Interdisciplinary Practice as a Foundation for Experimental Music Theatre

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Abstract

This commentary is a discussion about and around several creative works, by the author, written between 2016-2018. After an initial explanation of how the author's work fits within an expanded field of *experimental music theatre*, the author looks at each work in broader interdisciplinary contexts, unified by four main themes: production, the audiovisual contract, aesthetic 'poorness', and the divide between live and mediatised performance. Discourse around the works in the portfolio is consistently framed by a number of contextual case studies from parallel disciplines of sound art, traditional and contemporary theatre, fine art, and film in order to bring uncommon perspectives to a music-orientated work, and present potentially innovative models for experimental music theatre making. In particular, the commentary dedicates one chapter each to the work of two artists/companies who remain relatively unstudied in compositional contexts: Richard Foreman, and Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker.

Overall this commentary articulates a fluid relationship between practice and theory that outlines potentially innovative and unusual models of interdisciplinary production relevant and new to the author's own work, and to the field of experimental music theatre more generally.

Contents

List of Figures

Contents of Portfolio

The portfolio is organised in a series of folders, each dedicated to a single work or group of works discussed in the commentary. The folders are titled:

Live Guy, Dead Guy

— Video documentation (full documentation and one extracted clip)

Orderly Mouthpiece Spent

— Audio (full audio recording and extracted clips)

— One score extract, and a list of personnel and section timings

Regretfully Yours, Ongoing

— Score (full score of the work)

— Video documentation (full documentation of the performance)

Ritual

— Structural outline of the work, and stage layout

— Video documentation (full documentation of the performance)

Screen Tests

— *Dartmoor 2006* (full video)

— *Deepy Kaye*

  — Documentation (full video, and audio recording of live performance version)

  — Live performance score

— *Exam Prep* (full video)

— *Vexed* (full video)

Sweet Error Miku

— List of section timings and composer credits

— Video documentation (full documentation and one extracted clip)

In addition to the digital portfolio, one separate, digital appendix is also included with this submission:

Appendix - *Zomboid!* Reference materials

— 1. Table: Sound events in Zomboid! (extract) - supplied separately as a digital file
— 2. *Zomboid!* Performance footage (extract) - supplied separately as a digital file

Preface

This PhD submission is ostensibly in the form of a portfolio of original music theatre compositions, alongside an accompanying commentary. I present six works composed between 2016-2018 as audio recordings, videos, and scores where appropriate, along with a written commentary that places these pieces within a critical framework.

At the same time, however, this PhD submission reflects the challenges that arise from conducting academic research into and through creative practice. Indeed, treating the works in this portfolio as direct, empirical outcomes of rigid research questions is problematic, for several reasons.

First, although my practice is rigorous and informed by research, it is also to a large extent intuitive. Second, the works in the portfolio were not created for purely academic environments; the majority of them were commissioned for public performances and broadcasts, and so, in addition to articulating research questions, they were simultaneously responses to real, professional situations. Third, the works presented here were primarily designed to be experienced live, rather than as documentation. Last, the works are diverse in form and compositional technique. They embrace music theatre, radiophonic pieces, orchestral scores, performance to video, and collaborative compositions. This means it can be difficult or at least slippery to make any kind of unilateral statements about their collective nature.

The diversity of the portfolio, and its intuitive internal logic as a body of a work, however, is what I believe makes for a rich field of study. The purpose of this thesis is to show how my compositional work occupies an idiosyncratic position in the field of interdisciplinary performance practices. By extension I aim to demonstrate how viewing experimental music theatre through the lens of certain interdisciplinary concepts—in particular models taken from theatre, film, and fine art practices—can contribute new and original directions in the field.

As such, to focus on detailed, technical aspects of the work would run the risk of giving a too narrow view of the work presented. Rather, this commentary is structured to reflect broader interactions between practice and theory. After providing an overview of the field of study and the key literature that can help navigate the liminal creative practices in question, I will discuss my compositional works in an order which, although not strictly chronological, most clearly outlines the central qualities and themes which unify them to some extent. Discussion of the work will be interspersed with, supported by, and interrupted by theoretical concepts and, crucially, two major case studies of artists whose works have not only significantly influenced my own in certain ways but also represent valuable and under-examined models of practice in my field: Richard Foreman, and Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker.

Threaded through the commentary are four themes which seem to connect ideas across the diverse portfolio, as well as offer up possibilities for further creative application and study. These themes are: production, the audiovisual contract, aesthetic 'poorness', and the divide between live and mediatised performance.[1]
This thesis is, then, part critical analysis, part expanded survey, and part personal manifesto.

A note on the accompanying portfolio of works

A portfolio of creative works accompanies this thesis. It is structured as a series of folders, dedicated to each piece, or in the case of the *Screen Tests*, a collection of pieces. Within these folders are full documentation (audio and video) of the works, as well as scores and scripts where useful.

The nature of my practice, broadly speaking, results in works that often come into realisation through hybrid processes; traditional composition, workshops, improvisation, collaboration, directing, aural instruction, and post-production. As such, by far the best way to experience the pieces is either live, or through documentation. With this in mind all best efforts have been made to ensure the audio and video material supplied here is of the highest quality possible within each project's means.

Conversely, the scores provided, whilst up-to-date and as accurate as possible do *not* necessarily give a full picture of the works. Indeed, in some cases the final works diverge noticeably from the scores. This does not mean the scores are inaccurate or incomplete, or that I have not provided all of the material available. Rather, I ask the reader to treat my scores and scripts (that I have included where relevant or potentially useful) as technical documents or jumping-off points, that provide perspectives on the pieces additional to the documentation of the performances themselves. In some cases scores are adhered to more strictly (as in the orchestral piece *Regretfully Yours, Ongoing*) but even here they should not be understood as definitive 'texts' to the same degree as more traditional concert music pieces.

[1] I borrow this term from Philip Auslander, who in turn adapts it from Jean Baudraillard. Auslander's description is, however, most pertinent to this thesis: he loosely describes "Mediatized performance" as: "…performance that is circulated on television, as audio or video recordings, and in other forms based in technologies of reproduction." Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 4.

Acknowledgements

I owe a great debt of gratitude to many individuals and organisations that have supported and contributed to the work that comprises this PhD. Firstly, I would like to express thanks to my supervisors Bill Brooks and Catherine Laws who have both taught me so much, and been unfailing generous with their time, knowledge, and engagement.

I would also like to thank my parents, and my wife Satoko who have always been actively supportive of my musical and academic endeavours, but in particular have provided so much encouragement over the last four years.

I am extremely grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the White Rose College of the Arts and Humanities who have funded my time undertaking this research.

Many musicians and artists have contributed hugely to the creative work in the portfolio, and I am grateful to all of them for being wiling to collaborate so closely, and so hard with me in often very challenging projects. In particular I would like to thank the members of my own ensembles ARCO (Adam de la Cour, Tom Jackson, Benedict Taylor, Chihiro Ono, Sam Rice, and Matthew Lee Knowles), and squib-box (Federico Reuben).

In addition, many other talented and generous artists have given their time to collaborate on these projects; Fiona Bevan, Kit Downes, Dominic Lash, Lore Lixenberg, Musarc, Lynette Quek, Max Wainwright, James Whittle, James McIlwrath, Rebecca Burden, Mary Ann Hushlak Anders Bigum, Baest, Bodyslam, Rūta Vitkauskaitė, Daniel Matz, Anna Jalving, Rikke Jorgensen, and Athina Vahla.

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My research has benefitted from many stimulating conversations with tutors and colleagues within and outside of York University Music department, including formal interviewees Travis Just, Daniel Allen Nelson, and Toco Nikaido, and my Noh theatre tutors at the Kyoto Arts Centre. I would also like to thank many of my artistic colleagues and friends for sharing ideas and music with me over the last four years that have impacted on my research. In particular, these include Matthew Shlomowitz, Ed Mckeon, James Greer, Cameron Dodds, Matt Rogers, Sally O'Reilly, Sam Belinfante, Gelsey Bell, Louis D'Heudieres, Jennifer Walshe, and Andy Ingamells.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Chapter 1
Introduction

Experimental Music Theatre

In the title of this thesis I refer to *experimental music theatre*. A major reason for this is that over the last 12 years of working professionally, it has quite naturally become the most useful descriptor for what I do, especially when communicating with the public, venues, partners, funders, and performers.

Although *music theatre* can be an almost meaningless term in general use, my work *is* primarily realised by musicians and *is* somewhat theatrical. It is sometimes presented in concerts, but often in galleries, or theatres, or public spaces, or as radio, or as video. It always features music, but it also draws on performance practices rooted outside of musical traditions, such as video, text, dance, and theatre.

The music-heavy, multimedia nature of my work is not unusual in and of itself: it pays homage to a genealogy of composers, artists, theatre makers and filmmakers who synthesise sound, music, image, gesture, and text. I am not particularly interested, then, in attempting to invent what might be a better terminology for what I do, although I am interested in talking about my practice and those used by others in ways that aren't necessarily the default in their native disciplines.

Critical discussions around the landscape of similarly interdisciplinary practices has been thoroughly mapped in music, art, theatre, and film literature, but I am interested in illuminating particularly resonant and crucially useful points where these discourses, and the creative work which populates them, overlap. By looking at my work through a network of lenses I aim to discern answers to the central, practice-orientated questions of my research:

In what ways can the study of music theatre from an interdisciplinary standpoint serve as the basis for challenging ideas about the practice?

How does my own work fit within the landscape of these practices?

How might this research point towards innovative directions and developments for my own creative work?

Similarly, the label of *experimental*, umbilically linked to John Cage's writings, can be problematic in its complexity but again provides a useful descriptor of practices that situate themselves outside of traditional institutions and modes of production. Although the work presented in this portfolio is not at all reminiscent of Cage's aleatoric works, it *is* rather acutely concerned with the "coexistence of dissimilars" and "disharmony" in the way that media objects, styles, and materials interact and interfere in a "play of interpenetra-

tions."[2] Indeed, Cage viewed what he understood as experimental music as a step *towards* theatre, asking "Where do we go from here? Towards theatre. That art more than music resembles nature. We have eyes as well as ears, and it is our business while we are alive to use them."[3]

Some of the clearest expressions of this are manifested in Cage's Happenings—mixed media events which staged simultaneous independent musical, artistic and everyday actions within coordinated time frames.[4] In 1987 Michael Kirby claimed that under the direct influence of Happenings as a form "every aspect of theatre in this country [USA] has changed."[5] Curiously he makes no direct reference to sound and music, but it is notable that many of the innovations he highlights—"performances are created collectively… audience participation has been investigated…"[6]—bring to mind practices not unfamiliar to music-making.

In a published discussion in 1973 between Cage, the American artist, author, and critic Richard Kostelanetz, and the avant-garde theatre director Richard Foreman (a figure of great importance to my work, and this thesis), Kostelanetz highlights America's embrace of "performance theatre, where the performer controls the entire production rather than realizing a script or being at the service of a script."[7] Kostelanetz's comment is a little vague, but he seems to be gesturing towards what he sees as a move away from a single predominant text (be that a score or a script) and towards a situation in which either works are created *with, by*, or *around* performers (a quality of some of Cage's works), or where *every* aspect of a performance is controlled by an individual auteur (as in the case of Foreman's plays).

Rather than seeing these conditions as necessarily opposites, Cage draws attention to how both approaches might seem to reflect the emancipatory influence of Antonin Artaud's "theatre of cruelty"[8] that allowed "every element in the theatre… [to become] its own centre."[9] Similar qualities of decentralisation will come to form a major part of this thesis' discourse.

Cage's ideas were enthusiastically embraced in the 1960s and 70s by artists associated with the Fluxus movement. Many (primarily in America, Europe, and Japan) grappled very directly with the space between experimental music, art, and theatre—indeed, specifically with the territory mapped out by Cage's actions and ideas (many early Fluxus composers had attended his lectures in the late 1950s at The New School for Social Research). Artists such as George Brecht, Dick Higgins, Mieko Shiomi, Alison Knowles, Takahisa Kosugi, and many others contributed to a huge wealth of Fluxus Event Scores, often programmed in so-

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[2] John Cage, *Silence* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), 12.

[3] Ibid.,12.

[4] Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and beyond*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 72.

[5] Michael Kirby, *A Formalist Theatre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 15.

[6] Ibid., 15.

[7] John Cage, Richard Foreman, and Richard Kostelanetz, "Art in the Culture," *Performing Arts Journal*, 4/1/2 (1979), 73.

[8] Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double,* translated by Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 89.

[9] Cage, Foreman, Kostelanetz, "Art in the Culture," 73.

called Fluxconcerts,[10] many of which directly implicated musicians and their instruments in ways that speak beyond purely musical codes. Kosugi's *Distance for Piano*, for instance, sets out an almost perversely obtuse version of a musical performance:

> *Distance for Piano (to David Tudor)*
> Performer positions himself at some distance from the piano from which he should not move. Performer does not touch piano directly by any part of his body, but may manipulate other objects to produce sound on piano through them. Performer produces sounds at points of piano previously determined by him. Assistants may move piano to change distance and direction to directions of the performer.
> 1965[11]

Michael Nyman identifies this *conceptual* reframing of musical performance as a key characteristic of much of Fluxus repertoire, including the employment of musical instruments "as objects over and above (or below?) their normal use as sound producers."[12]

Many of Nam June Paik's collaborations with the cellist Charlotte Moorman in the 1960s and 70s, for instance, return again and again to this phenomenon, Paik casting Moorman and her instrument as art objects in themselves. *TV Cello* (1971) featured Moorman playing an instrument-like arrangement of television screens that projected images of herself and other cellists playing as well as a live-stream of the performance area itself. In these works, Paik fuses sculptural objects,[13] live video technology, sound, and performance. "Closing the gap between gesture and sound by making Moorman both performance and instrument,"[14] the 'work' becomes a site for multiple readings and understandings.

Mediated Performance

Holly Rogers has discussed the intersection of sound, performance, and video that began to gather momentum in the 1960s, deriving its catalytic power from the advent of affordable video cameras. Approaching the topic of early video art (and Paik in particular) from an explicitly interdisciplinary perspective, Rogers suggests that it can be positioned genealogically in both experimental music and the visual arts. The medium of video represents a site where audio and image are recorded and reproduced simultaneously (as opposed to the simulated unity of film and cinema); this in turn challenged the traditionally silent and atemporal space of the gallery, prompting a radical reevaluation of art exhibition practice for gallery goers and artists alike.[15]

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[10] Ken Friedman, Owen Smith, Lauren Sawchyn ed. "Fluxus Performance Workbook," *Performance Research*, 7/3 'On Fluxus' (September 2002), accessed May 31, 2020, https://www.thing.net/~grist/ld/fluxusworkbook.pdf.
[11] Ibid., 73.
[12] Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and beyond,* 79.
[13] John G. Hanhardt, *Nam June Paik* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1982), 95.
[14] Holly Rogers, *Sounding the Gallery: Video and the Rise of Art Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 51.
[15] Ibid., 5.

Rogers' study, however, remains very much framed by visual arts discourse. Music and sound are treated as something of a single medium, a material to be used in art-making. This seems to miss a degree of nuance present in the music; it disregards music's complex codes and semiotic systems and only goes a modest distance in exploring what a more explicitly music-orientated framework might bring to an understanding of video art. Rogers identifies three forms of 'expanded music—noise music, sound art, and sound by artists.'[16] Rather than opening up categories of art making, descriptors like these can often serve to silo works and practices off into genres and categories within which they don't properly belong.

In *In the Blink of an Ear* Seth Kim-Cohen offers perhaps a more useful view of an "expanded sonic field."[17] Setting out to re-read the history of postwar sound art practices in broader, intertextual terms, Kim-Cohen turns to Rosalind Krauss, who in the 1970s posited the idea of what she saw as an e*xpanded field of sculpture.*[18] Recognising the conceptual turn[19] in visual arts practices of the time, Krauss suggested that terms like 'sculpture' could no longer be inextricably tied to particular materials or media; she saw "sculpture as a discursive construct,"[20] the product of a universe of terms and their negative oppositions.
Kim-Cohen attempts to translate similar principles into the sonic field, in order to illustrate what he refers to as the 'non-cochlear' in sound art:

> Just as each work of art engages certain conceptual concerns, every sound work cannot help but signify. But certain artworks foreground their conceptual aspects, and certain instances of sonic art engage the materiality of sounds as a means to a semiotic end.[21]

This more holistic way of reading works of sound-orientated art is useful for looking at my own practice. Rather than viewing interdisciplinary sonic practices as somehow *extramusical*, it allows us to view them as part of a total experience, as an interconnected network of materials, actions, and meanings. Indeed, the idea of viewing the field of music and sound practices in not strictly 'cochlear' terms has been taken up in much more current, practice-based contexts. In her frequently cited essay-cum-manifesto *The New Discipline* (2016), the composer Jennifer Walshe outlines what she identifies as a current trend: many composers are creating works that are rooted in the "physical, theatrical and visual, as well as musical; pieces which often invoke the extra-musical, which activate the non-cochlear."[22] Whilst this provocation is a clear reflection of Walshe's own wide-ranging, idiosyncratic practice; this has, over the last 20 years, encompassed concert music, improvisation, operas, theatre, video, installation, exhibitions, publications and CD recordings, it also chimes uncannily with Cage's fifty-year-old ideas. However, Walshe is really addressing what she identified at

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16 Ibid., 38.

17 Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear : Toward a Non-cochlear Sonic Art* (London: Continuum, 2009), 155.

18 Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring): 30–44.

19 Ibid., xviii.

20 Ibid., 152.

21 Ibid., 156.

22 Jennifer Walshe, "The New Discipline," Borealis Festival, 2016, accessed May 31, 2020, http://www.borealisfestival.no/2016/the-new-discipline-4/.

that moment as a current ground-swell of activity, acknowledging how, for various reasons, many younger composers are often simultaneously functioning as "director, choreographer, perhaps most completely as an auteur."[23] This is certainly observable in the work of some of the artists she invokes, such as Jessie Marino and Natasha Diels. It also resonates strongly with my own work.

The New Discipline text, however, grounds these tendencies largely within a 'new-music' discourse. Walshe pertinently flags up the constructive challenge of making multimedia and theatrical work in the short rehearsal and development periods and structures usually afforded to composers and ensembles (as opposed to actors, directors, or dancers), but doesn't explicitly acknowledge that some of the innovative work she cites (notably Object Collection), have adopted practical models of production essentially outside those of classical music traditions. It is frequently the potentials revealed by looking at alternative models for artistic production—ways of making things, of presenting and disseminating work—that are the preoccupations of my practice, and of this thesis. As such, it has proved essential and fruitful to look to artists and theorists rooted in disciplines other than musical composition to find models of production that might inspire innovation.

Further Parallels

Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* identifies a parallel lineage of avant-garde theatrical practices. He defines a field of performance that utilises unconventional aesthetics and uses of multimedia to outline a *panorama* of postdramatic traits or signifiers. Of particular interest to my research is the *musicalization*[24] of these performance practices: a tendency to foreground auditory semiotics, rather than prioritising conventional scripts. Lehmann isn't simply talking about the inclusion of songs and music here, however, but rather an an approach that embraces rhythm and counterpoint in staging, non-naturalistic aestheticising of vocal delivery, and increasingly sophisticated and creative uses of theatrical sound-design. Specifically, he notes how postdramatic works might employ non-traditional models of production, where "the musical level is no longer constructed in a linear fashion but rather, for instance, through simultaneous superimposition of sonic worlds."[25]

In my work, and the works of many of the artists I'll discuss in this thesis, musicalization is closely wedded to the amplification of sound in performance through technology, an increased density of sound cues, the use of sound-film, and the spatialisation of sound sources. The presence of technology plays a key part in this, particularly when the conspicuous artefacts of that technological *grain* announce themselves.

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre,* translated by Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006), 91.

[25] Ibid., 92.

Matthew Causey has discussed how "the nature of performance deteriorates as it is enfolded in technological reproduction":[26] the edit, the frame, the mix all separate the mediatised object from its original source. This thesis treats that observation as both a truism and limitation with respect to the presentation and study of video documentation, but also as a potentially desirable aesthetic quality. Composers such as Alvin Lucier have created entire bodies of work engaging with these concerns. His iconic piece *I am sitting in a room* (1969) is a prime example: the iterative, gradually deteriorating recording and playing back (on analogue tape) of a voice in a space leads to a gradual revelation of the fundamental resonant frequency of the room in which it is performed. In Lucier's piece "sound and its source diffuse into a larger conversational interaction in which the voice makes apparent the surrounding architecture through its disembodied reproduction."[27]

Lucier here brings to the fore an immaterial presence by increasingly lo-fidelity material means: "sound gains in material presence."[28] More explicitly theatrical dispersions of presence through technology appear in postdramatic theatre of the 1970s onwards, with companies such as The Wooster Group employing sound and video as *constitutive* elements of their work. The technological permeates the fabric of their performances which feature prerecorded "found 'objects'",[29] and include as well original, often live, self-reflexive mediations of characters on stage. The presence of mediation is apparent, even foregrounded; "The technical workings of the performance are openly exhibited: cables, apparatus, instruments are not shamefully hidden or masked by lighting but integrated like props or almost like actors in their own right."[30]

In more contemporary practices digital mediation is manifested in often analogous ways that entail new types of degradation: the glitch, the buffer, the crash. Discussed later in this commentary, Hito Steyerl's writing on the accelerated reproducibility of internet-based media, and the video dystopias of Lizzie Fitch and Ryan Trecartin provide useful perspectives in this regard. Indeed, returning to Rogers' assertion that film and video represent bonded (and so fracturable) multimedia forms, it is useful to scrutinise film: this is a medium that often deals with complex relationships between image and sound, both live and recorded. Many contemporary artists' film and video creations may then provide key models of production for multimedia work more generally. Artists like Fitch and Trecartin, when capturing performance on video, offer unusual modalities and aesthetics that hinge on the weighty presence and understanding of the 'edit' and other forms of media postproduction. Thinking about this, my work, and the documented, mediated presence of it in the public realm (and indeed in this portfolio) through the rubric of digital film production opens up a further alternative way of seeing music theatre performance: no longer an organically synthesised *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but rather a constellation of media actions that suture or disrupt an "audiovisual contract."[31]

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[26] Matthew Causey, "The Screen Test of the Double: The Uncanny Performer in the Space of Technology," *Theatre Journal*, 51/4 (1999), 38.

[27] Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York ; London: Continuum International, 2006), 126.

[28] Ibid., 125.

[29] David Savran, *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group* (New York: Theatre Communications Groups, 1986), 51.

[30] Lehmann, *Postdramatic theatre*, 168-169.

[31] Michel Chion and Walter Murch, *Audio-vision : Sound on Screen,* edited and translated by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 1.

Multiplicities

This doubling, tripling, piling up of perspectives is more useful than confusing. It is somewhere within these overlapping fields, or within the liminal spaces between practices and discourses, that my compositional research and practice lies. The work in my portfolio is rarely consistent in form and style, but there a number of themes and ideas which unify it, and these depend on the ways in which I utilise terminologies, methodologies, examples, and tools from a variety of angles.

A related interdisciplinary study was carried out in the 2013 collection of essays *Composed Theatre*.[32] This field of discourse surveys a plethora of practices broadly defined by artists working with compositional methods to organise theatrical materials and the resulting effects on the mechanics of theatrical production. Editor David Roesner proposes that applying the lens of Composed Theatre to much contemporary, interdisciplinary performance work can expand our understanding of the field of to include "music theatre, dance, staged concerts, sound installations etc."[33] Despite his explicit attempt to distance these ideas from Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre*, however, *Composed Theatre* feels as much an expansion of this earlier text, as to a large extent it applies a more 'music-centric'[34] way of looking at much of the same body of work.

Although taking an explicitly interdisciplinary perspective here is essential in understanding a complex network of creative practices, this thesis is also an attempt to distance my work and the discussion around it away from any particular practice or media-centric dogmas and languages. I am attempting not only to demonstrate the unique position which my creative work occupies amidst this but also to show how the rhetoric, aesthetics and modes of production native to other artists, rooted in different disciplines but working with the same materials (sound, music, text, gesture, video), have presented, and might continue to present, models of art-making that are new, productive, and even radical when applied to more music-orientated approaches. Conversely, viewing others' performances, theatre practices, or video work through a musicalised perspective reveals certain qualities and approaches that literature native to their disciplines have left relatively undiscussed. Indeed, I write about two artists in depth (Richard Foreman and Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker) in order to learn from them, in the role of an apprentice. Approaching these works from an idiosyncratic perspective will, I hope, not only contribute new ideas to the discourse around them but also outline pragmatic techniques, tools, and aesthetics that can themselves offer innovative ways forward for experimental music theatre.

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32 Matthias Rebstock, David Roesner, *Composed Theatre: Aesthetics, Practices, Processes* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013).

33 Rebstock and Rosener, *Composed Theatre: Aesthetics, Practices, Processes*, 11.

34 Demetris Zavros, "Composing Theatre on a Diagonal: *Metaxi ALogon,* a Music-centric Performance", in *Composed Theatre Aesthetics, Practices, Processes*, ed. Matthias Rebstock David and Roesner (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 203.

Chapter 2
Sweet Errors

Portfolio work - *[sweet-ERROR:miku]*

[sweet-ERROR:miku][35] was the first work realised during the course of my research, made in collaboration with fellow artists/composers/performers Federico Reuben and Adam de la Cour, with whom I've been collaborating for many years as the artist cooperative *squib-box*. The piece is both a successful collaborative work that lays out many ideas and directions that are explored throughout this portfolio and a problematic and somewhat flawed piece that barely hangs together. These opposing qualities, however, are not mutually exclusive; *[sweet-ERROR:miku]* harnesses errors and glitches as positive aesthetic values.

The piece is complex both in the range of materials and ideas in play and in its method of creation. Commissioned as part of the AHRC-funded research network *Music Composition as Interdisciplinary Practice* (MCIP), the piece sets out to address the broad remit of that network:

> MCIP is interested in interdisciplinarity itself, an approach to creative practice and inquiry in which disciplinary boundaries become permeable and associated working habits, training, individual knowledge, skills and assumptions are challenged.[36]

This brief felt very comfortable to squib-box, as our practice is rooted in a close mode of collaboration. The three members of the group have a certain amount of overlap in skills (musical composition, live performance, audio production) but also have unique disciplinary specialisms (e.g. live coding, video production, specific software knowledge, and stage direction).

With *[sweet-ERROR:miku]* we addressed the idea of permeable disciplinary boundaries by staging a dialogue between analogue and digital modes of performance, positioning a live musical performance within a digital multimedia environment. Rather than creating a slick blend of the live and mediated, we wanted to highlight the gaps and disconnects between corporeal and virtual acts. As such, the work features two virtual performers in addition to four live performers on stage.

The primary actor in this regard is Hatsune Miku, a Japanese animated character created by Crypton Future Media. Miku is one of several characters modelled in *Vocaloid* software, a modestly priced DAW plugin that allows users operate a fully programmed singing voice. Anyone can buy Miku's voice and create music with it—she can sing Japanese and English syllables, and the wide-ranging parameters of her voice are fully au-

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[35] A full, annotated video of the work (**Luck_203030507_video_SEM Full documentation.mp4**), and accompanying list of section starting times **(Luck_203030507_SEM section timings and credits.pdf**) can be found in the portfolio.
[36] University of Surrey, "Composition, Performance and Sound Art: Research projects, outputs and events," University of Surrey, 2019, accessed Dec 19, 2019, https://www.surrey.ac.uk/department-music-and-media/research/composition-performance-and-sound-art.

tomatable, allowing control of, for instance, vibrato, the 'openness' of the sound, gender (formant structure), portamento, and darkness/lightness.

Fig.2.1. Fan-made 3D model model of Hatsune Miku.[37]

All Vocaloid characters also have likenesses and biographies. Miku (who is presented as an eternally 16-year-old Lolita-esque girl with turquoise hair) is by far the most well-known. Over the last ten years she has become one of Japan's biggest pop cultural icons; her voice and image have been used on hundreds of thousands of fan-made pop tracks and videos worldwide. Originally intended as just a cannily marketed music production plug-in, Vocaloid and Miku's presence have propagated far beyond their native environment to become a global subcultural phenomenon. Although at its core Vocaloid is an open access music production tool, the popularity of Miku's voice and image have led to heavy licensing for commercial and marketing purposes.

[37] Image rendered by the author from a 3D model freely available at: キオ式アニキャラ3D act.3, accessed July 16, 2019, http://kiomodel3.sblo.jp/article/23486819.html.

Context No.1: *No Ghost, Just a Shell*

In 1999, prior to the development of Vocaloid, the artists Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Pareno initiated the project *No Ghost, Just a Shell*. Purchasing the intellectual property rights to *Annlee*—a character from a Japanese Manga comic—the artists created, and invited other artists to create, a series of works using her image in a variety of contexts. This body of work has been frequently exhibited as a collection. The multiple perspectives on the character offered in these exhibits raise questions about identity, power, manipulation, and "the constitution and continuity of the existence of the individual."[38] As curator Hans Ulrich Obrist observes:

> Traditionally within artistic production, the idea is legitimated by the definition of a form, then protected by a system of copyright. Here Parreno and Huyghe sought a different approach. . . . The form each artist gave to this idea would not be definitive . . . and . . . copyright would no longer be attributed to the authors but to the sign itself.[39]

Fig.2.2. *Ann Lee in Anzen Zone* by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster. Part of *No Ghost, Just a Shell* by Philippe Parreno. Photo © Tate.[40]

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[38] Hans Ulrich Obrist, "No Ghost Just a Shell: Hans Ulrich Obrist on the Historic Import of AnnLee, Pierre Huyghe and Philipe Parreno's Self-Aware Manga Creation," Artspace, 2015, accessed Dec 19, 2019, https://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/book_report/no-ghost-just-a-shell-phaidon-53070.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Reproduced from the Tate gallery website under UK Fair Dealing Copyright exceptions. Image source: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gonzalez-foerster-ann-lee-in-anzen-zone-t14148.

The title of Pareno and Huyghe's project refers to Mamoru Oshii's 1995 animated movie (or *anime*) *Ghost in the Shell*, the plot of which is concerned with a female cyborg whose consciousness is used and misused as part of an online data network. *No Ghost, Just a Shell* explores and problematises similar themes of control and complicity with digital networks, demonstrating, as Christopher Bolton has put it, that "anime bodies, like the bodies of puppets, are [both] performing and performed."[41]

The collaborative mode of artistic production put forward by Huyghe and Pareno seems, then, almost clairvoyant in its prescience. However, where *No Ghost, Just a Shell* was an exercise in building a networked identity, a means of presentation, and modes of production, with Hatsune Miku we're handed all the tools necessary by a commercial organisation. Vocaloid powers her voice, and other third-party software such as the free-to-use 'MikuMikuDance' allows users to program an animated version of her in keyhole anatomical detail. Huyghes' and Parelli's constructed criticality here is replaced by readymade commodification, casual exploitation, and mass adoption.

