

Student Music Philosophies and Usage of Environmental Affordances
Free Improv Environments 1: Spring 2023
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Hi there:

I would like to thank my friends for their contributions first to my life and second to this record below. Any and all observations, descriptions, explanations, and conclusions I state here come from a place of deep admiration, intrigue, and respect for you and your craft. I am thoroughly honored to be in your lives and to create and converse with you, and I thank you endlessly for always inviting me to do so. Your expansions to my life, this campus, each of your particular creative niches, and the world as a whole is incalculable. I cannot wait to see what you do in the future. You have a place forever in my heart and in my entries.

Abstract:

This ethnography charts my introduction to the world of improvised music and performing it at Hampshire College in the group Primitive Accumulation created by students of the Spring 2023 cohort, created as a branch off of one of the members' conceptually identical project, Giant Enemy Cancer Cult. I entered this world and stayed in it because I appreciated and managed to juggle the affordances of the social, physical, and conceptual environments presented to me, such as other students more tenured either with the college or with performing and improvisation itself. The patterns of conceptual ideals I encountered such as the value of virtuosity and how it manifests in authority designation and talent/skill stratification are one of the guiding forces of this college's music scene (and likely all music scenes); interestingly still visible and deep-seated even when all students approach this environment with the intention to be radical, anti-authoritarian, and non traditionalist. The desire to be in a group may usurp, complicate, slow, accelerate, expand, color, these intentions.

Part 1 introduces literature surrounding how the material and non-material environment impacts human social behavior in general as well as specifics of music and theater; Part 2 forms and analyzes a record of Roos-Rodhe house shows at Hampshire beginning at Fall 2016 (detailing the conceptual environment of the past) and an ethnographic description of the environment; Part 3 utilizes my own journal entries as field-notes and anecdotal evidence to describe the stages of jam sessions and shows (detailing the physical and conceptual environment of Spring 2023); Part 4 will apply ecological psychology, symbolic interactionism, enactivism, and social psychology with personal examples to dissect the social patterns that occur with and around the band utilizing the literature mentioned in Part 1; Part 5 summarizes interviews I conducted with five Hampshire students about their opinions and observations of the campus environments, creative freedom, personal creative approaches, and more; Part 6 contains some predictions for the conceptual environment of the future, limitations of this approach, and questions to be answered and explored.

Introduction:

This is an ethnography of my introduction to free improv music and live experimental performance art through a student band at Hampshire College; formed by first year and transfer students of the Spring 2023 cohort. We formed casually and quickly early in the semester and immediately after I began taking notes and churning with thoughts about creative freedom, sense-making, and the idea of social/physical/conceptual environments.

Upon reviewing the literature, I came to the overarching framework that these environments and the observations and theories of how people interact with them are tied together with the thread of cognition, thus this essay is under the guise of Ecological Psychology, Enactivism, and Social Ecology and symbolic interactionism. I contribute to these disciplines by using Hampshire in Spring 2023 as a distinct time, place of action, example and/or point of departure for future study.

This essay serves to document the changes that occurred in the Hampshire social music environment as the school recovers financially and the increase in the student body since the halting in 2019. Such a collection gives new students, non-students, and faculty a way to see what has already been done and how we can further push the bounds and utilize Hampshire as a creative space. We must know what trails have already been blazed, by who, when, and why, to illuminate other creative thickets we need to explore and how the continuum of student philosophies regarding creative freedom and the environment we have to use can either promote or halt these expansions. This gives students confidence to get involved in the Rodhe House on both the technical/booking side and by performing themselves, though these sides are not laser cut divisions already as students who perform adopt all these roles, both outside the college and under it: students learn how to advertise themselves to get booked; the technical setup and meshing of a band's hardware with the college's hardware and other aspects of its physical performing environments is also a frequent bridge that must be crossed with multiple people, many of which are more tenured. Students who haven't performed at all or at this college may not know about all the details that go into performing/setting up for one, the booking process in PEAT (the college's student-run music booking group), how to interact with the college when they disapprove of the PEAT's decisions.

I encourage melding as it is useful for everyone to interact and develop new ways of showcasing and responding to decision making agents and bodies. These interactions and the developments that came out of them should be documented or noted at the very least.

This paper's main goal is to detail how one's conceptual environment sets the stage for how they will interact with a physical environment (such as a stage); how the organization of that stage, the items in the building, and the conceptual environments of the people who enter that environment (why they enter, open-mindedness, patience, etc) will mold an individual's own ideas on how they want to and how they can and cannot engage in creative social spaces, creating a highly nuanced but cohesive, patterned, and felt social environment. I use this as part of my personal lens that sociology's core goal is to analyze how humans determine behaviors for the environments they make and utilize them.

My framework and coding lies in three main groups: social, physical, and conceptual environments. Social environments include the extent to which people (individuals, dyads, triads, and more) visibly adhere to regional norms of politeness and privacy, gender roles,

sexuality, authority, legality/morality, religious practice, and appropriate levels of playfulness; conceptual environments are similar but are more covert, they include an individual's memories, (rational and irrational) beliefs, fears, goals, preconceptions, assumptions, opinions on spirituality, cultural teachings, etc; physical environments include the tangible material items present including architecture, the seasons, clothes and accessories, connecting technologies, decorations, schedule or pay based access to other physical environments, door locks/cameras, accessibility features (wheelchair ramps, elevators, wide and paved sidewalks, etc), functioning utilities (bathrooms, (clean) water fountains, sinks, lights, electrical outlets, fire alarms, etc). These are not mutually exclusive at all, in fact they are all simultaneous and overlapping and should always be thought of that way. A culture is a social group with defined conceptual practices in a physical environment, their conceptions of social practice adapted to the landscape. The arrangers of a physical environment approach the space with a certain conceptual environment they are attempting to communicate through and persuade whoever encounters the physical. The people who gather in a physical environment have a certain conception of how they plan to interact with the physical items and architecture, and may change their conceptions and behavior if they are moved by the arranger's conceptions or the conceptions and activities of the rest of the people that gather there, creating an enlightening social environment. Thus environments can be (and usually are) simultaneously social-conceptual, conceptual-physical, as well as individual-social-conceptual, group-social-conceptual, social-physical-conceptual, individual-physical, etc., as shared by Stavros et al. "...Valsiner (1984), "many objects and settings in the human environment are outright products of culture, constructed by human beings for some meaningful purpose" (66)," (93) and Goldstone, "Human groups are networks of people, each of whom is a network of concepts" (433-434).

There are also subsets, including mental (psychological), and biological environments that are within the individuals, each person's internal environment will clash and/or harmonize with the others.

A simpler example of these simultaneous environments could be a funeral. The physical environment might be a place of worship or cemetery, built and organized to house and convey feelings of sorrow, remembrance, grief, community and connection to other people and to spirituality; part of the function of a physical environment is to root a baseline conceptual environment. The conceptual-social environment demands quiet, black clothing, solemnity, gentleness, no sudden movements (physical limitations). Joking around or playing would be frowned upon or even scorned in these environments except if done by extremely young children, though their parents would be scolded for failing to make their children adhere to the arbitrary conceptual restraints. Some people's conceptual environments when approaching funerals, wakes, burials, etc may include thoughts of spirits, ghosts and other supernatural entities, which alters how they interact with the physical items near them, maybe talking to framed pictures of the deceased, praying, touching caskets with a lighter hand than usual, walking around graves instead of on them out of "respect". These are the norms that help us know what to expect, prepare ourselves for the actions we might need to take, the actions we might witness, etc. Funeral norms are well known, their environmental demands we began to internalize from television, books, or stories from others; "Current perceptions of the social

setting are coordinated with stored representations of appropriate behavioral responses; the cognitive system then decides among alternative actions,” (Stavros, 78).

Other environments and their norms, such as colleges and their niche creative groups lurking within, are much less well documented; because of this, most people have some previous conceptions of the social mores, action patterns, and physical items involved and can improvise the most appropriate entrance, but some avoid it all together or develop a negative conception.

This essay is not a critique of how the physical environment is set up or how people utilize it, nor is a dissing of anyone's personal approaches to creation or music; these are simply observations and categorizations that I found useful to code actions with as I participated myself during the semester. This essay does not aim to provide a guideline on how to best utilize creative social environments, the proper social conduct for them as environments and personal goals are highly variable, nor give preference to one person's approach over another. Sometimes there are barriers to access, sometimes not, sometimes barriers decrease with time, some increase with time, influenced by the social environment that frequents the physical environment. Changes in the physical environment may make it more or less useful for socializing and conceptual expansion.

Lastly, I often use the phrase player/watcher interchangeably with performer/audience to mean essentially the same thing, their only linguistic difference is that player indicates someone playing an instrument whereas performer does not have to include an instrument.

Part 1: Review of the Literature

The first piece of literature I utilized that helped propel my thoughts and further literature review to the domains of ecological psychology was a Hampshire Division Three thesis titled Talent and Being Good in Music by Daniel Inglis. Inglis dug into psychology, previous conceptual frameworks of “incremental v entity theorists” created by Carol Dweck, cultural conceptions of talent, utilized personal experiences with feeling inadequate due to the social environment, and included original data from teaching voice lessons to students and categorizing their conceptions. I am more descriptive of the physical environment in which both instrumental music and performance art are being played and for promoting improv as an option for creative improvement not only as an exercise (as it is often limited to that) but as its own domain. Inglis’ main conceptual framework dissects talent and though he does that eloquently, he still holds the idea that there is one way to sing “well”, which I feel, along with the word talent, are too vague to be useful in radical conceptual environments. Still, Inglis makes excellent points about how talent is a method of stratification and how a performer's perception of their ability to advance plus their interpretations/utilizations of critiques may sabotage themselves depending on how personally they take it.

Inglis also mentions the necessity for musicians to be able to transcribe and read music (45), this, so far, has never happened with Primitive Accumulation and it doubt it ever will considering both players and listeners will find it difficult or impossible to discern which instrument is which and accurately follow the speed of the note change. This is a feature, not a

bug. It is not a tragedy that transcription will likely never occur as the conceptual environment prioritizes new-ness, not repetition, thus putting in the effort to transcribe and discern notes would be antithetical. Though, there is a frequent desire to have sessions recorded in audio format.

Inglis also did not study group dynamics or actions of his students during performance, only during practice sessions; I emphasize phases, contexts, and individual action and reaction in group settings.

I will proceed mainly with ecological psychology, introduced to me by Marshall and Rossman (1995: 2), which “stresse[s] the interaction of the person and environment in shaping behavior,” and enactivism as described by Read and Szokolskzy, “Enactivism takes sensorimotor capacities and contingencies as the basis for action, whereas for Ecological Psychology perception is not constituted by sensation and, therefore, perceiving/acting based on affordances of the surround is the cornerstone of cognitive functioning” (2020: 3).

