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Originally this show was called *Art of Improvisers Extended* but we ended up calling it *Art of Improvisers*, in its 2017 edition. It draws on a number of female artists who are part of the newer generation of free improvisers and also artists in different media. The exhibition presents previously unseen and new artwork.

Exhibiting artists include Andie Brown, Tania Chen, Poulomi Desai, Helen Frosi, Sharon Gal, Rie Nakajima, Helen Petts, Julie Pickard and Blanca Regina. The festival programme for 2017 presents workshops with Maggie Nicols, Sharon Gal and Helen Frosi and a talk & performance to close the show. It brings together some of the founding members of the UK free improvisation music scene, plus new generations of musicians and artists, unveiling previously unknown aspects of their art. Joining the evening performances at Cafe Oto will be Steve Beresford, Mandhira de Saram, Terry Day, Julie Kjaer, Maggie Nicols and David Toop.

The first *Art of Improvisers* was in May 2015, at Oto Projects and Cafe Oto, London. The exhibition featured musicians and artists Terry Day (artwork), Evan Parker (collages), Steve Beresford (archives), George Khan (clothes), David Toop (archives), Max Eastley (installation), Gina Southgate (paintings), a film by Anne Bean (Taps) and extracts of *The Art of Terry Day*, film by Blanca Regina.

Our thanks to all the participating artists and supporters.

Steve Beresford & Blanca Regina, London, June 2017

prologue

The head of the music department at Wellington Grammar School, Shropshire, was not at all happy with my musical taste, even though I was an OK piano player and passed the exams. The music he wanted his pupils to enjoy was noble nineteenth century orchestral music, nearly always about things like battles, rough seas and famous monarchs. I was less than impressed.

That's why the first time anything in that school inspired me was not in a music lesson, but in a lesson about art history. The teacher showed us work by Klee, Kandinsky and Miro. I instantly loved their work. Things like that happen when you're a teenager.

The paintings seemed close in spirit to the music I was listening to: EPs and LPs of Miles and Coltrane, Ornette Coleman at the *Golden Circle*, Sun Ra, Stockhausen, Cage, even occasional radio broadcasts by John Stevens' *Spontaneous Music Ensemble*. My music teacher couldn't stand that stuff. Probably my art teacher felt the same, but the art he showed us made connections for me. Later, I discovered Ornette Coleman's Free Jazz LP on Atlantic. They had used a whole side of the inside right of the gatefold to print a gorgeous Jackson Pollock, cutting a little window in the front cover so you saw a detail of when you found the record in a shop.

Years later, at the Schoenberg Centre in Vienna, I nearly bought a very large volume about Schoenberg's friendship with Kandinsky. I finally went for a small book about Schoenberg's inventions: four person chess, circular tram tickets, things like that. It's been pretty standard practice for decades to have Kandinskys on the cover of Schoenberg records. There were friends, after all, and dabbled in each other's genres, but Schoenberg's paintings were quite wonky and sometimes rather depressing. I'm not sure about Kandinsky's music.

Art Of Improvisers looks at a few of the myriad ways visual art connects with free improvisation. Even just in this catalogue, the work is exceptionally varied. And, as you will see, new (probably) approaches have taken root: creating the artwork whilst the music is being played seems particularly appropriate if the music is freely improvised. We now regularly see people at performances: Julie Pickard in the front row with two pens, Gina Southgate at the back with paints and a canvas, and occasionally Morgan O'Hara with two pencils, on stage as part of the band.

We were sure that visual artists so dedicated to the music must be, in their own ways, also musicians. We were right.

Steve Beresford



connecting the dots SHARON GAL

I moved to London in the late 1980s. It was a leap of faith, inspired by my love of British music and a need for change and transformation. I was fearless and naïve, packing as much as possible into one kitbag, en route to the unknown.

Thirty years later I am now looking back for the first time, reflecting and connecting the dots. The occasion is the Art of Improvisers festival, which celebrates and highlights the work of women and their contribution to free improvisation in music and art. It brings together some of the founding members of the UK free improvisation music scene and new generations of musical artists, unveiling less known aspects of their art.

