

PRESENTER ABSTRACTS

Skin-Surface-Circuit : Embodying the Improvisatory

McGill University-ICASP Conference

June 14-16, 2012

Days/Months/Years

ANGELA : Arizona State University

In May 2011, at the Arizona State University Art Museum, our quintet presented and improvised dance/music/spoken word performance entitled : *Days/Months/Years*.

The work was presented in honor of the presence of renowned activist/scholar Angela Davis. Created collectively through a process of somatic awareness in movement and sound, this realtime performance was inspired by Ms. Davis' publication *Are Prisons Obsolete ?*. The piece was shown in the context of resident artist Gregory Sale's exploration of prison systems *It's not just black and white*.

For this conference, we propose to develop *Days/Months/Years*. As originally explored in Davis' writings, we will continue to unpack relevant concepts of social justice and power structures through somatic inquiry in movement, text, and sound. And in response to the conference's themes regarding new models of embodied knowledge and community, we ask through an improvisational performance process : what is a socially rehabilitated body ? What is an incarcerated mind ? Do existing so-called 'correctional' paradigms heal or dismember society's body/mind ?

Integrating personal development, transcending limited perspectives of ourselves and social constructs is a common base for our work together as improvising artists and educators ; it informs our collective approach ; 'love for the daily work' of being an artist, of being human, of being *a creative part* of something larger ; an active fascination with shaping and disseminating our collaborative and individual awareness's in the present moment.

This is what we share in embodied practice and what brings us together as an ensemble for improvised performances ; a Bigger Body, including the audience, comes into play.

Adaptive Use Musical Instruments (AUMI)

*Pauline Oliveros, Leaf Miller, Jaclyn Heyen, Gillian Siddall, Sherrie Tucker, Ellen Waterman:
Improvisation, Community and Social Practice (ICASP) research group*

Adaptive Use Musical Instruments (AUMI) interface enables students who have very little voluntary movement or other varieties of impairments to create and perform electronic sounds and sequences in order to participate in solo and ensemble electronic music improvisation and composition.

An original member of the AUMI team, programmer and RPI student Zane van Duzen, developed an initial computer program that enabled students with very limited mobility (head turning only) to generate musical rhythms and scalar patterns.

The AUMI program incorporates camera tracking so that no invasive devices are necessary. Their improvised movements enables the students to create rhythmic patterns and to communicate with others musically in the drum class led by Occupational Therapist Leaf Miller of Abilities First, Inc.

The AUMI program continues to be revised and improved with input from the technologists, students, therapists and feedback from registered users. A training program for therapists, aides, parents and

teachers in the use of the AUMI interface and improvisation is now available. The latest initiative is the development of an AUMI iPad App.

AUMI Researchers include:

Deep Listening Institute, Ltd.

Staff and students of Abilities First, Inc.

Faculty and students of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

Scholars and students of ICASP from University of Guelph, Guelph Ontario

All those who download and use the AUMI interface, currently over 500 registered.

AUMI Programmers include:

Zane Van Duzen

Zevin Polzin

Doug Van Nort

Jaclyn Heyen

Ian Hattwick

Henry Lowengard

Interactivity, Immersive Environments and Electronic Literature as Improvisation

Frédérique Arroyas: School of Languages and Literatures, French Studies, University of Guelph

How is reading electronic fiction like improvising?

In this presentation, we will explore works of literature that engage readers in interactive and immersive environments to ask how the reading process can be informed by musical improvisation.

Electronic literature is often presented in an open-ended format where the author steps aside in favour of the work, leaving a greater creative role to the reader. For example, Bill Seaman's *Red Dice/Dés chiffrés* (2000) is based on Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, a poem that represents "a first example of a network structure, of random combinatorics, multiple choices" (Weibel: 27). Seaman's installation requires participants to play an active, even performative role to generate a version of Mallarmé's poem. With *Toucher/To Touch* (2009) (<http://www.to-touch.com/>) by Serge Bouchardon, Kevin Carpentier and Stephanie Spenle, poems are generated via an interface that requires readers to move, caress, hit, spread, blow and brush the screen. The work requires headphones, a microphone (for "blow") and a webcam (for "brush").

