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**THE PLACE FROM WHICH I SEE:**

**a practice-led investigation into the role of vision in understanding  
solo performance improvisation as a form of composition.**

**Hilary Elliott**

**A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**January 2013**

## ABSTRACT

*The Place From Which I See* is a practice-led investigation into performance improvisation in which I have asked the question: 'What is the role of vision in understanding solo performance improvisation as a form of composition?' The research is encompassed and presented in two different, but interwoven, modalities, which function as a total thesis. These are: (1) a written thesis, which is divided into the four main chapters outlined in the Introduction and (2) a sharing of studio-based investigations and performances - included on the accompanying DVD - and a live performance. This sharing of practical work is designed to illuminate how the practice has functioned as a methodology for research and as a means of embodying and making public the research outcomes. Together, it is intended that these different articulations form a clear and useful prism through which the practical and theoretical terrain of the project can be distilled.

In this thesis I argue that working pragmatically and creatively with vision within the specificity of the immediate space and situation of performance can function as an efficacious means of understanding solo improvised performance as a form of composition, and the research offers five strategies that collectively function as a template of approaches for generating and shaping improvisational material. The strategies have been developed through instigating a practice/theory feedback loop with the phenomenology and artistic paradigm offered by French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I introduce his model of painterly composition as a particular rubric of what I call vision/action responsiveness against which I situate my own compositional approaches. I also outline five of the key ideas that infuse both this rubric and his phenomenology more generally - the significance of the entwining of a 'questioning' vision with movement; the chiasm; the visible; the 'invisible' and the 'I can' - and illuminate the way in which the practice has been developed and refined through a pragmatic interaction with these ideas. The thesis also outlines how these aspects of the phenomenological discourse have been re-framed through this interaction with the practical investigations and I situate my working of Merleau-Ponty's ideas within the context of other treatments within both dance and theatre. More broadly, I relate this doctorate's methodological approach and aesthetic concern with vision as a core compositional tool in and for performance to the compositional strategies, aesthetics, methodologies and philosophies of a range of other practitioners, locating the research within the wider field of improvisational performance. As an outcome, this research offers the template of strategies, layered with my particular re-framings of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, as an original contribution to the practice and discourse of solo performance improvisation.

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## INTRODUCTION

### FOCUSSING IN

#### *Practice & Merleau-Ponty*

##### **I.1 Questioning the Space**

I begin with a description of an exemplary piece of solo improvisation, grounded in a purposeful use of vision and illustrative of a finely honed compositional sensibility. It occurs in the film *The Usual Suspects*. Early in the film we see a detective borrow a colleague's office in order to interrogate 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 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 cups 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. What is dramatically revealed in the final three minutes of the film through the shocked and disbelieving eyes of the detective is 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 fictional improviser, but he illustrates the generative capabilities of the performer who uses his vision as a compositional tool very nicely. He doesn't move from his chair as his eyes scan the office but, to introduce a Merleau-Pontian formulation that has been key to my own research, his fabrications are the result of employing a 'certain kind of questioning on the part of (his) gaze' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 226). In Klint's case, this 'questioning' vision looks for the generative potential in the immediate situation and it enables him to discover the material (small, mundane features of his immediate environment) that he then composes into a plausible story. In Merleau-Ponty's case, as we shall see, it is through a vision that 'questions the things' that the complexities of the world are revealed (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 103). This Merleau-Pontian questioning vision is embodied, dynamically entwined with movement and action. It is also characteristic of the actions of the painter, Merleau-Ponty's quintessential artist, who entwines a questioning vision with movement - with the action of hands and body - in a compositional paradigm of seamless vision/action responsiveness. In this research this notion of visually 'questioning' the immediate environment is explored as one thread of the practical enquiry, a means of layering a particular attitude onto my inhabitation, as an improviser, of the performance space, in order to test its compositional efficaciousness. More broadly, the research examines the way in which shifting the direction and intentionality of vision - investigating various vision/action rubrics of composition in relation to the paradigm offered in Merleau-Ponty's work - can seed different compositional outcomes that can then be harnessed and shaped in the creation of pieces of improvised work.

## I.2 Responding to the Environment

I began to research solo improvisation as composition after several years of work in duet and ensemble formats.<sup>1</sup> In this context, I am defining composition as the generation and shaping of material, a two-fold process that involves both the genesis and selection and arrangement of material and is also inclusive of the generative and structural challenges of making longer-form pieces over twenty minutes in length. The earlier work - based on a dialogic relationship of 'give and take' between performers - had instilled an interest in, and trained a tendency towards, a pragmatics of relationality and responsiveness.<sup>2</sup> The challenge of this doctorate, then, was to find ways in which I could generate and structure performance material as a soloist, beginning with the perhaps paradoxical acknowledgement that despite the absence of co-performers, I was nonetheless interested in relationality as a creative starting-point and generative device. I frequently worked alone in the studio, but in developing the methodology of this project, I worked alongside research collaborator Andrew Morrish, who functioned as a generic audience and more specifically as second-person perspective and with whom I developed the practice of the 'Immediate Writings' - an initial instance of which is on p.14. All these methodological details are described in full in

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<sup>1</sup> Some of my work in this period was duetting work with co-performer John Britton and some with improvising drummer Eilon Morris. At times we collaborated as a trio. Many of these performances were held as part of an ongoing series, *Spontaneous Combustion*, including Spontaneous Combustion #37 @ Berlin ADA Studio, June 2007; Spontaneous Combustion #38 @ National University of Mexico, as part of the research project 'Writing the Body and Dancing the Mind', March 2008 and Spontaneous Combustion #39 @ University of Huddersfield, as part of the research project 'The Week of Speakers', June 2009.

<sup>2</sup> All the duet and trio improvisations stemmed from the relationship we established through mutual watching, listening and responding - a kind of back-and-forth inter-activeness. The responsiveness to each other also meant that when working with the musician, the music did not function simply as a kind of illustration or underpinning of the dancing or story-telling, but at times would seed the development of movement or text and at times would be the lead 'voice' in the ensemble.

Another example of improvisation as a performance form in which musicians and dancers worked as equals can be seen in the partnership of Judith Dunn and trumpeter Bill Dixon (Dunn danced with the Merce Cunningham Company and was an early member of Judson Dance Theatre, a dance collective that formed in New York in 1962 and whose work is extensively tracked by dance academic Sally Banes - see footnote 23). In this partnership, music 'was not an accompaniment to the dance, and dancing wasn't just an exploration of the music. The idea that they were both running parallel and interacting was a key element to their work' (Susan Sgorbati quoted in Goldman, 2010: 65). Further examples of partnerships between dancers and musicians can be found in Danielle Goldman's book, *I Want to Be Ready Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Goldman, 2010), including the work of Dianne McIntyre, who set up an ensemble of African-American dancers and musicians in 1972 called 'Sounds in Motion'. McIntyre developed a sense of cross-identification whereby 'the dance actually was the music...the dancer's body became a musical instrument' (Goldman, 2010: 79). Susan Foster also discusses 'Sounds in Motion' in her book *Dances That Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull* (Foster, 2002). She notes that 'McIntyre identified a common rhythmic and gestural impulse that both sound and movement shared'; there was a 'call and response' interaction between dancers and musicians as they traded rhythmic phrases or worked in unison (Foster, 2010: 85-87).

the next chapter, but at this point I want to note that the Immediate Writings, which are peppered throughout this written thesis (most liberally in chapter four) are intended to reflect the variegated registers through and with which my solo improvisations were transcribed into written form. At times the writings are quite factual ('an episodic structure of little blurts of direct address narrative' – see p.14) or descriptive ('break with these clawed hands and spins, turns and travels' – see p.14). They include musings, moments of questioning and wondering that fed into the longer-term process of analysing, articulating, making explicit and progressing my knowledge ('the texture and material feels as if it is fuelled by the drive to improvise in *relation to* something' – see p.14). At times the writings capture something of the experience of doing an improvisation ('the concepts from the day's writing and thinking swimming around my head – I am not very 'in' my body...' – see p.39). Often, however, these writings don't yield 'experiential insights into what it feels like to perform' (Nelson, 2006: 110), nor do they function as analyses of something that is seen or experienced, but sit instead as playful, interpretive pieces of poetic expression ('disruption is in the air'; 'look at it, look at it, look at it!' – see p.40). Taken in their totality, then, these writings signal the space and time between each studio improvisation - the first moment of response, reflection or thinking in words by both doer and watcher. Their inclusion in this thesis also illuminates a process of re-reading and selection, as after each studio session I transposed the writings as they were written by hand (inclusive of punctuation, spelling errors, neologisms and lay-out) onto computerised word documents, which I later inserted into this thesis. When it came to choosing particular pieces of writings from the wealth of samples that I had, I made selections based on reverberations between the Immediate Writings and my analysis or argument in the main body of the text. Each sample of writing thus includes a word, phrase or train of thought that obliquely and poetically or directly and quite factually ripples outwards to the discussions that immediately precede or follow it.

The accompanying DVD also contains notebook pages of Immediate Writings and excerpts of discussions that Morrish and I had at different stages of this investigative process, giving a sense of the wider methodology as it was put into play in the studio. The DVD's two short chapters - *Studio Practice* (duration 6:03) and *Performance* (duration: 4:32) - also contain video footage and still images of studio practice and public performances in order to give a sense of the look of this work in its different contexts and to highlight some of the questions about researching solo improvisation that Morrish and I posed and grappled with. As a companion to this written thesis, the DVD can be accessed at any time.

Working in a (usually familiar) studio, then, the solo task was initially one of fathoming what I could work 'in relation' to. I was aware that I could choose to use recorded music, work with pre-determined props or enter the space with a particular choreographic agenda, all of which could readily facilitate a spirit and pragmatics of responsiveness. I was interested, however, in keeping the research terrain even more sparse, if you like, stripping it of even these pre-determined features, so the improvisations that formed the spine of the research were all 'totally improvised', a development of American Al Wunder's definition of un-premeditated inventions - un-scored in the sense that I did not draw a set of 'very clear parameters' to circumscribe and narrow the field of exploration (Wunder, 2006: 12) - and further extended so that even musical intervention was not included (Wunder, 2006: v).<sup>3</sup> The task of working in this 'totally improvised' way reinforced the desire for relationality and responsiveness but without any pre-determined immediate hooks (such as music), it became evident that creative impetus needed to be found from within the givens of the immediate environment and in my inhabitation of that immediate environment. This imperative to inhabit the immediate context in a way that felt relational and generative led me to the discovery that if I extended my vision outwards into the space as I moved, I became more consciously aware of the physical environment. I then further explored how shifting the reach and direction of vision enhanced or minimised the sense of relationality (shifting between close-up and longer reaches, and directing vision to different parts of the space, for instance) and the correlation between where my vision was directed and the generation of improvised material.

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<sup>3</sup> Wunder studied and danced with Alwin Nikolais in New York in the 1960s, before gradually developing his own teaching and improvisation practice. After moving to Melbourne, Australia, in 1982 he established what he calls the 'extended performance workshop' in Cecil Street Studio, in which participants meet twice a week for ten weeks, with each class lasting 6 hours. The work is designed to prepare students to perform a 30 minute solo and a 30 minute duet at the end of the course, both 'un-scored' in the sense of seeing what emerged from the encounter between the improviser/s and the performance context rather than working with a pre-determined theme or structure. I studied with Wunder from August - November 1999 and again from August - November 2000 and whilst working in this 'un-scored' way would also (alongside Wunder's other students) often include recorded music as part of an improvisation. Questions such as what pieces of music, how many pieces, or even whether to start or end with music would therefore be raised (and the answers sometimes determined) before an improvisation began. In this research, however, I wanted to follow a more rigid definition of 'totally improvised', removing the possibility of a musical intervention.

**The texture and material feels as if it is fuelled by the drive  
to improvise in *relation to* something  
after the morning's 3 has become 2.**

**The body feels responsive once it notices the floor  
Clawed hands**

**See 'gold' up on the truss – the colour sparks the image of gold teeth  
An episodic structure of little blurts of direct address narrative, thematically connected  
Break with these clawed hands and spins, turns and travels in order to loosen the  
impulse that I have to force out material – I am trying to whirr my way out of a forced  
verbal text**

**The little bits just are**

(Immediate Writings, 27/6/09)

**Arms arc through the space, spreading energy everywhere. The shapes made from the  
folding arms close to the torso become more interesting and your vision is drawn into  
this.**

**A fixed point high in the corner of the studio attracts your vision. The arm movements  
continue in relationship to this fixed visual focus.**

**Words are drawn from this – we see the landscape marked out by the image of a  
golden grinning mouth. The talking shifts through e-bay to dentistry, and is  
highlighted by energetic shifts that move you through the space. Turning is a big part  
of this. The source image, connected to your image seems very real, but when I look, I  
cannot see what provided it.**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 27/06/09)

Early practice (such as that captured in the Immediate Writings above) thus determined the foundational concerns of the research - the role of vision in establishing a sense of relationship with one's environment and the potentially generative tenor of that relationship. It also established a particular focus that is unusual territory in the discourse and practice of

improvisation, as vision is largely considered within duet and ensemble training contexts rather than in performative and, further, solo performative contexts. On the margins of this general trend, there are a number of solo practitioners who, significantly, do explicitly attend to vision as a communicative or generative tool within performance and I examine their methodological and aesthetic approaches in chapter two in order to both progress and contextualise my argument that vision can function as an efficacious means of understanding solo performance improvisation as a form of composition.

I was immersed in practical enquiry when I began to investigate potential theoretical perspectives on the research. Because it would ‘meet’ an emergent practice, I was interested in a theoretical view which could not only offer a lens through which to examine the practice, but could also intersect with it in pragmatically useful ways and contribute to a refinement of its articulation (in practice and in writing). At this stage - because of the ‘before’ and ‘after’ relationship between the practice and theory - it did not seem to me that any theoretical discourse itself could be challenged by the particularities of the research direction, only that it might supply a useful frame and tool for articulating the nuances of a practice. One of the most interesting discoveries of the research stemmed from the subsequent realisation that in utilising particular phenomenological ideas in certain practical ways, those ideas themselves would at times be challenged and usefully enhanced.

In terms of a theoretical perspective that could supply a framework for my investigations and could also pragmatically intersect with them in relevant and enriching ways, I turned to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1908-61).<sup>4</sup> Before elaborating on the specific reasons behind this choice, it is worth noting that phenomenology as a philosophical current does not cohere into an agreed method or set of ideas about experience, consciousness or knowledge. Although its origins are widely traced back to the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), whose approach I briefly touch on below, the philosophers who identified with the practice of phenomenology after this time were and are:

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<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) studied philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure. His major text, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, was published in 1945 whilst his last, the incomplete *The Visible and the Invisible*, was published posthumously in 1964. In addition to receiving the chair of child psychology at the Sorbonne in 1949 and the chair of philosophy at the Collège de France in 1952, he was actively engaged with politics and much of his writing extends beyond the scope of this thesis in its dealings with Marxism as well as France’s identity after the Second World War. In addition to his extensive philosophical output, Merleau-Ponty produced some interesting (but limited) essays on the arts, which form a major point of entry for my own research.

extraordinarily diverse in their interests, in their interpretation of the central issues of phenomenology, in their application of what they understood to be the phenomenological method, and in their development of what they took to be the phenomenological programme for the future of philosophy.

(Moran, 2000: 3)

Within this loose collective of agendas that philosopher Dermot Moran rightly points to, I was interested in a discourse that could speak to the very particular concerns of this research - relationality and responsiveness as operational principles, the generative capacities of a purposeful use of vision and the core questions of artistic composition and, further, solo artistic composition. My interest in Merleau-Ponty was initially piqued by his discourse on vision - a highly significant correlation with this research - but by following this initial spark with in-depth, very close readings of his works, I found points of intersection with the wider web of concerns in my work. The choice to then focus on this single philosophical voice stemmed from the fact that his complex discourse seemed to offer sufficient avenues for both practical and theoretical engagement with the specific nuances of my research and I wanted to focus on returning and re-returning to a single set of (vast) ideas. This practice/theory feedback loop made evident that there was generally a very neat 'fit' if you like between the direction of my practical research and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological discourse - I enumerate shortly on how he speaks to all of the specific concerns outlined above - but also at times his ideas were quite alien to what I was experiencing and developing in the space. In these moments, the tension or friction that I was experiencing between his philosophical ideas and the development of my own compositional approaches functioned as a spur to a clearer articulation of those differences and to a more variegated understanding of possible modes of compositional vision/action responsiveness. I am aware that this choice to focus on a single philosophical voice demarcates the research terrain and addresses the research question in a very particularised way, and that the practical model that has been refined and developed through this theoretical engagement represents both the fruitful tensions and limitations of this approach. I address this again in the conclusion to this thesis.

### I.3 Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is founded on the primacy of bodily, perceptual experience - what he called 'incarnate subjectivity' or 'le monde' ('life world') - in the creation of meaning (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 167).<sup>5</sup> In placing subjective, phenomenal experiencing at the centre of his theorising - 'phenomenal' here meaning embodied perception, our experience of the world as lived - Merleau-Ponty challenged the 'thinking which looks on from above' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 160) which in his view characterised the scientific approach, and re-oriented meaning-making instead towards the world as it is experienced by the individual. Whereas science 'manipulates things and gives up living in them' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 159), Merleau-Ponty placed 'what I live through' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: xvii) and the 'actual body I call mine' at the centre of his philosophising (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 160). 'I can seek no light concerning the world', he says in his last work *The Visible and the Invisible*, 'except by consulting, by making explicit, my frequenting of the world, of comprehending it from within' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 32).<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on the perceiving subject and her direct encounters with the environment aligns with both my own research position as a reflexive examiner, experiencing and appraising my own work 'from within' (although in my case, as explained later, I also built an intersubjectivity into the methodology of the work) and my interest in relationality and responsiveness as generative starting points for acts of improvisation.

Merleau-Ponty's work was also a shift away from the original Husserlian project, in which Husserl set about clarifying the essence of 'consciousness itself' (Moran, 2000: 145). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine Husserl's ideas in full, but here I note that his phenomenological project was characterised by the 'suspension' or 'bracketing' of everyday concerns and all "'world-positing' intentional acts which assumed the existence of the world' (Moran, 2000: 2). This meant that 'all scientific, philosophical, cultural, and everyday assumptions had to be put aside' if there was to be a genuine phenomenological insight into the essence of cognition and consciousness (Moran, 2000: 11). Moran characterises Husserl's approach as an 'absolute insistence on the necessity of bracketing the

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<sup>5</sup> Moran notes that the term *Lebenswelt* 'first shows up' in the draft manuscripts associated with Husserl's *Ideas II* and was also used by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) in a lecture series in 1919 (Moran, 2013: 114).

<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty's orientation was historically a challenge to the philosophical notion of Cartesian mind-body dualism - after René Descartes (1596-1650) - in which the body was treated as an instrument or object under the control of the mind. The body 'is not an object for an 'I think'', Merleau-Ponty counters, but 'a grouping of lived-through meanings' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 153).

actual world in order to proceed phenomenologically' (Moran, 2000: 78); his aim was to return to a 'transcendental standpoint, to uncover a new transcendental domain of experience' (Moran, 2000: 147). By contrast, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology was clearly a movement away from this emphasis on cognitive acts and a non-physical transcendental realm and towards the 'world' as phenomenally experienced by the individual. Later I return to the idea of 'bracketing' one's assumptions as it relates to some forms of phenomenological writing, but for now point out that in its general search for 'essences', particularly an essential conceptual foundation of knowledge, this transcendental phenomenology was evidently alien to the direction and intention of my own research agenda.

It could at this point be argued that Merleau-Ponty's positing of incarnate subjectivity as the locus of experience and knowledge is loosely characteristic of post-Husserlian phenomenological research in general. Despite the diversity of approaches within phenomenology identified earlier, there is a general theme - what academic Stanton Garner classifies as a 'mutually entailing set of aims' - that loosely unites contemporary phenomenological researchers. These are:

to direct attention from the world as it is conceived by the abstracting, 'scientific' gaze (the objective world) to the world as it appears or discloses itself to the perceiving subject (the phenomenal world); to pursue the thing as it is given to consciousness in direct experience; to return perception to the fullness of its encounter with its environment.

(Garner, 1994: 2)

Very broadly, phenomenology's interest in the experience and insights of the 'perceiving subject' can be deemed to be a widely shared theme; covering discourses as diverse as Merleau-Ponty's *Lebenswelt*; Martin Heidegger's formulation of *Dasein* in which individuals are 'thrown' into the world (Moran, 2000: 242) and even Jean-Paul Sartre's rubric of a radical freedom, to identify just three threads.<sup>7</sup> Here, however, I return to the specific nuances embedded in Merleau-Ponty's versioning of the perceiving subject to highlight the details of what he offered my research.

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<sup>7</sup> Heidegger published his major work *Sein Und Zeit (Being and Time)* in 1927. Sartre (1905-1980) published his major philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness* in 1943. Both authors are extensively treated in Dermot Moran's *Introduction to Phenomenology* (2000).

Highly significant is Merleau-Ponty's idiosyncratic discourse on vision and the confluence of visual perceptual experience and the movements of the body, which shifted his discourse into a particular register. He stresses a foundational correlation between vision and movement in everyday activity but beyond this he also creates a paradigm of what I call vision/action responsiveness based in the compositional activity of the painter. His philosophy is propelled by a reliance (arguably, as I address later, an over-reliance) on an embodied vision as the means of experiencing the world. It is 'true that the world is *what we see*', he says (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 4, original italics) and, of equal import, 'I have only to see something to know how to reach it and deal with it' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 162). For the painter, the eyes are 'computers of the world which have the gift of the visible' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 165); his is the eye that questions the world, that 'sees the world' and then 'through the offices of an agile hand' turns that world into paintings (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 165). Here then is both a general discourse on the entwinement of vision and movement and a model of solo artistic composition grounded in an active relationship with the environment that gave me a relevant, detailed discourse - a pragmatic and attitudinal way of being - that I could use as a provocation of my own emergent practice. Dermot Moran points out that Merleau-Ponty produced 'the most detailed example of the manner in which phenomenology can interact with the sciences and the arts' (Moran, 2000: 434) and he himself commented that 'if we make it our goal to reach the concrete, then in certain respects we must put art above science because it achieves an expression of the concrete man which science does not attempt' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964d: 36). His was thus a phenomenological voice that was also profoundly interested in artistic expression, and his focus on a solo compositional activity, grounded in a purposeful use of vision, chimed very clearly with my own concerns.<sup>8</sup>

On this note, it is also because Merleau-Ponty confines his own model of vision/action composition to the actions of the painter that his ideas invite a wider application. The painter is deemed to possess a 'secret science' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 161) which enables him to both access and then transmit onto canvas the qualities and properties of the visible world around him. The reasons behind this privileged position are explained later on p.94 as part of

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<sup>8</sup> Two of Merleau-Ponty's early essays concern the novel and cinema - *Metaphysics and the Novel* (1945) and *The Film and the New Psychology* (1947). His first essay on painting, *Cezanne's Doubt*, was published in 1945 and his late work *Eye and Mind* was originally published in 1961 (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a). It is in this latter work that he formulates a coherent philosophy of artistic activity rooted in the connection between the artist and his environment and which I discuss in detail in chapter three.

the discussion of Merleau-Ponty's ontology, but because the painter's work is rooted in a combined action of seeing and moving, his ideas take on wider significance when extended beyond painting to other creative processes that also place an embodied vision at the centre of compositional action. Although positioned within particular ontological strictures, the corporeal activities of the painter are rooted in a 'questioning' vision; his role is to 'grasp and project what is seen in him' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 167). These dynamic descriptions place vision and the 'expressive operation of the body' at the centre of an artistic paradigm in which 'the smallest perception' is 'amplified into painting and art' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 70). Whilst not sharing the ontological connotations of the painter's activities, this research does extend the rubric of 'art' into solo improvisational processes and challenges the notion that it is only the painter whose compositional activities can be fruitfully grounded in a vision/action model of responsiveness.<sup>9</sup> As I discuss further in chapter one, Merleau-Ponty's interest in the lived immediacy of experience - the 'incarnate subjectivity' that grounds his phenomenology - also lends itself to expressive modes that share that very incarnate subjectivity as it is experienced and shaped into compositional form, as is the case in this practice.

Merleau-Ponty's interest in vision/action responsiveness also chimes in another way with the direction of my practical experiments, in that he takes the specific facticity of our bodies into account when constructing his phenomenology of perception. 'What if our eyes were made in such a way as to prevent our seeing any part of our body...?' he asks in his essay on painting *Eye and Mind* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 163) anticipating some of his later discussions on the way in which the realisation that we can both see ourselves and simultaneously be seen by ourselves then ripples out into an entire meaning-system based on this reciprocity between subjectivity and objectivity (these ideas are discussed in full in chapter three). He also considers what it would be like if, like certain animals, 'we had lateral eyes with no cross blending of visual fields' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 163). His answer is that there 'would be no humanity' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 163). Our entire

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<sup>9</sup> Academic and dancer Susan Kozel - who I refer to again later in the Introduction - also extends Merleau-Ponty's model of the painter to include dancers in general in her doctoral thesis (Kozel, 1994). Whilst I acknowledge the common impulse here, Kozel's interest is in a philosophical re-examination of Merleau-Ponty's discourse through dance and in supplying dance with a new philosophical framework, but without testing or giving body to the philosophy in a practical context. Dance remains as 'a poetic image' in her work because it 'does not take place as a bodily phenomenon' (Kozel, 1994: 298). I also refer later to her text – *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology* (Kozel, 2007) - in which Merleau-Ponty's ideas are interwoven into her practice in a sophisticated way but, as I explain, through a different set of artistic media and with a different agenda from mine.

phenomenological experiencing of the world would be radically different. I would ‘see’ the world in an entirely different way and therefore the world would afford me very different possibilities for experience and action. This interest in what our corporeal facticity enables by way of movement responsiveness finds an analogous expression in my practice, as I am literally using my eyes (where they are) rather than expanding into terrain in which I use an imaginative construct of vision - working as if I had eyes at the back of my head for instance - or conceiving of the eyes in a metaphorical sense.<sup>10</sup>

Before giving an introductory example of how Merleau-Ponty’s specific discourse on vision/action responsiveness functions as a pragmatic provocation in the space, I also want to note that Merleau-Ponty’s general use of language (albeit in translation) is often richly imagistic, metaphorical and elliptical - indeed he has been criticised for ‘letting poetic speech have a voice in his philosophy’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 312). In this research, however, this ‘poetic’ tendency was another reason that I explicitly utilised and worked with his concepts. It is appealing and useful for the very reason that it allows me to engage with evocative keys of expression - to engage, in other words, with an artistic sensibility as much as with a philosopher. This poetic voice is usually dynamically suggestive, notoriously difficult to pin down to a static or unitary meaning, but redolent with action, movement and, when applied to acts of composition, textures of experience that give me a very clear set of markers against which I can situate my own compositional paradigm. To give a brief example here, a dynamic correlation between vision and movement is alluded to when he says that ‘my movements and the movements of my eyes make the world vibrate’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 7). This poeticised turn of phrase led me to attend to the motional quality at the heart of the relationship that he is talking about - his core formulation of the chiasmic exchange - as well as to the ontological connotations of the idea. The chiasm represents a moment of exchange or overlap between an individual and the world (and within an individual himself) and it begins by opening oneself to one’s surroundings through one’s

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<sup>10</sup> I give examples of imaginative constructs of vision when discussing the improvisational training practices of Al Wunder and American teacher Barbara Dilley later in the thesis. An example of a metaphorical approach to vision occurs in Phillip Zarrilli’s actor training, when ‘the body becomes all eyes’ (Zarrilli, 2009: 1). Zarrilli uses the metaphor of the body as ‘all eyes’ as a way of describing the charged state of perceptual and sensory awareness that he develops through his training processes.

vision, extending one's body into the surrounding world through the act of looking. Here the (poetic) consequence of this embodied vision is that the world begins to 'vibrate'.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, the relationship between an individual's body and the world is described elsewhere as 'a relation that is one of embrace' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 271), a poetically condensed description that distils the movement towards one another of two distinctive but related identities. This 'embrace' is the 'me other exchange' of the chiasm (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 215) and suggests the blurring of boundaries, the merging of the roles of perceiving/perceived and touching/touched, that is again core to both a philosophical understanding of the chiasmic exchange and to its dynamic motional quality.<sup>12</sup>

To return now to an example of the specific relationship between vision and action in Merleau-Ponty's discourse and the way in which it infiltrated my practical research, he states in *The Phenomenology of Perception* that a meaningful connection with the world 'does not occur in the natural transactions between my sight and the world', but rather 'it is the reply to a certain kind of questioning on the part of my gaze...' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 226).<sup>13</sup> Experimenting with a 'questioning' vision became a useful pragmatic tool in the studio - scanning the space to see what it contained for instance - and a way of exploring links between this kind of attitudinal approach - adopting the assumption that there would be something in the space that would 'reply' to my look - and its compositional efficaciousness ('questioning' the space often yielded something that functioned as a creative spur but it sometimes didn't - a point I pick up on again in relation to the development of an alternative compositional avenue). The idea of visually 'questioning' the space thus intersected with the practice's initial findings, which were that in directing my vision externally, reaching it into the things of the space, I could establish a sense of relationality for myself. This process of bringing the theoretical discourse as an attitudinal and pragmatic way of being into the space

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<sup>11</sup> The chiasm is variously described (and translated) as a 'me other exchange' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 215); an 'overlapping or encroachment' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 123); 'encroachment, infringement' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 134); 'the intentional encroachment' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 239); 'reversibility' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 263 & 264) and 'Ineinander' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 268) - German for 'into one another'. Merleau-Ponty's use of the term is a linguistic theft from physiology - the optic chiasm is the site in the brain where one set of nerve fibres from each eye crosses over and joins with the non-crossing nerve fibres from the other eye, forming two optic tracts, each with information from both eyes. I elaborate on the chiasm's ontological connotations in chapter three.

<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty makes his poetic inclinations explicit when he exclaims in *Signs* that the 'expression of the world' 'must be poetry' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 52).

<sup>13</sup> Merleau-Ponty interchanges 'gaze' with 'vision' throughout his discourse.

- a process I describe as one of ‘encroachment’ after one of Merleau-Ponty’s terms for the chiasmic exchange - is outlined further in chapter one. The process also entailed a return to the theory between the practice sessions, developing the feedback loop in which the practice would be refined by pragmatically investigating the theoretical discourse and would itself also begin to talk to and enhance that discourse, particularly the vision/action rubric of composition.

#### **I.4 Other treatments of Merleau-Ponty**

I am cognizant that Merleau-Ponty has been treated in earlier studies, most noticeably in movement/dance but also in theatre, so this doctorate engages with a number of academic writers who offer a range of points of view on several of his key philosophical ideas. I outline and intersect with their arguments as part of the enunciation of the particular direction of this research.

One of Merleau-Ponty’s most articulate proponents - philosopher and dancer Susan Kozel - offers a close reading of some of his ideas in the fairly recently published *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology* (Kozel, 2007). I acknowledge a commonality of interest in the key idea of the chiasmic exchange, but I illustrate in chapter three that Kozel’s adaptation of it, grounded in her explorations of digital technologies, is quite different from mine. She also pursues ontological readings of the concept of the ‘invisible’ (summarised on p.110) whilst I pursue one of Merleau-Ponty’s alternative formulations of the invisible as it relates to the ‘visible’ and the act of perception. Kozel’s other major influence is ‘flesh’ which I discuss on pp.99-100 but which is not directly applicable to this study. In general, I have found *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology* to be an extremely interesting and influential text in itself, and an excellent example of the ways in which some of Merleau-Ponty’s complex ideas can be flexibly and usefully adapted to a number of very different contemporary performance forms.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kozel also draws on Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) when she is ‘confronted with the strangeness’ and the ‘sheer-not-me-ness’ of the digital rendering of her movements (Kozel, 2007: 245). This interest in alterity - ‘the state of being different, diverse or other’ (Kozel, 2007: 243) - is filtered through Levinas’s understanding that ‘I cannot control or contain the other’ (Kozel, 2007: 245) and that there is a dimension of the ‘other’ that I do not have access to. Kozel draws on Levinas in part because there is some debate around the question of whether Merleau-Ponty’s discourse sufficiently accounts for ‘otherness’. I talk directly to this issue in chapter three, but overall my project does not share Kozel’s overt interest in self-identity and alterity.

A contrasting voice is supplied by one of Merleau-Ponty's most ardent detractors, dance academic Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, in *The Primacy of Movement* (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998). She contests Merleau-Ponty's reliance on vision as integral to movement expression, so opens up a useful line of discussion on the absence of a valuing of kinaesthetic awareness in his work. In chapter three I speak to both her own paradigm of the body in which kinaesthesia (and touch) are the 'bedrock of our experience of ourselves and of the world' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 297) and Merleau-Ponty's position in which vision is integral to movement expression. In chapter five I also talk to her model of 'the essential character of a dance improvisation as it is experienced by a dancer' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 486) by noting points of both convergence with and divergence from my own (non-essentialist) strategic approaches.

I also refer briefly to a third dance academic, Sondra Fraleigh, when discussing different forms of studio-based writing on p.43. Fraleigh includes Merleau-Ponty in her creation of a descriptive aesthetics of dance and her major text, *Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics* (Fraleigh, 1987), captures phenomenology's interest in the 'lived body' in its very title, exploring both the subjective experiencing of dance and the communicative or inter-subjective intent that imbues it in its aesthetic form.<sup>15</sup>

This bias towards dance/movement voices in my thesis is indicative of the way in which Merleau-Ponty's ideas readily lend themselves to somatic practice - to gaining knowledge and insight through the phenomenal (lived) body - but it is also indicative of the origins of my own improvisational work in movement-based explorations (I trace my improvisational training in chapter two). It is also important to place a theatrical voice in the mix, however, in part because my own practice smudges the boundaries between disciplines, drawing on movement and words and exploring the creation of imaginative fictions as well as corporeal improvisations. Stanton Garner's *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Garner, 1994) utilises Merleau-Ponty's interest in corporeality and the facticity of the body in his analysis of the works of Samuel Beckett, opening up a useful

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<sup>15</sup> An impulse towards intersubjectivity is in Sondra Fraleigh's work the definition of what makes dance - both choreographed and improvised - an art, or an aesthetic mode of expression. 'If I dance only for myself', she says, 'I am not brought into a dynamic intersubjective relation with the other. I am simply bound up in my own subjectivity' (Fraleigh, 1987: 59). 'Dance is not completed *as art* until it enters an intersubjective field' (Fraleigh, 1987: 23, original italics). Improvisation is treated under the same rubric, 'since works performed for others, even when improvised, are intentionally performed for an aesthetic purpose' (Fraleigh, 1987: 173). For Fraleigh, to express 'is to exist for the other, to manifest oneself toward another or others and at the same time to draw others into the orbit of this manifestation' (Fraleigh, 1987: 59).

play of difference between my adaptation of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and his own. Garner offers a formulation of theatrical space as 'phenomenal space' that is 'perceived and inhabited' by both actor and audience (Garner, 1994: 3) and grounds this understanding within the dramatic text and the possibilities for action that inhere within the text. To this primarily theoretical understanding, I add my own lived experience of 'phenomenal space' from the perspective of both improviser and audience, drawing on Garner's notion of the 'embodied eye' of spectatorship (Garner, 1994: 4) on p.79 and expanding on his discussion of 'spectatorial power' (Garner, 1994: 48) in the seeing/seen section of chapter three, p.103.<sup>16</sup>

## **I.5 Further Framings**

I now propose to contextualise this research beyond its Merleau-Pontian framing, introducing key texts and figures that are relevant to my research for significant conceptual, methodological and aesthetic reasons. The delimitation of literature that follows points ahead to chapter two, which relates the nuances of this practice to the aesthetics and philosophies of a range of other practitioners and it also enables me to further pinpoint the rationale of my own approach and topic. As part of this contextualisation I also note a range of other discourses that have been used to illuminate improvisatory practices and indicate how my work sits in relation to these alternative framings.

### **(1) Conceptual Links**

The dance-oriented companion to improvisation *Taken By Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader* (Cooper Albright and Gere, 2003), is primarily oriented towards encouraging its readers to 'think and talk about improvisation' (Cooper Albright and Gere, 2003: xiii). The collection of essays explores a range of themes from the work of individual practitioners, approaches to performance improvisation (Contact Improvisation, tap dancing, flamenco) and manifestations of improvisation in everyday life. The primary relevance of this volume

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<sup>16</sup> A final addition to this survey of other treatments of Merleau-Ponty is Australian improviser Shaun McLeod, who refers to Merleau-Ponty's discourse of embodied subjectivity in order to view dance as 'a way of knowing' (McLeod, 2008: 17) in *Chamber: Dance Improvisation, Masculine Embodiment, and Subjectivity*, his account of his work *Chamber* (McLeod, 2008). As mentioned earlier, my position as a reflexive researcher needing to monitor and reflect on my own experiences within improvisation aligns me with this general phenomenological orientation, but I do not engage directly with this text as McLeod's primary philosophical interest is in adapting feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz's ideas to his exploration of the links between dance improvisation, embodiment and masculine identity. Grosz's argument that gender is not a fixed entity but mutable and dynamic frames McLeod's engagement with masculine experience in this project and assists him in his aim of challenging a hegemonic masculinity.

to my work lies in the principle underpinning all the essays, namely that improvisation is ‘susceptible to careful articulation’ and that the ‘careful articulation of the improvisational moment by no means renders it any less valuable, or any less capable of surprise’ (Cooper Albright and Gere, 2003: xiv). This understanding coheres in a very basic way with a primary motivation behind my doctoral research - to undertake ‘careful articulation’ of my own emergent approach and contribute to both professional and academic contexts clarity and understanding of a particular practice.

American dance improviser Kent De Spain’s writings are also geared around an understanding that movement improvisation is amenable to articulation and analysis, and further, to precise categorisation.<sup>17</sup> An early article ‘Dance Improvisation: Creating Chaos’ (De Spain, 1993) draws on chaos theory in order to view improvisational dance as a dynamical system or ‘kind of strange attractor’ that never repeats exactly but that nonetheless operates within certain tendencies (De Spain, 1993: 25). De Spain proposes that the individual tendencies of any improviser can therefore be tracked, analysed and categorised, a proposition that he then tests in his doctoral thesis, *Solo Movement Improvisation: Constructing Understanding Through Lived Somatic Experience* (De Spain, 1997). In a broad sense my research follows on from the kind of in-depth analysis of improvisational experience pioneered by De Spain, although I employ a very different methodology (addressed below), and have chosen to translate my generative approaches into strategies - into tools that allow me to become more attuned to the links between my visual attentiveness and my compositional actions - rather than broad categories of experience.<sup>18</sup>

## **(2) Methodological Links**

Kent De Spain’s approach to capturing improvisational experiences in his doctoral thesis serves as a significant methodology against which I developed my own approach. Drawing on the theory of ‘flow’ in the work of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, De Spain followed Csikszentmihalyi’s model in which research participants were interrupted by pagers at various intervals during their day and requested to write down their state of mind

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<sup>17</sup> De Spain is a multidisciplinary artist, improviser and teacher who has conducted extensive research into processes of movement improvisation.

<sup>18</sup> De Spain’s categories of experience include ‘attending to some aspect of the external environment; direct descriptions of movements or the experience of moving; awareness of some aspect of desires/intentions; and macro-level thoughts about some specific or general aspect of improvisation’ (De Spain, 1997: 193).

at the time of the pager's signal.<sup>19</sup> De Spain set up an audiotape during studio sessions, which interrupted the improviser at random intervals with a pre-recorded request to 'report what you are experiencing now' or 'report now' (De Spain, 1997: 124). The participants in his sessions had been briefed beforehand on what to expect, and were also encouraged to 'report on any aspect of how you are working improvisationally (what you are working with) or on any aspect of how you are experiencing what you are doing in any way that you are experiencing it' (De Spain, 1997: 124). The methodology aimed at discovering the nature of improvisation 'as experienced by improvisers' (De Spain, 1997: 118). The essence of that experience as communicated through the language of the verbal reports determined De Spain's interpretation of the data and, combined with additional focus groups and interviews, led him to create categories of activity or experience within solo improvisation. This methodology is explained in full in his thesis and is also discussed in his article 'The Cutting Edge of Awareness: Reports from the Inside of Improvisation' (De Spain, 2003).

This methodological approach was extremely useful in building appreciation of what De Spain calls 'some fundamental organizing concepts' shared by the study's participants (De Spain, 1997: 287) but he also acknowledges that the act of translating improvisatory experiences into verbal reports 'can be difficult, if not impossible' for the participants (De Spain, 1997: 289). Key differences in my methodology were that I wanted to find a way of capturing salient features of improvisational experience after the event, rather than during, thereby avoiding the necessity for the improviser to interrupt the 'flow' of what they were doing and instantaneously verbally report what they were experiencing. I also wanted to track what was experienced or noticed by both the improviser and the watcher. The desire to not interrupt the 'flow' of an improvisation whilst in progress influenced my decision to use 'Immediate Writings' - fully documented in chapter one - as a means of capturing (but also not capturing) aspects of the improvisations. As will be explained, I also did not attempt to create categories of experience out of these writings, but used them in the studio as

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<sup>19</sup> Csikszentmihalyi has researched topics related to flow - a state of complete absorption in an activity - for over twenty years. His texts include *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990); *The Evolving Self* (1994); *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (1996) and *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement With Everyday Life* (1998). His approach was called the Experience Sampling Method. The pager was activated about eight times a day for a week; at each signal the participant was asked to 'write down how they feel and what they are thinking about whenever the pager signals' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 4). The data collected from this process functions as a 'running record, a written film clip of his or her life' and forms the basis of Csikszentmihalyi's conclusions in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990: 4).

springboards to discussion and now in this written thesis as a means of loosely re-tracing what was experienced of the improvisations by both improviser and watcher.