My own journey is interwoven with the history of the London Musicians Collective (1975-2009) and its offspring, Resonance 104.4FM arts radio. These entities have been pivotal both personally and culturally, supporting and promoting experimental art-music activity and offering a new communal space to imagine, create and collaborate. We are now used to the Internet, social media and accessible communication on the move but it is worth noting that, at the time, much of the experimental activity was hidden beneath the surface and only accessible through word of mouth. Self-published small-run publications and The Wire magazine were, at the time, not widely distributed.

Initially I responded to ads in Melody Maker. Later on, I put call-outs for musicians in Loot magazine. My first band was Where's Adam? (a salute to our sweet and unreliable bass player). We performed in venues around the Southeast and recorded a couple of songs, but I was becoming increasingly restless, dissatisfied with the role of bandleader and songwriter. I was imagining a collaborative relationship, where the music was created together, composed as a group.

Mouthcrazy, with Justin Harries and Richard Young, achieved a delicate balance within triangular dynamics. Richie's bass playing provided a foundation for our 'songs' and Justin- who could never repeat anything- added a sense of chaos and sabotage with electric guitar and electronics. Our record, *Open/Open-wide*, was released by Thurston Moore & Byron Colie's Ecstatic/Yod label, but by that time the band no longer existed.

While talking to Paul Burwell, percussionist with the Bow Gamelan Ensemble, he mentioned the London Musicians Collective (LMC) and London's experimental & free improvisation scene. This was a transcending moment. A new vista opened up before me, a new field of play and possibilities. I joined the LMC: there was a monthly calendar with listings of gigs and events and a member's booklet with everyone's home 'phone numbers & addresses.

About then I met Dennis Austin. He was a generation older, the age of my parents, a photographer with extensive experience as a drummer and percussionist, influenced by Jazz and Latin music. Although his background was different, he was not put off by my loud bass playing or the strange sounds I was making. On the contrary, he relished it. When guitarist Moshi Honen joined us, we became Voltage.

Our music was dynamic, edgy and volatile; there were no songs and nothing repeatable. It was exhilarating and at times menacing. Richard Sanderson invited us to perform at The Club Room and we also performed in other clubs dedicated to improvised and experimental music: Hugh Metcalfe's Klinker, The Bonnington and many spaces run and curated by Adam Bohman.

Voltage existed from the mid '90s to the early 2000s. At that time our music was at odds with much of the free improvised music that was played: we were a regular trio, as opposed to playing in ad hoc collaborations, and our sound was amplified, electronic and noisy with shifting tempos and rhythms, chaotic bass and unsettling vocals. I remember being annoyed that each time we listed a gig in Time Out, they added 'difficult music'.

Thinking back about this early period I realise this was the space-time where I learned about *Otherness*. As an immigrant I automatically became 'the other' and there was also the otherness of the music I was making, not quite fitting to any particular, existing genre.

Dennis told me that he'd been waiting for our band since the 1960s. His spirit and enthusiasm was contagious. After seeing me playing a small toy keyboard, he amassed a great number of them. His red 2CV even turned into a sound-mobile, setting off percussion, electronics and toys in a spontaneous score of comic-like sounds, narrating each car journey.

Dennis met Maggie Nicols in the early '80s through his photographic documentation of free improvisers. He reconnected with her by going to The Gathering and that's how I met Maggie.

The Gathering is a place to be, where you meet people and interact through music and art. It's been taking place regularly, every week, since 1992. It is a space to be together in our own individual rhythms, to express and create unpredictable music. There is no correct/incorrect: to be, to sound. There is no expectation or specification regarding the sounds or the nature of the music, or even if anything is to be played. There is attention, intention and active listening as part of the process, without explanations or directions. It is not a workshop or a performance and the instrumentation and number of players varies each time.

Over the years there have been hundreds of local and international musicians who took part. Some were regulars, some stayed for a while and others passed through. This is a truly phenomenal, unique and inspiring long-term endeavour and a praxis which is maintained with dedication and love.

Ironically, it grew out of a conflict at a volatile LMC meeting. Maggie suggested that they work out their differences and agitation through music, and the idea took hold. Within a short while there was a venue for weekly music meetings.

