

## Letters to Sheila: Improvisational Scores in Creative Practice Research

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### Abstract:

This article argues that improvisational scores can function as valuable scaffolds to support creative practice research. Drawing on existing literatures about creative practice research, and the practices and scores of artists including Simone Forti, Rosalind Crisp, James Hazel and Nancy Stark Smith, the article proposes seven different ways in which improvisational scores might help to focus, sustain and evolve research methods. Importantly, the author not only *discusses* the ways improvisational scores support research – she also *uses* a score to write the article itself, thus enacting the method she describes. The score she uses is based around a task: to write a series of letters to non-fiction author Sheila Heti. The resulting letters focus especially on the ways scores are used in improvised dance, and on the ways they might be applied in other fields, such as writing and filmmaking. In doing so, the letters show how creative methodologies can be moved across disciplines and artistic forms to invigorate practice. They also give expression to, and seek to better understand, the embodied and affective dimensions of scholarship.

Keywords: improvisation, scores, creative practice research, dance, writing, methodology

10 July 2019

Dear Sheila,

Today I begin my project of writing you a series of letters that sketch out the contents of a Publication about my research. I am hoping to submit this to *Choreographic Practices*, or maybe the *Journal of Writing in Creative Research*, and to offer as my central idea that improvisational scores can work as scaffolds to support creative practice investigation. I'm going to say that scores are like a form of writing that supports the research from the inside.

There are two lucky reasons I arrived at this project/idea. The first is that I read one of your books, and then another, on a friend's recommendation. And particularly in the first one I read, I discovered a writing style that appealed to me because of its playfulness and its frankness – because of the way it sounded out thoughts in the very shape of their awkward and perfect first appearance. And also because yours sounded like a I voice I have in *me*, but don't often let out because I am too busy moderating my tone and trying to make myself sound more nuanced.

The second lucky reason for arriving at this exercise is that I am in a group called Writing Dancing, which explores the application of choreographic and dance-based practices to writing, and vice versa. We meet monthly. Our discussion has recently been eddying around the very questions that fill my own inner thought-life, like how to go about having an independently structured writing practice, and how to write about my past research in a way that doesn't feel somehow dead, or like it's just reporting on something that was, and is no longer, actively unfolding.<sup>i</sup>

The other day I almost didn't go to Writing Dancing because I went to the osteopath and she pushed my muscles and bones around, and it felt like the bottom had fallen out of me (sort of in a good way) and I was so phenomenally tired. But I went, and was reminded again of how rare and valuable this group is. It provides me with incentives to enter the writing differently. The other women there give me the confidence to pursue an as yet latent writing practice that I can only vaguely make out, and that feels like it *must* be somehow worthwhile; to walk forward, despite a thousand tiny doubts, into the dark.

On the first Thursday in May this year, it was Justine's turn to lead the session. She ran the very exercise that I hope to, sort of, reproduce here. The exercise was to write a letter to an author we loved, in their 'voice', as a way of extending our own writerly voices.

We started by reading over a passage from a well-loved text we had chosen to bring along, and then spent some time moving around Justine's apartment trying to physically embody the voice of this passage. Specifically, we were instructed to try and ascertain what the physicality of the piece of writing might be, and to find an expression or enactment of that through bodily movement. We shuddered, paced, gestured, leaned. Then we sat and wrote letters to the writer, in the voice of the writer. We worked to a strict time limit and followed a series of prompts provided by Justine.

I had chosen a passage from your book, *Motherhood*, and I wrote to you. Here is what I wrote. (I've put Justine's prompts in CAPS.)

DEAR Sheila,

TODAY I went to an art exhibition with my students, twice. It was a big day and I was very worried about not sleeping enough before, which meant I didn't sleep, because I was worried. Was I awake because I was worried, or because I felt in a mild state of disrepair after being hypersensitive due to tiredness with M. earlier?

*Yes.*

I had flipped a coin to get this answer – a sort of shorthand for what you do in *Motherhood*, flipping three coins every time you ask a question – but then I realized that I must ask a yes or no question for this method to make sense.

