

# What Your Spontaneity Is Worth to Us Improvisation between Art and Economics

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A substantial number of artists from the music, dance, theater, and performance worlds are currently giving workshops (on an occasional basis, or even as their primary source of income) for corporate employees, especially upper management, in which those work performers are supposed to learn improvisation techniques. Organization theory, a discipline that develops new work and cooperation models for companies, theoretically supports and promotes such transitions between artistic and economic performance. Transferring improv concepts and practices to the workplace might seem out of place or irregular, but it does produce effects in the working environment. And I believe it is important to analyze where economic interests intersect with artistic work, which aspects of art are being seized upon, and what it is about the aesthetics and artistic practices that makes this economicization possible or even accommodates it.

To the question of why companies are interested in improv, the first and “official” answer is that the markets in which they operate have become so turbulent, developments can only be foreseen within a short limited time, and workers are often confronted with unexpected situations. However, this need for improvisation that workers are faced with only represents the situation in which many of us find ourselves in as soon as we come in contact with other people and try to deal with them. After all, the reactions of other people (and partly even our own reactions) are always to some extent unpredictable. Particularly in cases where a large number of people are interacting—and strangers participate in these interactions—the unpredictability increases sharply. It could be that improvisational abilities have atrophied somewhat in our nationally framed, institutionally managed societies, because in many areas of life indirect communication through the more predictable institutional procedures now replaces, or redetermines, the direct settling of affairs.

From this quotidian improvising, we ought to distinguish improvisation as something I *choose*, something I might try based on the recommendations of others because it promises me solutions to problems where I cannot achieve my goals through planned procedures—much like the fictional addressee in Heinrich von Kleist’s “On the Gradual Formation of Thoughts in the Process of Speech,” which is written like a letter to a friend. In his cheerful brutality, Kleist places clear emphasis on a moment of improvisation that tends to be overlooked or trivialized in the discourses of organization theory and management (but also in group therapy and teaching); namely, the moment of conflict or competition. When he gets bogged down working out a math problem or a legal case, as Kleist’s narrator imparts—which may be due precisely to knowing *too much* and being capable of *too many* things, so that in effect the abundance of possibilities clogs, as it were, the present—then he starts to explain the issue to his sister, although she knows nothing about either mathematics or law. The purpose, hence, is not mutual discussion, an exchange of information,



but rather “a movement on the part of [his] sister indicating she wants to interrupt [him],” which puts the young man on high alert: “For my strained mind becomes even more excited by the need to defend this inherent right to speak against attack from the outside. The mind’s abilities grow like those of a great general who is faced with a very difficult situation.”<sup>1</sup> In this state of high excitement, the narrator is now talking for his life—he stutters and stammers, produces “inarticulate noises,” and saves himself through long drawn out, connecting words and superficial appositions during the empty time in which no continuation occurs to him. Through this process of continuing to speak at all costs and connecting with himself through talking to deflect the attempted interruption, he finally succeeds in doing what previously seemed to elude him: at some point he blurts out the solution.

The “other” is, in this specially initiated improvisation, a partner whose task is above all to be the opponent in a dispute not about content, but rather about *speech*, about *performative dominance over speech*. And he (or in this case: she) performs this task without actually contributing anything. The person I call on for improvisational formation of my thoughts only *embodies* the *threat* of fighting me for control of the situation. This option of reclaiming dominance over a situation after consciously exposing oneself to the risk of losing that dominance seems highly attractive as a dynamic of improvisation for work performance in twenty-first-century companies. It brings a type of self-command into play that was new in Kleist’s day, around 1800, but is quite familiar to us: *performative self-command*, which does not relate to a status, enjoyed because of noble birth or office, but rather becomes evident *in action*, in the actuality of performing—and actually consists in nothing but this evidence.

The institutional political self-command possessed by someone who inherits a throne or, in the age of modern nation-states, takes on the office of a ruler or administrator, is essentially *potestas* (e.g., a power that exists in the form of *possibility*). Performative self-command, in contrast, is a power that people gain only by effectively carrying out actions, and this requires them to put their status at risk to begin with. Here, improvisation stands for the deliberate creation of a state of exception: I put myself in a situation that I cannot control by my rank or office, which therefore at first suspends my control over myself as well. And in this suspension, I regain control over myself and the situation.

This reorientation toward performative self-command uncouples self-command from politics in the sense of institutional authorities, from government action authorized by rulers or the state. It suddenly appears on this side of the central public sphere, in a scene of private work and study. And Kleist’s political-military framing of such a domestic, economic problem-solving exercise betrays something important about performative self-command: it has no exclusive or even merely privileged sphere of activity, and it no longer applies to an

exclusive or privileged circle of persons. Kleist’s poetics of improvisation, which also comes up with various other examples, transforms the “General” from a military rank into a figure of *generalizability*. All activities that rely on being performed, and their style of being performed, can be carried out with masterful self-command. By self-command we mean today a certain kind of excellence, namely, a way of doing something very well that expresses, in light of the admiration we grant it, a particular *superiority*—a superiority over others who do (or could do) the same work, and simultaneously the superiority of a capable ego over another ego in the same person that fails to achieve it. The proof of performative self-command, no matter where it takes place, sends a message about the drama of a successful self-conquest to those who testify to this self-command by allowing themselves to be impressed by it.

