

slow and soft and righteous
improvising at the *end of the world*
(*and how we make a new one*)

by Sonia Louise Davis



Sonia Louise Davis performing "return to your breath (did it ever leave you?)" at Sadie Halie Projects, Minneapolis MN, September 29, 2017. Courtesy the artist.

This book of collected texts is culled from five years of writing and thinking I've done around the concept of improvisation. For most people, improvising is what we resort to when something goes wrong, or what performers do in the absence of sheet music or set choreography. However, I've found that the language of improvisation can illuminate a skillset many of us have honed without realizing: how we navigate the oppressive structures that were not made with us in mind.

When we shift our focus to the improviser, we witness resilience and resourcefulness and care. Heightened awareness of our surroundings, increased capacity for listening, collaboration across difference and through dissonance, as well as the ability to move effectively into the unknown, are all tactics that can help us guide ourselves and our communities into a more just future. I believe improvisation can be harnessed for the radical collective action needed to make the world we want to see. I embrace scholarship on deep listening, waywardness, adaptation, and collaborative survival.

Some of these pieces were self-published as giveaway posters at exhibitions of my visual artwork, and used as material to guide my voice- and movement-based live

performances inside or adjacent to the installations. Others appeared online or in print as standalone texts. Writing has become an essential creative activity for me. I've enjoyed sharing my words with readers/viewers, providing an occasion to linger longer with these ideas. I love engaging in that same kind of productive play that happens inside the studio, both physical and abstract. I feel connected to a long line of Black womxn artists who write themselves into the world.

I'm thrilled to be able to share this work with you and couldn't imagine a better publisher than Co—Conspirator Press at the Women's Center for Creative Work. I'm grateful for the opportunity to gather these texts together for the first time, especially during this extremely difficult and unpredictable year. Instead of constant rage, I have tried to choose love. Thank you for reading. Remember, we must trust and take care of ourselves in order to be ready for whatever comes next.

Sonia Louise Davis,
Harlem NYC, October 2020.

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1

SHAKE THE STARS WITH YOUR SONG (EXCERPT)

Ease into and away from the groove, cultivate the distance between knowing and not knowing, the certainty in moving together toward an unseen destination & relishing in the here and now as it turns into there and then. It's oblique or sheer depending on the context or strength of our conviction and the direction of the wind. Abstraction can be a tactic, a form of resistance or subversion/submerge us in water and watch the lotus flower grow.

Play, like actually play. Let go of your ego and listen to other people and make something better than yourself. Bend at the waist and flow down, let your arms brush the floor, sweep left and right in a fluid motion. Look around with abundance, participate in the sermon of the jam: call out clap hands, Embrace Embrace. Sound washes over you if you receive it, be the vessel and at the same time reject those limitations that seek to minimize your strength; be the vessel and un-be the vessel. You are a mastermind, a mad scientist. Queen of the swing. Go Off.

you can't think and sing at the same time:
there is a displacement that happens so that the physical
reactive body can take over—
if you had to think before every note
you'd be at least one beat behind.

per-form / pre-form
there is a necessary letting go in the performative moment
but it's bookended by a rigorous practice
the training needed to be able to get to that place
a certain mastery of one's instrument, which is synonymous with
the body / the frame / the limits imposed or understood
by a certain structure.

& what if the body and voice are used in such a way as to
illuminate not illustrate the embodiment
of a particular experience
and ancestral knowledge without figuring the body
or depending on language?

As a vocalist I remember being hyper-aware of my frame
and not just during performances or on stage
but in rehearsals when my professor Jay would remind me
to stand and breathe correctly
and stop thinking
in order to produce sound
that could resonate
within my body and propel outward from it.
He said that if I wanted to sing
like some of those women I so admired
(Ella or Sarah) I would need to work at it.
A differential in sheer physical size meant that their voices
could resonate more easily within their frames.

//

frame | frām

verb [with obj.]

place (a picture or photograph) in a frame:

he had the photo framed

- surround so as to create a sharp or attractive image:

a short, strong style cut to frame the face

abstract, the verb, means to separate out, to remove something from its context, but it also means to withdraw (oneself). scat is a directive: go away. voicing is the way a musician chooses to play a chord, and there are all sorts of references to the spoken/singing voice when giving praise for a horn player in common parlance. resonance is the physical vibration of sonic depth, and is also used to describe something evocative or emotive, so resonance can be at once the scientific fact of sound and its ability to produce affect.



frame | frām

noun

a rigid structure that surrounds or encloses something such as a door or window

- a person's body with reference to its size or build:

a shiver shook her slim frame

One time a friend told me
he could hear me practicing
because the sound traveled
into the lecture room across the hall.
I got so embarrassed realizing that
all the upper-level music students
were listening to me sing
during Braxton's class every week.

about movement and stillness: there's something in the
generative tension between two poles. action and non-action,
or reflection, or slowing down so much you almost look
like you're going backwards but you're storing up potential
energy in the process. duration gets you somewhere if
only because of the passage of time. we've got to stop setting
up this opposition between doing and thinking, as if
thoughtfulness required no verb, no work. what if what you
do in the slow-down looks like nothing? there is strength
in singing out of time.



listening is engagement and collaboration, awareness and attention.¹ it is a key element of improvisation, a crucial skill to develop in a practice (necessary for playing together, still important when playing alone.) how do we reconcile the machismo jam session effect with a non-hierarchical feminist organizational structure? working towards a common goal with other people doesn't mean sacrificing each participant's unique gifts. it's like Lorraine O'Grady said recently² "the best collaborator is someone who has her own business to mind."

