Certainty, Contingency, and Improvisation

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Aesthetic Taste and Improvisation

If we take seriously Nietzsche’s famous claim that the world and existence can only be justified as an aesthetic phenomenon, then the question of taste becomes significant well beyond the domain of art, no matter how “expanded” this field has become (52). In some ways Kant already recognises this when, early on in the Critique of Judgement, he observes that aesthetic judgement (taste) is “referred wholly to the Subject, and what is more to its [the Subject’s] feeling of life” (emphasis added, 42). In this vein the following reflections, while referencing particular modes of improvised arts practice, will nevertheless assume that what can be said of art can be said of life, and, as such, allow the promotion of what might be described as an aesthetic model of human action (and inaction).

Staying with Kant, we might begin by looking more closely at his conception of aesthetic judgement, firstly as it relates to the creative act and then, more specifically, what it might bring to a discussion of improvisation. What is apparent from the outset is that Kant makes a clear distinction between the aesthetic judgement of taste and the creative act:

The artist, having practised and corrected his taste by a variety of examples from nature or art, controls his work and, after many, and often laborious, attempts to satisfy taste, finds the form which commends itself to him. Hence this form is not, as it were, a matter of inspiration […] but rather a slow and even painful process of improvement, directed to making the form adequate to his thought […] Taste is, however, merely a critical, not a productive faculty; and what conforms to it is not, merely on that account, a work of fine art. (174)

This, the adequation of form and thought captured well here by Kant, offers considerable insight into the process whereby the cultivation of taste, while not productive in itself, is nonetheless responsible for the control and, indeed, the certainty we might (perhaps unfairly or erroneously) expect of an artist and their creative practice.

To explain, Kant’s aesthetic is rooted in the certainty of feeling, the certainty of pleasure (or displeasure) that is immune to the judgements of others. One does not say, “I think this is beautiful” or “this is beautiful for me” (mere agreeableness), but simply, “this is beautiful,” a judgement that is aesthetic to the extent that it demands universal agreement. It is for this reason that Kant claims that there cannot be a dialectic of taste, and that in matters of aesthetic judgement it is not a question of dispute but only of contention (204-5). What is of interest here is that a lack of taste during what might be called the developmental stage of an aesthetic practice, where an artist’s creative endeavours fail to “satisfy” aesthetic judgement, does not prevent the production of work. Indeed, a peculiarity of aesthetic judgement is that it is always certain of itself regardless of its relative development or undevelopment. Kant uses the example of a “youthful poet” to articulate this peculiarity:

Hence it is that a youthful poet refuses to allow himself to be dissuaded from the conviction that his poem is beautiful, even by the judgement of the public or his friends […] It is only in aftertime, when his judgement has been sharpened by exercise, that of his own free will and accord he deserts his former judgement. (137)

As regards improvisation there are a number of things suggested by this distinction between tasteful critique and creative production. First of all, it is clear that the development of aesthetic taste does in fact include an essential improvisatory dimension, one that through a process of “practise and correction” (we would say trial and error), many “often laborious attempts” and a “painful process of improvement” eventually arrives at a form that “feels” right and adequately communicates that feeling. In this view the creative act comes after the development of an adequate form, where, Kant believes, the figure of the “genius” (we would just say artist) outstrips the mere criticality of the aesthetic judge. This is a common form of improvisation that, interestingly, is often ignored, not least because the finished work is precisely intended to conceal or at least obscure the uncertainty and improvisatory nature of its genesis. Thought in terms of youthfulness and maturity, the very life of the artist is conceived here as improvisatory, leading ultimately to the said adequation of form and thought to be found (for Kant) in works of “genius.”

