UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

'Why Do You Play The Way You Do?':
Musical Improvisation, Identity, and Social Interaction

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

in

Music

by

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The Dissertation of Kjell Gunnar Nordeson is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

'Why Do You Play The Way You Do?':
Musical Improvisation, Identity, and Social Interaction

by

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This dissertation is an ethnographic study analyzing how four improvising musicians articulate their music as social interaction and how they conceive of their practice in a larger stylistic and historical context. The musicians—Andrea Neumann, Joe McPhee, Suzanne Thorpe, and Axel Dörner—share in interviews the formative factors of their music practice, including the direct influence of local music scenes, socio-cultural considerations, gender and race dynamics, and their

intimate relations to their instruments.

The interviews were preceded by an exchange of recorded solo improvisations with each of the musicians. This exchange served as the catalyst for a broader discussion about musical interaction and what constitutes a musical dialogue.

In my analysis, I focus on: first, their sense of agency in a context of individuality and community; second, performativity in music and the relation between musical practice and social interaction; and third, the connection between a distinct musical practice and the notion of musical fluency.

I pay attention to three vantage points articulated by Ingrid Monson. She proposes a framework of *discourse, structure,* and *practice* to parse out the relations between influential external factors and individual agency. I am also applying Erika Fischer-Lichte's notion of *perceptual multistability,* in this context signifying the potential overlap or disconnect between the musician and the character of the music, or the blurry lines between an identity on stage and off stage. Ellen Waterman's use of the term *performativity,* relating to a *listening trust,* and Tracy McMullen's neologism *the improvisative* serve as concepts to better understand the formative qualities of empathy and generosity in musical improvisation.

In conclusion, I am showing the different ways four musicians experience

agency and the performative dynamics of interaction in improvised music. The dissertation analyzes the close link between personal identity, music communities, and an individual music practice. In connection to this multilayered context of stylistic influences and social interaction in music, I propose the term *family resemblance* as a term affording both similarities and differences in a global musical community characterized by a great stylistic diversity but ultimately a shared focus on improvisation.

Chapter 1:

Introduction

Once on tour in northern Sweden, I came to Umeå, the city where I grew up, to play at the annual Umeå Jazz Festival. The band, AALY Trio + Ken Vandermark and Peter Brötzmann, performed at *The Idun Theater,* a mid-sized venue that mostly booked progressive forms of jazz.[1] Before the concert started, I looked out at the focused and anticipative audience. It was a packed crowd: local and out-of-town avant-garde connoisseurs filled the front rows; a few of my childhood friends were scattered around the room; and my mother sat on the edge of her seat at a table in the middle of the room, excited for this rare opportunity to hear her son perform locally.

For about an hour, the five of us on stage filled the room with dense layers

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[1] This episode is also described in my master's thesis from 2013 "Improvisation and Identity."

of cymbal washes, percussive hits, multi-phonics and angular outbursts from the saxophones. There were no chord progressions or precomposed thematic material, and rarely a discernible pulse. The three saxophones, the two mentioned above plus Mats Gustafsson, are all known for a "hard-blowing" style of playing that is part of a European free improvised music tradition with close connections to American free jazz. The concert was reviewed by a man who, when I was a child, had been a flute teacher in the local public music school, and now doubled as a journalist. He wrote a review in the local newspaper. It was extremely negative.

> The night at The Studio ended with this year's representatives of avant-gardism, or do-what-you-like-and-hope-that-someone-buys-it. Aaly Trio with Mats Gustafsson saxophones, Peter Janson bass, and Kjell Nordeson [percussion], performed together with saxophonist Peter Brötzmann and Ken Vandermark. They may be famous, and have received hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants: for me personally these kinds of excesses have no value. Except possibly that it's a good thing that the enormous and unresolved wrath these people seem to carry, gets released in this way and not in physical violence.[2]

I was taken aback. Besides the judgmental tone of the review, both regarding aesthetics and grant money, I reacted strongest to the end when he called attention to our "enormous and unresolved wrath." After some initial knee jerk defensiveness, when I dismissed the journalist as hopelessly conventional, I

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[2] Westerlund, Jan. "Studion har det mesta." *Västerbottens Kuriren,* trans. Kjell Nordeson. November 1, 1999.

found myself intrigued. It felt unfamiliar and unpleasant to be described as a potentially violent person, and more importantly I realized I would never have allowed myself to provoke such a reaction when expressing myself in any other way than through music. This time, what was observed about me through my playing was aggression, another time it could be playfulness or tenderness.

I am intrigued by the apparent confusion of what social rules are at play in musical expression. To make sense of this confusion, I would argue that music making is a platform for personal development that has its own set of affordances and constraints different from other contexts. The platform of musical performance co-exist in communication with other contexts that make up our daily life experience, and can potentially create dynamic tension. The music our group was playing that night could very well due to its edgy hits and outbursts have been described as aggressive, but the aggressive expression was within the constraints of this particular platform of contemporary improvised music. The journalist who reviewed the concert erased that line between the daily life and music performance; he applied the constraints of the former to the latter.

The musical mode of expression, with its lack of explicit semantics affords a constructive ambiguity and therefore a loose relation to self-censorship. We are able to learn and evolve through our actions. This is how music becomes

instrumental in shaping a personal identity. This performative aspect of a performance has a complicated relation to conscious intentions. My aggressive behavior was disguised, or transformed, into a musical shape. If music without words has a semantic component, it is obviously very imprecise. This is an intricate and to me interesting aspect of music performance. On a personal and hypothetical level, if my playing could be translated into words I would probably not say them.

The concert above became for me a point of departure in a long partially self-reflective process. Richard Schechner describes what he calls restored behavior where an actor reflects upon his or her character on stage explaining - it's not me, and it's not not me.[3] In the context of improvised music, I would describe the same paradox as - it's me and it's not me, considering the myriad of influences channeled and transformed in a performance. In the following chapters, I am trying to give a picture of how four musicians negotiate and articulate these influences.

The work on this dissertation started with an invitation to four musicians to discuss their musical practice. The musicians, Andrea Neumann, Axel Dörner, Suzanne Thorpe, and Joe McPhee, graciously agreed to participate in the work,

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[3] Richard Schechner, *Between Theater & Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 112.

which also entailed an exchange of music preceding the interviews. I asked them about their practice as improvising musicians, their stylistic trajectory, and how they conceptualize the relationship between their music practice and a personal, social, and cultural identity.[4]

In the second chapter, *Solo but never alone,* I engage with the long-standing sociological discourse on the relationship between structure and agency, and I propose solo improvisations as the nexus of individuality and broader contexts, where aesthetic discourse, musical and personal history, and other socio-cultural factors underscore a process of perpetual musical change. I ask the interviewees to place themselves stylistically in a larger context, and to discuss how they perceive or conceive of agency in their musical practice.

In chapter three, *A malleable scene,* I interrogate how social interaction in music relates to a musical and personal identity. Performativity and transformation are key concepts in this chapter, which revolves around experiences of tension and power, as well as politeness, generosity, and independence in improvised music. This chapter theorizes that improvised music is a playground for negotiating and constructing identities both within and outside of the situation of music making.

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[4] The exact questions are listed in the Methodological discussion.

My two vantage points in chapters two and three investigate respectively the individual musician in relation to a community, and the individual musician in interaction with other musicians and the audience in the moment of music making. They are like two sides of the same coin, or the macro and micro version of the same phenomenon. They each indicate at various levels the ongoing process of identifying oneself in the context of a music practice.

The fourth chapter, *The musical exchange*, describes and analyzes the exchange of recorded solos between myself and the four musicians; an exchange that preceded the interviews for this dissertation. Our exchange of musical improvisations served as natural gravitational points for the conversations. In this chapter, I ask how each musician experienced or conceived of this musical interaction, and how that may have influenced their artistic motivations or process. Each solo is embedded in the text as an audio file, making it possible to follow the discussions with direct access to the recorded music. The chapter ends with an experiment exploring the idea of a *family resemblance* between the five musicians (including myself). I edited together a version with all five solos superimposed to an ensemble piece as an indication of what I claim to be a far-reaching common aesthetic ground for all participants.

Chapter five, *Musical fluency,* is an investigation of the elusive but strong

sense of communicated meaning generated by music. I introduce the notion of *fluency* in music and discuss the significance of fluency as a factor in their musical expression. The notion of fluency is interwoven into a broader discussion on music, in which I primarily focus on the topic of music and emotions. I am asking the musicians to elaborate on the nature of that relation, through the hypothetical question of whether it is possible to separate emotions from music at all.

The musicians included in the interviews all have long experiences as improvising musicians. They have navigated the tensions between styles and scenes, and they all express the engagement in their work in profoundly personal terms rooted in a social experience often with political implications. Axel Dörner and Andrea Neumann have both been instrumental in the radical aesthetic shifts on the improvised music scene taking place in Berlin starting in the nineties. Suzanne Thorpe has moved from the alternative experimental rock scene in the nineties to a scene of experimental electronic music and site-specific installations. Joe McPhee has been active as an improvising musician since the late sixties. His long career includes free jazz, free improvised music both in Europe and in the US, and funk and R&B.

All interviewees are in their practices confronting issues of artistic self-definition in environments in constant change. I chose these improvising

musicians because of the far going implications in the double nature of interpreter and composer which is inherent in all improvised music. In that double nature lies a potential for elaborating and processing the sense of one's place in a larger context. Improvisation resonates with larger social processes where you actively position yourself within possibilities and constraints. This resonance is obviously not exclusive to improvisation, but its temporal significance in the performing moment, in front of an audience, makes improvisation a focus point of creativity, agency, and instant response.

Andrea Neumann grew up in Japan and Hamburg, Germany. She studied classical piano at Hochshule der Künste in Berlin between 1988-93. Remaining in Berlin after finishing her studies she was involved in the formation of the stylistically diverse new music scene of experimental music, noise music, electronica, and improvised music called the Echtzeitmusik scene. Her involvement in the scene included being a music curator as well as a lecturer in experimental music at Berlin University of the Arts and University of Potsdam. She performs on an instrument she calls *inside piano*[5] which is a piano frame removed from its wooden case, placed horizontally, prepared and miked. Through close miking of primarily very soft sounds causing feedback in a mixer, she creates

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[5] Innenklavier (German).

sound textures with a dynamic range from extremely loud to barely audible.

Joe McPhee grew up in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. He learned to play the trumpet from his father at the age of eight. He was later, as a member of a US Army band stationed in Germany, introduced to performing traditional jazz. By his late twenties, he added the tenor saxophone as his main instrument in addition to the trumpet. A few years later McPhee released a number of recordings in his own name, among them Nation Time from 1971, which was inspired by a text written by Amiri Baraka. In the 1980s he met Pauline Oliveros whose theories of *deep listening* influenced McPhee to explore further extended techniques on his instruments and he started to experiment with electronic manipulation of his sound. McPhee lectured on jazz at Vassar College in the late 1960s and early 1970s. McPhee's discography includes over a hundred titles, of which ten are solo recordings.

Suzanne Thorpe grew up in upstate New York. She performs on the electroacoustic flute, expanded with digital and analog tools. She co-founded the experimental indie-rock band Mercury Rev in 1989, with which she toured and recorded until 2001. As a composer, Thorpe creates interactive site-specific pieces drawing upon ideas of soundscapes and acoustic ecology. Thorpe studied with Pauline Oliveros and is a *deep listening* instructor. Oliveros's ideas has, as with

McPhee, had a profound impact on her practice regarding the awareness of sound, acoustic ecology, and the philosophical implications of silence. She is the co-director of TECHNE, an organization that introduces young women to technology-focused art making, improvisation, and contemplative practices. At the time of the interview, Thorpe is a Ph.D. Candidate in music at UC San Diego.

Axel Dörner was born in Cologne, Germany. He studied trumpet at Cologne University of Music from 1989 to 1994. In 1994 Dörner moved to Berlin where he became one of the more influential musicians of the emerging Echtzeitmusik scene. He developed in the 90s a highly idiosyncratic way of playing the trumpet, characterized by circular breathing, multiphonics, and long passages in the music oscillating between various shades of acoustic noise. Dörner also plays music closer to the jazz tradition. He is a part of a notable collaboration with piano player Alexander von Schlippenbach which in 2005 released interpretations of the complete repertoire of Thelonious Monk compositions.

As an improvising musician myself, I often wonder what circumstances have shaped—and continue to shape—my particular way of playing. The question is obviously multi-layered. It involves large-scale socio-cultural factors, including racial and gender presuppositions, the influence of local scenes and close collaborators, the embodied relationship with the instrument, and the ongoing

work of developing and maintaining motor skills in tandem with an earnest and evolving engagement with sounds. These layers and more are all relevant in the pursuit of an answer to my general question 'Why does one play the way one does?'

Methodology

This dissertation is largely an interdisciplinary study drawing from improvisation studies, performance studies, cultural anthropology, philosophy, and linguistics. Overall, this dissertation is a phenomenological approach to questions on musical practice, trying to clarify the relations between musical, personal, and social identity.

In my approach to qualitative analysis, I am loosely following the guidelines for *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)*, aiming to understand the interviewees' perception of themselves and their environment. This method which mostly is used in psychology and qualitative medical research is characterized by in-depth interviews of a small number of participants where the researcher analyses how individuals make sense of their experiences. IPA provides a bottom-up approach in the analysis which, halfway, meets a set of pre-determined over-arching concepts. In the interpretative part of the process, I

discuss not only the participants' experiences but also the relevance of those pre-existing analytical concepts.[6] This work is inevitably an example of a *double hermeneutic* both on a conceptual level where terminology, analytical tropes, and established concepts already have influenced myself and the interviewees in every interaction, but also in the fact that I, in my analytical summaries, claim to understand what the interviewees try to understand about themselves. This circumstance comes with the territory.

A different kind of doubleness comes from my dual role of being a subjective part of the interviews, and later a researcher analyzing and commenting on the content of those interviews. In the interviews, I speak according to my experiences as a performer, in dialogue with another performer with whom I have a personal relation. In my analysis, I articulate conclusions based on patterns and triangulations from all the interviews, including my own contributions. This self-reflective quality is common in ethnomusicological research of the last decades. The insider-outsider dilemma where a researcher takes both an outsider-observer and an insider-expert role could seem to implicate wearing different hats at the same time. Timothy Rice argues that it ultimately is not a conflict but rather a

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[6] For more information on IPA, see: Jonathan A., Smith, Michael Larkin, and Paul Flowers. *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: theory, method and research* (Los Angeles, SAGE. 2009).

requirement for a meaningful analysis to combine the two approaches.[7] In his words, the researcher needs both "objectivist strategies of observation" and "subjective knowledge of the force of meanings and intentions."[8]

Themes from the interviews are extracted, or coded, so that I as the interpreter can focus on patterns relevant to the interviewees rather than keeping the presentations of each interviewee intact. This means that certain aspects or understandings of experiences are brought together as themes with the consequence that each person is presented in relation to those themes. From the viewpoint of the structure of my presentation - in the text, artists revolve around themes rather than themes revolve around artists.

Analytical concepts

In the second chapter, *Solo but never alone,* I am paying attention to three vantage points articulated by Ingrid Monson. She proposes a framework of *discourse*, *structure*, and *practice* in order to parse out the relations between influential external factors and individual agency.[9] *Discourse* concerns ideas

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[7] Timothy Rice, "Toward a Mediation of Field Methods and Field Experience Ethnomusicology," in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology, eds. Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (Oxford University Press, 2008), 42-61.*

[8] Ibid., 55.

[9] Ingrid Monson, "Jazz as Political and Musical Practice." In *Musical improvisation: art, education, and society*, ed. Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 23.

expressed verbally and shared in texts and in people's conversations. They articulate values and attitudes and concern aesthetics, racial and gender considerations, political structures of power as well as status, and definitions of failure and success. *Structure* relates to the influence of laws and economic systems; they concern the influence of such things as government support for the arts as well as the effects of a market-driven economy on a specific scene and its artists. *Practice*, the third part of this framework, Monson describes as "the wild card." It looks at the unpredictable ways individual artists deal with the reality of the aforementioned discourse and structure. *Practice* is about agency and individual negotiations of restrictions and potentials. It is a tangible, embodied, area of the analysis with real people navigating in a world of ideas and aesthetic values, with legal and material constraints, in collaboration or opposition, among other people. *Practice* is the implementation of a life as an artist in tension and rest, in relation to these constraints. The definitions of these focal points are informed by works by Michel Foucault (discourse), Anthony Giddens (structure), and Pierre Bourdieu (practice).

In my interviews I have put the weight and initial focus on the *practice* of my interviewees. It is in the articulation of a *practice* that all the other levels are reflected and considered. *Practice* also entails the dynamic character of negotiation

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and navigation as well as difference and conflict, all formative elements of an artistic expression. *Practice* embodies the tension within the field, without which the art would lose much of its interest.

In the third chapter, *A malleable scene*, I'm using Erika Fischer-Lichte's notion of *perceptual multistability*. Fischer-Lichte introduces this term in the context of performance theory where she describes the audience's oscillating attention between the performer and the performed character, the phenomenal body and the semiotic. The idea of perceptual multistability can be adapted and applied to the parts of the interviews that concern the musicians' perceived sense of identification with the character of the music. This presupposes a view on music as a mode of expression and that the music has an identity that in the moment of performance is owned by the musician. Perceptual multistability in this context, then, signifies the potential overlap between the musician and the musical character, or the blurry lines between an identity on stage and off stage. The tension between musician and musical character is a key also to the third main analytical concept - *performativity*. I am presenting a general background to the developmental trajectory of this term, however, in my analysis, I am staying close to Ellen Waterman's use of performativity. In her account of a concert with George Lewis, Marilyn Crispell, Hamid Drake, and Miya Masaoka, at the Vancouver

International Jazz Festival in 2003, she points at *empathy* being an "explicitly musical skill," and she describes how generosity in a diverse situation, besides its obvious ethical dimension, also from an aesthetic point of view leads to a more dynamic musical interplay.[10] In Waterman's account, the "listening trust" of the four musicians becomes a performative strategy with musical consequences.

Generosity is equally central to the fourth analytical concept. I am considering Tracy McMullen's neologism *the improvisative* to understand the formative qualities of the personal investments each musician makes in a musical performance. McMullen extends Judith Butler's understanding of performativity, but where Butler is unwilling to allow much room for *playing* in the performative shaping of personal identities, McMullen introduces the term improvisative to signify a generous playfulness. Playing as a notion is for Butler too volitional and risks of downplaying the severity of the constraints she means are at the center of every human interaction. McMullen instead moves the initiative to the subject emphasizing its quality of being a giver; in this context someone who contributes generously in musical interaction. Her notion of the improvisative shifts the weight away from the constraints of the others to the generosity of the subject. Giving, then, is for McMullen the crux of improvising.

[10] Julie Dawn Smith, and Ellen Waterman,"Listening Trust: The Everyday Politics of George Lewis's 'Dream Team.'" *In People Get Ready: The Future of Jazz Is Now (Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice), ed*. Ajay Heble and Rob Wallace (Duke University Press, 2013), 65.

The four analytical lenses above cover most of the information I gathered from the interviews. Besides these main themes, I also included questions about expressivity in music. I primarily introduced the interviewees to the notion of musical fluency, asking whether they viewed their musical expression as fluent. Fluency is in this context a notion that can evoke an ambivalent response. Resistance, which counteracts fluency, is a source for deeper reflection and attention to details. The tendency to over-disclose, coming from an uninhibited fluency, and an inability to hide, resulting from a lack of fluency, are endpoints in a discussion on the convergence of musical fluency and musical expression.

Furthermore, I wanted to find out how much the notion of music as a language in a broader sense resonated with the interviewees. This is somewhat a side theme in chapter four which is influenced by theories by Mark Changizi.[11] His hypothesis on language points to a hypermimetic nature of language where prosody, phrasing, and timbre, dominate the very early stages of the development of the human language. Language was hypermimetic in that it communicated positions, relations, and emotions, in a protolanguage manner. This, according to Changizi, was the stage before the explicitly semantic character of language took over as its dominating function, pushing other aspects of language into a

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[11] Mark A. Changizi, *Harnessed, How language and music mimicked nature and transformed ape to man* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2011).

subliminal existence. One can argue that this pushed-out initial character of language is still flourishing in music and hypothetically serves as an explanation to why music, although non-explicit, is so undeniably expressive.

Research considerations

Besides these main analytical concepts, there are a number of underlying assumptions guiding my approach to the intersection of personal narratives and social contexts. Georgina Born et al. describe in the introduction to *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics*[12] the process of both broadening and criticizing the traditional notion of aesthetics, which, based on Kant's free beauty, and Eduard Hanslick's understanding of music particularly, claims to be free from any extramusical connotations. First, a social aesthetics needs to include the social conditions into the understanding of art. Second, not only the social context surrounding the art needs to be included, but the art object itself has to be seen as a social process, giving experiences of social nature both to performers and audience.[13]

Through this expansion of a social aesthetics, more meaning is revealed; art stays meaningful. The social aesthetics Born et al. describe has an overarching goal

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[12] Georgina Born, Eric Lewis, and Will Straw."Introduction: What is Social Aesthetics," in *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics (*Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 2.

[13] Ibid., 8 f.

of understanding the embedded values of aesthetics in society, recognizing their importance "in that they are judgments that we may employ to demarcate ourselves from others, to glorify or vilify others, to help define the communities in which we claim membership and to which we claim allegiance, …"[14]

Born defines "four planes of social mediation" where the first plane involves musical performance and practice; the second plane concerns the listeners and the audience; the third plane reflects larger social groups of social hierarchies of race, class, gender, etc. The fourth plane concerns the broader institutional factors influencing music production, both private and public. Born's planes are to some extent overlapping with Monson's three categories, but with an important difference. Born articulates her categories with the intention of distancing the research from accounts of the individual artist's experience. To not lose focus on the manifestations and mechanisms of power, she steers away from the academic consideration of individual testimonies, or narratives, of aesthetic nature. "…, such aesthetic theories are atomic in that they elevate individual agents and their mental beliefs and perceptual qualities as the primary concern."[15] This is mainly a critique of the ubiquitous focus on the genius as it evolved in the last couple of centuries, but Born's contribution is aimed as a corrective to research

[14] Ibid., 4.

[15] Ibid., 1

of much later date where she finds the attempts to look inwards, at music itself and its practitioners, and extrapolating those observations to a surrounding society, being too occlusive.[16] She is critical of the tendency "to reduce the socio-musical universe to the micro-social space of relations and practices…"[17] which she finds, for example, in texts by Tia DeNora and Antoine Hennion.

DeNora's position, which is partially based on Hennion's writing, points out the risks of a 'grand' description of the music-society nexus where the intermediary is left undefined: "while music may be, seems to be, or is, interlinked to 'social' matters - patterns of cognition, styles of action, ideologies, institutional arrangements - these should not be presumed."[18] The generalizing belief in music's connection to social structures without a concrete intermediary, makes the academic results "'visionary' rather than 'visible.'"[19] Instead, academic research should in her view present and analyze the discourse among musicians and audience, trusting that discourse feeds action which affects society. DeNora speaks of the 'little tradition' (in contrast to the 'grand' tradition) where researchers take their informants at face value, considering artist's (and audience's) understanding

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[16] Georgina Born, "After Relational Aesthetics: Improvised Music, the Social, and (Re)Theorizing the Aesthetic," in *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 42.

[17] Ibid., 42.

[18] Tia DeNora, 2010, *Music in Everyday Life*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4

[19] Ibid,. 4

of their work in relation to the surrounding world not only being descriptive, but formative. That performative aspect of discourse is the intermediary which was missing in the 'grand' tradition.[20] This dissertation is a contribution to the 'little tradition.' It pays attention to the personal narrative with the belief that discourse shapes practice, and that the patterns in our lives we find meaningful guide us in a direct way.

The synergy of disciplines

Disciplines can be transgressed constructively but when I in this dissertation borrow terminology between discourses, I try to be aware of the risks with extrapolating terms that have emerged in a particular setting. A discipline defines an overarching focus, while discourses included in the discipline have embedded in them a world of references with its particular terminology that has to be understood from within. It thereby also signals a sense of limitation. Any framework has evolved so that we can understand and give answers to questions emerging from a specific frame of references, but it is not appropriate for other adjacent areas although analogies can be tempting. I will in this work let

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[20] This also resonates with how George E. Lewis describes his conclusions from listening to recordings of early AACM meetings. The fact that the AACM rarely used the term jazz affirms that their "nascent discursive strategy" in their practice was instrumental in a transformation "not only [of] their livelihoods, but also their very lives and musical selves." (Lewis, A Power Stronger than Itself, xl)

disciplines share views from afar, but when I get closer, I will be attentive to extrapolations jumping between discourses. Michel Foucault points to the illusion of discursive unity. There is not one vantage point the same as another, and with that difference comes a whole slew of terminology and value judgments preceding every description and every explanation. An event is never just an event but a discursive event.[21] In this work, I am thus embracing a multi-disciplinary approach while maintaining vigilance in the mix of discourses. This dilemma is especially pertinent in the discussion of performativity which is an attractive, dynamic, concept, but its various particular discursive connotations need to be unpacked. In the social sciences, performativity puts the finger on the tension and interplay between individual malleability and social constraints. The term fills a slightly different function in performance studies where it helps to understand the dynamics in the intersection of fiction, reality, and ritual. Furthermore, performative has a casual meaning loosely pointing to any circumstances around drama and performance. My use of Fischer-Lichte's perceptual multistability is equally a situation of a terminology transferred between discourses, in this case between theater and music. Hopefully, my reasonings will justify that transfer.

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[21] Foucault writes extensively about discursive formations in *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* 21-40

Family resemblance and free improvisation

The ubiquitous character of improvisation makes it a daunting challenge to define improvised music, but it is also this all-permeating quality that contributes to the relevance of improvisation studies. Even when we stay within the realms of musical improvisation, the differentiation and presence of improvisatory elements at all levels easily escapes taxonomies and genre definitions. The notion of improvisation is charged with values and issues of identity, making it sometimes neglected, sometimes uplifted.

The pervasive nature of improvisation makes an account of improvisation, in a historical perspective, as Anders Eskildsen points out, not an account of improvisation per se but of the conceptualizing of improvisation;[22] not the phenomenon itself but the discourse around it.[23] Eddie Prevost characterizes improvisation as having two distinctive qualities distinguishing it from other kinds of music making. First, "the application of 'problem-solving' techniques 'within' performance." Secondly, "the dialogical interrelation between

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[22] Anders Eskildsen, "Interagency in Improvised Music: A Systems Theory-Based Analytical Strategy," (PhD diss., Aarhus University, 2018), 19.

[23] Eskildsen distinguishes between marked and unmarked improvisation, the former signifying improvisation as "a form of music performed as, intended as, and expected to behave as improvisation." Eskildsen, "Interagency in Improvised Music," 25.

musicians."[24] Although these two aspects are in the foreground of musical improvisation they are not in any way unique to improvisation. Without distinguishing the particular 'problems' that need to be solved, this characterization is not sufficient. Musical variables need to be negotiated on the spot in any music making.

