

# EXTENDING NOTATION THROUGH EMBODIED RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

Through engagement with embodied research, I challenge the use of notation as part of the ‘paradigm of reproduction’ [1] in which notation plays a central role in the musical work concept. In my work, I propose new collaborative methods which place an accent on performers’ response and embodied memory, thus I anchor the idea of a work with collaborators of my projects in addition to any other methods of mediation such as a notated score. In this paper, I would like to discuss two of my latest works, *On Fragments* and *Motion Studies*, which rely on performers’ embodied memory in order to execute the works.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

My concern for composition with the performers’ physical gestures and embodiment came from my work with live electronics, where I started to embrace collaboration. The need for feedback on how the technology was working led to back-and-forth exchanges which led to further collaboration. Thus, I understood that composing with gestural controllers could introduce openness within a musical structure where performer’s improvised movement contributed to the compositional process. In this process, producing new gestures takes place through embodiment. For me, embodiment is a technique of playing an instrument or a character, and as a practice where new instances of embodiment are generated through cross modal associations from performer’s interpretation of audio or video documents. I call such instances of new knowledge imaginary gestures. The latter definition of embodiment relates directly to Ben Spatz’s in *What a Body Can Do* [2], where one treats technique that anyone’s body acquires as knowledge and practice as research that one engages with in order to gain insight into new embodied knowledge.

Traditionally, once the work is created, it assumes ideals related to the conditions of its reproduction and presentation. In *Beyond the Score* the musicologist Nicolas Cook terms this the ‘paradigm of reproduction’. In this model, music is communicated through written notation and the

performers mediate the composer’s ideas to listeners who are expecting an adequate reproduction of the score in which the composer’s intentions are located [1]. Through embodied research, my work assumes a different ontology to that of traditional chamber music because of its involvement with extensive collaboration, the search for new approaches outside such paradigm and the different possibilities for presenting work as part of the concert performance ritual. Here, I present a couple of my works which challenge the notion of score as part of the musical work concept.

## 2. TWO WORKS

### 2.1. On Fragments

In *On Fragments*, I treat the score like a script with performance instructions rather than a document of authority. I devised the score with nine scenes indicating changing setup configurations, and instructions for playing and movement. In *On Fragments*, I introduce sections which are based on field recordings from construction sites in a southwestern neighbourhood of Montreal. In the collaborative process, I asked the saxophone players from the Quasar saxophone quartet to imitate these field recordings both sonically on saxophones and physically with movements of their bodies. Later, I used their interpretation of the field recordings both as audio and gestural material to be included in different open scenes of the score which follow on from the notated sections. The embodied field recording sections would be different if the field recordings were interpreted by a different saxophone quartet because both sonic and gestural material would be based on responses from different musicians. Moreover, the final section of the piece is graphically notated and gives players the freedom to replace it with their own improvisation in response to the piece. The graphic score gives suggestions in terms of interacting in a quartet format between players, the field recordings used in the piece and the processing effects included in the electronic patch of the piece.

Initially, I was interested to see how saxophone players could reproduce field recording sounds and orchestrate them within the ensemble. Thus, the idea of self-organisation is present at the level of interpretation of the original recorded material. Since field recordings of construction work, sounds of industrial fans and trains are non-idiomatic to saxophone playing, it was fascinating to hear their

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reproduction on saxophones. After receiving the recordings, I decided at first to work with them as transcriptions. However, I later realised that essentially the players became embodied carriers of these sounds, thus, I could also compose directly by asking them to reproduce their interpretation of certain recordings in some places in the score.

Altogether, I sent Quasar nine recordings from different locations in Griffintown. In my research into imaginary gestures and embodiment of sounds, I was interested in the poetic physical responses to abstract sounds for the varied visual possibilities of composing with them. Thus, it was important to present the players with both complex and simpler sounds which could be embodied. For this reason, two of the recordings were processed through a max patch with an FFT filter where the amplitudes of certain bands were exaggerated, so that regular fan sounds became hybrid sound versions of industrial turbines (video documentation 5:45–6:15 and 7:01–7:27) [4]. For tracks 1, 2, 4, 6, 7 and 8, I asked the players to react physically by embodying the kind of movements that they imagined were associated with different tracks without playing their saxophones. I also asked them not to imitate each other and to avoid similarity between themselves. For tracks 3, 5, 9, I asked them to choose one movement that they could all agree on to perform together. The aspect of self-organisation here also helped with the overall ethos of the piece where I was leading the performers to contribute to compositional process without me telling them exactly how to execute each step. As the piece was collaborated on over distance (myself in the UK and Quasar in Montreal), I wanted the gestural response to be as natural as possible for the players without my external involvement in rehearsals.

The possibility for varied responses from different performers to sound samples of abstract or simple quality seemed an especially interesting way to generate varied responses as compositional material. Above all, the movements, however abstract or direct, added many different layers of interpretation to each recording. They became compositional material and part of the extra-musical content in the piece. I developed the piece by layering composed sections, original field recordings, their physical and sonic embodiment, and text about the state of labour economy from Paul Mason's *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*.