New prompt:

I LOVE THE WAY that, in your book that I am reading, you spell out your thoughts in this frank, almost unfiltered way, but in a nicer way than Chris Krauss because your writing feels less like it's name-dropping, less sceney, and more like it has a point. More outward-focussed.

Is my obsession at the moment with this frankness, this style of writing?

*Yes.*

New prompt:

WRITING TO YOU MAKES ME FEEL elated, excited. Just before there was a moment where I felt I was doing your syntax. This is all part of an exercise and I'm really glad I came here tonight because I too (like my friend Justine) am sometimes bored to death by my academic voice, and maybe this is the key.

Is this the key?

*Yes.*

Am I flipping coins poorly, and therefore always getting the same result?

*No.*

Thank goodness.

I do think, though, that maybe I just got better at it, or maybe I just got lucky, because deep down I know it maybe was actually a *Yes*.

Is this sort of questioning against the rules?

I ran out of time to flip a coin. New prompt:

I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT how best to spend my time. Whether it is best spent with a lover or partner, with friends, with myself. In the present, or with a mind set on the future.

I've been thinking about work. How important it should be, and what counts as meaningful work, and whether I'm doing the right things or not. I've been calming myself with the thought that I can identify my values and move towards them in the longer term. Accept where I am now, and commit. A.C.T.

End of exercise.

Dear Sheila, the ultimate aim is not to write exactly as you do, but to try something different, and to discover how else writing as *I* do might look.

It feels important to write the first draft on paper. There is less opportunity to edit, to delete and start over – much like in an improvised dance performance, if we are to draw connections with dancing. In an improvised performance you can't undo what the audience has already seen: you can't delete your choices halfway and start over.

Maybe you can delete your choices when writing on paper – you just can't fiddle with them so much.

Sheila, thank you for listening. Thank you for being my addressee, and for lending this work its stakes and its focus, in the same way an audience (or anyone asked to watch or listen) does for a dance.

All the best,  
And thank you again.

Cleo

12 July 2019

Dear Sheila,

Just now I have been wondering how best to re-enter the conversation with you.

Back when I was doing my PhD I read an article by Paula Kramer about site-specific dancing (2012), and it raised in me the question of how, on any given day, to "re-enter the dance". A question that can be meaningfully applied to writing. This was the year my dear old dog would follow me around the house, sleep wherever I worked, until we laid her darling body to rest beside the lavender.

I'll start this letter by doing the plan: talking you through the contents of The Publication. The Publication is saying that improvisational scores can work as focusing devices, or flexible scaffolds, to support creative practice research.

What is a score, might be the first question to answer. There are musical 'scores' – like notes on a stave, in Western notation – and these are perhaps the most widely known. But there are also scores as improvising artists use them, and as improvising dancers use them – scores as I have encountered them in BodyWeather training,<sup>ii</sup> in Contact Improvisation,<sup>iii</sup> and in encounters with the dance practices of friends and colleagues. Here scores are understood as boundaries, structures, or guidelines, in which play and exploration take place. They are foundations for composition on-the-fly.

There are some wonderfully lucid examples. In the early 1960s American choreographer Simone Forti made a series of performances that were essentially task-based or game-based improvisations. The tasks, or rules for play, were the "score". Dance historian Sally Banes has written lots about her, and the innovative environment in which she worked (1987).<sup>iv</sup>

Apparently, in her piece, *Huddle*, the performers' task was to form a huddle and take turns climbing over each other. They were faced with the challenge of finding footholds in each others' bodies and feeling out who would go when in a wordless (but not laughterless) negotiation. In *Slant Board*, performers had to travel across a slanted surface using ropes attached to the wall for traction. They had to figure out how to stay upright, and also how to share the small space with each other. In *Herding*, the task was to politely herd the (freely standing) audience from one end of the performance space to the other until they became frustrated.

A more local example: in 2019 Sydney musician James Hazel handwrote twenty scores on pieces of A4 paper and installed them in public places, in different Sydney suburbs. I don't know where exactly he put them, but when I read about them I imagined the pages sticky-taped to traffic-light posts and shop windows.