Setting up The Gathering was a collective effort and, among others, drummer Dave Fowler was a regular and long-term contributor. Maggie was a natural hostess and facilitator. A generous musician and a brilliant vocalist and improviser, she is also a visionary educator and activist. Maggie introduced me to the work of John Stevens and the Spontaneous Music Ensemble. We performed the 'click' and 'sustain' pieces from the Search & Reflect workbook, which she had used in performances with John and carried on working with as part of her practice, in workshops and collaborations. Maggie introduced me to new ideas about the dialectics of music: music of opposition and contradictions.

In 1998 I joined a small group of enthusiasts to form community arts radio Resonance FM. It came out of the LMC and was led by Ed Baxter and Phil England. Its first incarnation was in a month-long residency on the third floor of the South Bank, broadcasting 24 hours a day as part of the Meltdown Festival. The station was housed in two dressing rooms, one acting as live performance space and reception, the other the control room. The setting was immersive, with sounds leaking in from the corridor adding to the mix. It was exhilarating to take part in this creation and to witness the emergence of a new sonic horizon for London (and the world).

Following the success of the project, in 2002 we became one of twelve new community stations in the UK. 9 Denmark Street (aka Tin Pan Alley) was the address of the first arts radio station in London. The broadcast range was defined by the geographic boundaries of each community but we argued (successfully) that, as a community of artists, our FM range should cover the whole of London.

Resonance 104.4FM was run and managed collectively, with decisions taken together by the 'steering committee': basically all the people involved in the project that formed and maintained the station. I was presenting and engineering, making documentaries and audio sound pieces.

The series *The G Spot* focused on women improvisers, with conversations and live playing in the studio. Later, I joined Edwin Pouncey and for the next eight years we presented *Diggers* every week, with guests and live music.

Resonance FM offered me a space to experiment, examine and research topics of personal interest. In one series I set out on a search for inspiration. Another, *Venus Rising* (2008), explored the role of women and looked at gender politics in the arts. I was given opportunities to work with sound and radio as material, utilising field and found recordings and using juxtapositions to create audio collages, sound pieces and new compositions.

After Voltage, I needed time to reevaluate my relationship with music and form. My studio became a room of my own. I started working solo, dedicating more time to visual art and mixed media, performance and video. I became interested in the intimate dynamics of the duo and the number 2, and have explored this in collaborations with Steve Beresford, David Toop, Alex Ward, Yoni Silver and Andie Brown. Andie and I make music as Mami Wata. Occasionally we play bass together. She is a friend, an inspiration and together with Sophie Cooper, is a catalyst in the creation of Gals with Guitars.

For the past ten years I have been developing and performing a series of participatory group compositions which examine the inter-relationships between people and place. These pieces are site specific, evolving collaboratively and inviting participation from the public. This body of work includes *L'esprit d'escalier*, for voices in a staircase, *Toy Orchestra*, for children and adults, *Room to Breathe*, balloons & music, Long Drone, for a large ensemble, Sound Out, for a group of voices in a public space, and Gals with Guitars, for female players. This last piece was the first



time I worked exclusively with female musicians and it gave me an opportunity to observe and gain deeper understanding of social conditioning and gender politics.

Leo Tolstoy said that the only important time is now and that the present moment is the only time over which we have dominion. Over the years I have become a better practitioner in the art of the moment. It is a life practice, a way of being. Like breathing, it is fundamental and metaphysical, giving rise to presence and the awareness of the interconnectedness of everything.

I am delighted to take part in the *Art of Improvisers* festival. The recognition of the contribution of women is timely. The field of experimental and free improvisation has expanded many-fold, with an ever-growing number of practitioners. It's encouraging and uplifting to acknowledge the abundance and extent of the work.

Andie Brown



Born and based in London, Andie began playing music as a bass player in her teens, working with a number of bands over the course of the following two decades. In 2007 Andie began performing and recording as a solo artist with glass and electronics under the name These Feathers Have Plumes. Additionally to this Andie has enjoyed collaborating with a diverse range of artists, most often with Sharon Gal in the duo Mami Wata. In 2016 Andie began working with audio-visual installation and she will be showing a fixed media re-interpretation of her interactive installation for glass harp, *Glass Harp* (2016).

