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## The Aesthetic Paradox of Artistic Improvisation (and its Solution)

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Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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# *The Aesthetic Paradox of Artistic Improvisation (and its Solution)*

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ABSTRACT. I explore aspects of the relationship between artistic improvisation and aesthetic normativity by addressing an *aesthetic paradox* that sometimes arises in particular in the case of so-called free improvisations, i.e., kinds of artistic improvisation that are not based on themes, plots, or choreographies: namely, that an improvised performance that is appreciated as a successful one is not perceived *as* an improvisation.

## **1. The Aesthetic Paradox of Improvisation**

Although one may know, or suppose, that a particular performance of music, theatre or dance is, may have been, improvised, sometimes it is hard or even impossible to grasp its improvisational quality. The performance may succeed so well that it seems to have been studiously prepared in advance according to a predetermined plan. As a consequence, the audience may question the improvisational nature of the performance. In this case, the artistic success of improvisation appears as the failure of the performance *as improvised*. What is (paradoxically) unforeseen here is the fact that the unforeseen does not show itself.

Of course, artistic success is a trade-off between different aspects of an artwork or performance. But typically, when we witness a performance of “free” or radical improvisation in dance, music, theatre, or performative poetry – that is: improvisations not based on chord structures, scripts, choreography, or some other type of instruction or rule explicitly established prior to the performance – we expect to see a performance that is not without moments of uncertainty, situations of imbalance and tension, and perhaps even inappropriate aspects or

elements. Perceiving that everything is going the right way confuses our expectations and makes us doubt that the performance is an improvisation at all. We may indeed think that something is actually not going the right way because the artists are deceiving us.

Yet the performance is indeed improvised and improvisers are not following any explicit action plan. When it really works, we may not perceive its improvised character, even though, as has happened to me several times, it could be the first time that the musicians have played together. As I shall argue, perceiving the improvisation as so successful that it seems impossible that it could have been improvised – hence, perceiving it as a failed improvisation – is usually not the fault of the performers or the performance. It is *our* fault because we lack the capacity to follow the performance properly; we fail, as it were, to become part of it.

## 2. Improvisation

A short definitional outline of improvisation is in order before we proceed. A very basic, and admittedly partial, general definition is this: Improvisation is the act of doing something “on the spot”, without preparation, precision, proper means, or the following of planned instructions.

Hence, improvisation as such “presents us with something that comes into being only at the time of its presentation” (Benson, 2003, p. 25): in other words, improvisation involves the coincidence between invention and realization. The action plan is set up in the process. Improvisation articulates the norms of its own action, “on the spur of the moment”. Consequently, the context, the circumstances, and the contingency of the action re-enter into the performative action as constitutive elements.

## 3. Evaluating Improvised Art

In this regard, the aesthetic evaluation of artistic improvisation is a thorny issue. How is artistic improvisation to be evaluated? When can artistic improvisation be assessed as successful?

### 3.1. Standard Criteria

As already argued by Alperson (1984, p. 22), some aesthetic criteria apply to artistic improvisation even though the performance is an improvisation. The dynamism and the dramatic expressive power of a dialogue between actors, the formal coherence and intelligible development of improvised music or poem, the grace of the movements of a dancer, and many other qualities such as originality, intensity, virtuosity, etc. can be reasons for aesthetically appreciating an artistic phenomenon regardless of its improvisational character. As Davies (2021, p. 145) writes, “[o]ne reason for thinking that some improvisations are artworks is that they are appreciable in the same ways as other things that are unquestionably artworks”.

### 3.2. Evaluating the Making

However, judging improvisation in this way is not enough. Indeed, we want to say that improvisation has its own specific aesthetic legitimacy: that of a practice that exhibits the making in the product. We do not only evaluate improvisation as a product but as a product of a particular kind of production.

