Cultural Collisions: Improvisational Practices in the Production of Precarious Common Spaces on the Periphery of Europe

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The improvisor has to be like a man walking backwards. He sees where he has been, but he pays attention to the future. (Johnstone 161)

Recent years in Greece have seen a series of economic and social crises that have led to a radical contestation of dominant political practices and hegemonic structures. Ongoing, harsh austerity measures and reforms have led to a general dismantling of the welfare state and an evolving humanitarian and social crisis. Through protests, occupations, and uprisings, demonstrators have challenged these neoliberal processes, offering diverse forms of community organization while demanding greater say in the utilization of public spaces. Notions of the “public commons” have in part provided a language for these political alternatives. Yet, as these crises intensified, wider questions regarding viable alternatives to the present condition began (and continue) to emerge. In a 2014 interview, Italian autonomist Franco Berardi argues that “the conditions for social solidarity have been cancelled by the pervading precarity. We should stop deceiving ourselves: the only resistance to global financial capitalism for the time being is the ideantarian force of localism, identity, and fascism” (LaborinArt). Rather than giving ground to “global financial capitalism” or its fascist alternative, examining emergent practices of resistance across social strata may well address both the present reality and an imagined future. Understanding the methods and failings of such struggles is essential to advancing new solutions, social institutions, and political practices, especially where neoliberal forces and bottom-up, grassroots resistance are in conflict. In the case of contemporary Greece, where established structures no longer offer real alternatives, such potentiality may lie in a new form of emergent improvisational politics.

In The Fierce Urgency of Now, Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz describe improvisation as a social practice that can open new paths of social change and teach “us to make a ‘way’ out of ‘no way’ by cultivating the capacity to discern hidden elements of possibility, hope, and promise in even the most discouraging circumstances” (xii). Such practices serve as “a focal point” that can produce “performance spaces that transform physical spaces” and “performance times that interrupt and redirect historical times” (xxii). This article explores improvisation as an emergent cultural activist practice with formidable subversive potential—specifically in relation to the occupation of the Embros (a disused, publicly owned theatre in the center of Athens) by the Mavili Collective in 2011-2012. Through their initial twelve-day occupation and the subsequent grey period during which they continued to operate the space for almost a year, Mavili improvised new political paths of resistance, new models of self-institution and public participation.

Glimpses Through Open Doors: Sonic Dissonance

The Embros Theatre occupies a block corner in the centre of Athens. The north wall is blank brick, while the west facade has a high row of windows and a formal double-doored entrance, as well as a small black metal side door that allows for direct access to the main auditorium, which seats over one hundred people. During the twelve-day re-activation programme, this side door was almost always half-open so that audience members could enter, even when late, and find their seats in the dark.

On November 21st, 2011, a few days before the end of this period, Minimmaximum Improvisation presented a live concert in collaboration with dancer Alexia Sarantopoulos. Minimmaximum is a seven-woman ensemble of musicians, visual artists, and architects who improvise using “acoustic and electric instruments, sampled sounds, voices, objects, texts, and images.” This concert was part of the “own goal” strand that Mavili describes as “an experiment with new structures, hybrid forms and unexpected collaborations . . . an invitation to reverse certainties, challenge personal limits, artistic clichés and conventions” (“Programme Categories”). As the concert started, sounds traveled into the auditorium from open doors, located beside and above the empty stage. A video of a little boy in a park waving at the camera began to play, and I recognized the sounds of a trumpet. A short riff repeated, and slowly the soundscape meshed and grew, washing in through the doors, around the stage, and out the side door into the street. The open side door also invited other voices and melodies to enter the space: a loud set of drums from the rock band rehearsing in the opposite building, an old man calling loudly as he sold fresh psyrri kouli (crisp bread), psychedelic music from a club down the road, and distant voices singing an old Greek song (probably in a nearby taverna, one of a few still open in the area). Noises and voices produced an uncanny symphony—composed, decomposed, and recomposed.
The door closed quickly and the space was almost dark again. A trumpet sounded a tune that travelled across the space, and a voice joined in as the musicians slowly appeared on stage. Alexia, on the upper floor, initiated a series of uncanny movements, her body in and out of balance gradually producing a physical score—looped again and again. The boy on the video ran into the distance while a fragmented text from Walter Benjamin about being lost in our own cities was projected on screen. The door opened again, and glimpses of other spaces and utterances joined in close proximity with the sounds of the concert: inside and outside improvised possible encounters, the “everyday life” of the neighbourhood met this new cultural articulation of spatial and sonic dialogue. Minimmaximum, perhaps responding to the closing and opening of the door and the unexpected outside sounds and melodies, moved toward a crescendo. Images of a city landscape (perhaps Athens) were projected onto the screen. Alexia’s improvised physical score on the upper level grew more manic, and her body almost lost its definition through the blur of repeated movement. The kinesthetic response of the audience melded into the collaborative improvisation: clicks and turns, feet keeping tempo, bodies slowly moving, heads looking from the stage to the side door, as if waiting for someone to enter, for something to happen. A shard of bright streetlight fell into the theatre, and I saw the old man who had been selling crisp bread now gazing silently through the half-open door. Improvised dialogues between the inside and the outside, the staged and the unexpected, created a landscape of sonic dissonance, reflecting spaces resonating within earshot of each other.

