



**Unravelling the frontiers of artistic collaboration:  
An exploration of the space of  
improvisation**

**Volume I**

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PhD Arts Practice

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Submitted to the University of Limerick,

March 2023

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own original work. None of the material has been submitted, either in whole or in part, for the purpose of publication, award or degree from any Third Level institute. This work meets the requirements of The University of Limerick's Ethics Committee, the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, and all of the participants in the research.

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Eugene Murphy

## **Dedication**

To my beautiful wife Cathy who travelled with me every step of the way and is the love of my life. And to my wonderful children Greta, Fionn, Sadhbh and Ferdia who encouraged me and made it all worthwhile.

## Abstract

This practice-based inquiry examines the concept of ‘collaboration’ with artists from different disciplines who have an improvisatory practice. It explores how the disciplines unravel in the intricate array of interactions that take place in the making of a collaborative piece and it also examines the complex dynamics of improvisation in relation to collaboration. There are two principal objectives; firstly, to investigate the frontiers of collaboration when artists from different disciplines work together. Secondly, to explore the concept of ‘space’ - and its various dimensions - in improvisation as experienced by the artists participating in the research.

The research methods include auto-ethnography and narrative inquiry as approaches to interacting with and documenting of the process. The primary data for the investigation emanates from two works (which were performed live in the course of the research), *Beginnings in the Dark* and *Flux: Five iterations of Becoming*. Along with the live performances and the audio-visual recordings of the works, the transcripts from the voice recordings of the three artists in dialogic conversation during the creative process forms an exceptional foundation for this research.

A number of findings have emerged. Firstly, the shifting of boundaries in an essentially ‘emergent’ process means that they ‘dissolve’. This is suggested by the transformations they undergo in the exchanges that take place in experiential discourse. Secondly, collaborators ‘build’ a customised improvisational space which is ‘shared, conceptual and experiential’; each new collaboration is identified as having its own unique space. Thirdly, the term ‘pre-disciplinarity’ – referring to discourse that takes place *before* or *outside* discipline-specific notions - is proposed to identify the process of finding what is in common and what is essential to the making of a new work.

## Acknowledgments

My deepest gratitude to Dr. Óscar Mascareñas composer and lecturer at The University of Limerick for supervising this thesis and for guiding me artfully along a very rich journey of discovery. I would like to thank Professor Helen Phelan for her encouragement from the outset of this investigation. To the faculty of The Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, especially Professor Mel Mercier and Dr. Sandra Joyce – I am grateful for the tremendous opportunity to be part of this artistic community.

Special thanks to Steve Boyland (voice artist) who collaborated on this research. It was a great privilege to have Steve's input and his generosity and guidance throughout the project was always positive and motivating. Likewise, I am indebted to Mary Wycherley (dance artist and choreographer), the second collaborator on this research, who made invaluable contributions to the discourse and performance.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the technical team at The Irish World Academy – Dr. Alan Dormer (senior technical adviser) and Danny Bride who supervised all aspects of sound; to Lucy Dawson for her videography of the two performances and to Róisín Berg who worked on the digital presentation of the poetic texts for the performance of *Flux:Five Iterations of Becoming*. Early contributions from Dr. Mary Nunan, Paul Johson, Robert Conor and Loretta Yurick assisted me in setting the parameters to move forward with the investigation and I am grateful to them for their wisdom and experience.

I would like to thank those who attended the performances for their feedback and encouragement along this journey and also to my 10 'GMIS' friends for taking a keen interest in my work. To my factorONE band mates, Andrew and Padraic, for including me on a great adventure over many years. And to my father and my brothers, Anthony, Thomas and Patrick for their positivity and support.

Embarking on this voyage would not have been possible without my incredible children - Greta, Fionn, Sadhbh and Ferdia who believed in me even when I doubted myself. The person who was most heroic throughout this whole voyage is my wonderful wife Cathy. I am forever indebted to Cathy for her constant love and her generosity in giving me the opportunity to embark on this research and for walking the whole journey with me. Thank you!

# Table of Contents

Declaration.....	i
Dedication .....	ii
Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Memory Stick of Contents .....	ix
A Note on the Three Participants in this Collaboration .....	x
Introduction.....	1
Research Question .....	1
Thesis Layout.....	1
Chapter One: Introduction .....	4
Introduction.....	4
My personal journey .....	4
Diminuendo.....	8
Arts Practice Research .....	9
Methodology .....	14
Auto-ethnography .....	15
Keeping a journal.....	16
Narrative Enquiry.....	17
A reflexive voice.....	18
Interviews.....	19
The Discourse .....	21
Conclusion .....	22
Chapter Two: A Review of the literature in context.....	23
Introduction.....	23
Collaboration.....	23
Defining Collaboration .....	23
Categories of collaboration .....	24
Discipline .....	25
Intra-disciplinarity.....	26
Multi-disciplinarity .....	26
Inter-disciplinarity.....	27

Trans-disciplinarity .....	28
Collaborative Framework .....	29
Pre-Disciplinarity .....	30
A note on the collaborative relationships in the present research.....	31
The Creative Process.....	33
Locating the artist in collaboration .....	35
The concept of Space .....	35
The concept of Time .....	37
The concept of Liminality.....	38
Improvisation .....	39
Free Improvisation .....	40
The space of improvisation .....	41
The embodied mind .....	43
Shared and Experiential Discourse .....	44
Conclusion .....	46
Chapter Three: Findings I: Beginnings in the Dark.....	48
Introduction.....	48
An overview of the collaborative journey .....	49
A concise discussion of the aims and creative ideas.....	51
An account of the rehearsal process.....	54
How did the process evolve? .....	54
What was rehearsed?.....	55
What emerged in rehearsal?.....	55
An Account of the first Performance .....	56
Beginnings in the Dark .....	57
Opening the piano lid (16:06 – 17:13).....	58
How the creative decisions were made during the performance .....	59
A brief analysis of performance placed in the context of the research questions.....	62
What are the frontiers of artistic collaboration? .....	62
What is the space of improvisation? .....	63
Conclusion .....	65
Chapter Four: Findings II: Flux: Five Iterations of Becoming .....	67
Introduction.....	67
An overview of the collaborative journey .....	68
Our first encounter in the rehearsal room .....	70
A concise discussion of the aims and creative ideas.....	72
How the creative ideas were approached.....	72

The first part of the rehearsal process .....	73
Crafting the work together .....	73
The second part of our rehearsal process .....	75
Practical considerations for the purpose of performance.....	75
The final preparations .....	77
An Account of the second performance.....	78
May 31 <sup>st</sup> ‘The ‘get in’ .....	78
Flux: Five Iterations of Becoming .....	78
The Performance – Flux: Five Iterations of Becoming .....	80
The creative decisions which I made during the performance .....	83
A brief analysis of the performance placed in the context of the research questions .....	84
What are the frontiers of artistic collaboration? .....	84
What is the space of improvisation? .....	85
Conclusion .....	86
Chapter Five: Discussion .....	88
Introduction.....	88
Part I - The Collaborative Space .....	89
An exploration of space .....	89
Determining the reality of space we inhabit .....	90
Articulating the experiential and discursive space.....	91
Where to locate my practice?.....	92
Space and Frontiers.....	93
Everything flows.....	94
The concept of ‘pre-disciplinarity’ in the discourse .....	95
Part II - The Performance Space .....	96
Curating an experience .....	97
Performing in a space of improvisation .....	98
The ephemeral nature of performance .....	99
Examples from the works .....	100
Trajectory.....	100
Interjections.....	101
‘Mapping’ from within in our process .....	101
Corners stones of Improvisation .....	103
Paying attention .....	103
Listening .....	104
Being present .....	104
Utilising fixed and unfixed elements in performance.....	105



Conclusion .....	105
Chapter Six: Conclusion .....	107
Introduction.....	107
Collaboration and the ‘pre-disciplinary space’ .....	107
The concept of space as a useful approach for practitioners .....	108
The production of knowledge in artistic research.....	108
The Space of Improvisation .....	109
The challenges of an interpretative approach .....	109
What is emerging in my practice .....	110
Bibliography .....	112
Appendices.....	132

## Memory Stick of Contents

Video: Performance 1 : *Beginnings in the Dark*

November 15<sup>th</sup> 2018. 7pm, Tower Theatre, Irish World Academy, University of Limerick. Filmed and edited by Lucy Dawson. Sound by Danny Bride.

Video: Performance 2 : *Flux: Five Iterations of Becoming*

May 31<sup>st</sup> 2019. 7pm, Theatre 1, Irish World Academy, University of Limerick. Filmed and edited by Lucy Dawson. Sound by Danny Bride. Lights & digital supervision by Róisín Berg and assisted by SORCHA HASSETT.

## **A Note on the Three Participants in this Collaboration**

### **Steve Boyland - Voice Artist / Composer**

Steve Boyland is one of the UK's most accomplished improvising voice artists. He creates solo work and collaborative projects with leading international practitioners in improvised music, visual and sound art, innovative poetry, dance and performance presenting his work in gallery, festival and concert spaces around Europe.

### **Mary Wycherley - Contemporary Dance Artist / Choreographer**

Mary Wycherley is a contemporary dance artist and choreographer based in Ireland whose work embraces live performance, film and installation. Her body of work has toured and been exhibited in Ireland and internationally at venues and festivals including the Museum of Contemporary Arts Shanghai, National Museum of Contemporary Art Budapest, Kilkenny Arts festival, Dublin Dance festival and Galway Film Fleadh. Mary was appointed Limerick Dance Artist in Residence from 2015-2019 by the Arts Council of Ireland.

### **Dr. Óscar Mascareñas – Transcendental Poet**

Dr. Óscar Mascareñas's research interests include, poetry, music and dance performance, somatic approaches to sound composition and performance, improvisation, radical pedagogy, Zen, early music and chant, the philosophy of music, photography, as well as the notions of nothingness, fragmentation, time and space in contemporary practice. Apart from his work as supervisor in this research Dr. Mascareñas lectures in music at The University of Limerick and works as a composer and performer internationally.

For the purposes of the commentary in this thesis, the artists are referred to by their first names.

# Introduction

The principal idea for this current thesis arose out of my established interest in collaborating with other artists, especially choreographers and dancers. The initial scope of the thesis centered around multi- and inter-disciplinary processes, before expanding into an exploration of the space of ‘collaboration’ itself and how artists from different disciplinary backgrounds work together. The requirement of two performances for the PhD opened the research up further to include an exploration of improvisation. Indeed, the title of the thesis – ‘Unravelling the Frontiers of Artistic Collaboration: An Exploration of the Space of Improvisation’ – reflects this, with two performative works presented as part of the research: *Beginnings in the Dark* (November 2018), and *Flux; Five Iterations of Becoming* (May 2019). The discourse among the three artists who participated in the current research was a powerful witness to what potential there is in collaboration for the deepest reflections on artistic process, and I set out to analyse how I arrived at this new juncture in my creative practice. Here, I made new and original work with other artists and had the opportunity to reflect on what emerged as a consequence of those collaborations, resulting in a detailed record of the discourse and reflexive commentary on the audio-visual recordings of the performances and what took place.

## Research Question

Examining the frontiers in collaboration requires a detailed investigation of the concept of collaboration itself in order to establish what possible boundaries exist in this type of practice and what can be understood when we attempt to unravel the boundaries. As such, the following research question is set forth:

*What are the frontiers of artistic collaboration and what is the space of improvisation?*

The concept of ‘space’ forms part of the overall discourse, including how it affects the preparations for the performances and the performances themselves. Indeed, what happens in the ‘space’ and what the performers reveal about their experiences provides valuable insights about improvisation.

## Thesis Layout

Chapter 1 opens with some personal background information pertinent to the research.

Situating myself as a collaborative artist, it allows the reader to understand why I have decided to explore the concept of collaboration. The second part of the chapter relates my investigation to arts practice research as the methodology most applicable to this investigation. It sets out the research tools used for the purposes of collecting data, namely, auto-ethnography and narrative inquiry.

Chapter 2 examines the theoretical framework underpinning this current research. It defines the term ‘collaboration’, before discussing how collaboration will be examined in relation to this process. The terms – discipline, intra- and inter-discipline, trans-discipline – are all defined and placed within the frame of the research. Questions of ‘space’, ‘time’, and ‘liminality’, as they manifest themselves in artistic practice, are explored. The second part of the chapter focuses on improvisation, specifically ‘free’ improvisation, which identifies the experimental character of the works. Finally, there is a note on embodied practice and the experiential nature of this artistic process.

Chapter 3 is a detailed record of the discourse around the preparations for the first performance, *Beginnings in the Dark*. It includes a written account of the lead up to the performance, as well as detailing the event itself, with a reflexive commentary relating to the audio-visual recording of the performance and my recollections of the event.

Chapter 4 presents the second work, *Flux: Five Iterations of Becoming*. The preparations and performance is a continuation and expansion of the discourse in Chapter 3. Like Chapter 3, it sets out chronologically what happened when the artists first met to prepare the work, right through to the performance and post-performance feedback. This chapter is a re-imagining of the process and, with the assistance of the audio-visual recording, offers some deep reflection and reflexive analysis of the performance.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion and examination of the data from the discourse surrounding the two performances in relation to the literature reviewed in the current thesis. It is divided into two parts. The first part explores the ‘Collaborative Space’, which revealed some valuable insights about the nature of collaboration and how the works evolved. The second part, the ‘Performance Space’, examines how the collaborators constructed an immersive space for performer and audience alike. The discussion extends to exploring the complexity of the exchanges that took place among the performers during the performances. Chapter 5 then offers insights about the frontiers of collaboration and what I have found at the end of

the process and also what is revealed about the improvisational space which the collaborators occupied during this process.

Finally, Chapter 6 concludes with some reflections on the current work. It demonstrates why the term ‘pre-disciplinarity’ became part of the methodology of this collaborative process and offers the concept of ‘space’ as a means to articulate what characterises collaboration and how the collaborative space might manifest itself without frontiers. A brief outline follows, regarding the concept of ‘knowledge’ and internal ‘mapping’ as a feature of this type of compositional process. Finally, there is a note on the limitations of an ‘interpretative’ approach to this inquiry, before a brief comment on what is emerging in my practice concludes the thesis.

# Chapter One: Introduction

## Introduction

In the first part of Chapter 1, I examine what steps, historically, have led me to this research and why I have decided on an Arts Practice PhD programme at the University of Limerick. The second part of the chapter includes an outline of arts practice, including research methodologies available to this research. I present the methodologies and tools that I will use to assist the investigation – auto-ethnography and narrative inquiry – gathering reflections of my own experience and the experiences of the other collaborators in the discussions, interviews, and conversations that form part of the overall discourse, as well as from the analysis of the two performances and the preparations beforehand.

## *My personal journey*

From an early age, I had a great desire to create something and, in my case, it happened to be through the medium of music. Thankfully, because of my mother's intervention I began to take piano lessons at a relatively early age and I was captivated from the start. I remember one of my uncles asking me if I could 'play by ear' and I began to understand that, apart from the notation on the manuscript that provided access to the music, there were other ways to assimilate tunes and extemporise on melodies that did not require learning to read music. After a few successful attempts at playing tunes by ear, I was able straddle both worlds of formal and informal music-making and it became an important creative outlet to, not only be able to read music, but also to memorize a tune by ear.

My first attempt at composing for piano was at the age of 11 and I remember the piece was called 'Thunder and Lightning'. Although I endeavoured to notate the music, I found that particular part challenging. This little piece was the first inclination of my desire to create some music of my own. By the age of 14, music had become so much part of my education at school and in my local community, where I had positive experiences playing the church organ, being in a school band, and as accompanist for the local musical. While at secondary school, I formed a band with two of my brothers, Thomas and Anthony, and a local boy, Andrew. This was to be my first experience of collaboration. We rehearsed often and played a few gigs and our signature tune was 'Rock around the Clock' by Bill Haley and The Comets. I travelled seamlessly and unselfconsciously on this musical journey in secondary

school until I reached university, where at the age of 17 I decided to study music at University College Dublin, hoping this programme of study would enable me to acquire skills in composition. The focus of the programme was on studying music as an academic subject, as distinct from studying composition for creative purposes. Unfortunately, after one year as an undergraduate in music, I dropped my music studies in favour of English literature. During my undergraduate years, I became friends with a guitarist, Padraic Gilligan, and he and another friend, Andrew Basquille, invited me to join a band which we named FactorONE. It has been an incredible journey of creating music with these two musicians over a lifetime and we still play and write songs together.

In the early 1980s, I met Robert Conor and Loretta Yurick, two American dancer/choreographers who had come to Ireland and who had decided to settle in Dublin. They were part of a dance company called *Dublin Contemporary Dance Theatre*,<sup>1</sup> which was set up by Joan Davis and Karen Callaghan, both of whom were influencers in contemporary dance, in Ireland, from the 1970s onwards. In conversation with Mary Nunan<sup>2</sup>, one of the dancers with *Dublin Contemporary Dance Theatre* during that time, she told me she had the great opportunity to create her own works within the structure of the company. This was the case with Robert Conor and Loretta Yurick, who also created their own work and who gave me my first opportunity to compose a piece for a choreography based on the Neolithic tombs of Newgrange,<sup>3</sup> an opportunity for which I am forever grateful. Newgrange is perhaps the most important ancient site in Ireland, having been built around 5200 BC. It is best known for the illumination of its passage and chamber by the winter solstice. Indeed, it is the illumination and symbolism surrounding Newgrange that inspired the piece. With this commission, I was catapulted into a strange new world of dancers, choreographers, light and sound engineers, costumes, and art work. It was exhilarating, and with the assistance of a well-known percussionist and composer, Noel Eccles,<sup>4</sup> we collaborated together on the piece: ‘What a sharp learning curve...I was a novice. But I gathered what was required to compose for choreography fairly quickly’ (Appendix 3).

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<sup>1</sup> Dublin Contemporary Dance Theatre (1979–1989) was a significant company in the development of dance in Ireland, and the first state funded contemporary dance group. (Meehan, E, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> Mary Nunan, Choreographer, <http://www.marynunan.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Newgrange. Newgrange is a 5,200 year old passage tomb located in the Boyne Valley, Ireland.

<sup>4</sup> Noel Eccles. Noel was principal percussionist with the RTE National Symphony Orchestra. He is a composer/musician and has played with a number of famous traditional bands in Ireland.



By 1990, I was developing my own practice as an artist and becoming more conscious of what interested me and provided stimulation for me to grow as an artist. During this year (1990) I was invited to attend a two-week workshop in Limerick for composers and choreographers.<sup>5</sup> It was organised by Dr. Gabrielle Tanhem, who was Development Officer for The Dance Council of Ireland (now Dance Ireland) at the time. Regrettably, there is no official record of this two-week long workshop held at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick that I have managed to locate. What I remember most was meeting like-minded artists, eager to shape their work in the artistic world. At the conference we were offered a diverse programme of workshops and performance opportunities which was a very useful platform for my own development as a composer. The tutors on the programme in Limerick included a percussionist who had worked with John Cage, and a choreographer from Martha Graham's School of Contemporary Dance in New York. Learning by exploration alongside another young composer, Jules Maxwell,<sup>6</sup> from Belfast and dancer/choreographer, Paul Johnson,<sup>7</sup> was serendipitous; especially with Paul, whom I went on to have a professional collaboration for almost ten years. In this forum, we were encouraged to push boundaries, experiment with new sounds, new instruments, expand the choreographer and composer relationship, arrange 'happenings', and take risks in function of new art. At the end of the two-week programme, there was an exhibition of pieces prepared in the workshops, with the piece created by Johnson and myself being the final piece in the exhibition. For my part, the composition involved producing a selection of rhythms with coins on the strings of a grand piano while dancers uttered fixed words and phrases overlapping each other in alternating rhythms. It resulted in a very dramatic, albeit cacophonous sound score, of which I was very proud at the time. I believe that Tanhem's aims were to connect contemporary dance with original live music and these two weeks opened up all of the participants to the wonders and the challenges of live collaborative performance. My abiding memory, and it is more than thirty years ago, was of the uninhibited expression in our artistic work over the period we spent together and there are traces of it still with me today in how much my own work has been influenced by this gathering of artists. Late summer 1990 also included working as an accompanist, during rehearsals, with the now defunct Cleveland Ballet company, featuring Rudolf Nureyev, which was visiting Dublin. There, I had the opportunity to witness another style of dance and discipline and, as a composer, it was an interesting contrast to the

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<sup>5</sup> Composer & Choreographer workshop (1990). MIC Limerick. Organised by *The Dance Council of Ireland*

<sup>6</sup> Jules Maxwell. He is a composer and is currently the keyboard player for Dead Can Dance.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Johnson. Choreographer and Director of ManDance. Paul was CEO of *Dance Ireland* (2007-2020).

workshops and performances in Limerick which featured contemporary dance. The year 1990 was also the same year I was invited to write music for a new work by a newly formed dance company, *Dance Theatre of Ireland*.<sup>8</sup> I had produced a number of short pieces for the New Music New Dance festivals,<sup>9</sup> which brought young composers and choreographers together to create new work. This new commission was for a full length piece, an ambitious task for me I will admit, as I had little experience of producing music for an extended work, other than Newgrange. The theme of this work, “Freedom’s Gait”,<sup>10</sup> was based on the experience of Brian Keenan,<sup>11</sup> a teacher in Beirut, who had been captured by Islamic rebels in 1986 and who spent 4 years, incarcerated, mostly blindfolded, and chained until his release in August 1990. It was a sensitive political issue in the media at that time and one which carried much emotion and pathos borne out in the score and in the choreography. Keenan attended the dress rehearsal and was visibly moved by the experience. As Keenan noted: ‘I thank the Dance Theatre of Ireland for translating into movement those inarticulate moments and experiences...in a sense confirming that we are never alone’.<sup>12</sup> One of the interesting points about this work is that there were two composers assigned to compose the music, John Dunne<sup>13</sup> and myself. This was the second time I found myself in a position where the music would be negotiated between two composers. John Dunne was an experienced jazz pianist and composer who had composed mainly for theatre projects. In that regard, I was able to examine my own strengths and weakness. For example, on one particular occasion in the studio, I had a very interesting motif for a particular section of the dance, but no matter how I tried I was unable to develop it further. John took the motif and developed and expanded the idea into a piece which provided the score for one part of the dance. It was a formative lesson in understanding that working with others would also mean giving up something, exposing a weakness or admitting that other artists may sometimes have greater creative output in a particular space and time. It took time to adopt the idea of not being territorial about who developed the motif, but I learned an important lesson in how to overcome my

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<sup>8</sup> Dance Theatre of Ireland founded in 1989 is one of Ireland's premiere contemporary dance companies touring Europe, Asia and America.

<sup>9</sup> New Music New Dance Festivals organized annually in 1980s & 1990s. [accessed in Dance Ireland. December 2020] <https://www.danceireland.ie/about/history/>

<sup>10</sup> “Freedom’s Gait” Choreography. Robert Connor & Loretta Yurick (1990)

<sup>11</sup> Brian Keenan, CBE. Northern Irish writer whose work includes the book *An Evil Cradling*, an account of the four and a half years he spent as a hostage in Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>12</sup> Brian Keenan attends rehearsal of Freedom’s Gait and comments [Dance Theatre of Ireland website, <http://www.dancetheatreireland.com/pages/repertoire.htm>, accessed November 2016]

<sup>13</sup> John Dunne, jazz pianist and composer who collaborated with Paul Mercier in the 1980s on a number of original musicals

shortcomings and it led me to truly embrace collaborative participation as an artist. One journalist wrote of *Freedom's Gait*: 'The choreography and musical score was received very well, 'exquisite style from the expressionistic to the impressionistic. Utterly assured dance work energised by the post-industrial score' (Moroney 1990).

### ***Diminuendo***

Having had a number of opportunities to work with choreographers and composers, my artistic output disappeared, partly because opportunities did not present themselves, as before, and partly because my work in business took me far away from my artistic roots. My experience, up to this point, had been formative and I had consolidated a multi-disciplinary collaborative practice that enhanced my repertoire and output as an artist, which had been very fulfilling...

And then came a long period of silence.

My practice remained dormant for approximately 15 years, until I began to feel compelled to find that precious space again, in the summer of 2016. It arose out of a conversation with Cathy (my wife) where I was mourning the loss of my creative side and I expressed to her that I longed to have it back. She encouraged me to find an avenue to revitalise my practice. Having looked at a number of options, I stumbled across the Arts Practice PhD research programme at The University of Limerick. I wanted to explore a new approach to composing and it seemed that this might be the answer. There was a requirement to present two performances as part of the PhD and this was very attractive to me. However, unlike other candidates on this programme, who came with a 'live' and current practice on which they could base their research, I came with a dormant practice. As such, facilitating the research part of the Arts Practice PhD would necessitate a rediscovery of my practice, in order to create new work and the potential to augment my practice within the overall inquiry. This was my greatest challenge in setting out on this journey.

In the early stages of the programme, I kept a diary about how I set about to compose music. It revealed to me that something had to change in how I approached my work.

It is the trying again that I recognise as the artist in me. It is a compulsion to make my mark...find something eloquent that I will be satisfied with, reaching the level of a creative work that I can stand over. I'm going to stop now...because I've never found it. But I will come back and repeat the process all over again (Appendix 4).

It thus faced a dilemma, as I was stepping into a formal, academic programme and I feared I might not be able to shape my work into something new. Nevertheless, I felt compelled to try, as I had already wasted so much time in allowing my practice to dissipate over a long period of time.

One final thought on my personal journey is that at the end of my first year of the programme, in May 2017, I gave a short presentation to the directors of the Arts Practice PhD programme at The University of Limerick. Micheál Ó Súilleabháin<sup>14</sup> (founder of The Irish World Academy) was in attendance and he asked me what it meant for me to be a participant on the programme after all of this time being away from my practice. I told him, ‘I feel like I’m finally home’.

### **Arts Practice Research**

Although there are other terms used in the field such as practice-led research, practice-based research, and arts based research, for the purpose of this research I refer to arts practice research as best reflecting the approach to my investigation. Nithikul Nimkulrat makes the distinction between what is practice-based and practice-led:

Practice in practice-based research can be carried out freely for its own sake in order to produce artefacts. This is fairly similar to the general conception of art/design practice. On the contrary, practice in practice-led research is conscious exploration with the knowledge involved in the making of artefacts (Nimkulrat 2007, p.2).

Nimkulrat distinguishes between the role of the practitioner as central to a practice-based model, with a clear distinction between the two roles. In practice-based research, the focus is on the practice and this is applied to the practitioner, who is free to create art work without constriction. In the case of practice-led research, the roles of the practitioner and the researcher have equal status, where the research becomes an integral part of the practice. Indeed, McNiff (2008) provides a broad definition of art-based research as one that,

...can be defined as the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies (McNiff 2008, p. 29).

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<sup>14</sup> Micheál Ó Súilleabháin was a pianist, composer, recording artist and academic, he held the Professorship of Music at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance which he founded at the University of Limerick in 1994.

