

## Artist Statement - The Improvising Eye

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### Concept

The hypothesis this project aims to develop is that the improvising being is a whatever being. The Latin word for whatever, *quodlibet*, refers both to an expression emphasizing “it does not matter what,” and to a piece of music in which several melodies are combined, often in a playful manner. In Medieval scholastic philosophy, as Giorgio Agamben explains, *quodlibet ens* signifies not only “it does not matter which,” but also “being such that it always matters” (1). The whatever claims its significance from what it is purely within itself, and not by belonging to this or that universal, category, or tradition (x belongs to jazz, y belongs to poetry). The whatever simply belongs; it is the condition of belonging itself (Agamben 1-2).

Musical improvisation continually forces us as spectators to treat the music on its own terms. In listening, we can better access improvised music through restraining an impulse towards taxonomical judgment (good/bad, music/noise, jazz/not-jazz). The purpose of this project is to interrogate precisely this categorizing impulse in us as spectators, and to recreate in video the “whatever” quality in improvisation as it is experienced in the minds of engaged listeners.

What *belongs* in documentary film, and what doesn't belong? The distinguishing feature of the documentary is its realism. Documentary film tends to aim at capturing a person or event as concretely as possible. In its purest form, the documentary is absent of any events that are staged or otherwise called into being through a pre-arranged script or plan. Thus, there is already an improvisational element to standard documentary itself. Documentary immediately responds to, and incorporates

within it, the immediate, the unexpected, and the unknown. It is also this apparent concreteness in documentary that defines, for most of us, the form's outer limits. And yet, documentary remains a highly constructed form of visual representation: shots are framed, scenes are cut, and the raw audio/visual footage is often modified (even if only slightly) through a computer. The challenge of this project lay in making this constructed element in documentary so highly explicit so as to push beyond the boundaries of cinematic realism, of documentary itself. In short, the goal was to create a documentary presentation that was both palpably concrete and visibly unrealistic.

### Methodology

Regarding musical improvisation, Anthony Braxton writes, “if an improvisation is 10 minutes, I'm lucky if I can get thirty seconds of real creativity, of real surprise” (“Keynote” 3). My own process in working through this documentary is in keeping with this insight. The starting point of *The Improvising Eye* lay in the extensive archival footage of the ICASP project, which is now found on the ICASP website (<http://www.improvcommunity.ca>). Using Final Cut Pro, I cut this footage into scenes that in some way pointed towards the guiding themes of the project as a whole. The interface of Final Cut Pro allows for the layering of video, and through the application of various filters and controls, allows the user to dramatically change the final audio/visual presentation of raw footage. The bulk of the project consisted primarily in “mucking around” these various filters and controls, largely without a predetermined artistic or aesthetic vision for the final product in mind. As a result, there are some aspects of the video I am happy with, and some that I am not. In completing this project, I consciously resisted an impulse towards “correcting” my work and imposing an aesthetic on the project that would conform to what I found personally pleasing. Like a note, that once

played, cannot be put back into the instrument again, I tried to let certain scenes in the project “be” whether or not I thought they could be improved upon later. I was then happy for certain moments that I did find pleasing—the “real surprise” in Braxton’s words.

While much of the video does not conform to a predetermined artistic vision, it does contain certain motifs that are more consciously applied. These include movement and fragmentation. In scenes where visual material is laid overtop of music, a motif of movement characterizes these scenes, as we move through a hallway, a library, or through the city of Guelph on a GO bus. This motif of movement, to my mind, conceptualizes elements of both musical improvisation and the ICASP project itself: sound waves move in time and space; research moves from ignorance to knowledge.

The second motif, fragmentation, is found largely in the presentation of my interviews with Ajay Heble and Daniel Fischlin, and again aims to make explicit what is often unnoticed in traditional documentary film. The visual rhetoric of contemporary video often contains representations of “the body in pieces,” which Linda Nochlin rightly describes as central to the visual culture of modernity (*The Body in Pieces*). In film and television, apart from representations of the full body, we are also continually presented with heads, heads and shoulders, hands writing at a desk, and so on. In *The Improvising Eye*, the interview subjects were shot and framed using traditional methods. I then worked to fragment the experience of these interviews in two ways: by multiplying the frames on the screen into discrete “boxes,” and by taking larger frames of video and cutting them into smaller, discrete parts that in turn make up the whole.

Multiple frames in the video can be viewed together, or focused on individually. Certain frames may draw attention to

aspects of the interview that might otherwise escape the viewer’s attention, such as expressive hand gestures, the spatial orientation of the room in which the interview is being held, or the facial expressions of the subject in dialogue.

### **Embodied Practice**

The actual work of transforming the archival footage seen in *The Improvising Eye* involved the use of technology in an intuitive manner, rather than its measured use to achieve a desired outcome. The limits of my knowledge of Final Cut Pro foreclosed the possibility of predicting the effects of many of the filters and modifications that I would apply to both interview and archival material. What emerges in *The Improvising Eye* is a disruptive audio-visual experience that I hope will add new layers of meaning to the lectures or interviews being presented. As the project moved from parts One through Five, the disruptive or transformative effects were increased.

