

Dominik Schlienger-Tuomi, Alejandro Olarte

Workshop Description

Workshopping the idea of sound in motion, moving sound and sound of moving provides a common ground for interdisciplinary exploration. The dynamic of movement as space over time is common to arguably all disciplines in the arts. On the one hand, movement is required in the making of sound, be it when we hit a drum, strike a string, or press a button. Also, the activity of moving a brush, taking a step back from the easel, creates a sound. On the other hand, we can move the sound source: this transforms a space, usually thought of as a static entity, into a dynamic shared instrument. And last, but not least, we, as participants, can move around inside this dynamic space, allowing for an experience which is constituted through the changing aural perspectives our trajectories through the space creates. This leads to an individual experience of the space, over the time period of the performance: Space becomes a participant's individual narrative.

Abstract

Carte Blanche, Right Now!

Motion, Sound, Improvisation, and Experimental Research

Introduction

We have been working over the past years on integrating improvisation and multidisciplinary as tools for research in the domain of music technology. In this abstract we will introduce some aspects of the ongoing research, and we will sketch a broad picture of our working methods.

Improvisation freedom and frameworks

The practice of improvisation is a large chapter and a strong component of the artistic disciplines. Improvisation can be understood in very different ways: from being a tool, to producing material or content to be further developed in an artwork, to improvisation as the artwork itself. We use it as a tool for research, as a magnifying glass to observe the interactions, dynamics, and tensions between performers and the practices of art, but also as a way to stimulate inventiveness and the collective creation of an art moment, on the spot.

Two important aspects propitiating those moments of collective creation are *freedom* and *frameworks*. The total freedom of expression in a free improvisation reveals itself as an utopia, since everybody is subject to habits, learned tricks and behaviors, emotional memories, social rules, political agreements, beliefs, etc. The supposedly white empty page as the start of an improvisation is actually a rather full one: minute clearing work is necessary. However, dropping a group of artists who have never worked together before in a room with their only shared purpose the making of art right there and then, is a very fruitful way of revealing all those secret agreements, codes of behaviour, self imposed limits, and understandings of freedom. On the other hand, regarding inventiveness, the struggle to get to say something within a very narrow and defined framework reveals it to be as useful as the fight for total freedom: asking the performer to create inside a very restricted set of rules allow us to isolate, analyse, and research specific issues.

Finally, finding a balance between improvisations that focus on the struggle for freedom, and ones that focus on coping with restrictive rules or imposed frameworks, appears to be a way to develop methodologies which use improvisation as a research tool in a collective creative environment.

Experimental Research

To add to the corpus of knowledge in the field of sonic improvisation requires the performer, or group of performers, to *experience* the questions themselves; to spot the relevant points, invent dynamics to address the issues, navigate between *doing, understanding, creating, erasing, re-doing*. To integrate the method of improvisation as a research tool within a research agenda, we have used a circular process, wherein we move from reflection on concepts to questions via hypothesis – and the other way round – to be fruitful. The process is very straightforward: we improvise, reflect, isolate issues, invent hypotheses, design experiments, and improvise again. Therefore, experimental research should be understood here as a methodology for research in which designing and performing experiments assists the researcher to elucidate ideas, confirm hypothesis, illuminate ideas, and clarify concepts from inside the art practice.

Interdisciplinarity

In interdisciplinary improvisation, when participants from different disciplines improvise together, the differences are less important than the common ground which is teased out playfully through interaction. In our improvisational practices we notice that borders between disciplines are transgressed, ignored, or extended, at the least, rather than delimited. This happens often via imitation (trying out another discipline), invitation (a participant offers her tool to another participant, for example), or translation (a participant tries to do “the same thing” in his or her own discipline).

An important aspect of enabling this is the aspect of feeling confident enough to try out something else. Part of learning something new involves a certain degree of unlearning; doing something differently means doing it not in the usual way, in the faltering, imperfect, tentative way of the novice and beginner. This requires courage, and confidence that the other participants allow for this and provide support, not criticism. This is why, in our practice, we do not perform in front of the public: everybody who wants to experience it has to participate, i.e. be happy to leave his or her own expertise behind in order to experience something new. Often this leads to a form of non-disciplinary meta-practice which, to a non participating audience, might be difficult to access. As a provocative analogy, the idea of watching such a performance as an audience without participating can be likened to going and seeing somebody eat.

As an example of situated action combined with reflective analysis, we see great possibilities in using this approach as a tool in participatory design for technologies and techniques for the arts, as it provides a prerequisite for the successful integration of stakeholders in a practice to experience another discipline’s approaches first hand.

Sound and Motion

Workshopping the idea of sound in motion, moving sound and the sound of moving, provides a common ground for interdisciplinary exploration. The dynamic of movement as space over time is common to arguably all disciplines in the arts. On the one hand, movement is required in the making of sound, be it when we hit a drum, strike a string, or press a button. Also, the activity of moving a brush, taking a step back from the easel, creates a sound. On the other hand, we can move the sound source: this turns a space, usually thought of as a static entity, into a dynamic shared instrument. And last, but not least, we as participants can move around inside this dynamic space, allowing for an experience which is constituted through the changing aural perspectives that our trajectories through this space creates. This leads to an individual experience of the space, over the time period of the performance: space becomes a participant’s individual narrative.

Concluding Remarks

In relation to the theme of arts without borders, we believe that the borders within arts can be overcome with approaches like interdisciplinary improvisation. Using the shared situation of sound and space across disciplines, our workshop creates an experimental opportunity to transgress, ignore, or extend disciplinary borders.

REFERENCES

L. A. Suchman. *Plans and Situated Actions: The Problem of Human-machine Communication*. Cambridge University Press, New York, NY, USA, 1987.

J. Andean. Research group in interdisciplinary improvisation: Goals, perspectives, and practice. [http://www.academia.edu/4158856/Research Group in Interdisciplinary Improvisation Goals Perspectives and Practice](http://www.academia.edu/4158856/Research_Group_in_Interdisciplinary_Improvisation_Goals_Perspectives_and_Practice), 2014.

J. Pressing. "Cognitive Processes in Improvisation." *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3, no. 3 (March 1, 1986): 315.

S. Nachmanovitch. *Free play : improvisation in life and art*. Los Angeles; New York: J.P. Tarcher, Inc. ; Distributed by St. Martin's Press, 1990.

C. Asplund. "Frederic Rzewski and Spontaneous Political Music." *Perspectives of New Music* 33, no. 1-2 (January 1, 1995): 418.

A. Balsamo. *Designing Culture: The Technological Imagination at Work*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC, USA, 2011.

J. Simonsen and T. Robertson. *Routledge International Handbook of Participatory Design*. Routledge International Handbooks. Taylor & Francis, 2012.

Dom Schlienger-Tuomi is a Swiss musician and composer-researcher living in Espoo since 2011, after living and working for 12 years in Bristol, UK. He is working on a doctoral project on spatially interactive music at Sibelius Academy's Centre for Music and Technology at the University of the Arts Helsinki. He is interested in improvisation from free to jazz and all forms of artistic interactivity. In his compositional work, he creates situations for participants to perform with freedom.

Alejandro Olarte is an electro-acoustic musician and researcher working and living in Helsinki. His interests include improvisation, synthesizers, digital lutherie, performance arts, and pedagogy.