

# The Birth of Art from the Spirit of Improvisation \*

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## *Introduction*

Georg Bertram recently argued that a consistent and accomplished philosophy of art should consider not only the specific nature of art, but also its value as human practice. Following this line of reasoning, I will defend that “art” may be a particular way to look at and to develop human practices and that the link between human practices and art is provided by improvisation.

Improvisation is not only a particular artistic technique. Improvisation incorporates and genetically shows the specificity of autonomous art as well as the value of art, that is, the link between human practices and art as a *specific* human practice. Indeed, as I will explain, art both *derives* from and *is* a particular way to improvise (upon) human practices, i.e. to develop them in unprecedented and valuable ways. Accordingly, improvisation, as a specific artistic procedure, will be understood as that kind of artistic

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A Philosophical Journey”, 3 (2016). The text presented here, with the title echoing Friedrich Nietzsches *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem geist der Musik*, includes also material from my talk on *Improvisation and Ontology of Art* presented at the workshop *L'expérience esthétique comme « praxis » : perception, imagination et atmosphères* (Paris, March, 22. 2018). I thank all participants at the mentioned meetings (and, especially, Georg Bertram, Federico Vercellone, Gerard Vilar, Stefen Deines, José Zuñiga, Giorgia Cecchinato, Walter Menon, André J. Abath, Tonino Griffero) for their precious comments and questions.

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production in which the human practices art is based in come, as it were, exemplarily to the fore.

Hence, improvisation can be understood as the paradigm of art as human practice: as I shall suggest, art begins with, and ends in, improvisation.

### 1. *The paradigmatic normativity of improvisation*

In the book *Kunst als menschliche Praxis*<sup>1</sup> Georg Bertram resorts to artistic improvisation to illustrate a characteristic aspect of the constitution of artworks: the self-referential relations implied in the artworks and shaping the artworks do not result from an alleged closure of the artwork's form, but are negotiated locally, in relation to each individual artwork. The example provided by Bertram is the interplay between improvising musicians and their interaction with the attending audience. These interplay and interaction are responsible for the aesthetic normativity of the performance. Although standards of artistic value are assumed before the musical performance, in accordance with the musical genre and the style of the musicians, they can also change during the development of the performance itself. The way musicians react to what others play and, more generally, the way performers cope with unpredictable performance situations produces the sense of the performance, that is, the *normativity* of that specific performance<sup>2</sup>. This amounts to saying that the normativity of the performance does not only regulate what is happening within the performance, but emerges from what happens. In other words, normativity is open, rather than fixed, because it is constitutively moving along with the concrete development of the performance. In this sense, as showed by Richard Keith Sawyer's research on the topic, improvisation, and especially interactive improvisation, is like a *conversation*<sup>3</sup>: in fact, the

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<sup>1</sup> G. BERTRAM, *Kunst als menschliche Praxis. Eine Ästhetik*, Berlin, Suhrkamp 2014. Cf. A. BERTINETTO, "Do not fear mistakes – there are none" – *The mistake as surprising experience of creativity in jazz*, in M. Santi, E. Zorzi (eds.), *Education as Jazz*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2016, pp. 85-100.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. BERTINETTO, *Formatività ricorsiva e costruzione della normatività nell'improvvisazione*, in A. Sbordoni (ed.), *Improvvisazione oggi*, Lucca, LIM 2014, pp. 15-28; A. BERTINETTO, *Jazz als Gelungene Performance. Ästhetische Normativität und Improvisation*, in "Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft", 59/1 (2014), pp. 105-140; A. BERTINETTO, *Esequire l'imatteso. Ontologia della musica e improvvisazione* Roma, il Glifo 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. R. K. SAWYER, *Creating Conversations. Improvisation in Everyday Discourse*, Cresskill New Jersey, Hampton Press 2001 e *Improvvised Dialogues: Emergence and Creativity in Conversation*, Westport, CT, Ablex 2003.

meaning of a conversation does not depend only from contextual constraints and from speakers' intentions, but emerges out through speakers' actual interactions.

Now, the very same way the normativity of a collective improvised performance is established by and within the performance – accordingly to the development of the interplay between musicians, in relation to the specific situation of its occurrence, and through the reactions to the audience's feedbacks –, the normativity of an artwork does not depend uniquely on the criteria and on the norms of a given artistic practice or of a given artistic genre. It rather 'grows' from the inside out of the artwork itself. However, this does not mean that the artwork is closed. On the contrary, the artwork is open, because its meaning and its cultural identity depend on receivers' interpretive activities and because, as cultural construct, it retroactively influences the art genre or the practice it refers and/or it belongs to<sup>4</sup>. So one may say that the artwork (including both its internal formal and material relations and the received interpretations and meanings) is a kind of improvisation which signifies<sup>5</sup> on an artistic practice (or artistic genre) that (trans)forms itself thanks to the new – emergent and unexpected – artwork. In other words, the development of an artistic genre or practice is improvisational, because each artwork is *ex improviso* in relation to a given established artistic tradition<sup>6</sup>.

Let me explain a bit what I mean with this. Alva Noë observes in this regard that certain artworks contribute to the transformation of the criteria of art evaluation<sup>7</sup>. Following Georg Bertram<sup>8</sup>, I think that this thesis must be radicalized: *all* artworks, as such, contribute to (trans)form the criteria of art (and, also, artistic genres) and precisely this is the reason why general classificatory definitions of the essence of art in terms of sufficient and necessary conditions do not work. Moreover, this is why Kendall Walton's famous thesis that, in order to evaluate an artwork correctly, we must properly put it in

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<sup>4</sup> On this subject cf. the already mentioned book of G. Bertram, *Kunst als menschliche Praxis* as well as A. Noë's recent book *Strange tools. Art and human nature*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2015. Noë's approach is indebted to John DEWEY's *Art as Experience* (New York, Putnam, 1934).

<sup>5</sup> "Signifying" means the appropriative re-semantization of cultural production and the word is used especially in relation to the Afro-American culture. Cf. H. L. GATES JR., *The signifying monkey: A theory of African-American literary criticism*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press 1988; I. MONSON, *Saying something. Jazz improvisation and interaction*, Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. A. BERTINETTO, *Ex Improviso, Trans-Formation als Modell künstlerischer Praxis*, in K. Maar, F. Ruda, J. Völker (eds.), *Generische Formen*, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2017, pp. 143-157.

<sup>7</sup> NOË, *Strange tools*, p. 229.

<sup>8</sup> BERTRAM, *Kunst als menschliche Praxis*.

the right artistic category is too partial and mistaken<sup>9</sup>. Artistic categories (genres, styles, traditions...) are actual and real only through concrete artworks and artistic practices (including interpretive and critical activities) that emerge out of such categories as unforeseen events that re-shape them. Therefore I endorse Joseph Margolis' view of *artworks as culturally emergent and physically embodied constructs*<sup>10</sup>. A brief discussion of what this means and implies may be helpful here.

As Peter Lamarque clearly explains, the point is that, in order to exist, artworks need to be put in the world as something new, i.e. as product of creative human action. Moreover, in order to (continue to) be what they are, artworks also need «a complex cultural background of practices»<sup>11</sup>, «appropriate beliefs, attitudes, modes of appreciation, and expectations»<sup>12</sup>:

Nothing can be a work (of art) if it does not play a role, or be fit to play a role, in a human practice where a sufficient number of informed practitioners recognize its status and respond appropriately.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, practices, cultural contexts and their normative force are flexible and can change<sup>14</sup>: hence, since their identity depends on practices, artworks change or disappear, when the relevant practices change or disappear.

Once having acknowledged this, and rightly so, unfortunately Lamarque follows Walton's shortcoming, and observes that «we need to place the work in its proper category»<sup>15</sup>. So, accordingly to the general principle “no identity without evaluation”, judgements of value make ontological identification possible, but, in Lamarque's and Walton's view, they do not *make* sense or *generate* categories (genres, norms and values).

Joseph Margolis rightly sees the point, recognizing not only the role of artistic practices and evaluative interpretations in shaping artworks' meaning and identity, but

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<sup>9</sup> K. WALTON, *Categories of art*, in “The Philosophical Review”, 79, 1970, pp. 334-367.

