

**“ABAIR”: IMPROVISATION AS A ‘FOLDING IN’ TO THE CONTEXTS OF PERFORMANCE****“Abair”. Improvisación como “pliegue” en el contexto del performance****Autor:** Aodán Mccardle<sup>1</sup>**Filiación:** University of London**Email:** [redochre.aodan@gmail.com](mailto:redochre.aodan@gmail.com)**ABSTRACT**

This paper will present and consider the processes of making and re-visiting the improvised performance “abair” which included a projected text poem used as a score for the performance, spatial installation including books and other texts and soundscape applied to textual transitions within the film. It will present a reading of Charles Olson’s ‘breath’ as a consideration of the knowing necessary to make decisions or move within the action of improvised performance. Crucially this performance comes out of a relationship to ‘Performance Writing’ and a tracery of that tradition will be explored to emphasize its particular influence followed by some of the poetics that were central to my stance particularly in relation to the dynamics inherent in improvisation. It will then introduce the call provided by the gallery to which this project responded and outline how the preparation for the performance developed and how the conditions in the here and now of that performance made their own demands.

**Keywords:** Olson, Performance Writing, Mottram, Improvisation, Physicality in poetry, Abair, Action and poetry.

**RESUMEN**

El presente artículo presentará y considerará el proceso de creación y revisitará la performance improvisada “Abair”, la cual incluye un proyecto de poema textual utilizado como un puntaje de la performance, una instalación que incluye libros y otros textos, y un ambiente musical aplicado a las transiciones textuales en el film. Se presentará una lectura de “breath” de Charles Olson, como una forma de considerar el conocimiento necesario para tomar decisiones o moverse dentro del espectro de acción de la performance improvisada. Esta performance emerge de una relación con la “escritura performativa”, por lo cual se explorarán los trazos de esta tradición, para enfatizar su particular influencia, para luego centrarse en las poéticas que fueron centrales para el desarrollo de mi propuesta, particularmente en relación con las dinámicas inherentes a la improvisación. Esto permitirá pasar al llamado realizado por la galería al cual este proyecto responde, y delinear cómo se desarrolló la preparación de la performance y cómo las condiciones del aquí y el ahora de

esa performance produjeron sus propias demandas.

**Palabras clave:** Olson, escritura performativa, Mottram, improvisación, fisicalidad en la poesía, Abair, Acción y poesía.

### A Tradition

The tradition of performance writing can be traced for me through current established practitioners such as Caroline Bergvall and Cris Cheek and John Hall to London in the early seventies and the presence of Eric Mottram, an American academic and poet and Bob Cobbing a sound and concrete performance poet. Mottram wrote an essay “Open field Poetry” which gave links for a type of poetics which could be traced back through the Black Mountain school, in particular Charles Olson and backwards to the poets William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. The territory for these poets was from Apollinaire and Gertrude Stein back to Mallarmé and Rimbaud and forward through Duchamp and the Dada and Surrealist writers and artists of the 20’s and 30’s. My own consideration of this in my thesis “Action and the Articulations of the Contemporary Poem” places particular emphasis on the body as it exists in the idea of physicality and as it makes available a haptic trajectory for meaning. Crucial to that dynamic is doubt as it figures the decision making process which composes performance and action as the base condition in which a poem is still a poem and a performance a performance.

If we begin by considering Pound’s view that “prosody is the articulation of the total sound of a poem” and concentrate on that idea of total articulation we quickly begin to question exactly what can be considered as the articulation of the poem, or in this case of performance. (Pound 421) The actions of looking, listening, speaking, of uttering words in the mouth, and of touching will be considered as a poetics of physicality and direct articulation of meaning and as a progression of composition by field as explored by Pound, Williams, Olson, and Mottram in their theoretical writing. But it will return always to the poem, the performance, as the location of what is available. So the eye, the palm, the ear, the mouth, etc., can be locations of meaning, where the meaning becomes available and through which the meaning becomes available.

Eric Mottram in his essay “Open field Poetry” refers to Robert Duncan on Olson’s Maximus saying that “Duncan gives the movement of language weights and durations as dance: ‘in whose measured steps time emerges as space emerges from the dance of the body’”. (Mottram 7) A really important development comes when he goes on to say that “The ear is intimate to muscular equilibrium. The line endures’ and in the next passage mentions Williams’s comment on Pound’s Cantos: “the principal move in imaginative writing today – that away from the word as symbol toward the word as reality”. (Mottram 7) It is there with the consideration of the word as material reality on the page and the understanding that the body, the physicality of the writer or reader may be the correlation with the word on the page and the space it inhabits that is a focus of my working poetics.

