

I Surrender to You and Loving It. (A study in co-authoring)

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Abstract

This paper utilizes autoethnographic and qualitative methodologies to examine the concept of co-authorship within the field of participatory arts, with a specific focus on sound art installation. It challenges the traditional myth of the lone, solitary genius by exploring how the artist can shift from an autonomous creator into a collaborative facilitator. While the literature often categorizes participatory sound art as a series of pre-designed, determinate actions that merely trigger processed noises, this research highlights how co-authoring can foster deep sociability, community, genuine improvisation and individual self-esteem. Drawing upon nearly 30 years of practice-based research, the study analyzes two recent 2026 works to demonstrate the strengths of this collaborative framework. The first piece, *Score*, reimagines an abstract expressionist painting series as a graphic score, moving past the passive gaze to open avenues for unbridled performative interpretation by the audience. The second piece, *Rock and a Hard Place*, is a participatory sound installation that compels participants to pass through a throng of live electric guitars. Through these case studies, the paper argues that relinquishing strict artistic control grants creative agency to the gallery-goer. By inviting hands-on participation in the ongoing development of the artwork, the traditional boundaries of authorship are dismantled, transforming the audience into vital co-creators.

Co-Authorship in Sound Art Installations, It Does Exist!

My paper will demonstrate through both autoethnographic and qualitative methodologies how co-authorship can work in the field of participatory arts with my focus in sound art installation.

Artist co-authorship breaks with the myth of the lone, solitary genius. In the works I'm presenting I have surrendered my role of artist, breaking the myth to become a facilitator. I use my knowledge, creative mindset and artistic abilities to construct participatory/socially engaged artworks that encourage the agency of the gallery goer through their hands-on participation in the works' ongoing development. The installations I'm examining work to forge sociability, community and individual self-esteem. Two of my 2026 artworks demonstrate the strength and popularity of co-authorship. *Score* uses my series of abstract expressionist paintings as a tool for moving past the gaze into a graphic score that opens avenues of unbridled performative interpretation.

Rock and a Hard Place is a participatory sound installation that compels participants to pass through a throng of live electric guitars.

The art-goer's participation has been a structural aspect of my sound installations for close to 30 years, but only recently have I started regarding these works as co-authorships. The idea of co-authoring is easily misconstrued, my research has led me to observe that the literature demonstrates, as well as personal experience, that in most instances sound art works have distinct determinate qualities. The literature supports the notion that in many participatory sound art models the idea of participation is to set off pre-designed, possibly processed noises. Many models encourage participants to walk on, to touch, to pull open—in other words, to take action to trigger these noises. This implies a sense of participatory control that is more like DJing than artwork creation.

In 2022 Chibalashvili et al, in the study “Interactive Sound Installation as an Implementation of Contemporary Communication Models,” examined the act of co-authoring in sound art installations and practices. The study examines acts of participation with sound installations in a controlled environment. The researchers found that “A certain route or bridge of interaction is built from the author to the recipient and there is an impression that the role of the recipient in this type of communication grows, for the recipient influences the final stage of perception.”¹

The word in this statement to take notice of is “impression”; there is an allusion to the notion of co-authorship presented in the works their study examines. Yes, it is interactive, but the producer still holds authorship, so rather than substantial co-authorship the installation offers only to lend out what I refer to as an ellipsis: a chance to mould an already existing work. Despite the illusion of new creation, the installation, and its participants, are still controlled through the axis of the creators’ pre-determined parameters. The study itself verified my thinking when it concluded that: “... in reality, this is a one-way process — from the author to the recipient — which is controlled mainly by the author. This is a traditional model where the audience is offered seemingly variable perception but in fact, it is determined by the author.”

I must agree that many participatory situations may be promoted as co-authorships when they are not in reality. But the notion that full co-authorship doesn’t exist or isn’t possible, is revealed as a fallacy when we see artists genuinely surrendering control of authorship.

In my thinking and process, in true co-authorship, the participants are in full control of the outcome. To create true co-authorship, however, improvisation is central.

