

## The Philosophy of Improvisation

Gary Peters  
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Improvisation is often described in favourable terms in theoretical works, as synonymous with freedom and creativity. When one looks at newspapers or other popular media, however, one can see that improvisation also often carries a negative connotation. Comments such as “the Prime minister is improvising” or “this business strategy looks totally improvised” are rarely used positively, even if the manager-as-jazz musician metaphor is now commonplace. In *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, Gary Peters proposes unpacking improvisation and looking beyond these typical constructions. While understanding improvisation as a potentially emancipatory and subversive practice, he also sees improvisation as a way of connecting with the past. In his view, improvisation is a peculiar type of creativity that entails not only the production of the new, but also the constant renewal of what is already there. Thus the improviser is an ironic performer, conscious that what is created is not as important as the display of how it was created. To some extent then, improvisation for Peters lies in an awareness of the distance between what was and what is.

In his first chapter, Peters proposes an initial conceptual view of improvisation. Notably, he does not posit a concept of improvisation for the sake of being “theoretical,” but rather attempts to develop a sophisticated meeting between continental philosophy and improvisational practice. Drawing heavily on Heidegger, Adorno, Hegel, and Kant, he looks at improvisation by transporting these philosophers into the space of the popular television show *Junkyard Wars* (*Scrapheap Challenge* in the UK). Taking improvisation seriously in this context means taking a look at how it happens, at what Peters calls “the demands for a work” and “of a work” (11). Like the contestants on the scrap yard shows, improvising—in any domain—implies creation from preexisting material. Therefore, we can see the possibilities opened by the multiplicity of crystallized creative gestures that impose “limits on what can and cannot be done on the occasion of the material’s subsequent reworking, whether improvised or not” (11). Although this is not necessarily a new insight for improvisation studies, wherein the material, technical, political, and aesthetic conditions of improvisation are being increasingly documented, Peters’ take on these issues is intriguing. According to him, we need to understand improvisation not as something created out of the blue, but as a reappropriation, an affiliation with previous cultural forms, a question asked from the present to the past: a “re-novation” model (18). The past is the “unmarked space” (12) subsequently marked by the work of art, what Peters also refers to as the predicament of the work: the possibility that it can exist in a specific form. There is also the becoming-work of the work itself: to be a work, something needs to emerge and mark an undifferentiated surface. For improvisation to be recognized, one needs to consider how it appears as improvisation, as something singular. When the work is improvisation itself, it is understood as a “becoming” instead of a fixed moment, as a beginning instead of an end. Thus even fixed artwork from a traditional Western perspective can be a site of improvisation, for improvisation resides in all the moments that have made the artwork “prior to the fixity (and fixation),” the hesitations and moments of uncertainty (1). Throughout the next chapters, Peters vacillates between these two conceptions of the work, which are not mutually exclusive, therefore giving no definition of improvisation—only ways to understand it and how it appears in the world.

In chapter two, Peters looks at free improvisation as an “exemplary form” for thinking about improvisation (2), while also taking issue with the celebratory discourse of liberty in improvisation and with the future-driven notion of political emancipation that it supports. This discourse embeds free improvisation in a teleological timeline, signaling the passage from a past and present restricted by capitalism and the modern obligation to be free to a future that “has liberated freedom from its own imperfection” (23). Thus Peters casts free improvisation as a discourse of anticipation in which freedom is the quality of a future state. Drawing on Kant’s philosophy of aesthetic judgment, he proposes another way to think about freedom in improvisation, stating that it is not something to reach for in the future, but something to remind ourselves of in the present: liberty is the origin of the practice, not what it is expected to become. Free improvisation is marked by a memorial aesthetic that refers to its unmarked space of origin, a space of liberty that precedes the first movement of the improviser. In other words, freedom is not reached through improvisation, but is something that it can preserve. Peters argues that a large part of the literature on free improvisation proposes that freedom requires a dialogic relationship between performers, that freedom is not something that happens through communion between participants, but through performers relating to and paying attention to the “working of the work”: “At its best, free-improvisation is not driven by a concern for other improvisers, but by a concern or care for the work itself” (58). In this way, the unmarked space from which the work originated is remembered through the unceasing “delay” of the artwork’s termination. This displacement from the communal practice of improvisers to the diverse

“strategies that keep the work happening” brings to the forefront an awareness of the contingencies that have participated in the creation of this improvisation rather than any other (60). This requires an ironic distance in order to allow one to understand that improvisation is not free, but caught in a web of competitive and historical forces: “the tragic knowledge of the ironist” is an awareness that the unmarked space of freedom has been lost in the artwork and that this is “itself a kind of freedom” (73). Any “emancipatory” potentialities in free improvisation are thus based in irony.

