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## Anne Douglas & Kathleen Coessens

### Improvisation and Embodied Knowledge – Three Artistic Projects between Life, Art and Research

#### Introduction

In life there exists no script. The primacy of experience is a form of 'trying out' or improvisation, a moving from an indefinable and undifferentiated state to feeling our way by creating a direction.

In art, improvisation is differently nuanced. As artists, we cast a critical eye on the predetermined structures of social, cultural, material experience while recognising that freedom and constraint are profoundly interrelated. Improvisation in art across cultures is a specific approach to form making that centres the imagination (of creator/ performer/spectator) precisely on managing the interplay between freedom and constraint.

In artistic research, the artist/researcher places him/herself at the sharp point of an inquiry, re-imagining and re-configuring arts practice experimentally in the world. In research we explore new horizons of practice collaboratively, finding new meanings, working generatively and reflectively with new materials, technologies and within social, cultural processes.

Taking an expanded notion of improvisation as a "being alive" (Ingold 2011), this research traces a trajectory from improvisation in life to improvisation in art. It draws upon three interrelated artistic projects exploring collaborative improvisation experiments across the domains of visual arts and music, philosophy and anthropology: *Calendar Variations 2010–11* is a visual activity; *A Day in My Life 2011–12*, mirrors this experimental activity in music; *Sipping Water 2011–12* is a new collaboration with Dr Amanda Ravetz, anthropologist, Manchester Metropolitan University. It focuses attention through drawing. All three projects use "scores" in the form of text-based poems that imply or invite activity. They have emerged one after the other as a development from each other.

The following research questions are at the heart of this threefold artistic work: How might a revisiting of improvisation as a condition of life open up approaches to improvisation in art, challenging its current formulation as a specific formal approach? In what ways might such an inquiry inform new understandings of improvisation as a form of embodied knowledge<sup>1</sup> within and beyond artistic practice?

A short reflection on improvisation in life and in art

#### In Life

Consider the human being, with needs and possibilities, entering a world full of unexpected events, discovering different experiences and taking an active part in that world. The world's movement impels us to act, to reflect, to judge and create, to feel as we also move, encountering and interacting with other beings. In this complexity of experience the world both embraces and defies human expectation. In so doing it drives us to improvise as an ongoing series of experimental moves that are not predetermined but emerge as necessary attempts in and of the moment, as urgently needed acts in life in order to survive, but more than that – to live well.

The word "improvisation" is borrowed from the Italian 'improvviso', meaning un-fore-seen, unprepared. It has its origins in the Latin 'improvisus' and the related verb 'pro-videre', to look ahead, to prepare. The 'im' refers to its being in the moment, ad hoc. As the etymology reveals, improvisation refers to the fate of human beings to cope with an absence of predictability in their world in which materials, dimensions, perceptions and, by extension, living beings are connected in complex, often indeterminate ways.

In summary, improvisation therefore

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Coessens (2011).

emerges from three particular characteristics of human life. Firstly, the human world is unpredictable to a large extent. The continuity of life is not and cannot be planned precisely. Even if we search for expected outcomes, contingency and indeterminacy are part and parcel of the complexity of the world. As Hallam & Ingold (2007) write: "There is no script for social and cultural life. People have to work it out as they go along. In a word, they have to improvise." (p. 1)

Secondly, human beings are unable to repeat events precisely. The variability of situations coupled with our inability to repeat or even predict events necessitates an improvisational approach that generates a wide range of patterns of action and skill, of relational modes and ways of behaving. Thirdly, human survival depends upon collaboration and cohabitation engendering a degree of social complexity. We respond to each other in slightly different ways. We greet each other so often, but rarely in exactly the same way. We talk to each other, by constructing sentences and making gestures, but in all subsequent dialogue we vary those sentences and gestures. Moreover, with each individual, new possibilities and improvisatory acts are added.

Absence of predictability and precise repeatability coupled with the social imperative in human beings to collaborate affects all dimensions of human action: techniques and skills, social relations, happenings and events, material interactions, thoughts and the imagination. Sometimes, we try to adjust the world to our expectations and ideas. Sometimes we adjust our expectations and ideas to the world. We search constantly for an equilibrium and a viable projection of (un)expectedness (Coessens & Douglas 2011).

