

The Condition of Improvisation  
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If he is not at once improvising and improvising warily, he is not engaging his somewhat trained wits in some momentarily live issue, but perhaps acting from sheer unthinking habit. So thinking, I now declare quite generally, is, at the least, the engaging of partly trained wits in a partly fresh situation. It is the pitting of an acquired competence or skill against an unprogrammed opportunity, obstacle or hazard. It is a bit like putting new wine into some old bottles.

-- Gilbert Ryle, "Improvisation" (1976)<sup>1</sup>

Gilbert Ryle's discussion of improvisation in this late essay neatly encapsulates the critical reasons why we should be interested in the practice. First, musicians will notice a refreshing absence of the moral imperative concerning structure that animates so much Western commentary on the practice. Ryle precisely reverses the notion of improvisation as lack, resulting from a reliance on simple pattern regurgitation; it is those who *do not* improvise who are acting from unthinking habit.

More importantly, improvisation, as the practice of thinking, a ubiquitous method of meaning exchange in any everyday life interaction, becomes a crucially important site for both humanistic and scientific study. Even so, to paraphrase George Lipsitz's observation regarding whiteness, improvisation is everywhere, but it is very hard to see--the reason being that improvisation is fundamental to the existence and survival of every human formation, from the individual to the community, through the postnational body to the species itself--as close to universal as contemporary critical method could responsibly entertain.<sup>2</sup>

For me, centering improvisation in my scholarly practice came to a head during a residency that I co-led in 2002 at the University of California's Humanities Research Institute, for which the object of study was "Improvisation In The Contemporary Performing Arts." The group included historians, new media artists and technology researchers, artists, anthropologists, musicologists, dance historians, and theorists whose work somehow seemed to evade attributions of field and specialization. Our introductory narrative for the group declared, among other things, that

- improvisation mediates cross-cultural, transnational and cyberspatial (inter)artistic exchanges that produce new conceptions of identity, history and the body
- improvisation functions as a key element in emerging postcolonial forms of aesthetics and cultural production
- improvisative production of meaning and knowledge provides models for new forms of social mobilization that foreground agency, personality and difference.

- improvisative work symbolizes history, memory, agency, difference, personal narrative and self-determination.
- improvisation fosters socialization, enculturation, cultural formation and community development.

Any practice for which such expansive claims could be sustained would seem to be one that should be studied widely, in depth, and with great alacrity. At the same time, I cannot help but notice that these optimistic and forthright declarations of improvisation's centrality are probably not shared across wide swatches of our public intellectual and political culture. In these domains, improvisation is most commonly invoked in a pejorative or negative sense, as in "improvised foreign policy;" "Improvised Explosive Devices"; or now, "military improvisations in Afghanistan."

In contrast to these images, I draw upon Jason Stanyek's analysis of pan-African intercultural jazz encounters in the 1940s in observing that face-to-face, improvisation-imbued collaborations in any area are less about transcending difference than about how to "take account of the expected and unexpected collisions that occur when musicians come together to engender a collective space." In the cross-cultural improvisative space, as Stanyek has observed, there is "a ceding of complete control over the final 'product' in exchange for certain advantages that intercultural and interpersonal contact create." For Stanyek these advantages encompass not only "shared problem solving" and "a wider sonic palette," but also, and just as importantly, "embodied collective learning"—an indispensable creative crucible that is also a marker of the importance of sociality. In this context, we can abstract insights from musical sound to address larger issues in public culture.

Writing in a 1930 issue of the National Urban League's newsletter *Opportunity*, composer William Grant Still issued an optimistic call for a "Negro Symphony Orchestra." Going considerably beyond a challenge to the widespread notion that "there is no place for the Negro in serious music," Still predicted that for the players in such an orchestra, "their training in the jazz world will even have enhanced their virtuosity, and they will be able to play perfectly passages that would be difficult for a man trained only in the usual academic way." This early recognition of the transformative power of improvisation, however ignored by modern symphony culture, was followed by a recrudescence of real-time music making in the American and European classical music of the 1950s. This, according to cultural historian Daniel Belgrad, was part of an emerging "culture of spontaneity" that crucially informed the most radical American artistic experimentation in the mid-20th Century, from the Beats, the Black Mountain poets, the Abstract Expressionists, and the musical New York School of John Cage, David Tudor, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, and Christian Wolff. Belgrad also includes the transgressive new music of Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Mary Lou Williams, and other bebop pioneers in his discussion of spontaneous practice, a fact that is particular import because their work appeared at least a decade before the earliest experiments in real-time musical expression by the other artists mentioned.

