

“How are notation and improvisation interfaced in contemporary and experimental music?” San Diego born composer and bassist Christopher Williams posed that question when he embarked on a doctoral research project that eventually became the website *Tactile Paths*. Published online, his findings and speculative probes transcend the limitations of a bound book. Sections can be read in any order and still make sense, while audio and video components contribute at least as much as verbal texts. One chapter, “A *Treatise* Remix Handbook”, augments Cornelius Cardew’s graphic score with fragments of spoken commentary and layered excerpts from historical and original recordings. Another chapter exploring two scores by Malcolm Goldstein is a documentary film made with director Zachary Kerschberg in which Williams interprets those pieces and airs his thoughts on issues arising from their performance, while pigeons coo, swallows twitter and innumerable other sounds of action or environment add nuance to the discussion.

“Practically speaking, the chance to reach a non-academic readership meant that I used as much straightforward, non-technical language as possible,” Williams observes. He envisages a readership who will experience *Tactile Paths* as they might dip into a book of recipes or a poetry collection, savouring ideas and drawing stimulation from insights or examples. “My ambition was to produce research that is not only about art, but is an artwork itself,” he says.

The project is rooted in Williams’s own work as a writer of chamber music, free improviser, interpreter of unconventional compositions and explorer of interdisciplinary formats. It also draws on his extensive study of the varied practices and orientations of other

adventurous musicians including Richard Barrett, Ben Patterson and Bob Ostertag. *Tactile Paths* is offered as a catalyst rather than an exhaustive survey. It aims not only to generate interest, but also to enhance communication among musicians, especially those working in ostensibly disparate fields, and to reconfigure awareness of relationships between notation and improvisation in order to open up new spaces for collaboration.

Since 2009 Williams has lived in Berlin, a city he has found to be rich in potential for creative liaisons. In 2015 he made *A Treatise Remix* for radio broadcast with vocalist Christian Kesten, inside-pianist Andrea Neumann and percussionist Robyn Schulkowsky; last year he collaborated on another radio piece with sound artist Christina Kubisch. “This town is crawling with brilliant musicians and artists!” Williams exclaims. Soon after his arrival, he and woodwind player Chris Heenan initiated a monthly salon series called Certain Sundays. It ran for six years. Local artists and notable visitors, such as Philip Corner, George Lewis and John Tilbury, met to perform but also to talk about their work over coffee and homemade cake.

“In Berlin it’s not only about fashion, careerism, tradition or toeing the party line,” Williams remarks. “Many experimental musicians like to exchange ideas, and that contributes to the diversity and non-hierarchical nature of this bubbly, thoughtful scene.” Now he co-curates the concert series Kontraklang. “It’s not about talk this time, but we use discursive dynamics to drive our programming – what artists care about, how they position themselves, what kind of larger context they inhabit.”

Kontraklang recently hosted a festival that took notation for improvisors as its focus and used the

name Tactile Paths. Alongside guest composers including Annea Lockwood, Yannis Kyriakides and Burkhard Beins, this edition featured a performance of sustained tone music in just intonation by Reidemeister Move, a duo bringing together Williams on double bass and Robin Hayward playing microtonal tuba. “Robin was an important person to bounce ideas off as I wrote the dissertation,” Williams notes. “He’s got a serious bullshit allergy.”

One of his academic advisors, the musician and philosopher Marcel Cobussen, suggested that the completed dissertation should be a website. Another supervisor was Richard Barrett. Williams had encountered him earlier in California and was impressed by his work, so when Barrett arrived in Berlin, Williams sought him out for composition lessons. “The fact that he writes complex through composed music and is also involved in free improvisation is exciting,” he says. “There are still precious few musicians working at a high level in both those fields.” Barrett then accepted a professorship at the University of Leiden and Williams enrolled as a postgraduate student. “Richard is fucking sharp, and has great musical imagination anchored in his love of ‘What if?’ type questions. My music has little in common with his, aesthetically or technically, but I suppose we share a love for radical speculation and self-transformation. Of course, he has a lot to say about the topic of notation for improvisors. That was indispensable for the development of *Tactile Paths*, and my favourite pieces by Richard over the last ten to 15 years, such as his *fOKT* series, are prime examples of the potential of this notation and improvisation interface.” □ [tactilepaths.net](http://tactilepaths.net)

Julian Cowley

# Choose Your Own Route



The freeform website *Tactile Paths* is only one string to composer and improviser Christopher Williams’s bow