1. According to scholar, composer, and improviser George Lewis: "Improvisation involves not only outwardly expressive action but also inwardly manifested attention and the analysis of conditions. We must choose where to direct our awareness, and the consequences of those choices feed into the next expressive action, as well as the next moment of attending to the present moment." (Lewis, 2014)

2. During the first group meeting of Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter, convened by Simone Leigh at the New Museum on July 20, 2016.

It's funny now looking back that
I spent so long keeping my singing self
and my artmaking self apart, like these roles
could not peacefully coexist.
Maybe there's something about my identity
as a singer that felt dependent
in relation to the band, or
specific to the college campus.

frame | frām

noun [usu. in sing.] a basic structure that underlies or supports a system, concept or text:

the establishment of conditions provides a frame for interpretation

improvisation is about the synchronicity of the moments of composition and performance, preparation and action, an ever-present readiness.³ being alert to one's surroundings, making snap judgments informed by changing conditions and responding to the world are all ways we improvise throughout everyday life. it's strange then to talk about the technique as if removed from any environment, and even stranger to discuss the practice when the conversation centers on the false understanding that improvised music is simply playing without a score or going off-book. improvisation is not utter freedom from any plan, but is the act of collapsing planning and playing together under a set of determined constraints or limits, which might be the chord changes, your instrument's range, how much you warmed up, the temperature of the room, or how you're feeling that day.

3. Here I am thinking of Danielle Goldman's use of readiness and her description of contact improvisation specifically. (Goldman, 2010)

Singing standards became too predictable after a while
I think I was happy
to give the whole thing up after graduation.
I also developed a distaste for that positioning –
being on stage in front of the band
looked at instead of listened to.
Moving back home to Harlem there was an urgency
in working slowly as everything
seemed to be moving so fast around me.



the breaking apart of the (Black/woman)subject: the way
that the parts never add up to the whole, the compartmentalizing we are taught to do to ourselves and our bodies.
(musically) you have a good ear, or a nice voice... a strong
sense of phrasing, work on your pitch in the upper register.
enclosure/foreclosure: "where are you from?" the body
is an instrument or tool that performs identity in public
space and is read and mis-read as foreign or exotic, over
and over, even as a "native" in this city.

For a while I made large format analog
portraits of neighborhood families
as a way to hold on to the feeling of groundedness.
My projects often took place outside in public space
on the sidewalk or in a park
and I enlisted collaborators in family members.
We called our process a dance:
taking turns framing through the ground glass
and passing the shutter release to a portrait-sitter.
Even though a photograph was the result of our encounter
it never seemed to encompass
the prolonged moment we shared together
or the excitement from passersby about our performance.
I was always most interested in what was happening
outside the frame of the picture.



frame | frām

verb [with obj.]

create or formulate (a concept, plan, or system):

the staff have proved invaluable in framing the proposals.

- form or articulate (words):

he walked out before she could frame a reply

singers embody musicianship in the physical body as their instrument. in the gendered division of labor what you bring to the table is (only) yourself. the familiar desire to move beyond often troublesome lyrics to the solo, to behave as a member of the band, to exhibit and display the fullness of your instrumentality always works with and against the refusal to be instrumentalized.

In early spring one year my friend did a tarot reading
that revealed cleansing healing and
mental clarity were in my immediate future
and advised that I spend time near bodies of water
to recharge my batteries.
For the next two months I traveled almost daily
to a botanical garden on Staten Island
for a residency in a cottage.
I quickly found myself singing alone in the wooden house
because the acoustics were so good.
Some afternoons a recording of Whitney Houston
singing the national anthem came in through the windows
from the ball fields behind the grounds.

Improvisation is located at a seemingly unbridgeable chasm between feeling and reflection, disarmament and preparation, speech and writing...improvisation is never manifest as a kind of pure presence—it is not the multiplicity of present moments just as it is not governed by an ecstatic temporal frame wherein the present is subsumed by past and future. Improvisation must be understood, then, as a matter of sight and as a matter of time, the time of a look ahead whether that looking is the shape of a progressivist line or rounded, turned. The time, shape, and space of improvisation is constructed by and figured as a set of determinations in and as light, by and through the illuminative event. And there is no event, just as there is no action, without music.⁴

4. (Moten, 2003)

and where does radicality lie?

is it in the gesture or the medium or the project's stated aims?

can it inform the fullness of a life and a practice

in all of the complicated and subtle ways we want it to,

always?

11

The studio can be a site of refuge
a reserved practice room for improv-ement
endless workshopping
small victories
and necessary failures.

It may be my notebook on the subway
and it can also be the localized resonant space
for running those scales.