¹ CHIBALASHVILI, Amati, KHARCHENKO, Polina. BEZUHLA, Ruslana, SAVCHUK, Igor, SYDORENKOS, Victor, *Interactive Sound Installation as an Implementation of Contemporary Communication Models*, 2022, *Postmodern Openings*, Volume 13, Issue 2, pages: 239-253 | <https://doi.org/10.18662/po/13.2/451>

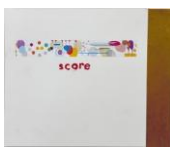
Now I would like to present the research I have gathered through the presentation of two participatory artworks. The first is *Score*, through a series of 13 conjoined paintings, a polyptych, forming a 61cm x 1190cm graphic score inviting participants to create unrestricted performative content.



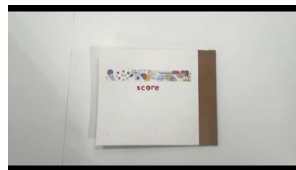
Score 1-5, 2025/26, 24"x 36", 61 x 91 cm each painting- 24"x 180" works 1-5, 61 x 457 cm, acrylic on canvas.

The work, when presented in its entirety is exhibited alongside musical instruments that are signifiers for the beholders to use as participatory implements to translate the score. There is a bifurcation in *Score* that is not a common element in the examination of traditional paintings on canvas, that goes beyond the gaze to translate the polyptych into a set of non-instructive performative actions. To this date seven of the 13 painting have been completed.

For my research I printed a prospectus, including colour reproductions of five of the paintings, as a five-painting printed manuscript which I sent to a few improvising musicians, writers, actors, poets and art critic/curators, asking for a written response to the manuscript.



Double click to play.



Score manuscript, 2026, 10" x 13", limited edition of 20, archival paper and inks on paper and cardboard

The list of recipients—from dancers, theatre professors, musicians to visual art curators and poets—varied widely, and so did their range of responses. For example, the art writer/curator saw the work from an unexpected perspective:

I am not looking so much as to how to perform it but what meaning lies behind the relationship between performer and artist. So, to that end, I look toward conceptual art and some of the innovations that it made in terms of the role of the participant in considering the artwork. Specifically, I look at artists such as Lawrence Wiener and, in Canada, Gerald Ferguson, and how they would have others complete the work. I also look at Yoko Ono's instructional pieces, which offer guidance in straightforward language.²

A response from a composer took the manuscript in a more sacred way,

I like to think of the Jewish mystical tradition where they speak of the Torah as black fire (the written letters) on white fire (the page) but also white fire on black fire, that is the meaning of the white space around the black letters. Could we consider the "white fire" in this score and what might our interpretation be?³

Theatrically Dr. McLeod expresses a physicality:

I'm thinking about the term score in relation to movement and collective presence in space, rather than from a sonic or tonal perspective. ... I work best with bodies and would probably tackle this in a theatre movement/devising context best, working with a small movement ensemble. While I have hunches about what might emerge in working with this score, so much would emerge through improvisations with the

² Miller, Earl, art writer/critic/curator, Research notes from Mike Hansen, 2026.

³ Dr. Barwin, Gary, composer/writer/poet/musician, Research notes from Mike Hansen, 2026

group. My initial orientation is toward time—how we feel it, how it moves across us, and how it stretches or breaks.⁴

Serendipitously, several paintings into *Score*, I was asked to exhibit the work at a new gallery in Hamilton, The Vero Gallery, May and June 2026. Through displaying this sampling of paintings, and hosting and playing in two public performances, I was able to set my research into motion in a public setting.

During this exhibition two ensembles were invited to perform the work in the gallery over a two-week period. The first performers were Ghost Variables, an improvising free jazz collective, I must state I'm the drummer /percussionist and Gary Barwin is the reed player. Here is an excerpt of the translation by Ghost Variables, a structured improvisation in which stopwatches coordinated the musicians' attention to each painting.



Score invitation/poster for two performances.



Ghost Variables performing *Score*, Vero Gallery, Hamilton ON. -Double click to play.

At the beginning of the performance the audience were asked to follow the score themselves, observing the paintings on the wall and envisioning the kinds of performances that might be inspired by their interpretations. This improvised interpretation of *Score* was based on six minutes per painting,

⁴ Dr. McLeod, Kimberly, theatre director, professor, playwright, Research notes from Mike Hansen, 2026

generating a 30-minute performance. At the end, one set of responses summed up the concept of paintings as a score that brings together musical interpretation and the extended gaze:

Audience member one: "I didn't have a preconceived notion of what it would be, but I could always tell where you were. ... "Always. Especially the pink dots. I'm like, that's [musical passage] definitely the pink dots."

