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COVER SHEET

Improvising Time: An investigation into the link between time and intersubjectivity in the performance of solo dance improvisation

Nareeporn Vachananda

Abstract:

Improvising Time is a practice-led research project investigating embodied temporality in the performance of solo dance improvisation. It explores two temporal concepts in Japanese Noh theatre — the sequencing concept of jo-ha-kyū 序破急 and the notion of ma 間, defined as interval — investigating how jo-ha-kyū and ma can be embodied for the temporal organization of solo dance performance when improvised before an audience. Grounded in praxis where theory is imbricated in practice, Noh performance theory is brought into a dynamic interaction with the fundamental theory of time in physics and a phenomenological approach to intersubjectivity. Using a multi-voice dialogic approach as a key methodology, the studio research examines the experience of improvisation from both sides — as improviser and as watcher — in collaboration with solo dance practitioner Janette Hoe. The research shows how, in the act of improvising, an embodied temporality of the improviser is created not only by an awareness of embodied processes but also by the potentiality of unknown improvisational material. Culminating in a major project, Solo Dialogue (2021), the research proposes a new framework of embodied temporality offering an insight into how improvisation can be temporally shaped and organized by prioritizing attentiveness and attunement to diversify performance material and enhance the intersubjective experience between improviser and audience.

Keywords:

solo dance, Noh, jo-ha-kyū, ma, intersubjectivity, riken no ken, granularity, relationality, indeterminacy, improvisation, Performance making, temporality

Published in: Journal for Artistic Research (JAR), Issue 35 (2025)
<https://jar-online.net>

URL: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/profile/show-exposition?exposition=2262837>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22501/jar.2262837>

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Improvising Time

An investigation into the link between time and intersubjectivity in the performance of solo dance improvisation

Nareeporn Vachananda

INTRODUCTION

This exposition addresses my practice-led research project, which examines the sense of time felt in the improviser's body in the performance of solo dance improvisation. Using concepts drawn from Japanese Noh theatre, fundamental theories of time, and phenomenology, I propose a new framework termed '**embodied temporality**', which organizes improvisational material to enhance the interrelationship between **improviser and audience**.

Specifically, the conceptual framework of this study is drawn from the sequencing concept of *jo-ha-kyū* 序破急 and the notion of interval of time and space, or *ma* 間. The research explores these Noh performance concepts as they relate to the field of temporality and seeks to find ways in which embodied temporality is articulated in a practice of solo dance improvisation.

In the course of the research, aspects of historical Noh performance theory were brought into a dynamic interaction with other key elements, including the notion of the **granularity** of time proposed by theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli (Rovelli 2018: 124–27), and an examination of intersubjectivity between improviser and viewer. This research aimed to gain insights into how a non-Western perspective of practice can be embodied in dance improvisation, and how the Noh technique of attunement to the audience could inform the **temporality** of improvisational material when the improviser is composing while dancing.

This research project was conducted through my Noh and improvisation practice, offering a

first-person perspective of temporal organization through *jo-ha-kyū* and *ma*. The research culminated in a creative outcome framed between improviser and watcher. The dance film documentation, *Solo Dialogue* (2021), delivered an embodied exemplar of the research findings.

Methodology

1. **Textual interpretation** of the translations of Noh historical text written by [Zeami Motokiyo](#) specifically on *jo-ha-kyū* and *ma*, along with other relevant performance theory.
2. A '**multi-voiced**' approach (Magee 2012: 8) for studio research in collaboration with dance artist [Janette Hoe](#), to examine the experience of improvisation from both sides — as improviser and watcher. As improviser, I investigated the impact of being watched while using *jo-ha-kyū* for temporal organization of my improvisational material. As watcher, I reflected on how I experienced improvisation, performed by Janette, in light of the research enquiries.
3. '**Unfinished thinking**' (Borgdorff 2012: 194): An approach to studio research where an enquiry generates further enquiries. The dual role of improviser–researcher means that my perspective while improvising and post facto was incomplete. The incompleteness in each enquiry invited Janette and me to fill the gap of what was unclear, which, in turn, gave rise to further enquiries — an enquiry upon enquiry. For instance, [Enquiry 1](#) (October 2018–September 2019) was an exploration on *jo-ha-kyū* in my improvisation practice, which gave rise to [Enquiry 2](#) and [Enquiry 3](#) (May 2019–February 2021). While these two enquiries were yet to be completed, [Enquiry 4](#) and [Enquiry 5](#) emerged and continued concurrently with Enquiries 2 and 3.

>> [Hover the cursor to see the timeline of the research](#)

Background of my improvisation practice

As part of a community of improvisers in Melbourne, Australia, my improvisation practice draws on the lineage of post-modern dance improvisation along with somatically informed approaches such as ideokinesis and Body-Mind Centering (BMC). Having worked as a solo dance artist since 1997, I studied and worked with BMC practitioner Alice Cummins from 2007 to 2017. In 2009, I travelled to Kyoto, Japan, to study with the late Master-actor Udaka Michishige of the Kongō Noh School, and subsequently with his sons Udaka Tatsushige and Norishige who are specialists in the *shite* 仕手 or leading roles.

To me, the performance of solo dance improvisation is an act of composing while dancing where improvisational material emerges from relational fields of perception, sensory-motor skills and tendencies, historicity, dynamic forces including gravity, affectivity, potentiality, and so on. In the lineage of post-modern dance improvisation, temporality can be understood as

concerning sequential form as well as complex and non-linear experience. The improviser's temporality is often discussed as 'body time' which refers to some extent to clock time (De Spain 2014: 117). Generally, practitioners use their instincts to judge what it feels like to improvise for a time period such as ten minutes and so on.