Some articles on enactivism and ecological psychology focus solely on person-object interaction and less on person-person interaction. Here I do both, attempting to depict how people flit their attention from object to human to idea to object to human to idea within seconds to comprehend and utilize their physical, social, and conceptual environment. I focus on social interaction and affordances of the environment, defined as “*interaction affordance*, an opportunity for action that is only possible given interaction with another individual” (Worgan & Moore, 2010). I believe the layman's term for this phenomenon is an “in”.

Some of these papers delve into the specific biological functions and anatomical structures such as eyes, detailing the order of how light is reflected through the eye lenses and then colored with cones and rods. Phrases such as “visual sweep” and “optic flow” (Heft, 5) describe how the eyes function as tools of panoramic perception separate from emotional or cultural perceiving: “Advocates of ecological psychology maintain that their approach to perception provides grounds for the claim that the environment is directly perceived. Direct perception means that perception of the environment – that is, the detection of its relational structure by means of perceptual systems – is not mediated by non-perceptual processes such as stored memories, mental representations, and the like.” (Heft, 2). I disagree. Perception is an adaptive process and one unconsciously coagulates memories and preconceptions during perception, and that perception is a constant process.

Loic Wacquant theorizes similarly in *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* as he constantly mentions how the conceptual environment of the boxing club is reified with decorative physical items, creating a pulsing, inescapable social atmosphere. He also mentions his “sporting capital” (p. 9), or previous experience and familiarity with the social, physical and conceptual requirements needed for full participation and progress in sports helping his integration into the boxing clubs of Chicago. In Part 3 I will describe how my musical capital aided my melding into the social environment of music and social creativity at Hampshire but, unlike Wacquat, my previous experience did not prepare me for the social and conceptual environment within Hampshire.

Florian Sprenger details John Scott Haldane's concept of the environment and biointeraction such as, determinations of organic versus inorganic, artificial versus natural,

organism versus environment: "...the organism can reintegrate whatever it emits into its surroundings back into its own continued existence...an organism must be regarded as an objective active unity which embraces its environment, and manifests itself not merely in the mutual relations between the part of the organism itself, but also between the organism and its environment." (Sprenger, 14-15). The environment is itself an agent alongside the organisms that occupy or visit it, an agent that dictates or suggests the action possibilities and affordances of its denizens, and vice versa. The college has creative social spaces set up, but students are simply guests who have to integrate what they produce in the college space into their lives and other environments they visit.

Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theater* includes Spolin's own theories, exercises, excerpts, and games that provide an interesting comparison for other studies on social interaction. There is little to disagree with, as this is essentially a compilation of the tools she uses as a stage director, with occasional but not thorough or psychoanalytic descriptions of how her students have reacted to these exercises.

She often mentioned environments and the required group integration into the stage environment for actors to be convincing and enjoyable to watch, saying they must have "involvement on all levels: intellectual, physical, and intuitive," (Spolin, 3). Emphasizing that to achieve excellent acting both in scripted and improvisational theater, the environment must loosen intellectual and anxious restraints by dissolving authorities, hierarchy, and competition to shift focus from depicting a scene "correctly" to embodying it. Her glossary defines "environment" as "The conditioned stage life agreed upon by members of the group; all the animate and inanimate objects within the theater, including self and the audience; an explorable place," (ibid, 381). Page 31 mentions similarly, "'environment' in workshop training refers to both the physical set-up and the atmosphere existing within that set-up". From these two definitions Spolin shows how essential the physical and conceptual environments are in creating social environments that promote and invoke genuine improvisation.

Spolin introduces the chapter "Where" by expanding outward in a concentric circle, she brings attention to the objects and contexts that provide actors with affordances to color their scene, "The *immediate* environment is that area close upon us-the table where we are eating, with its food, utensils, ashtrays, etc. The *general* environment is the area in which the table is placed-the room, restaurant, etc., with its doors, windows, and other features. The *larger* environment is the area beyond--the space outside the window, the trees in the distance, the birds in the sky, etc.," (ibid, 89). She mentions environment in her definition of Improvisation as well, "...permitting everything in the environment (animate or inanimate) to work for you in solving the problem; it is not the scene, it is the way to the scene," (ibid, 383).

Interestingly, she also defines "direct communication" as "a moment of mutual perceiving," (ibid, 17). Compared to previous texts on perception, this definition does not include mentions of the anatomy either person is perceiving with, if they are correctly interpreting what the other was trying to communicate, moments of mutual misunderstanding, the vast array of affordances one can take depending on what is said and interpreted and the surrounding (social, physical, conceptual) environment, etc. Spolin prioritizes direct-ness, clear communication but not necessarily interaction.

Again aligning (perhaps unconsciously) with texts on enactivism, Spolin discusses sensation; reception; how the body feels, reacts, and looks when nervous, excited, mournful, etc; how bodily movements and expressions are key tools in the symbolic interaction that is inherent in theater. She includes one sensory deprivation exercise using blindfolds to make actors more comfortable and aware with how they interact with an environment (ibid, 171), and mentions “barefoot rehearsals” as another sensory expansion (366); but paradoxically she provides another exercise that prohibits sensory deprivation, saying the actor must not withdraw from the environment at all (ibid, 212).

My original framework for this analysis started with ideas of creative freedom being limited or encouraged depending on the (social, physical, conceptual) environment; Spolin asks, “Is it possible that we confuse license with freedom? (ibid, 287). Does the presence of affordances inherently grant permission to take advantage of them? Is freedom the ability to utilize affordances to their conceptual and tangible extremes? Is the depth to which one can change their environment a measure of personal freedom and/or the freedom the environment affords?

Part 2: History of the Physical Environments

SITE 1 Rodhe House

The main creative Hampshire environment available to all students is the Rodhe house, supplying students with a relatively even variety of performances every few evenings. The Instagram account, *Volatile_Invisible_Baby_Events* (VIBE) posts the latest colorful flyer listing the night’s acts. These shows have always been free to attend.

Most shows start at 8pm, but students often wait around 45 minutes before approaching the Rodhe house, much to the annoyance of the nights’ organizers and performers since everything is set to be played and any extension of the collective nervous energy drains all nearby. This fluctuates depending on the time of the semester and the genre of the bands playing that night. At the beginning of the Spring 2023 semester, people flooded in quickly, likely riding the high of being back on campus and with friends, and other highs as well. This deteriorated over the semester as students became busy with work, other campus obligations, and off-campus entertainment options.

Between set activities of the watchers vary depending on the kind of audience the genre playing that night tends to attract: in between heavier rock, metal, and noise sets as the performers adjust their equipment and change out, students will hang around the outskirts of the Rodhe house smoking, chatting, and recovering from headbanging, moshing, and two-stepping around the cramped space allotted to the audience; quieter noise, indie, and acoustic nights often do not need substantial technical set up and thus most audience members stay in the Rodhe house quietly chatting and sitting (both on the floor and on the few chairs and couch scattered around the open area in a semi-circle), briefly exiting to smoke or talk louder. There are two doorways on either side of the building: one narrow that opens to the Mixed Nuts Co-Op that is shuttered and locked during performances, a small table in front of the Co-Op holds a bucket full of earplugs in small plastic packages and a container of hand sanitizer that is rarely utilized, on the left are shelves and long seating areas for alert student sound technicians, clear

plastic tubs of art supplies stacked against the wall, authorized students of PEAT that book the events and diplomatically interact with the night's performers, the occasional cluttered merch table, other acts waiting with their supplies and equipment and nervousness piled in the corner near one of the bathrooms (which is surprisingly clean and stocked for an on campus college venue). For nights where dancing, moshing, and larger crowds in general are more likely, chairs, couches and tables are shoved and stacked in the corner farthest from the narrow door and are brought back out and reorganized at the end of the night by PEAT students. To the right of the storage corner are the large double doors that open near a parking lot, where performers often haul larger equipment through. To the right of the doors is the lightswitch panel frequently utilized during shows to alert the crowd of an act's start and to create colorful ambiance. Occasionally odd movies and landscape scenes will be projected onto the white wall behind the performers, again adding to the specific mood of the piece and/or providing the audience with an additional source of stimulation and inspiration. The large wooden beams that run across the ceiling are occasionally decorated with lights, as well as during the first show of the Spring '23 semester, a performer hanging and swinging from the beams, to the awe of many a Hampshire student.

There is also a section for VIBE/PEAT on HampEngage (site that lists all Hampshire clubs), listing shows and meeting times all the way back to Fall 2016. Its intro states, "PEAT aims to organize live acoustic and amplified music shows for the Hampshire community that are diverse in genre and support women/queer people/people of color and support Hampshire musicians. We hope to provide a network of support for musicians from the five colleges, the greater western mass music scene, and bands from other surrounding music scenes". ("PEAT") There have also been showcases of DIV 3 student work at the Rodhe house, as well as improvised sound work open to all students, called videosonics, that occurred three times.

Show information and plans for Spring 2016 by PEAT are also available on HampEngage as a separate PDF, showing the process for some bookings that include contract writing and approval and budgetary concerns, including a list of acts that at the time could not be booked because they were too expensive.

Acts local to Massachusetts and New England at the most common, with some more distant and touring bands playing at the Rodhe house.

Hampshire student bands and solo student musicians played 21 times out of 87 shows spanning from Spring 2016 to Spring 2023 ("PEAT Events - Past") (this count includes the 4/22 show). Spring 2016 had the most shows overall, eleven total. The most student music acts occurred in the Fall 2022 semester and Spring 2023 semester, so far.

There are usually around 3-5 acts per night, only a few nights having two or six sets in one night. The least common genres played are hip/hop and rap, only occurring at four shows. Noise, indie, experimental, experimental rock, folk, and punk are the most common genres played. These genre distinctions are tentative as the artists may have a different description of their work or their work has shifted since playing at Hampshire; I can only vouch most accurately for the shows I attended, and the captions underneath the VIBE Instagram posts accounts for their interpretation of the artists' work for booking purposes. Some entries did not describe the band or what they usually play, and some bands I could not locate on Spotify nor Bandcamp.

Considering the Spring '23 semester, I noticed a difference in attendance depending on genre; the two metal/hardcore shows of the semester had significantly higher attendance than the experimental and indie rock shows. The 4/22 show is again, an exception.

Often there is a common genre or volume for each night, usually four noise sets in one; four experimental rock, noise, and hardcore bands in one; four acoustic and/or indie sets; etc. This common grouping serves multiple purposes I believe, one being so that artists of common genres can connect with each other and so that students can know what to expect from the rest of the setlist if they are familiar with one act.

Six shows out of 81 included one improvisational noise set of one or more people. Of the three improv sets I witnessed, the audiences' reaction often included confusion and restlessness, as people (both on this campus and likely elsewhere) are not used to witnessing acts that are unpredictable and unconventional.

There was also a significant change in the demographics of the performers that occurred over the Spring 23 semester, with more female and explicitly queer acts nearing the middle and end of the semester. As found in the past events section, there have been nights at the Rodhe house dedicated to queer/femme solo artists and bands, regardless of genre. Still, male fronted and male-total bands occupied most of the setlists throughout the five semesters covered by the VIBE Instagram account, but zooming out, the eleven total semesters covered by the HampEngage Events Page appear to balance out demographically, showing that the method one uses to analyze these shows will paint very different results.