As often as not, ruptures in the arts are purposeful and consciously asserted, but some ruptures draw their power from their emergent complexity—in the case of jazz, the notion of a high musical art emerging from both vernacular roots and subalterity, asserting wide-ranging challenges to musical aesthetics and the provenance of musical historicity. And fueling it all was the reassertion and rapid growth of improvisation in a fashion undreamed of by the former keepers of a Western tradition that was abandoned in the 19th Century—a process that is routinely portrayed in the historiography of Western music as gradual and even inevitable, instead of a radical rupture with over a half-millennium of canonical practice--a Quiet Revolution, as it were.

However, the perception of rupture draws sustenance from an assumption of commonality--of history, of culture, and yes, of race, class, and gender. Thus, in Euro-literate intellectual communities, atonality constitutes a rupture with the past, whereas the emergence of jazz, a far more influential music than the atonal, does not, since it is perceived as extrinsic, outside of history, crafted by designated subalterns, or in David Noble's words, taken from Hegel's view of the African, the product of a people without history. This has little to do with the vernacular/cultivated or high/mass culture divide; in fact, this precisely reverses the strategy of high modernism's rupture with popular culture, where, as with the historical (i.e., pan-European) avant-garde, rupture became part of a project in identity politics and valorization---or, as Renato Poggioli might have put it, a form of permanent (or continuous) rupture, otherwise known as the loyal opposition.

I've concentrated on these evidently local models to emphasize that even if some communities prefer to believe in the universal qualities of their cultural productions, despite the long postcolonial odds against them, if improvisation survives because it *serves*, as Berthold Hoeckner has put it, we are obliged to ask about who is being served: what communities are being served, and whose survival is considered vital; whose histories are considered canonical (and why), and whose modernity is sought and needed; and in which communities is the result epistemic or transgressive?

In both Europe and the United States in the 1960s, musical improvisation was widely viewed as symbolic of a dynamic new approach to social order that would employ spontaneity both to unlock the potential of individuals, and to combat oppression by hegemonic political and cultural systems. In the wake of the events of 1968, the rise of "free jazz" in the United States, and later in Europe, was widely connected with challenges to racism and the social and economic order generally.

Of course, improvisation had its detractors in Europe as well. French musicologist Celestin Deliege, writing in the wake of May 1968, drew upon Adorno's critiques of jazz and mass culture in describing as "illusory" the notion of a participatory improvisative aesthetic in collective improvisation. Such an aesthetic, made possible by the contemporary absence of musical rules, would inevitably lead to an art produced, not by designated and presumably qualified specialists, but by "everybody."

So be it. The “condition” of improvisation is indeed open to everybody--as a human birthright that was, for example, expressed precisely in the real-time plight of those fighting to survive Hurricane Katrina’s levee-smashing onslaught. Again, I quote from our UCHRI residency narrative, which asks:

How might an examination of the distribution of power in improvised expression provide models for social responsibility and action? Improvisation is viewed by many as facilitating direct intervention in political, social, economic and scientific discourses, promoting an awareness of intercultural and transnational discourses, and providing an atmosphere for the acknowledgment and articulation of difference that employ expressive means to challenge totalizing narratives that seek to reify notions of the role of creative expression in society. Building on these kinds of insights enables an examination of the potential for improvisation to aid in imagining new possibilities for interrogating power structures.

Just now, I’ve already hinted at the simplest possible definition of improvisation that can be invoked, one that does not center music or any other art practice, all of which can be seen as subsets of our everyday-life improvisations. As improvisors, all of us cast down our buckets where we are, as Booker T. Washington was wont to say; our improvisations begin by analyzing our situation and reading intention with the tools and senses we have at hand, and in an expression of recursivity, our development of new and more refined analytic toolkits is fundamentally improvisative as well. On the basis of our analyses, we actualize or realize our desire, our intentions, our responses, in a real-time analysis, generation, manipulation and transformation of meaning, mediated by (among other factors) the body, history, temporality, space, memory, intention, material culture, and diverse methodologies. Here, improvisation becomes more than a subspecies of performance, except to the extent that performance is a condition of being in the world. On this view, if anything, improvisation’s ubiquity becomes the modality through which performance is articulated.

If from a musical improvisor’s standpoint, composing, performing, and listening are hardly unrelated as John Cage once suggested, but come together in the practice of improvisation, the plain fact remains that the study of improvisation has bigger fish to fry than trying to relegitimize itself as part of the rarefied, minoritarian practice of art music. At the same time, even as improvisation transcends musical history and practice itself, the study of music provides us with a unique, if not particularly privileged standpoint from which to investigate that transcendence. Music has provided us with an ideal platform for experiencing the condition of improvisation, for investigating its effects, and divining its future--and ours as human beings.