### In Art

Though seemingly helpless, akin to surviving on a rudderless ship, humans embrace the unpredictable, layering its complexity creatively. Where improvisation in everyday life may be ephemeral, improvisation in art leaves a trace. It offers a structure to repeat the process but not to replicate its experience. Where in everyday life improvisation is a means of "keeping going", providing situations with rapid reactions

and new experiences, in art the impetus is an urge to move from a loose structure to catalyzing new relationships (Douglas & Coessens 2011).

While in life, improvisation remains a potentially useful practice that will not necessarily become part of experiential knowledge, in art it has developed into an aesthetic technique, a method and even a discipline. By reflecting on experience, we come to understand it (Dewey 1938). By tracing our experiences of artistic improvisation, we develop insights that inform the next step, seeking to deepen the experience, whereas life moves on, with or without reflection.

We will discuss these elaborated forms of improvisation in art further on, and explain here the three artistic projects that tried to uncover the frontiers of improvisation between everyday life and artistic creation.

### Three scores, three artistic explorations of similar pathways

As a method or tool in the arts, improvisation often starts from a constraint, freely chosen. In this way musicians improvise on a melody or theme; actors improvise on an emotion, an idea; poets improvise on a form or a set of words.

Artists can improvise on a score i.e. on the creation of another artist. A score complies to certain rules, it activates a certain behaviour and is part of a particular domain, normally music. The score is already socially, culturally and historically embedded. It represents a particular moment in the mores of musical interpretation. By having the potential to generate different responses that become unique unrepeatable events, the score offers a field of possibilities to the artist that exceeds simple articulation or translation: the artist creates "a certain thing." The score is a specific tool for artistic response (Coessens & Douglas 2011, p. 52).

In our three experimental projects *Calendar Variations 2010–11* (initiated by Anne Douglas), *A Day in my Life 2011–12* (initiated by Kathleen Coessens) and *Sipping Water 2011–12* (initiated by Amanda Ravetz), three scores offered the material for drawing out an artistic response. These

scores were written texts, rather than image based or notational, more common, familiar media in either domain. They all offered a pattern for action as a basic condition towards improvisation. They were all related to performance and time and opened up potential for shared social experience. The necessity to negotiate meaning and appropriate response would arise in a shared performance. Moreover, they allowed for a blurring of individual and artistic experiences valuing the moment in which one was working and as such creating a space for "the unforeseen".

### On Calendar Variations (2010–2011)

*Calendar Variations* is based upon *Calendar* (1971), a written score/poem by the artist, Allan Kaprow, who was working at the time in California. The poem is related an experiment in which organic growth is evoked as a dynamic between different elements. Grass, moisture, light, time result in different degrees of greenness and dryness of turf, a metaphor that resonates with human social experience. Taking it into our own context, the *Variations-score/artwork* was developed by seven artists in Scotland<sup>2</sup>.

The artistic experiment started with an invitation sent by Anne Douglas in July 2010 to the artist researchers at Grays School of Art:

Dear All,

I would like to invite you to participate in a small experimental drawing project. Here is the exercise. The following is a score by the artist, Allan Kaprow:  
*Planting a square of turf amid grass like it*  
*Planting another amid grass a little less green*  
*Planting four more squares amid grass progressively drier*  
*Planting a square of dry turf amid grass like it*  
*Planting another amid grass a little less dry*  
*Planting four more squares in places progressively greener*  
 Activity, AK California, November 2 1971 (Coessens & Douglas 2011). (Kaprow, 2002, pp. 120)

Douglas reflects during the exhibition, *Woodend Barn* in April 2011,

The score is a riddle that evokes time through states of change. The values of green to dry increase in contrast and then decrease, establishing equilibrium at its final point. We choose to yield meaning through the coming together of different viewpoints within a shared territory, encountering the other in all its social, ecological and artistic facets. As we questioned our experience, new thoughts, ideas, emotions, possibilities enter in, enriching that experience through seemingly inexhaustible paths and trajectories. We explored, improvised and acted upon these possibilities. We left traces that lead to the world and also mirror its systems and ways of operating. These in turn provide material for a new iteration and a new improvisation.

