

FREE PLAY

*IMPROVISATION
in Life and Art*



Stephen Nachmanovitch

its own nature and its own way of being, from a unique and unpredictable place which is the group personality or group brain.

Early on we noted that everyday speech is a case of improvisation. More than that, it's a case of shared improvisation. You meet someone new and you create language together. There is a commerce of feeling and information back and forth, exquisitely coordinated. When conversation works, it is, again, not a matter of meeting halfway. It is a matter of developing something new to both of us.

Some jobs are too big to handle alone, or simply more fun when done with friends. Either case leads us into the fruitful and challenging field of collaboration. Artists working together play out yet another aspect of the power of limits. There is another personality and style to pull with and push against. Each collaborator brings to the work a different set of strengths and resistances. We provide both irritation and inspiration for each other—the grist for each other's pearl making.

We need to remind ourselves here of what is obviously true but not often enough said: that different personality styles have different creative styles. There is no one idea of creativity that can describe it all. Therefore, in collaborating with others we round up, as in any relationship, an enlarged self, a more versatile creativity.

This brings us back to the law of requisite variety. By crossing one identity with another we multiply the variety of the total system, and at the same time each identity serves as both a check on the other and a spur to the development of the total system. That is why sexual reproduction arose so early in the history of life on earth. Because one set of genes gets married or meshed with another somewhat different set, ambivalence, change, and therefore the full riches of evolution become possible. Otherwise, evolution would still have taken place, but it would have been

Playing Together

It takes two to know one.

GREGORY BATESON

The beauty of playing together is meeting in the One. It is astonishing how often it happens that two musicians meet for the first time, coming perhaps from very different backgrounds and traditions, and before they have exchanged two words they begin improvising music together that demonstrates wholeness, structure, and clear communication.

I play with my partner; we listen to each other; we mirror each other; we connect with what we hear. He doesn't know where I'm going, I don't know where he's going, yet we anticipate, sense, lead, and follow each other. There is no agreed-on structure or measure, but once we have played for five seconds there is a structure, because we've started something. We open each other's minds like an infinite series of Chinese boxes. A mysterious kind of information flows back and forth, quicker than any signal we might give by sight or sound. The work comes from neither one artist nor the other, even though our own idiosyncrasies and styles, the symptoms of our original natures, still exert their natural pull. Nor does the work come from a compromise or halfway point (averages are always boring!), but from a third place that isn't necessarily like what either one of us would do individually. What comes is a revelation to both of us. There is a third, totally new style that pulls on us. It is as though we have become a group organism that has

colossally boring. We'd all still be protozoa and slime molds, reproducing by mitosis the same dull replication of genes over and over again.

One advantage of collaboration is that it's much easier to learn from someone else than from yourself. And inertia, which is often a major block in solitary work, hardly exists at all here: A releases B's energy, B releases A's energy. Information flows and multiplies easily. Learning becomes many-sided, a refreshing and vitalizing force.

And of course there is the incalculable power of friends, even if they are not our collaborators, as the most congenial of block-busters, through conversation, support, solar, humor, and resonance, as well as the challenge, criticism, and even opposition they offer. Here is a whole vast universe of play, not only with the close friends who love us, but also with people whom we may not know so well but who somehow appear to drop just the right piece of new information in our ears at the right time (or a reminder of what we once knew but forgot). I remember, suddenly, the small green corner record store I visited at the age of fourteen, and the English record seller who crooked his finger mischievously at me, handed me an old record of the Bach Cello Suites, and said, "By the way, have you ever heard of the great Pablo Casals?"

Then there are those extraordinary spiritual friends who may appear once or twice in a lifetime, with a deep and compassionate perception of who we are and what we can become, the friends we call teachers, who may say a few words that change our lives irrevocably. They may say something as simple as, "Something lacking!"

Beyond the aesthetic surprises we can find in our own exploration of our craft, we join in community with others and respond to each other, thanks to the power of *listening, watching, sensing*. The shared reality we create brings up even

more surprises than our individual work. In playing together there is real risk of cacophony, the antidote to which is discipline. But this need not be the discipline of "let's agree on a structure in advance." It is the discipline of mutual awareness, consideration, listening, willingness to be subtle. Trusting someone else can involve gigantic risks, and it leads to the even more challenging task of learning to trust yourself. Giving up some control to another person teaches us to give up some control to the unconscious.

The free interplay of musicians is just one of many possible kinds of aesthetic conversation. Intermedia collaborations enrich the lives of musicians, poets, visual artists, dancers, actors, lighting designers, filmmakers, and many others. The combinations and permutations are endless, and new technologies are making old dreams of composite or integrated art forms, such as visual music, infinitely more feasible. This is a time when the multifarious worlds of music and art are beginning to meet and blend and create whole new species. We are now seeing a renaissance of crossover art of all sorts. East meets West, popular meets classical, improvisation meets tightly scored composition, video meets digital synthesizer meets Pythagorean monochord meets Balinese trance dancer. Whole cultures can play together, contribute to each other, fertilize each other.

