

SAY NO SCORE: A LEXICAL IMPROVISATION AFTER BOB OSTERTAG

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Abstract: Music that features the interface of notation and improvisation tends to dwell in liminal regions of musical labour. It thus calls much entrenched musical vocabulary into question. The word score is one such example. What seems like a synonym for notation in everyday parlance turns out to be something quite different on closer inspection – more regulatory, yet at the same time more inclusive. This article explores three different meanings of the word score through the lens of composer-improviser Bob Ostertag’s 1990s tetralogy *Say No More*: a cut, an index of a game, and a record kept. *Say No More* consists of a chain of tape pieces and ensemble pieces in which performers Joey Baron, Mark Dresser, Gerry Hemingway and Phil Minton were put in front of a machine-made mirror of themselves ... with wacky lenses that distorted the image into something superhuman. In the performances the musicians tried to keep up with their digital reflection, a task at which they could only fail. Although the notation seems to play a minor role in this dynamic, its usage in the score as a whole offers important lessons on what writing might still have to offer composers in the digital era.

A Score can become a notch cut or line, an account kept, number of points made, set of twenty, a topic, piece of good fortune, worst in repartee, and much more. And not to forget a Partitura from the Latin Pars indicating both partial, direction and task. It sounds like music but really isn’t.¹

I imagine these musicians meeting not to read scores but to improvise from available scores, as was common in the Renaissance. A recording of the music will become the basis for further improvisation by future musicians. ... The basis for such music making is an original score, a program, a set of rules. But using recordings of recordings of recordings, this score will soon disappear behind the horizon of musicians who are improvising with continually reprogrammed memories.²

¹ Eric Andersen, ‘In Mezzo a Quattro Tempi’, in *Word Events: Perspectives on Verbal Notation*, ed. John Lely and James Saunders (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 79.

² Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 169.

Introduction

Since the 1960s, many composers and musicians have worked at the interface of notation and improvisation. The list is as long as it is diverse: Maarten Altena, Robert Ashley, Richard Barrett, Burkhard Beins, Steve Beresford, Anthony Braxton, Earle Brown, Chris Burn, Cornelius Cardew, Phillip Corner, Werner Dafeldecker, Luc Ferrari, Fred Frith, Malcolm Goldstein, Vinko Globokar, Robin Hayward, Barry Guy, Erhard Karkoschka, Hans Joachim Koellreutter, Yannis Kyriakides, Anne La Berge, George E. Lewis, Annea Lockwood, Christian Marclay, Misha Mengelberg, Pauline Oliveros, Bob Ostertag, Ben Patterson, Pedro Rebelo, Frederic Rzewski, Wadada Leo Smith, David Toop, Jennifer Walshe, Christian Wolff, John Zorn, and I are just a few examples.

Thinking about this body of work as a whole – connected by methods and practices that belie aesthetic and historical differences – has much to recommend itself to both practitioners and scholars. As I detail in my PhD dissertation ‘Tactile Paths’,³ it reveals hidden assumptions about notation and improvisation beyond this repertoire alone. It sheds light on the terms and roles of performer choice in experimental music. It broadens our awareness of the many ways in which performers and composers approach collectivity and collaboration. Furthermore, it helps to erode institutional assumptions about the barriers between ‘improvised’ and ‘composed’ music that limit dialogue and hamper musicians’ economic livelihoods.

One way notation for improvisers achieves this is by calling certain entrenched musical vocabulary into question. *Notation* and *improvisation* are obvious examples; among others one may count *compose*, *interpret*, and even *read* and *write*. Because this music tends to dwell in liminal regions of musical labour, it challenges the way we conceptualise and talk about it.

With this in mind, I wish to dedicate the present article to exploring the word *score*. I will do so through the lens of composer, electronics improviser, and historian Bob Ostertag’s *Say No More* project (henceforth *SNM*). *SNM* offers ample opportunities to ruminate on this term, for its own score comprises notation, recordings and even its own performance history. Although its notation appears conventional, the score as a whole facilitates an ensemble dynamic and a sounding music which are anything but.

In the following sections, I will unpack *SNM* along with three different notions of the word *score*: a cut, an index of a game, and a record kept. Through this lexical improvisation, I will attempt to outline a broad notion of what, and whether, scores for improvisers bound and contain. In closing, I will reflect on what *SNM* and an expanded notion of the score suggest about the potential of the practice of writing music in an era in which it is increasingly obsolete.

Notation and Score

Before discussing *SNM*, a brief clarification of terms may be in order. Like many musicians, I use the term *score* almost interchangeably with *notation*; in the world of practical music-making, the two words differ very little. Beyond day-to-day usage, however, there are subtle but important differences.