Differently from post-modern dance improvisation, in Noh, the performer's experience of temporality emerges from the process of embodying the sequencing concept of *jo-ha-kyū* from the smallest of movement to the whole performance. The sequencing concept of *jo-ha-kyū*, along with its companion concept of 'interval' or *ma*, are not the theories of time in Noh theatre as such. Instead, these two concepts pertain to the embodied articulation of artistic form in Noh, from the rhythm of accompanied music, chanting, dance movement (or *kata* 型), and other components of a Noh play. In my practice, *jo-ha-kyū* and *ma* are approached from the perspective of embodied practice where the articulation of each *jo-ha-kyū* modulation is an emergent process in relation to the performance milieu as well as the audience. With the influence of Noh and Rovelli's theory of time in my improvisation practice, this research project uncovers what I call '**embodied temporality**' — the sense of time, timing, and other aspects of temporality that are inextricable to embodied processes such as listening, thinking, feeling, sensing, speculating, moving, vocalizing, and so on.

This exposition is presented to reflect the non-linear nature of the research through text, images, audios, and videos. It is designed for the viewers to go through the 'movement' of the research processes guided by the **arrows in the graphics**. However, the viewers may use hyperlinks to go back and forth within the exposition as they wish. In addition, audio files provide commentaries in relation to the improvisations shown in the videos.

[Click here to begin Enquiry 1](#)

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ENQUIRY 1 | *JO-HA-KYŪ*, *MA* AND MY IMPROVISATION PRACTICE

My practice converges two lineages of dance traditions: dance improvisation and Noh theatre. I began studying Noh in Kyoto with the late Master-actor Udaka Michishige in 2009 followed by a number of study trips. In 2019, with support from the Norman MacGeorge Travelling Scholarship, I returned to Kyoto to study with Michishige-sensei's sons, Udaka Tatsushige and Norishige.

Video description: A video recording of the author's performance of a shimai (仕舞 dance repertoire) from the Noh play 'Tamura' 田村, with accompanied chanting by Udaka Tatsushige, at the Iori Stage in Kyoto, August 2019.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2262837/2271647#tool-3302910> to watch the video.

In researching Noh performance theory, I used the method of textual interpretation of Zeami's Noh treatises as well as my practice and study of the Noh repertoire. I found that the concepts of *jo-ha-kyū* and *ma* in the repertoire concern not only the embodied articulation of the artistic form in Noh but also its temporality and the interrelationship between performer and audience. In my research, *jo-ha-kyū* and *ma* are explored as the conceptual framework of embodied temporality.

[>> Jump to 'What was a priori?'](#)

Jo-ha-kyū

As a tripartite structure originating in ancient court musical performance, or *Gagaku* 雅楽, *jo-ha-kyū* was adopted in Noh as 'an ordering principle' in many traditional art forms including tea ceremony, poetry, and flower arrangement (Komparu 1983: 25). *Jo-ha-kyū* is a modulation of beginning–middle–end or beginning–break–fast/resolution (Komparu 1983: 25). There is *jo-*

ha-kyū in all levels of Noh performance, from a breath, a pivot of the feet, a phrase of *kata*, or standard movement, the whole dance, the whole play, and the whole programme of the performances of the day. *Jo-ha-kyū* can be interpreted through the translation of individual *kanji* characters:

jo 序 means beginning

ha 破 means break or ruin

kyū 急 means hurry, sudden or abrupt in resolution

In this interpretation, a foundation (of a movement or a dance) is laid in *jo* while a ‘disordering element’ is introduced in *ha* to break the configuration of the foundation (Komparu 1983: 25). The disordering element can also mean an exploration of diversity of material in all its particularity and resolve in *kyū* with a sense of energetic force (Zeami 2008: 78).

In the historical text of Noh treatises, *jo-ha-kyū* is underpinned by an understanding that life itself pertains to process. Zeami conceptualized *jo-ha-kyū* to infuse as much vitality of all performance actions as possible (Ramirez-Christensen 2008: 61).

Ma

Like *jo-ha-kyū*, the concept of *ma* is prevalent in Japanese culture, not only in performing art traditions but also in literature and architecture. According to Noh theory, *ma* is the interval of time when the dance, chanting, and music ceases and ‘nothing happens’ (Zeami 1984: 97). In the treatise *Kakyō* 花鏡 (1424), Zeami defined *ma* as ‘gap’ between two physical actions (Zeami 2008: 115). On the significance of *ma*, he wrote:

The gap between is where, as they say, nothing is done. When you consider why it is that this gap where nothing is done should be interesting, you will find that this is because of an underlying disposition by which the mind bridges the gap. [...] This internal excitement diffuses outward and creates interest. However, should it be apparent to others that you have adopted this frame of mind, that is no good. If it becomes apparent, then it is likely to turn into a dramatic technique in itself. Then it is no longer ‘doing nothing’. (2008: 115)

According to Zeami, *ma* has a Zen origin and requires a concentration that reaches the rank of ‘no-mind’ or *mushin* 無心 (2008: 115). However, the state of *mushin* can be obtained only by devoted Zen practitioners such as Zeami himself and it is rare among Noh performers in the twenty-first century. From the perspective of embodied practice, *ma* is experienced by the performer as a temporal gap that facilitates an **intersubjective** experience between performer and viewer (Kono 2019: 253). Michishige-sensei discussed *ma* when I interviewed him in 2015:

Video description: A video recording of an excerpt from the author's interview with Michishige-sensei in 2015, discussing his experience of ‘ma’.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2262837/2271647#tool-3302920> to watch

the video.