Audience member two: "Really? No, why do you say that? Explain."

Audience member one: "Because it was pink dots."

Audience member response, Ghost Variables performance, June 5/2026, Vero Gallery, Hamilton ON, Canada

A week later at the Vero Gallery, a second ensemble fronted by poet and educator Dr Gregory Betts, responded to the manuscript by producing a poem which the ensemble TZT performed. Here Gregory describes his process for his intimate translation of *Score*.

"I start by holding *Score* upside down, read the wrong way and then back again. It needs to feel improvised, but I want the score to be more intimately, genetically linked with a leap, as if it were a mirror in a dream. The image is 24' by 36" so each line of the poem is 24 characters by 36 lines. The second part is not necessary, but to illustrate the point." ⁵ This is an excerpt from Gregory's poem "The Murmuring," his translation of *Score*:

my lungs already bruised
burp out grey and orange
thought balloons grey is
orange growing pink huge
amorphous sounds all red
stretched in moaning red
microtones sustained low
punctures rattle thought
i scream as beige guitar
bass thunders an old sun

⁵ Dr. Betts, Gregory, poet, professor, vocalist, Research notes from Mike Hansen, 2026

blond cymbals blue straw
 corrupts the moons orbit
 puce prattles off snares
 drumsolo tomtom kick lug
 flares in ratatat boom
 we flow stalactite stars
 rise and embed the night
 pulse steady big growing
 in this heart of silence
 an abyss dissolves empty
 of all words where poems
 slide off a page purples
 blues and I find a voice
 a sonnet of noise little
 songs tone poems strange
 atonal counterpoint puny
 as my voice blitz bursts
 air raid of emotions sky
 world supplanted embryos
 earthly air farming gulp
 gurgle giggle bleat burp
 more startling harmonies
 cut over my voice shrill
 shriller shrillest lilac
 and then i burst blossom
 leave only the murmuring ⁶



Here is an excerpt from the 30-minute
 performance of *Score*: vocalist Gregory Betts
 with the ensemble TZT, performing an
 experimental rendition of “The Murmuring.”

TZT performing Murmuring, a translation of Score, Vero Gallery, Hamilton ON, Canada - *Double click to play.*

⁶ Betts, Gregory, [The Murmuring \(excerpt\)](#), translation of the Score manuscript, Research notes from Mike Hansen, 2026

Score performances creates co-authorship opportunities: in negotiating the piece, performers develop avenues of free improvisation without prior instruction or hegemonic structuring through the translation of abstract images in a language of shape, form and colour. Fred Moten from his text *In The Break*, supports this ascertain, “The picture is text, the image is writing, *sounded and not visible* thought of a brilliant luminescence in the ensemble of the graphic, the (non)verbal, the aural.”⁷ The written responses to the painted works I solicited from various performers and academics construe the paintings to be open to interpretation, in various forms, outside of the aesthetic of abstract expressionism and the act of the gaze. The act of co-authorship is supported by free improvisations and concepts outside of musicking by inviting channels of creation that extend beyond the aural.

The abstracted forms presented in the paintings move out of the control of the painter and are reinvented through the thoughts and actions of, in this study, the musicians and poets who are invited to translate the works, and the beholders who, through their gaze and their listening, were able to make what could have been a static show of hung paintings into a vibrant interpersonal event. Bourriaud reinforces my concept in *Postproduction*:

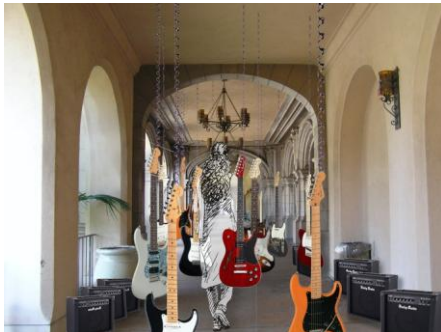
... the contemporary work of art does not position itself as the termination point of the ‘creative process’ (a “finished product” to be contemplated) but a site of navigation, a portal, a generator of activities. We tinker with the production, we surf the on a network of signs, we insert our forms on existing lines.⁸

The performances supporting the written responses and the ability of the beholders to fully understand *Score* as a platform for a democratic and non-hegemonic performative gaze. The piece

⁷ Moten, Fred, *In the Break, The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 2003, pg. 52

⁸ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Postproduction, Culture as a Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, Lukas & Steinberg, New York, NY. 2002, pg.19.

enacts what Rancière describes in the *Emancipated Spectator*: “These stories of boundaries to cross, and of distribution of roles to be blurred, in fact coincide with the reality of contemporary art, in which all specific artistic skills tend to leave their particular domain and swap places and power.”⁹



Rock in a Hard Place, 2016-2026, digital collage, in situ installation, guitars, amplifiers, distortion pedals, video projection.

