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Expecting the Unexpected: Improvisation in Arts-Based Research

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It is not easy to improvise, it's the most difficult thing to do … [but] I believe in improvisation, and I fight for improvisation, but with the belief that it is impossible. (Derrida 2002)

This article attempts to define and describe improvisation as a method for doing art-based research. When we think about research, we usually have in mind understanding what has already happened. The 're' in 'research' tells us that we are engaged in a backward glance, looking again at what has been in order to comprehend its significance. Improvisation, on the other hand, indicates action that looks forward to what has not yet been and what cannot be anticipated – the *imprévu*, that which cannot be seen in advance. How then can improvisation become a method for doing research? How can the still unknown show us the way to knowledge?

Too often research is a repetition of what the enquirer already knows. In our quest for new knowledge, can we avoid basing our research practice on our own habits and memories? Especially in the case of 'outcome' research, we often seek to find the result that we anticipate. This raises the question, how can we build upon what we know and still discover something new? Can we adopt an improvisational method for research in order to become spontaneous even in our attempt to understand the past?

Perhaps we can find a clue to this dilemma by looking at improvisation in the arts. In a sense, all art-making has an improvisational element – it aims to bring something new into being. Even works produced according to classical models give us a new way of seeing what is old. However,

it was not until modernism that the new became the explicit goal of making art – in Ezra Pound's maxim for modern poetry: 'Make it new!'

Partly this quest for the new is a consequence of the breakdown of tradition. In a period of rapid technological and social change, the rules according to which we act come into question. If traditional models can no longer be relied upon, then we must operate as if we were starting all over again. As the title of Pirandello's play puts it, 'Tonight We Improvise'.

My own experience as a performing artist has been primarily in improvisational styles, including Lecoq-based physical theatre (clown, neutral mask, commedia dell'arte), improvised vocal expression in the Roy Hart tradition, and Butoh, Japanese postmodern dance. It is interesting to see what happens when highly trained performers come to workshops in these improvisational methods. They have much greater difficulty finding their way than do amateurs such as myself, since their established technique tends to inhibit them from discovering something completely new.

Of course, much of what happens in improvisational classes and workshops is not very good art. Participants may enjoy themselves by engaging in free expression, but the results are often of little interest to the audience. The main problem in improvisation is that the performers can get in their own way – their subjectivity becomes the content of the work. This is also a challenge in art-based research. The exclusive identification of art as self-expression is a misunderstanding that has haunted the field of Expressive Arts, which uses creativity and art-making in helping relationships, since its inception – the very word 'expressive' misleading students and practitioners into thinking that to make art, one need only express one's own feelings. Sincerity becomes the criterion of excellence, and criticism is impossible.

In my own experience, on the other hand, I have often seen that self-expression is the death of art. As my Butoh teacher, Denise Fujiwara, says (quoting her teacher's teacher Hijikata), 'The first prerequisite of Butoh is, "Kill the self!"' She goes on to say, 'And Buddhism tells us, "There is no self!"' In other words, art cannot be reduced to psychology – the psyche is in the world, not in an interior space understood in the Cartesian manner as separate from the external world. Indeed, we understand who we are through what we do and what we make. *Poiesis* implies that we shape ourselves by shaping the world. We do not express a pre-existing and substantial self

but form the self continuously through our poietic acts, a process that James Hillman calls 'soul-making'.

Actually, we should say that the work is expressive, not the self; the artwork has qualities that affect us. It is not the person that touches us in the work of art but the expressive qualities that the work embodies. Rudolph Arnheim was one of the few psychologists to understand this. For him, the psychological element of the work of art consists not in the expression of the self but in the effect that the expressive work has upon the psyche. We call this the 'aesthetic response' that the work produces in us, the way it 'touches' or 'moves' us. This is the 'effective reality' of the work, the impact that it has upon us (Knill et al. 2005).

Improvisation, then, cannot be understood as self-expression, doing whatever one feels like in the moment. Moreno, the founder of psychodrama, understood this very well in his description of spontaneity, action that is free. Spontaneity, for him, is what characterizes an act that is an appropriate response to what is given, not a mere action upon impulse. Moreno touches upon an important aspect of improvisation here. Unlike most theories of improvisation (e.g. that of Stephen Nachmanowitch in *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (1990)), spontaneity is not conceived of as an absolutely unconstrained beginning, a God-like creation *ex nihilo*, but as a response to what is given, a response that meets the prior situation in a way that allows for maximum freedom within the framework that is provided to us.

