

Musicallographics: Improvising Across Modalities

Jesse Stewart, Jim Davies, and Jamaal Amir Akbari

In 2023, Jesse Stewart and Jim Davies met over coffee at a café in Ottawa, Canada, to discuss the possibility of collaborating under the auspices of the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI), with which we are both affiliated researchers. Having been friends and colleagues for over ten years, we expressed a shared desire to work with one another on a project that would explore cross-modal improvisation. What would happen, we asked, if we improvised with one another, combining our respective creative practices of improvised music and improvised calligraphy? And what might we learn about cross-modal improvisation through such an endeavour? We agreed that we would film the collaboration and then analyze the footage to examine the ways in which our choices influence one another across art forms and sensory modalities.

In a second phase of this research, we included improvising hip hop and spoken-word artist (and former poet laureate of the City of Ottawa) Jamaal Amir Akbari, who added significantly to the project. From the beginning, we conceived of this initiative as a research-creation project that we hoped would result in a publication and in a series of videos that could serve as both objects of analysis and research outputs in their own right. This essay and the accompanying images and videos are the result of this initiative, which we call *musicallographics*. In keeping with the collaborative nature of the project, we have adopted a flexible authorial voice in this paper, oscillating between our individual perspectives and shared insights.

There is a longstanding connection between calligraphy and improvisation. As Antanas Andrijauskas notes, “In treatises on calligraphy, structures of rhythmic calligraphy are often vividly compared to music and dance, because of the spontaneous rhythmic and improvisational features, typical to these forms of art. [. . .] Calligraphy is often described not only as painting without images, but also as music without sounds” (179). There have been several precedents for collaborations involving musical improvisation and the calligraphic arts, including a group called Cinnamon Sphere that Jesse saw perform on numerous occasions in the 1990s. The group—which featured Korean-Canadian calligrapher Chung Gong Ha, guitarist Nilan Perera, and electroacoustic musician Sarah Peebles—combined improvised music with calligraphic gestural drawings created in real time in dialogue with the music. Related practices can be found in “live painting” performances such as Nancy Love’s paintings created in collaboration with the improvised music of CCMC during their long standing residency at Toronto’s Music Gallery in the 1970s and 1980s; artist Jeff Schlanger’s real-time collaborations with improvising musicians in a practice he calls musicWitness; and the work of other painters who have collaborated live with musicians, painters such as Claire Zakiewicz and Mark Rowan-Hull. Performances involving graffiti writers and freestyle hip hop musicians and dancers might be seen as another precedent for this type of real-time interarts collaboration.

Surprisingly, the subject of cross-modal improvisation has received relatively little attention within the field of improvisation studies. Two notable exceptions are Roger Dean and Hazel Smith’s *Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts Since 1945* (1997) and Simon Rose’s *Relational Improvisation: Music, Dance and Contemporary Art* (2024). The former discusses improvisation in various forms of “monomedia” (a single idiom), “bimedia” (improvisatory work involving two different art forms), and “polymedia” (hybrid forms such as happenings, performance art, and theatre, that may incorporate improvisation across a spectrum of art forms). In *Relational Improvisation*, Rose and a variety of artist-researchers from different

disciplinary and artistic backgrounds examine “improvisation’s multiplicity by offering a view of transdisciplinarity through a collaborative, in-depth exploring of the processes involved” (xii).

Other examples of writing on interarts improvisation include Helen Julia Minor’s examination of the gestural conducting system known as “Soundpainting,” a method for facilitating real time improvisatory collaboration across multiple creative forms (2020), and *Aesthetics of Improvisation* (2022) by Alessandro Bertinetto, who notes that “one can observe that the improvisational practices are becoming more and more inter- and multi-media. It is not uncommon for musicians, dancers, videoartists, poets, and painters to intervene in a concert of improvisation” (84–5). Bertinetto and Ruta’s *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts* includes a two hundred-plus page section on “Improvisation in the Visual, Narrative, Dramatic, and Interactive Arts” that examines improvisation in such diverse fields as dance, comedy, cinema, painting, poetry, and sculpture, although it says relatively little about how improvisers collaborate with one another *across* these domains apart from a single sentence noting that “pictorial improvisations can surely take place in the mode of a performance; artists, for example, can paint in front of an audience, possibly interacting with other performers (musicians, dancers, etc.)” (570). This pattern appears to be emblematic of scholarship on cross-modal improvisation within the field of improvisation studies more generally.

A more robust consideration of interarts collaboration (if not cross-modal improvisation specifically) can be found in the field of aesthetic theory, including Adorno’s concept of *Verfransung*, the erosion of boundaries among the arts that he felt characterized artistic production in the post-war period (95–6); the concept of intermediality, “a generic term for all those phenomena that (as indicated by the prefix *inter*) in some way take place between media” (Rajewsky 46); and, most usefully to the musicallygraphics project, Jerrold Levinson’s concept of “hybrid art forms” (5–13). Levinson defines hybrid art forms as those “arising from the actual combination or interpenetration of earlier art forms” (6). He delineates three hybrid art form varieties, namely juxtaposition, synthesis, and transformation. The musicallygraphics project falls into the juxtaposition category, in which “objects or products of two (or more) arts are simply joined together and presented as one larger, more complex unit” (8). He goes on to note how

The interaction of the separate components or strands in a hybrid artwork—be it harmonious, antagonistic, synchronic, or anarchic—is surely the most obvious feature of attention in such works. [. . .] Artists and audiences are interested in how the two sequences of events will be related to one another—whether they will unfold in parallel fashion, in explicit opposition, or in an apparently sublime indifference. We are on watch for sparks of similarity and contrast to be struck from events in different realms occurring simultaneously. One question that arises regarding this central feature is the following: How is the relation between the two developing patterns—e.g., a musical one and a mimetic one—in such a hybrid different from the relation between different structural aspects in paradigm nonhybrid arts? (11–12)

This essay takes up this question in a somewhat heuristic way, examining the real-time decision-making processes involved in a juxtapositional hybrid art form involving music, calligraphy, and poetry wherein improvisation was the common denominator.

While we focus in this essay primarily on the aesthetic or formal considerations that affect our decisions as improvisers, we recognize that a host of socio-cultural factors necessarily inform our choices, including our diverse national, racial, cultural, disciplinary, and artistic

backgrounds. Jim's background in the fields of cognitive science, theatre improv, and his work as a fantasy writer all impact his improvisatory decisions, in addition to his past experiences as a calligrapher. Likewise, Jesse's experiences in the visual arts influence his contributions at some level, along with his background as an improvising percussionist in the fields of jazz and creative improvised music. As Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman write, improvisation's "creative and political force is manifested through sounds and gestures that are traces of experience that are at once relational and contextual" (1).