Thus, I would like to suggest that the condition of music in the 20th, and now the 21st Century, announces the importance of our condition of improvisation. "Music is no longer made to be represented or stockpiled," Jacques Attali wrote in 1977, "but for participation in collective play, in an ongoing quest for new, immediate communication, without ritual and always unstable. It becomes nonreproducible, irreversible." Or, as

Diana Taylor put it “the repertoire”—performance—“enacts embodied memory—performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing...ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge.” In that regard, those of us who study improvisation seriously find ourselves at the center of things, even as the myth of our marginality--our academic subalterity, if you will--is ever more anxiously repeated.

Because of music’s importance among the arts that freely embrace the improvisative, the art that has provided a wide and trenchant variety of models and actual experiences of how meaning is exchanged in the real world, the study of music will be central to the development of an exemplary literature of improvisation studies that illuminates the condition of improvisation. That literature will necessarily be interdisciplinary--not simply multi-disciplinary, as at present, where we find important work being done in sociology, psychology, media studies, linguistics, and more. That literature will also be deeply collaborative in nature and method, as insights gleaned from the study of musical improvisation find homes in many other fields.

One aspect of this, suggested by the brief performance Roscoe Mitchell and I will do shortly, involves the observation that improvisation lies at the core of powerful new forms of computer interactivity that challenge traditional conceptions of human identity. As the anthropologist Lucy Suchman declared, ‘I take the boundaries between persons and machines to be discursively and materially enacted rather than naturally effected and to be available [...] for refiguring’.<sup>3</sup> Improvising computer programs – or, more broadly, *creative machines*—construct an articulated object of creative research that can project new models for the study of meaning and sociality. Musicians were among the first to design and perform with creative machines, and to this day, many of the most advanced creative machines create music in real time, even if the earliest composers of this new music, unprepared to contextualize their issues beyond the frame of pan-European composition, left the cultural implications of interactivity to a later generation of “new media” theorists.

Because creative machines manifest self-organizing, interactive musical behaviour that operates both independently and in dialogue with the viewer-auditor’s constructing gaze and activities, performances with them are not simulations of ‘actual’ musical experience, but (to reference sociologist Alfred Schutz's 1964 musing on improvisation) a form of ‘Making Music Together’.<sup>4</sup> Interacting with creative machines become a way to highlight Schutz’s observation that ‘a study of the social relationships connected with the musical process may lead to some insights valid for many other forms of social intercourse’.<sup>5</sup>

For Schutz, what is important is “the social relationship prevailing among the performers. This social relationship is founded upon the partaking in common of different dimensions of time simultaneously lived through by the participants.”<sup>6</sup> Here, Schutz performs a critical shift in disconnecting improvisation from a mystificatory, Romantic connection with artmaking; instead, for Schutz, ‘[M]aking music together [presupposes] a face-to-face relationship, that is, a community of space’.<sup>7</sup>

Even so, this view is problematized by the creative musical machine, an entity that did not exist in its present form in Schutz's time, and which in much contemporary practice embeds not a face-to-face animating metaphor, but a dramaturgy founded, first, upon empathy in the relation between bodies, and second, upon the construction of a diverse community of differences and commonalities between one listening ear and another, where listening itself, an improvisative act engaged in by everyone, announces a practice of active engagement with the world.

Even so, I want to place extreme pressure upon utopian claims for the cultural “benefits” of improvisation, and Stephen Greenblatt’s essay on “Improvisation and Power,” in his influential book on Renaissance self-fashioning, presents a promising path. Improvisation, for Greenblatt, is “the ability to both capitalize on the unforeseen and transform given materials into one’s own scenario.” Greenblatt correctly terms this ability “opportunistic,” a term that speaks to the practice of attention and awareness in improvisative encounters. In Greenblatt’s account, improvisation was vital to the conquest of the New World, and Hernan Cortes emerges as the master improviser. For the conquistadors, “improvisation is made possible by the subversive perception of another’s truth as an ideological construct.”

Even so, literary theorist Ajay Heble feels that “To have been truly improvisatory would have required turning away from imperial greed to initiate something quite different—like a peaceful and productive alliance with indigenous cultures...forming a transnational community based on dialogue and ‘true’ improvisation.” In fact, this common notion of the “true,” i.e., authentic improvisation, is often taken up as part of an overall critique of the practice. The John Cage of the 1980s, for instance, called for improvisations that are “characterized by an absence of intention.” Here, we have the ironic spectacle of the denier of improvisation attempting to become the arbiter of its authenticity.

But as Greenblatt recognizes, the conquistadors improvised the imperial imperative of conquest, with little room for altruism. Heble invokes the obviously self-interested Cortes to advance a moral critique, but the moral, social, or political motivation of a given actor has nothing at all to do with whether improvisation is in fact taking place; we learn little about the nature of improvisation from the examination of motives.

