

Preparing a Space: On the Philosophy and Aesthetics of Improvisation

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“In all beginnings is a magic source...”

-Hermann Hesse — *The Glass Bead Game*

Introduction

This essay examines the philosophy and aesthetics¹ of improvisation as perceived both from within musical realms and beyond. The concept of improvisation is considered broadly, not in the area of any particular established practices—although my background is in sample-based music; that is, sound recordings collaged and altered through the use of technology—but rather as a living practice, whose very nature demands that it be viewed beyond limiting definitions. It will thus illustrate the ways in which musical creativity unfolds and informs all interdependent relationships between artist and artwork.

To this end, five different concepts act as philosophical foundations for the discussion; place, silence, intuition, surrender, and dialectics. The aim is to trace an aesthetic continuity between these concepts, culminating in notions of ‘resonance’, both physical and figurative, as they relate to improvisation in these five realms.

Much of this research has emerged through my own creative practices, which are centred in sample-based improvisation *in situ*—that is, travelling to different places, recording my own solo improvisations, and gathering materials from others for collaborative compositions created after the fact. Although those specific experiences will not be detailed here, they suggest conceptual divisions (solo versus collaborative creativity, improvisation versus composition, spontaneity versus planning before or after-the-fact), the nature of which will unfold throughout this essay as the expanding view of improvisation gradually serves to draw out a network of relationships between such divisions.

On Place

Through my own creative practices, my understanding of what constitutes 'place' with regard to improvisation has transformed dramatically. Initially, place was considered as the literal, immediate physical environment; that sphere which we perceive with our physical senses and our intuition. However, through my diverse creative encounters this concept has gradually expanded to also include both human interactions and creative works in a broader conception of 'place'.

In relationships of any nature people can invite each other to share in their personal or intimate spaces on many different levels—psychologically, emotionally, creatively, physically, and so on. For example, most people are familiar with the experience of being 'in the presence' of someone with great charisma, or some other powerful quality, by whom they may feel strongly psychologically affected. Whether these spaces are real or metaphorical is of no importance; it is through the artist's ability to communicate, garner inspiration from, or transform such spaces, that their essential creative value can be realized. Young illustrates the way in which such 'places' can be revealed in creative human relationships in his discussion of intimacy:

"Revelatory self-disclosure finds validation through the other partner's response; this is interpreted as evidence of an emergent and binding understanding...Real intimacies are synonymous with trust, cohesiveness and psychological proximity; trust that a partner will provide what is expected...and cohesive in the sharing of experiences and aims." (Young, 2009)

When considering improvisation, these factors of trust and cohesiveness are core components of these shared 'places', these spheres of intimate human interaction. This is because, as the work unfolds, we trust each other to align

with whatever we are mutually involved in. As we create the work, so through the work we inform the creation of each other as artists.

In this act of co-creation, the creative works themselves can also be seen as places; in the simplest sense, where the artist's awareness can inhabit a work as it is being created. This idea of the artist creating or unfolding the work from within is most important to this discussion and an essential insight into a deeper understanding of the role of intuition in improvisation. The realm of art is where artwork and artist emerge in an interdependent co-creation, "the existential interdependence of the artist and artwork, ensures that the marking of an unmarked space is not a singular, momentary act but the initiation of a process that ties the artist...to the working of the work that produces both the artwork and the artist" (Peters, 2009). Heidegger's *Origin of the Work of Art* illustrates this trinity of art-artwork-artist, by which the artist and artwork co-create within the creative space:

"On the usual view, the work arises out of and by means of the activity of the artist. But by what and whence is the artist what he is? By the work; for to say that the work does credit to the master means that it is the work that first lets the artist emerge as a master of his art. The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other. Nevertheless, neither is the sole support of the other. In themselves and in the interrelations artist and work are each of them by virtue of a third thing which is prior to both, namely that which also gives artist and work of art their names — art." (Heidegger, 1960)

In the co-creation of artist and artwork, these two additional conceptions of place—human relationships and the unfolding artwork—are vital to the understanding of dialecticsⁱⁱ and intuition in improvisation. It is only through sharing the perceptual spheres of others that we can come to a lived understanding of dialectics. This involves the necessity, in the creative moment, to be receptive to the diversity of change demanded by intuition, and it is only through unfolding the creative work from *within* the work itself that we can

access those many levels on which intuition may operate. Being present also to the 'work creating the artist' demands that the artist is not lost in a hedonistic trance within the work's unfolding, but is also aware of their own unfolding; this means being able to move their attention freely between a broad 'outside' overview of the work (the ideal being to perceive it all-at-once), and a minute 'inside' view of the details (Clarke, 2001). This ability to adapt to various modes of perception is where dialectics and intuition interrelate: true intuition only comes through listening, through conscious awareness of silence and openness to the eternal change that it *is* and that it *demands*. Paradoxically, this openness to silence is a consistent call to action, as accepting its demand for diversity is true engagement with dialectics.

"Shifting [toward]...the silent (or silenced) origin of the artwork...the fundamental relationship is here understood to be between improviser and improvisation, not between improviser and improviser...[It is] the inevitable situatedness of the improviser in a work." (Peters, 2009)

That is to say, a focus on continually aligning with the origin of the work and thus tuned in to "the demands of the work to *be* a work, to become itself once under way" (Peters, 2009), and one might say that a true awareness of the other (or of oneness, of the illusion of 'otherness', of the dialectic imperative for diversity) is made manifest. Through their alignment with the origin of the work, both artist and collaborator(s) are increasingly aware of mutual needs, and of their involvement in the interdependent interaction between the self-as-artist and the unfolding of the artwork for all involved. Young illustrates the essential dialectic nature of this relationship between artist and artwork:

"If all performers adapt to sound (the environment), rather than trying to adapt to one another, this is comparable to the biological process of stigmergy." (Young, 2009)

Stigmergy can here be understood as a system of traces left in the environment that indirectly stimulates self-organization; so in music, we could consider those

traces as ‘resonances’—whether physical, psychological, emotional, or intellectual.

