Towards an Ethos of Improvisation:
Group interview with Roger Dean, Tracey Nicholls, and Rebecca Caines

An Interview and Discussion with ICASP Researchers

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BA: My name is Ben Authers. I'm a researcher here at the ICASP project at the University of Guelph, and I'm delighted to have an opportunity to talk to three fantastic researchers also involved in the ICASP project, in various places locally, provincially, internationally. So, I'll ask all the presenters to introduce themselves.

TN: My name is Tracy Nicholls and I am the ICASP postdoctoral researcher based in Montreal this year at the Centre de recherche en éthique de l'Université de Montréal. And I come to this project actually from a long involvement at McGill. I did my doctoral dissertation under Eric Lewis, whose the McGill site manager for ICASP, and he got me involved in his earlier project on improvisation, which was one of the founding, I guess founding strands of what has become the ICASP project. So, I'm an instructor, professor, assistant professor in philosophy, and I'm on academic leave this year to come back to work with the ICASP project and take up a project working with improvisation and decolonization, and looking at how improvised music in particular can play a community-building role such that we can actually get off the ground social justice movements for indigenous communities. That's the very short version.

RC: I'm Rebecca Caines. I'm the postdoctoral research fellow here at Guelph, working with Ajay Heble, and I come from a kind of performance-making, performance studies background, via a few countries. I'm Australian, but I've been living in Belfast, Northern Ireland, for the last three years. And I'm bringing a project, well hopefully, with Guelph and to Guelph, based on spatiality and the understanding of community and space, and how improvisation and improvised sound and music can help in the creation and the challenging of space and site. And that's bringing in my experience as a performance maker, and as a researcher in theatre and performance studies. I'm new to the field of music, and I'm new to the field of improvisation studies, although I'd argue there [are] a lot of connections with performance studies, and we'll maybe talk about that a bit later. But I'm hoping to work with community groups in Northern Ireland, Australia, and in Guelph, on an interactive soundscape project which will be online and launching in 2010. That, again, is the very short version.

RD: I'm Roger Dean. I'm an improviser, composer, and researcher, and I'm from the University of Western Sydney, from MARCS Auditory Labs. I guess I'm an established researcher. I just finished twenty-five years as a full research professor, so I've had a lot of opportunities to do research at the same time as be a creative worker. I used to do research in biochemistry, and I ran a research institute, and then, while I was doing that, I've done a lot of work on improvisation. I've published five books on improvisation, which is why I was invited as one of the non-Canadian outside participants in this project. And more recently I started working in music cognition. So I'm now spending all my energies on music computation and music cognition, as well as my creative work. And improvisation is still part of one of the projects that I do.

BA: Thank you. Well, I guess one of the questions I'd like to open up to the participants is a broad one, but hopefully one that—because you are each coming from quite different perspectives—[asks]: how does improvisation inform your research? To throw it open wide, as it were.

TN: Okay, well I think with my research I started off writing my doctoral dissertation on a philosophy of improvised music, looking in particular at the free jazz era—Coltrane, in particular—and really, way back in the beginning, I took myself to be doing what I thought was a fairly standard aesthetics dissertation. I was going to write about the interesting values of improvisatory music. And as I got into it my thesis did this huge political turn. At one point I found myself hunched over a computer thinking about how we can rebuild civil society in Haiti. So, that's pretty much where my research is centered. Now, not Haiti in particular, but looking at the question of how it is that an ethos of improvisation, the internalizing of the norms that are present in improvised jazz groups and improvised jazz communities, can actually help us be more responsive citizens, and help us build more responsive, more democratic, more pluralistic political communities. So there's a sense in which even when I'm not explicitly talking about improvisation it's still informing all of my sense of what an optimal political community is. So it really is sort of there under the surface all the time.

RC: I, like I said, I'm new to the concept of improvisation studies as a discipline, but I'm very interested in live bodies and the performance of the body live. I think that, partly, improvisation is quite exciting to me because it's—we were talking about this this morning—it's both a metaphor and a tool for a lot of different disciplines who work with the creative moment, the moment when creativity connects to society, to social change and to social development. And coming from a background of community-based performance, working with communities to develop creative processes that also talk about their lives, that talk about what's important to them, I think that improvisation is a great way of talking about that moment of creation. And I guess performance studies has always been interesting in process. It's always been about duration and it's been about time and about the body. So in that way improvisation seems like a perfect word for what performance studies are looking at anyway. In terms of my specific research, I've done quite a bit into community hip-hop and community music, and I guess I see the hip-hop practice as very improvisatory/ And the process of creating hip-hop is something that's both social development and personal development, and creativity and artistic development. So in that way I think that improvisation is a very useful way of thinking about it. I'm going to be looking at pedagogy in improvisation as well, the teaching of improvisation in hip-hop, which is, of course, a very specific type of pedagogy that's international, and very

interesting. With the soundscape stuff I think [that] how users in an online environment and how communities using online environments can improvise with sound to develop a sense of place, or to challenge the place that they live in...I think that moment of having freedom to play is very useful for them. I hope. And I think useful for scholars to think about as well.

