

“Towards a practical philosophy of collectively improvised space”

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Athens, May 2011. Thousands of peaceful protestors are gathering up outside the Greek parliament in Syntagma, the city’s largest and most emblematic square; it is a collective movement that seems to have sprung up quite spontaneously, in an effort to oppose government plans for further austerity measures. Practically overnight, the square becomes densely populated with makeshift tents. Within a couple of days, the assembled groups are meticulously organized to handle everything from health and legal aid to cultural and artistic activities. This kind of collectivity, still active as we speak, becomes portrayed in the press as a veritable cross-section of Greek society; people of different ages, ideologies, educational and cultural backgrounds are persistently taking to the streets. The movement’s motto, “keep calm and take the square” and its main identifiers, a site, blog and various social media accounts bundled under the name “real democracy.gr”, all centre around the rhetoric of a spontaneous, real-time democratic gathering.

At the same time, another, much smaller and more specialized kind of democratic collective is convening, on a less central, less symbolic quarter of the city centre. Musicians and non-musicians are gathering to improvise together, as they have been doing every Sunday for the past few years. They are following no rules but the ones they make up on the spot, and after each set, they are exchanging individual opinions as to whether these rules help or hinder the music they just made. They do so not in an attempt to perfect a singular outcome, nor are they trying to reach some sort of objective, reified aesthetic conclusion as to the style and quality of “the music itself”. In fact not everyone will come back next Sunday, not everyone has attended this gathering before, and every week there is bound to be a variation in the number and identity of the participants. This is not a rehearsal for something; the participants are not an ensemble. What is happening is a free improvisation workshop, comparable to

several such weekly, fortnightly and monthly workshops that have been taking place around the world for decades. Some historically notable and perhaps more widely known examples originate in the UK and I suspect several colleagues here may be familiar with them. However, given that most such workshops operate on a distinctly low-profile, localized and self-funded basis, it should come as no surprise that there are probably more instances of such gatherings internationally than the global media community could ever catch sight of. Besides, a workshop of this kind is usually difficult to portray and promote as an entity, because it is not always conditional on the presence of specific participants, nor is it defined and labelled as a group of people that go under a collective name. Rather, it is quite often defined as a place, a context in which people can collectively explore and communicate their individual notions of musical freedom, a context set up there and then by the people that make it up each week.

Both instances described above contribute, in my opinion, to a very tangible construction of space and a very real reclaiming and redefinition of the domain of the everyday, in the sense defined and described by sociologists and political philosophers like Henri Lefebvre (1974/1991; 1947/1992; 1961/2002; 1981/2008, 1987), Pierre Bourdieu (1993) and Michel de Certeau (1988). However, although the rhetoric of collectivity permeates broader cultural movements like the one described in my first example, it is non-centralised, non-massive forms of collectivity such as the second example that interest me in this research. In fact, through a third example to be discussed in depth shortly, I will argue that the specificity, localized activity and regular nature of free improvisation workshops, collectives and similar contexts makes such practices capable of exerting a significant and sustained kind of social impact on everyday life.

First, however, I would like to provide a bit of background on the research behind this presentation, and also make a few clarifications regarding the title of this paper. Group improvisation has of course been attracting scholarly and public interest for some time now, and in recent years it seems that interdisciplinary, practice-based research in the history, educational functions and community impact of improvisation

has been developing steadily in all directions, from aesthetics and critical studies to community practice and social policy. However, large-scale, institutionally supported and adequately funded international initiatives (see e.g. <http://www.improvcommunity.ca>) still seem to constitute a rare exception to the everyday, localised realities of under-funded, neglected, often discriminated against practices of collectives striving to “make space” for improvisation within cultural institutions and educational establishments. Most frequently, the latter are being marginalized to the point of being pushed outside the effective support zones of such establishments (Watson 2004; Grundy 2011; Prevost 2009). This is an interesting oxymoron, considering that research on the production, delineation and negotiation of space through performance is another increasingly pursued strand of scholarship, involving such diverse disciplines as cultural geography and philosophy of music education (e.g. Crang & Thrift 2000; Leyshon, Matless & Revill 1998; Kanellopoulos 2010). This poses several interrelated questions including, but not limited to, the following:

