



Mapping Participation: Lawrence Halprin's *RSVP Cycles* Meets Richard Barrett's *fOKT*

Christopher A. Williams

To cite this article: Christopher A. Williams (2021): Mapping Participation: Lawrence Halprin's *RSVP Cycles* Meets Richard Barrett's *fOKT*, Contemporary Music Review, DOI: [10.1080/07494467.2021.2001935](https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2021.2001935)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2021.2001935>



Published online: 17 Dec 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Mapping Participation: Lawrence Halprin's *RSVP Cycles* Meets Richard Barrett's *fOKT*

Christopher A. Williams 

Visionary landscape architect Lawrence Halprin's The RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment (1969, New York: George Braziller) is an interdisciplinary model for collaborating through and with notation. In this article, I outline RSVP's potential to articulate undertheorised connections between notation, collectivity, and improvisation in the work of a number of present-day composer-performers through the case study of British composer-improviser Richard Barrett's fOKT series (2005). At the same time, I show this music can help redress a number of blind spots in Halprin's own ideas about scores—especially the inclusive, participatory political vision that grounded them.

Keywords: Experimental Music; Improvisation; Notation; Participation; Collaboration

Notation is an invitation to collaborate. (Barrett, personal email to the author, 12 December 2015)

In the planning of communities a score visible to all the people allows each one of us to respond, to find our own input, to influence *before* decisions are made. Scoring makes the process *visible*. (Halprin 1969, 4)

Introduction

Visionary landscape architect Lawrence Halprin's *The RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment* (1969) is a theory, a manifesto, and a metascore for collaborating through and with notation. The author and his wife, dancer and choreographer Anna Halprin, employed its principles throughout their storied careers.

References to the book in contemporary and experimental music are rare.¹ However, Halprin's ideas have great potential to articulate undertheorised

connections between notation, collectivity, and improvisation in the work of a number of present-day composer-performers.

In this article, I will outline RSVP's relevance for such work, using the case study of British composer-improviser Richard Barrett's *fOKT* series (2005). At the same time, I will explore how this music can help redress a number of blind spots in Halprin's own ideas about scores—especially the inclusive, participatory political vision that grounded them.

The RSVP Cycles

Structure and Purposes

The heart of *The RSVP Cycles* is a compass-like diagram (Figure 1) representing 'nothing less than the creative process—what energises it—how it functions—and how its universal aspects can have implications for all our fields' (Halprin 1969, 2). The model includes four elements: Resources (R), Scores (S), Valuation (V), and Performance (P):

Resources which are what you have to work with. These include human and physical resources *and* their motivation and aims. *Scores* which describe the process leading to performance. *Valuation* which analyzes the results of action and possible selectivity and actions. The term 'valuation' is coined to suggest the action-oriented as well as the decision-oriented aspects of V in the cycle. *Performance* which is the resultant of scores and is the 'style of the process'. Together I feel that these describe all the procedures inherent in the creative process. (2)

The Cycle is ostensibly applicable to any field. This point is manifest in Halprin's heterogeneous examples, which include everything from Hopi petroglyphs and player piano rolls to American football plays and vegetation maps.

As landscape architect and critic Kathleen John-Alder has argued, their common thread is a capacity to 'illustrate how to make or act at a particular moment or place' (John-Alder 2014, 58). In other words, the Cycle emphasises how scores are

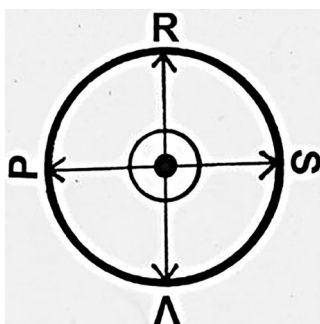


Figure 1 RSVP Cycle. Reprinted from Halprin (1969, 2).

used in a given context, rather than what they represent. To this end, the diagram reflects what elements of the process are active; the degree of overlap among them; where a given process begins; and its route through the diagram. These factors can reveal if scores 'energise' processes, or 'describe or control' them (Figure 2).

