

## WHAT DO WE KNOW THROUGH IMPROVISATION?<sup>1</sup>

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In this paper, which is exploratory in character, I address the question of whether, how, and what we know through artistic improvisation. Has artistic improvisation a specific cognitive supply? Can this alleged cognitive supply contribute to the aesthetic merit of the performance? And how? In order to answer these questions I will first explain which is exactly the problem we face. Secondly, I will try to give some suggestions to solve this problem.

### 1.

In everyday life agents improvise when they do something on the spot, without a previous plan. They improvise when they have to (re)act under pressure to unexpected circumstances without being properly prepared for the action. Thus, in everyday practices, agents improvise when they use “the limited experience and resources at [their] disposal to carry out an activity in a (usually) time-bounded situation” (Anderson 1995, 93). The way agents cope with unforeseen difficulties, adapting their intelligence to the unexpected affordances of the environment, can be more or less efficient and ingenious. It can be aesthetically satisfactory, in that, for example, one can find an *elegant* solution to an unexpected problem without previous preparation and without having the means ordinarily required to do it.

Moreover, while improvising a solution to an unexpected problem, we can achieve a practical experiential knowledge about how to act in some unforeseen circumstances. However, the knowledge that we can achieve

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through improvisation in everyday life in virtue of solving some unexpected problems is not the kind of knowledge I am interested in here. My aim is rather to understand whether improvisation in the arts, i.e. artistic improvisation, can be the source of some specific knowledge and whether the knowledge gained through improvisation can improve the aesthetic merit of the improvised performance.

## **2. Three remarks concerning artistic improvisation and its epistemic significance are in order here.**

2.1. The first remark is the basic one. It concerns the general possibility of acquiring knowledge through art. I take for granted that we *can* get knowledge through art and that this knowledge is or, at least, can be part of the value of art. The acceptance of this claim does not commit me to the radical thesis that “only items with cognitive value count as artworks” (Young 2001, 1), but only to the more modest thesis, that the knowledge acquired through art can be, and often is, an important source of aesthetic value. Of course the knowledge offered by art is not the kind of knowledge achievable through science. However, artworks can offer an understanding of some aspects of reality. Artworks can provide knowledge on matters on which science cannot always successfully cast light. Artworks can provide us with insights through which we can understand ourselves, our thoughts and emotions, and our relations with other people as well as our place in nature and in the social world (cf. Young 2001, 21; Bertram 2005). Unlike science, art does not demonstrate theories about the world and about us by means of arguments; artworks rather show or illustrate perspectives on us and on our world. Through the perspectives offered by art –that can be judged as right or wrong– we enhance our understanding of ourselves and of our world. Art can provide non-propositional knowledge at least by means of *illustrative representation* (which can make use of expression) and *exemplification*.

a) Something is a representation when it is about something, is intended to be

about something and is recognized as being about that something. According to James Young, semantic representations, which are used in science, represent because they are true. On the contrary, “illustrations represent because an experience of the illustration has something in common with experience of the object represented” (Young 2001, 26), which, besides a particular object or event, can be also an affective states and classes or types of objects or events. The similarity between both experiences is recognized also in virtue of conventions. Through cultural conventions we can understand which are the relevant similarities between both experiences. Moreover, not only *what*, but also how it represents contributes to determine the forcefulness of the illustration. The success of the illustration in offering perspectives on ourselves and on the world can also require the capacity of activating our imagination and/or may work if it succeeds in making us feel emotions.

b) Artworks can provide us with knowledge by means of literally or metaphorically exemplifying a property. They succeed in this when they refer to a property by literally or metaphorically possessing it. In order to grasp what is exemplified by an artwork we need to consider the right context. According to Keith Lehrer, exemplar representation, or *exemplarization*, works in the following way: the exemplar represents “content, a plurality of objects, which includes itself, as it is used as an exhibit to show us what the objects are like. The exemplar becomes a term of representation of the objects and may be affirmed of them in the way that a predicate is affirmed of a subject. So it is true that the exemplar applies to those objects it represents. Exemplarization marks a distinction defining content in such a way that the exemplar of representation is true of itself, that is, it is true that the exemplar applies to itself as it applies to other objects it represents.” (Lehrer 2012, 5) Briefly, “exemplarization yields a representation of content in terms of an experienced particular that stands for other particulars. Exemplarization involves the generalization of a particular.” (Lehrer 2012, 10)