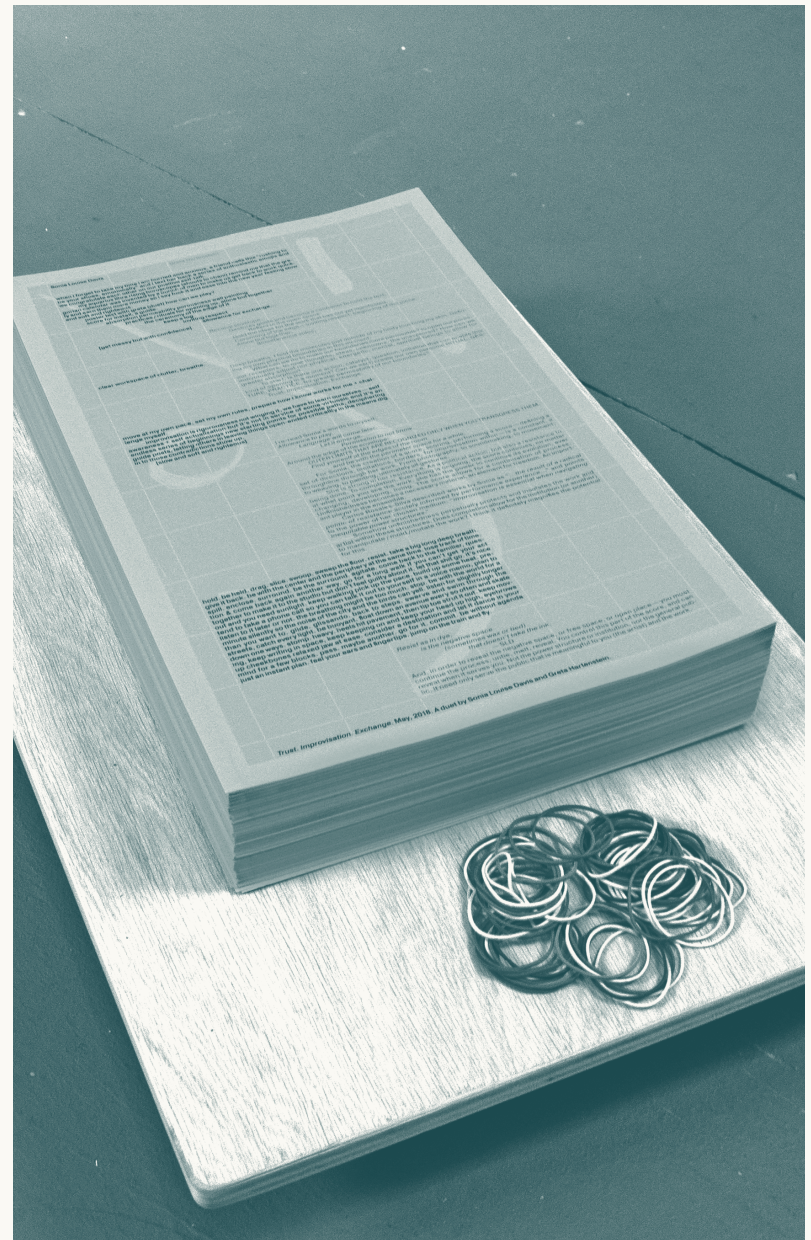
A room of my own with rules made and remade
broken and breaking.

The contradiction here is not between engagement and craft,
but between call and response.
Working to and through.

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"Trust. Improvisation. Exchange." duet with Greta Hartenstein, limited edition off-set poster, 17in x 11in, on custom plywood plinth with casters and rubber bands. Designed by Other Means and printed by Post Heritage. Exhibited in Sonia Louise Davis' solo exhibition "Sound Gestures" at International Studio & Curatorial Program Project Space, Brooklyn NY, May 22 - July 31, 2018. Courtesy the artist.



3

A SCORE TO KEEP TIME / A SCORE TO LOSE TIME / BUT NEVER YOURSELF, IN IT

what does a body say? or rather, what can a body say that words can't, and relatedly, what can these forms say if i'm listening closely enough? what happens when i am so slow + quiet, impatient but yearning? and what if i don't always have a plan? how do we trust ourselves?

fall and then get up. (put freedom in context)

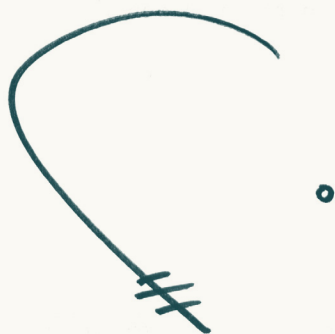
repeat these lesson-mantras: allowance to play.
language comes later. let it emerge.
permission to not know &

"stay / reading that heavy-weight theory shit but stay
/ knowing when to put it the fuck down."⁵

5. taisha paggett, from *vestibular mantra (or radical virtuosity for a brave new dance)*, 2012.

felt time is a shared object between us that we negotiate together. collaborative tactics for moving together into the unknown, authentically and with eyes closed, for finding one's voice again after a long time, for duets and quartets of brown women greeting the sea.

resonant frequencies, blossoming tones
a score to keep time
a score to lose time
but never yourself, in it.
hold space with words or gestures, invitations
(not explanations)
the rupture / the rapture
undercut the lyrics.
return to your breath (did it ever leave you?)
think about levity.
keep some secrets for yourself.



resist as in dye, is the negative space (sometimes wax or tied) that doesn't take the ink. a loop is really just a delay, a way to suspend time, to linger longer with a sound or a moment or revisit it over and over, adding to it with new bits from now. these marks are fluid, cyclical. no forward momentum or accelerationist progress (so-called) but a string of returns, a coming back around.

a score to stay alive,
a score to find freedom

listen closely to the song stuck in your head
(if there are versions by other singers try to hear them all at once and find your own from the sum).

find yourself at the edges of the room and be with the peripheral space for a while. enter however feels right (and know that there are no wrongs and that an entrance doesn't always have to look like one).

