

Title

Beyond the Singular Voice: Mask Performance and Embodied Authorship in Artistic Research

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Author Bio

Inessa Kalabekova is a multimedia artist and PhD candidate at Universiti Sains Malaysia. Her practice-based research explores the relationship between performance, folklore, and cultural memory through embodied and site-responsive methodologies. Working across painting, installation, and movement, she investigates how rituals and gestures function as living archives within contemporary Southeast Asian contexts.

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AI-assisted tools (ChatGPT) were used for language refinement and structural editing. All content, arguments, and interpretations remain the author's own.

Abstract

This practice-research paper examines how artistic authorship in performance can be reconsidered beyond the singular artist-subject through relational and embodied processes. While authorship within artistic research is often still framed through individual creative intention, this study argues that performance generates distributed forms of authorship emerging through interactions between bodies, materials, movement, and site-responsive environments.

Drawing on ongoing artistic research in performance, mask-making, visual art, and ritual-informed movement practices across Southeast Asia and Eurasia, the paper proposes authorship as processual, situated, and collectively negotiated through live performative encounter. Central to the inquiry is the use of masks within site-responsive performances involving the artist and collaborators across different generations. Rather than functioning as symbolic objects or theatrical props, the masks operate as performative agents that redistribute presence, memory, and bodily orientation across performers, materials, and spatial conditions.

Using a practice-led and performative research methodology, the study investigates how improvisation, repetition, collaborative staging, and spatial adaptation reshape authorship during performance. The research focuses not on fixed representation but on how meaning emerges through embodied negotiation, sensory responsiveness, and environmental interaction within the live event. By analysing the shifting relations between performer, material, gesture, and site, the paper examines how authorship is continually produced through performative exchange rather than located within an individual creator.

The paper further argues that artistic research can function as a relational mode of knowledge production in which authorship remains unstable, collective, and continually reconfigured through embodied encounter. In doing so, the study contributes to contemporary discussions on performative research methodologies, relational authorship, and embodied knowledge within artistic research and performance studies.

Keywords: Embodied authorship; mask performance; relational performance; practice-led research; distributed presence; ritual-informed performance; performative transformation

1.Introduction

Who speaks through artistic practice when performance emerges through bodies, masks, materials, gestures, sound, and space? Conventional models of authorship often position the artist as the primary origin of meaning, treating artistic work as the expression of individual intention, originality, and creative control. However, such frameworks cannot fully account for performative practices in which meaning emerges collectively through embodied interaction, material encounter, and spatial negotiation.

This paper argues that authorship in practice-led artistic research does not originate from singular artistic authority but emerges relationally through performance itself. Rather than functioning as fixed ownership or stable creative control, authorship is approached as a

distributed and continually negotiated process produced through encounters between bodies, masks, movement, material presence, memory, and site-responsive environments. By repositioning authorship as relational, performative, and materially situated, the paper contributes to broader discussions in artistic research concerning embodiment, collaboration, agency, and knowledge production through practice.

The paper draws primarily on Michel Foucault's concept of the "author function," which positions authorship not as the stable origin of meaning but as a cultural and discursive construction shaped through systems of relation (Foucault, 1977). This perspective is further extended through performance theory, particularly Richard Schechner's understanding of performance as restored and repeated behaviour continually reshaped across bodies, contexts, and situations (Schechner, 2013). Together, these frameworks support an understanding of authorship as performative, processual, and collectively produced rather than individually possessed.

Drawing on my ongoing artistic research in performance, mask-making, visual art, and ritual-informed movement practices across Southeast Asia and Eurasia, the paper investigates how mask performance reshapes relations between performer, material, gesture, and space. Central to the inquiry are site-responsive performances involving masks activated through collaborative and intergenerational actions with my daughters and other participants. Within these works, masks function not as symbolic props, but as performative agents carrying embodied memory, accumulated gesture, and ritual traces that emerge through live interaction.

Grounded in a practice-led methodology, the research examines how improvisation, repetition, collaborative staging, and spatial adaptation generate shifting forms of authorship within performance. The paper analyses how bodily action, material responsiveness, and environmental encounter continually reshape performative relations during live events. Rather than treating performance as the expression of pre-existing meaning, the study approaches artistic research as a relational mode of knowledge production in which authorship emerges collectively through embodied and situated exchange.

