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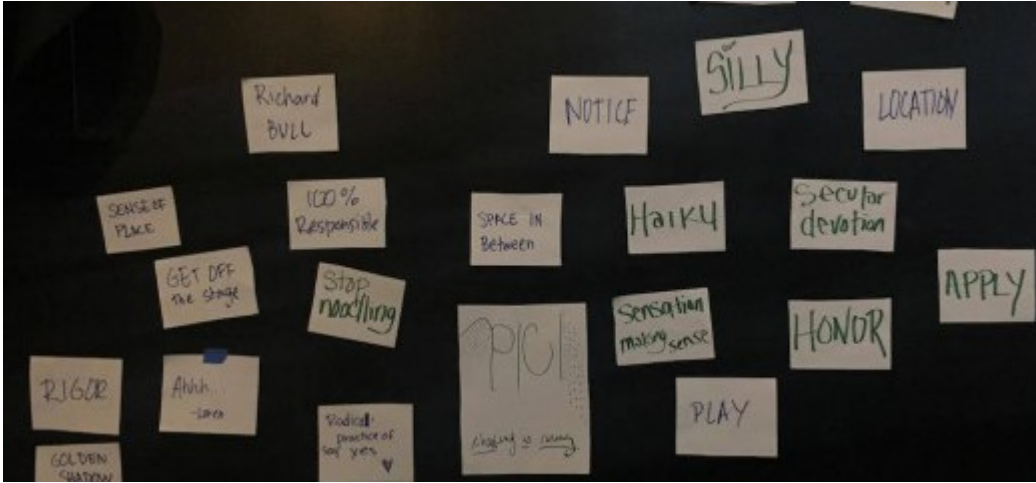


Photo: Katie Vason

The People Have Spoken: A Day of Compositional Improvisation in NYC

by Kat J. Sullivan

I am darting around the studio in Brooklyn's Triskelion Arts in tandem with Jennifer Kayle of the compositional improvisation ensemble [The Architects](#). During her presentation, divvying a few of us into duos while others observe in a circle, she is leading different scores that dig into aspects of the leader/follower dynamic. At first, she and I attempt to pause at the same moment for the same duration, but then she instructs us to freeze when the other starts moving, switching back and forth. Jennifer and I flit around the others, daring only to take our eyes off the other for moments at a time lest we miss the other freeze. I experiment by moving slowly into a pause to see if it changes our attentive quality; she erupts out of stillness for just a few seconds before freezing again suddenly, compelling me to jerk into something before I thought I would need to. Assumptions can be so juicy. In a moment of out-of-body awareness, it occurs to me that someone without context might find what we are doing amusing, humorous even. In *the moment*, the landscape is entirely different. Humor lives here, but it serves to deepen what is happening rather than comment on it from the "outside." Here, whatever happens in the moment can feel like a wholly religious experience.

In my lineage of compositional improvisation—a dance form focused on creating a complete piece in the moment—there are pockets of people from three main areas: Philadelphia, New York City, and Iowa. Several offshoots have sprouted across the country (and likely beyond): Chicago, Maine, and Arizona come to mind first. It is a rare joy for members from each area to convene in one place to practice the form. Normally, we would make the pilgrimage to Lancaster, Pennsylvania for the Movement Intensive in Compositional Improvisation ([MICI](#)), facilitated by The Architects. This summer, with MICI on hold because of The Architects' sabbatical, I've been lucky to attend two events: [Dissolving Doors](#), a dance festival of compositional improvisation that I co-facilitated with Loren Groenendaal and Curt Haworth here in Philly; and PICI, the People's Intensive in Compositional Improvisation, a day-long series of workshops and culminating performance orchestrated by the NYC-based ensemble [The Lovelies](#).

The co-op-style intensive allowed for the democratic sharing of a wide range of ideas. Those wishing to present (a piece, a lecture, any number of options) could pay a fee reserving a 45-minute slot, and those wishing to participate only could pay a smaller fee for either half or the whole day. The Lovelies, comprised of Katie Vason, Johanna Futral, and Lena Lauer, administrated and produced the event. They reserved the space, created the schedule, disseminated information to participants, supplied us all coffee, acted as informal hosts the day of, and probably more. And, they paid for their presentation slot, just as anyone else did.

Other presenters included The Architects (Katherine Ferrier, Kayle, and Pamela Vail), Meredith Lyons, and Thom Barranca. (Admittedly, in desperate of a mental breather, I missed Barranca's presentation.) Notably, two different Philly artists presented: Groenendaal, who mined the connection between composing and physical contact, and Everything Is Improv (Caroline O'Brien and Steve Davit), who explored improvisational movement and sound as an opportunity for psychological self-examination. Over lunch, we listened to Penny Campbell, a professor of dance at Middlebury College, conservator to compositional improvisation, and something of a dance grandmother to me, having taught my teachers. Campbell interspersed timely reminders of the originators of compositional improvisation (including some key black artists, [Bill Dixon](#) among them) with sharp-tongued wit: "if you're noodling," she quips, referring to movement without awareness and intention, "get off the stage!"

The full day is beautiful but grueling. I am exhausted, dipping often into the coffee supply, and yet in other ways I am full. Despite the 5am wake-up call to make it to New York on time and the lulling white noise of the Megabus beckoning me, I am bummed to duck out before The Lovelies lead a final dance, sealing the workshops before a dinner break and optional public performance. As some improvisers often say, when you're in, you're in and when you're out, you're still in. As I rocket back to Philly on I-76, sun setting, I imagine the boundaries of the group composition expanding wider and wider.

[People's Intensive in Compositional Improvisation](#), The Lovelies, Triskelion Arts, July 27.

By Kat J. Sullivan
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