It is one thing to define improvisation; a much different one is to distinguish styles where musical improvisation is central. Initially, in the late sixties and the seventies, the term *free improvised music* was a name of a kind of music making where the self-identifying emphasis on improvisation was the component that differentiated it from other kinds of music. Later, when the scene of experimental improvised music in Europe and the US had become a mosaic of more or less interrelated scenes and styles, the term improvisation was not always placed in the center as a defining device. Instead, genres such as Echtzeitmusik, laptop music, noise music, turntablism, etc. have bypassed the term improvisation, considering improvisation inherent but not a label.

Although the usefulness of the label "free improvised music" is debatable, I will use it throughout this dissertation. It will foremost serve as a name of a style and not be confirming a particular music's claim to be free. Derek Bailey's claim

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[24] Edwin Prevost, *No Sound is Innocent: AMM and the Practice of Self-invention. Meta-musical Narratives. Essays* (Copula - an Imprint of Matchless Recordings and Publishing, Essex, 1995), 172

that free improvised music is non-idiomatic, I think, comes from a need to distinguish the music from jazz and western art music (WAM), meaning that, with a strategy of negation, the music that evolved in the late sixties in Europe was neither jazz nor WAM. When the phase of "freedom from" to use a notion used by for example Gary Peters was evolving into "freedom to," the music gelled into a style that clearly can be described as an idiom.[25] The term is also dubious through its hyperbolic self-image of being free, implying on some level that other kinds of music are not free. The experience of freedom is all too subtle and unpredictable to be expected to be generated solely by the distance to previous styles. On the contrary, that presupposed differentiation can equally be perceived as jarring, with its implied character of avoiding rather than allowing.

The diversity of idiomatic and aesthetic identity within the umbrella term of free improvised music globally contributes to a more inclusive and non-hierarchical character through its multiple roots and branches. What started off as a potentially conflictual binary between free jazz and free improvisation in the sixties has now evolved into a much more fine-grained division of an overlapping complex web of sub-genres. The use of electronics and computers, together with stylistic sources other than western contemporary music and jazz contribute to

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[25] Peters, Gary. *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 21ff.

this diversification. New generations of improvisers also bring new musical input.

A consequence of this diversification of the last couple of decades is a more

comfortable relation to eclecticism than previously. All five musicians, including

myself, have an available contact surface emerging from the fact that we all self-

identify as improvising musicians, even though we live in different parts of the

world with different stylistic and social backgrounds. We could all be

programmed as a group performing ad hoc together, without preparations, at a

festival of improvised music. This circumstance is an indicator of a commonality

which I would like to call *family resemblance*. Even though we can be said to belong

to different subgroups of an idiom, we all belong to the very loosely defined idiom

called free improvised music.

The term *family resemblance*, borrowed from linguistic philosophy,[26] is useful

when we want to argue for an affinity between artistic activities that includes both

similarities and differences. The term indicates commonalities in a nonlinear way,

especially when thought of in terms of extended family. There is not one aspect

that defines a community or a style. Certain experiences are shared, but not by

everyone. Some individuals, A, have characteristics also shared with another

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[26] The term *family resemblance* was (re)introduced by L. Wittgenstein, especially in his *Philosophical Investigations* where he means that, instead of relying on a dictionary definition of a term, we need to consider a word's malleability. Wittgenstein likens a term with a fibre. "And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres." (*Philosophical Investigations*, §67)

community, in which there are individuals, B, who have other experiences shared with some in the first group but not with everyone in B, and also with some in community C, etc. *Family resemblance* as a concept allows for overlapping but also for lacks of commonalities. Used in the context of improvised music, it makes it possible to see a kinship between different musical scenes from various parts of the world. It reflects an affinity beyond the apparent characteristics. Even though they each have unique site-specific qualities, musical scenes become like a family constellation with resemblances and deviations to various degrees, where differences in nationality and race, etc. are contained through the notion of *family resemblance*. I am using *family resemblance* as a way to indicate the commonality between for example myself, a Scandinavian improvising percussionist in diaspora, Joe McPhee - an African-American improvising free jazz saxophonist and trumpet player, and Andrea Neumann - a German improviser on piano frame with attachments and electronics, from the musically minimal Berlin Echtzeitmusik scene.

I will continue the discussion on *family resemblance* in chapter 4 - *The musical exchange* - where the music in itself will become an argument for a *family resemblance*. In that discussion I am proposing the term as a catalyst for reflection more than anything else. It enables a discussion around what constitutes a scene,

and the kinship involved in that.

Musical identities

I am repeatedly throughout this dissertation referring to notions of identity. The definition of identity will, depending on context, oscillate between social, cultural and personal identity. Since it is a notion belonging to many disciplines, identity, like performativity, easily gets sucked in a cloud of ambiguity. The trajectory of each interview is modified by where each interviewee prefers to place the notion of identity in their responses. I wanted to let it be open to what extent the interviewees placed the formative aspects of their music in social, cultural, and personal narratives. The diversity of perspectives in this matter is part of the equation, and the potential confusion referring to different levels of identity is partially by design. Since social, cultural and personal factors overlap and influence each other, I have not prioritized a compartmentalizing approach to identity, but instead attempted to contain the synergy of social and personal circumstances.

Negotiation is a term often used in texts about musical identity. It points to a malleable reality and a process where positions are ready to be moved. The term could be deceiving in the sense that it implies a clear and constructive exchange -

someone to negotiate with. That clear interaction might not be as tangible as the term implies. The negotiation we are talking about here is embedded in a reality where there is no clear negotiation table but instead a reality with many entrances and layers. There is no obvious equivalent of diplomacy, and there is a playfield where some of the actors have a painfully high awareness of inequalities and expectations, and others with a very little awareness at all of what is going on, even when they themselves are protagonists.

I am letting one aspect permeate the understanding of identity and that is the act of self-identification. In line with the transformative qualities of musical improvisation as a performative phenomenon, the act of musical self-identification resonates with a factor of agency that one can trace in narratives from Joe McPhee's Po music where he claims his own aesthetic idiom, to Andrea Neumann's description of a fictive conversation between a composer and an improvising musician. She says:

> When a composer wants to work with an improviser and asks: 'What do you have? Can I use your sounds?' I know a lot of musicians who would say, 'No, I don't want to give you my sounds. This is me, and my life, and all my socialization of my music is in my sounds. I can't give it to you like that.' And when as a musician you go somewhere, you perform your own work, because the improvisers are their own work.

These examples show, first, an actively gained, articulated, and performed identity, either through spoken language or in music, and secondly, they both exemplify a blurry line between music and person.

The interviews

The interviews were semi-structured and conducted between October 2017 and March 2018. They had a set of fixed questions that were the same for every interviewee, but these were merely starting points leading to follow up questions and in that sense laid the ground for individualized discussions. Besides the common questions, there were also for each musician a number of questions related to their particular individual musical experiences, and specifically to the exchange of music that had preceded the interview.

After the musicians had responded positively saying they wanted to be a part of this research project, I recorded a short solo improvisation which I sent to them as an initial point of exchange. I requested them to record a responding improvisation to send back to me. This exchange would catalyze the interviews and was a way for me to anchor the conversations in each participant's music. It would provide a context of artistic statements and an environment of musical interaction.

The interviews were conducted in English. Two of the interviewees, Andrea Neumann and Axel Dörner, and myself, are not native English speakers which naturally influenced the conversations. In written text, a non-native speaker can correct and modify the language, but in a real time conversation, this circumstance becomes a palpable factor in the search for the best words and expressions in support of often subtle reasonings. In my edit of the interviews, I have adjusted some of those language issues (including my own) but in general, I have interpreted them as idiomatic expressions of personal perspectives. I have also given the interviewees the opportunity to read through the excerpts I intended to include, with the option to correct, change or expand their answers. Three of four interviews were made via video conference calls. The interview with Axel Dörner was done only via email.

These were my instructions for their responding recording:

- This is obviously not a 'playing together' situation. It's more of - I say this, what do you say? My recording could be seen as a statement of: how I play today, how I play in general, how we play where I come from, or just who I am. Or everything in between. However you choose to position yourself, or define yourself and

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your playing through your responding recording is up to you, and will be a part of what we can talk about later in the interview.

- Please, feel free to make it easy for yourself in terms of recording technology. I was lucky to have access to recording engineer students for my recording, but that was just lucky circumstances. You can record your response in whatever way you find convenient/ satisfying. Zoom, iPhone with external mic, home studio - whatever. Have in mind though, that I will include the recordings in my dissertation, so that people reading the text also can listen to the music.

- The length of the recording is up to you. This aspect of your response is part of your contribution. We do not need to harmonize any aspects of the recordings for any other reason than that you would like to.

The interview questions

The exchange of the recorded music:

1.	A-Z. Initial questions regarding the exchange of music that preceded the interview. This part naturally included a discussion of how my recording had influenced the response, and how this situation is different from a normal duo situation. It often touched the idea of adaptation and compromise in musical improvisation, but also how we get input from each other in constructive ways. This set of questions was adapted to the specific exchange between myself and each musician.

Solo improvising and community:

2.	What are your ideas about individuality and communality (lineages, traditions, and other influences) manifested in your own solo playing?

3.	How much in control of your improvisations are you? Are you conscious about the details and form in your playing?

4.	How do you prepare a solo improvisation? Do you prepare your improvisations from a composer's point of view or do you trust the flow of the moment?

Language and Fluency:

5.	Is it possible to separate musical expression from emotional expression? Is giving musical shape overlapping or corresponding to an emotional state

present in music making or do you prefer to talk about the two aspects
separately?

6. How is your relation to rhythm? Dynamics? Melody? Timbre?

7. Do those parameters ever on some level relate to language in a
communicative sense?

8. Would you describe your musical language as fluent?

9. How does the level of fluency in your music correspond to what you
perceive as your personal musical voice?

Transformation and performativity:

10. Can you describe how you experience the social interaction in music, with
fellow musicians or with the audience in terms of politeness, tone of voice,
cutting someone off, listening, speaking up, being emotional etc.?

11. What's the correspondence between you on stage and you outside the
stage? Do you see yourself having and nourishing a "musical character,"
expressing yourself in a musical mode, being in potential conflict with who
you are off stage? Do you feel that your musical expression and you
overlap completely?

12. What is your relation to clichés and reuse of old material?

In addition to these questions, I asked all interviewees: How has gender dynamics influenced your artistic development? I also asked everyone what race has meant for their careers, decisions, inhibitions, forward momentum, etc. These questions were worded differently to each musician, depending on considerations of their specific scenes and situations.

Although these questions were setting up a determined path, I expected the interviewees to guide the continuation of the trajectory through what they picked up as relevant to them. I was treating the interviews as structured improvisations, and for that reason, I'm quoting them at length at some points. This gives the reader the opportunity to follow the dynamics and triggers of the dialogues as a source of information besides the extracted conclusions one can make from them.

Throughout my text, I am embedding chunks of the interviews alongside my own reflections and analyses. Much more is contained in those conversations then what I distill from them. In the same way an analysis of music becomes meaningful when juxtaposed to the music itself, my comments gain meaning by being triangulated by the exact verbal exchanges.

Chapter 2:

Solo but never alone

I ask myself - what music can I, having grown up in the north of Sweden, call my music? My situation as a child, living in a medium-sized town,[27] just below the arctic circle in a northern European country could seem to put me in an unfortunate situation regarding access to music that was accompanied with a sense of cultural and historical ownership. Very little of the music I encountered was native to my part of the world.

However, in no way was my early musical exposure particularly local. The amalgamation of countless factors - TV, radio, recordings, overrides any geographic limitations and did so also forty years ago. My musical references are a

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[27] I grew up in Umeå in the north of Sweden. Umeå is an administrative center for the region and a university town. In the seventies the population was around 50 000 (the greater municipality had around 80 000).

result of a systematized far-reaching relocation of music; a dramatic and irreversible technological and societal transformation in the name of globalization. By the age of twelve, I had already heard a considerable amount of music from all over the world, historically and geographically spread far beyond the horizon of the midnight sun.

To exist in the margin can be liberating. From the perspective of western art music, John Cage writes:

> Once in Amsterdam, a Dutch musician said to me, 'it must be very difficult for you in America to write music, for you are so far away from the centers of the tradition.' I had to say, 'It must be very difficult for you in Europe to write music, for you are so close to the centers of tradition.[28]

Cage comments on a highly specialized situation where a specific music of the *old world* is put in comparison to the same genre in the *new world*. But as a general comment, the distance to the social location where a music first emerged, makes the relation to the music less sensitive to the expectations a tradition normally imposes.

My musical childhood

What would an account of my early musical influences look like? Sweden

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[28] John Cage, *Silence [1961].* First Wesleyan paperback edition (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 73.

in the 1970s had had a social democratic government for over forty years. Music education for children was available for a nominal sum in the public education system. From age ten I took lessons on drums, and a few years later I started studying classical percussion. I took weekly lessons until I was nineteen, then attending a small community college-like school specialized in music, focusing on classical percussion.

One of my earliest musical memories is the music of The Beatles. I remember sitting at a desk at my pre-school, incapacitated with growing pains, next to the tape recorder being my own DJ navigating the reels of tapes. The first singles I purchased with my own money was a seemingly random collection of Swedish schlagers, the Scottish band Middle of the Road, Hot Butter's version of Pop Corn, The Creedence Clearwater Revival, and The Jackson Five. This was an early experience of handling my own money, and the resulting cascade of diverse music was part random, part curiosity guided by a vague sense of musical qualities. The first LP that I remember listening exceptionally closely to was Deep Purple's *Made in Japan* from 1972. I was then eight years old. Even listening to a CD version today, I can feel in my body when the music approaches a point in Ritchie Blackmore's solo on Child in Time where my LP was skipping, getting ready to move the needle carefully over that point.

Around seventh grade, I started listening to fusion. Mahavishnu Orchestra was harsh to my ears, but I found endless energy trying to absorb the music. The group's second LP *Birds of Fire* with its edgy melodies and asymmetric rhythms was both jubilant and austere; intense and cold at the same time. Later in high school, I was mesmerized by King Crimson, but only the recordings from before their hiatus in 1974. During these early teenage years I had an extended period when I daily listened to the British group Jethro Tull, but only their live album from 1978 - *Bursting Out*. Their studio recordings sounded dry and disappointingly dead to me. Their drummer Barriemore Barlow mesmerized me with his melodically supportive and soloistic playing behind his huge drum set. Every bar seemed different in a way of playing that was continually morphing with the music going on around him.

When I was fifteen I heard The Rite of Spring for the first time. I believe that music, and other music by Stravinsky, impregnated my sense of phrasing in a way detectable in my own playing still today. A five-eighth figure is succeeded by a two-eighth figure, and when repeated, the five-eighth figure is succeeded by a four-eighth figure, and so on in endless and small changes. I remember thinking that Orff's Carmina Burana felt so square in comparison to Stravinsky's organically unpredictable music.

It is also around this time that I start to listen to Bach. My father had a couple of LPs with the Brandenburg Concertos performed by Karl Richter and the Munich Bach Orchestra from the sixties. My relation to Bach's music is different from any other music I have encountered. I would estimate that the proportions between the music of Bach and all other music I listen to would be in the proportions of 80 to 20, in favor of Bach. Even today, decades after I was introduced to his music I listen to Glenn Gould's piano interpretations, or any of the cantatas several times per week, any given week. It feels like it communicates with me on a cellular level, at least metaphorically speaking. The contrapuntal lines comb my brain like a massage. The religious drama so effectively communicated and expressed with such bare emotions in the cantatas might be the most tangible remains of the religious content of my childhood. The begging for help by man to God, depicted as unmediated by clergy, so simply expressed and given such eloquent musical shape, is at the core of the Protestant environment in which Bach functioned. This drama is translatable to many other contexts. It contains pleading and fighting back in the same expression; and surrendering by means of honesty.

John Coltrane made an indelible impression on me during this period in my late teens. This is not unique in any sense, or unusual, but the force of the impact

of John Coltrane's playing in my young early formative years was too remarkable not to mention. There is indeed an enigmatic side of musical expression that can be summoned up by the "Coltrane quality." His ability to make every phrase relevant, every note ringing true, is confusingly romantic and unavoidably real. The guidance of his example is a blessing and a curse. It becomes, in a different way compared to the music of Bach, a matter of life and death in the music. Not music carrying the emotions of life and death, but being dead or alive.

At the same time as the music of Coltrane entered my musical life, something that could not be undone, I started to improvise freely together with a friend, in my hometown Umeå.[29] We were already playing a kind of Mahavishnu Orchestra style jazz-rock in a band, and from there the idea of a more open improvisation emerged. We listened to FMP[30] LPs recorded by the generation of musicians on the European continent who in the sixties and seventies had developed what was called free improvised music. It was music by Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, Peter Brötzmann, Barry Guy, Paul Lovens and many others. For us, these sessions also coincided with getting to know our instruments beyond producing conventional rhythm and melody. We were making sounds together

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[29] Saxophonist Mats Gustafsson

[30] Free Music Production, a German record label starting recording and releasing improvised music in 1969. FMP also curates concerts and festivals in parallel with the record production.

that did not connect to anything we had done before on the instruments. We did it with a sense of connecting to a European avant-garde, but also with putting ourselves in a musical situation where we were highly uncertain of what was good or not. It was a very private, and earnest endeavor.

I saw the Steve Lacy Sextet, including trombonist George Lewis, playing at Scharinska Villan in Umeå in the early eighties. I was impressed and excited. Everything felt right from the detail to the whole. The intensity in their playing and the simplicity in their appearance; the way they were dealing with melody, rhythm, improvisation, and density, it all exemplified to me an ideal way of music making. The way they negotiated their individual roles in relation to the music as a whole was beautiful and mature. I could identify all those parameters in their musical expression that later have been the focus of my own music making, achieved or not is another question.

Umeå had a few record stores and a thriving progressive jazz club (*Föreningen jazz i Umeå*), located in Scharinska Villan, which regularly received international artists (like the concert above). *Föreningen jazz i Umeå* also programmed bands from the experimental Swedish jazz scene which since the sixties, partly through contacts with Albert Ayler as well as Don Cherry, who both

lived in Sweden for an extended time in the sixties, was vibrant and productive.[31]

Another mind-boggling factor that fits into this weave of influential factors is the access to obscure and rare recordings of improvised music available in the local department store in Umeå. There you could find records of Eugene Chadbourne, Polly Bradfield, and Henry Kaiser alongside Mozart and Beethoven and Swedish popular dance band music. And in the only second-hand record store you could find both FMP records and the Wildflower series; recordings of the New York loft scene from the early seventies with musicians such as Anthony Braxton, Henry Threadgill, Jimmy Lyons, Marion Brown, and many others. I, and my friends, must have been some of the most unexpected consumers of those recordings, produced and printed in low numbers on the other side of the world.

This account of my musical childhood is obviously a reconstruction; it is filtered through what I today believe was important to me. It is, furthermore, not to be understood as influences only, but as results of influences. They impacted me, but they were also the result of factors that had already affected me in incalculable ways. People, society, family, all preceded these musical examples. Nevertheless, it gives an image of a web of music styles and musicians marking my musical sensibilities from early on, and maybe even reminiscently detectable

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[31] Bands such as Mount Everest, Rena Rama, Per Henrik Wallin Trio, Mwendo Dawa, Position Alpha and many others.

in my playing today.

From here on as a young adult I entered a professional world of music and musicians embedded in a surrounding society of values, potentials and constraints. It is in this phase my interviewees enter this dissertation. In the interviews we talk about experiences after the childhood period, as musicians navigating a personal career.

Historical background to structure and agency

One central part of this dissertation is to discuss the relation between the individual musician and his or her sense of being part of a larger context. That larger context can be a geographic site, a stylistic sub-genre with a global community, a sense of identity strongly linked to race, or, as most often, a combination of some of these.

Instead of a detailed account of the history of improvisation as a musical concept, I will in the first part of this chapter give a historic context to the understanding of agency and power between individual and the surrounding environment. The tension in that span is a reoccurring theme in my discussion why musicians play the way they do.

The term structure is elusive but fundamental in the social sciences. As

William H. Sewell Jr. puts it: "if social scientists find it impossible to do without the term 'structure,' we also find it nearly impossible to define it adequately."[32] As a methodological component, structure brings three problems: it tends to imply a strong causal determinism; it inhibits an understanding of the dynamics of change; and its meaning oscillates between firm and soft - a 'firm' social structure, but also the 'soft' quality of a cultural, mental, structure[33].

I want to revisit some fundamental contributions to the philosophical investigation of the relation between structure and agency. They all reflect different views of the foundations of the human nature and its role in a social reality. In a religious context, monotheistic religions, regardless whether you see them as reflecting a given truth or being socially constructed, express a tension between an almighty god and various iterations of free will. This is like an ur-cell of the drama of the individual versus an external structure. Martin Luther's polemic texts exchanged back and forth with Erasmus of Rotterdam during the time of the Reformation, where he insists on man's individual excellence having no part in his or her salvation, contrast with Erasmus's image of a divine core of agency in every human. Erasmus platonically inspired notion of the free will,

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[32] William H. Sewell Jr., "A theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation." In *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (July 1992):1-29, 1.

[33] Ibid., 2f.

which he admits to being resemblant to folly, breaks the godly predestination of events and the imperative of human sinfulness.[34] Luther, on the other hand, suggests that the consequential posture facing God's omnipotence is for each individual to give up dreams of agency and abandon into a divine structure of order and power.

Political treatises negotiate a structural make up of a society where individuals and groups claim rights to agency and influence. Rousseau's Social Contract from 1762, sets up a design to assure the people's ability to keep an abusive power structure at bay, assuring the individual's right to fair treatment by a superimposed hegemony. The whole idea with democracy, from ancient Athens to the American constitution and thereafter has been to create an ethically sound and practically sustainable model for the interplay between individual and group. Needless to say, the results have proven the task to be immensely challenging. The flaws of all presented and implemented models are to a great extent due to an unwillingness to let go of power and an inability to recognize the need, other than one's own, for influence in an integrated society.

Living together in an organized way can provide safety and opportunity but has also other consequences on an individual level. Compromise and

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[34] Desiderius Erasmus, and Robert M. Adams, T*he Praise of Folly and Other Writings,* (New York: Norton, 1989).

negotiation, the give and take of a community, means that you have to see farther than your own individual immediate best. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* from 1930 Freud describes how the rules of a culture exist, as an evolutionary progressive instrument, to assure the continuation and flourishing of a society.[35] But the rules and norms have a prize on an individual level, where we are supposed to restrain ourselves for the good of our culture as a collective. Those restrictions concern most obviously our sexual and violent behavior.

The reductive nature of all political ideologies boil down complex contexts to a limited number of mechanisms. Winners and losers, abused and abusers, are defined in a clear-cut manner. Structuralist understandings of culture and society, although often more nuanced, are reductionist in a similar way. They connect with natural sciences in that they formulate causal relations between actors in a definable environment. Structuralism in a broad sense is first of all a method. It provides answers in accordance with a presupposed structural character. If the structures are articulated correctly one can predict the individual behaviors. Structuralist theories of the 1950s and 60s tended to create an over-reliance on determinate mechanisms where very little can fall between the cracks. Individual deviations became anomalies indicating that the formulation of the structures

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[35] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere, Hogarth Press, and Sigmund Freud Collection (Library of Congress), (London,: L. & Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth press etc., 1930).

need to be tweaked in the same way the medieval models in astronomy, describing the observed movements in the sky, were tweaked in absurdum until, finally, the heliocentric explanation replaced the geocentric.

The deterministic straightjacket suggested by structuralist theory was loosened by Pierre Bourdieu's added focus on strategic behavior. Coming from a structuralist point of view, but aiming to nuance the element of causality, he proposed an augmented level of individual agency. "I can say that all of my thinking started from this point: how can behavior be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?"[36] The idea of *strategy* as a tool for an individual to navigate the rule system of a society or a community certainly adds a level of individual initiative but will immediately, especially in contact with performative models of human identity, run into the challenge of defining the level of volition a strategy affords. For Bourdieu, that distinction was more an issue of positioning himself between Claude Levi-Strauss, or even more so, Althussser's deindividualized structuralism and the extreme form of individual agency articulated in Jean Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy.

With *habitus* and *field*, Bourdieu established a scene where every participant is given considerable freedom to act within the constraints of that scene. An

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[36] Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays toward a Reflexive Sociology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1990), 65.

individual needs to develop a sensibility, a "feel for the game"[37] within a "space of possibles."[38] to navigate in order to attain his or her goals. Bourdieu's notion of field is helpful in the ambition to define a musical style or a genre. The intention to understand a musical style from a societal vantage point removes focus from directly musical parameters to other contextual circumstances, which makes the inclusion of stylistic clashes seem less paradoxical.

Marta Blažanović borrows from Bourdieu's thinking in her description of the Echtzeitmusik scene in Berlin. With Bourdieu, she realizes that distinct musical borders are not crucial for the discourse.[39] She quotes Bourdieu saying, "There is no other criterion of membership of a field than the objective fact of producing effects within it."[40] The larger context ties the music together, not necessarily specific musical scales or certain approaches to harmony. As presented in the earlier methodological discussion, my use of *family resemblance* is a similar attempt to reach the unifying components of the improvised music my interviewees are practicing.

All the examples above, concerning the relations individual and God,

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[37]Pierre, Bourdieu, *Outline of Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1986), 66.

[38] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 64.

[39] Marta Blažanović, "Echtzeitmusik. The social and discursive contexts of a contemporary music scene," PhD diss., Humboldt University of Berlin, 2014. 12.

[40] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 42.

individual and political rights, academic theories about our place as individuals in a collective power structure, musicians in a scene, have a common denominator in the reference to agency. Agency is the pinnacle in the discussion of the interdependence between individual and structure. Who does what, and what influences who? Agency is not necessarily contradicted by the influence of external factors. A focus on an individual musician's practice is not made obsolete by the awareness of a flurry of influential factors. One can argue that a view of a certain individual closure is necessary to better understand the effects of surrounding influences. David Borgo describes a constructive relation between closure and openness where the distinction of an individual improviser is necessary to understand the dynamics of a complex 'outside' world. "[I]t is only through the interrelated operational closures of individual musicians' bodies and psyches, the 'staging' of the performance event, and the self-organization of the artwork itself that improvisation is able to and productively engage with the hypercomplexity of the world."[41] Borgo uses the notion of interagency to describe the fluidity of agency where decisions, actions, and influences are distributed in interactions between both human and non-human actors.