In 2009, I witnessed Michishige-sensei performing the title role of the Noh play *Omu Komachi*. In the play, he maintained his inner concentration in *ma* — the silence and stillness between the dance and the chanting — but without the audience noticing his effort. I remember when he paused, listened, and waited to correspond to other performers most vividly. During this pause, I gravitated towards his attentiveness as if I anticipated his next move. In the interview above, Michishige-sensei gave an example of *ma*; he also attuned to his viewer/listener to provide intervals within his speech.

What was a priori?

Through the multi-voiced methodology, the studio research was devised as joint studio practice between Janette and me. The studio research aimed to explore the embodiment of *jo-ha-kyū* and *ma* in dance improvisation where Janette and me took turns to be improviser and watcher. In the studio research, Janette generously imparted an invaluable perspective to unpack ideas, and to interject, criticize, argue, propose, and reply in the confluence of doing–reflecting–reading–articulating–doing processes in the studio.

The 'flow' problem

During the early stage of Enquiry 1, as shown in the video on the left, I reflected that *jo-ha-kyū* and *ma* in my improvisation was wave-like: before one movement ended, the next movement was already underway. At times, this wave-like flow was experienced by the viewer as a long continuous sequence of movement, as Janette commented in the audio on the left. Inherent in my Western dance training, the flow was my habitual mode of improvisation, and my temporality conformed to this flow.

Video and audio description:

A video recording of studio research on the 2nd of November 2018, shows an exploration of sequencing when *jo-ha-kyū* was felt like a wave-like flow; duration: 04:33 minutes.

An audio recording about the studio research recorded on the 2nd of November 2018. Janette Hoe and the author discuss the experience of time in the author's improvisation in the video above; duration: 01:27 minutes.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2262837/2271647#tool-2288294> to watch the video and listen to the audio recording.

The wave-like flow was in contrast to the clear articulation of *jo-ha-kyū* and *ma* in my Noh practice. In my experience of the improvisation on the left, the wave-like *jo-ha-kyū* could be felt within the continuous sequence. However, at times, it was as if there were *jo* and *ha* in each movement, **but what about *kyū*?**

To examine this problem, I referred to Zeami's writing. One of the most important features of *jo-ha-kyū* is its fulfilment or *jōju* 成就 (Zeami 1984: 137). It's the finishing — *kyū* — that make *jo-ha-kyū* an arc. **Once an arc of *jo-ha-kyū* is fulfilled, there is a gap between two *jo-ha-kyū* modulations.** This gap is where *ma* can emerge.

The disruption of flow

During the Noh study trip to Kyoto in 2019, I practised implementing the fulfilment of *jo-ha-kyū* both in the Noh repertoire and in improvisation. As a result, the flow in my improvisation was **disrupted** in favour of fulfilling each arc of *jo-ha-kyū*. An example of this is shown in the video on the left. During the small pauses, the intensity of Janette's gaze intensified in my experience. Furthermore, it was as if my dancing body experienced a sense of indeterminacy — potentiality and uncertainty as to what might come next.

Video and audio description:

A video recording of studio research on the 25th of October 2019, shows an exploration of the fulfilment of *jo-ha-kyū*; duration: 05:14 minutes.

An audio recording of a conversation about the studio research on the 25th of October 2019. Janette Hoe and the author discuss the author's improvisation, shown in the video excerpt above; duration: 04:10 minutes.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2262837/2271647#tool-2289360> to watch the video and listen to the audio recording.

In practising fulfilling each *jo-ha-kyū* modulation, my temporal experience as a mover could be described as discrete but ongoing. During the pause when I experienced time most vividly, time seemed to stop. **Time no longer flows smoothly in my experience!** An example is shown in the video, with the audio of Janette's comment, on the left.

This practice led to the question of what can be understood about time in [Enquiry 2](#), the relationality with Janette in [Enquiry 3](#) and the indeterminacy during the pause and before moving in [Enquiry 4](#).

[>> Return to top of page](#)

[<< Return to home page](#)

[Next page >>](#)

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ENQUIRY 2 | GRANULARITY OF TIME

From [Enquiry 1](#), my habitual flow during improvisation was disrupted by fulfilling each arc of *jo-ha-kyū*. My experience of time was both discrete and ongoing – a time that does not flow smoothly. This puzzling experience prompted me to look at what can be understood about time. During the Kyoto trip in 2019, I finished reading a book called *The Order of Time* (2018) by quantum physicist Carlo Rovelli who proposes a theory of time called ‘**loop theory**’.

What is ‘loop theory’?

Here is a crude summary: loop theory follows the three interrelated principles of quantum mechanics: **granularity**, **relationality**, and **indeterminacy**. Rovelli’s theory describes time at the fundamental or granular level of physics known as quanta. Loop theory begins with **quanta of space** (Rovelli 2018: 83).

Quanta of space are not something that immerse in space. They *constitute* space (Rovelli 2018: 124). When adjacent quanta of space interact by making a loop, time emerges. This process is called the quantization of time, which is characterized as probabilistic. That is, the existence of quanta of time is subject to probability, fluctuations, and uncertainties like any particles at the quantum level (Rovelli 2018: 124–28).

According to loop theory, quanta of time emerge from relational processes of interactions between quanta of space. Rovelli argues that physical reality, including time, is made up of processes and events, not things and entities (Rovelli 2018: 97). As Rovelli puts it, ‘if by “time” we mean nothing more than happening, then everything is time’ (Rovelli 2018: 104).

I found that Rovelli’s idea resonated with my own experience of time when embodying *jo-ha-kyū* and *ma* as apparatus for generating improvisational material. Importantly, the characteristic of my temporal experience, which is discrete as well as ongoing, or being processual, is central to Rovelli’s idea.

