

IMPRO TALKS

subTexte 14

A Symposium on Improvisation in Theater
Zurich University of the Arts, October 2016



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Introduction IMPRO TALKS

The symposium IMPRO TALKS was held in October 2016 at the Zurich University of the Arts and to our knowledge it was the first international academic gathering dedicated to improvisation in theater. We had realized that there is an imbalance in research on improvisation in different artistic fields: While there is quite an impressive corpus of research on improvisation in music, there is only very little academic literature on improvisation in theater, dance and writing. The most comprehensive collection on research in improvisation *The Improvisation Studies Reader* (Caines and Heble 2015) is a manifestation of this: While contributions on music reach a deep academic level, contributions on theater are more essayistic and practical. Research in music is highly differentiated, technologically up to date and well established; fascinating research has been conducted in search of neurological mechanisms that foster improvisation (Limb and Braun 2008) (Beaty 2015). We felt that research on improvisation in theater has to catch up and so we invited 10 advanced researchers of the field to present and discuss their topics. The result was an interesting mix of methods, approaches and academic conventions. As expected the contributions were quite heterogeneous, since there is no such thing as a “theory of improvisational theater” or even a consensus of which discipline should investigate on it: Psychology? Theater studies? Linguistics? This book compiles most of the contributions of IMPRO TALKS and makes them accessible for an interested public and for further research.

The first contribution is a historical investigation by Edgar Landgraf on the understanding of improvisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth century – contrasted and complemented with ideas of the 20th century by Niklas Luhmann and Gerhard Richter.

In the second chapter Gunter Lösel provides a concept from theater studies to explain the contemporary success of improvisational theater – the use of perceptual frames that direct the audience’s attention towards the strengths of improvisation and away from its weaknesses.

In the third contribution Nicolas Zaunbrecher reflects on a concept that is so much at the very basis of improvisation that most improvisers don’t even think about it any more: spontaneity. He describes practices to gain insight into

the process of performing spontaneity and reflects on the paradox of being spontaneous on command.

Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow then reflect on how their concept of improvisation has changed and widened during the 20 years since the publication of their acclaimed book *“Improvisation in Drama”*. They give an introduction to the third edition and give insight into their current discussions.

In the fifth chapter, Duncan Marwick looks at two key concepts of improvisation from a practical side: attention and awareness. He underpins his reflections with practices from playback theater and the Meisner Technique.

The last contribution is dedicated to improvisation as a method of research. Christian Freisleben-Teutscher sketches out a framework for the use of improvisation in artistic research and practice-based research drawing attention to research methods that don't follow a linear, predictable research-design, but follow emergent phenomena.

We are proud to have hosted this inspiring event and want to thank the Institute for the Performing Arts and Film (Zurich) for funding and supporting the symposium, namely Anton Rey, Yvonne Schmidt and Jasmina Courti. The publikation is part of the series *“subTexte”* edited by Anton Rey.

Zurich, April 2017
Gunter Lösel

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Improvisation as Art: History, Theory, Practice

Edgar Landgraf

The article traces our modern understanding of improvisation and improvisation's contentious relationship to art back to the eighteenth century. In the period, artists and theoreticians of art vacillated between high praise, feelings of ambivalence, and profound skepticism about improvisation's artistic value. The historical ambivalence reflects how improvisation's traditional connection to repetition and variation is being supplanted by the recognition and appreciation of improvisation as an inventive tool that fulfills key expectations for modern art as articulated in the eighteenth century. The article explores how contemporary descriptions of the art creating process by Niklas Luhmann and Gerhard Richter, which do away with the metaphysical and psychological vocabulary of the past, make apparent the deep affinities between improvisation and art. Such affinities are apparent also already in the Romantics' appraisal and rediscovery of improvisation. Their staged improvisations anticipate not only contemporary Improv theater practices, but also invite a critical reassessment of distinctions between authentic and staged, spontaneous and planned, rule-governed and free that is much in line with contemporary tendencies in critical improvisation studies. The article concludes with a reflection on an alternative conception of authenticity, one that does not oppose authentic or "natural" performances to staged and planned acts, but instead seeks to understand authenticity as the artist's, actor's, and improviser's identification with his or her doings.

Let me first address the title of my presentation, which is also the first part of the title of my 2011 book *Improvisation as Art. Conceptual Challenges, Historical Perspectives*. The topic it denotes falls in-between two trajectories within contemporary improvisation studies. One main area within improvisation studies is concerned with the art of improvisation (rather than improvisation as art). Its focus is practice oriented, deals with technical matters, includes how-to-do guides, and often is of a personal nature, offering descriptions of improvisation by practitioners in various fields (typically in music, theater, and dance). Michael Dibb's 2005 documentary *Keith Jarrett: The Art of Improvisation* is exemplary in this regard, combining elaborations of techniques with personal accounts of the experience of one of Jazz's most famous improvising pianist. As much as I am interested in such practical considerations, my approach is different. Rather than examining particular practices or draw on personal experience, I am interested in the codes, ideas, distinctions, expectations, hierarchies that inform such descriptions and the sentiments they often share about improvisation. Put differently, rather than observe improvisation, I like to take a second-order perspective and observe observations or descriptions of improvisation.

My research is also not following the present tendency of critical improvisation studies to go beyond the traditional art forms of music, theater, dance, and poetry and examine improvisation in the non-arts. Studies on improvisation in business and organizational theories go a while back now, but more recently we can witness a further expansion into such diverse fields as cognitive science, computer science, neurophysiology, law, urban planning, yoga, and even farming. Paul Richards' recently published article "Shifting Cultivation as Improvisation" looks at West African farmers' use of improvisation to determine when to set fires or for adjusting seed mixtures. Improvisation serves here as a disposition that helps deal with what could be called the predictable unpredictabilities of natural cycles. I find explorations of improvisation in such unexpected areas particularly interesting as they challenge dominant tropes, ideas, and assumptions about improvisation. The focus on farming, for example, makes us reflect on the temporality of improvisation. We like to think of improvisation as *ad hoc* and like to use the metaphor of "being in the moment" – but, as George E. Lewis pointed out, there is quite some flexibility about the possible length of such a "moment."¹

Richards' essay is part of the 2016 comprehensive (two volume) *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* edited by George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut. The *Handbook* contains a plethora of contributions that expand the scope of improvisation studies into unexpected fields and an excellent introduction by the editors that reflects on the history and on possible future directions of critical improvisation studies. Together with the 2015 anthology *The Improvisation Studies Reader. Spontaneous Acts*, edited by Rebecca Caines and Ajay Heble (Routledge 2015) and the continued work of the Guelph-based "Improvisation, Community and Social Practice" group and its Journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation* (<http://www.critical-improv.com>) – and with workshops like this one – we can witness not only an expansion of improvisation studies going on at the moment, but also an attempt to consolidate and reflect on the history and possible futures of improvisation studies.

My own work remains committed to the more narrow focus on improvisation in and as art. That is, my concern is with the recognition and description of improvisation as a legitimate artistic activity, not as the "imperfect art," as Ted Gioia entitled his 1988 book on improvisation in jazz, but as a practice that helps fulfill in exemplary ways the expectations for modern art as they have developed since the eighteenth century. Gioia's book title indicates how this remains a controversial claim long into the twentieth century where avant-garde and performance artists like John Cage still shy away from using the term improvisation in part because they want to distance their "serious" artistic endeavors from improvisational practices that are seen as entertainment (including Jazz).²

Why this resistance to the recognition of improvisation as art? And what are the counterarguments that can help us appreciate improvisation's artistic significance? My research approaches these questions from two angles. One, drawing on poststructuralist and neocybernetic theories, I hope to challenge some of the implicit and explicit hierarchies that inform twentieth-century and many contemporarily still popular views on improvisation. Secondly, I think it is necessary to expand the historical frame with which we look at improvisation and go back to the eighteenth century, to the time when our modern understanding of art emerged. (For apparent reasons, improvisation studies tend to focus on the twentieth century.) The eighteenth century is also the time when the appreciation

for improvisation changed dramatically, when after centuries of improvisation being a revered practice in music, poetry and theater, the authorities from north of the alps decide to ban improvisation from what is now considered “high art”.

In the following, I will summarize some of the main arguments of my book *Improvisation as Art*. I will first go back to the period around 1800 and focus primarily on developments in the use of improvisation in theater vis-à-vis the aesthetic discourse of the time period. In the second part, I will pay special attention to the Romantics who rediscover and to some extent reinvent improvisation, anticipating contemporary uses and conceptions of improvisation that I hope are interesting not only from a historical and theoretical viewpoint, but also from a practical perspective.

Before turning to the eighteenth century, we should remind ourselves again that improvisational practices have a much longer and venerable history especially in music and theater (and also in rhetoric). In this regard, it is surprising, but also telling that improvisation loses its appeal in the eighteenth century. It reflects comprehensive social changes that affect the period of the Enlightenment and that today we associate with the advent of modernity. With regard to the German theater, it is Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700–1766) who articulated the Enlightenment’s position against improvisation (and other forms of “low art”) famously and forcefully already in 1730. In his *Essay on a Critical Poetic Theory* (*Versuch einer Critischen Dichtkunst vor die Deutschen*), Gottsched understands improvisation as a sign of laziness and ignorance, and the stock characters and masks it employs – Gottsched specifically targets the *Commedia dell’arte* and related traditions – as dispensable. Gottsched faults the improvisational theater for not following the model of nature and for failing to elevate because, he argues, improvisation does not pursue the universal but instead clings to the particular.³ The concerns expressed by Gottsched did not mean that improvisation disappeared altogether from the stage or that it lost all of its popularity during the Enlightenment era;⁴ it does, however, lead to improvisation being positioned outside of the realm of art at the very moment when modern aesthetics emerges as a discipline, and fundamentally rethinks the function and meaning of art.

There are a number of political and cultural developments that contribute to the banning of improvisation from art in the eighteenth century.

Improvisation was often associated with the burlesque, its inclination to mock authorities scared state censors who insisted on the ability to review theater scripts in advance of a performance (even for puppet theater performances); the more reverent forms of improvisation as practiced in the *Commedia dell' arte* and its French variant, the *Comédie-Italienne*, were also closely linked to a stratified courtly culture and the duality of aristocracy and lower classes against which the bourgeoisie writes. Equally important, though, is an underlying media change. The eighteenth century is a tipping point, where the largely oral culture of past centuries loses its dominance to print. This change in communication media is important because it is accompanied by a new (at the time) emphasis on newness and originality in art. Whereas oral cultures process and communicate information through repetition and the variation of familiar types and patterns, the ready availability of books reduces the need for such mnemonic aids and instead encourages newness, originality, and innovation, notions that are quickly adopted by the emerging aesthetic discourses. Here, too, improvisation finds itself (at least at first) on the wrong side of history, if we consider its traditional use. In epic poetry and the ancient schools of rhetoric, that is, from Homer to the rhetorical writings of Alcidamas and Quintilian,⁵ improvisation had served the mnemonic, persuasive, and decorative needs of oral cultures. As a consequence, improvisation emphasized the repetition and variation of existing patterns and types, rather than its potential to promote inventiveness.⁶ We need to remind ourselves of this tradition to appreciate how much the identification of improvisation in art with ideals of inventiveness, newness, alterity, non-conformity, and so on is a modern development that presupposes a modern, Western understanding of art as it emerged in the eighteenth century, and that continues to inform our contemporary views on what constitutes art, our expectation for art, and hence whether we might recognize improvisation as art.

If we look at improvisation against the backdrop of these eighteenth-century changes in the understanding of art, we have to rethink popular twentieth-century narratives, which put improvisation in opposition to “traditional” bourgeois art. George E. Lewis, for example, in his assessment of Bebop links improvisation intricately to non-conformity (*Improvised Music*, 95). This is, of course, a valid position in the social, cultural and political context in which Bebop emerged. If we view non-conformity

as a form of pursuing inventiveness, however, then twentieth-century improvisational practices that run counter to the established arts of their time, are not negating, but rather fulfill more radically “bourgeois art’s” artistic ambitions. Put differently, the aesthetic ideals that emerge in the eighteenth century and that continue to define our modern expectations for art should not be confused with the bourgeois practices and preferences in art, music, and theater that “petrified” as the established arts at any particular period of time.

While the described media and social changes can help explain why improvisation fell out of favor in the eighteenth century, they also contain the seed for the rediscovery and reinvention of improvisation. This tension is reflected already in the varied and often contradictory reception of improvisation before 1800. In the German context, Gottsched’s rejection of improvisation is met with more moderate and somewhat ambivalent responses by such notables as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Karl Philipp Moritz. Carl Ludwig Fernow’s *Über die Improvisatoren* from 1801, the first book-length study of improvisation in German, which focuses on the Italian improvisational tradition, is an outright celebration of improvisation as a true expression of artistic genius. Historically, it is particularly interesting that two of the chief architects of the aesthetics of autonomy, namely Goethe and Moritz,⁷ were simultaneously troubled and fascinated by the performances of Italian improvisers. Moritz’s Italian journey coincided with Goethe’s, with the two for a period of time meeting each other regularly in Rome. At the same time that they were discussing their ideas on beauty, art, and aesthetic autonomy, Moritz frequently visited the performances of a Venetian improviser on Rome’s Piazza di Spagna. In one of the longer entries in his travel journal dated October 11, 1787, Moritz provides us with a detailed account of the talented Venetian *improvistore*’s performances. The entry is a telling example for improvisation serving, in Angela Estherhammer’s words, “as both a model and a foil for an emerging Romantic aesthetics of genius, originality and inspiration” (*Overflows*, 9–10).

I offer a more detailed analysis of the varied reception of improvisation around 1800 in my book than is possible here. Instead, I will try to summarize some of the contentious issues that I believe are still relevant for contemporary discourses on improvisation. Let me start with one of

the more controversial features of the aesthetics of autonomy, namely its notion of completeness and perfection – that art finds its purpose in itself, or, as Moritz put it in his essay “On the Describability of Artworks,” that true works of art cannot be described because they are perfect descriptions of themselves.⁸ For a study of improvisation, concepts of completeness and perfection must raise questions regarding their applicability to what often is perceived as an “imperfect art” (Gioia). Needless to say, improvisation always runs the risk of failing. But so do artworks or performances that do not stage themselves as improvised.

The question, in any case, is what is meant by perfection? And what would constitute a “mistake” or incompleteness in art? Moritz defines perfection in terms of a self-referential closure, which he unfolds as a relationship between parts and whole. The idea is that the parts that make up the artwork give meaning to each other and the whole and the whole gives meaning to all of its parts and do so in a saturated way. While some of the verbiage is old-fashioned and problematic from the perspective of an age that has learned to emphasize openness, contingency, randomness, and so on, we should not ignore the main thrust of the argument, namely that the coherence of the artwork or performance can no longer be determined by preset parameters, independent rules, the work’s relationship to nature, or other factors that would be external to the particular instantiation of the artwork (e.g. the wishes of the aristocracy or the church or today by the needs of the mass media and advertisers). Aesthetic autonomy means that each artwork or performance must develop its own way of creating coherence and necessity, of getting parts and whole work together for something to emerge that is, if not beautiful, then interesting, complex, expressive, and in some form or another appears to be artistically coherent and necessary. This also applies to improvisational performances that aim at staging incoherence, incompleteness, imperfection, or the absence of meaning, necessity, continuity and so on. To be recognizable as art, such celebrations of contingency must still seem original and necessary – in the sense of them exhibiting an aesthetic program. Someone untrained hammering randomly away on a piano does not constitute a form of improvisation, though one could certainly imagine an artist framing such doings in a way that could lend them artistic value. Since the beginning of the twentieth century (think Dada), much of improvisational- and per-

formance-oriented art has been thriving on this tension, on staging art's ability not only to frame the necessary as contingent, but also to present the contingent as necessary for art.

Against the backdrop of such a self-referential concept of autonomy, we can also better understand another feature of improvisation, namely the idea that improvisers take on more risk than art forms or performances that do not rely on improvisation as an inventive and compositional tool. While it is certainly true that the self-imposed temporal frame of improvisation and the inability to discard failures present particular challenges to the performing artist, improvisers at the same time are able to compensate for those risks as they have the flexibility and are trained in the art of error correction. In this sense, improvisation is perhaps even less prone to making "mistakes" than artistic performances that follow the blueprint model. For a "mistake" is only a mistake when the performance fails to give meaning to it subsequently, and this is harder to do for someone following a score or a script than for someone that focuses on and is trained in framing "mishaps" in ways that can subsequently make the contingent appear as necessary.

Another affinity (rather than opposite) of the ideals of aesthetic autonomy with the practice of improvisation is that both attribute increased significance to the *production* process over the product. In the eighteenth century, this becomes apparent if we look at how art's relationship to nature is redefined. Art – and this is the argument at the center of Moritz's essay "On the Artistic Imitation of the Beautiful" – is no longer about imitating or idealizing the products of nature, rather, it now is thought to emulate the productive *force* of nature. Nature, in turn, no longer reveals itself in its objects, but as "drive" and stimulus ("Reiz" or "Triebkraft"). This is interesting not only because it introduces a whole new field of psychological thinking to aesthetics, but it also puts the artist in a paradoxical situation. Simply put, if art can no longer follow rules or models or replicate (or idealize) something that preexists in nature, then how is the artist to approach the production of art? For the aesthetics of autonomy, the creative process remains *im-provisio*, in a literal sense, unforeseeable: the artist cannot know in advance what she will create if what she creates ought to be autonomous and equal to the self-contained perfection of nature. Put differently again, like the improviser, the modern artist, too, is put in a po-

sition where she has to *plan on not planning* the artwork or performance to allow for the possibility of the creation of art.

Let's be clear, the point is not to deny how much planning, organization, predetermined choices, experience, and knowledge go into the production of art or any artistic performance; nor that outside factors, be they economic, political, cultural or other, would not affect the production of art; what cannot be planned or otherwise determined externally, however, is what the eighteenth century calls "perfection." What cannot be planned – but now can only emerge in the process of its creation or during the performance – is the work's internal coherence ("Stimmigkeit"), its uniqueness, and the particular contribution it makes in relation to other works of art. This insight leads Moritz to the famous proclamation: "The beautiful can thus not be recognized but must be brought out – or *felt*" (143) ("Das Schöne kann daher nicht erkannt, es muß hervorgebracht – oder empfunden werden") (2, 974).