³ Christopher Williams, ‘Tactile Paths: On and Through Notation for Improvisers’, PhD diss., University of Leiden. www.tactilepaths.net (accessed 26 September 2017).

Notation, on the one hand, is often referred to in its uncountable form, like love or water. To me personally it has a casual, almost benevolent character; it makes communication possible. We use notation to observe or 'note' things that happen. We build, or improvise, on existing knowledge by 'annotating' texts. Oxford dictionaries defines notation as 'The methods of writing down music so that it can be performed'.⁴

Scores, on the other hand, are countable, definitive, regulatory. The modern conventional score includes all the parts, or voices, arranged and synchronised in vertical order like soldiers in file. The score marks winners and losers in competitive sports. It defines success or failure in tests. Creditors keep a score of debts and payments. Scores signify boundaries; they contain notation.

Score: A music-copy that shows in ordered form the parts allotted to the various performers, as distinct from 'parts' which show only that of one performer.⁵

The English word *score* most likely has its origins in the cuts with which medieval scribes would rule blank parchment to prepare their manuscripts.⁶ In close proximity to the word *score* are its equivalents, *Partitur* in German, *partition* in French, and *partitura* in Italian and Spanish. As Fluxus artist Eric Andersen mentions in the extract earlier in this article, these words derive from the Latin *pars*, or part. What Andersen does not mention is that they derive specifically from *partitus*, past participle of the verb *partire*, which also means to share. This collective sense of the score contradicts the top-down allotment of parts suggested by the definition cited above.

Yet another sense of the word is suggested by the common score form in jazz: the chord chart, a rough harmonic structure with or without melody on which players improvise. Nominally this term connotes greater freedom for the performer with respect to notation than *score*, but it also carries a tone of fixity which counterposes itself to the improvisation itself, like sailing charts, as described here by anthropologist Tim Ingold:

The marine navigator may plot his course on a chart, using a ruler and pencil, but the ruled line forms no part of the chart and should be rubbed out once the voyage is completed.⁷

Given this semantic variety, what exactly is a *score* for improvisers? Where are its boundaries? What does it contain? Let us proceed to SNM for some answers to these questions.

Cutting and Pasting (back together) the Performer–Instrument Coupling

Bob Ostertag's *Say No More* project transpired over four 'generations' throughout the 1990s:⁸

⁴ Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. 'notation', accessed 2 September 2016. www.oxfordreference.com/10.1093/acref/9780199578108.001.0001/acref-9780199578108-e-6533.

⁵ Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. 'score', accessed 2 September 2016. www.oxfordreference.com/10.1093/acref/9780199578108.001.0001/acref-9780199578108-e-8167.

⁶ 'Until the twelfth century, most manuscripts were ruled in hardpoint, that is, with blind lines scored with a stylus or back of the knife. Scribes ruled hard and sometimes cut through the parchment by mistake'. Department of Medieval Studies, Central European University, 'Materials and Techniques of Manuscript Production', *Medieval Manuscript Manual*. <http://web.ceu.hu/medstud/manual/MMM> (accessed 20 November 2016).

⁷ Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (New York: Routledge), p. 85.

⁸ All recordings and unpublished scores in the SNM series are available at www.tactilepaths.net/ostertag.

- 1 Studio: *Say No More* and *Tongue-Tied* (1993)⁹
- 2 'Live'/Live: *Say No More* and *Tongue-Tied* (1993)¹⁰
- 3 Studio: *Verbatim* (1996)¹¹
- 4 'Live'/Live: *Verbatim Flesh & Blood* (1998)¹²

The first generation began with unreleased solo recordings by three veteran improvisers: drummer Joey Baron, contrabassist Mark Dresser and vocalist Phil Minton. Ostertag initially asked each player to record a solo improvisation with no prompt as to the type of material, style or duration to be performed. According to the composer, the only information given to the players – other than a disclosure of his plans to edit these recordings and use them in a tape piece – was to

play! I told them that I wanted them play their music, and that I didn't want a catalogue or an inventory of things they did ... you know, not little samples of this and that. But if they could somehow cover the range of their vocabulary as an improviser, ... that would be what I would want.¹³

Ostertag received a 30–60 minute recording from each of the performers and edited the material in DAW software (the first version of Pro Tools). The primitive and delicate state of this technology at the time allowed him to chop up and layer his material, but not to process it. When he wished to pitch shift or time stretch the material, Ostertag loaded the sound files onto an Ensoniq ASR-10 sampler and recorded himself 'playing' the alterations on the sampler, while recording himself in the Pro Tools session.¹⁴ With these collage techniques, Ostertag rends the solo improvisations far from their original context in the tradition of musique concrète.

