

## Conclusion

**Unit Model: An Agential Improvisatory Performer-Camera Practice**

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This research developed the *Unit Model* – an interdisciplinary practice for the development of improvisational filmmaking. It is an interdisciplinary form, which encompasses camera, sound and performers – a new ensemble practice of improvisation.

This enquiry used a process of practice-research and six ensemble workshops to develop a new form and model of improvisation practice. This *Unit Model* practice works within an interdisciplinary ensemble form using a shared set of modes and strategies. This enacted dynamic structure enables awareness and communication between members of an ensemble and instigates a co-constitutive filmmaking process between interdisciplinary roles – performers, camera and sound. The *Unit Model* formulates new methods to enable and develop practices of improvisational filmmaking and performer-camera relations. These methods were iteratively derived and explored through each ensemble practice-research workshop and distilled into the *Unit Model Games*. This collection of accessible and playful workshop games is designed to build ensemble skills and disseminate the *Unit Model* practice.

The research examined the following questions:

- *What strategies might form a model for an improvisational filmmaking practice?*

- *How can a filmmaking process (including the roles of camera operator and performer) be reconfigured through ensemble improvisation?*
- *How might agency be understood and afforded within an improvisational filmmaking practice?*

## **Overview of Research**

Three *Contextual Video Essays* framed the practice-research enquiry and examined: improvisatory performer-camera approaches within the emerging field of improvisational filmmaking practice; improvisatory frameworks for developing practices and skills; and a theoretical framework for considering dynamic relations within improvisational filmmaking. The five *Workshop Methodology Films* and related *Workshop-Films* trace the development of the *Unit Model* through ensemble practices and methodological analysis. This was a methodological enquiry working within the discourses of improvisation. Developing the methodologies, understanding and development of the working model often took precedence over improvised filmed material. The improvised material tested, developed and refined methods through practice.

The three contextual videos in combination, articulate key theoretical influences that informed the practice. These theoretical ideas were applied through practice by all the ensembles. The multiple layered methodologies informed this emerging practice, and the development, design and construction of the model. The model informed the practice, and each iteration of practice in turn shaped the evolving model and its application.

*What strategies might form a model for an improvisational filmmaking practice?*

The strategies used in the practice were derived collectively by the ensembles through each workshop. My use and application of Edgar Landgraf's theoretical work within this enquiry provided a way of considering and applying his theories as a means of *formulation* of new practices. Landgraf's methodological theories influenced the conceptualisation and incremental formulation of the model through practice. His conception of improvisation, which entails processing and reprocessing elements to generate dynamic structures was a key concept in the formulation of the model. These theoretical ideas were, for me, became generative and practical tools for the construction of a model and not solely used for theoretical interpretation and analysis of an existing process.

Identifying specific strategies came about through improvised solutions in workshops. These were then selected and refined within the ensemble. The strategies were assimilated through games and short experimental improvisations. The reflective methodologies of Donald Schön, which encompass stages of exploration, hypothesis testing and refinement, provided a framework for this process. Results were iteratively collated in the schematics. The schematics became vehicles for organising and considering the intra-relations between different elements. The schematics became a 'table of contents' of the evolving model of possible strategies. These diagrams helped coalesce elements and their potential configurations and this laying out of relations could be physically observed and used in the workshops.

It was an on-going reference for all the ensembles within the workshops, and this can be seen in much of the workshop documentation. I realised that this translation of improvisatory strategies into an evolving diagrammatic form afforded ensemble participants an effective way of engaging with the material and enabled different ways of considering these improvisatory practices – specifically when working with multiple participants. It was a way of distilling results between us all in a distributable form. This ongoing distillation of strategies occurred through practice and was refined into the sharable *Unit Model Games* in the latter stages of the research. This stage moving from schematic to games forms marked a critical point for me in the research. It moved from analytical processes in understanding the model to a refinement and dissemination of practice to others within a workshop environment designed to explore it.