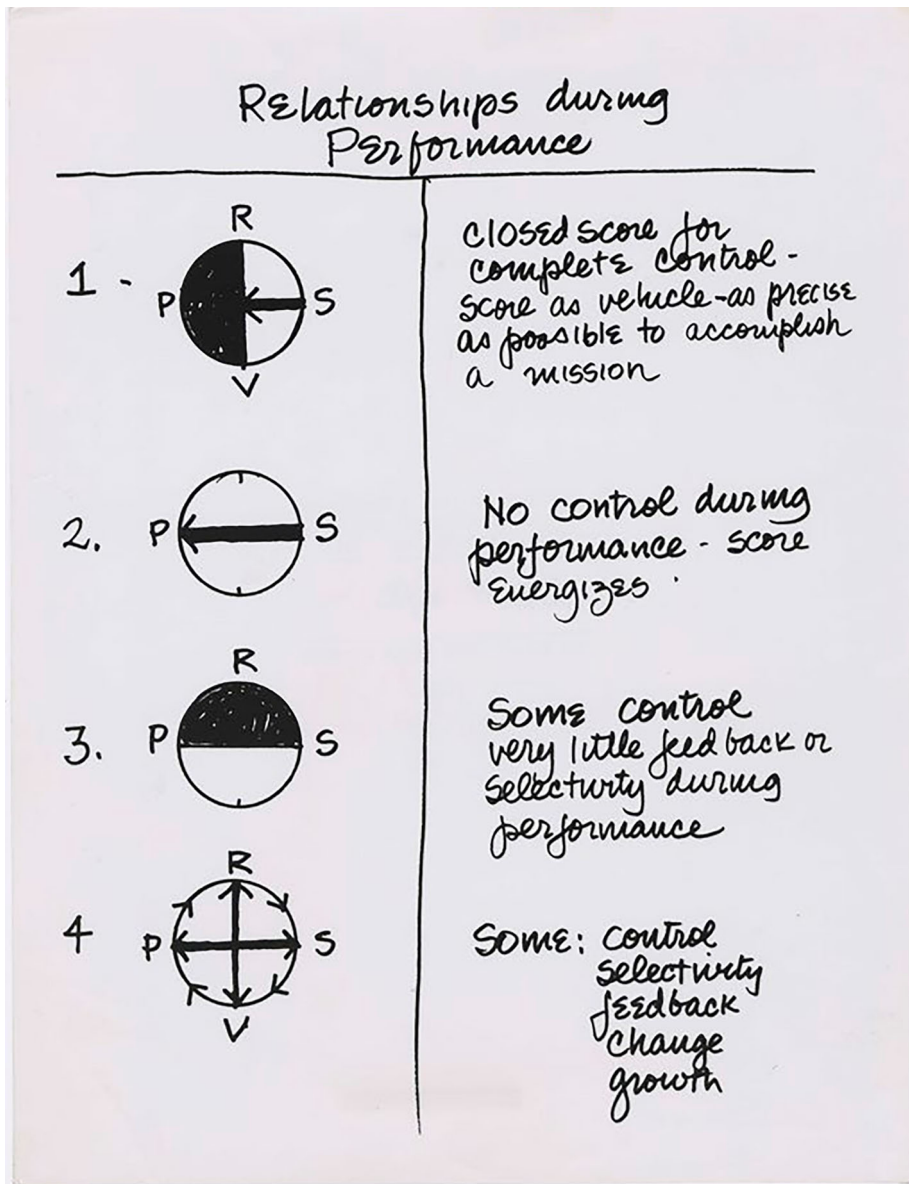


Figure 2 Relationships during performance. Reprinted from Halprin (1969, 192).

The above schema hints at the explicitly political underpinnings of the Cycle. For Halprin, RSVP was not merely a conceptual tool, but rather the lifeblood of a participatory praxis. By making creative processes in urban development projects visible through notation in the broadest possible sense, he intended to liberate them from corporate and government hierarchies that consolidated power and dehumanised inhabitants. To replace these controlling, ‘closed’ processes, he proposed the Cycle as a method of mapping and catalysing inclusive, ‘open’ scoring.² Halprin intended that this would both integrate the needs of end-users into the creative process and leave room for choice in the built results:

The new scoring needs to be as visible as possible so as to scatter power, destroy secrecy, and involve everyone in the process of evolving their own communities. [...]

A community has the right to make scoring decisions itself, based on its own understanding of the implications of action. The implication of this method of approaching planning through multivariable scoring systems is *not* to abrogate authority or decision-making in deference to chaos, or to avoid responsibility by making everyone responsible. What it proposes is a scoring process related to parts of the ‘systems approach’ in operational research where all the parts and participants, in the search for solutions to particular problems, have equal validity and strength in arriving at decisions. It is on this approach rather than a hierarchical structure of planning that the new scoring technique bases itself. (Halprin 1969, 175)

Case Study: The Sea Ranch

In order to unpack the principles of the Cycle further, it is useful to examine projects in which Halprin creatively applied it, such as the ecological planned community The Sea Ranch (Halprin 1969, 122–155; Lyndon 2009). In this project, (R = Resources) consisted of many elements:

- a commission from ‘Oceanic Properties [...] to oversee the master plan for a second-home community’ (John-Alder 2014, 55);
- the natural landscape and conditions of the Sonoma coast; local architectural tradition, such as ‘timber framing of local barns’ (Lyndon 2009, 84);
- a shared desire to work with the environment and create ‘an opportunity for people to form a community’ (Canty 2004, 25);
- the methods of ecological scoring; and
- an unprecedented interdisciplinary team of ‘foresters, grasslands advisors, engineers, attorneys, hydrologists, climatologists, geologists, geographers, and public relations and marketing people’ (Canty 2004, 23).

Much as (R) consisted of more than building materials, (S = Score) comprised more than construction plans. It involved a range of notations³ developed at different times, including

- maps of vegetation, soil, drainage, and topology;
- ‘thematic scores’ that sketched design principles such as (the now iconic) asymmetrically sloped roofs to divert strong coastal winds;
- an ‘ecoscore’ that poetically represented the co-evolution of humans and the land in geological time; and
- a ‘location score’ featuring urban policy proposals that ‘establish[ed] major ‘lines of action’ for performers to follow’ (Halprin 1969, 132)—and finally conventional building plans.

These scores energised the process by ‘directing his colleagues to look at [...] generative parameters that intermingled people, their actions, and their chance encounters with natural processes, their actions, and their chance events’ (John-Alder 2014, 58).

(V = Valuation) was present in constant feedback between stakeholders throughout the process.⁴ In early phases of the project, discussion about scores fed back into both (R)—e.g. in reevaluation of the role of wind patterns or how many architects should take part in the project—and (S)—e.g. by influencing alternative designs or determining what kind of new scores to produce.

When the first houses were constructed (*P* = Performance), the built development became both (S), a structured environment for future performances by inhabitants, and (R), a salable commodity. Because of unexpectedly high demand for the properties, Oceanic constructed additional buildings not included in the original design. These violated the ecological principles of Halprin’s foundational vision. That in turn led to prolonged tension between Halprin and the developers, culminating in Halprin’s dismissal and Oceanic’s withdrawal from the project.

Here we see some of the primary strengths and weaknesses of the Cycle. On the one hand, The Sea Ranch showcases how RSVP can articulate and encourage meaningful collaboration among disparate perspectives. Rather than simply feeding a plan chosen by the developers and the architects, stakeholders and researchers interacted dynamically. Genuinely open and inclusive scores provided ways to reflect on and change the design process, not only carry it forth unilaterally. The final design—at least in the first stage of construction—successfully embodied Halprin’s ecological values both functionally and aesthetically.

