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Playing with/in boundaries

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Introduction

This is an article about openness, corporeal situatedness and looking.

The impulse for the writing stems from a particular interest in the relationship of the solo improviser to both the explicit contours and unrealized potentialities of her corporeal situation. From the multitude of both internal and external stimuli to which an improviser may respond at any moment, I am choosing to zoom in here on questions of how the occupation of space may be understood and articulated. The significance of precise corporeal positioning within particular, delineated surroundings is explored and the improvisational impetus towards disclosure and revelation is posited as a form of interrogative exploration.

My improvisational practice, which began by studying with Al Wunder¹ in Melbourne and is now, 10 years later, situated primarily in a small town in the North of England, is concerned with the interaction between the improviser and the processes of improvising. The improvisations I make and watch are poised at the centre of the research and the theorizing. The shift in my geographical location is one impetus behind an interest in situation and context, but it is also one of the concerns to emerge most strongly from the investigations of my larger practice-led doctoral project into the tropes and characteristics of the solo, open mode. The complexities (and richness) of inter-performer dynamics within duet and ensemble forms is deliberately by-passed in order to focus on the situation of the individual performer. Hence the relationship of that performer to his material, his processes and his environment – which includes material aspects of the space and interpersonal relationship with audiences - become key overall concerns.

In phenomenological vein my knowledge and discoveries depend on the immediate experience of improvising, my conclusions stem from embodied practice, felt and shared. To give a sense of this, I have included studio writings from my on-going research with Andrew Morrish – small pieces of ‘poetic’ reflection written immediately after solo improvisations by both improviser and observers, designed to ‘capture’ something of the preceding performance. I have also inserted quotes from a project conducted in 2006 which add the conversational voice of the improviser as an adjunct to the more theoretical and discursive language.²

When I refer, loosely, to the term phenomenology, I am referring to existential phenomenology, particularly as espoused in the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 – 1961). This philosopher explicitly placed ‘what I live through’ (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xv11) at the centre of his theorizing, insisting, in a clear-cut challenge to Cartesian mind-body dualism, that the body functions as the means by which the world is perceived and comes into existence. Rather than functioning as ‘an object for an ‘I think’’ (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 153), the body inhabits space and time in an intentional, goal-oriented manner in which ‘consciousness is in the first place not a matter of “I think” but of ‘I can’’. (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 137)

This notion of ‘I can’ as the body’s ‘basic intentionality’ (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 137) becomes the means of entering into a dynamic inter-relationship with the surrounding environment. Thus we are ‘permanently stationed before things in order to perceive them’ (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 303) and perception is treated as ‘initiation into the world.’ (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 257) In other words, our mode of entering into some kind of relationship with our surroundings, our world, is through the corporeality of the body.

¹ Al Wunder’s ‘Theatre of the Ordinary’ has been based in Melbourne since 1982. The classes in improvised movement theatre ‘use a multi-level class structure that combines the technically developed skills of the advance student with innocent and unencumbered creative explorations of the raw beginner.’ (<http://www.theatreoftheordinary.com>)

² Andrew Morrish has been a Research Associate at the University of Huddersfield since February 2006, and was appointed as an Honorary Research Fellow in December 2008. He regularly collaborates with John Britton and me on a variety of research and performance projects relating to improvisational performance.

In this article I draw on this fundamental tenet by adopting Merleau-Ponty's formulation of vision as an extension of the corporeal in order to highlight some of the ways in which the solo improvisational space may be construed. A certain type of looking is equated with an intentionality that is purposefully interrogative and that raises questions about the dynamic relationship between the improviser, his material and his environment.

The juxtaposition of phenomenology with the comments of various improvisers is intended to present a synthesis of ideas on the ways in which the improviser may engage with his surroundings; Merleau-Ponty's late writings are driven by complex notions of the individual's ontological relations with the world – poetically realized as 'a relation that is one of embrace' in some of his working notes (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 271) And, as I will argue, the situation of the solo improviser is one in which negotiation with and within particular conditions is a fundamental and foundational principle.