The motivation to embark on *Calendar Variations* came from a discomfort with the way creativity in art had become absorbed in a social/political discourse and cultural policy imperatives that consume the idea of participation. As we worked, our differences as artists emerged strongly, confrontationally within the group in terms of aesthetic approaches and related beliefs. Like the score these escalated at a point in time. The lines of our drawings, "planting squares of turf", at times became boundaries to contain an aesthetic approach, a stability. At others the drawings opened up choices, opportunities to experience differently, to accommodate difference in ways that were unstable, that created instability.

In a first movement, the artists worked individually with an evolving understanding of Kaprow's aesthetic.

In Janet McEwan's experience, the world of the score and her own personal world merged in the experience of the act of cutting out a square of turf. The practice of doing it was hard, and the piece of turf, like a slab of dark layered chocolate cake, suddenly made her aware of the coincidence with her own life, as she realised that the spot she had chosen was next to the site in the garden where she had burned a lot of artwork on paper. Had the grass suffered, thrived, or been totally indifferent to the addition of the artwork to the soil? She became aware of the quality and differences of kinds of grass, of the traces left in the grass by human movement, of its delicate waving in the wind.

2) This project is a collaborative and experimental venture, started by Anne Douglas, visual artist and researcher, Robert Gordon University and co-produced by Kathleen Coessens, pianist and philosopher of Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Both are Senior Research Fellows of Orpheus Research Centre in Music, Ghent. The other artists are: Georgina Barney, Chris Fremantle, Reiko Goto, Janet McEwan, Chu Chu Yuan. The work has been presented at Orpheus Research Centre in Music, Ghent, Belgium in 2010 and exhibited at Lang Byre Gallery, Woodend Barn, Banchory, Aberdeenshire, Scotland, at the University of Nottingham, UK, and at the (re)-thinking improvisation conference in Malmo, Sweden, in 2011.



Figure 1. Janet McEwan *The experience of cutting turf*, 2011.

This kind of reflection towards the grass and the act of cutting turf was a starting point for Chris Fremantle's approach where a real square of turf, a memory of a Dürer drawing and attending to a new set of drawings in response to the score became an experience of "blurring art and life"<sup>3</sup>.

For Chu Yuan, the score connected to social patterns, to the movement of positions of living beings towards each other, always defining and redefining their place:

The drawings here are an exploration of one trajectory of possibility if we begin to think what happens if we read Kaprow's score as



Figure 2: Chris Fremantle *A piece of turf*, 2011.

reflecting a process of something taking root, spreading and growing. In what way does it grow? Does it grow below others, alongside others, or above others? Does it grow noticed or unnoticed? Does it grow being suppressed by or equal with or in dominance over others? There are two kinds of growth that I had imagined here. One in intensity/lightness or depth/shalowness as analogous with shades of green to dry, and another which is growth in area occupied, as expansion or reduction, all of which suggesting variations in terms of relationships of hostility or receptivity within the field (Chu Yuan, in Coessens & Douglas 2011, p. 41)

3) A play on Kaprow's (1993) own philosophical writings, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*.

