Deakin University

Indigo Perry

Performing vulnerability: On performance writing and improvisation

Abstract
In this paper, I am reflecting on Entwinement, *an improvisational live performance by myself, a writer, and my collaborator, musician Andrew Darling, appearing as a performance art act called Illuminous. Performances by Illuminous involve live improvised trumpet playing and poetic text created live and projected digitally in the performance space.* Entwinement *was included in Spectral Harmonies, an umbrella event of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) Annual Conference in 2015. In documenting and reflecting on the performance in terms of practice-led research, I make observations about improvisational writing and the genre of performance writing, and I suggest that this performance became an experience of performative dissonance and embodied vulnerability for myself and my collaborator. This had cascading effects on the event, inadvertently adding elements of artistic and social dissonance to those that were intentional in the work.*
Key words: Improvisation, performance writing, Anthropocene

In this paper, I am reflecting on *Entwinement*, an improvisational live performance by myself, a writer, and my collaborator, musician Andrew Darling, appearing as a performance art act called Illuminous (Darling & Perry 2015). Performances by Illuminous involve live improvised trumpet playing and poetic text created live and projected digitally in the performance space. *Entwinement* was included in Spectral Harmonies, an umbrella event of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) Annual Conference in 2015. In documenting and reflecting on the performance in terms of practice-led research, I make observations about improvisational writing and the genre of performance writing, and I suggest that this performance became an experience of performative dissonance and embodied vulnerability for myself and my collaborator. This had cascading effects on the event, inadvertently adding elements of artistic and social dissonance to those that were intentional in the work.

For my methods in this ongoing research project anchored in Illuminous performances, I am using practice-led research, drawing upon Smith and Dean's definition of practice-led (or practice-based) research as terms that:

> are employed to make two arguments about practice which are often overlapping and interlinked: firstly, that creative work in itself is a form of research and generates detectable research

> outputs; secondly, to suggest that creative practice – the
> training and specialised knowledge that creative practitioners
> have and the processes they engage in when they are making
> art – can lead to specialised research insights which can then be
> generalised and written up as research. (Smith & Dean 2009: 5)

I am also using Yoland Wadsworth's 'living systems' approach to research evaluation (Wadsworth 2010), in which a researcher makes frequent, ongoing evaluations of research as it is in progress, often over a long term, and often through 'built-in' methods, so that observations made during the processes of research activities over a longer-term project are not lost. In this paper, I am recording observations that have emerged from the creative work in one particular performance by Illuminous, but the Illuminous project is ongoing.

Beginnings in the forest: the background of the Illuminous project

The Illuminous collaboration beginnings came early in 2014 with a dialogue in my home community with Andrew Darling, a trumpet player. The conversation was underscored by a shared love of poetry, and branched out to our developing awareness of links between personal challenges in our day-to-day lives and increasing global despair – or, perhaps more worrying, a lack of it in some, especially in relation to climate change and worldwide environmental degradation. We considered personal and environmental unease to be closely connected, and this quickly became an aspect of what became our shared creative practice – an exploration of those connections between human selves and environmental or ecological selves.

The idea that the wellbeing of self and world are inseparable is echoed in deep ecology theories. Joanna Macy, for example, writes:

> The way we define and delimit the self is arbitrary. We can
> place it between our ears and have it looking out from our eyes,
> or we can widen it to include the oxygen-giving trees and
> plankton, our external lungs, and beyond them the web of life
> in which they are sustained. (Macy 2003: 59)

As the conversations between Andrew and I began to shift into a creative collaboration context, we started to explore ways that we might encompass the idea of connectivity between self and non-human environments in nature into the ways we improvised – through performing onsite in natural environments and bringing elements of what we discovered there into performances done outside those environments.

I'd mentioned my interest in live improvisational writing to Andrew. I knew nothing of trumpets, and less of jazz music and its strong elements and history of improvisation. But I hungered to improvise again, remembering the creative thrill of past collaborative improvisation performances with a group of dancers. And I was drawn to the forest scapes around the town where we lived, Warburton, which is close to the upper reaches of the Yarra River and the pristine catchment that supplies 70 per cent of Melbourne's drinking water. The area around the town juxtaposes a cool-climate rainforest environment and the Anthropogenic realities of weed infestation and a constant threat of clearfell logging practices and destruction of wildlife habitat. Along with the rest of planet, it's susceptible to effects of climate change, with the local council citing the municipality as being 'vulnerable to the impacts of climate change across our natural and built environments'. For example, 'decreases in rainfall result in less water flowing into our waterways, reducing water quality and the

