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Mediumship as Method: The Application of a Process-Based Understanding of Mediumship to Research and Arts Practices.

Julia Moore

Abstract

Free association, as a psychoanalytic method, has arguably been overlooked in favour of a focus on psychoanalytic theory. However, the method has significant potential and may offer, according to Christopher Bollas (1999), a way to undermine the dominance of Western epistemologies. This research paper suggests that various methods rooted in practices of mediumship and intuitive practice may have a similar capacity to challenge epistemic certainty and habitual approaches to knowledge, and offer fruitful avenues and new research methods in arts and humanities disciplines.

Drawing upon my recent PhD research, I discuss the nature of mediumship and propose an understanding of mediumistic acts and experiences which roots these in philosophical theory. Following work by (particularly) Kenneth Batcheldor and other academics who experimented with the séance format, I attempt to first theorise mediumship in a way which separates out questions of the ontology of mediumship from what mediumship feels like to do, and what it might uncover when used as method.

In the paper, I first embed this expanded understanding of mediumship in a wider theoretical context which draws upon psychoanalytic theory, philosophical discussions of délire, and Gendlin's concept of the felt sense and his body-based phenomenological method of focusing. I then look at ways in which this theoretical understanding yields empirical methods of working with texts and objects, with some examples drawn from my research and art practices. Finally, I suggest some potential uses of the methods, and discuss possible refinements.

Introduction

Free association, as a psychoanalytic method, has arguably been overlooked in favour of a focus on psychoanalytic theory (Bollas 2002). However, the method has significant potential and may offer a way to undermine the dominance of Western epistemologies (Bollas 1999). This paper considers the practice of mediumship, understood as a practice rather than a theory, and suggests that tools rooted in mediumship and other intuitive approaches may have a similar capacity to challenge epistemic certainty and habitual approache*s* to knowledge, and offer fruitful avenues and new research methods in arts and humanities disciplines as well as for art practices.

In free association, as developed by Freud, a patient is encouraged to speak aloud the thoughts as they pass through the mind. Thoughts flow and are uttered freely, and the client attempts to express them without censoring by the critical mind (Jones 2017). The value of free association lies in its potential for uncovering unconscious material. Lothane (2007) describes it as a «Copernican revolution», uncovering the «contribution that non-rational … representational, magical and pictorial thinking makes to discursive, logical and rational, and goal-directed thinking». Free association also offers a way of working with non-rational content linguistically (Lothane 2007), unsettling our relationship with language (Britzman 2003). Bollas (1999) goes further, suggesting that by reworking how language is used, free association discovers truth, «by abandoning the effort to find it» (Bollas 1999, p. 63). As such, free association offers a technique which can lead to a new type of discourse, and, ultimately, an alternative approach to knowledge which has the potential to «undermine the entire structure of Western epistemology» (Bollas 1999, p. 63).

In this paper, building upon my PhD research, I suggest that mediumship can be considered, like free association, as a radical and powerful practice, as a method, separate from claims about the veracity of mediums' beliefs. Mediumship is frequently understood as centred on beliefs around life after death and communication between the living and the dead (see e.g. Kelly 2011). However, by focusing less on whether the claims mediums make are true, and more on what they are doing and how they do what they do, I suggest that mediumship methods have potential to be used in research and arts practice in a wide variety of ways, offering nuanced and sensitive tools for investigation into the complex areas occupying a space between fact and fiction, theory and practice, myth and science, truth and falsity, and playfulness and seriousness.

In the following, I first look at academic studies, particularly those focusing on mediumship as a method. I then offer a brief theoretical discussion of different aspects of this method, and how this theory leads to a toolkit of methods. I then look at some practical explorations of these methods, first a research group which formed part of

my PhD, and second an arts project ‹Dead Band›, which culminated in a participative performance in October 2024. I end with some reflections on the methods.

Mediumship Examined: From Distance to Experiment

As my aim is to describe a method for use in research and arts practices based in mediumship, it is useful to understand a bit more about mediumship and how it has been understood. This section looks at academic perspectives, particularly those which focus on mediumship as experiment.

Setting aside arguments about the ethics and reliability of AI summaries, Google's generative AI provides a somewhat useful summary of mediumship as «the practice of mediating communication between living humans and the spirits of the dead». This definition assumes both an ontology: the existence of incarnate spirits and of a spiritual realm; and an epistemology: that humans can know the spiritual world, although the means by which this knowledge develops are unclear.

