Improvisation and/as Singularity

[1] It is a sunny Sunday afternoon at the new *BIM-Huis* in Amsterdam. Scheduled is a trio, consisting of Will Holshouser on accordion, Michael Moore on clarinet and alto sax, and Han Bennink on drums. Most of the pieces they perform exhibit more or less the same structure: after a free style introduction, in which some basic materials are exposed, a theme is presented, followed by an improvisation which ends in free playing which, in turn, leads to the next piece.

This kind of music making – *musicking* as Christopher Small would have it (although Small emphasizes that the actual production of music is only one aspect of *musicking*) – rests first of all on the interactions of the musicians; the musical choices that are made are based on what the others are (not) doing. That is why the most important activity the performers need to engage in is to listen, to listen closely and actively, because they 'are continually called upon to respond to and participate in an ongoing flow of musical action that can change or surprise them at any moment'.[1] A clarinet trill is taken up by the accordion; sax and accordion develop a call and response game; an obvious miscommunication between the same two instruments turns out to be the beginning of a voyage into unknown sonic territories; accordion and drums gradually play towards each other's rhythm; extremely high pitches on sax and accordion make that any perceptible differences in timbre between the two instruments disappear. All these occurrences make clear that the three musicians are using their ears very well, thereby being able to respond to musical opportunities or to correct mistakes. This *response-ability* is crucial as to whether a particular musical idea is picked up on, developed, or ignored.[2]

However, this afternoon, the playing of Bennink is attracting particular attention. Using an extremely limited drum set, consisting of only a snare and hi-hat, he already, during the first tune, 'creates' a bass drum by stamping his feet on the wooden floor. Further on, Bennink expands his drum kit even more by playing the floor and many other objects as well with brushes and sticks. The whole venue becomes a potential instrument;

[1] Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something. Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 43.
[2] Ibid., p. 88.

Bennink reveals to the audience that in order to make music, a musical instrument in the conventional sense is not needed.

[2] Attending this concert helped me further on my way in the process of rethinking improvisation. It assisted me in my attempt to add something to the already existing discourse around musical improvisation. Bennink's use of the whole stage and all its objects as a percussion instrument made me aware of the simple fact that improvisation is not only about interacting musicians. Of course, how Moore and Holshouser react to Bennink's input (and of course vice versa) is still a very important aspect as to how successful their performance will be. But, unlike scholars such as Paul Berliner and Ingrid Monson, I do not regard interaction as an (almost) exclusive affair between two or more humans. In addition to the musicians, more *actors* are at work during a musical improvisation. On this Sunday afternoon in the *BIM-Huis*, during this particular concert, parts of the venue, the floor, and some more or less randomly present objects, became important agents.

In more general terms, one could state that besides musicians, instruments, audience, technicians, musical or cultural background, space, acoustics, technology, et cetera, are all potential actors. Possible interactions can take place between musicians, between a musician and his instrument or between a musician and the audience, but also between instruments and acoustics or between technological devices and the architectural space. Furthermore, sometimes it might even be useful and necessary to specify a particular relationship even further, e.g. between a musician and his instrument: fingers touching the keyboard, knuckles hitting a sound board, nails plucking the piano strings, et cetera.

Bennink's interaction with the floor suddenly turned the latter into a musical instrument; Bennink somehow made the floor more visible or audible: no longer was it an unproblematic and inextricable part of a regular jazz club; instead, it became an actor in itself, reverberating in response to the movements of its player. The contact between wood and metal strings or wooden sticks led to new acoustic experiences; the contact made the floor sound, a giant surface with an enormous potential of different pitches,

volumes, and timbres. In Deleuzian terms, one could say that Bennink formed a rhizome with the floor:

> The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome. It could be said that the orchid imitates the wasp, reproducing the image in a signifying fashion (mimesis, mimicry, lure, etc.). But this is true only on the level of the strata — a parallelism between two strata such that a plant organization on one imitates an animal organization on the other. At the same time, something else entirely is going on: not imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp. Each of these becomings brings about the deterritorialization of one term and the reterritorialization of the other; the two becomings interlink and form relays in a circulation of intensities.[3]

Bennink deterritorialized the floor, turning the floor into a becoming-instrument, reterritorializing it on a percussion set, adding an extra function to it. And, in the same way as the drum kit, the floor was necessary in order to turn Bennink into a percussion player: the two actors (in)form and create one another.