<sup>10</sup> J. MARGOLIS, *What, after all, is a work of art?*, University Park, Pennsylvania State UP 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. P. LAMARQUE, *Work and object*, New York, Oxford University Press 2010, p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 54.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> In this regard Lamarque refers to J. SEARLE, *The construction of social reality*, London: Allen Lane 1995, p. 117.

<sup>15</sup> LAMARQUE, *Work and Object*, p. 75.

also artworks' contribution to the shaping of practices, genres, styles and traditions. On the one hand, to individuate an artwork (as different from physical natural or functional objects) is to assign it cultural/interpretive/intentional/evaluative "parts" and doing so belongs to the same practice of imputing meaning to the artwork by means of interpretation. In this regard, Margolis does not diverge from Lamarque's view. On the other hand, however, Margolis rightly defends that «you cannot settle the ontology of art by imposing *a priori* constraints on the logic of interpretation»<sup>16</sup>. In this regard, Margolis interestingly disagrees with Lamarque's and Walton's view. Differently from purely physical entities, numerical identification of artworks does not necessarily require the description of their nature, by means of assigning them determinate and invariant properties – i.e. attributing them predicates following bivalent logic. Hence, the identity of an artwork does not simply depend from fixed categories and criteria that rule interpretation and evaluation. Identity and meaning of artworks can be specified only in terms of intentional (i.e. cultural) properties that are in flux, in that they are subject to interpretive and evaluative transformations situated in a given cultural context and responsive to that particular context as well as to other interpretations. Interpretive transformations of this kind are rightly termed *improvisations*<sup>17</sup>. They (trans)form artworks' identity and are not constrained by fixed criteria of practices, genres and styles.

This amounts to saying that artistic categories (genres, styles, and the like) are not simply invariant *objective properties qualifying* the artwork's identity. Rather, artworks – as works of art (in the double sense of the genitive) – impact on artistic categories, since they *actualize* (or realize) and (trans)form artistic *categories*: an artwork is not a content that enters a given artistic category like an object we put in a box. Artworks assign categories (typifying styles, genres, and practices) different meanings, thereby transforming them. Thus, the relation between artworks and artistic categories (genres, styles, practices etc.) is not a one-way relation of determination, but a mutual retroactive interaction.

(a) Artistic categories develop through artworks, are (trans)formed through artworks, emerge out of artworks<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Margolis, *What, after all, is a work of art?*, p. 95.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 96.

<sup>18</sup> Hence, artistic categories should be conceived of in terms of plastic interpretive *habits*, in the sense I will discuss later on in § 3.

(b) Each artwork, I repeat, is *ex-improvisò*; while applying the artistic category/norm, also emerges out of it and contributes to its (trans)formation.

Briefly, each successful artwork is an *improvisation* «open to further improvisation»<sup>19</sup>.

Hence, although the knowledge of the artistic tradition, genre or practice of a given artwork (or artistic event) usually engenders expectations concerning structures, values and meanings of artworks, the specific artistic normativity of the individual artwork cannot be foreseen in advance. The artwork's meaning and identity are not deduced, as it were, from the tradition, the genre, or the practice the artwork refers to. Rules of production as well as standards of evaluation are not completely determined and given before the actual existence of the individual artwork. Rather, as the Italian philosopher Luigi Pareyson famously wrote, art is that kind of making that invents the way of making while making<sup>20</sup>. Otherwise the artistic enterprise would not be creative. Hence, since (successful) art requires creativity, artworks need to exceed bounds and rules of given traditions, genres, or practices. Since there are not given recipes for producing creative artistic outcomes, artistic creativity, as I have argued elsewhere<sup>21</sup>, is of an improvisational kind. This does not mean that each new successful artistic outcome is merely a kind of exception of given rules of traditions, genres, or practices. On the contrary, each new successful artwork is a kind of improvisation on an established practice, genre or tradition. As such, it contributes to the "life" of the practice, the genre or the tradition, precisely by means of emerging out of that practice, genre or tradition. In this sense, my argument goes forward, not only each artwork is an improvisation on a given tradition, practice, or genre, but the "life" of the tradition, of the practice or of the genre is an improvisation on the long run<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Margolis, *What, after all, is a work of art?*, p. 94. Margolis takes as example Picasso's "*Les demoiselles d'Avignon*" that «cannot be routinely reconciled with any of the would-be canons of well-formed painting up to the intrusion of *Les demoiselles*» (Ibidem, p. 93). While appropriating African styles and Cezanne's innovations, it is an improvisation on past canons. This a very clear, paradigmatic and blatant example of the improvisational and (trans)formative performance of artworks: their sense is not determined by fixed categories, but they make sense. The same goes, on my and Bertram's view, for each artwork deserving this name.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. L. PAREYSON, *Estetica. Teoria della formatività* (1954), Milano, Bompiani 2010, p. 59.

<sup>21</sup> A. BERTINETTO, *Performing the Unexpected. Improvisation and Artistic Creativity*, in "Daimon", 57 (2012), pp. 61-79.

<sup>22</sup> As I have sketched elsewhere, in a paper devoted to musical meaning (*Sound pragmatics. An emergentist account of musical meaning*, in "Rivista italiana di filosofia del linguaggio" 11/2 (2017), pp. 1-2) elaborating

In a nutshell: artworks are cultural constructs generated by interpretive meaning attributions made by different cultural entities (including persons). Artworks have a culturally emergent identity. Consequently, as defended in particularly convincing way by Bertram<sup>23</sup>, art ontology depends on the dynamics of artistic practices (production, interpretation, and criticism). This dynamics is improvisational, since it is generated by improvisational interactions among different agents at different levels producing feedbacks that retroact on artworks' meaning and identity: although the physical object may remain (or be restored as) the same, the emergent intentional (cultural) 'part' always is in flux. Moreover, artworks participate actively in those improvisational interactions, (trans)forming criteria of evaluation/interpretation that emerge out of new artworks.

Not only that. What I am going to argue in the rest of the paper is that *improvisation plays a genetic role in the constitution of art as human practice*. This is precisely the radical thesis suggested by the "Nietzschean" title of my paper, which I will explain in what follows. As I am about to explain, improvisation provides the link between human practices and art. In other words, improvisation is the way human practices become arts and – also – *fine arts*.

## 2. *Improvisation in the performing arts*

In order to clarify my point I will follow Bertram's example and I will start focusing precisely on improvisation in the performing arts.

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on Andrew Hamilton's criticism of Noël Carroll's intentionalist conversationalism, this view may be properly called *Conversational improvisational emergentism*. Accordingly, interpretation of artworks is like a conversation, but differently from Carroll's view of the matter (firstly developed in N. CARROLL, *Art, intentions and conversations*, in G. Iseminger (ed.), *Intention and interpretation*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press 1992, pp. 97-131), this conversation does not aim at discovering author's intentions (as A. Huddleston rightly defends in his *The conversational argument for actual intentionalism*, in "British Journal of Aesthetics" 52 (2012), pp. 241-256.). Rather, conversations are improvisational in kind, in that, as Richard K. Sawyer argues (cf. R.K. SAWYER, *Creating conversations: Improvisation in everyday discourse*, Cresskill (NJ), Hampton Press 2001), their meaning emerge out of creative improvisational interactions. Hence, conversations follow conventions, norms and constraints, but the specific conversational situation reshape norms, as speakers' reciprocal interactions impact pragmatically on the context. Analogously, evaluative interpretations of artworks shape creatively their meanings and their flexible identities retroactively: Artworks' meaning and identity emerge and are (trans)formed through improvisational interactions in which artworks participate.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Bertram, *Kunst als menschliche Praxis* and G. Bertram, *Che cos'è l'arte? Abbozzo di un'ontologia dell'arte*, in A. Bertinetto, G. Bertram (eds.), *Il bello dell'esperienza. La nuova estetica tedesca*, Milano, Marinotti 2016, pp. 209-226.