As we embarked on this project, one of our first challenges was to find a suitable location in which to perform and to film. As luck would have it, Jesse's friends Mike and Jon King own a video production and design company in Ottawa called Stripe Studios, which specializes in interactive real-time graphics in live broadcasts. In addition to several high-end video cameras, their studio space at the time happened to have a wall painted with blackboard paint. They kindly agreed to film us performing with one another in their space, with Jesse improvising musically and Jim improvising calligraphically in chalk on the blackboard wall. Each piece was performed and filmed in one take. We did not discuss beforehand what we would write or play. The Stripe Studios staff operated four cameras, switching among them during the performance, effectively editing the videos in real-time as we played and eliminating the need for any post-production. The process of documenting the performances was thus also highly improvisatory.

Our first session took place on August 29, 2023. Jesse and Jim performed and recorded two improvisations. For the first piece, Jesse played the waterphone, an experimental percussion instrument invented in the 1960s by American instrument maker and artist Richard Waters. Consisting of bronze rods of different lengths attached to the perimeter of a stainless-steel resonating chamber, the waterphone is normally played with a small amount of water inside it. Tilting the instrument causes the water to move across the bottom resonating plate, creating a series of haunting echoes and bent pitches when the rods are bowed, rubbed, or struck. Most people have heard a waterphone, but comparatively few people have seen one. This is one of the reasons why waterphones have been used extensively in movie soundtracks, especially science-fiction and horror films (including *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* [1979], *Poltergeist* [1982], and *The Matrix* [1999], to name only a few). Most people do not associate the sound of the waterphone with a particular instrument, or a particular set of performative gestures, which contributes to its ability to sonically signify a sense of otherworldliness in film. The spooky connotations of the waterphone prompted Jim to write words and phrases related to fantasy and horror in a stream-of-consciousness manner using his unique calligraphic style, which combines aspects of traditional calligraphy with influences from graffiti writing and contemporary calligraphic forms.

You can watch Video 1 (*Atrocity Habituation*) by clicking on the screenshot below.



The resulting text is shown in Figure 1 and transcribed in Table 1 (both below). We later titled the piece “Atrocity Habituation” after one of the things Jim wrote on the board.

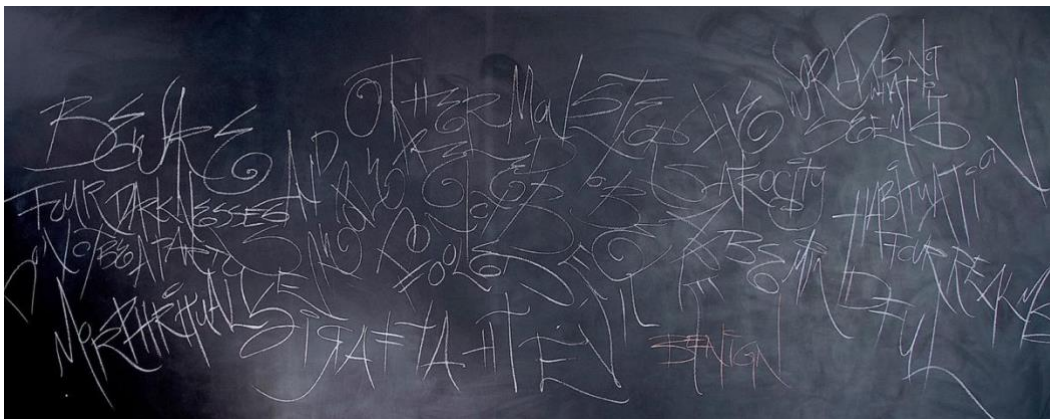


Figure 1. Jim Davies’s chalk calligraphy, titled *Atrocity Habituation*, created in dialogue with a waterphone improvisation.

Table 1. Transcription of Jim Davies’s chalk calligraphy pictured in Figure 1.

People are led to believe that faeries and other monsters are benign
Beware
Four darknesses
Do not be a party
Morph ritual
Evil
The world is not what it seems
Atrocity habituation
Be mindful
Do not be fooled

Davies: A given work of calligraphy is often done in a particular style, called a “hand.” For example, traditional Western calligraphy hands include italic, uncial, and blackletter. In graffiti

writing, hands (which are called “styles” or “handstyles”) include bubble style and wildstyle. In all the works described in this paper, I used “thunderwords,” a hand of my own invention.¹ Although I created this hand in the 1990s, this is the first time it has been described in publication. This hand was inspired by a book on contemporary Chinese calligraphy by Gu Gan, which described how a single stroke on the paper could play roles in various characters.² I read this book while studying Chinese calligraphy in Beijing and applied this idea to English Letterforms to create the thunderwords hand. Over the decades my style evolved to look more and more like wildstyle graffiti. The influence of Chinese calligraphy is strong to the point that many English-speakers mistake thunderwords calligraphy for Chinese characters.

Thunderwords is a “gestural hand,” meaning that it is done quickly and using movements of the entire arm, particularly for large pieces. This is in contrast with traditional Western calligraphy, which is often done very slowly, and emphasizes finger and wrist motion at a small scale. Gestural hands are excellent for pieces done on walls at fast speeds, making thunderwords a fitting choice for this project.

The waterphone reminds me of departures from reality, dark fantasy, and fear. For the last several years, I have been developing an urban horror and fantasy-fiction world. The text of the calligraphy in this video is inspired by elements of this world of hidden dark magic, describing beasts that engage in fel rituals to morph into more powerful forms, and cultists who are gradually habituated to perform acts that get progressively more evil.

What was written, the shape of the letterforms and their placement, was improvised, responding primarily to ideas about the fantasy world that came to mind and what had already been written. For example, as I began to write in a spiral, I used this cue to continue to write in a spiral. Building on elements already introduced is a key to building patterns and meaning in improvised works of all kinds.

As more of the wall was filled in, remaining space became limited and the piece ended when the wall was full. The final pattern on the wall roughly had a shape of a spiral in the centre, with words radiating out in lines from the left and the right. Most of my choices in the calligraphy were not affected by Jesse’s moment-to-moment musical contributions to a great extent. I found it difficult to focus on the music during the writing—my mind was occupied with generating words and making compositional decisions. This was also the first time we had collaborated with one another and, indeed, the first time I had done calligraphy with music. The influence of the music was primarily in the basic mood and sound inspiring the content of the writing. My writing was steady and continuous. In the future, I think I would take pauses in the writing to listen, allowing the music time and attention to inspire continued writing.

Writing has a rhythmic quality that I think could dovetail with improvised music in future attempts at similar collaborations, particularly if the forms being written are calligraphy-like, even if they are not depicting actual words.³ The rhythm of gestural hand movements, and even the sound of chalk on the wall or board, could be used as visual and auditory complements to simultaneous improvised music. The experiments described in this paper helped me discover how musicalgraphics can be done better in the future.

Stewart: The abstract quality of Jim’s calligraphy made it difficult for me to read what he was writing during the performance. As a result, I responded primarily to the visual aesthetics of the calligraphy, not its semantic content. In a way, the calligraphy functioned for me as a kind of graphic score that was slowly revealed in real time. When I realized he was writing in a spiral, I introduced a circular bowing motion that produced a kind of swirling vortex of sound that

seemed appropriate to the visual form of the calligraphy. The writing of the word “benign” in pink chalk seemed significant to me as it established a figure-ground relationship with the other words that were all written in white. I responded to this visual figure with a single bow stroke. It felt to me like this rupture in the musical texture required a further musical response, so I continued to play single tones in the hope of making musical sense of the initial single bow stroke retroactively.

