

Improvisation in the Arts

Introduction

This article focuses primarily on improvisation in the arts as discussed in philosophical aesthetics, supplemented with accounts of improvisational practice by arts theorists and educators. It begins with an overview of the term *improvisation*, first as it is used in general and then as it is used to describe particular products and practices in the individual arts. From here, questions and challenges that improvisation raises for the traditional work-of-art concept, the type-token distinction and the appreciation and evaluation of the arts will be explored. This article concludes with the suggestion that further research and discussion on improvisation in the arts is needed, particularly in the areas of non-jazz improvisation.

Improvisation in the Arts in General

In a general sense *improvisation* is spontaneous, unplanned or otherwise free-ranging creativity. Besides denoting an activity *improvisation* is also used to denote a product of improvisational activity (see Alperson 1984 19). Thus certain performances or products of artistic activity are referred to as *improvisations* when they have been produced in a spontaneous, originaive way.

Philip Alperson considers Aristotle (*Poetics*) and R.G. Collingwood (*The Principles of Art*) to be examples of philosophers who use the term *improvisation* to denote creativity in the broad sense (see 1998). In a similar vein R. Keith Sawyer treats improvisation as a kind of product creativity that leads to art objects such as paintings, sculptures, architecture, poems and novels, theatrical scripts and musical scores (see 2000 149-50 and 1995). At this broad level of generality improvisation in the arts is no different from improvisation in any other field of minded human endeavor, whether it be conversation, science, ethics or any other spontaneous, creative activity. This is in line with the pragmatic philosophies of John Dewey and Joseph Margolis, among others (see also Aaron, Alperson 1998, Barnes, S. Davies 2001, Hamilton 2000, Hebidge, Matheson, and Zaunbrecher). Music, theater, and dance, however, are more likely to use *improvisation* to refer to a particular method, mode or feature of a performance practice.

Despite this focus on spontaneity, most improvisation theorists agree that improvisation is not *ad hoc* activity; rather, it involves skill, training, planning, limitations and forethought (see Alperson 1984, Bitz, Bresnahan, Brown 2000a, Clemente, Hamilton 2000, Kernfeld, Sterritt, and Zaunbrecher). These theorists hold that all creation and performance within an artistic discipline involves an awareness of the

aims and parameters of the work of art or event, genre, school and style in which the activity is taking place. To achieve the emotional effects required by certain genres of classical tragedy, for example (and as Aristotle has noted in the *Poetics*), the plot structure and characters must have qualities that create pity and fear in the audience. Thus spoken words or gestures on the part of a playwright or actor cannot violate these conditions or the performance fails to be successful as a performance in this genre.

In the case of jazz Barry Kernfeld notes that “the completely spontaneous creation of new forms by means of free improvisation, independent of an existing framework, is rarer in jazz than it might seem, not least because where two or more musicians play together, no matter how intimately they know one another’s work, some agreed decisions about the progress of a piece are normally necessary” (Kernfeld 315). Andy Hamilton would agree, noting that sometimes improvisations are “fixed” in advance even if they are not written down (see 2000 177). Finally Alperson and Lee Brown point out that improvisers often work and perform against a musical context and tradition and that mastery of this tradition is thus necessary in order to improvise well in these cases (see Alperson 1984 22 and Brown 2000a 114).

The idea that there are limitations on spontaneity in artistic improvisation has led some philosophers to speculate that improvisation is just a fast kind of composition (see Hamilton 2000 and Alperson 1984 119). Against this idea is Stanley Cavell, who held that improvisations are not compositions because their ephemeral nature means that they cannot be evaluated and interpreted as such by critics (Hamilton 2000 127, citing Cavell 200-01). Hamilton further notes that sometimes a non-improvised jazz performance can feel improvised due to the performer’s skill at interpreting a composition (Hamilton 2000 169).

Another feature of improvisation that occurs in all of the arts is that it can be done either by an individual artist or in a collective group (Kernfeld, Matheson, Sterritt). Solo improvisations include those by painters like Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Cézanne (see Gilmour), Beat writers like Jack Kerouac (see Sterritt), and certain iconic dancers such as Anna Pavlova and Ruth St. Denis, who were known to vary the interpretation of each performance they gave (Matheson). Collective improvisation can occur in a variety of different ways. In jazz, collective improvisation often takes place between soloists and accompanists (see Kernfeld 314). In theater, performers often jointly improvise during the course of a play, responding to others on the fly (see Barnes). In street performance collective improvisation can occur during flash mob performances and happenings. Game structures also exist for improvisation in dance and theater that require “group cohesiveness” or the game won’t work (Clemente 3 and 5 and Spolin 1963). Collective improvisation also takes place during Steve Paxton’s “contact improvisation,” where two or more dancers improvise together while maintaining physical contact, all the while

open to the influences on their bodies exerted by the physical dynamics such as energy, momentum, gravity, stillness, and tension (see Paxton).

