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Script for the Viva Voce of the research project Percussion Theatre: a body in between
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PART I

Good morning. Thank you for being here.

What does the musician become when sound and the instrument are no longer privileged as the foundation of her music practice? In what ways does an emphasis on the musician's body cause music to approach art forms such as theatre and performance? After a generation of pioneering work from Mauricio Kagel, John Cage, and many others, where is the theatrical and the performative in music today? How do its recent developments shape a musician's artistic practice? Through my research project Percussion Theatre: a body in between I have come to believe that this type of music — that which ventures into the performative and the theatrical — demands the musician assume a different relation to their instrument and therefore a different relation to their body. Within this project, this called for new ways of making and doing—new artistic practices that reconsider how we train and how we create new work—ways of making and doing that foreground the body as a fundamental performance material. Through this emphasis on the musician's body, the musician emerges as a performer. Or at least, this is what I believe has happened to me across this project.

Like many research projects, this is one motivated by a certain perceived problem, a certain lack. The field of contemporary percussion, and in particular the percussion soloist, flourished at the exact moment that Cage and Kagel would reflect ideas associated with the 'performative turn' in the mid-20th century. This confluence of emerging practices meant that much of the percussionist's canon is constituted of works that approach theatre and Performance Art, particularly with pieces that score for speaking, singing, gesturing, and moving percussionist. The solo percussionist's canon appeared to me to be as much one of experimental theatre as it is experimental music. Despite this, in all of my studies to become a professional percussionist, I was never encouraged to address the theatrical elements imbedded in our field.

The second problem I perceived was that the structure of the recital form was keeping music that approaches theatre and Performance Art within the conventions of music presentation. I saw this convention of the recital, which is a concert consisting of a hand full of ten-minute pieces, as one that limits the possible theatrical elements this type of work could explore, in particular with the use of space, technology, lighting, and scenography. For these reasons I wanted to embrace a longer format that might reflect the scale of contemporary theatre and dance works, and I would do this through commissioning the relatively rare form of evening-length percussion pieces that incorporate theatrical and performative elements.

Through the course of the project, however, what was perceived as the most interesting problems to address began to change. Over the course of making these new evening-length pieces, I became less interested in training extra-musical skills in order to serve canonical works, and more interested in the body in particular as the material of a morphing music performance practice. In the creation of the new pieces, I became less concerned with disrupting musical conventions for the aim of moving music towards other art forms and spaces and more concerned with the ways seemingly radical collaborative models between a composer and performer can serve artistic practices undergoing fundamental change and extension.

As I stand at the ending point of this project, I can see how its trajectory, turning points, and motivations have been shaped by a changing discussion within the field of contemporary music, which has become steadily more concerned with the performer body in and as music and with a desire to question traditional hierarchies within music-making practices—a fact illustrated by the sheer number of projects on these topics in this house alone.

My hope is that this research can contribute to an already crowded field with a body of new works, and with its attempt to articulate how these changes and trends in the field of music directly effect how a performer — specifically me — understands and realises her artistic practice. What does it mean for the performer when a work becomes performative or theatrical? In what ways does the body emerge as the performers material instead of or in addition to an instrument? If the instrument is not at the center of the work, what is actually demanded of the performer and how should we prepare and train to realize these works?

(VIDEO: No Say No Way (2015), Blaha Lujza Tér (2016), How to Fight (2016))

At the core of the project is a collection of new evening length works created by and with composer collaborators Trond Reinholdtsen, Francois Sarhan, Johan Jutterström, Carolyn Chen, Neo Hülcker, Peter Swendsen, and Wojtek Blecharz, as well as a realisation of an older work by Tom Johnson. With its wide range of pieces, the project behaved like a laboratory space where the body could be tested, where my skills as a performer could be questioned, and where the processes of making could be a space for artistic extension. In each new work, I deliberately encouraged my collaborators to start with the idea of no instrument, I viewed this as a method that might reveal the nature of my body in its relation to an instrumental practice that extends towards performativity. What resulted are a range of pieces that seek out a foregrounded body— a body standing front and center of the piece. The body emerged through physical gestures and actions, by using the body as an instrument typical to body percussion, through exhaustion and athleticism, through the use of my voice, through movement through space, through my relation to the audience's body, and through my concrete presence on stage.

