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Performing Imagination: The Aesthetics of Improvisation

Alessandro Bertinetto
(Università di Udine)

I. Introduction: The Difficult Relation between Aesthetics and Improvisation

It is undeniable that the artistic significance and part of the social reputation of the practice of improvisation in Western culture diminished at the time that gave birth to 1) aesthetics as a philosophical discipline devoted to a particular kind of experience which is detached from everyday affairs, 2) the so-called « system of the fine arts »¹, and, partly as a result of the spread of typography², 3) the triumph of the notion of the artwork even in the field of the performing arts³.

The practice of improvising has been conceived as such an obvious and natural expression of the human being that it didn't need a specific name until about the seventeenth century. Since Aristotle⁴ it has been understood as the origin of poetic creativity and – from the Greek bards, to Church music and the Commedia dell'arte (to mention only well-known cases) – it was widespread in many artistic fields as an ordinary and valuable way of art making. Then, as the different ways of making and experiencing art began to be organised and theorised, the verb « to improvise » appeared in various languages. The noun, « improvisation », was coined later, during the Romantic age, by Madame de Stael, who thereby showed that by now the difference between the action of improvising and its result was established⁵.

¹ Cf. P. O. Kristeller, « The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics », Part I in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 12, 4, 1951, pp. 496-527, and Part II in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 13, 1, 1952, pp. 17-46.

² On writing and musical improvisation see D. Sparti, *Il corpo sonoro*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2007.

³ See B. Nettle, « Introduction. An Art Neglected in Scholarship », in B. Nettle & M. Russell (eds.), *In the Course of Performance*, Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 1-26 ; L. Goehr *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works. An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992.

⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics* 1448b7-1449a14.

⁵ See J.-F. de Raymond, *L'improvisation. Contribution a la philosophie de l'action*, Paris, Vrin, 1980, pp. 17-36 ; S. Blum, « Recognizing Improvisation », in *In the Course of Performance*, pp. 27-45, in part. pp. 37-40.

When it first acquired its proper name, the practice of improvisation was considered, especially in music, as another kind of composition and execution. Subsequently it was conceived as different from proper composition and as an exceptional activity (thus ceasing to be seen as the pristine and ordinary way of making art), but also as a practice that could scarcely reach the aesthetic and artistic values of composed artworks. The word still has this derogatory sense, when it means an activity that is not prepared and sufficiently organised.

To sum up, and look forward: as it received, in the eighteenth century, the name that we still use, improvisation began to be considered as a practice that did not fit the requirements for the creation of artworks. For the main features of improvisation – among them : contingency, situationality, irreversibility, unrepeatability⁶ – contrast with the aim of creating enduring artworks intended to be offered to aesthetic contemplation that has no connection with or function in practical life. Conversely, due to its performative character, improvisation can invite participation, not only contemplation: therefore, it seems to have a special capacity to excite the audience, moving them to action, freedom and even anarchy. It can therefore be seen as about to violate the divide between stage and stalls, i.e. between art and life. It does not use imagination only for evoking fantastic and fictional worlds through objective and autonomous artworks exhibited in specific appropriate institutions like museums and concert halls, but rather as a tool for intervening in social and political life. As such it can be an ideological weapon. At least this is a leitmotiv, a common thread that connects disparate cultural trends, from the poetical performances of the Italian improvvisatori⁷ in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to free jazz and impro theatre of the last decades of the past century⁸.

⁶ See A. Bertinetto, « Performing the Unexpected », *Daimon*, 57, 2012, pp. 117-135, here pp. 129-131.

⁷ Cf. A. Estherhammer, *Romanticism and Improvisation 1750-1850*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

⁸ See K. Lothwesen, *Klang – Struktur – Konzept. Die Bedeutung der Neuen Musik für Free Jazz und Improvisationsmusik*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2009 ; K. Johnston, *Improvisation and the Theatre*, London, Methuen Publishing, 1979 ; S. Nachmanovitch, *Free Play. Improvisation in Life and Art*, New York, Penguin, 1990 ; D. Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity. Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America*, Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 1998 ; D. Sparti, *Suoni inauditi. L'improvvisazione nel Jazz e nella vita quotidiana*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2005 ; D. Sparti, *Musica in nero. Il campo discorsivo del jazz*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2007 ; D. Sparti, *L'identità incompiuta. Paradossi dell'improvvisazione musicale*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2010 ; W. M. Muiyumba, *The Shadow and the Act : Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz, Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2009 ; B.

As a matter of fact, improvisation, unlike other art practices and objects, does not delight exclusively because it distracts attention from everyday life; on the contrary, the pleasures of (some important genres and kinds of) artistic improvisation, may also be due to its ability to connect art and life⁹, i.e. to engage both performers and audience in actions which not only have striking moral, social and political significance (which is certainly not an exclusive prerogative of improvised art), but that, at least in some cases, are concrete interventions in the particular historical situations in which they occur and, as such, modify those situations. In improvisation the real seems to outstrip the possible and the imaginary. For this reason, I insist, improvisation seems to have an anti-institutional character that is at odds with the widespread view that the space of art is the imaginative autonomous dimension of the aesthetic experience that can flourish in locations erected for this special purpose. In this context, it is significant that at the end of the eighteenth century in Austria a law was passed that forbade theatrical improvisation for political reasons¹⁰. The then political rulers understood improvised theatre not as an expression of aesthetic art, that builds imaginary worlds in the fictional space of the stage, but as an illegal practice that directly intervenes in the real life of the audience, addressed as co-performers and invited to act to transform the socio-historical situations in which they lived. Performance art of our time seems to have an analogous *raison d'être*¹¹.

However, though culturally oppressed and regarded with suspicion by cultural and political authorities, improvisation survived even in the context of the aesthetics of the artwork. On the one hand it survived as a less noble art that played a more limited role and was tolerated as a marginal form of artistic expression in different cultural fields. On the other hand, improvisation survived precisely at the heart of the autonomist aesthetics of genius (elaborated exemplarily by Kant and especially by Karl Philip

Altherhaug, « Improvisation on a Triple Theme: Creativity, Jazz Improvisation and Communication », *Studia Musicologica Norvegica*, 30, 2004 ; C. Béthune, *Le Jazz et l'Occident*, Paris, Klincksieck, 2008 ; D. P. Brown, *Noise Orders. Jazz, Improvisation, and Architecture*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

⁹ Cf. de Raymond, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-213.

¹⁰ See R. Borgards, « Improvisation, Verbot, Genie. Zur Improvisationsästhetik bei Sonnenfels, Goethe, Spalding, Moritz und Novalis », in M. Mauss & R. Haeckel (eds.), *Leib/Seele – Geist/Buchstabe. Dualismen in den Künsten um 1800 und 1900*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2009, pp. 257-268. For the subversive power of (poetic) improvisation in the romantic age, see Estherhammer, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-13.

¹¹ Cf. E. Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 2004.

Moritz) and of its institutions (the museum, the concert hall, etc.) as well¹². While replacing improvisation, the autonomist aesthetics of the artwork not only marginalised improvisation, but also assimilated some of its main features: in particular it assigned essential properties of improvisation – like spontaneity, self-referentiality, and autonomy (the power of engendering its own rule) – to artistic creation and the products thereof. In the process, however, some of the values of improvisation changed. Autonomist aesthetics anaesthetised the performative effects of improvisation, i.e. precisely its power of bridging the gap between artistic fiction and real life, by means of developing an organic aesthetics of the (textual) artwork, that in the realm of the imagination gets a life of its own, precisely because it is severed from real life. For this reason, the champions of the romantic movements and later of the avant-garde movements would have again to disrupt the artwork-aesthetics in order to re-affirm the performative power of art as an experience, that, as Gadamer argued, « changes the person experiencing it »¹³.

As we have seen, the link between the artwork-aesthetics and improvisation is certainly ambiguous, limited, and rather hidden and subtle. Nonetheless, the practice of improvisation is surely not completely at odds with the autonomic aesthetics of the artwork, broadly understood (i.e. conceived in non-formalistic and non-objectivistic terms)¹⁴. In other words, improvisation is not an exclusive prerogative of a performance (anti)aesthetics radically opposed to artwork-aesthetics¹⁵. I think that the compatibility between both improvisation and artworks-aesthetics can be affirmed and understood precisely by exploring the reciprocal link between improvisation and imagination. The capacity of using imagination in producing, expressing and embodying aesthetic ideas, which contrast with the prosaic reality of our world, while at the same time illuminating it, is commonly considered as one of the main requirements for artistic production (and since the eighteenth century has been understood as the

¹² Cf. Borgards, *op. cit.*, pp. 262-268; Estherhammer, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-79; E. Landgraf, *Improvisation as Art*, London, Continuum, 2011, pp. 42-83.

¹³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, New York, SUNY Press, 1994, p. 102.

¹⁴ Generally speaking, non-formalistic aesthetic theories defend the view that aesthetic experience is not provided only by the formal features of artworks, but also by their content and meanings. Non objectivistic aesthetic theories favour the experiential values of our relation with artworks over detailed analysis concerning the ontological properties of aesthetic items.