The academic study of mediumship arguably began with the work of the London Society for Psychical Research (SPR), founded in 1882. Mediums were the focus of the SPR's investigations until the 1930s, when the interest shifted to statistical testing, and an early case study method gave way to quantitative methods (West 2015; Radin 2010), and interest in mediumship decreased as focus shifted to other paranormal phenomena (Radin 2010). Research until the early 21st century was limited and tended to assess the extent to which mediumship practice could be associated with demographic, neurological, or biological variables. Cognitive deficits became a common way to explain beliefs in the paranormal (Clancy et al. 2002; Royalty 1995; Tobacyk and Milford 1983; Tobacyk 1984; Smith *et al*. 1998; Otis and Alcock 1982). Others associated such beliefs with a set of wider, more social and cultural causes (Wuthnow 1976; Emmons and Sobal 1981; Tobacyk et al. 1988; Randall 1990). Later, a linguistic perspective was taken, drawing upon discourse analysis (Lamont 2007, 2009; Wales 2009; Wooffitt 2007, 2009, 2013). It is only in the last 10 to 15 years that a less reductive approach has appeared, for example, Hunter's anthropological approach (Hunter 2013, 2020) and Beischel's experimental studies into mediumship (Beischel 2007; Beischel and Schwartz 2007; Rock, Beischel, Boccuzzi and Biuso 2014). While these more recent approaches offer new perspectives, there is still a focus on mediumship understood as a practice of talking to the dead, rather than as a method. In contrast with these approaches, there exist a few academic studies which highlight mediumship as methodological possibility, and it is in this work by Batcheldor and the Owens that I root my focus on mediumship as a set of body-based, non-rational and creative techniques, and the possibilities for these techniques.

Kenneth J. Batcheldor (1921-1988) was a clinical psychologist who became interested in investigating séances after a dinner party in 1964, when the guests decided to try a séance, and experienced puzzling phenomena such as loud bangs. Batcheldor, fascinated by this, went on to hold over 200 séances. Batcheldor was more interested in how his group produced table tipping, noises, raps, bangs, and apports than in what these phenomena were. He came to believe that no special mediumistic ability was needed, but rather that the capacity to elicit mediumistic phenomena was a universal human ability (Batcheldor 1968, p. 18). He believed certain group characteristics facilitated such events, including cultivating an open-minded, light-hearted and playful atmosphere. He also talked about the need to avoid scepticism, and even suggested that fraud, trickery and deception were needed to facilitate the appearance of genuine phenomena (Batcheldor 1968, pp.20-21).

George and Iris Owen drew upon and developed Batcheldor's work. George Owen was a retired geneticist and mathematician; his wife, Iris, a nurse. They moved from the UK to Canada in 1970. The Owens are perhaps best known for the ‹Philip› experiment, in which they, together with members of the Toronto Society for Psychical Research, invented a character, Philip, and developed a biography for him, using séances to communicate with this fictional character (Owen and Sparrow 1974; Owen 1974; Owen and Sparrow 1976; Owen and Sparrow 1977). The process of developing Philip was elaborate: it involved drawing and developing stories about the character until he took on an imaginative life of his own. Initially, the experiment was unsuccessful; it was only when the group started using methods recommended by Batcheldor that they started to get results in the form of rappings, communications, table movements, and noise (Owen and Sparrow 1974; Owen 1974; Owen and Sparrow 1976; Owen and Sparrow 1977). Like Batcheldor, the Owens refined a methodology for this type of work and found results could be repeated by any determined group (Owen and Sparrow 1974; Owen 1974; Owen and Sparrow 1976; Owen and Sparrow 1977).

Thus, Batcheldor and the Owens both focused on what makes mediumship successful, rather than on truth claims made by mediums. Methods advocated by both these sets of researchers will feed into my discussion later in this paper about how research and arts-practice methods might be devised from mediumship, but I also draw on other theorists to ground these methods. In the next section, I look further into this wider theoretical context for mediumship, understood as intuitive practice, and talk about some of the tools I derived from these theories.

Development of methods grounded in theory

As well as methods suggested by the practices of Batcheldor and the Owens, I also draw upon ideas from Gendlin, from contemporary discussions of free association, and from Lecercle's discussions of *délire.*

Gendlin used Husserl's phenomenological method to develop both a theory of embodiment and a set of tools for working intuitively with the body (Gendlin 1963, 1973, 1978, 1990, 1992, 1995). Notably, Gendlin's concept of the body is not a mechanised entity, separated from mind, spirit, or soul, but rather a fluid, interactive body, known intuitively and emotionally, not through abstract schemata and concepts (Gendlin 1996). The value of Gendlin's work here is two-fold. Firstly, through his discussions of the felt sense and dipping, he offers a way to underpin an idea of intuition, solidly rooted in a respected theoretical tradition. Secondly, Gendlin, in his discussion of focusing, develops a strong model for the applications of his ideas to practice (Gendlin 1978, 1996).