We live in a society in which many of us participate in this game of self-command—and the processes of work and of cooperation in particular have become the primary venues for competition for performative self-command. One reason for this is that so-called post-Fordism has led to a *crisis of assessment*. Flexible teamwork is central to the post-Fordist reorganization of work. For more and more workers, it is a standard requirement to communicate with others in a way that allows for optimal assignment of responsibilities and use of individual contributions, and for arranging work procedures through mutual discussion—as well as determining the nature and amount of their output in goal agreements, while competent negotiation and capable presentation of the results may be more important than the action undertaken. If working means working together in teams, which consistently decide during the course of the work process how they are going to do something and how individual competence will be realized in a collective *performance*, how is the contribution of each individual employee to be judged? Compensation for work still mostly takes place via the abstract exchange medium of money, which in its generality implies an ability to generalize the paid work. Even though different forms of work vary enormously in how well or poorly the workers are paid in deregulated employment markets, at least the same work in the same place ought to receive the same compensation (or if not, one should be able to demand it in the name of equal pay for equal services, and criticize current practices). But how does one evaluate the collective accomplishment on the level of the individuals involved when the work of each individual not only refers to that of others, but acquires a value in the first place through what each one

1 Heinrich von Kleist, “On the Gradual Formation of Thoughts in the Process of Speech,” trans. Christoph Harbsmeier, University of Oslo website, accessed March 1, 2016, [http://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/research/projects/tls/publications/Kleist\[1\].pdf](http://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/research/projects/tls/publications/Kleist[1].pdf).



has contributed to others' work—through their organizational value for the team?

Since the 1990s, we have observed a downright inflationary multiplicity of evaluation services advertising processes that companies can use to measure the work performance of their departments and individual employees. Yet the variety of competing approaches and methods itself is already an indication of how little certainty there is about which data should be gathered, and above all how it is to be interpreted, since the relationship between the company's balance sheet and employee activity becomes more difficult to reconstruct the more complex internal structures become. Employees may contribute great specialist knowledge and rack up hours of overtime in the office without actually providing any benefit to team practice. Is it because they lack the ability to synchronize their expertise with colleagues? Or is the problem to be found with one of these colleagues, who is not making use of valuable preparatory work, perhaps consciously or unconsciously blocking it? Could it be that certain personalities just do not go together and it would be better to put them on separate teams? Or does the workflow have to be moderated until the people involved adjust to each other? Or does someone need to be fired and replaced with a more suitable employee?

Despite all attempts at objectification and standardization, post-Fordist liberalization of work processes has caused an upsurge in *personal dependencies*. The evaluation of workers increasingly takes place in the dimension of affective reactions, based on their conduct—in the dual sense of behavior and of self-presentation as a service subject in an intersubjective network of cooperation. It is precisely here that a motive can be discerned for corporate interest in artistic improvisation processes. Improvisation in the performing arts is, after all, not only one of the disciplines in which performers impress an audience by demonstrating their confidence. The performers also evaluate and judge each other in the course of their common efforts. *How* an improviser reacts to what the other has just done—whether he or she reacts at all; to what extent he or she tries to make something of what the other has done; and what kind of a model he or she supplies to the other co-performers or makes as a response to the first one: all this produces a value judgment that the fellow actors recognize, understand, and incorporate into their own reactions. Conversely, the value of this value judgment depends on how highly regarded a given participant is by the other players—and finally also on whether this judgment itself enhances the performance as a whole, or at least creates an opportunity for enhancement in its effect on the reactions of the one being judged and the others.

Achievement criteria are intimately bound up with the dynamic of social recognition and esteem in these ways of interacting. This problem has long

been recognized in improv theater. Instructions suggest establishing the so-called yes-anding principle as a connective agreement.<sup>2</sup> This means that a player should always relate to what another player does in the form of “yes, and ...”: first affirming it in order to then continue the matter, or to give it another direction. In extreme cases this could be the opposite of what was suggested by the other, but it must still be formulated in a “yes, and ...” manner, rather than ignoring or directly rejecting, since both of those will hurt a performer whose offerings are literally nothing without being acknowledged.

Although occasional references to yes-anding are not absent in organization-theory literature, at the center of economic engagement with improvisation is a genre in which the performers work with precisely these kinds of psychosocial offenses—or with a strategic withholding of recognition that operates at the margins of the offensive and tests out this marginal zone as the true realm of artistic *peak performance*; namely, jazz, in those forms where, on the one hand, improvisational freedom is guaranteed and where the musicians standing together on the stage participate pointedly as (virtuoso) soloists in the ensemble performance, but, on the other hand, in tune with tradition to an extent that a high significance can be ascribed to reputation. Musicologist Nicholas Gebhart, in his study *Going for Jazz: Musical Practices and American Ideology*,<sup>3</sup> investigates the relationship between ideas of peak artistic achievement in jazz and an “American ideology” that combines capitalistic production and evaluation forms with a basic tone of aggressive emotionality—an *affectionately aggressive* emotionality. For in the interactions between professional jazz musicians, a certain conviviality combines with an aggressive-pugnacious spirit into a special frame of mind. The instrumental “talk” in the collective performance of jazz is similar, according to anthropologist Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, to the playful “duels” that African-American communities call “signifying.”<sup>4</sup>

