Tactile paths : on and through notation for improvisers

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Say No Score: a Lexical Improvisation after Bob Ostertag

Media for this chapter may be found at http://www.tactilepaths.net/patterson

> A Score can become a notch cut or line, an account kept, number of points made, set of twenty, a topic, piece of good fortune, worst in repartee, and much more. And not to forget a Partitura from the Latin Pars indicating both partial, direction and task. It sounds like music but really isn't.[77]

> I imagine these musicians meeting not to read scores but to improvise from available scores, as was common in the Renaissance. A recording of the music will become the basis for further improvisation by future musicians. [...] The basis for such music making is an original score, a program, a set of rules. But using recordings of recordings of recordings, this score will soon disappear behind the horizon of musicians who are improvising with continually reprogrammed memories.[78]

Introduction

Notation for improvisers calls much entrenched musical vocabulary into question. "Notation" and "improvisation", as I explain in "Chapter 0", are the most obvious cases, but also "compose" (see Ben Patterson's "new variation" in *Variations for Double-Bass*), "interpret" (see Cornelius Cardew's semantic vacuum in *Treatise*), and "read" and "write" (see Malcolm Goldstein's *Jade Mountain Soundings*) are among them. Because these pieces tend to dwell in liminal regions of musical labor, they challenge the way we usually conceptualize and talk about them.

In one way notation for improvisers encourages us to find new terminology that reflects contemporary practice. Perhaps for this reason, composer-improvisers such as Anthony Braxton (1985; 1988), Malcolm Goldstein (1988), Wadada Leo Smith (see Oteri 2014), and Cecil Taylor (1966; see also Bartlett 1995) have made colorful musical wordsmithery an important part of their work.[79] I myself have attempted to develop two new verbal constructs relevant to notation for improvisers in this dissertation. In "Entextualization and Preparation in Ben Patterson's *Variations for Double-Bass*", I borrow the term *entextualization* from anthropologist Karin Barber (2007). This helps to shed light on how Patterson embeds the contingencies of his own improvised performance practice in the score. In "Invitation to Collaborate – Répondez s'il vous plaît",

77. Eric Andersen (Andersen 2012, 79).

78. Vilém Flusser (Flusser 2011, 162).

79. Verbal creativity can also have its problematic side. Consider the first lines of an interview between Braxton and music critic John Corbett: "[M]y work in the past twenty-five years has sought to erect a trans-idiomatic context for exploration, and along with that context to create a tri-metric architectonic unit that could serve as a basis for recognition in the postnuclear continuum. I feel the quartet is an excellent example of a postnuclear, tri-metric unit that demonstrates stable logic information, mutable logic information, and synthesis logic information in one time-space, where there is one individual having extended open improvisation and in that same space there is a logic containing two musicians working together [...]" (Corbett 1994, 209). Such idiosyncratic writing makes it difficult for performers and scholars with whom Braxton has not worked directly to penetrate the meaning of his scores, many of which use abstract graphical notation (see Lock 2008). But one can imagine that this barrier is (at least in part) strategic, for two reasons. First, its nontransportability requires interested parties to come closer to Braxton personally, in effect building a community based on oral tradition. Second, the quasi-cosmological character of Braxton's language (and of his notation as well) might be likened to that of musicians such as George Clinton, Lee "Scratch" Perry, and Sun Ra, whose "black science fictions" (Corbett 1994, 19) articulate resistance to the music industry and white hegemony more generally. (For related thoughts on the nexus of jazz, racial politics, and language see Monson 1996, 73-96.) I would have liked to include Braxton's work in this dissertation, but I had neither the resources to spend time with him in person nor the time necessary to decode his writings thoroughly (particularly *Tri-axium Writings* (1985) and *Composition Notes* (1988)). Thus, I felt it would have been impossible to arrive at an authoritative result.

I adopt architect Lawrence Halprin's concept of *valuaction* (1969, 2) to explore how realtime self-editing modulates the improviser's interpretation of notation in performance.

But the music discussed in *Tactile Paths* can also encourage us to rethink and reinterpret old terminology. Indeed it is an important objective of mine to encourage readers to reconsider, and not simply discard, more familiar musical vocabulary and what it represents. The hope is that practitioners and scholars might thus see different, perhaps more, connections between various practices than are apparent from other discourses around music. Classical musicians, for instance, might recognize improvisational openings in notational elements that otherwise appear fixed and finished, such as articulation and ornamentation; and dyed-in-the-wool free improvisers might warm up to the potential of scores for diverse reasons, such as minimizing clichés in their own music.

