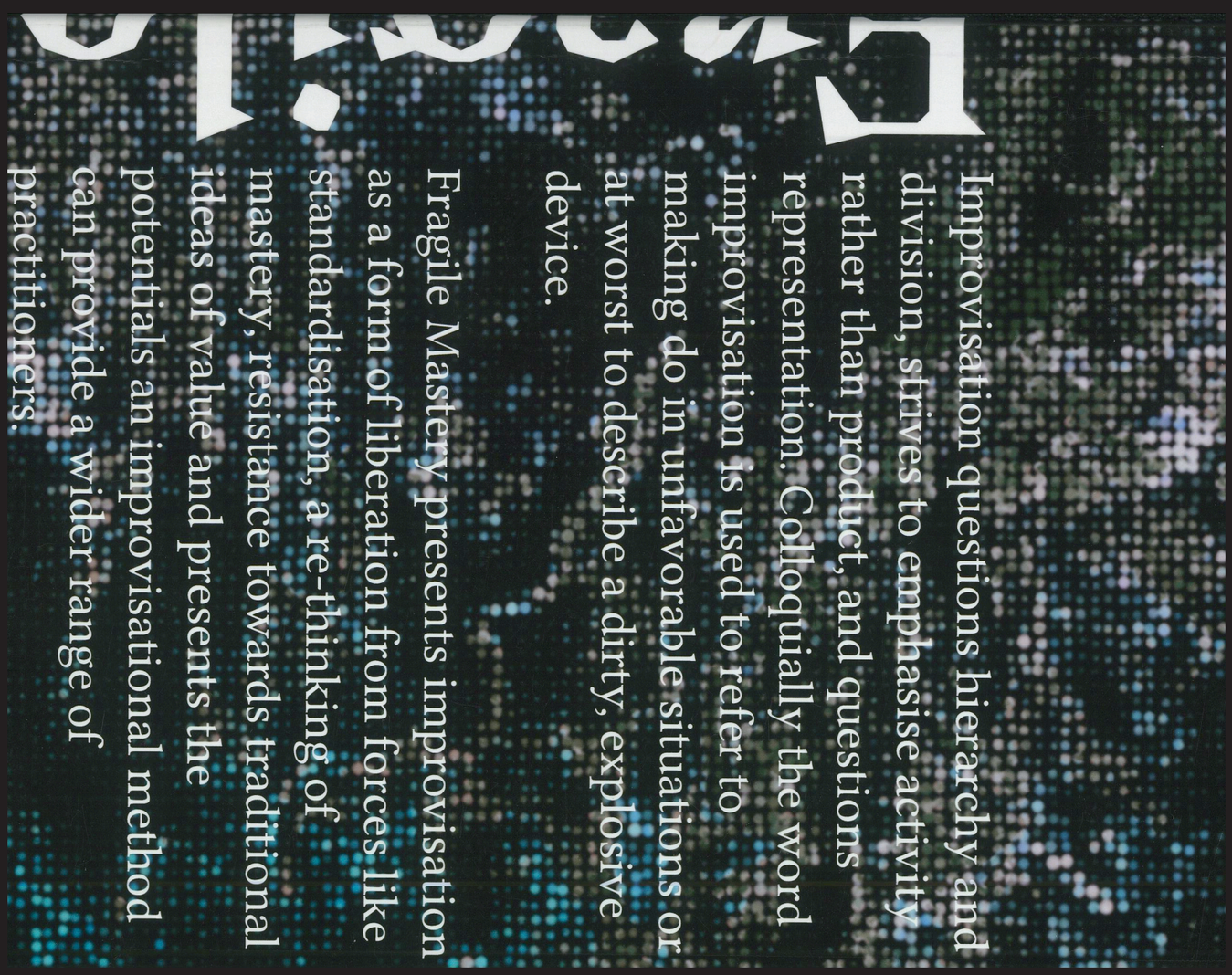
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Magic Mastery

an XPUB Book

// Introduction 11
// Liberation 17
// Collectivity 27
// Mastery 39
// Revolution 51
// Conclusion 63
// Research 69

Fragile Mastery is structured around conversations I had with my peers who are improvising musicians, supported by research on software, improvisation, and collective practices. These bodies of research are applied to my own works and my improvisational practice involving software and music. My interest in software and improvisation has lead me to ask, how can improvisation augment my practice involving music and software?