The assumption that art in its perfection cannot be planned, but can only emerge in the process of its creation, infringes on cherished Enlightenment ideas about conscious agency, rationality, and subjectivity. Eighteenth century aesthetic discourse develops instead paradoxical notions of an active unconscious, a blind "Triebkraft" as Moritz calls it, ideas of unintentional intentions. Such dark drives are also at the heart of the period's conceptions of genius – which is an attempt to recuperate the loss of authorial control through the assumption of special talents. Kant, for example, defines genius as an "innate mental predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art" (*Critique of Judgment*, 174 [§46]).

Kant's definition of genius gives a modern spin to the ancient *topos* of artistic enthusiasm or inspiration. One doesn't need to be Gottfried Benn to be skeptical of this term – which comes at the expense of an analysis of the actual work, the technical expertise, practice, experience and skills that go into the making of art and that are indispensable for improvisation. Yet, the sense that one is not fully in charge of the art-creating process – which has a long history in the (traditional) arts and in improvisation – is quite persistent and surely not without merit. The aesthetics of autonomy allow us to explain this "inspirational" aspect in terms of the attentiveness artists lend to the emerging artwork, how the artwork or performance in the process of its creation, step by step – "through all stages of its gradual

becoming" ("durch alle Grade seines allmählichen Werdens") (Moritz 2, 973) – comes to determine, restrict, open, and close unforeseen choices for the artist or performer, a process that may or may not reach a point where a sense of coherence and necessity emerges, or where "closure and completeness" are stipulated by the artist's decision to end the process (which artists often find quite difficult). Niklas Luhmann in his book *Art as a Social System* (originally published in German in 1996), describes this as the "self-programming" of art, that is, as a process that requires that the artist, after contingent beginnings, attune herself to the emerging artwork or the performance, react to the choices that present themselves during and based on the production process until the work or performance achieves a level of saturation or cohesion that invite an end.⁹

I discuss Luhmann's concept of self-programming more extensively in my book (see chapter 2.4). Instead of using Luhmann's theoretical verbiage again, I want to draw on reflections on the art-creating process by the contemporary painter Gerhard Richter that are much in tune with Luhmann's and that abstain from drawing on metaphysical concepts of spirit, inspiration, genius, or on the paradox of subconscious intentions. Corinna Belz's 2011 documentary *Gerhard Richter Painting* (Zero One Film, 2011) follows the famous artist over a period of time. The film records his atelier work, his approach to painting, and contains many reflections of Richter on his approach to the process of painting. It is an impressive document that captures how the production of art, even if done in a studio, is bound up with improvisation as described above. Already at the beginning of the documentary, Richter is surprised about how one of his paintings ended up looking quite dark and gloomy despite the initial parameters he had set. As the interviewer notes how much the painting changed, Richter responds: "That's the thing. They do what they want. I planned something quite different, pretty colorful" (5'43" – translations here and subsequently are mine). As in improvisation, the bourdon of a work's composition, Richter confirms, lies not on the beginning, but on the step-by-step execution, and on finding an end. Richter suggests that at the beginning, he can "theoretically, practically smear anything he wants" on the canvas. "This first creates a state to which I have to react, which I have to change or destroy. Then it develops on its own, not on its own, but without plan, without reason" (54'20"). Richter rejects concepts of automation or ideas

of subconscious or chance composition. The creative process is experienced as following codes that emerge during the work and that create a sense of necessity (or failure) for subsequent choices. "With every step, it becomes more difficult, and I become less and less free, until I reach the point, where there is nothing else to do, where, at my level, nothing is false anymore, then I will stop, then it is good" (55'22").¹⁰ This process is improvisational not only in the sense that its outcome cannot be planned or otherwise foreseen, but also with regard of the simultaneity of conception and doing that is at the heart of performed improvisations. This applies to all "autonomous" art, from Moritz to Richter and beyond. If the program (selection criteria) for each artwork can emerge only in the process of its completion, then conception and doing, planning and execution must coincide for art to be autonomous, whether this process is performed, staged, and perceived as improvised, or not.¹¹

If we understand the art creating process as a form of self-programming, where conception and doing, composition and performance (in the broader sense) take place simultaneously, we are also better able to appreciate the receptive sensibilities an artist needs to possess. He or she needs to be able to perceive and react to the subtle differences, choices, and restrictions that the work comes to offer in "all stages of its gradual becoming." Such a receptive understanding of the process makes it possible to circumvent another short-coming of the aesthetics of genius and other popular overestimations of the subject-as-agent, namely its failure to capture art-creating processes that rely on the cooperation between participants, where the outcome is not planned, but conditions for the emergence of art are created that allow for and take advantage of multiple actors.

It is as a cooperative and competitive activity especially in theater that the Romantics came to appreciate improvisation as fulfilling its aesthetic ideals. The Romantics thus are first in conceiving improvisation as art in the modern sense. Adam Müller's lecture "Irony, Comedy, Aristophanes" ("Ironie, Lustspiel, Aristophanes") makes this apparent. Müller drafts the theory of a universal comedy ("Universallustspiel") that would triumph over the moral-aesthetic premises of the Enlightenment and learn "to engage life audaciously and willfully." Drawing on Friedrich Schlegel's concept of irony, Müller envisions that this universal comedy

will “reveal humankind’s divine freedom” and lead to the “democratization of both theater and society.” To realize his ambitious project, Müller proposes a return to the improvisational theater:

Yes, I can imagine a time, it might still arrive, when the real life in the auditorium and the idealistic life on stage will agree so much, will be inspired so uniformly by the same spirit of irony, where one understands the other in a way, so that the actors merely set the tone for a great dialogue that is led between the auditorium and the stage, where, for example, improvising leaders among the audience with wit and grace engage the work of the poet, and other improvisators on stage artistically defend the work of the poet as if it was their fortress, where, at last, the real life in the auditorium and the idealistic life on stage, like king and jester in my explanation above, remain each unconquered and each crowned and the poets in the auditorium together with the poet on stage reveal to the whole house and to each actor and the audience the invisible presence of a higher poet, a spirit of poesy, a God. (Müller 1, 244–5 – translation here and subsequently are mine)

At the center of Müller’s description of the universal comedy is the dialogue between the auditorium and the stage. Dialogue defines the comedy’s temporality, orienting it toward the present; it also structures the creative process, redefining the relationship between artist and work by including input from the actors and the audience; finally, dialogue recodifies the theatrical space, allowing the auditorium to figure also as stage and the stage also as auditorium. All three features are interconnected, forging what Müller calls a union between real life and idealistic life.

One of the more controversial consequences of the romantic exploration of improvisation for its aesthetic and poetological concerns is how it challenges the distinction between “authentic” and staged improvisation. In both of his lectures on comedy, Müller does not clearly differentiate between Tieck’s comedies which stage improvisation (if they were performed at all) and the Viennese people’s theater among other *Commedia dell’arte* venues where improvisation and the dialogue between stage and auditorium are indeed practiced. Read in the context of the transcendental poeology he cites, Müller’s failure to differentiate actual from staged improvi-

sation is not accidental. It is an attempt to make productive the distinction between staged improvisation and the practice of improvisation, between “idealistic” and “real” performances. This means to highlight the “reality” of a staged performance as well as to signal that “true” spontaneity is also a form of stagecraft. The attempt to distinguish between both rigidly would in any case contradict the universal comedy’s attempt to implement a transcendental standpoint within the theater, a standpoint that would inspire actors and spectators with the same sense of irony.

The romantic framing of the theatrical space serves as a caveat that can be generalized and applied to any observation of improvised doings. Improvisation can always be staged, cited, faked. It is impossible for any improvisation to mark with absolute certainty its authenticity as a completely unrehearsed, unplanned activity. Even if we trust that what we see on stage is improvised, it is still impossible to determine fully where improvisation starts and where it ends. This is not merely a problem for an audience watching a romantic comedy (or other performances that stage spontaneity) that might not be able to distinguish with certainty between pre-planned acts and “doings” that are improvised, unplanned, or *ad hoc* inventions. The problem runs deeper. To be recognizable and communicable as new and different in the first place, any artwork and any performance remains tied to what is known and familiar – at minimum in as much as the known and familiar must be recognized as that from which the improvisation has to distinguish itself. For that reason, performers themselves cannot completely determine where improvisation and where repetition, citation, or simple variation start and end.

The Romantics are also groundbreaking in the way they explore self-reflexivity as a productive principle. Through the use of irony, self-reference, self-thematization, and parabasis – actors falling out of their roles openly reflecting on their characters, the play they are in, and themselves as actors or directors and so on – the romantic comedy stages and makes productive typical strategies of theatrical improvisation.

When the Romantics thus collapse traditional distinctions between authentic and staged, spontaneous and planned, real and simulated, they anticipate the deconstruction of such hierarchies by Jacques Derrida – who used similar tactics in his “performance” – the reading of a script entitled “Play – The First Name: 1 July 1997” – at an Ornette Coleman concert in

Paris on said date. More over, the Romantic comedy reveals how self-reflexive and recursive processes can be used as generators of inventiveness. They show how newness can be derived from iterative doings, that is, they collapse the distinction between repetition/variation on the one hand and inventiveness, singularity, uniqueness on the other. As indicated earlier, it was this distinction that played an important role in the banning of improvisation from art in the eighteenth century, and it is a distinction that long into the twentieth century prevents the recognition of the artistic value of improvisation (e.g. jazz improvisation). And even Derrida, I argue in my book, in his insistence on the advent of true Otherness, still holds on to a radicalized version of this distinction. The radicalized distinction between repetition, representation, discovery on the one hand and the advent of true Otherness, true inventiveness, radical difference drives Derrida's narrative of modernity as a time that promotes, yet fails to live up to its call for true inventiveness (by instrumentalizing invention, by integrating it into programmatic calculations, and so on). This leads Derrida to make his by now famous proclamation about the impossibility of improvisation captured in Kirby Dick's and Amy Ziering Kofman's documentary: "And so I believe in improvisation, and I fight for improvisation, but always with the belief that it is impossible" (*Derrida*, 58'57").¹²

The Romantic staging of improvisation does not lament, but underlines how improvisation is always already tied to what Derrida calls the statutory. We saw in the quote above that Müller does not read improvisation as a random disregard for rules, or as completely unplanned and chaotic, but rather as a playful, competitive dialogue where the actors' task is to defend the work of the poet "as if it was their fortress" against the arbitrary intrusions from the audience.

This aleatory-agonistic structure points toward conceptions of improvised doings as we find them in the writings of Adam Müller's more famous friend and editing partner, Heinrich von Kleist. While Kleist's texts are filled with depictions of improvised doings – most famously in the essay on the "Gradual Completion of Thoughts While Speaking" – there is only one literary text, the very short anecdote "News from Another City: Herr Unzelmann" ("Korrespondenz-Nachricht"),¹³ which uses the term and comments on the art of improvisation directly.

Mr. Unzelmann, who for some time now has been a guest performer at the theater in Königsberg, is reported to satisfy the public there completely, which is after all the main thing; but, as we also learn from the Königsberg papers, the critics, and the management as well, find something left to be desired. There is a story of how the Director forbade him to improvise. Herr Unzelmann, who detests obstinacy, complied with his orders, but when, to the horror of the audience, a horse having been led on stage during the performance suddenly began dropping manure all over the set, he suddenly wheeled about, interrupting his speech, and addressed the horse: "Where you not forbidden to improvise?" Whereupon even the Director is said to have laughed. (*Abyss*, 272)

Kleist's brief anecdote is revealing with regard to the cultural status of improvisation in the early nineteenth century. Historically, the Berliner actor Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Unzelmann (1753–1832) was indeed known for his inclination to improvise, and theater directorates – not only in Königsberg – were known to prohibit improvisation on stage. Despite Romantic efforts to the contrary, the early nineteenth century continues to associate improvisation with "low" art that is thought to be morally corrupt and pedagogically dangerous.¹⁴

Kleist's anecdote exposes the hubris of externally imposed and morally motivated aesthetic standards. While the episode with the horse questions the possibility of purging the theater from the particular, material, and corporeal, Unzelmann's improvised response simultaneously aims at asserting the theater's autonomy, not by denying the legitimacy of the law, but by citing the law that threatens to constrain the actor's performance. Doing so, Kleist invokes improvisation's contentious relation to laws, rules, and regulation. The whole anecdote enacts the paradoxical dovetailing of rules and laws on the one hand with spontaneity, transgression, and inventiveness on the other. It is important to note that, contrary to Unzelmann's claim, it is Unzelmann, not the horse that is improvising here. Improvisation is not about mere contingency, about crap ("Mist") happening during a performance. Rather, improvisation is about the creative response to contingent events. More precisely, Unzelmann succeeds in improvising because he is able to relate the contingent event on stage (the particular, as Kant would say) to a general law: not by subsuming the event

under the law, however, but by citing the law to mark the event as its transgression. In this sense, it is not the absence of the law, but its very presence that allows Unzelmann to turn what otherwise would be mere “crap” into a self-reflexive and successful performance that finds the applause of the audience, including the directorate from Königsberg. Without law and without Unzelmann citing the law, there would be no improvisational act, but merely crap interrupting the performance. In citing the law, the performance thus enacts art’s autonomy vis-à-vis the demands of the directorate. Unzelmann is not rejecting nor merely subverting the law, but, improvising, is able to make it productive, gaining artistic mastery over it, regaining agency and, “which is after all the main thing,” the affection of the audience.

Historical coincidence or not: that the anecdote places the Berliner actor Unzelmann’s performance in Königsberg invokes Königsberg’s most famous citizen, Immanuel Kant. Unzelmann figures in Kleist’s text as a genius in the precise Kantian sense: it is through Unzelmann that nature (represented by the horse and its droppings) “gave the rule”¹⁵ to art. Unzelmann uses a parabasis, steps outside his role, the technique we saw the Romantics use a lot. It is a technique that demonstrates how notions of immediacy and authenticity derive from particular staging processes, originate in specific modes of mediation.

I want to end on a more contemporary note, by reflecting on the use of poststructuralist and neocybernetic concepts in critical improvisation studies (see, for example, Sara Ramshaw’s reception of Derrida in her book *Justice as Improvisation* or David Borgo’s writings on improvisation). We are living in a time that exhibits a noticeable fatigue vis-a-vis poststructuralist paradigms of thought, including in theater studies. In a recent article entitled “‘Black Box’ Theater. Second-Order Cybernetics and Naturalism in Rehearsal and Performance,” the Canadian scholar and director, Tom Scholte, interprets the current return to naturalism in acting as a reaction to a crisis of meaning, as representing a backlash against “paralyzing post-modern skepticism” (§61). In this context, he discusses the use of improvisation in Stanislavski’s system of acting (or “Method acting”). At its core, Scholte finds an “essentially cybernetic vision” (§14). Improvisation demands a particular mindset, the attentiveness to one’s surroundings and the willingness to “stay engaged in feedback loops within imaginary set-

tings" (§17). Improvisation thus serves as a tool to evoke spontaneity and immediacy in acting, qualities that promote the semblance of naturalness and authenticity. These qualities are retained even after a scene has been memorized and underwent "formalization" by the director.

Stanislavski's use of improvisation resonates with one of the central theses of my research, namely that "improvisation is best understood as a particular mode of *staging* art that shares properties common to various individual arts and fulfills many of the expectations we have for the arts in general" (Landgraf, 11). My argument is based on the recognition that it is impossible to decouple improvisation fully from structure and repetition. Like Scholte, I see second-order cybernetics as a way to circumvent the impasse between postmodern skepticism (expressed, for example, by Derrida's proclamation that improvisation is impossible) and the essentializing tendencies adopted by various practitioners of improvisation (e.g. Derek Bailey) who find improvisation in its "immediacy" utterly incompatible with theoretical reflection.

Rather than deconstructing the idea of naturalism or similar terms – such as immediacy, authenticity, originality, singularity – and "proving" their impossibility, the cybernetic approach encourages us to find descriptions on how such ideals are enacted, staged, performed. I have tried to do this with reference to the Romantic staging of improvisation. As we saw also in Kleist, art's ability to cite and recontextualize other societal discourses – including prohibitions – is not only liberating, it also makes apparent the constructedness of the reality to which they appear to respond. Put differently, art in modern society "naturally" invites second-order observation on society's observation patterns, instilling a sense of contingency and freedom from societal constraints.¹⁶

In conclusion, I want to return to the notion of authenticity which is one of these terms that in improvisation studies holds still quite a bit of currency, e.g. in Jazz and its insistence on the role of personality (Lewis 1996) or in the ideal of naturalism in acting. Earlier, I suggested that ultimately it is impossible to uphold a notion of authenticity for improvisation that would shut out all forms of repetition, rule-governedness, structure, or staging. Yet, I do not want to deny that for performers and audiences alike, it makes sense to describe a certain experience – a successful performance – as authentic. This necessitates, however, an alterna-

tive understanding of authenticity, one that allows us to appreciate better what performers and audiences might view as authentic without relying on problematic insinuations of expressivity or originality that could easily be deconstructed. To do so, I will draw on a pregnant formulation from Goethe's *Hermann and Dorothea* which comments on the aftermath of the French Revolution with the words: "At the time, everyone hoped to live his own self" ("Damals hoffte jeder, sich selbst zu leben") (Goethe I:8, 848). David Wellbery explores the emphatic notion of authenticity behind this statement. To live one's own self is to desire "that one lives *entirely* in one's doings, that one is fully in those doings and, for this reason, fully with oneself when doing them" (220).¹⁷

While I do not agree with the totalizing gesture of Goethe's quote, I find the definition of authenticity as identification with one's doings useful. If we think of it as the other side of what we feel when we hate what we are doing, or are bored with it, when we feel alienated in the Marxian or Freudian sense, we can also understand acting, the assuming of a role, as being experienced as an authentic mode of being. In fact, it allows us to understand our daily performances, the many roles we play in different social settings, as authentic (or not) without having to presuppose a unified "authentic" subject in the form of an unchanging substrate that would exist independent of its social interactions.

Furthermore, this definition enables us to appreciate authenticity as something that is acquired, is not the opposite, but the result of extended practice. I want to suggest that some of the excitement associated with a notion of authenticity as "living in one's doings" is fueled as much by a sense of agency as it is by the sense that one is participating in something larger than oneself. The skills and expertise in such moments are the precondition for participating and experiencing oneself as partaking in processes that exceed the boundaries of individuation. The practice of improvisation as art celebrates the freedom enabled by the mastering of constraints in a creative process where one is able to "live in one's doings."