Miku represented the ideal digital entity for our new piece. She raised questions less about her construction and more about her potential for deconstruction. Her off-the-shelf, idealised, ready-for-deployment form was open to be re-rendered as raw material, to be reformed in new, more critical ways. The solution that seemed clearest to us was to exploit glitches, cracks and the limits in her reproductive software that might reveal alternative aesthetic beauties and interests—to explore her digital *dis*-abilities.

For the second virtual character we decided to work closely with the performer John Kizito. Kizito is an actor and dancer suffering from cerebral palsy, which primarily affects movement in one of his arms and hands. We worked closely with John in an attempt to explore and celebrate the idiosyncrasies of his movement. Filming him in a dance studio, we were able to form composites by placing his movements on screen alongside, or overlaid with, Miku's animations. It was our intention that John's onscreen presence would both raise questions about the lack of representation of disability in contemporary performance and simultaneously help contextualise the alternative use of Miku's software in a real-world analogue.

With this conceptual framework, we set out to create the piece, deciding that a 'gig' structure of a series of songs would be an achievable way to write the piece collaboratively. Each of us would create two or three short pieces, the length of a pop song, that could be strung together in a set. Each would take responsibility for his compositions, but all would work collaboratively to generate multimedia elements, video parts, programmed vocals, and improvisatory musical material.

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[41] Christopher A. Bolton, "From Wooden Cyborgs to Celluloid Souls: Mechanical Bodies in Anime and Japanese Puppet Theater," *Positions*, 10/3 (2002), 731.

Cover Versions

I contributed three pieces to this set: a trio of 'cover versions,' acknowledging a form that already treats creative material as somewhat open source. It is an aesthetic approach that also connects closely with Karaoke performance, a parallel practice of fan-made musical appropriation.

The most substantial of these covers, was a version of the jazz standard *Body and Soul*.[42] The original is a tender ballad written from the perspective of an individual suffering the pain of a lover's rejection, yet still feeling complete commitment to that partner:

My life a hell you're making
You know I'm yours for just the taking
I'd gladly surrender
Myself to you, body and soul…[43]

In my version of *Body and Soul*, the text is primarily delivered by a live singer (myself) and the voice of Hatsune Miku simultaneously. The song and its lyrics become repurposed as a duet centred around a problematic and complicit relationship of control: I sing and play (acoustic guitar) along with a fixed, programmed backing track. Exactly as in karaoke, I sing along as the lyrics are projected as subtitles on a screen behind me. Miku's voice, however, has been completely pre-programmed and predetermined; I've put words in her mouth, manipulating her virtual vocal physiology to serve *my* purposes.

The 'cover' aspect of the arrangement is embraced wholeheartedly, layering up several stylistic versions of the song simultaneously. The other three live performers on stage play the song in different musical genres, building cumulatively in a way that increasingly blurs the line between analogue and digital sound, the live and the processed.

The broad structure of entries in the piece is as follows. All timings refer to the video file *Luck-_203030507_video_Body and Soul (SEM extract).mp4* in the accompanying portfolio:

Verse 1 : [00'20"]: Live acoustic guitar and voice, soft rock ballad
Verse 1 : [00'20"]: Live classical violin performs increasingly virtuosic countermelodies to the main line.
Verse 2 : [00'47"]: Hatsune Miku's voice enters.
Verse 3 : [01'13"]: Live Heavy Metal vocals and guitar, gradually increasing in presence.
Verse 3 : [01'13"]: Live electronics, harsh noise, processing the sound of the violin, guitar and voices on stage .

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[42] An extracted video clip of this section is available in the portfolio as: **Luck_203030507_video_Body and Soul (SEM extract).mp4**.

[43] Lyrics transcribed from: Billie Holiday, "Body and Soul," track 1 on *Body and Soul.* Verve, 1957, vinyl record.

From thereon, these layers continue simultaneously, building in intensity. The overall effect is of a dense mass of sound that blends due the sheer density of information. Towards the end of the song it becomes almost impossible to discern exactly what is live from what is programmed.

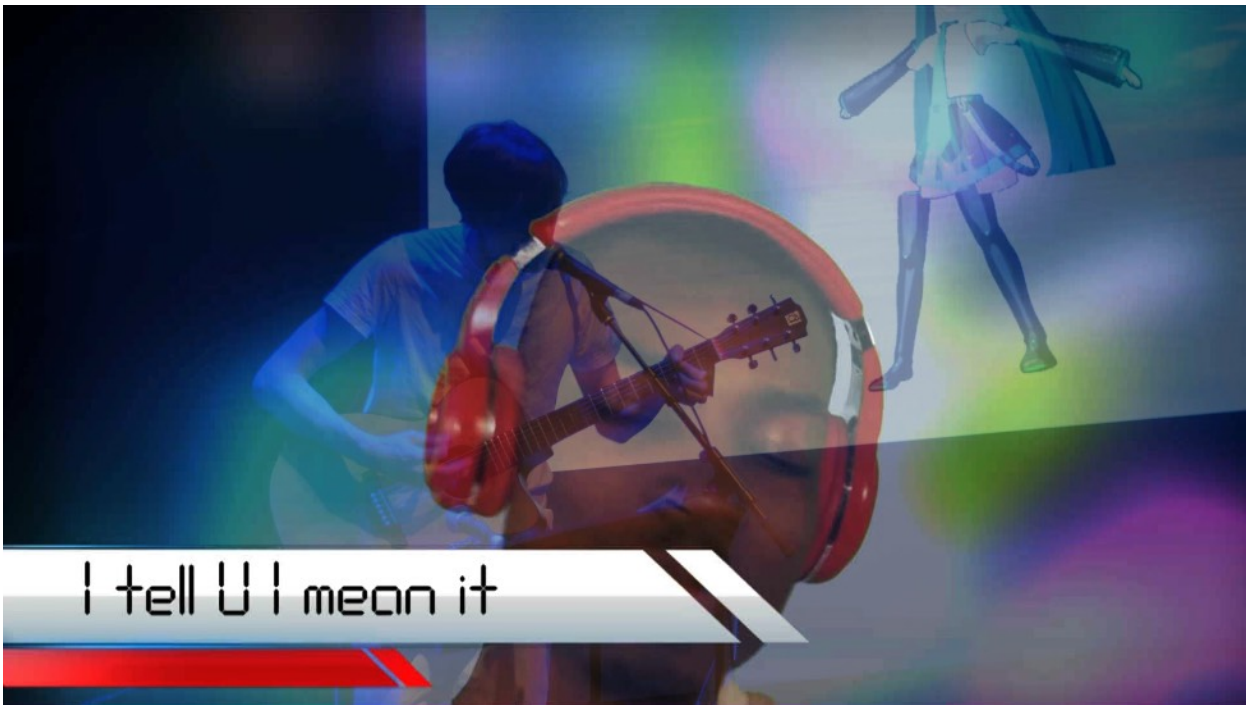

Fig.2.3. John Kizito and Hatsune Miku projected in *[sweet-ERROR:miku]*

The projected visuals follow a similar course. Beginning with Kizito pensively listening and dancing to music with carefully timed subtitles (01'14"), animations of Miku dancing enter the frame as the music becomes more complex. Animations and video footage become busier and more overlaid, Kizito's movements become wilder, and Miku is animated into uncomfortable and unnatural dance pattern (03'00"). At the end of the piece, all of this material coheres in a visual and sonic glitch; the video projections become stuck in loops, animations awkwardly repeating out of time with the music. Similarly, the live musicians on stage mechanically repeat a short fixed musical gesture, together with the discrete physical movements necessary to perform that gesture. Digital faults are rendered as a live performance aesthetic in a moment which obfuscates who exactly is in control here—the analogue bodies or the digital media?

The other sections in *[sweet-ERROR:miku]* take a variety of approaches to addressing similar questions. Broadly speaking, Adam composed two original rock songs for the set. Lyrically these deal with the topics in hand, but they are perhaps more straightforward and conventional in their use of live and media forces. Federico's work is mainly concerned with live electronics, live programming, and improvisation. As such, he contributed several sections to the work which feature live, distended manipulations of Miku's voice and her animated body parts, blended with the similarly manipulated sound of performers on stage.

Failures

[sweet-ERROR:miku] is an exercise in foregrounding these conventionally unattractive moments: carefully calculated glitches, non-connects, and dodgy cover versions. Equally important, however, to the work's compositional aesthetic was its collaborative method of construction. Its (admittedly subjective) success lies to a large extent in its *unplanned* failures. Specifically, we were beset with a number of unpredicted challenges and problems:

1. As individuals, we are geographically dispersed across the UK. This made it very difficult to meet together in person before the final phases of rehearsal. We therefore had to hold many devising and planning meetings over Skype video calls. One member of the team had a consistently bad internet connection, causing lost information, gaps in communication, and abandoned conversations.

2. Vocaloid software is commercially available but is not cheap. We could not all afford to purchase individual licenses, and therefore the bulk of vocal programming fell on my shoulders.

3. The software that powers Miku's animated avatar only runs on PC operating systems. As the only member of the group with a working PC laptop, all of the programmed animations again fell to me.

4. Although Adam was the most qualified member of the group to produce video materials and offered to take a lead on this, his editing computer had to be sent for repair during the key production period of the project.

The immediate outcome of point 1 was that the compositional process suffered from a lack of proper communication. Despite the collaborative nature of the project, we were forced to work in a disjointed way. Points 2 and 3 (beyond leaving me personally with a greater workload) forced us into the position of needing to be as open as possible to the contamination of each others individual compositional workflows and aesthetics. As composers, we were no longer solely responsible for our creations. Point 4 resulted in Federico and I taking charge of visual materials. We are both somewhat amateurs in this area, and the result was a certain aesthetic poverty of video material, editing, and live manipulations of animations. However, rather than seeing these consequences as obstacles or compromises, we decided to embrace them as catalysing qualities, allowing the inevitable imperfections, errors, artefacts, and miscommunications to define the work as part of its overall conceptual, expressive framework.

Fig.2.4. Onstage live green screen in *[sweet-ERROR:miku]*

For example, throughout the performance we make use of an onstage green screen background, strung from two microphone stands supported with duct tape. A performer in front of this footage can be captured, the background colour removed, and the remaining image projected onto a secondary, ground level projection screen, also on stage. In the documentation of the full show, at 08'05" one can see this in action. Lit only roughly with stage lighting, the colour replacement technology cannot operate flawlessly, and so the composited images on the projection screen are distorted, warped, and unpredictable. When presenting on stage the mechanics of this digital compositing and all its glitches, any illusion of an idealised, digital-analogue fusion rapidly dissolves.

My Miku Could be Real is a song composed by Adam de la Cour, but with vocal programming by me. One can hear in this piece (beginning at 11'15") that the register of the vocal part and the speed of delivery makes it very difficult to understand Miku's voice. In large part, this results from the composer, who with little understanding of the software's capabilities, outsourced the programming of the voice to me. However, I chose not to 'correct' the pitch or the lyrics of the vocal part in this case, in order to articulate the limits of the technology and force Miku into extreme registers that cause distortion and a breakdown of legibility.

Lastly, the lighting design for the performance had to be, by necessity, programmed at the last moment. The project allowed for only a short technical setup and check. We decided to employ a design that emulated the pyrotechnics of a high energy pop concert, using as many of the venue's lighting tricks and novelties as possible. However, rather than setting distinct lighting states for each number, we provided the operator with a more general sense of feeling and energy to convey. The result of this is an unpredictably lit stage that often seems 'wrong'. For instance, at 25'54" the main central projection becomes bleached out as the performers are over-lit. At 22'29" the opposite occurs—the screen is visible but the live performers are in darkness.

Context No.2: *Still be Here*

In the same year that *[sweet-ERROR:miku]* was created, another group of artists realised a concert-documentary work about the phenomenon of Hatsune Miku: *Still Be Here*. This premiered in Berlin several months before our work, although I was only able to see the performance at London's Barbican Centre in February 2017, shortly after our work was realised. *Still Be Here* brought together a team of international collaborators to create a touring live multimedia spectacle with new electronic music, live action documentary footage, with multiscreen and holographic projections.

In contrast to *[sweet-ERROR:miku]* the creative framework, aesthetic, and language around the production of *Still Be Here* was substantially more polished and conventional. In an essay on the project, contributing artists Laurel Halo and Mori Matsutoya describe the clearly defined roles of the creative team:

> *Still Be Here* is a hybrid performance piece featuring Hatsune Miku, collaboratively created by five artists from various disciplines: sound artist Mari Matsutoya, composer Laurel Halo, digital artists Martin Sulzer and LaTurbo Avedon, and choreographer Darren Johnston.[44]

They also give a nod towards the high-end aesthetics of the piece:

> Her dance sequences were motion-captured from a live dancer and grafted onto the beautiful Miku model by illustrator Tda.[45]

Indeed, the overall aesthetic of the performance was one of smooth integrations, well-produced audio and visuals, automated high-tech slickness, and the illusion of a digital-analogue symbiosis. The performance featured a quasi-holographic projection screen at centre stage, on which an animated Miku danced, appearing almost as a physical body amidst an otherwise 2D, fixed, played-back presentation.

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[44] Laurel Halo and Mari Matsutoya, "The Multiplicity of Hatsune Miku," after us, 2017, accessed Dec 19, 2019, http://www.aft3r.us/still-be-here/.

[45] Ibid.

Fig.2.5. *Still be Here* by Mari Matsutoya, Laurel Halo, Darren Johnston, LaTurbo Avedon and Martin Sulzer.[46]

The most fascinating part of *Still Be Here* (for me at least) happened in the post-concert discussion. Several of the artists and a moderator took to the stage to discuss the project. They were joined in their discussion by the visual artist La Turbo Avendon—a digital artist who is manifested only as a female, online avatar (never in person). As such, Avendon was to contribute to the discussion via Skype's chat window projected large on stage; she could hear the live conversation but only respond with written text. Due to a technical issue, the Skype connection suffered from significant latency, meaning the conversation was littered with lengthy and awkward pauses and out-of-sync replies. This became such a problem that, by the end of the discussion, Avendon's responses were only occasionally even acknowledged. Compounding this, the screen showing her replies was partially obscured by the aforementioned holographic projection displaying (now that the show itself had finished) a frozen, "unresponsive,"[47] mummified image of Hatsune Miku: a digital *corpse*.

In the context of the discussion, these technical errors were seen as unfortunate embarrassments and eventually became simply glitches to be ignored, despite the fact that they seemed to elegantly express the problems and nature of the "networked", "amateur",[48] and constructed idealism of the technologies and means of presentation being discussed.

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[46] Reproduced under UK Fair Dealing Copyright exception. Image source: http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/StillBeHereAPerformanceWithHatsuneMiku.

[47] Arwa Haida, "Hatsune Miku: Still be Here, Barbican, London—a hollow hologram." *Financial Times*, Feb 27, 2017, accessed Dec 19, 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/3c1b3a8e-fcf5-11e6-8d8e-a5e3738f9ae4.

[48] Halo and Matsutoya, "The Multiplicity of Hatsune Miku."

Still Be Here and *[Sweet-ERROR:Miku]* are both, I believe, strengthened by faults. *Still Be Here* benefits conceptually from unplanned technological failure and a lack of consideration regarding how humans and machines might *really* interact. *[Sweet-ERROR:Miku]*, on the other hand, is a work beset with certain production issues and realised by means of nonspecialist creative labour, reframed as an aesthetic choice. There is no ghost in the shell, just a corpse; both works reanimate the digital cadaver of Hatsune Miku as an illusion that appears as present and 'alive' in some way. In *Still Be Here* the mechanics of this illusion are seen as an accident; in *[Sweet-ERROR:Miku]* they are thrust centre stage, fully acknowledged, and embraced.

The faults in *[Sweet-ERROR:Miku]* highlight how technologies of reproduction, and multimedia hardware and software, might be used for expressive ends in and of themselves. They pose further questions about we might move the meaning of a work away from simply what is represented and toward its very means of representation.

Chapter 3
Service Interruption

Portfolio work - *Orderly Mouthpiece Spent*

A repurposing of the error, of the glitch and its intentional incorporation into an artwork, is a quality that pervades this portfolio. In contrast to the quasi-accidental faultiness of *[Sweet-Error: Miku]*, however, many of my subsequent works have employed errors in controlled ways. This is perhaps best illustrated by the radiophonic work *Orderly Mouthpiece Spent* (*OMS*).

OMS was a commission from BBC Radio 3's dedicated contemporary classical music show *Hear and Now*. I was asked to produce an hour-long radiophonic music-drama that would immediately follow and respond to the live broadcast of the *Last Night* of the BBC Proms. The Proms Festival is the UK's largest classical music festival, and the last night is typically reserved for a bombastic celebration of classical 'hits,' as well as British patriotic songs and hymns like Elgar's *Land of Hope and Glory*.

Orderly Mouthpiece Spent was designed as a warped underbelly, an ambiguously satirical comment on this expression of tradition, nationalism, and positivism. Pre-recorded in BBC studios, and presented by one of the BBC's regular presenters (Tom Service), it was intended, as a whole, to be a 'glitch' in the programming: an interruption in normal service that had an outward appearance of complete verisimilitude in its high-end broadcast production values, but upon further inspection seemed to be profoundly 'wrong.'

Although conceived, scripted, largely composed, and edited by me, it contains much input from other artists; both performing musicians and several composers, who supplied self-contained segments, contributed to the whole. The nature of these segments were suggested by me, but then developed as ideas in collaboration with the contributing artists. The actual details of the material, and the production and recording of the segments, however, was completely down to each individual artist. This approach allowed me to maintain curatorial control over the work as a whole, but also allowed each artist to work relatively independently and freely.

Entirely pre-recorded and highly edited, the sense of a diversion from normal programming is absolutely planned and its rendering as literal glitches and errors is evident throughout. For instance, the programme opens, 00'00"[49] with an overblown version of *Land of Hope and Glory*,[50] heard immediately after the genuine performance that closes the *Last Night of the Proms*. In *OMS*, however, the piece is presented as a distorted reflection.

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[49] A full recording of the work, and a comprehensive list of timings and contributors is available in the accompanying portfolio. All timings in this text refer to the full recording presented in the portfolio as:
Luck_203030507_audio_Orderly Mouthpiece Spent_Full Recording.mp3.

[50] An extracted audio clip of this section is included in portfolio as **Luck_203030507_audio_LOHAG.mp3**, as well as a score of the arrangement: **Luck_203030507_score_Land of Hope and Glory.pdf**.

I arranged the piece both conventionally and in reverse. By this I mean I made a live arrangement that *sounded* like a recording of *Land and Hope of Glory* being played backwards. The actual recording of this backwards arrangement was then digitally reversed, and the reversal was mixed on top of the conventional 'forward' arrangement. The result is a warped, misaligned, mispronounced, and bastardised version of the original.

This particular technique of technological distortion references that of 'back-masking': the practice of playing musical records in reverse to divine hidden messages. Back-masking gained exposure in the 1970s when right-wing Christian activist groups claimed to hear satanic messages hidden in rock and heavy-metal of the era.[51] Whatever the veracity of these claims, they were almost certainly supported by the sheer *strangeness* of the sonic artefacts resulting from this technological hack. The intentionally 'wrong' use of the technology allows a readymade musical object (a Heavy Metal record) to speak in new ways.

OMS's Land of Hope and Glory, however, *doubles* this reversal in order to satirically keep the essence of the original intact while simultaneously embracing the alienating technological strangeness of back-masking. My use of this technique was specifically inspired by its identical application to voices and choreographed movement in David Lynch's television series *Twin Peaks*. In the "surrealistic encounters"[52] of the 'Black Lodge' scenes, characters move and vocalise with an uncanny, mediated strangeness that throws into question our accepted notions of the medium (of television) itself, the result being "a fairly obvious defamiliarisation technique which draws attention to the production apparatus in true Brechtian style."[53]

The quote above makes reference to Bertolt Brecht's theatrical methods of creating distance between "the showing and the shown, the represented and the mode of representation."[54] Through what he described as *Verfremdungseffekt,* or "alienation"[55] effects, he replaced conventional realistic narrative and empathetic models,[56] with one that foregrounds the theatrical artificiality (and mechanisms) of their presentation. Similarly, throughout *OMS*, radio production techniques are defamiliarised in order to give voice to the medium itself. At 07'45", for instance, we hear an interview with an anonymous composer,[57] conducted by the presenter "on radio via video-link." Similar in nature to the faulty Skype signal of *Still Be Here*, a series of questions are responded to as garbled, digitally distorted replies—a bad signal. Communication is impossible, meaning remains obscure, all that really 'speaks' is the subject of communication itself.

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51 Joe Banks, "Rorschach Audio: Ghost Voices and Perceptual Creativity," *Leonardo Music Journal*, 11 (2001), 82.

52 John Richardson, "Laura *and* Twin Peaks*: Postmodern Parody and the Musical Reconstruction of the Absent Femme Fatale,*" in *The Cinema of David Lynch: American Dreams, Nightmare Visions*, ed. Erica Sheen and Annette Davison (London: Wallflower, 2004): 87.

53 Ibid., 88.

54 Lehmann, *Postdramatic* Theatre, 30

55 Although not a direct translation of *Verfremdungseffekt,* "alienation" is broadly accepted as the most useful English language interpretation of the term It is also sometimes referred to as the "distancing effect". Bertolt Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (London: Methuen Drama, 1993): 91-99.

56 Jacques Ranciere, *Intervals of Cinema,* trans. John Howe (Verso Books, 2014), 103.

57 An extracted audio clip of this section is included in portfolio as **Luck_203030507_audio_Interview 1.mp3**.

A second interview attempts to get closer to a one-to-one unmediated interaction but encounters similar problems in more visceral and explicit terms. At 26'43"[58] the presenter reflects on a piece by an anonymous deceased composer, before conducting an interview with them, via their "reanimated larynx in the studio … to talk with us in true 'pataphysical form." What we proceed to hear is the presenter firing questions to this disembodied vocal tract, to be met, once again, with distorted, garbled responses, sonically reminiscent of the electronic, artificial larynxes used by tracheostomy patients.

In reality, the sound is produced live by myself and another performer, adapting a technique developed from a past piece of ours (see photo below). I vibrate air in a long tube using a hunting duck caller (which sounds by means of a small, raspy reed), whilst the other performer—Adam de la Cour—at the opposite end of the tube modifies the sound with the shape and position of his mouth and tongue.[59] Even when the voice is present in the room, then, all we really hear are the defamiliarised mechanics of its own production.

Fig.3.1. Neil Luck and Adam de la Cour foregrounding the mechanics of speech production.
Photo by Dimitri Djuric, 2012. Used with permission.

Context No.3 : Konstantin Raudive

In the 1971 English translation of his book *Breakthrough: An Amazing Experiment in Electronic Communication with the Dead*, Konstantin Raudive outlined his technique for communicating with spirits via what he argued was an empirically scientific (and, crucially, technological) method. Raudive would conduct séance-like conversations with supposed spirits in the presence of analogue recording devices - typically either a microphone recording directly onto tape, or by recording radio static in the presence of his supposedly oth-

58 An extracted audio clip of this section is included in portfolio as **Luck_203030507_audio_Interview 2.mp3**.

59 A video clip of this technique, applied to Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate*, can be viewed here: https://vimeo.com/335386824.

erworldly dialogue.[60] Through the subsequent interpretations of these recordings Raudive was able to divine and dictate extensive conversations with family, strangers, and well-known figures (such as the psychoanalyst Carl Jung). The sounds captured from these devices tend to be highly distorted and littered with noise artefacts. By playing back these recordings repeatedly, and at differing speeds Raudive was able, with some practice, to discern voices:

> Despite my most strenuous efforts I heard nothing but the words I had spoken myself and the rushing sound of the tape whenever I played a recording back. After three months of practice, at last I heard a male voice.[61]

Listening to Raudive's recordings one hears heavy tape noise, radio static, and apparently (although barely decipherable) heavily modulated voices. In the commercially released album of his recordings,[62] these clips are repeated many times, interspersed with explanations of the text by a presenter. This guided projection of meaning facilitates our re-reading of technological noise into semantic semblance.

In *OMS* we hear this, almost literally, in action beginning at 39'50". In a segment by the sound artist Max Wainwright—*Talking to Itself*[63]—the programme begins to fall apart at the seams, breaking down into pure radio static. At this moment the musical, semantic, semiotic 'content' of the programme has completely disintegrated and we're faced with only the medium of radio itself. Through this static, we begin to hear Max's voice, heavily modulated by noise, incomprehensible but seemingly 'close up'; a sound reminiscent of a shortwave radio enthusiast scanning frequencies in search of a correspondent.

That intimacy is a quality that Marshall McLuhan saw as an intrinsic property of radio, a medium—in its usually solitary reception—that offers the simulation of one-to-one communication. Through this intimacy and involvement offered to and asked of the radio listener, McLuhan saw the radiophonic medium as an "extension of the central nervous system that is matched only by human speech."[64] That is, in the absence of any visual, spatial, tangible media, listeners are required to project themselves into the work. Just as the Raudivian listener must project and find meaning in the chaos of static, as radio listeners "given only the *sound* of a [radio]play, we have to fill in *all* of the senses, not just the sight of the action. … [It requires] so much do-it-yourself, or completion and 'closure' of action."[65]

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[60] Raudive outlines his methods for making these recordings in *Breakthrough*, pages 20-27. See: Konstantin Raudive and Peter Bander. *Breakthrough: An Amazing Experiment in Electronic Communication with the Dead,* trans. Nadia Fowler, ed. Joyce Morton (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1971).

[61] Raudive and Bander, *Breakthrough: An Amazing Experiment in Electronic Communication with the Dead*, 17.

[62] Many of Raudive's recordings were made available at the time on LP, on the album *Breakthrough*. A recording can be heard at: SWARDH, "Konstantin Raudive - Breakthrough (Full Recording)," *YouTube* video, 23:33. November 12, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxRTguQtHfw&t=381s.

[63] An extracted audio clip of this section is included in portfolio as **Luck_203030507_audio_Talking to Itself.mp3**.

[64] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Routledge Classics. London: Routledge, 1964), 330.

[65] Ibid., 331.

The expanded space for an audience's projection allows room the medium itself to speak. The artefacts, detritus, and errors of production thus have potential for much meaning. In Lynette Quek's contribution, *Live from the Royal Albert Hall*[66] heard at 13'30", we're guided—in the style of a typical 'outside broadcast'—to the Proms' main venue. Naturally, now that the Last Night is over, however, we're merely greeted by the sound of empty, unpopulated spaces. For several minutes we listen to recordings of room noise, air conditioners, the dull sound of activity behind walls. These are sounds which one might usually aim to eliminate in a broadcast situation, but here they are presented as spaces into which we must project our own imaginations.

The ultimate anticlimax of the work begins at 44'10". *Void* [67] is a layered composition, devised by myself but with text by the poet Matthew Lee Knowles and a background solo violin performance by Benedict Taylor. Dramaturgically it serves as the aftermath of Wainwright's radio static breakdown. In *Void* we hear all of the signifiers that have propped up the artifice of the past forty minutes—the presenter, the studio musicians, voices of 'guests', the studio audience—but here operating in a kind of limbo. The medium of *the radio programme* speaks here in an abstract tongue. The text is a gnomic stream of meaningless verbosity; the musicians and studio audience interject with undirected and grotesque outbursts; the violinist in the background seems to be experiencing a violent episode. All of these elements orbit around each other without any apparent direction. Radio 'content' is present—that is, all the signs are there—but it is reduced to barely recognisable matter with little to no function.

The Expanded Sonic Field

Orderly Mouthpiece Spent presents the audible error and glitch as something controlled, intentional, and aesthetically desirable. It repurposes the means, structures and, crucially, the *grain* of radio production itself in a way that allows it to speak of its own failings.

In his book *In the Blink of an Ear*, Seth Kim-Cohen draws attention to what he sees as the inherently intertextual nature of sound in art. To describe this, Kim-Cohen proposes the concept of an "expanded sonic field"[68]—a model for thinking about sound-related practices as part of a larger, interconnected landscape of artistic practices (Fig.3.2). His model deals to a degree with liminalities, recognising that between the relatively intuitively defined opposing poles of noise/not noise and speech/not speech lie whole swathes of practices.

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66 An extracted audio clip of this section is included in portfolio as **Luck_203030507_audio_Live from RAH.mp3**.

67 An extracted audio clip of this section is included in portfolio as **Luck_203030507_audio_Void.mp3.**

68 Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear : Toward a Non-cochlear Sonic Art*, 155. An idea directly translated from Rosalind Krauss' 'expanded field of sculpture.' See: Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October*, vol. 8 (Spring, 1979): 30–44.

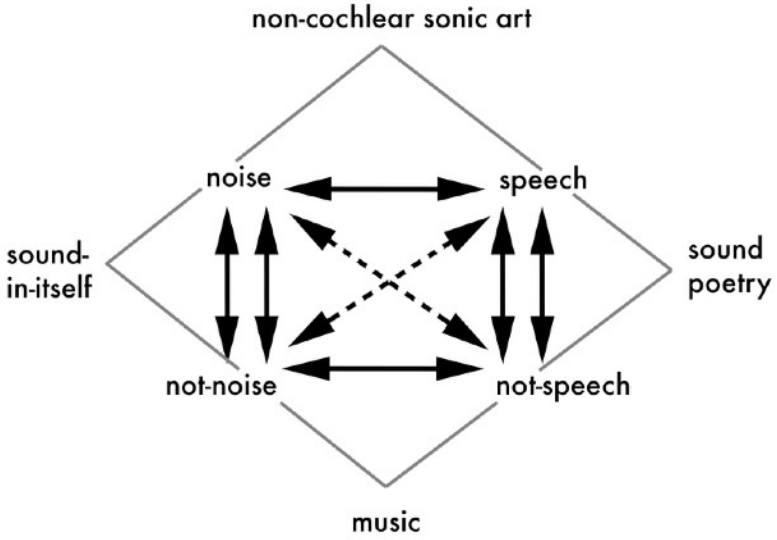

Fig.3.2. Diagram reproduced from *In the Blink of an Ear*.[69]

This expanded sonic field is used to revise the critical history of sound art practices, framing them in ways that align more closely with fine art discourse. Kim-Cohen draws particular attention to the combination or collision of 'noise' and speech' that results in what he describes as non-cochlear sonic art; "noise that functions linguistically and is therefore read as much as it is heard."[70]

Such non-cochlear art points towards a semiotic resonance of sound and its production, and indeed Kim-Cohen highlights how the engagement of sounds materiality, and an artworks questioning of "the inherent presumptions underlying the experience of audio recordings,"[71] can be central to this.