The page for Score Number 20 goes like this:

- Go to [contscore.com](http://contscore.com)
- Press record
- On a scale of 1-10 rate your level of financial security.  
1=very low or lowest

10= very high or highest

- This number will be turned into music

... and then there's a sort of barcode.

Other scores ask you to do things like whisper something true or false, whistle for as long as you can in one breath, and record an interesting natural sound (a dog barking, the wind). When you go to [contscore.com](http://contscore.com) there is an actual website and you can play back the recording and the transformed music to yourself. I wish I could show the scores to you in his handwriting. You can look them up, though, at ASDR Zine issue 004 (Hazel, 2019).

And then there's another example of a score that has been recycled and shared (always with proper attribution) so much that it must be okay to mention it here – it's Rosalind Crisp's "stick with that; take that to an extreme; disrupt that". There's a dancer, or a few dancers maybe. And then there's an onlooker, who is 'lending the work its stakes and focus', as it were, and who is also the sort of score-keeper. The dancers start doing improvised movement and the onlooker calls out an instruction whenever they feel it might be helpful or interesting. And no matter what they are doing in the moment an instruction is called, the dancers respond to it in one way or another. *Stick with that. Take that to an extreme. Disrupt that.*<sup>v</sup>

There are other kinds of scores, too: the agreement among a group of musicians to play in a particular scale, or a picture of a bird as stimulus for a dance.

Maybe you are already very familiar with all this.

I wonder if your method in *Motherhood*, of writing questions and answering them with the flipping of three coins (an adaptation of a practice you found in the *I Ching*), was a sort of score: a compositional rule that had the effect of shaping the writing in a really satisfying way.<sup>vi</sup> The formula of asking the universe a question and getting the coins to answer it was a structure you could throw ideas at and, reliably, it would do something interesting with them. Reliably, it would give you something surprising back.

Maybe this is not at all what you were doing.

This letter writing project is also a score. It's a structure I can hurl ideas at, a loose set of rules I can play within, listening out for the surprises.

Maybe this will be all the more convincing if I tell you the seven things I think a score *does* in art making, and in research or learning more broadly.

### **The Seven Things a Score Does in Art and Research – Part 1**

First, I'll list the four things a score does in a live performance – and also in research.

**One.** A score provides prompts, or stimuli, for creative action. In other words, a score tells you to do something, so you have a basis on which to start doing in the first place.

Examples:  
Play an e-flat.

Paint a mountain.  
Rate your financial security on a scale of 1-10.  
Climb over your co-performers.  
Summarize your key concerns in under 150 words.  
Read some books.

**Two.** A score helps to circumscribe, or focus, decision-making in creative practice. In other words, by telling you in relatively specific terms to *do something*, a score gives you significantly less choices for what to do, which makes your decision making easier and your choices perhaps more cohesive. Note: this does not mean that a score gives you only *one* choice for what to do. You still have options – just less options.

Examples:

Play *andante* (not *allegro*)  
Play an e-flat (not any of the other tones)  
Climb over your performers (don't walk around them or crawl through their legs)  
Write a letter (not an obituary, not a shopping list)  
Summarize your key concerns in 5000 to 7000 words  
Try to approximate the writing voice of Sheila Heti.

I am cringing imagining what you might be thinking just now. What a violation! How alienating this must be! Maybe I can't publish any of this. Why do I always stray into territory where, inspired by the work of others, I risk somehow trashing it? Is this – what Sigrid Nunez (2019) also talks about, the ethical difficulty of representing the real people who have lit up your soul and inspired you to write – the writer's eternal challenge?

Yes.

I really am terrible at flipping coins.

On the subject of having limited options, though – Olivia Millard says this beautiful thing: 'Scores support me. They allow me to not know what comes next. They are a prop, a ruse, a pretense which, while giving me the illusion of knowing in my dancing, allow me to not know' (2016: 50).

By *seeming* to limit the field of possibilities, scores help us to endure the profound openness we are in fact still faced with.

**Three.** Improvisational scores provide a safety net, or an emergency resource, to return to when you have lost your way.

