TEXT AS INSTRUMENT: IMPROVISING WITH MUSICIANS

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1 Iris Colomb is a poet, artist, performer, curator, editor, and translator based in London. Her practice explores various relationships between visual and verbal forms of text through projects involving performance, text objects, experimental translation, and improvisation. Iris is the founder of the investigative poetry and performance platform SLANT, Co-Editor of HVTN Press, a founding member of the interdisciplinary collective No Such Thing, half of the performance duo Soft Play (with Paul Ingram), half of the text and sound duo [something's happening] (with Daryl Worthington aka Beachers), and a member of the band Daylightbulb (with Nathan Graywater and Tom Spurling). Website: www.iriscolomb.com

In July 2021 I started taking part in SKRONK's 'Open Sessions'. In these bimonthly events, organised by artist Rick Jensen at London's New River Studios, musicians improvise in small groups across multiple short sets. Anyone in the audience is welcome to sign up and join in. At the time of writing (August 2022) this essay attempts to render my experience of improvising with text in this music context over the past year.

The first sounds set the scene, let them gather, take them in. A space builds through them, don't try to fill it, feel your way through it to find where words fit. Sound is a space we actively share and are constantly negotiating. Find where words flow, let it change. Learn to resist the instinctive pull of saturated speech. Forget the weight of total responsibility, sound is a space through which we move, a space we all keep choosing, a space we hold together. I speak into it. I speak as I listen. I speak as I read. I listen as I speak. I listen as I read. I read, I listen, I speak, I pause.

I was used to hearing nothing but my own voice, what it should, what it must, what it needs to be doing. I had learnt to resist all other sounds, to speak over and despite them, to keep going. Here, whether I do or do not speak, I am part of every moment. Time flows with a new intensity, every instant bursting with potential and significance. Every choice is urgent, irreversible and immediately exposed. If I hesitate I use it. If I stammer I repeat it. My silence isn't silence. I let the sounds speak back.

I try to accept whatever I do as I do it, to stop questioning, to start reacting. Improvising requires a new kind of focus. I don't know how to reach it. Every set is full of new experiences for me to welcome, process and collect. I don't know myself in this context. I want to learn. I don't expect this to be linear. I try not to lose patience. Learning is a cumulative process. Every challenge is constructive. Struggling is necessary.

I think about the pieces I wrote to be delivered the way they were written to be delivered, the strain of every phrase, the rise and fall of every syllable, the weight of every moment, every breath, every word. I remember weighing my delivery against my expectations, feeling for the gaps, flinching. Here, the text is what it is as soon as it starts to exist, the text is happening and there are no mistakes, it ends when it stops, when it stops it is already gone. There is no time for regret.

People have often asked me if I would consider setting my poems to music. Despite the sincere enthusiasm they often spring from, these questions have always felt tinged with disdain for poetry, a familiar reluctance to consider it as a self-sufficient performative medium. I would say that I am interested in the sound of language, that I strive to reach a kind of musicality built through and for speech, one which other sounds can only dilute. My poems are written to be heard on their own terms. I haven't changed my mind. I neither want to wrap sound around text to make it more palatable, nor to plaster text onto sound and force meaning upon it. I want to learn to use language as an instrument, to explore text in a world of sound, to learn a new language.

I listen to musicians interact through their instruments. I slowly start to recognise events, to notice reactions, to hear voices, to imagine a kind of dialogue. Each set becomes a situation with which to engage, each phrase comes with an opportunity to respond. I play with the expressive qualities of speech, I ask, I suggest, I agree, I assert, I insist, I comment, I call. Sound makes me wary of the weight of language, that consuming propensity to point, define and explain. Here, language is one of many sounds, it must not overpower. I try to use meaning with caution. I avoid the 'I', favour connective words, pick out ubiquitous phrases, weave speech into patterns, let them contract, expand and collapse.

I start using a loop station. I pour words into unsynced loops and leave them to their own devices. They bounce against each other, building new connections through a set of independent permutations. Language latches onto itself. Once it is captured in a loop, text becomes tangible, speech becomes a gesture. I handle the words, alter, edit, add. As lines unfurl I speak through the gaps. A single word can heighten, transform or dissolve sense, but if I don't move, language carries on without me. I start to find this comforting. It gets too comfortable. I don't want to rely on technology. By the time I set my loop station aside I realise I have absorbed its patterns. My voice forms loops of its own.

