and widespread practice of context-responsive creation challenges the above tendencies through

its aversion to hyper-individualism and promotion of collective creative responses to uncertainty.

My extensive experience as participant (performer, curator/organiser, co-founder of festivals and ensembles) and observer of the international Improv scene over the last two decades has allowed me an extraordinary level of access to the human interrelations and data sets associated with the practice, attitudes and shifts in this community, and of this art form in general. The timing of this research is of particular note, being that the research has taken place as CRIM practice is emerging and artists and organisations are shifting their approaches to research, collaboration, presentation and performance. The variety of personal performance experiences referred to throughout the thesis¹ and compositional works collated in appendix 2 are further evidence of the depth of my applied research and the reflection undertaken to articulate, test, and refine the observations made regarding CRIM practice.

That Derek Bailey's book on improvisation (formulated in the 1970s) is still regarded as key and current for practitioners of improvised music is problematic if it is not framed by an understanding of the two waves of practice that have taken place since Bailey was active. My research posits that one of the key reasons why the practice of improvisation is sidelined and misunderstood is due to a lack of acknowledgement of this historical flattening of the art form, in combination for the lack of influence attributed to context on the sonic outcomes of performance. Literature generated by practitioners does much to elevate the practice beyond

¹ Splinter Orchestra 'Bikelights', Splitter Orchestra in Berlin Hauptbahnhof, Westhead Project, John Butcher Ensemble, 'Oranges and Influence' and 'Odds and Influence' for two of the NOW now festivals, Germ Studies, solo performances for Liquid Architecture in Melbourne, Sydney, and Tainan.

mere ‘jamming’, but stops short of offering definitions that help those outside of the practice to fully appreciate the waves of practice and their varying motivations and platforms.

The key aims of the research were to identify the ways in which the translocal improvised music scene disturbs increasingly codified and stabilised modes of presentation and performance through engaging context as a compositional tool in performance. Through asking ‘what do improvising musicians articulate as the key elements of their practice, and how do these elements emphasise a community of practitioners and context-responsive performance while challenging conventional approaches to traditional musical idioms and languages?’ the thesis was able to highlight the three waves of practice since the inception of NIFIM and the need to view the evolution of the practice as such in order to grasp the shifting motivations and opportunities of the translocal scene.

The research found that it is possible to broaden what we understand as compositional practice through valuing the practice of CRIM beyond the field of music, and that through developing new frameworks we are able to appreciate the practice as historically cumulative and dispersed across location and time. And that moreover, appreciating collaborative creation in this way is a core constitutive practice that is exemplary of how we might propose new forms of engagement and listening through a deeper understanding of CRIM practice.

In seeking out new approaches and lenses through which to understand the practice, the research explored new conceptual tools and asked ‘In what ways can the theoretical frameworks for improvised music practice be enhanced through the adoption of theoretical models of emerging design practice?’ By investigating the similarities in process and practice within emerging design scholarship, the research showed that the pursuit of generative solution-spaces has ripple effects beyond performance and out into the translocal community of practitioners. The resulting investigation proposes new forms of engagement, listening and collaborative creation; they prompt new investigations and new problem-spaces. By taking

dynamic contextual elements into account as compositional tools, the skill of asking fruitful and generative questions is honed.

I have been able to draw on my background and skills in design (design thinking and visual communication) to graphically articulate relationships and processes that have to date existed only textually and anecdotally. The application and intention of notation, whereby notes and symbols are arranged on a staff in relation to each other, is relevant here. To understand the impact of notation on the ontology of music itself is, in one sense, a means to understand the impact of a context responsive improvisation. The process of CRIM gives practitioners, as well as those outside the practice, a way of understanding the concepts, the flows, the patterns, and the story of the composition on a page. Symbols and codes arranged in a graphic way allow us to compare process with process, design with design, composition with composition. What the Contextual Variables Diagram does for an improviser is visualise a process where one may locate oneself in a territory of practice and identify the opportunities for disturbing reliable devices. Used in conjunction with the CRIM Practice Cycle, practitioners (individual performer, ensemble or organisation) can follow the flows or practice moment to moment, or week to week, or event to event, reminded of the opportunities available to pursue the endlessly variable. To the field of design, this research offers a transdisciplinary application of framing practice, showing the intersections between design scholarship and the study of improvised music practice that could be applied to other creative practices and processes.

For those engaged in improvisation pedagogy this research offers clear graphic models of both the dynamic elements at play when one is engaged in improvisation (from research through to performance) as well as a clear graphic model of an approach to CRIM practice that values seeking the endlessly variable over a single sonic ‘product’. In addition to this, scholars across music, performance, and cultural studies may apply the new models

offered in this research to better understand the massive body of work produced by the international improvised music scene with a more granular appreciation of the practice and performance of context-responsive improvised music.

Recommendations for further research include an in-depth survey of the application of these models for practitioners who have not as yet attempted consciously context-responsive approaches in their practice. This could also be applied in early musical pedagogy, and in collective score-making for existing ensembles, as well as for organisations interested in more experimental curatorial practice applied to their festivals or regular events.

As mentioned within the thesis, further investigations into the fields of activism, resistance and solidarity aligned with CRIM practice but in fields outside of music was outside the scope of this thesis, but is recommended. Collectives and organisations interested in actively responding to dynamic situations within which they are a part can learn a significant amount from the historically cumulative interventions of the translocal improvised music community as well as specific approaches to responding to context from CRIM practitioners.

Further research is recommended with regards to how other creative, collective practices can apply scholarship from the design field in a way that invites fresh approaches to creation, organisation and response. The ways in which thinking like designers can aid in the diagramming and navigation of critical and experimental systems in other realms of performance is under researched and therefore highly recommended.

This thesis offers new graphic models, framing terminology (language) and contributes to the discourse of describing what Solnit refers to as “complex, subtle, and fluid phenomena” such as the practice of being context-responsive, in an attempt to better understand and value “these slipperier things”(Solnit 2014, np).

Context-responsive improvisation celebrates “the slow, the meandering, the digressive, the exploratory, the numinous, the uncertain”, and the tools explored and presented here are to act as compasses for this creatively fertile territory within which we might get happily lost.

Appendix 1

The following excerpt is the from Arika's *Collective Manifesto – Attempt Number 1* (2010)

Talk: C

Duration: 16 mins

Title: What is to be done?

A Recapitulation.

In the first two talks I've tried to outline (perhaps shakily) our problems with contemporary musical and artistic activity: here's a kind of emergency compendium of what I've passed off as my own so far...