There was a significant drop in shows spanning Fall 2019 to Spring 2022. This is most likely because of the financial crisis, failed merger, and rejection of admitted students Hampshire dealt with in 2019; evident in the fact that there were only three shows in Fall 2019, three shows in Spring 2020, none for Fall 2020, two for Fall of 2021, and none for Spring 2022. The influx of students admitted for Fall 2022 resulted in ten shows played, with a record high of seven student bands and individuals performing at the Rodhe house. Spring 2023 saw five student acts at the Rodhe house out of nine total shows, again impressive considering the total record. I predict that the number of student performances will increase for Fall of 2023 due to the influx of 300+ students eager to get involved and learn the patterns of the social, conceptual, and physical environments at Hampshire.

This long history of genre diversity and student acts allows (and continues to build) the Rodhe house and Hampshire as a site for connecting conceptual environments in one physical and social environment. Other spaces on campus also allow for this, such as the Music and Dance building that housed improv harp and piano in the latter half of Spring 2023.

The 4/22 event is also notable because of its extremely high attendance rate with many 5 College students and non-students staying well past midnight. Eight acts were written on the flier, only six played, and five out of the six bands that played were Hampshire student bands. This event was not listed on the regular Instagram account, it was listed on [freak_frogz.inc](#), mainly used for parties and other non live music based social events in other places on campus that aren't the Rodhe house, showing that the unique social and conceptual environment of the show is communicated to students through a slightly different advertisement. That account is also managed by different people than the PEAT organizing and booking group that is under the

college, meaning that taking the un-bureaucratic avenue of the few students who manage that account suggest that the difference in management is felt and utilized differently and strategically by students.

SITE 2 Practice Rooms

Within the Music and Dance building reside at least a dozen equipped practice rooms for students to use, with preference given to musicians but side-stepped quite easily with camaraderie with the building monitors. When turned on, the flat overhead lights seep into every corner of the space and emit an audible buzz. The small space becomes crowded with items brought in by students: instruments, amplifiers, cables, coats, backpacks, picks, bows, drumsticks, pedals, microphones; and items provided by the school: In the percussion practice room there are extra cymbals, two different chairs, a sheet music stand, Evans brand toms (only small and floor, no medium tom) and snare drum, kick drum and pedal, Pearl brand cymbals, and a full grand piano. The cream colored walls are blank except for two flyers near the door instructing users to disinfect the piano keys after use and to put broken strings in the trash. In a non-percussive practice room there is just a piano, a narrow mirror nailed to the wall, and a sheet music stand. Unlike the Rodhe house, there are no windows in the practice rooms, letting everyone inside ignore the changes in weather and time of day that might distract or influence the process. The environment is contained but not rigid, built with a certain intention but with just enough space to allow for other creative directions to be explored.

I consider these sites potential third places as they are areas separate from home and work, built specifically to facilitate socializing, and have few or no limits for access. Both of these environments provide people with social affordances not found elsewhere on campus; in practice rooms and the pit of each show students are united by the social, conceptual, and physical environments they choose to play in and associate themselves with.

This may be contested by the fact that the practice rooms are technically built for students who are 'majoring' in music, but it is not limited to those students. The only limits that students find themselves frustrated with are the scheduled closings of both sites each evening, facilitated by student building monitors during the bulk of the semester and external college staff members during holidays and the tail ends of each semester. During the weekdays, the percussive rooms are only allowed to be used after all classes have finished; non-percussive rooms are allowed to be utilized whenever.

Part 3: Improv Environments: Participant-Observation Analysis

Intro

The attempt to figure out which comes first, conceptual, social, or physical environment, is ultimately a useless one, as with each passing second all change immensely just by the addition of a new second to its stretch of existence. They move simultaneously, in a helix, in 3D, but not at the same speed. A social environment/conceptual environment may change when people find a new way to utilize the physical environment even when no new items are added.

Environments do not morph in a vacuum or align with some untouchable, inherent schedule “[they] are never complete but are continually under construction (Ingold, 172). Environments pulse and have their own predictable patterns and rhythms, just like the people in them.

The classification of artificial is often a negative one even though all environments are artificial, or more specifically, all environments are modifiable. It is harmful to presume physical environments are unchangeable except as a temporary exercise in working with what you have. People make all environments by projecting previous conceptions onto them. The resocialization and new utilization that occurs before and during reconstruction “involves an individual who detects (perceives) information (based on the constraints imposed by intentions) and acts, thereby transforming the environment so that new effectivity-affordance relationships can be perceived and acted upon,” (Young, et al., 299).

Further, there are “canonical affordances” (Piccini, et al.) or the term for what an object was made to provide: a straight-forward example is that a chair’s canonical affordance is to be sat on, but it can be utilized in many other ways, standing on it to reach a high place, drumming on it to make a percussive sound unique to the materials it was built with, thrown for self-defense, etc. In music, canonical affordances are few and continue to evaporate as one dives further into improvised and experimental art. A synthesizer or keyboard is built to play what is determined as the “standard” tone, but with modifications and re-wiring it affords endless new sounds. Canonical affordances can differ depending on the conceptions each person arrives with; some may disapprove of anyone who uses an item in a non-canonical way, which is a common response to experimental art and performances that reject the value of virtuosity.

Specifically, the environment art is presented in can change one's willingness to participate in future (re)creation in the first place. Environments are sites for resocialization. For example, I entered Hampshire and the two sites I analyzed with a certain conceptual environment: riddled with anxiety, fear, rigidity, pre-set priorities and even disinterest. This changed when the social environment that resides here welcomed and relaxed me with its atmosphere of playfulness and rejection of traditional methods and concepts of music and creation. The external, local social environment is a positive feedback loop; continuously express interest sincerely enough and the environment will unfurl its affordances.

Musicians and performers are guided/contained by their environment; such as a building versus outdoor setting, how much room the crowd and/or bandmates takes up, the time of their set, how long their cables are, etc. Thus a performer may not be able to utilize all the environments’ (physical, conceptual, social) affordances because of the limits of the space they are visiting or the affordances they brought with them, harking on their creative freedom; these restraints also create and enable a unique creative freedom as well, a unique environment built by a unique formula of limits.

Economic Affordances or Lack Thereof

Though mostly advertised as interdisciplinary, Hampshire is at its core, due to both its individual missions and its role in the Five College Consortium, a liberal arts school that enjoys advertising its value in visual, performance, and collaboration art, especially in comparison to the other colleges. This environment is thus ripe for utilizing social spaces for trade to put off the

traditional, capitalist, individualist notion of everyone buying their own instrument and competing for first chair. Still, these spaces could be more equipped, more affordances could be present. The lack of readily available instruments (and a variety of them) may result in some students not being able to indulge in their wish to participate because their financial situation is torn.

I am lucky to have been given an electric violin and allowed to borrow an acoustic violin from two different friends here at Hampshire. The electric is a Cecilo, often listed online for \$149.99 to \$159.99; the acoustic Juzek often listed online for \$1,499.00. I have these in my hands for free. I would not have access to these instruments if I had not prodded at my environment. Even before receiving these I questioned how expensive a performance can be; Most people bring their own instruments, bought years ago and now chipped and loaded with memories more valuable than its original price, quality amplifiers and pedals that provide more options, travel, etc. Prioritization is the calculator of opportunity cost.

Maintenance, such as tuning, string repair, instrument cases, reed changes, etc, are expensive and occasionally require unique attention to the type, model, and age of the instrument, which may be an uncommon one or reputedly cheap. Players may not know the details of maintenance or be able to achieve them because of the cost of luthiers, local inflation, and simply not being instructed like a professional or school-based player would.

Toy and children's instruments are occasionally utilized because they are less expensive, can be circuit-bent, provide uncommon sounds, and do not cost excessive amounts of time or money to maintain.

Ways of recording, producing, and sharing music are vast; students may use their phones or laptops for efficiency and low cost but unhappily sacrifice quality; professional quality recorders are expensive and require external batteries, and large file sizes may be incompatible with standard computers. Such higher quality instruments and reliable recording materials are not provided in either site mentioned, but they are in a different place on campus, the basement of the library available to students by supervised appointment basis. Though understandable to guard the integrity of expensive instruments, this is another environmental (physical, conceptual) barrier that yields less use by students.

Further inquiry should be done to compare the amount of instruments and spaces available to students across the Five Colleges, including the variety, if faculty approval is needed to access them, availability and schedules of practices spaces, amount and quality of recording materials; this should be done in conjunction with assessments of each college's budget distribution and major prioritization to see if the disparity is a result of evidence/predicted use or caused by intentional federal redistribution of funds.

In more figurative terms, performing is also an investment; in exchange for expending time, money, energy, effort, vulnerability, travel, etc to perform in front of others, players understandably hope there is an adequate return both in solidly economic forms like money, network connections, invitations to perform elsewhere and in more social forms of exchange such as friendship, sexual and romantic attention, spiritual and religious experiences, and more. Though many refrain from phrasing performing as an investment because their motivating factor is more social and personal than economical, different environments do provide returns, which can be the reason some performers seek to expand their affordances by varying their environment as much as economically possible. Regardless of the quality of the instruments or

effort put in, the conceptual and social environment one performs in influences the return more than anything; an underground space may be more personally rewarding to play in and allots social connection but may provide little or no cash to the performers. Performing with the pre-organized guarantee of monetary return may make the social environment feel insincere and draining.

Chronological Phase Analysis

Here I will display some of my own personal journal entries alongside my main concepts of physical, conceptual environments, social environments, and serving as evidence for the subsets of psychological environments, etc, as they are similar to ethnographic fieldnotes. These entries were written immediately after significant events and in a fragmented form whenever my memory was jogged, as these entries are the crux for my distinctly phenomenological way of analyzing these environments.

I have removed a few sentences that are too personal at this point in time. I hope to one day have the emotional distance to include them as they provide important, telling, and specific information as to what draws people to spaces they might usually avoid or only be mildly interested in. Underlined are edits made to preserve anonymity and in italics are present additions that are still fresh in my memory or round out my thoughts.

During the early process of refinement I allowed three people to read these entries (two of which I later interviewed) to get a sense of how their feelings towards performance and social creation may differ from mine, or simply how they interact with my past emotions put into words. One was quite saddened after reading my entries, feeling friendly and empathetic towards the anxiety I felt weeks before. Another calmed my worry by reassuring me that I am not intruding at all, that I am very welcome and there is invitation to all regardless of skill level. They also added that this environment was born out of passion and intrigue, thus even if I am not "skilled" I am still satisfying the requirement of free improv. A third said my descriptions pulled them into the flow of the jam session.