On the other hand, the Cycle’s potential to *sustain* heterarchy in urban planning seems less convincing here. Halprin ascribes the project’s downfall to aspects of (S) and (P) within the Cycle:

1. The score was not visible enough to everyone involved.
2. Some of the score was kept secret because it was not completely agreed upon by management. For example, public access to beaches and the idea of varied income. This did not really turn out to be a balanced community in terms of income levels, which is what it was intended to be.

3. All the principles of the score were not understood thoroughly. For example, the notion of tight-housing clusters of various configurations was not really visualised by the sales force.
4. Early sales management groups were disbanded, and the second wave had not been involved in the score and subsequently did not really understand it.
5. Short-range economic goals were allowed to override long-term goals. (Halprin 1969, 146)

This final (V) is instructive, but it glosses over an inconvenient truth: the Cycle artificially flattens power relations and fails to represent authorship. In fact, Oceanic's power of purse hovered over all else, so even the most open score from Halprin's point of view was encased in a classically closed one. Had the score been more visible to Oceanic, it still remains unlikely that The Sea Ranch's corporate developers would have prioritised the score's principles over their own bottom line.⁵

The Cycle from a Musical Perspective

Conceptual Relevance

Despite the above-mentioned problems and Halprin's own underinformed musical examples in the book—see Williams (2016, 'Invitation to Collaborate —Répondez s'il vous plaît!'), RSVP has much to offer artists and scholars of experimental musics.⁶ First, Halprin's model situates scores in complex, changing, collective environments. Whereas musical scores in the modern era have often been treated by scholars and composers as prescriptions and preservations of musical works-as-nouns,⁷ the Cycle reflects their contingent role in musical work-as-verb.

The Cycle's flexible (re)cursibility makes this possible. A path through it need not begin at (S) and proceed directly to (P)—with an optional path through (V), interpretation and rehearsal. It 'can start at any point and move in any direction. The sequence is completely variable depending on the situation, the scorer, and the intention' (Halprin 1969, 2). Thus it reflects how notation emerges from and feeds back into ongoing practice; how its meaning both mediates and is negotiated in performance; and its evolution between performances and editing over longer periods of time.

A second relevant aspect of Halprin's model is the (V) element, *valuation*, which 'incorporates change based on feedback and selectivity, including decisions' (191). In a musical context, valuation may comprise processes of criticism, revision, and verbal negotiation among collaborators, as it would in other disciplines, but valuation can also take the form of nonverbal reflection in practice, experimentation, and rehearsal.

The coupling of evaluation and action during the course of performance is especially crucial to improvisation. When a musician hears as she plays and plays

as she hears, this is not an unmediated flow. She might make mistakes, she interacts with one sound or player and not another, she feels ambivalence about when to end or not. These interruptions and microjudgements, however, apparently small, both reflect larger values and significantly impact what follows. The fact that Halprin's model gives (V) the same hypothetical importance as all the other elements in the Cycle underlines its relevance for improvised music.

Third, the model focuses on what participants actually do, rather than their functional identities in a predetermined social text. In the Cycle, identities shift with and/or emerge from process; conventional distinctions between composers, improvisers, and interpreters do not register. Thus RSVP permits mapping workflows that are unique to particular projects or performances. It not only generically frees us from problematic conceptual binaries but also shows (some aspects of) what happens concretely on a case-by-case basis.

In sum, even 50 years after Halprin's book was published, RSVP's ecological approach is still refreshing when viewed from a musical perspective. Despite an explosion of scholarly interest in improvisation, performance, distributed creativity, and many other aspects of collective music-making over the last 20 years, there are few models that so ambitiously attempt to trace the creative context writ large.

The Big Social

At the same time, the liberatory potential of the Cycle—and claims for its universality—could benefit from a critical reappraisal. As Halprin's problematic postmortem of The Sea Ranch reveals, the Cycle insufficiently reflects the *social* context writ large, especially as it manifests in power relations among participants. A historic deployment of RSVP in Anna Halprin's collaborative dance piece Ceremony of Us (1969) further exemplifies this difficulty.

The project brought together a group of white dancers from the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop with a group of black dancers from Studio Watts, based in a poor area of Los Angeles that had suffered devastating race riots in 1965. Rather than playing the role of 'the choreographer', Anna Halprin offered performers a variety of games, bodily exercises, improvisations, and opportunities for verbal and written reflection in order to root the work process in the experience of the group. As dance historian Janice Ross states, tensions concerning race, gender, and sexuality inherent to that experience took center stage, but not (entirely) in the productive way Halprin had intended:

Although the Dancers' Workshop members were familiar with how Ann [Halprin's first name at the time, CW] used the real emotions that emerged, improvising with them to create performative, narrative material, the performers from Watts didn't have the same training history with Ann, so for them the feelings elicited may have hovered much closer to the real than the metaphoric. [...] Ann believed so deeply in the salutary capacity of dance metaphors that she seemed not to have worried about the dangers of the literal anger and hostility that had fueled the Watts riots and still

simmered in many of the exchanges between these white and black youths. (Ross 2007, 276–77)

Indeed, according to Ross, the influence of such inescapable social asymmetries on the creative process seriously hobbled the project. She cites two particularly difficult moments: the performers not being properly credited in the performance program notes, and Halprin's choice to distribute grant money for filming the project to the Dancers' Workshop members but not to the Studio Watts members. Perhaps not surprisingly, several dancers and critics found the project to be a failure for topicalising racism but ultimately not confronting it head on.

No creative model, of course, could ever be comprehensive enough to account for, much less alleviate, the complex ways in which capitalism shaped the evolution of The Sea Ranch, or how race shaped *Ceremony of Us*. But if the Cycle were to have even a remote chance of reconciling its egalitarian aspirations within the creative context and the ineluctable disparities of the social context without, reckoning with the histories and power relationships among creative participants themselves—especially project leaders—should be fundamental.