Talk 1.

- 1) Music is about more than just music: it is always the product of rich and complex social, philosophical, political factors.
- 2) Much experimental music thinks that it's inherently political (in a good way), as if just 'improvising' (for example), is somehow noble in and of itself!
- 3) This is never the case, without thinking through the foundational radical thought or proposal at the heart of any system of thought or action, and asking:
 - a) Is applicable to everyone?
 - b) Does it oblige us to act (in a specific way)?
 - c) How do we remain true to that obligation?
 - d) How do we resist mystifying or occulting it?
 - e) How do we resist reactively recuperating it back into the mainstream, or making it elitist?
- 4) What would be an experimental music that is not just a ghost of its conceptual core, but a process of fidelity to a radical proposition for how to engage with the world?

Talk 2.

- 1) Both the enacting of taste based decisions, and their favourable reception, stratifies society and allows those involved to define themselves against others.
 - a) As such, taste is nothing other than lifestyle choice.
- 2) Self-expression is a hackneyed and embarrassing cultural hang-up:
 - a) we could say that the "self" (how do you do inverted commas in a talk?) is produced by, serves and in return produces the status quo.
- 3) Any music based on, involving or received via notions of taste, creativity or self expression should be rejected as outdated, outmoded and pernicious.
- 4) Instead, how about

- a) We cultivate processes of uncreativity so as to guard against the production of selves as commodities, and
 - b) We embrace a notion of desubjectification and collective practices so that we can imagine (amongst other things) a music or art governed by a kind of rule that orientates us away from the false notions self expression, and the spiteful nature of individual choice, towards the exploration of rational collective obligation.
- (Esson 2010, 12-13)

Appendix 2

Schematic scores by Clare Cooper during the research period 2014-2017

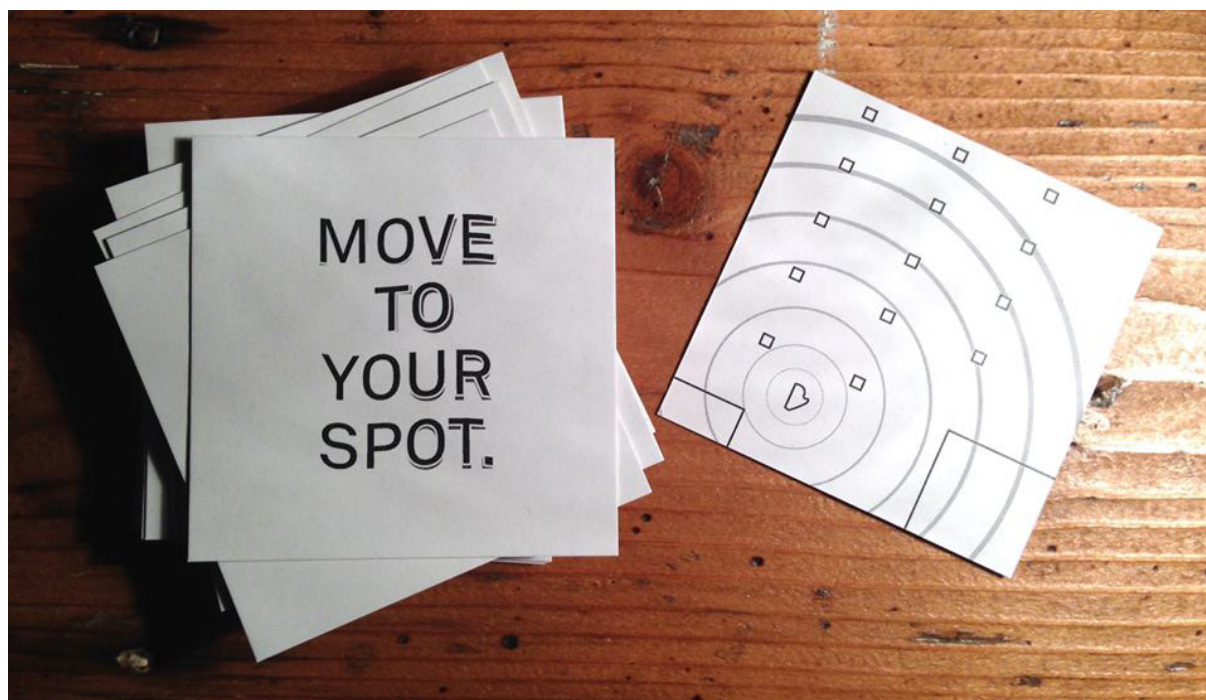
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Mapped Intimacy #1: Carpark (2014)



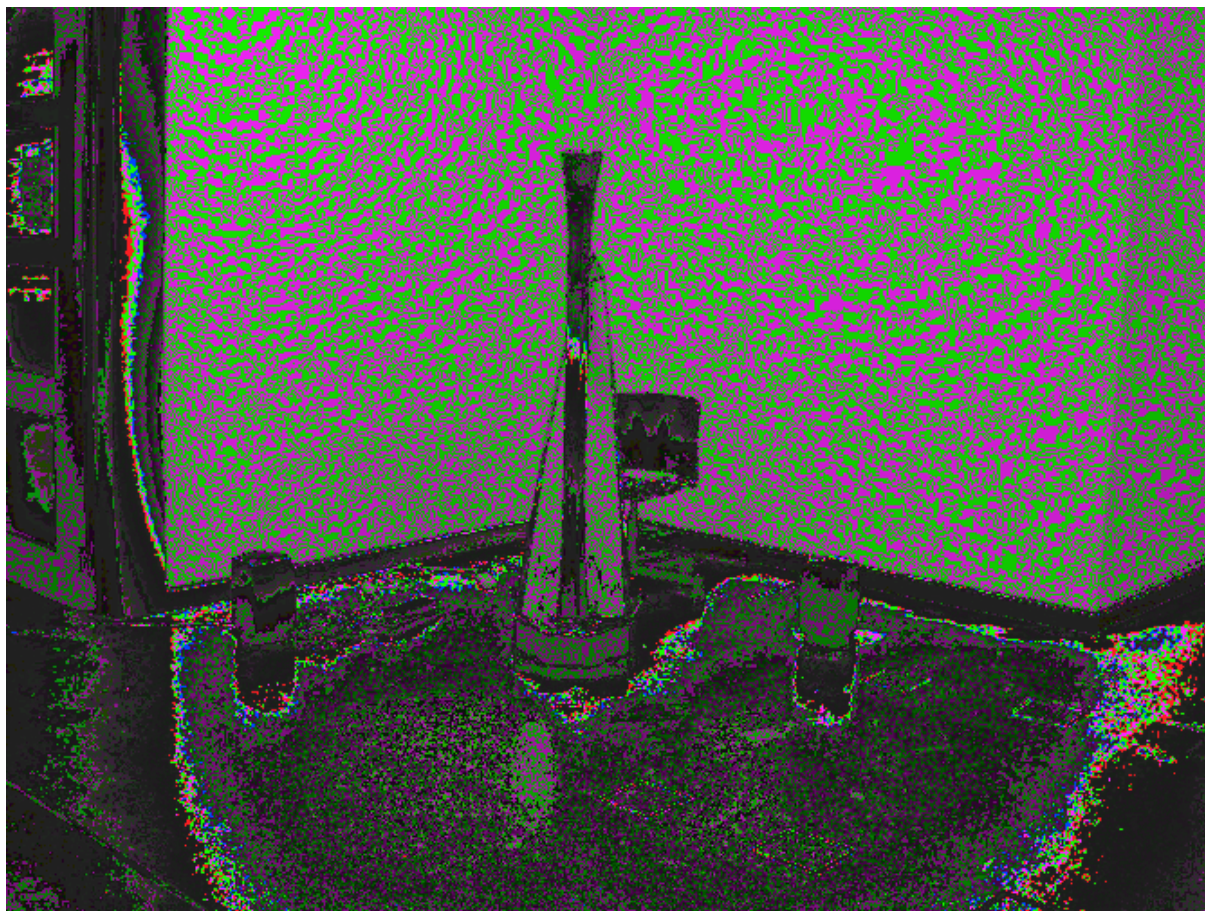
The audience at Alaska Projects car park venue on September 14 2014 were given a score in the form of a map of the car park. Each individual map was marked with a small coloured spot.