Adopting a non-cochlear approach to sound is useful in viewing many of the works in this portfolio. First, it offers a method by which artists and practices grounded in (particularly) theatre and film can be considered in more explicitly sonic and musical terms. Second, it begins to describe how the grain of technological reproduction might be as meaningful as its content. In *OMS*, Max Wainwright's radio static and the failed interviews with distant or deceased composers fall uncannily and explicitly between noise and speech; but, taken less literally, a non-cochlear nature of sound might have even broader semiotic resonances.

The medium of a work's production and reproduction is central to this discussion, and a slightly morbid fascination with what might be understood as a form of *mediumship* pervades much this portfolio, populated as it is by work that asks an audience to derive meaning from not just content, but also the work's rendering—its non-cochlear resonances. In this regard, the *Screen Tests* discussed in the following chapter represent a further, focused, practical investigation.

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[69] Ibid., 155.

[70] Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear : Toward a Non-cochlear Sonic Art*, 156.

[71] Ibid., 156.

Chapter 4
Behind the Scenes

Classic cinema practice is the apotheosis of media artifice. A movie results from a profoundly collaborative endeavour: melding together mise-en-scène, camerawork, editing, sound recording, and music into the portrayal of a singular world.[72]

In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan saw cinema as a contemporary expression of 'hot' media;[73] that is, a form that, in its combinatorial essence, appeals to the senses in high definition, being "well filled with data." A result of this, he suggested, was the audience's non-participatory relation with the medium; conventional mainstream films wed, in particular, sound and image in ways that leave little space for a "free interplay of the senses" in their fused, "uniform and connected … qualities."[74]

In her seminal 1987 text *Unheard Melodies*, Claudia Gorbman looks at Hollywood cinema from the specific perspective of its music. Gorbman states that, in conventional practice, music most often "may act as a 'suturing' device, aiding the process of … lessening awareness of the technological nature of film discourse."[75] This suturing is fundamental to the verisimilitude of cinema, the 'narratively implied spatiotemporal world'—its *diegesis*. Musical moods support narratives, leitmotifs refer to characters, swooning strings smooth over harsh visual cuts and edits. Fundamentally, Gorbman sees (and hears) image and music as operating in a relationship of *mutual implication*.[76] When music and image are placed together, they will do or imply *something.* Even an accidental alignment will create some sort of *combinatoire* of expression.[77]

Michel Chion refers to the fluid yet inherently artificial relationship between film sound and image as its *audiovisual contract.*[78] In *Audio-vision* (1990), Chion looks primarily towards European art-house and *auteur*-led cinema as models of practice that describe the stretched edges of this contract. Chion's views rest on a fundamental observation: whereas an image is inextricably contained within a frame (the screen), sound does not have an analogous container;[79] rather, it coexists somewhat separately, somewhat symbiotically, in a variety of roles, relationships, and meanings, able to take many more liberties alongside and against the typically diachronic flow of images.[80] Crucially, Chion dissects the diegetic relationships within the audiovisual contract in some detail, and a quick *precis* of this is useful here.

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72 Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London: BFI, 1987), 4.

73 McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 14.

74 Ibid., 315.

75 Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, 5.

76 Ibid., 15.

77 Gorbman briefly discusses Jean Cocteau's principle of "accidental synchronization" between pre-composed music and image, and how this results in such a *combinatoire*. Ibid., 15-16.

78 Chion and Murch, *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen*, 1.

79 Ibid., 66.

80 Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, 22.

Underpinning Chion's ideas are the categories of onscreen, offscreen, and nondiegetic sound. Generally speaking, onscreen sound refers to those that are visibly linked to an action on screen (a sound effect, spoken dialogue, musicians playing on screen). Unseen or *acousmatic* sounds may also be linked to actions within the narrative of the film, but these are not shown in the frame (e.g. someone knocking on a door). Nondiegetic sounds are those that exist outside of both the visual frame and the narrative of the film. Generally, for instance, an orchestral film score falls into this category (*Fig.4.1*).

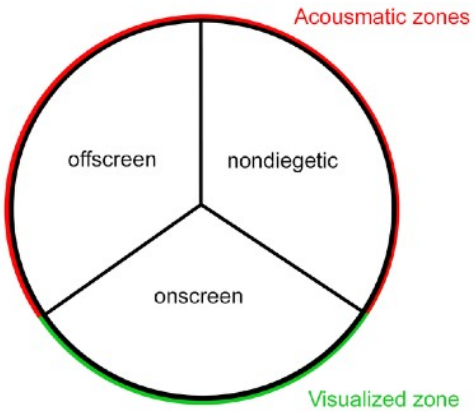

Fig.4.1. Diagram reproduced from *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen.*[81]

Chion goes on to further deconstruct these distinctions, recognising that the boundaries are highly porous and often thrown into question by even the most standard cinematic tropes. For instance, he identifies *ambient* sounds (bird song, traffic noises) as inhabiting the visual scene but having no clear identifying visual marker. These exist between diegetic and nondiegetic realms. *Internal* sounds, such as an inner monologue or a heartbeat, straddle the offscreen-onscreen divide. *On-the-Air* sounds (telephone conversations, radio broadcasts) can confuse the sense of time and place within a scene depending on whether or not they are rendered with the technological grain of their mechanical reproduction. (*Fig.4.2*).

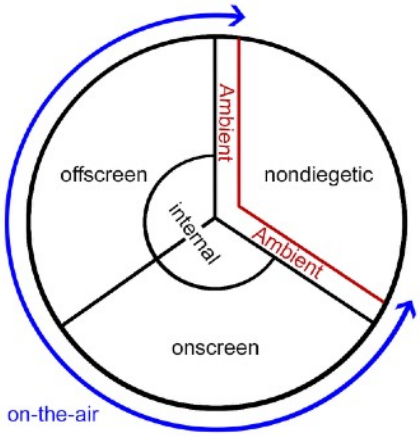

Fig.4.2. Diagram reproduced from *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen.*[82]

This taxonomy begins to describe the extent to which images and sound magnetise each other in cinema, to achieve an almost unconscious sense of unity or logic. What interests me about this, however, is not the in-

[81] Chion and Murch, *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen*, 74.

[82] Ibid., 78.

tricacies of how music and sound function within film and cinema *per se*, but rather how we, as viewers (or listeners), are able to accept this technologically unreal *combinatoire* as essentially realistic, or at least unified, despite its ambiguous and fluid relationships. To return to the question left hanging at the end of the previous chapter, how can the exposure of these technologies and techniques of reproduction be used productively and expressively?

Portfolio work - *Screen Tests*

My ongoing series of video works—*Screen Tests*[83]—are in effect a set of experiments that explore this question. Generally made quickly, roughly, and with a zero budget, they also serve as a set of portraits of individual musicians with whom I work regularly and closely. These short works take their cue from the standard practice of prospective actors performing lines to camera in order for a director to determine their suitability for a role. In my *Screen Tests*, I place the performers in a state of performing to the camera and to the microphone not in an actorly fashion, but in way that acknowledges the recording devices and the expectation of the edit.

Each work was carefully planned (and scored to varying degrees) from the perspective of them being both live performances, as well as actions that would be captured by cameras and microphones. However, in each of the cases discussed below, a significant degree of testing and rethinking of material and ideas in collaboration with the performers was necessary to realise the works.

Vexed [84]

Fig.4.3. Screenshot from video of *Vexed.*

[83] All the Screen Tests discussed in this commentary are included in the portfolio. However, the full series is available to view online here: https://www.arcoarcoarco.com/screentests.

[84] A full video of the work can be found in the accompanying portfolio as **Luck_203030507_video_Vexed.mp4**.

Vexed, recorded in June 2017, directly expresses this anticipation. Written to be performed by myself and actor-cellist James Whittle, the work takes the form of a short, surreal conjuring skit. From the outset, the intention was to produce a short video in the form of a 'blooper-reel'—the quick, edited outtakes or mistakes captured when shooting a TV sitcom or movie.

To enable this, I devised a live performance that would serve to generate as many mistakes, continuity errors, and corrective retakes as possible. The central skit uses live text, action, instrumental sounds, and pre-recorded music-cues and sound effects; over the course of the performance it is repeated eight times. In each repetition the performers are given the freedom to change performance style, spoken accent, subtleties in timing and delivery, and musical material. The score is skeletal, merely indicating basic musical material, spoken text, and the order of events (timed around fixed audio cues). Compounding the sense of failure, the supposed illusion in the skit is never successful, and lines are timed to disrupt natural responses in favour of *non sequiturs*. In total, this performance of eight repetitions lasted twelve minutes.

This twelve-minute performance was then performed and documented four times over the course of a day, resulting in forty-eight minutes of footage that capture thirty-two total variations or 'takes' of the skit. Each performance was filmed from a different, single static camera angle. The resultant *Screen Test* is a condensation of these thirty-two takes into a three-minute edit that saves only the mistakes, glitches, and continuity errors (both intentional and unintentional). A nod to the micro-variations that slowly begin to become apparent during a performance of Erik Satie's *Vexations*,[85] this film repackages that process for platforms that thrive on short attention spans (YouTube and other online streaming services). The sonic and performative logics of the performance and recorded artefact are mutually reliant on each other. Live, one is always anticipating the mechanical reproduction of the retake and edit. On video, the viewer is forced into a state of mentally reconstructing the live act, while also being asked to view that live performance critically.

Vexed's warts-and-all aesthetic bears some similarity to Andy Warhol's series of *Screen Tests*.[86] Shot between 1963 and 1966, Warhol's works are three-minute, unedited, single shot, silent portraits of friends and celebrities in extreme closeup. What is interesting in these works is how different people are clearly more or less comfortable in front of the camera; some stare sheepishly away, whereas others toy with and tease the lens. The technology of image capture is writ large on the subjects' behaviour, so that "both the psychological vicissitudes of self-imaging and the technological training of the modern subject are most evident."[87]

Our current, enculturated technological training is, of course, very different to that of the 1960s. In an age of constant surveillance, social media self-curation, and the constructed media narratives of 'fake news,' our

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[85] Satie's *Vexations* is a work for solo piano, 52 bars in length. The performance consists of this work repeated 840 times over the course of around 18 hours. Usually, performances of the work are staged as relays, with a number of pianists taking turns to play. For more information on the work see: Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, 35-37.

[86] Many of Warhol's videos have been archived online at: Ubuweb, "Andy Warhol: Screen Tests (1963-66)," Ubuweb, accessed Dec 19, 2019, http://ubu.com/film/warhol_screentests.html.

[87] Hal Foster dissects Warhol's fascination with portraiture throughout his oeuvre, including a discussion of the Screen Tests. See: Hal Foster, "Test Subjects," *The MIT Press*, 132, (2010), 38.

mediatised perspective of the world, and of ourselves, is drastically more complex than a single camera's-eye view. Hito Steyerl has commented on our shifting sense of visuality, as we've become increasingly aware of the new perspectives on our environments offered by satellite mapping, tracking, and drone footage:

> We … notice the decreasing importance of a paradigm of visuality that long dominated our vision: linear perspective. Its stable and single point of view is being supplemented (and often replaced) by multiple perspectives, overlapping windows, distorted flight lines, and divergent vanishing points.[88]

Exam Prep [89]

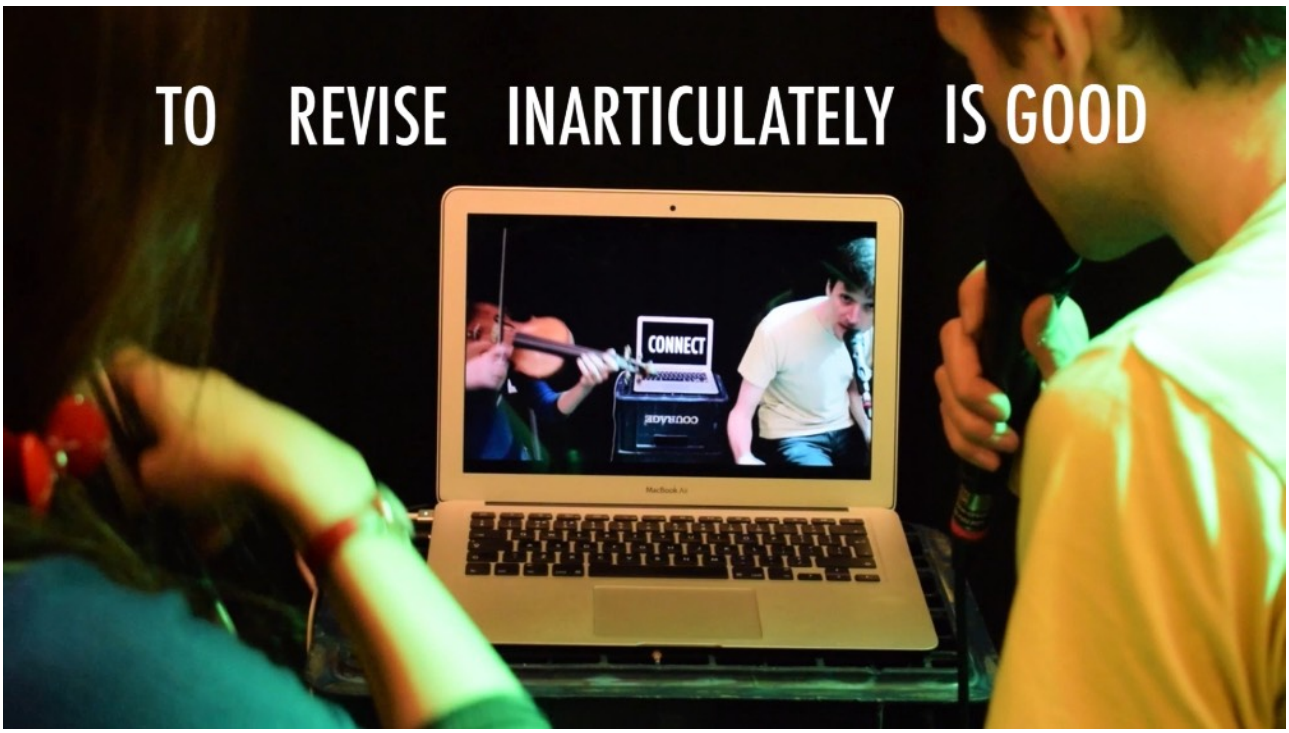

Fig.4.4. Screenshot from video of *Exam Prep*.

Several other *Screen Tests* specifically investigate this perception of multiple, simultaneous, 'impossible' perspectives. In *Exam Prep*, a single performance for voice and violin is recorded, played back, and re-recorded in a digital *mise en abyme.* To begin with (0'00"), a rhythmically delivered sentence is delivered in front of a laptop screen displaying an animated text. The sentence and text are intentionally gnomic and seem unconnected. In the next section of the video (1'11"), a recording of this performance is played back on the visible laptop, but it is now masked by a simultaneous, overdubbed performance that reveals certain words, spelling out a hidden meaning:

"TO REVISE INARTICULATELY IS GOOD"

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88 Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 14.

89 A full video of the work can be found in the accompanying portfolio as **Luck_203030507_video_Exam Prep.mp4**.

The process of overdubbing and layering shots and texts with visible performers, laptops, instruments, and microphones is repeated a further two times (beginning at 1'50" and 2'01") until the depth of perspective becomes confusing and opaque to the point that it literally "means nothing." The mechanics of the video's production are laid bare, like a technical tutorial that obfuscates as much as it illuminates. The audio in this piece shifts from live sound to *on-the-air* sound, further overdubbed with clearly artificial, non-diegetic sound effects. The audiovisual scene here achieves a unity through its explicit representation of mechanical production, reproduction, and *post-production*:

> Postproduction is a technical term from the audiovisual vocabulary used in television, film and video. It refers to the set of processes applied to recorded material: montage, the inclusion of other visual or audio sources, subtitling, voice overs, and special effects.[90]

Dartmoor 2006[91]

Fig.4.5. Screenshot from *Dartmoor 2006* showing the performer as an anonymised interview subject.

Dartmoor 2006 focuses almost exclusively on post-production techniques of this kind. Performed by the bassist Sam Rice, the work consists of a single, forty-second shot and recording that is subject to various post-production operations. Cast in the form of a documentary-like alien abduction confessional, the video begins with a character speaking, but anonymised in two trope-laden ways: his voice is pitched shifted significantly downwards, and his features are seen only in silhouette. Both of these techniques are often employed in television programmes to disguise the identities of people conveying sensitive information.

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[90] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002), 13.

[91] A full video of the work can be found in the accompanying portfolio as **Luck_203030507_video_Dartmoor 2006.mp4**.

After several seconds, however, the digitally effected camera closeup suddenly pulls out to a wide shot, and the pitch-shifted audio drops away to reveal the performer in his living room. The image and audio shifts from a supposedly *on-the-air* reproduction to a 'live' performance. Under the pitch-shift effect he is discovered to be in fact already speaking in the lower register of his voice and doubling his speech with electric-bass notes (thus acoustically disguising his speech). His silhouetted profile is revealed to result merely from sitting in front of a decorative room light. It is now clear that he is speaking into a microphone, and that an earlier digital 'buzz' effect was artificially added to the shot.

The camera then shifts in position to frame the performer's head in front of a black cloth. In the edit, this enabled me to isolate his head (at 00'26"), to be composited on top of a completely separate image.
So, here, the live performance, technical set-up, and camera motion all remain completely intact, but all are designed to serve an editing process—not as material for a collection of edits and cuts (as in *Vexed* and *Exam Prep*), but rather to facilitate and expose obvious methods of 'fakery' and mediated untrustworthiness.

Context No.4 : *Priority Innfield*

Beyond film-sound theory a more suitable context for this work might be the more technologically democratised, homemade medium of video-art. Holly Rogers aptly observes that whereas cinema is a heterogeneous medium that 'belies the illusion of synchronicity and flow apparent in the final, sutured product,'[92] analogue video technology, when it first emerged in 1965, was an inherently audiovisual medium. Image and sound were not captured separately (and later composited) but rather simultaneously on a shared electromagnetic channel.[93]

Distinctly different even from the 16mm film employed in Warhol's *Screen Tests*, Rogers traces the adoption of video by artists and musicians alike, through the 1960s and beyond, as a medium that offered a new, accessible intermedial space. In an explosion of what the author refers to as 'Video Art-Music,'[94] artist-composers began thinking about the audiovisual contract in new ways, as an expansion beyond conventional screen space "as an intermedial, multidimensional form [which] allows it to expand beyond… diegetic restrictions in ways similar to nondiegetic music."[95]

In the epilogue to her book, Rogers observes that the aesthetics of Video Art-Music can be felt keenly in its contemporary, digital descendants:

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[92] Holly Rogers, *Sounding the Gallery: Video and the Rise of Art Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 21-22.
[93] Ibid., 1.
[94] Ibid., 118.
[95] Ibid., 176.

> Interactive hypermediality is most clearly articulated via the Internet … The interactive displays of computers, tablets, and mobile phones enable continual audiovisual engagement, while the increasing prevalence of live, interactive reality television and amateur digital film archives such as YouTube suggests that our current audiovisual topography is beginning to fulfil the desires of early video practitioners.[96]

Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch's collective practice embodies this internet-savvy hypermediality with striking directness. Working together since the mid-2000s, Fitch and Trecartin work in a variety of media that coalesce into densely edited, super-fast-paced digital films. Rooted in the fine art world, the artists exhibit these films in galleries but also share them freely online (via streaming services YouTube and Vimeo).

Their films are characterised by very highly edited footage of staged performances featuring huge amounts of spoken text and abrasive sound design and music, resulting in a feeling of complete sensory overload. Many of their performances are delivered direct to camera. in the style of a reality TV show. The works speak to the saturated landscape of contemporary popular media, but their multivalent deployment of video, literature, music, performance, and sculpture represent a truly contemporary *gesamtkunstwerk*.[97]

Performers are heavily made-up and perform within sets that are carefully weirded versions of familiar environments—domestic interiors, kitchens, swimming pools, warehouses, conference centres. Many of the sets and the props which populate them spill out of the films' audiovisual frame and into to the artists' gallery installations, housing their videos within 'sculptural theatres,' offering a "perspectival twist"[98] that highlights the work's material non-reality.

Priority Innfield (2013) is a series of video works that have been installed in galleries as a collection of these sculptural theatres,[99] but the collection can also be seen online. Four independent, but semi-related films make up the bulk of this collection: *Centre Jenny, Comma Boat, Item Falls,* and *Junior Wars.*

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96 Ibid., 183-184.

97 Jeffrey Deitch. "The Post-Reality Show," in *Any Ever: Ryan Trecartin,* 7, ed. by Lauren Cornell, Kevin McGarry, and Jeffrey Deitch (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2011): 7.

98 Lisa Åkervall, "Networked selves: Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch's postcinematic aesthetics," *Screen*, 57/1 (2016): 48.

99 The body of work was originally commissioned for the 2013 Venice Biennale 2013, and has subsequently been installed at several major galleries internationally, including the Zabludowicz Collection London. For details of the London installation see: Bridget Crone, Kenneth Goldsmith, Christopher Glazek, Maitreyi Maheshwari, Elizabeth Neilson, and Ossian Ward, *Ryan Trecartin, Lizzie Fitch: Priority Innfield* (London: Zabludowicz Collection, 2014).

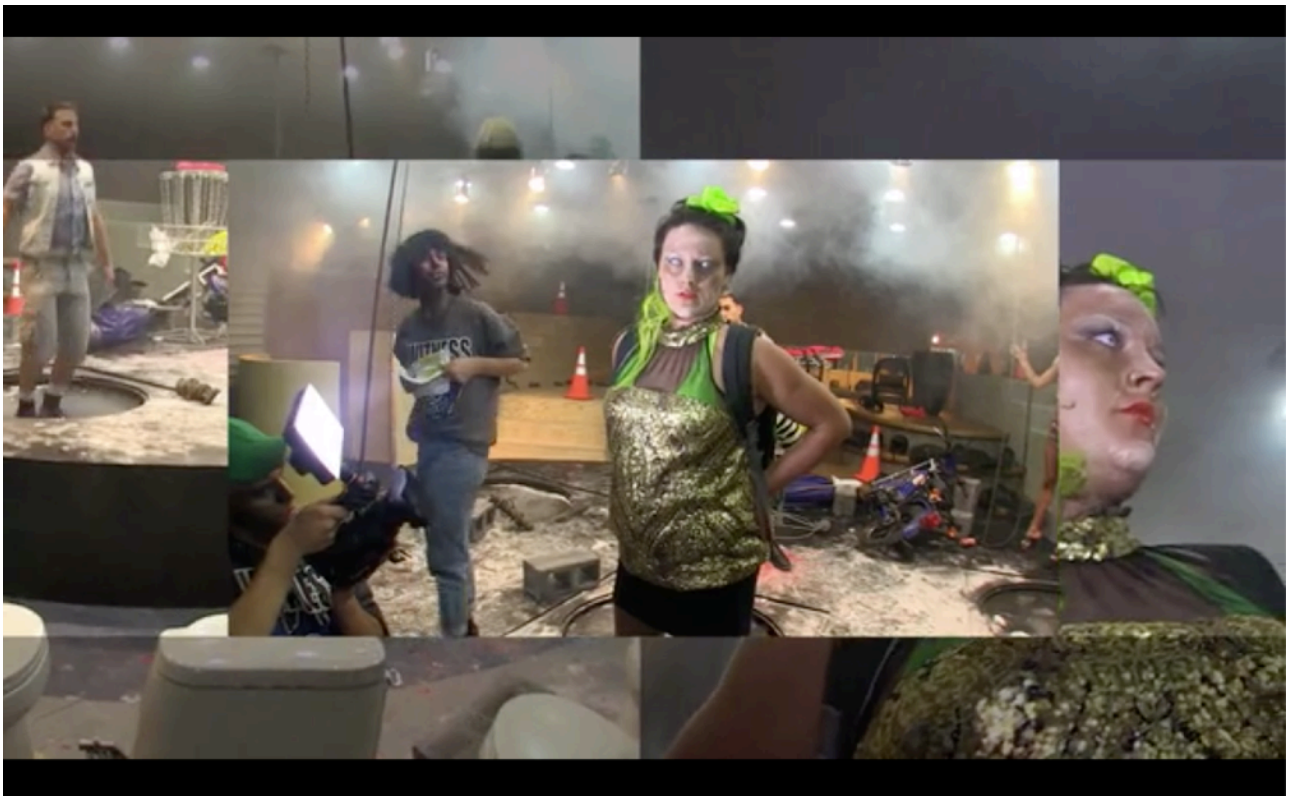

Fig.4.6. Screenshot of *Comma Boat* Vimeo upload.

Comma Boat[100] renders what feels like a behind-the-scenes shoot as its own subject matter. The film centres around Trecartin himself, playing a director-performer in a complex identity crisis that "oscillates between feelings of omnipotence and self-doubt."[101] The entire movie is shot on handheld digital cameras, point-of-view style. Trecartin's character holds one camera, as do several other operators amongst the cast, clearly viewable on screen. All performers wear wireless head mics (their voices are foregrounded in the audio-mix and are often digitally manipulated through pitch-shifting, distortion, and autotune). Dialogue is intercut with loud music, and the whole performance happens on a set somewhere between a studio soundstage and a reality TV gameshow. When installed in a gallery, the movie is exhibited on three screens in a small enclosed space, each screen offering different simultaneous camera angles. Seated in Fitch-Trecartin's sculptural theatre surrounded by screens and listening to the film's soundtrack over headphones, viewers are given a panoptical view of the artwork and its self-reflexive means of production.

The characters in *Comma Boat* seem to be in a continual state of rehearsal, preparation or retake. For instance, at 02'34" we see a trio of performers in an apparent soundcheck, singing the refrain "do I sound good? I say you sound real good!" over and over again, in rough, screeched unison, while their voices are manipulated by a digitally applied chorus effect. We're not viewing a performance, as such, but rather artefacts of its pre-, and post- production simultaneously—the implied, final, 'rendered' result is conspicuously absent. This has clear resonances with my own work in the *Screen Tests*, which aim to disrupt how live performance is usually positioned within mediated presentations. Indeed, Trecartin, talking about his and

100 The full film is viewable on Trecartin's Vimeo channel: "Comma Boat, 2013 (1 Screen)" *Vimeo* video, 33:02, posted by "Ryan Trecartin," December 8, 2013, https://vimeo.com/81315760.
101 Christopher Glazek, "The Past is Another Los Angeles," in *Priority Innfield* (London: Zabludowicz Collection, 2014): 71.

Fitch's earlier work *Any Ever* (2009-2010) has drawn attention to this quality, affirming that "the performance is not live; everything is performed for the edit—performed to become live through mediation. Editing is itself a part of articulating the character, and so I see it as a performative gesture."[102]

This articulation of character via the edit manifests in a variety of ways throughout *Priority Innfield*. For instance, *Priority Infield (Credits)* exists independently, and features the credits for all the other films show as 3D CGI texts, flashing over the screen at a speed too quick to properly parse. Performers and contributors are reduced to their technical roles with the films, but their names and roles are warped to reveal further narrative information and clues: 'Audition Manager Park Recurs,' 'Story Telling Boy Bands,' 'A Standard Chick,' 'Stunt Audition Better than a Basic Horse,'etc.[103]

Fig.4.7. Screenshot of *Center Jenny* Vimeo upload.

Center Jenny,[104] the most substantial of the films in length, inverts the panoptical viewpoint of *Comma Boat* by distributing the identity of an archetypal central 'Jenny' character amongst a group of actors (all named 'Jenny'). These actors are essentially avatars for this shared identity or character (in much the same way that

[102] Cindy Sherman and Ryan Trecartin, "Cindy Sherman interviews Ryan Trecartin," in *Any Ever: Ryan Trecartin,* ed. Lauren Cornell, Kevin McGarry, and Jeffrey Deitch (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2011), 144.
[103] The full, exhaustive list of credits is printed in: Bridget Crone, Lizzie Fitch, Kenneth Goldsmith, Christopher Glazek, Maitreyi Maheshwari, Elizabeth Neilson, Ryan Trecartin, and Ossian Ward, *Priority Innfield* (London: Zabludowicz Collection, 2014), 168-173.
[104] The full film is viewable on Trecartin's Vimeo channel: Ryan Trecartin, "Center Jenny, 2013 (1 Screen)," *Vimeo* video, 53:15, September 29, 2013. https://vimeo.com/75735816.

Hatsune Miku channels the inputs of her multitude of contributors). In *Center Jenny*, then, the sense of self is "networked"[105] across a body of performers similarly performing for the edit.

Here, as with all of *Priority Innfield*, all aspects of the work's media and production are explicitly utilised as expressive materials, rather than simply tools. In this sense the work reflects the conceptual and technical intentions of much of my portfolio, but also provides a model of how these concerns might underpin much larger scale, rich, complex structures. In the following *Screen Test—Deepy Kaye*—I attempted to adopt a similarly multivalent panopticon of media through an exposition of its own mechanics.

Deepy Kaye[106]

The most substantial work in my *Screen Tests* series, *Deepy Kaye* is a musical setting of a collection of fan-fiction anecdotes I wrote about the American actor David Patrick Kelly (the title is a misreading of his spoken initials, D.P.K.). Kelly is a recognisable but not exceptionally well-known actor who has worked in theatre, television, and film. Before writing this piece, it came to my attention that Kelly had entered my cultural consciousness at several different periods of my life. As a teenager I'd known his work from 1980s and 90s Hollywood action movies like *Commando* (1985) and *The Crow* (1994). A little later, I came to know him again through his supporting roles in the more surreal work of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) and W*ild at Heart* (1990). Later still, conducting research into the work of avant-garde theatre director Richard Foreman (the next chapter is a case study of Foreman's work), I discovered that Kelly had been one of his lead actors on stage in the 1990s. I felt, then, that I had a relationship with Kelly, or at least an understanding of him and his career from a number of networked perspectives, all mediated through his performances, and a director's-eye view.

The idea of trying to understand or distil an individual through a network of performed selves seemed like an interesting lens through which to investigate the concerns of the *Screens Tests*. As such, *Deepy Kaye* looks at the truthfulness and untruthfulness of a mediated identity by deconstructing, obfuscating, and thwarting its own attempts at presentation.

