



This, Here, Now

Document Version

Final published version

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Citation for published version (APA):

McPherson, H. (2024). *This, Here, Now: Invitations to Improvise*.

Citing this paper

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INVITATIONS
TO
IMPROVISE

HENRY MCPHERSON

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Written 2021-2022
Published March 2024
ISBN: 9789403723785

Cover image, collage of skies over Malham (UK)

This, Here, Now

Invitations to Improvise

Henry McPherson

Foreword

This short book contains a collection of texts conceived as invitations for improvisation performance and practice. They are written to be open to use in any medium/discipline/form, in studio/rehearsal/closed environments, and in live performance (for audience). They can be approached as scores or structures, research questions, discussion points, reflective tools, provocations, experiments, meditations, poems, or in any other way that practitioners might find useful and stimulating. For me, each text points to one (or several) of the diverse experiences and interlocking aspects of improvisation – a practice which I believe emerges richly through an entanglement of presence, awareness, responsiveness, receptivity, and activity. These texts are not intended to be prescriptive; rather, I offer them as stimuli (in addition to those present already and inherently in practice) upon which improvisers may draw, to which they may respond, if they choose.

The texts are divided into three sections – Prompts, Questions, and Necessities. The first section, Prompts, contains thirty-three invitations, presented mostly as pairs of complementary phrases – sibling verses. Each Prompt has been conceived as a way for practitioners to absorb in and interrogate one or more aspects of practice. What could be inferred as the inherent “goal”, “challenge”, “problem”, “suggestion”, or underlying “principle” of each the prompt may well be readily apparent, or it might not. As with all of the texts, these are open broadly to practitioner interpretation, to a variety of agendas and motivations. In particular, the specific verbs in each Prompt might apply differently and manifest different activity in different disciplinary and social-cultural contexts.

Prompt number five, for example, which reads: “*Speak until you have nothing left to say/ Then continue speaking*” might engender different kinds of responses from practitioners who use words, as opposed to those who

do not, or those who use sounding instruments, body, or other expressive means. The word “speak” may not suggest the use of text or language (although it may), and practitioners should feel at liberty to interpret these kinds of phrases as they see fit, in whatever form best applies to their own performance practice and through their own particular expressive modalities. These could include instrumental sounding, moving, dancing, talking, singing, orating, verbalising, vocalising, instrumentalising (etc.), as well as any combination, dissolution, or extension of these.

The second section contains twenty Questions. Like the Prompts, these questions can be approached in a number of ways and their language can be considered flexibly applicable. Practitioners might choose to internalise and dwell upon the Questions through an extended period of practice, allowing them to become digested and embodied. Alternatively, they might be imagined more immediately as if someone else were asking them directly – right here, right now (and perhaps expecting a response). Some might elicit immediate or reactive ‘answers’, whereas others may be less direct. Some of the Questions have modifiers included in parentheses; the purpose of these is to provide gentle shifts in emphasis which might engender subtly (or overtly) different responses, and practitioners should feel free to explore variations upon these.

The third section contains sixteen Necessities. Each of these is presented in both the affirmative (“Speak!”) and negative form (“Don’t Speak!”), and can be approached from either perspective (or both). While I call these Necessities, as with the Prompts and Questions, they should not be taken as absolute instructions (!) – they are still invitations, rather than obligations, to practice. The reason these texts are presented and named as Necessities, as linguistic imperatives (hence their brevity and their directness), is simply to invite a tighter or more honed focus upon a specific idea, mode of interacting, or trajectory of practice. As with both Prompts and Questions, the specific language of the

Necessities is open to interpretation and to contingencies of person, place, time, and context.



This collection is a work in progress. The ideas within it are continually developing, shifting, changing, transforming through practice and through discussion with peers, friends and family (including pets), and through the discursive interactions with far-flung improvisation practitioners which I have been privileged to access across the last few years in my role as a researcher. The texts emerge from an intense period of studio-based practice, as a soloist, and in companionship with a cohort of friendly co-improvisers, undertaken as part of my research at the University of Huddersfield's *Research Centre for Performance Practice* and *Centre for Research in New Music*, where I have been keeping busy since 2019. The motivation to write these texts owes much to the legacy of Pauline Oliveros, whose well-known text-scores the *Sonic Meditations*, among others, have inspired countless practitioners across the globe to come together, to create, and to attend to each other. Pauline's scores have nourished my improvising practice since its early days, and through practising them, I have come to know a deep respect for the power of dedicated and attentive listening (with the ears, with the mind, with the body). The understanding that short pieces of text could contain rich impetus for improvisation was first illuminated for me by her work, and I view this collection as a way of thanking her. They have also been inspired by the specific challenges of teaching improvisation in higher education – how to allow students to engage fully with the contingencies of the moment in their own way, without imposing restriction.