The audience was invited to gather as closely as possible to the acoustic harp (and harpist) and after about 5 minutes to gradually move to the spot indicated on their map.

As the audience moved away from the acoustic harp, the amplification intensified and appeared to follow them through the space in a singular, increasing wave until the acoustic sound was overwhelmed by its amplified twin.

With thanks to Elia Bosshard, Andrew Brooks, Michaela Davies, Theo Pettaras

—
Mapped Intimacy #2: Foyer (2014)



The audience at ARTSPACE on November 13, 2014 were each given a score in the form of a map of the foyer. Each individual map was marked with a small coloured spot.

The audience was invited to begin their listening at any location within the ARTSPACE building and to gradually move toward the spot marked on their maps - the final composition of bodies before the harp appeared almost regimented - the listeners followed their maps with such precision!

As the audience moved towards the sound of the amplified harp, the amplification level reduced and appeared to suck them towards the harp in a singular beam until the amplification was completely absent, leaving only the raw acoustic pluck and tap of the strings in the small foyer space.

With thanks to Francesca Heinz, Andrew Brooks, Michaela Davies and Will French
+ also filmed (POV performer)

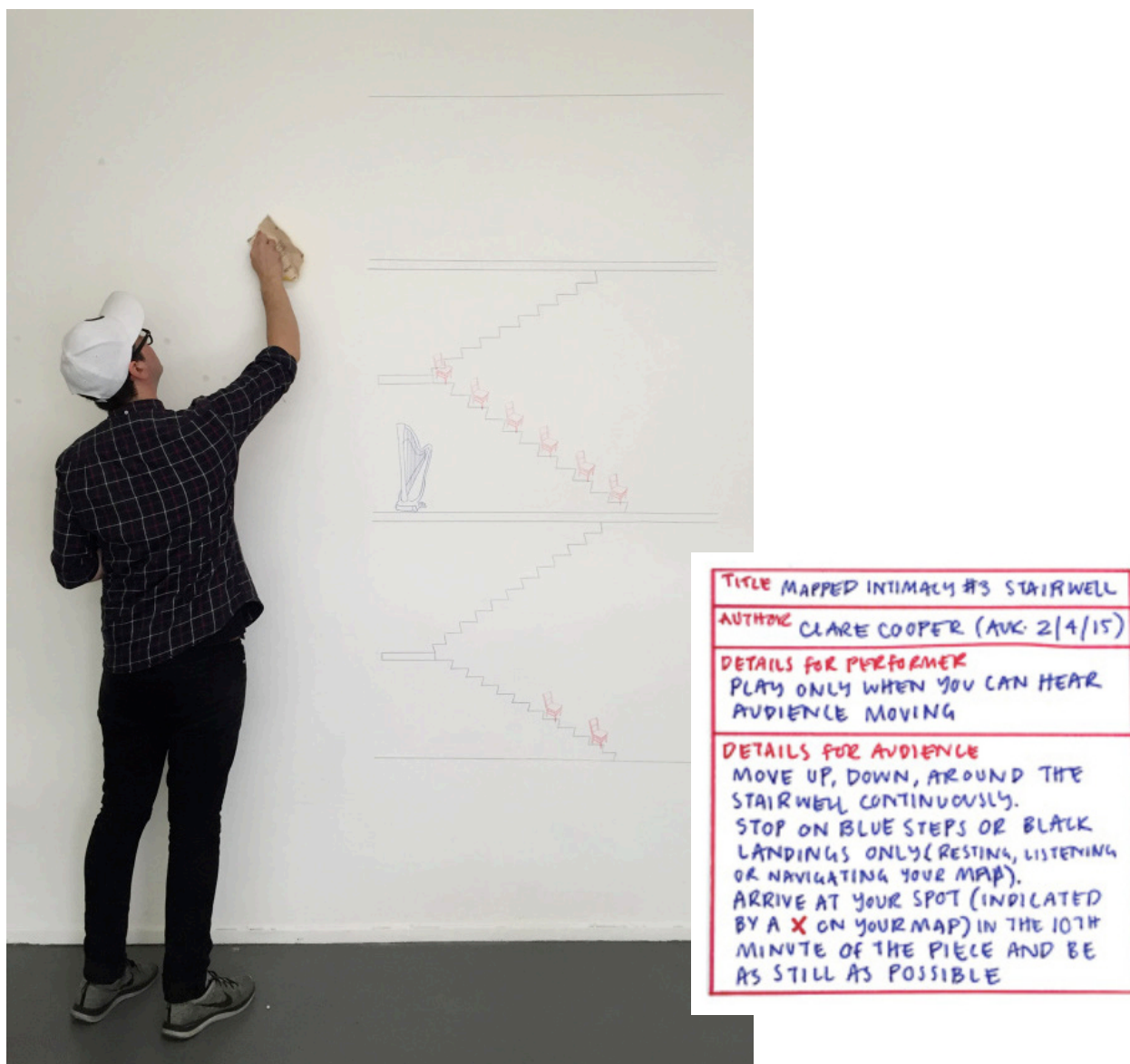
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Mapped Intimacy #3: Academy (2015)



The audience at Woodford Academy on May 16, 2015 were each given a score in the form of a map of the first and second levels of the National Trust's Woodford Academy. Each individual map was marked with 4-6 coloured spots in various locations. The audience was invited to explore the space, moving through their "spots" with relationship to the alternating and overlapping solos taking place in two spaces. With thanks to Sarah Breen Lovett, Monika Brooks, Will French, Bon Bub and the National Trust folks.