(VIDEO: What Noises Remain (2016), Etudes to become a deer (2017), Soundtouch (2017))

In several of these works, traditional notions of music (that is, the idea that sound and instrument are at the center) are put on equal footing with performance elements such as movement, body, space, visual media, and technology. The hierarchy of the elements that builds what is generally understood to be 'the music' is then flattened. This flattening changes what types of elements, objects and activities the performer - i.e. myself in this case — engages with. Over time this new engagement throws into question not only how we understand what music is but also what we understand the music performer to be. The consequences of this flattening within musical works echo the course of development that, according to Hans-Thies Lehamnn, lead to postdramatic theatre, a theatre that does not necessarily privilege a text or script as the basis of the work. Lehmann identifies that this rupture consequentially lead to the mutation of the 'actor' (whose task is to deliver text) into that of the 'performer' (whose task is to offer her concrete presence on stage). The rupture of the hierarchy in music that displaces sound and instrument as the core of the musician's practice was experienced through the course of this laboratory-esque project as a mutation of my practice as one of a 'musician' to that of a 'performer'.

(VIDEO: Nine Bells (1978), Institute for Post-Human Performance Practice (2018))

This mutation none the less demanded that I reckon with my daily practice as a performer. Though I walked away from any notions of 'mastering' specific extra-percussive abilities, my understanding of what a performer is responsible for - namely giving excellent performances - meant that some reflection on what it means to prepare and train would still be required.

Across the project I made forays into training and preparation activities, including the predictable ones of lessons and courses on voice and movement, and perhaps more experimental approaches like copying deer movements from youtube videos or taking martial arts courses. The sheer variety of what I was being to asked to do from the work revealed that I would never be able to articulate a coherent method that anyone else could copy.

Managing the wide spread of skills required could be demanding and sometimes daunting — and coming to an understanding of my own limitations was an awkward (albeit self-inflicted) process that I had to endure. In my reflection I relate to Michael Kirby's spectrum from not-acting to acting as found in his 1987 text *A Formalist Theatre* to understand in what ways musicians approach the

performative and theatrical in music. In this spectrum not-acting represents the performer's concrete presence onstage and complex acting represents a performer simulating fiction. This reflection helped me articulate that in most cases the musician will enter the performative and theatrical long 'before' complex acting - which in Kirby's definition is performance that combines both emotional and physical acts of simulation. And I have come to understand through this project that complex acting is, at least at this point in my practice, a limitation in my ability as well.

As the project progressed I recognised that it was primarily in the generative process of creating the new pieces, rather than lessons or courses, that I was beginning to develop new skills and dispositions. Over the course of the project, the process of making and learning often collapsed into one action. Making became a primary space for extension.

And it is here that would like to turn for the remainder of this talk on the topic of collaboration and how I have come to understand it through this project.

PART II

In the article "Rethinking the performer: Towards a Devising Performance Practice", which was written as a research finding during the course of this project and was published in VIS nordic journal for artistic research, I argue that the performer's relation to the composer is a primary element constituting her artistic practice. That is to say, the relation, the proximity even, that the performer has to the composer is as consequential to the musician's artistic practice as her instrument is. If one primarily plays pieces by dead composers, the proximity between the composer and the performer is so distant that the music-making process inevitably becomes one of interpretation. If one primarily plays music written in close collaboration with a (living) composer, the musician's practice will become one built on some degree of collaboration.

In my own practice I have experienced this shift towards a collaborative practice as a fundamental shift in how I view myself as an artist. My skills as a percussionist are just one part of the full picture of my approach to music making. My philosophy and practice of collaboration has taken more and more presence and emphasis within my daily work. The negotiation between artistic subjects and the collective nurturing of an artistic idea moves to the foreground, and the instrument becomes but a material of working rather than the root of the artistic aim itself.