The collection represents also, for me, a manner of response to the immediate and urgent concerns of the time in which it has been written. It has coalesced at a period in which the world is reckoning with the ongoing impact and, looking forward, the aftermath of the Covid-19 Pandemic, an event which has unmasked both the precarity and the

profound interconnectedness of global economic, social, political, biological, and medicinal systems. It springs from a time in which dualistic thinking manifests dangerously as excess political and social polarization, underpinned by the reinforcing of archaic (and imaginary) essentialisms of difference; this thinking delights in finding new ways to delineate humanity, to force it into oppositions, to reduce, to disavow, and to condemn. It emerges in an era when the magnitude of human impact upon the more-than-human is being made explicit in every corner of the world. As we turn to address the overwhelming uncertainty of ecological and meteorological destabilisation, the horrors of extinction and habitat-destruction precipitated by the ever-insistent climate emergency, our attention and our creativity are required in a myriad of different places and different forms.

Improvisation is by no means ‘The Answer’ to global inequality, the climate crisis, the crimes of authoritarian regimes, the inequities of oppression derived from racist ideologies, or the upheavals of human conflict. However, what the practice offers, for me, is a way to experience very directly our astonishing and vibrant capacity for attentive and responsive creativity. In improvising, whether solo or with others, we bring our attention, our bodies, our desires, and our curiosity into visceral relationship with this, here, and now. In learning and sharing how to attune to the precarious, dynamic, complex, ever-changingness of our reality and interrelations ‘in this moment’, I believe that we can equip ourselves with the knowledge to navigate and mediate the innumerable changes we encounter. Through improvising practice, we can empower ourselves and our communities through the understanding of what it is to be here, now, at *this* time, being in *this* way, enriching our relationship to each other, and to the world.

PROMPTS

Tell a story

Don't think about it

Note: A story can be told with(out) words, sense, meaning, clarity, direction, shape, form, understanding (etc).

Accept that everything you do may be right

Don't try and work out whether or not it is

Note: Acceptance is not (necessarily) the same as resignation, apathy, or passivity.

3

Everything you do is right

Begin, and keep moving

Don't return to or pass through somewhere you have already been

Speak until you have nothing left to say

Then continue speaking

Enter and speak plainly

Articulate what happens

Following others closely:

Don't copy

Only respond

Speak only when necessary

Find somewhere and stay a while

When you leave, take it with you

In relation with a friend:

Same form, different quality

Same quality, different form

Note: The wording of this prompt owes its simplicity and symmetry to the input of my friend and collaborator Sky Su, with whom it first came to be.

Wander aimlessly

If you find a place to rest, move on

Do something imaginary

Without explaining

Provide only endings

Note: (an) Ending can be a feeling, a point, a process, a choice, a resignation, a sensation, an atmosphere, an instruction, a demand, a withdrawal (a ...). How long does it take to end?

Start in the middle of something

finish before it ends

Listen closely

Respond with(out) understanding

Begin by asking a question –

And again, and again, and again ...

Enter and wait

Once you have waited, leave

Show what you have

Don't talk about it

Only beginnings

Follow the changes

(only the changes)

When you have said all you have to say,

Stop

Do not try to do anything

Then, try to do nothing

Do not anticipate anything

If you do, leave it alone

Accept everything as it is without resistance

(do not forget to act)

Find an ending

By offering a beginning

Show what it is that you understand

Listen to the response

Don't bother clinging

Just move on

Only present the truth

Don't use (someone else's) words

Open a door, close a door

Go through both

Note: It may or may not be the same door.

Go on a journey

Without harming anything

Receive a gift

Return in kind

Look after your ghosts

Without holding their hands

Note: This prompt was stimulated by a research session in Leeds with improvisers Rachel Dean and Lewys Holt.

QUESTIONS

Out of all the possible locations, times, contexts and environments
that you could be in, you find yourself right here –

What do you have to say?

(What) is the(re) difference between inside and outside?

What is right here?

(How) can you show you are present?

What is needed?

Can you do this differently?

What is there to find?

Where is your comfort?

What is not here?

Note: This question emerges out of conversation and a processes of co-authoring academic papers with Maria Sappho

What is the way forward?