Related more generally to my methodological approach, is Al Wunder's *The Wonder of Improvisation* (Wunder, 2006), as it introduces a concept of 'totally improvised' to the field of improvisatory discourse that is both relevant and, as mentioned earlier on p.13, able to be extended in my own work. Although there are some other examples of improvisational work which are characterised as 'totally improvised' - see footnote 20 - my research is underpinned by a very particular understanding of the term so that neither music, notions of character, thematic ideas or specific choreographic agendas are imported into the performance context as the seeds or building blocks of improvised compositions. Building on the conceptual foundations supplied by Wunder, then, my research contributes to the existing literature in dance, drama and hybrid improvisational performance a set of strategic approaches for solo composition within a 'totally improvised' paradigm.<sup>20</sup>

### **(3) Compositional Strategies**

The bilingual compendium of interviews, *Nouvelles de Danse* (Benoit, 1997), is premised on the point of view that it is 'impossible to dissociate improvisation from composition' (Benoit, 1997: 9) and features dancers experienced in performance improvisation talking informally about their practices. Proceeding as 'a series of conversations' (Benoit, 1997: 7),

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<sup>20</sup> Very different understandings of 'totally improvised' occur in Frost and Yarrow's account of Theatre Machine - formed in 1967 with Keith Johnstone as director - in their text *Improvisation in drama* (Frost and Yarrow, 2007) and in the work of London-based Improbable Theatre. Frost and Yarrow classify Theatre Machine as the 'only professional company to present performances which have been 'totally improvised' - though in recent years work by The Improbables has come close' (Frost and Yarrow, 2007: 81). For Theatre Machine, 'totally improvised' meant that there was scope for the performers to access a number of pre-determined characters and some sections of a show 'may be familiar to them or quite fully rehearsed' (Frost and Yarrow, 2007: 81). Johnstone himself describes Theatre Machine as 'the only pure improvisation group I knew' and 'like a jazzed-up drama class' (Johnstone, 1981: 27) in his text *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (Johnstone, 1981). Johnstone doesn't discuss Theatre Machine in depth and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to analyse his approaches to using improvisation to foster spontaneity and release the imagination in students, which is the main focus of his text. I do, however, discuss his technique of 'Reincorporation' (p.82) and elaborate on his comments on the imagination (p.153) as part of the contextualisation of my own practice.

In the case of Improbable Theatre, for whom Keith Johnstone is a major influence and to whom co-Artistic director Phelim McDermott credits his initial interest in improvisation (Svich, 2001), there are a range of approaches to improvisation for and in performance, with some work labelled as 'totally improvised' (Improbable, n.d.). Within this frame, however, there are levels of structure or theme that are predetermined, so that in the case of the show 'Spirit' for example, in which there are 'no scripted lines to say and no story to act out', the skeleton of the piece - a story of three brothers - is already in place (Improbable, n.d.). Similarly, 'anything can happen' in the show 'Animo' but it begins with 'a range of everyday materials and found objects' (Improbable, n.d.) and in the Keith Johnstone-inspired 'Lifegame' the actors work within a clearly-defined frame, firstly interviewing, then dramatising stories from the life of, a chosen guest (Improbable, n.d.).

the text is a useful prompt for considering improvisation and composition as simultaneous, entwined activities, but leaves a lot of room for more in-depth analyses of particular artists, strategies and approaches. In the case of dancer Julyen Hamilton, for instance, whose treatment of improvisation as ‘a way of composing’ (Benoit, 1997: 199) explicitly aligns his general approach with mine, further explication of the nuances of his approach are needed.<sup>21</sup> Some of these are supplied in his own earlier DVD of improvisation (Hamilton, 1994) and other reflective accounts such as a more recent interview in the American journal *Contact Quarterly* (Stark Smith, 2011).<sup>22</sup> In these accounts a particular discourse of ‘making pieces’ and following a ‘line’ of enquiry is enunciated, which functions as a significant reference point for my analysis of our respective approaches to generating and structuring material in chapter two. Also touched on in the Benoit text is dance artist Yvonne Rainer, whose own book, *Work 1961-73* (Rainer, 1974), also gives more detailed accounts of her performance work in that period and outlines the operational principles driving her aesthetic at the time.<sup>23</sup> *Work 1961-73* includes a lively and provocative statement on approaches to improvised performance - *Some Thoughts on Improvisation* - which is of direct relevance to this research and which I analyse in depth in relation to the use of vision and attitudes towards choice-making.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Hamilton was born in 1954 in England, trained at The Place in London in the 1970s and now lives in Spain. He performs and teaches widely throughout Europe.

<sup>22</sup> Contact Quarterly was founded in 1975 as a forum for discussing Contact Improvisation but now presents writings on a range of improvised performance practices.

<sup>23</sup> Born in 1934 in California, Yvonne Rainer was one of the original members of Judson Dance Theatre (1962-4), a collective of performers who grew out of a choreography class held by musician Robert Dunn, who had studied with John Cage. The class was held between 1960 and 1962 at the Merce Cunningham dance studio in the Living Theatre building in New York City. The work of Judson Dance Theatre has been extensively covered by Sally Banes in *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Banes, 1977); *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Banes, 1993a); *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962 – 1964* (Banes, 1993b) and in ‘Choreographic Methods of the Judson Dance Theater’ (Banes, 2001). One of Rainer’s pieces, *Continuous Project-Altered Daily (CP-AD)* was also foundational to the emergence of The Grand Union (1970-76), ‘one of the most brilliant projects of the postmodern dance’ (Banes, 2001: 359). *CP-AD* existed as a performance frame, which stipulated some tasks and actions but left it up to the performers to choose the order and manner of execution. Rainer describes it as ‘constructed of interchangeable units of material, some very elaborate and requiring the whole group, other units being solos that could be done at any time, or duets and trios (Rainer, 1974: 125). Susan Foster gives a useful overview of the ‘noncohesive roughness’ (Foster, 2002: 82) of the Grand Union in *Dances That Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull* (Foster, 2002: pp. 79-84 and pp. 186-190) although her text primarily concentrates on Richard Bull’s choreographic practices within the context of artistic experiments and social shifts in America in the 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>24</sup> Sally Banes summarises the choreographic idioms of *Some Thoughts on Improvisation* as part of a wider discussion on the exploration of possibilities for choreographic method that characterized the work of the original Judson Dance Theatre workshop (Banes, 2001: pp. 358-9).

*The Improvisation Game: Discovering the secrets of improvised performance* (Johnston, 2006) is Chris Johnston's overview of primarily drama-based performance and teaching practices in the UK and America.<sup>25</sup> The text is a mix of historical contextualisation and a more practically oriented selection of conversations with drama, dance and music artists, games, exercises and reflections on how to generate and structure both solo and group improvised performances. Despite the hybrid nature of the book, the section on Johnston's approach to solo performance improvisation is a useful account of a parallel aesthetic, against which I situate my own generative approaches. Similarly, musician Stephen Nachmanovitch - whose improvisational practice and life are framed through Buddhist philosophy - outlines his approach to composition in his text *Free Play* (Nachmanovitch, 1990) and in a number of on-line articles.<sup>26</sup> At first glance Nachmanovitch might be regarded as an incongruous inclusion in a selection of relevant literature and practitioners, but my research has thrown up several striking points of linguistic and ontological convergence with the tenor and temper of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology; points of connectivity which enable me to clarify and situate my own compositional approaches in relation to the philosophical agenda that permeates Nachmanovitch's procedures.

There are two other practitioners who are relevant to my research for aesthetic reasons. Australian improviser Peter Trotman is scarcely featured in the existing literature, but I discuss him on pp.88-91 in order to deepen my analysis of the use of movement and words as stylistic compositional signatures in my own research.<sup>27</sup> The Australian journal *Proximity* - similar in scope and aims to *Contact Quarterly* - serves as the primary source of the extremely minimal written reflection on Trotman's work but my understanding of his compositional strategies primarily stems from the studies I undertook with him throughout

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<sup>25</sup> Johnston trained at the Drama Centre, London, before working in small-scale theatre as a director and writer. He has run his own company, Fluxx, since 1998 and has also written about community-based drama practices in *House of Games: Making Theatre From Everyday Life* (Johnson, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> Nachmanovitch was born in 1950 in the US. He has a Ph.D. in the History of Consciousness and in the 1970s was a pioneer in free improvisation on violin, viola and electric violin. He teaches and lectures widely in the United States and abroad on creativity and the spiritual underpinnings of art.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Trotman studied Maths and Computer Science at RMIT in Melbourne before beginning classes with Al Wunder and becoming a founding member of Wunder's Theatre of the Ordinary improvisational performance group in 1982. In 1987 he co-founded the improvisational movement theatre duet Trotman and Morrish with my research collaborator on this doctoral study, Andrew Morrish. Together they performed numerous seasons of improvisation including the Greenmill Dance Festival in Melbourne in 1994, 1995 and 1999 and the New York Improvisation Festival in 1995 and 1997. He continues to teach and perform regularly at Cecil Street Studio in Melbourne.

2003 and 2004 and the links I have made between the pedagogical ideas infusing his exercises, the subjective experience of ‘performing’ them in class, and watching his own on-going solo performances.

Absent from the literature on improvisation is Nigel Charnock, who was best known - and documented - as a founding member of UK physical theatre company DV8 but who had been exploring improvisation for several years. With the exception of his own blog and various reviews of his performances, Charnock’s improvisational work is undocumented, but his inclusion in my selection of related performance practitioners in chapter two adds a significant improvisatory presence to the existing discourse - analysed and positioned in relation to my own research trajectory - but more resonant now, I think, in light of his untimely death in August 2012.<sup>28</sup>

#### **(4) Approaches to the use of vision in improvisation**

Melinda Buckwalter’s recently published *Composing while dancing: An Improviser’s Companion* (Buckwalter, 2010) includes a small section on ‘The Eyes’. It is the only broad-based companion or manual that does so, and the section serves as a useful introduction to the way in which vision functions in the training practices and pedagogical approaches of a number of improviser/teachers. The text includes an outline of the workshopping practices of Katie Duck, for instance, a veteran improviser/teacher who has a particular interest in collaborative dance and music improvisational practices. When exploring vision she asks her students to play with the correlations between different lengths of gaze and movement choices. She also encourages her students to look each other directly in the eye, invoking what she calls ‘biology’ - a kind of hormonal rush - by ‘eyeballing’ each other and eliciting a sense of interpersonal interest and excitement (Buckwalter, 2010: 120). The use of the eyes in performance is briefly alluded to in relation to eliciting a ‘rush’ that ‘pulls the audience in and gets them involved in the exchange empathetically’ (Buckwalter, 2010: 120)

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<sup>28</sup> Charnock trained at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and the London School of Contemporary Dance. He was a founding member of DV8 Physical Theatre Company in the UK in 1986, with whom he co-devised and performed *My Sex, Our Dance* (1986). He also performed in various other DV8 works such as *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men* (1988) and *Strange Fish* (1992) (DV8, n.d.). In 1995 he formed his own company, Nigel Charnock and Company, through which he made a series of set solo shows including *Original Sin* (1993) and *Human Being* (1997), before developing the shows that involved a degree of improvisation - the solo *Frank* (2002) and a quartet, *Stupid Men* (2006) (Nigel Charnock and Company, n.d.). He also worked as a choreographer with companies throughout Europe and was Artistic Director of Helsinki Dance Company between 2002 and 2005.

but in keeping with the book's flavour as a companionable provocation for experimentation, the use of vision in and for composition and performance is not treated in depth.<sup>29</sup>

In 'Before Your Eyes: Seeds of a Dance Practice' (Nelson, 2004), Lisa Nelson documents her work with video.<sup>30</sup> It is an interesting account of how she used video in a process of 'reverse-engineering' the 'composition' of her movement and the 'composition' of her seeing (Nelson, 2004: 20). Her investigations into composition, framed as a 'dialogue' between her attention and her physicality (Nelson, 2004: 24), position her linguistically and, more broadly, aesthetically close to my own research although the emphasis in this article is on how her use of video functioned as a means of re-training and re-experiencing both her attentiveness and her dancing. From this studio research, Nelson then developed the 'Tuning Scores', an ensemble training methodology that engages strategically with vision and kinaesthesia in order to make explicit individual decision-making processes. This score is discussed in *Nouvelles de Danse, Composing while dancing* and in a number of other non-academic contexts and although it is a training tool, it serves as a rare example of a methodological approach to improvisation in which the activity of observing something (from both inside and outside) is exploited with compositional intent. I discuss the score on pp.70-72.

American improviser Barbara Dilley has also created an ensemble training methodology based on the use of vision, sketched in 'Two Streams/Many Ways' in *Contact Quarterly*

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<sup>29</sup> Duck's experiments in using vision as a means of creating interpersonal interest and excitement are useful as general points of reference for my own work, but the 'core' of her improvisatory research is the 'practical dialogue between dancers and musicians' (Buckwalter, 2010: 113). This interest led her to establish the Magpie Music Dance Company in Amsterdam in 1995, now an umbrella organisation designed to support a range of projects.

There are other brief mentions in the text of the image-based explorations of eye depth in the teaching practices of Nancy Topf, a pioneer of developments in anatomical release technique (Buckwalter, 2010: 200) and an exercise with Indonesian performer Prpto in which students 'make windows' with parts of their bodies in order to alter their perspectives (Buckwalter, 2010: 127). The text also illustrates one eye exercise - 'Big/Small' which experiments with shifting the size and scale of an image from an observer's perspective - from improviser Nina Martin's 'Articulating the Solo Body' work. Martin is an American improviser whose training work for solo dancers concentrates on developing personal vocabulary whilst her 'Ensemble Thinking' structures 'help improvisers read what is going on in the dance space' (Buckwalter, 2010: 194).

<sup>30</sup> Lisa Nelson was born in 1949 in New York, studied dance and choreography at Bennington College in Vermont and later worked with Daniel Nagrin's improvisational company, The Workgroup (1971-74). She teaches and performs throughout Europe. The Workgroup's exercises, games and structures that were developed in studio sessions and then performed for audiences are recounted by Nagrin in *Dance and the Specific Image* (Nagrin, 1994).

(Stark Smith, 2005) and in *Composing while dancing*.<sup>31</sup> The ‘eye practices’ are loosely outlined as a means of bringing awareness to the use of the eyes. A range of other structures, which serve as tools for group dance training, are also sketched. Dilley’s work is contextualised more widely by reference to Shambhala Buddhism and the practice of meditation, a branch of exploration that differs from mine in its lengthy immersion in an internal, meditative state (a session is designed to take about three hours).<sup>32</sup> As will be clear throughout the following discussions, my emphasis on seeding and shaping material for composition in performance, and the impact on the development of the strategies of the seeing eyes of an audience throughout this research orient my work very differently, but I do relate Dilley’s eye practices to my own research on pp.138-139.

Wunder’s text includes a few exercises on the use of vision in duet training. The exercises are offered as a means of ‘bringing yourself into the present’ (Wunder, 2006: 153), an agenda which in my case is subsumed into a more complex compositional paradigm. Overall, Wunder’s text operates as a loose mix of class exercises, pedagogical principles and autobiography, and his treatment of vision, although noticeable, is cursory.

The existing literature on the use of vision in improvisation is thus almost exclusively contextualised as training and, further, primarily as training within duet and ensemble formats. The commentaries also serve as general accounts or summaries of approaches and exercises, offering interesting reflective thoughts but falling short of more in-depth analyses or explications. In this research, then, I offer a more detailed explanation of how a purposeful use of vision can function as an efficacious compositional tool in and for performance improvisation. To the current literature I add a template of pragmatic strategies for performance grounded in vision/action models of responsiveness, gearing my research around the role of vision in solo, ‘totally improvised’ work and, further, the role of vision in understanding this work as composition. Here I also reiterate that I pursue the details of Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on embodied vision and the very specific model of art and

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<sup>31</sup> Dilley performed in some of the early Judson Dance Theatre pieces and later became a member of The Grand Union.

<sup>32</sup> Dilley’s ‘Contemplative Dance Practice’ uses meditation as part of the articulation and framing of the improvisational work (Buckwalter, 2010: 193). Dilley characterises this practice as ‘open space improvisation’ in which there are no predetermined rules or limitations (Buckwalter, 2010: 197) but it begins with a sitting meditation that moves into a personal warm-up and then grows into ‘open space’ improvisation before closing with a ‘short final sitting meditation’ (Buckwalter, 2010: 193). Meditation as an approach extends to the participants who are sitting around the edge of the space when not dancing; they employ a ‘meditative attention’ (Buckwalter, 2010: 193).

composition that he puts forward as the focal points of a practice/theory feedback loop which adds a distinctive methodological approach to my investigation.

## **I.6 The chapters**

Chapter One, *Ways of Seeing*, further elaborates the aims, scope and characteristics of the practical work. It outlines the roles of my research collaborator Andrew Morrish and the use of Immediate Writings in the studio. It also discusses the encroachments of the theoretical discourse into the practical explorations, and (in a reversal of the encroachment) points to the ways in which the practice challenged that discourse. In Chapter Two, *Telescopic Views*, I situate the concerns of my practice within a broad field of performance improvisation, relating them to the aesthetics, methodologies and philosophies of other performance practitioners. The choice of practitioners is explained in more detail, their defining characteristics summarised and significant points of intersection with my own and each other's work highlighted. Chapter Three, *Chiasmic Connections*, gives close readings of five of Merleau-Ponty's core formulations. These are (1) the entwining of a 'questioning' vision with movement, (2) the chiasm, (3) the visible, (4) the 'invisible' and (5) the 'I can'. A detailed examination of these ideas is offered in order to articulate their nuances as phenomenological concepts and to further discuss the way in which the practice/theory encroachments have led to a reframing and re-envisaging of the theoretical ideas. Chapter Four, *Putting on Creative Spectacles*, introduces the five strategies that I have developed in response to the research question. The strategies are:

- (1) Seeing and responding to the performance space.
- (2) Shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience.
- (3) Shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli.
- (4) Inhabiting an imaginative landscape.
- (5) Using internal editing.

These strategies are contextualised by specific examples from studio investigations, performances and other improvisatory practices and throughout the written thesis I also include examples of the studio-based Immediate Writings as a way of bringing a voice from the studio onto the page.

# CHAPTER ONE

## WAYS OF SEEING

### *Audiences, Immediate Writings and the Practice/Theory feedback loop*

#### **1.1 The Studio Practice**

I begin by outlining the pragmatics of the main thread of practical investigation with my collaborator Andrew Morrish.<sup>33</sup> Although I also engaged in solo practice between these shared sessions, there are three defining features of the practice as methodology which were crystallised in the work with Morrish. The first is the significance of developing and practising the work in the presence of a spectator, by which I mean that Morrish functioned as a kind of generic audience (developing and practising the work with audiences was also put into play through a series of public performances)<sup>34</sup>; the second is the extension or refinement of this more generic role to that of expert in the field of improvisation, building a relevant second-person perspective into the methodology; the third is the inclusion in our practice of Immediate Writings. This chapter also outlines the encroachments of the theoretical discourse into the practical explorations and gives some introductory remarks on the ways in which the practice challenged that discourse.

Morrish and I conducted seventeen studio investigations, each of which lasted between one and seven days, in the period between 2009 and 2011.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Morrish began performance improvisation with Al Wunder's Theatre of the Ordinary in Melbourne in 1982. In 1987 he co-founded the improvisational movement theatre duet Trotman and Morrish with Peter Trotman. In 2000 he moved to Sydney where he based his solo performance practice. In 2002 he relocated to Europe and now teaches and performs extensively in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK.

<sup>34</sup> Performances that have taken place as part of this research include a number of events at the University of Huddersfield in April 2009, November 2009, May 2010 and October 2010; Spontaneous Combustion # 40 @ Cecil Street Studio, as part of *Concoction*, July 2009; Spontaneous Combustion #41 @ Balletakadamen, Stockholm, November 2010; Spontaneous Combustion #42 @ University of Northampton, June 2011; a number of performances in the Cellar Bar of Laurence Batley Theatre throughout 2011 and a performance at the University of Salford in June 2012.

<sup>35</sup> The sessions were held on:

March 31 – April 2 2009  
June 25 – June 27 2009

The sessions varied in length from three to five hours and all took place in either Studio 1, 2 or 3 of the Milton Building, Drama Department, University of Huddersfield. The sessions followed a regular format in which Morrish and I would conduct our own individual warm-ups, lasting on average between thirty and forty-five minutes. We would then begin an ‘exchange’ of solos, usually commencing with a ‘warm-up solo’ of five to seven minutes and gradually progressing to longer pieces. Each of the solos was timed with Morrish’s stopwatch.<sup>36</sup> After each solo we would do the Immediate Writings, which are explained further on p.38.

Morrish acted as ‘audience’ for the many improvisations that constituted the terrain of the research. As audience - being physically present, attending to the improvisations - he also created a through-line with the public performances, which were peppered throughout the research period. Here I want to point out that the idea of practising and developing improvisation with an audience present - even an audience of one - also extends the scope and applicability of Merleau-Ponty’s deep interest in perceptual experience as lived - the ‘incarnate subjectivity’ or *Lebenswelt* that grounds his phenomenology and his model of painterly composition. Merleau-Ponty’s rubric of composition does not generally allow for the ‘expressive operation of the body’ in which ‘the smallest perception’ is ‘amplified into

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August 16 – August 22 2009  
November 2 2009  
February 17 – 18 2010  
February 28 – March 4 2010  
May 4 – 5 2010  
June 28 – July 1 2010  
September 15 – September 16 2010  
October 4 – October 8 2010  
November 29 – December 3 2010  
December 6 – December 7 2010  
December 22 2010  
February 21 – February 23 2011  
May 11 – May 12 2011  
June 6 – June 7 2011  
August 23 – August 25 2011

Morrish also made eleven separate visits between 2006 and 2008. I was not engaged in the doctorate in this time, but these exploratory sessions functioned as a useful precursor to this research. It was in this period that we developed approaches to sharing practice - alternating doing and watching, discussing the work - that would later be repurposed into the methodology of this research and formalised into Morrish’s role as generic ‘audience’ and expert second-person perspective - a kind of collaborator/witness.

<sup>36</sup> The choice to time each solo was linked to Morrish’s interest in developing longer solos of about 50 minutes in his own practice. I did not use a time-frame as a determining structure, but I was interested in developing a felt sense of shaping material over a time-frame of 20-35 minutes as this seemed to be of sufficient length to challenge my generative and compositional abilities.

painting and art' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 70) to be witnessed and experienced by others (there is an unusual exception to this which I discuss later in relation to the development of strategy 5, *using internal editing*). For those of us interested in the work of the painter, it is mostly the final product that 'teaches us to see' and 'makes us dwell in a world we do not have the key to' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 77). By contrast, in the far more evanescent mode of performance improvisation, it is (in this model) the improviser's 'seeing' itself that is witnessed as it develops and amplifies perceptions into embodied expression; the practice shares the generative processes themselves. In some ways it is self-evident that the actual act of painterly composition is a private (even if ontologically resonant) business, but because Merleau-Ponty is so interested in the painter's encounter with the world, an encounter that in his view 'lays bare the body as spontaneous expression' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 65), his ideas are enhanced by being applied to creative processes that lay bare the encounter as it unfolds as part of a consistent aesthetic and methodological approach. Thus Merleau-Ponty's interest in the lived immediacy of experience is given actual (spontaneous) body in the act of improvising, and in the witnessed act of expressing and shaping the encounter itself.<sup>37</sup>

Beyond functioning as a kind of generic audience, Morrish's role was also to offer a second-person perspective on my improvisations (although he also maintained his own practice at this time and we would also discuss his work). Here the importance of his role inhabiting a second-person perspective was linked with his expertise in the field of solo performance improvisation. His factual descriptions of what he saw, interpretive analyses and critical feedback were thus filtered through an embodied knowledge that was steeped in experiential understanding of the field of improvisation as performance and an empathetic appreciation of the particular concerns of my own research direction.

The importance of utilising expert knowledge in the construction of methodologies that seek to access and express a particular domain of experience has been established by consciousness-study researchers Francisco Varela and Jonathan Shear in their development of a 'science of consciousness' (Varela and Shear, 1999: 2). Their perspective enables me to link expert knowledge with what they call 'the full second-person position' (Varela and Shear, 1999: 10) in my methodological approach. Varela and Shear frame their discussion of

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<sup>37</sup> The topic of 'spontaneity' constitutes a research project in itself, but, as will be illustrated, my practice was informed by investigations into the speed with which I made certain responses visible and the use of pauses as sites of gestation. Considering the temporal aspect of vision/action responsiveness meant that at times I filtered and mediated 'spontaneous' impulses or ideas before they were made visible as content.

first and second-person accounts in the language of anthropology, borrowing the term ‘heterophenomenology’ from Daniel Dennett to suggest the situated position of the anthropologist studying a remote culture (Varela and Shear, 1999: 10). The intention of this ‘full’ second-person position is to ‘meet on the same ground, as members of the same kind’ (Varela and Shear, 1999: 10). This second-person view is grounded in sensitivity, in empathy. The ability to resonate with others’ experiences would not be possible ‘without the mediator being steeped in the domain of experiences under examination’ (Varela and Shear, 1999: 10). The view is not, in other words, of a ‘neutral anthropologist’ but of what Varela and Shear categorise as ‘a coach or a midwife’ (Varela and Shear, 1999: 10). Their first-hand knowledge, their own experience and expertise, guide them in their interpretive activities.

Returning to the studio, then, Morrish’s ability to adopt an empathic position in relation to my improvisations, stemming from his extensive experience in performance improvisation, placed him in this kind of ‘full second-person position’. He offered a particular, situated perspective, one grounded in a richly embodied knowledge of performance improvisation, which served to facilitate my articulation of my generative processes and the articulation of the strategies as they were in development. His presence built into the methodology openness and amenability to intersubjective feedback that was grounded in his empathetic understanding of the direction and intentionality of the research and allowed for both common experiential ground and points of divergence in approach and aesthetics. He maintained ‘a modicum of critical distance and of critical evaluation’ whilst simultaneously being sensitively open to the ‘subtle indices’ of what I was doing (Varela and Shear, 1999: 10). In sharing the Immediate Writings, following the sharings with in-depth discussions and analysing the strategies as they were in development, my articulation of the research entered this intersubjective domain that both enhanced my experiential understanding of the sometimes nebulous processes at work in improvised composition and verified the efficaciousness of the strategies as explicit compositional tools.

## **1.2 Immediate Writings**

Immediate Writings are a hand-written response to the preceding improvisation, carried out by both improviser and observer. The period of writing is consistently timed at five to seven minutes, in order to encourage a free-flow of ideas and no or little editing. There are no other constraints put on the form, style or content of the writing. After the timed period

elapses, first the improviser and then the observer read their writings aloud, and from here we use the writings as a spring-board to discussion, often observing what had and hadn't been captured in the writings and reflecting further on the improvisation itself. Not directly related to my research question, in the sense that Morrish and I were not asking ourselves to answer the research question in the writings, or even to watch the improvisations through the filter of the question, the writings nonetheless played a significant role in cementing an iterative cycle of doing/reflection as a core feature of this research process. The writings trace how improviser and spectator have seen, noticed and captured the improvisational phenomenon. In this respect, they are variously inclusive of perceptions, ideas, emotions, imaginings and questions - in the language of phenomenology, the different modes or textures of the improvisations' 'givenness', or the ways in which they were experienced.<sup>38</sup>. In this aspect the writings also contain blind spots; the gaps that are inherent in perceptual experience that Merleau-Ponty identifies when he notes that 'there is no thing fully observable, no inspection of the thing that would be without gaps and that would be total' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 77). So the writing process entails a kind of filtering - many aspects of what occurred are not captured - and the final written artefacts stand as situated and partial accounts, two of many possible responses to - and re-interpretations of - the original improvisation. In this sense, I am putting forward the argument that each improvisation is open to the reflections of the Immediate Writings and this written thesis but also maintains a distinctive identity that exists prior to, and beyond, these subsequent reflective actions.

**The concepts from the day's writing and thinking swimming around my head – I'm not very 'in' my body but verbal material tumbles out thickly. The opening gesture of a wave and the focus to the back supplies a character, a narration, a scenario – all this is quite seamless.**

**I do find myself repeating, deliberately, certain moves – the hand wave, feet swivels – it's like I'm trying to find something else in the movement, but at other times because**

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<sup>38</sup> Dermot Moran explains the notion of 'givenness', a term originally coined by Edmund Husserl (Moran, 2000: 11). 'Givenness' sums up the view that 'all experience is experience to someone, according to a particular manner of experiencing'; there is always a 'to whom' of experience and a mode of 'givenness' in which a phenomenon will appear (Moran, 2000: 11).

**the scenario has moved on it feels as if the movement could convey a slightly different meaning – more of ‘her’ is known each time the wave returns.**

**I like following the straight line of the masking tape – it matches some of the story’s focus on regulation or transgression. Clutching the curtain – an accidental wobble that also takes on an emotional flavour for ‘her’.**

(Immediate Writings, 7/12/10)

**Waiting and waving, or not  
Following the careful path, across, down and back  
Waiting for something that cannot be... knowing  
Follow the time it takes.  
Disruption is in the air  
Breathing the wanting in... so that the noticing can occur,  
Look at it, look at it, look at it!  
Waiting or waving, but not drowning**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 7/12/10)

### **1.3 Other writings practices**

A similar writing practice (which I came across after Morrish and I had begun to incorporate writing into our sessions) was developed at the International Dance Exchange of Amsterdam (I.D.E.A) in 1991.<sup>39</sup> As part of the informal sharing of works-in-progress, a form of spontaneous writing called ‘The Fountain’ was developed, in which the audience members used the three-minute pause between dances to write spontaneous reflections. At the end of the entire showing, the writings were read out. Agnes Benoit, writing in *Nouvelles de Danse* in 1997, notes that discussion wasn’t included as part of this model (Benoit, 1997: 121) although I.D.E.A’s current website notes that ‘we end with reading our responses, tea and talk’, which suggests that the writings may lead onto further discussion (I.D.E.A, n.d.). Instead of ‘reviewing or criticizing’ the dances, what is encouraged is writing from the

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<sup>39</sup> I.D.E.A was conceived by dancer and writer Christina Svane. It took the form of a monthly open showing of works.

‘senses’ (I.D.E.A, n.d.), implying that the purpose of writing is to reflect the spectator’s own sensory shifts, their awareness of their own corporeality or the kinaesthetic effects of watching dance.<sup>40</sup> This particular interest in reflecting the physical experiences of the spectators themselves differs from the more open-ended aim of the Immediate Writings, which was to capture anything at all - factual details, imaginative constructs or physical experiences - that appeared to either the improviser or watcher.<sup>41</sup>

The Immediate Writings can also be contrasted with the use of studio writings before performing, as illustrated by improviser Simone Forti who talks in *Nouvelles de Danse* of doing a ‘twenty minute writing before performance’ (Benoit, 1997: 161).<sup>42</sup> Before writing she recalls a recent event or thought that interests her and commences her writing with that image or idea. After twenty minutes of continuous writing she looks for ‘things that are somewhat related’ to the writing and the original stimulus as the starting-point for her improvisation (Benoit, 1997: 161). The writing gives her a framework for her improvising, something that shifts the dynamic of the improvisation from her earlier work in which she ‘used to really go in the space without knowing what I’d do’ (Benoit, 1997: 161), to something that is based on the images or associations inherent in and prompted by the writing. In a later article in *Taken By Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader* (Cooper Albright and Gere, 2003) she again identifies the twenty-minute continuous timed writing as a crucial part of her pre-performance preparation. ‘If I’m lucky’ she says, ‘this gives me an outline that I can play off’ (Forti, 1999: 61).

The Immediate Writings, by contrast, are snapshots from different angles taken after the event. They are, in Morrish’s words, ‘post-artefact thematizing’ (Morrish, 29 June 2010),

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<sup>40</sup> The question of how spectators respond empathically to dance is also the subject of the ‘Watching Dance: Kinaesthetic Empathy Project’, whose aim is to use audience research and neuroscience as complementary methods to explore how spectators respond to and empathise with dance movements. The activities of the project are documented at: [watchingdance.ning.com](http://watchingdance.ning.com).

<sup>41</sup> I also note here that in this sense the Immediate Writings do not constitute ‘first-person’ accounts as defined by Varela and Shear. For them, a first person methodology for accessing experience requires ‘a moment of suspension and redirection moving from content to mental process’ (Varela and Shear, 1999: 11). The subject of an experience must attempt, in other words, to ‘shift from the natural attitude’ of cognition in which they label and interpret phenomena, to the ‘process through which such content appears’ (Varela and Shear, 1999: 8).

<sup>42</sup> Simone Forti was born in 1935 in Italy. She studied and performed with Anna Halprin who set up the San Francisco Dancer’s Workshop, inclusive of an outdoor deck, in 1955. Some of Halprin’s students, including Forti and Yvonne Rainer later became involved in the Judson Dance Theatre. Forti describes some of her training, teaching structures and life experiences in *Handbook in Motion* (Forti, 1974).

evidence of the different ways the improvisations have been traced, and in-roads to further discussion. Crucially, I have also found that in returning to these pieces of writing, several months or years after the event, my memory of doing or watching an improvisation has sometimes been triggered. Traces of the lived experience in the studio are recalled, echoes of what was significant at the time - a way of moving, a particular piece of content, a joke, a struggle, a character. I have used the writings as reminders in this way. Though still partial, and after such a gap of time quite distanced, I can recollect specific moments of work that would otherwise disappear almost entirely from memory.<sup>43 44</sup>

**Start with a response to a conversation Andrew and I are having out here  
Seamlessly I start picking up and collating little things in the space –  
a piece of rubbish, the bobby pins, this ‘thing’ becomes the thematic focus of a  
character, a story about found objects, an artist who once did big things and now does  
small  
A repetitive line up + down the ledge of the back – this is deliberate but I don’t think  
about the moving. It just is whilst I play with a character’s point of view on making art  
works  
It is structured through this character, her thinking out loud, associations springing up  
and usually instantly verbalised.**

(Immediate Writings, 23/8/11)

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<sup>43</sup> It is quite common in improvisational work to forget the details of content, so the Immediate Writings function in part to document and concretise the form. They set up a resistance to a complete evanescence. As a related observation, I note Sally Bane’s comment on Judson Dance Theatre’s Concert #14, expressly devoted to improvisation, that very few of the participants remember what they did (Banes, 1993b: 195).

<sup>44</sup> Morrish and I also experimented with another mode of ‘capturing’ the improvisations in written form. This required the observer to write down whatever caught their attention at regularly timed minute-intervals throughout the improvisation. Although these writings sometimes provided an emergent sense of structure, I was frustrated by the split-focus, unable to fully focus my attention on either watching or writing. The method also offered only the outside eye perspective, so ran counter to my interest in capturing the improvisations from different ‘angles’.

**A small conversation about small things**

**The need to notice small things is clear. The back wall becomes a defining structure as  
you draw me into the small world of the piece.**

**Inside the small world we can find the large world of the ship and the enormous ocean.**

**There is a decrescendo as the piece continues.**

**But “small” becomes a beacon word, a rhythm and something significant.**

**At the end**

**You leave your small collection of small things.**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 23/8/11)

#### **1.4 Phenomenological Writing**

At this point, I want to make an important distinction between the phenomenological interpretation of the Immediate Writings that I have offered - their capturing of experience in its ‘givenness’ by situated and reflexive researchers - and a different model in which the activity of writing might be regarded as a phenomenological method itself. Susan Kozel gives a useful example of the latter in which ‘data received immediately from the senses, as well as memories and imaginative constructs’ are first of all preserved in a ‘rough form of documentation such as video, notes or sketches’ and later shaped into a document for dissemination (Kozel, 2007: 52). The initial documentation may occur immediately following immersion in a sensory experience, or after an interval, but regardless of the amount of time between an experience and its recording, memory and imaginative reconstruction will be involved (Kozel, 2007: 53). This initial type of documentation finds an analogous form in the Immediate Writings but in doing a phenomenology it is important that at some point the detail of lived experience is rigorously re-examined for what may have ‘deeper conceptual relevance’ (Kozel, 2007: 53) and that this process of re-examination then leads to levels of abstraction or the inclusion of theoretical ideas that are collated into another document. This second document ideally balances ‘concrete sense description and reference to abstractions’ (Kozel, 2007: 54). Sondra Fraleigh gives a similar account of a possible phenomenological method, beginning with writing ‘quickly and fearlessly without editing or censoring’ and (after letting time pass) revisiting the writing to extract the core existential values that colour the experience (Fraleigh and Hanstein, 1999:

215). These values can then be explored and expanded philosophically. For Fraleigh it is 'intuition' that guides the phase of probing the original writing and it is 'theory' that is developed by spiralling one's thoughts back out again (Fraleigh and Hanstein, 1999: 215).

In both cases, it is the second stage of teasing out 'values' from the original writing that is crucial to categorising the process of writing as phenomenological method. In my case, however, I have deliberately not dissected the Immediate Writings in the systematic ways suggested above, although I have revisited them and made selections for inclusion in this thesis. Their function as part of the practice was to enable and validate dual perspectives on the improvisations and to serve as springboards to further understanding of the nuances of the practice as 'given' through the discussions they provoked. After Merleau-Ponty's understanding that 'there is always a skipping over in every observation, one is never at the thing itself' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 192), I was as aware of what the writings left out as of the details they captured; they represent both noticing and not noticing, the situatedness and partiality that are intrinsic to subjective experiencing. I therefore preferred to address the research imperative of developing theoretical and conceptual understanding by instigating the practice/theory feedback loop (outlined in more detail throughout this thesis); embodying the 'core existential values' in the improvisations themselves rather than teasing them out of the reflective writings. Adopting Merleau-Ponty's phraseology, it is each improvisation that thus constitutes the 'thing itself' so the writings allow what has been experienced of the practice to reverberate loosely with and through them.<sup>45</sup>

As a further point, it is also worth noting a contrasting view of the purpose of doing a phenomenology, offered by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone in her essay 'Phenomenology as a Way of Illuminating Dance' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1984). She states that a phenomenology must provide a description of 'the essential nature of the phenomenon in question' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1984: 129). A phenomenological account is 'not a reflective musing' and contra

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<sup>45</sup> I acknowledge here a loose linguistic echo of the infamous clarion cry of phenomenology, 'back to the things themselves', first coined by Edmund Husserl in his 'Logical Investigations' of 1900-1901 (Moran, 2000) and referring in his case to the search for the essence of cognition outlined earlier. In similar linguistic vein, although carrying different connotations, Stanton Garner categorises the dramatic text as 'the thing itself' because it 'deals with the actual in its possible manifestations' (Garner, 1994: 6). The theatrical event is conditioned by the 'essential boundaries' that the text contains which nonetheless open themselves to a variety of actualizations (Garner, 1994: 6). This interest in the play of possible actuality that is already posited by the thing itself, the dramatic text, is grounded in dialectic between the variable and the invariable, between the possibilities that inhere with set parameters. The improvisations in this doctorate share this sense of a play of possibilities, but as an emergent form the improvisations do not already contain a variety of specific suggestions that could be actualised in a number of different ways in the manner of Garner's dramatic text.

the views of both Kozel and Fraleigh, ‘no theories emerge from phenomenological accounts’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1984: 129). For those who take up the ‘method of existential or experiential analysis’, there is a concern with ‘presenting descriptive accounts of lived experiences in such a way that the essential structures or truths of the experience come to light’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1984: 131). Although, like Kozel and Fraleigh, she does see phenomenology’s focus as on the experience as experienced, as it is lived, she emphasises phenomenology’s ability to ‘uncover what is actually there’ through the process of reflection (Sheets-Johnstone, 1984: 138). It is in the act of reflecting that one is able to gain some insight into essence or ‘truths’ because the preconceptions in the experience itself come to light (Sheets-Johnstone, 1984: 138). Although it is unclear how the person undertaking the phenomenological analysis can temporarily set aside, or ‘bracket’, their own preconceptions and access these truths, and Sheets-Johnstone herself side-steps the issue by encouraging the reader to ‘plunge into phenomenological accounts themselves’ rather than ‘debate the possibility of essence grasping’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1984: 139), the essay raises questions for me about the kind of phenomenological analysis that has ‘essence grasping’ as its goal. In a sense Sheets-Johnstone’s approach carries overtones of the original Husserlian phenomenological project - explained in the Introduction - in which the aim was to side-step one’s ordinary, everyday engagement with experience in order to access a more essential domain. Rather than attempting this ‘suspension of the natural attitude’ (Moran, 2000: 12), the Immediate Writings in this research reflect the improvisations as they were ‘given’. Thus although they variously contain sense descriptions, imaginative ideas and analytical thought, they stand, as already mentioned, as situated and partial responses to the original improvisations.

**‘capacity incarnate’ – I should keep my matches between my practice and MP  
Rearranging the kitchen = the things I always use are the nearest to hand...  
Loops of material: picked up in different ways; re-sewn; notice when things come  
back; follow threads through – there is a gathering, a circular emergence of  
movement; foreground/background for movement and verbal material – I am going  
around the material then discover the central material.  
The longer form enables the discovery of the central material more  
None of us know the material before the discovery  
Emergence – T.S. Eliot beginnings/endings**

(Immediate Writings 4/5/10)

**“Backwards in heels” Repetition and augmentation**

**Merleau-Ponty – implicit/explicit**

**Subtending**

**Backwards in French**

**Merleau/Merlot**

**Loops of images**

**Suntentation**

**“At 6pm the Merlot bottle is always full”**

**Detailed description of the 6pm ritual**

**“It’s best if nobody knows”**

**Shift of pronoun – “she does”**

**Shift of pronoun – “they don’t talk”**

**Temporal shift – 19<sup>th</sup> Century/1960s**

**Spatial shift – stations on the side wall**

**Back wall “no corset”**

**Back corner “appropriate he died”**

**Repetition and augmentation “I like to think”**

**“Saved...salvation”**

**Loop through content: Heels – dance – underwear – bucket of merlot**

**“Saving graces”**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 4/5/10)

## **1.5 Developing the strategies and talking back to the theoretical discourse**

Throughout this research process, Merleau-Ponty’s theoretical ideas have encroached into the studio as a way of enriching the development of the strategies and as a way of experiencing and challenging the ideas themselves in a pragmatic, compositionally-oriented domain. Chapter three documents the ideas in detail and chapter four covers the strategies in depth, so here I broadly introduce some of the ways in which each strategy developed through a set of specific theoretical encroachments and the way in which the practice began

to talk back to the concerns of the theory, specifically the vision/action rubric of composition.