The performers in the film are Frances Morgan, Áine O'Dwyer, Sharon Gal, Helen Frosi, Joanne Owen and Annie Stubbs.



Blanca Regina



Blanca Regina is an artist, teacher and curator based in London, currently involved in creating audiovisual performances, sound works, installations and film. Her research and practice encompass sound art, free improvisation, moving image, live events, electronic music and performance.

In London, she co-founded *Strange Umbrellas* with Steve Beresford (later adding Jack Goldstein), a platform for free improvised music and visual art. She has performed with numerous artists, including Terry Day, Leafcutter John, Beresford and Matthias Kispert and has curated a number of events and installations in London and internationally.

Her last exhibition, *Expanded and Ephemera Audiovisual*, was presented at MUPO, Oaxaca, México in November 2015. Current works in development include the direction of *Unpredictable*, a film about Terry Day, and *Unpredictable Series*, a series of exhibitions, talks and performances.

Citizen of now here (2017) is an installation that looks at the idea of identity and place and explores cultures exchange and mixed media.



Photo: Atilio Doreste



I have live painted at improvised music events approaching 30 years. During that time I have observed musicians both from the side lines and through interaction. Some of these interactions have been sonic, using objects and materials to create real time sound sculpture. Improvised music, my favourite to paint, is abstract and unpredictable. Each musician has their process and trusted patterns but when put in a group situation, or a space, each improvisation is different. Over the years I have built up a repertoire of language in paint and objects to apply it with. I transfer marks from one surface to another in the form of collage and monoprint. Abstraction is my studio based process, my practice if you like.

For this exhibition I chose to work on 20 x 16 inch panels. I am working spontaneously and trying to ignore cliché and technique, trying to grow the lovely, without consciousness. As a recent glasses wearer I'm in the stage of uncertainty about wearing them to paint. When I put them on everything changes. This made me think of the late great Jennifer Pike whose performances inspired my own. My favourite piece of hers was the movement of a large ribbed Perspex disc across her spotted garment making herself into something like a human lava lamp. The process of perception is personal and altered by the simplest actions.

Gina Southgate, May 2017

Photo: Steven Cropper

Gina Southgate

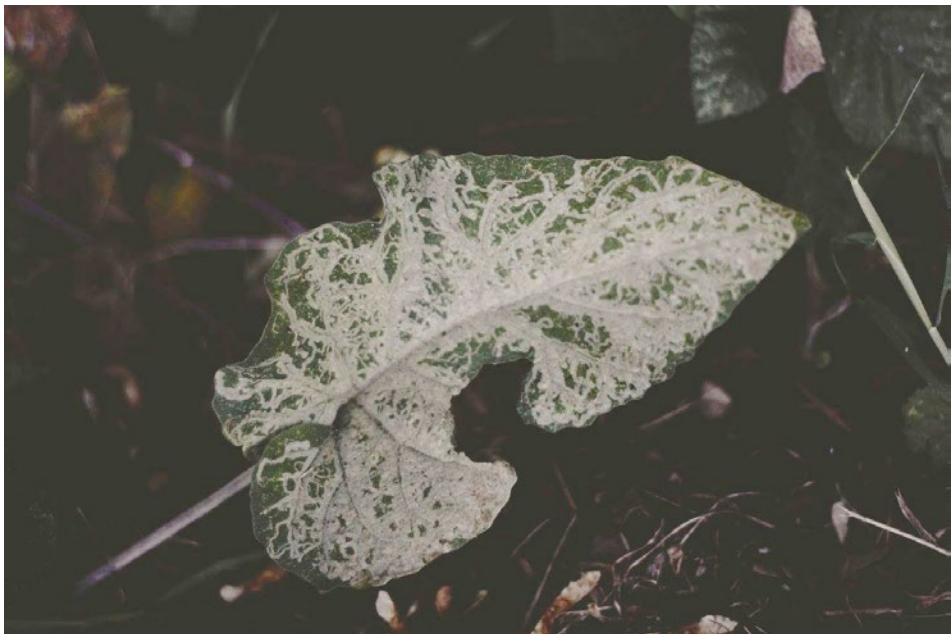


Helen Petts



Helen Petts is an artist film-maker who explores rhythm, texture, sound and chance events, both in the landscape and in her long-standing relationship with the free improvisation music community. A former television director of arts programmes, she now regularly shows her own artwork at film and music festivals as well as in gallery installations. She studied Fine Art at Goldsmiths College and film at Westminster University. Her work is distributed by Lux Artists Moving Image.