2. Relational and Embodied Authorship

Artistic authorship within performance does not always emerge through singular intention, fixed identity, or individual control. In embodied and site-responsive practices, meaning develops through interactions between bodies, materials, gestures, movement, and spatial conditions. Rather than originating solely from the artist as an autonomous creator, authorship can emerge relationally through performative encounter itself. This understanding resonates with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach to embodiment, in which perception and meaning arise through the lived body moving within the world rather than through detached observation alone (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Within this research, authorship is approached as materially and performatively situated. The performances draw upon ritual objects, masking traditions, and museum artefacts encountered across Southeast Asia and Eurasia, reworked through mask-making, movement

experimentation, and site-responsive performance. Encounters with museum collections informed the visual and material language of the masks, costumes, and performative objects within *Threads of Time*. Through live enactment, static artefacts became activated within contemporary performance, generating new relations between memory, bodily movement, and material presence. As D. S. Farrer suggests, ritual action and embodied movement extend aesthetic experience beyond object-centred understandings of art (Farrer, 2012).

The introduction of the mask further reshaped performative relations between body, material, and space. Rather than functioning as a fixed theatrical object, the mask altered bodily awareness, movement, and perception during performance, redistributing attention between performer, material presence, and surrounding environment. In this sense, authorship emerged not through individual expression alone, but through ongoing negotiation between body, gesture, object, and site.

Grounded in a practice-led methodology, this study examines how collaborative performance processes, mask-object interaction, and embodied movement generate shifting forms of authorship within live artistic practice. Through improvisation, material engagement, and performative interaction, *Threads of Time* approaches authorship as relational, embodied, and continually produced through live encounter rather than fixed artistic ownership.

3. Practice-Led Methodology

This study adopts a practice-led methodology in which artistic practice functions as a mode of inquiry developed through cycles of making, performing, experimentation, and critical reflection. Drawing primarily on Sullivan's understanding of artistic research as knowledge generated through creative practice (Sullivan, 2010) and McNiff's emphasis on art-based inquiry as reflexive and process-oriented investigation (McNiff, 2008), the research approaches performance not as illustration of theory, but as a site through which knowledge is produced.

The methodology combines mask-making, movement experimentation, costume construction, sound, and site-responsive performance as interconnected forms of embodied inquiry. Rather than separating artistic production from analytical reflection, the research understands knowledge as emerging through material engagement, performative action, and iterative development across the creative process. The artist's body functions as an active site of investigation through which movement, perception, spatial interaction, and performative relations are explored reflexively within live practice.

The research is centred on *Threads of Time*, a site-responsive performance developed for Singapore Art Week 2026. The work evolved through rehearsals, site explorations, improvisational structures, and public performances involving masks, textiles, movement, and collaborative staging. Ritual-informed movement practices and masking traditions from Southeast Asia and Eurasia informed the development of the performances, shaping approaches to embodiment, transformation, and performative interaction within the work.

As both artist and researcher, I occupied a dual position within the study in which understanding developed through embodied participation and reflective engagement with the

unfolding performance process. Collaborators participated within the artistic work itself through shared performative actions and site-responsive interaction. However, the research focuses primarily on artistic process, movement development, mask-object interaction, and spatial composition rather than on participant experience.

The research process was documented through video recordings, rehearsal notes, sketches, reflective journals, and photographic documentation. These materials functioned both as records and analytical tools supporting iterative reflection on performance development, material interaction, movement structures, and spatial relations throughout the evolution of the work. Through this methodology, artistic research is approached as a relational and evolving mode of knowledge production generated through practice itself.

4. Threads of Time: Performance Analysis

4.1 Overview of the Performance

The central artistic outcome of this research is Threads of Time, a site-responsive performance developed for Singapore Art Week 2026. The performance took place in public space surrounding the Asian Civilisations Museum and extended across a river bridge connecting different areas of the site. The work combined masks, costumes, bells, red textile threads, movement improvisation, and carried ritual objects within a live outdoor environment.