During the research, the workshop improvisations operated on multiple levels: individual personal practices; evolution of specific techniques; and finding ways to communicate between the group. This developed a rich ethos of problem solving in the workshops, and I became aware of the value of using improvisatory processes as the primary research tool to derive practical solutions. Problem solving and the ensembles' understanding of the research aims enabled a reflexive way of working as a group and detailed analysis of process from experienced improvising practitioners.

The challenge for an interdisciplinary practice of improvisation is the meeting between the various disciplines. I realised that this required the creation of a shared framework for improvisation that could operate across the various disciplines – performers, camera and sound. To some degree the visibility of the schematic was a physical manifestation of this shared framework and a common reference across each discipline. The methodological

emphasis of this research enquiry afforded ways of considering and understanding models and forms from different disciplines. My own interdisciplinary practices of improvisation within theatre and music informed how I perceived improvisation practices *across* different disciplinary boundaries and enabled me to understand their potential influence.

Bruno Nettle's examination of improvisation models in music provided one of these additional frameworks. I recognised from my experience as a musician that the structural form of improvisation he was examining had potential applications to my research. This was an understanding that the modes and structures he was articulating were components that we were already developing as a group. It provided a way of thinking about the strategies and their ensemble deployment. I realised that this would necessitate a translation and adaptation of his ideas and this was specifically the use of modes as a practical structuring device. Modes provided a useful way of considering this developing practice from the multiple points of view of each discipline. The use of modes became a conceptual framing device that enabled a meeting of disciplines through improvisation and use of the emerging model components. The conceptual developments of modes as the primary description became a communication device and way of sharing and collectively reading players during the improvisations.

Nettle's conception of an improvisation model in music found an equivalent in the *Unit Model* practice. It provided a way for players to understand each other's actions and decisions and recognise when specific strategies were being used spontaneously. The organisation of the schematics into the categories of *Framing*, *Movement* and *Structure* re-enforced the understanding of these modes and provided ways of explicitly

communicating them within the ensemble. Other examples from music including John Zorn and John Stevens each provided specific ways of approaching the development of the *Unit Model Games*: Zorn's use of a 'prompter' as used in *Cobra* and Steven's primary focus on relational skills in his workshop games both having direct influence on the final *Unit Model Games* format. As the research progressed, I began to understand the importance of prioritising ways of building relational skills within the ensemble as key to realising the operation of the model in practice.

*How can a filmmaking process (including roles of camera operator and performer) be reconfigured through ensemble improvisation?*

*Unit Model* is a new practice with no former conceptual framework to adapt. Existing models of practice from filmmaking and improvisation provide some basic strategies, as seen in *Contextual Video Essay 1*. But there has been no formulation of a single improvisational film model, which can be applied and disseminated. This enquiry was the conception and development of a new improvisational filmmaking practice and the development of methods to communicate and disseminate it. The aim was the formulation of a practice that could exist outside the realms of the research workshops and the confines of academia, and be used and built upon by other practitioners. I became aware of the necessity of developing an accessible, interdisciplinary language and terminologies for communicating and sharing – ways of conceiving and describing the practice to other practitioners. The practice was developed through the building and sharing of new skills. The research continually aimed to be public facing and maximize the potential impact of

the research by creating a distributable form that could be explored and extended by others.

As seen in *Contextual Video Essay 2*, Viola Spolin's conception and structuring of theatrical workshops pays particular attention to and consideration of ontological and epistemological aspects of improvisation practice. I recognised that this was in fact already at work within the *Unit Model* ensembles – a recognition and understanding by the players of the entangled ways of knowing and being which had evolved through the shared workshop practices. I knew all of my collaborators well, having improvised on stage with them and trained alongside them in practices of theatrical improvisation. This shared knowledge of improvisation practices was invaluable to the level of trust, risk, experimentation and spontaneity that could be observed in the workshops. Spolin's approach informed the structural design of the *Unit Model Games* through her use of shared problem solving as an integral device within a learning environment.

