

IM-OS

Improvised Music – Open Scores

Issue 14, Winter 2025

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ISSN 2596-9080 (paper)
ISSN 2596-9099 (online)

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Proposals from readers are invited

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EDITORIAL

There can be an awkwardness in taking on the role of editor of an already established journal, especially one that is on its 13th issue and has an international community of talented and creative people engaging with it.

A realisation I had that broke me free from the tabula rasa anxiety I was experiencing was that a transcription of a conversation I recorded between Carl and I in 2014 could be a fruitful starting point for my first issue as the new editor, as it provides a snapshot of the wonderfully philosophically diverse and thought provoking conversations Carl and I have had of many years about open scores and about all things related to improvisation. This issue is also an opportunity to give tribute to Janet Boulton, an English painter who unfortunately passed away earlier this year and who I worked with extensively in the last few years of her life as she explored how graphic scores could enable her to learn about music and sound through her visual artistic practice.

Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to thank Carl for all the work he has put into making this journal what it is and for providing such a plethora of thought provoking materials within its pages. I feel hugely grateful to have had Carl's support through my PhD and beyond and he is someone I am proud to call a friend as well as a hugely respected colleague. I am very much looking forward to working with him in the years ahead.

JS

Curious about Joe Scarffe's PhD? Please go back to issue 9, p.21.

CBN

Simple music - Nikolaus Gerszewski

INSTRUCTIONS

The material of this piece can be organized and interpreted in many different ways; the piece can be performed by any number of players; musical skill is not required.

Play signs from the map in indeterminate succession; you do not have to play all signs in a performance; you may organize the material serially (play always the same sequence of signs), or choose signs arbitrarily; never play a sign twice in sequence.

Play each sign continuously; determine a duration-latitude (e.g. 10-60 sec. or 5-30 sec.); durations should vary from entry to entry (within the latitude); between two signs always pause for at least the shortest determined duration value (e.g. 10 or 5 sec.); when performing with a large ensemble, pause for the equal amount of time playing; skilled musicians may agree upon shorter sequences (e.g. 1-3 sec.); players may also determine the latitude individually each; for wind instruments duration is limited to breathing space (play always in one breath).

When repeating a sign, you may decide to produce always exactly the same sound, or each time a different sound (regarding pitch, timbre, sound source etc.); players may agree upon choosing particular signs as meeting points (play those signs simultaneously).

The duration of the performance should be agreed upon in advance; the piece starts with players entering one by one, and ends with players exiting one by one, always in sequences corresponding to the duration-latitude (e.g. if the duration of the piece is agreed upon by 20 minutes and the latitude by 10-60 seconds, all players must exit somewhere between minutes 19 and 20, in any case before 20).

The piece can be performed on musical instruments, on toy instruments or on any objects that resonate.

Hamburg, 27th July 2010, for Maki Takano



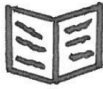
morse code: play short and long notes in irregular sequence; execute on a percussion-instrument (or object; do not use a pitched instrument).



mouth-harp: either play a chord, or just one note; either draw or blow (do not change the notes during an entry).



brush: on a drumskin or on any other surface; use hard bristles (e.g.: shoebrush)



read: from a book or newspaper; in any available language.



small bell: can be substituted by a woodclacker or the like.



bubble: with a staw in a glass of water.



melody: sing, whistle or play on an instrument any tune from memory, or invent one.



loop: short motive (*ostinato*), repeat either literally, or modify (gradually change proportions: durations, dynamics, timbres; do not change pitches or soundsources).



move chair: push chair across floor (chair can be substituted by any piece of furniture or other object; if floor is carpeted, push an object across a tabletop)



tube: breathe, humm, growl or produce any other vocal sound through a tube (cardboard-tube).



radio: turn the dial of a shortwave receiver; play with distortions; optionally tune fine when receiving music.



shaker: can, box or jar, insert peas, nails, gravel etc..