In each of the anecdotes narrated and performed in the piece, the central character encounters and solves extremely mundane technical problems while on stage or set: a rattling in a lighting rig, a decision about how to overdub a voice track, a confusing request from a director. Throughout the piece, identities are blatantly anonymised: names and references are 'bleeped' out, reproduced clips of Kelly's performances are blurred, and the faces of the 'live' performers (myself and two string players) are purposely hidden. The technology that captures the performance is always made present: microphones are visible in shot, and the camera is always handheld, pulling in and out of focus, announcing its constant presence as a manipulated viewpoint.

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105 Åkervall, *Networked selves: Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch's postcinematic aesthetics,* 35.

106 A full video of the work can be found in the accompanying portfolio as **Luck_203030507_video_Deepy Kaye.mov**.

Fig.4.8. Screenshot from the video of *Deepy Kaye.*

All the anecdotes were written with the edit in mind. The piece opens with the central character delivering a narrative about making *Commando*; in discussion with a recording engineer, he decides to employ a particular type of boom stand to capture dialogue in a public location, as opposed to overdubbing lines at a later time. The narrative is both spoken and conveyed allegorically through my manipulation of a pack of cards. The camera never captures my speaking mouth, and so the source of the spoken text remains in question. However, the sounds produced by the cards (shuffling, flicking, laying down) are all doubled with cartoonish sound effects produced by the string instruments. The scene concludes with a short excerpt from the film, blurred, with a simultaneous synopsis of that scene narrated by a disembodied voice. In these few short moments, then, Kelly is present in anecdotal details, my impersonation of his voice, the allegorical demonstration of the cards, his 'real' blurred image on screen, and a disembodied audio description. All of these means serve to describe the outline of his character, yet he is remains distinctly absent and unnamed.

Throughout the piece conventional narratives are fractured or destroyed by mediated obfuscation. At 02'57" a short section describing the actor's performance in Richard Foreman's staging of *Woyzeck* features text delivery becoming masked by the gargling of water (in the climax of *Woyzeck*, the main character drowns), with accompanying sounds from the instruments that imitate a life-support machine. The text I speak describes an issue with a noisy lighting rig in the theatre; in moments of gargling, the text is reproduced as subtitles on the screen. Simultaneously and overlaid with this, two disembodied voices give contextual clues about the play being described and, eventually, the solution to the noise.

These two voiceovers (a male and female, both Americans) appear throughout the piece as anonymous commentators on the action. To some degree they fulfil the role that Chion calls the *acousmêtre*—the never-

seen narrator, a character's internal monologue. They are diegetically untethered from what is happening on screen and occupy an ambiguous spatiotemporal position:

> First, the acousmêtre has the power of *seeing all*; second the power of *omniscience*; and third, the *omnipotence* to act on the situation. Let us add that in many cases there is also a gift of *ubiquity*—the acousmêtre seems to be able to be anywhere he or she wishes.[107]

In *Deepy Kaye*, this ambiguous, omnipotent position is used to full effect, the voices being employed in a confusing variety of relationships to the viewer/listener. They give

(a) narrative information:

> 'They tried his suggestion with mixed success. In the final edit though the keep some of the live sound in carpark where Schwarzenegger rips out the car seat, before running down and killing him on the freeway'
> [01'10"]

(b) audio descriptive information:

> 'This is a poor fidelity reconstruction of a late scene, in 2017. He's older. He's stoned, two camera shoot, first and third person perspective. His foot talks to him. He is in a constant, deep, uncomfortable lunge.'
> [05'31"]

(c) contextual information:

> "Later on the lighting crew reassessed and found there was no problem. The ringing must have been an auditory illusion."
> [03'29"]

and (d) direct comments to the audience about the work as a whole:

> "Don't feel too confused
> This untruthfulness is normal
> Deterioration is inevitable
> These memories are licks of dull paint
> Your image of this chap
> Are jut an avatar that hovers above everything"
> [04'26"]

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[107] Chion and Murch, *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen*, 129-130.

Fig.4.9. Screenshot of poor lip-synching from video of *Deepy Kaye.*

The post-produced fallacy of the *acousmêtre* is fully exposed at a passage beginning at 05'03". The two voiceovers enter a dialogue, which is intentionally poorly lip-synced on screen by the two string players. However, the sound of the players' lip-syncing (lips smacking together) is also captured and amplified. The resulting image and sound are clearly 'connected' semiotically but conspicuously disconnected aurally.

In *Deepy Kaye*, then, the position of a 'live' performance is thrown into question. Designed for and subject to a range of post-production edits and manipulations, the verisimilitude associated with this type of footage is revealed to be a construct, to be used as an expressive means in itself. The multivalent, panoptical, and atemporal viewpoints it offers of David Patrick Kelly mark him out as a series of mediated nodes around a strangely empty core.

In a curious turn, in July 2019, I was asked to present a live version of this piece at the BBC Proms Festival in London.[108] The work was to be presented to a live audience but also simultaneously broadcast on live radio. In order to restage the version presented on film, I and the string players had to perform *around* the rhythm of its edits—a highly unnatural and somewhat awkward thing to do. The result, however, was exciting and successful: material could now be thrown between a live stage, a sound system, and clips of the original video projected on a large screen. In parts of the piece, we timed ourselves to perform in tight sy-

[108] A full audio recording of the performance can be found in the accompanying portfolio as: **Luck_203030507_audio_Deepy Kaye LIVE@BBC Proms.mp3**, as well as a score of the live version of the piece: **Luck_203030507_score_Deepy Kaye_Live score.pdf**.

chronicity with visual edits; in others, we allowed ourselves to drift from this tight, "Mickey-Mousing"[109] connection, further complicating and disrupting the audiovisual contract. Furthermore, in order for the visual cues to communicate to a radio broadcast audience, I introduced a live audio describer to simultaneously narrate what was happening on stage. A third *acousmêtre*, then, was present; another layered narrator described this new multivalent media space.

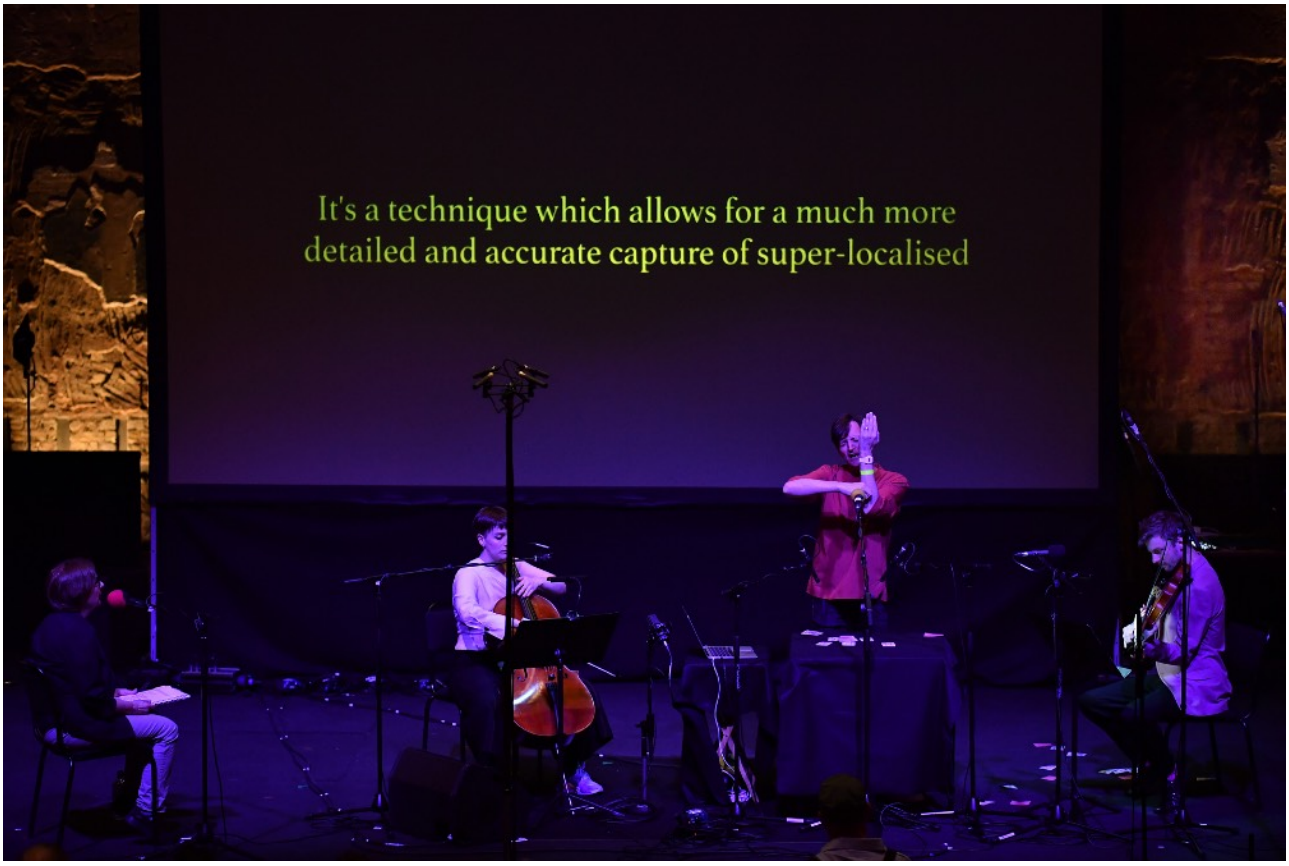

Fig.4.10. *Deepy Kaye* performed live at the BBC Proms, 2019. Visible on stage right is the audio describer. Photograph by Chris Christodoulou, reproduced courtesy of the BBC Proms.

Adding these extra layers of performance, media, and voices significantly increased the density and intensity of the work. It became a challenge for the audience to decode what was being presented to them. As the work gets folded further and further into a mediated state (the initial anecdotes, the edited video, the live performance, the radio broadcast), the figure of David Patrick Kelly seems to retreat further and further from view. What is foregrounded, what really *speaks*, is the means of his presentation.

This is addressed directly in the final section of the video piece. At 05'48", the final clip of Kelly performing disappears from view, along with any trace of myself or the string players. In their place appears merely a printed QR code, which, if scanned, will take you to Kelly's personal website. Meanwhile a final *acousmatic* voice posits how we might begin to consider the identity of Kelly in the future as something hypothetical and technological. The human hands that play such a strong visual role throughout the video are replaced by

[109] Gorbman describes the technique of 'Mickey-Mousing' as "Music making actions on the screen explicit—'imitating' their direction or rhythm." Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, 88.

a digitally rendered hand, and the sound of a synthesiser is heard. This is a completely artificially constructed media space, created and composited digitally, in which almost no trace of the 'human' remains. Pushed to its mediatised extreme, then, Kelly becomes merely an avatar for the tools of his own manifestation. The end of the *Deepy Kaye* video, and the live radio broadcast, point towards a state where the grain of reproduction becomes its own expressive force.

The live version of *Deepy Kaye* is emblematic of many concerns and possibilities not only for subverting and deconstructing the audiovisual contract in a live setting but also for orchestrating the performed dispersion of character and narrative between distinct media and bodies. Indeed, it is these possibilities, projected into live performance, that characterise the remaining works in the portfolio, as well as the late works of Richard Foreman—the subject of the case study in the next chapter.

Chapter 5
A Compositional Appreciation of Richard Foreman's 'Plays with Films'

Richard Foreman is a playwright, theatre director, and filmmaker who, since the late 1960s, has been creating most of his work with his own company 'The Ontological Hysteric Theatre,' in his own dedicated theatre spaces. Although he has also presented plays in theatre and opera houses throughout the world, Foreman remains a relatively unknown figure outside of America, his work virtually unknown in the UK.

His plays are characterised by a constant and conspicuous interplay of surfaces. Audiences are confronted with spoken and recorded text, movement of actors, amplified sound, projected image, bizarre hand-made props, and complex and aggressive lighting designs incessantly interacting, disrupting, intercutting and jarring with one another in 'complex rhythmical interweavings of visual, aural, and ideational material.'[110] Writers have often referred to Foreman's work in musical terms, describing the plays as "harmoniously disharmonius,"[111] his process as akin to 'orchestration.'[112] Foreman himself has said that "for me, the centre of the theatre is compositional. Manipulating all the elements in three-dimensional space."[113]

His theatre is one of media objects arranged according to their own internal logic and the effects they exert on one another, the whole constituting what Foreman calls a "reverberation machine."[114] In *Composed Theatre*, Roland Quitt describes the nature of 'composition' as "a means of achieving complex functionality through internal relations within a work,"[115] a rhetoric that points towards the non-hierarchical interplay of media in Foreman's practice. His plays in this sense represent, I believe, a vital and under-examined model for interdisciplinary compositional practices in general.[116]

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110 Richard Foreman, 'From the Beginning,' in *Unbalancing Acts: Foundations for a Theatre* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993): 83.

111 Ben Brantley, "It's What Happens When 2 Iconoclasts Get Together.," *New York Times*, Feb 13, 2009.

112 Mel Gussow, "Celebrating the Fallen World," *New York Times*, January 17, 1994, Section C, p.11.
Also reprinted as: Mel Gussow, "Celebrating the Fallen World," in *Richard Foreman*, ed. Gerald Rabkin (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999): 56-59.

113 Dance and Media Japan, "DMJ interview Richard Foreman 2/3," *YouTube* video, 3:43, January 28, 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FF5bJSxLPCA.

114 Richard Foreman, "Author's Note," in *The Manifestos and Essays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013), 51.

115 Roland Quitt, "Composition and Theatre," in *Composed Theatre Aesthetics, Practices, Processes*, ed. Matthias Rebstock David and Roesner (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 68.

116 Until very recently, accessing footage of Foreman's productions has been difficult and limited. Much of the research for this chapter was conducted in conjunction with visits to the only UK-based video archive of his work at the University of Loughborough. Since late 2018, however, Penn Sound have published an online public archive of much of Foreman's work. For the convenience of the reader, then, where available, I have included links to relevant online footage in the footnotes.

Fig.5.1. Screenshot from video documentation of *Zomboid!*[117]

Assemblages

Foreman has written and spoken extensively about his working methods, but the kernel of his ideas can be found in the three 'manifestos' written at the start of his career between 1972 and 1975. In them he proposes a theatre which focuses not on literal representations of reality but rather on a representation of the conflicting impulses that "stand under"[118] and define our experience of reality. Rather than setting up causal, teleological relationships between events, Foreman from the very start is interested in arranging theatrical events that in their conflicting, inexplicable, surprising combinations reverberate with one another in revealing ways:

> Match two moments (objects).
> They just, slightly don't match.
> … and that tiny, unresolvable mis-match…
> is the source of human creativity, energy, life…)[119]

[117] All video stills are screenshots of publicly and freely accessible documentation hosted by the Penn Sound Archive. Footage of *Zomboid!* is available at: Richard Foreman, "Zomboid!: Camera View 1," *Penn Arts & Sciences* video, 1:07:12, https://media.sas.upenn.edu/app/public/watch.php?file_id=221267.

[118] Richard Foreman, "14 Things I Tell Myself when I fall into the trap of making the writing imitate "experience," in *The Manifestos and Essays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013), 69.

[119] Richard Foreman, "Ontological-Hysteric Manifesto II," in *The Manifestos and Essays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013), 23.

This approach begins with Foreman's writing process. Rather than producing fixed scripts, he accumulates fragmented ideas, lines, and aphorisms that pertain to different subjects or concepts. At the point of mounting a play, he picks out and begins to reorder these fragments, "assembling the play in [a] very casual manner."[120] This is further mirrored in the production and rehearsal process itself:

> From the first day or rehearsal there's a set. … I'm sitting there with a little light board next to me, the lights are set up. And just to get different feelings I try to see the scene in different kinds of light. We have a sound man who, at the beginning, has about seventy different little sound fragments, loops of repetitive music, sound effects, what have you. And I have the script —up until a couple of years ago it was a written script. The actors all had to know their lines. Lately, I have a big piece of cardboard with about 120 little aphoristic lines that I choose and I say, 'OK we're going to start the play. Now Sophie and Max at the start of the play you come in from the left and you see each other, and you run back against the wall, you press against the wall because you're scared. And as that happens, try music seventeen and as they're halfway across the stage hit sound effect seven. And when you get to the wall, Max, you say the first line which is 'stories hide the truth' or whatever it is. And so we do that, and then I say, 'urgh that was stupid, no, forget it.' Day after day after day for fourteen weeks that what we do.[121]

Through a constant process of editing, reframing, and recombining materials the work progresses towards an astonishingly interwoven, fused and tight assemblage of text, media and performance. Correspondingly, as a musically orientated researcher interpreting and unpicking these plays, one is met with a difficult task; viewing the components of Foreman's theatre parametrically makes little sense. However, considering sound in Foreman as a key theatrical, aesthetic, and technological presence that interacts with and disrupts the tapestry of the plays as a whole can provide a useful perspective. In particular it illuminates ways to think about how sound and music might operate within interdisplinary work outside of conventional, hierarchical structures of production, that resonate strongly with my own works, and working practices.

The multifaceted role of sound in Foreman's work is prominently illustrated in three of his last plays, which incorporate projected video. As such, in this chapter I'll focus primarily on this small body of late works.

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[120] Richard Foreman, "Foundations for a theatre," in *Unbalancing Acts : Foundations for a Theater* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993), 16.

[121] Barbara Wilson, "RICHARD FOREMAN II - BARBARATORIUM," *YouTube* video, 8:39. April 4, 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3U0b5wnCJgA.

Fig.5.2. Still showing videos projected at the back of the stage. Screenshot from video documentation of *Wake Up Mr. Sleepy! Your Unconscious Mind is Dead!*.

Among Foreman's final plays are three that, for the first time in his career, incorporate substantial filmic elements. These plays—*Zomboid!* (2006)[122], *Wake Up Mr. Sleepy! Your Unconscious Mind is Dead!* (2007)[123], and *Deep Trance Behaviour in Potatoland* (2008)—could be seen to represent something of an apotheosis of Foreman's style; expanding his elemental tools through the introduction of fixed projected videos on set that bring with them another layer of captured performances, images, sounds, written texts, and light sources. Unusually, however, these films are completely edited and rendered before rehearsals begin. Projected as continual bas-relief backdrops to the live performance,[124] they serve as a form of click-track around which all the other aspects of Foreman's theatre are arranged. To a degree, then, these plays foreground the tension between live and recorded action and the presence of technological media as something which speaks on its own terms, as opposed to being merely *mise en scène*.

In his introduction to the published texts of Foreman's 'Plays with Films' George Hankin has commented that the works "are completely devoid of subtext, they're all surface,"[125] and, indeed, it seems that the interplay of surfaces lies at the core of what is being attempted in these works:

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122 Footage available at: Richard Foreman, "Zomboid!: Camera View 1," *Penn Arts & Sciences* video, 1:07:12, https://media.sas.upenn.edu/app/public/watch.php?file_id=221267.

123 Footage available at: Richard Foreman, "Wake Up Mr Sleepy! Your Unconscious Mind is Dead!," *Penn Arts & Sciences* video, 10:01, https://media.sas.upenn.edu/app/public/watch.php?file_id=221267.

124 Richard Foreman, *Plays with Films,* ed. Rainer J. Hanshe (New York: Contra Mundum Press, 2013), 17.

125 Ibid., 6.

> So, god is dead, now the unconscious is dead because of the internet and so forth, and the task is to find a way to place in this world of surfaces the same kind of unfathomableness and mystery between the digitised elements of our contemporary world. And I would like to think that in my art one of the things I'm trying to do is figure out a way to reintroduce that potent, pregnant sense of the mysteriousness and the unfathomable in a world that is all surface.[126]

Narratively these plays are some of Foreman's most unfathomable, dreamlike, and obtuse. Completely stripped of any even transitory narrative elements and any concrete characterisation of the live or onscreen actors,[127] they align with Foreman's compositional attitude: the impetus of each play is peculiarly decentralised, and the theatrical objects of Foreman orbit and combine in almost endless permutations and interpenetrations.

Sound Design

This interplay of surfaces operates on many levels, not least in the way the plays *sound*. Foreman's approach to designing the sound of his plays is dramatically different to usual theatrical conventions. From the very first day of his extensive rehearsal periods he works with a full crew, including a dedicated sound engineer. This enables him to assemble a detailed and dense web of cues that interact with the other media employed.

In the plays with films, sounds typically fall into seven broad categories:

1) Non-amplified voices of the live actors onstage
2) Onstage non-vocal sounds (actors interacting with set and props)
3) Pre-recorded sound effects (bells, buzzers, bangs)
4) Pre-recorded musical cues (fragments and loops of 'found' music, often used as underscore)
5) Pre-recorded 'archival' voices (generally old, found recordings)
6) Foreman's own pre-recorded 'directorial' voice-over
7) Voices and incidental sound within the film

During the rehearsal process cues (aside from the fixed audio on screen) are built up, rearranged, layered, discarded, and re-organised in increasingly complex configurations with the other aspects of the theatrical apparatus. In order to be able to work in this idiosyncratic way, Foreman's technical sound setups have remained almost perversely hardware-based. Cues are stored on multiple pieces of hardware that enable them

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126 Maxim Jago, *Trust Me: Working with Richard Foreman.* DVD (Loughborough: Loughborough University, 2006).

127 The performers in *Wake Up Mr. Sleepy! Your Unconscious Mind is Dead!* and *Deep Trance Behaviour in Potatoland* do not have character names assigned and are described in the published script by their appearance: 'Girl in Pantsuit,' 'Man in Striped Suit,' etc. In *Zomboid!* the characters have generic, holding-names: 'Ben,' 'Stephanie,' etc. In all three plays, the amount of spoken dialogue that these actors have is extremely minimal and, unlike most previous Foreman productions, unamplified.

to be triggered live but also to be edited, rearranged, replaced, overlapped, and faded in and out at a pace that can respond to the director's moment-to-moment decision making.[128]

Daniel Allen Nelson, the sound technician for a number of Foreman's productions, including *Zomboid!* and *Wake up Mr. Sleepy! Your Unconscious Mind is Dead!*, reflected on this setup:

> …by the first day we'll have four minidisc players and we'll have two samplers, and then it would just be like adding more and more machines or he would bring in another sampler and he'd be like 'here, I've programmed this for you to add this in.'[129]

By the time the production was ready to show to the public, this setup would have inevitably developed into a more complex arrangement:

> I ran about six minidisc machines, plus there were about eight different samplers, and …then all mixed live on a Mackie 16-channel mixer.[130]

This haptic, hardware-based approach has been a hallmark of Foreman's theatre since the earliest productions and is tied symbiotically to the methods of production of his plays. In order to be able to orchestrate his hyper detailed and dense textures, he needs to be able to organise sound cues in the most immediate way:

> … I knew this the whole time I was working for Richard, that there were software systems whereby we could be replacing all this gear, but … he liked always, again to have the feeling that he had control over it, so he loved the idea that he could like ask for one of the minidiscs, take it home and edit the loop and then bring it back and be like 'I changed that, here, take it back.' Or he could just bring in a new minidisc and be like 'here's a new series of loops that I made, just copy them onto your other discs.' Or he could, you know, bring in a new SD card to plug into the sampler with new samples on it.[131]

The hardware facilitates the way that sounds are used and the way that Foreman sources and assembles them. Sound and its reproduction hover as tactile and material presences in the plays. This presence is further evidenced by the speaker setup that existed at Foreman's St. Mark's theatre space. Far from recreating a realistic and high-fidelity sonic environment, Foreman seems much more concerned with the material grain

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128 It should be noted that in the most recent of Foreman's plays that use film the technical sound setup shifted from being hardware-based to running almost entirely on Ableton software (see full interview with Travis Just, Appendix B). Although by some accounts this *did* alter the devising and rehearsing process in certain ways, the aesthetic quality of Foreman's sonic language that has developed alongside his reliance on complicated hardware setups was retained.

129 Daniel Allen Nelson, interview with the author. London, October 2nd, 2017. Full transcript available upon request from the author.

130 Ibid.

131 Ibid.

of amplified sound. Travis Just, another of his sound engineers, detailed the speaker setup during *Astronome: A Night at the Opera* (2009), a collaborative opera with the composer John Zorn:

> You know the speakers Richard had in there were insane. They were cobbled together from … these giant speakers that were as big as this [outlines a person sized area], ok, and they weighed a trillion pounds, and they're completely blown out. And then he had these other speakers, so he had two of these giant cubes … that were from the 70s. And then he had two other EAW's which were pretty good but we had refurbished them. … So it was just the most insane sound system, it just made no sense, like sonically. It was chaos in the room. But it really worked.[132]

The low-fi quality, poor fidelity, and sheer loudness of a such a technological setup facilitates the work's compositional layering of surfaces. Sounds are starkly delineated in the overall soundscape of the play by their timbral fidelity, by their *grain* of reproduction. For instance, Foreman's live actors are all unamplified. Performed in the small theatre of St Mark's Church they loudly project their voices into the space's dry acoustic. In contrast, the actors on film speak in generally soft tones, often under the breath, but amplified through the theatre's sound system. The film clips are shot in a variety of everyday domestic and work spaces and recorded by camera-mounted shotgun microphones[133] which capture an audible sense of the acoustic particular to the space they were filmed in. These clips are then played back into the theatre space, conspicuously separate from the live action, their clearly mediated nature "bearing no verifiable indexicality to the actual space of performance."[134] Other prerecorded sounds are similarly delineated in timbral quality. Forman's directorial voiceovers are recorded with close mics and are obviously pitch-shifted downwards. Frequent bells and buzzer sounds are clear and loud, and looped beds of music are often sampled from radio broadcasts or old vinyl recordings, bringing with them their own, medium-specific grains: pops, scratches, interferences and other glitches.

Overall this jarring non-homogeneity in sound has the effect of pulling one's attention in a multitude of directions from moment to moment in what Richard Schechner describes as an "intense, you-must-pay-attention"[135] energy. It is this conspicuously perceptible mediation and editing, mixing, layering, framing and reframing of *all* material that lies at heart of Richard Foreman's compositional theatre, characterised by a lo-fi aesthetic and a bathetic DIY awkwardness. Foreman looks to the glitch, the error, and the non-sequitur as moments around which to organise his compositional objects:

> Normally, let us assume we are delighted by a sunset
> We are not delighted by a corpse.

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132 Travis Just, interview with the author. London, September 23rd, 2017. Full transcript available upon request from the author.

133 The documentary *Trust Me: Working with Richard Foreman* features much behind-the-scenes footage of the Bridge Project and indicates that a relatively simple camera-mounted microphone setup is used.

134 Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear : Toward a Non-cochlear Sonic Art*, 25.

135 Richard Schechner. *Performance Theory*. 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 234.

> But if we place the corpse within a certain composition, let us say—we are then delighted by the composition of which the corpse is a part
> So—while we are still not delighted by a corpse we can be delighted by something (made or found) of which the corpse is a part.
> The task of art is to find what heretofore does not delight us, and make that part of some kind of composition in such a way that delight results.[136]

It is the corpse-ness of Foreman's theatrical objects that allows the medium of his theatre to announce itself so clearly. They are awkward artefacts to be dealt with, made-up or embalmed to become something desirable and to create dramatic momentum.

Neal Swettenham's comprehensive overview of Foreman's work draws attention to the significant and important auditory impact of the plays.[137] Inspected through Hans-Thies Lehmann's postdramatic framework, specifically, Swettenham sees the "overdetermined"[138] quality of the sound as related to the concept of *musicalization.*[139] Lehmann describes musicalization primarily in terms of the foregrounding and focused manipulation of the material qualities of sound and speech—"frequency, pitch overtones, timbre, volume …"—and the non-linear and non-conventional design and use of musical cues. He also describes an emergent "auditory semiotics"[140] in the application of a musical sensibility to the sound and rhythm of theatre performance. Indeed, although Foreman's sound design clearly relishes musical and timbral richness, it is often the semiotic properties of sound that propel the plays.

In *Composed Theatre*, Roland Quitt discusses what he sees as the predominant semiotic modes in twentieth- and twenty-first-century avant-garde, *compositional* theatre and music. Type-P or "Code provided"[141] semiotics describe an approach that relies on traditional signs and their signifiers remaining intact. Quitt highlights the chance-derived works of John Cage as a good example of this in action; the recipient is left to freely discern connections and meanings from a non-hierachical interplay of elements. Type-W or 'Code withheld" semiotics intentionally withdraw the codes "that provides for an artwork's functionality,"[142] requiring a riddle-like solution to be found by the viewer. What we see at play in Foreman's work, however, is more like a hybrid P+W semiotics whereby "the discrete elements that it employs function in two ways at the same time: on the one hand they try to achieve a "scenic rhythm", on the other a scenic "assemblage". It is a theatre that ask us to sense its rhythm and enjoy its self-reference, as well as to understand its riddling address to its subject matter."[143]

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136 Richard Foreman, "How to Write a Play," in *The Manifestos and Essays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013), 90-91.
137 Neal Swettenham, *Richard Foreman: An American (partly) in Paris* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 106.
138 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 91, quoted in Swettenham, *Richard Foreman: An American (partly) in Paris*, 106.
139 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 91.
140 Ibid., 91.
141 Quitt, "Composition and Theatre," 64.
142 Ibid., 68.
143 Ibid., 76.