Contemporary digital technology, and the Internet in particular, has become a primary instrument/medium through which transnational improvisation is manifested in everyday life--perhaps the largest technologically mediated collective improvisation ever created, active in all time zones, 24 hours a day--and indeed (at least in principle) produced by ‘everybody.’ As globalised as anything ever built on this planet (all economic dislocations admitted), the Web assimilates vast asymmetries in agendas (corporate, collective, individual), cultural viewpoints, and infrastructure to perform a summing of agencies.

Now, consider the nature of computer memory devices--volatile, non-volatile, and now, varieties in between--the fundament upon which the Web is built. The nature of volatility here is bound up with time--the amount of time that one can expect the data contained in

the device to endure. Thus, the various forms of computer memory become associated with temporal ontologies of archive, and at the same time, notions of hope, intention, and resistance. Seduced by the power of temporary memory, typical narratives about digital archives see the matter mainly as a question of efficient storage and retrieval: “Both individual and cultural memory are increasingly mediated by modern technologies, which means that memories are not only recorded and recollected by media, but are also shaped and produced by them. The digital media, in particular, allow for new ways of storing, retrieving and archiving personal and collective memories, as well as cultural artefacts.”

This is the official story, isn't it? On one level, the goal is laudable enough: to ensure cultural continuity by *preserving* collective knowledge from one generation to the next, rendering it possible for later generations to *reconstruct* cultural identity. Seen from another vantage point, however, this is late capitalism's preferred mode of encounter with computer systems, where the risk of conflating history and the archive with the structure of data retrieval methods is ever-present. “As we may think,” indeed, to borrow the title of Vannevar Bush's essay outlining the foundations of what became hypertext: “thinking” becomes not a form of improvisation, as Ryle saw it, but an encounter with a relational database. From there, creating the archive becomes a simple matter of reform or philanthropy, with the goal of rectifying the digital divide—diversity on the cheap.

On the Web, individual decisions of navigation and choice, including those taken by machines and improvised in dialogue with local and global conditions both within and outside the network, result in shifting allegiances that are inevitably transforming histories and cultural memories. But the fact remains that just as the random access memory that powers our computers needs to be refreshed, so it is with cultural memory. The instability and ephemerality of both processes results in part from the ways in which bits of information inevitably become scrambled--mutations that lie just beyond the purview of human agency, driven by indeterminacy, but which nonetheless can yield new information that becomes continually reinstated through improvisative processes, forming the basis for an open-ended cultural memory whose stability emerges from the vigilance of always reforming itself in the present.

I'd like to conclude by recalling philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch's psychoanalytically oriented framing: ‘In improvisation, the too far-sighted man wants to reclaim the innocence of day-to-day life, and to resolve on the wing the small problems born of the indeterminate moment: he thus disturbs his own adaptation to accident and deprives himself of the temporality that ensured his safety.’<sup>8</sup> On this view, improvisation becomes not so much a practice, but an aspiration toward freedom that, even as it is doomed to failure, nonetheless produces a consciousness that continually transgresses limits and resists their imposition. The ideal here, as Jankélévitch understands, is a kind of mobility of identity that manifests itself in a fundamental mobility of temporality, or what the 1st Century Roman rhetorician Quintilian called ‘*mobilitas animi*’--*mobilitas* as mobility, inconstancy, changeableness of the mind, and of the soul; a dangerous hybrid formed by agency and indeterminacy whose ultimate outcome is a continuous transformation of both Other and Self.

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Ryle, "Improvisation," *Mind, New Series* 85, no. 337 (1976): 77.

<sup>2</sup> See George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Suchman, *Human-Machine Reconfigurations: Plans and Situated Actions, 2nd Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Schutz, "Making Music Together: A Study in Social Relationship," in *Schutz, Collected Papers 2: Studies in Social Theory* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> Schutz, "Making Music Together: A Study in Social Relationship," 159.

<sup>6</sup> Schutz, Alfred. "Making Music Together." In Schutz, Alfred. *Collected Papers II: Studies in Social Theory*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff (1964), 159-178.

<sup>7</sup> Schutz, "Making Music Together: A Study in Social Relationship," 177.

<sup>8</sup> 'Dans l'improvisation, l'homme trop prévoyant veut retrouver l'innocence d'une vie au jour le jour et résoudre au vol les problèmes minute nés du hasard minute: il dérange donc sa propre adaptation aux accidents et se prive du délai qui assurait sa sécurité.' Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Liszt: Rhapsodie Et Improvisation*. (Paris: Flammarion, [1955] 1998), 111. Translation by the author.