



AUTHOR(S):

TITLE:

YEAR:

Publisher citation:

OpenAIR citation:

Publisher copyright statement:

This is the _____ version of a work originally published by _____
(ISBN _____; eISBN _____; ISSN _____).

OpenAIR takedown statement:

Section 6 of the "Repository policy for OpenAIR @ RGU" (available from <http://www.rgu.ac.uk/staff-and-current-students/library/library-policies/repository-policies>) provides guidance on the criteria under which RGU will consider withdrawing material from OpenAIR. If you believe that this item is subject to any of these criteria, or for any other reason should not be held on OpenAIR, then please contact openair-help@rgu.ac.uk with the details of the item and the nature of your complaint.

This publication is distributed under a CC _____ license.

'Venturing out on the thread of a tune': the Artist as Improvisor in Public life

Anne Douglas

Just as the musician or composer has at his disposal a 'theory' with which he can work meaningfully whether he follows it closely, develops it or deviates from it, so the painter and the sculptor need a theory dealing with the laws of rhythm, proportion, measure, weight (light-dark), quality (colour), space, and the like. (Grohmann 1959, p 174)

In discussing the work of Wassily Kandinsky of some hundred years ago, Will Grohmann, an art historian, focuses on Kandinsky's effort to develop a new grammar for the visual arts. Kandinsky, Grohmann argues, undertakes a profound rethinking of visual perception from the perspective of the artist. Working alongside Paul Klee and others in the context of the Bauhaus at Weimar, Kandinsky repositioned art and craft in relation both to industrialisation and the emergence of anthroposophy, at a point of momentous social, cultural and political change. It is 'theory' Grohmann argues that guides the artists and their followers to navigate through the new terrain aesthetically, practically, spiritually and intellectually. Acting as leaders, they opened up a new kind of potential in the way the visual arts were thought and practised.

In the early 21st century some leading artists such as Suzanne Lacy, Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison, John Newling and Mierle Laderman Ukeles among others, have increasingly focused their understanding of change within issues that effect public life, shifting gravity from individual experiences of material production, form and grammar that arguably defined modernism in art, to a different focus, a quality of encounter in public life. They delineate a point of transition from modernism into a different way of understanding art in the world. Modernism was predominantly concerned with evolving form from a material base in developing a utopian world of continuous progress. The practices of these later artists, in contrast, focus on current systems of value, on the implications of value in shaping how we live in the present – for better or worse. Their work is also deeply concerned with form, but in a different way. It has become increasingly important, for example, for artists like these to have insight into the processes by which they engage a public, to make legible the dynamic between their work and its publics, symbolically as well as through forms of intervention. They challenge the canon of single medium art forms, working directly in communities, organisations and institutions of public life, encountering inconsistency and contradiction. They are never entirely in control of how the work unfolds in the world, of how it might develop through participation.

Where Grohmann cites 'theory' of form in modernism as a guiding principle, this chapter offers metaphors as an equivalent focus to explore the particular character of socially focused art practice. Metaphor operates in a different way from theory. Metaphors, unlike theories, are fluid, relative and mutable. They do not establish principles based on analysis but are altogether more exploratory,

focusing the imagination in a particular way.

I pose the question - to what extent might improvisation act as a metaphor offering insight into the nature of artistic approaches that position art within issues and subjectivities of everyday life? Improvisation in art is often understood in a non-metaphorical way i.e. as a very particular approach to the creation of an artwork for example in jazz or in non notated musical traditions such as the classical Indian raga. Here and in contrast I juxtapose two different metaphorical senses of improvisation. Both are concerned with acting and thinking freely. In the one we *escape* a past in which we are trapped in pointless repetition by undertaking a new direction. In the second, past and present are entangled within a continuous unfolding process.

Both ways of thinking about improvisation are used to explore a movement in art from material concerns to issues of public life in a selection of artists' practices through a series of questions: How, if at all, is improvisation present? Why is it significant? What does improvisation as a metaphor reveal about the relationship of art to public life in the late 20th and 21st centuries? How might an analysis of improvisation in art develop insight into improvisation as a way of being in life?

Living with environmental change: Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison

As artists and ecologists, Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison have been concerned over fifty years with the implications of eco-cultural well-being between human and non-human communities. They explore the ecologies of particular places through a series of questions: How big is here? How long is our now? These questions are not seeking definitive answers. They act as a point of entry into the complexity of relationships in eco-systems (Douglas & Fremantle 2016).

