

Liner Notes to “*Open Space*”
by Rishin Singh

I interviewed Jason at a house in Marrickville (the suburb of Sydney that the *NOW now Festival* calls home) whose inhabitants are a revolving line-up of experimental musicians. At the time of the interview, my fellow *NOW now* curators – Sam Pettigrew and Laura Altman – were living there. Jason and I entered through the backdoor which is always unlocked. Laura was in the kitchen cooking lunch.

I arrived armed with a notebook filled with questions written down exactly as I intended to phrase them, alterations in the size of my writing and the darkness of ink to remind me of the most appealing cadences of sentences that I had rehearsed to myself – repeatedly, silently – accents emphasised with capital letters.

At one point in our interview I suggested that there exists a paradoxical anxiety of impermanence amongst improvisers, where on the one hand we celebrate the ephemerality intrinsic to our practice while simultaneously trying to hold that old transient down, handcuffing him with microphones and hard drives at every available opportunity. I then asked Jason whether he thought his compositions are an attempt to combat that fleeting moment of sound that is already dissipating in the moment that it enters the world.

Jason answered “No, I’ve never thought of that actually, what I was thinking of though just now is actually, it’s not just my composition, cos everyone participates in the composition, because they have time in the piece to think about what they’re going to play, and to change that after the rehearsal, and so it’s kind of like um... it’s a collaboration actually!”

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Rishin: It’s a collaboration of improvisers right? But at the same time it’s you as composer setting parameters for when we play, and so setting up a hierarchy within that group.

Jason: Ok, that’s true I mean, if you want to look at it that way I’m dictating what’s to be done up to a point. But I don’t have a problem with that. I guess there’s been a lot of discussion about hierarchies in improvisation, and composers, and even Cardew came out really strong against composers at one point but then later in his career he came back to that and I think, I’m comfortable with it. I feel like it’s open enough that I’m comfortable with it.

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After the rehearsal earlier that afternoon I talked to Chris Abrahams about *Open Space*. He remarked how much he enjoyed relinquishing all responsibility for the creation of the music and instead attempting absolute fidelity to Jason’s placement of events in the space/time of the score.

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Somehow in all the excitement of our interview, I made the rookie error of not hitting the *RECORD* button on the audio recorder for a large chunk of our time together. And so now, eleven months after the fact, I’m writing this based on a combination of some recorded audio material, email exchanges, and written notes from before and after our interview.

What is lost or gained in relying on memory and impressions rather than a supposedly ‘true’ document of the event as it happened? I’m sitting in my living room listening to a recording of our performance of *Open Space*. I am listening to music quite different to the performance I participated in. As Jason argues: *‘the recording is one thing, the performance another. And, in fact, the two often don’t have as much to do with one another as one might think. So much about a live musical event*

has to do with the space, the people in that space, the sense of being there and experiencing the music unfold as it happens, etc. A recording provides another experience altogether.' I listen back to some of our recorded interview and remember that Jason was eating a muffin at the time, playing with the crumbs on the table – broad sweeps of his hand collecting them in piles. I can hear it in the recording. It is almost a shock to hear Jason's voice again, as having not seen each other for eleven months, when I read his emails his words speak in my own accent in my head. Now I obsess over the softness of his pronunciation of the letter 't', and the speed at which he jumps from one idea to another mid-sentence as he tries to answer my rather muddled questions.

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One way to understand Jason's compositional process is as of bodies as both conduits for, and creators of, sound: the ensemble members record themselves playing; Jason listens to these recordings; for each musician Jason draws shapes on a grid whose x-axis represents dynamics and y-axis represents duration; at the performance the ensemble members perform these shapes distributed across the grid; Jason records the performance; Jason sends the ensemble members a recording of their performance to listen to for approval to release it; the digital 1s and 0s created from microphones and computer capturing our performance are converted into vibrations etched into pieces of vinyl which you are now holding in your hands; you put the record on your turntable, hit play, listen.

One way to understand my process in writing this is as of bodies as both conduits for, and creators of, sound: I record Jason and I talking; I listen to this recording; I type words on a computer; I send these words to Jason who reads them, hearing them in his head (probably in his own accent); Jason edits the words; the edited words get printed onto the cardboard which you are now holding in your hands; you are reading these words, hearing them in your head (probably in your own accent).

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Jason: The scores themselves they're essentially abstract which means there's no meaning with their form aside from timeline, the duration of the piece: when people should play and when they should stop playing, and a vertical axis, which is the dynamics: how loud and how soft they should play. And when I say it's abstract, they're graphical forms which each player is free to interpret as they wish. So I don't tell them beforehand what they should do, what they shouldn't do, I just tell them 'please, if you can, stay within the given parameters – the time parameters and the dynamic parameters' – and then I leave that up to everyone else to decide what they do.

Rishin: You say it's abstract and it has no meaning but however there seems to be quite programmatic elements too...

Jason: OK well when I say they're abstract I mean ... it's not like a note where you have a *C* on a musical staff. You have a, for a lack of a better example, a series of squares, so the squares don't have any embedded meaning like a note on a staff so that's all I mean by abstract. But the form of the piece is not abstract, I mean I have a certain sense of what I want to do with the people at hand, and what I want to achieve with the structure of the piece, or the balance of the players, the movement of the piece and how things flow. So that's all stuff I think of beforehand, and in fact what I found was, doing this piece for us in Sydney, is that I did this by hand and up 'til now I've done everything on the computer with *vector graphic* programs, so by doing this by hand I needed much more time to finish the score but it also kinda made me think about it more, so it kinda brought me deeper into the piece, taking more time to write it and yeah...