The performance unfolded through slow processional movement involving myself, my daughters, and collaborators. Movement developed across transitional spaces shaped by pedestrian pathways, open public areas, and the bridge crossing. Masks were worn throughout the performance together with layered costumes, bells, and extended red threads connecting performers across the site. A hand-carried Slavic ritual calendar also formed part of the moving performance structure.

The work was developed through rehearsals, site explorations, and iterative movement experimentation. Rather than following fixed choreography, the performance used improvisational structures that allowed movement and spacing to adapt to surrounding conditions and audience presence. Gestures repeated across different sections of the site, while performers adjusted pacing and bodily orientation in response to one another during the movement sequences.

Sound formed an important part of the performance environment. Bells attached to costumes generated shifting acoustic patterns as performers moved through the site. Textile threads stretched, loosened, and changed position throughout the performance, creating changing visual and spatial relationships between bodies and objects.

Masks remained central throughout the work and moved between performers during different stages of the performance. The masks, costumes, threads, and ritual objects functioned together as interconnected performative materials shaping the visual structure and movement development of the work.

Documentation of the performance included video recordings, rehearsal notes, sketches, reflective journals, and photographic documentation produced throughout the development and presentation of *Threads of Time*.



Figure 1. *Threads of Time* crossing Cavenagh Bridge during Singapore Art Week 2026. The performance incorporated masks, red thread, bells, and collective movement within public space. Photograph by Gregory Kalabekova, 2026.

4.2 Masks as Performative Archives and Transmission

Within *Threads of Time*, masks operated not as theatrical props or fixed symbolic objects, but as performative archives carrying embodied memory, ritual traces, and accumulated bodily knowledge across performance (Taylor, 2003; Connerton, 1989). Rather than functioning as stable representations of identity, the masks acted as material carriers through which gestures, performative habits, and embodied experience remained active within live enactment.

Informed by Indonesian masking traditions, the masks functioned as forms of transmission through which bodily knowledge and performative memory circulated between performers, objects, and performance situations (Havlik, 2015; Trisnawati et al., 2023). Their significance emerged not solely through visual appearance, but through use, handling, movement, and continued activation within performance. Through repeated wearing and shared performative actions, the masks accumulated traces of bodily interaction and performative experience extending beyond any singular performer. In this sense, embodied knowledge was transmitted across generations through recurring acts of performance and remembrance (Adonyeva &

Olson, 2011). This understanding resonates with Barbara Myerhoff's conception of ritual performance as a living process through which cultural memory and shared knowledge are continually renewed through embodied participation rather than preserved as static tradition (Myerhoff, 1982).

The movement of masks between performers further displaced fixed understandings of authorship and performative ownership. As masks circulated across bodies and generations, embodied knowledge was transmitted through shared gesture, physical interaction, and collective enactment. Meaning therefore emerged not from the object alone, but through interactions between mask, body, and action.

Mask-making itself formed an important component of this archival and transmissive process. Through painting, textile layering, material experimentation, and performative testing, the masks evolved alongside the performances rather than existing as finished aesthetic objects. Museum collections and ritual artefacts informed aspects of their visual language, although the masks were not intended as reproductions of traditional forms. Instead, they developed as contemporary performative forms shaped through embodied interaction and ongoing artistic use.

Approached in this way, the masks functioned simultaneously as material objects, embodied archives, and performative carriers of memory. Their meaning remained active and continually reshaped through performance, allowing embodied knowledge and ritual traces to persist within live artistic practice.



Figure 2. Mask and bell detail from *Threads of Time*, demonstrating the relationship between bodily perception, sound, and performative transformation. Photograph by Vincent Ling, 2026.

4.3 Distributed Presence, Collaboration, and Improvisation

Within *Threads of Time*, movement developed collaboratively through continual adjustment between performers rather than through singular artistic control or fixed choreography. Improvisation structured how performers responded to one another in real time, allowing gestures, pacing, spacing, and bodily orientation to shift through shared interaction during the live event. Although recurring movement sequences informed the work, no enactment unfolded identically, as performers continually adapted movement through observation, hesitation, imitation, and mutual responsiveness.

Interactions between performers shaped the unfolding structure of the performance itself. Gestures circulated between myself, my daughters, and collaborators through processes of repetition, mirroring, and bodily attention, allowing movement patterns to develop collectively across bodies rather than remain attached to an individual performer. Movement therefore emerged relationally through ongoing negotiation between participants, where timing, direction, and gesture were continually modified through shared performative awareness.

