"What kind of music do you play?"

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Finally, I'd like to acknowledge the support of my family and friends whose patience, help and understanding have enabled me to begin and finish this thesis, especially my parents who have always been unequivocally supportive of my aspirations as a musician. Above all, my most heartfelt thanks go to my wife Sarah and our children Ambrose and Oren who have somehow managed to endure the emotional rollercoaster of living through a pandemic with someone who is attempting to complete a PhD thesis. I honestly couldn't, and wouldn't, have done it without them.

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Notes

This thesis is practice-based, in the sense that I am a practicing improviser. I view the written text of this thesis to be as much of a part of that practice as the performative, audio-visual elements included in the appendices. The critical reflections below were formed in dialogue with the performances they refer to, whilst simultaneously influencing the direction of what happened next. I have included examples of the performative aspects of my practice because of their direct links to how this text was formed. The text is not an analysis of practice rather, writing it became a part of my practice itself. Where I have included moments of musical analysis, I have done so to augment the philosophical aspects of this project rather than to support a musicological argument.

The structure of this thesis has evolved to be reflective of my music-making; it is an intersecting criss-cross of bits and scraps collected over time that shape—and are shaped by—each other. I will give reasons why I think that is the case in my introduction below. Presenting my work in this way may reveal inconsistencies of approach and tone between certain written elements, some of which were conceived and written nearly three years apart. I hope that across the course of this thesis it becomes clear why I made the decision not to revisit and rewrite those parts at a later date. As such, you are not obliged to engage with this thesis sequentially from beginning to end. My intention has been to create a series of provocations to think through which you are free to engage with however you wish, as you might do with the pages of a scrap book. This applies to both the writing and the audio-visual examples. Although I have given recommendations throughout of where to stop reading and start listening, you are free to ignore them. The lack of a written conclusion or overall summation of this research should not be taken as a frivolous rejection of academic convention, but as a reflection of my artistic practice and my desire for this thesis to be a beginning and not an end.

As I began to explore ways of writing about my music-making I was introduced to Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart's book *The Hundreds* (Berlant and Stewart, 2019). Their book is a collection of writings on various subjects—with the constraint of being written in one hundred words or multiples thereof—that uses the act of writing as a way of thinking through problems often inspired by ordinary, everyday occurrences. These themes are noted at the bottom of the relevant pages. I used this method as a part of my research, writing short pieces incorporating Berlant and Stewart's limitations to explore the relationship between the practical and written aspects of my project. Although I wrote

many more, I have chosen to include just two of these short pieces (three including my abstract) in places where I feel they resonate with the themes of the surrounding text. They are as much a part of my practice as any other element, offering moments to think through the problems I am addressing through my practice. These moments are clearly marked by a `change in font` which echoes that of Marion Brown's book *Afternoon of a Georgia Faun: View and Reviews* (M. Brown, 1973a), another significant source of inspiration for this project.

Another, more substantial influence on this thesis has been the work of Wittgenstein, in particular his *Philosophical Investigations*. As this text is referred to throughout, I have chosen to employ the convention of citing passages from it using (§) followed by the number of the paragraph to which the quote relates e.g. (§371). This decision was made to improve the readability of my text. A full citation to the version of *Philosophical Investigations* I have used can be found in the Bibliography.

Chapter 3 contains references to the post-performance discussions between the members of *stillefelt*. A digital version of the transcription of these discussions can be found in the accompanying OneDrive folder titled "Digital Appendices" as Appendix 4. The references are formatted using the initials of the person who is being quoted, the name of the document and the page number referencing where the quote can be located in the transcription e.g. (CM, Residency Discussions:54). The video extracts from *stillefelt's* live performances, the video of the piece *Alone (together)* and recordings of my solo performance on 26th March 2019 can also all be found in the same OneDrive folder.

Abstract

The question "what kind of music do you play?" stems from an ordinary, everyday conversation. It underpins this thesis in a way that highlights the ordinary, everyday aspects of the artistic practice with which it is concerned. In his later work, Wittgenstein advocated for a way of 'doing philosophy' that closely examines the details of ordinary, everyday uses of language in context to clarify their meaning. Through his *Philosophical Investigations* he encourages us to ignore the temptation to be drawn into answering metaphysical questions—a way of doing philosophy which he thought said little about human nature—and instead focus on the specific examples which cause us to feel lost. If we closely examine these moments, if we "look and see" (§66), then we can begin to address *a* (small) philosophical problem not *the* (big) philosophical problem. As we solve these small problems by thinking through individual instances in detail, we can then begin to remedy our lostness.

In this thesis I draw on Moi and Diamond's understanding of Wittgenstein's spirit of investigation to closely examine the details of my own artistic practice. The confusion caused when I attempt to answer the question "what kind of music do you play?" brings forward examples to think through, from my practice and beyond, as a means of clarifying my response. Weaving these ideas, theories and examples through one another, this thesis explores the inherent narrativity of improvised music practice as well as directly addressing its key narratives; freedom, identity, temporality and the idea that improvisers must be 'saying something' through their music-making. This thesis is *a* philosophy of improvisation, one which seeks to foreground a holistic consideration of artistic practice—a practice that includes the text of this thesis itself—and broadens our understanding of what it means to improvise music together.

[improvisation | music | narrative | Wittgenstein | time | the everyday]

Introduction 1

"I didn't realise you're a musician, is that your job?"

"Yeah, I play gigs, do a bit of teaching, some community music stuff…"

"What instrument do you play? Which one are you best at?"

"I'm a bass player." [plays 'air' bass guitar] "Mostly bass guitar. I can play double bass too, but I haven't really played it much in the last few years."

"I love the double bass, it's such a cool instrument. So, do you play in a band then?"

"I play with a lot of different people in a few different bands."

"Like a session musician?"

"Kind of. I've got a couple of bands which are sort of my projects too, a quartet and a trio. And I play solo gigs occasionally."

"Sounds good, I'll have to come and check you out some time…

What kind of music do you play?"

Introduction 2: "What kind of music do you play?"

"A philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about""

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (§123)

The question "what kind of music do you play?" is at the heart of this thesis. I've been asked this question, or variations of it, on numerous occasions by friends, fellow musicians, audience members, distant (and not-so-distant) family members, colleagues and acquaintances. I have rarely been able to give a succinct or adequate response. In previous attempts to answer I have almost certainly pointed to one or more communally recognised genres (jazz, electronic music, noise, etc.), tailoring my answer to fit my perception of what I think might be common ground between myself and my interlocutor. This may or may not be followed up with a mention of some artists commonly associated with those styles or with whom I have been fortunate enough to have worked. I will usually reference improvisation, or free improvisation, or composition, or not. I might try and describe some textural, timbral or dynamic quality of the sound, mention the instruments used and the people playing them or use venues, scenes or promoters as cultural identifiers. More often than not my answer is a fudged, bumbling combination of all of the above which inevitably leads to a swift change of subject. I am hopeful that this thesis will provide some clarity and not further muddy the waters.

My difficulty in conveying something that is so familiar to me is not, I feel, due to an apparent ineffable quality of music, my lack of experience with the subject matter or my (usually reasonably competent) ability to express myself through language. Yet, my attempts to answer this question thus far have always felt unsatisfactory, unhelpful or just plain wrong. When I ask myself the same question—motivated by a desire to better understand my practice, to better know what it is to improvise music, simply to better answer the question "what kind of music do you play?"—I find myself at a loss, I don't know my way about.

This problem extends beyond the need for sustaining conversational pleasantries. Toril Moi takes Wittgenstein to mean that "genuine philosophical work begins with one's own sense of lostness"(Moi, 2017:89). Giving her reasons for why she chooses to draw on ordinary language philosophy—principally the works of Wittgenstein, Austin and Cavell—to clarify the issues around the subjects in

which she feels a sense of lostness[1], Moi points to its rejection of established philosophical models and ways of thinking and its focus on specific cases, on how language is used ordinarily every day. "Ordinary language philosophy doesn't set out to provide a theory of anything…[t]he work of ordinary language philosophy is to help us reach a clear view of problems we find confusing" (ibid). To gain some clarity on the questions which trouble us, ordinary language philosophers ask us to look at individual examples in detail. Moi says that we should not rely on philosophical methodologies which take their inspiration from scientific investigation, an attitude which she feels has dominated the humanities since the 1970s (ibid)[2]. For Wittgenstein this idea is manifested in the belief that words are not infused with an objective, deeper meaning but that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (§43). Examining the context in which a particular word or phrase is uttered can help us to clarify our understanding of a specific concept. For example, a bandleader's mid-performance instruction to "carry on to the bridge" is clearly different from two people discussing the best route across a river. An understanding of the context, that a "bridge" can be part of a musical structure as well as a physical structure, is fundamental in clarifying how the words are being used and what they mean.

Wittgenstein's assertion that "philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it" (§124) is not meant to undermine the value of philosophy. Instead, when we feel lost and turn to philosophy to help us find our way, Wittgenstein is urging us to conduct our own investigations in the world of human action, not in metaphysical abstraction. As we come to understand—through description—how words are used in a particular context, we simultaneously come to understand something about the context in which they are uttered; "to learn a language is to acquire a world" (Moi, 2017:34). For Moi and Wittgenstein, my own sense of lostness brought about by my attempts to answer the question "what kind of music do you play?" would certainly seem like an appropriate place to begin a philosophical investigation. This isn't a case of being 'lost in music' in the romantic, caught-up-in-the-moment sense meant by Sister Sledge, or in the lack of familiarity felt when attempting to play a particular composition for the first time with a group of other musicians

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[1] In this specific example Moi is discussing feminist theory specifically in the context of a broader discussion of literary studies.

[2] See also *Manifesto of Artistic Research* (Henke *et al.*, 2020)for a similar position on the need to address artistic research projects on their own terms rather than by comparison to other existing projects, methods or theories. Specifically point 3: "Multiple misunderstandings block our perspective of what artistic research can be—in the sense of research characterized by its own form of thinking as distinguished from that of established artistic and scientific praxis". And point 4: "The potential of artistic research consists in asserting undisciplinarity, allowing for uncertainty, integrating negativity, and searching for clarity. This is considered insufficient by a rigorous understanding of science" (ibid).

who know the piece intimately ("Sorry, I got a bit lost around bar 173"). What I am referring to here is the (in)ability to offer a meaningful description of my own music-making, as alluded to in the opening paragraph. In attempting a fuller description of my practice, one which does not rely solely on its relationship to external references but draws on specific instances (uses of music) from within, I hope to give a meaningful account of improvised music-making; an example to think through when considering what it can mean to improvise music together.

Context to the context

In essence this thesis is one long contextualisation. It is a thorough investigation of my practice manifested in the descriptions provided below as well as in the supporting audio and video documentation. Throughout, I will draw on examples from other philosophers, theorists, musicologists and music practitioners in order to further enrich that context and address the specific philosophical problems raised by thinking through my practice. In the individual examples that follow, the act of defining the context establishes itself as the main focus of my task; an attempt to clarify my practice through description so as to address my feeling of lostness within it. "If Wittgenstein teaches us anything" says Moi, "he teaches us *how to think through examples*. In doing so, he shows us how to escape from the logic of representation—the logic of inclusion/exclusion—that dominates so much theory today" (Moi, 2017:88). The logic of inclusion/exclusion would certainly appear to be present when theorising about music-making or attempting to describe the characteristics of a particular musical performance or composition. In Introduction 3 I discuss the implications of this logic in relation to narrative representation and its relevance to a discussion about meaning in music. More broadly— but still within the world of music—this logic is present in the act of codifying music by genre according to the, sometimes arbitrarily agreed upon, attributes of a piece of music, a band, a recording or a performance. Consider any record shop you've ever visited, or the statement "jazz always contains improvisation, but improvisation does not always contain jazz" (Day, 1998:4) [3]. For those who defend genre binaries, acceptance often depends on imperatives such as Day's[4]. As points of reference, genre

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[3] See Chapter 4 which explores Wittgenstein's notion of our "craving for generality" of which genre definitions are surely a prime example.

[4] As well as addressing the binary assumptions of literary studies, Moi interrogates the value of gender binaries when it comes to understanding what we mean by 'woman' (Moi, 1999). Moi's essay is a comprehensive and highly nuanced account of what is a very active debate and therefore, cannot be easily summarised in a footnote alone. The relevance of referencing Moi's text here is to emphasise the importance of thinking through individual examples when trying to come to understand a concept. She asks, "What is a woman?" not to provide an exacting definition but to draw our attention to the fact that any attempt to answer this question should take into account the embodied, situated experiences of individuals.

classifications can be seen as useful shortcuts to familiarity (which perhaps indicates their ultimate purpose as a tool of marketing). They can help the continuation of an informal conversation and the sale of records but are not necessarily useful in coming to understand anything about a specific artistic practice or what it means to perform music together.

One way of escaping this logic is to look beyond the idea that specific examples of music practice must necessarily be defined in relation to the work of others[5], "after all, the only way to bring out the spirit of Wittgenstein's understanding of theory and philosophy, is through the close examination of specific cases" (Moi, 2017:88). To closely examine something in Moi's—and Wittgenstein's—terms is to approach a subject free from metaphysical distraction or obfuscation. This way of thinking allows me to offer this thorough account of my practice as *an* example of what it means to improvise without being bound to say something about all instances of improvised music practice. However, I do not wish to discuss my practice in perfect isolation, quite the opposite. Recognising my practice as being something unique is reflective of its situation, of the way that it has been shaped and influenced through a distinct combination of everyday experiences. Examining how those connections are made will become vitally important as my investigation develops. Where difference and confusions arise between this thesis and other accounts of what it means to improvise music, they should be taken as problems to think through rather than opportunities to seek ratification by a general theory or method.

Considering my own artistic practice in this way—as an example to think through—led to the development of this thesis such that writing about improvising has become an integral part of my practice. I do not mean writing about the process of improvising more generally, rather, thinking and writing through the specific events of my practice which are presented here by both the audio-visual elements and the writing itself. As my research developed, post-performance reflection through thinking and writing informed the direction of the next performance (and vice versa) in a way that inextricably links the text and the music. Therefore, this thesis should not be considered a presentation of an artistic practice with an accompanying report or analysis. Rather, the entirety of this thesis *is* my artistic practice; it is what it means to improvise music in this context. This dualistic process of writing about improvising and improvising about writing has undoubtedly been enriched by the discovery of, and connection to, other specific examples of practice or philosophy. Linking my practice to the wider conversations with which I am engaging through the act of music-making

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[5] That they must be bound by genre.

(improvisation, freedom, narrative, the use of technology[6] in live performance, the development of a community, etc.) begins to add some clarity to this investigation. This is an important part of the close examination of the context surrounding specific examples drawn from my everyday practice—inspired by Moi's reading of Wittgenstein—which will further help to make that clarification.

Contained within this thesis are references to theories and practice which I feel share an affinity with my own practice and, as such, are drawn on throughout to help establish these links and form the context, to situate my practice in a world. Wittgenstein characterises the sense of commonality we feel between the phenomena we choose to group together—he takes the example of 'games'— as "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" (§66). The individuals contained within these groups are like members of a family, similar but not the same, with no single overarching link between them all. In justifying his terminology, he says:

> "I can think of no better expression to characterise these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. And I shall say 'games' form a family." (§67)

For Wittgenstein, our recognition of similarities between groups of things, ideas, actions etc., and the act of grouping them together through the way we describe them, is dependent on our experience of those phenomena and our observations that they share certain traits with other 'family members'. If we examine each individual case, if we "look and see", we will realise that there is not one common element which all family members share, but a series of interlinking similarities and relationships (see §66). Wittgenstein asks us to consider the links between a variety of games including Olympic games, card games and a game of ring-a-ring-a-roses. Whilst they are clearly quite different examples of the use of the word 'game', with no one thing in common, we still class all these activities as 'games'[7].

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[6] In this instance I take technology to mean digital technology, such as laptops, software and other sound processors. I would also include guitar effects pedals—often a combination of digital and analogue electronics—to be part of my definition of 'technology' in this context. Clearly, 'technology' could encompass a much wider spectrum in relation to music practice, specifically the instrument I play the bass guitar—see, for example, *Technology and the Stylistic Evolution of the Jazz Bass* (Dowdall, 2019). In order to maintain the focus of my thesis I wish to limit this scope so that references to technology are akin to the general understanding of what constitutes 'music technology' in a contemporary setting, particularly since the advent of powerful, portable computers.

[7] Cavell believes that "all that the idea of "family resemblances" is meant to do, or need do, is to make us dissatisfied with the idea of universals as explanations of language…and, more importantly, see that concepts do not usually have, and do not need "rigid limits", so that universals are neither necessary nor even useful in explaining how words and concepts apply to different things" (Crary and Read, 2000:35).

Wittgenstein's main concern in *Philosophical Investigations* is clearly with language and the idea that we need not turn to metaphysical philosophical methods when we examine the details of how language is used in specific instances. By thinking through how we use the word 'game' and the contexts in which we use it we can come to understand something about what 'games' are. If we *look and see*, we will recognise that 'game' means something different in the context of 'video games' than it does in, for example, 'war games' and that this process enriches our understanding of what a 'game' can be, what it means to play a game. For Wittgenstein, there are no essential qualities of the word 'game' which give it its meaning in all circumstances, no deep meanings which are revealed to us only through philosophical enquiry, simply the meaning of the word in use. Although Wittgenstein is investigating the use of language, the spirit of his investigation need not be limited to linguistics alone, opening up the possibility of harnessing that spirit in an investigation into music practice[8]. Wittgenstein himself makes more than one analogy with music in *Philosophical Investigations*: "speech with and without thought is to be compared with the playing of a piece of music with and without thought" (§341), "Understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think" (§527), "We speak of a sentence…in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.)" (§531). Following this Wittgensteinian thread of familial resemblances between language and music and exploring how the spirit of his investigation can be used as a way of examining an artistic practice raises another problem to think through, one which underpins this thesis.

Conducting an investigation in a Wittgensteinian manner also invites the criticisms levelled at Wittgenstein. One major criticism of his position is that Wittgenstein's account is only interested in the generalities of the technical, communicative aspects of ordinary language and therefore it is not useful in addressing the Big Questions of philosophical thought. This assumption appears to be behind the motivation of art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto when he questions what purpose the work of ordinary language philosophy in general, and Wittgenstein in particular, can serve beyond investigating how we use words. Below is an excerpt from an interview with Danto titled *Art and Analysis* which appeared in the Jul/Aug 1998 issue of the journal *Radical Philosophy.* As the interviewer steers the conversation toward ordinary language philosophy Danto refers to Wittgenstein, paraphrasing a line—taken to be about intent—from *Philosophical Investigations.*

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[8] See Cora Diamond below.

"Take the passage in the *Investigations* where Wittgenstein asks 'What remains over from the fact that I raise my arm, when I subtract the fact that my arm goes up?' It's not a bad way to think about art. What remains when I subtract from the fact that it's a work of art, the fact that it's an object, when the object could look exactly like something which is not a work of art? A work of art is an object plus x, an object is a work of art minus x, and the task of philosophy is to solve for x. You're not going to make much headway in solving this by asking 'What would we say when?' That was the great weakness of ordinary language philosophy, though it's true that you can write philosophy in ordinary language, unless you're doing logic." (Osborne, 1998:40)

Danto takes Wittgenstein's question to be literal, a demand for a philosophical explanation. He assumes that Wittgenstein is pointing to something missing, something hidden and asking for philosophy to reveal it through a Cartesian explanation; to define where the act of will that causes our arm to move is located. Danto wonders how ordinary language philosophy can solve this problem whereas Wittgenstein is suggesting that such a metaphysical approach to philosophical investigation is meaningless[9]. Danto misses what Wittgenstein is really drawing our attention to: "In asking: 'what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?' (*PI* §621) Wittgenstein is bringing out how tempting it is to think of voluntariness as a psychological occurrence that needs to be present on top of the physical movements involved in an action" (Schroeder, 2010:554)[10]. Danto falls for this temptation when he asks that philosophy "solve for x", and imagines that "x" is part of neither object nor art. His craving for a general formula to explain what he perceives to be the quality of otherness that separates artworks from objects reveals his search for an answer to a Big Question, namely "what is art?" This is a question that Danto feels ordinary language philosophy is incapable of solving.

Wittgenstein thought that we cannot come to understand anything about what we mean by "art"— or intention—by attempting to create an all-encompassing theory, by trying to answer a Big Question. There can be a temptation to think that philosophy can provide us with an answer which lies outside of our everyday experience at a level of metaphysical abstraction. Wittgenstein says that we are wrong to think that philosophy can help us to quench our thirst for hidden meanings by ignoring the way we

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[9] See (Moi, 2017) Chapter 3 'Wittgenstein and Deconstruction' and Stone, 'Wittgenstein on Deconstruction', in *The New Wittgenstein* (Crary and Read, 2000).

[10] See also *Remarks on the "Thickness" of Action Description* (Tanney, 2020) for a critique of "the tendency to view the "thick descriptions" of everyday discourse through a metaphysical scheme" (ibid).

ordinarily use words. Instead, we should look at specific examples of objects we describe as works of art and examine the context in which we describe them (§122). Asking a question such as "why do we refer to some objects as artworks?" may lead us to say something about which things can or cannot be generally referred to as a work of art. If we are interested in saying something about art through the examination of an individual work or practice, then a more appropriate question might be "why do we refer to this specific object as an artwork?" The shift in emphasis from the general to the specific points to an apparently irresolvable difference between the two schools of thought. In Moi's discussion of Derrida, for example, she notes that,

> "[t]his difference cannot be bridged, for it arises from the respective traditions' most fundamental understanding of meaning: for the post-Saussurean Derrida meaning is an effect of a *system*; for the Wittgensteinian [Stanley] Cavell it is *use*. A system can in principle be accounted for by a general theory; use—understood as the countless ways in which human beings use, have used and will use language every day—cannot." (Moi, 2017:71)

Cavell saw in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* a revolutionary way of 'doing philosophy'; as an activity which he felt could reveal more about human nature than metaphysical theorising (Cavell, 2015:63). This is what Moi means when she draws the above comparison with Derrida and when she says that "Wittgenstein (and Austin and Cavell) isn't working with what the same idea of what philosophy (or theory) is" (Moi, 2017:64)[11].

Ignoring the temptation to be drawn towards answering the Big Questions when engaging with philosophical thought is not easy. Cora Diamond[12] describes the rejection of metaphysical philosophical theorising as "a conception which it is enormously difficult, in practice, to renounce" (Diamond, 2004:207)[13]. However, if we are to begin to comprehend how Wittgenstein's approach—

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[11] Wittgenstein hypothetically questions what use his investigation can be when it seems to "destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important" (§118). He wants us to consider that when we begin a philosophical investigation hoping to find an answer to a Big Question that leads us to some metaphysical enlightenment, that we are really searching for something meaningless. By rejecting methods which try to redefine words devoid of their everyday context, Wittgenstein feels that "what we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards" (ibid); these methods are constructs we have put in place as an attempt to help us make sense of the world when they only seem to further distance us from it.

[12] Moi refers to Diamond's work throughout *Revolution of the Ordinary*, regularly citing Diamond's reading of Wittgenstein as influential on her own work. See (Moi, 2017:109-110) on the rejection of Big Questions in relation to Feminist Theory.

[13] Diamond would seem to have this quote, taken from Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, in mind here: "Not empiricism and yet realism in philosophy, that is the hardest thing"

the Wittgenstienian spirit[14]—can give momentum to this investigation into artistic practice, then that is exactly what is required. In Diamond's terms this means trying to avoid the temptation to "ask philosophical questions about our concepts in the grip of an unrealistic conception of what knowing about them would be" (Diamond, 1991:65); to not let our expectations of what we feel our investigations should be shape how we go about conducting them. Instead, Diamond advocates for following Wittgenstein's advice to avoid the frictionless, icy path of metaphysics that is in a certain sense "ideal" and instead head "back to the rough ground" (§107) where the friction of everyday experience enables us to walk. This, Diamond suggests, can be achieved by resisting the urge to seek theoretical justification and addressing our problems individually, "the re-conception of the problem as a particular problem" (Diamond, 2004:213).

Most often, Diamond says, these particular problems arise when we notice a specific example of a phenomena with which we are familiar that contradicts or challenges our previous experiences[15]. As an example, Diamond points to what we may perceive to be as contradictory ideas that the Christian and Jewish faiths hold about what being a 'Messiah' means[16]. They both refer to the same texts, but the teachings of Christianity proclaim that 'Jesus is fulfilment of these texts', whereas the teachings of the latter faith do not (Diamond, 2004:214). Diamond says that by examining both cases we can begin to unpick our understanding of 'contradictions' as, in fact, followers of both faiths take the word 'Messiah' to mean different things within the grammar of their own language-games. Her implication is that there can be no contradiction in this case as there is no universal meaning behind the word 'Messiah'. Instead, the concept gets its meaning through its use in the separate language-games of Christianity and Judaism. The differences in what constitutes a Messiah do not lead to a contradiction but a richer understanding of what 'Messiah' means through its use in context. This idea is what Wittgenstein was referring to when he described the criss-crossing of "family resemblances". Diamond builds on Wittgenstein's concept, encouraging us to look at individual cases and compare

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(Wittgenstein *et al.*, 2001). Diamond opens her essay *Realism and the Realistic Spirit (1974-82)*, taken from *The Realistic Spirit* (1991), with these words from Wittgenstein.

[14] See Diamond *The Realistic Spirit* (1991) for her explanation of how we can become "dazzled…by ideals" (ibid:36) when we set out on a philosophical investigation, making the assumption that finding answers is dependent on the asking of Big Questions.

[15] Cavell describes this as us experiencing an artwork and asking ourselves why it has caught our attention and what that, in turn, reveals about the artist's intention. "I had suggested that a certain sense of the question "Why this?" is essential to criticism, and that "certain sense" is characterized as one in which we are, or seem to be, asking about the artists intention in the work" (Cavell, 2015:210). I will return to the "Why this?" question in Chapters 4 and 5.

[16] Diamond also uses this point to illustrate Wittgenstein's understanding of 'grammar' as not only the structure of a language but the way we make sense of the words used in that language. "Essence is expressed by grammar" (§371).

them to others of a similar type, to observe where they intersect and where they differ as opposed to considering longitudinal theories as the best method of explanation. Here, then, is where a method inspired by the spirit of Wittgenstein's investigations can become a revolutionary way of 'doing philosophy' in the context of a practice of music-making; "we now demonstrate a method...Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem" (§133) or, in Diamond's terms, "our problems can be transformed if we are able to take them as problems on their own, without connection to a Big Question" (Diamond, 2004:217).

Asking "what kind of music do you play?" is a way of beginning my investigation and addressing my sense of lostness. It is an attempt to resist the metaphysical urge to adhere to one particular established theory or philosophy of improvisation, to try and achieve "the kind of clarity that can come from going criss-cross" (Diamond, 2004:218). With that thought in mind, this thesis is presented as a criss-cross of intersecting examples of practice and theory to think through. This is reflective of both the nature of the way the musical examples contained within it were created through solo and group performance, as well as the very form of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations,* which Diamond highlights by drawing attention to this line from the preface of his book:

> "my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination.—And this was, of course, connected to the very nature of the investigation. For this compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction." (vii)

The main events

If I am to continue my investigation based on the specific details of my practice, then I need to clarify where and when those instances might be found by "looking and seeing". Through the act of music-making, both as a soloist and in a group, the focus of my practice is exploring what it means to improvise during a performance. That is, at performances attended by audiences of varying sizes who have differing degrees of familiarity with the process with which I and my fellow improvisers are engaged[17]. These performances involve—to a greater or lesser extent—elements of notation or graphic scores, sampled excerpts of recordings from previous performances, the use of acoustic and electronic instruments, sound processors (software and hardware) as well as chance procedures, all

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[17] What it means to "attend" a performance is something which has been altered by the advent of lockdown measures, a change in the grammar or context surrounding that word. I will explore this idea further in Chapter 5 which describes how my practice adapted to this change in circumstances.

of which form frameworks for improvising. This is where the details of my practice can be seen, in the moment of performance, where in the company of others the work is done.

My focus is on three specific performances, all of which occurred during my period of study between 2018 and 2021, with each performance providing an example to think through. I have chosen to describe each performance using different methods with narratives that criss-cross throughout this family of examples. Placing these events side by side allows for three things: a comparison of the moments themselves, a comparison of the various modes of describing my practice and the relationship of these moments to other historical examples. The descriptions below make multi-faceted connections to human thought using established philosophies, theories and concepts as further examples to think through. Comparing and contrasting my own practice against existing thinking in and around the subject of improvisation has helped to provide the traction of a rough ground rather than a frictionless path to 'truth'. In the spirit of ordinary language philosophy, I have not set out to create *the* theory or philosophy of improvisation or an instructional 'how to' method[18].

Phenomenologist David Carr sets out a similar position in his introduction to *Time, Narrative and History* (D. Carr, 1986) by stating that he hopes to create a "philosophical reflection on history" (ibid:6) not a philosophy of history. He continues:

> "Nor is it to be identified as a bit of phenomenology in the narrow sense—nor, for that matter, a bit of conceptual analysis, literary theory, "narratology" or whatever. While I draw gratefully

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[18] Derek Bailey's suggestion that "only an academic would have the temerity to mount a theory of improvisation" (Bailey, 1993:x) would appear to show that he also recognised the distinction between the two different ways of 'doing philosophy' under discussion here. Bailey's now famous account of his, and others', musical practice seeks to avoid such Big Questions and theorising in way that would appear to be sympathetic to Wittgenstein's understanding of the use of ordinary language. However, through his writing Bailey also reveals the temptation to be drawn back towards answering Big Questions about the nature of improvised music as he makes generalisations about "free improvisation" such as: "The whole point of a jazz player's improvisation is that he works within a clearly accepted and circumscribed idiom. And he accepts these boundaries, in fact revels in them, because they define his music. Now I would have thought that one of the main things free improvisation provides is the opportunity to avoid just that situation" (ibid:p114). Using the language of inclusion/exclusion, as we have seen above, pulls us back into the logic of representation. By making wholesale claims for what "free improvisation" is not, Bailey simultaneously says something about what he thinks it must be. In making the distinction between "jazz improvisers" vs "free improvisers" he wants to say that generalisations cannot be made about the practice of improvisation, or indeed human nature, as a whole. However, with his sweeping claims about the practices of (still quite large) groups of people Bailey undermines his ultimate goal of avoiding the creation of a theory; in this case, that free improvisation must be nonidiomatic (a paradoxical idea that necessarily implies an idiom of its own, one that seeks to avoid all others).

on the work done in all of these fields and with all these methods, my work seeks to establish its subject matter on its own and to chart its own methodological course. If this runs the risk of seeming too diffuse and methodologically eclectic, I would prefer that risk to the one posed by a predetermined methodological straight-jacket." (ibid:6)

My own investigation into my artistic practice shares an affinity with Carr's approach[19], particularly when it comes to exploring what he refers to as the continuity between art, narrative and everyday life. Considering the problem of representation in narrative description will help to introduce one of the key themes of my investigation. I will return to the narrativity and the role of narrative in this project and my practice in more detail below.