Rock in a Hard Place, When Noise becomes Sound

Rock and a Hard Place is possibly the opposite to *Score* in its co-authorship message. Unlike *Score*, in which abstract expressionist images are presented to be translated, or synthesized as performance-based actions, *Rock and a Hard Place* is loaded with signifiers that send visual signals and aural clues of what the piece is and how it might function. *Rock and a Hard Place* is an in-situ, performative sound installation that asks participants to weave through a hallway or room of live amplified electric guitars hanging from the ceiling via bungy cords, daring the visitor to touch, listen, and create.

The piece is an analogy for my own apprehension about walking through crowds and evokes the societal change since the Covid pandemic: now many of us are wary of large crowds, and more dubious

⁹ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans: Gregory Elliot, Verso, London, New York, 2011, pg. 21.

than ever about touching and being touched. It also joking reflects the stereotype of the polite Canadian: dare I touch someone else's instrument?

Each guitar is attached to a distortion pedal and an amplifier. The instruments are suspended from the ceiling of the location by bungee cords allowing the guitars to move freely as participants walk through them. The installation is anchored with a slow moving, slightly blurred black and white video projection on the walls at the back of the gallery, made by a videographer (myself) moving through a large crowd. When a participant contacts a guitar, the instrument reacts to this interaction, bouncing, knocking against the participant and other guitars, causing a noise backlash. This can be compared to the apologies, such as "sorry", generated when bumping into people while travelling through crowds.

I was able to install the work at a monthly event in Hamilton ON, Canada called Art Crawl.



What I thought would happen didn't. As I stated, I believed there would be a passive participation of passing through the guitars and brushing against them. Instead, people straddled the guitars and began to play them.

Participants Rock in a Hard Place, You Me Gallery, Hamilton ON, 2026

double click to play

This broke down my own hegemonic idea about my authorship or predetermination of participants' responses. Both non and experienced, guitar players now shared the space, creating fascinating sounds

and joy enveloped in smiles. They were taking control of the piece and changing its nature. Moten puts it succinctly: "... improvisation or more precisely, that improvisation of a notion (or perhaps more faithfully a phenomenology)"¹⁰ My idea, a notion as I have stated, my authorship dissolved in this formless communal improvisation. A community is established through the guitar and its voice, of those who could and those who couldn't becoming a singular body. This unconscious action is a culmination of societal experiences through visual and aural relationships supported through Ponty's corporeal schema,

We grasp external space through our bodily situation. A 'corporeal or postural schema' gives us at every moment a global, practical, and implicit notion of the relation between our body and things, of our hold on them... Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. It applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument, and when we wish to move about, we do not move the body as we move an object... We transport it without instruments as if by magic, since it is ours and because through it, we have direct access to space. For us the body is much more than an instrument or a means; it is our expression in the world, the visible form of our intentions.¹¹

Rock in a Hard Place essentially enacts this theory of the relationship between the guitar, the body, noise and sound in this way it draws its participants into a situation of co-authorship.

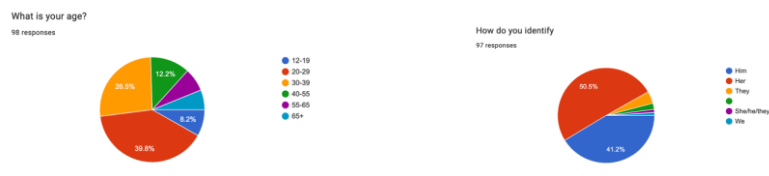
¹⁰ Moten, *ibid.*, pg. 43.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, The primacy of perception and other essays on phenomenological psychology, the philosophy of art, history, and politics, trans: James Edie etc. Northwest University Press, 1964, pg. 27.