With this objective in mind, I dedicate the present chapter to a brief exploration of a word that I have elsewhere used somewhat irresponsibly: *score*. In the other chapters of the dissertation I use the term almost interchangeably with *notation*, primarily in an attempt to refrain from numbing the reader with repetition. It is also as a result of my embeddedness in the world of practical music-making, where the two words differ very little in meaning. Beyond day-to-day usage, however, there are subtle but important differences between the meanings of these words that lead to deeper issues in the study of notation for improvisers.

Notation is often referred to in its uncountable form, like love or water. To me it has a casual, almost benevolent character; it makes communication possible. We use it to observe or "note" things that happen. We build, or improvise, on existing knowledge by "annotating" texts.

> Notation: The methods of writing down music so that it can be performed. (Rutherford-Johnson et al 2012a)

Scores on the other hand are countable, definitive, regulatory. The modern conventional score includes all the parts, or voices, arranged and synchronized in vertical order like soldiers in file. The score marks winners and losers in competitive sports. It defines success or failure in tests. Creditors keep a score of debts and payments. Scores are boundaries, the containers of notation.

> Score: A music-copy that shows in ordered form the parts allotted to the various performers, as distinct from 'parts' which show only that of one performer. (Rutherford-Johnson et al 2012b)

The English word "score" most likely has its origins in the cuts with which medieval scribes would rule blank parchment to prepare their manuscripts.[80] In close proximity to the word *score* are its equivalents *Partitur* in German, *partition* in French, and *partitura* in Italian and Spanish. As Fluxus artist Eric Andersen mentions in his quote at the beginning of this chapter, these words derive

80. "Until the twelfth century, most manuscripts were ruled in hardpoint, that is, with blind lines scored with a stylus or back of the knife. Scribes ruled hard and sometimes cut through the parchment by mistake." (Department of Medieval Studies, Central European University 2016)

from the Latin *pars*, or part. What Andersen does not mention is that they specifically derive from *partitus*, past participle of the verb *partire*, which also means to share. This collective sense of the score contradicts the top-down allotment of parts suggested by Rutherford-Johnson's definition of the word. Yet another sense of score is suggested by the common score form in jazz: the chord chart, a rough harmonic structure with or without melody that players improvise on. Nominally this term connotes greater freedom for the performer with respect to notation than score, but it also carries a tone of fixity which counterposes itself to the improvisation itself, like the sailing chart here described by anthropologist Tim Ingold:

> The marine navigator may plot his course on a chart, using a ruler and pencil, but the ruled line forms no part of the chart and should be rubbed out once the voyage is completed. (Ingold 2007, 85)

So: if *notation* for improvisers is processual, contingent, and unfixed – as I characterize it throughout this dissertation – what is a *score* for improvisers? Where are its boundaries? What does it contain? Herewith I would like to improvise on these questions through the lens of composer, electronics improviser, and historian Bob Ostertag's *Say No More* project (1993a; 1993b; 1996). *Say No More* offers ample opportunities to ruminate on these questions, for its score – which consists of both notation and recordings – is at the same time fluid in meaning and rigid in form, rich in suggestions and poor in details. Its notation and language are highly conventional, yet they point to an ensemble dynamic and a sounding music which are anything but.

In the following sections, I will unpack its themes and genealogy through three different notions of the word *score*: a cut, an index of a game, and a record kept. In doing so, I hope this lexical improvisation will lead us to a broader notion of what, and whether, scores for improvisers bound and contain. I will reflect on what these notions tell us about the potential for the medium of notation at a time in which the practice of writing music is, as Ostertag's project shows, increasingly obsolete.

1. Cutting and Pasting (back together) the Performer-Instrument Coupling

The *Say No More* project transpired over four "generations" throughout the 1990s:

1. Studio: *Say No More* and *Tongue-Tied* (1993)
2. "Live"/Live: *Say No More* and *Tongue-Tied* (1994)
3. Studio: *Verbatim* (1996)
4. "Live"/Live: *Verbatim Flesh & Blood* (2000)

The first generation began with unreleased solo recordings by three veteran improvisers: drummer Joey Baron, contrabassist Mark

Dresser, and vocalist Phil Minton (also a member of Richard Barrett's fORCH, an ensemble I discuss in "Invitation to Collaborate – Répondez s'il vous plaît"). Ostertag initially asked each player individually to record a solo improvisation with no prompt as to the type of material, style, or duration to be performed. According to the composer, the only information given to the players – other than a disclosure of the fact that these recordings would be heavily edited and integrated into a tape piece – was to

> play! I told them that I wanted them play their music, and that I didn't want a catalog or an inventory of things they did… you know, not little samples of this and that. But if they could somehow cover the range of their vocabulary as an improviser, […] that would be what I would want. (Ostertag 2016)