RD: Well, related to that, I commonly use the terms creative work and research separately, as I did already. But I don't really see them as separate. They're obviously a continuum. And I think particularly in the current creative environment within universities it's quite important for us to probably argue that point—as I've done in a recent book—so that we establish that the creative work has, should have, a value within academia. Just as high as it has in the rest of the community, which we hope can be substantial. Similarly, that research work not only has a value in the academic community, but potentially can have a value in the other communities that are around. And that's because they both share most of the properties of contributing to knowledge, contributing to new understanding, however you want to define research or understand the idea of developing knowledge and insight. So, I've actually found in practice that... I started out intensely involved with improvisation to such a degree as a musician, and I formed my own group and that sort of stuff, that for quite a long time I was averse to the idea of composition. And I specifically, for at least ten years thought, I do not want to write any notated composition, even though I had the background to do so. But that gradually transformed. I guess partly because I realized that improvisation was a tool for a lot of other things. And so I then realized on many occasions that it was a tool within my biochemical research. I did biochemistry research before I did cognition, as I mentioned. And I remember many instances where we came, in the group structure that I had, to a particularly intractable problem, and I used an improvisatory technique to decide how we would go further. By saying, "Well, we don't really have a totally rational way of prioritizing what would be the next good question to put to this particular problem. So let's discuss in a group manner all the possibilities we can think of." And while I didn't talk about that to my group as, "we are going to improvise about this"—because they wouldn't have known what that implied and they might have been restricted by it—that's what we actually did. We got the maximum range of possibilities on the table and then we chose a limited number of them. We got probably twenty—I don't remember—and we chose to do two or three of them. As possible ways of solving a problem that we really couldn't see a direct face-on attack to.

So I've found improvisation to be very valuable in those kinds of contexts repeatedly, without necessarily making that process overt, which is partly why I like the idea of being involved in a project which tries to have utility and tries to make the possibility of improvisation being part of policy development overt. And that's something that, barring this project, I probably would not seriously have thought about, or certainly not have written or verbalized about even to the degree that I have as a minor participant in this project. I'll probably make more contributions to that. So that, again, is something quite stimulating and valuable that a project like this can do. I mean, I knew in participating in it, and the reason that I was invited into it was that I knew enough about improvisation to have something to offer. But I didn't realize that there would actually be some new lines of thought that I could work on, and which might potentially be useful. And some of the stuff that we've discussed about dialogue versus improvisation, and whether there might be any extra benefit, could be an example of that. So I guess it's informed many aspects of what I've tried to do, and what I will try to do.

BA: Rebecca, with your work with disadvantaged groups in Northern Ireland and Australia, that's right...?

RC: Mm-hmm.

BA: You've talked a little bit about how perhaps improvisation might inform that. In your experience already have you seen improvised practice having a useful role in that?

RC: Yes, totally. I mean, with the community-based hip-hop it's pretty clear. Again, with performance studies I've always been very focused on the moment of performance, rather than doing ethnography, or looking in the future [at] what's happened to people after a project. It's usually been focused on the moment of performance, and what that itself is doing socially.

So for an example, a hip-hop artist in Australia, Morganics, he works with all sorts of people but is very well known for working with indigenous kids all over Australia. And some of the pieces that he's done have been very ...I mean, he creates an environment where you blur the lines between the participant and the teacher, between adult and young person, between Australia and the rest of the world. Although he's very clear about people talking with their own voice, with their own accents, about their own lives. I mean it's very tied into the American hip-hop culture. I guess it's got a lot of street cred, and this is possibly why young people are so interested in it, but it's very much about their own moment then, what their life is, what's happening in their life right then. And there's a great example. He did a solo piece about his hip-hop work, and he did a kind of—I mean it's fictional but I've seen the same thing in his workshops again and again—a scene where he was playing a few characters, and he opened the floor to people to rap. And one person got up and started talking about bitches and bling, a very American kind of accent. And then another guy with dreadlocks got up and was like, love and awareness and peace, man. Equally fake, equally not really tied to anything. And then the third person that got up was a teenager who said, "It was terrible this morning. My parents were fighting. I had a really hard time leaving the house. I just want a joint." And it was much more real. And maybe wouldn't have happened without the other two. So this sort of environment where people will have a play, where they'll try things out, where they'll copy and imitate, almost sort of fight against each other in the style of hip-hop culture, it creates a moment where something exciting happens and suddenly people both want to express themselves, and also want to say things the way they would like the world to be. So it's not just the way it is now, it's the way it could be. It's the way they dream it could be. It's the way it should be. And it's all mixed up together. You'll have a description of a life that's incredibly accurate, and it's incredibly optimistic, or incredibly full of fantasy. And I think that's quite exciting, an environment where creativity and everyday life are so ingrained together, in a practice that is about play and having fun. So in that way it's really obviously improvisatory.