In Foreman's work the *meanings* of sounds are multiple and fluid. Sounds are simultaneously aesthetic, functional (in that they convey information), and bound up in a dense strata of "quotational subsystems."[144] The table, and accompanying video extract included in *Appendix A*[145] takes a particularly dense section of *Zomboid!* as a case in point.[146] The table outlines all of the sound events occurring in a three-and-a-half minute section towards the end of play. The most immediately striking aspect of this is the sheer number of distinct events: fifty-four, in total. These vary from short punctuations to musical sound-beds that play for several minutes. At every moment in this section at least one sound event is happening; and commonly two or more are overlapping and interrupting each other, repeating, repeating at different volumes, or fading in and out. In addition, the sounds serve a variety of functions:

1) Underscore
2) Live action Foley
3) Interruptions
4) Masking
5) Textual information
6) Incidental/accidental sound

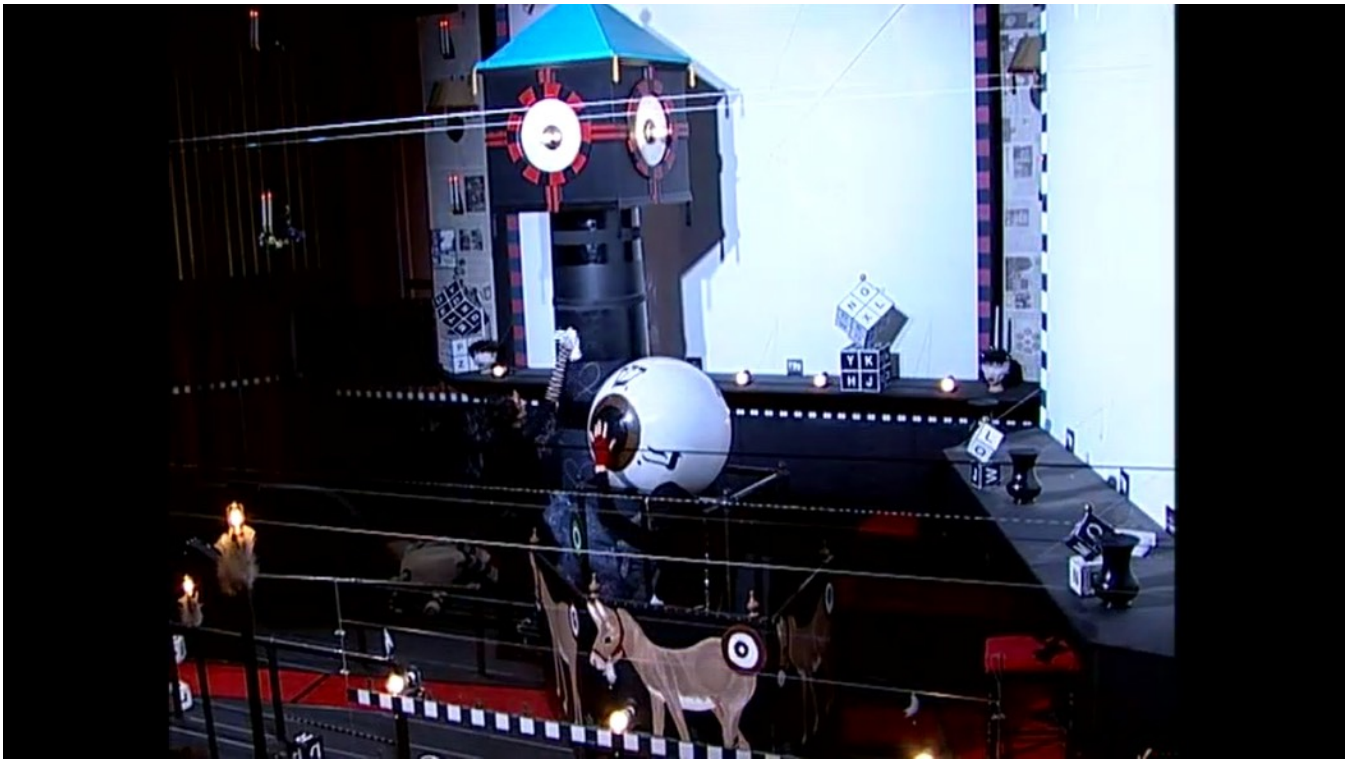

Fig.5.3. Prop wiping in *Zomboid!* Screenshot from video documentation.

144 Ibid., 78.

145 For formatting reasons, the Appendix is provided as a folder of materials separate to this commentary document.

146 The table is included in the Appendix as **Luck_203030507_table_Sounds events in Zomboid! (extract).pdf.** It should be followed along with video footage of the performance. Timings correspond to the footage hosted at: Richard Foreman, "Zomboid!: Camera View 1," *Penn Arts & Sciences* video, 1:07:12, https://media.sas.upenn.edu/app/public/watch.php?file_id=221267, but the clip in question has been provided in the appendix, with timecode as: **Luck_203030507_video_Zomboid! Performance footage (extract).mp4**.

These functions are not discrete; some sounds confuse multiple roles or change roles. For instance, the 'hee-haw' sound at 58'06" is a clear nod to the donkey references spoken by the actors and voiceover throughout the play and the cardboard donkeys on set, but it also momentarily serves as a cartoonish Foley sound to accompany the actor vigorously wiping down a clock prop. Similarly, the buzzers which begin sounding at 57'40" appear to be 'attached' to the flashing lights of the clocktower prop but also serve momentarily to apparently interrupt and freeze the projected action and sound on film.

Foreman's sounds then occupy an unusual and unstable place; while the compositional arrangement and the grain of their reproduction are an essential aesthetic quality of the work, many of the same sounds do fleetingly imply functional or dramatic meaning (a sad piece of music sets a tone, a glass-smashing sound effect halts an action). Sometimes these align with other actions on stage, and sometimes they misalign. Sound and the voice in Foreman are, then, not simply used 'musically' but operate as part of a network of roles and signs, in a field of multimedia activity.

In my own work such as *Orderly Mouthpiece Spent* and the *Screen Tests*, I attempt to use both the musical content, and medium of the works' presentation in a similarly networked way. Foreman's work, however, far from being simply *about* this quality, or *about* the medium itself treats sound in a somewhat more elemental way. This is, perhaps then, less a *musicalized* field in the postdramatic sense and more like Seth Kim Cohen's 'expanded sonic field,' introduced in chapter 3. In the expanded sonic field, speech, noise, sound, music, and the 'non-cochlear' are considered in a matrix which allows for a broad range of semiotic roles and interpretations. A piece of work "might engage philosophical texts, musical discourse, social roles enacted by the production and reception of sound and/or music, conventions of performance or the inherent presumptions underlying the experience of audio recordings."[147]

This multiplicity of roles, meanings and their implicit interactions reverberates in sympathy with the abstract, compositional qualities of Foreman's theatre. All of these qualities are present in how Foreman's plays *sound*, but also every aspect of the dramaturgy. It very quickly becomes, then, almost impossible to discuss sound in Foreman's theatre as an extricable element. Although the sound design is rich and complex, it functions in the context of the whole production; continually framing and being framed by the text, the action, film edits and props on stage.

Isomorphism

Throughout his own writings, Foreman describes the principles underpinning his theatre as "isomorphic"[148]; that is, the elements of his plays (as manifestations of his thought and writing process) all operate within the production of the work, on similar, interpolated organisational principles. Daniel Allen Nelson corroborates

147 Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear : Toward a Non-cochlear Sonic Art*, 156.

148 Richard Foreman, "The Carrot and the Stick," in *The Manifestos and Essays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013), 79.

this sentiment from a practical perspective.[149] He describes the two experiences of working for Foreman as a sound technician and as an actor as "exactly the same", drawing attention to the *performative* role of running sound:

> the whole process of doing it, of doing the sound, is very much like learning a performance because it's all in choreography and muscle memory. … it was really like constantly just doing this [mimes quickly moving between devices, buttons] you know, and watching and watching, and getting to a point of being able to do it all while watching what's happening on stage. It's like Foley, so it's all, like, you know you're scoring like action, action, action, action on a sampler.[150]

The sound, then, doesn't merely find analogies with other aspects of the production; it becomes an essential and integral part of the performance itself. Operating with the exactitude of a Foley artist, the *performers* of the sound design operate in a taut symbiosis with the entire theatrical apparatus, cueing and taking cues from one another. Indeed, Daniel recalls the precarious contingency of this process, relying on as small a visual cue as the director's movement at a mixing-desk fader:

> Richard would be like … 'Now let's do that all again but this time that new, like, Schumann loop I gave you, I want it to come in, like, three times as slowly on the fade in.' So he would say something like 'follow me, as soon as you see me…' (because he would sit there) '…bringing my slider down, then start creeping it in.'[151]

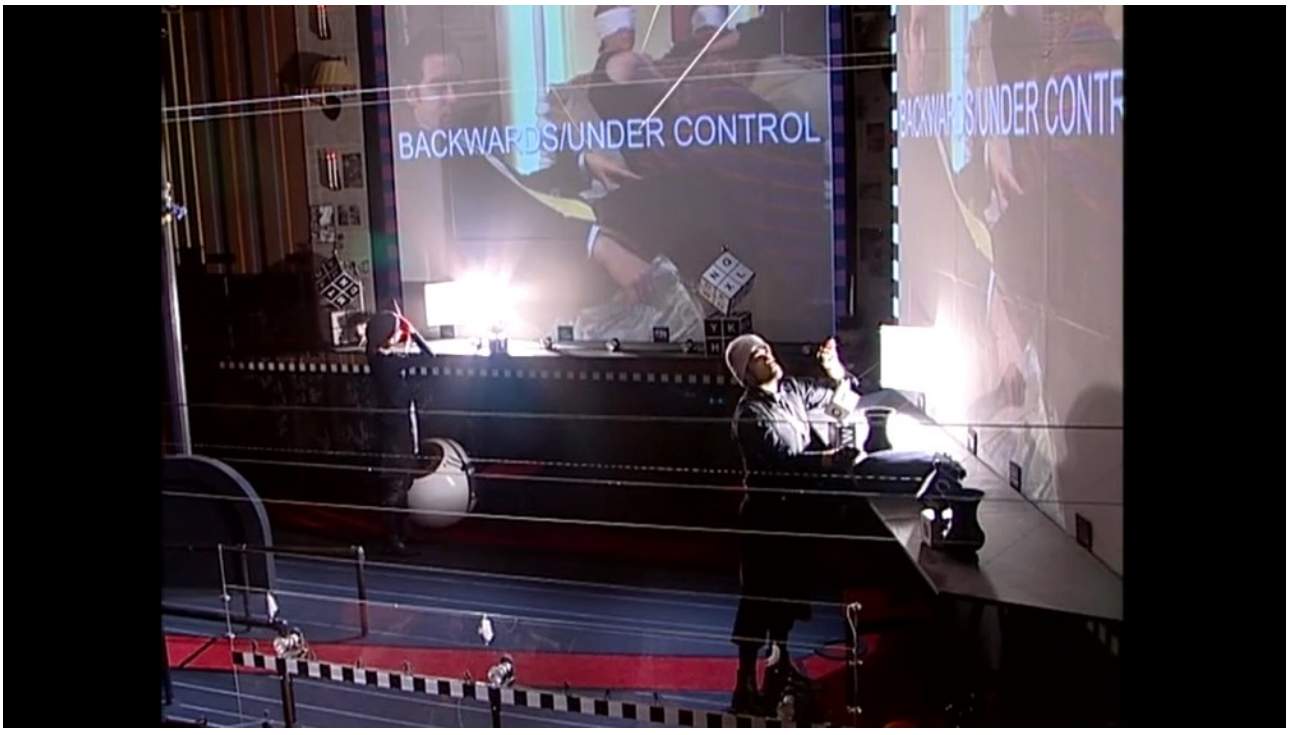

Fig.5.4. Duplicated projection surface in *Zomboid!* Screenshot from video documentation.

[149] Daniel is also an actor and performed onstage in Foreman's *Idiot Savant* (2009).

[150] Allen Nelson, interview with the author, 2017.

[151] Ibid.

The projected films problematise this relationship, in that they are pre-edited and fixed from the start of the rehearsal process. However, their style and method of production are *isomorphic* with those of the play as a whole. Shot in a relatively short space of time,[152] before being heavily edited for several months,[153] the finished films end up far removed from representations of their original intact performances. Foreman edits their assets in much the same ways as he edits and reframes his live performance materials. Furthermore, projected on two flat surfaces, we are constantly reminded of the film's reproducibility, and so artificiality. The film's *non-liveness*, its status as a *corpse* on stage in all its awkward self-announcement fits isomorphically within the play as a whole.

Framing Foreman's theatre as 'musical' *per se* is a reductive one. That's not to say, however, that attempting to read it in this manner isn't useful in teasing out certain fundamental qualities of the work. Foreman himself often applies musical analogies and terms to his theatre, whether in his compositional approach, the rhythm of events, orchestration of theatrical apparatus, or the syncopation and counterpoint of his reframing processes. In a particularly revealing statement about how and audience should read his works, Foreman states:

> IT'S LIKE POLYPHONIC MUSIC. YOU *CAN* LISTEN TO THE MELODY PLUS ACCOMPANYING CHORDS, but that is NOT THE REWARDING way to listen. The music is really to be heard as a sequence of chord modulations; you should listen vertically, to the SPREAD AND TENSION OF EACH CHORD, then succeeded by ANOTHER SPREAD-OF-NOTES-PLAYED-AT-ONE-TIME "CHORD", and so on own the line.
>
> So in my plays, it will help you to watch the cell in its complexity and "spread", then succeeded by another cell, and another.[154]

Curiously, what Foreman seems to be describing here is *not* polyphonic, but more a harmonic reading of a linear structure. Rather than attempting to follow the line of a melody, an audience should shift their perception to focus on how everything behaves at a particular moment, a "continual thematic modulation."[155]

The somewhat confusing statement above, then, gets to the heart of how I think a compositional appreciation of Richard Foreman's work can operate: as a simultaneous appreciation of the micro- and macro-structures at play. Foreman's plays *do* of course have a polyphonic quality to them. Differentiated by their medium and grains of production it is possible to view the surfaces of media in play as an articulation of dense

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152 Footage for the video components of all three plays was captured as part of Richard Foreman and Sophie Haviland's 'Bridge Project'—a series of international residencies at theatre departments in which both directors would work with students, performing to camera. These residencies typically lasted around a week. This working process is outlined in detail in the documentary: Maxim Jago, *Trust Me: Working with Richard Foreman.* DVD (Loughborough: Loughborough University, 2006).

153 Julia Lee Barclay, "An Interview with Richard Foreman," in *The Manifestos and Essays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013), 117.

154 Richard Foreman, "Notes on the Process of Making It: Which is Also the Object," in *The Manifestos and Essays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013), 60.

155 Allen Nelson, interview with the author, 2017.

theatrical counterpoint. It *is* possible to draw out and examine the behaviour of sound as a single parameter, but it is most revealing when considered as part of an isomorphic, *harmonic* whole, taking on a range of contextual roles.

The compositional use of media objects in Foreman's plays with films provides a pertinent model for my own interdisplinary work almost entirely unexamined in academic music discourse. The semiotic slippage of theatrical objects and the palpable, meaningful grain of technological reproduction mark a clear precedent for works such as *Deepy Kaye.* The decentralising effect of this is a quality that I explore in some depth from here on, using media objects and multiple performing bodies as mediators of character, narrative, and meaning in live, staged settings.

Chapter 6
Passing Over

Foreman's staging of the 'corpse' as a way of drawing upon errors, glitches, and the 'bad' resonates strongly with the colloquial British theatre term *corpsing*. The Oxford English Dictionary defines this as:

> *Actors' slang*. To confuse or 'put out' (an actor) in the performance of his part; to spoil (a scene or piece of acting) by some blunder.[156]

The non-slickness of media and the conspicuousness of Foreman's means of production find an allegory in this particular live performance 'glitch': the mistake, the breaking of character, the momentary crack in the facade. Works such as *[Sweet-Error: Miku]* and *Deepy Kaye* explicitly highlight their own forms of mediation as a staging of Foreman's 'corpse,' but in this chapter I want to introduce work that attempts to bring this quality into a more live, embodied, and narrative realm.

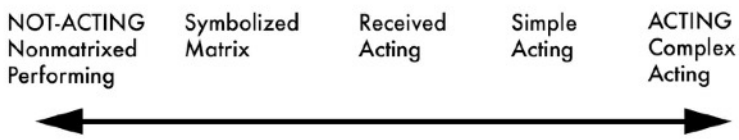

Fig. 6.1. Diagram reproduced from Kirby, *A Formalist Theatre*.[157]

Central to this discussion is Michael Kirby's view on acting 'matrices.' In his book *Formalized Theatre*, Kirby maps a scale that describes modes of performance from 'not-acting' to 'complex acting' (Fig.6.1).[158] The 'not' end of the scale describes that which doesn't require any conscious characterisation on the part of the performer. These performers are not embedded within "matrices of pretended or represented character, situation, place, and time."[159] Kirby draws attention to the stage assistants in East Asian theatre, such as the *kurogo* of Kabuki, as a good illustration of this. Clothed in black and visible on stage, these assistants facilitate the placement of props, costume and makeup changes,[160] and other functional roles in the mechanics of the theatre, yet their dress denotes them as existing outside the narrative of the play.

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156 "corpse, v." In *OED Online,* December 2019, Oxford University Press (accessed December 20, 2019). https://www.oed-.com/view/Entry/41861?redirectedFrom=corpsing&.

157 Michael Kirby, *A Formalist Theatre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987): 10.

158 Ibid., 3-20.

159 Ibid., 4.

160 James R. Brandon and Samuel L. Leiter, *Masterpieces of Kabuki: Eighteen Plays on Stage* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 339.

Acting, according to Kirby, becomes more complex once a performer is part of this matrix, even if only referentially. The wearing of a costume, for instance, serves as a cipher or reference to characterisation, even if only applied to, rather than acted by, a performer: a *symbolized matrix*. *Received* acting refers to a state of being visibly part of a drama but behaving naturally (as a movie 'extra' for instance), and *complex* acting describes when the artifice of a character is most fully embodied and expressed, or fully matrixed. Somewhere between this complex state and the received state is *simple* acting:

> If the performer does something to simulate, represent, impersonate, and so forth, he or she is acting. It does not matter what style is used or whether the action is part of a complete characterization of informational presentation. No emotion needs to be involved … Acting is acting whether or not it is done "well" or accurately … Acting can be said to exist in the smallest and simplest action that involves pretense.[161]

This state of acting is particularly interesting to me, as seems to sit on the cusp of the matrixed and non-matrixed, of the believable and the clearly artificial, of the good and the bad. Foreman's corpses exploit this territory, re-matrixing errors, glitches, and moments of awkwardness into the fabric of his theatre. It is also, however, rich territory for theatrical *corpsing*, a zone where the pretence of character is most unstable.

Operatic Mass Actions

In 2016 I was invited to join an international team of six artists from a range of disciplines tasked with creating a 'city opera' in Aarhus, Denmark. That team consisted of myself (composer, performer, director), Anders Bigum (video artist), Anna Jalving (violinist, composer), Rikke Jorgensen (architect, artist), Ella Marchment (opera director), and Rūta Vitkauskaitė (composer).

Commissioned by the contemporary music organisation *Aarhus Unge Tonekunstnere* (AUT), and part of the European Capital of Culture 2017 initiative, this project—*Operatic Mass Actions*— was to be an operatic work performed in a single day, in public spaces around the city. At the beginning of the project AUT published an accompanying statement as both a marketing text and a kind of 'manifesto' to which the artists were to respond:

> By letting the operatic mass actions intervene in the urban space of Aarhus we aim to emancipate the genre of opera from the grand institutions and their stages.[162]

Coming from such a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds we each had very different ideas about what 'opera' might mean and what about its institutions it might be interesting to challenge and question. In our

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161 Kirby, *A Formalist Theatre*, 7.

162 Aarhus Unge Tonekunstnere, "OMA — Operatic Mass Actions," AUT. 2017, accessed Dec 20, 2019. http://www.aut.dk/event/oma-operatic-mass-actions/.

initial meetings (around eight months before the final performance was to take place), we grappled with a somewhat diverse and interdisciplinary idea of what was at stake. It quickly became evident that one very practical challenge—which came to define the production of the project—was that, as a group of collaborators, we were expected to work collaboratively with equal agency, rather than in conventional production roles. Our solution to this was to structure the project as a collection of networked collaborations within the group. Bringing on board a variety of musicians, actors, and singers, different scenes would be developed by different permutations of artists. The final result, rather than being a single event that played out with a linear narrative, consisted of a collection of loosely related scenes that were wildly different in form, duration, style and content. Some scenes were to be attended at specific times by spectators who were aware they were happening; others were largely unadvertised, designed to be stumbled across coincidentally by the public.

A quick *précis* of the scenes will shed light on the diversity of forms they took:

- *Perfect Geek*: A thirty-minute narrative music theatre performance, staged in a small, seated, domestic interior.

- *The Erit & Erat*: A dance performance with surround-sound diffusion on the expansive outdoor terrace of the city library.

- *Mass Meditation* (installation): an installation running for twelve hours during the daytime. An interior space became a meditative sound and light installation, designed as a reflective place for the public to escape the performed activity of the street.

- *The Erit, Yogamom and Soldier*: A staged, narrative, street-theatre-esque performance in a small pedestrianised square of shops and cafes.

- *Soldier and Void*: An evening performance in the same square as above utilising technology: a video wall subjected to live digital manipulation, with a surround-sound diffusion.

- *Walking Opera*: A sound walk around the city centre combining binaural headphone listening and live performance.

- *Eccoes of Aarhus*: A sound installation and solo vocal performance performed in a city-centre building site.

- *Ritual*: A summative post-concert discussion imagined as a Viking sacrificial ritual.

Despite the variety, we were able to agree on one general overarching theme for the work: the *fictioning* of everyday behaviour; that is, viewing the way we behave in public spaces as a form of performance, partially separate from our 'true' character. Each of these scenes was designed to work on the one hand as an independent performances but, on the other, all would also be connected on this more subtextual level.

As part of this project I created two scenes. One of these, *Perfect Geek* (a collaboration with Anders Bigum), went on to be developed much further (as *Live Guy Dead Guy)* following its initial performance and so in some ways now stands as an independent work. I will discuss this separately in the next chapter. My other scene *Ritual*, however, was very much tied to the specific conditions of the project.

Portfolio work - *Ritual*

Fig.6.2. *Ritual*, Aarhus 2017. Photo by the author.

Ritual[163] was primarily a collaboration between myself and the architect Rikke Jorgensen. From the outset our intention was to develop a 'finale' for the opera, something which would draw together the personnel of the other scenes and also draw in the character of the city itself. Specifically, we wanted to create a situation that foregrounded the liminal space between the performed self and the 'real' self, the matrixed and the non-matrixed actor, the performer and the audience—staged not necessarily as a *corpsing* error but more as a boundary to be crossed.

[163] A full video of the work can be found in the accompanying portfolio as **Luck_203030507_video_Ritual_Full documentation.mp4**, as well as section timings: **Luck_203030507_Structure and layout.pdf**.

As such, we decided to stage an allegorical Danish Viking funerary ritual. Although historically the variations in the details of these funerary rituals were "almost infinite,"[164] as symbolic happenings they marked the passage of a deceased individual from the earthly plain to a higher realm (Valhalla). Far from austere occasions, the more significant of these rituals often lasted for many days and were staged as frenzied celebrations, full of "feasting, drinking, music and sex."[165] In our performance, then, we used the mechanism of ritual sacrifice as a way of un-matrixing characters and contributors from other scenes of the opera, emancipating them from the fictional realm and back into civilian society. To articulate this, we constructed a musical-theatrical frame that was a hybrid of sacrificial ritual, TV chat-show, and after-show party.

Fig.6.3. Building site used to stage *Ritual*.

The performance was staged in a city centre building site (Fig.6.3.). For us, this represented a liminal or transitory space, part way through the act of rendering raw material into a final form. It was pregnant with potential, a void to be filled. We decided to apply a similar approach to the performance materials themselves, to bring into the space pre-fabricated, readymade performance elements that were self-supporting on their own terms but could be recombined in a way that represented this idea of crossing a boundary. Firstly then, *Ritual* invited participants from earlier scenes to 'pass over' by being first interviewed in front of a live audience and then experiencing their own symbolic sacrificial deaths. We then composited a syncretic mix of performers and performance materials that would all operate together in this allegorical scheme:

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[164] Neil Price, "Mythic acts: material narratives of the dead in Viking Age Scandinavia," in *More than Mythology : Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian* Religions, ed. Catherina Raudvere and Jens Peter Schjødt (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2012): 21.
[165] Ibid., 25.

Artists and performers from other scenes: Interviewed partially in character before being allowed to join the audience following a sacrificial death.

Wrestlers Bodyslam: Enacted out modes of death in the language of professional wrestling.

Death Metal Group Baest: Performed alongside wrestlers. Their songs covered themes of the afterlife, death, occultism and paganism.

ARCO Ensemble: Experimental performance group that enacted out final, 'literal' death tableaux after each wrestling bout.

Staging materials: We kept the staging materials somewhat 'raw,' as both an indication of the space and a nod to the 'ancient' anachronism of the material. Lighting was provided by builders' lamps, and the main stage was a patch of turf sixteen meters square.

Compositionally, my involvement in the performance was relatively minimal. I invited the metal band to perform their own songs, in full and unchanged. I did devise the short moments for ARCO ensemble, but these were developed closely with the performers themselves, all of whom are capable improvisers with many creative ideas themselves. In this sense, the piece might be seen more as an act of creative production, or curation on my part: organising pre-existing materials and performers into new configurations. The structure of the event, then, warrants a short explanation.[166]

Lasting thirty minutes, it was divided into three main sections. Acting as a compère, I gave a brief welcome and introduction to the audience. Following this I conducted a brief interview with performers and artists from a particular scene before initiating their 'un-matrixing'—or, as it was described in the performance, releasing them "from their operatic bubble, back into the plain of existence that is reality, via a series of sacrificial death rituals."[167] These rituals were enacted by the wrestlers, accompanied by the death metal group. At the end of this performance, three performers from ARCO (one vocalist and two string players) entered the stage as 'sacrificial surrogates,' the vocalist of the trio enacting a final, musicalised death. At the end of this performance, the interviewees were sent to shake hands with the wrestlers and reenter the audience throng.

This process was enacted three times, with three different sets of interviewees. The three wrestling bouts and final deaths referred to the Odinistic 'Threefold death,' an idea rooted in the Norse myth that Odin sacrificed himself in three ways in order to gain secret arcane knowledge. These methods were hanging, spearing, and drowning; all were articulated in *Ritual* by different wrestling techniques. After these three sacrifices, a final ritual based loosely around the Catholic Latin Mass was enacted as a gift to the audience, to allow them passage back to the city streets.

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166 A more detailed guide to the structure and stage layout is included in the portfolio as: **Luck_203030507_Structure and layout.pdf**.

167 See spoken introduction at 01'00" of the video documentation.

The overall performance, then, operated on the level of allegory rather than as an explicitly literal, or *complexly* acted, representation. Even though audiences did find the performance extremely affecting (and in some cases alarming), the artifice of the situation was always foregrounded. For the interviewees passing over from matrixed to non-matrixed states, *Ritual* represented a carefully planned process of *corpsing*.

Moreover, this process extended beyond the narrative allegory of the work to its material. It is no coincidence that the primary languages used (professional wrestling and death metal) both employ similarly liminal approaches to characterisation or acting.

Professional[168] wrestling falls "between sports and theatre."[169] Whilst there is no doubt that what is on show is a display of prodigious athleticism, it is also constructed theatre of entertainment. Wrestlers project over-the-top characters and wear garish costumes. Grand narratives of good-versus-bad are played out on stage.[170] In *Ritual*, our wrestlers were performing with incredible strength, agility, commitment, skill, and pain, yet we were able to plan each bout to last a certain length and to finish with a certain outcome (at the end of each fight one of the wrestlers would grapple the other into a submissive situation that resembled the mode of sacrifice being enacted). We understand this as an audience, and so a somewhat willing suspension of disbelief is practiced[171] to maintain the effect of the symbolic matrix and the *simple* acting of wrestling.

Similarly, Death Metal bands are part of a tradition of quasi-theatrical music-making. Although musicians are generally *not* actors, nor attempting to act, the dress codes and onstage behaviour of musicians play a significant part in how we experience the musical performance. Philip Auslander describes this as a musician's 'representation of self within a discursive domain of music': their *persona.*[172] He notes that, in Kirby's terms, musical performances are usually nonmatrixed[173] (in that they usually exist outside of fictional time and narrative), but that they do exist within *frames*—bracketed situations utilising references understood by both the performers and the audience. Musicians will often perform with a "front",[174] a way of presenting themselves that is in some way expressive and meaningful within this frame. In the case of Heavy Metal, the general shared vocabulary of fronts includes black clothing, head-banging, low-slung guitars, a serious demeanour, wild stage antics, grotesque lyrics, arcane and occult imagery, tattoos, and more. This might seem reductive, but in a genre where performances are melodramatic, extreme, and intentionally over the top, the conveyance of certain established personae are an important communicative tool. Like the *simple* actor, in

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168 I use the term 'professional wrestling' here to refer to American-style entertainment wrestling, as associated with the World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. (WWE).

169 Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 13.

170 Sharon Mazer, "The Doggie Doggie World of Professional Wrestling," *TDR (1988-),* 34/4 (1990), 97-98.

171 Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 13.

172 Philip Auslander, "Musical Personae," *TDR (1988-),* 50/1 (Spring, 2006), 102-3.

173 Ibid., 104.

174 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959): 22, quoted in Philip Auslander, "Musical Personae," *TDR (1988-),* 50/1 (2006), 108.

the quasi-pantomime of live Death Metal, a rupture of that frame, that front, that personae would shatter an audience's temporarily suspended disbelief.

The role of ARCO in *Ritual* sits somewhere between these two states of the wrestlers' *simple* acting, and the band's knowingly framed *personae*. The vocalist in ARCO is masked like the wrestlers and performs with a faux operatic grandeur—clearly melodramatic and certainly not realistic. The string players, however, perform with little expression or overt theatrics; a demeanour, or front, more common to classical music.

Finally, I myself take the role of a master of ceremonies: welcoming the audience, interviewing the performers, and initiating the sacrifices. The role was loosely scripted, but my delivery intentionally resembles a hybrid character of TV-show host, occult initiate, and something of a live composer (or at least *wrangler*) of events. As with most of the works in this PhD portfolio, I appear as a performer—never quite as a total non-actor, but partially matrixed into the frame of the work. In *Ritual* this is made explicit in the friction between my demeanour and the patently practical role that I play in simply moving the proceedings along.

Fig.6.4. Professional Wrestlers, Death Metal musicians, and a string play and singer from ARCO enact a death, in *Ritual.* Screenshot from video documentation.

The feeling of performance as an artifice or formulation is mirrored in how the work was devised as a whole. As previously mentioned, I cannot lay claim to having either 'composed' the work or 'directed' it in its fine details. The music that the band play are songs taken from their repertoire. The wrestling bouts, asides from the final submissions, are designed and planned by the wrestlers. The interviews with artists are not scripted; they are improvised and candid. The space is not a carefully prepared black box, it is a raw artefact of the city. With the exception of the short passages performed by ARCO, all the key performance elements are

readymades, merely recombined and pushed into place to articulate a narrative. However, this is intentionally perceptible: all the elements operate clearly as self-contained elements. Whereas in *[Sweet-Error:Miku]* and the *Screen Tests* various medias are repurposed as expressive elements through their faultiness, their corpseness, in *Ritual* the *corpsing* is employed isomorphically, in the micro and macrostructures of the performance.