Because I primarily collaborate with composers and other co-creating musicians, I have experienced a blending of the skills associated with making and doing. I am beginning to contribute to the conceptual frames that build a work, and the composers are increasingly performing alongside me — which was the case with Neo Hülcker, Carolyn Chen, and Trond Reinholdtsen, and felt to be a natural consequence to our collaborative processes. In other words, a mutation is occurring on both sides of the old dichotomy of performer and composer. We are both in a moment of flux and our practices are no longer singular.

In the initial approach to creating these new works, I asked each composer to work in highly collaborative ways, which usually took the form of multiple one to two-week long creative development sessions where the composer and I went into a shared space together and worked.

The motivation for asking my collaborators to allow me into their process of creation was done for several reasons - Firstly, I had grown tired and bored of the the traditional compositional process that keeps the composer and the performer working at separate times and in separate spaces. I wanted to be a part of the process that was bringing new works into the world, I wanted to be closer to the composers and their music.

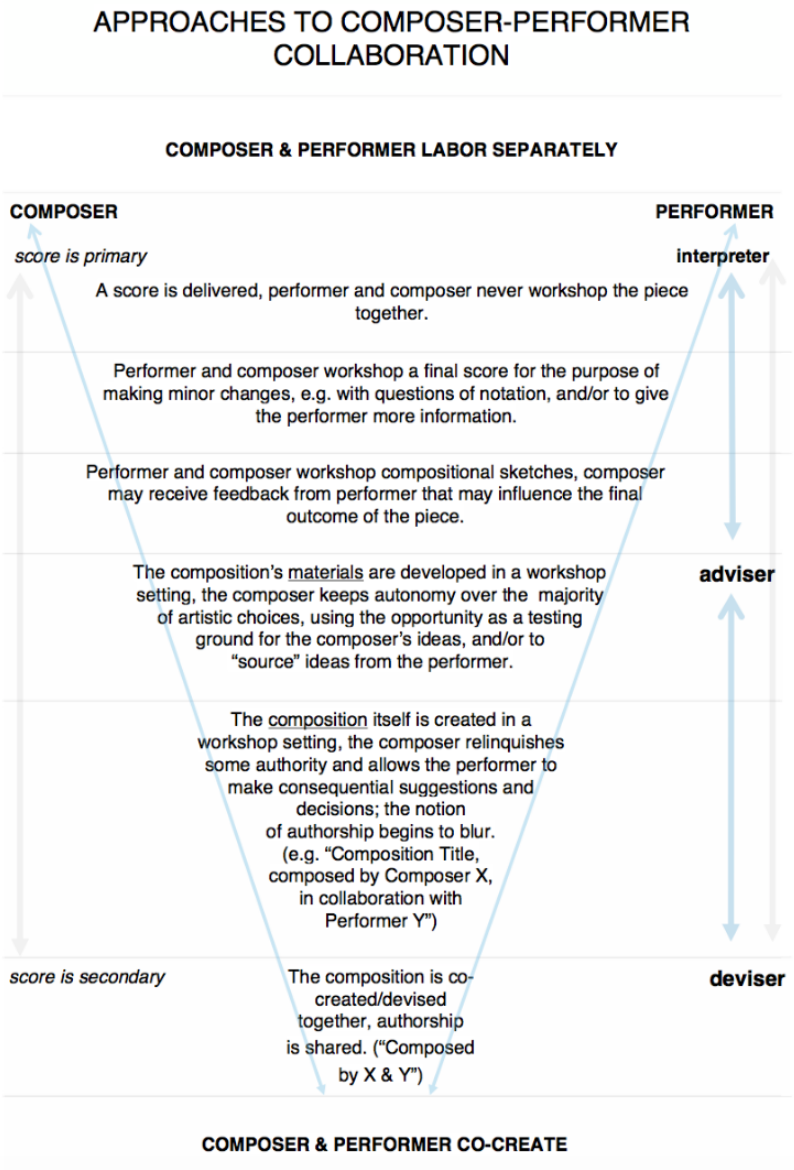
Secondly, as the owner of the research project, I insisted on maintaining some influence over the course of the work's development.