As the *Unit Model* coalesced into a working and understandable form that could be shared and experienced, it became clear that the distribution of agency inherent in this improvisatory framework enabled new interdisciplinary ways of working. The development of the *Unit Model* practice involved many configurations of ensemble and a total of eighteen collaborators. Each configuration was required to engage with the evolving dynamic structure of the *Unit Model* and its iterative development.

The strategies within the *Unit Model* are not fixed or deployed using set configurations or combinations; the strategies are continually adapted, deployed and reconfigured by the participants during improvisation. The model must be assimilated by all of the

collaborators, so that they are able to understand, read, anticipate and react. This relies on developing ways of knowing and being that can accommodate and respond to shared dynamic situations. Workshop participants developed the ability to create combinations of strategies that were bespoke to their ensemble, innovative ways of mixing and layering these now familiar working components. Collaborators improvised with practitioners from other disciplines and developed a shared understanding through this enacted dynamic structure. They could observe how distributed agency was visible unfolding amongst them in the context of the *Unit Model* – an evolving literacy and confidence in being able to really play with its open structure.

*How might agency be understood and afforded within an improvisational filmmaking practice?*

Karen Barad's conceptual reworking of agency as distributed and relational – was tangible and evident within the workshops and in the context of this practice. Barad's ontology *agential realism* informed ways of considering improvisation and were *realised through practice*. These concepts were explored and developed between the members of the ensemble during improvisations – developing a form of disparate or agential awareness of the potential agencies at play. Improvisers were actively engaged with ways of perceiving, experiencing and being during improvisations in this new interdisciplinary context. Communicating these ideas through non-technical language and practical experimentation became part of the research process and helped these ideas become embedded within our ensemble practices. Baradian terminologies such as intra-action were not used explicitly during the workshops. The *Unit Model Games*, for example, distill

Baradian ideas of intra-activity and dynamic relational structures but maintain an accessible form of language and public facing approach. This way of using theory within the practice-research was carried throughout the workshops and manifested in the accessible style and approach to the *Unit Model Games* as an output.

Working with an ensemble entailed having to continually share new processes and ideas. This was informed by my experience as an improviser: being with others within practice – reading, recognising, experiencing, responding, reacting and interacting with others. The active engagement with multiple dynamic agencies at play within the unfolding improvisations demanded an extension of skills on behalf of the participants. This extension of practice came from a reading and understanding of others within the ensemble and the use of modes in practice. I began to describe this as *agential awareness*.

The workshops functioned in multiple ways in the development of the model and its operation – a building of components that could be utilised, and the development of personal practices by each participant, which in turn fed into its development. These workshops were extensions of known practices from theatrical improvisation.

The games were designed for the development of skills and agential awareness to enable the unfolding of improvisation between the members of the ensemble. *Unit Model Games* are a vehicle for experiencing intra-activity within an ensemble practice. The Games are not a fixed set of rules to be deployed by cues. They enable a group to experience an unfolding dynamic structure, which is activated and enacted through practice. The games are vehicles for building intra-active skills that can be applied within an improvisational

filmmaking process. The modes enable group awareness. They provide a readable and shared structure. I became aware that the repetition of the games was necessary to afford players an opportunity to assimilate and familiarise themselves with the modes. The Games enabled players to experience dynamic situations, intra-act and respond to the unfolding shifting conditions within an improvisation.

The process of formulating the games led to a fundamental shift in my understanding of improvisation: I realised that the improvisation process at work in the *Unit Model* can be understood as unfolding iterative intra-activity and an enacted dynamic structure – an agential practice.

Whilst the *Unit Model* may not destabilise mainstream orthodoxies, it expands the potential applications of improvisation to making films and provides an alternative for projects working with open and exploratory developmental structures. Its open operational framework invites adaptations from theatre, choreography, media and fine art practices. The *Unit Model's* open, exploratory form offers practitioners rich possibilities for experimentation, by using modes and strategies that help formulate visual and conceptual palettes.

In October 2020, I used the games in a workshop that took place as part of the Master of Fine Arts programme in Scenography at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London. It was clear from the students' enthusiasm and speed of assimilation that they were ready for a creative practice that offered them a new, shared and dynamic experience.