quality of habitat for freshwater plants and animals' (Yarra Ranges Council 2017). Andrew and I decided to go into the forest to improvise as a way of adding a further dimension to our conversations. The first time, we set ourselves up by Cement Creek, near its confluence with the Yarra River. During the session, Andrew did not read what I hand-wrote in my journal (I shared it with him later), and although I consciously heard some of what he played – and at times I became so immersed that I paused in my writing to listen – I did not hear it all at a conscious level. Yet it seemed doubtless to us as we talked about it later that we had worked cohesively. We hardly knew one other, but in the space of the session, we had opened up creatively and emotionally. The work struck us as significant both creatively and personally. We could see ways that it gestured towards potentially transformative work at a community and possibly a global level. Our shared interests in psychic wellness and un-wellness and a perceived un-wellness of the world in the context of environmental crisis came to strongly underpin the artistic collaboration that began that day, and we continued to develop the work into a performance art piece, incorporating digital projection of the writing text within our performance and practice spaces. Our own collaborative practice without an audience other than ourselves continued, each improvisation session its own performance as each one was unique and its content never repeated. The work was, and continues to be, practised regularly – weekly if possible. It has often been difficult work, creatively and at times emotionally, as when we begin each improvisation session, it is with an understanding that we will try to dig in deeply to what is present for us when we consider our personal vulnerabilities, both at a day-to-day, even mundane level (perhaps one of us has just fought with a partner; maybe one of has stayed awake all night worrying about children or how to pay a bill; maybe we're sick or tired or angry), and then, if it feels right on that particular day, in any particular moment of the creative practice, we extrapolate the vulnerabilities to how we may feel about the realities of climate change locally and globally. We frequently undergo self-evaluations in the work, reflecting to one another following each session, documenting changes in ourselves and our creative process. Some observations are personal – notes of increased hope or a growing sense of buoyancy and resilience, and intertwined with those are observations relating to the creative work – noticing, for example, the ways that paying attention to the natural environment enters the work through style, through pace and rhythm, through directions taken (a bird alighting nearby might change the focus of what I am writing, and cause a tonal variation in what Andrew is playing, for example). The collaboration, too, affects our creative practices significantly, and both of us observe changes in the ways we work during these sessions – finding ways to work together rather than being two different artists with different modalities simply playing in the same place. I become acutely aware of the pace and rhythm in the ways that I write – the ways I move my hands and the rest of my body, the way I write slowly at particular times and very fast at others; the sounds I make – pages turning, pen nib scratching, a cough or sneeze, various patterns of breathing, which become part of the whole soundscape of the music and the sounds of the environment – birds, wind, water, leaves, branches, distant traffic, voices of others passing by. When eventually we begin to improvise with me using my computer keyboard, so that I can digitally project the work, the tapping sounds of my keyboard become very significant to the work, sometimes setting the rhythm of the music in the way a percussionist does with instruments. We are learning about creative collaboration and the resilience that can emerge when focus is given to vulnerabilities that are present and arising.

In the *despair work* intrinsic to deep ecology practices, communities and individuals learn, usually through collaborative group work, to reconcile with the realities of environmental threats including catastrophic possibilities. In

despair work, participants are invited to work *with* the despair rather than avoiding its presence and effects, and to build resilience up both personally and as groups or communities. Tony Birch has also written about the importance of community connectivity when it comes to fear and vulnerability in the face of climate change, suggesting that:

> In order to allay fear, or direct it productively toward the hopefulness of action in response to climate change, frameworks supporting knowledge exchange, community education and connectivity between individuals and communities must be developed. (Birch 2017)

Through the creative work developed in the Illuminous project, we begin to notice such connectivity, between ourselves as creative collaborators, and also between ourselves and the forest environment. We take this 'knowledge exchange' that's unfurling, and experiment with how to transport that into a public performance context, wondering if the effects we have noted in our self-evaluations of the work can have wider application when we perform the work publicly, outside the forest environment but nevertheless taking aspects of that environment with us because of the intensive creative development done on site in the forest.