Thirdly, because the desire was to have works made specifically for my body it seemed natural to consider using generative processes typical to theatre or dance, where the work is often made through extended development periods that involve many different people and artists. At the core of

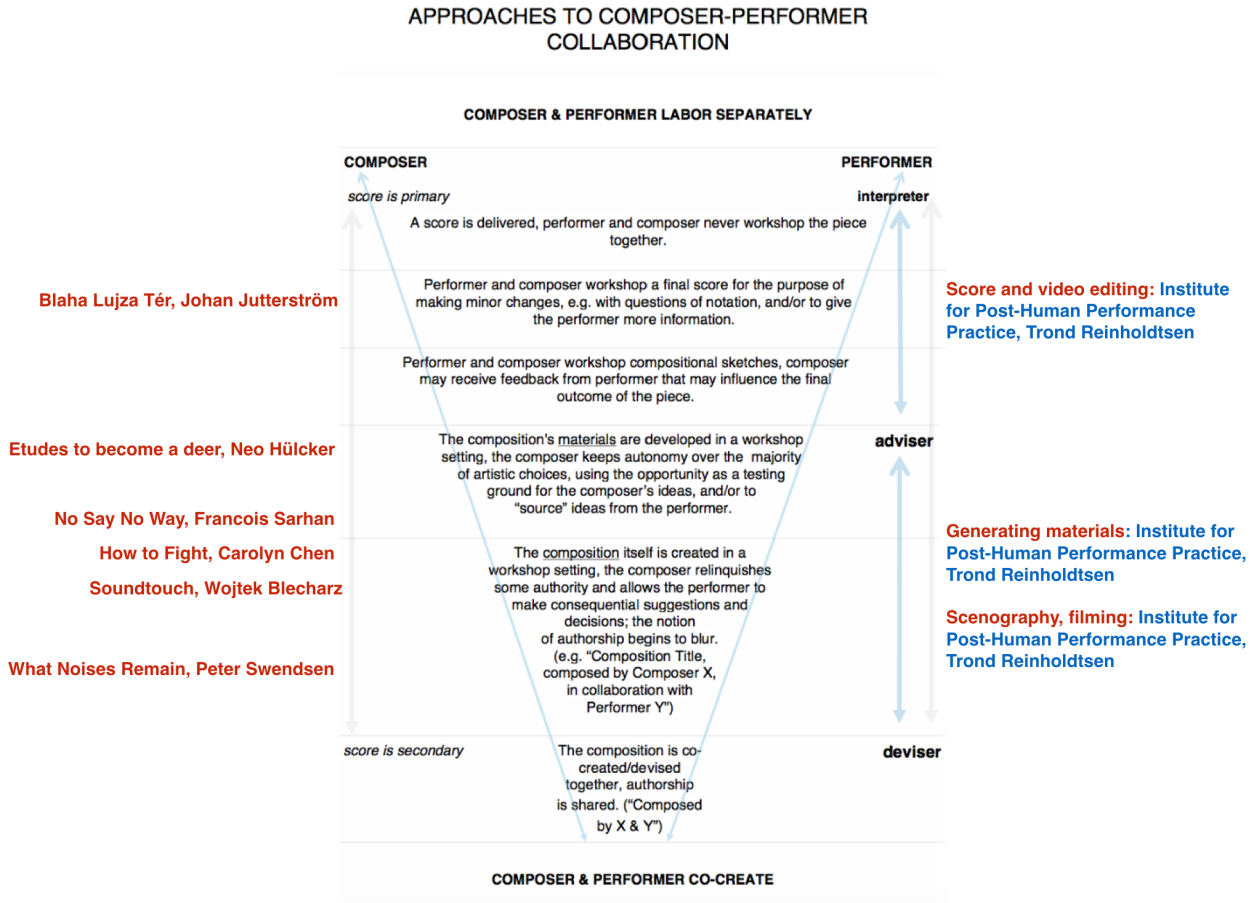
this move laid bare the questions, could other collaborative models outside our traditional methods be more appropriate for creating work that centers around the body and possibly approaches theatre and performance? After all, if the main material is a specific human body, and not for something standardized like a piano or a snare drum, couldn't that human body need to be present to make that work?