Material elements further intensified these collaborative interactions. Bells attached to costumes transformed bodily movement into shared sound, while extended textile threads physically connected performers across the site. These elements required continual attentiveness and mutual adjustment, as changes in one performer's movement directly affected the movement pathways, spacing, and bodily orientation of others within the performance.

Threads of Time therefore approached authorship as a collectively negotiated process produced through collaboration, improvisation, and responsive interaction. Rather than positioning the performer as a singular author directing a stable composition, the work generated meaning collectively through shared bodily action, material exchange, and live performative encounter.



Figure 3. Red thread interaction sequence from *Threads of Time*. Movement and spatial relationships developed collectively through tension, gesture, and responsive interaction between performers. Photograph by Vincent Ling, 2026.

4.4 Space as Active Participant

Within *Threads of Time*, the performance site actively shaped movement, perception, and bodily interaction throughout the work. Positioned between the Asian Civilisations Museum, the river crossing, and surrounding public walkways, the performance unfolded through shifting relations between architecture, audience presence, movement pathways, and embodied action. Space did not function as a neutral backdrop for performance, but as an active condition continually influencing how movement developed across the site.

The bridge crossing became a particularly important transitional zone within the performance. As a narrow public passage connecting different spatial areas, it created changing relations between performers, passersby, sound, and bodily orientation. Movement pathways repeatedly shifted as pedestrians crossed through the performance space, forcing performers to adapt spacing, direction, and pacing in real time. Rather than interrupting the work from outside, these encounters became integrated into the unfolding structure of the performance itself.

Architectural thresholds throughout the site further shaped how bodies moved and interacted. Open public areas allowed wider spatial dispersal, while narrower sections compressed movement and intensified proximity between performers, audiences, and material elements. The extended red textile threads linking performers became increasingly difficult to navigate within confined areas, producing continual spatial negotiation between bodies, objects, and surrounding movement flows. Sound also shifted across different parts of the site as bells carried unevenly between open and enclosed spaces.

Environmental conditions continually altered bodily awareness and performative interaction. Wind displaced textile materials, urban noise merged with the sound of movement and bells, and changing public activity reshaped the temporal flow of the performance. Audience members did not remain fixed observers but moved unpredictably through the site, at times slowing, redirecting, or fragmenting movement sequences as performers adjusted to the surrounding environment. These shifting interactions generated rhythms of movement, sound, and spatial encounter that resonate with Henri Lefebvre's concept of *rhythmanalysis*, in which lived space emerges through the interaction of bodies, temporal patterns, and everyday practices (Lefebvre, 2004).

In this sense, space functioned as a relational and dynamic component of the work rather than a passive setting. The performance further resonates with Lefebvre's understanding of space as socially produced through movement, interaction, and lived experience rather than existing as fixed architectural form alone (Lefebvre, 1991). Within *Threads of Time*, spatial meaning emerged through ongoing interactions between bodies, materials, sound, architecture, and public movement across the live event.

5. Performance as Embodied Authorship

Within *Threads of Time*, authorship emerged through shifting relations between bodies, masks, materials, sound, and site-responsive interaction rather than through singular artistic control. Movement remained open to interruption and adaptation as performers responded to one another, surrounding audiences, and changing spatial conditions throughout the work.

Rather than unfolding through fixed choreography, the performance developed through improvisation, responsiveness, and collective adjustment. Gestures and movement sequences evolved differently across rehearsals and live enactments, allowing meaning to emerge through performative interaction rather than predetermined form.

Central to this inquiry is the practice of listening before imposing structure. The work developed through attentiveness to bodily interaction, material responsiveness, and spatial encounter, allowing performative relations to unfold collectively within the live event. In this sense, *Threads of Time* approaches authorship not as stable ownership or singular expression, but as a relational process continually produced through embodied exchange and performative presence.

5.1 Distributed Presence and Collective Speaking

Within *Threads of Time*, authorship emerged through shared performative relations between bodies, masks, movement, ritual objects, and collective action rather than through singular artistic control. The performance approached collective speaking not as the expression of a single authorial voice, but as a process distributed across performers, materials, gestures, and embodied interaction. Meaning therefore developed collectively through live exchange rather than remaining attached to an individual performer or stable artistic authority.