In considering resonance however, it is useful to re-affirm the conventional notion of ‘place’, where place is considered once again as simply the physical environment, and resonance as simply a physical property of sound. Tempting as it is to become overly metaphysical when discussing the seed of the creative moment, one cannot ignore the realities present and essential to such a discussion. Those realities are most often our basic creative stimulus, the things in our physical sphere of perception to which we may attune our senses, or pick up unconsciously, which may inform the unfolding of a current or future creative work by setting up a resonance, an unfolding within us, or by triggering a sudden realization or call to action. This is the most direct level at which artist and artwork co-create. In the improvisatory moment, this could be as simple as the artist listening to the sound they are making in the space they’re in (the resonance of their creative choice), and thus choosing how to proceed based on what they hear. David Byrne, in *How Music Works*, provides a succinct insight into the notion of the physical space of co-creation:

“In a sense, the space...“makes” the art, the music.”

“The music perfectly fits the place where it is heard, sonically and structurally. It is absolutely ideally suited for this situation — the music, a living thing, evolved to fit the available niche.” (Byrne, 2012)

Although what Byrne is referring to here is the site at which the art is *delivered*, it holds just as true for the site at which it is *created*. By subtly reframing the latter context, ‘the place where it is heard’ comes to mean not ‘heard by the audience’ but rather ‘heard by the artist’—suggesting both the physical hearing of what they’ve just created, and the intuitive ‘knowing’ of what to create next, perhaps even suggesting a unified, spontaneous creative vision of hearing or imagining the piece of music in a single ‘glance’ (Clarke, 2001). In either case, the artist is being with the place and allowing the work to create them as they create the

work. Thus the physical place and the artwork-as-place are effectively unified, and one can become aware of the interweaving of physical and creative place as the artist is ‘traveling through’ the transforming improvisatory moment:

“Improvisation invokes and perhaps demands nomadism. Music travels and transposes across all forms of experience...The nomadic nature of improvised discourses, their ability to travel, to be transposed in and across cultures as they travel, is a key to their authenticity, their ability to retain what makes them both distinct and able to mutate in new contexts.”

(Fischlin, 2009)

Once we begin to see the concept of improvisation itself as nomadic, it becomes not just a musical practice but a process that can transpose into any other realm. Thus the notion of the creative work as ‘place’ suddenly becomes all-encompassing. Any act of improvisation, in any sphere of life (a physical gesture, a conversation, a thought process) becomes a creative ‘place’, a site of co-constitution of artist and artwork.

“Improvised musicking has more to teach us about other forms of social practice — but also...improvisation’s limited play in the world beyond its own borders needs to be addressed.” (Fischlin, 2012)

So the gathering together of all these manifestations of place—the physical environment, the space of human relationships, and all conceptual and imaginary creative spaces—reveals a bridge into the somewhat paradoxical demand of silence as the call to action in the improvisatory moment.

On Silence

Physical 'silence' is effectively non-existent in our everyday lives, but we can define the concept of a silent space as the absence of any particular defined thing. However, since aesthetics is the essential overview to this whole discussion, it is ideal to go a step further and focus on 'silent space' as being the *relationship* between one thing and another, and consider aesthetics as the balance of these relationships. Thus we expand from a binary outlook to a dialectic outlook, where we have a network of reconfigurable relationships; even when an entity is somewhat crystallized (such as when a musical fragment is recorded) it can itself become a node in a new, larger work (Shaviro, 2003). These relationships, whether crystallized or fluid, are nonetheless silent. And so *via* relationships, silence may not necessarily be silence, depending on what is being communicated and how it is being received. To visit once again Young's idea of intimacy:

"Playing a certain phrase, sound event, gesture, or by electing to do nothing: these could all be interpreted as acts of self-disclosure." (Young, 2009)

One could just as well be saying something with silence as without — what is the intention, and how clearly is it being communicated? One could say that it is only through action that we are able to truly say nothing:

"We are in the presence not of a work of art which is a thing but of an action which is implicitly nothing." (Cage, 1973)

Only through action can one make the choice to flow and adapt to change—to be present to the source of the work and its demands for us to form it, adapt it, and thus form and adapt ourselves in the artwork/artist co-creation. Peters addresses this by thinking of freedom as the beginning of the artwork, so that the "link between freedom and origination is established". Process oriented work, or 'generative music', is one strategy for preserving the freedom of the origin of the artwork: it can be set in motion and allowed to evolve in and of itself (here a sense of order is not dependent on control), and thus it is not conceived as an end but as a field of dynamic relationships (Eno, 2011). In a very different way

sampling *implies* a generative structure. This can be seen both within the work (though generally in a fixed form) and actively in the relationships *between* itself and the works from which it is constructed in the real world; here the collaged artwork, whether consciously or unconsciously, defines itself as a microcosm of this social network of interdependent creation. It is a composition whose structure speaks of the structure of social connections from which it was created. Moreover, the branching of relationships will continue because in sampling, as in any other medium, even the artwork that is conceived as an *end* is a potential site of origination—one that in an instant can be returned to, and retrieved from, silence. Of course any act of appropriation, whether large or small, or involving any ideas or creative materials, is also a new connection in this interdependent creative network. Creative ideas have always, and will always be appropriated, altered, and evolved. Imagining only the silent links between these newly created entities, sampling is just another necessary evolution of relationship structures in the generative network of authentic creative unfoldment.