As seen in *On Fragments*, most of my works are incomplete when delineated through the musical notation only because they are composed through collaboration with performers where embodied sound and movement is retained in the memory of the performers, and act as living scores [3]. In those cases where the score is to be performed by a different performer, there are also additional forms of mediation that will need to be carried out, such as a new performer creating their own responses to audio or video. In addition, I do not have a single ideal reproduction because some of my works are ephemeral, based on specific performers and situations.

## 2.2. Motion Studies

In my work, new instances of embodied response can be constantly generated in an open interdisciplinary collaboration. My previous research on imaginary gestures, in which embodied movement was derived from listening and reacting to different sound files with musicians of the Quasar Saxophone Quartet [4], served as an impetus for the new research in combination with theatre researchers for whom embodiment as theatrical practice comes from a post-Grotowski lineage of physical theatre.

In the lab sessions, we were two musicians and two actors focusing on how practitioners from both disciplines respond, influence and react to each other's sound and movement in space. Throughout the lab sessions we looked at the possibility of recalling initially improvised movements and sounds in order to generate new instances of an open score work. Eventually, each participant's embodied knowledge in combination with embodied memory of the movements learned in the lab-sessions became the embodied score of *Motion Studies* [5].

In *Motion Studies*, we chose the initial structure to be an open session, like in the post-Grotowski practice where the emphasis is on embodied research as part of a lab environment [6]. It is relevant to notice that the theatre researchers helped in the dislocation of discipline-specific boundaries, since their embodied movement techniques and practices were spilling into the workflow of the lab sessions and extending the boundaries of the open musical work. On the other hand, the musicians' instrumental improvisations were influencing theatre participants' vocal response because the melodic and textural materials of sound were becoming sonically embodied and were open to change during the performance. In addition, the musicians, Colin Frank and myself, were open to a lot of different types of improvisation because of our previous background in musical improvisation and in interdisciplinary collaborations: thus moving and improvising also with our bodies seemed natural and normal.

The new instances of embodiment that we learned in the lab sessions were discovered through improvisation in pairs. This led to an easily repeatable technique where one member of the pair leads the other through sound (leading movement) or through movement (leading sound). Three main instances of repeatable movement and sound combinations emerged:

- Linear movement: accompanied by percussive sounds with linear square-like movements in space where pairings of performers are initially observed ([Excerpt 1](#))
- Stretched out vocal section with high leaps, accompanied by slow movement, and where cymbal is usually used somewhere in the performance space ([Excerpt 2](#))
- Circular movements: which could be carried out in pairs in which members alternate

leadership roles between pairs where sound leads movement and vice versa ([Excerpt 3](#))

A useful tool in our lab sessions became video documentation with a camera in a fixed position where it became a supplement for reflection and further composition. Another useful tool was reflection on the phenomenological presence of oneself during the improvisation in discussion with the other participants, during which we recorded our affects and feelings and analysed the relationships between each other during the improvisation to uncover which sensations and affects were important and interesting to explore further. Thus, we shared our reflections on each other's actions within the group and how we perceived they affected our sound and movement. The technical language in these exchanges became less important than the language concerning our personal multi-sensory experiences in relation to each other.

Our interdisciplinary improvisation became a ground for knowledge exchange amongst the group to do with spatial awareness, movement and sound composition in real time. This knowledge started to spill from one discipline to another as our responses became quickly entangled. Thinking about the philosophical implications of our lab sessions helped to ground our embodied actions within a larger structure of aesthetic considerations to do with the performance aspect of the work. Conceptually, thinking in terms of Deleuze's 'packets of sensation' as a boundary object of the open score work helped:

Percepts aren't perceptions. They're packets of sensations and relations that live independently of whoever experiences them. Affects aren't feelings, they are becomings that spill over beyond whoever lives through them (thereby becoming someone else) ... Affects, percepts, and concepts are three inseparable forces, running from art into philosophy and from philosophy into art. [7]

Thus, 'packets of sensations' is what the repeatable embodied instances of sound and movement became in our collective work when they belonged to experimental instances of improvisation. These are not concrete knowledge but rather a phenomenological reflection for each participant on the physical and sonic actions in the moment of improvisation, what they are and what they could be in future reproductions.

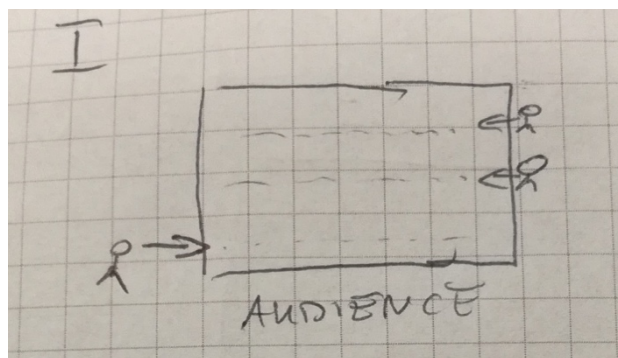
The working methods of our lab-sessions could be compared to that of devising theatre-dance companies whose works collectively reflect collaborative working methods. William Forsythe's Dance Company uses similar working methods where there is no dramaturg or a final dance score of the production. The dramaturgies of Forsythe's pieces are usually distributed among individual and shared dramaturgical practices across different spaces and times utilising boundary objects in place of a specific dance dramaturgy [8]. In *Distributed Dramaturgies: Navigating with Boundary Objects* on Forsythe's Dance Company's dramaturgical process, Vass-Rhee defines boundary objects as "objects or concepts, which, although jointly deployed by members of a community, are utilised