You Ask, You Shall Receive (the survey)

This installation of *Rock in a Hard Place* was presented over a four-hour time span on a Friday evening in May 2026. During Hamilton's monthly Friday-night Art Crawl, in a small storefront gallery downtown on James Street, the piece drew in an astounding 600-plus participants (my assistant Kelly Okamura kept track until her numbers were well over 500, but we were eventually both overwhelmed by the crowd's sheer size and enthusiasm).

I asked participants and observers alike to fill out an anonymous Google survey, 97 responded. The survey asked a series of questions of the experience playing, the role in creation of the sound, what the participants heard and felt during the co-authoring of the work. The survey was simple and suggested that it would take respondents about 5 minutes to fill. I started with age and binary code:

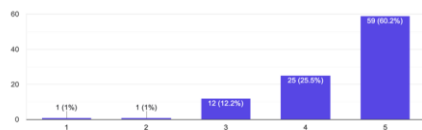


The largest number of participants is Generation Z closely followed by Millennials. Cis gendered women were 10% higher than cis gendered men to participate with other binary coding following in much lower percentages. Most of the questions asked participants to judge the experience on a scaling system with 1 typically being a negative response and 5 being the most positive. I instigated a series of questions asking about levels of participation and control over the environment created by the installation.

Rate how much you agree with this statement: *Rock and a Hard Place* made you feel immersed?

[Copy chart](#)

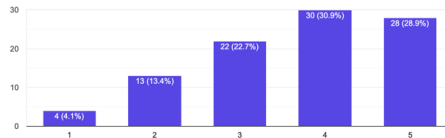
98 responses



How much control did you feel you had over the sound/noise/music?

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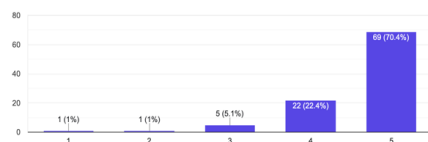
97 responses



How would you describe your experience?

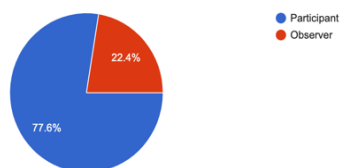
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98 responses



Did you feel like an...

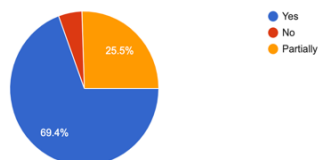
98 responses



Did you understand how your actions influenced the sound/noise?

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98 responses



between passive and non-passive participation uprooting the principles of art creation or the artist and audience. I was gobsmacked by audiences' reaction to both the installations. The responses opened my eyes to how an art audience's participation can move away from the creator's expectations. These works redefined the role of the beholder where passive and non-passive no longer exists.

As Claire Bishop in *Participation* supports, "Unattached to a privileged artistic medium, this principle would not divide audiences into active and passive, capable and incapable, but instead would invite us all to appropriate works for ourselves and make use of these in ways that their authors might never have dream possible."¹²

Commented [DL1]: Which principle?

The exhibition of *Score* recontextualized the idea of a polyptych of paintings. They became a manual for action, a performative display of colour and form that opened avenues for democratic/creative thinking moving beyond my own authorship. I believe *Score* is a work that can be regarded not just as a musical composition, but as an instructive tool: a template for various forms of thinking that transcend the gaze or open up the notion of the gaze to something greater than the purely ocular. Prior to its first performance, the scholarly and artistic responses I received to *Score* as a manuscript in written form, works in conversation with the audience reactions to the improvised music it inspires in performance to develop a shared authorship beyond the artist, (me) who ostensibly created the works. As Bourriaud might say, it's "far from the classical mythology of the solitary effort."¹³

This is a bifurcation of the co-authoring model I have been demonstrating and proposing here. Each of these pieces creates a democratic field of authorship; the participants bring two levels of interpretation: both an abstracted gaze and a response to the invitation to touch. Visitors to *Rock and a*

¹² Bishop, Claire, *Participation*, Whitechapel, London, 2006, pg. 14.

¹³ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Postproduction, Culture as a Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, Lukas & Steinberg, New York, NY. 2002, pg. 20.