Drawing together Zeami’s conceptualization of *jo-ha-kyū* as a ‘**symbolic animation**’ of life’s **process** (Ramirez-Christensen 2008: 61) and **Rovelli’s idea of time**, in this enquiry I

experimented with reconfiguring *jo-ha-kyū* and *ma* in my improvisation as a kinaesthetic interpretation of loop theory, featuring the characteristic of Rovelli's time – **granular, relational, and indeterminate**. To put these three characteristics into *jo-ha-kyū*, I asked:

- What if a movement with *jo-ha-kyū* can be configured as an event, a '**grain**'?
>> See '**Granularity of *jo-ha-kyū***' below.
- As the grains of *jo-ha-kyū* emerge, what is my improvising body and/or my movement relational to?
>> See **Enquiry 3**
- As the grains of *jo-ha-kyū* emerge, what kind of 'movement processes' are there?
>> See **Enquiry 4**

Granularity of *jo-ha-kyū*

Video and audio description:

A video recording of studio research on the 9th of November 2019, exploring the granularity of *jo-ha-kyū* through the score 'What if I have a biscuit in my pocket?'; duration: 05:42 minutes.

An audio recording of a conversation about the studio research on the 9th of November 2019. Janette Hoe discusses with the author the improvisation in the video above; duration: 03:48 minutes.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2262837/2272763#tool-2272953> to watch the video and listen to the audio recording.

Things and entities persist in time while events and processes are discrete (Rovelli 2018: 98). Much like *jo-ha-kyū*, a process has a beginning, middle, and end. To embody *jo-ha-kyū* in my improvisation with the qualities of granularity, relationality, and indeterminacy, I explored the granularity of *jo-ha-kyū* first. Here are my key observations on embodying *jo-ha-kyū* in my improvisation:

- There is one consequential difference between *jo-ha-kyū* in Noh and in improvisation. In Noh, the performance material is already known. The *jo-ha-kyū* of each *kata* or vocalization can be embodied instantaneously. But in improvisation, the performance material is unknown until it has been performed. As a result, the embodiment of *jo-ha-kyū* in my improvisation is an **emergent** process.
- To embody *jo-ha-kyū* as discrete or granular, I practised the fulfilment of *jo-ha-kyū* by emphasizing its ending. This means that a *jo-ha-kyū* modulation can be experienced as

an arc, or a grain, with gaps between the grains.

- **There is *ma* between *jo-ha-kyū* grains.** During *ma*, my perception of Janette's gaze intensified, as did my perception of time.

Back-formation of jo-ha-kyū grains

Unlike in the Noh repertoire, my improvisational material emerges at the same time as the *jo-ha-kyū* grains are created. In the exploration of granularity in the video excerpt above, the trajectory of a *jo-ha-kyū* arc was realized after it had been formed. This forming process is what Brian Massumi calls '**back-formation**' (Massumi 2002: 8).

This suggests that the formation of a *jo-ha-kyū* grain consists of two parts: **the dynamic of the passage** and **the realization of the arc**. During improvisation, I experience the dynamic of the passage through embodied processes such as listening, attuning, sensing, feeling, or moving while the whole arc of *jo-ha-kyū* is realized in retrospect. That is, I realize each arc of *jo-ha-kyū* by construing the ending of each movement.

Moreover, in the studio research, I embodied each *jo-ha-kyū* arc in the presence of Janette. Thus, the formation (or back-formation) of *jo-ha-kyū* was relational to her. In the video, I experienced the dynamic of the arc and construed its ending while attuning to her attention. I explore this relational aspect of *jo-ha-kyū* in [Enquiry 3](#).

[>> Return to top of page](#)

[>> Return to home page](#)

[<< Previous page](#)

[Next page >>](#)

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ENQUIRY 3 | RELATIONALITY

In enquiring about the relationality with Janette in the studio research, I excavated a theory of the interrelationship between performer and audience according to Zeami because Noh performance theory was developed in tandem with the concern of ‘how best to engage audiences’ (Quinn 2005: 202).

In Noh, there is a practice of observing oneself as if from a distance, or *riken no ken* 離見の見, literally translated as ‘the seeing of detached perception’ (Yusa 1987: 331). *Riken no ken* is underpinned by the notion of the performing body in Noh. Based on the framework of medieval Japanese Buddhist philosophy, mind and body are considered as transient but inextricable from each other (Amano 2011: 535). The awareness of the transient nature of all living things leads to the critical framework of the Noh performing body, understood as a ‘flexible processual site’ opening towards the surroundings and undergoing ‘constant transformation’ (2011: 530).

Riken no ken is a practice that aims to shift the performer’s perspective towards that of the audience (Yusa 1987: 334). For me, practising *riken no ken* is a form of a ‘somatic mode of attention’ – an attention *to* and *with* the performing body in the **intersubjective milieu** with the audience (Csordas 1993: 139).

Riken no ken

Riken no ken is a form of ‘double reference’ (Lepecki 2000: 354) of perception where one observes oneself perceiving, or ‘a perception in perception’ (Massumi 2011: 44). An example of practising *riken no ken* is in the video on the right.

Video and audio description:

A video recording of studio research on the 2nd of February 2020, shows an exploration of the practice of *riken no ken*, through the score ‘What if the air moves as I move?’; duration: 08:53 minutes.

An audio recording from the studio research on the 29th of November 2019. Janette Hoe

discusses the practice of *riken no ken* through the score 'What if the air moves as I move?'; duration: 02:02 minutes.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2262837/2273471#tool-2274607> to watch the video and listen to the audio recording.