Following *The Forest Within*, an early public performance of the work, funded by Yarra Ranges Council and a community arts support scheme called Art Seed Pods, we have video captures taken of audience responses, expanding upon our own bank of self-evaluations: our 'living systems' research evaluations. These early responses seem to support our inkling that what we are doing in the work may have affect on audiences, possibly evoking strong emotional experiences during the performances. For example:

> More exquisite and delicate than I imagined… It really sort of altered my state of consciousness. It was like being in a dream at times. (Audience member response, The Forest Within performance, 2016)

> It was a very mystical, magically, dreamy, soulful experience, of just being in another place and time… An incredible stillness and meeting of the words and music and the audience's holding of that process. (Audience member response, The Forest Within performance, 2016)

Whether before an audience of only ourselves or a public audience, our intention is to play out the emergence of emotions at the level of the individual, everyday life. The content does not necessarily explicitly refer to climate change or wellbeing, but those concerns remain its underpinning. The forest permeates our work, and we bring it with us, even when we don't literally perform in the forest, through the ways described earlier in which the forest emergence of the work gave the work its shapes and its style – all of that early development of the collaboration comes with us into its ongoing iterations. In a more overt way of recognising the work's beginnings, in some performances I write in a sculpture, a nest woven from wonga vines sourced from near where we live. It is big and heavy and in truth difficult for us to transport and troublesome to carry into performance spaces. It would be easier to leave it at home and perform without it. But it is of the forest. It connects us materially to the origins of our work, and even the difficulty of carrying is part of the work we do: part of the reality of the challenges of reconciliation. It adds a layer to the work – placing a physical remnant of the forest in the buildings where we perform.

Writing, improvisation, performance

As the collaboration developed, I noticed that that my writing emerged in a poetic form in improvisation. I'm reluctant to categorise the writing text as anything, genre- or form-wise, except perhaps to put it under the expansive umbrella of *performance writing*, which itself is elusive to define, although I find David Buuck's offering useful, suggesting 'performance writing' might:

> generally indicate forms of experimental writing that work
> with/in/out of performance, and to distinguish such forms from
> an emphasis on 'performance poetry' (slam, spoken word, etc.)
> or performance art practices that are not driven by non-
> narrative and/or avant-garde poetics. (Buuck 2017b)

Often when I say that I perform writing – sometimes calling that writing 'poetry' for simplicity's sake, although I am not at all sure that 'poetry' fits this writing work – there is an assumption that I'm a spoken word poet. That I perform poetry with my voice. Buuck's suggestion is helpful, then, at the very least because it acknowledges the existence of performance writing that is other than spoken word. Creative writing in live performance writing contexts – work that varies and shifts across different modes of performance and delivery, some spoken-word, some not – may be of increasingly relevance to developers and teachers of tertiary writing programs as experimental and emergent artforms continue to be popular amongst artists. For example, for Marina Abramovic's 2015 work, *Marina Abramovic: In Residence* (Abramovic 2015), presented in Sydney, twelve emerging performance artists, each having undergone a highly competitive application and selection process, were in residence with Abramovic, and four of the artists incorporated performative creative writing elements into their work – Nicola Gunn, whose work 'combines text, choreography and visual art and is made in response to the impulse to tell a story'; Lottie Consalvo, who 'sees her practice as an extension of personal diary entries, drawings, poetry and love songs'; Sarah Jane Norman, who 'unites performance, text, sculpture, video and sound, but the body remains at the core of her artistic practice'; and Sarah Rodigari, who 'appropriated the literature of Dostoevsky, Nabokov, Cixous and Barthes into corporeal mime' (Kaldor Public Art Projects 2015: 4-5).

So, what happens, in terms of writing, in the Illuminous performances? Essentially, I perform the process of writing a text that is visible to the audience as I create it, working deeply in a performative collaboration with my musician counterpart. The Illuminous writing text itself could be related to some forms of experimental poetry. Several of the writing texts created in Illuminous performances have been published in the literary journal *Otoliths: A Magazine of Many E-Things*, a poetry journal that publishes: 'textual poetry, vispo, fiction, essays, photographs, art and any combination of the above' (Young 2017), and in form and visual appearance the published versions of Illuminous texts *could be* classified as *vispo*, visual poetry. They are written to be seen as well as read, and Willard Bohn described visual poetry as: 'For all intents and purposes … poetry that is meant to be seen – poetry that presupposes a viewer as well as a reader' (Bohn 2001: 15). But the publication of the texts represents another, supplementary facet of the work. The shapes and lineation of the text, and indeed the work in entirety, originate in the performance context, the writing text existing in collaboration with the trumpet-playing and the bodily presence of the writer in performance. A multi-voiced conversation takes place during the moment of performance: between Andrew and me; the keyboard, projector and me; performers and the audience; performers and