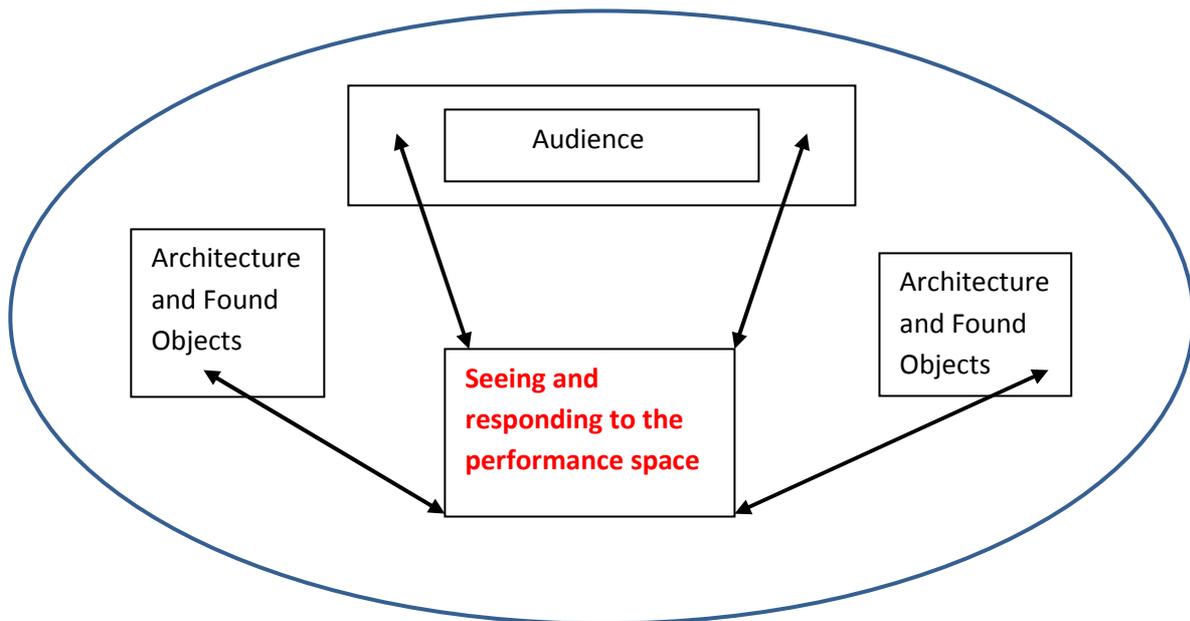
As outlined in the Introduction, practical explorations into the reach and direction of my vision (which were certainly effective as a means of either bringing my environmental space closer to the forefront of my attentiveness or making it recede into the background), were then layered with what I think of as a specific attitudinal approach, after Merleau-Ponty's discourse of a 'questioning' vision (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 226). Merleau-Ponty assumes that '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, 1962: 153); in other words he gives vision a revelatory power - the 'things' of the world respond to its interrogations. I discuss the ontological implications of this in chapter three, but note here that what this particular outlook gave me in practice was a more pronounced tendency to visually and physically interact with the specifics of the immediate environment - most noticeably the architecture and any objects that were already in the space but also (less physically) the spectators - as a way of questioning or investigating the generative potential of the interaction. The aim of many improvisations became to discover what was specific about the space I was in and to investigate how I could then compose with and from that specificity.<sup>46</sup>

I developed strategy 1 - *seeing and responding to the performance space* - by consciously moving in response to what I saw as a result of my 'questioning' vision, either by locating myself very precisely within the spatial landscape (which includes the audience as a physical presence), physically interacting with the architecture (when possible) or 'borrowing' or 'taking' the shapes of the external surroundings, and physically exploring them in my own movement. This latter exploration embodied the 'me other exchange' of the chiasm (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 215) - in which the individual opens herself to and interacts with her surroundings through her vision and movement - and in doing so 'borrows from', 'takes from' and 'encroaches upon' her surroundings (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 261). It became a playful and fecund generative device in which I interpreted what I saw through particular corporeal and choreographic choices. The idea of 'taking' from the space became an attitudinal and pragmatic approach in which the relationality and vision/movement responsiveness that is core to the chiasmic concept gave me a means of finding and

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<sup>46</sup> In chapter three, I also outline how this interest in discovering something that was specific to the immediate context in which I was operating was fed by Merleau-Ponty's concept of the 'Invisible' and an interest in adopting different perspectives on and within the space.

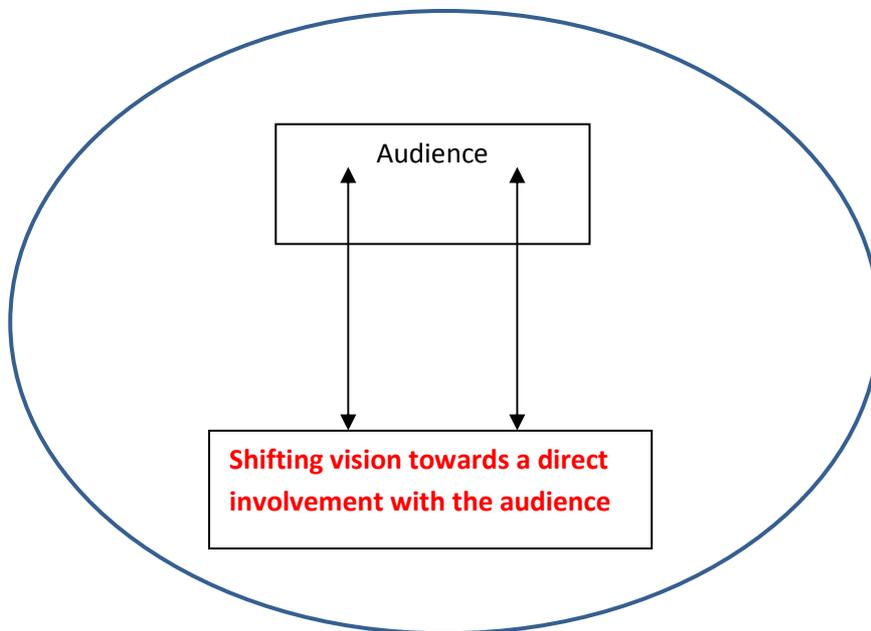
inventing movement material. Later the strategy began to incorporate verbal as well as corporeal responses, expanding the scope of the possible ways I could operate with the architecture, audience and (found) objects that constituted the topography of the immediate environment.



**FIGURE 1** represents the ‘questioning’ externally-directed vision of strategy 1, in which the improviser uses her vision to establish an active interrelationship with the topography of the immediate surroundings. The chiasmic exchange is two-way (explained further in relation to strategy 2) so the arrows represent both the improviser’s intention to engage with the spatial landscape and her compositional responsiveness in the form of ‘borrowing’ or ‘taking’ from or ‘encroaching’ upon what she sees.

*Strategy 2 - shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* - also developed with the motivation of using a sense of relationality - this time very explicitly with spectators - as a generative source. This strategy developed in part by practically re-framing Merleau-Ponty’s core philosophical notion that ‘my body simultaneously sees and is seen’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 162), an awareness that he uses to describe a self-reflexivity (in seeing myself I am also being seen by myself) that then ripples out into layers of chiasmic meaning. In the studio, I explored how this awareness of seeing and being seen might expand into a compositional responsiveness to seeing and being seen by others. An initial discovery (reinforced too by Morrish’s own proclivities as an improviser) was that shifting

vision towards the audience could instigate a very particular line or vector of energy that could then be harnessed in the generation of material. This energetic connection was shaped by the characteristic intimacy of both the studio and performance events - the wider reverberations of which are discussed further on pp.58-59 - and a further key discovery was that I could then channel the kinaesthetic effects of being very directly looked at - muscular tension brought about by self-consciousness or nerves for instance - into the generation of material. Composing from kinaesthesia thus offered a more nuanced understanding of the compositional potential inhering within the seeing/seen dynamic than that offered by the original chiasmic model, which, as explained later, does not attend to the kinaesthetic sense at all.



**FIGURE 2** represents the chiasmic ‘me other exchange’ of strategy 2 in which the improviser establishes direct visual contact with the audience in order to create a vector of energetic communion. Harnessing the kinaesthetic effects of being seen in return establishes a nuanced paradigm of ‘seeing/being seen’.

The energised engagement with one’s surroundings that characterises the chiasm also fed into the refinement of *seeing and responding to the performance space* and *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* in terms of temporal dynamics. Merleau-Ponty’s concept functions as a two-way exchange, so as well as ‘encroaching’ upon one’s surroundings, those surroundings are characterised as encroaching upon the individual. Thus ‘things pass into us as well as we into the things’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 123) and in the case of the painter this passing ‘into’ results in a ‘secret and feverish genesis of things in our

body' - their transformation into works of art (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 167). There is a particular ontology at play here, which I discuss in chapter three, but at this moment I want to note that the idea that external things might 'pass into' me became a useful working idea in the space that facilitated a more pronounced attitude of receptivity. I allowed myself to experiment with the length of time in which I lingered over visual details or looked at the audience (either at a distance or close-up), in order to discover whether allowing myself to spend time funnelling my attentiveness in this way (rather than quickly visually scanning the space or responding to the first visual or kinaesthetic impulse) altered my inhabitation of the space in useful, generative ways. I treated the evocative (poetic) conception that things might 'pass' into me as a cue to play with holding a single visual focus and maintaining that focus for a longer duration than I might otherwise have done.

The development of strategy 3 - *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* - illuminates a more complex pragmatic involvement with the theoretical discourse. Whereas *seeing and responding to the performance space* and *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* were practised in relation to the externally-directed vision of the chiasmic exchange, strategy 3 developed out of a need to create an alternative compositional avenue. I could not assume that my 'questioning', externally-directed vision would always supply a compositional impulse or idea, nor that a somatic impulse or imaginative idea seeded in this way would germinate in ways that felt interesting or inspiring. Here the practice diverged from a core assumption in Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic paradigm, which treats as given a creative correlation between the 'voracious vision' of the painter and the discovery of the 'voluminosity of the world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 166). It assumes, in other words, that a questioning, interrogative look will necessarily result in a productive (indeed in the case of the painter profound) act of composition. In this research, however, there were times when my relationality with the environment, although firmly established in my awareness, did not function generatively, so I investigated the compositional potential of reversing the motionalty of reaching towards and engaging with the external surroundings, by adopting an internal focus in which my vision was closed-in, looking at my own body or only a few centimetres ahead, or by shutting my eyes. I also experimented with continuing to adopt a longer reach of vision but without the intention of composing with what or who I saw; allowing my vision to scan the space as I moved so that I was aware of the environment but not 'exchanging' with it. All of these experiments shifted the locus of composition, so that rather than foregrounding the

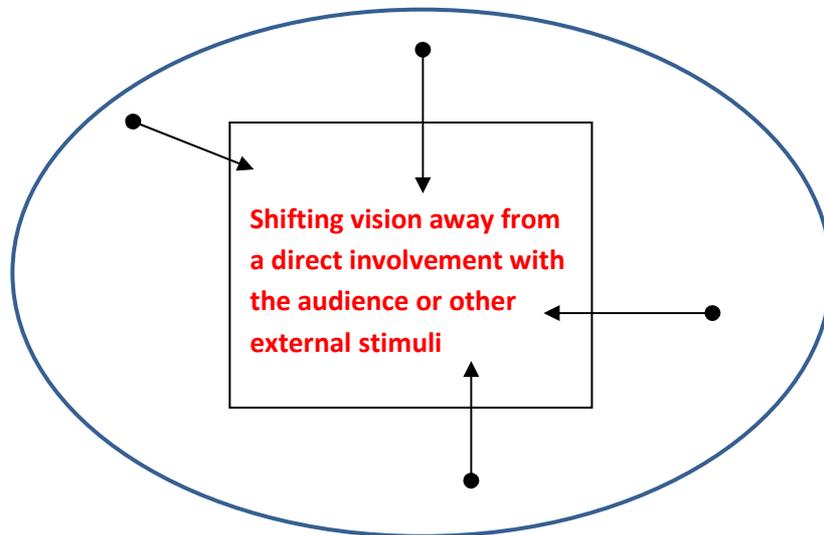
‘me other exchange’ of the chiasm (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 215), I found that I attended more rigorously to kinaesthetic sensation and kinetic motion that was not explicitly propelled by responsiveness to my visual surroundings. This shift of attentiveness resulted in a mode of corporeal improvisation that became a generative device itself and at times also functioned as a self-contained composition; an operational mode that was reliant on this reversal of visual direction and/or intent.

The strategy thus began in response to the limitations encountered when relying exclusively on a chiasmic model of composition, but there was a different theoretical encroachment - the ‘I can’ - which led to a refinement of the strategy’s pragmatic and linguistic articulation. Chapters three and four discuss the ‘I can’ in detail, so here I want to note that in essence the ‘I can’ is Merleau-Ponty’s means of capturing the idea that the body possesses an innate expressiveness and intentionality that precedes any conscious deliberation. Movement is ‘already with me’ and ‘propels itself’ towards its own ends (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 94). When developing strategy 3, I became aware that dropping the visual and energetic line of connection with the environment as the focal point of composition foregrounded the appearance of movements that were ‘already with me’, reflecting in part the entrenched vocabularies of my early dance training. What for Merleau-Ponty is an innate, foundational attribute was refracted in my case through particular trainings, but my subjective sense of moving was very much in keeping with the pre-reflective corporeal actions of the ‘I can’. The ‘I can’ thus became a useful lens through which to understand the nature of particular corporeal compositions; it also supplies a charismatic descriptive of the body’s expressiveness which infiltrates the practice as linguistic usage. When my body feels as if it is expressing its innate capacity (particularly, I must say, as I get older), I regard it as relishing or celebrating its abilities, what it can currently do. The term is, after all, not ‘I might’ or ‘I should’ but ‘I can’.<sup>47</sup> This is a particularly visceral linguistic encroachment,

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<sup>47</sup> The translator’s preface to *Signs* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b) includes mention of ‘my body as an “I am able to” (the motor power of operating intentionality)’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: xvi). For me this carries the same celebratory connotations but loses some of the pithiness of ‘I can’. As a sidebar to this linguistic persuasiveness, I am also struck by the few moments when Merleau-Ponty describes the body in less expansive terms. It is sometimes in ‘the paste of the body’ that our initiatives ‘get bogged down’, for instance, (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 239), a nod towards tiredness, inertia or the inability to action. More strikingly in *Eye and Mind*, he quotes German poet Rainer Maria Rilke’s description of the ‘body’s prison’, a ‘dark prison’ that in a typical nod towards the power of vision needs the ‘eyes to show him the infinite variety of creation’ (Rilke, 1928, cited in Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 186). In a later reference in *The Visible and the Invisible* that I find quite amusing, although I suspect it wasn’t intended as such, the body is described as ‘the sack in which I am enclosed’ giving a vivid picture of lumpy inertia, far removed from the animation of the body’s ‘I can’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 134). Although most of Merleau-Ponty’s discourse on the body is coloured by the pre-reflective expressiveness of the ‘I can’ and the sense of potentiality associated with this innate capacity, there

functioning now as a short-hand for a certain approach in the space, when I withdraw my visual interest from external stimuli and concentrate on the moment-by-moment unfolding of the body's (trained) intentionality.



**FIGURE 3** represents the withdrawn vision of strategy 3, in which a more internal focus foregrounds the body's 'I can' as the main site and source of compositional creativity.

In keeping with the operational principles of relationality and responsiveness, I wanted to explore correlations between my use of vision and the genesis of imaginative ideas that were specific to my inhabitation of the immediate environment. In developing strategy 4 - *inhabiting an imaginative landscape* - I discovered that an internal landscape - a scenario, a character, images or feelings - could occur as a consequence of the externally-directed vision of *seeing and responding to the performance space*, the connectivity established by *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* or the concentration on somatic impulse facilitated by *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli*.<sup>48</sup> As mentioned earlier, experimenting with the length of time in which I lingered over a visual detail also became a useful way of inhabiting the space in a

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are these minor concessions to the limitations of one's corporeal situatedness, reminders of the opposing ways in which our bodies can be phenomenally experienced - as 'prison' or as capacity; as intrinsically expressive and active, or 'bogged down' in ennui or incapacity.

<sup>48</sup> The direction and intentionality of vision - the specific way in which I inhabited the immediate environment - thus functioned as a trigger for ideas or inclinations, although it is worth pointing out that these responses might at times involve memories or re-imaginings of past occurrences. As in strategy 3, composing from and within my inhabitation of the immediate environment allows for the storehouse of memories that are 'already with me' to emerge.

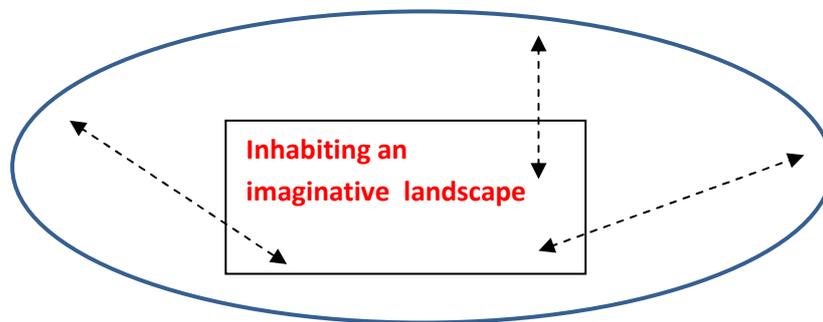
more receptive mode and an imaginative landscape sometimes arose as a result of this process of lingering. Slowing down in this way demanded that I become comfortable (as a soloist) with suspending the active process of seeking out or shaping material, and adopting instead an attitude of receptivity to whatever might ‘pass’ into me. Deliberately adopting an attitude of receptivity was also about relinquishing conscious control over the nature of the material that emerged. Initial imaginative fancies thus arose as a result of where and how I directed my vision but their specific nuances existed beyond my conscious determination.<sup>49</sup> As they were emerging, however, I engaged with these fancies compositionally, making deliberate decisions about how (or whether) to shape and express them, employing strategy 5, *using internal editing*, as a crafting mechanism and particular techniques of word production (such as working associatively, discussed on p. 89) or movement expression.

The imaginative play of strategy 4 thus often began with the kind of connection with features of the external landscape encouraged by the chiasmic exchange, through engagement with the ‘I can’ of my movement tendencies or through the receptivity inherent in lingering, but it then flavoured the ensuing compositional work very differently from Merleau-Ponty’s painter. The difference here is one of intent, as the painterly vision/action rubric of composition is geared towards capturing on canvas the essential qualities of the things that the painter has become aware of through his ‘questioning’ vision. The details of this are explained in chapter three, but it is summed up when Merleau-Ponty comments in *Eye and Mind* that the painter’s role is to ‘make space and light, which are *there*, speak to us’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 178, original italics). This process involves a combined action of seeing and moving - it is the eye that ‘sees the world’ and then ‘the offices of an agile hand’ transmit that world onto canvas (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 165) - but it is also grounded in an ontology in which there is a continuum or foundational interconnectedness between the individual and the world which the painter’s actions make explicit; the painter functions as a kind of channel or medium for the things of the world to reveal themselves. It is ‘the painter to whom the things of the world give birth’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 181). By contrast, strategy 4 prioritises the creation of an alternative landscape within the concrete parameters of the performance space. It practises composition as the creation of fictional or fanciful ‘worlds’, rooted in the immediate visible (and tangible) surroundings but also moving beyond them into new ‘worlds’ of the improviser’s own making. The strategy therefore

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<sup>49</sup> I continue this discussion in chapters two and four as it relates to characterisations of the imagination put forward by improvisers Keith Johnstone and Chris Johnston.

developed with an in-built tension or dialectic in which I consciously occupied and responded to the visible and tangible surroundings of the performance space but also practised occupying an alternative landscape, the imaginative dimension, which infiltrated my decisions within that performance space. Grounding composition in this dual occupancy of the space places strategy 4's artistic agenda at some distance from the work of Merleau-Ponty's painter, and instances one example of how the tension between some of his philosophical ideas and my own creative approaches led to the development of alternative vision/action models of composition.



**FIGURE 4** represents the improviser's dual occupancy of space in strategy 4. She consciously occupies and responds to the visible and tangible surroundings of the performance space whilst simultaneously inhabiting an alternative landscape, the imaginative dimension, which infiltrates and determines some of her compositional decisions.

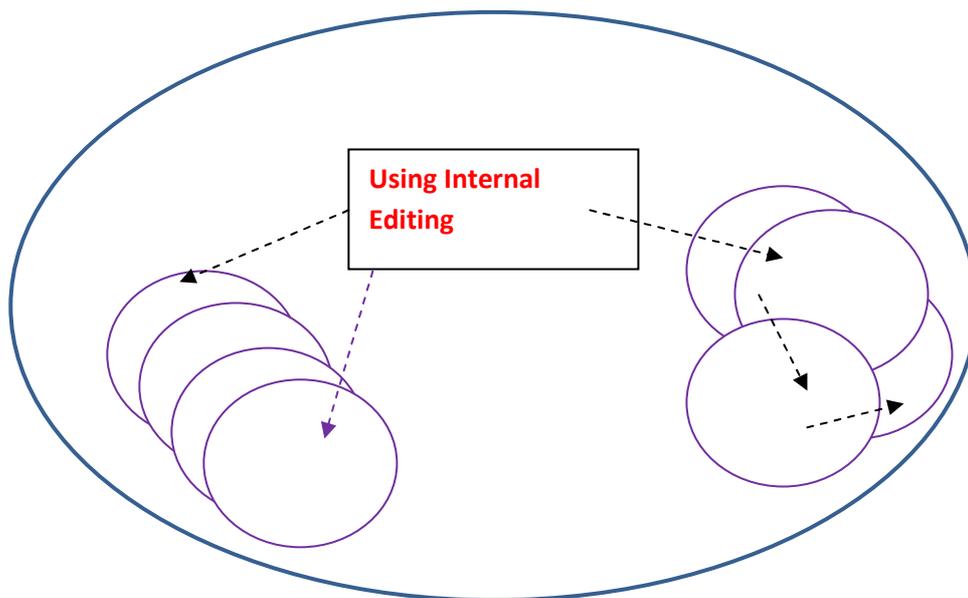
Strategy 5, *using internal editing*, was developed in part as a result of practising strategies 1 - 4, which collectively resulted in a pull of variegated, divergent and at times contradictory impulses. These first four strategies enabled me to occupy the space in different ways - and pursue different models of vision/action responsiveness - necessitating that I discriminated between them. Further, I needed to make choices within strategies, so *using internal editing* became a means of shaping and moulding the details of expression within the particular focus of any one strategy. One particular corporeal agenda might be pursued whilst others were discarded, for instance, so that I might concentrate on exploring and responding to only one area of the space when *seeing and responding to the performance space* or isolate a certain body part after *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli*. Similarly, I might maintain a concentration on only one thread of a particular imaginative landscape or choose to engage with several emergent themes whilst

*inhabiting an imaginative landscape.* The need to operate in this kind of self-aware way, making on-going editorial choices, was also a consequence of developing longer pieces of work (over twenty minutes) and the need to consider the selection and arrangement of material (I pick up on this aspect of composition in chapters two and four).

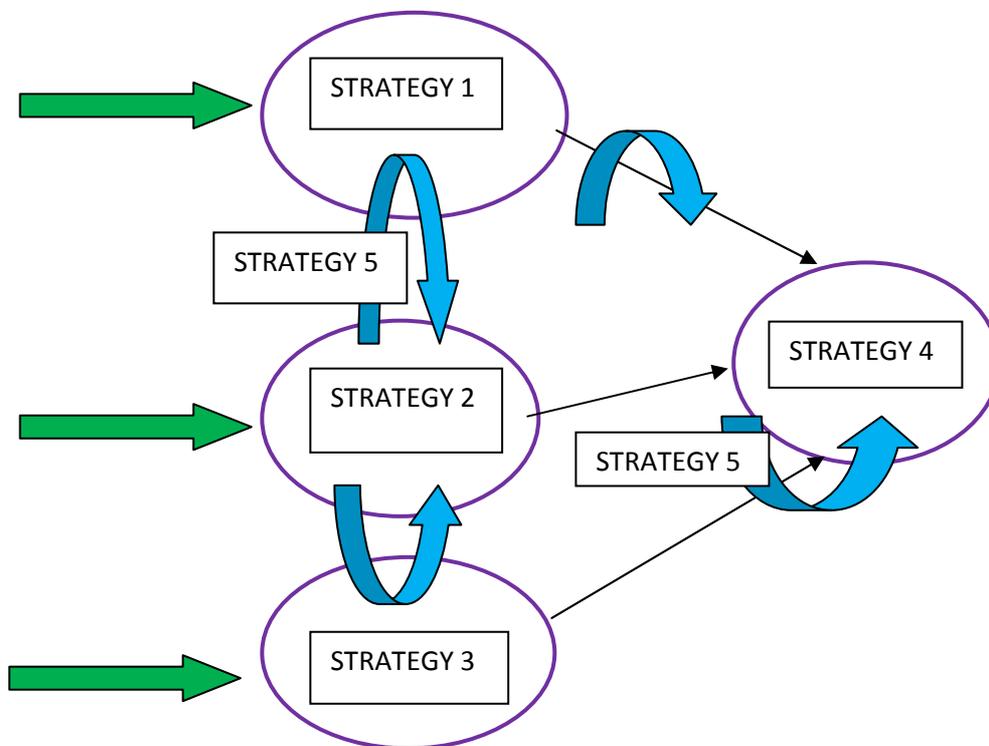
*Using internal editing* thus made explicit a conscious, self-aware decision-making process in which I simultaneously experienced and made aesthetic judgements about my occupation of the space; discriminating between impulses, making choices about the speed with which I made my response to something visible or whether to discard something that I was already engaged in. By way of contrast, although a process of choice-making can be assumed to be a part of Merleau-Ponty's vision/action compositional paradigm, not least because the painters he refers to - Cézanne, Klee and Matisse - were consummate technicians, the kind of deliberate choice-making of strategy 5 is rhetorically absent when the actual act of painterly channelling is described. As mentioned previously, the painter's openness to his surroundings through his embodied vision is adopted so that he can then function as a kind of channel through which the things of the world can reveal themselves. Grounded in this role of channel or medium, the act of composition is then poetically likened to a deflagration in which 'something moved, caught fire, and engulfed his body' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 188). The painter is 'engulfed' by something outside himself - something in the 'immemorial depth of the visible' - and 'everything he paints is in answer to this incitement' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 188). This poetic discourse captures the sense that the action of painting is an intense and fluid transposition or transcribing of elements of the surroundings onto canvas - with the kind of explicit deliberation inherent in *using internal editing* absent from the descriptive. Further, this compositional activity results in a blurring of the boundaries between the painter and his surroundings. As the act of painting proceeds, 'it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 167); in channelling his surroundings the painter becomes immersed in them, a point I shall pick up on again later in terms of my re-framing of the chiasmic exchange.

There is one intriguing variation on this painterly tempo, when Merleau-Ponty refers in *Signs* to a slow-motion recording of Matisse at work (a rare instance of the painter's work being witnessed). Slowed down, the painter's brush 'was seen to meditate in a solemn and expanding time' and 'to try ten possible movements, dance in front of the canvas, brush it lightly several times, and crash down finally like a lighting stroke upon the one line

necessary' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 45). The painter, in other words, was weighing up options. His hand 'did hesitate' because 'there was a choice' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 46). Interestingly, however, Merleau-Ponty argues that 'there is something artificial in this analysis' as it is slow motion itself that 'enumerates the possibilities' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 45). For the painter, operating in real time, the range of possibilities is not explicit and neither is his choice making. One can glean from this example that the process of choice making is operating at a more unconscious level than I am practising in this strategy - because it is clearly occurring - but even when acknowledged in this way it is not highlighted as a significant part of the painter's compositional activity. Practising *using internal editing* thus makes explicit what in Merleau-Ponty's model of composition is rhetorically absent but tacitly present - that there is a process of simultaneously experiencing and making certain aesthetic judgements about the (in my case multifaceted) encounter with the surroundings.



**Figure 5** represents the conscious decision making process of strategy 5, in which the improviser practises choosing between strategies as well as maintaining an awareness of choices within an individual strategy. The overlapping circles, existing as an ongoing and fluid template of possible compositional avenues, represent *seeing and responding to the performance space; shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience; shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli and inhabiting an imaginative landscape.*



**FIGURE 6** represents a basic configuration of the 5 strategies. The green arrows show the direction and intentionality of vision, giving rise to the different compositional approaches embedded in *seeing and responding to the performance space*, *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* and *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli*. *Inhabiting an imaginative landscape* is seen to be consequent upon any of these three strategies. The blue arrows represent *using internal editing*, continually operational within and between the other strategies.

Related to this process of consciously choosing and shaping material, I also want to note that in developing the strategies I also needed to acknowledge the moments when I found myself between them, in a kind of nebulous zone in which I was not clearly orienting myself in relation to the compositional focus that the strategies supply. At these times I began to use (momentary) pauses as a means of hovering or waiting; enabling - or at least remaining receptive to - a surprising insight, somatic impulse or imaginative idea. These pauses were not geared around funnelling my visual attention into something that I had already become aware of, and were generally characterised by the kind of withdrawn vision that is utilised in

strategy 3, but they functioned as necessary punctuation points in which I acknowledged that I was in a sticky place between strategies. Here the active process of seeding and editing material was suspended. Rather than orchestrating a particular outcome, I inhabited the hiatus of the pause in order to give myself time to reorient myself towards a particular strategy or, in the manner of the process of lingering described earlier, to enable a fresh idea or impulse to ‘pass into’ me (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 123).

## 1.6 Public Performances

The public performances that I have included in this research have enabled me to test out these strategies whilst in development, further consolidating the performance focus of this research (and providing a different focus from improvisational practices geared towards somatic investigation, such as exploring movement qualities in order to achieve a particular somatic state, or those intended very directly for therapeutic purposes). These performances have also highlighted a regular and influential characteristic of the performance form as I experience it - the smallness of the audiences. An examination of the reasons behind this phenomenon could cover the relatively self-contained communities (such as Cecil Street Studio in Melbourne, discussed further on p.66) in which the form is practised, the attendant low profile of the form in its various manifestations, the seclusion of some work within academic confines or the difficulty of attracting audiences to a performance that cannot be clearly described or explained as defined content or recognizable product before the event.<sup>50</sup> In terms of exploring the role of vision in understanding the solo form as composition, however, the small audiences have functioned as a useful and influential element. There is a sense of intimacy (that is even more heightened in the studio investigations) that has encouraged me to explore the option of directly, visually engaging with those present (strategy 2) and, as sketched earlier, has led to the composition of some material via this energetic line of visual connection. In this vein, Stephen Nachmanovitch notes that with ‘miniscule audiences’ there is ‘a much better chance of visually engaging them, of physically engaging them, of getting close to them, of involving them in the sound, of making them part of the sound, of playing with them’ (Nachmanovitch, 2006). Becoming

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<sup>50</sup> In the post-performance discussion of his improvised show, *Frank*, Nigel Charnock mentioned that UK venues were reluctant to book his 4-man improvised show *Stupid Men*. Compared with readily commodifiable products, *Stupid Men* was deemed to be too difficult to categorise and therefore sell. *Frank* had been touring since 2002, but it had only one performance in the (now closed) Greenroom in Manchester. I discuss *Frank* in the next chapter.

‘involved’ with the small audiences in these kinds of ways reveals an approach to composition that is reliant on being attentive to the individuals in the space, ‘attentive to their cues and attentive to what’s going on’ (Nachmanovitch, 2006). For Nachmanovitch, as I explain in the next chapter, this attentiveness ultimately leads to a profound sense of unification and interrelationship. In my case, visually attending to individual spectators serves as a springboard to the creation of textual, physical or imaginative material but, as mentioned in relation to *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience*, I have found that it also gives rise to a heightened sense of being seen in return and leads me to explore the compositional route of harnessing and shaping the kinaesthetic effects of being watched. The point I want to make here is that I have found that this awareness of ‘being seen’ extends beyond the explicit eye contact of strategy 2 to influence my general orientation in the space and the way in which I engage with the generative and structuring processes of composition throughout the strategies. The small audiences have thus been central in the formation of an understanding of vision in this practice as enfolded into a larger seeing/being seen paradigm in which an awareness of being watched (by one or few) infuses all the vision/action models of responsiveness that I have developed. The significance of this dynamic of seeing/being seen is specifically addressed in relation to my re-framing of Merleau-Ponty’s chiasmic seeing/seen rubric in chapter three and with practical illustrations from the studio and performance work in chapter four. It is also forms part of my discussions in the next chapter, specifically in relation to Nigel Charnock’s performance style, feeding into the wider analysis of a range of related performance practices.

**Start by just moving – allowing the body to move around, generating sensation.**

**I notice a few things but it is Andrew’s shoes that arrest my attention –**

**I move to them and away but am interested in returning to them – themes grow  
narratively from here**

**an old woman who has worn these shoes out but now she’s left them on the front step**

**A different character – waiting for the old lady → a host of imaginings develop from  
here and different points of view on getting new shoes...by stealing them.**

**The UK riots are firmly in my mind, as background supplying the logic here**

**Bring Andrew into this landscape by posing a moral dilemma of what would he do if he saw shoes for the grabbing in a shop recently trashed by rioters – or a £20 note sticking out of an ATM**

**The moral dilemma is characterised as not being one for anybody – or the old lady – it feels great – it brings a smile**

**I like following along this character whose morality I don't share but who I enjoy making**

(Immediate Writings, 23/8/11)

**The consequences of waiting**

**A patient kind of simplicity, well balanced and empty**

**An urge to join a riot**

**To smash open someone else's shop**

**(even you could do this)**

**You would not be so good at it.**

**The dilemma is to take the new shoes or not.**

**A kind of endless questioning about how good, enhancing or decorative a new pair would be.**

**An action in search of a moral motive**

**The pronouns become more and more potent as you and I become the same and the ethical world becomes a blurry space**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 23/8/11)

## CHAPTER TWO

### TELESCOPIC VIEWS

#### *Tracking and Mapping Performance Improvisation*

##### **2.1 Locating the Practice**

I begin this chapter by casting an eye back on my own history in order to acknowledge and contextualise the provenance of certain trends in this research. Merleau-Ponty's poetic claim that 'I am installed on a pyramid of time which has been me' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 14) hovers in the background as I briefly chart my early dance training in Canberra, Australia, later professional work in combined dance/theatre modes and my first encounters with improvisation as a performance form through the teaching methodologies of Al Wunder in Melbourne, Australia. I then discuss in more detail the practitioners that are relevant to my research for significant conceptual, methodological and aesthetic reasons. Practitioners who utilise vision as a communicative or generative tool within examples of improvisational performance are discussed and, more broadly, I incorporate into my analysis various understandings of improvisation as composition, different philosophical and aesthetic stances taken towards audiences and the use of movement and words as stylistic modes of performance in order to spotlight how the aesthetics of this practice sit in relation to other improvisational practices.

##### **2.2 A short and partial autobiography**

Before I discovered movement improvisation in Melbourne, I had orthodox dance training in ballet at the Bryan Lawrence School of Ballet in Canberra. I studied ballet for twelve years, from the ages of five to seventeen, before giving it up to attend university. At university I got involved in various theatrical productions at the Australian National University and the Canberra Repertory as well as studying and performing with a local semi-professional dance company called Canberra Dance Theatre.<sup>51</sup> Loosely grounded in 'modern' techniques, the

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<sup>51</sup> I acted as all the servants in *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare, ANU (1987); Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare, ANU (1988); Viola in *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare, ANU (1990) and Nina in *The Seagull* by Anton Chekhov, Canberra Repertory (1991).

company's training diluted to some extent the rigid verticality that was my ballet legacy, but itself instilled other corporeal tendencies which are still at play as I conduct my movement experiments today. I am aware, for instance, that I frequently work in and out of the floor, using gravity as a counter to the taut erectness, jumps and 'aspirational lines' of ballet (Fraleigh, 1987: xxxv). I also work with off-balance motion and falling, in addition to the held, vertical extension and elongated spine of the ballet. A third characteristic is the use of a weighted drop of the upper body or arm, followed by a rebound.<sup>52</sup>

My interest in both dance and theatre led me to undertake the Masters in Theatre Studies at Leeds University in 1992. It was here, somewhat coincidentally, that I first heard the term 'physical theatre' from one of my lecturers - an indication of the very orthodox and conventional milieu of my early performance experiences. After completing the Masters, all my professional work was rooted in my continuing interest in performance pieces that were both 'physical' and textual; that utilised text (at that time scripted) and movement as a means of communicating story, character and mood with an audience. On a professional level, I made work through Quiddity theatre, a company I shared with John Britton.<sup>53</sup> Britton scripted the pieces, but they included sections of choreographed material.<sup>54</sup> The physical episodes were always determined by textual clues, so in this sense the dramatic text was the bedrock of the performances (it was, after Garner, 'the thing itself', Garner, 1994: 6). At times the physical episodes functioned as interludes within a scene, designed to suggest the mood or internal imaginings of the characters and at other times they would be woven into a section of dialogue, so that the dancing and the text would interleave and interact, creating (one hoped) additional textures and significances within the scenes. This work embodied a fluid, hybrid aesthetic - a criss-crossing of movement and words - that later became a

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<sup>52</sup> This kind of 'fall and recovery' motion, in which the dancer loses and then regains balance or equilibrium, was associated with dancer and choreographer Doris Humphrey (1895-1958), widely regarded as one of the pioneers of American modern dance.

Sondra Fraleigh gives a useful broad analysis of the ideological differences between ballet and 'modern dance' in *Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics* (Fraleigh, 1987). Although 'modern dance' encompasses a range of styles, practitioners and methods, 'beginning with the expressionists in the 1920s and 1930s' (Fraleigh, 1987: xxxii), the term is generally representative of a spirit of 'discovery' and 'inventing out of one's own bodily being' (Fraleigh, 1987: xxxii) and originally signalled a 'revolt against the artificiality and affectations of ballet' (Fraleigh, 1987: 142). In my experience, 'modern' was used as a kind of umbrella term for the particular movement characteristics that were not part of my ballet legacy.

<sup>53</sup> Quiddity's work is documented at [www.quidditytheatre.com](http://www.quidditytheatre.com).

<sup>54</sup> Performances included *Charred Vision* (1994) *Diving For Pearls* (1995) and *The 18:12 To Tashkent* (1996), the latter a co-commission by Bradford University's Theatre in the Mill and the Yorkshire Dance Centre, an organisational coming-together that reflected the dance and theatre fusion within the work.

general characteristic of the duetting improvisations. In the practical investigations of this doctorate, these signature modes of performance have been further refined, operating as the channels through which I respond to and shape the impulses and ideas that have arisen from where and how I direct my vision.

Shifting to Melbourne in 1997, I began a fresh search for new artistic stimuli and by chance saw a performance of one of Al Wunder's 'extended performance' workshops. Never having seen an improvised performance before, my first reaction as an audience member was one of intrigue at how the students were finding and building material, how they were creatively sustaining themselves over thirty minutes. Reliant as I had been on a written structure as the underpinning for performance or, in my earlier dance training and work, a set choreography, the free-floating appearance of improvisation was a challenge to my understanding of structure and structuring processes. Subsequently, I attended one of these 'extended workshops' enabling me to challenge my own history of making set pieces of scripted dance theatre by confronting Wunder's pedagogy of improvisational performance.<sup>55</sup>

### **2.3 Al Wunder**

Wunder does not see himself primarily as a performer (although he does occasionally perform). Performance is crucial in his pedagogy, however, in the sense that he opens his classes - which have a performance component built into them - to those who are not professional or otherwise 'trained'. As the title of his classes suggests, *Theatre of the Ordinary* is 'a theatre where ordinary non-professional performers can regularly put themselves on stage and perform in front of an appreciative audience' (Wunder, 2006: v). Firmly grounded in an ethos of accessibility and equality, this aspect of Wunder's teaching can be seen to have its roots in the postmodern developments in dance occurring in America in the 1960s and 1970s, developments that Wunder was certainly aware of during the period he lived in New York. As he notes in his book *The Wonder of Improvisation*:

Bob Beswick had been telling me about some very interesting dance explorations taking place in Judson Church, which was being used as a rehearsal hall by dancers such as James Dunn, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton and others. It can arguably be

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<sup>55</sup> As an interesting side-note, the American teacher and performer Ruth Zaporah, who has developed a form of improvisational training called Action Theatre, was also first introduced to movement improvisation in the late 1960s by Wunder in Berkeley, California. Action Theatre treats improvisation as a hybrid, multi-modal form of expression, straddling the boundaries between text-based, movement-based and sound-based improvisations. It is usefully recounted in Zaporah's major text - *Action Theater: The Improvisation of Presence* (Zaporah, 1995).

called the birthplace of post-modern dance. People were actually performing improvisation and he thought I might like to see what was happening.

(Wunder, 2006: 14)

Rather astonishingly, it appears that Wunder didn't venture out to see this work, but the importance given to the inclusion of both professional and non-professional performers in his classes aligns him ideologically with the aims of accessibility and equality that characterised the experimental work of that era. Nearly forty years after Judson Dance Theatre began, Wunder's approach carried echoes of the 'egalitarian impulse that claimed value in each person's natural abilities' (Banes, 1993a: 114). Aesthetically, the inclusion of a 'pedestrian' mode in Wunder's system (discussed in full on pp.129-130) parallels the Judson dancers' use of 'quotidian actions performed in a matter-of-fact style' in their choreography (Banes, 1993a: 70), itself part of a wider push 'to strip the polish from dance style and restore to dance what was felt to be an antitheatrical authenticity of presence' (Banes, 1993a: 70). It is important to note, however, that in contrast to that particular aesthetic preoccupation of the Judson dancers, Wunder's system also allows for 'polish' of technique and significant degrees of theatricality.<sup>56</sup>

Wunder's pedagogical innovations were based on the premise that the student should 'trust and develop their own self teacher' (Wunder, 2006: 12). His range of exercises was designed to assist the improviser in finding and honing an 'artistic form to support impulsive play' (Wunder, 2006: 79).<sup>57</sup> The role of other class members functioning as audience giving what he calls 'positive feedback' was also designed to help the improviser recognise and understand his or her own aesthetic tendencies, likes and dislikes, particularly the 'power sources' that might be key to an individual's developing style.<sup>58</sup> The body was always

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<sup>56</sup> Wunder's system is based on four performing modes - 'pedestrian', 'character', 'caricature' and 'abstract'. I discuss the 'pedestrian' in chapter four as it forms a backdrop to the development of strategy 2. 'Character' is understood as 'implied character', a 'fictitious person whose actions and reactions are governed by the physical and emotional feelings of the improviser as these arise and are expressed during performance' (Wunder, 2006: 94). 'Caricature' defines 'a performing style that exaggerates the physical or vocal attributes of a human being' and Wunder aligns it with the overly exaggerated movements and facial expressions of early screen actors (Wunder, 2006: 100). His definition of 'abstract' is based on 'the non-literal aspect of movement itself' but he also states that 'abstract is the language of emotion' (Wunder, 2006:105).

<sup>57</sup> Wunder's pedagogy consists of constructing a two or three sentence exercise or 'score' that 'sets some very clear parameters yet purposefully leaves lots of space for student input and interpretation' (Wunder, 2006: 12). The 'play' therefore occurs within clearly defined parameters, but allows the student to choose their own focus within those parameters.

<sup>58</sup> 'Positive feedback' is a cornerstone of Wunder's approach to teaching improvisation. On one level, restricting both the improviser and the audience to positive commentary 'helps alleviate a negative state of

central to the explorations, functioning as the initial and primary site of investigation. Warm-ups would often start with a focus on ‘primary movers’ - any part of the body nominated by Wunder as the source of movement and main point of attention (Wunder, 2006: 62). Language, sounding and for some students song, would emerge from this physical base.

Wunder would also occasionally introduce exercises that played with the use of vision, and he notes in his book that ‘clarity about what you are actually seeing is one of the best ways of bringing yourself into the present’ (Wunder, 2006: 153). Attending to vision in Wunder’s system functioned as a means of becoming aware of the directional possibilities of the eyes in duet work, primarily swapping between a focus on oneself and one’s partner (Wunder, 2006: 67). The intent was to become ‘more present’ by ‘actually seeing’ parts of one’s own body or one’s partner. An example of this kind of score directed the students to either look directly at their partner, away from their partner or utilise peripheral vision to ‘look’ at their partner [author’s notes, 23/8/00]. In addition to ‘direct looking’ and ‘peripheral looking’, Wunder identified a third visual mode, ‘unsighted looking’, which took his work into the realm of an imaginary construct of where the eyes are in ways that mine does not do (Wunder, 2006: 154). In this mode, ‘your partner is somewhere behind you but you are still trying to look at him or her as if you had eyes in the back of your skull’ (Wunder, 2006: 154).