But Ostertag goes a step further than cutting up mere objets sonores. He scores the very coupling of the players to their instruments, the ongoing physical processes from which the material emerged. One hears this in the first minutes of *Say No More*, a drum solo followed by a bass and drums duo. Both the solo and the duo include looped fragments of high physical intensity. However, they contain no trace of the physical work – the lifting of the arm, the recovery of the bow, the endurance – required to have produced these sounds. Sectional divisions are hard-edged, with no transition between Baron's positions at the drum kit or Dresser's changes from pizzicato to arco, all of which require time and effort in the physical world. The relentless intensity of the material, and the lack of physical preparation and release, render the virtual parts technically unperformable by humans on physical instruments.

In addition to decontextualising these improvisations as described, Ostertag also creates a new context for the material: a pasted-together virtual ensemble. Although the original tracks were recorded in complete isolation from each other, the rhythms, dynamics, and types of

⁹ Bob Ostertag, *Say No More* (ReCDec 59, 1993), CD.

¹⁰ Bob Ostertag, *Say No More In Person* (Transit – 444444, 1993), CD.

¹¹ Bob Ostertag, *Verbatim* (Rastascan Records – BRD029, 1996), CD.

¹² Bob Ostertag, *Verbatim Flesh and Blood* (Rastascan Records – BRD 035, 1998)

¹³ Bob Ostertag, unpublished interview with the author, 6 July 2016. Mark Dresser adds, 'One thing, that Ostertag didn't mention in the recording process of *Say No More*, it was not just "play" but to me play your strongest stuff. That definitely put a[n] even more impossible spin on the de/reconstruction, beyond motility, beyond ... normal endurance and accelerated beyond what was possible. What was interesting was to perform a gesture that emulated that kind of intensity.' From Mark Dresser's Facebook page. www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10154335426731849&tid=691546848&comment_id=10154335602246849&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R3%22%7D, (accessed 29 December 2016).

¹⁴ See Dresser's repeated upwards 'smear' glissandi at 9:30–13:30 of *Tongue-Tied* (1).

material in the edited parts often fit together as if they had been performed by a live singer and rhythm section.¹⁵ This new treatment gives the performers' original material a kind of unity and stylistic familiarity that it may have lacked initially. Paradoxically, however, one hears enforced unity and familiarity, rather than an 'organic' groove of musicians playing together. The impression of a cyborg studio band, constructed through audible digital editing rather than interpersonal communication, recalls the regulatory connotation of the word *score* mentioned above.

Both aspects of this scoring process – the cut and the paste – obtain a particularly surreal quality when one considers the significance of the performer–instrument coupling to the improviser's performance practice.¹⁶ For improvisers, instruments are not merely a means to the end of producing sound; they are structured environments from which musical materials emerge and against which they are developed. They are a fundamental part of the recursive process of thinking, producing and perceiving music both in real-time discoveries on stage and in the development of a personal 'sound' over longer periods of time. As saxophonist Jim Denley states,

[f]or the improviser, the physicality of producing sound (the hardware) is not a separate activity from the thoughts, emotions and ideas in music (the software). In the act of creation, there is a constant loop between the hierarchy of factors involved in the process. My lungs, lips, fingers, voice box and their working together with the potentials of sound are dialoguing with other levels which I might call mind and perception. The thoughts and decisions are sustained and modified by my physical potentials and vice versa, but as soon as I try to define these separately I run into problems.¹⁷

An important part of this 'constant loop' is resistance, which may take the form of gravity, the weight of body and instrument parts, breath cycles, bow and string tension, and myriad other points of tension between humans and their music-making devices. According to technology scholar Aden Evens, improvisers often exacerbate such resistance to creative ends:

Generation of resistance is essential to creative improvisation; the body must be made to feel awkward in relation to the instrument, the known must be un-known. . . . At some point in the musician's training, the instrument ceases to offer an adequate resistance. The interface between player and instrument becomes too smooth, and familiar patterns are so comfortable as to discourage the invention or investigation of any other possibilities. To escape the trap of their own training, some improvisers alter their instruments, taking them apart, adding pieces on, and in general ensuring that their practiced playing techniques are either untenable or will generate unfamiliar results.¹⁸

Although Ostertag does not take apart or alter his collaborators' instruments directly, he invents and investigates new possibilities in performer–instrument couplings by means of studio editing. Seen in this light, Ostertag's scoring process in the first generation of *SNM* might actually share more in common with his collaborators' initial improvisations than meets the ear. This intervention took on a new significance when he asked the performers to reproduce the recording in person.

¹⁵ See *Say No More* (1), 5:15–6:30, and *Tongue-Tied* (1), 4:20–5:00.