Rishin: Why? Why did you do it by hand this time?

Jason: I felt like I wanted to be, in a sense, more engaged with the process of composing it. Of

course there's different processes, different levels of how you compose – there's a conceptual, mental process, but I feel also there's a kind of process where I'm putting forms to paper ... or on computer putting forms to whatever: a file, but by putting those forms to paper and really taking time and thinking about how those forms feel and how they're being drawn and it kind of puts me more in connection with the piece and maybe more in connection with the people playing the piece.

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Jason: When I make a shape I have an idea of what that's gonna mean musically, or what I would expect it to mean, or what I would even like it to mean.

[edited transcript of email exchange #1]

Jason: I think about these pieces in perhaps as much a visual as musical way. If the score "looks" right to me then it often "sounds" right, which [...] is also part of the premise behind these pieces: the translation of sound into visual forms and vice versa.

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Of all the nine musicians for whom *Open Space* was composed, only Matt Earle and Adam Sussman share a part in the score. I imagine this is because Jason was well aware that their duo *Stasis Duo* have been performing together for a long time (they released a download only recording together, *Earle, Kahn, Sussman : Concerts Melbourne+Sydney*, AVANTWHATEVER 006). It is interesting to see, however, that Laura Altman and Monika Brooks have parts almost identical in duration, dynamics and shape type. No other musicians have their events scored so that they are always playing together. Perhaps Jason knew that they have been playing as a duo since at least 2008, but if this were the case, why didn't he score them in the same way as *Stasis Duo*? Otherwise Laura and Monika's partnering in *Open Space* was a result of Jason's curatorial ear, upon hearing their individual tracks sent to him, decided, without realising that they were an already established duo, that their musical temperaments compliment each other very well.

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The original purpose for interviewing Jason about *Open Space* was for an article I was going to write for a zine about the intersections of exploratory music and politics. The zine was abandoned but the original idea has now taken a different, digital, form. As I was a member of the *Open Space* ensemble and we had already conducted the interview, Jason asked me if I would like to turn our conversation into the liner notes for this record.

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Performing this piece involved a form of highly active, almost synaesthetic visual listening. As I played, trying to focus on my own shapes I could see on the score with whom I was going to play in the future and for how long. Because this particular graphic score is so prescriptive in regards to duration and dynamics, I spent a lot of time pre-guessing how others would interpret their shapes in their durational and dynamic parameters in order to make my own participation in the collective authorship of the piece as meaningful as possible.

Despite the independence of each musician's designated images from all others, I felt like our contributions were not intended to behave like independent cells in a larger sound field. I felt obliged to make what I played relevant to what I had already heard and what I imagined would happen next. I think that most of the ensemble members responded to the score in this way, and so what our performance of *Open Space* created was the sonic residue of the musicians' deep involvement with all the shapes on the page, not just their own.

Knowing each other's music and temperaments (to greater and lesser degrees), particular shapes on each musician's timelines sounded different and performer-specific in my imagination before they had even played them. In this way we were participating in a conversational sense-making process, reconciling abstract images with other abstract images according to whose name they corresponded with. This process of divination, by which I mean ascribing meaning to abstract images through their relationship to active agents collectively performing in a linear timeline, took the form of a constant feedback loop between the visual and the sonic: the expectation of a sound derived from the shape of an image accorded to a particular musician collided with the actual sound that resulted from that musician's interpretation of the image, and the resulting sound affecting one's expectation of that musician's interpretation of their next shape.

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Rishin: You describe your scores as 'open systems', but if you were to improvise with that same group of musicians would it not create a similar result?

Jason: No I don't think so because what happens with the scores are two things which push people into another space for improvising. First of all they are put in different juxtapositions which they might not normally put themselves in if they were free improvising. So for example in this piece, I don't know, maybe you're playing with John and if we'd have been improvising maybe you would be playing with him at another time, or maybe you wouldn't play at all, or you would play the whole time together. So that's one thing, another thing is the time limits, it also puts people in kind of a position where they might not necessarily have engaged themselves in the improvisational process. So what I like in improvisation is when people get kind of knocked off balance and they're not comfortable with what they're doing, and that's when interesting things happen. Like when maybe you feel like 'ah this isn't working!', and then...but... I think in the end it could be more interesting when it's a situation which is not optimal for the player. So you could say 'yeah this is antithetical to free improvisation, I'm dictating when you should play', but on the other hand I think its another way of improvising within a **time context**.

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[edited transcript of email exchange #2]

Rishin: I asked you about what happens in the mixing process and you said that you didn't do very much, just making sure everyone can be heard. You said "I'm not going to take their playing and rework it". I guess this is that grey area between improv and composition that you situated these pieces in. But I want to just challenge this grey area a bit and see how far it stretches: why are you hesitant to rework people's playing, when in your writing, you are kind of *pre-working* it?

Jason: I agree that I am by definition pre-factoring much of the events in these playing situations by using scores which stipulate certain playing parameters. On the other hand, what I'm interested in here is the whole process of creating this framework for people to interact in. And this framework is intended to represent a certain chronology of events of people actually playing together. By re-mixing a recording-- re-ordering certain events -- I would be ignoring the interaction of the players in the context of the score. In this case, I wouldn't need to go to all the trouble of composing the score, traveling somewhere to have people play it, go to all the trouble of recording it. I could just solicit recordings from different musicians and re-work all their sounds on computer. But this would be a completely different approach and one I'm not really interested in pursuing. The entire social element would vanish with this way of working. Joseph Beuys' extension of the idea of art to social forms (Soziale Plastik --social sculpture) was a real inspiration for me in doing these scores: working with the social interaction of people in the context of musical interaction.