

free improvisation, modes of playing, gestures

1)

I begin with a kind of disclaimer: there is nothing new in this essay. Ideas have an enormously elastic relation to temporal succession. Take the article that I wrote in 1983 that stole ideas developed perhaps thirty years before that: those ideas had brought together a new diagrammatic vision of the world with the mythical systems of Amazonian societies that had no temporal alignment with our own histories or calendars. Now, in 2018, I am stealing from Gilbert Simondon, who worked more or less at the same time as Lévi-Strauss, but whose thinking grew from an engagement with the Presocratic philosophy of Thales. Free collective improvisation of music also emerged in the 1950's. Like all forms of aesthetic thought, it makes important transductive connections across different orders of organisation and different scales of measurement of space-time. In music the different orders are, most importantly, the order of simultaneity and the order of succession: the differences of scale embrace everything from evolutionary time, through individual ontogenesis and life-span, down to the minute temporal intervals in which we discern the starting transients of a single sound. Improvisation disdains, of course, the claim to immortality enshrined in even the most transient of written texts. It also un-fixes and renders as a variable the integration of players into pre-structured groups and in so doing makes the relationship between player and group central to its handling of the order of simultaneity. This makes it a unique cultural weapon in the struggle to bring into relation with itself the matter of existence for a simultaneously biological, psychological and social being.

In 1983 I was invited by Franco Fabbri to write something on free improvisation for the journal *Musica/Realtà* published in Milan. This was my first attempt to think out how free improvisation works. I was, and still am, unsure as to whether thinking it out has any bearing on the skill of actually doing it: more important to me is to discover how each artistic practice is its own form of thought, and how it might be possible to place alongside it thoughts in the very different medium of a set of ideas expressed in words - all in the hope of initiating a fruitful and transductive relation between them. I began by borrowing some ideas from Lévi-Strauss about art of every kind being always an encounter between structure and contingency. I could see there were plenty of accidents in free improvisations, but was there also structure, and, if so, what sort of structure? I had taken note of the fact that some listeners found free improvisation "difficult" because it seemed to them to lack any organisation or sense: part of what I wrote was this:

At the level at which music traditionally invites us to recognise structural continuity, the listener perceives disunity. You will hear, for example, a grouping of sounds which invites a development, or working-out, in terms of a familiar dialectic of continuity and change. The manner in which we expect this to take place is given by the musical context implied by that particular grouping of sounds. Yet, what actually happens is something else, a development that might have been appropriate to another grouping, another musical context.

In other words, the structure which is emerging at a given moment is not allowed to be worked out and fulfilled as a unity before it must give way to a new structure. Structure requires a space for unfolding and a time for growing, and this is constantly denied, so that structure on this level is always destroyed. It is destroyed not only in the sense that it does not continue, but also in the sense that it is given a new significance by the new structure that follows it.

Now, the implication of any heard grouping of sounds is its expected development, and this derives from its musical context - that is, all the other musical experiences which, taken together, constitute the experience of a given music, or musical tradition, to which it belongs. The musical context of a

given grouping does not derive from its immediate musical surroundings but, on the contrary, from its place within the sum of all other musical experiences which are not that one.

If elements of different musical contexts are placed together, or in sequence, their structural rules are in disunity. But a synthesis may emerge on a higher structural level which invites us to hear not only how things might be expected to proceed as independent normalities, but how things actually develop when they are heard together. In this sense, each break and change in musical context implies not only a discontinuity of structure, but a shift in structural level. If this begins to describe the flow of free improvisation in time, it also describes its simultaneous nature, where, in the case of several players, the stream of musical thought in the mind of each player constitutes one level of structure (which may or may not coincide with a particular musical context), whereas the interaction of the players constitutes some form of synthesis at a higher level.

I propose that free music does not, as it first appeared, live only in its each opposing instant, but that it constructs a structure of contexts, a theatre of contexts, a pattern in the sequences of shifts in structural level, and that this is the essence of its compositional element, and the means whereby an aesthetic will may work within it.