TN: That's what really excites me too, is this attention to the ethos of improvisation. It's not just a metaphor, and it's not just a tool. It is a certain set of practices that really can be an orientation to the world, right? So, if you really try to internalize the lessons of extremely practiced—yet at the same time extremely spontaneous musical groups—what you get to is this attention to listening to others, this attention to the subtle differences of different voices. You get an appreciation for the way these subtle differences can just radically change the dynamic of the group. You get this sort of non-hierarchical attitude. And you get also, I think, this whole

attention to process. I think you can see this in social groups, and therapy, in research, where you start off just throwing something on the table, and you just really focus on the process rather than the goal, getting the right answer. And what comes out of this is something that you couldn't possibly have foreseen.

And it doesn't always work, right? And it's certainly not always as easy as, "Let's just be non-hierarchical," because we're all fighting against the habits of a lifetime. But when it does work, it really does open up these possibilities [that] sometimes when you try to talk about them sound really California-utopian. But I do really think that there's a huge potential.

RC: I almost think the word "improvisation" sometimes is standing in for "experimental" though. I think there is not a culture where you can really make a lot of mistakes. I think mistakes are very—I mean people have talked about it through this forum—that mistakes are so deadly. They are deadly in so many parts of your life. They're deadly if you're a politician. They're deadly if you're an artist.

RD: But not if you set up a framework that is really improvisatory. In other words, I was going to say in response to your comment, Tracey, that emergence isn't a unique property of improvisation, of course.

TN: Of course.

RD: While we can achieve the ideal that you mentioned, of a non-hierarchical structure in improvisation, I don't think we should idealize that as being the most common or even the most important one. A lot of the things that you said about those situations with the kids just a minute ago, are examples of leadership. In other words, the person, while behaving rather like the kids perhaps, was nevertheless leading them into things. And so I think that's something in improvisation that we don't know very much about. I mean, I actually have an empirical approach to questions of leadership in musical improvisation, where we have single and duo improvisers, and we take physiological and electrophysiological, and audio, and Midi kind of data from them so we can do analyses of how these relate to each other, and then subsequently relate them to people's perception of the music which resulted. And I think we'll be able to tell when there was a musical process in which what you could describe from a musical perspective as a transition took place, and if that transition is or is not in general associated with some activity in one of the improvisers... which leads the other. In other words, causality between person A and person B, or vice versa if the roles are changed. But I think that if we could understand that aspect of improvisation a bit better, we might be able to harness it even more efficiently in those contexts like you describe, where there is some utility intended.

RC: I was going to say the term "guided improvisation" comes up a lot in theatre.

RD: Yup.

RC: And you mentioned Keith Johnstone.

RD: And, of course, Keith Johnstone...

RC: It's a powerful performance creative development tool, guided improvisation. It's something that every theatre school will start off with, every acting training course will do for the first year. And it's a way of allowing people's inhibitions to shift... I mean they never go away... but to be aware of them and to utilize them helpfully. It's a way of creating a group, a sense of a group. It's a way of creating really interesting movement in performance. If nothing else, improvisation develops new types of creativity, it takes you away from stuff that people think is the only thing you can do. And so in theatre it's so useful.

RD: But the way that it's used in Keith's techniques, and as you just described in guided improvisation, has some difficulties if one was attempting to apply them within what you call rational linguistic policy development. Because that positing of a leadership and a follower... you know, Keith talks about the person having power in relation to the other person, and how they negotiate that. That isn't necessarily productive in itself. I think it's a very useful tool probably in theatre, also in learning how to improvise, but it needs to be transformed to be really effective in other discourses.

RC: In Keith's book, he talks about it as a kind of social development tool for people who do have blocks, or do have shifts that they need to make and they have to be able to start learning, or to start something. And that's why I said first year of theatre school, because it's a training method. It's a way of learning about your own body, about your voice, about the people around you, recognizing signals, being able to listen, which are words that keep coming up again and again in improvisation: listening, attentiveness, response.

RD: But you've only got to see the Hanif Kureishi film about the Mike Leigh story. You know, Mike Leigh, the film director, uses improvisatory processes in the development of most of his films so far, and he has a very hierarchical set-up during a long period in which they work together to develop the text. He then takes authorial control. Hazel Smith and I, my partner, in a book that we did together, we interviewed Mike Leigh and got some of the nitty-gritty of this out, and it's in the book. It's a very effective process but it's not, again, it's not necessarily one that one would want ideally to be adopting if one was trying to do a more communal policy development.

TN: Well, again, I think that there is this point that you guys have been talking about in terms of guided improvisation. Very clearly you cannot just throw people who are unhabituated to improvisation, throw them into a circumstance and tell them, "Come up with improvisatory social policy, or something." You're going to end up with nothing but disaster, right?

RD: Exactly.

TN: I think there is a huge education process, a huge training process both for people who are going to lead and inspire improvisation and for people who are hoping to participate in it on a mass scale. And I think these are the things that we've been talking about over the last couple of days: the importance of self-trust, the importance of trusting the other person, the importance of trusting the process, all of these aspects. You crucially really have to prepare yourself if you're going to be a party to successful improvisation.