So for performance writing: it is this sense of the physicalities of performance as a continuation of the investigation of materials available to the poem that is taken further by the performance/writers such as Cris Cheek, Caroline Bergvall and John Hall when they

consciously acknowledge and work with the physicalities of encountering a text and foreground these for the audience.

The materialities of composition and its further complication of the idea of the time of writing might be considered especially in relation to the walks of Frank O'Hara around New York which at the end of my thesis I investigate through the possibilities of "gaze", an act of looking, as a complication, an "auctioning", of presence. I consider O'Hara's walking as being an actioning of the poem prior to the initiation of text on the page, I parallel them with the work of Richard Long and Cy Twombly in the tracery of the 'now' of the act of making which remains vital in the so called finished form.

What Pound, Olson, Mottram, Bergvall and Cheek point to is an increasingly open availability of materials from the outside to the poem and from the poem outwards. Eric Mottram writes, "As Whitman said some time before all these writers: 'I will make poems of materials for I think they are to be the most spiritual poems'" (Mottram 16). The continuation of this as a material of performance, in particularly improvisation, can be found when Mottram quotes Jackson Mac Low,

There are kinds of inner and hidden causation that are very difficult to distinguish on the one hand from 'chance' or 'coincidence', and on the other, from 'synchronicity': 'meaningful acausal interconnection'. Also, absolutely unique situations may arise during performances of such works, and the experiences of those participating in them (whether as performers, audience or both) cannot help but be of new aesthetic (experimental) meanings. (Mottram 16)

This is the poetics of doubt in action, the possibilities of "chance", "coincidence", "meaningful acausal interconnection" and the "very difficult to distinguish" which is married all the time to the morality of decision and consequence. The improvised performance with its lack of distance from the moment of composition brings the potential of all materials to the fore and I consider it a vindication of the idea that the actions of doing and being there are materialities of the poem, which intrinsically become the meaning rather than represent the meaning.

### **Poetics of improvisation and the stance of the poet/performer**

For improvisation to be truly active in the moment of the performance there has to be an open ended potential at work such that the poet/artist/performer may not be sure of their own actions or for example how the performance will begin or end. In the case of "abair" there were conditions set by the gallery such as space and time but one of the fundamental considerations is how the poet inhabits the improvisation, how decisions are made during performance and how the preparations towards the performance might provide generative potentials instead of closing down the trajectory of the work. Charles Olson's understanding of 'Composition by Field' is central to this.

As a critique of the assumptions of the mind, Charles Olson refers to the 'continuous' (Olson 46) as opposed to the 'discrete' (Olson 48), the former being the term Elizabeth Cook used to marry Keats' 'bodily gesture' and 'spiritual attitude'. (Cook xxvi) I take this to imply that the 'continuous' embodied Keats' stance as a poet and writer. The problem with the discrete is that they are particles of agreed value whether mathematical or logical, syntactic or semantic and are therefore to some degree closed as potentials. The "continuous" is an

open state that is not only more generative but speaks to a particular stance for the poet/artist such that one's extension in the world is at stake. The stance operating on discrete knowledge extends into a world that has already been measured and weighed. The alternative, the continuous, demands a meeting with the new that is the here and now. The problem is how to operate within that stance. Olson roots this as a response to the thoughts of Herman Melville, especially citing a line from a letter to Hawthorne, "By visible truth we mean the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things". (Olson 47) He says "Nothing was now inert fact" and continues that man is "folded in (...) a thing among things, which I shall call his physicality". (Olson 48) This physicality, I would argue, is the condition of knowing, not the discrete, separate, knowledge, but as a condition of duration, 'continuous'. It is within that condition that the poet operates during the improvisation though the analogy works for Olson during the writing of the poem also and this is equally pertinent since the process of writing remains active at the centre of performance writing. This, the decision making process, is also the shape and shaping of the poem/performance. Olson writes in 'Projective Verse', "It is the LINE (...) that gets as the poem is getting made, the attention, the control, that it is right here, in the line, that the shaping takes place, each moment of the going". (Olson 19)

The shaping or form of the poem or performance is in the instant active, in the line and therefore in the breath. Olson puts it, "HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE". (Olson 19) The pressures of the breath then are the arbiters of the shape of the poem in the now, each moment "as the poem is getting". (Olson 19) Field then is experience, open, always now, produced by the breath. Breath then is understood as material force, as the knowing of material force rather than knowing as personalized inwardness or ego.