"You are a living breathing star and your ancestors are with you.
Be as FLY as you want to be."

wanting to show up with my body now, in the work, be accountable. it's a starting place, it's honest and flawed but maybe it's better than involving others at this moment especially as i gather my words + non-words together to see what all this is. there's an undeniability in physical presence and i worry less about the ethics of representation because it's only ME on the line + at least i signed up for this, right? also seems like a logical place to speak from, to take a position that is ever-evolving and to consider an embodied practice with all the tools + strategies + feelings + pitfalls.

like sitting in this studio with my rage not sure how to proceed or if i can make any art today or even if i should... is the work. showing up with + in and sometimes probably in spite of my body. the emotional register is always there bubbling under the surface of a not-so-cool exterior and i want to find a way to get rid of the worry fear anxiety and just DO but that's hard.

why not / who cares / what gives / no rules
practice gratitude.

i love how the work is telling you where to go and before you even have language for what you're doing things happen in this incredible way and it's like speaking to your future self leaving clues or weaving some threads so she gets it later and picks up where you left off.

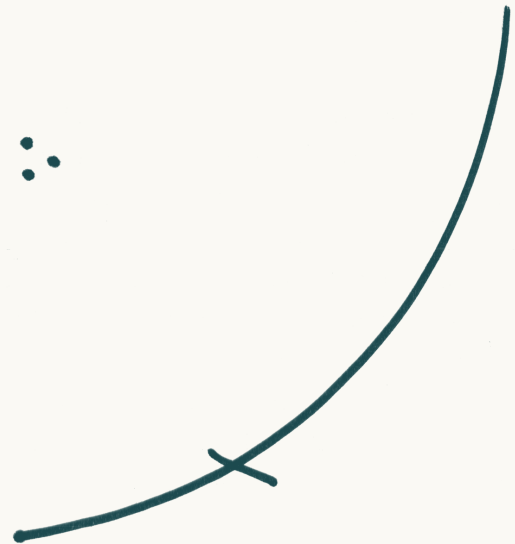
Sonia Louise Davis performing "you know we got to find a way" at Denniston Hill, Glen Wild NY, July 28, 2018.
Photo credit Vladimir Radojicic for Denniston Hill.



4

NOTES ON IMPROVISATION

trust skill practice fear unknowable trained naïve courage
listening nuance phrasing breath softness confidence
urgency slow mindful quick rituals habits clichés unex-
pected experience past + future momentary the now
forward thinking momentum space time



a friend shares a quote about the ingenuity + inventiveness of Black people in the face of adversity, attributed to the poet Nikki Giovanni:

“Style has a profound meaning to Black Americans. If we can’t drive we will invent walks and the world will envy the dexterity of our feet. If we can’t have ham, we will boil chitterlings; if we are given rotten peaches, we will make cobblers; if given scraps, we will make quilts; take away our drums and we will clap our hands. We prove the human spirit will prevail. We will take what we have to make what we need. We need confidence in our knowledge of who we are.”

and this makes me think about the necessity of improvisation as survival + as strategy for self-preservation. but also work and that rigorousness that morphs into grace and ease like the way sports commentators describe each young phenom as being “truly gifted, naturally athletic, a joy to watch on the court, with the ball,” etc. because talent is collapsed into Black performance in a move that erases effort discipline time + practice in favor of an essentializing trope of entertainment. but what about all those lonely pre-dawn hours at the free throw line or perfecting footwork on the left hand side?

hold. be held. drag. slice. swoop. sweep the floor. resist. take a big long deep breath. give it back. be with the center and the periphery at the same time. lose track of time. spill. enclose. surround. be the surround. agitate. come back to the familiar, question & come back again another way. go for a long walk if you can’t get your act together to make it to the studio but don’t feel guilty about it. let that shit go. it’s nice out and you need sunlight. keep walking pick up the pace. build up some heat. pretend to take a phone call so you can talk it out to yourself in a voice memo, plan to listen to it later or not. the breathing might be too much. stop. be with the world for a minute silently so the noise of the city and the birds can yell. listen for slightly longer than you want to. glide. glissando. back to steps. swerve and swim through the streets, catch every light. be buoyant. float down an avenue every so often and skate down one ways. stomp. heavy. heels hit pavement, then tip toe strut it out. keep moving, keep writing in space, keep keeping on and keep your head up high, eyebrows up cheekbones relaxed jaw at ease. consider a destination and let it dance in your mind for a few blocks. pass. maybe another. go for it. commit. be without agenda just an instant plan. feel your ears and fingertips. jump on the train and fly.