**Improvised Presences**

Improvisation has always already happened. The decisiveness of a beginning, the marking of an unmarked space, always comes after a multitude of false starts, erasures, and abortive attempts to get things going. (Peters 1)

Improvisation in music and theatre has the potential to challenge institutions, hierarchies, and notions of authorship. Improvisers work beyond script and score, drawing on embodied knowledge and working within contextual limitations to imagine and enact something new. Hazel Smith and Roger Dean argue that, while real-time improvisation implies radical possibilities, theatrical improvisation “is vital for the development of the play, which may then become fully scripted,” and works to serve the “vision” of directors as diverse as Peter Brook, Charles Marowitz, Mike Leigh, and Jerzy Grotowski (208). Improvisation in theatre can manifest realistic or unrealistic forms of presentation. The latter, Smith and Dean argue, has a special relationship to avant-garde theatre (209). According to Patrice Pavis, improvisation can elude “the constraint of re-petition and re-presentation” associated with “the sign,” which “[the avant-garde distrusts and tries to free itself from” (182-83).

In contemporary performance, improvisation often functions within a set of limitations, not as a moment of complete freedom, but as an exploration of the limits of theatre. Improvisation then is not just a method or a tool, but a condition that supports artistic and ethical growth because it activates new forms of agency within a specific set of constraints. Susan Foster notes that improvisation may signal a departure from structural integrity, not a complete abandonment of structural principles (30); Smith and Dean further suggest that improvisation can produce complex relationships between and among semiotic systems where “the focus of the theatrical experience [is] the relationships between the systems themselves, rather than an external referent (as in realistic theatre)” (208); and Paul Sills states that “I am not interested in improvisational theatre per se. I am interested in the establishment of these free spaces where people can do their own work, and I'm interested in the forms, which begin to emerge in these free spaces . . . It's an exploration into the unknown, into a world that one can't enter alone” (qtd. in Sweet 19).
As cultural and social frameworks collapsed in Greece during the recent austerity crisis, cultural workers began to actively explore how art might create or nurture free spaces. When emerging performance companies were unable to access traditional venues, they often found support at the peripheries of the system, creating distinct spaces and relationships with audiences and communities: companies such as Nova Melancholia, F2 Performance Unit/Mkultra, Blitz, Per-theatre-formance, and others improvised new structures and contexts to support experimental performance in an otherwise restrictive and conservative cultural landscape. 2

Greek citizens set out to self-organize the urban landscape through a series of networks, collectives, and community centres, engaged anew in exploring the limits of performance practice within an “im-potential” landscape, building on the possibilities of improvisation and testing interrelations between political and artistic practice(s). Improvisation became simultaneously a mode of action during crisis and a practice of survival. This was accomplished through impromptu artistic and political movements that sought to re-imagine, reclaim, and re-constitute public spaces through community encounters, impromptu street interventions, homemade theatres, and solidarity platforms.