At this point, it is useful to re-introduce the notion of ‘resonance’ as the conveyor, *in* and *of* the silent space of relationship. In the physical world, resonance requires both a thing and for that thing to embody a large degree of no-thing, of emptiness. This is not empty *space*, as there is air, dust, and whatever else, but it is an absence of the thing that embodies it. Thus, an object must contain an appropriate amount of emptiness (silence of that which it is) in order to resonate well. And so this is physical resonance, but there is also the resonance created within, as we seek to realize no-thing:

“It is of the utmost importance not to make a thing but rather to make nothing. And how is this done? Done by making something which then goes in and reminds us of nothing. It is important that this something be just something, finitely something; then very simply it goes in and becomes infinitely nothing.” (Cage, 1973)

So the notion of physical resonance is analogous to what Cage is describing here; that is, the ‘something’ that must be present in order that the nothing is

defined—the form that holds the resonant space. Again, we can apply this equally to artist communicating to audience, and co-creation of artist and artwork where the artist is initiating creation with intention, then through action (in the form), receiving and communicating (resonating with) the demands of the work as it unfolds. Then, as in the physical world, the resonant space ripples out; received and understood as the silent creative moment, it becomes infinitely nothing.

In improvising, we wish for our resonance to illuminate silent relationships between the sounds that are congruent with the unfolding demands of the work. The unfolding demands of the work must also be congruent with its larger context—its historical moment. It is in this light that the interplay of philosophy and aesthetics may express the truth of the historical moment. If, for example, the truth is that chaos and deception are rife throughout society, then in the long run, to express an abhorrence of this with congruent intensity may be more conducive to silence (acceptance of what is) than ignoring or saying nothing of the problems, or enforced or oppressive silence, because in the former we bring awareness to the issue at hand, in the latter we ignore it and allow the suffering to continue. Being congruent with reality helps us to evolve beyond problems of control, because we must acknowledge and accept that which is out of our control in order to transcend it:

“To be able to surrender is to be able to know when to stop trying to control.” (Eno, 2011)

So creating a resonant space conducive to inner silence necessitates creative congruence with inner and outer realities. To use an analogy; to create a resonant space in the realm of chaos, means to cast a bell from the substance of it, whose inside is hollow and empty of chaos. Thus ringing the bell resonates the recognition and awareness of that chaos; it is an affirmation that one sees it, yet one’s inner nature in the face of it is clear and undisturbed.

“If one is making something which is to be nothing, the one making must

love and be patient with the material he chooses. Otherwise he calls attention to the material, which is precisely something, whereas it was nothing that was being made” (Cage, 1973)

Questions of what silence is in any particular context must be navigated by our consciousness as the absence or presence of one thing or another within a conceptual space. We can say, “This is the sphere in which this particular piece of music will take place, these are the parameters, and thus the presence or absence of this-or-that in this context, is a silence.” In saying or implying this, an audience can navigate through and perceive the work from anywhere inside or outside its sphere, ideally recognizing and resonating with its network of relationships. Schafer, in *The Soundscape*, illustrates this mechanism for consciously navigating sound:

“The ear’s only protection is an elaborate psychological mechanism for filtering out undesirable sound in order to concentrate on what is desirable...Of its own nature then, the ear demands the insouciant and distracting sounds would be stopped in order that it may concentrate on those which truly matter.” (Schafer, 1994)

On the other hand, Cage has said:

“To obtain the value of a sound, a movement, measure from zero. (Pay attention to what it is, just as it is.)” (Cage, 1973)

Schafer is talking about delineation between ‘distracting sounds’ and those which ‘truly matter’, while Cage is talking about awareness of the ‘pure beingness’ of a sound. In the practicalities of day to day life—as in the practicalities of music making—if we are not able to ‘pay attention to what it is, just as it is’, accepting *all* sounds including the distracting or undesirable ones—then there is a psychological imperative to filter out, and decide which of them ‘truly matter’. In an ideal situation we could accept whatever comes along, then through this total acceptance, we would transcend the distinction between

‘distracting sounds’ and those which ‘truly matter’. But this ideal situation is a matter of breaking what are often deeply ingrained habits of selective awareness—the illusion of the necessity for making one thing more important than another—and this is another process altogether. Meanwhile, the immediate psychological demands of ‘filtering out’ are a practical necessity that cannot be put on hold.

The ‘measuring from zero’ that Cage proposes is, in itself, presence-as-silence. In accepting a sound as it is, one is present with it and the state of receptivity required for one to accept a sound is silence. Schafer again offers an essential insight into this receptivity that serves to illustrate both his, and Cage’s point of view:

“[Foreground sounds] are listened to consciously. In terms of the psychologist, they are figure rather than ground. Any sound can be listened to consciously, and so any sound can become a figure.” (Schafer, 1994)

So whatever we choose to foreground—be it one sound or many-at-once—we can make a distinction between that thing being foregrounded, and that which is filtered out—and thus be present with *that* moment, that choice to accept one thing and filter out others. That becomes the new site of creation, the acceptance of that which we do not accept. Then, being with *that* new moment, we are present and able to unfold from there. Acceptance-as-presence. In being present with what is, an individual has *a presence*. This aesthetic balance between *having* a presence and *being* present is the essence of resonance in all realms; physical, emotional, intellectual and so on. In improvisation, presence is the only way a piece may unfold; if the artwork’s presence resonates with the artist’s, they can continue on course, if not, they can choose to re-align. If *the artist* is present, they unfold with the artwork, if not, the field of possibilities created by artist and artwork shrinks and eventually closes:

“The problem is simple: You either stay put until you get an invitation or you make yourself an invitation written in such a way that you couldn’t

know, when you wrote it, what you were writing, and where it would be sending you going.” (Cage, 1973)

This is accepting our own humanity, and this is our mechanism for re-alignment to our intentions; being present to what is, and if we can't accept it, navigating through by way of choice and transformation.