The psychoanalytic literature on free association, particularly recent discussions of free association as practice, is also useful both to understand the mechanisms underpinning mediumship, and to generate useful intuitive methods. Of the contemporary writers talking about free association as practice, Bollas and Lothane interpret free association as a primarily linguistic and cognitive process (Bollas 1999, 2002; Lothane 2018), while Barratt and Totton see free association as embodied and primarily non-verbal (Barratt 2014; Totton 2003). The latter accounts are particularly useful for understanding the links between mediumship and free association. For Barratt and Totton, free association becomes a mediumistic, intuitive process, carried out in a dream-like and embodied state. Totton's discussion highlights a relationship to language: the mind's unconscious, mediumistic content is both an always-present «aspiration of language» (Totton 2003, p.193), and something which hides behind the boundaries imposed by language, against which it exercises a «frontier control» (Totton 2003, p.193).

The idea of two sides to language is more fully developed by Lecercle (1985, 1994), who posits a theory of language in which the abstract, meaning-communicating elements are sometimes surpassed by language's material underbelly, which Lecercle, following Deleuze and Guattari (1972), calls *délire.* Lecercle opposes a «dominant tradition» (Lecercle 1985, p.6), with «another tradition… suppressed but persistent»; the «age-old tradition of ‹speaking in tongues›… of possessed visionaries» (Lecercle 1985, p.7). In the dominant tradition, language is primarily a means of communication: In Lecercle's *délire*, by contrast, the rootedness of language in the human body is acknowledged (Lecercle 1985). Lecercle's *délire* offers a further way to understand how intuitive material is expressed in language (not referentially, but tangentially, through hints, expressive outbursts, and poetry).