1. What kind(s) of space (mental, social, physical etc.) is collective free improvisation claiming today, and why are such claims so often challenged or restricted?
2. How “global” or homogeneous is this claim across different improvising communities? How do improvising groups articulate, negotiate, create or contest spaces? Do these modalities differ between individuals within a group and, in the case of mixed-media collectives, between different improvising media?
3. How is individual, subjective space embodied and expressed in the context of collective, intersubjective performance and what is the place of institutional support in this interplay?

This paper deals primarily with the first and, to some extent, third group of questions, contextualizing them and examining their relevance but not necessarily attempting to provide conclusive answers at this stage. The thoughts presented here are very much a work-in-progress, as they form part of a much broader, ongoing and as yet unfunded

project concerned with a practice-based ethnographic study of free improvisation in Greece. In this project I work closely with an intermedia collective based in a university music department as well as with a number of weekly improvisation workshops taking place in independently run performance spaces. As an actively engaged participant in the above contexts, I am also examining a series of both planned and completely incidental cross-geographical and international “meetings” between participants in the above contexts and improvisers from different geographic and cultural backgrounds.

The designation “collectively improvised space” in the title of today’s presentation, refers precisely to those manifold delineations and negotiations of physical and symbolic space that happen on a real-time basis during an ensemble improvisation. Following from that, the reference to a practical philosophy does not imply a philosophy model designed to offer practical explications to the aporias of improvised processes; in fact, it proposes a consideration of the very process of collective improvisation as an act of practical philosophy in itself. Although theories of space and spatial production form a large part of the aforementioned project’s backbone, I will therefore not be making more explicit references to those in today’s presentation, but devoting most of the ensuing presentation to case-specific, pragmatic observations instead.

Through the immersive experiences gained during this research, I can say without doubt that the reality of improvised practices always tends to be messier, but also infinitely richer than the potential verbal descriptions one may resort to in an attempt to communicate or explicate the nature of improvisation. This becomes even more evident when examined through the inevitably partial lens of audiovisual documentation, especially if this is carried out by a third party, i.e. someone who has no involvement in the practice that is being documented. With this in mind, we can now move on to a third illustration of improvised space, comparable to the two instances outlined in the opening of this paper. This example is a short video segment:

[VIDEO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCyeIMgol7g>]

The excerpt documents an open air performance by 6daEXIt [pronounced exceeda-exit], a self-labeled intermedia improvisation collective that has been active in the city of Thessaloniki since 2007. The group was originally founded by Music Department undergraduates and a postgraduate teaching assistant; it then grew to encompass students from across different disciplines, and became a lasting flexible core ensemble, engaging several other interested parties including staff, friends, international guests and diverse members of the local community in Thessaloniki. The session on this excerpt was part of a project entitled “Imagined Ears” and commissioned by the 50th Thessaloniki International Film Festival in 2009 as part of a series of site-specific parallel events around the festival screenings. 6daEXIt were commissioned for two site-specific performances; the second of those took place in an open air car park in Thessaloniki city centre and involved live video projections on the sides of adjacent buildings. The project briefly shown here was 6daEXIt’s first commissioned and fully funded project in the city of Thessaloniki, and several others followed thereafter. This first performance is based on the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki’s city centre campus; at the same time, 6daEXIt’s existence is probably known to very few, if any, staff members outside the Department of Music, where the collective still carry out their weekly improvisation meetings. They have never received funding or other support by the University, the School of Fine Arts or the Department of Music; quite on the contrary, the collective’s right to rehearse in University premises has often been put into question and occasionally suppressed.