“Each had been a theme which needed to be developed and dismissed; each had been a space to pass through, to transcend. Already they lay behind him.” (Hesse, 1943)

On Intuition

“Persistence of the origin of the work within the work itself as a perpetual presence and possibility.” (Peters, 2009)

Creative intuition can perhaps most simply be described as a knowing or receiving of the origin of a work (its essence) in every grain of that work. The 'knowing' needn't be defined, and in all likelihood, cannot be communicated as an absolute—it is the artist's or audience's dynamic relationship to the unfolding work. That relationship *is* silent receptivity itself, and thus changes as the work unfolds.

“For the power of imagination is also and precisely a faculty of intuition, i.e. of receptivity. And it is receptive, moreover, not just apart from its spontaneity. Rather, it is the originary unity of receptivity and spontaneity.” (Heidegger, 1929)

This definition by Heidegger illuminates the originary moment at which the creative action and the intuitive reception are united. This is reminiscent of *The Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel—as man and God reach out, the moment of creation is present as infinite potential (silence) between their near-but-

never-touching hands. Thus in the creative moment one can reach out with spontaneous gesture, open to receive inspiration. This unity of spontaneity and inspiration is intuition—the spontaneous gesture is illuminated by inspiration as it unfolds, the creative ‘hand’ thus intuitively knows where to go. This is often described as “flow”; “in which the skills of an individual are perfectly matched to the challenges of a task, and during which action and awareness become phenomenologically fused” (Borgo, 2006).

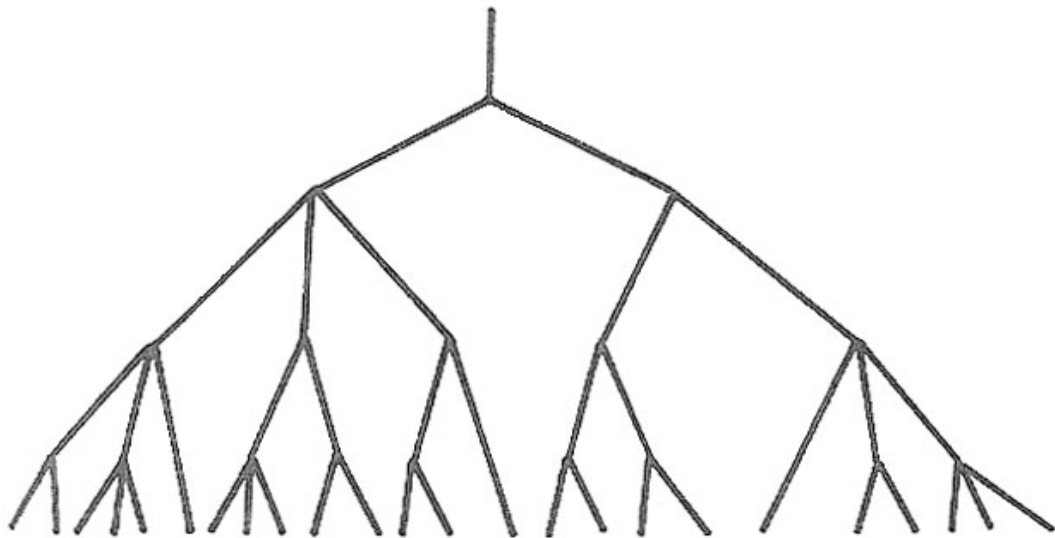
“Measuring from zero” however, shows us that the source and the nature of intuition is necessarily elusive. One could parallel it with Hesse’s appreciation of music for its “quality of being constantly present, its mobility and unceasing urge to hasten on, to leave the space it has only just entered” (Hesse, 1943). Intuition is, and demands, change. Intuition is the receptivity that is the ‘reward’ for acceptance—in ‘paying attention to what it is, just as it is’ we are able to see it for what it is. If we do not accept our presence (our role or ability to respond) in the co-creative moment of artist/artwork, then we shut down our receptivity to intuition—that is, our awareness of aligning our aesthetic choices with the demands of the work. When this happens, the only options are to either continue the work mechanically by acting out of unthinking habit, or to end the work.

However, the question of whether one is ‘tuned in’ to intuition during improvisation is not only a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response. Although it may be so from moment to moment, in the span of an unfolding work, it is not uncommon to move in and out of different states; anywhere from unconscious habits to moments of inspiration. This is part of the constant re-alignment; recognizing and reminding oneself where one is in relation to where one *intends* to be. It is the depth and clarity of one’s reception of intuition from moment to moment that defines, and is defined by, the quality of the communication between artist and artwork in the co-creative moment; the interdependent presence and resonance between artist and artwork. It is the factor of intention that serves to lay the way for this deepening of intuition.

It could be said that ‘intention’ seems counter to the nature of improvisation—intention implies planning and structure. At the most basic level, one must at least intend (plan) to improvise (Peters, 2009), but what is the nature of their relationship beyond that? The aligning of aesthetic choices necessitates intention, and vice-versa. In a sense, this is the improvisation that takes place *before* improvisation. The artist makes a choice to communicate something through the artwork—diversity, change, freedom, individuality, whatever it may be—or in not making a choice, the artist has unconsciously chosen to either surrender to whatever comes along, or to negate their openness to whatever comes along through unconscious habits or tendencies. Intention is the goal that has been set and the foundation by which the improviser can gauge their alignment with the unfolding artwork and ground it in physical presence. Their intuition can say ‘yes this is what I was intending’ and continue on, or ‘no this is not what I was intending’ and either accept the deviation or re-align.