In the following analysis of a series of pieces for improvisers by Richard Barrett, I will attempt to show how this might be achieved through the logic of the Cycle itself.

Case Study: FURT, fORCH, fOKT

Richard Barrett

Richard Barrett (1959, Swansea, Wales) has been active at the extremes of 'composed' new music and experimental improvised music for most of his career. Until the late 1990s, however, his public lives as a 'composer' and as an 'improviser' were mutually exclusive. *transmission IV* for solo guitar (1999) and *Blattwerk* for cello and electronics (2002) were among his first projects to integrate both facets of his work.

Barrett's turn to notation for improvisers grew largely out of an interest in the politics of ensemble performance, or what musicologist and anthropologist Georgina Born has called its 'microsocialities' (2017, 52). Barrett's experience performing Cornelius Cardew's *The Great Learning* (1972) was a watershed moment in this regard. Cardew's mammoth verbally notated work, based on texts by Confucius, was written for the Scratch Orchestra,

an experiment in collective musical creativity of which Cardew was a founder member [...]. This work consists of seven *paragraphs* corresponding to the division of the original text, and the longest of these is Paragraph 5 [...]. The second half of Paragraph 5 is a free improvisation [...].

Something that stuck in my mind about this experience was the way that this improvisation, despite being in many different senses 'anarchic', was somehow informed and imbued with particular qualities by the actions which preceded it, and by their disciplined nature, without Cardew having had to say anything in the score about *how* the performers should approach it. [...] This seemed to me,

as it no doubt seemed to Cornelius Cardew, to be trying to say something about how a society in balance with itself might become self-organised, so that the idea had resonances far beyond addressing the relationship between improvisation and preparation in narrowly musical terms. (Barrett 2011, 1)

Here we see a number of clear connections to RSVP. Like Halprin, Barrett sought to increase performers' agency through notation. Also, like Halprin, Barrett aimed to distinguish the desired process from chaos and anarchy; to emphasise the responsibility of participants; and to caution against determining results in advance. The convergence of their ideas on the nature of notation in collective situations provides a strong argument for applying Halprin's ideas to Barrett's music. Likewise, Barrett's music offers a rich context in which to update Halprin's utopian portrayal of the Cycle.

Analysis

1. (R)

The first three instalments⁸ of *fOKT* (2005) were written for a bespoke ensemble of eight improvisers entitled *FORCH*: John Butcher (saxophones), Rhodri Davies (harps), Wolfgang Mitterer (prepared piano), Paul Lovens (percussion), Phil Minton (voice), Ute Wassermann (voice), Richard Barrett (electronics), and Paul Obermayer (electronics). All of these musicians are experienced improvisers; two of them, Lovens and Minton, had rarely worked with notation.

One can trace the genealogical origin of this project to FURT, Barrett's electronics duo with Paul Obermayer:

FORCH was initially formed, at the invitation of Reinhard Kager,⁹ for the 2005 New Jazz Meeting of the SWR (South West German Radio), which consisted of a week of intensive rehearsing and recording followed by four concerts. [...] Expanding FURT into a new kind of 'orchestra' (hence the name *FORCH*) had been an objective for many years, and the SWR project created an opportunity to establish such an ensemble, in which the electronic duo was combined with vocalists and instrumentalists, all leading players in the world of improvised and experimental music who have developed their own unprecedented sounds and techniques. (Barrett and Obermayer 2009)

The ongoing practice of FURT; Barrett's wish to expand its principles to *FORCH*; the rehearsal phase and concert tour made possible through the SWR New Jazz Meeting; and the ensemble members' backgrounds all formed the initial (R) of the project. It is important to note that these resources formed an integral *situation* from which subsequent steps in the cycle emerged. Just as personnel, landscape, creative aims, and local architectural traditions were dynamically linked in *The Sea Ranch*, so did the components of (R) in *fOKT* condition the next step in the cycle together:

- A long, intensive rehearsal period meant the score would not need to be comprehensive; there would be plenty of time for personal communication and experimentation.

- The score(s) would need to be written in a way that Minton and Lovens would respond to—i.e. not in conventional notation—if they were expected to pay it any heed.
- The players would all bring their diverse, idiosyncratic methods and sound worlds to the piece. The ensemble would therefore not only passively extend FURT's history and identity but also actively transform and potentially confront it.

2. (S)—*entextualisation*

Barrett prepared the first three scores for fORCH, *fOKT I–III* (2005), before the rehearsal week in Baden-Baden.¹⁰ According to the composer, ‘the first set of fORCH scores served to short-circuit a process whereby FURT’s aims and methods would infuse the whole group’ (Barrett, personal email to the author, 5 August 2016). They can thus be considered an entextualisation of FURT’s improvised praxis.

The term *entextualisation*, which I borrow from anthropologist Karin Barber, and she from fellow anthropologists Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (1996), refers to the ‘the process of rendering a given instance of discourse as text, detachable from its local context’ (Barber 2007, 30).¹¹ Because FURT’s improvised discourse preceded the written score in *fOKT*, it is important to consider how the score reflected and mediated it.

One obvious aspect of FURT’s praxis that *fOKT* entextualised was the predominance of vocal material. As Barrett and Obermayer note,

A constant strand in our output has been the appearance of diverse vocally-derived materials, using our own or sampled voices, which seem primarily to be engaged in the (often desperate) attempt to articulate a message whose import remains out of reach. (Barrett and Obermayer 2000)

Ute Wassermann and Phil Minton are, of course, no ordinary singers. Their extraordinary command of noisy and extreme vocal techniques both complemented and extended FURT’s virtual manipulations of vocal samples.