Sonia Louise Davis reading "[slow and soft and righteous]" at ACRE Projects Gallery, Chicago IL, December 7, 2018.
Courtesy the artist/ACRE Projects.



5

WE MUST BE VERY STRONG / AND LOVE EACH OTHER / IN ORDER TO GO ON LIVING

writing from my Harlem apartment, more than three months deep into pandemic quarantine, as unrest has pushed many of us out onto the streets, i am starting to see what has lifted with the smog.

yes, this moment is a historical one, ripe for change and unprecedented in many ways, but also displaying all of the same patterns of state violence some of us have long condemned. i think it's true that this uprising is a convergence, representing neither accident nor coincidence. and i know we must trust and take care of ourselves, to be ready for whatever comes next.

may 19, 2020

from my fire escape,
seated on the wooden folding chair i've shoved out
my bedroom window,
i get to witness
growth
change

and time in general
at an altogether different pace,
the daily updates of spring's arrival:
buds on bare branches become
soft and curly baby leaves overnight.

after a rainy few days my view is altered entirely,
many more neighbors
are fully obscured by shady tree-cover,
the birds are perpetually active,
even during thunderstorms,
chattering coo-ing
making endless flights from branch to rooftop to
windowsill and back.

when a breeze changes direction
new sounds and smells are suddenly present,
i am aware of every layer of my hyper-local ecosystem,
have learned the timbre of the barking dog
in the backyard six lots down,
seen the changing light reflected off new
construction behind us
that bathes our afternoons in a pinkish hue,
felt the gradual movement of the sun,
know now how much daylight i'll get
between the end of the noisy work day
on that job site and
the sun's dip behind the roof of the gut-renovated
building one over,
after which point
only our west-facing windows get blasted
and the houseplants adjust their lean.

• • •

i think Busy tried to keep us numb and stretched too thin
to notice just how close to the edge many of us were
(in the Before). of course, as others have stated recently, but
i'll choose to give credit to the Black womxn leading
this charge, the way things were was killing so many of us:

Tricia Hersey, founder of The Nap Ministry, writes, *I ain't
gotta grind. I ain't gotta hustle. I ain't gotta work myself to
death to reach my goals. I don't listen to the teachings of white
supremacy and capitalism. I resist those lies. They cause harm.
I am about liberation. I will rest.*

writer and activist Sonya Renee Taylor says, *Normal never
was, and We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new
garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.*

in a mid-march conversation with adrienne maree brown,
community organizer Aja Taylor reminds us that, *The world
we are fighting for is just on the other side of apocalypse.*

april 4, 2020

in a strange way, i have been readying
for something like this.
preparing to improvise.
seeking out slowness.
telling myself the potential energy is just as crucial
as its twin,
the more visible kinetic manifestation.

the artists and thinkers i'm gravitating towards
preach a practice of
willful mindful survival, against all odds.
i'm not here for the silver lining talk just yet,
it feels like we're approaching the eye of the storm.

but i want to honor the teachings i've come across
and/or invented,
because they seem to serve me well right now.
grateful for health, home, safety, and love.
eager to dream up a radically different world after this.
buoyed by the collective efforts i've witnessed and
by all the good work happening behind the scenes.

reminded of a mantra i wrote at the beginning of a
new year/new phase of my work

[slow and soft and righteous]

may it be an offering to listen to those inner rhythms
and slip away,
if only momentarily,
from that productivity pacing we've been told we
need.

i've been enjoying what happens when i let my body
lead.



a shift in focus to my immediate physical, mental, emotional
surroundings and what i have the privilege to choose to
do, has become absolutely necessary (but miss me with that
“now more than ever” bullshit)

how do we make space to grieve? how can i keep showing
up for myself?

the crisis of the pandemic has made clear to those who
simply wouldn't listen prior, that we face many ongoing and
interconnected crises. but right now, i am hopeful.

we are witnessing local action in the face of widespread
federal inaction, the proliferation of neighborhood-specific
protests/vigils/marches and the implementation of
community-designed solutions, the wholesale refusal to
return to business as usual, and perhaps, the long-planned
and long-awaited reckoning this uniquely urgent moment
demands.

i keep asking: how do we successfully navigate an oppressive
and unjust set of conditions that affect all of us differently
and most of us badly?

i attempt to embrace something like stillness: trying to put my phone down, trying to forget the terribleness outside, trying to simultaneously mourn and deconstruct those longings for normalcy, trying to get immersed enough in a tactile process to quiet my overactive worry-mind. i am unable to pick up a book for very long; too agitated or distracted or fidgety, i reason. i wish i'd stockpiled some fiction or short stories.

i go on a long solo walk through the north woods of central park, emboldened by a handmade cloth mask recently gifted to me by my mother, out of work since Broadway shuttered. the park is so crowded i vow to wait for rainier days before venturing out again; my partner and i soon make a pact to this effect. i sit on a sunny rock overlooking Harlem meer, and write in my notes app.

april 25, 2020

a meandering walk in the park
takes on a sinister quality,
especially on nice warm days
when maintaining safe distance from others
is impossible.