It has been often stated that improvisation shows human creativity on the stage. This is not always true without qualifications<sup>24</sup>, but this is (at least partly) true for improvisation in the performing arts, such as music, theater, and dance. Although the existence of every kind of improvisation requires, at least to some degree, the ontological coincidence between invention and realization, improvisation in the performing arts is special, because here the results of the creative process are not detachable from the process itself: instead, the actual and concrete process of artistic production is (part of) the artistic product perceived by the audience. The way of production is intentionally exhibited as object of aesthetic attention and appraisal. The point I want to stress at this regard is the following. In this kind of improvisation in which the process of artistic making is intentionally offered by performers as a component of the focus of aesthetic attention and appraisal *the work as well as the shaping and the development of artistic habits and skills are significantly shown as originating art.*

Consider. Not always an artistic improvisation is particularly unexpected or surprising. Rather the big surprise, although always possible, is something rare, if not exceptional. The rule is rather the way artists make use of techniques and habits of behavior they have learned through the practice as well as the way they adapt their “know how”<sup>25</sup> to the particular situation of that specific performance, that they cannot know in advance in all its details, taking advantage of the conditions and of the actual development of the performance, not only for showing their expertise and their more or less virtuous artistry, but also for managing their skills in relation to the forms, the materials, and the events they have at their disposal “here and now”. The practice of skills and techniques, that have become habits of actions, during the performance can produce outcomes that *can* be unexpected (even for the makers) and, if moderately, surprising and new. More generally, each event of the performance retroacts on the whole performative process, continuously inviting performers and audience to re-negotiate meanings and values of the performance. The action and its sense do not depend indeed only upon a previous fixed plan or set of intentions and habitualized patterns of actions: on the contrary, the sense (which means both the meaning and the direction) of the action builds itself during

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24 For a discussion of the issue, cf. A. BERTINETTO, *Immagine artistica e improvvisazione*, in “Tropos” 7/1 (2014), pp. 225-255.

25 Cf. G. RYLE, *The Concept of Mind*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1949.



and with the action, the same way specific performing skills and styles are acquired, as habits, during their practice<sup>26</sup>.

Improvisation in the performing arts shows precisely the articulation of the artistic creative process. This is not a “creatio ex nihilo”, but the transformative practical development of inherited and embodied artistic forms and materials that cannot be deductively derived from those forms and materials, but “emerges” out of them<sup>27</sup>. Yet, the main point here is that in the same way also performers’ habits and skills shape themselves and develop through repeated practice or, more precisely, the development of improvisers’ technical and artistic competence is part of the transformative development of artistic forms and materials in the course of the creative process.

The learning of improvisational techniques, abilities and styles is a «learning through doing», a «procedural knowledge»<sup>28</sup>. Surely, this procedural knowledge is acquired during rehearsal training. While training and rehearsing, performers shape and develop their skills, habits and styles. In each training session and rehearsal skills, habits and styles are formed by means of performing the gestures and the movements of which those skills, habits and styles consist. Each session retroacts upon already available skills, habits, and styles (trans)forming them. Shortly: skills, habits and styles are shaped and developed by means of performing them. Competence is generated through performance.

Now, since

(1) in improvisation in the performing arts creative process and artistic product coincide (when the process is finished, the product vanishes too<sup>29</sup>),

(2) artistic creativity is the attempt of shaping the ways of making through the making itself,

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. A. BERTINETTO, *Esequire l'inatteso*, pp. 68 ff. I will (briefly) discuss the connection within improvisation, between habit and creativity *infra* (§ 3).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. M. FERRARIS, *Emergenza*, Torino, Einaudi 2016; M. MASCHAT, *Performativität und zeitgenössische Improvisation*, “Auditive Perspektiven”, 2 (2012); A. BERTINETTO, *Esequire l'inatteso*, p. 273.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. A. BERKOWITZ, *The Improvising Mind*, New York, Oxford University Press 2010, pp. 43, 72, 83, 117; B. ALTERHAUG, *Improvisation as Phenomenon and Tool for Communication, Interactive Action and Learning*, in M. Santi (ed.), *Improvisation. Between Technique and Spontaneity*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholar Publishing 2010, pp. 103-133; K.R. SAWYER, *Improvisational Creativity as a Model for Effective Learning*, in M. Santi, *Improvisation*, pp. 135-151.

<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless results may endure in virtue of recordings, that offer a track manifesting the improvisational performance they are the product of.

(3) such attempt – that may fail – primarily concerns the ways and the procedures of artistic production, that should be re-invented at each application (that is, each artistic achievement is partly due to specific ways of production devised for the specific occasion, to the extent that each single artistic product re-shapes artistic ways of making), and

(4) skills, habits and styles make up the procedural knowledge involved in the procedures of improvisational artistic production,

then

(5) artistic improvisational performances (concerts, shows and the like), in which procedural knowledge (skills, habits and styles, shortly: artistic competence) is applied in specific situations, are involved in the process of generating and transforming procedural knowledge, that is, in the evolution of artistic competence. In other words, each performance contributes, to different degrees, to the development of performers' artistic competence, that is, each performance retroacts upon performers' artistic resources. So each performance not only expresses the artist's personality, but (re)shapes it as well. The way performers each time cope (more or less successfully) with the (more or less) unexpected situations of the different performances retroactively contributes to the evolution of their skills and of their personal artistic styles as well.

Briefly, in the improvisational performance the artistic work as well as the development of artistic competence (in terms of skills, habits and styles) are directly and intentionally shown to the audience, since in this case the creative process (including the development of artistic techniques) is not closed before exhibiting the artwork.

This is particularly clear when something unexpected happens which might cause the failure of the performance. Work and development of the procedural knowledge that nourishes the improvisational practice come often to the fore in these moments. Then, the performance shows not only that acquired skills – not only in terms of technical expertise, but also and above all of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) – allow to find, invent, and offer a (different, unexpected, or new) sense for unforeseen situations (which are potentially risky for the performance outcomes), but also that skills are acquired through the practice itself<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> See L. GOEHR, *Improvising impromptu, or, what to do with a broken string*, in G. E. Lewis, Benjamin Piekut (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of critical improvisation studies*, Vol. 1, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 458-480.

In this sense, improvisation in the performing arts shows at a micro level what happens, at a macro level, in artistic practices in general. For every achievement of an artist is possible thanks to the artist's competences, skills, techniques, projects, etc., while, at the same time, retroacting on the whole complex of competences, skills, techniques, projects, etc. Analogously, each new encounter receivers have with a performance or with an artwork retroacts upon their artistic normativity, upon their aesthetic criteria and standards for value. This retroactive improvisational way of *auto-poietic*<sup>31</sup> self-development is, indeed, the way the normativity of artistic traditions, genres and practices develops. But, more generally, this is the way normativity develops in human practices<sup>32</sup>. This point is of invaluable significance for understanding the role of improvisation in showing the connection between human practices and art, that is, for understanding the birth of art from the spirit of improvisation (and, as we shall see in the conclusion of the paper, for understanding also how to make sense of the idea of the end, or of the death, of art in the spirit of improvisation).

### 3. *Everyday improvisation and artistic improvisation*

In order to explaining this connection and its significance it can be useful to clarify the link between *everyday* improvisation and *artistic* improvisation.

Of course, the term improvisation has specific meanings beyond the artistic sphere. In the everyday life improvisation is *the handling of unforeseen situations* where the plan and the performance of an action coincide as well as the ability to react adaptively to unexpected events, which usually implies the adaptation of a tool for some use different than that which it was designed for, or the building of a device from unusual components<sup>33</sup>. The reaction to the emergency forces us, in short, to act without knowing exactly what and how to do it. It is a "left-handed" act, as Walter Benjamin defines it in *Einbahnstrasse* (1928): it is something that is done without preparation, that is, without

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<sup>31</sup> On the notion of autopoiesis see H.R. MATURANA e F. VARELA, *Autopoiesis and cognition. The realization of the living*, Dordrecht, Reidel 1980. Erika Fischer-Lichte applied the concept of autopoiesis to the theory of artistic performance: cf. E. FISCHER-LICHTE, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp 2004.

<sup>32</sup> See G. BERTRAM, *Improvisation und Normativität*, in G. Brandstetter, H.-F. Bormann, A. Matzke (eds.), *Improvisieren. Paradoxien des Unvorhersehbaren*, Bielefeld, Transcript 2010, pp. 21-40.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. J.E. ANDERSON, *Constraint-Directed Improvisation for Everyday Activities*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Manitoba 1995.

knowing how to apply rules for action<sup>34</sup>.