Improvisation in Individual Categories of Art

The philosophical literature on improvisation in arts other than jazz music is sparse. New philosophy is needed in these areas in order to supplement the brief accounts provided below. The sections below have been separated into different genres of art in order to organize the sort of improvisation that is happening in these areas in some sort of readable form. They could have been organized differently without harming the theories that apply. In addition the lines between the arts are not rigid since many artforms are hybrids of various artistic processes, media and styles, not all of which come from the genre of art in which they are working.

Painting, Literature, Experimental Music, and Film

This section will begin with a discussion of improvisation in painting. John Gilmour has pointed out that Kandinsky improvised pieces during the process of creating a final painting (Gilmour 191). Gilmour also notes that Cézanne produced paintings, such as the paintings of Mont Sante-Victoire during the last years of his life (1902-04), that were what Gilmour has called “improvisational gestures” (200).

Sawyer describes painter Pablo Picasso’s process, for example, as “free-form, without preconceived image or composition; he is experimenting with colors, forms, and moods” (2000 149). He shows how Picasso might start with one thing but then change and revise it as new ideas emerge and others are rejected. Thus the process involves revision but is still creative and improvisatory in spirit.¹

Painters such as Robert Ryman, Larry Poons and Larry Rivers have acknowledged that they were inspired and influenced by jazz music, much of which is improvised (Colaizzi 35). In addition Vittorio Colaizzi and others have noted that painter Jackson Pollock played jazz records at a high volume in order to harness the energy and spontaneity of jazz music while painting (Colaizzi 36). This suggests that at the very least Pollock’s paintings were inspired by jazz and that at most they were improvisations themselves.

In the case of literature David Sterritt points out that Beat poetry was influenced by jazz music as well (163). Kerouac, for example, is reported to have modeled his spontaneous writing technique, what he called “spontaneous bop prosody” or “spontaneous trance composition,” on jazz saxophonist’s Lee Konitz’ improvisational style (Sterritt 163). Specifically, Kerouac’s improvisational techniques: i) used a stream-

of-consciousness that was influenced by the bebop jazz of his time, ii) involved “sketching,” what Kerouac called or “blowing” it (as a jazz musician would), “with words just as a visual artist would sketch it with lines,” and iii) revisited certain themes and memories (Sterritt 168). Similarly Allen Ginsburg compared the wild and imaginative abstract aspects of Beat poetry to saxophone playing (Sterritt 167).

It seems that when artists experiment with improvisational techniques in one art form, artists in other art forms follow suit. Thus literature, the visual arts, dance, theater, and jazz and non-jazz music have reacted to and been influenced by one another. Matthew Sansom connects abstract expressionism in painting with free improvisation in experimental, non-jazz music (31). Joan Miró, André Masson and Max Ernest, Sansom points out, developed painting processes that were influenced by surrealist poet André Breton’s efforts at automatic writing (31). These artists followed Breton in allowing their work to unfold and actualize in spontaneous ways.

Experimental musicians and groups such as John Cage, Cornelius Cardew, Derek Bailey, AMM, and the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, also engaged in what they called *free improvisations* (see Sansom 29). They organized sound into collages and via chance operations (a technique Cage developed with his partner, contemporary dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham) with the goal of creating non-predetermined results. Cage also created pieces of music that allowed ordinary sounds to be themselves (Sansom 29).

In the case of film, Sterritt points out that some film directors, such as Robert Altman and Mike Leigh, have used improvisation as part of the actors’ pre-filming rehearsal process (169). This is not unlike the use of improvisation as a rehearsal tool for actors in theater (see Wexman 30). One difference between rehearsal improvisation in theater and film, however, is that most film improvisation is for a recording that will be replayed for an audience rather than for an audience that shares the same space as the performers (Wexman 30-31). This means that the director can edit actors’ improvisations and add to them during the course of editing the film (Wexman 32).

Film is most like theater and performance art where the film is part of an unrehearsed happening, as in the case of Andy Warhol and Jack Smith, who tried to capture entirely improvised, unplanned and unrehearsed activities on film (see Sterritt 169). Some film directors who film for recordings have been charged with forgetting that an audience exists at all. Directors Robert Altman and John Cassavetes, for example, have been accused of engaging in “private improvisation” on film, where the improvisation that takes place is more for the actors’ benefit than for the benefit of the public audience (Wexman 31).