Another immediately recognisable mark of FURT on the score was Barrett and Obermayer’s frequent coupling as a duo; their modules coordinated far more often than those of other musicians. The octet thus directly featured the duo’s intimate shared performance practice, instruments, and sample libraries. Barrett and Obermayer:

We tend to think of FURT as one person rather than two; while our musical preferences and activities outside the duo don’t coincide precisely (though almost), in a FURT context they do, so that for the most part disagreements don’t occur. [...] We mix our performances from the stage, and fiddle around with each other’s output levels without bothering to ask. Synchronisation is one of those things which takes its course. (Barrett and Obermayer 2000)

FURT's aims and methods also influenced *fOKT*'s timeline-based *track notation* (Figure 3). The track notation distributed modules containing eight event types within which individual players improvised for a rough duration:

1. Textures 'describe a point of arrival or departure for a process' detailed on a case by case basis.
2. Duos link specific players as a subgroup within the ensemble, playing one of two loosely defined material types.
3. Coordinated Events: Barrett's 'unambiguous hand signal[s]' cue different types of designated behavior from 'explosive bursts' to guided solos that suddenly change character.
4. Solos
5. Accompaniments
6. Perturbation
7. Transitions
8. Free improvisation.

Tracks also referred to

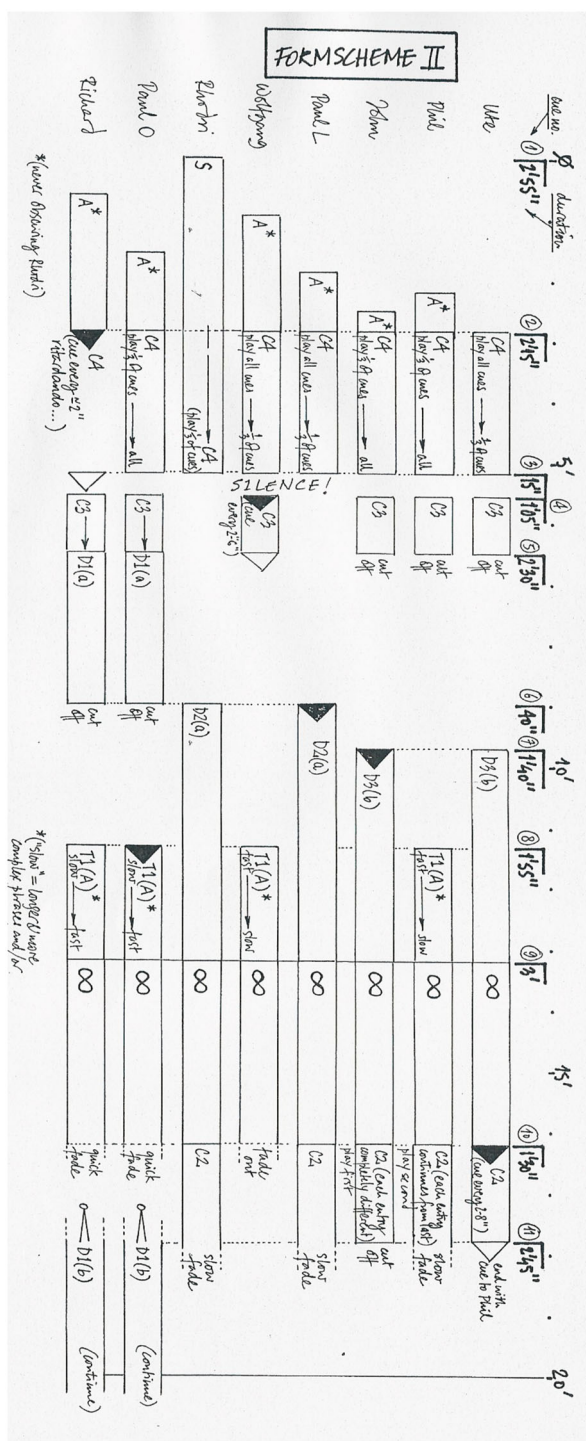
- sound objects (T4: Points—'almost exclusively short sound with longer silences between' or D3b: 'breathy and consonantal sounds');
- individual processes (Transitions—'gradual or stepwise transformations within or between any of the other types of activity'); and
- socially distributed processes (A: 'as it were the opposite of Solo [...] affected by everything else which is going on at that point relating').

Different elements often coincided in single modules, such as C3:

C3: Ute/John/Phil: begin sustained, interwoven sound at first cue (like T3 'submerged' material but generally louder); everyone changes sound (in timbre, pitch etc.) instantaneously at each cue as if switching between radio stations or CD tracks. (Barrett 2005, 'Performance Instructions')

What interests us most here is not the structural intricacy of these modules, but rather how the modules' material, subjective, and intersubjective modalities *overlapped*. The majority of Barrett's modules asked each performer to be aware of several levels at once, and often multiple modules occupied the ensemble simultaneously. This resulted in a meshwork of cross-referenced sounds and contingent processes, tethering the players in subtle and unpredictable ways.

This multidimensionality reflected FURT's unique approach to sampling, in which multiple layers of sound objects are processed in real time, often beyond recognition. In *fOKT*, the score modules acted as conceptual 'samples' assigned to the performers who 'processed' the material according to their own radically different methods and



sound worlds. When multiple modules sounded at once, and began and ended at different times, the dynamic polyphony of the whole tended to scramble their individual identities, much as FURT scrambled their samples as a duo.

3. $(R) = (R \rightarrow V \rightarrow P)\mathfrak{O}$ —Remapping

Given that the score entextualised these complex practices, it is somewhat misleading to map *fOKT*'s first steps in the Cycle simply as $(R) \rightarrow (S)$. Nesting aspects of FURT's ongoing practice in (R) directly gives us a much clearer mapping.

FURT's practice constituted its own ur-cycle, which did not use written scores: $(R) \rightarrow (V) \rightarrow (P)$.