Endnotes

- 1 Lewis made this observation in April 2015 during the symposium "Improvisation in the Arts and Everyday Life: A Weekend of Performances, Dialogues, and Seminars" I had organized together with Rob Wallace. For information on the symposium, visit <http://www.bgsu.edu/arts-and-sciences/german-russian-and-east-asian-languages/improvisation.html>.
- 2 See George E. Lewis' 1996 essay for examples of the European avant-garde distancing itself from the term improvisation because of its association with Jazz. On that point, see also Anthony Braxton who argues that the use of words such as "aleatory and indeterminism" by avantgarde artists were an attempt to "bypass the word improvisation and as such the influence of non-white sensibility" (Braxton 366).
- 3 Gottsched claims that it was out of laziness and ignorance ("Faulheit und Unwissenheit") that the comedians stopped memorizing and replaced conventional plays with "vulgar farces" (*Werke*, 342). He sees harlequinlike characters such as "Hans Wurst" and "Pickelhering" as "creatures of a disturbed imagination that do not follow any examples from nature" (358).
- 4 See Angela Esterhammer, *Romanticism and Improvisation* and Beatrix Müller-Kampel on the continued popularity of improvisational theater practices throughout Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
- 5 The improvisational quality of oral poetry is often mentioned in relation to Homer. Bernhard Zimmermann looks more closely at the (limited) evidence regarding the presentation of oral epic poetry in ancient Greece, noting how improvisation in ancient poetry must be thought to be about the repetition and rearrangement of templates of sorts ("Improvisation – Ritus – Literature," 219f), not about innovation. Wolfram Ax analyzes Alcidamas's and Quintilian's writings on improvisation and describes how in most cases improvisation was restricted to the *elocutio* and only rarely extended to those aspects of a speech that belonged to the *dispositio* or the *inventio*. Within the various ancient schools of rhetoric, it is clear that improvisation is viewed as a mechanical skill that is acquired through extensive practice (Ax, "Improvisation," 75).
- 6 Robert Henke as well as Kenneth and Laura Richards note how many eighteenth-century commentators remark and lament the "ossification of improvised playing" (Richards and Richards 188). Maximilian Gröne

even sees the decline of the *Commedia dell'arte* in the eighteenth century as the result of improvisational techniques having become petrified (105). I would argue that the perception of petrification and similar remarks by commentators of the eighteenth century say less about actual changes in the practice or quality of improvisation, but instead offer evidence that inventiveness has become a primary factor for the assessment of art in this time period.

7 The full doctrine of aesthetic autonomy emerges in Moritz's essay "On the Artistic Imitation of the Beautiful" ("Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen"), which was written with some help from Goethe who later included a large part of the essay in his *Italian Journey* (published in 1816-7, 30 years after his travels).

8 "The essence of beauty, after all, is that one part becomes expressive and meaningful by virtue of another part and the whole by virtue of itself – that it explains itself – describes itself by itself – and thus merely needs a finger pointing to its content, but no additional explanation or description" (Moritz Vol 2: 994 – translation mine).

9 "In this sense, creating a work of art – according to one's capabilities and one's imagination – generates the freedom to make decisions on the basis of which one can continue one's work. The freedoms and necessities one encounters are entirely the products of art itself; they are consequences of decisions made with the work. The 'necessity' of certain consequences one experiences in one's work or in the encounter with an artwork is not imposed by law but results from the fact that one began, and how" (Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, 203-4).

10 For Luhmann, the realization of the artwork ends and the artwork a "success and novelty" when the "program saturates, as it were, the individual work, tolerating no further productions of the same kind" (202).

11 This is not to ignore that there are important differences between performed and "hidden" modes of composition. Unlike an improvising actor on stage, Richter has the luxury of being able to give his paintings time – he likes to look at them for weeks before deciding if they are indeed "complete." Richter also does not like to be observed as he fears such observation will affect his work negatively (it makes him "walk differently"). Reflecting on an "error" he made that leaves him at a loss on how to continue, Richter blames the presence of the camera, suggesting

that "painting while being observe is the worst thing possible" (46'). He understands painting *per se* as a secretive business. Yet, he subsequently challenges the rigidity of the distinction when he stipulates that there is always a degree of reflection present on the public reception of the painting, whether a painting's quality will be recognized, whether its mistakes will be ignored. Just as public performers learn how to act more or less naturally on stage, the painter who works in the private space of his or her studio cannot completely shut out the sense of being observed.

12 Derrida's elaborates the problem of inventiveness and improvisation more extensively in his essay "Psyche. Inventions of the Other" and returns to this argument in "Play."

13 In the introduction to *Improvisieren. Paradoxien des Unvorhersehbaren. Kunst – Medien – Praxis*, the anecdote is briefly discussed as exemplifying the paradoxical relationship that improvisation maintains to the law that it needs for the "unpredictable to emerge in its aesthetic and emotional quality, as a spontaneous digression, surpassing, and breaking of the norm" (Bormann et al, "Improvisieren," 9). My interpretation expands on these observations.

14 In the early nineteenth century, Berlin had only two stages that were supported by the government, the royal opera and the royal national theater. In 1810, Kleist published two articles in the *Berliner Abendblätter* that engaged the national theater critically. In particular, Kleist noted that the theater's success in ticket sales cannot serve as an indication of its quality as long as it holds an exclusive monopoly. Kleist asked for the "industry to be free" and for an "unrestricted competition among the stages" ("wo das Gewerbe frei, und eine uneingeschränkte Konkurrenz der Bühne eröffnet ist" (2, 410). The autonomy of the theater is also at the heart of the "Korrespondenz-Nachricht."

15 The sentence in section 49 of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* reads: "fine art is to that extent imitation, for which nature, through the genius, gave the rule" (187).

16 What Scholte, in a Brechtian spirit, calls a "genuine second-order awareness of the contingency of dominant societal structures" (Scholte §59).

17 Wellbery understands this definition of authenticity as the expression of a historical problematic that is also a core of Hegel's idealism and

finds its cognate poetic articulation in Goethe's post-classical work. Without delving into the complex philosophical context in which Wellbery locates the historical problematic he finds expressed in the ideal of a full identification with one's doings, we can grasp its significance if we think how prominent the *failure* of identification, the feeling of alienation from one's doings, has figured in narratives of modernity from Lessing, Kant and Hegel to Marx, Nietzsche, Benjamin and beyond.

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Playing Games with Frames

Gunter Lösel

In this article I explore the framing of improvisational theater, proposing that framing is a crucial point in staging improvisation. I will introduce the concept of two orders of perception by Erika Fischer-Lichte and draw on the concept of frames as theorized by Georg Bateson, transferred to theater by Irving Goffman and applied to improvisational theater by Keith Sawyer. Drawing on a model of performative levels by Klaus Schwind (1997), I will outline three possible frames: Reality/Play/Fiction. As a deduction I will introduce a three-dimensional, dynamic model, claiming that the performative frames are not static but can change both on purpose and arbitrarily. I will apply this concept to improvisational theater, examining in detail how improvisers introduce certain frames of perception thus influencing the performative status of the performance. I will suggest that much of the fascination of improvised theater is due to the multiple perceptions that are generated by the emergence of frames within a performance.

Introduction

The starting point was a question: Why is improvised theater so fascinating as a whole, while almost all its parts are weak – the stories, the characterization, the dialogue and the staging, When the magic of the performance is gone, when you look at it at daylight, from an aesthetic perspective, there is almost nothing left. So I started dwelling for concepts that might help me understand this phenomenon. The following thoughts and models are parts of my dissertation, published 2013 under the title “Das Spiel mit dem Chaos” (Playing with chaos) (Lösel 2013), where I applied the theory of performativity by Erika Fischer-Lichte to improvisational theater (Fischer-Lichte 2004). Other parts of my PhD thesis deal with the history of improvisational theater, the specific language of improvisers and systems theory, but here I will focus on a model of performativity because I think it can be of interest to other researchers. Doing research means looking at familiar things with a distancing view, questioning in particular those aspects that seem most obvious. I feel that this is especially important, when you are exploring things that you love – in my case improvisational theater.

1. Two orders of perception

Erika Fischer-Lichte in her theory of performativity is describing two orders of perception, an “order of presence” and an “order of representation” (Fischer-Lichte 2004, 255 ff). In an order of representation the audience will ascribe meaning to the signs on stage: The words, the characters, the story represent something, that is real in a world outside the theater. For example when the actor is playing a surprised person, this is a significant for a surprised person that might exist in some other place or some other time. While the actor is performing this significant, the sign or significant is decoded and understood in the minds of the spectators – but only when they are in the perceptual order of representation (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Random Photo from the website of an acting school

When not, he or she might just see a young man with eyes wide open, standing in his underwear in a rather uncomfortable position. When the order of presence is active, the audience will not see the stage event as representing something else, but as standing for itself without any meaning

beyond this. The body of the actor stays the body of the actor, a phenomenal body that is present in the same way as the spectators are: in the Here and Now, breathing, sweating, aching and making sounds like everybody else in the room. The order of presence is very much connected to performance art and Fischer-Lichte developed the concept in this context. Within a performance the orders of perception will shift and oscillate between representation and presence, and this is not a mistake in the make-belief of the performance, but a crucial process in order to create an aesthetic experience that allows the spectator to question his or her ways of perception.

Fischer-Lichte draws a parallel to the phenomenon of a bistable figure that has been in the very center of Gestaltpsychology and has been discussed by philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein. Bistable figures offer an input, that can be interpreted in two ways. One of the famous examples is the duck/rabbit (Figure 2).

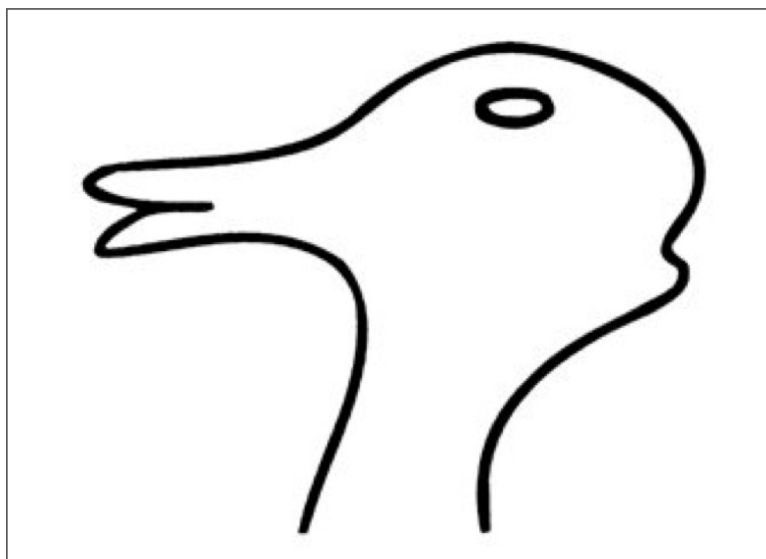


Figure 2. The duck/rabbit as a bistable figure

A central aspect of bistable figures is, that the two versions cannot be perceived at the same time. When the duck appears, the hare is not there. When the hare appears, the duck is gone. Bistable figures have been subject to extensive experimentation by psychologists and some of the results are:

1. The spontaneous first interpretation is dominant. It is hard to see the hare, when you have before interpreted the figure as a duck. After discovering the second option, both alternatives are active and the perception will switch back and forth in certain periods of time. It will do so spontaneously.
2. It is not yet quite clear, if the switch can be done voluntarily or if it is a function of basic neurological process that cannot be influenced.

When transferring the concept to the theater Fischer-Lichte has widened the concept from the perception of just one single input to the whole mode of perception. One might question if this is backed by psychology (since we are no longer talking about a Gestalt), but it seems to describe and explain well the irritations that appear while watching performance art, for example when the spectator is wondering, if the pain of the performer or the blood on stage are real. It certainly seems applicable when we are looking at a human body: Are we seeing a character or an actor? Fischer-Lichte is claiming the effect of different orders of perception for the whole theatrical experience, which means, that every stage phenomenon can be seen in the perceptual order of representation or presence. Fischer-Lichte introduces the term “perceptual multistability” to highlight the bistable nature of orders of perception. So the body of the actor, can be seen as a fictional character or as the phenomenal body of the actor, but not both at the same time. Moreover the shift between different orders of perception is to some extent unpredictable, which means, neither the actor nor the spectator does have complete control over the oscillation between orders of perception. The theater-maker can of course suggest a change, but he can never be sure when or if it will happen. There is no deterministic relationship. Rather can it be described as an offer that can be accepted or refused. Fischer-Lichte suggests to understand this oscillation as an emergent phenomenon, building a conceptual bridge to systems theory (Fischer-Lichte 2004, 258).

These concepts, although derived from performance art, provide a theoretical frame for theater as a whole allowing to analyse the way, theatrical forms offer frames of perception. In the following I propose to substitute Fischer-Lichte's term "order of perception" by the term "frame", that was introduced by Georg Bateson (Bateson 1956) and transferred to theater by Irving Goffman (Goffman 1974). I think, the concept of frames and framing is quite close to Fischer-Lichte's approach, but has a stronger theoretical background and a stronger impact on research. Bateson examined communication and found that normal communication is happening on different levels and that in order to change the level the communicating person has to set certain metacommunicative signals, thus establishing a frame in which the content be understood. Framing puts a little more emphasis on the active role of the communicating person, but otherwise very much accords with Fischer-Lichte's concept.

When we apply this model to improvisational theater one of the most obvious observations is, that in most improvised performances you will see the actors outside the representational frame quite often. You see them out-of-character as much as you see them in-character: At the beginning of the performance, when they enter the stage, between scenes, when they ask for suggestions, during scenes, when they are sitting at the side of the stage or when they are visibly transforming into a character. Different from most forms of scripted theater the performance does not start within the representational frame/the fictional reality. Instead another frame is established and one might assume that it is a frame of presence. But surprisingly the improvising actor when he or she is not in-character does not fit in the categories: He or she is presenting something like an everyday self – but not quite the everyday self. The body is not the phenomenal body that we see in performance art. Instead improvisers introduce themselves as *players*, as something like their own puppeteers. During the course of the performance they will step out of their characters with ease, comment on the scenes and talk to the audience. They will leave the representational frame and return without effort, generating a representational frame that seems to be less stable than in other forms of theater. Actually it is easy to see through the fictional character and realize that this is just a guy in jeans and t-shirt, doing strange things. So the order of representation is unstable. This accords with the concepts of characterization used

in improvisational theater – in the words of Paul Sills: “*Wear your character as lightly as a straw boater and be prepared to tip it and reveal yourself.*” (zit. in SWEET 2003, 142). This of course is a Brechtian notion and it is due to the fact that Paul Sills and David Shephard, the founders of the Chicago Tradition of improvisational theater, were heavily influenced by Brecht (Sweet 2003). Using a distancing effect the actor is breaking the illusion and make-belief and is leaving the order or representation – but he or she is not entering the order of presence as is the case in performance art. There really seems to be no adequate description in Fischer-Lichte’s model. *It cannot describe and explain the status of an actor who appears as a creator of the performance while at the same time being in this performance* (Figure 3).

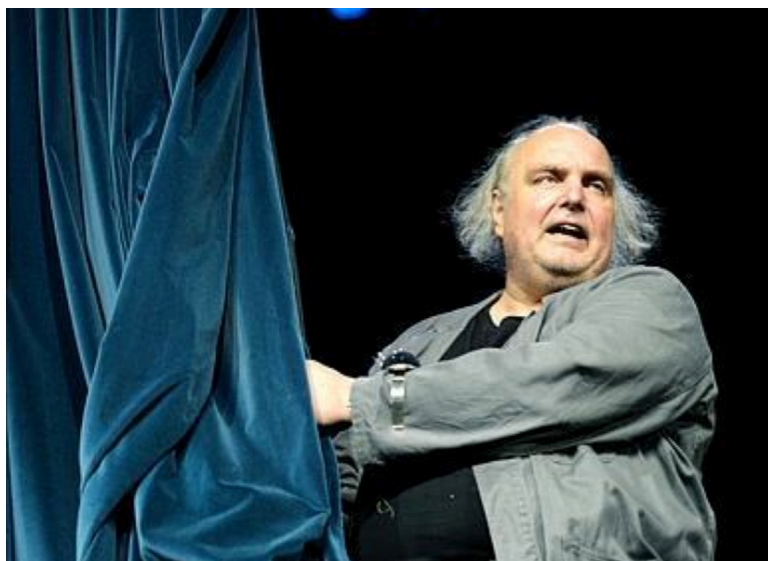


Figure 3. What is an actor when he is not acting?

This is the German actor Thomas Lichtenstein. The picture shows him on stage, but is he acting? He is wearing everyday clothes and there is a tailor’s tool on his wrist. Is he checking the curtain? Or is he playing a character who is checking the curtain? You cannot know, unless you have

more information about the frame. (Actually he is talking to a journalist about what it means to be an actor.)

2. Three frames of performativity

Klaus Schwind, a German researcher in theater studies, has widened the semiotic model of performativity in 1997, and in the following I will draw on his model (Schwind 1997). As a starting point Schwind is focusing on the human figure on stage, stating, that as soon as an actor enters the stage, his or her body is not only doubled into a significant (the role) and a significant (the actor) but it is *tripled*: in an in-between sphere, he or she *appears as the one who is playing with signs*. So the missing link between “real” and “fictional” for Schwind is a mode of play (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Three frames of performativity Own table on the basis of SCHWIND 1997

The three frames will inform and influence the experience of the audience, sending out a three messages: “This is real!”, “This is fiction!” or “This is play”. They cannot apply at the same time, but the spectator can and will shift through these frames, partly by decision, partly by emergence, while he or she is moving through the performance. For those who are familiar with Friedrich Schillers “Briefe für eine ästhetische Er-

ziehung”(letters on the aesthetic education of man), this model of three worlds or spheres will seem quite familiar. Schiller establishes a very similar model of three levels, highlighting the autonomy of every one of these three worlds.