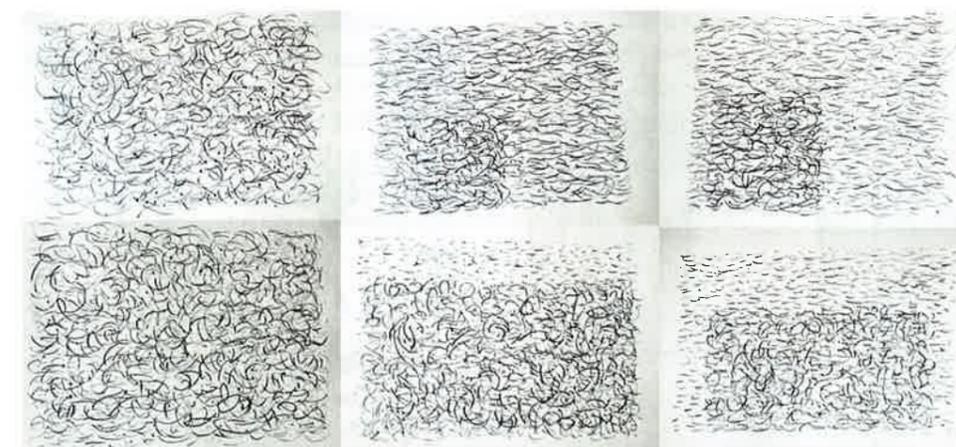


Figure 3: Chu Yuan *Stanza 1*, 2011

Reiko Goto, an ecology artist, explored the relation between humans and plants, engaging with a deep aesthetic and ethical feeling towards ecological survival and equilibrium: "I wanted to know where the aspen trees grow and how they grow here." She rewrote the score, reframing the importance of Californian turf towards the Scottish environment of Aspen trees, their presence and survival in Aberdeenshire:

Planting a tree in places progressively greener that is supported by the sunlight, rain, soil and microbes and that is supported by the city and citizen

Planting another tree in the same square that is supporting birds, moths and other wildlife, that is supporting the quality of water and soil and that is supporting the well being of communities and individuals

Use our imagination about natural succession from grassland to mature forest  
From less green to more green  
Again and again but it is never the same  
Imagine what drives this progress  
Between a disturbance and restoration  
Is it natural or manmade?  
From less green to more green  
A natural progression from sporadic to a success forest along the Dee  
highland to the mouth in Aberdeen  
(Reiko Goto, *Calendar Variations* 2011)

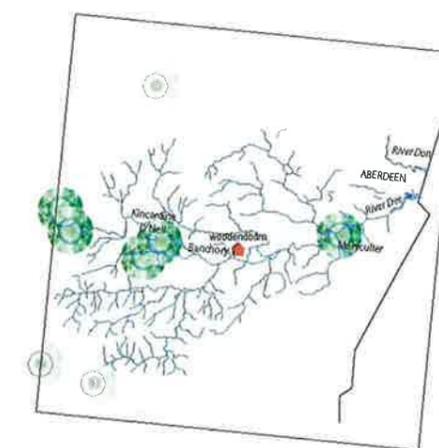


Figure 4: Reiko Goto, preliminary work for *Calendar Variations*, 2011.