The Harrisons' work is a profound critique of mankind's increasing tendency to assume control over nature, resulting from a problematic transmutation of knowledge into economic systems based in values of progress and profit. In 1974 at an early stage in their artistic partnership, Newton Harrison observed

It is not the supermarket as a centre of trade, which is its legitimate cultural function, that disrupts man's intuitive contact with his biological sources, but the supermarket as a utopian simplifier and developer of artificial needs that eventually erodes our inner sense of discrimination and our ability to relate magically to the environment (Burnham 1974, p 166).¹

The Harrisons have slowly evolved an alternative imaginary recasting human/environmental relations as interdependent. This is most vividly expressed in two mirroring texts in *The Lagoon Cycle* 1975-85, a project that

1

I am grateful to Chris Fremantle for drawing my attention to this quote 1st October 2015

studied the ecology of a species of crab in Sri Lanka. The artists attempted to mimic and reconstruct the habitat of the crab in California in order to question and document different stages of their growing understanding of its life conditions.

Are the Harrisons improvising in this work? If so, how?

The Lagoon Cycle, as a discrete work, takes the form of a published text and an exhibition that both include large -scale maps and images. The text takes shape as a dialogue between two opposing perspectives or characters– that of the Witness as someone who reflects on and questions courses of action, versus the Lagoon Maker, who is more spontaneous, driven by pro-action more than reflection. It is through interplay between the two positions that new insight emerges. Differences are not resolved but held in productive tension. The whole work is conscious of formal values, of “rhythm, proportion, measure, weight (light-dark), quality (colour), space” (Grohmann 1959). This is evident in the following two short fragments, in the way these are organised, paced, and in the use of repetition to develop underpinning ideas. The fragments appear at different parts of *The Lagoon Cycle* but are usefully juxtaposed here to give a sense of the Harrisons’ approach.

*“But people are tough and resilient and improvise
their existence as best they can very creatively with
the materials at hand but the materials keep changing
Only the improvisation remains constant*

The Witness (Harrisons 1985, p 37)

*Life in the lagoons is tough and very rich
it breeds quickly Like all of us it must improvise its
existence very creatively with the materials at
hand but the materials keep changing Only the
improvisation remains constant*

The Lagoon Maker (Harrisons 1985, p 60)

Every aspect of the text is determined, rather than indeterminate. In any formal, literal sense it is *not* an improvised work but a concept that is threaded through the text, appearing and reappearing much like a leitmotif within a piece of scored music. However, *The Lagoon Cycle* may also be considered improvisatory in another sense. To understand this it is necessary to move beyond the text, image, exhibition and book as art objects, and examine how these function as part of a much larger movement.

The text is part of a discourse that is never completed. At a relatively early stage of development, the Harrisons open up their creative process to participation and the inevitable collisions that result from multiple understandings and sensibilities. Once they have achieved a sufficient level of knowledge and

awareness of the issues to hand, they shape a discrete work described above, as a product. At this stage they are seeking to make sense of what they have experienced and to offer this back to a listening public, putting their thinking to the test and drawing critical response. The point is not to arrive at a blue print to act upon but to sustain an unfolding, iterative movement, one that functions in the symbolic realm of the imagination with potential for specific action. It is in this process back and forth, between action and reflection, that the deep learning they are seeking through the work can occur. The dialogue between the Witness and the Lagoon Maker opens into wider conversation gathering participants as it moves, a form of 'conversational drift', the Harrisons' own metaphor (Adcock 1992,p 45). In this way the issues gain in intensity and complexity. Invitation (and not competition predetermined by a design brief) is fundamental to the open-ended, exploratory and mobile nature of their aesthetic. *The Lagoon Cycle* established a foundation for all subsequent projects in the Harrisons' oeuvre.

Both meanings of improvisation, as an escape from the dead weight of the past versus joining a world that is given, are simultaneously true in the Harrisons' work. On the one hand, improvisation is a force or energy that underpins all life, human and non human. It is continuous and ongoing, given. However, there is also the desire to move forward into a future that is different from the past. Is this simply a contradiction in which improvisation loses any specific meaning?

Gary Peters, a jazz improviser and philosopher, critiques a reading of improvisation that makes claims for innovation and novelty. The real work of the improvising artist is not that of freedom as a form of emancipation in a future yet to come, a freedom based in hope, but that of a freedom that has always existed, and that the artwork helps us to remember. Free improvisation in music is commonly described as acting 'on the spur of the moment' of an experience ("improvisation" in Collins Dictionary), 'working with the materials' to hand ('improvisation" in Oxford Dictionary). Deploying the metaphor of the scrap yard challenge, Peters acknowledges that the improviser is always working with the knowledge of existing musical material, so the past is always present in the experience of improvising. The important question is the quality of relationship between the improviser and time and available material.