When the Mavili Collective occupied the Embros Theatre on November 11, 2011, Greece was temporarily without a government. The situation produced an interesting reversal of circumstances, as the building became active after a significant period of government-imposed inactivity. 3 In their opening manifesto, the Mavili Collective states,

Today we occupied the historical disused theatre building of Embros in Athens, deserted and left empty for years by the Greek Ministry of Culture. We aim to re-activate and re-occupy this space temporarily with our own means and propose an alternative model of collective management and (new) post-contemporary forms of creative work. For the next 11 days, Mavili will reconstitute Embros as a public space for exchange, research, debate, meeting and re-thinking. ("Manifesto")

For the next 12 days, an intense programme of activities ran throughout the space with an emphasis on access and action. Responding to the precarious Greek cultural landscape of the previous decade, organizers deliberately balanced structure and anti-structure, creating a unifying framework while not defining a set of expected outcomes. A total of 291 artists, musicians, and architects responded to these conditions by presenting new works in spontaneous, experimental, and DIY forms. Expected categories of cultural action were reversed by practices that challenged established roles and artistic formats that embraced accident, irruption, improvisation, and the unexpected.

On Embros’s stage, emerging artists, university professors, theoreticians, and migrant communities co-existed by presenting work beyond category: a whole generation from different fields of praxis collectively improvised new relations, embodying Mavili’s concept that

artists, theoreticians, practitioners and the public will “meet” and try out models beyond the limits of their practice and the markets’ structural demands of “the artistic product.” This re-activation is not a proposition of a “better” model of production and management, but a proposition of re-thinking, responding, and re-making. This model emerges from the current lacks and shortfalls of our system and attempts to interrogate the global changing landscape at this moment in time. (“Re-Activate Manifesto”)

These practices focus on experimentation and process rather than product, as they test the limits of what constitutes cultural value. For twelve days, the Embros building was re-used and re-invented for a collective cultural experiment.

In Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t, Scott Saul describes how jazz musicians in the 1950s and 1960s created new communities, building their music and audiences simultaneously, “often in tension with that audience’s own understanding of the music and its promise” (3). In the Athenian political landscape where the Embros space was given new life, tensions between audience expectations and new artistic works created similar reconfigurations. Mavili challenged the politics of the culture industry and the exclusions of institutional art spaces by producing incomplete, improvised structures, works, and processes that responded to emergent situations. As artists, spectators, and organizers tested possible encounters, structures of co-existence, and forms of “inappropriate” sociality, Embros produced and re-produced newly improvised performance relationships.

The Grove Dictionary of Music defines improvisation as the “art of thinking and performing music simultaneously” (qtd. in Bailey 16). This is close to what Gregory Bateson calls “deutero-learning” (137), learning through experience rather than accumulation of knowledge. At Embros during this brief, intense period, artists and organizers were constantly making and thinking, responding and proposing, challenging conceptions and practices by creating a space for other stages, other presences, and other social and artistic relations, a kind of improvised experiential spontaneity that suggested alternative ways of knowing and of coming to know.
Figures 2-6: Uses of the Embros space.
(Figure 3, centre-left: photograph by Georgios Makkas. All other photos taken by author.)
Improvised Futures

At the end of the twelve-day Embros programme, the Mavili Collective initiated a general assembly to decide the future of the occupation. The closing assembly became a moment of reflection for participants who had created new ecologies of cultural and political practice while testing the limits of their own work:

Today we wonder about the consequences of our decisions and actions and how they create a future landscape? . . . What modes and practices might allow us to rethink relations and roles in society? Perhaps practices that do not follow familiar approaches, practices that exhaust themselves . . . Without the necessary solutions, we think the political today through “places” of exchange, of re-evaluation . . . that will perhaps produce future alternatives. (Mavili, “Νο ξαναπιέξουμε το πολιτικό” 121; my translation)

Basque improviser and artist Mattin writes that to improvise is to “be open, receptive and exposed to the dangers of making improvised music, . . . exposing yourself to unwanted situations that could break the foundations of your own security . . . no vision of what happened can bring light to that precise moment” (20). In the same way, Mavili members, Embros participants, and audiences came together on this last day without previous experience or knowledge of a long-term viable solution to the ongoing crisis. They recognized a new situation for addressing the politics of the moment through reciprocal engagement and the new politico-aesthetic landscape that this collective twelve-day jam had created. Unforeseen, even by event organizers, was the long-term impact that these improvised cultural and political encounters would have in terms of generating sustained public dissonance as a response to the economic and political crisis Greece was facing.