Unfathomable Liquids, 2010. DV 5' looped. Black and white. Stereo. Commissioned by Anne Bean and Matt's Gallery for TAPS *Improvisations with Paul Burwell*. A collaboration with musicians Phil Minton and Roger Turner. Il Gesto del Suono Festival, Bolzano, 2009, Kino im Sprengel Festival, Hannover, 2010, *Be Glad for the Song Has no End*, Wysing Arts Centre 2010, Hatton Gallery, Newcastle 2012, Zwei Tage Zeit Festival, Zurich 2012.



Helen Frosi, *Lost Empire*, 2017

Helen Frosi, *There Are No Inanimate Objects*, 2016

Helen Frosi



Helen Frosi is a London-based artist researching into the cultural, social, and political aspects of sound and listening. For *Art of Improvisers*, Helen shifts focus to her interest in the resonance and poetics of place and presents works that take inspiration from her regular wanders along the river Lea and its navigation. Helen is particularly fascinated in the Lea Valley as a peri-urban landscape that perpetually shifts —visually, geologically, economically and metaphorically— acting both as memory palace and palimpsest.

Helen is co-founder of *SoundFjord*, a nomadic gallery and research unit dedicated to practices highlighting the sonic within contemporary art and hybrid disciplinary practices.

In addition, Helen has curated programmes for Dragonfly Festival (SE), Galerie8, Gorey Arts & Film Festival (IE), GV Gallery, ICA, Longplayer, Museum of London Docklands, Oboro (CA), Octopus Collective, PVA MediaLab, The Pigeon Wing, V22 and Victoria and Albert Museum amongst others.

Photo: Blanca Regina

Julie Pickard

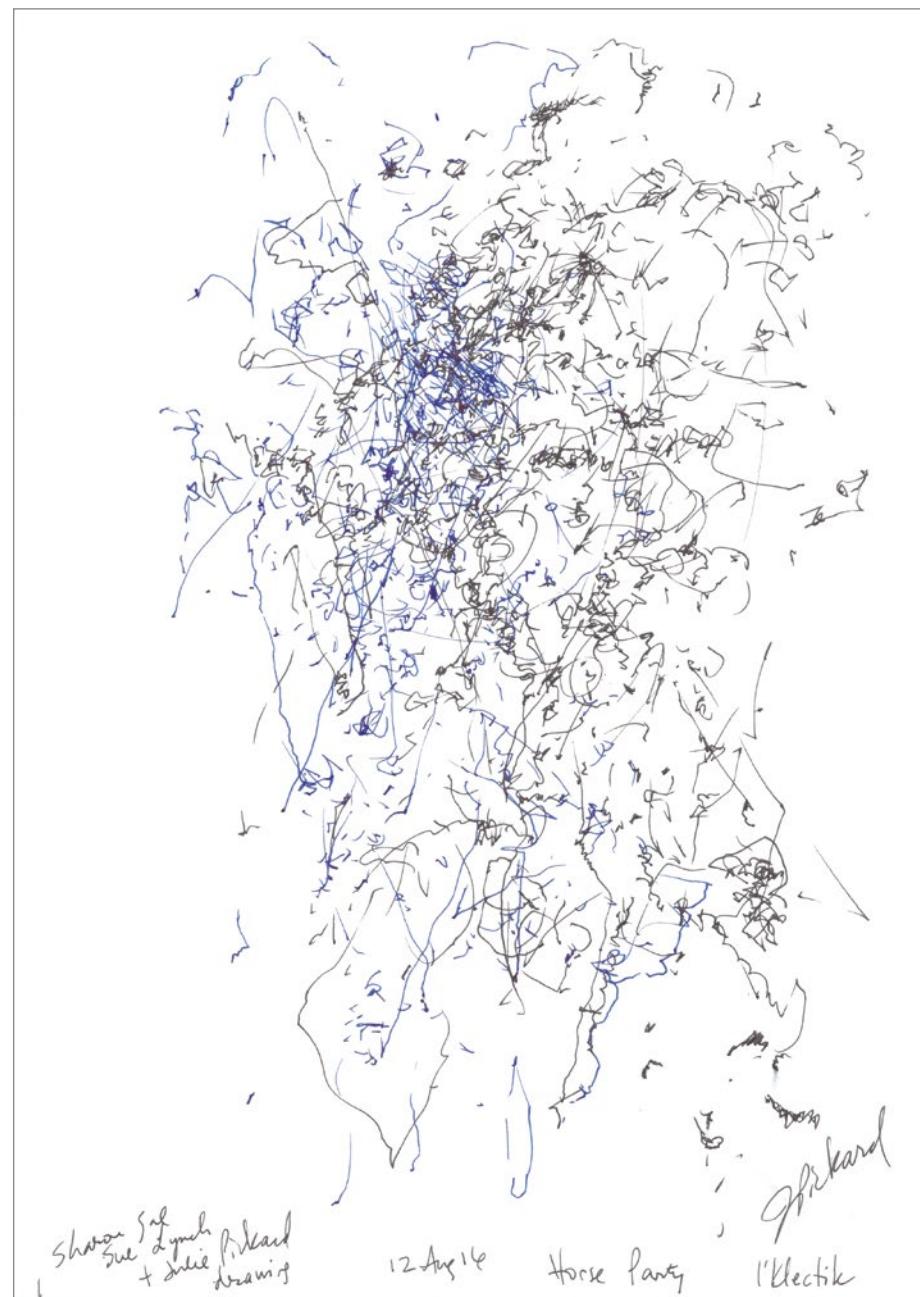
Julie was born in Toronto, Canada and is now based in London. Over the years her art practice has included drawing, sculpture, painting, writing, sound and music, sometimes all of these together and sometimes mainly drawing and writing.