i find myself easily frustrated
having to collaborate with
huge numbers of strangers
in an ongoing performance:
negotiating my own safe passage
through public space, never mind
the infinite number of personal thresholds
that have been set by others.

i catch myself seething under my mask
at trios of blasé yuppies, faces uncovered,
moving towards me as an undefined blob,
their group indifference threatening
to push me off the path entirely
(a reminder of those unwritten,
and violently enforced, rules of another time and place,
which i am privileged to say
i have never personally experienced...)

my usual cure for writer's block
or an uninspired day in the studio
is a long aimless walking practice,
movement through space without a fixed destination,

a chance to improvise my way
towards some small breakthrough or
a new entry into a familiar idea.
but now
these attempts are thwarted
by the overwhelming sense
that every other human
poses a unique threat to my own
autonomous health and well-being,
a paranoid state of distrust
brought on by our common invisible enemy,
while of course, the visible enemies are all around us,
flaunting a lack of concern for themselves
which, in our highly contagious reality
extends outward, including me.

my energy on recent walks has shifted profoundly,
instead of feeling magnetized to explore a new direction,
i'm on high alert,
stuck in constant risk-assessment-mode.
each change of course
motivated by an external stimulus, a
disappointment at the sheer magnitude of
other people's lack of self-awareness,
the genuine disregard for community,
which now presents itself as proximity.
the irony is not lost.



i could not have anticipated (although i am not at all surprised)
that the park would soon become a site of weaponized
whiteness. evidence of nypd making social distancing viola-
tions the new stop and frisk is circulating expectedly, and
i make another vow to limit my time on social media, which
during isolation, presents painfully triggering reminders
that everyday injustice is not on furlough.

i tell myself that my personal emotional safety is more
important than the constant stream of updates and that
my close friends will still text me critical commentary memes,
like the one i keep describing in facetime happy hours, of
the anime character looking up at the butterfly, posing the
question as white people, *is this [quarantine] oppression?*

one sunday in early june, after attending a modest mid-after-noon Harlem families march with my mother, i write in my journal once i make it back home:

june 7, 2020

have the nightly cheers subsided?
or are they simply unheard
when we have the ac on high,
windows shut, trying to get
comfortable in this sudden humidity.
perhaps they've been replaced by sirens
(those i do hear through closed windows)
marking the beginning of curfew,
our city's decline into martial law,
accompanied by those aggressive notifications
we haven't yet opted out of.
sometimes a helicopter hovers
just above our building,
filming demonstrations on 125th street?
hard to say.

a few hours later i record (and then transcribe) a voice memo, softly, as i lay in bed

in a way
the beginning of the slow down was exciting
because it forced the pace i know i thrive in,
upon everyone and everything, it seemed.
but what the pandemic has done
much more effectively is to
make the fog lift quite literally
and reveal what so many of us have known and
been attuned to for so long:
that there exist inside this country
and even in this city,
vastly different experiences of reality
and that privilege blinds you
to the injustice that is
everywhere
all the time and
which you are foolish
to think has gone away
if you have never seen it.

(my world would not have slowed
if i drove a bus for mta
or staffed the check-out line
at fine fare or trader joe's,
where i hear about union busting
and attempted negotiations
for hazard pay.)

in other words
my intense personal discomfort
comes at the realization that
this is a moment unlike any other
when things are rapidly shifting
and i feel ill-prepared
to document or even follow
the overwhelming wave
of news that is triggering, the
videos circulating callously
of violence and the
feeling of being under attack and also of
being insulated from that attack.
the very real acknowledgement that
in many ways, my life is not in immediate
danger at all times, and for that
i am grateful but furious.

• • •

the balancing act has become: how to stay informed and/or
gather inspiration from trusted sources with intention, while
somehow avoiding the worst parts of the endless scroll that
i know will destroy me. casual cellphone video of knees
on necks, or cops kneeling, "think-pieces" about thriving in
quarantine, reports of exponentially increasing outbreaks
in prisons across the country, how-to guides for getting the
lighting right for your zoom calls, empty statements of
solidarity from arts organizations with notorious track
records on race and gender equity, the suggestion to drink
bleach (i wish he would).

this shit goes on and on, and doesn't need me as an audience.

friends and family living elsewhere constantly ask us how
things are "on the ground" in NYC, seeing the numbers
spike and the in-fighting between inept elected officials.
we share what we've been cooking, i keep trying to cultivate
something like joy.

june 20, 2020

from my partner's art studio
on the corner of east 118th street
we stand outside on the fire escape
overlooking third ave
and witness a Black Lives Matter
bike protest, 7 minutes of which
i film on my phone while
choking back familiar tears
as i watch whole families clapping
from the sidewalk on either side,
a father and young son in masks, fists raised.
the woman from one of the cars
stranded at the intersection
has jumped out leaving her door ajar
and is holding a baby and cheering
for the endless line of bikers,
some waving flags and homemade signs, others
banging drums with only one hand steering.
i cry like this, i remember,
at the marathon runners

as they flow down upper fifth ave at the end of our block,
overcome with emotion i can't quite explain
(proud of their effort, perhaps?)
but this feels different today.
honking cars are blaring in rhythm
to chants of "no justice, no peace"
and "whose streets, our streets" as
waves and waves of wheels keep coming
up the avenue for at least another
7 minutes after i stop recording.
actions are everywhere all the time now,
and i love that one finds us to briefly interrupt
traffic and hold our attention
this muggy afternoon.