Interactivity is becoming more and more a feature of electronic fiction. As the physical boundaries between the reader and the literary work become less apparent, it is important to ask how new technologies are affecting the reading process. By considering musical improvisation and its reliance on physical in the moment performance (there is no previously existing score that would constitute the musical work), I hope to shed light on the ways in which interactive electronic literature changes a reader's physical relationship to text.

Agency in Coaction: A Material-Semiotic Approach to Understanding Electro-Acoustic Improvisation

David Borgo: Department of Music, Integrative Studies, University of California San Diego

The standard account of improvisation maintains that our senses provide information to the brain, which then processes and plans utilizing its rich internal structure, and only then activates our motor systems (Pressing). Ethnomusicologists tend to adopt this orientation while also focusing on how improvisation is shaped by cultural conventions, usually conceived of as a model or referent stored in long-term memory

(Nettl). Others shift this focus to the “perceptual agency” of the listener, noting that perception itself is partially volitional (Monson). All of these approaches, however, subscribe to methodological individualism and to a representationalist cognitive paradigm. What if “agency” is not so easily contained by an individual’s consciousness? Recent experimental evidence demonstrates that our actions are often initiated from below the level of our conscious awareness and they can be extremely sensitive to external social pressures of which we are seldom aware (Wegner). Additionally, what if we expand our notions of “agent” and “agency” to include technical systems capable of actively searching for new information and of participating in planning and control activities? In this presentation I explore electro-acoustic improvised music that involves technologies that share generation, memory, and even judgment capabilities during performance. By drawing on literature in distributed cognition, actor-network theory, and post-humanism, I argue that improvising in this hybrid constellation of human-machine interagency provides an experience by which we can, at least temporarily, lessen our grip on social accounting and realize “action is always dislocated, articulated, delegated, translated” (Latour).

Embodied improvisation in cultural and social facets of boutique effects pedals

John Fenn: Arts and Administration, University of Oregon

A culture of boutique effects pedals has blossomed globally since the early 2000s, emerging at the intersection of DIY impulses, knowledge sharing on the Web, and desires across musical practices to interactively modify sounds. It is in this last domain that bodies figure most obviously, as we use feet and fingers on switches or knobs—often in moments of improvisation. As I have argued elsewhere (Leonardo Music Journal 20), though, locating improvisation in moments prior to or beyond performance per se, especially when it comes to the building of musical technology, has merit. On the one hand, we can consider how processes of improvisation coalesce in the assembling of circuits, the visual decoration of metal boxes, the building of boutique pedals: how does improvisation inform the making of technology that is, possibly, then used in musical improvisation? On the other hand, we can consider how the body as social and cultural nexus for praxis places improvisation in the creation of boutique effects pedals: how do individuals improvise with business models, the sharing or adaptive reuse of knowledge, or the aesthetic imagining of sounds that could come from a circuit? A continuum of embodiment in/of improvisation transects cultural and social domains, oscillating with the technical domain all the attendant aspects of improvisation that Kevin Patton finds there. Ultimately, this paper posits that pedals are cultural objects rich in potential for understanding improvisation as a multimodal process intimately wrapped up with the body—as physical, social, and cultural entity.

Age and Body Movement Improvisation in the Context of Folk Dance: A Case Study of the International Folk Dance Club of The University of Toronto

Fethi Karakeçili: Department of Music, York University Toronto

The International Folk Dance Club meets every Friday at a building on the campus of the University of Toronto. They have been doing so for more than 30 years. The group is composed of folk dance enthusiasts; some professional, most amateur but all imbued with a passion for appreciating, learning and performing international folk dance. However most are what would be identified as seniors – over the age of 65 and beyond. As an insider to this group and a folk dancer myself I will be examining the ways in which aging forces a body to naturally improvise movement within meter, rhythm, steps and gesture. The rigours of this dance style sometimes demands a dancer to jump, hop, turn and run. This can provide a challenge for an older body; improvising provides a means to perform.

