Notes and Opinions

Thoughts on an Improvisation

Julie Lassonde

Streaming video of performance by Julie Lassonde and Joe Sorbara

On June 20th, 2009, late afternoon, I improvised with Joe Sorbara as part of “Lex Non Scripta, Ars Non Scripta: Law, Justice & Improvisation,” a conference organised by the McGill Centre for Intellectual Property Policy as well as the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice research project. The performance, entitled “Improvised Contemporary Movement and Sound Performance,” took place at Sala Rossa in Montreal. I was moving, using corporeal mime and other movement techniques, and Joe was making sound with various percussion objects. Joe and I were improvising based on a score that we developed together. The score was spatially defined in the shape of a line that we followed as we improvised. The coordination of our movements and sounds was also defined. Joe was the musician and I was the mover, primarily, but sometimes the line was blurred between who was moving and who was producing sound. Our improvised performance lasted around seventeen minutes. This commentary aims to build on those seventeen minutes by exploring the improvisational structure of the performance and examining this structure as the “law” of our improvisation. I will also reflect on the broader relationship between law and improvisation.

The request to write this commentary came shortly after the performance. A few minutes after performing, still sweating and slightly disturbed by the emotional zone where this piece took us, Joe and I were asked whether we would be willing to have the video recording of the piece published in this special issue of Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation on Improvisation, Law, and Justice. We agreed, provided that we could see the video and confirm that we were happy with it in advance (it’s always hard to say when you just performed!). A few days later, we were asked whether we would be prepared to write a commentary on this piece that could be published alongside the recording. We agreed and, because of my previous work about performance and law and Joe’s commitment to write on our duo for a different publication, I became the chosen writer for this commentary.

As I started thinking about writing this text, my first reaction was that it would probably be more interesting to have an audience member write a commentary on the piece rather than one of the performers. However, as I was a conference participant in addition to being a performer, I thought that perhaps this exercise would allow me to continue exploring some of the themes of the conference, including what improvisation feels like from the inside. More precisely, I thought I would ask myself whether our improvisation involved law and how we engaged with law as performers. So I accepted the challenge of exploring this question as an insider who has access to both a bodily memory of the performance as well as a recording of the event. The process of thinking back about a piece through watching its documentation is also, of course, an important part of developing the improvisational relationship, as well as new scores, which is part of our duo’s work.

Looking back on this particular performance, it involved a normative framework, although one that allowed for chaotic moments (at least from a performer’s viewpoint). The grounding rule which informed our improvisation and probably informs any improvisation was listening to one’s improvisational partner. For me, improvisation is about being in the moment and listening. This grounding rule allows for the law of the improvisation to reveal itself to the performer. It allows for improvising freely or building on an agreed structure. Being attentive and always ready to go implies a capacity to engage with the law of the performance but also potentially to interfere with and challenge it, sometimes intentionally, sometimes by mistake. These interferences lead improvisers to take into account whatever rule changes they provoke as creative material, a process that is also part of the improvisational normative framework. Improvisers also expect the audience to engage with their momentary constructions as audience members try to follow and make sense of them. When I improvised with Joe, I felt that these elements were in place, constituting our underlying agreement and challenge.

In addition to this grounding rule, what happened that day involved other elements of a pre-established normative framework. Joe and I had agreed to perform an improvisational structure that we built together and had performed before. The structure involved moving and playing following a line that was clearly defined in space by Joe’s percussion instruments. We also planned starting and ending points at each extremity of the line. At these beginning and ending spaces, we would play with a different set of sounds and movements than in the main body of the improvisation. At the beginning and end, Joe would play simple and repetitive sounds while I would move instruments around and remove them from Joe’s reach. During the main body of the improvisation, Joe was allowed to play percussion instruments that happened to be vis-à-vis my body, as I moved in parallel to the line. That was our plan, our improvisational normative framework.

