

This, Here, Now

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Cover image, collage of skies over Malham (UK)

# This, Here, Now

Invitations to Improvise

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Henry McPherson

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# Foreword

This short book contains a collection of texts conceived as invitations for improvisation performance and practice. They are written to be open to use in any medium/discipline/form, in studio/rehearsal/closed environments, and in live performance (for audience). They can be approached as scores or structures, research questions, discussion points, reflective tools, provocations, experiments, meditations, poems, or in any other way that practitioners might find useful and stimulating. For me, each text points to one (or several) of the diverse experiences and interlocking aspects of improvisation – a practice which I believe emerges richly through an entanglement of presence, awareness, responsiveness, receptivity, and activity. These texts are not intended to be prescriptive; rather, I offer them as stimuli (in addition to those present already and inherently in practice) upon which improvisers may draw, to which they may respond, if they choose.

The texts are divided into three sections – Prompts, Questions, and Necessities. The first section, Prompts, contains thirty-three invitations, presented mostly as pairs of complementary phrases – sibling verses. Each Prompt has been conceived as a way for practitioners to absorb in and interrogate one or more aspects of practice. What could be inferred as the inherent “goal”, “challenge”, “problem”, “suggestion”, or underlying “principle” of each the prompt may well be readily apparent, or it might not. As with all of the texts, these are open broadly to practitioner interpretation, to a variety of agendas and motivations. In particular, the specific verbs in each Prompt might apply differently and manifest different activity in different disciplinary and social-cultural contexts.

Prompt number five, for example, which reads: “*Speak until you have nothing left to say/ Then continue speaking*” might engender different kinds of responses from practitioners who use words, as opposed to those who

do not, or those who use sounding instruments, body, or other expressive means. The word “speak” may not suggest the use of text or language (although it may), and practitioners should feel at liberty to interpret these kinds of phrases as they see fit, in whatever form best applies to their own performance practice and through their own particular expressive modalities. These could include instrumental sounding, moving, dancing, talking, singing, orating, verbalising, vocalising, instrumentalising (etc.), as well as any combination, dissolution, or extension of these.

The second section contains twenty Questions. Like the Prompts, these questions can be approached in a number of ways and their language can be considered flexibly applicable. Practitioners might choose to internalise and dwell upon the Questions through an extended period of practice, allowing them to become digested and embodied. Alternatively, they might be imagined more immediately as if someone else were asking them directly – right here, right now (and perhaps expecting a response). Some might elicit immediate or reactive ‘answers’, whereas others may be less direct. Some of the Questions have modifiers included in parentheses; the purpose of these is to provide gentle shifts in emphasis which might engender subtly (or overtly) different responses, and practitioners should feel free to explore variations upon these.

The third section contains sixteen Necessities. Each of these is presented in both the affirmative (“Speak!”) and negative form (“Don’t Speak!”), and can be approached from either perspective (or both). While I call these Necessities, as with the Prompts and Questions, they should not be taken as absolute instructions (!) – they are still invitations, rather than obligations, to practice. The reason these texts are presented and named as Necessities, as linguistic imperatives (hence their brevity and their directness), is simply to invite a tighter or more honed focus upon a specific idea, mode of interacting, or trajectory of practice. As with both Prompts and Questions, the specific language of the

Necessities is open to interpretation and to contingencies of person, place, time, and context.



This collection is a work in progress. The ideas within it are continually developing, shifting, changing, transforming through practice and through discussion with peers, friends and family (including pets), and through the discursive interactions with far-flung improvisation practitioners which I have been privileged to access across the last few years in my role as a researcher. The texts emerge from an intense period of studio-based practice, as a soloist, and in companionship with a cohort of friendly co-improvisers, undertaken as part of my research at the University of Huddersfield's *Research Centre for Performance Practice* and *Centre for Research in New Music*, where I have been keeping busy since 2019. The motivation to write these texts owes much to the legacy of Pauline Oliveros, whose well-known text-scores the *Sonic Meditations*, among others, have inspired countless practitioners across the globe to come together, to create, and to attend to each other. Pauline's scores have nourished my improvising practice since its early days, and through practising them, I have come to know a deep respect for the power of dedicated and attentive listening (with the ears, with the mind, with the body). The understanding that short pieces of text could contain rich impetus for improvisation was first illuminated for me by her work, and I view this collection as a way of thanking her. They have also been inspired by the specific challenges of teaching improvisation in higher education – how to allow students to engage fully with the contingencies of the moment in their own way, without imposing restriction.

The collection represents also, for me, a manner of response to the immediate and urgent concerns of the time in which it has been written. It has coalesced at a period in which the world is reckoning with the ongoing impact and, looking forward, the aftermath of the Covid-19 Pandemic, an event which has unmasked both the precarity and the

profound interconnectedness of global economic, social, political, biological, and medicinal systems. It springs from a time in which dualistic thinking manifests dangerously as excess political and social polarization, underpinned by the reinforcing of archaic (and imaginary) essentialisms of difference; this thinking delights in finding new ways to delineate humanity, to force it into oppositions, to reduce, to disavow, and to condemn. It emerges in an era when the magnitude of human impact upon the more-than-human is being made explicit in every corner of the world. As we turn to address the overwhelming uncertainty of ecological and meteorological destabilisation, the horrors of extinction and habitat-destruction precipitated by the ever-insistent climate emergency, our attention and our creativity are required in a myriad of different places and different forms.

Improvisation is by no means ‘The Answer’ to global inequality, the climate crisis, the crimes of authoritarian regimes, the inequities of oppression derived from racist ideologies, or the upheavals of human conflict. However, what the practice offers, for me, is a way to experience very directly our astonishing and vibrant capacity for attentive and responsive creativity. In improvising, whether solo or with others, we bring our attention, our bodies, our desires, and our curiosity into visceral relationship with this, here, and now. In learning and sharing how to attune to the precarious, dynamic, complex, ever-changingness of our reality and interrelations ‘in this moment’, I believe that we can equip ourselves with the knowledge to navigate and mediate the innumerable changes we encounter. Through improvising practice, we can empower ourselves and our communities through the understanding of what it is to be here, now, at *this* time, being in *this* way, enriching our relationship to each other, and to the world.



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## PROMPTS

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