The second point to be made returns us to the “peculiar” certitude of aesthetic judgement throughout its developmental stages. It is only “in aftertime” that the youthful poet recognises the error of his or her earlier work and acknowledges that, in retrospect, such improvisations were necessary as uncertain gropings on the way to the control and mastery normally associated with maturity and mature works of art. But of course, at the time, as Kant’s example demonstrates so well, there is no such uncertainty; far from it, the works of youth are often not only forthright but plain arrogant—such is youth!
Improvisation and Choice

But it would, of course, be somewhat bizarre to suggest that earlier works are necessarily more improvisatory than later ones, a fact which may or may not be true. The real issue is not the work itself but the function of the work within what might be called the wider existential structure—the “life” of the artist. Looked at in this way, improvisation characterises not the interior of the form itself but instead the mechanism by which one form is chosen rather than another within a contingent context, without absolute criteria, where all outcomes are thus intrinsically uncertain. Put another way, it is not the works of youth that are more likely to be improvised so much as the formal choices that are made before the work even begins. Thought of like this, it would not be contradictory to suggest that even the strictest, most highly organised work imaginable could be understood as the product of the freest improvisation, while an avowedly improvised one, without any pre-given formal structure, might not be so understood at all.

An interesting corollary of the above, where improvisation takes place between rather than within works, is that such improvisation does not have to be seen as an intentional aesthetic act so much as a response to a particular existential predicament: What to do? How to do it? Like this? Or like that?

At the time, when the time is right, the choice feels right, hence the self-certainty that prevails, and must prevail if the work is to come into being. In this regard it might be further claimed that there is no such thing as an uncertain artwork. Notwithstanding the fact that improvisers habitually valorise unpredictability and uncertainty, nothing could be more certain; there will be a work, and on this occasion it’s going to be like this (usually pretty much as expected).

But what does it mean to improvise between rather than within works? And in what ways can the choice of one form rather than another be considered improvisatory? To help answer these questions we turn now to Hegel’s account of two different (but related) beginnings: the beginning of sense experience, as described in The Phenomenology of Mind and the beginning of art as accounted for in his Aesthetics.

Hegelian Aesthetics: Sense, Contingency, and Severity

Summarised briefly, in the first section of the Phenomenology Hegel sets about demonstrating dialectically that the apparent certainty offered by the senses represents, in fact, the most uncertain of experiences on account of the essential abstractness and insubstantiality of immediacy confronted as this “this” and this “now.” Obscured by the particularity of what is here and now, the universality of “this-ness” and “now-ness,” the recognition of which constitutes a first step on the road to absolute truth, remains beyond the grasp of those entrapped within the certitude of sense-certainty. In this regard then, Hegel recognises that, at the level of sensibility—itself at the heart of the aesthetic of course—we (“we” meaning those thinking from a position outside of the immediate sensuous situation, for Hegel, the “philosopher”) witness simultaneously the greatest degree of certainty and the greatest degree of contingency.

Apparently paradoxical, this contradiction does, in truth, offer considerable insight into human behaviour, where it is evident that in situations characterised by uncertainty, obscurity, and incomprehensibility the best course of action is often the absolute commitment to one singular task or method. As Descartes famously declares, when lost in the woods don’t run hither and thither; commit yourself to a straight line: “In this I would imitate travellers lost in the wood; they must not wander about turning to this side, now to that, and still less must they stop in one place; they must keep walking as straight as they can in one direction, and not change course for slight reasons” (25). So while Hegel is keen to expose the limitations of sense certainty, it would be quite wrong (and philosophically naive) to interpret this as a rejection of such an, admittedly primitive, but nonetheless essential dimension of human experience. Indeed, as is well known, the real thrust of Hegel’s dialectic is as preservative as it is destructive, and what we seeks to preserve in his phenomenological account of human experience in its infancy is precisely the profound embeddedness in, and the immediate engagement with, a sensuous (and sensual) world that is intuitively felt as an all-encompassing presence: here and now as this and that.

Notwithstanding this, it is clear that, for Hegel, sense-certainty, in the brute form of pure intuitive reception of sense data, is utterly devoid of any consciousness of the universality of truth that transcends immediate experience of the given world. It is for this reason that, as promised, a broader perspective will be sought now—one that encompasses Hegel’s parallel account in the Aesthetics of mankind’s “infancy” within the domain of art. It is here that the desired model of improvisation begins to emerge (unbeknownst to Hegel, of course).