In the video, the practice of *riken no ken* helped to expand my fields of attention to include Janette and my surroundings. At times, I felt a dispersed quality of my body – as if my dancing body became porous – and Janette's gaze could penetrate through my body.

While the act of observing myself from a distance initially generated a dispersed quality of my body, my attention intensified as though my body became a thickness for Janette to perceive my embodied processes. Likewise, I also noticed her lingering attention as she watched me moving. This two-way reciprocity informed how my improvisational material was generated. In this way, we were co-contributors to the generative milieu of the improvisation through our relationality. Through practising *riken no ken*, my experience of each *jo-ha-kyū* passage and its construed ending was relational to what I felt Janette **might** experience.

Indeed, *riken no ken* offered not only relationality between Janette and me, but also an intersubjective relation. In this way, the process of attunement when practising *riken no ken* pertained to the active acquisition of intersubjective experience: I attuned to Janette and her attention informed my actions. As a way of organizing my improvising body, *riken no ken* is **speculative** in nature as I cannot ascertain what the viewer **actually** perceives.

For *riken no ken*, the process of detached perception can be employed only as what Philipa Rothfield calls 'an asymptote', or 'a movement towards' (Rothfield 2021: 182). That is, I shift my perspective towards the kinaesphere around me but I am not actually being outside myself.

Here are my reflections on practising *riken no ken* in my improvisation.

- First, the boundaries between Janette and me were clear, but they were permeable.
- Second, in the studio research when I practised *jo-ha-kyū no ken*, I shifted my perspective towards the point of view of Janette as if offering her what she *might* be able to see. But as soon as I felt that I took Janette's perspective, it became mine and no longer hers. Nevertheless, the practice of *riken no ken* intensified my attention. I felt as though Janette's gaze was drawn towards me and my embodied processes became accessible to her. This was not only during *ma*, but also as I was moving and generating arcs of *jo-ha-kyū*.

Riken no ken cannot be practised in a hurry. It takes a while for me to perceive myself as if from a distance. In turn, the practice gives me *time* to notice the back-formation of *jo-ha-kyū*.

What emerges from this enquiry is that when practising *riken no ken*, my improvising body was

unable to settle into a state — it was at first dispersed then intensified to become a thickness. During the improvisation, the continual **uncertainty of my improvising body** became heightened, along with the initial vagueness of my perceptual experience and the sense of **potentiality** before each *jo-ha-kyū* grain emerged.

This led to **Enquiry 4**: the indeterminacy of embodying *jo-ha-kyū* and *ma* in my improvisation.

[>> Return to top of page](#)

[>> Return to home page](#)

[<< Previous page](#)

[Next page >>](#)

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ENQUIRY 4 | INDETERMINACY

This enquiry began in April 2020 during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic through to February 2021. Informed by previous enquiries, I took the opportunity during the extensive lockdowns in Melbourne to collect a series of perceptual tools to begin an improvisation and to activate the process of *jo-ha-kyū*.

>> To jump to the **perceptual tools**, please [click here](#).

In this enquiry, I focused on two aspects of indeterminacy – the vagueness of my perceptual experience while practising *riken no ken*, and the sense of potentiality it entailed. The body as thickness when observing myself as if from the outside heightened my awareness of how a *jo-ha-kyū* arc emerged. There was always more than one option for a passage of movement and more than one way of construing its ending. In particular, I examined the instance when **body-in-stillness** became **body-in-motion** at the beginning of an improvisation. To do this, I brought in the idea of **virtual** and **actual** movement.

The term ‘virtual’ denotes qualities or ‘senses relating to essential, as opposed to actual existence’.[1] Actual movement is defined as ‘movement that is observable as kinetic motion with a sense of direction and magnitude of force.’

When an actual movement is performed, both mover and watcher perceive a quality. The quality of actual movement is also its virtual side (Manning 2009: 19).

However, when I stand still, I can sense/feel microscopic movements deep in my body. My body-in-stillness is tending towards moving or towards making relationship with the world. There is a speculative quality emerging from thought, or felt perception, as if it causes my body to become kinaesthetically organized towards movement. This type of movement is what I call ‘**virtual movement**’. I would argue that virtual movement is the foundation of actual movement.

In my research, I make a **notional distinction** between virtual and actual movement, so that I can pay more attention to the subtlety of virtual processes to enrich their actualization. I can

also use virtual movement as improvisational material on its own.

In Noh, there are many examples of performance material that are enriched by virtual processes. For example, in vocalization, Zeami posited that the *jo-ha-kyū* of vocalization begins with the performer's attunement to the pitch and tone of the flute, the sense of occasion, along with the **relational milieu** in the performance and so on. This attunement is the *jo* of the vocalization, which occurs well before the performer produces an utterance. Just as the performer begins chanting, the performer packs the breath in the lower abdomen as *ha* to produce voice in *kyū* (Quinn 2005: 214).

Audio description: An audio recording of a discussion about studio research via Zoom on the 8th of May 2020. The author exchanges with Janette Hoe about the indeterminacy of sensing in improvisation; duration: 00:58 minutes.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2262837/2274613#tool-2289854> to listen to the audio recording.

In addition, to include a sense of spatiality of the **relational milieu** during improvisation, I used the term '**field**', defined as the domain and extent of that which is perceived and experienced. To gauge the interactions between my body, the surroundings, and Janette, the term '**fielding**' is also used for the act of initiating the relationality between my body and the surroundings.

Perceptual tools

>> [Return to top of page](#)

Video description: A video recording of an improvisation recorded on the 7th of October 2020, during one of Melbourne's lockdowns; duration: 02:52 minutes.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2262837/2274613#tool-2276223> to watch the video.

