

## **PANEL: Exploring the Improvisative: Two Views**

**Chaired by Ellen Waterman (School of Fine Art and Music, University of Guelph)**

**Panelists:**

**Benjamin Piekut**

### ***Bio***

Benjamin Piekut is a PhD candidate in historical musicology at Columbia University, where he is writing a dissertation on experimental music in New York in 1964. He has also been a student in the Critical Studies/Experimental Practices program at the University of California, San Diego, and earned an MA in composition from Mills College. His article “‘Demolish Serious Culture!’: Henry Flynt and Workers World Party, 1962–67” will appear in *Otherwise Engaged: Avant-garde Music and The Sixties*, edited by Robert Adlington and forthcoming from Oxford University Press. He is the assistant editor of the *Journal of the Society for American Music*, and serves on the editorial board of *Current Musicology*.

### ***Abstract***

“From the Performative to the Improvisative: Reconsidering Butler”

This paper considers Butler’s theory of reiterative performance and suggests ways to think about the creation and maintenance of social structures through the varied practices of improvisation. Her theory of performativity presupposes a text (of gender codes) that is enacted in the course of daily life, and open to transformation through the techniques of drag and parody. The notion of “improvisativity,” however, does away with the underlying text, offering in its place an always emerging set of dynamic structures that are read, taken apart, resisted, joined, or otherwise negotiated by improvisative actors. The transformation of preexisting systems is no longer framed in the somewhat limited terms of drag, but part of the everyday process of reacting to one’s surroundings and seizing opportunities to redirect flows of power to different ends.

Seizing on improvisativity as the dominant modality through which social structure and identity are enacted necessitates a closer look at the discourse of improvisation itself. In the formulations of both Butler and Pierre Bourdieu, improvisation is explicitly set against the normative ideal of structure: a “regulated improvisation” suggests that improvisation alone is unregulated and without structure. Such an opposition—also common in discussions of musical improvisation—promises a fantasy world where the improvisative may only carry notions of freedom, individuality, deterritorialization, and perhaps even liberation. By the same token, this escape from structure also commonly connotes a lack of

preparation, inadequate foresight, and questionable judgment. Both of these constellations of meaning do a disservice to the heterogeneous practices that can be subsumed under the label “improvisation,” and they indicate that a move away from the composition/improvisation opposition holds promise for new theorizations not only of musical practice, but of social structures broadly construed.

This paper begins with a recapitulation of Butler’s theory of gender performativity and some of the debates and resonances it has engendered. I then introduce the concept of improvisativity and consider the ramifications of displacing the composition/improvisation binary that has preoccupied scholars in favor of an examination of the relationship between improvisation and performance—or, more specifically, improvisativity and performativity. Finally, I offer a brief account of how the concept of improvisativity has been helpful in my own development of an actor-network model of experimental music in the 1960s, specifically the substitution of Latour’s emphasis on the *performance* of knowledge/power networks with their *improvisation*.

## **Tracy McMullen**

### ***Bio***

Tracy McMullen earned her PhD from the University of California, San Diego in Critical Studies/Experimental Practices. She is currently a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Guelph as part of the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice Research Project. Her published works include, “Corpo-Realities: Keepin’ it Real in ‘Music and Embodiment’ Scholarship” in *Current Musicology*, No. 82 (Fall 2006) and “Identity for Sale: Glenn Miller, Wynton Marsalis, and Cultural Replay in Music” in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, edited by Nichole Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, forthcoming from Duke University Press.

### ***Abstract***

“Playing the Performative: Replay and Improvisativity”

Working from the assumption that “the improvisative” is that radical element which allows for movement within the performative, this paper argues that musical practice may offer important insights into how identity operates in the larger social field. I first examine practices that could be considered the opposite of the improvisative – practices I name “Replay.” Replay describes those performances that strive to recreate a past event exactly, as found in certain tribute bands, civil war reenactments, and other nostalgic recreations. Much like the scopophilic pleasure of the instant replay in sports, cultural Replay offers the same sense of exactness, of the identical, the bounded, the true. It comforts by showing us what we (think we) have seen before and by its ability to play it again – a fetishized moment, captured and displayed. I assert that Replay is a form of cultural production that yearns to create the perfectly “happy performative”

described by J.L. Austin in his classic work, *How to Do Things with Words*. In order to maintain such a performative, Austin had to elide the many ways that it could fail to perform its expected function, for example through citation in different contexts. Replay is a form of cultural entertainment that attempts to contain contexts and citations within a hegemonic narrative, ritually performing its narratives and stereotypes (musical and cultural) as “truth.”

If one viewed performativity as a continuum, Replay would be at the end characterized by “perfect” reiteration. The other end of this continuum could be the pure improvisative, something which would surely be as impossible as a perfect repetition. I argue that we consider the improvisative a capacity or faculty more than an action or performance and that such a capacity can be honed through corporeal practice, including the practice of instrumental performance. Understood in this way, performative agency can be found not only in the possibilities inherent in misfired signification as described by Butler, Derrida and others, but also in a practice that works to mitigate the power of signs over the performer. Looking at various musical responses to Replay, this paper suggests that improvisers consciously practice loosening the constriction of expectations inherent in the performative, allowing them to perform amidst, as well as against, musical clichés – both formal and social. Examining such a practice may help elucidate larger operations of identity and ways of negotiating agency within a world of signs always already defining us.