2.2. The second remark directly ensues from the first one. If art can offer knowledge through illustration and exemplification, then artistic improvisation, *qua* art, can provide knowledge too. In other words, if music, dance and theatre

can be sources of some kind of knowledge –that adds to the artistic value of the respective works and performances–, then improvised music, dance, and theatre can, *qua* music, dance, and theatre, provide some of the kinds of knowledge we obtain through these performing arts.

2.3. The final remark concerns the kind of knowledge we should consider for assessing the cognitive weight of artistic improvisation and its aesthetic merit.

In the last years some research has been devoted to studying the link between improvisation and learning processes. Researchers have focussed on two related areas.

a) The first area concerns the learning process in artistic improvisation. In particular, it has been discovered that the way the competence of improvising is achieved is analogous to the way we acquire linguistic competences. The learning of the techniques of improvisation is a “learning through doing”, that is, a “procedural knowledge” (Berkovitz 2010, 43, 72, 83, 117). This is especially clear in musical improvisation (Cf. Alterhaug 2010, 130; Sawyer 2010).<sup>2</sup>

b) The second area of studies focuses on the link between improvisation as a way of acting and procedural learning of different kinds of practices. Researches in this field concern, in other words, the link between improvisation and education. Improvisation is here regarded as an important, although often neglected, way of achieving and organizing knowledge. According to many researchers, the importance of improvisation for education relies in its relational and experiential nature. Reality is apprehended not by means of reading of texts, but in a participatory way, i.e. by means of making, and subsequently interiorizing, trials and errors experiences (Gamelli 2006, 31). Also in art practices, exactly like in other practices, improvisation can be used as a useful tool for learning certain kinds of activities. We can learn to dance, to play theatre, to make music and also to paint or to make sculptures by means of improvising; moreover, by means of improvising music, dance, theatre, etc.,

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<sup>2</sup> The theoretical paradox of “learning to improvise” is discussed in Raymond 1980, 50-61.

one can also learn how to enact some movements, how to interact with other people, how to adapt old plans to new situations, etc. Through a more or less guided artistic improvisation we can get knowledge: it is the procedural knowledge about how to produce some kinds of artworks and performances as well as about the achievement of skills concerning body movements, social interactions, and the speaking of languages. Moreover, while performing, improvisers can also obtain experiential information about their own personalities. For example, they can experience to which extent they are ready to risk for achieving set goals, whether and how they are willing to obey to rule, to which extent they are able and willing to collaborate in a team environment and exercise independent judgment and initiative, etc.

However, here I am not interested in both these kinds of connections between improvisation and knowledge.

On the one hand, the problem I am concerned with is not how one can learn or know how to improvise, by means of the interiorisation and routinization of skills. I am rather interested in what one can know *through* artistic improvisation.

On the other hand, I am also not concerned –at least in the first place– with artistic improvisation as an instrumental technique for learning skills and for exploring the self of the performer who improvises. Improvisation is sometimes described as a maieutic process of discovery of the self, i.e. as a kind of “*automaieutics*” (Rousselot 2012, 56; De Raymond 1980, 165-169), in virtue of which improvisers, while acting in different media, find what they previously ignored about their personalities as well as about their ways to relate to other people and to the world. However, this *instrumental* improvisation, through which improvising performers can learn artistic practices (as well as other practices) and, by means of practising these activities, can get acquainted with themselves, is not the kind of improvisation I am interested in here.

### 3.

The point I want to make regards neither the cognitive processes of learning activities of different kinds (included artistic ones like music, dance or theatre, but also painting, sculpture, etc.) nor improvisation as a practice of self-knowledge in virtue of which performers (or more generally: everyone who

performs some artistic activity) discover themselves, while understanding aspects of themselves they otherwise could not get acquainted with.

Those are important matters, of course. However, here I want to focus, rather, on the possible knowledge the *audience* can obtain through *artistic* improvisation and on the possible *contribution of this knowledge to the artistic* quality of the improvised performance. The reason of my interest here is simple.