More generally, phenomenology also reaches for enhanced understanding of whatever phenomenon is under examination. Part of its aim, in the words of dance academic Sondra Fraleigh, is to 'arrive at meaning, perspectives on the phenomenon of experience...which can be communicated.' (Fraleigh, 11) Thus, in this instance, it is through this reflective process of writing that I am seeking to re-visit and map part of the complex operations of the solo improvisational form. And, hopefully, get to know it better.

Unexpectedly perhaps, but indicative of the on-going search for prisms through which aspects of movement improvisation can be elucidated, I also refer to the quintessentially clever improvisation at the heart of the 1995 movie, *The Usual Suspects*.

Openness

In solo open form improvisation, the performance intention is to enter the space without a pre-determined theme, or a pre-organised score or structure. The form asks, challengingly, for a holding back of material, ideas and structures until the moment of performance. Of course, when the moment of performance begins is open to question and debate - as one waits on the side? As one enters? Once one is 'in'? But, accepting this ambiguity around the very beginnings of the piece, the open form is one in which there is a stated or implied absence of pre-existing script or set operational rules. Seen in this way, the open form is both susceptible to misinterpretation or exaggeration and raises some thorny questions that are akin to those confronting phenomenology in its broadest, most ambitious, sense.

First, to the misinterpretations. If 'open' is equated with a kind of unfettered freedom, or structurelessness, then the form is erroneously believed or implied to exist beyond boundaries or rules. Descriptives such as: 'guaranteed ride full of this wild taste of spontaneous delight' in which participants are 'released into delicious rule-breaking.' (Dilley in Zaporah, xvi) reinforce the notion of structure-less abandon. Or, from Roger Copeland who would dismiss 'mere improvisation' for the same reasons that others celebrate it, improvisation is treated as an attempt to 'break through the resistance of {the} rational mind in order to tap the unconscious, "natural" or primitive impulses that lie waiting to be unleashed.' (Copeland, 108) Here improvisation is equated with a kind of undisciplined eruption and wildness, even thoughtlessness.

In practice, as most improvisers I have read, spoken to and worked with accept, the open form is hardly as unbounded, undisciplined and wild as this. As the philosopher Gary Peters notes about 'so-called free improvisations' - a term that I regard as interchangeable with 'open' - the 'apparent freedom of the improviser – the risk taking and spectacle of spontaneity – is rarely the inspired abandonment that it appears to be or is promoted as.' (Peters, 82) Improvising musician Stephen Nachmanovitch points out in his aptly titled *Free Play*: 'Improvisation always has its rules, even if they are not a priori rules...We carry around the rules inherent in our organism.' (Nachmanovitch, 26) Or, very explicitly from the doyen of contact improvisation Steve Paxton: 'It must be noted that

'...there was something about trying to find the space in a new way...'

Hilary Elliott in conversation with Andrew Morrish, July 11th 2006, University of Huddersfield

Free Improvisation cannot exist, theoretically...The problem is ‘freedom’ is as dependent on circumstances as this sort of improvisation must be free of them. To be “free” of a circumstance only means to be in another...’ (CQ, 12; 2, 4)

Thus the open form is in fact very explicitly situated within boundaries – what Paxton calls ‘circumstance’ – and structures.