In signifying, one actor provokes another by offending him or her in a masterly, amusing, or original way, either verbally or by means of twists that cast doubt on the competence of the other. In jazz this can happen when a musician does *not* play what the conventional continuation of the routine pattern would require—and thereby creates a situation in which it will sound like a mistake, unless a fellow player rescues the phrase through an original, spontaneous invention that sounds excitingly different from the routine, rather than simply wrong. Whether the result of this break in routine will be recognized as a gaffe

2 See Vera Dusya and Mary Crossan, “Theatrical Improvisation: Lessons for Organizations,” *Organization Studies* 25, no. 5 (2004): 727–49.

3 Nicholas Gebhart, *Going for Jazz: Musical Practices and American Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

4 See Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, “Signifying as a Form of Verbal Art,” in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of African-American Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 310–28.



that puts the entire performance into a bad light and exposes the reactor as a failure, or as an innovation that brings them and their fellow musicians fame, depends entirely on the reaction. And how disconcerted or how excellent the reaction seems will determine whether the improv session comes across as the scene of a (lost) battle or of a collective virtuosity, where the battle as such is not obvious; rather, the performers up the ante through mutual playful challenges, test their confidence on one another, and win prestige with every test passed.

Kleist presents improvisation as a battle in a war of the subject with himself, where the other functioned solely as an oppositional figure. Here, in contrast, several people compete in the mode of improvisation with each other, and this competition is also part of their cooperation: the performative gibes and ripostes create an elastic consensus that no performer can ever break, if the collective project is not to collapse. In this atmosphere, as jazz cultivates it and makes it extremely productive, the organization theorists identify the ideal milieu for interlocking cooperation and competition, which business jargon calls "co-competition" or "co-opetition." For the post-Fordist enterprise, it is crucial to incorporate moments of competition into mutual relations, so that the competition never ends—as the battle does, when the victor punches the air and the other lies prostrate as the loser. In capitalism at all levels the goal is to organize endlessness: dynamics that in and of themselves *cannot* come to any conclusion.

Since Adam Smith's claim that competitive egoisms have charitable effects for the community, the task of economic reason is seen as binding destructive powers into a dynamic in which they bring forth productive effects. Advocates justify the competition model by pointing out that it is so far the most successful solution to this task. From the battle, only its affect, aggression, is absorbed to animate a form in which several competitors act against each other for an individual advantage. This robs them of the decision a battle will bring, obliging them to repeat the competition incessantly. Even monopoly, or "market dominance," may not represent a final victory. As soon as a victorious finale becomes apparent, the more successful competitor must orient their actions toward the time *after* that, which would be their own victory and the defeat of the competitors; and precisely through the immanent reorientation involved in carrying out the competition itself, the victory does not take place—it is skipped and postponed: a "new" challenge takes the place of the old, in which the old one, which was not fought to an end point, continues to exist and waits to become the new one again.

Evaluation must adjust to this dynamic. And because of this, it helps in the establishment of co-competition as a form for how we interact—at work and in all those areas of life influenced by an expanded understanding of productivity—if

evaluation remains provisional, if it orients itself toward the actual reactions of co-performers rather than general and time-resistant standards.

In such a work process there is nothing definitively wrong, because it is only when other team members react that what I have done is shown to be a mistake or an impetus toward new paths—indeed, perhaps it is the very push into the unknown that the process will have needed. "We paint ourselves in and out of corners all the time, the saxophonist Jeff Clayton once said."<sup>5</sup> Improv explicitly allows making mistakes, or risking making mistakes, as an attempt. But that also means there is no definitive right choice, no matter how well I can do something for myself, as long as the others are not able to derive some gain for their performance from what I am doing. If I cannot at least get them to *expect* that sort of advantage for themselves, my knowledge and ability become useless. And *whether* I navigate with my solo contribution to the team performance on the track of a shared enhancement or end up marginalizing myself is something that I only find out each time I do it, because the evaluation of the work does not take place outside the work period, but rather coincides with the carrying out the respective cooperation. The value of what I do is—and remains—as provisional as the action in the mode of improv itself.

The word "improvisation" comes from the Latin *im-provisus*, or unexpected. Still, improvisation as trying something out initially requires everything that happens in the process to be provisional. This has a liberating, unburdening effect, especially at the beginning, and as long as improvisation is imagined as a repeated beginning. But in the long term, to the extent that the improvisation process makes its participants become aware of time passing, the darker sides of this deliberate provisionality are also revealed—and this includes deferred recognition and a type of interpersonal esteem that is also only conditional, always delayed a little further, to the next challenge and the challenge after that.

Translated from the German by Aileen Derieg

5 Cited in Alessandro Duranti and Kenny Burrell, "Jazz Improvisation: A Search for Hidden Harmonies and a Unique Self," *Ricerche di Psicologia* 27, no. 3 (2004): 84f.