Let’s Improv It

As a social species, humans are experts in collaboration. However, an understanding of the social glue that allows us to coordinate complex actions, within such dynamic environments, is limited and often speculative in nature. ‘Let’s Improv It’ was a summer school, with an intensive five day practice-lead investigation, where we explored psychological theories of the role and perception of physical and emotional touch. Joint actions and kinaesthetic empathy were introduced through improvised movement enquiries, with the aim to develop an understanding of others through embodied

The six researchers were interdisciplinary with backgrounds in Dance, Music, Psychology, Cognitive Science, Eastern Philosophy, and Cultural Studies, which collectively challenged perspectives of improvisation. These dialogues often transitioned to a practical enquiry. Holistic explorations unfolded through improvisation in response to scientific literature, and discussions on touch and kinaesthetic empathy through Radio Lectures. We found improvisation as a highly efficient and significant research tool in an exploration of verbal and non-verbal connections. Communicating this with the wider audience became an area of interest. We concluded that a shared movement experience was the mode to translate our complex and intertwined reflections, sensations and feelings into a structured workshop. Such an approach allowed for the process of being, and an avoidance of an end-goal, to be the focus by offering a space for curiosity where one can submerge into the process of durational investigation through a non-verbal, collective improvisation.

Radio Lecture in Practice

Scientific theories were introduced in the form of a Radio Lecture, which the collaborators engaged with simultaneously to their physical warm-up practice. This way of providing information allowed us to directly integrate new knowledge into our physical practice, through shared experience with each other, encouraging embodied reflection. We continued with an exploration of improvisation scores as reflection and application in practice as a form of research development.

Shared experience

Public were invited to enter the space in darkness, intended to reduce visual stimulation, as the dominant sensory input in everyday life, and encourage embodied knowledge through experiential improvisation. We planned minimal verbal instructions yet asked participants to lie on the floor, with closed eyes and follow a narrative into somatic awareness. We used improvisation scores from our research period to encourage connections through touch; starting with fingers, hands, and finally allowing participants’ bodies to connect. We freely engaged with the public, moving from task to task non-verbally, which concluded with a shared run then rest. The experience lasted 25 minutes, revealing the potential of shared movement, and the embodied communication between us, to transfer knowledge of our research to participants experientially. We concluded the experience in a circle, where participants had the opportunity to share and exchange their experience freely.

‘The stage where everyone moved in the space, bonding through touch with each other, became deeply sensual over time. I had never thought that touch, with people I don’t even know, could be so sensual.’

‘The most enjoyable was approaching someone who responded fully and then moving together in new unpredictable ways.’

‘I thought the touching would have been awkward but it was liberating. A shared experience of the senses.’