The literature often focuses on the relationship between the improvising performer and his/her performance: it focuses on production. Due to the particular features of improvisational art practices,<sup>3</sup> this approach is surely unavoidable. However, this is not enough here. In investigating the epistemic merit of an improvised artistic performance we are concerned with the way the improvised performance, precisely in virtue of its being improvised, improves the knowledge and understanding of the audience that attends the performance, offering perspectives through which they can enhance their experience of themselves, their historical and social world, and the reality in general. As in the case of other kinds of artworks, also in the case of improvised artistic practices we have to focus on reception, not on production. Hence, for the sake of precision, the question I am concerned with here can be expressed as follows.

Assumed, as I did, that art can offer us knowledge, is there in the performing arts any *specific* contribution of artistic improvisation (i.e. improvisation as art, not as tool of learning artistic skills) to the way the possible knowledge offered by a performance increases its aesthetic qualities? Or is the improvisational quality of the performance irrelevant, at least under this respect? It is not that easy to answer this question, especially because there are very different styles and kinds of artistic improvisation. For instance, the way the characters of the *Italian Commedia dell'Arte* (or *commedia all'improvviso*) improvise is very different from the improvisation performed in contemporary *Improv-theatre*; and, in the musical field, improvisation in free jazz is different from improvisation in baroque music and also from free improvisation in the avant-garde. Therefore, artistic improvisational practices differ a big deal from each other in terms of kind of artistic practice and aesthetic style.

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<sup>3</sup> See Bertinetto 2012a and 2012b.

Hence, the problem which I would like to solve may be reformulated in this way: in spite of the differences between styles and kinds of artistic improvisation, is it still possible to identify a specific epistemic influence of improvisation, as a particular kind of artistic production, on the aesthetic merit of an artistic performance? If yes, what does this specific contribution amount to?

Although the answer I will offer in the following part of the paper will merely be tentative and explorative, I am convinced that the first step must consist in finding a general plausible frame of understanding for artistic improvisation, i.e. a plausible way to understand what is improvisation as an artistic practice. We need to find a definition that is so general as to encompass all kinds and styles of artistic improvisation and at the same time so specific as to provide us with a valid criterion for distinguishing improvisation from other artistic practices.

#### 4.

In order to define artistic improvisation we should previously return back to improvisation as such. As such improvisation can be defined as an activity consisting in constructively coping with disorder (Dell 2004, 119), that is, with unforeseen and unexpected events occurring in a situation. The action performed is not planned: it is the adaptive re-action to a (more or less) unexpected emergence. Given unexpected circumstances we must sometimes act without previously planning the action: in these cases we are forced to act without knowing what to do. It is an acting “with the left hand”, as Walter Benjamin calls it in *Einbahnstrasse* (Benjamin 1980, 89); it is something one does without preparation, that is, without knowing how to apply a rule of action (Brandstetter 2009, 133).

However, there is also another important kind –or, perhaps better, another important aspect – of improvisation. We use to practise many everyday activities (walking, reading, writing, swimming, driving a car or a bicycle, etc.) without paying explicit conscious attention to them, because we have learned and assimilated, through imitation and exercise, the proper techniques. As again Benjamin says (Benjamin 1987, 97), we cannot unlearn those techniques that have become habitualised practices we usually perform in an automatic

way. In this sense, while swimming, walking, driving a car, etc., we improvise, because we do not consciously plan what and how to do. Instead, we simply act, without conscious reflection upon the action.

Both kinds, or both aspects, of improvisation are important for artistic improvisational performances. Artistic improvisation is a self-imposed and intentional kind of improvisation in which the invention and the performance thereof to some extent coincide. Artists interact with each other as well as with the artistic frame, the social set and the natural environment, without previously knowing in advance what exactly will happen and what to do in response to what will happen. However, they have often achieved through practice an automatic control of techniques, so that they can play without consciously deciding each single step of their performance. The spontaneity of improvisation often consists precisely in this automatism. Therefore, artists are somehow prepared to improvise, because, normally, they have the required technical skills and experience. They follow the more or less fixed rules and conventions of a genre or a style, because they have embodied them, at least to a certain extent. Generally speaking, they should obey to the (aesthetics, cultural and technical) constraints paced upon a practice. Hence, what is achieved is never a *creation ex nihilo*.<sup>4</sup>