¹⁵ This (anti-)aesthetics is defended in E. Fischer-Lichte's previously cited book *Ästhetik des Performativen*.

main feature of the artistic genius). Moreover, the production of artworks by means of imagination is often conceived as spontaneous. So, since spontaneity – as we mentioned earlier – is a central property of improvisation¹⁶, it may be interesting to investigate on the one hand whether the spontaneity of imagination has improvisational features and, on the other, whether, and how, improvisation makes use of imagination. This could in turn show the tight and profound intertwinement between the practice of improvisation and the aesthetic dimension of art, despite their apparent opposition.

In the first part of the paper (§§ 2-6) I will suggest that the way imagination works – in the aesthetic realm of the arts as well as in the cognitive dimension of experience and in social-political constructions – has improvisational traits. I will suggest that this is due to the fact that both imagination and improvisation proceed by means of an abductive method.

In the second part of the paper (§§ 7-12), I will argue that in both everyday and artistic improvisation imaginative performances are set in motion, that may have valuable aesthetic outcomes. Moreover, I will defend the view that artistic improvisation succeeds as an art practice, if and when it involves organisational and creative imagination, i.e. if and when it performs imagination on the spot with valuable artistic and aesthetic results. On the one hand improvisation enacts imagination *hic et nunc*; on the other, in improvisation, as in any other artistic practice or method, imagination is the source of artistic formations that appear to be distinct from everyday reality.

II. Meanings and Functions of Imagination: Organisational Imagination and Creative Imagination

Since we assign different meanings to the word « imagination », a brief conceptual clarification is in order. We imagine something when we entertain a proposition without asserting it or when we entertain the concept or the phenomenal image of an object or of an action without being committed to the existence of the object or to performing the action¹⁷.

¹⁶ On spontaneity in improvisation see J.-F. De Raymond, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-65 ; D. Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity* ; M. Santi (ed.), *Improvisation. Between Technique and Spontaneity*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2010 ; R.K. Sawyer, « Improvisation and the Creative Process: Dewey, Collingwood, and the Aesthetics of Spontaneity », *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 58, 2000, pp. 149-161.

¹⁷ Cf. B. Gaut, « Creativity and Imagination », in B. Gaut & P. Livingston (eds.), *The Creation of Art: New Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics*, Cambridge, Cambridge

Therefore, in very general terms, imagination can be understood as the activity of entertaining propositions, objects and experiences, without asserting them or without believing in their actual existence, as, for example, in the capacity to make present in an image what is absent, and as in the ability to show something (a landscape, a human being, etc.) by means of the perception of something else (for example, a surface covered with pigments).

The power of going beyond what is given to perception can be understood and evaluated in different ways. It can be seen, negatively, as a sensual, disordered and useless power which diverts our attention from the serious things of life, and especially from perceptual reality and from the rules of understanding (in this sense imagination can be conceived as a source of misperception and misunderstanding). Yet, in the course of the history of philosophy a host of thinkers have given positive accounts of imagination as mediation between perception and thought, as a kind of experiential thinking which can be sensibly embodied.

In different ways and with different aims, imagination has been understood as a productive power, that makes perception possible, and is free from the rigid rules of the understanding, because it is a condition of the applicability (and/or even of the generation) of the rules of understanding. Hence, this kind of imagination, that we may call organisational imagination does not divert us from reality, on the contrary, it is a tool, as it were, in virtue of which we organise our experience of reality.

On the other hand, however, imagination can be conceived of as qualitatively opposite to perception, as in, for example, Sartre's account of imagination¹⁸. According to this view imagination faces us with what is not real, and cannot be useful for knowing or organising the real world. Anyway, according to a milder version of this notion of imagination, imagination is not simply the opposite of reality, but makes it possible to visualise different realities or to see actual reality differently. Through what we may call creative imagination we are offered contrafactual models of reality, as in the case of the construction of imaginary social and political landscapes¹⁹. And, more importantly for the present discussion, imagination,

University Press, 2003, pp. 148-73.

¹⁸ Cf. J.-P. Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, London, Routledge, 2010.

¹⁹ In this regard in the nineteenth century thinkers like Coleridge and Ralph Waldo Emerson preferred to use the word « fancy », in the sense of wilful fantasy. Emerson writes: «Imagination is central; fancy superficial. Fancy relates to surface, in which a great part of life lies. The lover is rightly said to fancy the hair, eyes, complexion of the maid.

as the capacity to make present what is unreal or absent, plays an irreplaceable role in the arts, both in organising the experience of reality and in manifesting different realities. As has been acknowledged at least since the eighteenth century, imagination is a kind of condition sine qua non of art. Art requires imagination because imagination makes it possible to see and hear different things in what we perceive (as has been argued for example by Richard Wollheim in his theory of twofoldness and by Roger Scruton in his theory of metaphor²⁰) : thanks to imagination, we can hear sound as music and recognise the subject depicted in a pictorial representation. Moreover, as Kendall Walton paradigmatically argued²¹, imagination works in art as a game of make-believe, as, for example, in children's games : it prompts us to experience and explore non-existent worlds fictionally and to understand our world better by means of comparing it with imaginary ones. Due to the virtues of imagination that I have just mentioned, one of the most common reasons for praising art is precisely its power to engage the imagination. Artists make their imagination work when they see possibilities of invention in the media they are interacting with. Their creative outcomes engage the imaginative activity of beholders and listeners.

III. How Does Imagination Work? The Abductive Process of Imagination

The hypothesis I will argue for is that both organisational and creative imagination work in an abductive way and this will prove important for arguing for the reciprocal connection between imagination and improvisation. Such a connection, in turn, could partly explain how and why improvisation is involved in the aesthetic experience of art.

However, that imagination works abductively could sound an odd claim. For it seems that abduction, like deduction and induction, has to do

Fancy is a wilful imagination, a spontaneous act; fancy, a play as with dolls and puppets which we choose to call men and women; imagination, a perception and affirming of a real relation between a thought and some material fact. Fancy amuses; imagination expands and exalts us. Imagination uses an organic classification. Fancy joins by accidental resemblance, surprises and amuses the idle, but is silent in the presence of great passion and action. Fancy aggregates; imagination animates. Fancy is related to color; imagination to form. Fancy paints; imagination sculptures.» (R.W. Emerson, « Creativity and Imagination », *Letters and Social Aims*, Boston, Osgood, 1875).

²⁰ Cf. R. Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1987 ; R. Scruton, *Art and Imagination*, London, Methuen, 1974.

²¹ Cf. K. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-believe*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990.

with our intellectual powers, not with imagination. Nonetheless in the following parts of the paper I will explain this issue, as well as its role in the question about the structural link between imagination and improvisation.

Imagination, I claimed, faces us with what is not present. In order to do that, it cannot proceed deductively, because what can be deduced is somehow already present and foreseen. In a deductive process, we simply make explicit what was implicit. Nothing must be properly invented. Hence, we may think that imagination works inductively. We work inductively when we collect single cases, generating from them a general rule. However, as for example Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Edmund Husserl objected to empiricism, the problem with induction is that we cannot know which the relevant cases are if we do not anticipate a rule that is not there, in virtue of which we are able to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant cases²². An external confirmation of the outcomes of inductive reasoning is needed. However, there is a further possibility to be explored: imagination may proceed abductively²³.

According to Peirce, « abduction » is the way a rule is generated for interpreting a sign²⁴ : we use abduction when, moving from a single case, we anticipate (i.e. invent) the rule according to which we are judging it. In everyday life, but also in science and in art, « abductive reasoning is reasoning that forms and evaluates hypotheses in order to make sense of puzzling facts »²⁵. According to organisational theorist Karl E. Weick,

²² J. G. Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (= GA), Hrsg. von R. Lauth *et. al.*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, Frommann-Holzboog, 1962-, II, 14, p. 21 ; E. Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil*, Hamburg, Claassen & Goverts, 1948, III.II.d.

²³ The difference between abduction and deduction is clearly described in J. R. Josephson & S. G. Josephson (eds.), *Abductive Inference. Computation, Philosophy, Technology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 10 : « The abduction transcends the information of its premises and generates new information that was not previously encoded there at all. This can be contrasted with deductions, which can be thought of as extracting, explicitly in their conclusions, information that was already implicitly contained in the premises. Deductions are truth preserving, whereas successful abductions may be said to be truth producing ». Good (*i.e.* reasonable, valid) inductive generalisations are here treated as cases of abduction (see p. 16). In other words generalisations by means of induction can be taken as valid and good, if a rule is projected, in virtue of which one can suppose which are the relevant cases. This rule cannot be acquired in an inductive way.

²⁴ Cf. C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, vol. 5, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1931, §§ 187-189. Cf. U. Eco, *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio*, Torino, Einaudi, 1983, pp. 40-43.

²⁵ K. E. Weick, « Faith, Evidence, and Action: Better Guesses in an Unknowable World », *Organization Studies*, 27, 11, 2006, pp. 1-14, here p. 9.

« (t)he basic idea is that when people imagine reality, they start with some tangible clue and then discover or invent a world in which that clue is meaningful. This act of invention is an act of divination. (...) The essence of conjecture and divination lies in the faith that a fragment is a meaningful symptom which, if pursued vigorously, will enact a world where the meaning of the fragment becomes clearer »²⁶.

Hence, in everyday experience, but also in science and in art, « when an observed fact is read through an imagined rule, this action can generate a world not previously thought of »²⁷.