Examples:

When you have forgotten what music to play, you can look at the paper with the notes on it and be reminded.  
When you have lost clarity about what it is you are doing, you can closely observe the guidelines/boundaries/plan until the fog lifts.  
When you have run out of inspiration, when you have tired of caring, you can use the score to draw yourself back into curiosity.

The last of these examples moves in two directions. On the one hand, a score can draw you back onto the straight and narrow. On the other, a score can function to disrupt and evolve something. It can open up new possibilities, can offer the improviser a palette of options to reinvigorate the composition.

Recently, on our first ever Writing Dancing retreat down the coast at Nikki's place, Clare used scores in this way. She gave us all a timed writing exercise and as we wrote she threw us optional, additional instructions:

*If it's useful, add a plan.*

*If it's useful, add a memory.*

*If it's useful, add a prediction.*

She also added more open-ended ones:

*Somewhere an apricot has fallen from a tree.*

*In Circular Quay a Russian warship has exploded.*

The effect of these prompts on my writing was exhilarating.<sup>vii</sup>

The score as straight-and-narrow, and the score as a palette of disruptors/invigorators. In both instances, the score is a life-buoy. Run out of juice? Then push on to Item Number Four. *Do the plan, remember?* We do some of our best writing at Writing Dancing.

**Four.** Scores can provide a common vocabulary for collaborators, as well as a vocabulary to draw together a solo practice that has many prongs or that is longitudinal (spanning a long period of time).

In other words, the boundaries or prompts that form a score give us words and symbols with context-specific meanings which we have personally fine-tuned for the purposes of *this work*. These become a sort of shorthand that we use to talk about our work quickly and meaningfully.

Examples:

When we talk about the 'verse' and the 'chorus' of a song, it is generally understood that we mean two parts of the song structure, one of which recurs as a sort of refrain throughout the piece.

When we talk about 'flipping coins', it is understood that we mean the practice you adopted from the *I Ching* in your book, which I am tentatively copying.

When we talk about a 'Literature Review', it is understood that we mean an overview of the literature that is relevant to a thesis.

I include this example from scholarly research because I hope to make the central point in The Publication that research *is always a kind of improvisation* (as Anne Douglas and Melehat Gulari (2015) have pointed out before).

Then there's the other part of number Four: the score as a language for solo practice. When I was doing my PhD I developed a set of words to describe decisions I made with a camera while filming one-take portraits of people hanging out their laundry. Over the course of about

sixty improvised shoots, these words became the guiding principles for my decision-making with a camera. The words were: 'catching rides', 'anchoring', 'hooking onto', 'unhooking', and 'lurching'. These were my score, and they didn't so much help me communicate with *others* about my practice as help me develop clarity and consistency for myself over the course of a few years, and to link together many discrete instances of improvisation and decision-making that might otherwise have drifted apart. More on this later.

There are also three more functions of the score that I'd like to write about, but maybe I will put these in my next letter. I have grown tired, and quite possibly you have too.

One last thing I will say, before signing off: I have been making mental notes about all the things I would like to write to you, and am afraid I might forget. I've even started jotting them down. At the Writing Dancing retreat, Clare described a similar feeling in writing – of having things still to find a place for, loose ends to tie up, possibilities that should not be left behind. Erin said then that the dancer Matthew Day once described improvisation as "bringing all the possibilities forward with you". I like this thought – improvised composition as bringing possibilities forward. It seems impossible, paradoxical. Making choices in improvisation so often feels like a narrowing down, or a forgoing of one opportunity in pursuit of another. But maybe it isn't like this.

Can a narrowing down simultaneously be a bringing forward of the possibilities?

*No.*

That's okay. I almost didn't flip a coin there, because I felt the substance was already in the question – as it always is in your questions also.

Thank you again, so much, for your time. For your listening ear. I hope this is interesting to you. I personally am feeling very energized by it all.

All the best,  
Cleo

15 July 2019

Dear Sheila,

I am writing to you very late at night. It is probably nearly 2am, but I have resolved tonight to DO THE RIGHT THING and get out of bed and not look at the clock, as my sleep psychologist recommended.