Time is important but in the sense of *timing* - knowing when a word, note, chord or sequence is taken up, worked on and when it is necessary to forget it and find something else to remember (Peters 2009, p165). Material is also important, but always in relation to contexts of meaning that might produce new musical content. Peters dismisses the relationship between two or more people improvising as reducing improvisation to 'a glorified love-in dressed up as art' (Peters 2009, 3). Instead he emphasises the relationship of improviser to improvisation. Improvisation

...is not an awareness of the other but of the inevitable situatedness of the improviser in a work, the contingency of that work, and of the agility necessary to avoid becoming trapped in the communicative community created by it. (Peters 2009, p 3)

Peters' insight is important in deepening our understanding of improvisation as a method of progressing from past into present that is not a Utopian projection or rupture with the past but based in 'hyper awareness' of what the past has led us to. The past and present are thus entangled and mutable. Improvisation in this sense is a movement from a closed sense of what has been, to one in which the past is re-opened, re-imagined in the present.

In this light we might read dialogue in the Harrisons' work as a way of exercising the freedom to think as individuals through participation in a shared experience, hence the importance of difference between the two perspectives of Lagoon Maker and Witness and the movement implied in conversational drift. Both gather momentum and connect a deep ecological past to the present, keeping the issues, in this case of the environment, alive, urgent and open to new potential. Peters cites both qualities as aspects of Improvisation: the search for the freedom to think as an individual within the contingency of social life and holding in tension the space of ambivalent, contradictory values. The Harrisons go beyond Peters' articulation of improvisation in the sense that they believe that the future is determined by the stories we tell ourselves now, stories of our own becoming.

Whose voice? Suzanne Lacy

In a parallel way, Suzanne Lacy has constructed a long-term, ten year programme of work focused in the relationship between young black people and the law enforcement agencies, educationalists and youth services in Oakland California. In the Oakland projects (1991-2001), she explored the absence of 'voice' among black youth in the 1990s in an area that previously had fostered powerful political movements some 20 years before – Malcolm X, the Black Panther movement. Each project within the Oakland series included a high profile performance event (Lacy, 1991-2001) (Douglas, 2007).

In *Roof is On Fire* 1993-4, one of a number of performances within a ten year cycle, the artist worked with participants to stage a series of conversations to a listening public with a view to exposing and challenging racial prejudice. The staging, like the Harrisons' *Lagoon Cycle*, was meticulously considered in formal terms. In this case, large black and white cars that seated up to four to five young people created focal points within an Oakland rooftop parking lot. Spectators could wander freely between the vehicles to hear what was being said and to see, by whom. It was a self-conscious, aesthetic decision to time the performance for sunset marking a transition through the colour spectrum from light into darkness. The content of the conversations within the cars was not determined but extemporized by the participants exploring their experiences of the issues.

In what sense is improvisation specifically evident in this work?

In this particular sequence of projects, Lacy's 'world as found' is socially, rather than ecologically, situated. It addresses issues of identity and power. She draws out a temporary space and time, encircling disorder. The point is to acknowledge the conflict inherent in the issues at hand, to be open to the disjuncture and

contradiction that differences of view and experience produce. In this space it is also important to let go of judgementalism, of fixed positions. This temporary space allows participants from different factions to foreground the conditions of their oppression, to make visible these conditions in juxtaposition with other perspectives between young people, police, educationalists and politicians. In her role as the artist, Lacy does not attempt to determine future courses of action. She focuses on creating a shared sense of the freedom to think differently. In this way, the work, like that of the Harrisons, offers the potential for new understandings.

Where the Harrisons emphasise and reveal a certain methodical progression through time, Lacy's performances punctuate moments in time. In this sense she might appear to lean towards the first definition of improvisation, an *escape* from a past by undertaking a new direction. However, her work has an important durational dimension. The performances frequently occur at the end of months of intense workshop experiences with participants that establish the boundary conditions of a discourse. The performances distil and re-open the workshop dynamic to a larger public affected by the issues. With each project the quality of encounter cannot be standardised into a method that can be reliably repeated. Each encounter is unique, involving Lacy (echoing Peters) in inhabiting the situation, gaining deep knowledge of its contingencies, working with the knowledge that is 'to hand' and also of judging when to act and when to move on. In this sense the past is continuous with the present, but differently inflected.