My friend Rachel Rosenthal developed a long-running group-improvisation project in Los Angeles in the 1960s, the Instant Theater. Not only the theatrical play itself, but the costumes, sets, and lights as well were all a collective improvisation. The spotlights moved, the actors followed, in mutual call and response, mutual trust. People speaking in many languages, with many skills and of many schools, can play together and create whole and lively theater. This kind of interplay has always transpired among friends, though



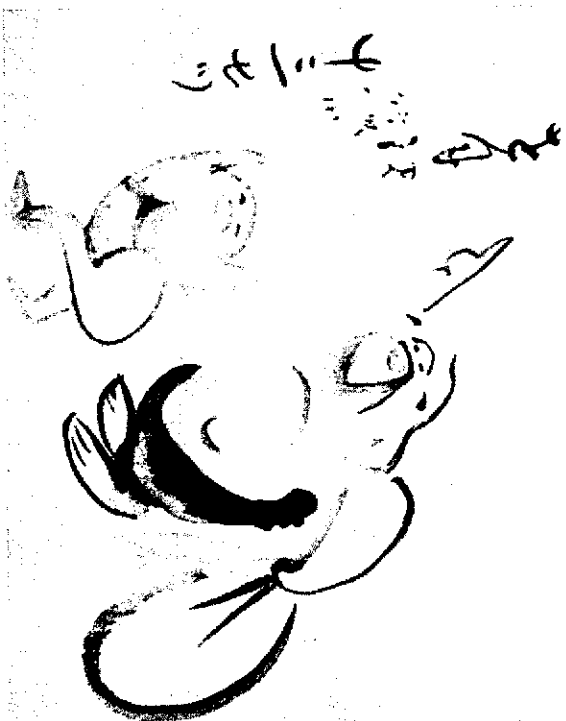
there is usually nothing concrete by which to remember the events afterward. What comes down to us (whether from last week or five centuries ago) are tantalizing rumors, like those of Leonardo da Vinci getting together with his friends at the court of Milan to present entire operas in which the music, poetry, and theatrics were made up as they went along.³¹

Artistic collaboration can run the gamut from a totally structured hierarchy, as for example a motion picture crew working from a script, to a leaderless group of performers improvising together, taking equal and shared responsibility for everything that happens.

Collective free improvisation in the performing arts, music, dance, and theater invites us into whole new kinds of human relationships and fresh harmonies, in that the

structure, idiom, and rules are not dictated by any authority, but created by the players. Shared art making is, in and of itself, the expression of, the vehicle for, and the stimulus to human relationships. The players, in and by their play, build their own society. As a direct relationship between people, unmediated by anything other than their imaginations, group improvisation can be a catalyst to powerful and unique friendships. There is an intimacy that cannot be reached through words or deliberation, resembling in many ways the subtle, rich, and instantaneous communication between lovers.

There is a phenomenon called entrainment, which is the synchronization of two or more rhythmic systems into a single pulse. If a group of men is hammering on a building site, after a few minutes they fall into the same rhythm without



any explicit communication. In the same way, the body's physiological rhythms resonate with each other; even electronic oscillators operating at close to the same frequency will entrain together. It is entrainment that provokes the trance states in the *samâ* dances of the Sufis. When improvisers play together, they can rely on this natural phenomenon to mesh the music so that they breathe together, pulse together, think together.

In entrainment, the voices are not locked in exactly; they are always slightly off from each other, finding each other again and again in micromoments of time, weaving in and out of each other's rhythms. Perfect harmony can be ecstasy or an utter bore. It is the push and pull that makes it exciting.

We can play together without even playing together. For writers, art colonies or libraries are often good places to work, because even though the people around us are total strangers and are all doing their own private work, the silent rhythm of working together strengthens everyone's work energy. We feel a self-reinforcing entrainment of our concentration and commitment to *be* with our work. If one is learning meditation, to sit cross-legged for half an hour alone, silent and still, can be a difficult test of stamina. But if a group is sitting together, the physical-spiritual challenge becomes much easier to bear, and retreats of a week or more become feasible.

Entrainment mediates the performers' unity with the audience as well as with each other. A good hypnotist will tell you that you will be much more successful at putting a person into trance if you pay close attention to his or her breathing, and mold your words, their timing and tone, to the timing and tone of the breaths. This is just what one does in improvising music for audiences: learning to detect and amplify the collective breath, which, as the experience pro-

ceeds, becomes more and more synchronized, deeper. There is a quality of energy in the room that is very personal and particular to those people, that room, and that moment. As in the case of controlling autonomic body responses by bio-feedback, we don't know quite how it's done, but we know that it is done.

The separate beings of audience and performers can *disappear*, and at such moments there is a kind of secret complicity between us. We catch glances in each other's eyes and see ourselves as one. Our minds and hearts move together to the rolling of the rhythm. This is more likely to happen at informal performances where there is no stage and no fixed seating to impose a dualistic split between active performers and passive audience. Through subtle but powerful entrainments, the audience, the environment, and the players link into a self-organizing whole. Even the dogs in the room are entrained. We discover together and at the same time the rhythmic and emotional scene as it unfolds. The skin-boundaries become semipermeable, then irrelevant; performers, audience, instruments, the room, the night outside, space, become one being, pulsing.