I seem to have a boundless amount of energy at the moment. Since my schedule freed up and I went on this writing retreat, I have felt myself to be on a giant wave that, if I stay on it, will carry me towards my dreams.

There is a very large "should" that lights up in my head, like a neon sign, around sleep. It says, people SHOULD sleep at 2am – that's what healthy people do. It says, people SHOULD NOT be up and working at this hour. Clearly this thinking trips me up. Maybe I will make some really good use of this 2am energy. Sure, I was so deliciously sleepy before and I don't know where that feeling went, but rather than telling myself, I've broken my sleep, I should tell myself, I've had a second wind!

Sheila, I am writing my way through this crisis, which is what you did in both the books I've read of yours. It is striking that you should have come hurtling in, so entirely out of the blue, to inspire me.

Back to the plan. Re-entering the dance. I am realising that I haven't given you some of the background information to this stuff around scores and creative practice research that I would have given already in a more linear format. I haven't done the Literature Review.

Literature Reviews. These are always so overwhelming to me. I have probably never in my life done a Literature Review that felt disciplined enough. Mostly I feel like a fraud when I try to write one, like I'm doing a bit of smoke and mirrors to make it look as though I know my shit. I think this is partly because you really can't know everything, and possibly everyone feels a little like a fraud when they write a Literature Review. But also, it is because I tend to follow desire in my research. And while I have, by now, managed to assemble a strong enough case for desire-driven research (which would go in the Lit Review itself, where I survey writings about artistic and practice-based research methodologies), I know that across the full gamut of scholarly methods, this sort of approach is still viewed with suspicion.

My friend David, a wonderfully articulate and sensitive man about forty years my senior, told me he and his late partner Penny used to joke that her scholarly working style could be characterized as "Protestant", while his was more "catholic". She was rigorous, he a romantic. I'd say my reading habits are romantic, too. Somehow I am perpetually convinced that my desire and enthusiasm will lead me in the right direction. Which is interesting because I'm not always so good at that in other areas of my life. I wonder if this just means that I am a lazy reader.

Sheila, I think it's important to tell you at least a bit of what was going to go in the Literature Review section of The Publication – or, at least, to tell you the bit where I establish some key definitions. Because here I am, talking about terms like 'improvisation' and 'scores' and

'creative practice', and I have a very particular understanding of what those mean, but if anything I've only explained one of them to you – 'scores' – by giving some loose examples.

I'm excited to get to this part: it gets at the heart of why I think this stuff is useful.

Firstly. If we are thinking about improvised scores as tools, or scaffolds, for research, then we assume that:

a. Research involves improvisation. It *is* a sort of improvisation.

b. Improvisation is not an all-or-nothing thing. It is never "totally free", and equally someone performing something tightly composed is never totally constrained. There is always an interplay between planned (or predictable), and unplanned (or unpredictable), elements. Between enclosure and openness, constraint and possibility.

In a thing she wrote for the *Improvisation Studies Reader*, Clare from Writing Dancing talks about a *Commedia Del Arte* workshop she attended in New Zealand. Here, she found that a certain rule held true: the more refined the 'pre-determined narrative landing spots' of the theatre piece – the enclosure, or the score, you could say – the 'wilder the flights of the unexpected' (Grant, 2015: 353).

Danielle Goldman takes this into political terrain. She writes that improvisation is, by definition, the enacting of 'practices of freedom' in constrained, or 'tight' spaces, and that it is this *creativity under constraint*, this insistence on the liberties you *do* have, that makes improvisation powerful and political, both in art and in the wider world (2010).

c. Research is emotional, non-linear, failure-prone. Knowledge is always born in a context; it lives in place, in the body, and in material action. Here it is actually quite easy for me to start rapid-fire listing all those people who say inspiring things about research methods.

There is pedagogy expert Carole Gray reminding us that philosophy is half love: the Greek root *philo* meaning love, and *sophia* meaning wisdom (2007). Love of wisdom.

There is Laura U. Marks talking about 'haptic criticism', which is a sort of writing that brushes up closely to the world instead of trying to understand it from a distance. It's wet, not dry, and Marks says of her very book on this subject that it was penned from her 'uncool, nose against the glass enthusiasm' (2002: xvi).