If at this point we return to a phenomenologically-inspired framing of the open performance mode as one in which the performer attempts to ‘set aside beliefs, biases, explanatory theories and hypotheses’ (Spinelli, 25) we see that the open form is further problematised. Whilst the performer’s receptiveness to what is present in the space is a characteristic of the form – and one that I shall pick up on later – the notion of setting aside one’s own beliefs or biases is less easily accounted for. Thus on a superficial level we have a form in which the intent is not to re-play or re-visit existing narratives, choreographies and character, but rather to generate from the here-and-now of the performance event. But on a deeper level, the form is clearly circumscribed and bounded by the very ‘beliefs’ and ‘biases’ of the performer; they are the filters and foci through which the present space is encountered and from which the performance is created. ‘Beliefs’ and ‘biases’ are Spinelli’s words, used in the context of explaining phenomenology, but they are useful catch-all descriptives for the nexus of circumstance that bounds the open form. Within this nexus might lie our own limitations as performers; there are the tacit rules of operation or expectations that we assume before the piece begins; there are conscious or habitual patterns of physical discourse that we return to. In an even broader sense, there is any individual’s performance history, life history, cultural encodings. If we follow this line of argument through, we see that a complete ‘openness’ is corporeally, mentally and emotionally impossible; the open form, to borrow Paxton’s words, ‘cannot exist’.

What is left, then, if the term ‘open’ is accepted as a problematic misnomer, is the performative tension and improvisational possibility that arises from both an acceptance of, and playing within, boundaries and between circumstances. It is a construal of the improvisational space as one in which an interrogative exploration might enable the improviser to accept the parameters of every (shifting) circumstance but still embody a generative energy or momentum beyond the sense of limit, of boundary. It is an envisioning of space impelled by asking how the improviser maximises the potential or possibility of delineated space and contingent moments.

‘...what I always say is – there is always a structure! Whether or not we can see it as structure is another thing...some we recognise and some we don’t, but they’re always there.’

Andrew Morrish, July 12th 2006

Corporeal Situatedness

In *The Usual Suspects*, an interrogating detective borrows a colleague’s office in order to question a small-time criminal called Verbal Klint. The film’s narrative unfolds through a series of episodes relayed by Klint, and involves the exploits of a fantastically terrifying crime lord, complete with unexplained deaths and inter-criminal machinations. When we first see Klint in this office, he is sitting silently, extremely composed, looking around him – his eyes linger on a cigarette box and they scan the back walls which are busily covered with pieces of paper. Early on in his interrogation he requests coffee and mentions, nonchalantly, that he was once in a barbershop quartet. At the end of the first interrogation scene we see him looking at the bottom of the detective’s coffee cup. The camera focuses on his eyes.

In the next scene, we again become aware of his eye movements. Seemingly succumbing to interrogative pressure, he confesses the name of a key player in the criminal matrix – a lawyer, ‘Kobayashi’. Not long after this there is another long, lingering shot on the bottom of the detective’s coffee cup as he drinks.

The plot accelerates and plays with our perceptions, though we don't know this at the time. Only retrospectively do we realize that the version of events we see, the version relayed through Klint's tale, is a sophisticated lie.

It is not, however, the fabrication of an elaborate fiction that is most interesting in the context of improvisation. Rather it is what is dramatically revealed in the final 3 minutes of the film through the shocked and disbelieving eyes of the detective - the suddenly obvious link between Klint's immediate environment and the details of his story.

As the detective's eyes begin to scan the notice-board at the back of his colleague's office, they fall on a small sign - 'Quartet. Skokie, IL.' At the same time he remembers Klint talking inanely about once being in a barbershop quartet, in Skokie Illinois. Now the detective scans faster, half-remembered pieces of dialogue suddenly cohering with what he is seeing; a random name on a list matches the name of one of the central crime figures of Klint's narrative; a picture matches a description he gave.

His coffee mug has fallen to the floor and smashed (the nicely cinematic mode of signalling his discovery of the truth). As we follow his eyes downwards, we see the inscription 'Kobayashi' on its broken base. The detective realizes that Klint's entire story has been concocted from a string of randomly placed words and images, suddenly visible to him in all their improvisatory significance.

