

The Philosophy of Improvisation. By Gary Peters. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009, viii + 190 pages.

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Kant's *genius*, like Klee's *Angelus Novus*, looks forward into the past, engaging the lessons of the past to mark an unmarked space within which to create. Above all, Kant's genius privileges originality of thought, which is not to say a rupture with earlier thought, but rather an ontological frame that draws, dynamically, on the frames provided by earlier geniuses. It privileges an ontology of *difference* that focuses on the given-ness of the frame itself, and which defines the mimetic nature of the genius-to-genius succession in terms of both the plurality of that givenness and the identity-drive of difference itself: difference *as* identity. In other words, originality does not equate to entirely new thought, but instead rethinks its place within the tradition of earlier influences: new-again, a dialogic free-play that locates along a smooth stratum of creative flow. Peters quotes Kant's observation that genius begets "another genius—one whom it arouses to a sense of his own originality in putting freedom from the constraint of rules so into force in his art, that for art itself a new rule is won" (31),¹ and part of the job of the genius is to actively forget the accomplishments of the genius that came before while acknowledging the spirit that led to those accomplishments.

Many of the multitudinous threads of Gary Peters's *The Philosophy of Improvisation* seek to unpack the metaphor of Kant's genius that stands in for the improvising artist. Peters is careful to separate his celebration of difference and contingent newness from what Jay Bernstein calls the "exaggerated severity" of a "frenzied autonomy"² that requires that each new artwork emerge out of nothingness, unaware of works of genius that came before, which Bernstein criticizes as a futile, restless search for the new. Peters, following Kant, instead celebrates the inquisitive spirit of newness, as something to strive for in the pursuit of freedom and, we will see, as a dialectic between a negative freedom-from and a positive freedom-to. Both of these freedoms play out in crucial ways when we start to examine how an improvised performance can unfold, from the beginning that marks an unmarked space to the many ways in which the continuation responds to that beginning, which Peters will describe in turn as contingent, tragic, and ironic.

First, a few brief words on what this book is not. This is not a book on how to improvise. Peters takes no firm ideological stance in regard to what improvisation should or could do, although he does reveal a card or two with the particular improvising musicians to whom he chooses to appeal. There is no attempt to define an aesthetic of improvisation, although he is not afraid of engaging

some very challenging aesthetic viewpoints. And Peters is not trying to coopt a particular philosophical ontology in order to bend it to the needs of his thesis; indeed, while Peters engages a remarkably broad range of thinkers, from Kant and Schiller to Nietzsche to Heidegger and Levinas to Adorno and Benjamin to Artaud, Deleuze, and Derrida, he admits that this diverse roster might not represent "the most obvious choice of participants in this attempt at a reconceptualization of improvisation, but their presence should not be misinterpreted. This book is not and was never intended to be a commentary on those thinkers . . . : this is not a secondary text" (6). It quickly becomes clear that not only are none of these invocations superfluous, they are crucial pieces that Peters uses to construct his argument.

A metonym for improvisation is introduced in the scrap yard game, in which contestants vie to create "a work, produced within a restricted time frame, within a delimited productive space with delimited resources" (10). The scrap yard game provides a useful entry point for Peters's argument, since it introduces such concepts as creativity, collaboration, and teleology (since the goal of the contestants is to work toward the creation of a specific *work*). But right away Peters challenges the notion of an improvised performance as a *work* or as something that should be regarded as a product. He asserts that improvisation is seldom about the product as much as it is about "the chronicling of a series of decisions, insights, confusions, successes, and failures" (10), a view shared by many of the viewers of the scrap yard programs. Peters does this by encouraging a Nietzschean "active forgetting" of the beginning of a work, which serves to deny the very possibility of the beginning becoming a work; in this way Adorno's "inherent tendency" of material becomes "the inherent *possibilities* of material at any particular historical moment as part of an inherent temporal unfolding that is largely unresponsive to the whims of the individual subject" (11). The forces of time, experience, use, and creativity all conspire to circumscribe the way in which the artist engages the artwork, and conversely the artist attempts to shape the materials-at-hand in order to control those forces. Another way to think of this is to consider a dialectic between what is *there* and what is *given*—what is inherent in a beginning that promotes a particular trajectory of Becoming—that in turn enacts a Husserlian noemic-noetic relation mediated by the "I" of the artist's intention.