¹⁶ See Chapter 1 of 'Tactile Paths' for a more detailed discussion of the performer–instrument coupling ('Seeing the Full Sounding', www.tactilepaths.net/goldstein).

¹⁷ Jim Denley, 'Improvisation: The Entanglement of Awareness and Physicality', *Sounds Australian* 32 (1992), p. 29.

¹⁸ Aden Evens, *Sound Ideas: Music, Machines, and Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 154.

Index of a Game

In the next phase of the project, Ostertag brought together a live ensemble to play (1). Phase (2), *Say No More In Person*, illuminates the ludic notion of the word *score*: the ‘record or register of points made by both sides during the progress of a game or match; also the number of points made by a side or individual’.¹⁹

The game began when Ostertag invited Baron, Dresser and Minton to perform a live transcription of (1) together. While Dresser and Minton accepted, drummer Joey Baron declined the invitation, expressing reluctance to perform the distorted ‘Baron 2.0’ that Ostertag had created in the studio. Ostertag cites the drummer’s perfectionism:

Joey called me up and he said, ‘I’ve listened to it several times, which is fantastic, and I love it, but I can’t play it’. I said, ‘Well I know you can’t play it, but that’s not a problem! The point is not to play it note for note – the point is to use this *process* to generate an ensemble repertoire of music that’s organic to the way you all play. We don’t have to reproduce the recording – that’s OK’. Joey just said, ‘Yeah, but we can’t play it. You’ve made the perfect realisation of this, and all we can do is fuck it up’. . . . Joey’s a perfectionist you know, he wants to play it *right*. So that was fine, and at that point he dropped out.²⁰

Baron’s desire to ‘play it right’, as Ostertag portrays it, would have been fundamentally incompatible with the scoring of performer–instrument couplings in (1), in which the composer aimed deliberately

to highlight the tense and problematic relation of human and machine. In effect, the players were put in front of a machine-made mirror of themselves. It was not a perfect mirror, but more like the digital equivalent of a funhouse mirror that was curved, with wacky lenses that distorted the image into something superhuman. In the performances the musicians tried to keep up with their digital reflection, a task at which they could only fail.²¹

Despite Ostertag’s quasi-Beckettian image of ‘failure’, one might better understand the score of *SNM* as a kind of sympathetic dare, a way of catalysing collective creativity. As Ostertag reveals above, ‘the point [was] to use this process to generate an ensemble repertoire of music that’s organic to the way you [Baron, Dresser, and Minton, CW] all play’ rather than to thematise impossibility as such. This sense of the game echoes an important aspect of play in improvisation brought up elsewhere by music philosopher Marcel Cobussen: the opportunity to stretch one’s competences.

‘Baby reaching for a toy, pussy patting a bobbin, a little girl playing ball – all want to achieve something difficult, to succeed, to end a tension’ (Huizinga 1970: 29). This element of tension arises from the innate compulsion to expand one’s own skills; any game requires the development of competences, be they physical, mental, or social.²²

If not to Baron, the physical and mental challenges of keeping up with one’s digital reflection must have appealed to drummer Gerry Hemingway, who accepted Ostertag’s invitation to take Baron’s place. This change in personnel brought a new dimension, a new challenge to the game. It added complexity to the task of recreating Baron’s part, as Hemingway would not have had intimate knowledge of the original recording session or the techniques that ‘Baron 1.0’ used to produce the material given to Ostertag.

¹⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘score’ www.oed.com (accessed 2 September 2016).

²⁰ Bob Ostertag, unpublished interview with the author, 6 July 2016.

²¹ Bob Ostertag, *Creative Life: Music, Politics, People, and Machines* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), p. 138.

²² Marcel Cobussen, *The Field of Musical Improvisation* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2017).

Hemingway's participation also socially enriched the game; he and Dresser had a long history together. They had been friends and collaborators since at least the early 1980s, as pillars of an iconoclastic community of improvisers in New York's 'downtown' scene.²³ (Ostertag had also been a part of that community before temporarily leaving music and moving to central America for most of the 1980s.) The bass and drums team had also worked together for several years with Braxton's 'classic quartet', which specialised in game-like scores. Hemingway's description of realising composition 108B with Dresser highlights the social dimension of this work, which would have primed the duo for *SNM*:

108B ... is nothing but numbers and lines that go up and down, with wavy motions to them that suggest glissandos, dynamics, but could be anything ...

The other thing is that these dots also keep appearing in the score. We usually hit them, but sometimes we mime them, just to keep ourselves connected.

...