In the creative moment, the increasingly refined intuition does not need to consciously step through this process of measuring against the intention and checking for a yes or no. Instead, awareness of both the moment and the creative flow are increasingly unified, and (as in binary data) the flow of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ can be conceived and received as information that is greater than the sum of its parts, eventually not even a question of yes or no, but a ‘sense’ beyond language, and thus a stream of that-which-is-sensed. In this way, the nature or character of the creative flow becomes a perceptible moment in itself, an entity, and the increasingly refined intuition develops (and is itself) an increasing aptitude for agility in navigating this generative network of creative information. In essence, it is the ability to move between all levels, from the momentary details to the overview of the artwork all-at-once. As Clarke (2001) puts it “in the course of a performance, a player’s structural awareness constantly shifts between regions of activated structure that vary in durational extent and generative depth”—in the diagram below, this can be considered as shifting between the top of the tree (unified awareness of structure) and the bottom (awareness of discrete details). Improvisation often amplifies the intensity and immediate necessity for intuition to guide this faculty of “shifting between regions of activated structure” (moving

up and down on the tree—zooming in and out between the overview and the details), not least because the duration and detail of structures in-progress, or yet-to-happen, are largely unknown—that is, the future is largely unknown to the improviser, thus the positioning of their aesthetic perspective/point-of-view on the piece from moment to moment relies greatly on intuition.



This diagram comes from Clarke’s discussion of “Generative Principles in Music Performance” (Clarke, 2001)—in which he discusses this notion of the awareness of a generative structure, where the very top of this tree is a “total unified structural knowledge” where the artist can hear (or imagine) a piece of music at all-at-once, and the bottom of the tree represents the focus on individual structural details.

“Though something of an idealization, we can imagine a performer who, at the start of a performance, has a complete knowledge of the generative structure of the piece, from the very highest level, where the whole piece is represented as a unity, down to the lowest level where each individual note is represented...Evidence for the highest level in this structure is rather sparse, and is confined to statements by a number of composers (Mozart,

Beethoven, Hindemith) which indicate that they were able to hear (or imagine) their own compositions in a single 'glance'. Since these composers were also performers, the unified conceptions of which they claimed to be capable can be regarded as the basis of performances as well as compositions." (Clarke, 2001)

Although Clarke's discussion is centred in composed music, his acknowledgement that it also applies just as well to performance welcomes it into the realm of improvisation. This question of the delineation between composition, performance, and improvisation is illuminated by the notion of a "total unified structural knowledge". In all three cases, the following rings true:

"It is likely that incorrect projections will result in inappropriate attributions of structural significance, failure to grasp long term connections" (Clarke, 2001)

When one has an intuitive overview of a piece there is a basic 'knowing' when one element or another is incongruent with this overview; there is an inconsistency, an aesthetic imbalance, or a sense of something being out of place with those 'long term connections'. The overview doesn't even have to be defined in detail in the performer's mind, it may just be a sense of aesthetic continuity derived from an intention. 'Incorrect projections' amount to not being present with 'what is' in the unfolding of the work, instead imposing our will in order to try to control the outcome—'what we want it to be' rather than 'what is'. This is different from those alterations and re-alignments with the nature of the work that *do* grasp the long term connections. If the essence of a work is present in every grain of the work, then *any* projection that runs counter to that essential nature of the work fails to grasp long term connections.

If we apply the above diagram not just to the elements of musical structure (which at any rate we generally believe to be happening across a linear flow of time), but also to the concept of 'moments', then its significance to the intuitive receptivity of aesthetic continuity (long term connections) expands infinitely. In

this light, the top of the diagram would represent all-time, all moments perceived at once, or a single moment encompassing all other moments, and the bottom would represent discrete moments that were interpreted as being distinct from one another. Thus the question of 'how short is a moment' could as easily be 'how long is a moment'. The question of being 'in-the-moment', so often considered in improvisation, could just as well apply to a 'moment' of composition that spans years. One can consciously navigate this generative structure between the momentary details and the all-at-once as required in the service of doing and preparation:

"We will never have a better idea of what we're doing than we do right now. It is not in the nature of doing to improve but rather to come into being, to continue, to go out of being and to be still, not doing. That still not-doing is a preparation. It is not just static: it is a quiet readiness for whatever and the multiplicities are already there in the making... so we continue doing and changing." (Cage, 1973)

On Surrender

"That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art...One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition...And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the...renewal of mankind." (Benjamin, 1936)

To return to the discussion of sampling as it relates to improvisation, Benjamin discusses the authenticity of the original—the 'aura' of the original work that is absent in its reproduction—and the way in which this 'shattering of tradition' enables the surrender of both artwork and audience to the 'reactivation' of the reproduction. In improvisation, the artist is as much the 'beholder or listener' as

the audience, and so this rebirthing of the reproduction into a new life in a new context is also the surrendering of the artist, in the artist/artwork co-creation, to this new mode of being with, and of, the work. As Benjamin illustrates, in the creative moment, the art of sampling (or whatever other mode of creative reproduction) transcends the problem of the loss of aura. In sampling, objects of reproduction become the raw materials in a new work of art with its own unique aura of authenticity. The concept of sampling suggests the inevitability of a non-hierarchical generative network of interdependent collaboration. This is the surrendering and opening of the 'means-end' entity to dialectic vision, with each artwork as a creative node holding separate, and yet weaving together, a multitude of viewpoints.

If we assimilate this into our understanding we do not even need the collage process to take place. Through this understanding we can perceive the reproduced artwork/artefact (just as it appears in the physical world) in a new context (that moment, which is always new) as a new piece of art. This new piece of art is not authentically what the original was intended to be, but it can be authentically something new. Thus whenever a work of art goes out into the world, regardless of notions of ownership, it is surrendered to reproduction and re-contextualization, either by our perception, or through being re-born as part of a new artwork.