In my interviews with musicians in this dissertation the use and

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[41] David Borgo, "Openness from Closure: The Puzzle of Interagency in Improvised Music and a Neocybernetic Solution." In *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation Sound and Subjectivity,* ed. Ellen Waterman, and Gillian Siddall (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 115.

understanding of agency is closely linked to a seemingly natural sense of identity. Identity as a phenomenon is, like agency, positioned in the intersection of communality and individuality. Its roots can be traced either into a collective experience, or to an individual experience of oneself. An identity can be perceived isolated in the same way a body is isolated. We evolve among people, but this gait is for better or worse only mine; my fatigue can seem unoriginal, but it's fully my fatigue. Regardless of commonalities and structures; idiosyncrasies come with a sense of ownership similar to "…how can I deny that these hands and this body are mine,…?" already rhetorically asked by Descartes, in his attempt to counterbalance the intellectual skepticism of the time.[42] Suzanne Thorpe's work with site-specific performances, as we will see later in this chapter, distributes agency between a number of agents including audience and nature, and stretches the notion of composer far beyond a conventional understanding of the role.

In the mutual exchange of experiences in the interviews, I made a point of departure to discuss how a multitude of influences and factors have affected the way improvising musicians play, and whether it is possible to say what those factors and influences are. Some circumstances are harder to identify than others; certain factors are in the foreground, others have had more of a tacit presence. It

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[42] René Descartes, "Meditations on first philosophy,"(first published 1641), from *Discourse on the method ; and, Meditations on first philosophy,* ed. David Weissman, Trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 59.

became discussions of a personal character where the experiences of each individual make up the data. The interviews evolved to pave the way for an interpretation of that web of influences, staying close to each individual artist's experience of him or herself as an actor, or agent, with subjective qualities. A picture emerges where details stick to sites, and circumstances point to other factors that later become instrumental. It all summons up in what Clifford Geertz[43] called a *thick description,*[44] which through its more open-ended interpretive component deviates from a structuralist approach. Geertz says, we are all "suspended in webs of significance, [we ourselves have] spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."[45]

Jazz and improvisation studies - background

Throughout this dissertation I am premising that circumstances such as socioeconomic factors, gender, race, attitude to history, and personal experiences of identity and self, are directly instrumental in shaping the way an improvising musician improvises music. These embedded factors are part of the answer to the

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[43] Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays*. (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

[44] Geertz borrowed the term thick description form British philosopher and linguist Gibert Ryle.

[45] Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays*, 5.

question - why do you play the way you do? The connection between musical

aesthetics and outside factors is commonly integrated in jazz- and improvisation

studies, particularly where one tries to find a connection between a radical musical

quality and a radical political attitude in a society where power dynamics and a

musical identity are negotiated simultaneously. For some recent examples of this

body of work, see the various contributions in *People Get Ready: The Future of Jazz is*

Now,[46], *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics*[47], and *Musical Improvisation: Art,*

Education and Society.[48]

In his work *New Musical Figurations*, Ronald Radano describes the aesthetics

of musician and composer Anthony Braxton in relation to biographic, political and

societal factors.[49] Radano follows, through a series of interviews and informal

conversations made over a ten-year period, Braxton's early years all the way to his

later work. He manages to connect Braxton's stylistic idiosyncrasies, in a detailed

account of his life, to the environments where he functioned. Braxton might seem

paradoxical in his synthesis of African-American and European aesthetics, his use

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[46] *People Get Ready: The Future of Jazz Is Now! (Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice),* ed. Ajay Heble and Rob Wallace (Duke University Press, 2013).

[47] *Improvisation and social aesthetics,* ed. Georgina Born, Eric Lewis, and Will Straw (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[48] *Musical improvisation: art, education, and society*, ed. Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[49] Radano, Ronald M, *New musical figurations: Anthony Braxton's cultural critique* (Chicago u.a: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993).

of African esoteric terminology, his scientific systematic compositional approaches, his experience of African-American separatism in the mid-sixties in South Side Chicago, and his ultimately integrationist musical practice. But a sense of paradox becomes less relevant considering the complexities of a life trajectory. A closer look at Braxton's productive life, when he, "moving dexterously in and out of disparate settings, spun a web of highly original, experimental approaches,"[50] challenges expectations of a predictable coherency. The method of anchoring multi-directional aesthetics in the paradoxical reality of a person's life, makes them less disparate and more graspable. Radano weaves a biographical, sociological, and historical narrative in his elaborate way of answering what in my simplified version would be the question "why does Braxton play the way he does?"

A part of Braxton's global approach to both music and language has been the attempt to take charge of its transformative effects. Understanding that words are loaded with meaning and context, he invented his own terminology. The term restructuralist refers to theories of structuralism but adding a performative component. *Creative music*, which he sometimes describes as "good music," is restructuralist in that it confuses the patterns of racial identity in music and in society. The restructuralist musicians according to Braxton are the true innovators.

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[50] Ibid., 188

Ornette Coleman, Arnold Schoenberg, Paul Desmond, Chuck Berry, Warne Marsh, to name a few important to Braxton, were all re-articulating certain aspects of music. They restructured the dominant structures of their fields. In musical terms it meant for Ornette Coleman his way of freeing melodic lines from underlying harmony, for Schoenberg to formulate new compositional methods independent of tonal harmonies, for Chuck Berry his sensibility of white teen culture and the impact he had on that, for Desmond and Marsh their phrasing and timbral qualities. It stands for a belief that every profound development is also transgressive to some extent. For Braxton to nourish his own restructuralist qualities it was paramount to develop a personal voice in music, being true to himself and by that overriding and changing the patterns of expectations outside of himself.[51]

George E. Lewis describes in *A Power Stronger Than Itself* the intentional predilection in AACM for the term *creative music,* instead of the pigeonholing term jazz. "Being a 'creative musician' in this sense is an act of perpetual becoming, an assertion of mobility that can take one anywhere at all, beyond the purview of genre or method."[52] This transformative idea has similarities to Tracy McMullen's

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[51] Ibid.,118

[52] George Lewis, *A power stronger than itself: the AACM and American experimental music* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008), xl.

endeavor to connect Judith Butler's theories of performativity with improvised music in that it emphasizes intentionality and individual agency in a collective and structural context.

The identifiable sound of a musician is both part of an old narrative in the history of jazz and a subject for recent research in jazz- and improvised studies. The notion of *sonic personalities* in improvisation is a reoccurring theme in Lewis's writing. Sonic personalities signifies the inseparable character of sound and musician, creating a link between music, identity, history and memory. It contrasts the notion of a musician being a medium for an idea that only passes through, self-effacingly transmitted by the musician in the exchange between a composer and an audience. Lewis distinguishes between two different "systems of improvisative musicality" exemplified by the terms afrological and eurological.[53] These terms do not signal a geographic site for where music is produced, but rather points to a number of differences in attitudes and values that Lewis refers to African and European music cultures respectively. Closely related to these two terms is the notion of *social location,* which, again, in concordance with afrological and eurological do not correspond to where or by whom the music is created, but points at the cultural origins of a particular improvisative musicality. This

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[53] Lewis, George E. "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives." In *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music,* edited by Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, 272-284. The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc. New York, 2004.

definition helps to open up the discussion of personal style which otherwise in the light of appropriation risks of getting locked in by essentialist claims. In *Gittin' to Know Y'all*[54] and in *A Power Stranger than Itself*,[55] Lewis means that the strong emphasis on an individual voice and a personal narrative connects the musicians of the early European free improvised music from the sixties and seventies with an African-American tradition.

Social location can also relate to the tenaciousness of the racial implications of cultural labels. Lewis uses the term in that respect when he talks about the black musicians in AACM. Regardless of their innovative experimental activities, their social location would make it almost impossible for them to be considered anything else than jazz musicians. "Clearly, for these black working-class musicians, sound and musical method were not enough to accomplish that feat; in fact, the socially determined frame of jazz definition continually transformed its topography to accommodate virtually any direction these and other musicians might take."[56] A situation where a cluster of sticky characteristics forms a Geertzian thick description, where a shift in musical practice, however radical,

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[54] George Lewis, "*Gittin' to Know Y'all*: Improvised Music, Interculturalism and the Racial Imagination." *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation* [Online], 1.1 (2004): n. pag. Accessed 18 Sep. 2017.

[55] George Lewis, *A power stronger than itself*, 250.

[56] Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself*, xliv

would certainly not be enough for a white musical world to perceive them as other than first and foremost jazz musicians.

Ingrid Monson describes *aesthetic agency* as a term enabling us to talk about the process of hybridization musicians inevitably are facing. Aesthetic agency serves as a positive counterweight in a discussion that otherwise would be strongly inhibited by notions of eclecticism or appropriation. As in so many other discussions around identity in society today there might be a need for elevating self-identification as a meaningful tool in a hybrid reality where authenticity is redefined. But "the hybridity and intermixture that can be heard [in the music] is not accompanied by a similar intermixture in where people live, where people go to school, where they worship, where they work, and whom they marry."[57] The creativity and playfulness in a process of musical hybridization is not matched by a similar swiftness of structural changes in society at large. In the world of jazz, it cannot come as a surprise to anyone that an African-American jazz musician historically might have hesitated to express generosity to a white musician, seeming less inviting musically, when so many of the privileges in other areas were not granted him or her.

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[57] Monson, "Jazz as Political and Musical Practice," 32.

Solo

Being alone on stage is just one way of looking at it. The idea of a solo performance is from an ontological perspective rather intricate. Beyond one person being on stage, our understanding of what is going on needs to be projected through a number of lenses. In the same way as we individually are inextricably part of a history, a cultural context, a spacial presence shared with an audience, a result of an interpersonal and intrapersonal process, so is the music that is being generated. How can I ontologically understand the piece? What is it a product of? Is *solo* a misguiding label?

One can argue, as a response to the notion that only a critique of structural relations gives us a meaningful understanding of the whole, that the individual expression is the big picture. Structure and individual are complementary phenomena with a great deal of redundancy. In conversations about individual trajectories, the surrounding formative factors are exposed. For example, in the following chapter, Andrea Neumann describes the tension in the room during the early Echtzeitmusik concerts in Berlin.[58] It is a description that reflects personal artistic considerations in relation to her particular musical practice, but it can also be read as an account of an audience culture in Berlin in the nineties in the context

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[58] See page 142.

of the strong tradition of German free improvised music, having emerged in the late sixties, partially as a reaction to post war frustration, in mutual exchange with the free jazz movement in the US etc. Simultaneously, we have to recognize that each response to the large context is individually different. It really is Joe McPhee we are hearing when we listen to his music. It is his experiences, his digestion of those ideas, his reflections, his short-comings, his path forward. The stage for him has been the United States during a politically volatile period with racial discrimination, and extensive global musical exchange, but ultimately it is his diaphragm contracting when he is blowing his horn, his facial muscles manipulating the mouth piece. With a Heraclidean view, we realize that no one processes similar experiences in the same way, and every response is always new. Although we sometimes wish for less stylistic imitations when we hear musicians play, when we get closer we realize that the variation is endless, literally. How could it be in any other way? The big picture is perpetually individualized.

All the musicians I interviewed are active in various formats of ensembles. Large ensembles of a dozen improvisers to smaller settings such as quartets, trios and duos. However, in the conversation I chose to give a particular focus to their experiences and reflections around their solo work. In their solo work they have condensed and summarized a number of larger contexts boiled down to the

musician, the instrument, the audience, and the musical ideas.

The following pages start with a reasoning around solo performances that I articulated in my master's thesis.[59] In that work I focused on my own solo music. Here, I will develop a background leading into the succeeding account of the interviewees' solo practices.

Rebecca Schneider writes in her essay *Solo Solo Solo* how difficult she found it to be to approach the topic of solo since so much of the contemporary academic research has de-throned claims of individual authorship and singularity.[60] So much has been gained in the process of critically studying the effects of structural characteristics, on art and elsewhere, that a study of an individual solo would seem like a return to an old illusory conception of the unique and solitary artist. Insisting on her solo discourse, however, she takes on the challenge of nuancing the notion of a solo and articulates an expansive interpretation of being connected in a multi-facetted way, in terms of collectivity and dialogue:

> "Read as involved in call and response, or read as imbricated in collective and choral actions, 'solo' in some senses casts itself into the future as *becoming ensemble* even as it re-cites itself backward, answering a thousand calls. [. . .] Any action, here, is already a

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[59] Kjell Nordeson, "Improvisation and Identity," (master's thesis, University of California San Diego, 2013).

[60] Rebecca Schneider. "Solo Solo Solo," In *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, edited by Gavin Butt (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 25.

palimpsest of other actions, a motion set in motion by precedent motion or anticipating future motion or lateral motion.[61]"

A solo becomes in other words connected backwards and forwards in time, as well as engaging in dialogue laterally with an audience and other artists. Schneider puts the focus on relationality and reflexivity, emphasizing the structure of connectedness, making the solo a resonator of past events, and itself resonating in future works. A solo is by this understood as an integrated part of a larger whole and distinguished from the modernist (or romantic?) discourse claiming all agency within the introverted closed system of the individual artist. Paradoxically, regulations within a system can lead to increased freedom for the individual, in the same way as unregulated systems can fail to provide equal opportunities to its individuals. A social structure never emerges in a balanced symmetric way. It always develops inherent biases and asymmetric power structures, leading to inhibited freedom for a number of individuals or subgroups within the structure.[62]

Gabriel Solis suggests that Mikhail Bakhtin's critical expansion of influence and authenticity in language, summoned up in his term *dialogic*, can be expanded

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[61] Ibid., 40f.

[62] This reflects also the differences between social liberalism and neoliberalism, where the former claims the necessity of a foundation with crucial regulations in order to guarantee a maximum freedom for the individual. Access to healthcare, education, and efforts to prohibit structural discrimination are seen as a fundamental basic circumstance, and should, according to social liberals, stand outside the dynamics created by individuals, employing their freedom.

even further to signify a character of intertextuality over time and space also in music. Language "comes into our possession already 'populated' with the thoughts and intentions of others; it comes to us as 'fully historical.'"[63] Bakhtin's terms heteroglossia and dialogic are similar to the postmodern meaning of intertextuality. They point at the ways our expression always is a part of a previous context. "For any consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a heteroglot conception of the world."[64] This serves as another corrective to claims of uniqueness often included in the notion of authenticity (and to the notion of the genius artist). But, as Solis says," although words and ideas come to us already populated, we can and do populate them with our own intentions all the time - we are not necessarily hamstrung by their history."[65] Bakhtin's inventive formulation of the dialogic resonates with later theories of intertextuality, especially Derrida's use of re-iteration as an ontological

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[63] Gabriel Solis, "Genius, Improvisation, and the Narrative of Jazz." In *Musical improvisation: art, education, and society*, ed. Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 95.

[64] M. M. Bakhtin,"Discourse in the Novel," In *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press, Austin and London, 1981), 293.

[65] Solis, "Genius, Improvisation, and the Narrative of Jazz," 97.

principal which outside of, anything would be unintelligible.[66]

Richard Scott, connects with Schneider, and with Bakhtin, in his text *Free Improvisation and Nothing.* He paints a picture resonating with the perpetual dialogics of Bakhtin's, applied to improvised music: "The performance does not begin as he walks onto the stage, and it hardly stops when he leaves – it has always already begun; an improvisation is always in the middle, a fragment of a much greater, indeed ceaseless, body of material with which the improviser connects and by which he allows his body to be affected."[67]

Even an empty stage is already a play of forces[68]

A solo improvisation is a moment where preparation, experience, and musical material meet the demands of an empty void not yet filled with music. A musician's awareness of his or her place in a stylistic lineage, or of being a part of a scene, is directly linked to a sense of self-consciousness that often is described as antithetical to improvisatory creativity. Joe McPhee states:

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[66] Derrida couples re-iteration with alterity as a way to save the possibility for innovation, or at least for pseudo-innovation. In a Heraclidean reality, there is no reason to worry about the lack of change in repetition. Nothing can possibly repeat itself exactly. Transformation is ubiquitous, and, drastically put, unavoidable. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

[67] Richard Scott, "Free Improvisation and Nothing: From the Tactics to Escape to a Bastard Science," in *ACT - Zeitschrift Für Musik & Performance*, Nr. 5 (2014): 9

[68] Ibid., 9.

When I play solo I quite often start as a though it was a complete blank canvas. I just jump off of a bridge and then see what happens. If I'm going to crash or if I'm going to float up or whatever's going to happen and then I can finally just release my ego and let things be the way they are without trying to make anything other than what they are. Whatever comes out comes out and, then I just let it go like that.

I suppose at some point I'm going to do something that's absolutely horrible like go on stage and not have any idea whatsoever. I think it's happened and when it happens like that, I just say I'm sorry I can't go on, I have to stop because I don't want to cheat the people, but it hasn't happened too much. [laugh]

This might seem like a romantic commentary reflective of an artist's self-image of being free from the shackles of expectations and traditions, but it is a very common description and it springs out of a genuine consideration of the obstacle to improvisation that a self-conscious calculating mindset really is. It is like many other higher functions of mind-body integration - if you are thinking too much, you will crash.

Suzanne Thorpe refers to the mechanism of a judgmental self-consciousness as a real and undesired factor in the improvising moment. Previously in our conversation we had been discussing flow and fluidity in improvisation and how "self-consciousness is the thing that gets in my way of that state [flow]." She continues, in connection to the piece of music she had recorded as a part of this

research project:

> **Suzanne:** I sent you my first try, my first take because in the consecutive ones I caught myself editing and I was like, 'No, no, no, no.' [laughs], 'I could do better. I could do this, I could do that,' and 'No.' The editing just started to stop my playing and I don't think that's what you were trying to get at and also that felt disingenuous to the project. Part of my development as an improviser is to let go of that control, that control impulse, and to let go of that self-consciousness, which for me can be a challenge. Which may be one of the reasons why the duo with Bonnie has developed because I can function more on instinct with her.[69] That's something special, when you learn somebody's vocabulary, that enables a free flow. Not that there isn't a lot of instinct in a first meeting but there's a lot of processing happening at the same time.

Thorpe does not describe the improvising activity as antithetical to real-time editing or real-time composing. She rather points to the pivotal moment when the internal critical voice reaches a level where its contribution becomes counterproductive.

> **Suzanne:** I think that there is a point, I have experienced that point, where I feel like self-consciousness just stops me. There's a threshold. Sometimes I don't have the same level of self-consciousness and I'm able to really be present and I'm editing but I'm not so aware of that function. That function isn't the primary function that's in my brain. I think that there are times when I'm playing, when I'm highly aware of that function happening and in which case, it becomes a hindrance, that hyper awareness.

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[69] Bonnie Jones is an improvising musician, poet, and performer working with electronic sounds and text.

This turns McPhee's "blank canvas" into a practical necessity, not a romantic illusory denial of history. It is the moment when a practice mitigates an internalized regulative aesthetic gravity with all its potential political, personal, and historical roots. Besides the demand for a creative delivery within a limited timeframe, there is also the need for a tamed self-critique in order to produce at all. This could sometimes be mistaken for a denial of historic influences.

> **Kjell:** Do you go into an improvised solo anticipating a certain arc of the piece ahead of you, preparing from a composer's point of view?
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> **Suzanne:** I think I do that naturally no matter what, and that carries over into my music. But I've found that the best "preparation" if there is to be any, is the experience of doing. It's not so much, "I'm going to play this sound and then I'm going to play this sound." [. . .], but rather the knowledge that I can start out with an intention, but if I uncover another path, it's great to take that too. I don't see a difference between a composer's point of view and an improvisors'. I think the flow of the moment is simply a lack of editing time. For me, what gets in the way of that is the self-consciousness issue that we're just discussing. When the editing becomes primary as opposed to running in the background.

Andrea Neumann has experimented with various degrees of structures in her improvisations. Dissatisfied with an openness in the music making that is too uncritical, she tried to understand what in her idiosyncrasies she wanted to give more space to, adding a compositional structure to her solo sets.

> **Andrea:** The last maybe five six years I have developed solo sets that

are completely constructed and not improvised. [. . .] I have improvised music alone or with other people and often with a feeling that something very important is missing. It's never really satisfying, completely satisfying. There are always things that I like and that I don't like and that's why I have been experimenting with preparing my sets.

Equally important to the sound qualities and the treatment of musical parameters is the feeling of not being coerced into a certain use of those. She has developed a personal style in her musical practice, and she wants to maintain the power over when and how that style is expressed. She describes it as if her sense of timing, character, dynamics can be compromised by an external demand, even if it is her own premeditated demand.

Andrea: I have tried to find out what the main parameters in my music are, and what I could call them, and give a score to another performer which would be based on my way of improvising. Then, if I took the score myself and wanted to interpret my own way of improvising, it just failed completely because I just did not feel free. It was not interesting for me to play that. That's how I found out that, although it always sounds a little bit similar because I have this style, I have sounds, I have aesthetic parameters, improvising means to be aware of them but not necessarily to follow them. I need this kind of openness, at least the feeling of openness— Everything is possible. But when you put this 'everything is possible' into a score, it doesn't feel right to me.

In a similar way to Thorpe, Axel Dörner de-emphasizes the difference between improvisation and composition. The improviser is a composer adapting

his or her ideas and performance to the immediate surrounding. The music is subject to a polyphony of influences, both previous and momentary. Even if the term site-specific normally is used for installation pieces, it is a good descriptor of improvised music. It suggests the solo improvisation as being the "big picture," hinted at earlier in this chapter, where history, site, audience, instrument, and a multitude of sociopolitical factors coinciding in that moment, boil down to sound.

> **Axel:** I prepare my solo improvisations in different ways depending on my personal situation and the circumstances of the time and place where the solo improvisation will happen. Sometimes I have fixed decisions beforehand, sometimes it's completely open to the situation of the moment. I look at what is called improvisation as a method of composition. In this sense it's always a composition, only the methods of composing are different. For example, it can be written on a piece of paper or it can be invented in the moment of performance on stage.

And accordingly:

> It is very difficult to measure the degree of control I have of my improvisations. Mostly I try to realize music I want to hear. Sometimes mistakes in this process are leading to surprising unexpected new musical results. For this reason it's important to be aware of my own expectations and stay open for unexpected musical situations.

This Heraclidean model of music making where the musical influence of many factors remains undefined, where lack of control is mocking anticipation, with one foot in a deterministic view of meaning, but ultimately escaping a model for determination, might seem unhelpful in the pursuit of an answer to "why do

you play the way you do?" But without this elusive complexity there would not be much need for music, composed or improvised. A crucial part in why music is meaningful lies in the quality of music being practically, and philosophically, unrepeatable. This we have for free. There is always a reason to play again.

In the part of the interviews that concerned the musicians' sense of tradition, their view of themselves in a greater aesthetic and social context, I tried to get closer to the elusive core of their aesthetic choices. My intention approaching this question, as the first part of this chapter indicates, was to ask them to point out external influences relevant to them and from there walk through their individual artistic trajectories.

Andrea Neumann, even before I had asked her the first question, gave me her picture of the strong sense of identification with his or her sounds an improvising musician can have, and how the link between sound and person has to be handled sensitively, acknowledging a sense of ownership.

> **Andrea:** Your musical identity as an improvising musician is something that you build up during a long time. It is in a way a vocabulary and musical techniques that you have researched and developed, sometimes for years. And when you improvise, you play with them, and I think this becomes very clear when, for example, a composer wants to work with an improviser and asks: 'What do you have? Can I use your sounds?' I know a lot of musicians who would say, 'No, I don't want to give you my sounds. This is me, and my life, and all my socialization of my music is in my sounds. I can't give it to you like that.' And when as a musician you go somewhere, you

perform your own work, because the improvisers are their own work.

Kjell: I think that we accumulate with time, with years, our own way of playing, including the sounds. But also, I think just how we phrase, and our temper or personality in the music. It's not just now, it's a result of decades.

Andrea: Yes. Probably even everything that I listened to in all my life, or every person I played with, shaped my way of playing. So, it's a very personal thing that comes out at the end, because it's not possible to separate your musical output from the rest of your life.

Although Neumann refers to a strong generative quality emerging from her personal and musical past, she describes no greater sense of loyalty or conscious affiliation with previous music styles. Her performance experience is rooted in the immediate environment and the exchange with her fellow musicians in a sense of discovery and invention. In the mid-nineties, when Neumann established herself on the improvised music scene in Berlin, the scene was in a state of transformation from an earlier period dominated by the free improvised music around the FMP record label and the annual Total Music Meeting festival which had produced and presented improvised music since the late sixties. This searching phase of the scene, the Berlin improvised music scene, which evolved into the Echtzeitmusik scene, coincided with her discovery and invention of her own instrument and playing style. The Echtzeitmusik, which Marta Blažanović describes as "quiet,

noise-like, weird, uneasy, unbearable, intriguing, demanding, ephemeral,"[70] was

on a social level characterized by strong sense of co-operation and co-creation,

with many groups having members overlapping with other groups within the

scene, creating an aesthetic and social cross-pollination. Blažanović distinguishes

the meaning of the term *scene* from community or collective as "it offers to the

musicians a sense of belonging, at the same time giving them enough space not to

feel 'fenced in'"[71] Neumann describes an intensity on a horizontal local level being

the creative circumstance helping the Echtzeitmusik scene develop its aesthetic

idiosyncrasies.

> **Kjell:** What can you say about the traditions, lineages and individuality and community manifested in your own solo playing. I think sometimes the one question that I want to ask, even if it might be impossible to answer is, "Why do you play the way you do?"
>
> **Andrea:** That's a very big question.
>
> **Kjell:** Yes. Big and simple at the same time. But how can one approach that question?
>
> **Andrea:** At the time when I started, I wasn't so aware of all those people who also worked with sounds and noises and not with pitches. I think I was mostly influenced by the musicians I played with. For example, as a piano player, when I started to improvise on keys I played with people who would do circular breathing on their instruments, but I couldn't do that on the keys. I was looking for

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[70] Marta Blažanović, "Echtzeitmusik. The social and discursive contexts of a contemporary music scene" (PhD diss., Humboldt University of Berlin, 2014), 1.

[71] Ibid., 11.

sounds that would match that, so I went into the strings, because when playing inside the piano I could find techniques to have a long-standing or never-ending sound. Or, when at the end of the 90s people started to play much more with computers. Electronic music had quite an impact on my playing. For example, machine like sounds that would start and stop abruptly, not like a person who would warm up and get louder and get quieter again. This is all things that happened at that time. I wasn't very aware of the traditions twenty, thirty, or fifty years ago. It was more like what is actually happening now, and I was curious about some things and I wanted to respond to something that I heard. So, I developed my instrument in this direction.

Neumann calls the instrument she developed during this time the *inside piano*, which is a piano frame extracted from its wooden case, placed horizontally on a table, prepared with objects and processed through attached microphones at various positions.[72]

Kjell: Are you from Berlin originally?