In the template of strategies offered in this doctorate, Wunder’s interest in using vision to become more ‘present’ is subsumed into a more complex generative and structuring paradigm. Although I do become more ‘present’ by ‘actually seeing’ what I am looking at, the intent in strategies 1, 2 and 4 - *seeing and responding to the performance space; shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience and inhabiting an imaginative landscape* - is to use vision and the connection established with what (or who) I see as an

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mind’ (Wunder, 2006: 122) and ameliorates the negative judgement that can occur during or after a performance. More widely, positive feedback ‘helps reawaken the creative teacher residing in all of us’ (Wunder, 2006: 122) and is linked to Wunder’s ideology that the improviser must value the style of presentation that most suits them. Concentrating on what was ‘positive’ in a performance is a critical tool designed to assist the improviser in identifying and evolving their unique approach. The aspirational-sounding ‘power sources’ are linked to the methodology of ‘positive feedback’. A power source is ‘what you like, you enjoy, gives you pleasure, turns you on, excites you, a thing that you can do easily, something you do unconsciously and frequently, a pattern of physical behaviour, your personal philosophies, personality traits, anything that empowers you’ (Wunder, 2006: 125). So evidently wide-ranging, Wunder cites his own power-sources as ‘hands, locomotion, space shaping, Hum Drumming, vocal sounds, autobiographical stories, isolated movements and timing’ (Wunder, 2006: 126).

explicit compositional source. The intent in strategy 3 - *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* - is to deliberately withdraw vision from external stimuli in order to facilitate a different occupation of space, but part of its efficaciousness as a strategy lies in its contrasting compositional agenda. Diverging here from Wunder's approach, becoming 'present' is a consequence rather than an explicit aim of this research.

## 2.4 Cecil Street

Wunder's classes took place in Cecil Street Studio, established in 1997 by Martin Hughes and Fiona Cook who were 'keen to find a permanent home for the improv community they belonged to' (Cecil Street Studio, n.d.). Hughes was a founding member of *State of Flux*, a Contact Improvisation group that performed regularly in the studio. There was also a weekly Contact Improvisation jam every Tuesday night. Cook became a founding member of *Weave Movement Theatre*, a group of mixed able-bodied and disabled dancers, which also formed in 1997, and with whom I danced for a few years. *Weave* was also grounded in techniques of Contact Improvisation and performed regularly in Melbourne. This significant and visible presence of Contact Improvisation was a defining feature of Cecil Street Studio and a major determinant of how improvisatory practices were understood and articulated in that milieu. Noted for its inward orientation and visual dissociation from the audience, Contact Improvisation offers several points of aesthetic and philosophical contrast from both Wunder's work and my own, and I use the form as a contrasting model in chapter four. Another point I want to make here, however, is that there was an important operational principle infusing all the improvisational activities at Cecil Street - that of practising performance, learning by and through performing with an audience present. This theme has influenced the methodology of this doctorate, although the presence of a 'full second-person position' and the inclusion of Immediate Writings already discussed have been core additions to the general theme of practising work in front of an audience.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> There have been changes to the running of Cecil Street since I frequented it between the years of 1997 and 2004. It is now managed by 'Cecil's Moving Body Inc' and was obliged in both 2011 and 2012 to hold fundraisers 'to assure the viability of the studio' and 'ensure the future of the studio' in light of ever-increasing overheads (Al Wunder, personal communication, 16 October 2011). Despite the financial challenges, its current mission statement reinforces the studio's original purpose as a 'home' for the local improvisation community, and its ongoing aim to:

## 2.5 Performing Improvisation

Of necessity, the process of identifying improvisational performance practitioners who effectively locate my own practice is highly subjective, but it has meant drawing together artists that reflect the hybrid style of my own work and also enable me to build understanding and insight into the specific trajectory of my own research into vision as a core compositional tool in and for performance. I thus discuss three practitioners who work from a dance base (although in all cases spoken text is also used) and two from within a more character or text-based frame (entwined with physical expression); one expressive of an eclectic mix of performance modes (dance, song, spoken text and recorded music); and a violinist. All the practitioners are based in the UK, Europe, United States or Australia, a particular cultural context that delimits my study, but does so because my own experiences and understandings of improvisation are filtered through this cultural context. All the practitioners are also experienced performers - for the purposes of this study I define 'experienced' as having over ten years of practice performing improvised work and in most cases the practitioners have several decades of experience, a longevity which brings an authority to their practice. In all the cases there is also written and/or oral testimony about their own work, a self-reflexiveness which felt important as I looked for ways of accurately situating my own practice, ten years old in primarily duet and ensemble formats when I started this doctorate (as explained in the Introduction, the doctorate's focus on the solo form refined pre-existing interests and attitudinal approaches and has essentially articulated what is for me a new paradigm). I also chose practitioners experienced in the solo form, even if, as is frequently the case, the improvisers are also practised in group work or working with musicians.

It is also useful to note that most of the practitioners tend to work with varying degrees of structure, creating defined parameters or a pre-existing framework within which to explore. They thus put into play different understandings of composition from the 'totally improvised' realm of my work, generating and structuring material in relation to one or two carefully pre-arranged stimuli or structures. In Chris Johnston's solo work, for instance, he has a 'props table' from which one or two props will be incorporated into the work as it unfolds

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support the continuance of the improvisational and movement-based awareness and performance practices as currently exist at Cecil Street Studio by providing and administering an affordable, accessible space for classes and performance.

(Cecil Street, n.d.)

(Johnston, 2006: 125).<sup>60</sup> In Julien Hamilton's solo shows he also uses objects to 'dress the space' (Stark Smith, 2011: 31). He favours daily, quotidian objects that are 'immediately recognizable', such as a table, an apple, an empty glass, a book or a pair of shoes, as a way of filling the space with imaginative potential (Stark Smith, 2011: 31). Nigel Charnock also utilised a number of props that had been pre-set on the side of the stage in his solo show *Frank*. The British flag, a water bottle with water, a plastic bag full of chocolates and a torch were, like the pre-recorded music, pre-determined elements that Charnock drew on to give his show shape and variety. *Some Thoughts on Improvisation* was itself the pre-determined element of Yvonne Rainer's solo, functioning as a set, textual accompaniment. Similarly, in Lisa Nelson's work, the 'Tuning Scores' themselves score or frame both the doing and the reception of the work. By contrast, Peter Trotman 'might have a feeling' about how he wants to start (Ellis, 2009: 13) but he does not work with a pre-determined score in performance, whilst Stephen Nachmanovitch is committed to working 'without having made any prior agreements' (Nachmanovitch, 2006). The details of the generative processes of all these practitioners, and further nuanced understandings of composition, are discussed further as this chapter progresses.

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<sup>60</sup> In Johnston's longer-form productions with his company *Fluxx*, he also structures the work by outlining or developing characters prior to performance. The audiences are also usually proactive in choosing key aspects of the show - relationships between characters and narrative lines for instance - and in some productions they interact with the actors, choosing the degree to which they engage with the story or character that is presented, quite literally becoming co-creators of the material. An early version of a show currently in the repertoire, *Without Planning Permission*, for instance, involved a performer coming to a table where a spectator had sat - by sitting down the spectator triggered the show. The actor would 'bring a dilemma, a problem or a story' and spectators could choose 'to engage with the character, to become improvisers themselves, or simply observe' (Fluxx, n.d.). In another show, *Heaven and Hell*, the audience determines which three characters are to be sent to heaven and which three to hell (Fluxx, n.d.). In *La Ronde Improvised*, the actors prepare characters before performance and at the outset of the show audience members utilise a set of cards to determine some of the unfolding relationships of these characters (Fluxx, n.d.).

## 2.6 Examples of a purposeful use of vision in improvisational performance

Turning first to practitioners who explicitly utilise vision as part of their strategic approach to improvisational performance, I now discuss Lisa Nelson, Yvonne Rainer and Nigel Charnock.

Lisa Nelson's interest in the correlation between vision and movement introduced earlier began with her solo experiments with video cameras in Vermont and New York in the 1970s. As well as documenting the work of practitioners in the New York dance scene in the 1970s, (including Steve Paxton's early years of Contact Improvisation), her work with cameras re-invigorated her own dancing as she discovered how the use of video 'magnified the sensations of looking' and made Nelson aware of the movements that her body made to support her seeing (Nelson, 2004: 24). She also discovered how her 'visual desires reflexively prompted her own movement through space' (Buckwalter, 2010: 121) and this new-found awareness enabled her to explore the emergent 'dialogue' between her 'visual desires' and her physicality (Nelson, 2004: 24). Although much of this 'dialogue' was owed to the mechanics of moving about a space holding a camera to the eye, and the requisite adjustments she needed to make to the hold of her own body, Nelson does describe at one point how she could 'feel my focus anchor me in the actual space beyond it, while what I was looking at funnelled deeply into my body, seeming literally to hold it up' (Nelson, 2004: 24). I note this discourse of interplay with one's environment - a visual focus that gives rise to a sense of somatic connectedness - because the language of 'funnelling into' echoes the 'passing into' of the chiasmic exchange in my own practice. My research builds on the sentiment of Nelson's example - that 'what I was looking at' could 'funnel' into me - by allowing what I have seen (without a camera) to gestate within my imagination and/or dictate elements of my movement choices. My research also progresses Nelson's idea by developing and practising a number of forms of vision/action responsiveness and embedding relationality and responsiveness as core operational principles, via the theoretical encroachments of Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic exchange. Strategy 1, *seeing and responding to the performance space*, for instance, operates by visually reaching into, scanning, and 'questioning' the immediate environment, attending to the length of time in which I linger over a visual detail and then generating corporeal or textual material that deliberately responds to or stylistically reflects and embodies what I have visually noted. In this sense my improvisational material 'borrows from' and 'takes from' my surroundings (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 261). Similarly the visual connectedness with the audience of strategy 2 -

*shifting vision towards a direct engagement with the audience* - locates the seed of composition in the dynamism of the exchange of looks - the 'me other exchange' of the chiasm (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 215). In my practice, this kind of chiasmic relationship is core to my argument that working pragmatically and creatively with vision within the specificity of the immediate space and situation of performance can function as an efficacious means of understanding solo improvised performance as a form of composition, but in general Nelson does not articulate the 'dialogue' between vision and movement in the way that she does above. Indeed she also states that 'operating with eyes open had kept me at a distance from my environment' (Nelson, 2004: 25), a comment that flatly contradicts the earlier remark on how vision had functioned to almost merge her with her environment. Tellingly, Nelson needed a period of exploration in which she closed her eyes (presumably this was separate from her work with video cameras) to 'bring the space closer' (Nelson, 2004: 25). It was for the most part only with eyes shut that Nelson was able to imprint the space on her body and create movement that 'held a mirror to the space, making its hidden life visible' (Nelson, 2004: 25).<sup>61</sup>

Nelson later extended her interest in exploring and exposing aesthetic desires into her group 'Tuning Scores'. These training scores tessellate visual and kinaesthetic desires with bodily movement and operate as a forum - treated as a kind of laboratory performance - in which connections between observing, feeling and moving are made explicit.<sup>62</sup> The scores serve to examine links between observing and moving but in such a way that the participants' aesthetic desires - what they see in a dance and what they then want in a dance - are foregrounded. By using a particular set of verbal calls such as "pause," "replace," "reverse,"

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<sup>61</sup> Deliberately shutting the eyes is quite common in movement explorations as by cutting out visual stimuli - often considered as distractions - one's ability to tune into the other senses (predominately in a studio context information from the kinaesthetic and tactile senses) - is enhanced. Daniel Nagrin says that 'all the sensitivities are honed' and a 'wider range of possibilities and images becomes accessible' when the eyes are shut. He talks of working with eyes shut as a route to becoming 'less self-conscious and freer - creatively'; it 'intensifies all the neglected senses and elicits a sense of danger and adventure' (Nagrin, 1994: 53). Similarly, Anna Halprin, known for her research into dance and the creative arts as in-roads to healing, begins many of her exercises with eyes shut. 'Keeping your eyes closed will intensify your awareness of your internal sensations' she says (Halprin, 2000: 50). In my research, shutting my eyes is one option within strategy 3 - *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli*; it functions as the most extreme example of the reverse visual motuality characteristic of that strategy.

<sup>62</sup> As well as building a spectating perspective into the score's operational protocols, the Tuning Scores operate more broadly in performance. Throughout the 1990s an ensemble of improvisers called 'Image Lab' conducted a series of 'Observatories' in which audiences were invited to witness the way in which the process of 'tuning' operated as a mechanism for looking at dance and identifying aesthetic proclivities. A slightly more formal performative realisation of the score can be found in the duet *Go*, first created in 2001 by Nelson and Scott Smith. In this piece the Tuning Scores' calls are used to move and adjust the position of objects (Buckwalter, 2010: 144).

“repeat,” “sustain,” the improvisers make ongoing adjustments to the dance as a way of exploring their compositional and aesthetic desires (Buckwalter, 2010: 70). The workshop participants move in and out of what is called the ‘image space’ (Buckwalter, 2010: 123), the arena designated as the site of action, so there is a constant fluid exchange between observing and doing. The dancer is able to move between roles at will, sometimes choosing to look at the improvisation from the outside, and sometimes inhabit it from inside. In this way the activities of observing and doing become interchangeable and the students develop the ability to glean information about their aesthetic tastes by looking at something from the outside, looking at something from the inside and/or sensing, kinaesthetically, from the inside, giving equal credence in fact to the visual and kinaesthetic modes of sensing as keys to compositional decisions. Here composition is understood as ‘a repertoire of responses to constantly shifting internal and external environments’ (Nelson, 2004: 22), a ‘reading and responding to the scripts of the environment’ (Nelson, 2004: 21).

The parallels between Nelson’s research into group improvisation as a consciously-chosen set of actions based on one’s attentiveness to visual (and kinaesthetic) stimuli and my own formulation of solo vision/action models of responsiveness serve to spotlight the particular trajectory of my own research. There is a shared point of view that utilising one’s vision to take note of specific elements in the performance space - in my case the architecture of the space, any found objects and the audience - and in Nelson’s Tuning Scores the physical choices of other dancers - can function as an efficacious stimulus to composition. Within this shared understanding, however, our focus of investigation differs, as Nelson is propelled by the question of ‘*what do we see in a dance?*’ in order to make explicit both aesthetic tastes and the decision-making process (Nelson, 2004: 26, original italics). In my practice I am aware that if I follow in movement the direction of my vision, or narratively build an imaginative thread that has occurred to me from something I have seen, I am both pursuing and articulating my creative tastes, what one might think of as my visual desires, but developing and articulating my aesthetic proclivities is a by-product rather than explicit aim of these strategies. In shaping and expressing what has piqued my visual interest, without literally verbalising it, the strategies also function as tools of performance composition in which the kind of self-reflexive interaction characteristic of Nelson’s work is subsumed. Indeed, strategy 5, *using internal editing*, deliberately involves a lack of transparency; the decision-making processes are at play, but not expressly flagged. Thus whilst Nelson’s work is propelled by her interest in seeing (and hearing) ‘the internal dialogue that shapes the

surface' of the dancer's 'interaction with herself' (Nelson, 2004: 22), my improvisational strategies are designed as compositional tools that inform and shape the improviser's decision-making processes without literally stating the internal dialogue that I am having.<sup>63</sup>

In the field of dance scholarship, Yvonne Rainer is probably best known for her work *Trio A*, created in 1966, and lauded by Sally Banes for 'its resolute denial of style and expression, making a historical shift in the subject of dance to pure motion' (Banes, 1977: 54).<sup>64</sup> Indeed Banes dubs the piece 'the signal work both for Rainer and for the entire post-modern dance' (Banes, 1977: 44).<sup>65</sup> I include Rainer here, however, because of her statement on improvisation, *Some Thoughts on Improvisation*, an essay that originally appeared as a taped commentary accompanying an improvised solo which was part of Judson Dance Theatre's Concert #14.<sup>66</sup> It is an interesting statement of improvisational principles and approaches to the generation and sustainment of material, made more complex by the fact that it was written in response to an earlier performance in an art gallery so contains both specific

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<sup>63</sup> In a sense, Al Wunder's training supplies a learning environment similar to Nelson's although his forum is not interactive. The watchers in his classes still investigate their own tastes and the nature of their own seeing by giving verbal feedback, but this is after the improvised event and it is much more discursive than Nelson's single-word directives. In Nelson's case, the use of language to state a compositional desire and alter the unfolding of the improvisation, and in Wunder's case the challenge to find a vocabulary that will capture what was seen and enjoyed (the 'positive feedback' noted earlier), both require that the student give voice to their own viewing processes and tastes.

<sup>64</sup> *Trio A* was originally performed as a set of three simultaneous solos by Rainer, Steve Paxton and David Gordon at the Judson Church on 10 January 1966, and was at that time entitled *The Mind is a Muscle, Part 1*. Sondra Fraleigh offers an alternative reading of the significance of *Trio A*, pointing out that any attempt 'to purify a medium by emphasizing its formal (objective) characteristics either on a high technical level or on a pedestrian level has to produce some stylistic consequences if anything with a unique identity is to result' (Fraleigh, 1987: 121).

<sup>65</sup> Banes defines 'postmodern' as the avant-garde dance work that began in the United States in the 1960s and carried on through the 1980s (Banes, 1977: xv). She characterises the American avant-garde artists of the 1960s as 'the first generation of postmodern artists' (Banes, 1993a: 6), although the term is also applied to work that subsequently spread from the United States to Europe and England. For Banes, this 'first generation' of postmodern artists had an immense influence over time. They 'shaped the debates, forms and institutions that would animate art and culture for the rest of the century' (Banes, 1993a: 6). Fraleigh concurs that postmodern dance produced various styles, although she states that 'the style inherent in the ease and unremarkableness of sneakers' suggests a general trend (Fraleigh, 1987: 129).

<sup>66</sup> Concert #14 took place on 27 April 1964. Although themed around improvisation, the program notes specified that in the first half there would be seven improvisations 'choreographed' by various individuals, and the second half would consist of a twenty-five minute piece choreographed by Deborah Hay (Banes, 1993b: 194). According to Banes, 'very few of the participants in Concert #14 remember what it is, exactly, they did' (Banes, 1993b: 195) so the nature of the 'choreographic' approaches remains elusive. Interestingly, a column by *Village Voice* critic Jill Johnston noted that the final group improvisation had 'minimal restrictions on freedom' but the 'tacitly accepted Open Sesame (free play)' of the event didn't, for her, succeed (Banes, 1993b: 198). She was looking for a "'situation" that would develop out of electric necessity out of a collective atmosphere of private sideshows' and in this she was disappointed (Banes, 1993b: 198).

references to that event and more general observations and musings.<sup>67</sup> I regard it as significant because it appears to grant performance improvisation a different set of permissions with regard to the use of vision; a possible counterpoint to the withdrawn gaze that is attached to the 'pure motion' of *Trio A*.

To contextualise the significance of the use of vision in the essay, it is worth recounting the clear ideological agenda for the use of the head, face and eyes in *Trio A*. The strategy there was one of 'refusing to face the audience with one's face' (Rainer, 2001). There was a 'refusal to confront the audience', which was driven by wider aesthetic and philosophical concerns (Rainer, 2001). Aesthetically, Rainer was generally interested in revealing people 'as they are engaged in various kinds of activities' (Rainer, 1974: 71); she wanted the audience to look at 'the object-like nature of the movement and not at the personality of the dancer' (Rainer, 2001). She therefore evolved an aesthetic in which the performer matter-of-factly carried out a series of movements, eschewing any additional overlay of psychological or emotional significance. The body was presented as 'object-like' in the sense that it was stripped of 'the exhibition of character and attitude' (Rainer, 1974: 65) and it was also stripped of virtuosic displays of skill. Rainer's aim was that dance allow for 'a more matter-of-fact, more concrete, more banal quality of physical being in performance' (Rainer, 1974: 65). Dance was therefore to be viewed and evaluated without imputing any psychological or dramatic meaning to it. It was to be understood as devoid of 'theatrical bloat' (Rainer, 1974: 51) with the emphasis rather on what Rainer 'loved' - the body's 'actual weight, mass, and unenhanced physicality' (Rainer, 1974: 71). This sense of how movement was to function is caught in a section of *Some Thoughts on Improvisation*, in which the spectator/listener is given a list of various unadorned physical actions, described in language that is also devoid of psychological or emotional registers:

And I keep walking. And I make decisions. He has left the room, I will run; she is standing stock-still, I will bring my head close to hers; that man is moving his arms around, I will do as he does; the wall looms close, I will walk until I bump into it; my black dress is white from the wall, I will brush it off; they are finished, I will rest in this position for a long time; the man is using the magnifying glass, I will look at him from the other side; he and she are standing together, I will stand with them; the woman removes her cellophane bag from the reach of my steam-rolling foot...

(Rainer, 1974: 299)

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<sup>67</sup> Banes notes that Rainer's text was originally written after she had danced at the Green Gallery in an event by James Lee Byars, to whom *Some Thoughts on Improvisation* was dedicated (Banes, 1993b: 196).

The mater-of-fact language here captures Rainer's general task-like approach, with both words and movement carrying 'unenhanced', arguably 'banal' registers of meaning.

Philosophically, Rainer's orientation towards an 'object'-like movement quality, and its attendant withdrawn face 'was a way of foregrounding the whole idea and problem of the look between spectator and performer' (Rainer, 2001), the general "“problem” of performance' being the 'exhibition-like presentation' of the performer who directly visually engaged the audience (Rainer, 1974: 67). To cut across the perceived narcissism of the performer, a 'pleasure in being looked at' that Rainer admitted she may have shared (Rainer, 2001), Rainer's general solution was that either 'the gaze was averted or the head was engaged in movement' (Rainer, 1974: 67). Rainer's logic was that 'if I don't look at you...if I don't see you, you won't see me as exhibiting myself' (Rainer, 2001).<sup>68</sup>

This philosophical and aesthetic approach was such a strong trademark, that it is even more striking that her 'thoughts' on improvisation allow for the possibility of 'just *being* there looking at the people who are looking at you' (Rainer, 1974: 300, original italics). In the context of improvisation, Rainer gives this direct looking a particular significance. It is the moment when the improviser deliberately highlights her vulnerability - in her example very specifically tied to her lack of conviction about what she is doing - and deliberately points it out to the audience. It is the equivalent of saying "“Look at my dirty underwear. I forgot to change it today, but you see, it too exists”" (Rainer, 1974: 300). Rainer doesn't discuss whether or not the direct look is a successful strategy for dealing with a lack of conviction, but its inclusion here is significant because it is tellingly at odds with the ideology of not looking at the audience infusing *Trio A*, and seems to allow for something of the person and personality performing the improvisation to come through; it is a display of emotion and psychology, the kind of overlays or reverberations that Rainer so assiduously drained from her set choreography.<sup>69</sup> What is useful to the articulation of my own research direction is

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<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, in the conference held in Paris in 2001, Rainer admitted that 'betrayal oozes out of every pore. There's no way to be neutral in the presentation of the self. I can sit here like a statue and you read things into my body...' (Rainer, 2001).

<sup>69</sup> As a side comment, it is also worth noting that during the improvisation Rainer was dressed in a black dress and high-heeled shoes (Banes, 1993b: 196 and Banes, 1994: 224), a costume that evokes a certain image of femaleness or femininity and one can surmise also restricted her movement to some degree (Banes, 2001: 359). The choice of costume problematizes Rainer's general ideology of task-like and object-like presentation in which the spectator was encouraged to focus on the 'unenhanced physicality' of the body's actions (Rainer, 1974: 71). Certainly in terms of inviting alternative readings, her costume might be seen as a deliberate (and probably ironic) embodiment of conventions of female presentation - the 'super-stylization of the dancer' - that she otherwise forthrightly rejected (Rainer, 1974: 71).

acknowledging, with Rainer, that ‘just *being* there looking at the people who are looking at you’ is a choice available to the improviser but whereas she leaves her reader with little sense of how she proceeds with and after the look - concluding with the comment that ‘a little bit of dirty underwear goes a long way. Haw Haw’ (Rainer, 1974: 300) - I have in this practice explored the pragmatic and creative potential of composing from and with my consciousness of being watched, a self-awareness that is especially enhanced when I directly visually engage a spectator by *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience*. That strategy moves beyond ‘just being there’ by following any compositional impulses that arise from this self-awareness - an example is given on p.133. Although potentially entwined with feelings of a lack of conviction about one’s inhabitation of the space, the emphasis in this research has been on composing with one’s awareness of being watched and from the kinaesthetic effects of being very directly looked at, rather than ‘letting go of one’s concentration and just *being* there’ (Rainer, 1974: 300).

Later in her essay, Rainer states that improvisation ‘demands a constant connection with some thing - object, action, and/or mood - in a situation’ (Rainer, 1974: 299), a formulation of connectedness that is a useful point of entry for further understanding of my work as it linguistically echoes this doctorate’s pragmatics of relationality. This connection is characterised as ‘a lifeline from “it” to me that conducts a flow of stimuli and ideas’, a conceptualisation that in the direction of its dynamic - from ‘it to me’ - also linguistically echoes the chiasmic exchange - as treated in this practice - when things (stimuli, ideas) ‘pass into’ the improviser. The need for ‘a constant connection’ with something is evidently vital to Rainer’s methodology and aesthetics (and is given a symbolic twist in her use of a spool of white thread in the actual improvisation), but unlike in this practice she does not identify tools or strategies for establishing or maintaining it. She notes that the more connections there are, ‘the easier it is to proceed’ but when the lifeline ‘breaks’, she ‘flounders’ about, looking for another one (Rainer, 1974: 299). She also gives a robust account of what happens when she doesn’t find a new lifeline, a visceral description that captures the sense of being disconnected from a creative stimulus:

I lose all reason for being there at that moment, become frantic, grasp at unkinaesthetic memories of previous moments, lose my freedom, work mechanically and am miserable, and in misery drift deeper into a murky ambience of non-distinctions.

(Rainer, 1974: 299)

This sense of disconnected aimlessness is probably familiar to most improvisers and is a reminder of the perils of a form that leaves a degree of composition to the immediacy of the performed context. In a clue as to what might enable her to navigate the improvisatory situation more smoothly, however, Rainer comments that the improviser's sense of more or fewer connections is related to their 'degree of awareness of the total situation, including audience' (Rainer, 1974: 299), a remark that again suggests, but does not build on, the compositional potential of either the direct look to the audience or the tacit acknowledgment that their presence might influence compositional or structural decisions. In my research, it is by a purposeful use of vision that the improviser practises an awareness of the details and parameters of the 'total situation'. Adopting Rainer's phraseology further, the research also caters for the need for various 'lifelines' of connectedness by implementing the strategies as tools that assist the improviser in not only becoming aware of, but also building a greater capacity to compositionally respond to, the specifics of the immediate space and situation of performance. Shifting the direction and intentionality of my vision, and tacitly or directly acknowledging the audience, enables me to establish a vibrant, generative and compositionally-minded connectedness with and within the immediate surroundings. *Seeing and responding to the performance space* and *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* thus both create a visual line of energy in which the chiasmic exchange influences the evolution and dynamics of the improviser's compositional choices. *Shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* facilitates a compositional agenda in which the moment by moment unfolding of the body's trained intentionality is foregrounded and *inhabiting an imaginative landscape* builds on the imaginative inclinations that might be seeded by the direction and intentionality of vision pursued in the first three strategies. All of these options function as kinds of 'life-lines' for the solo improviser in the moment of performance.

Whilst Rainer was committed in general to 'submerging the personality' and becoming a 'neutral "doer"' (Rainer, 1974: 65), the late UK physical theatre maverick Nigel Charnock's stage persona oozed personality. In contrast to the way in which Rainer assiduously avoided any direct looking in *Trio A*, and also in contrast to the way in which the direct look was restricted to connotations of vulnerability in *Some Thoughts on Improvisation*, Charnock appeared to use the duality of seeing and being seen by the audience as an energetic driver and a source of pleasure. Indeed Charnock's work clearly rejected the kind of abstraction and formalism that permeated *Trio A* and was informed by a far more pronounced sense of

desiring to see and be seen than Rainer's ideology - even as filtered through the permissions she grants herself in improvisation - allowed.<sup>70</sup>

In *Frank*, Charnock mixed and alternated spoken text, movement, singing and recorded music.<sup>71</sup> This piece (as well as his 4-man improvised show *Stupid Men*) was created after years of work in set dance and physical theatre shows with DV8 and his approach to improvisation carried echoes of DV8's original artistic agenda (begun in 1986 and still promulgated through the company's Artistic Policy) of 'taking risks, aesthetically and physically', 'breaking down the barriers between dance and theatre' and 'communicating ideas and feelings clearly and unpretentiously' (DV8, n.d.). Broadly contextualised by the ideological approach to performance captured in that artistic manifesto, Charnock revealed a delight in being looked at, and looking at us in return; a particular dynamic of seeing/being seen that clearly energised his stage demeanour and which related in kind, although I will argue not degree, to my use of a direct visual engagement with the audience in strategy 2. Related to this visual engagement with the audience was Charnock's choice to physically interact with us, an approach that opens up some interesting phenomenological understandings of my spectating perspective and of the ways in which Charnock appealed to our own embodied experience of and in his performance. Enfolded into this pleasure in using vision and physicality as direct (and unpretentious) communicative tools, was a deep immersion in, and simultaneous questioning of and commentary on, his corporeality, a literal speaking from and through a place of corporeal knowing as he experienced it in performance.<sup>72</sup> His attitude to his own physicality also raises an interesting point about the

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<sup>70</sup> Glancing back at Charnock's own artistic heritage, I note that Simon Murray and John Keefe describe Lloyd Newson (co-founder of DV8) as 'reacting passionately to the position exemplified by Yvonne Rainer's well-quoted manifesto for modern dance' (Murray and Keefe, 2007: 77). In similar vein, when watching *Frank* I was also aware that most of Rainer's 'No' statements in this 'manifesto' could also be seen as functioning in a vivid, affirmative 'Yes':

No to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved.

(Rainer, 1974: 51)

<sup>71</sup> *Frank* by Nigel Charnock, (2009), Greenroom, Manchester, [29 May 2009].

<sup>72</sup> Charnock also commented several times that he could improvise because he was experienced and old enough, a line of reasoning that linked his improvisational sensibility to his already extensive performance experience and his pre-existing stage skills. In 2009 Charnock was 49, and demonstrated an extremely impressive fluidity, suppleness and expressiveness of both body and voice.

visibility of embedded physical technique and the kind of attitudinal stance an improviser might take towards habitual ways of moving or creating movement. In my research, this question fed into the articulation of strategy 3 - *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli*; In Charnock's case, he engaged in an ongoing conversation with himself - specifically with parts of his body, his own generative processes and the dance forms that he so skilfully embodied, a point I return to when discussing the amalgam of words and movement in his work.

Charnock began *Frank* by arriving in the space, unlit, so that only his outline was visible. This was enough to reveal that he was doing turning and travelling movements and it wasn't long before he announced that he was doing 'post-modern' dance that we couldn't see because he was in the dark. This satirising of a performance mode that as the lights came up we could see he was simultaneously executing with consummate skill and flair was characteristic of his irreverent and wry approach to his own virtuosity. After this opening he established a playful - arguably intrusive - interactivity between himself and his audience by seeing a spectator's handbag, rummaging through it and improvising text as he went through the contents of the spectator's wallet. This sense of imposing his physical presence on us was also at play when he looked and talked directly at us, which he did frequently, as he dwelled on his own ageing and the state of his body (including his greying pubic hairs) as common themes. There was a sense in both his choice of content and stage demeanour that Charnock was motivated, indeed propelled, by an exuberant pleasure in being watched and in encouraging us to look at his body. The seeing/seen dynamic thus manifested as a very pronounced line of energetic engagement with the audience, which was similar in kind to my visual connection with them in strategy 2 - *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* - but far outran that strategy in terms of intensity. There was a kind of insistence, if you like, that the audience scrutinise and enjoy the improviser's corporeal presence, an aesthetics of pleasure for which there is no direct correlation in my own work.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> The importance Charnock attached to being watched is also captured in a Blog entry during the creation of *Stupid Men*. Charnock writes:

I wanted it to be observed. I wanted it to be watched. I wanted to be not alone in here. I think if there's a camera or if there's someone taking notes it becomes different. I think if you hadn't been here over the last couple of weeks then we would have behaved differently.

(Charnock, 2006)

At one point Charnock threw chocolates at the audience (which I reached for and ate when I caught them) and at several points he climbed through the audience seating, in a recognizable gesture of flaunting a traditional, end-on divide between audience and performer. These moments functioned to connect Charnock very literally with his watchers and served to remind me, as spectator, of my own embodied perspective. Reaching for chocolates (and tasting them) and feeling the weight of Charnock's body as he clambered past had the effect of re-embodiment my own viewing. Rather than the 'disembodied eye/I of traditional realist spectatorship', as Stanton Garner characterises one mode in which theatre or performance can be experienced (Garner, 1994: 37), Charnock's interactivity disclosed my body (to me) as it infused the act of watching performance. My own corporeality became more alert and sentient as I experienced the 'embodied eye' of spectatorship (Garner, 1994: 4). Although there were also moments in *Frank* where Charnock did not directly visually engage the audience and in which he chose not to physically interact with us (and in which, as I explain later, I engaged with the work somewhat differently), the piece was nonetheless characterized by a palpable sense that Charnock wanted to engage us as directly as possible, to share his lived experience of performance - or after Merleau-Ponty his *Lebenswelt* - with us. In doing so, he heightened my sense of my own 'positionality and material presence' (Garner, 1994: 37) and re-conceived the performance space into one in which, after Garner, the 'body's livedness' (Garner, 1994: 50) extended to the 'bodied spaces' of both actor and spectator (Garner, 1994: 3-4).<sup>74</sup>

Charnock's use of direct address to his audience - his informal chatter - was interspersed with sections in which he either danced silently to pre-recorded music or created sections in which he both danced and either commented on his dancing or on dance modes in general.<sup>75</sup>

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It is also noticeable that in the Blog he notes that there's 'no one to please. You're pleasing yourself' (Charnock, 2006).

<sup>74</sup> *Frank* also set up a story that began quite early with the question 'why are you here?' Towards the end of the piece, Charnock told us that we came to the theatre in search of something, only to find him. He talked about the insatiability of our desires and the ways in which we attempt to satisfy them, always unsuccessfully. He then gave us a parable about a thief who is convinced he will find a valuable diamond in some belongings left on a train. The thief fails to find the diamond where he thinks it is, only to discover later that it is in his own pocket. In the Q & A after the show Charnock elaborated on this parable, and the show's intent, by explaining *Frank* as a kind of 'slap on the face', a reminder that whatever we are all looking for is with us already, in how we live and experience our lives.

<sup>75</sup> He told his audience that the different sections were there to help him navigate his way through the show, signalling how much time had passed and how much was left. The deliberate segmenting of time into discrete chunks of either talking or dancing also functioned to create variety. Perhaps this is an obvious point, but on an aesthetic as well as structural level, the 'potential sameness' of the solo form (Johnston, 2006: 123) is a pitfall that Charnock astutely avoided (he also sang and manipulated props).

His choice to perform an ongoing dialogue with his own body, technique or the wider world of dance, to comment on what he was doing whilst doing it, also encouraged me to watch his dancing with a much more analytical eye than when he simply danced. His commentary encouraged me to watch his technique and his generative processes very closely, as he followed a pattern of making verbal content by moving silently, then noticing something particular about his moving and then commenting on it. I was made aware of how Charnock was experiencing his embodied subjectivity, his idiosyncratic *Lebenswelt*, because he verbally foregrounded the emergence and significance of particular movements or gestures. In discussing what he was doing, in engaging his audience in a process of analysis, he also encouraged a slightly distanced viewing mode, the antithesis, in fact of the more 'embodied eye' of the interactive sections (Garner, 1994: 4). His use of improvised text both drew attention to his somatic involvement in what he was doing and simultaneously prevented me from having a more immersive or embodied experience of that very same somatic life. When he simply danced, however, the self-aware irony that permeated his verbal commentary was dropped in favour of an equally self-aware command of his own virtuosity, a delight in his own corporeal capacity that in my research has been filtered into the expression and particular phraseology of the 'I can' of strategy 3.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> As a side-note, this slightly distanced viewing mode encouraged by the use of self-reflexive commentary is mirrored in Rainer's *Some Thoughts on Improvisation*. Here the conjoining of text and movement also seems to function to encourage a viewing mode that is quite analytical as the audience was listening to one set of ideas about a process of making improvisational work at the same time that it witnessed a different process unfold. One of the themes in the text, for instance, is the difference between solo, pair and group improvisations, whilst what was presented at Judson Dance Theatre's Concert #14 was a solo. In addition, some of the text describes part of the surroundings of the original art gallery and some of the people in it. Unlike the other examples of text and movement juxtaposition which I introduce later, this (pre-determined) spoken text does not emerge from or reflexively comment on the immediacy of the improvisation currently being performed, but references an earlier improvisation whilst simultaneously pointing to general methodological approaches. Presumably the spectators grappled with both coherence and disjuncture between what they saw and what the words said, a viewing mode that itself complicated (and perhaps enhanced or refined) the relationship between the enacted movement and the spoken words.

## 2.7 Moving beyond Vision

Turning now to two practitioners who loosely attend to vision as part of a broader attentiveness to the senses, but whose primary aesthetic and philosophical concerns enable me to extend the terms of my discussion beyond the specificity of vision as a compositional tool to more general questions of compositional structuring, I discuss drama-based practitioner Chris Johnston and musician Stephen Nachmanovitch.

Johnston has developed an approach to dramatic improvised performance which is deliberately ‘some distance from comedy impro’ (Fluxx, n.d.) in its emphasis on structure, or ‘the search for form’ (Johnston, 2006: 101) and an interest in how to ‘make a journey’ (Johnston, 2006: 93) for both improviser and audience. Johnston notes that the solo improviser needs to be attentive to the ‘auditory, visual or kinaesthetic stimuli that are present’ (Johnston, 2006: 227) as a way of seeding material, although he doesn’t offer strategic in-roads to, or detailed, concrete examples of, these initial generative processes. His primary interest is in the improviser’s ability to use whatever has been noted - something that ‘triggers the imagination and in turn creates emotional engagement’ (Johnston, 2006: 110) - as a way of beginning to build an imaginative world.<sup>77</sup> This particular focus enables me to locate aspects of my own work within a relevant, compositionally-oriented, frame.

In my strategy 4 - *inhabiting an imaginative landscape* - an imaginative terrain might begin as the suggestion of a place or a scenario that itself emerges from an architectural detail or an object in the space. Alternatively, a particular somatic sensation might be the starting-point for an emergent character. If I then adopt the point of view of this emerging character, or use a third-person perspective to begin to describe an event, I begin to enter into the logic of this alternative, imaginative landscape. Strategy 4 practises a receptivity to, and immersion in, imaginative ideas - on p.149 I further characterise this as being ‘chiasmically’ taken by an imaginative idea - but, crucially, this absorption is qualified by the structuring

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<sup>77</sup> Johnston lists ‘Storytelling, Commentary (enacting an image or scene while commenting on it), Inhabited Scene (speaking as the character within the scene), Movement, Abstract Sound and Dialogue with the Audience’ as possible modes for the solo improviser (Johnston, 2006: 124). ‘Inhabiting’ a scene both verbally and corporeally, as well as dialoguing with the audience are both characteristic of my practice. I have not developed ‘commentary’ or abstract sound, preferring instead to orient myself around movement and storytelling.

sensibility of strategy 5 - *using internal editing* - which functions to simultaneously shape that idea for the seeing eyes of the audience.

Framing improvisational material in terms of a unification of imaginative ideas with a structuring impulse is given further clarity by Johnston's writings on how the dramatic improviser can give 'shape and definition' (Johnston, 2006: 100) to imaginative inclinations. Johnston colours the imagination as an independent entity - it is 'the devil' (Johnston, 2006: 10) - which is a useful reminder that the specifics of imaginative content can be deemed to exist beyond the improviser's conscious control (a point I discuss further on p.154). He also writes of the narrative journey, however, of the search for form and the paramount importance of 'narrative tension and narrative development' in the dramatic improviser's work (Johnston, 2006: 117). Thus the devilish imagination is 'likely to go its own devilish ways. As dreams do' (Johnston, 2006: 10) but, simultaneously, the audience 'needs and expects development' (Johnston, 2006: 119); they want a 'journey' that is given 'shape and definition' (Johnston, 2006: 100). Johnston's advice is to 'let the imagination do its worst. Open the Entrance Stone and trust that something will emerge' (Johnston, 2006: 10). In trusting one's imagination, however, in 'shaking hands with the devil then inviting him to sit down and tell his story' (Johnston, 2006: 10), the feelings and sensations that emerge within the performance must also be articulated in such a way as to craft a shape or a journey that 'does the business of 'making sense' of them for an audience' (Johnston, 2006: 101).

At this point it also useful to draw on Johnston's own citation of the well-known strategy of 'Reincorporation', developed initially by Keith Johnstone, for further clarification of how a 'devilish' imagination might meet a structuring impulse. Johnston regards this technique as a 'possible, perhaps essential' device for the dramatic improviser (Johnston, 2006: 100). The technique demands that the improviser maintain an overall sense of form, a sense of the emergent shape of the work, so that he can elect to return to material and 'reincorporate' it if it feels appropriate or interesting, and it is a device I use quite often:

The improviser has to be like a man walking backwards. He sees where he has been, but he pays no attention to the future. His story can take him anywhere, but he must still 'balance' it, and give it shape, by remembering incidents that have been shelved and reincorporating them.

(Johnstone, 1981: 116)

Not necessarily looking for linear development, Johnstone's improviser is nonetheless making choices that enable his stories to take form, with the randomness of being able to go 'anywhere' balanced by the sense of shape that the simple compositional decision to reincorporate a word, phrase or character can bring. When I use this structuring technique I note that in returning to material it may be imbued (or I may choose to imbue it) with different emotional textures. Returning to movements, single words, sentences or characters that emerged earlier enables the improviser to find additional resonances or extra perspectives on and within the material, particularly in the course of a longer-form piece. For Johnston, reincorporation helps mitigate against the 'randomness' that might occur if the improviser doesn't maintain an overall sense of dramatic form (Johnston, 2006: 100); for me it is part of the compositional sensibility that enquires into how things might go together and seeks the additional textures or cohesiveness that reincorporating material can bring. This contextualisation of Strategy 4 will be deepened in chapter four in relation to some other aspects of Keith Johnstone's attitudes towards the imagination.