Ostertag received a 30-60 minute recording from each of the performers and edited the material primarily in linear timeline-based audio software (the first version of Pro Tools). The primitive and delicate state of this technology at the time, according to Ostertag, allowed him to chop up and overlay his material, but not to process it. (By "process", I refer to alterations that cannot be achieved through fragmenting and/or layering the sound file, such as pitch shifting and time stretching.) When this was desired, Ostertag loaded the sound files onto an Ensoniq ASR-10 sampler and recorded himself "playing" the alterations on the sampler back into the Pro Tools session. This technique can be heard at 9:30-13:30 of the *Tongue-Tied* recording (1b) in the repeated upwards "smear" *glissandi* in the bass part. As one can hear, the tape collage takes the solo improvisations far out of context. Ostertag often fragments the source material to an atomic degree, rending it from the kinetic totality of its originary performances – the time and physical effort involved in creating it.

Here is the first cut of the *Say No More* project: Ostertag *scores* the coupling of the players to their instruments, of material to physical process. As I explore in "Seeing the Full Sounding", a key aspect of the improviser's practice is her physical relationship to her instrument. Instruments are not merely a means to the end of producing sound; they are structured environments from which musical materials emerge and against which they are developed.[81] They are a fundamental part of the recursive process of thinking, producing, and perceiving music both in real-time discoveries on stage and in the development of a personal "sound" over longer periods of time. Composer and digital instrument designer Newton Armstrong summarizes this neatly in the language of enactive cognition:

> In a sequence of on-going negotiations between performer and instrument, the performer adapts to what is uncovered in the act of playing, continually developing new forms of embodied knowledge and competence. Over a sustained period of time, these negotiations lead to a more fully developed relationship with the instrument, and to a heightened sense of embodiment, or flow. (Armstrong 2006, 6-7)

81. For further comment on the physical coupling of improvisers and instruments, see Oliveros 1984; Denley 1991; Bailey 1992, 98-102; Iyer 1998, 2008; Sudnow 2001; Neumann 2011; and Borgo 2014.

Whatever "flow" may have been present in the unedited recordings by Baron, Dresser, and Minton is throughly interrupted by Ostertag's edits. One can observe this even in the first minutes of *Say No More*, a drum solo followed by a bass and drums duo. Both the solo and the duo include looped fragments of high physical intensity. But they contain no trace of the physical work – the lifting of the arm, the recovery of the bow – required to have produced these sounds. Sectional divisions are hard-edged, with not a semblance of transition between Baron's positions at the drumkit or Dresser's changes from pizzicato to arco – all of which require time in the physical world. The relentless intensity of the material and the lack of physical preparation and release give the virtual instrumental parts a superhuman quality that renders them technically unperformable by humans playing physical instruments; this had important consequences for the next generation of the project, in which the players were asked to attempt this impossible feat.

However in addition to decontextualizing these improvisations, Ostertag also creates a new context for the material by combining the performers in a virtual ensemble. Although the original tracks were recorded in isolation from each other, the rhythms, dynamics, and types of material in each part often fit as if they had been performed together. At times, the virtual groove shared by Baron and Dresser is so tight that they sound like a live rhythm section – e.g. *Say No More* (recording 1a) at 5:15-6:30 and *Tongue-Tied* (1b) at 4:20-5:00. Paradoxically, this new treatment gives the performers' original material a kind of stylistic familiarity that it may not have initially had; notwithstanding the fragmentation of the players' individual tracks, the overall impression is one of a cyborg "studio band".[82]

While the technical nature of Ostertag's cut in (1) may seem exceptional among scores for improvisers, or improvised music more generally, technology scholar Aden Evens reminds us that the

> [g]eneration of resistance is essential to creative improvisation; the body must be made to feel awkward in relation to the instrument, the known must be un-known. [...] At some point in the musician's training, the instrument ceases to offer an adequate resistance. The interface between player and instrument becomes too smooth, and familiar patterns are so comfortable as to discourage the invention or investigation of any other possibilities. To escape the trap of their own training, some improvisers alter their instruments, taking them apart, adding pieces on, and in general ensuring that their practiced playing techniques are either untenable or will generate unfamiliar results. (Evens 2005, 154)

In my opinion, Ostertag also aimed to generate resistance to – or cut and reassemble – performer-instrument couplings in the first generation of the project. Rather than altering his performers' instruments directly, though, he encourages the "invention or investigation of new possibilities" through the means of studio editing. In this first generation of the project the performers themselves were not directly affected by the process. However, in the second

82. The term "studio band" refers to another more common form of virtual ensemble in commercial music, whose players do not play together at the same time in the studio, but rather are overdubbed and mixed in the final production to simulate having done so. The sound of music made with this recording technique differs from that of a band playing together in physical space primarily, though not only, in its lack of a unified "room sound" – bleeding between microphones placed on musicians in the same space – and/or subtle interactive inflections between musicians (as heard, for example, on the band Steely Dan's 1977 record *Aja* – see Crowe 1977).

generation Ostertag's cut took on a new meaning when he asked the performers to reproduce the recording in person.