In their essay *Of the Refrain* Deleuze and Guattari describe improvisation through three different scenarios (2002). Each formulates a particular quality of response to chaos as life's condition. The child in the dark stabilizes her fear by singing and repeating a refrain under her breath. The refrain is familiar and enables the child to overcome her feeling of fragility and exposure, the feeling that chaos will break apart her sense of order. In a similar way, the adult draws a circle and calls it 'home', a delimited space that is never completely free from the forces of chaos but also resists and filters their impact. These are fragile gestures of control in which the possibility of chaos is ever present – "(A) mistake in speed, rhythm, or harmony would be catastrophic because it would bring back the forces of chaos, destroying both creator and creation" (Deleuze & Guattari, p 311). This temporary containment and control is not lasting. The circle re opens, an opening that is produced by the circle itself, 'as a function of the working forces it shelters' (ibid, 311). It is a controlled reopening in a different place from the circle's origin in chaos. These are not three successive movements but three aspects of a single thing, the refrain or *ritournelle* that is improvisation.

One launches forth, hazards and improvisation. But to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it. One ventures from home on the thread of a tune. Along sonorous, gestural, motor lines that mark the customary path of a child and graft themselves onto or begin to bud "lines of drift" with different loops, knots, speeds, movements, gestures and sonorities". (ibid, pp 311-312)

The chaos Lacy confronts in social settings is not directionless but a complex

array of conflicting forces, of interior beliefs and expectation, of exteriorized identities, of collisions between social class, gender and race, of wider political and civic forces. Performance is a means of moving between the different realms, connecting together critical moments in “different loops, knots, speeds, movements and sonorities” producing newly configured relations. Needs and In Lacy’s project *Roof is on Fire*, for example, young people, normally the recipients of a speaking public, momentarily lead the conversations and the adults listen in, “looping” the social order in a new configuration.

Marking the transition into public life

Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of improvisation draws on music to describe the movement from private to the public, from the domestic to the civic – “A child hums to summon the strength for the schoolwork she has to hand in. The housewife sings to herself, or listens to the radio, as she marshals the antichaos forces of her work.” (ibid, p311). Each demarcates a space through song. The foundations of cities are created, they suggest, by walking a circle “as in a child’s dance, combining rhythmic vowels and consonants” (ibid, p311). The one context – the domestic – shares with the public a fragility that might break at any moment albeit at different scales of endeavour.

This shift in scale, from the private to the public, is significant and brings its own challenges, in particular in the gap created by modernity in relation to civic values. This has a bearing on how we might explain the shift in art as improvisatory, opening up to issues of public life through both form and content.

Hannah Arendt, as a political philosopher, characterises modernity of the 19th century onwards as a period marked by an excessive preoccupation with labour built around hierarchies that function to fulfil material needs and desires, with a corresponding emphasis on administration rather than intelligent governance. Modernity, in Arendt’s view, is not conducive to nurturing thinking and finding meaning in communal life. Nor does modernity create a climate for critical action (Arendt 1998).

Arendt has a conservative view of art, aligning it with craft activity, a means to engage with materials in skilled ways that move the human condition beyond mere survival (Arendt 1998, 173-4). She did not envisage in her writings a civic or public role for art in the activist sense presented by the Harrisons and Lacy. However, her observations of change in the public sphere are significant to understanding how and why certain artists have chosen to develop a critical counterpoint to the values of modernity.

More recently Pascal Gielen as a sociologist of contemporary art, has gone further than Arendt in characterising the 21st century as a time of excessive discrepancy between human wants and needs and the loss of stable structures in the form of institutions that embody and care for values (Gielen 2013). Gielen’s particular examples include the law in relation to the state, the university in relation to money, the church in relation to superstition. Gielen echoes Arendt’s political critique of modernism. Unlike Arendt, however, he aligns contemporary

artistic endeavour with other social and political moves to address new conditions for action and meaning in community in postmodern societies. Such an undertaking would involve a new set of skills and preoccupations, not least critical skills.

How, if at all, might improvisation both characterize and inform such a shift in focus?