The struggle of the aesthetic will in free music is a struggle to integrate chance relations, and the only kind of structure which can absorb a continuous input of chance relations and still remain a structure, is a continuously self-transcending one - namely, a structure in which the prime significant relations are relations between structures, between levels of structure, and between contexts.

2)

When I wrote this I had grasped the relevance to improvised music of a thought that distinguishes structural levels. But I'm not sure that structural anthropology had more than a summary understanding of the idea of structural **level**: in Lévi-Strauss, structures are deductive, and he distinguishes structural levels to clarify his analysis of myths. Lévi-Straussian structures appear as static visual diagrams. But for me, in the context of music, the importance of the difference between two structural levels is the **event** of passing between them. The idea is not to analyse static and given structures but to point to an operation that actually happens in real life when an incompatibility between two elements on one level is transformed into a functional process on a higher level. However, in my 1983 account, change appears as largely arbitrary and driven by external factors: there is simply a sequence of structural changes as if musicians are constantly randomly selecting references to different musical contexts, and it is not clear why a later structure should be considered to be of a necessarily higher level than a preceding one.

To overcome these limitations I want to look at the process of improvisation in more detail from the inside. By "inside" I don't mean inside people's minds, but inside a continuing process of emergence. The focus shifts from how a continuous encounter between structure and contingency produces a series of new structures, to the detail of how any one single element might emerge. To articulate this phase of emergence, I turn to the work of Gilbert Simondon on individuation, and, in particular, his idea that anything that is defined or individuated always - in this transformation from its previous state of having been undefined, or merged with everything else - not only comes out into an environment, but exists necessarily in relation to that environment: this new emergent something is always one of the terms of a new relationship between its interior and its exterior: it also always retains aspects of the pre-existing field in which that relation did not yet exist: the presence of those pre-individual aspects means that individuation is never complete, and there is always a potential for further phases of individuation driven by the objective problematic of the internal tension of the structure.

Simondon developed his idea of individuation whilst thinking in the most general way about parallels between mineral crystallisation, and biological, and psychological individuation. But his concept of individuation can be a way to understand aesthetic processes: the connection is clear: aesthetic activity concerns itself directly and explicitly with origination in a way that other kinds of human activity do not.

In Simondon's theory, substance is always already organised, and its degree of internal differentiation is always relative. It does not stand in antagonism to form: there is simply a dynamic series in which different levels of organisation appear. Each process of individuation happens in a pre-existing field that contains structured energy potentials. The emergence of a new structure is the emergence of a new configuration of interiority and exteriority: a certain part of what was previously undifferentiated in the field becomes the new entity.

This aspect of Simondon's thought has important repercussions for understanding distinctions between form and material in art. Although, as a musician, I am in some way forming a material, the material that I am forming is always already formed – for example by the molecular organisation of the components of alloys used in the making of a saxophone or a cymbal, by the properties of sound waves in air, by expertise stored in memory, and so on. In the development of artistic practices there are important choices to be made about how formative actions acknowledge or do not acknowledge the pre-existing structure of the material, and, concomitantly, on what structural level the material is most closely examined and engaged with.

The notion of structure becomes relativised. Part of the awkwardness of my earlier description of improvisation is to do with the rather hypostasised and static notion of structure that I took, unexamined, from anthropology. Simondon's thought is more thoroughly time-based: it allows a closer approach to the fluidities of improvisation in which every element is already a structure and every structure is about to be an element of a new structure, so that the linkage of structures to anything as fixed as rule-based musical contexts has to sink further back in the process.

Once we bring forwards the fact that new elements emerge from a field that pre-exists them, it becomes easier to see how they always retain some aspects of all the other things they might have been. This seems to apply most potently in aesthetic contexts: here value is generated by choices, each move accompanied by a kind of denial of the move that it is not: the denied moves remain present in the affirmed move: each affirmed move carries within it the potential of self-transformation grounded in the presence within it of the other possible moves it was not: each affirmed move is historical in the sense that it is the history of how it was decided on, and this history is a resource for its future development or cancellation. The presence of the pre-individual field is highly salient for each individuation of an element. Every new element that comes to our attention is, by design, intimately connected with its own origination. The contrast with other, non-art, contexts is very strong: where discourse is being enunciated or where functional objects are being produced, originating processes are largely swept aside by the magic of the given fact. This is not to deny that, as a social institution individuating its own rules and territories, art does not suppress and conceal the pre-individual fields of its constituent elements behind the “genius” and “inspiration” that produce “classical” and “timeless” works. In fact, to this contradiction between concrete practice and social meaning, we owe the dynamic of individuation on the much larger scale of art history.