Fore sure, there are different kinds and styles of artistic improvisation. Some artistic improvisational practices are more experimental, free and unrestrained; other ones are more traditional, controlled and bounded to different kinds of constraints, contexts, instructions, patterns of actions, styles, etc. In some cases improvisers play against the rules and/or the conventions and transform, change, and violate them. In other cases improvisers' inventive creativity develops inside the space of the rules of a practice. The two cases are not mutually exclusive *de facto*, because during the same performance improvisers can enact both kinds of improvisation: inside the rules and against the rules.

Moreover, even in controlled, structured, and bounded improvisational performances, the normativity of the process develops to a certain extent in real-time. The meaning and the value of the each move made by the improvisers is not only determined through the reference to a pre-existent and

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<sup>4</sup> See Bertinetto 2011 and 2012a (and the literature quoted there).



already established context, but it contributes to shaping its own normative context. A dialectic between plan and action is in play here. Each move can assign in retrospect different meanings and different values to what has been planned as well as to what has being previously done in the course of performance: so that, one can know only in retrospect whether a move has been right or wrong. What follows can change the meaning and the value of what has been previously decided and made. Every unexpected event and accident may and should be taken as an affordance for valuable artistic outcomes, for the meaning and the value of unforeseen accidents depends, at least in part, from the way we react to them. Therefore, even the criteria for the artistic evaluation of the performance can change through the performance.<sup>5</sup>

Lot of studies about improvisation highlight the risky quality of improvised performance. This quality allegedly derives from the lack of a well-defined plan that the performance should realize. In improvisation performers risk to fail because they have to act, react and interact, without knowing in advance what will happen next and without knowing how the results of their activity will be understood and evaluated and how will they be followed up. In this sense improvised artistic performances are very much like everyday life. However, I do not agree that they are more risky than non-improvised performances of composed artworks. On the contrary, it seems that the risk to fail while performing composed works is higher, because in this case the range of possibilities of a right performance is quite narrow. Performers have to comply with instructions that are not supposed to be transformed during the performance. In the case of improvisation matters are different: here the normative frame can change to a higher degree. Obviously, if improvisers fail, they cannot correct, conceal, or destroy their works. However, they have the important possibility –that executants of prepared instructions lack– to retrospectively take an apparently wrong move as an affordance for creativity, for instance by reacting to the evaluative feedback of the audience or of the fellow performers' during the performance: by doing so, they can transform the normative context of the performance and the criteria for its evaluation. Thus, the risk can turn out to be a favorable opportunity. Therefore, the real risk of

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<sup>5</sup> See Bertinetto 2011, 2013, 2014a, and 2014b.

improvised performances is rather the risk of lacking aesthetic merit: for instance, the risk to be boring or incomprehensible and meaningless. It is the same risk all artists face in their respective fields.

## 5.

But we must still emphasize an important difference between performing arts (like dance, theatre and music) and other kinds of artistic practices.<sup>6</sup> In improvisation in performing arts the process of art production coincides (to a large extent) with the product. The audience does not experience the performance of an already composed work, but the ephemeral production of a performance. The improvised performance is ephemeral, because it is tied to its space-time conditions (although it can be audio-visually recorded). Improvised performances of this kind are ephemeral items using ephemeral media (while works of music, theatre and dance are enduring work using ephemeral media) (see London 2013). What has been done, cannot be corrected or erased, and disappears a second later, while being replaced by what follows up.