A. JAM SESSIONS

2 February

12:08am ...my friends invited me to the music hall and found an open practice room with a piano. One of them started playing an audio recording of a poem and told me to turn the lights off so I did. Both of them started playing random notes on the piano. I was initially fearful because I couldn't see anything and I was afraid to make a noise because I didn't want to interrupt or interfere with their beautiful and interesting sounds. But soon I started pressing on keys myself then pausing to listen to see how my sounds added to theirs. I really began to enjoy it after a few minutes! I was on the far left of the piano so I could only really make deep droning noises but I'm happy I was there. It was perfect for me. I hung on to the edge of the piano to relax myself and occasionally looked around in the dark, occasionally putting my arm out to feel where my friend was next to me. I kept closing my eyes and just feeling around on the piano keys because it felt useless to open my eyes, I couldn't see anything anyway. *Over time my eyes got used to the darkness, and the small room was slightly illuminated by the light in the hallway, seeping*

through the cracks in the door. I invited myself in. I invited myself onto the keys, got the confidence to keep pressing, to keep hearing MY sound. Eventually the playing slowed down but the poem went on. I could hear one of them abandon the piano and sit on the floor. It was just two for a minute. Then the second did the same thing, I saw their shadow move to the floor and I did the same. The poem went on and we listened in the dark. It was an unbelievable, spiritual, out of this world, out of body experience. I am so glad I got to be a part of that. Soon one of them made a comment about it being late and I turned on the lights and we left. I thanked them both for letting me be there and be involved. What an incredible thing to be involved in. I really feel like the darkness allowed me to contribute. When the lights were on and I saw my friends' hands moving in more technical ways I felt like I shouldn't interrupt. *I felt like I had nothing interesting to contribute, nothing they would find particularly intriguing, but the dark made it so that none of us knew what sounds the others were making, the sources were muddled and non-essential.* But I really loved the sounds I added. What a cleansing experience. It felt so relaxing and in the moment to add my sounds. I was forced to focus on sound and touch and not sight.

3 February

12:48am back at my dorm finally. I had the time of my fucking life at the music hall. *The people who I play with set the foundation for how excited I am and how much effort I plan to put in; they influence my level of anxiety, fear, intrigue.* Me, and three others gathered and played improv music on various instruments. For the first part I was on piano, one on drums, another on banjo, and one doing vocals. With the lights turned off. It was really really fun. Then my arms started hurting like hell and my friend and I switched. I enjoyed that thoroughly. I can't even describe right now how much I loved finally getting to play drums. It felt phenomenal to contribute. But it's such a nerve racking responsibility. Everyone complimented me on my drum playing. One of them said I was doing jazz rhythms. I didn't even know that, I was just playing what made sense and copying how the drummer in Whiplash held his drumsticks. To finally be invited into this musical space is like peeling something out of me. What a phenomenal place to be. *This kind of invitation is so different compared to playing with a more traditional band or school-based orchestra or jazz group. Rehearsal is non-existent. It is simply not a thing, not necessary, not part of the conceptual environment compared to other music genres/performance arts. There is no regard for practicing or repeating a string of sounds to "perfect" it for future shows, but it might be noted how it was made (which combination of strings and pedals and tempo and tone) to loosely integrate it in the future.* Since the lights were off I could only see the shadows of people as well. It was interesting to see my friends' shadow as they sat at the piano, to see when they turned their head towards me, when they reacted to my drumming on piano. Sitting at the drums also showed me their perspective, since they sat there initially, they had a perfect view of me. *The kick drum obscured the view as well, I couldn't see one of my friends sitting on the floor whereas at the piano I could. Even in the dark there are ways to be more hidden, more out of sight. This did not necessarily decrease how attuned we were to each other, as the main focus that each of us is replying to is what we hear and*

not what we see. Wow. I am so happy I got to sit there and make noise. Hopefully I can remember how to do that.

Students' musical backgrounds, preferences, and skill levels can, but don't always immediately become apparent in free improv sessions. Instruments are traded around in the group and most often when there is a lull in collective playing, or when an individual needs to rest. During this period discussion of sound, techniques, ideas, and more occurs. This is unique to jam sessions because members are not restricted to a set time like they are in a show, there is simultaneously more and less focus on the music because of this.

Sound progression during sessions often starts with an interesting loop of notes on an instrument, the others pile on, lyrics create a story and the instruments begin moving around the story. There is almost always a point/multiple moments where one or more people decide to pick up the pace and increase the tension, the others follow, quickly recalibrating, leading to a chaotic crescendo. These words are an understatement. People are open to sounds, prompts, actions, storylines, tempos, players, gestures etc, that would be found odd or uncomfortable outside of this genre and level of playfulness, trust, and comfort within a friend group. Much more is learned and made when "unacceptable" practices are allowed, and much faster as well.

The psychosocial aspects of any group activity become especially and uniquely visible in jam sessions. It is a very relaxing environment in which you are encouraged to forget the internalized discipline and structure you have been taught. Constant active reteaching and unlearning of what it means to be creatively free/have creative freedom in the context of music and performance. The amount of group cohesion, meshing, and compatibility, is essential and incredibly noticeable. It takes a great degree of attunement to calculate how and when to add to others' sound; you have to pay close attention to the others in the room, the moment demands itself, requiring a degree of self awareness that can morph into embarrassment or paralyzing anxiety (which depends heavily on the surrounding social and conceptual environment and the expectations they create).

"Players respond almost instantaneously to each other and their opponents, taking into account not only their teammates' positions but also their projected intentions, abilities, and roles. Coaches do provide strategic direction, but much more important are the in-the-moment negotiations and communications between players" (Goldstone, 422). Authority can change the conceptual environment even if the physical is identical; "group-level structures can spontaneously emerge without leaders ordering the organization, and sometimes despite leaders' efforts," (Goldstone, 428); "If an actor says, 'I wanted to scream but thought you didn't want us to,' he was working not on the problem but on the teacher for approval," (Spolin, 189). Coaches, authorities, and the overwhelming influence of one person is hard to spot considering that expertise may not be valued or counted on during sessions. It is not really needed until the stakes become higher and others unconsciously cede the bulk of creative generating and performance vulnerability to the one most comfortable doing so, or until a plateau is reached and further conceptual prodding and ingenuity is required to achieve the "goal" of making something new.

My conceptual environment is prone to edification and possibility, but my actions are dictated by how comfortable and secure I feel within my social and physical environment; I could make a long list of everything I could do with my environment (social, conceptual, physical) but

only do very few of those actions, restraining myself out of fear, priorities, a desire to only be seen in a way that aligns with how I want to be perceived, etc: "...perceiving an affordance is not the same as actualizing an affordance (i.e., performing the action that is afforded..." (Travieso et al., 7).

B. FIRST SHOW OF THE SEMESTER

We formed in a matter of hours because the band booked to play at that time dropped. Loose prompt of "what do you know?" from the card game Hanabi that we played the night before, an inside joke.

4 feb (Paraphrase)

One of the organizers for tonight's show came up to me a minute ago and said hi and I said im playing drums in the set tonight and he asked if i'm psyched. He said it's Really cool we were down to play so last minute and I said it's really cool how things like this can happen so last minute. He agreed that it's a very spontaneous campus and thanked me for being involved. *This is a very casual band as I see it, formed within hours of the day of the show, no constant or regular jam sessions, occasional discussion of what we want to try with our next performance. I wonder, is this casual-ness influenced more by the genre we play in, the personalities and schedules of the members (the fact of being a free improv group, hard to collect more people at one time), availability of practice spaces and shows*

First show at roos rodhe house - drums, harp, vocals.

Inside jokes spawn from the shows and jams themselves and from individual and collective experiences; sometimes persevering through time (with the help of recordings and social memory) and sometimes being just a blip in the radar.

5 February 2023

7:48 am I'm still thinking about the show. I dropped my drumsticks at one point and I was so afraid of people looking at me that I closed my eyes at one point. It was interesting to be there so early before anyone else, getting used to the space, seeing the planner guys and dudes in another band talking. I felt like I was in a boys club. *The social, physical, and conceptual environment changes over the course of the night. The feeling of it being a boys club decreased as a more diverse crowd filled the room, balancing out the quite typical lineup. Spending more time in the physical environment and noting how people use it, how and where they decide to spend their time gives me instructions on how to use it similarly or not, who and what each space is meant for and how long they take it up. Conceptual environments may not be as quickly and thoroughly perceived as physical ones, during the show I thought everyone hated it but afterwards multiple people stated their intrigue with it, not noting or caring about my ineptitude. This is mind-boggling, that they are partially unable to know how much I know. This is where the questions of "how long have you been playing? Did you take lessons?" come from.*

Being in the Rodhe House before any members of the audience arrived was an odd feeling; I felt unrooted and uncalled in the company of other performers seasoned either from playing at the Rodhe House before or elsewhere. A comment I received from both drummers of the two other bands was that I'm likely more creative and innovative on drums since I've barely played and had no training. I felt simultaneous relief and stress at this, as now that they know I have no real technique but are leaning on their conceptions of nonstandard play, simultaneously expect less and more of me. This role strain is anxiety-inducing.

6:24pm And another person in line recognized me and said they were really high during our set and was laughing. Before the show I would see these exact people at lunch and dinner and long to talk to them, and now that they've seen me perform they know me. They've seen me. They talk to me and introduce themselves to me instead of me to them. It is unbelievable how this connection has formed from them seeing me play drums shittily. Now I have a connection to these guys. I'm the player. They're the witness. Wild. Blows my mind that I'm a player and not a witness. Even though I was a witness to the two other bands. I'll write more about that later, the feeling of witnessing and self recognition through witnessing others doing what you did. *It is almost a feeling of calm, that I have finally touched the other side of the dichotomy that has felt indomitable to me for so long. I am amazed at how easy it was in the moment to cement this as fact. Performing, terrified and unfocused and uncoordinated, yet still performing. I see others who have performed multiple times, often solo, and lay in awe at their ability to continuously tolerate the inevitable anxiety. The acts after were focused and prepared when they approached the kit, I could see the difference in how they and I played very clearly. But I was still there, and I have a sliver of experience, a sliver of social capital that is monumentally valuable that shapes my conceptions and grounds how I approach performing itself and the social and physical environments I will encounter when doing so.*

11:57pm I found brief videos on instagram of our set last night and when the camera panned to me I had a visceral reaction. Massive cringing. Had to get up out of my seat and walk around tense up. Holy shit. In the video it shows me looking around as I drum pathetically. Oh my god. So embarrassing. That's how I look?!?!?! That's what I look like????? That's what people were complimenting me on????