Like Johnston, Stephen Nachmanovitch nods towards the significance of attending broadly to information from the senses as an initial generative approach. He turns to the immediacy of where he is, to a 'direct encounter with what is in front of our noses' as his creative starting point (Nachmanovitch, 2006). It is his instrument, fellow musicians, the room in which he is playing and the audience that serve as the concrete and tangible points from which the music arises and through which he hopes to eventually make explicit the 'pattern, relationship, context, interconnectedness' that philosophically subtends his work (Nachmanovitch, 2007a). In this sense his pieces (solo and group) are un-scored or 'totally improvised' in the same way that mine are - he wants his music to 'arise from the present mind and the present moment' (Nachmanovitch, 2005) and to start 'without having made any prior agreements' (Nachmanovitch, 2006). I want to focus on a key difference in intent, however, as a way of clearly demarcating the artistic ambition, if you like, of my own research, and in order to continue to build understanding of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical model. I will do this by noting the linguistic and ontological parallels between Nachmanovitch's work and the ontological thrust of Merleau-Ponty's painter.

For Nachmanovitch, the ultimate goal is to use his improvised music to reach a state where 'the violin and the bow and the electronics and the room are all contiguous with our skin and with our nervous system' (Nachmanovitch, 2007). His aim is that 'performers, audience, instrument, the room, the night, outside, space become one being, pulsing' (Nachmanovitch,

1990: 101). There is in this aim a deep spiritual and philosophical commitment to ‘the interconnectedness of the big system’ (Nachmanovitch, 1990: 186), poetically captured in the Hindu image of Indra’s net, an interconnected latticework of reflective jewels ‘that goes on forever and where each jewel reflects all of the others’ (Nachmanovitch, 2007a). Philosophically and artistically, Nachmanovitch desires to reach a state of profound interconnectedness between himself and the world; a self-surpassing transcendence in which ‘the wholeness of the psyche’ reflects the ‘the wholeness of the world’ (Nachmanovitch, 1990: 187). He thus shares Merleau-Ponty’s commitment to an indissoluble continuum of individual and world, a continuum which is held to be ‘our reality’ (Nachmanovitch, 2007a), and he also characterises the artist as the individual who is able to both capture and express this ‘reality’ in moments of creative inspiration (although the ‘artist’ is limited in Merleau-Ponty’s case to the painter).

Here I note that the channelling of experience that characterises Merleau-Ponty’s painter’s work described earlier, in which ‘something moved, caught fire, and engulfed his body’, reaches a stage in which ‘it becomes impossible to say that nature ends here and that man or expression starts here’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 188). Boundaries between the painter and his surroundings break down as he experiences a kind of blending with the world about him. For Nachmanovitch, an analogous merged state is ‘the territory that we arrive at’ through improvisational explorations (Nachmanovitch, 2006). By contrast, in my case, the pragmatics of using my vision to make explicit a compositionally-oriented relationality with my environment is not propelled by this kind of desire for a felt sense of unification. Although I deliberately work in relation to my environment, I do not extend this sense of relationality to the deeper sense of belonging, what after both Nachmanovitch and Merleau-Ponty, is regarded as being ‘*in the being*’ and ‘*of it*’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 248, original italics). For me the presence of the (small) audiences throughout the research - the awareness of being seen - also mitigates against this kind of fully immersive and transcendent experience. My awareness of being looked at has been ingrained into my embodied understanding - my experienced *Lebenswelt* - of this practice, so that in tandem with my own purposeful use of vision there is a cultivated self-consciousness and self-awareness that grounds and enforces my own presence to myself in the space (I discuss this in more detail on pp.101-104).

Compositions emerge and take shape for Nachmanovitch primarily through the improvisers’ ability to listen to one another (or in the case of the solo musician to listen to himself).

Listening is the ‘alpha and omega of improvisational music’ (Nachmanovitch, 2005) and in tandem with a developed ability to respond to what is heard, enables the improviser to ‘perform innumerable infinitely complex computations in real time on what we’re hearing’ (Nachmanovitch, 2007a). The pieces are edited, then, refined and shaped, in a continual exchange of listening and responding.<sup>78</sup> Through these ‘infinitely complex’ micro adjustments, what is revealed - compositionally and ontologically - are the ‘connectedness’ and ‘wholeness’ of the piece itself and the piece’s relationship ‘with things out there in the world’ (Nachmanovitch, 2000). The sense of pattern that emerges, in other words, points to an internal logic and consistency in the musical piece that has a corollary in the wider patterning and interconnectedness of the world. “‘What is the deep structure of theme, pattern, or emotion from which all of this arises?’” Nachmanovitch asks (Nachmanovitch, 1990: 104). What is the macro-pattern to which the micro-pattern of the music relates and out of which it emerges?

Related to this building and shaping of an improvisational cosmology in which the patterning within the musical piece functions as a reflection of a wider, universal patterning, Nachmanovitch’s philosophy of improvisation also gives credence to the generative sense that playing music is like ‘following, or taking dictation’ (Nachmanovitch, 1990: 4). Rather than “‘doing something’” there can be a sense of relinquishing control and enabling or allowing something greater than oneself to emerge (Nachmanovitch, 1990: 4).<sup>79</sup> In deciding to ‘play as if the bow itself were making the music’ and ‘simply to stay out of its way’ (Nachmanovitch, 1990: 140), Nachmanovitch opens up a theory of improvisation in which his job is not to impose his will on the instrument - to construct or compose by deliberately manipulating or ‘doing something’ - but to operate as a kind of pathway for a larger creative impulse. Here the linguistic and ontological parallels with Merleau-Ponty are striking. In the sense that the musician functions as a kind of pathway or channel for a wider creative force, he parallels the painter in whom ‘something moved’ and ‘caught fire’. Just as the painter responds to this force that has ‘engulfed his body’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 188), the musician follows or takes dictation from this ‘creative impulse’ that threads through him.

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<sup>78</sup> Nachmanovitch describes some of the elements of artistic editing as ‘(1) deep feeling for the intentions beneath the surface; (2) sensual love of the language; (3) sense of elegance; and (4) ruthlessness’ (Nachmanovitch, 1990: 109).

<sup>79</sup> Nachmanovitch also frames this understanding in relation to Michelangelo’s theory of sculpture, which holds that 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, 1990: 4).

The source of Nachmanovitch's music is also located as 'straight from the preconscious depths beneath and beyond me' (Nachmanovitch, 1990: 141), a place that finds its equivalence in the 'immemorial depths of the visible' that surround the painter (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 188).

There are no parallels in my template of strategies for a phenomenal sense of being 'engulfed' - the exchange is less fevered than it is for Merleau-Ponty's painter - or for 'taking dictation' from a creative or ontological force into which I am subsumed. In being receptive to ideas that might 'pass into' me as a result of where and how I direct my vision, however, and in acknowledging the inclinations that exist beyond my conscious determination - the corporeal impulses of strategy 3's 'I can' or the imaginative fancies of strategy 4 - there is scope for relinquishing conscious control of the emergence of material. The intimacy with the environment which has been practised in the research is thus not representative of Nachmanovitch's ontological togetherness - I do not claim Indra's net as 'our safety net from those trepidations we have as improvisers' (Nachmanovitch, 2007a) - but it is illustrative of a general methodology of working with the immediate surroundings, making visual connections that in turn make explicit a pragmatic interrelatedness.

## **2.8 Further understandings of composition and amalgams of movement and words**

The five practitioners introduced so far enable me to spotlight how I utilise vision as a core compositional tool, but they also do so in relation to a wider web of aesthetic concerns in this research - understandings of improvisation as composition, different philosophical and aesthetic stances taken towards audiences and the use of movement and words as stylistic modes of performance. The next two practitioners - Julyen Hamilton and Peter Trotman - are included here because they enable me to further deepen the discussion on improvisation as composition and the use of movement and words in my own research.

Julyen Hamilton does not share this doctorate's concern with the role of vision at the centre of an embodied understanding of solo performance improvisation, but he is concerned with improvisation as 'a response to the compositional issue' (Benoit, 1997: 199) and as a form of 'composing instantly' (Stark Smith, 2011: 31). Concerned with 'how things are made' and 'how they might go together' (Hamilton, n.d.), Hamilton's rigorous exploration of improvisation as a performance form, particularly his interest in discovering and developing individual movement expression, can be traced back to his training at the Place in London in

the 1970s, a period of radical experimentation in dance practices in the UK.<sup>80</sup> He expressly links his interest in composition with a discourse of making 'pieces' of improvised work (Holzer, 2010), a compositional outlook that foregrounds a discriminatory or editing sensibility. Articulating this aspect of Hamilton's work enables me to further explicate my own attitude towards practising improvisation as composition - as concerned with both the generation and shaping of material - and my own interest in describing or defining the resultant work as 'pieces' of performance (as I did on p.11 when defining composition).

For Hamilton, the improviser must stay focussed on 'the piece at hand' (Stark Smith, 2011: 32) and he does so by developing a fine, discriminatory sense. Improvisation 'is not just an experiment' he says (Benoit, 1997: 199); to compose 'is to put the elements you wish in the configuration you sense is right and to take responsibility for that' (Benoit, 1997: 199). Improvisation as composition involves a commitment to what one is doing, a taking responsibility 'without any apology' for the improvisation that is unfolding (Benoit, 1997: 200). It is interesting that composition is tied in with responsibility in this way, a conjoining that for me points to a cultivated ethos of deliberateness and care and, further, to a very finely-tuned discriminatory sense that seems to be propelled in part by quite an essentialist outlook. Hamilton's discourse reveals a belief in 'the' piece, if you like; the piece that has to be made at any given moment, the 'one thing' that is 'more important than all the other possibilities' (Hamilton, 1994). Whereas I treat the piece that emerges as a result of the implementation of my strategies as one of several equally viable outcomes - in part because I am aware of choosing between various options at certain stages and the discarded options, or those not followed through, can at times remain quite vivid as unrealised material - Hamilton tries to 'fulfill (sic) the piece that has to be made', indeed the product 'already has a shape but it hasn't taken form yet' (Stark Smith, 2011: 33).

Following this logic, Hamilton muses that choreography might be 'the movements you take to keep in vision of it - to keep it in your sight and to keep you in its sight' (Stark Smith, 2011: 33) and all the improviser's actions 'are manifesting because of wanting to keep on

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<sup>80</sup> The various shifts that occurred in London in the 1970s are contextualised by the term 'New Dance'. Performer, director and academic Emily Claid describes how the questioning of prevalent dance conventions, institutions and hierarchical systems in that period created a 'cluster of discourses' 'that served as a 'framing device for dance artists' liberation' (Claid, 2006: 79). Rather than existing as a particular technique or style of dance then, New Dance came to signal the liberation from 'fixed forms and structures' that was key to the development of alternative ideologies of performance. Part of this liberation involved attending to 'anatomical and muscular workings' of the body and turning 'outwards to the intelligence of improvisation' (Claid, 2006: 86).

track with the piece' (Stark Smith, 2011: 34). Hamilton notes that his pieces will have 'a certain line that is growing and developing' and his role is to 'do all I can to serve that line' (Stark Smith, 2011: 32). This 'line' does not seem to function in any limiting way - he is not constricted to any one performance mode, for instance, frequently juxtaposing movement and text.<sup>81</sup> Nor does the 'line' restrict the aspect of the material to which he might attend; he points out that he tries to keep himself 'on the physiological, on the visual, on the musical, on the situational' (Hamilton, 1994). What the 'line' does seem to supply and represent is a way of orienting himself to what he feels needs to be expressed in the immediacy of each moment. This might be a 'tone' or a 'particular atmosphere' (Stark Smith, 2011: 33). It is, he says somewhat obliquely, what is 'in my sensation' (Stark Smith, 2011: 33), so the choices he makes have to fit in with that overall 'sensation'. Indeed, he states that he has 'trained' himself 'to sense a movement that is not in a piece before it actually becomes a movement, or a word or an action' (Stark Smith, 2011: 32). This structuring sensibility, this intent to follow a very specific line, therefore involves the ability to make deliberate editorial decisions; an awareness that one can follow through or discard options that is paralleled in my strategy 5, *using internal editing*, but which in Hamilton's case is grounded in a much more pronounced appraisal of what has to happen at any given moment. What we do share is a commitment to the activity of choice-making - a discussion I continue on p.162 - and an interest in making choices that are coherent within the self-contained logic of, in Hamilton's case, *the piece* (author's italics) and in my case, *a piece* (author's italics) of emergent improvisational performance.

Peter Trotman, whose solo pieces are characterised by a lavish vocabulary, an interest in the 'complexity and richness in language' (Ellis, 2009: 7) and a desire to 'make language in performance as interesting as it would be in a book' (Ellis, 2009: 7), does not utilise vision as a core compositional tool but his aesthetic parallels mine in its play across a spectrum of both movement and words and one of my own techniques for word production - very fast talking - has its provenance in Trotman's classes. In my discussion of Trotman's work, I outline how this technique's emphasis has shifted in my own research to be grounded in

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<sup>81</sup> For Hamilton, text and movement 'live together, they always did' (Holzer, 2010). In keeping with the structuring sensibility I am outlining, Hamilton reveals an interest in the different ways in which the two modes can be combined, although he doesn't 'have any big strategies' for combining them (Holzer, 2010). He notes that the 'phrase of body might be resolved with two words of text. Or the beginning of a line of text might be finished as a phrase with a movement' (Holzer, 2010) and he makes ongoing decisions about 'how much they are exposed' at any given moment (Holzer, 2010).

vision and I also note the points of convergence between Trotman's delight in entering and embellishing imaginative worlds, and my strategy 4, *inhabiting an imaginative landscape*.

In my general approach to performance improvisation, moving and talking have equal status as expressive vocabularies. I conceptualise them as separate but interwoven activities in the process of composing pieces and utilise them as ways of embodying, exploring and expressing different points of view on the emerging material. At times, as when *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience*, I will often interleave moving and talking in such a way that talking will be foregrounded whilst moving is backgrounded (the moving here might be primarily gestural). Whilst *inhabiting an imaginative landscape*, I might work with silently moving, talking whilst moving so that there is parity between them, or primarily talking whilst maintaining a background awareness of posture and gesture. Much like the strategies themselves, the interplay between talking and moving functions as a constantly shifting kaleidoscope that illuminates and shapes the material in different configurations.

There are two different compositional techniques that I apply to words. The first is building associatively as a way of enabling the verbal material to develop ongoing narrative shape or find additional layers of meaning or suggestion. Once material is already 'in' the space, once it has been spoken, it is by pursuing any associative details that further verbal material can evolve. These might be the pictorial details of a fictional landscape, the narrative details of story or expressions of a character's inner landscape of psychology or emotion. The improviser creates a kind of verbal tapestry by relating each new verbal component either narratively, emotionally or pictorially to what has already been stated. By both inhabiting the material and arranging the next set of verbal offerings in relation to what has already been established, verbal associations accrue.

An alternative way of generating words is increasing speed, which itself is frequently aligned with looking directly at the audience and speaking to them. Increasing speed allows for the emergence of quite random thoughts, which are instantly verbalised (rather than subjected to the internal editing of strategy 5). It functions as a way of allowing verbal material to emerge but without shaping or editing any part of it. It is, if you like, a more careless approach to language, and in my case I use it in order to create a sense of momentum out of which a fraught or fervent character or a useful idea might emerge. Maintaining regular eye contact with the audience helps to increase the energy of the verbal

output and the speed of acceleration, with the result that there may also be increases in volume, repetition of words or parts of phrases, a more demonstrative gestural language or useful slips of the tongue. I first experimented with ‘very fast talking’ in Trotman’s classes, as it was often a part of the ‘Metronome’ exercise described below. It was about practising relinquishing control and ‘prising yourself away from becoming too attached to any content that arises’ (Trotman, 1998), but at that stage it wasn’t tied to vision in any pragmatic way. Additionally, although not being concerned with verbal coherence or the need to develop content was certainly liberating in class, in the context of this doctorate, fast talking has been practised with compositional intent. Either a character emerges as result of loosening verbal control or a particular phrase or slip of the tongue then becomes fresh content, able to be further investigated and shaped.<sup>82</sup>

‘Metronome’, takes the basic form of uttering one word at a time, and accompanying that word with a movement. Permutations of the exercise are endless. Versions might involve saying three or four words whilst standing on the spot and then doing a movement, or keeping movements and words functioning simultaneously but then expanding the fourth word into a phrase or sentence.<sup>83</sup> Another version of ‘Metronome’ was bounded by the alphabet - each word needed to start with the next letter of the alphabet.<sup>84</sup> Another specified that a different part of the body should be articulated with each word.<sup>85</sup> ‘Metronome’ encompassed variations in the use of space (so that the movement would range from the stationary or gestural to steps and travels across the space designed to use as much of it as possible) and variations in speed, from ‘languid’ to ‘very fast’.<sup>86</sup> At its core, ‘Metronome’ challenges the improviser’s ability to generate and embody both language and movement; to be able to gear oneself to engage ‘the part of the mind that is the writer’ (Ellis, 2009: 7) at

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<sup>82</sup> Trotman’s classes also investigated the generation of words by exploring phonetic associations. A basic exercise was to begin with a sentence (provided by Trotman) and try to find other words by continually repeating and morphing the sounds. One also kept returning to the original sentence as a kind of anchor [author’s notes, 9/2/03 and 15/12/03].

<sup>83</sup> Commenting on this exercise, I made a note to myself that I should ‘give the movement as much weight as the words’ [author’s notes 3/5/04].

<sup>84</sup> [author’s notes, 9/2/04].

<sup>85</sup> [author’s notes, 1/3/04].

<sup>86</sup> The terms ‘languid’ and ‘very fast’ appear throughout my class notes in 2003 and 2004, indicating Trotman’s interest in cultivating different qualities or speeds of delivery as well as generating and freeing physical and textual vocabulary.

the same time as one engages the body. But the very fact of needing to move and speak as one enterprise, even given the variations in the ratio of words to movements which allow for pauses in either moving or speaking, makes the experience of generating language deeply physical. For Trotman, the exercise illustrates his understanding that language and movement are 'of the same cloth' (Trotman, 1998). The act of speaking is physiologically a corporeal experience and 'Metronome' makes this embodiment of voice a focal point of investigation.

Thus although Trotman is the most language-focussed of all the practitioners referenced in this doctorate - fascinated by how it may be possible to 'make language in performance as interesting as it would be in a book' (Ellis, 2009: 7) - it is clear from studying with him that he attends to the kinaesthetic sense and to the relationship between how the body feels in motion and an emergent imaginative idea. He then draws on a broad and colourful vocabulary to create and embellish imaginative worlds, stories that he narrates for his audience from both a first and third person perspective. In my research, I have extended this interest in the correlation between somatic impulse or kinaesthetic sensing and the emergence of an imaginative terrain into danced material. In addition, my investigation acknowledges that it is my embedded corporeal habits and trained vocabularies that frequently reappear and which serve as the seedbed or wellspring of potentially interesting or fresh imaginative notions.

## **2.9 Summary**

In investigating the role of vision in understanding solo performance improvisation as a form of composition, relationality and responsiveness to the immediate space and situation of performance are embedded into my practice as core operational principles. These interests are linguistically and methodologically shared by Nelson in both her solo and ensemble training/performance contexts and enable me to progress my argument that attending to the details of what one looks at can function as an efficacious spur to compositional responsiveness. Shifting to a different set of significances around the use of vision, Rainer allows herself the rare privilege of looking at the audience but confines this look to connotations of vulnerability, whereas in my practice I have practised shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience in order to compose material from and with the visual line of energy and/or the kinaesthetic effects of being watched. More closely aligned to the approach in this research, Charnock clearly generated energy for himself

through a dynamic visual (and physical) interactiveness with his audience, but increased the intensity and reverberations of my strategy 2 - *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* - by insisting that the audience scrutinise and take pleasure in his corporeality. Moving away from these references to vision as either a generative tool or a means of acknowledging the audience, Johnston and Nachmanovitch include attending to information from the visual sense as part of a broader attentiveness to the senses, but I discuss them in order to shift my discussion from the specificity of vision as a core compositional tool in my work to some of the work's broader nuances. Johnston's discourse is primarily concerned with the role of the imagination and the search for form and enables me to foreground both how and why certain compositional decisions are made once an idea has been seeded. Nachmanovitch's improvisational paradigm is rooted in a spiritual commitment to the interconnectedness of the artist and his world, which although not linked in his own discourse to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, enables me to spotlight the edges, if you like, of my own adaptation of Merleau-Ponty's painter's creative expression. Deepening the discussion on improvisation as a form of composition, Hamilton articulates an aesthetics of making 'pieces' by following a very particular 'line', illuminating a structuring and editing sensibility that I shall also return to when discussing strategy 5. In terms of the use of movement and words as stylistic signatures of my own work, Peter Trotman's amalgam of the two enables me to acknowledge the provenance of particular trends in my own use of these modes. I have also developed his interest in the correlation between kinaesthetic sensing and imaginative word play into an investigative process that acknowledges and builds on correspondences between the emergent material of the body's 'I can' and the seeding of an imaginative idea (this is discussed further on pp.139-141).

I turn next to an in-depth examination of the phenomenological ideas that have permeated this practice and offer further discussion of the way in which the practice/theory encroachments have led to a re-framing and re-envisaging of those ideas.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CHIASMIC CONNECTIONS

#### *Composing the Exchange of Theory and Practice*

This chapter discusses in detail five of Merleau-Ponty's key phenomenological ideas: (1) the entwining of a 'questioning' vision and movement, (2) the chiasm, (3) the visible, (4) the 'invisible' and (5) the 'I can'. It articulates how these ideas have been re-framed through the investigations of this research and places my own (pragmatic) treatment of the ideas in the context of other treatments and articulations. The major Merleau-Pontian texts in which the original philosophical ideas appear, and to which I give close attention, are his essay on painting, *Eye and Mind* (1964a) and the text *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), his last published (though incomplete) work. I also refer to *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), *Signs* (1964b), *Sense and Nonsense* (1964c) and *Primacy of Perception* (1964d) where they provide instances of the same thinking that is more comprehensively outlined in his last works.

#### **3.1 The significance of the entwining of a 'questioning' vision with movement**

*'This precession of what is upon what one sees and makes seen, of what one sees and makes seen upon what is – this is vision itself' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 188).*

As we have seen, within the context of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, particularly as outlined in his essay *Eye and Mind*, vision - and through vision the movement of the body - is of central importance. What Merleau-Ponty calls the 'working actual body' is 'an intertwining of vision and movement' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 162). Movement is 'the natural consequence and maturation of my vision' and 'vision is attached to movement' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 162). This embodied vision is important because it reinforces the phenomenological position that movement 'is not a decision made by the mind' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 162); indeed in the case of the painter Merleau-Ponty 'cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 162, original italics). This extension of the body into the surrounding world through the act of looking opens the individual onto his

environment, and for the painter is the means by which he is then able to creatively express his interrelationship with those surroundings.

The nature of the individual's vision is important if he is to be able to open himself to his surroundings in such a way that the 'things' of the world might reveal themselves; hence the 'questioning' vision introduced earlier. The 'see-er' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 162) is more open to the world if he adopts an 'exploratory gaze' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 315). The eyes 'have the gift of the visible' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 165) and 'a certain power of making contact with things' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 279) when imbued with a questioning intent. For the painter, it is a 'voracious vision' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 166) that facilitates his compositional connection with the world and instances his status as a kind of channel or medium, a poetic turn of phrase that suggests an unremitting curiosity or eagerness to open himself to the world about him.

I want to explain further here what it is that the painter is asking via his embodied vision, as this marks an important point of divergence from my own adoption of a 'questioning' intent in the development of *seeing and responding to the performance space, shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience and inhabiting an imaginative landscape*. Merleau-Ponty posits that the painter's gaze asks the components of the mountain 'what they do to suddenly cause something to be and to be *this* thing...' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 166, original italics). In other words, he visually explores the means by which an object like a mountain makes itself visible as a mountain. In 'interrogating' the mountain with his gaze, he identifies that light, shadows, reflections, depth and colour are all components of the mountain's existence, components that he then himself uses to compose his response (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 166). In this way, the painter literally expresses, in the form of his painting, the qualities that he has seen in the mountain.

There is a further significance built into this process, however, as the painter is enabled to capture 'light, color (sic), depth' because they 'awaken an echo' in his body (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 164). The painter's intent is thus to use his vision to discover the quiddities of the things around him, but he is able to capture and channel them onto canvas because 'the body welcomes them' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 164), because there are foundational equivalences between himself and what he sees. These things 'have an internal equivalent' in him (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 164). I shall pick up on this again later in this chapter but for now note that by contrast I use the dynamic of an externally-directed vision, imbued with a

‘questioning’ attitude, as a means of embedding relationality and responsiveness as generic operational principles. Certainly in working with the environment I am compositionally responsive to what my vision reveals but, unlike the painter, the creative process is not motivated by an interest in the qualities of the things around me *per se* (and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider either my or their ontological status) but rather in the generative potential of the relationship with what or who I see.

### **3.2 Tactility**

It is important to note that Merleau-Ponty’s prioritising of vision and movement as expressive of an interrelationship between the individual and his surroundings allows for tactility, but gives scant attention to the other senses. Tactility is entwined with movement since ‘the same body sees and touches’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 134). Objects in the environment present themselves to the ‘gaze/touch’ and arouse ‘a certain motor intention’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 317). This is in keeping with the overall philosophical concern of interrelatedness. Vision and touch are ‘a certain way of linking up with the phenomena and communicating with it’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 317). We are also told as part of the explanation of the chiasm, that we ‘must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible’ and ‘visible and tangible belong to the same world’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 134), reinforcing the entwinement of vision and movement through touch. In chapter four, I outline how my own vision/movement responsiveness also at times extends to touch and to a more literal ‘encroachment’ between my body and the environment. These tactile explorations are also more widely contextualised by reference to the practice of Contact Improvisation, in which one’s relationship with one’s partner is grounded in an ongoing tactile awareness.

Whilst inclusive of touch, Merleau-Ponty’s reliance on the entwinement of vision and movement as his central paradigm of the body is the source of the trenchant criticism that Maxine Sheets-Johnstone levels at him, because it puts ‘all of the burden of an understanding of movement on sight’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 289). Her point is his ‘trivialising of kinaesthesia’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 288) leading her to wonder why he stays ‘strictly with what his eyes see, with his sense of vision alone’ rather than consulting ‘living bodies in motion’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 288-9). Although there is a reference to kinaesthesia as part of a definition of ‘The Invisible’ in *The Visible and the Invisible* - the invisible is ‘what exists only as tactile or kinaesthetically, etc’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 257) -

I agree that Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on kinaesthesia remain rudimentary and unfinished. Even the passing comment above leaves the reader with little to go on other than the point that kinaesthetic sensation is invisible to an outside observer.

Although in a sense my own research shares Merleau-Ponty's bias towards prioritising vision in compositional endeavours, I also address Sheets-Johnstone's request that those of us who digest Merleau-Ponty's ideas 'reflect attentively on our own experiences of our relationship to the world in order to judge whether they coincide with what Merleau-Ponty places before our eyes' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 299). Thus whereas strategies 1, 2 and 4 - *seeing and responding to the performance space, shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience and inhabiting an imaginative landscape* - were all developed in relation to the 'me other exchange' of the chiasm (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 215), strategy 3 - *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* - arose as a result of the need for an alternative compositional avenue. Developing strategy 3 acknowledged that Merleau-Ponty's exclusive reliance on an externally-directed vision for creative output - captured in *The Visible and the Invisible* when he states that 'our world is principally and essentially visual; one would not make a world out of scents or sounds' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 83) - can be usefully and productively attenuated in order to supply a more nuanced paradigm of compositional action. Strategy 3 expressly concerns itself with choices that emerge when the improviser chooses to compose from attentiveness to the phenomenon of kinetic motion and kinaesthetic information, when she chooses to turn off, if you like, the externally-directed vision that is the province of Merleau-Ponty's painter. As mentioned earlier, there are also moments in *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* where I find I can attend to kinaesthesia within the wider seeing/seen paradigm, thereby enhancing Merleau-Ponty's rubric. This also smudges the sharp differentiation that Sheets-Johnstone draws between attending to kinaesthesia (and touch) as the 'bedrock of our experience of ourselves and of the world' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 297) and Merleau-Ponty's rival position in which vision is integral to movement expression.

### 3.3 The Chiasm

*'We are involved in the world and with others in an inextricable tangle'* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 454).

The complex idea of the chiasm begins with the 'enigma' that 'my body simultaneously sees and is seen' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 162). This is initially significant because it implies a degree of self-reflexive awareness. I can look at things around me, I can look at myself and I can be aware that I am looking at myself. The body, 'visible and sensitive for itself' in this way does not simply phenomenally experience things, it is aware that it sees itself (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 162). Merleau-Ponty frequently extends this dual perspective to the tactile sense through the example of the left and right hands touching each other. In the following example the development of a kind of doubling up of perception is explained:

When my right hand touches my left, I am aware of it as a "physical thing." But at the same moment, if I wish, an extraordinary event takes place: here is my left hand as well starting to perceive my right... Thus I touch myself touching; my body accomplishes "a sort of reflection." In it, through it, there is not just the unidirectional relationship of the one who perceives to what he perceives. The relationship is reversed, the touched hand becomes the touching hand, and I am obliged to say that the sense of touch here is diffused into the body – that the body is a "perceiving thing", a "subject-object".

(Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 166)<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes the same occurrence:

When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the role of 'touching' and being 'touched'.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 93)

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, this versioning of the left and right hands touching each other occurs in the working notes:

The flesh of my fingers = each of them is phenomenal finger and objective finger, outside and inside of the finger in reciprocity, in chiasm, activity and passivity coupled.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 261)

There is also an earlier reference to the 'reflection of the body upon itself' through the hands (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 9) and a later description of when 'one of my hands touches the other, the world of each opens upon that of the other because the operation is reversible at will...' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 141). Later in the working notes there is the neat summation – 'The touch = movement that touches and movement that is touched' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 256).

The model of the chiasm thus becomes a model of reciprocal perceiving/perceived which, having started with seeing/seen, extends through tactility to a conception of the whole body as 'subject-object', as both 'objective body and phenomenal body' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 136). The chiasm is further developed, and complicated, as a process that occurs between senses - 'not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible...' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 134) and ultimately, as it is put forward in the chapter called 'The intertwining - The Chiasm' in *The Visible and the Invisible*, it pertains to an individual's entire inhabitation of the world:

...the idea of chiasm, that is: every relation with being is simultaneously a taking and a being taken, the hold is held, it is inscribed and inscribed in the same being that it takes hold of.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 266)

These rippling layers of chiasmic 'me other exchange' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 215) are inherently dynamic and reflect an energised intentionality of engagement, a kind of reaching towards connectivity that I have practised as a useful pragmatic and attitudinal way of being. In its full philosophical and poetic force, however, the chiasm pushes the idea of an 'exchange' or 'overlap' beyond this kind of compositional pragmatism, into 'a blending of some sort' which blurs the boundaries between 'the seeing and the seen', between the 'touching and the touched' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 163). In *Eye and Mind*, for instance the (seeing) subject and the (seen) object eventually merge in such a way that 'it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 167). The painter, having opened himself to his surroundings through his vision and his body, blends or merges with those surroundings as he simultaneously becomes a conduit for expressing them. In the final manifestation of the creative act, 'it is impossible to say that nature ends here and that man or expression starts here' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 188). There is 'no break at all in this circuit' between the individual and his surroundings (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 188). This kind of total absorption and immersion in the environment (and that environment within the individual) far surpasses my own more pragmatic sense of 'borrowing' and 'taking' from the environment, and of allowing the things of the environment to 'pass' into my imaginative and corporeal constructs. Shortly I shall compare my usage with that of Kozel, for whom this sense of immersion (and also for her consequent sense of instability) is key. Firstly, however, I want

to briefly introduce another of Merleau-Ponty's complex and poetic constructs, that of the 'flesh', as it further contextualises the chiasmic exchange.

Flesh is a formidably difficult concept to define, as illustrated by Kozel's description of it as 'the ultimate understanding of space as a non-void flux of finitudes, as a syrupy substance that contains and composes all our movement and perceptions' (Kozel, 2007: 126). Merleau-Ponty's own descriptions of flesh as 'a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 139) and as a 'texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 146) are equally elusive. But whereas a single definition of flesh remains difficult to pinpoint, there is an aspect of it that is readily characterisable in relation to the chiasm. Having set up a series of encroachments within the individual body and between the body and the world, the nature of this encroachment is explained by the fact that 'my body is made of the same flesh as the world...and this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world reflects it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 248). Here then, the idea of flesh grounds the philosophical position that 'the world is made of the same stuff as the body' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 163). The proposition is that there is a kind of fundamental unity, a foundational state of 'sameness' if you like that body and world (and therefore other bodies) share.<sup>88</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to tease out the ontological implications of this notion of an 'antecedent unity' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 261) or indissoluble continuum of individual and world except to note that it grounds the kind of purposeful vision described earlier and accounts for vision's revelatory power. The kind of questioning, exploratory vision propounded by Merleau-Ponty is effective because it opens the individual to a world of which he is already a part, in which things 'have an internal equivalent' in him (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 164). The individual 'must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 134) if he is to 'see' (and in the case of the painter artistically

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<sup>88</sup> This is a formulation that raises problematic ontological questions and has been critiqued along the grounds of its seeming inability to account for difference and otherness. Susan Kozel points out that various commentators believe Merleau-Ponty 'adequately accounts for otherness' whilst others do not (Kozel, 2007: 319). She cites Luce Irigaray's reservations that the notion of reversibility, or chiasm, 'is the same as substitutability, causing the subject to be mapped outward like a rippling solipsism' (Kozel, 2007: 244). Kozel herself both 'delights' in Merleau-Ponty's consideration of the other and needs 'a more elaborated understanding of otherness' in order to 'push the limits of alterity' (Kozel, 2007: 245) but she argues that 'despite being called reversibility' the chiasm 'is not a synonym for substitutability or replaceability' (Kozel, 2007: 249).

respond to) it. In my practice, however, I did not need to address the question of such a radical homogeneity as a necessary precursor for the creative exchanges of *seeing and responding to the performance space, shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience and inhabiting an imaginative landscape*, nor were my exchanges propelled by a desire for unification as is the case in Nachmanovitch's work. Here there is a sharp distinction between opening myself to and operating with my environment through a relationality made explicit through my vision and Merleau-Ponty's (and the painter's) blended state of being 'engulfed' by it (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 188) or, as he also poetically frames it in his last work, 'possessed by it' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 134).

Taking a sideward glance at this complex notion of Flesh, however, I also want to note that Merleau-Ponty seems to me to allow for, indeed rely upon, distinctively situated individuals to articulate his overall phenomenology. Returning to his foundational notion of incarnate subjectivity or *Lebenswelt* as a marker, I read in his works an ontological system that lends itself to multiple perspectives but simultaneously outruns any one perspective (a point I pick up on again in relation to the visible and the 'invisible'). The 'world's flesh', 'the miraculous multiplication of perceptible being' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 16), is 'precisely that which can haunt more than one body' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 15) because different viewpoints open onto the 'flesh' of the world in different ways and, importantly, through different social and historical contexts. 'We are all hemmed in by history', Merleau-Ponty says in *Signs*, so 'it is up to us to understand that whatever truth we may have is to be gotten not in spite of but through our historical inherence' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 109), a point that I was also aware of when writing chapter two.<sup>89</sup> Despite the homogenous connotations of Flesh then, our situated perspectives are 'the source of our curiosity' and of our 'investigations' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 110), enabling us to give individuated, unique form to what we see and how we inhabit the world around us.

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<sup>89</sup> Our historical situatedness is also movingly captured in the essay *The War Has Taken Place*, written in June 1945 (Merleau-Ponty, 1964c). Merleau-Ponty laments the naivety of the pre-war years in which 'it seemed to us that at every moment each of us chose to be and to do what he wished with an ever-new freedom' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964c: 144). What the war revealed was that 'in co-existence, each of us is presented to others against a historical background which we did not choose; and our behavior (sic) toward others is dictated by our role as "Aryan", Jewish, French or German' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964c: 144).

### 3.4 Seeing/Seen – the audience

*‘To have a body is to be looked at...it is to be visible’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 189).*

It is important to reiterate that for Merleau-Ponty, the seeing/seen paradigm begins with the individual body seeing itself. The body perceives itself and is perceived by itself (as when the two hands touch). The realization that my body can therefore exist as both subject and object, and that these roles chiasmically blend into one another, then becomes the ground for understanding the world as the site of further encroachments. Although Merleau-Ponty does make brief mention of the role of another person’s look in some of his later writings on vision, he does not elaborate on the consequences of being watched. He notes towards the end of the *Visible and the Invisible*, for instance, that ‘to perceive a part of my body is also to perceive it as visible, i.e. for the other. And to be sure it assumes this character because in fact someone does look at it’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 244). Following on from this, he makes a rare reference to the somatic sensation of being watched when he comments that one ‘feels oneself looked at (burning neck)...because to feel one’s body is also to feel its aspect for the other’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 245). He leaves hanging the question of how one might respond to this (felt) knowledge that one is observed, that one is ‘visible’, but in this research I deliberately explore the implications for my own self-awareness and behaviour of the knowledge that I am seen. In developing the strategies, and placing ‘being seen’ at the heart of the methodological approach, my awareness of my ‘aspect for the other’ becomes a vital influence on the compositional character of the form.<sup>90</sup>

Whilst engaging in the process of investigating the possibilities of the current circumstances - generating and shaping the material of performance - I also attune myself to the fact of being watched, developing aesthetic responses to this felt and seen knowledge. Rather than existing in a tacit, unattended or unacknowledged vein, then, the presence of the audience (even an audience of one) creates an awareness of my role ‘for the other’ that infiltrates my demeanour on stage, my choice of where to look, my choice of performance modes and my

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<sup>90</sup> There is another interesting realization in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy that the body can also be seen by other ‘things’, that other things ‘look’ at it. In *Eye and Mind*, he gives credence to a feeling amongst painters ‘that things look at them’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 167) and in *The Visible and the Invisible* he states that ‘I feel myself looked at by the things’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 139). The mountain mentioned earlier in *Eye and Mind* ‘makes itself seen by the painter’ and subsequently ‘it is the mountain that he interrogates with his gaze’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 166). By contrast, I refrain from conceptualising the concrete things of the performer’s world - the architecture and objects - as possessing an animistic propensity to ‘look’ at the performer.

choice of material. In this model of improvisation, the audience is always held in awareness, creating a tension between the two (entwined) states of seeing and being seen - experiencing (living) the encounters in the performance space and simultaneously knowing that these encounters are witnessed. I thus re-frame the entwinement of 'objective' and 'phenomenal' body - when the two 'turn about one another or encroach upon one another' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 117) - so that it raises more complex compositional questions than the realization that in seeing myself I am also seen by myself (a realization that although interesting as a phenomenal construct was not particularly useful as a pragmatic tool in the space). In the context of this research, this re-framing means that I make ongoing decisions about how explicitly and how much to mould my material with or for the audience. Throughout the strategies, I hold this seeing/seen duality in my body and in my compositional choices, varying the degree to which I prioritise the body for myself and the body for the other.

On one level the presence of the audience is a simple enough definition of what makes improvised performance actual performance. We can take Peter Brook's famous statement that a man 'walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged' as a reminder of the vital role that the spectator plays in constituting something as 'an act of' live performance (Brook, 1968: 11). Chris Johnston cites a similar example:

If I get out of bed and walk to the shops and buy a packet of cigarettes, that's life.  
But if I first find someone and persuade them to stand on the corner of the street and watch me walk along it to buy cigarettes, that's theatre.

(Mark Long quoted in Johnston, 2006: 165)

More directly in my practice, the audience's presence and the re-framing of the phenomenal body/objective body encroachment offer a number of specific compositional routes and ways of operating within the seeing/seen dynamic. In strategy 1, *seeing and responding to the performance space* for example, the simple decision to move to a particular area of the space and to stand at a certain angle may be determined mostly by the improviser's interest in corporeally responding to a feature of the architecture but also in part by her awareness of the location of the audience, especially the viewing angle they have of her, so the seeing/seen dynamic here is weighted in favour of the 'phenomenal' body that is doing the seeing but also takes account of the 'objective' body that is being looked at. In strategy 2 - *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* - the interest lies in forming a complicity with the spectators, using the connection that is established through eye contact

to reinforce the intimacy of the situation and create a line of energy that may provoke material. It therefore also complicates the seeing/seen dynamic by foregrounding the spectator's own presence as visible, as able to be seen by the improviser.

On this point I note that Stanton Garner's examination of 'phenomenal space' - influenced by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodied subjectivity - treats the performer's own gaze as disruptive because it opens the field of performance to destabilising 'competing perceptual configurations' (Garner, 1994: 47). To the spectator, the performer represents a permanent possibility that he might himself be seen, becoming in the process a 'visual object in another individual's perceptual field' (Garner, 1994: 48). For Garner, the significance of the possibility of the 'reverse-gaze' lies in its reminder that the audience is caught up in theatre's 'unique game of orientation and positionality' and that in looking at the audience the performer asserts a subjectivity that 'reverses the assertion of spectatorial power' (Garner, 1994: 48). This exchange of looks 'exceeds the containing parameters of representational space' and challenges and undermines any sense of spectatorial detachment (Garner, 1994: 49). I agree with the connotations of these kinds of shifts and I am aware that in giving myself permission to look directly at the audience (and talk to them) I am foregrounding myself as the subject of my own looking. I am the object of the spectator's look that can itself look back and it may be that as a result of this direct look a spectator feels 'objective, suddenly and vulnerably embodied' (Garner, 1994: 48). The intent in strategy 2, however, is to use this reversal of 'power' in compositional ways by creating a sense of shared visual energy out of which material might emerge. The compositional interest thus lies in the energetic friction that emerges from the meeting point of simultaneous points of 'power'. Unlike Garner, for whom the 'phenomenal' performance sphere is structurally destabilised by this kind of reversal, *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* seeks to make the meeting point of looks a site of complicity and generative momentum. Strategy 4 - *inhabiting an imaginative landscape* - also allows for the seeing/seen dynamic to be further complicated by the emergence of character, so the audience may be spoken to, or interacted with, from within a fictional world that has been created. In this sense a character's awareness may join, or be layered onto, the performer's own awareness of seeing and being seen (indeed the performer's kinaesthetic response to being seen may spark the emergence of a character, a point I discuss in chapter four).

By contrast, concentrating on kinaesthetic responses and kinetic motion that is not sparked by visually engaging the audience is, in strategy 3 - *shifting vision away from a direct*

*involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* - a way of foregrounding the improviser's phenomenal body as 'lived' or experienced at one remove from the audience. In these moments, the audience is invited to share these explorations, to witness them, but is not directly involved in the emergence or ongoing development of the material. The improviser still holds the duality of seeing/seen in her awareness but does not make compositional choices (such as where to move in the space) that are explicitly in response to the audience's presence. It is, of course, arguable that this visual dissociation from the audience 'objectifies' the body in the sense that the improviser does not assert her subjectivity by looking directly at the audience. By avoiding eye contact the body might be regarded as open to scrutiny in ways that colour it as 'for the other'; indeed it is the 'I can' of the body that is on show, if you like, for the seeing eyes of spectators. I am aware of these possible reverberations, but the approach in strategy 3, as in the others, is consciously and strategically chosen, driven by a compositional imperative to improvise in a particular way. In these moments the improviser is aware that she will not meet, respond to or counter the audience's look and it is in this deliberateness that I primarily locate the body as acting for itself rather than 'for the other'.