Conversely, in non-performing arts –like painting, sculpture, films, photography, etc.– there is no coincidence between process and product. Although the process is ephemeral, the product is made in an enduring medium. So the beholders can enjoy the product, without being acquainted with the process of production. Therefore, even though the production of a painting, say, can be partly improvised, the product survives the end of the process. Moreover, during the process of production, what is done is not replaced by what follows up: on the contrary, what follows up is added to what was previously done (which can be corrected or erased). Hence, improvisation in non-performing arts counts rather as a method of art production. Obviously, it can be important to know that the artwork has been produced in this way in order to grasp its aesthetic and artistic meaning and to appreciate its cognitive contribution and the aesthetic significance thereof. However, in this case the process is usually not perceived directly by beholders; and, when it is so perceived, the production is seen as a

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Bertinetto 2014c.

kind of theatre performance.<sup>7</sup> In non-performing arts the process usually precedes the product offered to beholders' contemplation and only the perception of the product (considered in the right cultural context) can provide with some kind of knowledge or understanding about themselves and the world via illustration or exemplification. Thus, in this case, the fact that the artwork has been improvised seems to be of little relevance for the possible knowledge we can achieve through the artwork. It can be useful as information about the process of production, and this information can increase the cognitive supply of the artwork; but, like other methods of production, it does not seem to be of primary importance for understanding the cognitive perspective the artwork is intended to show.

## 6.

I think that we now have the elements required for answering the main questions addressed at the beginning of the paper. The questions were whether in performing arts the improvisational method of art production I have just outlined is *per se* significant as source of knowledge via illustration or exemplification, what and how can artistic improvisation illustrate or exemplify, and how can this knowledge contribute to the aesthetic value of the performance.

To answer these questions we have to focus on the fact that in improvisation in the field of performing art practices, due to the coincidence between process and product, the improvisational quality of the process which is directly attended to by the audience is relevant for appreciating the cognitive import of the artistic performance and its aesthetic merit.

So, let's try to understand what and how an improvised performance –in theatre, music, and dance– can illustrate and/or exemplify, due to its improvisational character.

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<sup>7</sup> In order to grasp what I mean here the reader may see Hans Namur's movie *Jackson Pollock* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cgBvpjwOGo>) (1950/1) and Henry-Georges Clouzot's movie *Le mystère Picasso* (1956).

Several studies maintain that improvisation, in virtue of its (alleged) spontaneity, can illustrate or exemplify human freedom and even anarchy and that, through this illustration or exemplification, improvisers aim at making ethical and/political statements like protesting against political authorities or claiming the rights of oppressed groups of people. Without understanding those meanings the audience misses a big deal of the artistic value of the performance.

In some cases, performers involve the audience in the performance and intervene directly and explicitly in their actual social and political situation, for example occupying spaces for the performances they have been not allowed to, or making explicit political assertions connected with the actual reality of their social and political situation. In this way performers aim at breaking the divide between art and life: the artistic performance loses its fictional character and, as a consequence, the transformational power sometimes associated with the art experience –that the experience of art is transformative, is for example a famous thesis by Hans-Georg Gadamer (see Gadamer 1994, 102)– is immediately part of the content and of the meaning of the artistic performance. As a tool for intervening in social and political life, improvisation can be an ideological weapon. As I have recently written, “[...] this is a leitmotiv, a common thread that connects disparate cultural trends, from the poetical performances of the Italian *improvvisatori* (cf. Esterhammer 2008) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to free jazz and *improv-theatre* of the last decades of the past century.<sup>8</sup>” (Bertinetto 2013, 28).

“As a matter of fact” –please allow me to quote myself again at some length– “improvisation, unlike other art practices and objects, does not delight exclusively because it distracts attention from everyday life; on the contrary, the pleasures of (some important genres and kinds of) artistic improvisation, may also be due to its ability to engage both performers and audience in actions which not only have striking moral, social and political significance (which is certainly not an exclusive prerogative of improvised art), but that, at least in some cases, are concrete interventions in the particular historical situations in

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<sup>8</sup> See Johnstone, 1979; Nachmanovitch 1990; Belgrad 1998; Sparti 2005, 2007, 2010; Muyumba 2009; Alterhaug 2004; Béthune 2008; Brown 2006.

which they occur and, as such, modify those situations.<sup>9</sup> In improvisation the real seems to outstrip the possible and the imaginary. For this reason, I insist, improvisation seems to have an anarchist and anti-institutional character that is at odds with the widespread view that the space of art is the imaginative autonomous dimension of the aesthetic experience that can flourish in locations erected for this special purpose. In this context, it is significant that at the end of the eighteenth century in Austria a law was passed that forbade theatrical improvisation for political reasons.<sup>10</sup> The then political rulers understood improvised theatre not as an expression of aesthetic art, that builds imaginary worlds in the fictional space of the stage, but as an illegal practice that directly intervenes in the real life of the audience, addressed as co-performers and invited to act to transform the socio-historical situations in which they lived. Performance art of our time seems to have an analogous *raison d'être*.<sup>11</sup>” (Bertinetto 2013, 28). In such improvisational practices art is intended not as a mirror of reality, but rather as a tool for transforming it.

