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Improvisation: Experience: Self-Disclosure

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Free Improvisation as Experience & Self-Disclosure

In his 1952 essay “The American Action Painters,” Harold Rosenberg set the template for a particular understanding of the abstract painting of the day. It was an understanding based on a mythology—mythology in the sense of a primal story that makes sense of something without having to be literally true. This was the myth of painting as spontaneous gesture, the product of which—the painting itself—was the record of an event. This event consisted in the existential encounter of the painter, acting freely and without any premeditated notion of what would result, with the blank canvas. As Rosenberg memorably put it, the empty picture plane became “an arena in which to act,” the site of a process rather than a place on which to paint a picture. Call it painting understood as performance. Like many clichés, this one became established because it did contain a core of truth.

Rosenberg’s essay drew on ideas taken from the Existentialism that was in vogue in the immediate postwar period and that—partly through his influence as a critic—permeated talk about art at the time. To the extent that the painters Rosenberg described were acting spontaneously—and certainly not all of them were—his speculation did capture something of what was in fact happening with them, both in terms of what they experienced while painting and what kind of relationship there was between their artistic processes and products. Although art is rarely spoken about in these terms any longer, a view of artistic activity as rooted in the realization of the artist’s free, concrete choices does still seem relevant to understanding how certain kinds of art are made. It particularly seems to describe what many of us experience in the practice of free improvisation in music and sound art. But a more complete picture would have to look beyond the notion of free choice and see it as being afforded by an often unarticulated background of technical skill and intuitions about form. In short, the experience of free improvisation is the experience of freedom, but it is a freedom structured by a rich background of practical knowledge expressed in gestures holistically fusing intention and action.

In the moment of playing a free improvisation, we do seem to act on the basis of unconstrained choices. Any given gesture—meaning here a physical action producing an intended sound—may be made with reference to what came before it, but it doesn’t feel determined by that precedent. I can for example choose to play a sequence of notes or unpitched sounds that would fit in some way with what was just played, or I can choose to play something that would break with it entirely. The improvisation may seem to be unfolding in a particular way, but I can always choose to play otherwise and thus to redirect it, to convert its mood and developing formal structures into something quite other than what it was.

In part, the experience of free improvisation is the experience of freedom because there is no pre-given formal structure or work to which our individual choices must conform. Instead, the freely improvised performance is directed toward an open possibility—a possibility made open by the lack of a preexisting composition to be realized in and by the performance. Free improvisation is in this sense the exploration of a country that doesn’t exist until it’s conjured into being by that very same exploration.

In practical terms, this means that the object of the gesture—the sound, phrase or, seen from a more encompassing perspective, the entire performance—doesn’t exist prior to the gesture and only comes into being with the gesture itself. As a result, the decisions we make while playing from moment-to-moment are decisions that transcend these moments toward some as yet unattained formal/plastic state of affairs in which sounds find their places within, against and among each other. It is only from these individual decisions that a musical object comes into being; its formal qualities and structures are the audible results of the individual choices that informed and produced our musical gestures. The completely improvised musical object, in other words, is just the sum of the individual actions—gestures chosen freely against a background of possibilities—

that go into its making. It is constituted by the choices made in real time that are themselves aimed at the external, open field of possibility that is the object's not having existed yet.

Seen this way, free improvisation is free to the extent that it consists in making a choice of form in the absence of controlling formal constraints. If the sonic plasticity of the object—which is to say the formal qualities of the freely improvised performance—is not given in advance, there is at any given time no a priori, external reason why I should play notes chosen from, say, scale X rather than from mode Y, or a particular rhythmic figure or vertical conjunction of sounds rather than another, and so forth. All of these choices are mine to make in the moment; I am free to shape the performance as it unfolds in real time according to these choices and to modify and convert them as seems appropriate at any given moment.