2. *Index of a Game*

In the next phase of the project, Ostertag brought together a live group to play (1) in person. *Say No More In Person* illuminates the ludic notion of the word *score*: the "record or register of points made by both sides during the progress of a game or match; also the number of points made by a side or individual".[83] Ostertag's score indexes, or points to, a game with no clearly defined rules or playing field.[84]

Indexicality distinguishes Ostertag's notation from many other musical game scores. Pieces such as John Zorn's *Cobra* (see Brackett 2010 and Cobussen 2016), Vinko Globokar's *Individuum-Collectivum* (1979), Iannis Xenakis' *Duel* (1959) and *Stratégie* (1962), or Robin Hayward's *Borromean Rings* (2011), written for my duo with him entitled Reidemeister Move, all make the rules in advance and define fields of play. The score of *Say No More*, on the other hand, points to (and occasionally mediates) a game happening outside it. How so? Of what does that game consist?

Some answers can be found in the interim between (1) and (2). After composing the first generation of *Say No More*, Ostertag invited Baron, Dresser, and Minton to perform a live version of (1) together. But drummer Joey Baron declined the invitation, expressing reluctance to perform the distorted Baron 2.0 that Ostertag had created in the studio. Ostertag frames Baron's hesitance in terms of the drummer's perfectionism:

> Joey called me up and he said, "I've listened to it several times, which is fantastic, and I love it, but I can't play it." I said, "Well I know you can't play it, but that's not a problem! The point is not to play it note for note – the point is to use this *process* to generate an ensemble repertoire of music that's organic to the way you all play. We don't have to reproduce the recording – that's OK." Joey just said, "Yeah, but we can't play it. You've made the perfect realization of this, and all we can do is fuck it up." [...] Joey's a perfectionist you know, he wants to play it *right*. So that was fine, and at that point he dropped out. (Ostertag 2016)

Baron's desire to "play it right" would of course have been in conflict with Ostertag's *scoring* of performer-instrument couplings in (1), in which the composer wished

> to highlight the tense and problematic relation of human and machine. In effect, the players were put in front of a machine-made mirror of themselves. It was not a perfect mirror, but more like the digital equivalent of a funhouse mirror that was curved, with wacky lenses that distorted the image into something superhuman. In the performances the musicians tried to keep up with their digital reflection, a task at which they could only fail. (Ostertag 2009, 138)

Here is the heart of the game: keeping up with one's digital reflection. What makes it a game, rather than simply a celebration of

83. Oxford Dictionaries , s.v. "score", accessed 02.09.2016. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/173033?rskey=EqgMSQ&result=1&isAdvanced=false.

84. In this sense *Say No More* might be compared to buzkashi, the national sport of Afghanistan in which horse-mounted players try to drag a goat carcass into a scoring circle. According to Fluxus artist and design scholar Ken Friedman, "Buzkashi has few rules, perhaps none. The field has no boundaries in the legendary tournaments of years gone by. A horseman may do nearly anything on the road to victory" (2016, 9).

failure? The *Gestalt* here is different in kind from authentic celebrations of failure, as for example in early chamber music by Richard Barrett. In Barrett's music, the spectacle of the performer failing at transparently complex tasks is conceived as an exposition of the absurdity of performance itself, and of the art of composition in the age late capitalism (see Fox 1995). There is no development of failure, there is only "the void" (see Hewett 1994).

By contrast, Ostertag's score is ultimately a kind of sympathetic dare, a way of catalyzing the second stage of the game, in which collective creativity takes over. As Ostertag reveals in the previous interview fragment, "the point [was] to use this process to generate an ensemble repertoire of music that's organic to the way you [Baron, Dresser, and Minton, CW] all play" (Ostertag 2016). Instead of the word "organic", we might also say "hyper-organic", to highlight the playful tension Ostertag sought to embed in this new repertoire.[85] Ostertag's sense of the game echoes an important aspect of play brought up by improvisation scholar Marcel Cobussen: the opportunity to stretch one's competence.