performance space and time. The conversation has verbal and non-verbal layers. In its purest form, the writing text exists within its specific context of a performance in a particular place at a particular time, inseparable from the collaborative presence of the trumpet player, or from the digital projection of the work's live presentation and related elements of the performance such as the projection surface, colour, luminosity, dimensions, the nature and dimensions of the performance space, the audience (including no audience except ourselves), ambient sounds, weather and temperature, time of day, type of event, etc. The writing text is not presented or indeed created ahead of the performance time. It appears letter by letter, space by space, live in the moment of performance. Time is part of the context. It not only has literal spaces between words and lines of text, but pausation and pace are woven intrinsically into the work. As the writer, I am led by what happens from moment to moment in the performance. I slow down my typing. I speed up. I let a single word, complete or not, float alone in the projection space, or else fill the space with busy walls of text. Sometimes I pause motionless for long periods within a performance. Allowing stillness. Voids. Dark matter. I type loudly on the keyboard. Or stroke the keys so softly that I'm soundless, even to myself. Andrew may or may not pick up on the sounds I make, sometimes, for example, tapping the valves on his trumpet in imitation or reply to my tapping of my keys, or making a humming sound through the trumpet that moves in rhythm with the sound and pace of the typing. Of his part, Andrew writes: 'I play the trumpet in a very unconventional way, exploring a range of unorthodox extended techniques, atonal playing and strange sounds.' He describes the trumpet-playing in Illuminous as: 'At times melodic, rhythmic, lyrical, employing elements from jazz: scales, chords; at others sobbing, yells, whispers, cathartic, lulling. It can be simply breath and air, surging of waves and language of wind' (Darling 2016).

In the development of experimental shapes and textures in the work, there appeared to me to be a gesture towards what may exist in non-verbal space: expressing the inexpressible, as theorised by Julia Kristeva in relation to the impossibility of writing about trauma (Kristeva 1989). This is part of the appeal for me of working with a musician. Andrew's art-form is (mostly) non-verbal and the weird sounds he makes evoke deeper levels of the non-verbal … some of the sounds are uncanny – almost human, but also not. I have a sense at times that he is playing his own body rather than the trumpet. In the presence of this, my own art form becomes less structured and more innate and intuitive. I move away from the desire to *make sense* or think ahead even to what the end of the word I'm writing will be. I'm making shapes and arranging bits of light, rather than making sense or arranging parts of language. I'm aware of the discomfort in this, for myself, and for the audience, and at the same time there is a peace that comes with it: an emotional reconciliation with living with what may be beyond my comprehension, and staying with it, rather than running from it.

The realities of climate change and increasing likelihood of environmental catastrophe are frightening, and for most of us, difficult to fathom, let alone face and begin undertaking reconciliatory action. With that in mind, it became apparent throughout the initial months of development of the collaboration that *vulnerability* was intrinsic to the work.

For me, the vulnerability first showed up in my personal shyness and self-doubt. Andrew's trumpet playing was impressive and he was an experienced performer. For a long time, I had been telling a story of myself as a relatively introverted writer. I was only just coming into an awareness of the performative aspects of my writing practices. During our sessions, I experienced moments of acute self-consciousness, often coupled with embarrassment. Andrew was sometimes provocative, and pushed at my edges of comfort – playing very

close to me, playing softly close to my head so that my hair moved in the air blowing from the trumpet, and turning suddenly to catch my gaze. Emotionally I ran away a thousand times during the early months.

My self-criticism particularly concerned my relationship with embodiment. I was richly present emotionally and intellectually in the improvisational, collaborative space, and deeply creatively engaged in the fusion of writing and trumpet, but I remained self-conscious in my bodily presence. I was painfully aware of my facial expressions, posture, physical appearance and most of all acutely aware of how nervous I thought I looked in the time and space. I was terrified of being seen in my terror, and angry with myself for it. But as I became more familiar with the nuances of the collaboration, I noticed two things. One was that I became more confident of presence in my body, and able, for example, to meet and hold Andrew's gaze during the sessions, something that has become a motif in the work. Secondly, I recognised the value in the plethora of emotions experienced during the sessions. Frank J Barrett writes, of improvisation: 'Full immersion and embodiment help to open the way for breakthroughs. Holding on to routines and stock responses obstructs immersion in the immediacy of now' (Barrett 2010: 158). It was in the practice of the work of our improvisation that I found my way to such a breakthrough. Rather than, say, trying to force more self-confidence on myself, I immersed in what was actually happening and what might happen next – 'To be open to what is unfolding is to be vulnerable in the face of the unknown' (158).