IV. Imagination as Abductive Organization of Experience

Abduction is in other words the reflective process in virtue of which meaning is generated, by means of supposing a way (« an imagined rule ») to perceive and understand something. The imagined rule is assumed as probably valid. Certainly, this kind of knowledge-producing inference is fallible and each time the validity of the abduction can be confirmed or rejected only in retrospect. « Nevertheless, by the aid of abductive inferences, knowledge is possible even in the face of uncertainty »²⁸.

Hence, using Kantian jargon one may say that the validity of a determinate judgement (which proceeds from universals to particulars) requires confirmation by a reflective judgement, which attempts to find universals for given particulars²⁹. This holds both at the level of perception and at the level of cognition.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.* Weick elaborates on this point referring to a paper by N. Harrowitz: « Conjecture essentially utilizes “obscure or remote clues in a speculative manner to build an epistemological model”. Clues enable people to “leap from apparently significant facts, which could be observed, to a complex reality which – directly at least – could not. (...) The importance of the conjectural model is not found in the notion of reading coded signs such as imprints [animal footprints], but rather in the fact that the systems (...) were developed and invested with meaning through a process much like abduction. The rules were postulated to explain the observed facts. (...) As in abduction, a cultural or experiential knowledge is required to codify a system. Abduction is literally the groundwork necessary before a sign is codified.” ». The citations in the quotation are taken from N. Harrowitz, « The body of the detective model: Charles S. Peirce and Edgar Allan Poe », in U. Eco & T. A. Sebeok (eds). *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988, pp. 183-184.

²⁸ Josephson & S. Josephson (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 13.

²⁹ Cf. I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), Eng. Transl. Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000, Introduction, § iv.

With regard to perception, we may consider that, as has been explained especially by Merleau-Ponty, when we perceive an item we include in the horizon of our perception what we do not literally perceive. Although what we really see is for instance not a cube, but, say, a rhombus, we complete what we are seeing by means of projectively anticipating its whole image, and in this way we can see it as a cube³⁰.

As far as cognition is concerned, we may turn to Kant, according to whom imagination does not only mediate between a given concept (i.e. the general meaning) and the single cases of application of the general concept (intuition), as he explains in the *Critique of Pure Reason*³¹, but also anticipates the general meaning of a single item³²: as Heidegger would have said³³, it is thus an « anticipatory projection » of a sense which is not given and determined³⁴.

Many aspects of this account of how imagination works as faculty or function of experience could be further discussed, but in this brief general outline I have simply aimed to prepare the terrain for what will be done in the next sections. So I will leave the matter at that and in the next section will rather pursue the following related question. Can we connect imagination to abduction also when imagination, as a vehicle of creativity, invents something which, allegedly, is not present and/or is not real as is the case in fiction and, more generally, in art?

V. Imagination as an Abductive Process in the Arts

³⁰ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Engl. Transl. London & New York, Routledge, 2005, pp. 175, 235-237, 306-308. See S. Priest, *Merleau-Ponty*, London, Routledge, 1998, pp. 87-91.

³¹ Cf. I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Eng. Transl. Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1999, Book II, Chap. I.

³² This function of imagination is suggested in the Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

³³ M. Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 24, Frankfurt a. M., Klostermann, 1975-, p. 364.

³⁴ In this sense imagination involves time. Not only in the rather obvious sense that, as a human activity, its exercise requires time, i.e. that it develops in and through time. Imagination also involves time in the more fundamental sense that it is time considered from the standpoint of human experience. This is also the reason why Fichte claims that imagination sways between finiteness and infiniteness, i.e. from the (de)finite representation and its in(de)finite possible nuances, applications and transformations (cf. J.G. Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, GA I/2 260). Today one would say: imagination sways between digital and analogical procedures (cf. S. Mahrenholz, *Kreativität – Eine philosophische Analyse*, Berlin, Akademie-Verlag, 2011). The radical temporality of our experience implies that also the concepts that we generate and use (a Wittgensteinian would say: we generate by means of using) in a non-temporal way are prone to temporal flux. Identity is made up by, and exposed to, difference.

We might now ask whether the link between imagination and abduction can explain the creative process in art. I claim that it can at least in one particular and important sense: artworks are products of creative imagination. This should not be understood as committing us to something like the (nonsensical) claim that in art the inventions of the imagination are absolutely free. As a matter of fact, artists are not faced with unlimited possibilities for creative experimentation; they rather work within specific cultural horizons that feed, but also limit, their artistic creativity. Moreover, they also have to struggle against various kinds of difficulties and constraints concerning both practical issues (time, money and so on)³⁵ and artistic problems (for example artists have to follow the rules of a genre in an original way)³⁶. Certainly one of the most difficult tasks artists have to solve is dealing successfully with the media and the materials they are working with. In this regard, we can go back to the rather traditional idea³⁷ that artists do not know exactly how they can (and have to) produce their creations, before actually beginning their work. This seems to imply that a condition for artistic success is the ability to produce artworks while avoiding a total control over media, materials and working procedures. The point has been made in radical terms by the German abstract painter Willi Baumeister in the book *Das Unbekannte in der Kunst* (1947)³⁸. Baumeister observed here that if artists knew how to create art, they could not create art. For authentic art is something creative and, by applying well-known methods of working artists could not really be creative, because they would simply repeat the already known. Hence, the value of artistic production partly depends on the emergence of objective forces, which artists cannot dominate, because they simply ignore them³⁹. If this sounds too mysterious,

³⁵ Cf. H. Becker, *Art Worlds*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982.

³⁶ See J. Elster, *Ulysses unbound. Studies in Rationality, Precommitment, and Constraints*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, chapter 3. On Elster's book cf. G. Matteucci, « Creatività e sapere estetico », in L. Russo (ed.), *Dopo l'estetica*, Palermo, Aesthetica Preprint, 2010, pp. 167-181.

³⁷ In modern times this view of artistic creativity received serious philosophical consideration in Kant's theory of genius and since Kant has been variously defended by important philosophers of art from different cultural traditions (such as F. W. J. Schelling, R. Collingwood and L. Pareyson) as well as by celebrated artists (like Francis Bacon and Picasso).

³⁸ Stuttgart, Schwabe, 1947.

³⁹ A similar point is made by C. Menke, *Kraft. Ein Grundbegriff ästhetischer Anthropologie*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 2008. Menke conceives artistic making as a kind of non-making, because artistic capacity (künstlerisches Können) is properly speaking incapacity (Nicht-Können). I thank Daniel Martin Feige for this suggestion.

we can make the same point in a more sober fashion. Artistic flair and inspiration is not simply imposed on the process of production; on the contrary, inspiration grows, as it were, through the process, thanks to the interaction with media and materials. Although many aspects of artistic practice can be learned, controlled, and technically mastered, artists cannot completely anticipate the aesthetic result of their creative endeavour by means of envisioning it in their mind⁴⁰. This is due to the fact that artists cannot exactly foresee how their work will be evaluated by the public, by the critics or even by themselves, for each artist builds and develops herself through her artistic achievements. And it is also due to the fact that, as Merleau-Ponty once said, « thought and expression (...) are simultaneously constituted »⁴¹.

This simultaneity seems to be particularly true for the artistic field : the power of imagination to present us with the absent, the unreal, or the unprecedented exercises its action by means of expressing itself in the dynamic interaction between the artists' ideas and the concrete situations in which they are working. When artists are engaged in discovering or inventing the way to apply successfully their artistic techniques and ideas to the particular concrete situation in which they are in, they literally do not know what they are looking for. They act spontaneously, because, as Luigi Pareyson rightly pointed out⁴², upon the basis of a general and vague idea of how to produce their artworks (a kind of « forma formans ») they generate (tentatively) the precise norm, according to which they act – a norm which is valid for the single case and which coincides with the artwork (a « forma formata », according to Pareyson) –, while taking the specific situation in which they are involved and the media they use as affordance for creativity. In other words, they « invent a world », embodied in the artwork, in which particular materials, ideas, and situations become a meaningful affordance for aesthetic experience.

Hence, as has been recently argued, a symptom of success in art production is that artists feel vis-à-vis the outcomes of their creativity the same surprise as other listeners and beholders⁴³. Art, as a practice that

⁴⁰ This view is contrary to the so called « ideal theory of art » defended by Benedetto Croce, Robin G. Collingwood, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

⁴² Cf. L. Pareyson, *Estetica. Teoria della formatività*, Milano, Bompiani, 1988.

⁴³ Cf. E. Huovinen, « On Attributing Artistic Creativity », *Re-thinking Creativity I*, special issue of *Trópos: Journal of Hermeneutics and Philosophical Criticism*, 4, 2, ed. by A. Bertinetto and A. Martinengo, 2011, pp. 65-86.

prompts valuable aesthetic experiences, is something unforeseeable and unpredictable. Therefore artists cannot plan the success of their artworks by following a recipe, in a kind of deductive way⁴⁴. The process of art production seems rather to follow an abductive path : the creative path of imagination, by virtue of which, as Wittgenstein and Picasso rightly claimed, we can know what we were (imaginatively) looking for, only after having found it («Je ne cherche pas, je trouve »)⁴⁵.

VI. Abductive Imagination in Art Appreciation (the Artwork as Metaphor)

We have explained what it means for artworks to be products of the creative imagination. However, this is not the only way imagination is at work in art. For artworks engage our capacity (sensibly and conceptually) to entertain things, persons, events, situations, etc., without needing to assert their existence. In other words, artworks engage the imagination of beholders, readers and listeners experiencing art.

