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FINA 2290: Performance and Time-Based Practice

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Research and Performative Response to Lou Sheppard

Lou Sheppard is an interdisciplinary artist who uses audio, performance, and installation in their practice. Raised on unceded Mi'Kmaq territory, Sheppard graduated from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 2006 and is now based in K'jipuktuk/Halifax. They have exhibited their work in Canada and internationally. Sheppard seeks to “disrupt systems of power, considering in particular how bodies and identities are shaped by language” (Belcher). Through a process of translation and metaphor, they explore and unpack systems of power in language and data, and look for new meanings, understandings, and perspectives outside and between the boundaries of traditional forms of knowledge.

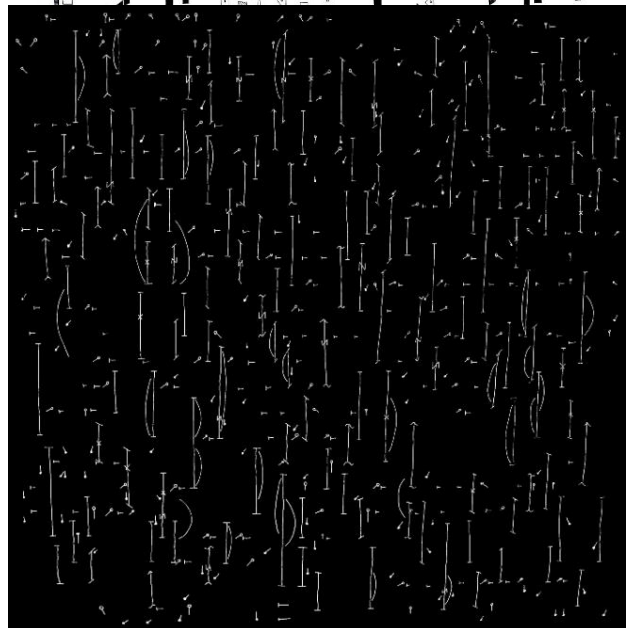
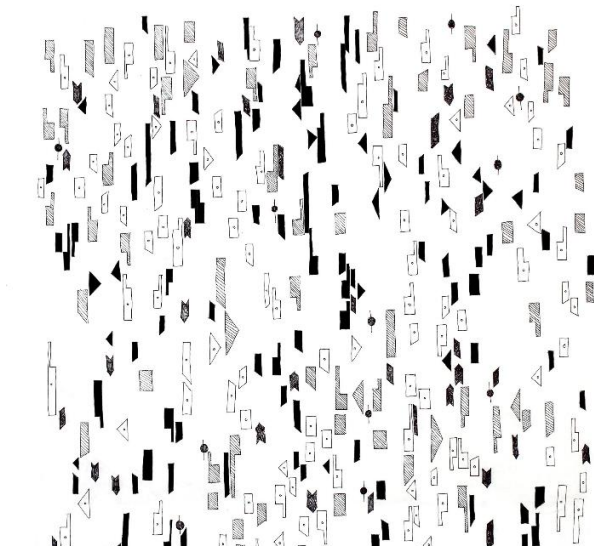
This focus is exemplified in *A Strong Desire* (2018), where Sheppard explores the limitations of language and the medical establishment in understanding gender identity, and the subsequent limiting effects this has on the lives of trans people. Taking the diagnostic criteria for gender dysphoria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) as a starting point, Sheppard tracked the shapes of the gaps between the words and translated them into labanotation, a system for recording and analyzing human movement, in order to choreograph a dance based on what is missing from the text. In Sheppard's words, “[f]or me, the in-between experience of the Diagnostic Statistical manual

text is the lived experience" (Cochrane). This focus on the literal gaps in the text highlight the failure of the DSM to capture or understand the experience of being trans, which is specific and subjective, and resistant to categorization.

Sheppard performed the dance for an audience in 2019 in *A Strong Desire: Syntactic Movement*. They used twelve poses from the original score to make drawings on the gallery wall through the movements of their charcoal-covered body. Through the performance, Sheppard sought to push beyond even the confines of the dance notation. They explained, "[b]y exploring all possible movements within a series of fixed poses I attempt to find moments of resistance and freedom within the rigid constraints of both the diagnostic criteria and the dance notation" (Sheppard, "A Strong Desire"). The trace of the drawing remained displayed on the wall next to the DSM text.

Bryne McLaughlin defines this piece as privileging "the in between zones of presence and absence, place and non-place, dissonance and symmetry and fluid identity as spaces of generative if unpredictable discovery" (McLaughlin). In these spaces, through the breakdown of existing systems, definitions, and power structures, is the possibility of new meaning.