Of relevance to the present discussion is his account of what he calls symbolic art, as distinct from the classical and the romantic. In brief, for him each form of art is characterised by a different relation of meaning and configuration (content and form). With symbolic art it is the obscurity, incomprehensibility, and consequent arbitrariness of its meaning that results in a “severity” of configuration that brings certainty of form in the absence of a comparable certainty at the level of content. Hegel calls this the “severe style.” This is how he introduces it in the Aesthetics:
This severe style is that higher abstraction of beauty which clings to what is important and expresses and presents it in its chief outlines, but still despises charm and grace, grants domination to the topic alone, and above all does not devote much industry and elaboration to accessories [...] Similarly, everything accidental is kept aloof from this style so that the caprice and the freedom of the artist’s personality does not seem to intrude through it.¹ (616-7)

The point to be made here is that, unlike the phenomenology of sense-certainty, which describes the unwavering acceptance of the given, the severe aesthetic Hegel associates with symbolic art, while similarly creating the artwork out of what is “there and available,” nevertheless acknowledges, no matter how obliquely, that such a commitment to rigorous form articulates the dim awareness of an Idea that outstrips such (all) form (616). Thought in Hegelian terms, the manifestation of Absolute Spirit (the telos of his dialectics) would be accompanied not only by absolute truth but also by absolute law and the strict adherence to that law.² The “inkling” of this by the artist unable to either fully grasp or adhere to such law finds, nevertheless, an initial expression in the law-likeness of the severe style (315). In this regard it is important to be aware that in German the word strenge can be translated as either “strict” or “severe”; it is this subtle but fundamental difference that is at issue here. Strictness denotes a regime that demands obedience to a pregiven law, one that originates outside the subject and that is obeyed or not. Severity, as a style, is rooted in the subject although, to be clear, it is never the expression of the subject—quite the opposite. Whether situated before or outside the law, the severe style represents a particular manner by which the artist is able to comply with the exigencies of aesthetic form in the absence of (or transgression of) the law. In this instance it is the renunciation rather than the expression of the self that is paramount. Unlike strictness, severity is not obedient but committed.

**Art, Improvisation, and Dialogue**

So, bringing Kant and Hegel together, we have seen that their philosophical engagement with the non-adequation of thought and form, and meaning and configuration respectively, leads them into an aesthetic domain that, far from being stricken by dis-integration and lawlessness, is, on the contrary, characterised by rigidity and severity. Quite apart from the challenge this poses to the self-image of improvisation that has for so long capitalised on its reputation as being the epitome of playfulness and flexibility, and quite apart from the realisation that such an improvisatory commitment to arbitrary forms in uncertain times is profoundly rooted in the immediacy of what is “there and available” rather than the novel and the unwonted (another corrective), it is also worth noting one further (and intended) consequence of this line of enquiry: the erosion of dialogics as the predominant and all-conquering model of intersubjectivity within improvisation.

Working back (and backwards) through the above: it is commonly and too easily assumed that the improviser inevitably assumes a stance that is profoundly open both to the world and to those significant interactive others within that world. If, however, improvisation is understood as one possible response, not only to an otherness or others that is/are known or knowable, but to a more radical alterity that resists the transparency of the knowledge economy and the communicative community that it assumes, then questions of dialogue become secondary, even insignificant. Just as Kant’s young poet refuses to acknowledge the advice and judgement of his friends, indeed the Critique of Judgement goes so far as to recommend that we “stop our ears” and refuse to listen to the opinions of others when it comes to the judgement of taste, Hegel’s severe artist is similarly unconcerned with the opinions of others. This is Kant:

> I stop my ears: I do not want to hear any reasons or any arguing about the matter. I would prefer to suppose that those rules of the critics were at fault, or at least have no application, than to allow my judgements to be determined by a priori proofs. (140)

This is Hegel:

> The work of the severe style is entirely shut in upon itself without wishing to speak to a spectator. [...] As the severe style [...] it is as if nothing at all were granted to the spectator; it is the content’s substance which in its presentation severely and sharply repulses any subjective judgement. (619-20)