Before getting into the specifics of that problem, I wish to give a brief overview of the three examples from my practice that I have chosen to think through, as well as outlining the ways in which I have addressed them. I encourage you to juxtapose my examples with your own experiences and to form your own conclusions, hence why I have not included one of my own. To make objective claims about my practice would be contrary to the Wittgensteinian spirit in which this investigation is being conducted. Instead, my answer to the question "what kind of music do you play?" can be found in the descriptions of the specific events below and what is revealed through the undertaking of this process. The three performances I have chosen to focus on are presented chronologically. This reflects the evolution of this thesis as a process which grew as I engaged with the practice of writing about improvising and improvising about writing. Performances coupled with reflections—both alone and with my co-creators—became a feedback loop which helped to recognise the importance of establishing a context in which to improvise as well as helping to define that context in order to remedy my lostness within it.

The first moment from my practice I wish to consider arose from a solo performance I gave on 26th March 2019 as part of the ongoing Birmingham-based free improvisation concert series *Fizzle*. In my

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[19] See also *Why?* (Tilly, 2006). In his preface to the book the sociologist Charles Tilly says that "the acid test of the [his] book's value is not whether it improves on existing literature, but rather whether people who have read it see their own and other people's answers to the question "Why?" more clearly, or at least differently, than before" (ibid:xi). Like Carr, and Wittgenstein, Tilly advocates for individual human experience over blanket theoretical explanation. Furthermore, Tilly's identification of 'narratives' as one four categories of explanation that he feels people draw on when they are required to give an explanation resonates with this project (see Introduction 3).

post-performance analysis I noted that there was something different about the way I had begun this improvisation when I considered it in the wider context of my practice. This led me to think about the 'bits and scraps' which I consider to make up my practice and how the beginnings of an improvisation do not necessarily align with the start of a performance. In his book *Improvising Improvisation* (2017) Gary Peters makes a distinction between the beginning of a musical event and the start. He asserts that in order for a performance of a piece of composed music to start, the work must have already been completed, its beginnings therefore precede the start of its performance. Peters asks us to think about this as being contrary to freely improvised music[20] where he considers that the work *is* the performance. Here, he says, the start precedes the beginning if, indeed, there is a beginning at all (ibid). Peters takes 'begin' to mean something like 'happening' or 'kicking off', a moment that is somehow mutually recognised by performers and audience members as the 'beginning' of the performance when the music starts to 'happen'. It is possible, says Peters, that this moment of beginning never arrives in a freely improvised musical performance, but the performance must always start. Taking the reverse view, that the beginning can precede the start in an improvised musical performance, I wish to show how one non-musical incident, the death of Scott Walker, highlighted this aspect of improvisation in my practice during the solo performance under discussion in Chapter 2. This reveals something about the nature of my practice, that it is built on a collection of general and specific bits and scraps of musical and non-musical information that form a context for improvisation to begin, start and continue.

Secondly, I wish to describe a moment from a four day residency with the trio *stillefelt* which took place between 23rd and 26th October 2019. *stillefelt* consists of myself on bass and electronics, Percy

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[20] Arguments about what to name the practice of playing music with little or no prior discussion, use of notation or pre-agreement of stylistic, melodic, formal and timbral characteristics are ongoing, distracting and largely unnecessary for the purposes of this thesis. Defining terminology in absolutes is antithetical to the Wittgensteinian spirit. The practice is variously referred to as "free improvisation" (Peters, 2009), "improvised music" (Toop, 2016) and "non-idiomatic improvisation" (Bailey, 1993) amongst other such terms. Trevor Barre explores and explains his reasons for choosing "Free Music"—the capitalisation reflecting, in his view, its status as a movement rather than a description—in his book *Beyond Jazz* (Barre, 2015), an historical account of the Free Music scene in London between 1966-1972. His justification runs throughout the first one hundred pages of the book, over a third of its total length.

What Wittgenstein shows us is that the application of such terminology is necessarily essentialist. Once a boundary has been drawn, as with genre, you are tied to the logic of inclusion/exclusion. The questions "what is free improvisation?" or "is this (performance) an example of free improvisation?" can be understood to be Big Questions, and, as such, are meaningless in the eyes of a Wittgensteinain investigation. If we want to understand more about the process of improvised music-making then we should "look and see" how specific musicians improvise rather than concern ourselves with assumptions about what the practice should be. As such, I use these names and more interchangeably throughout this thesis. This is not done to recognise the 'correctness' of a particular term or to be ignorant of the associations with each of the varied names, it is done to give the clearest and fullest possible description of my practice.

Pursglove on trumpet and Thomas Seminar Ford on guitar and electronics. This trio was established before I undertook this research and continues to work together. The moment which all three of us identified as something 'out of the ordinary', a moment to think through, happened on the third day of the four-performance residency. This moment continues to shape our shared practice today. Taking the idea from my solo practice of a framework of bits and scraps that informs practice as it is in turn informed by it, I turn to Michael Taussig's recognition of the importance of keeping a notebook and drawing in it as a way of making sense of a world (Taussig, 2011). The shared physical and metaphorical bits and scraps collated in the real and imagined notebook of *stillefelt*'s combined musical practice is a site for understanding group improvisation in this context.

Naturally, the focus of my investigation at this point turns towards the actions of individuals in a communal context established through prior, collective actions. This idea is something which Marshall Sahlins addresses when discussing the differences in the way we narrate our history. He observes what he feels is a tendency to tell our histories centred either on turning points brought about through individual action or progressive, collective changes (Sahlins, 2013). Sahlins says that an overbearing focus on individuals—"subjectology" (ibid:149)—has reinforced the gap between individual action and the culture within which those actions take place, something he sees as having permeated the social sciences. He argues that an examination of the context surrounding the actions of individuals will show that individuals can represent their cultures without losing their individuality by what he describes as "conjunctural agency". This is how "history makes history makers" (ibid:155) how individuals are "circumstantially selected for [their] historic role[s]" (ibid:157), being in the right place at the right time *and* acting on it. The combination of our culture—our shared note/scrap book—and individual action is the backdrop to the shared practice of *stillefelt*, where group performances create moments for individuals to act upon. In my consideration of this example of practice I unpick the complex nature of this relationship and explain why an appeal to an all-encompassing scientific theory is unhelpful in explaining this aspect of *stillefelt's* practice.

My final example takes the form of an audio-visual piece put together remotely by *stillefelt* between April and May 2020 during the first UK Covid-19 lockdown. Bolstered by the contextual exploration of the examples from my solo practice and *stillefelt*'s residency, I present my description of this final example as just that. In the spirit of Wittgenstein as read by Moi and Diamond, my final account of practice offers a detailed description of the events surrounding the creation of what became the piece

called *Alone (together)* (stillefelt, 2020a). The description of the event and the piece itself are examples of 'doing philosophy' in the ordinary, everyday sense that consider the effects of temporal and spatial distance on our understanding of what it means to perform improvised music together. Here, finally, is the invitation for you to compare these examples with your own experience and draw your own conclusions about improvised music practice within the context I have outlined throughout the totality of this thesis.

The written descriptions of all these moments are complemented by audio and video representations[21], reflecting the dualistic nature of my practice which has developed during the creation of this thesis. There are indications throughout of when it might be appropriate to listen/watch these extracts in relation to the text describing the events. You are not obliged to obey these instructions[22]. In Appendix 4 you will also find a transcription of four conversations between the members of *stillefelt* which took place after each of the four performances of our residency. It is not the intention to include this document so that it be read in its entirety (unless you wish to!) The act of transcribing our conversations became a part of my practice. It was a way of remaining connected to those performances and to the other musicians when we could not physically be together. It reveals a wealth of difference between our individual comprehension of our collective practice that became my examples to think through, an invitation to act and react, a context within which to improvise my answer to the question "what kind of music do you play?" As I suggested above, considering the narrative and narrativity of both this thesis and my practice will play a fundamental part in my attempt answer to this question. In beginning my investigation, I wish to use the following pages to think through one of the key problems of narrativity to establish a position from which I can proceed.

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[21] To be found in the Appendices.
[22] Similarly, the three descriptions of practice could be engaged with asynchronously to create a different criss-cross juxtaposition of my practice.

Introduction 3: Thinking through narrative

"When most people take reasons seriously, those reasons arrive in the form of stories" (Tilly, 2006:95)

The reason I keep asking myself what kind of music I play is shown in the opening by a brief story. My choice to present this scenario as a dialogue serves to underscore the importance of the role of narrative in this thesis as an explanation of my practice; it is a (my) story. Although the exact conversation in the introduction never actually took place, it is a distillation of many similar conversations which I have had and continue to have. I could have just as easily recorded, transcribed and presented one of these 'real' conversations without changing what I am trying to illustrate by opening with this particular dialogue. Either text would point to my role as the author of this story, to the choices I have made by foregrounding particular events in creating my narrative. Through my reflections on the specific moments referred to throughout this thesis I have come to understand something about what I feel is the inherent narrativity of my improvised music practice. In the chapters that follow I wish to draw attention to examples that demonstrate the creation of narrative(s) through musical events. I want to say that these musical actions are not representative of an external narrative, but that they tell a story as temporal and spatial moments located in the context of a life; through their inextricable connections to each other and the environments within which they occurred[23].

At first it may appear that I am doing precisely what I opposed in my introduction, that the difficulty of turning away from the appeal of scientific method has led me to narrative theory as a way of proving

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[23] I acknowledge that this thesis (considered in its totality of words, music and video) could itself be considered a representation of the reality of my practice. It is possible to argue that this thesis should perhaps not be necessary at all if it really were possible for musical action to create a narrative of its own. Firstly, this thought highlights a difficulty facing anyone who wishes to explain the narrativity of human experience, musical or otherwise. Carr identifies this problem as being an area that is "methodologically suspect" (D. Carr, 1986:17) in his own investigation into the nature of narrative; "I aim to show that full-fledged literary story-telling arises out of life. But in order to show this I will be examining life with constant reference to a pregiven "model" which is precisely full-fledged literary story-telling" (ibid). He hopes that his reader will be able to identify where he has judiciously used the "model" to augment his study rather than distort it. This aim is, I feel, synchronous to the approach of thinking through examples where the goal is to enrich understanding through consideration of individual problems rather than proving or adhering to an overarching theory. Secondly, this thesis is not separate from my practice but a part of my practice. It is not representative in the way that a third-party report into another's practice would be, or a critical account written by a non-practitioner. This is a meditation on how I have come to understand my own practice, a practice which continues to evolve in response to the considerations outlined here, such that these problems can continue to be examined through musical action in dialogue with non-musical, critical reflection.

something about my practice or narrativity itself. In fact, as my investigation developed the connection to narrative theory felt like an appropriate one as I sought clarity in the details of the examples of practice below. The affinity grew as I recognised difference(s) between how I wanted to explain those events and the prevailing modes of explanation of improvised music practice. My appeal to narrative is my way of interpreting these events; I do not believe that this entails that it is necessarily the only way of doing so. By drawing attention to the narrativity of my practice I am obliged to engage with one of the core debates of narrative theory, narrative representation versus reality. This is a discussion that forges links to Moi's rejection of structuralist theorising and raises questions about the dominant, representative methodology in narrative musicology and narrative thinking in jazz and improvised music studies. Therefore, a brief introduction to some of the key themes is necessary before making the connection back to my practice.

The differing views of the human experience of narrative is one of the central problems of narrativity from the ancient to the contemporaneous, running throughout philosophies of the humanities in literary theory, history, musicology and beyond. Of most relevance to my thesis are the conversations around the nature of narrative arising in the twentieth century which continue to be pertinent in music research today. The heart of this matter lies in the understanding of narrative as either a representation of the world put forward by humans (Barthes, White, Riceour) or as something which is part of the very nature of the world itself (Husserl, Carr). Given the focus of my thesis this is necessarily a simplification of what is a complex and nuanced problem. A fuller consideration of the problems of narrative would require a study of its own. What is of importance to my investigation is the key dialogue of narrative representation versus narrative reality, and how an understanding of that concept helps to bring about an understanding of my improvised music practice.

In setting out this problem, Carr says that narrative is one of the main ways we make sense of the world, it is "our primary (though not our only) way of organizing our experience of time" (D. Carr:4-5). When we then come to explain our experiences to others, Charles Tilly suggests in his book *Why?* (Tilly, 2006) that our explanations can be divided into four distinct categories. Alongside conventions, technical cause-effect accounts and codes or 'workplace jargon' Tilly says that storytelling (narrative) is a mode of explanation that "matter[s] greatly for social life" (ibid:16). When we recount events through the stories we tell about them, Tilly says that our focus becomes the individuals directly involved in the story, that we tend to focus on explanations centred around the key protagonists

rather than considering the 'big picture'; they did this because of that. Tilly says that "by their very nature, [stories] frustrate purists: they condense complex life into simple plots with absurdly stripped-down causes and effects" (ibid:95), but that this necessary simplification makes stories a highly effective mode of communication. We more readily understand a narrator when they present us with a version of events in a way that relates to our own experience and, as such, the practice of storytelling is a fundamental aspect of how we live our lives. Hayden White agrees with Tilly and Carr in part when he says that the "impulse to narrate" (White, 1980:5) is a natural part of any report of how things actually happened, such that it is only problematic in a culture where narrative does not exist or is denied (ibid)[24]. It is perfectly understandable that narrativists would broadly be in agreement about the importance of storytelling as a fundamental part of human communication and understanding.

Where Tilly and Carr differ from White in this matter is on the relationship between narrative and daily life, a difference that is key to understanding the concept of representation versus reality. For Tilly, explanation through story telling reveals how we experience daily life, that we give our reasons as stories precisely because that is how our experiences are presented to, and made sense of, by us. By contrast, White sees the impulse to narrate as what "makes a narrative representation of real events possible" (White:1980:10). White says that those responsible for writing histories create a narrative based on the events that relate to their period of study and that those events are not narrative in themselves—they do not inherently possess the literary structure of beginning, middle and end (ibid). For White, who is building on ideas first put forward by Barthes[25], events find their meaning in relation to the overarching narrative structures imposed by human narrators. This desire to systematise narrative is what prompts Carr to say that, whilst Barthes and White have contributed much to the understanding of narrative, they see narrative as being somehow removed from the everyday and operating at a higher level, that they have "misunderstood its relation to the "real world"" (D. Carr, 1986:16).

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[24] Tilly and White also agree on that narrative necessarily entails morality. One of White's provocations, "Could we ever narrativize *without* moralizing?" (White, 1980:27), is answered by his adherence to a Kantian moral imperative. For White it is a fundamental part of story-telling: "narrativity…is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality" (White, 1980:18). Tilly also moralises story-telling when he says that stories include "strong imputations of responsibility, and thus lend themselves to moral evaluations: I get the credit, he gets the blame, they did us dirt"(Tilly, 2006:16). I discuss the morality of my narrative in Chapter 2 via Tracey Nicholls, Naomi Klein and wiping the slate clean (or not).

[25] See *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative* (Barthes and Duisit, 1975) for Barthes' detailed classification of the features which he feels are present in all examples of narrative.

Eelco Runia also identifies this problem of separation between historical narrative and human experience in representationalism. In a panel discussion at Berkeley, California in 2014 Runia addressed a group of his peers, including White, and outlined his reasons for rejecting a representational point of view based on the distinction it makes between subject and object. Runia says that, while he was initially drawn to a Whitean understanding of the narrative of history he ultimately finds it restrictive as it creates "a tension between history as it was written and history as it is experienced" (UC Berkley Events, 2014). To free himself from this tension and deconstruct the subject-object distinction he suggests that we "think through the event…to really experience the event that you are writing about…[to recognise] that it has a close connection to yourself" (ibid). For Runia, the historical narrative of an event is not imposed but it is intertwined with the way it was, and is, experienced.

Representationalism, then, faces the same criticism that Moi makes of structuralist and post-structuralist thought, as outlined in my introduction. Moi sees the discontinuity in the unbridgeable gap between Wittgenstein and Cavell on one side (Carr, Tilly and Runia for the purposes of this discussion) and the post-Saussurean Derrida on the other (White and Barthes, the representationalists). Moi says that Saussurian assumptions pervade humanities research, even if that fact is not always recognised by those whom are engaged with it (Moi, 2017:15-16); one of the key assumptions being that language, like the representational view of narrative, must be a closed system[26]. For example, Saussure's distinction between 'signifier' and 'signified'[27] in a system of language can be felt in Barthes' consideration of narrative when he describes art as "pure" system, without "noise" (Barthes and Duisit, 1975:245). This representational understanding of narrative is, as Moi suggests, irreconcilable with an investigation conducted with Wittgensteinian spirit, one which embraces everyday "noise" in every sense and its impact on practice.

Moi's identification of the prevalence of structuralism throughout the humanities is certainly true of musicology in the late twentieth century. The idea that the narrative of (instrumental) music—if there

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[26] The prevalence of Saussurian assumptions is reflective of a wider problem in humanities research namely, seeking validation through scientific-like methods and models. Moi (2017) discusses this in detail with particular reference to Diamond's use of Wittgenstein's "craving for generality" (Diamond, 2004). Ironically, from Moi's position at least, the interest in narrative in the philosophy of history was, in part, a reaction against what was perceived to be an attempt by the *Annalistes* to align historiography with the natural sciences, to seek truth in historical writing (White, 1980:169).

[27] See (Moi, 2017:15-16)

is to be a narrative—must be representative first gained popularity amongst musicologists with an interest in Western classical music before later being picked up by those studying jazz and improvised music[28]. Patricia Tunstall notes that throughout the 1970s there had been a growth in the structuralist approach to musicology influenced by Western European intellectual thought in the tradition of Descartes and Kant (Tunstall, 1979)[29]. In 'Paul Ricoeur's Theories of Narrative and Their Relevance for Musical Narrativity' (Grabôcz and McClelland, 1999), Grabôcz and McClelland reflect on contemporary issues of representation in musicology and demonstrate how structuralist thought has remained influential in that discipline twenty years after Tunstall's survey. This same influence can be found in jazz studies from the 1990s, including chapters by Elworth and Corbett in *Jazz among the discourses* (Gabbard, 1995), Ingrid Monson's *Saying Something* (Monson, 1996) and George Lewis' essay 'Improvised music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological perspectives' (Lewis, 1996). Each author explores, albeit in very different ways, how the narratives of improvised music-making are representative of character, ways of communicating, culture and experience.

In the final few weeks of my research, I came across Amit Chaudhuri's *Finding the Raga: An Improvisation on Indian Music* (Chaudhuri, 2021) and was immediately struck[30] by the similarities to the form and content of my own work. Firstly, Chaudhuri's book begins with a short script of a conversation between two people (in his case a real conversation) which is followed by a long contextual introduction (*Alaap*) reflecting the form of the text's subject, North Indian classical music performance. The text of *Alaap* constantly restarts in a series of apparent 'chapters' which bear the formal chapter-like characteristics of beginning on a new page with a space for a header but lack some of the others, like a title or number. This gives the impression that Chaudhuri, like a performer of North Indian classical (which he also is), is searching for a way to begin by exploring his source material: a criss-cross of descriptions of the ragas themselves, his memories of growing up and being introduced to this way of music-making and theoretical concerns with the narrativity of music.

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[28] Doubtless there are individual examples which counter this statement but, in order to not be drawn into a history of musicology I have chosen to highlight the broader trends of narrative in musicology. Furthermore, the argument for and against the representational narrative of music is not an exclusively Western concern. I have tried to address this through the discussion of Amit Chaudhuri's work.

[29] See Kivy *Sound and Semblance: Reflections on Musical Representation* (1984), Nattiez *Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?* (1990) and Maus *Music as Narrative* (1991) for examples of the influence that structuralism had on the debate around music and narrative around this time.

[30] And initially alarmed!

Early on, Chaudhuri clearly makes a distinction between what he means by text (North Indian classical music) and narrative (Western classical music). He says that "'India' is text" (Chaudhuri, 2021:42) that narrating stories about it cannot adequately represent the human experience of living in India, whereas Western classical music is situated in a "culture that privileges narrative and representation" (ibid) and therefore the music's composer is also afforded that same privilege[31]. When he says that the raga is not about the world but that it belongs to it, he means that the ragas are a resource of possibilities with which to engage with a lived experience. North Indian classical music, says Chaudhuri, doesn't tell stories it "relegate[s] the composer to secondary or invisible status, and see[s] the text as the primary progenitor" (ibid). For Chaudhuri, the meaning of North Indian classical music can be found in its performance, a performance that is inherently linked to the performer, their environment and the raga's relationship to India as a text. This idea, despite his rejection of narrative as representation, would seem not too far from how I have discussed my practice in this thesis.

However, when he makes the link between North Indian classical music and language and says that "the raga has no more absolute identity than a word does" (Chaudhuri, 2021:42) he does not mean it in the Wittgensteinian sense. Instead, Chaudhuri makes an immediate link to Saussure's idea that language finds its meaning through difference. He highlights[32] the semiotics of Saussure's theory that binds the meaning of language to representation; words become signs for the objects they represent and, as such, are able to differentiate themselves from other similar words.

> "This is one way of looking at the raga. It has no recognisable existence in isolation from other ragas. It is recognisable through differentiation; it is the ragas that it is not" (Chaudhuri, 2021:43)

Chaudhuri is attempting to answer the Big Question "what is a raga?" (ibid:42) and therefore it is perhaps understandable that he is drawn to a systemic explanation of language and ragas. In the pages that follow his question he gives a detailed breakdown of the ten major thaats of North Indian classical music on which the ragas are based[33]. His definitions are made of comparisons to the other ragas and thaats which, because of the way he chooses to link North Indian classical music to a Saussurian

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[31] Chaudhuri does not offer a direct consideration of non-representational narrative although the entirety of his book could be seen as such.

[32] Via Derrida.

[33] A raga is more than what is meant by a 'scale' or 'mode' in Western music. Each raga is based on a thaat and uses specific combinations of notes, intonations and interrelations that give the raga its distinct identity. How the performer interprets or improvises within a particular raga demonstrates their skill and experience.

understanding of language, creates a system in spite of the individual. The detailed description of his own life and relationship with music he weaves between his theoretical analysis is undermined by this apparent craving for generality.

In an example taken from a Western perspective of improvised music, Vijay Iyer argues for what he describes as a non-linear understanding of the narrative of improvisation (Iyer, 2004). He focusses on understanding improvisation through the narrativity of an individual improviser's embodied situation rather than relying on a more systemic, representational explanation. Iyer connects the microscopic details of performance(s) to the macroscopic life of the musician through their embodied actions, saying that "the story is revealed not as a simple linear narrative, but as a fractured, exploded one" (ibid:395). He describes his resulting essay as having a similar nonlinearity and his writing of it as an enacted process that, through action, reveals the underlying mosaic of jazz improvisation (ibid). Iyer's concept of nonlinear narrative is not one which undermines the temporality of improvised musical events. Rather, he is asking us to consider whether the predominant, sequential literary structure of narrative is an appropriate tool for analysing improvised music-making. Where structuralist investigations will seek to find meaning in a text[34], Iyer's foregrounding of embodied, situated action presents an alternative way of thinking about how improvisers might tell their stories.

What follows then is informed by my impulse to narrate; a description of the events listed at the end of Introduction 2. I wish to tell a story based on my experiences which recognises my place within it and describes what I think it means to improvise music in the context of my artistic practice as it is outlined in the following pages. This process will, as Iyer suggests, reflect the criss-cross nature of my practice whilst becoming part of it. The turn away from representationalism—inspired by Iyer, Moi, Runia, Tilly, Diamond, Wittgenstein, Austin, Cavell and Carr—is a turn towards individual experience and phenomenology. That the differing ways we experience improvised musical events says something about the narrativity of human nature. An alternative, phenomenological view of narrative is provided by Edmund Husserl's theory of internal time consciousness, a theory which Carr later draws upon. Husserl says that the dual horizons of human temporal perception—in his terminology, retention and protention[35]—demonstrate an understanding that events happen *in* time. He illustrates

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[34] What does this compositional device/composition represent? (Kivy, 1984) How can it be explained in relation to an established model of music theory? (Maus, 1991) What makes a particular recorded improvisation a preeminent example of improvisation? (Friedman, 2018)

[35] See *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* (Husserl, 2019).

this idea by using the unfolding of a melody as an example, saying that as we hear the notes of the melody being played, the sounds make the transition from the present to the just-past (Husserl, 2019). We hear the notes arriving in the present moment against the background of the just-past, in the same way that we perceive an object in space as inseparable from its background.

Building on Husserl's theory, Carr extrapolates that we are not merely historical beings intertwined with history but that "we are *in* time as we are *in* the world: it serves as the horizon and background for our everyday experience" (D. Carr, 1986:4). Our experiences are shaped by our place in time just as much as they are by our place in the physical world. This is what Carr means when he says that the present, and therefore our experience, is reliant on a past *and* a future and that therefore "the reality of our temporal experience is that it is organised and structured" narratively (ibid:26). Carr believes that Husserl adds another dimension to the way we perceive events when he suggests that our anticipation of the near future is as much part of our experience as our retention of the just-past, what Husserl calls protention. This is not long-term planning, or dread of a future event as Carr puts it, but the mirror of the relationship between retention and recollection. These two horizons of time illustrate the idea that an event has "temporal thickness", a beginning and an end which take place within a context of other larger-scale events, "these make up the temporal configurations, like melodies and other extended occurrences and happenings, that are the stuff of our daily experience" (D. Carr, 1986:24). Understood in Carr's terms, human perception and action are embodied with the narrative form such that stories are not only a form of discourse but a form of being.

Considering the "stuff of our daily experience" draws us back to where my second introduction began, back to the rough ground and the Wittgensteinian spirit. Thinking through the narrativity of human experience certainly provides the friction needed for us to start walking, to start considering the nature of improvisation in this context. Before moving on to more detailed descriptions of the events listed above, I wish to give more consideration to the role of narrative in music specifically and how this relates to my practice. This includes both the importance of clarifying the events within a musical practice through the provision of an accompanying description and the narrativity of musical events themselves. My understanding of practice is one that consists of both musical action and the conversations, writings, interviews and explanations given by those actors. If a thorough consideration of the context surrounding musical action is given, then it becomes possible to give examples of improvised music-making which can create narratives without the need for representational analysis.

There are several narratives which my practice addresses directly that are also ongoing concerns within improvised music-making more broadly, with what it means to improvise. Firstly, the idea that jazz musicians must 'say something' through their improvisations; that when they perform they tell a story (Iyer, 2004). In this way, they are able to forge a connection between musician and listener that leads them to mutual understanding. I engage with this narrative throughout this thesis by drawing on Nicholls' discussion of improvised music practice as being embedded in a community. This is particularly relevant to my solo practice, as outlined in Chapter 2, and my discussion of what happens when the nature of that community is dramatically altered in Chapter 5. This desire to communicate has led to a situation where, through recorded performances, improvisations which are understood to be 'saying something' can become canonised as exemplars e.g., Miles Davis' solo on *So What* from the album *Kind Of Blue* (Davis, 1959), John Coltrane's solo on *Impressions* (Coltrane, 1963) or any of the recordings covered by the transcriptions in the Charlie Parker *Omnibook*. As an electric bass player, I have seen and heard countless references to Willie Weeks' 'must learn' solo on *Voices Inside (Everything Is Everything)* from Donny Hathaway's *Live* (Hathaway, 1972) album[36]. These improvisations have become accepted and crystalised through time and folklore, as if defining an objective framework for excellence in method and understanding (Friedman, 2018). Engaging with and challenging the canonical urge within improvised music practice is addressed explicitly through examples from the ensemble *stillefelt* in Chapter 3 and 4 as well as examples from Marion Brown and Mostly Other People Do The Killing in Chapter 1.

The second narrative of improvised music I wish to address through my practice is one which can be found amongst the musicians, critics and audience members of the freely improvised music scene[37]; the claim that improvisation is transitory. Here I am referring to the idea that freedom occurs 'in the moment' and can be understood as arriving 'from nowhere'—that improvisers are making it up as they go—as an explanation of freely improvised music practice. I explore this narrative by outlining the nature of the musical events of my practice described below. The example taken from my solo practice described in Chapter 2 sets out an alternative narrative which understands free musical action as being directly related to the events and environments which surround it. In order to be 'in the moment' it is important to recognise all of the other moments which have preceded it and those which will follow it. I develop this idea throughout the descriptions of the collaborative aspects of my practice, a process which examines the 'freeness' of the event by emphasising the interconnectivity

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[36] See (C. Brown, 2010) for one such example.
[37] See Frith, Rzewski and Corbett's accounts in the *Slime Mould Improvisers* interlude below.

of different performances by the same group of musicians (Chapter 4) and the impact of remote collaboration on how an improvised musical event may be understood (Chapter 5).

There is one final narrative which I wish to draw attention to in this introduction that is intertwined with all the examples I have given below, that of identity. The idea that musicians say something about who they are through their music is a key narrative of both improvised music practice and this thesis. For example, this idea is demonstrated by Lewis' notion of Afrological and Eurological improvisers as referenced above (Lewis, 1996). Lewis draws a "historically emergent rather than ethnically essential" (ibid:93) distinction between Afrological improvisation (including jazz) and Eurological indeterminacy (Western art music). He interprets improvised music in reference to these historical and cultural contexts, making the claim that musicians say something about either their Afrological or Eurological identity through their music. Rather than appealing to external definitions to confirm the identity of improvisers I am, once again, drawn to the detailed examination of specific examples as a way of coming to understand the narrative of identity improvisers create through their practice[38]. Improvisers need not be subject to narratives bestowed on them by third parties. They can choose to say something about who they are through the act of music-making and/or through the discourse[39] that they surround those actions with, taking into account the context of the environment in which those actions take place[40]. Improvisers can draw on their own personal histories (both real and imagined), engage with the communities of improvisers and audience members in which they are embedded, describe the people and events that have shaped their practice in the past, create contradictions that deepen our understanding of what it means to improvise and form connections with their environment such that they confirm their place within it. From these possibilities emerges the final key claim of this thesis, that to improvise music is to say something about what it means to be human. To help develop this idea I am initially reliant on two quite different examples to think through. Returning to Danto, this time through his theory of *Narrative Sentences*, I will draw out a way of thinking about how musical action has the potential to create its own narrative once a full understanding of the context for those actions is made. However, I wish to begin by exploring the links between musical action and written text by taking inspiration from saxophonist Marion Brown and his album and book of the same name *Afternoon of a Georgia Faun*.

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[38] 'Practice' in the holistic sense referred to above.

[39] Conversations, interviews, announcements, liner notes, books, articles, etc.

[40] See Nicholas Gebhardt's essay 'A time for jazz' (Gebhardt, 2017) which focusses on Alan Lomax's biography of—and recorded interviews at the piano with—Jelly Roll Morton. Gebhardt uses Lomax's biography of Morton as an example of an unconventional understanding of biographical narrative, one that is created by both Morton and Lomax throughout the processes of writing, playing, speaking and thinking through Morton's life in music.