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Notation process for A Strong Desire (Sheppard, 2018)



Performance of A Strong Desire: Syntactic Movement (Sheppard, 2019).



Trace from the performance of A Strong Desire: Syntactic Movement (Sheppard, 2019).

Sheppard also used a process of translation in *Requiem for the Antarctic Coast* (2017), but this time the resulting trace was an audio-map of the Antarctic Peninsula,

between Joinville Island at the tip of the peninsula, and Winter Island in the Grandidier Channel (Sheppard, "Requiem"). Using lines of longitude and latitude to document the geographical shapes and features of the coast, Sheppard then mapped the data onto musical notation to create a score, and recorded a performance of the composition on piano and strings. The notes are sometimes singular and clear, and at other times discordant combinations as islands appeared off the coastline and added layers to the notation (Sheppard, 2017).

Sheppard describes their process as a way of queering the data. They note that, "if we lay these ideas over top of each other, or if we push here, there's something else to be seen or there's space that opens up" (Peacock). For Sheppard, this is a way of bringing a new interpretation or a new way of seeing things to a space that has been understood through scientific data, "but with little poetic understanding" (Cochrane). Similarly to *A Strong Desire*, in this piece Sheppard shows their interest in what exists outside the rigid constraints of science and data. When the Antarctic is explored outside of a predetermined system, there becomes space for the unexpected. Sheppard finds a commonality here with their experience of their identity, where linear meaning is disrupted to create "a space of possibility, a space of resonance, a space of spectre, a space of- we're not sure what" (Peacock).



Display of notations and headphones for listening to the composition of Requiem for the Arctic Coast (Sheppard, 2017).



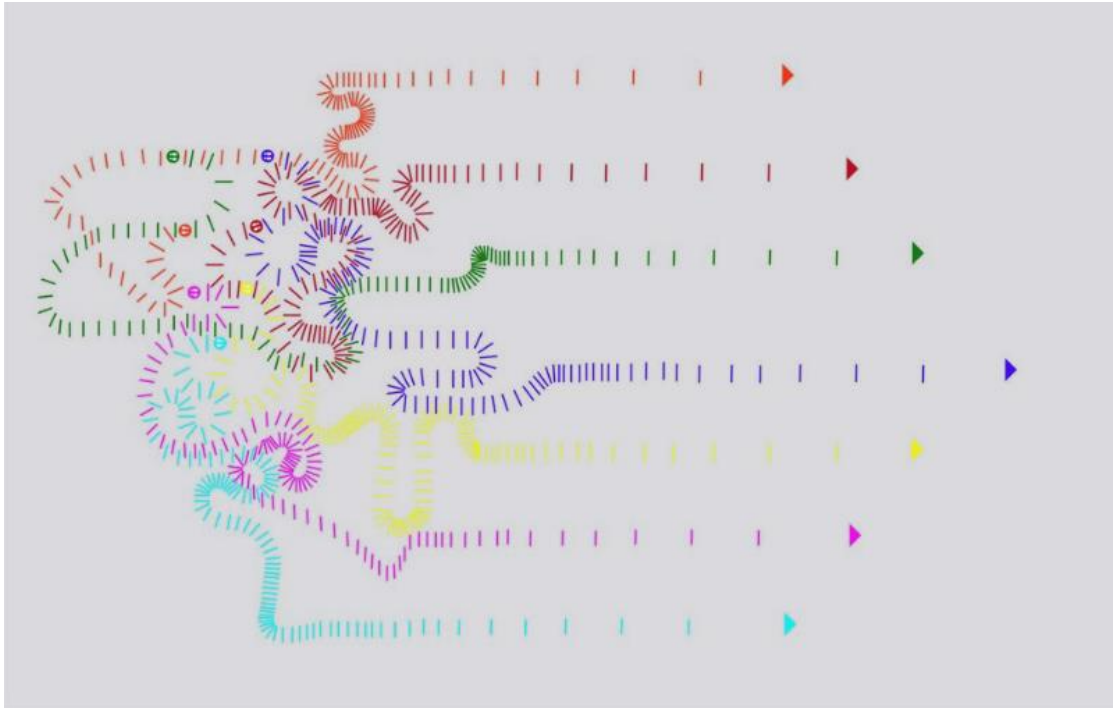
Notation process for Requiem for the Arctic Coast (Sheppard, 2017).