Verbal Klint is, admittedly, a fictionally ideal improviser, but he illustrates both the limitations and capabilities of the situated performer very nicely. Physically bounded by a small, unfamiliar office, he doesn't move from his chair as his eyes take in enough information to construct the contents of his story. What he creates is a direct result of the particular view afforded him by his situation in space - it simply isn't possible to 'see' more of the room. His corporeal situatedness creates a set of conditions that radically affects what is possible 'now'. Improvisationally he can't proceed unless he takes his current spatial location into account as a defining factor in what may be possible next.

But, to adopt a Merleau-Pontian formulation, what he 'sees' is also a result of the 'art of interrogation' (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 133) that underpins and infuses his corporeal attitude. He is obviously looking for the potential in his situation. In the words of improviser Chris Johnston: 'The improviser is looking for something to respond to, something that triggers the imagination and in turn creates emotional engagement. When it's happening the solo improviser becomes like a detective who's hunting down some quarry.' (Johnston, 110) The interrogative stance reveals details, images, words (small, inconsequential things) that would otherwise have stayed mute, invisible.

The consequences of our 'situatedness' are re-enforced in the film by the teasing revelation that the detective, necessarily adopting his own situated perspective, misses the most vital of all clues - the words 'Kobayashi' on the base of his own mug. The absoluteness of the 'here' that the detective occupies does not invite an alternative perspective. Of course, the detective could have noticed the clues in the office earlier; he could have held his mug up and seen the words on its base, but then we would have a rotten drama.

The movie's climax leaves one aware of the detective's limitations, the constricting results of his complete immersion in his own point of view, dictated by his 'beliefs, biases, explanatory theories and hypotheses'. If we agree with Merleau-Ponty that 'each one inhabits only his own, sees only according to his own point of view, enters into being only through his situation' (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the*

*'Placing myself firmly against the wall -
A decisive move to 'plant' myself somewhere
Look at the light on one side
And the piece of paper on the other
Words - looked for, sounded out on the tongue
Verbal nonsense
Looking up to see sheets of paper with words
Then the fact of the paper's text the light's label
and the wall text
Begin to cascade into verbal and internal
imagery
I can always go back to the wall writings
So I do - it's like I don't have to
Find the original source but the jumble of
Words becomes a character stuck and highly
strung'*

Hilary Elliott, Studio Writings, March 1st 2010

Invisible, 62), then the situatedness, when combined with an unwillingness to look for what might not seem evident, closes down other possibilities of ‘seeing’.

Simultaneously we see Klint’s improvisatory cleverness as a mode of freedom (literally, in fact, as it results in him walking out of the police-station). His freedom is not the kind of Dionysian abandon associated with improvisation in some discourses but stems from his corporeal grounding in and imaginative playing beyond the limited confines of his specific spatial situation. Although the topic of imagination cannot be adequately explored here, it is clearly an operational mode that acts to reconceptualise and reconfigure one’s current circumstance: ‘Imagination rubs up against the senses, defining and redefining the material world.’ (Zaporah, 261) And this maxim, from Keith Johnstone: ‘that we are not, as we are taught to think, our ‘personalities’, but that the imagination is the true self.’ (Johnstone, 105)

Looking

As an extension of the corporeal, the improviser’s vision can function in a diffusive or focussed way – scanning the environment, noticing an array of details, or lingering, immersed in a particular detail or sensation. Vision is both generative – it is a way of finding material or inspiration – and grounding – as the things noticed do not have to be explicitly picked up: ‘Don’t react, remain aware continually, without interruption. By not reacting, by just noticing, we come to know the “noticer” as separate from the experience being noticed...the phenomenological world becomes something to watch.’ (Zaporah, 181)