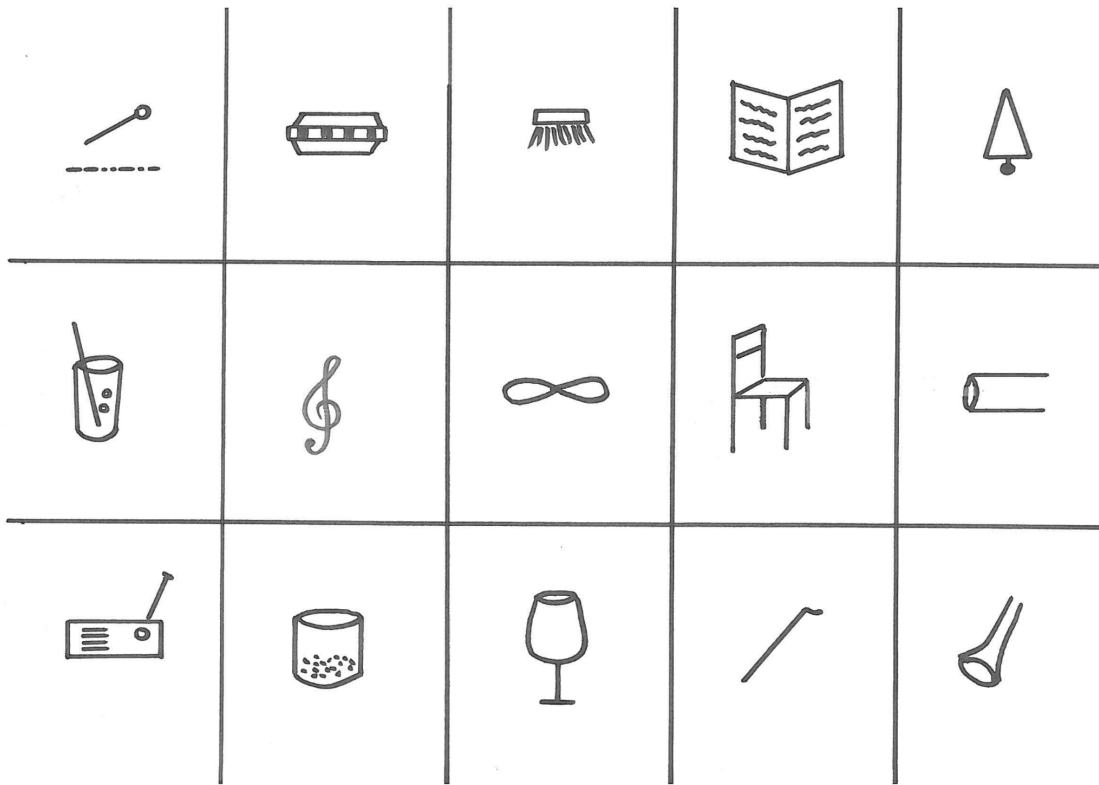
wineglass: either stroke rim with fingertip (*harmonic*), or produce a continuous clinking, with two glasses together.



bow: any object that resonates: e.g. a piece of metal, cardboard or styrofoam (optionally a string instrument: play a holding tone, a two voiced chord, or a slide).



horn: play a holding tone on any simple wind instrument (e.g. toy instrument).



In Memoriam Janet Boulton (1936-2024)

by Joe Scarffe

Janet Boulton was a renowned English painter primarily known for her finely detailed watercolour still lifes, undertook an intriguing venture, late in life, into the realm of music through the creation of a series of graphic scores, she called 'Eye Music'. Despite her lack of formal musical training, Boulton's work in visual art brought her into a unique dialogue with music by creating pieces that serve as a means for her to explore the abstract, rhythmical, and structural dimensions of music while remaining within the boundaries of visual art. Her "Eye Music" series challenges traditional distinctions between art forms, demonstrating her deep interest in synthesizing abstract musical ideas with concrete visual elements.

Boulton expresses a candid and philosophical stance toward criticism and interpretation of her scores by musicians, a notable feature of her creative outlook. She accepts, with remarkable openness, that each viewer's or musician's interpretation of her work is beyond her control. When asked if she ever gave feedback on performances of her graphic scores, she replied "no, I don't think I am entitled to do that, because if anyone chooses to respond to what I have done then that is their affair... If they think it's a crap painting then that is what they think. I am defenceless and don't want to defend my work." Central to her artistic ideology was a responsibility to remain open to critique, inviting both admiration and challenge without attachment or need for defence.