Finding ways to examine and understand experience in artistic process has been a challenge for researchers in this field. The traditional concept of separating theory from practice in arts practice mirrors the trend across a range of disciplines in academia, where the use of practice has become the main tool for research (Candlin 2000). Indeed, Smith & Dean (2009) refer to the 'problematic nature between creative practice and research', and underpinning this is the 'philosophical quandary as to what constitutes 'knowledge' (Smith & Dean 2009, p.2)

It has been a challenging road towards acceptance of practice as research in the arts, with fundamental questions arising in the debate surrounding the acceptance of Arts Practice Research, taking into consideration what 'competencies could be included in practice-based work' (U.K., Council for Graduate Education 1997). What emanates from this UK report is a strong conviction that the work submitted for evaluation on a PhD programme '...must make a recognizable and original contribution to knowledge and understanding in the field' (p.11). In fact, in order for doctoral submissions to meet this requirement, the research must include 'a substantial contextualization of the creative work' (p.14). The report claims that, by keeping within these parameters, the evaluation of the work is somehow clarified in terms of its scholarship, as well as giving clear markers in terms of the originality and the location of the work.

A further report from Nelson & Andrews (2008) examines the rules and regulations regarding 'Practice as Research' in the performing arts, pointing out that writing is only one practice, whilst examining a research question in the arts i.e. examining new ideas, insights and knowledge in Arts Practice research using a range of practices, can achieve the same outcome as traditional PhDs. The emphasis in the Nelson & Andrews report is on arts practice research making a contribution to knowledge or 'affording new insights'. This does not conflict with the more traditional doctoral research framework found in most universities. The report also includes non-text based research as being valid in arts practice research, which is at the heart of Arts Practice PhDs.

One of the suppositions relating to the earlier models of arts practice is that a substantial amount of writing/theory accompanies the work in order for it to contribute to knowledge. In my experience of recording and documenting what took place in the two required performances for this current PhD, the writing part was an important element in the reflections and findings which were revealed in the inquiry. Writing is one form of articulating knowledge, but not necessarily the most suitable or the most comprehensive.

From my own experience, the performances themselves in their own right constitute knowledge. This means that, even with a variety of research tools, and systematic examination of artistic process that enables the better understanding of practice-based research, there is that knowledge that can be pointed out at most which exists in the realm of the work itself, with no requirement for further explication. It is embedded –for example, in the experience of live and indeterminate performance – where insights and knowledge that are fleeting and emergent are understood by the performers within the context of the live collaborative process but which cannot be documented or verified in any traditional method of verification.

Candlin (2000) describes Arts Practice and Academia as having been ‘institutionally separated’. In her working paper, *Art and Design*, she speaks about the anxiety experienced by students, supervisors, teachers, and institutions regarding the issues of practice research, particularly relating to boundaries in disciplines and academic expertise. She argues that the ‘changing values’ in research should lead to greater openness and, for her, it is an ‘opportunity to critically reappraise academic territory’ (Candlin 2000, p.5). What has brought on some of the anxiety is fear of the unknown and the changes of habit and traditions in academia. There is nothing unknown, relatively, about arts practice or doctoral research, but what is and has been regarded as new territory is how practice and theory are being placed side by side in the qualitative research carried out by arts practitioners.

The problem lies, not in the definition of ‘practice’, but in the definition of theory as applied in arts practice. However, if theory is only about the speculative, logocentric discourse, and excludes experiential, reflexive, and contemplative discourse, then we will never arrive at a point where practice is accepted as a form of knowledge. As more and more arts practice studies come on stream which examine practice as the main component of their research and use a wider variety of methodologies, the greater the potential for consolidating a position of practice as theory capable of producing knowledge and accepted as producing knowledge.

In the refinement of practice as research in the performing arts, the test seems to be in how to measure, assess, and evaluate competence in this field. Nelson (2013) put it succinctly:

The critical skills in PaR [practice as research] are not so much collecting, gathering and storing details and experiences but rather deep reflections, synthesis and a dogged ability to navigate the practice led ideas and activities through complex, epistemological terrain’ (Nelson 2013, p. 90).

Nelson argues that, in establishing this kind of research practice as credible and ground breaking, new models need to be created which can communicate the relationship between theory and practice. He believes that, the more stringent the type of methods of research employed by the student, the greater the insight and understanding regarding where to locate practice in relation to theory.

There is no doubt that we will understand arts practice by being able to articulate the something about the performative nature of the processes and content and the different perspectives pertaining to our work. Even if the depth and scope of arts practice analysis is rigorous and structured, ‘issues are less well defined – they may be multiple, diffuse and broad in scope’ (Berridge 2007, p.4). This leads to a state of flux where the processes can remain unwieldy and difficult to describe in writing. In an essay on ‘Doctoralness’ (2004), Nelson wonders if the problem with writing about the arts is not with the text-based strand itself in arts practice but that ‘the problem of defining the research for the candidate is the problem of defining the exegesis’, where any attempt to define the exegesis results in a complex interplay of social, cultural, political, and personal influences. The interpretation of an artistic performance in writing is core to Arts Practice research, where the artist takes on a number of roles that involve ‘viewing the artist as a researcher, and the artist/critic as a scholar who comments on the value of the artistic process as the production of knowledge’ (Barrett & Bolt 2010, p.135). In adopting those roles, the artist may be more qualified and more grounded in defining the exegesis, as outlined by Nelson, and may become skilled at measuring the experience and outcomes achieved in creating and performing a new work. Here, the artist as researcher may invent new measures in qualifying and describing performance in the research process.

At Monash University,<sup>15</sup> where Nelson taught, what was considered as the conventional premise of doctoral research was the contribution to knowledge. However, Nelson considered this as relatively meaningless in arts practice research since the outcomes did not necessarily yield a result, or ‘new knowledge’. The new premise on which the research proceeded in Monash, thereafter, was based on the idea that the work in Arts Practice had to offer ‘a cultural contribution of substantial significance’. This was a more fitting goal for PhD students in Arts Practice, according to Nelson. Perhaps this view of offering a ‘cultural

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<sup>15</sup> Monash University is a public research university based in Melbourne, Australia.

contribution' does not go far enough and only strengthens the case for a paradigm that is logocentric. However, Nelson foresaw a new type of pressure:

The work (or conceptual background) has to live on the page. It has to come to life again in order to appear as a significant cultural contribution and hence the writing cannot disappoint the high charter of the creative work. The creative material is in constant rebirthing through the text that sits beside it (Nelson 2004, p.3).

However, I believe it is possible to critically engage with the project, both in writing and through practice.

Perhaps the test for researchers in arts practice is to find ways of critically engaging with the writing part in order to find new ways of critiquing their thoughts and, in so doing, bring new testimony to the nature of how work is performed and how it can be captured, displayed, and positioned in thought and word, insofar as that is possible. Granted, it is not an easy task, given the nature of live performance and its elusive qualities:

...arts-based researchers are after truths and not truth (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). By producing a multiplicity of meanings, ABR [Arts-based research] has the potential to promote deep engagement, critical thinking, and reflection, all of which contribute to the ultimate impact and thus usefulness of the work (Leavy 2015, pp. 276-277)

The 'deep engagement' in my research is the form of discourse, which engages with the work experientially, and not speculatively. Patricia Leavy points to the range of discourse and 'deep engagement' that can take place among artists in search of knowledge within the process, both implicit and explicit. Apart from the artists, there is also consideration of the audience, their assessment and feedback on performance, and how it contributes to assessment in arts practice. The part played by audience has had significant impact on this inquiry in regard to what they understood and experienced in the performances. Leavy suggests that, as with other evaluative criteria in arts-based research, it is difficult to 'gauge audience response' (Leavy 2000, p. 276), and that it should be examined only on a 'case-by-case basis'. Thus, there is no generic response possible from audience. I have witnessed the most valuable insights and profound understanding of the process from the audience in this current investigation, with each member of the audience having her/his own interpretation of what they experienced. The interactions, the experience, the interpretations are completely subjective and have no other basis beyond that. However, documenting their written and oral responses to the performances is evidence that their knowledge of what they experience is not dependent on some objectifiable norms of how we might gauge audience response.



According to Barrett and Bolt, ‘The interplay of ideas from disparate areas of knowledge in arts research creates conditions for the emergence of new analogies, metaphors and models for understanding objects of enquiry’ (Barrett & Bolt 2010, p.7). Therefore, the dimensions for this kind of research may extend beyond the artistic domain. I am encouraged by Barrett and Bolt’s argument that the task of research is more than the generation of ‘appropriate discourses to establish the value of their activities as research’ (*Ibid.*, p.7). They also propose that the arts practice researcher take an interest ‘in the deployment and circulation of artistic outcomes beyond the studio...expanding what is commonly understood as research’. In multiple collaborations that are documented in arts practice research, each one brings additional insights in the corpus of data collected and analysed, and this is my aspiration for my investigation. Laermans (2012) points out that what brings artists in collaboration ‘beyond the studio’ to ‘unchartered terrain’ ‘...is the other’s otherness that one co-stimulates through artistic cooperation’. What Laerman alludes to is that artistic exchange brings artists, in collaboration, to a place of intense engagement, and he cites Kruschkova, who describes the action of ‘thinking collaboratively’ as ‘weakness’, in this case meaning preference, ‘for the potentiality of the other and otherness’ (Laerman 2012, p.97).

As I embarked on my own research, what emerged related to a number of factors: my comprehension of the literature relating to the research, ‘analysing’ the process for the two performances and how they related to theoretical underpinnings, and how best to collate and comprehend the data – discussions/conversations, interviews, diaries and reflexive analysis.

## **Methodology**

The methods I used in my research allowed me as performer/researcher to document the discursive and performative parts of the experience with a variety of tools, which have been developed and honed over the past thirty years. The employment of qualitative methods/strategies, auto-ethnography, and narrative techniques including, interviews, diaries, an examination of digital recordings of my work, as well as reflective and reflexive analysis were invaluable sources of data along this journey. I employed the above techniques in order for me to find the flow of this inquiry. Cole and Knowles (2000) sum it up as follows:

Whether it is through poetry, prose, movement, drama, mime, meditation, painting, drawing, sculpture or any other non-traditional linguistic or non-linguistic form the important thing is to find a way or ways that will allow us to follow the natural internal flow of our inquiry (Cole and Knowles 2000, p. 66).

Some techniques proved central to the investigation, while other methods proved less useful in the data collecting process, as seen below.

### ***Auto-ethnography***

Auto-ethnography is ‘one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist’ (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011, p.1). However, in addition to telling and writing about individual experiences, ‘auto-ethnographers are often required by social science publishing conventions to analyse these experiences’ (*Ibid*). Analysis and a deepening of understanding performance in a particular context is what separates auto-ethnography from autobiography. Chang (2008) views auto-ethnography as ethnography which, instead of being about the experience of others, is about the researcher’s analysis of her/his personal experience. For Chang, the collecting and documenting of personal data is useful for the researcher, and the self-reflection which accompanies the analysis of the data reveals much about the culture and values of the researcher. It assists in defining the context for the researcher and, in so doing, is, not only a record of activities, feelings, memories and thoughts of a person’s experience, but contextual evidence of the self-reflective process taking place.

Denzin (2003) puts it succinctly when he describes the role of the auto-ethnographer: ‘The auto-ethnographer inscribes in the experiences of a historical moment, universalizing these experiences in their singular effects on a particular life’ (Denzin 2003, p.234). Alexander (2005) goes one step further in remarking that auto-ethnography is not simply about examining the self through performance but ‘seeing the self, see the self through and as the other’ (p. 309). This is what gives credence and an element of objectivity to the observation and examination of an individual’s creative work that is a critique and social commentary as research practitioner on an observable self in performance but looking on from a distance. McIlveen, commenting on the limitations of auto-ethnography, states that ‘the narrative analysis has no rightful purchase on generalisability’ (McIlveen 2008, p.5). He believes that the researcher and reader of auto-ethnography should be aware of the limitations of the researcher’s short-comings regarding self-knowledge; however, in that acknowledgement some positives spring to life.

Auto-ethnography in this research was a valuable tool in finding a pathway to my understanding of the research process itself and it was a unique way for me to begin to put

my 'self', as an artist, at the centre of this investigation. One of the first experiences I encountered at the outset was to experiment with new approaches to my work by observing how I created new work, how I compose. It was something I had never thought about before but was initiated by my endeavouring to deconstruct what the different stages in this process are. It was ground-breaking because I realised that I would often come with new motifs and ideas on the piano, develop them a little, and then discard them without keeping a record of them. In one respect, it was a simple observation, but writing it down and looking at it through my own lens, my experience, it led me to believe that I should alter this process if I wanted to experiment and find new avenues for my practice. According to McIlveen, in a 'single case' of narrative inquiry, we can understand something profound from a case study which can 'act as a stimulus to open new intellectual vistas for the reader through a uniquely personal meaning and empathy' (McIlveen 2008, p.16). I acknowledge also that there are short-comings and that subjective judgements are also part and parcel of the limitations of Arts Practice research. However, by acknowledging those limitations and by being aware of them, the researcher somehow has the possibility to validate findings within the realm of qualitative research.

### ***Keeping a journal***

Keeping a journal, especially in the early stages of my research, also enabled me to learn from my experiences as a composer, an encounter with my creative self that had never occurred to me before. It was a liberating experience to look at myself in the mirror and ask what it means to me to be an artist, a composer. According to Ellis, what journal writing in research gives is a 'meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience' (Ellis 2010, p.2), which helps in developing our critical thinking through consistent practice at keeping a journal. Another advantage of keeping a journal is that the external reader is allowed into the world of the researcher and the researcher has the added advantage of using the journal reflections to validate the methodologies used alongside journaling, especially if the researcher can take a step back and develop the capacity to examine the self while observing the self. I employed this technique in my research and found it useful to find more than one voice, a reflexive voice with which to articulate my experience.

## *Narrative Enquiry*

According to Dewey's theory on Art as Experience (1934), 'an experience is a product...of continuous and cumulative interaction of an organic self with the world' (Dewey 1934, p. 220). To document how an 'organic self' interacts with the world is a challenging task. Referring to narrative inquiry, in particular, as means of documenting our experience Clandinin and Connolly state that 'narrative inquiry is a part of narrative experience' (Clandinin and Connolly 2002, p.19), and that experience happens narratively. Clandinin and Connolly recognise experience as the point of departure for both the methodology and inquiry, and both are informed and understood in and through the theoretical literature. Further on, Clandinin and Connolly state, '...the contribution of a narrative inquiry is more often intended to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic than it is to yield a set of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to knowledge in the field' (p.42). Individuals are not isolated human beings, according to Clandinin & Connolly, but are continuously and organically linked to a social context which identifies their experience in a given moment in time. It is ever changing. Thus, where traditional empirical approaches to research can capture certain types of data there are often hidden elements of data which are not revealed using empirical methods due to their nature. These hidden elements of data are not readily observable or unaccountable or quantifiable. Therefore, empirical methods of collecting data do not provide a comprehensive methodology which can collect all of the data and such is the case with arts practice research.

Webster and Mertova (state that narrative research 'does not claim to represent the exact 'truth', but rather aims for 'verisimilitude' – that the results have the appearance of truth or reality' (Webster and Mertova 2007, p, 4). I think scholars often confuse truth with the repeatability or predictability of a phenomenon or with something that needs 'verification'. The arts offers an expression of experience in life and, therefore, contains within it a truth based on the appearance of what is real which does not require verification in the way that is required, for example, in scientific methodology. Qualitative research of this kind is often open-ended and does not necessarily yield conclusions. Narrative inquiry is a generic term which covers a variety of tools useful such as stories, autobiography, journals, field notes, letters, conversations, interviews, family stories, photos and life experience itself. The recorded conversations and discussions in both collaborations form much of the data used to analyse the creative process in this enquiry. I do not think it would have been possible to arrive at such a connected understanding and clarity of our collaborative process, had it not

been for the conscientious and collective endeavour on all our parts to consider the myriad of possibilities available as we searched for the something ‘new’ in our making of each piece. The appendices in this current thesis provide a comprehensive document of what was discussed in the preparations for both performance. It reveals a wealth of information and knowledge about how we related as artists, what we shared of our experiences, and how we brought forward the vision for both pieces. As Hollingsworth & Dybdahl state:

Most narrative inquiries involve some sort of conversation – from structured interviews to unstructured conversation – and some form of systematic analysis...Our conception of narrative was grounded in Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of learning, which suggest that personally meaningful knowledge is socially constructed through shared understanding (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl 2007, p. 176).

Clandinin and Roseik, locating narrative research in Deweyan experience, state that ‘experience is the fundamental ontological category from which all inquiry – narrative or otherwise – proceeds’ (Clandinin and Roseik 2007, p. 38). I believe that, at the heart of this experience, is an exploration of our artistic disposition towards the ‘other’ – listening to the artistic exchanges of each one as a fundamental basis for building the work. The recording and documentation of these conversations formed a central and strategic focus in this narrative inquiry and in comprehending the nature of our process as collaborating artists/participants/researchers.

### *A reflexive voice*

Whilst writing the narrative for the two performances from the audio-visual recordings, I realised that another ‘voice’ would be useful to clarify something more about what arrives in the performance space in moments of creativity when a germ of an idea begins to present itself. To attempt to describe what is happening in those moments seemed important in the overall analysis. The reflexive commentary that accompanies some of the narrative descriptions in Chapters 3 and 4 was formative in terms of finding a layer of meaning and a language to point towards the inner knowledge that is often embedded in performance and which is considered as knowledge itself, a knowledge beyond the ambit of quantitative data gathering techniques. According to Hertz (1996, p.5), ‘the concept of reflexivity emerged out of a shift in our understanding of data and its collection’. Data collection is, not simply based on “facts” and “truths”, but yields to interpretations of experiences as data. Reflexive writing is a deeper, self-critical practice, that examines underlying assumptions and attitudes and how this impacts on our research. The self, interpreting the self, as its own subject, is a

reflexive voice and is a key strategy available to the practitioner as researcher. It was a key strategy for me in endeavouring to make sense of the interactions among the performers during the live performance and to extract the fundamental elements of our collaboration. The deployment of a reflexive voice enabled me to search for answers to those more challenging questions about what is happening in collaboration, to find some answers or insights that are not readily observable in the overall experience.

Hertz (1997) said the role of the ethnographer is, not only to actively engage in the construction of interpretations of experiences, but also to question how those interpretations evolved. Documenting my research through a limited number of semi-structured interviews, recordings of conversations during the process, audience feedback, alongside the reflexive writing confirms the ‘authenticity of research data collected using this method’ (Lamb 2013, p.90). In the context of arts practice, steps are taken by the researcher that underpin the inquiry and which leads to a more authentic ‘result’. By virtue of its own qualitative rigour, the knowledge acquired is tested through the reflections and interpretation of experiences and the connectivity with other relevant concepts which enable the data to be understood.

Much of the narrative inquiry for my research centred around the discussions and discourse that took place for the first performance with Steve, and then with Mary and Steve in the preparations for the second performance. Very early on in the process, it became apparent that the contributions by the other artists in the discourse were extremely valuable to this project. As the lead in this research, it was possible for me to enter into this discourse where we shared deeply about experiences as artists and, at the same time, I was able to steer the discussions towards the research questions about artistic collaboration and improvisation. Thus, choosing narrative enquiry as a method for this research was far reaching because of the insights and discoveries that became apparent during the course of the work.

### ***Interviews***

In qualitative research, interviews are one of the most useful methods of producing and collecting data. In order to forge a link with my practice from the 1980s and 1990s, I had the opportunity to converse with a number of people, which was constructive in the earlier part of the investigation. The interviews I conducted were semi-structured, with scope for the interviewees to elaborate on points of interest.

The first interviewee was Paul Johnson (Appendix 15). Paul is a dance artist and choreographer with whom I collaborated on a number of projects over a 10-year period. Paul was CEO of Dance Ireland until he stepped down in April 2019. The reason for inviting Paul to be interviewed was to reflect on our experience of working together in the past and to hear what Paul had to say about this experience, both from a historical and personal perspective. In our interview, Paul reminded me of how we collaborated together as choreographer and composer and how he developed his ideas in collaboration with me. This led to other questions about the nature of our own multi-disciplinary collaborations and how, regarding contemporary dance collaborations in Ireland during the 1980s and 1990s, the format of working alongside each other as choreographers and composers was standard practice. There was little attempt to challenge the multi-disciplinary process of working together during this period. It was very useful and positive to engage with Paul about how our practice had evolved, to reflect on the value of this as a composer and to forge new pathways for my practice.

The second interviewee was Dr. Mary Nunan. Mary was a dance artist in the 1980s with *Dublin Contemporary Dance Theatre*, and our paths had crossed as I had worked with Robert and Loretta who were also dance artists with *Dublin Contemporary Dance Theatre*. Mary was head of the M.A. programme in Contemporary Dance Performance at The University of Limerick until 2016. We both recalled what it was like for contemporary dance in Ireland during the 1980s (Appendix 21). My interest in interviewing Mary was because she had been involved in many different types of artistic collaborations and, as such, would have valuable insights into collaborative practice. She spoke at length about her own collaborations and what types of encounter with other artists worked for her in her practice. These encounters were never categorized, or labelled as multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary in scope. On reflection, this interview transformed the direction of my research at an early stage because I realised that artists, like Mary Nunan were more inclined to characterise their working relationships with other artists as collaborative and the concept of working in an inter-disciplinary capacity was not her main point of reference when setting out to produce a new piece. I understood immediately after this interview that a wider research project based on collaborative engagement in artistic practice seemed to be where the research was heading and I had the opportunity, following this interview, to re-scope and re-evaluate the investigation.

My final interview was with Steve Boyland (Appendix 16). It outlines his practice as an artist and how he came to be interested in experimentation as a voice artist. As Steve was involved in collaborating on both performances, it was essential to delve further into his background to be aware of his musical influences and how he became involved in improvisation.

One approach to interviewing is ‘responsive interviewing’ (Rubin and Rubin 2012). This is an approach to in-depth interviewing which involves the researcher responding to certain questions which result in asking further questions of the interviewee. Rubin and Rubin see the relationship with the interviewee as one of partnership rather than treating the respondents as ‘objects of research’ (Rubin and Rubin 2005, p.xv). By probing the respondent with further questions which arise through the interview, it helps to ‘elicit detail’ perhaps more than the structured model which begins with a set of pre-determined questions. By responding in this way, there is often a deeper engagement between the two parties. This model of questioning assisted me since it prompted ideas during the interviews about useful points of departure in this research that I may not have considered without the interview process. Re-reading the data from interviews was indispensable in recognising that, what is articulated from someone else’s practice, must be read without assumptions from one’s own artistic experience. It was enriching to engage with artists who have reflected deeply on their own practice and who shared some very key moments of discovery from their own experience with me.

### ***The Discourse***

Clandinlin and Roseik (2007), locating narrative research in Deweyan experience, state that ‘experience is the fundamental ontological category from which all inquiry – narrative or otherwise – proceeds’ (Clandinlin and Roseik 2007, p. 38). I believe that, at the heart of this experience, is an exploration of our artistic disposition towards the ‘other’ – listening to the artistic exchanges of each one as a fundamental basis for building the work. I developed a sensitivity to listening during the discussions and it readily translated into the performances as a measure for how we might find a reciprocal exchange in sound and movement, by listening intently to each other’s ‘voice’, and this was core to the methodology I employed. The recording and documentation of these discussions and exchanges formed a central and strategic focus of this narrative inquiry and assisted immeasurably in comprehending the nature of our process as collaborating artists/participants/researchers.



What I began to realise was that, apart from the discussions, conversations, and meetings to bring the work forward, what I identified as the ‘artistic experience’ in the process, was also part of the discourse. It is ‘experiential discourse’, a ‘shared experiential discourse’, an all-embracing kind of discourse that lies outside the realm of thoughts and words, sound or image, but simply is unconscious knowledge which exists beyond form. It is a collective experience of discourse which leads to kind of ‘knowing’ embedded in the work. McIsaacs, in Fenwick (2006), harps back to experiential ways of knowing as part of an ancient concept.

Indigenous ways of knowing, for example, have maintained that spirit, mind and body are not separated in experience, that learning is more focused on being than doing, and that experiential knowledge is produced within the collective, not the individual mind. (McIsaacs 2000, p.89).

In the same way, our ‘shared experiential discourse’ is knowledge that arises and is produced out of the collective experience of being.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter opened with a brief history of my artistic journey and why I chose the Arts Practice PhD programme at the University of Limerick. It then followed with a presentation of arts practice research methodologies. I set out the tools designated in this qualitative research project that would assist the investigation - auto-ethnography and narrative inquiry – collecting data on reflections of my experience and the experiences of the other collaborators in the, discussions, interviews and conversations that form part of the overall discourse and an analysis of the two performances. This included an explanation of ‘shared experiential discourse’ which embraces the kind of knowledge in artistic practice that exists outside of our reach but which is embedded within the process of our collaboration.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **A Review of the literature in context**

#### **Introduction**

The first part of Chapter 2 presents the relevant literature (theory and methodology) and connects the chosen concepts and methods in relation to the research. It centres on what the term ‘collaboration’ means in different contexts and how it is understood in the light of collaborations in arts practice. This is followed by a description of a range of different categories of disciplinarity and how they are beneficial in clarifying different types of practice. The term ‘pre-disciplinary’ is outlined as a space which is essentially ‘constructed’ to find the common ground among the participants, *before* any investigation of the disciplinary elements which may follow on in the creative process. There is an account of how the creative process is interpreted in this enquiry and the kinds of knowledge that emanate from this space. There is also a section on the concepts which are significant in comprehending the dynamics of the process. The second part examines the term ‘improvisation’ and, in particular, ‘free’ improvisation, which applies directly to the two performances presented in this enquiry. It takes into account notions of an ‘embodied self’ relating to this process and how this informs the making of our work. What unfolds is underpinned by the idea that collaboration is predominantly a shared and experiential discourse.

#### **Collaboration**

##### ***Defining Collaboration***

A dictionary definition of ‘collaboration’ describes the process as working jointly with others, especially in an intellectual endeavour (Merriam-Webster 2018). Barbour (2008) states that ‘collaboration is generally understood to be the acts and processes of two or more people working together to create or achieve the same thing’ (Barbour 2007, p.51). Although these are simple definitions, research into artistic collaboration by Barbour and others, such as Sawyer (2004) and Taylor (2016), point to the idea that collaborations are not always unproblematic. Indeed, Taylor argues that ‘collaboration is used indiscriminately to describe a great variety of different working relationships’ (Taylor 2016, p.564) and adds that this

may not be useful in understanding the collaborative relationships which composers develop with other artists. Dobson (2009) points to what she perceives as the different types of artistic relationships to which the term ‘collaboration’ is applied and which may be useful in this investigation in beginning to unravel what can be understood about the term in this research.

When discussing collaboration we could be talking about anything from independent parallel working, characterised most extremely by Cage and Cunningham’s work, by cooperation where each member of a group performs a distinct role independently, or a much more involved approach perhaps seen when musicians improvise and perform Jazz (Dobson 2009, p. 6).