Aesthetic contexts encourage sequences of incomplete or unstable perceptual syntheses that, taken together, make up operative sequences. Structure is relevant in so far as it bears on operativity. A resonant operation is one that involves a change of structural level, a shift in perspective, and not simply the re-arrangement of elements within a structure that remains fixed: permutation, per se, is

always insufficient. So potentials in a structure are internal distributions that can reconfigure into new relationships between new elements, and open towards a different structural level that contains both the original structure and those structural elements within it that were suppressed or marginalised. A resonant operation would then be one that redistributes not the elements but the constituents of the elements within an existing structure. A structure with this kind of capacity for change would contain tension: the internal distribution would not be final but would contain a pressure for change that pushes against the resistance of the forces maintaining the structure's stability. This way of putting it relocates the dynamic from external to internal: it is not so much that musicians are constantly introducing new musical contexts with new structural implications but that new structure emerges from within an ongoing problematic within the material.

Musical intensity is highest where each individuation is a solution to a problem: not any old problem, but the problem posed by previous phases of individuation. Here the musical mind is most fully aware of the limitation of each solution, keeping itself sensitised not so much to the inadequacy of every stability but to the potential energy that accumulates as a result of the suppression of contradiction within every stability, forming the charge that can energise the next step forwards. What we learn as improvisers is primarily how to read and identify the sources of energy within a problematic, and to exploit them to make our interventions decisive ones. A decisive intervention is one that passes the energy of structural tension forwards in time towards the growing necessity for further interventions.

3)

Studies of improvisation - including my own in the past - often assume an interaction between centred individuals. Here I take an alternative line that starts by recognising the complexity of individuals and how this complexity produces itself on the trans-individual level. To extrapolate from Simondon's ideas about how individuation organises biological and psycho-social structures and apply them non-metaphorically to the processes of a specific art form may seem far-fetched, but this move simply reflects the reality of what art does in relation to human ontology. The playfulness of improvisation has depth: the decisions of improvisers occur both at the interface between the nature and individuality of each individual, and at the interface between the nature of each individual and the social group as it is present during improvisation as a trans-individual dimension.

To deal with the first of these interfaces first, the work of the improviser, as of any artist, is partly to do with negotiating across the boundary between the individual and the pre-individual field that remains with us, inside us but without being exactly a part of us, forming our individual nature. Unlike in other art-forms, the improviser chooses to articulate this negotiation in public. That is, she sets up conditions in which an input of indeterminacy triggers fast reactions that by-pass the mill of reflexive self-consciousness. These conditions for indeterminacy - beyond the axiomatic decision to not use a score to synchronise and coordinate the players - include the unspoken agreement to avoid not only predictable musical structures, but also any consistency in what might be used to define them. This generates an overlapping of boundaries in the sense that elements are more likely to be individuating simultaneously on the basis of diverse musical and non-musical variables: a field subject to multiple interpretations then makes it less likely that the individual perspectives of the players will synchronise. Other sources of indeterminacy include the use of unstable acoustic systems, the accenting of transitional and ambiguous aspects of sounds, and the choice of unknown partners.

But the improviser is not simply throwing herself into the flow of simultaneous moments of her immediate reactions: she is also intending musical shape, and this requires that the order of simultaneity be brought into reciprocal relation with the order of succession. She seizes out of time her momentary action and imagines its consequences: she weighs these consequences. In some way

she must constantly regenerate and perform her reflexive self-consciousness. This is where risk arises, not just on the level of individual decisions - because there might be failure and she might launch a damp squib - but on the level of the entire ontological project of a self-consciousness that must continuously constitute itself in a psychological field with which it is not coextensive because this field is also the pre-individual field from which that consciousness emerged. The improviser is, in this sense, performing the ontological problem of reflexive self-consciousness as a phase of existence in the world.