Unlike sense-certainty then, which passively accepts the particularity of each and every contingent sensuous experience and event as absolute, the militant rigidity of the youthful poet or the severe artist might be better understood as a form of certitude, a subjective feeling of certainty (in the absence of objective certainty) that must accompany the feeling of pleasure that, in its turn, must (according to Kant) accompany aesthetic judgement. What this opens up for consideration is the idea that if improvisation is, as it often is, understood as a process of trial and error, then it makes sense to at least try and offer a more sophisticated model, one that goes beyond the banality of merely “having a go.” That is to say, a model of improvisation that properly confronts both the complex structure of aesthetic judgement, rooted as it is in a particular form of solitude, as well as the enactment of the adjudicatory process in works of art—the conducting of a trial rather than simply “trying things out.” Once again this brings us back to a concept of improvisation that is concerned not with the trial and error that takes place

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² The separate utilisation of a style, usually in relation to the severe style.
within an improvised or partially improvised work but, rather, with a process that puts on trial and perhaps tests to
destruction the work as a whole. And it is the fact that any possible work within any contingent situation could be
other than it is that requires an originary felt certitude that leads the artist on this occasion to make this decision
and then stick with it.

In a sense, what is being mooted here is an approach to improvisation that breaks with the dominant view that is
fascinated with uncertainty as it is played out from moment to moment within the unfolding of the artwork. We are
instead proposing what might be described as a long-distance or slowed-down model that sees completed and
often tightly organised works as part of a much larger improvisatory field that has a much greater scope and
much longer duration than any individual piece. As such, a whole life might be seen as an improvisation, whereas
individual works or groups of works (improvised or not) are but components in the much greater aesthetic and
existential enterprise of integrating thought and form or meaning and configuration.

As we have equated the severity of this task with a solitude that is intended to resist the allure of dialogical
improvisation, a moment should be spent considering such solitude and its relationship to the nature of aesthetic
judgement and, in turn, to the role played by judgement within the trial of the work. Given that we are, at least
partially, working within Kantian parameters here, it is illuminating to consider further Kant’s manner of describing
judgement, as well as Hannah Arendt’s well-known gloss on this in The Life of Mind. Hopefully this will better
ground the claim that improvisation can be legitimately conceived as a solitary, non-dialogical activity in spite of
the majority view that thinks otherwise.

Singularity, Solitude, and Otherness

Regarding aesthetic judgement then, in the Critique of Judgement Kant elucidates the following three “maxims
of common human understanding” (152) as fundamental propositions:

1. To think for oneself
2. To think from the standpoint of everyone else
3. Always to think consistently

Broadening these maxims to thinking and doing to accommodate the thought and action/practice of the artist
(and improviser), when deciding what to do (regarded here as itself an essential improvisatory gesture) the artist
is in the first instance advised by Kant to ignore the judgements of others and enter into the solitude of the
autonomous work: to “think for oneself,” but also stay true to what one feels. But the question immediately arises:
how can one protect the autonomy of one’s own judgement and subsequent work when the next maxim explicitly
demands the necessary acknowledgement of the other? Indeed, for Kant, it is precisely this hermeneutical shift
into otherness that constitutes judgement proper. While this would seem to contradict his description not only of
the excessive inflexibility of the youthful poet but also the ears tight shut approach he has to aesthetic judgement
more generally, the situation is in fact more complex than that. The key here is to understand that when speaking
of the other, Kant is speaking as a philosopher and not as a social scientist and, thus, when describing
judgement as a form of “common sense,” this commonality is not assumed as a sociological fact. This is how he
makes the same point:

By the name sensus communis is to be understood the idea of a public sense, i.e. a critical faculty which
in its reflective act takes account (a priori) of the mode of representation of everyone else, in order, as it
were, to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of mankind, and thereby avoid the illusion arising
from subjective and personal conditions which could readily be taken for objective, an illusion that would
exert a prejudicial influence upon its judgement. This is accomplished by weighing the judgement, not so
much with actual, as rather with the merely possible, judgements of others. (151)

When discussing Hannah Arendt’s Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, Ronald Beiner summarises her
position on judgement in almost identical terms:

The more she reflected on the faculty of judgement, the more she was inclined to regard it as the
prerogative of the solitary (though public-spirited) contemplator as opposed to the actor (whose activity
is necessarily nonsolitary). One acts with others; one judges by oneself (even though one does so by
making present in one’s imagination those who are absent). In judging, as understood by Arendt, one
weighs the possible judgements of an imagined Other, not the actual judgements of real interlocutors.
(92)

What both Kant and Arendt share here is a deep understanding of thinking and doing, grasping the necessary
solitude of judgement while recognising that such solitude must on the one hand take account of otherness
without, on the other, being in thrall to the judgements of “real interlocutors.”
We have claimed above that this manner of thinking pulls the discussion away from the dialogism that retains its hegemonic status within the discourses spun around improvisation, and this is true, but with the following proviso. The break with social interaction, not only described but demanded here, is not intended to oppose but, rather, to transpose dialogue into the interiority of the judging subject. Drawing on Kant's *Anthropology*, where he describes thinking as “talking with oneself [...] hence also inwardly listening.” (186) Arendt makes a useful distinction between solitude and loneliness:

Thinking, existentially speaking, is a solitary but not a lonely business; solitude is the human situation in which I keep myself company. Loneliness comes about when I'm alone without being able to split up into the two-in-one, without being able to keep myself company [...] It is this duality of myself with myself that makes thinking a true activity, in which I am both the one who asks and the one who answers. (185)

Interesting here, particularly given the almost obsessive concern with call and response in improvisation, is a conception of thinking and judging that is improvisatory to the extent that it is structured around and driven by a process of trial and error while, at the same time, containing this dialogue within the interiority of the subject. The result, as Arendt goes on to argue in good Kantian fashion, is not the discovery of truth (objective certainty) but self-consistency (subjective certitude). As she writes of such “Socratic thinking”: “The criterion of the mental dialogue is no longer truth [...] The only criterion of Socratic thinking is agreement, to be consistent with oneself” (186). This brings us to Kant’s third “maxim”; the attainment of consistency, in the absence of objective certainty, contributes to our understanding of the severity and inflexibility not only of the developing artist, keen to protect his or her artistic integrity, but also of the improvisations that conceal their provisionality beneath the iron mask of commitment and certitude.

If, like Arendt above, we think this existentially, then we can begin to see a model of improvisation emerging that is characterised by disengagement rather than the engagement (political, ethical, spiritual) one normally associates with this world. Nevertheless, looked at from a different perspective such withdrawal from the collective space and all of its worldly concerns must be counterposed to the intensification that, as Kant himself recognised, accompanies the pluralisation of the self’s interiority as outlined above. While he does not make altogether clear what he means by works “involving intensity,” we might conjecture that, in the attempt to “enlarge” one’s mind by thinking from the position of the other, the danger is not only one of heteronomy (admittedly central for Kant) but also of dilution. This is avoided by ensuring that the notion of “common sense” (sensus communis) at the heart of Kant’s second maxim is, as we have already seen, not understood as a sociological concept but as a philosophical idea.

Thought of in this way, the Kantian notion of “common sense” adds something to Hegel’s account of “sense-certainty” not only by situating the certitude of the sensing subject in the commonality of phenomenological experience, but also thereby raising the issue of communication and the communicability of aesthetic feeling. As Jay Bernstein has suggested, Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* articulates what he describes as a “memorial community” that, through the memory of a lost sensus communis, “mourns” the demise of this communicative community in a manner that resonates well with the fragmentation and yearning that typifies post-romantic and modernist art forms (60-1). Without wishing to explore the art historical dimension of this claim here, what Bernstein describes as “mourning” might equally be referred to, in a more affirmative vein, as intensity. Whereas mourning dwells on and works through the experience of loss, intensity, while sharing the same predicament of a commonality without community, is more productive in that it is committed to finding a universal means of communicating singularity, albeit in the face of its recognised impossibility. Central to our argument then is this: it is the limits of actual social interaction thought ex-tensively that necessitates the philosophical idea of an intensive communion between self and other (Arendt’s “two-in-one”) that, through the solitary duality of aesthetic judgement, puts each and every attempt at communication on trial. And, to repeat, such a trial is not concerned with truth (how many trials are there?), but with consistency and the degree to which such efforts (works, narratives, performances) make sense—literally make sense.