RC: I was going to say it's interesting artistically, though, because on one level, and again I come back to performance, you've got a body that needs training, it needs development. I mean people who do performance, especially something like durational performance, where you're somewhere for twelve hours and you're experimenting with what comes out of that time and that space, the body needs training or it won't make it.

But I was going to say about the Mike Leigh thing... It's interesting when you start bringing artistic talent to the table, to levels of creativity. I mean everybody obviously has creativity. Where does some creativity work better than other creativity in improvisation? And it was very interesting with the hip-hop I was talking about because one of the most famous tracks that Morganics facilitated is called "Down River." Very famous in Australia, played on the radio. Nobody knew that Morganics was involved. All they knew about was that the kids did the track. And he, as a hip-hop artist, was kind of like, "Well I'm a music producer, I should have been... like I'm part of that process, you know?" And it was really weird for him because he was totally supportive of the kids but he was erased in the whole process. It came about [with] these cute ten-year-old kids talking about their lives, and not about the process of creativity, which is what they were part of. So I don't know if that comes up again in music because I'm interested. But I would say that it does in film, obviously, that people's own egos, and their own artistic talents, and their history of practice must come to the table and interfere or possibly improve the process of improvisation.

TN: Well, that's one thing. And I think there's another thing too: that if we're going to engage in any sort of successful, rich theorization of improvisation—which I think is the great value of the ICASP project—then one of the things we need to acknowledge, I think, along with the idea that improvisation can fail and maybe does spectacularly sometimes, I think we also need to acknowledge that this principal of non-hierarchical relations does not necessarily mean that everybody's equal, right? People bring varying levels of talent, varying levels of preparation. They bring their egos. So there is this sense in which you want to have this general guiding principal that everybody who steps up and says something should be listened to, but at the end of the day that doesn't necessarily mean that every contribution is going to be of equal value, or is going to be equally fruitful or fertile.

RC: And the playing field is so uneven to start with. I do find it hard when we start. I mean, it comes up. And about community organization, the same sort of conversations will happen if you're trying to start a housing project or an allotment garden. How do we talk together? How do we make a group? Who decides? How are decisions taken? Those kinds of conversations. And this is where improvisation may be useful. But the blocks are often when people won't admit that they have already such a massive advantage at the table. They may have a language advantage, a culture advantage, an advantage of growing up in a place where you talk more than somewhere else. And culturally going from Australia to Northern Ireland was crazy because Australians, in general, are pretty chatty and Northern Ireland is a place where people take a while. I mean, they'll talk to you at the bus stop for hours about everything, but in terms of actual, real dialogue they take—obviously for a lot of reasons—take a long time to trust and a long time to talk. So it was interesting to have to, as a community development officer, to try and work with communities to kind of find a level where my way of expressing myself as an Australian and their way... we had to find some way of talking before we could start. And I think those uneven levels, they have to be acknowledged, you know?

RD: I think the corollary of everything we've said so far is where does one want to get into the educational or professional development process, the idea of the importance of improvisation and then training for it? And I suspect it's probably ideal if it was at every level. In other words, if it was implicit initially with kids, became explicit perhaps in secondary school or something, continued to be explicit in university. Then, where it's probably most lacking—because it probably is implicit in those three places, in general, already—but it's completely lacking in my experience of the business community and amongst the management policy development community. They have leadership courses, but you look at the content of those leadership courses [and] they don't explicitly address this and usually they don't implicitly get beyond dialogue in the simple sense that I defined it this morning or that we generally talk about.

TN: You know, the point that strikes me, at least at the level of social policy-making, and I would be inclined to speculate that this is true of the business world too, is Daniel Weinstock's point that it actually happens a lot, it just doesn't get called that and acknowledged [as] that. So, when you have the training course, if you're training junior executives they'll go on a training course, and no one will ever mention improvisation, no one will ever mention attention to process.

RC: Like "role-playing."

TN: Maybe.

RD: But for it to become really useful it has to become more than implicit knowledge for those people.

TN: But that's my point, that they are being mis-trained. Right?

RD: Right.

TN: And then f they do actually then successfully get good at improvising it's usually because they've just sort of stumbled across it, accidently. So I think there's a lot going on, but it's not being transmitted in effective and fruitful ways.

RC: But that point about Northern Ireland and Australian cultural difference in terms of speaking, it was to do with school, very much. The schools that I worked with, I realized very quickly—apart from [the fact that] there are always teachers that are unusual—across the spectrum it was very quiet in a classroom. People were not talking a quarter of what they would in an Australian classroom. They just weren't. And my partner said that about his schooling. He didn't talk. He didn't talk in school. They hardly ever did presentations. They didn't have a culture of talking. So I don't know how you start improvising if you don't have a culture of expressing that way. You have to find what they do to express themselves, which is very different, you know? And very subtle. In Northern Ireland they have a lot of black humor, but it's very subtle. It's a different way of expressing. So I don't know how you find that point when we've got a very—well, I do anyway—have a very idealistic idea that everyone will be able to

express themselves, and then we'll find something out of that. But if people can't, then that's a bad place to start.