Glimpses Through Open Doors: Public Dissonances

Walking we ask questions not from the perspective of the theorist removed and separate from organizing, but rather from within and as part of the multiple and overlapping cycles and circuits of change. (Shukaitis and Graeber 11)

During this final meeting, the Embros theatre was full of artists, participants, area residents, and other familiar faces. Diverse and contested questions about the political orientation of the Mavili Collective and their aspirations for Embros revealed many conflicting visions of how the space should function. After the event, Mavili found itself simultaneously implicated in the politics of not knowing and confronted with the need to determine the meaning of the Embros event and its future possibilities. The political language of the assembly did not seem to allow a space for “no demands” or “not yet here” to exist—the community demanded concrete solutions and plans. The anarchist style of self-organization was, for some, the appropriate use of the Embros space, but others needed a clearer, more pragmatic artistic vision and structure—and both demands were resistant to the ongoing cultural improvisation proposed by Mavili. Would it be possible for these fragile practices of improvisation to continue in the face of so many challenges?

Judith Butler, in an article regarding Occupy Wall Street, notes how conflicting demands can be satisfied depending on the attribution of legitimacy to those who have the power to satisfy the demands, “and when one ceases to direct demands to those authorities, as happens in a general strike, then it is the illegitimacy of those authorities that is exposed.” Embros had challenged the legitimacy and authority of dominant political and cultural practices, but within a social context that sought similarity and tended to homogenize the unknown and the unforeseen. Mavili, engaged in an ongoing improvisation to constitute a world between presence/analysis and action/reflection, was haunted by questions of legitimacy and by the need to articulate both cultural and political demands. Undeterred by a state of “not-knowing,” the Mavili Collective announced publicly that Embros would not establish a model for action, but would experiment and improvise with temporary formats for concrete periods. Additionally, the collective claimed that it would propose alternative forms of dialogue beyond that established by the general assembly and would continue to support creative expressions of public dissonance.

The Politics of Expectations

Marvin Carlson argues that memory supplies the codes and strategies that shape reception, and that “as cultural and social memories change, so do the parameters within which reception operates, those parameters that reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss has called the ‘horizon of expectations’” (5). In the months that followed, Mavili struggled to meet the needs and desires of its participants, for whom Embros was no longer an event without expectations.

For a few months, then, Embros operated via weekly residencies in which different artists, practitioners, and theoreticians “occupied” the space temporarily. Every week, participants set their own rules of co-habitation. On Thursdays and Fridays, the space was opened for public presentations from the residents. Inhabitants of the
Athens neighbourhood of Psyri also met in Embros every week and designed local social projects, such as a community vegetable garden.

During these intervening months, the Mavili Collective, local inhabitants, and audience members collectively engaged in further forms of improvisation—a process of learning/unlearning and rehearsing new horizons of expectation. Despite ongoing pressure, the Mavili Collective resisted fixed modes of organization and undertook a process of wayfinding, day by day, an uncertain process of listening and responding, thinking and making, improvising and producing new horizons of expectation as a response to the political and economic crisis.

After six months, Mavili initiated a festival of “alternative modes of production,” seeking through co-habitation and collective uses of the space to produce a series of hybrid improvisatory relationships. A visiting group of post-graduate theatre students from the Netherlands decided to clean and redesign the upper floor of Embros, which was not in use at the time, and open it to the public. Visual artists from the neighbourhood organized a series of workshops outlining methods to reuse objects and repair the space. Minimunomax Improvisation presented on the main stage a live improvised concert in collaboration with Theatre Domatiou. A series of short performances also occurred in response to an interview comment by Greek-French social thinker Castoriadis: in one example, a collective of visual artists improvised theatrical scenes using discarded props found in the theatre (Figure 7–8). In these various ways, then, artists used Embros as a space/place to “stage” and collectively explore the potentialities of ongoing improvisation.

![Figures 7-8: Brigitte’s Vardo or almost 15 minutes installation-action-cohabitation (Stavros-Christos Vlaxakis, Maria Lianou, Ioanna Pantazopoulou, Iordanis Papadopoulos, and Nana Sachini).](image)

In The Imaginary Institution of Society, Castoriadis locates the potential for change in the ability of citizens to “self-institute”—to make their own laws. Most societies attribute their imaginaries to a deity or some other extra-social authority, or to ancestral obligations and traditions, but he argues that there is always the possibility of initiating an autonomous society.