Performance Art, Theater, Dance, and Jazz Music

In the performing arts the artist who is the composer of the original piece and the performer may be two different people. There may be a pre-existing structure created by a composer from which the performer improvises. This division is not always clear. In performance art *happenings*, which also occur in experimental dance and theater, laypersons may participate in an improvisatory fashion in ways that make them performers, if not also partial composers, of the structure or event (see Clemente 6). In the case where a composer creates a new structure or event while performing an entirely improvised work, however, the performer and composer may be the same person. Performance artist Marina Abramović, for example, often creates events where every moment of her performances is unplanned and improvised (McGillicuddy; see also Howell for more on performance art).

Formal, descriptive features of improvisation in the performing arts include the following. Improvisation: 1) can apply to either a whole piece or a part (Carter, Alperson 1998, Sterritt 164-65); 2) can provide variations on a theme or rearrangements of a structure (Sterritt 164 and 166); 3) can depend on meaning that is extrinsic to what is being performed such as making references to external events or commonly known occurrences (Kernfeld calls this feature “extramusical meaning” at 322, Goldman, see also Matheson); 4) involves risk (Brown 2000a 119; see also Alperson 1984 23 and Kernfeld 322); and 5) may involve repetition (Kernfeld 322; see also Sterritt 168).

Specific forms of improvisation in theater include: 1) Commedia dell’arte, 2) most comic or clown traditions, and 3) Viola Spolin’s *Improvisation for the Theatre* (Barnes). In general these provide structures and rules that govern the way that actors improvise, as in the *Second City* company in Chicago, where prompts are given by the audience that govern the actors’ improvisations (Barnes; see also Sweet; for more on improvisation in theater in general see Zaunbrecher and see Napier).

In dance, formal types of improvisation have been employed by Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Twyla Tharp, Daniel Nagrin, Art Bauman, Richard Bull, Margaret Beals, Kenneth King, Dana Reitz, Tanaka Min, Mark Morris, Judith Dunn, Dianne McIntyre, Bill T. Jones, Blondell Cummings, and Jowale Willa Jo Zollar among others (see Matheson). Besides contact improvisation (discussed earlier), experimental dance companies use improvisational game structures, prompts given by audience members, and other techniques both during the course of performance and as part of training for performance (see Clemente and Matheson).

The vast majority of the literature on improvisation highlights the improvisation that occurs in jazz music. This is due in no small measure to the vast influence that jazz has

had upon all of the arts, as touched upon earlier in the discussion of painting and literature. African-American dance, in particular, has often modeled itself explicitly on jazz improvisation (see discussion of Judith Dunn's, David Parsons' and Ishmael Houston-Jones' collaborations with jazz musicians and Dianne McIntyre's group pieces in Matheson). In addition, challenge dances and dance "battles" in tap and hip-hop dancing have shared origins in both African dance and music and in the U.S. history of slavery (see Floyd, Hill, and Matheson).

The features of improvisation that are particular to jazz are so extensive that this article cannot do full justice to them here. Kernfeld provides a laundry list of specific improvisational techniques in jazz, including full explanations of and examples for each, that includes the following: i) paraphrase improvisation (such as paraphrasing melodies), ii) use of motifs (use of musical fragments from other pieces), iii) formulaic improvisation (such as when certain "licks" are incorporated into continuous lines), iv) motivic improvisation (where a motif or series of motifs form the basis), v) interrelated techniques (using more than one of the techniques of improvisation together), and vi) modal improvisation (one that "explores the melodic and harmonic possibilities of a collection of pitches, often corresponding to one of the ecclesiastical modes or to a non-diatonic scale from traditional or ethnic music") (315-22). In addition some of the features particular to jazz improvisation connect jazz specifically to the socio-historical context under which it was developed. Thus jazz improvisation often does what Henry Louis Gates calls "signifyin," what Brown says is a distinctively African-American form of repartee that is typically satirical or mocking of the piece or phrase it is riffing off of (see Brown 2000a 118, citing Gates).

Improvisation and Ontology

Improvisation, as we have seen above, focuses on performance and on the spontaneous making of a new composition or event. This focus means that improvisation is not well-described by traditional notions of art that assume that art objects and structures are made in a pre-planned way by a composer or artist and that performers merely instantiate or interpret art products but are not themselves creators of art. If art is made new while being practiced by a performer this raises the question of whether the role of the performer is not just an interpretive artist but creative artist. If performers are considered to be creators of art this suggests that certain traditional ontologies of art, such as the work-of-art concept and the type-token distinction, do not adequately describe everything that we want to consider part of the activity and production of art. The debates surrounding these questions will be explored below.