As I started thinking about writing this text, my first reaction was that it would probably be more interesting to have an audience member write a commentary on the piece rather than one of the performers. However, as I was a conference participant in addition to being a performer, I thought that perhaps this exercise would allow me to continue exploring some of the themes of the conference, including what improvisation feels like from the inside. More precisely, I thought I would ask myself whether our improvisation involved law and how we engaged with law as performers. So I accepted the challenge of exploring this question as an insider who has access to both a bodily memory of the performance as well as a recording of the event. The process of thinking back about a piece through watching its documentation is also, of course, an important part of developing the improvisational relationship, as well as new scores, which is part of our duo’s work.

Looking back on this particular performance, it involved a normative framework, although one that allowed for chaotic moments (at least from a performer’s viewpoint). The grounding rule which informed our improvisation and probably informs any improvisation was listening to one’s improvisational partner. For me, improvisation is about being in the moment and listening. This grounding rule allows for the law of the improvisation to reveal itself to the performer. It allows for improvising freely or building on an agreed structure. Being attentive and always ready to go implies a capacity to engage with the law of the performance but also potentially to interfere with and challenge it, sometimes intentionally, sometimes by mistake. These interferences lead improvisers to take into account whatever rule changes they provoke as creative material, a process that is also part of the improvisational normative framework. Improvisers also expect the audience to engage with their momentary constructions as audience members try to follow and make sense of them. When I improvised with Joe, I felt that these elements were in place, constituting our underlying agreement and challenge.

In addition to this grounding rule, what happened that day involved other elements of a pre-established normative framework. Joe and I had agreed to perform an improvisational structure that we built together and had performed before. The structure involved moving and playing following a line that was clearly defined in space by Joe’s percussion instruments. We also planned starting and ending points at each extremity of the line. At these beginning and ending spaces, we would play with a different set of sounds and movements than in the main body of the improvisation. At the beginning and end, Joe would play simple and repetitive sounds while I would move instruments around and remove them from Joe’s reach. During the main body of the improvisation, Joe was allowed to play percussion instruments that happened to be vis-à-vis my body, as I moved in parallel to the line. That was our plan, our improvisational normative framework.
However, as we started improvising, perhaps predictably, unplanned events happened. These events became moments of transgression as well as, more importantly, moments of confusion concerning the details of our improvisational plan. As an example of a moment of transgression, at the beginning of the improvisation I was about to move or steal an instrument from Joe, and Joe decided to remove it from my reach. This led me to engage with him physically more than I thought I would at that point in time. What I refer to as “confusion,” though, was much more disruptive and occurred throughout the body of the improvisation. Although Joe and I agreed on an improvisational structure, we didn’t discuss in advance the possibility of revising this structure that we had rehearsed without an audience. In the end, during our improvisation at Sala Rossa, it turned out that Joe and I had radically different variations on our improvisational structure in mind. Simultaneously, we each performed a different variation on the structure. In addition, we were convinced that we were performing the same variation and it was only after we finished the improvisation that we realised what had happened.

Variation one allowed Joe to play instruments that were vis-à-vis my body as I moved through the line, no matter what part of my body was touching the ground. Variation two only allowed Joe to play instruments that were vis-à-vis parts of my body that were touching the floor. As I was moving in parallel to the line of percussion objects, I understood that we were doing variation one. Meanwhile, Joe was performing variation two and experiencing a much more constraining environment. This environment became even more constraining for him because (thinking that we were doing variation one) I didn’t make explicit efforts to have more parts of my body touch the ground to give Joe more options. In other words, if I chose to have only the tip of my head as well as one foot on the ground, Joe didn’t have many percussion objects to choose from. If I moved quickly, it was quite a challenge for him to keep up with the required change of instruments. Despite this variation confusion, Joe and I were still focused on listening and responding to each other, following our ground rule, and attempting to comply with our overall structure.