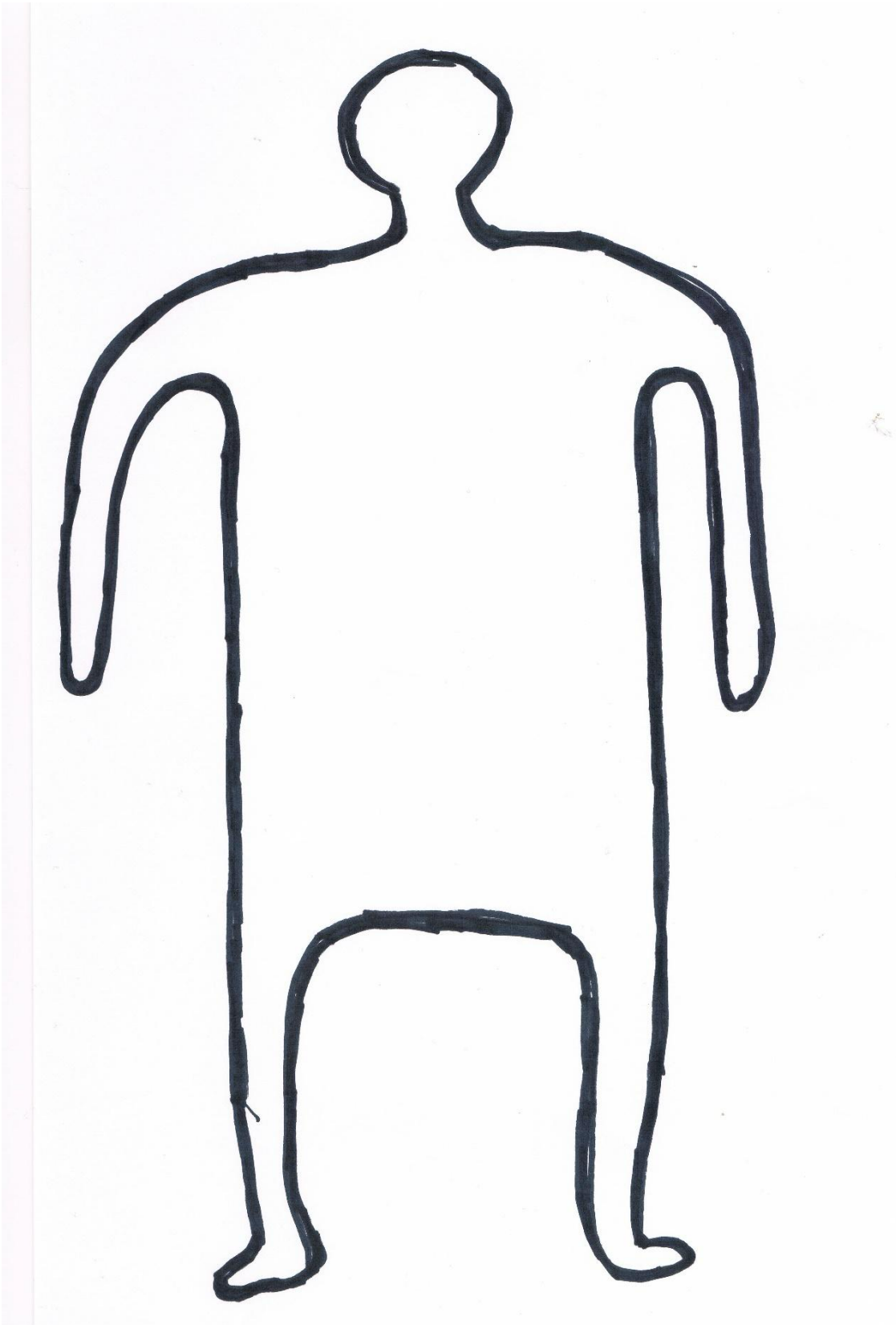


Figure 1: Body maps for Gendlin-influenced work

Each of these three theoretical models yields methods for use in research and beyond. Using Gendlin's methods of focusing and dipping, and his concept of the felt sense, I developed a form of body mapping to allow participants to first express, then to dialogue with, their felt experience. As a means to facilitate this, I designed schematic body shapes which I photocopied onto A4 paper. These are distributed to participants, together with pens, coloured markers, etc. Participants are invited to experience, respond in terms of the impact on felt bodily experiences and the ways in which these change, and convey this by using the body shapes, drawing and writing on the schematic forms.

In terms of free association, I wanted to take the method out of the analytical setting and into the research context. My aim was to invite participants to freely associate on the object of investigation, so a stream of associations was generated to be recorded in different ways. My use of the method frees it from this context for wider, more public uses, for example, associating in a group. This method offers a different way of working within research contexts, where participants are often encouraged to supply their thoughts and feelings on subjects in a more linear, rational way.

Lecercle's concept of *délire* was also useful, but for methods of reading research outputs rather than for generating material. This is fitting, as Lecercle's discussion (1985) is presented as both a theory and a tool for analysing literary texts. My aim was to simplify his method and apply it particularly to research outputs: as my discussion of the research group below explains, this aim has not yet been completed.

Additionally, I developed other methods, rooted in mediumship and how it might be understood as experimental practice. Some of these methods were derived from séance practice, or from the experiments by the Owens. For example, and as will be described below, the ‹Dead Band Project› (DBP) utilised methods predicated on the Owens' working premise that mediumistic communication with an imagined character is possible. To help develop such a character, I devised ‹Character Co-Creation Sheets›, which facilitated the group of participants to work together by answering questions and building on previous replies to generate a fictional personality, which perhaps offers a felt phenomenology of the fictional. To communicate with this character, séance methods were used. These methods are described in more detail below.

DEAD BAND

First Name:	
Second Name:	
Any nickname?	
Role Circle / add detail	Singer / percussionist / keyboards / bass guitar / other guitar / other instrument (state) performance / other role (state)
Physical appearance when alive:	
Appearance now dead:	
Era when alive:	
Circumstances of death:	
Story the journalists told:	
Artistic influences (music):	
Artistic influences (written):	
Artistic influences (visual):	
Where born and where lived at time of death	
Dress style:	
Catchphrase or soundbite:	
Relationship with band mates:	

Figure 2: blank character co-creation sheet

Testing the methods: a research group

I have briefly explained the development of some research methods based on understandings of mediumship as practice. The methods are also grounded in a set of theoretical concerns, which I used to better articulate mediumship and other intuitive practices. These theoretical concerns included: Gendlin's phenomenological and body-based techniques of focusing, dipping, and the felt sense; free association, understood as practice and articulated particularly by Bollas; and Lecercle's concept of délire. Each of these theoretical frames, as well as mediumship practice and work by Batcheldor and the Owens, led to the development of a set of techniques which can, I suggest, be applied to both qualitative research and arts practice. In the following sections, I look at two examples of my use of these techniques in two different contexts: first, a research group I organised during my PhD research to explore attitudes to academic reading, and second, an arts project Dead Band which culminated in a participative performance in October 2024.

The first testing was carried out through a research group I ran as part of my PhD to assess the applicability of the methods to research contexts. My aim was to explore participants' experiences of academic reading. The mediumship-based techniques seemed particularly appropriate to this context, as they offered a way to get deeper into participants' feelings. Adhering to University ethical processes, I recruited a group to meet monthly for 2 hours. Groups were typically attended by four to eight people, with some participants attending most, if not all, sessions, and others attending one or two. The groups took place in a university seminar room. Participants were given written information about the theoretical background to the methods used in each session. Data was collected over 6 research groups, each group featuring a single method tailored to throw light on the overarching research question.