How Improvisation Affects the Work-of-Art Concept

As shown above, one of the salient features of improvisation in the arts is that it allows for the possibility of on-the-fly artistic innovation. If the improvisation is upon a known standard, as in the case of jazz, then a debate arises about what this improvisation amounts to. Is it the interpretation of a pre-existing and enduring *work* of art? Is it a new, changed work of art? Is it following an outcome-determinative plan or does the standard just act like a set suggested of guidelines from which the performer is free to depart? The ways that philosophers have addressed these questions are outlined below.

Nelson Goodman held the traditional view that the work of a performed art like music or dance is in its notatable structure (see Goodman 177-91 and 211-13). Graham McFee follows Goodman's model for dance (see McFee 2011 and 1992). Both hold that no actual notation need exist but that the work as composed consists in a formal structure that can, at least in principle, be notated. It is unclear how Goodman or McFee would account for improvisation given that both consider performers to be the interpreters rather than the composers of these works of art.

Some philosophers acknowledge the validity of the *work* concept for art but consider improvisational performances to be those situations where the work is identical to the performance because the performance is a one-off event. Both Roger Scruton and David Davies hold this view (see Hamilton 2000 169, Scruton, and Davies). Alperson locates the work of art in jazz music in the performance event that instantiates the structure (Alperson 1984). For Alperson one does not have an artwork when one is in possession of a musical score (or the idea of its structure); the work exists only in the event that instantiates it.

Garry Hagberg and Andy Hamilton hold that jazz creates performance *events* rather than *works* (see Hagberg 2002, and Hamilton 2000). David Osipovich makes a similar move in theory, finding that the product of theater is a production and event rather than a work (see Osipovich). Andrew Kania says that jazz music does not create works of art because of its high degree of improvisation, with the standard functioning like a suggested recipe for performance from which the performer is free to depart (see Kania 2011 396). Stephen Davies agrees with Kania here, calling many jazz improvisations "musical playings" rather than artworks, especially in those situations in which a musician is improvising without any intention to create a work of art (see 2001 11-12). Brown says that a fully improvised jazz performance is not a "work" because it "is not re-identifiable in multiple instances" (Brown 2000a 115; see also Brown 1996).

If improvisations or improvisational performances are not individual works of art, and if art is defined as an activity that results in works of art, then it follows that improvisational products and practices are not properly conceived as essentially artistic at all. If *art* is defined in an institutional way, or in terms of how the term *art* is used in

culture, however, then improvisational arts like jazz music do seem to be regarded as art. In any event it seems clear that if one wants to treat improvisations and improvisational performances as part of art proper one may need something other than the work-of-art concept in order to do this.

How Improvisation Affects the Type-Token Distinction

If improvisation does not necessarily create *works* of art then it is possible that it does not create types or tokens-of-types either. In short, a type is a universal kind that is tokened by particular instances (see Wollheim 74-75 following C.S. Peirce).

When applied to the performing arts some philosophers have referred to performable structures as types and individual performances as tokens. James Young and Carl Matheson believe that improvised jazz performances can be tokens (particulars) of a type (a universal kind) "...when they share a common starting point in a loose set of tacit instructions" (128; see also Alperson 1984 26). In his earlier work Brown (before his pieces on higher-order musical ontology that claim that no universals exist for jazz – see 2011a and 2012) agrees that improvisations can token work-types, agreeing with Young and Matheson that an entirely improvised performance is not itself a musical work (2000a 115).

Hagberg eschews the type-token distinction for jazz music since he believes that its performances are never strictly repeatable (2000). He says that jazz improvisation gives us not tokens of types but "sonic embodiments without mental ideas behind those embodiments" (1998). Thus Hagberg holds that the "universal" being identified by the "type" language simply does not exist. Alessandro Bertinetto agrees, holding that the type-token distinction cannot adequately explain one-off improvised musical works that are not repeatable (Bertinetto 109).

The ephemeral nature of many improvisational events and activities is another reason that some philosophers have given for why the type-token distinction is inadequate for describing improvisation in the arts (see Kernfeld 314, Bertinetto 106; for ephemerality in dance in general see Conroy). It is not difficult to imagine that a performance might be ephemeral but it's difficult to imagine how a repeatable work or type can itself be ephemeral. If the word "art" attaches only to enduring structures and universals then anything that fails to attach to such a structure or universal would fail to be art in an important sense. This suggests, once more, that we are left with the idea that either improvisation is not part of art or that we need something other than the type-token distinction to describe the kind of art that it is.