In Expressive Arts, we speak of this as 'expanding the range of play', the *Spielraum* or play space in which the client finds herself. Usually someone will come for help with a sense that they have no options, that their range of play is constricted. By setting a frame for art-making in the session, we aim to give the person the experience of finding freedom within limits, an experience that can analogically enable them to see the possibilities in their own limited life-situation.

From this point of view, improvisation, although oriented towards the new, only accomplishes this by building upon the old. Improvisation in art-making, as in Expressive Arts, responds to what has been given by taking it in unexpected directions. I have experienced this, for example, through participating in an improvisational music groups in Toronto, the Element Choir. The choir is a purely vocal group lead by a conductor, Christine Duncan. Christine uses a series of hand signals to indicate what kind of sounds she would like to hear and who she would like to make them (e.g. who will solo, complement the soloist, sing in contrast, where silence will come or very loud sound, what pitch will be used, etc.). However, though there is the constraint of

Christine's direction, the sounds themselves are not predictable and depend solely on the sensitivity of the performer. As in all music-making, the key to excellence here is listening – the ability to hear what sound has occurred and to sense what could come next.

Similarly, in the annual clown-show that I do with my clown partner Ellen Levine at the European Graduate School in Switzerland, although the show emerges out of improvisations that we and the other performers engage in, I always take the role of director and shape the improvisations so that they have the maximum effect. At the same time, however, we find improvisational moments that arise unexpectedly within the performance itself, playing within the framework so that it stays alive and does not become mere repetition. Sometimes a truly unexpected element happens in the performance; someone falls down or a technical glitch occurs. Clowns call this a 'gift from the gods', since it challenges us to be truly spontaneous in the moment without having prepared our response in advance.

Improvisation, then, although an activity that aims for maximum freedom, always has a frame within which to operate, usually set by a director, someone who sets the framework for the kind of expression that may occur. Improvisation, moreover, expecting the unexpected future, still responds to what has already been given in the past. Perhaps in this way improvisation is a model for life – we are never free from the past but neither are we condemned to repeat it. At every moment we can carry it forward into new and surprising directions. I have elsewhere referred to this, following Derrida's term, as 'mimesis with a *différance*' (Levine 2009: 186).

In a research project, this orientation to improvisation means that researchers must accomplish two goals: on the one hand, they must provide a direction for the research and intervene in order to keep it on track. On the other hand, they must be sensitive to what is emerging and be willing to go down unexpected pathways if indicated by the knowing that comes towards them. Improvisation in research, as in art-making, thus carries a dual imperative: to provide direction and at the same time be willing to give up control and follow the surprise of what is emerging.

There are two difficulties in particular inherent in our attempts at improvised behaviour, whether in art-making or in research practice. We can be stuck in our old patterns, repeating what once was new and is now merely a habit. And we can overly control and predict what will occur, trying to make it attain the result that we want. It was for this reason that John Cage, one of the great innovators in modern music, disdained the practice of improvisation. Cage is sometimes thought of as a master of improvised music, but in fact he criticized improvisation as necessarily based on the composer's or performer's habits and memories. To make something

truly new, Cage thought, it would be necessary to escape the subjectivity of the musician and base the music totally on chance. For this reason, Cage used random methods of composition in which his own inclinations would be totally put out of play. It is an open question, of course, whether this attempt at absolute serendipity was successful; among other things, Cage had to choose the particular random method that he was using. In addition, he came more and more to rely on one method, the *I Ching*, which not only has a very clear framework but is also subject to interpretation by anyone who employs it.

It was not until Cage was almost 70 that he deliberately took up improvisation as a compositional method, temporarily letting go of his own habits as a composer. In 'How to Get Started', Cage developed an improvised lecture format, in which he used a series of ten cue cards, each with a single word that he had chosen on one side. Cage turned the cards over and, in a random manner, would pick one word and then speak about the topic that it indicated for three minutes. His three-minute lecture would be recorded and then played back while he was engaged in lecturing for the next three minutes on another topic indicated by a different card. At the end, the audience heard ten lectures occurring all at the same time over ten different audio channels. 2012 was the centenary of John Cage's birth. To commemorate this, a number of events were held in different locations around the United States and other countries. In one of them, the lecture format for 'How to Get Started' was offered for public participation (Cage 1989). To honour Cage's work and to explore his method of improvisation, I decided to give a lecture on improvisation at the European Graduate School and to use Cage's method as part of the event. The talk was approached as an art-based experiment involving myself, Ellen Levine, and responses from the EGS community.