Mapped Intimacy #3: Stairwell (wall score)



Title: Mapped Intimacy #3: Stairwell

Author: Clare Cooper (AUK 2/4/15)

The audience at Audio Foundation on April 2, 2015 were each given a score in the form of a map of the stairwell.

The audience was invited to begin the piece at the base of the stairwell gradually move up and down and around the stairwell continuously over the course of 10 mins.

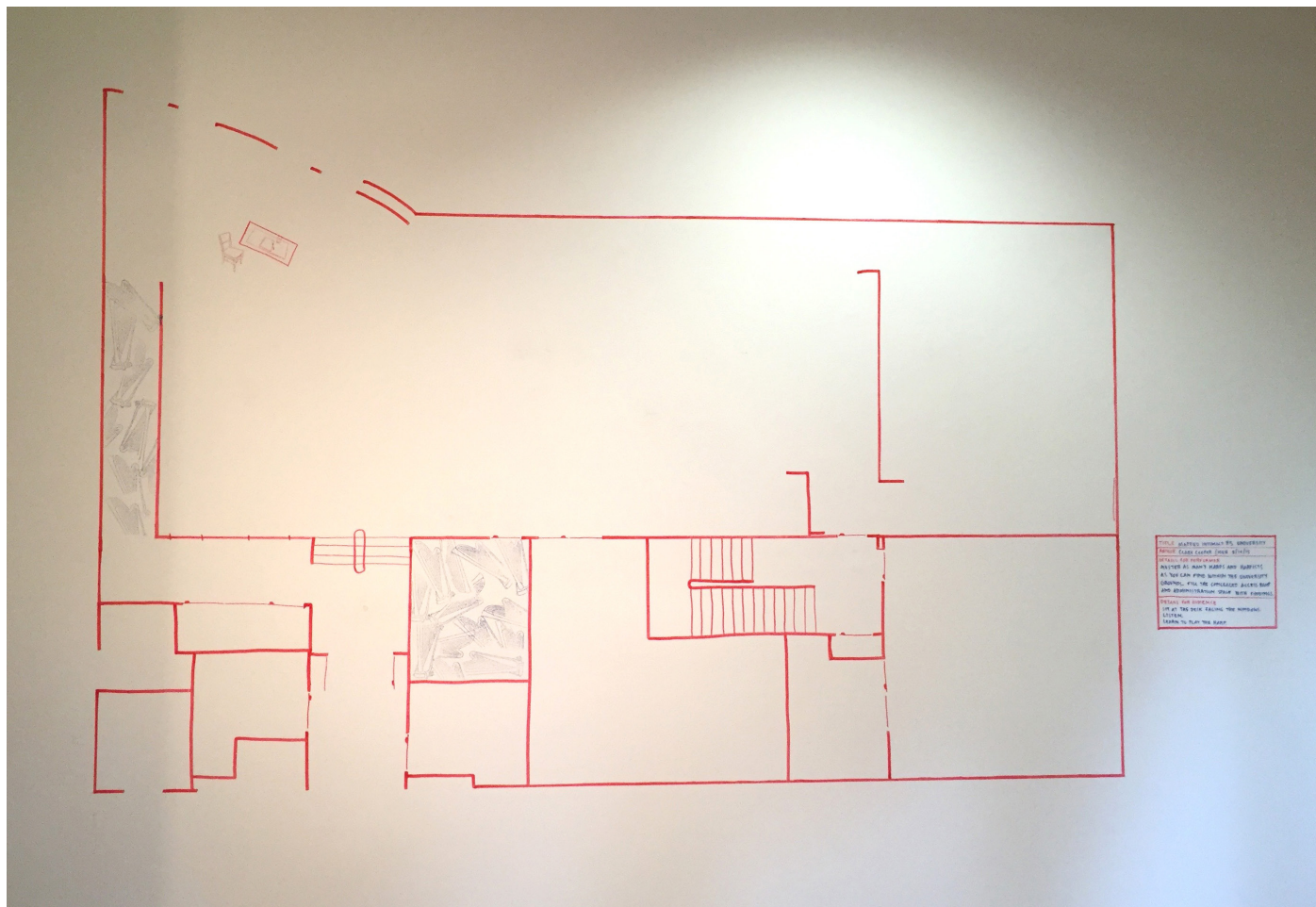
The torrential sounds of stepping overwhelmed the

minimal and repetitive string sounds right up until the 8th or 9th minute.

Eventually finding "their spot" they remained motionless for the final minute and the playing ceased.

With thanks to Jeff Henderson and everyone at Audio Foundation, Auckland NZ.