TN: I think I would contest this idea that people can't.

RC: In the way that I do [it].

TN: Exactly. If you bring an expectation that what expressiveness looks like is what I do...

RC: Yah, then you're in trouble.

TN: Exactly. But it's a matter of trying to find, like you were saying earlier, "Everyone has creativity." I look at my own sad, sad, sadly underdeveloped level of music ability and think, "Oh, I don't think I have any creativity." But clearly that's not true. It's just that it maybe expresses itself in cooking, or being able to come up with loopy research proposals that actually get funded. Or something like that. So there's this whole sense you have to find the way into people's communities, right? You sort of have to meet them where they are.

RC: I think that's why I like ICASP. I like it because it's truly multidisciplinary. It really feels like we have very different research backgrounds and we can have this conversation. I mean, when you first started talking to me about science (gestures toward Roger Dean), and sticking things into people's heads, and measuring levels...

TN: You were afraid, weren't you? [laughing]

RC: It freaked me out a little. I probably sounded incredibly wooly because I'm coming from a humanities background. But when we start talking there is great conversation going on. There [are] not a lot of places where you get to have that conversation, I think. People talk about it a lot, but actually on the ground—let's figure out how this improvisation thing can make a change in the world—it's pretty special. So I like that about this place so far. It seems like different levels of expression are here.

TN: Yah.

RC: And valued.

BA: So then how do you place improvisation and community next to each other? If it's the "Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice" project, is that an "and"? How contingent is it? You've talked a little bit about the different local communities, and the way improvisation works in that. Can we talk about improvisation and "the" community? Or is it something that always has to be contingent, always has to be site-specific?

RD: I even wonder about whether we can talk about an improvisation community at all. I was quite struck by the musiques actuelle guys this afternoon saying that they thought they had a community, that it wasn't just a funding application nomenclature but it was a community and that they really supported each other, because I don't think I really experienced that in London

when I was a professional musician there. I think the improvisation community was fragmented from the jazz community and, in turn, from the contemporary music community. And I personally wanted to be part of all three and it was a problem. I think that the improvisation community, to the degree that they identified themselves, it was a separation from the rest as opposed to a cohesion with each other that was emphasized.

[It was] a bit different when I moved to Australia, in that there was hardly any barrier between the two communities, although their practical opportunities were very different. By the two I mean the jazz, and the improvised music. In fact, the main body in Sydney which presented improvised music was called SIMA, Sydney Improvised Music Association. When I read that when I first visited, and before I moved there, I thought, Oh wow, there's actually a body which does both [of] these things, takes jazz and improvised music to be one and a whole. Unlike this brief situation that I've just described. But actually that wasn't the case. SIMA almost entirely promoted jazz, and just a little bit of improvised music. Nevertheless, there was much less of a schism. But still, not a community in my mind. Maybe the Canadian community is really a community, but it's a problem in itself.

RC: It's funny because I had never thought of it as "Improvisation, Community..."...the beginning of ICASP. I thought of it as "and," a lot of "ands." And because a lot of my research, in terms of doing a doctorate this is what you do, was trying so hard to get a sense of this word "community," to get a real handle on the philosophies of community, the sociological understandings of it. And it became really interesting to me that it is both incredibly patrolled borders and incredibly transient and shifting. It can be both a terrifying box that you're stuck in and something that you suddenly find and get liberated by, simultaneously. So maybe in London you were feeling like those communities were not there for you, or not helpful, and falling apart, or arguing with each other, and then suddenly you fell into something that was a bit more helpful or useful. I call it a post-structured idea of community. It's both something that we keep using over and over, this word. Conservative politicians are really good at it. We throw the word around all the time. We don't want to define it because we're sick to death of defining it. We've defined it forever. But it's shifting all the time, what it means. I think that's quite interesting with this project: the concept of community, improvisatory, is it something that we improvise on, is it something that we have a bit of a play with, and mess up, and shift around? And that maybe is a useful social practice, messing with community.

TN: Yah. I was actually thinking when you posed the question, Ben, that for me it's not an "and" so much as an "in." It's about looking at improvisation "in" communities, and how that actually makes these communities more functional. But your comments just now, Rebecca, got me thinking that maybe it's actually "Improvisation 'with' Communities," or maybe that's another aspect. Because I think this relationship of improvising communities—how people who are committed to improvisation can come together and build a community that they then speak about like a family—comes back to these crucial local contextualized situated questions of identity. When you look at something like Derome and the musiques actuelles scene in Montreal part of what you have to recognize is that Quebec has a very special history within Canada, a very special situation within Canada, where linguistically—because it's predominantly a French-speaking province—they feel very isolated. But also Montreal has this weird thing going on where it is the most bilingual city that I've ever lived in, ever visited. So you can really have that kind of group that showed up today, where you have Anglophone musicians and Francophone

musicians playing together in a community that they are all really committed to. And that's something I think you don't easily find in other places. I don't know that it's something necessarily special to Canada. I'm more inclined to think that that's just something really special to Montreal, right?