6 February 2023

12:16pm my friend texted me the link to the audio of our performance and I listened to two minutes of it and had to stop. It's too much. Too much to hear the drums in the background and know I was making that sound. My face is attached to that sounds. I'm too embarrassed to perform again. It's too much. No more. No more no more. Oh my god i had to pace frantically and kneel on the floor. That's part of me now. People recognized me and my shitty sound. Fuck. i don't know if i can listen to the whole thing knowing i made those fucking sounds. OH my god and to think they had to listen to this whole fucking thing to download it and splice it and whatnot. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

And other people had to listen to this and witness it and witness me. Oh the pain. I have chest pains now. I can't be seen again. *I am still shocked that the pain of perceiving myself as inept and anxiously thinking others perceive me as so brought on genuine chest pains and tunnel-vision fear. That is the result of a rigid, paralyzing, and self-defeating conceptual environment. My anxiety can be a useful prompt but it is most often, and most visibly, a roadblock.*

12:47am im so monumentally overwhelmingly embarrassed by being seen playing drums lamely it makes me want to rip my skin off. But if I relinquish the role of the player, of being in a band, being behind an instrument, I won't be able to fully study it and comprehend it from a participant observer sociologist perspective. That perspective, that role of being in it, being there first before anyone shows up, being a player and not a watcher and connecting with other players is so valuable. Do i really want to give that up bc of my anxiety and embarrassment? Push through. Stay in it for the unique insight it gives me. Let the science save me, once again, as it always does. Play alive not dead. Participate and observe. Both. Breathe. Practice. Suck it up. Do it again. *Also, I force myself to let go of the embarrassment I feel when watching others perform, it is a useless feeling that distracts me from contributing to the moment. It is not my job to be embarrassed or concerned with what they are doing while performing, it is not my job to police how anyone acts in that time frame. Embarrassment when actualized is policing behavior. This function does not add to improv music, it detracts. This feeling is not intrinsic either, it is a result of being raised in hypervigilance and trained to be a watchdog of others' behavior to keep everything running smoothly. It is a conceptual brake pedal. It is a waste of mine and others' valuable time to be hypervigilant and discriminating in an environment that thrives on variety.*

Considering shows, there's an obvious beginning, hazy middles, and a sudden end. The noise will taper down and the performers will more visibly exit their role, the audience will clap and or respond how they see fit as a group and individually. Sound or conceptual goals may not differ much compared to jam sessions, but attunement to each other decreases as the audience becomes the new, unpredictable, and thus insatiable focus.

The audience became my focus in an unproductive way; I was completely preoccupied with how each person in the audience stared at us, unmoving, not hiding their confusion or judgement. Their reactions halted and dissolved all the previous confidence I had built in the small groups with my friends.

Eventually the audience members perceived the added detail being able to join in, but most stood back and did not utilize the opportunity, as "It is highly likely that most people who would like to partake in musical activities, but do not, refrain because they consider themselves devoid of the needed quality," (Inglis, 99). I would have hung back as well if not for the preparatory sessions a few days before, shaking up my conceptual environment was the catalyst for being there in the first place. It is likely that previous experience in a lower stakes environment makes participation elsewhere less anxiety inducing.

Once the dust is settled, the groups agreed upon perception of how well the performance went is influenced by audience reaction during the show and their comments after

(compliments from the audience, if people leave the room or not), the quantity and quality of new ideas and sounds that emerged, and how the result becomes a part of the conceptual, social history of the group, each person individually, and the conceptual and social history of the physical environment.

Frequently, improv music is talked about by way of casual comparison; that's its value and if it's sticking to the "integrity" of the genre or not: "it doesn't sound like anything else" or the middle on the continuum, "it sounds like these two bands mashed together".

I think there's a functionalist aspect to the fact that we played first before the other two acts who are both well established at Hampshire whereas we were not. It made the others look better. Our intended function was to fill the roster and an unintended function was making the others look more polished and comprehensible and palatable in comparison to us, as the audience stood still and looked at the person next to them in reaction to our occasionally synchronized failings.

People's final opinions might be less influenced by the music and actual performance aspects and more by the individuals doing the performing; our appearances and beliefs disguised playfully with satire, costumes, and characters may leave people unable to form a specific opinion in the first place. This is a feature, not necessarily a bug.

C. BOTH AND FURTHER

Might I add that a social environment is a physical environment; many have experienced feeling social tension in a room even when it is unspoken, such as sexual tension, aggressive tension, fear, and in sessions described, the tension of a crescendo being foreshadowed (implies that everyone "needs" to start playing faster, but not necessarily change their conceptions), the tension of a new narrative structure or storyline being built by lyrics or movement (does not necessarily imply or require a change in the way the instruments are played or a "logical" change that is in sync with the narrative change).

The social environment is defined by the amount people are attuned to each other; Though studied on sports teams, this conceptualization of teamwork can be applied to music sociality; "Third, the cliquishness of a team can be measured by seeing how dense the collaborative links are within the team relative to links that connect the team to other teams, and Guimera et al. (2005) have shown that an intermediate level of cliquishness is ideal—not so cliquish so as to be inbred, but the team members should also not be so promiscuous with their connections so as to lose their ability to deeply communicate and connect with their team... Ideally, a shared perspective will emerge that allows efficient transmission of information, but this perspective should not become so predominant that it stifles diversity." (Goldstone, 433). Perhaps the amount of cliquishness changes depending on the way the performers are positioned: in jam sessions they are huddled together in a lazy circle and have no trouble catching the attention of each other and reconnecting face-to-face, they converse frequently about the sound and create inside jokes within seconds, revel in the safe claustrophobia of the practice room free of judgment for each others experimentation; during shows each person is turned outwards toward the audience and it is more difficult to catch one another's attention, they are tuned to the collective sound flowing from the amps, the reactions from the audience,

monitoring the state of their instrument, and the amount of time left, only half-focused on each other.

There is a limit to attunement within a group setting, especially as the amount of people increases; it becomes time consuming, difficult, nearly impossible, and then futile to attempt to watch each and every person to see where their hands or facial expressions are going and try to intuit an exponential synchronicity. You end up ignoring your own instrument, adding less as you try to figure out more. Further observation of dyads, triads, and increasingly larger groups in both shows and jam sessions should be done to note the specific “Social acts that attune another person to affordances in the shared environment,” (Stavros, 89). Such acts could be overt and covert movement, sound, and verbal cues that precede a change in narrative, position, character, emotion, etc.

Within cliquishness and friend/peer groups a sense of following the leader can still occur, mostly unconsciously. Hearing who makes the most noise, is the loudest, who follows whose rhythm and accessorizes which sound. Acquiescing to another and/or trying to sonically oppose them happens for a number of reasons: to impress or appease, deliberate creative choice, eagerness, fear, indecision, etc.

Admittedly, I want to impress my friends more than the audience because my friends’ opinions will follow me whereas the opinions of the audience may be uninformed or I may never even hear them. My prioritization of my friends’ opinions might differ for others, and thus would likely lead to different behaviors during performance.

I might gather a piece of someone’s interpretation by their body language as they watch me but that is often not the full story; I thought an audience member hated what they were hearing from the way they plugged their ears but that same person approached me afterwards and said they enjoyed the performance and that they simply forgot their earbuds. My anxious state of mind caused me to take personally their innocent physical reaction, making my social and conceptual environment more strained and fearful. Their explanation soothed me and is a reminder that initial interpretations of behavior are clouded by preconceptions, and that social environments especially can be changed quickly, with conceptual environments following close behind.

Mixed skill set/experience level groups can be functionally useful as less experienced or more timid participants might freeze and contribute less if authority was assigned to them verbally and or non verbally. It is less about arbitrarily designating people to make a “good” end product and more about encouraging any contribution so that the end product is more diverse.

Skill level or experience is not a factor that consciously designates who is allowed to handle an instrument, but there are instances of accepted stratification within both jam sessions and shows. Instruments are traded around without regard to who actually brought/bought the item, except initially in which whoever did provide it plays on that instrument for a certain amount of time, then it is traded. Use of more delicate, unique, old, and expensive instruments is mostly, or at least initially, limited to the person who provided it; they are wordlessly but consciously assigned authority by others and it is presumed that they, as the owner, have more skill and knowledge on how to handle it. Others also likely do not want to break said instrument, for both financial and social reasons.

The frequency of instrument trade is about equal between both sessions and shows: trade can be decreased or sped up from of the amount of time allotted for the group as a whole to play (set time/scheduled access to instruments and space); people can become comfortable and fall into a flow with their instruments and not want to trade, which is not fought during or after the set; people may flit between instruments incredibly fast; not staying in one area for more than five minutes due to impulsive playful energy; to fill a conceptual and social goal of eliciting a reaction from the audience, to utilize as much as possible; and/or for simple enjoyment of playing.

Handedness of the instrument is barely regarded; it is allowed and encouraged to switch an instrument from right to left, usually done so to increase/decrease comfort and to create new sounds.

Previous experience or training is not required and virtuosity is almost shunned in free improv spaces. As told in my journal entries, other players asked if I had professional training and/or self-taught experience with the instrument I was handling and when I responded honestly, “not at all/barely,” they were pleased to hear that; mentioning that lacking classical training often increases creativity and uniqueness. People often presume I have more knowledge and experience than I actually do with whatever instrument I am behind, simply because of my closeness to it. My previous capital with playing violin and guitar and witnessing others play drums (even through media) is enough attunement to be perceived and respected by others here at Hampshire. Perhaps in a space where a higher basic level of knowledge and experience is expected, people would assume that my capital and attunement is low, too low to be “good” at whatever instrument I am handling. A conceptual environment founded on technique hierarchy/talent stratification will be more eager to categorize people based on their amount of perceived and actual attunement rather than potential, desire, and ability to break conventional music notation and themes.

Physical Musicianship, Emotion & Power

I feel it is more difficult and almost defeating of the purpose of being unpredictable when improvising by myself; as I move the bow over my violin or my hands over a line of keys or strings, I think a second beforehand about where my hands will be and since I have a general idea of what sound the strings might make, it feels futile to continue since I know what to expect. I am almost too attuned; unable or willing to make distance between expectation and reality. This changes with sensory deprivation, using additional techniques, and of course, the inclusion of others.

Tim Ingold mentions feeling similarly in his book *Perception of the Environment* (2000, 413-414), “as a reasonably proficient cellist, my experience is that when I sit down to play everything falls naturally into place – the bow in my hand, the body of the instrument between my knees – so that I can launch myself directly, and with the whole of my being, into the music. I dive in, like a swimmer into water, and *lose myself in the surrounding ambience of sound. This is not to say that I cease to be aware, or that my playing becomes simply mechanical or automatic: quite the contrary, I experience a heightened sense of awareness, but that awareness is not of my playing, it is my playing. Just as with speech or song, the performance embodies both intentionality and feeling. But the intention is carried forward in the*

activity itself, it does not consist in an internal mental representation formed in advance and lined up for instrumentally assisted, bodily execution. And the feeling, likewise, is not an index of some inner, emotional state, for it inheres in my very gestures, in the pressure of my bow against the strings, in the vibrato of my left hand. In short, to play is itself to feel, so that in playing, I put feeling into the music” (emphasis mine). Personally, I half-diverge from his statement about ‘internal mental representation’ that is executed; my default mental environment is an anxious one, so I play how I feel. I bring my worries into the noise I make; I can hear my own anxiousness in the way I play drums and violin: jumpy, quick, twitching. I wait and listen to play off the others in the group, following their lead, not totally confident or focused on my instrument except for a few groups of seconds within a piece. I believe that as long as my conceptual environment is based in anxiety, fear, and unnecessary stress, my music and art will be colored by those feelings regardless if that is the emotion I am consciously attempting to convey.