A ‘much more involved’ approach identifies the collaborative endeavour which I set out to encounter and explore in this investigation and which requires what Papastergiadis (2000) describes as ‘mutual understanding, shared languages, common goals and the ability to negotiate across differences (Papastergiadis 2000, p.1). Crook notes the interpersonal exchanges of collaborators as ‘constructing shared meaning’ (Crook 2000, p.166) and Moran and John-Steiner describe it as creating a ‘shared vision of something new and useful’ (John-Steiner 2004, p.11). Fontaine and Hunter describe the outcomes in collaboration as, ‘...shared creation of new meanings’ (Fontaine & Hunter 2006, p.xxv, in Taylor 2016). The ‘new meanings’ are not fixed because the process is always emerging and this idea of what is ‘emergent’ underpins the type of collaboration I want to examine in relation to the making of new work in function of this research. Sawyer, in his research on improvised jazz, emphasises that ‘shared understanding’ is core to how we create new work in collaboration (Sawyer 2003a, 2006). The adjectives used to describe collaboration – ‘unfixed’, ‘emergent’, ‘shared understanding’, ‘creating new meaning’ – find their way into all aspects of this process. Artistic collaboration is a complex activity and problems arise with simple descriptions and definitions. As such, the different ways of describing and categorising collaborations is a useful starting-point.

### **Categories of collaboration**

Apart from the different descriptions of collaboration above, there are categories that outline the types of collaborative arrangement engaged in by artists. The following presentation of categories will assist in my examination of what happens in collaboration across a variety of artistic disciplines.

## *Discipline*

In its most simplest form, a discipline is a field of study or a body of knowledge that is the object of scholarly attention. To gain a useful description of the term, we may turn to Klein:

The term discipline signifies the tools, methods, procedures, exempla, concepts, and theories that account coherently for a set of objects or subjects. Over time they are shaped and reshaped by external contingencies and internal intellectual demands. In this manner a discipline comes to organize and concentrate experience into a particular “world view” (Klein 1990, p.104).

In addition, a discipline embodies a set of knowledge distinctions and research practices used by academics to formulate and address specific problems (Abbott, 2004). It typically has a departmental structure and status in universities; provides a basis for scholarly training, identity and a job market for new doctorates; and may be an area of application in practice.

Massey describes the limitations of disciplines and how they are structured:

We continue to define disciplines by exclusion rather than by interrelation: we assume there are areas beyond a discipline’s purview. And we define those areas in terms of subject matter rather than what one might term angle of approach (Massey 1999, p.7).

Turner, commenting on the limitations of disciplines and recommending inter-disciplinarity as an alternative, states that, despite apparent advantages of disciplines, they are also problematic. Limitations could be in the form of exclusion which produces an unpopulated space ‘...often involving practical problems, that ‘belong’ to no discipline and cannot be easily addressed by any of them’ (Turner 2010, p.19, in Frodeman, Klein, Pacheco). From the 1980s onwards, disciplines have given way to ‘blurred genres’. Geertz (1980) saw the rigid boundaries between disciplines as slowly breaking down, where we find more fluidity and permeability. What Geertz understood in the 1980s is echoed by Klein in the 1990s, when she says that ‘...the permeation of disciplines is a major aspect of knowledge production’ (Klein 1993, p.186). According to McMullen, the practice of improvisation can be a ‘direct repudiation of an epistemology of boundaries’, offering instead an acknowledgement of blur (McMullen 2016, p. 15).

With respect to music and dance as disciplines and central to this discussion is where does the music end and the dance begin? McMains & Thomas state there is an integral link between music and dance but that ‘the disparate languages of the two disciplines rarely facilitate analysis of their interaction’ (McMains & Thomas 2013, p.198). McMains and

Thomas concur with what Barbara White and other scholars postulate, about how we understand the relationship between music and dance:

...look past the binary fallacy of *whether* the elements are coordinated to observing *where* it is that they inevitably meet—whether the point of contact falls at the level of gesture, texture, rhythm, phrasing, formal design, register, contour, melody, or harmony, and so on—and to consider more fully what happens in that fleeting moment where music and movement reflect each other (McMains & Thomas 2013, p.73).

Both artistic disciplines are structured in and through ‘space’ and ‘time’, with many similar characteristics – rhythm, tempo, gesture, expression etc. There is much overlap between music and dance and to this extent the disciplinary lines are blurred. This is an important point to note in unravelling the frontiers of collaboration and what might be revealed in this investigation.

### ***Intra-disciplinarity***

The term intra-disciplinarity, although working within the scope of a single discipline, or between artists working within the same discipline, still requires further qualification.

In intra-disciplinary collaborative research the researchers are from the same discipline and collaborate out of a shared interest or because they bring complementary skills such as, combining theory and practice backgrounds, having different genre or style expertise that enable comparative studies, and so on (Mafe & Brown 2006, p. 3).

An intra-disciplinary approach in arts practice draws from different areas of practice in a single discipline, which may extend beyond the scope of one individual’s practice, thus enabling comparisons, sharing of knowledge, and expertise, all of which enhance the collaboration.

### ***Multi-disciplinarity***

‘In the OECD classification, multi-disciplinarity was defined as an approach that juxtaposes disciplines. Juxtaposition fosters wider knowledge, information, and methods’ (Klein 2010, p.2). As disciplines are not integrated and remain distinct and their identity is largely unchanged, Klein states that multi-disciplinarity is ‘essentially additive, not integrative’. As such, nothing is transformed and because of this the relationship between and among disciplines is ‘limited and transitory’ (Klein 1990, p.56). Therefore, the principal

characteristic is that multi-disciplinary work in artistic practice stays within its own boundaries.

### ***Inter-disciplinarity***

From the outset of my research, I was interested in the concept of inter-disciplinarity. The concept of inter-disciplinarity relies on the existence of disciplines (Klein 1996; Turner 2006). Indeed, Mafe & Brown (2006, p.4) state that, when different disciplines are involved in a collaborative project, there can be a range of different approaches:

*Multi* means ‘many.’ In multidisciplinary research many disciplines contribute their piece to solving the problem... *Inter* means ‘between’ or ‘among.’ In interdisciplinary research, each contributor... talks from his or her expertise, so there is a conversation... between and among disciplines... (Crabtree 1994, pp. xiii-xiv).

Robert Frodeman in the opening chapter of *The Oxford Handbook of Inter-disciplinarity* states that inter-disciplinarity is ‘most commonly used as a portmanteau word for all the more-than-disciplinary approaches to knowledge’ (Frodeman 2017, p.4), with Hübenthal (1994) stating that some problems are too complex to be solved with ‘...the subject-knowledge of a single discipline’ (Hübenthal 1994, p.727). Hunter states that ‘interdisciplinarity happens when we commit to staying in the in-between, to staying in process. It is about not-knowing as a precondition for encountering matter/material, about not aiming at knowledge but at ways of knowing as practices of becoming’ (Hunter 2015, p.1). According to Parker (in Irwin, 2005), ‘we are surrounded by a fringe of the unknown, an ineffable but insistent existential reality that is larger than ourselves’ (Parker 1996, p.103). For Parker, it is in those ‘unsettled’ parts of our knowledge and experience, those ineffable and indefinable points that the ‘transformative activity’ of knowing takes place. This is one essential element of interdisciplinary in arts practice.

In comparing the fundamental difference between multi-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity, Klein states: ‘When integration and interaction become proactive, the line between multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary is crossed’ (Klein 2010, p.5). Newell (1998) and Menand (2001) concur that inter-disciplinarity depends on an understanding of disciplines having their own specific area of inquiry in order to completely comprehend the nature and development of inter-disciplinarity.

In fact, ‘We understand interdisciplinarity as both a process and a practice by which a set of purposive arrangements and a sense of community are established and ultimately integrates

ideas with others to form an end product' (Rhoten, O'Connor, & Hackett, 2009, p. 87). This description of inter-disciplinarity from the social sciences encapsulates the essence of the process, whereby building community with other artists produces an outcome that would not have been imagined by one person on his or her own. Klein goes further in *A Taxonomy Of Interdisciplinarity* (2010) and points to a new genus *Interdisciplinarity* 'propelled by new species of integration, collaboration, complexity, critique and problem solving' (Klein 2010, p. 1). Further to this, Moran, regarding inter-disciplinarity, states: 'I want to suggest, along with Roland Barthes, that interdisciplinarity is always transformative in some way, producing new forms of knowledge in its engagement with discrete disciplines' (Moran 2010, p.16). Thus, what an inter-disciplinary study produces as new forms of knowledge, according to Barthes, is 'a new object that belongs to no one' (Barthes 1981, p.72).

Our process, although transformative, is challenged by how to make sense of those transformations when it does not always have the language to express the nature and dynamics of that interdisciplinary process. In that regard, Stone states that '...the central barrier to effective interdisciplinary collaboration boils down to language, to our inability to communicate concepts, theories, and methods across disciplines in interdisciplinary contexts (Stone 2013, p. 87)

### ***Trans-disciplinarity***

Davis distinguishes between inter-disciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity and makes the following point:

In interdisciplinary pursuits disciplines collaborate...However, these interacting disciplines ultimately retain their identities as isolated from each other. Transdisciplinary projects also have an agenda to explore common practices among disciplines, but with a much more holistic approach. (Davis 2005, in Augsburg 2010, p.140)

With *Trans* meaning 'across' or 'beyond.

There are complex layers of engagement in collaborative practice which do not seem to find their way into the literature relating to different disciplines in the arts (Augsburg 2010). For example, the multi-dimensional nature of collaboration reveals itself when it is possible for several practices (intra- multi-, inter-disciplinary) to be present in the same collaboration, at the same time. Not only are they present, but one practice can contain others and this signals the complexity in unravelling collaborative practice, especially in the area of live

performance and how different artists engage in the making of new work. Indeed, there is evidence of complex layers of engagement in both performances.

### **Collaborative Framework**

An interesting approach to categorising collaborations among composers and performers is provided by Hayden & Windsor, who identify three different categories of collaboration which I have found it useful in structuring the array of collaborations which abound in the arts and which relate to collaborative engagement. The categories they propose are directive, interactive, and collaborative. The first is hierarchical, relating to the traditional composer-performer relationship; the second remains hierarchical while offering a degree of negotiation, with the third involving a ‘collective decision-making process’ (Hayden & Windsor 2007, pp. 28-39), where there is no hierarchy and where, typically, the collaboration is based on a process on improvisation. What is pertinent to this current research is the third category, chiefly because of the ‘collective decision-making process’ and how artists make decisions together in an essentially non-hierarchical environment and because improvisation (relating to our preparation for the performances) can be established as part of this third category. On the one hand, the idea of making collective decisions in collaboration appears unproblematic when the relationships are harmonious and the participants have a common goal. However, there is the risk that one of the participants dominates the group which might upset the balance of the decision-making process. In Chapters 3 and 4, I discuss how the decision-making unfolds among the participants, both in the preparations and in the performances.

Jennifer Walshe outlines how she employs the term ‘new discipline’ to accommodate her choices of artistic collaborative practices: ‘The New Discipline...allows different compositions to be connected, to be viewed as differing in degrees rather than kind’ (Walshe 2016). Walshe’s framework is about the collective compositional approach ‘differing in degrees’, as equally as Taylor’s collaborative framework is a ‘continuum’. Dr. Mary Nunan<sup>16</sup> (choreographer) speaks about how she perceives collaboration both with other dancers and artists from other disciplines: *‘I suppose it’s a term [spectrum] we can use when we are trying to understand what is at play when you collaborate’* (Appendix 21). Despite

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<sup>16</sup> Dr. Mary Nunan is a dance artist, choreographer and writer. She was a member of the faculty of The Irish World Academy at the University of Limerick where she was responsible for coordinating the masters programme in choreography.



efforts to categorise collaborations, according to type or specific group, perhaps a more useful approach is to understand that every collaboration is essentially different. Therefore, the concept of spectrum, degree, and continuum take some account of the complexity of collaborative practice, in that it cannot so easily be divided up. This complexity is further compounded, in my opinion, by the discernible traces of different practices that can be readily found in various combinations in our work.

### **Pre-Disciplinarity**

By way of explication, before there is a disciplinary/inter-disciplinary exchange among artists, there is something which comes before that part in the exchange, at least in relation to the process in this current investigation. What is it that we share which lies behind or beneath our own disciplinary practice? We can share what dwells in common no matter what the discipline. What is in common in artistic practice are concepts of ‘space’ and ‘time’, ‘becoming’, ephemerality, participation (audience/performers/technicians), flux, etc., and these elements are enriched through our disciplinary and inter-disciplinary lens throughout the discourse.

Hence, my proposal in Chapter 5, which is outlined here in Chapter 2, that these concepts exist as part of our shared discourse and belong in the first instance to a ‘pre-disciplinary’ space. Through this lens of ‘pre-disciplinarity’, the foundations and the material for our creative process develops and unfolds within an interdisciplinary frame. By ‘pre-disciplinary’, I mean that desire, on all our parts, to investigate the process of ‘finding’ what is essential and core to our making of a new work, *before* we consider our identity as artists shaped by particular disciplines – music, choreography, and text. The discourse unravels to find the common ground that expresses something meaningful in the creative process, long before that disciplinary identity of the expression of our process ever comes into focus.

It might appear as an arbitrary choice to use the term ‘pre-disciplinary’ to denote a designated space as forming part of the initial stages of an artistic collaboration. It may add nothing more in comprehending how the inter-disciplinary, collaborative space emerges and is identified by the participants. For collaborators who do not seek out what is in common at first but proceed immediately to the disciplinary part of the process that is the choice of the participants involved. In postulating the idea of a ‘pre-disciplinary’ space, there is only the measure in this current research of what we observed, discussed, documented, experienced,

and intuited in our collaboration. Within the limits of this kind of practice, perhaps this term can be accommodated to provide another channel for our creative responses.

### **A note on the collaborative relationships in the present research**

Examining our roles in this collaboration came about quite organically. I opened up a conversation (Appendix 3), suggesting to Mary and Steve that we do not enter the space as a choreographer or a voice artist or as musician. Instead, we entered the collaboration firstly with the expectation of ‘wanting to express something together’ and this became an essential marker in the process. Steve added and Mary confirmed that this is where the artist resides. The artist beyond – even prior to those disciplines that we reach, that we operate within, that we choose to operate in – resides in a collective space, building the relationship with the other collaborators long before disciplinary considerations. John-Steiner (1997) makes the distinction between what she calls cooperative relationships and collaborative relationships. In the former, the collaborators share out the tasks, whereas in the latter the collaborators perceive ‘themselves as engaged in a joint task’ (John-Steiner 1997, p.13). In this process, we engaged in a task jointly together with a common purpose. Perhaps if we were collaborating outside the parameters of the PhD, then the dynamic of our relationships might have been quite different. When I re-read the transcripts from the discussions and remember what took place with Óscar, Steve, and Mary there is no apparent non-alignment of ideas in how the discussions and the preparations proceeded. Laermans (2012) points to the idea that sometimes in collaborative work different types of conflict can arise among the group that results in debates being inconclusive or differences in opinion ending up with something not being satisfactory in how the collaboration develops. What I observed is that we learned to reference each other in the discourse, which set the foundation for referencing each other in a different way throughout the performances. As such, we opened up a channel of communication, creating a new discursive space together which extended into the performance (Appendix 16).

The early meetings that took place to collaborate with Óscar (supervisor) on a piece entitled ‘Work in Progress’ (which is outlined in Chapter 3), was fortuitous. As collaborator, it was a different role to supervisor, but I understood it as putting into practice many of the concepts we discussed about the research and it was a smooth transition for both of us. Óscar had challenged me to think beyond whatever repertoire I had created in the past, in order to find a new vision for my work. During my many meetings with him, he made me acutely aware

of what I should try to achieve in my practice. For example, when we spoke about sound he asked me to consider that, with an improvisation, there should be no confusion in the choices we make in sound. He asked me to reflect on where those choices of sounds come from, where are the impulses that make one choose a particular sonic force over another. Throughout the investigation, Óscar was there to encourage, challenge, and steer me to explore new angles and new ways of experimenting with new work, which was invaluable.

Steve Boyland commented that there was something very specific about our collaboration. Firstly, it was the first time that he had used his own writing as the basis for a piece and that made it feel very special. Secondly, it was not just the relationship which for him felt very powerful and facilitated much creativity, but it was the lyricism that was present in the work which was deeply satisfying. Steve felt, regarding *Beginnings in the Dark*, that I enabled that lyricism to become an important component of the piece in the way that it unfolded. Parts of the voice, textures, tones, colours, that do not always get used by Steve in other projects were present in how the work emerged because of the context we created. My creative responses to Steve's vocal range inspired me to develop new lines of enquiry, new material that would not have been possible otherwise. In hindsight, the collaboration was novel and I was keen to make it work. It was about entrusting each other with all that we had to offer artistically both before and during the performance. The common denominator was that there was an intense desire to configure the work to meet the task of the research and that was a strong foundation in the collaborative dynamic. There were very few times in the course of the collaboration that we were not on the same wavelength. One such occasion was when Steve suggested we might find a way to incorporate the poetic texts as material for the second performance. My initial reaction was negative simply because we had used this material already in the first performance. However, I did not communicate any misgivings on my part to Steve. Perhaps I was inexperienced at navigating my way through this with Steve or felt that for the sake of the project that it would be better to go with his suggestion. Paradoxically, there was the risk that everything might appear too familiar which would disadvantage our improvisatory process, but there was the potential advantage that, by continuing on with Steve's poetic texts, we could experiment with them, de-construct them, and find new ways to present them. In the end, the use of the texts in the second performance pushed the boundaries and we presented them in a digital format that I would not have envisaged at the outset. I learned that collaboration requires taking risks with the other participants, to be open about ideas and opinions.

When Mary Wycherley entered into the collaboration with Steve and I for the second performance, she showed great enthusiasm for the investigative part of the project. During my first session together with Mary (Steve was not present), we spoke about how we might plan for the second performance. Mary's view was that it might be better to have a series of short pieces, rather than one long improvisational work, on the basis that the former might yield more useful information for the research. During the Question and Answer session following the second performance, Mary said she felt her role was as a 'disruptor' during the process, essentially because of the context of research in which the process was immersed. She said her role was to ask 'other kinds of questions' (see Chapter 4) and by this she meant to challenge and question where the process was leading as a means of testing the rigour of the research. Mary contributed greatly and I admired the kind of radicalism she brought into the space. She spoke about 'expertise' sometimes getting in the way of 'finding the essential things' we are looking for in artistic practice. At one point in the preparations for the second performance, Mary questioned whether we needed to have a performance at all and if the performance would add anything to the research. I was seeing the work through a different prism with Mary's interventions and, in my opinion, this strengthened the collaboration and challenged some assumptions I may have had. I would have welcomed having more opportunity to engage with Mary on an individual basis as I had with Steve.

My specific task was to explore questions about artistic collaboration and improvisation. What ensued in the collaborative space in exploring these questions was that both Mary and Steve, from the vantage point of their own discipline and their experience as improvisers, appeared to play the role of 'narrator' by sharing their experience in the discussions about the complexities of collaboration and improvisation and the concepts which are inherent to these activities. I understood that my role was to lead, by steering this rich narrative towards finding some insights and answers to my research questions and this meant that I had to be alert during the discussions, to make reference or intervene, to seek clarification, offer a new idea, or provide an alternative question.

### **The Creative Process**

The term 'process' in our collaborative work is characterised by differentiation, where everything is constantly changing, in a state of flux and the process is emergent. We tend to misconstrue 'reality' as fixed and stable, but in our kind of artistic process, our 'reality' is unstable and unfixed. Indeed, what we may lose in our perception of reality as static is 'the

capacity to pay attention to what things are becoming' (Hickey-Moody 2009, pp.75-76), which, in my opinion, is one of the hallmarks of this process.

Poutanen (2016), in the section of his thesis relating to perspectives of collaborative creativity, comments on what are the distinguishing characteristic of 'collaborative creativity':

The advocates of so called collaborative creativity have suggested that creativity is emergent (Sawyer, 2010), participatory (Hanchett, Hanson, 2015), socio-cultural (Glvăeanu, 2010), and pragmatic-reflective (Miettinen, 2006), etc. (Poutanen 2015, p. 22).

According to Poutanen, the 'collaborative perspective' on group creativity is complex, as it is difficult to comprehend a meaning that is hidden or that is not clear in the intricacy of this type of engagement and because, as Sawyer points out, group creativity is 'emergent'.

It is also reflected in Wright's description of collaboration that 'meaning is process immanent, and the process itself is subordinated to no extrinsic finality and so engenders no object-based work' (Wright 2004, p.2). Outcomes in arts practice are intrinsic to the process and, therefore, are qualified by what emerges in a shared environment.

A central concept which I explore in the research is about the space in which the process takes place, which is first and foremost a creative space. However, it is also something more. Because artists can reflect on their own process in a profound way, this space which they occupy becomes knowledge-making itself. Mafe & Brown make this point:

...the value of the emergent outcomes goes far beyond the straightforward production of any artefact. The collaboration as a resource begins to build up a range of informations or knowledge itself, which is far in excess of the simple sum of its component parts (Mafe and Brown 2006, p. 11).

Furthermore, Mafe and Brown shed light on how knowledge exists and emerges in creative practice and this resonates with how I perceive the improvisatory and collaborative process in this investigation:

We have found through the *Pixels* project that creative practice in a research context can lead to new knowledge. This knowledge is embedded in creative practice as an embodied or tacit knowledge. Information about this knowledge can be found in the people creating it, the culture in which it is created and consumed, the processes used to create it, and in the artefacts produced – but cannot be found in only one of these alone (pp. 9-10).

This dimension, according to Mafe and Brown, is about the ‘knowledge’ which stems from our collaborative engagement. There is a kind of ‘knowing’ that we experience in performance that is embedded within us and how the flow of ideas emanates from the discourse in the creative space is what become known in and through the performances. According to Igweonu et al. (2011), ‘even though theory is embedded in the creative process, it very often remains elusive to the practitioner’ (p. 228) but can be clarified through writing and through deep reflection, enabling the artist to understand that ‘elusive’ part of artistic practice.

### **Locating the artist in collaboration**

Gablik (referring to collaborative art states there is a ‘distinct shift from the autonomous...to a new kind of dialogical structure that is not the product of a single individual but is the result of a collaborative and interdependent process’ (Gablik 1995, p.76). Referring to collaboration in art, Jones (makes the point, regarding two collaborative artists (painters), Arkley and Davilla that ‘...understandings of collaborative identities rely on a constant level of interdependency between artists to blur hierarchical notions of authorship and thus the obstruction of a simple set of meanings’ (Jones 2013, p.3). The emergence of ‘composite authorship’, for example, exemplifies the true nature of the ‘postmodern, polysemic artwork, by showing the signs of its collaborative, multi-layered construction’ (*Ibid*). Artistic roles in collaboration are ‘often predetermined by their ‘separate’ artistic disciplines and this can be a real hindrance to the success of the collaborative artistic situation’ (Hayden & Windsor 2007, p.39). Even working individually the composer/artist is challenged. ‘In accordance with the post-modernist tradition, the artist is transformed into a producer of processes, contexts and experiences, revising the concept of authorship’ (Lopes 2015). Jennifer Walshe grapples with how she and other composers working in music theatre can ‘dissolve the concept of a single author and work collectively; how to dissolve the normal concept of what composition is’ (2016). Exploring what it means to collaborate includes an acknowledgement that we are, first and foremost, individual artists and our desire to make new art together is perhaps influenced by how we enter a new realm of creativity with the potential to be transformed in the process.

### **The concept of Space**

The ‘space’ that artists, among different disciplines, occupy in collaboration might be conceived as being generated out of complex interactions and exchanges among the

participants. Coessens (2009) argues that each ‘unique performance’ arises out of ‘a long process of patient integration of multiple tacit dimensions’ (Coessens 2009, p. 271) and these dimensions are ‘broad spaces at the disposal of artists’. The dynamic process of the performance takes place not only in time but also in space. In fact, ‘both are deeply entrenched’ (Coessens 2009, p.275).

Crabtree (1994), referring to collaboration across different disciplines, makes a valuable observation regarding how this type of collaboration is shaped. ‘In this research the conversation takes place...in a new common space and goes beyond and across what any one discipline offers’ (Crabtree 1994, pp.xiii-xiv). The ‘common space’ is where integration takes place, where the creative process deepens among the collaborators and where the potential for something transformative and original might emerge. Nowhere is this more applicable than in improvised musical performance.

Malpas (2015) states that to comprehend fully what is happening in improvised musical performance requires an examination beyond the temporal because music must also be considered in relation to spatiality. He asks if we can think of the temporal without also thinking of the spatial at the same time and he points out that this is not a question in relation to physical theory and how space and time are perceived but in relation to how space and time are understood as a framework of experience. Malpas states that the priority that is given separately to temporality in music,

...prevents us from any adequate thinking of *transcendence*, understood as an opening up of that which goes beyond the immediately present or presented (and which is surely at the heart of any creative engagement with the world, whether through thinking, mak-ing, or acting) (Malpas 2015, p.34).

The question of space itself is twofold and according to Malpas clarifies how *transcendence* evolves and how the performers arrive at this point. He firstly distinguishes between the construction of the empirical space which in this investigation is the rehearsal space and performance space where the creative process and event takes place. Secondly, there is what he names as the space of consciousness which ‘is integral to the very structure of possibility and experience’ (Malpas 2018, p.18). A performance which is improvised cannot simply be considered as existing in the present moment, the *now*, the temporal space, because it is more than this. McAuliffe (2021) explains that, for Malpas, whereas the temporal moves us forward, we need to recognise that performers occupy and engage with this ‘space of consciousness’ as well. In comprehending how performers experience a musical

performance, it is only when we consider the spatial along with the temporal that the ‘opening up’ to what emerges in the space, the *transcendent* can be revealed. This is pertinent in examining how a live improvised performance can be framed. The space is ‘bounded’ by what is ‘immediately present or presented’ (Malpas 2021) but at the same the work has the potential to open up and go beyond the present, the *now*. This relates to the potentiality of what comes to the surface, what is revealed in the space as the performance evolves and the possibility of the *transcendent* comes into play. However, the space of possibility must also include those parts of the experience that exist below and beyond the level of our conscious interactions and this idea is explored in subsequent chapters. From another viewpoint the performance space is ‘finite’ because it is temporal and exists for a set period of time, and inhabits a certain physical space. At the same time the space is ‘unbounded’<sup>17</sup> because it is not fixed by any pre-determined concepts or rules – ‘finite but unbounded’. Translating this concept into how our own process evolves is noteworthy because the structure of our collaborations, which offer limitless and spontaneous choices within the framework of improvisation, have the potential to ‘go beyond’ in the moment, to anticipate something new which has the potential to reveal itself, to emerge in the space while being fixed in a particular temporal space.