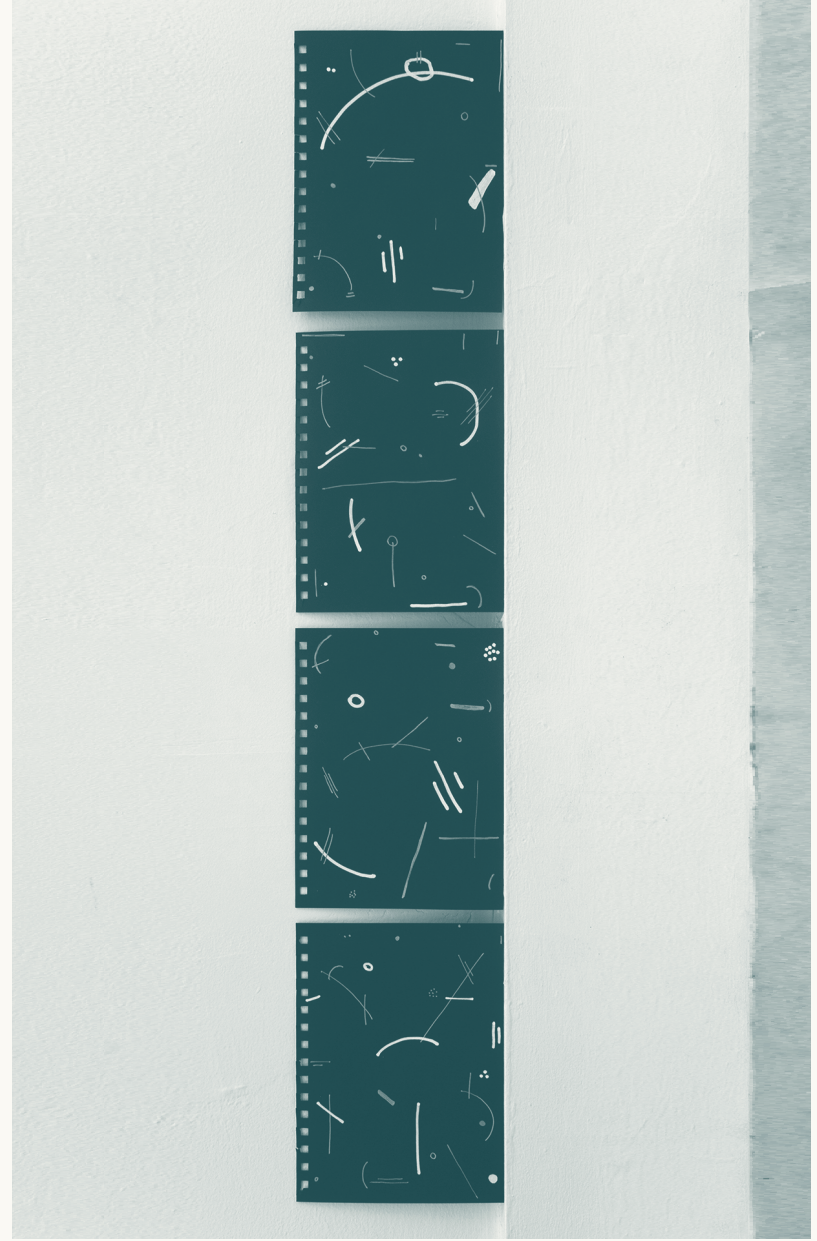
and what now? these facts remain: the virus is surging in parts of the country where officials shrugged off health experts' warnings. cities' population density is not itself a reason for those early waves of infection, instead, legacies of injustice are to blame: the intersecting crises of unaffordable housing, chronically low-wage work and lack of healthcare, which has exposed our most vulnerable yet "essential" neighbors to more potent strains of the disease. there is finally a national conversation about abolition, as police departments around the country are being defunded and restructured, but the cops who murdered Breonna Taylor as she slept have still not been arrested.

Audre Lorde, whose words i've lifted for the title of this piece from the last lines of her 1969 poem "Equinox," elsewhere famously called (our) self-preservation an act of political warfare.

the work continues, calls for accountability abound, and folks on the ground keep pushing, making sure this moment stays connected to the movement that spawned it. we yell and scream and rest, and somehow, still stay hopeful. repeat after me: "we must be very strong / and love each other / in order to go on living."