What are the possibilities inherent in, or given by, the materials-at-hand? An improviser might ask: what are *all* of the possibilities? What are some unguessed-at possibilities? Many improvising musicians invoke a rudimentary *epoché* here, carefully bracketing out known possibilities in order to explore a plurality of experiential relationships with the aesthetic materials at hand as well as a range of strategies by which those experiences may be enacted. We will return soon to the notions of the *there* and how the *there is given*, but for now we might begin to think about construing the given as broadly and generously as possible: what *are* the ways in which something can be ready-to-hand, or that we might imagine that something *might* or *could* be ready-to-hand? This is how we move from predicament to possibility, by interrogating the aesthetic

¹ Kant (1951, 181).

² Bernstein (1992, 95 and 124).

materials and by accumulating a plurality of ways in which they might become useful to us, thereby transcending predeterminations (whether they be social, historical, aesthetic, formal, etc.)—this is the very goal of the epoché.³

This is all circumscribed by retentive experiences of engagement with the ready-to-hand aesthetic materials: we need to consider “in what ways all material contains, sedimented within it, historical patterns of human engagement and creativity that impose limits on what can and cannot be done on the occasion of the material’s subsequent reworking” (11). This is Adorno’s predicament, that “the ‘material’ is itself the crystallization of the creative impulse, an element socially predetermined,”⁴ which Peters will eventually turn into a positive by expressing these reworkings as the ways in which the there can be given, resulting in “a shifting dialectical or differential relation (depending on your philosophical loyalties)” (12)⁵ that involves nuanced considerations of alterity and difference *as* identity (following Deleuze), and challenging notions of the work, beginning, destruction (and deconstruction), and teleology.

A teleology of improvised music is subsumed into a consideration of Becoming that begins in the most natural way: with a beginning. A beginning necessarily begins with the marking of an unmarked space (an originary moment that Peters eventually describes as tragic, since it turns out to hold the seed of its own destruction), but what exactly does the marking of an unmarked space entail? It turns out that, for Peters, the unmarked space that begins an improvised performance is a quite literal thing; namely, the silence that precedes the beginning of said performance. It is this silence upon which the performance intrudes. Peters asks “Will it begin?” (36), but a better question, since Peters’s can’t be much more than rhetorical, is “*What* is to begin?” What are the improvisers going to do? This is a better

existential question, and it also engages the dialectic between artist and artwork: *how* does the marking of unmarked space determine what is to follow; what is the particular teleology (or willful non-teleology) within which the performance will operate? Big questions about the nature of art and the role of the artist start to emerge: “At issue here is not just the aforementioned transition from absence to presence constitutive of the artwork but also the position and status of the artist whose productive freedom is . . . dependent upon the liberation of the reflexive subject from the subjection to subjectivity . . .” (37). Some of that subjectivity concerns the relationship of the artwork (and the artist) to its history, tradition, expectations, etc., and some has to do with the way in which the *there* of the beginning is *given*; the protensive range of possible continuations inherent in the beginning. But again, for Peters the project of the improviser (which he frequently refers to as the “tragedy” of the improviser) is to *deny* continuation of the beginning, to deny the possibility that a beginning will begin a *work*. Instead he offers an ontological model in which the beginning is continuously destroyed to make way for new beginnings—a negative freedom—from the work-forming tendencies of a beginning to congeal into a work, a process that, as Adorno makes clear, is doomed to failure.

To repeat: Peters is suggesting that the goal of improvised music is not to produce “works,” but to produce “beginnings,” which exist primarily to be destroyed as each beginning is supplanted by a new beginning—(re-)marking the *marked* space. Peters paints this as a positive: “As an ideal-type in this regard free-improvisation is able to achieve, or at least strive to achieve, a prior degree of aesthetic erasure beyond the reach of other art forms precisely because its primary aim is *not* to produce works. Its primary aim is to produce *beginnings*” (37). Peters describes this as tragic, but a tragedy to be celebrated, that reifies the ephemerality of improvised music, and that navigates a (tragic) struggle between the positive freedom of the beginning (and of subsequent beginnings) and the negative freedom of the destruction of that beginning (freedom-from the constraints of the protensive field suggested by the beginning). The dialectic between negative and positive freedoms now opposes a hyper-aware, caring improvisational attitude that is “attentive to, responsive to, and . . . supportive of the mark-making project” against an assertive stance that is “decisive, determined, and often disruptive of cozy, considerate communities” (54).