If Olson's "heart-breath-line" is a consideration of the present moment of a poem, or in this case performance, or indeed of daily work then it places the poet as 'folded in' to the poem and not as outside it and the breath, the pressure of the breath as an exchange of force where experiences meet not as discrete moments but as reaction within the duration which is the condition then of both poem and poet and by extension reader/viewer.

Melville grasped the most relevant single fact of his experience: "(...) the inertial structure of the world is a real thing which not only exerts effects upon matter but in turn suffers such effects". (Motttram 11)

The poet as a material of the performance, as 'folded in' to it, is subject to it as well as an active decision making force within it, exerts effects and suffers effects. This is in keeping with Lyotard's idea that "(...) the obedience revealed for a moment in Tonkunst [the art of sound or tone, not music] means that we (who, we?) are due to the donation of the event". (Lyotard 181) The donation of the event is the here and now and we, the 'who' we meet each moment of experience in experience, of performance in performance, and also the poem/performance are due to the here and now. This is the condition of decision making within the improvisational performance.

### **Revisiting Performance**

In trying to talk about the performance, my performance of, in, as "abair" for Ciall 2011, I come up against the problem noted by Anthony Caro when he made his metal sculptures which were so big in his studio that he had to work from within them. He said, "You couldn't step back, step away to look at it (...) I was in the same space as the sculpture" (Caro 12-7-

04). Vanessa Engle suggests “that by working close up you suspend taste” (Engle 12-7-04). Caro responded, “I couldn’t really judge, I just had to live with them”. That is very much the position within the performance that I pursue and engage.

William Carlos Williams said “No ideas but in things”, (Williams 133) poetry and performance for me must achieve the status of thing. This is as opposed to being merely a description of a thing. Robin Blaser says about Jack Spicer,

It is part of his notion that poetry is necessary to the composition or knowledge of the ‘real’ and this drew him into a combat for the context of poetry – that it was an act or event of the real, rather than a discourse true only of itself. (Blaser 271)

Yes, poetry, is an “act” or “event” of the “real”. It is not a writing about, it is not an adjective, it is a doing, it is a being in and of the real. Olson’s “folded in” demands this. Robert Creeley in the essay “Introduction to New Writing in the USA” in 1965 referring to writers such as Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Michael McClure among others mentions,

(...) writing (distanced) from the usual habit of description – by which I mean that practice that wants to ‘accompany’ the real but which assumes itself as ‘objectively’ outside that content in some way (...) one is either there or not, and being there, cannot assume some ‘not being’ so as to ‘talk about it’. (Creeley 45-46)

Performance then must achieve the status of thing and take its place in and of the real. It is of its moment of action and as a performer I act from within it and cannot therefore be outside it in order to describe it. I can talk however about the residue of the preparation for the work. The performance itself is to some degree lost in that both video cameras, set up to capture it, failed in different ways so there are only a few still images and a sound recording of background noise. I dealt with recovering some sense of the performance through conversation and collaboration with the writer and artist David Berridge in a blog on his *VerySmallKitchen* site which he called “anarcheology”, I had referred to looking for the pieces of the performance as being like an archeological dig. The residue then is the material memory of what lead to the performance. The problematic of working towards and through an improvised and site specific performance becomes the resistance which my performances need to begin, to continue. The consideration of how to revisit a performance has been handled in various ways.

Reidin McSweeney in her essay, “RE: Performance-the role of the audience in the documentation of Marina Abramovic’s performances”, considers *Seven Easy Pieces* as an address of the open and contingent nature of performance documentation and as an invitation for constant re-performance. (McSweeney 45-57). For the most part I agree with this but McSweeney goes on to premise the live act over the document by promoting the ritualistic nature of the live act in line with Benjamin’s idea of ‘aura’ as embodied in “the here and now, uniqueness, authenticity and ritual”. (McSweeney 51) Two problems arise here, firstly the ritualistic act contains within it an overt element of intention which in itself demotes the here and now of the live act whereas improvisation with its intrinsic doubt locates the body more specifically in the here and now and secondly this same quality of preordained values aligned with ritual skews the potential of the reader in front of the document and even the making of the document itself. In the case of the documentation of my piece “abair” in *VerySmallKitchen* it became a collaborative conversation. The blog then became both material from the original performance and a conversation around what it might have been

about, avoiding the singular intention of description. The demand on the reader viewer of the document then as indeed on the reader/viewer of the original is closer to McSweeney's prioritising of "context of the moment" and "taking part" as opposed to the passive reception demanded by a video of the original performance which would indeed negate the transitory contextual moment of occurrence<sup>2</sup>.