Again, the notion of abduction may turn out to be useful for explaining the appreciation of art as an experience that engages our imagination. For artworks should be considered as metaphors and metaphors are cases of abductive inferences. In what follows I will briefly try to explain this point.

Even the most fantastic product of an artist's imagination engages our capacity to grasp its significance, and undoubtedly in a playful way, as Kant would have said⁴⁶. And when we assign some meaning or significance to what we are invited to imagine through and by the artwork, we search for a way of interpreting and understanding the imaged item. We manage to do this if we find ideas by virtue of which we are able to connect the fictional worlds offered by imagination to the ordinary world: in other words, we are in search of possibilities of understanding the artworks as vehicles of meanings, that connect the ordinary and the imaginary world. We succeed in this endeavour when we understand the imaginary world and the ordinary world through an often unconscious and implicit reciprocal comparison

⁴⁴ Bertinetto, « Performing the Unexpected », *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Cf. Matteucci, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-179.

⁴⁶ Cf. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, *op. cit.*, §. 9 See also R. Sonderegger, *Für eine Ästhetik des Spiels – Hermeneutik, Dekonstruktion und der Eigensinn der Kunst*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 2000.

between them⁴⁷. The artworks, by virtue of which this creative connection is made, are therefore understood and used as metaphors.

The main point I want to make in this regard is the following. The metaphorical use of imagination in experiencing artworks requires a kind of divination⁴⁸, which in turn engages the interpreter's imagination in unforeseeable and surprising ways. For, in order to understand the fruits of artistic imagination, interpreters are required to adjust or re-direct imaginatively their categories and standards of judgement.

The understanding of artworks requires the performance of the metaphors in which they consist, i.e. requires the establishment of links between the ordinary and the imaginary worlds. Those links are meanings that should be projectively anticipated by means of the interpreter's imagination. In other words, metaphors work abductively⁴⁹. The validity of the projected meanings is stated only hypothetically and interpreters can make sense of them only in retrospect, i.e. only relating the products of imagination to a referential context of set and shared meanings. This ordinary context of meanings helps interpreters to make sense of the imaginary worlds of the artworks and of the meanings they projectively assign to them, while, at the same time, the projected meanings retrospectively transform the referential context, in a continuous process of cognitive and interpretative feedback-loops. Hence, at least potentially, the significance of the results of imagination (the significance of artworks as metaphors and of the metaphors presented through artworks) is not simply added to the interpreter's previous conceptual order. To grasp the outcomes of imagination, and also as a consequence of this grasping it, interpreters take a stance towards their previous conceptual order and re-set it.

⁴⁷ This is perhaps a way to understand what Novalis (Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. M. Mahony Stoljar, New York, SUNY Press, 1997, p. 60) says about the connection between romanticization and logarithmization: « By endowing the commonplace with a higher meaning, the ordinary with mysterious aspect, the known with the dignity of the unknown, the finite with the appearance of the infinite, I romanticize it. The operation for the higher, unknown, mystical, infinite is the reverse – this undergoes a logarithmic change through this connection – It takes on an ordinary form of expression ».

⁴⁸ Here I use the term « divination » in Schleiermacher's sense, according to which « divination » means « conjecture » or « guess ». It is the fundamental aspect of the process of comprehension of meaning that later Peirce will call « abduction ». Cf. F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1999. (However, the fact that I take divination in Schleiermacher's sense does not commit me to accept Schleiermacher's whole subjectivistic hermeneutics).

⁴⁹ See B. Sørensen & T. Thellefsen, « Metaphor, concept formation, and esthetic semeiosis in a Peircean perspective », *Semiotica*, 161, 2006, pp. 199–212.

This is exactly what Gadamer means by writing, as I have already mentioned, that the experience of art changes those who experience it⁵⁰. Successful art does not leave us indifferent, but gives rise to thought. However, that the imaginative experience of art goes beyond ordinary experience, while eliciting a reassessment of our conceptual and perceptual orders, does not mean that imaginative experience is irremediably detached from ordinary everyday experience. Even when imagination invites us to build fictional worlds or to see/and or hear « things » (that are not actually there) in the material surface that we are observing or in the sounds that we are hearing⁵¹, the extra-ordinary results of imagination, on which art thrives, are meaningful, that is, they become part of our ordinary experience : the way imagination exceeds our ordinary experience offers an intensification and/or an amplification of the way our ordinary perceptual and cognitive experience is organised in virtue of projective anticipations which can be understood (confirmed and verified, or maybe rejected or transformed) only retrospectively (only moving around the cube can I assure myself that what I have seen is a cube and not a rhombus).

In § 4 we have seen that abduction, as anticipatory imagination, is the way meaning is generated in everyday practices. From this ensues that in human practices rules and/or meanings cannot always be applied in every situation without loss of identity; in principle the normative identity of the rule (i.e. of the meanings, of concepts) is abductively, and tentatively, generated in and by the process of its application. Since concepts are formed abductively, it is not at odds to claim that new cognitions occur in virtue of metaphors.

Therefore, art is not absolutely opposed to everyday experience. In this particular respect, in art metaphors work the same way as concepts are shaped in everyday life and in science. So the art experience, both from the perspective of production and from the perspective of appreciation, embodies, develops, and makes somehow explicit the abductive working of imagination in ordinary and everyday experiences. In improvisation this is particularly clear, as I will argue in the next section.

⁵⁰ In other words, this transformation is the authentic experience of art. See D. M. Feige, *Kunst als Selbstverständigung*, Münster, Mentis, 2012, pp. 110-138.

⁵¹ In this sense Surrealism is only the most evident instance of a process that is at work in every art practice.

VII. Improvisation, Imagination, Abduction

Everything I have said so far about imagination and the art experience deserves much more clarification. However, it will suffice for showing the structural affinity between imagination and improvisation. Such an affinity depends, I argue, upon the fact that both share the same way of operating : abduction.

According to the anthropologist Tim Ingold abduction and improvisation are two opposite models of creating⁵². According to the abductive model, Ingold claims, the creativity of actions is judged by the novelty of its outcomes by comparison with what has gone before and then traced to the antecedent conditions in the form of unprecedented ideas in the mind of individual agents. Conversely, according to the improvisation model, we do not connect a creative outcome to a previously projected idea, but create while performing.

The problem with this view is that both models are falsely described. On the one hand, what Ingold calls the abductive model is rather a kind of deductive model. It is not an abductive model because, as we have seen in § 4, in abduction the imagined general idea is only anticipatively supposed as valid; it is not taken as definite and certain before its application. On the other hand, the improvisational model – creating while performing – does not exclude the possibility that, while performing, we connect what we are doing with previously formed ideas. Rather our imagination evolves while working in an on-going process of transformation.

As we have previously seen (in § 5), this is to be sure a feature of artistic production in general. Yet, only improvisational practices properly so-called display this on-going process of (at least potential) transformation on the spot. However, the important thing is that improvisation does not rule out abduction, i.e. evaluation of an item according to a rule which is not given, but only supposed as valid. On the contrary, improvisation, like imagination, works in an abductive way, because it applies norms that still do not exist – but that are generated in the praxis, in a metaphorical way – for making sense of the concrete and unrepeatable situation of its realisation⁵³. It generates normativity out of single cases. In this sense, it

⁵² Cf. <http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/creativity-lecture-3-creativity-abduction-or-improvisation-video>.

⁵³ This performative generation of normativity is philosophically developed by L. Wittgenstein (*Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1953) and J. Derrida (« Signature Event Context », in *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago, University of Chicago

performs in real-time what artists do when they use imagination for producing artworks. Let's examine the issue a bit more closely.

VIII. Improvisation in Everyday Practice

Improvisation is typically a kind of making something without previously knowing what to do, i.e. by imaginatively anticipating the unknown, which nonetheless remains unpredictable. Hence, one can properly see what really was in the running only in retrospect.

We may firstly consider improvisation in everyday practice. In everyday practices we are sometimes involved in situations in which we have to act rapidly, in spite of lacking information or means that would otherwise be required. In such cases we lack the possibility of weighing up carefully and accurately, by means of comparison, the best way to act, consciously considering the possible consequences of our actions, and of projecting a plan of action that we can put into practice at a later stage. Our success depends on the ability to find in a moment a structure in chaos, discovering or inventing a way of proceeding by means of spontaneously performing it, and seeing if it works. In particular, in everyday practices improvisation may have the three following common meanings:

* «The process of “making do”, or coping with some activity, using minimal resources. For example, provisionally replacing a broken car fan belt using nylon stockings. » In this sense improvisation has the connotation of being imperfect (and, sometimes, only partially adequate).

* «The process of producing quality results using inferior materials : for example, turning old discarded clothing into new fashions, or producing a gourmet meal using leftovers. »

* «The process of adjusting to the occurrences around oneself while working at a particular activity; of being receptive to the world around oneself, and using knowledge of that world (...) to adapt to change. »

Hence, generally speaking, in everyday practices an agent improvises when she « uses the limited experience and resources at (her) disposal to carry out an activity in a (usually) time-bounded situation. »⁵⁴

Press, 1982).

⁵⁴ All above quotations are from J. E. Anderson, *Constraint-Directed Improvisation for Everyday Activities*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Manitoba, 1995, p. 93. On improvisation and the everyday see also L. Goehr, « Der Agon des Improvisierens – auf Gerissenen Saiten. Zu einer Theorie von Passung und Witz », in F. Döhl, D. M. Feige, T. Hilgers & F. McGovern (eds.), *Konturen des Kunstwerks. Zur Frage von Relevanz und Kontingenz*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München, 2013.