It was perhaps mostly the beholding of Andrew in his bodily presence, emotions, and creative practice that revealed to me the value of being as authentic as possible in my emotional experience during the sessions. He seemed better able than me to be unguarded with the spectrum of his emotions in the performance space. I wanted to be invisible. And at the same time, be seen. The paradox caused me much anxiety. It occurred to me that if I could just be courageous enough to be seen in exactly what was present in the space – then I could have more confidence in my own part of the work. If what was present was fear, then that was present. If it was crushing shame at being visible, all mixed up with grief over possibly not being visible, then that was present. If I thought my writing dull or clichéd or hysterical, and suffered humiliation at it being viewed by my peers, then that was there.

And in regards to creative writing, what might improvisation actually mean? Rob Wallace asks:

> Given the nature of writing, and the process of revision,
> editing, revision, editing, printing, publishing, reprinting, and
> so on, we could say that the entire writing process is an
> extended improvisation, where a set of materials (words, a
> poem, a novel, etc.) is developed over time and achieves a final
> form (i.e., the published work – but this itself takes multiple
> and mutable forms). (Wallace 2015: 194)

I believe this to be a sound premise, but in exploring improvisation in my writing, I want to move beyond the improvisation of the writing text in the Illuminous collaboration and into the performance of improvising that text. Following one performance, an audience member asked the question – *Isn't all writing improvisational?* He observed that I had written a 'story' during the performance, and questioned if I had known what I was going to write, and if so, then was it truly improvised? Wallace suggests that 'an improvisation can never be "pure" anymore than a fixed composition can be "pure". There are structured and less-structured varieties of improvisation' (2015: 195). And this

is the case with the Illuminous collaboration. The 'story' fragment of that performance emerged as the rest of the text did – in the moment. This is of course a familiar experience for writers – regardless of whether or not it's done in a public performance context – you begin writing and the process leads you to another thing and another, and another. I wondered later if the audience member was questioning that in telling a story with quite a distinct narrative quality to it – perhaps relating a story that I 'knew' – then was I not being truly improvisational? It was an improvised story because it came to exist there in that moment, in that particular context and form. A moment in time and place not ever to be repeated. This singularity of the moment is definitive of improvisation across forms and disciplines. Wallace writes of it in terms of music:

> It is this ephemeral nature, the notion that what you are hearing has never happened before and will never happen again, that makes musical improvisation particularly captivating for musician and listener. (195)

Part of my interest in improvisation lies in an attraction to writing moments as they emerge, sometimes a similar moment of 'story' that recurs again and again, written differently every time in a new context.

Further, David Buuck, in considering performance writing, writes: 'I suppose we can begin by agreeing that all poetry is of course to some degree a performance, and all text-based performance has to some degree a poetics (to the extent that it uses language shaped to the purposes of performance)' (Buuck 2017b). He moves on, then, to a more specific imagining of how what is called performance writing might be different to or *as well as* that performativity in the act of writing, and other acts such as performing poetry live in a public reading or slam, for instance, suggesting that:

> too often the poetry reading is used to confirm the unique power of the otherwise autonomous text, instead of leading witnesses into what cris cheek calls "exegetic microtopias of 'live writing'," where performance is "an occurrence of conversations between process and product ongoing. (2017b)

Such a conversation interests me in regards to Illuminous: to create a product, yes, but also to simultaneously *perform* a writing process, live, before an audience.

The performance

In the afternoon prior to our evening performance of *Entwinement*, I presented a critical paper at the AAWP Conference and provided some introductory material about the performance. I expressed doubt about choosing the Spectral Harmonies event for the work, as we would be performing at a town hall potentially filled with writers, improvising a work that in order to be true to its intentions needed to allow space for failure: for 'bad' writing and 'bad' music if that's what emerged. All art must allow at least the possibility of that space – it's surely what underscores the idea of Lorca's *duende*. In the case of an Illuminous live performance, we don't get to hide (apparent) mistakes or (ostensibly) poor work. My every word and space are projected immediately in the space as I write, and Andrew's every note and silence is heard as he plays and pauses. Tord Gustavsen says that in order to allow 'mystique' to happen in improvisation:

> Impressive analytical, technical and creative skills must be
> united with the courage to let go of control, and the courage to
> engage in something that you can never know the outcome of
> beforehand. You have to dare "losing" yourself without
> guarantees as to how and when you get yourself back. You
> have to dare the encounter with the challenging unknown
> within what is familiar. (Gustavsen 2010: 18)

Vulnerability

I said, possibly fatefully, that the most powerful unfolding of the performance
that night might occur if I wrote very badly by widely held writerly standards
and Andrew blew wrong notes and made a discordant mess of the sounds, and
we nevertheless stayed with the reality of the time and space of the moment – if
we kept going, rather than surrendering to any temptation to call a halt to the
performance. If so, then according to some jazz improvisation discourses, we
might be travelling too far into the dark, perhaps as Gustavsen describes here:

> On the other hand of the dark destructive side lies the
> alienation in distance where you don't "get in touch with" the
> music or the flow of the relationship, and cannot break the
> barrier against emotional flow of the relationship, and cannot
> break the barrier against emotional participation; where you
> operate in the musical landscape from strategies that are "un-
> organic" in that they are not founded in a real musical presence.
> (Gustavsen 2010: 36)

But this work is not jazz improvisation. And my writing in its raw form is not
intended for publication except as it appears in the projection, live in the
moment. It's performance art. The work is experimental and emergent, and in
emergent art: 'The process of exploration is more important than a fully
resolved artistic product as the project outcome' (Australia Council 2017). In
one practice session in the forest, Andrew, exhausted from his job and
parenting demands, fell asleep on the ground for a few minutes while I
continued to write. It was a moment as perfect as any other in the work.

During the paper presentation, I suggested that in the eyes of many in our
audience that evening we might fail, or more particularly, I as the writer would
fail. I noted that I was experiencing feelings of shame about being audacious
enough to get up and perform writing in front of this crowd. Who was I, to do
that? But if I were to stay with this vulnerability, I might feel that I had made
some shift in how I might exist in the world and be further along the way to
exploring how it is that we all might exist in the world in greater vulnerability
and thus the possibility for reconciliation with great challenges.

The performance art work that is Illuminous is comprised partly of writing and
music, but what is not being offered is polished work. It's not edited or revised.
It may be ugly to read or hear. Discomforting. Ragged. The sounds may not be
melodic and often aren't. The writing may not be elegant or even 'good'. It's
raw. We sometimes identify as writer and musician. But in this work we are,
foremost, performance artists. Marion May Campbell has written of
Illuminous's performance work:

> Like a tentative probing to make space-time intelligible, letter-
> by-letter, the text appears on a back screen – sometimes in
> response, sometimes, it seems, in anticipation of the trumpet's
> notes, from raucous, gut wrenching protest, through mournful

sobs, to seductively looping insinuation. Using the screen as a kind of poetic "open field", with the arrival of each new word, the writing itself unfolds here as a fascinating performance. As response and provocation to each other, the improvised poetic text and the trumpet line build an enveloping narrative world, enthralling the audience in what increasingly seems like a collective fantasy. That is a key aspect of the innovative force of this work: rather than being isolating practices, here writing and reading themselves become a communal performance and present the word, both active and reactive, as event. (Campbell 2015)

On the evening of the *Entwinement* performance, what emerged could be described as an embodied practice of vulnerability.

Tropes of the Illuminous work include playing with elements that may discomfort us and the audience – a combination of artistic dissonance and social dissonance, to use Jesse Stewart's terms, with dissonance defined as 'apart sounding'. Long silences and stillnesses often emerge. Pausing long enough mid-performance to start whispers in the audience – *What are they doing? Are they still going? Is it finished?* In my own experimentation with this trope of the work, I've strung out my own discomfort. Feeling my face flush with the audacity of what I'm doing – not only writing live in performance, but pausing here for long moments, and as I start to feel it's gone on long enough, pausing just a bit longer again. I'm playing with pushing back against possible audience expectations of a live performance, and pushing my own edges as performer and human who suffers frequently from acute feelings of shame and embarrassment. As Marina Abramovic famously said: 'The hardest thing is to do something which is close to nothing' (qtd in Gompertz 2014). These long silences and/or stillnesses (sometimes one of us pauses for a time; sometimes both) are never planned as such. But the pauses have arisen as a trope in the work's development and are often a component of the performances. Also, prior to Spectral Harmonies, we had another constant aspect of the work. It involved Andrew lighting a candle set on a stand near me, to mark the performance's beginning, and then, when the time was up for the performance, with Andrew being the timekeeper, he would approach the candle, ceremoniously extinguish the flame, and make eye contact with me, and we would both come to stillness and silence to mark the end of the performance. This served several purposes. The first was that it was a timekeeping mechanism, because at that point of development, the performances always had a particular duration, usually between thirty and sixty minutes, agreed on beforehand, and it was also intended to give a sense of containment and a distinct beginning and end to each performance. It was a well-practised routine that had worked effectively for us both aesthetically and practically up until the end of the performance at Spectral Harmonies. At this event, the candle's flame was just below my sightline from where I was seated. This might not have mattered, as it's the ritual of Andrew approaching the candle and lighting and then later extinguishing it that is the marker of beginning and end, and that's not easily missed by me. This time, unseen by me, the venue's air-conditioning extinguished the flame soon after it was lit. There followed a perfect tiny storm. I could not see that the flame was out. Andrew did not know that I couldn't see the flame was out and that therefore we needed a change of plans for the ending. The performance went on, and at a certain point deep in the performance, Andrew introduced one of our long, languid, deliberately discomforting silences. I was deep in writing, and thoroughly immersed in the silence and in the comparative loudness of the clacking of my keyboard. It was the kind of moment in the work that I embraced. Several times, during this long pause, Andrew played a little, a few plaintive notes at a time. Perfect.