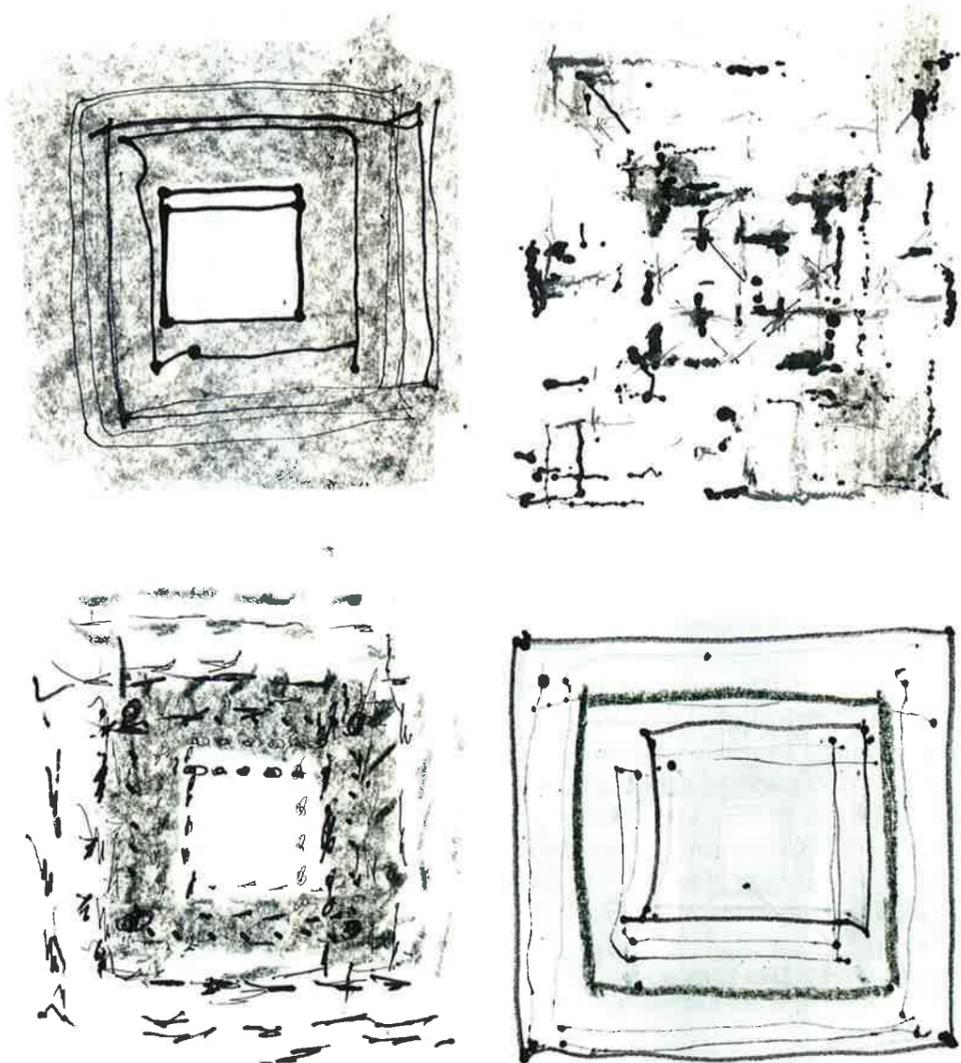


Figure 5: Anne Douglas, *Variations on Calendar*, excerpts from a sketchbook, 2011.

Anne Douglas engaged with experimental open time-spaces of drawing in which the trace, the score, and life-experiences came together in more than a hundred improvisatory variations on the theme.

What happened in these experiences was that the original score faded away, allowing for an immense field of possibilities to create unique outcomes. It opened the space for a myriad of cartographic and topographic maps of interpretations and creations, unlikely and individual interventions and performances, discussions and emotions. New "scores" appeared like

small improvisatory jumps here and there, responding to the invitation of the original score and the different worlds surrounding art, practice and individuals. These newly created objects, "scores", became accessible to others and thereby enlarged the game and the rules. Points of rupture have emerged on different layers by the enaction of different artists. Traces of transpositions appear that become possible between the domain of individual creativity and the domain of culture and its artifacts. At different points in the process, the same thing – a score – can acquire different identities.

The artists then worked together to figure out how to "perform" the score as a shared experience in accordance with Kaprow's aesthetic. They agreed to do so through improvisatory walking. This choice was a combination of many journeys, individual and shared, that culminated in a few simple decisions:

We threw a dice to determine who would go first, who would plant the first square and by doing so create an equivalent between making a mark on a piece of paper and moving in this particular place and space. Reiko, an ecologist artist, walked the first square through the long space. She could not see her trace, she repeated it. One by one we each joined in at intervals walking behind or alongside, until we were all in the square walking round and round each other, impressing the long grass into a mark. By repetition we embodied the score's patterns with increasing familiarity letting its writing emerge through flattening the grass, keeping up, judging distance. By the afternoon our performance was seemingly effortless, intuitive as if all that matters was that very particular moment of experience. Being free in that moment somehow meant finding an equilibrium between our inner world experiences that had brought us to this point and

the outer world we were sharing with others. It was like finding, mastering a new sound as one single activity, sensing and acting, judging and listening as new experiences unfolded as if for the first time. It was at this point that I really understood Kaprow's aesthetic idea. Engaging with the riddle of the score in our own time and space, sharing activity, reaching agreement on how to act was, constituted the work of art. Since that moment we have been challenged by "exhibiting" this sense of improvisation. (Douglas in Coessens, K. *On Calendar Variations* DVD 2011)

One of the artists suddenly broke the linearity of the square by jumping in the middle of the grass field and a new opportunity of freedom and improvisation was realised. The rule of making the square was suddenly broken and spontaneous action emerged. Is that what happens also in some of the drawings of the artists?