Again applying this extended model to improvisational theater there can be no doubt that the frame of play is more important than in other forms of theater. Improvisation embraces and exposes the playful process that leads to the fiction on stage and it makes this the primary frame of perception. This is especially obvious in the process of setting up the frames for the audience. Unlike most other forms of theater, improvisational theater starts with an audience warm-up, which can take 5 to 20 minutes at the beginning of the performance. Only after the message “This is play!” has been thoroughly established, we see the first actors in-character on stage. Considering the priming effects of bistable figures, one can assume that the frame, that has been established first, will be dominant throughout the performance. Most improvised theater forms also found ways to refresh the frame of play during the evening, by introducing a Master of Ceremonies or a framework of competition that can not be taken seriously. So one can speak of a dominance of the frame “Play” in improvisational theater (Figure 5).

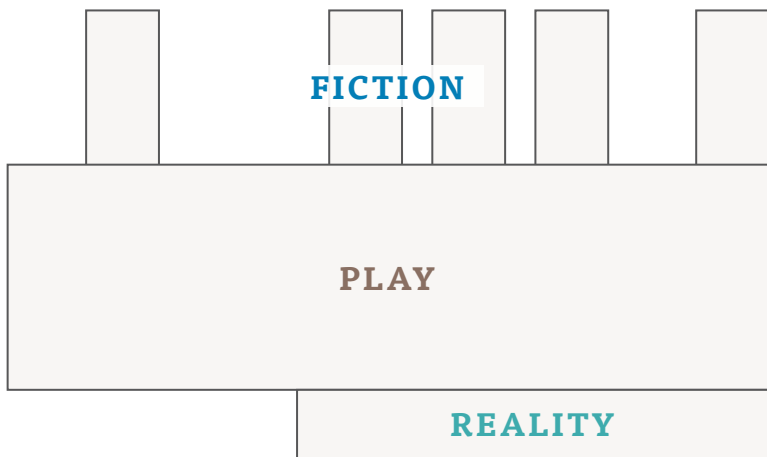


Figure 5. Three frames of performativity in improvisational theater

Improvisational theater does not hide the process of creating a fictional reality through play, but instead exhibits it, turns it into a game and invites the audience to take part in this game. Quite often the whole evening is framed as a game: The most common frame is a competition – or rather a played competition. Almost all formats created by Keith Johnstone (Theatersports, Maestro, Gorilla-Theater) are based on competition, while at the same time finding means to subvert the idea of competition (Johnstone 1999). Johnstone drew on the liveness of sport events in order to engage the audience in a similar way: not as participants, but as a “hot audience” that identifies with the competing parties.

Competition provides a ‘meta game’ for the whole performance. While the Chicago tradition rejects the idea of competition – at least the founding generation Spolin did (Spolin 1999 orig. 1963) – the frame of the evening is still a game, which I characterize as a construction game: Through suggestions the audience is taking part in the construction of a fictional world, built around the famous Where/Who/What questions. Construction games are more basic than rule-governed games, they evolve ontologically before the latter and they don’t need rules. Children building castles in the sand are a good example a construction game. Taking suggestions from the audience turns them into participants in the construction game.

When play is established as the dominant frame of the performance, improvisers can and will start to play with frames, juggling them to their and the audience’s amusement, by letting the frame of play get dominant, then changing it to a fragile fictional frame – and then disturbing it through talking aside, breaking the fourth wall, making fun of themselves and returning to the fictional sphere again. The players can be seen as part of the fiction and as builders of this fiction.

Thus the improviser is juggling the frames of fiction, play and reality. Wait a moment. Reality? I think, the frame of reality is less activated than the other two, but it is an important frame for improvisation none the less. Self-revelation is a desired aspect of improvised action, particularly in the Chicago School, with its central paradigm “*The truth is funny*” (Halpern, Close, and Johnson 1994, 15). It is not self-revelation in a therapeutical sense, but serves a performative goal, establishing in the audience some

uncertainty about the reality of the performance. In Johnstones view honesty and displaying the good-natured real self is very much at the heart of his approach. In both schools improvisers are advised to not suppress impulses as real persons but instead to notice them and use them as material for the stage. Actors for example might be talking to the partner on stage in a private manner, commenting on his or her outfit, speaking about personal themes, but they will leave it open, whether this is authentic or not. The spectator never can be sure if he or she has just glanced at the actors real self or at a performed part. Actually the actors themselves often do not know and are trained, not to care. Especially experienced improvisers seem to establish a communication that is quite intimate on stage, working on their relation as real persons while at the same time communicating in a fictional world through characters.

3. Detailed exploration

In the following I will explore two aspects of improvisational theater in more detail, the audience warm-up and the use of games. If we take the model of frames as a key to research in improvisational theater we can focus on the edges of this performance, the very beginning, the end and maybe the moderation in-between. This is where the frames will be established or where they will emerge. This starts long before the show: How is the performance announced? Where does it take place? What stages are preferred? And on the performance night it starts again, as soon as the audience enters the venue: How are they greeted? Can they get a drink or a snack? Can they take it inside the theater? Who is the first person on the stage? How does he or she address the audience? How do the players dress? How do they enter the stage? What levels of semiotics, co-presence and liveness are established? What rules for audience participation are set up? What mindsets are activated in both the audience and the players?

3.1 Framing the Performance: Audience Warm-Up

In improvisational theater the audience warm-up is so well established that most improvisers don't even think about it any more. For a researcher this is a good starting point, looking for things that are too obvious to get noticed.

a.) Venues: Most venues are not built as theaters exclusively but serve as rooms for all kinds of events like stand-up comedy and music. Also there is a long tradition in the US to perform in bars. This is of course often not a conscious choice but due to a lack of options, but on a more conscious side improv rejects the idea of a theater as a place of silent concentration. In the case of the Chicago tradition, a line might be drawn to Brecht's ideas of a "smokers theater", as Brecht was one major influence for Paul Sills and David Shepard. The Johnstone tradition, striving for a more theatrical environment for improvisation, has created a model for a theater room in the Loose Moose Theater in Calgary. Still Johnstone emphasizes that the atmosphere should be not the atmosphere of a theater, but rather one of a sporting event, a movie or a circus. So for him it is important to serve popcorn and drinks in the theater.

b.) Stages: Most improvisational theaters work with the idea of a naked stage. Usually it just contains a couple of chairs, no scenography and no props. Where did the concept of a naked stage originate? I am not sure, but there are some hints. Halpern and the Chicago school reject the idea of props, because they obstruct the imagination of both players and audience. Johnstone on the other hand uses selected props on stage, like a sofa or a boat, but here also, the scenography is extremely reduced.

c.) Master of ceremonies: He or she serves as an in-between-character, negotiating between the sphere of the audience and the sphere of the players. The MC will explain the rules, take suggestions and moderate the participation of the audience. In Johnstone's formats this character often is split into a "good" and a "bad" character, allowing for projection of suppressed emotion.

d.) The message "This is improvised": There is an ongoing debate about this, since Johnstone claimed that for the audience it does not matter if the performance is improvised or not. But I agree with Salinsky and White who state in the "Improv Handbook"

"But none of these companies would dare advertise or present their show without acknowledging the fact that they are improvising. This would expose the weakness of their plotting, characterisation, dialogue

and staging, which cannot hope to measure up to the best scripted and rehearsed equivalents. Even practitioners who don't want to accept the 'free pass' still want the audience to admire their cleverness in operating without a script – they need the 'high wire act' aspect of their performance or the audience would be bored to tears." (SALINSKY & WHITE 2008, 34)

So practice shows, that the information "This is improvised" is crucial to the experience of the audience.

e.) Audience warm-up: Here is a description of a typical audience warm-up (Figure 6): The MC enters the stage in a heightened energy and is trying to heighten the energy of the audience too, by asking them to shout



Figure 6. Random video of an audience warm-up, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Slytj_uvvcuo

and perform some physical action. Also she is setting up a communication of call and response: The MC asks questions and the audience will answer. The MC will greet any suggestion with enthusiasm, thus establishing a

friendly, positive relationship, inviting spontaneous action. For example, the audience members are asked to greet their neighbours, which certainly changes the atmosphere a great deal, because it is the neighbours that conduct social control (as everybody all will know at their homes). If the contact to your neighbours is friendly, the chances to overcome inner censorship and yell out something spontaneously will rise considerably. When asking for suggestions the MC will welcome uncommon suggestions, thus widening the scope of what is considered 'normal' in this special environment. The audience is invited to think outside the box, accepting far-fetched associations.

Building up a frame through audience warm-up can be very tricky and is an art by itself. The audience can lose its inhibition and get too "hot", yelling out obscene and obstructive suggestions and the MC might lose control over the situation. The MC must balance chaos and structure of this situation. When done in a successful way the audience warm up will leave the audience in a state of:

- heightened energy
- heightened responsiveness
- heightened spontaneity
- reduced censorship and judgement
- expectation of the unlikely options

To achieve this it seems to be very important to discourage the habitual frame of theater: "This is art". This frame seems to be harmful to improvisation, so considerable effort is put into discouraging it, sending out the message: *"This is not art; this is not theater as you know it; this is something else; don't evaluate what you see; it is not so important"*. In conclusion the warm-up is setting up a frame of play. This is done in the very beginning of the performance and, once established, serves as a layer of performativity that both players and audience can activate at every step of the performance.

3.2 Play, Games and frames

While there is a multitude of definitions for the term play it generally describes a general mode of behaviour and perception. The term game is tied more to the specific singular playing event that is rule-based. In a

game one will find a set of rules that shape the interaction of the players and props. Usually also a goal is defined. In improvisational theater the concept of game is central, it is one key concept in Viola Spolin's work and the Chicago tradition, where the games started as learning tools in acting training and then, probably in the 60s, became part of public performances where they now are indispensable. In Keith Johnstone's work games are also part of both the training and staging of improvisation. If we look at the literature on how to improvise, it is full of the description of games and it seems reasonable to state, that modern improvisational theater is built around the concept of games. On stage we usually see a mixture of games, some were obviously designed for the classroom and others have been developed for the stage.

In the following I differentiate between three kinds of games:

1. Explicit games: The rules are made explicit to the audience
2. Secret games: The players know the rules, but the audience does not (Status)
3. Emergent games: The rules of the game emerge through interaction

1. In explicit games the audience will be informed about the rules by the MC or by the players. The rule is usually a simple one like: "The players have to sing a song, whenever the audience yells 'smells like a song'" or "Each player has to start his sentence with the next letter of the alphabet". The audience will watch the following scene through the lens of this rule, which means, they will split their attention between watching the scene as a fiction and controlling if the rules are followed. It is quite surprising how much audience members can get involved in the role of a referee, scrutinizing the scene for 'mistakes' and enjoying both success and failure. Of course this is drawing attention from the fictional frame and a 'good' scene in a dramaturgical sense is very unlikely to happen. Even if it does emerge, the audience will probably not give credit for it. Explicit games draw the attention to the frame of play. They mostly produce bad theater – but with a strong involvement and participation of the audience. The frame of play here is including the spectators as rule-keepers, judges and referees (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The selective attention test (Simons and Chabris 1999)

2. Secret games are premeditated and trained by the actors, they have a set of shared rules like the “Yes and”-principle in the Chicago School and the use of status in Johnstones school. The audience is not informed about these rules, but will get the impression that the stage actions are somehow magically connected and that the players understand each other. Setting up a secret game does not draw the attention of the audience to the game, but lets it focus on the fiction of the scene, allowing for more immersion. So the frame of fiction is much stronger than in the explicit game. The secret game also serves as an acting technique by narrowing the focus of attention of the player to the rule and thus weakening the inner censor. This is what Spolin calls the “Point of concentration”. The frame here is excluding the spectators from the play, while letting them sense on a subconscious level that some game is going on.

3. In emergent games the rules appear through social emergence, which means, the players will ‘listen to the game’, trying to detect patterns in the scene and building rules from there. For example a player starts to lament about his life and his stage partner is joining in, lamenting about her life too, so a game of competition is starting, who has the worst life. Emergent

games are the most sophisticated use of games in improvisational theater, it takes a lot of experience to co-create a game on the go, while at the same time setting up a fictional reality. Unlike in secret games, the audience will usually understand that a game has emerged and enjoy that it is being played out to the very climax. So in emergent games, both the actors and the audience discover the game simultaneously, switch to the frame of playing while the fictional frame is still in the background and will be activated as soon as the game is over. Still the spectators stay outside the game, not as excluded as in secret games on the one hand and not as included as in explicit games. Their status is not co-creation but co-discovery.

Emergent games quite often touch the third frame, the frame of reality, when players start to mock each other on stage, using personal material like referring to another player's overweight or commenting on his or her habits. So emergent games have a quality of transcending frames, creating what above was introduced as a perceptual multistability.

Conclusion

For theater research the model of frames leads to a shift of focus. New questions arise: How are frames established on stage? Which is the dominant frame? How do actors play with frames, what techniques do they use to mark a passage? Does the audience follow the indicated frame or does every spectator use his or her own frame? Is there something like an emergent frame, either between the actors (as Keith Sawyer suggested) or even between the audience and the players (as I am suggesting)? What does this have to do with the experience of liveness?

Playing games with frames is an important feature of improvisational theater, adding a richness and multi-level communication to the performance, that could otherwise not compete with scripted theater in terms of storytelling, depth of character and dialogue. Improvisational actors develop some virtuosity in playing with frames, they use it to create a strong theatrical experience – out of almost nothing. The model I introduced here is derived from the theory of performativity and might help to explain, why improvisational theater most of the time seems to produce only rubbish – and still is one of the most successful and most interesting new form of theater we have at the moment. In other words: It is not con-

tent, that makes improvisational theater so fascinating. It is not the stories that are told, nor the characters, nor the dialogues. It must be something else and I suggest it is the specific use of frames.

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How to Play

Nicolas J. Zaunbrecher

Instructions for Readers

The following is an account and analysis of an interactive presentation at the academic symposium IMPRO TALKS held on Oct. 20, 2016 at the University of Arts in Zurich, Switzerland. The group of about 25, mostly improvisational theater scholars, students and practitioners, was assembled in a large, flat lecture hall, mostly filled with chairs but otherwise with few features besides the slightly raised stage with table and podium in front. They do not know it yet, but it is time for them to play.

The connection between play and improvisational theater is strong, with many methodologists linking successful improv with successful play (e.g., Napier 4–11, 25–26; Salinsky and Frances-White 51–53; Spolin 4–7). Improv is also generally accounted as distinctively dependent on spontaneity (e.g., Johnstone “Theater” 75–105, Johnstone “Storytellers” 55–74, Salinsky and Frances-White 46–53, Spolin 4–17, Zaunbrecher 50). But in what ways do play and spontaneity overlap as unified supporting principles of improv? While play and spontaneity often overlap in behavior, play can certainly be nonspontaneous and spontaneous behavior may be decidedly not play. Though this space cannot allow for a detailed discussion of these intricate relationships, I offer one point of approach to this question in the following account of symposium participants’ responses to a series of variations of directives to “play” in different ways.

Certainly no generalizable claims about play or spontaneity can be drawn from participants' concrete responses to these exercises, though the structure may serve as a basis for qualitative experiments comparing groups of varying demographics or in different contexts. The purpose is rather to simply provide a concrete example of responses to varying play situations as a way of illustrating some of the issues related to the play/spontaneity/improvisational-theater relationship, and as a way of anchoring in concrete behavior to illustrate my ethnomethodological view of this relationship. The accounts of participant behavior and responses below are drawn from a video of the presentation and audience. Despite its high visibility, no participant reported feeling affected by the presence of a recording agent, and the video itself indicates that participants seem to treat the camera and its operator as outside the notice of the situation altogether; no one ever "plays to the camera" nor apparently seeks to avoid it. A great deal more could be identified in the audience's behavioral responses to prompts; for the purposes of space and clarity my examples are biased toward the behaviors most easily and readily described in everyday language. Unfortunately, a great deal of the audience discussions was partly or entirely inaudible on the videotape; thus my examples of participant self-assessment below are biased toward those voices that best "showed up" on tape or responses whose substance I could determine based on my own responses, such as echoing their language.

One final warning: If you are reading this article alone, stop. Find a friend or colleague (or better, a few) and read it together (why will become clear, don't worry). As you read, stop as you come to each new play prompt and *do it* before continuing on to read about it. The comparison of your own experience with that reported should deepen your appreciation of the theoretical points that follow. Also, it will just be more fun, and more closely resemble the experience of a group actually enacting these successive modes of play. Ready? You can start just as did the symposium group, prompted with as little preamble as possible to:

Go Play

There is something contradictory and paradoxical about being told to "go play" (c.f. Meares 764). Nonetheless, a crowd of scholars has no trouble doing it on command. They are just really getting into it – tossing

an apple around a circle, setting their weight against walls innovatively, rolling around in a chair on the stage, talking at the podium, making a paper air-plane – when I break things up and ask them to refocus on accounting for their play: How did they respond in attempt to accomplish this directive?

Responses include “doing something forbidden,” that one is not “supposed to do” in this setting, in this case speaking at the podium. Other participants mention “exploring” and “changing the space” (not actually changing the physical setup, but interacting with it in novel ways). The apple-tossing play was explained as “using an object to connect people.” A variety of play-methods were in use, drawn largely from a sense of freedom to engage in novel or previously-proscribed behaviors. However, this sense of “freedom” is made possible by the sudden *imposition* of a play situation – the recess bell rings, and suddenly you are playing whether you like it or not. The key point is that despite the sudden imposition of a play situation, everyone was immediately able to play by deployment of their varied methods – nobody needed explanation or clarification on how to play. Some perhaps were dissatisfied, having some sense that they could have played “better”, but everyone was able to play.

This may make it sound as if it is impossible to fail at playing, but that is not the case at all. Some participants reported “awkward moments”, especially initially, trying to figure out what was meant by play; another described feeling “self-conscious” before choosing to play individually. But despite some early “failure”, everyone was able to “figure it out”. The point is not that it is impossible to fail at play, but rather that we all have working methods of identifying our own actions as play. We have practices for recognizing if we are playing or not, and indeed play is one of those behaviors in which reflexivity is criterial – to be playing, one must have a conscious sense of oneself as “playing”, for it is the sort of activity subject to the “most pervasive contexture of indexicality and reflexivity,” in which “the actor’s self-understanding of his/her activity is to some degree criterial for the identity of practices” (Heap 102). We also have methods of recognizing and evaluating whether we are “successfully” playing. In other words, play is an *accomplishment*. But even this internal evaluation method is a social accomplishment and social practice. Its particular form, our ability to “just know” what “counts” as play, is derived from social interaction: making our

behaviors recognized/able to others as “play” and in turn recognizing their behaviors as play (or not).