The ability to be open to the stimuli that exist, or may exist, in the space without reacting to them, combined with the preparedness to utilise that openness in a constructive, generative way characterises the ideal improviser. Klint, as our model, epitomises the kind of ‘responsiveness’ that is axiomatic in improvisatory discourse as an essential skill. Improviser Chris Johnston writes: ‘Responsiveness therefore begins with noting the auditory, visual or kinaesthetic stimuli that are present. With these responses, the aim is to trigger the imagination so as to provoke its progenitive ability to spawn its own world within the world of the event.’ (Johnston, 227) And from improvising teacher Ruth Zaporah: ‘Action is, in fact, a response. That’s all. To act is to respond to the material of one’s awareness: information from the senses, imagination, memory. To act is to enact the current experience of awareness as it awares.’ (Zaporah, 154) These formulations are useful reminders that responsiveness within improvised performance is not passive; it is not merely a taking-in of data or information: ‘Responsiveness, then, is about action that is consequent on awareness.’ (Johnston, 228) The ideal improvisatory state is responsive, active, attentive and aware.

A journey. Moving...always moving

Exploring by looking at the edges. The edges of the space, the edges of the objects in the space.

Touching and reflecting what is felt.

The vision leads sometimes.

Sometimes it feels like a “being with” and sometimes like an inspector’s gaze.

The arms lead sometimes,

Arcing through the space, causing the torso to rotate in response.

The feet and legs lead sometimes.

Creating pathways that allow you to travel from edge to edge.

A casual restless curiosity propels the journey

Andrew Morrish, Studio Writings, June 27th 2009

Whilst agreeing that these are essential qualitative states for any improviser, I think it is also useful to throw a phenomenological light on the improviser’s active looking and active responsiveness. To briefly generalise Merleau-Ponty’s formulations on the interaction between the individual and the world, he posits that one both perceives the world through observation and interaction, and, simultaneously, experiences the world revealing itself: ‘The gaze gets more or less from things according to the way in which it questions them, ranges over or dwells on them. (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of*

Perception, 153) It is ‘the look that questions the things.’(Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 103) ‘When I ask myself what precisely it is that I see...it is the reply to a certain kind of questioning on the part of my gaze.’ (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 226) ‘My eye for me is a certain power of making contact with things...’ (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 278/9)

In Merleau-Pontian thought, there is an interactiveness between the gaze - as an extension of the corporeal, tactile body - and the world that he claims to be mutually constructive: ‘The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world, and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which the subject itself projects.’ (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 430) It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into the complexities of what he calls the ‘chiasm’, what we might understand as an overlaying or entwining of the world and the individual. But what is useful to consider here is the proposition that the individual does not simply actively respond to the sensory stimuli surrounding him, but that, as a result of his interrogative stance, he enables what was already present, latent or, to take one of Merleau-Ponty’s crucial constructs ‘invisible’, to come to the fore. If we follow this idea through for its performative implications, we can posit that the space of the solo improviser becomes one in which potential and possibility is both created and enabled; generated and released. Stephen Nachmanovitch citing the example of Michelangelo’s theory of sculpture, follows a parallel argument when talking of the improviser’s feeling as ‘more like following, or taking dictation’: ‘The statue is already in the stone, has been in the stone since the beginning of time, and the sculptor’s job is to see it and release it.’ (Nachmanovitch, 4)

Nachmanovitch, whose writing in *Free Play* articulates an elegant belief in the processes whereby shape, form and music are released, or revealed, talks of a ‘deep innate patterning of information’ as ‘holographically present in whatever we care to look at; not just in Michelangelo’s blocks of Carrara marble, but in everything... It is as if there were something underneath this piece of paper, a pattern whose outline I am trying to catch and make visible by pointing to it with these words.’ (Nachmanovitch, 35) Whether or not one aligns oneself with the ontological dimension of Nachmanovitch’s thought – captured in the statement that the ‘ultimate source and destination of creative work...lies in the wholeness of the psyche, which is the wholeness of the world.’ (Nachmanovitch, 187) - his thinking does point to the significance of revelation and disclosure within the improvisatory process; the establishment of a constructive relationship with something external to ourselves: ‘The liberation, the awakening to creativity, comes when we can finally see ourselves as neither placating nor resisting the universe, but seeing our true relation to it, as part to whole.’ (Nachmanovitch, 193)