Inglis states similarly about his inner state and pianistic skill influencing each other, “I began to see the range of moods I evoked at the piano as my range of moods, as indicative of the palette of emotions I felt or could feel. Therefore, since I was uncomfortable playing quickly enough to improvise an agitated or fiery piano piece, I developed a conception of my emotional self that did not include those emotions. On the contrary, I tended to think of my soul as being naturally contemplative, calm, and rich in color and clarity. In fact, it was only that my music was careful, slow, harmonically varied, and economical. I was revising my notions of my true identity of stable traits of my soul, based on what was in actuality nothing more than the current state of my pianistic ability... instead I think that the function of improvising was to make me more aware of calm, contemplation, and introspection as emotional or mental states I identified with, as modes of being *me*. Moods that require faster keystrokes to evoke, because I lacked the adequate tools to reify them, did not receive the same attention and did not become such familiar and accepted parts of my self-image.” (italics in original) (Inglis, 72).

Feeling the weight of the bow or the drumsticks in my hand, the heft in my legs to push on the unsteady kick drum pedal, the broken and chipped nails, the ache in my forearms after playing violin, the dent in my shoulder from my guitar strap, the calluses on my fingers, the bloody shredded sides of my nails from abstaining from picks, these physical markers that remain after the actual playing deposit an identity onto me. The instrument and the scenario of music making mark its territory on me. Only then, for as long as the calluses or aches or scabs persist, do I feel confident to claim any sort of real relation to or identity with the instrument itself and musicianship as a whole. With this I am reifying the idea that a “real” musician’s work ethic produces not only interesting music but physical indicators of the time and effort put in. Like an instrument, musicianship is something I pick up and put down, only identifying with it as long as it is in my hands and being heard. Being identified as the one making such sounds is its own affordance, guaranteeing me stake in the delicate conversations and settings usually reserved for seasoned performers.

Regardless of the fact that the genre I play in the most (noise/improv) does not require lengthy experience or technical rigor for me to be valued or included as a player, I have had to encourage a conceptual change in the way I approach music making to develop any kind of confidence. Before entering the physical and conceptual environment of the practice room on

February 2nd with my friends, my core goal for picking up an instrument was to become “good” at it, as in fluent with each sound it can make and capable of producing something technically loaded and aligned with the genres I enjoy listening to. This changed after several instances of being exposed to and (simultaneously) playing improv and noise music. After these instances, my conceptions of what I want to make changed; With violin for example I went from only visualizing myself playing complicated scores (and thus being too daunted to try and attempt/learn) to being thrilled to make as many screeching, grating, macabre, and alien sounds as my stamina would allow (those are also the sounds easiest to make). This increased my confidence in general as I became aware that noise is much more accessible and less intimidating to become involved in than other genres. For me, even improv can be intimidating as its main goal is to produce something novel and fascinating on the spot, which can be difficult as I am often, especially in large social groups, slowed or even paralyzed by anxiety. The vagueness of the command, “make noise” is somehow easier to fulfill than “improvise something”. The word improvise still sits higher on the sonic hierarchy than ‘noise’.

I feel that knowing about your instrument, knowing the language, is essential for contributing to the conversation. Since I often bring my left handed guitar to sessions, I feel like I would be able to contribute more and “better quality” additions if I had a more diverse knowledge of techniques, chords, strumming styles, genre characteristics, etc. I observe how in jam sessions others use my guitar, they all have memorized certain tricks and sound patterns or are able to blend their mistakes into the general sound quickly enough so that it seems planned or unnoticeable. Fluency in spoken language does not require knowing every word and mastering every dialect, it simply means having a large enough repertoire of vocabulary and cultural details to utilize when telling a story, how well you can add to the conversation on the spot. Although, “Not every phase and transformation looks unambiguously like a step closer to the goal of proficient language use,” (Leo Van Lier, 159) especially when proficiency is hard to define and is not regarded as a goal in these conceptual environments.

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11:20am I am not overwhelmingly passionate about music. I have daydreams of playing violin and guitar beautifully and powerfully but my lack of access or motivation or priorities turn me away. I can see this difference when comparing myself to my friends; music and performance is their main focus, it is clearly not a hobby for them. It is where they put their all. I put my all into writing. I almost feel like I am intruding on them, dragging them down, making them wait for me and accommodate me. It's a miserable feeling to know I am making someone attend to me and my lack of skill or speed or decisiveness. *These are very anxious, very binary thoughts. Instead of dividing myself and others into specific categories I should be reminding myself that social environments function best by being flexible. Also, I would be able to sense if others were attempting to accommodate me or compensate for me, that is a very perceptible feeling that clouds a social and conceptual environment quite quickly and can remain in the air for a while.*

Wishes to play powerfully, emotively, and effectively seem to be common (and maybe necessary) among creators, such as Inglis, “...both guitar and piano are difficult for me to play

powerfully” (70). Though I cannot know what Inglis defines as powerful, I know my definition of power specifically for music and performance means to be impressive, commanding, attention-drawing, complicated. Socially, a powerful performance sways the audience, puncturing or guiding their conceptual environment. Individually, nurturing this social power involves being confident and fluent/fluid with my instrument and what it can do, both in the sounds, emotions, and scenes it is capable of creating and utilizing how my posture, clothes, facial expressions and other physically visual aspects will inexplicably add to how the audience digests my performance. Having various pieces to employ and doing so ‘effectively’ is powerful itself, “In music, if we want to transmit three kinds of emotion, we need to be able to draw the bow or blow our breath or strike the keys with at least three kinds of touch--preferably many more. This is what we call “having technique to burn” -- having more powerful and flexible means available to us than we need in any given situation,” (Nachmanovitch, 44).

Autonomy, Virtuosity, Creativity

What is depicted as talent and virtuosity, the specific images and techniques and philosophies promoted by those designated as such, is an arbitrary determination plucked from the wide spectrum of human creative ability.

Further, Inglis teases apart how the vague hope of talent poisons the social and conceptual environments not only in music but across hundreds of creative and even academic disciplines: “Making issue of who has talent and who lacks it contributes to a social organization that excludes many from music making and causes even musicians to seriously question their musical potential and identity. Western classical music culture is socially organized around level of ability or being “good”. Therefore, to the degree to which people are incorrect in seeing innate talent as a crucial factor in musical ability, this social hierarchy reinscribes whatever class differences, privileges, and musical and non musical opportunity give the “talented” minority this coveted position. It reinscribes these differences in the material culture it produces, but more important it teaches them in the psyches and egos of the people who participate in the society--- both as its “musical” people as its “umusical”.” (ibid, 9)

To be genuinely creatively free and free in general requires autonomy and distancing from hierarchies. The distance one can get from these deep rooted concepts of talent and what sounds “good” varies; little distance will be provided or allowed in classical music schools and the social environments within them, requests for more depth or oddity is unreasonable, self-distinction is not useful when the goal is to follow the notes. The curriculum for music lessons includes chords, scales, formal notation reading, and “classic” songs. Everyone is standardized then encouraged to find what makes you unique and thus useful and appealing, giving you a competitive and marketable edge. It can feel like an assembly line formation, being both the product moving down the conveyor belt of musicianship and the overseer of the belt, pushing your own creativity down the predetermined chutes. This conceptual and social environment can be incredibly stifling, slowing personal ingenuity, group ingenuity, and personal enthusiasm with the medium or instrument.

Whereas in social, conceptual, and physical spaces that are founded on autonomy, distance from institutional ideologies is celebrated. There is less social pressure to become virtuosic and more social pressure to simply do something new and uncommon, to dig up

something from the underground of your subconscious or of some culture's rich history of ingenuity with the tools they had. There is social pressure to not run dry, as once you and others notice the repetition or stagnation of techniques and sound, trade begins for both instruments and people. At other times, social pressure dissolves completely, creating a conceptual echo chamber that can be peaceful but stifling in its own way, "Insular collectives of artists or writers or even just friends on social media provide another analogue. They all consume each other's work as peers and have narrow enough horizons to ignore the ways in which what they are all doing might be considered derivative. Artists and audiences are one and the same in such circles; making and consuming are simultaneous, and hierarchies among participants are suppressed," (Horning).

Demographic Affordances

Lastly, it is fascinating to notice the demographic difference: Who is actualizing their interest? Who is utilizing the affordances this environment has to offer? Are they being offered less? Fewer women perform than men at Hampshire. Are they not being included because they are not attempting to get booked out of personal fears and priorities, or because they are being intimidated and bullied away from developing the confidence to perform, or because the booking staff is deliberately not including them and prioritizing other more established acts? I give the benefit of the doubt to Hampshire students, who are remarkably more equitable than most; still, a cause of this could be the larger conceptual environment each student was raised with before coming to Hampshire, one of binaries and fixed characteristics that is hard to shed even when in a more fluid space.

In any environment, boys clubs' can appear and reshape the social and conceptual space; they can be deliberate, intimidating, and exclusive or they can be accidental, loose, not formed with the intention of inequality, but fail to thoroughly integrate others due to appearing unapproachable. Explicitly queer and inclusive parties can have an opposite but parallel effect, their clear intentions, visible distance from heteronormative appearances and concepts, and being perceived as easy to approach allows for others to utilize these social affordances more quickly.

I find Marie Buscatto's study of how the French jazz world treats its women singers unfairly compared to male instrumentalists applicable here; she mentions having to become familiar with the male conception of jazz (Buscatto, 50), a detailed set of beliefs that creates "women's low degree of integration into musical networks, a situation that leads to their "exclusion" from the most comfortable musical positions, reserved for more renowned instrumentalists, those who make their living "exclusively" from jazz (Buscatto, 2004)." (ibid, 49).

She elaborates on the social and economic affordances provided by having a male counterpart, "I also observed that the only women singers who manage to hold their own in the jazz world are those with a male instrumentalist partner. Not only does a male partner, regardless of his age, provide access to a more open, regular network, but he is very likely to manage his partner's group, directly (by composing arrangements or managing relations with the musicians) and/or indirectly (by handling the singer's reputation, for example). Such a partner seems a necessary source of assistance in daily interactions and plays a fundamental

role in keeping these women relatively present on the weak job market. All women singers who tried to penetrate that market or stay on it while having a love relationship with a non-musician partner failed in their endeavor. Breakups were often costly. I was only able to reach this conclusion thanks to long, careful observation of women singers in professionalization spaces such as vocal jams in Paris cafés and music centers (2003b; 2006b)." (ibid, 51). This is corroborated with the anecdotes of many women being accused of 'sleeping her way' into a professional career or the local scene of any music genre.