We can call this perspective an “ethnomethodological” account of play, and it is the perspective I will follow in assessing and describing responses to the following play directives. The key feature of this perspective is that it rejects any account of play that defines it as a determinable subset of behavior; we cannot define *a priori* what “counts” as play, and thus determinably label behaviors as play or not independent of their occurrence in some concrete social context. Instead, play is viewed as a social practice enacted in concrete situations whose accomplishment is dependent on both reflexive and shared methods for recognizing what “counts” as “play” (for more detailed discussion of relevant aspects of ethnomethodological perspective, see e.g. Eberle 288–90, Garfinkel 6–7, Genev 297, Maynard and Clayman 387–88, Peyrot 272–78).

Responses to this first play directive illustrate starkly this perspective in operation. The prompt was maximally unspecified and given to participants without any advance notice of the sort of prompts they should expect. The higher-level “academic symposium” situation within which the play directive was given is in part constituted by a shared expectation among participants of responsiveness to prompts given by presenters. In order to continue constituting their shared symposium situation, audience members had to figure out how to play – and fast. And they did.

The particular form of this play situation was in part dependent on spontaneity, in a generic sense of being “unexpected” or unplanned-for. In this generic sense of spontaneity, participants’ play in response to the first directive was necessarily “spontaneous.” This particular mode of spontaneous play becomes unrecoverable once the pattern of a succession of play directives is introduced; thus, the character of the play situation is altered dramatically in the next directive, even though its literal substance is identical:

Go Play (Again)

Upon calling an end to this second round of playing – featuring body play like shaking hands and rolling shoulders, environment play like stroking chairs or moving under them like a tunnel, a circle passing a series of claps via pointing gestures, a staring contest, and a pair playing char-

acters with one standing behind and providing the arms for the forward body – my guiding question for response is “How did having previously practiced/prepared for play influence your methods of playing?” A common theme was to “avoid doing the same thing” and reject repeating behavior from the previous prompt; other participants mention feeling a greater compulsion to “move around”. The source of these new subjective rules cannot be attributed to the actual directive given; they were arbitrary rules made up by participants about how they will recognize play differently in this new situation. Participants begin not “just playing” but *trying* to play; they restrict their sense of what will constitute success in playing. But these rules were no less “real” in constituting the character of the play situation because they were arbitrarily accepted by participants and not explicit in the play directive.

The shift in responses in this repetition illustrates the difference between implicit and explicit approaches to play. In the first directive, participants had to “figure out” how to play in real time, as they were doing it. The repetition of this directive as our second prompt allowed the audience to deploy explicit play behaviors – to do things like think about how they could have played last time, how they can “improve” their play, etc. In doing so, they enact new rules that are in no way implicit in the prompt responded to.

In our generic sense of spontaneity, this response was of necessity “less spontaneous” than that to the first prompt, as the audience was now explicitly prepared to play, and had just called explicit attention to their implicit play practices. In addition, participants were now “trying” to play instead of “just doing it”. In this sense, the explicit deployment of play is by necessity less spontaneous than the implicit, which can no longer be accessed as such in a situation of repetition of play directives. However, the presentation is not doomed to a downward spiral of progressively less-spontaneous play. Though the central theme of playing holds, spontaneity can be reintroduced through variation on the repetition of the play directive, as in its third iteration:

Play Alone

At least half the participants immediately break out a smart phone, laptop, or notebook and engage intently with it at their seats. Other responses in-

clude standing or walking about while looking down, brushing and drumming on legs, and hiding under a blanket. The most interesting response to my following guiding question of “How did you make your actions recognizable to *yourself* as ‘play’?” was a participant who noted playing paper-rock-scissors with himself. In a sense, “really” playing this game with oneself is impossible; its fundamental characteristic relies on unpredictability derived from social interaction. But in the present play situation, we may ask, “So what if he wasn’t *really* playing paper-rock-scissors but only borrowing analogous behaviors for a different purpose?” This participant still recognized himself as *playing*, and that was the key to success for our purposes.

As in this case, on one level, participants responding to this third directive were responsible only to their own subjective senses of play – if they experienced themselves as playing, then they were playing, and that’s all there is to it. But in fact, the framing creates *social* strictures on the successful accomplishment of play in this situation, even as it is enacted through explicitly individualistic methods. For in prompting participants to play “alone”, the play situation is now governed by a shared *rule*. This rule is different from the arbitrary, self-imposed “rules” occasioned by participants’ responses to the iteration of “play again” – playing *alone* is an explicit rule constituting the present play situation. In this third iteration, it becomes for the first time possible to fail to accomplish playing for a reason unrelated to the experience of oneself as playing.

In agreeing to play “alone”, the participants enter into a shared frame of recognition about what will constitute play for their current purposes. A person who interacted with others in this situation (exactly where that line might be drawn is an element subject to spontaneous implicit rule-making or negotiation) would be enacting an ethnomethodological “breach” of the shared practices constituting this particular play situation. That is, their behavior would interrupt the flow of taken-for-granted practices and induce “bewilderment”; participants would become unable to act without explicit account of their actions because “the ‘other’ was no longer acting in accord with shared background expectancies and thus sensemaking and trust were no longer possible” (Rawls 280–81). Even though this person may well experience themselves as “playing”, in the broader context they are not playing at all, but rather doing something

like “disrupting play”. By explicitly constituting play in this situation as featuring “aloneness”, the situation ironically becomes far more *social* in its character, for it establishes the possibility of account-ably recognizing *another* (not just oneself) as “failing to play”, and responding to the other from that perspective.

Granted, we’ve had “rules” the whole time – violent or offensive behaviors, e.g., would have violated more general shared expectations and shifted our frame of reference to the higher level “symposium” frame and its tacit expectations, where you definitely don’t do “that kind of thing” whether you are “just playing” or not. But these rules are implicit in the broader situation that holds throughout the symposium; playing alone is an explicit rule that applies only to the framed action of the play directive. By agreeing to constitute play in accordance with this rule, we shift from a “pure” play situation – accountable only to participants’ subjective experience of play and to their shared implicit rules constituting higher-level social situations – to a *game*, which requires shared adherence to play. Such a sense of “game” reflects Hans-Georg Gadamer’s sense of the term in his analogy with language use’s relation to dialogical reality; games are “underway when the individual player participates in full earnest, that is, when he no longer holds himself back as one [...] for whom it is not serious. Those who cannot do that we call men who are unable to play [sic to the gendered language, of course]” (66). While our stereotypes of games tend to be far more complex than “play alone”, I argue that this is exactly what a game “is”: shared subjective recognition of a play situation featuring the shared acceptance of at least one explicit rule constituting that play situation.

By playing a *game*, we reintroduce spontaneity in our generic sense into our succession of play frames – a new and unexpected element to which participants must respond. Interestingly, we thus *increase* spontaneity by *limiting* behavior – troubling any account of spontaneity that equates it with freedom or range of possibility. Increasing spontaneity by limiting behavior may sound counterintuitive, but we do it all the time, from planning parties to playing charades.

A final shift was also introduced in this directive: For the first two rounds of play, after giving the audience its directives, I stepped out of the room and did not observe them. This absence was so that (if I did not play

myself) there would be no “authority” standing outside of the play and evaluating it, nor (if I did play myself) would I be modeling an “example” of play with authoritative weight that might influence participants’ choices (see Spolin 6–9, 39 on the deleterious impact of authority and examples on play). The idea was to allow for as uninfluenced a response as possible in participants’ discovery and negotiation of how to play. In contrast, when the audience played the game of “play alone”, I specifically did not participate in the play, but observed in case there was occasion to “enforce” the rule. Thus, participants not only had to play alone, they also had to *make visible* to an evaluating presence that they were playing alone. In other words, they not only had to in fact play, but also to *perform* aspects of their play, to make their concrete play-behaviors visible and recognizable – in ethnomethodological terms, “accountable” – as in accordance with the constituted play situation. This aspect of play as a social practice is brought to the forefront of our next prompt:

Half the Group Plays; The Other Half Observes Them Playing

Play takes on yet another aspect when it is explicitly called to be recognizably account-able to other social participants who are “outside” the play situation. Here, play featured tossing around a water bottle, scooting on the floor and interacting with others via feet and legs, and a great deal of clapping – not in applause, but as a form of playful interaction. Following this round of activity, each half of the group was asked a different question: Players, “How did you make your play recognizable to observers?” and Observers, “How did you evaluate what you observed as successfully displaying ‘play’ or not?” Players reported making rules; throwing the bottle more or less randomly “became ‘keep away’, and then evolved to include others.” Others identified an “increased intensity” in their actions, making a point of “showing you’re having fun.” As for the observers, some responded by indicating that they had questioned if two participants who were having a conversation were “really” playing or not, and another indicated looking for “childish” behavior.

In this directive, the game element of the last round was eliminated, and any form of play behavior meets the expectations of the situation. But the performance aspect of play is reinforced, with behaviors’ general status as play itself under explicit scrutiny. We remove the game element but

retain the evaluative one, i.e., “play however you want, but others will be watching and judging whether you are really playing!”

The focal aspect of play in this situation thus becomes the performative, the making-evident that one’s behaviors constitute recognizable play. Doing so means channeling one’s behaviors into directions assumed to be recognizable based on implicit appeal to communicative behavioral codes associated with play by both players and observers. That is, to be clearly playing, a player must behave such that observers would likely interpret their own analogous behavior as also play. Notably, participants can accomplish this without any subjective understanding of themselves as playing! For purposes of social accomplishment, the criterial reflexive experience of play is subsumed, and “successful” play is dependent upon communicative practices coded in shared association with “play”.

In such a context it first becomes possible to “fake” playing, to perform communicative play codes cynically, and accomplish being “at play” for all practical purposes without experiencing oneself that way at all. However, “faking” play is something of an odd idea and not the point to this prompt, which was to highlight the aspect of play that requires appeal to shared methods of recognizing play and making play recognizable. After all, when it comes to overt behavior, an ethnomethodological view focused on the social accomplishment of play makes distinctions, such as Erving Goffman’s (18–21), between “sincere” and “cynical” social performances irrelevant, for both participants who aim to “fake” play and those who aim to make “genuine” play evident will make use of the same framework of shared tacit recognition-practices and communicative codes (65–66). Our range of effective methods becomes more restricted – i.e., embedded in wider frames of reference – as the field of social participants and relevant contexts expands. When we play alone, with no one watching, we have only the restriction of our own subjective experience limiting our range of recognized play behaviors. When we play in a private setting with a personal friend, our range becomes far more restricted, for we now must appeal to shared behavioral codes recognized as play by both parties; anything nonoverlapping will breach the play situation and call for accounting-of. We are still more restricted in a complex social situation like an academic symposium, seeking play behaviors that meet our own subjective experience of play, our shared understandings of each other’s ranges

of recognized play behavior, and maintain accord with higher-level roles such as our statuses as scholars, professionals, students, foreigners, etc. With some exceptions, this group of participants is essentially strangers, with no sense of each other's senses of play, and so performing play tends toward more stereotypical methods understood as widely recognizable.

Our next prompt rolls our prior aspects of play together into a single directive as the group is asked to:

Play Together

A bit of initial hesitation and awkwardness, as a few participants flap their arms or drum with pens, some go around greeting others. A clapping game quickly emerges, a couple play paper-rock-scissors ...the clapping becomes rapid and widespread, drawing in most of the group under the tossing of imaginary balls by others... from the clapping participants begin to rear up and hoot, more and more, until we end on a single howl.

This prompt clearly incorporates both the “game” and “performance” aspects of play. An explicit rule is included, the inverse of our third prompt; playing “alone” is explicitly not recognized as play. Participants must perform adherence to this rule, by making their behavior recognizable to others both as play and as interactive. The explicit confluence of these aspects establishes a situation in which participants must “negotiate” the recognized behavioral parameters for play: What “counts” as playing “together”, and what behavioral methods are mutually enactable and recognized in common as play? Participants in this framing must collectively adapt their methods of play to the methods deployed by others, discovering where these overlap, clash, and are mutually recognizable/enactable. In this way, participants progressively develop the “meaning” of play in this situation through their own behaviors and reaction from within the situation, determining what “counts” as play through concrete action in real time.

Such a framing seems almost synonymous with first-glance intuitions of what constitutes “improvisation”. However, the prompt of “play together” does not preclude planning and organizational behaviors occasioned to facilitate interaction. When asked how they went about accomplishing this form of play, participants identified such techniques as arranging or moving in the environment in order to facilitate movement and

physical interaction, and displaying physical openness to others through body language. One participant cited “reading signals” as critical – interpreting reactions of others as “enjoying an idea, or seeing it as imposed.” By sharing such signals in the process of playing, participants negotiate the constitution of play behavior through both the opening and foreclosing of possibilities. To take the next step, the audience is prompted to drop the play-preparatory and -organizational activity and instead:

Improvise – i.e., Play Spontaneously!

It takes a second to sink in... then the waving of arms begins, a couple people climb on top of their chairs. One plays with a laptop keyboard as if it is a piano. Several people drum on legs or look up to the ceiling, and many play games involving passing and transforming motions or invisible objects.

While our previous play prompts indirectly addressed the relationship between play and spontaneity in terms of greater or lesser degrees of planning/preparedness, this is the first to explicitly connect spontaneity with play and establish spontaneity as a rule with respect to successfully accomplishing recognized play. It is certainly possible to conceptualize improvisational theater without appeal to practices of play, but not without appeal to practices of spontaneity. To improvise, we must not only reflexively experience ourselves as spontaneous, we also must *perform* our spontaneity: i.e., make our reflexively-experienced spontaneous behavior recognizable to relevant others as spontaneous.

Following spontaneous play, the audience was asked how they did just this: How did you play “spontaneously”? What methods did you use to make the spontaneous character of your play evident to others? One audience member notes that in this context, with so many other improvisers, she was “more focused on methods of improvising [such as theater games] rather than spontaneity itself.” Another describes his process as “allowing inner impulse...start something, follow that direction, then change the game” if it gets “boring” – but not just do arbitrary things moment-to-moment, because “that would just be random.” This raises the question of the distinction between randomness and spontaneity, to which another participant suggests that spontaneity is action “in response to impetus that has some creative logic, whereas randomness would just be nonsequiters.”

Again, “improvisational” play is criterially dependent upon spontaneity. But there are no “correct” answers about how participants should have gone about playing spontaneously; that is exactly what is being progressively determined through their concrete spontaneous-play behavior. The interesting part is in just how participants did in fact go about attempting to accomplish spontaneity. And as with play generally, spontaneity is subject to ethnomethodological accounting along the same aspects:

1. Spontaneity is a *social practice*. It is an action that is done in concrete social contexts, not some mysterious property of action independent of specific behaviors.
2. Spontaneity is an *accomplishment*. It is enacted through concrete behavior accountable to situation-specific working methods of recognizing spontaneity as such.
3. Spontaneity is subject to account-ability with respect to *rules*. Such rules may be implicit and derived from tacit working methods organizing the enactment and recognition of spontaneity in higher-order social contexts framing some call for spontaneity, or may be explicit (and as arbitrary as will be accepted by participants) in delimiting forms of behavior with respect to what will “count” as spontaneous in a concrete situation.
4. Spontaneity is made accountable among social participants through shared practices of recognition and making-recognizable, that is, as a *performance* enacted and interpreted through shared communicative behavioral codes drawn from alignments of participants’ individual methods of enacting and recognizing spontaneity.
5. The practical character of spontaneity in a concrete social situation is subject to change and adaptation through *negotiation* by participants via concrete behaviors and reactions to/interpretations of the behaviors of others – i.e., the nature of spontaneity may change as participants do it.

As seen above, these same points are equally applicable if we substitute “play” for “spontaneity”, and overlap along all these lines with respect to the role of play in improvisational theater. However, these shared aspects do not imply any necessary overlap of play and spontaneity; they are

more an artifact of my ethnomethodological perspective than inherently shared between working methods of play and spontaneity. And indeed, play can be readily severed from spontaneity, as enacted in our seventh prompt:

Don't Play

A twist, just when we were getting comfortable with playing so much. With this new and unexpected prompt, we suddenly increase spontaneity in the generic sense while explicitly calling for behavior recognizable as *not* play. Participants do not appear confused, but there is little action involving significant motion. Several take out notebooks (though interestingly, unlike our prompt of “play alone,” nobody begins using a smartphone or computer...); a few begin drinking water or sharing food and having conversations from their seats. Many simply remain seated and look, either around the room or toward the front. Asked to describe how they accomplished “not playing”, several accounts were offered. Some equated it with “doing work”, while others emphasized “passivity”. One participant mentions “questioning every action” – which we may view as a form of “work” oriented toward determining what counts as play so as to avoid it.

As we have methods for establishing play situations, so do we also have methods for foreclosing them: “This isn’t playtime.” As in our first prompt, which called for otherwise indeterminate “play”, the meaning of play to be elided in this seventh directive is maximally indeterminate. But yet again, everyone “just knows” how to “not play” already, without explanation or specific behavioral directives. Our tacit practical methods for recognizing and enacting play also include shared practices of *contrast* and *exclusion* as well as shared practices of positive recognition. These exclusionary methods are just as readily available for behavioral deployment, and everyone can easily find something to do that they (and generally others) definitely recognize as “not playing”, regardless of how they positively identify it (or even if they do at all).

The funny part is (as one participant pointed out in describing the process of assessing his actions to avoid play), there is *nothing* to any of the concrete behaviors enacted in response to “don’t play” that is somehow inherently not play. Any of these exact same behaviors could have just as easily been recognizable as play if we acted as if they were embedded in

a play situation! But this encompassing ubiquity of potential practices of play was no cause for confusion or hesitation by participants; everyone knew how to “Not Play”, i.e., how to make actions recognizable as *excluded from what “counts” as play*. These tacit practices of exclusion have been at work throughout our progressive set of play situations; explicitly marking them in contrast to play may reinforce or unsettle them with respect to play practices. Thus, in this prompt we simultaneously negotiate what *does* count as play even as we are specifically not playing. But methods of contrast and exclusion are not always so clear and readily accessible, as demonstrated in our final prompt:

Don't Be Spontaneous

For the first time in our series of directives, this one threw the audience into some confusion. The mood appears awkward; it is difficult to say what people might be described as *doing*, though a fair portrait for many might be “looking around tentatively for guidance.” How can we even accomplish this directive? When asked to account for how they attempted to accomplish this directive, the first response was “It’s impossible!” Another participant describes making a “plan” and carrying it out, and a third identifies efforts of finding ways to “be in control”, but neither could escape the sense that these tactics were being folded back into spontaneity even as they tried to avoid spontaneity through them. Certainly, the directive has something of a “Don’t think about elephants” quality. We have everyday methods aplenty for indicating and recognizing nonspontaneity, but here participants are unexpectedly and without preparation called to act; however they respond, how can their response be anything but spontaneous? This tension is evident throughout the audience’s response; another participant states that although there was very little overt action, the situation was not boring. Rather, it was “Fascinating to watch... so much inner conflict, like deep psychological theater.”