This piece was a response to a call for artists to come to Antarctica and explore “what art making is outside of human space” (Peacock). They continued this theme of searching for meaning and art making outside of human-dominated space in *Murmurations: Scores for Social Distancing* (2020). Sheppard takes their continued interest in nature, geography, and birds as sources of scores, and explores the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on human movements and social norms, wondering if there is meaning and

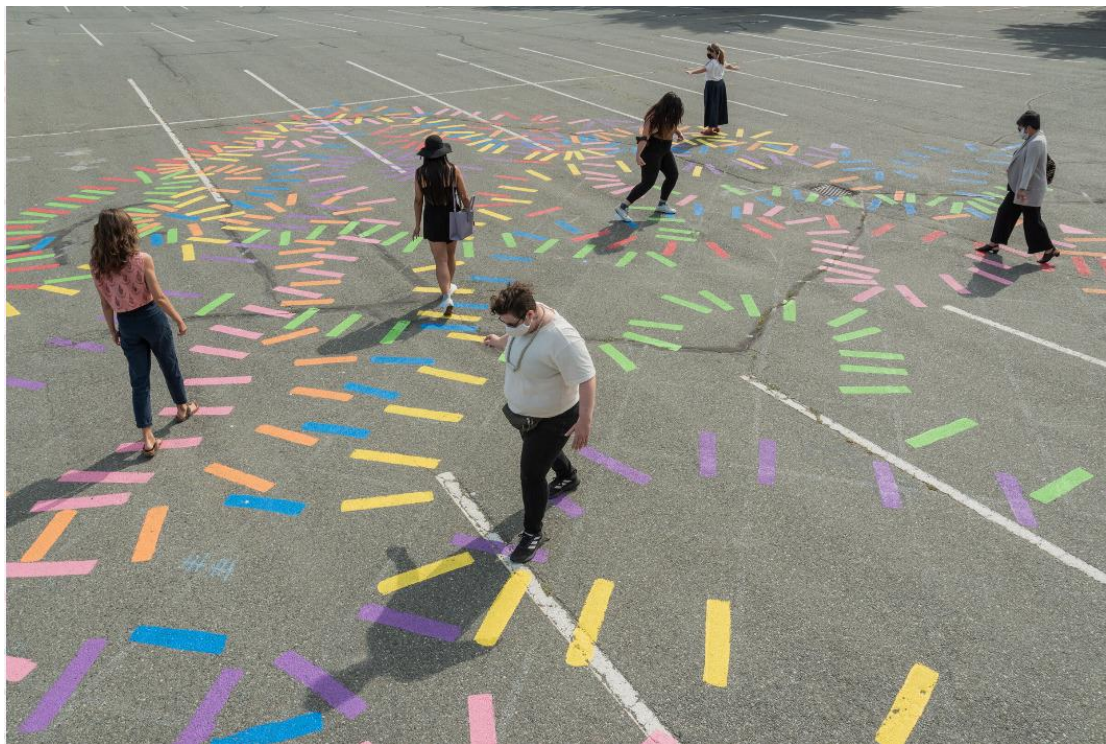
learnings we can take from the behaviour of animals as we meet this challenge and come to grips with our interdependence.

The piece is a choreographic notation where seven dancers perform an interconnected set of movements all the while maintaining a two meter distance from one another. The idea came from the increasing signage and directional marks that indicate the new flow of movement in our stores, schools, and public buildings to ensure social distancing protocols, but Sheppard draws a connection to the ways that flocks of birds already perform a similar choreography in flight, synchronizing their movements with the seven birds nearest them (Sheppard, "Murmurations"). The piece was installed on the parking lot in front of Lansdowne Mall, and persists as a visual score for anyone who wants to come and use it.

In thinking through the shifts in physical behaviour that the pandemic has prompted, Sheppard also explores our increasing awareness of our connectedness. They identify a corresponding need for a shift towards interdependence in the art world where, in practice, the artist may work in dialogue with community, but in order to share their work they still must rely on "a system of resource-intensive exhibitions and international art fairs that celebrate a myth of solitary genius and privilege only a few" (Sheppard, "Pan/demic"). They wonder if the restructuring of our social systems that has been prompted by the pandemic will also be matched by a corresponding restructuring of our cultural institutions. This questioning of accepted forms of knowledge is typical of Sheppard's work, along with the desire to look for new perspectives and spaces for meaning in the spaces in between.



Score for Murmurations: Scores for Social Distancing (Sheppard, 2020).



Performance of Murmurations: Scores for Social Distancing (Sheppard, 2020).