Though these issues and reasons were certainly in my mind when I started the project, the importance of the topic and the consequences of the method upon my own artistic practice were not fully understood or recognised until near the end of the project. This is perhaps a typical characteristic of research where the project very slowly reveals what the real questions at stake truly are. At this point I began to look backwards to understand what exactly had happened in the processes of creating the pieces. The result was the aforementioned published article. At the core of this article is a graph created for the purpose of reflecting the various ways that performers and composers collaborate.

There are three important points before we go to the graph:
1) There is no correct nor incorrect way to collaborate to make new musical works.
2) There is no correlation between collaborative method and the quality of the new work.
3) This graph is a tool for thinking, it does not reflect reality. All methods are messy and very few practices chose only one method at a time.



And this is where the new pieces fall on the graph. However, most pieces used more than one method, for example we can see how many methods were employed to make Institute for Post-human Performance Practice.



What occurred as I reflected was that I noticed I was moving towards a practice as a deviser. And I recognised that this collaborative method was allowing me to venture into other fields and activities beyond my instrument. This could include, making scenography or costumes or filming or experimenting with technology. What this revealed to me is that the process of having close collaborations and making those pieces was actually contributing to the extension in my practice.

But what exactly does a collaboration in the room and on the floor look like? How does a performer such a myself contribute in such a process? To answer this I will go into detail into the works Institute for Post-Human Performance Practice and What Noises Remain.

WHAT NOISES REMAIN

What Noises Remain is a 50 minute work for percussionist, video, and audio playback. The whole process of creating this piece would take more than two years beginning in 2015.

At the start Peter brought forward a variety of concepts, and from our conversations we settled on his idea of retelling of Shakespeare's the tempest through a reconstruction of place, landscape, and weather using percussion and multi-media elements.

For our first creative development our primary task was to find a shared approach to the text. We each chose excerpts out of the play that are based on sound and natural environment and then compiled this into one shared document where we began to imagine how aspects of the story could be dispersed across the different media.

This process lead to us creating a structural form where we imagined creating audio and visual environments as related to the narrative of The Tempest. (Here we settled that the piece would have five parts, each associated to a specific soundscape).

We also began to play with lighting and projection and some scenographic ideas. Much of this collaborative process included testing ideas that would ultimately not make it in the piece, which can be a time consuming but nonetheless important process. For example on the left side of the image I am experimenting with a handheld camera and objects on the bass drum that could have been combined with the fixed media.

Throughout everything we collected a ton of video material. In this photo we see one studio recording session — this is an example of how contingent and unpredictable some creative processes can be. A tangent, a whim, a moment of play, can reveal an important element for what materials stay in or out of the final work. In this photo we had just finished up a video shoot where we had completed basic plan for what we wanted to capture. As we were walking out of the room I noticed some rope lying on the shelf and suggested that we hear what it sounds like when I play it on the drum and capture some video of that. Peter agreed and we began improvising and filming without knowing where it would go. Some months later as we were reviewing our huge archive of video material we remembered the rope and decided to try to incorporate into my performance material. From this moment of untethered exploration, the ground was laid for an entire section of the piece.

In the next development Peter and I set to make the performance aspects of the piece. Peter began the week with an audio track that he made based on the structures and form we settled on in the first creative development. From here we began to develop the performance material through processes of improvisation. In this case, Peter normally behaved like a choreographer. I would produce materials or he would provide starting points from which I could improvise, and then he would give suggestions to develop the the material forward.

From here, Peter edited the video component of the piece, largely on his own and the work was the ready for the premiere.