Each session consisted of two or three exercises, opening meditation exercises and discussions. In addition to text-based responses, the research groups produced drawings and other visual materials. Participants were asked to report all aspects of what they experienced, from thoughts and logical processes of cognition to fleeting impressions, bodily sensations, visual images, emotions and other non-cognitive processes. Participants were also asked to reflect on the sessions in the days afterwards and provide feedback via post-session questionnaires by email.

Different data analysis methods were used to explore the materials collected in the different groups; for example, visual material analysis was carried out in line with suggestions made by Gillian Rose (Rose 2016). Analysis of data also drew upon notions of the body and embodiment in research, for example Formenti et al. (2014). The predominant frameworks used for analysis of the material relating to the body are Gendlin's and Totton's, as discussed above. Reflexive analysis, looking at how

group participants understand the processes and exercises, was also influential, and group discussions were incorporated into every session.

It should be noted that there was a gap between how I anticipated analysing the material, and how it was analysed. I was hoping that the text generated would be analysed by a method developed specifically for this research, based on Lecercle's suggestions on ways of understanding *délire* (nonsense language) (Lecercle 1985). However, because of time constraints and the nature of the material generated, I used thematic analysis to identify emerging themes (King and Horrocks 2010).

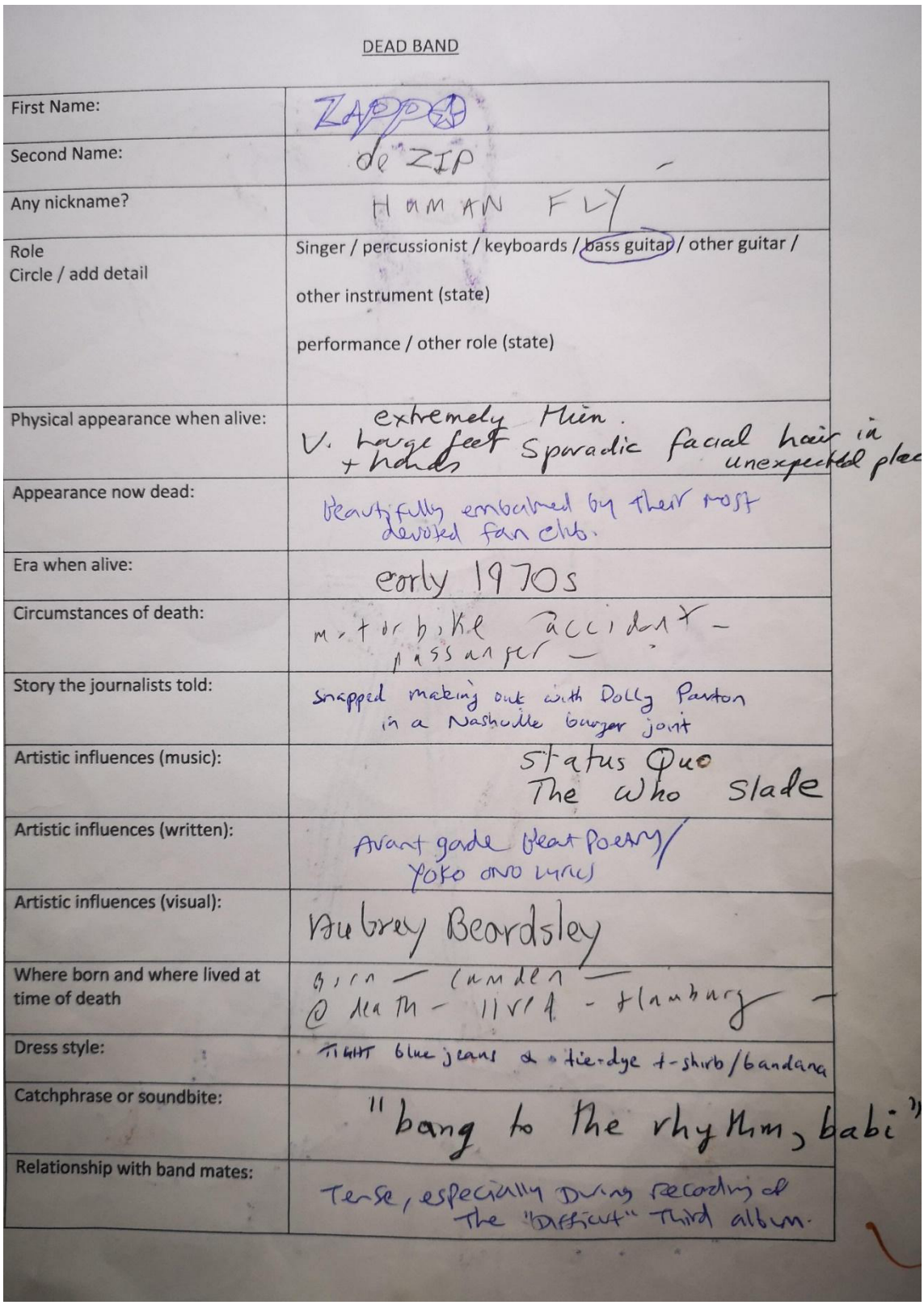
Results threw light on participants' experiences of academic reading, as intended; however, these are not the focus here. Rather, I am interested in the efficacy and reception of the tools, which I derived from mediumistic and related methods. Participants overall found the techniques used in the sessions beneficial in facilitating deeper engagement with academic materials, seemingly paradoxically, as the techniques pushed the notion of 'reading' to the extreme. In summary, these mediumistic practices of reading felt to participants like a valuable way to explore experiences of academic reading. Some participants said that they would use techniques from the session to help them better engage with texts, or to use in their own work or practice.