Boulton's practice, especially in the Watercolour variants of the Eye Music series, often reflects a kind of dialogue between the artist's initial intention and the artwork's "response," a dynamic she explains as a "decisive moment." She states, "There is always a stage of the painting when the painting starts telling you what to do... there is a kind of little fight that goes on about what you thought you were going to do and what you are being told you can't do." Her description of painting as a negotiation with the medium highlights her respect for the inherent qualities of watercolour, which she views as particularly "unforgiving." This dynamic adds a layer of complexity when she combines abstract ideas, like music, with the concrete elements of still life, balancing representational forms (like glass jars or gardens) with purely abstract forms that represent musical notation. This balancing act between abstraction and realism situates her work in a complex spatial interplay, one that Boulton herself recognizes as "trouble with regards to space"—a quality that she found both challenging and deeply fascinating.

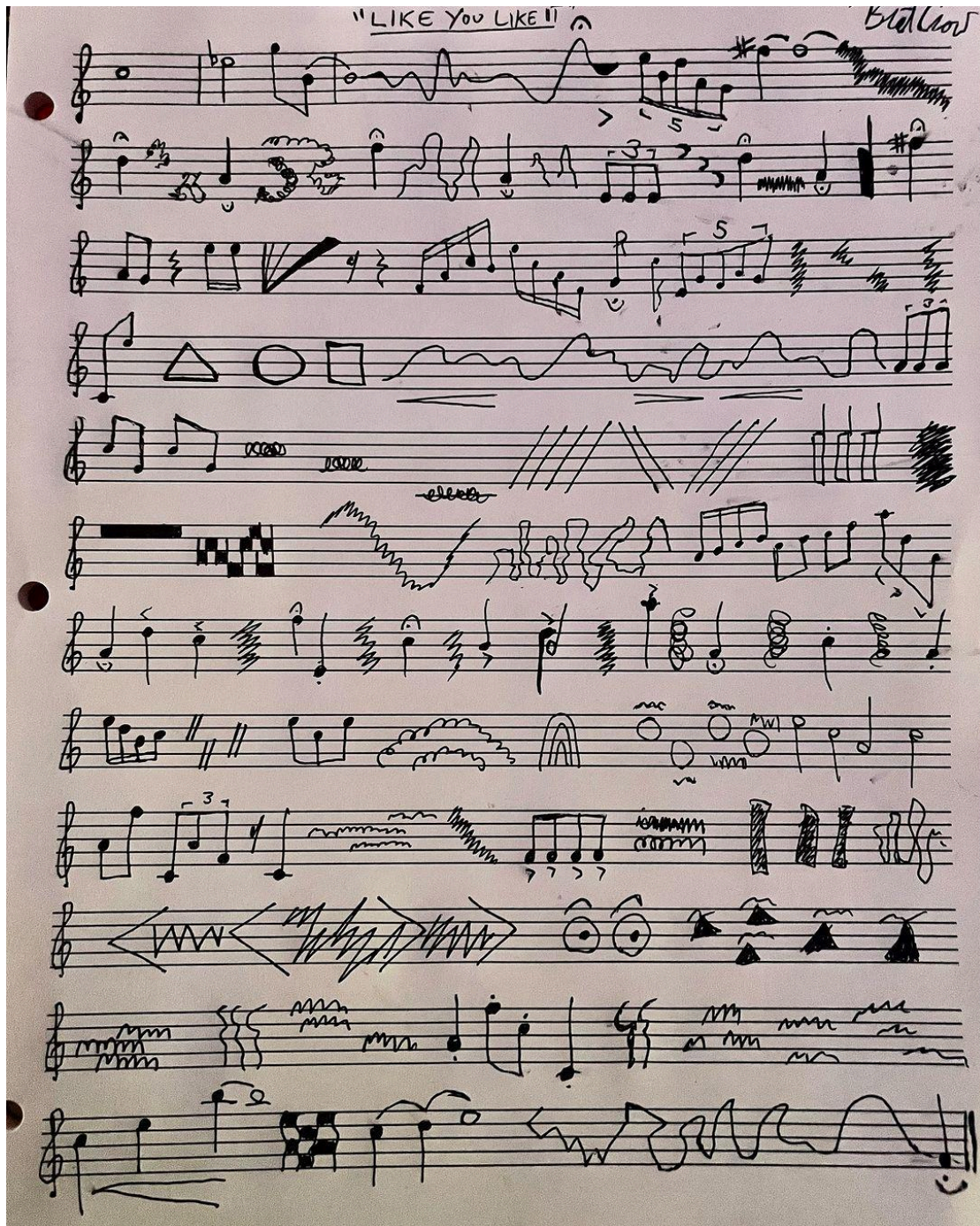
The interdisciplinary nature of her work comes alive particularly in her interactions with musicians, who, upon viewing her graphic scores, interpret them audibly. A pivotal moment in her journey came when the composer Simon Walley engaged with her work in ways that astonished her: he would “start to sing the stuff, humming it,” demonstrating an immediate and intuitive musical response to her visual composition. Boulton describes this as an illuminating experience, a “huge learning curve” that revealed the potential of her visual art to resonate in the auditory domain. She reflects on this development with humility, acknowledging that “I am learning, I definitely am learning, and that’s wonderful.”