Mapped Intimacy #5: University

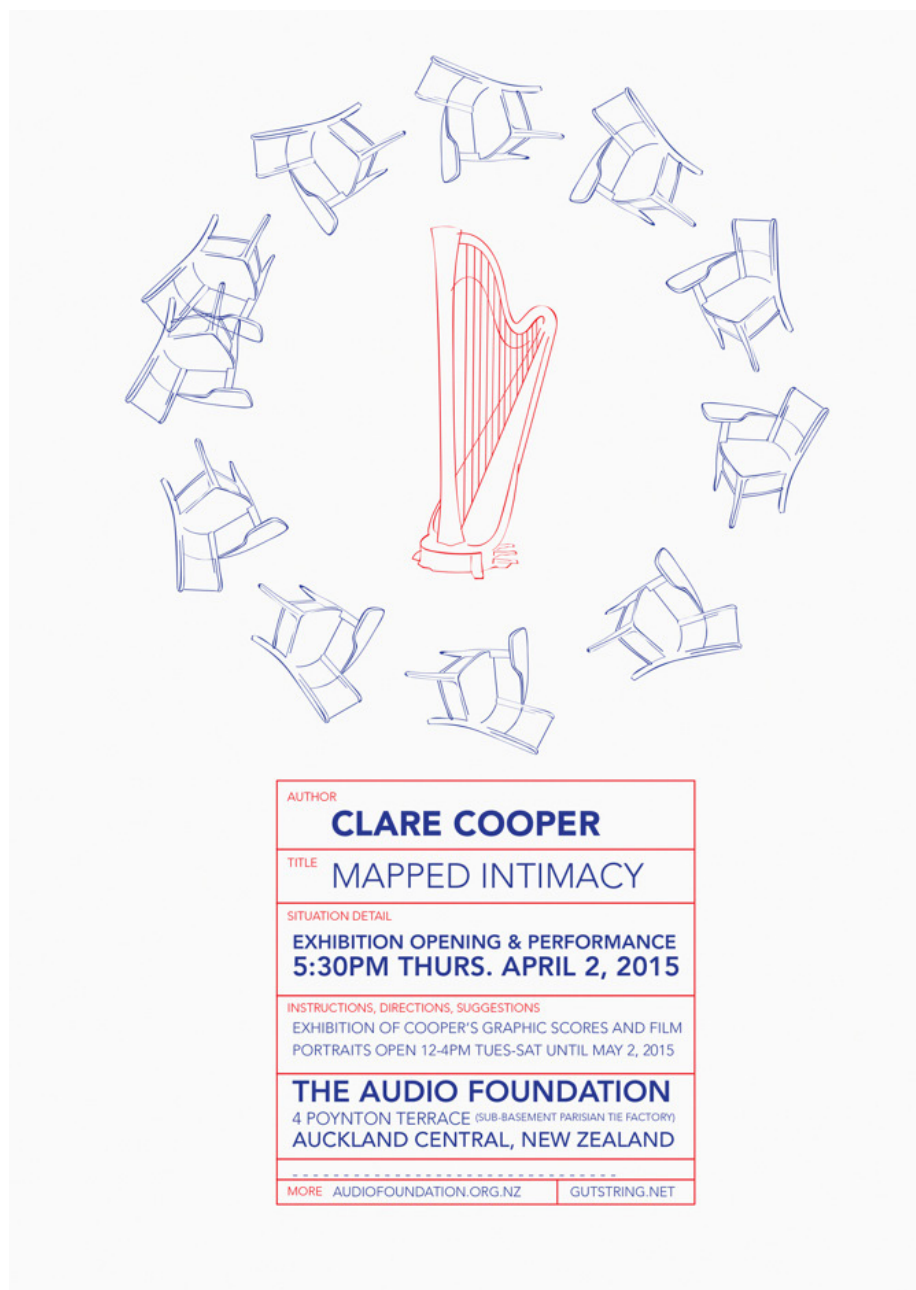


Title: Mapped Intimacy #5: University
Author: Clare Cooper (SYD 8/10/15)
Exhibited as part of a group show with other MQU PhD candidates at Macquarie University Gallery.

Details for performer:
Muster as many harps and harpists as you can find within the University grounds. Fill the concealed access ramp and administration space with harpists.

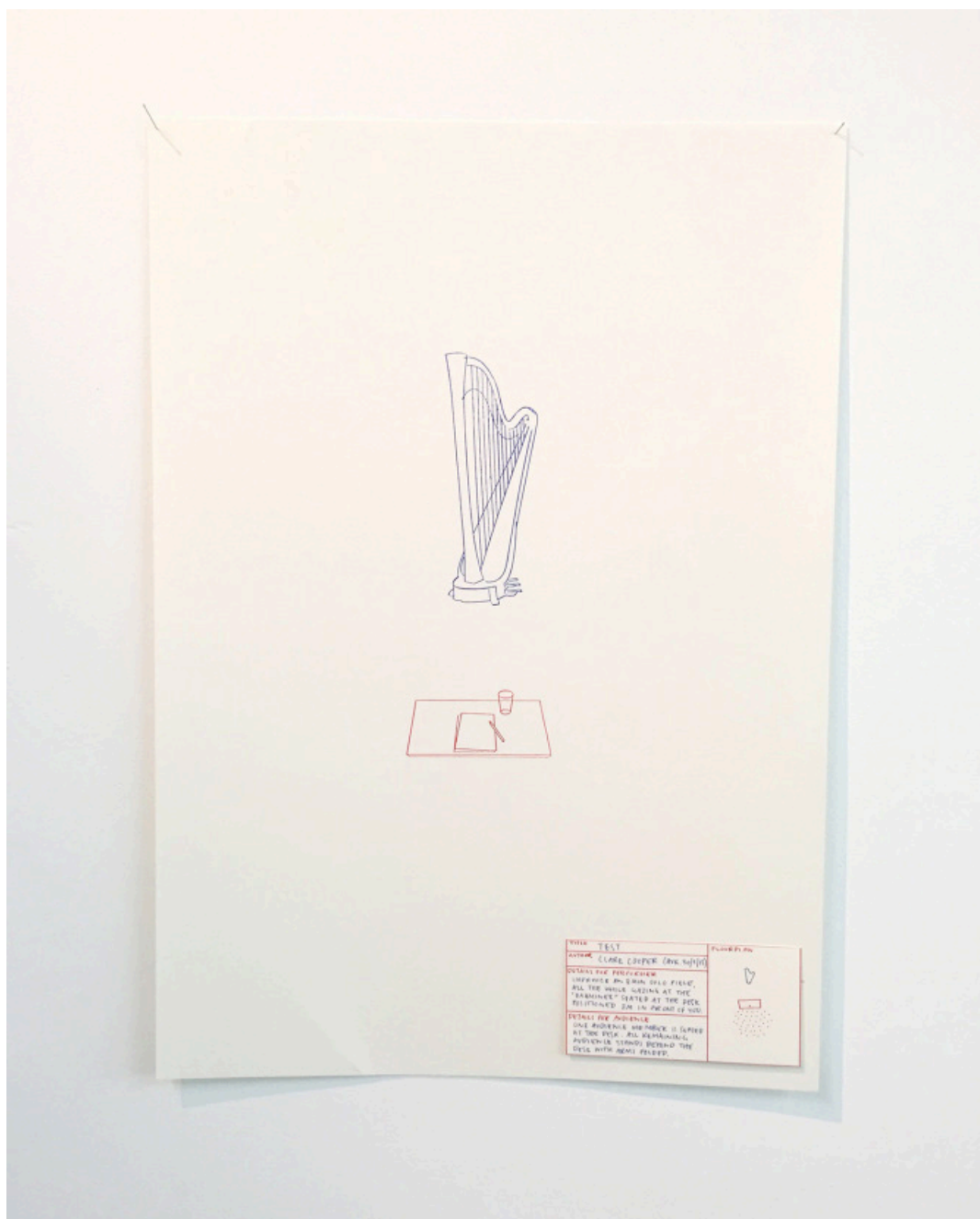
Details for audience:
Sit at the desk facing the windows.
Listen.
Learn to play the harp.