This is not to suggest that the exercises were equally useful to all participants. Some participants struggled more than others to see the exercises' purposes, and the first three sessions seemed to yield more material for analysis and reflection than the final three. Despite these issues, and drawing upon the experiences reported by participants, there would seem to be a value in using the tools explored in the sessions in research, by allowing an element of 'play' to enter into the relationships the research questions were concerned with, and through allowing a creative engagement with texts, participants felt that they could engage with texts in a new way.

Testing the methods: an art project

These methods were also deployed in the participative, performative arts project ‹Dead Band Project›, as mentioned above. The associated ‹Dead Band Collective› (DBC), made up of four South-East England-based artists, was formed to explore ideas of mediumship as practice in an art context. DBC met at regular workshops to use mediumistic methods to first imagine, and subsequently bring to life, a rock band made up of musicians imagined as having died. Over these collaborative sessions, the 5 members of the rock band ‹Dead Band› appeared to DBC through exercises based in the methods outlined above, and incorporating séances and automatic writing-inspired techniques.

The exercises took two main forms. First, a set of exercises rooted in the experiments by the Owens were used to create characters collaboratively. These included ‹Character Co-Creation Sheets›, upon which were printed a number of questions (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). Each participant answered a question, then passed the sheet to the next participant, who would read previous questions and answers, and then answer the next question in a manner to produce a coherent, fictional, co-created character. A similar exercise, loosely similar to the Surrealist Game ‹Exquisite Corpse›, developed a visual representation of the character, with different participants contributing different body parts (see Figure 4).



DEAD BAND

First Name:	ZAPPO
Second Name:	de ZIP
Any nickname?	HUMAN FLY
Role Circle / add detail	Singer / percussionist / keyboards / bass guitar / other guitar / other instrument (state) performance / other role (state)
Physical appearance when alive:	extremely thin. V. large feet + hands Sparadic facial hair in unexpected plac
Appearance now dead:	Beautifully embalmed by their most devoted fan club.
Era when alive:	early 1970s
Circumstances of death:	motorbike accident - passanger -
Story the journalists told:	snapped making out with Dolly Parton in a Nashville burger joint
Artistic influences (music):	Status Quo The Who Slade
Artistic influences (written):	Avant garde Beat Poetry/ Yoko Ono lyrics
Artistic influences (visual):	Aubrey Beardsley
Where born and where lived at time of death	born - Camden - @ death - NYC - Hamburg -
Dress style:	TIGHT blue jeans & tie-dye t-shirt/bandana
Catchphrase or soundbite:	"bang to the rhythm, babi"
Relationship with band mates:	Tense, especially during recording of The "difficult" Third album.