Joe was experiencing what I would describe as frustrating constraints (and sweating like me because it was very warm in the room that afternoon). I’m not sure if I felt his frustration or if it was the precise and obsessive sounds he made, but this performance took me into unexpected emotional zones. It’s sometimes hard to know who provokes what during an improvisation, but the ongoing listening leaves room for transfers of each other’s emotions, and sometimes for the transfer of these emotions to the audience. During the improvisation, I was not aware of our dissonant variations. I focused on responding to the sounds that Joe was producing. Moreover, in response to the moment, I found myself exploring intensity and anxiety through rather tense and jerky movements. I was quite shaken after the improvisation. Our improvisation did not last as long as we expected, and the audience seemed surprised by our abrupt ending. We knew there would be a different quality of sound and movement at the beginning and end: simple repetitive sound and daily life movements, as opposed to the main body of the improvisation, which involved a higher complexity and formality of sound and movement. We thought we had agreed upon the relationship between my occupation of the space and Joe’s use of instruments. We had an approximate duration in mind. We knew that Joe was mostly making sound and that I was mostly producing movement. We allow accidental blurring of that line, which is what provides us access to each other’s discipline and creates the spirit of our duo. We knew that anything could happen. Because anything could happen, we were committed to the basic principle of listening to and responding to one another.

Joe and I only realised after we finished and talked about it that there had been some confusion about the details of the improvisation. Our overall structure had nevertheless been clear, and we had been able to “adjust” and “take liberties” which created this particular version of the piece. Although it is not necessarily interesting to identify precise and fixed causes and effects in improvisational work, I like to think that our confusion, our simultaneous performance of different variations of the structure, contributed to the uniqueness of that particular improvisation. On the other hand, I cannot underestimate the importance of our stable ground rule, our clear overall structure, and our experience playing together. This leads me to ask whether the law of any improvisation must allow for a capacity to transgress while maintaining some basic principles.

In short, if I summarize the law of this improvisation, it involved spatial, temporal, and relational elements. We knew where the improvisation would start, progress, and finish. We knew there would be a different quality of sound and movement at the beginning and end: simple repetitive sound and daily life movements, as opposed to the main body of the improvisation, which involved a higher complexity and formality of sound and movement. We thought we had agreed upon the relationship between my occupation of the space and Joe’s use of instruments. We had an approximate duration in mind. We knew that Joe was mostly making sound and that I was mostly producing movement. We allow accidental blurring of that line, which is what provides us access to each other’s discipline and creates the spirit of our duo. We knew that anything could happen. Because anything could happen, we were committed to the basic principle of listening to and responding to one another.

What we didn’t know in advance—the unexpected—was also part of the law of the improvisation. We didn’t know that we might be operating with competing variations regarding the detailed relationship between movement and sound in the main body of the improvisation. This simultaneous performance of different variations on the basic structure complexified our relationship and pushed us to find new elements within the improvisational structure. The simultaneous performance of competing variations may have been the result of confusion, but confusion may also be an important aspect of improvisation, part of the risk involved when everything is not planned in advance.
In the end, Joe and I responded to the confusion by relying on our experience working with each other, our common memory, and on our listening skills. We were able to interpret and use each other’s improvisational gestures as material for this improvisation. Concentrating on the overall structure and working through the confusion, while experiencing the drama of each being convinced that we followed the same rule, ended up being our piece that day. We managed to finish the improvisation and therefore found a resolution, even though we probably left traces of the emotion and tension that we had been experiencing throughout. Our capacity to respond to the unexpected, engage with it, and tie it to the overall normative framework is probably what allows us to call ourselves improvisers.

Notes

1 Julie Lassonde is a movement improviser and performance artist, as well as a lawyer. Joe Sorbara is a percussionist and improviser/composer, as well as an educator.

2 An example of Julie Lassonde’s interdisciplinary projects on performance and law can be found at www.law.uvic.ca/lassonde. See also Julie Lassonde’s essay “Performing Law.”

3 See Joe Sorbara’s “A Way Forward.”

4 As I’m writing this text, I find myself struggling with whether to use the term “laws,” “norms,” or “rules.” I find the expression “grounding rule” appropriate to describe basic principles of improvisation like listening and responding to one’s fellow improviser. However, this expression reminds me of Hans Kelsen’s efforts at finding a grundnorm that would be the source of the validity of all other legal norms within a legal system, which not only is at odds with my goal in writing this article but is also ironic as Kelsen would most likely object to interdisciplinary projects involving law and art (see, generally, Hans Kelsen’s Pure Theory of Law). While my aim is not to tie into and justify all aspects of the improvisational framework through my “grounding rule” in such a hierarchical way, I find parallels with legal theory intriguing.

Works Cited