Central to this investigation is what can be elucidated about the ‘space’ we occupy as artists, with the key question being about the frontiers. There are other constructive means for artists to articulate how a collaborative process unfolds apart from the dividing lines, the crossing over, and the integrating of different disciplines. The focal point of this investigation is to explore what other options might apply to this work as it develops and how the ‘space’ we inhabit in performance is interpreted in this enquiry.

### **The concept of Time**

Conventional understanding of time is that it is a linear and continuous line of progression (*chronos*). However, for the analysis of this practice, there is another concept of ‘time’ in artistic process which is being examined in this current investigation, which is *kairos*.

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<sup>17</sup>Albert Einstein (1879–1955). Relativity: The Special and General Theory. 1920.

Chapter XXXI. The Possibility of a “Finite” and Yet “Unbounded” Universe. In simple terms the concept is that closed spaces without limits are conceivable. This relates to the discussion on the characteristics of collaboration in arts practice which forms part of this research.



Coessens (2009) compares the two concepts relating to time: *chronos* and *kairos*. The first aspect is the ‘time-space frame of the performance’, the preparation beforehand and the social context – ‘the when, where and how will the performance take place’ (p.63). The second aspect, according to Coessens, is the ‘not-knowing’ part which signals the unfolding and emergent characteristics of a process like improvisation, for example. Coessens explains that, once the performance starts, the performers and audience are caught in their own world of time, *Kairos*. It is ‘enclosed in this artistic time and place’.

Rather than being just measurement or duration, time is also movement. It is another way of understanding the displacement of things in space, another way of determining what is meant by time (Papastephanou 2014). This other concept of time, *Kairos*, is a key component in how our live performances played out. *Kairos* examines time in a different way, that is, time as experience, taking into account the spontaneous, the unexpected, and emergent, especially in the world of live performance. Emma Cocker commenting on *Kairos* relating to improvised performances states that artists/performers need to be attentive to and identify opportunities in performance to look out for new creative ideas. It is crucial for the artist in performance to observe the ‘spaces of possibility...to act swiftly because Kairos is fleeting’ and ‘disappears as quickly as it comes’ (Cocker 2010, p.2). Chapters 3 and 4, which examine the performances, address what I experienced as these ‘fleeting’ moments of discovery.

## **The concept of Liminality**

Liminality is an important concept in relation to this investigation. A liminal space in performance is the time between what has just happened and what is about to happen but has not yet materialised. This allows for a conjuring up of those transitional moments in performance where an idea in sound or image has just ended and another one is about to begin which is especially relevant to our improvisations. Victor Turner used the term *Liminality*, which he developed in his work on anthropology to describe a space which ‘holds a possibility of potential forms, structures, conjectures and desires’ (in Broadhurst 1999). Coessens (2009) examines the concept of *liminality* in relation to both the preparations for a performance and the performance itself. In the preparations, there is the ‘ordinary world’ of expectation where the performers prepare for an ‘artistic act’ and then the performance itself is enclosed in its own ‘artistic time and space’ (p.63). ‘The kairos of the artist concerns the faculty of coping with the unexpected...in this liminal space of performance’ (Coessens 2009, p. 276). It might be possible to understand that once the performers step from the

‘ordinary world’ of the preparations into the world of performance that they are stepping beyond the boundary into a liminal space of the unknown. The idea of an improvised performance as emergent, ‘uncertain’, and full of potential mirrors Turner’s idea of a liminal space.

## **Improvisation**

Solomon states that improvisation is about making decisions during the act of performing. It is the ‘...discovery and invention of music spontaneously, while performing it’ (Solomon 1986, p.226). He adds that a recording ‘upon replay is no longer an improvisation’ because it has lost its immediacy of belonging to the present. Brown concurs regarding the immediacy of improvisation. ‘A phenomenology of the experience of improvised music would profile . . . *presence*. The sense that a unique, unscripted event is taking place as I listen gives an improvisatory performance a sense of moment...’ (Brown in Kanellopoulos 2011, p.119). For Brown, improvisation exists in a ‘special world of time’ which is indicative of *Kairos* and is governed by what is emergent. Freedom of choice in improvisation is limitless, in the same way that the framing of collaboration as a ‘network of relationships’, offers an infinite number of possibilities.

In terms of the experience of improvisation, Kanellopoulos refers to Bhaktin who understands improvisation ‘as a mode of musical practice’ whereby the performers develop an “attitude of consciousness,” as a way of delving into music-making which transforms our relationship with what traditionally has been called composing and performing’ (Kanellopoulos 2011, p.130).

Derek Bailey divides improvisation using the terms *idiomatic* improvisation, *non-idiomatic* improvisation and *not-pre-determined*. He said that improvisation needs no justification and that it is part of our identity as musicians ‘because it invites complete involvement, to a degree, otherwise unattainable, in the act of music making’ (Bailey 1992, p. 142). Beaty describes improvisation as follows:

The improvising musician faces the unique challenge of managing several simultaneous processes in real-time—generating and evaluating melodic and rhythmic sequences, coordinating performance with other musicians in an ensemble, and executing elaborate fine-motor movements—all with the overall goal of creating esthetically appealing music (Beaty 2015, p. 105).

Borgo (2004) description of improvisation resonates deeply with how I understand it:

Improvisation emphasizes process over product creativity, an engendered sense of freedom and discovery, the dialogical nature of real-time interaction, the sensual aspects of performance over abstract intellectual concerns, and a participatory aesthetic over passive reception (Borgo 2004, p. 21).

Borgo's remark about improvisation as giving a sense of 'freedom and discovery' is how I have experienced improvisation in this process and it is connected with the sense that there is no limit to what I can create in sound.

'My intention is to let things be themselves', Evan Parker (in Lewis 1996) reported in the International Times underground newspaper. A new movement of composers/performers founded in 1965 went beyond the *avant-garde* and free jazz improvisations to create new music exemplified in the work of AMM, a group of free improvisers (the name not divulged) in Britain. Brian Olewnick wrote in *ALL Music Review*, 'the overall sound of the group [AMM], even in 1966, was so different, so idiosyncratic, that it's not at all surprising that both new jazz and contemporary classical audiences were baffled, if not horrified'. Fundamentally, improvisation is spontaneous, but Bresnahan (2015) points out that most improvisation theorists do not consider improvisation as *ad hoc*, that it involves skill and training. Alperson comments as follows, referring to music theatre and dance,

...we can clearly identify sets of skills or directed actions that establish a context against which the free play of improvisation activity and the context of performance provides a pertinent venue in which improvisation can take place and be witnessed (Alperson 2010, p. 274).

There is directed action in both of our performances and some fixed elements in text and film which are imported into our work from which we establish a context. The configuration of elements, seating, instruments, lighting, screens, film, visual elements etc. in the space give a specific context to both improvised works. Brown (2000) also points out that musicians/composers who improvise together are doing so within the context and backdrop of their own musical background and that 'mastery of this tradition is thus necessary in order to improvise well in these cases' (Brown, p.114 in Bresnahan 2015, p. 2).

### ***Free Improvisation***

According to Foss (1963), 'free' improvisation has its origins in the experimental, classical music typical of Cage and his contemporaries and also in developments in jazz. A simple definition of free improvisation is that we create music, live, in real time without a pre-determined structure.

Free improvisation has often been presented as an improvisational practice in which musicians try to reduce to a strict minimum the decisions made before performance, aiming at the spontaneous act of improvisation in and of itself, independent of the expression of any musical idiom (Canonne 2018, p.1)

Canonne's description captures what is often the challenge with free improvisation i.e. the difficulty to express 'freely' in the light of what impinges on and influences our creative actions. This is true regarding how we approached our preparations for the performances. There was a rehearsal that took place on the day of each performance regarding how the space worked and we had a sound check but we were careful to keep to a minimum anything that would affect the spontaneity of the work, mindful also that we brought our musical and visual aesthetic into the space.

Derek Bailey 'holds that while there is no prescribed idiomatic sound to free improvisation, its characteristics are established by the sonic-musical identity of the person playing' (Bailey 1993, p. 83). What improvisation offers all of the participants is the experience of not knowing what is coming next and that is the 'common ground' on which the piece is constructed. My own 'sonic-musical' identity was modified during the course of this study because the avenues for experimentation opened up a space that was unknown to me and gave me the freedom to fundamentally change my perception of music-making.

### ***The space of improvisation***

In his work 'Negotiating Freedom', David Borgo references 'free' improvisers such as Frederic Rzewski, Richard Teitelbaum, and Cornelius Cardew who hailed from the 1960s and 1970s. Borgo points out that, '[t]he primary musical bond shared among these diverse performers is a fascination with sonic possibilities and surprising musical occurrences and a desire to improvise, to a significant degree, both the content and the form of the performance' (Borgo 2004, p. 167). For musicians who are involved in improvisation, this kind of music-making is about perpetually creating something new and experimental, with the desire of performers to make something original. Free improvisation is 'live' art and Reason states that such forms of art are 'impervious to representation' (Reason 2006, p. 232). Likewise for Cage, when a piece based on indeterminacy is 'performed for a second time, the outcome is other than it was' (Cage 1961, p.39). Theorists like Schechner emphasise that the idea of repetition in performance is never exactly the same and that 'restored behavior is always subject to revision' (Schechner 1985, p.37). For Phelan, performance is a 'one off' event and not repeatable i.e. any repeat performance is not the same because it is ephemeral and

disappears once completed:

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance (Phelan 1993, p.146).

Presenting for a second (third, fourth, etc.) time is simply not presenting 'the same', it is RE-presenting something. What the audio-visual recordings of our two performances capture are traces of the performances that will hopefully elucidate some insights about what happened in the space occupied by the performers. While acknowledging that I am observing an audio-visual recording of the performance (and not the performance) some ideas/insights and information can be gathered and documented from this source which may provide useful data for the enquiry. The experience itself which unfolds in the live event does not always translate into language and lies below the surface of our conscious awareness. This has to be taken into account while observing the space of improvisation because it is challenging to find avenues to communicate those ineffable parts of the experience.

Within the context of the space of improvisation is the experience of 'change' in all its facets and what it engenders. Chia writes,

... for most of us, our deeply ingrained habits of thought surreptitiously work to elevate notions of order, stability, discreteness, simple location, identity and permanence over disorder, flux, interpenetration, dispersal, difference and change (Chia 1999, p. 210)

The state of flux, as outlined by Chia, captures the emergent and ever-changing score that is always unfolding in the experience of improvising artists. By score, I am referring in this case to the elements of sound, image, text, silence, and how they interpenetrate randomly in performance. The concept of flux obstructs any notion of permanence or order in favour of a continuous process of becoming which is essentially the space of improvisation. Bradlyn (1991, in Borgo 2004) outlines steps to be acquainted with as performers – in the overall context of 'learning to listen' in this space of uncertainty. The first of three steps is literally to stop and listen, to 'figure', next 'to ground' and then 'to field'. Bradlyn states that the field is 'the aggregate of sound' in soundscape. The three elements, 'figure', 'ground' and 'field' are constantly shifting so that there 'must be a constant flux'. The unexpected and momentary changes in live improvisation which are in a state of 'flux' are aptly expressed by Bradlyn and I believe sum up what is happening – 'One performer's playing may

suddenly emerge as a stark figure against the background of another's only to just as suddenly submerge into the ground or even farther back into the field as another voice emerges' (Bradlyn 1991, p.23).

### **The embodied mind**

American philosopher and movement therapist, Thomas Hanna, coined the term 'somatics' and he sought to define the field. Somatics relates to what we are as embodied beings and this sense of being embodied connects to our identity and how we perceive ourselves. It is not simply about the mind being connected to the body but that the body influences the mind. In examining a theory of embodied mind, Lakeoff and Johnson (1999) state:

There is no such fully autonomous faculty of reason separate from and independent of bodily capacities such as perception and movement. The evidence supports, instead, an evolutionary view, in which reason uses and grows out of bodily capacities (Lakeoff and Johnson 1999, p. 17).

The case made by Lakeoff and Johnson is that our understanding is dependent on the physical world and how we perceive, interpret, and interact with it. In this investigation these perceptions, as outlined by Lakeoff and Johnson, can be connected to performance because we have insight and understanding through performing, according to Phelan (2012). From the outset of my exploration and my search for a new way to engage with my own practice, I became more aware of other influences beyond the narrow perception of music-making that had been my experience. This was evident in how I set out to disrupt the relationship between my physical self and the instrument through which I express my emotions, stories, and creative ideas. The de-construction of the physical materials which make up the piano – the soundboard, the strings, the frame, the pedals, as objects of sounding became the centre of my focus, early on, to seek out a new range of sounds and displace any traditional notion of 'playing the piano'. More than that, I was awoken to the sensory nature of this experience with a self-realisation that the embodied mind would somehow enhance my creative potential.

Sandqvist commenting on what parts of the experience that are not accessible to language states, 'an intuitive choice is thus as conscious as a considered choice, it simply uses aspects of consciousness that are not accessible to language. It cannot say, but it can show' (Sandqvist 1995). In examining what happens in the two performance there will be those parts of the live event that I will not be able to de-construct and explicate in language because

they are not readily accessible. However, as Sandqvist states, I can ‘show’, point to, describe, in my own terms what I have experienced.

The ‘knowledge’ that is discovered and is contained within the process is embodied as well as cognitive, is tacit as well as explicit and, as Coessens points out, ‘the *techne* as well as the *episteme* and *praxis* (Coessens 2006, p.52). Given the nature of this kind of discovery, ‘knowledge’, according to Coessens, requires ‘continuous re-negotiation’ because it has to be considered ‘within a contingent, temporal and subjective situation’ (p.53). I believe that these kinds of discovery, insight, ‘knowledge’ in performance that are often embodied cannot be held to any other measure beyond itself. In accepting the notion of a broader kind of knowledge that embraces the embodied mind and the sensory information that flows into the space in performance, I understand that the performance itself can be put forward as evidence of what took place without further explication. This proposition asks the reader to ascent to a concept of knowledge that cannot be empirically verified and can only be demonstrated through ‘showing’, recounting and through the guidance of what is revealed in and through the narrative enquiry.

### **Shared and Experiential Discourse**

The enquiry into these experimental collaborations which took place over a two year period operate out of a shared experience. The collaborators shared and discussed ideas which evolved across a range of concepts - ‘space’, ‘time’, ‘ephemerality’, ‘change’, and the conversations and discussions which took place in the preparations could be conceived as happening in a conceptual-experiential space which we occupy during the process. Gadamer in his analysis of conversation stated:

The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will ‘come out’ of a conversation (Gadamer 1990, p. 383).

Gadamer’s comment resonates with me because it is often surprising what will ‘come out’ of a conversation, especially these focused discussions in the discourse, and I am reminded that our process is organic and can travel anywhere in search of ideas. For artists with an improvisatory practice, ‘uncertainty’ is fundamental, not only to this process, reflected in the conversations and the discourse, but also reflected in the reality of life itself.

In relation to conversation, the ‘I’ and ‘thou’ should not be perceived as ‘isolated, substantial realities’ (Gadamer in George 2017, p.335). I think that it is useful to consider our shared conversation as determined by ‘we’ rather than ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ and this was the sentiment in the initial part of our discourse. ‘We’ are in a shared space, we inhabit it, co-exist and live in the experience of it. Therefore, everything ‘we’ say is also said by the space, is also the space. There is, indeed, a presupposition that the collaborators share the same goals and values in proposing this idea of how we inhabit the space in collaboration.

As artists we interpret the experiential in collaboration by having a ‘shared language’ which greatly assists in developing a common understanding of the artistic vision for a piece. In the ‘pre-disciplinary’ focus at the outset of our process, it is critical to understand that ‘the language of creative exchange does not have to be verbal’ (p. 94), as experiential discourse can be both verbal and non-verbal. Discourse opens the door to artistic experience itself as part of the conversation. The experiential part of our discourse does not necessarily take place either as thoughts or as words, not even as sounds or images but simply as that meta-knowledge which exists beyond form or the unconscious knowledge that reveals the invisible ephemerality in the work itself. We cannot verbalise it but we can make it part of our discourse because we experience it and because we are witnesses to it in the live performance. It comes ever before an utterance, a gesture or movement. This knowledge that transpires from experiential discourse exists in the realm of the ‘mythos’ and it cannot be verbalised because in being verbalised we may miss it. In conceiving of the process in these terms I believe that Čargonja captures the essence of it ‘The fact that “something” is not possible to be incarnated in the language or quite fully grasped, does not mean that it does not exist’ (Čargonja 2011, p. 302). For Čargonja, language is only part of experience – ‘We do not think just in sentences. We think in pictures, sometimes in melodies, sometimes in feelings and embodied sensations’ (*Ibid*). In the end, Čargonja believes that we need a term like ‘experience’ because ‘by using experience we are explicating something that is inherently inexplicable’ (*Ibid*). This is the premise on which the shared discourse, unpacks, unfolds, and takes shape in this research. The preparations and delivery of the two performances made it possible to ‘test’, witness and document some of the ideas put forward about experiential discourse. As Charles Parker said, ‘Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn’ (in Greenlee 1962,). As such, drawing on the idea that everything is contained within the ‘experience’ is critical to making sense of this whole process.



## Conclusion

The term ‘collaboration’ was outlined at the beginning of the chapter with emphasis on how it was interpreted in collaborative arts practice. The description of a range of different categories of disciplinarity was necessary to outline the types of opportunities available to artists who step into a collaborative sphere. The term ‘pre-disciplinary, which I utilized in the research, outlined a designated space in the early stages of collaboration which could be ‘constructed’ to find the common ground among the participants *before* any investigation of the disciplinary elements followed on in the creative process.

A note on the collaborative relationships described how my relationship with each collaborator developed over the course of the project with testimony from the participants. Regarding the creative process itself, there was a description of what it entailed when focused on this enquiry. The creative process included a profile of ‘space’, ‘time’ and ‘liminality’ and how those concepts influenced my perspective, perceptions and the ‘reality’ of the space we constructed.

The second part of Chapter 2 was dedicated to an exploration of improvisation and in particular ‘free’ improvisation which identified the two performances presented in this enquiry. Peggy Phelan (2002) described how the performance space was transient and for that reason a performance could not be repeated and consequently a live performance was difficult to capture and analyse. Chia remarked that in reality notions of permanence was a false reality and that reality instead was governed by change. Relating this to the artistic world the works in this enquiry mirrored Chia’s understanding of the reality of ‘change’, imbued with uncertainty and in a state of flux.

Lakeoff and Johnson proposed the idea of the ‘embodied self’ whereby we use our own bodily experience and processes to make sense of our experience and, in particular, our emotional experience. This is particularly relevant to my artistic practice. In terms of my partnership with Mary and Steve we were able to embrace a broader kind of understanding, as artists, taking into account all the sensory information that arrives into the space and we acknowledged many times during the enquiry that there were parts of the experience that were not available to express through language. Čargonja aptly and succinctly described how this process unfolded. ‘We think in pictures, sometimes in melodies, sometimes in feelings and embodied sensations’ (2011, p. 302). The combination of these different elements became the substance of our work together which we shared at a profound level

and which formed part of a wider experiential discourse which is discussed in the following chapters.

## **Chapter Three:**

### **Findings I: Beginnings in the Dark**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter 3 focuses on the development and delivery of the first performance as part of the requirement for the PhD. Firstly, it outlines the dynamics of the artistic collaboration and discusses the development of the creative process. This is then followed by an examination of the audio-visual recording of the performance and an elucidation of how the performance is designed in the context of the research question. The opening part of the chapter depicts how the creative process is approached for the first performance and how the initial contributions from participants in the project give an insight into generating the conditions to enable new creative ideas to evolve. This is followed by a concise discussion of the creative ideas which unfold in the discourse which takes place during a number of discussions, along with a description of the contributions made by the collaborators. The chapter then continues with an overview of how the performance is approached, developed, and delivered and what role is played by each performer in the lead up to the performance. In relation to how the work progresses, there is the question of what is rehearsed or prepared prior to the live performance and who leads with creative ideas in this collaborative dynamic, both before and during the performance.

There is an account of the performance, with examples from the audio-visual recording which capture pivotal moments in the performance and which offer insight into the complexity of the interactions between the collaborators in the live performance. This is followed by an examination and reflection on my role and creative input in the decision-making during the process and how these inputs function and influence the dynamic of this predominantly improvised work. Lastly, there is an assessment of how this first of two performances advances my understanding of the research questions: what are the frontiers of artistic collaboration and what is the space of improvisation in composition?

## **An overview of the collaborative journey**

Given that my practice had been dormant for a number of years, I felt I needed a new approach to my work. In order to develop a new approach, I connected with other artists to experiment with some new ideas. The first encounter was an exploration of movement and choreography with dance artist, Laura Murphy, who suggested a workshop relating to collaboration. It was a gateway to stimulating new ideas into my own practice with a choreographer.<sup>18</sup> The title of the workshop which she proposed was ‘An introduction to Choreological Studies for collaborative purposes’. It was a desire, on my part, to return to collaboration with artists who I had engaged with in the past. Murphy challenged me to find ways to respond to dance/movement that would essentially be a translation of the types of dance gestures and movement into sound or concepts of sounds designed from the physical movements. Her approach was vastly different to my earlier work with choreographers and it altered my perspective on how to engage in collaboration with other artists. This experiment was followed by a task set by my supervisor, Dr. Óscar Mascareñas, to compose a new work for voice and piano. The piece was entitled *Work in Progress* and it became the inspiration for ideas for my first performance. It was performed at a lunchtime recital, on April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018, in collaboration with Óscar at The Irish World Academy in the University of Limerick. The approach adopted during the creation of this new work was structured to the extent that I would compose and record a fixed score which would be played simultaneously with a less structured part, a live improvised performance of voice (Óscar) and piano (me). The preparation for the ‘Work in Progress’ opened up new horizons as to how my practice would develop, and these initial contributions by Laura and Óscar laid the foundations for what was to come. Both Óscar and I were later invited to perform the work again at the opening of the ISSTA (Irish Sound, Science & Technology Association) conference in August 2018 and this marked, for me, the beginning of a new chapter in my work which consolidated this new approach.

Subsequently, I set about creating the conditions to work on the principal task, the preparations for the first PhD performance which involved finding a person/persons with whom to collaborate. Once I confirmed that Steve Boyland would participate in the project, I set out to create new content for the first performance. This voyage of discovery is marked throughout by a profound discourse and exchange where both Steve and I sought to create

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<sup>18</sup> Laura Murphy is a choreographer and dance artist based in Ireland. (<http://www.lauramurphy.ie>)

new things and to search for the fertile ground for our creative ideas to evolve. The live performance itself is testimony to what new ideas emerged, those moments in our discourse which enlightened us in the spontaneous making of the piece. The audio-visual recording of the work allows me, as researcher, to examine how the discourse played out in the performance and how we, as performers, related to the space and to each other in those moments. What did those moments reveal? For although the audio-visual recording which I use to document this performance is a record of it, it is not an analysis of the event itself. Therein lies one of the challenges of this work, its ephemerality and how that governs what can be articulated about the experience of the performers afterwards.

Following *Work in Progress*, which I prepared with Óscar, I attended a recital given by Óscar and Steve at The Irish World Academy. It was an improvised piece and they delivered a vibrant and experimental duet for two voices. I felt a profound sense of being connected to this way of creating new music and, as a consequence, I began to foresee potential for the first performance, perhaps with Steve as a collaborator, who engaged in this type of music making. Having invited Steve to collaborate with me, he agreed to take part in my research and the discussions and preparations took place over the number of weeks and months that followed.

Steve has worked for over thirty years as a voice artist. He has been at the forefront of a movement of artists, with pioneers such as Phil Minton and Maggie Nichols, who were forerunners to Steve and who paved the way for voice artists to step out of a jazz idiom towards a completely avant-garde and individualistic way of creating sounds with the human voice. In the early years, Steve was much concerned with composed music but then began to focus on improvised composition. He recounted this when I interviewed him:

*I worked for the BBC as a session singer for a period of about 10 or 12 years ... I'd already had some contact with free improvised voice and extended vocal technique through my contacts with Maggie Nichols. I met Maggie Nichols late '70s, early '80s and you know, we kind of carried on a dialogue about practice of our voice, about the possibilities of voice and I actually moved to London in the early '80s to be closer to Maggie's work and practice and also to the free 'improv' sessions that she was running in London (Appendix 16).*

With Steve's experience, I wanted be able to extend my own sound and music vocabulary. We endeavoured to express our creative interests from completely different musical styles and vantage points and this would hopefully enrich our collaborative exchange and lead to a very distinctive process. In that regard, it was an intra-disciplinary process.

### *A concise discussion of the aims and creative ideas*

The principal aim in the preparations for *Beginnings in the Dark* was to observe and document how the collaboration progressed from the initial stages until the live performance. Secondly, it was to observe to what extent this artistic experience yielded new data about the collaborative space we occupy as artists and, on reflection, what can be understood about the frontiers of this artistic collaboration. This represented what I wanted to explore in this part of my research.

Speaking of how he works in collaboration, Steve remarked on how he evaluates the ‘process of making’:

*The fulfilment of the work does not, for me, consist purely in the object it becomes but in the processes that lead to its creation...An awful lot of the collaborative work that I engage with will often come out of discourses established some time earlier...The process for me is key. (Appendix 16)*

Steve underlined the importance for him of cultivating relationships that support the artistic collaboration, saying that he is ‘... always intrigued about how the creativity starts with the creation of relationship and how the foundations that are laid there become crucial to the process of the collaboration itself’ (Appendix 16). I instantly concurred with this sentiment about the relationship between collaborators being a strategic part of how we would make new work together. However, what resonated with me even more was the idea that the ‘process’ is key and how relevant the discourse is in preparing a new work. I had not previously approached my practice with either of these concepts in mind – ‘process’ and ‘discourse’. I felt that this was a rare opportunity to gather new strands of information, insights, and ideas which would assist in the research. In the early stages of the preparations, I adopted the role of learner, given my inexperience in the field of improvisation, as I believed I had much to learn.

The first time we met in the rehearsal room, Steve brought along some texts which he had composed and which he felt might be useful as material for our work. In his various readings or interpretations of the text in the course of our creative explorations, it provided much material with which to play. In addition to the concept of ‘space’, concepts of ‘ephemerality’, ‘unknowing’, ‘becoming’/flux, core concepts in Steve’s poetic texts (see below), permeated our discourse and were essential in the making of this piece, as well as being a source of rich textual material. In his various readings and voicing of the texts, I observed that there is

always something novel in how the words are conveyed, performed, and uttered, where words and ‘pieces’ of words are repeated or transformed into abstract sounds. The texts were a catalyst for many of the creative ideas which came to the surface and which materialised in the performance of *Beginnings in the Dark* and which can be observed in the audio-visual recording.