In chapter three, Peters focuses on critics of improvisation, rather than on its celebratory discourses. Instead of reading the well-known comments of Theodor Adorno about the predictability and standardization of jazz as a criticism of improvisation, Peters interprets Adorno’s theories as a restatement that the promises of freedom made by improvisation have not been fulfilled by its actualization. His point is not to criticize Adorno and others (like Benjamin, Artaud, Boulez, and Derrida), but to adapt their comments into his new concept of improvisation. Peters frames the problem posed by these thinkers as one of mimesis: where earlier critics use mimesis as the primary aporia of improvisation—producing clichés, pseudo-individualisation, etc.—Peters uses it to reassert the memorial aesthetic of his re-novation model. What this means is that in order to seriously consider improvisation as mimetic, one needs to understand it as re-producing and re-presenting the unmarked space of origin. In this sense, what is compelling is not that improvisation is a copy of something else, but that it is a method of rendering this remembered freedom in the present. Again, in the distance between the finished artwork and the free space from which it originated, which is produced through the process of mimesis, Peters find irony. The ironic improviser is one who is aware of the distance from performance to the space of freedom from which performance originates, and of the responsibility to reveal this distance. The ironic model of improvisation entails many responsibilities for the improviser that go beyond the moment of performance: to show us the distance and the work that is needed to make the “transition from one thing to another, from the unfixd to the fixed”; to establish that the goal of improvisation is no longer one “of going beyond the known, but of entering into it again and again” (115).

In his fourth chapter, Peters returns to his initial proposition: the re-novation model of improvisation. Here, we find the keys to understanding the motivation for this book. Peters frames his model with the distinction between Levinas’ “there is” and Heidegger’s “it gives.” This difference is settled through a careful study of the roles each of these concepts implicitly assigns to improvisers. Peters uses the example of comedy and the difference between a good or bad stand-up comedian: “What is there for the funny and the unfunny comedian alike is more or less identical: same mother-in-laws, same genitalia, same racial and gender stereotypes” (126). For Peters, improvisation lies in the process of giving what is “there,” already present, and of moving “among and within the comedic formulas or clichés that are there” (127). The model of improvisation proposed by Peters lies in the *giving* of what is *there* through the process of re-presenting the old, the memories and traditions, and in the way the imaginative space in which we live is rendered. In this way, re-novation means a “backward looking” practice that aims to transform the “concentration of all memory” into something more (140). Improvisation is a strategy for re-novating what was already there, be it conventions and clichés or the unmarked space of freedom, and for showing the passage from “there” to a re-novated “there,” as if for the first time.

Peters concludes this thoughtful book by turning his arguments upside down. Instead of looking at the ways philosophy could add to or say something about improvisation, he considers the spaces where the two collide: the philosophy of improvisation as an improvisational practice. Although Peters suggests that he improvised his book by “writing half a page a day (max.)”, his understanding of the improvisational practice of philosophy goes beyond the writing process itself (167). Improvising philosophy means demonstrating the deployment of thought and the way in which improvisation takes what is there and represents it anew. Inspired by Heidegger, Peters argues that a philosophy of improvisation should not be “about” improvisation—as it would then be a theory of improvisation—but a way to delay, “to slow the progress along the path of knowledge,” to multiply those paths into “an ever-expanding network of . . . possibilities” (160). A philosophy of improvisation should give us the opportunity to re-novate what is there—the everyday, the common—by demonstrating the progression of our thinking and the opening of new conceptual paths. In locating improvisation “within the linguistic, rhetorical, and performative structures that are themselves in play at any one time” in the unfolding of thought, Peters proposes a new line of thinking, a becoming-improvisation of philosophy and a becoming-philosophy of improvisation (168).

In trying to create a concept of improvisation—though he calls it a “model” on occasion—Peters goes beyond the practice itself. He takes on a diagnostic perspective that gives him the opportunity to think about the becoming of improvisation. He does so at the expense of the analytical dimension, however, which is given a relatively low profile. For example, discarding a few instances of improvisation because they are not “free” enough does not grant them all the weight that they deserve. Nevertheless, as he explains in his conclusion, *The Philosophy of Improvisation* is not ultimately a book about improvisation; it is a book that tries to create a philosophical concept, although unfinished and in its early stages. Peters does this well, creating space for dialogue among new participants. For this reason, and due to the careful presentation of selected philosophers as “improvisers,” this book is a good read for anyone who

wants to look beyond the celebratory or the analysis of performances and instead consider the possibility of failure and irony in improvisation.