Grant Kester as an art historian, is particularly interested in the challenges of opening art up to the social and political. He notes how socially engaged artists and theorists are looking outside of art, drawing on non art discourses to explain what art does in the world. In his editorial of a new journal *Field*, he observes

While otherwise quite diverse, this field is driven by a common desire to establish new relationships between artistic practice and other fields of knowledge production, from critical pedagogy to participatory design, and from activist ethnography to radical social work. In many cases it has been inspired by, or affiliated with, new movements for social and economic justice around the globe... (Kester, 2015)

Kester remarks on the desire of contributors to the field of social art practice to move beyond existing definitions of both art and the political and to challenge hierarchical forms of power and decision-making. He defines the fundamental challenge as one of epistemology - of appropriate concepts, language and methodology, of techniques of analysis.

...we are sorely lacking in any useful intermediary theories that retain a sufficient engagement with the materiality of practice to open up its complex interrelationship to larger political and economic structures. It is our belief that appropriate criteria for the analysis of socially engaged art can only emerge out of an epistemological inquiry that seeks to provide both a more comprehensive research methodology and a basic definitional language that would allow us to more confidently describe the scope and function of the work itself (ibid).

Kester defines a clear need to look beyond art to address the shift in focus towards the social and political. In contrast I argue for an approach that reaches deeply into the epistemology of arts practice itself as a particular means of understanding this shift. The latter works closely with evidence in the writings of artists themselves (the Harrisons, Peters) and of philosophers who draw on art (Deleuze and Guattari).

What in particular has improvisation to offer?

Improvisation as explored above, always occurs in relation to place and context, a form of call and response that is contingent on what is ongoing and what has gone before. It is a refusal to be trapped under the weight of a 'before', to be free to move, to open up potential by harnessing the past in a fresh way. In this light Peters' metaphor of the scrap yard challenge, of being surrounded by the debris

of the past while tasked to produce something fresh, is particularly resonant. It evokes a dilemma: the fear of getting stuck while being compelled to move forward. To unlock this dilemma, Peters unravels confusion between 'origin' and 'freedom'. Improvisation does not originate. It 'recovers' the freedom to be and to act. In a different way, Deleuze and Guattari remind us of the fragility of life, of how chaos as a dominant state, refuses order, and of the tentative techniques we have of taking temporary control. Drawing on music, they evoke improvisation in relation to repetitive song that, like birdsong, marks a temporary territory in a complexity of other interests and agendas. Kester describes the spilling out of art into public life through terms such as 'relational' or 'socially engaged'. This language powerfully connects arts practice to issues of public life. However, these terms also have a tendency to neutralize the specificity of the work as art. They are interchangeable with other social sites- educational, legal and so on.

Improvisation evokes the image of the performing musician, one not normally associated with public life and its institutions. In the concert hall or theatre we suspend disbelief just as the improviser suspends intention. In a scrap yard made up of the debris of the past, he/she is challenged to create an atmosphere of hyperawareness in which anything might become possible. Improvisation is a kind of 'infinite agility' (Peters 2009, p 70) centred on the individual in relation to his/her disordered life world. It is a way of acknowledging that there is no possibility of escape from the happenstance, from the contingent in life, to something more ordered, just as it is impossible to escape the circumstances of our birth. Instead we are presented with an opportunity to re-enter the world as if for a second time, through an impulse to live, rather than merely exist.

These insights suggest that there is something important about drawing on a concept that is hardwired into art, in particular music, to inform the outward focusing trajectory of art in public life in the late 20th and 21st centuries. Improvisation allows us to substitute an assumption of control, of design, with the possibility of encounter in Althusser 's sense of a change of direction brought about through chance. An encounter may be infinitesimally small, but if lasting, brings about the possibility of a different world (2006, 6).

“ Art does not express the self, it meaningfully configures it” (Peters, 2009 p 14).

Mierle Laderman Ukeles and her practice of Maintenance Art (1969-present) presents a particularly vivid example of the artist seeking new conditions for political action and meaning and of improvisation in the sense outlined above. Ukeles sees disorder in social and political inequality. She creates a new direction within this disorder by writing a manifesto early in her career, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969* (Ukeles, 1969, pp 622-624). This calls for a rethinking of 'maintenance' in culture by initially addressing the art world and its relationship to conflicted values of maintenance and creativity. The manifesto acts as a point of departure for a number of projects that explore the issues in contexts well beyond art into societal practices of waste management.

A. The Death Instinct and the Life Instinct:

The Death Instinct: separation, individuality, Avant-Garde par excellence; to follow one's own path to death-do your own thing, dynamic change

The Life Instinct: unification, the eternal return, the perpetuation and MAINTENANCE of the species, survival systems and operations, equilibrium

(ibid, p 622)

In Western art, the manifesto suggests, we value the development of special works by individuals. These claim to be the force of change, of life itself and ironically require significant maintenance - of ideas, activities and of materials within institutionalised practices of the museum and gallery. In other words, the need for maintenance is a hidden consequence of the West's celebration of dynamic change. Doing one's own thing as an individual is a force of death, not life, when placed alongside living systems that require maintenance to survive.