Figure 6: *Calendar Variations Walk*, Wood End Barn, Aberdeenshire 5 August 2010





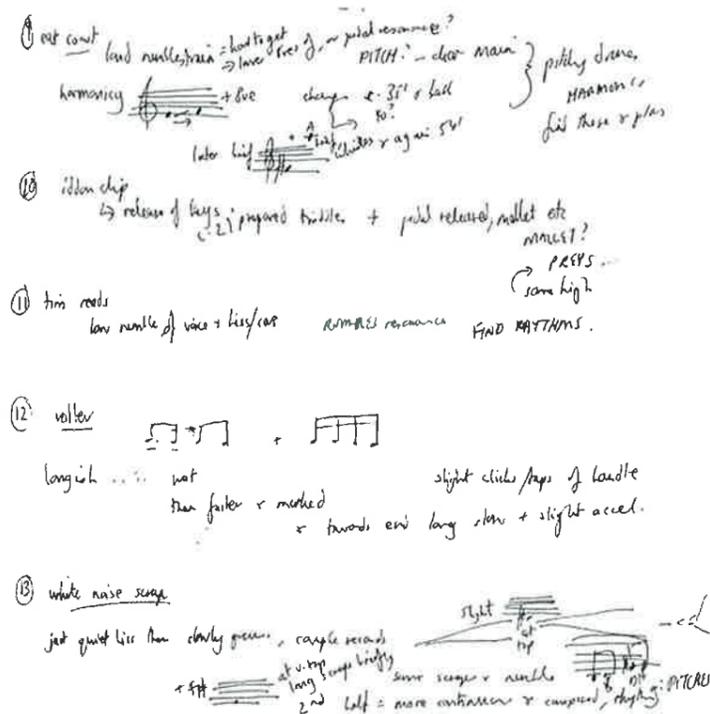


Figure 8: Catherine Law's notes for *A day in my life*, 2011.

Other artists came with very different perspectives and creative improvisations, all sounding as different layers of interpretation.

Catherine Laws<sup>6</sup> created 20 one-minute sound tracks on the basis of environmental sounds of one day in her life. They offered minimalist sound representations of daily noises of nature and culture including part of her own movements and habits: the train, writing, birdsong and so on. She then translated some of these sounds as short ideas and material to improvise with on extended piano (see Figure 8).

6) Catherine Laws is a pianist and researcher at the University of York and Senior Research Fellow at Orpheus Research Centre in Music (ORCIM), Gent.

Kim Cunio<sup>7</sup> and Vanessa Tomlinson<sup>8</sup> made a twenty-four minute music performance of the text, bringing in their own life experiences as well as their artistic expertise<sup>9</sup>.



Figure 9: *A day in my life* performance, Orpheus Institute Research Festival, Gent 2011.



Figure 10: Detail of Vanessa Tomlinson's percussion instruments, *A day in my life* performance in Gent 2011.

7) Dr Kim Cunio is a composer, performer, lecturer and researcher at the Queensland Conservatorium, Australia specialising in intercultural music practice.

8) Dr Vanesa Tomlinson is a performer, lecturer and researcher at the Queensland Conservatorium specialising in solo percussion, contemporary chamber music, improvisation.

9) These 20 sound compositions of Catherine Laws as well as the version of Kim Cunio and Vanessa Tomlinson are available at <http://mosamplab.posterous.com/#/a-day-in-my-life-preparations-partial-contrib>

10) The different perspectives will be part of a large artistic output in the format of both a publication and a "sounding" exhibition in 2012, the second phase of the experimental project.

Actions mirrored the particular lives of the individuals involved in sound. These gave rise to new encounters and interactions. It was in the co-incident of the different creations between life and art that improvisation and co-creativity developed. The score forced some of the artists to reflect more upon the relation between their daily life and their artistic practice, putting them in "non safe", non habitual, unfamiliar situations.