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[72] Neumann describes her instrument in great detail in the text *Playing Inside Piano* : "It is a piano frame constructed by Bernd Bittmann, stripped of its wooden housing, mechanical action, and keys, and amplified with the help of a mixer and several pickups. The strings are prepared with bamboo sticks, forks, screws, and metal clips and strips, among other things. They are played with objects such as mallets, snare brushes, metal pipes, propellers, steel wool, and piano hammers. The pickups, attached to the instrument in various positions, serve, due to their differing characteristics with regard to sensitivity, not only to amplify the otherwise very quiet instrument, but also to broaden its spectrum of potential sounds. A metal surface (also miked) that is fixed to the instrument as a repository for preparations is played with objects similar to the ones used for playing the strings, though it results in sounds that seem more electronic. The mixer, an element made necessary by the use of the many pickups, serves, with different filter settings, to differentiate the amplified sounds from one another. In addition, through internal feedback, the mixer constitutes its own sound source capable of interfering with the strings' acoustic sounds." Andrea Neumann, "Playing Inside Piano," in *Echtzeitmusik Berlin: Selbstbestimmung einer Szene,* ed. Burkhard Beins, Christian Kesten, Gisela Nauck, Andrea Neumann, 202-213. (Hofheim: Wolke, 2011), 203 ff.

Andrea: I grew up in Hamburg. I moved to Berlin in '88.

Kjell: Had you been performing in Hamburg before you came to Berlin?

Andrea: No, I came to study classical piano music in Berlin. Then, at the end of the studies, I discovered more free playing.

Kjell: Would you say your playing is related to that site, to Berlin?

Andrea: Definitely. Completely. I think there were a bunch of people who were really searching for something that they didn't know and hadn't found yet. There were all these places where we could be for free, you didn't have to pay rent. There were a lot of squats where sessions happened. It was quite a big exchange of ideas, and a lot of explorations.

Kjell: And not so much relating to what had happened before musically, but looking at where you were at that moment?

Andrea: Yes. It might have been naive because things are never new, and you always have traces of things that happened before that might be similar. But at that time, I was very much about doing something that I didn't know of from before, and had never heard [chuckles].

Moving to Berlin enabled Neumann to immerse in an emerging music scene at a nascent moment when the musicians had a strong sense of building something new. She describes an environment very much focused on itself in a creative but local process, which only later showed to become immensely influential from an international perspective.

Suzanne Thorpe has moved between genres in her career. From an outside perspective, it looks like there are at least two contrasting periods. The first one

being in the rock band Mercury Rev, the second period being her site-specific

installations and playing flute and live-electronics in various improvisatory

settings.

> **Suzanne:** I think that I belong nowhere and everywhere at the same
> time. I was classically trained as a kid, grew up on punk rock and
> rock 'n roll and all that kind of stuff. I'm just as likely to play a 1-4-5
> chord progression as I am to play extended techniques. So in that
> sense, in that ability, and agility, how I'm thinking about musicking,
> is very broad.

> I think that I belong to the lineage of contemporary improvisers that
> recognize a broad spectrum of influences. We've developed our own
> languages that retain ties to those histories. There's a tradition of
> that in creative improvisation that I identify a lot with.

To the extent there is a need for definitions in music making beyond genres,

the term *family resemblance*, described in the methodological discussion, signifies

an affinity and potential for common music making on equal terms. The term is

not indicating absolute factors but signals a degree of workability based on

musical improvisation and a non-hierarchical social structure where everyone is

expected to bring *their* music to the mix.

> **Kjell:** The identity of improvised or experimental music can be
> experienced as being quite strong, even though stylistically it might
> be going in many different directions. There's still something that
> feels shared.

> **Suzanne:** Yes, I would agree. I think it's more of a principle as
> opposed to how we actuate that principle. Interesting to think of it in

those terms like a principle of-- I don't know what it would be —
expected variance?

This elusive *principle* Thorpe is suggesting resonates with how Andrea
Neumann describes the background to the development of the Echtzeitmusik
scene. And this, on another note, might be what Derek Bailey's often criticized
notion of non-idiomatic improvisation actually refers to:

> It was all the more cheering to uncover a form of music in which
> one's own vision-that is to say, one's own hearing-accounts for the
> foundation, the source, the impulse for everything that makes a
> sound; a music that makes it possible, under the name 'improvised'
> music, to create the kinds of sounds one wishes, under one
> condition: the decisions made must be responsible to one's own feel
> for aesthetics.[73]

The feeling of being consistent in one's own music making is not
necessarily paired by a consistency in the aesthetic or social aspects of the music.
This points toward an internal and external reality as a musician where an internal
musicality evolves through external manifestations which can be contrasting and
even contradictory but which contribute to a gradually evolving consistent
musical identity.

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[73] Neumann, "Playing Inside Piano," *Echtzeitmusik Berlin: Selbstbestimmung einer Szene,* ed.
Burkhard Beins, Christian Kesten, Gisela Nauck, Andrea Neumann (Hofheim: Wolke, 2011), 203

Kjell: You described starting your musical trajectory with the classical flute and then punk rock and all that, realizing it's so hard to hold all that together but it is you somehow. I guess that in certain periods there is a sense of belonging that is clearer or less problematized. After your time with Mercury Rev, when you no longer were a member of that band, your work must have gone through a change aesthetically, or socially, or in sense of tradition.

Suzanne: Everything, all that, all that changed. But there is a through-line of experimentation that is at the heart of every project I've engaged. Historically that's the connecting thread for me.

Kjell: Even if you contain everything, many styles and traditions, in certain periods one of them can dominate over others in your actual musical activities.

Suzanne: Yes, absolutely.

Kjell: I see that for myself too. A sense of belonging can be hard to define. It can cause confusion, but it could also create clarity. And all this builds your musical identity as an improviser. Although there might be more reason to be confused since more things have happened, making experience more complex and maybe paradoxical, I think I'm a better improviser now than I was twenty years ago.

Suzanne: I'd say I'm a better improviser now. I know that there have been times in my life when I've been more agile in terms of technique. But my focus and attention and how I approach an improvisation is stronger. That attention, developing it in a different form and then coming back to improvising, it's interesting to watch that change and modulate, how I approach my improvising, how my different discipline of study influence each other. It's another aspect of it that's interesting to see how it develops.

In Ingrid Monson's terminology of *discourse, structure*, and *practice* there is a continuum regarding the level of fluidity in those terms. The pragmatic and

practical aspect of *structure* with its function of being instrumental in political decisions promotes by necessity a rigid view on music and art in general. In order to be supportive or regulative the structure of political and governmental involvement leans on clearly defined actors - jazz clubs, concert halls, chamber music, contemporary art galleries, early music ensembles, are all categories with a certain clarity enabling their representatives to be part of a societal and political structure where money and other resources are distributed with a level of accountability and overview. The *practice* is at the other end of the spectrum where artists position themselves and their work according to subjective and idiosyncratic circumstances in a fluid reality much more resisting clear definitions than what is needed within the *structure* perspective. The relation between practice and structure is of both dependence and a sense of constraint. To label yourself as an artist makes you visible in the established structures; to resist labels enables you to stay aesthetically fluid and evolving, but risks making you invisible. *Discourse* is where this tension is negotiated. The unwillingness to being labeled, or named, has a long history in African-American music tradition. Duke Ellington described his music as *beyond category* preferring the much wider label of *American Music*, or *Negro folk music*, before the term jazz. The specific racially pejorative connotations to jazz as a label, relevant to the Ellington's, Mingus's and many

others dismissal of the term, is not paralleled in Berlin in the nineties, but the reluctance to be labeled is present also there. Axel Dörner describes the unwillingness to be defined motivated by a need to maintain artistic flexibility.

> **Axel:** There is some kind of a musical evolution existing among human beings, I look at myself being a part of it. It is something which is not static, I see it rather in a constant flow and it can be looked at from very different cultural perspectives. I prefer not to define styles and rules too strictly in order to be able to change my perspective and question the culture I live in.

> **Kjell:** In a conversation with Werner Dafeldecker[74] you are critical to the labelling of the Berlin scene as Echtzeitmusik or Berlin Reductionism. What do you find problematic with those labels?

> **Axel:** I think those labels rather lead to more confusion than clarification. Once a label is established, there is a separation between different musical systems defined. The separation is leading to a change of perspective towards a point of view of musical expectations defined by a simplification of the rules of a musical system of a label. If these expectations are not fulfilled it becomes very difficult to understand music which is functioning in a different way outside of those simplified rules.

Labels facilitate finding, or being given, a place in an aesthetic or social structure. Although an artist can yearn for a place outside of the prescriptive expectations of a genre or a style, the freedom in escaping the reductionism of a definition can have a backlash. Recognition happens through familiarity. A quality

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[74] Werner Dafeldecker, Axel Dörner, "A Conversation," in *Echtzeitmusik Berlin: Selbstbestimmung einer Szene,* ed. Burkhard Beins, Christian Kesten, Gisela Nauck, Andrea Neumann, 360-381, trans. William Wheeler (Hofheim: Wolke, 2011)

that is not easily relatable, disappears in juxtaposition with an established style in which the effect of a commonality creates a gravity of recognition. Recognition is an ambiguous term relating to the circumstance of being perceived in an understandable manner but also as an indicator of quality. In the conversation with Dafeldecker mentioned above, Dörner says "I think when one isn't recognized, when someone does something that no one thinks is good, then this person is isolated. And you can't communicate as an isolated person; your work gets written off by the entire milieu."[75] To be accepted according to a standard of quality is necessary for communication.

In certain rare cases, the tension between an individual expression and a tradition coincides with the question of renewal or repetition within an individual practice. Axel Dörner developed in the mid-nineties a personal style of playing the trumpet which contained the stylistic characteristics of the emerging Echtzeitmusik scene with sparse, spacious playing, no traditional development of the musical material, and a restrained musical temper. This was combined with a radically new way of creating a multi-layered timbre palette of (acoustic) noise on the trumpet.

> **Kjell:** In my view, and I think many would agree, you have influenced the trumpet playing on the European free improvised

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[75] Ibid., 377.

music scene in a very radical way, almost so that you can talk about a before and after Axel Dörner entered the scene. Is one component shaping your solo playing today the question whether you should continue or break with your own personal very idiosyncratic "tradition"?

Axel: My memory of what I played until now is influencing my music of today. I look at myself as a musician who enjoys discovering new ways of playing and composing and doesn't want to repeat his own clichés over and over. On the other hand I also enjoy music which is based on a longtime tradition which can't be invented by one musician so easily. For that reason from my point of view every music I'm doing in the present is in a relation to the music I already realized until now. So it's always both, continuing and breaking with my own personal "tradition". But my perspective on this is also changing and in a constant flow, it might also look for somebody from outside like I'm repeating myself over and over.

Joe McPhee circumvents the question of influence and lineage by giving precedence to the moment of playing where the absorbing act of improvisation in itself becomes a tool to avoid self-conscious reflection about musical identity. He is not in any way denying influences but in order to protect his own subjective character he has invented his own category - Po music - which has no stylistic criteria; it is only defined by the fact that it has sprung out of all the influential factors within himself, and the circumstances of the moment. Po music with its inherent openness disarms every attempt to box him in.

Kjell: What are your ideas about the relation between individuality and commonality, lineages and traditions and other influences that are important to you?

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Joe: When I play solo I don't think about that kind of thing, I try to keep from falling off the stages [chuckles]. I just start something and then I follow whatever goes. I usually don't have a fixed idea, sometimes there's a theme or something but generally not. I start completely blank and then see where the sounds lead me.

Kjell: Yes, but besides the playing moment when you -- how do you feel about the word Jazz, for example?

Joe: I know where it comes from historically. I don't think that the music I play is jazz. In fact I started to use a term called Po music. The reason for that was that I wanted to put my music in a certain location. If you say Jazz and put my music in a Jazz collection, we're do you find it, under what style? If I said it's Po music, go to the Po music section and you'll find all of my music, whatever it is, where it comes from, or what it's influenced by, it will all be there. Jazz is such a big catch all term, I don't disregard it, I know its influence on what I do, and I respect that, but I don't think it's a very good descriptive term for what I do.

Po comes from an ancient Minoan symbol to show that provocation is being used and you shouldn't take things to be what they seem to be. For example I made a recording called Oleo based on a Sonny Rollins composition which comes out of bebop, but I don't play bebop, I have tried it but it's not my language. I use it as a beginning, an entry point into the improvisations, to take the other musicians along, coming from what they know about music that we call Jazz and see where we can take it, but don't take it to be Jazz, it's whatever it is, it's provocation. There was a man by the name of Dr. Edward de Bono who had this concept of Po, using it as a language indicator to show that provocation is being used to move from a fixed set of ideas which are already known in order to try to discover new ideas. I thought if the Po music is my section then you're going to have to try to figure that one out. [laugh]

Kjell: Since we're talking about Po music, do you think that Po is relevant as a concept also outside of music?

Joe: Absolutely. I think of it as, for example one description that De

Bono uses is, say you're driving on a highway and you're going north, and you know where you want to be, you know where your destination is but you come to a hole in the road and you cannot move further north so you have to take a detour, it could be East, West or whatever and to go around the hole. In that process you're going maybe even in the wrong direction, you might even have to go backwards to get around it but in that process you discover things along the way. You keep in mind what your ultimate destination is, and you move towards that, but you find things along the way that enhance your knowledge, your wisdom, whatever and hopefully you can use that and when you get to your destination maybe you'll be wiser.

Earlier, in my conversation with Suzanne Thorpe, I discussed the independence between an eclectic artistic experience and the emergence of a consistent musical identity, describing it as a slightly paradoxical relation. Joe McPhee's work shows a similar process of stylistic openness as a way to a coherent musical expression.

> **Kjell:** I listened recently to *Nation Time*[76] and I was reading in the liner notes where you say that you tend to neutralize and re-interpret various elements of the music known as J*azz* from New Orleans to avant-garde. When I read that it made me think, however contradictory it may seem, that the clear sense of focus on the disc might be related to an almost eclectic stylistic openness. What, would you say, holds your musical voice together?
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> **Joe:** When I recorded *Nation Time* I had been playing saxophone for about two years. I'd listened to a lot of music and I was influenced by a lot of things from Sun Ra, to Archie Shepp, to Coltrane, to

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[76] *Nation Time*, recorded in 1970.

Albert Ayler. The musicians I chose for that, were musicians who I had been playing within a local bar mostly soul, and rock music, and I tried to introduce them to this craziness that I had going on and that's where that came from.

Nation Time was recorded in 1970, a few years after the civil rights acts of 1964 and 1968, the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., the Black Panther Party and the black nationalist movement.

Joe: Well, it was inevitable. It couldn't be avoided. What was happening with the civil rights movement and then the riots that were breaking out, New York, New Jersey, California and in Washington DC. All of those things, you couldn't escape it. It was bound to happen. It had to happen, and it was affecting the music, yes.

Kjell: Amiri Baraka's collection of poems *It's Nation Time* had just been published. Was there a connection?

Joe: Yes. It was a clear connection. I heard a reading of that, and I was very impressed with it. At that time, I was teaching at Vassar College in a program called "Black Studies." I gave a concert and I used that title, "Nation Time," as a way to engage the students to think about race and what was going on with the civil rights movement at that time.

McPhee describes Baraka being upset by McPhee's use of the term, as if "I was trying to usurp his term." But he concludes:

This was a different thing altogether. One part of the point, I would say, is that it's beyond race, it's about gender and sexual identity and all other things coming. When we're talking about a nation, I'm

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talking about a nation of people coming together for our own good, really.

Kjell: You could do a new *Nation Time* today with the expanded notion of what *Nation* means.

Joe: Yes. As a matter of fact, it will happen -- The first of October, [2018] there's a benefit in New York and I'm doing a program with a double quintet and it's going to be called *Nation Time for Real This Time, in the Error of Trump*.

There's a lot to think about when we talk about a nation. We say, "One nation under God," well, whatever. What does that mean? Better reexamine that one.

McPhee's expanded understanding of Nation includes considerations of sexual identities and gender. "It has to be more inclusive. It's not just about African-American civil rights." McPhee is expansive by being inclusive.

Aesthetics in the body

A musical style eventually becomes embedded in physical patterns and bodily impulses. Andrea Neumann handled her intention to break with a dominating musical aesthetic by regulating her bodily musical impulses.

Kjell: In an interview you say, 'It was all about to follow your bodily impulses as little as possible, and instead stop for a moment to see what really makes sense in that moment.'[77] At another place you say:

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[77] Roberto Duarte, *Berliner Improvisation*. Video trailer accessed Nov 26, 2017. http://www.robertoduarte.de/film.html.

'The desire to act was called into question.'[78] What do you mean by these two comments?

Andrea: When we started to play in the nineties a lot of music in Berlin was free-jazz, and free-jazz was so much about pushing certain limits, like energy and dynamics, and I felt it was about losing control and letting things go. I think what happened then in the kind of scene where I'm belonging to, was about distancing the music from that approach and doing something really opposite to that. It was about being very suspicious to what you play and questioning every impulse in order to let out only the most essential thing. And that's very much where my being a musician started. This aesthetic, or approach, was very much present at that time. I don't think I do that anymore, but maybe when you do that really intensely for a period, it stays a part of you.

Kjell: When I read those statements, I interpreted them as there's something in your impulse that you are critical about, that you want to filter out somehow, because you don't want that aspect of you to inform the music. But now when you describe this, it sounds like the reaction is not towards your own impulses but towards an aesthetic which dominated the Berlin scene for decades before the 90's, a style of improvised music that was loud and dense.

Andrea: Yes, it's true, but both is true, right? Because, it's true that you can only, if you are [embedded] in certain codes and you never question these codes, you have to do a very radical step to question your own implicit rules and renew them. And that, of course, created a new aesthetic which can be questioned again after a while.

Kjell: Is that why you feel that need less now since it's become internalized in the core of the style, so you don't have to think about that so much anymore?

Andrea: Yes, it's interesting to break the impulse and sometimes not to. But, at that time the uncritical flow was judged as bad. Now I know a lot of musicians who can follow their bodily impulses and

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[78] Neumann, "Playing Inside Piano," 211.

they play incredibly interesting music. It's a very nice quality, but I felt at that time that when my hands were carrying the music, it wasn't as interesting as if I would include also my thinking.

The strategy of stopping the uncritical flow, which she and her peers found characteristic of previous German free improvised music as it had evolved from the late sixties, became a collective strategy and an aesthetic trait central to the Echtzeitmusik scene, at least the part of the scene that sometimes also is called Berlin reductionism. With the perspective of time, which Neumann adds in the last comment, it is clear that the bodily impulse was not problematic per se; it was as a manifestation of an earlier dominant aesthetics it needed to be inhibited, so that a new music could emerge. The resistance to something old is regulated by stopping the body from uncritically affirming the aesthetics of that dominance. To talk with Monson's terminology - the body channeling an individual *practice*, establishes itself as a stylistic *discourse*, confronting a dominating preceding aesthetic *discourse*; which at that time had become entrenched with the *structure* of funding and political representation.

So far in this dissertation, agency has been tied to an individual ability to act; the arts practice as a manifestation of individual agency. Although there are structures ushering artist in certain directions, and a sense of repeating previous work - others or one's own - the ownership of the detail dominates the narratives I

have encountered. But not necessarily in Suzanne Thorpe's work. In her site-specific pieces, the detail is unpredictable and contingent of a number of (f)actors.

> **Kjell:** I saw a beautiful video documentation of your piece *Listening Is As Listening Does*.[79] Where do you see yourself in your site-specific work? Where is your agency?

> **Suzanne:** I see myself as just one component of the work at large and I do my best to be mindful of agency of the entire environment and those that are participating in it, that that's going to be a part of the piece. I am one of many in the network that is producing the piece. I might compose a strategy, structure or container for the piece to take place, but there are all these elements that are contributing to the piece as a whole.

> It's almost like conduction. I think like Butch Morris or Anthony Braxton, who are familiar with the characteristics and behaviors of performers, and conduct their individual vocabularies into a form. But it's the individual's uniqueness, brought into conversation with another, that makes a piece what it is.

> **Kjell:** Do you mean your role is as a facilitator?

> **Suzanne:** More like a parameter builder. I delineate time and space as a container for activity.

> Whether it be birds and cicadas or echo-response from reflections, or a person's situatedness […] These are all the elements that interact with the music that I wrote in some form or fashion.

Thorpe's site-specific pieces are designed to progress from input by nature, audience, and every fixed or dynamic factor present. Giving up individual agency

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[79] Listening Is As Listening Does was installed on site at the Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts, NY, in 2014. The piece uses echolocation as a compositional factor. Thorpe describes: "*Listening Is As Listening Does* asks . . . positions the listener as a variable within the piece, as their presence will affect the reflections of sound amidst the architecture, compelling the work to navigate new compositional terrain."

in this context is not an act of submission but rather an act of liberation. This is not a way of devaluating agency. The idea of distributing agency among controllable and uncontrollable actors becomes a political/philosophical statement where agency is at focus but uncoupled from control and power.

> **Kjell:** Are your site-specific pieces problematizing the whole notion of agency?
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> **Suzanne:** You mean my agency?
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> **Kjell:** Well, yes. Trying to get away from the hierarchy of composer, performer, audience and environment. It's embedded in the aesthetics of that kind of piece.
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> **Suzanne:** Yes, that's what I've been trying to get at with these pieces. In site-specific work, after a couple of tries, you figure out that it's not all about you. It's not about my agency, but rather what will the space, and those that occupy it, allow for *me* to do. My will, my control is not the primary factor.
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> **Kjell:** Is it possible to think about agency without control?
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> **Suzanne:** They're different, I think. Agency is the ability to act, it's not necessarily whether or not I can follow through on it but it's the potential, it's the ability. It's more about the potential as agency. Control is a different thing than agency, I think.

The inextricable integration of gender dynamics

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I was always a contradiction
(Suzanne Thorpe)

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Gender constraints exists in all of Monson's categories - *structure, discourse,*

and *practice*. The history of jazz has undoubtedly been dominated by male musicians, and on top of that, jazz historians have written the history with a tendency to diminish or downplay the role of the female musicians that were there. My own experiences from festivals of improvised music in Europe in the nineties and later show a strong dominance of male musicians with rare exceptions in musicians like Iréne Schweizer, Marilyn Crispell, Joelle Leandre and a few others.[80] Georgina Born describes a striking unbalance in gender representation in music technology education in England where approximately 90% of the students are male.[81] Tara Rodgers pictures a gendered epistemology in what she calls the "audio-technical discourse," where metaphors rooted in a perspective of a white, male, subject permeate the language around electronic music.[82]

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[80] However this is an anecdotal comment, a quick look at archived programs from the leading festivals of improvised music f. ex. Konfrontationen in Nickelsdorff, Jazz Atelier in Ulrichsberg, Total Music Meeting in Berlin, or Company Week in London , all festivals with a long history, show undoubtedly a very strong male dominance. This, I would argue, is not symptomatic particularly to these festivals but of the free improvised music scene in general. However, there is a clear tendency in the last decade to break this pattern. Many more women are represented at festivals and concert series. Again, this is anecdotal observation. For a more detailed quantitative account of the Total Music Meeting in Berlin, see page 97-98 below, and Dana Reason Myers, "The Myth of Absence: Representation, Reception and the Music of Women Experimental Improvisers." (PhD diss., University of California San Diego, 2002).

[81] Georgina Born & Kyle Devine,"Gender, Creativity and Education in Digital Musics and Sound Art," *Contemporary Music Review*, 35:1 (2016): 2

[82] Tara Rodgers, "Synthesizing Sound: Metaphor in Audio-Technical Discourse and Synthesis History," (PhD diss., McGill University, 2010), 3.

Thorpe makes it clear immediately when I bring gender into the conversation that gender is not an addendum or a sidetrack that can be extracted from any interaction or musical context; it is inextricably integrated in everything we do regardless if we want it to be or not.

> **Suzanne:** Well, the gender dynamics are inherent in what I do because I am a gender, I am a sex, and I'm read as that sex, okay?
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> **Kjell** Yes.
>
> **Suzanne:** I read myself as that sex, and part of that reading, whether it be from you or me, or whomever, is constructed by how we've been taught to read gender and sex. It's in the room, is my point. It's inherent in the dialogue, or the musicking, or a conversation.

Structure and discourse evolve overtime through political mechanisms and collective processes. The individual practice, although still complex, is more liquid. In practice there is room to strategize. A jump between genres is one way an artist moves a practice to a different discourse and structure. Societal attitudes about gender are reflected differently in different genres of music.

> **Kjell:** Do you think gender plays a role in people's expectation of your sounds?
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> **Suzanne:** How can it not? We all base our expectations on something, some form of structure that has helped to form that expectation. I think that rarely did people expect me to show up and play flute and shred like J Mascis. I say shred in the terms of guitar punk, like rock kind of thing. We would put me through a bass amp

that was taller than me sometimes. I would always go against expectations, but at the same time I was playing this instrument that was read as quite feminine in many ways, or feminized. I was always a contradiction. I always tried to exceed those expectations and those constructs.

That's probably one of the reasons why I've been drawn to creative music because I could get out of the tropes that maintain a feminized construct of what the instrument is. That has played a large role in my choices.

In the mode of experimentation, there is more than the music at stake. "The tropes that maintain a feminized construct" might equally be negotiable and questioned through performance. For Thorpe, the shift between genres implied a shift in expectations. The differences in gender expectations between genres is part of a push and pull dynamic. The hope that creative music, here synonymous with experimental music, brings with it a malleable re-structuring quality, constitutes a pull factor.

> **Kjell:** Do you think that the gendered expectations are very different in the musical environment of your duo with Bonnie,[83] compared to your 90s career?
>
> **Suzanne:** Yes, they're very different worlds. For instance we are actuating something that's outside of expectations, in part because we've taken on sonic vocabularies that have yet to be gendered. That was our original impulse, to be liberated from norms. Though after

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[83] Bonnie Jones.

doing this for a while, I will say that 'liberation' is a naive idea. Perhaps intervention is more accurate.

But:

> **Suzanne:** There may be less obvious expressions of gender expectations in the community that we're in, but they're there, though subtle. It comes out in different ways and it comes out in the ways that we were discussing previously, about ideas of consideration, leaving space for people's expression. Is a player going to really allow for dynamics and share space? Are they going to be participating at that level or is it just going to be 100% up in the amplitude and presence, for example.

Ultimately, Thorpe tones down her optimism as the conversation goes on. The moment of performance mirrors a surrounding society. My suggestion that music affords a different set of constraints where expectations on behavior on-stage are different from off-stage, allowing for another relation to your own strength of voice, politeness, taking focus, being loud, being emotional, seems to her to disregard too much the regulative structures related to gender expectations.

> **Suzanne:** Our behavior is also constructed in part by these structures and we bring our behaviors into the musicking space. How good have we been at checking our behaviors in terms of our gender expectations, whether they're in the musicking space or not, and are we aware of where they carry over into the musicking space? We're all evolving when it comes to this and I don't think the creative scene is any more liberated, I think it's just a different expression of it, in my experience. It's not as obvious as in the rock world, where a

guitarist might show up with an amp the size of a tree [laughs]. It's subtle.