Mapped Intimacy Exhibition, NZ (poster)



Exhibition of new graphic scores and portrait films opening and performance: Thursday 2 April, 5.30pm start at the Audio Foundation, Auckland. Show runs until May 2, 2015.

Mapped Intimacy: Test



Title: Test

Author: Clare Cooper (AUK 30/3/15)

Details for performer:

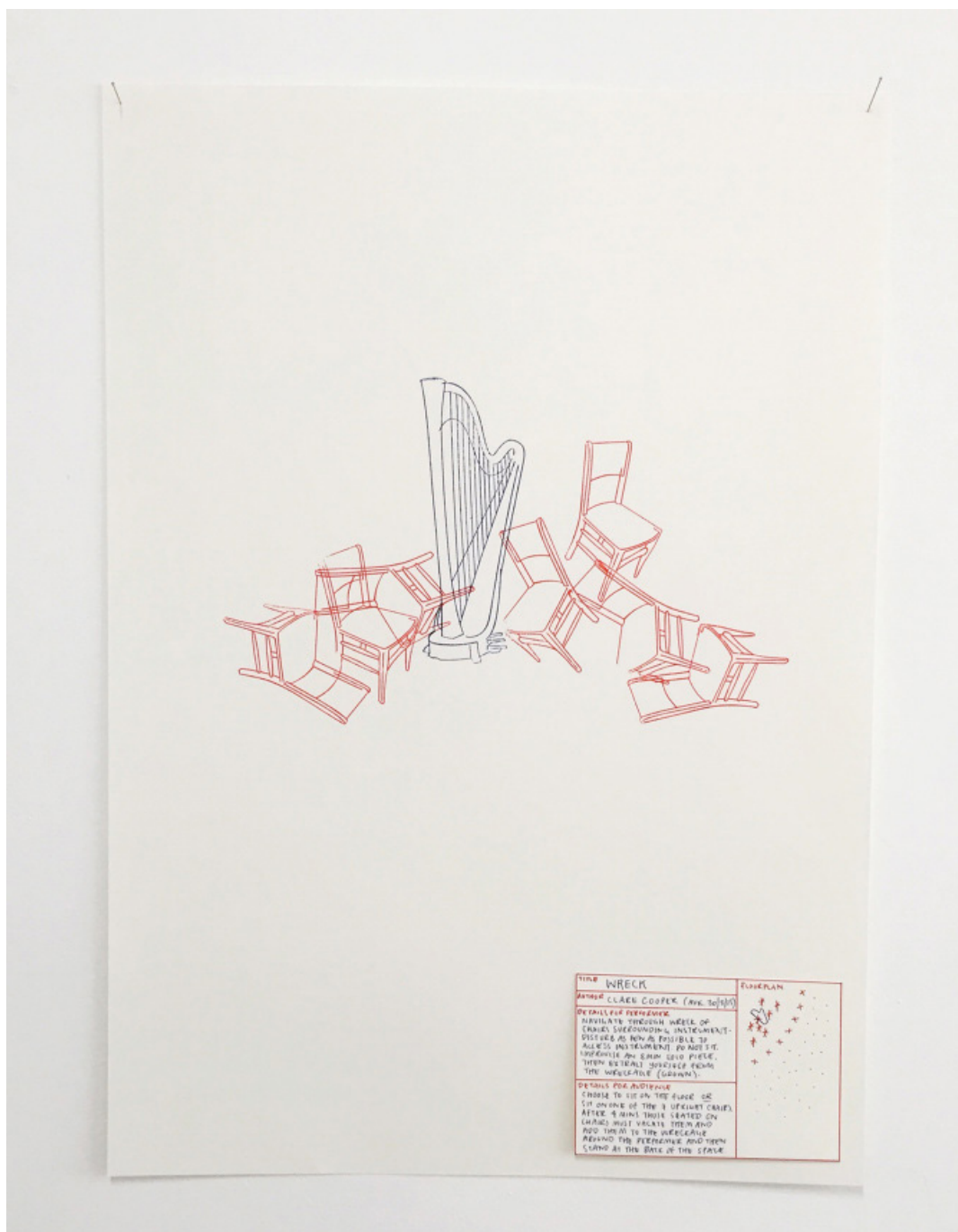
Improvise an 8 min solo piece, all the while gazing at the "examiner" seated at the desk positioned 2 meters in front of you.

Details for audience:

One audience member is seated at the desk. All remaining audience stands behind the desk with arms folded.

Floorplan: (illustrated)

Mapped Intimacy: Wreck



Title: Wreck

Author: Clare Cooper (AUK 30/3/15)

Details for performer:

Navigate through wreck of chairs surrounding instrument. Disturb as few as possible to access instrument. Do not sit. Improvise an 8 min. solo piece, then extract yourself from the wreckage (grown).

Details for audience:

Choose to sit on the floor or sit on one of the 7 upright chairs. After 4 mins those seated on chairs must vacate them and add them to the wreckage around the performer and then stand at the back of the space.

Floorplan: (illustrated)

Mapped Intimacy: Counsel



Title: Counsel

Author: Clare Cooper (AUK 2/4/15)

Details for performer: L

listen to your audience for 4 mins. then play back what
you heard for the following 4 mins. Keep listening.

Details for audience:

FOR COUPLES CONSIDERING A BREAK-UP ONLY.