There is Brad Haseman proposing that artistic research doesn't always begin with a problem to be solved, or even a clear methodological plan, but from 'enthusiasms of practice' (2006: 100). You dive in and make multiple starting points, open up multiple methodological possibilities. The problems to be solved follow.

Love, enthusiasm, joy. Are these good indicators that you are on track? The answer is clearly not *always*. It is certainly also not *never*. Joy *tells you something*. But joy is in the domain of emotion, pleasure, subjectivity, and these mean that it generally does not cut the mustard for 'hard science'. Apparently Isaac Newton said that the key to discovering the law of universal gravitation was just 'thinking on it continually' (cited in Csikzentmihalyi, [1988] 2014: 163). I.e. keeping on going for a long time. Spending enough time with the questions. I suppose, at

the very least, getting some joy out of what you do gives you the ability to keep on going through the fatigue and the doubt, until you find what you are looking for.

There's Roger Dean and Hazel Smith telling us that knowledge might be context specific, body-specific, not cleanly transferrable from one person to another (2009). And Tim Ingold, who said that we often think of objects and materials in the world as static, but really the whole world is moving all the time (2011: 26). Even the rocks and armchairs that we call 'inanimate' are alive with secret movement. Knowledge, like matter, is of motion. It lives in our *doing*, in our enacting of things, and it lives in place. Although I do think people can transfer understanding to each other, I like the idea that one person always does and knows something a bit differently from the next person. Something is always known differently here than it is over there, or there, or there.

There's Barbara Bolt writing about her attempts to paint in the desert. She took her theories out there, theories born in the studio, imparted in the academy, and found them obliterated in the blaze on the edge of the Kalgoorlie, and this was ultimately edifying and not a bad thing. She failed at producing paintings but she succeeded at learning something and writing about it (2010: 32).

There is Julienne Van Loon reminding us that research often does not know, *should* not know, exactly where it is going (2014).

And for all these reasons there are all manner of people proposing that research is often messy and non-linear. That it vacillates between a goal orientation and a process orientation. That it is more often than not cyclical, a series of repetitions or iterations that together form a gradual evolution (every return bringing something new, something changed).

There is much more to say about repetition in research: how it can be a method for honing understanding, refining a technique (or a piece of work) to a careful exactitude, and how it can equally be a method for destabilising something, opening it up. You can return to something with the aim of bringing it to a singular precision, or you can return to it with the desire to keep it morphing, evolving. Being in the studio with dancers like Rhiannon Newton and Trish Wood has made this clear to me. So has reading Donald Schön (1983).<sup>viii</sup>

And actually, there is a final thing to add about repetition here – something that must go in the publication. If I didn't say this bit, someone might read it and, at the end of it, not actually have come across any suggestions for how to go about making a score. The elephant in the room! But here it is: repetition is *the thing* I used to develop scores for my research in the first place. I came to different scores by literally making up some slap-dash boundaries and trying them out, and then adjusting them if I felt they didn't work. Trial and error. Repetition and evolution. Renewed commitments to exactitude, renewed commitments to uncertainty. Certainly, the boundaries I started off with were pretty mediocre.

This – one's scores being mediocre at first – is something that James Hazel (of the handwritten scores in Sydney suburbs) also celebrates: the unfinished and evolving nature of the score. In his article about that handwritten scores project he expresses something that I think is wonderful and true: scores can be temporary, disposable things. They can be 'hastily written', 'not-well-made', 'almost-made' (2019: 13). They can be thrown together and tested and then, if they don't sustain us (or don't take us quite where we want to go), we can change them! They don't have to be these deified, unchanging, untouchable objects.

All this excites me so much because I think it gives us a language with which to understand research conducted in conditions of uncertainty, with methodologies that are still only partly formed. It provides a framework for accepting and harnessing failure in one's research. And it is not only relevant for scholarly research, but for any kind of learning. Because, certainly, doing a scholarly research project is hard – full of unknowns and half-shaped methods and failures – but so is doing just about anything. Quitting smoking is hard. Learning how to ride a bike is hard. Both of these are possibly also instances of research where you try different methods or techniques, and where there is plenty of uncertainty about whether – and how – you will achieve your goal. Now I sound like I am writing a self-help book. But really: I think this stuff does provide tools that can enrich just about anyone's learning.