[…] there are certain behaviors that I retain, that I've developed in this gendered structure that we have, that carry over into the musicking space. If there isn't acknowledgment of that in the musicking space by my male counterparts or those that are identifying as male, and if they're going to also continue with certain behaviors that they've built without checking themselves, then the same dynamic gets repeated. That's all I'm saying. We carry with us these behaviors and we carry it into the musicking space. Let's pay attention.

When asked about gender representation in the Echtzeitmusik scene, Andrea Neumann says: "Compared to other scenes there are a lot of important and very active female musicians in the Echtzeitmusik scene. Looking at programs of improvised and experimental music festivals it's still unfortunately far away from being balanced gender-wise." She describes a progress from the early years of the scene to recent years.

> **Andrea:** In the beginning I felt that it was necessary to make some effort to be taken seriously. The scene around "Anorak" was very male dominated.[84] Women mostly worked behind the bar or were listeners in the audience. Even though everybody, both male and female musicians, was experimenting I felt that women's musical work was more questioned or less trusted by men and women. Nowadays it's different. But still i feel it's important to assert that what you do will be generally of interest – which is not easy for a lot of women I know, including myself.

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[84] Important venue of the emerging Echtzeitmusik scene in the mid-nineties in Berlin.

Compared to the gender representation of thirty years of musical activities around the FMP and the Total Music Meeting, the Berlin scene now shows a significantly different gender balance. Or, one can say that the number of female performers has risen from extremely low to low. A list of performers at some of the most important venues in Berlin between 1996 and 2011 shows a female participation at 18%.[85] This number should be compared to female participation at the Total Music Meeting between 1968 - 2000 which adds up to 6%.[86] Between the years 1970 and 1976, Irène Schweitzer was the only woman performing at the Total Music Meeting. She performed at two occasions over those years. There were normally around 20 - 30 musicians participating each year at the festival. Considering the Total Music Meeting being a pinnacle of the German improvised music scene with its international connections, it is clear that free improvised music was to an overwhelming majority performed by men. This under-balanced gender representation did not change in following decades. Between 1990 and 2000 only 19 out of 239 performers were women at the Total Music Meeting, which adds up to 8%. Dana Reason Myers concludes, in her research regarding the

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[85] The venues included are: 2:13 Club, Labor honor, Raumschiff Zitrone, biegungen in ausland, and Quiet Cue. *Echtzeitmusik Berlin: self-defining a scene,* 384ff.

[86] I am using data from Dana Reason Myers' dissertation *The Myth of Absence* (Appendix B) completed with data from FMP's website: http://www.fmp-label.de/freemusicproduction/projekteindex.html

strong under-representation of women at the Total Music Meeting, that "[t]hese choices seem to reflect a male notion of the improvising community; so few women are included that one must suppose that the men are not familiar with the larger community of professional women improvisors."[87]

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[87] Dana Reason Myers, "The Myth of Absence: Representation, Reception and the Music of Women Experimental Improvisers," (Ph.D. diss., University of California San Diego, 2002), 84.

Chapter 3:

A malleable scene

Performativity and transformation in improvised music

This third chapter takes the vantage point of improvising music being foremost a revealing activity. Culture, geography, time period, gender, race, technology - all speak through us. Furthermore, every note and every sound is irreversible; you cannot take it back once it is out there. The quality of being irreversibly revealing is the main circumstance feeding my narrative around identity and performativity in improvised music.

Improvised music is also a defining activity. The music itself has no repeatable identity besides the one time it is performed. The next improvisation is always a different piece. Improvisation springs out of an identity and it also constructs an identity; an identity in a broad sense, musical as well as personal. We

are full of traces and intentions exposed willingly or inadvertently.

We do all this in a mode of expression with no semantic component. Music manages mysteriously to be free of semantics but full of meaning. It cannot be expected that a musician is in control of all the cultural and stylistic markers that can be read in the music. So, in one way we are telling who we are when we are improvising music but since the musical links to defining structures are ambiguous, one might say as an understatement we do not fully understand what we are expressing.

Although the aesthetics of scenes and music communities are always compounded by heterogenous layers of influences, both general and specific, the one thing the musicians interviewed for this dissertation have in common is the conviction that improvisation is foundational to their musical practice. Since a distinction between improvisation and composition is arbitrary, or at least more elusive than the common binary would suggest, self-identifying as improvising musicians becomes, more than anything else, indicative of a sense of belonging to an aesthetic location where improvisation is recognized as a central formative musical factor.

Describing music as consequential of a context larger than music, it becomes natural to think of the relation as mutual. Music is not only an object

shaped by a person or a group of people; it is a phenomenon in its own right with repercussions back to the context where it is created. This reciprocity is the foundation to the playground of transformation and performativity in music. The overall theme here is interaction. Musicians interact with musicians and audience, but also in a broader sense with memories, perceived expectations, and intentions. Regardless of the character of the music, the moment of music making is never static. It is as everything else, part of a constantly flowing Heraclidian river of change. This chapter is about how musicians perceive change in relation to their music.

Improvisation is a social process in itself. There is no way around a very tangible social interaction in musical improvisation. The level of co-creation that is asked for when improvising in ensemble is instrumental; the music is relying on that, formally speaking.

Defining improvised music might be a thorny and overwhelming task, navigating musical connotations to social, racial, geographical and generational factors. Furthermore, a presentation that deals with improvisation in music and its role in a larger context needs to recognize that the meaning of improvisation itself is contested. Where does improvisation start and end? As Bruce Benson points out,

the strict binary of composition and improvisation is not convincing.[88] Music is an ontological continuum between two place-holding endpoints - improvisation and composition - which are, philosophically speaking, the only two points on this continuum that do not exist. Nicholas Cook discusses what he sees as a false dichotomy between improvisation and composition, saying that although the music of Mozart and Billy Strayhorn are in many respects very different, those differences "may disguise but do not eliminate the irreducible core of real-time determination that is shared between WAM[89] performance and jazz improvisation, and it is this irreducible core that I see as grounding the social dimension of all music, WAM included."[90] This understanding of the perpetual malleability in music making points towards the notion of performativity I am using in this dissertation: performance as an event where musicians negotiate the musical material "through processes of constant accommodation between self and other."[91]

Our lives contain a multitude of platforms where we manifest, not only how we want to be perceived, but also what we've become, and where we are

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[88] Bruce Ellis Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music. (*Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2003).

[89] WAM -Western Art Music

[90] Nicholas Cook, "Scripting Social Interaction: Improvisation, Performance, and Western 'Art' Music," in *Improvisation and Social Ethics*, eds. Georgina Born, Eric Lewis, Will Straw. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 64.

[91] Ibid., 64.

going. It is not a far stretch to assume that the characteristics of these platforms affect the character of our identities. The concept of performativity, central to this chapter, helps us focus on the mechanisms connecting identity and performance, or identity and action. The term has been used broadly in a number of intellectual disciplines, diverging from the idea of a fixed reality, shifting towards looking at a social context in which members actively perform and shape their lives. Performativity resonates with an unwillingness to take a given reality for granted; it embraces our ability to change and redefine crucial aspects of ourselves. Every context in which we function amplifies or suppresses aspects of ourselves, sometimes so much we may wonder who we fundamentally are.

Transformation and performativity are buzzwords with a solid academic existence. The concepts themselves have transformed in the last decades, branching out through linguistics, philosophy, the social sciences, and performance studies. Transformation and performativity particularly figure in artistic research describing the relational processes of identity in performance and to the ethics of relations in performance, both between performers and between performers and audience. In my interviews, I led the conversations towards those issues. My intention was to embed the meaning of transformation and performativity in my questions so that we in the conversations always remained

close to each interviewee's musical practice. I naturally approached the artists not as experts on performativity but as experts on their own artistic practice. The performative qualities of events emerged through discussions about their music and their performances.

The discourse of performativity in performance corresponds with a general idea of malleability. In this malleability lies both a political and psychological potential. Political in the sense that structures of influence and expectations are put under spotlight. Improvised music reifies in real time, generosity as well as dominance, engagement and indifference, and the tension between individual and collective. These are all characteristics with political implications. Improvised music is a micro version of larger macro phenomena where these characteristics are blown up to a larger scale. The psychological dimension of improvised music relevant to this dissertation lies in the fact that each participant invests him- or herself self personally in the relations present in music making, willingly or timidly, but unavoidably.

The potential for change embedded in the notion of performativity brings with it hopes of a better world. Jill Dolan theorizes around utopia in theater performances, trying to save the idea of utopia from accusations of escapism. She

does so by emphasizing the fleeting quality of utopian performativity.[92] Utopia is in her view not a distant unrealistic goal, but should be perceived as a process, thus being already present. She integrates utopia in a constructivist description of the present moment which is engaging in its possibility rather than as an illustration of a preset goal. She says: "I know I risk sentimentality with this work; I know I risk emptying even further overused signs like 'peace' or 'love.' Yet I find myself wanting to take back these words, to refill them, to ground them not in naivete or troubling innocence, but in concrete, material conditions that give rise to empathy (and more) for others."[93] Empathy as part of theater has been criticized by for example Bertolt Brecht for being a sedative for the arts, evoking complacency and passivity. Dolan describes, on the contrary, empathy as part of reclaiming a political engagement in performance.

Transformation is traditionally part of a set of lofty expectations attached to performance that goes outside a technical judgment. 'It took me places, it changed me. The world is a little different after this' are typical testimonies of a transformative quality which can be applied to any kind of performance. The experience is not necessarily linked to radical aesthetics or the level of

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[92] Jill Dolan, *Utopia in performance: finding hope at the theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 13

[93] Ibid., 23

experimentation of a performance. Any kind of performance can at the right time and place evoke a sense of transformation. It is an elusive phenomenon that stands for an immaterial shift of perspective where something has changed, proportions might be perceived differently, priorities have shifted. Erika Fischer-Lichte describes this traditional form for the expectation of transformation in art as being linked to either of two things - "the artist seized by inspiration or the beholder of art roused by an inner experience."[94] Both the performer and the audience are potentially subject to this exalting experience; the performance has the potential to enrapture anyone present.

In contemporary performance theory, however, the aspect of malleability, a denial of rigidity and stability, manifests in at least two different ways. Marvin Carlson describes a utilitarian pragmatic concept of transformation which is in contrast with a non-referential non-volitional transformative dynamic.[95] The former, is influenced by the instrumentalism and pragmatism of philosopher and psychologist John Dewey's theories, extrapolated into a performance context by Victor Turner and William O. Beeman and others. This tradition maintains the

[94] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance : A New Aesthetics*, (New York: Routledge, 2008), 13.

[95] Marvin Carlson, "Introduction - Perspectives on Performance: Germany and America," in *The Transformative Power of Performance : A New Aesthetics* by Erika Fischer-Lichte, 1-10, (New York: Routledge, 2008).

view of performance as an event created by artists and performers to affect and transform an audience. It can, inspired by Dewey, emphasize an educational intention, and sees art overall as instrumental in restructuring society. Musician and composer Anthony Braxton's term *restructuralist music* rhymes with this notion of a conscious strategy to change structures of, in his example, expectations related to race. The latter in Carlsson's account, the non-referential and non-volitional view, includes an unpredictable interactivity between actors and audience. This interactivity is transformative in the sense that it sets in motion a play with powers and constraints present in the room. It is non-volitional because it cannot construct a predicted outcome. It is non-referential in that it sees the resulting transformation as emerging in the space between everyone involved, not referencing a fixed state of "before." The philosophically intricate notion of non-referential transformation comes from a view of identity rooted in Judith Butler's theoretical framework where an individual identity is not fixed but rather constantly manifested, constantly performed. This forms a malleable ontology where identity is perpetually defined in interaction within the constraints of the moment. This perspective has evolved from a structuralist view where deterministic factors outside of the individual are constraining the options for actions in what Butler, influenced by Foucault, calls regulative discourses. In

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Butler's descriptions of society it becomes hard to find a philosophical ground for a significant individual agency.

The potential for change is attractive. It is linked to hopes of a more just and dignified society, and in that sense the focus on transformation connects the arts with politics. Transformative art re-structures, re-defines; it involves action and re-action.

> Perhaps there is a key here to the persistently documented tendency for performers to be both admired and feared - admired for their artistic skill and power and for the enhancement of the experience they provide, feared because of the potential they represent for subverting and transforming the status quo.[96]
>
> *Richard Bauman*

> My music, my life's work, will ultimately challenge the very foundations of Western value systems, that's what's dangerous about it.[97]
>
> *Anthony Braxton*

It is as if a music performance itself threatens, or promises, to open the door to an alternate world which we might be attracted to but also afraid of, depending on what part of the political equation we identify with. A performance rises from the surrounding constraints of everyday life to a situation where imagination,

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[96] Bauman, Richard W., *Verbal art as performance*. (Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press, 1977), 53

[97] Graham Lock, *Forces in motion: the music and thoughts of Anthony Braxton* (New York, N.Y.: Da Capo Press., 1989), 163

fantasy, fiction, intentions, coordination, or just a sense of unstymied behavior, is given a place to which an audience is expected to give attention, maybe even be drawn into. Transformation concerns the elusive and intangible fields connecting everyone present in the performative event; a performance can change the way we think of each other.

A background to the notion of performativity

Transformation, transition, transgression, transcendence, liminality are all words that imply a change of some sorts. Moving from one state to another, becoming, morphing, leaving behind, going towards, are processes charged with hopes and fears. Performativity summons up the idea that the content of our identities are not fixed in an essentialist way but needs to be performed over and over again in order to stay real. This focus on action and transition originated in linguist theory but was soon adapted to the social sciences.

Philosopher of language, John L. Austin, coined the term performative in the mid 1950s.[98] He defined performative utterances in contrast to constative utterances, meaning that the latter passively describes the reality like a still shot, while the former signifies an action. Performative utterances do not capture a

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[98] John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words (*New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).

momentary picture of reality, but bring change in the very moment they are uttered. To say "I do" in a wedding ceremony initiates a transition which could not happen without that utterance. This contribution defines a dynamic inherent in language itself. It not only has the capacity to describe a state of reality, but it marks a transition from one state to another; language is performative.

Austin's contribution, in line with the thinking of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gilbert Ryle, was rooted in the notion that meaning and truth is not there outside of us waiting to be described, but is constructed through the use of language. This opened the flood gates to extrapolations and adapted interpretations in the social sciences and the humanities. The dynamism of the construction it hinted at pointed towards a critique of every dominating hegemony's claim of dominance justifying itself by natural reasons. For poststructuralists this dynamic had great political implications. The poststructuralist message was, at least originally, the one of the underdog. It had a political force in talking to power: 'You think your powers are indisputable? They are not. You are seated in a patchwork, a palimpsest. You rely on structures that need to be confirmed in every moment, and therefore can be altered at any moment.' The deconstruction of power was also the undressing of power. Claire Colebrook describes the poststructuralist deconstruction of the normative structural orders in victorious terms. "…this

recognized impossibility of organizing life into closed structures was not a failure or loss but a cause for celebration and liberation."[99] The theory of performativity was part of this liberating wave of new approaches to fundamental matters of identity and power. Performativity in this context means both that we are constructed but also that we construct ourselves in the circumstances of our lives. At the center of this equation is agency, but the view on how volitional this ontological process is, varies greatly, which I will come back to.

In 1988 Judith Butler published the article *Performative acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.*[100] There she lays the ground for her theory of performativity related to gender identity. She describes the performative action in terms close to a staged performance, repeated over and over, with an openness in the outcome, showing "… that what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo. In its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status."[101] Two related circumstances are significant here. First, there are regulative powers, both externally and internalized, which usher us to adopt certain crucial aspects of our identity, and second, the performative nature of interaction provides

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[99] Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.

[100] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution, an Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist-Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4, (Dec. 1988): 519-31.

[101] Ibid., 520

a scenario where that very influence can be counteracted. Butler's message thus contains both a critique and a hope. In Gender Trouble, first published in 1990, she solidifies how the mechanisms of performativity operate in society. First, performativity operates through anticipation and expectation. "The anticipation conjures its object."[102] Secondly, performativity does not imply a one-time event, it is rather a "culturally sustained temporal duration."[103] It is repeated over and over as a social ritual.

Butler refers to Derrida's reading of Kafka's story *Before the Law*[104] as a background to the mechanisms of performativity. Kafka's parable tells how a man stands in front of a gatekeeper asking to be let in. The gatekeeper reveals that the door is open but denies him entry. Throughout his life the man stays fixated at the door, asks the gatekeeper repeatedly for entrance but is every time responded to negatively. At the end of his life, as he is soon dying, he asks why no one else has come to the door asking for permission to enter. The gatekeeper answers, or rather yells since the old man now is hard at hearing, that "No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut

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[102] Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xiv.

[103] Ibid., xv

[104] Jacques Derrida, "Before the Law," in *Kafka and the contemporary critical performance: centenary readings*. ed. Alan Udoff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

it."[105] I will not go deeper into the interpretations of the parable that Derrida is making, and which Butler is building on, but significant to the understanding of performativity, the story illustrates that the constraints are not real in the sense of an actually closed door but, again, real as anticipations and expectations, and they are maintained in interaction. Furthermore, each person faces individually the consequences of this seemingly locked situation. Butler and Derrida plants Kafka's parable in the continuum between internal and external constraints, individual and collective expectations, where the drama of a potential entrance through a gate reverberates the notion of regulative discourses.

Performance studies

> Performance… requires two groups of people, one acting and the other observing, to gather at the same time and place for a given period of shared lifetime. Their encounter - interactive and confrontational - produces the event of the performance.[106]

Performance studies, more so than musicology, focuses on the relation between the performer and the audience. There is an interdependence between the two referencing experiences back and forth, creating a performance version of the

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[105] Franz Kafka, and Nahum Norbert Glatzer, *The complete stories,* trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, 22-23 (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 23.

[106] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 38.

literary notion of intertextuality. Erika Fischer-Lichte's book *The Transformative Power of Performance* is a critical investigation of the relation between performativity and performance. She brings two important issues to the discussion: she means that the transformative process in a performance also includes the audience, and she puts forward the Butlerian notion that performativity is in opposition to expressivity. The former is intuitively in line with the view that everyone present in a room naturally feeds the interactive dynamics of a performance; there is no 'fly on the wall' situation where a spectator can maintain the illusion of an unnoticed presence. The latter, however, challenges the idea that music is a mode of expression in which a personality can evolve. She means that performativity is non-referential, and not an expression of an identity: "…, performative acts do not express a pre-existing identity but engender identity through those very acts."[107] Fischer-Lichte, with Butler, points out that identity is always fleeting. An individual is not participating in a performative situation as a fixed raw material. He or she is perpetually constructed by actions in a context of constraints. The inclusion of the audience as instrumental to the performative dynamics of a performance places transformation in the middle of the event. The notion that everyone is affecting everyone is a contribution by performance theory

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[107] Ibid., 27

to make performance stay utterly meaningful. The performance progresses in a "self -referential and ever changing feedback loop."[108] The audience and the artists enable an autopoietic process which does not reference an identifiable starting point but emerges as interaction and feedback between actors and audience. This dynamics of feedback is also present in a music performance. The music is inflected at every moment in a field of tension between audience and performer. The notion *field of tension* is elaborated in great detail by Johan Petri in his dissertation *The Rhythm of Thinking*,[109] where he distinguishes five poles involved in a reciprocal, intertwined and co-dependent dynamic exchange in the making of a theater performance. The poles active in the field of tension of a performance are: the performers, the material (music, texts, scenography, instruments etc.), the full performative event (the meeting between the performance and the audience), the director's initiative (including his or her intentions, esthetics, skills and inabilities), and the "conglomerate of critical tools used in the analysis."[110] Petri creates with these distinctions a number of analytical focal points to better discern the performative composition and character of a stage performance.

Petri, who besides being a theater scholar is also a director and a musician

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[108] Ibid., 38

[109] Johan Petri, The Rhythm of Thinking, dissertation: Immanence and Ethics in Theater Performance (PhD diss., Art Monitor, Gothenburg University, 2016), 30f

[110] Ibid., 30.

with a long personal experience of the dynamics of the stage, describes what he

calls *the visceral foundation* of performance. In itself, performance is a meaningful

constructive event accompanied by an unclear and unpredictable logic. His

description reads like a credo of the process over the content:

> I picture the theater as a space where things happen. I do not know
> exactly what, and I do not know how it will be perceived. It is an
> atmosphere of possibilities. What I know is not actually interesting.
> The known is a restriction, almost like a burden. It is the movements
> of the attempts we make to find our way that are beautiful. They
> come when we are lost. It is then I start to invent. (What am I
> inventing? Something to hold on to? Relations of sorts?) The event is
> full of movements and sounds and words, and when I am inside I
> alternately feel and think, think and feel. This variation makes me
> feel alive. I sense that I am part of time's unfolding. The inventing is
> perpetual. It makes up my inner world, and is steered by an ongoing
> evolvement of events that surround me. As an artist it feels
> impossible not to let this momentum be a part of the conception.
> Rather, to actually see it as the driving force.[111]

I am interested in how improvised music becomes a platform for this

transformative process, with a unique set of constraints. Distinguishing music

from other activities allows us to understand the attraction this transformative

character may have for a musician. And, is the character of that expression

different from the character of my expressivity in other contexts? In the

introduction I described my experience of a review of a concert I did in the late

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[111] Ibid., 405.

nineties where the only "positive" comment was "…it's a good thing that the enormous and unresolved wrath these people seem to carry, gets released in this way and not in physical violence."[112] I was first taken aback by that comment but subsequently it became an eye opener for how differently I could be perceived depending on situation, or performative context.

Performativity and musical improvisation

The focus on the present moment of action as ultimately the moment of construction, makes theories of performativity attractive to improvisation studies. One pillar of performative theory is that, even though anticipations and expectations highly influence our sense of identity, it is actually not until each and every moment, through performative actions and interactions, that identity and character is emerging. Transferred to improvised music, the musical content is anticipated through intentions and idioms, but it is in every moment, in an improvisatory manner, possible to add a musical element different from what might be expected, and changing the musical trajectory. This potential playfulness with anticipation makes musical improvisation a fertile ground for applying a performative perspective. However, bringing Butler's ideas of performativity into

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[112] Jan Westerlund, "Studion har det mesta," *Västerbottens Kuriren*, November 1, 1999.

the discourse of musical improvisation is not made without friction. In Tracy McMullen's interview with Butler in *Improvisation within a Scene of Constraint* there is a certain reluctance from Butler to sanction an extrapolation of performativity and transformation into the field of musical improvisation, which McMullen suggests.[113] Butler's objection is that the word *play*, as in playing music, makes a performative transformation seeming too reachable and easy. Butler wants instead to maintain the focus on the constraints and the difficulties attached to them, historically and today. She emphasizes that gender identity, and personality expressed and shaped in a stage performance, however related, are two different things.[114]

The intersection of Butler's notion of performativity and musical improvisation traces back to Butler's text *Undoing Gender* from 2004. The introduction to Undoing Gender is named *Acting in Concert* and in the second paragraph she says:

> "If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for

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[113] Tracy McMullen, "Improvisation within a Scene of Constraint: An Interview with Judith Butler," in *Negotiated Moments: improvisation, sound, and subjectivity, e*d. Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman, (Duke University Press, 2015), 21-33

[114] This is something she has articulated already also earlier: "Indeed, the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence." (Butler, 1988, 527)

that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint."[115]

She continues:

"Moreover, one does not 'do' one's gender alone. One is always 'doing' with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. What I call my 'own' gender appears at times as something that author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself)."[116]

Collective improvisation becomes a way for each participant to create an identity in dialogue with both participants and constraints. Butler's perspective, again, emphasizes our dependence on the context in which we are functioning. We are not evolving in a vacuum. The platform on which we are acting is not neutral but has its own tendencies and gravities, all formative for each individual. Edgar Landgraf sees in Butler's text systematic improvisation as a means to navigate constructively in our lives, shaping and reshaping fundamental aspects of our identity. Landgraf writes:

[. . .] improvisation – marks a process that acquires a degree of consistency by connecting to – repeating and altering – what has come before. [. . .] The idea of improvisation retrospectively developing and building on its

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[115] Butler, Judith, 2004, *Undoing Gender*. New York ; London: Routledge, 1.

[116] Ibid., 1.

own history allows us to understand better Butler's use of the term to describe something as seemingly consistent and 'fixed' as a person's gender identity.[117]

This navigating activity can be more or less constructive depending on the severity of the constraints. Adapting Butler's ideas to a model of several partially overlapping platforms, one can start to see how music with its particular set of constraints, holds a unique potential for shaping an identity, one might say a parallel identity.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself* Butler emphasizes the opacity of the individual subject meaning that the natural limits of our self-knowledge ought to lead us to focus on society where rules and constraints are tangible. She uses a psychoanalytical framework pointing to the fundamental challenge to a basic understanding of ourselves:

> If we are formed in the context of relations that become partially irrecoverable to us, then that opacity seems built into our formation and follows from our status as beings who are formed in relations of dependency.[118]

Theories of subject formation combined with a philosophical query of the possibilities of language create an impasse in what we can expect from and

[117] Edgar Landgraf, 2011, *Improvisation as Art : Conceptual Challenges, Historical Perspectives*, New Directions in German Studies (New York, NY: Continuum), 16.

[118] Judith Butler, *Giving an account of oneself (*New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 20.

know about an individual subject. In *Senses of the Subject* Butler describes a

methodological problem for considering an "I" at all. In the process of tracing

subject formation backwards in time, she says:

> … If I say that I'm already affected before I can say "I," I am
> speaking much later than the process I seek to describe. In fact,
> my retrospective position casts doubt on whether or not I can
> describe this situation at all, since strictly speaking, I was not
> present for the process, and I myself seem to be one of its
> effects.[119]

It is here, I think, she loses relevance to many scholars in improvisation

studies, who, while attracted by the mechanisms of performativity, can find it

unsatisfying to stomach such a philosophical disbelief in what we can say

about subjectivity. However, for the improvisation scholars and others who can

take this challenge, Butler offers a hand:

> My suggestion, rather, is that we accept this belatedness and
> proceed in a narrative fashion that marks the paradoxical
> condition of trying to relate something about my formation that is
> prior to my own narrative capacity and that, in fact, brings that
> narrative capacity about.

The necessity to let go of the subject is philosophical but also pragmatical. It

is in line with her denaturalization of gender as a "natural" phenomenon. As a

response to why she so strongly criticizes the persistent normative values in

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[119] Judith Butler, *Senses of the subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 2.

society, Butler argues from a perspective of urgency:

> The writing of this denaturalization was not done simply out of a desire to play with language or prescribe theatrical antics in the place of "real" politics, as some critics have conjectured (as if theatre and politics are always distinct). It was done from a desire to live, to make life possible, and to rethink the possible as such.[120]

What if we conceived of the Other as one to whom we give?[121]

Tracy McMullen proposes the term *Improvisative* as a tool to theorize the playfulness within the constraints that can break the expectations.[122] With this neologism she takes a step away from the performative in that it reinstates the self and its ability to give, instead of focusing on what the *Other* can recognize.[123] McMullen means that the idea of a malleable performative individual identity implicitly presupposes a stable counterpoint in a fixed Other. She argues that this implicit notion is not necessarily correct, and it blocks the view of a mutual influence between self and other. The improvisative therefore does not point towards a thing or an action, instead it signifies a willingness to emphasize the

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[120] Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity (*New York: Routledge, 1999), xx.