But there is another interesting aspect of everyday improvisation to be considered. We often practice many everyday activities (walking, reading, writing, swimming, driving a car, riding a bicycle, etc.), without paying explicit attention to them: in fact, we have learned and assimilated into our bodily movements, through imitation and repeated training, techniques to *perform such activities without having to think about what and how to do* while we act. As again Walter Benjamin observes, we cannot learn a second time those abilities which have become habits in virtue of our practices of learning through doing and which we actualize in an unreflective (automatic, though not mechanical) way<sup>35</sup>. In this sense, while swimming, walking, driving etc., we improvise, since we do not knowingly plan what and how to do when we act. Rather, once we learn a skill (which means: once a skill become a habit), we act of course knowing how, but without thinking at, carrying out the action and what sequence of movements to accomplish, just as the artists of improvisation do<sup>36</sup>.

In this sense, however, habit is not the opposite of creativity, as it may seem at first glance. Habit and invention are not the two antipodes of human behavior, but they feed on each other<sup>37</sup>. This is implied in the illuminating definition of habit provided by Felix Ravaisson (1838). According to Ravaisson habit is a

disposition relative to change, which is engendered in a being by the

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<sup>34</sup> W. BENJAMIN, *Einbahnstrasse*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp 1987, p. 16. Cf. G. BRANDSTETTER, *Improvisation im Tanz: Lecture-performance mit Friedrike Lampert*, in M. Gröne et alii (eds.), *Improvisation. Kultur- und lebens-wissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, Freiburg i.B., Berlin, Wien, Rombach 2009, pp. 133-157.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. W. BENJAMIN, *Lesekasten*, in *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp 1987. In the discussion following on of the talks that originated his paper, Georg Bertram observed that habits are not unreflective in the sense of being opposite to human essential power of reflection. I completely agree. As dispositions to act in certain ways, they are a constitutive part of the reflective practices of human beings. This manifests to us clearly, and somehow sadly, when we indeed lose physical abilities due to injuries caused by an accident: in this case we may have to reflexively re-learn how to perform the unlearned movement we previously used to perform without explicit and focused reflection.

<sup>36</sup> Hence, many activities carried out in everyday as well as in artistic improvisation are expressions of the embodied implicit knowledge, rooted in cultural contexts, that Hubert Dreyfus called “intuitive expertise”. See e.g. H. DREYFUS and S. DREYFUS, *Mind over machine: the power of human intuition and expertise in the era of the computer*, New York, The Free Press 1986. I thank André J. Abath for making me aware of the relevance of Dreyfus’ work for my investigation.

<sup>37</sup> On the link between routinary habits and creativity and the related issue of everyday aesthetics see P. Di Cori, C. Pontecorvo (ed.), *Tra ordinario e straordinario: modernità e vita quotidiana*, Roma, Carocci 2007 and G.L. IANNILLI, *Everyday Aesthetics: Institutionalization and “Normative Turn”*, in “Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics”, 8 (2016), pp. 269-287.

continuity or the repetition of this very same change. Habit implies more than mere mutability; it does not simply imply mutability in something that remains without changing; it supposes a change in the disposition, in the potential, in the internal virtue of that in which the change occurs, which itself does not change.<sup>38</sup>

Drawing on this notion of habit, Catherine Malabou defended, in her preface to Ravaisson's essay, that habit is a «resource of possibilities»: it «makes possible a future»<sup>39</sup>. On the one hand, habit is the *plastic* formation, by means of repetition and practice of actions, of individuals' essential dispositions (as Malabou has recently argued, referring to Hegel); so habit is «essence a posteriori»<sup>40</sup> of subjectivity, which is generated by continuous changes. Yet, on the other hand, «habit is actualized as a habit of changing»<sup>41</sup>.

So understood, *habit is not the opposite of improvisation*. On the contrary, as Gary Peters has recently written (elaborating on Malabou's elaborations on Hegel and Ravaisson), habit, as a «doing that has forgotten thought», is a «moment of improvisation»: «it is *responsible* for rather than *resistant* to the transformation of human action and the creativity associated with that»<sup>42</sup>.

However, the relevance of improvisation for the everyday practice is not limited to *adaptive reaction to emergency in real-time* and to the *shaping of plastic habits of behavior*. As a matter of fact, generally speaking, not only *the performance of any action involves elements of improvisation*, in that every intention or action plan must cope “here and now” with the concrete, unforeseeable, and unique situation of its enactment<sup>43</sup>; but, independently from the “here and now” constraints, the reshuffling or recycling of already-extant material to making something new can also be conceived of as improvisation. Hence, improvisation

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<sup>38</sup> F. RAVAISSON, *Of habit*, Eng. Trans. by C. Carlisle and M. Sinclair, London, Continuum 2008, p. 25.

<sup>39</sup> C. MALABOU, “Addiction and Grace: Preface to Felix Ravaisson's of Habit”, in F. RAVAISSON, *Of habit*, Eng. Trans. by C. Carlisle and M. Sinclair, London, Continuum 2008, vii.

<sup>40</sup> C. MALABOU, *The future of Hegel: plasticity, temporality and dialectic*, Eng. Trans. by L. During, London, Routledge 2005, p.74.

<sup>41</sup> C. MALABOU, “Addiction and grace: Preface to Felix Ravaisson's *Of habit*”, in F. RAVAISSON, *Of Habit*, Eng. Trans. by C. Carlisle and M. Sinclair, London, Continuum 2008, viii.

<sup>42</sup> G. PETERS, *Improvising improvisation. From out of philosophy, music, dance, and literature*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2017, pp. 123, 122, 127. For the rich, but sometimes a bit chaotic, discussion of the relation between improvisation, repetition and habit see pp. 89-168.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. S. L. FOSTER (quoted in G. PETERS, *The philosophy of improvisation*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press 2009, p. 115): «The performance of any action, regardless of how predetermined it is in the minds of those who perform it and those who witness it, contains an element of improvisation».

is not only the act of doing something “on the spot”, without preparation and/or without the following of planned instructions, but is also the *adaptive and appropriative re-use* of something in a more or less useful, valuable, and creative way.

Within the artistic field, improvisation (and now I mean: conscious and intentional improvisation) is – as we have already seen – the *development of creativity in real-time* (following Lydia Goehr, this may be called «improvisation *ex tempore*») or, even in not explicitly improvised arts, *(the ability) to (successfully) react to sudden problems* (Lydia Goehr called this kind of improvisation «improvisation *impromptu*») <sup>44</sup>, but also, and even independently from the real-time constraints, the *creative rearrangement* not only of materials, included ‘poor’ stuff like wastes, but also of forms, styles, conventions, techniques, and habits.

In this sense practices like variations, arrangements, *covers*, *mash-ups*, citations, remixes etc. are all forms of improvisations <sup>45</sup>. They all are forms of «distributed creativity»: they are ways in which *an old (material or cultural) stuff is appropriated, re-signified and transformed, in unforeseen ways* <sup>46</sup>. The way Broadway songs became jazz standards is paradigmatic of these processes, that concretely manifest how the way of making is invented in the making, i.e. how creativity is at work in the arts. Creative novelty ensues from appropriation and re-adjustment of more or less passively inherited cultural stuffs: in other words, the invention of the new ensues from the appropriation of the old. This is clear in the way artists create by reflexively reacting to past artworks, in different ways: by adaptation, distortion, re-combination, de-structuration, citation, and even rejection.

#### 4. *The improvisational nature of cultural practices*

Now, my thesis is that an improvisational process of this kind, an improvisational performance on the long run, is responsible not only for the ongoing development of

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<sup>44</sup> See GOEHR, *Improvising Impromptu*.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. G. BROWN, D. Hesmondhalgh, *Western Music and Its Others. Difference, Representation and Appropriation in Music*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000; F. DÖHL, *Mashup in der Musik. Fremdreferenzielles Komponieren, Sound Sampling und Urheberrecht*, Bielefeld, Transcript 2016; *Ladri di musica*, issue of “Estetica. Studi e ricerche” 1 (2014) ed. by A. Bertinetto, E. Gamba e D. Sisto; L. LESSIG, *Remix. Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*, London, Bloomsbury 2008; J. O. YOUNG, C.G. BRUNK, *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, Malden MA, Wiley-Blackwell 2009.