Yet, of course, considering improvisation as a practice that exhibits the making in the product does not solve our problem. Not all artworks that phenomenally display their producer’s making are improvisational works: for instance, careful technical and formal preparation, which is far from being improvised, may be displayed by a movie. The display of the producer’s making is therefore a necessary but not sufficient condition for the aesthetic justification of improvisation. The aesthetic justification of improvisation – which provides the reason why improvisation can have a specific aesthetic value – requires that the making is not only displayed by what is perceived but is also directly perceived as shaping the performance’s artistic content. As studies about improvisational practices in different arts suggest (see for instance Bertinetto and Ruta, 2021), the aesthetic perception of improvisational performances is marked by a distributed attention between the artistic phenomenon at issue and the making that produces it. In other words, the making is not only important as regards a particular performance that is responsible for some artistic content: the making as such is *aesthetically* important.



This is consistent with Tarasti's (2002) semiotic view of improvisation as an indication of the contingency of the performance situation within the performance itself, that is, as a signal of artistic production through the product which is part of the artistic content of the performance that is aesthetically appreciated. So, the artistic production process becomes part of the aesthetic content of the work or performance. As Davies (2021, p. 151) argues,

[...] improvisational actions, no less than their products, can be objects of aesthetic contemplation.  
 [...] [O]ur aesthetic interest in an improvised performance is an interest both in the construction, qua improvised product, and in the action of constructing it, qua improvised performance.

As regards improvised music, the focus of appreciation is not only the perceived music but also the way sounds are produced and organized, thereby producing music. In improvisational theatre, the focus of appreciation is the narrated fictional story *and* the way gestures, actions, and words are produced and organized, thereby staging a story. Indeed, two stories are told at the same time: the fictional story told by the staged drama and the story of the actors staging the drama. Viewers are induced to distribute their perception between the actors' acting and the fiction of the characters whose actions are staged. Analogously in other artistic practices, distributed perception allows us to directly grasp the making as aesthetically relevant in the produced artistic outcomes. Although distributed in this way, the perception is focused on the emergence of the artistic content from the artists' practice (the perceptual attention has a target and is distributed among its properties: cf. Nanay, 2016).

In other words, the audience focuses not only on the articulated artistic material and content and on the aesthetic qualities depending on it; the audience attends also

to features of the performance whereby these qualities are realized, hearing it as exploratory in nature and as produced in real time so that features that might be heard as flaws in a polished performance of a classical work will be heard as contributing to the overall content and point of the work. It is not merely that [...] we must attend both to structural values of the improvised product and to aesthetic features of the improvisational action such as "sensitivity, lyricism, and general virtuosity." Rather, we must attend to the performance as one whose artistic content is intended to be articulated in the very process of generating the improvisational product through the improvisational action. (Davies, 2021, p. 154)

The articulation of the artistic material is part of the focus of the audience's attention. We are witnessing the development of the aesthetic sense of the artistic material. The development of the aesthetic sense of what happens is evident above all when events and situations occur that could jeopardize the performance's success but are instead accepted in the performance as affordances to creativity (Bertinetto, 2016).

#### **4. Improvisation as Action vs Improvisation as Process**

The idea that in improvisation the maker's activity is offered up to aesthetic appreciation has recently been challenged. Pierre Saint-Germier and Clement Canonne (2021) question the idea that the focus of artistic appreciation is not only the final product but also the performance as the improvisers' action. They argue that the target of the audience's appreciation is the very product of an improvised performance as a *process*, the aesthetic qualities of which cannot be reduced to syntactical relations among artistic materials such as sounds and expressive gestures but should be located in the unfolding performance. Indeed,

the fact that the sonically realized aesthetic qualities of [a musical improvisation] depend at least causally, and perhaps constitutively, in corresponding qualities in the [musician's] actions, does not imply that those aesthetic properties primarily attach to the underlying activity, rather than to the actual stream of sounds he produces. (Saint-Germier, Canonne, 2021, p. 119)

Accordingly, although the aesthetic focus of improvisation is its dynamic quality, it's being a process, i.e. the music as a flow unfolding continuously through time, listeners are not meant to pay attention to the maker's activity. Of course, the target of appreciation is not a structured object but a process. Still, the causal link between the maker and the product is not part of what is appreciated and is not relevant for the evaluation criteria. While being properties of a process and not of an object, the aesthetic properties of the improvised music are not properties of the actions producing them.<sup>14</sup>

This idea is interesting. Indeed, it seems to do justice to the intuition that art has to do with appearances, and that the way the artwork is produced is to be understood as a technical means to an aesthetic end, rather than as an aesthetic end in itself. If the artistic goal of the

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<sup>14</sup> According to Saint-Germier and Canonne, this applies also to improvisation in arts other than music.

improvisational practice is the unexpected, it is not so much the production activity that must be unexpected, but the artistic result that is the target of aesthetic appreciation.