As an improvising musician I have mixed feelings about this thesis, although I’ll admit that Peters makes a persuasive case. While the notion of “improvising form” is a cliché that is repeated *ad nauseam* among free-improvisers (and, admittedly, it is a rare improvised performance in which a formal design unfolds skillfully and transparently), it is more than just a celebratory stance; it is a real goal and is considered by many to be *the* metric of a successful performance. For many improvisers, the beginning (the marking of the unmarked space) *is* intended as the beginning of a *work*, and the success of the improvisation has everything to do with the success of the communication of the form of that work (*not* necessarily to the audience, but at least to

3 I know that this narrative borders on anachronism, and that Heidegger (and in some ways, by extension, Adorno) was reacting specifically to the Husserlian ontology of phenomenological inquiry, but I strongly believe that there is a value in the pursuit of the “bracketing-out” project requested by the epoché. Even if that project can never be entirely successful (that is, if we will never be able entirely to bracket out our basic behavioral predilections), the mere attempt to do so, and the subsequent unconcealing of alternate epistemologies, can only enrich the phenomenal (or in this case, productive) experience. I should also be clear here: this thread is my interpretation of aspects of Peters’s narrative—nowhere does Peters directly engage a Husserlian phenomenological model of inquiry.

4 Adorno (2003, 33).

5 This is one of a number of witticisms that occasionally pepper Peters’s text and that serve as very welcome grounding-points when his discursive path starts to get particularly thorny. A few others: describing author and gourmand Diane Seed as “the Adorno of pasta cooks” (75), his nod to the possibility that there may be an ironic thread in Kant’s writing (98), the snarky “Certainly, the pseudo-individualism that works across the surface of this infinite sameness as an illusory force of differentiation that fools almost everyone fortunate enough not to have read Adorno should be treated with some suspicion . . .” (121), and my favorite, following a narrative on renovation in comedy: “Admittedly, this is a rather odd take on Heidegger’s (deeply unfunny) ontology . . .” (128).

the rest of the musicians in the ensemble—if the audience catches it then it's a bonus!).⁶ Peters counters that “indeed, one could go further and suggest that the primary aim of free-improvisation is to ensure that this ongoing and endless destruction is not short-circuited by the finished artwork or by a spurious community promoting an ideology of oneness” (51). One could argue that Peters is confusing the work and the tradition to which that work might (problematically) refer. But Peters is offering a hypothetical model for how improvisation *could* go rather than how it *does* (or *should*) go. In this sense Kant's genius is not an idealized figure, but stands in as a notion, an act, a conscious effort to strive for a more attainable “sense of originality” in the sense of an autochthonous, continuously re-originating creative flux.

Now, Peters does not deny the work-directed intentions of the improviser, but neither does he overtly acknowledge that there are many improvisers who strive to create works in some fundamental sense. Or at least he withholds this acknowledgment until much later—eventually he will offer a model that circumvents both the need to describe an improvised performance as a work (and therefore the possibility, or even inevitability, that it will fail as such in some fundamental way) and the criticism of such a performance to live up to the standards that a work-directed aesthetic demands. In framing his argument in such a way, Peters suggests that the improviser's work-drive is misguided, that the hackneyed “improvisation as spontaneous composition” meme should be replaced by a new improvisational ontology that subtends re-novation, re-origination, and irony. In a work-driven improvisation, the problem “is that once at play within the marked space, the . . . improvisors risk being enticed or indeed forced into the given structures of gameplay, thus posing a threat to the positive freedom desired and demanding, in turn, a liberation—from the game” (26). This is improvisation's first tragic moment—even as the performers strive to mark an unmarked space in a way that liberates them from the weight of history, tradition, representation, reception, and so on, the very act of marking that space enables new structures that threaten to assert their denial of positive freedom on the participants. In the very act of creating a space in which to celebrate a newly-found freedom—from, the freedom-to is actually oppressed by the Becoming-expectations of the beginning.

AN AESTHETICS OF PRODUCTION

Kant's aesthetic experience “can only take place as a moment of *reception* within a marked space” (27, emphasis added), but Peters is more interested in the freedom of the original moment; that is, of the moment of *production*. Most of the conversation

about aesthetics, historically, has been about reception, but improvisational arts privilege production over reception, presentation over representation, and creation over preservation. Here Peters turns to Heidegger, who attempted “to ground the whole Kantian project in the productive imagination” (35) by taking the imagination as a ground for intuition, receptivity, and spontaneity; in short, for “the free play of human cognition.” Kant's genius, Peters affirms, represents the apex of the productive imagination and “appears able to spontaneously originate artworks untarnished by the history of representation sustained by the mimetic activity of the reproductive imagination” (36).