Chapter 1

Narrative and music (and improvisation)

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how the problem of narrativity detailed above is intertwined with improvised music practice in the past and the present. I wish to examine how the tension between representational narrative and the inherent narrativity of musical events is navigated by other practitioners, so that I might be able to begin explaining the narrative of my own practice. Considering how the story of improvised music practice is told will help to clarify both the direction of this thesis and the claims I wish to make for my own music-making. Where possible I have sought out examples from practitioners who are engaged with thinking through the problem of narrative through their musical actions and critical reflections. These consist of recorded and un-recorded performances alongside written or spoken texts.

Locating such examples is not a straightforward task. When it comes to discussing practice and/or offering explanations, musicians are not always willing or able to do so. There can be a temptation, one that is often succumbed to within the practice of improvised music, to employ a well-worn cliché and 'let the music speak for itself'[41]. This perhaps explains why I have found that, in my experience as an improvising musician working with a variety of other improvisers, analytical discussion relating to musical practice rarely occurs amongst peers. Groups come together to perform—often meeting as a unique ensemble for the first time in the moments before a performance—they exchange pleasantries, play together and then disappear into the night. Without the necessity of having to perfect material through ongoing rehearsals and gigs, post-performance peer analysis is often limited to positive murmuring and congratulations, if it takes place at all. While these conversations are of use in coming to understand the practice of improvisation, more detailed discussions do exist. One example of an attempt to amplify the conversation around improvised music practice has recently been made by Denzler and Guionnet who have collated a large, if not particularly diverse, collection of interviews with practicing improvisers in a book entitled *The Practice of Musical Improvisation* (2020). The fifty or so subjects are drawn from what Guionnet describes in the closing chapter as the "improvised music

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[41] David Toop: "The problem is that most players don't actually want to write about playing and if they do, they tend to be flattering or maybe just disarmingly polite and positive" (Toop, 2016:76). The rejection of written or spoken explanation creates a narrative of its own as the example of *slime mould improvisers* (see below) suggests.

milieu" (Denzler and Guionnet, 2020:195). That the final chapter takes the form of a transcription of a conversation[42] between the collection's two editors reflects their decision to present the entire book as a narrative of the process of improvisation, suggestive of the idea that the practice might be in a constant dialogue with itself.

The interviews touch on many of the key themes which any researcher of improvised music is likely to encounter. Certainly, the conversations that arise align with some of the themes of improvised music addressed by this thesis: idiom, aesthetics, product vs process, improvisation vs composition, habits and customs, the presence of electronic instruments and defining terminology. Contributions are grouped by the editors by topic, not as whole interviews with individual musicians. Each chapter addresses a particular problem raised by improvised music practice: technique, listening, dynamics, etc. There are two suggested ways of reading the text, either by subject matter or by crisscrossing through the chapters to find the opinions of a single musician. The editors made this decision in order to create "a sort of grand discussion" (Denzler and Guionnet, 2020:ix) between the musicians. The narratives which arise through the juxtaposed comments, no matter how you choose to read the book, tell us something about what it means to improvise music together. Each theme raises contradictory opinions from musicians whose practice overlaps or indeed whom have worked together on multiple occasions. For Denzler and Guionnet, understanding improvised music, like the process of improvising music itself, is a negotiation between its practitioners, albeit a purely linguistic one in the instance of their book.

The comments in Chapter 6 of the book are amongst the most revealing because they underline the conflicting ideas about the narratives of improvising music, as the following statements demonstrate: "you do the work while playing…the discussion takes place while you're playing", "we don't talk about the music after a concert", "it's actually quite rare to talk about the music with the group members" (Denzler and Guionnet, 2020:111). These comments reinforce the idea that the 'music speaks for itself' and that there is no need to offer any further explanation; an idea which is called into question by the Wittgensteinian escape from the logic of inclusion/exclusion. By perpetuating the idea that improvised music is free from preparation and discussion these contributors are maintaining the narrative of temporality, that the music 'comes from nowhere'.

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[42] There doesn't appear to be anything in the text to suggest that their conversation actually took place, but the layout is consistent with a discursive part of a magazine interview, for example.

This chapter is not only about the stories that improvisers tell about their music. The narrativity of improvised music itself is called into question through the discussion about music and language. Analogies between music and language are seen by the contributors as useful but not always entirely appropriate; some of them seem to reject the connection altogether. However, by discussing the problematic relationship of language and music something about the nature of improvised music practice is revealed, as in this extract from an interview with saxophonist Seymour Wright:

> "I think that the kind of analogy often made between conversation and language in improvised music is wholly flawed. I think it's not the right way to be thinking about it. That said, just as I'm trying to articulate what I do, I'm going back on it, changing my mind. Because as I try to formulate an idea and then articulate it, by the time I get to it, I'm not even sure that I agree with it. It's very much the same with what I play." (Denzler and Guionnet, 2020:112)

Whilst he considers that the literal relationship between language and improvised music may be flawed, Wright's description of how he perceives it reveals something about his practice, just as analysing and writing about my own playing has revealed something about its nature. This passage highlights one of the key narratives of improvised music practice; that its meaning is being brought into question by playing and by talking and thinking about playing. The range of opinions presented in the book regarding the relationship between language and improvised music— "Some musicians do tend to talk about the music…we don't ever really have big discussions…I think there's something that resonates with questions of language and meaning" (ibid:111-112)—reveals how a Wittgensteinian investigation of specific examples can be useful in coming to understand something about the diverse, sometimes apparently contradictory practice of improvising music[43]. A desire to make generalisations about improvised music practice risks ignoring the differing opinions of its practitioners, leading to a narrow understanding of what it means to improvise. An examination of how other improvisers deal with the intersection of music and language will strengthen this dialogical link as well as revealing something about the narrative ability of musical action itself. To clarify this I want to focus on the work of Marion Brown.

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[43] See the examples from both Brown and Bailey included later in this chapter. Brown discusses music's lack of ability to communicate whilst justifying the way his music practice creates a narrative of identity. Bailey discusses developing a vocabulary of musical ideas but seems to deny improvised music's power to say something outright when he quipped that "anyone interested in communication should spend time digging holes for telegraph poles" (Kaiser, 1975).

Marion Brown and *Afternoon of a Georgia Faun*

Marion Brown was an improviser who had no issue with discussing his own practice and believed that all artists should actively seek opportunities to explain their work. The relationship between music and language for the saxophonist/multi-instrumentalist/bandleader/composer/academic was not only a matter of artistic significance but of racial imperative; a connection between his music and his African and Georgian (US) heritage. He presented his music as being informed by his ancestry as well as inseparable from the social implications of being a Black musician and academic in North America in the 20th Century. Brown was interested in communicating meaning through musical and non-musical action in performances, recordings and written text to define his identity. This is demonstrated by the track *Tokalokaloka* from the album *Geechee Recollections* (M. Brown, 1973b), one of a trio of albums Brown dedicated to Georgia[44]. "According to the liner notes [authored by Brown], the title comes 'from the Congo' and literally means 'little bits of firewood'" (Porter, 2002:252) making clear the connection he wanted to forge to his African heritage through the stories he told about his music. Brown also uses the word as an onomatopoeic description of the speech patterns presented by the four percussionists on the recording and as a reference to the "vocal qualities of African instrumental music" (ibid). Finally, he reinforces his narrative through the form of his music in *Tokalokaloka* in what Porter describes as a "self-conscious investigation of the African oral expression through the practice of improvisation" (ibid). The tension between representation and experience is apparent in the dialogue between these different aspects of his practice. Through his work, Brown made claims for music's ability to represent our experiences whilst questioning whether language could adequately represent them (Porter, 2002).

Brown's use of the concept of 'backward-looking, forward-thinking' to explain his approach to the interconnectivity of music performance and a written text is perhaps most concisely represented by the album *Afternoon of a Georgia Faun* (M. Brown, 1970) and in the subsequent collection of writings which he published three years after the album's release. *Afternoon of a Georgia Faun: Views and Reviews* (M. Brown, 1973a) was both Brown's response to what he had felt was a lack of critical reception for the album[45] and a rich example of the narrative of identity brought out in his musical practice and his writings about it. In his liner notes for …*Georgia Faun* Brown identifies specific moments, explaining of the title track that "[i]t depicts nature and the environment in Atlanta…The composition begins with a percussion section that suggests raindrops…[then] metallic sounds that

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[44] The other two being *Afternoon of a Georgia Faun* (M. Brown, 1970) and *Sweet Earth Flying* (M. Brown, 1974).
[45] "The album generated little attention and even less praise from the mainstream jazz critics." (Porter, 2002:248)

suggest light" (M. Brown, 1970). The Zomari[46] and flute entries which follow are representative of the animals of the forest before Chick Corea's piano solo arrives "like Oriental Poetry"[47] and then the piece "ends as it began, with wooden raindrops" (ibid). Brown demonstrates this dualistic process of creating a narrative of and within improvised music in his interview with John Turner which is included in *Views and Reviews*:

JT: Were you playing the wood-blocks for the raindrops?

MB: Yes, I played them

JT: So you could control the end of the piece with those?

MB: The beginning also. They were very important in setting the mood.

JT: Did you think of them as raindrops before they were recorded or only after?

MB: After. I conceive the sounds first, and name them afterwards, when I have heard them back. I did not realize they were wooden raindrops until I heard the tapes and felt the unreal quality of imagination. They were wood-blocks. But, for me, they became, in my mind's ears, the sound of wooden raindrops, a figment of my imagination.

(M. Brown, 1973a:22)

It is clear, given his own description of the process, that Brown's narrative of identity in his music is not entirely post-hoc. Even if the woodblocks' representation of raindrops was something which only occurred to Brown upon reviewing the recording—and naming them as such—they played an important role in shaping the narrativity of the piece from its conception.

Brown says that, although ...*Georgia Faun* was wholly realised through improvised music performance by the musicians who participated in it there were, in fact, two verbal rehearsals where they discussed what he had in mind for the piece (M. Brown, 1973a). In this further extract from his interview with Turner he outlines these structural arrangements.

JT: Was there an order in which the musicians were to play?

MB: Yeah. Everything happened in a particular order.

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[46] Brown describes the Zomari in his liner notes as "an African double reed instrument from Tansania [sic]" (M. Brown, 1970).

[47] In *Views and Reviews* Brown revisits an expands on his narration of Corea's solo saying that in contrast to the "primitive" opening section it represents "the contemporary world of electricity and electro-magnetic energy, stop and go, interruptions, earth and moon." (M. Brown, 1973a)

JT: So that you completely set up the sequence?

MB: Right.

JT: Did you ever think of that sequence as being a narrative?

MB: In the sense that narration for me means the way the music moves, movement in general, that is rhythmical, melodic and textural.

        (M. Brown, 1973a:16)

Following on from his wood-block example, here is another instance which shows that Brown viewed the relationship between his music and the narrative that he wished to create as functioning on at least two levels. There is the narration which happens after the fact, where Brown sets about defining his own music through the written word and in doing so becoming the "very first, and most accurate critic" (M. Brown, 1973a:22). Then there is the narration, which is created through the act of playing itself, which pervades into to the formal aspects of the music, the way it moves. Brown's assertion that "[w]hen I play, I'm a narrator—an essayist" (Brown and Tucci, 1973:61) comments on how he perceived his musical actions as forming an imagined representation of his African heritage. It is important to note that Brown never visited Africa in the physical sense, so his connection remained an imaginary one.

Brown used the temporal distance afforded to him through his reflections to address the issues of immediacy, intangibility and semiotic ineffability in his improvised music practice. He connected his practice to his personal, musical history, even if it was, in parts, an imagined one. His description enriches our understanding of his practice, the story of his music and his life underscoring his "belief in the ability of musicians to create the terms by which their own music should be understood" (Porter, 2002:254). In contrast to Lewis' definitions of improvised music (Lewis, 1996), Brown saw his own music as historically emergent *and* ethnically essential. It was part of the narrative of identity with which Brown was engaged through his practice. "My music is a personal view of my past culture. I'm transcribing from one time and place to another"; he was, as he so eloquently described it, "like a man walking into the future backwards" (Brown and Tucci, 1973:61).

Back to the future

There are echoes of Walter Benjamin's famous description of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* in Brown's statement. Benjamin's interpretation of the angel of history was of a being casting their gaze over the events of the past whilst being helplessly driven, backwards, towards the future.

> "This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress." (Benjamin, 2006:392)

If it is possible to temporarily set aside the political implications of Benjamin's description and take his vision more literally, then perhaps we can begin to get a sense of what Brown means by his statement. For Brown, the knowledge and recognition of his past as playing a role in shaping a future allowed him and his co-contributors to improvise music-making together. It provided the context within which he could make choices and act on them, a freedom grounded in his personal and social history that recognised his place in time as well as in space, to use Carr's terminology. There is a sense of optimism in Brown's assertion, that a recognition of the past makes possible a future, as opposed to the futility and determinism of Benjamin's vision.

In *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (2009), Peters sets out his argument for a re-examination of the notion of the past as something that is fixed. I take Peters' book to be 'A' philosophy of improvisation to take inspiration from rather than 'The' philosophy of improvisation which should be adhered to. As such, his book is extremely useful in providing examples to think through for this philosophical reflection on improvised music practice. Like Brown, Peters' claim is that by embracing the past as something to be explored, re-used and re-purposed improvisers are able to give meaningful, musical performances. Peters sets the tone for his arguments with two quotes. The first is an extract from Benjamin's paragraph above and the second is a familiar sounding quote from Keith Johnstone, one of the leading proponents of improvisation in stage acting. The quote from his book of techniques for improvising, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*, reads "the improviser has to be like a man walking backwards. He sees where he has been, but he pays no attention to the future" (Johnstone and

Wardle, 2019:116). Originally published in 1979, within six years of the interview with Brown[48], Johnstone's words are, given the methodical nature of his book, minded towards the instruction of others engaged mid-performance rather than post hoc self-reflection. He describes the technique of referencing earlier material and events within a single performance as a method of (re)connecting to an audience, a call back that builds a communal sense of understanding. As Johnstone is advising stage actors it can be safely assumed that, in the majority of cases, they are able to construct their narratives through the use of language during a performance. As an instrumentalist, Brown's opportunities to access language as a method of forging a connection to his past, to narrate the act of music-making, can only take place outside of the present[49]. Considering the differences in the approaches of Johnstone and Brown helps to enrich our understanding of what it can mean to improvise, in performance, together.

For Brown, this concept underpins the connection between musical action and dialogue. Facing the past as he moved towards the future was about more than just call-backs and connecting to an audience in the moment. He wanted to forge a connection to his personal heritage and to the environment that surrounded him (and that of his ancestors) through musical action. Brown did not see this as in anyway deterministic but as an opportunity to allow for meaning-making through improvised musical performance; to create a narrative between the people and environments of his present, his past and his future. The spiritual, holistic view of time that Brown outlines as a way of understanding his music shares something with Māori culture, as found in this *whakataukī* (proverb):

> *Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua.*
>
> I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past.

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[48] Peters describes the walking backwards… idea as Johnstone's definition of improvisation and as having "considerable currency" (Peters, 2017:233) within improvisation as he, Peters, defines it. Both Brown and Johnstone were working in academia in the 1970s although on opposite sides of North America, with Johnstone in Calgary and Brown in Connecticut. It is possible to imagine that their paths may have crossed although this seems unlikely. The walking backwards… concept predates them both through Benjamin and the Māori *whakataukī* detailed below, but it's application to improvisation seems to have arisen in Brown and Johnstone's thinking around the same time, although Brown was published first. Rather than concentrate on who first conceptualised its application to improvisation it is perhaps more useful to note that firstly, they both *do* apply the concept at all and secondly, the slightly different ways in which they do this. Brown's notion would seem to have a more spiritual dimension born from a desire for his music to connect and communicate, something he had in common with Māori culture. Whereas Johnstone seems to want to apply the idea in a more practical setting, as a technique for improvising rather than as a holistic, artistic vision.

[49] Some of his compositions included vocals with words which obviously affords access to language in performance. Here I am considering the choices he made as an instrumental improviser in performance.

This translation is taken from Lesley Rameka's paper on early childhood development and the implications for Māori children[50] as they enter schools which are not equipped with the knowledge and understanding that this proverb brings to bear on the Māori way of life (Rameka, 2016).

The emphasis on the individual's place in time and not just in space, as outlined by this *whakataukī*, criss-crosses with Brown and Carr's concepts of human experience[51]. Recognition of a personal history that connects the Māori to their ancestors and their ancestral homes is an acknowledgment that:

> "[t]he past is central to and shapes both present and future identity. From this perspective, the individual carries their past into the future. The strength of carrying one's past into the future is that ancestors are ever present, existing both within the spiritual realm and in the physical, alongside the living as well as within the living." (Rameka, 2016:387)

This is central to the Māori concept of *whakapapa*, the idea that all those who exist today are connected to all those who have existed along a continuous thread. It is at the very heart of what it means to be a Māori and, for Rameka, of upmost importance in recognising "how the past, present and future influence the [Māori] child; respecting the natural environment; and recognising Māori ways of knowing and making sense of the world" (Rameka, 2016:391). This view of narrative recognises the impact of human actions on the environment, whilst at the same time recognising the role that our environment plays in shaping our own lives. It is not only representative but a part of how we experience the world. This is what Brown means when he says he is a man walking backwards into the future; and what it means, for him, to improvise.

Inherent narrativity

Whilst the combined works of *…Georgia Faun* address both the narratable and inherently narrative aspects of music-making, Brown seems to be most concerned with the narratable. He wished to

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[50] And the implications for those tasked with working with Māori children.
[51] Brown's concept does not necessarily draw a conclusion about human nature as a whole, but his belief that his methods were appropriate for all artists suggests the transferability of his ideas.

exercise his right to be the first and most accurate critic and tell the story of his music through text and conversation. Brown held the conflicting views that musicians should be the ones to describe their music-making, whilst at the same time saying that musical action was not wholly describable through ordinary language. What follows then, in the remainder of this chapter, are a series of examples which offer opportunities to consider an alternative to the problem raised by Brown's dilemma; the idea that music-making can create meaningful narratives through action alone. In the spirit of Wittgenstein my investigation is concerned with not only describing the context of a practice but examining the enacted uses of music within it. To progress this investigation further I want to suggest that both of Brown's appeals to narrative outlined in his interviews with Turner—as a way of enriching meaning after the fact and as a formal device—are potentially problematic. Brown clearly felt that he was telling his narrative through both his text and music, although he considered "the language of music" (M. Brown, 1973a:29) as being very different to written or spoken dialogue. He is confronting the problem of representation when he says that written and spoken language alone cannot adequately reflect the 'musicalness' of music (Porter, 2002). Brown suggests that there are things which belong to the world of music which do not have equivalents in language, therefore constructing an adequate narrative to represent them through language alone would seem to be an insurmountable task.

Richard Walsh, approaching the same problem from a background of narrativity theory, begins from a position similar to Brown saying that, unlike stories, music is thought of as being fundamentally un-representational and that narratology is "necessarily inadequate for the task of describing music's distinctively musical features" (Walsh, 2011:50). As he continues to dissect the narrative devices employed by musicologists, Walsh identifies two distinct strategies which can be aligned with Brown's own approaches to narrative and with the problem of narrative representation more generally. Firstly, Walsh identifies a structural approach which "provides for considerable interpretive flexibility in the identification of units of meaning in music" (Walsh, 2011:51). The structure of a piece of music provides the temporal development and boundaries which Walsh says are fundamental to narrative cognition. Whilst Walsh does not necessarily have improvised music at the forefront of his mind, a parallel is easily drawn with Brown's loose structuring of *Afternoon of a Georgia Faun* as providing the required temporal boundaries here. Although Walsh feels that this mode of the narrative of music is able to evade criticism up to a point, the lack of specificity in the translation of meaning to musical form leads to the possibility of multiple subjective interpretations by an audience. This is, Walsh feels, too vague and thus music requires a second, higher contextual strategy to reveal its narrative potential. The second strategy Walsh identifies is one that "incorporates both musical event and

interpretative response" (Walsh, 2011:51). Again, Walsh and Brown appear to be in alignment at this point. Walsh's representative account of a composition—or an improvised performance if we translate it to Brown's practice—accompanies the musical event and builds on the semiotic and formal aspects of it through a written explanatory narrative. The style that the narrative takes does not matter to Walsh, "what is necessary is just that [it] capture[s]…a formal pattern in the music" (Walsh, 2011:52). *Afternoon of Georgia Faun* (the recording), Brown's liner notes and his expanded commentary in *View and Reviews* align with Walsh's description of this hermeneutic strategy, with perhaps the additional caveat to acknowledge Brown's roles as both artist and narrator[52].

Walsh says that there is still a danger for those wishing to draw a link between music and narrative, for theoretical or artistic reasons, that music may not, in reality, fit within either the structural or hermeneutic models he has identified. In order for the relationship between musical events and narrativity to be solidified, Walsh says that music must be seen as being "capable of establishing a sense of narrative intentionality, rather than just being narratable in the same way as any other event" (Walsh, 2011:52). Text-based representation alone does not satisfactorily link music and narrative rather, Walsh says that the key to this connection is that narrative description and musical action are both articulated in time, "they give structure to the flux of experience" (ibid:56). There are similarities and differences between Carr and Walsh's theories of human experience which are worth highlighting here. Carr says that "writing is a time bound process" (D. Carr, 2018:71), the central theme of his paper on hindsight, an idea that he attributes to Laura Stark. Whilst Carr might disagree with Walsh when he says that some events are merely narratable, pointing to the inherent narrativity of human experience, he would appear to agree with Walsh's recognition of narrative description as being *in* time.

Walsh expands on this notion saying that music and discourse are grounded in our understanding of rhythm as a feature of communication which he says predates language, and music as we understand it today. As humans we are, Walsh says, rhythmically entrained, somatically, through the synchronisation of the disparate rhythms of the body (heart rate, rate of breathing etc.) This rhythmic entrainment consists of two parts which straddle involuntary human response and conscious choice. They are phase correction, realised through "our general ability to synchronize action with an

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[52] As opposed to the narration being provided by a third party, a critic for example.

anticipated event" (ibid:59), and period correction, a uniquely human trait of being able to adjust behaviour to a specific tempo of a beat or pulse. Walsh's explanation is reminiscent of Husserl's concept of protention, that our anticipation of the near future is an inextricable aspect of human experience. Crucially, for Walsh, rhythmic entrainment leads to the ability to comprehend and relate to external events and imagine our role within them. There is a welcome synchronicity to be found between Walsh's invocation of the body's daily rhythms, Carr's narrative structuring of everyday experience and Wittgenstein's illumination of the ordinary.

Deepening the connection between music and narrative—and also providing a link with Wittgenstein's view that language is not founded in semiotics—Walsh continues, suggesting that the protomusical events that enabled rhythmic entrainment are a vital part of human development and must have predated and informed our development of language[53]. Therefore, he says he is obliged to engage with the debates of protolanguage and declares that he must side with either the atomistic or holistic viewpoints. Atomists, Walsh says, believe that language has its foundations within a lexicon. Walsh sides with the contrary, holistic view, that early linguistic interactions were an expression of emotive force rather than symbolic reference, in part because it is "hospitable to the view that language and music share a common foundation in a protocommunicative form of expression" (Walsh, 2011:54). This is the idea that our earliest communications expressed our desires and aims rather than helping us to name objects[54]. As with rhythm, he feels we are narratively entrained through social interactions to first recognise the goal of others intuitively (empathy) and then to consciously help them to achieve it (sympathy)[55]. This decentring of the self not only helps to form and maintain social bonds, but, for Walsh, it is at the heart of narrative cognition. Understanding, he says, is facilitated through the anticipation of the goals of another and the conception of how we may help to bring them about, even if we choose not to act. Walsh's dependence on linguistic theory need

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[53] Gary Tomlinson's book *A Million Years of Music* (Tomlinson, 2015) goes further than this, suggesting that the foundations of modern, musical understanding predate the emergence of *Homo sapiens*. That the prehistoric developments of our early ancestors' bodies, communities, actions and protolanguages have directly shaped music today.

[54] Wittgenstein's opening to *Philosophical Investigations* imagines an Augustinian world of words where "every word has a [fixed] meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands" (§1). Countering this understanding of our use of language is what underscores Wittgenstein's project.

[55] Empathy and sympathy can both play a significant role in 'successful' group improvisation where the goals of others and the role in helping to achieve them must be balanced with an improvisers own desires as well as the ensemble as whole (Nicholls, 2012, Peters, 2009).

not exclude his ideas from this thesis as I wish only to draw attention to them as an example to think through, not as the basis for any objective conclusion.

Walsh finds common cause between music and narrativity, as our protomuscial and protonarrative behaviours give way to ostensive behaviours and iconic representation. His primary interest, as a narrative theorist, remains in using the understanding of the connections between music and narrative as a way to "enhance our understanding of the cognitive and communicative force of narrative in general" (Walsh, 2011:55). He concludes by saying that music and narrative share a bond: "a relation to the articulation of temporal affect" (ibid:66) but that they do this in different ways.

> "[W]hile music elaborates upon this in a systemic, experiential mode at the cost of intentional specificity, narrative elaborates and objectifies its sequential structure at the cost of the immediacy of systemic immersion." (ibid)

Perhaps within Walsh's idea of a (modern) musical event, namely the performance of a composition, there is no way for music to be anything other than immediate and unspecific. However, improvised music practice has the potential to address some of these inadequacies in light of the more fundamental, experiential temporal connection to narrative highlighted by Carr and Walsh himself. By providing a detailed description of my own practice I want to show how meaning in improvised music-making can be engaged with this discussion of narrative. How an understanding of the specifics of a practice can reveal a narrative intentionality through musical action such that we can come to understand something about human nature. Through the consideration of the specific performances detailed below I hope to show them as not just narratable events but as events which have an inherent narrativity.

The first bassline I learnt was the synth bass part from Herbie Hancock's Chameleon. I was around twelve years old. A friend copied it onto a cassette tape which had come free with a medical journal his dad subscribed to. The body of the cassette was off-white with a pale blue label. There was the obligatory Sellotape covering the holes along the top edge allowing discussions about haematology to be replaced with 70s jazz fusion.

At first the tape only contained Chameleon and Watermelon Man, both from the Head Hunters album. Over time, more music was added, generally things to be learned for our band. I played that tape over and over, listening and playing along myself trying to master the intricate groove in the second half of Chameleon and the double stops of Watermelon Man.

Gradually, I absorbed the playing of Paul Jackson, Harvey Mason, Herbie Hancock, Bill Summers and Bennie Maupin through car stereos, boomboxes and my Walkman, finding any opportunity to play the tape. The soundtrack of my summers.

Afternoon of a Georgia Faun was recorded three years before Head Hunters and also features Bennie Maupin on various woodwind instruments. Marion Brown's afternoon in Georgia begins with what he describes as the sound of raindrops before wooden flutes enter to suggest the animals of the forest.

As I sit and listen to …Georgia Faun some twenty-five years after I first heard Bennie Maupin, I can't help but recall the sounds that open the Head Hunters' version of Watermelon man. Instead of Brown's imagined Georgia afternoon I am imagining my own summer afternoon. A childhood afternoon when that off-white and blue cassette and the music on it became a fundamental part of my musical present and future.

I am not thinking of a specific afternoon but, like Brown, I have a feeling of a time and a place. Brown's narrative for …Georgia Faun does not match the one I'm creating in my head, but the sense of a memory of somewhere and somewhen is difficult to escape from. The timeless quality of eternal childhood summers is felt then and now.

A few days after this listening experience I saw the news that Paul Jackson had died. Once again I'm thrown back to those summers spent studying his playing. Once again I'm reminded how music can enable connections through time and space to yourself, your friends and musical heroes.

[Marion Brown's Afternoon of a Georgia Faun | teenage summers | Paul Jackson | conversations with bass students]

Narrative musical events

Before finally turning to the descriptions of my own practice I wish to briefly consider what I have described as the inherent narrativity of musical events and how this is connected to one of the core narratives of improvised music, freedom. Firstly, I want to ask what it might mean for a musical event to have an inherently narrative structure and secondly, I wish to show how this narrativity can be demonstrated through the specifics of an improvised music practice. This section marks the end of the broader contextualisation of my practice and will allow me to move on to the specifics of my solo practice and *stillefelt* and address the question of what kind of music I play more directly. In the previous section I indicated that Brown and Walsh's views on narrativity in relation to music might offer improvised music practitioners a way of exploring freedom within time, even if it is not possible for them to escape the unwavering linearity of objective or 'real time'[56]. In this section I want to explore this idea further. By responding to past musical[57] events through their enacted musical agency, improvisers have the potential to alter the significance of those same past events. This is an understanding of the freedom of improvisation as being within a meaningful negotiation between the present and the past, one that makes possible a future. A consideration of this concept is fundamental in establishing my method as a solo practitioner. I will come to describe this aspect of my practice in the next chapter as being the "general" and "specific" bits. Within the practice of the ensemble *stillefelt*, this concept took on an added significance during the four-day residency which is the subject of the Chapters 3 and 4 and the piece *Alone (together)* which makes up the final chapter of this thesis.

Many practicing improvisers are concerned with the problem of freedom. Much of the discourse around their practice centres on what freedom means in a musical context: improvisers make it up as they go along, they are free from the constraints of composition, free to play whatever they want, to create something out of nothing. The focus of those who take this view is on what might happen, on how something new may be created in a performance; and this affects their relationship with the past. This view considers the past to be fixed and determined and therefore an undesirable exploratory avenue when considering the freedom of their practice. An unfixing of the musical narrative of the past offers an alternative to the view that history remains fixed and therefore redundant in the search

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[56] I will return to the concept of 'real time' later in Chapter 5.

[57] Non-musical events which impact on an improviser's musical decisions are part of this too in the sense that they make up the bits and scraps of their practice. Attempting to account for all non-musical events would make for an unnecessarily complicated version of the argument under consideration at this stage. I will return to non-musical events and their impact on my practice in Chapter 2 (solo) and Chapter 5 (ensemble).

for newness and freedom[58]. Continuing my investigation in the Wittgensteinian spirit suggests a way of addressing this assumption and reconsidering the idea that an improviser's relationship to their past is objectively determined. One example I wish to consider illustrates the idea that events of the past do not necessarily have a fixed meaning, Danto's concept of 'narrative sentences'. His view, which he explores in the key chapter of his book *Analytical Philosophy Of History*, is that through a philosophical analysis of the language we use in relation to past events, we can come to understand something about our concept of history. He says that "we are always revising our beliefs about the past, and to suppose them 'fixed' would be unfaithful to the spirit of historical enquiry" (Danto, 1985:145). Despite his rejection of ordinary language philosophy[59], Danto is philosophically closer to Wittgenstein than he admits. The argument I wish to make here is that through a philosophical analysis[60] of the relationship between past and present musical events we can come to understand something about the concept of freedom within the practice of improvisation and discover its potential as a narrative making activity.