Hard Place, using their own hands to create the work, radically redistribute authorship across an unpredictable assemblage. In a sense, *Rock and a Hard Place* becomes a *carnavalesque rhizome* sonic playground where the singular rooting of the artist is replaced by a rhizome define, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms as

Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order... A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles.¹⁴

As with Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque, the laughter, lawlessness, chaos and freedom all flow for a fixed or finite period:

During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants.¹⁵

What is developed is an interconnectedness, one through the social of the carnival and the rhizomic non-hierarchical network where any point connects to any other, here through the shared actions signified in the hanging, amplified, distorted guitars of *Rock in a Hard Place*. Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* brings these theories together with the notion of the *carnavalesque rhizome*, where the body or bodies become one:

¹⁴ Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. trans: Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pg. 7.

¹⁵ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, trans: Hélène Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984, pg. 7.

To be a consciousness or rather *to be an experience* is to hold inner communication with the world, the body and other people, to be with them instead of being beside them... (they) could not fail to rediscover himself as experience, which means as an immediate presence to the past, to the world, to the body and to others at the very moment when he was trying to see himself as an object among objects.¹⁶

At this particular moment in time in the cultural *zeitgeist*, through these improvisations, bodily encounters, and opportunities to experiment, both studies develop a community. *Score* brings the gaze, improvisation and performance beyond the player, actor and artist to dissolve the *A priori* of the passive and non-passive. *Rock and a Hard Place* also disassembles the myth of the bifurcation of the musician and non-musician.

Both installations induce relations—or what I like to refer to as temporary communities—that can only be found in acts of co-authorship that enable a freedom to improvise, and to disrupt the modeled system of the gallery and the associated artworld. Co-authorship is an idiom that we can only understand through improvisation, and the epistemological knowledge that flows out of a theory of improvisational intercorporeality. These events/installations prove that meaning is inherently collaborative and somatic. The evidence I present here through surveys and texts brings an empirical ontological backbone to these two projects, proving a non-parametric co-authorship is an observable phenomenon, not just an abstract concept. Participants are offered, and accept, permission to take the work from me and make it their own with actions that propel the work beyond the gaze. The participant is seen in the artwork, through the actions in the work's finality. This reinforces agency in the participant, producing a realization of personage—here I am, I exist—an ontological outcome through an

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans: Colin Smith, Routledge, London and New York, 1962, pg. 111.

epistemological experience. My initial artworks—first journeys as an artist—have evolved and accumulated into a landscape of positive knowledge and experience. Research and practice have developed a foundational framework for defining, acquiring, and validating knowledge, guiding my theory of sound art installation through co-authorship. As Bourriaud writes, building an aesthetic dissolving ownership and intention facilitating a space for unrestricted exploration, beholder agency and community. “This culture of use implies a profound transformation of the status of a work of art...it now functions as an active agent, a musical score, an unfolding scenario, a framework that possesses autonomy.”¹⁷

These experiences the participants were involved with are long-lasting, a positive outcome where strangers create together, the inexperienced and the experienced becoming one, forming a community for even a short time through a demonstration of the power of collective art making, making it their own beyond the gaze. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “With the first vision, the first contact, the first pleasure there is initiation, that is, not the positing of a content, but the opening of a dimension that can never again be closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated.”¹⁸ Let me end with a couple of anecdotes; first, the owner of You Me Gallery in Hamilton, where the installation was exhibited, keeps being asked when he will present *Rock and a Hard Place* again. Next: during a visit to the gallery, a participant in *Rock and a Hard Place* approached me to tell me of their experience. He had always wanted to play guitar, but was reluctant to try, especially if anyone else was there to hear him. The opportunity of *Rock in a Hard Place*, however, triggered the desire machine. He felt comfortable playing this distortion effected guitar in a situation that allowed for

¹⁷ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Postproduction, Culture as a Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, Lukas & Steinberg, New York, NY. 2002, pg. 20.

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans: Claude Lefort, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1968, pg. 151.

no failure. The distortion made everyone sound like a rockstar, enabling an aesthetic of the error-less, where the effect pedal takes the noise to a place of sound where there are no wrong notes. There was no



need for fancy tricks; even his body tapping the guitar lit up the space, filled with feedback and anonymity as he fit into the collegial crowd of participants all creating noise together. The gallery itself became a joyful noise. I would like to leave you with this short but delightful video he gave to me of him creating noise.

Double click to play

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