> "Baby reaching for a toy, pussy patting a bobbin, a little girl playing ball – all want to achieve something difficult, to succeed, to end a tension" (Huizinga 1970: 29). This element of tension arises from the innate compulsion to expand one's own skills; any game requires the development of competences, be they physical, mental, or social. (Cobussen 2016)

Such an opportunity must have appealed to Dresser and Minton, as well as drummer Gerry Hemingway, who accepted Ostertag's invitation to take Baron's place. This change in personnel brought a new dimension, a new challenge to the project. It added complexity to the task of recreating Baron's part, as Hemingway would not have had intimate knowledge of the original recording session and the techniques Baron 1.0 used to produce the material given to Ostertag. Hemingway and Dresser also had a long history together. They had been friends and collaborators since at least the early 1980s, as pillars of the by that time well-known community of iconoclastic improvisers in New York's "downtown" scene (see Lewis 1996 and Brackett 2010). (Ostertag had also been a part of that community before temporarily leaving music and moving to central America for most of the 1980s (Ostertag 2009)). The bass and drums team had also worked together for several years with Braxton's "classic quartet", which included pianist Marilyn Crispell (see Lock 1989).

What role did notation play in this game? Relatively little. The two scores of (2) are ostensibly a transcription of the two tape pieces from (1), plus parts for Ostertag on live sampler. But the notation is not a transcription in the usual sense – a preservation, documentation, or reorchestration of an existing piece or performance. Rather, it behaves as a "road map" (Ostertag 2016) to the tape itself:

85. This it shares with Barrett's more recent compositions for improvisers, such as *fOKT*, which extends and amplifies the resources of his duo FURT.

> I don't really think of it [the performance of (2), CW] as performing transcriptions because really the score is the tape. I don't think the transcribed score would make much sense if you couldn't hear the tape. And the idea was to make the transcribed score as minimal as possible [. . .] you want to put a piece of paper in front of them to remind them of what goes where, when you do what, but really they should learn it by listening to the recording. (Ostertag 2016)

To this end, Ostertag's notation clearly marks sectional divisions (with capital letters); players' entrances and exits; repeats; general qualities of materials in each section; and, where appropriate, specific pitches and rhythms. None of the "ambiguities, imperfections, contradictions, and so on, which constitute what might be called the 'poetry' of notation" (Barrett 2002) are really at play. The medium of notation is accorded no extra meaning that might detract or distract from the musicians' game of recreating their superhuman/superorganic selves. From this, one can infer that (1) is not only *a* part of the score, but its most important part. As I will show, this has provocative consequences for (3).

Ironically the first performance of (2) was not on stage in front of a concert audience, as one might expect from a project that thematizes the "tense and problematic relation of human and machine" (Ostertag 2009, 138). Rather, the band first came together to record the pieces "live" in the studio of Austrian National Radio (ORF), whose radio art producer Heidi Grundmann had commissioned Ostertag to produce *Say No More In Person* for her *Kunstradio* broadcast. The recording session, and the days of rehearsal leading up to it, were fraught with logistical difficulties and political battles within the radio station, which ultimately led to creative hurdles:

> This was in the early days of *Kunstradio* and the ORF was not supportive of her [Grundmann, the producer of (2), CW]. There were actually people trying to kick her legs out from under her very strongly. So we all arrived in Vienna, and we were supposed to have three or four days of rehearsal and then this recording session, [. . .] and the powers that be at the ORF had given the studio time to somebody else. So then we had to take a train to Innsbruck [a small city in western Austria, CW] to have a place to rehearse. We got to Innsbruck, and the [regional office of the, CW] ORF had also given the studio time [to someone else, CW]. So then we had gone to another town – there was still no place to rehearse – and they said there was this garage that a local rock band played in and we could rehearse in this garage. We went over there at night and dropped our instruments off [. . .] it was the middle of winter, and there was no heat in the garage and the idea that we were supposed to rehearse in this cold place – it was just insane. We came back in the morning and the whole street was full of firetrucks because the garage was on fire [laughs]. . . Mark's bass was in the garage, and that was when Mark turned to me and says, "Ostertag – you got my number in your book? Cross it out!" So then we had to go back to Vienna and record with no rehearsal. It's the first time we've [Ostertag, Dresser, and Hemingway, CW] met, we were supposed to have had days of rehearsal and we didn't have any, and it was all on the fly. They put us in this recording studio – their first digital recording studio [. . .] –

> and it was recorded to hard disk. But they wouldn't give her [Grundmann, CW] an engineer; they were really trying to shut her down. The only engineer she could get was a guy would did radio theater, and he'd never miked a drumset, and then they wouldn't give us the good mics – they said the good mics were only for the musical engineers. [...] You know that first piece is particularly tense, particularly for Phil, and Phil said, "Bob, I hope you like the first take, because I can't do this more than once in a day." We got four-fifths of the way through it and the whole studio crashed. All the data was lost. [laughs] So that was hardly an optimal situation. That CD was made with no rehearsal, second take, everybody in a grumpy mood, bad microphones, the engineer doesn't know what he doing. [...] If you're going to make music that's outside the box, then you have to accept the circumstances that you get. And they're never optimal. (Ostertag 2016)

I include this story not only for entertainment value, but to show that the game indexed by the score also included Ostertag himself. By inserting himself into the process, rather than simply challenging Dresser, Hemingway, and Minton from the outside, Ostertag accepted the challenge set to his bandmates as a performer, plus the additional challenge of stretching his own competence as a bandleader, much like Zorn did as the conductor of *Cobra*,[86] or Braxton did while on tour with his classic quartet in the 1980s (see Lock 1989).

86. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yp-oZbmsQVw.

To bring the human/virtual cycle of (1) and (2) to a temporary conclusion: thinking of scores as containers of rules and regulations, or as boundaries of notational matter(s), limits the view of what may actually be happening between players and their instruments, and between each other – both of which are fundamental to the dynamics of improvisation. Thinking of scores for improvisers as cuts and reassemblies of performer-instrument couplings, or as indexes of games, puts a focus on how they interact with rich performative activity beyond notation's immediate purview.

3. *A Record Kept*

Like (1), the third generation of *Say No More*, entitled *Verbatim*, was made in the studio from fragments of recordings by Ostertag's collaborators. Unlike (1), which began with solos recorded in isolation from each other, (3) began with fragments of collective recordings made during the production of (2). The raw material consisted both of tracks taken from *Say No More* (2a) and *Tongue-Tied* (2b), as well as a free improvisation recorded in the studios of ORF at the same time:

> At that same session [(3)] after we recorded the pieces, we did a free improvisation. My idea was [...] for the next go-around, [...] instead of fragments from solos, I wanted an ensemble improvisation with the tracks broken up so I could isolate the different components and mix them together in ways that they weren't played together at the same. (2016)

Even before he had finished (2), then, Ostertag had already conceived of the project in long-range terms, along the lines of Ben Patterson's *Variations for Double-Bass* or Richard Barrett's *fOKT*. But by the time of composing (3), the project consisted not only of an ensemble-specific repertoire, but also of a concrete constellation of individuals with its own history and methods – a *band* in the emphatic sense. Ostertag:

> By this time now we actually had gigs, we toured, and it was feeling much more like a mature project. Very, very fun band. [...] That was my first band – I'd never had a band before. For your first band to have Gerry Hemingway and Mark Dresser – it's kind of crazy. I would regularly just start laughing on stage. I would be playing and I would think, "Wait a minute – is this my band?" (Ostertag 2016)[87]

Like all bands, the quartet developed through life experience offstage, and inevitably this experience influenced the musical material, as we see in the Austrian odyssey related by Ostertag above. This underlines that *Verbatim* is a record of collective evolution above and beyond a compositional intervention. If we consider the recording to be itself part of a score, (3) is shown to be an entextualization[88] of the band's life and music practice as a whole, a new opportunity to further refract and reflect upon it.

It could be argued that all recordings entextualize, and it is in the negative sense of entextualization – its erasure of a singular, non-repeatable, generative context – that many an improviser has criticized the recorded medium. Guitarist Derek Bailey, for example, has critiqued "the loss during the recording process of the atmosphere of musical activity — the musical environment created by the performance" (1992, 103). Philosopher Gary Peters argues that "[a]s a generalisation, free improvisers show little interest in tape, in the analogical or digital freezing of performative flow [...] largely because improvisation's big idea is the realization of future possibilities in the unreproducible now of the 'in the moment' moment" (Peters 2014, 9-10). Both Bailey's and Peters' positions are reflected in the following comment by Cornelius Cardew, who gives them a relevant twist by triangulating improvisation, recording, and scores:

> [w]ritten compositions are fired off into the future; even if never performed, the writing remains as a point of reference. Improvisation is in the present, its effect may live on in the souls of the participants, both active and passive (i.e. audience), but in its concrete form it is gone forever from the moment that it occurs, nor did it have any previous existence before the moment that it occurred, so neither is there any historical reference available. Documents such as tape recordings of improvisation are essentially empty, as they chiefly preserve the form that something took and give at best an indistinct hint as to the feeling and cannot convey any sense of time and place. [...] What a recording produces is a separate phenomenon, something really much stranger than the playing itself, since what you hear on tape or disc is indeed the same playing, but divorced from its natural context. What is the importance of this natural context? The

87. There is no extant list of live performances of (2), but when I asked Ostertag about *Say No More in Person*'s performance history he recalled "off the top of my head: tour of japan, angelica festiavl [sic], mulhouse festival, numerous club dates in europe, kunstencentrum voruit in belgium, merken [sic] hall in nyc, calperformances in berkeley, Moers Festival, Bimhuis in Amsterdam, Taktlos festival" (Ostertag, personal email to the author, 2 August 2016). The Taktlos Festival performance is discussed in a chapter on Ostertag's music in Wilson 1999.