As I alluded to in Introduction 2, Danto's concern is with accounting for the philosophy of history. Like Wittgenstein, he is examining the use of language but a fundamental difference between the two arises through Danto's desire to draw universal conclusions from specific examples; Wittgenstein would consider such a stance as meaningless, "language on holiday" (§38). I wish to reiterate my commitment to avoiding a blanket, theoretical approach and instead provide the consideration below as part of the criss-crossing of examples to think through which this thesis holds at its core. Danto gives the name "narrative sentences" to the type of phrases which he wishes to analyse. His concept is most easily understood through the pre-eminent example given in his chapter of the same name. Danto says that the sentence "The Thirty Years War began in 1618" is a sentence "which refers to the beginning and the end of the war, but is about the beginning of the war" (1985:152). This sentence can only have been uttered after the end of the war. No one witnessing the events in 1618 could know that the war which was just beginning would last for thirty years, or that it would be referred to as such in the future. Following Danto's idea, it would have been impossible to have said in 1618 "The Thirty Years War has just begun" as there was no way of knowing, at the time, of the historical significance of those same events.

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[58] See the *Slime Mould Improvisers* interlude below for some examples of improvisers who think this way.
[59] See Introduction 2.
[60] In the Wittgensteinian sense.

For Danto then, the use of narrative sentences as a way of understanding history means that the significance of an event can only be fully determined in retrospect. Simultaneously, an event is always open to a revised understanding through further historical study or through the discovery of new historical evidence or artefacts. There is no way for us to fully determine the significance to the historians of the future of an event which is happening in the present. Danto takes this idea further and uses it to argue for the basis of a philosophical enquiry of history, to try and show that narrative sentences say something about how humans understand history. This is a problematic view on several levels which reach beyond the scope of my thesis[61]. However, reconsidering narrative sentences as addressing *a* problem not *the* problem, as Diamond and Wittgenstein would suggest, allows an adaptation of the theory to suit my purposes. What if Danto had used his example to only make a claim for our comprehension of The Thirty Years War? Would he have said any less about human understanding? More pertinently, what can Danto's method help to explain about the historical narrative created by improvised musical events? The following example of the relationship between *Blue* (Mostly Other People Do The Killing, 2014) and *Kind of Blue* (Davis, 1959) demonstrates how Danto's method can address *a* philosophical problem and make connections to several others.

The reason for choosing this example is that, whilst it may not have had the impact on European societies of the Thirty Years War, one of the most significant events in the history of jazz was the recording and release in 1959 of Miles Davis' *Kind Of Blue*[62]. The album still sits atop best-seller lists and is frequently cited by fans and musicians from across the spectrum of music as a perennial influence or favourite album. The album's current status could not have been so easily predicted at the time of its creation, something which seemed like a remarkably ordinary event for some of those involved. Drummer Jimmy Cobb, who played on *Kind Of* Blue, said of the recording session that "[t]he call I got from Miles for that record was just like any other record. He'd say we've got a date, where it is and what time it is—I didn't know if it was *Kind Of Blue* or *Kind Of Green* at the time, you know?" (Kahn, 2001:95) The other musicians involved seemingly shared Cobb's view: "In later years, [pianist

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[61] It is generic in its application, it only considers history documented in a certain way by a certain group of people, it makes broad claims for a philosophy of history as a whole whilst being presented from a Western viewpoint, etc.

[62] To talk of the significance of *Kind Of Blue* is not to recognise its significance to me as an individual or to comment on its artistic merit. It is a recognition of its significance in terms of its impact on the jazz and improvised music community and beyond. It is not my intention to further enhance Miles Davis' canonical status (although this is perhaps unavoidable) as that is problematic in itself. However, few other recordings, in and out of the jazz world, have had the same impact in terms of sales, column inches and cover versions. My wish, if it is possible, is to use *Kind Of Blue* as an example of a moment that has become significant to a lot of people. A past event that is able to be reinterpreted through musical action alone. An opportunity to recognise an understanding of what it is to be human and how improvisers can begin to deal with that problem.

Bill] Evans recalled that 'there was a good feeling on those dates. But I really had no idea—I don't think anybody did—that it would have the influence and duration it did'" (ibid:145). Following Danto's method, it is only in retrospect that the sentence "the seminal album *Kind Of Blue* was recorded on 2nd March and 22nd April 1959" can be uttered. It would not have made sense for any of those involved in its creation, or anyone else for that matter, to describe its impending significance at the time. This narrative sentence refers to what *Kind Of Blue* has become and to its beginnings, but it is about the events which brought it into fruition.

However, it is not the linguistic narrative but the musical narrative which is most crucial in appropriating and applying Danto's method as an example to think through. Fifty-five years after the recording of *Kind Of Blue* the band *Mostly Other People Do The Killing (MOPDTK)* attempted to recreate that album as accurately as possible through transcription and repetition of performance and recording techniques. Their 2014 release *Blue* caused a certain degree of controversy upon its release, possibly due to a misunderstanding of *MOPDTK's* intentions by the fans of the original album. Comments on the *Soundcloud* page which hosts the *MOPDTK* version of the track *All Blues*—a track which features on both albums—are a mixture of praise, criticism and outrage. The most striking posts fall into the latter category:

> "Wow. What a huge waste of time and effort. Congratulations for the dumbest idea of the year and the squarest playing ever in the history of jazz"
>
> "Nice try, though I wonder why, but it's not even close."
>
> "yeah its pretty much pointless! why would u buy this? when u can get the real deal?"

(Comments from: https://soundcloud.com/bk-music-pr/all-blues-mostly-other-people-do-the-killing)

The fact that these commentators apparently did not get a sense of *MOPDTK's* intentions for the project by listening alone does not mean that it is true that the music of *Blue* is lacking in inherent narrativity. Their disappointment at the project only underscores the point *MOPDTK* were trying to make about the continuing significance of *Kind Of Blue*. That is, the way it is held up as an exemplar of jazz practice through its preservation of a moment in time, a moment which seemed unremarkable to those who were involved but has come to mean so much to so many. *MOPDTK* bassist and bandleader Moppa Elliot recognises the controversy, but in an interview with *Time Out* states that their intention was "not to piss anyone off. If we'd wanted to do that there were plenty of other things we could have done" (Cohen:2014). *MOPDTK* are certainly capable of intentionally causing annoyance should they

have wished to do so. Their approach to music-making runs counter to the conservationist views of the people whom Elliot regards as the gatekeepers of jazz.

Instead, Elliot's thoughts about pianist Ethan Iverson's writing on *Blue* shed light on both the purpose of the album and the reason for its inclusion as an example here:

> "I think it seems pretty obvious that people are going to react negatively, like "Oh, this is a copy of Kind of Blue that is stupid and exploitative," and not bother to think about or look into what it actually is…The one person I always read is Ethan Iverson, who's done two posts about [the record]. First, he wrote that it was a great idea and he wished he had thought of it and when you have a strong reaction to a piece of art you're validating the art. Then he did another post where he was actually pretty critical of it. He talks about how our version doesn't swing, which I actually agree with. On the one hand, I'm not Paul Chambers and Kevin is not Jimmy Cobb. Their pocket is ridiculous. So I read Ethan and I thought, Oh, man—Ethan doesn't think we swing on this record. But it's like, we're not trying to swing on this record; we're trying to make a copy." (Cohen, 2014)

The strong-reaction-equals-validation argument is of less importance in the matter under consideration here, but it is important in setting up the final sentence of this quote. A slight expansion of that sentence reveals its nature as a narrative sentence: "we're not trying to swing on this record [*Blue*]; we're trying to make a copy [of *Kind Of Blue*]." The additional words do not change the nature of what Elliot is saying, instead they highlight that the sentence refers to both *Blue* and *Kind Of Blue* but it is about *Kind Of Blue*, matching Danto's definition of a narrative sentence.

Recognising Moppa's comments as a narrative sentence does not add anything new to Walsh and Brown's identification of the narratability of musical events. Where this example differs is that it is not necessary to read Moppa's comments in order to understand the narrativity of *Blue*. Familiarity with *Kind Of Blue* and its history is more than enough preparation to garner meaning from listening to the music of *Blue* alone; examining difference, marvelling at the complexity of both projects, foregrounding the human moments that make *Kind Of Blue* unrepeatable and hearing *Blue* as a way of understanding why that is the case. Extending this principle to the act of recording and releasing *Blue* says something about the nature of improvisation in the project through the unfixing of past

events through musical action and the narrative of freedom. *Blue* could not have existed until after the recording and release of *Kind Of Blue* in 1959. Arguably it would not have even been attempted until some years after this date when the full impact of *Kind Of Blue* and its significance as an event had been realised through its rise in popularity. To attempt to recreate *Kind Of Blue* before the events of 1959 would have been non-sensical even if it were possible. To return to Danto, no one could have predicted The Thirty Years War, or named it as such, before 1618 (or any time before its conclusion). Even if they had their utterances would have likely been ignored as unintelligible. The music contained within *MOPDTK*'s *Blue* refers to both itself and *Kind Of Blue*, but it is about *Kind Of Blue.* The act of recording and releasing *Blue* is a narrative musical event; a musical event which refers to itself and a past musical event but which says something about the significance of the past musical event through the enacted freedom in the present of the musicians involved. The freedom of the musicians is evident in their choices to pursue the project at all. Their lack of deviation from the original recordings further demonstrates their choices; at any moment they could have chosen to digress from one of the 'original' solos, for example. *Blue* is an example of how music-making can be more than just a narratable event, it can be inherently narrative and, as such, allows for understanding through the experience of musical action alone.

Even with years of listening, transcribing and practising, *MOPDTK*, by their own admission and as Iverson et al. have observed, could not accurately recreate the events which became the album *Kind Of Blue*. No one could, and that was their point. By undertaking and completing this project they have said more through their musical actions and limitations about the significance of *Kind Of Blue* (both to themselves as individuals and to the jazz community as a whole) than has been expressed by even the most eloquent of jazz historians and commentators. They have addressed two key narratives of jazz and improvised music, canon and freedom, through musical action alone. No further linguistic contextualising of *Blue* as a project is required other than familiarity with *Kind Of Blue* itself and a recognition of its significance to you as an individual and/or the wider music community. Thinking through the example of *Blue* can reveal, through its inadequacies and short-comings, part of the reason why *Kind Of Blue* has become so significant to so many people.

Interlude: Slime mould improvisers

Another philosophical consideration which arises from using Danto's concept to address the specific example of *Blue* and *Kind Of Blue* is to ask what would the alternative look like? Or, more specifically, how does one go about attempting to improvise music not defined by its relationship to past events? As I have made clear, context is at the heart of how I wish to define my musical practice. Direct and indirect reference to past musical and non-musical events in the present is essential in revealing the narrativity within my practice and creating a possible future for it. As future events make the transition to becoming moments of the present and then the past, they serve to enrich the palette of ideas available in the moment of action in an improvised musical performance. In order to clarify this position and address the issues raised above, I want to imagine a contrary stance, one where past events are actively ignored by improvisers wishing to search for freedom and newness. In this quest an unlikely candidate oozes forward as we delve into the fascinating world of slime mould.

A yellow pulsating mass of insatiable organic matter perhaps seems like a far-fetched analogy for improvised music practice. Slime mould, *physarum polycephalum* or "The Blob" are terms which refer to a group of single cell organisms, some of the few single cell organisms which are visible to the naked eye. Slime mould apparently displays some quite remarkable characteristics for an organism with no central nervous system, appearing to make choices, solve problems and remember—and ignore— things about its past. Individual slime mould cells are capable of binding together with each other in the search for food, thus increasing their chance of success. Millimetre by millimetre the slime mould expands and contracts hunting for bacteria, yeast, fungi and porridge oats, the slime mould's favourite laboratory food.

Under laboratory conditions it is possible to see how slime mould behaves. Whilst it may seem odd to describe a single cell organism in terms of cognition, the way these moulds 'behave' has been presented as a primitive form of intelligence. In the quest for food, the mould is capable of solving quite complex mazes (Earth Labs, 2018) or accurately mapping out Tokyo's transport system (No Director, 2010). It does this by discovering, through its relentless exploration, the most optimal route it can towards a food source. As "The Blob" slowly expands and contracts it creates an arterial network. This process has a dual purpose, helping it to continue the hunt for a food source whilst concurrently recording its previous investigations. These networks never overlap as the slime mould

is apparently capable of recognising itself through its own chemical signature, it never repeats its actions. The patterns it can create through this process are a wonder in themselves, reminiscent of an outline of a row of tree branches against a winter skyline, all rendered in garish yellow.

Once a new source of food is discovered, almost all of the slime mould's energy is diverted into moving itself along the most optimal route towards its goal[63], hence its ability to recreate transport links effectively. As it does this, the previously explored paths disappear into obsolescence leaving behind traces of extracellular slime which act as markers, ensuring that the slime mould does not waste energy by revisiting its past. This primitive form of memory drives the slime mould away from where it has been to pastures new in a constant search for a food source (Reid et al.:2012). Slime mould's altruistic nature is revealed through its fertilisation method, where the creation of its spore capsules is fatal to the mould itself. Once its food source is exhausted slime mould can jettison spores in a process which means the end for that particular blob, but ensures the continuance of its slime-line (Briggs and Peat, 1990:139).

Individual cells of slime mould are capable of gathering together in groups to create a cohesive whole and use a process of exploration in order to achieve their/its goal, the quest for food. Once slime mould discovers the best route to feeding itself the majority of its resources are diverted into sustaining that pathway, all the while continuing its exploration for its next food source until its eventual need to spawn and its subsequent death. Any inefficient investigative paths are regarded as redundant and the slime mould has no desire to revisit, revise or re-contextualise its past. Whilst the behaviour of slime mould may not be the perfect analogy for the practice of improvised music as a whole, viewed in this way it does serve to highlight a certain, idealistic approach to musical improvisation, one which is opposed to the idea of finding meaning and freedom within the events of the past.

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[63] Slime mould's goal is singular, it must find food to sustain itself. Its entire life cycle is geared towards achieving this. Its ability to self-organise is its only strategy for survival so it is not comparable to more complex organisms who need more complex strategies in order to respond to changes in their circumstances (Fox Keller in Turkle, 2007:306). Despite its simplicity "it is undoubtedly a versatile and fertile object-to-think with" (ibid), an everyday something in which we can find difference, allowing the possibility of philosophical thought to begin.

For the purposes of this analogy the appropriate term for these fictional idealists would seem to be *slime mould improvisers* due to the characteristic behavioural traits they share with *physarum polycephalum*. The goal of *slime mould improvisers* could be best described as the creation of a novel event through improvised musical activity, one which begins from nothing and contains only previously unexplored musical ideas. Once a musical idea is felt to be exhausted it is abandoned by the *slime mould improviser*, its death signifying the moment to continue in a new direction. Like the slime mould itself, a *slime mould improviser* has no interest in revisiting, re-engaging or re-contextualising their past. Let's imagine that their practice is interested in achieving 'total musical freedom' through improvisation. In short, the goal of the *slime mould improvisers* is 'newness'.

In the search for 'newness', the *slime mould improviser* rejects previously explored musical ideas, paths and self-perceived creative cul-de-sacs in the same way slime mould ignores its extracellular slime trial memories. What remains is the most direct route to 'newness', enacted as the *slime mould improvisers'* performances in which they only play what they have never before played. At the end of their performances *slime mould improvisers*, along with their musical actions from the event, are jettisoned away, like the slime mould's spores, until landing at the start of the next occasion when the whole process begins again; a process which might be described by audiences, promoters, critics and the *slime mould improvisers* themselves as free improvisation. In this instance the freedom in the *slime mould improvisers'* practice is equated with the search for newness. Alleviated from the burden of repetition and reinterpretation of their pasts, they are free to explore 'new' musical possibilities. Except that, by constantly shirking their past, the *slime mould improvisers'* behaviour is every bit as deterministic as the slime mould's itself. The slime mould will always be driven away from its past in order to find the most direct route to its food, as the *slime mould improviser* will always be driven away from their past in the pursuit of 'newness'. They will never escape the logic of inclusion/exclusion identified by Moi; choosing to ignore past events necessarily entails the recognition of very thing they wish to escape from.

It is likely that no pure example of a *slime mould improviser* exists. The presumably exhausting task of constant musical reinvention is enough to discourage even the most ardent seekers of 'newness'. It is hard to imagine an experienced improviser who could constantly reinvent their relationship with their instrument so as not reference their (or its) past. Perhaps the closest thing to a *slime mould improviser* is a person who, upon discovering their chosen instrument, attempts to make music for the first time;

"mankind's first musical performance couldn't have been anything other than a free improvisation" (1992:83) as Derek Bailey pointedly observed. However, the language of the *slime mould improviser* permeates through the narratives of freedom in the practice of free improvisation as it exists and is relayed by some of its practitioners, commentators and audience members. Bailey's own conception of "nonidiomatic" improvised music being a prime example that seeks to justify the rejection of the past in the name of free musical action.

Fred Frith asserts that you "learn to improvise not by being full of ideas, but emptying yourself of them" (2010:130). Frederic Rzewski likens the process of improvisation to garbage removal "constantly clearing away the accumulated perceptions of the past, so that it becomes possible to move ahead at all" (2002:379)[64]. John Corbett, in his *Listener's Guide to Free Improvisation,* follows the heading "What Is Improvised Music?" with this definition:

> "Improvised music is made using improvisation. Simple enough. In this book, unless
> otherwise specified, the term is used in its purest form, sometimes referred to as free
> improvisation, freely improvised music, free music, spontaneous music or instant
> composition, in which improvising alone and no other means—like using a previously
> written score, or remixing, or otherwise monkeying with time in which the music is taking
> place—is utilised." (2016:xii-xiii)

He asserts that this description constitutes "plain old unadulterated free improvisation" (ibid:xiii) a phrase which makes the logic of inclusion/exclusion profoundly clear. The slightly glib tone of language he uses and the simplification of the issues at hand is doubtless a by-product of Corbett's desire to create new audiences for the musicians he is passionate about. However, these statements become equally as meaningless as the goal of the *slime mould improviser* when those same musicians, and new listeners, wilfully ignore the 'garbage' of their musical and personal past. They also define free improvisation in a way which is diametrically opposed to how I understand freedom to manifest itself in my own improvised music practice. The past moments of my personal, musical history are vital in creating the context for improvised musical action. Furthermore, in an ensemble setting, as we shall

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[64] See Chapter 2 for an alternative approach to dealing with waste as demonstrated by Nicholls, Klein and Peters.

see later on with *stillefelt*, remixing, written scores and monkeying with time all become part of the framework within which musical action can be narratively and meaningfully expressed.

Chapter 2

Celebrity deaths on Twitter; how improvisation can begin before it starts

Scott Walker and starting from scraps

"It's going to be a Scott Walker kind of a day." – A Facebook friend's post from 25th March 2019

"The career of Scott Walker, who has died aged 76, followed one of the most extraordinary trajectories in popular music." – *The Guardian* 25th March 2019

An article written for *The Independent* in 2016 claims that that year was "characterised by a long list of high-profile celebrity deaths" (Osborne, 2016). Even a cursory glance at *The Independent's* list reveals the names of Prince, George Michael, Carrie Fisher, Alan Rickman, Harper Lee, Muhammad Ali and Leonard Cohen as being amongst those who passed away. At the time, news of these deaths was often mediated through peer sharing on social media, as fans of the deceased expressed their grief. Posts, like the one above taken from Facebook, became a way of sharing news as well as demonstrating a connection to or love for the person who had died. As someone who was active on social media that year, I witnessed what appeared to be a steady stream, sometimes daily, of announcements that another incredibly famous person had died. Rather than a plain statement of the facts, these posts often took a form similar to the one above, where the words being used required a contextual understanding in order to fully comprehend the sentiment. All of which explains why, when I saw my friend's post about Scott Walker, I understood immediately what the implication of it was and went to check the news for confirmation. Sadly, I was right.

I have to admit to being late to Scott Walker's music, but I have really grown to love it, in particular his work towards the end of his life. Whilst my own artistic journey has been nowhere near as stratospheric as Walker's, the trajectory of his career from accessible pop musician to music which could be described as much less mainstream—as outlined in his obituary in The Guardian—resonates with me. His desire to continually challenge himself artistically is something I admire and find inspiring.

His fascinating 2014 release *Soused*, in collaboration with another of my musical inspirations Sunn O))), continues to be a particular favourite of mine, which might explain the Twitter notification I received later on 25th March, the day Walker's death was announced:

Tony Dudley-Evans is a well-known British promoter, music-lover and friend with whom I share a lot of musical interests, among them Scott Walker and Sunn O))). We previously attended the Sunn O))) performance at the Royal Festival Hall in 2015 together, so perhaps it is unsurprising that he had mentioned me in this particular tweet. Tony has supported my music for as long as I have lived in Birmingham, over twenty years. The reason[65] for including this example in my thesis is that in 2019 he was working with Andrew Woodhead in the programming and running of the series of improvised music nights known as *Fizzle*. Scott Walker's death and Tony's response took place the day before I played a solo gig at *Fizzle* on 26th March 2019 (hereafter referred to as 'the Fizzle gig') with Tony in the audience. I want to use this example of my practice to explore the idea that an improvised musical performance can begin before it starts through the process of compiling "bits" and "scraps" of musical and non-musical information as the basis of a personal, musical history. Subsequently, I will return to the idea that a musical action taken in this context can be understood to be both a narratable event and a meaningful, sense-making narrative act through an understanding of the "general" and "specific" bits of my practice.

Starting from scrap—the beginning

My practice is based on improvised musical performance, it is a communal process which both affects and is affected by its environment, an environment built around its musicians and audience members. As I remarked upon at the beginning of my exploration of narrative, both Tilly and White consider the

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[65] A reminder: "when most people take reasons seriously, those reasons arrive in the form of stories" (Tilly, 2006:95).

act of creating a narrative to be intrinsically moral[66]. If I am making a claim as to the narrativity of my practice it is important then to think through the potential moral considerations more comprehensively. What are the ethical implications of improvising music together? In her book *An Ethics of Improvisation* (2012), Nicholls uses what she sees as the democratic freedom of improvised music-making as having a use beyond the practice itself; as a model for a more positive and socialist political landscape. "In essence, a performative notion of community reminds us that community is not something we have, but something we do—together" (Nicholls, 2012:148). Nicholls says that in improvisation there are ethical considerations to undertake and compromises to be made, for, as with all dynamic communities, "embracing a dialogical model of music-making is most obviously about power-sharing" (2012:149). Nicholls is making an argument for improvised music practice as a political model, as a way of facilitating democracy, of making room for every voice. For Nicholls, the application of that power is best modelled through the enacted process of improvisation.

The dangers of arguing for improvisation as a political model are made clear by the discussions around the ethics of improvisation. Lydia Goehr highlights how we easily make assumptions by contrasting "democratic" jazz music and improvisation with music from the "authoritarian" European classical music tradition[67] (No Director, 2008). Assuming that humans are collectively striving for freedom and democracy[68], it becomes all too easy to descend into a moral dialogue pitting "good" improvisation, with all its assumed freedom, against "bad" western classical music, and its apparent obsession with adhering to rules and leadership. Nicholls is engaged with this debate, but her position is more nuanced than a simple "jazz is good" statement. For Nicholls, improvised music-making is not inherently less evil than any other form of music-making; but rather, it provides a good example to think through when considering the reformation of our political system. She argues for a political transformation and, in referencing Naomi Klein's 2007 book *The Shock Doctrine* (Klein, 2008), states that we do not simply need new leaders to fix what she perceives to be our political problems. Instead,

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[66] See footnote 24.

[67] Both of these examples ignore non-Western musical traditions, with their absence reflecting a wider issue of a lack of diversity in discussions about both musicology and democracy. In musicology this has recently begun to be addressed through Ewell's 'outing' of the racism of Schenker (Ewell, 2020) an attempt to confront the accepted narrative which underpins Western musical analysis.

[68] This is a big assumption, but a necessary one to make here when understanding how improvisation can be drawn into questions of morality. Clearly, there is a wider debate to be had about the ethics of this assumption: whether this statement is true, what that freedom and democracy might look like, whether they are the equivalents etc. In the interest of the readability of this thesis I have chosen to leave this thought as a footnote so as not to distract from the central point which I am trying to make here about the perils of moralising music-making.

she points to the enacted process of improvisation as having "the power to suggest visions of new social realities" (Nicholls, 2012:165) through creative collaboration built on the scraps of ideas in the environments which already surround them.

Nicholls argues that reforming the political system is not a case of 'wiping the slate clean' but doing what she perceives improvisers as doing, interrogating past ideas and building upon them. She agrees with Klein's view that whilst the desire to create a "shiny" new future may sound appealing, it can lead to morally repugnant ends. In the short video *You Can't Always Start From Scratch* Klein summarises the idea of starting afresh as an "anti-human idea" (Klein, 2007). The cleaning of a slate, the beginning again from nothing is "the ideology that has rationalised the great cleansings, the great genocides. And we need to identify it as a dangerous ideology" (ibid). As an alternative Klein has "[developed] a philosophy that is the opposite of starting from scratch, which is *starting from scrap*" (ibid, my italics). Both Klein and Nicholls express a desire for a "rusty [future]…cobbled together from the scraps we can salvage from the present" (Nicholls, 2012:164-5), as opposed to the anti-human, unachievable, utopian ideology of the shiny futurists (represented by my *slime mould improvisers*).

Nicholls choses to close her chapter on *Improvising Communities* with Klein's thoughts, suggesting improvised musical practice is an example of starting from scrap. That improvised musical performance creates communities from the salvaged scraps of the present and, thankfully, very rarely involves genocide. The relevance of this philosophy within this practice of an improvising musician is in reversing Nicholls' argument and making "starting from scrap" a potential model for thinking through improvised musical practice that foregrounds and clarifies its context.

Bits of improvisation

My artistic practice differs considerably from the *slime mould improvisers'* approach to music-making. I embrace the scraps of my past and present musical and personal history to make possible a future through musical actions; actions which are bound to, informed by and contribute to their ever-expanding context. In order to better understand this, it is important to examine exactly what

constitutes a "scrap" in the context of my improvised music practice. Throughout the discourse of improvisation both practitioners and commentators use the words "scrap" and its synonym "bit" frequently. Bass player Dominic Lash (Lash, 2011) describes the fragmentary motifs notated as practise exercises by Derek Bailey as "bits" which can be heard throughout his 1967 record *Three Pieces for Guitar*, amongst many other recordings. Peters' discussion of the scraps surrounding Benjamin's vision of *Angelus Novus* and Keith Johnstone's notion of the improviser also cites the television show *Scrapheap Challenge* as displaying "some fundamental principles of creative practice…[and that] in common with our television contestants, all improvisers[69] must face the demand for a work from within the confines of a limited material universe" (Peters, 2009:10-11). Again, in *Improvising Improvisation* (Peters, 2017), he discusses Bailey's practice in a chapter entitled *Bits and scraps*, which references Lash's work on Bailey's practise diary archive.

Writing in *Views & Reviews*, the companion piece to the record *Afternoon of a Georgia Faun* (M. Brown, 1970), saxophonist Marion Brown offers an explanation of the intention behind his practice and, more specifically, the recording in question and how it relates to the narrative of identity he is creating. The album consists of two pieces, each covering one side of the record. The first piece shares a title with the album and the piece on side two is entitled *Djinji's Corner*[70]. In the transcribed interview with John Turner which makes up one section of the book, Brown draws attention to these bits: "I have stored bits of melodies, along with other memories, away in my mind; and, when necessary, I can call on them as reference to past things" (M. Brown, 1973a:20). In explaining his practice and "by connecting his physical skills as an improviser (that is, his technique) to his cultural memories and identity, he asserts that improvisation, as the height of Black musical expression, connects the artist to his people" (Porter, 2002:249) something which is foreshadowed in the Māori concept of *whakapapa* discussed in Chapter 1. In contrast to the *slime mould* improvisers, there is a recognition of a personal and musical past in Brown's work. This is both the 'bits' of melody and the 'bits' of the story he is trying to tell through his music and writing.

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[69] A reminder of Peters' intention to create <u>The</u> *Philosophy of Improvisation*.

[70] *Djinji's Corner* is a reference to Brown's son, Djinji, and was "written to welcome my son into the world of music that I live in" (M. Brown, 1970). Clearly his approach worked as Djinji Brown went on to become a musician himself and paid homage to his father's tutelage; in 2014 he released an EP titled *Djinji's Corner* (D. Brown, 2014). His 2002 album *Sirround Sound* (D. Brown, 2002) contains the track *Papa Marion's Fight*, a montage of a recording of his father recounting his battle with a brain tumour overlaid with a recording of his saxophone playing. In the recording Brown describes how his son had asked the doctor to operate in order to save his father's life. This brief but poignant track combines Brown's music and words to tell the story of a father and son's love for music and each other.

One of the 'bits' of Brown's practice which demonstrates that narrative is the incorporation of non-expert musicians to take part in the recording process, as demonstrated in the piece *Djinji's Corner*. This is Brown's attempt to simulate his conception of traditional African societies where "music functions as a unifying force that binds people, artistically and culturally, to a set of values that are passed on orally" (M. Brown, 1973a:3). Part of this process involves the creation of small musical instruments, made by the musicians themselves, that require "no great skill" (ibid) to play and are built from "miscellaneous pieces of scrap that can only be assembled by the builder" (ibid:9). Brown exemplifies Nicholls' social model for improvised musical practice by literally connecting scrap to the emergence of an evolving community. His practice also points to the preparation involved in improvised music, where "bits" are collected together in advance of the start of a performance, be they bits of melody or scraps of instruments or the participants themselves. These actions are undoubtedly connected directly to the performance (in this case a recording) in question but are not widely accepted as being part of the/a improvisation[71]. They fall outside of the communally agreed notion of an event of improvised musical performance, a happening defined by its start and end times, but are vital in considering the process of starting from scraps and the narrative that Brown is trying to create.

The examples of Brown, Bailey and the *slime mould improvisers* help us to explore the idea that improvisers need not ignore their own personal and musical histories in order to act freely and meaningfully. In relation to my solo practice, I want to examine the idea of collecting together 'bits' that occurs in advance of the start of a performance, to say that this is when the improvisation begins. In order to do this, I will divide these 'bits' into two distinct categories: general 'bits' drawn from my personal practise i.e., what I practise (akin to Brown's 'bits' of melodies) and specific 'bits' relating only to individual events. I consider it to be possible for 'specific bits' to change in nature to become 'general bits' in the future but, as I will use the Fizzle gig to illustrate, I feel that their inception is temporally linked to a specific event. To better explain the practice of collecting together 'bits', I want to make a distinction between the beginning and the start of a performance.

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[71] Watson's description of Derek Bailey as a kind of composer of people (Watson, 2013), in relation to his organisation of his *Company Weeks* concert series, is another example recognising the impact of the actions and decisions made before the start of improvisation on the improvisation itself. In my own practice I have always been more interested in choosing people to work with based primarily on their musical personality and our social relationships. *Gonimoblast* is an example of a band I set up to explore those relationships more thoroughly, through improvisation, and also to introduce guests into the musical conversation in order to provoke a different internal dynamic.