The project *A day in my life* ended its first phase with a concert at the artistic research festival of ORCIM in Gent, October 2011. Other different artists have continued working on the score and will offer their materials and created pieces to the project over the next six months. These will be added to the meta-mapping of the project that in turn will aid understanding of artistic interpretation, transformation and action in collaborative improvisatory settings<sup>10</sup>.

**On *Sipping Water* 2011–12**  
This artistic project continues our collaborative and experimental research in the domains of art, music, anthropology and philosophy that seeks to understand embodied, experiential knowledge and situations of improvisation. In September 2011 Ravetz, as visual anthropologist, wrote the following score:

An exploration of lightness, stillness and gesture in drawing practice, in relation to improvisation and the creation of new knowledge and experience.

Take a full glass of water, a sketch book, a pencil and a pencil sharpener.

Sip the water slowly, tasting each drop. If an impulse arises, pick up the pencil and draw. Do not draw without feeling moved to; continue until half an hour has passed.

Do this for half an hour, every day, for eight weeks.

Beginning in October 2011 we, Amanda Ravetz, Anne Douglas and Kathleen Coesens, each spend eight weeks responding to the score through drawing and writing:

10th of October 2011

Dear Amanda, Dear Anne,  
I received the sketchbook last Thursday, but because of the Orpheus festival, I could not start the "sipping the water" experience. I did it for the first time today, and just finished this strange experience of being in between the water expressing its fluidity and coldness, its invasiveness towards my invitation, and my thoughts and recollections of parts of the day, delicately searching for an ephemeral equilibrium.

Thanks for the experience,  
Kathleen

The uses of different languages merge in this experimental process – visual and graphic, tactile as well as verbal, metaphorical and textual. They find an expression by way of different modes – functional, poetic, reflective and representational. The translation from the score to an experiential setting and onwards to an experiential situation involves different levels of

understanding.

The score draws upon tacit domains of experience. It acts as a mediator between our own intentions and actions (inner world) and the environment (outer world) and invites us to act in and upon the world. As a culturally evolved notational semiotic medium, a verbal score implies literacy and conceptual understanding. At the same time, it immediately forces us to engage perception fully within broad forms of embodied experience. It is situated in two directions i.e. not just between "speaker" and "listener" but also between one's inner and outer worlds of experience as individuals.

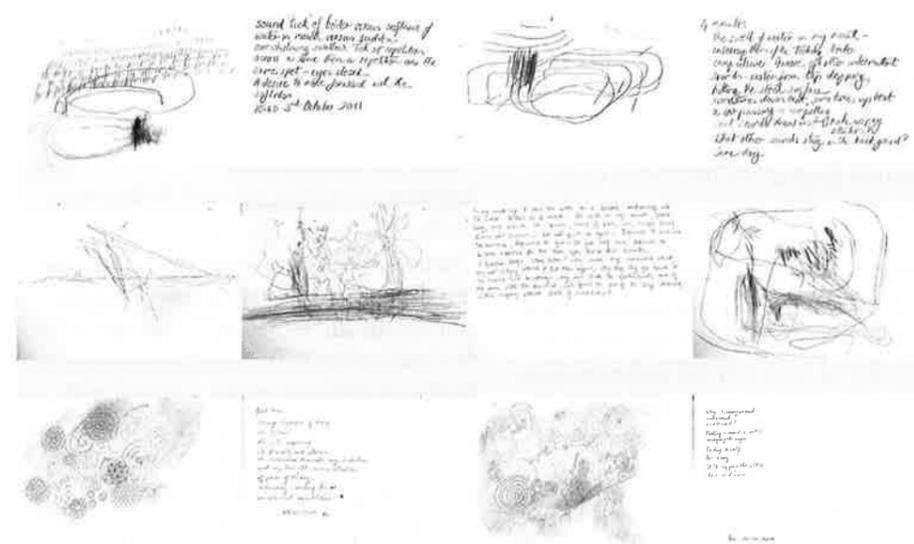
This particular experimental setting in *Sipping Water* addresses cross-sensorial capacities of expression and translation. Its strict material conditions (glass of water, pencils, paper) and its focus upon tacit dimensions of experience (sipping water) constrain as well as enable creative outcome. While each daily situation of *Sipping Water* involves a determined time and space, all action in that framework remains unexpected and allows for improvisatory freedom: Shall I draw, and, if so, what and how will I draw? How will sipping the water become a mark left as a trace on paper? How much freedom remains for the artist in this setting?