Wonderful. And then, as I came to the end of a phrase in the writing text, loud clapping began in the auditorium, and Andrew stood up to bow to the audience. I followed suit. It wasn't how we usually ended, but I went with the flow of finishing there. Only when off stage did I realise that our timing device involving the ritual of extinguishing the candle flame had failed and that we had gone almost ten minutes over time. At a different event and venue, this may not have been a problem. In this case it was, and I was mortified to learn that I had cut into the following artist's time. Afterwards, we apologised profusely to the artist and to the event's organisers, but the damage of encroaching on another's artist's performance time and disrupting the programming could not be undone.

In an essay about improvisation and dissonance, Jesse Stewart tells the story of a 2004 performance by the vocalist Sainkho Namtchylak at a jazz festival, in which, at the beginning:

> Namtchylak sang a three or four-note melodic motif. A few seconds later, she repeated the same motif. Then again. And again. She continued to repeat the same melodic fragment for over twenty minutes, offering a clear reminder that the words "ostinato" and "obstinate" come from the same Latin root. (Stewart 2015: 216)

The performance went on, in a similar vein to how it began, until eventually it was stopped by an MC, who had the support of some present and was strongly criticised by others, including Namtchylak. Stewart contends that the performance is not 'an example of improvisation gone wrong, but rather as a powerful example of improvised dissonance that continues to stir discussion and debate nearly a decade after it took place' (216) – with 'dissonant' defined literally as 'apart sounding' (213). Further:

> To my mind, the history of creative improvised music has always been about pushing musical boundaries. Namtchylak's performance reminded me that there are still boundaries to push, that improvised dissonance still has the capacity to challenge complacency and provoke debate. (217)

In reflecting on this, I'm questioning what boundaries were pushed in this Illuminous performance, which were intentional and which were not, and whether an intentionally pushed creative boundary is more necessarily more powerful than one an unintentionally pushed one. The incident involving the candle, and our feelings of acute embarrassment following the performance (and in Andrew's case, during the performance, towards the end), meant that the vulnerability we had intended to inhabit and provoke – aspects of the deliberately dissonant nature of the work, both artistically and socially – were pushed beyond our levels of comfort. There was no pushing of boundaries intended in missing the end-point of the performance – it was not an intentional experiment in dissonance. And yet, in retrospect, the work itself seemed to push its own boundaries, thrusting us as performers (and humans) to the very edges of personal vulnerability at that moment. Beyond our own gestures towards being creative and experimental and provocative, the work itself became provocative in the playing out of chance, error, and miscommunication.

David Buuck writes, on performance writing, that:

> a more explicit focus on performance (whether as a method of composition or as a way of "taking poetry off the page") can help us attend to the often more tangled and discomforting

politics of embodied identity in ways that on the page might
otherwise result in more conventional poems *about* identity/etc.
(where the poet remains a disembodied wordsmith and identity
a language-concept). (Buuck 2017a)

In the *Entwinement* performance, my collaborator and I focused on the
overarching theme of vulnerability in the face of climatic crisis and its effects
on the psyches of individuals that runs through our ongoing Illuminous project.
We did indeed have an intention of performing vulnerability. But in this
performance, the work itself seemed to offer us an opportunity to see how we
coped and what it felt like to be in not just the semi-controlled vulnerability
deliberately opened up to in the creative work and the social context of being
before a live audience of peers – but in the face of a completely unexpected
turn of events. The work's intentions and artistic content came into strange
alignment with a random aspect of performance. It became a multi-tiered
experiment in vulnerability, an embodied work of performative dissonance,
with the 'error' of the timing becoming bound up intrinsically with the playing
out of the experiment – a performance that moved our research investigations
off the page and out of the music notes, and into a different dimension of
performativity. It opened up new avenues of enquiry for the project that we will
continue to explore – what might we do next? Are there ways we can play
more provocatively with improvisation and particularly with the performance
of vulnerability that became so acutely central to this performance? And for me
– what kind of writing is this that I am doing? Do I have to give it a name or a
genre or a form? Is that useful or not? How might I (re-)publish the writing that
emerges from this performance in ways that encompass its dimensionality; its
specific mode of performativity? The project, perhaps like the most satisfying
of improvisations and the most satisfying of poems, and like the knowable and
yet infinitely unknowable spectre of climate change and how it may affect each
of us, asks many more questions than it answers.