Still, I do not find this view completely compelling. First, I do not see why viewers and listeners cannot have an aesthetic interest in the activity that is causally related to the processual character of the art they are perceiving. In point of fact, they perceive not only the dance or the music, for instance, as an unfolding process, but also how the process is engendered (especially when they are attending to a live performance). Although, arguably, not all information they get from perceiving the artists at work is relevant for the aesthetic focus of appreciation, denying that this plays a role at least in providing a cue for grounding the aesthetic qualities of the music, the dance, etc. as the unfolding process does not seem to be plausible. Second, the notion of process is not exclusive to improvisation. Generative art seems to be perfectly well understood as an art form whose main aspect is to manifest itself as a process, rather than as an object. Yet generative art, such as Brian Eno's generative music, is not improvised but instead created by systems designed or initiated by composers, that work producing variations by executing algorithms. The difference between generative art and artistic improvisation is indeed that in the second, but not in the first, the process quality of the artistic content which is the focus of appreciation depends, in an aesthetically relevant way, on the actions producing them. In fact, the material gets its shape and makes sense as artistic content thanks to the qualities of these actions, which develop by responding to what happens in the moment of the performance.

In any case, even if the "procedural thesis", as we can call it, were right, and the "action thesis" wrong, this would not imply the rejection of the view that, besides cultural constraints and the aesthetic standards of a practice, the evaluation of improvisation must take into account the fact that, as is clear, especially in the cases of so-called free improvisation, what is going on here is a performance that develops in a self-organizing way: it is not simply the application of a predetermined plan, such as a script or a score, but the shaping of an articulated artistic content, which makes – or it is supposed to make – aesthetic sense, through the confrontation with a developing contingent performance situation.

## 5. Normativity as Sense-Making and the Aesthetic Paradox

To cut a long story short, I take it as essential for artistic improvisation, and its aesthetic appreciation, that the process of its making, including the actions accomplished by its performers, is displayed as the performance's aesthetic content. Different from the interpretive rendition of an already prepared artistic construct, improvisation is the articulation of the aesthetic sense of artistic material in the performative process and as an unfolding process. Of course, the performance as a procedural activity of dancers, musicians, and actors is different from the performance as a procedural artistic result of this activity. The fact remains that improvisation presents the process of articulating an artistic content through (cor)responding to unexpected contingency as the focus of appreciation – while generative art does not. If one does not perceive the formation of an artistic content that makes an aesthetic sense, that is, an aesthetic sense in formation – i.e., the artistic product as a *sense-making process* –, the process is hardly grasped as improvisational. At stake in the aesthetic experience of an artistic improvisation is not simply the quality of the performance as a process (and not as an object), but the quality of artistic performance as a process of aesthetic *sense-making*.

Thus, although norms – such as formal, stylistic, syntactic social constraints – are in play in even the freest improvisations, the audience is attending to the negotiation through and within the performance of the way to achieve artistic goals, and sometimes even to the very formation of artistic goals themselves. Consequently, the particular artistic character of improvisation seems to rely on the generation of specific criteria for its aesthetic evaluation on the spot.

In this regard, the *aesthetic paradox* of improvisation comes into play. As mentioned above in Section 1, the paradox goes as follows. If an improvisation manifests the unpreparedness and the uncertainty of the performance, it displays artistic failure; if it exhibits a successful performance, it is not perceived *as* improvisation.