I have pursued Improvisation as a methodology since as far back as I can remember. During my studies in Jazz Performance, I experienced problematics in my practice as a musician, and a narrow representation of improvisation. Improvisation here was limited to the structure and language of Jazz, limited by an approved rule set as extrapolated from the master's that came before. I later discovered that a resistance to a limited definition of improvisation was shared by many of the celebrated legends of improvisation that came before. The likes of Ornette Coleman, Herbie Hancock and others, who in the face of these narrow representations of improvisation shaped many contemporary musical styles. Some ways this manifested in their practices was through the abstention to theoretical and aesthetic structures of jazz, the adoption of new technologies and a re-imagining of the cultural mainstream.

I adopt software, primarily the visual programming environment *Pure Data* to further break from the predispositions of my formal musical training. Pure Data allows me to not only create software instruments to improvise

their work to exist in forms like performance art, installations, video art, comedy, education, and many more.

The Improvisers

My first conversation was with Peter Farrar and Laura Altman. Peter Farrar is a saxophonist who has been prolific within the improvisation scene in Sydney for over a decade, extending his practice to composition, hip-hop, and electro acoustic music. Laura Altman is a clarinettist and electro acoustic composer who too, extends her practice into the realms of folk music, jazz, traditional composition, and electro acoustic music.

Both Peter and Laura are prolific performers and improvisers playing with many notable Australian and international artists, and as permanent members, sometimes leaders, of improvisation ensembles around the world. During our conversation we talked about their individual practices, and about two groups in particular of which they are both core members, the *Splinter Orchestra* and the *Prophets*.

Liberation is very different depending on who you ask, and in which context they practice. Laura and Peter both talked in non-specific terms about how, rather than specifically liberating them from something holding them back, it was more the sense of being libre, free, unrestrained by training, tradition, or preconceptions of value. Laura and Peter used *Splinter Orchestra* and *Prophets* to illustrate these feelings.

Prophets are a group born out of a will to collectively improvise grooves, with no idolisation of the individual artist, and embracing the musicality of the *"un-mastered"* musician. To achieve these goals they employ techniques outside of a musical practice. By adorning themselves in custom made brightly coloured costumes, they take on alternate identities removing their own histories, musical or otherwise. This allows the musicians then to play instruments that they have little to no training on, obscuring any preconceptions of mastery as imposed by their audiences, or themselves. For the members of *Prophets*, they are liberated from the historical position of mastery, and any constructs of ego, embracing their music as a collective endeavour. The music dives headlong into a space of fragile possibilities based upon collaborative support, and happy accidents.

The *Splinter Orchestra* is a fluctuating, twenty person strong ensemble that too is concerned with collective practice, and embraces the contributions of artists that would not normally be considered musicians. The constitution of the orchestra is made up of many kinds of music making devices which in no way is prescriptive. Its primary form is to make collective improvised music where all kinds of mastery are welcomed. the *Splinter Orchestra* is concerned more with the conservation of a strong community of like-minded, creative individuals who wish to explore music together.

I mention these two groups as they contain all the artists I spoke to. These groups unify them in their creative intention, and demonstrates how very different practitioners are involved in quite a distinct collective practice.

"..fallen out of like with the Jazz language [...] this new world that is a bit more open, exploring and finding something else." (Stewart, 2018)

Rebel Scum liberates both of them in rejecting the structures of jazz improvisation, as well as a reincarnation of their roots in Punk music. For them, rather than adorning themselves in costumes to expunge their history and any preconceptions it may carry, they situate themselves in an imagined story from a galaxy far far away. They do not ignore their practices as highly trained musicians, rather ignoring any elitism *jazz school* may have applied, and acknowlede their passions for punk and science fiction as a means to re-discover music. The liberation here is less about abstaining from oppressive structures, and more about embracing a playfulness, and the lost merits for ones own cultural mouldings.