Heidegger's productive aesthetic, which foregrounds the “existential predicament of the artist rather than the ontological essence of art” (34), is extremely compelling with regard to improvised music—focusing away from the finished work and its reception and onto the artist and the act of creating (from the standpoint of the dialogue between production and reproduction, Peters is careful to reinforce) in a way that resonates with contemporary critiques of analytical epistemologies of improvised music, such as those offered by John Brownell and Ingrid Monson.⁷ This relates to phenomenological accounts of temporality in a compelling way. When Thomas Clifton or David Lewin (or Husserl)⁸ describe the listening experience phenomenologically, there is a tacit assumption that the listener is hearing for the first time—otherwise, the relationship of retained-past to present to predicted-future is skewed by the listener's history of prior experiences (it is hard for an expectation to be denied when you heard it the last time you experienced the piece).⁹ But with improvised music, every performance has (to some degree) the potential to be a fresh phenomenological experience. I say to some degree because every improvised performance also communicates with past performances, traditions of improvised music, and a range of expectations about how improvised music tends to go.¹⁰

7 Brownell (1994) and Monson (1996). Regarding the consideration of an improvised performance as a product, for example, Brownell offers that “[i]ts superiority . . . lies in its use of devices that are normally considered to be indicators of quality in composed music. Development of themes, coherence, deliberation and consideration of material employed (as opposed to whatever the player ‘happens to hit upon’) are the hallmarks of well-crafted compositions. I propose the term ‘notism’ for this critical attitude. Notism springs from a fixation on the object of analysis rather than on the process from which it springs. . . . rather than analysing music, what ends up being analyzed is the frozen record of a process” (Brownell [1994, 15]). Brownell goes too far, with a straw man argument that positions positivist music theory as asserting that all aspects of all music can be represented by graphic notation, which I extrapolate as an argument that promotes the suggestion that such a frozen record somehow stands as a metonym for a dynamic performance in all of its vital complexity and ephemerality. I know of no theory that asserts this, nor of any theorist who claims that it is possible or even desirable.

8 Clifton (1983), Lewin (1986), and Husserl (1964).

9 But on the other hand you can “sweetly anticipate” the denied expectation once you know that it's coming!

10 In Bailey (1993), Derek Bailey and Gavin Bryars engage in an intimate and revealing conversation about the latter's disenchantment with improvised

6 Here and elsewhere Peters appeals to free-improvising musicians (for instance, Eddie Prévost, Derek Bailey, and Steven Hicks—c.f. the Prévost quote on page 37, from Prévost [1995]) who lean to the polemical as far as their musical and discursive predilections go. It would be very interesting to hear how other improvisers would respond to this kind of characterization—Misha Mengelberg or Han Bennink for example, or Roscoe Mitchell or George Lewis, to appeal to a North American point of view.

Peters's scrap yard model is appropriate here as it conflates the "working of the work" and the spectacle of the improvisational process. In most art the productive aspects are hidden, but in improvised arts the audience is privy to every instant of production, including false starts, dead ends, and do-overs, and the struggle to succeed is what makes the spectacle so compelling (there's that reception aesthetic again, however!). Or, following Heidegger, "the struggle clears the space for a moment of decision, one in which the past and future may be gathered and granted significance in the present."¹¹ On a more prosaic level, this tragedy can be construed simply as the dialectical relationship between free extemporization and the constraints of formal design, whether an *a priori* design as in a jazz standard or Indian raga or Arabic maqam, or simply the willful decision to acknowledge that there should be *some* entrainable formal design. Here Peters seems to insinuate that there is *not* no work, but rather that the success or failure of the work is not the proper metric for determining the success or failure of the performance. Neither is the success or failure of a work's attempt to sever ties with its past.

ADORNO, ARTAUD, AND RE-NOVATION

For an advocate of improvisational aesthetics, Peters is perhaps surprisingly supportive of Adorno, who of course had little positive to say about jazz or other similar musics. However, Peters is quite convincing when he explains the lesson to be learned from Adorno's critique: "as an immanent critic Adorno does not . . . use composition to judge and condemn improvisation but, through the mediation of negative dialectics, allows improvisation to judge *itself*, and thus fail to meet its *own* standard" (76–77). Peters suggests that "instead of castigating Adorno . . . for his uncomprehending aloofness and rarefied abstraction, it might be more fruitful to listen more carefully to what he actually says" (77); by doing so we can begin to point toward a more powerful conceptual model of improvisation.