Mark and I have actually gone further with this and figured out more things to do ... The kick of it is we're usually figuring out how to do these things right on stage. We talked about it when we first played it, but since then we don't articulate to each other directly, we're doing it right there in the moment, being quick with each other, each understanding what the other is doing.²⁴

In contrast to Braxton's colourful, quasi-mythological notation, *SNM*'s notation plays a relatively minor role in in the game. The two scores of (2) behave as a road map to the tape itself, which is not only a part of the score but its most important part:

I don't really think of it [the performance of (2)] as performing transcriptions because really the score is the tape. I don't think the transcribed score would make much sense if you couldn't hear the tape. And the idea was to make the transcribed score as minimal as possible ... you want to put a piece of paper in front of them to remind them of what goes where, when you do what, but really they should learn it by listening to the recording.²⁵

To this end, Ostertag's notation clearly marks sections (with capital letters), players' entrances and exits, repeats, general qualities of materials in each section and, where appropriate, specific pitches and rhythms. He accorded it no extra poetic meaning that might detract or distract from game of the musicians recreating their superhuman selves.

This threadbare quality differentiates *SNM* from many other musical game pieces such as Iannis Xenakis' *Duel* (1959) and *Stratégie* (1962), Vinko Globokar's *Individuum-Collectivum* (1979), or John Zorn's *Cobra* (1984). Whereas the notation of these and most other game scores prescribe the rules and define fields of play, Ostertag's notation indexes (and occasionally mediates) a game emerging outside it: the musicians keeping up with their virtual *Doppelgänger* and using the tension of this impossible task to evolve a new group identity. Instead of bounding the game, the score participates in its unfolding.

Ironically, the first 'live' instantiation of this unfolding took place not on stage in front of an audience, but in the studio of Austrian National Radio (ORF). ORF's radio art producer Heidi Grundmann had commissioned *Say No More In Person* for her *Kunstradio* broadcast. The recording session and the days of rehearsal leading up to it were

²³ For an extensive self-portrait of this scene, see John Zorn, ed., *Arcana: Musicians on Music*, vols 1–7 (New York: Hips Road, 2000–2014).

²⁴ As quoted in Graham Lock, "What I Call a Sound": Anthony Braxton's Synaesthetic Ideal and Notations for Improvisers', *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études Critiques En Improvisation* 4 no. 1 (2008). www.criticalimprov.com/article/view/462 (accessed 26 September 2017).

²⁵ Bob Ostertag, unpublished interview with the author, 6 July 2016.

fraught with logistical difficulties and political battles within the radio station, which ultimately led to creative hurdles. Ostertag:

This was in the early days of *Kunstradio* and the ORF was not supportive of her [Grundmann, the producer of (2)]. There were actually people trying to kick her legs out from under her very strongly. So we all arrived in Vienna, and we were supposed to have three or four days of rehearsal and then this recording session, . . . and the powers that be at the ORF had given the studio time to somebody else. So then we had to take a train to Innsbruck [a small city in western Austria] to have a place to rehearse. We got to Innsbruck, and the [regional office of the] ORF had also given the studio time [to someone else]. So then we had gone to another town – there was still no place to rehearse – and they said there was this garage that a local rock band played in and we could rehearse in this garage. We went over there at night and dropped our instruments off . . . it was the middle of winter, and there was no heat in the garage and the idea that we were supposed to rehearse in this cold place – it was just insane. We came back in the morning and the whole street was full of firetrucks because the garage was on fire [laughs] . . . Mark's bass was in the garage, and that was when Mark turned to me and says, 'Ostertag – you got my number in your book? Cross it out!'

So then we had to go back to Vienna and record with no rehearsal. It's the first time we've [Ostertag, Dresser, and Hemingway] met, we were supposed to have had days of rehearsal and we didn't have any, and it was all on the fly. They put us in this recording studio – their first digital recording studio . . . – and it was recorded to hard disk. But they wouldn't give her [Grundmann, CW] an engineer; they were really trying to shut her down. The only engineer she could get was a guy who did radio theatre, and he'd never miked a drumset, and then they wouldn't give us the good mics – they said the good mics were only for the musical engineers.

...

You know that first piece is particularly tense, particularly for Phil, and Phil said, 'Bob, I hope you like the first take, because I can't do this more than once in a day'. We got four-fifths of the way through it and the whole studio crashed. All the data was lost. [laughs] So that was hardly an optimal situation. That CD was made with no rehearsal, second take, everybody in a grumpy mood, bad microphones, the engineer doesn't know what he doing. . . . If you're going to make music that's outside the box, then you have to accept the circumstances that you get. And they're never optimal.²⁶

I include this story not only for entertainment value, but to illustrate that the game indexed by the score also included Ostertag. Ostertag threw himself into the funhouse completely, accepting the challenge set to his bandmates as a performer. Additionally, he stretched his own competence as a bandleader, much like Zorn did as the conductor of *Cobra*,²⁷ or Braxton did while on tour with Dresser and Hemingway.²⁸ Furthermore, the anecdote also shows that the notation was just one element among many in the social ecology of the score, rather than a cornerstone. I will return to this point later.