“*Space*” according to de Certeau “*is a practiced place*. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers” (de Certeau 1988: 117). What happens, however, when the ordinary functions of those walkers are briefly disrupted, or at least significantly altered by another kind of practice, bearing different kinds of functions? In the above performance, the ensemble re-located an indoor practice that normally happens late at night in the empty hall of an off-centre campus, by exporting its contingencies to a lunchtime intervention in the busiest

passage of the University's main campus, a public space hosting several thousands of students during the day and situated at the heart of town.

Although intermedia improvisation is a regular, everyday kind of practice for 6daEXIt, there is nothing common or "business-as-usual" about the activity documented here. If anything, it exemplifies Ben Watson's idea of free improvisation as an act that "shrieks protest" at the "business-as-usual" modes of promoting artistic communication as an official, formally framed and institutionally approved activity (Watson 2004: 256). The very clash between starkly different notions of the everyday, acted out in the middle of an open, public space can exert a unique kind of impact on commonly held perceptions of what performance is and how it should be framed, but most importantly it can also challenge assumptions about the measure of achievement a performance should entail in order to be considered worthy of the (focal) space and attention span it occupies. This gains even more in significance when one considers the current state of affairs regarding higher education institutions in Greece. For several years, all elected governments have been gradually attempting to decrease public subsidy of universities, simultaneously calling for more tangible results: more externally funded research programmes, more proof of graduate employability, more rigid modes of quality assessment. Crucially, these have been accompanied by a steady pressure for highly controversial changes in the Greek university asylum legislation. Legally, university campuses were, until very recently, identified as sites where unlimited freedom of expression was to be protected at all costs and persons acting on university grounds were automatically granted immunity from persecution. This "freedom of expression" clause was flexible enough to be exemplified in the posters covering the atrium wall in the background of the video we just watched, but also in the very presence of an improvising ensemble on university premises on a busy weekday.

The documentation video we just watched was produced by the Thessaloniki Film Festival crew, and in three short minutes betrays a certain struggle to find a focal point, or establish a narrative thread in the performance. The camera emphasises the visual and kinetic aspects of the improvisation, closely following a few isolated

performers, often at the expense of the visually less salient sound-producing actions of most musicians, who were scattered in a loosely formed out-of-frame circle, mingling with by-passers and standing audience members. It mainly follows two female bodies, a dancer and a painter, temporarily dwelling on the other two (male) painters and their as yet unformed paintings, then turning to one or two musicians who appear to be issuing discernible high-pitched tones when the overall sound is temporarily diminishing in volume. Interestingly, the dancer depicted here was actually not reacting so much to the sound, as one might assume when watching this video. Rather, her movements were primarily interpreting the gestural patterns, physical contours and groupings of the performing bodies surrounding her. Unsurprisingly, when asked about her impressions from the actual event and the video excerpt, she reported that the latter felt “foreign” to her in several ways. She did, however, find that the camera represented a valid subjective viewpoint, so much so that she later confessed “not being able to remember how certain things felt at the time, because of the video”:

Generally, when I watch this video it feels like I was somehow exposing or making a spectacle of myself in that performance, but during the actual performance I don't think the question of exposure or spectacle ever entered my mind. This is probably because if I watch the video I am always “outside” the performance looking in. And by that I mean that it would be very difficult for me to re-enter the world that I was in when I was performing, because the vantage point of this document leads me to focus on entirely different features. [Extract from online communication]

It seems to me that the performer here displays a highly self-reflexive understanding of her position in relation to the ensemble and to spectators and audiences outside it. She does not seem to be bothered so much by the realization that she inadvertently became the object of a permanently captured “external” vantage point. What concerns her more is the fact that somehow the prevalence of this scope is canceling out her own “internalized” focus. In fact, this internalization is a recurring feature in most discussions and interviews carried out with members of 6daEXIt. “Nowadays” says another performer heard, but not seen, in this video, “I am not consciously trying to perform for anybody”

I mostly see every improvisation as an opportunity to test my limits, to explore the limits of an instrument, to see what new parameters I can discover to limit myself, and so on... I think this in itself can be interesting enough for other people to observe and experience; maybe it can even encourage them to make such observations and “rules” for themselves, without everyone necessarily knowing what exactly it is that each performer is working on at every given moment. [Extract from one-on-one interview]