As such, an experiential situation was created at the heart of listening to oneself and forced a distance in relation to social habits as well as expertise. By distancing habit, we allowed for the unexpected.

We also allowed for experiences "in the moment" both in our thinking and in our creativity. The tactile experience of connecting inner and outer worlds (body/mouth and water) drew together familiarity and strangeness. It forced us to realise intersensory relations. The background of the score, as well as the materiality of the paper and the pencil again played on the level of semiotic understanding and skill both with the familiar and the unfamiliar. They offered the material conditions of translating sensory and imaginative processes into a drawing, extending the experience of the body with the lines on the paper in performative acts. Relationships were established on the basis of our experience of the outer world combined or adjusted with our inner world.

On reflection experimental/artistic output arises not only in response to our external environment, to what is given, but also from the inner world of the individual and h/her particular perception. Interaction and interrelatedness between actor and environment leads to a precision, a subtle "com-prehension", a "grasping" of this interaction and a translation of it into a new creation. By combining the experiential with the skill of organising and perceiving complex material in relation to the whole "as a field" (Arnheim 1986), our output realises a "field of relations"<sup>11</sup>. We still have to explore the complexity of the tacit and explicit elements of the outcome of this experiment.

Figure 11: Detail of a 6 metre long document of sketchbook pages: top strip Douglas, middle strip Ravetz and bottom strip Coessens.



Returning to artistic improvisation as a tool and method

Improvisation can be a spontaneous way of creating an artwork. As such it appears like improvisation in life, where a creative act takes a spontaneous direction, without intention, rather as a kind of intuition, "having a go". In this case improvisation is an important quality of the work, and also part of its development. The artist creates conditions in which improvisation can occur most of the time without consciously setting them up specifically to be improvisational.

In contrast, improvisation can also become a method. In this scenario, the circumstances set out consciously to be improvisatory. One knows that one will improvise, and more or less how one will improvise though not necessarily when. In this sense the circumstances for improvisation are set up more or less in a technical way, determining constraints and allowing for moments of indeterminacy in which decisions may be made freely and spontaneously. Certain known techniques are deployed to achieve tension and balance between determined and indeterminate elements within a work. These improvisatory techniques can be taught across the performing arts, in drama, in dance or in music. They can also be acquired through experience. A play with meaning and associations in words or movements can be enhanced by extensive practice in these kinds of rehearsal or performance situations.

Artistic improvisation is a method concerned with freedom and constraints. It explores the indeterminacy of a controlled artistic situation to release original and creative responses. In improvisation the artist puts him/herself in a situation that is not totally controlled: a new situation in which the emergence of previously unexplored, new combinations can occur. This situation allows for shifts between foreground and background. In some sense, the artist searches for a situation in which he finds him/herself 'on the edge', in a liminal space between the known and the unknown. Some domains of the arts radically take improvisation as the heart of their expression: think of jazz or of improvisatory theatre. Here improvisation is not only an ex-

periential mode, method or technique, but has become a discipline in its own right, as it invades the whole expertise of the artist and is the fundamental articulation of its work. These domains of improvisation were not included in our experiments.

The three artistic projects in which we were engaged, were balanced on an edge between improvisation in life and improvisation in art, between life and discipline, experience and method, "having a go" and technique. The scores allowed for experimentation with improvisation as mode and as method, rather than as technique and discipline.

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11) Arnheim (1986) proposes that the human mind is "double edged" in that it engages in two forms of cognition: 'linear' and "field". On the one hand in problem solving e.g. mathematics, the human mind distances itself sufficiently to abstract and deduce a linear set of connections such as  $a+b=c$ . On the other, in experiencing the world through our senses, our minds scan "a field" of complex relations and create new linkages to make sense of the complexity that we ordinarily face.