PLAYING WITH WORDS

Mike Fletcher and Nicolas Pillai

Playing With Words is an experimental interdisciplinary practice-as-research project that combines improvisation by a musician and a writer. The idea for the project originated as a result of the two of us having participated in an experimental writing workshop, during which the participants were invited to listen to an improvised solo saxophone performance by Rachel Musson and subsequently to write as fast as possible for one minute about what we had heard. The conceptual-methodological question of how to go about expressing in one creative medium one's experience of a different medium forms the starting point of the present project. However, *Playing With Words* is conceived in order to make the process interactive, which is to say that, as well as the writer responding to the music, the musician responds to the writer. Furthermore, as the piece consists of an improvised live performance, the responses unfold and evolve in respect of what has gone before.

The video that accompanies this text is the very first performance of the piece, and no preparation was made other than to establish a time, venue and rough duration of ten minutes for the performance. As a result, each of the performers tackled the conceptual-methodological issues pertaining to their role in the performance individually. Below each reflects on their approach to, and experience of, the piece.

Video: Playing With Words - Nic Pillai and Mike Fletcher

Mike Fletcher

Before we started the performance I made a conscious decision to avoid any kind of prior methodological preparation other than that I would wait for Nic to start, and then base my response on what he wrote. Nevertheless, I did contemplate what some possible methodologies might entail. For example, if Nic had begun by writing full sentences, I could have derived syllable patterns from the words and used the resulting rhythms as thematic material. Or I could have taken a more programmatic approach and played, for example, rising pitches as the pen moved vertically upwards and vice versa. However, I chose to leave these decisions until the moment we began to perform the piece.

When I started to conceive of this project, the aspect that seemed to present the greatest creative challenge was how to represent words – and also as it happened, shapes – with music was the lack of an established series of precedents. When I improvise in a purely musical context I use a set of criteria that, although very much personal, is informed by a combination of established musical norms - pitch, rhythm, timbre and so on – and my many years of experience as an improvising musician. As a consequence, when I improvise music, the decisions I make as to how to proceed throughout the performance are made in respect of musical stimuli. However, to interact in an improvised setting with a non-musician presents a new series of challenges precisely because the criteria I normally use would become unstable because the stimuli are visual as opposed to sonic.

As I noted above, I decided not to pre-conceive of any specific methodology. My reason for making this choice was that I wanted the way I played to be as much a result of the performance itself - which is to say, the words, phrases and symbols that Nic created – as the product of my own theoretical understanding of the project.

What I realised in the first few seconds of the performance was that without any type of methodological framework in place I had no way to begin, and so I had to quickly make a decision. As can be seen in the video, Nic began by writing letters, but proceeding slowly, one stroke at a time. I responded to this by choosing to interpret the emerging letters as roman numerals, which in music correspond to intervals. This approach provided me with a starting point, and so my improvised response to the first 'screen' followed this pattern.

It is worth noting at this point that I was not aware of the type of technology Nic was planning to use, so it was not until the first 'screen change' that I realised that our performance might divide naturally into smaller episodes, and that as a consequence there would be scope for me to adopt different methodologies accordingly. In fact, the decision to vary my methodological approach was somewhat forced by the fact that I had previously decided to respond to Nic as opposed to taking the lead.For example, a change of methodology can be seen at 2:04 when I began to improvise based on the rhythmic pattern implied by the five syllables in the phrase 'so am I writing?'. This gave rise to what I consider to be one of the most interesting parts of the performance. Once I had begun to improvise using five-note phrases, Nic switched from text to drawing dots. My response to this was to interpolate an irregular groove based on the appearance of these dots, while still using the five-note motif as a melodic reference point. This combination of methodologies, and fact that the nature and balance of which could not have been reached outside of the performance context, provides a clear example of the value of the creative potential of this type of practice-as-research.

In conclusion, I found the project to be a uniquely challenging experiment. Before we undertook the piece I anticipated that it would require the both of us to engage in a significant process of methodological conceptualisation, which indeed proved to be the case. Consequently, in terms serving as a practical demonstration of practice-as-research process, the piece has already proved a success. However, in respect of both my own contribution and the potential for developing a closer interactive performance practice with Nic, I feel that there remain many avenues to be explored.

Nic at *Writing with Noise* workshop.
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Nic Pillai

[sits at computer with his back to Mike; boots up Onenote]

NP: (thought-bubble) This'll be fine. This'll be fine. It's an experiment, a work-in-progress. Maybe I laboured that too much in my intro though? It felt like Chris was getting impatient with me. OK – start writing.

[abstract lines begin to form the word PLAYING)

NP: (thought-bubble) Mike's waiting to see what this comes out as. Thought he'd just begin playing straight away. Maybe I should have faced him? Last-minute decision to deny him a sight-line, bad idea. Anyway, this bloody room layout means I'm stuck here in the corner tied to the computer.

[Mike starts to play]

NP: (thought-bubble) This is working! Needn't have wasted all that time drawing charts and watching Godard films. I'll not look at my guide notes after all. What's Mike doing? I wonder if I can follow that? The audience is quiet. Probably a weird situation for them, especially after a formal seminar. But it works because we were discussing fusion, right? Right? Yeah – all the trappings of a lecture but we've subverted it by crafting an improvisatory exploration of chance circumstance.

[OneNote crashes. Nervous laughter from the audience.]

NP: (thought-bubble) Shit.

[Boots up OneNote again. Writes HELP. Audience laughs more confidently.]

NP: (thought-bubble) OK, gags work. Gags are good. This fucking software. I should have gone with the digital sketchbook after all. What shall I write next? Let's introduce some intellectual content –

[OneNote crashes.]

NP: (thought-bubble) Son of a bitch!!! OK, it's up again. Look at that BCU screensaver, very corporate. But this writing function isn't working now. How about if I make these dots. Dot dot dot. Mike's mickey-mousing them. Ooh this is a bit Len Lye. But is this just drawing now? How is that different from writing?

[OneNote crashes.]

NP: (thought-bubble) It's over. I think it's over. It's over.

[Audience applause]

NP: (thought-bubble) Next time I'll throw fucking paint at the wall.

Some closing thoughts

As a coherent performance, it is difficult to see this as a success. But as an experiment, it has provided us with a number of routes to follow. Evidently, institutional environment and technological mediation had a major impact upon each stage of the process and so it would be useful to see how outcomes changed with different variables. Equally, now that we have entered into this musician-writer contract, our subsequent performances will be informed by the accretion of shared experience; an interesting challenge will be to fold audiences into what is at present a somewhat solipsistic experience. Bodily interaction, of the sort suggested by Pillai at the close of his reflection, would dramatically affect performance and the possibilities for escalation and discord.

Dr Mike Fletcher is a saxophonist, composer and postdoctoral researcher at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire/BCU. He locates his practice within the fields of jazz and improvised music, and his main research interests are the creative processes and conceptual implications of composing for improvising jazz musicians.

Dr Nicolas Pillai is the author of Jazz as Visual Language: Film, Television and the Dissonant Image(2016, I. B. Tauris) and co-editor of New Jazz Conceptions: History, Theory, Practice(2017, Routledge). He is PI on the AHRC-funded project Jazz on BBC-TV 1960-1969, which includes a practice-as-research element.