The Greek term for “self-institute” is αυτοπραξία (auto-nomo: self-law, make my own law), while the word for improvisation is αυτοπραξία (auto-sxediazo: self-plan, make without a lot of preparation). In both words, the self is placed in relation to personal actions, made with (or for) others, that have social implications: both seem to embody a struggle over method, leading to a critical question—how might practices of self-institution relate to practices of improvisation? Within these contexts, improvisation might well be viewed as a practical exercise for more comprehensive political, social, and cultural participation, as well as a tactic for collective engagement and agency.

In the midst of improvisation (auto-sxediazo), self-institution (auto-nomo), and an ongoing process of trial and error, Embros continued as a cultural space of research in action (or practice-based research). Different collectives continued to produce experimental, improvised platforms, and political and charity groups organized numerous events, discussions, and solidarity kitchens to respond to the economic crisis. Over 500 events took
place within twelve months—an astonishing level of community uptake—as Embros sustained itself culturally and financially, independent of the dominant Athenian cultural economy.

Marxist philosopher C.L.R. James notes that revolution is a movement from the old to the new that “needs above all new words, new verse, new passwords—all the symbols in which ideas and feelings are made tangible” (qtd. in Ransby 374), while political theorist Jodi Dean argues that holding “a space for an indeterminate amount of time [allows] more durable politics to emerge” (221). Through a sustained period of collective self-institution, then, Mavili generated the words and symbols of a vulnerable yet expectant future.

Political Implications

In this context, we turn to the political and cultural collisions that beset Embros almost a year after its re-activation. While anarchists/political circuits questioned Mavili’s focus on cultural practice and their lack of organized assemblies common in other squatted spaces in Greece, mainstream cultural institutions criticized the indecisiveness of this improvised structural experiment. Following Foucault’s assertion that power relations are “mobile, reversible, and unstable” (292), Embros’s new improvised structures were confronted with sedimented social practices—what Castoriadis refers to as “society’s sub-power” (Imaginary Institution 110)—struggling nonetheless against forces of normalization. Such forces can appear in unexpected modes, for Avery Gordon notes that “the power relations that characterize any historically embedded society are never as clear as the names we give to them imply,” and that power arrives in forms “that range from blatant white supremacy and state terror to ‘furniture without memories’” (3). Improvising politics and culture thus involves constant negotiation of one’s standing in relation to unstable power relations, challenging both outside repression and self-imposed limits: as Albert Murray asserts, to improvise “means to be alert at all times” (qtd. in Fischlin et al. 77).

Mavili struggled daily to remain inclusive in the face of numerous, conflicting proposals from institutions, collectives, artists, immigrant communities, and charities—to bring together practices that historically took place in separate circuits. Fundamental dilemmas regarding Embros’s future as an alternative cultural institution also began to haunt both participants and the collective—although in a way consistent with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s argument that the multitudes can draw power from such conflict:

> It is true that the organization of singularities required for political action and decision-making is not immediate or spontaneous, but that does not mean that hegemony and unification, the formation of a sovereign and unified power . . . is the necessary precondition for politics. Spontaneity and hegemony are not the only alternatives. The multitude can develop the power to organize itself through conflictual and cooperative interactions of singularities in the commons. (Hardt and Negri 175)

Diverse modes of improvisation may be considered as a critical practice for constructing the commons. Fischlin et al. argue that improvisation helps us to overcome the scholarly conception that “there is a time and a place for everything—that people need to be in time and stay in their place” (xxii), while Danielle Goldman asserts that improvisation is a practice not of absolute freedom, but one through which performers learn to recognize and challenge constraints (27). Both failure and success can co-exist and make sense if participants operate outside the forces, practices, and powers that seek to evaluate them—and this practice can then become a model for exercising social and political responsibility.