To bring the human/virtual cycle of (1) and (2) to a temporary conclusion: thinking of scores as containers of rules and regulations, or as boundaries of notational matter(s), limits the view of what may actually be happening between players and their instruments, and between each other – both of which are fundamental to the dynamics of improvisation. Thinking of scores for improvisers as cuts and reassemblages of performer–instrument couplings, or as indexes of games, puts a focus on how they interact with rich performative activity beyond notation's immediate purview.

²⁶ Bob Ostertag, unpublished interview with the author, 6 July 2016.

²⁷ See John Zorn – *Cobra* – On Improvisation (1992). www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-p-oZbmsQVw (accessed 27 September 2017).

²⁸ See Graham Lock, *Forces In Motion: The Music And Thoughts Of Anthony Braxton* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989).

A Record Kept

Like (1), the third generation of *Say No More*, entitled *Verbatim*, was made in the studio from fragments of recordings by Ostertag's collaborators. Unlike (1), which began with solos recorded in isolation from each other, (3) began with fragments of collective recordings made during the production of (2). The raw material consisted both of tracks taken from *Say No More* (2a) and *Tongue-Tied* (2b), as well as a free improvisation recorded during the ORF session:

At that same session [(2)] after we recorded the pieces, we did a free improvisation. My idea was ... for the next go-around, ... instead of fragments from solos, I wanted an ensemble improvisation with the tracks broken up so I could isolate the different components and mix them together in ways that they weren't played together at the same time.²⁹

Another major difference between (3) and (1) is that the project had coalesced around a band, rather than three solo tracks and a composer. Ostertag elaborates:

By this time now we actually had gigs, we toured, and it was feeling much more like a mature project. Very, very fun band. ... That was my first band – I'd never had a band before. For your first band to have Gerry Hemingway and Mark Dresser – it's kind of crazy. I would regularly just start laughing on stage. I would be playing and I would think, 'Wait a minute – is this my band?'³⁰

In one sense, it was Ostertag's band. He assembled it, of course, and provided the material (and the gigs!). In another sense, however, the group had become larger and more complex than Ostertag's vision alone could account for. It had evolved into a complex entity with its own history (recall the ORF odyssey) and methods. *Verbatim* is a record of this collective evolution above and beyond a compositional intervention. It preserves a performance practice – and created a new opportunity for further reflection and refraction.

Indeed all recordings serve the function of preservation, and it is in the negative sense of the word – its erasure of a singular, non-repeatable, generative context – that many an improviser has criticized the recorded medium. Guitarist Derek Bailey, for example, has critiqued 'the loss during the recording process of the atmosphere of musical activity – the musical environment created by the performance'.³¹ Philosopher Gary Peters argues that

[a]s a generalisation, free improvisers show little interest in tape, in the analogical or digital freezing of performative flow ... largely because improvisation's big idea is the realization of future possibilities in the unreproducible now of the 'in the moment' moment.³²

Both Bailey's and Peters' positions are reflected in the following comment by Cornelius Cardew:

[w]ritten compositions are fired off into the future; even if never performed, the writing remains as a point of reference. Improvisation is in the present, its effect may live on in the souls of the participants, both active and passive (i.e. audience), but in its concrete form it is gone forever from the moment that it occurs, nor did it have any previous existence before the moment that it occurred, so neither is there any historical reference available. Documents

²⁹ Bob Ostertag, unpublished interview with the author, 6 July 2016.

³⁰ Bob Ostertag, unpublished interview with the author, 6 July 2016.

³¹ Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1993), p. 103.

³² Gary Peters, 'The Obligation to Improvise', paper presented at PoMI II, Oxford University, 9 September 2014, pp. 9–10. Available at www.academia.edu/15816123/The_Obligation_to_Improvise_Schoenberg_and_Beckett_2014.

such as tape recordings of improvisation are essentially empty, as they chiefly preserve the form that something took and give at best an indistinct hint as to the feeling and cannot convey any sense of time and place. . . . What a recording produces is a separate phenomenon, something really much stranger than the playing itself, since what you hear on tape or disc is indeed the same playing, but divorced from its natural context. What is the importance of this natural context? The natural context provides a score which the players are unconsciously interpreting in their playing. Not a score that is explicitly articulated in the music and hence of no further interest to the listener as is generally the case in traditional music, but one that co-exists inseparably with the music, standing side by side with it and sustaining it.³³