The only way to view this prompt as accomplishable is to abandon the generic sense of spontaneity as unexpected/unplanned behavior and to instead view it as argued above – as a social practice constituted through ongoing concrete interaction. In an ongoing way, we negotiate what will “count” as spontaneity for practical purposes in concrete situations where it is recognized by participants as relevant. As with play in our last prompt,

this is negotiated through practices of contrast and exclusion as well as through practices of positive recognition. The confusion comes from the mingling of spontaneity's generic sense in many of our practical methods, and with good cause – practices of recognizing behavior as unplanned/unexpected are prominent in our everyday methods of recognizing and enacting spontaneity. But clearly the presence of prepared elements of behavior or expected elements of a situation does not foreclose spontaneity, understood as a negotiated social practice – otherwise, spontaneity would either be conceptually impossible or incoherently ubiquitous. Concrete social situations and participants always come with prepared/expected elements; to those for whom spontaneity is relevant, these form parts of the backdrop against which spontaneity's concrete character is negotiated.

So we come at last to the upshot for improvisational theater: This is what improv is doing *all the time*. There's a whole lot more to improv, of course, but the negotiation of what shall be recognized as “spontaneity” for practical purposes is the dimension that is criterial to the identity of practices by which improv as such is constituted. Improv performers are oriented toward many other accomplishments, of course: strong stories, vivid characters, etc., but can fail at these accomplishments and still successfully accomplish “doing improv” as such. Failure in such sub-objectives may yield a performance which is evaluated as poor-quality improv; but for performers to fail to act spontaneously would be for them to fail to do improv at all. Improv cannot exist as a form of behavior without performers' self-understandings and shared methods oriented toward the *accomplishment* of spontaneity.

Thus, what shall “count” – be socially recognizable and behaviorally enactable – as spontaneity is *the* existential question for improvisational theater; play is but one technique for accomplishing it, but a potent one owing to its expansive recognition among improv practitioners as indicative of spontaneity. There is no “correct” answer to this question; the negotiation of what shall constitute spontaneity is constantly happening in the process of creating and experiencing improvisational theater. Instead, I leave the reader with two further questions central to improv that arise from this core existential question. First, considering that our practices of spontaneity are largely tacit when it comes to concrete interaction, what methods and practices of interaction do we count as “accomplishing”

spontaneity in our improv practice? Not just, what *should* we recognize as spontaneity in accordance with improv methodological theory and our histories of practice, but what do we *in fact* treat as spontaneity for the purpose of enacting improv? And second, what are the implications of these accountings? For they are not neutral; as we have seen, practical methods of recognition operate by exclusion as well as inclusion. That being so, we must ask about the material impact of our recognized practices of spontaneity on the social field of improv – what practical methods, and individual positionalities, do our practices of spontaneity (explicitly or tacitly) privilege or exclude? And how do such practices accomplish this privileging or exclusion? For insofar as successful improv is identifiable with successful play, it is in negotiating these questions through our concrete, situated “spontaneous” actions that we figure out, as we go along, how to play.

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The Improvisatory – an Ecology and a Politics: some Suggestions and Stimuli

Tony Frost and Ralph Yarrow

Our presentation was quite largely in the form of a conversation, so here we attempt both to recall some of the areas it covered and to speculate about some future directions both it and other presentations at the Impro Talks event opened up.

First, we asked what we meant by “the improvisatory” and how this concept has developed through the three editions of our book (latest version: Frost and Yarrow 2016). The book overall identifies a number of ways in which, across time and space and place and practice, the readiness and capacity to be in a state of improvisation has resonances for political, existential, psychological and social performativity, agency and responsibility.

Improvisation for us (specifically in drama, theater and performance, but also more generally) is:

- a history: lots of people have done it at different times in different contexts and in different ways which relate to, comment on, challenge or redefine those contexts and the systems and structures which frame them;
- a set of practices, similarly culturally embedded and transgressive;
- an underpinning set of principles or theoretical positions.

In this respect it is both diachronic and synchronic. It manifests itself continually (developmentally?) across time and it signals a “universal” set of understandings or claims.

As we tried to explore it over many years in relation to this spectrum of criteria, we were led to ask questions like:

- Who does it?
- How?
- Where?
- When?
- Why?
- What forms has it taken?
- What are its processes, functions and outcomes?
- What does it suggest about the way humans can “perform”?

The detailed and diachronic answers form the substance of our book as it develops across its three successive editions. We have focused on the history and practice of improvisation in drama and performance, in Europe, in the USA, in other parts of the world (e.g. Africa). We have examined it as:

- practices and attitudes which have intervened in performance, strategies and in the relationship between “theater” and society;
- performer-training methodologies.

The trajectory of the book broadly follows a line from the use of improvisation as a component in the rehearsal and preparation of “conventional” theater towards becoming a form in its own right (including “improv” and its derivatives); and signals its emergence as the nub of de-

constructive and reconstructive modes of performance, for individuals, groups and audiences. This schema repeats itself across different geographical and historical zones. Throughout, improvisation and the improvisatory operate as drives to extend, unpick or relocate form and relationship; and signal an ecology of loss and restitution, of the reordering of the transaction of who we are and how we engage with what we are not. The move is thus from improvisation in theater to improvisation as the dynamic of theater and performance process.

Part 3 of the book examines the synchronic cloud which emerges and which illuminates improvisation as an attitude and a set of actions which contribute to the reshaping of identities, relationships, boundaries and transactions: as intervention in performance practice and personal repertoire, it discloses itself as an ecology, an active and transformative dynamic of exchange.

Here our thinking has collided with recent work in performance and ecology and in the psychophysiology and somatics of performance; we think about improvisation particularly in terms of how it affects the relationship of self to self, self to other, self to surrounding contexts and environments, and how the kinds of bodily disposition which many practitioners believe it engenders signal changes in daily and extra-daily ways of thinking and acting (in both the narrow and the wider sense). This widening of the spectrum has also encompassed a look at the empowered spectator, since performance itself has begun to claim increasingly participatory dimensions and include the (partly) unplanned reactions of its audience. Like all generalisations this is of course also contentious from a number of points of view; that's also why we look not only at "immersive" performance but also ask, via discussion of jazz and stand-up, about what actually does count as "spontaneous". This whole area opens up questions which we'll take a bit further below: they range from the neurological to the aesthetic but also increasingly include the ethical.

The garden in which we played has grown into a field over the thirty years covered by the various editions of our book. Within this emergent field of "Improvisation Studies", we can find discussions of fine art, tradi-

tional and non-traditional theater, actor training, devising, theater games, poetry, comedy, dance, politics, therapy and medicine, engineering, and even military strategy. The territory continually expands, and we find ourselves continually drawn into various highways, byways and occasional culs-de-sac as we try to map it.

We always knew that our book ought to unite historical, critical, and theoretical perspectives with an account of the practices they give rise to. (We thought of it as being, in our terms, “a UEA book”, in that the synthesis implied here underpins the drama course on which we both teach).

We began simply enough, by establishing two kinds of improvisatory practice, which we dubbed (borrowing from mathematical terminology) the “applied” and the “pure”. The former dealt with the uses of improvisation as training, rehearsal practice etc., in the production of existing forms of (chiefly) scripted theater. The latter dealt with improvisation as a generative force, capable of being an art in itself and of being the means to the spontaneous, on-stage creation of (chiefly) non-scriptable performance forms.

After the first edition appeared, we had a long period (seventeen years, in fact) of feeling that there was more to say than we had said, or that editorial space had permitted us to say. When the invitation to prepare a second edition emerged, we had already asked ourselves key questions about improvisation in other contexts (such as in therapeutic settings, and in non-Western forms), and about other improvisers not discussed in the first edition. Chief among those we had othered (unintentionally, *nostra culpa*), was a significant body of female improvisers.

So, in the second edition we paid (either new, or renewed) attention to important innovators such as Suzanne Bing, Margaret Naumburg, Neva Boyd, and Jo Forsberg. And we researched dramatic forms from the wider world, including Papua New Guinea, Turkey, Iran and West Africa. By the time of the third edition, seven years later, we were ready to think about parallel developments in fields such as improvised poetry (e.g., Bengali, Basque, Jamaican, Maltese, Rap), stand-up comedy, scientific research into

the improvising brain, and improvising in the worlds of music, dance and movement.

Meanwhile, some of those innovators discussed in the first edition (Grotowsky, Lecoq, Dario Fo) had passed away: thankfully others, (like Mike Leigh, Peter Brook, Keith Johnstone and Roddy Maude-Roxby) are still going strong. There was a need to update or to sum up their careers. And we had encountered new games, exercises, practices which needed to be incorporated into the book.

None of this is intended as a marketing ploy for our latest edition! Rather, it is an attempt to account for the way in which the field has expanded and inflated around us, while we have frantically tried to keep up. As the interest in (and marketing of) improvisatory games has grown, and every sixth-former has joined an Impro troupe at school, and the term “improvisation” has gained greater and greater currency in more and more disciplines, we have endeavoured to chart its progress. And we continue to learn: there are on-going explorations, not necessarily destined for inclusion or for further study.

We have noted, for example, that the remarkable 1930s on-stage experiments of Hallie Flanagan and the Federal Theater Project, were facilitated by the backstage “furious improvisation” of politicians like FDR, Eleanor Roosevelt and, particularly, Harry Hopkins to enable the Works Progress Administration relief project to succeed, against entrenched opposition (Quinn, 2011). This seems to us to be different in kind from the thought-free, risk-filled brinkmanship of contemporary political machinators, and we will say more of the improvisatory in politics below.

We have considered the role improvisation has in military thinking. After the Second World War, German analysts determined that from the first moment of crossing the Russian border, Operation Barbarossa became a concatenation of improvisatory expedients. Improvisation is despised by staff officers because its use means that their detailed planning has been inadequate (the roads on the Barbarossa maps turned out to be muddy tracks unsuitable for wheeled vehicles etc.) – yet it responds to the

truthful observation (formulated by the elder von Moltke among others) that such plans always break down in the real world, and strategic designs are frequently rescued by tactical improvisations “in the field” (or “theater of operations”). “No plan of operations extends with certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy’s main strength” – or “no plan survives first contact with the enemy” – and therefore strategy always needs to consist of a series of options (Moltke 1993, 45–7: the quotation dates from the 1871 work, “On Strategy”, which is famously defined therein as “a system of expedients”).

Sometimes (as we noted many years since with Grotowskian *para-theater*), the journey across the boundary of a field of study helps to define the shape of the field. One day, it dawns on you that what you are doing is no longer “theater”, and it may occasion a departure or a return. If studying improvisation in political, or military, or engineering contexts (the recovery of Apollo 13 is a casebook in how to improvise in weightless near-Earth orbit!), drags us beyond the field of theater studies, then so be it. Their consideration helps us to define what is central to our principal investigation, and the time is well spent. And it invites us to widen the scope of our enquiry – to lift our eyes from the narrow-field investigation of drama, to the broader discussion of performance.

Impro Talks showed the variety of dimensions, contexts, modalities and interfaces of improvisation, improv, the improvisatory – as practice, praxis, methodology, event structure, performance form, human capacity, cognitive functionality, aesthetics, politics etc. It identified, exemplified, and demonstrated intellectually and practically that there are ways of rooting what improvisation is and does in psychophysiological, interpersonal, communal and “universal” terrains. We think this is worth carrying further; and also that there is also a lot of scope for the exploration of “applied” work, especially in the sense we meant with reference to Applied Theater/Performance.

The key links between improvisation and applied practice (in a variety of fields) include:

- extension of awareness/sensitivity
- receptivity
- listening
- interaction and interpersonal relationship, self/other negotiation
- co-creativity
- local and social economies and ecologies
- “spontaneous” response and articulation
- confidence and self-production/autopoeisis
- embodied resource

Its application includes:

- individual production in many forms: verbal, tactile, tonal, rhythmic, somatic, etc.; and genres: drama/theater, music/jazz, poetry/scripting, dance/movement, painting/sculpting etc.
- pair and group production as above
- processes of social, psychological, communal dialogue, interaction and negotiation – including conflict resolution, co-creativity, therapy/therapeutic applications, entertainment and fun, information exchange, problem-solving etc.
- accepting and using risk, failure, fragmentation, deconstruction, loss, unknowing, puzzle, vulnerability, chaos

Many of these considerations and applications underpin work which people at Impro Talks and others are doing and many of the examples from history and different contexts which our book describes and situates. It is necessary to revisit, restate and reconsider them in the light of recent electoral outcomes, which highlight crucial questions. Trump as an Improviser; “dark play”; Brexit: does improvisation’s *habitus* of off-the-cuffness, smart answers, going with the first response/reaction, welcoming the uncensored, offer a stock of resources which are adulteratable and manipulable, open to hijacking (trumping) by opportunists and unscrupulous parties? Or are they just “neutral”: what you do with a tool depends on the workman?

Alternatively, can the improvisatory be one mechanism which stands against the crass and crushing defensiveness of Brexit and neo-Na-

zism and hate and othering in the places and spaces which we comfortably-off academics and liberal thinkers and arts practitioners inhabit (of course these things and worse are not absent from other spaces and places in which arts work also goes on under much greater threats too).

A necessary encounter with these issues means interrogating the ethics of practice. If, as David Charles reminds us (in the words of Judith Malina), the role of the artist is:

In time of violence: to make peace

In time of despair: to give hope

What can improvisation bring to this?

We have perhaps tended to construct or accept the broadly positivist and humanist tropes which underpin the application of impro/visation as a training methodology, as historical game-changer, as an impetus to performance, as celebratory play with the capacity for “original” and spontaneous response.

Is this vision itself fatally compromised by bourgeois liberal narratives about a creative individualist self? Do I only let you play because you are prepared to accept my game and confirm my sense of my own “creativity”? Or does improvisation come with insights and more importantly practices of mind and body which can work with these challenges?

“The spectacle... is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the large issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details; it provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and rational thought. It calls for emotion rather than conviction; it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge; it confirms without necessarily offering a challenge. It is the literature of the powerless identifying the key factor responsible for their powerlessness.” (Njabulo Ndebele, 41)

In what ways might improvisation *practice* – as opposed to one-off “techniques” – combat this culture of the spectacle – which others have

of course identified too? What if the key thing isn't the method but the attitude ("relationship", interactivity)? In this understanding, the detachable components, the techniques even, are always going to be inflected by the *how* of the work. Now in the case of any performative methodology, the *how* means how the skill is embodied, learned psychophysically; and how in that process it recalibrates the *habitus*-spectrum of the mind/body that is learning. In such a process of embodied learning, the mind/body develops some different patterns. So if you pick the tricks off the shelf, you employ the components without undertaking the process of recalibration: the effect will be different. What will emerge will be a series of tricks, some impressive but ephemeral moments. They will not be linked by a skeleton and musculature.

Process is not instantaneous. It doesn't deal in sound-bites and one-liners. There may be parallels with western and eastern approaches to performance training here, though we would need to insert lots of qualifications. Many eastern forms work through extensive body/somatic training over many years to cultivate a base of performance flexibility and skill. Only after that is "improvisation" possible: it follows "mastery", and then it operates on a basis of extended physical resource and interactive sensitivity to other performers – it is a kind of extra-daily operational capacity. But it is rooted in a very precise command of individual skills and sensitivities. Now although much western practice also incorporates similar training regimes (ballet and music, obviously, but also the now-standard curricula of drama schools and conservatoires), nevertheless there is still a disposition to encourage "self-expression" or "creativity" in writing or other genres before undergoing rigorous preparatory training of the kind referred to above.

It can be argued that such training does of course exist – in the examples noted, but also in "conscientious" impro work: Playback companies, Chicago improv teams, many Impro Sports ensembles, undertake a lengthy, if not always so formally organised, process of developing individual response mechanisms, group interactivity, listening, accepting and extending, organising and recombining the elements of their practice. If during long-term performance training it may be said that the mind/body

develops not only capacities but also discovers new kinds of *habitus*, and that these have certain mental and physical consequences, it's worth asking what the social, ethical and political consequences of this might be; and wondering if this applies to improvisation too. In other words, if you work with it and allow it to become a part of the way you negotiate your being in the world (as opposed to using it as a one-off technique) does it have different effects?

We might be going here in the direction of the neurological investigations of e.g. jazz musicians which we refer to in our book. Might, because these only provide data about kinds of neurological functioning. It is not their remit to draw ethical conclusions. Nor do they differentiate between short and long-term, though the people they were investigating were trained musicians of some standing.

Is the argument plausible that long-term engagement in the kinds of processes we identify under the umbrella of improvisation tends to make you more available, responsive, flexible etc.; a Johnsonian “yes-sayer”? So therefore someone who is less rather than more likely to fall into “politics of fear” behaviour, which is that of division, protectiveness, separation, non-contact, whose energies prime it to retreat, to curl up, or to strike out and thrust away from or at that which it does not feel comfortable with, fears, envies, suspects of invading its space and threatening its property (= its “*propre*” being). How valid is the claim that the being which emerges through extensive improvisation practice is more like uncurling, opening up, reaching out, welcoming the other, being prepared to risk its vulnerability and negotiate its action?

The following is about Lecoq and “play” but reflects the disposition of the improvisatory.