Note: It might be behind you, or it might not have happened yet...

Are you ready?

(How) do you move from nothing?

How big is this space?

(How) can you follow and lead?

What is holding you (back)?

What is happening?

Now, in what way?

And when it isn't like that, what do you do?

What makes you smile (inside, outside)?

What (?) is the question

NECESSITIES

Change!
(Don't Change!)

Note: This necessity was inspired by a particularly vivid practising of Pauline Oliveros' *Horse Sings From Cloud*.

Follow!
(Don't Follow!)

Stray!
(Don't Stray!)

Speak!
(Don't Speak!)

Wait!
(Don't Wait!)

Arrive!

(Don't Arrive!)

Go!
(Don't Go!)

Indulge!
(Don't Indulge!)

Insist!
(Don't Insist!)

Release!
(Don't Release!)

Let Go!
(Don't Let Go!)

Hold!
(Don't Hold!)

Shape!
(Don't Shape!)

Carry!

(Don't Carry!)

Forget!
(Don't Forget!)

Dream!

(Don't Dream!)

Afterword


My practice, from which these texts spring, would not exist without my community of peers and colleagues, through whose wisdom I have grown, and whose creativity is a bottomless limitless bubbling hearty soup. Improvising practice owes its continued existence to the tenacity of dedicated artists and performers, as well as to technicians, festival curators, avid listeners, workshop participants, watchers, streamers, supporters and family members who build a community around this thing which we do. I owe particular thanks to Maria Sappho (the plurality) and Colin Frank (friend of objects) with whom I co-habited and improvised my way through the two first years of the Covid-19 pandemic; to Brice Catherin, co-Noisebringer and wise old man who showed me that improvisation is both good food and a “practical tool for happiness”; to my Scotland-based research participants, Sky Su, Skye Reynolds, and David Yates, for their contributions to my work across the last few years; to Catharine Cary, for her words, movements, shapes, and her dedication to a life improvising; to Michael Schumacher, my friend and mentor, whose humour, patience, and care have helped shape my practice and my teaching; to Kirstie Simson, who I have come to know recently as a true “force of nature”, whose deep love for improvisation and what it can offer the world is a great inspiration and affirmation; to Anne Bourne, for her sensitivity, her wit, and her guidance; to my partner Harry, who has supported me without wavering, whose love and understanding has steadied skies and calmed seas; to Tammy, my more-than-human companion and old friend who teaches me there is time for rest and less to say; to my mother Elspeth, for encouraging me from the get-go; to Sensei Karl Kaliski and the sangha of the Cloud Water Zen Centre in Glasgow; to Raymond MacDonald, the Glasgow Improvisers’ Orchestra and friends; and to Hilary, Philip, Claudia and Ben for keeping me going in my research.

About the Author

Dr Henry McPherson is an interdisciplinary artist, improviser, composer, and researcher. His work explores collaborative creativity and improvisation in environmental and socially oriented projects, often in collaboration with plants, animals, and the more-than-human world. His portfolio includes music composed for concert, stage and recording, graphic scores and gallery pieces, texts and audiovisual installations, as well as the performance of contemporary experimental and improvised music and dance. Creating across a variety of media and disciplinary contexts, Henry holds improvisation as the centre of his artistic work; as a richly expressive performance practice, as a generative mode of being-awareness, and as a source of creativity and presence. His recent works explore aspects of free association, spontaneous collage, and transmedia interactivity across paint, instruments, body, text, notation, voice, video and sound. He is fascinated by communication across the non-verbal, by the juxtaposition of expressive forms, by the capacity of artistic practices to transform individuals and communities and to focus attention on the great issues of our time.

More information, and a portfolio of work, can be found at:

www.henrymcpherson.org.uk



“Out of all the possible locations, times, contexts and environments that you could be in, you find yourself right here

What do you have to say?”

No.1 from ‘Questions’

This, Here, Now is a collection of text invitations for improvisation performance and practice, written and compiled by artist, composer, and improviser Henry McPherson.

Conceived for use by musicians, dancers, actors, performance-makers, theatre-makers, composers, choreographers, poets, artists, and any others working in the performing arts (and beyond), these texts are offered as stimuli for practical work in the studio, on the stage, and in the rehearsal space.

They can be approached as scores or structures, research questions, discussion points, reflective tools, provocations, experiments, meditations, poems, or in any other way that practitioners might find useful and stimulating.

For more scores and improvisational documents, please visit:

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