There is no pre-established rule as to how to solve problems in a spontaneous way, because each situation calls for different solutions (even though one can improve by practice the capacity to act and react spontaneously in a satisfactory way in a given sphere of experience). Rather we intuitively focus on the situation we are in and rapidly imagine and perform a way to solve the emergency situation, without having the right means or time to analyse the facts and the data at our disposal and to reflect about the validity of the imagined solution. In other words, when we react, on the basis of our previous experience, to unforeseen circumstances, we have sometimes not even conceptualised explicitly what the problem is exactly we must solve; we act while applying what psychologists call the « adaptive unconscious »⁵⁵ and one may say that the solution to the problem is that which afterwards enables us to see what was the specific problem we were faced with. The ability to judge, which is the real problem at issue, is in other words part of the improvised solution to the problem; therefore, we can consciously understand what the problem was only in retrospect. The effectiveness of the solution performed enabled us to understand retrospectively that we had rightly imagined the link between the emergency situation and the problem-solution chain.

Obviously every domain of human practice allows for different degrees of improvisation. Nonetheless, « even in a very structured domain [like chess, airplane piloting, or medicine] where high quality results are demanded, improvisation is performed to some degree »⁵⁶. The instrumental quality for which improvisation is required, and valued, in human activities is its flexibility, i.e. its ability to adapt to circumstances. However, the frugal, quick, economical way we cope with such emergency situations in virtue of individuating the right problem while performing a (more or less) satisfactory solution can also be aesthetically valuable both from the subjective standpoint of the agents and from the objective standpoint of the results of the performed action: it is so when the lack or inadequacy of a previous standard action plan, rather than being detrimental, increases both the effectiveness of the action and the qualities (such as elegance, sharpness, courage, boldness, control curiosity, organicity) of the performing agents, actions performed and results thereof, and/or when the solution offered

⁵⁵ Cf. M. Gladwell, *Blink. The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Little, Brown, Back Bay Book, 2005, p. 11.

⁵⁶ Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

enlightens creatively a previously unknown problematic field⁵⁷. In this sense we can speak about an aesthetics of improvisation in practical life. It regards our capacity to act without following a prepared plan and by using found materials, performing actions that establish the nature of the problem that they themselves resolve, in ways that are satisfying not only instrumentally, but also for their own sake⁵⁸.

In these improvisatory practices the (partly unconscious) imaginative and decisional process does not completely precede the performative gesture. Imaginative anticipations and operative decisions (and re-decisions) are part of the performance and are shown in the performance. Conversely, the performative gesture is the way we invent – imaginatively, albeit also concretely – the solution to a problem that is envisioned through the solution : in other words improvisation in everyday practice proceeds in an abductive manner.

This is also what happens in improvisational artistic practices, which thrive and elaborate on the aesthetics of improvisation in everyday practices.

IX. Imagination and Improvisation in Performing Arts

It will therefore be useful to discuss the dynamics of the interaction between imagination and improvisation in the performing arts.

A) Firstly, imagination contributes to the performative organisation, construction, evaluation, and interpretation (one may use the German concept of *Gestaltung* to encompass all this) of the improvisational event. Here, like in the construction and interpretation of our ordinary experience of reality, organisational imagination is at work.

B) Secondly, imagination is a vehicle of artistic creativity and – together with many other aesthetic qualities, such as virtuosity, style, coordination, to name but a few – it is partly responsible for the aesthetic and artistic value of the improvisational performance, when the spontaneous achievements of improvisation not only go beyond expected and common results, but the way they are innovative and unexpected is also highly valuable aesthetically and artistically, in virtue of their formal and structural

⁵⁷ For a discussion concerning the value of ingenuity cf. C. Dowling, « The Value of Ingenuity », in *Re-thinking Creativity I*, pp. 47-63.

⁵⁸ Scrapyard challenges (or, as they are also called, junkyard wars) are competitions that artistify, as it were, precisely this ability to improvise for coping with a difficult and unforeseen situation. Cf. G. Peters, *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 9-19.

qualities (like elegance, dynamism, boldness, coherence in complexity, etc.) or of their metaphorical and expressive significance.

C) Thirdly, improvisational performances set audience imagination in motion in order to grasp the shape that the performance is taking while the performance is going on as well as its artistic and aesthetic significance.

X. Imagination and the improvisational process

In the construction of an improvised dance, music, or theatre performance a complex network of reciprocal feedback-loops among action, imagination, evaluation, and acknowledgement is set in motion⁵⁹.

In dance, music, or theatre improvisation the meaning and the value of every moment of the performance depends on, and is loaded with (the recollection of) past and (the expectation of) future moments. The identity, the meaning, the function and the value of every single piece of the whole performance (movement, sound, gesture, action, figure, and the like) is not definitive before the process, but depends upon the network of references

⁵⁹ Regarding theatre improvisation see K. Johnstone, *op. cit.* ; A. Cafaro, *L'improvvisazione dell'attore nel teatro di ricerca contemporaneo. Tra determinismo e aleatorietà*, Ravenna, Longo Editore, 2009. For dance see Y. Nakano and O. Takeshi, «Process of Improvisational Contemporary Dance », and F. Lampert, « Kommunikation in der Gruppenimprovisation. Zur verschlüsselten Verständigung beim Ballett Freiburg Pretty ugly », in A. Klinge & M. Leeker (eds.), *Tanz Kommunikation Praxis*, Muenster, Lit, 2003, pp. 77-90. For musical improvisation see : J. Pressing, « Cognitive Processes in Improvisation », in W. R. Crozier & A. J. Chapman (eds.), *Cognitive Processes in the Perception of Art*, Amsterdam, 1984, pp. 345-363 ; « The Micro- and Macrostructural Design of Improvised Music », *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 5, 2, 1987, pp. 133-172 ; « Improvisation : Methods and Models », in J. Sloboda (ed.), *Generative Processes in Music*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987 ; E. Sarath, « A New Look at Improvisation », *Journal of Music Theory*, 40, 1996, pp. 1-38; V. Caporaletti, *I processi improvvisativi nella musica - Un approccio globale*, Lucca, Lim, 2005 ; B. Nettle & G. Solis (eds.), *Musical Improvisation. Art, Education, Society*, Urbana & Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2009 ; G. Ferreccio & D. Racca (ed.), *L'improvvisazione in musica e letteratura*, Torino, L'Harmattan Italia, 2007. In particular regarding jazz improvisation see I. Monson, *Saying Something. Jazz improvisation and Interaction*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1996 ; E. Jost, « Über Jazzimprovisation », in R. Brinkmann (ed.), *Improvisation und Neue Musik*, Mainz, 1979, pp. 55-63 ; P. N. Johnson Laird, « How Jazz Musicians Improvise », *Music Perception*, 19, 3, 2002, pp. 415-442 ; V. Caporaletti, *La definizione dello swing. I fondamenti estetici del jazz e delle musiche audiotattili*, Teramo, Ideasoni, 2000 ; Sparti, *Suoni inauditi, op. cit.* ; Santi, *op. cit.* ; P. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz. The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1994 ; R. G. O' Meally et al. (eds.), *Uptown conversation. The New Jazz Studies*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 393-403 ; R. Kraut, « Why Does Jazz Matter to Aesthetic Theory? », *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 63, 2005, pp. 3-15; A. Bertinetto, « Reflexive Prozesse bei der Jazzimprovisation », in G. Bertram, D. M. Feige & F. Ruda (eds.), *Sinnliche Reflexivität. Zur sinnlichen Dimension der Künste*, Berlin, Diaphanes, forthcoming.

that is being woven in the course of performance. Every action and gesture interacts with the meaning of previous actions and gestures, defining and modifying them, so that every past moment or sign may change its meaning depending on what will happen later. At the same time, every act and gesture shapes anticipatively the meaning of future acts and gestures. Hence, the identity of the meaning of the performance is in flux, because the referential context of the performance is continuously re-created in the course of the performance⁶⁰ and every situational moment acquires its meaning and, reciprocally, contributes to the meaning of the whole process, in the course of performance⁶¹. The sense of the whole process is established only at the end of the process. However, since every performance is not an isolated atom, but a stage in the history of a personal and/or collective artistic practice, there is, as it were, no end to the process.

Every performance is (in different ways: conformist, evolutionist, revolutionary, etc.) a continuation of the previous ones. Therefore, based upon their previous experience as well as upon the knowledge of references of some kind (aesthetic styles, historical contexts, artistic genres, artistic rules, chord progressions or narrative plots, but even embodied patterns and learned gestures, and so on) performers (and audience too) surely have some expectation of what is happening in a certain performance, what will happen, and how. In some artistic genres performers are expected to direct their improvisations along more rigid tracks than in other genres; moreover in each performing practice some parameters of reference are more stable and foreseeable than others. For example, in Bebop musical improvisations the general harmonic structure is more fixed than in Free Jazz : so expectations regarding harmonic development are generally stronger in Bebop than in Free Jazz; but one can expect that in a Bebop performance the melodic lines will be more elaborated than in a Free Jazz performance. This will probably focus more intensively on the « energy » of the musical interaction.