And yet this picture of freedom needs to be qualified in important ways. If we can speak of free improvisation as lacking the external constraints imposed by pre-given forms, things become quite different when we consider the role of internal constraints. Here the freedom of the free improviser becomes conditioned freedom. Once we step back and look beyond the moment we can see that what appears at first to be a completely free choice isn't entirely free. As improvisers we don't start from nothing; we instead act in a way that's always already constituted by our store of practical knowledge. We do choose, but within certain limits intimately connected to our personal histories and facilities as artists. These limits include such things as our technical skills and the consequent repertoire of things we know how to do, our expectations of what an improvised work should sound like, our ability to listen and respond in an interesting and appropriate way, and so on. This practical knowledge is a function of our competence as improvising musicians, all told, as well as of the intuitive sense of form we bring to any improvisational situation.

It is this competence or skill that is the practical ground underlying and facilitating the feeling of freedom in performance. Our ability to play improvised music appropriately is the result of those internalized, intuitively available musical patterns that come with learning and practice—what we mean when we say that we “have something under our fingers”—and that we can turn to in the moment. This kind of internalized skill allows us to immerse ourselves in the moment-to-moment unfolding of the improvisation without the need to reflect on what we are doing or how we are doing it. We just know how to do it, within the limits of our practical ability.

In addition to the requisite instrumental and listening skills, the free improviser has an intuitive—that is to say a pre-deliberative—sense of the formal relationships that structure a performance. This intuitive sense of form includes such elements as our sense of the rhythmic and pitch balance of a phrase; the contrasting or complementary relationships among pitches, timbres and rhythms; the degree of density and dynamics desirable at any given moment in the performance; the placement of sounds and silences as constituent parts of an overall musical structure, and the like. All of this constitutes the background of expectations against which our individual choices take place and which is available as a kind of reservoir of possibilities to be realized in any given musical gesture or set of gestures.

The upshot of all this is that the improvised musical gesture isn't a blind act arising in a vacuum but instead is grounded in the improviser's training and experiences as an improviser. In practical terms, this means that it embodies—quite literally—an intuitive sense of phrase structure and balance, duration, timbre and pitch, as well as such ensemble features as harmony and counterpoint and is made possible by the technical means we possess to produce it. Improvisation as a gesture with materials—to borrow Rosenberg's phrase—thus takes place within a context of certain given conditions that, taken together, function as a background that encompasses certain assumptions regarding how a musical piece or work of sound art is supposed to be, and include the skills needed to realize or at least to approach that ideal.

And yet even if our gestures are constrained in a general sense by the skills and sense of structure that constitute them as possibilities, our relationship to them is still imbued with freedom. But these techniques and formal structures aren't realized until they are produced by the improviser's concrete gestures, which are themselves the products of choices made in the moment of improvisation. We are left the freedom to act within the complex interplay of forms and sounds that make up the developing performance. For whatever we actually play, we could always have chosen to play something different, had a different sound or phrase somehow suggested itself to us as we played. Thus our intuitive sense of form influences but doesn't determine our moment-to-moment decisions; the musical structures it encompasses exist as possibilities, not as inevitabilities.

At its best, when we improvise we become immersed in the performance. This is brought out in some of the common figures of speech often used to describe that state of immersion—we say we're "lost in the music," "absorbed in the sound" or "in the zone." When all goes well and we feel we're in the zone, we're simply unaware of the background conditions that afford the possibilities our performance endeavors to realize and simply draw on what we know without reflecting on it. All we know is our immersion in the process of creation—our gestures and responses seem immediately and directly solicited by the musical situation as it unfolds from moment to moment. It isn't that we don't know what we're doing, but that we don't know that we know what we're doing. We do know, but our knowledge is not an object of particular, focused attention, it isn't something separate and distinct standing over against us as we play. Rather, this knowledge is part of the unarticulated background against which our performance takes place. We act out of a deeply rooted knowledge of what to do, but it is a knowledge immanent in the act that expresses it.