Floorplan: (illustrated)

Author: Clare Cooper (AUK 1/4/15)

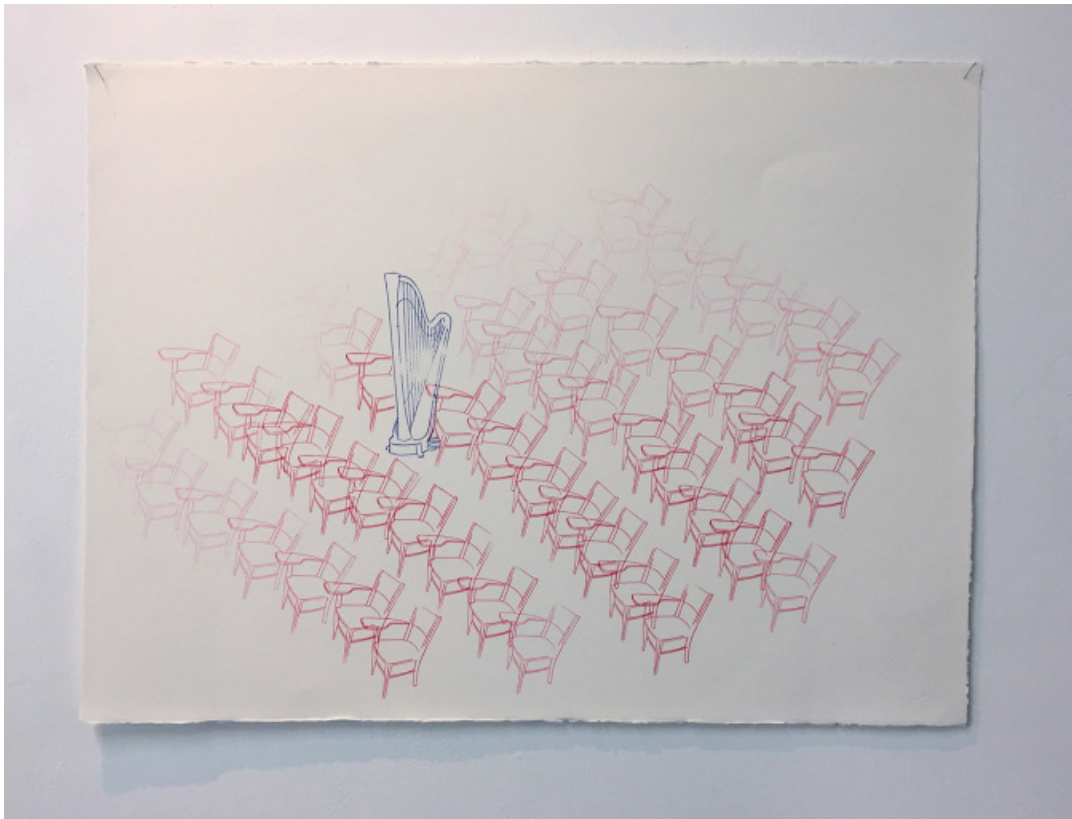
Move between instrument and (blue) desk. Play for 2 mins then assess at your desk for 2 mins. Pay attention to the notes being made by your audience - the piece ends when you have filled a page with marks/notes.

Sit at your desk and make notes during the 2 mins of “playing”. When the performer is not playing, listen without making notes.

Page 11

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Mapped Intimacy: Amidst

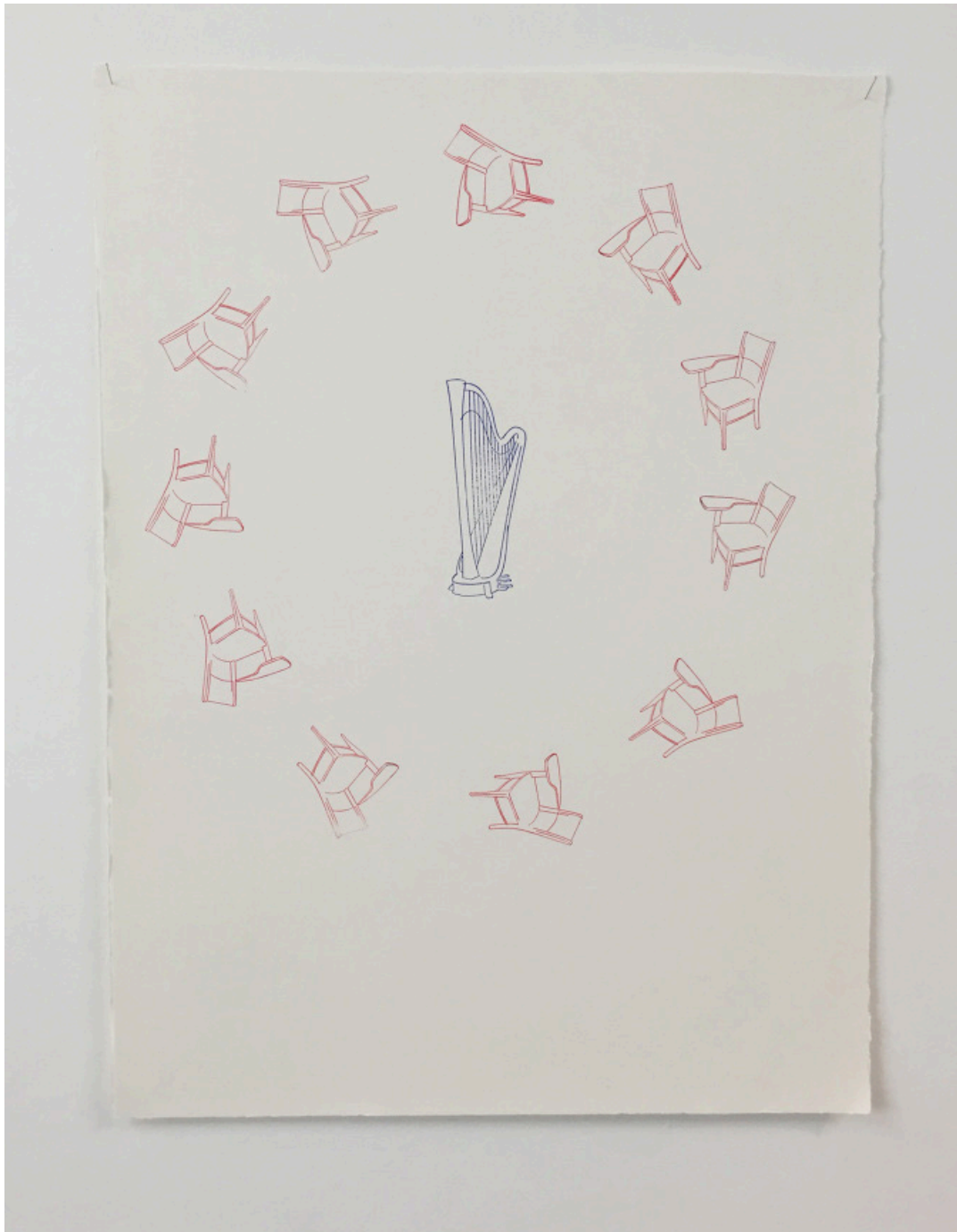


Title: Amidst

Author: Clare Cooper (AUK 30/3/15)