## 7.

However, besides considerations as to the political efficacy of improvisational performances in provoking real changes, this is only a partial view of the matter. On the one hand, a performance can illustrate, exemplify, and, in so doing, encourage freedom and anarchy, or more generally a transformation of reality, without being improvised. On the other hand, not every improvised performance has political and social aims or intends to illustrate or exemplify some social or political claim. This is typical for some kinds of improvisational art practices, genres and style, like free jazz, but it is far from being a general feature of artistic improvisation.

More generally, improvisation can for sure express and show spontaneity, unpredictability, and originality, but it can also express and show routine

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<sup>9</sup> De Raymond 1980, 212-213.

<sup>10</sup> See Borgards 2009. For the subversive power of (poetic) improvisation in the romantic age, see Esterhammer 2008, 1-13.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. E. Fischer-Lichte 2004.

patterns of repetitive actions based upon the construction of habits.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, artistic improvisation does not illustrate or exemplify always a demand or a need of freedom –both negative (*freedom from*) and positive (*freedom to*). It can do that, but this is not necessarily so.

Still less convincing is the idea that every improvised performance aims at breaking the divide between stage and stalls. Again, I think that this is true of some kind of improvisational participatory performances, but of course not of every improvisational performances. Although in some improvisational practices every event of the environment can become part of the performance, cultural conventions dictate often a clear separation between performers and audience, between stalls and stage, between art and life: in such cases the audience contemplate the improvised performance made by somebody else, without (at least directly) intervening in it.

However, it remains true that, while attending to an improvised performance, the audience has the *tendency* to take a more participatory attitude. This is due sometimes to neurocognitive reasons. For example, empiric research has proved that the neural activity of the brains of listeners to a musical improvisation mirrors the neural activity of the brains of improvising performers.<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless, what is indeed of more importance for our purposes is of course the simple fact that while attending to an improvised performance, the audience “are actually witnessing the shaping activity of the improviser.” (Alperson 2010, 274). As Philip Alperson claims about musical improvisation, “it is as if we in the audience gain privileged access to the performer’s mind at the moment of creation.” (Alperson 2010, 274).

Hence, on my opinion what improvisation in performing arts can generally illustrate and exemplify as such are two related kinds of things.

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<sup>12</sup> The reason offered by Adorno (see Adorno 1982 and 1984) for supporting his famous negative judgement of jazz is precisely, at least in large part, the alleged routinary and repetitive quality of jazz improvisation. However, Adorno’s criticism of jazz seems not to be supported by a competent knowledge of this music.

<sup>13</sup> For some reflections about the perception of musical improvisation see Bertinetto 2012c. See Canonne 2014 for an inquire concerning the main feature of the aesthetic appreciation of musical improvisation.

a) Improvisation can illustrate or exemplify artistic creativity, because a successful improvisation possesses the property of being creative and, staged in the proper context, can refer to artistic creativity, and to how our creative attempts can be successful or fail. Since I already have developed this point elsewhere (see Bertinetto 2012a), I will not make this here again. So I will immediately turn to the second kind of things artistic improvisation can illustratively or exemplarily represent.

b) Improvisation can illustrate and exemplify ways of staging the construction and the developments of the self, its more or less routine-bound and mechanical or more or less original and innovative actions, and also its interactions with other subjects as well as with the natural and cultural environment. Improvisation provides illustrative representations of the ways subjects can shape themselves through their actions, gestures and expressions and can articulate interactions with other subjects and with their natural and cultural context. Improvisation can also illustrate the dynamics of groups, as well as the interactions between individuals, between individuals and groups and between different groups.<sup>14</sup>

In improvisation on the stage, individual and collective subjects can present themselves as more or less “free”, as more or less at ease with their social and natural environment, or as struggling for establishing themselves in a hostile situation. The different ways performers interact with each other can illustrate moral interactions and moral attitudes toward oneself, other individuals and the world. This does not happen only in theatre and dance, where performers can express themselves with spoken language and body gestures, but also in music (Hagberg 2008 has shown this in the case of jazz).