Between genuine indeterminacy and the actualization of kinetic motion, there lies the activation of *jo-ha-kyū*. To activate *jo-ha-kyū* means to put in place a somatic–perceptual organization to facilitate a formation of *jo-ha-kyū* from virtual to actual movement. For generating movement, if we take into account the virtual processes, or the tending towards movement, the activation of *jo-ha-kyū* does not occur at one point, but as an accumulation of processes.

The following **nine** perceptual tools do not prescribe movement. Instead, they facilitate the processes of activating *jo-ha-kyū* and *ma* in improvisation. In this exposition, the perceptual tools for beginning an improvisation will be presented chronologically. However, in practice, they can be explored in a different order or examined one by one.

The use of these perceptual tools is demonstrated in the video above.

(1) Begin with *riken no ken*.

In general, I begin an improvisation with the practice of *riken no ken*, by observing myself perceiving my environment as if I were watching myself a metre away from my body.

(2) Begin improvising by fielding attention — inside and outside my body.

I then begin **fielding my attention** by noticing my body in relation to the surroundings.

(3) Begin improvising by attuning to the field(s) of relationality.

Next, I use the tool of attuning to the **fields of relationality** by locating where and what I pay attention to, and how specific parts of my body might potentially be associated with various elements in the surroundings.

(4) Begin improvising with virtual and/or microscopic movement.

While practising *riken no ken*, I begin to improvise by generating **virtual movement** *in thought* when standing relatively still. At the beginning of an improvisation, it might take a while for my perceptual experience to become alive to various embodied processes, and I often feel an urge to move and be seen to be producing movement. With this urge, inevitably I fall into a default mode of moving, that is, habitual movement.

[>> Return to video](#)

(5) Begin with ‘attentive waiting’.

For this reason, I examine what might occur should I not follow the urge to always be in motion by waiting attentively for the interweaving of perceptual uptakes to occur. ‘**Attentive waiting**’ is a mode of attention in contrast to ‘an ego-driven desire to seize prematurely on a particular understanding of reality’ (Maier 2013: 230).

(6) Begin with the superposition of relational fields.

By being attentive to embodied/virtual processes, I become more receptive to **the sense of potentiality** — there are a few options vaguely presented to me. To mediate this vagueness, the notion of ‘**superposition**’ can be useful to give me a tangible mental image of how the fields of relationality and potentiality can be schematized.

SUPERPOSITION:

Time described in loop theory has the attribute of quantum indeterminacy, which is expressed through the term ‘superposition’ (Rovelli 2018: 87). Superposition is a speculative term denoting quantum states of granular bodies such as quanta that have more than one possible position or observable value. For quantum superposition, the positions or qualities are ‘present together’ (Rovelli 2021: 44) or ‘coexisting’ (Lu 2017: 27).

[Hover the cursor here](#) for the image of the superposition of my fields of attention.

(7) Begin improvising by approximating a *jo-ha-kyū* grain of virtual movement.

I then **speculate the first virtual *jo-ha-kyū*** as movement of thought by attuning to one of the fields. After the first virtual *jo-ha-kyū*, the second *jo-ha-kyū* grain can be formed by repeating the process of the first but with a different outcome.

(8) Begin with repetition with differences.

That is, the second *jo-ha-kyū* can differ from the first one in intensity, temporality, and other qualities. I call the process of repeating the embodied interactions with the relational fields, each time with a different quality, '**repetition with differences**'.

(9) Begin with a nexus.

As I repeat the embodied processes with different outcomes, the kinaesthetic experience is gradually archived in my body as a **nexus**, defined as a series of points linking kinaesthetically condensed body parts to my surroundings.

A nexus does not consist of precisely connected points, and my body archives the nexus in a blurry fashion. So, the nexus becomes a **superposition** of nexūs.

[Hover the cursor here](#) for the image of the nexus.

[>> Return to video](#)

[>> Return to the top of the page](#)

Movement as events

Taken together, the use of the perceptual tools to activate *jo-ha-kyū* concerns not merely the sensory–motor process of kinetic motion but also other embodied processes, including attunement to the watcher's attention, perception when practising *riken no ken*, and speculation of potentiality. These processes underpin the activation of *jo-ha-kyū* as a progression of somatic–perceptual organization, enabling virtual movement to become actualized through the process of repetition with differences. Thus, kinetic motion, or movement, can be understood as a series of accumulative processes subjected to ongoing transformation, or events.^[2]

Embodied temporality

Through practising these tools, the perceptual and sensorial remnants of *jo-ha-kyū* grains begin to accumulate in my body. These remnants are nested in my felt perception and generate potential *jo-ha-kyū* grains. While moving, I perceive not only the embodied process(es) of each *jo-ha-kyū*, *but* also their temporality. Informed by Rovelli's notion that time pertains to process, I would argue that my experience of embodied processes gives rise to temporality, which I term '**embodied temporality**'.

Through the repetition with differences, the nexūs are formed as a kinaesthetic archive. I can then return to explore other potentials along these nexūs. This allows me to wait or delay while realizing that the archive is there. And the repetition with differences functions in tandem with

the archive of nexūs to become a resource for sequencing the improvisation.

This leads us to [Enquiry 5](#).

[1] Oxford English Dictionary. ↩

[2] Rovelli equates something that occurs as 'happenings', 'processes', and 'events'. To him, events imply 'something that does not last, and that undergoes continual transformation' (Rovelli 2018: 97). ↩

[>> Return to top of page](#)

[>> Return to home page](#)

[<< Previous page](#)

[Next page >>](#)

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ENQUIRY 5 | SEQUENCING IMPROVISATIONAL MATERIAL WITH *JO-HA-KYŪ* AND *MA*

This enquiry expanded the activation of *jo-ha-kyū* and *ma* into the sequencing and pauses of an improvisation. Concurrently, I considered duration, speed, and temporal patterning in composing while dancing as additional layers of temporality that could be animated from the activation of *jo-ha-kyū*. This is what I propose as the term ‘**improvising time**’, as exemplified in the creative component of this research, *Solo Dialogue* (2021).