How does the manifesto work in practice? In *Care* 1969, Ukeles proposed to inhabit an art gallery, to create a community of participants to explore labour of all kinds (in the sense of ordinary, day to day activities that sustain life). Fifty individuals of different classes and activities, from maids to construction workers, bankers to librarians, were to be interviewed individually, recorded and re-presented in the exhibition. The idea was to explore the meaning of maintenance and the difference between maintenance and freedom. In this way the public space (of the gallery) would become a space to debate meanings and values associated with each concept - 'work', 'labour' and 'care' (Ukeles, pp 624-625). Ukeles has evolved this approach over decades within sustained programmes over the past 40+ years situated in issues of public health, waste disposal and sanitation, *Touch Sanitation* (1978-84), *Flow City* (1983-present), *Fresh Kills Landfill* and *Sanitation Garage* (1989-present).

In what sense can Ukeles' work be considered improvisatory? To return to the two definitions that opened the chapter - improvisation as an escape from the past v improvisation as entanglement in an emergent world - it becomes apparent, as in the work of the Harrisons and Lacy, that both senses of improvisation hold true in Ukeles' work. She proposes to reverse the inherent systems of value in both contexts of waste management and art museums. These constitute a mental and imaginative break with the past. Her work also manifests a durational commitment and direct entanglement in the issues over considerable periods of time as a means of creating change.

While aspects of Ukeles' work may be considered improvisatory such as the gesture of shaking hands, of reaching forward, of judging how long to engage, other aspects are distinctly *un-improvisatory*. The work involves considerable levels of repetitive action. This is their power. In *Touch Sanitation* Ukeles shook the hands of 8500 sanitation workers in one year (1979-80) and walked the routes of sanitation workers across both day and night shifts. Far from being content to 'live in the moment' of a performance 'using the materials to hand', she meticulously documented each project, in particular the conversations

between herself as artist and her participants, materials that subsequently formed gallery exhibitions. She also targeted language (rather than focusing on the nonverbal often associated with improvisation) to reveal the degree to which we become trapped in certain conceptual polarities: nature v culture, creativity v maintenance.

To understand the improvisatory qualities in Ukeles' work, I would like to pick up on Peters' underpinning of free improvisation as a search and recovery of freedom that has always existed (as opposed to freedom as origination) (Peters, 2009). In developing his argument, Peters juxtaposes two notions of freedom drawing on the writings of Isaiah Berlin (1958). These closely mirror Ukeles' manifesto. Positive freedom is driven by the desire to be one's own master whereas negative freedom is driven by non-interference, of not being prevented by others from acting as oneself. Paradoxically the first, the freedom of the individual to act on their own terms separate from a wider community, threatens the freedom of non-interference that *allows* the individual the scope and space for spontaneity and originality. At the risk of caricature, the first may be the freedom of the self seeking anarchist (or avant garde artist) who might go to any lengths, including violence, to realise self whereas the second may be the freedom of the activist driven by a desire for the co-existence with another, engaging with difference, "the concern for the ecosystem, the concern for the downtrodden and silenced" (Peters 2009, 23-24).

"...the freedom of free-improvisation is not something that is enacted or expressed therein as a given substance of the performance but it is, rather, something the improvisation allows us to *find*. Free improvisation then is not the embodiment of freedom but a search for it in the here and now of the work's becoming. In a sense it is the negative freedom that is necessary to free the improviser and improvisation from the forces that would devastate it: past works, the work, the other, the collective." (ibid, p 72)

Touch Sanitation places in tension both positive and negative freedom. Positive freedom is firstly the artist herself who unpaid spends time with the sanitation workers and invests in the department. Freedom is also manifest in the individual who creates waste without taking the responsibility for disposing it, effectively othering waste. This position while destructive of a sense of common good, is culturally privileged over the waste collector, referred to pejoratively as the 'garbage man'. (Ukeles critiqued and displaced this term with 'sanman'). Ukeles' second manifesto, *Sanitation Manifesto!* (1984, 624-625) builds significantly on the earlier *Maintenance Art* manifesto (1969) around this particular civic experience. Using the metaphor of ownership that is resonant of public as paying audience and private consumer, Ukeles positions sanitation as *co-owned* and *co-produced*, a consequence of living inside 'our corporeal bodies' in urban civilisations within the planet. If individual freedom is defined as self-interest, she argues, we are led into a shallow relationship between the public and waste. We do not see where we put waste, what we do or should do with waste and indeed, what choices we have in relation to waste. She offers us a different imaginary. 'Waste is our immediate unwanted past' (p 624). We are

faced with choices in relation to that past – to conserve through transforming it or to drown it.