And then when you get back to this community hip-hop stuff, again, I think identity really, really is crucial there because certainly kids all over the world are taking up hip-hop, but the history of hip-hop, it has a very particular relationship to African American culture. And the way that the blues developed and the way jazz developed, there are musicians working in hip-hop who will make this connection. I wrote a paper a few years back where one of the things I talked about was Horace Tapscott and his community involvement in Los Angeles in the sixties. And there were people, blogs online talking about Horace Tapscott's legacy, and one of them was speaking as a hip-hop artist, saying, "I never would have gotten out of Watts if it wasn't for Tapscott and jazz." There is this legacy.

There's a sense in which, if you're in Northern Ireland and you're doing the American accent and talking about bling and hos or whatever, then that's really inauthentic to that context. But there's also this sense in which that's at least an initial foray into connecting with the roots of this artistic tradition.

RC: That's why I love that scene in Morganics's show because it says equally the bitches and ho bit, and the dreadlocks, love and awareness and peace and hippie bit, and "Oh, my life today, and what actually happened to me." [They] are equally valid in that scene, right then. And with the connection to the culture, I mean, it's massively important that it's connected to the American hip-hop scene everywhere in the world. So that connection to a global—which comes up again and again—"a global hip-hop community," it's very vague, but it's very important.

RD: It's presumably substantially aspirational, isn't it, as it is with those kids you've been talking about? I haven't read the massive literature there is about theories of community in any detail, but I've read two of the volumes quite seriously. And it's interesting that one of them, the one about the avant-garde and it's characterization on [Bruno?], is basically an exclusionary mechanism rather like I was describing [with] the free improvisers in London.

RC: Yes, a border patrol.

RD: Yes. And the other is George Lewis's recent book about the AACM. I think he's a really interesting guy. And he's a participant in this, of course, as you know. That one is about an organization, the AACM, whose overt and partially achieved purpose was advancement of their standing within the world, if you like. So it was a very different objective. It was trying to externalize their input instead of, in a sense, from the avant-garde concept, sequestering it. So that is also much more positive and aspirational I guess.

RC: I find "aspirational" one of those words I never quite know what to do with, though. I mean, when you think of community. Nike has a website for people who love their Nikes. You can go on, and go on a forum. Now your first initial response is: just another type of advertising, completely commercialized rubbish from Nike, which doesn't have a good history. But then you go onto the website and you have a look, and you think, probably 90% of it is advertising. But there are some people on there who have done some fantastic artwork and stuck it up with their

Nikes. And it matters to them. And for all the patronizing in the world—"Oh well you're commercialized, you've been suckered in by Nike"—they've created some awesome artwork that's important to them. So how do you characterize that community? Exactly what do you say about it? It's online, it's displayed from all over the world, they're connected by a corporate commercialization that doesn't seem to have any value in terms of social change or development. And yet there's something interesting happening there. So, I don't know what to do with "aspirational" because it's so tied to advertising, the concept of "aspirational," things you can't achieve but you aim for.

RD: But in the case with the kids that you were talking about, "aspirational" is a necessary step.

RC: Definitely. Definitely.

RD: That's what I was getting at. So they achieve that expression but it's not fulfilled unless the aspiration that it embodies is subsequently followed up. The Nike thing, in a sense, that is the follow-up, that is the completion of that particular process, isn't it? It's some wonderful artwork. Fantastic. They got some fulfillment from it. They don't want to promote Nike.

RC: No, but ten-year-old kids who did "Down River," which was a song about jumping in the river, and playing the didge, and catching fish, and putting it in the fridge, and other fantastic lines, they were singing about wanting to be football captains. They were singing about a river that at that point was in drought and hadn't had water in it for years. They were singing about all sorts of things that wouldn't happen to them, and haven't happened to them.

RD: But they are all aspirations which are a kind of target for them.

RC: But at the same time as they were singing about all that stuff, they were singing about stuff that was happening to them in their own life as it was, and being moved around, and their history, and their spiritual tribal connection to the river. So I thought what was more important, was that at the point of performance I was thinking, yes it's important that they don't get forgotten, and those aspirations of becoming a football captain don't get left behind, but I'm interested in that moment of performance, of them sitting around in a living room hanging out with a mic they bought at the thrift shop for two dollars, playing and coming up with this stuff. That moment of coming up with it was interesting, not when, in ten years time, what has happened to them, for me.

RD: Well, then that's probably pro-sociality, isn't it?

RC: Pro-sociality?

RD: Pro-sociality. In other words, there's quite a lot of research thrust towards the idea that if you collaborate with other people in making something—e.g. music—and then after that process you look at how the people rate each other, to what degree are they willing to trust each other, all those social or pro-social parameters of behavior, in general they do better after a group activity, or even a duo activity. And so perhaps that is a benefit for those kids.