This negotiation that is made explicit in improvisation between the psychological individual, in the sense of a conscious, volitional, decisive mind, and the pre-individual field, in the sense of a body with its intuitions, its immediate reactivities, and its characteristic gestures and rhythms, brings forwards the pre-individual field into the trans-individual field that is the improvising collectivity, and this bringing forwards is enacted in collectively improvised music with more energy than in any other art practice. It is as if the whole relationship of the individual to herself and of the individual to the collectivity is unfolded in sound. The tension in the relation between the individual's thinking mind and the individual's pre-individual nature pushes her towards the higher level of integration offered by the trans-individual collective. Here an incompatibility between elements on one level can potentially be transformed into a functional dynamic process on a higher level. What I had earlier brought to bear on musical structure in improvisation, namely a structural thinking that could understand the process of this music by pointing to the actual event of passing from a lower to a higher structural level so as to unblock and mobilise potential energies, applies also to the human, or psycho-social and affective, content of this music.

There is a further sense in which the trans-individual collective constituted by the improvising group stands for, and functions as, the trans-individual collective as it is lived as a general field of experience. If art presents as sensory experience the ontological processes of the human being, improvised music occupies a pivotal zone. In Simondon's theory we are still reckoning as humans with our nature as purely living beings. Our earlier individuation as living beings has as an essential phase the emergence of the single somatic individual from a previous phase in which biological life was organised into colonies. For the colony, the individual is a temporary phase, a specialised fragment of the colony that separates itself temporarily from the mother-ship and goes off to reproduce the colony elsewhere. The colony - which we might call a "biological collective" - is, then, the earlier phase of organic being from which the biological individual, with its separate ontogenesis and ageing, evolved. This inherited sense of a biological collective is present deep in our biological individuality. Integral to the pre-individual field of every biological individual is a participational dimension deriving from this earlier phase - with "participation" carrying both the spatial meaning of togetherness and the temporal meaning of synchronicity. As humans evolve, and the biological individual reaches the phase of psychic individuation and the development of reflexive thought, the relation between pre-individual field and individual comes back into play, and this participational dimension becomes operative in a new way as the new kind of individual looks for new ways to resolve the new problematic of its existence. The trans-individual collective is the emergent field that recreates the participational dimension of the colony, but on a higher, richer, more complex, level. The collective integrates the de-phasings constituted by individual ontogenesis and ageing that were lacking in the colony that was always stuck in its permanent present. It allows these de-phasings to come into relation with one another.

The trans-individual collective is not a particular form of society or a specific kind of social group. Indeed a group of musicians getting together to improvise is one of the few actual possible embodiments of the trans-individual collective. A group of improvisers is disinterested in the Kantian sense: in principle it has no collective agenda and neither do the participants have an individual agenda: or, rather, the agenda is to discover the potentials of the situation to the greatest possible extent, avoiding anything that might impede that process. To witness collective

improvisation is to witness an ontological drama struggling to realise itself empirically as a sensory experience of organised sound, compromised perhaps only by a certain degree of interference coming from a tendency for actual social relations to substitute themselves for individuation processes on the level of the trans-individual collective. Most importantly, improvisation deals with the central matter that the trans-individual collective addresses, namely the phenomenon of temporal de-phasing as expressed in the biological individual's ontogenesis, ageing and death. The condition of being of the individual player at any moment is exactly that of de-phasing, of confronting, in the sense of taking a position in relation to, a time that is complex and multiple, sustained by and summoning into being memories of the past and protentions towards the future, but also, and simultaneously, dissolving into the immediate unity of the continuous present of that time.

One of art's potencies is to bring into reciprocal relation different orders of experience operating on vastly different scales. It is a familiar trope, for example, that duration in time-based art is intimately linked to the human life-span. Sounds are said to "die" - unless we quickly re-energise the acoustic systems that produce them. Performances end, and the unique process of aesthetic subjectivation they initiated closes off: the aesthetic subject that inhabited the musical experience falls away, the energies that were mobilised in it to be reconfigured into other types of subjectivity.