In some respects, when Steve presented the texts I was taken aback because I was unsure about how we would adapt them into our work, even though I liked the themes and poetic images he put forward. I also grappled with the fact that these texts had arrived ‘ready-made’ into our preparations and I questioned whether this would detract from or restrict the creative potential of the work. Steve perceived the texts as one possible element to be negotiated in the frame of our discourse; he brought them to the table with no intention other than as an element that might be of interest to me. With this in mind, I believed it was an interesting opportunity, although a risk, to use prepared texts as another element along with voice and piano, and I was curious but a little unsure as to how we would integrate the texts into the piece. The texts are presented below which formed part of the first PhD performance, *Beginnings in the Dark*. Steve spoke poignantly, explaining that the texts were written after the death of his father, where he felt compelled to express something of that profound, existential experience. This is one iteration of the texts, as they were continuously being altered when Steve responded to them vocally.

### **Poetic Texts**

a voice unfastens itself

and enters its stream

the I dissolves

voiding its light

congealing in shadow

bare bones of body

harrowed hovel in the site of self

extravagance of air

leached out  
displaced in motion  
In the taut transcendence  
of becoming

I lift and shift  
turn, stall and twist  
in a tide of unknowing

Wrought from stone  
mired in the  
pressure-space  
I delve its dark meander  
and draw down its roar

the thrum of red petal  
of measuring myself  
in pitched orbits of rare abeyance  
an anxiety of beginnings  
endlessly rehearsed

Steve Boyland<sup>19</sup>

(2015)

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<sup>19</sup> Steve Boyland composed the ‘poetic texts’ prior to the collaboration for *Beginnings in the Dark* and offered them as a resource that we might incorporate into the piece



## **An account of the rehearsal process**

### ***How did the process evolve?***

Steve and I met on a number of occasions over a period of 4 months, between May and November 2018. The process evolved slowly as I got to know Steve, but I already had ideas about some aspects of the piece. During one of our initial conversations, I explained I would like to have a fixed recording at the beginning and the end of the piece. I had found myself being responsive creatively to the presence of fixed and live sounds in the *Work in Progress* piece which preceded this part of the research. Because I had worked with pre-recorded elements in a live improvised piece with Óscar, I wanted to continue this approach as a development of my practice. To some extent, although this was an arbitrary decision on my part, it represented a creative idea that was characteristic of my way of expressing myself artistically. There was the additional challenge as to how the recorded section would relate to the overall piece or if it would work at all. My choice of ‘bookending’ the performance with the recording was less of an artistic decision and had more to do with being able to insert it into the piece, with minimum disruption to the live part, both at the beginning and the end of the piece. My musical choice was to create an ‘overlap’ between the recorded composition and live improvised part because this would establish a connection between both during the performance. This meant that, while the recorded part was played in the live performance, I would play the strings of the piano at the same register in response to the recording as a way of ‘overlapping’ the sounds. This blurred the lines between what the audience heard as recording and what they were witnessing live. The pre-recorded part was made on the upper strings of a grand piano and sounded like ‘empty milk bottles’ with short frenetic bursts of sound and rhythmic patterns. There was no opportunity to ‘test’ the pre-recorded sounds until the very end of the process because I was not happy with the initial recording and so I set about recording the track again and this delayed the proceedings. Working with live and pre-recorded sound meant I had the opportunity to experiment and produce something very distinctive.

The work moved beyond these initial conversations and I observed one new element I should adopt which was ‘spatial appreciation’, how I could draw on ‘space’ as a multi-dimensional concept and as a creative resource. ‘Spatial appreciation’ extended into the workings of the whole process conceptually and physically. Consequently, ‘space’ became the predominant concept through which to document and express what is happening in this collaborative engagement as part of the investigation.

### ***What was rehearsed?***

I became engrossed in making new music with Steve during the rehearsals and there were a number of very useful opportunities for me to grow as a musician/composer in this world as an improviser. I learned how to respond to and embrace Steve's style of voicing sounds while at the same time trying to decipher and shape my own music making as an improvising artist. Sometimes after lengthy conversations about the work, we played music together and I developed ways of creating sounds on the piano in response to Steve's vocalisations. We created a wide variety of voice and piano combinations of sound, some lyrical and beautiful and some elements I found strange. Steve extemporised to create sounds that were often alien to me, a wide landscape in a sonic world that sometimes made me feel awkward and unable to respond as they were unconventional utterances. At times, I struggled to know how to engage with Steve during these moments and often nothing was forthcoming. I often remained silent just watching and listening. Yet still learning all the time.

In the maelstrom of this sounding, I was caught up in the very essence of the creative collaboration where I was experiencing a range and mix of things: being focused, anxious, exposed, and sometimes feeling lost. However, I was 'completely absorbed' – completely inside it! In our rehearsals, there were times when I was so focused and absorbed in the musical explorations and experiments that I forgot to record my conversations with Steve. This meant that I came to rely on memory more than I desired, in analysing the rehearsal process. I learnt from this oversight by the time we began rehearsals for the second performance. Although Steve and I prepared well, we did not 'rehearse' in the traditional sense, as this would have led down a path of trying to fix the improvising part of the piece and we were mindful of this temptation. Some of our most beautiful improvisations disappeared the moment they were over. At the outset of the collaborative process, I was very frustrated to lose such beautiful music. By virtue of its ephemerality, I had to let go of it and it was a steep learning curve to appreciate this fact. I learnt much during these months, reflecting on the mutual connection between the content in the discussions and how this affected and influenced my approach to improvisation.

### ***What emerged in rehearsal?***

During the exploratory sessions, we worked with the texts to see how to respond to them together and how to improvise with them, and as time went on we became more at ease with each other's way of sounding. Steve used words to set in motion patterns of sound devoid of

lexical meaning but which often had their root in the word and were voiced or spoken, sometimes using rhythmic patterns. This content was available to me to respond to creatively, to find my own voice in this new space as an improviser. What emerged was that, despite the texts having been written prior to the commencement of this process, they enabled a platform from which to build our creative score, and it introduced another dimension into the work as it progressed. As such, the texts became something other than what had been on the page.

What was also emerging was that the boundaries in our intra-disciplinary process were becoming less obvious to me. There was something transformative taking place (which I found difficult to translate into words). Indeed, I felt I was guided by my creative impulses, generated by emotional processes from within in a complex series of interactions between us that materialised in sound. The boundaries were blurred between us in the spontaneity of our creative endeavour and on the occasions when we took the opportunity to improvise the dialogue in sound seemed to me to mirror the dialogue that was taking place in the discussions.

### **An Account of the first Performance**

The title of the first piece, *Beginnings in the Dark*, is quite literal, encapsulating my struggles and challenges during the early stages of my research. The performance took place at 7pm, on November 15<sup>th</sup> 2018 in Tower Theatre, Irish World Academy, University of Limerick. A flyer was prepared to advertise the event (Appendix 1). The stage setting was sparse – a grand piano with the lid removed (to gain access to the strings inside), a lectern and a chair, with the performance captured on video and audio.

The commentary below documents segments of the recording which I observed and examined on a number of occasions, along with an audio-visual recording of audience feedback in a question and answer session, which followed immediately after the performance. I use timing references (minutes and seconds) to mark and separate out different parts of the recording, to highlight moments of interest or significance in the performance. I have used italics for those sections that describe my impression/reaction/reflection on specific parts of the recording. This also includes a description of memories and feelings which resonated from my experience of the performance itself.

### ***Beginnings in the Dark***

The performance opened with Steve, on stage, extemporising to the fixed ‘milk bottle’ pre-recorded track. There was a seamless crossover from the pre-recorded to the live part (05:10) and this transition marked the beginning of the longer improvised section that followed. My deferred entry into the space came five minutes after the performance had begun and the reason why I entered after Steve was to dispel any notion that I was accompanying his voice on the piano. This was something we discussed beforehand. Also, spatially, the piano was placed at quite a distance from where Steve initially opened the performance and we purposely arranged for the piano to be positioned far apart from where Steve was situated on stage so as to disrupt the conventional relationship between Steve as singer and myself as piano accompanist. It also served to introduce the audience to the world of sound produced by Steve while he was on stage on his own.

From the moment I entered the space, I was acutely aware of the live aspect of this performance. I wrote afterwards, recounting my experience of these opening moments:

My initial presence with Steve [on stage] is the overture to the undiscovered elements yet to come and I am somewhat nervous as to what will ensue. But I don’t wish to be pre-occupied with the worry of this as I think this will inhibit or hamper what creative elements will be generated in the live and unknown spaces of the performance taking place (Appendix 20).

In the opening section of the performance, I was aware of being fully present in the space, to listen attentively, to be open to what may be generated. I intuitively felt that the overriding necessity in this environment was to have the capacity to respond to the unforeseen, to continually adapt my responses in each moment to what may lie ahead in the making of the piece. This was what I perceived as the space of improvisation in this instance. I had rehearsed all of these ideas in my head. Yet, I recall that when I entered the space I was aware of people in the audience, of being self-conscious and distracted, not feeling fully engaged in this musical experiment. I had no alternative, as it was a live performance but to continue on with the belief that something would happen and seek out the space that would allow me to be completely present, mindful of the sounds Steve was generating in the space and to participate fully in the improvisation taking place. It was one thing to articulate what was required, but it was another thing to be able to correspond.

### *Opening the piano lid (16:06 – 17:13)*

I have chosen the following section of the piece, from 16' 06" to 17' 13", as a focal point for the analysis. This example illustrates one aspect of how I experienced this improvisation and how this section unfolded for me during *Beginnings in the Dark*.

It was a risk to wait, but I was calm and collected and when the time felt right I instinctively opened the lid of the piano. I cannot explain why I made this decision at precisely that moment. In my observations of this part of the recording, I remembered something that Steve had said in our discussions about improvisation which indicates what was happening. In his experience as an improvising artist, Steve understood that, as performers, we are in tune with the environment, with each other as performers, and because of this we are able to interpret what is coming next in the performance.

*The senses are acutely developed as receptors, as interpreters of what can come next in the improvising space. There is a transitional moment that carries with it suggestions about what the rest of the journey might consist of and that forms part of the process (Appendix 25).*

We were already sixteen minutes into the performance and our creative exchanges, according to what I observed, were becoming more fluid, more uninhibited in the delivery of these new ideas. At 16:18 once I opened the piano lid and Steve uttered the words 'An Act of Becoming', I began, without responding or without any conscious reference to Steve's line, to develop an idea where I am manipulating the piano strings, using my fingertips to move swiftly across the strings with both hands. I remember enjoying, not only the physical connection with the strings, but the myriad of sounds produced by this action. It was like a wave of energy, an unremitting momentum of sound. Steve simultaneously used the texts to create his own dynamic score, uttering the words 'twist' and 'turn'. These words aptly portrayed images of our encounter with each other's sounds at this point in the performance.

As the line of inquiry developed, I was becoming acutely aware of Steve's presence. The improvising part of our performance was undulating because there were times when Steve and I seemed remote and independent from each other and at other times, as in this case, what was unfolding live was completely interwoven and there was a deep unity between us driving the piece forward. It was a clear example of when something transformative was unfolding for the performers. My rapid finger tapping across the strings gathered speed and evolved into a strumming action as the rhythm became more intense. Suddenly, I started using my knuckles

as a means to accentuate the rhythm on the strings. Looking back, I am intrigued by this action and why I played the strings with my knuckles but in the wider landscape of this research and in my desire to seek a new approach to my practice, it was satisfying to participate in this type of experimentation with sound and technique. The connection between my knuckles and the strings was somatic, coming from a deep place, and it transcended anything I have experienced before in my delivery of sound as a musician. The power of being caught in a moment of time affords the possibility to go beyond the boundaries of your own playing, your own musicianship. The boundaries are no longer clear as you step into a new space. It is perhaps one of the most original moments in the score and the power of this episode cadences appropriately with Steve's long, slow exhalation of breath and then it disappears. This is how improvisation has the potential to function in this piece, where the two performers go beyond their own musical language into a world of free collaborative improvisation; where what is characterised by piano sounds and voice sounds are no longer distinguishing markers in this multi-faceted performance. The boundaries unravel to reveal that we as collaborators find the fertile ground in performance in that inter-disciplinary, transformative space where we are totally free. That freedom opens up the potential for pushing the collaboration into a new and ground-breaking space which is what I encountered. Even though I can express how it transpired, I cannot always account in my observation for everything that is happening.

### **How the creative decisions were made during the performance**

During our discussions before the performance, Steve shared about facets and characteristics of his practice as an improvising artist and this assisted me greatly in developing my own understanding of free improvisation and how I might adopt my own style. All of the preparations and rehearsals culminated with this performance where I am alive to the complexity of our artistic exchanges including the sensory information which is not necessarily manifest or obvious but which informs how I am reacting and how the creative decisions are realised in these moments. This was an enormous leap for me in my comprehension of how improvising together often results in somatic responses in the making of the piece. However, there were times in the performance when new ideas were not taken up or where the connection between us was not as intense, such as in 16:06.

The first example is when the flow is disrupted between us from 10:23–11:20. I endeavoured to close down the trajectory both at 10:23 and 10:33, but Steve did not take up the offer to close down his line of inquiry and he continues on. Subsequently, my line is broken off in an instant

exemplifying the unstable nature of this process. I didn't know what to do but I felt that my only choice was to realign with Steve and participate in expanding his idea. I felt confused and was coping with the fact that everything is live and Steve is continuing on with his idea. Perhaps, had I been more experienced I may have chosen another path other than subscribe to Steve's idea. What I discerned is that when there is a collaboration of this kind it is set apart by a dialectic of convergence and divergence between the performers which steers the performers from one trajectory to the next. Furthermore, the connections we make in collaboration are not always apparent, or unanalysable, because they belong in the realm of the unconscious or its order and the order that makes it functional is too complex to be deconstructed. Therefore, the creative decisions and who makes them is not always clear-cut based on my observation that there are layers of communication and information in the live performance which cannot be easily accessed or monitored. Nevertheless, there are those occasions when the creative decisions are governed by one or other of the performers. In the second example, at 19:05 – 20:19, I am disrupting the flow of Steve's line of sound when I introduce a short outburst of chords on the piano, but Steve's vocal line prevails and again he continues on the path of his trajectory. He does not appear to accept my offer of a new idea and so we moved on. However, in examining this further I cannot be completely sure this is exactly what took place. My impression is that Steve was leading the line of inquiry at this point in the performance. If this is not the case, then it might be that there are two leading trajectories, one of which (mine) might be short-lived, but none-the-less as present and embodied as the other (Steve's)? Or none of them is leading per se, but is simply different trajectories of sound travelling through space and time in an experiential discourse that unfolds and within which ideas are simply exposed and developed (perhaps to an extent negotiated) without any particular desire to establish them. Sometimes it was very clear as to how decisions were made and, at other times, it was complex and difficult to untangle how we arrived at a particular point in the piece.

Danny Bride was the designated audio engineer on this project at The Irish World Academy in The University of Limerick. During the later stages of the preparations, he joined the discussion about the setup for both performances. From a practical viewpoint, I asked that we have as many microphones as possible inside the piano, given that I would experiment live using the strings. For Steve, we decided on a lapel microphone so that he could move around the stage. In managing the technical components, I asked Danny if he would be happy to respond to the sounds we produced by using some sound effects to enhance our music-making. This meant

that during the performance Danny was also making creative decisions with us. He chose to use ‘reverb’ and ‘delay’ intermittently on both the vocals and the piano and I had the impression with these effects that the space itself was amplified and I had a strong sense of ‘liveness’ in encountering these altered sounds. For example, at 22:28, Danny chose to put ‘reverb’ on the amplified piano and he was responding to the sound of the ‘scraping’ noise on a bass piano string, which was achieved by using my finger nail across the string. It was a perfect balance to and echoed the insistent vocal line of the ‘the’ sound which Steve repeated metronomically during this episode.

I created a pre-recorded track which I created and which was to be played at the beginning of the performance and it lasted for approximately five minutes. The same track was used at the end of the performance. Improvising with the pre-recorded track at the beginning of the piece was fascinating because I had the sensation of experiencing a very particular acoustic dynamic where the pre-recorded sounds were ‘interwoven’ with the live sounds and as a consequence it was difficult to untangle the relationship between the two elements both visually and aurally. There was no fixed point in the performance as to where and when Danny would introduce this track towards the final part of the piece. I explained to him that this would be his decision alone based on what he sensed was the moment when the track should be brought back. For the purposes of the research, we had a loose and approximate timeline for the length of the performance (forty minutes), and this was the only guideline given to Danny.

The processes which Danny employed had a degree of impact on the work. By altering the shape and dynamic of some of the sounds meant that he was participating live with the other performers. Secondly, what we improvised was being influenced by the alterations he made to the sounds in real time and I recall that I responded very positively to the ‘unexpected’ elements in Danny’s contribution. I considered it a novel way to use fixed and unfixed elements in the work. Thirdly, we decided when the final pre-recorded track would be introduced. It was a far greater role than a sound engineer which I welcomed wholeheartedly. As performers, and including Danny’s role, we oscillated between instant reaction to each other’s creative impulses in a fast moving section to times where the sounds were lyrical and appeared ‘composed’ to other moments where one of us subverted the other’s line of inquiry. Each of us led at some point in the performance. I am sure that I may have unconsciously acceded sometimes to Steve’s judgement to continue on and participate in developing his idea on a number of occasions, but there were many other occasions when I developed my own ideas.



## A brief analysis of performance placed in the context of the research questions

### *What are the frontiers of artistic collaboration?*

My first encounter with Steve in preparation for the first performance came with his invitation to walk around the space (theatre) and take in the height of the ceiling and everything around me. Then, he began to map the physical space in relation to the space our bodies inhabit. Steve walked towards me and then walked around me. He peered up at the ceiling and took a step back and then stared at me. A momentary awkwardness on my part, subsided, as he invited me to take note of where either of us was positioned at different vantage points in the theatre, sometimes close to each other and then at various distances from each other. We walked, we stopped, we paced quickly around the theatre.

Looking back, I understood I was being invited to reflect on all types of boundaries, the theatre, my own body, my spatial relationship to others around me and this was potential material for our work. As we continued our discussions, and then when the preparations for *Beginnings in the Dark* began, we spoke about other types of boundary relating to our artistic practice and our role as artists. Steve, in experimenting with his voice, stretched the boundaries of what sounds can be produced using the human voice. Correspondingly, for this performance, I experimented with how to find new ways to make sounds on the piano, apart from using the keyboard. I was endeavouring to go beyond the traditional limits of the instrument and consequently altering the boundaries of how sounds are produced on a piano in an effort to discover new sounds and new ideas for my work.<sup>20</sup> Apart from this intention, I also experienced a level of uncertainty in the ‘liveness’ of the space which contributed to what undiscovered sounds might materialise by being open and by pushing the limits of what potential sounds the piano can produce. After the performance, what I realised is that disciplinary frontiers as I perceived them at the outset of the collaboration with Steve, shifted as time went on because in free collaborative improvisation the boundaries are always shifting and remain blurred. The example from 16:06 onwards, outlined above, reveals that there is no sharp dividing line between my role and Steve’s as we test the boundaries with unspoken prompts and cues and sensory information that arrives into the space. My ‘insistent’ and spontaneous rhythmic strumming on the piano strings with my knuckles results in a particular response with frantic

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<sup>20</sup> I am not the first artist to make explorations of the kind, e.g. John Cage with his prepared piano, and then John Oliver using materials on strings and many other electron-acoustic composers who have experimented with transcending the boundaries of the ‘classical’ piano.

noises issued forth from Steve. From my observations there were different layers of interaction in the performance space from minimal to rapid changes in the music from simply responding to a sound to the complexity of 16:06 where our receptors were attuned to sensory information and ‘unconscious and embodied knowledge ‘which characterised and identified the segment. The contrast between this section and the immediacy of the pounding chords that I began to play on the piano which followed immediately at 17:15 revealed that the score is constantly changing and as a consequence the boundaries not only shift but ultimately it is their blurred, undefinable nature that is unravelled. The creative impulse to play these pounding chords to expand a new idea is not a conscious decision on my part and this is something I am beginning to reflect on in my practice since.

In embarking on the preparations for *Beginnings in the Dark*, I thought about what I wanted to achieve in this part of the research and this guided the process. I wanted to be liberated from predetermined ideas about my music making, what had shaped me in the past and to radically change my practice. The opportunity to work on an improvisation has proved valuable in providing me with new material and it has alerted me to how the dynamics of boundaries and how they behave are an integral part of this collaborative process when I endeavour to describe what is happening in this performance.

### ***What is the space of improvisation?***

Gary Peters in his insightful work *The Philosophy of Improvisation* states that when examining the concept of improvisation the aim is not ‘to describe or explain improvisatory practice but to reveal how it comes into being...’ (Peters 2011, pp. 149–50). The word ‘reveal’ captures much of how I would describe the making of this improvised piece as it unfolded as a continuous process of revealing new things in the performance.

In the last part of *Beginnings in the Dark* while Steve remained on stage and I prepared to depart (which mirrors how the piece opened), a melancholic and delicate line of sound was revealed in the final ‘duet’ of the performance before I departed (27:00-28:05). Gathering my thoughts, having observed the recording a number of times and recalling how I experienced this segment, I wrote,

*My own experience of this ‘meditation’ is that there is something unknowable in the documenting of this score, the ephemeral and beautiful moments that transpire in the course of the performance. I cannot explain how Steve and I played this segment, feeling our way through the score as if it had been designed somewhere else and arrived*

*to us perfectly formed. As with any artist I wanted to repeat this moment again but it had vanished, come into being and then dissolved into the nothingness from whence it came.*

By the time the process was completed for this part of the research, I had discerned that the space I occupied with Steve in the performance, the space of improvisation, had altered my comprehension of performance. *Beginnings in the Dark* is an artistic work governed by the fact it only existed in the space and time when it was performed live and cannot be known except by experiencing it live. The piece is original, in essence, because it is an unrepeatable artistic performance. It is unrepeatable because it is ephemeral and cannot be replayed – at least not ‘to the letter’ and in the sense it was intended in the first place, that is, as an improvisation.

The complexity of an improvisation is that the process of its making, the creating of it in real time, happens while it is simultaneously materialising in the space. This can lead to what I considered a surprise in the performance, like the section (27:00-28:05) which is plaintive and evocative and this part impacted on me, profoundly. However, the freedom in the space to generate new ideas brings with it a level of insecurity, of unpredictability, which was a challenge for me. Putting into practice the idea of performing while creating a new idea at the same time is challenging as it is a new way of approaching my practice. For example, I closed the piano lid between 14:50 – 16:05 and it was a decisive moment, complete and dramatic. While the piano lid was closed, it was an opportunity to explore other parts of the instrument. Nonetheless it was unexpected and a risk because I did not know if it would obstruct our flow at that point in the performance. However, I listened attentively and began to generate my own responses by tapping the underside of the piano, holding down the sostenuto pedal while hitting the body of the piano which created a beautiful array of harmonics from inside the piano that permeated the theatre, lingered and then died away. I wrote later about this episode: ‘*Under close observation the elements in this part are connecting in unexpected ways as both the vocal and the percussive piano sounds alter the sounding in the performance quite dramatically*’.

The output was quite different to what had gone before and reinforces the idea that my openness and sometimes my courage to experiment, to take risks in the performance brought the performance into a unique space of sounds and responses to sounds.

In another section at 08:54, Steve takes the ‘t’ sound – extracted from the word ‘out’ – and repeats it a number of times in a rhythmic pattern. The ‘t’ sound is offered in the space and I pick up the thread of this idea to continue the line of inquiry. In a short space of time we are

witnessing how this process is marked by words becoming fragmented, formed and then randomly disconnected from the original texts and this unpredictability gives life to new lines of inquiry that emerge between the voice and piano.

The section at 23:01 is where I begin a new idea and Steve waits and listens and I remember feeling exposed. My overriding desire was to offer cues to Steve, where he could enter into the inquiry with me, but he held back. As I developed the idea on my own, I had a feeling of uncertainty about how the idea might transition and I was losing my confidence because there appeared to be nothing of interest in this idea so I closed it down. I replaced it with a more gripping and energetic motif and this was another invitation for Steve to respond to this new idea. Observing the recording my sounds become louder as if I was trying to attract Steve's attention. Steve appeared to decline my idea and at 24:00 my second idea died away and Steve then began to utter a new line of poetic text. I think Steve may have wanted to give me the space to develop an idea on my own but the 'not knowing' what is happening gave me a sense of feeling dislocated from the collaboration. However, Steve might simply have been creating spaces for my own ideas to be themselves and I think it is important to acknowledge other possibilities of interpretation.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter 3 opened with an overview of the journey I undertook over two years to develop new strands to my artistic practice. There followed a section on my aims and creative ideas for the first performance and the introduction of the poetic texts from Steve and how they were integrated into the work. There was a concise account of the rehearsal process and what ideas emerged in the rehearsals. The section on the performance itself examined my approach to the work, my impressions and observations, by using a number of examples which explain what insights I had about what was happening during the performance and how creative decisions were made. This was followed by a description of the roles played by Steve and I during the performance. I included a brief account of the question and answer session with the audience immediately after the performance.

I subsequently analysed the performance in the context of the two research questions. Firstly, what are the frontiers of artistic collaboration?

From my observations and assessment of *Beginnings in the Dark* I noted that the multiple and diverse exchanges that took place between Steve and myself demonstrated that our roles are

flexible and the boundaries shift and to an extent dissolve from one episode to the next because of the unpredictability of the score. Raising questions regarding what are the frontiers in collaboration reveals the complexity of what a boundary means. Is it the frontiers or boundaries established by each artist in relation to her/his own experience and disciplinary insight? Or is it established by the negotiation of the materials (pre-existing and unfolding) between the two artists? If I establish that there are no boundaries between the disciplines in an inter-disciplinary process perhaps what is happening is that we are negotiating the boundaries constantly.

The second question which was examined in relation to the performance was what is the space of improvisation? From my experience of what I encountered during the performance I became increasingly aware of the complexity of my interactions in the collaborative space and the originality of my artistic output. The space of improvisation is unstable, ever-changing and transient and as a performer in this collaborative setting I have learned that there are an infinite number of possibilities available to me as an improviser to alter my approach to my practice in search of new creative ideas.

I will endeavour to further advance my research on collaboration from what I have gleaned in this process into the preparations for the second performance which is presented and documented in chapter 4.

## Chapter Four:

### Findings II: Flux: Five Iterations of Becoming

#### Introduction

This chapter focuses on the second and final performance as part of the requirement for the Arts Practice PhD. The opening part of the chapter depicts how the creative process is approached for the second performance and how the initial contributions from the three participants in the project give an insight into the conditions which enable new creative ideas to evolve. In the second part of the chapter, there is an account of the performance itself, with examples from the audio-visual recording which capture pivotal moments in the performance which I interpret as offering insight into the complexity of the interactions between the collaborators in the live space. Here, I examine and reflect on my role and creative input in the decision-making during the process and how my input influences the dynamic of this, predominantly, improvised work. As in chapter 3, the audio-visual recording of the performance is in time-marked sections, with these sections, in italics, providing insight and reflection on my observations and experience of the recording of the performance. The Question and Answer session which took place immediately after the performance between the performers and the audience reveals the extent to which the audience engage with the performance and the degree to which their experience of the event is reflected in their feedback. Lastly, there is an assessment of how the second performance further advances my understanding of the research questions: what are the frontiers of artistic collaboration and what is the space of improvisation which we occupy in live performance and what I understand thus far about the collaborative process.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The separate volume of appendices which accompanies this thesis contains transcripts of recordings of our discussions during the preparations for the second performance and is a comprehensive source of information as to how the creative process unfolded.