Like any other aesthetic forms, improvisations need to make sense and, indeed, make sense—at least at the time. It is not necessary that they make sense to anyone else, except for the improviser of course, and even the improviser might not see any sense in his or her improvisations in “aftertime,” but at the time, here and now, they must. The greater the uncertainty and the more that sense (and sense-certainty) needs to be made, the greater the intensity and the greater the consistency—that is the peculiarity of aesthetic judgement and (the argument being constructed here) the peculiarity of improvisation.

While this might help explain the commitment (inflexibility/severity) of certain aesthetic choices at the formal level, and also begin to open up a discussion of improvisation at the level of the work (understood as trial), the above thoughts can also feed into the critical analysis of improvisation at the level of content at the moment of its production—the “in the moment” moment so cherished by improvisers. In this regard an actual improvisation taking place now in real time could be considered not only as a microcosmic repetition of what might be called the grand narrative of an individual life, with all of the forking paths that this entails, but also by implication an accelerated version of the slow-motion developmental process traced above. Understood thus, the analysis of an individual unfolding improvisation would be less concerned with the experience of uncertainty, expectancy, risk-
taking, and surprise; such things are already expertly taken care of in all of the other writings on improvisation, the issue here is instead, in spite of what is said to the contrary, the extraordinary certainty of the improviser, the predictability of the improvisation, and the absence of risk-taking (when and why did improvisation become an extreme sport?). In addition, most surprises are bad surprises, not at all what improvisers want, which is why they work so hard between improvisations to ensure these rarely happen—once again, a dimension or domain of improvisation that is largely ignored—the between.

Fixing and Unfixing

As Heidegger never tries of reiterating, erring is essential to human endeavour and it is, one might say, the work or working of erring that takes place between one trial and another. It is this work that, through what might be described as the auto-education of the “two-in-one,” ensures that “trying something out” becomes less and less hit and miss as it increasingly takes on the full adjudicatory force of the aesthetic proper, and becomes instead a task that gains in consistency and intensity. This process transforms, over time, if not the nature then certainly the feeling of certitude necessary for an improvisation to take place. So if on the macro level the choice between one genre or another, one structure or another, one style or another contains an improvisational dimension that is obscured by the fixity of the outcome and the apparent fixation of the artist, deaf to criticism or contradiction, then would it be correct to suggest that the same process of fixation is operative at the micro level, between notes, phrases, gestures, marks, and so on? On the face of it this would appear to go against the grain of most writing on improvisation, which very much places the emphasis on the unfixing of fixed structures, indeed using fixity as a necessary foil for the enactment of unfixing, conceived (very often) as liberation. But if this really were the case, why is it that so much improvisation, even the freest of free improvisation, is (as Pierre Boulez, no fan of improvisation, so helpfully reminds us) so predictable? Surely the pleasure associated with improvisation, for both the improviser and the audience, has as much to do with the shared certainty that quite strictly prescribed things are likely to happen than it does with the much-heralded uncertainty that so effectively fuels the risk-taking agenda and the edgy virtuosity that accompanies it. If this is accepted, then Boulez’s intended critique does in reality identify an essential quality of improvisation, one that is neither positive nor negative but which undoubtedly distinguishes it from all forms of “composed” work—to say again, its certainty.

