

Some notes on ‘Thirteen pages of improvisation’

For me, this score explores the notion of how a score functions, or what a score ‘is’. In some ways it functions as a rewriting of John Cage’s *4’33”* but translated into the genre of improvisation rather than notated music. Both pieces attempt to ‘reduce’ a score to as little information as possible. For Cage, this actually translates to the music becoming as little as possible—silence, or the sounds that comprise ‘silence’ when we remove all ‘intentional’ sound. My piece functions quite differently in this sense as it contains no information about the actual performance and interpretations will no doubt vary wildly. Rather, it functions as an exploration of how empty of content a score can become while still functioning as a score; the facticity of the score becomes what the performer engages with rather than the content of the score.

The piece also takes inspiration from meditation practice. In meditation, one focuses on something—a breath, flame, bodily sensations—and it will invariably happen that one gets distracted, caught up in thoughts; the practice of meditation consists in starting again, in coming back to the object of concentration, again and again. In this sense, ‘Thirteen pages of improvisation’ functions as a kind of reminder to the improviser of the process that they have undertaken—to improvise. Perhaps they have gotten lost in thought, or emotion, or even ‘lost in the music’? What does it mean to keep in mind the intent to improvise? Furthermore, the score asks the performer not just to improvise, but to improvise *from a score*, albeit a score with almost no content. The piece demands that the performer come back to this intent to improvise *from the score*, to refocus on this (at least thirteen times).

In ‘letting go’ of a musical intent, the piece implicitly asks what it means to improvise having let go of aesthetic judgment. In some sense you cannot play this piece ‘wrong’—a performer could sit silently for fifteen minutes, or play noise, or a melody—nothing in the score disallows or judges (or suggests) any of these interpretations. If we could read *anything* that happens as a ‘valid’ interpretation of the score, how then does the improviser proceed? The focus of ‘improvising’ shifts from *what* one improvises to *how* or *why* one improvises. In my own improvisation practice, as well as my meditation practice, I have tried to cultivate an ‘effortless striving’ for acceptance of ‘whatever arises’; this has required a shift of focus from

aesthetic *judgment*—from an ‘outside’ voice—to a focus on feeling ‘moved by’ the acoustic environment. I have no doubt that this radically affects the sounds that I produce, but this seems secondary.

The piece also foregrounds the tyranny of the blank page—although not literally blank (something I considered, but didn’t think worked as well). The pages of the score do not offer up anything to the performer; they offer no constraints or guidance (except the notion of playing from a score). The score foregrounds everything not present, and the challenge—perhaps even existential challenge—that ‘free improvisation’ presents.

I considered the length and number of pages of this piece for some time before finally writing it. I wanted a length that allowed for some engagement with the process of playing the piece, I wanted enough pages that it had a comic effect, but not so many that they would take up too much space in the piece. Thirteen seemed like a good number because of its associations in our culture with bad luck, and resonates with an antinominalist stance in my praxis as well as a queer reclamation of various taboo cultural ephemera. Fifteen minutes also seemed like the shortest time that I could imagine the piece having enough space around it for the performer to explore a relationship to the score, and I liked the idea of the score containing less than one page per minute—I don’t want to invite too much attention to the (physical) score in performances; the score should have a presence for the performer, and demand some kind of engagement in their performances, but a 100 page score for a fifteen minute performance, say, would most likely lead to it getting in the way or becoming a prop rather than prompting (hopefully interesting) questions.

The element of humour feels very important in this piece as well—I hope that a reader or performer when first looking at this score will laugh, or at least let a smile cross their face. But this is also a serious humour, in the tradition of Zhuangzi, some Zen writers, Dada and Discordianism, a humour designed to shock the reader out of their complacency.

These notes constitute my own musings on this piece and no one should regard them as definitive or instructional. I do not believe that the piece requires explanatory

notes (and these do not constitute such) and interpretations that explore different aspects of the score that have not occurred to me have as much—if not more—“validity” than anything that happens to sit comfortably along what I have written here. I welcome alternate engagements.