Buscatto's article covers adult jazz women singers, whose career involvement is impeded by social factors within the jazz world and the economic world as a whole, harked by perceptions and expenditures of family and "back-up" careers. The resistance or inconsistent utilization of affordances by students at Hampshire may be less influenced by the social and conceptual environment of the creative social spaces they are in and more so by their obligations tied elsewhere. It is possible that the lack of women involved in music activities is a result of them knowing how male dominated it is, knowing if they approach it they will be tokenized and objectified and invited to stay not for their value as a performer or player but for their presence as a visual accessory to be toyed and flirted with. This may be a motivation for some women to join though, those who have the social capacity to tolerate, navigate, and use these social labyrinths to their benefit. Each woman's utilization of the affordances inherent in and multiplied in male dominated social, conceptual, and physical environments will differ depending on their comfort and social and economic standing.

Ethnic and religious differences can be more difficult to note, but over the Spring 2023 semester there is a disparity between the overall racial demographics of the college and those of whom decide to perform. Again, students may forfeit the connections and opportunities of performance fearing being tokenized, embarrassed, perceive the social and conceptual environment as unapproachable or incompatible with their work, and/or tie themselves elsewhere to other venues.

No student performance, local band, or international act so far has sung or spoken in another language or explicitly involved aspects of another culture in their performance; either for distinctly political purposes or for simply using instruments, movements, and vocal patterns as creative tools. A possible cause is that those who attempt to be booked by describing their act as non-English-American are rejected outright or deprioritized; event planners thus (consciously and unconsciously) keep their venue's social and conceptual environment quite ethnocentric. Another is that performers may not think of their language and regional culture as useful or significant and thus do not make it visible in their work, again keeping the social and conceptual culture vague and indistinct. In parallel, performers may consciously avoid employing aspects of their regional culture as a way to distance themselves from the bureaucratic State, not wanting their art to have the same effect as a tourist advertisement.

Students prod at the social-conceptual environments in different ways, some do not prod at all. Another reason the demographics of performers may be discrepant to the amount of arts students at Hampshire is that many deliberately avoid the social affordances that may come with performing to save their work from being swayed by audience reaction. Though the social environment around performance and music is quite adaptable or at least not overtly critical of

student work, some withhold their work from fellow students but not from advisors or faculty friends, wanting only professional feedback.

Part 4: What do *you* know? Interview Summaries

I was only able to interview five people, far less than I planned, because of the timing at the end of the semester with many still finishing finals and preparing to leave campus. Thus, this is an incredibly small sample size, limited to two Spring 23 students and three Fall 22 students.

Regardless, I asked all five some standardized questions and some personalized questions based on what I had learned about them and their personal methods of creative expression over the course of the semester. I was able to interview people with a variety of methods, including music, performance art, visual art, film, and writing, so summaries of their thoughts are generalized unless otherwise specified.

Every participant was made aware during my approach days before that I would be recording the interview, transcribing it, and sending it to them so they can cut and/or clarify anything in hindsight. I will be detailing each person's thoughts on the concepts I introduced earlier about creative freedom, physical/social/conceptual environment, and other themes frequently brought up by the participants' own accord.

Takeaways From the February 4th Show

One student revealed that their conceptions were turned on its head during our performance on February 4, leading them to dislike the latter half. At the start of listening, they enjoyed the concept, playfulness, and audience inclusion but began to be irritated, bored, and indifferent as they realized our performance was not 'punk', as in, not adhering to their previous conceptions of what punk music looks/sounds like in general and at Hampshire, even though the evening had been advertised as such. The environment and beginning of the work suggested certain sonic and structural elements; "the work itself engenders expectations that influence how the remainder of the work is experienced...listeners adapt their expectations while listening," (Huron, 313). Listeners may become confused at the lack of cohesion between acts, feeling that this is not what they signed up for, and in some situations, that they wasted their time and money.

Another noted their perception and the accessibility of our performance, "I liked the sort of whatever-ness of your show, just going up there and you know, I knew you had a little bit of a plan but not much, right? And I liked the sort of, it didn't really, it didn't take itself too seriously and that's what I liked about it...I think that, noise music sort of treats itself as if it's as intricate and as structured as other music genres or should be taken as seriously which truthfully I don't believe, and I think what I really liked about your show was there wasn't the idea that you were doing something that other people couldn't do,". That last statement is particularly striking as it shows that our disregard for virtuosity and exclusivity was successfully, non-verbally transmitted from performer to audience. Another student also commented on how our lack of concern for technical skill generated a feeling of irritation, that they could make something "better", also inadvertently accomplishing the general mission of rejecting talent stratification and hierarchy.

Referencing another noise show they had witnessed and disliked, one student felt the performers had not “earned” their stage time, feeling that the lack of narrative structure, dissonance, and not successfully invoking a feeling (besides boredom or annoyance) means the performer(s) had failed at making something artful, interesting, or worthy of being witnessed. They explained that they can find dissonance anywhere, they can become bored anywhere, and were disappointed when the environment that usually assuages their boredom, did not.

Both students who admitted to disliking the performance did not let it show when speaking to me afterwards, only sharing the things they enjoyed because being thoroughly honest would not result in the outcome they were aiming for. Complimenting immediately creates a connection, and proxemically, involves moving closer to one another and recounting the details of the performance with increased admiration than initially presented as a member of the audience. This is one potential set of audience reactions, possibly holding back for the sake of keeping the new relationship intact and casual as both parties phase out of the performer ‘versus’ audience member dynamic, adhering to the common phases of social interaction by only revealing their true feelings months later once attachment and trust has formed and other interactions sully the blow. Interestingly, we have never been booed off stage or explicitly told to not come back; the most audience members have responded “negatively” is in clearing out the venue/room and/or in response to asking how they enjoyed the show, simply shrugging and saying “meh,”.

“Good Art”

Of the five students, the three who occasionally described their own work and others’ as “crap,” “low-quality,” “not good,” were the ones who felt frequently preoccupied with worries about evoking emotions in an audience while performing and/or the emotions one feels when performing themselves. Criticizing and monitoring themselves and others made for a conscious hierarchy focused on ensuring the quality of the piece and desired reception by others. Though all three logically and philosophically understand that the delineations between “good” and “bad” artwork are subjective, culturally constructed and arbitrary, that did not stop them from forming their own strict and unshakeable binary and projecting it to others.

The other two students barely regarded the quality of a piece (their own or others) when observing it, instead focusing on the fact that it exists at all, honing in on the internal pulse of the result and process. Pertaining to music, they also focus less on ‘good or bad’ or ‘fitting’ rhythm, lyrics, melody, etc, but form their work by collaging together specific sounds and signifiers.

These conceptual environments are easy to identify based on how much one utilizes absolute and binary descriptors of very subjective moments. People often socialize with those who harbor similar conceptions, sometimes never leaving the echo chamber even in a setting that provides multiple viewpoints. Most, but not all, acknowledged that these hierarchical ideals must be continuously shed and fought for them to engage with the creative process in a way that is not detrimental to their self-esteem and goals.

Creative Freedom, Planning, Narratives, Limitations,

Upon asking the question, 'what does creative freedom mean to you', one student began to first break down the often seen application of the word 'freedom', saying "there are two ways that people talk about freedom: one way is "I should be able to do what I want all the time" and that's wrong, it's shitty and that's not what freedom is, and the other one is "I should not actively be oppressed,". They also disagreed with the notion that, "any sort of artistic standards or creative standards are a tyranny that must be abolished, like, I think that the standards exist as things to fall back on,". This student frequently mentioned the things they fall back on when they want to create and how they analyze others to see if they made, "good art,": rhythm, attunement, creates or expands a connection to others, sincerity, invocation of feeling. Obviously, these are not universal. Some artists don't want to make good art at all (which is then sometimes adored). These inner conceptual goals present themselves in very specific and cornered acts of rebellion against the mainstream music image that thus don't always look like rebellion or have the desired effect, as they are still sticking to creative standards found in the wider world.

One student admitted without hesitation to being rarely creatively free, imposing harsh limits on themselves for how they want their work to be structured, how they want their audience to engage with their work and thus how much they do or do not share, exhibit, or promote what they create. They also provided this new expansion for future analysis of creation and social psychology: "everyone who does narrative art is doing art about the environments they have been in".

Two students also had very particular thoughts on narrative structures in storytelling and stated that its main priority is to invoke a swath of certain feelings and thoughts; Any failure or lapse in being able to perceive what the integral emotion to the piece is does not afford a connection between the performer and audience, and is thus not artful or skillful. This shows that many students still value a hierarchy of skill and creativity and impose it on themselves and others.

All students agreed that they set personal limitations on themselves while creating, both consciously and unconsciously. Some talked more about limits being set by the medium, some prioritized the limits set by the surrounding social and conceptual environment for what is acceptable and "artful", some said that in-person physical environments such as venues or installation halls can be limiting, distracting, alienating, or complimenting to the full scope of their project or concept. Many directly cited the performance environments as compressing, "...the audience and venue itself are always limitations. You cannot ever be fully free of limitations, context itself is limitation...". The same student also concisely summarized how variable the perceptions of conceptual claustrophobia can be, "...limitation only becomes observable when you're not doing what you want,".

This student and another frequently mentioned limitations becoming visible when initial creative decisions clash with the outside world, "There is a freedom in not needing material objects that for me is often in conflict with wanting to be a maximalist,"; "once a space expects something then the rules change, it's based on the expectations," ; "I like made a whole thing and I realized like there's no way to like for people to comfortably view this...I thought about it

and was like some people in the class can't bend down in that way and it felt a little like exclusive,"; "I guess you start making yourself less free once you get started,".

Several students had mixed feelings about the word 'art' itself, often considering it not useful to their work and the specter of creativity as a whole; saying that defining what is "art and 'not art'" is an unnecessary obstacle that enforces hierarchies and can intimidate people out of creating.

Anxiety, Shame, Embarrassment, Vulnerability

All students mentioned feeling anxious or fearful while performing, hyper-aware of the environment most of the time or occasionally, admitting that these feelings fluctuate. These feelings are often created outside of the person themselves; brought on by harsh critique colored by racism or sexism, feeling ostracized by the skill hierarchy found in all environments, and more.

One student noted that wearing a mask to prevent being directly perceived by the audience assuaged their anxiety, showing how shielding oneself from the social environment impacts what and how they present their work. Some noted that time helped them become comfortable with the procedure of performing, learning to enjoy and indulge in it. Some maintain vulnerability without shame by not taking criticism or audience reactions personally; conceptually separating themselves and their art.

One student interestingly mentioned how the amount of time and planning they've put into a piece influences whether they display it or not, "fear of actually releasing stuff that I've worked hard on...I think part of it is shame... I'm more okay if I spend a day working on something and someone is like "this sucks" than if I spend a year working on something and someone is like "this sucks,"".

Rhythm, Skill, and Creative Flow

All students mentioned rhythm and creative flow when referring to their own work and how they perceive others' creations. Their opinions varied when asked if rhythm and creativity are inherent in humans and how one's creative sense and style develop over time and in various environments. One professed that rhythm is innate and familiar to humans overall, regarding the seasons and consistent change from day to night, and said they became angry when watching a performance that had no rhythm, as it had "nothing to grab onto".