As is true of the intuitive knowledge that guides our playing, the intentions that inform our performance rarely become explicit to us as we play. The improvisational gesture may be purposive, but its purpose—the intention it is aimed toward realizing—isn't prior to the physical movement either in importance or in time. The gesture has its purpose built into it, as it were; the intention is nothing other than an embodied element of the action. Thus the improvisational gesture counts as a holistic action because the intention—that is to say, its purpose or meaning—and the action are inseparable. The intention isn't a goal reflected on and formulated prior to the act but rather is embedded in the act and is known simply as a way of being present to oneself and the situation while acting.

For purposes of analysis we can separate intention and physical action, but in real time such a distinction—which is inevitably a theoretical, after-the-fact construct—collapses into an indivisible whole. We can analyze a gesture in such a way, but only because it has become an object of reflection, a kind of opacity we construct for ourselves. This is in contrast to the way the gesture is lived in real time. We experience it simply as a way of being present to ourselves and to the situation. The gesture is an event in a sequence of events, an occurrence in a stream of occurrences in which the intention isn't a prior thing or moment that subsequently gives rise to the gesture, but is a dimension of the gesture of which it is a holistic component.

This purposive aspect of improvisation—the sense that any given musical gesture is meant, or in other words is taking place for a reason—is experienced as a kind of attunement or feeling of fit or rightness that accompanies the unfolding of the gestures within the music. We feel our gestures as appropriate responses to the musical situation as it develops around us. Thus it is that I play a certain sound or phrase or pause because I meant to, and my having done so successfully is present to me simply as a certain feeling that both accompanies and results from the gesture. This sense of fit or rightness isn't anything we stop to notice or reflect on—it isn't something we are aware of as if it were an object separate from the action in relation to which it arises—but rather is an aspect of our immersion in the music and in our part in it. Without this sense of fit or rightness we wouldn't be immersed in the improvisation; instead we'd be jolted out of it with the feeling that something had gone wrong or wasn't as it should be. At that point we might self-consciously reflect on what we're doing in

order to put it right and return to our previous state of immersion in the music.*

The holistic nature of the improvisational gesture has an important implication that goes directly to the heart of our being in the performance. To paraphrase something the philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto once wrote, when the intention to act is a contemporaneous, inseparable part of the act, the distinction between being and doing dissolves. One just is what one does.

If this is so, then improvisation entails an irreducible kind of self-disclosure on the part of the improviser; the gesture is a realization of the improviser as much as it is the impetus for the occasion of a sound. Both sides of this single action—the realization of sound and the realization of self—are inextricably bound up together in the same way that the intention and the physical movement making up the musical gesture are inextricably bound up together.

To put it in unabashedly existential terms, improvisation discloses the improviser's way of being in the world, of taking the world as a site for meaningful activity projecting toward a modification of that world. It is through the performance that we modify the world, creating a temporally-bound object that hadn't existed before. The specific form this object takes is the result of the moment-to-moment choices we make and as such it embodies our own conception of meaningful form. We can't help but create forms imbued with meaning, since through our choices we reveal the formal structures and plastic vocabulary to which we have been drawn. Each improvised gesture represents the result of a formal judgment that is our own and through which we reveal something of ourselves. With it we disclose our sense of how things should be, how the situation this moment should be resolved in this particular way.

Thus to the extent that the formal choices we make while improvising express our skills and our apprehension of the situation within which we act, we express ourselves. Consequently, there is an ineliminably expressive dimension to improvisation quite apart from whatever expression of private emotion its sounds may also embody. Seen this way, form is expressive no less than content. And there is more. Because improvisation entails real-time composition, it discloses us in a particularly unpremeditated way. We are what we disclose of ourselves in the moment, without the benefit (or drawback) of taking back what we've just done. The stakes are higher this way; every improvised action becomes a risk in that it reveals a choice of ourselves which has to stand without revision. At its most uncompromising, free improvisation is self-disclosure without regrets.

*This description of what it is like to be immersed in an improvisation is indebted to Heidegger's account of everyday praxis in *Being and Time*.