At times the body leads us in movement. In folk dance - gestures, postures, time and space are reliant upon the movements of others when they are linked to one another. When we perform folk dances the body follows particular gestures and articulations which we may respond to or ignore at times; this depends on our own space and music. At an older age our body capabilities diminish thus transforming

individual dance spaces and increase naturally occurring improvisations.

As one ages it may be generally assumed that memory capacity diminishes however my observation is that movement experience leads the body through memory and practice to perform. I will also discuss the relationship between the conscious brain, memory, experience and self as discerned from the writings of Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio.

Agency and Disorder

Monique Lanoix: Department of Philosophy and Religion, Appalachian State University

Merce Cunningham relied on chance operations to structure his dances. By doing this, Cunningham wanted to distance himself from narrative and have less control over the outcome of his choreographies. This paper examines the manner in which control, or lack of control, and dance destabilize notions of agency and make possible a more inclusive social space.

In the first part of the paper, I compare and contrast chance operations with the activity of improvisation. My purpose is not only to understand the role of intentionality in the creative process but to understand the role of intentionality for agency. This will help situate agency in greater framework of intent and control. In the second part of the paper, I use the example of dance for Parkinson's in order to discuss control in aesthetic expression. Mark Morris, a choreographer and the founder of the Brooklyn Parkinson Group, has been making dance classes available to persons with Parkinson's disease. I focus on the fact that such dancers lack a crucial constitutive element for a perfectly embodied dancer, that of control over their bodies. I make the case that by breaking the close tie between agency and control and opening the space for chance and disorder, the inclusion of those with less than perfect bodies and less than perfect control is made possible. The widening of the aesthetic realm is significant as it can then serve as a gateway to include all types of bodies in a social and political space.

Comprovisation, Emergence, and the *Fluxations* Human Body Interface

Joshua B. Mailman & Sofia Paraskeva: Steinhardt School, New York University; Faculty of Music, Columbia University; Copper Blue Media

Fluxations is a fluid artistic technology for creating unconventionally expressive music through spontaneous bodily motions. It exploits new interactivities to address relations between complexity and perception.

Rather than generating individual sounds directly from discrete gestures or using gestures to manipulate playback of samples, *Fluxations* enables user-improvisers to steer the flow of spontaneously generated algorithmic music by manipulating its *emergent* (macro) properties. Continuous quantities (from analog sensor input) feed into the music generative algorithms, serving as statistic bounds and seeds that correlate indirectly but palpably with the *emergent* qualities whose flux is heard.

This produces a non-repeating musical stream, whose nuanced expressive mood shifts are spontaneously steered through continuous bodily motions. Our approach enables new synergies between spontaneous movement, computation, and sound, thus initiating technology-fueled fusions of dance and music, which prompt new cross-fertilizations between choreographic and sonic composition and improvisation, suggesting tantalizing syntheses between organisms in motion and the continuous flux of their environment.

Comprovisational fluxuations serve as vehicles for *expression*, signals acting as *vectors of transmission for feeling*, as Whitehead (1929) says. Comprovisation is compositional by involving composed music-generating algorithms guided by aesthetic concerns and planned choreography of physical movements. It is improvisational by involving spontaneous physical movements or nuanced expressive ornamentations to

planned (choreographed) movements, not to mention that quasi-stochastic algorithms are “improvising” details impromptu.

The technology to be demonstrated is programmed in *Max/MSP/Jitter* and *RTcmix*, taking continuous input of hand motions from glove flex sensors and sliders and tracking whole body motions with Microsoft’s *Kinect* infrared video camera.