### **Procedures of preparation**

The gallery which devised the exhibition Ciall 2011 which this performance became a part of is set in a Gaeltacht area of Ireland, that is a mainly Gaelic speaking area. As such the gallery is partly funded by Údarás na Gaeltachta the regional government agency with responsibility for the economic, social and language/cultural development of the Gaeltacht (Irish speaking) areas. It pursues its core language preservation and development objectives through the preservation and development of job and wealth creation and a wide range of community, arts, language and cultural initiatives. The main part of the call by An Gailearaí in Gweedore, Donegal, read,

**Ciall** translates as 'sense'.

To quote Theo Dorgan from his book *Sailing for Home* the speaking of Irish "forces us out of the language set of the boat" (An Gailearaí Ciall 2011). In this sense, together they felt they were the smallest Gaeltacht in the world which took them beyond the notion of a small island nation. Furthermore, it provides them with a different way of seeing, experiencing and understanding the world.

Is there a Gaeltacht sensibility?, If so how is this expressed?, Does a Gaeltacht sensibility inform the work of contemporary visual artists?

In the case of submission to a gallery the poem/performance has to exist as a proposal a narrative of itself in order to give them a position for the work. As anticipation of performance it is for me performance already in action. It was supplied with the poem/score for performance on powerpoint. The artist's statement I supplied with the submission to them read as follows,

To paraphrase John Hall this work places itself as a gerund "an action caught as a thing". (Hall 27) A performance of it would anticipate itself as a thing in action. The sensibility of the Gaeltacht is or has to be that of an action, an anticipation of a "we", of a making of a present. Otherwise it ceases to be.

This work will use "abair" as a score for an improvised read/writing that anticipates a reader, a viewer, an "other" making a meaning. That meaning is a present of activity. The Gaeltacht makes a present out of its own body of language, language of body, of I of mé, of tú, of muid. The world exists as [we sing it] and how we sing it into existence, anticipate its present. While it reaches graphically towards voice this work must retain its link to writing and reading, its focus is on the making of meaning and identity through language and the material bodies present in that activity, the graphic sign and the reader/viewers body in equal focus. Senses and sense as poetics of the body.

The poem/performance for me is investigative and, in the sense that it creates and opens towards creating, it questions. Within the temporality of the question is the call set by the

Gallery. The poem which became the score for 'abair' is in itself a performance of a mode of investigating or thinking, a correlation of materials<sup>3</sup>.

The phrase "outside the set of the boat" speaks to me not only about language or the poetics I'm bringing to the gallery but about the individual and the fact that the poem accepts at least two individuals the writer and the reader/viewer just as a performance accepts an audience even if an anticipated audience and demands that they be outside the set of their own boat in order to activate and be activated by the poem/performance.

The theme that emerges early on is survival. Existence is action. The Gaeltacht exists because it speaks, the "it", they as a collective people are, speaks. The impelled action "to speak" then becomes an initial and key line for me which everything else after engages with. Once this line is engaged with it makes demands on the lines and rhythms of what will be a score as they emerge. Each line is... as intention as assertion and as provocation.

As a score it is both a question and an answer that demands investigation rather than any sense of finality. Even "labhair" (to speak) is vibrationally between the intention to communicate and having communicated. It is a projection of an action into a moment of or as possibility in that the content, subject, is yet to be revealed.

The poem itself finds the necessities emerging into itself, its hovering temporality. The particular confusions of the Gaelic language demand to be heard and then seen, these being the grammatical structures but also the phonetic potentials. These might be seen as recognitions, that is conditions or materials which demand or provoke acknowledgement from the viewer or reader. Within the poem these have bearing such that the material conditions of IS and BE, 'bí' to be, might be recognized as an embodiment in language through the graphic mark on the page of the stance of the collective of the Gaeltacht.

The first line re-emerges, 'to speak', to make a decision on how the other lines might be encountered, it becomes a consideration of voice within the graphic terms of engagement, graphically to come into awareness and leave as the sound of speaking and the action of speaking inhabits the ear and the eye and leaves. The resistances of making the initial piece using what is to hand, Powerpoint, as a representation of paper, book and text and reading, make their own demands and add their own confusions. The graphic consideration of sound and reading pushes towards sound and concrete activities, these, Sound and Concrete poetry, being in and of the tradition which my performances emerge from. The facility lent by the programming needs to be acknowledged and resisted. The facility needs to keep earning its place in the poem, why is it doing anything more than a line on a page would. If the words are to be shown on a wall, what is the importance of their size. As a painter my works bear some gravity to the human frame. The page then would be human in scale. These possibilities exist as questions as much as answers and exist as potentials towards a score or performance rather than as fixed structures. Other possibilities of display emerge, there is going to be a curtain, then there isn't, its going to be a wall. The other temporal connections of the writer and the poem underhand filter and weigh each other. I was working for instance on performance writing for my thesis and on the line of "Open Field poetics" through the late 20th century. These forces do not ignore each other.