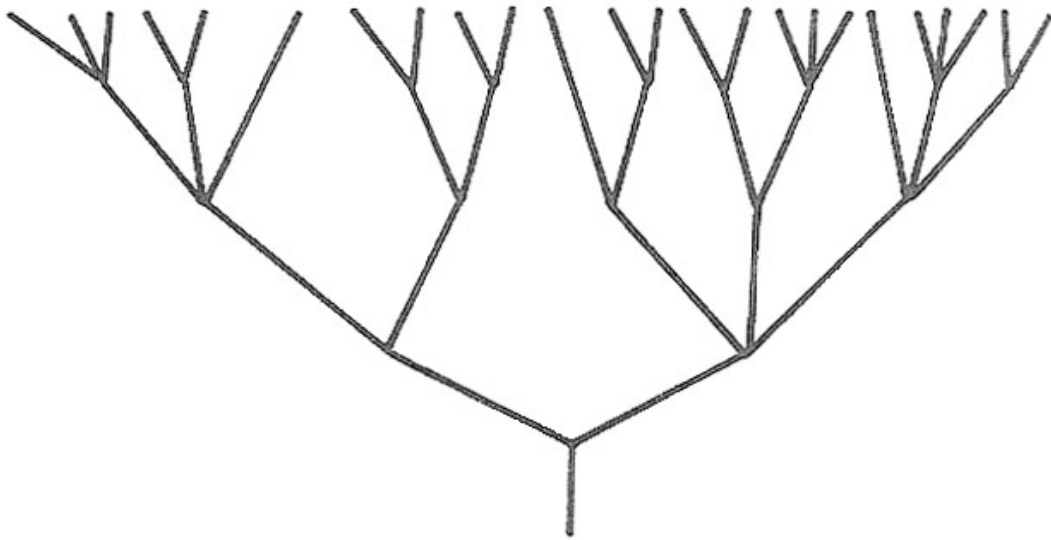
This re-novation is at the heart of the improvisatory moment of artist/artwork co-constitution, as we are increasingly able to see even the completed artwork as being a node in a network of re-contextualizations—a field of possibilities. Whether these re-contextualizations are quite literal—as they are in sampling and collage—or whether they take place in conceptual or imaginary spaces, the artist still has, in the creative moment, the choice and/or ability to consciously engage in an act of surrender to this field of possibilities, to open or close the emerging artwork to various dimensions of a network of shifting relationships. The notion of generative music further illustrates this:

“What fascinated me about these kinds of music [Riley, Reich, and Cage] was that they really completely moved away from that old idea of how a composer worked. It was quite clear...that the composer didn’t have a picture of the finished piece in his head when he started. What the composer had was...a packet of seeds, you might say. And those musical seeds, once planted, turned into the piece. And they turned into a different version of that piece every time...Changing the idea of the composer from somebody who stood at the top of a process and dictated precisely how it was carried out, to somebody who stood at the bottom of a process who carefully planted some rather well-selected seeds, hopefully, and watched them turn into something.” (Eno, 2011)

Eno goes on to define “bottom-up organization” where things grow from the bottom and turn into things of greater complexity—citing Stafford Beer’s *The Brain of the Firm: The Managerial Cybernetics of Organization*:

“Instead of trying to organize it in full detail, you organize it only somewhat and you then rely on the dynamics of the system to take you in the direction you want to go.” (Beer, 1981)

So returning to the concept of surrender, what Eno seeks to define here is a surrendering of the artist to these unfolding dynamics of a system, rather than the artist dictating their vision and defining or controlling the parameters as tightly as possible in order to have that vision realized. He describes “working in collaboration with the complex and unpredictable processes of nature...[in order to] stop thinking of top-down control as being the only way in which things could be made” (Eno, 2011).



In this way, the generative structure we have been discussing is more accurately represented upside-down, where the seed is planted at the bottom, and the dynamics of the system allow it to branch out in perhaps complex and unpredictable ways. David Borgo also challenges traditional notions of control, and supports the notion of generative creative systems, leading towards the dialectics of collaborative creativity:

“An extreme reliance on centralized organization and centralized metaphors in the past has led to a situation in which many people are unwilling or unable to imagine systems organizing in a decentralized fashion. When people hear music they tend to assume a composer, a leader, or, when that music is improvised, they tend to assume that creativity emerges solely from the individual.” (Borgo, 2006)

His suggestion of ‘systems organized in a decentralized fashion’ brings us back to the idea of surrender in the form of a generative network. To illustrate and expand on this, it is useful to more deeply explore the concept of stigmergy—that principle which gives order to many complex dynamic systems in nature, such as the complex structures built by many social insects. In the process of stigmergy, one individual in a system modifies the environment, and another individual responds to the changed environment rather than responding directly to the

actions of the first individual (Borgo, 2006). Thus each creative moment, allied to the unfolding demands of the work, is a node in the network of a larger creative work. The co-creation of each new moment must *be* surrendered to the demands of the work as it unfolds within a network of works—the artist in a cooperative network. This surrender also entails that the artist accept the possibility of their own limited local perspective; like insects, they need not see the whole picture in order to carry out their role effectively in the system. Eno describes this as:

“a rethinking of one’s own position as a creator...You start thinking of all of us as the audience...I think it isn’t the difference between order and disorder, it’s the difference between one understanding of order and how it comes into being, and a newer understanding of how order comes into being...It’s a repositioning of ourselves on the control/surrender spectrum...We’re used to the idea that the great triumph of humans is their ability to control...What we’re not used to is the idea that another great gift we have is the talent to surrender and to cooperate...To be able to surrender is to be able to know when to stop trying to control.” (Eno, 2011)

Improvisation is about surrender to ‘what is’, and ‘what is’ transcends improvisation, but accepts it as a site of transcendence, to become a new conception that lets go of any improvisatory limitations to embrace an expanding sphere of cooperative creativity.