This process of individuation is very much in line with the ideal of creativity as a “refusal to follow presupposed rules, forming a counterpoint to goal-oriented purposive activities” (Tomas 1970, cited in Cobussen 2008: 12). Furthermore, there is a shared position on the importance of making up one’s own, internally formed but intersubjectively shaped rules and instructions instead of resorting to more explicitly communicative conventions such as the attempt to engage an audience. This sharing leads to the development of something other than the kind of communicational locus often identified as a shared inner time between individuals performing together (Schutz 1977; Warren 2008). Here we have a case of “shared inner space” where, through repeated contact with each other and with the very process of individuation described above, performers are becoming more and more adept at devising means of self-exploration in a communal setting. Moreover, in doing so they are not simply facing inward, but also practically opening up a space for intersubjective relations (Cobussen 2008) actively inviting anyone in their immediate environment to construct their own meaningful whole in the context of a public, spontaneously devised, collectively improvised situation.

“But... is this dance?” comments an international colleague upon watching the close-up in the video segment discussed here, and proceeds to exclaim: “In any case, it’s fascinating that you have a group in your department doing things like that”. Precisely in an attempt to eschew associations with established art forms, the members of 6daEXIt prefer to refer to this activity as “movement” or “kinetic improvisation”, and rarely ascribe pre-determined roles or specialties to each other’s practice (hence individual members rarely refer to themselves as a dancer or a musician during sessions, though many are educationally and vocationally directed towards specific

media such as music or painting). However, this casually phrased question also seems to echo a couple of rather deeper and potentially more problematic limitations currently discernible both in improvisation studies as a discipline and free improvisation as a practice. Despite the aforementioned rise of scholarly interest in improvising practices, a considerable amount of research still relies on the attempt to define improvisation through loosely or more formally expressed sets of criteria (Borgo 2006; Peters 2009; Cobussen 2009). This apparent fixation on ontology, however, may often obscure other, perhaps more critical issues attached to the specificity of improvising practices (Lewis 2004a, 2004b, 2008; Watson 2004). After all, if autonomy and the right to self-definition are as important in improvisation as the decision to play without provisions, then “what is improvisation?” is a question that has to be posed and answered ad-hoc for each improvisatory practice, its defining criteria set and judged anew by the very people that practice them.

Where and *when* improvisation happens, on the other hand, is something that still requires extensive research, and by this I am not necessarily suggesting geographical or temporal mappings, though these too are of course factors that may hold their own particular significance. I am referring here to the kinds of questions that will also enable us to better understand *why* improvisation happens, and what can be learned from engaging with it on a closer, hands-on basis. So we can ask: what kind of space is the space that at any particular moment welcomes, supports, tolerates or fights a collectively improvised activity and what kind of place does this activity set up to frame, defend, sustain and develop itself?

To conclude by going back to my colleague’s observation, the truth is that it is sometimes very difficult to declare with certainty whether 6daEXIt are a group operating *in* my department or merely *around* my department. What is fascinating, however, is this perceived discrepancy per se. It provides vital information not only about the act of improvisation and its nature as an everyday practice, but also about the academic culture that enables the flourishing of complex actions reaching beyond identifiably positive and negative expressions of freedom (the struggle for freedom *from* an externally established set of rules and constraints and the quest for a freedom

to act according to internally defined consensus) (Berlin 1958; Peters 2009; Kanellopoulos 2007). And to that end, I think it is important to remember that there is often far more to be gained from examining the local, unsung micro-histories of virtually unknown collectives and the frictional spaces they spring out of, than by dwelling on already widely accumulated stories of virtuoso-based and/or institutionally-supported playing ensembles that are fully integrated in the mechanisms of an achievement-based culture (Prevost 2009; Grundy 2011; Finnegan 1989/2007; Frith 2002; DeNora 2004).

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