88. For a more thorough discussion of the term *entextualization*, see "Entextualization and Preparation in Patterson's *Variations for Double-Bass*".

> natural context provides a score which the players are unconsciously interpreting in their playing. Not a score that is explicitly articulated in the music and hence of no further interest to the listener as is generally the case in traditional music, but one that co-exists inseparably with the music, standing side by side with it and sustaining it. (Cardew 1971, 126-128)

To distill Cardew's position: written composition belongs to the future,[89] improvisation belongs to the present, and recording belongs to the past. This is a conventional schema which I have deconstructed in various ways throughout *Tactile Paths* – particularly in the cases of *A Treatise Remix*, in which I improvise over time in the studio with a collection of historical recordings, or Barrett's *fOKT*, which, like *Say No More*, makes extensive use of sampling. It would therefore appear to bring us no closer to understanding how *Verbatim* challenges this received wisdom. However, Cardew's formulation opens up considerably through his attention to the "natural context" of improvisation as a score.

89. Or, as Benjamin Boretz would say, "composing is oddly positioned as a speculative notational act prior, and abstractly general in its relation, to the actual musical act itself of realization in sound, performance." (1981-1982, 82)

By calling this context "natural", Cardew initially suggests that it is somehow external to the act of playing, or given in advance. But he adds that the context "co-exists inseparably with the music, standing side by side with it and sustaining it", revealing a resonance with the ecological view of notation for improvisers that I have advanced throughout this dissertation (see my discussion of architect Lawrence Halprin's *RSVP Cycles* in "Invitation to Collaborate – Répondez s'il vous plaît!"). In this view, the "context" of improvised performance – or the "field of musical improvisation" as Cobusssen calls it – is not fixed or determinate. Rather, it co-evolves with the improviser through performance, or, in Bailey's words, it is "created *by* the performance" (1992, 103, my italics).

Whereas I claim that scores are but one element of this environment, changing and being changed by other elements through improvisational practice, Cardew claims that the environment *is* a score – a subtle but intriguing difference. For when we consider the recording of (3) to be a (principle part) of a score, the score to be the environment, and the environment to co-evolve with the improvised performance, we have a feedback loop that in fact describes the *Say No More* project rather well: performances nested in recordings nested in scores played in performance, the whole of which (re)constitutes the environment in and over time. Rather than a static documentation – "the digital freezing of performative flow" (Peters 2014, 9-10) – the "record kept" here is an intractable knot within a knot, an inherently dynamic performative tool.

4. Final Cut – The Future of (Musical) Writing in the Age of Digital Reproduction?

Verbatim Flesh and Blood, the fourth and final generation of *Say No More*, reanimated the third generation, *Verbatim* – as the second generation, *Say No More In Person*, reanimated the first, *Say No More*. As I suggested in the previous section, (3) and (4) differ from the

project's earlier incarnations in that the band had established a voice of its own. One can hear this immediately when comparing (4) to (2): there is a much greater fluidity in the interaction between players, and at the same time a greater proximity to (3), particularly with respect to section timings. By this time, the band had learned how to play together, and had mastered the medium of self-impersonation on which the project was founded. The awkwardness of (2) – apparent in Gerry Hemingway's nervous drum solo at the beginning of (2a) – is gone. In its place, a kind of tortured flow has emerged. The recording of (4) can thus be seen as a "final cut" of the project in the filmic sense: the definitive final product, the ideal image, of a long and complex collaborative process. But is it really? And what does the success I confer on *Verbatim Flesh and Blood* say about the relationship of scores and/or notation to recording in the *Say No More* tetralogy as a whole?

In a book chapter entitled "The Future of Writing" (2002, 63-69), philosopher Vilém Flusser discusses the changing historical relationship between images and writing in order to articulate an empowering vision for writing in the techno-imaginative culture of the postmodern era. According to Flusser, "the original purpose of writing was to facilitate the deciphering of images" (64). He conceives of images as "mediations between man and his world, [. . .] tools to overcome human alienation: they are meant to permit action in a world in which man no longer lives immediately but that he faces" (65). In order to make sense of these images as tools, he argues, "one must learn the conventions that give them their meaning [. . .]. For example, the 'imagination' that produces road maps is not the same as the 'imagination' that produces cave paintings and projections. Explaining images with the help of texts may therefore be useful" (65).