In the pieces discussed earlier (and in several discussed later), the weight of digital post-production techniques weigh heavy on the work, beginning to force the raw matter of performance into a subservience to how that matter is later rendered and edited. In *Ritual* we see a similar approach to the raw matter of performance, the work being focused as much on the combinatory effect of its artificial assemblage as its actual content. Nicholas Bourriaud describes this form of creative postproduction as a "reprogramming [of] existing works."[175] The foregrounded construct of the overall allegory forces the sense of (my) authorship into the background and allows space for the audience to be their own *scriptors,*[176] authoring their own way through these syncretically coexisting raw materials.

In this sense it is useful to view *Ritual* as a beginning of an investigation into staging the artifice of mediation as an expressive means, shifting it away from mere technological manipulation and towards a performance aesthetic itself. The fascination with *passing over* as a cipher for this kind of deconstruction is admittedly a morbid one; but it is also powerful, opening up space for the investigation of liminal and fluid boundaries between embodied performance modes and medias. Indeed, that underlying concept becomes something of an obsession with the works that follow on from *Ritual*, attempting to foster a more symbiotic relationship between analogue and digital media, subject matter, and live performance modes.

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175 Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, 15.

176 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in *The Rustle of Language,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 54. Quoted in Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, 88.

Chapter 7
Intermediation

Portfolio work - *Live Guy, Dead Guy*

In this chapter I will look at my work *Live Guy, Dead Guy* as a vehicle for discussing further the interrelationships between subject matter, live performance aesthetic, and the use of multimedia elements, while also broadening the context of the discussion to non-Western, traditional examples of interdisciplinary practices. The piece's production history itself, however, has affected the work very directly, and warrants an explanation as a primer to my discussion.

Live Guy, Dead Guy[177] is a piece made in collaboration with the video artist Anders Bigum. It is written for four performers with pre-recorded sound and video, and plays out as two distinct acts: *Live Guy*, and *Dead Guy*. *Live Guy* was developed simultaneously with *Ritual* in Aarhus as a separate scene of the City Opera (where it was titled *Perfect Geek*) in 2017, discussed in the previous chapter. *Dead Guy* was created and realised around one year after the Aarhus performance, in London, as a new second act scored for the same live and multimedia forces. The two acts do not strictly connect narratively, but they do spill into one another. They are two different perspectives of the same core ideas.

It is crucial to note that, between creating these two acts, I underwent an intensive period of academic and practical study of traditional Japanese interdisciplinary theatre forms (in particular Noh, and Bunraku), which greatly influenced both *Dead Guy* and extensive revisions of *Live Guy.* This chapter thus takes the idiosyncratic integration of media in these traditional forms as a framework for understanding more contemporary practices.

Live Guy

Live Guy more closely approaches conventional narrative than anything else in this portfolio. It stages an absurdist interaction between a father and mother (implied to be elderly technophobes) and their son, returning home from his career in Silicon Valley in order to introduce his parents to his fiancé. As the scene plays out, it becomes apparent that this fiancé (named Angel, and voiced with the same Vocaloid software as employed in chapter 2)[178] is an artificially intelligent digital entity, designed by the son who communicates with the family through an onstage television set. The dialogue questions the benefits of a virtual existence over a corporeal one:

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177 Full video documentation of the work (**Luck_203030507_video_Live Guy, Dead Guy_Full Documentation.mp4**), and its earlier version—*Perfect Geek* (**Luck_203030507_video_Perfect Geek_Full Documentation.mp4**) can be found in the accompanying portfolio.

178 In Chapter 2 I outline the use of Vocaloid software to generate the voice of the digital avatar Hatsune Miku.

Angel: "Man's body is a 'fossil'; solid, dead, curled up and buried deep in me and what I embody. This isn't frightening, this is natural.
It's future biology, next stage evolution, your soul is preserved in servers…"

At the climax of the scene, the son reveals that he intends to join Angel in this post-physical state of existence by abandoning his body, and he wishes to take his parents with him. It is revealed he's poisoned their food, and the three 'live' characters die in a pyrrhic *liebestod*.

Fig.7.1. Shot of the original staging of *Live Guy* (originally titled *Perfect Geek*). Aarhus, 2017.

The performance exploits the real-artificial, and corporeal-digital thresholds in its mode of presentation—an unusually mediated aesthetic. The work is rich with dialogue, but none of it is spoken live by the performers; it is all prerecorded and played back. In the original staging a multichannel sound-system allowed for the performers' recorded voices to issue from speakers positioned below their respective chairs. Each of the characters was voiced by the same vocalist in different 'bad' accents, then digitally pitch-shifted to give an intentionally 'fake' difference in tone (the mother is high, the father is low, the son is unaffected). The dialogue is edited in a way that feels highly unnatural and 'wrong': gaps between lines are too long, or they overlap unnecessarily, or the ends of words are cut off short. These production and post-production artefacts are left in, in a way that foregrounds the artifice of the work.

In *Is the Internet Dead?* Hito Steyerl suggests that, as our online and real-world environments become increasingly interconnected through the multiplication of screens and 'smart' communication technologies, we

find ourselves in a 'networked space' of media. Here, "images and sounds morph across different bodies and carriers, acquiring more and more glitches and bruises along the way."[179] In *Live Guy* the already bruised technological rendering crosses the screen and speaker-arrays to find a truly 'beaten up' live embodiment. The three performers roughly gesticulate in time with their respective voices on tape. This is non-realistic imitation, though; instructed to keep their limbs loose and marionette-like, arms and hands flail across the tabletop, noisily disrupting overladen piles of cutlery and crockery, sending it to shatter on the floor. As in Richard Foreman's heavily amplified theatre, there is a "separation of the actor from her voice,"[180] the performers employed as a poorly 'animated' avatars.

The work itself is not scored. Rather, the performers follow (and memorise) a script, developing their physical and sonic responses through a long rehearsal and devising period. They were encouraged to glitch and fail in a careful, but genuinely chaotic and non-fixed way, as well as a completely analogue, live, and *unmediated* way, conspicuously alienated from the pre-produced tape and video parts. The live performers could, in this sense, be seen as analogue *analogues* of the digitally reproduced Angel character, who is herself a puppeteered construct.

Context No.5: Bunraku

In chapter 2 I discussed Christopher Bolton's idea of the animated avatar as a digital body that is both "performing and performed";[181] but whereas in *[Sweet-ERROR:miku]* this disembodiment was primarily rendered on screen, in *Live Guy* the performers' own bodies are wrenched viscerally—as puppet-like objects—away from their voiced subjects. They articulate Bolton's image of the "ambivalent oscillation between a subject and an object [that] is a quality of all artificial bodies, and particularly those acting a part onstage or on film."[182] Bolton specifically draws a connection between digitally animated characters and traditional Japanese Bunraku puppetry, seen as a form of performance that heavily mediates (visually and audibly) the projection of character while always making apparent the artifice of that projection.

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179 Hito Steyerl, "Is the Internet Dead," in *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (London; New York: Verso, 2017), 147.
180 Elinor Fuchs, "Presence and the Revenge of Writing: Re-Thinking Theatre after Derrida," *Performing Arts Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2/3 (1985), 172.
181 Christopher A. Bolton, "From Wooden Cyborgs to Celluloid Souls: Mechanical Bodies in Anime and Japanese Puppet Theater," *Positions*, vol.10, no.3 (2002), 731.
182 Ibid., 753.

Fig.7.2. Bunraku puppets and puppeteers at Awa Jurobe Yashiki theatre.[183]

The tradition of Bunraku dates back to the early nineteenth century. It is a serious form of theatre performed on a large stage in, generally speaking, dedicated auditoriums. The core repertoire primarily deals with Japanese history and contemporary (for the nineteenth century) domestic dramas, and it includes many plays concerned with mythology and the supernatural. Bunraku is particularly notable for its unique style of performance. The puppets of the principal characters are directly operated (as opposed to being remotely operated by marionette strings) by three puppeteers simultaneously; a principal operator of the head and right hand, an operator of the left hand, and an operator of the feet. The operators work with an intimate choreography to realise an uncanny organicism in the puppets' movements, while they themselves remain clearly visible. The two secondary operators are "attired completely in black and wear gauzy black hoods"[184] to allow the viewer to focus away from their onstage presence and onto the puppets. However, the principal operator (for reasons historically connected to standing and fame) has an exposed face, constituting what Donald Keene describes as a "excessively conspicuous presence."[185]

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183 Photograph by Dumphasizer. Reproduced here under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license. Image source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Awa_Jurobe_Yashiki_(46044265632).jpg.

184 Donald Keene, *Noh and Bunraku: Two Forms of Japanese Theatre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 161.

185 Ibid., 161.

Fig.7.3. Woodblock print, *Two female gidayu, Takemoto Kyōko and Takemoto Kyōshi, 1899.*[186]

The characters of the plays are all customarily voiced by one vocalist, accompanied by a single Shamisen player, collectively known as the *Gidayū* musicians. The vocalist's most important task is to evoke the emotional states depicted by the puppets on stage (dialogue and narration)[187] though a somewhat extreme variety of extended vocal techniques. Far from forming a seamless or natural diegesis with the puppetry, this performance most definitely *announces* itself audibly and visibly.[188]

The characters that populate Bunraku, then, are dispersed across the media of the stage. The mode of presentation separates act from gesture and rends voice from body in a "total, though divided, spectacle."[189] The puppeteers are effectively unmatrixed yet constantly present as reminders of the work's artifice. The narrator is intricately and complexly matrixed into the drama yet is also conspicuously distanced from it (both spa-

[186] Reproduced here under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license. Image source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Takemotokyouko,kyousi.jpg.

[187] Motegi Kiyoko, "Aural Learning in Gidayū-Bushi: Music of the Japanese Puppet Theatre," *Yearbook for Traditional Music,* 16 (1984), 97.

[188] Roland Barthes describes Gidayu narration as expressing the text in 'the way one squeezes a fruit'; its techniques include 'shrill feminine tones, broken pitches, weeping, paroxysms of anger, moaning … every emotional recipe, openly elaborated at the level of this internal, visceral body, whose larynx is the mediatory muscle.'
Roland Barthes, "On Bunraku," *The Drama Review: TDR*, 15/2, Theatre in Asia (Spring, 1971), 76.

[189] Ibid., 78.

tially and through the non-naturalistic delivery). Yuji Sone describes this property of Bunraku's dispersed theatrical mechanisms as a form of "intermediated embodiment":[190]

> The audience does not experience its media independently, as discrete elements, but experiences only the encounter. The audience experiences a strange totality that results from the integration of Bunraku's separate elements confounding sensory hierarchies.[191]

Sone describes intermediation as an interdependent, rather than collaborative, coming together of artistic disciplines in a "suspended tension."[192] Intermediated forms of work allow their constituent elements to maintain a degree of discreetness while also contributing to a synergistic whole, revealing a "kind of heterogeneous sphere at the interface of various arts media."[193] Furthermore, Sone observes that the contemporary presence of screens and loudspeakers in live multimedia performances *can* operate in a similar way, as discrete elements coming together to be perceived as a unified "virtual medium."[194]

Live Guy Revisions

Fig.7.4. Revised staging of *Live Guy.* London, 2019. Photograph by Dimitri Djuric. Used with permission.

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[190] Yuji Sone, "Cyber-Puppets, Presence and Performance. Bunraku, Intermediation and Interdiscplinarity," in *The End of the 60s: Performance, Media and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Edward Scheer and Peter Eckersall (Sydney: Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, UNSW and Performance Paradigm, 2006), 113.

[191] Ibid., 115.

[192] Ibid., 114.

[193] Ibid., 113-114.

[194] Ibid., 116.

In the original staging of *Live Guy* the separation of voice and body, of act and gesture, similarly exemplified intermediated embodiment. The blunt tearing apart of the live bodies and their projected voices, together with the confinement of the digital central avatar to a television set, fragments and disperses the characters; their *tele-audio* presence[195] is distributed amongst media surfaces. This kind of intermediation—the decoupling of character, agency and voice away from the performing body—lies at the centre of *Live Guy*'s narrative. Taking inspiration from the aesthetic foregrounding of this intermediation in Bunraku, I aimed to challenge the synergetic totality of *Live Guy* even further when revising the work.

Firstly, I changed the pre-recorded audio part by inserting even more intentionally 'bad' edits and artefacts in the form of unnatural pauses, overlapped words, cut-off lines, and other glitches. Noise and clipping distortion were added, and the original quadrophonic arrangement was abandoned for a narrow stereo image. All of these changes underlined the artifice of the 'playback' nature of *Live Guy* and disrupted any sense of a conventional audiovisual contract.

Secondly, the performers themselves were directed to act in a much less refined, more sloppy and abstracted manner. Rather than merely badly mimicking certain actions suggested by the narrative, gestures now acted only to suggest that a character was speaking. The illusion of naturalism was repressed even further.

Fig.7.5. Puppeteering in *Live Guy.* Still from video documentation.

One added element in particular pushes the intermediated embodiment of the piece momentarily to the unavoidably obvious fore. At 08'10"[196] the roughly gesticulating figures of the parents remove themselves

[195] Ibid., 117.

[196] This moment is also extracted as a separate video clip in the portfolio as **Luck_203030507_Video_Live Guy Puppets (Extract).mp4**.

from the matrix of the scene altogether and are replaced by two (roughly fashioned) hand-puppets, manipulated by the one remaining performer. The two departed performers pick up their instruments (violin and viola) to accompany the action, evoking, like the shamisen player in Bunraku, the emotional states of the puppets on stage, and simultaneously the acted figures of the mother and father become one degree further mediated away from a real body. The performer of the 'Son' role becomes simultaneously both the puppeteered and the puppeteer. His performance is reduced to an abstracted flailing of the limbs, smashing crockery in a hyper-slack diegesis with the tape part. His puppeteering—problematised by his own puppet-like limbs—serves to further confuse the dichotomy between the embodied/disembodied, real/mediated, and matrixed/unmatrixed.

Following the composition and revision of *Live Guy*, I wrote the accompanying act: *Dead Guy*. Here, I aimed to further foreground the mediated quality of the work by exorcising the live performances *almost* completely, or rather disappearing them amongst a network of media. In this sense the work draws greatly on my experience of studying and performing Noh theatre.

Context No.6: Noh

This distribution of character and narrative between different media and different performers might be seen as a characteristic of traditional Japanese theatre. Indeed, Japan's three main forms—Bunraku, Noh, and Kabuki—share much of the same repertoire of plays and, importantly, employ an interdependent fusion of artistic disciplines in highly *stylised* forms. Noh theatre, however, originated much earlier than the other forms, in Japan's Muromachi period (1333-1568). The form is similar, however, in that it synthesises dance, drama and music in an intermediated, and disembodied way. Noh is performed on a smaller, and simpler stage than Bunraku, but, as with the puppet theatre, all of its constituent elements are made visible.

Fig.7.6. The Noh stage and its performers.[197]

[197] Photograph by Yoshiyuki Ito. Reproduced here under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license. Image source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Noh_Performance_(235951661).jpeg.

Noh is performed by a small number of actors: a lead *shite* actor, a secondary *Waki* actor, and if necessary other supporting *Tsure* roles. These actors are not concerned with realism in any sense, however, but rather convey narrative through supremely aesthetic[198] performance modes: monotone chanting and a highly stylised form of dance. Also onstage, seated behind the actors, are several musicians playing drums and flute. Seated with the musicians are *kōken* stage assistants, whose role in the placement and removal of props and costume elements is comparable to the similarly to un-matrixed *Kuroko* of Kabuki theatre mentioned in chapter 6. Finally, at stage left is a gallery that holds a seated chorus of chanters.

These groups of performers and the artistic disciplines they represent work together intermediately; the constituent elements retain some independence in terms of their staging and function but also serve and support each other. The relationship between the chorus and actors is particularly revealing in this regard:

> The function of the chorus is to recite for the actors, particularly when they are dancing. Unlike the chorus in a Greek play, it makes no comment on the action, and is never identified as townsmen, warriors or demons; the chorus, in fact, has no identity, but exists solely as another voice for the actors.[199]

This kind of interdependence is particularly interesting when one considers how Noh is rehearsed and produced. It is essentially a repertoire theatre, where dance is the central performance script,[200] using patterns of precise gestures known as *kata*. Hence the constituent elements of Noh are usually prepared and rehearsed separately, coming together at the last moment in what Richard Schechner sees as a network of contingencies:

> The *shite* rehearses only with the chorus. The *waki*, *kyogen*, flutist, and drummers are all from different families and rehearse separately from each other. The whole group of actors, chorus, and musicians meets only once or twice before a public performance… Rehearsals as such are rarely held. The performance itself is the meeting place of the strands—singing, chanting, dancing, reciting, music making—that are braided into the public Noh.[201]

Indeed, my impression of watching and performing Noh[202] is of several simultaneous layers of performance occurring simultaneously, loosely aligned except for rare, key moments of dramatic tension. This distribution of focus occurs not just on a practical level, however, but is of fundamental importance in the construction of character.

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198 Keene, *Noh and Bunraku: Two Forms of Japanese Theatre*, 17.

199 Ibid., 21.

200 Dance in Nō has been defined as any action made by the actors on the stage, for not one motion is unpremeditated. Keene, *Noh and Bunraku: Two Forms of Japanese Theatre*, 72.

201 Richard Schechner and Victor Turner, *Between Theater & Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 143.

202 I gained much practical experience of performing, and attending Noh theatre performances whilst a student on the *Traditional Theatre Training* course, Kyoto Arts Centre, Japan, June-July 2017.

Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443)—one of most important Noh actors, playwrights and theorists—outlined how the *shite* is positioned in a contradictory state between an actor's commitment to "face reality directly"[203] and the arts of song and dance which allow requires one to "leave the reality of…life."[204] The *shite*'s unique position is best articulated by wearing a static mask covering their own face: they must at once rectify the contradiction between the actorly state of *imitating* a role (to copy facial expression and gestures realistically) with that of *becoming* a role by assimilating themselves into the already existing construct of character by means of mask, costume, and *kata*.[205] The *shite* points towards an aesthetic separation between performer and role, a quality that resonates with Noh's similarly ephemeral, often supernatural or mythical subject matter. The *shite* roles are rarely concrete personages; more often than not they can be thought of as "the incarnation of some powerful emotion, whether unforgiving enmity, possessive jealousy, or remorse for some unspeakable deed. … the *shite* belongs to another world, not our own."[206]

In Bunraku, then, concrete characters appear to be suspended in balance between performers and media; in Noh, the essence of character is dissolved amongst them. As opposed to an intermediated embodiment, here we experience a kind of *mediated disembodiment*.

Dead Guy

It is precisely this disembodiment toward which *Dead Guy* strives. It follows narratively on from the first act in the sense that it is concerned specifically with an afterlife; indeed, the body of the performer playing the son in *Live Guy* is, throughout this act, laid on the same table now as a literal corpse. However, (just as in many Noh plays, where a *shite* actor may change appearance, or reveal a disguise representing an entirely different person),[207] in *Dead Guy* we are no longer concerned with the nuclear family from the first act; the inert body on the table comes to seemingly represent the spirit of a deceased marketing executive named Angela.

Dead Guy is more substantially scored than *Live Guy*. This was necessary to hold together the web of elements discussed below. However, as with *Live Guy* the work relied heavily on close collaboration with the performers over many rehearsals, developing many of the finer details of the material and performance aesthetic together with them.

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[203] Yamazaki Masakazu, "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity," in *On the Art of the No Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), xxxix.

[204] Ibid.

[205] Ibid., xxxix-xl.

[206] Keene, *Noh and Bunraku: Two Forms of Japanese Theatre*, 18.

[207] Ibid., 20.

Fig.7.7. *Dead Guy* staging. London, 2019. Photograph by Dimitri Djuric. Used with permission.

The act is cast in the form of a séance-like dialogue between a questioner engaging in a form of mediumship (played by myself, offstage, speaking live into a microphone) and the implied spirit of Angela. Angela's presence and her responses to the questions are, however, distributed amongst all of the performers and medias in play. The nature of the dialogue itself is somewhat gnomic but concerned with equating and blending commercial marketing-speak with occult mediumship. Both practices mark a movement away from an engagement with tangible objects and bodies to their *disembodied* representations, thus:

> *Questioner*: When did you pass over Angela?
> *Angela*: I didn't pass over, I got promoted.
> *Questioner*: If you can hear me, KNOCK once.
> *Angela*: Understand this—HOW TO IMPRESS people upon people is a verbal skill more than a tactile one.
> *Questioner*: I don't understand.
> *Angela*: Top secret—this is a sales pitch for the occult.[208]

[208] See 18'25" in the video documentation.

These two voices are also disembodied spatially. My role as the questioner is performed from a chair in the front row of the audience, facing towards the performers and therefore hidden from the view of most audience members.[209] Angela's voice manifests as gravelly, distorted speech articulated by multiple sources:

1) Pre-recorded filtered bursts of noise
2) The inert performer on the table vocalising with growls through a microphone amplified by a heavily distorted guitar amplifier
3) Two offstage string players performing with heavy bow pressure and other distortion techniques
4) A pair of corpse-like decomposed hands gesticulating on screen
5) Projected subtitles.

Angela, then is not clearly tied to a specific body or to a particular sonic location but, rather, distributed amongst a network of physiological and technological articulators on and off stage, mediated and disembodied. The timbre of Angela's voice is specifically modelled on Konstantin Raudive's EVP recordings, discussed earlier in chapter 3. As well referencing this familiar occult trope it also presents a pertinent model of a character's perceived presence.

Raudive's experiments and the phenomenon of EVP recordings are still taken very seriously in paranormal circles,[210] but as the artist and theorist Joe Banks outlines in *Rorschach Audio: Art and Illusion for Sound*, any perceived voices are most likely the result of psychoacoustic projections by the listener. Banks explains that EVP interpreters "construct, authenticate and share"[211] meaning out of the material of a technological medium; electromagnetic interferences come together in the listener's imagination to resemble speech. There are no singular voices here; the only thing that speaks is the technology itself, as "the mind projects meaning into ambiguous, indistinct and incomplete imagery."[212]

This projection of meaning and dissolution of character resonates strongly with the aesthetics of Noh theatre, in its abstraction and distribution of material, within which "the viewer participates in the creation of the play by individual free association… Indeed, he becomes… [the] protagonist."[213]

In *Dead Guy*, comprehension is made possible thanks to projected subtitles, but the source of the voice, and indeed the meaning of its comments are left distinctly ambiguous, provoking the audience into a state of actively synthesising their own understanding of what is playing out in front of them. Even at moments in

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[209] This is staging technique adopted directly from Richard Foreman. In almost all his productions Foreman occupies a similar position in the audience. In his early plays, where he took responsibility for running sound in his shows, he would, from here, operate a mixing board and tape machines.

[210] A popular modern day version of Raudive's technology is the 'Spirit Box'; a device which rapidly sweeps radio frequencies supposedly to provide a carrier frequency through which spirits can communicate. Here, for example, is a popular model available via Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Spirit-Ghost-Hunting-Equipment-Radio/dp/B00NABGFSM

[211] Joe Banks, *Rorschach Audio - Art and Illusion for Sound* (London: Strange Attractor Press, 2012), 49.

[212] Ibid., 38.

[213] Author's interview with Kunio Komparu quoted in: Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 231.

the piece when we sense a real tangible presence—for instance, at 22'20" a *real* plate is dropped on the *real* floor amongst the *real* audience—this happens in an intentional non-synchrony with the same action performed on screen several seconds before. The non-alignment and non-fusion of *Dead Guy's* constituent elements threads throughout the entire work and are central to its aesthetic of mediated disembodiment in terms of both its staging and its content.

Practically speaking, there are no click tracks to keep things perfectly together and taught. Rather, as in *Live Guy* cues are taken from the video and soundtrack, meaning that live actions and sounds are often delayed, preempted, or echoed.

Even though the content of *Dead Guy* plays heavily on cinematic horror tropes, the action happens almost exclusively off-screen. The voices of the medium and of Angela are classic *acousmêtres* not only in their absence of visible sources but also in their *on-the-air* mediation. Instrumental sounds and other pre-recorded sound effects seem to be connected to the voice of the spirit, but they also play on non-diegetic movie score tropes of extended string techniques and ominous drones. Whereas, in *Live Guy*, the drama's technological and narrative intermediation puts the performers in a semi-matrixed state, in *Dead Guy* the performers are removed almost completely from the diegesis of the audiovisual frame. The remaining onstage performer (lying still on the table) is reduced to a prop: a passive symbol of a previously live presence within an interdisciplinary, intermediated, technological sarcophagus.

Fig.7.8. The reanimated corpse of *Dead Guy.* London, 2019. Photograph by Dimitri Djuric. Used with permission.

In the final third of *Dead Guy*, the conspicuous construct of both acts is profoundly collapsed. At 22'55", following what is designed to feel like a cadence, if not an ending, the central performer on the table is sud-

denly, violently, and unexpectedly reanimated into life. The pre-recorded video and audio, along with the instrumentalists and questioner then continue to perform in the same vein as before, while the reanimated performer on stage veers off into new, independent material. The performer (Adam de la Cour) now acts 'realistically,' according to the stage direction:

> You are yourself, Adam de la Cour, reanimated into life, but channelling the spirit of Angela from *Dead Guy*, whilst being inexplicably trapped within the body of the Geek from *Live Guy*. You find this genuinely terrifying and confusing in a very 'real' way.

As the performance styles and narratives to the two acts collapse into one another, Adam proceeds to come to terms with himself, vocalising off-mic with a mix of genuinely terrified screaming, and miscellaneous garbled lines from *Live Guy.* Attempting to stand, his loose-puppet like limbs cause him to fall and stumble, destroying the table itself and falling to the floor, writhing in mechanical, spasmodic movements. Here, realism intrudes on the mediated fantasy of the work in a completely non-aligned, "anempathetic"[214] palimpsest of performance styles, material, and dramatic trajectories.

During the London premiere of *Dead Guy*, at this point Adam proceeded to force his way through the audience to the back of the venue. The sudden injection of unamplified, unmediated, fully embodied realism was so jarring that the venue staff mistook him for a troublemaker (a heckler, a drunkard, or a gate-crasher) and proceeded to eject him from the venue altogether. The producers of the event were compelled to negotiate with the venue staff to allow Adam to re-enter in order to take a bow several minutes later, as the piece ended. The sudden re-focusing of attention and agency into a central, embodied performer came to provide the most powerful and striking part of the piece.

Negotiating the threshold of life-after-death, both narratively and allegorically as a live-recorded dichotomy seemed to disorientate the frame of the work. The conventional forward-facing staging of *Live Guy, Dead Guy*, however, as in the usual cinematic experience, can only take this so far. In the following chapters I want to look at work of my own and by others that continues to negotiate the live and mediated border but in contexts that expand the frame of performance in somewhat more drastic ways.

214 Chion and Murch, *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen*, 24.

Chapter 8
Radical Amateurism:
The audiovisual spectacles of *Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker*

Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker (MRIB) is a contemporary theatre company based in Tokyo, Japan. Founded and directed by Toco Nikaido in 2013, MRIB have established a reputation for their relatively short, hyper-energised and somewhat baffling performances combining musical performance, dance, choreographed action, elaborate costumes and props, and multi-surface video projections. MRIB make the most of the multifarious, or "Galapagos"[215] subcultures of Japan, employing an overwhelming and jarring panoply of materials, signs, tropes, and musics in their performances. In their full stage shows, MRIB performances last between thirty and forty minutes. They usually feature between twenty and thirty performers mostly present for the entire duration, either performing onstage, climbing amongst the seating and talking to the audience, or throwing buckets of water, seaweed, and tofu into the audience from the sidelines.

MRIB's work is intensely musical, not least because sound and music are continual, foregrounded presences in their productions. Their pieces are really driven by music, or at least a kind of musicalization in the way that text, action and sound enter into interdependent relationships. Familiar pop-cultural materials are used, re-used, re-contexutalised, sped up, cut up, corrupted, and juxtaposed among lo-fi and oversaturated sounds and images. This forces their work into a state of intense vibration between semiotic overload and audiovisual abstraction.

This chapter will begin to outline how Nikaido's production methods represent a unique approach to making multimedia performance. Specifically, the adoption of certain 'amateur' audio and visual aesthetics, pushed to their breaking points, reveals a radical and fascinating aesthetic framework for interdisciplinary performance making.

215 Toco Nikaido, interview with the author, Tokyo, June 24th, 2018. Full transcript available upon request from the author.

Fig.8.1. Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker. Screenshot of *Totes Adorbs* ♥ *Hurricane* YouTube upload.[216]

Culture Shock

> From its opening minutes the piece hits hard and doesn't stop: it's saturated with sound, colour and smell, as intensely saccharine J-pop blasts out and the performers dance … and clamber across the rows of seats while pelting us with water. …It's primary school playground routines on a larger, louder scale, mixed with Belieber-level hysteria.[217]

MRIB embraces the music and imagery of popular and historical Japanese subcultures and reimagines these in hyper-dense and dissonant new combinations on the stage. The company describes its performance style as "ohagi live,"[218] an invented term partly derived from the Japanese geek subculture of *otagei.* Also written as 'wotagei,' this is the term applied to the phenomenon of fans performing reciprocal, synchronised dance routines *back* at the stage during the live shows of (usually female) Japanese pop music 'idols.'

The adaptation and development of this style by MRIB stems in part from Nikaido's background as an underground 'net-idol' herself (a subculture of aspiring idols building followings via online videos) in the mid-2000s. During this time, however, she came to find the behaviour of the audiences at live shows much more

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[216] Mot Nok, "Totes Adorbs ♥ Hurricane: Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker - 革命アイドル暴走ちゃん -," *YouTube* video, 24:34, Feb 16, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmWZeWamo7k.

[217] Tim Bano, "Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker Review - A Sensory Onslaught," *The Stage*, 2016, accessed May 30 2019, https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2016/miss-revolutionary-idol-berserker-review/. A 'Belieber' is the term used to describe a fan of the teen pop-idol Justin Beiber.

[218] Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker, "English PR," Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker, accessed December 20, 2019. http://missrevodolbbbbbbbberserker.asia/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/EnglishPR.pdf.

interesting than the performances by the idols themselves, the crowd performing with 'much more passion and energy.'[219] Fittingly, then, MRIB's performances rigorously confuse and intensify the relationship between audience and performer.