<sup>46</sup> On “distributed creativity” see G. BORN, *On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology, and Creativity*, in “Twentieth-Century Music, 2/1 (2005), pp. 7-36.



artistic traditions, genres, and practices, but also for the evolution of everyday human practices *as* and *into* art practices. One of the main theses of Michel De Certeau's book *L'invention du quotidien* is precisely this<sup>47</sup>. Fine arts are, as it were, specializations of arts conceived of in terms of practices, that is: *arts of doing*. Human practices, as arts of doing of different kinds, work exactly by appropriating and adapting institutionalized norms, habits and conventions to particular situations in unprecedented ways, inventing, through the application of rules or the exercise of habits, spaces of freedom («tactics», as De Certeau calls them), that (trans)form the rules and the habits (i.e. the «strategies»), creatively producing novelties.

According to De Certeau, society organizes itself through institutions of different kinds that rule human behavior. Institutionalized, structured, codified and normalized procedures regulate the spheres of practical life in methodic ways. However, instead of automatically and rather passively executing the rules that constitute the institutions (the strategies), human beings discover, in different situations, rooms of freedom and invention. In virtue of those rooms of freedom human beings use and abuse in tactic ways the institutions to which they are and *should be* submitted for aims they freely pose to themselves. In other words, resorting to that kind of intelligence one learns only by means of exercising it, which is the practical intelligence called *metis* in ancient Greek, human beings apply rules and conventions in ways that inventively transform those rules and conventions, adapting them to specific situations and taking advantage of their contingency for finding concrete solutions to concrete problems<sup>48</sup>. This inventive behavior is the fuel, as it were, of human practices. Without it, there would be no human

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<sup>47</sup> M. DE CERTEAU, *L'invention du quotidien. I. Arts de faire*, Paris, Gallimard 1990.

<sup>48</sup> See M. DETIENNE, J.P. VERNANT, *Les ruses de l'intelligence. La mètis des Grecs* (1974), Paris, Flammarion 1993. *Metis* is that kind of intelligence typified by Ulysses. Adorno and Horkheimer famously condemn Ulysses as paradigm of the instrumental reason of Enlightenment (cf. M. HORKHEIMER – Th. W. ADORNO, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944), Frankfurt am Main, S. Fischer, 1969, Nachdruck als Taschenbuch 1988) However, Adorno is also a tireless critic of improvisation. Although the constructive formal process of improvisation coincides with the retroactive temporal dynamics that he himself praised in his essay on the “musique informelle” (“But in music nothing has the right to follow something else unless it has been determined by what precedes it or conversely, unless it reveals *ex post facto* that what has preceded it was, in reality, its own precondition”). Th. W. ADORNO, *Vers und musique informelle*, in Id., *Quasi una fantasia*, London, Lawrence & Wishart 1988, pp. 272-305, here p. 297), Adorno never understood the creative, imaginative and transformative potential of improvisation that he reduced to mere repetition and passive imitation. Hence, the reduction of the Ulysses' practical and “kairologic” intelligence (which operates at the opportune moment or rather that makes opportune the moment in which it operates) to an instrument of power and dominance is a mistake deriving from a fundamental blindness toward improvisational creativity. I thank Giorgia Cecchinato for pushing me on this point.



agency, as we understand it.

This crucial point is confirmed also by contemporary anthropology. As Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam state in the introduction of the collective book *Creativity and cultural improvisation*, the social and cultural life of people is improvisational: «people have to work it out as they go along»<sup>49</sup>. They «construct culture as they go along and as they respond to life's contingencies»<sup>50</sup>.

In this process they are compelled to improvise, not because they are operating *on the inside* of an established body of conventions, but because no system of codes, rules and norm can anticipate every possible circumstance. At best it can provide general guidelines or rules of thumb whose very power lies in their vagueness or non-specificity. The gap between these non-specific guidelines and the specific conditions of a world that is never the same from one moment to the next not only opens up a space for improvisation, but also demands it, if people are to respond to these conditions with judgement and precision. “Improvisation” [...] “is a cultural imperative”<sup>51</sup>.

Hence, they conclude, «[i]mprovisation and creativity [...] are intrinsic to the very process of social and cultural life»<sup>52</sup>.

Interestingly enough, this inventive behavior, that typifies human agency and that uses the rules it is submitted to, adapting them to aims of different kinds that are not foreseen by the rule, is what an important cultural tradition calls “art”. The notion of “art” means here that kind of knowledge that does not consist in *knowing that*, but in *knowing how*, or, rather, in the excellence of a *knowing how*. This excellent *knowing how* does not depend upon the routinary application of rules or models. As Freud would have had it, it is «eine Sache des Takts»<sup>53</sup> (a matter of feeling). Moreover, according to the venerable

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<sup>49</sup> E. HALLAM, T. INGOLD (eds.), *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, Oxford-new York, Berg 2007, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> E. BRUNER, Ivi, p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Ivi, p. 19.

<sup>52</sup> Ivi, p. 19.

<sup>53</sup> S. FREUD, *Eine Teufelneurose in siebzehnten Jahrhundert* (1922), in S. FREUD, *Gesammelte Werke* XIII, pp. 315-354, here p. 330.

cultural tradition that goes from Francis Bacon through Denis Diderot<sup>54</sup> up to Emile Durkheim<sup>55</sup> and beyond, art, in this sense, is that kind of knowledge that is not merely contemplative. Art is rather a practical *knowing how to do* that implies the production of objects of different kinds, thereby exceeding the non-operative scientific knowledge of methodic rules. The same way utterances, each speech acts we use in our conversation may exceed the codes of grammars and dictionaries, by and while using them, for saying what is appropriate in a given and specific situation, and this may result, on the long run, in the transformation of a language, art is a practical knowledge that, through its concrete achievements, transform rules and models of cognition and practice.

This does not mean, however, that this *knowing how to do* which is art is not ruled; it is certainly ruled, but the rules are generated, and transformed, through the praxis. In this sense, as also De Certeau observes, *knowing how to do* (and how to deal with diverse materials and forms in concrete situations) is self-ruled in the very same way the Kantian *reflexive judgment* is at work in the realm of aesthetic experience. In the following of the paper I will suggest that the step from this idea of art as tactical practice of *knowing how to do* responding to concrete situations to Luigi Pareyson's view of art as formative making that invents its own rules in the making is not very long, as it may seem.

##### 5. *Art as "knowing how to do": the inventive use of norms*

Art as *knowing how to do* is the inventive use of normative rules. In other words, it is an improvisation upon normative rules, which exploits the rules – as well as standards and habits of behavior – and transforms the rule according to the rule. This strange and apparently self-contradictory manner of speaking (“a transformation of the rule in concert with the rule” is an odd thing indeed!) can be explained and justified by means of going beyond De Certeau's conceptualization. Indeed, one may of course understand De Certeau's own aim in making the distinction between strategic behavior following institutions and inventive tactic behavior transforming institutions – a distinction that, by

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<sup>54</sup> See J.-L. MARTINE, *L'article ART de Diderot: machine et pensée pratique*, in “Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie”, 39 (2005), pp. 41-79.

<sup>55</sup> See R. O'TOOLE, *Durkheim and the problem of art: some observations*, in “Durkheimian Studies / Études Durkheimiennes”, New Series, 8 (2002), pp. 51-69.

the way, looks very similar to Noam Chomsky's dichotomy between rules-following and rules-changing creativity<sup>56</sup>. This distinction is apt to clarify the specificity of human everyday practices that presupposes institutionalized rules and intervene upon the rules in an inventive way. However, this model is too static. It does not explain the way normative institutions are generated and develop within human practices, that is, it does not explain how is it possible that norms are generated in the practice of following norms.

A genetic and dynamic model, instead, may do exactly this job, since it may explain that the inventive use and abuse of institutions, whose excellence may be conceived of as "art", is precisely the way institutions and their rules form and transform themselves. At this regard, it can be appropriate to refer to Wittgenstein's famous saying «We make up the rule as we go along»<sup>57</sup>. The rules of human practices and behaviors are not transformed just by their violation, but rather by their applications. Rules develop in virtue of uses and abuses that inventively improvise upon them according to the specific circumstances that are unforeseeable by the rules. Transformations of rules ensue from the adaptation of rules to those specific situations of their application. So uses of the rule (potentially) transform the rule, and the behavior normed and controlled by the rule, by applying the rule in a particular situation and in a specific way.