“The novelty of our work derives therefore from our having moved away from simply private human concerns towards the world of nature and society of which all of us are a part. Our intention is to affirm this life, not to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we’re living, which is so excellent once one gets one’s mind and one’s desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.” (Cage, 1973)

On Dialectics

“Nietzsche often says that the strongest will of all is the will not to will, thus describing the resolution necessary not to succumb to the attractions of mere diversity and its illusions of infinite novelty and the pseudo-individuality that so easily accompany it.” (Peters, 2009)

The act of surrender that is ‘the will not to will’ illustrates an essential point to clarify about diversity in order to gain a clear concept of dialectics; the difference between diversity of ego (‘illusions of infinite novelty’) versus egoless diversity (true dialectics). As a product of the ego and diversity-embroiled-in-control, take for instance the improvisation that privileges technique over aesthetic congruence; no matter how skilfully executed, if not done with conscious presence of the unfolding nature of the artwork, this action is oppressively silencing that nature. Instead, the artist is dictating and imposing their own will. Taken to the extreme, where philosophy and aesthetics *are* considered by the artist, but the will is overwhelmingly imposed on the nature and the communication (perhaps through attempts to be ‘original’, ‘free’, or to avoid cliché), the infinite novelty of diversity can approach entropy, or perceptually undifferentiated chaos:

“When everything is unpredictable, unpredictability becomes the most predictable thing imaginable.” (Peters, 2009)

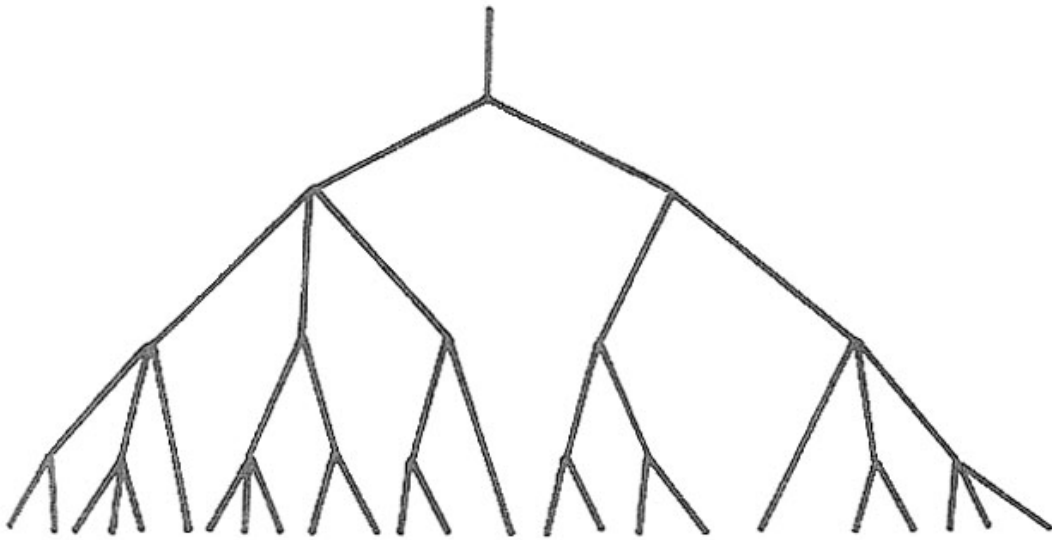
This is analogous to white noise; the details may be constantly shifting and unpredictable, but the impression for the average listener is a predictably uniform blanket of sound.

On the other hand, egoless diversity in improvisation might be considered as a collaboration between artist and artwork, whereby the artist surrenders their will and opens their intuition to what is required of them in the unfolding generative network. This is sometimes referred to as a “group mind”, being in that egoless state where “the actions of individuals and the group perfectly

harmonize” (Borgo, 2006). The paradox of dialectics is that the site of the creative moment at which this egolessness occurs is between artist and artwork, not between artist and artist. Cage re-iterates this notion:

“That faculty of observing relationships we are also leaving in us, not putting the observation of one into the other who, it goes without saying, see things from his own point of view which is different from another’s...By keeping things in that are in and letting those things that are out stay out, a paradox takes place: it becomes a simple matter to make an identification with someone or something.” (Cage, 1973)

Again, this echoes what has been expounded in discussions of stigmergy; individuals act on, and respond to changes in the environment rather than relying on direct communication with each other. In a broader sense, the process described by Cage of leaving the faculty of observing relationships in oneself, and thereby making an identification with another, is at the heart of creative dialectics, “measuring from zero” in this case to identify with a point of view. It is a paradox; it seems rational to reach outside of ourselves to try and understand another, but the state of receptivity is silence, it is to “pay attention to what it is, just as it is”. In this way, the multitude of viewpoints is accepted, and acceptance of the creative moment is receptivity to intuition.



Returning again to the tree diagram above, the top of the tree represents “total unified structural knowledge”, but this time it is being considered in the realm of relationships. So the multitude of different viewpoints (at the bottom of the diagram) is encompassed in the single unified viewpoint at the top. This is the ‘common-sense’, that sense which is common to all, which is the ability to “measure from zero”. In this context, truly identifying with another (ultimately all others, at which point the illusion of ‘other’ dissolves) means to observe out of one’s own silence. So the top of the diagram could just as well represent the reception of a piece of music all-at-once, or the single moment containing all others. Indeed, if we superimposed those different trees—dialectics, musical structure, and moment—then we have an idea of the individual-unified-group-mind-receiving-and-creating-from-all-sources-simultaneously; the eternal creative moment of change that is silence.

To return again to the concept of stigmergy as self-organization without the need for planning or control, where self-organization in this context refers to both the inner-self, and to the generative network of interdependent entities (selves) in which the individual is but a single node, here again we see the co-creation of artists and artwork when they are aligned to a common purpose. However, ‘common purpose’ here does not mean trying to reach a consensus, a common

concept of what is beautiful, as this again implies top-down control. Rather, it is artists in collaboration intuitively responsive to “the demands of the work to become itself once underway”, responsive to the artwork rather than to each other. Not needing to reach consensus is itself a process, and in the service of that process of unfolding towards egoless engagement with diversity— adaptability is essential:

“[If] improvised sound is thought of as a shared environment, adaptability is the ability to acclimatize...offering an inference that the behaviour may in turn modify the sonic environment. The unfolding temporal structure of a musical event (performance, composition) could be interpreted as a process of adaptation...Sonic materials might be heard as agents that present, modify, and re-represent according to the emergent environment context; an autonomous ‘living’ music responding to its own environment.” (Young, 2009)

Although the autonomy that Young is describing here is in reference to creative algorithms, the concept can be applied to a broader conception of improvised music making. Interpreted in this way, ‘adaptability’ in the dialectic interplay comes to mean that not only can one acclimatize one’s behaviour to the environment, but that both artist and artwork have agency; music, as much as the artist, as a living entity responding to its environment. To extrapolate improvisation beyond the realms of music, dialectics thus concerns relationships between all things, as the field of improvisation shifts the focus from the agents to the changing relationships between them (Cobussen, 2009). This field of dialectics is diversity in every dimension, and thus an implicit fluidity and adaptability in every realm, for diversity in all realms demands (and is) fluidity and adaptability. Change is the only constant.