Lecoq did not invent the circumstances of play for theater training but it provides, as the philosophers say, a “necessary condition” for the *life* of all theater. At its heart play contains the disposition to refuse authority, it offers actors the possibility of claiming agency in the construction of work, and it finds in error and failure a hope of redemption, the confi-

dence that not knowing solutions is the first and last step of a democratic act. Play refuses authority, not through aggressive contestation, but by joyfully shifting the terms of the debate, through slippage, laughter, deflection, the rough, the vulgar, the irreverent, the indirect angle of incidence and arriving from the oblique. Lecoq ventriloquizing through the words of Tim Etchells might have said: "(P)lay is a state in which meaning is in flux, in which possibility thrives, in which versions multiply, in which the confines of what is real are blurred, buckled, broken" (Etchells 1999). Play thrives on the unruly and invites the inmates to take over the asylum. Less poetically, the playful actor mischievously challenges and undermines the "expert" director, playwright, choreographer or composer. The pleasure of insouciance. The frisson of uncertain outcomes. The fearful delight in not knowing where you are heading. The risk of throwing away the route map. (1.54). A cultural politics for over-prescribed times, for art in its own right and on its own terms.

From Mark Evans and Simon Murray, *The political legacies of Jacques Lecoq in twenty movements*. Presentation delivered at IPPT Wrocław, 2015.

Key points here are:

1. disposition to refuse authority (not through aggressive contestation, but by joyfully shifting the terms of the debate)
2. possibility of claiming agency
3. finds in error and failure a hope of redemption
4. not knowing solutions: the first and last step of a democratic act.
5. challenges and undermines the "expert"
6. the frisson of uncertain outcomes
7. the risk of throwing away the route map

Several of these can be read two ways: 1., 3., 5.–7. all might be a recipe for the kind of spectacular rejection of "establishment" models seen in the UK EU Referendum and the US Presidential Election; whilst the second part of 1., 2., 3. and positive readings of 5.–7. could be interpreted as leading to more open forms of "democratic act". Again, is it a question of attitude and embodiment as against one-off application? And is what you bring to it what conditions what comes out of it?

The psychophysiology of the long-term, in-depth process of working with improvisation and play is vital. Short-term cherry-picking, grasping of techniques or tricks, may produce spectacular results (cf. Ndebele, above). But as we explore in our approach to neutrality and disponibility, what is targeted is a condition of maximum openness and non-judgementalism; this is only achieved through a specific relaxation of barriers both mental and physical, including those which designate and protect fixed notions of self, identity and status. The condition of neutrality is not an opting out from the personal or psychological, but rather a moment of holding it in abeyance, an “Aufhebung” or “epoché”, so that its energies and directions are suspended, able to be reformulated. What is reformulated depends on the quality, the scope, the duration of the engagement. What we saw in Zurich confirms that the effects operate in many dimensions which seem to demonstrate that practice is also an ethics.

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Improvisation's Double A-Side

Duncan Marwick

As an art form, Improvisation is wide-ranging and has the potential for infinite diversity. Therefore, as a training paradigm it can also be infinitely useful. However the preposition here is that the elements for this diversity are themselves finite. By looking at the elements of Attention and Awareness, which potentially mean a great deal to an improviser, we will enquire into this Double A-Side of improvisational practice through the lens of Playback Theater and the Meisner Technique. We will observe what similarities and contrasts these two improvisational forms have, plus the potential wider applications beyond improvisational training. The use of Meisner Technique here is deliberately provocative, since it is often seen as sitting outside of the improvisation family, and should prompt thinking as to its improvisational qualities.

Fundamentals and Definitions

There are many fundamental concepts within an improvisors skillset, the understanding of which is important but does not immediately mean that the improviser will be highly skilled. Practical knowledge, coupled with a clear understanding of the results of their use within that practice allows them to have the potential of high quality performance. In this essay we will look at a workshop, first presented at the *Impro Talks Symposium* (Zurich, October 2016). As a starting point to research into elements of improvisational practice the presentation at this symposium raised multiple questions concerning the content of the workshop and therefore the practice that was previewed therein. The workshops foci were the two key concepts of Attention and Awareness within the frame of improvisational practice, and their uses in wider performativity. Within this frame there was a further specification, to explore these aspects through using elements of Meisner Technique and the Pairs short form from Playback Theater. Through practice in both of these, apparently, different forms of performer training it is clear that there are improvisational principles that link them.

Attention:

- a.) the act or state of applying the mind to something
- b.) a condition of readiness for such attention ... especially a selective narrowing or focusing of consciousness and receptivity (Merriam-Webster)

The need for the performer to apply a “state” or “condition” will be recognisable to many and correlates to the Stanislavskian exercises in Attention, or Concentration, set out by Gordon (1988, various chapters) where “The development of the actor’s ability to focus or concentrate on a single sensation or object is the first step necessary in producing the CREATIVE STATE OF MIND.” (Gordon, 234). It is clear that this concept was seen as a skill that could be improved through exercise. It is also clear through the practical work here that our context for Attention is more aligned to that of Vaktangov, who believed an actor’s attention must be on something for “ ... every moment ... ” you are working. Barba states that “Daily techniques generally follow the principle of less effort: that is obtaining a maximum result with a minimum expenditure of energy.” (Barba & Saravese,

p8), since although we do pay attention throughout our daily lives (or we would potentially not survive the walk to work) there is a deeper attention that can be implemented through practice which would be more beneficial to the performer, and indeed any profession. Although achieving a “state” such as this is important for improvisers, perhaps a more important aspect of this definition in the context of this workshop, and paper, is the aspect of selectiveness. The ability to be specific with what you pay attention to, or more importantly in this context: what you choose as the most appropriate (or important at each individual moment). There are so many things which we could give our attention to, but once we begin to select what we *need* to attend to then our thinking can change. This became apparent in the Zurich workshop through “ ... succeeding to plant seeds of joy and laughter ... ” (Freisleben-Teutscher, 2016) which will be looked at in more detail later.

Awareness:

having or showing realization, perception, or knowledge
(Merriam-Webster)

The concept of “perception” is, potentially, the most important word here. What we perceive is likely to be different with each individual and indeed through the workshop, and its further incarnations, it is clear that each exercise itself has its own individuality although the *rules* are the same.

Perceptions and Evolutions

“Awareness is knowing a thing exists, Attention is having an interest in it.”
(Smith, 2016)

The work in Zurich raised a number of questions which clarified a way forward with the practice based research and where it could now move to. The physical connection between the performers during the exercises, and the emerging links to the vocal elements throughout them, created a discussion between the delegates in Zurich as to the creation of physical and embodied vocality which has the potential for further exploration. This is for the next paper in this series but it is clear that focusing on specific aspects within a given context allows for a distinct reading of the outcomes, or opinions, contained within the exploration. Further con-

versations were instigated with colleagues back in West Yorkshire in the following months, especially with Matthew Smith, which have widened the notion that both Attention and Awareness are intrinsically linked, especially for the performer but also in wider society (Smith is a photographer). For example: people are *aware* of their breath, but an performer has an *interest* in it and so will put their attention *on* it in order to manipulate it. Similarly we can have an awareness of Global Warming, but when we really pay attention to it we are more likely to do something about it. So it is with the work explored here, we train ourselves to be aware of as much as possible and when we are in the middle of the exercise this awareness is focused to specific aspects of ourselves, the space we are working in and our partners behaviour; allowing us to be changed as the exercise evolves. This ability to change and evolve is an important, if not fundamental, element of improvisational performance and is highlighted by the work of both Farquhar (2014–15) and Britton (2016) who, although working with different techniques, are deeply interested in how our relationships in the space change us.

Through the workshop and discussion in Zurich, subsequent work in Leeds with degree students from Leeds City College and Smith's clarity on the different aspects of both Attention and Awareness it is obvious the two cannot live without the other in performance work, or indeed the wider world. This work begins with a ball game, where in Zurich Freisleben-Teutscher stated he hated ball games as he feels he cannot throw or catch. However, by the time we had played for ten minutes he, as stated above, began " ... succeeding to plant seeds of joy and laughter ... " due to a very different variation of a simple ball game – we made it impossible to catch everything. There is only so much that you can attend to at any one time and therefore allow yourself to be the best you can be but forgiving yourself for not catching all the balls, this is proven to be liberating as it was for Freisleben-Teutscher. This game allows us to see that there is much to be aware of, and then allow ourselves to decide what to actually attend to. It allows us to begin to create our appropriate "state" to then work, this is a "state" that is helpful for both Meisner Repetition and Playback Theater- the following aspects of the workshop.

Meisner Repetition is used here in two ways. Firstly as it is normally used: to observe and respond, secondly to generate vocals not necessarily

connected to the action. What we are exploring is physical and vocal connection plus how one member of the final exercise is affected by the other and vice-versa. We build from simple repetition into simple repetition whilst moving together physically connected into the basic physical set-up of the Pairs short form in Playback Theater. From there we simply gain a short story with two opposing aspects and we can present it relatively easily. One of the difficulties of learning Playback is the potential emotional content of the stories that are offered which can be difficult to express whilst learning the performative techniques, and so unconnected vocals allow the technical aspects of the form to be explored without any need to generate content. As with Meisner, the vocals within the first layers of these Playback Pairs sit above the interaction allowing the performers attention to be with their partner, rather than worrying about creating content. So the use of repetition allows us to begin to exercise the “state” that Gordon speaks of.

Recognitions and a Way Forward

“Recognition of the sudden awareness of the voice and body together.”
(LCC Student, 2016)

The exercises here were selected carefully so they would be generative within the workshop allowing for the participants to see the difference between the two main aspects explored, but have also done more than this. They allow the participants to begin to choose what is important in the moment, have the body affect the voice and vice-versa, allow an emerging comfort in closer contact with each other and to unlock joint discovery which can then be taken forward into further work. Specifically looking at how the concepts of Attention and Awareness put you in the moment, a “state”, and allow you to recognise when you are really present and responding to your partner physically, vocally and emotionally. It has unlocked a way for students to become “ ... more confident using your body without worrying ... ” (LCC Student, 2016).

The “receptivity” from the definition above this is a key concept, since without it there is no discovery and therefore very little change in the participant. Without the opportunity to be changed you cannot train your ability to pay attention and notice when the change comes, and therefore what to do with it. Much of this can be attributed to a fear of failure, or a desire to fit in. However this receptiveness can allow greater freedom,

connection, sensitivity, recognition of distraction and the results of it: greater change. Freisleben-Teutscher stated that within the workshop we “... named the frustration. The eagerness to succeed ... told us, there is no “properly” way to do it. That there are infinite variations how to do it ... succeeding to plant seeds of joy and laughter and working together – creating a safe place for really anybody.” That is the most important aspect of this work, feeling safe and held. Having a clear process to allow for exploration and risk taking.

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Research with Applied Improvisation

Christian F. Freisleben-Teutscher

Improvisation is “the creative and spontaneous process of trying to achieve an objective in a new way” (Vera & Crossan, 2005). Principles and methods of improvisation are applied in very different fields, e. g. in theater, in music, in consulting in various branches of business and non profit institutions, in therapy and coaching and also in research. In the first part of this paper I will describe cyclic research methods – improvisation itself is such an approach. In the second and third part of this paper I will take a look at research with artistic approaches, starting with the history of artistic research. These parts will also help to explain well grounded, why to choose improvisation as an approach and tool in research. I will describe the concept of “Research with the body”, a very important aspect of applying improvisation methods. After that I will list some examples of Applied Theater – they show very clearly the power of cleverly compiled improvisation methods mixed with tools, normally used in theaters. In the last part I will describe methods I used at the conference “Impro Talks”, as an additional way of showing how improvisation methods can be applied in research processes and sketch out other approaches that I see in the future.

Cyclic research methods

One characteristic of iterative and/or cyclic research methods is that the phases of finding and/or evaluating data are not strictly separated. Furthermore the development of research questions and hypotheses is part of the overall process – both may change in the course of the research work on account of the findings made. This may also result in continuous changes of the methods of the investigation or how they are applied (Witt, 2001). Ideas concerning data gathering are repeatedly taken from the field of ethnography: the researchers often spend longer periods of time as part of the life and the living conditions in those parts of the world they are investigating, collecting not only data but also personal and practical experience which is, amongst others, continuously documented with field notes. Simultaneously partly intensive relation work is accomplished with diverse people in their own worlds of life (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Typical fields of application are e.g. (participative) Action Research, Grounded Theory or Design Based Research.

In the 1960s an attempt was made at Design Research (design theory) – analysing the course in design processes. This attempt was based on the beginnings of the scientific examination of decision making processes as well as creativity methods since the 1950s. The architect and system theorist Richard Buckminster Fuller added the concept of Design Science (Fuller, 1957; Joannesson, 2014). Design is considered in broad terms from architecture via medicine, engineering and the development of computer games to marketing strategies. Design Research is finally regarded as a special kind of thinking and planning and seeing that the course runs off smoothly (Cross, 2006). The philosopher Donald Schön (1983) took up the concept of the reflective practitioner of conceptual art once again and emphasized, with regard to design processes and their examination as well as further development, the importance of intuition and artistic approach. He demanded the conscious utilization of phenomena of insecurity and instability. Particularly in Design Research and Design Science iterative approaches are used. Moreover, when tackling certain tasks it is necessary to do so not only from the perspective of various disciplines but rather to view the own work within a more comprehensive context also aiming at the effects on basic social rules and course of events. These views were put into action by the Bauhaus movement e.g. after 1910 (Conrads, 2010).

Since 1977 Alexander et al. (1977) and others have furthered the idea of the design model e.g. in the field of architecture. A basic idea: there are very many similar formulations of a problem and even if they are perhaps posed in different social contexts, models may be useful to tackle them.

Another essential aspect: even if people have no contact with each other, faced with comparable tasks, they will come up with similar approaches and models of ways of proceeding. Alexander et al. refer to the construction patterns of medieval towns or castles (Pratt, 2009). Since the 1990s design models have also been in use in the field of computer science and computer-man-interaction (HCI).

Gamma et al. (1994) emphasize that there are also models for research processes. They consist of the name of the model, the formulation of the problem, the solution attempt and consequences that may be deducted from its use. In addition there is the context at a higher level from which e.g. the choice of the research methods could be deducted.

Iterative research methods can be seen as a further step of this development: Here again models of design are used. The central starting point according to Pratt (2009) is the relation to a really existing problem, irrespective of the research field. One of the first steps may then be observation – e.g. perceiving the surrounding area of the problem and how people move within it and interact with each other and/or the formulation of the problem. It is also possible to refer to previous findings. On this basis (research) questions and/or hypotheses concerning the further process are formulated. This results in the next step which again may be a prototype. The fourth step is testing the development. These phases are repeated several times while changing their intensity, methodology and focal points. This method of proceedings can also be found in the concepts of Design Thinking.

Improvisation can be viewed as a process of playful tinkering with myriads of options, how to combine them and/or create new approaches: An important starting point is awareness: What is happening in a social system, in a work or learning process, when different people are thinking and working together? What approaches, objects, tools, ways to think and speak are used? Which knowledge and which working experience is fundamental as starting points? Improvisation methods are using and combining all these materials – important approaches are embodiment

and association methods. So people who apply improvisation are testing multiple variations of how to approach questions, hypothesis, problems. They fail and try again. They learn in the process of trying. They try again in other variations – a cyclic approach.

Research with/by/through arts

In literature you may come across the question to which degree art supports research and learning. Various definitions can serve as tools in this fields (Tröndle & Warners, 2011) e.g.:

- art research
- artistic research
- aesthetic research
- art based research
- performative research
- research through/with/about arts
- sensual and embodied knowledge
- applied arts

This can be summarized as follows: “Research can be a performance, by performance, of a performance, or in performance.” (Roberts, 2008). A definition of ‘performative’ as coined by the British philosopher John Langshaw Austin in the 1950s is quite interesting: To him it implied linguistic statements that do not remain just verbal but through which an action is simultaneously performed and reality is changed or perhaps even established (“the buffet is opened”, “Going, going, gone!”, “Herewith I christen you...”, “I declare you husband and wife!”) (Pfeiffer, 2012).

In the late 1990s the performative turn began in social research (Haseman, 2006; Dirksmeier & Helbrecht, 2008). Performance was not considered as a process on a theater stage with a rather passive audience, but as a comprehensive principle for researching and understanding human actions – of course the word ‘performance’ also includes/also refers to any kind of using improvisational approaches. Haseman introduces the concept “performative research”. A wide variety of research methods are used, the practical action often showing the way and/or being determinative and the performative action being a fixed part. His description:

“[Performative action is] expressed in nonnumeric data, but in forms of symbolic data other than words in discursive text. These include material forms of practice, of still and moving images, of music and sound, of live action and digital code.” (Haseman, 6)

Methods of artistic research are for example perceptive as well as participating observation, ethnographically coined theatrical methods, (auto)biographic interviews as well as the cyclic approach of action research – and methods of applied improvisation.

In the 1990s Shaun McNiff experimented with inner dialogues with paintings: for instance he would start a conversation with the person portrayed in the painting including information given by objects or events in other parts of the painting – at the same time a very good example for an improvisational approach. He recorded and transcribed these dialogs. McNiff replaced the dialogs by the articulation of sounds, rhythm produced by various methods, motion impulses and ritualised actions. He defined his role as that of a “teacher researcher”, as someone who, together with others, consciously perceives artistic impulses, interacts in a improvisational way with them, studies them and at the same time learns from them (McNiff, 1998). This joint action was also recorded and the results were transcribed and summarised. This is a very good example how to record and thus utilise the cursory encounters and interactions with artistic elements. Methods of improvisation can help not only to show questions, the course, patterns of relations, basic conditions, personal experience and interactions but also to study the actions and their documentation (McNiff, 1998). Therefore artistic methods in research can be defined as...

“the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people they involve in their studies.”
(McNiff, 22)

Studying art, creativity and improvisation as well as the question how learning and research processes develop is related in many ways to research dealing with human cognition.

“Visual cognition is both a biological and cultural construct where mindful practices are structured, framed, and embodied. These cognitive practices take place within, across, between, and around the artists, artwork, viewer and setting. Visual cognition creates ideas and insights that connect ‘within’ and ‘across’ individual dispositions and experiences, and produces cultural capital that questions existing knowledge systems and structures ‘between’ and ‘around’ discipline boundaries and cultural contexts.” (Sullivan, 100)

Sullivan refers to the art psychologist and media scientist Rudolf Arnheim who ardently advocated his assertion at the end of the 1960s amongst others in his basic work “Visual Thinking”, that seeing and thinking are directly connected to each other (Arnheim, 2004). “Arnheim was part of a growing cognitive coalition who rejected the idea that perception was mindless sensation.” (Sullivan, 101). He was also of the opinion that art triggers more than visual perception and thinking and/or feeling make the individual respond in his entirety and move him in a comprehensive sense. In improvisation reacting and thinking with the body is a crucial aspect – there is no dichotomy of body and mind.