The beginning vs the start

A fundamental part of my artistic practice is live performance; opportunities to improvise music-making in a room with an audience. Performances provide a context in which to describe the meaning of musical actions, this is where the work is done. However, thinking through performances in detail as they are happening is not always practical or possible for the performers themselves. Documenting improvised performances in comprehensive ways which do not hinder the music-making is one of the problems I am engaged with throughout this thesis. The Fizzle gig is one such example of how I chose to explore this problem. Firstly, I made an audio recording of the performance. Secondly, I took written notes of what I perceived to have happened, my thoughts and interpretations both before and immediately after the gig. Finally, I conducted a further analysis of the recording together with my notes some days after, so that I might reappraise the events unhindered by the urgency of the act of performing itself. While reviewing my documentation of the Fizzle gig, it became clear, for reasons I outline below, that the focus of my investigation should be the origins of this improvisation.

When considering the inaugural moments of a musical performance, Peters separates the "beginning" from the "start" in reference to musical works involving both composition and performative improvisation. Composed music, he says, "must be finished before it can start" (Peters, 2017:8). The work's origin, its beginning, takes place long before the musicians start their performance of it; when the composer conceives of it and begins to create, and complete, a musical score (work) for others to follow.

> "Compare this to an improvisation, where instead of forgetting, obscuring or secreting the above prehistory beneath the lustrous sheen of a pristine 'work' and the virginity of its commencement, the start almost always precedes the beginning (if indeed there *is* a beginning)" (ibid).

Peters is saying that for the work to begin in improvisation, for it to be "happening", the musicians must have already started improvising. This is not equivalent to the moment when the musicians start to play (by making sounds) as much as the sense of recognition amongst those involved, musicians and audience members, that the process of improvisation is underway; it has begun.

The caveat in Peters' definition, the "almost always", allows for the possibility of an improvisation to begin before it has started[72]. The Fizzle gig is an improvised performance which unlocks the potential for narrative sense-making through the temporal recontextualisation of musical and non-musical events. It is a recognition that this method can offer, without contradiction, a way of preparing to improvise freely. To clarify this, I have divided the bits of my practice into two key areas. Firstly, 'general bits' deals with the accumulated techniques, equipment and experiences that have gained familiarity through repetition, and with which I am bound to approach any musical situation. These are things which, generally, are not related to a specific performance. One exception to this is when a 'specific bit' makes the transition to becoming a 'general bit', when an occurrence from a single performance finds a way to become part of my general practice. Secondly, the 'specific bits' are those bits which arise from individual events and relate to specific performances, being distinct enough to be memorable as having their origins in a definite moment in time. The dynamic relationship between the specific bits and the general bits allows for connections to be made between the present and the past, facilitating the possibility of creating a narrative through contextually situated musical actions.

General bits 1: technique and pedals (and pedals and techniques)

In his book on listening to freely improvised music, one of the attributes that Corbett suggests new audience members try and observe is the personal vocabulary of the individual musicians. "Each player amasses a range of techniques and sensibilities that can be described as a sort of lexicon" (Corbett, 2016:86). He reinforces this point with reference to trombonist Günter Christmann who "has explained that although you can find all sorts of weird and wacky sounds to make on any instrument, the job of the improvisor is to really deeply examine the potential squeaks, hisses and rasps he or she feels connected to, and to develop a special vocabulary based on those sounds" (ibid:88). Considering how improvisers obtain their special, personal vocabulary in the way that Christmann describes is helpful in coming to understand what I mean by 'general bits'.

Improvisers and commentators alike often use terminology more appropriate to the description of language when discussing the act of improvising, as the examples I took from Denzler and Guionnet's interviews in Chapter 1 have shown. Likewise, jazz musicians and commentators readily embrace this

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[72] Something he later acknowledges, see below and (Peters, 2017:145).

way of describing their practice, referring to the musical phrases, rhythms and harmony associated with their idiom as "language". You need to be able to decode, learn and speak their language (both musical and verbal in this instance) to communicate with other jazz musicians and jazz audience members. Ingrid Monson's widely cited work *Saying Something* (1996) makes this point explicitly in its title and throughout, drawing parallels with the way jazz musicians speak and how they improvise. Through its performance, Monson allows for (jazz) improvisation to communicate much more about its practitioners than Brown or Bailey claim for their own music. Like Lewis (1996) she argues that, through improvisation, musicians communicate something about their cultural identity, and that this is achieved through the music's language in performance.

Thinking about the context in which these analogies with language are used helps to clarify their appeal in describing improvisation. The implication of Corbett and Christmann's use of language is that of the individual as having a place in a collective. The idea that someone can develop a personal vocabulary implies that there is a collective vocabulary through which they feel they cannot adequately express themselves. The sense of 'place' is meant here as more than physically being somewhere. It is the grounding of an individual in a culture, in a community, in time, in a context and for Wittgenstein in a language that implies a "form of life" (§23)[73]. Wittgenstein says that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (§19) because speaking and writing a language is a communal action that must be embodied. By identifying the development of an individual voice within the broader community of improvised music Corbett, Christmann and others who analogise improvised music practice and language are describing a form of life. The development of individual lexicons says something about those individuals whilst inextricably connecting them to the context within which they make music. This is their personal, musical history, what I have identified as being the 'general bits' of my practice, something that embeds it in the context that shaped it.

This section deals with the development of that vocabulary in my practice, taking specific examples to show how I understand the process as a whole. When reflecting on their individual practising, their pre-performance preparations, both Brown and Bailey describe the process as the accumulation of a language in the sense described above. Discussing his solo playing, Bailey outlines the development

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[73] Wittgenstein uses the term "forms of life" throughout *Philosophical Investigations.* In §23 he is discussing participation in language games and says that "Here the term "language-game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life." (§23) I will return to this concept below.

of material as "building a personal vocabulary and working to extend it in both performance and preparation" (1993:106)[74]. He later refers to part of this vocabulary building as "the normal basic technical practise, the musical equivalent of running on the spot" (ibid:110). Marion Brown describes his practising as "technique, acquired through laborious years and hours of practice [that] make possible the realization of what is remembered of past experience" (M. Brown, 1973a:6). Both musicians recognise the importance of the role of personal practise in the development of a context to improvise with or within 'general bits'.

The deep, lengthy and ongoing relationship I have with the bass guitar, through both my practise and practice, has led me to extend its sonic possibilities through the use of multiple effects pedals and software patches. Brown describes the "necessity of creating new sounds" (M. Brown, 1973a:3) in relation to expanding the vocabulary of his own practice and his creation of new instruments; "there can be no 'new-music' without new instruments" (ibid:10). In my practice this necessity has led me to explore the potential offered by combining the bass guitar with effects pedals. I prefer to use individual pedals, as opposed to a multi-effects unit, each with its own signal processing characteristics. This modular system can be altered before, during and after a performance, through signal routers or by physically repatching the interconnecting cables. Using individual pedals allows me to spend time exploring, practising with, just one pedal at a time. This helps me to learn a pedal's characteristics and quirks and understand how it might interact with my other pedals and my bass playing, becoming part of the overall aesthetic I am trying to create[75]. Through this process these

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[74] Here is the contrast with his earlier insistence that erecting telegraph poles is the only way to communicate.

[75] For an illustration of how this process manifests itself in my practice listen to the beginning of *Part IV* on CD 1 from the *Gonimoblast* album *Live* (2017). I had spent some time in my practise sessions playing with the Boss DD-7 delay pedal. I initially bought this pedal to be able to control the delay time, in real time, using an expression pedal with my feet which gives a rather pleasing digital squeak. The pedal also has a function which allows you to create a loop of around 30 seconds. Whilst practising with this pedal I found that creating quite a short loop of around one or two seconds could create interesting rhymical patterns. By gradually feeding the recorded loop in the pedal more and more short notes and sounds through overdubs, complex phrases begin to emerge over the top of the original phrase. The DD-7 gradually fades out the originally recorded phrase (in a musically satisfying way) as more and more layers are added and as the memory of the pedal becomes full. As the original loop begins to disappear, so does the original point of reference and the ideas which have been added take on a new significance and suggesting new rhythmic possibilities whilst remaining connected to the initial idea.

I had worked on this in my practise sessions but this is one of the first examples I can remember of this technique coming out in a performance. It occurs approximately thirty-six minutes into an hour-long performance which had, until that point, been quite dense as the ensemble sought to find a direction with our guest Maja S.K. Ratkje. As the other musicians dropped away I remember wanting to start from a small idea and gradually build into something new, hence the DD-7 short loop idea made the transition from my practise to a performance and became part of my wider practice. I am actually using two DD-7s on this recording. The second loop which emerges around the 4:20 mark was created on the second pedal and then I faded it in over the top

pedals become part of the 'general bits' of my practice as I develop a history with each pedal individually and collectively. They are as much a part of my instrument as the bass guitar itself; my sound is not solely based on the acoustic qualities of the instrument, it incorporates the entirety of the signal chain from bass to pedal board output[76].

Preparation is not uncommon among improvisers. Lash gives one such example of this, found in one of Bailey's notebooks in which he recorded ideas to practise, or things he was practising. With reference to his set up of using two amplifiers in combination with two volume pedals[77] he writes: "[p]ractise: Fast pitch osc[illation] with slow pedal movements + slow p[itch] o[scillation] with fast p[edal] m[ovements]" (Lash, 2011:145). Lash continues, "it seems that Bailey's intention with his stereo setup was not to increase volume but to gain an additional musical resource that could interact with more conventional resources such as pitch" (ibid). This exploration of extended sonic possibilities can be heard throughout much of Bailey's work in the 1970s, one specific example being the album with Anthony Braxton *First Duo Concert* (Bailey and Braxton, 1974). Martin Davison's 1996 liner notes for the reissue of this album make a reference to Bailey playing "a normal electro-acoustic six-string guitar augmented by stereo amplification, with the sound coming out of the two speakers controlled by two volume pedals" (ibid).

My exploration of various effects pedals forms what might be described by Bailey as the "search for whatever is endlessly variable, [for] the construction of a language, all parts of which are always equally available" (1993:106). I am interested in sonic ideas that have the potential to readily offer a rich vein of exploration in improvised performance. Contrary to Ian Carr's view that "[w]ith monastic vigilance [Bailey] tries to avoid the habitual side of playing" (I. Carr, 2008:70-71) he was interested in

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of the loop from the first pedal, adding an extra layer of rhythmic complexity. The whole thing then fades out into a long reverb tail as the other musicians re-enter.

[76] As my instrument relies on amplification in order to be audible in a live music context the signal chain is naturally extended into the amplifier I'm using, the PA, the venue, the stage set up etc. For the purposes of this thesis I have chosen to mark the end of my pedalboard as the end of the signal chain. Partly this is because I have spent time developing my sound so that the type of amplifier being used is of less importance to me than the rest of the signal chain, and partly because of the limitations on this thesis.

[77] A volume pedal is exactly what it sounds like, a volume potentiometer operated by a foot pedal. This is one of the simplest ways to electronically manipulate sound using an effects pedal and, although the electronics of modern pedals can be vastly more complicated, the fundamental musical principles in this context remains the same. That is, the exploration of how the sound of an instrument that is traditionally played with two hands can be manipulated using foot-controlled electronics.

practising ideas which he felt could potentially be subjected to endless variation during performance as a way of moving the music forward, keeping the performance "happening". The habits accrued through the practising of various technical and sonic exercises gave Bailey the facility and control to engage with free improvisation in such a way that he is widely considered to be one of its greatest exponents. These habits can become the vocabulary that improvisers use to develop the narratives that they wish to tell.

Carr's statement about Bailey reinforces the latter's place in the free improvisation canon and helps to perpetuate a commonly held[78], core narrative, that newly improvised musical ideas arrive mid-performance from nowhere. Avoiding the habitual, for Carr, involves a degree of self-control akin to religious zeal for which Bailey is to be lauded. Carr points to what he sees as Bailey's devotion to a lack of preparation as the ultimate sign of his commitment to free improvisation. This is a narrow view which heads in the direction of the *slime mould improvisers* and undermines the preparation work which Bailey undertook, as documented in his various writings on the subject. Broadening descriptions of improvised music practice to include the various preparations undertaken by the musicians, as I am suggesting here, helps to clarify what it means to improvise. As with Diamond's example of 'Messiah', offering an alternative explanation does not automatically render existing definitions meaningless; nor should the existence of a single definition preclude all others.

Like Bailey, spending time preparing with effects pedals has become part of the musical, personal history I draw on in performance, becoming available along with other musical ideas or memories. The repetition of ideas and material through practise and preparation does not have to be contradictory to the idea of a freely improvised performance as Carr seems to suggest. Rather it is, I believe, a fundamental part of creating a coherent improvised performance based on a narrative of freedom. Control, and self-control established through practise, enables me to enact what I believe to be the most appropriate musical contribution to a freely improvised performance, to "mobilize strategies that keep the work happening" (Peters, 2009:60). Without control, the notion of developing a collection of 'general bits' within which to improvise remains an impossibility. The lack, or ignorance, of an historical context to refer to during performance would lead back to the world of the *slime mould improvisers*, starting from scratch and genocide.

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[78] See the *slime mould improvisers interlude* and the examples from (Denzler and Guionnet, 2020) at the start of Chapter 1.

Control comes from spending time practising with individual pedals as well as practising technical exercises, scales and rhythmic development; the things that Bailey describes as the musical equivalent of running on the spot. Due to a formative musical background which owes more to the Western classical tradition and jazz education than anything else, some of these exercises and techniques have been with me for many, many years becoming part of the 'general bits' of my practice as a musician and improviser. These 'general bits' are present at the beginning of any improvised solo performance I undertake as part of my practice. They are there, in the beginning, before the start of the performance. Furthermore, in combination with 'specific bits' they make up an individual improvised performance which starts from these scraps. The 'general bits' of my solo practice are habitual developments reflecting my musical and personal history. Whilst there is some fluidity, new technical exercises or a new pedal on my pedalboard, the overwhelming majority of 'general bits' have come from a lifetime of music-making. This, in my solo practice at least, is the root of improvisation, in the preparation, something Peters ultimately concedes is possible when he says that "the improvisation in a sense begins before the live event itself" (Peters, 2017:145).

General bits 2: laptop and sound files

In solo performances, alongside my pedal board set-up, I use a laptop and various software patches which I have created in the programme MaxMSP—as well as those created by others—to further extend the sonic range of my bass guitar. I originally began using MaxMSP as a way of replacing my expensive habit of acquiring effects pedals but, through development in practise and performance, its current use has become the further manipulation of the sound outputted from my pedal board. In solo performances I have most recently been using a patch called *ppooll* (Figure 1), the creation of which is attributed to a member of the Max community named Klaus Filip[79]. *ppooll*, like my pedalboard, is also a modular system which allows the user to create a collection of individual effects (such as granular synthesisers, reverbs, delays and loopers) and to route the sounds they produce between each other in dynamic ways[80]. This patch is the latest in a series of patches I have used and,

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[79] https://ppooll.klingt.org/index.php?title=Main_Page

[80] Although I have been using MaxMSP for many years and *ppooll* has been in existence long before I began using the programme. I became aware of its existence some time into my MaxMSP journey after watching a Christian Fennesz solo performance on YouTube in 2017 (Fennesz, 2015). I was intrigued by the sounds he created as well as by the shots of the screen of his laptop that showed the interface for *ppooll*. After some quick Googling I discovered what he was using and downloaded it to try for myself. This process is a part of the 'general bits' I am describing in this second instance, something which was not initially directly connected to my own musical action but has come to be part of my practice.

Figure 1

The *ppooll* patch I use in solo performance. See Appendix 5 for a high-resolution version of this image.

partly because it was created by someone else, is slightly beyond my expertise and control to the point where it can illicit genuine surprise through the sounds which are outputted. As a soloist, I use performative digital technology in this way to compensate for the lack of what Bailey describes as the "unpredictable element usually provided by other players" (1993:106).

Using a method similar to the way I practise with effects pedals, I have spent time developing various iterations of my laptop set up before settling on this version for the Fizzle gig. Prior to this performance I had also begun to use *ppooll* to process audio recordings from previous improvisations I have been involved with, both solo and from ensembles, to create textures and sounds which form part of new solo improvised events. I use the source files of multitrack recordings to pick out sections of my own playing as well as that of other musicians from the ensemble[81]. The use of MaxMSP, my laptop and my collection of sound files undoubtedly contributes to the 'general bits' of my practice as the preparation (editing, patching, combining etc.) has happened in advance of any specific performance.

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[81] This 'general bit' of my practice became very important during the *stillefelt* residency (see Chapter 4) as a way of considering narrative links between the past and the present.

The sound files themselves provide a link to past events, the moments when they were played and captured for the first time, not only as subjective internal memories but as objective external digitally captured memories. This becomes explicit during performances as these moments are re-played, re-heard and responded to, highlighting the significance of both the past moment and the present action. The description of this "bit" of my practice reveals not only a way of understanding musical freedom in my practice, within the past, but it foregrounds the possibility that musical action has the potential to create narratives. A present reaction relates to a past event but it is about the past event, altering the past event's significance through its foregrounding as a re-played sonic scrap.

Specific bits

The description of the 'general bits' in my practice suggests one way that improvised musical actions can create a narrative of freedom in performance, where enacted muscial events take place in the context of my musical and personal history (with those events being subsumed themselves into that history). These 'general bits' are part of what enables improvisation to begin within my solo practice. Peters says that the work of improvisation begins at this point.

> "An infinite multitude of artworks never managed to mark the unmarked space from which they are intended to be liberated-from, but freely improvised performances *have* to begin precisely because that is their primary role within the aesthetic: to make a distinction between something and nothing." (2009:36)

If we take Peters' position and accept that the beginning *is* the work then it must be considered how it is possible for solo improvisers to produce works (beginnings) that have the potential to be markedly different from one another, to create novel narrative musical events. The beginning must consist of something other than the 'general bits' of my practice. To return to Nicholls' reversed model, if, as a solo improviser, I am starting from scrap(s) and if those scraps consisted only of the 'general bits' of my practice, then we could quite justifiably expect each improvisation, each work, each event, to contain a high degree of similarity. If the practice of an improviser could not evolve or be influenced by external and unique events, then there would be a struggle to develop new ideas.

Clearly this is not the case, as anyone with even a passing interest in improvised music will be able to testify to. Countless recordings and performances from solo improvisers demonstrate this and, to relate it back to the topic under discussion here, this is also reflected in my own practice. By listening back to recordings of two separate performances I have given it is possible to observe two very distinct improvisations. This is something I did as part of my research for this thesis, comparing the Fizzle gig to another solo performance from several months prior. To account for the differences I had noticed by documenting my solo performances I broadened the search for the 'bits' of my practice, taking into account the 'specific bits' or moments that related directly to each performance. Occurences which I felt had made an impact on the beginning of these improvisations and, therefore, helped to shape both it and my practice. Thinking of these beginnings as individual works, as Peters suggests, is helpful in distinguishing between the start of performances themselves and recognising these 'specific bits'.

What constitutes the 'work' of improvised music is also something which concerned Brown. His thoughts on the subject reveal something about his understanding of individual events or works. When considering whether an improvised musical performance should be thought of as a "valid work of art" (M. Brown, 1973a:7) in comparison to composed music, Brown believes that we should approach his music—in this case *Afternoon of a Georgia Faun*—rather differently. "How it sounds is a result of *where* the participants were in August 1970. It is *what* you have to work with rather than what you do as work that is siginificant" (ibid – my italics). The where and the what that Brown describes are parts of what I consider to be the 'specific bits'. That is, things which could be considered outside the 'general bits' of my practising, as described above, that have the power to influence a specific event, a beginning, and relate directly to it. I would also include the "when", recognising that, as Carr suggests, we are *in* time as well as *in* space; I do not think Brown would disagree with this. Examining the collecting together of 'specific bits' in my practice through individual examples highlights how an improvisation can begin before it starts. This idea plays a crucial role in consdiering improvised musical performance as both narratable and inherently narrative.

Returning to the title of this chapter, and the example given in the opening paragraphs, my interaction with Tony Dudley-Evans before the Fizzle gig is a clear example of how I understand the process of improvisation as beginning before the start of the performance. Although the communally agreed start was still over twenty-four hours away, I had already begun improvising, creating the work, by responding to a 'specific bit' related to that performance, Tony's tweet. This was outside of the

'general bits' of my practice and beyond my control. Events which are beyond the control of the performer are key to understanding what I mean by 'specific bits'. Goehr's concept of "improvisation impromptu", which she defines as "what we do at singular moments—*in the moment*—when we're put *on the spot*, particularly when we're confronted with an unexpected difficulty or obstacle" (2014) arises from the event of a broken violin string mid-performance. Although there is no broken string, Goehr's concept is also applicable to my solo performance. The nature of the improvisation was fundamentally altered in response to a change in circumstances, an unexpected event. Here I am taking Goehr's use of "in the moment" to be *a* moment, a narratable event, which occurred before the start of the communally agreed performance time, but which nonetheless was a part of that improvisation; it had begun.

As discussed in the 'general bits' of my practice, for solo performances I incorporate a laptop running the open-source MaxMSP patch *ppooll*, partly to replace the lost sense of the "other" which solo performance can induce. Here Goehr's idea of improvisation impromptu enters my practice more immediately, more in line with her notion of "in the moment" as I respond to the "obstacles" produced by my inexpert use of *ppooll*. In solo performance I am aiming to respond to the absence of other improvisers through the use of digital technology in this way[82]. As well as becoming part of the 'general bits' of my practice, my use of *ppooll* during the Fizzle gig highlights how 'specific bits' can contribute to an improvisation's beginning, becoming a narrative musical event.

As I have integrated a laptop running MaxMSP into my solo set up, made it a 'general bit' of my practice, I have explored different ways of implementing it; as a sound source, a sound processor and as a way of expanding my sonic capabilities. In a solo setting, the audio files I use as sound sources

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[82] The absence of fellow improvisers in a solo context has led me to explore other avenues to create the possibility of surprise, so that I am not simply reliant on surprising myself. The dynamics of my relationship between my actions and the response of *ppooll* are hard to predict but, obviously, not entirely random. This sense of surprise is explained by Borgo through complexity theory. He describes complex systems, ensembles of improvisers, as "those that exhibit neither too much nor too little order. Their dynamics are hard to predict but not entirely random. In short, they offer the possibility of surprise" (2007:4). To some extent this is what I am trying to emulate through my use of digital technology in solo performance. This added complexity, while not a direct replacement for an ensemble performance, goes some way towards emulating it in terms of how it "feels" for me as an improviser, in the moment of group performance. I will return to complexity, complex systems and Borgo in relation to *stillefelt* in Chapter 4.

have, until the beginning of the performance under discussion here, all been taken from recordings of ensemble improvisations I have been involved with in the past. They provide a link to my personal, musical history and, by reusing them in a different context they become the basis of, or inspiration for, further musical ideas. During performance the sound files I have preselected often become mangled to the point of being unrecognisable through the software I use and my lack of control over it. Part of the way I have set up my performance patch in *ppooll* is to allow for these new inflections to occur from the "fixed" moments of the past, the source sound files.

My use of the laptop and *ppooll* in this way has developed from the combination of an accumulation of sound files and a search for new ways of processing them. For the Fizzle gig I chose, in this instance, to extend my collection of past personal moments by including sound sources with which I had not been a part of creating, namely Scott Walker's recorded output. Until this performance I have never included sound files taken from other artists. Indeed, I had no desire or plan to use someone else's work as a part of my own in advance of the beginning of this improvisation. My decision to do so was a response to the events leading up to the start, Scott Walker's death and the notifications I received on Facebook and on Twitter from Tony Dudley-Evans. Thinking through this example, I found I was able to say something about the significance of Scott Walker's death to me, about my friendship with Tony and about the community (narrow and wide) my practice is situated within without the need for written or spoken language[83] but through improvised musical action.

On the day of the performance, several hours before the start, I was away from the workspace where I usually make music and prepare for gigs. I had my laptop with me, so between the other things I had to do that day I listened to some of my favourite Scott Walker recordings with the intention of recording extracts for inclusion in the folder of source sounds I use on my laptop. I tried not to think too deeply about which parts I chose, taking only fragments which caught my attention, and saving them as source audio files alongside my bank of other pre-selected sound files. As with the compilation of the other 'general bits' of my practice, I had no expectations of definitely including this material in this specific performance (or any subsequent one). However, I wanted the opportunity to

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[83] The recordings I chose from Walker had lyrical content, but the processing applied to these extracts (reversing, filtering, chopping etc.) rendered the words, in the most part, unintelligible.

do just that if I felt it was aesthetically and musically appropriate during the course of the performance. This preparation was a necessary part of the improvisation.

Whilst engaged in an improvised musical performance, improvisers receive new (most often musical) information and have to choose how to respond to it, even if that response is to ignore it entirely or do nothing. Peters says that an expert improviser will formulate a response that sustains the improvisation, based on their experience as an improviser, their immediate environment (including other musicians), what has happened and what might happen. In this expanded definition he says that:

> "the virtuosity of an improviser should not be measured in terms of technical mastery but, rather, in relation to an ability to create or mobilize strategies that keep the work happening, even if this requires sacrificing oneself and one's precious hard-won talents to the continuity of the work—the virtuosity of sacrifice" (Peters, 2009:60).

Tony became part of this improvisation, regardless of his intention, through his communication. In receiving this information within what I perceived to be the temporal horizons of a specific improvised performance, I chose to view it as I would a musical contribution. The response I formulated helped to 'keep the work happening', an improvised a response. It became one of the 'specific bits' of this improvised work, a narratable event which also revealed the potential to understand musical action as something which has the ability to create a narrative. In the above quote Peters is referring to how virtuoso improvisers might behave *during* performance, how they might respond to the other musicians, audience members and the environment in helping to keep the music happening. In the case of this improvisation, a strategy was mobilised to keep the work happening *before* the start of the improvised event but after it had already begun. Although I am not making a claim for my virtuosity as an improviser, many years of working this way have undoubtedly given me some of the musical skills and experience for this scenario to be familiar and to enable me to act in the way that Peters is describing.

The use of audio recordings in my practice as both a 'general' and a 'specific' bit demonstrates that, whilst it is possible to consider that the start "almost always" precedes the beginning in improvised music, there are clearly instances where this is not the case. Considering the opposing view—including

the specific musical actions and context of my practice as I have described it—gives an example to think through when considering how improvised music-making is engaged with the narratives of freedom and identity. What I am suggesting is that it is possible for musical action to construct its own narrative without the need for an accompanying spoken or written explanation, given a detailed understanding of the context of those actions. Tony commented after my performance that he had understood why I had included the Scott Walker recordings, even though we had not discussed this element in advance of the gig. Unlike Peters' definition of a composed musical work, this performance's end occurred simultaneously at the finish of the performance, not before the start. And, in the end, it was Scott Walker who had the last word, with the first few notes of *Brando* from his 2014 collaboration with Sunn O))) echoing round the performance space.

Two audio files which relate to the Fizzle gig can be found in the OneDrive folder "Digital Appendices". I have included a recording of the full performance (Appendix 6 - approx. thirty minutes) and an edited version (Appendix 7) which consists of the final ten minutes when I began to use the samples taken from Scott Walker. These recordings were made on a handheld audio recorder and are therefore not of the highest quality. However, they do capture something of the essence of the performance discussed above such that now would be an appropriate time to listen to either the full or shortened version.

Chapter 3

stillefelt fieldwork

Quiet Field

On Wednesday 23ʳᵈ October 2019, *stillefelt*[84] played the first date of a four-day residency at Artefact Café in Stirchley, Birmingham. The performances, discussions and reflections from that residency provided the basis for the next two chapters. I wish to use *stillefelt* as an example of a shared artistic practice which draws on scraps of musical and non-musical, individual and collective histories as not only a performance strategy, but as a way of exploring narrative through improvised musical performances. The collective 'scraps-book' of our shared musical practice impacts on the context in which it is created as well as being impacted upon by that same context. This contextual feedback loop is reflected in the way I will draw on the two ideas raised in the previous chapters of this thesis, of 'general' and 'specific' bits and scraps and narrative musical events. This chapter begins by defining the context of *stillefelt's* practice, taking in the nascent moments of the trio's inception. I will then move on to an exploration of how our performance methods have become established and, through their establishment, have helped to inform the aesthetic of the music we create. Here I will bring in moments from our post-performance discussions as well as Michael Taussig's thoughts on keeping and drawing in a notebook to examine and define our field of work.

The next chapter focusses on this residency too, building on the context and describing the details of a specific, very significant moment which occurred on the third day of our residency. By thinking through this example, I will draw on Moi's reading of the ordinary language philosophy of Wittgenstein, Austin and Cavell to show how we might find meaning in the ordinary musical actions which make up the practice of *stillefelt.* As a bridge towards this idea, I will consider why an appeal to

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[84] The lower case 's' is intentional and should be taken as being a synchronous reflection of the approach of this ensemble and its origins as a 'quiet' band. The name came from the idea of recognising the importance of international artistic relationships, of acknowledging musicians with similar aims, practices and intentions who are not part of our local scene. I have been drawn to the music of several Norwegian musicians and lucky enough to work with some of those I admire most. The word 'stille' is used throughout the languages of Northern Europe and can be understood as meaning 'quiet' (Norwegian), 'quietly' (Danish) or 'silent' (German, Dutch). 'Felt' is also a word which occurs in more than one language and in Norwegian can be taken to mean 'field' as in a field of research or an area of natural resources.

a scientifically minded explanation of improvised music practice—taking Borgo's use of complexity theory as an example—does not help to make things any clearer.

Firstly, an outline of the beginnings of this project will add some much-needed specifics to the context of this trio. A familiarity with the origins of *stillefelt* is a vital part of understanding how those fledgling moments continue to shape its work today. *stillefelt* was first formed in 2017, inspired by conversations with guitarist Thomas Seminar Ford (Tom[85]) which focussed on a set of loosely associated ideas for a new music project. The line-up of the trio is completed by me on bass (and laptop as this residency progressed, see Chapter 4) and trumpet player Percy Pursglove (Percy). Tom is a guitarist who has become known for his exquisite playing alongside his use of guitar effects pedals in live performances. He plays in such a way that calls into question the canonically accepted role(s) of his instrument; our practices centre around this common theme. We both share a curiosity in the possibilities offered by time-based audio effects including, but not limited to, various iterations of delay and loop focussed pedals. By 2017 we had become very familiar with each other's playing having worked together on many different musical projects over the course of several years. This also meant we had spent a lot of time travelling in each other's company, whiling away the hours by discussing music, politics, food, coffee and all the other things that musicians and friends find in common. In amongst those topics, effects pedals became a frequent source of discussion, including the merits and pitfalls of their application in the context of live performance.