The fundamentals demand to be re-examined, writing, reading, drawing. Mark making came to the fore again as I came across the Herzog film of cave paintings. The necessity to speak demands that there be speaking and so bodily performance seemed inevitable.

The performance has its own developed considerations from my practice with LUC, (London Under Construction), a performance or anti-performance collective, and my own amalgamation of those experiences with my individual performances over the previous four years. LUC was a collaborative process, between five and seven poets considering site specific improvisations with writing as performance at their center. My own work developed from this, and from reading at Writers Forum and workshops at Birkbeck and encounters with poets such as Mike Weller and Ulli Freer. They carry within the atmosphere of their work, their stance as poets, a questioning of the assignment and assessment of value and the ego.

There is a continual reassessment of the position of the fundamentals such as how to get a poem to be a thing. From this point some part of the process demands a consideration of conditions and potentials, potentials are ideas, concepts, encounters, or objects that I carry with me either in material form or simply as temporal phenomena.

The gallery has set a time of 10 mins and it has a given space. The conditions as they come and go, as they change are forces within the temporality of the poem and in that sense make demands. The powerpoint has to stand on its own when presented to the gallery in order to give the performance a chance of being selected. There is a maximum of three pieces allowed. A previous intention in other projects to use words on photographs or in landscape emerges as a potential to point at the concept of “naming”, “Ainmnigh”. This piece then develops alongside the “abair” piece and establishes other conditions or questions. The status of “book” in the gallery space must be considered, the idea of “picture” and the question of what it means to look or read, the inevitable pull towards narrative from which even non-figurative art is not exempt.

So the conditions at this stage were set for an act of speaking that included the body. Not being an Irish speaker, I couldn't pretend an articulacy with the language, therefore any use of the language had to reflect both my own practice and tradition.

### **The Here and Now of improvised performance**

Within the performance of “*abair*” the potentials brought to the space of the performance met particular resistance when the environmental conditions prepared for changed dramatically. To take one specific incident the action of speaking became nullified by the sound of a first night audience and therefore the inability to be heard had to be engaged with and also the situating of the performance within the composition of the show became radically other than had been originally programmed. The resulting actions on the part of the performer of silence and occupation of space found their vector through the conditions met by the body during the performance, they became in that sense the meaning, the finding, of the performance as investigation of the position of the Gaeltacht sensibility within Contemporary Art. The ability of the performance to inform that art was more acutely defined because of the availability of the performance to the here and now. The flexibility of potentials is that, being generative rather than conclusive, they find activation as much within an unforeseen environment as within that which is expected. The result was a writing and reading through erasure and censorship, a presence of duration. The open possibilities of improvisation allow access to the ‘unique situation’ to the ‘new aesthetic (experimental) meaning’ because it is a converging of conditions which only the here and now can provide. It is the stance of the poet/performer in foregrounding the pressures of the breath as arbiter

of knowledge of the here and now which allows the equivalence of response, within the unique or new, to form.

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slideshow for vlak reading <sup>[33]</sup> <a href="http://vimeo.com/46060239">http://vimeo.com/46060239</a> A sample of the text from my latest book 'IS ing' can be seen at <a href="http://www.bbk.ac.uk/cprc/publications/Veer\_Publications/Veer038">http://www.bbk.ac.uk/cprc/publications/Veer\_Publications/Veer038</a> A sample from my previous book collaboration 'SHUDDERED' with Stephen and Piers can be seen at <a href="http://www.bbk.ac.uk/cprc/publications/Veer\_Publications/Veer024">http://www.bbk.ac.uk/cprc/publications/Veer\_Publications/Veer024</a> also recordings of reading done at SPF can be heard at that last link.  
2 <http://verysmallkitchen.com/2011/06/12/vsk-project-aodan-mccardle-abair-anarcheology1/> <http://verysmallkitchen.com/2011/06/17/vsk-project-aodan-mccardle-abair-anarcheology2/>

3 See <http://vimeo.com/25988906>. Score for Abair: Click to Add Title, This is how I am for the powerpoint film of the poem which was sent to the gallery as part of the submission procedure. The call gave me a chance to engage with Gaelic. It gave me a chance to combine the word and the visual. The poem as a situation needs to take into account the given elements even in order to reject them if need be and even in rejecting it continues to become. In this sense the temporal flux of the poem, its gravities, come into being, are recognized. The call establishes certain elements, restraints, resistances and from that the poem separates into itself, gets to know itself.