differently by different participants" [8]. The boundary objects in Vass-Rhee's view need to be flexible enough yet contain adequate detail to be recognised by multiple collaborators. In addition, Forsythe was known to practice dramaturgical silence in the devising process of the work. Thus, the boundary objects and his dramaturgical silence created radically open dramaturgy for both the participants and spectators where the boundary objects remained open to recognition and interpretation among different participants of the work. Similarly, "packets of sensation" which are individually experienced in different repeated embodied instances (Excerpts 1-3) of the embodied score of *Motion Studies* became our boundary objects. They contained enough variance in the interpretation by different members of the group, in addition to containing many details for their recognition between the participants.

In our work, an open embodied score based on boundary objects of "packets of sensations" [7] came first followed by conceptual responses later. These responses encompassed conceptual thinking when it came to aesthetic decisions of how to present the work again. Here, I present the lighting considerations which are based on boundary objects of our repeatable movements as demonstrated in this diagram for a performance at the REVERB series in Ormskirk. However, our conceptual aesthetic considerations could be made in reference to other features of a new performance space and not only for the lights.

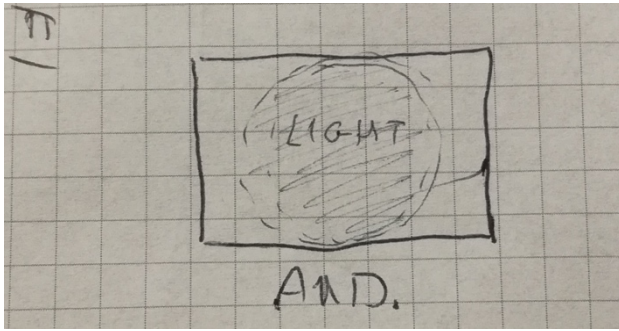
Please note, the following are not parts of a musical or dramaturgical score but rather examples of spatial and lighting considerations that could be employed in preparation for a performance.

Figure 1 shows lighting considerations for the first scene where linear movements informed a lighting scene composed of spotlights on stands projected in three straight lines from sides of the stage.



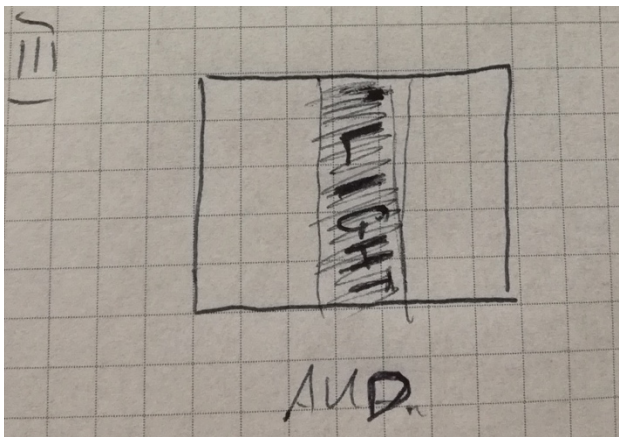
**Figure 1.** Scene I, linear movements (I. Krawczyk).

Figure 2 shows Scene II, where circular movements grow with more encounters between the pairs and slower interaction that could happen at the centre of the stage. These movements suggested spot lighting from above forming a larger circle.



**Figure 2.** Scene II, circular movements (I. Krawczyk).

Third lighting scene (Figure 3) is more experimental in our structure as it relates to the kinetic energy that our embodied interactions generate. Our interactions in the third scene were represented through high energy leaps both in sound and movement where bodies could be coming in and out of the vertical corridor of light projected from the back and front of the stage.



**Figure 3.** Scene III, vertical corridor (I. Krawczyk).

*Motion Studies* is a process-based work that develops with each performance, and one with a flexible structure, where ‘affects, percepts and concepts’ [7] can flow in and out of each other within a conceptual framework chosen regarding a new venue.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Thus, both works, *Motion Studies* and *On Fragments* confirm the retainability of embodied knowledge where performers became carriers of this knowledge in relation to each other. In these works, a score is not the only set of instructions in order for the performance to take place. *Motion Studies* is a process-based work that develops with each performance, and one with a flexible structure within a conceptual framework chosen regarding a new venue. Whereas in *On Fragments*, the saxophone players successfully retained the embodied memory of their movements proposed through collaborative research sessions. The repeatability of the movements has been retained for different performance situations as the work has been performed already several times over the period of two years.

### 4. REFERENCES

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