A common thread Tom and I both recognised in these discussions was being asked (by other musicians) to supplement 'regular' playing with pedals and effects in contexts where they were not part of the initial considerations of a composition, project or aesthetic, but more like added sound-effects. We both play instruments of which it could be said that there are accepted norms in relation to their role within an ensemble, particularly within a specific musical context. The division of roles between 'lead' and 'rhythm' guitar players in a large number of guitar bands being a prime example. As a bass player who has spent many years playing and learning within the jazz tradition, I am aware of the history of my instrument's role in that context and the weight that jazz history brings to bear

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[85] The choice to use of Tom and Percy's first names for the duration of this text is not a sign of over-familiarity or a rejection of academic convention for the sake of it. Rather, it is a deliberate attempt to convey the sentiment that part of what constitutes the structure *stillefelt*, part of what enables us to function as an ensemble and create music in the way that we do is a result of our personal relationships. Formalising those relationships through the use of surnames alone would be to ignore our personal histories, something which runs counter to the underlying argument of my thesis that our interwoven narratives help to a create our musical context.

from musicians and audiences alike[86]. Monson summarises the jazz bassist's role in an ensemble setting in this way:

> "During a performance, a bassist can make three general types of interactive choices: playing time (walking), interacting melodically (or rhythmically) with the soloist, or playing pedal points underneath the ensemble texture." (1996:29)

While this does not comprehensively outline all the expectations of the role of the jazz bassist (and by extension, the jazz bass[87]) within a jazz ensemble, she articulates the wider sense of a hierarchy within the jazz canon, a hierarchy which has grown and been reinforced through countless hours of live performance, innumerable recordings and decades of critical writing. Attempting to meld the sonic and cultural expectations of a jazz bassist with the expanded sound world made available through electronic sound processing can lead to the instrument *plus* effects mentality described above, rather than the holistic approach that I have outlined in the previous chapter in relation to my solo practice. Tom and I recognised this shared problem arising in instances when we had been asked to bring our pedalboards into musical situations which were founded, in terms of compositional and aesthetic approach, on certain assumptions inherited from jazz's instrumental hierarchy. Whilst the creation of musical problems could be seen as the raison d'être for improvisers[88], it does not mean they can always be explored to the satisfaction of the musicians involved.

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[86] The 'expectations' in this context point to precisely what I am trying to convey about *stillefelt*'s practice. It is possible for individuals to make aesthetic judgements based on their experience of how they, and others, define and comprehend a particular context. In the case of jazz, there are some commonly held understandings about what constitutes 'jazz' music which have arisen from the practice of playing and listening to music together over many years. I do not wish to discuss what does and does not constitute jazz music, partly because I believe that there are no absolutes to be made in that discussion. A proper consideration of this problem would require much more space than I have available here. What is important in the context of this thesis is the recognition of individual experience in shaping how those judgements are made rather than an appeal to an objective criterion. For example, in order to make a judgement about whether a musician is playing jazz music, an audience member might draw on their own experiences of this rich history to form their own set of qualifying criteria. This is what leads to value statements such as "They sound like Mingus" or "They're not as good as Scott LaFaro" which are all too common when audiences or critics discuss jazz musicians. I will revisit this idea, of how a fuller description of the context highlights a challenge to established expectations, via a return to Moi's reading of ordinary language philosophy.

[87] It is important to make the distinction between player and instrument here. For example, jazz bassists can play the same notes and perform the same functional role on upright bass and bass guitar but in certain situations arriving at a gig with a bass guitar would be viewed as wrong or not appropriate for a jazz context. This is broadly dependent on how individuals' experiences of 'jazz' and how they define those boundaries and how they have been reinforced by this canonical hierarchy. See Dowdall (2019) which both describes and enforces the canonical aspects of the bass in jazz music.

[88] See Bailey's chapter on John Stevens' pedagogical approach: *Classroom Improvisation* (Bailey, 1993) as well as Stevens' own *Search and Reflect* (2007).

One of the initial concerns during the formation of *stillefelt*, along with determining who the group's members would be, became the continued critique of the traditional roles of all three of our instruments; guitar, bass and trumpet[89]. In practice, for Tom and I this meant focussing on the understanding of the totality of a signal chain (from strings to amplifier) as the instrument, rather than conceiving of the 'natural' sound of the guitar or bass as being processed by the other electronic devices present. This initial desire, arising from the discussions between us informed some of the other conditions which were decided upon at the beginning of the life of *stillefelt* and became part of the shared bits and scraps of our musical process. This brief story about the origins of our trio is more than a 'how the band got together' anecdote[90]. The choices we made in 2017 helped to form a framework within which those initial elements and ideas have been combined and recombined in acts of repeated public performance, specifically during the residency under discussion here. They continue to influence and be influenced by the performance environment. Through this process-led-practice, the bits and scraps that make up *stillefelt* interact in unpredictable and complex ways, enabling a musical narrative to emerge that is greater than the sum of its parts[91]; "it sounds like more than three people" (CM, Residency Discussions:67).

As well as the personnel choices and a mutual understanding of our 'instruments' there was one other aspect of *stillefelt's* shared musical practice which arose from our early meetings and remains influential on the group's practice. This trio is very much the work of all three of its members; it is not the *Chris Mapp Trio*, for example. Its name reflects a desire to differentiate this project from another project I initiated, the ensemble of improvisers *Gonimoblast. Gonimoblast* developed a way of playing such that there were often moments in that ensemble's performances where the overall dynamic of the band was quite loud for extended periods[92]. s*tillefelt* was established partly in response to this as an attempt to improvise at a different dynamic extremity. Whilst the collective name has played a significant role in other ways (see below) it is also an attempt to create a band identity rather than following the route that many improvised music ensembles take of using the names of one or more

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[89] All three of us have substantial training and performance experience within a jazz context.

[90] I would argue that, in a Wittgensteinian investigation, these anecdotes are pivotal to gaining an understanding of any band or ensemble anyway. My focus here, perhaps understandably given the nature of this thesis, is on *stillefelt*. However, the link between founding context and the music played is an excellent place to begin for anyone wishing to understand more about the work of a specific musician or group of musicians.

[91] The tense of this sentence reflects the fact that *stillefelt* is very much an ensemble that continues to perform and evolve beyond the life of the residency under discussion and, indeed, this thesis.

[92] Listen to *Gonimoblast Live with Maja S.K. Ratkje and Arve Henriksen* (2017): Disc 1, Part VI.

of its members as or in the name of the group. This, in part, helps to delineate the trio from the 'free improv' world where bands are often transitory and have no need for an ongoing collective identity[93].

Despite this shared desire for an equitable musical partnership, I have been the one to take on the initial (and ongoing) functional roles played by a bandleader: organising gigs, rehearsals, recordings etc. It is clear from our post performance discussions that both Percy and Tom see me as the driving force behind many aspects of the project, although not in a way which is necessarily detrimental to their own musical contributions[94]. Striking a balance between leading and creating a space for individual, musical expression has been one of my (our) hopes for this project from the start. During our first meetings—these were not strictly rehearsals, more of a chance to negotiate and share ideas— I brought along several short, notated musical ideas (see Appendix 1 for examples). My intention was that we should not play these 'as written' but use them as starting points to find a common ground from which to progress[95]. Tom recalled my intentions for these notated ideas in our discussions, saying that "you [Chris] said straight away "this is just ideas, I don't care if you play it". That was one of the early things that we were told, that you don't actually have to play anything that's written" (TF, Residency Discussions:42). The balance of direction and openness in Tom's words highlight the contrary musical practices within the context of this trio, the posing of a problem which we look engage with through musical action.

Over time these notated ideas became an integral part of the identity of our performances, they have become adopted into our musical practice. We have a book of music with my printed, notated ideas inside, labelled with numbers rather than titles, an object that we think through[96]. My hope was (and still is) that the physical book would become unnecessary in order for us to play together but the fact that it had existed would be something which binds us together. We were able to explore this idea

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[93] During our post-performance discussions all three of us felt that we had a sense of what 'free improv' was, that it has become a practice with an identifiable approach. All of us have had considerable experience performing within what we would consider 'free improv' contexts. We agreed that we don't consider the work we do as *stillefelt* to be part of how we understand a 'free improv' context, but that this does not necessarily mean that the act of improvising freely is excluded from *stillefelt's* practice. See Residency Discussions pp68-69 for one example of this discussion which reoccurs throughout our thinking about the ensemble both during and outside of our recorded discussions.

[94] This was another recurring theme throughout our Residency Discussions.

[95] See Schütz (1951) where he presents the argument that notated music lacks the ability to communicate meaning directly, or even to be completely specific in conveying a composer's original musical intentions. The minimal instruction on the notated parts used by *stillefelt* are invitations to the musicians to interpret the music through their own experiences and intentions, to improvise. Filling in what is missing is making music.

[96] See Turkle, 2007 for an account of how material objects can be a source for inspiring philosophical thought.

during our remote collaboration, the subject of the final chapter of this thesis. Throughout this residency we used these pieces as a basis for our improvisations, as touchstones or way-markers that strengthen our musical bond and provide a connection to our shared past; or viewing them as obstacles to react against, recognising our shared past by attempting to avoid repeating exactly what has come before. It would be possible to claim that these ideas constitute *my* compositions which we are playing or interpretating as, say, a jazz musician might use a piece of standard repertoire[97]. However, it has become clear through playing and talking together that, whilst the notated ideas appear to take the form of lead-sheet-like compositions, we do not always view them as linear structures to be repeated from first bar to last as a jazz improviser might. They can be conceived of as notated, rather than recorded[98], improvised musical statements; a thought represented through ink rather than soundwaves. As such, they are treated by us as ideas to be engaged with, played, ignored, re-interpreted or simply repeated, with each new performance extending the nature of any one notated idea beyond the notes on the page. There is no obligation to 'play the form' but an understanding that we are creating one from the materials at hand. In making these distinctions clear, in describing the practice of *stillefelt*, I hope to show how we are exploring what it means to improvise music together through collaborative musical action.

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[97] Marion Brown apparently used notated material in a similar fashion. His notated part for *And Then They Danced* in the appendices of his Masters thesis (M. Brown, 1976) contains only four bars of music totalling forty four notes and includes no other performance directions, such as dynamics, tempo, articulation etc. The recorded version on the album *Porto Novo* (M. Brown, 1975) is just over sixteen minutes long and deviates wildly from the written material such that it is not always possible to make a certain link between the music being played and the notated part, as you might be able to do with a set of repeated chord changes from a jazz standard, for example.

[98] In the sense of an audio recording.

I'd always assumed that the "quiet", "stille", aspect of the name *stillefelt* was the feature that defined our work more strongly than anything else. As if this reaction had provided both the impetus and the aesthetic. A desire for change is a powerful catalyst after all. This dynamic restriction has, consciously and subconsciously, provided boundaries in which to explore freedom in music.

"Felt" was appended to name of the trio because of its multiple connotations in the English language. The softness of the material, textural tactility, the sense of something past. Then there's how this reasonably short and simple word is said aloud, the complex way it is formed in a mouth, that suggests a soft, restricted aesthetic; the combination of sibilance followed by a glottal stop and rounded out with a soft, dental consonant. A gentle complexity.

"Felt" can be used by Norwegian speakers in a similar way as the English use "field". Our quiet field has become a place to play within. An everchanging environment that behaves as if it were alive. A place within which to carry out our fieldwork, where the fieldworkers and the field interact with each other in ever more complex and unpredictable ways.

[naming a band | fieldwork | Michael Taussig | Daisy Tam | collaboration]

Bits and scraps and notes

"The notebook is an improvement of the art of living" – Jørgen Leth

Combining 'bits' and 'scraps' into a single place, time or practice can be carried out in many ways. The most immediate association is perhaps with the collecting together of achievements or memories into a scrapbook, assembling a story through pictures and texts. In the case of the practice of *stillefelt*, 'bits' and 'scraps' of musical and non-musical experience combine to form an aesthetic, a musical framework within which to improvise. Notebooks, an annotated relation of the humble scrapbook, can also be considered as collections of the 'bits' and 'scraps' of experience documented through the senses of their author and transcribed onto its pages. Seen as a whole, whether they are a scrapbook, a notebook or a musical practice, it is possible to piece together narratives within these collections of thoughts and ideas, to find meaning.

There are links between the practice of keeping a notebook and the musical practice of *stillefelt* at two distinct levels. Firstly, and very literally, there are the books described above that are filled with musical notation which consist of a series of short ideas, a book of notes[99]. These books document past musical thoughts and experiences, both through the notes and handwritten annotations on the page as well as the musicians' personal and collective associations with playing and hearing them. They do not take the form of fully realised compositions; rather, they should be thought of in the same way that the texts of notebooks might inform the completion of a book, considered as individual ideas that perhaps mean very little when stripped of their context.

Anthropologist Michael Taussig's *I swear I saw this* (2011) reflects on a drawing he made in his notebook during a visit to Medellín, Columbia to argue for the importance of the often ignored practice of drawing[100] in notebooks. The drawing is of two people lying by the side of a busy road in the mouth of a tunnel with one apparently sewing the other into a white nylon bag. This moment

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[99] As in Appendix 1.
[100] Taussig is not interested in the quality, style or medium of the drawings but the act of drawing itself and the narrative it creates between the moment captured and the reflection on that moment. Marion Brown's own collection of writings also features his own drawings. *Recollections: Essays, Drawings, Miscellanea* (M. Brown, 1984) features a whole chapter of his drawings alongside his essays and some examples of his handwritten scores.

struck Taussig as remarkable such that he felt compelled to capture it in a drawing, as if to confirm what he had actually witnessed, *I swear I saw this*. Taussig says that when he looks at the drawing now it "surpasses the moment which gave rise to it" (Taussig, 2011:2), that by capturing a fleeting moment through his drawing he continues to provoke thoughts in himself about what that glimpse of another's life means. In his exploration Taussig seeks to justify not only the importance of drawing(s) in notebooks, but the importance of keeping a notebook at all, as a record of individual experience, as a record of one's self. He writes that "the notebook is actually an extension of oneself if not more self than oneself" (ibid:105). As a record of individual experience Taussig's notebook becomes a way of understanding what it is to be human.

For Taussig, the act of collecting experiences in a notebook, whether written or drawn, is as important, if not more so, than the content of the notebooks themselves. He gives examples of two writers who, for differing reasons, were unable to have access to their fieldwork notebooks but went on to write books based on their recollections of what those notebooks contained. That the notebooks existed at all, that their authors had been through the act of recording their experiences, was of more importance than the details of what was recorded.

> "simply going through the exercise of writing down observations and thoughts therein is so helpful to one's sense of being and intellectual machinations such that loss is not necessarily all that much of a loss. It is not all that important what goes into the notebook, compared with the mere fact of having the notebook in hand and spending each day writing." (Taussig, 2011:113)

With this in mind, it is possible to explain how the book of notes used in *stillefelt* performances acts like a notebook in Taussig's sense. It is not important what the notes are, but the mere fact that we have our book of notes in hand that matters. Our sense of what those notations represent, our memories of past performances, or shared musical history, contributes to the creation of the framework we improvise within. We aren't dependent on these specific forms in order to make music together; it would be possible to perform without the notebooks at all, as the remote piece *Alone (together)* detailed in Chapter 5 explores.

As discussed in the opening of this chapter, the intention behind the *stillefelt* book of notes arose as part of our post-gig discussions during the residency. When Tom recalled my initial expectation that the notes need not necessarily be played, he illustrated his point by following up with his recollection of a moment from one of the residency performances: "[s]o, for example, on Saturday when we did number 2[101], the melody was never played" (Tom, Residency Discussions:42). Tom is referring to our shared desire to create a situation where we are playing music informed by the aesthetic of the pieces but not necessarily using the notes verbatim[102]. If composition (notation) can be considered as a way of documenting improvisations on one's past ideas[103] then the notes of the *stillefelt* book of notes are past improvisations captured in ink with which we can improvise again. They could be thought of as equivalent to the anthropologist's fieldwork notebook on which they may base an extended book. In this way the existence of the *stillefelt* pieces as a representation of experience is essential, their content is not. The story is told through our enacted performances in response to the existence of the notated pieces, not through the pieces themselves.

The practice of *stillefelt* in a wider sense can also be conceived as an incomplete notebook, an ongoing collecting-together of 'bits' and 'scraps' of experience documented as performances, conversations, compositions and audio recordings. If the literal *stillefelt* book of notes can be likened to an old notebook of experiences to be used, by the fact that it exists, as a source of aesthetic inspiration, then this second sense is akin to the action of making notes 'in the field'. The double meanings in this context of both 'note' and 'field' are welcome and will hopefully help to elucidate the sentiment I am trying to convey here. The 'field' of work for an anthropologist might refer to a specific social environment within which their fieldwork can be carried out. 'Notes' are made to be referred to at a later date when writing them up into a book or paper. In the case of *stillefelt*, notes are made in a (literal and imagined) field through our practice. The work is both process and product, with the two locked in an ongoing complex feedback loop of performances. The notebook, in this sense, becomes both a repository for new experiences as well as the source for creating those same experiences. This symbiotic relationship between notebook and field is recognised by Taussig. Referring to the role

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[101] The notated pieces are numbered 1 to 9.

[102] Listening back to the recording of the performance Tom is referring to reveals that the melody for *2* was actually played, once, albeit in a very rubato and highly inflected manner. This can be heard in the full video of that performance, Saturday 26th October, at 16m33s, see Appendices for details. The fact that Tom remembers that it wasn't played would seem to reinforce the idea that the actual notes matter very little in this context. Whether we played it or not the melody remains, in Tom's view, something which is unnecessary for a successful *stillefelt* performance. Like the notes themselves, it does not matter if the melody existed (in sound, space and time) or not but that the sense of *2*-ness remains in Tom's memory of the performance.

[103] See Benson (2003) and Cavell (2015).

played by chance in anthropological fieldwork he points to Daisy Tan's PhD thesis to highlight the interdependency between the field of study and the notebook.

Tan's primary research takes place in Borough market, London where she worked on a stall selling produce from a single farm. She recognises that her field of study is not a static object to be studied but, due to the complex interactions between people and place, a dynamic context which she herself was a part of through her actions as a participant and an observer. She reflects on her experience in her written notes as such: "the field was, as it were, alive and always changing, there was always something new to be learnt" (Tan Dic Sze, 2009). Taussig cannot help but notice the role that chance plays in creating these opportunities for understanding, through the events observed in the field and their preservation in a notebook. He takes this to be a "testimony not only to the chance effect, but to the life-endowing qualities of that effect…[the field becomes] alive and always changing—even more than the fieldwork notebook and thanks to the fieldwork notebook" (Taussig, 2011:60).

Life in the *stillefelt* 'field' is sustained through our re-engagement with the collective notebook; our shared musical and non-musical experiences, the book of notes, our senses and memories of past performances and audio recordings. Our presence in the field means that we can take full advantage of the "life-endowing qualities" of chance, through action, making notes and sustaining the life of the field through continued field-work(s). During an improvised musical performance, chance may show itself through the recollection of a happenstance pre-performance occurrence[104], a fortuitous musical coincidence, or an external extraneous sound arriving at an opportune moment. The reaction of the musicians, in combination with a shared musical and non-musical history, embodies the field's abstract nature, reaffirming its live-ness as an aesthetic framework.

As we discussed our differing notions of what constitutes the *stillefelt* aesthetic, how our notebook was being constructed and maintained, Tom described how, for him, it is represented by an envisioned image of an imagined field.

TF: …we were talking about the aesthetic and the way I've been dealing with creating a mental image and trying to imagine each moment and how it fits into that mental image. So that's like

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[104] As with the example in the previous chapter of Tony Dudley-Evans, Scott Walker and my solo practice.

a perfect moment of the quiet field kind of thing in the sense that…there's kind of…I don't think it always has to be this perfectly tranquil idea. In the sense that, it will return to that, that's just a natural occurrence, in the sense that here [in Birmingham] we've had the kind of crazy rain recently. But in a really literal sense of imagery to me it's like, well, I can see it happening in my mind…

PP: *A* field and the events that are happening?

TF: Yeah, I can see the events. It's this weird…it's quite childlike, in a sense, but I can see storm clouds appear and a load of crazy stuff happen. But, as long as the intention's not forced, and it is more of a natural response to what's happening, the different impetuses from each of us, then I think it's within the aesthetic still. Because you can't really control kind of…in my head, in this version of…there's no control over it, events just happen. It's like a little silly kids thing where a sun comes up and goes down and things happen within it. (Residency Discussions:48)

For Tom, this image of a field has become his way of representing the aesthetic, a place where he reconciles the life-endowing musical events of the 'actual' field with events in the life of an imagined field.

Later, during the same discussion, Percy referenced Lars von Trier's film *The Five Obstructions* (von Trier and Leth, 2003) in relation to how we work with the repeated inclusion of the notated material (PP, Residency Discussions:51). Like Taussig, Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth are interested in the idea of what it means to be human. In *The Five Obstructions* Leth remakes his own film *The Perfect Human* with a series of obstructions or limitations imposed by von Trier. Through the repeated remaking of his original film Leth comes to understand something about himself and what it is to be human; at least this was von Trier's intention for the project. Footage from the film shows Leth listening to von Trier's instructions and avidly taking notes. Some of these notes go on to appear as part of the animated film produced in the *4th Obstruction*. Leth's feelings about his notebook are further clarified in the quote from the film which begins this section.

Percy is clearly making the link between von Trier's obstructions and something in the way we perform as *stillefelt*. We challenge ourselves to 'remake' the notated material with each performance

navigating the obstructions imposed by ourselves, by others and the environment. This is not a perfect analogy—I do not think Percy meant it as such—but watching the film reveals something about Leth's filmmaking technique that also holds a certain affinity with Tom's imagined field. Leth talks about how, as a director, he arranges a "sluice" or frame and waits to lose control (von Trier and Leth, 2003). He sets a frame and allows the subject of its (his) gaze to respond to his minimal direction. In describing the scene in the original *Perfect Human* where Claus Nissen is seen eating a meal, Leth says his only directions to Nissen were to eat and finish the meal. The finished scene shows a clearly emotive Nissen eating whilst posing existential questions to himself through speech and song. Leth says of Nissen that "He plays with emptiness. He plays with nothing. He plays with the fragments and crumbs he finds." (ibid)

If we return to Taussig for one final time, it is possible to find a further parallel with his passionate ode to notebooks, one which might also partially help to explain the success of the remote recording project undertaken by *stillefelt* in 2020[105]. He asks who the author of a notebook is writing for, given that the notes within will likely be intended only to be read by the author, if at all[106]. In exploring this problem, he relays an example of a student, Celine Sparrow, who imagines objects or scenes (such as a sailing boat being subjected to varying weather conditions) as she sings in her a cappella group. He gives a series of examples where Sparrow's actions and the imagined scenarios are so intertwined it is impossible to tell whether the action precedes the image or vice versa. Taussig draws the conclusion that the image is responsible for a "barely conscious consciousness" (Taussig, 2011:76) which allows for a transcendence between the song and the body, something he calls an "everyday miracle" (ibid). He goes on to describe how this everyday miracle shines a light on the audience for his notebook, what he thinks of as the spirits.

Whether it is Taussig's spirits, Sparrow's sailing boat, Leth's frame or Tom's imaginary field there is the sense of an underlying obligation to continue writing, singing, playing and living. The spirits must be appeased and life in the field goes on. The removal of the possibility of performing to live audiences at the time of writing, due to Covid-19 restrictions, has heightened the similarities between the collective practice of *stillefelt* and the practice of keeping a notebook, shining a light on the need for an audience. Who is this music for and will they ever hear it? This is something I will return to in the final chapter

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[105] See Chapter 5.
[106] Leth obviously goes some way to addressing this question with the inclusion of his notes in the fourth film of *The Five Obstructions*.

on *stillefelt's* remote collaboration during lockdown. There is, currently, only an imagined audience of spirits to whom we are obliged. In order to draw the music out we must rely on the notes made within the context of the notebook of our collective practice in order to keep our quiet field, both real and imaginary, alive.

Chapter 4

Investigating the field

Breathing life into our field brings forth the implication that it is capable of change. Not only does the field influence the events which take place within, but it is changed in some way by those same events. In the case of *stillefelt* the field is our shared musical practice based on our individual and collective musical and personal histories. Every time we play together, we refer to the past events within our field and in doing so, alter the composition of the field itself. Specific events, such as the introduction of notated ideas, can lead to new ways of working; the collective decision to resist the intended temporary nature of those notated ideas and bring them from the rehearsal room and into performances.

Linking context and actions directly in this way could lead to a criticism of pre-determinism or 'sameness' from those who wish to define each improvised musical performance as starting 'from nothing', our *slime mould improvisers*[107]. However, recognising the limitations of improvising within a context need not restrict the musical possibilities or the agency of the individual musicians. The choice to embrace or reject that same context remains. This is without pointing out that the *slime mould improvisers'* wish to 'start from nothing' could equally be considered a deterministic position from which to begin. For there to be a 'nothing', it must be recognised that a 'something' exists, that which the *slime mould improvisers* are attempting to avoid. The act of ignoring that 'something' makes it impossible to begin from a position of emptiness. "I want to avoid doing this" is just as instructive as "do this", Moi's logic of inclusion/exclusion. To press this point further, it might be helpful to consider how music that started from nothing might mean anything at all. How would music that started from nothing sound? Wouldn't music that all started from the same place, from nothing, end up sounding remarkably similar anyway? It is easy to see how questions of this nature might have informed David Borgo's view that "despite the frequently expressed desire among certain free improvisers for a "styleless" or "nonidiomatic" approach to music, more than four decades of recorded documents and live performances attest to a growing tradition and reveal certain shared traits to the music" (Borgo, 2002:184). The two decades that have since passed have only added more weight to Borgo's claim.

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[107] See the interlude between Chapters 1 and 2 if you have chosen to not read this thesis chronologically.

The *slime mould improvisers*' idealistic point of view also reveals another problem for consideration which is that, by continuing to conceive of improvised music-making as a homogenous practice we will necessarily be led into making generalised, and therefore meaningless, conclusions about it. Wittgenstein calls this approach our "craving for generality" (Wittgenstein, 1965:17) which is revealed in this instance when sweeping statements are made about the practice of improvised musical performance as a whole. This is, he says, the "tendency to look for something in common in all the entities which we commonly subsume under a general term" (ibid) rather than explore the individual similarities, the family resemblances, that we recognise in individual phenomena which are commonly grouped together[108]. Wittgenstein identifies one of the main sources for this collective craving as "our preoccupation with the method of science" (ibid:18), something which I have discussed in detail above. When our view of the world is dominated by metaphysical philosophical problems and grand scientific theories which seek to find *the* answers to Big Questions, then it is perhaps only natural that we may come to think of any object of study in those terms. Rather than considering the specifics of individual examples we are tempted to try and answer Big Questions such as "what can an investigation into the practice of improvisation contribute to the problem of freedom?" Or, "how can improvised music practice be explained in terms of aesthetic theory or complexity science?" When we approach improvised music practice from this generalised, 'philosophy of...' perspective its diverse nature is revealed as is the need for an alternative, more detailed approach.

Trying to combine the practices of such a disparate and varied group of individual and collective practices will not satisfy our cravings. What I am proposing here is that, as Wittgenstein suggests, we set aside the desire to make any general claim about the practice of improvised music-making and the aspects of human nature which intersect with it. Instead, we should continue to examine specific examples as a way of establishing some clarity. By thinking through specific examples and contrasting them with our prior experiences, in describing the practice of *stillefelt*, in coming to understand the context of our field in greater detail, that it is then possible for philosophy, in the Wittgensteinian sense, to begin. To clarify this process, I return to Moi's reading of Wittgenstein, Austin and Cavell (2017). Before I do, though, I want to consider an alternative position—Borgo's complexity-infused theorising about improvised music practice—in order to show why the craving for generality is unhelpful in addressing our (my) sense of lostness.

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[108] See the discussion of Wittgenstein's 'games' example in Introduction 2.

A complex explanation

One method of attempting to explain the practice of improvised music-making that has gained traction, particularly through the work of Borgo, is to examine it through the nonlinear lens of complexity science. If your goal is to subject improvised music practice to a theory, to satisfy a craving for generality, then it is easy to see how complexity theory might be a good candidate. There is some synergy between behaviour as described by complexity theorists and descriptions of improvised music-making. For example, from a seemingly simple set of initial conditions—a collection of players, perhaps some initial ideas about form or timbre, a shared but loose sense of artistic direction—it can be difficult to understand and near impossible to predict how certain moments come about during improvised music-making. This can be particularly evident in those moments which seem to have no direct link to the musicians involved in the performance and arrive 'out of nowhere'. Tom identified this feeling in the practice of *stillefelt* saying that "every time we play there's something new. And, sometimes when I'm listening, I'm completely unaware of who is doing it or how" (TF, Residency Discussions:67). Percy more succinctly summarised it as "1 + 2 = at least 3" (PP, Residency Discussions:14) and, as noted earlier, I felt that "it sounds like more than three people [are playing]" (CM, Residency discsussions:67)[109]. It is not my intention to question the validity of a sense of unpredictability or 'otherness' felt in an improvised music performance, but to scrutinise the way of explaining how that feeling arises.

Certain aspects of complexity science, including some of the language used to describe its principles, provide neat and apparently meaningful intersections with the way some improvisers (including the members of *stillefelt*) describe aspects of their practice. In particular, Borgo's book on improvised music practice *Sync Or Swarm* (2007) relies heavily on both the language and concepts of complexity science. Borgo takes his initial inspiration from M. Mitchell Waldrop's *Complexity* (1994), an account of the origins of the Santa Fe Institute, a place Waldrop considers to be the home of complexity science. As an example, Waldrop says that complexity can be found on the "edge of chaos" in what he describes as "the constantly shifting battle zone between stagnation and anarchy, the one place where a complex system can be spontaneous, adaptive and alive" (Waldrop, 1994:12). Borgo underscores the

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[109] This is perhaps what Derek Bailey is referring to when he says that "the possible musical dimensions of group playing [improvising] far outstrip those of solo playing" (Bailey, 1993:112). Or what David Toop means when he says that "improvisation allows me openness, allows me the range of my character....[i]n communality with others who are also experiencing that self-allowance I can go beyond the edges of my character" (Toop, 2016:2).

importance of complexity theory to his project saying, "I can think of no better definition of improvised music" (Borgo, 2007:xvii). Waldrop's compelling description of the edge of chaos—the locale of complexity—and Borgo's subsequent interest in it outline the idea put forward by complexity theorists that complex systems can be found throughout the natural world, as well as within human constructs. This includes, Borgo thinks, improvised music practice. He states that his aim is to provide "a systems or ecological understanding of music…[that is always] situated in a particular social or historical context" (Borgo, 2007:5)[110], with complexity theory as the system on which Borgo wishes to base his understanding. What follows below is a brief account of the science of complexity which will help to show how and why Borgo uses it to clarify his understanding of improvisation and why such a clarification is meaningless in the context of a Wittgensteinian investigation.