## **An overview of the collaborative journey**

I set out in the preparations for *Flux: Five Iterations of Becoming* to observe and document how the collaboration progressed from the initial stages until the live event. By this, I wanted to evaluate to what extent this artistic experience which followed on from the previous performance would yield new insights and new data in order to support the current research.

The process which led to the first performance was very rewarding and almost immediately afterwards I began to think about what choices I wanted to make, in terms of who I would collaborate with on the second performance. My instinct was that, by engaging with Steve for a second time, it would, not only establish a continuity in the research, but would deepen the exploration since we had already established a productive collaborative relationship and I had learned much in the process. Moreover, my perception of my role had altered positively from when I started working with Steve at the outset, thus I felt confident that I was coming into this process with a lot more experience and a different attitude to the work as a consequence. When I asked if he would be interested in a second collaboration, Steve embraced the opportunity wholeheartedly.

I had planned to expand the collaborative arrangement to include an artist from another discipline along with Steve because I wanted to explore collaboration, not only from an intra-disciplinary vantage point, but also from an inter-disciplinary perspective. I also hoped that a collaboration with more than one discipline would provide new data for the research. I discussed the idea of engaging a choreographer with Óscar because of my experience of working with a number of choreographers in the past. He suggested that I approach Mary Wycherley, a choreographer and film-maker who has an improvisatory practice. I met with Mary and outlined the project and the context of the research and she came on board with much enthusiasm for the kind of research with which I was engaged.

Mary Wycherley is a contemporary dance artist and choreographer, based in Ireland, whose work embraces live performance, film, and installation. About her own practice Mary spoke of her passion for ‘what the body and movement is’ (Appendix 7). She made the radical choice to step back from her practice as a dance artist and began to use film to record her dance movements as a means to analyse her work. Mary endeavoured to find some answers in and through her film-making. Her decision arose from a desire to move away from a ‘kind of performing’ that she no longer subscribed to, in favour of ‘letting something else be’ so that

she might understand the fundamental question behind her desire to perform as a dance artist. This exercise continued over a 10-year period and, in that time, she began to consolidate a frame for a different kind of practice, which enabled Mary to resume her work as a performing artist and choreographer.

In January 2019, I spent a day with Mary exchanging ideas about why we create and how we create artistic work. It was a very useful introduction and it was an opportunity to speak about potential ideas for the second performance. Mary proposed that we might create a number of short improvised pieces, that this might be worthwhile in gathering a variety of perspectives on collaboration in terms of the research. Getting to know how Mary expressed herself artistically was the first step and it was enriching for me to discover Mary's experience as an artist.

In February 2019, I met with Steve on his own to begin the preparations for the second performance. We immediately picked up from where we left off, with a suggestion from Steve that we explore the concept of working on one single piece. I noted that this idea was different to what Mary had proposed regarding having a number of short pieces in the performance. Steve shared his thoughts regarding the structure of a long improvisational piece and he pointed out that there is always the chance of losing the 'wider picture of what we are wanting to achieve' (Appendix 8) in a longer piece. Nevertheless, he still favoured this idea over short improvised pieces, as proposed earlier by Mary. I had similar thoughts about the strengths and weaknesses of a longer piece, which is what I opted for as my choice for this project.

At the meeting with Steve, he opened up a conversation about the possibility of including the poetic texts in the second performance. Unlike, the first performance, where I was unsure about using the texts, I thought that, if they could be utilised in a completely different way in the second performance, then it might be worth exploring. Although my initial response was negative, I did not convey this to Steve at the time. He made the suggestion that the poetic texts might have primacy over the sound score or that the sound score would include 'dropping in' text at various intervals. I questioned whether this would steer the work away from the improvisational model we had established previously. Steve emphasised that, in his opinion, 'we are not tied to kind of puristic intention here, which is concerned only with free improvisation' (Appendix 8) and he said he was happy to 'fix partially'. What occurred to me, in the first instance, was that I had not given due consideration to the fact that the first performance included fixed and unfixed parts. With this in mind, it gave me scope to



encompass a greater range of ideas and possibilities and what I concluded would be a more experimental approach to my creative practice by using a hybrid of fixed and unfixed elements in future work.

One of the early challenges which presented itself was that Mary suffered an injury prior to the start-up phase of the project, with the result being that she would no longer be able to participate, as she would not be able to dance while her injury healed. Without the possibility to postpone the project, I began to explore the idea with her of using film instead of dance in the project, as Mary had much experience in this area. She spent time reflecting on whether this new proposal would work and came back with some ideas that she thought would assist in how we might adopt film as a medium for the second performance. Mary said she could offer a series of short films that she had recorded prior to entering the process, which I could assess regarding how they might be inserted into the process as material for the second piece.

### *Our first encounter in the rehearsal room*

We met as three artists together to explore ideas for the second performance in April 2019. We sat together in Theatre 2 and Steve made the opening comment:

We all know as performers that before we perform, we've already started the process of what we might call consecration. We have appointed a time and a place and we agree to be there together and then we arrive in the space. We take account of the space and we've already in a sense started to make (Appendix 7)

This was a signpost for how we would proceed on our creative journey. The collaboration and the making of the piece had already begun by meeting together to participate in the work. The discussion moved on to examine what the best approach to working towards this type of performance would be. Mary gave the example of how she warms up in the studio, preparing the body but explaining that the process is so much more than preparing the body:

And you know, warm-up in some ways with dance, of course, it has a function in that you prepare the body...but on so many levels, [it is] so much more than that of course... the warm-up is the preparation for the performing. So it is part of the whole process of the work, whether it's the performing or the preparing to perform or the making...It shifts this question of what's important ...that we might put value on as important or the significant part of a process, it shifts that thinking entirely because...the preparation and the finding in a warm-up...you arrive into a space. You're ... taking the space in (Appendix 7).

In terms of ‘the making’, ‘the preparation for the performance’, and ‘the performing’, these different stages shifted the question towards another line of inquiry about what is important and what is necessary in the making of a piece. I took note of how Mary explicated what it means to prepare and perform - arriving into a space, taking it in, observing and listening, and I understood that being alert to these components are vital in drawing out new ideas in this type of creative process.

Steve also remarked that he has long since abandoned those mechanical preparations and the warm-up as a voice artist, and he explained that when he reflects on space he perceives it, not only as being located in a physical place where the preparation/rehearsal or performance takes place, but as a metaphor for finding a new space to inhabit, where there is attention to finding those creative moments that we access in order to allow a piece to develop. The idea of ‘space’ – what images and meaning are contained in this rich concept – resonated with me because it enabled me to articulate how we collaborate in a live context.

Regarding her own improvisatory practice, Mary said that, ‘if we deal with too much of what’s known, then we lose the sense of risk in the moment of performing’ (Appendix 7). I became aware that in whatever way our work proceeded we needed to be mindful of the fact that our preparations might lead us to being over-prepared and that might reduce our capacity for the creative spontaneity that characterises this type of live performance. According to Steve, in improvisation, we have ‘a broad intention but not a fixed goal’ (Appendix 7) and that is why it remains live and exciting for us as performers and for the audience as well.

What I encountered in my experience of the first performance was being articulated in the language of the exchanges for the second performance. Mary and Steve had distilled their experience of ephemerality and the unstable world of improvisation, over a long period of time, and articulated their experience through the body of their work. I grasped the opportunity to clarify my own thoughts about collaborative engagement, and through the many conversations and discussions I had a growing awareness of being mindful in the preparations of the potential for finding a space to generate new ideas together. The collaborative experience is complex because it relies on unknown quantities, but overall I understood more fully at the end of this part of the process what it means to collaborate with other artists within the context of an improvised piece.

## **A concise discussion of the aims and creative ideas**

### ***How the creative ideas were approached***

The principal aim in this part of the investigation was to observe and document the creative approach for the second performance and to evaluate how this might elicit some insights about artistic collaboration. One creative idea which I thought was useful in understanding the approach to this collaboration was Mary's desire to question outside her own practice, her own discipline, and to pare back the discussions to find the 'fertile ground to generate ideas to make the piece' (Appendix 7). For each of us, the commitment to step back from our own disciplinary framework in order to embrace this experience would bring something new and would shape how the piece would evolve. The creation of the piece would begin with an exchange of ideas essential to artistic discourse rather than our respective disciplinary considerations. At the outset, I had a degree of uncertainty about this approach because there was perhaps too much emphasis on discussing ideas and not enough on 'rehearsing' in my opinion. I was also anxious to ensure that the performance would reflect the inter-disciplinary elements that I sought to advance in the research. As time went on, I began to see the value in these profound artistic exchanges and how the openness in our discussions would impact on what followed on in the performance. Where the structure in a formal classical score, poem or a play allows the performers to shape their performance around a known or pre-determined form, this collaboration was contingent, not on this kind of structure, but on the relationship and communication of ideas as the means of 'structuring' the piece.

Steve understood the role of the improviser as an interpreter of what might come next in the performance. What pertains to this kind of collaborative process, according to Steve, is '...that artistic moment when something happens and it sparks something else, that moment of suggestion...intense suggestion' (Appendix 7). Once again, I had found images and metaphors in the language of the discourse which helped to shape my own role as improviser, a role that was still relatively new to me. Listening to the others strengthened my sense of self as an artist and this would influence and enrich my role in this process.

The conversation led to a discussion on the nature of improvisation and ephemerality and what this means in performance, when everything just created, disappears. This concept resonated with me much earlier when I met Steve first and I spent a number of occasions creating improvised duets of voice and piano which I wanted to retain but which were no more and could not be repeated. However, I was consoled by what Mary described as the 'information'

that remains after the performance, as having ‘gone into store’ and then later on folds into the next thing and it reveals itself in new work, not necessarily in the same way but in a way that it becomes part of our embodied knowledge. From my point of view, and in respect of the research, I wanted to understand how this would be possible. It required a deeper reflection on what was meant specifically when terms like ‘information’ or ‘knowledge’ were employed to identify artistic output. The discussions led on to the traceable information that can be found after a performance, a kind of knowledge that is embodied, retained and which might resurface at a later time. The idea of embodiment came into greater focus for me as I envisaged how the corporeal, the body as a material object, was a channel for how we interact in an improvised performance. How I expressed myself creatively during both performances was imbued with gestures, movement, and emotion that I understood implicitly and which informed what sounds I made and how I communicated with the other performers.

## **The first part of the rehearsal process**

### ***Crafting the work together***

The initial discussions for the second performance focused on how the introduction of another discipline might influence the development of the research. We explored the term ‘trajectory’ and how the use of poetic language would enable us to grapple with this and other key concepts that arose in the discourse. We understood the goal was to construct an experience that would encompass the idea of the ‘unexpected’ which is core to an improvisatory process. This would be manifested by ‘unfixing’ how the space would be conceived by the audience literally and metaphorically.

Clarifying how the work might develop, Mary said that ‘it is very different to have a duet to having a trio’ and thus it was essential to find out, ‘what are the new things that I am [Eugene] exploring in terms of the research in relation to the second performance’ (Appendix 7). Mary was referencing her entry into the collaborative process. She suggested that there is a ‘turn’ that needed to happen from where the first performance was, and that decisions need to be made in relation to that to get to the next stage. I was grateful for this intervention, as it challenged me to reflect on what changes I perceived with Mary’s presence and contribution in the collaboration and what I would hope to explore further. Certainly, the inter-disciplinary scope of the collaboration was very important in how it compared to the first collaboration with Steve. Although I was not sure what ‘new things’ I might discover or what ‘turn’ needed to

take place, the broad frame of reference was there, with the addition of another discipline. As such, I had every opportunity to observe what would evolve in this new arrangement.

I was able to refer back to *Beginnings in the Dark* when we endeavoured to envision how creative ideas are generated in an improvised performance. Describing what happens between the performers during performance was an important starting point in the rehearsal part of this process. This included defining the term trajectory as the place from where the seed of an idea in sound or movement takes off and is developed, as well as what is understood by trajectory when improvising with other performers. Sometimes the language we used was more poetic because it was impossible to comprehensively describe in analytical terms what was happening. For example, the discussion included phrases like ‘leaning into the possibility of intersection’, ‘transitional moments that carry with it its own suggestion’, ‘the potential of the colliding of these things’ (Appendix 7). These descriptions relate to live creative ideas of sound, movement, and image that we generate and respond to in the performance. The challenge is that because the interactions are layered and complex we have no other choice but to step into the realm of the poetic to express something of what we are experiencing. Moreover, there are sometimes no words, neither prose nor poetry, that can adequately express some of the artistic exchanges and responses which appear in a live context and our sense of what we are expressing experientially is beyond what we can say. Despite knowing that there would be some moments in the performance that would remain outside the scope of what I could analyse, those moments would still form part of the fabric of the piece and remain central to how I experienced the collaborative process.

Deep rooted in the discussions was the sense that the piece had much to do with making an experience, creating a world, both for the performers and the audience, and that decisions needed to be made in order to set up the potential elements that would create the experience. We spoke about the challenge of the theatrical setting in creating experience, as the audience often come with the expectation of being given some meaning and that the performers would have a defined meaning to convey to them.

The discussions began to focus on concepts in relation to the actual performance such as ephemerality, space, time, becoming, ‘fixing’ and ‘unfixing’, which had been introduced at the outset. Mary gave an example of how, in a previous piece, she had used an art gallery as the space for performance because the audience, upon entering the gallery, would have completely different expectations to entering a theatre and this different type of environment to a theatre

supported how the work might be perceived by the audience. Theatre 1 at The Irish World Academy, where the second performance was to take place, is larger and more flexible than the Tower Theatre where the first performance took place, and we thought about the idea of completely clearing the space and literally unfixing it from how it is conventionally laid out. The concept of ‘unfixing’ in our creative process would coincide with the idea of unfixing the physical space and this would reinforce the vision for the piece as encompassing the unexpected.

Apart from exploring how to shape the theatre space, there was the question of how to use the poetic texts because text is versatile as it can be visualised, as well as read or vocalised. We discussed the possibility of using projected images of text inside the theatre thus giving them a sculptural dimension which was not previously present. We would explore this later on when we knew what technical requirements were needed to make this happen. This gave rise to other questions related to space design - how to configure ourselves, as performers, in the space in relation to the audience? Would we remain static or would we move around the space? I sensed that we had an opportunity to explore how we could be physically closer to the audience or at least that we might move away from a directional approach between performer and audience. We could experiment with the space, taking away the certainty of the expectation of theatrical space and how it is read. By creating a new space that is alien to the performers, we would enter an unfamiliar setting where we naturally would want to assess the space. ‘All of our receptors are wide open because we want to try and figure out...[it’s a] primal response’ (Appendix 7).

## **The second part of our rehearsal process**

### ***Practical considerations for the purpose of performance***

By May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2019, when we reconvened with our preparations we had elaborated on some of the ideas from the earlier discussions relating to projection of text, use of video, and changing the layout of the theatre.

We held a meeting with Dr. Alan Dormer, the senior technical officer at the Irish World Academy where we explained that we would like to have the opportunity to project text randomly around the theatre, on screens but also on the floor, and to project text onto the performers as part of the idea to create an immersive environment. Alan suggested we use a

software programme to achieve this effect and that we would be able to test this in the final week of rehearsals.

In reference to the preparation of film content, Mary said the best option was to have a range of text images and a 'palette' of videos to choose from and then the decisions about how to use them could be made prior to the performance. Mary was referring to the different short films she had made over a period of time, prior to our collaboration, moving images that capture her inner voice as a dance artist, some of which feature movement *per se*. – e.g., a black and white film of the movement of branches and trees in the wind. Some of the films use translucent images, a dancer's movements captured enigmatically, coming into focus and dissolving away. Sometimes there is a hint of colour and other times part of the film is in full colour, which changes the ambience. Some segments of footage are dramatic, involving fast editing that creates strong movement dynamics, while other contrasting images move at a slower pace. I was excited by the prospect of using this material which I knew would be a rich source from which to generate new ideas in the performance.

A conversation took place about how we might envisage the texts and short films being used in the piece. The potential of 'live choosing' came to the fore, as a means of improvising, using both the texts and films. There would then be a 'liveness' about Mary's contribution, noting that Mary would be in the background during the performance but would have an impact by having the freedom to choose images live in relation to what she was experiencing at the time. Steve said that the 'live choosing of video' (v-jing), a real time improvised video mix during performance, would be an innovative solution to allow the three artists to perform live together. We explored a number of options regarding how the film footage would be inserted into the piece – whether the films would appear on a loop throughout the performance, whether there would be occasional insertion in between sections of the sound score or whether there was a way to use the images to respond to and interact with the sound score.

And you could make a case therefore for saying that the important presence in the space all the way through the piece is image. So it could be that, you know, that the screen, that the footage [Mary's] just loops right through the piece and that we find various ways of relating to it (Appendix 5).

In addition, the deconstructing of the texts, using projected images of words that move, change and reform, would reinforce one of the central ideas of this collaboration: that the work itself

comprising of the sonic, visual, and spatial elements would be deconstructed in function of revealing a unique and original score.

### *The final preparations*

In the final week before the performance, our task was to set out the practical details for the performance. In terms of the 'journey' through the space in the performance, Steve explained that he might deliver different stanzas at various points in the theatre and, in response, Mary said she could facilitate a feedback/response on that while she was watching it live. However, we all recognised that it would not be possible to map these interactions in the same way as a rehearsal for a conventional performance because of the improvisatory element of the work. It might be the case of observing a partial rehearsal, once and, in seeing it, Mary would respond observing how Steve reacted organically within the space. Steve and Mary agreed that, in order to avoid consolidating anything that might appear fixed, we could walk through the space, getting a sense of this idea, being mindful of not fixing but finding ways of guiding each other to find out how best to bring forward particular ideas in performance. I was keenly aware of not observing too closely anything that was displayed prior to the actual performance in case this hindered the spontaneous and unrehearsed approach required in this investigation. In retrospect, I thought this was a good idea. I remember entering the space at the opening of the performance feeling that the space was unfamiliar and I believe this had an influence on how I responded creatively.

As part of how the space was mapped for the performers, we contended with where the two pianos would be placed. Óscar (who joined the conversation) spoke about that 'old codified relationship' between piano and voice which we had contended with in the first performance. By placing the pianos away more remotely in the space would consolidate the concept of installation. Likewise, we spent time deliberating on how the performers might engage with the space and this resulted in the suggestion that some of the performance could take place off stage. This could lead the audience to think that the space we constructed was something other than a 'concert'.

Once again Danny (sound engineer) agreed to come on board towards the latter stages of the project and I explained what we proposed for *Flux: Five Iterations of Becoming*. Practically, the scope of the project was much greater in terms of the size of the space, the fact that there were two grand pianos in the theatre and screens at various points in the theatre. It was a more



detailed technical role for Danny. As with the first performance I asked Danny if he would make his own choices regarding the sonic element and I suggested he respond with his interpretation. I felt the impact of his choices the moment I played the first note because Danny had put a ‘delay’ effect on the piano. The single note which I played rang out and repeated a number of times, filled the theatre and then dissipated. This initial sound influenced the musical choices I made and I remember being stimulated creatively by what I heard which enabled me to respond intuitively. At various moments throughout the performance, Danny opted for different sound effects. For example, during the performance, I moved from one piano to another and, when I began to play the second piano, it did not have any sound effects on it. My impression was that I was playing a completely different instrument both in terms of the sounds emanating from the piano and how they were being filtered by Danny. On reflection, I do not underestimate the role Danny played. To step into a collaborative process requires an acknowledgement that creative input extends to all of those who participate in it.

### **An Account of the second performance**

#### ***May 31<sup>st</sup> ‘The ‘get in’***

May 31<sup>st</sup> 2019 arrived, which was the date set for my second performance. I talked about how it might be a continuation of our explorations from the first performance and how Mary’s participation, as a dance artist and choreographer, would give further insight into our collaborative process.

I remember some vivid moments during the set-up on the day. There were quite a number of technical people in the theatre, sound and light checks, film/video and software checks. From my small world of composition this was preparation for a grand opus. From the profound discourse that had taken place over a number of months, we were stepping into the space to grapple with and continue our discourse in performance. We had no idea what would resonate with the audience, what they would capture from the drama of our artistic exchanges and what might be awoken in us from the immersive environment we had carefully created for both the performers and audience.

#### ***Flux: Five Iterations of Becoming***

The title of the piece, *Flux: Five Iterations of Becoming*, relates to the set of five texts/stanzas which Steve wrote prior to the preparations for the first performance and which contributed to

the process for both performances. The texts are a meditation on ‘becoming’ and our existential predicament as human beings. They are described as ‘iterations’ to reflect the repetition of the idea of ‘becoming’ throughout the texts. The word ‘Flux’ in the title captures the essence of the whole work as a process of ‘becoming’.

The performance took place at 7pm, on November 31<sup>st</sup> May, 2019 in Theatre I, The Irish World Academy, University of Limerick. As the crowd gathered outside the theatre, the flyer for the programme was projected onto a large screen (Appendix 2). The visual for the flyer was inspired by the title of the work. I used an edited photograph of a portrait of my daughter that I was working on, using oil paint on canvas. The image expresses the idea of flux because I split the portrait into two parts: it is blurred on one side of the face to indicate the notion of movement and the idea of ‘becoming’, while the other side of the face is in focus to accentuate the idea of ‘coming into being’.

Inside the theatre, there were three screens where the audience could view the visuals: a large permanent screen opposite the doors of the theatre plus two smaller screens placed at fixed vantage points in the central space of the theatre to give access to the audience to the variety of different images selected live during the performance. I chose to have two grand pianos situated in the theatre but neither was in the geometrical centre of the space. Firstly, I believed the two pianos enhanced the installation in this choreographed space. Secondly, I thought that it would add a theatrical dimension where the audience would endeavour to ‘figure out’ out what was going on as they entered the space. My idea was to play both pianos during the performance and I prospected that by being situated at two different pianos at various times would stimulate different creative possibilities.

The seating was clustered around the theatre so there was no single vantage point ‘better’ than another one and it allowed the audience to absorb the immersive environment in which they found themselves. The audio-visual recording of the performance which included two cameras captures to a large extent how the work was presented. However, the recording has limitations because sometimes different films were displayed simultaneously on different screens which the video recording was unable to capture.

The commentary below documents segments of the recording which I observed and examined on a number of occasions, along with an audio-visual recording of audience feedback in a Question and Answer session, which followed immediately after the performance. I use timing

references (minutes and seconds) to mark and separate out different parts of the recording, to highlight moments of interest or significance in the performance. I have used italics for those sections that describe my impression/reaction/reflection on specific parts of the recording which also includes a description of memories and feelings that resonated from my experience and memory of the performance itself.

### ***The Performance – Flux: Five Iterations of Becoming***

There was no doubt from the outset of the performance that the introduction of film as another discipline into the collaboration was having immediate impact. The theatre was completely silent and an air of calm had descended with the simple back and forth movement of ‘long sheets’ projected on the ‘folding’ screen. On my deferred entry, I sat and began to respond to the mood of the dimly-lit theatre with the moving image displayed to my right. The lighting was purposely subdued so attention would be focused on the multiple elements and how they would interact rather than highlighting the performers themselves. Likewise, my deferred entry and Steve’s later on was a means to displace the conventional view of how we might be perceived by the audience. I treaded lightly with the slow emergence of single notes from the piano, amplified by Danny, the sound engineer. Danny had put a delay on the piano which allowed those single notes to fill the theatre, repeat and fall away. I looked intently towards the white moving sheets for inspiration. The first impact of our inter-disciplinary exchange struck me, that the risk in this moment resulting in my response to the projected images arose from being affected by those images. The new dimension of film broadened the scope of what might materialise in the space. This contrasted with the intra-disciplinary discourse from the first performance which had a simpler landscape of sound and image. Image relates not to a visual image but refers to an abstract understanding of ‘image’ that enriches the process – the idea of ‘image’ as emergent which is accessed as it unfolds in performance but which is elusive by virtue of its ephemerality.

There are two notable sections which illuminate interesting points relating to the performance. Firstly, in what way this work is an example of and represents an inter-disciplinary process and secondly, what constitutes the role of the artist in this unique and specific space.

#### **Section I (at 22:20).**

An image of the dancer appears on one of the smaller screens. It is an ethereal moment as I observe and respond to facets of the dancer’s movement. Steve responds too with a delicate

lyrical line and then the intimacy of this scene fades as the image of the dancer dissolves into moving abstract colours corresponding to and reinforcing the ephemerality of the discourse. The segment continues and the sounds are layered and textured. I felt at the time how seamlessly I was able to generate new ideas from the various elements I encountered which were interconnecting and weaving their way on this journey of sound and image. These interconnections which I experienced and which were generated as a result of our interdisciplinary engagement were spontaneous and visceral. At 24:38 I sounded a bass note on the piano which Mary appeared to respond to with a fast moving image of a dancer on the large screen. Everything is transfigured with the choice of a bold and cinematic image, a giant silhouette of a dancer. As a fast moving image, it signifies the sheer immediacy of the experience and my challenge is my capacity to respond to it. I watched intently and absorbed the magnitude of this image. It was an original and transformative moment in the performance.

#### Section II (at 26:40).

A new idea emerges immediately after the previous section outlined above. Steve has moved position in the space and is making curious short bursts of sound and with the repeat on his voice the whole space is enveloped with this dramatic soundscape. Steve then proclaims the words 'Bare Bones' and the sound surges with the suggestion of a rhythmic pattern emerging due to the delay effect on the voice. Mary responds instantly, choosing what are perhaps the most gripping visuals of the performance, a fast moving edit of the dancer in quick sequence shots which correspond to the intensity and pattern of the sounds. I wait, listen, and observe. At this point the sounds and images are one, in perfect unity and I am listening and watching and absorbing what is happening. Everything is inherently connected at this point and with each encounter there is more surprise and a newness that is drawn from the inter-disciplinary transformations which are defining my perception of the space as I am immersed in it. The vocal sounds become more desolate and the images on the screen are sombre. Reaching this nadir, such depths of isolation and despair transmitted through the score, I am moved to play quite a dramatic chord on the bass part of the piano which enters quite abruptly and I cannot determine why I chose this chord other than I was moved by the desolation evoked by the image and sound which emanated from the other performers. The expression 'I struck a chord' aptly describes how I was at one and attuned to the desolation communicated by the other performers.