To put it briefly, improvisers have at their disposal some explicit and implicit perceptual and conceptual schemes in virtue of which they can

⁶⁰ Using the language of system theory one can say that the system develops its own borders. See N. Luhmann. *Soziale Systeme : Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1984, Eng. Translation, *Social Systems*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995.

⁶¹ Sparti, *Suoni inauditi*, *op. cit.* p. 165. See G. Bertram, « Kreativität und Normativität », in G. Abel (ed.), *Kreativität*, Universitätsverlag der TU Berlin, vol. 1, pp. 273-283 ; G. Bertram : « Improvisation und Normativität », in G. Brandstetter, H.-F. Bormann & A. Matzke (eds.), *Improvvisieren*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2010, pp. 21-40.

understand (more or less) what is going on and, consequently, they are able to evaluate what they themselves and their fellow performers are doing. This continuous evaluation has performative power⁶², because it guides the decisions that are taken and re-taken (often unconsciously) and drive the performance forward.

In interactive improvisation performers need to solve coordination problems by means of common referents and, especially (due to the fact that common referents may be absent or too weak) by means of searching for « focal points » through the anticipation of others' performing decisions⁶³. Focal points⁶⁴ – which can be both discovered and created – should make performers able to disambiguate the rules of selection according to their artistic competence and to establish successive identities and stable points in the performance stream.

It is true that the coordination itself between performers « probably depends on the existence of a shared representation of the ongoing situation »⁶⁵. Still, even when they share a common cultural, artistic, and stylistic background, performers cannot know at a given moment (at least in any detail) what will happen some moments later; they cannot know whether their present representation and evaluation of the ongoing situation will still be valid some moments later. They do not know exactly how their gestures will be acknowledged and evaluated by their fellow performers (or by the audience). For the referential frame that guides performers' and audience expectations and sets norms for the meaning of what is happening, is not stable and static. It is rather dynamic and changes (or may change) during the performance: in fact it emerges during the performance beyond the performers' subjective intentions⁶⁶. So, relying on the representation of the

⁶² Nachmanovitch, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

⁶³ Cf. C. Canonne, « Focal points in Collective Free Improvisation », *Perspectives of New Music* (forthcoming).

⁶⁴ «A focal point is (...) a point of convergence for expectations; and it arises because players are trying somehow to single out one of the solutions ». (Canonne, *op. cit.*, p. 3 of the manuscript).

⁶⁵ C. Canonne & N. Garnier, « Cognition and Segmentation in Collective Free Improvisation », *Proceedings International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition*, 2012, p. 198. Regarding dance improvisation F. Lampert (« Kommunikation in der Gruppenimprovisation ») calls the focal points « catalyzing agents ».

⁶⁶ In reference to theatre improvisation R.K. Sawyer (*Improvised Dialogues : Emergence and Creativity in Conversation*, Westport/London, Ablex, 2003, pp. 41-43) highlights the structural affinity between the construction of artistic meaning in artistic performances and the construction of meaning in human interactions and dialogical conversations; in this regard he rightly observes that « the emergence of the frame cannot be reduced to an actor's intentions in individual turns, because in many cases an actor cannot know the

ongoing situation, performers can only suppose what is probably the best way to react in the present situation. However, they cannot really know in advance how what follows will modify both the sense of what they have already done and of what they are doing now as well as of the mental representation thereof. Performers can « anticipatively project » an expectation concerning both the meaning of the present moment of the performance and what will emerge later : they continuously suppose or imagine a sense that is both a meaning and a direction) of the performance. What each single performer does is guided by this anticipatory imagination, which is more or less collectively and interactively shaped and shared. However, this anticipatory imagination may go frustrated, because each moment of the performance is not really foreseeable : nobody knows whether the sense of the performance they are imagining – which is expressed in what they are doing – will be confirmed, modified or rejected and at every single temporal step of the performance reality outshines prevision, provisional conjectures, and imagination.

Since performers do not follow a rigid plan, but – at least to a certain degree – invent on the spot what they do, every actual event in the course of the artistic performance is per se unforeseen and, at least from their fellow performers' standpoints, accidental : it is an emergent accomplishment that reflexively and recursively feeds back the imaginative projection of the course of the performance, that is, the live (self-)construction of normativity. At each step of the process, in every single instant, performers (should) search for, imagine, and anticipate a norm for making sense of the process as emergent accomplishment. This norm is a projection, a regulative ideal in the Kantian sense : as an actual and real rule is generated through each of the different emergent accomplishments in which, as an ideal imagined and projective norm, it is applied. Therefore, the undeducible and emergent, thus unexpected (or better : expected as unexpected), application of the rule precedes the rule, because the rule is paradoxically generated through and by its application(s). In other words, the actual and real rule is the performance itself, which as emergent accomplishment is perceived, understood and evaluated thanks to norms that are not pre-given, because they are generated throughout the course of performance. In this sense,

meaning of his or her own turn until the other actors have responded. (...) In improvised dialogues, many actions do not receive their full meaning until after the act has occurred; the complete meaning of a turn is dependent on the flow of the subsequent dialogue ». See also Bertram, « Improvisation und Normativität », *op. cit.* and E. Landgraf, « Eine wirklich transzendente Buffonerie », in *Improvisieren*, pp. 65-94.

improvised performances are cases of performative abduction. The normative evaluation of the process by virtue of an ideal and projected norm influences the reality of the process, the actual construction of a real norm, and vice versa the reality of the process continuously re-regulates its meanings and values.

11. Imagination and the question concerning the artistic value of improvisation

One may ask whether and how the improvisational nature of a performance concerns its artistic and aesthetic meaning and value. One can indeed be sceptical about the real artistic import of improvisational practices. Although, as we have previously seen (§ 8), even improvisation in everyday practices may be aesthetically, and not only instrumentally, valuable, this is not a sufficient reason for praising improvisation in art practices. For we can certainly be satisfied by improvised solutions in everyday activities, yet this seems not to be the case in the realm of art. In the realm of art we look for excellence and we cannot be pleased by mediocre or partial results, no matter how flexible we might be. Art requires perfection and, one may argue, one can be aesthetically and artistically pleased by improvised « art » like scrapyards only if one has poor taste.

In other words, the general objection against the artistic value of improvisation may be split into two parts. One may firstly object that in and with improvisation aesthetic and artistic perfection cannot be reached, because performers have to cope with the accidents of reality, agreeing to make compromise with the actual circumstances. Secondly, one may further contend that the impossibility of perfection in improvisation is due to the fact that in improvisation creative imagination is weak and cannot play a great enough role to generate creatively valuable artistic performances. If imagination in an improvised performance does only the same amount of work as in the organisation of everyday experience, then it seems that imagination is not particularly important for the artistic and aesthetic features and values of improvisation in the performing arts.

The first part of the objection against improvisation in art is mistaken, because it depends upon a wrong (or at least partial) notion of perfection as formal completeness in accordance with a structured order. Arguing that improvisation needs a special « aesthetics of imperfection » (as

a lot of scholars do⁶⁷) does not help. The problem with this view is rather that in art and aesthetics perfection should not simply be understood in these formalistic terms, because compliance with an established structured order is not always the right criterion for artistic value : the criteria of success in art and aesthetic experience are renegotiated in and through each particular situation. Hence, since in improvisation the rule is invented while it is performed in a particular and unrepeatable circumstance, improvisation seems to be a paradigmatic case of the art experience, rather than exemplary of an aesthetic of imperfection. However, as I have already discussed this point elsewhere⁶⁸, I will here leave the matter at that and switch to the second part of the objection. In this regard I will make two related points.

(i). In artistic improvisation, I have observed, the reality of the performance exceeds the simple possibility of a structured imaged plan. Each moment of the performance forges, to a certain extent, its own normative context. The sense of the performance imagined by performers and audience cannot resist the surprising emergence of reality. Therefore, it may even be argued that imagination and improvisation are not compatible at the ontological level. The argument could go as follows. Imagination is a projective anticipation of a content of experience, which is not present. But, if we anticipate something, then – so it seems, at least – we foresee that something. Hence, while performing what we have imaginatively anticipated, we are not improvising. So, we cannot imagine what we improvise, because, while improvising, we are not performing something that we knew already in the past, even if the kind of « knowledge » we are referring to is only an imagined one, that is a conjectural anticipation.

However, this is a wrong way of reasoning. During the performance, the imaginative anticipation of the course of the performance and the actual course of the performance tend to merge into each other. The projective anticipation is not fixed but changes in function of the actual development of the performance. As we have seen, there are continuous feedback loops

⁶⁷ Cf. T. Gioia, *The Imperfect Art. Reflections on Jazz and Modern Culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988; L.B. Brown, « “Feeling My Way”. Jazz Improvisation and Its Vicissitudes – A Plea for Imperfection », *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 58, 2000, pp. 113-123; A. Hamilton, « The Art of Improvisation and the Aesthetics of Imperfection », *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 40, 2001, pp. 168-185; A. Hamilton, « The Art of Recording and the Aesthetics of Perfection », *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 43, 2003, pp. 345-362.

⁶⁸ A. Bertinetto, « Improvisazione e formatività », *Annuario filosofico*, 25, 2009, pp. 145-174; Bertinetto, « Performing the Unexpected », *op. cit.*; A. Bertinetto, « Jazz als Gelungene performance. Ästhetische Normativität und Improvisation », *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, forthcoming.

between emerging situations in the performance and their normative significance. Therefore, it is not true that performers have no imagination or plans concerning the performance; but what performers imagine, plan and decide during the performance is influenced by the performance itself. Hence, projective imagination is not ontologically prevented by artistic improvisation, it rather moves along with the improvised performance.