The paradox seems to present a problem of *aesthetic unforeseen*: the appearance of successful improvisation is taken as (the performance of) a previously prepared artwork, i.e., in Saint-Germier's and Canonne's words, is perceived as an "object" and not as a "process"; therefore, as improvisation, it fails to satisfy the audience's aesthetic expectations: in this sense it is unforeseen. Unfortunately, it is unforeseen in the wrong way.

Thus, a successful improvisation can conceal what it is, i.e., an improvisation. Consequently, aesthetically misunderstanding an improvisation as carefully planned, studied, and prepared – i.e., as not improvised – can be an indication of its artistic success, thereby at the same time possibly being a symptom of the failure of the perceptual appreciative performance.<sup>15</sup>

## 6. Normativity in *statu nascendi*

In order to avoid this misunderstanding, and to appreciate a performance both as successful and as improvised, it must be considered that improvisation is neither, as such, absolute creation nor uncreative repetition. In improvisation, innovative invention emerges through the application of the known as a condition for felicitously coping with contingency, and in coping with contingency the extant norms and skills are put into play, re-organized, and (trans)formed. This coping with contingency – which is articulated in the multifarious interactions in which improvisation consists – (trans)forms the known, *making* it unexpected.

In improvisation normativity works in such a way that the applications of cultural, technical, and aesthetic norms continuously transform normativity as they are confronted with the reality of the contingent performance: Wittgenstein's (1958, p. 39) saying "We make up the rules as we go along" suits perfectly improvisation. This is, generally speaking, also the aesthetic theme of improvisation: *normativity-as-transgression*. Again, this implies that the aesthetic success of improvisation may appear as the negation of improvisation.

As rightly observed by Bertram 2021, in improvisation what, against the background of expectations, is unexpected, is welcomed as an impulse or as an *affordance* (Gibson, 1979) that prompts re-actions and, since it is developed by the responses elicited, it "changes the way the practice is continued" (Bertram, 2021, p. 23). Each event in the performance is both an impulse to the ensuing responses and a response to the previous impulses. Improvisation forms and transforms itself through the way the interactions of the performance produce events that, being both impulses and responses, construct "constraints for themselves" (Bertram, 2021, p. 25). Normativity is generated through the way an event is taken as an impulse or affordance

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<sup>15</sup> As I argued elsewhere (Bertinetto, 2021, pp. 73-6), both the "Romantic" prejudice of the immediacy and absolute spontaneity of improvisation and the "Adornian" prejudice of the falsity of improvisation fall victims to the aesthetic paradox of improvisation: they arise from misconceptions of the normativity of improvisation.

that elicits a response that retroactively makes the impulse binding, by adhering to it and accepting it as a normative force – or, conversely, deviating from it, rejecting it, and denying it its sense. Through the collaborative or conflictual interactions within the performance, which appear aesthetically in the artistic content thereby progressively developed, norms are formed and transformed in the course of an improvisation. As Bertram (2021, p. 29) nicely remarks: “The constant making of norms (norms in *status nascendi*) is what explains improvisation’s creativity”.

In fact, the norms and skills that are in place as cultural and technical pre-conditions of the artistic improvisational practice are also themselves retroactively transformed by the performance that applies them: they are “plastic” because they absorb the contingent performative situation, adapting to it and transforming themselves in unexpected ways with respect to the expectations they previously elicited.

## 7. (Dis)Solving the Aesthetic Paradox

Moreover, the skills for producing the unexpected also include perception. The unexpected is not simply something that happens but is something that should be perceived as what it is, i.e., *as* unexpected. By developing an “ability to notice” (in) the flow (Doughty, 2019, p. 147), performers should be able to perceive the unexpected even though they cannot anticipate it. They have to be able to grasp aesthetic and artistic events and qualities that do not precisely fit within the normative order of the performance, thereby making the normativity of improvisation transform. As Bertram (2021, p. 30) writes:

the perceptive skills that ground improvisation must be open towards non-normalized impulses, which makes it possible for improvisers to overcome given patterns and established schemes. Only through such openness can improvisers assess the unexpected affordances of impulses. In this sense, the process of unlearning and relearning in improvisation applies not only to playing and acting but also to perception.