Since 2008, she has been exploring and drawing music and musicians, mostly in the London Free Improv community, as well as at some cross-over events. She draws live at gigs, making finely observed drawings that are both abstract and representational. These drawings form an archive of visual recordings of the many gigs she has drawn at.

She describes her approach:

Pen poised over paper, waiting, anticipating. The musicians start playing. I start drawing: an exploration, an unfolding, focusing solely on the musicians and their music: the sound, the movement, the pace, the interaction, the energy. I draw without looking at what I'm doing, feeling my way around the page, sometimes drawing with one hand, sometimes with a pen in each hand. I am completely captivated as if I'm inside the music, drawing what I see, guided by what I hear.

She'll be showing drawings, as well as a few small paintings and/or sculptural pieces based on improvisation...





Maggie Nicols

Maggie Nicols is a singer and a pioneer of free improvisation in the UK. She joined London's legendary Spontaneous Music Ensemble in 1968 and began running voice workshops, using the techniques of the SME's John Stevens. She also worked in local experimental theatre. Later she was a member of the large ensemble Centipede, led by Keith Tippett. In 1977, with musician/composer Lindsay Cooper, she formed the remarkable Feminist Improvising Group. Maggie continues to perform worldwide and record challenging and beautiful work. When she is not performing solo she collaborates with a wide range of artists including Joëlle Leandre, Irene Schweizer and Phil Minton.



Poulomi Desai

Poulomi Desai is best known for her large-scale sound and photography installations that interrogate the politics of identity, listening and perception. Inspired by her post-punk theatre background, her tools are image-based, textual, performative and acoustic, traversing boundaries of physical location and structures of presentation.

Her work has been published in four books: *Red Threads*, *Different*, *Terrorist Assemblages* and *Out of Place*. She runs Usurp Art space in the suburbs and curated an exhibition about the Grunwick strike.

Poulomi's unique, modified sitar embraces elements of chance, challenge and subversion —industrial, noise influenced, improvised art performances. Her prepared/bowed sitar is extended, with modified cassette decks playing her field recordings, circuit bent toys, optikinet instruments, kitchen knives, axes and massage tools. It is a conscious response and reaction to the idea of 'authenticity', seeking to break the rules and expectations of how a 'sacred' instrument should be played.