Moreover, the imagination involved in artistic improvisation is not exclusively a conscious exercise of the performers' private minds. It is embodied in the public gestures of the performers, who shape what they are imagining while communicating it in their artistic expressions. In other words, in improvisation the use of imagination is not an exclusive exercise of mind control over the performer's own body and over the artistic media (sounds, gestures, speech, movements, and the like). The performer's imaginative power reacts to what is going on now, and feeds itself not only with performing possibilities inherited from past experience, but also with possibilities emerging from the interaction with the situation in real-time. Performers, in other words, envision how and where to go on in the performance by means of doing. And their doing is not exclusively mind-controlled, it is not under the control of the single performers' minds but rather open to multiple influences⁶⁹ within the collective performance⁶⁹. Imaginative ideation and interactive performance largely coincide.

(ii). One may, however, take an Adornian stance toward improvisation and judge it as aesthetically or artistically feeble on the premise that improvisation is an obstacle to, rather than a vehicle or a source for, artistic creativity. The core of Adorno's general criticism toward the artistic value of jazz is that in jazz improvisation is not creative, because improvisers refer to established and shared contexts of expectations by recourse to standardised stereotypes and to normalised and fixed structures that are simply repeated again and again. So what is passed off as « spontaneity » is really only the boring and conventional repetition of the same⁷⁰. Hence, it does not subvert the existent, but re-affirms it by means of

⁶⁹ For creativity in group improvisation see R.K., Sawyer, *Group Creativity : Music, Theater, Collaboration*, New York, Taylor & Francis, 2003; Bertram, « Improvisation und Normativität », *op. cit.*; D. Borgo, *Sync or Swarm : Improvising Music in a Complex Age*, New York, Continuum, 2005; (in non artistic fields) C. Dell, *Die improvisierende Organisation. Management nach dem Ende der Planbarkeit*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2012.

⁷⁰ Cf. for example T.W. Adorno, « On Popular Music », in T.W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. R. Leppert, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2002, pp. 437-469, here p. 445.

the repetition of standard commonplaces. In other words, improvisers are not, and cannot be, creatively imaginative.

The literature has already explained that the « music Adorno knew as jazz at the time he produced his principal work on the subject (. . .) was the popular dance music produced in the waning years of the Weimar Republic [1919-1933] and also in England (. . . and) had everything to do with salon music and the military march [. . .] and very little to do with non-swing American jazz and even less with African-American musics »⁷¹. Moreover, the criteria Adorno applied in order to judge this kind of jazz as stereotypical (« individualization, escape from normalization, pioneer artisanship, anti-standardization, un-delimited aesthetics, spontaneity, freedom from constraints, inexhaustible possibility »⁷²) are also stereotypical. Yet, the main point against Adorno's rejection of improvisation is that the fact that artistic improvisations can artistically fail does not prevent them from being (at least potentially) artistically successful. In this regard improvisational arts do not differ from other art forms. Imagination plays in this an important role.

Adorno is certainly right in saying that the sheer fact that one improvises is no warrant for the artistic quality of a performance. Indeed, not every improvisation is inventive and/or expressive in a valuable artistic way. It is trivial to observe that improvised performances, like any kind of artistic performance, may be bad performances. Moreover, needless to say, a performance may be improvised in the pejorative sense of the word and precisely for this reason not reach the standards of quality required in the artistic practice and genre at issue. Not only that. Even though the performance is well organised, the contribution of imagination to the organisation of the improvised performance does not imply, per se, the artistic success of the performance. Even if, thanks partly to the anticipations provided by their organisational imagination, performers succeed in producing a coherent performance, this is not a sufficient condition for achieving valuable aesthetic and artistic results. As a matter of fact, as with other artistic practices, the performance's lack of quality can be partly due to a scarce, or bad, exercise of the creative power of imagination,

⁷¹ R. Leppert, ed. T. W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, *op. cit.*, p. 357, quoted in D. Fischlin, « "Wild notes" ... Improvising », *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, 6/2, 2010, pp. 1-10, here p. 7. (<http://www.criticalimprov.com/article/view/1358/1938>). See also Spati, *Suoni inauditi*, *op. cit.*; W.R. Witkin, « Why Did Adorno 'Hate' Jazz? », *Sociological Theory*, 18/1, 2003, pp. 145-170.

⁷² Leppert, *op. cit.*, p. 357, quoted in Fischlin, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

i.e. to an incapacity to imagine valuable artistic possibilities for improvised performances. Indeed, besides contributing to the arrangement and the organisation of an improvised performance by means of its projective anticipations, imagination should guide the improvisational process in creative, inventive and expressive ways, otherwise the performance will hardly have great artistic and aesthetic merit. However, pace Adorno, improvisation is not an obstacle to creative imagination.

The distinctive trait of improvised artistic performances is rather that both the organisational and the creative imagination are (or at least can and should be) exercised to a certain extent during the course of the performance, in order to produce the performance. Like organisational imagination, that is responsible for the coherence of the performance, creative imagination too is a necessary condition, i.e. a prerequisite, for the success of improvisation and it is particularly important for the achievement of its artistic qualities. As Tom Nunn put it in his book *Wisdom of the Impulse. The Nature of Free Improvisation*⁷³, « [w]ithout [creative] Imagination, a free improvisation cannot “move forward”, there are no ideas and no progression of meaning. Nothing is quite as boring as a free improvisation without [creative] Imagination! ». In this sense, to claim that improvisation (in Nunn’s own words : « Free improvisation ») « is the imagination unleashed through impulse »⁷⁴ is not an exaggeration.

12. Performing imagination : the aesthetic merit of improvisation

One could argue that, at least in the way I have presented them here, organisational imagination and creative imagination are individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for artistic improvisation. Without organisational imagination improvisation could hardly achieve coherence and the performance could hardly be followed either by the performers or the audience. Without creative imagination the coherence achieved through organisational improvisation would lack originality, inventive force, expressivity, and other aesthetic qualities that are required for art to be valuable and authentic. I do not contend this point; it seems to be a nice way to explain the kind of work imagination does in art (see §§ 4-6). However, creativity is an evaluative concept. Therefore, the formula «

⁷³ T. Nunn, *Wisdom of the Impulse. On the Nature of Musical Free Improvisation*, http://www20.brinkster.com/improarchive/tn_wisdom_part1.pdf / -part2.pdf 1998 (pdf edition 2004), p. 23.

⁷⁴ Nunn, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

organisational imagination + creative imagination = art » cannot be rightly conceived as a recipe for artistic success. Analogously, it would be a mistake to understand the more specific formula « performative organisational imagination + performative creative imagination = artistic improvisation » as a recipe for valuable improvised performances. Rather, we can judge an artwork and also an improvised performance as successful and creative only in retrospect, i.e. after the event is done. This is due, in turn, to the fact that artworks set, in the abductive way previously explained (§§ 5-6), the criteria for the assessment of their own artistic merit. Improvised artistic performances are not exceptions to this rule and they rather enact and exemplarily show this generation of aesthetic normativity in the course of performance⁷⁵.

The role of imagination as anticipatory projection of the improvised performance during the performance has already been explained (in § 10). Imagination is in this sense a condition of the organisation of the performance in real-time. However, as discussed in §§ 5-6, in art imagination is not only a necessary condition for the organisation of the experience, but also vehicle and source of artistic creativity. We have just clarified the point that improvisation is no exception to this general rule. Yet, differently from other art practices, in improvisation the inventions of imagination are immediately realised, exhibited and evaluated during the performance. Improvisation is, in this sense, imagination at work, performing imagination, i.e. imagination producing its inventions immediately.

Obviously, this does not mean that the way improvisers take advantage of their imagination on the spot is completely unprepared. Like in other human practices, « imagination cannot happen in a vacuum; it requires material to work with in order to generate ideas. There often has to be a problem to solve. Or it may simply be a creative response to an emotion »⁷⁶. Moreover, improvisers perform their imaginative capacity in interaction with other performers, with the environment, with the emotional atmosphere of the particular situation in which they are involved. Imagination works here as a formative force that comes from a cultural background, but articulates itself in interaction with the specific situation of the performance. Therefore it is exposed to an unpredictable number of possible perceptual and contextual influences that can shape the artistic performance, if allowed

⁷⁵ I have elaborated on this in Bertinetto, « Performing the Unexpected », *op. cit.*

⁷⁶ Nunn, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

to do so⁷⁷.

Nonetheless, the most important question is yet another one : what, besides its real-time character, is specific to imagination as a creative and formative force in improvisational artistic practices? This question may receive psychological answers. Here, anyway, I am not concerned with this kind of answer (the importance of which I do not deny). The answer we need here is an aesthetic one. We need to understand what is the contribution of imagination to the specific aesthetic value of improvisation as an artistic practice. In other words we must distinguish the value of imagination for everyday improvisational practice and for art in general from the specific value of imagination for artistic improvisation. The answer I suggest goes as follows.