In her graphic scores, Boulton creates a visual space where music and painting converge, transforming her artwork into an interdisciplinary bridge that invites a multiplicity of responses from both visual artists and musicians. Her work presents an innovative synthesis of visual and auditory abstraction, a rare attempt to fuse the temporality of music with the spatiality of painting. Through her “Eye Music” series, Boulton suggests that one need not be a musician to explore musical ideas profoundly. Her willingness to embrace the inherent uncertainty of this process underscores her work as an ongoing search—a deliberate merging of disciplines that seeks, above all, to invite exploration and interpretation.



6 million views for a graphic score

Bret Crow is a US-Based professional composer and bass guitarist. In February 2024 he posted on TikTok asking for people to perform his graphic score 'Like You Like It' and had an astonishing 6 million views and hundreds of people submitted their recordings of performances of the score. All the performances are available on TikTok via Brett's channel at thebretcrowshow or by searching 'Like You Like It' on TikTok.



'Little Bangs' - A Conversation Between Joe Scarffe and Carl Bergstroem-Nielsen (Summer of 2014)

UNIVERSE AND MULTIVERSE

JS: The first thing I want to talk to you about is this idea of universes and perhaps multi-verse that are created in the cognitive experience between different musicians. Rzewsky talks about this idea of constant cognitive universes appearing between musicians which are like bubbles and they burst and then another idea emerges, which then fades away... And they are constantly being blown up between you.

CBN: And those are the "Little Bangs". In this way it is a good article, but it is not just like that.

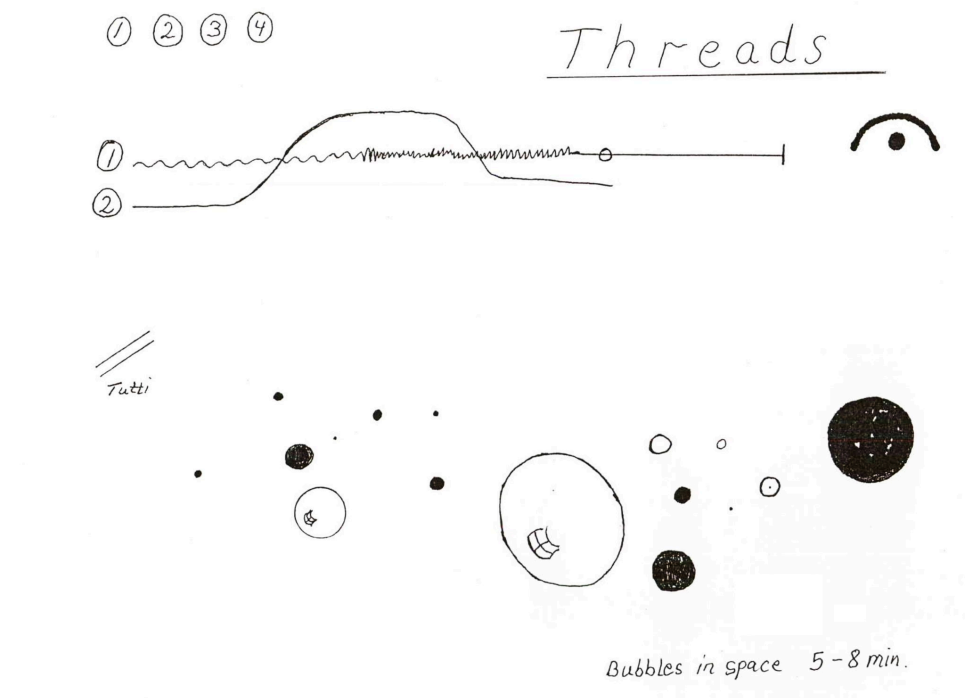
JS: No, and something I wanted to ask you about is, for you, the concreteness of these cognitive universes. Peter Werth manages all of the cognitive linguistic worlds that exist in life.

CBN: The receiver or the creator's cognitive world?