Complexity science is thought of as a counter to reductionism. Its theorists believe that explaining how the universe operates at a sub-atomic level does little to explain how it works at what they feel is the more meaningful level of human perception[111]. Complexity scientists aim to address this through the holistic consideration of dynamic behaviours in systems made up of simple adaptive agents. David Krakauer, for example, makes an analogy which is useful in grasping this concept of 'emergence', which is one of the fundamental aspects of complexity. He describes the well-worn adage of a child attempting to understand how a radio works by taking it to pieces. The child (presumably a reductionist) wants to break that radio apart to satisfy their curiosity, to see what the individual components look like and perhaps learn how they function. Those interested in explaining the world through complex systems, Krakauer says, want to put the radio back together to find out how those same components interact to create its emergent properties, something which could not be determined from examining the individual parts in isolation; "there is some insight to be had in looking at what makes something up [the individual components], but the harder problem is to put it together again…and that's emergence" - Krakauer (Santa Fe Institute, 2019).

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[110] Borgo's aim would appear to be not too far from my own, but his desire to systematise, to make an appeal to theory, reveals his craving for generality. When he turns his attention to specific examples—Sam Rivers' trio and Evan Parker's solo practice—it is through the veneer of scientific method, and he presents a compilation of evidence that seeks to provide answers to Big Questions about the nature of all improvised music-making.

[111] Hofstadter makes a similar point about human understanding as taking place at the macro rather than the micro level, although not against the backdrop of complexity science. He describes it as *The Epi Phenomenon* that translates will into action. "If I *want* something to happen, I just *will* it to happen, and unless it is out of my control, it generally does happen. The body's molecules, whether in the fingers, the arm, the legs, the throat, the tongue, or wherever, obediently follow the supreme bidding of the Grand "I" on high." (Hofstadter, 2007)

Examining the principles of complexity science more closely reveals how Borgo's craving for generality might be satisfied, why he feels there is no better way to define improvised music[112]. In a complex system, even a seemingly minor interaction can have incalculable consequences for the future behaviour of the system as a whole. Borgo's analysis of improvised music draws on theorist John Holland's idea that the world is made up of what he calls Complex Adaptive Systems. For Holland, and Borgo, this is a way of explaining emergent creativity through the dynamic interactions between a relatively small system of simple ideas, agents or "building blocks", both with each other and their environment (Holland, 1996, 2016). As a system evolves, its history is written through unpredictable actions, reactions and bifurcations which are maintained through interrelated positive and negative feedback loops. Those perpetuating the ideals of complexity science maintain that "[o]nce you learn how to recognize them, in fact, these systems [are] everywhere" (Waldrop, 1994:145). The 'greater than the sum of its parts' ideology which encompasses complexity science is something which resonates with descriptions of improvised music practice, as noted by Bailey and Toop[113]. The emergence of new ideas or events though nonlinear causality is at the centre of Holland's explanation of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) and crucial to Borgo's desire to provide us with a systems-based understanding of improvised music. In an enthusiastically delivered and engaging workshop at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore in 2011 Holland outlines the key characteristics shared by all CAS (Holland, 2016).

Firstly, Holland says that all CAS are made up of agents capable of learning or adapting their behaviour, they are dynamic. In an ecosystem these individual agents are the organisms which live in it. In an economy these agents could be banks, stock market traders or companies[114]. Likewise, Brian Arthur agrees that systems with multiple elements are common in all areas of complexity and that "the elements might be cells in a cellular automaton, or ions in a spin glass, or cells in an immune system" (Arthur, 1999:107). How these agents react to their surroundings and each other, their dynamism, is key to their adaptive behaviour and to the emergent properties of the system. Holland describes the "aggregate" of the system as being both top-down and bottom-up (Holland, 2016) meaning that individual elements can impact upon the system as a whole, as well as the system itself impacting on the behaviour of individual agents. He describes this as the second characteristic of all CAS. This positive feedback loop helps to create the instability and unpredictability which is so fundamental in

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[112] Particularly in relation to the sense of the 'other' as recognised by all three musicians in *stillefelt.*
[113] See footnote 109.
[114] In a musical performance these agents could be considered to be the musicians and, depending on how you want to construct the system, could also include audience members.

CAS and their ability to create through the process of emergence. Even if agents behave in what may be perceived to be a fairly simplistic manner when considered individually[115], the combination of their behaviours in reaction to each other and the aggregate leads to CAS behaving in nonlinear ways. Holland summarises this in typical computer science language as "if-then" behaviour (ibid) (although this way of thinking is certainly reminiscent of some of the more reactive aspects of active listening in improvised music-making[116]).

The nonlinearity of complex systems is Holland's third characteristic and an important step in an attempt to relate CAS to human behaviour and, in this context, improvised music-making. Nonlinear systems can be understood in terms of inputs and outputs. In a linear system, inputs are directly related to outputs and therefore form a predictable line when represented in graphical form: 1 + 1 =2, 1 + 2= 3, etc. Nonlinear systems and equations have no such relation between inputs and outputs. Given a set of inputs it would be very difficult to determine the outcome of a particular complex system or equation because of the interactions and feedback loops that are determined by a system's initial conditions. In an introductory overview to Holland's work—as an exploration of how CAS might inform the understanding of trends in heroin use—Agar highlights his subject's fondness for games to illustrate this point. "Chess is a favourite example: With a board, a few pieces, and a few rules, you never know how a particular game will go, and even after hundreds of years, discussions over strategies and their effectiveness continue" (Agar, 1999)[117]. To put it another way, the "building

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[115] It makes little sense to examine a single agent out of context. This can be explained with an analogy from the insect world, a world which Borgo draws from heavily in his 2006 paper *Sync or Swarm*. Taken on their own wasps are a guaranteed way to spoil a picnic and likely to be swatted with the nearest available blunt object. Their individual safety might well be better assured if their role as pest-controller, pollinator and food source as part of an ecosystem was more widely considered.

[116] By this I mean the strategy of thinking if "I hear this then I will do that". This idea is present in several of John Steven's workshop games for improvisers taken from *Search and Reflect* (Stevens *et al.*, 2007), including the exercises which take the title of the book as their instruction. It can also be heard in call and response improvisations or when one musician decides to repeatedly play something which goes against or complements the idea of another.

[117] Wittgenstein would say that the example of chess only helps us to come to understand more about the concept of 'games' rather than informing a universal truth. He also often uses chess as an analogy for how language functions in a language game, that is, that we understand the pieces in chess by the rules we prescribe to them. When we are asked to describe a pawn in a game of chess we are inclined to discuss how it is used, which rules it adheres to etc. We do not necessarily consider its physical properties as this removes the object of its context, that it is a piece to be used in a game. For Wittgenstein then, "[t]he question "What is a word really?" is analogous to "What is a piece in chess?"" (§108) Complexity science understands behaviour by defining a system and observing the outcomes, Wittgenstein urges us to "look and see" how we use specific words/pieces within a context.

blocks" can be combined in innumerable ways that allow for spontaneous creativity or the "perpetual novelty" that is the hallmark of CAS to occur (Holland, 1996).

It is perhaps understandable why the theory of CAS might be appealing to those attempting to make sense of the practice of free improvisers. There would seem to be many overlaps with the way in which the members of *stillefelt* describe their practice, for example. Borgo introduces the idea of complexity in relation to improvised music by making a comparison to Swarm Intelligence (SI), a way of describing the collective behaviour of groups insects and other animals (Borgo, 2006). SI seeks to explain how bees collectively find a food source or how birds take flight in what can seem like predetermined and complex patterns. Like CAS, SI's descriptions of a system allows for positive and negative feedback as well as random[118] occurrences and multiple interactions between multiple entities within the system (ibid). The conclusion that is drawn is that, as a result of quite simple initial conditions, the systems which arise become complex through the interactions of the agents with one another and the environmental conditions of the system itself. There is no centralised decision making, hierarchy or preconceived plan. These top-down, bottom-up systems are dynamic, responding to changes from within and without through emergent behaviour. This is the model through which Borgo wants us to view improvised music-making and therefore human nature. He makes this clear from the start saying that "improvising music together allows participants and listeners to explore complex and emergent forms of social order" (ibid:1).

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[118] It is difficult to know what would be classed as a 'random' occurrence in a systems explanation of free improvisation. Borgo goes on to use Actor Network Theory (ANT) to show how he thinks complex systems, like a group free improvisation, are themselves embedded within larger networks. When Borgo refers to the random occurrences which take place during a performance, he is presumably referring to extraneous sounds or events which occur without the intent of the performers or audience members (a spilled glass, a passing siren, a chance cadence that creates an implied harmony). Taken within the context of the performance these random events become a point of reference for the improvisers and audience members. In a systems explanation of human actions it would be hard to conceive of these occurrences as random. Their origins are traceable and connected to the moment of performance even if an explanation of those origins would be incredibly complex.
Borgo says that without these random occurrences "groups of improvisers who work together over a longer period of time might become too familiar with one another's musical language and approach or might fall into regular strategies of support and counterbalance" (Borgo, 2006:6). Familiarity is seen by Borgo, and others, as a kind of anthesis of free improvisation. If these random occurrences were ignored by the improvisers, would that make their performances any less meaningful? The idea that familiarity or regular methods are opposed to meaningful group free improvisation brings to mind, once again, our *slime mould improvisers*. As I have argued– and will continue to argue–throughout this thesis, familiarity is an essential part of my improvised music practice's ability to be a site for meaning making.

Certainly, there is a persuasive argument to be made, one which could go some way to explain the sense of "more than three" felt by the members of *stillefelt*. What makes it less appealing is the complexity theorists' craving for generality, their insistence that complexity is everywhere, that it is necessarily found across all natural and human activity. When confronted with a specific example or behaviour a complexity theorist questions how it fits the model of complexity as opposed to seeking clarity by examining the example in its own terms. To return to Cora Diamond, complexity, as a concept, lacks the ability to transform our problems into small criss-crosses of human understanding as it will always be attempting to address a Big Question about the nature of everything. In Borgo's case he asks "are there lessons from improvising music that can help us to understand, or at least to cope with, the complexity of our world?" (Borgo, 2006:21) He assumes that complexity exists as he and the complexity scientists define it and the asks improvisers to help to prove it. He is asking a specific (Big) question of improvised music practice and expecting a specific product as a result, something which would appear to go against the very nature of a complex system as explained by Holland. This approach exemplifies Borgo's scientific investigation of improvised music which hypothesises a context and seeks to use improvised music practice as a way of explaining it[119].

Continuing my investigation with a Wittgensteinian spirit means questioning whether grand theories of science fully account for human experience, the 'bits' and 'scraps' of an improvised music practice or the drawings in a notebook. The generalisations necessitated by scientific rigour are of little use in attempting to provide a rigorous understanding of a specific artistic practice. By their very nature those theories and theorists seek to exclude examples which do not fit the model[120]. "It is a little absurd to go on insisting that physics provides us with knowledge of the world which is of the highest excellence", insists Cavell in his essay *Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy*, "the measures which soak up knowledge of the world leave us dryly ignorant of ourselves" (Cavell, 2015:63). Instead of attempting to explain away difference, we should embrace it, using those moments which we perceive to be contrary to our everyday experience as examples to think through, to develop a deeper,

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[119] Borgo's 2002 essay *Negotiating Freedom: Values and Practices in Contemporary Improvised Music* further demonstrates his attempts to create generalised theories of free improvisation. The essay briefly examines a huge range of musicians and their opinions in a seemingly short piece of writing. By choosing this approach he reveals the necessary contradictions which arise when attempting to legislate for the practices of such a diverse group. Borgo says that this is "somewhat problematic" (Borgo, 2002:184) but still attempts to reach an overall conclusion about the nature of improvised music and its practitioners. This is his notion of context, a context which includes all those he has identified—and those who self-identify—as free improvisers. The contrast with this (my) project is that Borgo is searching for an overarching definition or philosophy of improvisation as opposed to thinking through examples of improvised music practice as a way of doing philosophy.

[120] See *Manifesto of Artistic Research* (Henke et al., 2020) for a justification for the rejection of scientific methods in artistic research.

more rigorous understanding of what our concepts might mean. Moi draws our attention to a passage in *Philosophical Investigations* which emphasises this point: "A spirit—an attitude—is not an opinion, and certainly not a philosophical position, a doctrine or a theory. The realistic spirit is ordinary" (Moi, 2017:63). She explains that if, as in Wittgenstein's example in §52, we observe a mouse emerging from a pile of grey rags and dust and suspect that it spontaneously came into being from those same rags and dust, we would do well to examine those items and see if that really was the case rather than assume that it was. For Wittgenstein and Moi this is what philosophical and scientific theorising misses, an examination of the particulars. They feel that there is an innate readiness to accept the explanation that the mouse really did arrive out of nowhere. Wittgenstein and Moi's "kind of realism—the realistic spirit—is not above examining dusty rags. It assumes that philosophical insight will arise from attentive investigation of the ordinary and the everyday" (Moi, 2017:63). An appeal to science to describe improvised music practice—for example, the sense of the other felt and articulated by the members of *stillefelt*—is appealing because of our craving for generality and the enormous difficulty we have in renouncing such an urge (Diamond). However, continuing to define artistic practice in terms of scientific method will reveal very little about the everyday practice of improvising music together. A theory-first approach doesn't help me to remedy my sense of lostness.

Thinking through the ordinary

What could an alternative to a theory-first method look like? In *Revolution of the Ordinary* (Moi, 2017) Moi offers an account of ordinary language philosophy which, I feel, serves as a way forward for researchers wishing to avoid scientifically-influenced methodologies when negotiating the tricky business of unpicking their own artistic practice. I am returning to Moi's book to consider once more her championing of specificity over generality in greater detail. To provide this part of my thesis with the necessary traction, I wish to take inspiration from her Wittgensteinian insistence that, to help address our problems, we should foreground investigations of everyday use over appeals to metaphysics. Moi draws on the works of a very different trio to the main subject of this chapter (Wittgenstein, Austin and Cavell), to argue for the power of ordinary language philosophy to revolutionise literary studies and counter the Sausserian assumptions which she says are the foundations of much contemporary thinking in this area. Like Wittgenstein, Moi says that these assumptions persist due to our "craving for generality". To gain some clarity when dealing with our problems Moi suggests the alternative method of thinking through the specific examples which are causing us to feel lost, to try and fully explore the context which surrounds them. Wittgenstein says

that only when we understand how language is used in a particular and considered context can we begin to make sense of what is being expressed. To try and construct grand (literary, in Moi's case) theories in the mould of scientific reasoning risks ignoring the everyday use of language where, for Moi and the ordinary language trio, the root of human understanding lies[121].

I wish to follow the spirit of Moi's investigation and think through a specific example from *stillefelt's* practice to show how a description of that practice can lead to greater understanding of the key narratives of this thesis. Although Moi, Wittgenstein, Austin and Cavell are dealing specifically with language, there are, I feel, enough parallels with *stillefelt's* musical practice for this to be an appropriate starting point[122]. I will use the following example, taken from our practice, to explore the idea that an improvised musical action can be better understood when it is afforded a careful consideration of the context which surrounds it, as with Wittgenstein's understanding of language. I have already begun to explore this thought in the previous chapter in relation to my solo practice where describing a specific example, a specific use, revealed the potential narratability and narrativity of a specific moment during a performance. I want to extend that way of thinking by examining the context within which other specific musical actions took place during the *stillefelt* residency under discussion here. I wish to show how meaningful action might be understood in the context of the practice of *stillefelt.* You are then free to contrast my example of how meaning and music are related with your own examples and experiences to clarify what it means to improvise.

What Moi, Wittgenstein, Austin and Cavell all share is a desire for the recognition of the importance of the ordinary use of language; to show that words do not have hidden or deep meanings. They set out to achieve this through grammatical investigations into the way we use words to establish how they acquire their meaning in context. Firstly, we must give the word "grammar" its context. Here, it is to be understood as not only the mechanics of what we say but the context (social, temporal, environmental etc.) within which we say it. Moi says that an analysis of words (and their meaning) "can't be done in the abstract" (Moi, 2017:51), any analysis must take place within a context of use and, as such, cannot be separated from its grammar. When Wittgenstein says that "the meaning of a word is its use in language" (§43), his concept of language is bound up with that of "form[s] of life"

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[121] See Moi, 2017 chapter three *Wittgenstein and Deconstruction* for an explanation of how carrying out a Wittgensteinian investigation is not "doing theory" in a Derradian, post-structuralist sense.
[122] See Introduction 2 for an explanation of the potential to employ a Wittgensteinian spirit in investigations beyond linguistics.

(§19). Through their embodied, spoken and written interactions these lifeforms define the grammar, in the wide and narrow sense, that determines the meaning of words. I will return this idea in more detail below. Austin also considered language to be performative. In his conception of speech as an action he offers an explanation of the way that the meaning of words is implied when they are spoken, but only when the context is taken into consideration (Austin, 1975). For example, wedding vows find their meaning as part of a wedding ceremony and promises can only mean anything if they are spoken and then kept. It is possible to conceive that, for Austin, grammar is a part of the rules of a language as well as a part of the context in which it is spoken[123]. Finally, Cavell considers the question *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cavell, 2015) by exploring the differences and similarities between the works of Austin and Ryle, using them as examples to think through and discover something about human nature. Cavell says that we learn context as we learn a language, that what we say and when we say it has implications for what we mean, something native speakers of a language come to understand. "*Learning what these implications are is part of learning the language*; no less a part than learning its syntax" (ibid:11).

Following this common assumption, that language finds its meaning through its use in context, allows for the rejection of the notion that language finds meaning in systemic abstraction, a post-structuralist view. Taking the stance of ordinary language philosophy helps us to avoid being misled by our cravings. Wittgenstein and Moi believe that a sceptical investigation of language at a metaphysical level says nothing about how meaning is understood in the ordinary world, it is not 'doing philosophy'[124]. Moi says that "Wittgenstein thinks of utterances as actions, as something we *do*…[t]o understand the action is to understand why I or you do this particular thing, and to grasp the implications of doing it in the particular situation " (Moi, 2017:180). If there is something which confuses us about an action, about a situation, then Moi says our investigation should not begin with a preconceived theory or philosophy but with the question "Why this?"[125] (ibid). This question is central to her, and my, investigation.

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[123] Austin's, *A Plea for Excuses* (Austin, 1956) is also relevant here as an insightful exploration of reason-giving. Austin evidently plays a crucial role in Moi's thinking and ordinary language philosophy more broadly. However, Moi's work on thinking through examples is primarily based on ideas first put forward by Wittgenstein and explored further by Cavell, hence my choice to discuss their thoughts in greater detail than Austin's.

[124] Wittgenstein considered philosophy to be an active process, something we do. Understanding philosophy in this way draws it away from the abstract and towards the human, the everyday. See (Moi, 2017) Chapter 8, *Nothing is Hidden*.

[125] There is an argument to be made here that beginning with "Why this?" could be seen as a preconceived theory or philosophy. Moi's reading of Wittgenstein does not adhere to this view as is shown by Moi through Wittgenstein's example of the mouse and the dusty rags (see above).

"We can't ask it unless we have noticed something, seen something that surprises or strikes us. Anything we notice—a specific word, a way of applying paint strokes, a surprising camera angle—can become the starting point for an investigation. Whether the investigation will be important depends on what we noticed in the first place. Training, experience, skill, knowledge are required if we are to be able to notice something of genuine interest."

(Moi, 2017:181)

In this case we are reliant on our experience to recognise something out of the ordinary which we find of interest, something which subverts our expectations or catches our attention as being different, a cause for investigation. When we do find something of that nature we should ask "Why this?" This leads us to question the intention behind an action or an utterance, exploring the context in which it took place and revealing what it is that the speaker meant by their words.

To illustrate this point, and to make an attempt to bring the spirit of ordinary language philosophy one step closer to music, we can draw on a specific example, Joe Bataan's aptly named song *Ordinary Guy* (Bataan, 1975)[126]. For this example, I wish to focus on the lyrical content which, maybe goes without saying, is an example of language in use. The connection to non-lyrical musical actions, as is the case in *stillefelt*'s music, will hopefully be aided by this intermediary step. The song begins with Bataan giving a description of a man, presumably Bataan himself[127], and his "ordinary" lifestyle. Bataan paints a picture of an "ordinary guy" who doesn't "hang around with Playboy millionaires", doesn't have an elegant home, a beautiful car, or a seaside cottage for the weekend (ibid) so that the listener is able to gain a sense of context he is speaking (singing) from. He describes his lifestyle eloquently and vividly but seemingly without a specific purpose or audience. In the chorus of the song, Bataan reveals that there is an intended recipient for his extended description as he laments "That's what I am, an ordinary man, you left behind" (ibid). The sudden introduction of a "you" leads us to the question, "Why this?" We can retrospectively ask why Bataan gave such a detailed description of the apparent mundanity of his lifestyle and explore his intentions behind it, something that isn't apparent as you hear the verse in isolation, prior to the "you". Is it, in fact, a list of complaints directed at him by a

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[126] Bataan recorded several versions of this song, originally in 1966. The 1975 version has slightly different lyrical content which I why I have chosen to refer to it here (see below).

[127] The Bandcamp page for Jazzanova's 2012 re-recording of this song, with Bataan on vocals, attributes this this quote to him: "It's been my moniker for a long time. You know, hey, I'm an ordinary guy. Don't expect anything else. I mean, that's me, and I've always been that way." (Jazzanova, 2012)

lover intent on climbing the social ladder who has left him behind in the pursuit of a higher status? Is his description intended to inspire jealousy in the "you" the song is now clearly directed at by highlighting the stability and apparent simplicity of Bataan's life?

"[T]o understand any utterance may require us to ask about the speaker's motivations, reasons, and intentions; about its repercussions, ramifications, consequences, and effects; and to consider issues of responsibility, ethics, and politics arising in and through the utterance" (Moi, 2017:180-181). Once we have clarified the context within which Bataan is using the phrase "you left behind" we can start to understand what he means by it and begin to contrast it with our own experiences, to think through his example of what it is to be ordinary. Perhaps we empathise with him entirely having been left in a similar situation. Maybe we can disagree with his definition of "ordinary" or "average" (he uses the two words interchangeably) as being too privileged or not privileged enough. We could also consider why earlier versions of this song contained no reference to his ethnicity but in the 1975 recording he includes the line "Afrofilipino, average sort of guy" (Bataan, 1975). What role does his ethnicity play in his social status and/or the departure of the "you"? Was this reference removed at the request of a market-conscious record label executive in 1966 or did Bataan simply choose to add it in at the later date[128]? What can his tale tell us about his perception of ordinary life for Afrofilipino-Americans in 1960s America when compared to the "ordinary" lives of Americans from other backgrounds?

As a consequence of Bataan's use of language, we are able to come to understand something about his life, assuming he is the protagonist of the song's story. He provides an example to think through. In order to take a step closer towards applying this concept to instrumental music it is helpful to recall Wittgenstein's idea that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (§19) [129]. Moi feels that the interpretation of this idea has become one of the greatest misconceptions to arise Wittgenstein's investigations, this is more than simply understanding that an individual exists in a community. She rejects the idea that "forms of life" is equivalent only to "social conventions" an idea which turns the concept "into a mere shadow of itself" (Moi, 2017:54). It is not a case of forms of life

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[128] Either scenario is imaginable. Charles Mingus wrote lyrics for his composition *Fables of Faubus* (Mingus, 1959) which were a stinging attack on Governor Orval Faubus, the man responsible using the Arkansas National Guard to enforce racial segregation in the schools of Little Rock in 1957. His lyrics were determined to be too controversial at the time and the song appears in instrumental form only on the 1959 album Ah Um! Mingus later re-recorded the song, with lyrics, for the album *Charles Mingus presents Charles Mingus* (Mingus, 1961) under the title *Original Faubus Fables*. For a discussion of both versions see (Sloan, 2021).
[129] See Chapter 2.

being simply a social construction[130] but rather something which means "both our cultural practices *and* their connectedness to the natural world" (ibid:55). Any human activity presupposes human life, but speech (and gestural communication) is directly related to our physicality, "to the very shape of our bodies" (ibid).

Moi says that Wittgenstein isn't saying this to try and achieve superiority for a particular language or saying anything normative or essentialist. He gives no necessary conditions for the type of body that is speaking a language, only that the concept of language implies the existence of intelligent beings. She takes his imaginary example of someone who "it comes naturally…to react to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction from fingertip to wrist, rather than wrist to fingertip" (§185) as an example not of their inferiority but of our misunderstanding. Given more experience or an investigation of the context as to why this person behaves in a way which is unfamiliar to us, we may come to understand the meaning of their actions. Wittgenstein is not claiming either interpretation of the gesture to be more meaningful than the other, simply that we do not fully understand the other person's action because we haven't taken the opportunity to "look and see" and compare what we are witnessing with our previous experience.

To further clarify Wittgenstein's thoughts on meaning we can take one more example from *Philosophical Investigations* and Moi's response to it. Wittgenstein poses this question: "Can I say 'bububu' and mean 'If it doesn't rain, I shall go for a walk'?—It is only in a language that I can mean something by something" (§38 footnote). A misreading[131] of this phrase leads critics of Wittgenstein to say that he has said that there is at least one thing that "bububu" can't mean, with the implication that this leads to a theory of language, something Wittgenstein considers as meaningless (Moi). Is he a victim of the logic of inclusion/exclusion? It might also be argued that Wittgenstein is disregarding utterances which don't belong to a language we recognise as meaningless, the superiority argument detailed above. Moi, again, rejects this reading of Wittgenstein and theories of language in general saying that it is not that "bububu" can never have meaning, but that we lack the context to understand what its meaning might be.

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[130] "Socially constructed as opposed to what?" (Moi, 2017:55)
[131] Misreading as defined by Moi.

"To understand "bububu", or any other utterance, we don't need a theory of language. We simply need to establish its context of significant use, that is, we need to grasp what language-game it participates in, understand what *work* "bububu" is doing. To establish this requires us to engage in a form of description. We look and see, and try to establish the grammar of the utterance, for example by calling for the criteria we go on when we use it. In the case of "bububu", we will discover that it doesn't mean anything because it has not (yet) received a place in our language-games. It doesn't follow that it couldn't one day be given such a place." (Moi, 2017:80-81)

An example to think through

Can the same be said for musical utterances? "Bububu" could certainly be imagined as a musical utterance and given the right context could mean something. (Since first reading the word and thinking about its sound I can't help but hear "bububu" as a three-quaver floor tom pick up starting on the second half of beat 3 of a bar of 4/4, leading to beat 1 of the next bar). I have already begun the work of describing my solo practice as a collection of 'bits' and 'scraps' informed by performative music-making, showing how the detailed examination of one moment can reveal the narrative and narrativity of an improvised musical action[132]. That moment was a "why this?" moment, an instance where I recognised something which contrasted with my experience of solo improvised music performance. The object here is to try and respond to a similar "why this?" moment which took place within the practice of *stillefelt*, a moment which was identified as unusual in the experience of all three musicians. I hope that a detailed examination of this example will also add some clarity to this investigation of my practice.

This second "why this?" moment occurred on the third day of *stillefelt's* residency. It was identified in our post-performance discussion as we all felt that something had 'happened' around this moment even if we couldn't readily identify what exactly that 'happening' was. This unusual moment confounded our experiences not only as members of the trio *stillefelt*, but as musicians with life-long experiences of music-making. Percy summarised what we all felt when he described that moment as being like worlds aligning (PP, Residency Discussions:37). There was something which happened in the coincidences of pitch, timbre, timing and tonality that led us, as experienced improvisers, to recognise

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[132] See the example of Tony Dudley-Evans Tweet/Scott Walker's death, above.

this moment as being one of *those* moments in music that we search for, an aligning of worlds, something out of the ordinary. Taken in isolation this example means very little, as with Wittgenstein's initial proposition for "bububu" or like a chess piece removed from the context of a game of chess[133]. It is only when we think through the context within which this moment took place that we can begin to see what work is being done and start to make sense of its implications as we contrast this moment with our past experiences of improvisation and music performance.

The specific moment I am referring to here can be seen/heard in the videos of Performance 3 from the stillefelt residency. In order to fully understand the context, I recommend watching this section of the performance now so as to familiarise yourself with the material. I have included an edited and annotated version of this moment as Appendix 8 in the OneDrive folder "Digital Appendices". There are also details of how to access the full versions of each of the four performances via YouTube in Appendix 3 should you wish to also view the whole of performance 3. If that is the case, then the section which I have edited out and annotated in Appendix 8 corresponds to the section which begins at around 16m25s in the full version.

I made the decision to make audio and visual documentations of our residency performances in advance of our first performance. I wanted to present our practice as a part of this thesis as well as aiding my/our own artistic development through the self-reflection afforded by repeated listening. Listening, watching, discussing and playing have become intertwining aspects of the shared artistic practice of *stillefelt*. The videography is very basic with one or two fixed cameras left to capture the performances. For the audio capture I invited sound engineer Luke Morrish-Thomas to record the performances as multitrack audio. This meant having separate recordings of trumpet, guitar and bass which could be mixed down at a later date so as to give a clear representation of the music created. Sometime between our second and third performances I made the decision to use the audio files captured on the first two days of the residency as part of our third performance, to play them back as if they were in the moment samples of the 'live' sounds being produced by the musicians in the room

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[133] See footnote 117.

in 'real' time[134]. There is some connection here to how I have used audio from previous performances in my solo practice (see Chapter 2 for details), but I had not attempted to do anything similar in an ensemble context before this performance.

Rather than use MaxMSP (the software I use in solo performance) to playback the audio samples I chose to use Logic Pro. This meant that I would not have to listen to the files in advance for editing purposes as I could simply drag and drop them into a Logic project and use the graphical representations of the waveforms as a visual guide. My aim was to try and preserve the anticipated impact of re-hearing so that all three of us would be re-encountering the recordings together in performance. I wanted there to be an element of the unknown in this process, an attempt to mimic what it is like to improvise with another musician. During the performance I made selections, visually, pressed play and faded the excerpts into the performance space using an analogue mixing desk and a pair of PA speakers. The recordings from the separate instruments were routed so that each one had its own fader, meaning that I could choose between the three sounds in the moment of performance. I explained to Tom and Percy as well as the audience members present what I was planning to do in a short announcement at the beginning of the performance. Despite being present for this announcement and having a full understanding that I was to be playing back previously recorded audio material Tom still remarked afterwards that "it felt like you'd [Chris] sampled me [in real time]" (TF, Residency Discussions:37). Tom's apparent confusion as to what had happened is a symptom of the "why this?" moment. It is not that Tom did not understand what was happening, but that what happened was outside of his ordinary experiences of the use of recorded samples in live performance, improvised music practice generally and *stillefelt's* practice specifically.

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[134] Clearly the idea of sampling itself (recontextualising a musical action) is not an innovation of my practice. The idea of recontextualising pre-recorded sound has existed almost as long as the technological advancements which made it possible: Schaeffer, Henry, Varese, Oram et al. The prevalence of sampling firstly in hip-hop and then dance music has been well documented through countless records, interviews and texts as, once again, being driven by technological change throughout the 1970s and 80s (from two turntables to the advent of the MPC). As portable computing power has increased, so has the potential for near immediate recording and playback in musical performance, allowing musicians the creative fluidity of more traditional, analogue instruments. Live, in-the-moment sampling, manipulation and playback which fuses acoustic and digital instruments is more commonplace now than ever, see Endresen and Bang (2020), Evans and Pluta (2019), Ratkje (2013) for just some examples. Percy, Tom and I have all worked in this way prior to *stillefelt* and have therefore experienced performing with/as musicians who are using sounds captured in-performance as source material. The method I employed during this performance was based on contemporary live sampling practices, in that the source material came from the other members of the group, so was not unusual in that sense. What led to the "why this?" moment was that the source material was taken from a different performance than the one with which we were engaged at the time, something none of us had experienced of before.