In addition to the visual aesthetics of the calligraphy, I was keenly aware of the sound of the chalk on the wall, which gave me something to work with sonically. At a few points, I responded to accented chalk marks with similarly accented musical gestures. For example, the forceful chalk marks in the “T” of “The world” at 3:19 prompted me to change from the bow to a superball mallet and drag it quickly across multiple rods, producing an accented arc of sound. Otherwise, I resisted the urge to imitate the rhythmic vocabulary of the chalk too closely. In my experience, musical imitation in improvisatory settings can have the effect of masking another improviser’s contribution or taking their place in the music. For me, the sound of the chalk was integral to the sonic dimensions of the performance, so I tried to play in counterpoint to it, making musical choices that would complement it while ensuring it could be clearly heard.

After our initial improvisation, we agreed to do another, this time with drum set. You can watch Video 2 (*The Enemy of Improv*) by clicking on the screenshot below.



In an example of content mirroring form, Jim wrote about improvisation, as shown in figure 2 and in the transcription below. (See table 2.)

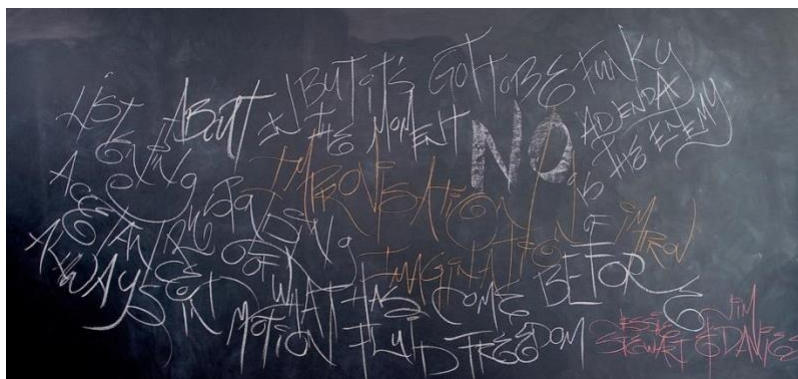


Figure 2. Jim Davies’s chalk calligraphy on blackboard,

created in dialogue with drum set improvisation, titled *The Enemy of Improv*.

Table 2. Transcription of Jim Davies's chalk calligraphy on the blackboard pictured in Figure 2.

About improvisation
Listening
Acceptance
Always in motion
Freedom
Responding to what has come before
In the moment
Imagination is the enemy of improv
NO agenda [sic]
But it's got to be funky
Jessie [sic] Stewart and Jim Davies

Davies: For this piece, which we later titled “The Enemy of Improv,” I filled the wall with words and statements about improvisation, broadly speaking. I was trained primarily in theatrical improvisation, in the tradition of Keith Johnstone, and performed in front of audiences for twenty years. One of the biggest themes in Johnstone’s approach is to pay close attention to the work of art in progress, and, importantly, not to have an agenda or plan about how the scene should play out (See *Improvisation and the Theater* and *Improv for Storytellers*). This practice involves “listening” to your scene partners, being “in the moment,” and practicing “acceptance” as embodied in the “yes, and” philosophy.⁴ One is also expected to reincorporate elements from earlier in a scene. These elements compose the *platform* (in Johnstone’s jargon). The improvisers are not only in the moment, but also responding to what has come before.⁵

People find the idea that “imagination is the enemy of improv” counterintuitive because, in English, we often equate imagination and creativity. But in this statement, I’m using the term imagination in a more constrained way to refer to the generation of possible structures and scenarios in the head, composed of various memories. In this sense of the term, to say that imagination is the enemy of improv is simply to communicate that making plans for the future of a scene, or having an agenda (“NO agenda [sic]”), distracts you from paying attention to what the work needs right now.⁶

We can see examples of high-imagination and low-imagination creativity in the art world (Davies 185). Kanye West claims that he never wrote down the lyrics for his first four albums (Syron). Mozart is said to have composed entire pieces in his imagination before writing down anything, although the truth is likely more nuanced (Schroeder 170). These are high-imagination creative acts. At the other end of the spectrum are creative improvisations for which there is little or no formation of the output in imagination before it is created; examples include freestyle rapping, musical free improvisation, and this musicalligraphics project. You cannot (or, at least, shouldn’t) imagine what is to come because one doesn’t know what the work will be like in the future, particularly when improvising with collaborators. When a musician is playing a pre-composed piece of music, they engage in small amounts of musical imagination, limited to a few seconds’ worth of upcoming notes and actions, and this imagery functions to generate limited plans, allowing the player to better anticipate what other performers will do, and to guide action.⁷

The inclusion of “it’s got to be funky” was based on a memory of something Michael Jackson used to say to his band. Before concerts, Jackson and his crew would clap their hands, stomp their feet, and yell “Whatever we play, it’s got to be funky!” (Taraborrelli 42), a rallying cry likely

inspired by James Brown's 1971 recording "Make it Funky," which begins with a spoken exchange between Brown and bandmate Bobby Byrd: "What you gonna play now?" asks Byrd, to which Brown responds, "Bobby, I don't know but what's n' ever I play, it's got to be funky." In referencing these statements, my intention was not to cue Jesse to be more funky, but rather to express the idea that improvisation should be created for the audience first and foremost, prioritizing the audience over benefits to the improvisers themselves. In contrast, other improvisatory traditions, such as contact improv in dance, appear to be more about benefits to the dancers than to the audience. As Paxton notes, "the dancers remain in physical touch, mutually supportive and innovative, meditating upon the physical laws relating to their masses: gravity, momentum, inertia, and friction. They do not strive to achieve results, but rather, to meet the constantly changing physical reality with appropriate placement and energy" (Paxton 26).

The overall shape of the calligraphy resembles a smile, with text going downward on the left and upward on the right, although I was not aware of this while I was making it. I used orange chalk for words I thought were particularly important: "improvisation," "imagination," and "improv."

Stewart: I was intrigued by Jim's idea that "imagination is the enemy of improv" in part because I regard imagination itself as a largely improvisatory process. Indeed, I rarely have a preformulated plan in mind when I use my imagination. Furthermore, I think improvisers can, and often do, imagine the upcoming actions of their co-performers, although this process takes place very quickly, often within the blink of an eye. Bertinetto refers to this as "anticipatory imagination":

What each single performer does is guided by this anticipatory imagination, which is more or less collectively and interactively shaped and shared. However, this anticipatory imagination may go frustrated, because each moment of the performance is not really foreseeable: nobody knows whether the sense of the performance they are imagining—which is expressed in what they are doing—will be confirmed, modified or rejected and at every single temporal step of the performance reality outshines prevision, provisional conjectures, and imagination. ("Performing" 84)⁸

I find it highly satisfying when our anticipatory imaginings are confirmed in an improvisatory setting, when an ensemble plays in what Garry Hagberg refers to as an "as-if" mode: "they play as if the momentary passage were rehearsed, as if they had known in advance what they were going to do together" (492). In my experience, this seemingly telepathic form of imagination is most likely to develop among improvisers who have performed with one another for a long time. With one exception (described below), I don't think we achieved that level of shared anticipatory imagination very often in the musicalligraphics project, perhaps not surprisingly given the fact that we were performing with one another for the first time. Hopefully, we will get there eventually.