Whilst researching then, I used the strategies to orient myself to the presence of the audience and to compositionally respond to them to varying degrees, maintaining a kind of hyper-fine awareness that I was seen, that I was being watched. In the ongoing choices of where on that spectrum of awareness I placed my moment-by-moment attention, I pragmatically re-framed the entwinement of the body as it acts for itself and the body as it acts for others, as they 'turn about one another or encroach upon one another' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 117).

### **3.5 Adapting the chiasm**

In her doctoral thesis and in *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology*, Kozel puts forward an extrapolation of the chiasm that allows for a 'disruption or displacement of our control over ourselves, others and the world' (Kozel, 2007: 201). She is interested in 'the moment of ambiguity, of disequilibrium' that she sees at the heart of the chiasmic exchange (Kozel, 2007: 249); the sense of a 'constant slippage of control' (Kozel, 2007: 202). Introducing the 'dancing-danced' or the 'moving-moved' as another versioning of the seeing/seen dynamic, (Kozel, 1994: 211 and 2007: 38), Kozel posits that the chiasm occurs 'between moving actively and letting ourselves be moved by things, or people, of the world' (Kozel, 2007: 38). It is 'about expanding the space between control and being controlled'

because dance is 'an active exploration of that region where the subjective control over the body is at its limit' (Kozel, 2007: 38). In a different reading, pertinent to her work with digitised representations of physical bodies, the chiasm becomes about the 'drawing of strangeness into the relation of the self with the self' (Kozel, 2007: 249). In her examination of how it feels to perform with motion capture technology, she talks of the performer's body as 'split, transformed, multiplied'; the figure she animates 'is me, because it is animated by my movement, but it is also other because it is separated from me by the thickness of the space between us and because it moves around and looks back at me' (Kozel, 2007: 239). This is a chiasmic relation because 'we are the same but we are different in space and in dynamic form.' The motion capture figure is 'always at the same time both my own body and another body' (Kozel, 2007: 239). This characterisation of the chiasm is also informed by Kozel's understanding of 'flesh' as a substance that dissolves the boundaries between self and others. Her experience of performing with layers of technology that operate 'across degrees of materiality' (Kozel, 2006: 125) finds an equivalent in the way that flesh exists across 'the many spaces of subjects, objects and the world' (Kozel, 2007: 126).

Garner also relies on what he sees as the 'epistemological/ontological paradox' animating Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of bodied subjectivity as a way of explicating Beckett's depiction of character as caught up in ambiguity and dispossession (Garner, 1994: 30). Emphasising the estrangement at the heart of embodied subjectivity, Garner's interest in the destabilising aspect of being a body that always escapes complete self-possession mirrors Kozel's work with the 'split' versions of herself and he argues that subjectivity is both the point from which the world arises into meaning and the site of an 'endlessly deferred moment of self-coincidence' (Garner, 1994: 32).

My own adaptation of the notion of chiasm for the solo improviser shares Kozel's dynamism but does not extend to the kind of overt interactions with versions of myself illuminated in her projects with digital bodies. Nor do I particularly embrace the 'fundamental lack of stability within our corporeal insertion in the world' (Kozel, 2007: 39) which is key to her understanding of chiasm and also key to the correspondences Garner finds between Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and the dispossessed characters of Beckett's plays. Although there are what one might think of as 'unstable' moments in performance improvisation - moments of vulnerability or insecurity that occur when one is in a nebulous zone between structural or compositional impulses - the way in which I inhabit my own version of the chiasmic exchange as a compositional principle - infused with the hyper fine-

awareness of being seen described earlier - functions to remind me, quite viscerally, of my own presence and to mitigate against the sense of a 'destabilization of identity' and 'a losing of oneself' which is central for both Kozel and Garner (Kozel, 2007: 39). Whether working relationally with my environment in *seeing and responding to the performance space*, *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* or *inhabiting an imaginative landscape*, or operating through an attentiveness to somatic impulses after *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* (which I don't frame as chiasmic), I have practised an ongoing awareness of the seeing eyes of the spectator which serves to ground and enforce my own presence to myself. There is in this way a cultivated, embodied self-consciousness infusing my inhabitation of the space. At its most heightened during strategy 2's direct involvement with the audience and its loosest during strategy 3's withdrawn vision, this self-consciousness permeates my lived experience of the practice, reinforcing the sense that my body is firmly present to itself as I make ongoing choices about the composition of material (the structuring sensibility of strategy 5's *using internal editing*, weaving throughout the others, is also grounded in this heightened state of embodied self-awareness).<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Academic and actor trainer Phillip Zarrilli introduces an interesting version of the chiasm within an actor training context in *Psychophysical Acting: An Intercultural Approach After Stanislavsky* (Zarrilli, 2009). He builds on Drew Leder's ideas in *The Absent Body* (Leder, 1990), which were themselves influenced by the 'lived body' notion inherited from Merleau-Ponty (Leder, 1990: 5). Leder explores the gaps in our corporeal awareness through his examples of the 'surface' body which is turned outward to the world and the 'recessive' body which includes our internal organs and processes of which we are not normally aware such as digestion. Both of these 'bodies' recede from our full conscious awareness, illustrating that our self-presencing is 'lined by a multiplicity of absences' (Leder, 1990: 37). Zarrilli adds two 'extra-daily modes of embodiment' to the model, as part of his analysis of the actor's craft. He adds an 'aesthetic inner body mind' discovered and shaped through long-term training practices and an 'aesthetic outer body' that is constituted by the specific tasks of the actor's performance score (Zarrilli, 2009: 50-51). In the process of training his inner 'bodymind' through specific forms of yoga or martial arts, Zarrilli casts the actor as 'braiding, interweaving, or tying knots within the inner body' (Zarrilli, 2009: 59). The repetitious action in certain poses of bringing the foot or leg into one's centre and then out again from that centre constitutes 'a form of churning or knotting which exercises the lower abdominal region' and therefore exists as an oppositional tension of 'body-as-chiasm' (Zarrilli, 2009: 59). The lower abdominal region is 'that place to and from which the intertwining extensions of attention/awareness are circulated' (Zarrilli, 2009: 90). More generally, Zarrilli's chiasmic model of the actor's experience rests on Merleau-Ponty's original characterisation of the individual body's relationship to the world as an intertwining or criss-crossing. Functioning analogously to this original 'braiding', Zarrilli proposes that the actor engages in a process of continual adjustment between his inner 'bodymind' and the exigencies of the performance score, creating in the process a 'constantly shifting' subjectivity that engages with the tasks or actions in different ways (Zarrilli, 2009: 60). As I have noted, my own adaptation of the chiasmic exchange is also coloured by Merleau-Ponty's dynamic of engagement between individual and surroundings, but I differ from Zarrilli in the sense that I am not working within pre-established scores, but encountering my surroundings (or negotiating my own corporeality) without any kind of pre-existing holding form.

### 3.6 The Visible and The Invisible

*'...if world there is, what can be the relations between the visible world and the invisible world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 27).*

In enquiring into the role of vision in generative processes, the visible elements of each performance context were obviously foregrounded as sites and sources of compositional activity. Did the ledges, curtains, walls or even the floor engender interest? How could I relate visually and compositionally to the person or people watching me? In addition, as noted, my awareness of myself as visible, or after Merleau-Ponty, a 'visible-seeing' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 272), permeated my choices of how to inhabit the space and compose material. I want to add a further layer of significance to this inhabitation of the visible context, however, so I turn here to Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the visible and the 'invisible' to help frame my discussion.

To understand why these notions might carry useful performative implications, I return to the interrelatedness between the individual and her surroundings as a cue. When Merleau-Ponty comments that he finds 'a visibility older than my operations or my acts' 'under my hands, under my eyes, up against my body' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 123), he poetically expresses the sense of a field of existence that at any one moment I can get only a small phenomenal slice of. The world contains 'visibilities' that are made manifest to my perceiving body but they also surpass it. Elements of the visible remain elusive because I cannot phenomenally experience them in their totality. The visible things extend beyond me through time and past me in space; the visible is 'the surface of a depth' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 136) and 'the total visible is always behind, or after, or between the aspects we see of it...' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 136). What I see is therefore a direct result of the position I have in space (and time); my embodied, situated perspective. The essential ambiguity at the centre of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, then, is that the body is the site through which the world comes into existence - my specific corporeal mode of inhabiting the world is my means of experiencing the world - but the world simultaneously surpasses and exceeds my perception.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction, much of Merleau-Ponty's writing stems from a re-working of scientific thinking which 'looks on from above' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 160). This kind of 'high-altitude thought' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 88) does not take the situated body into account in its construction of meaning and assumes that the world can be objectively and totally grasped. Merleau-Ponty exhorts philosophy to 'return to

This is also true on a mundane, every-day plane as the following neat example of a cube illustrates. The ‘hidden face of the cube radiates forth somewhere, as well as does the face I have under my eyes, and coexists with it...’ Merleau-Ponty tells us (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 140). In other words there are always aspects of an object of perception that are not seen, that remain ‘hidden’ because of the situatedness of the observer. This leads us to a definition of the ‘invisible’ as it relates to the visible:

what is not actually visible, but could be (hidden or inactual aspects of the thing – hidden things, situated “elsewhere” – “Here” and “elsewhere”)

(Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 257)

The ‘invisible’ aspects of an object of perception remind the viewer of her spatial and temporal locality - what is actual or current from her situated perspective - and the fact that there will always be a hidden ‘elsewhere’ in relation to her ‘here’. Although there is a literal solution to the dilemma, and Merleau-Ponty points it out when he writes in earlier work that ‘the unseen sides of the lamp are not imaginary but only hidden from view (to see them it suffices to move the lamp a little bit)’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964d: 14), the many-sidedness of objects precludes any individual from seeing all the sides simultaneously. Because I am embodied at each moment of my life in a particular perspective, I simply cannot grasp an object in its totality. The implication here is that the object, or more widely any part of the vast visible world, invites examination from different perspectives. It presents itself to vision and to the body in order to be explored, for the very reason that it contains ‘invisible’ aspects that ‘could’ become visible.

The significance of our perspectival grasp on the visible things of our surroundings is a phenomenal idea that captured my imagination quite early in the research, but was one for which I could not find a useful pragmatic correlation in the space. It was in fact one of Andrew Morrish’s habits in the studio that enabled me to link the idea to the practice. Morrish would frequently stand alongside the audience, facing the empty space before him,

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the “there is” which is ‘the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 160). For my current point, the significance lies not just in returning to the body as the ‘site’ through which the world is perceived and comes into existence but in acknowledging that this body opens onto a world that spatially and temporally outruns it. It is also important to note that even for the painter who is ‘incontestably sovereign in his own rumination of the world’, the world cannot be captured in its totality (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 161). The painter may thus grasp the defining qualities of the ‘visible’ world but his view is still partial and perspectival - ‘the world will always yet to be painted’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 189). Each painting ‘changes, alters, enlightens, deepens, confirms, exalts, re-creates, or creates in advance all the others’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 190).

as he constructed verbal material. As well as encouraging me, as a spectator, to contemplate the empty space before me (and the way it might then fill with Morrish's imaginative constructs), it reminded me of the permission given to the improviser in this practice to inhabit the space quite fluidly and, in a very literal way, to 'look at' it from different angles. Although the audience seating was usually in a traditional 'end-on' formation in both the studio and performance events, thereby defining a customary 'frontal' perspective, I began an additional thread of enquiry into how viewing the space, or the audience, from different angles might function in a generative way (always cognizant that whether the audience was then receiving my own body from the front, back or side, this aspect of it was being watched). In Merleau-Ponty's example, the lamp itself is moved in order to see the hitherto 'invisible' parts of it, but in the context of this research the space itself became the subject of the enquiry as it was inhabited in more fluid ways.

Changing position is of course possible within any of the strategies, but when it is the shift itself that is of interest (rather than it being the consequence of following the body's intentionality of the 'I can' for instance), I found that it could lead to the discovery or emergence of fresh ideas, impulses or imaginative threads. I note that Julyen Hamilton touches on a similar idea when he mentions in his DVD of improvisation that 'dancing is about changing the situation. Your perspective of the world changes if you step a little to the left' (Hamilton, 1994). He follows this with the comment that in a somersault a performer 'will turn the world upside-down for a second' (Hamilton, 1994). By re-orienting his inhabitation of the architectural surroundings, the improviser literally changes perspective, a shift that serves to refresh his overall occupation of the space. Similarly, I found that by shifting my viewing-angle of the space or audience, I could galvanise both my literal and my attitudinal occupation of the space. I engaged in a kind of play between what my situatedness revealed and what it kept concealed - kept 'invisible' - when I adopted different perspectives and positions. In this entertainingly literal way, the process of composition in these moments became grounded in an interest in the fruitful tension between positionality and generative possibility.

There is another definition of the 'invisible' that carries completely different connotations from these and although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine it in full I mention it here in order to highlight that Merleau-Ponty's writings on the invisible cover vast and diffuse territory and that at times his ideas were not conducive to the practical direction of my research.

Core to this other version of the invisible is still the notion that the visible and the invisible are inextricably linked but here the invisible maintains its status as invisible. It is not a 'de facto invisible, like an object hidden behind another' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 151), which is in line with the understanding that I draw on, namely that one can take up different positions relative to something visible. Here, by contrast, the invisible remains invisible but its function is to galvanise the visible. It 'inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 151). Much like 'flesh', it is a fiendishly difficult concept to give a single, clear definition to but it is variously described as the 'invisible inner framework' of the visible (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 215); the 'lining' and 'depth' of the visible (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 149); the force that is 'inscribed within' the visible (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 215) and (in a typically poetic turn of phrase) that which is 'in transparency behind the sensible, or in its heart' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 150). I read the idea as a force that gives animated existence to the visible but acknowledge that its full significances need to be dealt with elsewhere. Susan Kozel briefly discusses this version of the invisible and concurs that it is nebulous concept. It 'does not make sense on its own, but gives depth and texture to what we see' (Kozel, 2007: 40). It is 'quite like dark matter in the universe...the glue or the lining of our worlds' (Kozel, 2007: 40). Kozel reads the invisible as 'close to our bodies'; it is 'within us' (Kozel, 2007: 42). It represents a 'gap' or 'absence' in an individual's corporeality and she characterises it as 'this depth or darkness within the weave of perception' (Kozel, 2007: 42). Whilst the glue analogy is useful in providing an image of the essential inter-connectedness of the visible and the invisible, I have had no phenomenal sense of an invisible in my own body in this way and turned instead in my research towards the literalness of Merleau-Ponty's alternative definition of the term as it relates to acts of perception.

Strategy 4 - *inhabiting an imaginative landscape* - and strategy 5 - *using internal editing* - also connect and entwine a notion of invisible with the visible, but here I use 'invisible' in an everyday sense. In strategy 4, the audience are invited to follow the threads of the improviser's imaginative connections as they are revealed through text or movement, but the wellsprings of those associations will remain invisible to them, whilst vibrant and vivifying for the improviser herself. Similarly in strategy 5, the audience witnesses the improviser as she engages in a process of internally sifting through options, but some of the plethora of choices available to her will remain invisible to them. The process of deciding between possibilities, of discriminating between which choices to 'put' out in the space and which to

keep invisible, the timing with which the material is made visible and the performance modality in which it will be expressed are all part of a conscious editing process that acknowledges the explicit act of making compositional choices. I use the entwinement of visible and invisible here as a linguistic strategy to help the reader understand the pragmatics of *using internal editing* as a process of discriminating between multiple options.

### **3.7 I can**

As mentioned in chapter one, strategy 3 - *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* - was developed in response to a need I felt for an alternative compositional avenue. I wanted to address the moments when my relationality with the environment, although firmly established in my awareness through my use of vision, did not function generatively. In investigating the compositional potential of dropping the visual and energetic lines of connection with the environment as the locus of composition, I found that I attended more rigorously to the kinaesthetic sensations of my body and would compose by following my somatic impulses - aware of, but this time not overtly informed by, the physical surroundings in which I worked. Crucially, the movement that emerged in this way was not explicitly informed by the operational principles of responsiveness and relationality to my visual surroundings (although the seeing/seen paradigm was still at play, so I held the audience in my background awareness). This led me to understand and articulate the nuances of the movement that emerged as expressions of the deeply-embedded corporeal signatures that are 'already with me' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 94) and Merleau-Ponty's seminal notion of 'I can' encroached into the practice as a linguistic and pragmatic tool. The practice thus re-framed the notion by enlarging its field of application to take account of the learnt and embodied vocabularies and ways of approaching movement that are the result of specific trainings. As I explain in more detail shortly, my investigations were also reliant on a use of vision that did not chiasmically engage with the surroundings, as is the case in the original 'I can'.

The 'I can' is Merleau-Ponty's way of articulating his belief that the body possesses its own set of goals or intents, goals that do not appear via conscious thought, but that reside instead in a pre-reflective movement of the body itself. He acknowledges that he borrows the term from Edmund Husserl in a footnote to his comment that consciousness 'is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can'' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 137). In the following

passage, Merleau-Ponty describes this pre-reflective corporeal intentionality in terms of ‘magic’:

But my body itself I move directly, I do not find it at one point of objective space and transfer it to another, I have no need to look for it, it is already with me - I do not need to lead it towards the movement’s completion, it is in contact with it from the start and propels itself towards that end. The relationships between my decision and my body are, in movement, magic ones.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 94)

What is ‘magical’ is that the body seems to manifest its own intentionality. It ‘propels itself’ without a separate (cognitive) ‘I’ telling it what to do.

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone extrapolates the ‘I can’ as the initial set of discoveries we make of ourselves in movement. I can ‘arises from [everyday] tactile-kinaesthetic activity: chewing, reaching, grasping, kicking, etc’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 134). This ‘primal animateness, this original kinetic spontaneity’ is ‘our point of departure for living in the world and making sense of it’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 136). Part of this process of discovering ourselves in movement involves a ‘realm of sheer kinetic “I cans”’: I can stretch, I can twist, I can reach, I can turn over and so on’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 136). For Sheets-Johnstone, these kinetic-kinaesthetic ‘I cans’ constitute ‘an open-ended realm of possibilities’ determined in part by ‘how far we grow into the bodies we are’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 136).

Sheets-Johnstone’s versioning of the ‘I can’ shares with Merleau-Ponty the point of view that the body itself is infused with a pre-reflective propensity for movement, though Sheets-Johnstone locates this propensity in formative tactile-kinaesthetic activity, whereas for Merleau-Ponty, there remains a link with vision and with the intimate entwining of vision and movement that expresses the individual’s relationship with the surroundings.

‘Everything I see is in principle within my reach, at least within reach of my sight’ he says in *Eye and Mind*, ‘and is marked upon the map of the “I can”’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 162).

In my case, my prior trainings take ‘I can’ beyond the kind of elemental kinetic motions that Sheets-Johnstone identifies in formative activity. It also takes it beyond Merleau-Ponty’s original usage, so that in my adaptation the ‘I can’ is not just ‘a result of moving or already having moved’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 134) but of moving and having moved over time in repetitive and specialised ways, developing and practising a practice. I do not need to ‘look

for' these ways of engendering or manifesting movement. I am familiar, for instance, with my preference for doing spins and turns with my arms held close to my body; for utilising sweeping motions of the arms and legs to propel me through space or to initiate changes in direction; for dropping to the floor, rolling around the floor and using my hands to push out of it again. I am also aware of my tendency to elongate the arms and legs, reaching them into space. These, and a myriad other tendencies, stemming from early trainings in ballet and contemporary dance, have become recognisable traits or signatures of my dancing, and the impulses to carry out these movements emerge pre-reflectively. What is important, and what links my usage of the term conceptually with its linguistic origins, is that the phenomenal sense when improvising with strategy 3 is that these ways of moving are 'with me' and there is a flow of my body 'propelling' itself. It is this bodily intentionality that creates the composition. As I shall discuss in chapter four, emotions, images and associations might also emerge from, and through, my moving body, providing additional compositional avenues. Alternatively, I can choose to enter into a kind of dialogic negotiation with my (trained) tendencies, instigating reflective pauses as a means of interrupting this kind of pre-reflective flow.

The withdrawing of vision was core to my formulation of compositional activity in this strategy, but I acknowledge that it dilutes the intimate entwining of an externally-directed vision and movement, the chiasmic tangle of individual and environment, that is intrinsic to the original construct. It was only by withdrawing my vision from an interest in the external surroundings, by expressly shifting my (visual) field of interest in this way, that I was able to concentrate on the compositional potential inherent in the phenomenal sense that 'my body moves itself, my movement deploys itself' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 162). Here the practice/theory encroachments that have characterised this project thus embraced a number of contradictory threads. Whilst my phenomenal sense of improvising in response to somatic impulses chimed with Merleau-Ponty's articulations of the 'I can', and I also came to associate the phrase with a kind of celebratory affirmation of bodily capacity, I needed to adopt a vision that was deliberately uninvolved with my surroundings in order to fully ground an emergent composition in and through this corporeal capacity.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> I also note that Phillip Zarrilli employs the term 'I can' in relation to his discussion of his six primary psycho-dynamic principles of psychophysical training in *Psychophysical Acting: An Intercultural Approach After Stanislavsky* (Zarrilli, 2009). Not explicitly related to Merleau-Ponty's concept, Zarrilli uses the 'I can' to denote the actor's optimal state of awareness, when all the principles have become absorbed to such a degree that they manifest 'as a gestalt – a whole' (Zarrilli, 1994: 83) and the actor's embodied knowledge has become

### 3.8 Summary

In general terms, Merleau-Ponty's is a phenomenology of action; an intertwining of vision and movement that expresses the body's 'incarnate significance' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 166) and its chiasmic relationship with the world about it. The body for Merleau-Ponty 'must in the last analysis become the thought or intention that it signifies for us' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 197), a statement that can be read for its obvious philosophical leanings towards incarnate existence, but that can also be read artistically in terms of the importance of the creative embodiment of ideas and intentions. If 'we cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 162, original italics), then interest shifts to the 'working, actual body' that paints (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 162) or, in the case of performance improvisation, to the body that also dances, speaks and imagines. The next chapter elaborates on the five strategies that I have developed with my 'working, actual body' and discusses the ways in which the visual connection with the external landscape of architecture, objects and audience and the internal landscape of phenomenal sensation and imagination, is given compositional shape through the improviser's corporeal and textual choices.

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tacit, or second nature. As my discussions make clear, my own use of the 'I can' also relies on an understanding that movement can arise pre-reflectively, without conscious choice on my part, but in my adaptation I am referring to the emergence of habitual moves or ways of generating movement whereas Zarrilli is referring to the acquisition of a state of fuller attentiveness through which and with which the actor can then realise particular performance demands.

**Staying with playing with deliberate vision – on the space – on my surface body in the  
space and not out to my audience – plus surfaces of the curtains**

**The parameters I put on the vision and the interest in the texture of the curtains  
creates a structure whereby contact creates internal imagery that is embodied in  
physical details – the hands cupped, the staccato walks with bent knees on tips of toes –  
I think of nuns, of army types and of sailors but keep them all internal – they remain  
fleeting compared with many improvisations. It is overwhelmingly about texture and a  
kind of claustrophobia of vision.**

(Immediate Writings, 22/12/10)

**Proceeding with care up the left side,  
Turning towards the other side,  
Balancing the energy  
Speeding up and slowing down,  
With the intention in your eyes**

**A series of finding places, spaces,  
Using your vision  
Then releasing yourself  
Allowing the physical energy to run  
Like water in a stream.  
It has a careful (full of care) feel  
Like a woman going through her dead mother's house,  
Looking for something  
And yet not knowing  
What you are looking for  
But also  
Knowing that everything is somehow important.**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 22/12/10)

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PUTTING ON CREATIVE SPECTACLES

#### *Five Compositional Strategies*

This chapter discusses in detail the five strategies that I have developed as a response to the research question, via the encroachments of the theoretical discourse into the pragmatics of practical investigation.

For the purposes of clarity here, I treat each strategy independently, but in practice they overlap and overlay one another, functioning in a constantly shifting, kaleidoscopic pattern. Looping in and out of each other, the patterning and dynamic of these strategies is mobile and the amount of time the improviser spends dwelling in any one strategy or combination of strategies equally fluid. It is possible, for instance, to build virtually an entire piece by inhabiting and articulating an imaginative landscape (strategy 4) but it is equally possible to interleave short imaginative segments into other sections in which the primary focus and grounding of compositional activity is on somatic sensation (strategies 4 and 3). The primary driver of a piece may be making and sustaining an explicit visual connection with the audience (strategy 2) or they may not be directly referred to or looked at at all (strategy 3 or possible in 4). As generative answers to the compositional question of how things are made, strategies 1 - 4 are instigated by a particular use of vision, infused in *seeing and responding to the performance space, shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* and *inhabiting an imaginative landscape* by the ‘questioning’ attitude of Merleau-Ponty’s chiasmic exchange and in *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* by slackening the energised intentionality of that relationship. Strategy 5 - *using internal editing* - puts into play an ongoing discrimination between options. Operating both within and between the other strategies, internal editing is ever-present, as options are considered, made visible or discarded in a process of selecting and arranging material. In this way, strategy 5 also deals with the temporal consideration of how long an improviser might (internally) contemplate a piece of content before (or if) making it visible, as well as spatial considerations - how and where she will position or move herself in the space - and which performance mode she will use at any given moment.

In this chapter I therefore note those occasions where one strategy might segue or dovetail into another, in order to indicate moments of shifting or multiple compositional attentiveness. At times when two or more strategies are operating simultaneously, I use the terms ‘foregrounding’ and ‘backgrounding’ to indicate the improviser’s prioritising of attention but attentiveness can also be distributed more equally between strategies so that the phenomenal sense is that they carry equal compositional weight.

I give an introductory example here of a generative nexus in which two different strategies operate simultaneously in what is experienced as an equal compositional distribution. After noting an angular line in the space, using the externally-directed vision of *seeing and responding to the performance space*, I enquire into what it is like to maintain an angular hold of the arms whilst traversing around the space with the more internal focus that is characteristic of *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* (and to make a very fine distinction, it is in this example only the arms and upper body that have ‘borrowed’ a sense of angularity from the environment). Working with the arms in this way keeps me connected to the original visual stimulus; I am relating to the external surroundings even though I am not looking at them; *seeing and responding to the performance space* and *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* operate simultaneously and equally. At some point, however, the enquiry shifts further ‘inwards’ into a more purified version of *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* in which I completely background the external environment (the hold of the arms creates a muscular tension that prompts an impulse to drop the elbows and I follow through with new arm movements), or I deliberately shift my attention back ‘outwards’ by using my vision to directly reconnect with the immediate surroundings, backgrounding my kinaesthetic sense as a spur to a different type or quality of responsiveness (see Figure 7, p.165, for a visual representation of the strategies’ mobility, highlighting several key nexus points).

The strategies are thus tools that allow the improviser to shift and mould her attentiveness - to negotiate the surroundings in different ways - and to become more attuned to the possible links between her visual attentiveness and her compositional actions. Rather than the ‘very clear parameters’ that are set in a ‘score’ as a way of narrowing the field of exploration (Wunder, 2006: 12), the strategies function as more general resources for composition.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> If I were to create ‘scores’ from the strategies, narrowing their focus, I might suggest:

They are anchors that allow the improviser to inhabit the space with compositional intent - harnessed and channelled through the purposive use of vision - but they are anchors with a light touch; able, too, to accommodate the unlooked for and the unexpected.

Operating collectively, then, the strategies capture the oscillation between making compositional choices - enacting my version of the chiasmic exchange by deciding to follow the corporeal or imaginative threads that 'pass into me' from something that is seen for instance - and the moments where something un-looked for emerges or intrudes. Using strategy 3, for instance, my vision is not actively reaching out into the space but in moving or traversing the space I might become peripherally aware of something of interest. I can then choose whether or not to attend to this new element more directly (I have previously come across red painted dots and bobby pins on the floor in this way; minutiae of the space that led to the creation of verbal material). Chance occurrences that occur in the space such as latecomers or the sound of a passing siren can also be attended to. If I choose to acknowledge the sudden intrusion into the space, and remain open to ideas, images or feelings that might emerge as a result of accepting it, material can form that stems directly from this attitude of receptivity. Associative images and ideas can then 'pass into' me in the same way that a more deliberately chosen line of visual connection might do. As tools and anchors then, the strategies are mobile, aiding the improviser in a compositional inhabitation of the space - specifically the visible space - but in their very mobility they also facilitate receptivity to sounds (and, hypothetically, because as yet untested in the research, smells and tastes).

This chapter also includes more examples of Immediate Writings as a means of supplying a voice from within the flow of research and reflection in the studio. These writings suggest, hint at or foreground particular strategies within the complex compositional weave that is at play in any given improvisation. The writings chosen here thus evidence and poetically augment the points I am making about how the strategies work as operational tools, but have not been moulded into neat illustrations of just one strategy. I also include examples of the strategies in public performances. These examples do not have Immediate Writings as an accompaniment, but I include them because they illustrate the strategies in operation beyond

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1. Move towards or away from the walls.
  2. Talk to the audience for three minutes as fast as you can.
  3. Play with 'extending' and 'bending' movements in the arms, legs and torso.
  4. Begin to tell a story. Every now and then ask an audience member to say a word. Incorporate that word into your story.
  5. Start moving. Every time you repeat something, stop what you are doing.

the delimitations of the shared studio practice with Andrew Morrish. At the conclusion of each strategy, I also offer examples of either contrasting or parallel models of improvisation as they relate to the strategy under discussion. The intent here is to refer back to chapter two, deepening the process of situating this model of improvisation within particular parameters - most significantly within practices of improvisation as performance.

### **Strategy One**

#### **Seeing and responding to the performance space**

*'With no other technique than what his eyes and hands discover in seeing and painting, he persists in drawing from this world...'* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 161).

*'...vision happens among, or is caught in, things...'* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 163).

#### **4.1 Vision/action responsiveness**

In this strategy, an externally-directed vision is prioritised in order to enable the improviser to 'see' the performance space - to become aware of its visual details and idiosyncrasies - and to make compositional choices that are a response to specific visual information. If the improviser uses her vision to become aware of aspects of the immediate surroundings and to instigate a fruitful connection with a visible element of the performance space, then her interrelationship with the space becomes an explicit compositional source, and the site, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, of the chiasmic 'me other exchange' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 215). If 'questioned' for its generative potential in this way the space can offer possible lines of connection and potential compositional avenues.

The overarching aim of the strategy is to 'see' and respond to the space that one is in, to note the specificity of its visible architectural detail, to be cognizant of the audience and, depending on the performance studio, to visually note props or other objects that also inhabit the space. This 'seeing' can be understood through the lens of Merleau-Ponty's 'exploratory gaze' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 315) and (a more tempered) 'voracious vision' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 166); it is a way of opening oneself to and enquiring into one's surroundings so that the generative potential of being 'open' in this way is made explicit and then used. When prioritising this kind of externally-directed vision other sensory information, most noticeably kinaesthetic information, is present and tacitly involved in the perceptual

engagement, but (when operating exclusively with this strategy) that information is deliberately not used with a generative intent. Thus whilst deliberately reaching one's vision into the space in order to 'see' its specifics, the improviser will not also choose to compose from the tensions or placements of her body. She backgrounds that information in order to follow impulses that stem from what she sees, such as in a very basic enactment of this strategy when she might simply move to a particular area of the space and position herself at a certain angle to an architectural feature. The fluidity of the strategies as tools, however, means that such an exclusive reliance on this kind of vision/action responsiveness may only last a number of seconds before blending with, or being replaced by, composition that stems from kinaesthesia and the flow of kinetic motion or one of the other strategies.

**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**

(Immediate Writings, 1/3/10)

**Located against the wall**

**She begins to read the  
Secret messages written in  
Hidden places on the floor and wall  
She follows directions she receives  
Letting go of the brake  
Material tumbles, falls, reconnects and hangs  
A bathroom overlooking the Brisbane river  
A postman making a deposit  
A lost key in the rain  
She lets it tumble but it falls**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 1/3/10)

#### **4.2 Vision/movement responsiveness**

If the improviser employs an externally-directed vision in order to establish an active interrelationship with the performance space, then any feature of that space is potentially of interest as a means of propelling compositional responsiveness. Even the familiar and mundane features of a well-used studio have the potential to spark a generative train of physical impulses, mental imagery or words, associative sparks that the improviser can then use to build danced or textual material. The strategy allows for an exactitude in positionality described in the very basic example as well as what I think of as creative embodiments of features of the performance space, such as the exploration of angular motions of the body as a way of corporeally 'borrowing' lines of the space. In one public performance, I noted lighting cables strung along the ceiling and responded by adopting sinewy, curvaceous arm movements that led the rest of my body in spiral pathways around the space.<sup>95</sup> I continued to investigate these movements without continuing to look up at the original visual stimulus, so began to operate in a nexus between this strategy - responsive to what I had seen - and strategy 3 where (facilitated by a withdrawn vision) my ongoing kinetic flow also produced the movement.

Responses can also incorporate dynamics as well as shape-making - a response to curving archways may be drops and undulations of the body that deliberately play with a sense of

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<sup>95</sup> Laurence Batley Theatre, Huddersfield, UK, [22 September 2011].

suspension before the drop. The response to the height of a ceiling may be a slow intake of breath accompanied by a steady lift of the chest, head and arms in an upward motion. During one improvisation in the studio investigations I visually noted the rounded joints in the archways in the studio and responded by adopting tensed, clawed hands as part of my moving.<sup>96</sup> As these kinds of compositional responses are enacted, the improviser can continue to use her vision to see and respond to other features of the performance space. Particularly when travelling and traversing the space, shifting directions and positions, the visual sources or stimuli will shift with the improviser's location in space. Thus whilst moving in response to an original source (the cables, the lines on the floor), the improviser can overlay and/or shift into new responses to new visual information. Thus movement material may build by layering - at the same time as I am working with spiral pathways borrowed from the cables I have seen, I may add in sharp angular cutting motions with my arms as a response to the lines in the architecture. Or I may choose to cut short what I am doing and concentrate on one visual source at a time, perhaps also engaging in the generative play of positionality and possibility discussed earlier, in which the compositional focus is on what is revealed or concealed - after Merleau-Ponty what is visible or 'invisible' - by adopting different perspectives on the space or on something within the space.

If an architectural feature - an arch, a ledge, a windowsill - is visually noted and the improviser does not respond in these kinds of shape-making or dynamic ways, then further, physical interaction may be possible. The ledge at the back of Studio 3 at the University of Huddersfield and the windowsills and ballet bar in the performance studio at the Ballet Academy in Stockholm for instance, have both lent themselves to physical investigation during the course of performances and studio practice. Sitting on them, leaning into them, pulling against them, rolling around them have been compositional responses that begin with a direct visual interest. I see these features and am prompted to move towards them. Externally-directed vision then combines with tactility, kinaesthesia and sometimes peripheral vision in the choreographic explorations. In these examples too, movement vocabulary and compositional possibility clearly evidence an interrelationship between the improviser and her external environment, as movement is supported and facilitated by the physical shape of the architecture. The improviser's movement literally 'encroaches upon' the physical surfaces around her (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 261).

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<sup>96</sup> University of Huddersfield, UK, [23-25 August 2011].

### 4.3 Vision/text responsiveness

Reaching my vision into the space, ‘seeing’ something of interest, can also lead to verbal responses, which in turn may operate in a nexus with strategy 4 (if I allow imaginative associations to ‘pass’ into me and I then speak from within that imaginative realm). Also, as mentioned previously, something may appear in my field of vision that I have not looked for that can then be explicitly cultivated for its compositional potential. Improvising at a conference at the University of Salford in 2012, for instance, I began an improvisation in a particular spot on one side of the designated performance space.<sup>97</sup> I made a conscious choice to look at a blackboard on the other side of the space and in doing so noticed a cloth on the floor, a random object that I hadn’t previously registered. I moved towards the cloth and having picked it up then began both reading the words on the blackboard and erasing them, an action that enabled me to find a narrative impetus and threads of dramaturgy that propelled the piece for a few moments. This was a literal ‘reading’ of something in the space as well as a making explicit of what had been a chance encounter. Although my response was predominantly verbal, my decision to stay with the action of wiping the board was also part of my response. A further layer of significance was in my awareness that the audience could see me erasing the words (even if they could not see the words themselves). This awareness of the seeing/seen dynamic in this case fed into my decision to begin to build an imaginative narrative out of the words I was reading; a character began to emerge and *seeing and responding to the performance space and inhabiting an imaginative landscape* dovetailed as I began to read the words through the ‘eyes’ of a fictionalised persona.

### 4.4 The audience

The hyper-awareness of being seen discussed in previous chapters is played out in different ways in this practice, and in this strategy the improviser acknowledges the presence of the audience by attending to positionality and spatial considerations - distance, proximity, viewing angles of the body. The audience are thus treated as an explicit part of the spatial landscape, so the improviser might move to a particular area of the space in response to the presence of the audience and her hyper-fine awareness of being seen as well as an interest in

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<sup>97</sup> Studio Matejka: The Human/Body as a 'Cultural Actor' Research Symposium and Work Demonstration University of Salford, UK, [1 June 2012].

the architecture. In this example she puts into play a vision/action responsiveness that investigates positionality through the filter of her awareness of her role 'for the other' as Merleau-Ponty calls it (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 245) in tandem with her role as the 'seeing' improviser who is engaged in a process of composition. Perhaps she chooses to stand at the back of the studio, for instance, because she wants to open up a spatial distance between her and the audience and the spatial gap will also allow her to explore expansive movements. Or perhaps she does the opposite and sits, stands or moves with small gestures next to a spectator so that she can attend to what might emerge from both this proximity and the minimalist moving. As I have practised these strategies, I have found that the motivations behind compositional choices are rarely singular. Complex intersections between strategies occur because my occupation of the space is infused with an embodied responsiveness to being seen at the same time as the exigency of creating spontaneous pieces of work determines choices in the space.

By way of example, in a public performance at the Cellar Bar, I saw a tea towel hanging from the railings in the bar area of the space from where I was sitting. I also saw an usher standing close by.<sup>98</sup> This happened at the very beginning of the improvisation as I had adopted a sideward angle (sideward in relation to the audience's frontal perspective) as I was interested in what I might see from there. This initial choice of where to position myself can be seen through the lens of the dialectic between positionality and possibility and, after Merleau-Ponty, through an interest in the essential explorability of anything that presents itself to the visual sense (in this case the performance space itself). After noting these things (and here I do extend 'things' to include the usher as a physical presence), I concentrated my attention briefly on the tea towel before walking across the space to the bar, asking the usher if I could borrow it, and re-entering the space. Walking to the tea towel was an enactment of strategy 1 - *seeing and responding to the performance space* - an intertwining of vision and movement propelled by my visual interest. I instigated strategy 2 - *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* - when talking to the usher, as the direct eye contact with him created a useful line of energy. As I walked back into the space with the tea towel, I utilised both *seeing and responding to the performance space* and strategy 4 - *inhabiting an imaginative landscape* - because the interaction I had just had with the usher prompted the arrival of a fictional character but I was also aware of choosing a particular area to sit in - using the externally-directed vision of strategy 1 as my guide. This nexus of 1 and 4 again

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<sup>98</sup> Laurence Batley Theatre, Huddersfield, UK, [22 September 2011].

points to the powerful encroachment on compositional choices of ‘being seen’, as inhabiting an imaginative dimension and extemporising text occurred here within the wider inhabitation of the immediate performance space and my awareness of the seeing eyes of the audience. In choosing to position myself in a certain area, then, whilst also inhabiting a fictional world I had just created, I was operating with a dual-focus that grafted *seeing and responding to the performance space* and *inhabiting an imaginative landscape* onto each other.

#### 4.5 Timing

The temporal dynamic is important to note here, as the improviser’s use of an externally-directed vision may lead to a response that is virtually synchronous with the action of looking. Practising these strategies before a performance in Stockholm, for instance, the decision to perform with the blinds open on one side meant that the city’s streets, buildings and lights were constantly present, exerting a considerable pull on me.<sup>99</sup> My spatial orientation was often directed to that side of the space and I frequently looked at and moved towards the windows in an action that was, after Merleau-Ponty’s vision/action paradigm of the body, essentially seamless. At other times, the improviser may either choose to take in information more slowly, and/or pause before responding. Although this is still suggestive of the vision/action responsiveness of Merleau-Ponty’s discourse, using a pause filters and mediates ‘spontaneous’ impulses before they are made visible as content (and certainly colours composition differently from the fevered channelling that characterises the painter’s work). The improviser may also use a pause to wait, allowing the information or stimuli she has received to gather into the shape of her response. These variations in timing, however, still occur within an overall frame of intentional engagement with, and chiasmic responsiveness to, what has been seen.

The action of walking towards the tea towel mentioned earlier, for instance, occurred after a pause of about three seconds in which I waited for a response to formulate (rather than internally sifting through options which would have been the case if I had felt the pull of several different responses to seeing the tea towel). In that example, both during and after the pause, I continued to visually attend to the tea towel, to let my vision funnel into it, so I was still prioritising *seeing and responding to the performance space*. Had this visual

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<sup>99</sup> Ballet Academy, Stockholm, Sweden, [20 and 21 November 2010]. These performances were duets with Quiddity collaborator, John Britton, but as I was immersed in this research at the time I practised the strategies between performances.

attentiveness given rise to imaginative associations, I would have segued into *inhabiting an imaginative landscape* (and the visual line of connection with the object would have become imbued with an imaginative dimension; I would have started ‘seeing’ it through an imaginative landscape rather than ‘seeing’ it in its everydayness). Had I looked directly at the usher from where I was, reciprocating his look, I would have *shifted (my) vision towards a direct involvement with the audience*. Had I decided to shift my vision to another feature of the architecture I would still be within strategy 1 - *seeing and responding to the performance space* - but searching for a different stimulus. As a site of gestation, then, the pause offers a useful alternative to the faster act of virtually synchronous seeing and moving. I pick up on the use of pauses again on p.143.