Although on many levels the company's work is explicitly 'Japanese,'[220] in recent years MRIB has garnered major critical praise internationally. For first-time viewers or for those unacquainted with the subcultural references on the display, however, their work can be profoundly confusing. Reviewing the company's performance at the 2016 LIFT festival in London, a reviewer for *Time Out* was profoundly disorientated:

> Er. Look. I'm going to level with you. I could pretend I knew what the hell was going on in this frankly bewildering Japanese show. I could pretend I understand any of the context in which it exists, or pass off the official description … as if I knew what that meant. … But the honest truth is, I have absolutely no fucking idea.[221]

This statement comes from a positive, four-star review but isn't atypical in its incomprehension. However, what on the surface can look like genuine chaos is always tightly controlled, planned and choreographed by Nikaido. Somewhat of an auteur, she writes scripts, compiles the musical score, choreographs the performers, directs, and even performs herself as an audibly vocal director at the back of the stalls.

Underpinning the work as a whole is a fixed, musico-dramatic structure, a playscript and, notably, a score made from pre-existing (but heavily remixed) recorded music. The continuous, overwhelmingly intense score, in particular, is a key feature of MRIB's connection to otagei performance. A quick internet search will bring up dozens of videos of these performances: groups of audience members performing incredibly tight, unison dance routines in front of, and facing, groups of young pop stars on stage also singing and dancing along to a backing track of their latest hit song. These mirrored performances aren't necessarily the same as those on stage; the audience generally perform movements drawn from a repertoire of stock gestures. The whole phenomenon is a kind of double-karaoke; the artists singing along to their tracks, and the audience performing along in parallel.

This framework — a rigorously rehearsed, high-energy fan made performance contained within the fixity of a karaoke pop gig — is a foundational quality of MRIB's work:

> In terms of music, everything is completed beforehand and I don't bring anything incomplete to the rehearsal. It's not something that is pieced together during the rehearsal and I never let

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219 Toco Nikaido and Masashi Nomura, "Artist Interview: Toko Nikaido and her spirit behind the "berserker" performances," Performing Arts Japan, 2015, accessed December 20, 2019, https://performingarts.jp/E/art_interview/1504/1.html.
220 As stated in their English language press release: "The "Ohagi Live" is a Dance Performance that breaks down all barriers and forces audience participation, presenting the perspective of "Life-Size Tokyo Youths" living in Modern Japan." See: Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker, "English PR."
221 Andrej Lukowski, "Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker", *Time Out*, 2016, accessed May 30 2019, https://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/miss-revolutionary-idol-berserker.

> the performers do ad-libs or allow them to act spontaneously… I complete the choreography myself… So yes, everything is fixed.[222]

These are intricately preplanned, auteur-led, audiovisual spectacles — a quality directly connected to the process of the work's production.

(Re)Production

MRIB's shows are conceived by Nikaido using a particularly detailed method:

> I do everything regarding play-script writing, directing, choreography, composition and music for this performing arts group …
>
> What I do firstly, is make a huge list of surveys for the casts, which is about 10GB in data size with about 100 questions. Some of the questions that I ask are 'What is your strength?,' 'What is your value?,' 'What is your characteristic?,' 'What is your favourite song?,' … 'What do you want to show the audience?', 'What do you want to show the international audience?' … I collect these enormous amount of surveys from each cast and use them as reference to select and coordinate music …
>
> I write the play-scripts after the casts are fixed; this is the same when selecting music too. So I would choose certain music for particular casts …
>
> For music, we use medleys that I make by combining and mixing various songs collected from all ages and places … Each medley is approximately 15-20 minutes long, as this is the maximum that the performers can physically stand. They may seem extremely random, especially for those who see our performance for their first time, but actually everything is coordinated under a set title/theme.[223]

The company's performances are constructed through a gradual process of careful layering and encrusting of media and materials over fixed musical and thematic foundations. Together, choreographies are created, costumes are made, thousands of props are assembled, and multi-surface video projections are edited.

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222 Nikaido, interview with the author, Tokyo, June 24th, 2018.

223 Ibid.

Fig.8.2. Toco Nikaido directing performers in rehearsal. Bar Mita, Tokyo, Japan, July 2018. Photograph by the author.

Sitting in on a rehearsal of a small-scale performance by the company, I was able to observe how the elements at play are continually refined and perfected through repetition. Much like a drill instructor or high-school sports coach, Nikaido stands in front of the performers, constantly shouting instructions, pointing at details, gesturing, singing lyrics and crucially taking a constant stream of notes that she conveys to the performers immediately after each practise. This role extends into the performances themselves, in which she casts herself as an exaggerated director-as-performer, controlling the show and taking notes from the back of the auditorium. What we see in the theatre, then, is in one very literal sense a rehearsal; MRIB presenting themselves as a cast of trainer and trainees, an antithesis to the aesthetic polish of mainstream theatre.

Despite the apparent imperfection of the many surfaces in play, Toco and MRIB explicitly strive towards a level of perfection, of literally "no mistakes"[224]—a rigorously detailed compositional approach to making theatre through a continual process of construction and rehearsal. Media is carefully blended "into an array of metaphors"[225] that drives the underlying themes and narratives forward in constantly mutating configurations of music, choreography, action, video and props. This doesn't mean that certain configurations of media are necessarily sacrosanct—indeed, one gets the impression from watching a performance that, just as with Gorbman's cinematic combinatoires (see chapter 4), any configuration of elements combined with rigour could work, could produce something interesting. This is perhaps most evident in MRIB's reuse of

224 Nikaido, interview with the author, Tokyo, June 24th, 2018.

225 Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker, "English PR."

materials and tropes within and across productions. Songs, dance routines, and costumes are often remixed, recontextualised, and redigested into new forms and contexts.

Fig.8.3. Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker perform Franki Valli's *I Can't Take My Eyes Off You* . Kaisyo Festival Performance (2017). Screenshot of YouTube upload.[226]

One of most striking examples of this occurs with the 1967 Franki Valli hit *I Can't Take My Eyes Off You*. The song has been featured in at least three of MRIB's full productions, as well as in several smaller scale events. In each version, however, the song is 'set' in a new way, whether choreographed differently, positioned differently in a narrative, cut, sped up, or restaged. Here is a comparison of four of these settings:

[226] Mot Nok, "藝祭2017【天下の藝大殴り込みよっしゃ行くぞー！】 - 革命アイドル暴走ちゃん -," *YouTube* video, 15:11, Sep 9, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yzGavyUVvw.

1.
Show: Noise and Darkness (2014)[227]
Length of Song clip: 01'08"
Overall length of performance: 31'00"
Start time within performance: 25'00"
Tempo: crotchet = 144
Key of Chorus: A / A ♭ Major (pitched somewhere between)

Preceding
The song follows an upbeat Japanese pop track, resulting in a jarring shift of pace.

Music and Choreography
The setting begins with a rubato, solo rendering version of the chorus. This is sung live (over a microphone) by solo female American voice (Amanda Waddell), accompanied by a basic backing track. The verse is sung in a similar manner, but to a regular pulse. The live solo voice is clear, but with a very rough approach to pitch and timbre.

Around fifteen other performers move about the stage area clapping in time to the beat and then begin dancing in position, in strict unison.

During the song's bridge section, the entire cast, still in position, chants along in Japanese to the rhythm of the instrumental motif in the song. They perform with large flags bearing the symbol of the Imperial Japanese army.

Following this, the soloist sings the chorus at full volume, whilst the rest of the cast shout and chant in unison. This section also features certain members of the cast holding up large homemade letters.

Video
Throughout the performance there are video projections on three sides of the performance space, showing strobed videos of firework explosions, combined with, and often bleached out by, the bright, multicoloured and flashing on-stage lighting design.

Following
During the final repeat of the chorus the lights go down and the song merges messily with an upbeat disco track.

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[227] Mot Nok, "騒音と闇 - Noise and Darkness - ドイツ凱旋バージョン: Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker - 革命アイドル暴走ちゃん -," *YouTube* video, 31:01, Feb 13, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8vwKVUk_Hg.

2.

Show: Crazy Girls Save the World (2017)[228]

Length of Song clip: 00'27"

Overall length of performance: 26'00"

Start time within performance: 12'10"

Tempo: crotchet = 150

Key of Chorus: F♯ Major

Preceding

The song begins immediately and cleanly, following an upbeat pop song (a different song to example 1).

Music and Choreography

The song begins at the chorus, pitch-shifted up to a higher key than in example 1 and at a significantly faster tempo. The same American singer is centre stage, but her voice is barely audible; she is visibly off mic and seemingly miming to the song. She is wearing a feather boa.

Around fifteen members of the company perform around and behind the lead singer, chanting and dancing in unison. The chanting is subtly different to example 1. Again, they hold up cardboard signs at the front of the stage.

As well as this, many performers towards the back of the stage perform with flags printed with Japanese characters. Several performers also throw confetti on stage.

Video

The video projections throughout this part of the performance are screened on a single back wall projection and feature Japanese language characters scrolling quickly across a shifting, multicoloured background.

Following

At the end of the chorus, the soundtrack cuts instantly and cleanly to a J-pop ballad at a matching tempo. There is absolutely no segue.

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[228] Mot Nok, "Crazy Girls Save the World: Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker - 革命アイドル暴走ちゃん - (4)," *YouTube* video, 26:14, Feb 19, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgicFDU5fyw.

3.

Show: Kaisyo Festival Performance (2017)[229]

Length of Song clip: 00'25"

Overall length of performance: 15'00"

Start time within performance: 06'30"

Tempo: crotchet = 152

Key of Chorus: F♯ Major

Preceding

The song begins suddenly at the chorus, following on from an upbeat J-pop track (although a different track to the previous examples).

Music and Choreography

There is a lead singer, although she is not the same performer as in the previous examples and her voice is not audible. She sings along to the track but stands far off the microphone. She is wearing a feather boa.

Initially, this performance is accompanied by eight members of the cast chanting rhythmically with the track (in Japanese), arms strung together in a line performing a can-can. This formation breaks apart into a unison dance-and-chant routine around the central performer. This routine seems to mainly reference high-school cheerleading, with performers using pom-poms and forming a series of cheerleader-style group formations.

Video

The video projections appear to be the same as in *Crazy Girls Save the World*.

Following

At the end of the chorus, the soundtrack cuts instantly and cleanly to a J-pop ballad (the same as in example 2) at a matching tempo. There is absolutely no segue.

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[229] Mot Nok, "藝祭2017【天下の藝大殴り込みよっしゃ行くぞー！】 - 革命アイドル暴走ちゃん -," *YouTube* video, 15:11, Sep 9, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yzGavyUVvw.

4.

Show: Totes Adorbs ♥ Hurricane (2018)[230]
Length of Song clip: 00'27"
Overall length of performance: 25'00"
Start time within performance: 14'40"
Tempo: crotchet = 150
Key of Chorus: F♯ Major

This setting of the song, despite having a different central performer/lead vocalist, appears to be exactly the same as in *Crazy Girls Save the World*. The length, tempo, and pitch of clip, the choreography, video and the surrounding music is identical. This segment, then appears to have been uprooted and replanted wholesale into this new work.

The dissection above is admittedly somewhat at odds with the synaesthetic experience of being in the room during a performance. However, what it does begin to illustrate is the nature of appropriation and the reuse of appropriated material that occurs within and across MRIB's body of work. Musical numbers are set in a plethora of variations. Multimedia configurations are produced and reproduced over and over again. Materials are compressed—sped up, shortened, amplified to distortion, reframed, and recombined into an increasing, cumulative state of defamiliarisation. This isn't a post-modern puzzle waiting to be decoded; indeed as audience members we're barely even able to parse the blur of images we see and hear around us.

In *Postproduction*, Nicholas Bourriaud draws a distinction between "artists who produce works based on objects already produced, and those who operate ex nihilo".[231] In MRIB's work it is primarily the former that takes place, in that their work relies almost completely on pre-existing, readymade cultural objects. Similar to my own work in pieces such as *Ritual*, often musical and cultural artefacts are kept intact in order to capitalise on the richness of their own languages. The speed and density with which MRIB's readymades are remixed and compressed, however, makes it difficult to perceive and understand them on their own, let alone their original terms.

Indeed, in its use of an overwhelming cascade of references, MRIB's productions vibrate between different semiotic states. On the one hand, as with Foreman's compositional theatre and of course my own work, everything that's (re)used comes with history, genealogy and cultural codes; we're presented with an almost endless cosmos of references.[232] On the other hand, however, through MRIB's seemingly throwaway syncret-

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[230] Mot Nok, "Totes Adorbs ♥ Hurricane: Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker - 革命アイドル暴走ちゃん -," *YouTube* video, 24:34, Feb 16, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmWZeWamo7k.
[231] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World.* 2nd ed. (New York, Lukas and Sternberg, 2002), 17.
[232] Roland Quitt, "Composition and Theatre" in *Composed Theatre*, ed. Matthias Rebstock and David Roesner (Bristol, Intellect, 2013), 64.

ism these same materials are violently decoupled from these original codes and contexts and re-coupled into much more open, speculative, and abstract combinations. The tension that arises from this tendency towards abstraction typifies MRIB's use of sound and image and emerges as a striking compositional tool in every layer of their work.

A Theatre of Voices

> The sound of the music and performers' voices seem cacophonous and disorderly. However, everything is cued with perfect precision; the sound is presented faster than the audience can process, to evoke strong feelings and emotions.[233]

One of the most immediately striking features of MRIB's work is the continually saturated presence of the performers' voices. Almost all of the cast spend the entire duration of the shows vocalising in some way, usually in the form of wild singing, screaming, and chanting. However, this vocal soundscape is organised in complex and sophisticated ways: voices are orchestrated with and against each other, and voices are used in relation to other media. One of many striking examples of this can be observed in the company's 2018 production *BOUSOU ZAKURA*.[234] Looking at just a sixty-second slice from the performance gives an impression of the voice techniques and layers in play:

> **08'00"**: The entire company roughly sings along to a recording.
>
> **08'15"**: As the company continue to sing along, the lead vocalist closes in on a microphone centre-stage and addresses the audience directly, separating himself sonically and linguistically from the rest of the troupe.
>
> **8'25"**: The company now join in unison with the soloist, addressing the audience with a massed chant, that is separate from the backing song.
>
> **8'30"**: The lead singer join the rest of the company who again sing along roughly to a recording (a new song). This is interspersed with chanted phrases outside of the song lyrics.

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[233] Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker, "English PR."

[234] Mot Nok, "暴走桜 -BOUSOU ZAKURA- 5th Stage: Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker - 革命アイドル暴走ちゃん - ," *YouTube* video, 31:14, Oct 15, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYnE6vDFoSE.

8'45": Some of the company members come directly up to audience members and shout messages/instructions to them individually. This is completely outside of the structure of the song.

8'55": The performance of the song continues now with some company members on stage, and some interspersed with the audience itself.

Watching this clip, it is clear, firstly, that these are not 'polished' voices. They are intentionally raw, brash, and unsubtle. They resemble fan performances in quality; as singers, members of the cast exist in an awkward space as tenuously matrixed popstar personae.

Secondly, it is apparent that the performer's voice is situated at the centre of a complex nexus of sonic, spatial, gestural and linguistic functions. Some of the text sung and spoken by the company is understandable (the predominant language is Japanese, although for overseas performances snippets of the host country's native language are often thrown in), but much of it is not, distorted and drowned as it is in an overall melee of sound. In this sense the over-saturated use of the voice results in a semi-abstract soundscape and *textscape*—a quality that resonates with Lehmann's concept of a postdramatic *theatre of voices*.[235] Rather than prioritising linguistic meaning, the voice is used in energetic, quasi-musical ways. A musicalised treatment of the voice is a central tenet of my own work (particularly in pieces such as *Live Guy, Dead Guy* and *Orderly Mouthpiece Spent*), often bound up specifically with the grain of whatever medium it is presented in. In MRIB's work voices are arranged more architectonically: both spatially throughout the theatre and compositionally in their amplified and acoustic layers, counterpoints and unisons, and varying timbres. Their approach to staging the voice is striking, and offers a parallel model to my treatment of Angela's voice in *Dead Guy*. However, it is MRIB's staging and delineating of voice-types physically around the audience, and their embrace of the untrained voice, expounded upon below, that is specifically relevant to the final work in my portfolio, discussed in the next chapter: *Regretfully Yours Ongoing.*

In many ways MRIB's work sits very comfortably within Lehmann's overall panorama of postdramatic signifiers, with its visual and musical dramaturgy, its overloaded and heterogenous interplay of signs, its synaesthetic disconnectedness of the senses.[236] In particular, a certain type of 'choral bundling and … *desecration* of the word' seems to be in play in MRIB's work. One comes away from a performance with impressions derived from visual and auditory images rather than any, somewhat obfuscated, semantic ones. This sonified, compositional quality of MRIB's textscapes are compounded by the fact that no over-riding purpose governs the bundling and overlaying of voice and sound. Indeed, the resultant quality is most often one of profound *non*-synthesis: a broadband of sound that is impossible to resolve into a single focused image.

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235 Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 148.

236 Ibid., 84.

A good illustration can be found part way through *Crazy Girls Save the World*.[237] At around 8'46" into the show occurs a massed performance of a Japanese pop song. The recorded song itself is sped up (and pitch shifted), but the lead vocal line is still clearly discernible. At the same time, the company perform an extreme, distorted version of the song as a palimpsestic overlay. Almost like a live, acoustic *audio-clipping* or *pixelation* of the original, this layer features the entire company singing roughly and tunelessly as a massed group. At certain refrains (e.g. 8'53") all semblance of melody or tone are abandoned in favour of tight, bellowed shouts. Furthermore, several members of the company begin screaming the words at ear-splitting pitch and volume. Underpinning all of this activity are the usual rhythmic chants delivered by a number of the company members.

The impact of this is overwhelming in volume and density. Rather than all the elements in play working together in synthesis, what we encounter here is a profoundly non-blended *simultaneity*.[238] The pop-song is no longer treated as a sonically and semantically sealed entity; instead, through this overdriven karaoke, it becomes a site for wild vocal extrapolations. Linguistic comprehension is broken down in favour of the voice as a sound-producing device, and as a mechanism for forcing the bodies of performers to be abundantly present and activated at all times. MRIB's vocalisations foreground the liminal space 'between a language and voice,'[239] between comprehension and material, sensorial impact.

Roland Barthes describes these two poles of the singing voice as the *pheno-song*—covering phenomena that belong to the structure of language and representation—and the *geno-song*—signifiers germinating from language and its very materiality.[240] Much like the interviews, and shortwave radio static of *Orderly Mouthpiece Spent*, in *Crazy Girls Save the World* the geno-song is forced to the distorted fore, to the point of total sensorial overwhelm. Desperately holding in the earplugs issued by the company before the start of each show, we're made rudely aware of "the body in the voice as it sings."[241] Of course, it should be recognised that as a non-native Japanese speaker, the pheno-song (the *lyrics*) are beyond many audience members' comprehension anyway. However, the voices of MRIB quite intentionally serve a vital, *physical* purpose:

> The actors need to be saying something constantly, because if they don't, their facial expressions would look dead and unspirited. It's not worth looking at a lifeless facial expression. … So yes, the performers in my group are constantly verbalising things related to the concept or lyrics of the songs.[242]

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[237] Mot Nok, "Crazy Girls Save the World: Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker - 革命アイドル暴走ちゃん - (4)."
[238] Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 87.
[239] Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image-Music-Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 181.
[240] Ibid., 182.
[241] Ibid., 188.
[242] Nikaido, interview with the author, Tokyo, June 24th, 2018.

Nikaido makes it clear that the visual, gesticulative dimension of speech is vital to the work. The actors' mouths and voices here are used choreographically. Facial movements are over-exaggerated, writ-large and sped up, modifying and skewing the sound of the voice in the ways described above.

Fig.8.4. Performers in the lower right corner touch tongues whilst singing. *Crazy Girls Save the World* (2017). Screenshot of YouTube upload.[243]

Later on in *Crazy Girls Save the World* this finds alarming expression in one of the company's recurring tropes. At 13'30", mid-song, several pairs of company members move in close to the audience and continue to sing along to the underlying track whilst touching their tongues together. The articulators of language, the mechanics of the pheno-song are quite literally tied up; the song lyrics are mangled and distorted in a raw, bizarre gesticulation of the voice.

Poor Images

Musical, sonic, gestural, choreographic, and visual materials continuously trend towards a state of collapse and abstraction. References constantly fall away from their original codes and contexts by means of remixing, layering and various forms of distortion. The result is a high-velocity, low-fidelity aural and visual blur of cultural debris: an intense succession of second-hand, post-produced images.

[243] Mot Nok, "Crazy Girls Save the World: Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker - 革命アイドル暴走ちゃん - (4)."

In her essay *In Defence of the Poor Image*, Hito Steyerl celebrates the grain of contemporary digital images and videos as they're downloaded, uploaded, compressed, shared, and re-edited online. In contrast to a high-resolution cinematic image, for example, Steyerl proposes:

> The poor image is an illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image. Its genealogy is dubious. Its file names are deliberately misspelled. It often defies patrimony, national culture, or indeed copyright. It is passed on as a lure, a decoy, an index, or as a reminder of its former visual self. … Not only is it often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all.[244]

Steyerl regards such decoupling of images from their historical, cultural, and genre-specific contexts as a type of dematerialisation: the value of these artefacts no longer lies exclusively in their fidelity or resolution, but in their speed and density.

In MRIB's live work we experience a kind of analogue staging of this digital paucity—a rarefaction of individual cultural artefacts that regain new meaning, structure, and effect through hyper-dense and fast reconfiguration. This resonates to a large extent with my own work that deals with its own type of reconfiguration via the simultaneity of events (the end of *Dead Guy* being a particularly pertinent case in point), as well the poverty that results from conspicuously unintegrated or faulty multimedia. In MRIB's work, however, this aesthetic poorness is gleefully exacerbated by the company's performance style, rooted in extreme reimagining of fan subcultures. In an interview from 2015 Nikaido put this into context:

> In Japan today, there is a unique emergence of something that might be described as 'amateurism,' in which the users themselves do things like making Hatsune Miku … clips and Niconico video clips [a popular Japanese video sharing site that features fan-made content with overlaid text and music] to share with each other, with the result that there is a lot of authorless (anonymous) creation going on. In our ohagi live performances there is a lot of as yet unnamed culture and emotions or what you might call raw material dancing unconsciously around and charging forward with a feeling of what seems to be excess.[245]

It is exactly this excessive unrooting of material from its original authorship that creates space for the audience to find their own internal relations and meanings in the work.[246] MRIB's unique aesthetic realised through a kind of radical amateurism, thrusts us into a semiotic void, populated with images in a state of acceleration and deterioration. It is perhaps this unrootedness of material that allows international audiences (such as the bamboozled *Time Out* reviewer) to respond so positively to a theatre whose constituent parts are so colloquially alien.

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244 Hito Steyerl, "In Defence of the Poor Image," in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Sternberg Press, 2012): 32.

245 Toco Nikaido and Masashi Nomura, "Artist Interview: Toko Nikaido and her spirit behind the "berserker" performances."

246 Quitt, *Composed Theatre*, 64.

Ultimately, Steyerl sees the circulation of poor images as another form of value, as a way for cultural objects to resonate beyond their original contexts:

> The poor image is no longer about the real thing—the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: it is about reality.[247]

With MRIB we see a similar circulation and dispersion in action; a release of material from the solipsism of its original codes of meaning in a way that Nikaido's company sees as representative of modern Japan.[248] This is brought to the fore in two particular ways by which the company actively gives back ownership of the work to their audiences.

First, at the end of each performance, the cast bring the audience onto the stage and then themselves fill the rows of seats, in a complete reversal of the audience-performer relationship. The audience is seen by Nikaido as the "main character"[249] in the play, and indeed this final reversal is a literal platforming of the fan, the chaotic and clumsy amateur finally and genuinely manifest amongst the detritus of props deposited over the previous thirty minutes. In a gesture of quintessential *omotenashi* hospitality, the work and everything it contains is generously handed back to the fans. The play's ultimate protagonist is intermediated not just among the performers onstage, then, but among everyone in the room.

Fig.8.5. Performers hold up social media icons. *BOUSOU ZAKURA* (2018). Screenshot of YouTube upload [250]

[247] Steyerl, *The Wretched of the* Screen, 44.

[248] Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker, "English PR."

[249] Nikaido, interview with the author, Tokyo, June 24th, 2018.

[250] Mot Nok, "暴走桜 -BOUSOU ZAKURA- 5th Stage: Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker - 革命アイドル暴走ちゃん -," *YouTube* video, 31:14, Oct 15, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYnE6vDFoSE.

Second, audience member are rolled into the 'swarm circulation' of MRIB's poor images by being explicitly encouraged to document performances on their phones and to share these images and videos on social media. This is spelt out in *BOUSOU ZAKURA*[251] at 02'10" when company members hold up large, homemade logos of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as a sign reading "Photo OK."

Fig.8.6. Poor attempts at capturing MRIB's performance at LIFT festival, London 2016. Photographs by the author.

Contemporary theatre companies rarely share footage of shows beyond carefully edited and highly polished showreels and trailers. Unusually, Nikaido takes the attitude that she simply wants "people to see what we do and there's no reason why not to."[252] The result is an online proliferation of shaky handheld phone footage; a survey of social media sites throws up clipped, distorted, blurry audio, video, and images capturing different point-of-view perspectives of their shows, all shot at odd angles and with unbalanced audio levels. These clips are often disrupted by a screaming company member clambering over the camera. This isn't *bad* footage though, it is *poor* footage, and in its poorness reflects the content, ethos, and spirit of Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker with uncanny accuracy.

MRIB's performances sit in an exciting and volatile space, a push and pull of meaning and abstraction, comprehension, and bamboozlement, familiar and alien, auteur-made and fan-made, colloquial and global. These qualities are activated through their high-speed-low-resolution aesthetic which disperses and overwhelms not only the material on stage but also our attention as audience members as well.

The interaction between the media in play (music, voice, text, action, image) is thorough and striking. It is compositional in its arrangement; but, in its superficially chaotic layering, demonstrates a particular paucity of material. Like my own work, but in a very different manner, much of this effect coalesces around the mu-

251 Ibid.

252 Nikaido, interview with the author, Tokyo, June 24th, 2018.

sicalised voice and song as sites of profound, 'amateurish' (in terms of its reference to karaoke and *otagei*) distortion—structurally, sonically, and physically.

All of this makes MRIB's work extremely relevant to my practice and to interdisplinary practices more generally. The company explore similar ideas to my own work, using similar means and medias but arrive at drastically different conclusions and results. Even so, MRIB illuminates many key ideas at play in the final work of this portfolio, *Regretfully Yours, Ongoing*.

Chapter 9
Inattention

The works presented so far in this portfolio and the case studies that accompany them all demonstrate a degree of involvement from the spectator in their assemblage. This happens primarily at the level of perception: dispersed subjects are sutured together in a spectator's sensorium, ruptured analogue-digital thresholds require negotiating, faulty diegeses are constantly disturbing passive readings of multimedia conflations. In the work of *Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker*, and also in my final piece discussed in this commentary—*Regretfully Yours, Ongoing*—this collaborative production becomes more active, conscious, and coercive through the direct, physical involvement of the audience. They become participants in the production of artistic content and negotiate the same matrixed-unmatrixed boundary of the *corpsing* performer. This participatory act opens up a further, reflexive chamber to sound in, a further surface to project onto, a further body to activate.

Richard Schechner draws a distinction between a performance's *accidental* and *integral* audiences. An *accidental* audience is made up of persons that attend a performance individually, or in small clusters, simply to see the show. That show has usually been advertised publicly, and tickets are available. An *integral* audience, on the other hand, comprises those "necessary to accomplish the work of the show,"[253] such as hecklers, TV studio audiences, or core fans. When audiences are implicated in the production of work (either perceptively or physically), the boundaries between accidental and integral can become permeable. Schechner goes as far as to posit that as audiences tend towards the *integral*, performances come to resemble rituals—a quality clearly evident in Nikaido's work:

> I believe that what makes a work of art is not only the artist, but also who takes it in … After all, we always need the presence of the receiver to do what we do, so I want to send them my gratitude, 'Thank you for seeing our play. We couldn't have made this without you. You are the main character here![254]

In MRIB's performances the intentionally amateur aesthetic, the *poor* acting of the performers feels somehow relatable, as expressed in the final audience-performer exchange. In a Schechnerian turn, this—and indeed the consistent, replicated *structure* of MRIB's works,[255] the Pavlovian repetition of certain musical, choreographic and visual cues, and the donning of special waterproof clothing—certainly has an air of the ritualistic about it.

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253 Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 220.

254 Nikaido, interview with the author, Tokyo, June 24th, 2018.

255 In their official press release, MRIB describe the fixed structure of their 'Ohagi Live' performances: "Preset", "Main Event", "Encore", and "Audience Send-Out". See Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker, "English PR."

In my own work, the boundary between accidental and integral audiences is also often in question. Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Ritual* highlights this most clearly so far; in chapter 6 I described how the performers in that work are either in a process of 'passing over' from matrixed to non-matrixed roles (performers shedding their matrixed roles to rejoin the audience) or constantly on the cusp of corpsing within their musical personae. However, the gathered audience members in this event were also integral. It is clear from the documentation that there were a large contingent of fans of the local performers present. Baest (the Death Metal group) followers, lured from the local Metal bar, were dressed similarly to the band, cheering and head-banging along to the music. Wrestling fans were also present, clustered in close to the ring. Finally, all those gathered were offered a celebratory drink at the end of the show. The event overall, then, felt less like a formal theatrical production and more like a collective, social, conversational, and immersive celebration.

Selective Inattention

Schechner aligns the ritualisation of aesthetic drama with the concept of *selective inattention*; the idea that in certain contexts an audience may not be able, or equally may not be expected, to engage fully and presently with every detail of a work. Interestingly, as a polar opposite he cites Richard Foreman's "intense, you-must-pay-attention kind of work."[256] The "hypnagogic" and "dreamlike"[257] construct of Noh theatre, however, he sees as a paradigm of *selective inattention*:

> Among the noh audience are many whose eyes are closed, or heavy-lidded. These experts are 'paying attention' by relaxing their consciousness, allowing material to stream upward from their unconscious to meet the sounds/images streaming outward from the noh stage. … Often images and sounds are shared by *shite* …, chorus, musicians, and spectators so that the principal character is constructed by, distributed to, and shared among a number of participants.[258]

This state of inattention facilitates a particular type of disembodied co-creation[259] between audience and performer, one that seems to go hand in hand with Noh's disembodied mechanisms, allowing "patterns of the whole to be visible, patterns that otherwise would be burned out of consciousness by a too intense concentration."[260]

Selective inattention, then provides a useful way of understanding how dispersed, disjointed, dense multimedia environments *can* operate. In that sense one could view the intentionally faulty diegesis of *Live Guy, Dead Guy* as impelling viewers towards a similar kind of selectively inattentive engagement. As that work builds towards an increasingly layered and distributed sense of character, a greater onus is placed on the

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[256] Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 234.