Glimpses Through Open Doors: Last Notes

> I believe in improvisation. I fight for improvisation, but with the belief that it is impossible. (Derrida qtd. in Landgraf 19)

> Be careful what you play . . . every note, every beat be aware that it comes back to you. (Sun Ra qtd. in Szwed 236)

After almost a year, ETAD (a private company created to sell Greek national assets) wrote to the Mavili Collective—and to the police—demanding the group evacuate the space immediately. Repeated attempts by the collective and local inhabitants to appeal to state representatives produced no result, nor did a 2000-signature petition. ETAD stated, “we are particularly sensitive to the requests from groups and inhabitants of our city, but our company has to privatize buildings according to the common interest of the citizens.” They demanded the key to the space and threatened prosecution, collecting personal identification from individual members of Mavili. One day before the announced closing date, the collective declared, “We are not going away. Groups, collectives, citizens of Athens, come and oppose with us the closure of Embros tomorrow morning.”

On the night before the police planned to close Embros, Minimimum Improvisation performed a final concert there. The theatre was full of people—more than it could really fit. People sat on the stairs, in front of the seats, and by the half-opened door. Not knowing what tomorrow would bring, we all found our seats in the dark while the band stood silent, waiting onstage. A sound found its way into being, and around this sound, other sounds coalesced, searching for a pulse, a movement. The sound of a trumpet, followed by other instrumental sounds, travelled through the space. The audience was still . . . almost breathless. The door opened for some latecomers, and the city outside was quiet, as if waiting with us—watching, listening. On stage, images of the Embros occupation flickered one after the other, snapshots from other times. The performers synced with each other, the audience, and the projected photos, improvising a way forward, listening to whispers and movements from the audience and the still city outside.

The collective opposition that morning succeeded: the occupied Embros Theatre remains open and has since late 2012, following the organization of other squatted spaces in Greece and established practices in the circuits of alternative politics, hosted a weekly assembly open to all citizens of Athens and numerous other educational, artistic, political, and social activities. The ownership of the space was transferred from ETAD to HRADF (Hellenic Republic Assets Development Fund), and attempts to close the space continue.

After internal clashes, the Mavili Collective withdrew (although some members remained active in the subsequent Embros assembly) and initiated a new series of interventions, seeking to critique and question dominant circuits of power rather than institute alternatives. In 2015, a group of Mavili members, Embros assembly participants, and others active in the Embros space initiated a new cultural occupation of Green Park, an abandoned café in Pedion tou Areos, one of two central parks in Athens. Improvisation was again tied to a physical site, as Embros occupiers found new iterations to address ongoing political and economic crises in Greece. Assemblies and public commons can still renew social relations based on improvised connections.

In tumultuous times, continuity is not an option, and a normative future is difficult to imagine. In crisis, agents improvise new relations, creating other possible worlds in flats, bars, street corners, and disused yards—spaces made from a position not of privilege, but of need, incomplete, precarious blueprints of a horizon beyond which, in Jose Muñoz’s words, the here and now are “transcended by a then and there which could be and, indeed, should be” (97).

Notes

1 “Irthan me ta aspra kai oi kopeles me ta aspra katevainoun sti kato geitonia: they came in white and the girls in white are now walking towards the lower neighbourhood.”
2 Collectives and formations from other artistic fields also experimented with self-organization. For example, Bios, a group working in graphic design and electronic music, produced a series of music festivals in the early 2000s, and in 2003, established a cultural venue in the centre of Athens that, in the following years, created new relationships between the city and its art scene, significantly affecting contemporary Greek artistic production.

3 Embros had been a print house in the 1930s before becoming a state theatre and drama school in the 1990s. It was closed in early 2007.

4 The following YouTube link was sent to all participants and they were asked to respond freely through an artistic work: www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOr42HhnLXo&feature=related. Castoriadis argues “There is this phrase that is attributed to Dostoevsky that ‘if there was no God everything would be allowed’—which I want to question. Despite the provocation of this argument, it is the basic starting point for heteronomous societies: that the law is coming from somewhere else in order to be valid. And in that ancient Greeks respond by saying ‘we make our laws and until we change them we respect them,’ and it is that position that the contemporary radical movement follows, proposing that the laws are made by people. Autonomous societies know there is no afterlife: whatever happens is happening here and we have to give to each other laws that allow us to be autonomous beings” (my translation).

5 I found this quote on Mavili’s homepage (mavilicollective.wordpress.com) on 15 March 2013, but it is no longer accessible there.

Works Cited


ETAD. Email to Mavili Collective. 8 Oct. 2012.