In our second improvisation, after an initial period of listening and watching Jim's calligraphic writing, I again responded to the sound of the chalk on the wall, this time by scraping my fingernails in a circular motion on the head of the snare drum to create a continuous wash of sound that provided a sonic ground for the rhythmic sounds of the chalk. I often listen for, and think in terms of, figure-ground relationships when improvising musically, owing perhaps to my background in the visual arts wherein figure-ground relationships are more fully theorized. At around the 0:57 mark, worried that I was running the risk of masking the sound of the chalk, I switched to the fleshy part of my fingers, providing a quieter sound wash. Picking up a drumstick in my right hand, I held it like a writing implement (not unlike the way that Jim held the chalk) and rubbed it back and forth against the head of the floor tom. When the tip of the stick passed

over indentations on the battered drumhead, it resulted in some unanticipated sounds from the floor tom. Like many improvisers, I generally welcome such unanticipated occurrences as they provide additional prompts to which I have the option of responding. In this case, I did respond by lifting the stick off the drumhead to punctuate the musical texture after which I repeatedly pressed the tip of the stick against the drumhead and rapidly pulled it away, a so-called “extended technique” that added dots of sound and established a figure-ground relationship within the drum part in addition to the figure-ground relationship between the chalk sounds and the drum part as a whole.

At the 2:08 mark, Jim moves from the right side of the wall to the left, ceasing the sound of the chalk and providing an opportunity for me to introduce a new sonic texture with the hi-hat and ride cymbal that was still in keeping with the musical vocabulary that had preceded it. As Jim writes, improvisation involves “responding to what has come before.” Of course, improvisation also necessitates that we offer new ideas and prompts for our co-performers. At the 2:45 mark, as Jim finishes writing the word “Before” with a flourish, it felt to me at the time like a musical change was necessary. At that point, I picked up a pair of nylon brushes and introduced a busier musical texture that provided a counterpoint of sorts to the relatively static musical texture to that point. I interpreted the line “But it’s got to be funky” as an invitation for me to play something groove-oriented. However, breaking into the “Cold Sweat” groove or some other sonic signifier of funk would have felt contrived to me and do a disservice to the music that preceded it. So, I opted for a middle path: I introduced a somewhat funky musical groove that I hoped would respond to both Jim’s prompt and the musical context.

After our initial collaboration, Jim noted that it would give him more to work with if we were to add a spoken-word poet into the mix. So we reached out to Jamaal Amir Akbari, who kindly agreed to collaborate with us. The three of us met at Stripe Studios on November 9, 2023. As before, we did not discuss what we would play, say, or write beforehand other than to agree that everything would be improvised. We made three pieces, each of which was performed, filmed, and edited in one take by the Stripe Studios crew. In addition to videos and photos of each performance, Jamaal’s poetry is transcribed below, alongside a transcription of Jim’s calligraphy for comparison. (See tables 3 to 5 and figures 3 to 5, below.)

You can watch Video 3 (*The Centre of Time*) by clicking on the screenshot below.



Table 3. Side-by-side transcription of Jamaal Amir Akbari's poetry and Jim Davies's calligraphy for *The Centre of Time*.

Jamaal's Poetry	Jim's Calligraphy
Yesterday	<i>Feeling</i>
Felt like tomorrow	<i>Present</i>
Moving at a pace that I could barely keep up with	<i>Today</i>
I got regrets	<i>Tomorrow</i>
But I can't allow the curves of life to make me feel	<i>Yesterday</i>
Like I'm not supposed to be here	<i>Language</i>
So, I stay in the present	<i>Spoken</i>
Hanging around	<i>Open</i>
I said I'm just hanging a round	<i>Hope</i>
Trying to find my centre	<i>Thought</i>
Where do we go from here?	<i>All of it</i>
How does it look when tomorrow cares not of the day before?	<i>Believe</i>
Only if you're willing to scribe your name into its pages	<i>Seconds</i>
Look forward	<i>Meaning</i>
A wasp can sting you in an instant and you will feel it forever	<i>The scars teach</i>
Stay sharp	<i>Life</i>
For life is bright so don't be dull honey	<i>All Until</i>
Checkmark the boxes that say yes	<i>Slides</i>
And with each breath	<i>Unattended Darkness</i>
With each light touch	<i>Be here</i>
You open the gates	
To a word defined	
Through the language	
Spoken into your world	
What does it mean?	
Isn't it the most archaic of questions?	
What does it all mean?	
Our wants, desires, needs, dreams	
If we can't even guarantee that tomorrow they will come true	
What does it mean?	
And why?	
Is it more real than anything spoken?	
To gift yourself the blessing of hope	
That the hours that pass by	
Are a bridge to something better	
I've thought of it all	
Yes	
I've thought of all of it	
Cried buckets of tears when no one could hear	
Held myself close when no one was close	
And begged for forgiveness	
For not believing that yes, these tears are real	
And as they drop and dry	
And I fear for my life	
Because tomorrow still did not greet me in the way that I	
imagined it would	
At least I am comfortable knowing	

That the seconds will always go by
Meaning there will always be time
And time is always good
These scars of life
Shall not be the scabs that I remove over and over
I will learn
I will burn
Until those scars match
Match the vigor
The tenacity
The warrior that is inside all of us
When those scars that life slides into our drawer
Of unattended
Of unattended darkness
I will become the person that I need
For with your word and your gift
You are the only way out
So advance
Ahh
Create a cloud of smoke that can move through any obstacle
Use the magic in your hands and triangulate your destination
Nothing is made certain until you want it
As bad enough as you want air
As bad enough as reality forced all its favour for you to be here
So listen
Be brave
And touch something real