In other words, as famously claimed by saxophonist Lee Konitz, performers must “not be prepared” and “that takes a lot of preparation” (quoted in Hamilton, 2010, p. 55): in order to perceive the unexpected and properly deal with it, performers have to prepare themselves by

training in the skill of perceiving the unexpected and reacting to it appropriately. In point of fact, only by practicing improvisation do performers acquire the ability to participate in the *making sense process* in which improvisation – as the articulation *in fieri* of an aesthetic normativity as *trans-formation*, or as an “artistic grammar of contingency” (Bertinetto, 2021) – consists.

My point is that this kind of preparation that happens through, and thanks to, a practice for which one should already actually be prepared, is what is also required by the improvisation’s viewers and listeners. The audience also has to develop the skills of perceiving the unexpected as a reason for a (trans)formation of normativity. In other words, they must participate through their perception in the transformative *sense-making* process driven by the performers’ actions aesthetically displayed as sounds, gestures, movements, etc.

Appreciators should not exclusively rely on the evaluation criteria in place of the artistic improvisational practice at issue as parameters external to the situational concreteness of the performance; instead, they should welcome aesthetic criteria as plastic norms, capable of interacting with the contingent unexpectedness of the single case that retroacts on the evaluation standards, thereby contributing to their trans-formation.

As aforementioned, in improvisational interactions the sense of each move is retroactively generated by the reactions to the following moves (Bertram, 2010 & 2021) and normativity emerges as (trans)formed through the process. Nothing is *per se* a mistake (Bertinetto, 2016): it is a mistake when no reactions follow such as to welcome what happened as an invitation to the performative articulation of normativity, presenting it instead as a stumbling block, a deviation from the rule or indeed an error.

This requires, even on the part of the perceiving public, particular attention to the specific case, a readiness of responsive reaction to what happens: that is, it requires staying in the moment, not as a fixation on the present as an instant detached from the context, but rather as a participation in the performance flow. The “grammar of contingency” that is concretely specific to improvisation invites perceivers to focus their attention on what happens as produced through the artists’ interactions with each other, with the materials, with the situation, and with the audience. And since this process involves, or is, the (trans)formation of artistic normativity, the process of normativity (or normativity as process) is (part of) what improvisation is about, i.e. (of) the aesthetic theme or content of improvisation: improvisation makes *sense* as a process of *sense-making*. Therefore, the aesthetic perception of improvisation

is itself an achievement, something one has to be prepared for, even though, when it happens, the aesthetic experience is, somehow, unexpected.

Why is it, therefore, that improvisation, when it succeeds and makes sense, may appear as not improvised – and therefore failed as improvisation? Improvisation may appear as not improvised, and consequently as a failed improvisation, in spite of being a successful performance, because its sense does not appear in its making, but rather as *made* (or *ready-made*). Briefly, since the activity of sense-making does not appear as such, the improvisation does not appear as such. The answer to the aesthetic conundrum I am focussing on in this article, I contend, must be sought precisely in the unpreparedness of the public's perception, in its inability to adapt to the improvisational process through a *perceptive performance which is also (a kind of) improvisation*. In order for the improvisation to appear as such, spectators must assume the perspective of the participants in the ongoing practice, so that their aesthetic appreciative perception *corresponds* to, and is attuned with, the articulation of artistic normativity *in fieri* in which artistic improvisation consists.

In other words, as jazz pianist and improvisation researcher Vijay Iyer (2004) avers, the proper perception of an improvisation is itself *improvisational*: it adapts to a process that is characterized, potentially, by unpredictability, by means of being itself unpredictable and ready to change as regards expectations, aesthetic attitudes, and even criteria of evaluation. Improvised art calls for participatory perception. Entering an in-between state of joint attention and awareness, the audience members immerse themselves in the process of the spontaneous decision-making of the performance and so an implicit collaborative partnership with the artists may emerge (Machon, 2019). A *shared* experience – an experience which is lived through together – then develops (Linson, Clarke, 2017), not only between performing artists but also between artists and audience, since the audience shares with performers the attitudes and feelings of curiosity, trust, joy, alertness, sensitivity, adventure, risk, frustration and wonder that are gesturally expressed and impressed in the improvised performance. Perceivers are not only contemplative observers: they actively participate in the negotiation of the artistic shape and sense of the performance.