So that is the end goal of my research.

There are still the three other things I think a score does in creative research. But I am, once again, getting tired. Time, maybe, to try laying down again.

Hmmm... whenever I sign off on a letter it makes me a little doubtful of the letter-writing score, because I always feel myself drawn towards formulaic pleasantries, and it suggests that on some level I am really just writing these letters to myself.

Anyway. Thank you for reading. Until potentially very soon.

Cleo

20 July 2019

Dear Sheila,

I can already feel myself thinking back over what I've written to you so far, and making mental edits: insertions, copy-pastes, deletions. I seriously considered typing the first three letters up already, getting them into Microsoft Word to make them more pliable, but no. I will keep pushing forward on paper. This is the score I set for the writing exercise – it's the rules for play – and I want to see where it leads.

Doing research sometimes feels like housekeeping. There is so much to do. So many things to find a place and a time for. Bringing all the possibilities forward is maybe the same as leaving no valuable thing behind. No bed unmade. Although keeping house also involves throwing things away.

In the final months of my PhD I cleaned houses to pay the rent. There was something satisfying about starting a task, and then finishing it. The reliable magic of bicarb soda and vinegar. Wide, clean lanes across the mirror with a squeegee. This was so different from the completion of my PhD, which would never be finished.

Of course, I had romanticized the hard labour, as I often do. Someone in my position could have chosen any one of a huge number of jobs that were not so labour intensive. A mild repetitive strain injury drove home the maths: if I was injured, I couldn't work, and if I couldn't work, I couldn't get paid.

Still, it was satisfying – both the physicality of the work, and the fact that you could *complete* a task. Dirty mirror, clean mirror. Damp clothes onto the line, crunchy clothes off the line. I worked out my sequences: from the cleanest part of the toilet to the dirtiest part; from the top of the house to the bottom. Washing out first, beds later. Floors last. I learned which surfaces required most care, and which were harder. Although each house threw its own curveballs, my methods came to possess a certain reliability.

At times, doing the PhD research felt like cleaning a house I had no idea how to clean: foreign proportions, difficult materials. At other times I could slam the research out, hypnotically, the same way I would slam out the ironing (steam rising from the board on those wordless summer afternoons), or slam out a wipe-down of the kitchen bench-tops, mesmerized by my own smooth circles.

There were three more things to tell you about the function of a score.

### **The Seven Things a Score Does in Art and Research – Part 2**

**Five:** Scores can have the function of disrupting a habitual mode of practice. In other words, you can make up rules or prompts to push yourself into different pathways, and to unsettle your creative habits.

**Six (following on from Five):** Scores can be used to consolidate desired modes of practice, or more specifically, preferred creative dispositions. There's a connection between the tools you use and the way you meet the

world, and you need to find the tools that will help you to meet the world in the way you would like. And scores are tools.

A warm day in October, three revolutions before I will burn the house down. As always at this time, the back fence is in full bloom and Andy G. from next door is singing full pelt, earphones in, emotional. I am out here a lot with my camera under the hills hoist, filming H and T hang out their washing, searching for the right score to help me compose – or improvise – a continuous, "single take" video recording of this domestic routine. I am looking for a score that doesn't leave me feeling so lost, or stranded, when I notice that the humans have left the frame and I have wound up filming the grass, or the play of light in the windowsill. I want a score that will help me film places in a less human-centred way, and also in a less visual way. A score to help me "meet the world" with all of my senses.

The eventual score I settle on provides me with a set of rules that invoke weight-based memories from dancing. The "Catching Rides" part of the score is a good example. In Contact Improvisation classes I will often "catch a ride" on someone's lower back as they swing me around in a half-circle, pivoting on their heels; or I might catch a ride on the side of their torso as they roll, like a rolling pin or an ocean wave, beneath me. Once I apply this term (and other made-up terms, like "Lurching" and "Unhooking") to my camera work, I start to respond to the filming environment differently. In more of a whole-body way – seeing in broader strokes, feeling in finer strokes, like in Contact Improvisation. Which is very different from what I have done at other times with a camera.