In improvising time, improvisation is not merely about shaping actualized movement. As established in Enquiry 4 that [movement can be understood as events](#), my approach is to facilitate and put in place embodied processes that generate embodied temporality across the elastic formation between virtual and actual movement.

After beginning an improvisation through utilizing [the perceptual tools discussed in Enquiry 4](#), I will now discuss how improvisational material can be generated by approaching from aspects of embodied temporality — the time felt by the improviser — particularly in the presence of the audience.

In the studio research, I explored *jo-ha-kyū* and *ma* as apparatuses for articulating five aspects of time in improvisation. These five aspects of time are proposed by neuroscientist Dean Buonomano as crucial for the intelligibility of speech. These temporal aspects are [sequencing](#), [pause](#), [duration](#), [speed](#), and [temporal patterning](#) (Buonomano 2017: 83). An exemplar of this exploration can be seen in [the excerpt of *Solo Dialogue* below](#).

Sequencing

From the repetition with differences, *jo-ha-kyū* can be utilized as an apparatus of **temporal composing in sequential form**. Along with the [fulfilment of each *jo-ha-kyū* grain](#), which produces *ma*, a sequencing of improvisational material can emerge from the same **node** as the previous one, or from a different node.

A **node** is defined as ‘a knotty formation’ or ‘a point in a network or diagram at which lines or pathways intersect or branch’.[1] In my practice, a **node** is where the *jo* of *jo-ha-kyū* originates along the nexūs. The term node speaks to a superposition of *jo* because a node can have many arcs issuing from it. Through the perceptual tool of repetition with differences, each time I repeat a similar passage of a *jo-ha-kyū* along a nexus, and the kinaesthetic sense of the nexus thickened, potential *jo-ha-kyū* grains in a sequence may begin from a different node.

Pause

Each *jo-ha-kyū* grain is an event and, therefore, discrete. As a grain resolves, it leaves an **interval** that retains qualities. These qualities can be archived in the improvising body before the next movement event emerges and become a potential for a future movement events.

As Erin Manning writes, ‘the interval is virtual, incorporeal. Yet it has substance: it is palpable’ (Manning 2009: 24). I take it that the substance of the pause is the field of potentials. Therefore, the pause, or *ma* between *jo-ha-kyū* grains, can be perceived as a virtual zone, for catching up with what previously occurred. It also provides an interstice for perceptual uptakes where the next superposition of possibilities can be speculated from the archived felt perception of the past *jo-ha-kyū* grains.

In addition, the pauses are instances where the reactivation of successive *jo-ha-kyū* grains and the re-attunement of intersubjective milieux can take place. Within each pause, the viewer may anticipate what could happen next. The audience anticipation then informs my embodied processes and strengthens my intersubjective experience with them.

>> [Return to top of page](#)

Duration

Video description: A video recording shows an excerpt of *Solo Dialogue* (2021). Filmed in February 2021 at Studio 864–221, Dance Building, Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, University of Melbourne Southbank Campus.

Performers: Nareeporn Vachananda and Janette Hoe

Videographer: Cobie Orger

Production manager: Kris Cheney

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2262837/2276568#tool-2276664> to watch the video.

In my practice, **the sense of duration** is most palpable during the pause or *ma*. I experience a processual quality within *ma* during its unfolding. At the same time, from the first-person

perspective of an improviser, if a *ma* begins, it will come to an end. Therefore, it is discrete. Through practising the perceptual tools, I found that the duration of virtual and actual *jo-ha-kyū* events could be experienced as ongoing as well as discrete, depending on the perspective of experiencing.

In the act of improvising, I perceive the ongoingness within the passage of *ma* until I make a movement again. *Ma* is also processual — there is a *jo-ha-kyū* process to it. After the *ma* is complete, I also recognize its **back-formation**. Furthermore, the detached perception of *riken no ken* provides another layer of experiencing duration with an element of double articulation where the ongoingness and discreteness of *ma* can both be perceived during improvising.

Speed

The notion of **speed** in my improvisation practice is not only about moving fast or slow but also considering speed as relative. In particular, what determines speed in this research is the intersubjective interface between improviser and watcher.

Embodied temporality is always embedded in embodied processes, i.e., attuning, noticing, perceiving, feeling, as well as moving. The *riken no ken* practice of double perception, or witnessing my body perceiving, enables me to generate what sociologist Robert Hassan refers to as ‘controlled speed’ (Hassan 2009: 99) from deliberate, organized, and thoughtful actions. In the context of my improvisation, I consider controlled speed as one that allows enough of the fabric of time for me to perceptually access my embodied processes as well as relational and intersubjective milieux.

Moreover, through controlled speed engendered by *riken no ken*, emerging impulses can be mediated. They can be enacted upon, or linger...

Sometimes, delaying impulses can strengthen the bond between the past and the potential in the future.

Temporal patterning

By controlling speed, I gain some time to notice and, if needed, reactivate the relationality between the past kinaesthetic experience and emerging fields of potential. At any level of *jo-ha-kyū*, from virtual movement deep in my body to rigorously energetic movement, kinetic energy is emphasized in the *kyū* phrase of *jo-ha-kyū* events. Thus, the *kyū* of movements or phrases are where I notice the peaks in the fabric of **temporal patterns**.