JS: Both. Because the person creating the text wants to create a certain composite world and the receiver receives this composite world and they want them to match as closely as possible. And I wonder, when you are both improvising and interpreting graphics of various kinds, how strong is this cognitive image of what's going on, in your mind? Is there something very concrete in the way you play, do you imagine certain characters or involvement, or do you see it purely as sounds, timbre?

CBN: I don't think I translate much into theatre, with roles and people and characters. When I'm interpreting graphic scores, I think of structure, I think of sound, I think of time. I like being in the sound.

JS: Does that position of being in the sound not have its own agency? If we take the Rasmussen piece 'Threads', the bubbles are characters that have movement, they have personality. Do you picture bubbles bursting when you see those, or do you disassociate the imagined world and just focus on what bubbles might sound like?



From Henrik Ehland Rasmussen: *Threads* (1997)

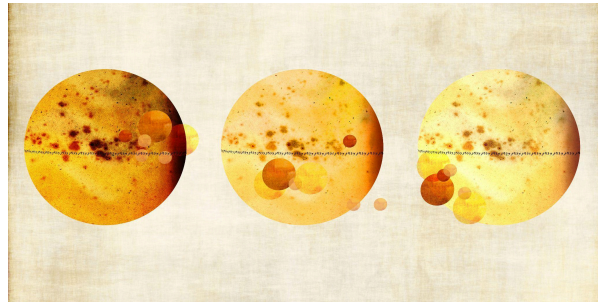
CBN: Whether I picture the bubbles very directly, or whether I detach myself and go to the notion of the sound?

JS: Exactly.

INTERPRETING BUBBLES AND CIRCLES

CBN: Yesterday, I kept looking at the bubbles and tried to play what was there in a loyal way, but also to extend it. I was having a very slight conflict... I was thinking "there are some long notes that are nice here but I can't do too many really long notes, because there are not so many of those very light big bubbles, so I have to have a fair number of short notes of a different kind. Maybe it's the same as what I write in "Towards an Unbearable Lightness" : Keep interpreting the graphic symbols. I could imagine that this is very much my way.

JS: Right, so when we were performing Theresa's Circle Pieces, you mentioned in the masterclass that there is this sense of space and subliminal feeling, a sense of awe at the grandness and majesty of space. Was that a purely philosophical approach, or did you actually have a very concrete imagined narrative?



Theresa Sauer: Gold Circles from Circle Series (2011)

CBN: I think I had something concrete. This notion of the universe is not so foreign to music, it is encountered in many places, from very old music to Stockhausen and the text pieces. I've also worked very concretely with that. There's a whole little literature about that. I think there was someone else looking at it in the same way that I do, saying that you must play what is there in the notes, but in your own way, but I can't remember who said that.

JS: You must play the notes in your own way?

CBN: Yes, you must play what is there in graphic notation, don't play anything. You must play what's there. Yes, a bit humorously, like traditionally, but then again it's not at all traditional as interpretation is a very personal point. Okay, this seems to be my way but I'm aware, not least for music therapy, that you can choose the focus for your attention differently. For music therapy improvisations, the aim is not so much to aim at aesthetically satisfying and beautiful music but to explore important personal issues. That's the classic Mary Priestly way, rather than the Nordoff Robbins way. For the Priestly way, it involves grown ups who are capable of reflecting and talking about what is going inside them etc. But this focussing on rather emotional and personal matters is different.

JS: Yes, I would hate for my thesis to come across as a guide for how to experience graphics. I rather wanted to give examples of other people's interactions.

CBN: Yes, and I think what I describe here is not the only possible view. You can have different views of the freedom of graphic notation. It's such a broad field. I hope it's obvious for many of my pieces that I want this and this and it's a framework and this and this way and I suppose it's the same for Rasmussen too. But if we just give a graphic piece with no explanation, then we can't blame those playing it for having their own way, and they will have.

JS: Of course, yes, and that's an exciting conflict, how much instruction to provide.

CBN: It may not be a conflict, if it's open then it's open.

JS: Oh yes, but the amount of text a composer should put into the score is an interesting conflict.

CBN: It may be a conflict for the composer. It's a choice to be made. You do what you do.

JS: Yes, that's true. And I suppose that's what I wanted to talk about in terms of improvisation. But also the distinction that can be made between that and interpreting graphic scores, because, as Rzewski talks about, there is this idea supported by many composers, that improvisation doesn't allow you any reflection time. There is this famous anecdote that Rzewski talks about...