One may reply to this that this is not specific of artistic improvisation. It seems that every kind of non-improvised art can illustrate the expressive and gestural shaping of subjects and the interaction between subjects and between subjects and the social and natural environment. Goethe for instance defined the string quartet as a conversation between four intelligent persons.

However, there really is a specific quality to artistic improvisation. It consists in the fact that in an improvised performance actions, gestures, expressions as

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<sup>14</sup> See for example Bertram 2014; Borgo 1996/7 and 2005; Pétard 2010; Sparti 2010.

well as interactions and conversations are actually performed in real-time. They are not the execution of pre-written actions, interactions and conversations. The display of the vicissitudes of the self and the development of inter-subjective interactions is not only achieved by means of *re-presentation*. The articulations of the self, the developments of inter-subjective relations, and the ways agents play with rules and with unforeseen accidents, are rather *presented* as enacted live, in the moment, in real-time. The actions presented to the audience (with the means of music, dance, and theatre) are real actions, performed with (more or less) sensitivity and attentivity to the actual situation and to the moment in which the performance is taking place. Thus performers present, with artistic tools and in artistic media and frames, what is continuously happening in real life, in which “[...] one finds order and disorder, fulfilment of expectations and their violation, freedom and constraint [...]” (Berkovitz 2010, 175). When they are good, performers possess and display a particular readiness to the changing environment and to the emergent affordances it generates and, in so doing, they show us, in an exemplar way, how we can successfully extricate ourselves from the unexpected situations life presents us with.

Therefore, artistic improvisation does not only represent, but presents and enacts “intentional life” (Hagberg 2008, 281), because it is the staging of the developments of the self and of its inter-subjective relations in a changing environment. Presenting and representing subjects who cooperate, compete, act with or without respect, responsibility, attentiveness, and so on, „improvised performance allows the audience members a chance to share in the construction of the narrative before their very eyes and ears“ (Berkovitz 2010, 175). Therefore, although I said above that in order to answer to the question of the epistemic relevance of artistic improvisation we should not consider the “automaieutic” potential of improvisation –in virtue of which improvising performers discover previously ignored aspects of their personalities–, but only the knowledge which perceivers achieve while attending to an improvised performance, it must now be pointed out that improvisation may be appreciated by the audience precisely as a process in virtue of which performers, interacting with other performers and with the environment, present the way they discover, shape, and express their self.



This is not to say that what the audience perceive while attending to an improvisation is always the *authentic* expression of the self or the authentic manifestation of inter-subjective interactions. Artistic improvisation displays not only the authentic subjects or the authentic interactions, but also the construction of images of the self and of inter-subjective relations. In this sense, artistic improvisation shows society as a theatre, which is more or less authentic and genuine, or artificial and counterfeit. The stage is a space in which performers offer themselves as well as their masks to the audience (Pétard 2010, 202); it is a space in which performers, who are engaged in the artistic interaction on the spot with other performers and with the unforeseeable affordances of the present unrepeatable situation, evaluate themselves and are, in turn, evaluated by the audience. Yet, performers too evaluate the audience and react to their evaluative (affective and cognitive) reactions. While attending this *recursive* and *reflexive* process,<sup>15</sup> the audience can attentively focus on this reciprocity of evaluation, which has performative power, and, while judging the degree of authenticity or of camouflage of each exhibition, understand, to different degrees, the dynamics of the developments of the self interacting with other selves and different kinds of natural and cultural environment in a succession of situations as well as the way in which, through the adventures of the performance, the improvising subjects discover previously ignored aspects of themselves.