Simondon maintains that evolution and adaptation do not solve ontological problems but simply transform them through a series of phases of being that become increasingly complex. On the one hand this argues for the continuing relevance of the ontological problems of earlier phases of being, however remote in evolutionary time: on the other, it underpins the need for a description of the human being as a complex unity in relation to which exclusively biological, psychological or sociological forms of analysis are always inadequate and reductive. From this perspective it is salutary to compare Simondonian transindividuation to the idea of *communitas* as developed by the anthropologist Victor Turner. The aporia of anthropology was that it wanted to construct an essence for humanity but at the same time for this to be exclusively on the basis of social facts. Turner was looking for ways to explain certain social facts, starting from the liminal phases of rituals in Zambia, and connecting them with the new culture of spontaneity and of opting out of the social order that he saw emerging in contemporary Europe and America. He characterised this as a phase of *communitas*, of being outside of, or in opposition to, social structure, but his argument, whilst fatally implying them, could never actually account for the sociological relationships between social structures and liminal states. No surprise, perhaps, that the next thinker to take up the theme of *communitas* is Roberto Esposito, who, by dint of an excursus into its etymological and historical depths, situates it in contemporary experience as a zone in which we encounter our pre-individual alterity: Esposito draws on Simondon a second time when he considers the human body as the vector of a transindividuation, but a historically specific one that registers a contemporary need to restructure the basic dichotomies that separate persons from objects, and subjects from bodies.

In this new importance of the body, the history of music and the history of thought seem to have run in step. The return of the body in contemporary music, the new emphasis on the physical materialities of human body, of musical instrument, and even of sound itself, spells the moment at which music shakes itself free from a thousand years of submission to the radical dichotomy of spirit and flesh imposed by the Church: meanwhile the body re-enters philosophy shrugging off the past in the form of the inherited categories that underpin political, social, and legal definitions of the person as the owner of a body. But whilst the musician's body returns in scored music more often by implication, in the form of extreme demands made on players, it is jazz and its improvised dimension that bring forwards the individual body as the concrete source of musical action and the meeting-point of processes that are both gestural, decisive, and highly time-conscious. This is why free improvisation, despite its principled autonomy from fixed musical contexts, never cuts itself off

entirely from jazz. The bodily presence of the improvising musician counts in collective improvisation not as a mode of emphasis or demonstration but as the place of negotiation between individual and pre-individual, and between individual and trans-individual collective.

4)

Improvisation demands a new level of awareness of the physical materiality of the technical object that is the musical instrument. Again, just as the return of the body is nothing to do with the body as some absolutely authentic substance, or with any requirement for art to engage with substance in and of itself, so the new engagement with the instrument is directed towards its organisation as a many-layered structure, its precise mode of embodiment of an accreted mass of human gesture inscribed and crystallised into operative potentials. The improvising attitude cross-cuts the many ways in which individual instruments are integrated into larger systems, not only into ensembles in the literal, musical, sense of a group having a limited *instrumentarium*, or into families of instruments using related acoustic principles, but also into normative tuning and scale systems. During practice, the technical possibilities of the instrument are broken down into components and reconnected differently. Essentially, the instrument is re-thought as a meta-instrument, and the player moves between temporary stabilities offered as possibilities by the meta-stability of the meta-instrument. Timbre and envelope, traditionally fixed and used to define the contrastive or melding relations of instruments in ensembles, now become important variables in defining different modes of playing.

Had I been a conservatoire educated clarinettist, I might have gotten a “good” embouchure that would have carried me through the repertoire. But from my present point of view there is no such thing as a single good embouchure producing a single good sound, and it seems absurd to use the same embouchure for both Brahms and Stravinsky. As an improviser, I want my instrument to be not a single perfect instrument but many imperfect instruments. An improviser looks to develop the capacity to choose, on the fly, a mode of playing, which can be defined as a set of technical limitations selected from the total range of possibilities. The short-term problematic is how to achieve adequacy to the total situation within the mode of playing chosen at a given moment. The point at which individuation occurs is the point at which the player breaks into a different mode of playing: the voluntarily selected limits can no longer handle the developing situation. The change from one mode to another is often less instantaneous than playing within one mode: successive changes between modes of playing potentially form a definite and audible layer of rhythmic organisation.