Figure 3: Example completed character co-creation sheet

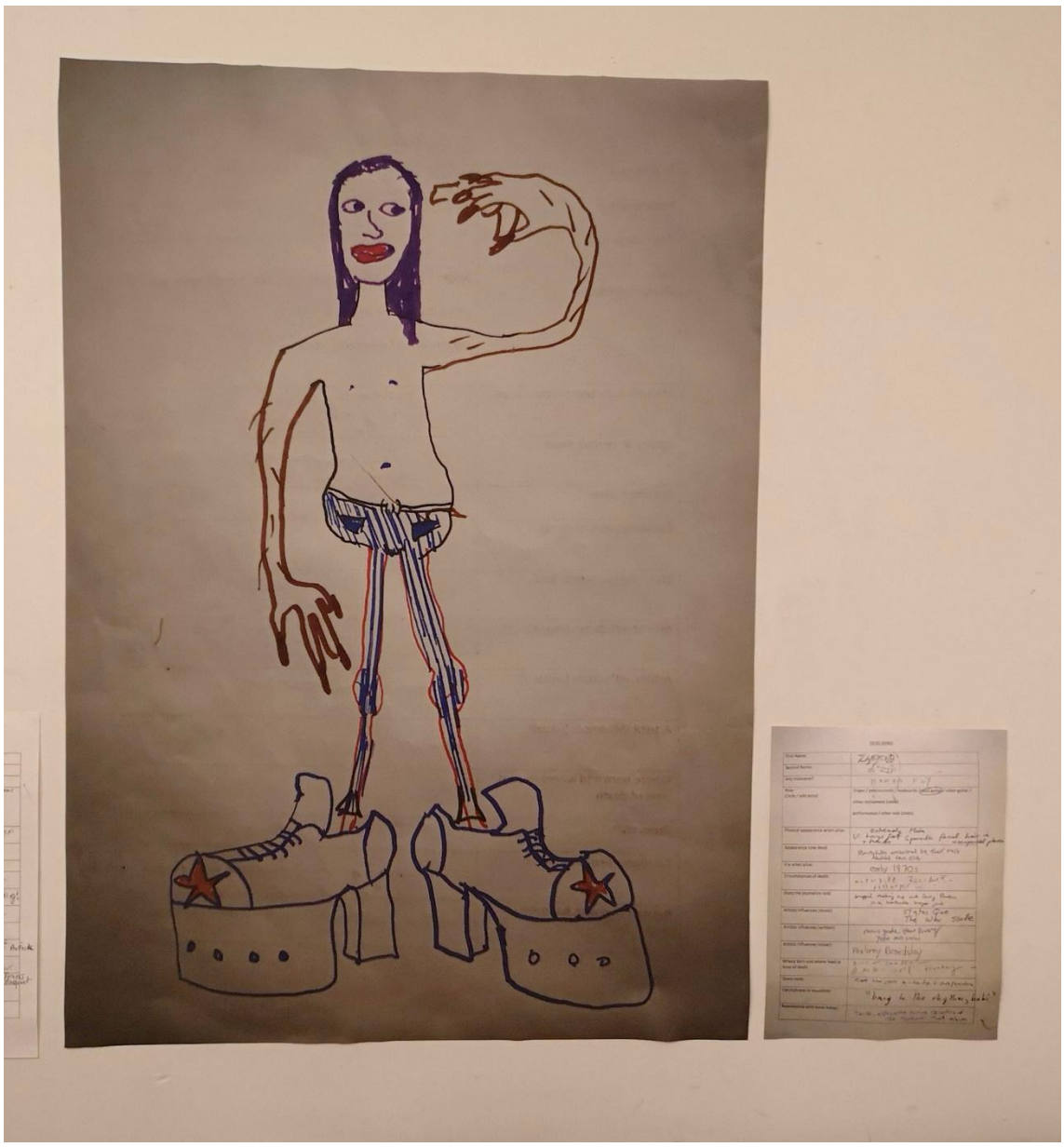


Figure 4: Example visual representation of character, with character sheet alongside.

Once the characters were created, participants spent time informally talking about these characters and developing a sense of their independent personalities, as well as the relationships between them as musicians. The Dead Band members were called Jelly Bobbie, Melissa Pissa, Zappo de Zip, Billy Thunder and Elektra Diskord, and were later joined by a singer selected by similar methods at a later stage in the process: Figure 5 shows the pool of applicants for this role. The visual representations and written descriptions which emerged presented the characters as cartoon-like caricatures of hedonistic musicians and their lifestyle. For example, Zappo de Zip died young in a traffic accident riding pillion on a motorcycle, Elektra Diskord was a hedonist who died in Hackney in the late 80s from a drug-related incident, and Melissa Pissa fled to Italy, where she lived out her last days in poverty until she was murdered.

Figure 5: Characters taking part in the séance audition for the Dead Band singer.

Having established a strong sense of the band, a number of séance format workshops took place to communicate with the band members and deliver lyrics and music. In each of these, members of the DBC formed a circle at a table with the letters of the alphabet, together with the words 'Yes', 'No', and other words and symbols as deemed appropriate. The expression 'Beyond the Scope of Language' was also added to the words and symbols. Participants placed a finger on a glass or other object, selected for its ability to easily glide over the table, and waited until movements spelt out words, phrases, and messages. The resulting messages tended towards the obscure and incomprehensible, with chunks of seeming 'word salad' interspersed with occasional understandable phrases (illustrated in Figure 6). From this material, lyrics and music were generated.