What is intriguing about the section leading up to playing this chord is that from the moment I stepped away from the first piano at 26:13 until I played this chord on the second piano at 28:54 was a period of 2' 40". I remained, silent and listened in this part of the performance yet my memory was that I was completely at ease observing everything around me, taking in the information and waiting for a new creative impulse to arrive, to take the seed of a new idea and offer it to the other artists when that idea came to me. It was a vastly different experience to the first performance where I sometimes felt awkward or was distracted at various times which can obstruct the freedom and openness required to shape the unexpected as it arrives. I had a sense that as a performer one needs to be always ready for what comes next. I also understood that my role as an artist is governed, not only by what I generate, but by my presence in the space and my capacity to be an open channel in the space. Being attentive and alert to what emerges is something authentic that constitutes a greater role as an artist that solely creating sounds. The role is measured perhaps by the affect we construct in the space by our collective presence and also by our silence as well as our sounding. The affective moments are an essential part of that desire as an improviser to have a profound understanding at every level of what is happening in order to be able to participate in this complex collaboration.

In the very last segment of the performance Steve begins on his own with the words, "a voice/ a voice unfastens itself" as I make my way to the first piano again. My moving back to the first piano is my way of unfixing what has just taken place and that is replaced with a fragile and restrained line of inquiry that distills the emotion from all that has taken place already. The piece ends poignantly with the moving branches, the last element left in the performance, fading away in time.

*The image "unfastens" suggests the loosening of ties, the letting go and allowing something to move on or fade away. In poetic terms, it may signal death and Steve repeats this line and gently utters "and enters" twice. This brief part of the performance is in quiet repose and the beautiful images on screen, the branches of the trees, capture my mood, as they move quietly but insistently, intertwined with fragments of melody on the piano. It is one last element of the unexpected in our discourse. I remember being affected by the moving images of the branches in these final moments of the performance and they provided material for what was the last segment of the score. I felt a 'oneness' with those images, reflecting on what they were revealing to me as the piece came to a close.*

This reflexive piece above captures what resonated with me, my own 'letting go' and how this began to shape my own aesthetic, my own way of being an artist in this environment. What we co-created was as a result of so many things, but the fundamentals for me of listening and waiting were pre-eminent in this particular process.

### **The creative decisions which I made during the performance**

It is important to outline choices and decisions that I made during the preparations in order to create a loose structure for the performance. During the rehearsals, we mapped out in the theatre where Steve would be situated at certain points during the performance. Nothing was timed but there was a sequence of Steve's movements from being out of sight at the opening of the performance to moving around the space during it. The movement from part of the theatre to another would coincide with the introduction of new parts of the text – although which texts would be used was not predetermined. Correspondingly, I decided I would move from the first to the second piano and back again during the performance but without prescribing when this might happen. Mary was not visible during the whole performance but worked from a number of laptop computers to provide the visual score from the back of the theatre. Roisin Berg, a technical assistant for The Irish World Academy used a piece of software on a laptop to provide the random projections of texts which was overseen by Mary. Against this backdrop of fixed elements the performance began, and the creative decisions, the unfixed elements, were not impeded as we would be able to improvise freely during the performance. From this, it is clear that the improvisation may be a play within limits.

The scale of the second performance was greater than the first and this required a different approach regarding how the piece would unfold. Spatially, Steve was 'off stage' or physically quite a distance from me, at times, during the performance and Mary was located remotely. This meant being more attentive to the presence of the live sounds and images presenting themselves rather than relying on the presence of the performers and this had a bearing on how the creative decisions were being made in the process. In the early stages of the performance my responses in sound were a little disjunctive, lacking connection with what was presented on screen. For example, from 04:00 – 06:30, I was engrossed with my own line of inquiry and although I was moved by the image of the dancer when it first appeared on the screen I was more preoccupied with what I was generating myself. I was finding my way into the creative space to be alive to the present moment but I had yet to reach that point of flow. There was a point of transition which came from my moving away from being preoccupied with my own part to being alive and attentive to everything around me as a reference to generate new material. It took time to get the balance right and I did have a similar experience in the first performance. As the performance proceeded, I began to have greater clarity as to where the piece was travelling and had a deepening awareness of searching beneath the surface for new ideas to offer in the performance. My impression is that many of my creative decisions were

derived from the affective connections I made from the sounds and images as they presented themselves and this is principally how I navigated my way through the piece.

One example is at 37:17. There is a tight connection between Steve's vocal line, my unselfconscious response and the collection of images which Mary had chosen alongside the sound score. The backdrop to Steve's plaintive sounds was an image of mountains and water to one side and on the top corner the image of a moving dancer. Simultaneously, on the 'folding' screen there was a green coloured abstract moving image projected on two parts of the screen while the middle part remained blank. It was a complex assemblage of images and sounds that encompassed the theatre and my responsiveness to these elements influenced how the score was being navigated. I remember I had a profound sense of desolation at this point in the performance and the same feeling was awoken in me when I returned to the audio-visual recording. It confirmed to me that the emotions which come to the surface in performance influence the outcomes to a great extent and this is what I witnessed and experienced in this performance.

### **A brief analysis of the performance placed in the context of the research questions**

#### ***What are the frontiers of artistic collaboration?***

In undertaking the preparations for *Flux: Five Iterations of Becoming*, I had a second opportunity to examine what happens in collaboration by extending the scope of the research beyond composition to include another discipline. By being able to step into new territories, to push beyond the expectations of the boundaries of our own discipline we were able, in this collaboration, to create a highly original piece and in so doing expand the space of discovery and finding.

One example of this is at 45:00. The moving rags and branches appear on the 'folding' screen while Steve's sounding becomes more abstract and glides upwards into an intense and manic moment against the backdrop of the branches. However, it is as if what appeared to me to be coming to a point of rest becomes restless once more, stirring up feelings of anxiety and despair reminiscent of previous sonic episodes in the piece. The vocal line begins to 'spin out of control' from 45:50 with perpetuated staccato noises eliciting unrestrained hysteria in the form of one last rallying cry. The piano sounds remain restrained, the images of the moving branches retain their bleakness and both elements appear to pull this trajectory inward and the vocal line dissipates and fades away. Looking back on this segment I wrote: 'The score oscillates between

two extremes of emotion, forming and reforming but never arriving at a fixed point – the plaintive images and minimal piano sounds were unperturbed while pitted against the cries from the vocal line’. In this part Steve completely disrupts my expectation of what is coming next and his creative impulses stretch beyond the boundaries to a new space of discovery to which we all belong in that moment. I did not know where the vocal line was leading and I was almost paralysed and not able to respond. In fact, when I replay this part of the recording I can see that I was momentarily stunned by what I was hearing and was challenged to find a way to insert my own sounding into this particular timbre of sounds. The bleak and doleful images of the branches on which I fixed my gaze remained a constant for me during this episode and reminded me that as artists, each one’s affective response does not always converge with the other but the spontaneity of the moment brings forth something unique within which we co-create together.

By finding and expanding the space of discovery, we are no longer bound by disciplinary lines and perhaps the experience of this second performance led me to a point where I would suggest that there are no frontiers in this work. As improvisers, the undetermined moments yet to be discovered may require the abandonment of frontiers. Otherwise, the exercise may become devoid of spontaneity and risk and the potential to create a unique artistic experience would be lost.

### ***What is the space of improvisation?***

In *Flux: Five Iterations of Becoming* there is an inextricable link between the performers, the performance space and the audience. Factors which influence the work relate to performativity - the dimension of installation that we constructed for the second performance - i.e. how we decided the arrangement of the chairs for the audience and their positioning in clusters around the theatre, where the two grand pianos would be placed relative to each other and relative to the audience, as well as the choice to position two screens in the performance space. These were the parts that we curated in the preparation for the second performance to provide an immersive experience for the audience. The introduction of Mary into the collaborative process undoubtedly expanded our vision for the work and revealed how the inter-disciplinary aspect of the work was deepened by her contribution. We employed a deconstructed methodology which offered the potential to experience and explore this space at a number of levels during the performance. We discussed in the preparations how the performers would be perceived as ‘almost enigmatic, peripheral, but slightly mysterious figures in the space’ (Appendix 5). A



central presence in the space throughout this piece was not the performers themselves or the immersive environment that we constructed, but the concept of image. The all-embracing idea of the piece as image is evident in how the performers interacted with the different elements which the audience also had the opportunity to experience and choreograph for themselves in the performance. This piece opened up the possibility to explore the concept of ‘image’ in an all-embracing way because in free improvisation there are no apparent rules and the space can be inhabited freely with anything that we decide entering the space whether individually or collectively. However, it could be contended that there are ‘rules’ in free improvisation but they are not easily graspable or recognisable and are perhaps embedded within the sonic identity of the performers and the choices they make during the performance. It is difficult to clarify what rules might be attributable to free improvisation.

The concept of flux is an all-embracing image which pertains to the characteristics of the work. It is mediated through the improvising of the poetic texts and how the texts are transformed into images randomly projected on screen by the live choosing of film footage, the enigmatic role of the performers and the concept of space as ever-changing, a concept that pervaded our whole discourse. On reflection, the space of improvisation where this collaborative engagement culminated is an indeterminate space which provided favourable conditions to advance our artistic aims and where I discovered a new way to develop my own practice.

## **Conclusion**

The first part of this chapter opened with an overview of the collaborative journey from the discussions to the performance of *Flux: Five Iterations of Becoming*. This was followed by an outline of the aims and creative ideas which emerged during the process and went on to describe what happened during the rehearsals. This was presented in two parts: the first strand of the rehearsals examined how the concepts that evolved during the discussions were envisioned for the performance in terms of space, audience, performer, film and the poetic texts; the second strand focused on what happened in the week leading up to the performance, the practical details that were considered about where the performers would be located in the theatre, how we set out to create an immersive space for audience and the technical deliberations around the projection of text and film footage as well as the spatial arrangements for these elements. An account of the performance followed with some examples from the recording which raised points relating to inter-disciplinarity and the role of the artist in an

improvised setting. There was a brief commentary on the feedback in the Question and Answer session which followed immediately after the performance.

The second part of the chapter I explored how the creative decisions were made during the live performance. It was followed by a brief analysis of the performance placed in the context of the research questions. Continuing on from chapter 3 I reflected on what is understood about the frontiers of artistic collaboration in the light of the second performance and what can be construed about space in this improvisatory process. Chapter 5 discusses what has emerged in chapters 3 and 4 that can give direction and insight into what happens when artists from different disciplines collaborate together.

## Chapter Five:

### Discussion

#### Introduction

In order to answer the research question of this thesis, two performative works were presented as part of the research: *Beginnings in the Dark* (November, 2018), and *Flux; Five Iterations of Becoming* (May, 2019). These two performances were undertaken in order to:

1. To investigate the frontiers when artists from different disciplines collaborate.
2. To investigate the concept of 'space' in improvisation.

The current study set out to examine how I engage collaboratively with other artists, with my overall goal being to understand more comprehensively what took place when artists from different disciplines gather together to create new work. This current chapter is a reflection on the insights, discoveries, and findings of this endeavour. In setting the context for it, there are two vantage points which are worth considering. Firstly, there is my personal and potent artistic experience as participant/performer/insider. Secondly, there is the analysis, observations, opinions, experiences, and theories as 'observer/outsider'. The aggregate of 'insider' and 'outsider' viewpoints will hopefully provide further insight into this investigation.

In the evolving collaborative dynamic along this journey, what emerged is a deepening awareness of how the process was unfolding, which led to greater discernment regarding what it means to 'unravel the frontiers of artistic collaboration'. The introduction of a 'pre-disciplinary' space, where the discourse began, and which leaves aside elements of disciplinary consideration, was the scaffold on which we endeavoured to make sense of the space we inhabited in the preparation for the performances. Identifying collaboration, as being an experiential and discursive space, shifted the initial disciplinary investigation onto a new pathway, which allowed for discussion across a range of concepts about 'space' itself and the nature of 'becoming' (which is an essential characteristic of this kind of process).

In addition, the notion of the Performance Space was intrinsic to and emerged from what had opened up in the Collaborative Space. The performance itself is the space where a range of creative ideas and elements would potentially surface and be interwoven in the making of the

piece. This involved a dialogue about the physical space in the theatre, the role of the audience, and how the concept of flux might be incarnated in the text, images, and sounds in the preparations.

## **Part I - The Collaborative Space**

### ***An exploration of space***

In exploring 'space', we often have a preconceived image of what that term means, but the idea in this specific case is that 'space' morphs into what it needs to be, in order for the collaboration to work, therefore the meaning of 'space' is malleable. Rather than setting out to explore 'space' in a disciplinary context relating to our work as artists, it is viewed through a 'pre-disciplinary' lens. The starting point is not the musical space, or from the point of view of the physical space or from how the body relates to a physical space which is specific to our artistic inquiry. Rather it is from an initial idea of the poetics of space. This idea of space is dependent on an understanding of the richness of the image and how 'space' as a concept is understood by me and the other participants within the realm of artistic practice. Crabtree (1994), referring to collaboration across different disciplines, makes a valuable observation regarding how this type of collaboration is shaped: 'In this research the conversation takes place...in a new common space and goes beyond and across what any one discipline offers. The idea is to create a new shared language' (pp.xiii-xiv). Crabtree's remarks on collaboration illustrates that the 'common space', in our case the Collaborative Space, is where 'a new shared language' emerges which identifies our mutual understanding of our unfolding experience in developing the work; how we might express the experiential parts of our process. In what we understood from our collaboration, the new 'common space' exists for the period of time that the collaboration exists. As such, that space is unique to and identifies that collaboration. The 'shared language' in this research is a metaphor for the discursive, for all meaning inferred, intuited, derived, spoken or unspoken from the discourse taking place, and for how the creative ideas for the work are blended, infused and intuited in the live performance. Sometimes we struggled to find language to articulate our experiences. Indeed, Mary, referring to ephemerality in performance, pointed out, *'it's really fascinating always to try and put words on these things'* and she also describes it as a battle, *'writing to clear something that's really slippery...Then it just falls away...in terms of my sense of it experientially'* (Appendix 7). There was an aspiration among us to express the purpose and meaning of the process through the poetic texts and the film segments as part of that gathering and quest, and to reinforce the

‘image’ that would somehow bring the performers and audience closer to understanding the experience of the artistic process as it happened.

As collaborators, we constructed a customised space which is ‘shared, conceptual and experiential’ and, as such, each new collaboration that we enter into can be identified as having its own unique space.

### ***Determining the reality of space we inhabit***

Smollen (2021) examines from a scientific viewpoint the fundamental question of the nature of space, whether it is a framework or ‘an aspect of reality that grows out of a network of relationships of causality of change’. In the qualitative frame of this current research, it might be possible to transfer Smollen’s scientific question of space based on relationships and causation. The process of causing something to happen is related to the network of relationships which form and determine the reality of space. If this is the case, can it be inferred that each artistic collaboration is a unique reality based on a specific network of relationships among the participants, as well as the elements in space and time which cause something to happen? In the Collaborative Space, it is the relationship among the participants that generates new creative work through different media (sound, image, text). By affirming that the creative space is uniquely established in each collaboration, based on the network of relationships, then it might be possible to postulate that a new and unique space is created each time a collaboration is established. With this concept of space then, each collaboration is distinctive and cannot be repeated. There is only the space that is occupied and defined by the network of relationships among the artists and the elements which become the materials for the work and that impact on the work.

Does the use of the term ‘discipline’ distort and limit the capacity of what is happening in collaborative process and should the question be raised as to whether the terms disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity which were the initial focus of this inquiry, fully fit the model of this research? Perhaps a more suitable description has less to do with ‘unravelling the frontiers’ and more to do with notions of ‘creating the space’ each time we wish to explore ideas in the creation of new collaborative work. The exchange of language to interpret the artistic process is to enable another viewpoint for artists to describe their experience. However, in positing the idea that, in collaboration artists create a new space, may just be another way of describing a boundary which emulates the lines in disciplinarity. Perhaps I may simply be substituting terms

in a fruitless effort to adopt a new frame in which to examine artistic collaboration? In terms of this proposal about the Collaborative Space, it might be worth borrowing the term ‘finite but unbounded’ (Einstein 1920), as presented in Chapter 2, in order to comprehend the nature of this proposal about Collaborative Space. The possibilities of what is created in space are finite because they are temporal and exist for a set period of time in a defined physical space, as is the case of the work in this present inquiry. At the same time, the space is ‘unbounded’ because it is not fixed by any pre-determined concepts or rules. Translating this concept into how my own process evolved is appealing, mainly because a performance is temporal and operates from parameters which are finite. There are also an indeterminate number of options in the complex interactions that make up an improvised piece.

### *Articulating the experiential and discursive space*

The ‘common space’, as we understood it, is characterized as being experiential and discursive and contains within it all of the potential for ‘finding’ in relation to how the work was configured in our making of the piece and how we comprehended it. What is necessitated in stepping into this space together, as artists, is an awareness of the particular kind of experience generated in the space and how we observed and comprehended it. The kind of knowledge that emanated from this artistic process is based on experience and observation. David Bohm equates both experience and knowledge, pointing to what kind of knowledge we encounter in artistic practice,

...experience and knowledge are one process, rather than to think that our knowledge is about some sort of separate experience. We can refer to this one process as experience-knowledge (the hyphen indicating that these are two inseparable aspects of one whole movement (Bohm 1980a, p. 6).

This correlates with my understanding of those parts of the experience in artistic practice which are designated as pre-reflective forms of knowledge, embodied knowledge, which exist in the realm of ‘essentially non-conceptual, and hence non-discursive, content research’ (Borgdorff 2010, p.47). Borgdorff asks if there is ‘a smooth transition conceivable between pre-reflective forms of knowledge and experience and their linguistic-conceptual translation or conversion within the space of reasons?’ (2010, p.23). Thus, although translating some of the sensory experiences into language is challenging or unnecessary or impossible, it forms part of the artistic space we occupied.

In relation to the discursive in the Collaborative Space, Feldman (1999) – commenting on the

role of conversation in collaborative research action – states that ‘...the purpose of conversation is for the participants to construct new understanding’ (p.137). In relation to ‘new understanding’, Gadamer posits that it arises from the idea that each person in the conversation ‘opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says’ (1992, p. 385). In response to a question during the Q & A after *Beginnings in the Dark*, Óscar said that he considers ‘discourse is rehearsal’, and thus all of the conversations and reflections in the discourse, including the performances, the exchanges spoken or observed, reveal much about what had been explored throughout the process. He added, ‘*we spend most of the time in discourse and then we go and do*’ (Appendix 21). This exemplifies the significance of the Collaborative Space as discursive, as it provides potential insights into questions which arise along the journey, signalling the indispensability of discourse in the making of this kind of work. There are expressions of knowledge captured in the work itself, the process, the performance, and they exist as knowledge to be affirmed in the overall research, which is sometimes observable and sometimes not, and which cannot always be assimilated and put into a traditional theoretical frame. In relation to arts practice research, and specifically to this present inquiry, this opens up a conversation about how ‘knowledge’ is established. The context-based approach to questions that arose about performance and the live event was because what is intrinsic to improvisation is ‘temporal and contingent’ and ‘calls attention to the context of discovery’ (Sajnani 2012, p. 84). In this work, knowledge is both fleeting and emergent, and this requires another type of ‘analysis’, one that differs in nature and form from those used in traditional modes of argumentative/speculative scholarship.

Finding language to articulate what is embedded and embodied content was an important part of the direction of how this investigation took place. If, as Bohm suggests, experience and knowledge are part of the one process, then there was purpose in our creative drive to search for an original experience and attempt to elucidate and interpret it in whatever ways possible, insofar as it was available to be understood.

### **Where to locate my practice?**

In my desire to find a new range of experiences in which to locate my creative process, I did not, for one moment, predict that I would find it in and through the discourse of this present inquiry. In my exposure to improvisation as a vehicle through which new work could be created, I noted the richness of the discourse that had taken place with Steve and Óscar over

the previous months, leading up to the first performance, *Beginnings in the Dark*. However, at that time, I was more intrigued with new ‘sound’ ideas I had discovered in our collaboration and the experimental nature of the compositional process than with any philosophical insights about what lay behind this unique way of collaborating. The process in the making of the second performance opened up new avenues to discuss the *why* and *how* we make in the collaborative frame, which was inspired by the fruitful exchanges that had taken place already. Through the processes for both performances, greater clarity about where to relocate my practice became evident.

In the discourse, we spoke about the need to examine and locate the self as a precondition for the interactions which would take place with others and we described it as an awareness of self, paying attention to different environments that are encountered as a preparation for embarking on a collaboration. Both Steve and Mary reflected on the idea that the creative self is ‘*the making body, a permeable space waiting for encounter to start the process of making, the embodied space put into an environment*’ (Appendix 20). I realise at the end of the process that situating and preparing the self in the process opens up the possibility for meaningful discourse in collaboration and is also a way of initiating and opening up avenues to generate something new. This insight has positive implications for my practice moving forward.

## **Space and Frontiers**

The complex interaction of dimensions that make up artistic practice is witnessed in performance as a ‘visible feature’ of a lengthy and complex process of integration. According to Coessens, these dimensions can be looked upon as ‘broad spaces at the disposal of the artists’ (Coessens 2009, p.272). The ‘broad spaces’ at our disposal is where we have an opportunity to ‘pare back the disciplines’, and in so doing explore the meaning of ‘space and time’, how they are linked to the ephemeral and to what is emergent. Our discourse was a lengthy process which began with the examination of different dimensions of space common to our practice. For Mary, when the risk is gone in the exploration, whether in practice or performance, ‘*the space closes in*’ (Appendix 7). The dynamic for finding and creating something original is lost without the constant ‘change’ in space. Once fixed, the creative potential disappears. Regarding the space being ever-changing and what is contained within it is elusive and disappears. Mary added that as a performer ‘*it never feels like it’s ephemeral because...it’s...gone into store*’ (Appendix 7). Inquiring into the meaning of space for the two works and deconstructing it had



a great impact on the artistic vision for how both pieces were shaped but especially the second performance.

One ‘model’ for collaborative engagement is contingent on discourse because the ‘space’ we create is constructed through an inter-relational dialogue, and once there is formation of ideas through the artistic exchanges, then that other part which moves the direction into a dialogue about aspects of the preparations for the work can begin. In other words, without the inter-relational dialogue, there is no ‘opening’, and thus no space (in any case there is only the space that is always there, a space of nothing, that is always ready for possibility to flourish: the space that serves as a platform for all discourse to emerge). In unravelling the frontiers of artistic collaboration, it might be possible to reconstitute the frontiers as having moveable and unfixed parameters, without constraints, that are materialised and shaped by the power of discourse into something else that materialises and afterwards they fall away once the process is complete.

An inter-disciplinary process is considered to expand the ‘space of discovery’. As collaborators, we gravitated towards a new space beyond the boundary of our own self-expression and this opened up new horizons for the work to enter. The undetermined moments yet to be discovered may require the abandonment of frontiers in order to participate in this new expanded space.

Finally, from another perspective when two different artistic disciplines work collaboratively, I can argue that the boundaries dissolve between the disciplines and the boundaries form around the space rather than across the space for the period of time that the process/performance takes place. The shifting of boundaries in an essentially ‘emergent’ process means that they ‘dissolve’. This is suggested by the transformations they undergo in the exchanges that take place in experiential discourse; a transformation allowed by the quality of interpenetration characteristic to both the discourse and the improvisational approach used.

### **Everything flows**

The concept of ‘becoming’, the idea of things ever-changing and in a state of flux, relates to the notion that perhaps the only constant is ‘change’ itself and this concept permeated the discourse at so many levels from process to performance. Mary’s film palate of short pieces, like Steve’s poetic texts, were about coming into being or about how to erase things so that they are becoming (Appendix 12). In our conversations, Mary reflected on the idea of things

that do not appear fixed and which do not present as constructed material, and these ideas formed part of her own investigation through her study of film as a medium, which is outlined in Chapter 4. One of Mary's contributions was about identifying fluidity in the piece and much of her film presentations in the second performance capture subtle moments with the theme of 'appearing and disappearing' which contributed immensely to the second performance. How the work materialised in collaboration, the outcome as it unfolded, was much to do about the concept of becoming, of flux, which featured early on in the discussions.

What I discovered is that we were not only embracing the idea that there are several concepts in common relating to different disciplines in the arts but when we came together we were also acknowledging that finding the common ground through these concepts is a pre-requisite to opening the possibility of an integrative and transformative experience. By deconstructing concepts of 'change' etc. across a range of disciplines, there is the opportunity to re-interpret them, to find new perspectives which can be embraced in the Collaborative Space and which influence our work.

### **The concept of 'pre-disciplinarity' in the discourse**

In the initial stage of the discourse, there was consensus that we seek out only what is essential to our process. The willingness to set disciplinary boundaries aside was motivated by the desire to strengthen our integration in the collaboration and to enhance the process of creating, by being open to the variety of exchanges that potentially could be shared. Implicitly, the initial stage in the creative process was the segue into the inter-disciplinary process, where we would arrive at another stage to discuss specific elements of how the piece might be envisioned.

I proposed to the others that we consider this part of the discourse as 'pre-disciplinary', 'pre'<sup>22</sup> meaning earlier than, prior to, before, a place in our process which precedes the making of the piece and which endeavours to mark out the common ground for the work. Thus, the collaborative space provided a 'pre-disciplinary' place for a unique kind of reflection on our experience which would enable our intra-/inter-disciplinary explorations to emerge. The term 'pre-disciplinary' was used to express the inclination among us to extricate our thinking, our language and our focus away from our own respective practices.

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<sup>22</sup> "Pre-." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pre->. Accessed 15 Sep. 2021.

At one level, it seems tautologous to search ‘before’ what is disciplinary given that the ‘pre’ part of our discussions were conceptual and philosophical and therefore, fall within the boundaries of another discipline, philosophy. In addition, the ‘pre’ exists in relation to the disciplines (that is, it does not exist by itself) and thus can somewhat ‘only’ come from a consideration (or a need) that is originally disciplinary. ‘Pre’ implies temporality, and that is why it is problematic. Therefore, to argue that our discourse falls outside the boundaries of disciplines and should be described as ‘pre-disciplinary’ seems contradictory or at least a loose use of the term. What is disciplinary within this framework is related to the specific artistic experience and expertise held by the participants in relation to music and dance and other associated fields – film, text, somatic practices etc. The term ‘pre-disciplinary’ employed in the discourse was an attempt to create the conditions to examine and explore what comes before, prior to the set of disciplinary considerations in the making of the work even if the ‘pre-disciplinary’ space is of itself, disciplinary. Expressed another way, in the collaborative exchange the process can be obstructed by ‘disciplinary expertise’ (Appendix 7) because we can move too quickly to occupy the space with our own disciplinary considerations and creative ideas. Perhaps other ideas are lost or do not come to the surface when time and space is not given over to what is ‘essential’. Opening up a ‘pre-disciplinary’ space is an invaluable starting point for artists to build momentum in the ‘finding’ of new ideas for a new piece.

In relation to naming this part of the process, the root ‘ex-’, as a prefix, means outside of, and could be an interesting term to explore ex-disciplinarity rather than pre-disciplinarity. Contrastingly, ‘ex-’ does not directly imply temporality, but spatiality: a space outside the disciplinary enquiry. Throughout the thesis I have referred to a ‘pre-disciplinary’ space and for the current research the term ‘pre-disciplinarity’ has been applied.

