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(Article begins on next page)

## IMPROVISATION

by Alessandro Bertinetto

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It. *Improvvisazione*; Fr. *Improvisation*; Germ. *Improvisation*; Span. *Improvisación*. The term is from Latin *improvisus* ("not fore-seen", "unexpected", "not studied", "not prepared beforehand"). It denotes the artistic practice in which creative (inventive, ideational) and performing activity coincide and the artistic project is (to a certain degree) invented in the making. Improvisation is not only the ability to react "here and now" to unforeseeable artistic or technical accidents or problems (improvisation *impromptu*), but also the intentional development of creativity in real-time (*ex tempore*) or, independently from the real-time constraints, the creative rearrangement of already-extant materials (like in collages). Artists can prepare themselves for improvised performances by learning and repeating action and gesture patterns for keeping control of eventualities as well as by exploiting unforeseen and emergent events as affordances to creativity: they must be prepared to be unprepared (Lee Konitz).

### THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE (ONTOLOGY)

(A) In the performing arts (music, theatre, dance, oral poetry, and performance art) improvisation implies (to a high degree) the coincidence of process and product. Platonists argue that improvisers discover, rather than create, the atemporal artwork by performing it, and explain the coincidence of work and performance through the notion of "singleton" (a type with a unique token). However, this attempt to explain improvisation in Platonist terms fails. For, while the type/token distinction should help solve the problem of the alleged repeatability, without loss of identity, of an already available "structural" and normative work, improvisation is to be conceived of in terms of an unrepeatable, singular and unique "event" rigidly tied to the space-temporal situation and the social context of its occurring. Since the artistic achievement exists only through/as performance, it is unknowable (im-pro-viso) before being performed.

(B) Improvisation is highly spontaneous, because many performers' decisions about what and how to play, to act or to move, do not depend upon previously established instructions. However, improvisers draw on learned and inherited forms, materials, styles, conventions, techniques, and skills. Hence, not every decision is made from scratch, i.e. not every element of improvisation is created *ex nihilo* on the spot; thus,

in practice, imitation and repetition do not hamper *per se* the improvisational quality of artistic production (see Peters 2017). Conversely, even though the performance of a composition can be more or less improvisational, pace Keaton and Gould 2000, improvisation differs from interpretation in that it is intentionally not the reproduction of a composed work.

(C) Much of the contemporary debate on improvisation is about the relation between improvisation and composition. Improvisation is logically opposed to composition. For in a composition the creative process differs from the product that can be repeatedly re-elaborated and corrected, and it is closed before, thus temporally separated from, the performance normatively constrained by the codified instructions of the composed product (the work). Differently from the performance of a composition, in improvisation the focus of aesthetic attention is the exhibited process of inventing while performing, that cannot be changed or corrected, because changes and corrections are parts of the process. Many scholars maintain, however, that, in spite of their definitional opposition, improvisation and composition are empirically to be understood as poles of a continuum. While the compositional work can show interesting analogies with improvisation or use improvisation as creative resource, improvisation is etymologically also a kind of com-position, as the putting together of different elements. Moreover, improvisers may also be composers, when they produce technical repertoires of artistic possibilities or pieces to be performed by means of improvisation. Finally, in some artistic practices (such as the play of jazz standards) improvisation is both an intentional and autonomous activity and the interpretation of a composition.

(D) In visual arts (sculpture, painting, cinema, etc.) and literature improvisation has a different ontology: it is an artistic technique excluding the coincidence of process and product. The product remains after the end of the process, can be corrected and repeatedly perceived. The audience usually perceives the product, not the production process (as in the cases of Pollock's paintings or of Cassavetes's and Rivette's movies). Here the improvisational quality of the artwork mainly relies on the artistic (physical) gesture (filming, painting, photographing, chiselling, etc.) being somehow displayed within/by the final work (see Mouëllic 2013).

(E) Since improvisation is a highly admired creative skill, cases in which it is only staged as aesthetic effect or pretended and simulated as origin of the artistic product are not uncommon: they are rather a cultural *topos* (see Fertel 2015).

#### THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE (AESTHETICS)

(A) Improvisers are, by definition, authors of their performance, so improvisation is authentic or is not such (copies of an improvisation are not improvisations). The ontological authenticity of improvisation has consequences on its expressivity. For improvisers do not offer interpretations of emotions artistically expressed by others, but can allegedly express their own emotions in their artistic constructions, being true to their artistic selves, i.e. being authentic. However, improvisers can deceive listeners and spectators, artistically expressing emotions that do not really feel. Moreover, one may argue, expressive authenticity as truthfulness to one's artistic self originates performances not unforeseeable, but, on the contrary,

contrived by the self, its memories and habits. For this reason, composers like Cage and Boulez and a philosopher like Adorno rejected improvisation for being artistically unsatisfying, while Derrida judged improvisation as impossible. This view may be corrected, arguing that expressive authenticity does not depend on the disclosure of an immediate self (which may rather result in an artistic failure), but on the development of artistic personalities in specific situations through different media (sounds, gestures, actions, words etc.): expressive authenticity is the shaping and staging, rather than merely the showing, of the performer's artistic self during the improvisational process.

(B) Perception alone can hardly assure with certainty of the artistic production's improvisational nature; yet, an audience attending to an improvisation, and knowing the performance's improvisational quality in virtue of exposure to a given artistic practice and/or contextual information, can grasp the artistic invention during its unfolding. Sometimes its participatory and empathetic attitude may influence the performance with the affective manifestations of its aesthetic appraisal. More radically, the social distinction and/or the physical separation between performers and audience are not always in place and can be possibly negotiated during the improvisation. So, mainly due to the fact that in improvisation the reality of the live creational process is directly shown, a key question is whether improvisation weakens, overcomes or deletes the aesthetic difference between art and reality/life.

(C) Improvisation is often described as an open system, because – as it is evident in the interaction between performers in collective performances – it is a process in which subsequent actions and events affect meanings and values of what has been already performed. Improvisation shapes and regulates itself retroactively and (at least partially) autonomously (Gioia 1988): identity, meaning, function and value of every single performance's element (sound, gesture, action, figure etc.) depend upon the network of references that is being woven in the unfolding process. Hence, improvisation's normativity is "without [pre-established and fixed] norms" (Bertram 2010): its context of reference and normative conditions are, at least partly, built in the course of performance. For, while the performance presupposes aesthetic criteria of success, those criteria are themselves (re-)negotiated within its actual play. Therefore, each stage of the improvised performance is a "beginning" of a potentially different normativity (Jankélévitch 1955). This means that also failures can be creative (of new meanings, values, and norms): being against or beyond the rules is not necessarily a mistake, because can bring forth the foundation of different rules.

(D) Some scholars (Gioia, Hamilton, Brown) conceive of the aesthetics of improvisation as an aesthetic of imperfection. Improvisation, they observe, is imperfect, because artists have to cope with unforeseeable accidents, agreeing to make compromises with actual circumstances. However, this idea misunderstands both improvisation's and art's value. For perfection, as compliance with an established structured order, is not *per se* a criterion for artistic value: rather, criteria of artistic success are renegotiated in and through each particular artwork. As Kant taught, the power of aesthetic judgment is not determining (submitting a particular case under a rule), but reflexive (being the singular example of a rule which is not given). Hence, since in improvisation the rule is invented while being performed in unrepeatable circumstances, improvisation is right when it, somehow unexpectedly, "works", i.e. when it succeeds in a valuable and relatively unprecedented and surprising way. Consequently, improvisation seems to be paradigmatic of

the art experience rather than exemplary of an alleged aesthetic of imperfection.

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