Lyric transcripts

Title
JBMDELEODAICNEFMFPEBIA**YES**CDKDN
DDOGFDDGF
(Darren and ?Matthew? smell flowers)
DOGFLOWER?

Lyrics
LEHERNOSEXKIDSSXSXSXSX
WOMANZN**YES**GQN**YES**
IOUONOGRYONKOLAAYKNKGATNIGGHRW

CHORUS
AYOGNNOSXSXKEGOLEQOSXSXSXSX
CEZE**YES**JMNMGMNMNAH
Outside the scope of language

Figure 6: Example of generated lyrics.

The different strands of the process culminated in an exhibition at Stanley Arts, Norwood Junction, London, in October 2024, in which documentation of the band discovery process was exhibited. A live performance took place, in which audience members were invited to become members of Dead Band by dressing as and taking up the instruments of the band members, and singing / playing to the lyrics and music received through séances. Audience members were invited to enter an 'instantiation zone' of their choice, with one set up for each of the musicians. Wigs, costumes, and instruments were contained in each zone. A short invocation ceremony ritual for willing participants helped determine the ontological parameters of both the general performance space and the instantiation zone. That is, participants were invited to 'become' the selected band member for the duration of their participation. Drawing on the theories discussed above, there is an argument that this performance could be seen as an embodied phenomenological experience of the fictional characters within the ritual space. Multiple mobile phones, operated by members of the DBC, were used to film the performance from different viewpoints. Attendees could choose to watch the performance or take part as a band member. Prior to entering the space, a member of DBC was available to explain the performance and answer questions about participation, and written information was also available. The performance is illustrated in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Dead Band Live Performance

Discussion and Suggestions

While these two explorations, in the research group and in the artwork, do indicate the potential uses of the technique, there is a need for further explorations in both research and art practice to fully explore the potential of these methods. Looking at research first, the techniques used could be further refined, and also, the range of situations in which the methods are applied could be broadened. I developed the techniques in a relatively intuitive way, picking up ideas that came to me as I worked through the theoretical material. But these techniques could be firmed up by working out guiding principles and ideas about how they should be executed. For example, free associative techniques could be systematised, with clear instructions about, e.g., prompts used to ask participants to free associate, physical positions to facilitate associations, and techniques for writing down associations and interpreting them. Similarly, the use of Gendlin-inspired body methods could be further developed by first experimenting with and then refining the different elements of the method, including: the body maps upon which participants draw and write responses and simplifying the version of Gendlin's focusing and dipping techniques, which in the research group felt difficult for participants to assimilate in the time allocated. Equally, it would be useful to try the methods with different groups of participants, for example, different nationalities or different belief systems, and to answer different types of research questions. Undoubtedly, the methods will be more useful in some contexts than others.

These techniques were also used in the art project Dead Band. In an art context, there is arguably more freedom to use techniques and adapt them to the needs of the project, and to modify them as the project progresses. But here, also, several avenues suggest themselves for further exploration. First, I am interested in finding out what happens if the basic parameters are altered, for example, by specifying that the characters co-created be artists, or writers, or another group, rather than musicians. Secondly, as DBC was made up of artists who all knew each other, it would be interesting to see what happens when different groups of participants are brought together. It would be good to widen out the demographics for greater diversity: the artists making Dead Band were all of a similar age, ethnicity, and social class, as well as similar geographic location. I am currently working on applications to funders to further develop these ideas in new arts projects.

Space is too limited to reflect much on the wider implications of the methods and the theory in which they are rooted, but I would like to briefly indicate some of the nuances and potentially interesting areas to explore here. For instance, the practices outlined above raise interesting questions about the nature of self and other and how collaboration plays out; of truth v. falsity, fact v. fiction in writing; of what it means to be embodied, and of how rationality and irrationality manifest in writing. I am particularly interested in the theme, first raised in the Owens' creation of Philip, of

the nature of imagined entities and what it might mean to think they can take on a life of their own. There are theoretical explorations to carry out here, but it is also interesting to think about a more intense, prolonged experiment on these lines to see, if the ways in which Philip started apparently speaking for himself can be replicated. The project Dead Band occupied a space on the edge of these ideas; I am not sure how seriously we took the idea that the band members might have a life of their own. I'm wondering what might happen if we – or someone else – tried a bit harder to do this.

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