A good example of this process may be the following. The pragmatic application of grammar rules in the very use of a language inventively (trans)forms the rule. In De Saussure's terms<sup>58</sup>, the *langue* lives through the *parole*, but is also changed by the *parole*, whose use it is not deducible by the *langue*. So the organizational autonomy of a creative gesture that becomes a new practice is not detached from or incompatible with its validity and value: while autonomously changing the old practice, it re-signifies the practice, making it (if differently) valid and valuable.

#### 6. *The genetic link between art and practices*

However, we still have to go some further steps ahead in order to explain in which

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. A. BERTINETTO, *Performing the Unexpected*, p. 120; N. CHOMSKY, *Current issues in linguistic theory*, The Hague, Mouton 1964; E. GARRONI, *Creatività*, Macerata, Quodlibet 2010.

<sup>57</sup> L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical investigations*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1953.

<sup>58</sup> F. DE SAUSSURE, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris, Payot 1916.

sense the notion of improvisation, together with its value and specificity, is useful for understanding *the genetic connection between human practices and art* not only in the sense of *knowing how to do*, but also in the modern aesthetic meaning of the word “art”. For space reason, I will sum up those steps in a very sketchy way.

(a) *Art as evaluative concept.* The term “art” historically got an *evaluative sense*. Art, as *knowing how to do*, is not only a practical improvisation upon human institutionalized and traditional practices. It is also an improvisation upon human practices: as such it may succeed or fail. We understand this term precisely in this evaluative sense in locutions beginning with the expression “the art of” in order to stress the merit, i.e. the successful achievements of activities involving an improvisational *knowing how to do* in multifarious practical fields. Examples are legions: «The art of having fun», «The art of design», «The art of the brick» (this is the title of an exhibition of Lego), «The art of leadership», «The art of being right»<sup>59</sup>, «El arte de volar»<sup>60</sup>, and even the «art of the farewell» (as written in a funeral home advertisement in Turin, Italy: «L’arte dell’ultimo saluto»). A separate discourse would merit, of course, the very idea of an *art of living*, an idea that, while remaining within the circumscribed context of Western thought, has a noble cultural tradition that goes from Socrates, Montaigne, and Nietzsche up to Foucault, Alexander Nehamas and Zygmunt Bauman<sup>61</sup>, and that is related to the idea of human life as an auto-poietic process, i.e. as a creative improvisation that shapes its identity *in the course of performance*.

(b) *Art as aesthetic notion.* However, this evaluative sense in virtue of which human practices and art are connected, is still not sufficient for understanding the *aesthetic notion of art*, that is the notion of “*fine arts*”. My thesis is that the generation of the notion of “fine arts” required not only the excellence of practice of use or abuse beyond the rules in the application of rules, but also a kind of re-institutionalization. A trivial example, that I nonetheless hope may be effective, is this: when we ski or bike with art or have tea with art or whatever, perhaps thereby inventing new techniques or styles to carry out these

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<sup>59</sup> A. SCHOPENHAUER, *Eristische Dialektik oder Die Kunst, Recht zu behalten* (1830?), Frankfurt am Main, Haffmans Verlag 2007.

<sup>60</sup> A. ALTARRIBA, *El arte de volar*, Alicante, Ediciones de Ponent 2009 (it won the spanish Premio Nacional de Cómics 2010).

<sup>61</sup> A. NEHAMAS, *The Art of Living*, 2000; Z. BAUMAN, *The Art of Life*, Cambridge, UK-Malden, MA, Polity Press, 2008.

practices, we do not yet produce works of art. The notion of “fine arts” requires, in other words, the improvisation upon the rules to become, in turn, a special institution, with its own codified social habits, rules, and articulations<sup>62</sup>. This institutionalization, in turn, concealed the link between everyday human practices and art, giving rise to the widespread idea that art is an independent realm, a sphere severed from reality and life: this originated the so called *autonomist paradigm* of art, strongly and efficaciously criticized by Georg Bertram in the previously mentioned book. However, the link between everyday human practices and art remained active in the underground, as it were.

A possible (and easy) example for explaining this process is poetry. Poetry is the creative use of language. As I have previously suggested, each pragmatic utterance (De Saussure’s *parole*) is the improvisational use of the *langue* that may transform the *langue* by means of reshuffling linguistic forms and materials in more or less creative way. Paradigmatic is here the *metaphor*. The metaphor may be conceived of as an adaptive and transformative abuse that may have creative outcomes. Poetry is the excellent, intentional and social ruled use of this abuse, which finds new possibility of using, experiencing and developing languages, i.e. that possibly invents new linguistic uses and habits, that may be later institutionalized. Value and specificity of this praxis are the two sides of the same medal.

(c) *Art as self-reflective and critical practice*. However, art is not only the excellent social use of the improvisational (ab)use of rules. It is also a reflective improvisational performance on art as institution. Art implies a self-reflection, in that it is (also) a reflection on past as well as on other art. As argued by Georg Bertram in different occasions<sup>63</sup> and as Alva Noë recently wrote, art is always, «an engagement with other art, with artists, and audiences, and teachers and students. Art is, really, *itself*, a critical practice»<sup>64</sup>. Art grows through a critical confrontation with other art: it is a practical reflection on art through a confrontation with artworks of the past and other artworks of the present. In other words, it is a reflection on already institutionalized art, i.e. on the institution of art. This reflection upon the art institution(s) – which is a practical reflection

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<sup>62</sup> On the birth of art as institution cf. L. SHINER, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2001.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. especially BERTRAM, *Kunst als menschliche Praxis*.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. A. NOË, *Strange tools*, p. 109.

performed by art and, at the same time, a reflection that shapes art as art (as “fine art”, even when this, to say it with Hans-Robert Jaus’s famous expression, is “not fine art anymore”<sup>65</sup>) – is exhibited in contemporary art at least since Duchamp’s *readymade*, whose gesture is precisely an exhibited reflexive and performative playing upon and with art as institution. In other words, it is an exhibited improvisation upon the social codification of an excellent improvisational use and abuse, i.e. of a *knowing how to do*. The art institution was creatively used (and abused) as an ingredient of a (already past) new art which exhibited itself as an improvisational *collage*, using, abusing and transfiguring commonplace non-artistic materials<sup>66</sup>.

(d) *Art as ongoing interaction between institution and transformation*. But the game (nicely explained by Arthur Danto<sup>67</sup>) is not over: for the performative gesture of the Avant-garde (the gesture of the revolt, sometimes playful, jokey or ironic, sometimes serious and even violent, against art as institution) will be re-institutionalized<sup>68</sup>, and then – against and upon this further codification – artist will improvise again, for example re-affirming the practical and performative power of art as imagination and/or as knowledge by means of promoting the idea of *artistic research*<sup>69</sup> or inventing new expressive forms by means of de-structuring and re-mixing artistic genres and media<sup>70</sup>.

(e) *Improvisation as paradigmatic art*. Artistic improvisation, I finally contend, coming back to what I argued at the beginning of my paper, exemplifies, in the space and in the time of the performance this performative and transformative process, that is, the way in which in human practices and in art as well – precisely as human practice – codified forms, materials, and procedures (including the codified forms, materials, and procedures constituting art as social institution) are inventively used and abused and these uses are

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. H.R. JAUS (ed.), *Die nicht mehr schöne Künste*, München, Fink 1968.

<sup>66</sup>In this sense, Duchamp’s *readymade* is a performing gesture that displays improvisation as/at the root of art. I thank Walter Menon for inviting me to clarify this point. On the relation between improvisation and *readymade* cf. my article: *La paradoja de los indiscernibles y la improvisación artística*, in S. Castro, F. Perez Carreño: *Arthur Danto and the philosophy of art*, Murcia, editum, pp. 183- 201.

<sup>67</sup> A.C. DANTO, *The transfiguration of the commonplace*, Cambridge Mass, London, Harvard University Press 1981.