The audience members feel or perceive the artistic performance as improvised when they feel proprioceptively – and empathically – that their perception is also moving, so to speak, in an improvised way. For instance, listeners to a musical improvisation have to play, as it were, with their experience of the performance, even while they are witnessing it; thereby they



have to experiment with the perceptual possibilities opened up by the improvised music by shaping sounds as music as they are produced; they have to feel their being-in-the-moment while still imagining possible ways in which the performance might develop – and these imagined expectations, in as much as they are fulfilled in the course of the performance, will then impact the actual perception of the performance. Something along the same lines can be argued also for the perception of theatrical or dance improvisation.

This is not an easy task, however. Accomplishing the task of producing the unexpected while also perceiving the performance requires training and exposure to the practice at issue. Hence, there are good and bad improvising listeners and spectators: they can improvise *well* if they are cultivated, and if they ‘know how’ to act as listeners and spectators. Listeners can actively perceive the music improvised, playfully interacting with it, if – and to the extent to which – they know, or can grasp, what is happening. The skill of “playing with the music”, i.e., of grasping its sense, while it is being invented in the course of performance, depends upon the listeners’ experience and knowledge of musical traditions, instrumental techniques, performing conventions, musicians’ personal styles, and artistic personalities, etc. Yet, through the practice of perception, understood as repeated and continuous perceptual exposure to artistic improvisation, it is possible to develop a proprioceptive sense of “being-in-the-moment” while perceiving and being attuned to the “being-in-the-moment” of the improvised performance. Thus, perceivers can train themselves to resonate with the improvised event, savoring the improvised character of perception understood not only as a feeling of concomitance between plan and realization but also as a feeling of concomitance between the unfolding of perception and the unfolding of the performative event, i.e., as “the sense that the improviser is working, creating, generating musical material in the same time in which we are co-performing as listeners” (Iyer, 2016, p. 80)”. Perceivers also can, or rather should prepare themselves for being *rightly* unprepared.

## **8. Conclusion: Improvisation as the Enactment of the Aesthetic Judgment**

It is not, I repeat, an easy task; but it is a key task of the aesthetic appreciation as such. As I have argued elsewhere by adopting a Kantian view of aesthetic evaluation (Bertinetto, 2021, pp. 169-183), in point of fact whoever aesthetically appreciates something does not apply abstract criteria to concrete cases regardless of the work’s concreteness. Indeed, aesthetic

evaluative concepts exert normative force only through interaction with the contingency of single cases and are (trans)formed in virtue of the specific applications to concrete works. Thus, the logic, as it were, of aesthetic judgment is (analogous to) that of improvisation, and improvisation may be rightly understood as the enactment or the performance of aesthetic judgment (Peters, 2017).

Artistic improvisation invites perceivers to exercise a performance of aesthetic evaluation that has as its target a performative enactment of aesthetic evaluation through the arrangement of materials offered for appreciation in which artistic normativity is generated in the exercise of a grammar of contingency. Hence, when a performance of free improvisation appears as a perfect and complete organization of a content in which a sense has been made, rather than as a live process of making sense, the doubt about the improvisational nature of the performance suggests to us that we ought to refine our perception, sensitizing it through repeated practice, in order to grasp the aesthetic emergence of the artistic sense of the performance from the interaction with contingency. This training, I claim, is not only a fundamental ground for exercising and improving our aesthetic perception and the aesthetic judgment of improvisations, but is a crucial requirement of aesthetic perception as such. Therefore, practically solving the aesthetic paradox of improvisation, through repeated exercise aimed at grasping the emergence of the unexpected aesthetic sense of improvisation as a constitutive part of its artistic content, trains us in the practice of aesthetic evaluation as such.<sup>16</sup>

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