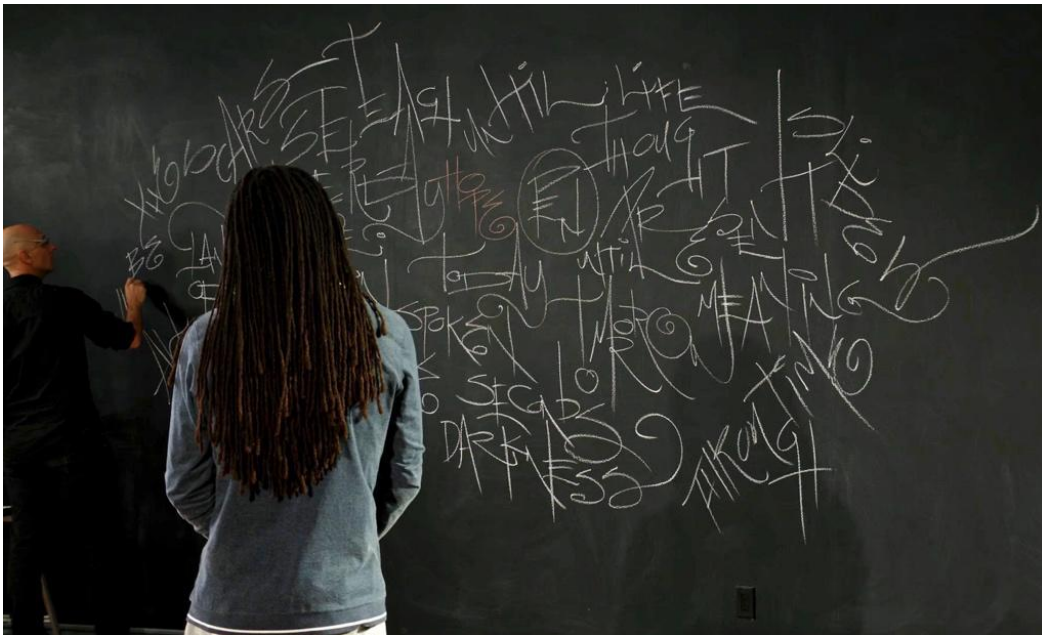


Figure 3. Video still of *The Centre of Time* showing Jim Davies's chalk calligraphy on blackboard.

You can watch Video 4 (*Let It Go*) by clicking on the screenshot below.

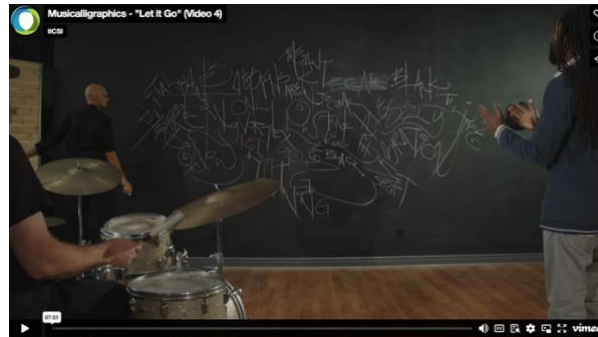


Table 4. Side-by-side transcription of Jamaal Amir Akbari's poetry and Jim Davies's calligraphy for *Let it Go*.

Jamaal's Poetry	Jim's Calligraphy
What are you protecting?	<i>Protecting</i>
Let it go	<i>Blank</i>
Let it snow	<i>Knowledge</i>
All is meant to be shown	<i>Endlessly</i>
A canvas of nothing	<i>To never</i>
Don't hold on to what you know	<i>Only</i>
For secrets don't benefit that which can't be praised	<i>Now</i>
So live life as if you are the goal	<i>Vital hands</i>
The hurrah	<i>Vibration</i>
The triumph of hands raised towards sky	<i>Break</i>
Stretching endlessly	<i>Vortex</i>
Hoping that one day	<i>Black</i>
A star shall see them, yes	<i>Sheet</i>
Go beneath	<i>Designs</i>
Beneath that which you told yourself is so vital to your existence	<i>Meant</i>
And breathe	<i>To life</i>
Elevate that ecstasy of what makes sense	<i>Let it go</i>
And watch it take flight	<i>Under</i>
From there to here to never	<i>Lightning</i>
A space that doesn't really exist	<i>Now</i>
There's only now	<i>Plummet energy</i>
So if the world of imagination scares you	<i>Are not to come</i>
Take what you hold within your sleeve	
And become the illusionist	
Let it go	
Bounce upon the vibration like drumskins resonate	
Tempos and timbres	
Find that staff that shall not break	
It's there you know	
This vortex of creativity	
Meant to place itself	
On the black sheet of dark matter	
Smudge its essence into the back of your mind	
But the mind too is a design	

And designs are meant to come to life
So let it go
And seek what you will find
Do not waver
Like a chef who thinks they added too much salt
And then put in way too much water
Take life as it comes
But know that you have the power
To also let it go
Your privilege of magnificence lies in your ability to filter
To find the channel that is you
And to rain, rain, rain
To bring it like thunder and lightning
Not forced or coerced by alien matters
But pushed towards the most epic descent of victory
The choice is yours
The course is yours
So as you plummet from a place
That once protected your energy
It's probable that you were meant to lay back and look at the sky
And find gratitude
And how you too can learn from moving backwards
Step by step
And if there's anything left
After you've landed in the place you know is home
If you carry any more baggage
Even after you've learned
To remove yourself from that which you no longer
Need to carry with you on this journey of life
If there's anything left in that space
It's what you're meant to hold onto
So let it snow

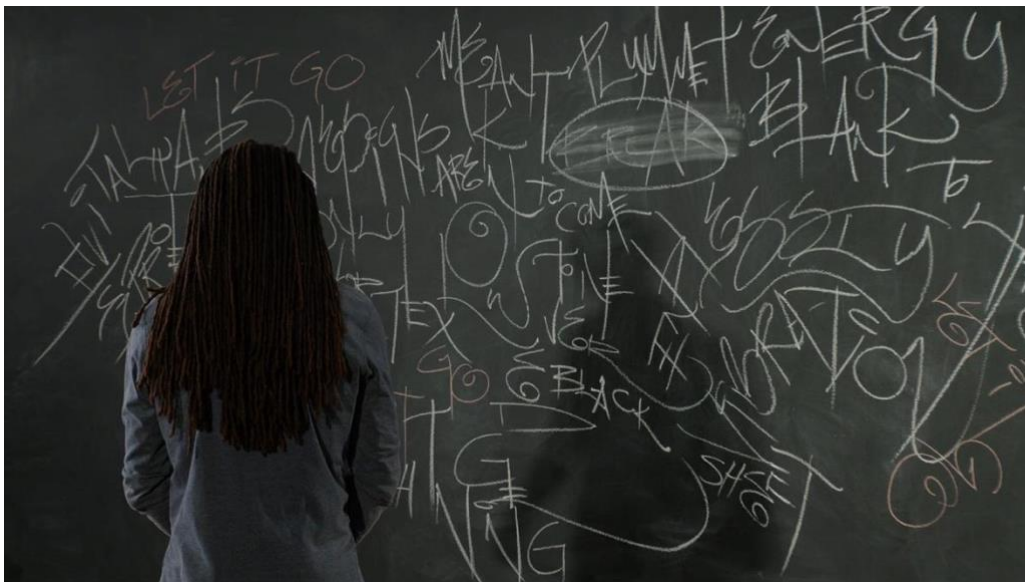


Figure 4. Video still of *Let it Go* showing Jim Davies's chalk calligraphy on blackboard.

You can watch Video 5 (*Spring*) by clicking on the screenshot below.



Table 5. Side-by-side transcription of Jamaal Amir Akbari's poetry and Jim Davies's calligraphy for *Spring*.