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Mapped Intimacy: Study

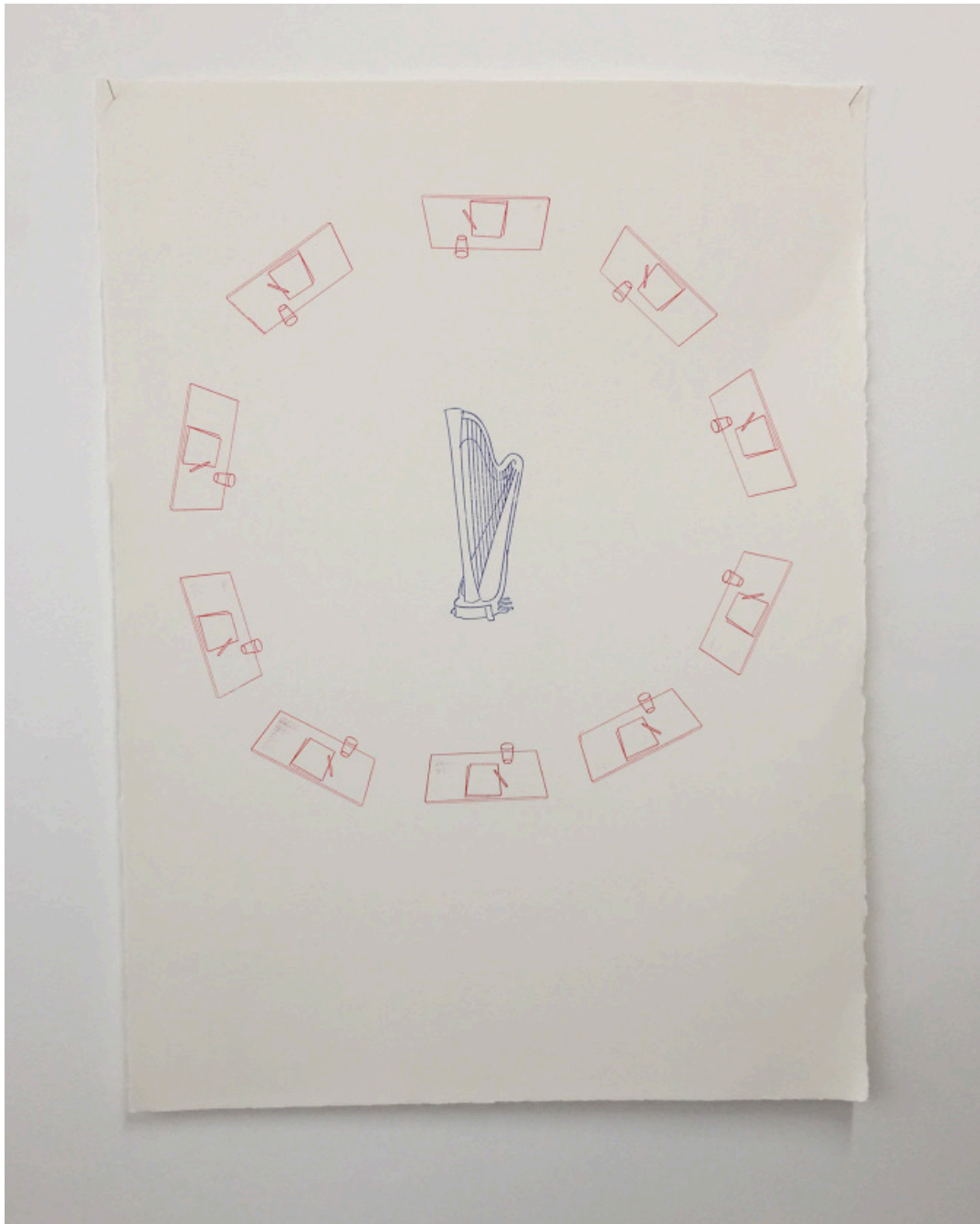


Title: Study

Author: Clare Cooper (AUK 30/3/15)

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Mapped Intimacy: Inquiry



Title: Inquiry

Author: Clare Cooper (AUK 1/4/15)

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22 December 2014

Professor Julian Knowles
Department of Media, Music, Communication and Cultural Studies
Faculty of Arts
Macquarie University
NSW 2109

Dear Professor Knowles

Reference No: 5201400785

Title: Investigating context as compositional tool in improvised music

Thank you for submitting the above application for ethical and scientific review. Your application was considered by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC (Human Sciences & Humanities)) at its meeting on 29 August 2014 at which further information was requested to be reviewed by the Ethics Secretariat.

The requested information was received with correspondence on 10 December 2014.

I am pleased to advise that ethical and scientific approval has been granted for this project to be conducted at:

- Macquarie University

This research meets the requirements set out in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007 – Updated March 2014) (the *National Statement*).

Details of this approval are as follows:

Approval Date: 22 December 2014

The following documentation has been reviewed and approved by the HREC (Human Sciences & Humanities):

Documents reviewed	Version no.	Date
Macquarie University Ethics Application Form	2.3	July 2013
Correspondence from Ms Clare Cooper responding to the issues raised by the HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities)		Received 10/12/2014
MQ Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF)	1	21/12/2014
Invitation email		
Interview questions		

This letter constitutes ethical and scientific approval only.

Standard Conditions of Approval:

1. Continuing compliance with the requirements of the *National Statement*, which is available at the following website:

<http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/book/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research>

2. This approval is valid for five (5) years, subject to the submission of annual reports. Please submit your reports on the anniversary of the approval for this protocol.

3. All adverse events, including events which might affect the continued ethical and scientific acceptability of the project, must be reported to the HREC within 72 hours.

4. Proposed changes to the protocol must be submitted to the Committee for approval before implementation.

It is the responsibility of the Chief investigator to retain a copy of all documentation related to this project and to forward a copy of this approval letter to all personnel listed on the project.

Should you have any queries regarding your project, please contact the Ethics Secretariat on 9850 4194 or by email ethics.secretariat@mq.edu.au

The HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) Terms of Reference and Standard Operating Procedures are available from the Research Office website at:

http://www.research.mq.edu.au/for/researchers/how_to_obtain_ethics_approval/human_research_ethics

The HREC (Human Sciences and Humanities) wishes you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely

Dr Karolyn White

Director, Research Ethics & Integrity,

Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee (Human Sciences and Humanities)

This HREC is constituted and operates in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007) and the *CPMP/ICH Note for Guidance on Good Clinical Practice*.