Another agreed that rhythm is natural, and that their 'creative flow' is easy to lean into, but that musical skill is difficult to quantify and thus master. One said their creativity thrives in places that allow them to be fluid. One specified that the ability to express is innate in humans, but creativity is refined and morphed, often from social/conceptual/physical environments. A third said, "it's best to not look at it, sometimes, as a skill. Because the effort it's what makes it worth it, so just by doing it means you've succeeded,". Another mentioned how absurd it is to believe in a "skill ceiling" when the concept of skill is arbitrary and determined by current and past human limitations.

Many questioned why they are drawn to their medium, trying to understand why creating conjures both satisfaction and anxiety, two students mentioned their work being a looking-glass to comprehend themselves: “why do I have to make art, like is it because my family? ...sometimes im like why the fuck am I doing any of this, like not, yeah. Just fun, just like fun and I guess you gain things out of it, learn about yourself a lot,” ; “like a creative work can scratch an itch for a period of time but then I change and it can no longer scratch that itch... I think the creative projects we choose to pursue are like our most useful element we have for, like, learning stuff about ourselves. All of the things I like to do in creative projects are very closely aligned and related to my psychological makeup...eventually I got to a point where, I could more easily discern between the things I actually wanted to work on because I started to notice patterns in the things I did work on more and things that were more exciting to me, and I became much much more selective of the stuff i want to work on and so, and that helped me learn about myself, so, I encourage any creative people out there to really think about why they are so driven to do the things they want to do, both in terms of like you know creative energy, why they have such creative energy and in terms of like what that creative energy is being put into, what kinds of stories,”.

“Scratching an itch,” or going through phases of interest and effort seem to be common as well; pursuing a creative project is more about working until satisfaction, but for the minority of this interview group it involves more of a marking off a checklist strategy.

Audience

Audience is both conceptual and literal, the former referring to the creator’s assumptions of how one might react, and the latter being the physical crowd cramped in a venue and their immediate responses, and online audiences that often interact silently.

Several students mentioned how large they want their audience to be: answers were all over the continuum of just themselves as a witness to their work, only certain people who are willing to put in the effort to dissect it and understand the meaning they intended, anyone who can come across it, and audience turned collaborators.

These conceptual ideals appear practically through the medium and environment each person chooses to and chooses not to interact with, their ideal way to be perceived being actualized in how much or how little they share their work with other people, either only close friends, faculty that has expertise in that medium and can provide individualized constructive criticism, or everyone with the aim of ingesting and integrating as many interpretations as possible. Though constructive criticism can emanate from not just faculty, but close friends and acquaintances as well, the weight of each comment varies and is actualized differently depending on who it comes from and the creator’s priorities.

All students were aware of how an audience that affords profit and bureaucratic connection can be harmful to the integrity of their work, distorting the intended messages and making the creator feel that their work is not for themselves but for some intangible, insatiable other. One mentioned how having an artistic “signature” can become limiting if that is how an audience was gained, as diversification does not guarantee increase in profits or connections.

In reference to interaction between creator, piece, viewer, one student said, “It’s not something new to fuck with the audience, it’s kind of trite...”. Another student agreed that “trolling” the audience is not always the best route to take, especially if you want them to feel welcome to contribute and are eager to converse with them outside the performer-audience dynamic. Still, they enjoyed occasionally toying with the audience’s assumptions about what is expected and palatable, often playing a different volume than the act before or intentionally dissolving the line between performer and audience by providing different methods of interaction, such as encouraging audience members to play an instrument, scream into the mic, or influence the narrative of the performance. They mentioned how these interactions or responses might play out, “there’s different ways an audience can be uncomfortable versus different ways an audience can be all for it; sometimes the audience will stand there and nod their head and um, enjoy it but that’s different than somebody joining in, an audience just sitting there and just kind of being bored, is different than an audience walking out or an audience member shouting at the band which has happened, um, and you know shouting at the band can be a lot of fun,”.

Many also enjoy small audiences for their intimate factors; being able to connect with people in the immediate environment can provide a sense of control and understanding of who is viewing their work. One student mentioned the way their social group does not involve themselves in either conceptual or literal audiences, “most of my friends aren’t artists who are attempting to make art for an audience, it’s mostly for themselves and just for fun,”. The result of doing something ‘just for fun’ versus ‘taking it seriously’ does not always present a noticeable or aligned change in quality or sincerity.

One student preferred to keep their work to themselves, as it is deeply personal and they find value in the integrity of their art not being swayed by others’ interpretations or comments. Most enjoyed casually sharing their creative endeavors, not always for critique but for connection and to observe how people interact with it. A third wants people to interact and collaborate with their work and wants it to be preserved for the future but has observed that the wider world frequently forgets or misunderstands the genres they play in, making it difficult to maintain or pursue an audience. All of these ways of interacting with a conceptual or literal audience are valuable and useful in their own way; creators might find themselves indulging in each throughout the course of their life, possibly specific to the medium and the sentiment associated with the piece.

Connection, Social Environments

Connection and attunement with self and others run through every decision a human makes; the opportunities for connection and interaction can be uniquely visible in social art and especially music spaces. A players’ focus on their instruments and sonic product can be a distraction from traditional awkward social interaction but also a catalyst for further social confusions.

Two students mentioned doing improvisational music in dyads with another person playing an instrument and themselves singing unscripted, “I used to do a lot of music therapy

and I would just go and like the person would like play piano or guitar and I would just sing whatever came to my mind,”; “since I was little I feel like my, and playing music with my dad it was always just improvised and like letting me just, he’d like play guitar and I would just start singing about owls and that was, that was kind of how I learnt to how to play music,”.

Interestingly, these near identical social scenarios resulted in each student approaching music and storytelling differently: the former prefers highly structured and detailed plans for their work across all mediums similar to a narrative labyrinth, and the latter finds themselves drawn to unplanned creation and improvisation. Both noted frequently feeling anxiety or apprehension about sharing their work, showing that improv music as a creative exercise while young does not necessarily implant a freer, more open, or long-lasting conceptual environment; other environmental factors may overwrite or blur what was learned.

One student was very articulate in describing pieces of the social puzzle that make themselves visible at a show or while listening to music in other environments, “...every show i go to it's like a huge social experiment...like art is such a vulnerable, intense thing, and so someone’s making art, and then somehow everyone else is expressing their art with themselves with their clothes, the way they’re standing the way, they’re interacting with people, the way they’re taking in the art that's being displayed, how they’re showing emotion towards it, if they’re like being standoffish, not opening themselves up physically to it or you know just listening and thinking really deeply about it internally, whatever it is, and then how those people on stage feed off of the energy of the audience I find so interesting too, and how, yeah and there's like a level of respect and like honor and like power that those people on stage have for sure and so you know you’re like giving them your attention and your power almost of like letting yourself, you are driving the boat right now, um but yeah...and everyones just performing too, the audience, everyones performing especially with like big social gatherings like that,”.

Part 5: Limitations and Areas for Future Research

This is an autoethnography where I have focused on my introduction and interpretation of student creative praxis (in the form of free improv) in the supplied environment but I hope more accounts are written that vary the environment and continue to methodically detail similar social interaction and affordance patterns.

I was unable to interview more people due to the end of the semester and finals preoccupying others as well as my own irrational hesitation to reach out. Knowing this, I plan to alert people of my desire to interview them far before I do so, so scheduling will be less tight, and hopefully people will be more aware of the genres, attendance, demographics, patterns of social art creation, creative philosophies and praxis of Hampshire college students for richer interviews. I plan to revise the way I conduct interviews as I realize that my room as the location, though standardized for all my interviews, could have influenced their responses. During the interviews I asked questions that would have been useful to ask others but since I had already conducted one or two before, I would not have a full range of answers and thus would be irresponsible to purport for the rest of my interviews. I did not have time for in-person follow ups either. Though I informed each person before the interview itself that I would be recording,

making a transcript, and sending it to them so they can cut or clarify anything, I should have informed them as well of their right to ask me to questions about my qualifications, on and off record ability (a few recognized that themselves, likely because they've been interviewed before).

Two of the people I interviewed did not often attend Rodhe house shows, which I feel is a simultaneous benefit and detriment to the data they provided.

My lack of eagerness to engage with substances at Hampshire, though otherwise beneficial, results in a whole corner of culture study being neglected. I invite others to fill in this gap with/for me, as this is a massive field of studies that document peoples experiences and reasonings for combining art making and sharing with substances. With my lack of participation in this corner I do not feel that I can thoroughly, accurately, or compassionately document student praxis here. Some questions I've been intrigued with from witnessing the drug and art culture at Hampshire in the Spring 23 semester are: What is the future of relationships between players and watchers if both come to shows high? If players are unwilling or unable to compose or converse sober? If watchers only interpret the show through an already distorted lens? I suggest a healthy dose of in-depth interviewing of both players and watchers on their decisions, perception, result, and future decisions regarding playing/watching under the influence.

I also feel that this brief description of one semester is highly inadequate, considering how much can change with each new influx of students and their responses to the larger global environments and personal environments of their past monumentally influence the work each person decides to pursue. A longitudinal ethnographic study spanning, ideally, at least four years/eight semesters to emulate the time it takes to graduate would be thorough enough to detail the gradual changes made by students to the Hampshire creative social environment. A large number of in-depth interviews including a variety of students must be done to monitor how they engage with places like the Rodhe House and the practice rooms (as well as other art buildings, the media basement, etc) over time, ideally interviewing a core group of people to monitor how their usage, philosophies, and observations change over time.

As a student, accessing spaces built for social creativity (both to make and to witness) was not difficult. The doors of the Rodhe house are open to all, with no fee or even showing of ID's to prove one is a Hampshire or Five College student. Early in the semester, the monitors of the Music and Dance Building that house our frequently used practice rooms required at least one student in the group be a music student, certifying that our use of the instruments, space, and time was reasonable enough to unlock the doors for us. As the semester went on, access became less restrictive but required more compromise, as the monitor positions were filled by students familiar to me and my friend group (who did not ask us to justify or explain our desire to use the practice rooms and often joined us in our sessions); and as the spaces began to be used by other students on campus, my friends and I occasionally had to wait to use our favored practice room (it was the only one outfitted with a drum kit and grand piano). We never argued for access with those who requested a few moments in the room to themselves because we understand the limits of the environment (scheduled closing time, no other practice rooms with this equipment), most of us are not primarily music students and accept the priority hierarchy

between other students who are, we do not subscribe to any conceptions of our superiority over other students and feel it would not benefit us to argue, hassle or trick others out of the space. Not having access to the physical environment 24/7 is simply a feature of the environment.

The transformation/expansion of my conceptualization of group improv music has been accelerated by writing this essay and I want to be specific as this could help for future research; my research interests over this course began to include social psychology → social ecology → crowd psychology and worries about research subjects/friends feeling like they are being surveilled or reminded that I'm noticing their behavior so they may inhibit themselves (limiting their creative freedom because of the social environment even if the physical environment stays the same).

Part 6: References

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