"quartet choreography," acrylic paint marker on four sheets of Fabriano black notebook paper, 4in x 8in each.
 Exhibited in Sonia Louise Davis' solo exhibition "Refusal to Coalesce" at Rubber Factory, New York NY,
 July 11 - September 2, 2018.
 Courtesy the artist.



scores for me can be a set of rules to follow or a framing device to guide a certain way of working—recipes, to-do lists, and GPS directions are all scores we use to prepare a meal, accomplish tasks throughout the day and get to where we're going. i use scores in my practice to learn/try/discover something new or to push myself and my work to an unknown place. i've been incorporating what i call life-scores into my practice for the past few years.

the first was a set of lesson-mantras:

allowance to play.

language comes later.

let it emerge.

permission to not know.

and (borrowed from taisha paggett):

*stay / reading that heavyweight theory shit but stay / knowing
when to put it the fuck down.*

sometimes these words find themselves taped to my studio wall.

the bulk of my recent work is an attempt to cultivate something i call critical improvisation: tactics for self-articulation and collective engagement as we demand a more just society. freedom, as angela davis reminds us, is a constant struggle. improvisation is not total freedom from any constraints, it is the awareness of outer limits within which to move and move beyond.

[slow and soft and righteous]

the dictionary defines improvise as: to create or perform spontaneously or without preparation. i would argue that to be a good improviser requires a lifetime of preparation, but that we always already have these tools, it's really just a matter of discipline and perhaps a change in perspective. it's about trust in self, and playing with the unknown. it's about beginning and becoming.

my newest life-score is taken from a longer piece of writing i did at the beginning of last year:

*when i forget to take my time i am hurried and anxious,
a friend calls this "rushing to tie your shoes, emotionally," and i
text her back a series of enthusiastic emojis and we congratulate
ourselves on our positive self-talk.*

my aquarius libra rising horoscopes (shouts to chani⁶) remind me that the gregorian calendar was invented by a bunch of men to make us get back to work quickly and earn them more money so i say fuck it and ease into the new year feeling slow and soft and righteous.

i return to this phrase again and again, as a refrain. when things feel out of control, it's a reminder to move at my own pace, set my own rules, prepare how i know works for me, and challenge myself. improvisation is rigorousness not winging it. we have to learn ourselves.

6. <https://chaninicholas.com/>

[slow and soft and righteous]

repeat after me

[slow and soft and righteous]

again

[slow and soft and righteous]

let's make it one sound

[slow and soft and righteous]

when i cue like this _____ i want to hear you say it again. ok.

on the last day in july i stage a solo performance on the loading dock outside my studio building in industrial east williamsburg brooklyn, the culminating event of a 6 month residency. it's windy. i have my microphone and my loop pedal, plus four large spherical balloons tied to the wooden benches in front of the brick wall by the door.

i hand out strips of blue tarp to members of my audience in the round. familiar faces pepper the crowd and i decide to begin by walking around the circle making eye contact. initial plans to tie the tarp strips to the railings of the loading-dock-platform-stage had gone awry like several other things that evening but i was rolling with it. cut from the same blue woven polyethylene tarp i'd made my costume, sewn into a poncho of two overlapping rectangles, the tarp serves as an extension of the security blanket it was for me in the studio – my reminder to “get messy but with confidence,” the thought being that fears of getting too wild and risking failure would be assuaged with a specified zone for dirty work.

[slow and soft and righteous]

another unexpected element (besides the wind): i run my cables through the mixer without any sound check or technician and hear an eerie overtone not quite an octave above my voice that is definitely audible when i begin and instead of a false start (there had been 3 at my in-process showing a few days before) i also roll with it, surprised but kind of into the ghostly echo it adds.

i sing a bit of mercy mercy me and layer my voice, doing a call and response with myself. i add some of what's going on, melodically linked, and so resonant. the delay offers just enough time to make the next move, and as with most of my improvisations, i listen and react and build.

[slow and soft and righteous]

the primal scream, something of a release, after so many frustrations over half a year of well-meaning but inept administrators, it marks the end of being disrespected, but it catches me off guard as well and i have the pedal recording so the gravelly cry comes back over and over in the looper.

then the soon-to-be-newest lesson-mantra, lifted from my notes made at a public dialogue between torkwase dyson and christina sharpe, "how does abstraction help us breathe?"

i remember enjoying how much emotion was in the piece, so different than my showing upstate in a dreamy light-filled barn. it was nice to feel connected to those friends in the crowd, holding pieces of me, in a way, containing my site and surrounding the performance in a kind of care, if only because of the reminder at the beginning of support. it was a way, in retrospect, of building community and solidarity in the moment to serve my own needs.

[slow and soft and righteous]

after a section plays in reverse, over which the hook comes in, "you know we got to find a way, to bring some lovin' here today," i get on my hands and knees and let the tarp blow over me, a moment of surrender, a space of privacy, a chance to catch my breath.

[slow and soft and righteous]

then it's over. some unknown amount of time has passed
but it feels right to end it so i lift the tarp over my head and
set it down on top of the mixer, hit the switch on the pedal
and walk offstage into the vestibule, where i take three deep
breaths to the sound of applause, turn around and move
past the crowd and down the steps into the parking lot
where i see baldwin, my friends' baby girl, who smiles at me
as i sit down next to her on the asphalt and we clap hands
for ourselves together.

Sonia Louise Davis performing "you know we got to find a way"
at Denniston Hill, Glen Wild NY, July 28, 2018.
Photo credit Vladimir Radojicic for Denniston Hill.



slow and soft and righteous
improvising at the end of the world
(and how we make a new one)
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