What Remains: Steve Lacy, Joëlle Léandre and the Untimely Body

Kevin McNeilly: Department of English, University of British Columbia

A duo concert in Brussels on 28 July 2002 by Steve Lacy and Joëlle Léandre formed part of a series of collaborations intended as Lacy’s valediction to Europe, as he and Irène Aebi prepared for a move to the United States. By the time a compact disc of three extended improvisations from that concert was released in 2005 under the title *One More Time*, the recording had transformed into something of a self-made elegy for Lacy, who passed away in June 2004. As if to acknowledge this modal shift – from live document to posthumous echo – the disc includes as a brief coda a one-minute phone message that Lacy left for Léandre, enthusing in a heavily-accented French about the recording and about working with her. The uncanny effect of hearing this temporary missive, a tenuous disembodied voice rendered archivally stable in the digital metals of the CD, not only points up the paradox of absence (the title of another Lacy elegy) in posthumous audition – the departed sounding themselves “one more time” again in an untimely present – but also speaks to a posthumous temporality that inheres in improvisation: its extemporaneity. Present-tense encounters such as those of Léandre and Lacy operate at the edge of a posterity, a musical (and, in Lacy’s work, a verbal) address not so much to the realized singularity of a given instant, a presence, as to its dilation and extension, its virtuality. The improvising musician produces and sustains a resonant virtual body just ahead of, outside of, or just beyond his or her own somatic moment: the posthumous voice, in this case, offers one possible configuration for this temporal dehiscence, an intensification of the untimely. This untimely corporeality, this virtuality, can certainly emerge from recording and sound-reproduction technologies, but nonetheless remains a formal feature not simply of media or electronica but of improvised performance itself. Solo concerts given by Lacy in the last year of his life often featured a version of “Tina’s Tune” (another elegy for a musical colleague, reedist Tina Wrase), which includes a recitation of a translated haiku by Ozaki Koyo (“If I must die / let it be autumn/ ere the dew is dry”). At the time, Lacy was ill with cancer, and “Tina’s Tune” effectively became a preemptive self-elegy, extending earlier solo meditations on the posthumous body such as “Remains.” The text for “Tina’s Tune,” as well as the taps-like ascending and descending tone-rows of the melody, gestures toward the pathos in an artist’s desire for aesthetic control: the attempt not so much to accept death and to mourn oneself (although these are surely functions of the piece) as to give one’s own death a knowable time-frame, one’s life a formal – if fatal – limit. But those limits are also exceeded, in performance, by a deliberate improvisational surplus, as vocal and instrumental sound unfolds from their source within a breathing visceral human frame toward an essentially unfinished business, an unclosed futurity. Even as he approaches his own ends, Lacy’s music – recorded or not – pulls at its temporal measures and at its finite material bounds to create what might best be called a *preposterous* futurity, concocting an audible if spectrally resonant body that both remains and endures. When he signs off his message to Léandre by asking after her heart and by calling out “baby, I love you,” Lacy isn’t merely empathizing, but he’s also gesturing toward that intersubjective sounding, the resonant excess of improvisation feeling its way forward, still.

Feeling What to Sound Next: the Embodied Aspect of Musical Improvisation

Vincent Meelberg: Department of Cultural Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen

Musical improvisation is always a relational activity, regardless of the number of musicians that participate. The sounds that are produced while improvising literally “speak back” to the improviser,

establish a relation with him or her, and influence the improvisational choices he or she will make next. This influence not only happens at an intellectual level, but at a corporeal level as well. More specifically, the sounds affect the improviser, with "affect" understood as the generation of prepersonal intensities in the body. Recent research suggests that these affects have an even stronger influence on the choices human subjects make than intellectual reflection has. Consequently, the body is intrinsically involved in all decision-making processes, including those that happen during improvisation.

Gilles Deleuze suggests that encounters between bodies and sensations (such as music) can be conceptualized in ethical terms. Bodies and sensations can be defined as capacities for affecting and being affected. Deleuze asserts that everything that increases or enhances the possibilities to be affected is good, whereas everything that diminishes it is bad. Departing from the conception of the improvising body as one that affects others and is open to affection, I will explore the productivity of Deleuze's ethics in the articulation of the role the body plays in musical improvisation. I will do so by taking the emergence of musical groove, and the manners in which performers should relate to this phenomenon in an improvisational setting, as a case study.