Sanitation works *all the time*, through all the seasons, no matter what the weather conditions. *Sanitation is totally inter-dependent with its public: locked in – the server and the served.* (p 625)

While acknowledging individual freedom, she suggests

“Just as by law, we can’t ship our garbage OUT, but *have* to deal with it IN our common ‘home’, manage it so it doesn’t destroy us, *we too, all together, have to work out individual freedom out without destroying each other.* (p 625).

Like Peters working in the context of free improvisation, Ukeles working in the context of social art practice, views art as lying at the centre of democracy ‘as *the* primary system articulating the forms of (individual) *freedom*’ (p 624). Ukeles suggests that the challenge needs to be undertaken at the highest level of intelligence and creativity in the development of new perceptual models. Underpinning the shift is a need to understand how to connect with one another, to move beyond the image of the ‘garbage man’ as dirty, to our clean state, to get rid of the caste system that currently operates and to view sanitation as the City’s (in this instance New York’s) cultural system. Sanitation serves everyone, everyone must be served in a democracy, the development of equal rights in the culture of sanitation inherently expresses this interdependence. In this way she avoids the atomisation of the individual separated out from the social by suggesting that the individual is constituted through social experience.

While Ukeles’ manifestos, like text in the work of the Harrisons, are not improvised in any formal stylistic sense, they establish, like improvisation itself, an aesthetic space in which ambivalent values are contained, but not controlled. This is not a superficial ‘look’ of an improvisational form or style of artistic production. Instead each project addresses a different situation and set of contingencies loosely held together through the manifesto as a point from which to ‘venture forth’. While the artists manage both the conditions and forms of interaction with others, all the work develops in dialogue with others. The work of art substantially results from negotiation between individuals, one of whom may be an artist and the other almost certainly not. Returning to Peters’ earlier dismissal of improvisation existing between two or more players, the relational aspect in Ukeles’ work is not based in egoism but in a particular quality of encounter. The sense of freedom operating in this work is not restricted to that of the individual acting autonomously for themselves but freedom with an awareness of other interests at work, freedom within the real constraints of public life, constraints that are critically revealed as part of the process. In a similar way, the Harrisons and Lacy also act as individuals within a social setting, not in isolation, but within a complex set of relationships and conflicting interests and across different spheres of influence that taken as a whole constitute an improvisatory approach.

Conclusions – Life without a script

The artists' practices that form the core analysis of this chapter mark a shift in approach, progressively opening up to the issues, content, form and structures of public life. Historically they constitute one aspect of a complex set of circumstances that mark the transition from modernism to postmodernism. Their work has provoked a different discourse surrounding art in life, one that is more concerned with forging a critical relationship between artist, artwork and public through participation, and less concerned perhaps with innovation through material production and art as object. The outward focus of these practices has involved the relinquishing of certain kind of control over the work where the public are no longer the receptors of completed works of art, but increasingly part of their creation. The artists themselves are never entirely in control. It is possibly this quality of interdependence between artist as individual and an engaged public that has provoked and informed an exploration of improvisation as a possible explanatory framework for understanding what has changed.

Along the way it has been important not to assume that modernist artists were not aware or critical of their political contexts (ref Kandinsky on the Spiritual in Art/ Brecht etc...). Nor am I suggesting that formal and material concerns have been displaced in contemporary art practices by issues – whether these are political, social or ecological. Contemporary art provokes a different configuration of the material and political, of private and public experience in ways that denote a shift in values and relationships. Improvisation is a possible characterization of the change.

To this end two apparently contradictory qualities of improvisation have been put forward: improvisation as a break with the weight of the past v improvisation as an entanglement within an unfolding present. Both qualities were found to co-exist in activist approaches that are simultaneously driven by a desire for a better world (therefore attempting to break with the past in ways that transform what has been) while acknowledging that any real development in public life is dependent upon deep forms of entanglement by the artist within communities that share the same issues or concerns, within and beyond a narrow understanding of art's publics.