For Adorno, individuation and freedom are the foundational ideas that inform the discourse around jazz improvisation. This sort of thought privileges individual acts of creation, subjectivity, intentionality, and originality, but Adorno suggests that jazz improvisers are in fact betrayed by this language, since they can seldom live up to its ramifications. Even the best jazz improvisations rarely transcend the known, the safe, the well-tread; indeed, Adorno would describe jazz improvisation as formulaic, proscribed, "confined within the walls of the harmonic and metric scheme," with very few possibilities afforded for real

improvisation.¹² And so since jazz fails to live up to its own promise of subjectivity and originality, we must accept the compromised "pseudo-individuality" that Adorno "sees as the hallmark of all popular music, with jazz improvisation, given its own ideology of authenticity, being its most insidious vehicle" (78). Adorno's stance actually resonates with that held by many improvising artists a few decades later: that improvising within the framework of a proscribed formal design is not really improvisation at all, but that just because a hegemonic paradigm demands compliance doesn't mean that one cannot improvise in a more subjectively original manner. The narrative that follows, in which Peters asks us to read Adorno through a Hegelian lens, points to "an improvisation that is substantial to the extent that it genuinely works through the dialectic of individuality and framework—of subject and object—thus opening both up to the aporias that, if faced, would resist the immediate gratification of the pseudo" (79). I am immediately reminded of the tragically small number of times (tragic for me as fan, that is) that Cecil Taylor engaged with jazz standards—his 1956 recording of "You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To" and his lovely take on "This Nearly Was Mine" from a few years later serve as two examples of the re-novative breadth of Taylor's improvisational ontology.

"The apparent freedom of the improviser—the risk taking and spectacle of spontaneity—is rarely the inspired abandon that it appears to be or is promoted as. . . . For Adorno, . . . [memory] become[s] fused and encoded in formulae, clichés, predigested chunks of aesthetic matter where everything new is really old." Instead, improvisation needs to become "more Nietzschean, more forgetful" (82). Peters contrasts this with Boulez's assertion that improvisation is *too* forgetful—that human memory is inadequate for the task of creating complex formal relations and processes without the aid of predetermined structure. Interestingly, Boulez supports the codification of gesture in Indian and Balinese [*sic*] improvisation, but doesn't seem to acknowledge gestural possibilities in jazz.¹³

Here the specific project emerges of using Adorno's and Boulez's misgivings about improvisation as strengths. Peters seeks to construct an immanent critique not only of the formulaic nature of pseudo-individualistic improvisation, but of its most outspoken critics, and in doing so he seeks to "consider how such opposition might be incorporated into a more powerful model of improvisation" (84); in other words, Peters seeks to firm up the very terrain upon which improvisation is constructed by navigating between the "more forgetful" / "too forgetful" polarities: as both Adorno and Nietzsche would suggest, a "music of forgetting" must first have something to forget,

music, including Bryars's distasteful discovery that, in general, "pieces always started tentatively, something big in the middle, and then finished quietly. That sort of arc happened every time. If there are no more formal devices than that it's pretty empty" (114). Bryars's response to this existential crisis was to leave improvisation altogether, refocusing his creative attention on composing works that, to his credit, explore formal and processual possibilities in very compelling ways.

¹¹ Caygill (1994, 17). This, of course, reifies the whole phenomenological angle alluded to earlier.

¹² Adorno (2002, 445).

¹³ There is actually very little improvisation in Balinese gamelan music, other than expressive performance decisions that affect dynamics and tempo more than pitch and rhythmic content. To his credit, Boulez does state of Balinese music that the "models are absolutely fixed" (Boulez [1976, 114]), but it is not entirely clear what Boulez means by "fixed," unless he means that they are entirely composed (which is true), in which case his comment about their improvised nature is curious to say the least.