Jamaal's Poetry	Jim's Calligraphy
Thank you for not abandoning me	<i>Nothing Dies</i>
You are the ear to my memories	<i>Remain Voice</i>
The song to my breeze	<i>The Destiny Map</i>
And the comfort of my longing	<i>Too Hot to Hold</i>
You've allowed me to plant seeds	<i>Seeds to be tended</i>
So that a garden may grow	<i>Eyes</i>
And that we both can tend to it	<i>Ashes</i>
This element of exchange can feel like fire sometimes	<i>Inferno</i>
Just too hot to hold on to	<i>Body to Asphalt</i>
But I love you	<i>Conscience</i>
So you keep listening	<i>Memories</i>
Whispering to me	<i>Strive to Manufacture</i>
Sweet nothings in my ear	
That somehow manifest into a map I call destiny	
It's frustrating	
To constantly go into a house on fire	
Trying to save a vision	
And exit without being burned	
It's highly unlikely	
And since you've shown me how to prepare for this inferno	
This challenge that remains pasted across the screen of my eyes	
I can't seem to let it die	
You've given me the life that I strive to manufacture	
But place no guarantee that it would look exactly as I've seen	
My heart	
Where do you want me to go?	
Which method should I choose to move along?	
Evolve?	
Expend?	

But still remain best friends with you
On the first day of Spring
When I bring my body to the asphalt
And move my legs forward
Inviting expansion and contraction into my lungs
It is at that moment
When I've run out of all the fuel from the ashes you've left
behind
I hear your voice:
"Keep going. You're almost there."
And that voice, as much as I put my mother on a pedestal,
It compares to her countenance
As below her rightful place in my life
That voice
That distinct voice that says:
"There's more in you, you know."
Yes, it is your first time
Spring is here, so rise.
But for every person on a journey
Wondering when that voice will finally dissipate
Into the truth of your conscience
Know that it won't go anywhere
Your own personal superhero
The "S" on your chest stands for "Self"
So gather your forces
And give thanks and gratitude
Because it's you
That will save you



Figure 5. Video still of *Spring* showing chalk calligraphy on blackboard.

Akbari: My involvement in this improvised experience, collaborating with a musician and visual artist/calligrapher, was not a first for me. As a hip hop practitioner and rap artist, I've participated in cyphers (hip hop improv sharing circles) with multi-disciplinary artists such as musicians, graffiti artists, and calligraphers simultaneously expressing. However, this experience with Jesse and Jim was the first time I have participated in a collaboration like this as a co-performer and co-researcher for academic study, and the first time creating with these two artists. In the beginning of each piece, I had moments of doubt. I thought, if it's improvised, is it true? How can words be improvised without a prompt? Without an impulse or nudge? If no prompt, would the words have any direction or sense? And if words have no sense (of direction), what is being communicated? So, to secure the safe start of each piece, I decided to comment metaphorically on how I was feeling in the moment. This gave me a doorway to formulate ideas and to travel with Jesse and Jim. After about twenty seconds into each piece, I knew that, as a poet, I would have to introduce literary devices such as theme and mood, allegory and contrast, regardless of where the music and calligraphy were headed. Poetry's intent is to deliver words in a cohesive and purposeful way, so I intentionally place poetic elements such as repetition and personification into the work to create a sense of completeness. After about one minute into each piece, I began to feel comfortable that the improvised poem was underway, and I would then express poetics not based on my initial feeling, but based on the music and calligraphy from my co-creators.

I realized at about two minutes into the first piece that if Jesse or Jim were to stop contributing at any time, the direction and sense of what I felt my poetic expressions had to deliver would have been threatened. I started to sense that, wherever the improvisation was headed, after starting with each other, we needed each other to get there. This is not often my experience in hip hop where competitiveness is at the root of many cyphers. In this experience with Jim and Jesse, I felt that to maintain the harmony of the writing, music, and poetics, I needed to depend heavily on the mechanics of storytelling, marking beginnings, climaxes, and conclusions with my tone, timing, and intonations. While I was comfortable with this, I completed each piece with similar thoughts to those I shared when I began each piece: "if I begin with an unspoken prompt to help me embark on the poem, is the experience truly improvised?"

Stewart: Jim selected certain words from Jamaal's poetry to write calligraphically on the blackboard. He also engaged with the poetry in a dialogic manner, adding words and phrases that complemented (and at times complicated) the poetry and provided prompts to which Jamaal could respond. For example, in response to the line "Find that staff that shall not break," Jim wrote the word "break" on the board. Then, in response to Jamaal's line "This vortex of creativity," Jim used his hand to smudge the word "break." A few moments later, Jamaal acknowledged the gesture by incorporating the word "smudge" into his poetry with the line "Smudge its essence into the back of your mind."

Davies: Music is generally considered one of the most abstract art forms, with (at best) oblique and personal connections to semantic meaning. This contributed to my difficulty in using Jesse's prompts in the first series of improvisations. Unsurprisingly, it was easier to use Jamaal's improvised poetry to inspire written words, and the synergy between the spoken and written words is clear.

For *The Centre of Time*, I thought to write the word "feeling" before any music or spoken words. But I soon latched onto Jamaal's theme of time. Many of the words written are on this theme, including "present," "today," "tomorrow," "yesterday," and "seconds." Most of the words I wrote were lifted directly from the spoken words.

In *Let it Go*, I began with a long, horizontal line, suggesting the representation of silence in a sonic waveform, confident that I would be able to use it as a stroke for a future letter. It ended up being the T of “protecting.” After the phrase “let it go” appeared several times in the poem, I thought it worth emphasizing in calligraphy, so I wrote it in pink chalk three times.

I mostly wrote words selected from Jamaal’s poetry. Upon writing the word “break,” I had the urge to wipe the chalk with my hand. I did this for two reasons. First, the word “break” suggests a change, and I had not used my hands on the chalk wall in any improvisation so far. Second, the word “break” has a hard sound, and I wanted to contrast it with the smudge I made with my hand.

For *Spring*, I began with “nothing dies.” This was in reference to a conversation the three of us had before we’d started, talking about how music styles come and go but do not fully die. My action suggested that the space of improvisation is sufficiently mutable that seemingly extraneous occurrences taking place outside the frame of a performance can be incorporated into the fabric of the improvisation and serve as prompts for further action. The words “nothing dies” and “the destiny map” were the only phrases that were not lifted directly from the poetry.

Stewart: Unlike our initial duo improvisations, in which I responded primarily to the visual aesthetics of the calligraphy and to the sound of the chalk on the blackboard, I responded primarily to the rhythm, cadence, and semantic content of Jamaal’s spoken poetry in the trio setting, though my attention did shift to the calligraphy at various points. As Garry Hagberg notes, “[a] player will have a form of attention that is constantly in motion, tracking what has happened within foregrounded elements, what has happened in other tracked elements, and then more generally what has happened in what we might call a semi-backgrounded (i.e., not foregrounded but not ignored either) foundation” (490).