In what follows I will provide a retrospective account of the kinds of questions that might flow out of the transformational effects used in *The Improvising Eye*. I would like to avoid a prescriptive reading of the project, and would rather like to erect some guideposts that might facilitate the viewer’s journey through the project’s audio-visual experience. In Part Two, for example, the effects used in presenting George Lipsitz’s keynote speech to the 2007 Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium tend to disrupt the viewer’s sense of space: is the subject far or near? Do the effects enhance or detract from our experience of the speech? Viewers might also question whether I have at least kept a sense of the original footage, by keeping one layer of video more or less unchanged, save for transformations of scale.

In Part Three, Marcel Cobussen, citing Sigmund Freud, asserts, “[i]n instinctual and unconscious desires of the individual

obstruct a total control and therefore subvert the ability to be completely responsible for one's behaviour." Using the Time Remap feature in Final Cut Pro, I was able to distort the viewer's preception of time in ways that hint at a loss of control in the visual presentation of his speech. The Time Remap feature operates by offering the user the ability to change the directional orientation of time in video footage from that of a line to a curve. The user is presented with a diagonal line, moving from the clip's beginning to its end. The user is then able to curve this line, and the video proceeds in forward or backward motion according to the dynamics of this curve.

The intuitiveness of this operation becomes immediately apparent when attempting to perform the same operation a subesquent time; I found it nearly impossible to duplicate the same curve twice. We can then interrogate how we might be conditioned to view technology as providing its user a sense of control not otherwise found in "low tech" activities—we might question the difference between drawing on a computer and drawing by hand, for example. In Part Four, the Time Remap feature is used again, and the visual expeirience of Gaelyn and Gustavo Aguilar's presentation becomes completely unmoored from our traditional sense of time. Does this add to their recurrent discussions of dislocation and disequilibrium, of being in two places at once, and dislocated in both?

Part Five concerns the contradictions of utopian discourse in the study of improvisation. This part is, I think, the most challenging segment of *The Improvising Eye*. It features a long shot of a blue sky overtop of Daniel Fischlin's discussion of some of the dangers of idealizing improvisation, and placing it within a utopian discourse. And yet, the scene continues the "blue sky" metaphor that Fischlin had invoked in Part 3. This long shot can be seen as correlating with Ajay Heble's mention of Charlie Parker's use of the "flat fifth," that is to say, a disruptive moment that, at first encounter, causes the viewer to

distance themselves from what is being viewed—to become disengaged rather than involved in the video being watched. Scenes such as these might cause the viewer to become disinterested, disengaged, and perhaps then approach the piece from another angle.

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I subscribe to the view that genre operates like a language. That is, our ability to place creative works within a genre relies heavily upon our ability to identify the recognizable and familiar within them. We identify the word "cat" as belonging to the English language in the same way that we identify a piece of music as belonging to pop, rock, jazz and so on. We recognize familiar motifs and significations that help us place the creative work within a specific culture, langauge, or tradition. This work of improvisation aims at situating itself in an amorphous zone between language and non-language. The linguistic construction "free jazz" is an example of how this zone might be concieved: the word "jazz" consciously locates the work within a specific tradition, and yet the word "free" alerts the listener to expect the unfamiliar, precisely what falls outside of that tradition. My approach to this project, therefore, lay not in the sense of asserting myself—my artistic vision, for instance—but rather, in Braxton's words, in the sense of "looking for myself" ("Keynote" 2), or allowing artistic vision to develop purely from practice and not from a preconcieved idea or relationship to a recognizable or identifiable form.

I am hesitant to call the present work an experimental documentary. I view improvisation (at least for the purposes of this project) not as experiment, but as example. To describe *The Improvising Eye* as experimental would suggest a consious attempt at innovation, at breaking barriers and transgressing boundaries, but this intent would nonetheless still be defined by its relationship to the forms it wished to

subvert. The example, by contrast, may or may not be innovative, transgressive, or disruptive: whatever it is arises spontaneously from its being itself. “On the one hand,” Agamben notes, “every example is treated in effect as a particular case; but on the other, it remains understood that it cannot serve in its particularity. Neither particular nor universal, the example is a singular object that presents itself as such, that shows its singularity” (10). My hope for this project is a clear representation of this singularity, its ability to be whatever and thus be treated on its own terms.

For Agamben, the ability to embrace the whatever is based on the capacity to love: “[t]he lover wants the loved one with all of its predicates, its *being such as it is*” (2, emphasis in original). To call this an improvised documentary is then to assert as its founding thesis—its particular challenge—a condition of belonging, beyond all the predicates that by their very nature exclude it from the documentary form.

### **Works Cited**

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