- (R) : sample library, jointly chosen instruments and software, synchronicity and duo history;
- (V) : preparation and experimentation with samples, individual live processing and decision-making process during performance; and
- (P) : collective improvisation in concert.

Adding a repeat sign (\mathfrak{O}) to show that FURT's performance practice is ongoing, we now have $(R \rightarrow V \rightarrow P)\mathfrak{O}$. Nesting this ur-cycle back into (R) and combining it with (S) , its entextualisation, we obtain the following new mapping (Figure 4).

What this remapping onto the RSVP Cycle makes visible is that, during entextualisation, FURT's microtradition remained in motion, and the score emerged from it. This is a far cry from modelling the first stages of *fOKT*'s inscription as the linear process $(R) \rightarrow (S)$, which suggests that (R) was simply raw material or given conditions for (S) . Since FURT's work grew from within the process of composing and performing *fOKT*, this was not the case. Indeed, one may infer from Barrett and Obermayer's comments that the duo's very objective of sharing their practice was to incite change and growth within it. We find echoes here of George E. Lewis'

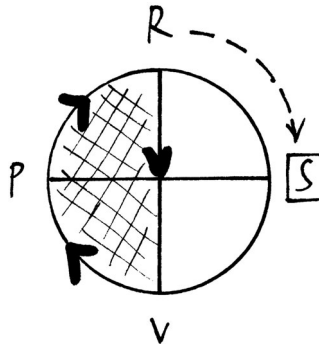


Figure 4 *fOKT* $(R) = (R \rightarrow V \rightarrow P)\mathfrak{O}$.

assertion that ‘both improvisation and non-determinate notation [transform] whatever combination of traditions the musicians performing the work have emerged from, thereby transforming the entire network from which the music emerges’ (Lewis 2006, 431).

Moreover, this remapping defuses one of the Cycle’s major problems. As I pointed out in my discussion of *The Sea Ranch* and *Ceremony of Us*, the Cycle does not structurally reflect authorial power. It allows for ostensibly transparent and collectively oriented processes to be limited or manipulated by those whose influence is not represented. Representing entextualisation as I do here, Barrett and Obermayer are clearly ‘the composers’; they produced the score, they received the royalties. But they were also performers before, during, and after the production of the score. Their investment in the potentially hierarchical position of ‘author’ diminished in feedback with their fellow players.

4. (V)—*Rehearsal*

Since I was neither creatively nor ethnographically involved with *fOKT*, and there is no extant documentation of the rehearsal phase in Baden-Baden, it is difficult to trace this stage of the Cycle empirically. I shall thus offer a few brief speculations on what (V) might have entailed by comparing the notation and recordings.

The performers, we can assume, began the project with the score. I infer this from the fact that Barrett had prepared the score in advance, and that the project as a whole had no previous shared history to build upon. (Most of the players, however, had worked together in different constellations before, so a certain degree of mutual familiarity would have been a factor.) Since the recordings of *fOKT II* and *fOKT III* correspond fairly closely to the structure specified in the score, we can also assume that the players worked with the notation in good faith.

The notation is sufficiently complex that performers must have studied the score to a degree. At a bare minimum, musicians would have needed to memorise the nomenclature and to understand how their own modules linked to other players. But the pace of change between the modules in individual parts is not so fast that it would have required much individual practice. Barrett was of course also present during rehearsals as a performer, so his fellow players might have shortened the learning curve by talking with him directly. In any case, the intersubjective nature of the notation lends itself to group learning; (V) would have occurred mostly in the context of playing together.

5. $(P) = ((S \rightarrow R) \mathfrak{O} \rightarrow (V \rightarrow P \rightarrow R) \mathfrak{O}) \mathfrak{O}$ —*recontextualisation*

In the same way that I nested FURT’s ongoing microhistory in (R), it seems appropriate to nest another feedback loop in (P). I assume again that the performers started with (S).

In a conventionally notated score where material is given, performers generally proceed to (V) on the way to (P). *fOKT* was different because of the multivalent nature of its modules. Material in the score was loosely defined and highly dependent on interaction among players. Players therefore actually began before (S) at (R): their own unique embodied sound worlds, instruments, and approaches to improvising.

(R) also included group resources (shared motives, gestures, textures, ideas) that emerged in ensemble interaction *during* performance. The score coupled players to cues, specific subgroups, and group textures whose sonic results were unpredictable. Players thus constantly had to revise (R) as they played together.

Another important aspect of (R) within (P) was the evolving performance practice of *fORCH* over time. Percussionist and composer Burkhard Beins calls this phenomenon ‘collective spaces of possibility’:

Collective spaces of possibility already begin to establish themselves when the same group constellation meets for a second time after having formed some initial common experiences. Through continuous collaboration and by being repeatedly revisited [...] their shape and content become ever more clearly defined and increasingly differentiated. This phenomenon appears to take place whether those who are involved are actively aware of it or whether they tend towards appreciating or rejecting such developments. (Beins 2011, 171)

It is difficult to assess how the microtradition of *fORCH* emerged and ‘whether they tend[ed] towards appreciating or rejecting such developments’ without the benefit of ethnography and documentation. However, it seems fair to assume that the intensive rehearsal period and concert tour would have fostered a group identity over and above the score. According to Barrett, for example, the group settled in during the rehearsal process well enough that he and Obermayer felt inclined to integrate a free improvisation into the concert programs of later performances, rather than play only a rehearsed piece.¹²

From (R), performers would have proceeded to (V) on the way to (P). Valuation took place in real time as performers processed aspects of (R), as mentioned above. They also simultaneously valued on aspects of (S) that conditioned (R)—a second-order (V) so to speak. This may have manifested in simple tasks, such as checking in with the timeline while performing an ongoing duo module. It may also have manifested in more complex tasks, such as negotiating when to make a given transition, or figuring out how to ‘ignore’ another performer who was especially adept at ‘interrupting’.

