

Table of Contents

Oh I love freedom! But what is it? 1

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ByMattin

At industry pop's polar opposite, improvisers are involved in a musical praxis which resists formulated goals, ready-made forms and final outcomes. Here, Mattin extrapolates the politics from the tactics of improvisation

Just as, in a game, the victory of one of the players is not (with respect to the game) an originary state to be restored, but only the stake that doesn't pre-exist the game but results from it, so pure violence – which is the name that Benjamin gives to human action which neither founds nor conserves law – is not an originary figure of human action that at a certain moment is seized and inscribed in the juridical order (just as for speaking man there is no pre-linguistic reality which, at a certain moment, would fall into language.)

Giorgio Agamben, State of Exception

Once we understand that we are embedded in contradictory social relations, we can also see that the contradictions themselves run deeper than the law that pretends to organise them.

De Selby

Improvisation as pure praxis. You cannot be outside of the game, but you don't have to be subject to the rules in order to play the instrument. Sometimes, when the musicians use instruments in unanticipated ways, you can create moments of convergence, communication. Exploring the material aspect of the instrument without conceptual restrictions can do this. If the musician is able to develop a personal approach to music making, this does not happen in isolation, but collectively, among other musicians and listeners. Improvised music generates meaning from the residue that marketed music tries to exclude, not in order to be recycled for future use but momentarily to destroy the hierarchies of value that structure the physical act of making music.

When sounds are thrown in improvisation, this can call into question our temporal and spatial understanding of sound and its place in reality. The inner rules that we bring to the performance as listeners become redundant if musicians present a different way of playing. This moment, in which you realise that you had a 'limiter' on music, shakes other notions and brings fragility to your understanding. Often the inner rules or parameters that enclose music are the same ones that contain other forces. If we understand politics in terms of potential social relations, we can see a politics in the exploratory element of improvisation.

So it appears that the common notions are practical Ideas, in relation with our power; unlike their order of exposition, which only concern ideas, their order of formation concern affects, showing how the mind "can order its affects and connect them together." The common notions are an Art, the art of ethics itself: organising good encounters, composing actual relations, forming powers, experimenting. Deleuze, Practical Philosophy

For Deleuze, the powers of a common notion are developed as it is put into practice. Within a common notion, subjectivities are formed; their 'nature' is developed by the common notion's future use. A common notion can only be a rule if it becomes a style: as, for instance, when one musician's traits or gestures infect another's. Unless you are able to bastardise this style it will become another template in which rules can be applied. In that case its political potential vanishes.

UNCONSTITUTED PRAXIS

Making products (or decisive endings) makes parameters easy to identify, allowing you to appropriate the work of art (I've got it! I understand it!) Today 'praxis' is generally understood as the making of a specific work. It implies having an end, a deadline, a limit to your potentiality. Improvisation, on the other hand, brings back the act of making as the main focus of artistic praxis. In fact the common meaning of praxis has changed over the millennia. For the ancient Greeks, notes Agamben in *The Man Without Content*, the sense of praxis was different from that of pro-duction. Pro-duction has its limits outside itself; praxis is self-contained and reaches its limits within action. Therefore it is not pro-ductive, and it can bring itself into presence.

In improvisation, thought and action are brought together in an unconstituted praxis. By this I mean a praxis which is not finally constituted, not complete, yet has no end outside itself. Its effect depends on interaction: the participation of others, by listening and/or making sound.

In improvisation the gestures made require a response in order for the dialogue to continue. But as the other players cannot anticipate a concrete response, it is the gestures that continuously interrupt and initiate the conversation. Unlike, say, John Cage's pieces, where the conceptual instructions determine the limits of the artificially separated 'chance', improvisation fully exposes each gesture to all others, forcing the singular 'concepts' to coexist. The gestures are never left alone because even the silence has a meaning; there is no such thing as neutrality in improvisation. Meaning is constantly produced and never isolated from its context.

Politics is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the act of making a means visible as such. Politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather, it is the sphere of a pure mediality without end intended as the field of a human thought.

Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*

From the point of view of the ideology (long obsolete in capitalist thinking) that identifies value (economic, cultural, spiritual...) with the tangible, clearly defined product, improvisation is useless, because nothing in it functions outside its context. Improvisation functions only in terms of the moment in which musicians are struggling to find common notions. This struggle is itself the aim. It is in trying to find a language within spectacle, in which musicians can for that time stop reproducing ready-made forms. In making an argot within the brutality and coldness of capitalist production, points of reference start to disappear. The awareness that we are embedded within this system remains: it would be ridiculous to think that we are not determined by it, but also ridiculous to think, by default, that everything we do must contribute to its efficient functioning.

Argot

The age in which we are living, in fact, is also the age in which, for the first time, it becomes possible for humans to experience their own linguistic essence – to experience, that is, not some language content or some true proposition, but the fact itself of speaking. The experience in question here does not have any objective content and cannot be formulated as a proposition referring to a state of things or to a historical situation. ... this experience must be constructed as an experiment concerning the matter itself of thought ...

Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*

If we are conscious of how these systems are able to cut off or actually introduce our objects of desire, we may be able to find ways to produce moments of resistance. It would be difficult to aim for a perfect (i.e. finished) situation in which you think everything would be fantastic (what happens once you achieve it? You stop?). The situation emerges out of a practice: it is a *modus operandi* that you should be aiming at. Once the eyes of capital know what you are looking for, you are easy to deal

with.

The concept of argot may be useful as an analogy here, although music and language work in different registers. Argot, not being a proper language, is difficult to institutionalise. Argot has the aspect of appropriating a language and making it personal (sometimes it is used in secret trading or other obscure business). In argot, ready made meaning is twisted to serve the purpose that the particular user wants to give it at a specific moment.

This music is produced by the combination of the exploration of the instrument against its intended purpose and a 'personal' way of responding, produced collectively among musicians and hearers. Therefore the musical language that is created serves only the communicability of that moment. It cannot be exported elsewhere. You can take ideas but you will also have to contextualise, in the sense that each element of the music is there to be activated by the consumer (who, in the process, becomes a producer). Decision-making is more prominent in the consumption of this music than is the case in other genres where stages of the process are more clearly defined, i.e. composing, performing, getting recognition, etc. Improvised music scorns aesthetic experience's divisions of labour in order to crack packaged meanings: infiltrating, deforming and extending enclosed vocabularies of praxis.

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