Sputtering Rituals: Remembering Pauline Oliveros as Improvisation-in-Action

Tomie Hahn

Breathing in, then...

Brrrgkkk...k.k.k...

Wupah. paa a a a.

Zzznnssssssss

schhhhpitueyyyy

Gkk, gkkk, ghhh, gkhhhhhhhhhh (clearing throat)

Spitueyyy!

(giggling, giggling giggling)

I begin with a photo, emailed to me by Pauline Oliveros after an iChat over a dozen years ago (Hahn). While not the most flattering portrait of either of us, it reflects a side of Pauline so many close to her know and miss. For me, Pauline's sense of humor pushed the boundary of inquisitiveness right over the crest of serious, and I fell into a mindset of living improvisation of the everyday.

Let me explain... Pauline was listening ALL of the time. Really.

While she held weekly Deep Listening® classes and workshops specifically for heightening listening awareness, Pauline served as an embodied example of how conscious listening and improvisation practices can integrate into everyday life. In other words, the act of listening is not switched on only during specialized sessions of music-making, dance, concerts, audio recording, and so on. Listening awareness and varied levels of attention become increasingly refined, redirected, or stretched and part of a way of being inside improvisation.

In Pauline's presence I came to profoundly appreciate how the attempt to listen all of the time affords a sensibility of being in the moment, supporting improvisatory possibilities. But just what kind of possibilities? For me, possibilities offer a consciousness of potentials for experiencing

each moment, being present—yes, all of the time. Awareness of potential possibilities offers insights into imaginable choices of direction, sonic or otherwise. Pauline seemed to approach improvisation fluidly, from everyday interactions to improvisation on stage. She did not verbally articulate this notion of the fluid nature of improvisation to me. I observed it. Pauline lived and modeled the fluidity of improvisation, and revealed it every moment: on stage, in meetings, classes, hallways, and online.

The playful and deeply witty side of Pauline I dearly miss. Her playfulness was driven by a sense of the everyday potentials of connecting and improvising with others (Oliveros). Here, I share the personal as an example of Pauline's nonstop ways of being *in* improvisation and listening.

Although I experienced Pauline improvising as early as the 1980s, it was not until we were working side-by-side at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 2001 that I discovered the many sides of her personality. Soon, we were greeting each other with tiger-like growls and laughter. These early greetings soon developed into our own ritual greeting of sputtering, or making spitting sounds. Pauline surprised me with her lightning-fast responses! Before and after faculty meetings we'd improvise churtlings alongside untamed smiles and grimaces. Ferocious vibrant greetings. 'Twas our idiomatic custom of improvising and communicating in the hallways, Skype, and even spilling into rapidly typed email exchanges. From time to time people noticed our sputtering salutations and appeared stunned, probably interpreting us to be spitting *at* each other. To this, Pauline would raise her eyebrows and add hearty laughter into the mix. Crackling spontaneity. I use my own Pauline salutation story as a personal example, but I know that countless Deep Listeners, affectionately known as "DLers," had similar wild Pauline greetings. No words of hello, just a... *Gwaaakzzzpshhhhh!*

The sputtering-as-greeting ritual displays Pauline's embodiment and use of playfulness in improvisation. Improvisation-in-action. She often talked about playfulness as a vital element of Deep Listening. For example, during an interview in 2014 on "Heart to Heart," a Korean Arirang television show, Pauline talked about Deep Listening, Sonic Meditations, and improvisation. At one point she turned to the studio audience and asked them to join her in a breathing meditation and improvisation. A discussion about playfulness and improvisation followed. Pauline offered:

That's an example... of an energy exercise, or energy practice, but also developing a sense of playfulness and improvisation... you don't need any musical training to do that...

I think laughing and giggling is important. Laughter is a very healing part of our world, our life... and I think that it loosens people up a bit to have fun and to find fun in something... especially if it is unfamiliar, you haven't done it before. And sometimes what I am offering is maybe strange... "What is this? Eeek."¹

During Pauline's on-the-spot improvisation with the Arirang television audience we can observe the reserved and perhaps self-conscious audience. The context is a perfect setting to observe how Pauline playfully encourages them to reach beyond the vulnerable moment and to try out the unfamiliar practice. The moment reveals her commitment to inclusivity, her passion to encourage all people to express themselves through improvisation. Pauline reveals how playfulness and laughter can be a path to healing that "loosens people up a bit to have fun and to find fun in something." The moment fosters a sensibility of freedom, and of being one's self while improvising with others.

I leave you with a challenge. Next time you see a friend or colleague, smile, then add an improvised movement and sound salutation. Note where it leads. How did that moment of vulnerability and play feel?

GZZZZZZaahhh . . . Bzzzpp!

Notes

¹ The invitation to the audience takes place at approximately minute 23 of the video. The quotes are part of the subsequent discussion, about minutes 26 and 27.

Works Cited

Arirang TV. "Heart to Heart Ep2720 All the Sounds of the World - Deep Listening - Musician, Pauline Oliveros." *Youtube*, 7 April 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=vM7SceO26Ps.

Hahn, Tomie. "Emerging voices—encounters with reflexivity." *Women, Arts, Politics/Power*, special issue of *Atlantis. A Women's Studies Journal/Revue d'etudes sur les femmes*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2006, pp. 88-99.

Oliveros, Pauline. "Safe to play." Just Improvisation: Enriching Child Protection Law Through Musical Techniques, Discourses and Pedagogies, 29–30 May 2015, Queen's University Belfast, Ireland. Keynote address. Video available at <http://translatingimprovisation.com/portfolio/symposium>. PDF available at <https://www.criticalimprov.com/index.php/csieci/article/view/3913>.