Works cited

Abramovic, M 2015 *Marina Abramovic: In Residence*, public art project, Kaldor Public Art
Projects, Pier 2-3, Walsh Bay, Sydney, 24 June-5 July return to text

Australia Council 2017 '*Emerging and Experimental Arts Frequently Asked Questions*',
Australia Council for the Arts, Surry Hills NSW:
http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/artforms/emerging-and-experimental/emerging-and-
experimental-arts-frequently-asked-questions/ (accessed 15 March 2018) return to text

Barrett, FJ 2010 'Cultivating an attunement to unfolding: improvisation and the discovery of
identity', in Marina Santi (ed), *Improvisation: Between Technique and Spontaneity*, Cambridge
Scholars Publishing, Newcastle on Tyne: 153-61 return to text

Birch, T 2017 'Climate Change, Recognition and Social Place-Making', *Sydney Review of
Books* (3 March 2017): https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/climate-change-recognition-and-
caring-for-country/ (accessed 14 November 2017) return to text

Bohn, W 2001 *Modern Visual Poetry*, University of Delaware Press, Newark NJ return to text

Buuck, D 2017a 'Performance poetics/poetry/writing', *Jacket 2*:
https://jacket2.org/commentary/performance-poeticspoetrywriting (accessed 14 November
2017) return to text

Buuck, D 2017b, 'What is Performance Writing?', *Jacket 2*:
https://jacket2.org/commentary/what-performance-writing (accessed 14 November 2017)
return to text

Campbell, M 2015 'Testimonial for Illuminous', personal correspondence, Melbourne return to text

Darling, A 2016 'Illuminous Press Kit', Melbourne return to text

Darling, A & I Perry 2015 *Entwinement*, live performance work, Spectral Harmonies, umbrella event of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs Annual Conference, Hawthorn Town Hall, Melbourne return to text

Gompertz, W 2014 'Marina Abramovic on Art, Performance, Time and Nothingness', *Intelligence Squared: The World of Debate* (11 September): http://www.intelligencesquared.com/events/marina-abramovic-on-art-performance-time-and-nothingness/ (accessed 9 August 2017) return to text

Gustavsen, T 2010 'The dialectical eroticism of improvisation', in Marina Santi (ed) *Improvisation: Between Technique and Spontaneity*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle on Tyne: 7-51 return to text

Kaldor Public Art Projects 2015 'The Artists', *Upstairs: Marina Abramovic: Residency and Programs Guide*, Sydney: 4-5 return to text

Kristeva, J 1989 *Black Sun*: *Depression and Melancholia*, Columbia University Press, New York return to text

Macy, J 2007 *World as Lover, World as Self: A Guide to Living Fully in Turbulent Times*, Parallax Press, New York return to text

Smith, H & RT Dean 2009 (eds) *Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh return to text

Stewart, J 2015 'Improvised Dissonance: Opening Statements', in R Caines & A Heble (eds) *The Improvisation Studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts*, Routledge, London & New York: 213-218 return to text

Wadsworth, Y 2010 *Building in Research and Evaluation: Human Inquiry for Living Systems*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW return to text

Wallace, R 2015 'Writing Improvisation into Modernism', in R Caines & A Heble (eds) *The Improvisation Studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts*, Routledge, London & New York: 187-200 return to text

Yarra Ranges Council 2017, *Environmental Strategy Plan*, Yarra Ranges Council, Lilydale, Victoria: https://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/files/assets/public/webdocuments/environment-engineering/parks-environment/environment-parks-environment/enviro_strategy_final_web.pdf (accessed 14 August 2017) return to text

Young, M 2017 'Submission Guidelines', *Otoliths: A Magazine of Many E-Things*: https://the-otolith.blogspot.com.au/2006/04/otoliths-is-open-to-submissions-of.html (accessed 14 November 2017) return to text

Indigo Perry lectures in Writing & Literature at the School of Communication & Creative Arts, Deakin University, Melbourne. Her memoir Midnight Water *was shortlisted for the National Biography Award. www.indigoperry.com*

General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Julienne van Loon & Ross Watkins
text@textjournal.com.au