## **Part II - The Performance Space**

The Collaborative Space was where we examined concepts of ‘becoming’ and related concepts – space, time, and ephemerality and then the discourse extended into what could be described as the Performance Space, where ideas might emerge to bring the vision for the piece into greater focus. The Performance Space is full of jeopardy, which is identified by the liveness and the visceral nature of improvisation which I encountered first hand. The Performance Space is a temporal force which forms a basis for thinking and re-thinking artistic process that is grounded in the unknown. It contains dimensions of the Collaborative Space; that is, the collaboration and the discourse in preparation for the performance exist, transfigured, in the

Performance Space, thus there is an overlap. However, the arbitrary division between both types of spaces creates a workable solution in this current research to identify and distinguish different aspects of the process.

### *Curating an experience*

In the discussions, we speculated on removing the seating in the theatre and, by appraising how we might generate an immersive environment, we were carrying through on the kind of experience we wanted to create from our previous conversations. The ‘unfixing’ of the space, literally as well as metaphorically, came about because of our desire to challenge ourselves as performers and also the audience by creating an unfamiliar and deconstructed environment for both audience and performers to experience. This is what we firstly understood as ‘setting the stage’ for the performance, to create the conditions for the performance as a space of ‘finding’ new ideas for our work. The difference between this approach and what follows in traditional performance settings/context lies in the purpose of the former (the second performance) to open up possibility, change, flux; that is, for notions like the ‘force’ of indeterminacy to act; while the latter (traditional performance context) focuses on ‘the work’ as separate from its performativity or independent of the context in which it eventually exists. In other words, performance, the design or devising of the work, the space of improvisation where the performance takes place, the performers and the audience, they all are ‘the work’, inseparable, indivisible: none exists independently of the other.

In his text on Cage’s concept of interpenetration, Tromans points out that, whereas language gives the possibility to make distinctions between elements, for example, performer, instrument, composer, text, audience, video etc., ‘...actual lived experience of performance events bears to no such clear cut categorization’ (Tromans 2014, p. 197). The interpenetration of elements is at once realised and ephemeral, and there is no possible binary explanation or articulation of this complex process and no clear-cut distinctions exist that are useful in making meaning of the performance and how the elements interrelate. Ephemerality is both a quality of the indeterminate work and the incarnation of its clarity. The performance (the work) articulates itself in the space it creates and, as a consequence, there is no need to say anything further.

### *Performing in a space of improvisation*

How improvisation translates in our work, to a degree, relies on how we understand our process. In conversations, we discussed at length how we compose our score. We generate new ideas by ‘listening out’ for an new idea to emerge, to arrive into the space, and ‘then we sculpt it into composition’ (Appendix 20). The encounters with his own voice and the impact of his voice in different spaces where Steve’s voice is projected from his body are encounters which Cromby describes as ‘embodied, affective phenomena’ (2011, p. 83). It is from this profound space, according to Steve, that he finds creative impulses for new ideas to materialise. Similarly, my own encounters with the piano in my experiment with the materials of the instrument, the body, soundboard, strings and pedals, both before and during the performances, initiated a visceral and deep response in me which I am not be able to explicate in words. Cromby states that it is often difficult to find language to describe these kinds of phenomena because they are ‘always slightly disjunctive with, language’ (*Ibid*) because they are ineffable. In this present inquiry, the profound moments of discovery that I encountered were original and surprising and, most of all, offered new scope for my practice.

Regarding what was experienced in the live space I was aware of the idea of ‘transitioning’ from one sound idea to the next and in the preparation for the second performance Mary described it as ‘the holding space’ where one idea dies and another one is about to be born. In the Q&A (chapter 3), in response to a question about how we interacted live on stage, Steve made the following appraisal relating to the first performance: *‘Ideas are offered, as in this performance, as a means of transition but sometimes they perish or wither because the other party somehow cannot relate to and develop the idea. It is a very spontaneous, dynamic and organic process’* (Appendix 18). This was something I began to understand, both in relation to Steve’s practice but also Mary’s as well and it would become part of how I perceived this process for myself. In the first performance, I noted earlier in Chapter 3, that losing my way, momentarily was about waiting for the next idea to reveal itself to me. I learned as an improviser that I could retract, momentarily in the live event, only to lean forward into the next trajectory and this idea assisted me in finding my own points of reference in performance. Likewise, for Mary, in Chapter 4, her comment on how she generates a new idea is pertinent: *‘I’m generating because it feels necessary right now’* (Appendix 3). To artificially add links to fill out the piece, where no new ideas are apparent, is to *‘put a dent in what we have generated’* (Appendix 7).

In examining the audio-visual recording of the second performance there were a number of times, I waited for an idea to emerge when I did not play the piano. My memory of this moment is that I was perfectly at ease, not sounding, but absorbing the presence of things around me. This action was developed out of our discourse, understanding what creative impulses drive the piece in a new direction or where the impulse dies and that idea fades away. I experienced these moments of decision-making while performing live and I witnessed those moments while viewing the recording of the piece afterwards.

I asked the question at the very beginning of the investigation – what is the space of improvisation? The main characteristic is that it is a space of the ‘unforeseeable’ and this unpredictable space gave life to new lines of inquiry that emerged in this specific case between the voice and piano in the first performance and between the voice, piano and film/choreography in the second performance. When we compose/create in the present moment, we respond to different emotions, sounds, qualities that are communicated through the materials, elements and the creative ideas of the other performers. The space is determined by those who are involved in the collaborative arrangement which means that each improvisation is distinctive and unique to those who experience and participate in it.

### ***The ephemeral nature of performance***

Referring to improvised composition, Sajnani contends that the kind of knowledge which emerges from this type of work is ‘...an approach to knowledge creation that invites fleeting, emergent and evolving discoveries’ (2012, p. 84). In a similar capacity regarding sound, Nancy in his work on listening refers to the presence of sound stating that ‘...it is rather a *coming* and *passing*, an *extending* and *penetrating*. The ‘sonorous present... opens up a space’ (Nancy 2007, p.13) that is not fixed but is ever-changing. Simply because some of the creative exchanges defied a rational, abstract notion of meaning did not lessen their value in the process as we sought to impart and comprehend our ‘knowledge creation’ in and through the experience of performance. David [audience] said in the Q&A after the first performance, ‘*You couldn’t record it ... It wouldn’t be the same thing*’ (Appendix 18). For David, the live performance experience was paramount and whatever information he gleaned from this event would not be ‘the same thing’ if replicated. Mary stated that sometimes writing can help to clarify those undefinable moments of understanding in the making of the piece, and, at other times, she said we need a different type of language to poeticize our artistic experience, to enable it to be understood. We grapple with trying to write down what we experience, especially trying to

capture those pre-reflected moments but it is also the case that those aspects of the work speak for themselves, implicitly, and there are no words required to explain it. In relation to performance and how it exists, Phelan argues that ‘its only life is in the present’ (1993, p. 146), which she describes as constantly disappearing, and as with Schechner and others, Phelan believes performance cannot be documented by virtue of its ephemerality. Part of the collection of data in the research is the examination of the traces left behind after the process is completed and which is evident in a variety of resources including the recordings of the performances, the audio recordings of the conversations that took place among the performers, before, during and after the performances, the personal reflections/diary notes and the various forms of feedback from members of the audience. On the other hand, in reference to De Certeau, Clarke (2004) suggests that there are those ‘bodily and tactile knowledges’ that are ‘placed beyond the limits of the practitioners’ own discursive knowledges such that they are difficult to speak of/reflect upon’ (p.10). Therein lies the mystery of it that we capture something special in a moment but then we lose part of it that is no longer available to us.

### **Examples from the works**

Below are some brief descriptions of examples of information which passes through in the performance but which cannot be identified beyond what the performer senses – hears, feels, sees, and intuitively. The parts in italics are part of a reflexive commentary, to describe the point in the recording to which I refer.

#### ***Trajectory***

##### ***Beginnings in the Dark:***

At 14:20 and up to 14:50, Steve interrupts the line of inquiry with a completely new vocal pattern. This brief trajectory reveals how instantly the lines can shift. I wrote in Chapter 3, ‘*My hand is percussively slapping notes on the upper register [of the piano] and it feels like a somatic moment coming from some deep place, beyond the sounds. There is no design to play any particular notes [14:28 – 14:33]; they arrive impulsively*’. Steve’s sudden change in his line of inquiry has triggered an instant reaction from me and, in observing the audio-visual recording, it appears that my experience of this trajectory is to ‘sense’ rather than to analyse the sudden change when I follow on in this line of inquiry. The interactions are complex because not all of our creative interactions seem to be at the level of consciousness; however, in the performance we enable the piece to move on by our accepting and participating along

the line of the trajectory and keeping the flow. Otherwise, we reject it and a new idea unfolds.

### ***Interjections***

#### ***Flux: Five Iterations of Becoming***

26:30 – 28:53. One unexpected moment about this segment is that, once I moved to the second piano, I began to ‘pay attention’ to the visual elements of the score. I had no impulse to begin playing but to absorb the elements around me as part of my contribution to the score. The interaction between the vocal score and the live choosing of video segments by Mary in this improvising context had such energy as well as clarity and highlighted the interconnectivity between the three elements, image, sound and text. It was a perfect encounter of the sonic and visual elements of the score on a fast moving trajectory. My personal encounter was about the power of listening to the other where the collaborative nature of the work is greater than any individual contribution. My action of listening and waiting for the moment to arrive when I would find something ‘new’ to contribute was an unexpected action which contributed to my overall sense of how improvisation plays out. At 28:53, after a period of more than two minutes, a dramatic entry on the piano was charged with all that had been experiencing. Maybe it is possible to add that, by ‘listening’ in the live context, it is also a form of composition.

#### **‘Mapping’ from within in our process**

The concept of an ‘indeterminate space’ in improvisation is complex. The relationship in an indeterminate space is between the space itself and the elements which occupy it. The relationship can only be materialised/performed or acted upon through experience if it is to be ‘represented or mapped out’. According to Petrescu, ‘This mapping ‘from within’ relates the body to the physical, socio-political and cultural space’ (2007, p.89), reinforcing the notion that the self is a force whose capacity to generate is in and through the act of performance as experienced in an indeterminate space.

The richness in the indeterminate space for artists is that it is, paradoxically, nothing and thus everything, as it is open to possibility that might occur to us. From my own reflections, what comes to light is that we cannot shield ourselves from uncertainty, from the risk factor in our work because to do so is to eliminate the vital conditions for generating new ideas. Likewise, the profound foundational processes that power our lives are mirrored in the creative articulation of the world we inhabit when faced with not knowing what comes next. The risk



and instability in our lives is often reflected back in this type of performance and influences how and what we create together. There is agency at work when we make a decision about traversing the space in sound, text, and image in a very particular way, that is, in one way rather than another way. There are many examples of how this came into being in the performances. One very clear image from the recording of the first performance is what emerged when I opened the piano lid at 16:06.

*I was absorbing the energy from Steve's tone and pace in his vocal line and I was equally responding with my own sounding on the piano strings. There was no time to wait, to listen to what might come next. It is a furious moment where both of us are anchored to the same trajectory, pushing out our idea simultaneously, with all the risk and excitement that is experienced by improvising performers (Chapter 3).*

What powered this experience? There is no doubt that, with the uncertainty of not knowing what I would do after I opened the piano lid, something happened that is in some way beyond the limits of my own conscious experience. It was an unexpected result. I created something unimaginable to me where we acquiesced to a deeper collaborative force, an internal voice at work which brought forth a very original and impactful score. The experience is powered by the effect of conditions which are predominantly indeterminate and which we experience live.

Being an essentially interactive process, a process of sharing, there is a kind of 'measuring' and there is mapping that takes place among the performers during the performance that can be pointed out or referenced in the recordings and in the recollections of those who experienced it. The mapping might be understood through the intuitions, perceptions, and articulation of the process by the performers. In the second performance, there is a line of inquiry between the piano and voice, where the finding between both instruments from 44:05 onwards provides a useful example of 'leaning into the possibility of intersection', in a moment of deep sharing. When the trajectories have completely intersected, a completely new trajectory unfolds, signalled by percussive sounds initiated from the vocal line. Observing this segment from the audio-visual recording I noted that there is a 'measuring' and mapping where we put those creative ideas into a space, an indeterminate space and we are mapping the sonic possibilities, what has arrived, what is happening with that decision and where will it go. From my memory of the second performance when something that was about to run its course I was already thinking beyond it. I had to trust that something would happen, would emerge that I could either support, embellish, extend or close down. What we convey are discursive ideas which are profoundly connected with our experience. In this regard, we are already starting to meet

the template that becomes the performative methodology of our work by articulating the creative process through ‘mapping’ which arises out of our desire to make sense of this emergent process. What I noticed is that when we are in a creative flow it all appears to be happening and is a very satisfying. However, I remember moments when I had nothing to add, when I was challenged to find something new, when I had no more responses that were coming to the surface. This also has to be reckoned with in the ‘mapping’ of an improvised performance that we may sometimes lose the capacity to generate and that is also something which I have reflected on as well.

A conversation took place with Óscar about his concept of sound and its quality of what he terms ‘ephemeral invisibility’<sup>23</sup> which makes it difficult to map sequences of sound in performance because the sonic elements are both invisible and pass away. The transformations that occur from one moment to the next in performance are not simply random or accidental, even if they are ephemeral and invisible; they are manifested out of deep observation, listening, and reaction to the experiences that come to the performers through all the senses at the time of the performance.

## **Corners stones of Improvisation**

### ***Paying attention***

What surfaced in the process for both performances was the importance of how performer creativity is a vital component in improvisation and this manifested itself in a number of ways. Firstly, as performers, a high degree of awareness, of ‘paying attention’ is required because everything is in a state of flux. The level of ‘uncertainty’ is evident in how the line of a trajectory can suddenly change and I felt that I had to be ready for these surprises in our pieces. There were moments when I was not ‘ready’ as I grappled with what was coming next. After the first performance, I had a greater sense of what is required in this kind of making music. I became acutely aware of the ‘*space of possibilities of sounding into the space*’ (Appendix 18), and Steve had the impression that there was an evolution in my playing from what I produced in the first performance. Leading up to *Flux: Five Iterations of Becoming* I set out to have a different approach and that was to seek out only what is essential in what I was inspired to play. I was attentive to the unfolding score, waiting for that moment to arrive, to have the germ of a

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<sup>23</sup> This notion of the ‘ephemeral invisibility’ of sound came up in a conversation with Dr. Óscar Mascareñas, who has written about it in relation to indeterminacy in the fields of contemporary practice and Gregorian chant.

new idea. My challenge was not to ‘waste’ a note, my impression being that this idea informed how I approached the second performance.

### ***Listening***

Improvisation requires a way of listening which allows the performer to react spontaneously in the performance space. In a live context we are dealing with things that we have to craft in the moment. Munthe (2015) describes this as ‘the activity of...creating and constructing a piece of music in the same time as it is being performed’. The thinking of what the structure is [in the piece] sometimes ‘collides with the ...capacity to listen’, according to Mary (Appendix, 27). The fluidity of the ‘structure’ in which the improviser seeks out new material and develops those ideas while, at the same time, listening intently to draw out different strands in the making of the piece, is an extraordinary creative feat for the improvising artist. In the section of *Beginnings in the Dark* (23:01 – 25:45) I am playing the piano and for the length of this section Steve appears to wait and is listening and observing. At other times in the piece, I am listening and Steve is vocalising. There are also multiple levels of listening at work in improvisation, from ‘listening out for’ a sign of an idea to listening as a product of inner knowing where you have a ‘felt sense’ in your body (Gendlin 1981) of what is emerging and you respond to it in performance. All of these ways of listening are happening in a collaborative space, and it is my impression that the reciprocal nature of the interactions as we ‘listen’ to each other is how the experience becomes transformative.

### ***Being present***

Bailey (1992) commenting on jazz musicians states that when they play improvised music they enter into a continuous ‘flow’. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) describes this ‘flow’ as an ‘extended present’ and, in that space, we make meaning, dismantle meaning and remake it (p.121). My experience of ‘being present’ in performance has been about finding that ‘extended present’ that I enter into with the other collaborators. In that space, the improviser has to be quick thinking and alert, be sensitive to the information coming into the space, be it sensory, sonic, or visual. They must listen profoundly to what is unfolding. In the initial stages of the preparations, I was unaware of this characteristic of being mindful beforehand, but from my involvement in this collaborative process I value ‘being present’ as a necessary skill in improvisation.

## **Utilising fixed and unfixed elements in performance**

My experience of using fixed materials and fixed points of reference in the performances opens up the question of diversity of output in how artists go about creating new work. We build a collaborative space that is formed by who we are as artists and what we want to communicate. To focus only on what is indeterminate is paradoxically to ‘fix’ or limit the potentiality of the output is to lose the opportunity to gather in material that is already formed – in this case the rich poetic texts and moving images that we were privileged to use and from which we drew much inspiration. This material was reshaped and reformed to stimulate new ideas as a creative resource and demonstrated a level of freedom to find something original to explore in the research. In so doing, we were able to translate those ‘fixed’ materials into our work and ‘unfix’ them and this is what happened in relation to the poetic texts by using digital software to randomised and deconstruct the texts when they appeared on the screens during the second performance. Also with the film segments we were able to choose samples live which allowed for a level of ‘unfixing’ of the images during the event. There were multiple examples of layering one film segment over another, ‘fading in’ and ‘fading out’, swapping images from one screen to another, the sudden blackout of one screen while an image appeared on another screen. Because this was ‘performed’ live, there was an element of unfixing of the film segments and this created space for new objects. In this research, the ‘fixed’ content acted as a stimulus for new creative possibilities which I felt enriched the work.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined and evaluated what took place in the artistic collaborations documented and it is divided into two distinct parts: the Collaborative Space and the Performance Space.

The Collaborative Space which we occupied is both discursive and experiential and opened up questions about the potential making of the pieces. Concepts of space were presented as an alternative to describing artistic process as having disciplinary and/or interdisciplinary boundaries and whether we should, instead, use concepts of space to articulate what happens in this kind of collaborative process among different disciplines. Whether or not concepts common to different disciplines can be explored outside the realm of a single discipline was argued and is considered as a potential finding. This idea was further elaborated in the section on ‘pre-disciplinarity’ which was presented as an insight and ‘finding’ on how this process evolved. The Collaborative Space is where different concepts figured in our discourse and the

Performance Space put greater emphasis on how those concepts would play out through the ephemeral experience of performance.

The section on Performance Space opened with an exploration of what it means to create an experience in performance and ‘setting the stage’. It proceeded with an explanation of what it means to have a space of improvisation with the main characteristic being that it is a space of the ‘unforeseeable’ and this unpredictable space gave life to new lines of inquiry. While acknowledging the ephemerality of the performances and the challenge of knowing how to document what happens in performance there are residual traces of the work later on that are not readily evident but which form part of a corpus of knowledge that is embodied and goes into store. Some examples from the two performances described segments which identified moments of ‘trajectory’ and ‘interjection’ as examples of performer interaction which I believe pointed to the other level of understanding and knowledge existing in the works themselves which convey a kind of knowledge not available to further scrutiny or abstraction.

I postulated that, in improvisation, there is a kind of measuring and mapping in relation to how the performers relate to each other’s responses as the work unfolds. The mapping might be understood through the intuitions, perceptions, and articulation of the process by the performers. Both works were mostly based on free improvisation and I presented what is indispensable to this type of improvising – being aware/attentive and ‘listening’ in performance.

The chapter concluded by identifying that there are both fixed and unfixed elements in the second performance and how they impacted on the piece.

## Chapter Six:

### Conclusion

#### Introduction

This chapter, by way of concluding this thesis, reflects briefly on some of the insights and findings in the investigation. To this end, the research question of this thesis was as follows:

*What are the frontiers of artistic collaboration and what is the space of improvisation in composition?*

To gather data to answer the research question above, two performative works were presented as part of the research: *Beginnings in the Dark* (November, 2018), and *Flux; Five Iterations of Becoming* (May, 2019). This research set out to examine how I create new and original collaborative compositions with other artists and my overall goal was to understand more comprehensively what takes place when artists from different disciplines gather together to create new work. There was substantial contribution from three experienced artists throughout the whole process and, as a consequence, there were multiple voices shaping the discourse which allowed for the potential of a profound analysis of the data.

This chapter now looks at the concept ‘pre-disciplinarity’ and how it becomes part of the methodology of our collaboration. This follows with a summary of ‘space’ as an alternative model to articulate how collaboration manifests itself without boundaries, and a discussion on how this concept is perhaps more applicable to environments where improvisation is constructed to create new work.

#### Collaboration and the ‘pre-disciplinary space’

Opening up a ‘pre-disciplinary’ space is an invaluable starting point for artists to build momentum in the ‘finding’ of new creative ideas together. It may benefit artists because they can potentially work to find the ‘common ground’ to advance their project, exploring mutual strands applicable to more than one discipline. With a consensus to look only for what is ‘essential’ in this ‘pre-disciplinary’ space, it is possible to open up the conversation around key concepts that emerge: becoming, ephemerality in live performance, space and time, and the

role of audience. In my current research, this became the methodology of our collaboration, and thus, in shifting the focus towards finding the fertile ground in the ‘pre-disciplinary’ space which we first inhabited, we found new and original dimensions in our work.

### **The concept of space as a useful approach for practitioners**

As my research progressed, there was shift in understanding the nature of how to shape and frame the work. One of the strands that exists within the ‘common ground’ of artistic practice is the concept of ‘space’, which became central to this research as the investigation developed. What the disciplines have in common is a ‘space’ that is both conceptual and experiential and with this understanding of ‘space’ there may not be a place for frontiers. The frontiers reveal that there are no frontiers, but opportunities to interact which are characterised by their lack of disciplinarity, or more accurately, by the shared conceptual-experiential ‘spaces’ that the disciplines have in common. It may also be possible to reconstitute the ‘frontiers’ as having moveable and unfixed parameters, without constraints, that are materialised and shaped by the power of discourse into something else that falls away once the process is complete. In this regard, we create a unique and customised ‘space’ in collaboration.

### **The production of knowledge in artistic research**

Throughout the current research, I have referred to a kind of ‘knowledge’ placed beyond the limits of what can be articulated in this research. I refer to ‘reflexive’ or ‘contemplative’ theory which emerges from both the abstraction and re-membrance of the artistic experiences as opposed to the purely theoretical ‘argumentative’ / ‘speculative’ theory. The former is the one the artist arrives at from artistic practice (and it is central to my work). It is the one that ‘catches’ and somewhat reveals the invisible ephemerality of the (sound) work as it manifests itself/travels through time and space. The contemplative/reflexive is used as a means to engage with the ‘other’ discourse, which technically falls outside of practice and yet helps create abstract frameworks that can be useful in understanding it. It is also a form of critical thinking without the abstraction of rational thought. Both are forms of knowledge, but more importantly, in this current research the premise is that the artistic work in itself and by itself is ‘knowledge’ that does not depend on (speculative) theory to exist or to effect change in the world. I have understood that verbalisation comes after the event, whereas the experiential discourse is the event. Out of the experience of the event, some theoretical frames may materialise later but which do not require speculation or generalisation.

## **The Space of Improvisation**

One of the greatest challenges in this research was to articulate how the performers shaped what they were creating, moment by moment, in an improvised performance. The sonic element is not easily mapped in the discourse and in a conversation that took place with Óscar he spoke about his concept of sound and its quality of what he terms ‘ephemeral invisibility’<sup>24</sup> in relation to indeterminacy which makes it challenging to map. Many of the segments from the performances give witness to the extent of compositional process at work where the transformations that occur from one moment to the next are not simply random or accidental and are manifested out of deep observation, listening, and reaction to the experiences that come to the performers through all the senses.

‘Mapping’ is a core component in this type of practice and the commentary on this aspect may add something to the conversation around ‘free’ improvisation and experimental composition. Of course, this is another kind of ‘mapping’ that does not lend itself to an analytical/theoretical approach but relies on interpretation and understanding at another level, an experiential level, which has at its core the desire to ‘map’ the score, in order to make sense of the emergent process.

## **The challenges of an interpretative approach**

Much of the data in this thesis has relied on making meaning, where possible, out of the processes that arose from our respective practices. In this qualitative survey of collaboration, we generated a number of outcomes which were observable through the analysis of the data gathered and examined along this journey. The investigation set out to examine *how* I create new and original collaborative compositions with other artists, and at the end of the process I now have a deeper understanding of what this means.

The primary data in this project are the transcriptions of the lengthy discourse, its commentary/analysis and audio-visual recordings of the two performances. This data is the primary source of this investigation and is analysed systematically throughout Chapters 3 and 4. There are also secondary sources represented by the literature relating to collaboration, inter-disciplinarity, and improvisation. The analysis and investigation in this current thesis may be

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<sup>24</sup> This notion of the ‘ephemeral invisibility’ of sound came up in a conversation with Dr. Óscar Mascareñas, who has written about it in relation to indeterminacy in the fields of contemporary practice and Gregorian chant.



open to criticism for being biased or limited by the personal viewpoint of the researcher, which would make the analysis unreliable from a scientific viewpoint. However, the interpretations in this work are the systematic analysis of the aggregate of comprehensive and meaningful contributions from three experienced artists working together. This analysis is without any desire on my part to control the narrative and is supported by the fact that there were three active participants contributing to the data of the research over a two year period.

Another limitation on this exercise is how concepts and terms are applied to the work. In those sections where I used theoretical concepts – such as collaboration, improvisation, space, time, etc. – I acknowledge that using these concepts is always problematic and one has to sometimes make certain compromises for the sake of simplicity or to avoid making the whole thesis a purely theoretical exercise. The broad scope of the research required the application of a number of terms and theories to embrace the subject-matter fully. Whereas a greater input into the meaning of theoretical concepts might have been desirable, it would have altered the study away from its fundamental aim, which was dedicated to collecting and examining the primary data within an arts practice type of inquiry.

### **What is emerging in my practice**

This overall experience was self-affirming, as well as self-altering for me at a number of levels. Firstly, I have had the opportunity to return to an academic environment and immerse myself in a community of artists who offered extensive support. Secondly, I am grateful also to have re-awoken my practice to find new ways to express my creativity and, through this extensive inquiry, strengthened my idea about what I wish to create in the future. There are very few things I would change, as I reflect on the work, except for one regret, which is that I did not have the opportunity to perform and record one of the performances twice. Given how the research has developed, it would have added to the discourse around experimental, free improvisations because a comparative analysis between two performances of the ‘same’ work would have given another perspective.

I have asked myself at the end of this process what it means to be a composer after this profound and evolutionary experience over the past number of years. My answer to that question is as follows:

*I am an artist, because these works in conjunction with the research are illuminating, not by composing sound or music, but by the creation of an experience for me and for*

*others which is at the heart of arts practice research.*

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## Appendices

*Please see Volume II*