<sup>68</sup> See Peter BÜRGER, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 1974.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. G. VILAR, *Aesthetic precariousness*, in “Cosmo”, 6 (2015), *Art and aesthetic experience*, ed. by A. Bertinetto, pp. 27-38.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. T.W. ADORNO, *Die Kunst und die Künste*, in T.W. ADORNO, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 10/1, Frankfurt am Main., Suhrkamp 1977, pp. 432-454; T.W. ADORNO, *Über einige Relationen zwischen Musik und Malerei*, in T.W. ADORNO, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 16, Frankfurt am Main 1978, pp. 628-642.

in turn normalized and then re-used as ingredients of new improvisations. *Improvisation*, I now contend, is the *genetic core of art* and *paradigmatic for art as human practice*.

### 7. *The role of improvisation connecting art and practices*

The theoretical point I want to stress is not uneasy to express. The practice of improvisation exemplifies the very exercise of artistic creativity, the encounter of the artist with the surprise of the forms and materials s/he works with<sup>71</sup>, as well as the connection with the ingenious and experimental ability to reformulate problems, projects and criteria in unprecedented ways, reinventing them during the practice, in order to offer effective solutions in terms of the costs and benefits balance as well as in terms of the risks and outcomes balance<sup>72</sup>. In improvisation, the conditions of creativity come to the foreground: it is the *background*<sup>73</sup> of practices, traditions, skills, techniques and habits which nourishes the artwork and with respect to which the artwork (like the metaphor and the joke<sup>74</sup>) emerges unexpectedly.

This theoretical framework provides the right explanation for understanding both (a) the link between human practices and art as well as (b) the role played by improvisation.

As to (a) this model nicely supports a conciliation of opposite theoretical models of art: the different theories of art provided by Kant – who stressed the specificity of the aesthetic experience of nature and of art – and by Dewey – who stressed the value of art as contribution to a satisfying human experience. Moreover this model offers a genetic account of art, that could nicely integrate both the Hegelian view concerning the historical-rational development of the art practices as well as more recent approaches developed in the human sciences (and, in particular, anthropology, sociology, and psychology) that are interested in showing the rooting of art in human perceptual powers, cultural habits and social environments.

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<sup>71</sup> E. HUOVINEN, *On attributing artistic creativity*, in A. Bertinetto, A. Martinengo (eds.), *Re-thinking creativity. Creativity between art and philosophy*, special issue of “Tropos”, 4/2 (2011), pp. 65-86.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. C. DOWLING, *The value of ingenuity*, in A. Bertinetto, A. Martinengo (eds.), *Re-thinking Creativity*, pp. 47-64.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. A. BERTINETTO, *Esequire l'inatteso*, Chap. 2, § 6.

<sup>74</sup> See NOË, *Strange tools*, p. 108.



As to (b), the value of improvisation relies in its fundamental contribution to human practices, to their genetic link with art as *knowing how to do* as well as to the evaluative aesthetic constitution of art as a kind of making that invents its norms in the making, as Luigi Pareyson famously argued. Its specificity consists in the way it shows the auto-poietic development of normativity in real-time through the interplay between co-performers and between performers and audience as well as through the adaptive and exaptive interaction between the artists and the artistic forms and material they use as well as between the artists and the social and cultural situation of the performance.

Obviously, at the conclusion of my paper, some further clarifications are in order for avoiding possible objections. The most important one concerns the role of improvisation (and of art) within the conceptual relation that links together tradition and innovation. This relation is often conceived of in terms of an opposition and improvisation is identified sometimes with tradition, continuity and repetition and sometimes, instead, with novelty, invention<sup>75</sup> and interruption. However, improvisation (as paradigmatic of art in general) is not to be understood either as repetition of tradition(s) and imitation or as absolute innovation and invention<sup>76</sup>. Rather, in improvisation repetition and invention are dialectically intertwined. Thus looking at improvisation helps to understand tradition in terms of continuous (trans)formation and invention as specific use/abuse of inherited habits, rules, styles, and techniques.

Hence, Vladimir Jankélévitch was right in saying that improvisation is always a «*beginning*» (of a potentially different normativity, and of a potential different temporality)<sup>77</sup>. In this way he attributed to improvisation the specific feature that according to Hannah Arendt characterizes human action<sup>78</sup>. Arendt maintains that proper

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. A. ZANETTI, *Improvisation und Invention*, Zürich-Berlin, Diaphanes 2014.

<sup>76</sup> The criticism to the idea of improvisation as innovation is the core of the already mentioned book by G. PETERS, *The philosophy of improvisation*. This criticism is deepened in G. PETERS, *Improvising Improvisation*.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. V. JANKÉLÉVITCH, *De l'improvisation*, in *La rhapsodie. Verve et improvisation musicale*, Paris, Flammarion 1955. Without mentioning Jankélévitch, but drawing rather on Heidegger, Peters (*Improvising improvisation*, pp. 7-27) elaborates on the crucial relevance of the difference between (what he seems to understand as a mere factual) *start* and the significant very *beginning* of improvisation, which is actually to be understood as «enactment and dramatization of the beginning» (p. 12), that, on its part, is condition of possibility of every start. I follow Peters in his making this distinction; still the way he establishes this distinction is somehow obscure to me.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, University Press, Chicago, 1958; H. ARENDT, *Understanding and politics*, in "Partisan Review", 20/4 (1953), pp. 377-392. For an "Arendtian" approach to (musical) improvisation, cf. P.A. KANELLOPOULOS, *Musical improvisation as action: An Arendtian perspective*, in "Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education", 6/3 (2007), pp. 107-110.

*human action is birth, initiative, new beginning, generation of the unexpected*<sup>79</sup>. It involves the creation of the new; in this sense, action is also free as it is free from intentions and projects that, typical of technological and industrial production, impede the real exercise of creativity (which Arendt conceptualizes on the basis of the romantic idea of the *genius*). I am not sure that Arendt is completely right in denying creativity to industrial and technological processes and, at this regard, her conception seems to be indebted to the general criticism directed by some significant twentieth-century philosophers (primarily Heidegger) to the technique. Actually, also technology and industrial production are human practices characterized by the improvisational dialectic between institution and transformation. However, I take her view as generally meaning that human action is not mechanical, that is, it does not follow routinary plans of execution, but, still relying on habits, it is reflective and formative in Pareyson's sense: it invents its way of doing, thereby producing the new. If we accept Arendt's thesis, improvisation is, therefore, the paradigmatic model of human action as well as the exemplary paradigm of the creative artwork: both surprise the foreseeable outcomes of fixed plans. Hence, improvisation is always a *beginning*, since in improvisation rules are suspended in every particular situation by their own applications.

Improvisation invents the rule while following it, while applying, it while iterating it. The normativity that rules an improvisation may change during the improvisation. Every event occurring during an improvisational performance may result in the (trans)formation of the normative constraints and the evaluative criteria of the improvisation, i.e. in a new beginning, just as any artwork – precisely as a work of art (in the double sense of the genitive) – can bring about the transformation of the criteria (depending on a certain style or genre) for evaluating art, at the same time they actualize or apply such criteria<sup>80</sup>.

The same way criteria for aesthetic judgment change precisely in virtue of the works that are judged aesthetically, what happens in an improvisation can redefine the criteria for its success, without necessarily causing it to fail (though, as I will soon suggest, the risk of failure is constitutive of art).

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<sup>79</sup> According to Arendt human being as such is to be conceived of in terms of *beginning*. Cf. H. ARENDT, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, The Viking Press 1961.

<sup>80</sup> See above § 1.

This is not to say, however, that improvisation is a “*creatio ex nihilo*”. Rather, improvisation requires, instead of avoiding or denying, a basis of patterns, habits, skills, rules, standards. It requires a background that, as it happens in every human and artistic practices, is received and appropriated, reshuffled, abused through its repetitions: through repetitions of patterns, habits, rules, standards, styles. Not repetitions of the same, but repetitions of the different: repetitions of a background that, as it comes to the foreground while being applied, is appropriated and adapted, i.e. continuously (trans)formed. As a matter of fact, the iteration must cope with the specific situation of its application that retroactively implies the transformation of the background (and this is the way how habits are shaped in human practices: cf. *supra* §§ 2-3). Hence, Derrida is certainly right in saying that improvisation, as absolute unforeseen novelty, is impossible<sup>81</sup>. Like freedom, improvisation exists only when it is conquered, it exists only as practiced. So the actual possibility of choice of actions is always constrained and limited.