which is itself a form of remembering. This resonates with Heidegger's "ontology of originary art" (84), where the origin is not always acknowledged. We also might frame this argument in Deleuzian terms: to actively forget is a nomadic thought, and to reconstruct that actively-forgotten something is a willful act of reterritorialization that emerges by taking a deterritorialized element and constructing a new context in which to nurture it. As Deleuze and Guattari describe,

forms depend on codes . . . and plunge into processes of decoding or drift and that degrees themselves are caught up in movements of intensive territorialization and reterritorialization. There is no simple correspondence between codes and territorialities on the one hand and decodings and deterritorialization on the other: on the contrary, a code may be a deterritorialization and a reterritorialization a decoding. Wide gaps separate code and territoriality. The two factors nevertheless have the same "subject" in a stratum: it is populations that are deterritorialized and reterritorialized, and also coded and decoded.¹⁴

We could cast this as two strata of nomadic thought: the willful destruction of the beginning as it gives way to a continuous stream of new beginnings ("and, and, and"), and the active forgetting of history. Of course these nest recursively into one another, reinforcing a stratified historical perspective that Deleuze would surely support.

So by actively forgetting the complex of history, formal design, process, etc., we essentially construct a new terrain on which to locate our memory of that complex; reterritorializing it *as* re-novation and in a sense even redefining the *re-* itself. Whether we choose to call it re-novation, re-presentation, or reterritorialization ("depending on your philosophical loyalties" [12]), we are striving to find new in the old, to relocate the known in new and adventurous terrains. This eventually unfolds as Peters's primary thesis. So just as we construct an ontology of re-novation that transcends mere reproduction, we can construe a mimesis that is active, vital, and that resonates with both Kant's dynamic genius-to-genius lineage and Benjamin's "non-sensuous similarity" that "produces rather than represents or reproduces affinities between the subjective and the objective" (86). This is a compulsion to become "like something else"—a mimesis of Becoming, which leads to a chain of mimetic relations that Adorno might call an "aesthetic of the instantaneous." And as Peters is careful to note, we could also consider this from the inside-out (an immanent reading): ". . . the situation is not the re-presentation of that which is already given but the sudden flaring up and recognition of the new within the old, the unfamiliar within the familiar" (87).

¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 54). "In many ways Deleuze's nomadism is our improvisation just as his nomad is our improviser. Similarly, his concept of 'ritornello,' which, it will be recalled, he offers as one of his main contributions to the creative practice of philosophy, itself bears the mark of its improvisatory becoming . . ." (150). It is worth noting that the conclusion of *The Philosophy of Improvisation* is framed very much in Deleuzian terms (although, perhaps surprisingly, it is Derrida who gets the final word in!).

Peters also appeals to Artaud, for whom improvisation is an "empathetic" interpretation of an authoritative text; an affirmation of the new rather than a negation of the old. An interesting dialectic emerges in Artaud's supposed sweeping-away of the text that still hints at a direct engagement with it: an engagement that "radically reconfigures the relationship between text, performance, and performer" by fixing the improvisational process as the culmination of a learned set of behaviors and responses. Artaud wants the improvised text to be just that, "made up on the stage" (91), but he wants the gestural content that comprises that spontaneity to be determined, rehearsed, and carefully circumscribed even while fluid and improvisatory. For Peters, "the expressive dimension of mimesis then has nothing to do with what it copies but concerns instead its dual nature as that which produces similarities while also satisfying the 'powerful compulsion' to become 'something else'. . . . Similarity assumes otherness, and it is this otherness that intrudes into every mimetic act and that makes it pulsate, but it is the pulsation of dissonance that has the 'life' required by both Adorno and Artaud, not the dead harmoniousness of an impossible mimetic sameness" (92–93).

AN (IRONIC) UNFIXING OF THE WORK

So here is another model: rather than a tragic (but willful) destruction of the protensive range of beginning-continuations, working within Adorno's pseudo-individuality by drawing attention to the clichés and fixed structures—"knowingly occupy[ing] the given," and making them new again. Peters describes a strain of free improvisers who can "inhabit an emerging work while, at the same time, observing or listening to that work as if from the outside," which he characterizes as "the inside/outside of irony" (68–69). He goes on: "this is comic, a negative freedom-from the pretensions of the artist and the conventions and constraints of the artwork. But irony is much more than this; it is also the positive freedom-to act, to mark without further ado the unmarked space in the full knowledge that each and every mark could be other" (69). This is not at all to suggest a "clever" postmodern ironic approach, but rather, again, a re-novative ontology that emphasizes the *spirit* of Kant's genius.¹⁵ This points to an important distinction between "(pseudo) modes of improvisation" (120) and a more authentic improvisational project that begins by opening up a rift between the there and the given, shifting the focus from "being free" to "allowing Being the freedom to be" (121). Peters, and this is key, wants to situate improvisation within the there, recontextualizing the there in and around what is given, or in essence *re-novating the there by*