[121] McMullen, "The Improvisative." In *The Oxford handbook of critical improvisation studies, Vol 1,* ed. George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2016), 118.

[122] McMullen, "Improvisation within a Scene of Constraint," 27.

[123] McMullen,"The Improvisative," 115.

contribution by a subject, rather than the reception by an object. The exchange, or tension, between self and other is paralleled by the relations between individual and community, and individual and structure. The improvisative recognizes generosity over judgment. The creativity of giving replaces the drama of obedience or opposition to rules and structures, which otherwise is so emblematic for how we see political and historical progress in the arts. The celebration of a rule system, or the opposition to one, is the dialectic timeline by which we traditionally measure progress.

McMullen brings in an example of the strategy of giving from improvised theater. She quotes actress and comedian Tina Fey describing what she learned as active on the Chicago improvised theater scene, saying that you do not enter an improvisation when you have a great idea, but "you come in when you are needed."[124] It signals a sense of stewardship towards a shared creative process. The improvisative means giving your attention and directing your creative efforts to what every moment needs instead of a more self-centered display where you implicitly ask for recognition of your ability to obey or bend the rules.

In the introduction to *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity* Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman say: "We focus … on processes of

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[124] Tina Fey, *Bossypants (*New York: Regan Arthur / Little, Brown, 2013).

improvisational negotiation in which agency is understood to be hard won, highly contingent, and relational."[125] Negotiation becomes the key method for the various contributions throughout the volume, aiming to articulate a synergy between performativity and agency. Siddall and Waterman are much closer a natural consideration of a subject, a narrator, than Butler's philosophically based skepticism to the possibility of an "I" at all. "We cannot escape from our enculturation and our histories; indeed, improvisation is often a means of narrating the past through the filter of the present moment."[126]

McMullen's *improvisative* giving, and Ellen Waterman's *listening trust* taken together picture a connection between aesthetics and ethics inherent in the making of improvised music. Generosity towards one another, trust and empathy applied to the malleability inherent in improvised music grants the possibility of an ethics between performers. But as Vijay Iyer reminds us, improvisation in itself is never a guarantee for generosity and respect of human dignity; improvisation is not inherently generous and respectful by nature. Malleability can as easily facilitate an abuse of trust, and an abuse of power. This observation comes as a consequence of Iyer's suggestion to see the prevalence of improvisation. Iyer argues, which

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[125] Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman, "Introduction: Improvising at the Nexus of Discursive and Material Bodies." In *Negotiated Moments: improvisation, sound, and subjectivity,* ed. Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman. (Duke University, Press, 2016), 4.

[126] Ibid., 3

George Lewis does as well, that improvisation is ubiquitous. In fact it could be considered a default function of the human nature. Improvisation is not a refined highly specialized technique, (intimidating to many musicians). No, instead it is the fundamental basic principle for decision making and actions. No script could ever claim to be totally controlling our behaviors, while making music or otherwise. And, consequentially, "for every Roscoe Mitchell or Charlie Parker or John Coltrane or Alice Coltrane or Mary Lou Williams, you also have a Dick Cheney or a contractor with Halliburton with an itchy trigger finger. They're improvising too."[127] The available option to give form and substance based on empathy and generosity can obviously be denied and instead taken advantage of to serve an agenda based on dubious ethical considerations.

In Conversation

> *I'm fairly quiet, yet I'm a musician. That's really counter-intuitive in the sense that being a musician is all about projection. It's projecting sound; it's putting yourself out there.*
>
> <div align="right">(Suzanne Thorpe)</div>

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[127] *Vijay Iyer, "Improvising Digital Culture," in People Get Ready: The Future of Jazz Is Now (Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice),* ed. Ajay Heble and Rob Wallace. (Duke University Press, 2013), 227.

The following excerpts from the interviews pertain to questions 10 - 12 in my questionnaire. These are questions concerning the application of performativity to improvised music, specifically the overlap of musical and social interactions, and the possibility of a distinct musical personality. My intention with this set of questions was to understand to what degree and in what way performativity, understood as the malleable shaping quality of performance and performer, was relevant to the musicians I interviewed. The questions served, as all the questions, as starting points to further conversations, progressing along lines guided by each musician's musical experience.

It is obvious that the musical material in an improvisation is malleable; it is at the core of an improvising approach to music that musical material is developed, invented, changed, transformed and shaped in the live situation on stage. But to say that also performers are malleable signals a view of a give and take situation between performers, and between audience and performer, where more than the music is at stake. In November 2016, I had the opportunity to listen to a concert with the Barcelona Series at the Music Unlimited Festival in Wels, Austria. I had performed myself right before their concert,[128] and after my performance I stayed around the stage to experience their concert from an area on

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128 With Mats Gustafsson's Nu Ensemble.

stage not visible to the audience. Barcelona Series is Axel Dörner on trumpet, Sven-Åke Johansson on drums and percussion, and Andrea Neumann, on her *inside piano* setup. My interview with Andrea a year later revisited that moment.

> **Kjell:** Last time I heard you play live was in Wels, Austria, at the Music Unlimited Festival in 2016 with the group Barcelona Series,[129] a concert which I, by the way, think was very good. I was in a small group of musicians standing a few meters away from you, in the wings beside the stage listening and watching you playing, which made it quite an intimate experience. I'm not sure the three of you were aware of us. You had the audience in front of you to think about.
>
> To me, the three of you, seemed very free, and you gave me the impression that the rules for communication were very generous, but never with the cost of losing the interconnectedness between the three of you. In a sense I think one can say there was empathy rather than sympathy; you didn't jump on each other's musical doings, you rather let them be. But, it felt like you were highly aware of each other in a calm way, not responding directly, just letting yourselves be together. It was altogether breathtakingly beautiful, and musically it worked. If you take this description and put it in a social context, I think it becomes an interesting description of togetherness in a general sense.
>
> **Andrea Neumann:** Yes, very beautiful comment I have to say. Yes.
>
> **Kjell:** But, it makes me wonder, is that approach particular for this group and the three of you, or is this an aesthetic significant to the Berlin scene?
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> **Andrea:** I think that this trio is special because we have known each other for a very long time, and I mean Sven-Åke has been on the scene much longer than me and Axel. When I came to Berlin, hearing

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129 Barcelona series is Andrea Neumann - piano frame and electronics, Axel Dörner - trumpet, and Sven-Åke Johansson - drums.

him without knowing him, I was super impressed from the beginning. I was sort of a fan. He was doing something that came very close to what I really like in music. It's a kind of playing with stop and go. He could just stop; he was not afraid to stop. It was not about flow, flow, flow, where a sudden silence typically creates a drama, urging the musicians to find a solution. Instead his playing was abstract and spacious, and at the same time super playful. This way of playing had a big influence on me. I don't think I imitated it, it was in me already, and I thought, "Oh, somebody's doing that, what I really like."

We had our first concert in '99 or 2000 in Barcelona, and it was very surprising that it worked so well from the first meeting. We don't rehearse much, we play maybe once a year or sometimes we don't play for two years, and then again twice a year. It's not very often— But I think there's a big common ground of aesthetic agreements between us.

Kjell: A sense of appreciative co-existence, mutual respect, and enjoying each other's idiosyncrasies was striking to me in the concert. It was inspiring on more levels than just musical.

The Barcelona Series concert stretched, and to some extent contradicted, the conventions of reciprocity and dialogue commonly held up as hallmarks of improvised music. The musicians rarely manifested a common dynamic tendency, rarely doubling in a confirming way each other's musical statements. The confirmation of each other was instead placed in the attention to, and the acceptance of, the other's musical independence.[130]

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[130] The attitude reminded of a Quaker meeting, where the participants are encouraged to not refute or praise what someone else is saying but to pay attention and listen carefully and deeply to what is spoken, leaving silence between speakers. This might serve as a description of the aesthetics of the Berlin Echtzeitmusik scene in general.

As free improvised music unfolds, musical relations emerge through initiative, response, affirmation and contrast, but also through respectfully letting someone be. Although it is an example of co-creation where every participant is invited and expected to contribute to the success of the endeavor, the inclusiveness necessary for the music does not require direct and responsive interaction. As in the case with Barcelona Series, the foundation for the music is a common space respectfully shared, not a common carving out musical details.

A performance of improvised music of this kind constructs not only the music but adds another layer of relational experience to the individuals involved. The ethical implications of this process contain a political relevance. However, it might seem disappointing to some that the claims of political expression in improvisation boils down to the inter-relationary dynamics of music making, like a vicarious substitute for a larger political context, a laboratory version of the real thing. In Ellen Waterman's and Julie Smith's article *Listening Trust*, Waterman quotes George Lewis from an interview she conducted in connection to a concert at Vancouver Jazz Festival in 2003. "Improvisational music, Lewis suggests, has an inherent 'potential for challenging and questioning.' But he contends, 'That's as far as I can take it.'"[131] In the same article Waterman refers to Robin Kelley who in

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[131] Julie Dawn Smith, and Ellen Waterman, "Listening Trust," 73.

Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination emphasizes the radical power of art as a quality not necessarily related to protest: "the most radical art is not protest art but works that take us to another place, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling."[132] Barcelona Series were not telling the audience anything through a mediated message, but their performance became a statement through their aesthetics of independent togetherness.

Musical relations in improvised music are defined and acted on at the time of the performance. Any musician can at any moment be louder than everybody else, interrupt an ongoing trajectory, or leave space for someone else's initiative. Those matters are not prescribed by a score but rather initiated by the musicians in a musical relational context. The musical interaction bear resemblance to any social interaction where the negotiation between musicians shapes the balance between individual and the group. What is my individual contribution, and what is the collective result of my individual playing?

> **Kjell:** Can you describe how you experience the social interaction in music, with fellow musicians or with the audience in terms of politeness, tone of voice, cutting someone off, listening, speaking up, being emotional etc.
>
> **Andrea:** I really like combinations with musicians where you can be impolite. There can be agreements so that cutting someone off, or somebody's getting louder than you, is done with a feeling that this

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[132] Robin D. G.Kelley, *Freedom dreams: the Black radical imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2002) 11.

person does it with the awareness that he or she will get quieter again. And that it's just an idea for a moment which makes me not having to play louder too. Instead I can stay quiet because I know this person will stop at one point. I feel that with certain musicians that you have known for a long time, and with whom you have a common base, you can be very impolite, but it's very interesting for the music.

The listening trust Andrea describes becomes a musical factor enabling a collectivity where the sense of dynamics does not need to be conformingly shared, where the musicians trust each other's musical input, creating a contrapuntal, naturally contrasting, musical texture.

Suzanne Thorpe: Two people go into a duo with the expectation that they're going to have a full experiencing and that individuals are going to express multiple voicings of themselves. Also my behavior might be more forceful … I might cut somebody off or be emotional, right? There's an expectation of all of that happening in that space, and therefore I feel less vulnerable. It's almost like a safe space to be doing all of those things. There's almost a permission to do all of that in the musicking space, and less of a permission in normal forms of social relations.

In traditional social situations we don't always know who we're talking to. We don't know what the expectations are, necessarily. We have some expectations, right, but the rules of the game can be very different outside of the musicking space. I'm fairly quiet, [laughs] yet I'm a musician. That's counter-intuitive in the sense that being a musician, it's all about projection. It's projecting sound, it's putting yourself out there. It's making yourself visible, making yourself audible whereas in regular life, I'm fairly quiet. But why do I feel like it's okay for me to express all of those things in the musicking space?

Somehow, there is a permission there that I don't find available elsewhere.

The idea that projecting sound is putting yourself out there implies a sense of ownership of the music. It is not just music, or a faithful rendition of someone else's music, it is the musician's own music. This notion of ownership of your sound is reflected in the organization of music ensembles. Axel Dörner motivates his preference for non-hierarchical group settings with a concern for the music. Musicians who are less constrained by explicit requests play better.

> **Kjell:** In a conversation with Werner Dafeldecker you describe an appreciation for non-hierarchical ensembles.[133] What is attractive with the lack of hierarchy, and do you think that quality can be heard in the music?
>
> **Axel**: I think my music is most interesting when there isn't anybody else telling me what to play. For this reason I look for musicians who think in a similar way. As soon as one musician is telling the others what to do and a hierarchy evolves, these other musicians lose a certain quality of their musical responsibility and it can be heard in the music they play.

The musician and the musical expression

If the sound musicians "put out there" is intrinsically linked to themselves, could there be a tension between the character of that sound and the character of

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[133] Werner Dafeldecker, Axel Dörner, "A Conversation," 366f.

the person? A tension that could be perceived either as an awkward circumstance or as the crux of playing music at all. Joe McPhee describes a strong consistency between himself in a musical setting and himself elsewhere.

> **Kjell:** Joe, the rules that we have for a conversation, are they there when we improvise music, or do you find that situation slightly different?
>
> **Joe:** I try to keep a balance and keep it the way I normally live, I treat people the way I would like to be treated. I try to be thoughtful. I don't shut people up or walk on people. I just try to treat people in music and in my life like that, respectfully. I really do that.
>
> **Kjell:** I have the impression I'm a slightly different person [chuckles] in an improvisatory musical context, in terms of politeness, tone of voice, cutting someone off, or listening, speaking up, being emotional. All those things are -- It's still me, but it's just handled a little differently in a musical context. I am more willing to be confrontational in a musical context. I can be intrusive and still feel considerate. Something in the co-creative process of improvised music makes me allow myself to do that.
>
> **Joe:** That's an interesting idea. For me I don't think so. I think what you see is what you get and most people who know me treat me that way, I don't see them changing anything. I mean if I play with Peter Brötzmann and Peter can be really hard, but it's never been like that with me. Never.

The issue of social interaction in improvised music points towards a related aspect which Joe McPhee's answer above strongly hints at. Seeing the music making as a scene for social interactions, are you behaving differently inside or outside of the music making? Of all my questions, I found question 11 the hardest

to articulate.[134] In order to better capture the multi-facetted background to the matter, I let it fall apart into a series of sub-questions. This compounded question relates to my experience of the clash of constraints illustrated in the concert from the late nineties that I am re-telling in the introduction. In my interviews, when we approached this section, I was aware of, and expecting, an understandable reluctance from the interviewees to answer affirmingly to what could be interpreted as: are you inconsistent in your social behaviors? Might there be a slight split-personality scenario here? Nevertheless, I was insisting in my endeavor to parse out this complex and theoretically interdisciplinary question, stretching analogies between different understandings of identities - musical and other.

> **Andrea:** I'm not nourishing a musical character, I think. I feel quite identified actually. I don't have a big distance to my playing, I have to admit. It's very much me. But in terms of expression, in normal life I am not a very harsh person, but I really like to play harsh sounds. On stage you can get to a certain extreme or to certain a craziness or sublimity. All these things that we just don't have the tools for in daily life. It's not like that is what I am-- It's not my character in real life. It is my expression on stage.
>
> **Kjell:** Do you feel that your musical expression on stage and you as a person off stage overlap?
>
> **Andrea:** I would say yes, I do quite completely overlap. There is not so much distance. Maybe some people say if you criticize their music

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[134] Question 11: What's the correspondence between you on stage and you outside the stage? Do you see yourself having and nourishing a "musical character," expressing yourself in a musical mode, being in potential conflict with who you are off stage? Do you feel that your musical expression and you overlap completely?

that it's only one part of them and there are lots of other parts. When somebody criticizes my music I feel very much entirely criticized.

This part of the conversation can be read as an example of a slightly contradictory confusion of the matter. Partially that can be due to ambiguities in the sequence of question and follow up questions from my part as interviewer. Neumann distinguishes between the character of the sounds and her musical interactions and her "character in real life." At the same time she articulates a total ownership over her music, and consequently, a critique of her music is a critique of her as a person. Erika Fischer-Lichte brings in, with her notion of perceptual multistability, a tool helpful to understand the tension between an expression and the person making that expression. Perceptual multistability signifies an oscillation between what she calls the phenomenal body and the semiotic body. Applied to this context, the former relates to the musician on stage as a private person, and the latter to that person within the content of the artistic expression.[135] This could seem to be a pseudo-issue; different kinds of situations ask for different registers of our expressive capacity. There is nothing remarkable in the fact that we expose different tone and attitudes when we interact with a bus driver, a close friend reminiscing old times, a police officer who just pulled us over, or a child

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[135] Fischer-Lichte uses perceptual multistability in the context of theater, where the actor and the role make up the phenomenal and semiotic bodies.

ringing the doorbell to sell cookies. But in the cases where the artistic expression entails a character which is in stark contrast with all those situations, the perceptual multistability becomes a phenomenon of interest. When I was reading about my performance in the newspaper saying that "it's a good thing that the enormous and unresolved wrath these people seem to carry, gets released in this way and not in physical violence,"[136] the oscillation between modes of expression in one single body, my own "phenomenal and semiotic body," became to me a matter to investigate.

> **Suzanne:** I think it is me. There's a different dynamic which I'm functioning in while playing. But they're all me. [chuckles] We're many personalities and people, and it just depends on what you're in relationship to that helps that come about.
>
> I think that having an expectation that our identity is fixed is a mistake. What we think of as our identity shifts or changes in relationship to who is in the room or what room we're in. I'm a very different person when I'm around my brother [laughs] or around you. When I say very different, I feel different. I feel like I'm being heard differently or received differently. I feel like I can behave a little bit differently or express myself differently. I'm not saying that I've starkly changed, but I probably exhibit a different persona. None of them are not me, they're all me. Some I enjoy being more than others. Some states I enjoy being in than others, more than others.
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> **Kjell:** Where does music fit in, in this?

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136 Westerlund, Jan. "Studion har det mesta." *Västerbottens Kuriren.* Transl. Kjell Nordeson. November 1, 1999.

Suzanne: I think that it's just another state of fluctuating being, it offers just as many variations. I think what appeals to me about musicking is the space of creation and the immediate dynamic between creation and feedback that's available in the musicking space, and there's something about sounding that has a different energy movement that is very satisfying and gratifying to me. It feels effective and is satisfying and gratifying. Maybe more so than words.

Sometimes I can get at emotions I want to express in the musicking space better, easier than I can in language, or at a different level. And there's a communion I think that happens in the musicking space, when I'm playing, that is also very gratifying, that I don't often get in the day-to-day social interactions.

Performance Studies contributes with a natural focus on the potential confusion of identities in performance. In theater, the polarization between an actor and the role the actor is playing is in the foreground. Richard Schechner coins what he calls *restored behavior* to better understand how material is re-used and borrowed over and over. This notion is a good corrective to impossible claims of innovation and a view on authenticity based on a unique and unprecedented sound, which for some musicians is implied in free improvised music. Restored behavior elucidates the situation where a performer has to recognize a heterogenous influence of previous performances, other artists, a tradition, in other words a context larger than him or herself. Schechner describes the intricate circumstance of a performer saying - it's not me, and it's not not me. I'm giving my voice and body to a text written by someone else, but I'm doing it with my

whole being. This can be applied to a performance of composed music, where the musician is playing a creation of someone else, but where, ultimately, the sounding shape of that music could in that moment only come from that musician - not me, and not not me. Schechner exemplifies this with Laurence Olivier playing Hamlet:

> Olivier will not be interrupted in the middle of "To be or not to be" and asked, "Whose words are those?" And if he were interrupted, what could his reply be? The words belong, or don't belong, equally to Shakespeare, Hamlet, Olivier.[137]

In improvised music the direction is the opposite. An improvising musician plays music which, considered as a piece, has no direct precedence, but could not have done that without being a part of an aesthetic history. Then it becomes - me, and not me. If someone during the concert I refer to in the introduction suddenly had stood up and shouted, "who is angry?" What would we have responded? "We are angry, or not we, but the people who developed this style of music were angry, the African-American musicians in the sixties who saw free jazz as an expression of protest, and the European musicians who were part of the free improvised scene that created the seminal album Machine Gun in 1968 were angry, and now

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[137] Richard Schechner, *Between Theater & Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 111.

when I think about it, we too!…" Luckily, we were protected by audience conventions, the question never arose, and we did not have to come up with such an awkward reply. The seemingly disparate sources for our *restored behavior* at that concert may become less disparate considering that Peter Brötzmann, who were a part of our group, actually recorded Machine Gun in 1968.

The Audience - and the right not to change

Performativity goes hand in hand with transformation. The ability to change a fixed state, inherent in the notion of performativity as it is used here, is a trope in progressive art. But in my interviews it has become clear that also the opposite is part of the driving force for these artists. The right *not to change* is equally a reason for these musicians to persist in their practice. On a personal level, transformation is not necessarily a goal. To insist on an aesthetic standpoint might be a way not to conform the way it is expected and suggested by a surrounding world. The tension in this is exemplified in Andrea Neumann's description of the palpable antipathy she sometimes experienced between artists and audience in the early days of the emerging Echtzeitmusik scene in Berlin.

> **Kjell:** How do you perceive the audience, or how does the audience matter to you when you play? Do you think about the audience when playing? Do you think you play differently depending on how you perceive a particular audience?

Andrea: I think the audience is influencing me. I don't know if it's audible in the music, but for example when I hear people coughing, or when I can hear people walking out, it affects me. I like when it's silent and I feel like everyone is really listening. The times when you feel that people are not really listening, it does something to you. I don't know... I can't change what I'm doing, I won't do that, but there is an awareness of the atmosphere and the audience.

Kjell: I have noticed how an audience affects me sometimes. It's exactly this thing that we talked about earlier about patience. If I sense that the audience is not so interested, or I feel that I'm losing the audience, then I unfortunately get impatient with my own music. In those moments I'm not allowing myself to slow down or be spacious. However, it seems to me like the aesthetics connected to the Berlin scene where you are, has made that into something that cannot be traded. You cannot give that away just because the audience seems to be expecting you to play more. To take your time has become a fundamental part of the style.

Andrea: Yes, and also in the beginning, we were sometimes confronted with very harsh reactions, but at that time we were so convinced, and we felt, 'No, we have to do this even though people might walk out.' Then, you start thinking for the audience, 'No, please, you have to take it now, and we won't change it and please go through that.' [chuckles] In the beginning in Berlin there were people, that, when we played with so much silence, started to play with their bottles and make sounds on their bottles to make fun of us. There were serious battles, so we had to be strong. We couldn't just play more, because people were impatient. That was impossible.

Kjell: So there was often a tension in the room?

Andrea: Yes, there was quite a tension, yes.

Chapter 4:

The musical exchange

The catalyst for a discussion

The interviews with the four musicians included are at the center of this dissertation. They provide a focus on subjective experiences that guides the emerging analyses. Accordingly, the musical exchange that preceded the interviews were designed as preparations for conversations where practice meets theory. My intention has been to anchor the conversations to the music of each musician, enabling us to stay close to a specific and subjective experience rather than conducting a more general theoretical discussion. By exchanging music, we, the interviewees and I, had a specific musical interaction to refer to in our conversations. These particular musical exchanges became the bases for discussions about how we relate to other musicians in a musical improvisation; how we are influenced in the moment of performance; and how they thought and felt about their musical responses in this particular context.

The form for the exchange, in which I sent them a recorded improvisation and invited a response, created some confusion. Was it a duo with a time-lapse, or was it separate but related solos? What were the consequences of the separation in time and space between my recording and their responses? Andrea Neumann described the separation in time and space as liberating. It made her less restrained in her response since I was not there to immediately react to it. Joe McPhee, on the other hand, described the exchange as one of the more difficult he had encountered where the disconnection in time and space was more jarring than liberating.

I was intentionally vague in my instructions for the musical exchange, but I described my initial improvisation as a statement; I said in my instructions to them that my music was an expression of "how I play today, how I play in general, how we play where I come from, or just who I am."[138] This description was intended to convey that I was interested in their music as a responding statement similarly related to a personal history and a social context. Beyond that, I gave no further guidance regarding the character of their response. "However you choose to position yourself, or define yourself and your playing through your responding recording is up to you, and will be a part of what we can talk about

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[138] From the instructions to the musicians regarding the musical exchange preceding the interviews. The full instructions are quoted in the Methodological Discussion.

later in the interview." And, furthermore, "[t]he length of the recording is up to you. This aspect of your response is part of your contribution. We do not need to harmonize any aspects of the recordings for any other reason than that you would like to."

I realized from the start that I was asking a lot from these four musicians. Not only was I inviting them to have a lengthy conversation focused on the deceivingly simple question "why do you play the way you do?" a question that can be perceived both elusive and inappropriately challenging, but I was also asking them to produce a recording exclusively made for this occasion. I am profoundly grateful for their generous co-operation. I will, on the following pages, give an account of this exchange and embed each musician's musical contribution in the text.

This was the recorded improvisation I sent to all four musicians:[139]

My improvisation

(audio available at www.kjellnordeson.com/research.html)

Andrea Neumann was the first to respond. Before I go into the details of her music and our exchange, I would like to give some background to Neumann's

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[139] Recorded at the Digital Music Recording Studio at UCSD music department in May 2017. Recording engineers: Michael Rosenbaum and Colin Winegardner.

musical approach. The aesthetic shift from the first generation of German free improvisers to those musicians connected with the Echtzeitmusik scene in Berlin could be described as fairly radical. The improvised music emerging in the late sixties, as played by musicians like Peter Kowald, Peter Brötzmann, Paul Lovens, Alexander von Sclippenbach and others was characterized by dense textures, a quick interplay, and loud outbursts. It was reactive with a sense of dialogue between musicians; it was rich in contrasts, changing direction often and abruptly. German improvised music since the mid 1990s or so, by contrast, tends to feature long relatively static sections that slowly evolve with little overt musical interaction. The music tends to explore more limited musical materials, slowly shifting the musical parameters over longer stretches of time. These and other changes were openly addressed during a series of organized discussions among musicians, composers, and theorists that took place in late 2007 and early 2008 at Kunsthaus KuLe in Berlin-Mitte.[140] The aesthetic discourse of the new generation of improvisers in Berlin was significantly altered. Burkhard Beins stated:

> As it appears to me, the thing that does differentiate our kind of
> improvisation [. . .] from more traditional free improvisation is that

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[140] These discussions were organized by Labor Sonor and the transcript included in *Echtzeitmusik Berlin,* includes comments by Kerstin Fuchs, Burkhard Beins, Björn Gottstein, Thomas Ankersmit, Sabine Ercklentz, Christian Kesten, Stefan Stretch, Michael Renkel, Nina Polaschegg, Kai Fagaschinski, Ekkehard Ehler, Boris Baktschun, Serge Baghdassarians, Chico Mello, Andrea Neumann, Annette Krebs, Arthur Rother.

there is often a sort of evolved consciousness that not everything has to be in every improvisation. Instead there is a kind of focussing. [. . .] We don't have to show now that we can have fits of virtuosity too, and that we can do this and build up a big climax. […] And that this older form of improvisation can develop in all possible directions. It's simply a meandering flow of associations. It continuously progresses in whatever direction, while in our case a kind of feeling for form quite often predominates.[141]

The musicians of this new generation favored long arches in the music, combined with a focus on a small number of details, distinguishing the music from what Beins calls a "meandering flow of associations." Margareth Kammerer emphasizes another aspect of Echtzeitmusik, distinguishing the music from the previous period. She describes an idiom of soft noises:

The noises [. . .] were often very quiet (so quiet that, to be safe, the fridge was unplugged before the concert started), but here they played the leading role.