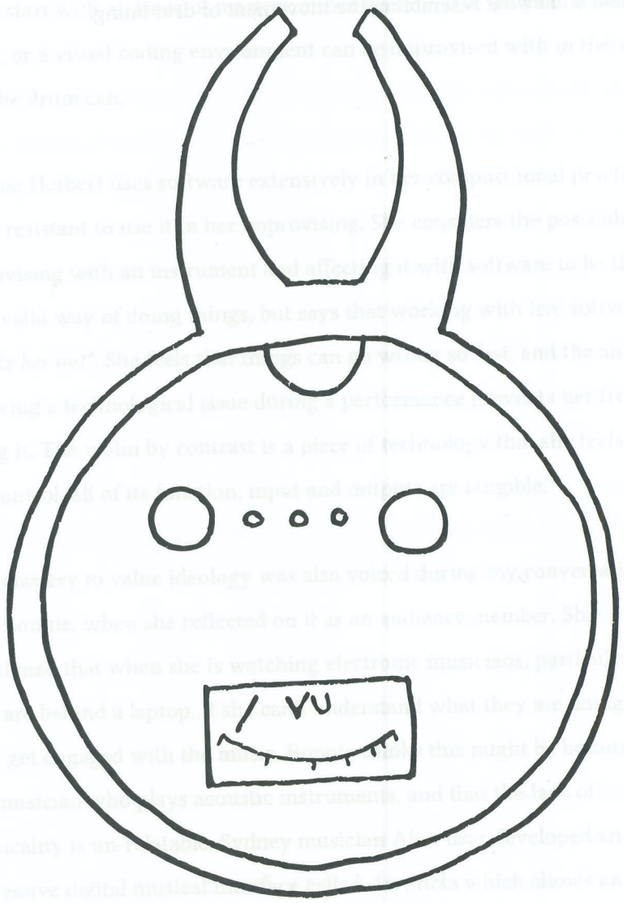
Improvising performance artist, and theorist Mattin talks about an improviser's search for fragility. He recounts Radu Malfatti when talking about musicians breaking from their musical orthodoxy, as the consolidation or re-metabolisation of fragile moments that an artist has encountered (Mattin, 2005, pp.22).

Mattin is an improvising, performance artist that works with computer hardware, open source software, and fluxus like techniques in cases where he physically alters computer technology (Monoskop, 2008). My introduction to his practice was through his writings on improvisation and

open source software, where he expands the application of improvisation beyond musical practice.

Rebel Scum, the *Prophets* and the *Splinter Orchestra* are all engaging with this fragility, pursuing not only to re-metabolise fragile moments, but to create new and unexpected ones. Mattin (2005, pp.22)states that *"there is a fine line between being persistent in pursuing a particular line of research, and getting comfortable within one's methods"*. If anything Peter, Laura, Melanie, Bonnie and Rhys are liberating themselves from the comforts their trained musical methodologies, and are interested in an expanded palate that improvisation has to offer.