¹⁵ This resonates with Derek Bailey's oft-quoted critique of the exclusive valorization of bebop in jazz pedagogy, in which "[t]he mechanics of the style are everywhere; [but] of the restlessness, the adventurousness, the thirst for change which was a central characteristic of [bebop] there seems to be no sign at all" (Bailey [1993, 50]). The spirit of Bailey's critique resonates in Peters's Heideggerian proclamation: "It is not the thing but the "Open" that demands preservation . . ." (16).

redefining the given. “Is there,” which Heidegger characterizes as “it calls,” is prior to “it gives,” which leads Heidegger “to promote hearing, listening, and hearkening as ‘the primary and authentic way[s] in which Dasein is open for its ownmost potentiality-for-being’” (123).¹⁶ We might cast “it gives,” then, as a dynamic process; beginning as a dialectical object/subject relation where giving is continually rethought as it becomes more known, leading to a Husserlian *temporal* consideration of this dialectics, and then a Bergsonian view where this exchange *defines the there* (in other words, *the there* is, ontologically, what *it gives*, which is in a constant state of Becoming (Being *as* Becoming). Peters describes this as “an alterity that shines through the same, thus revealing the difference within repetition” (131).

In comedy, little is invented on the spot, but we can say a great deal about “the manner in which the *there* is *given* differently. The re-novative production of the new out of the old” (126) is facilitated by improvisation. Peters offers that “the cherished autonomy of the improviser needs to be thought differently, no longer as a negative freedom-from the stockpile of tried and tested . . . but as the positive freedom-to move among and within . . . formulas or clichés that are there in an endeavor to remain alive to the manner in which what is there gives itself to itself. . .” (127). Or, more succinctly, “the mark of a good improvisation is often its *obviousness*” (129).

Much of this narrative channels Nietzsche, who champions “active forgetting” to promote novelty, without losing sight of the notion that actively forgetting is, of course, still an engagement with the thing being forgotten. Nietzsche’s ambition is to straddle Being and Becoming “in such a way that the there-ness of the *there* . . . and the giving of the *there* . . . are held apart in the experience of the eternal recurrence of the same” and, better, “Otherness does not have to be thought as an alterity constantly under threat from the same but . . . might also be understood as a component of, indeed the *crucial* component of the same: . . . that which *makes* the same the same” (134).¹⁷ Difference is internal to the nature of every Idea; difference “affirms the actuality of an Idea.” Heidegger concurs, asserting that “one must shape Becoming in being in such a way that as becoming it is preserved, has subsistence, in a word, *is*.”¹⁸ So what we arrive at is a definition of *is as* Becoming; Becoming *as* identity, which includes “the ontological interpenetration of preservation and destruction” and “the persistence of the origin of the work within the work itself as a perpetual presence and possibility” (137).

¹⁶ Heidegger (1962, 206).

¹⁷ And again we can appeal to Deleuze on this point—a nomadic ontology that regards difference *as* identity. This manifests on one hand as the difference inherent in resemblance that links like to like and defines a genus (see, for instance, Deleuze [1994, 12]: “the principle of difference understood as difference in the concept . . . allows the greatest space possible for the apprehension of resemblances”) and on the other hand as the internal qualitative difference that is an essential characteristic of a being’s temporal existence (see Deleuze [1988, 32]: “. . . it also has a duration, a rhythm of duration, a way of being in time [that] differs in kind not only from other things, but first and foremost from itself”).

¹⁸ Heidegger (1991, 202).

PHILOSOPHY OF IMPROVISATION, OR IMPROVISATIONAL PHILOSOPHY?