John Cage (also no friend of improvisation) states that improvisation cannot operate at the level of structure, another observation intended no doubt to belittle the improviser’s art (36). While this ignores the improvisatory dimension of committing to particular structures within the contingency of the moment of origination, as discussed above, there is certainly some truth in his view. But, again, this does not need to be resisted once we have recognised that it is precisely the improviser’s desire for certainty that does indeed protect formal structures from any serious disruption or deconstruction—that’s the point. I repeat, if you want uncertainty then stay away from improvisation. In essence, uncertainty is something produced by writers, composers, designers, choreographers, dramaturges who, having committed to an arbitrary structure, enact their freedom (to create) by bending, dismantling, or destroying whatever structure is at hand, thus ensuring a degree of manufactured uncertainty. There is a particular kind of aesthetic pleasure that can be associated with this process and the witnessing of it by an audience, but it has little or nothing to do with improvisation. In many ways Artaud (albeit unwittingly) comes closest to what is being suggested here when, against the “whims and rough and ready inspiration” of improvisers (83-4), he insists upon a “cruel” theatre that fixes the unfixed, thus imposing an arbitrary structure upon the uncertain play of the aesthetic space, and a severe certainty that, as a response to this exigency, must be enacted in the moment on the stage during the unfolding of the work (in rehearsal, if not during the performance … which is frozen). Obviously, one does not need an Artaud to enforce such “cruelty”; this is the very stuff of improvisation and explains why improvisers spend so much of their time “rehearsing” for an improvised performance. This is something Gavin Bryars (another vocal critic of improvisation) fails to understand when he mocks those performers who rehearse all day at home in order to “improvise” down at the pub in the evening. All of this work, all of this discipline and disciplining, all of this “cruelty” is worthwhile, indeed necessary to the extent that it allows the improviser, at the decisive moment, to begin and sustain a work with a degree of certainty that belies the uncertainty of its origin and gestation. This, the momentary and momentous fixing of arbitrary structures by the improviser, “emancipates contingency” (as Niklas Luhmann describes it [309]) from its lonely status as ontologically suspect and aesthetically fortuitous and places it at the heart of the work’s unfolding as the most intense demonstration of human resolve in the face, not of adversity, but contingency.

The Beginning

So, turning as promised to the moment of the work’s unfolding, seen as a microcosmic and accelerated repetition of what might be called the decisive between-ness where the “two in one” self goes to work, we might start, as is customary, with the beginning. The beginning is the transition from the unmarked to the marked space (Luhmann 117-8). We will describe this as the shift from uncertainty to certitude (remembering that certitude is an attitude towards uncertainty rather than certainty itself). The improvisation could begin in any number of ways but the recollection of previous beginnings will inevitably inform the expectations of how this work will begin, at which point retention and pretention will bring a form of temporal certitude to its unfolding. An important part of the improviser’s endless rehearsal, perhaps unbeknownst to many improvisers themselves, is the trialling of beginnings, the performative equivalent perhaps of what Heidegger calls the endless task of “inceptual thinking,”
of thinking and re-thinking the beginning (40ff). Obviously, the beginning of an improvisation can be either certain or uncertain, assured or tentative, but in either case the degree of certitude will need to be the same if the work is to begin at all. The more an improviser practices, on and on, day in day out, the more he or she will feel secure within the inceptual moment where everything starts again, and again. What gives this initiatory moment intensity is not its uncertainty but, rather, the irreducible duality of certainty and certitude (an essential aspect of the “two in one”?), the certainty that the beginning could be other than it is coupled with the certitude that here and now it will begin like this, “will” being the operative word. Something has to happen, something will happen, neither life nor art can await the arrival of certainty, and it is the improviser who, if nothing else, knows how to get things moving. But how do things move forward?

To begin with, the beginning must keep beginning if the improvisation is not to deteriorate into the certainty of the “work” with all of the manufactured uncertainty this allows. Incidentally, keeping the beginning beginning is not just an empty play on words but, one might argue, the central task of the improviser. The beginning is not the start of the work but the choice of a way into that which has certainly already started. As Hegel says, everything is “already there and available,” but it is the giving and re-giving of what is already there that constitutes the true beginning of the work. In a sense, improvisation dramatizes this moment, but does so in a manner that carries the sense of this beginning over into the continuation of the work beyond the moment of its inception.