The programmes in the Arts, Health and Society Division of EGS focus on the use of the Expressive Arts Improvisation, I believe, is not only a way of making art but also an essential element of Expressive Arts in general. In the phase of an Expressive Arts session that we call 'decentring', in which clients are guided in an imaginative process of play and art-making, they engage in improvised behaviour that often leads to surprising and unexpected results. Note that the one guiding the session, sometimes referred to as the 'change agent', has the responsibility of helping clients find their own aesthetic response. We call this the 'aesthetic responsibility' of the change agent, and it often involves the ability to improvise on the part of the change agent

herself, as she has to respond in the moment to whatever is happening to the client in the session.

Decentering, far from being absolutely free, has the characteristics of improvisational action that we have outlined: an agreed-upon framework as well as behaviour that, though spontaneous, nevertheless is always a response to what has already been given. We could say that art-based research is a form of decentering, in which the researcher moves away, or 'de-centers', from the research goal at hand and engages in improvised art-making that responds to what is emerging. In this manner, surprising discoveries may occur.

At the EGS event, after elaborating on the significance of improvisation for Expressive Arts, I did a performance of 'How to Get Started', using ten index card with words relevant to the field of Expressive Arts, laid face down on a table. At the same time, I invited Ellen Levine to make an improvised visual art piece that would be an analogue to the lecture format. Consequently Ellen chose ten containers, which she then numbered, and into which she placed ten different sorts of objects chosen at random from the art room. At every three-minute interval, she would overturn the container that had the same number as the index card whose word I was lecturing about, and add its contents to what she had already made. Since she was working on a flat table, we projected her process upon a large screen at the front of the room so that it could be seen by the audience.

Since we only had two audio channels, instead of the ten that Cage used, we removed the chairs and invited everyone to move around as they wished in order to facilitate the audience's experience. This, in fact, became the occasion for the most improvised part of the experiment. The audience was composed of faculty and students, and their way of moving around the room itself became an artistic performance with a distinct choreography as participants stood still, lay down, danced, did t'ai chi movements, etc. Afterwards, participants described how the combination of lecture, visual art-making and dance/movement 'worked' from an aesthetic perspective.

Nevertheless, on reflection I was disappointed with my own performance. Here the pitfalls of improvisation that Cage mentions can be seen. By choosing the words in advance, I had selected topics that I was familiar with. Consequently for the most part I found myself saying things that I already knew and that probably the audience was familiar with as well. The only truly

improvisatory moment came with the word 'sex', which I had chosen just for fun. I remember for a moment not knowing what to say at all and then finding some interesting connections with the Expressive Arts. However, even in that case, I think I fell back in part upon some already formulated thoughts concerning the role of Eros in art-making.

This experience raises the issue of improvisation as a method of gaining knowledge – in other words, as a research method. In the process of supervising the doctoral dissertation of Sabine Silberberg at the European Graduate School, I found that her research project was highly improvisatory in unexpected ways. Sabine had been working for over a decade as a counsellor at the Dr Peter Centre, an HIV/AIDS organization in Vancouver, which uses 'harm-reduction' as one of the models of care. The principle of harm-reduction is 'to meet the client where they are at', i.e., not to impose a desired outcome on them but to 'shape the moment' by responding to their situation in its own terms and helping them to find the best way to live with it (Silberberg, personal communication). Many of the clients are substance abusers. In accordance with the harm-reduction model, counsellors at the Centre do not try to help addicted clients 'kick' their habits but instead attempt to provide a supportive atmosphere in which they can cope with the issues that addiction raises in ways that are not self-destructive.

In recent years, Sabine had become interested in photography and ultimately brought it into the Centre as a way of working with clients. The goal of her year-long dissertation research project was to see what impact photography could have upon clients using Expressive Arts approaches within a harm-reduction context. Sabine chose to give clients cameras in order to encourage their capacity for taking charge of their lives. The first obstacle she faced was that sometimes clients would lose the cameras or forget to bring them to sessions. She dealt with this partially by using cheap cameras whose loss could be tolerated and partially by using her own camera or her computer in sessions with clients.