Locating embodied improvisation in the techno-aesthetic creation of boutique effects pedals

Kevin Patton: Department of Music, Oregon State University

Improvisation can be understood as a process by which physical interaction generates an embodied knowledge of materials which in turn creates an intuitive sense of how to spontaneously enact those materials. The improvised moment is a functional expression of a bodily-knowing of materials and the limitations of those materials. Jazz improvisation provides a clear example. In what is generally called 'straight-ahead' styles of jazz improvisation there are the materials—harmonic structures, chord progressions, and corresponding scales. These materials are learned by rote through physical repetition (practice). This is then used as the basis for the spontaneous creation of melody. In so-called free improvisation there is a similar procedure, but in this approach it is familiarity with the process of sound-making that may be better understood as the material. That is to say that the spontaneous creation of sound is dependent upon the practice of understanding the sound-making process on whatever sound maker you are using. It is interesting then, to turn this concept towards a non-performative practice. This paper will examine the creation of expressive circuitry not designed by engineers, but by practitioners who consider themselves to be artists that use improvisation in their designs. As a compliment to John Fenn's work on identifying the social and cultural aspects of a non-performative improvisational practice, this paper argues that there is an inter-objectivity between the physical body and the physical materials that emerges through the technical aspects of expressive circuitry in boutique pedal design.

Exploring the Micro-structure of Free Improvisation

Michael Pelz-Sherman: Freelance scholar/musician

This presentation will examine the mechanics of inter-performer communication in free improvisation, focusing on examining how physical gestures are used to negotiate queues, modes, and transitions.

The presentation will include analyses of video recordings made at the Center for Music Experiment at UC San Diego in 1995. In these recordings, graduate student improvisers were asked to solve a series of musical problems which I call "micro-scores" (after Seymour Papert's Microworlds – safe "incubator" virtual environments used to help children learn the basic principles of physics and mathematics). For example, in the piece "Change Together", the group was asked to hold sustained unison notes and change pitches collectively every 10-15 seconds. The musicians were interviewed after each performance and invited to evaluate their level of success and reflect on their strategies.

These videos provide a raw, up-close view of the mechanics of improvised performer interaction *in situ*. They also provide a model for similar research, which may be of interest to those seeking to do further

work in this area.

Incorporeal Materialism, Singularity, and Improvising Bodies

Michael Szekely: Interdisciplinary Humanities, Temple University

We say “incorporeal materialism,” because in art, in music, in improvisation especially, the material becomes “expressive” by virtue of its passing through affect, through the virtual. Deleuze and Guattari: “Even if the material lasts for only a few seconds it will give sensation the power to exist and be preserved in itself *in the eternity that coexists with this short duration*. So long as the material lasts, the sensation enjoys an eternity in those very moments.”

An improvisational ontology is thus an ontology of singularity. It does not really have to do with a “work” at all, or even a body of work—but rather: *a body that works*. Or further still: *bodies that work in continuous variation across space and time*. This is something that, in my experience, aesthetics in general—certainly of the Analytic stripe—often seems to resist: the idea of the “work” as what Deleuze describes as “a plurality of trajectories that coexist and are readable only on a map, and that change direction depending on the trajectories that are retained.” Archaeology is pushed toward cartography. We don’t uncover “subjective characteristics”; we experiment from singularities. Notes, tones, textures, rhythms, pulsions, skin, teeth, but also: repetitions, recapitulations, counterpoint, cadences—how are they singularities? How do they *become* singularities? This is “the postromantic turning point,” write Deleuze and Guattari. “The essential thing is no longer forms and matters, or themes, but forces, densities, intensities.”

Propagating experimental idioms in a networked laptop orchestra

Patrick Valiquet: Faculty of Music, University of Oxford

Recent decades have seen an intensification of research and development in digital broadcasting and telepresence infrastructure in which musicians have increasingly been engaged as expert researchers in transnational, multi-institutional partnerships. In this research paradigm, experimental music-making traditions are deployed as a kind of catalytic substrate from which elements of established models of creative practice and musical ontology may be disaggregated and propagated as new idiomatic hybrids for use in the testing stage of design. Informed by Hennion's (1989) analysis of studio practices in pop music production, my paper examines an encounter with these propagation practices through interviews and participant-observation conducted during an ethnographic study of teaching and learning processes in electroacoustic composition. I begin by tracing the genealogies of the institutional and technological architectures combined to assemble a “laptop orchestra” for a “networked performance.” Harnessing a level of technological accumulation which limits adoption outside of institutional research laboratories, and aesthetically purified through the application of organisational strategies drawn from Euro-American “non-idiomatic” improvisation traditions, successful propagation of these experimental idioms is ensured in practice through the meticulous isolation and testing of human and non-human agency in rehearsal, in performance, and in ongoing analysis. Networking practices help to slow down the mutations which accrue as the idioms pass rapidly from laboratory to laboratory. While musicians tend to rationalize the process as a humanistic effort against the effects of inexorable technological progress, their ideological struggles belie a more complex reconfiguration of the values of novelty and agency which undermines their attachment to pre-existing musical ontologies and aesthetics.