More importantly, he goes on to say, writing helps to break down the "idolatry of images" (65). By this Flusser refers to the power of writing, particularly as "historical consciousness, linear, rational thought" (65), to counteract decontextualized images' tendency to cover up the terms of their use, to reify into idealized (and/or ideological) objects, thus making man a "tool of his own tools" (65).[90]

I think Flusser's dialectic presents an uncannily rich way to view the relationship of notation and recording in *Say No More*. Ostertag began the project in (1) with a recorded "image" of a superhuman virtual trio, "meant to permit action in a world in which man no longer lives immediately" (65) – the "imaginary" world of recording. He then used notation in (2) to explain the recording to the players and direct them to its potential as a "tool to overcome alienation" (64). Although this notation may seem impoverished or haphazard on paper, in practice it played a fundamental role in indexing the game – inviting the performers to play with superhuman images of themselves, rather than be replaced by them. In other words, notation is not only the technical means by which

90. Here Flusser centers exclusively on the visual. In a rare discussion of the auditory, from which I took the quote at the beginning of my chapter, he states: "As the reader will surely have realized with surprise and annoyance, I have excluded everything to do with ear and mouth, with sound and words, from my thinking" (2011, 164). Nevertheless his analysis of writing – common both to visual and musical practice – is useful for reasons I elaborate below.

Ostertag represents salient elements in the recording to be reproduced, but also a device that enables his parodical critique of the myth of recording as an ideal performance. In this sense, he goes a step further than Flusser by questioning the presumed divide between the world of recording and the "live" world in which man lives "immediately".

But this is not the end of the story. Flusser acknowledges that "the rise of the new image culture" – exemplified in our times by television, advertising, the internet, and music videos – may be traceable to writing's own historical failures: "It is against the threatening lunacy of formal rationalism, of a meaningless existence amid speculative, opaque explanations, that the rise of the new image culture must be seen" (66). In this new image culture, unlike in prehistoric images such as cave paintings or tapestries, texts are no longer used to explain images, but rather to feed and support the image machine:

> The easiest way to imagine the future of writing, if the present trend toward a culture of techno-images goes on, is to imagine culture as a gigantic transcoder from text into image. It will be a sort of black box that has texts for input and images for output. All texts will flow into that box (news about events, theoretical comments about them, scientific papers, poetry, philosophical speculations), and they will come out again as images (films, TV programs, photographic pictures): which is to say that history will flow into the box, and that it will come out of it under the form of myth and magic. From the point of view of the texts that will flow into the box, this will be a utopian situation: the box is the "fullness of time," because it devours linear time and freezes it into images. From the point of view of the images that come out of the box, this will be a situation in which history becomes a pretext for programs. In sum, the future of writing is to write pretexts for programs while believing that one is writing for utopia. (Flusser 2002, 67)

Recording culture has, like image culture as here represented by Flusser, radically changed the nature of musical literacy in our time, as it no longer privileges or even requires written scores. The idolatry of recordings goes unquestioned in an age when one has almost all music at one's fingertips in one's phone or through the internet; there is a radical gap between the speed and rhizomatic nature of music consumption in the 21st century, and the slow pace and linear process of producing music with scores. As composer and electronic music scholar Nicolas Collins states:

> [M]usic notation as it has been known for several centuries — dots and crochets on five lines — is becoming ever more marginalized as a world language. Most music today is produced, distributed and heard through digital technology — computers, iPods and cell phones. Notes can be picked out on a keyboard and samples grabbed from existing recordings, then corrected, sequenced, layered and orchestrated as easily as words can be processed. We're living in a Cmd-X/Cmd-V world; it's no longer essential to know how to read and write music notation in order to function within this new paradigm, unless you're a member of that ever-dwindling percentage

> of musicians who play scored compositions on acoustic instruments. (Collins 2011, 6)

So if one is among the dwindling few to acknowledge the continuing value of scores for contemporary music, how does one contend with their seemingly unstoppable obsolescence? As *Say No More* shows us, notating music in conventional scores is no longer the only option. Composers and performers can use the very medium of recording (or video or software, for that matter – see Collins 2011) to communicate with each other, and using such nonwritten media can open possibilities for different kinds of communication – some of which may "speak" to improvising musicians more directly than conventional notation. A reactionary return to the internal complexities of writing is in any case unnecessary.

At the same time, *Say No More* shows a possible way forward for written notation: improvise with the context in which it is used. Ostertag exposes contingency and assigns notation a limited but strategic role in a musical environment where people, rather than disembodied sounds, are the subject matter. In so doing, he shows how written notation – and here I explicitly also include "conventional notation" – can be used to interact, play, negotiate, and challenge performers, who may even ignore it if they know the game to which it points. He not only offers an alternative model of the score, but also suggests a path to rethinking the often unfulfilling relationships between scores, recordings, and performances in our time.