At times, I tried to respond to particular words with analogous musical gestures, a practice sometimes referred to as “word painting.” In response to the line “A wasp can sting you in an instant and you will feel it forever,” for example, I flicked the bell of my ride cymbal with my middle finger to represent the wasp’s sting. A few seconds later in response to the words “Stay sharp,” I accented the floor tom within the context of the groove I was playing with my hands. Another example of word painting comes later in the piece: in response to Jamaal’s reference to “scars that life slides into our drawer,” I played a rhythmic scratch on the snare drum that introduces a scar-like sonic rupture into the groove. In response to the lines “For not believing that yes, these tears are real / And as they drop and dry,” I loosened the time and introduced a sparser musical texture in which I played single finger strokes on my toms and snare drum to represent the sound of tear drops falling. In response to the lines “That the seconds will always go by / Meaning there will always be time,” the groove becomes less dense still, almost like a ticking clock, to convey a sense of passing time. Then, in response to the line “And time is always good,” I reintroduced (and intensified) the earlier groove to suggest that musical time—in this case, in the form of an Afrological groove-oriented cyclical rhythmic pattern—is indeed good.

In contrast, the second improvisation begins with an arrhythmic musical texture on the drum set in dialogue with the sound of the chalk and Jamaal’s poetry. At the 2:01 mark, in response to the line “Go Beneath,” I hint at a sense of metric regularity and groove, but return shortly thereafter to the preceding arrhythmic musical texture. However, I didn’t abandon this musical idea altogether. Rather, I tried to let it “go beneath” the prevailing musical texture in the hope that an opportunity would arise to reintroduce it and develop it further. That opportunity did present itself at the 3:19 mark with the line “Bounce upon the vibration like drumskins resonate /

Tempos and timbres.” At that point, I brought back the earlier incipient groove in a more explicit manner.

Around the 5:25 mark, Jamaal’s line “And to rain, rain, rain” brought to mind a song titled “Rain, Rain, Rain” by the Canadian indie rock band The Rheostatics, which features a friend of mine, Dave Clark, on drums. That song happens to be a personal favourite, so I tried to reference (or at least allude to) it in the drum groove I was playing, while still responding to the musical context at hand. All our decisions as improvisers are informed by our previous life experiences, including all the music to which we have listened. Jamaal instinctively paused at this point, giving me room to develop the Dave Clark-inspired groove. In response to his following line, “To bring it like thunder and lightning,” I played a two-bar drum fill resolving with an accent on beat one of the time cycle, lining up with the word “forced.” This was one of the few times in which my anticipatory imagination (to return to Bertinetto’s term) meshed with the outcome, resulting in a satisfying moment of synchronicity.

In the final piece, I began by again scraping my fingernails on the head of a frame drum in a circular fashion to create a wash of sound, eventually introducing a roll in my right hand punctuated by occasional left-hand finger snaps at the drum’s edge in the spaces between Jamaal’s words. I appreciated his use of silence, which gave me more opportunities to enter into the audio-visual tapestry we were weaving. In response to the line “This element of exchange can feel like fire sometimes,” I filled out the right-hand finger roll with my left index finger to articulate a fast triplet roll that I thought reflected the intensity of fire. In response to the lines “But I love you / So you keep listening,” I slowed and decreased the volume of the frame-drum roll, fading to silence. At this point, the sound of the chalk became audible once again, so I reintroduced fingernail scratches on the drumhead in response to (and in dialogue with) the chalk sounds, maintaining a sparse texture.

Moments later, Jamaal returned to the lyrical motif of fire with the lines “It’s frustrating / To constantly go into a house on fire / Trying to save a vision / And exit without being burned.” I considered returning to the rapid triplet roll that I had used to represent fire musically earlier, but it didn’t feel appropriate in the context of the sparse and quiet musical texture at the time. So, I opted for a different sound: moistening my fingertip, I rubbed it against the drumhead to produce several long moans that reintroduced the resonance of the drum in a manner that I hoped would respect the delicate preceding musical texture while building a bridge to something of greater intensity. In response to the words “exit without being burned,” I finally reintroduced the rapid triplet roll, which transitions to a rhythmic groove in response to the lines “And since you’ve shown me how to prepare for this inferno / This challenge that remains pasted across the screen of my eyes.” The rhythmic groove underpins the remainder of the piece.

Discussion

Our experiences in the musicallygraphics project suggest, not surprisingly, that interarts improvisation offers both challenges and opportunities. When improvisers collaborate across different art forms, there is less opportunity for synergy, but also less opportunity for conflict. An important part of effective improvisation is responding to and building productively on what has come before. An improviser responds to the prompts or offers made earlier, either by themselves or a co-improviser. “Rejecting” previous offers can result in disjointed, less compelling experiences for both the improvisers and the audience. Although the idea of accepting or rejecting offers has been theorized most fully in theatre improv, it is applicable in other improvisatory practices as well, including interarts improvisations such as the musicallygraphics project.

If we look at the vocabulary used to describe works of music, calligraphy, and spoken-word poetry, there is substantial overlap, but there are also clear cases of non-overlap. For example, the visual composition of a work of calligraphy can only have, at best, metaphorical analogs in music and spoken-word poetry.⁹ In our initial collaboration, Jesse responded to the spiral shape of the calligraphy by using circular motions of the bow on the waterphone. But the music generated wasn't recognizably circular or spiral-like. The correspondence between the circular visual composition and the music is metaphorical and difficult for an audience to detect.

Music and spoken-word poetry can both have variation in volume, pitch, and timbre—qualities that calligraphy does not have. This is not to discount the power of metaphor, and there are reliable “cross-modal illusions” that interarts improvisers can exploit (Armontrout 1618–27). Suppose the spoken-word improviser shouted a phrase. A calligrapher could respond synergistically by writing a word with large letters (a metaphorical correspondence), while the musician improviser could respond with louder sounds (a literal correspondence). But sometimes, there are no reliable metaphors to draw upon. It is difficult to think of what a musician might create to recognizably respond to Jim writing “atrocious habituation,” for example. Music can evoke emotions, but rarely specific semantic meanings, such as “Ford Taurus” or “debt.” With few exceptions, music is mainly capable of evoking emotions describable on a two-dimensional scale of arousal and valence (Russell 1161). Exceptions include whimsy and tenderness, but one cannot reliably and specifically evoke emotions such as jealousy, relief, guilt, or adoration with music alone (Davies and Kraemer 249).

Perhaps the closest music can get to specific semantic meaning is through auditory imitation. Recall, for example, how Jesse represented sounds like tears falling in response to the lines “For not believing that yes, these tears are real / And as they drop and dry” with finger strokes on the drums. These strategies are limited, of course, to concepts reliably associated with specific sounds.

But dimensional incompatibilities also make it harder to make mistakes, or to explicitly reject offers. Suppose two musicians are improvising. One could reject offers in many ways: by playing in a different key (if playing a jazz standard, for example); by playing over someone or cutting them off; by refusing to use an established rhythm; and so on. But it's difficult to see how, for example, Jesse could play the waterphone in a way that would seem wildly discordant with the calligraphy, no matter what is being written. Similarly, aside from the general affect created by music, it would be hard to generate calligraphy that clearly “doesn't fit” with any particular music.