Cardew claims here that written composition belongs to the future, improvisation belongs to the present, and recording belongs to the past. On the surface, this is a conventional schema that *SNM*, along with most scores for improvisers, challenges head on.³⁴ However, Cardew's attention to the 'natural context' of improvisation that 'co-exists inseparably with the music, standing side by side with it and sustaining it' opens up his formulation considerably. He reveals an ecological view of performance, at which I hinted earlier, and the score's role within it. I borrow the term 'ecological' from music philosopher Marcel Cobussen, whose concept of musical ecology in improvisation derives from anthropologist and psychologist Gregory Bateson:

Actants such as instruments, technology, participating musicians, and/or venues all play a vital role in the creation and development of an improvisation. The aspects of the musician that make playing possible – her senses, bodily parts, her brain – are determined by the environment, that is, by all other actors, factors, and vectors involved. A change in instruments will affect the playing behavior; a particular ensemble affords a certain kind of playing; different concert venues will lead to distinctive ways of performing, interaction, and thus to different outcomes; musical rules and concepts demonstrate comparable influences.

Of course, a musician can also alter the affordances of her environment, but she is simultaneously dependent upon the situation. With Eric Clarke, I could call this mutual determination and interdependency 'resonance', the active exploratory engagement and interaction between organism and environment. This interaction also plays a crucial role in the exchange and development of musical ideas.³⁵

An ecological view of *SNM* takes musicians, instruments, notation, recordings, and histories to be part of the musical environment. These elements are mutually influential; their unpredictable interaction constitutes the event of improvisation. Because the 'context' is simultaneously inhabited and co-constructed by the event, the score is not separate from it. Rather, like all other elements of the context, it 'co-evolves' with the other elements, including the improvisers, through performance. Or, to borrow Bailey's words above, it is 'created by the performance'.

Whereas I claim that scores are but one element of this environment, changing and being changed by other elements through improvisational practice, Cardew claims that the environment *is* a score – a subtle but intriguing difference. For when we consider the recording of (3) to be a (principle part) of a score, the score to be the environment, and the environment to co-evolve with the improvised

³³ Cornelius Cardew, 'Treatise Handbook', in *Cornelius Cardew: A Reader*, ed. Eddie Prévošt (Harlow: Copula, 2006), pp. 126–8.

³⁴ See two cases discussed in my 'Tactile Paths' in particular: *A Treatise Remix*, in which I improvise over time in the studio with a collection of historical recordings. www.tactilepaths.net/a-treatise-remix, or Barrett's *fOKT*, www.tactilepaths.net/barrett, which like *SNM* makes extensive use of sampling.

³⁵ Cobussen, *The Field of Musical Improvisation*.

performance, we have a feedback loop that in fact describes *SNM* rather well: performances nested in recordings nested in scores played in performance, the whole of which (re)constitutes the environment in and over time. Rather than a static documentation – what Peters calls ‘the digital freezing of performative flow’ – the ‘record kept’ here is an intractable knot within a knot, an inherently dynamic performative tool.

Final Cut – The Future of (Musical) Writing in the Age of Digital Reproduction?

Verbatim Flesh and Blood, the fourth and final generation of *SNM*, reanimated (3), *Verbatim*, as (2), *Say No More In Person*, reanimated (1), *Say No More*. As I mention in the previous section, (3) and (4) differ from the project’s earlier incarnations in that the band had established a voice of its own. By this time, the performers had learned how to play together and had mastered the medium of posthuman self-impersonation on which the project was founded.

One can hear this immediately when comparing (4) to (2). The awkwardness of (2) – apparent in Gerry Hemingway’s nervous drum solo at the beginning of (2a) – is gone. In its place, a kind of tortured flow has emerged. (4) also resembles (3) much more closely than (2) resembles (1), particularly with respect to section timings.

The recording of (4) can thus be seen as a ‘final cut’ of the project in the filmic sense: the definitive final product, the ideal image, of a long and complex collaborative process. But is it really? And what does the success I confer on *Verbatim Flesh and Blood* say about the relationship of scores and/or notation to recording in the *Say No More* tetralogy as a whole?

In a brief text entitled ‘The Future of Writing’,³⁶ philosopher Vilém Flusser presents a tension between images and writing that is central to his view of technology. According to Flusser, images constitute ‘mediations between man and his world, . . . meant to permit action in a world in which man no longer lives immediately but that he faces’.³⁷ ‘In sum: the “imagined” world is the world of myth, of magic, the prehistorical world’.³⁸

The primary, but not only, function of writing for him is to explain images:

One may well ask why, six thousand years ago, the effort was made to substitute the world of conception for the world of imagination, why writing was invented. . . . The answer is, of course: because, six thousand years ago, some people thought that some images needed explaining. . . .