Sheppard's queerness and trans identity is central to the way they approach their work. The resulting ideas of experiencing the world in the in-between, questioning of

established systems of knowledge, and the celebration of alternative readings all resonate deeply with me. Sheppard brings their identity to bare on their practice in a way that speaks to my own experience of identity.

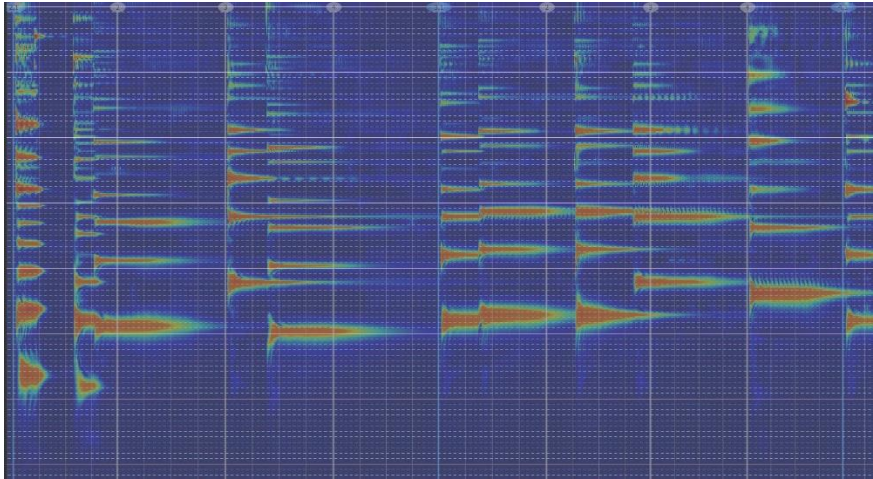
For my piece inspired by Lou Sheppard's work, I took a series of audio recordings of myself that I'd made over several weeks as a kind of auditory journal, and set about translating that sound data into something new. In the daily recordings I would ask questions of myself about things that were going to happen the next day, or mention something I'm looking forward to or nervous about. The following day I would record a response and ask a new question. I edited the sound balance so that each recording would only be heard in the right or left ear, if wearing headphones, to create the idea that there were two people. Given the context in which I was making these recordings (during the COVID 19 pandemic), much of the content of the conversations was focused on fear of the unknown, speculation about the future, feelings of isolation, and commentary on the different experience of time in this context.

The first part of the translation was to map the audio into musical notes, as Lou Sheppard did in their piece *Requiem for the Antarctic Coast* (Sheppard, 2017). I decided to translate the conversation into a piano piece due to the recordings being split into two tracks, or two 'speakers', similar to the way that musical staff for piano is divided into the treble and base clef lines, or the right and left hand on a piano. I wondered how the fluctuations of the sound waves might translate if mapped onto musical notes. I was also interested in the idea of masking from the audience the very intimate and honest conversations I had with myself, by translating them into a different kind of language which isn't so easily understood. And I was curious to see whether the music that came out would

bear any resemblance in tone or rhythm to the original conversation, of if it might become beautiful and lively, and something else entirely.

Unlike Sheppard, who translated the data into musical notes by hand, I ran the recording of the conversation through a computer program designed to pick out and identify notes in music via spectrogram. The program generated a musical score based on its interpretation of the sound of me talking to myself. I then ran the musical notation through another program which plays the sheet music, and recorded the result. Much of the translation process was out of my control as I had to rely on the interpretation and accuracy of a computer program to transpose the recording. Had I transposed the notes by hand, this would have produced a different result, as the program used a specific threshold for identifying a sound as a note and my estimation would likely have used different (and perhaps less rigid and accurate) criteria. Similarly, I could have asked a musical friend to perform the piece (I don't have the skill to play piano myself) but instead used another computer program, which removes some of the personal style that comes into a live performance and reduced it to a very literal representation of the music.

In choosing to process the piece through computer programs, each step made the interpretation more rigid and bound by rules, in contrast to Sheppard's approach which creates more fluidity and space for interpretation with each step (Peacock). I felt this was appropriate for my piece, which was recorded in early 2021 during the pandemic, when so much was uncertain and out of our control. The content of many of my daily recordings to myself also discussed this lack of control, uncertainty, and the feeling of being at the mercy of external forces, so in this way the form closely match the original content. Interestingly, the final piece retained a feeling of ominousness and anxious energy that was prevalent in the original conversations.



Mapping the sounds via spectrogram

Conversations 1	

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