RC: I would guess if you ethnographically traced their lives for the next ten years, there would be massive benefits. But I was really interested in the moment that that happened. I think that had it's own benefit. They were creating a space, a new place, a new space, a new site, by hanging out together and jamming. That was really interesting. That wasn't to say that I think we won't go back in ten years and say, "They're in a really crap area, where their life expectancy is thirty, where they're frigging squillions of kilometers from anything." We don't want to leave them and say, "Thanks for that lovely moment. See you later." But at the same time, that's powerful, and I think interesting, that improvisatory performance that occurred. And then, of course, what happened when it hit society, what happened when it hit the radio stations. And other tracks that were a bit more angry didn't get played. Because that one was cute, and non-controversial, and about hanging out and playing, it didn't have quite the fear of some of the other tracks about living in a slum or trying to rebuild a house that'd been raided, or something a bit more negative. They didn't get half the airplay. What happens after that improvisation moment is equally important, yah [gestures to Roger].

RD: I mean, ironically, perhaps the pro-social can be just as well achieved by a much simpler activity than any path towards proper improvisation in the more sophisticated sense [that] we talked about it. It can be achieved by people trying to tap in synchrony with each other. And perhaps where the real benefit of improvisation is in those areas where one is trying to create some kind of larger structure, be it a larger musical structure or be it a larger linguistic one.

RC: As I was saying, that angry one that didn't get as much airplay was based in Redfern in Sydney. And the lyrics of the song were about building a community housing association which then did get built after the song. These young teenagers did join a group and develop it in the way they wanted, which began with the song. So things happen out of that moment. I'm not saying they don't. I just think sometimes the process of creation, as well as the process of working together is quite important. The artistic creativity is quite important, as well as the "we're all in it together, we're getting to know each other, we're relaxing, we're losing inhibitions."

TN: And I think, too, that's another area where the importance of education really comes into play because the radio stations who are not playing the angry rap—because the ten-year-old kids are just a lot cuter—they're playing it because they have some sense [that] this is what the audience wants to hear and this is what will help us sell advertising, right? So, ultimately, the censorship is grounded in sort of a pandering movement. Whereas if you had an audience that was prepared, that was educated about the kind of raw honesty that can come out of improvisation, about the ways in which improvisation—and certainly improvisation is not the only thing—but the ways in which it can harness what might be really maladaptive, really dysfunctional anger and bring it in to build that sense of community that gets the community housing built... if there were audiences more sophisticated and more attuned to improvisation, more attuned to what it can do, maybe there would be more space for some renegade DJ to throw this on and see what happens. And maybe there would be people who would listen and go, "Oh my god. Either, that's really cool, or I had no idea, as a white Australian that lives in Glebe or something like that, that these people are so angry. What's going on?"

Certainly the decolonization work that I'm interested in looking at in Canada, I think part of the identity barriers, the border policing that goes on, is... there's just this huge cluelessness on

the part of the privileged communities. The middle-class white people who live in the suburbs have no idea what it's like to live in an inner city slum, or live in a First Nations northern community where they don't have doctors and milk cost six dollars a gallon. So, I think you have to prepare audiences in order to have those kinds of interventions where there might be some sort of community healing, community solidarity, community building. And part of what interests me in the theorizing of improvisation is this broad preparation of citizens, getting people to see that difference is not necessarily threatening.

To bring it back to one of the conversations that we were having earlier today in one of the sessions, this idea, for instance, that as a politician you could go on television and say, "I screwed up. I'm sorry. That was a mistake on my part. I learned. And it will never happen again." There's this sense in which, for me, to see a politician on t.v., to see anyone on t.v. doing that, to me that just enormously increases their credibility. I have a huge amount of respect for people who can do that because one of the lessons I learned as an adult, like one of the hardest things to do is to stand in front of a group of people and say, "I'm sorry. I made a mistake." And acknowledge it.

RC: Really hard to deal with the mistakes, though, true.

TN: But there's a sense in which when you know how much courage it takes to do that, then you can really respect other people's steps toward that courage. But for some reason we have this crazy social attitude where admitting you made a mistake is a sign of weakness.

RD: But it doesn't have to be—I agree with what you're saying—but it doesn't even have to be an admission of a mistake, does it? It can be, "We tried this policy," as I think [not sure whose named here] said this morning, which was very sensibly informed. But then instead of saying, "Well, we'll just go on and try again because it didn't work, because the people got it wrong," we say, "We're going to modify it and we're quite happy with that, and we'll move on."

RC: I'm just interested in the concept of mistakes because I was looking at the work of Peter Sellars in Australia, when he came—theater director Peter Sellars—and did a festival in Australia, the Adelaide Festival of the Arts. And I've just been writing about the kind of engagement of him with this festival and the many things that happened, many mistakes I guess you would say. To me it's a brilliant, interesting, fascinating experiment. But there were mistakes that were really bad. I mean bad in terms of communities who lost trust, who couldn't talk to each other anymore. I mean bad in that funding got cut to places and they never got it back again. Mistakes on a big scale can be scary. And I think improvisation, maybe, is about building trust and you can't lose that trust. And I think that's maybe where things went wrong in Australia with that festival. The trust fell down.