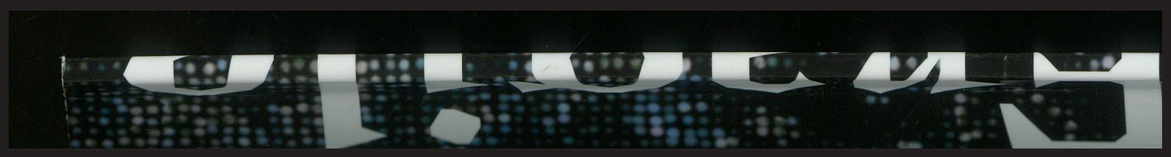
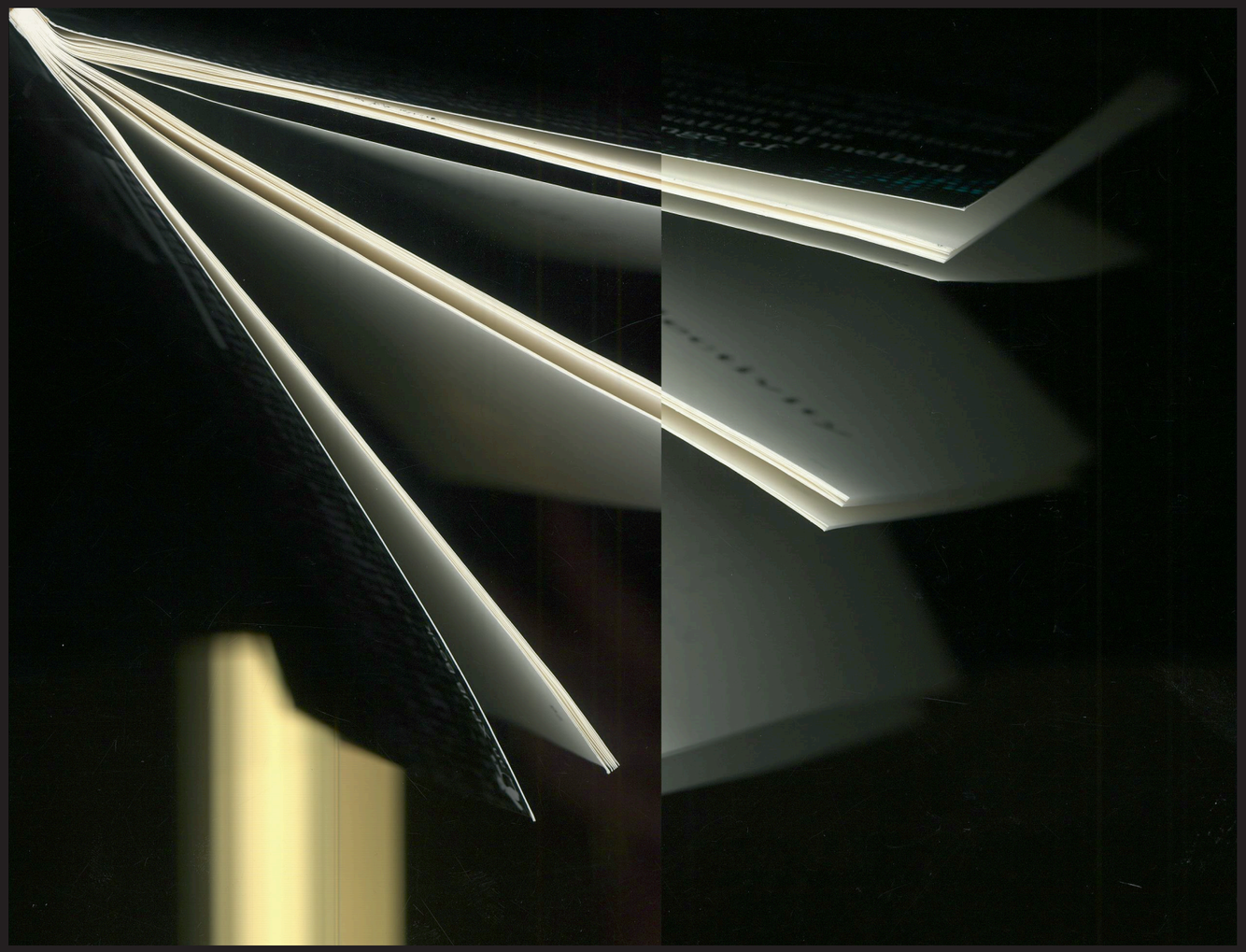
Collectivity



Revolution

As the practice of artists, and particularly improvisers embody many of the qualities of contemporary capitalism, it is important that improvisers materialise these issues so as to better understand their impact upon us.

> *"Improvisation needs to generate a form of agency that goes beyond the improviser's self" (Mattin, 2014)*

Improvisers need to further embrace the undermining of frameworks, practices and morals so that we can question the parameters of our existence, by improvising with ourselves, our material conditions, and applying these reflections and practices to broader social relations. The process of negative improvisation can allow us to quickly identify any limitations and negativities of our times says Mattin (2014), and believes that it will *"generate a form of agency that would link freedom with collective rationality rather than with individual expression"* (Mattin, 2014).

Conclusion