Spontaneous Bodily Verses: The Lyrical Physicality of Improvised Jazz Poetry

Sara Villa: ICASP-McGill/CREUM, Université de Montréal

In his essay entitled “Some Thoughts on Jazz,” (1958) Kenneth Rexroth stresses how, in the texture of jazz music, “the melody, rhythm, dynamics, ornamentation, tone color, sonority – all owe a great deal to

imitation of the human voice.” The importance given to the voice as a key element of the vernacular matrix of jazz is something that Rexroth found as one of the most interesting, yet not often analyzed, ties between the performed verses and the improvised solos which surrounded and intertwined with the poet’s words during every jazz poetry performance.

As Charles Bernstein highlighted many years later, in “Thelonious Monk and Performance Poetry,” (1999) during these happenings, the poet’s voice, and those of the instruments accompanying him were turning the poem into “a physically present acoustic event, giving bodily dimension – beat – to what [was] otherwise spatial and visual”.

The bodily nature of the performed verses is the site where the static monumentality of the written page turns into an ever changing vocal expression, which mirrors the ephemeral nature of the music that accompanies it. This paper aims at analyzing how the orality of jazz poetry performance is the space which iconizes and corporealizes not only the spontaneous nature of both verses and jazz music, but also the anti-essentialist political contents which imbue them. A series of selected examples taken from the works of Amiri Baraka, Ruth Weiss, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Michael Harper, amongst the others, will allow us to follow the various forms of political activism that were given voice through the improvised performative dialogue between their poems and the ad hoc jazz music surrounding them.

Improvising Subjectivity: Negotiation and the audibility of difference in Canadian experimental music

Ellen Waterman & Mehrenegar Rostami: School of Music, Memorial University

Enduring and deterministic narratives in Canadian music scholarship such as the “multicultural mosaic” and the “idea of north” fail to address the fluid power dynamics that inform what we characterize as a far more improvisational relationship between music and identity in contemporary Canada, a relationship based on “an ability to negotiate differences, and a willingness to accept the challenges of risk and contingency” (Heble).

From 2003 to 2008 Waterman conducted audience reception studies and over 150 interviews with musicians, producers, and volunteers at eleven festivals of experimental music across Canada. Driven by aesthetics, ideology, and economics, festivals strategically promote national and regional identities such as Ontario’s ethnic diversity and the distinctly Quebecois *musique actuelle*. To what degree do particular performances affirm or contest such strategies? How do performers improvise subjectivity, make difference audible, and thus contribute to shaping broader narratives of identity? Analysing the dynamics of a particular performance offers a rich ground for examining intercorporeal encounter and meaning making through music (Stanyek, Wong).

In this presentation we present a close reading of one improvisational performance from 2007. The intercultural trio Safa (Amir Koushkani, François Houle and Sal Ferreras) interwove Iranian *radif*, jazz and Latin music at the Open Ears Festival in Ontario. Understood as dynamic and dialogic processes of communication where individual histories are brought to bear in immediate articulations of social relationships (G. Lewis), Safa’s performance both embodies and troubles philosopher Charles Taylor’s concept of the “demand for recognition” by which minority groups may resist reified identity myths. Cultural critic Smaro Kamboureli problematizes Taylor’s humanistic ideal of an authentic self and insists instead that “contingency, be it hidden away or easily observable, holds the key to any change we may effect.” Our aim in this presentation is to demonstrate the negotiations of difference in Safa’s performance and to suggest ways in which improvisation may contribute to debates on multiculturalism and the politics of recognition in Canada.