At 2m40s into the video of the extract from Performance 3[135], I can be seen beginning to fade in some of Tom's guitar playing from Performance 1. There is some audio processing (delay, phaser) added to his sound so that it is not immediately recognisable as a recording from Performance 1. At 3m25s Percy begins a six-note phrase which ends on the note concert E. As he sustains this final note, I turn up the fader corresponding to the trumpet recording from Performance 1, which was already playing. What can be heard at 3m28s is one of Percy's recorded phrases from two days prior which is remarkably similar in pitch, tonality, dynamic and timbre to the phrase he had just played in real-time[136]. As can be seen in the video, Percy's immediate response was to carry on developing his 'live' melody, inflected by the recorded trumpet sound. He continued to duet with his past self as Tom and I found our own ways to react to this new scenario. As the dialogue between Performances 3 and 1 continues to develop over the next four-and-a-half minutes of the video[137] it becomes possible to gain a clearer understanding of what it means to improvise in this context; what the implications of our musical actions say about this particular form of life. Our process is laid bare by the act of replaying the recordings and our responses to them, providing an account of the grammar of our practice in both the wide and narrow sense.

Our practice is about improvising together in the context of *stillefelt's* shared history and how that history presents us with choices and enables us to freely create music within the framework of *stillefelt*, how our past(s) make possible a future. Improvisers face their past ideas each time they choose to play, whether they embrace or ignore them. In my prior experience, this is predominantly an internal process, in that, it relies on memories of past performances and not re-played audio recordings. The immediacy of improvised musical performance means that an improviser is not always able to think this process through in detail. This process is certainly not usually directly and audibly exposed to the improviser themselves, the other musicians or audience members as in the moment which I am describing here. The work of this moment is to reveal something about that process, to make the individual's problem of confronting their individual past a collective experience. By engaging with this process we can come to understand something about what it means to improvise music together and how the musical actions of this moment narrate our experiences of freedom.

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[135] The edited, annotated version in Appendix 8.
[136] The source recording of Performance 1 can be viewed in two ways: An annotated extract from this performance is included as Appendix 9, or the full version can be seen on YouTube via the links in Appendix 3.
[137] And in the room at the time.

This specific example could only have happened because of our shared history, because of the context we have created together where the use of a musical phrase in time can invite us to make some sense of the choices we have made and continue to make as musicians. This moment was made possible because of our shared history and became a part of that history as it happened. A moment which can be re-referenced, reaffirmed, reconsidered and recontextualised through our ongoing musical collaboration. The description of this moment is a provocation to think about time, history, freedom, community, intersubjectivity, technology, complexity amongst other things. It is an appeal to your experiences of improvisation, an invitation to consider this example of improvising. This is what Moi describes as an "appeal to the other's freedom" (Moi, 2017:92), and what Cavell means when he invites us to test something against our own experience and ask "why this?" This example from *stillefelt's* practice is an example of *a* use of a musical phrase in context that can provoke philosophical thought to begin.

Chapter 5

Alone (together)

The examples of my practice in the previous chapters were all taken from live performances, by which I mean performances to audience members who were physically present in the performance space. The capturing of these performances as video and audio recordings was crucial in enabling analysis after the fact, but it was not the intention that these documentations be viewed as performances or products in themselves[138]. Throughout this thesis I have put forward the case for a practice of improvisation that is contextually situated, with part of that context made up of the community of players, audience members and wider society within which my practice is located. This community influences my practice as it is influenced by it. Whether performing solo or in an ensemble, the examples of my practice so far have been directly engaged with this feedback loop; the performances took place at given times, in given spaces and within the presence of others.

Peters thinks that the act of improvising music requires not only a "sense" of a possible audience, but an actual audience (Peters, 2009). Nicholls also focusses on the importance of the communal aspects of improvised music practice saying that improvisers carry out their practice within a community that they help to reinforce through solidarity-building (Nicholls, 2012). When Melvin Gibbs asks the question "What is jazz?" he connects improvisation directly to ordinary life as part of a community, that improvisation in jazz is a reflection of the embodied, everyday improvisation that is life as a Black American.

> "When an explanation of jazz starts with "Jazz is a kind of music in which improvisation is typically an important part," recognize that to fully address the improvisatory nature of jazz you have to address the improvisatory nature of Black life. In the context of African America, improvisation is not a separate skill. It's a core competency…To put it in concrete terms, every time I'm stopped by a police officer it's a new solo. I cannot depend on what I did last time, and I don't have the luxury of not practicing for it." (Gibbs, 2021)

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[138] These recordings obviously took on a secondary, performative role in the case of *stillefelt*, as outlined in Chapter 4. It is worth reiterating that this was not an intended use of this material when the residency was conceived but a result of the creative thought during the improvisatory process of an extended period of music-making.

Whether a positive or negative, improvisation can be seen as a part of everyday life. As something which is enacted, something that we do as a response to our place in a community in both a narrow and a broad sense. In that way, improvised musical performances can create a narrative of identity through musical action informed by the communities within which those actions take place.

As someone who has spent a lifetime performing music in front of an audience, my instinct is always to continue along that path. Therefore, my initial plan for how I would carry out my research for this thesis included the provision for one more documented live performance, scheduled to take place in late 2020 following on from our 2019 residency. Due to the restrictions imposed because of Covid-19 it became impractical to consider arranging a live performance with an audience at this time. The wider community within which my/our practice takes place had the most profound impact on the practice of anyone reliant on public performance when it became no longer legal to be in the same physical space as other people. This thesis is not the correct place to discuss many of the issues resulting from the pandemic—the British government's response to it, its continuing impact on daily life, the heightening of inequalities, the issues of politics vs medical science—but it remains impossible not to make mention of it due to its impact on the everyday occurrences of this and so many other artistic projects dependent on live performance. The understanding of community changed very rapidly and, in order to continue making music together, all musicians who were subjected to these social changes were forced to respond to them[139]. Therefore, the way this final example was conceived, created, documented and presented is a radical departure from the previous examples of *stillefelt's* practice based on live performance, but it is an example that remains deeply connected to and influenced by our shared history as described above and the community within which it was created.

In April and May 2020 *stillefelt* created the collaborative piece *Alone (together)* (stillefelt, 2020a), the subject of this chapter. Understanding how it was created, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, is a part of how we can further clarify the practice of *stillefelt*, using this specific example to think through what it means to improvise music in our collective practice. Determining the context, narrow and wide, allows for the examination of specific examples of musical enactment as to how they might help us better understand some of the key themes of this thesis: freedom, narrativity, the nature of events, technology and improvisation. Some 'scene-setting' is necessary here, not to tell the story of

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[139] Even if that response was to disengage with music-making entirely.

the Covid-19 pandemic, but to show how it impacted on the practice of this trio. Understanding the wider context of artistic practice during this brief[140] but important period will help to highlight differences in *stillefelt's* approach giving us an example to think through.

During the highly stringent conditions of the first UK-wide lockdown in March 2020 as all live, in-person public performances ceased, musicians whose practice involves improvisation began to look for alternative ways in which to remain connected to their communities of audiences and each other. Methods of doing this fell, broadly, into three categories. Firstly, live streamed (mainly) solo performances from musician's homes began to take place on a regular, sometimes daily, basis. This method was adopted almost immediately by lesser known, independent artists ('Into The Shed', 2020; Diaz and Hunter, 2021) and quickly reached the mainstream and high-profile pop music acts (Reilly, 2020). For improvisers, and their audiences, these performances went some way to addressing the loss of live, in-person performance. The connection between performer and audience was maintained but also changed.

At this time, I was very heavily involved—as both a performer and in a production role—in a series of live streamed performances called *Around The Houses*. These performances took place between April and June 2020 using Facebook Live as the platform for sharing live-streamed video 'gigs'[141]. Looking through the comments left by audience members on the videos of these performances it is possible to see the many positives that these live streams brought to those who engaged with them. There was, it seemed, an increasing level of interactivity between performers and audience members as well as an emerging communal spirit in the face of adversity. The comments also point to some of the technical shortcomings and inherent inequalities raised through this way of performing. Streamed performances were being judged not just on the musicianship and technical ability of the musicians involved, but on the strength of their broadband connection, the quality of their recording equipment and whether their living arrangements meant that they were able to perform together with other musicians[142].

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[140] Here I am referring specifically to the first period of lockdown in the UK between mid-March and July 2020. Clearly, the implications and restrictions of Covid-19 are far from "brief" and continue to impact upon many aspects of daily life including, most relevantly to this thesis, the practice of *stillefelt*.

[141] https://www.facebook.com/aroundthehousesfestival

[142] The comments are still available to view via the *Around the Houses* Facebook page. See Mark Sanders' performance on 31st May 2020 for comments related to technical issues due to his use of a phone microphone in lieu of any alternative. Similarly, Elizabeth Bass' harp performance on 24th May 2020 was deemed to be not a "proper" recording by one commentator because of the lack of sustaining notes caused by a combination of

A second approach led some improvisers to collaborate with each other and embrace various forms of video and audio technology attempting to play or perform together in 'real-time'[143]. This method embraced the various technical limitations and possibilities offered by a particular software platform, for example improvising together over a massed Zoom call (MacDonald and Birrell, 2021) or combining existing platforms and technologies so as to try and mitigate barriers of time and space; Noise Orchestra's Autonomous Noise Unit (ANU) combines the audio routing possibilities of *Jacktrip*'s servers with a specially adapted *Raspberry Pi* microcomputer allowing musicians to play together remotely with "very low latency" within a 200 mile radius ('About ANU', 2021). Both these methods address one of the intrinsic differences between playing music together over a digital network and being in the same physical space, latency; taken here to mean the difference in time between the occurrence of a physically present action and that action reaching its intended, networked recipient. The two different approaches to the problem of latency outlined above, acceptance and reduction, reflect the determination and problem-exploring nature of improvised music practitioners as well as the diversity of responses (there is no 'right' way to approach this problem). There is a willingness to improvise a reaction in response to the incidences of daily life. The need for a community as identified

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quality of microphone, Facebook's compression and noise limiting algorithms and sound reproduction at the audience member's end. The performance which has (to date) received over twice as many views as any of the others is Sara Colman and Steve Banks' on 19th April 2020, a rare duo in amongst the solo performances. Private messages and comments made to the organisers of the streams suggested that programming more non-solo performances would have been preferable, although it would not be fair to reference those comments directly here.

[143] 'Real-time' becomes difficult to define as it is filtered through network connections. Its commonly understood meaning of variations on 'happening right now' would appear to break down in a world where human interactions take place remotely. It calls into question our place *in* time (Carr). What might be 'happening right now' for one participant of a remote conversation or musical interaction may be happening at a slightly different time for other participants due to network latency, connection speeds etc., leading to a chain of fractured timelines. An understanding of 'real-time' in this context has come to represent something like "a simultaneous, remote event with a mutually agreed start time". The meaning of the phrase 'real-time' has been altered because the context in which it is used has changed. This underscores "Wittgenstein's radical point: there is no meaning "behind" the use [of words in a language]…there is only meaning in use" (Moi, 2017:29).

Schütz's (1951) description of "inner" and "outer" time in relation to music performance is also relevant here. He says that "outer time" is measurable by a clock or a metronome whereas "inner time" refers to the duration of a piece of music as it is experienced through performance. For Schütz inner time is "the very form of existence of music…the flux of tones unrolling in inner time is an arrangement meaningful to both the composer and the beholder [including the performer] because and in so far as it evokes in the stream of consciousness participating in it an interplay of recollections, retentions, protentions and anticipations which interrelate the successive elements" (Schütz, 1951:89). The links to Husserl and Carr are clearly demonstrated by his explanation. His suggestion is that this can take place over centuries between the creation of a composition and its performance, but it is the enacted performance and its reception that links composer and beholder as they both experience the work's unfolding in "inner" time, where musical actions relate to each other within the performance. He goes on to say that the mutual experience of a musical performance leads, through the concept of inner time, to the 'I' and the 'you' which combine as a 'we'. Although the majority of Schütz's paper refers to western, classical compositions he says that there is "no difference in principle between the performance of a string quartet and the improvisations at a jam session of accomplished jazz players" (ibid:97). Assuming Schütz would allow a further extension to improvised music not in the jazz idiom lends further weight to the assumption that improvisers require a community in order enact meaningful musical moments.

by Nicholls is also apparent. An audience, even one made up entirely of fellow performers, demands and sustains performance as it builds solidarity.

The final approach I wish to discuss here is that of combining several, separately recorded videos into one split-screen video to give the impression of an ensemble performance. This was not a way of working which came about because of the Covid-19 pandemic but it quickly rose in popularity during this initial lockdown period[144]. In this method, each musician records their part of the performance independently and 'live'—presumably to a click track, metronome or previously recorded material—with all the resulting individual videos being combined into one at the end of the process as a group 'performance'. Perhaps understandably this method of performing became popular with pre-existing bands and ensembles with a pre-existing repertoire that doesn't have improvisation as its core. This approach allows for the musicians to record (and re-record if necessary) multiple versions of their part to achieve the 'correct' version, placing this method a step away from the 'real-time' methods mentioned above[145]. However, it is important to acknowledge the role that the proliferation of videos of this style played in shaping *Alone (together)*.

These three approaches are necessarily broad in their descriptions and clearly there are exceptions. To try and account for every different example of practice or variation on these three themes which transpired as a result of collaborative music-making through the first lockdown period would require far more space than this thesis allows and would not necessarily add any greater insight at this juncture. My personal experience of lockdown predominantly exposed me to these three ways of working as a performer and audience member. This was the context in which the idea for *Alone (together)* was first formulated and then created. I wanted to respond to the apparent desire to see non-solo performances that the proliferation of live streaming had brought about, by exploring and expanding on what solo, isolated performance could be. To see if the issue of (lack of) co-habiting musicians raised by the *Around The Houses* audience members could be addressed[146]. *Alone*

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[144] *Music Radar's* "How To" guide contains several examples of mainstream artists employing this method (Astley-Brown, 2020).

[145] One notable exception is large jazz ensembles (big bands, jazz orchestras) with featured soloists. Here the majority of the parts are fixed, pre-recorded and the soloist records their part over the accompaniment such as *Patchwork Jazz Orchestra's* 'in isolation' version of *Endless Stars* (*Endless Stars | Patchwork Jazz Orchestra (in isolation)*, 2020). There is obviously still a limit on two-way interaction with the accompanists only able to anticipate the soloist's actions.

[146] See footnote 142.

(together) can also be seen as a recognition of, and frustration with, the problem of latency. What happens if you stop trying to reduce the number of milliseconds audio gets delayed by over a remote network and choose to embrace a latency of several days or weeks instead? In the end, *stillefelt's* work also became a way of presenting an ensemble performance as video content, using the tropes of split-screen video home ensemble 'performances' to help draw attention the alternative way that this example was created.

Finally, *Alone (together)* was not originally intended to be a part of this thesis. Like so many other artists, I longed for the interaction of playing music with my friends and colleagues and was, at least partly, seeking to find a way to continue that bond given the constraints of lockdown. There was also the rather practical matter that, with possibly the worst timing ever for a band reliant on promoting its music through live gigs, *stillefelt*'s eponymous debut album (stillefelt, 2020b) was released on 2nd April 2020. In the absence of any performances to support the release of the album, we were exploring other ways to gain publicity for it, of which this became one. It was only after we had created *Alone (together)* that all three of us, Tom, Percy and I, noticed something surprising which caused us to ask "why this?"

Alone (together) is included in the OneDrive folder "Digital Appendices" as Appendix 10 and is also available via the following link where it was originally 'released':

 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lDgQwbCaww

I recommend watching/listening through the video before reading the description below so that some of the sense of "why this?" is conveyed to you. My hope is that as you learn how it was created you will begin to compare it to your own experiences of collaborative music-making both remote and in person.

Alone (together)

The inclusion of pre-recorded material in the live performances of *stillefelt* was a significant "why this?" moment that occurred during our four-day *Artefact* residency (see Chapter 4). All three of us felt that it was a new and exciting aspect of our practice which should be continued and developed further. Sadly, we only had one more chance to do that, the final day of our residency, as lockdown restrictions curtailed our planned live performance schedule for 2020. We had been due to perform as part of *Punkt Birmingham* in March 2020, a collaboration between *Punkt* festival based in Kristiansand, Norway and several Birmingham-based artists. *Punkt* is a festival centred around the concept of the 'live remix'; performances by one group of musicians are recorded and immediately remixed and re-presented by a different group of musicians in a second performance (Vitali, 2015:236-237). The ethos of performing "between past, present and future" (ibid:234) as festival Director and musician Jan Bang describes it, is something that has also been revealed in *stillefelt's* practice through the use of recordings in live performance. Once it became clear that *Punkt Birmingham* would have to be postponed, I streamed an alternative, solo performance via Facebook Live on 20th March 2020 (Mapp, 2020). This performance included pre-recorded elements of the *stillefelt* album manipulated in performance and presented as a "live remix" in the spirt of *Punkt*.

Using the pre-recorded elements in this way helped to sustain a connection between my physically isolated performance and the collective, enacted history of *stillefelt*. Whilst I played the bass guitar in my 'real-time', frozen loops generated from past recordings hung in stasis, reflecting the turbulence and disorientation of and in time I was experiencing[147]. As lockdown set in, I wanted to continue exploring and developing the connection between myself and the two other members of *stillefelt* despite the physical and technological restrictions we were all facing. I wanted to develop our relationship with our past performances through new musical action, in the way that we would have been doing if we had been able to continue physically performing together during this period.

I devised a set of handwritten instructions which asked Tom and Percy to 'perform' alone but to draw on our shared past experiences and imagine that all three of us were playing together with them. The

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[147] I was not alone in feeling a warped sense of time, see (Martinelli *et al.*, 2021).

full 'score'[148] (See Appendix 2) was sent to them with the proviso that they treated it as they would the numbered pieces from the *stillefelt* note-book; any or all of it could be ignored if they wished. Amongst some musical information and written text are these instructions

1. Set up a space you feel comfortable in with a chair, microphone, music stand and camera.
2. Start the audio and video recording (highest possible quality). You choose the shot/what's in the frame, so long as some element of you playing is visible.
3. Play for approx. 40 minutes*. Imagine we are all there playing with you. Leave space as you would when playing together. Long spaces/silences are fine.
4. When you feel like you've played enough, stop the audio/video and send it to me without editing it.

 *Don't time it, or do if you want.

Neither musician heard the other's recording before creating their own so their experience was similar[149]. My original intention was that these instructions would generate some new recorded material with which I could potentially create another remix-style performance, manipulating extracts in real time as in Performance 3 and 4 of our Artefact residency and my solo remix live stream performance on 20th March 2020.

To some extent the initial stages of the formulation of *Alone (together)* mirror how *stillefelt* have collectively negotiated musical ideas in performance. The initial idea was mine[150], one which was considered within the context of the musical history of the ensemble and which, through its conception, offered the possibility of continuing to create music together. I suggested my idea to Tom and Percy both of whom took it on board and developed it in their own way[151] (using my impetus to

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[148] This was deliberately conceived as a one page 'lead sheet', similar to the numbered pieces of the *stillefelt* note-book. The title *Alone (together)* underscores the connection that all three of us have to jazz music and the practice of extrapolating a performance from a single-page lead sheet, such as you might do with the jazz standard *Alone Together.*

[149] Improvisers Steve Beresford and David Toop released an audio piece recorded in a similar way, also in May 2020. *No Relation* (Abbey, 2020) was released as part of the *Amplify2020* quarantine sessions and was "recorded separately with no discussion beforehand except length" (ibid). The recordings were combined to create an audio piece, as with *Alone (together).* I discovered the Beresford/Toop piece after we had completed *Alone (together)* so it is interesting to note the similar approaches to the same problem of isolation was being explored independently by different groups of improvisers.

[150] Initiation is not necessarily a sign of leadership in this context. As discussed in Chapter 3 Tom and Percy did not necessarily have to follow my instructions or engage with them at all.

[151] They developed it as individuals in physical isolation but with the collective in mind.

a greater or lesser extent) before making their own recorded contributions and returning them to the collective. Tom's observation about the beginnings of *stillefelt* "that was one of the early things that we were told, that you don't actually have to play anything that's written" (TF, Residency Discussions:42) was something I re-iterated at the beginning of the process of *Alone (together)*. I made it clear that as with any improvised musical performance that choosing to not engage with what I was suggesting was a perfectly acceptable response as far as I was concerned. My response to the contributions Tom and Percy eventually sent back to me developed their ideas further in a way that they had possibly not intended but, upon reflection led to the creation of something which we were all satisfied to present as our collective work.

Percy sent me his contribution soon after he recorded it on 17th April 2020; Tom did the same on 8th May 2020. A few days later I found some time to begin working with the files. I had initially intended to attempt a 'solo' performance using a similar method to the one I developed during the residency and my solo streamed 'Punkt' performance; playing extracts directly from Logic Pro so that I could retain a sense of surprise, an attempt to recreate the possibilities of playing with another which I was sorely missing. To check that the files were suitable in terms of sound quality and volume I dragged them into a Logic project, aligned them at the start and pressed play. What I heard struck me as something out of the ordinary, a moment in which I rapidly changed my plan for this music and my own musical actions. Tom and Percy's recordings seemed, to my mind, to fit together with such purpose and intricacy it was as if they had recorded them together in the same room at the same time. To my surprise, my expectations of what those two musicians sound like when they play together, based on my experiences of listening to them, were met. The real subversion of my expectations was that they, in fact, weren't subverted at all! As Tom's first guitar chords faded away, I heard Percy play a phrase which I felt complimented Tom's contribution perfectly in terms of tone, timbre, tonality, timing and pitch. As if he was responding to what he had just heard[152], Tom played another chord of equal aptness which made me consider what it would be like to improvise along with these recordings as if all three of us were in the room together. I pressed stop, not wanting to hear any more so that I could experience the rest of it for the first time 'in performance', an imitation of our in-person practice. I routed the recordings so that the sound of each musician was coming from a different speaker in the room I was in, set up my bass equipment, my audio interface and my video camera, pressed record and began playing. The combination of our three recordings became *Alone (together)*.

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[152] Even though he clearly hadn't.

Why this?

> "I had suggested that a certain sense of the question "Why this?" is essential to criticism, and the "certain sense" is characterized as one in which we are, or seem to be, asking about the artist's intention in the work." (Cavell, 2015:210)

Cavell's question runs throughout this description of *Alone (together)* and has begun to reveal some of my and our intentions this way of working. The physical and temporal boundaries of lockdown brought to the fore the way that individual experiences from all three musicians are mediated through the group and the environment. As if adjusting the speed of our process from 'real-time' to 'anytime' has helped to highlight a key aspect of improvisation in our shared practice. Intentions are acted out in context, in community; they inform it as they are informed by it with the underpinning consideration that all actions are subject to the responses of others. Through musical action these intentions shape the shared musical history of the trio and enable a shared musical future, remote or otherwise.

In offering this description of our process I have not said anything 'hidden' or 'deep' about it; the philosophising arises directly from actions, from the use of music. Included in the description of the YouTube page where the video of *Alone (together)* is hosted is a brief outline of how we created the piece as well as a link to an image of the score in Appendix 2. These pieces of information are parts of the work, a use of the medium, which further reveal my/our intentions. Understanding how the work was created became a part of how the work can be experienced, so that you might contrast it with your own experiences of other live and online performances. Any other details emerging from the description above can be considered a part of the work in the way that Marion Brown's *Views and Reviews* is a part of the narrative of *Afternoon of a Georgia Faun*. His description of the music of that album enabled him to be the "very first, and most accurate critic" (M. Brown, 1973a:22) and to position himself, the artist, as "the ultimate arbiter of the meaning of his or her music" (Porter, 2002:248). In both …*Georgia Faun* and *Alone (together)* the work straddles the actions of making music and the act of reflecting on those same actions. Those actions are bound together inextricably in a way that strengthens the connection between the musicians and their audience and enriches

understanding through an enacted narrative of identity and the narratability of improvised musical events.

That I have recognised in Chapter 1 this same sense of narrativity in *Blue* and in *…Georgia Faun* should not be taken as a move towards generality. They are two specific examples in my extensive experience[153] of music as a practitioner and audience member which have caused me to ask "why this?" More exactly, to question what is it about the recording of *Blue* which led me to describe it as a narrative musical event. Comparing my own experiences of *Kind of Blue* to MOPDTK's *Blue* revealed something about my understanding of that musical process and its engagement with the canonical narrative of jazz history. With *…Georgia Faun*, too, I recognised something in Marion Brown's work which struck me as differing from my experience of how improvisers present and describe their music. This led to an understanding of the narrative of identity Brown wanted to create in and for his music. Thinking through Danto's idea of narrative sentences helps to illuminate the narrativity of these two examples and *Alone (together)*. As I have come to understand them, something of a family resemblance was revealed between my descriptions of all three examples and the narratives they are engaged in. This should not be taken as a theory or model of improvised music which will always hold true in all settings, <u>the</u> philosophy of improvisation as Danto, Borgo and Peters might wish for. But, as I have said throughout, these are three examples of improvised music practice to think through.

The example of *Alone (together)* calls into question our understanding of what a performance can be; that what we think of as an event may not necessarily be something that happens in 'real-time'. As this narrative unfolds, our understanding of the word 'performance' needs to be reconsidered. *Alone (together)* clearly does not fit within what might usually be considered a live music performance given the lack of physically present audience members and the physically and temporally distanced performers. Yet there is something performative about it, partly because of the way I have chosen to present it, and partly because the way the musicians involved went about creating it; by combining three performances as one through video and audio recording an artistic practice built on a shared musical and personal history. As Diamond suggests, calling into question what our understanding of a

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[153] Referencing my experience here is to show that, despite living a life which has been filled with musical activity from a very young age, these "why this?" moments have, for me, been few and far between. Perhaps more importantly, an understanding of my practice that includes thinking and writing about these everyday experiences shows how vital they are in clarifying what I think it means to improvise music within the context of my own experience.

'performance' is doesn't create a contradiction but deepens our understanding of how we use that word. Cavell's question "why this?" is clearly a pertinent one here, perhaps more precisely articulated in this instance as "why is this example of practice able to question our understanding of what we mean by a performance?" What Cavell wants us to do when we experience something which causes us to ask "why this?" is not to reject that thing but to consider how our experiences may be "wrong, or misinformed, or inattentive and inconstant" (Cavell, 2015:201). As we are drawn into the work, the piece, the performance, it's not a question of how the thing we are experiencing can be made to fit our understanding, but how that experience can serve as an example for our philosophical investigation such that we might learn what our philosophising must account for (ibid:210). Considering how *Alone (together)* was created caused me to adapt this entire thesis to account for what the piece eventually became.

Ultimately, this is reflected in the communal dimension of our practice and what happens when this is taken away. What does improvising music together look like when an understanding of what it means to be together has radically changed? Covid-19 has shown that this may happen at any moment, that our lives are improvised in response to the communities we live in. *Alone (together)* is such an improvisation, one which, when we compare it to our past experiences, causes us to ask "why this?" If we choose to answer this question in the way that Cavell would like us to, to question our experiences and to examine the intentions of the piece's creators, then our understanding of what it means to improvise music together can account for events of this kind. This does not necessarily entail a rejection of my/our past thoughts and experiences à la *slime mould improvisers*, but an expanded understanding of improvisation. In the example of *Alone (together)* this leads to a recontextualisation of those experiences, one which examines specifics, embraces and juxtaposes the criss-crossing of past and present ideas and actions, celebrates and investigates difference and finds meaning through the enacted narrativity of improvised musical performance. To paraphrase Borgo and Wittgenstein, I can think of no better description of the musical practice of *stillefelt.*
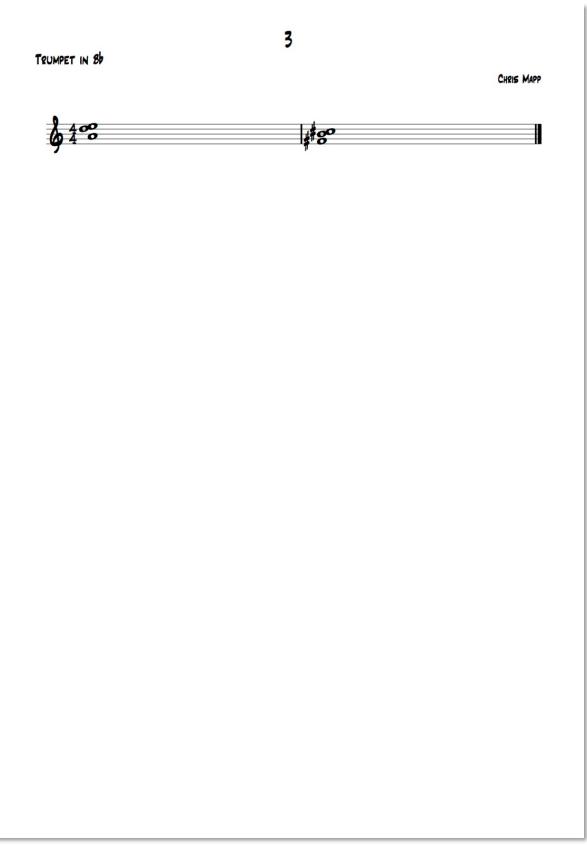
Appendices

Appendix 1

Examples of the pieces which make up the *stillefelt* notepad

Bass part for *7* page 1

Bass part for *7* page 2

TRUMPET IN B♭

Chris Mapp

Trumpet part for *3* (all three parts are the same for this piece, the only difference being how the three parts are transposed).

Appendix 2

Photo of the handwritten score (concert pitch) sent to Tom and Percy prior to them recording their parts for *Alone (together)*.

Appendix 3

Explanation of *stillefelt* residency video content

Each performance of *stillefelt's* 2019 Artefact residency was documented comprehensively. The full video of each performance can be found via the following unlisted YouTube links. It should be stressed that these links are included for reference purposes (which is why they are external links and not included in the accompanying OneDrive folder). It is not necessary for the purposes of this thesis to watch every video in its entirety. The edited, annotated videos discussed in Chapter 4 are included in the OneDrive folder titled "Digital appendices" as Appendices 8 and 9.

Wednesday 23rd October 2019:   **https://youtu.be/qh1cN1b5lSs**

Thursday 24th October 2019:   **https://youtu.be/2GmNHVDknns**

Friday 25th October 2019:   **https://youtu.be/1mkvTiQfZmw**

Saturday 26th October 2019:   **https://youtu.be/AjC0IhM9R78**

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