Masks played a central role in redistributing performative presence across the work. As they moved between performers and generations, they carried traces of previous gestures, bodily actions, and shared enactments, allowing performative knowledge to circulate collectively across bodies rather than remain fixed within individual identity. Additional performative elements, including red textile threads and the hand-carried Slavic ritual calendar, further displaced singular authorship by physically and symbolically connecting performers through shared movement and collective spatial interaction.

Movement structures developed collaboratively through observation, responsiveness, imitation, and continual bodily adjustment between myself, my daughters, and collaborators. Because gestures emerged through relational interaction rather than predetermined choreography, no single performer maintained complete control over the unfolding structure of the performance. Authorship instead developed through mutual attentiveness and collective negotiation within the live event.

Rather than emerging from singular artistic intention, authorship developed through ongoing relations between bodies, materials, movement, and spatial conditions. This relational understanding aligns with Manning's argument that experience and movement arise through

processes of emergence and co-composition, where agency remains distributed across bodies and environments rather than located within an individual actor (Manning, 2009).

Threads of Time therefore proposes authorship as distributed, relational, and collectively produced through performance itself. Meaning did not originate from singular artistic intention alone, but emerged through ongoing exchanges between bodies, materials, movement, and shared performative presence. In this sense, authorship functioned less as individual ownership than as a continually shifting process of collective enactment (Fischer-Lichte, 2008).

5.2 Restored Behaviour and Performative Transformation

Richard Schechner's concept of "restored behaviour" provides an important framework for understanding repetition within Threads of Time as a process of continual transformation rather than mechanical reproduction (Schechner, 2013). For Schechner, performance consists of behaviours that are repeated, reactivated, and reshaped across different contexts and enactments. Repetition therefore does not return performance to a stable origin but produces variation through each reactivation.

Within *Threads of Time*, recurring gestures and movement structures functioned through this process of transformation across enactments. Actions were not reproduced identically from one performance to another, but continually altered through embodied practice, changing relations between performers, and the unfolding conditions of live performance. Repetition operated as an open and generative structure through which movement remained responsive to adaptation and change, consistent with Schechner's understanding of restored behaviour (Schechner, 2013).

This cyclical understanding of performance also resonates with ritual practices associated with recurrence and embodied continuity within Slavic seasonal traditions (Álvarez-Pedrosa and Santos Marinas, 2023). However, within the performance, recurrence did not function as reenactment of fixed ritual forms. Instead, repeated actions accumulated subtle variations through bodily enactment itself, allowing gestures and performative relations to evolve across performances.

Repetition in Threads of Time therefore functioned as a transformative rather than reproductive process. Through restored behaviour, movement and gesture remained unstable, continually reshaped through recurrence, and open to new performative configurations within each enactment. In this sense, performance emerged not through the repetition of fixed forms, but through continual reactivation and transformation across embodied practice.

5.3 Liminal Space and Spatial Negotiation

Within Threads of Time, space functioned not as a passive backdrop for performance, but as an active and unstable condition shaping movement, perception, and bodily interaction throughout the work. The performance unfolded across transitional public areas surrounding the Asian Civilisations Museum and the river crossing, where movement pathways were

continually affected by pedestrian flow, architectural constraints, audience proximity, and shifting environmental conditions.

The bridge crossing became a particularly significant spatial threshold within the performance. As performers moved through the narrow public passage, spacing, pacing, and bodily orientation required continual negotiation in response to passersby, surrounding movement, and changing spatial conditions. Movement therefore developed through ongoing adjustment rather than through fixed spatial control.

Henri Lefebvre's understanding of space as socially produced through lived interaction and movement provides an important framework for interpreting these performative conditions (Lefebvre, 1991). Within the performance, space emerged relationally through encounters between bodies, architecture, sound, objects, and public activity rather than existing as a stable container for action. Spatial meaning developed through movement itself as performers continually adapted to interruptions, altered pathways, and changing relations between performers and audience members.