I had the feeling this 'music of quiet noises' created a complicity between the musicians and the audience, because the music was created in that moment and the audience was part of the process, both as listeners and as 'noisecreaters' (coughing, chair noises, etc.).

This challenge for the musicians and the audience in the process of 'music created in that moment,' was to listen to the noises, to find them, to react to them, and this complicity between the musicians, as well as the complicity between the musicians and the

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141 Burkhard Beins in "Labor Diskurs,' *Echtzeitmusik Berlin: Selbstbestimmung einer Szene,* ed. Burkhard Beins, Christian Kesten, Gisela Nauck, Andrea Neumann (Hofheim: Wolke, 2011), 142f.

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audience, helped to create a new musical language.[142]

Also Neumann, as we saw in the third chapter, refers to this musician-audience relation, however more in terms of tension than complicity.[143]

Andrea Neumann's musical response

Neumann's piece was, at a first listening, clearly contrasting with the music I had sent her. She performs on the instrumental setup she has developed over the years which she calls *inside piano* - a piano frame placed horizontally, with attached objects, amplified and processed in a mixer.[144] Her piece progresses calmly, exposing and exploring every angle of the musical material with meticulous patience. There is absolutely no sense of rush or forward leaning momentum.

Andrea Neumann's musical response

(audio available at www.kjellnordeson.com/research.html)

Kjell: After listening to your piece and listening back to my own improvisation, my music sounds so impatient to me. I'm asking myself: "Why am I in such a rush?" It's an interesting experience to

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[142] Margarete Kammerer, "Echtzeitmusik," *Echtzeitmusik Berlin: Selbstbestimmung einer Szene*, ed. Burkhard Beins, Christian Kesten, Gisela Nauck, Andrea Neumann (Hofheim: Wolke, 2011), 94

[143] See page 141.

[144] For a more detailed description of her instrument, see footnote page 77.

hear myself through the lens of your way of making music. It makes me curious to hear how the recording that I sent you affected your responding piece of music? We didn't play together, of course, it was two separate solos. How did my music affect your response?

Andrea: I think I definitely played differently after having listened to your piece compared to if you would just have told me 'Please send me a 10-minute piece.' My music was informed by yours in a way. Your playing was flowing, with no real stops. And it was rhythmical, percussion-like. I wanted to comment on your music, not only going with it. I wanted to play a little bit like the way you played, but maybe in a more abstract way. I wanted to take those accents but make it differently, a little bit of using impulses, but making something else with it.

In her piece, there are moments not only with percussive sounds but actual sounds of percussion. Close to the two-minute mark, there is a fast regular rhythm on a sound source sounding like a high-pitched drum. The rhythm then stops abruptly, leading into a few seconds of silence where after the music settles in a limping irregular rhythm of subtle but sharp electronic soft sounds. At around three minutes, heavily distorted hits on metal objects propels the music forward, reminiscent of the use of metal objects in John Cage's early percussion pieces. A tremolo-like layer of subdued electronic impulses suddenly succeeds that loud passage. It becomes clear to me what she means by "I wanted to play a little bit like the way you played, but maybe in a more abstract way;" the music throughout is full of references to percussion, but transformed to a musical world that is Neumann's own. Again, at around 4:40 the music settles in an ethereal

gamelan-like sound world with large gongs (although here represented by something much smaller, fitting between the strings of the "inside piano," and close miked). The music now progresses in a slow dancing manner, like a slow majestic dance of irregular rhythms. As Tracy McMullen's *improvisative* implies, I had given my sounds in the recorded music and they were received by Neumann, and transformed. The level of independence in that transformative act is related to the form for the musical exchange of this project. Neumann calls that transformation a *comment*. A *comment* is then not a reactive impulse but a more reflected transformation of my music. The distance in time and space, significant of this particular musical interaction, enabled her to be free in relation to my music. The character of adaptation is different from a live situation.

> **Andrea:** I think when you play live it's much more difficult to comment on the other person, because you are constantly relating to the other person and his or her sounds. This was more interesting for me at that moment, to give you a response instead of playing at the same time, because I could be more myself. I think otherwise, playing with you, I would be more compromising in a way.
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> **Kjell:** Do you mean you would be continuously influenced instead of influenced once? And that you in this exchange could deal with that response in your own way and time?
>
> **Andrea:** Yes, that's it. Yes, and if we would have played together, I would, of course, also have tried to find out how you could work with what I was doing, so that I would maybe be even more empathic. I think when I play live with other people, I'm not commenting. I'm really trying to be with them. But as responding [in

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this exchange], I can go more into — 'Now, I tell you what I think about it, and I'll try to play something that reflects that.' It's actually very far from playing together.

Kjell: How so?

Andrea: Yes, because I think I didn't care how you would respond to my response, so I was very free. But, being in the same room with the other musician, it would be much more influencing. For example, when I would feel that maybe somebody is really getting uncomfortable, maybe I would change. But here, when you are ten minutes on your own, there's nothing like that.

Neumann's response underlines the social character of all music making. She describes empathy, in a live situation, as having a moderating effect on artistic ingenuity clearly affecting the flow of her musical ideas. In the musical exchange here, however, which could be described as a laboratory duo, the immediate social character was gone. She did not have to consider my instantaneous reactions to how she dealt with my music; she did not have to be polite. Previously, when talking about social interaction in improvisation, she said: **"**I really like combinations with musicians where you can be impolite."[145] She connects this state of being impolite with artistic freedom, but also as something that is significant of long friendships. "I feel that with certain musicians that you have known for a long time, and with whom you have a common base, you can be very impolite, but it's very interesting for the music."

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[145] See page 131.

Kjell: I notice when I listen to your music that two things stand out to me. And that is that the music is delicate and bold at the same time. It can be very subtle, and at the same time not shy at all, which is a really powerful combination.

I think partially this comes from the quality of the sounds that you are using, the sound generators. There's something in the electronic sounds that is so direct, and they don't ask for permission somehow, they just emerge. Those sounds have almost no transient time. They start immediately. At the same time, there are these very delicate things going on. Your music is both sparse and intrusive. Do you agree with that?

Andrea: Yes, I like that. I really like those two different aspects and it's attractive to me to use these rougher sounds, the feedbacks, because my electronic sounds are made by feedbacks in the mixer, related to the acoustic sounds. But, for me, it helps to have this kind of foreign force, because I don't do it all myself. Because when you have to really bang on your instrument, it's not completely my style and it's easier to just open a channel and having like a weird impact.

Kjell: That's great. I realize I don't have that in my music making. I am doing everything myself and that puts certain limits to that. Even though I can be very quick and suddenly change dynamics within a fraction of second, it doesn't result in that extreme, I would say unnatural, sharpness that electronics can generate.

The technology provides a brutal quality that does not have to be performed by a body. A flip of a switch on the soundboard, a minimal physical effort, creates a tremendous effect of distortion and noise. To invoke again Schechner's theory on restored behavior - it is Neumann and not Neumann at the same time.

An intentional consequence of her instrumental setup is the possibility of

keeping several parallel activities going simultaneously. Neumann initiates musical events which continue to sound and evolve according to their physical character, such as a swaying object, or a feedback loop.

> **Kjell:** When I listen to your piece, I hear a distinct polyphonic approach. You have contrasting simultaneous layers creating a beautiful and interesting polyphonic texture. Those contrasting superimposed events, or layers, create a nice tension. I was thinking, what a great thing to have that available in your solo playing. Can you explain technically what you are doing?
>
> **Andrea:** Yes, It's really something I have been working on. Maybe, also because I'm a piano player. With ten fingers you can play many voices at the same time, and I try to do that on the *inside piano* too. The use of different pickups helps me do that. So, I have the pickup on one string that just amplifies the normal string sound. And, I have a metal plate where my preparations are lying, and a pickup underneath that. The third source is a mixer producing feedbacks. So, there are three sources and I have only two hands. I'm also looking for sounds that would continue by itself. For example I attach a fork between the strings and when I push it, it makes, "clang, clang, clang, clang, clang" for a long time. Maybe, for 2 minutes.
>
> **Kjell:** Oh, really
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> **Andrea:** So that sound is then already one voice, and I can use my two hands to produce other sounds.

Neumann's sounds are not clones. She has found ways to produce and maintain sounds with her *inside piano* which do not rely on technology producing identical copies repeated over and over again.

Kjell: A circumstance that to me makes your polyphonic textures so interesting, is the absence of loops. That's otherwise another way of creating layers of polyphony. But, I think there' something of the excitement that is lost when you as a listener identify a loop. And, I didn't do that in your music.

Andrea: Yes, there is no loop machine.

Axel Dörner's musical response

Axel Dörner describes the exchange of music before the interview in a way akin to Rebecca Schneider's deconstruction of a solo. Dörner recognizes that he has actually performed a solo, which is technically correct. But in the understanding of a solo he points to an immediate and formative relation to the past. The solo is a momentary result of all previous influences in synergy with the circumstances of the moment, "answering a thousand calls," as Schneider puts it.[146] The recording I sent to Dörner was the most recent of those calls. Added to that synergy between present and past comes the intention to project into the future

Dörner's musical response is a chain of musical ideas, fully formed from the moment they appear. The piece starts with a single note held for fourteen seconds: a B-flat played mezzo forte in a comfortable register. This note is abruptly

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[146] Rebecca Schneider, "Solo Solo Solo," 40.

followed by a simmering multi-phonic noise, which after twenty seconds shifts into an eighteen-second stretch of static, acoustic, noise. All throughout the improvisation different contrasting sections follow after one another with no transitions between sections, nor development within a section. Each section starts as if a door has opened into a new room, and the sound in the room cannot have been anticipated by the sound of the previous room. The piece ends for no apparent dramaturgic reason other than as a result of an unsentimental decision to end.

The sounds of his trumpet, the circular breathing, and the compositional trajectory are idiosyncratic to Dörner's solo playing as it has evolved since the mid-nineties.

Axel Dörner's musical response

(audio available at www.kjellnordeson.com/research.html)

Axel: The music I'm playing is influenced by my experiences in the past, the listening to your piece was just before recording my piece, so everything I played was related in a way to your music in my imagination.

Kjell: How would you then describe the communication in this exchange? It is clearly not a duo in a conventional meaning, but we are somehow communicating musically.

Axel: A duo can also be that the two musicians of the duo play only one after the other and never simultaneously. The music of the other

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is also very present if it's played in this way. If the music of the other is present it will influence the imagination and invention of the own music.

The present moment reaches backwards and forwards. Simultaneity is not crucial to a duo; the influence and sense of togetherness in the music making is plastic and survives a separation in time. In other words, the presence of the other's music is not necessarily contingent on an actual presence but on a memory or an impression that lingers, which is also the case when the musicians actually are playing in the same room and time. We saw in the previous chapter how Dörner de-emphasized the distinction between improvisation and composition, meaning that there is no improvisation that is not also composition, and vice versa. In a similar way, the music in a duo is not only a response to a present moment. It is always in duo with an ever changing and calling history. This is another version of the Heraclidean encouragement to play again. The present moment is always different from a previous one.

Suzanne Thorpe's musical response

Suzanne Thorpe approached the task by first deciding how to interpret the word *response* in this context. The time-component contributed to a confusion

around the distinction between a response and her own musical initiative. Again, there is no initiative that is free from earlier influences and the task then, theoretically, is to distinguish what is a response to a particular call and what is the integrated response to a thousand earlier calls.

Suzanne Thorpe's musical response

(audio available at www.kjellnordeson.com/research.html)

Thorpe establishes a grounded starting point in her responding solo. A single note is calmly repeated four times with subtle changes in intonation each time. Gradually, a three-note motive emerges, creating a sparse pentatonic character. At around two minutes she increases the density of the music, adding disruptive blow sounds, fast scale movements, and thrills. Three minutes into the piece, the density is increased further by the sounds of the flute being electronically processed and mixed back in with the acoustic playing. At 5:30, Thorpe abruptly stops the active melodic playing, now letting the processed mechanic key sounds take over. After a while, the initial three-note motive reappears, now superimposed by a layer of processed mechanic key sounds. The flurry of mechanic noise which was the endpoint in a process of gradually increased complexity, now serves as an accompanying layer to the reappearing

initial calm, melodic, playing. The improvisation ends with this state of simultaneously layered, contrasting, endpoints.

> **Suzanne:** It's an interaction but it's time delayed. There's that component of it. I think because you were using the word "response" that I was thinking in those terms as oppose to-well, I was thinking dialogically. I listened for a few times to what you sent and, I heard what I might play in real time in response. Because you were using this word, or how I might contribute to the conversation - I'd say it has to be a response. It's one-sided because it's not in real time so you can't really activate something new unless you go off on a tangent.

The word dialogic in Bakthin's terminology resonates with Thorpe's use of the word *dialogically*. The significance of Bakhtin's view on dialogue, which later was picked up by poststructuralists, is the idea that nothing can stand outside of a dialogic process. This is another step on the intellectual trajectory away from the illusion of an independent self. Bakthin's dialogics, structuralism, Geertz's thick description, Butler's peformativity within a scene of constraint, all help us understand the web in which we dangle. The sense of navigating in all that, however, is necessary for our feeling of being creative which, illusive or not, is the base not only for a sense of agency but for artistic activity in general. The one-sidedness of the dialogue in this musical exchange was challenging to Thorpe. The obvious rigidity of my pre-recorded contribution, gave her two options - staying in a response mode, or "go off on a tangent." The latter is one of the main keys to

the performative potential in a musical improvisation. The empathy of Waterman's *listening trus*t is a choice where a musician prioritizes a caring function, taking responsibility for the common success of a musical performance and the musicians involved. McMullen's *improvisative* lifts up generosity as a way out of the focus on recognition, stifling to the musical progression through its predictable nature. But Thorpe's "going off on a tangent" challenges the expectations of a listening trust and stretches the generosity of the improvisative. It resonates with Neumann's predilection for "impolite" improvisation and holds a way out of the Kafkaesque respect for perceived but imaginary laws, pointed out by Butler and Derrida. In the end, in Thorpe's recollection of the situation, the tension between response and going off on tangent results in a musical substance - "a motive or something"- guiding her in the recording of her responding music.

> **Suzanne:** I was thinking about how much of this is responsive and how much of this is me trying to initiate something new. But because of the time delay, that's tricky. I probably defaulted more to response as oppose to pushing for something new, often. What happened was I gradually moved into something new but then circled back to response mode which - -
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> **Kjell:** When you say 'something new,' is that like you're playing but not necessarily as a response but unaffected somehow?
>
> **Suzanne:** Something that's built upon what's already been said or something that I might try to be starting to initiate. When I say 'something new,' I can't claim that to be unrelated, but it may not be part of the original thread of thought in response to. It may be

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tangential or something that's added to it. It's like the new thought
but that new thought was inspired by the original conversation. In
answer to your question, while I was listening to what you sent, I
was listening for what my responses were. I think I kept hearing
something, I kept hearing a motive or something. That became the
groundwork for what I recorded.

Joe McPhee's musical response

For Joe McPhee, the fact that I was not present physically in the room

caused him considerable problems. He got back to me with the comment "This is

probably the most difficult project ever for me…"[147] I was both grateful and

honored that he had sent me a recorded solo, and curious of what he found

challenging with the process. McPhee, who is constantly traveling, had found a

moment in a hotel room to record his responding music. The premise of a related

response, was paradoxical since I was not there as a partner in a dialogue. The

immediate feedback of a musical dialogue was non-existent but since he had

(correctly) interpreted the task as taking my music in direct consideration when

responding, the experience of a dialogue was staggered.

McPhee's music, performed on tenor saxophone, is solemn and thoughtful,

bare and calmly playful. It explores the timbral possibilities of the instrument in a

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[147] From an email exchange in March 2018.

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slowly evolving melodic trajectory, gradually inflecting the notes into multi-phonics. Some passages employ blowing sounds with no clear pitch, like percussive moments of punctuation. The piece ends with barely audible multi-phonics.

Joe McPhee's musical response

(audio available at www.kjellnordeson.com/research.html)

Kjell: Do you think it would have been different if we had played in the same room at the same time?

Joe: I think it would have been very different. For me it was difficult to play because I didn't know exactly where to move at first. I tried several different ideas and then I said, "Oh no this is too much." Finally I said "No, I can't keep you waiting." So I put something there.

At first, I thought it was going to be a lot easier than it was but it was very complex for me. I listened to what you played and I tried to think shall I play with this, shall I follow it? I was in a hotel and I had a recorder in a bathroom and it made it sound extraordinary. [Laughter] So then I thought, well you made a statement and I'll make a response, and that's all I did. […] When I listened to your playing I wasn't listening for melody or that kind of thing, I was just hearing the kind of conversation that you were laying out there.

McPhee's description of the situation is diametrically different from Andrea Neumann's. What Neumann describes as the liberating effect of not having to deal with my musical reactions in real time creates to McPhee a problem where the

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musical dialogue suffers from a lack of input. His solution was to, regardless of

not having the generating presence of another person, still "put something there."

> **Kjell** Do you ever, when you are improvising in a duo, have the feeling that you are inhibited by the presence of the other person?

> **Joe:** No. I would have preferred if you were in the room and I could respond to you immediately. Here it was kind of after the fact and I was trying to do something that wasn't like a conversation. It was a completely different experience for me; one that I was not familiar with.

> I didn't know how to proceed when I first heard your solo. If I should think of it as a duo, but no it wasn't a duo, it was almost call and response in a way but in a very different way than I had expected.

One important aspect of this musical exchange is the difference in task for

the interviewees and for myself. They all had to constructively handle a presumed

but elusive musical dialogue while I had the freedom to record whatever I wanted,

although with my interviewees collectively in mind. My contribution was not

directed specifically to one person. I certainly would have played differently if I

had recorded my music after I had listened to each of the responses. As a reflection

of a future project, it would be interesting to continue the exchange of solos with

each of the musicians. Each trajectory made up by the series of musical responses

with each musician would naturally diverge, but how? What would be the

musical world evolving from a maintained musical dialogue with Joe McPhee

compared to one with Andrea Neumann? This is a reminder that our musical

character and our musical choices - in short, our musical identities - to a large

extent evolve in interaction with other musicians. Without speculating more in a

work that was not done here, I want to refer to what I heard bass player William

Parker say in a Q and A after a performance we did for music students in Sweden

in the late nineties. Quoting from memory, he said "Just play as much as you can

with as many as you can, and a mature personal musical voice will eventually

naturally emerge."

Family resemblance

There are obvious similarities as well as differences between the five

musicians (including myself) in this project. What are the factors one can assume

influence our playing? Three are Europeans, two are Americans; three are men,

two are women; four are white, one is black; four are middle-aged, one is in his

late seventies. Those are the obvious demographic facts implying further cultural

and aesthetic differences. Stylistically, the picture is more complex with different

phases in life having a variety of influences. We have all as musicians invested our

time and efforts in more than one style of music. Jazz, free jazz, classical music,

contemporary WAM, rock, and free improvised music, might represent the most

obvious stylistic factors at play among the five of us. Furthermore, the aesthetic

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and philosophic world of Pauline Oliveros has directly influenced both Suzanne Thorpe and Joe McPhee. Technology and electronics strongly inform the musical character of Andrea Neumann's and Suzanne Thorpe's music. Axel Dörner's highly personal way of playing the trumpet has evolved in close encounter with the extended techniques developed for trumpet in the last forty years in WAM and other experimental music. The vital history of the contemporary classical percussion repertoire, and the extended techniques for percussion developed in the free improvised music idiom, have to a high degree influenced my awareness of the sound possibilities of my instruments. I am here trying to illustrate in broad strokes the disparate factors likely to be crucial in the development of how each of us play the way we do. The question then is, what if anything holds the music of these five people together?

First, what might seem to be differences initially can be modified to proximity later. McPhee says in an interview that between 1980 and 1994 he played so often in Europe that people started to believe he lived there. Correspondingly, in this period he rarely performed in the US.[148] The relative ease with which we travel now is one of the factors that bring different scenes together. And even more so, the digital distribution of music and information totally

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[148] Fred Jung, "A Fireside chat with Joe McPhee," published Nov. 18, 2003, accessed August 24, 2018.

counteracts the physical distance, enabling visibility and contact between artists and styles.

Secondly, improvisation as a modus operandi facilitates musical co-operation. This is not a reflection about aesthetic similarities, but rather an observation how improvisation can function to overcome aesthetic differences. When it is possible to meet someone for the first time, sit down together in front of an audience, sharing your sounds in a successful musical event, every typical obstacle for togetherness loses its weight. The recognition of improvisation as central to music making is the decisive factor in what I call *family resemblance.* The music can sound different, be shaped in different environments, but with an attitude of negotiation, giving, and receiving, eventually coming together creatively through improvisation.

Family resemblance in action

How does this suggested *family resemblance* among the five musicians involved in this dissertation manifest sonically? Is the resemblance enough to create a successful common music? The answer to that question is obviously contingent on a subjective sense of what successful music sounds like. In order to play with expectations and notions of musical qualities, I have put together an

edited version of all five pieces of music superimposed and played simultaneously. The sound of this experiment is added below as *Family Music*. I have given each player a dedicated place in the stereo image and adjusted levels. I have not moved any sections back and forth in time, but certain individual passages are occasionally muted where I have found the density being problematic. I have gently tried to compensate for differences in sound quality between the pieces; the recording circumstances vary between fully equipped studio, home studio environment, and a hotel bathroom. This is technically a mash-up where I have been the sole decision maker. It should be viewed as a play with music where a new originally unintended context is imposed to the material. None of the musicians had this in mind when they recorded their contribution.

Family music

(audio available at www.kjellnordeson.com/research.html)

There is clear dissatisfaction with genre names and labels on music among the musicians I interviewed. However, *family resemblance* is not a genre; it is the result of a working method that removes a number of obstacles between the musician and the music. It implies a method that does not need scores to be understood and interpreted; it does not provide a set of formulas dictating the

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phrasing of melodic material; it expects everyone involved to contribute material to gather around at that moment; it asks of the participants to consider and relate to other musicians musical input, whatever it is, in a process of instant composing. One could say this sets up a situation that cannot fail. But is that true? And are those circumstances contributing qualities even to music that is not created naturally and intentionally, like in *Family music*?

Listening to *Family music*, it is a music that absorbs contrasts. The music gets tossed around and pushed at from all sides. It is rugged music that affords contradictory musical statements without losing its balance. At the same time, *family music* is full of serendipitous moments giving the impression of a common preconception of the music. The start with a concert Bb in the flute, followed by a concert Bb in the trumpet creates an eerie sense of common ground, considering those starts were not negotiated beforehand. When Neumann a little later adds a concert Db we are in a suggestive territory of a Bb minor tonality, surrounded by noise and rhythmic accents. Shortly after that when the saxophone joins with a concert Bb one could say the whole family is gathered. The particular serendipity around the Bb might be explained by the mechanics of the different instruments; an example of how technology conforms the music. Regardless, the effect is striking and unifying.

In the piece, and significant to the music of all five musicians here, there is a non-conflicting continuum between noise and tone. The resulting aesthetic provides the music with stability; no sound or noise threatens to cause the music to capsize. Musical creativity then becomes a much broader question, not concerning whether a specific interval fits in with a surrounding chord, but instead what does a sound, noise, tone, and timbre add to the surrounding sound world. The risk of exaggerated eclecticism is a consequence of this stylistic freedom, which might be why free improvised music in the 70s, as a reaction, evolved into a stylistically narrow mode of improvisation, counter to its potential. This conformingly sounding music contrasted with the idea of musical freedom. Free improvised music became idiomatic, shaped by a strict strategy of avoiding eclecticism and the traditional treatment of melody and rhythm in jazz and classical music.

Andrea Neumann says in an email after listening to *Family music*, and reading my attempts to define *family resemblance*: "I like what you want to say with this term *family resemblance*. My only concern is that families are somehow bounded by 'blood' - there is some biological implication. You can't choose them."[149] The biological aspect is an evident reason to object. There is likely

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[149] Email sent on September 13, 2018.

nothing in what facilitates a kinship in musical improvisation that is based on biological factors. Neumann suggests the German word Wahlverwandtschaften, which in English would be 'elective affinities.' or 'kindred of choice.' This suggestion turns away from the binding aspect of the word *family,* instead pointing at a conscious choice.

Suzanne Thorpe points out "how it signals likeness but not sameness," which is close to its meaning in the philosophic context from where the term *family resemblance* is borrowed. "It also points to the familial-like tendencies of music scenes, an aspect I'm particularly fond of. Once we're 'in the family,' so to speak, we can call upon other family members at any time." She continues: "A potential tension the term triggers, for me, is the implication of destiny that a family gene pool implies."[150] There is a performative aspect to the definition of a scene that comes from self-identification which could seem to be contrary to the notion of family. But the word family is ambiguous enough to point in different directions. The expectation of a *family resemblance* is either non-volitional or created intentionally. Thorpe concludes: "[d]oes our family define *us,* or do we design *it*?" With this question Thorpe distinguishes the performative mechanisms of a music community, emphasizing, as Neumann does, the 'kindred of choice' aspect of

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[150] Email sent on September 24, 2018.

familial relations in music. The social component to music making, which is embedded in *family resemblance,* resonates with the attention and consideration of Waterman's *listening trust,* the generosity of McMullen's *improvisative,* and the boldness of Thorpe's *going off on a tangent.* Taken all together these circumstances in their best moments generate a beautifully creative environment for improvised music.

Chapter 5:

Musical fluency

I really like to break the flow of the music, but this I do very fluently.

(Andrea Neumann)

In May 2015 I presented a performance called *Fluency.*[151] It was a performance growing out of my interest in how an improvising musician can create a seemingly endless flood of music from a limited and relatively undefined reference material. The performance started with an eleven-minute improvisation where I had given myself a number of loose preconceptions of musical material to use in any order and in any form. These musical ideas had no definite form that could be reproduced; they all existed as potentials to form. The music was intentionally dense and fast, with no obvious resting points. What are the factors

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[151] May 29, 2015, in the Experimental Theater at CPMC, UC San Diego.

involved in creating that output of music?

Fluency is an aspect of language related to how efficiently a communicator is able to convey a message. It is commonly associated with spoken language; a speaker is more or less fluent in a specific language and a specific setting. Fluency in a language means more than being proficient in that language; it implies a deeper understanding of more than grammar and syntax. It entails a mastery of intonation and includes an understanding of the references through which the language has evolved; to be fluent in a language means to be closely familiar with a culture.