“I believe, of course, that what we’re doing is exploring a field, that the field is limitless and without qualitative differentiation but with multiplicity of differences, that our business has changed from judgment to awareness...Would it be accurate to say then that we are all off in separate

corners engaged in our special concerns? No. It is more to the point to talk about the field itself, which is that it is and enables us all to be doing the same thing so differently.” (Cage, 1973)

Conclusion

“We look back and analyze the events of our lives, but there is another way of seeing, a backward-and-forward-at-once vision, that is not rationally understandable.” (Rumi, 2004)

Peters’ analogy of the scrap yard game, where contestants are challenged to create new things from the junk made available to them, illustrates the site where the old and new are engaged with simultaneously, and is thus the perfect place to bring this whole discussion full circle, back to the concepts of philosophy and aesthetics as they apply to improvisation:

“Using...the genre of scrap yard game shows for illustrative purposes [we may] begin the consideration of a rather different model of improvisation, one that is not intended to counter so much as augment the existing accounts of improvisation that privilege the new. In particular, it is the manner in which such games demand a form of improvisation...within the strictly delimited material universe of the scrap yard — that brings into view the productive interpenetration of origination and re-novation as the new and the old are engaged with simultaneously.” (Peters, 2009)

Sampling is analogous to this scrap yard game: artefacts and reproductions from the past are birthed into new contexts as uniquely authentic artworks. In this analogy of sampling, all our fields of exploration are embodied—place, silence, intuition, surrender, and dialectics:

Sampling recognizes an artefact as a place (a field of possibilities), as well as recognizing the new context into which it is placed. Taken out of its original

context, it recognizes the silence that surrounds it—the nature of its resonance—in order that it may be recontextualized according to that nature. Sampling recognizes the sonic qualities of its artefacts beyond only the ‘musical information’, thus demanding that attention is brought to those sonic aesthetics for which there are no rules and few guidelines, thus inviting intuitive engagement. Sampling demands surrender to the interdependent dialectics of the generative network, both the network of connections within the collaged work and the real-world network of the relationships between who-sampled-who—the generative lineage.

Being careful not to over-emphasize its presence in this discussion, it is used here (simply by virtue of it being my practical field of experience) as an allegory for the philosophy and aesthetics of improvised music making; it is a microcosm of the improvisatory moment. That which, in sampling, must be garnered, prepared, and redistributed can instead occur instantaneously in the improvisatory moment. Through the *concept* of sampling we can understand that it is no longer necessary to be “flying backwards into the future” (Peters, 2009); instead we can be present to the past and future at once; the moment of creation as both “origination and re-novation”. This presence is the culminating ‘resonance’, the sphere of ‘knowing’ of the aesthetic unfolding and thus the ability to sense the aesthetic relationship between the whole and the details. It is the presence by which we are empty and able resonate with the unfolding work, a “demonstration of disinterestedness...proof that our delight lies in not possessing anything. Each moment presents what happens. How different this form sense is from that which is bound up with memory” (Cage, 1973):

“We need not destroy the past: it is gone; at any moment, it might reappear and seem to be and be the present. Would it be a repetition? Only if we thought we owned it, but since we don’t, it is free and so are we.” (Cage, 1973)

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Notes

ⁱ To clarify the distinction between philosophy and aesthetics as referred to throughout, I offer the following, which is only my personal sense of those concepts. A more definitively objective delineation would be beyond the scope of this paper:

Where philosophy is akin to an unchanging foundation, aesthetics is the adaptable sense of balance by which we live our lives.

Aesthetics is a focus on those things which must be allowed to change in order to respond creatively to life, whereas philosophy focuses on those things that it would be hypocritical to change.

Aesthetics grow from the ground (of philosophy) and are then tended; thus becoming a garden for which we have a sense of balance that demands diversity and adaptability. Just as most codified art-forms are a set of guidelines from which an infinite variety of works can spring: in many cases, these guidelines are not prescriptive instructions, but rather they are parameters which can be woven into a multitude of configurations. What they most often describe is a sense of beauty as it applies to the nature of their historical moment—thus demanding that the art-form itself be able to respond to its situation. Philosophy represents the timeless principles against which we can guide and balance these aesthetic values. Without the timelessness of philosophy, we cannot perceive the change of aesthetics—without the change of aesthetics we cannot perceive the timelessness of philosophy. To use an analogy, philosophy is the wise old master sitting still watching the child, aesthetics, at play.

ⁱⁱ Dialectics here is intended to mean not just the synthesis of *opposing* points of view, but rather the synthesis of *multiple* and *diverse* points of view into a higher understanding. Where opposing points of view may be two sides of the same coin, *diverse* points of view are many different sides of many different coins.

The use of “dialectics” here is also not intended to suggest harmonious resolution based on consensus—‘synthesis of opposing points of view’ rather refers to perceiving the multitude of different points of view as they are, from a single centre of consciousness; holding many (possibly contradictory) ideas without needing to resolve or make any of them right or wrong, but rather to be present to the relationships between them all.