(P) was therefore an intersection and recontextualisation of all the paths I have just described: the concrete materialisation and interaction of individual (R)s and (V)s (Figure 5). The complexity of this step in the cycle, the musical ‘now’, challenges Halprin’s own characterisation of performance as ‘the resultant of scores and [...] the ‘style of the process’” (1969, 2). His definition suggests a linearity which, in my opinion, is fundamentally at odds with the dynamic structure of both the Cycle

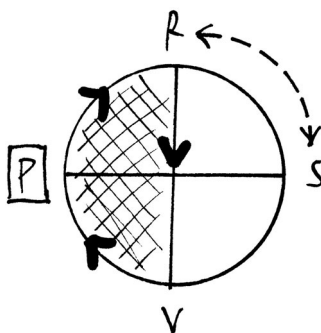


Figure 5 $fOKT(P) = ((S \rightarrow R) \cup \rightarrow (V \rightarrow P \rightarrow R) \cup) \cup$.

and musical performance. After all, if one conceives of (P) as the end of the process, the RSVP Cycle might as well be an RSVP line segment.

This expanded reading of (P) also helps to revise Halprin's impoverished portrayal of improvisation as a monad, (P):

[I]t is important for anyone working with the cycle to understand where he is concentrating and which parts are operating. If, for instance, you jump immediately to Performance (P), you are improvising. There are times when improvisation, for example, or spontaneous responses are vital to the release of creative energies which might remain locked up otherwise. But these energies can often fruitfully lead back into the rest of the cycle or remain isolated for their own sake. (3)

Improvisation in *fOKT*, as anywhere, was not simply a self-contained spontaneous performance.¹³ It was a consequence of many factors interacting in the musical environment: individual resources, values, and actions; the performance of and with fellow musicians; and, of course, scores. It occurred not only in a single moment but also over longer periods of time. That the Cycle makes this visible in spite of Halprin's own limited deployments is a testament to its richness and continued relevance.

Conclusion—Valuation

In this article, I have argued for the relevance of Halprin's *RSVP Cycles* to experimental music that triangulates notation, collectivity, and improvisation. Through my analytical application of the Cycle to Barrett's *fOKT* series, I have attempted to show the relevance of such music to critiquing, refining, and expanding the model as well.

In particular, I have focused on the Cycle's (in)ability to represent power dynamics in the 'performance' of community in a broad sense, beyond a single point, (P), on a diagram. While Halprin's own (sometimes surprisingly linear) readings and applications of the Cycle reveal serious blind spots in this regard, I conclude that the

Cycle still has enormous potential. Indeed, as I have attempted to show, it becomes possible to redress these blind spots by expanding the logic of the Cycle through recursion and tracing multiple iterations of creative processes over time (or re-Cycling, if you will).

Beyond (re)invigorating a discussion about the value of Halprin's ideas for music and other artistic disciplines, I hope this study shows how music can contribute to a reevaluation of current dominant conceptions of 'participation' throughout contemporary life, as denuded by writers such as art critic Claire Bishop (2012) and architect Markus Miessen (2010). Whether in politics, social media, or advertising (and truly, who can tell the difference?)—what passes for participation today is all too often a vanity fair—at best. In Miessen's words,

What we have witnessed over the last decade, which has been a decade of sympathetic and unquestioned use of the term 'participation' and its democratic principles, is an almost fundamentalist willingness toward inclusion that goes hand in hand with a grotesquely uncritical mode of setting up structures and frameworks for this so-called participation to take place, be it on the scale of national politics, local involvement, projects in the art world, and so forth. It seems that in the context of such romantic nostalgia of the good-doing, open-source practitioner, institution, or party, we are in urgent need of an outspoken political candor. (Miessen 2010, 45–46)

Halprin and Barrett would doubtlessly agree with Miessen's assessment, as do I. *The RSVP Cycles*—rethought with the help of music such as *fOKT*—perhaps begin to address this need for candor by making a part, if not the utopic entirety, of participatory and 'participatory' processes visible.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributor

Christopher A. Williams (1981, San Diego) makes, curates, and researches (mostly) experimental music. From 2021–2025, he will lead the research project (*Musical*) *Improvisation and Ethics* (Austrian Science Fund ZK 93) at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz. As a composer and contrabassist, Williams' work runs the gamut from chamber music, improvisation, and radio art to collaborations with dancers, sound artists, and visual artists. He co-curates the Berlin concert series KONTRAKLANG. His artistic research takes the forms of both conventional academic publications and practice-based multimedia projects. www.christopherisnow.com

Notes

- [1] A notable exception is the excerpt and commentary printed in Lely and Saunders (2012).
- [2] It is important to emphasise that 'scoring' in this expanded context could include practically any written or visual artefact whatsoever, not only conventional architectural notations such as blueprints and elevation maps. Halprin often worked with speculative or conceptual types

of notation, such as the ‘ecoscores’ in *The Sea Ranch* discussed below. In this article, I take a similarly ecumenical approach to musical notation, including verbal, graphic, and conventional Western forms.