INSTITUTE FOR POST-HUMAN PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

Institute for Post-Human Performance Practice is multi-media work that includes live research, live music performance, the scenography that is the Institute itself, and a video documentary.

Similar to What Noises Remain, the process of creating this piece was a multi year one. It began in November 2016 and the piece was premiered in January 2018.

(IMAGE) It started with Trond Reinholdtsen proposing the concept of building an institute for post-human performance practice. I think it is fair to say that the idea of creating an institute is in line with Reinholdtsen larger practice, probably most clearly illustrated with his creation of the Norwegian Opra. From here we spent the next week sharing references, discussing what a post-human percussionist might look like, reading texts, watching videos, and generally spending a lot of time and meals together in order to come to a common approach**.** In the second week we set to the task of building the institute, a construction of cardboard, tape, paint, chalk, and magazine cutouts.

At this point we believed the piece would be an installation and or a film without live performance. The week was concluded with the first of many filming sessions.

The second creative development was spent developing the post-human body enhancements and documenting them in action and writing the text that would accompany the film.

The last developments were spent gathering further footage for the film, reviewing the material we had created, and creating a sketch for a story board. Trond then spent some months editing this material into what the documentary is today.

During this final leg of the process Trond decided that we needed an extremely virtuosic percussion solo that would be performed live as the final work for human performer. This piece was written in the traditional way and was then workshopped for changes to some theatrical considerations.

Finally, In the weeks leading to the premiere final touches were made on the performance situation and set up, like integrating a live camera and live research.

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Where I believe a process moves towards devising or co-creating rather than more standard methods of making is when the task of establishing form and the carrying out of the concept is shared, even slightly, with the performer. It also has to do with a collective accumulation of materials. This causes the roles to blur and creates a space where artistic practice can shift. In both cases, though in different ways, each composer allowed this.

What I find interesting is how both of these processes, and indeed that of most of the new pieces, which is perhaps due to the scale and or nature of the work, tended to move through a variety of methods for creating the piece. Some parts were made in traditional ways, some were made in more collective ways. And allowing this flexibility was personally exhilarating.

What I have taken away from this artistic research project, and have hoped to communicate to a wider public, is that while there is no correct or incorrect way to collaborate, and there is no correlation between method and the quality of the work, what I do wish to insist upon is that it *is* possible to consider highly collaborative methods as modelled in other performance fields as a real possibility as we make musical works that approach theatre and performance.

And no matter what kind of work musicians make what is absolutely necessary, and is something we all need to get better at, is asking and gaining consent by both parties for how we create new work. And from there it requires accepting the consequences of those methods. For the performer who is moving towards co-creating it means accepting an amount of responsibility and risk that can be uncomfortable, a discomfort I regularly felt. It might also mean demanding economic models that consider paying the performer for more than the performance, as occasionally was the case during this project.

As we collaborate more closely in music, a complex set of questions begin to raise, both at the interpersonal level and at a systemic and institutional level. I continue to ruminate on all of this, even as I speak, but I have made significant leaps in understanding my own position during the last years - and I suspect this will continue to change as I develop.

Conclusion

What started out as a project about developing skills became one about developing collaborative processes. What moved away from a desire to disrupt some conventions in our field became one about disrupting some conventions in my own practice and then offering my reflections for others to consider.

At the end, it seems this project is about creating the conditions for a more ambiguous music practice: where sound is but one aspect in music, where the instrument becomes but one element I relate to, where what we understand training to be is not only the acquisition of disparate skills but also a slow process of extension in existing dispositions and abilities, where the roles of composer and performer can mix and blur, where creating new work is not just about production but about creating a laboratory space for taking risks and growing closer to other artists.

The pieces created and the processes taken in many ways reflect a wider shift in contemporary music that demands not only an excellent instrumentalist but also a creative performer who is willing to take risks on stage, in the practice room, and in the creation of new work. This was what has been demanded of me, and this ambiguous, boundary-ignoring, inclusive, collective, and interpersonal practice is one I hope I will continue to develop for years to come.

Thank you so much.