It's amazing how closely these intentions turn out to resemble those of Anne Scott Wilson, a dancer-turned-photographer who sought more embodied ways of taking still photographs (2016).

**Seven:** Scores provide a language for understanding what happened, and what may happen again, in research. In this sense they are both *descriptive* and *prescriptive*, to borrow from Nancy Stark-Smith, who was one of the founders of Contact Improvisation. In other words, a score can help you to identify and talk about what happened in a past instance of "doing", in retrospect, and to think forward about what you might encounter the next time you enter the "doing".

Nancy Stark-Smith did this comprehensively with her "Underscore" – a series of symbols that help to proactively structure and retrospectively describe a group improvisation that takes place in silence, for a period of two to three hours.

The nice thing about Stark-Smith's Underscore is that there is vocabulary for all kinds of events in the improvised dancing session. There is a symbol for boredom, for distraction, for having a rest. Also for intense connection, for preparation, and for that recurring internal resolve to shed your preconceived ideas about *where this dance should go*.

I gave blood today. I get very excited about giving blood: the high chair, the free snacks, the invariably warm and chatty nurses. And, of course, the idea that you are participating in some simple, beautiful economy – hospitals, healthcare and modern survival depend on those who have plenty of blood to give, giving a little bit away.

I wonder if these letters, more than prompting to write in a different voice, simply offer me a way to begin writing each day, and to finish. A way to enter and exit the dance.

Is now the time to break the score, and turn to the computer?  
Heads is yes, tails is no.

*Yes.*

Sheila, again – thank you.

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## Endnotes:

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<sup>i</sup> Over the many years of its existence, Writing Dancing has had a small ongoing membership of dancers, artists, scholars, and writers, as well as a broader fluctuating membership that has offered fresh and diverse thinking. In 2015, Writing Dancing guest-edited an issue of the Sydney based dance and choreographic publication, *Critical Dialogues*. The issue gives an extended introduction to the group, and a cross-section of some of our earlier writings from 2010 onwards. (See *Critical Dialogues*, Issue 5: 'Writing Dancing: Exercises in Writing Towards, About, and Alongside Dancing', at [https://issuu.com/criticalpath/docs/criticaldialogues\\_issue5](https://issuu.com/criticalpath/docs/criticaldialogues_issue5)).

<sup>ii</sup> For more information on Bodyweather, see <https://dequinceyco.net/bodyweather/about/>

<sup>iii</sup> For more information on Contact Improvisation, see <https://contactquarterly.com/contact-improvisation/about/index.php>

<sup>iv</sup> For more about Forti and her influence on American post-modern performance and minimalist sculpture, see also Spivey (2009) and Morse (2016).

<sup>v</sup> The circulation (and sometimes adaptation) of Rosalind Crisp's scores gives an interesting indication of the ways in which scores, concepts and insights about practice are circulated and cited in an independent dance context. It is understood, across the dance contexts I have encountered, that citation is not confined to writing, and that one *can* ethically cite material verbally and bodily 'in the studio', so long as one properly acknowledges the source and lineage of an idea (both where it came from, and how it might have transformed in transit), and so long as one is not culturally appropriating, or taking something that has expressly been protected from wider use. These provisos are important everywhere, but particularly in the colonial context of Australia.

<sup>vi</sup> Interestingly, influential dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham also used the *I Ching* in his chance-based choreographies. His work, and his use of the *I Ching*, have been widely and variously written about.

<sup>vii</sup> When I asked Clare Grant about these instructions again a few months later. When I brought them up, she was interested in my choice to refer to her instructions as "a score"; she personally thought of them more as "tasks". She also located her own practice of task-setting in a longer theatre-based lineage, linking her work to Melbourne-based writer-director Jenny Kemp and Cuban-American playwright María Irene Fornés.