I edge closer to sound without falling into it. I choose to stick to language. I don't sing. I choose to keep the tension. I use letters and numbers, occasionally play with syllables, but never stray far from words. Text is my medium and I work with textual materials: texts I find, gather or

assemble to then deconstruct and transform through performance. These materials are not scores, they are the instruments I am learning to play. Their limited set of words and various physical forms provide a generative range of possibilities to explore. Beyond my choice of material I have no plan.

I start with offshoots from previous performance pieces, repurposed fragments to be sequenced live. Something about them feels stale. I assemble new textual objects an hour before the next few sessions: a bucket full of cardboard text messages, torn articles stored in spice jars. Something about them is too familiar. It's too soon to make. Agency should start and end on stage, through sound, in the moment. I bring books, books I haven't read, books I find and borrow, books I would never read. I gradually replace books with everyday documents and items: contracts, forms, receipts, cereal boxes, medicinal tablets, cleaning products.

I am used to working with found text. Many of my pieces are composed by combining fragments from various sources. When I improvise, this becomes a performative process. I don't look at the text until I am on stage. As the set starts, my gaze skims across the material, I latch on to fragments I am drawn to and read them aloud. Liveness pushes me to both slow down and speed up. Instead of frantically sifting through endless possibilities in search of the ideal combination, I focus on finding one which is viable. When I do, I must both instantly commit and swiftly move on. As I speak the words, I often find myself hearing new layers of meaning. New possibilities emerge and I dive into them. Text and sound flow through each other, somewhere between intention and coincidence.

At first, five minutes feels endless, I struggle to find my place, the constant choices leave me drained. I know I just need to keep trying, to do it as often as possible. We are each called up to take part in several sets throughout the night. Everyone will play, but no one knows when or in what combinations. With no time to anticipate, I eventually forget to be nervous. As the pressure drops, choices become lighter until I hardly notice myself making them. At the end of a set I am often unable to describe what I have just heard or said, but always ready to start again. On my way home, I often walk longer than is necessary. I think about what I have just experienced and what I can take away from it; but I also tell myself that I need to find more time to write, that I should be writing, that I haven't been writing.

Transcriptions

[Attempt]
SKRONK 91, July 27th
2021 With Jonny Martin

and fall　　　the mess of
doesn't it　　　counterpoint　　　attempt to
　　　clearly connects　　　duration
not just　　　and fall
the mess of　　　before　　　middle of
order to　　　to reflect　　　no significance
　　　hover over　　　and fall
the mess　　　a solid resolution　　　as horror
expectations　　　dispensed with
over time　　　more than just
more of　　　the mark
　　　duration as horror
time from　　　to satisfy
over time　　　more than just
a solid resolution　　　caught up in
arms of　　　attempt to point　　　to point
are we　　　fieldwork　　　curl for granted
　　　tension　　　transitions　　　doesn't it
counterpoint　　　doesn't it　　　more of
tensions　　　transitions
attempt to point　　　over time
more than just
　　　duration as horror

[Clusters]
SKRONK 104, March 8th 2022
With Hywel Jones & Taku Hisadome

clusters clusters   to   clusters   out
you tried   to take out   clusters   to take out
you tried   to take out   all missed
tried   to take out   this   to take
cluster   to take   clusters   to take
clusters out   crisp start   to take
outer use   crisp   to take   clusters start
crisp   to take   clusters   start with
to take   some   your   help   you
help   help   to take out   clusters
towards achieving   to take
start   to take out   clusters   crips   start
if you are not entirely   crisp   start
if you are not   crisp   start   crisp   away from
start   once   opened   you will   crisp
once   start   once   opened   this   crisp
start   once   once   crisp   start   this   start

[Ridiculous]
SKRONK 106, March 29th 2022
With Chad Murray & Allan Newcombe

only do it once   only do it   no
don't adventures   once   once
don't bet   just don't   don't
don't   be ridiculous   take a
no   no matter   certain
the outcomes will   be ridiculous

leave   behind   your   work
it is   as you go
be be be be be be be be
be be be be be be be be
be be be be be be be be
be be be be be be   definitely

definitely   definitely   write
carefully   what you want to say
carefully   make things   now
don't forget to struggle   it is
your control   it's gonna be
yourself   you are so close to fun
it cannot   or

[Unlikely]
SKRONK 107, April 4th 2022
With Allan Newcombe & Andrew Ciccone.