**Diagonal path back almost immediately – with hands fidgeting**

**Path along side wall**

**Travelling along the centre line in the space –**

**Angular movement of arms and body follows the path**

**and letting my head turn and look sidelong at the space**

**I repeat this a few times then stop**

**Nothing in the space has caught my eye begging for associations**

**Facing the ‘front’ still, I wait and look at the mass of wires over the oblong box on the wall**

**It’s the shape of a suitcase**

**I sit internally with the image and then allow narration to start**

**It builds its own logic – a grey suitcase, a man, I’m in a queue – one of those ‘lines’**

**He wears blue shoelaces**

**The narrative comes readily after this**

**Driven by the internal movie**

**The ‘lines’ theme is taken into a 2<sup>nd</sup> part of the story – her regimented daily routine, not deviating from it**

(Immediate Writings, 6/6/11)

**Moving forwards and backwards,**

**Sending gestural energy forwards, backwards and to the sides.**

**Building the dynamics**

**Shifting into stillness in the space, just moving your arms.**

**The energy seems to catch up to you and you begin the forensic interview.**

**Describing the stranger in the queue at the airport. The interrogation form gives you permission dramaturgically and linguistically. A further shift back, towards the energy of the beginning, but with a new language/poetic focus.**

**The queue semantics and sensations are maintained.**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 6/6/11)

#### **4.6 Contrasting Model: Contact Improvisation**

Contact Improvisation prioritises the use of vision very differently. Rather than the externally-directed vision of *seeing and responding to the performance space*, Contact Improvisation hones peripheral vision (as well as kinaesthesia/tactility) with the dancers usually completely uninterested in situating themselves more directly in relation to the immediate surroundings.

The most fully-documented and globally-practised form of movement improvisation, Contact Improvisation is based on a duet of weight-sharing and touch between partners that creates an inward orientation, either oblivious to, or uninterested in, the visible features of the performance space.<sup>100</sup> Melinda Buckwalter (co-editor of *Contact Quarterly*) talks of Contact Improvisation developing ‘its own sense of space’ based on ‘the dialogue of weight shift and the play of reflexes activated in the constantly changing body orientation and falling that create the dance’ (Buckwalter, 2010: 79). Because the improviser’s attentiveness is attuned to ‘the nuance of the shifting touch and weight of the partner’, the space around the duet ‘is backgrounded in consciousness...less vital than the immediate dialogue of touch and kinaesthetic receptors taking place through the enveloping skin and soft tissues’

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<sup>100</sup> Contact Improvisation is widely credited as having been ‘invented’ by Steve Paxton in 1972. As part of a residency at Oberlin College in the United States, Paxton did a showing of some work he had been doing in a men’s class. The showing was called ‘Magnesium’ and explored gravity and momentum through balances, falls and rolls. The form is thoroughly documented in Cynthia Novack’s text *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Novack, 1990) and through the various writings of contact improviser Nancy Stark Smith (who watched the original showing of ‘Magnesium’ and started working with Paxton several months later). Stark Smith is also co-editor of *Contact Quarterly*, the journal primarily devoted to the form.

(Buckwalter, 2010: 79). The space of the contact improviser becomes, in the words of its founder Steve Paxton, ‘spherical’ as a result of the dancers’ constantly changing spatial orientation (Paxton, quoted by Buckwalter in Buckwalter, 2010: 79). Vision is employed in the form, but it is peripheral vision that is prioritised as the dancers organise themselves in this spherical space, moving through a range of body pathways and shapes.

Contact Improvisation thus hones peripheral vision and encourages a three-dimensional occupation of space, in contrast to an externally-directed vision, which prioritises a sense of visually reaching into the space in order to see and respond to its details. Ranging from exact spatial positioning and playful corporeal ‘borrowings’ to verbal responses, *seeing and responding to the performance space* functions as an anchor which enables the improviser to embody a mode in which she both ‘sees’ and makes aesthetic judgements about her immediate environment and simultaneously, in the nature and tenor of her responsiveness, operates in close proximity with it.

**Keeping to pathways – confined – until I notice paint**

**Beginnings of a narrative from 3 red dots**

**Verbalize around its ‘discovery’ as the material – but questions here too**

**Red dots that multiply and expand in the space**

**Whispering and proliferation in the image creates fevered energy**

**Putting it back into a matchbox**

**Retreat along edges of space**

(Immediate writings, 26/6/09)

**An agitated verticality**

**Travelling with vision (what do you see?)**

**Vision takes you towards the floor**

**And brings something slower (what did you see?)**

**Dots...Red...Three**

**The voice finds its breathiness**

**“Why, that’s why you’re here, because you understand. I do. How”**

**Dots...Red...Three**

**It all speeds up into a breathless waterfall of**

**Dots...Red...Three and Blood**  
**You work at the edge until you disappear**  
**Three...Red...Dots**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 26/6/09)

**Strategy Two**  
**Shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience**

*'We are involved in the world and with others in an inextricable tangle' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 454).*

#### **4.7 Background**

In strategy 2, the audience takes on a distinctive role within the improviser's generative activities. Rather than treated as part of the spatial landscape as they are in *seeing and responding to the performance space*, they are now looked at directly with the aim of involving them more explicitly in the unfolding of material. In choosing to visually engage them, the improviser establishes a dynamic exchange, a complicitous relationship, based on both seeing and being seen by them.

The practice of directly looking at the audience within movement improvisation was first taught to me by Al Wunder, so I briefly outline the relevant part of his practice here as a backdrop to this strategy. As noted previously (footnote 56, p.64), at the heart of his system of teaching improvisation is the creation of four different performance modes - 'pedestrian', 'character', 'caricature' and 'abstract'. Of the four it is the 'pedestrian' mode that most encourages a direct rapport with the audience. Improvisers are told to perform 'just being themselves' (Wunder, 2006: 89). The pedestrian approach is about 'communicating openly, speaking to the audience about your life and beliefs in a very natural way' (Wunder, 2006: 89). The intent is to create interpersonal interest and according to Wunder the material spoken 'is very often autobiographical' (Wunder, 2006: 92). In Wunder's system, the performer inhabiting this mode 'creates a relaxed, living room atmosphere by addressing the audience in a simple matter-of-fact way, becoming a friend to those watching' (Wunder, 2006: 92). At times the effect is that the audience 'seem to want to join in the conversation. Some actually do...' (Wunder, 2006: 92).

There are two noteworthy aspects of the pedestrian mode. The first is that the improviser's interest in establishing a 'matter-of-fact' rapport with the audience is often (although not always) instigated by a direct use of vision and the connection is maintained by regular direct eye contact. Although Wunder doesn't discuss the use of vision in his section on the pedestrian mode in his book, a note I wrote during my studies with him pinpoints the role of vision in the mode. 'Interesting that for AI', I wrote, 'pedestrian mode is partially recognised in the face and gaze. A fixed gaze, either out or in to self, is not pedestrian' [author's notes 8/9/00]. Accepting that I wasn't here attributing any particular nuances to the word 'gaze', I find the clues to the pedestrian mode in both the direction and intent of vision. 'Out' refers to a looking that reaches past and beyond the audience and 'in' is aligned with the more private world of the self. Both avert the eyes from the audience. A 'fixed' gaze also seems to suggest a kind of non-liveliness or lack of engagement with the immediacy of the moment, which also runs counter to the mode's interest in allowing 'the natural flow of emotions' to pervade the improviser's work and 'to inform them and their audience of the dramatic tensions and comic relief inherent in living a life' (Wunder, 2006: 92).

The second point to note about the pedestrian mode is that it authenticates a place for the quotidian in performance improvisation. Earlier I discussed how the inclusiveness of an 'everyday' performance style and content is part of the legacy of the American 1960s avant-garde dance and theatre improvisers. The Judson Dance Theatre's performances from 1962 to 1964, for instance, included 'quotidian actions performed in matter-of-fact style' as part of various choreographers' work (Banes, 1993a: 70). For that generation of artists, the display of daily actions (as well as non-trained dancing bodies) was a significant part of their ethos and aesthetic. As noted earlier, Wunder was clearly aware of these innovations and the role of the 'pedestrian' in his own teaching points to an inherited interest in the 'recuperation of the ordinary' (Banes, 1993a: 119) that can be traced back to the aims of accessibility and egalitarianism infusing the artistic experiments of that era.

#### **4.8 Energy Vectors**

This strategy utilises direct vision towards the audience to explicitly instigate a relationship with them and it sometimes results in the kind of 'relaxed, living room' chit-chat characteristic of Wunder's pedestrian mode.<sup>101</sup> In my extension of Wunder's formulation,

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<sup>101</sup> This a favourite choice of Andrew Morrish, whose mode of performance is firmly rooted in the sense of camaraderie established by directly visually engaging the audience.

however, the aim is not to share your 'life and beliefs', nor is the content necessarily personal. In part this is due to one of the dangers of the pedestrian mode, acknowledged by Wunder, and evident when I studied with him, of interpreting and enacting pedestrian in an un-energised, 'uninterested and uninteresting' manner (Wunder, 2006: 89). On these occasions 'pedestrian' is treated as being dull rather than being a mode of exploring and sharing the everyday. Although Wunder introduced a solution to this trend by inventing the 'enlivened pedestrian', a boost that was designed to ameliorate the tendency to downgrade energy, this more enlivened version was still rooted in an everyday personae and everyday content and simply exaggerated the 'entertainment value' in the 'normal, everyday lives' that were being described (Wunder, 2006: 89).

The aim in *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* is not so much to generate this type of self-reflexive content as to create a vector of energy - a chiasmic 'me other exchange' - (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 215) that can galvanise the improviser's creative processes. Resting upon the heightened self-awareness of both audience and improviser embedded in the exchange of looks, this vector of energy can be channelled into the creation of 'conversations' that are not necessarily autobiographical; indeed the improviser's desire to look at and talk with the audience may shift her performance into a different register, whether or not her look is reciprocated (if a spectator backs away, literally or energetically from this exchange of looks, this clash of divergent intentionalities can itself become the source of a compositional 'me, other exchange'). As mentioned earlier, in another useful reframing and extension of Merleau-Ponty's seeing/seen model, I have also found that if I consciously register the kinaesthetic feelings or emotional reaction to being watched, I can exploit those feelings in order to compose from and with them (I give an example below).

Also as mentioned previously, I am aware of the shifts in power relations embedded in this strategy - the self-consciousness in spectators now subject to the 'reverse-gaze' that reminds them of their own visibility (Garner, 1994: 48). I am equally aware of the significance of highlighting my own agency by looking at the audience and at times talking to them. Although my intent in creating and practising this strategy has not been to highlight power relations - the aim has been to work with the audience in a compositional way - there are useful implications here for improviser/spectator relations in improvised work. Much like Nigel Charnock's evident pleasure in both seeing (and chatting with) his audience whilst willingly subjecting his body to our visual scrutiny, acknowledging the twin dynamics of authoring my own seeing whilst simultaneously responding to being seen in ways that are

strategic and compositional allows the seeing/seen paradigm to operate as a playful site of compositional intentionality.

**Again the energy of talking with Andrew  
Becomes the start of the piece  
Finding something to play with in significance of dates +  
then German.  
It is fun to roll around linguistically in german –  
Later matching movement – by which I mean considering movement  
alongside the words.  
A small narrative of a future community group is a little  
Self-contained episode  
Return to german – direct address – almost making sense of  
Words. This return signals an ending**

(Immediate Writings, 21/8/09)

**A black forest cake, with a layer of German and English  
Starting close and gradually opening up into the space, mainly on the right side. You  
speak of the date, your brother's birthday, calculate his age, remember the day etc.  
The energy of your moving powers some of your language, it flows, rises and sinks.  
You imagine a future when German classes would be possible, building layers in your  
multi-lingual world. Waves and crescendos of language and movement.**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 21/8/09)

#### **4.9 Being watched**

The kinaesthetic feelings or emotional reactions that occur when as a result of looking at the audience one's own (self) consciousness of being seen is heightened can be channelled into corporeal compositional responses or characterisations that sit beyond the 'everyday' that is the province of Wunder's pedestrian mode. Self-consciousness that manifests through somatic sensations such as tightness in the chest, muscular tension in the legs or shoulders or

a hold of the breath, or emotional responses such as nervousness can be the building-blocks of movement or a character if registered, harnessed and then channelled into deliberate compositional form.<sup>102</sup> As an example, in the performance in the Cellar Bar already recounted, I became aware of a tensing between my shoulder blades as I looked at an audience member (the only spectator whom I did not already know). As I was also clutching the tea towel, I asked him to move his feet so that I could clean underneath them as I wanted to release some of the held tension in my torso (which he did). We then developed a repetitive rhythm in which I repeatedly bent down to his feet and he automatically lifted them; the exchange now supplying me with an emergent character who needed, quite obsessively, to clean. After a while I stopped asking him to lift his feet but we continued to carry out the exchange non-verbally. The final interaction in this sequence involved me looking at the spot that I had been cleaning but not bending down to clean it. He lifted his feet anyway; a very satisfying example of the way in which spectators might, after Wunder, 'join in the conversation' verbally, physically or imaginatively and in this case also fuelled by my compositional exploitation of my own responses to being seen.

An example from a different performance further highlights the complex and playful interactions that are possible within this strategy. Glancing briefly at an audience member who was wearing pink shoes gave rise to a narrative idea that (as a little girl) I wanted to be given pink shoes from my mother.<sup>103</sup> At some point in the ensuing story, the audience member (an ex-student) threw one of the shoes into the space, followed by the other. This action took me completely by surprise and was unique in my experience of practising and developing these strategies in performance. I put the shoes on and kept them on for the remainder of the piece. They were big and very heavy on my feet, radically altering my posture, articulation of movement and the narrative development of the story. There is an interesting nexus here between *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* and *inhabiting an imaginative landscape*, as at times I built material as a result of the galvanising energy of the visual connectivity and personalised relationship with the student who had thrown the shoes - speaking to him directly by name for instance - and at

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<sup>102</sup> Wunder's 'implied character' is similarly rooted in 'the physical and emotional feelings of the improviser as these arise and are expressed during performance' (Wunder, 2006: 94) but for him the sources of these characters are movement, the use of imagery and the use of voice (Wunder, 2006: 94-5). Here I am locating the emergence of character in the dynamic of seeing/being seen by the audience and in the improviser's compositional responsiveness to this entwinement.

<sup>103</sup> Laurence Batley Theatre, Huddersfield, UK, [3 November 2011].

times the compositional focus swapped from this line of energy to the internal world of the girl who now owned pink shoes. As part of that process the audience, including the student, became embroiled in a fictional landscape - re-created and re-invented through the logic of the imaginary realm. At these moments *inhabiting an imaginative landscape* was foregrounded.

The episode raises a host of interesting questions that reverberate as lively implications of this strategy. Is there an expectation amongst the small audiences of these improvised events that this kind of interaction is invited by the direct look? Are they feeling empowered by the reverse-gaze rather than self-consciously awkward? Is the desire to interact brought on by this strategy, or does the strategy simply give them permission to interact in ways that they already feel inclined towards? The questions sit in the realm of spectatorial expectations and behaviour and beyond the immediate concerns of this doctorate, but they are potent reminders of the implications of re-claiming (on both sides) the pleasurable play of direct looking.

**Start in mid flow talking to Andrew, close-up –**

**Verbal material is there because there is no distinction**

**Between sitting and standing in my interaction with Andrew.**

**Following words and images – I think a slight pause marks  
a shift in the texture of the text – some kind of imaginative  
place, and more of a character speaks**

**Retreat along the side wall (I'm deliberately on this side of the space) to the back line.**

**Quite sharp movements of arms and head and torso**

**accompanied by text – on memory loss and age**

**stepping travel to the other side on this plane – just off centre, I think**

**image of memories of the over 28s disappearing**

(Immediate Writings, 19/8/09)

**Speaking directly in front of me, you move to your right, then follow the side wall backwards and then enter the space, parallel to the back wall. Initially the movements are gestural and pragmatic, dominated by the talking. As you come into the space the rhythm and pace of how you are moving begin to interact. Then the feeling changes**

**from bravado to something more whimsical as you find a place in the centre of the room. Now the layers and the movement are together in a smooth way, both in terms of content and dynamics. You speak of memory and decline.**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 19/8/09)

#### **4.10 Contrasting Model of direct looking: Contact Improvisation**

Contact Improvisation again serves as a useful contrasting model here, in part because I practised the form alongside my studies with Wunder, thus simultaneously experiencing two diametrically opposed attitudes to the presence of an audience. In keeping with the inward orientation discussed earlier, the form rarely visually engages the audience. Spectators are tacitly included in the dancers' awareness, in part because the audience are usually on the floor or seated in close proximity to them, but if a contact improviser did momentarily break out of her inward-attentiveness to look at the audience it would not be with generative intent. What is worth noting here, is that this lack of visual engagement is partly technical - the form attends to the constant giving and taking of weight, using tactility and peripheral vision as the means of orienting oneself to one's partner - and it is partly ideological.

Contact Improvisation is described by Cynthia Novack in *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* as 'an experiment in movement research continuing the work of the '60s avant-garde' (Novack, 1990: 74). As such, it is historically and ideologically aligned with some of the concerns of experimental dancers in the 1960s (and through the 1970s) and very specifically with their belief that an inward orientation was 'more natural' than an 'outward focus' (Novack, 1990: 135). As Novack explains, an outward orientation 'was seen to indicate a major concern with pleasing an audience, with presenting an (artificial) image of oneself rather than the real, or authentic self' (Novack, 1990: 135). The contact improviser, by contrast, was concerned with physical sensation and touch, and 'took the focus on physical aspects as a neutral value, a part of natural law rather than an aesthetic (cultural) overlay' (Novack, 1990: 68). The dancers also identified with 'signs of naturalism' like 'coughing, laughing, adjusting clothes' so that they could be seen as 'just another person' (Novack, 1990: 136). Here I want to note the confluence between the technical demands of the form - a developed internal focus which facilitates the ability to sense shifts in weight (and keep its dancers safe) - and its ideological underpinnings in

which the dancers wanted to demonstrate their absorption in their work in order to differentiate themselves from ‘any kind of presentational dancer’ (Novack, 1990: 135).<sup>104</sup> These two motivations converge so that the kind of direct look to the audience of strategy 2 is both generatively unnecessary and ideologically suspect. By contrast, *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* intends a dynamic exchange of visual energy with them; it exemplifies an ‘outward orientation’. The aim for the solo improviser is to maximise the thread of energy and compositional possibility that begins by shifting her vision towards the (or a) spectator. As well as using vision to galvanise one’s own creative processes, the improviser’s vision also pulls the audience in. They are visually asked (or enticed) to become more involved with the improvisation, to become energetic and empathetic co-creators of the improviser’s material; to even throw shoes if they so desire.

### **Strategy 3**

#### **Shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli**

*‘...creative expression is a thought in act which learns to express only by drawing upon the past expression present in the body’s hidden motor power...’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: xxii).*

#### **4.11 Withdrawing vision**

Strategy 3 employs a vision that is deliberately uninvolved with either audience or other features of the external environment. The motional quality of reaching towards and engaging with the surroundings or audience is reversed here, as the improviser might literally turn away from the audience; she may adopt an internal focus in which her vision is closed-in or, as I began to practise it, she may still look out in the direction of the audience (or towards other aspects of the external surroundings) but without the intention of composing with what or who she sees. There have also been occasions where I have shut my eyes, taking the disengagement to its most extreme manifestation. After the deliberate decision to shift her vision in any of these ways, the improviser is able to enter into a quick interiority or begin a

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<sup>104</sup> Novack also notes that skilled improvisers, for whom a sensing of weight has become ‘almost second nature’, ‘tend more often to intentionally project their bodies into the surroundings than beginners do’ (Novack, 1990: 119). Retaining an internal focus remains a core value of the form, however, and this outward projection is not tied in with a direct look to the audience.

more gradual process of focussing on the sensations of the moving (or stationary) body, aware of, but not ‘exchanging’ with, external stimuli. I may thus notice things in the space, but in this strategy I do not then attend further to them (visually, corporeally or imaginatively). My vision skims over the surroundings, which in turn take on a more generic colouring. The energised intentionality of engagement with the space is loosened and instead the space is filled with movement inventions that emerge through attending to the sensations of my moving (or stationary) body.

Here the role of the audience also shifts from that of *seeing and responding to the performance space*, in which positionality and movement are determined in part by responsiveness to the audience’s presence (and the improviser’s cognizance of being seen) and *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* in which the performer’s look requests or entices their complicity. In *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* spectators become on-lookers, invited to witness rather than become directly involved in the emergence of the material. As mentioned earlier, however, the improviser still holds the duality of seeing/seen in her awareness. She does not completely forget about the presence of the audience here but rather temporarily backgrounds them, in part because this kind of tacit awareness can shift at any time into a more deliberate engagement and complicity. As part of the creation of longer-form pieces of work, the strategy rests the eyes, loosens the deliberate engagement with external stimuli and in (temporarily) re-claiming an inward orientation allows for a more nuanced compositional outcome that the Merleau-Pontian exclusive reliance on an externally-directed vision can do.

Interweaving this strategy with the first two also enables the improviser to play further with the seeing/seen rubric, as she allows herself to be watched without in this case either initiating or reciprocating the watching. The choice to shift her vision thus becomes a conscious and strategic performance tool, driven by a compositional imperative to make work in a particular way but also propelled by the cognizance that she will not in these moments meet, respond to or counter the audience’s look. It is the ‘I can’ of the body that both determines the composition and is on offer as the composition for the seeing eyes of the audience.

Before discussing the specifics of the strategy in more detail, I want to note that improviser Barbara Dilley began her ensemble training programme - ‘Five Eye Practices’ - after ‘a

friend's comment about a trend of blank looks and stares on the faces of dancers performing contemporary dance choreography' (Buckwalter, 2010: 118). The tendency to 'work with demi-opened eyes and look at the floor' is quite common in dance work (improvised and choreographed) that foregrounds attentiveness to the sensations of moving (Stark Smith, 2005: 39) and, as Dilley noted, dancers 'are so tuned interiorly that their gaze is almost closed' (Stark Smith, 2005: 40). The impulse for the development of her eye practices was that 'people had to stop looking at the floor. That became my instruction' (Stark Smith, 2005: 41). Her first practice, 'Closed eyes', follows through the shifts in awareness that occur with eyes shut and is influenced to a large extent by being played out with other people in the space. The second, 'Peripheral Seeing', is a soft focus that sees the edges of the space and in this sense ties in with the use of vision in Contact Improvisation. The third, 'Infant eyes', is a 'returning to a childlike experience of looking at the world before naming, before judgement, before concept' (Stark Smith, 2005: 40). In terms of directionality, this mirrors my use of an externally-directed vision when *seeing and responding to the performance space* as 'the eyes are looking all around, fascinated' (Stark Smith, 2005: 40), but Dilley's dancer does not then intend to compositionally respond to what is seen. In the fourth practice, 'Seeing the space between', the dancer looks for the negative spaces 'between two people or between people and the walls and the floor' (Stark Smith, 2005: 40). Buckwalter reports that this 'becomes quite a kinetic and energising score for improvisation' (Buckwalter, 2010: 119). As one of the pieces of Immediate Writings below hints, however, I attempted a solo version of this score and found it didn't carry the same generative interest as it does in the ensemble context. The fifth, 'direct looking', is also tied to the ensemble as it involves looking at parts of the other dancers, such as 'the creases of their arm or the way they hold their hand' (Stark Smith, 2005: 40). It also shifts into an imaginative plane as a way of 'looking' without the eyes, using 'the back of your head' for example' (Stark Smith, 2005: 40). This connects with Wunder's 'unsighted looking' in which 'your partner is somewhere behind you but you are still trying to look at him or her as if you had eyes in the back of your skull' (Wunder, 2006: 154). Both of these constructs diverge from the corporeal facticity which grounds my explorations as although an imaginative realm may arise as a result of my use of vision (strategy 4) I have, with Merleau-Ponty, grounded my investigations in literal rather than imaginative shifts of visual direction. In general, Dilley shares my interest in bringing one's use of vision to the forefront of one's awareness, although in my case this includes the option in this strategy of deliberately adopting an

interior focus in order to follow through the compositional consequences (a choice which does not necessarily equate to looking at the floor).

**Aware of my use of vision throughout this  
Looking at gaps and going into them is not very interesting!  
I allow the body, usually within an immeasurably short space of time, to determine  
where I move  
and where I end up  
The inquisitive looking is mingled into this at times, but the space doesn't offer me  
anything beyond the literal  
The loose eyes follow the body in turns,  
up to the ceiling, down to the floor, to the sides  
It is only about moving and watching my own moving**

(Immediate Writings, 7/6/11)

**Movement, a feeling of getting yourself going – curving, arching movements in the back half of the space. Your vision is part of this. Gradually this stops and leads to gestural movement becoming more and more frequent. Each of these stops but they also seem to contain an image that you have discovered, which gradually seems to build an emotional connection.**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 7/6/11)

#### **4.12 Allowing emotions, images and associations to emerge**

If I choose to improvise by following my somatic impulses, I compose by realizing and manifesting my body's intentionality, its ability to express itself. It is a (trained) kinetic intelligence, the 'I can' that I have extended into the domain of learned, acquired expression, that determines the flux and flow of the dance. Here there are parallels with Sheets-Johnstone's model of dance improvisation (discussed further on pp.160-161) in which the improvising body itself creates 'kinetic meanings' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 491) and the improviser experiences a 'vibrant kinetic reality' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 487). In both

Sheets-Johnstone's paradigm and in my adaptation of the 'I can', experiencing movement as 'vibrant', intrinsically intentional and generative stands as a useful model of composition in its own right. I have also found that compositional interest can lie in the emergence of any additional associations that occur as a result of moving. Whilst the movement is unfolding, the improviser may also become aware of emergent impulses to speak, the arrival of mental imagery, emotions or scenarios brought about, in fact, by the experience of moving. Whilst the kinetic intelligence determines the nature and range of the movements themselves, these additional images or impulses might become the generative seeds of additional compositional options (or, as mentioned earlier, the improviser may see something peripherally that she then decides to attend to). If she consciously pursues any of these nascent associations, the improviser will segue into or overlap with a different strategy, frequently strategy 4, *inhabiting an imaginative landscape*. Here the overlap points to a significant blurring in the locus of composition. In *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli*, it is the 'kinetic reality' of the body that propels the composition. When *inhabiting an imaginative landscape*, movement (and frequently text) is fed by the internal landscape of the imagination, a fictional 'reality'. Corporeal choices such as speed, degrees of lightness or weight, gestural language and positionality in space are then filtered through a character, emotion or scenario but when working in conjunction with strategy 3 they will simultaneously be filtered through the proclivities of certain embedded trainings. I pick up on this again in my discussion of strategy 4.

Sheets-Johnstone identifies a similar emergence of 'image or inclination' as a 'kinetic form within a form, a motional thought that momentarily intrudes itself into, or superimposes itself upon, the ongoing process of thinking in movement' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 488). Crucially, for Sheets-Johnstone, these latter ideas or impulses do not interrupt the flow of the movement. The improviser does not stop moving, and, in a noticeable point of divergence from my approach, she is not 'made to choose explicitly' what happens next (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 488). By contrast, when in strategy 3 emergent ideas or impulses arrive superimposed upon the moving body, the improviser does then explicitly choose what to do with them (even if that choice is to not follow them through). This is an internal editing process, which is discussed in strategy 5, *using internal editing*.

**Start with a slight turning movement  
That leads onto the image of spinning and headaches  
I play with a narrative that feels dry so I  
swap energies into faster moving + whispering  
Shutting eyes and the image of a newspaper  
Springs in -  
this image feeds itself like the dizzying images  
I am describing  
girl model on a carousel for 'Pink Week'  
ad for Blenders  
the weather  
I like the fact that my body appears to be  
wobbling but I don't know why  
And I love that I am not where I think I am when I open  
my eyes  
I bring the Dr material back in, more for a feeling  
of story conclusion than for its texture**

(Immediate Writings, 1/3/10)

**Walking and spinning, arms held horizontally from the elbows – a search for self-disorientation that produces the headache story. Attempts to notice the onset and the preceding conditions of each headache are described while the movement material is following the head towards the floor and the walls. This shifts toward talking while moving with the eyes closed (another strategy for self-disorientation?) leads to the story of writing a diary based on images from the newspapers:**

**The girl on the carousel**

**Electric blenders**

**Oversized Marks and Spencers underpants hanging on an outside washing line in winter. The images tumble together with increasing speed until the eyes open and a re-orientation in the space occurs**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 1/3/10)

#### 4.13 Negotiating the ‘I can’

It is important to note that the trainings I have undertaken both open and constrict (and arguably prohibit) movement possibilities. Movements that emerge via my body’s intentionality, whilst pre-reflective in the Merleau-Pontian sense of unrelated to conscious deliberation, do not in this practice connote the ‘open-ended realm of possibilities’ which, as mentioned in chapter three, categorises Sheets-Johnstone’s versioning of the ‘I can’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 136). Rather they denote my current corporeal identity, filtered through previous trainings and they are often expressive of embedded approaches to the generation and expression of movement material.

In conversation in *Nouvelles de Danse*, Steve Paxton talks of his physical sense of himself - which includes the ‘shape’, ‘mass’ and ‘condition’ of his body - as his ‘identity in the world.’ He ‘can’t change that’ even though, as he adds, ‘I wish that identity had more imagination, or more fluidity or something’ (Benoit, 1997: 47). In similar vein, Danielle Goldman notes in *I Want To Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* that technique ‘enables elegant articulation in dance’ but it ‘also shapes the body’s contours and enforces ways of moving’ (Goldman, 2010: 8). It is a ‘tight place’ that makes it difficult to move in surprising or unfamiliar ways (Goldman, 2010: 8).<sup>105</sup> Paxton is also quoted by Goldman as stating that ‘I spent many years studying dance and in that time, I became brainwashed...I came out of the Cunningham Company and I couldn’t stop pointing my toe. That’s the problem. We are creatures of physical habit’ (Paxton quoted in Goldman, 2010: 8). *Shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* deliberately brings to the fore the kinds of shifting engagement one can have with oneself as a creature of ‘physical habit’. As well as allowing a free-flow of movement material to emerge through the intentionality of the body, accepting in the process that where my kinetic intelligence takes me will reflect both the possibilities and the limitations

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<sup>105</sup> Goldman’s text draws on French philosopher Michael Foucault (1926-1984) in its examination of the rhetoric of ‘freedom’ in improvisatory discourse. Goldman understands improvisation in performance and more generally in everyday life as an ‘expressive negotiation with *constraint*’ (Goldman, 2010: 27, original italics), which understood through Foucault means that it involves an ‘ongoing interaction with shifting tight places’ and becomes a means of ‘giving shape to oneself and deciding how to move in relation to an unsteady landscape’ (Goldman, 2010: 146). With Goldman, I identify embedded physical habits as one area of possible constriction but whereas Goldman’s discussion traverses a wide range of social, cultural and physical ‘tight places’, I do not characterise the general terrain of my research in terms of negotiation with strictures or constraints, but in terms of the pragmatics of a purposeful and compositionally-minded use of vision within the immediate space and situation of performance.

of certain trainings, I can choose to interrupt the process of following my somatic impulses by the use of reflective pauses. This technique is a means of intervening in the trajectory of one's own kinetic intelligence. It functions as a stratagem for instigating a more reflective inhabiting and questioning of one's movement tendencies, bringing a degree of conscious thought to bear on the enactment of movement.

#### **4.14 Instigating reflective pauses**

The improviser can choose to interrupt herself by pausing at any moment in the unfolding of a movement improvisation. The kind of pause I am suggesting does not necessarily equate to a complete stillness, indeed individual parts of the body may remain in motion, but it is a means of interrupting the pre-reflective enactment of a particular move or series of moves, sometimes before they are fully realized. If a pause is employed in the beginning stages of a recognisable move - as an arm or leg is being lifted for instance - or at some point in the later manifestation of the move - half way through a signature spin for instance - the improviser literally creates a hiatus in the trajectory towards completion of what is familiar and habitual. Tuned interiorly in these moments, with the same kind of withdrawn vision that is employed throughout *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli*, the improviser engages in a kind of dialogic relationship with her own impulses. The kind of pause that I am talking about may only last a few seconds, but in these rapid moments of re-assessment, if she chooses, the improviser may alter some aspect of the unfolding of the movement - its speed, its direction, its size in space or the body parts involved. She uses the pause to intervene in what is otherwise a pre-reflective enactment of her kinetic bodily intelligence; she temporarily removes herself from the ongoing flow of her own momentum in order to instil a more reflective attentiveness on herself.

Importantly, I am not suggesting that by bringing a greater degree of conscious awareness to the unfolding of a movement, the improviser is able to orchestrate a deep change in her somatic tendencies. What I am suggesting, though, is that by bringing a reflective awareness to the enactment of a movement/s, the improviser brings a different compositional attitude to bear on it. Even if the movement that then follows the pause is part of her familiar repertoire, its re-emergence will not in this instance be pre-reflective. It will be consciously chosen (because of how it feels, how it looks, where it takes her). The difference is not one of value as the withdrawn vision of strategy 3 creates room for both the pre-reflective and

the reflective enactment of movement, but it does signal a difference in the attitudinal approach to composition. The first approach uses the pre-reflective emergence of movement material as a form of composition in its own right or as a means of generating further material. In both instances the improviser unquestioningly composes through the 'I can'. The use of reflective pauses, on the other hand, intervenes in the body's intentionality in order to either focus on the technical aspects of the movement itself - a curiosity propelled by formalistic concerns or even the kind of frustration mentioned earlier by Steve Paxton - or to create an opportunity for a different impulse or idea to emerge. In both cases, strategy 3 functions as a reminder that past techniques still infuse present corporeal choices and by shifting my vision away from external interests - and therefore away from compositions that are explicitly rooted in a chiasmic exchange with my surroundings - I deliberately highlight those techniques as consciously-chosen compositional resources for the present moment.

#### **4.15 Additional uses of the pause**

Pausing can also occur at any point in this model of improvisation, serving as a pivot moment in which the improviser can choose to shift strategies, or simply choose to wait, holding open a lacuna between strategies. As a means of hovering between strategies, suspending the active process of composing, pausing creates a spatial and temporal opening in which inclinations, images, sensations or imaginative ideas might emerge. As mentioned in chapter one, this kind of pause is a useful technique when the improviser finds herself in the in-between places, in the gaps or punctuation points in the emergence of material. Pauses allow both time and space for a fresh impulse to appear, and when a surprising, perhaps random notion or feeling does emerge in this state of receptivity, the phenomenal (lived) sense is that rather than orchestrating a particular outcome, the improviser has enabled something to 'pass into' her (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 123). She has, again in the language of the chiasmic exchange, been 'taken' by an idea or inclination (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 266). This idea or impulse then takes on a more fully constituted existence in the shape and tenor of her subsequent compositional response to it. Although this model of improvisation is founded on the practical implementation and crossover between the five strategies, I also acknowledge those moments where generative ideas occur in the gaps, in the more nebulous zone that exists between strategies.

#### 4.16 A parallel model of intervening in one's own flow: Inhibition

I have already introduced Sheets-Johnstone's parallel model of movement improvisation and continue my analysis of it in strategy 5 - *using internal editing* - so here I want to note a shared interest in the idea of intervening in one's own corporeal flow, common to two of the dance artists that I discussed in chapter two - Julyen Hamilton and Lisa Nelson. Whereas I frame the idea of intervention in terms of pausing, Hamilton and Nelson refer to a process of 'inhibition'. Hamilton identifies a kind of pre-movement moment, the impulse towards a movement 'before it actually becomes' something and he blocks its emergence, he 'inhibits' if it is not 'in' the piece that he is making (Stark Smith, 2011: 32). As previously discussed, Hamilton is motivated by a compulsion to follow a very specific set of impulses as he creates *the* piece, so he inhibits whatever does not match the 'line' that he is following, before it forms into a movement, a word or an action (Stark Smith, 2011: 32). Lisa Nelson also talks of practising the ability 'to redirect the shaping or intention of an action before it appeared, the instant I felt it become organised in my body' (Nelson, 2004: 23). This is a kind of inhibition at the micro level of impulse that Hamilton refers to. For Nelson, this 'became a personal technique for provoking new movement patterns and a useful strategy for repositioning my imagination' (Nelson, 2004: 23). Nelson also mentions inhibition as 'another skill which is very important in order to learn' (Benoit, 1997: 79). She says that there 'is a lot more that I'm deciding not to do, than I am deciding to do in my body' (Benoit, 1997: 81). For me this also relates to *using internal editing*, although the decisions about what not to do in my case also extend to decisions about voicing text or pursuing a particular narrative line.

Continuing my discussion of Contact Improvisation, I also note that the concept of the 'Gap' can be read as a kind of hiatus in the trajectory towards completion of what is familiar and habitual, so relates to my use of the pause within strategy 3. The Gap also represents a kind of unknown place, so functions analogously to my more general use of the pause between strategies. In its most literal sense, the Gap occurs because of the disorientation and suspension of stable reference points brought about by falling and tumbling. 'Being in a gap is like being in a fall before you touch bottom. You're suspended - in time as well as space - and you don't really know how long it'll take to get "back"' comments veteran practitioner Nancy Stark Smith (Stark Smith, 1987: 247). She regards 'the Gap' as 'one of the most precious spots offered by improvisation' because it is 'a place from which more directions are possible than anywhere else' (Stark Smith, 1987: 246). This is a literal disorientation, but

in my practice an analogous between-place is signalled by the pause between strategies; the hovering between moments of decisive compositional intent. The pause is the temporal and spatial zone which signifies a 'momentary suspension of reference point' (Stark Smith, 1987: 246).

Stark Smith also points out how adopting a kind of inhibitory stance - deliberately not following a first impulse - creates a 'gap' in which something else might emerge. 'Holding the moment open for a few seconds longer widens the gap where the old behaviour/idea/movement/thought/feeling would have gone' Stark Smith says. 'And maybe you have nothing to put in its stead. So you put in nothing' (Stark Smith, 1987: 247). Here the Gap functions to break a particular momentum and in doing so it encourages the improviser to bring a reflective attentiveness to her work. In this sense it functions like the pause in strategy 3 and has the potential to re-orient the improviser towards new material. Crucially, 'nothing' might emerge, but what is significant is not whether something interesting or even anything at all, emerges in the gap, but that the improviser brings an alert attentiveness to a moment that would otherwise be pre-reflectively enacted.

Both the gap in Contact Improvisation and the pause in this strategy are thus useful techniques when the improviser wants to engage in a process of 'reckoning with habitual perspectives and behaviors (sic)' (Stark Smith, 1987: 247). The strategy also allows for those moments when she does not want to 'reckon' with habit, however, but desires to consciously compose with and through her kinetic intelligence. In making the embodied past the locus of composition at these times, that past is deliberately made manifest, enlivened and perhaps celebrated, more evidently so as the improviser's vision temporarily withdraws from external interests, enabling her to concentrate on the body's 'I can' in its idiosyncratic moment-by-moment compositional unfolding.

**All dance. No words**  
**Playing with sculptural qualities – when shadows appear**  
**to me on the wall, they serve to pause and punctuate**  
**I see fingers of 3 hands descending**  
**And later a jazzy top hat + tails echo.**  
**Deliberately traversing the space in random (?) patterns and pathways**  
**Lots of in + out of the floor – the harshness of the landings**  
**Some feeling of wall and floor – the back rails screech**  
**The floor squeals some**  
**So there is noticing, which arrests the moving**  
**Or just deciding to stop – considering changes of**  
**Direction and independent body parts (that’s the reading again, hovering around the**  
**edges)**  
**Breath – hearing, sometimes making something of it**

(Immediate Writings, 19/8/09)

**The articulation of energy.**  
**Beginning by creating movement pathways across the space, and with giving your**  
**weight to the walls through your hands.**  
**You expand this by going into and away from the floor. You open out the energy and**  
**your breath becomes audible – you repeat the pressings into the floor and walls and**  
**continue to increase the energy. Fast turns, placing on foot between your hands and**  
**going into the floor, all get repeated.**  
**The higher energy begins to create pauses, usually with some aspect of giving weight**  
**into the floor, then we hear your breath, sometimes a small cough. The energy**  
**continues and the pauses become more frequent. The audible breath is a constant**  
**presence.**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 19/8/09)

## Strategy 4 Inhabiting an imaginative landscape

*'Expression is like a step taken in the fog – no one can say where, if anywhere, it will lead'*  
(Merleau-Ponty, 1964d: 3).

### 4.17 Making Worlds

Strategy 4 can be understood as consequent upon any of the first three strategies already outlined - as a response to what may be noted by the externally-directed vision of *seeing and responding to the performance space* or in response to the connectivity established by *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience*. Additionally, the inward-attentiveness that is facilitated by *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* may lead, through somatic sensations, to the emergence of images or feelings that the improviser may then use as a way of transitioning to an imaginative landscape. In keeping with the fluidity of the strategies overall, *inhabiting an imaginative landscape* can also take shape in a pause between strategies or be utilised when a chance occurrence shifts the locus of the improviser's compositional attentiveness. The strategy thus stems from what is experienced in the immediate space of the performance - a visual (or occasionally aural) stimulus, a corporeal impulse - and it rests on the improviser's investment in and engagement with an imaginary landscape as it emerges and builds.

In this interest in building imaginative landscapes and the transformation of what is seen, felt or at times heard into fanciful or fictional constructs, the strategy diverges significantly from Merleau-Ponty's vision/action rubric of composition, in which the painter's role is very specifically demarcated. Using his questioning vision, the painter accesses and then transmits the properties and qualities of the surroundings onto canvas; a vision/action responsiveness that colours the process of artistic expression as a means of making explicit the equivalences between the painter and his world; the continuum of existence that is a central tenet of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Strategy 4, however, is infused with a desire to engage in associative, transformative play, resulting in invention and new cosmologies; 'worlds' of the improviser's own making. Composition here may thus begin with the chiasmic connection with features of the external surroundings that instantiates the painter's work, but the intent behind the ensuing act of composition is very different. Its focus is on

making a particular atmosphere, scenario or environment - a particularised 'world' - within the givens of the performance context.

Here too the ideology underpinning the strategy also carries particular ramifications for the inhabitation of space in improvised work, as this impetus towards using the givens of the immediate performance context as stepping-stones towards the authorship of new imaginative spaces is significant. In line with what Goldman in her discussion of improvised music calls the 'world-making potential of improvisation', this strategy practises the ability to 'make new spaces, to create and form one's surroundings continually as one would wish them to be' (Goldman, 2010: 143). Discussing Bill Dixon, Goldman notes that he was motivated by a desire to not 'merely accept the world as it is given' (Goldman, 2010: 143); he was keen to make new music because in doing so he posited an alternative to the sounds or noises that were already present, 'whether one wanted their presence or not' (Dixon quoted in Goldman, 2010: 142). This impetus towards transformation also grounds strategy 4, although here the improviser consciously re-imagines and re-creates the givens of the performance context whilst also remaining firmly receptive to them - 'accepting' if you like that she is both grounded in and able to move beyond them.

As mentioned earlier, the temper of this composing also differs from that of the painter who is 'engulfed' by the chiasm's incandescent force (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 188). This strategy does practice an immersion in an imaginative landscape, an entwinement with its logic and momentum, but this absorption is subtended by a structuring sensibility, a simultaneous shaping of that landscape for the seeing eyes of the audience. Optimally, then, the strategy functions in such a way that the improviser's content is determined both by the fancies of her imagination as they arise - she is chiasmically 'taken' by her imagination which is itself sparked by something seen or experienced in the space - and by her moment-by-moment shaping of that imaginative content via the encroachments of strategy 5, *using internal editing*.