As I observed in § 8, in everyday practices improvisation may be a valid way to act. Imagination does not have primarily aesthetic functions here, but serves as a tool for rapidly envisioning the emergency situation and finding a valid solution on the spot. The improvised action can be aesthetically valuable – in different ways and to different degrees. Yet aesthetic success is not the main purpose of the action performed. In artistic improvisation imagination is from the beginning set in motion for aesthetic and artistic aims and not only for grasping and solving an emergency situation. The improvisation we meet in art is not simply the kind of practice to which we resort when we have no other choice. In other words, in art improvisation does not have primarily instrumental functions. Improvisation, in art, is a means for imaginatively inventing and producing creative and valuable artistic productions.

How then does the contribution of imagination in artistic improvisation differ from other artistic ways of production? Obviously enough, in dance, music and theatre improvisation at least part of the imaginative work responsible for the artistic invention is done in real-time, i.e. while the artwork is being created and exhibited. But this is not enough to understand the specific value and scope of imagination in improvisational art. Why is this real-time character of the exercise of improvisation artistically and aesthetically meaningful? I think the following is a possible line of answer. Improvisation shows the creative work of imagination, where imagination is working within a specific and unrepeatable situation. This can result in artistic outcomes that are all the more valuable as they are unpredictable and surprising, because dependent on the ingenious way

⁷⁷ Cf. Nunn, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

creative imagination thrives in emergency circumstances. Moreover, in the case of group performances, imagination is also not a private business, but an interactive practice according to which the artistic outcome is the product of the negotiation of each performer's private imagination, because the creative outcomes of the performers' imagination affect the imaginative creativity of their fellow performers. To perceive imagination at work, both in the soloist and in the interactive variation, is indeed aesthetically highly satisfying, especially for competent audiences, that are able to grasp immediately the moves made by performers on the spot. In a nutshell, a big part of the aesthetic merit of artistic improvisation lies in the way performers and audience perceive live, maybe feel, how imagination works in unforeseeable ways as a vehicle for artistic creativity in performances in which the coincidence between invention and realisation in a specific situation implies the unrepeatability and the exceptional nature of the artistic event that is happening now.

This epitomises the way art experience, as such, stands out from ordinary experiences. It cannot be completely planned and anticipated in advance and its evaluation and understanding both require and produce a metaphorical re-organisation of ordinary experience (see § 4-6). One of the merits of improvisation is that it directly shows – in an unrepeatably real-time and in unpredictable and surprising ways – how the creative work of imagination and the evaluative judgement of this work influence each other in an interactive and performative way. For in improvised dance, theatre and music performers imaginatively (though not always in a clear conscious way) elaborate ideas as to how and what to perform during the show. Each event of the performance is both the result of this imaginative work and triggers different (sometimes new) possibilities for the imagination. Actions, movements, sounds and image that co-performers and the performative environment produce during the performance are affordances to which each performer (should) react. Hence, every imaginative idea the single performer may have as to how to develop the performance is continuously called into question. It can be confirmed, but also criticised, modified, or rejected, by what other performers do, by the audience's reaction and by environmental factors. The whole outcome of the imaginative activity of the performers ensues from the way each performer's actions and reactions are performatively evaluated in the course of performance in interaction with the performative space. During the performance, the imaginative activity of each performer invites all co-performers to engage their imagination, in two ways : by a) imaginatively perceiving and understanding the outcomes of

the already-performed imagination; b) offering new material so that co-performers and audience engage their own imagination while, and by means of, interpreting this material.

The fundamental point is this. Both the organisational-interpretative and the explorative-creative imagination are engaged in the course of improvisation, while the outcomes of these activities are exhibited to fellow performers and to the audience. Improvisers are faced with the paradoxical task of imaginatively performing and interacting in a valuable way without knowing in advance whether the criteria upon which they base their activity and evaluate the whole process are, or at the end still will be, the right ones. They apply a rule without knowing whether it is the right one, that is, a rule which is not a rule, in the proper sense, but the generation of one. They are involved in a typical case of abductive reasoning, which unfolds in an interactive way and has performative effects.

13. Audience imagination

The third kind of imagination, as well as organisational and creative imagination, set in motion by improvised artistic performances is audience imagination⁷⁸. This happens in two main ways :

a) Audience imagination is set in motion by performers' movements, gestures, and actions⁷⁹. Like performers, spectators use organisational imagination in order to grasp the sense of the emergent accomplishment of the performance⁸⁰. However, differently from that of the performers, audience imaginative attention does not necessarily contribute to the performance, it does not have an unavoidably performative power (although it can have performative power). Audience attention is active; only active attention allows the audience to follow the performers' improvised gestures and actions. Like performers, listeners and beholders have some imaginative expectations regarding what might happen. Yet, since there is no artwork before the performance, they cannot previously know exactly whether their expectations will be confirmed or not. In some cases performers can

⁷⁸ For improvisation in art perception and appreciation see S. Zanetti, « Zwischen Konzept und Akt. Spannungsmomente der Improvisation bei Quintilian und Andersen », in *Improvisieren*, pp. 95-106, here p. 105.

⁷⁹ E. Fischer-Lichte, « Performative Spaces and Imagined Spaces. How Bodily Movement sets the Imagination in Motion », in B. Huppau & C. Wulf (eds.), *Dynamics and performativity of imagination*, London, Routledge, 2009, pp. 178-187, here p. 178.

⁸⁰ Cf. Nunn, *op. cit.*, p. 7 : « The audience is also called upon to use imagination to “make sense” of a music about which no one knows the outcome until after the fact. »

intentionally confuse the audience, offering only ambiguous and enigmatic images, movements, or sounds. Then audience imagination can go astray⁸¹.

b) Like in non improvisational arts, audience imagination is set in motion by what performers do also for creatively shaping the artistic scene being enacted. Imagination is here the tool for the aesthetic apprehension of the artistic product, as Wollheim's theory of twofoldness, Walton's theory of make-believe, every theory of artistic appreciation as metaphorical understanding, and aesthetic theories of fruition as active construction, all try to explain. The improvised performance may be imaginatively grasped in the same way. It is often highly expressive, can have symbolic meaning of various kinds and, besides having contemplative aesthetic value, can even convey, precisely in virtue of its being improvised, social and political meaning and performative power.

Therefore, due to the particular nature of improvisation, which, as an open and living system, builds its own borders⁸² and sometimes blurs the distinction between what is inside and what is outside, the performance (see § 1), and, in some cases (for example in some cases of performance art) spectators « can be transferred into a liminal state, into a situation of in-betweenness – [...] between the real and the imagined, the performative and the imaginary »⁸³. Especially in theatrical improvisations performed in non-institutional venues, the artistic value of the performance can consist mainly in the way the creation of imagination that comes true in the improvisational process directly influences the moral, social, and political life of spectators and listeners, triggering changes in people's minds and challenging the status quo. This is why established authorities may sometimes fear the imaginative power of improvisation and prohibit it.

14. Conclusion

As we saw in §1, this happened, for example, in Austria in the last decades of the eighteenth century, precisely when the ideological construction of the fine arts system reduced the role and the rank of improvisation in the arts. Improvisation began to be conceived as a practice

⁸¹ I have elaborated on this, in relation to music, in A. Bertinetto, « Improvisational Listening? », *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, 4, 2012 (Guimaraes/Braga, June 2011), 2012, p. 83-104.

⁸² Cf. C. Natoli, « Improvisazione musicale e complessità », in *Re-thinking Creativity I*, pp. 87-102.

⁸³ Fischer-Lichte, « Performative Spaces and Imagined Spaces », *op. cit.*, p. 185.

that lacks the right kind of aesthetic-contemplative imagination and, instead of being aesthetically disinterested, breaks the divide between art and life. There were allegedly good reasons for considering improvisation anti-artistic in nature. In this paper I have argued that this view is misguided. Improvisation fits the requirement of art and aesthetics, and it even exemplifies artistic creation.

Imagination has an important role in this. Imagination and improvisation share the abductive method of their making. The way imagination works can be labelled, to certain degrees and in some respects, improvisational. Improvisation needs imagination for the organisation of the process as well as for being creative. In particular, both organisational and creative imagination, in art and other human practices, proceed in an abductive way and in the production and appreciation of artworks the way imagination is engaged has improvisational traits. This is due, in turn, to the fact that both improvisation in everyday practices and artistic improvisation work abductively : in other words, organisational and creative imagination play essential roles in improvisational practices. So, just like imagination has, per se, improvisational traits, improvisation may be conceived as imagination performed in real-time. The way improvisers perform anticipatory and creative imagination on the spot is both for producers and for audiences one of the most intense pleasures of art experience.

Interestingly, this specific value of artistic improvisation shows, in virtue of its link with imagination, a feature that holds for art in general. The criteria for an artwork's success cannot be simply presupposed, but are established by the artwork itself⁸⁴; the interpretation of the value and of the meaning of artworks proceeds in an abductive way, by seeking a general significance for a particular item, i.e. understanding the artwork as a metaphor. Since improvisers enact abductive metaphorical imagination in the course of performance, this is in turn at least a clue indicating that improvisation is not opposed to the categories of the aesthetic experience, but, rather, a structural – sometimes hidden – element of this experience.

In sum up, in this paper I have argued that improvisation is not at odds with art and aesthetic experience. Instead of being anti-artistic and/or anti-aesthetic in nature, it is strongly tied to art and aesthetic experience. The strong link between art and improvisation is imagination, both

⁸⁴ See Bertinetto, « Performing the Unexpected », *op. cit.*

organisational and creative, conceived in abductive, metaphorical, and performative terms⁸⁵.

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