For the solo improviser, this sense of latent possibility inhering within the improvisational space ties in closely with our consideration of questions of boundaries and precise circumstance. The limitations of the corporeal self – the specific situatedness, the partiality of the individual’s spatial point of view, the impossibility of possessing an absolutely open stance from which everything is possible – rub against a sense, or a desire to sense, that there is an open field of possibility as yet untapped: ‘The “world” is this whole where each “part”, when one takes it for itself, suddenly opens unlimited dimensions..’ (Merleau- Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, notes, 218)

Perhaps this is the condition of the improviser – an ‘indefatigable ranging over things’ (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 103) in order to find the unique, dynamic potential of each moment; the ‘inexhaustible depth’ (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 41) that may exist beneath or beyond our customary ‘beliefs and biases’. The improvisational space lends itself to this kind of speculation; it is an arena of potential discovery and revelation – about oneself, one’s material, one’s audience, one’s wider world.

‘...you are here, there is an audience; it’s us and this is the situation...’

Andrew Morrish in conversation, July 11th 2006

As suggested earlier, however, it is also the quintessential solo experience to be obliged to approach that broad (invisible) spectrum through the limits imposed by our corporeal situatedness (and, beyond this spatial condition, the temporal conditioning of our histories and our enculturation). In acknowledging this tension, improvisation points to an essential, challenging, dilemma at the heart of the form: 'Personal agendas, and the resulting loss of awareness...prevent us from living in the

present. We allow beliefs to govern our actions, rather than our experience of the constant flow of change.' (Zaporah, 7) Or, as Merleau-Ponty phrases the same conundrum: 'Open upon the thing itself, the perception is no less our own work, because the thing is henceforth exactly what we think we see...' (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 29)

In the final analysis, the collision of limit with capacity; of boundaries with possibility; of what is pragmatically sensed with what simply might be offers a potent field of exploration in which the improviser can situate himself and, potentially, discover what has always been present.

A 2nd perspective on an improvisation:

A perpetual motion machine,

(in itself a holy grail)

Ticking and whirring

And provoking itself in

Turns. And Twists

And Tortions,

The room is solid and watchful,

Unyielding in places

Soft elsewhere.

Pillars and floors and walls

Reject your provocations

And suggestions that there are other ways

We could invent of being

Curtains and strings will go some way with you.

They'll take on a little of what you offer

Try the costume on

But in the end, their willingness decays

To watchful stillness.

Your sound merges with the ebb

And flow of traffic, wind and memory.

Outside a red light glows now,

DO NOT ENTER

For although you have not altered anything,

Everything is changed.

John Britton, Studio Writings, June 27th 2009.

Afterword

One of the things most appealing about Verbal Klint is the cool composure with which he goes about improvising his way to freedom. His corporeal stillness reinforces the darting and seeking movements of his eyes; his looking, as Merleau-Ponty might say, 'envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things.' (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 133) The minute details overlooked by the detective's habitual ways of being are 'caught' and improvisationally translated into fiction and freedom. And although he is immensely self-assured, the contingency of Klint's method is nonetheless apparent, as he builds an entire reality on the smallest of revelations, against a background horizon of numerous other possible eventualities. In this he is both improvisationally astute and, for the purposes of this short reflection, a good example of the phenomenological inclination and improvisational leaning towards disclosure, revelation and projection through and beyond our corporeal situation.

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A 3rd perspective on an improvisation:

Start with small movements in space. Very central

Surrounded by Space

Body searches for tactile experiences

Surfaces of curtain – deeper than I'd expected

Scratchiness of walls

I go 'off' the black and 'behind' where A + J sit

Driven by touching surfaces

And looking at smallnesses - switches

I find a drawing pin and pick it up

End back in the centre

Eyes are more awake in this space

Body feels more fluidly a surface

Hilary Elliott, Studio Writings, June 27th 2009