I don't know though. It's very important to be able to make mistakes, but it's also very important to be able to find a support network so things don't fall over when the mistake happens.

TN: But I wonder, too, if the reason why the trust was lost wasn't because mistakes were made. It was because mistakes were made and nobody stepped in to acknowledge it and correct it, and care about the fact that people were suffering because of these mistakes.

RC: And also maybe everyone didn't realize it was an improvisation. That's a really big thing. If everyone isn't thinking this is an experiment, for some people, this is it. This goes to this, and this is the answer, and this is what is going to happen. And then it doesn't. It's terrible. If everybody knew it was an experiment, well then if it doesn't happen we don't cry. We move on, we modify, we adapt. But in that case some people had to say, "No, this was definitely going to happen," to get the money in the first place. They had to.

BA: And in that instance—I think I know what you're familiar with—it was coming out of two incredibly successful festivals as well, under Robyn Archer. And so there was a history, an expectation that when Peter Sellars then took the festival in a very different experimental direction—which is not to say Robyn Archer's festival wasn't experimental in many ways—that disjunct with history proved quite problematic for...

RC: ...the massively long history as being the big arts festival in Australia. [With a] total change of the entire model it's always going to be difficult. But in that case, it's a community-based experiment. This is where it got difficult. If it had been an experiment with a bunch of artists who had a little bit more power then maybe the mistake would have been okay. But when they happen with community groups that are incredibly vulnerable, you've got to worry because ethically they didn't think this was an experiment. They thought something was going to come out of it, and when it didn't, when it got canceled half way through, when people left, when money got pulled, when projects got stopped just when the important, difficult conversations were happening, that was a really dangerous thing. To create the grounds for experiment, you have to be able to make mistakes. So, I don't know, maybe that's something we can think about with the ICASP project, building support into improvisation, building networks of support in there, where if things go wrong there are people to catch you when you fall.

TN: And I think we get back then to what Roger was saying about this importance of community, these people who are not just invested in a common idea, but are invested in each other. The flip side, the utopian, optimistic way of looking at mistakes is something that Ingird Monson writes about. She does music theory from an improvisation perspective. And she has this one anecdote in her book—in the book, *Saying Something,* that came out several years ago—where she's talking about this group that she used to improvise with in New York. And she was talking about how when you really are improvising sometimes people will play their way into problem structures. Basically, they'll screw up, right? A particular musician will go off somewhere, thinking he or she knows what they're doing, and then they will get to this point where they've painted themselves into a corner and they don't really know what to do. And she talks about those mistakes as being these really special moments of aesthetic potential because what can happen—and she quotes one of her fellow band members as saying this—is that everybody will rush in to help this person, to help them get out of this problem situation. And these are the moments—sometimes it doesn't work—but these are the moments where sometimes everybody rushes in to find ways out, and what happens is this spectacular, unexpected direction that nobody planned, nobody foresaw. And that's improvisation at it's most transporting, and it's most solidarity-building.

I think there is a need in theorizing improvisation, there's a need to rescue, or reconfigure, or redefine the whole idea of a mistake, what it means to make a mistake. I think that one of the things you certainly don't want to do is get to the point where making a mistake

means that the rug is pulled out from under disadvantaged people that don't have very much to begin with, and now are even worse off, and have this perception that, "Oh the festival's moved on and nobody cares."

RD: Yah, I think the concept of a mistake can only be applicable to what's gone before. Not to what comes after.

TN: Exactly. Yes.

RD: That's a paraphrase to what you just said. I think that's very important.

TN: That's an excellent paraphrase of what I just said, actually.

RC: Yah, that's a good way of putting it.

TN: And again, that comes down to another part of this ethos of improvisation, [which] is taking responsibility for what you do.

RC: There's a really famous theater game that you play in acting school—and I think Keith Johnstone uses it, but I don't think it's from him originally—where people are walking around a room and someone says, "I'm falling," and everyone tries to catch you before you hit the ground. And you get back up again, and you keep moving around. And then someone says, "I'm rising," and everybody rushes to lift you up. So you are both saving each other, and giving each other your moment in the light, or whatever it is. And when you start, people are very scared to drop, they're very scared to throw themselves down, and also they stay very close together [everyone laughs]. Eventually people will use the whole space, they'll be running around, they'll be falling, there will be six people falling at once and you won't know who to go and help. It's a lovely metaphor for both being able to catch someone when they're going down, but also to let go and let somebody have their moment when they're going up. So maybe this is something we can build into the research project.

RD: Makes me wonder when in the rugby liner, you know when they lift someone up, there's actually someone trying to push him over as well [everyone laughs]. I've never really detected that, but perhaps there is.

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