How Improvisation in the Arts Affects Aesthetic Evaluation and Appreciation

Another area of aesthetics philosophy that improvisation affects is the evaluation and appreciation of the arts. Hagberg says that improvisation affects critical evaluation because the critic has access to the piece only once (2000). This is more likely to be true, of course, where improvisation is during live performance rather than during the recording process. It does seem, however, that the gold standard for improvisation is live performance rather than recording because of the sense of unfolding-while-happening immediacy that improvisation during live performance provides. The post-recording editing process also casts doubt on whether a recording truly captures an improvisation or improvisational moment (see Wexman 32).

A live audience setting in which improvisations are observed in real time creates a situation where the perceived authenticity of the artist or performer is a good-making feature of performance evaluation (see Brown 2000a, Hagberg 1998 and Sterritt). To be “in the moment” and thinking on-the-fly in the way that improvisation requires entails that an artist summon all the skills, training and resources that he or she can muster. Shortcuts, half-hearted efforts and “faking it” will cause the improvisation to fail in its intent. The artist will lose the audience and the artwork or performance will not ring true. In addition a good-making feature of improvisation is that it provide the audience with a sense of an “anticipatory phase” that is “loaded with expectancy” for what comes next (see Alperson 1998, Clemente, Sterritt). Improvisation is also valued for the sense of “surprise, experiment, and discovery” that it provides (Kernfeld 313, Sterritt 163, Clemente, Albright and Gere).

Indeed, improvisation places a greater evaluative and appreciative focus on artmaking and on the role of the artist and performer in the making of art (see Clemente 1). It gives us a sense of access to “immediate flash material from the mind” (Sterritt 163, quoting Beat poet Allen Ginsberg; see also Alperson 1998, Brown 2000a 121, Clemente 1 and 6, Hagberg 1998 and 2000, and Sawyer 2000). It is the *sense* or *feel* of immediacy that is the relevant aesthetic feature of improvisational performances; this can be true even if portions of that immediacy were pre-planned or pre-vised by the performing artist in advance (see Sterritt 168-69, De Spain 2014, and Wexman). This sense or feel of immediacy is also the normative goal in non-improvised performances, as Brown points out, but it is heightened in improvisation by the audience’s awareness that much of what happens in an improvisational performance is new and immediate to the artist as well as to the audience (see Brown 2000a 120).

The sense of immediacy that improvisation brings is due in no small part to the way that improvisation brings the artist and audience’s experience together in a vital way, particularly in those cases where audience response is particularly solicited or required (see Alperson 1998, Clemente 2, Sawyer 2000 149 and Brown 2000a 121-22). If an event

will only happen once and is not repeatable, the audience had better pay close attention. Indeed, Hagberg and Brown have held any audience member who fails to attend adequately to what the artist is doing will fail to understand an important evaluative and appreciative quality of the performance (see Hagberg 2000 and Brown 2000a 121). This greater awareness and sense of involvement can also lead to heightened bodily and kinaesthetic experiences for the audience as well as for the artists (see Clemente 2). All of these things, Brown is right to point out, affect the aesthetic qualities of the performance as gauged by the experience of the audience, and thus any appreciative and evaluative aesthetic theory that relies on this experience will have to adjust accordingly (see 2000a 122).

In addition some have pointed out that appreciators often value improvisation for its impromptu and often chaotic aesthetic; what Hamilton calls an aesthetic of imperfection (Hamilton 2000; see also Brown 2000a, Gioia 66, Bailey 48). This is an ideal that is opposed to the aesthetics of perfection, based on a Platonist concept of the musical work (2000 170 and 172). An aesthetics of imperfection does not mean that jazz improvisers do not care about the quality of the music; instead it means that perfection is not the only, or even the highest, good-making feature of improvised jazz (see Brown 2000a 119 and Sterritt, who claim that jazz musicians do care about playing music that is worth hearing).

Conclusion

In conclusion, improvisation in the arts highlights creativity, immediacy, innovation, and spontaneity as part of its product and activity, although an artist's ability to create these effects may be highly skilled and trained. If we want to consider improvisational products and practices part of *art* properly conceived then improvisation also challenges us to find definitions of art that are large enough to accommodate it. It also attaches certain aesthetic values and modes of appreciation to the products and events it creates that may affect the philosophy of evaluation and appreciation. Significant strides have been made by aesthetics philosophers in the area of the philosophy of jazz improvisation. In need of far greater development are the philosophies of the other arts, including painting, sculpture, architecture, literature, film, performance art, theater, dance, non-jazz music (such as rap), digital media arts and others.

¹ For a filmed version of Picasso's five-hour improvisational process here Sawyer directs us to Claude Renoir's film, *The Mystery of Picasso* (1982), which uses time-lapse photography.

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