But this is where the current discussion takes a counter-intuitive turn, arguing that this sense of a beginning is equivalent to Hegel’s sense-certainty which, in truth, is only a felt certitude contradicted by the contingency of its partial and philosophically inadequate perspective. The “inkling” of this infinite otherness and the dim awareness that one’s feeling of certitude is in reality limited to the here and now does not, as might be assumed, undermine the conviction of the work, or taint it with a provisionality that renders it “improvisatory” in the bad sense: cobbled together, makeshift, off the cuff. On the contrary, it is this aesthetic sense that, as Kant recognises, initiates “reflection” and enables judgements of taste to be made, not only between one work and another but between one moment of a work and another, the productive. And this is where we get down to the sense certitude of the improviser.

In the Moment

Famously, improvisers speak of being “in the moment” as the moment of all moments when the improvisation comes into its own as the expression of … what, exactly? Unfortunately, the discourses surrounding improvisation, so often written by improvisers themselves, are not particularly helpful in responding to this question, most of them remain too bound up inside a humanistic language of emotion, expression, communication, and dialogue to fully engage with the severity being considered here. If we could put all of this to one side for a while, along with all of the wide-eyed celebration of surprise, shock, and awe, it might be possible to re-evaluate the value of improvisation not as the wondrous enactment of human freedom but, more soberly, as the performative site where the rigours of aesthetic judgement, locked up in the intensive dialogue of the “two in one,” transform the confrontation with contingency into art. Thought of in this way, the “in the moment” moment is no longer conceived as an ecstatic oneness where self meets self, meets other, meets all, within the warm glow of utopic togetherness, but rather as the region where the necessary rigidity of judgement arrives at a method of proceeding that places all of the emphasis on discipline, control, and a sureness of touch that, while having the appearance of spontaneity, is the product of endless rehearsal and preparation—indeed, a spontaneity that is inconceivable without the discipline of such preparatory work. Largely deaf to the aesthetic pleasures of others, the “severe” improviser does, nevertheless, provide pleasure to those who witness the unfolding of a performance, where it is not passion but precision that is offered, not as something to be shared but, rather, as the radically singular and solitary exemplification of aesthetic judgement in action here and now.

As with the between-ness that separates one work and another, offering an improvisational terrain that is obscured or erased by the work itself, so still we see and hear (if we look or listen close enough) that same space, now reduced to a speck and to be scrutinised at the level of instantaneity, as the barely perceptible difference between severity and strictness—the improvised and the non-improvised—here sensed at the point of delivery. Amongst all improvisers and writers on improvisation Susan Leigh Foster has come closest to capturing this moment which so effectively re-introduces contingency into the “in the moment” moment. She writes,

The performance of any action, regardless of how predetermined it is in the minds of those who perform it and those who witness it, contains an element of improvisation. The moment of wavering while contemplating how, exactly, to execute an action already deeply known, belies the presence of improvised action. (4)

In this moment of hesitation, in this infinitesimal delay between conception and inception (the start and the beginning), contingency remains, a fact and predicament that ensures the certitude of the improviser is never, and never should be, reducible to the certainty of the work. But, above all, it is good to know that even at the eleventh hour (the eleventh second), the working of the work unfolding and enfolding before us could have been, and can still be different, just as this essay could have been different.
Notes

1 Interestingly, he also identifies an inversion of this diremption in the modern (“romantic”) world where the incomprehensibility of content is the result of an excess rather than a deficiency of meaning, rendering all forms partial and arbitrary—merely pleasing. Hegel calls this the “pleasing style”—it has much in common with our own postmodern world.

2 “In man’s exaltation [of the law] there lies […] the complete and clear distinction between the human and the divine, the finite and the Absolute, and thereby the judgement of good and evil, and the decision for one or the other […] Thereby in his righteousness and adherence to the law he finds at the same time an affirmative relation to God, and has in general to connect the external positive or negative of his existence […] with his inner obedience to or stubbornness against the law” (377).

3 Here Kant states that works “involving intensity” require the “enlarged mind” resulting from obedience to the second maxim (153).

4 “Man errs. Man does not merely stray into errancy, because as ek-sistent he in-sists and so already is caught in errancy […] By leading him astray, errancy dominates man through and through” (136).

5 “We were listening to a group improvising, and I amused myself by describing what was going to come next; it is very obvious” (115).

Works Cited