The transitional structure of the bridge crossing also resonates with Victor Turner's understanding of liminality as a condition of passage, instability, and transformation between fixed states (Turner, 1982). The performance occupied threshold spaces in which movement remained open, unresolved, and continually negotiated through live encounter.

Threads of Time therefore approached space as dynamic and performative rather than fixed or neutral. Public interruption, unstable pathways, and architectural thresholds continually reshaped movement and bodily relations throughout the work, allowing performance to emerge through spatial negotiation and responsive interaction within the live environment.



Figure 4. Bridge crossing sequence from *Threads of Time*, showing movement negotiation shaped by masks, wind, sound, and shifting red thread elements within public space. Photograph by Gregory Kalabekov, 2026.

5.4 Artistic Practice as Embodied Inquiry

This study approaches artistic practice as a mode of inquiry through which knowledge emerges from processes of making, movement, rehearsal, and performance. Grounded in a practice-led methodology (Sullivan, 2010; McNiff, 2008), the research developed through iterative cycles of mask-making, improvisation, site exploration, reflection, and live enactment. Rather than separating theory from practice, understanding emerged through direct engagement with bodily action, material processes, and performative experimentation.

Within this framework, performance functioned as a form of embodied inquiry in which knowledge developed through live interaction between body, gesture, sound, material, and space. The research positioned the body not simply as a subject of analysis, but as an active site of perception, responsiveness, and knowledge production.

Central to the methodology was the practice of listening before imposing form. Instead of relying on fixed choreographic structures, the work evolved through attentiveness to movement, material interaction, and spatial responsiveness. Knowledge emerged gradually through reflective engagement with the unfolding performance process, allowing gestures and performative relations to develop through experimentation and enactment.

The research further extended beyond documentation into live presentation itself. The conference presentation functioned as a continuation of the artistic inquiry through the activation of performative materials, movement, and spatial interaction within the presentation environment. In this sense, the conference space became a temporary performative site through which knowledge continued to emerge through embodied exchange.

By positioning artistic practice as a mode of embodied inquiry, *Threads of Time* approaches performance as an evolving process of knowledge production generated through practice itself. Meaning emerged not as a fixed outcome, but through ongoing interaction between embodiment, material process, and live performative experience.

The conference presentation extends the artistic inquiry beyond documentation and verbal explanation through the activation of performative materials within the presentation space itself. The presentation begins with a masked entrance accompanied by the sound of bells and concludes through the unfolding and wearing of a painted dress carrying bell elements. Rather than functioning as illustration, these actions operate as performative continuations of the research, activating relationships between body, sound, material, memory, and space within the conference environment. Through this live enactment, the presentation itself becomes a temporary site of embodied inquiry in which authorship remains relational, situated, and continually produced through encounter.

6. Conclusion

Threads of Time reconsiders artistic authorship not as singular creative ownership, but as a relational process produced through interactions between bodies, masks, movement, materials, and spatial encounter. Across the performances, meaning developed collectively through improvisation, negotiation, and shared action instead of fixed authorial control. The study therefore positions authorship as distributed, unstable, and continually generated within live artistic practice.

Central to this inquiry was the role of the mask as a performative archive carrying embodied memory, ritual traces, and accumulated gestures across enactments. As masks circulated between performers and generations, they displaced fixed understandings of authorship attached to individual identity and redistributed performative presence across bodies, objects, and collective action. The research further demonstrated how repetition, spatial instability, and transformation continually reshaped movement and bodily relations within the work. Performance unfolded through adaptation, interruption, and reconfiguration rather than stable choreography or fixed reproduction.

By approaching artistic practice as a mode of inquiry, the study contributes to broader discussions within artistic research concerning relational authorship, knowledge production, and practice-led methodologies. Threads of Time suggests that artistic research generates understanding not only through interpretation or documentation, but through live artistic processes in which knowledge develops through bodily action, material engagement, and situated encounter. In this sense, artistic research becomes a collective and evolving practice in which meaning, authorship, and knowledge remain open, relational, and continually renegotiated through performance itself.

Statements and Declarations

Ethical approval: Not applicable. The study was conducted within public performance contexts involving voluntary audience engagement. No personal or sensitive data were formally collected, and interactions were informal and anonymised through fieldnotes.

Consent to participate: Not applicable.

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