[257] Ibid., 231.

[258] Ibid., 230-231.

[259] Ibid., 230.

[260] Ibid., 229.

spectator to deal with independent, often unrelated events and media, and perceive them as unified within the frame of the work.

However, as these environments become busier and denser, the kind of inattention practiced in the appreciation of Noh theatre gives way to a somewhat *forced* inattention. Certainly, in MRIB's work, the sculptural theatres of Fitch and Trecartin, and some works of mine (the finale of *Dead Guy* and the live rendering of *Deepy Kaye* in particular), it "isn't possible to keep your eye on all that's going on,"[261] but this is largely down to the sheer amount of information present. Inattention ceases to become a compliant state and becomes simply the only *possible* state.

Portfolio work: *Regretfully Yours, Ongoing*

Regretfully Yours, Ongoing (RYO)[262] explicitly explores simultaneous yet disconnected actions and activates the audience in suturing together a unified, inherently inattentive experience. The audience in *RYO* serves both as passive receivers of the performance and as active contributors to it.

Fig.9.1. *Regretfully Yours, Ongoing* performance shot. Photograph by Ilmė Vyšniauskaitė, used with permission.

[261] Ibid., 225.

[262] A full video of the work can be found in the accompanying portfolio as **Luck_203030507_video_Regretfully Yours, Ongoing_Full documentation.mp4**, as well as a score of the piece: **Luck_203030507_score_Regretfully Yours, Ongoing_Full score.pdf**.

The piece resulted from a commission to write for the London Contemporary Music Festival's (LMCF) newly formed festival orchestra. The work would be performed in the cavernous space (14,000 square feet) of Ambika P3.[263] Embracing the potential scale of the occasion, I decided to further expand the resources of the work to an almost absurd degree: thus the piece is scored for full orchestra, myself as a soloist, video, several other 'special guest' soloists, a 'stooge' choir, and the audience itself.

Like *Live Guy, Dead Guy, RYO* can broadly be seen to fall into two main sections that operate very differently and use different materials. I'll focus initially on the first section (which covers around two thirds, or ten minutes, of the total piece). This first section of *RYO* is threaded together by a loose monologue, delivered by me, on the subject of a vague but desired 'coming together,' and an equally vague, pathetic inability to do so:

> And again, who's here to pull together this horrible wound in a kind of
> Pull the sides together to a grim, miserable fixture…
> An ugly form of…
>
> A BOTCHED SUTURE…
> A botched suture, the end.
>
> But we're still left with this shitty echo[264]

This underlying theme is articulated through both the structure and the material of the piece. While narrating, I am also engaged in a fruitless attempt to assemble a simple table. Both I and it are constantly in a state of seemingly chaotic, but carefully rehearsed collapse. This causes loud banging sounds as the tabletop and legs hit the floor, combined with an audibly poor handheld microphone technique; often I am accidentally 'off mic,' or producing breath pops and percussive noises as the microphone collides with the table.

Simultaneously, the orchestra is playing a fully notated score, carefully calculated to sound 'not together'. Bars 67-69 (Fig.9.1.)(04'00" in the video documentation), show a typical orchestral tutti, where the attacks of individuals instruments are rhythmically offset from one another. The orchestral score also makes frequent use of certain extended instrumental techniques, employed primarily to distort and disrupt otherwise regular timbres. For example, in bars 1-2 of the full score (Fig.9.2.), I employ glissandi, half-valved brass notes, 'out-of-tune' microtones, lip smacks on mouthpieces, *sul ponticello*, and 'messy' left hand string pizzicatos.

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263 Ambika P3, owned by the University of Westminster, was formerly the concrete construction hall for the School of Engineering. Further information and images can be found on the venue's website. See: "About," Ambika P3, accessed January 15, 2020, http://www.p3exhibitions.com/about/.

264 See 02'05" in the video documentation.

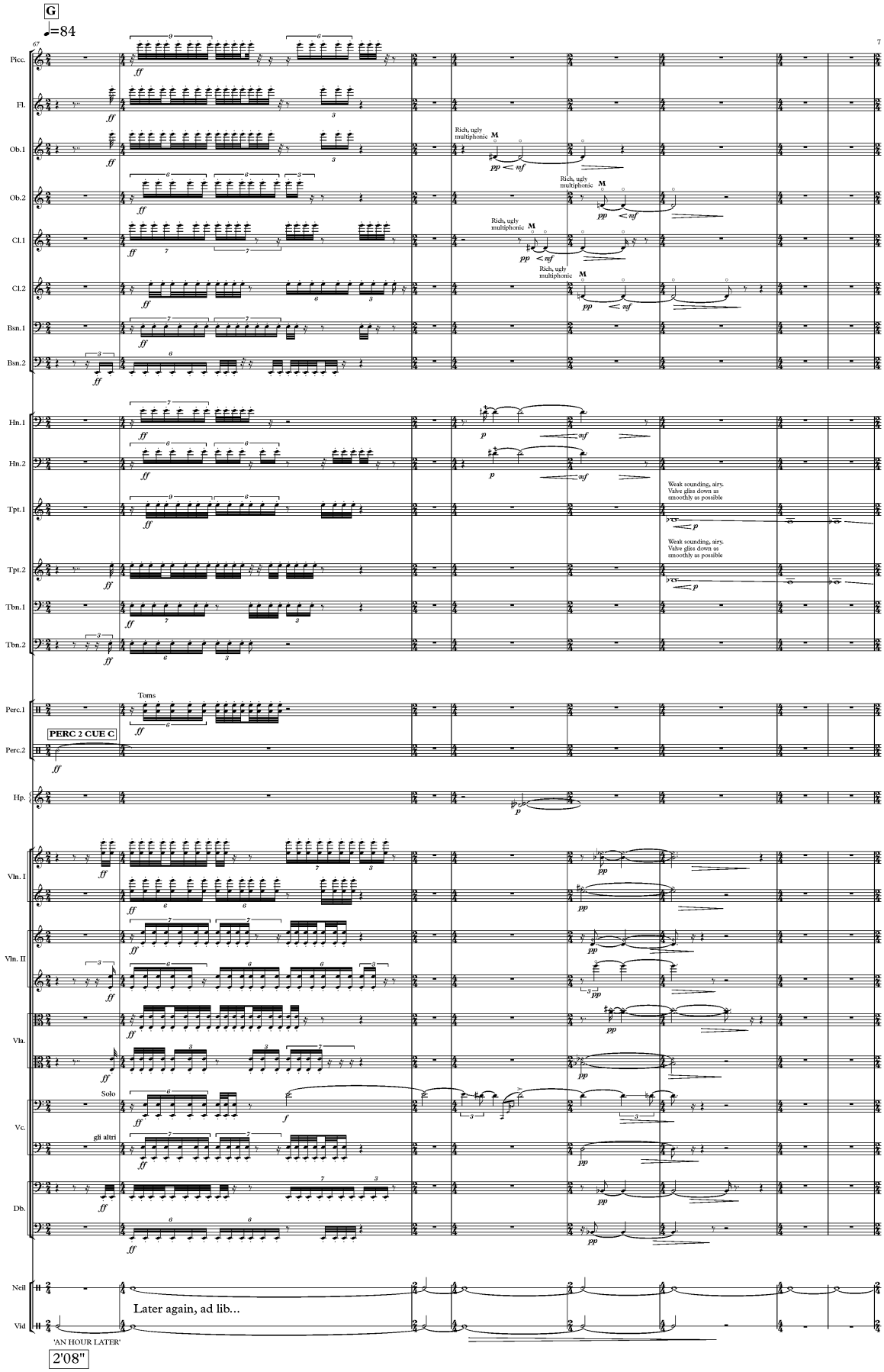

Fig.9.2. Bars 67-74 of the full score for *Regretfully Yours, Ongoing*.

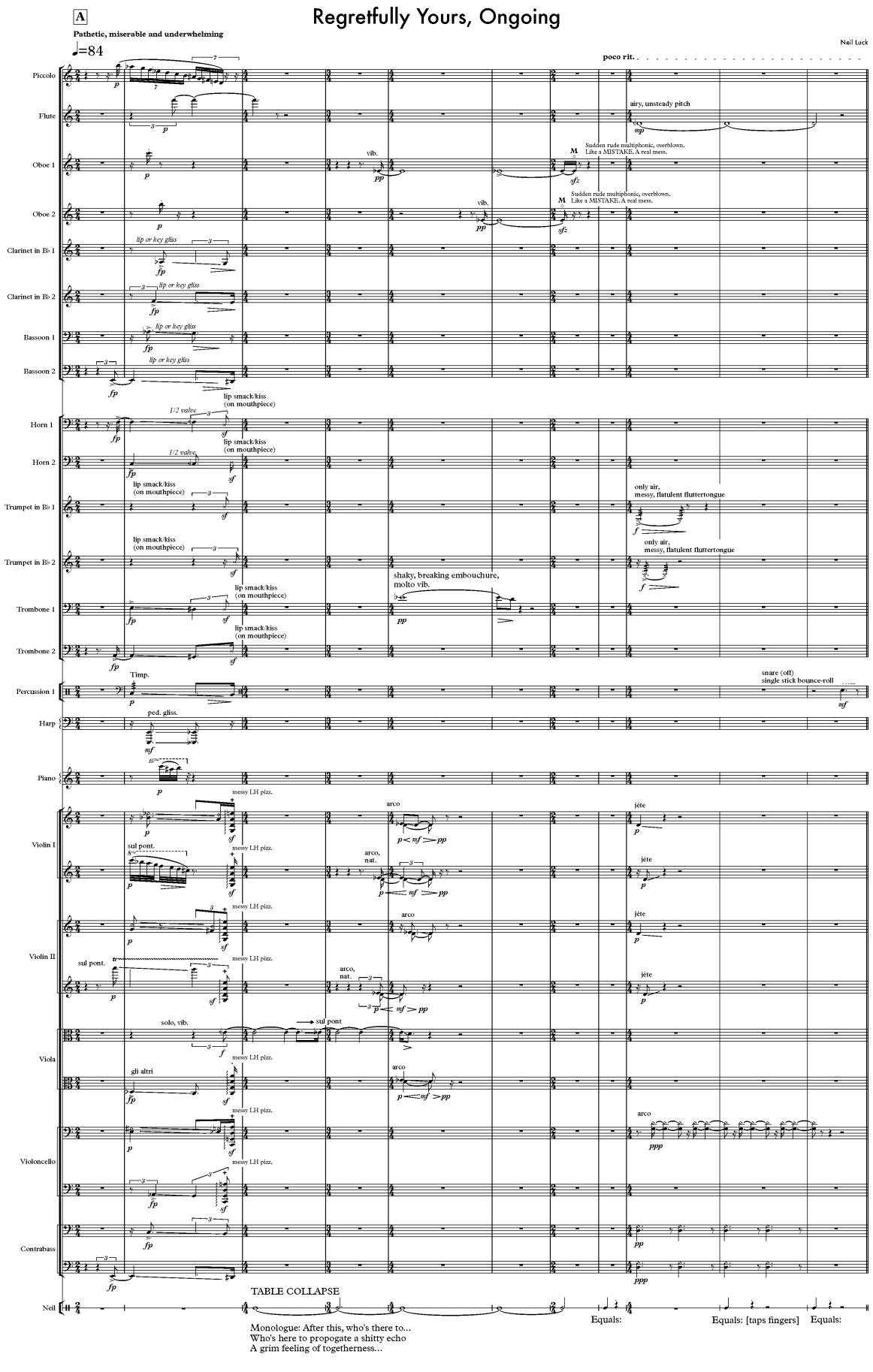

Fig.9.3. Bars 1-11 of the full score for *Regretfully Yours, Ongoing.*

Fig.9.4. The onscreen protagonist suffering a mundane accident. Screenshot from video documentation. Video still.

Running throughout this first part of the work is a fixed single screen video and stereo audio part. The video features edited clips of a performer (Athina Vahla) suffering a series of mundane accidents, mainly in outdoor suburban surroundings. She trips, walks into barriers, her elbow slips from a table, she fails to engage a key in a lock. The accompanying soundtrack consists mainly of sounds of glass and wood breaking and doors slamming. Over this we hear phrases spoken by a male voice obtusely and gnomically referring to what is happening in the performance with a sarcastically nihilistic tone. Finally, a drum-kit player is positioned below the video screen, cued by white flashes on screen—see, for example 02'04" (bar 40) in the accompanying video documentation—to play short, chaotic, outbursts designed intentionally to draw attention towards the projection.

These elements are, however, far from neatly stitched together. This reflects to some extent the piece's method of composition. In *RYO* all live and fixed elements were written and constructed simultaneously, and somewhat (at least to begin with) independently. The aim of this approach was to create a work whose materials felt at once unified, as well as inherently tangential. My job as a composer in this situation was to find, part way through the process of composition, connections, however tenuous. This is reflected directly in how the work feels in performance - similarly a desperate attempt to draw connections between elements that are wilfully separated.

For one thing, the elements of the piece are spatially distributed around the room (see Fig.9.3). Given the size of the venue, this becomes significant: the orchestra, positioned at one end, faces the video projection, high up on the other. I, meanwhile, perform on a separate stage at on one of the long edges of the space. These three elements also play out to a large degree independently, in a chaotic diegesis. The video and

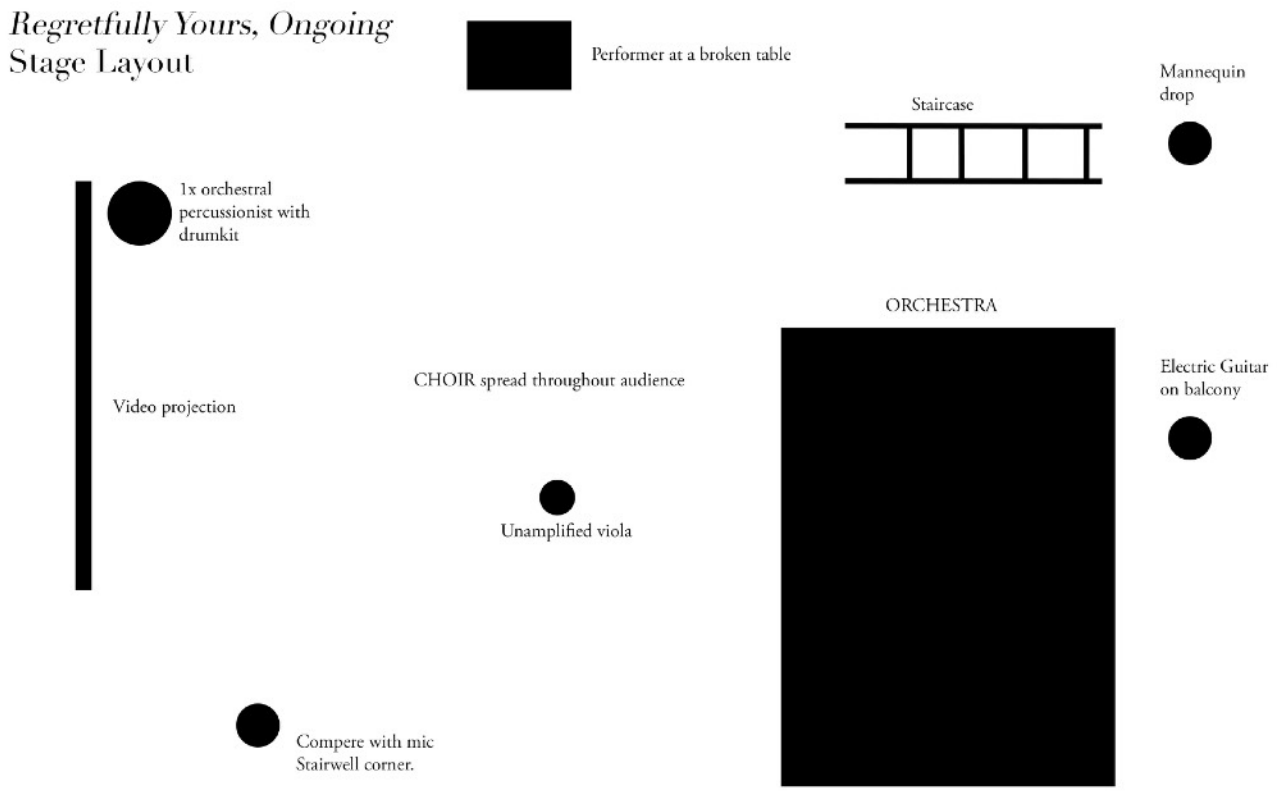

Fig.9.5. Stage/space layout for *Regretfully Yours, Ongoing*.

sound parts are completely fixed. Triggered just before their first appearance, they play uninterrupted until the end of the piece. My part as a soloist, however, is devised, rather than scored. The text *is* scripted, but it is cued roughly around the video and audio and also certain gestures in the orchestral score. Finally, the orchestral part sometimes operates independently, sometimes takes cues from the video, and sometimes responds to my table-top actions. All these elements then, exist in a fluid, awkward contingency with one another. The conductor and I need at various moment to lead, to anticipate a cue, or to ignore everything; there are very few tight, snappy synchronicities.

Many moments in *RYO* illustrate this relationship. At 01'25" (bars 22-31), for instance, a dialogue between myself, the percussionist and the full orchestra begins. I make reference to a 'hazy, pathetic knock, knock' that is played by a single percussionist, followed by the full orchestra, and then by myself sarcastically knocking on the table top. Immediately thereafter we hear the first explosive sounds of the tape part, along with the drum-kit player, roughly synched with the complete collapse of my table. Throughout this section, then, as sounds hocket unpredictably between the bodies and media around the space, the audience (who stand in the centre of the action) are required to constantly shift attention.

This dispersal of sound and action continues and builds in intensity to the work's first major climax at 06'30" (starting at bar 128), where the orchestra establishes a noisy texture while I prosthelytise on the subject of a wound sustained through falling. On screen, the filmed character stumbles up a staircase to the top

of a railway bridge, while on the opposite side of the space the orchestral percussionist carries a life-size mannequin up a similar staircase towards a balcony. At 07'14" (bar 155) we see the onscreen character plummet from the bridge. Following this a recorded voiceover retroactively announce the accident with 'tragically, a day later,' before a unified 'no' is shouted unamplified across the space between the two percussionists. The mannequin is then thrown down the staircase, followed by a delayed 'tragic' minor chord played in the orchestra, and an 'oh shit' spoken by me with, moments later, a pre-recorded American voiceover. The same act is then replayed onscreen as a digital animation while I continue my monologue in a collapsed position on the table.

Fig.9.6. Percussionist preparing to throw a mannequin down the staircase. Screenshot from video documentation.

This single moment of action (the fall) and reaction is stretched across the space to last thirty seconds in total. Throughout, the audience's attention is drawn to all the elements in play, experiencing multiple viewpoints of a single idea: an 'exploded' diagram in sound and image. Indeed, one can see from the footage of the audience at 07'26" that they are facing in different directions, turning and craning necks to see the dispersed activity, inevitably missing certain details.

Regretfully Yours, Ongoing doesn't feature an explicit protagonist *per se*, but at this moment there is a sense of an intermediated and embodied subject that is experiencing a descent and collapse. The subject is divided as a physical but also televisual presence[265] among the bodies, dummies, speakers, and screens in play. The falseness, and the paucity of the images in play—a hokey mannequin, handheld camcorder footage, jarringly high resolution and post-produced *acousmêtre*-esque voiceovers, and my own staged pathos—confirm that

[265] Sone, *Cyber-Puppets, Presence and Performance. Bunraku, Intermediation and Interdiscplinarity,* 117.

the work is an artifice. There are no fully-matrixed actors or dramatic-musical personae, but rather clearly allegorical, almost pantomimic signifiers.

This reflects the idea of inattention back onto the performers themselves, in situations where they are required to step in and out of focus. Schechner sees this as a movement from presence to absence*;* an actor "actually falling out of character" to reveal a vacuum, a "lack of anything complex to do."[266] Indeed, in *RYO* no one ever reaches a state of what Kirby would describe as 'complex' acting (and is thus enabled to drop it); rather, the centrifugal energy of the work, as it disperses material, attention, and character around the edges of the performance space, exposes an inattention and absence at its (aesthetic and architectonic) centre.

Absences

In 1985 Eleanor Fuchs described the theatrical dispersion of a centralised subject as one symptom of a "theatre of absence."[267] Specifically, she draws attention to technological mediation of sound and image as that which "disperses the center, displaces the subject, destabilizes meaning."[268]

More recently, the composer and director Heiner Goebbels has adopted Fuchs' concept of a theatre of absence as a cornerstone of his practice and his understanding of others' practices. Goebbels' work is extremely diverse, but he consistently considers musical performance as a theatrical act, and conversely the act of directing as a compositional process:

> I direct like a composer: I work very formally and consider theatre as a very musical process… the harmonic or contrapuntal relationship of the theatrical elements and the different levels between a 'visual' and an 'acoustic' stage.[269]

In *Schwarz auf Weiß* (*Black on White*) (1996) Goebbels treats an ensemble of 18 musicians[270] as a "collective protagonist.[271] Musical and theatrical actions are performed onstage in ever-shifting and overlapping permutations of solos, duos, and larger subsets of the ensemble. The result is a piece with an absence of centre; rather, it engineers shifting points of focus within an intermediated field of activity.

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266 Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 232.

267 Elinor Fuchs, "Presence and the Revenge of Writing: Re-Thinking Theatre after Derrida," *Performing Arts Journal*, 9/2/3 (1985), 165.

268 Ibid., 165.

269 Heiner Goebbels, "'It's all part of one concern': A keynote' to Composition as Staging," in *Composed Theatre: Aesthetics, Practices, Processes*, ed. Matthias Rebstock and David Roesner (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 113-114.

270 The work was devised with and premiered by Frankfurt's *Ensemble Modern.* See: Heiner Goebbels, "Schwarz auf Weiss / Black on White," Heiner Goebbels*,* accessed January 15, 2020. https://www.heinergoebbels.com/en/archive/works/complete/view/37.

271 Heiner Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence : Texts on Theatre,* ed. Jane Collins, and Nicolas Till, trans. David Roesner and Christina M. Lagao (London: Routledge, 2015), 2.

In contrast to |notions of presence and intensity"[272] in more classical concepts of artistic expression, Goebbels finds the notion of musico-dramatic absence useful in rethinking and describing how the constituent elements of interdisciplinary and multimedia music theatre might operate together and, crucially, how that relationship might open up space for interpretation and expression. His categorised concepts of a theatre of absence seem to describe much of the artistic territory that this thesis has covered in both my own work and that by others. Goebbels understands *absence* as including:

- The disappearance of the actor/performer from the centre of attention.
- A division of presence amongst all elements involved.
- A polyphony of elements (an absence of unilaterality).
- A division of the spectator's attention to a 'collective protagonist.'
- Separation of the actor's voices from their bodies and a musician's sounds from their instruments.
- A de-synchronization of hearing and seeing; a separation or division between visual and acoustic stages.[273]

This concept of absences encapsulates—in a much more focused way than Lehmann's post-dramatic panorama—a particular way of working across media that seems highly relevant to my practice. Rather than viewing questionable diegeses, conspicuously present media artifices, and tenuously matrixed performance as *perversions* of more conventional practices, Goebbels' aesthetics of absence frames them as essential parts of the interdisciplinary fabric.

A similar aesthetic of absence is useful in viewing this portfolio as whole. Many of the works are overloaded and dense in their elemental polyphony, and yet they also present situations in which something is missing—a clear focus, a physical body, an inattentive approach to multimedia. *Regretfully Yours, Ongoing*—a piece explicitly about disconnects, failures, and accidents—brings together, then, many of the strands and ideas explored throughout the rest of the portfolio.

In the final third of the piece the absence at the very heart of *RYO* is recognised and exploited. At 09'05" (bar 193), following a post-climax deflation, the attention in the space shifts. A point-of-view video of a dog feverishly and violently biting a man's arm (introduced by the spoken text 'a literal feeling of grafted-together, sunken-in togetherness') is projected large onto the screen, accompanied by a solo vocalising viola player, positioned in the middle of the audience, mimicking the sounds of both the attacker and the attacked. Although this soloist plays with great energy, the moment is designed, once again, as a point of unstable diegesis: although the sound and the image clearly relate, the difference in scale (between the large image and solo unaccompanied musician) is all wrong and, crucially, the sound's location is clearly and visi-

[272] Ibid., 1.

[273] Ibid., 4-5.

bly wrenched apart from the image. The audience's aural attention is focused inwards. The interior space of the hall is retrospectively unmasked as an absence.

Fig.9.7. The compère appears on a balcony. Photograph by Ilmė Vyšniauskaitė, used with permission.

Directly following this, at 09'50" (Bar 200), a glamorous female compère appears on a raised balcony and proceeds to lead the audience as a massed chorus in a sing-along with the orchestra, the lyrics of which are:

> A grim altogether now.
> A faulty stitch across a wound.
> A wholly unbeginning again.

This makeshift choir is led through several repetitions of the chorus, which builds in intensity in the manner of a 'classic rock' vamp; the orchestral accompaniment becomes increasingly busy, and the entrance of the drums also signals a hackneyed shift upwards in key as an electric guitarist joins to play an unhinged, stadium-rock-esque solo.

The audience here is cast as its own dispersed protagonist, and the sense of *presence* is divided between everyone in the room. The soloists manifest a selectively inattentive relationship with character and presence: the compère presents with a clearly over-the-top delivery; the guitar soloist is an over-the-top archetype. In addition, a pre-rehearsed 'stooge' choir is spread throughout the audience attempting to 'naturally' encourage the

whole room into song. *RYO* at this point becomes much more of a coercive ritual than an aesthetic performance, offering the audience agency in how they engage with the work and where they stand as co-producers.

Fig.9.8. The closing stadium-rock guitar solo. Screenshot from video documentation.

As *RYO* pushes towards its conclusion, this complex and dense texture becomes more and more dissonant and disorientating. From 12'25"(bar 224) to the end, the orchestral writing is increasingly cluster-orientated and distorted. Due to the sheer size of the room, the two percussionists—one playing drums under the video screen, the other with the orchestra—are unable to keep completely in time with one another. The guitar solo tends further towards noise and, as the volume of singing increases, it takes on an increasingly *poor* timbral quality. The entire assemblage sounds as unified, distorted howl, a thoroughly *geno*-singalong.

At once both together and not together, then, these final moments of *RYO* foreground the faulty scaffolding of multimedia production as both form and content. Its own failures and absences are employed not merely as compositional technique but also as expressive content and poetic allegory.

Chapter 10
Conclusion

Regretfully Yours, Ongoing very clearly problematises the possibility of a 'coming together' in a participatory diegesis. The cacophony of the ending, and the ultimately final deflation (with a dismissive "Merry Fucking Christmas"), was intended to cement an incisively ambivalent energy.

Indeed, the desire to unite the audience as the piece's dispersed protagonist is perhaps doomed to *not* be unilaterally successful; the video footage clearly shows that not everyone is participating, or even enjoying the experience. Fittingly, then, published reviews of the work were drastically divided. Robert Barry in *The WIRE* magazine responded positively to its massed collectivism:

> It was funny, it was painful, it was gloriously anti-spectacular, refusing all platitudes, and it was utterly cathartic.[274]

Conversely, a reviewer for *TEMPO* clearly saw the absence and the inattentive aspect of the work as ultimately inward looking and empty:

> The piece overall seemed eager to be a narcissistic sugar-coating, aiming purely to saturate the senses.[275]

Of course, with *RYO* it was not my intention to upset people; nonetheless, the divided responses are a strong indication, for me, that this area of practice offers much fertile ground. By pulling media apart, exposing performance as artifice, and dispersing any centralised focus or narrative, one opens up space for a richness of interpretation: an absence to be filled.

That particular absence has underpinned this whole portfolio and commentary. My practice and my research have not simply been about working across or combining multiple disciplines. What I've sought to illustrate and explore is how the act of musical performance might be seen as one point in a network of diverse, contingent, idiosyncratic, and independently rigorous performance practices, as opposed to a discrete, constituent part of a multimedia work. In my work I've become increasingly interested in how this might be rendered as a material quality. Looking closely at other artists' work from this perspective has been a useful way to think about how sound, music, image, video, and performance can operate within integrated, rich, complex webs. In the examples to which I have been drawn for thematic, aesthetic, and serendipitous reasons, this appears to be intrinsically connected to a work's very means and the artists' tools of production.

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274 Robert Barry, "LCMF 2018," *Wire*, Feb 2019, 12.

275 Stephanie Jones, "London Contemporary Music Festival 2019," *Tempo*, vol.73 (289) (2019), 66.

In my portfolio, there are almost no works made that employ conventional models of 'theatrical,' 'operatic,' or even classical compositional production, with perhaps the exception of *Live Guy Dead Guy* in certain regards. Largely the works have come into being in non-linear ways or through non-standard models of collaboration. The pieces have not been made according to the conventional divisions of labour in conventional opera or theatre productions; they have been born from overlapping, sometimes messy creative processes.

Shunning more conventional notions of 'slickness' in production, my works and those others that I've discussed embrace interdisciplinary models that keep their components somewhat *intermediated*. Thus the distance between various media disrupts and complicates the various contracts between them and place the conditions of 'live' and 'mediated' in tension. The qualities of paucity, badness, and roughness in my work may stem from the shoestring budgets of many of my projects; but, as this commentary has begun to illuminate, the reclaiming of corpse-like aesthetics can serve as a powerful tool in exposing, foregrounding, and reclaiming these conditions as desirable.

The four themes outlined in my preface—production, the audiovisual contract, aesthetic 'poorness,' and the divide between live and mediatised performance—might be seen as my own personal absences. They sit at the heart of the work; but they also exist as vacuums—sucking in other disciplines, as well as artistic and critical languages, that help to describe as well as to develop them. They are, then, productive terms from which to build a view of my practice and the broader, complex field of practices within which I operate. It is thus my hope and intention that approaching multimedia composition in this way will invite learning from and collaboration with other disciplines and methodologies, allowing experimental music theatre and broader compositional practices to resonate with an expanded-field of ideas, spaces, contexts, and audiences.

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