The theory of improvisation we inherited from the Greeks posed a binary opposition between the moment of inspiration, the *kairos*, and a continuing work of memory and construction in chronological time. These points need to be re-understood as the polar extremes defining the edges of a field of potential energy inside which the practice of improvisation comes alive. In free improvisation, players use modes of playing as intermediary structures: the risk the improviser takes is not, generally, in a single action but in committing to a course of action. So my understanding of improvisation has gone from an earlier focus on making a reference to a musical context as the operative move between structures, towards a new focus on committing to a course of action as the operative move between structures. The course of action is legible because it can be grasped as limited in what it can do here and now, rather than because it elicits a limited group of musical expectations originating elsewhere. Legibility in improvisation means not a precise decoding of intentions but grasping the possibilities given by a set of limits: it allows multiple interpretations of the same move, and this informs not only the interactive relation between players but also the relation between players and non-playing listeners. The beauty of improvised music is the particular way that multiple pathways open out to the imagination: not just the paths taken but also the paths not taken, not just what was played but what might have been played but wasn't, the differing

simultaneous interpretations of each instant by each player informing choices that materialise in sound the presence within each move of all the moves it might have been but was not, folding outwards the pre-individual field of each individuation, or, to put it more viscerally, tossing into view the innards of every decision.

The instrument and its associated modes of playing call forth gestures. By “gesture” I do not mean decorative flourishes like those of pianists doing pianisms, and neither do I mean significant gestures, in the sense that Robert Hatten has analysed for Beethoven in terms of a shared language of gestures within a particular cultural moment. In improvised music gestures materialise as temporary forms of integration within the energy field containing the complex structures of bodies, instruments and sounds. Gesture is here given back to its pure form as a mediator between perception and action: it integrates the dynamics of observation of form in the world with the dynamics of movement, flowing across this polarity and drawing on a deep vocabulary of shapes of motion that have lodged in individual bodies and their histories. The ways that persons advance, stretch, fold, place, and hold themselves in space appear highly individual to us, a reciprocal guarantee of our own individual being in the world with them, witnessing and being witnessed by them. But beneath this level of social and spatial phenomenology the pre-individual fields of individuals actively mitigate the separateness of agency and this sometimes allows us to feel the gestures of others as if they were our own. This resonance, vastly amplified in aesthetic contexts (where normal agency is placed in parenthesis), bears on the experience of listeners: sounds are read as implying gestures that are not simply echoes of the visible gestures of the musicians but are sensed as partially proprioceptive. This ties in with how Dennis Smalley analysed listening to electronic music - a music of extreme absence. Deprived of the visible presence of musicians and of material sound-sources, listeners create imaginary “virtual sources” in a series of substitutions in which subtle changes in sound texture imply musical gestures that in turn imply instrumental gestures that in turn imply primary physical gestures in which sound-making and the physicality of human movement are merged - such as when two stones are rubbed together or a piece of wood is scratched at. Transposing this schema to what happens in a live improvisation, it seems that gesture, as it arises from the objective problematic of both sensing the world and acting on it, is moving in both directions at once across the polarity between “sensing” listeners and “acting” musicians, even as it articulates the inner negotiation of the musician between individuation on the level of self-reflexion and the pre-individual field of the body.

Finally it is possible to glimpse something of the polyrhythmic organisation of improvisations, a temporal structuring that grows out from the process itself, in which changes in modes of playing, the cyclic action of gesture, that, moving transversely to time, nevertheless takes time to move, the flux of individual players approaching or distancing themselves from the collective, their individual de-phrasings augmenting or decreasing as they simultaneously confront their own self-reflexion and let themselves flow with the accidental and ungraspable dynamic confluence of interpretations, events, and decisions, generate together a quality of time in which the smallest sonorous details may be suddenly illuminated by vectorial forces that swivel across them like laser beams and are gone.

Tim Hodgkinson, London, August 2018

TEXTS

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