I continue the discussion on this idea of shaping the material at the end of this section but here want to note that the imaginative landscape may reside outside the body, somewhere on the stage space - a literal location, other people - but alternatively or simultaneously a rich interiority may be experienced, an emotional texture suffusing the improviser's choices from

within.<sup>106</sup> I use the word ‘landscape’ to encompass both a literal geography and an emotional terrain, but in either case it is by both immersing herself in this landscape, allowing it to function as the cog or driver of the material, and simultaneously moulding that material by making choices about its articulation, that the strategy can enable a useful generativity.

An imaginative landscape might begin as the suggestion of a place or a scenario that itself emerges from an architectural detail or an object in the space, such as the pink shoes discussed earlier. Or a particular somatic sensation might be the starting-point for an emergent character; an instance of this route is caught in the Immediate Writings below. If the improviser then adopts the point of view of this emerging character, or uses a third-person perspective to begin to describe an event, she begins to enter into the logic of this alternative, imaginative landscape. It can then be further determined and coloured by the improviser’s aesthetic tendencies and preferences for composing and shaping material - such as the associative building that I described in chapter two - but it functions overall as a kind of creative visualisation in which the improviser ‘sees’ features of an external landscape, or ‘feels’ the emotions or situatedness of a character.

The improviser may thus choose to silently inhabit a landscape, expressing emotion or situation purely corporeally. Specific corporeal choices such as speed, degrees of lightness or weight, isolation of particular body parts or oscillations between locomotion and stillness in space are filtered through a character, emotion or scenario. This kind of corporeal invention operates in a nexus with strategy 3, however, as at least some of the specific movement vocabulary will emerge from the embedded kinetic intelligence of the ‘I can’, the movements that are ‘already with me’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 94). I do not want to suggest that there cannot also be surprising, new additions to the improviser’s corporeal vocabulary here, but rather to emphasise that the locus of composition is shared between the emergent fictional world of the imagination and the body’s extant corporeal proclivities, its ‘vibrant kinetic reality’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 487). An example of this over-lap is given below.

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<sup>106</sup> I want to distinguish this use of the imagination from the use of imagery in dance work, as illustrated in the writings of Eric Franklin for instance. His writings are geared towards the use of imagery as a means of enhancing dancers’ technique and expressivity, and particular images may be determined before work begins or they may arise spontaneously. There is, however, a passage in *Dynamic Alignment Through Imagery* (Franklin, 1996) that is relevant to my point about the physical location of the imaginative landscape. Franklin notes that in dance ‘you can place your image inside your body, on the surface of your body, in the near or intimate space surrounding you, in your slightly larger personal space, or on the whole stage, even in the entire world’ (Franklin, 1996: 52).

Another compositional avenue is the extemporising of text, offering a first or third person perspective on an unfolding scenario. Here the improviser functions as story-teller and in keeping with Chris Johnston's understanding of the generative energy of the imagination in dramatic improvisation, ideas and images are inhabited and cultivated so that they can 'spawn' their own world within the world of the improvised event itself (Johnston, 2006: 227). As with the purely corporeal enactment, the improviser here remains connected to the logic and momentum of this newly created 'world', perhaps building verbal material associatively as I described in chapter two.

As I have practised these approaches, I have also practised oscillating between them, adopting different and multiple perspectives on an emergent landscape by combining movement and text. In one of the Cellar Bar performances, there was an extended section of movement and text in which the logic of a fictional character's emotional landscape determined the choice of verbal text, the speed of the movement and the idiosyncratic gestural vocabulary.<sup>107</sup> Strategy 3 was also at play, however, as some movement vocabulary - spins and leg kicks, for example - did not emerge from the logic of the imagination, but rather from the store of movements that tend to arise pre-reflectively when I have shifted vision *away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli*. In the moment of emergence, however, I chose to do these movements fast, imbued with a staccato quality and combined with a first-person narrative. These latter compositional choices stemmed from a character logic that was the result of an immersion in strategy 4, so here *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* and *inhabiting an imaginative landscape* operated in a tense, but productive dialectic.

**Feeling the potential structure as I start – I mean,  
the sense that things might or could unfold  
So I do slow moving – feeling inwards –  
unusually for me it is the muscular sensation of my head  
turning that gives rise to an image – the head, the  
headless puppet.  
Narrative – long, stringy comes from this.  
Different characters – dad, child, mother populate the story.**

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<sup>107</sup> Laurence Batley Theatre, Huddersfield, UK, [22 September 2011].

**At some point I know I won't have a dramaturgical  
answer to why the puppet has no head so it becomes  
a sort of tease in the material  
A reminder that dramaturgy won't always tie up neatly.  
In the gap – I move – then introduce a wayward strand  
that is related only visually – a big head rather than  
a no-head and thematically because I talk about  
my father – or at least a father.**

(Immediate Writings, 29/6/10)

**The headless puppet of Prague  
Meets  
A sleepless girl  
Who dreams of apples  
Everywhere**

**But now, she comes down the stairs  
Each night at 3  
To drink milk and to  
Dream of falling asleep.  
Why? She thinks.  
A mother and father  
disagree about what to do...  
And she filters what they say.  
As she grows, she goes..  
And comes back, with presents.  
She wants to give him  
A teddy bear, with an enormous head.  
His reward for the headless puppet.**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 29/6/10)

Whatever characters or situations emerge and are made manifest through the imaginative dimension and whichever performance modality she chooses to express them with (selections made *using internal editing*), the improviser will simultaneously orient herself to two different uses of the space. She will occupy, and be seen to occupy, the visible surroundings of the performance space and will continue to make decisions in response to the dialectic of seeing/being seen within these actual parameters. She will also occupy an alternative landscape, the imaginative dimension, which will also infiltrate her decisions within that performance space. To the extent that she fulsomely engages with the logic of the landscape that she inhabits, there will be a useful momentum to her occupation of the space. Equally, to the extent that she attends to her external articulation of this landscape, there will be a specificity and concreteness to her actions and utterances.

On this note, it is worth pointing out that the originating source of the improviser's imaginative play may or may not be evident to the audience. In other words they may see, for instance, that a particular interaction with an element of the visible space leads to the emergence of linked thematic material - such as a spectator's pink shoes. Alternatively, the audience may remain oblivious to the source of a particular imaginative landscape. Crucially, in terms of how the strategy pragmatically operates, once an imaginative landscape has been entered into, the sources of the ongoing associative layering will remain invisible (in the everyday sense) to the audience. As mentioned earlier, they are invited to follow the threads of the improviser's imaginative connections as they are revealed, but the wellsprings or cogs of this imaginative play will remain invisible to them. The material that results from an engagement with this strategy can thus be quite allusive and elliptical which in turn encourages the audience's own imaginations to engage with the emergent material. Their own invisible inner thoughts and images are brought into play alongside those of the improviser.

#### **4.18 Parallel and contrasting models of the imagination: Keith Johnstone and Stephen Nachmanovitch**

In his seminal work on improvisation, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (Johnstone, 1981), Keith Johnstone talks of the centrality of the role of the imagination in a section on spontaneity. He makes three observations that serve as a useful model alongside which the role of the imagination in this strategy can be positioned. He writes that there are three stages that he tries to take his students through, involving the realisation:

(1) that we struggle against our imaginations, especially when we try to be imaginative; (2) that we are not responsible for the content of our imaginations; and (3) that we are not, as we are taught to think, our 'personalities', but that the imagination is our true self.

(Johnstone, 1981: 105)

Johnstone doesn't elaborate on these enticing statements, but I do so here in order to locate my own ideas within a relevant discourse. His first point on the effort of 'trying' to be imaginative chimes with one of the potential challenges faced in solo improvisation, when the act of improvising seems uninspired, when interesting or abundant ideas are unforthcoming, and the improviser 'tries' to force imaginative material. Johnstone's point is that that kind of effort is rarely effective and, in tandem with his other points, he seems to suggest that the imagination will at any rate emerge of its own accord. In the model of improvisation I am putting forward, imaginative responses may arise as a result of shifts in the direction and intentionality of vision (or through a pause or in the nebulous zone between strategies) and it is then by both immersing herself in and externally articulating the imaginative realm in strategy 4 that the improviser can allow the content to take shape and build. The strategy's emphasis is on maintaining a generative responsiveness to the imaginative landscape that is emerging. In addition, treated collectively, the strategies attempt to ameliorate the stasis of 'trying' to instil a creative imagination (or any other forced outcome) by instilling instead an attitude of openness and receptiveness to the current circumstances which itself might determine the strategy the improviser uses at any given moment. If the imagination seems lethargic or absent, the improviser in this practice can shift her compositional interest, choosing to concentrate on the unfolding of movement for instance (strategy 3) or to work corporeally in relation to the architecture (strategy 1).

Johnstone's second point - 'that we are not responsible for the content of our imaginations' (Johnstone, 1981: 105) - is also useful for this discussion as it suggests that the imagination exists beyond an individual's conscious control. There are two different implications of this statement that I want to note. In as much as it implies that the specifics of imaginative content arrive unbidden, that the improviser can be open to imaginative ideas but cannot exactly determine what they will be, it is a resonant notion. Imaginative play can thus be practised in a general way - as I do by opening myself to visual stimuli - but the specifics of content can be understood as existing independently of any kind of conscious manipulation. Much like Chris Johnston's characterisation of the imagination as the 'devil', the

imagination for Johnstone brings something unknown or unfamiliar to the improviser's own processes. It is a pro-active entity that acts upon the improviser who remains receptive and responsive to whatever it does.

Johnstone's remark 'that we are not responsible for the content of our imaginations' can also be read as referring to content as it is presented to the audience, however, thereby suggesting that the improviser is 'not responsible' for what she chooses to reveal. This reading corroborates Johnstone's interest in promulgating a kind of unfettered spontaneity, captured in a statement on improvising verse, when he says that his 'job' is 'to get the actors to go where the verse takes them. If you don't care what you say, and you go with the verse, the exercise is exhilarating' (Johnstone, 1981: 105). Bearing in mind that Johnstone's comment pertains to class exercises (and I instanced a similar example of not 'caring' what you're saying in relation to some of my class exercises in chapter two), I note that my performative concern with compositional structuring modifies this view. Whilst the arrival of spontaneous ideas, images and corporeal impulses is invited throughout the strategies, and there is considerable compositional interest in seeing where these spontaneous flickers may lead, the improviser also makes ongoing choices about what to reveal or keep concealed from the audience. There is a continual exchange between 'going with' the spontaneous responses and editing or discarding them (this latter point is expressly discussed in strategy 5).

Johnstone's final, and most provocative statement - that 'the imagination is our true self' (Johnstone, 1981: 105) - is striking in part because Stephen Nachmanovitch utilises the identical turn of phrase when discussing the significance of creative action in *Free Play*.<sup>108</sup> 'The imagination is our true self', Nachmanovitch writes, 'and is in fact the living, creating god within us' (Nachmanovitch, 1990: 193). When Johnstone uses the phrase, he implies that the true self emerges when the improviser allows her imagination to freely determine her choices of material, uncensored and unimpeded. For Nachmanovitch, the imagination is the key to 'a transformation we can effect right now' (Nachmanovitch, 1990: 193), the significance of which is linked to the freeing of 'whatever creation is in us' and the emergence of 'our much vaster, simpler, true self' (Nachmanovitch, 1990: 194). The imagination is 'the living, creating god within us', another example of his belief in an essential interconnectedness between individual and world, a connectivity which is

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<sup>108</sup> Johnstone also almost replicates the phrase in *Impro for Storytellers* (Johnstone, 1999). 'Ultimately students have to accept that the imagination is the true self', he says, 'but it's not easy to grasp this nettle' (Johnstone, 1999: 73).

foundational to creative expression. In the case of both of these practitioners, the ‘true self’ exists beyond the limited, quotidian parameters of ‘personality’ and it is by allowing the imagination to take hold that this true self can be expressed.

The ‘self’ that emerges through imaginative play in strategy 4 is not necessarily ‘truer’, ‘vaster’ or ‘simpler’ than the improviser’s everyday self (or the self that is expressed through bodily intentionality in strategy 3 or who may talk with the audience in strategy 2) but it is a self that embodies the dialectical tension of two simultaneous occupations of the space. By occupying the visible and tangible surroundings of the performance space in a self-aware way, making choices through the filter of her ‘aspect for the other’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 245), the improviser grounds her compositional activity in the specificity of the immediate surroundings and within the dynamic of the seeing/seen paradigm as I have re-framed it in this practice. By simultaneously enabling an alternative, imaginative (and intangible) landscape to infiltrate her choices, she also creatively redefines and re-characterises that performance space, inhabiting ‘worlds’ of her own making that move her beyond the concrete givens of the immediate context.

**Moving through space, seeing it from different  
angles**

**A gaze upwards creates a monologue –**

**The words escape me now but I’m after security,  
somewhere**

**to place the bobby-pin I’d found + picked up**

**But shortly after I see a 2<sup>nd</sup> bobby pin on the floor**

**“ah”**

**The surprise and pleasure are real – as if  
it magically appeared – I just happened to be in a certain spot and then I looked  
down...**

**Clutching 2 bobbypins in my fists – this chance  
sighting gives me a thread of narrative energy**

**Moments, in character, of talking to Andrew  
propel it along but so too does the mental landscape of the persona – she doesn’t  
know what to do with 2.**

**They remain, clutched, till the end.**

**Passwords +boxes + computers have proliferated.**

(Immediate Writings, 6/6/11)

**Cracking the codes.**

**It's safer to have multiple layers of protection,**

**Codes within codes,**

**Slipping between movement, space and language,**

**Finding the passwords that let you shift between them until all are functioning.**

**Your eyes pass over the lights, leaving scars on the retina.**

**“I'm not looking at you...you hurt” you say.**

**I can imagine the coloured blobs that float in your vision, yet you seem to understand**

**how this all works.**

**Letting the layers speak to each other, and finding a way to let them all speak to me**

**too.**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 6/6/11)

## **Strategy 5 Using internal editing**

*‘This precession of what is upon what one sees and makes seen, of what one sees and makes seen upon what is – this is vision itself’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 188).*

### **4.19 Appraising what is seen**

In this strategy, the improviser internally sifts through options, some of which are revealed as threads of movement or spoken material and some of which, having been considered, will remain invisible to the audience because discarded. Internal editing is grounded in an attitude of aesthetic discrimination and illuminates a perspective that values choice-making as part of the explicitly compositional character of the practice, part of deciding how things might go together over a longer-form piece. As a piece develops, the strategy encompasses the improviser's awareness of her trajectory, the (visible) decisions that have been made, so each new element is considered in relation to what has gone before.

This strategy weaves throughout the previous four strategies and initially comes into play when the performance context presents multiple options - when the improviser feels the pull of variegated, divergent, even contradictory impulses. One of the consequences of treating the performance space as given to be explored, as potentially containing hidden ('invisible') options that might reveal themselves by re-orienting one's inhabitation of the architectural surroundings, visually ranging over things, lingering over visual details or being receptive to threads of imaginative, corporeal or emotional associations, is that more compositional options can then emerge. If the improviser then becomes aware of the co-existence of multiple choices in terms of her compositional avenues, internal editing is used to discriminate between them, both in terms of choices between strategies and choices within strategies. This includes what material to 'put' out into the space and which to keep invisible, the timing with which that material is made visible and the performance modality in which it will be expressed. In contrast to Merleau-Ponty's compositional paradigm in which choice-making can be treated as an implicit part of the painter's approach but is absent in the fevered rhetoric used to describe the moment of creative genesis, the improviser in this practice explicitly engages her discriminatory or judgemental sense, appraising elements of the performance context for their generative potential and then choosing how to articulate (make visible) her responsiveness.

#### **4.20 Multiple Choice**

At times during the course of an improvisation several different responses to a particular stimulus might present themselves. The improviser's 'exploratory gaze' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 315) might well have registered something of visual interest, for instance, but there may be a number of options in terms of her compositional response to it. An object in the space might simultaneously prompt contrasting scenarios or narratives, as I discovered when the pink shoes were thrown at me and I felt the pull of various different responses. The same source might provoke contesting impulses in turns of modality - the desire to extemporise text and the desire to respond in movement. Different approaches to the use of text may occur as options - direct address to the audience, adopting a character's point of view without engaging in a play of looks with the audience, or combining text with movement. Within the latter choice, the improviser may feel as if she wants to explore her corporeality with the different emphases permitted by *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli and inhabiting an imaginative landscape*. Wearing over-sized pink shoes, I was as interested in experimenting with the radical alterations in my

body's sense of alignment and posture as I was in pursuing the fictional character whose story I eventually told. As well as these kinds of multiple and at times conflicting responses to a single stimulus, the improviser remains involved in an ongoing process of choosing which sensory information, external and internal, to attend to.

**I need to derive energy. It's a bit like I have too many interesting ideas in my head and they are weighting the body. Dancing, moving – I let myself do it – purely generatively**

–

**I want to see if it will loosen ideas as well as the body – It's a tried and tested  
“method”.**

**The image of what Paddington Bear is wearing comes to mind – Andrew won't know  
this –**

**the boots, duffel coat + hat**

**It is transplanted onto a 'her' who becomes the subject of threads of narrative and my  
body**

**the cigarette comes from a physical gesture**

**Looking at the walls I see the library.**

**Some movement feels character/narrative driven –**

**It gets faster which is also a way of churning up the  
narrative pot**

**Speed is interesting when tired**

**Some sudden fullstops in movement and text – follow-on-thoughts**

**What do you do at night?**

**Impressions of urban life pop in and pop out as verbal material**

**I recognise another way I like to operate – seeing these images**

**Microseconds before telling them**

(Immediate Writings, 18/8/09)

**Moving, hands and arms leading, arcs and spirals follow. Keeping to the right of the centre line of the space, moving forwards and backwards in the space.**

**The hands create energy and rhythm through body percussion, creating little jumps and journeys into and out of the floor. The breath becomes audible and your mouth begins to form words that I cannot hear.**

**Your hands now create readable gestures connected to tying a bow on your chest, and wrapping something around your head.**

**It is a story about “she”, whispered but continually moving, with repeated gestures, especially a gesture of smoking a cigarette.**

**The words get clearer, getting dressed, putting on a hat, smoking...you shift from “she” to “I” and a story about wanting to sleep.**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 18/8/09)

It is important to note that there are contrasting views on the function of a kind of deliberate choice-making within improvisation. In her section on ‘Dance Improvisation: A Paradigm of thinking in movement’, within *The Primacy of Movement*, Sheets-Johnstone states that:

with respect to possibilities, it is not as if I am contemplating - or must contemplate - a range of options in order to choose from among them a ripest course of action, given now this, now that present situation. My possibilities in the ongoing present are not explicit and neither is my choosing.

(Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 487)

In her ‘steadfast and serious reflection on the phenomenon of improvisational dance’, Sheets-Johnstone concludes that ‘movement is neither a medium through which a dancer’s thoughts emerge nor a kinetic system of counters for mediating his or her thoughts; movement constitutes the thoughts themselves’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 492).

In the model of improvisation I am putting forward, Sheets-Johnstone’s argument has parallels with my view of the kinetic experience of moving pre-reflectively, described in strategy 3. There, as already outlined, the subjective sense is that the body enacts its own intentionality; movement that is ‘already with me’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 94) emerges without the need for conscious thought on my part. This phenomenon of moving is in keeping with Sheets-Johnstone’s argument that the body creates ‘kinetic meanings’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 491). Although I don’t frame the movement that emerges in strategy 3 as

‘the thoughts themselves’, I do experience a ‘vibrant kinetic reality’ that extemporises movement and ‘has the possibility of creating a dance on the spot’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 487). *Using internal editing*, however, offers an alternative proposition to the other characteristic of Sheets-Johnstone’s model of improvisation, which is that it is only in works that are choreographed from the outside that the choreographer ‘stands back from time to time and views the work in progress with a view to judging its form’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 495). *Using internal editing* is a form of ‘standing back’ whilst simultaneously creating the work; it is a means of making critical judgements about elements as diverse as timing, attention to particular gestures or whether or not to continue following a particular line of either danced or spoken material. The difference rests again in the fact that for Sheets-Johnstone ‘possibilities arise and dissolve for me in a fluid complex of relationships, qualities, and patternings without becoming thematic for me’; choices ‘are not explicitly made’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 489). By contrast, internally sifting through options is a technique that comes into play in my model for the very reason that ‘possibilities in the ongoing present’ do become ‘explicit’ (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 487). This perceived multifariousness of choice therefore results in an ongoing process of explicitly making selections as part of engaging in the process of composition.

As a side-note, there is a perhaps surprising convergence between Sheets-Johnstone and Merleau-Ponty in their attentiveness to the seamless interweaving of perception and movement in both everyday existence and creative activity - although in Merleau-Ponty’s case it is visual perception that is entwined with movement and in Sheets-Johnstone’s it is movement itself that functions as a way of directly inhabiting and exploring the surroundings. Merleau-Ponty’s painter, ‘engulfed’ by the metaphorical fire of the external surroundings, also operates in a state of unmediated, immersive flow that is similar in quality to Sheets-Johnstone’s paradigm of improvised dance (and similar in kind if not in degree to the kinetic composition that I have now framed into *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli*). As a tool for making more deliberate, strategic decisions whilst also in the flow of composition, however, *using internal editing* cuts across this kind of full immersion (as does the improviser’s constant awareness of being seen).

In my research, internally editing whilst simultaneously working with material that has already formed in the space can be illustrated through the example of an extended section of pure movement, in which the improviser allows a dance to unfold by following her somatic

impulses. This movement might lead to images of a character, a geographical situation or particular words. The internal editing here will involve her choosing which (if any) of these other associations to pursue as material that she makes visible for the audience, but she continues to allow her movement to unfold whilst this process is underway. As she doesn't have to consciously determine her choreography - the movement is propelled by her kinetic intelligence - this editing can occur whilst she is in motion, overlapping *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* and *using internal editing*. In this example, 'a critical thinking in movement' operates at the same time as 'a creative thinking in movement' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 495), two modes which for Sheets-Johnstone only occur simultaneously in non-improvisational dances that 'are choreographed from the outside' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998: 495). In the above example they occur together as part of the moment-by-moment unfolding of the improvised movement.

Internal editing can also involve a short pause in which the improviser decides which response to make visible for the audience. What is important is that engaging in a process of internal editing in this way does not create an unnecessary lag on the unfolding of material, or result in a wavering, vacillating occupation of space. On the contrary, the technique is designed to encourage decisiveness and to promote a clear engagement with specific, elected, material. Even whilst pausing, the strategy practises a form of rapid choice-making that is designed to bring clarity, decisiveness and aesthetic form to the particular material that the improviser elects to make visible. When the improviser chooses to pause, the kind of animated stillness that she will occupy may only last a number of seconds.

#### **4.21 Parallel models of choice-making: Julyen Hamilton and Yvonne Rainer**

Hamilton offers a point of view that is more closely aligned with the pragmatics of this strategy than the views of Sheets-Johnstone, when he talks in his DVD of dance improvisation of a 'hierarchy' of variations and of the need to choose between possibilities:

It's a very strong discipline to follow which life has to be manifested that moment and to not lose it because every movement has in it the seed of what needs to come next and there's always a very deep hierarchy of all the possible variations. There's only one that has to happen. Many could but only one has to happen.

(Hamilton, 1994)

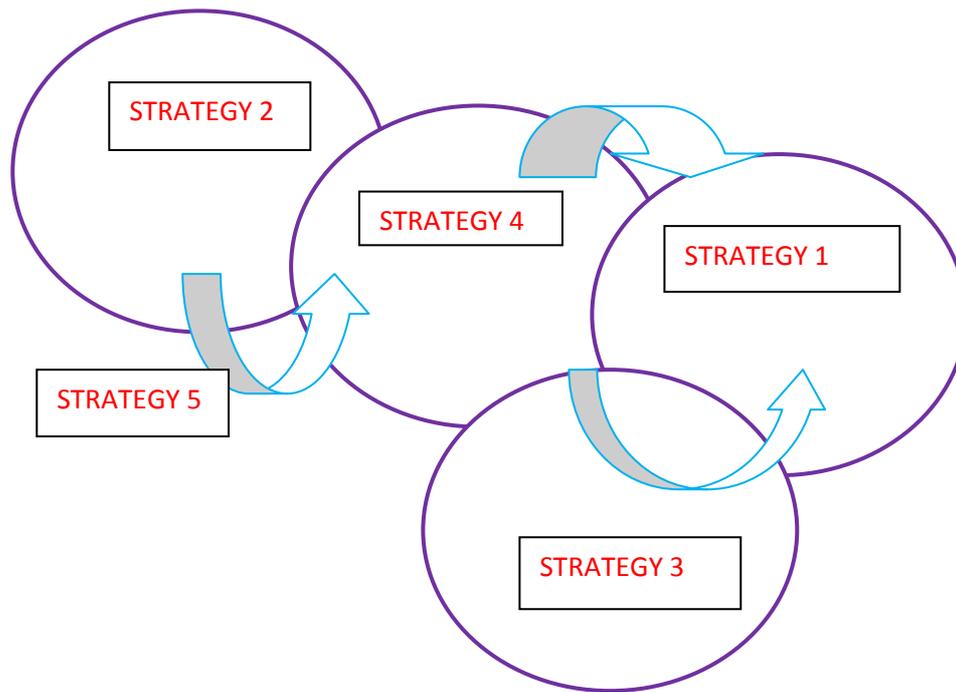
For Hamilton there is a 'deep discipline' in recognising that at any moment 'one thing is more important than all the other possibilities and that's the one you have to take'

(Hamilton, 1994). He doesn't elaborate in this context on what constitutes the 'more important' possibility and he confesses later in the DVD that 'the reason why that orchestration of movement comes through your body then...I don't know' (Hamilton, 1994). It is, however, connected to the 'organic genetic itch to do that then' and 'the profusion of tingling necessity to move that that genetic organic organism wants to put out' (Hamilton, 1994). The hierarchy of significance and the basis of choice-making lie here, perhaps, in the intensity of the urge to expression that an improviser associates with a certain impulse to move or the need to 'serve' the emerging 'line' of any given piece discussed earlier (Stark Smith, 2011: 32). In *using internal editing*, by contrast, the choice of which material to make visible for the audience is determined not so much by a hierarchy in which 'only one (choice) has to happen' but by a choice (which could be one amongst several equally strong alternatives) that embodies and furthers the improviser's physical or imaginative compositional responsiveness to the current circumstances.

*Some Thoughts on Improvisation* also reveals a methodological interest in explicitly choosing between options, both in the original art gallery event and more widely. Rainer characterises her generative approach as 'sizing up the situation' which 'doesn't take much doing' (Rainer, 1974: 298). First she notices the 'purely physical' impulses, vividly described as 'the pulse and tongue of the body in the place, in the space of the place' (Rainer, 1974: 298). After these physical impulses come the 'anti-impulses' and the decisions on what to pursue. 'So I keep on sizing up the situation', she says, and 'I keep walking' and 'I make decisions' (Rainer, 1974: 298). She states that she can 'choose not to carry thru an impulse' (Rainer, 1974: 299). In musing on one sort of impulse to 'defile, to desecrate, to shit on this whiteness, to crush this fragility' (an impulse that she claims is 'a common impulse with many people' in the gallery), she then states that 'I DON'T HAVE TO DO IT', the capital letters further emphasising her freedom of choice and the significance she attaches to her ability to consciously wield that freedom (Rainer, 1974: 299). 'I WILL NOT MAKE AN ISSUE OF IT', again in capital letters, bluntly asserts her ability to 'size up' the situation and make choices, not because there is an exigency for a particular choice to become manifest (as there is for Hamilton) but because the act of explicitly making choices is empowering. Crucially, at the moment of committing to one's choice and of 'moving into an action', the improviser 'must behave and feel as though no other choice exists...' (Rainer, 1974: 299). There is a fine distinction here between Hamilton's approach in which he tries to sense the 'more important' possibility and Rainer's

in which the improviser must behave ‘as though’ no other choice existed. Rainer’s methodology seems to acknowledge that a choice may not be the most productive, generative or satisfying, but the improviser must nonetheless ‘take a chance’ on the ‘fitness’ of their instincts (Rainer, 1974: 299).

*Using internal editing* illuminates quite starkly the solo authoring process and the consequences of taking a series of ‘chances’ on various compositional avenues. Decisions that have been articulated in the space, without also being negotiated with other performers, clearly highlight an individual’s generative processes and aesthetic proclivities. As well as operating as a tool for making and articulating choices, then, this strategy also functions over time to develop and foreground the desires, interests or tastes that underpin and colour those choices, aiding in the development of individual styles and approaches to making material. As mentioned earlier, developing and articulating aesthetic proclivities is a by-product rather than explicit aim of these strategies, but in implementing strategy 5 over a period of time, one’s individual tastes (or, after Nelson, ‘visual desires’) will become a more pronounced determinant of specific improvisatory choices.



**FIGURE 7** shows a number of significant nexus points between strategies: **1 & 3** - *seeing and responding to the performance space & shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* (p.119, pp.123-124); **1 & 4** - *seeing and responding to the performance space & inhabiting an imaginative landscape* (p.125, p.127); **2 & 4** - *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience & inhabiting an imaginative landscape* (p.136); **3 & 4** - *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli & inhabiting an imaginative landscape* (p.142, p.153). Although difficult to represent in diagram form, the kaleidoscopic patterning and motionality of the strategies is suggested by the arrows of strategy 5 - *using internal editing* - and the background/foreground arrangement of the overlapping strategies. Here *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* is foregrounded, whilst *seeing and responding to the performance space* is backgrounded, for example, but this nexus could also be reversed or, as in the example on p.119, the improviser's attentiveness can be evenly distributed between them.

#### 4.22 Summary

These strategies collectively function as a means of making explicit the correlations between the direction and intentionality of vision and compositional outcomes. Geared towards the challenges of solo practice, they operate as anchors of connectivity, 'lifelines' that assist the improviser in remaining connected to a number of possible generative sources - the architecture, audience, corporeal impulse and imaginative landscapes. As a template of attitudinal and pragmatic ways of being, *seeing and responding to the performance space*, *shifting vision towards a direct involvement with the audience* and *inhabiting an imaginative landscape* put into play the motionality and impulse towards connectivity that characterise Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic exchange; an energised compositional mind-set that both seeks

visual stimuli and remains open to the possibility that what is seen might potentially function as a fecund site of generative activity. In keeping with the exigencies of the solo form, however, and the need to give oneself as many compositional avenues as possible, *shifting vision away from a direct involvement with the audience or other external stimuli* supplies an alternative vision/action model of responsiveness; a different way of operating within the immediate environment that relies instead on a withdrawn vision and the pre-reflective intentionality of the body's (trained) 'I can'.

Taken as a template of strategic approaches to harnessing and shaping material that is grounded in a purposive use of vision, these tools also carry useful implications for an ethics of improvised work. They enable the improviser to choose what to work with and how to work with it (encompassed too in the ongoing protocol of *using internal editing*) but always within the context, and explicit parameters, of the immediate, visible surroundings. They thus develop the skill of honing visual attentiveness in tandem with practising responses to that attentiveness - corporeal, textual, imaginative. They practise making decisions and structuring those decisions in the presence of, and with, an audience, grounding composition in a nuanced and fluid paradigm of seeing and being seen.

## CONCLUSION

### RE-LEARNING TO SEE

**Writing after the opening w/up – on the fact of space and its infusion with memories of last night.**

**Story of a series of goodbyes – goodbyes that preface or set up hellos – the continuous loop**

**The verbal energy of telling a story generating its content**

**Presences in the space**

**Absences very present in the space – make it living**

**The memory having a gap in it; the story’s episodic structure is styled by forgetfulness.**

**Making material from what is there and what is there is the event; the people who have ‘gone’ only to re-emerge.**

(Immediate Writings, 25/6/09)

**Hello**

**Goodbye...and the gap between**

**a beginning of turnings and half finished gestures, left hanging...**

**and a thread unravels from the tangle.**

**A series of goodbyes, a flow of fast talk, covering the ground of how to end.**

**Fillings of chocolate and flowers.**

**Generous offers, that extend the commitment beyond the call, beyond assessment,**

**beyond the compulsory...into loving volition**

**Counting fingers**

**Listing and keeping count, fingers pressed into abacus duty.**

**Increasing speed, just like on a spiral slide...gravity pulls you and us into the ending.**

**The final goodbye...and “just a warm-up” said under your breath.**

(Andrew Morrish, Immediate Writings, 25/6/09)

## **Kaleidoscopic Strategies**

As a contribution to both the practice and discourse of performance improvisation, this research offers the five strategies as a) a model of practice - a potential model for others to explore and further develop - and b) an analytical apparatus that can assist in articulating and clarifying challenges that explicitly pertain to the solo form. The strategies also stand as one particularised instantiation of a practice/theory feedback loop; pragmatic and conceptual understanding and articulation of the emergent practice reinforced through the specific 'encroachments' of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ideas and specific linguistic usage. The vision/action models of composition thus represent both the fruitful results and concomitant limitations of a thorough investigation of a particular set of ideas - the significance of the entwining of a 'questioning' vision with movement; the seeing/seen dynamic of the chiasm; the visible; the 'invisible' and the 'I can' as well as the vision/action rubric of painterly composition. This distinctive methodological approach provides a clear example of how utilising particular phenomenological ideas in practical ways can function as an efficacious methodological underpinning for practice-led research, giving rise to a distinctive vocabulary and idiosyncratic conceptual apparatus with which to contribute to both professional and academic contexts clarity and understanding of a particular practice. Situating this research alongside the few practitioners who explicitly attend to vision as a communicative or generative tool within performance (Nelson, Rainer, Charnock); the aesthetics and philosophies of a range of other practitioners (Johnston, Johnstone, Nachmanovitch, Hamilton and Trotman); the duetting practice of Contact Improvisation and practitioner/teachers who treat vision as a means of becoming more attentive within duet or ensemble training contexts (Wunder, Dilley), also allows the nuances of the research to reverberate within a range of multifarious improvisational practices.

This research's entwinement with Merleau-Ponty's ideas gives rise to a particular experiential domain and a means of articulating it, and (engaging with Kozel and Sheets-Johnstone) I have worked with the dynamic of the chiasm and overlaps between vision and kinaesthesia in particularised ways. My work with and within the immediate environs thus variously locates the seeds of compositional activity in this research in responsiveness to what one sees and/or the kinaesthetic effects of being very directly looked at, as well as kinetic motion enfolded into a wider awareness of being watched. Relationality and responsiveness are embedded as core operational principles and a compositionally-minded awareness of being seen is ingrained into my embodied understanding - my experienced

*Lebenswelt* - of this practice. Related to this point, I extend Garner's analysis of 'phenomenal' space as 'perceived and inhabited' by both actor and audience (Garner, 1994: 3) so that my (lived) experiences as both improviser and spectator are variously recounted. Although he was propelled in part by a desire to reopen phenomenological lines of theatrical investigation as a way of 'reembodying the discourse of theatre' and countering the 'antitheatricality that runs through much poststructuralist criticism' (Garner, 1994: 26), Garner's discussion is primarily rooted in the possibilities for action that inhere within text, rather than non-textual instances of live performance. By contrast, expressly locating my own research in a phenomenological approach gives rise to the Immediate Writings, which serve as textual traces of this practice-led research (without also claiming that the writings themselves function as a phenomenological method). Selected for their reverberations within the wider body of the thesis, the Immediate Writings trace what and how improviser and spectator have seen, noticed, captured (and not seen, not noticed, not captured).

### **Looking Ahead**

There are a number of questions raised by this research, opening up potential avenues for further study. Most immediately, the five strategies that are offered as the outcome of this investigation invite wider application in order to test their efficacy within different research parameters. Given that this thesis was intentionally focussed on improvisation as performance, an important question is raised as to how the strategies might be explored within a pedagogical context. As alluded to earlier in the thesis, vision (usually peripheral vision) is frequently utilised in improvisational duet and ensemble training in order to become aware of and in tune with others, but there is clearly more scope for cultivating a broader visual attentiveness and responsiveness - to the space itself, the audience and one's own corporeal proclivities - as a means of evolving a more variegated operational mode; attentive to a wider network of stimuli and, importantly, compositionally responsive to that broader network of concerns. This research thus raises questions as to whether the kinds of correspondences discovered, made explicit and practised in a consistent way in my own practice can be established and creatively harnessed in a pedagogical context. The links between withdrawing vision from an interest in external stimuli and explicitly situating the locus of compositional activity in (trained) somatic intentionality, for instance, or the creative possibilities of attending to the durational aspect of vision (prolonging a single visual focus so that imaginative associations and/or corporeal impulses might emerge) - can be interrogated for their efficacy as pragmatic techniques in a pedagogical setting. It would

also be a logical follow-on from this research to test the different ways in which the strategies might be usefully adapted in solo, duet and ensemble training - both as practical techniques for creating and shaping material (with or without co-performers) - and as a route for evolving a richer aesthetic palette.

The procedure of Immediate Writings as a reflective mode in practice-led research could also be revisited and re-questioned in the future. As outlined, the writings in this project serve a particular function in both the studio investigations and this written thesis, but purposed in this way some subtleties of the improviser's (or spectator's) embodied experience have not received much attention. An alternative approach to studio writing and presentation of that writing could now be fruitfully cultivated in order to convey a more nuanced phenomenological understanding of embodied ways of knowing. More examples of original hand-written pieces (such as those included in the DVD of the ongoing practice) might, through the idiosyncrasies of personalised writing styles, further facilitate the reader's sense of being in the studio with the researcher. Similarly, focussing the writings on the purely somatic sensations of improvising or watching - writing *with* and *to* the question of what it is bodily like to improvise or spectate - could also function to give the reader clearer access to felt experiences within the studio. There is already significant research being carried out in the related area of simultaneous dancing and writing processes - writing whilst dancing, writing from the body (most recently by The Choreographic Lab's 'writing-dancing' project *Skript: a micro-installation* at the NottDance Festival in Nottingham, UK, from 8-17 March 2013) and it could therefore be useful to re-open the methodological question of reflecting/writing from within an improvisation as well as or instead of immediately after it. This would involve delving further into how and when writing might represent or evoke a bodily experience and whether certain approaches to writing and particular choices of sensory-rich vocabulary, for instance, might bring an improviser, spectator or reader into a more richly felt, experiential realm. It is also worth noting that reflective spaces could also be opened up by drawing, a tool that has immense potential for revealing the phenomenological understanding that we encounter the world as physical beings and that what we see, experience and understand is shaped by our bodily orientation in the world.

A defining methodological characteristic of this research - the encroachment of a set of phenomenological ideas into the studio as pragmatic and attitudinal ways of being - has

prepared the ground for more research into how theoretical propositions can be productively adapted and adopted in a studio context. Placing my own work in dialogue with Merleau-Ponty's core philosophical formulations opens up the question of what further understandings of improvisational experience and approaches to strategizing might be discovered by investigating other phenomenological constructs. Expanding my treatment of Merleau-Ponty's *Lebenswelt* by examining Heidegger's notions of 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' modes of being, for instance, might evolve a more nuanced language of lived experience within improvisational practice. The 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' - attributes of *Dasein* - are ways of differentiating between particular qualities of lived experience. The former suggests times in which we are 'most at home with ourselves' (Moran, 2000: 240), an embodied sense of wholeness and, usefully, self-awareness, which girds an ability to act in the world. This 'authentic' mode of being is pitted against the 'inauthentic', which operates as an unthinking state in which we are 'thrown' into the world and fail to consider (and certainly fail to realise) our 'potential-to-be-whole' (Moran, 2000: 240). Explored and explicated, these ideas could facilitate a more intricate understanding of the myriad ways in which improvisational performance (or training) is lived. Do moments of authentic, 'deep, concrete experience(s) of 'mineness'' (Moran, 2000: 240), potentially translate into a felt sense of improvisational flow, ease, relationality, responsiveness, expansiveness or creativity? Might the attribute of 'authenticity' serve as a useful marker of an improvisation's felt sense of being grounded or creatively connected with emerging material? This realm of questioning potentially extends the notion of *Lebenswelt* into more subtle statements about the quality of one's moment-by-moment lived experience (and, possibly, the concomitant value judgements that might be attached to certain improvisational states).

### **Vision/world responsiveness**

As I researcher, I have spent a lot of time now wielding vision as a tool for consciously orienting and re-orienting myself within the space and situation of 'totally improvised' solo performance work; the materials that I have read and digested and the concepts that I have put into play in the studio orient and guide my pragmatic and attitudinal way of being as an improviser. *The Usual Suspects* functions as a neat analogy for this body of work, as I echo Verbal Klint's improvisatory actions by strategically adopting and then building on a 'questioning' vision as I engage in playful acts of compositional invention. At this time, then, there is a need for a fresh parable to help challenge, creatively problematize and

progress the model that I have developed. In Albert Murray's description of Charlie Chaplin, the tramp who 'prances and dances' down the street 'like he's *related* to everything' (Murray, 1998: 577, original italics), I find another figure who embodies relationality and responsiveness as (largely unconscious) operational principles. In the anecdote that Murray recounts, Chaplin is 'so busy looking' at a pretty girl as he walks down the street that he doesn't see a banana peel underfoot. He slips and drops the pie that he is carrying, but because he is 'oriented to resilience and improvisation' and 'already hanging loose' he 'just dances all over the sidewalk and finally retrieves the pie and continues prancing on down the street' (Murray, 1998: 577). Unlike Verbal Kint, whose skill lies in rapidly sizing up and then creatively responding to his environment, Chaplin's skill is in being able to adapt to, and improvise with, the (very literally, un-looked for) variables of his environment. Here - in Chaplin's embodied extemporising with and within the surprises of his environs - I read a dynamic and playful reminder of the ways in which the accidents, mishaps, mistakes and intrusions that impinge on improvisational activity can serve as fertile sites of improvisational generativity. Having crafted an efficacious model of ocular-centric solo improvisational practice in which seeing and responding to the details of one's environment is a foundational working principle, then, the Chaplin parable offers a useful clue for future research. Unsettling my model in potentially enlightening ways, further study might point more explicitly to the play or (chiasmic) exchange that can be achieved between the kind of embodied knowledge and understanding developed and permeated through consciously-chosen and mindfully instigated compositional strategies and those slippery moments that exist outside the terms of such a paradigm, challenging improvisational skills, strategies and articulations in entirely unforeseen ways.

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**Attached to back cover:**

## **APPENDIX**

### **DVD**

**This DVD accompanies the written thesis and can be viewed at any time. There are two short chapters – Studio Practice (duration 6:03) and Performance (duration: 4:32), consisting of video footage and still images of the practice; studio-based Immediate Writings from within the practice (the role of these writings in my methodological approach is discussed on pp. 11-12 & 38-39) and reflective commentary from myself and my research collaborator Andrew Morrish about the practice. The DVD is thus intended as a quick window onto this research – giving a sense of the look of this work in its studio and more formal performance contexts and highlighting some of the questions about researching solo improvisation posed and grappled with at different stages of this investigative process.**

**Footage of a full-length improvised performance - cutting between two cameras (duration 15:28) - is included as an additional chapter on the DVD as supporting documentation. This improvisation was presented for the Examiners on March 25 2013 at the University of Huddersfield.**