By exploring improvisation more deeply as a concept that has been fundamental to art throughout history and that has taken very specific, specialised forms in particular in music, new unexpected dimensions of improvisation have been revealed.

A probe into the most radical end of improvisation, free improvisation in music, foregrounds the importance of freedom (rather than innovation or origination) as the sharp point of an improvisatory practice. The free improviser seeks to mark an unmarked space in the search for a freedom based in a sense of common good. This quality of freedom stands in contradistinction to modernism's heroic freedom of the isolated individual genius. This notion of existing 'freedom in

common 'is remarkably resonant of the activist artist striving to open art within social, cultural and community life. This (activist) artist creates the conditions that others inhabit. The whole constitutes an intervention in an historical process through an exposure to critical understanding rather than the fatalism.

This kind of improvisation is more than an absence of a script for life, the working of things out as we go along. Drawing on the epistemologies of art practice, improvisation is not necessarily a formal attribute of the material culture of the work but a quality of the way the work exists in the world. To achieve this requires specialised forms, extending understanding of visual rhythm, proportion, measure, weight (light-dark), quality (colour) and space into the temporal and spatial dynamics of public sphere itself. In other words a reading as improvisation allows the work to breathe.

References:

Adcock, C. (1992) *The Harrisons: Conversational Drift* in *Art Journal*, College Art Association United States Summer 1992 Vol 51, No 2 . pp 34-45

Althusser, L. (2006), "The underground current of the materialism of the encounter", *The Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, Trans by Goshgarian, G.M., Verso, London, pp. 163-207.

Arendt, H. (1958/1998) *The Human Condition*, Chicago: Chicago University Press

Burnham, J. (1974) *Contemporary Ritual: a search for meaning in post historical terms* 159-166 in *Great Western Saltworks. Essays in the meaning of Post-formalist Art*. New York: George Brazillers

Collins English Dictionary (2006), "Improvisation", 8th ed., Harper Collins, Glasgow, p. 819.

Deleuze, G. & F. Guattari (2002) *Of the Refrain* in *A Thousand Plateaus*, translated and foreword Brian Massumi. London: Continuum pp 311-350

Douglas, A. & C. Fremantle (2016) *Inconsistency and Contradiction: Lessons in Improvisation in the work of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison*. In *Elemental: an Arts and Ecology Reader*. Manchester: The Gaia Project

Douglas, A. (2013) *Altering a Fixed Identity Thinking through Improvisation in Improvisational Attitudes: Reflections from Art and Life on Certainty, Failure, and Doubt*. Amanda Ravetz, Anne Douglas & Kathleen Coessens. *Critical Studies in Improvisation* Vol 8, No 2. Montreal, 2013.
<http://www.criticalimprov.com/public/csi/index.html>

Douglas, A. (2007). *Working in public seminars* [online]. Aberdeen, Robert Gordon University [online]. Available from:
http://www2.rgu.ac.uk/subj/ats/ontheedge2/workinginpublicseminars/seminar_

menu.html[Accessed 20 February 2015].

Gielen, P. (2013) The artist as hybrid monster Incubate Conference 2013. Available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYT7XGwRQCA>. Accessed 3.12.2015.

Grog, D. *Ecological Restoration. Mierle Ukeles, Flow City*. in Art & Ecology Perspectives and Issues. Available from <http://www.greenmuseum.org/c/aen/Issues/ukeles.php>. Accessed 3.9.2015

Grohmann, W. (1959) *Wassily Kandinsky Life and Work* trans Norbert Guterman London: Thames and Hudson

Harrison, H. M. and N. (1985). *The Lagoon Cycle*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press)

Kester, G. (2015) *Field A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism* Editorial 1 Available from <http://field-journal.com>. [Accessed 8.11.2016.]

Lacy, S. *The Oakland Projects 1991-2001* Available from: <http://www.suzannelacy.com/the-oakland-projects/>. [accessed 3 October 2015]

Oxford English Dictionary (1989), "Improvisation", Vol. VII, 2nd ed., Clarendon Press, Oxford, p. 752.

Peters, G. (2009) *The Philosophy of Improvisation* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press

Ukeles, Mierle Laderman. 1969. Maintenance Art Manifesto in Stiles, K. and Selz, P. editors in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art. A source book of Artists' Writings* Berkeley: University of California 1996 pp 622-624

Ukeles, Mierle Laderman. 1984. Sanitation Manifesto in Stiles, K. and Selz, P. editors in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art. A source book of Artists' Writings* Berkeley: University of California 1996 pp 624-5