CBN: It's limited, yes.

JS: Yes, where Steve Lacey says that in composition you have all the time you want to think about what to do in 15 seconds, whereas in improvisation you only have 15 seconds.

CBN: Yes but I think that an important point is that 15 seconds is also a lot and thoughts and choices do occur. I also make free improvisation, so I know that there are many ways to do open Music, and I love free improvisation too.

MAKING CHOICES WITHIN A TIME FRAME

JS: What do you think about the term 'free' in that sense? Rzewski suggests that it's no more free than making a pot of coffee.

CBN: No, but you have a free time compared to whatever... But I just take it pragmatically, the label functions, I think. I know we could apply philosophy to it, but I don't usually. I'm not against philosophy not at all, but I think these mental processes are very interesting to look at. We have choices. This is not at all some amorphous thing. On the contrary, our brain is very active, and it's true that is very much about being in the moment and it's interesting how Stockhausen puts a sharp focus on exactly this process that there are choices and there are shifts inside us when we improvise. In this piece "Es", he puts "As soon as you start to think, stop playing", and that means of course you think and of course you stop playing from time to time. My old group did practice this piece in front of Stockhausen in the old days, and he emphasised that there is nothing wrong with leaving pauses and

thinking, of course you do. Of course we do that. And then I might think, "okay now I'm critical", now I think about what I did, taken an instrument, could I do something different on the horn, oh what's going on now, Oh what's going on now, there is this reflecting and there is this noticing what is there in the moment. Pauline Oliveros loves this word, observe, so much. Observe what happens. Observe the sound. Maybe that's a nice word. We should observe what happens and be present in the moment. It's funny, it's essential, it's captivating, the moment, a part of it too. It's certainly not just thinking and choosing that is maybe reduced in contrast to writing articles and PhD's and whatever. Playing music is more playful, maybe the form is a bit bounded and disciplined as interpreting a graphic section of a Rasmussen piece, or what disciplined as in interpreting this piece by Stockhausen, where you constantly endeavour to stop thinking and feel and be very in the present.

JS: That's interesting, because my research is all about deciphering this observance.

CBN: Oh! Yes, yes! Whether you are freely improvising and you have all the liberty in the world, to be completely at liberty with what you do.

JS: Not so much that, I don't think, as that comes with a whole host of philosophy and politics, I think.

CBN: But anyway let's say pragmatically, I might meet with some people that I have never seen before and we think it's very interesting to meet, it is very interesting to be together and improvise without any rules. That's a very normal thing for improvisers to do. So we sit down, probably there is some joyful expectation. Probably then we make sound, we listen to it and we can choose our attitude freely. I hope we have fun, I hope something meaningful happens. And more times than being frustrated, it's meaningful. I think that's why I like to do it again, it's often meaningful to go into that and not having told each other what we have to do. I have to accept that the others might make strange things.

NAVIGATING THROUGH PLAYING AND THROUGH LIFE

JS: Yes, and I think what I am interested in, as part of that experience, is how the brain is dealing with these tasks. Particularly Daniel Kahneman's division between fast and slow thinking which forms the basis of many Stuart Smith's compositions. Interesting that so many other musicologists and critics talk about this in other terminology other than fast and slow thinking

CBN: Oh, they don't really understand these processes. But the American improviser Ed Sarath does, in his very important and wonderful article "A New look at

improvisation".

JS: Oh right, I will make sure that I take a look at it. I find it fascinating how answering a question such as $2+2$ is for everyone split second and intuitive, whereas working out 17×54 will take them a while due to the extent of the cognitive load. Yet, for some very able mathematicians, 17×54 is something they can work out in a split second. It seems so counterintuitive!

CBN: And maybe some musicians have astonishing abilities in their specialisations.

JS: Yes, exactly. Something else that I wanted to speak about is something else that Rzewski talks about (although he is not the first or the only one, as it was first discussed in detail by Pascal) is the Paradise of the present moment.