[3] In general, it is my suggestion to approach improvisation as an event of constant interactions between mind, body, and environment. It should be noted, however, that neither mind nor body nor environment is entirely pre-given here; rather, they constitute one another in endless chains of interactions. Furthermore, the relations between body and mind can take many different forms. And this goes, mutatis mutandis, for the

[3] Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 11.

relations between body and environment.[4]

The mind, which I consider as exclusively human in this context, makes it possible to improvise, to act and react, to decide on (relevant) contributions, on the basis of rational considerations. But of course feelings, emotions, associations, memories, and all kinds of values (aesthetical, ethical, social, spiritual) have a strong influence as well on how a musician will interact with the environment. Furthermore, improvisation is certainly not always evolving from conscious decisions: many ideas and actual articulations come from the un- or subconscious, from irrational inspirations and musical intuitions.

All music making involves the body. And to say that our bodies, while performing or experiencing music, are simply doing what the mind tells them to do, is an outmoded idea. Bodies think, reflect, invent, produce; they have their own intellect or consciousness. And, especially during improvisation, the significance of the body cannot be neglected. Not only one's unconscious might (co)determine a particular improvisation; sometimes certain 'decisions' are actually taken by the body: motor skills. Fingers, hand, and arm are also able to act almost independently from the mind.

However, I do not regard the body as solely human. Again I turn to Deleuze and Guattari:

> A body is not defined by the form that determines it nor as a determinate substance or subject nor by the organs it possesses or the functions it fulfills. On the plane of consistency, a body is defined only by a longitude and a latitude: in other words the sum total of the material elements belonging to it under given relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness (longitude); the sum total of the intensive affects it is capable of at a given power or degree of potential (latitude). Nothing but affects and local movements, differential speeds.[5]

Not only do they, following Spinoza, distance themselves from the metaphysical and the phenomenological body; the body is defined by its capacity to affect and to be affected as well as its relations. Regarded this way, improvisation can be investigated from the

[4] Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind. Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 5-31.
[5] Deleuze & Guattari, p. 260.

perspective of interacting bodies: musicians, instruments, audience, amplifiers, mics, scores, peripherals, musical materials such as melodies, et cetera. All these bodies are affecting and affected by one another, all of them are defined through their relations with other bodies: the immanence of a musical improvisation.

The environment might be understood as the concrete physical environment: the architectural space where the improvisation takes place. I also consider fellow musicians and audience as part of the environment, the physical but also the social, emotional, and even spiritual environment. However, the environment can also be more dynamic and volatile: acoustics and atmosphere co-determine the milieu in which an improvisation takes place, and, conversely, they too are shaped by an improvisation. And even less visible, but often very well audible, is the socio-cultural or musical background of a musician; each musician is undeniably and inevitably interacting with his 'roots', the musical and other knowledge he brings in.

I term this the ecological approach towards improvisation and, by emphasizing the interrelatedness between mind, body, and environment, I hope to create a counterpart to an often-practiced reductionism, to studies that limit themselves to only a few aspects, a few actors operative during an improvisation.

[4] The modest description of the concert above has been necessary in order to make one important methodological claim: it is very difficult, if not impossible and even inexpedient, to investigate and write about (musical) improvisation *in general*.

First, not all of the actors mentioned determine each individual improvisation to the same extent; in certain situations (periods, styles, cultures as well as more singular circumstances), some are more prominent and active than others.

Second, it is my opinion that improvisation takes place in all musicking. Every performance, albeit one of a work meticulously notated by a composer, contains improvised elements or moments. Of course, the range of what is possible and permitted in such a written-out work differs from a piece of so-called 'free jazz', an Indian raga, or a Balkan folk tune. Perhaps there is less freedom for a performer of notated music than there is for a performer of music that does not primarily rely on the transfer of

information through writing. But freedom is no absolute concept, and the difference is not fundamental but gradual.

However, having said this does not mean that I thereby would suggest treating all musical improvisations equally. On the contrary, each time the improvised elements and moments need to be studied anew. Each time there is a different relation between the more stable and (relatively) unstable elements of a piece. Each time specific actors and specific relations between those actors become operative. Each time the interactions between minds, bodies, and environment need to be investigated anew and with the greatest care. Instead of studying improvisation, one needs to study *an* improvisation.

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