Fluency reaches outside the realms of spoken language. A bodily movement can be fluent or inhibited. An interaction with another person can be fluent or awkward. The notion of fluency in daily use expands easily to include various forms of action and behavior that unfold smoothly and efficiently.

Fluency, in general, has a positive connotation. It is associated with an executive ease and a satisfying coordination of mental and physical abilities. One is fluent in situations in which one functions optimally. However, fluency is in opposition to resistance which, with an implied tentativeness, leads to a certain thoughtfulness. Fluency then, through its close relation to ease, becomes a double-edged sword where the pleasure of fluency can be in opposition to finding an

unconventional inventive solution. Adam Alter describes in *The Benefits of Cognitive Disfluency* both cognitive and social benefits of a lack of fluency.[152] His research shows that cognitive disfluency leads to a deeper processing through a greater need for abstraction, which makes the cognitive process slower but deeper. Furthermore, social disfluency means a greater ability (by necessity) to "dampening the tendency to overdisclose,"[153] which in some situations could be an advantage.

Flow is a sibling phenomenon to fluency but with the addition of optimal resistance as an embedded factor. Fluency without resistance as well as with too much resistance impedes flow. Flow, then, is fluency in an optimally challenging setting. The research on flow is its own niche and only partially overlapping with the idea of the, in comparison, less complex notion of fluency.

Fluency sums up all the factors involved in generating speech. It can easily be applied to musical improvisation as well, where an endless number of factors influence the delivery in terms of momentum and substance. Improvisatory idiosyncrasies evolve over decades; layers upon layers of musical material with roots in various cultural and personal contexts melt into a personal musical dialect

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[152] Adam Alter, "The Benefits of Cognitive Disfluency," *Current Directions in Psychological Science,* vol. 22 no. 6 *(*December 2013): 439.

[153] Ibid., 439.

creating a veritable palimpsest of musical experiences, and in all of this, fluency is a decisive generative factor.

For many improvising musicians it is problematic to articulate in what musical genre their music belongs. Hybridization and nomadic musical identities affect and can problematize a sense of fluency. Fluent in what, one may ask? My own experience as an improvising musician was a long period oscillating between musical orthodoxy and eclecticism. Time coalesced these into a personal idiosyncratic practice; a somewhat painful process where musical and personal maturity in synergy gradually contributed to a sense of musical fluency.

In Conversation

> **Kjell**: Would you describe your musical language as fluent?
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> **Suzanne:** I guess the times that I'm in a space of what we'll call fluency, that's when my musical voicing feels the most available, my own personal voicing feels the most available. That's a fair way to characterize that.
>
> Again, it's more about the self-consciousness in the effort. For me, that determines whether or not I'm "fluid or not fluid." It's not whether or not the editing is happening, it's just how aware of it am I, and when does that awareness cripple my efforts and become a problem.

Alter's thoughtfulness, which he describes as the benefit of disfluency, has a counterproductive side. Self-consciousness, which is the backside of

thoughtfulness, is the factor that impedes Thorpe's sense of available voice. Fluency is for her indicative of a non-crippled improvisatory creativity.

Dörner expands the notion of fluency to involve our being and our environment. Meaning emerges in the interaction between musician and listener, an interaction that by necessity is fluid like a Heraclidean river. He emphasizes the proximity between fluent and fluid, implying a liquid character.

Kjell: Axel, would you describe your musical language as fluent?

Axel: I would describe it as fluent in a sense that it's constantly changing since I'm also constantly changing. In our existence (and therefore also in the existence of my music) time is always implicit. So I don't look at my music as something static, even a recording on a published CD is changing because every listener is changing, so it's impossible to hear the same recording twice. I see my music as a part of a flow. But I think my music is not a language, it is a way to express something which cannot be expressed in language.

Characteristic for any spoken language is that meaning is fluid and established in interaction. The fluidity in the emergence of meaning in music, however, is what ultimately makes Dörner reject the thought of music being a language at all.

Joe McPhee interprets fluency as being linked to the act of playing in a concrete way. At the same time as he recognizes technical limitations in his playing, he sees those limitations as a key to a boldness and fearlessness that is his

personal playing style. What Alter above describes as "the tendency to overdisclose," an unwanted result of a high degree of fluency, could have a corresponding flip side in an "inability to hide," coming from a lack of fluency. A quality, one can argue, that is highly valuable when playing music.

> **Kjell:** Joe, would you describe your musical language as fluent?
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> **Joe:** Probably not. I'm always as though I'm in orbit falling towards the earth, I will never get there, but I try to be more fluent on my instruments. I've played with some really great saxophone players, for example Evan Parker or somebody like that. I appreciate what they do, but I just keep trying to become better, but I don't think I'm fluent on my instruments. I just try my very best, like I said I know my limitations and I also know that I can do things that many people playing the same instruments can't do because, they won't think in that direction, they won't jump off that bridge with me. I don't worry about that so much, I can handle myself pretty well but [laughter] I do know my limitations.

McPhee is honest and modest, but also aware of his strength. His limitations are not an obstacle in any way to his artistic expression, rather the opposite; they are part of a methodology. In our conversations, he often returns to "jumping off the bridge," or as he said about his preparations for solo improvisations - "If I'm going to crash or if I'm going to float up or whatever's going to happen . . . I can finally just release my ego and let things be the way they are…" The lack of fluency which he refers to as limitations, is a help, almost a

guarantee, that a surface will rupture, and a core will be visible.

Andrea Neumann articulates another angle of this revealing aspect of musical improvisation. She relates to the joy of the ambiguity of musical expression.

Kjell: In your text *Playing Inside Piano*, you say:

The happiness of engaging with sounds rather than with words,

the happiness of revealing yourself in sounds,

the happiness of playing with this.[154]

Those are the three lines that you begin your text with, I think?

Andrea: Yes.

Kjell: Are those your words or are you quoting someone?

Andrea: No, those are my words. It's a little bit what you were asking before but what I was a in a way denying, right? Now you control me with what I wrote. I don't know. (laughing)[155]

Kjell: Later in the text you use a metaphor of dancing freely instead of learning the dance steps. And later you express the importance of "trusting oneself while forming the now." Taken together, those lines read almost like a credo. Do you still agree with those words?

Andrea: Yes, sort of. I think this analogy with dancing is very much because I was a trained piano player. And, I mean the classical music

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[154] Andrea Neumann, "Playing Inside Piano," 203

[155] See page 182.

that you can play, is so beautiful, I still think that. But it's just music that is already done by other people. That was the great discovery to create something yourself and trust yourself. Yes, right, I still agree with those words.

Kjell: Does the happiness of engaging with sounds rather than with words come from the fact that words are so clear and so square? The sounds are much more ambiguous somehow. But you are saying 'revealing yourself in sounds' as if they're still saying something about you.

Andrea: With words you think, I like to think, and I also think about sounds but there is another zone too. The music you play is informed by a lot of different elements – instincts, theoretical considerations, emotions, any music you heard in your life, other people's music, things that are not logically related – that's why I think you can't compare words and sounds. They touch the human system at very different places.

Neumann emphasizes the playfulness and the ambiguity with which she as an improvising musician represents herself in sound. In that regard, music resembles poetry, deeply seated in an elusive play with its non-descriptive and evocative qualities of sound.

Fluency, fluidity, and flow are adjacent and sometimes overlapping notions. After talking back and forth about what fluency in music could possibly mean, we ended that part of the conversation with:

Kjell: Would you describe your musical language as fluent?

Andrea: I really like to break the flow very much, but this I do very fluently.

Music and language

Broadening the discussion on musical expression to include a linguistic perspective, how does music communicate anything beyond the social connotations and the "thick" understanding of music? Is there a primary relation linking musical sounds to emotion, information, and communication? This question should not be understood as being in opposition to a cultural or political view but taking the question of communication to a micro perspective. What is the equivalent of prosody in music? The discussion on these ending pages of this chapter is based on questions 5 - 9 in my interviews. Besides the discussion on fluency above, is it relevant and realistic to investigate music in the context of language?

One can argue that the function of music as expression outside the spoken language precedes the development of the spoken language, both historically in an evolutionary sense but also in every human's development. Lacan's description of *the real*, often referred to as "the state of nature from which we have been forever severed by our entrance into language,"[156] however contentious, implies a

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[156] Dino Felluga, "Modules on Lacan: On the Structure of the Psyche." *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. Last update: 1/31/2011. Purdue U. Accessed 8/26/2018 <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/lacanstructure.html>.

need for expression not covered by the spoken language.

The idea that music is not a language in a linguistic meaning is for the most part based on the obvious observation that there is no clear semantic component in instrumental musical expression, at least not similar to the direct relation between words and meanings, signifier and signified, characteristic for spoken language. However, several other aspects of language are there: syntax, prosody, and intonation. Music and spoken language also share similar factors of dynamics, density, speed, phrasing, timbre, and not least - intention, all part of meaningful expressive communication.

Tia DeNora gives a clarifying account of the extensive research done on the topic of music and language.[157] She distinguishes between an expressionist and a formal standpoint, where the expressionist standpoint (often) takes a literal approach, trying to decipher music as if it were just another language but with words we do not yet know. The formalists with a more detached relation to the expressivity of music, approaches music, influenced by Saussure, as a system of signifiers but without signifieds. DeNora comments that: "[…] one can begin to see why the formalist position is often perceived as the more 'intelligent' side of the musical meaning debate, aloof as it is from the morass of expressionist issues."

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[157] Tia DeNora, "How is Extra-Musical Meaning Possible? Music as a Place and Space for Work," *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring, 1986): 84-94.

DeNora argues, however, that both approaches mistakenly focus directly on the musical object itself. Instead, meaning, for her, emerges in the interaction between musician and listener. She is indebted to an intellectual lineage from Wittgenstein's language-games, and John R. Searle's speech-acts, and points towards enacted cognition and agent network theories, in which meaning is created and re-shaped in interaction between a number of "actors."[158] The question, then, becomes not to decipher what music as an object means, but rather what meanings emerge in a musical context. DeNora concludes that considering the listener being an active part in the creation of meaning in music changes the view of music as a species of language. Instead, "it actually may be more appropriate to treat language 'as a species of music.'"[159]

A hypermimetic hypothesis

Mark Changizi applies an evolutionary perspective on the relation between music and language.[160] He describes music as being in relation to language, but not to language as we know it today. Rather as both being part of a shared

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[158] DeNora's article is written in 1986, and thus anticipates the development of enacted cognitive science and theories of distributed agency.

[159] DeNora, "How is Extra-Musical Meaning Possible?" 90.

[160] Mark A. Changizi, *Harnessed: How language and music mimicked nature and transformed ape to man* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2011).

evolution with its points of connection dating before human expressivity diverged into spoken language, music, dance etc.

Changizi points to a hypermimesis where music subliminally trigger our sensibilities for perceptions of human movements. The representational and mimetic qualities of music according to this idea are proto-semantic. Basically, everything we can do, every skill, every higher mental ability must be related to what the brain has evolved to be able to do, which is to perceive nature. Skills like reading, writing, and music are too complex for a child to learn without having a brain that from its earliest stages is shaped by evolution to be able to do so. Changizi calls the mechanism for this "nature-harnessing,"[161] which is "mimicking nature so as to harness evolutionarily ancient brain mechanisms for a new purpose." The nature-harnessing human mind has not learned music, music is what it is because of what the mind has evolved into. Anything else would not be perceivable as music.

Representation might always be there in the same way as our bodies always are there. The striving for an experience not caged by representations is similar to the longing for a free spirit untethered by a body. Mimesis and representation lose their conventional character when they are drawn down to a micro perspective.

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[161] Changizi, *Harnessed*, 5

These micro-representations play with our intuitive perception of the world. They approach Hanslick's dream of context free music. Mimetic representations, on the deep level of perception Changizi is proposing, become abstract carriers of emotionally charged information with unclear semantic content.

There is a potential theoretical connection between a hypermimetic theory of music and affect theory as it is presented by Brian Massumi, a connection that I will only suggest briefly. Despite affect theory's anti-representational stance, they share a similar notion of a tangible experience emerging from an elusive core. Massumi says: "With every sight we see imperceptible qualities, we abstractly see potential, we implicitly see a life dynamic, we virtually live relation. It's just a kind of shorthand to call it an object. It's an event. An object's appearance is an event, full of all sorts of virtual movement."[162] Transferred to music, the musical object (phrase, motif, or sound) becomes shorthand for something more, or something else which Massumi later relates to Suzanne Langer's concept of *semblance*, a notion that adds a level of abstraction and symbolism to a discussion that easily gets polarized by the contentious notion of representation.[163] Instead, semblance implies a link between music and expression that is not as explicit. It is not a

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[162] Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts*, (MIT Press, 2011), 43.

[163] Suzanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribner's, 1953).

representation of an object we hear in music, it is the semblance of an event, or with Massumi, a process.

If I knew what I was saying, I would probably not say it

Continuing the evolutionary narrative to understand further music's expressive qualities, music might have grown useful in social ritual through a low degree of specificity in regard to representation. The more developed the spoken language became as a tool to distinguish subtleties in semantics, the stronger was the need to have a socially engaging mode of expression that eluded such precision. Ian Cross points out:

> While [spoken] language self-evidently can also play a significant role in managing situations of social uncertainty, in many ways a communicative medium that lacks language's semantic specificity - or better, possesses the attribute of 'floating intentionality' or semantic indeterminacy - is better suited to the management of social uncertainty than is language, with its capacity for unambiguous meaning and hence assertion of conflicting viewpoints of the dynamics of socially uncertain situations.[164]

In other words, ambiguity and a 'floating intentionality' can be positive qualities distinguishing music from spoken language which instead gradually

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[164] Ian Cross,,"Four Issues in the Study of Music in Evolution," *The World of Music* 48, no. 3 : 55-63 (2006): 60.

evolved to better be able to deal with the specific details of human communication.

The interesting circumstance here is the grey-zone of ambiguous meaning that is refined in music, and art in general. In my MA thesis I wrote about how MD Bernie Siegel used drawings by his cancer patients to make sure they agreed with and believed in the treatments he suggested.[165] Siegel explains that, if he were to ask his patients directly, he knew that they would invariably be modestly optimistic about their prognosis and grateful for their treatment. However, in their drawings they unintentionally expressed a great amount of anxiety and little hope for the proposed treatments. His point is that they could express these emotions because they did not understand the visual language in their own drawings. His previous experience had convinced him that the patients would have censored themselves, had they expressed themselves verbally, in order to not seem rude. The drawings gave crucial information to the doctor and were valuable in deciding the type of treatments needed to be effective and fully emotionally sanctioned by the patients.[166] Siegel interpreted systematically his patients' drawings, claiming that the meaning was veiled, or at least ambiguous, to the

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[165] Nordeson, "Improvisation and Identity," 44ff.

[166] Bernie Siegel, *Love, Medicine, & Miracles : Lessons Learned About Self-Healing from a Surgeon's Experience with Exceptional Patients.* 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

patients themselves.[167]

I had anticipated an unwillingness from the interviewees to go deeper into a discussion about the expressive nature of music. First, because it would be futile to claim a certain knowledge about what the nature of that expression really is. Secondly, the view of music as a language signals a view on music that is close to a programmatic view which would downgrade music to a decipherable expression of thought and emotion, which it is not. I initiated the topic by asking about their sense of distance or similarity between musical expression and emotional expression.

> **Kjell:** Is it possible to separate musical expression from emotional expression? Is giving musical shape overlapping or corresponding to an emotional state present in music making, or do you prefer to talk about those two things separately?
>
> **Andrea:** I think I'm playing music because I need another space that is not the space of emotion or language expression. Because then I would maybe express it in another way or in words. You can't look for emotions in the other parts of life and transfer it into the music; it's something else. I'm happy that this [the music] is existing apart from the other world.

The attractive qualities of music, for Neumann, lie in the differences to spoken language, not the similarities. These differences are maintained by

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[167] Siegel interpreted the drawings based on Jungian theories.

consciously separating music from the expectations of conventional linguistic communication. She expresses no need to understand anything about what music communicates. The lack of semantic clarity or other language-like characteristics are not teasing or engaging to Neumann, but rather a relief.

Inherent in this question lies a philosophical issue of the nature of emotions. Can behavior of any kind be uncoupled from emotions? The question loses its significance in a musical context if the answer is no to that question; all actions have a root in an emotion. But however closely related, it is not the philosophical issue I want to clarify here, it is the musicians view on their own music and its emotional content. McPhee said unequivocally "For me, they are totally combined, I don't know how to separate them." Dörner points at the lack of distinct correspondence between musical expression and the emotional response it triggers in a listener:

> **Axel:** […] emotions are constantly implicit in everything we are doing. For this reason there is always an emotional aspect in musical expression implicit. For me it's more a question which kind of emotion is corresponding with the musical shape being expressed. This can be very different from listener to listener and is additionally very much defined by the culture we live in. A listener from a different culture than the musician who is playing it might find quite different emotions in a piece of music than the musician.

Since I provided no definition of emotion, to the interviewees, to agree

upon before asking this question, my interpretations include an assessment of their perceived meaning of *emotion*. Feeling, emotion, and affect are related terms with different distinctions in different contexts. In psychology, affect often means the displayed experience of a feeling or an emotion, and affects are studied to better understand how the emotions and feelings are consciously communicated in a social context. Brian Massumi gives a different distinction in his reading of Deleuze's and Guattari's use of the term. Affects here are the prepersonal and unconscious intensities of an emotion. My use of emotion in the question above, and also the answers, relate to the Deleuzian affect rather than the use of affect in psychology. It is the abstract, malleable, and transmittable quality of Deleuzian affect that lends itself to *emotion* in this context, not a concrete display of sentiment.[168]

> **Suzanne**: I mean, is emotion ever not a part of the equation? I can't separate them, or I don't. Emotion is information and part of the expression.
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> **Kjell:** So, are the emotions communicated in playing?
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> **Suzanne:** I don't know. [laughs] Successfully, I don't know.
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> **Kjell:** No, not successfully maybe, but as involved in phrasing, rhythm, and dynamics?

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[168] For more on the Deleuzian deinfition of affect see: Brian Massumi, "Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgements." In Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987), and *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002).

Suzanne: They are for me. I think that there's no way to separate them, for me. You're asking what's your relationship with rhythm, dynamics, melody, and timbre. It's so visceral, all of that, and part of that visceral-ness is the emotions that are part of that bodily experience.

Emotions, for Thorpe, and for McPhee above, are inextricably integrated in their playing. They are directly involved in musical parameters such as dynamics, timbre and phrasing.

In the interviews, I did not find much resonance to ideas of representation and mimesis in music. My initiative to a more expanded discussion of the evolution of music gained interested and encouraging comments from the interviewees, but not with any strong sense of relevance to their own music making. The visceral experience of instrument and sound stands steadily by itself.

Conclusion

Almost twenty years have passed since the concert in my hometown described in the introduction. I have to grant much of the thought processes in this dissertation to that experience; without that review I would not have gone down this path of inquiry.

I am invited again to Umeå Jazz Festival. A couple of weeks after I am defending this dissertation, I will play a solo concert at the 50-year anniversary of the festival. I am convinced some of the people in the audience this time also attended the concert in 1999. Even the journalist who wrote the review back then might be there. Will they hear a different musician? So much water has flown under the bridge since then. I have moved to a new country, I have spent another ten thousand hours of practicing, done a couple of dozens of recordings and tours; I have gained many new friends, lost contact with some old ones; I am totally immersed in a second language; I have a six-year-old daughter; I have written a doctoral dissertation. What has happened to my playing? Will there be a different

answer to the question 'why do I play the way I do?' Will I play differently? Will the audience hear 'unresolved wrath,' or will they hear something else?

In this dissertation I have investigated how a music practice is the perpetually evolving synergy of influences from music communities, traditions and styles, social interaction and performative processes, meetings with audiences, and the intimate relationship to an instrument. I put all these factors on the table in interviews with four improvising musicians. A varied landscape of strategies and experiences, solutions and philosophies have emerged through the conversations, reflecting themselves and their practices.

They all hesitate to clearly articulate where they stylistically come from or belong. Axel Dörner describes the double-edged character of music genres, meaning they both provide unwanted limitations as well as a base for being recognized as a musician; recognition happens through familiarity. Joe McPhee finds a way out of the politics of categorization by naming his own music *Po music*, which includes all music played by Joe McPhee regardless of what it is influenced by, where it comes from, or how it sounds.

What are the musical strategies going into an improvisation? McPhee describes the blank canvas as his naturally generating mindset; Suzanne Thorpe shares how she navigates a self-conscious mind in the constant ongoing editing

process that is simultaneous to playing; Andrea Neumann balances between composition and improvisation with the intention to constructively manage her underlying critique of the impulse; Axel Dörner trusts the generating flow of all previous moments coalescing in the present moment in a fluid, ever changing, musical process.

Gender dynamics are always at play, pervasive and formative of dynamics and behavior. However, every social context negotiate gender dynamics according to various sets of constraints, and various sets of tools to act within those constraints. Improvised music is about projection; "it's putting yourself out there" as Thorpe states. Inherent in that form is a mode of expression which affords a different palette of sounds and emotions. Neumann's statement, "I am not a very harsh person, but I really like to play harsh sounds," indicates different sets of constraints where socially loaded attributes can turn into a distinct musical expression.[169] The ambiguous relation between on-stage and off-stage feeds a playful but serious tension between modes of expression. This tension is implicit in Erika Fisher-Lichte's notion of perceptual multistability as well as in Richard Schechner's restored behavior where an actor plays a role which is "not me", but at the same time "not not me."[170] The openness of agency, intentions, identity, and

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[169] Neumann, page 134.

[170] Schechner, *Between Theater & Anthropology*, 112.

expression, feeds the creativity both of the artist and of the audience's imagination. Are the intentions mine, and is the expression mine? At the same time Neumann says: "When somebody criticizes my music I feel very much entirely criticized."[171] This strong identification with the music might seem contradictory to the ambiguity of perceptual multistability. But it is a consequence of a lifelong process as a creative musician where the improviser claims ownership and a sense of identification with the sounds. "This is me, and my life, and all my socialization of my music is in my sounds. [. . .] And when as a musician you go somewhere, you perform your own work, because the improvisers are their own work."[172]

In the musical exchange that preceded the interviews we saw a continuum of creative reactions emerging from an ambiguous call to dialogue. Sending separately recorded solos to each other, with the intention of a dialogue, changes the dynamic of simultaneously playing in the same room. The generative factor emerging from the presence of another person was not there; an immediate musical response was not part of this dialogical process. The intertwined musical and social interaction of a duo was deconstructed and re-created in diametrically different ways by the musicians.

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[171] Neumann, page 135.

[172] Neumann, page 74.

To Andrea Neumann, the form for the exchange was liberating. She appreciated not having to consider my instant reaction to her musical response. She could be free and undisturbed by the expectation of an interactive response which otherwise is a major and formative factor in a live situation. Joe McPhee, on the other hand, experienced the physical absence as a creative problem. "For me it was difficult to play because I didn't know exactly where to move at first. [. . .] I would have preferred if you were in the room and I could respond to you immediately."[173] Axel Dörner approached the exchange with the constructive recognition that the present moment is a result of previous moments and by that mitigating the sense of past and absence in the exchange; every musical action is, anyway, a response to previous calls, even when you play live.

To Thorpe, the one-sidedness of the exchange, the lack of reaction to her response, made the dialogue difficult to navigate. She describes "going off on a tangent" as the creative middle-ground. When a musical response is not received by a fellow musician, the constructive strategy might be to create a tangential musical material not based on empathy nor generosity, but on independence. Thorpe's independent response stays in relation to the material I had sent her, but since the expectations guiding a response were not palpable in the room, she could

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[173] McPhee, page 160f.

create a response only tangentially related to my initial musical statement. That reflection is similar to Neumann's in that it describes a situation where distance promotes creativity. In performative terms, when expectations are remote, constraints become less regulative. Thorpe and especially Neumann, the two women among the interviewees, appreciated the untethered quality of this unconventional musical dialogue.

If the perception of the musical exchange was varied, the interpretation of musical fluency was equally diverse. The adjacent terms flow and fluidity contributed to different understandings among the four musicians of what the notion of musical fluency might mean. Dörner referred to his music as fluent since, in a Heraclidean way, everything is constantly changing; nothing can be exactly repeated, including music. He prefers to approach fluency as fluidity and flow since the linguistic connotations to fluency to him are disputable.

Neumann describes how one characteristic of her improvisational style is to break the flow of the music. To be fluent, then, is about knowing your instrument and your musical vocabulary well so that they serve your intentions to interrupt a musical arc. She fluently breaks the flow. In an opposite way, fluency for Thorpe is when the constant internal editing interfere optimally with the flow of musical

ideas. There is always an editing activity accompanying the improvisatory process. The challenge is to make it conducive to the music, not inhibiting.

"Probably not," Joe McPhee laconically answers my question if he would describe his playing as fluent. His immediate understanding of the question is that I am assuming the fluency of instrumentalists like Evan Parker or Peter Evans. McPhee takes another route in his musical approach where the simplicity and bareness are primary components of his personal musical expression. "I know my limitations and I also know that I can do things that many people playing the same instruments can't do because, they won't think in that direction, they won't jump off that bridge with me."[174] Lack of fluency, then, generates a musical expression where a musician is unable to hide behind a layer of virtuosity.[175]

As an endnote, there are some areas of the dissertation that I would like to investigate further in future research. I could clearly sense, in my interviews, that the proposed connection between music and language was received reluctantly. I think many musicians are naturally suspicious of descriptive qualities attributed to music. The open-ended ambiguity and the elusive but strong expressivity is for many musicians, and listeners, part of what makes music engaging. However, I

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[174] McPhee, page 176.

[175] McPhee is highly appreciative of, and familiar with, Parker's and Evans' approaches and abilities, but they reach a musical core through a very different relation to musical fluency.

believe that the discussion on mimesis in music and its relation to representation can in conjunction with anthropological theories of human evolution give interesting new impulses to the understanding of music as a mode of expression. The intersection of music and linguistic language has suffered a long time from the assumed focus on semantics and the later developmental stages of spoken language. That dead end, I believe, can be avoided by a focus on human expressivity from very early on in the history of mankind, when proto-music, proto-dance and proto-language, emerged out of a common need for communication; still together, but pointing towards a future diversification.

A second area of interest for a continuation of the work done here concerns the cumulative effect of a continued exchange of musical improvisations. What would happen if I continued the exchange of music with each of the musicians involved? How would my and everyone's music evolve as a consequence of a series of exchanges back and forth? Would it be possible to discern a stylistic development characteristic for each chain of exchange? And, then, what leads to a diversification of aesthetic choices within the same person engaged in a set of continuing musical exchanges with different musicians? This, ultimately, could bring further nuances to the general discussion of why improvising musicians play the way they do.

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