She will be showing *Blown Up #1*: unique hand printed photographs literally blown up and fired with metal fragments and shards, creating a series of potential scores for compositions. With allusions to films about photography and sound effects, the physical medium of the print is mutilated, murdered and then resurrected.

Her irreverent aim is to shatter the contours of these fixed notions of sexual, national, cultural, personal, political and diasporic identities - Stuart Hall





Rie Nakajima is a Japanese artist working with installations and performances that produce sound. Her works are most often composed in direct response to unique architectural spaces using a combination of kinetic devices and found objects. She has exhibited and performed widely both in the UK and overseas and has produced *Sculpture* with David Toop since 2013.

O YAMA O is the music project she has with Keiko Yamamoto, exploring music with no genre. She also has a collaborative project *Dead Plants/Living Objects* with Pierre Berthet. Rie released her first album *Four Forms* in 2014. For the *Art of Improvisers* exhibition, she will present combinations of sounding objects that relate to the situation within the context.

Rie Nakajima



Sharon Gal

Sharon Gal is a multi-disciplinary artist, experimental vocalist, performer and composer, with particular experience in free improvisation and participatory, collaborative group composition.

She explores the psychology of sound and the relationship between sound and space, working electro-acoustically using electronics, field and found recordings and video projection.

Sharon performs solo and in collaboration with other musicians, including David Toop, Steve Beresford, Yoni Silver, Alex Ward and Andie Brown. She also directs a series of participatory compositions which offer a democratic space and collective authorship.

She is a co-founder of Resonance 104.4FM arts radio and has performed in the UK and internationally, including The ICA, The V&A, Science Museum, The Whitechapel Gallery, Arnolfini Gallery, Tate Modern, Borealis & Supernormal festivals. Her music has been released on numerous labels.

Sharon is presenting collage work from the series *Sweet Meat*. The work is created through a playful process of trial and error. Like a mysterious jigsaw puzzle with no predictable outcome, each collage has its own rhythm and conclusion. Each is unique, but all are bound by the decision to limit the source material to lonely figures inhabiting sweet or savoury worlds. Working with found material from fashion magazines, catalogues and cookery books, images are juxtaposed to reveal fantastic and hallucinatory landscapes that are both enticing and repelling. *Sweet Meat* highlights our complex relationship with food, as nourishment and a guilty pleasure, exploring the seductive and addictive aspects of consumption.





Tania Chen is a performance, sound artist, and free improviser. She performs internationally on piano, keyboards, digital, vintage electronics, found objects and video.

Tania has recorded with Stewart Lee, Steve Beresford, Henry Kaiser, William Winant, Wadada Leo Smith, Thurston Moore, David Toop, Jon Raskin and with the bands Bad Jazz and Tender Buttons. Forthcoming recordings are John Cage's *Electronic Music for Piano*. Her solo recordings include Michael Parsons & Cornelius Cardew's Piano music, John Cage's *Music of Changes* and a forthcoming recording of Andrew Poppy's piano music. Tania is Sound Artist in Residence at Exploratorium Museum in San Francisco.

Recently Tania has been creating sound pieces. Her pieces *Rendez-Vous I & II* and *Chez Moi* explore found sounds through found moments, video, objects, voice, electronics and digital electronics.

Tania Chen



HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

Tania Chen's video series *Home is where the heart is* explores the roles of routines that take place every day within the home. These video pieces document the individual performing repetitive domestic actions. Tania's work focuses here on the performative vs performance aspect of everyday gestures that operate almost as 'riffs' within a predictable composition, each of which have a determined outcome. Here in the art gallery these roles operate both as familiar and absurd.

When 1000 couples were interviewed in a survey documented by the Huffington Post, findings suggest that gender is by far the biggest determinant of attitudes towards housework. Typical female chores such as cooking, cleaning and child-care were assigned to partners perceived as the more feminine, within studies of heterosexual and same sex couples. Men spent an average of 21 minutes per day on cleaning and food prep in 2015, as opposed to 18 minutes in 2003.

Art of Improvisers - 15 to 22nd June 2017

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