But there is yet another, and more profound, reason for the invention of writing and of historical consciousness. There is in images, as in all mediations, a curious inherent dialectic. The purpose of images is to mean the world, but they may become opaque to the world and cover it, even substitute for it. They may come to constitute an imaginary world that no longer mediates between man and the world, but, on the contrary, imprisons man. Imagination no longer overcomes alienation, but becomes hallucination, or double alienation. No longer are such images tools, but man himself becomes a tool of his own tools; he ‘adores’ the images he himself has produced. It is against this idolatry of images, as a therapy against this double alienation, that writing was invented.³⁹

³⁶ Vilém Flusser, ‘The Future of Writing’, in *Writings*, ed. Andreas Ströhl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), pp. 63–9.

³⁷ Flusser, ‘The Future of Writing’, p. 65.

³⁸ Flusser, ‘The Future of Writing’, p. 64.

³⁹ Flusser, ‘The Future of Writing’, p. 65.

I think Flusser's dialectic presents an uncannily rich analogy to the relationship of notation and recording in *SNM*. Ostertag began the project in (1) with the recorded 'image' of a superhuman virtual trio, 'meant to permit action in a world in which man no longer lives immediately' (65) – the 'imaginary' world of recording. He then used notation in (2) to explain the recording to the players; it empowered the performers to play with superhuman images of themselves, rather than be replaced by them.

In other words, the score became a tool to overcome alienation. Notation is not only a technical tool with which Ostertag represents salient elements in the recording to be reproduced. It is also a hermeneutical tool in his parodical critique of the myth of recording as ideal performance.

To think about the success of (4) as a final cut, or an ideal image of *SNM*, is therefore to minimize the power of the project. Doing so would be tantamount to capitulating to what Flusser calls the 'image machine':

The easiest way to imagine the future of writing, if the present trend toward a culture of techno-images goes on, is to imagine culture as a gigantic transcoder from text into image. It will be a sort of black box that has texts for input and images for output. All texts will flow into that box (news about events, theoretical comments about them, scientific papers, poetry, philosophical speculations), and they will come out again as images (films, TV programs, photographic pictures): which is to say that history will flow into the box, and that it will come out of it under the form of myth and magic. From the point of view of the texts that will flow into the box, this will be a utopian situation: the box is the 'fullness of time', because it devours linear time and freezes it into images. From the point of view of the images that come out of the box, this will be a situation in which history becomes a pretext for programs. In sum, the future of writing is to write pretexts for programs while believing that one is writing for utopia.⁴⁰

Recording culture, like image culture as here represented by Flusser, has radically changed the nature of musical literacy in our time. It no longer privileges or requires written scores. The idolatry of recordings goes unquestioned in an age when one has more hours of music in one's phone than is possible to hear in a lifetime; some might indeed consider this utopia.

In any case, there is a radical gap between the speed and rhizomatic nature of music consumption in the twenty-first century, and the slow, linear process of making music with scores. As composer and electronic music scholar Nicolas Collins states,

music notation as it has been known for several centuries – dots and crochets on five lines – is becoming ever more marginalized as a world language. Most music today is produced, distributed and heard through digital technology – computers, iPods and cell phones. Notes can be picked out on a keyboard and samples grabbed from existing recordings, then corrected, sequenced, layered and orchestrated as easily as words can be processed. We're living in a Cmd-X/Cmd-V world; it's no longer essential to know how to read and write music notation in order to function within this new paradigm, unless you're a member of that ever-dwindling percentage of musicians who play scored compositions on acoustic instruments.⁴¹

So for the dwindling few who *do* acknowledge the continuing value of working with scores, what can we learn from the case of *SNM*? First, scores need not default to notation. Composers and performers

⁴⁰ Flusser, 'The Future of Writing', p. 67.

⁴¹ Nicolas Collins, 'Beyond Notation: Communicating Music', *Leonardo Music Journal* 21 (2011), pp. 5–6. This is Collins' introduction to the issue of the same title.

can use the very medium of recording (or video or software, for that matter⁴²) to communicate with each other. Using such nonwritten media can open possibilities for different kinds of communication, some of which may 'say more' to improvising musicians than conventional notation.

Second, play with the context in which notation is used. By exposing contingency, Ostertag assigns notation a strategic role in a score where people, rather than disembodied sounds, are the subject matter. He shows how even severely limited written notation – and here I explicitly also include 'conventional notation' – can serve to interact, play, negotiate, and challenge performers, who may even ignore it if they know the game to which it points.

These two lessons suggest possible ways forward for scores and notation in an era of apparent obsolescence. They also offer food for rethinking the often-unfulfilling relationships between scores, recordings, and performances in our time.

⁴² See numerous examples in *Leonardo Music Journal* 21 (2011).