It is unlikely   Or blocked
Unlikely   Unlikely   Or   Blocked
Or unlikely   Or   Blocked
Or   Unlikely   Blocked   Or—or—or—or
Or—or—or Unlikely   Or—or—or—or—or—or—or
Blocked   Or—or—or   Or   Unlikely   Or
Or—or—or—or   All things   All things   All things
All things   Always   Always   Always
Always Or Or—or—or—or   Unexplained
Not   Read or   Or—or   & Blocked
Problems   Ah   Ah   Ah   Ah   Associated
Ah   Ah   Ah   Ah   Ah   So   Ah
So   Sociate   Sociate   Sociated
Blocked   Or   Unlikely   Or—or—or—or—or
Blocked   Or—or—or—or—or—or
Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooor If you feel
If you   If you feel   This   You
This   If you feel   All   Also   Also
If you   If you If you If you   If you feel this
Or   Or—or—or   Unlikely   Or—or not
Or—or—or   Unlikely   Or—or—or—or—or—or
Or—or—or—or   Unlikely   Not   Or—or—or
Not   Or—or—or—or—or

[Lucid]
SKRONK 109, May 17th 2022
With Iris Garrelfs & Andrew Page

Has   exccc———eeded   the
exxx———pect——aaations
exxx———pec———ta———tionnn———sss
has exceeded the exxx———exxx———exxx
expectations of   expectations of
has   exceeded   the   expectations of
in an original   /   creative quality   /   are identified
referenced—referenced—referenced—referenced
referenced—referenced—referenced   ready for
referenced—referenced   ready for   referenced
referenced—referenced—referenced—referenced
referenced—referenced   where the
referenced—referenced   issues are
referenced—referenced—referenced—referenced
in an original   /   in an original   /   and or—or—or
referenced—referenced—referenced—referenced
ready for—ready for—ready for—ready for
ready for   ready for
almost almost   a sophisticated   almost
almost—almost—almost   the quality of   almost
with originality   and   and   and   of
assured and   lucid
a whip   that is   fluent
assured and   lucid   that is
fluent fluent fluent shares   all of the
feeea———tures of   relevant   relevant
lucid—lucid—lucid—lucid   relevant—relevant
lucid—lucid   referenced—referenced
relevant   lucid—lucid—lucid
referenced—referenced
completely   completely   referenced
relevant   lucid   articulate   articulate
articulate   synthesis—synthesis—synthesis
articulate   articulate   lucid—lucid—lucid—lucid
expectations   in an original   outstanding
well structured   and properly referenced
referenced—rendered—referenced—referenced
referenced—ref—ref—ref—ref—ref—ref—ref—ref—ref
sophisticated   identifiable   lucid
lucid—lucid—lucid—lucid—lucid—lucid—lucid
synthesis   lucid   synthesi———sss

Links to listen:

[Attempt], SKRONK 91, July 27th 2021, with Jonny Martin:

https://skronkimprov.bandcamp.com/track/iris-colomb-jonny-martin

[Clusters], SKRONK 104, March 8th 2022, with Hywel Jones & Taku Hisadome:

https://skronkimprov.bandcamp.com/track/iris-colomb-hywel-jones-taku-hisadome

[Ridiculous], SKRONK 106, March 29th 2022, with Chad Murray & Allan Newcombe:

https://skronkimprov.bandcamp.com/track/iris-colomb-chad-murray-alan-newcombe

[Unlikely], SKRONK 107, April 4th 2022, withAllan Newcombe & Andrew Ciccone:

https://skronkimprov.bandcamp.com/track/alan-newcombe-iris-colomb-andrew-ciccone

[Lucid], SKRONK 109, May 17th 2022, with Iris Garrelfs & Andrew Page:

https://skronkimprov.bandcamp.com/track/iris-garrelfs-andrew-page-iris-colomb