Within the *jo-ha-kyū* in each improvisation, the temporal patterning features variations in dynamic and speed. The speed and temporal patterning of upcoming improvisational material is considered in relation to that which precedes it. The relationality between each granular *jo-ha-kyū* event and its *ma* is accreted into the temporal patterning of the piece, which emerges as it is perceived through *riken no ken*.

[1] Oxford English Dictionary. ↩

>> Return to top of page

>> Return to home page

<< Previous page

Next page >>

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Findings and concluding thoughts

From the beginning of the research project, *jo-ha-kyū* in my movement improvisation was a post-reflective process. Having looked more closely at Zeami's writings, I embarked on an exploration of the embodiment of *jo-ha-kyū* as an emergent process and practised fulfilling each *jo-ha-kyū* modulation. In so doing, the wave-like flow of my habitual movement pattern was disrupted and replaced by the granularity of *jo-ha-kyū* arcs with small pauses of *ma* in between. Over the course of this research project, my embodiment of *jo-ha-kyū* as granular has allowed temporal space during *ma* to attune to the intersubjective milieu with Janette. Practising *riken no ken* (practising observing myself as if from the outside) to gauge the emergence and back-formation of *jo-ha-kyū* has rendered my improvising body as thickness yet porous, allowing the penetration of Janette's gaze.

Image description: A line diagram in white ink on dark paper, shows the relationship between 'jo-ha-kyū' and 'ma'.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2262837/2279193#tool-3339587> to see the diagram.

The process of activating *jo-ha-kyū* and *ma* while improvising in relation to Janette underscored the indeterminacy of my improvising body and my perceptual experience. To mediate this indeterminacy, I explored approximating superpositions of relational fields and nexūs, which allowed me to account for both potential (virtual) and actualized movement. As a result, I found the accumulation of virtual and actualized *jo-ha-kyū*, with speculative quality of *ma*, could enable sequencing — temporal composing in sequential form — in my improvisation. Sequencing through *jo-ha-kyū* generated *ma* while practising *riken no ken* allowed me to gauge the duration, speed, and temporal patterning of *jo-ha-kyū* modulations in any level of performance.

Findings | A new lexicon and languaging for dance improvisation

To bring the concepts from Noh performance theory to dance improvisation, this research employed the linguistic framework of Noh and physics to construct a new way of languaging,

discussing, and analysing [embodied temporality](#) in improvisation. This new lexicon of improvisation includes ‘grains’, ‘fields’ and ‘fielding’, ‘superposition’, ‘nexus/nexūs’, and ‘nodes’. The new languaging is based on the understanding of embodied temporality in my Noh/ improvisation practice and Rovelli’s idea of time as following:

- Time pertains to process and is understood as simultaneously ongoing and discrete (as grains/granular). Similarly, in improvisation, time is not an entity to be filled with improvisational material. Instead, **time emerges rather than is, and embodied temporality** emerges from embodied processes.
- The improviser’s perceptual experience is always relational across various milieux or fields – intersubjective, spatial, temporal, historical, cultural, etc.

Concluding thoughts | Expanding the idea of movement and embracing indeterminacy

The new linguistic framework in this research project provides a way in which indeterminacy can be taken into account and mediated as a resource for improvisational material. Through the activation of *jo-ha-kyū* from virtual into actual movement, this research project offers the following interrelated insights into movement improvisation:

First, an expansion of the scope of what can be considered ‘movement’. That is, movement should involve not only actualized motion but also mobilization of somatic–perceptual activities as the improvising body organizes perceptually and speculatively to attune to various relational milieux. For example, it is possible to have a movement of thought, a movement of attention and speculation.

Second, while being spontaneous ‘in the moment’ is widely practised in Western dance improvisation, overemphasizing spontaneity can risk improvisers striving for ‘temporal immediacy’ (Hassan 2009: 103). The state of temporal immediacy values the present above all else, which renders very little time for improvisers to pay deep attention. As I established in Enquiry 4 that improvised [movement can be understood as events](#), it takes time to account for various relational milieux, organize from retained perceptual experience, and speculate potential movement. My research calls for allowing temporal interstices (*ma*) while improvising to attend to evolving performance milieux and retained felt perception to inform future actions.

Third, my research advocates the cultivation of somatic modes of attention that approaches the fields of indeterminacy. Rather than determining movement too soon, my research shows that taking time to access embodied processes and temporality, as well as schematizing potential *jo-ha-kyū* as a set of superpositions, can be generative for improvisation and invaluable for facilitating intersubjective experience with the audience. In addition, this research project demonstrated that unactualized potentials are the foundation of actualized movement. By approximating superpositions of potential fields,

some of the potentials are not actualized. Unactualized (virtual) movement was retained in my body and informed further potential movement. Speculative qualities of unactualized speculations, such as those during *ma*, can 'give off the fragrance' of potentiality, which is perceivable by the audience as experiential fields of intensity.

The method of '**improvising time**' is based on my own experience in improvisation, and I am mindful that every improviser has their own take on what embodied temporality may be. This study calls for future research on diversification as well as articulations of what may constitute 'embodied processes', which inevitably manifest in embodied temporality.

Finally, I hope that this research project offers a method where embodied processes can enrich movement in its actualization, and that dwelling in a sense of indeterminacy during improvisation engenders **embodied temporality** and can be invaluable for both improviser and watcher alike. I hope that future research will include an exploration of implementing the proposed perceptual tools from a pedagogical perspective, in particular for dancers who do not have an experience in Noh training and study.

[>> Return to top of page](#)

[>> Return to home page](#)

[<< Previous page](#)

[References >>](#)

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[>> Return to home page](#)

[<< Previous page](#)