

PERIPHERAL ENCOUNTERS

John MacCallum and Teoma J. Naccarato, with performers Laura Boudou and Stacey Pelinka

BEFORE

We arrived at Djerassi with history together. We had been collaborating for two years on a long-term, practice-based research and creation project. In this project, we employ biosensors as a means to intervene in our choreographic and compositional process, in particular with regard to understandings of bodies and time in performance. In the current piece we are creating, we use electrocardiogram (ECG) sensors worn by dancers to generate tempos for musicians in real time. The impossible nature of the task given the musicians to follow the highly unpredictable pulses derived from the ECG calls into question the nature of their relationship to performative and clock time. Similarly, the incongruent relationship between the simplicity of the ECG signal and the complex biophysical process it is intended to represent disrupts the value systems by which bodies are measured and defined.

THE GIFT OF TIME

On our first day at Djerassi, the residency was described to us as “a gift of time.” And yet, time played tricks on us over the course of a month, expanding and contracting like an accordion. The generosity of the context—people, nature, food, studio space—allowed us to research *peripherally* and *unintentionally*. Collaboration spilled beyond our designated working sessions, such that sharing a coffee, dinner or glass of wine under the stars with any of the 12 artists and scientists present inspired perspective and progress in our artistic research. This residency was truly a gift of shared time.

BREATH PRACTICE

Every morning, post-coffee, we entered the studio for an intensive breath practice. The focus on breath came about initially because we are working with ECGs in our artistic research. Over time, however, we became interested in the physicality of breathing itself and in the extreme states of exertion and relaxation that performers can achieve through guided or self-directed scores for breathing. Additionally, a performer's use of breath affects treatments of body weight in movement, and, subsequently, the temporal unfolding of the choreography.

RELATIONAL LISTENING

Late one evening, in search of a title for our next show, we played the game where you open a book to any page, place your finger blindly on the text and read it aloud. In a collection of poetry by past Djerassi resident Susan Wicks, we were inspired by the phrase *peripheral numbness*. All week we had been struggling to articulate the indirect quality of



Studio sessions with dancer Laura Boudou and flautist Stacey Pelinka at Djerassi, 2016. (Photos: John MacCallum)



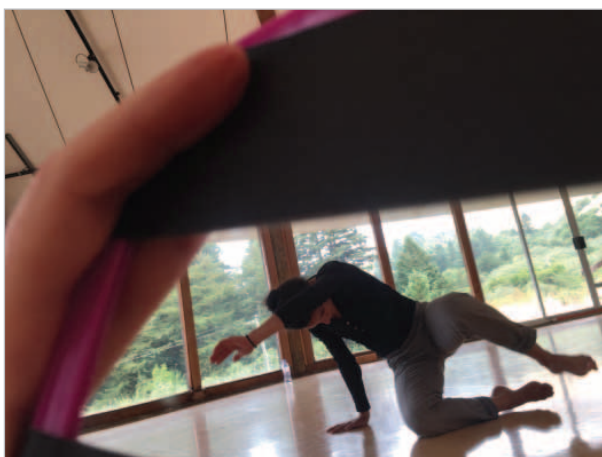
Morning breath practice at Djerassi, 2016. (Photo: John MacCallum)

listening and the relationality we desire between dancers and musicians, as well as between performers and media. The metaphor of peripheral numbness directed us toward somatic approaches to listening to/with/through the body and to/with/through multiple moving sensations and agents in the environment. We explored numbness not

as a loss of feeling or sensation but as a tingling reminder at the edges of our perception that we are in continuous reconfiguration with our surroundings. In the following weeks, we worked with dancers and musicians to craft a methodological progression for *relational listening*, which continues to be an important aspect of our practice-as-research.



Performance of Study #3 at the Djerassi Open House, 2016.
(Photo: H  l  ne Caujoie)



Performance of Study #4 at Djerassi Open House, 2016.
(Photos: Teoma J. Naccarato)

MEDIATION, IN RELATION

Our collaborative research is very much about contextual relationships between performers with one another, with media and with spectators. We view the role of the audience in creation and performance as one that actively shapes the context of the work. We use media—in this case, ECGs, click tracks and mirrors—to intervene in the context and therefore in the qualities of relation that emerge.

PERFORMANCE STUDIES

During our time at Djerassi, we created two short performance studies that we shared at the July Open House. Both studies are grounded in the practices we are developing around the relationships between breath, weight, time and listening. The two studies described below (the third and fourth from our long-term project) are in some ways each other's reciprocal. In the first, we use a fundamental bodily function—breath—to explore the mechanical nature of clock time, while in the second, we explore the biophysical time of the heart through music and movement.

STUDY #3: SCORING BREATH

Each performer wears headphones and breathes in time with a click track that varied smoothly and independently over the course of ten minutes. As the trio breathes together, rhythms diverge and converge to create musical textures. During the peaks and valleys of the score, the effort and coping strategies of each performer become visible, especially given the heightened pressure of a performance scenario.

STUDY #4: DANCER/FLAUTIST SKETCH, WITH ECG

The audience sits in the round, facing the exterior of the room, while the dancer moves in the center. Each guest has a handheld mirror that they direct to view fragments of the choreography, piecing together movements from their own perspective. The dancer wears an ECG from which a real-time, highly variable click track is produced for the flautist. As the flautist and dancer perform from their respective scores, the relational listening techniques in our practice inform a shared construction of time, involving temporalities of physiology, movement, music and environment.

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