We can look at an art form as having different parameters or dimensions. Music has dimensions such as rhythm, harmony, melody, and orchestration. Spoken-word poetry has word choice, rhythm, timbre, and volume. Calligraphy has colour, composition, word choice, media (ink versus chalk), and, in the case of calligraphic chalk marks on a wall, rhythm. What our initial improvised interarts experiments have suggested is that within *shared dimensions* across art forms, one is in an improvisational space more similar to single-art improvisation, such as two musicians improvising together. In our work, both calligraphy and spoken word share the dimension of *word choice*. In this space, it is easier to perceive—and to accept or reject—offers, synergies, and contrasts.¹⁰ Perceptions such as these are more difficult, but not impossible, for dimensions that are shared at a metaphorical level. If a musician offers a rising pitch sequence, a calligrapher might respond by writing upward, and the spoken-word poet might talk about the sky or respond more literally by going up in pitch.

We also have dimensions that are more or less incompatible, such as the colour of text in calligraphy and the rhythm of a drumbeat, although it is possible to find semantic relationships between almost any two things, no matter how disparate they are. Perhaps “incompatible” is too strong a word. A drummer might indeed find some drumbeat that, in their mind, corresponds to or contrasts meaningfully with the colour of text. The “incompatibility” of these correspondences and contrasts likely would be lost on most audience members, as the metaphor is idiosyncratic and not shared on a wider cultural level. Again, such incompatible dimensions mean it is harder to create an explicit synergy, but they also reduce the risk of the improvisation being incoherent.

The following table suggests the different dimensions in our three artforms and how those dimensions might overlap across forms in literal, metaphorical, or incompatible ways. For example, when we look at the feature of “Orchestration/Timbre,” we see that both (spoken) poetry and music share this dimension in a straightforward way: a voice can be loud, as can an instrument. In terms of orchestration, music might have a drum or a saxophone, and poetry might have a voice of a grown woman or a male child. But we see that calligraphy choices can offer nothing to reflect orchestration or timbre in a way that would be recognizable to the audience. (That is, it might be metaphorically related in the mind of the improvisers, but the connection would not be discernible to the audience.) Volume, on the other hand, is shared between spoken-word poetry and music, but for calligraphy the best one can do is relate metaphorically: one might write with large or thick letters, but largeness and thickness are only like differences in the volume of sound in a metaphorical way.

Table 6. Comparison of literal, metaphorical, and incompatible features of interarts improvisation.

	Literal/Shared	Metaphorical	Incompatible
Rhythm	Poetry/Music	Music/Calligraphy Poetry/Calligraphy	
Orchestration/Timbre	Poetry/Music		Music/Calligraphy Poetry/Calligraphy
Volume	Poetry/Music	Music/Calligraphy Poetry/Calligraphy	
Word Choice		Calligraphy/Music Poetry/Music	Poetry/Music
Pitch	Poetry/Music	Music/Calligraphy	
Colour		Poetry/Calligraphy	Calligraphy/Music
Hand			Calligraphy/Music Calligraphy/Poetry
Visual Composition		Calligraphy/Music Calligraphy/Poetry	

Interarts collaborators can practice exploring synergies and contrasts for literal and metaphorical dimensions. Recall Levinson’s observation that, in hybrid art forms, “[w]e are on

watch for sparks of similarity and contrast to be struck from events in different realms occurring simultaneously" (11). For incompatible dimensions, there is more freedom, in the sense that there are fewer constraints; in such cases, improvisors can focus primarily on making their respective contributions compatible with whatever the group has already produced.

Writing about group musical improvisation, Garry Hagberg emphasizes "the interrelations between the collectively inflected intentions of the individuals as they work together." Further, for Hagberg, "the act of working together is not a moment, but a process, within which we coordinate individual actions into a cohesive unity that transcends the capacity of solo action, where this involves attending to the distributed progress of the agreed-upon action *in the act of performing it*" (484, emphasis in original). In the musicalligraphics project, we responded to one another's improvised prompts across our respective art forms in an effort to coordinate, and to transcend the capacity of, our respective solo actions, to articulate a unified (albeit multi-sensory) series of improvisations that depended crucially on each of our contributions. Put another way, as Jamaal writes above, "we needed each other to get there."

Experienced improvisers often advise those who are new to improvisation to "not think too much" during the improvisatory process. Through the process of analyzing our collaborative multi-modal performances, it has become clear to us that we do, in fact, think a great deal while improvising, though not necessarily in an analytical way that would take us out of the moment. Rather, we make many split-second decisions while improvising as we constantly evaluate and re-evaluate the context in which we find ourselves and do our best to respond accordingly, balancing our own creative impulses with those of our co-creators. Improvisation is an art of constant negotiation and renegotiation. In the case of multi-modal, interarts improvisation, improvisers must negotiate with one another across multiple forms of difference and sensory input in real time. Our initial experiments in the musicalligraphics project suggest that cross-modal negotiations of this nature are worth the effort both artistically and as an avenue for further research.

Notes

¹A video of Davies describing the process of creating the thunderwords hand is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEu_WuNDUlo.

²See Gu, Gan (古干). *The Three Steps of Modern Calligraphy*.

³Master calligrapher Denis Brown uses the musical metaphor of "polyrhythm" to describe changes in spacing between letterforms: www.calligraphy.tv/courses/ital2poly/contents/5ed268305f0fe.

⁴Ideas related to "yes, and" appear in Johnstone's *Impro: Improvisation and Theatre* and Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theater*, but the origin of the exact phrase is unknown. Del Close and Charna Halpern named their production company "Yes And Productions" in the 1980s ("Yes And").

⁵Though the terminology may differ, other theories of improvisation offer related concepts. Georg Bertram, for example, suggests that "improvisations are all about how to react to impulses that improvisers are confronted with within the improvisation itself. This becomes clearer if we say that every impulse can itself be understood as a response. [. . .] Even the start

of an improvisation performance has to be understood as a reaction to previous improvisations and whatever else improvisations react to" (Bertram 25).

⁶I could also rightly say that "misspelling is the enemy of calligraphy." In this piece, I even misspelled Jesse's name. When you are focusing on the letters and the layout, it's easy to forget where you are in a sentence or make spelling mistakes.

⁷This is "anticipatory musical imagery" (Jakubowski 197).

⁸Bertinetto examines the relationship between improvisation and imagination in some detail, concluding "it is not true that performers have no imagination or plans concerning the performance; but what performers imagine, plan and decide during the performance is influenced by the performance itself. Hence, projective imagination is not ontologically prevented by artistic improvisation, it rather moves along with the improvised performance" ("Performing Imagination" 87). He goes so far to define improvisation as "imagination producing its inventions immediately" (90).

⁹Written poetry does have a visual composition, with some "graphic poets" using this dimension to great effect. But any such visual composition is lost in the audio version of a poem (Bradford 97–116).

¹⁰Dean and Smith make a similar point about what they call "sound/word improvising," noting that "semiotic exchange is possible because the two systems have common characteristics, even if in different degrees. [. . .] The sound/word medium therefore permits exploration of what constitutes meaning in each component, allowing new types of meaning to emerge as part of their cross-over" (131).

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