In addition to encouraging her clients to use photography, Sabine herself took photos and shared them with the people with whom she was working. Sometimes she and her clients took photographs of each other and exchanged them. She was thus engaged in art-based research in mutual cooperation with her clients. In several ways, she functioned like the director in an improvisational theatre piece, setting the stage, giving guidelines, helping the actors to find their roles, and engaging in the process herself. Throughout the process, she had to improvise a response to the erratic behaviour of the particular group of participants that were involved, using an 'arts-analogue' method:

The term 'arts-analogue' refers to an evolving process or dialogue between artist and subject, or material. Each step calls for reflection, for a stepping back, and for a response to a newly changed shape, which in turn invites the next one. The process is characterized by uncertainty, by a searching and by emergence as responsive to aspects of the process. (Silberberg 2012)

This is clearly an improvisational approach, one that was necessary given the situation she found herself in. Moreover, her method had profound implications. Not only did the participants discover new resources and possibilities for themselves through photography, but Sabine herself was significantly affected by the work they did and by the relationships with her that developed as the work was carried on. As she says, 'The openness and receptivity towards clients and their availability and interests shows the improvisational attitude, and the clinical discipline embodies the respective art modality because – if one does not do that, there is no connection' (personal communication).

In the end, what the process has left me with is a profound longing for what the participants have moved within me: absorption in artistic processes and following my own longing for beauty. (Silberberg 2012)

To engage in improvisation within art-based research is not only to be responsive to the emergent knowledge that arises. It is also to cultivate an essentially aesthetic attitude, one that can transform the scholarly task of doing research into art-making. This attitude is profoundly different from the prevailing models for conducting research, based as they are upon a quest for certainty. In the first modern formulation of a research methodology, the *Discourse on the Method for Reasoning Well and for Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, René Descartes proposed a number of rules for carrying out the search for truth:

The first rule was that I would not accept anything as true which I did not clearly know to be true. That is to say, I would carefully avoid being over hasty or prejudiced, and I would understand nothing by my judgments beyond what presented itself so clearly and distinctly to my mind that I had no occasion to doubt it. (1637)

Although this formula seems to be based on a worthy desire to avoid prejudicial opinions, its criterion for truth – that it be indubitable and presented to the mind in a clear and distinct way – actually sets into operation a new prejudice, for, in Descartes' view, only mathematical ideas are clear and distinct and only mathematical proofs are indubitable. Of course, Descartes' methodology was originally devised to account for the new physics developed by Galileo, but the criteria it set forth were soon generalized to all areas of research. Even so-called qualitative research now looks for results that are 'evidence-based', i.e., conclusions that are clear and distinct and that can be proven beyond any doubt.

The aesthetic attitude that is embodied in an essentially improvisational research method can never be validated in this way. This is both its limitation and its strength. To engage in research in an improvisational way is, in Sabine Silberberg's words, to be involved in a '… process [that] is characterized by uncertainty, by a searching and by emergence as responsive to aspects of the process' (Silberberg 2012).We do not have the luxury of beginning with certitude and of being clear about what is to come. Rather, we can neither predict nor control the outcome and must, as Shaun McNiff has repeatedly advised us, 'trust the process' (McNiff 1998).

The strength of this method is that we may find things hitherto unknown; by casting ourselves into an uncertain future, we may go beyond the expectations with which we have begun. Its limitation is that we have no pre-established guidelines to give us the assurance that we are on the right path. Rather we must be constantly inventing the path even as we travel upon it. And this means that we may err, that we may wander into dead-ends, trails that lead nowhere, *Holzwege*, as Heidegger names them. Only afterwards can we look back and see where we have gone and, if necessary, begin again.

An arts-based improvisational method offers a radical alternative to prevailing models of research. Although it may lead us astray, it may also take us to places that we could never have envisioned. What is necessary is a willingness to live with uncertainty and contradiction, to give up the quest for indubitability, a quest that is itself highly questionable. Above all we must cultivate what John Keats saw as the essence of the aesthetic attitude: *'… Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'* (Keats 1899: 277).

The paradox of improvisation in arts-based research is that we have to let go of certainty in order to find truth. If we can embrace this paradox, we may yet make research into an activity that is as valuable and life-enhancing as art itself.

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