CBN: Yes, this is an old wisdom and of course it's true. Fritz Perls very beautifully propagated that. I have a very funny example that demonstrates this teaching very well. I was standing in front of some students and was saying that we have our senses and they inform us about the present, we also have our emotions and they inform us about where we are right now, then we have models of the world which are intellectual constructions and they are maps that we carry around with us. I used the example that I know that there is a wall dividing Berlin, although I can't see it right now. And then somebody said "yes and this wall was taken down yesterday". I did not know this news of the wall had been taken down, and so my mental map had not been updated yet. So I thought I knew there was a wall which no longer existed,

JS: Yes, therefore navigating through life is navigating a terrain. And what fascinates me about that terrain, in improvisation, is how that terrain constantly undulates and there are new discoveries within that terrain all the time. When I am having these, my intuitive response was more creative than my later composed thought, because I have introduced a pressure and a framing, so I am divorced from the moment because I am living in the past remembering the preparation session, and not responding to the current environment. But agreements and rehearsal also belong to life. There was one improviser who said that life needs a reasonable mixture between spontaneity and planning.

JS: I was thinking this morning about Rzewski's comment about "Nobody ever reads a recipe to make a coffee".

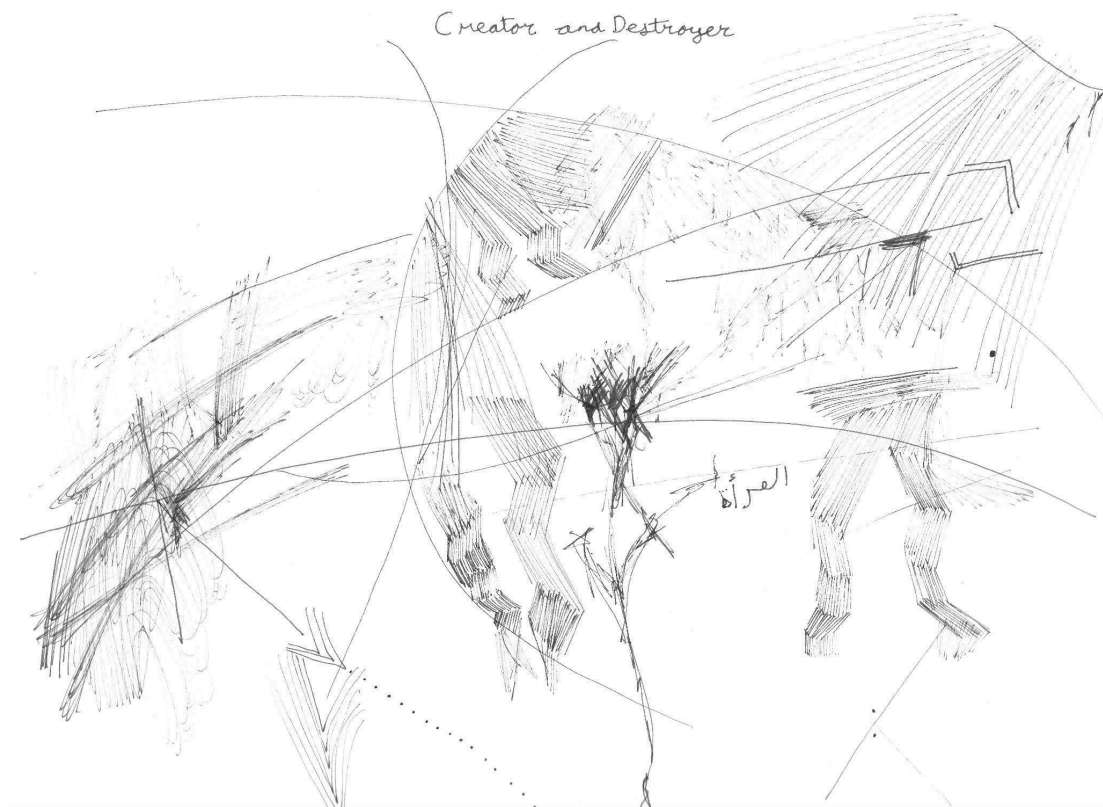
CBN: He also mentions elsewhere that art dissolves into life.

Transcribed by JS

Creator and Destroyer - Muyassar Kurdi

Muyassar Kurdi is a Palestinian-American New York City-based interdisciplinary artist. Her work encompasses sound art, extended vocal technique, performance art, movement, painting, analog photography, and film. Her practice honors the futuristic and ancient through meditative movements and sonic sound explorations. Centered on embodiment with a non-linear approach rooted in improvisation, she explores memory, displacement, and the body in relation to nature.

Performed as part of A Daughter of Isis at Roulette Intermedium with Camilo Angeles and Chris Williams (flute, trumpet, electronics, extended piano technique, voice), 2023



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