- [3] For images of all these scores, see Halprin (1969, 117–47).
- [4] The Sea Ranch was built on grazing land; there were no existing community residents to involve in the valuation. Resident participation did, however, form a core element of other Halprin projects from the 1970s employing the Cycle, such as the *Take Part* workshops – see Hirsch (2014, Chapter 4). Although these later projects are perhaps richer examples of the liberatory potential of the Cycle, The Sea Ranch is more appropriate for musical comparison because the ‘participants’ in question are builders (as are musical performers) rather than end-users (as would be audience members).
- [5] As Halprin scholar Alison Bick Hirsch (Hirsch 2014) has pointed out, Halprin’s ambivalent relationship to authorship was an Achilles heel in many of his RSVP-inspired projects. A common source of conflict was tension between Halprin’s earnest attempts to place community members at the center of a given project and his own modernist inclinations toward aesthetic control. In both cases, the Cycle does not reflect hierarchy.
- [6] Following Lewis (1996) and Piekut (2011), I conceive of experimental music here as a broad network of methods and backgrounds, rather than a single canonical (i.e. post-Cageian) avant-garde tradition.
- [7] Philosopher Nelson Goodman’s classic *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Goodman 1968) and various texts by musicologist Carl Dahlhaus (1979; 1983) are emblematic instances of this perspective. But it is still prevalent even among more progressive practitioners such as Kanno (2007).
- [8] Six versions in total were written between 2005 and 2009. In 2012, Barrett also co-composed a piece with Obermayer for fORCH entitled *spukhafte Fernwirkung*. Scores are available at <http://www.tactilepaths.net/barrett/>.
- [9] According to Barrett, Kager was at the time ‘in charge of the jazz department at SWR; one of his last acts there before the restructuring of the company impelled him to resign and return to his home two of Vienna was the commissioning of *spukhafte Fernwirkung*, so that he’s been involved in fORCH for its whole history so far. The inclusion of Wolfgang Mitterer in the original lineup was his idea’ (Barrett, personal email to the author, 23 August 2016).
- [10] Though each score was meant to be performed for separate concerts, the three comprise a unified bundle. They all make use of a similar notational format and refer to the same legend, instructional modules, and musicians.
- [11] For an in-depth discussion of entextualisation in a musical context, see my chapter on Ben Patterson’s *Variations for Double-Bass* in Williams (2016; <http://www.tactilepaths.net/patterson>).
- [12] Barrett: ‘Fairly early in the rehearsal process it became clear that octet improvisations were a possibility, which I hadn’t dared to put into the original schedule. The subsequent concerts in London, Aberdeen and Huddersfield followed the format of a fOKT piece plus a free octet improvisation of about the same length (Paragraph 5 [from Cardew’s *The Great Learning*, CW] rearing its head again!’ (Barrett, personal email to the author, 23 August 2016).
- [13] For an acute critique of the common overvaluation of spontaneity and the concomitant undervaluation of history and memory in writings on improvisation, see Lewis (1996).

ORCID

Christopher A. Williams  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1085-0423>

References

- Barber, Karin. 2007. "Improvisation and the Art of Making Things Stick." In *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, edited by Elizabeth Hallam, and Tim Ingold, 25–41. Oxford, New York, NY: Berg.
- Barrett, Richard. 1999. *Transmission*. Suffolk: United Music Publishers.
- Barrett, Richard. 2002. *Blattwerk*. Suffolk: United Music Publishers.
- Barrett, Richard. 2005. *fOKT*. Unpublished Score.
- Barrett, Richard. 2011. "Construction of CONSTRUCTION." 2011. <http://richardbarrettmusic.com/CONSTRUCTIONessay.pdf>
- Barrett, Richard, and Paul Obermayer. 2000. "Response to Questions from Nic Collins for Noisy.org." <http://furtlogic.com/node/7>
- Barrett, Richard, and Paul Obermayer. 2009. "fORCH." <http://furtlogic.com/nodeorder/term/14>
- Beins, Burkhard. 2011. "Scheme and Event." In *Echtzeitmusik Berlin: Selbstbestimmung Einer Szene Self-Defining a Scene*, edited by Burkhard Beins, Christian Kesten, Gisela Nauk, and Andrea Neumann, 166–181. Hofheim: Wolke Verlag.
- Bishop, Claire. 2012. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London; New York, NY: Verso Books.
- Born, Georgina. 2017. "After Relational Aesthetics: Improvised Musics, the Social, and (Re)Theorising the Aesthetic." In *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics*, edited by Georgina Born, Eric Lewis, and Will Straw, 33–58. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Canty, Donald. 2004. "Origins, Evolutions and Ironies." In *The Sea Ranch*, edited by Donlyn Lyndon, and James Alinder, 22–33. New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Cardew, Cornelius. 1972. *The Great Learning*. Leicester: Experimental Music Catalogue.
- Dahlhaus, Carl. 1979. "Was Heisst Improvisation?" In *Improvisation Und Neue Musik*, edited by Reinhold Brinkmann, 8–23. Schott: Mainz.
- Dahlhaus, Carl. 1983. *Foundations of Music History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goodman, Nelson. 1968. *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.
- Halprin, Lawrence. 1969. *The RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment*. New York, NY: George Braziller.
- Hirsch, Alison Bick. 2014. *City Choreographer: Lawrence Halprin in Urban Renewal America*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- John-Alder, Kathleen. 2014. "Processing Natural Time: Lawrence Halprin and the Sea Ranch Ecoscore." *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 34 (1): 52–70.
- Kanno, Mieko. 2007. "Prescriptive Notation: Limits and Challenges." *Contemporary Music Review* 26 (2): 231–254.
- Lely, John, and James Saunders. 2012. *Word Events: Perspectives on Verbal Notation*. London: Continuum.
- Lewis, George E. 1996. "Improvised Music After 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives." *Black Music Research Journal* 16 (1): 91–122.
- Lewis, George E. 2006. "Improvisation and the Orchestra: A Composer Reflects." *Contemporary Music Review* 25 (5–6): 429–434.
- Lyndon, Donlyn. 2009. "The Sea Ranch: Qualified Vernacular." *Journal of Architectural Education* 63 (1): 81–89.
- Miessen, Markus. 2010. *The Nightmare of Participation (Crossbench Praxis as a Mode of Criticality)*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Piekut, Benjamin. 2011. *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and its Limits*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Ross, Janice. 2007. *Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Silverstein, Michael, and Greg Urban. 1996. *Natural Histories of Discourse*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Williams, Christopher. 2016. "Tactile Paths: On and Through Notation for Improvisers." PhD Thesis, Leiden University. <http://www.tactilepaths.net/>