Hence, in general, we can conclude that, while attending to an improvised artistic performance, we attend to a presentation of the ways our social and embodied intelligence shapes and organises itself and the world and, while responding to the unforeseeable solicitations of the environment and of others interacting subjects, deals with uncertainty and copes with the unpredictable nature of life, adapting plans to present situations,<sup>16</sup> with more or less sensitivity to what is happening now, and with a higher or lower degree of success. The insights into the ways performers expose themselves to different problematic situations and –while and by interacting with other people and with the environment as well as while and by discovering themselves through this experience– try to solve the problems generated by themselves and by other

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Landgraf 2001 and Bertinetto 2014b.

<sup>16</sup> See De Raymond 1980, 107-110, 154.

interplaying subjects (cf. Brown 1996, 365), is a remarkable knowledge that contributes to the artistic value we assign to the performance.

The specific contribution of artistic improvisation to the significance of the cognitive power of art for its aesthetic merits relies on the different kinds of “presentational” illustration and exemplarization it can offer of the fact that in life

- we continuously deal with emergent and unforeseen accidents, while shaping our self in interaction with other people and our environments and,
- while interacting with unforeseen situations, we experience and learn previously ignored aspects of our self.

Obviously, in each different artistic improvisational practice these illustration and exemplarization have different qualities, accordingly to the different artistic media and artistic genres and styles of the relative practice.

## 8.

I think that a possible, and perhaps obvious, objection to my thesis can be this. We recognize the improvisational quality of a performance –sometimes in virtue of empathetic response– when and if we are well acquainted with the practice at issue (and, in particular, with the genre and the style of the performance). However, if we are not expert of a practice, we can fail to perceive and feel that performers are improvising spontaneously and neither following plans and instructions, nor even offering a fake improvisation or a prepared performance that only arouses the *feeling* of an improvised performance; or, on the contrary, we can misunderstand a fake improvisation, taking it as an actual improvisation. Hence, in those cases, it is obviously impossible to acknowledge the contribution of the improvisational quality of the performance to the significance of its cognitive supply for its aesthetic merit. By considering this, one can also deny that improvisation provide listeners and beholders with knowledge of the kind outlined above. For, how can improvisation offer this knowledge, if the difference between improvised and not improvised performance is not perceptively clear and discernible?

The objection can be answered by allowing that, for sure, when we do not understand the improvisational quality of the performance, we also cannot understand its epistemic supply and the artistic merit thereof. However, it is not necessary to *perceive* or *feel* the improvisational quality of the performance in order to *know* that it is really improvised. We may know that the performance is improvised, because of the context, or thanks to more or less explicit statements made by performers or organisers, or in virtue of some kinds of associations. If we are going to a jazz concert, for instance, we can reasonably think that we will listen to music that is (usually partly) improvised. For we use to associate jazz to improvisation.

Yet, once we know that the performance is improvised, we can (and should) intentionally attend to it as an improvisation, by perceiving and understanding its improvisational quality, i.e. by grasping the performance as a process of creation (see Canonne 2014). Thus, by means of intentionally attending to what is actually performed, we empathetically follow the (possibly changing) intentions of the performers<sup>17</sup> –who interact with each other, with the audience and with the environment. In this way, listeners and beholders can grasp and interpret the epistemic content presented by this improvisational quality, while evaluating it as part of its artistic merit. And, if we somehow get the information that a performance we did not know that was improvised was indeed improvised, then we can retrospectively re-shape the meaning of some of its aspects and the aesthetic merit thereof, because the knowledge of the fact that it has been improvised lets us interpret it in a different way.

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<sup>17</sup> Rousselot (2012, 40) discusses in an interesting way the puzzle of the intentionality of improvisation, which is described as a *quasi-action* halfway between automatic reflex and deliberate action. Briefly, this puzzle may be put as follows: if every action is as such intentional, in that the agent has a representation of the action's aim, which should be achieved, the intentional nature of improvisation is paradoxical, because improvisation is typified by the impossibility to know in advance what happens "ex improviso",. In other words, if an action is improvised, its aim cannot be established before its fulfilment. I think that a promising way to solve the puzzle is to understand the intentionality of improvisation not in terms of fixed representations of unchangeable aims, but of continuous reshaping of aims through a retrospective logic, according to which what now happens modifies the sense of what previously occurred. This means that, analogously to what happens in everyday life, also the intentions of the action change *in fieri*, adapting themselves to the changing circumstances.

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