In this sense, absolute improvisation is a kind of *Grenzbegriff* (“boundary notion”, “limiting concept”) that regulates how we think about certain artistic practices. However, empirically, absolute improvisation is impossible: in order to act, improvisers and artists need habits, intentions, rules, techniques, traditions of practices and material resources as fuel for their creations. So, the absolute unforeseen, like the absolute original, is impossible. However, the factual conditions of possibility of improvisation are put in play in an improvisation, the same way the conditions of artistic creativity are renegotiated (that is: appropriated, re-used, and abused) in every singular artwork: as paradigmatically exemplified by improvisation, the conditions of possibility of art are not only transformed, but further developed in every new artistic achievement. Hence, the innovative creativity of improvisation, and of art, is required for building the tradition of rules, habits, techniques etc. that builds up the basis of improvisation (and of art). Better: the innovative creativity of improvisation is this tradition as an ongoing and transformative process. The basis of improvisation (and of art) is part of that creative process that, in order to evolve and succeed as such, must re-establish its own

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<sup>81</sup> Cf. J. DERRIDA, *Unpublished interview*, <http://www.derridathemovie.com/readings.html>, 1982. Cf. S. RAMSHAW, *Deconstructin(g) jazz improvisation: Derrida and the law of the singular event*, in “Critical Studies on Improvisation”, 2/1 (2006).

presuppositions<sup>82</sup>.

Not only that: the process of each improvised performance and the creation of a new artwork reproduces the recursive and retroactive articulation of normativity that constitutes the dynamic retroactive connection between the tradition of a practice and the exercise (the ab/use) of the practice, and that for sure is to be explained in terms of ongoing improvisation. Interestingly, improvisation, as recursive dialectic between application and (trans)formation of norms and habits of behavior is precisely the way normativity is at work in human practices<sup>83</sup>.

To sum up: improvisation is impossible if conceived of in terms of an autonomous act *ex nihilo*, as absolutely unconditional freedom. However, we do not need at all to conceive of improvisation in this naive way. If conceived of in terms of (more or less successful) transformational and adaptive use of practices in specific situations, by means of a tactical and *kairologic metis* – that (ab)use a normative frame and makes opportune the moment in which it operates –, improvisation is not merely possible: it is rather the actual way human practices work and develop. As I have suggested, art, as human practice, is a specific dimension of that way human practices work and develop.

#### 8. Conclusion: end(s) and birth of art

In this article I have tried to argue in favor of a genetic link between human practices and art mediated by improvisation. Human practices develop in a tactical-transformational-improvisational way; art – both as *knowing how to do* and as *aesthetic fine art* – is the (intentional or unintentional) use of improvisational creativity, according to which habits, skills, styles, genres, standards and norms are formed, performed and transformed in concrete situations; improvisation in the performing art is the both habitual-adaptive and spontaneous-creative exercise of *kairologic metis* in real-time which paradigmatically shows here and know the genetic connection between human practices

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<sup>82</sup> Therefore, the improvisational process is articulated through the Hegelian logic of the position of the pre-supposition. Cf. L. ILLETTERATI, *Il sistema come forma della libertà nella filosofia di Hegel (razionalità e improvvisazione)*, in “Itinera”, 10 (2015), pp. 41-63.

<sup>83</sup> I discussed the issue elsewhere, also in relation to philosophical insights of Jacques Derrida, Carl Schmidt, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Hans-Georg Gadamer: cf. *Eseguire l'inatteso*, Chap. 7; *Formatività ricorsiva*; “Do not fear mistakes”.

and artistic creativity. Being improvisational, both human practices (in other words: culture) and art (as human practice) are as such experimental in character: they are kinds of improvisation on other practices and on precedent artistic outcomes.

In order to conclude the paper, I will briefly explain how two mayor topics of contemporary research in philosophy of art and of history of aesthetics may play an interesting role in the picture I have outlined so far. I am referring to the ideas of the *end* and of the *ends* of art.

As to the *ends* of art (in the plural), by showing the genetic link between art and human practices and by defending that both are improvisational, I already suggested that art is *per se* not independent from other practices as well as from uses and functions as claimed by philosophers sticking with a formalist paradigm of artistic autonomy: art may have, and often has, ends, contents, and meanings of different kinds, while at the same time maintaining its own specificity. Not only, and merely, art is often used and abused for different aims (paintings with religious subjects may be used for educating people; a TV Series on the history of a Reigning House may be used for promoting regional tourism; Music may be used for affording emotional responses, etc. Please choose your own example). Rather, art as such is a reflective practice that impacts on human practices, even though artworks, precisely as *strange* tools, have not instrumental function<sup>84</sup>.

But following the spurs of the genetic link between art and improvisation traced so far, how can I deal with the notion (and the challenge) of the *end* of art (in the singular)? Moreover, what does the theme of the end, or the *death*, of art (as the question is generally known in Italy) to do with the specific topic of this article? I am not concerned here with discussing the different ways philosophers have understood this notion. I am interested neither in explaining how we can make sense of Hegel's thesis that in modernity art cannot accomplish anymore the function of orienting and sustaining human culture, nor in discussing Danto's interpretation of the notion as claiming the end of art history<sup>85</sup>.

I will rather tackle this issue from the perspective of the *aesthetics of success* (German: “*Gelingen*”/ “*Gelungenheit*”; Italian: “*riuscita*”) worked out by the already mentioned Italian

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<sup>84</sup> This is the main point independently articulated by Bertram and Noë.

<sup>85</sup> I have discussed Danto's idea of the end of art history in relation to Gombrich's view of artistic progress in A. BERTINETTO, *Gombrich, Danto, and the question of artistic progress*, in “Proceedings of the European Societies for Aesthetics”, 7 (2015), pp. 37-50.

philosopher Luigi Pareyson which is nowadays embraced by philosophers of art such as Georg Bertram and Alva Noë. As I have already suggested, art is a tentative endeavor and may succeed or fail accordingly to standards that are themselves formed, performed and transformed through the artistic practice as human beings, and human culture, go along. Artistic practices develop through interactions between artists, receivers, and critics that involve continuous (trans-)formative (re-)negotiations not only of methods, forms, materials, topics, values and functions of art, but also of the essence of art. Each artwork is (or, if you prefer, embodies) a reflective question on what art is, because each artwork restates and reshapes the normative standards of art. The answer to that question as well as the success of that transforming restatement is never granted. In this sense, art – generally understood – is an experimentation that may succeed and fail and this uncertainty, that is, the constant possibility of failure is a constitutive, a definitional feature of art as *human* practice. This is another way to show, in one shot, both the autonomy (the specificity) and the heteronomy (the value) of art, i.e. the possible intrinsic agreement, their apparent oppositions notwithstanding, between Kant's, Dewey's, and Hegel's views of art<sup>86</sup>.

The end of art – as interpreted by Bertram as the constant possibility of failure – is intrinsic both to *fine arts* and to art as *knowing how to do*, and this amounts to saying that it is intrinsic both to art and to other human practices. However, as I have shown elsewhere<sup>87</sup>, the failure, which also means the violation of, or the deviation from, normative constraints, is not negative *per se*. Failures (in reference to established standards of success) may have surprisingly creative outcomes. Again, being uncertainty and the constant possibility of failure as well as their possible creative quality intrinsic features of improvisation – even when it goes on as habitual repetition of routine patterns of behavior –, this insistence on the constitutive uncertainty of art, human practices, and improvisation offers another important way for showing both the specificity and the paradigmatic value of improvisation for human practices and for art as well. And, of course, this is another contribution for throwing light on the genetic link between human practices and art provided by improvisation. In a sense, the end, or the death, of art,

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<sup>86</sup> Following Bertram and Noë one may add also Heidegger to this company.

<sup>87</sup> A. BERTINETTO, "Do not fear mistakes".

conceived of in terms of art's constitutive uncertainty and precarity<sup>88</sup>, that is, of art's unavoidable risk of failure, throws light on its very beginning: on the *birth of art from the spirit of improvisation*.

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<sup>88</sup> The relation between art and precarity has been recently investigated by G. VILAR, *Precariedad, estética y política*, Almería, Círculo Rojo 2017.