Jazz pedagogues will be pleased to know that Nietzsche privileges discipline and obedience to exemplars: “in essence Nietzsche’s conception of mastery is best understood as a radical reiteration of the Kantian account of genius in which, once again, it is the *giving* of the *there* to itself that is the central issue,” and that it is crucial “to grasp and imitate the manner in which the master is able to will his or her own determination.” This is the mimesis that Derek Bailey desired (see footnote 15), that “promot[es] the imitation of the aesthetic act of originating rules” (139). Here Kant’s *originality* and *exemplarity*, which one might reinterpret as Nietzsche’s *will-to-power* and *eternal recurrence*, could also be described as an interpretation (a de-territorialization) of Anthony Braxton’s tripartite restructuring/stylist/traditionalist ontology that casts the traditionalist as a devotee of the restructuring spirit of those who came before.¹⁹

As Peters begins to wrap up, he throws the reader a curve ball when he suggests that perhaps this book is not about improvisation at all (or rather, that it is not about philosophizing about improvisation), but that it is a determined attempt to frame an improvisational ontology for the benefit of the philosopher, broadening the latter’s conception of origination, work, *the work*, the *there* and the *given*, and the will-to-power of the eternal recurrence, re-novating the philosophical project in the spirit of the play-drive of the improvising artist. Most important for this argument is how *time* is engaged in the constitution of this conceptually-enriched philosophy: “any philosophy of improvisation must create or be engaged in the creation of a concept that bears the inscription of its own creation” (149), that creation being constantly re-created in the vital improvisational flux that unfolds. Peters is careful to outline a teleology that allows for “detours,” which naturally invokes a Deleuzian nomadic space:

. . . both the infinite hermeneutical transition from the phenomenology of the everyday to the ontology of essential Being and what Deleuze describes as the territorialization of the ritornello are constitutive of a space that has an essential relation to improvisation in its formation, continuation, and eventual destruction. Deleuze speaks of improvisation in terms of a world, but again he is not describing a space that is there but, on the contrary, one that is only given through the territorializing repetition of the ritornello (164–65).

Peters reaches far in *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, turning well-known criticisms of improvised music around by using those criticisms as ways of valorizing the improvisational project itself, engaging the dialectics/differentials between marking and unmarking, the *there* and the *given*, tragedy and irony, memory and forgetfulness, Openness and structure, deterritorialization and reterritorialization, innovation and tradition, the “homelessness of the productive imagination” and the “conceptual structures that would limit its play” (43), and championing a frame for improvisation that is impervious to critique from without.

¹⁹ See Lock (1988, 162–67) for an excellent introduction to Braxton’s traditionalist/stylist/restructuring triadic structure.

No matter how far into philosophical gamesmanship he may be accused of reaching, Peters always returns to practice:

At its best free-improvisation is utterly compelling and, let us be clear, not on account of any microcosmic aesthetic utopia that is too often peddled in its name. And . . . the most compelling improvisations of all are by no means those governed by the knowingness of irony. In actuality it is the radically contested nature of free-improvisation and the spectacle of this contest at the point of delivery that demands attention and, indeed allows our participation . . . (72).

One potential criticism is that, having danced through Peters's dense narrative, sorted out the complex web of philosophical threads that he has woven, and reached the end with a solid understanding of Peters's thesis, there is not much concrete for the reader to take home—little is offered about what to do with all of this information. The reader might by now surmise that this is by design. Deleuze insists that philosophy is not about anything, and that “the real task of philosophy is the creative act of inventing concepts” (146). Nowhere in *The Philosophy of Improvisation* is Peters more Deleuzian than in his conclusion, in which he likens his non-explication of improvisation to Deleuze's strategic non-engagement with his own ritornello: “how often in his work does Deleuze talk about the ritornello? Hardly ever, precisely because the work itself is the enactment of the infinite becoming of the ritornello” (146). There is no *theory* of improvisation, nor should there be. Nor can there be, by extension, a methodology for improvisation, as much as the plethora of how-to books that flood the pedagogical market might try to insist otherwise; instead, “any philosophy of improvisation must create or be engaged in the creation of a concept that bears the inscription of its *own* creation, the aim being not to describe or explain improvisatory practice but to reveal how it comes into being as [an] eternal origination” (149–50). Peters continually reaffirms that we are not looking for a method, or a theory, but (simply?) a concept of improvisation. And of course he insists that this book is only a beginning of that search for a concept:

Certainly, one is not provided by any of the thinkers that have concerned us here, none of whom would have considered themselves improvisers—so much the pity. Nevertheless, there might be detected an emergent philosophical concept of improvisation rooted in the very practice of thinking itself. . . . [I]t is not so much *what* the philosopher is able to make his chosen words say so much as *when* a word is taken up and turned in the hand, in the hermeneutical light, and *when* it is necessary to forget it again for the sake of the movement of thought and the task of finding something else to remember (165).

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