The development of conceptual art e.g. is considered the starting point of the development of research with artistic approach and methods (Wilson & van Ruiten 2014). The origins of conceptual art go back to the early 20th century, the name was coined in the 1960s.

Artistic work is strongly also considered a cognitive, planned process and the artist a “reflective practitioner” (Tröndle & Warmers, 2011, 5). Origins of this approach can also be found in the Bauhaus movement of the 1920s which dealt intensively with the question of knowledge transfer (Tröndle & Warmers, 2011). The Bauhaus movement supported interdisciplinary procedures and is considered one of the origins of design research. Conceptual art and artistic research were also influenced by Dadaism which emerged at the beginning of the 20th century or the principle of the cut ups that came up in the 60s using coincidences as a major element of the artistic process (Schmid, Sinapius, Zárate, Holkenbrink & Huber, 2015).

Furthermore conceptual art does not only define itself by public visibility in museums or galleries but also as manipulations and comments

of the public area, at the same time often questioning it. This may be compared to the Invisible Theater of Augusto Boal: theatrical interventions in public areas such as the underground railway which are neither previously announced nor explained during the action (Boal, 1985).

In the 1960s theater makers also began examining the concepts of anthropology and liminality and this resulted in more and more interconnections between theatrical activities and “scientific” research and/or theatrical methods and formats were introduced as research instruments. Mention should also be made of new aesthetics and methods of approach in documentary films in the 1960s. These films were meant to be a kind of field research, not only observing but also giving impulses for changes (Wilson & van Ruiten 2014). This is the kind of approach used e.g. by Günter Wallraff for his on-the-spot reports and later his films in the mid-sixties.

The Bologna process is also considered an important motor for artistic research: thus also in Europe research becomes an aspect gaining massive significance in tertiary institutions only marginally dealing with art (Biggs & Karlsson, 2011). In the 1990s art schools of various fields had to start cooperating with universities. After the turn of the millenium art universities also more or less voluntarily began to submit to the claim for “research” and started providing contributions (Lesage, 2009; Wilson & van Ruiten, 2014). According to the Austrian university law passed in 2002 “not only the scientific advancement and the development of the arts are seen as equally valuable tasks of the universities. The connection of science and art is also one of the concrete goals.” (Hofhues, Buck & Schindler, 61). These words were followed by at least rudimentary attempts in research programs e.g. in the Program PEEK (FWF Austrian Science Fund) or in other parts of Europe in the “DORE” Program (DO REsearch until 2011, Switzerland). Such promotions are mainly focussed on activities of art academies. However, they also make interdisciplinary attempts for instance with natural sciences.

Unusual Methods of Proceedings

The performative turn and the depicted development in several ways counterdict predominating views of both research and art. The acquisition of knowledge is considered by the majority of people as...

“... progressive accumulation of scientific knowledge – the building up of true descriptions and rational explanations, mostly in propositional form, for how things work in our physical, social, and cultural worlds. Second, by contrast, people typically think of art in terms of imaginative works that express and communicate emotions.” (Johnson, 142)

As a consequence, research working with artistic methods was at first regarded with great scepticism or the attempt was simply rejected. There is also a connection to the question how effective artistic methods are experienced in educational settings. Very soon the question may arise what the point of these methods is or the fear is expressed they might be a waste of time. Another point of criticism regarding this type of research concerns the intense participation of the researchers, thus stepping out of the purely analyzing role. This would endanger an objective point of view (Griffith 2011). In addition research is believed to take place in the setting of a laboratory with double blind studies and providing “proof” (Lesage, 2009; Johnson, 2011).

Another aspect is which individuals and institutions are actually recognised as possible “producers” of knowledge. And which methods should be used in doing so and which should not? In many fields there is more trust in Plato’s views, his hierarchy of knowledge headed by theoretical and mathematical ways of thinking and proceeding and/or considering the “realisation” rather an obstacle hindering sufficiently intensive contemplation (Sanjami, 2012).

Artistic approaches are denied seriousness and are believed to lack the seemingly necessary pertinence, a concentration on the facts, respectively. At the same time every kind of communication is also molded by artistic processes regardless of how much individuals try not to show their own personality and attitude of mind. Artistic research plays with these traditions, estranges them thus making the communication and quality processes perceivable as well as the motivations of those acting and the various factors of influence. This results in a more critical more reflecting approach to research. One feature distinguishing it from conventional research is the principle of irritation which should not only arouse curiosity for something new but also make way for new views of seeming truths

and realities and/or the own roles or possibilities (of action) within them (Tröndle & Warmers, 2011).

Aristoteles believed poetry to have the power to make things visible that are possible, i.e. not only images of the past- however abstract they may be – but also of possible variants of the future (Johnson, 2011). One central question is how knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge, how education is defined. I agree with Johnson's (2011) opinion that education is not a finished product but a continuous and dynamic process of research. This also means that there are no absolute truths, on the contrary, constant reflecting, questioning, re-defining, lifelong learning are required. Conventional research often solely concentrates on the results and is retrospectively oriented, whereas artistic research very much incorporates the process, also investigating the parameters hindering or advancing it. The construction of knowledge is thus perceptible, changeable and jointly formable (Tröndle & Warmers 2011).

Conventional research is rather aimed at generalising, discovering principles of actions or better even laws of nature. Artistic research would rather deal with the moment and all its dimensions and qualities (Johnson, 2011). "Art, in Dewey's view, does not so much describe or explain; rather, it presents or enacts the qualities, meanings, and values of a situation." (Johnson, 147). Therefore artistic approaches allow for perceptions at a different level. Art may provide impulses on how people see, feel, know – and can act. These different ways of functioning can also be of great importance in research processes (Dixon & Senior, 2009; Hofhues, Buck & Schindler, 2015).

Artistic research means a structured procedure, a manifold set of methods in which the ways of procedure are not used in arbitrary sequence. For the course of a research process dealing with art or using artistic – also theatrical – methods, Griffiths (2011) recommends an iterative and cyclical procedure, respectively. Reflective practice or action research is used here frequently. The process comprises the following phases:

- Focus: it may continuously develop due to initial or intermediate results. This development itself become the focus. The way how the data are collected may also move into the focus.
- Argumentation: Why is particularly this research important, which gaps in literature need to be filled, specific formulations of problems, professional advancement of the researchers

- Choice of methods: Considering theatrical methods a wide variety from simple scenic games and sociometric methods up to performances of dance, forum or improvisation theater are possible
- Collecting of data – besides interviews and field notes media such as photos, audio, videos as well as collage methods are of special importance. Data can also result from any kind of improvisation.
- Analysis of data and optional development of theories
- Summary of the results
- Presentation/dissemination: this may also have a theatrical character

One difference that Levy (2009) perceives is that “Art-based researchers are not ‘discovering’ new research tools they are carving them.” (34). Hasemann (2006) also sees an aspect of artistic research in changing or further developing existing research methods as well as creating completely new procedures and instruments. McNiff (1998) adds that an art-based research process is often very open and little or nothing is known about the possible result. He emphasizes that it is important to choose methods that can be easily described and systematically put into action which may then also be put into action and developed further by others. The point is not to repeat the method or the way in which it was used, but rather to develop agile tools which are adaptable to the current basic conditions and focal points of the research without losing the essence.

Therefore artistic research must begin with questions and adapt the design to the given conditions rather than to very strict research methods. “The art of the artbased researcher extends to the creation of a process of inquiry.” (McNiff, page 34). More than with other research approaches it is important that questions, experience, methods, approaches to the elaboration and results can be utilized by others.

In this context artistic research is more than just a provider of data for conventional research attempts: art as research means working with various different materials – which may also consist of texts, sounds, body movements – and to keep finding new ways to combine or change them in order to find solutions for questions and problems. Finding a research question or the appropriate methods can be an artistic process. This also implies embarking on an experiment in which it is permitted to test questions and methods, to discard, try again, combine, argue, question long-

term and well-proven opinions and procedures and to deconstruct and perhaps start again from the very beginning. (McNiff, 1998). How soon results become evident with this procedure also depends on how the “result” is defined; in any case it is more likely that unconventional attempts at solutions and ideas will emerge (O’Connor & Anderson, 2015).

Art – also theatrical methods and improvisation – enables the access to various dimensions of things and events, how they may develop further and what the role of each individual or of groups in their interaction is. This may lead to very different and also partly contradictory results which often do not fit the usual taxonomy or even question it. “the most intrinsic characteristic of artistic research is based on the continuous transgression of boundaries in order to generate novel, reflexive zones.” (Slager 2009, in Sullivan, 2011).

Perception transgresses the abilities of the five senses. For example complex problems in communicative situations but also in work sequences or research can be recognized very soon similarly as the access to new ideas and options of thinking and acting is supported (O’Connor & Anderson, 2015). Moreover apparent facts. Sequences, basic conditions, thinking and communication models etc. can be seen from quite different perspectives, even through the eyes of others.

Research with the body

“...we must recognize the role of the body, especially our sensory-motor processes and our emotions and feelings, in our capacity for understanding and knowing.” (Johnson, 145). Johnson also refers to the thoughts of Dewey that the acquisition of knowledge requires experience made by individuals. And that knowing is also a verb, an action, a doing.

“The locus of knowledge, according to Dewey, is experience, interpreted in the broadest sense to include both physical objects and states of affairs, but also everything that is thought, felt, hoped for, willed, desired, encountered, and done.” (Johnson, 46).

“The body below the neck barely exists in this sort of research” (O’Connor & Anderson, 26). This refers to the handed down research attempts which are based strongly or exclusively on the strength of the intellect. However,

as mentioned before man perceives the world with his entire body as well as by interacting with the world and other individuals. Perception with the body, with all senses, with human intuition does not stop at researching discovery – the findings can be processed at a physical level and the results made accessible to others who may join in the process.

Human beings perceive far more sensual impressions, emotions, connections than they can consciously process. The term ‘implicit knowledge’ does not fully cover this phenomenon. At the beginning of their lives human beings grasp their environment as well as their own possibilities and apparent borders by intensive physical experimenting. But also in a very traditional situation of conveying knowledge: when sitting at a school desk, listening, the body plays an important role. People do not “understand” only by the words they have heard and perhaps some additional words on the blackboard: there is also the body language of the teacher and the perception of the reaction of the others in the room. Simultaneously the room itself plays a central role, as well as the lighting, the temperature, the felt structure of the chair and a table etc.

Thus knowledge is always multidimensional and the individuals take conscious and unconscious access to the various forms of knowledge. Some knowledge, some impressions move to the background – also in order to support the focus of the present task – they are forgotten. A physical approach can help to regain access to this multi-layered information thereby becoming aware of abilities that nobody would have believed he or she possessed.

Research with Applied Theater

The term “applied theater” was first used in the USA in the 1980s. It implies a highly diverse form of applications of theatrical/improvisational methods and approaches in various fields (Balfour, 2010). Applied theater can be used in all phases of a research process. A participatory attempt is supported, thus, together with methods from this field research topics and questions can be found and put more precisely and the entire research process can be planned. The relationship between researchers and participants in a research is collaborative. In traditional research settings mainly the researchers can present themselves with their results, whereas here a representation of the participants and their life cultures is promoted

(O'Connor & Anderson). Their role flexibility is also supported: they can become researchers themselves or plan the research process, apply and document methods. Balfour, O'Connor, & Anderson (2015) term this as "shared ownership of the research in all its phases" (52). Theater methods have the function of viewing challenges of the research process which may be closely connected with one's own life, from a safe distance.

Examples Applied Theater

The "Theater der Versammlung" (Theater of Meeting) was founded in 1992 and has been part of the Zentrum für Performance Studies (Center for Performance Studies) at the University Bremen. Here students and teachers from various departments cooperate and work on topics from lectures as well as research projects. Work is based on a four-phase process (Bebek & Holkenbrink, 2010):

1. Free improvisation on the topics
2. Improvisation with instructions and impulses from texts connected with the topics
3. Selecting and making a collage of the scene(fragment)s that have evolved
4. Experimenting with the reconstruction as well as changing the order of the sequence developed in phase 3.

As mentioned topics may come from completely different fields, e.g. the development of organisation, from information technology as well as the development of computer games or dementia research. In addition students have the possibility of creating a very individual form of their studies and combining the chosen combination of topics with performative research. In this way the acquisition, immersion, practising and application of various key competences are promoted in many ways. This also becomes evident in a study with graduates (Bebek & Holkenbrink, 2010), six dimensions of experience are identified:

1. The art of perception: this means more than watching and listening, e.g. by consciously choosing different perspectives of perception
2. Autopoiesis (an aspect to which Boal also refers compare Fritz, 2014): the organisation of encounters
3. Laboratory; research, trying out, questions; here an interconnection

- to the concepts of life accompanying learning can be made and/or to the attitude of curiosity as an important aspect of improvisation
4. **Materiality:** examining the perceptions of the five senses, the effect of places and the events there
 5. **The role of the jester:** questioning these perceptions and looking for new possibilities of perception and interpretation
 6. **Specific methods of work:** how are encounters organised, which options of actions are carried out with which effects? Testing in ever new settings

Students report of success in utilizing methods of thinking and acting which they experienced in the theater of change, even if these were situations they believed to be new or risky.

In this context Bebek & Holkenbrink (2010) introduce the concept of post sovereignty – in concepts such as the theater post sovereignty is not only observed but also experienced and created with different people. This also allows for reconciliation, encounter, discussion and deconstruction of challenging situations at work and in private life, giving courage and providing ideas for effective solutions, new scopes of action develop.

In the “Cosmos Project” (Kuksa, Scriven & Rumney, 2011) it is assumed that processes of learning and understanding, particularly in the case of complex scientific topics will be more successful when using forms of storytelling rather than learning facts by heart. The initiators of the project consider themselves part of the “Theater for Young People” movement. Children between three and six years of age are the target group. By means of kinaesthetic exercises e.g. they are motivated to become “watching actors”, intensely interacting with the persons on the stage. In addition a mixture of puppet and object theater is used as well as various digital technologies. This research is aimed at examining the effectivity of theatrical approaches. For example perception is used to observe how children take part in the process of the interaction, i.e. answer or pose questions themselves. The difference, in this case, concerning the understanding of planets is measured amongst others by questionnaires. Furthermore the children make video diaries and also use a setup talking to a camera they do not see (comparable to a photo automat). In addition there are group

discussions and the children represent the various parameters of the planets e.g. by concentric circles.

In the “Young mob leadership program”, Sydney, Australia, (O’Connor & Anderson, 2015): indigenous juveniles participated in a process dealing with the future of the organisation and prospective focal points of its work. The team used fictional video messages calling on the juveniles to develop ideas with various methods. The “teacher in role” method from the set of methods of drama in education was used: the instructors took various roles based on the video messages. Then the juveniles produced texts, graphic material, video messages and songs which simultaneously served as data material in the research process. Moreover an approach similar to the idea of statue theater was used, the juveniles creating different pictures of the future. In addition qualitative interviews as well as semantic methods for the analysis of the created picture material were used.

More ideas how to apply improvisation in research

At the conference “Improv talks” I not only gave an overview of aspects to be found in this paper. I also used different improvisation techniques, I will describe three of them, the last one was not used at the conference:

Word by word: The basic idea is to create sentences together, everyone involved inserts just one word, that adds to the words already said. At the conference we used it to build research questions together. Research is – or should be – a process of collaboration, in that everyone has the chance to bring in ideas. At the same time everybody truly perceives the ideas and impulses of others, uses them as starting points, as elements for own and common ideas. Instead of words also (parts of) sentences can be used. In this way it is also possible to encourage participants of research projects to articulate hopes and fears, needs and wishes, ideas for products and services. The principle of “word by word” can also be used to collaboratively summarise (intermediate) findings. The sentences and stories, that emerged in this game can be used as data in a qualitative content analysis.

Living clouds of words: Together participants agree on a topic. One person enters a space, that is defined together in its limits. He or she says a word, associated to the topic (variation: participants and the facilitator help together, that each word said, is written at once on a small piece of paper, that is given to this person). Another person, looking from the out-

side hears the word and enters the space, says another association (which could be related to first but it is not an obligation) taking a certain distance to the first person, also choosing if to look at him/her or not. The third person entering and saying a word chooses his or her position and where to look related to the two persons already there and so on. After everyone has entered this cloud of word, every words are called out again (with holding up the papers in the variations) once or twice. The facilitator chooses a random person and asks him/her in which other word in the cloud he/she is interested. They look at each other (variation: keep the direction they are looking) and repeat their words in a kind of dialogue, testing different emotions, four to five times. This playing with words is repeated several times. A variation here is also to change the body posture with every emotion.

Then the facilitator chooses a random person and asks him/her to make a new formation of the word cloud by guiding people to certain places in the defined space, perhaps also building 'groups of words'. Within this groups and across different groups the experimenting with words like described above is continued. After that another participant gets the chance to rearrange the group.

In the debriefing important aspect are: "What did you learn about your word, other words and the main topic by playing with the words? What connections, similarities, differences did you discover between the words?" In a research process this game is also a possibility for brainstorming aspects of research question and the proposal. It also helps to research relations between aspects of a project, of participants, of (intermediate) findings. Photos or videos of this process can be part of the data, used in the research.

Mirror of your research: Couples. A mirrors any movement and sound of B. The movements and sounds can be chosen freely, without planning or thinking. Change of A and B. Intermediate Debriefing: "What aspects of a current research project, you are working on, did you discover, being the mirror of the other person? Problems? Findings? Hopes?... ." After that A starts again and tells with his/her movements aspects of his/her research without talking. Change. Debriefing: What did you learn about the research of your partner? This approach could also be used to visualise fears, hopes, wishes of participants of a research – recordings and

photos can be data for the research, also written down findings of the participants of a written debriefing.

Any kind of improvisation method can be transformed into a research tool. And any result can be used as part of the data material. As said before in this kind of research it is also important to use intensive literature research, to construct research questions and aims of the research. And the results of any method can evolve this questions and also the methods in a kind of “researching by doing”, interweaving the steps of asking and finding answers.

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