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Review: 'Improvising Improvisation: From Out of Philosophy, Music, Dance, and Literature'

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Gary Peters, *Improvising Improvisation: From Out of Philosophy, Music, Dance, and Literature*

Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017.

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REFERENCES

Gary Peters, *Improvising Improvisation: From Out of Philosophy, Music, Dance, and Literature*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017.

- 1 Immediately upon opening this book, the reader confronts Peters' disquieting claim that this is not a philosophical text *on* improvisation but instead *is* an improvisation. "[E]verything that follows," he explains, "regardless of its appearance, is completely improvised, written each and every day from scratch. Not from one chapter to the next (if only), not from one section to the next (I wish), but from one sentence, sometimes one word to the next" (p. vii).
- 2 At this point it dawns upon the reader that she is in what Peters would call a "predicament" into which she has been "thrown" (see p. ix). The predicament for the would-be book critic is to rise to the new circumstances of this unexpected critical-interpretive challenge. What she had thought would be an exercise in philosophical interpretation has now, suddenly and without warning, become the interpretation of an improvisational performance. What this means is that she has to quickly adapt to her momentary destabilization and its accompanying free-fall sense of vertigo and *just go with it*. She has to draw upon her own improvisational resources in order to access the insights and other conceptual goodies that the book has to offer. All right then—game on! To borrow a phrase from Peters and to further demonstrate my willingness to play by the rules of the improvisation that he has set up: "I've started so I'll begin" (p. 9).

- 3 The book contains 23 chapters that are, in fact, loosely structured so that theoretical riffs on philosophers and other theorists on improvisation are interspersed with improvisation-related themes such as art-making, creativity, freedom and decision-making within constraints, precision, decision, and accuracy, difference and sameness, virtuality and actualization, practice, rehearsal, and obligation and duty. Case studies of improvisational performances that connect in some way to these themes and theories both support and resist the connections that Peters sees between them in various ways. One might wonder, for example, whether Hegel's discussion of classicism or Romantic creativity really applies to Cyndi Lauper's performances of *Time After Time* (acknowledging, with all fairness to Peters that he claims that he is engaged in "philosophical ventriloquism" rather than bona fide philosophical interpretation). One might question whether Jurij Konjar's *Fake It!* counts as a "re-improvisation" of Steve Paxton's *Goldberg Variations*, as Peters says it does, or whether it is better characterized as a creative re-interpretation and re-enactment instead. In general, the reader may suspect that the term "improvisation" is at times being conflated with other types of creative art-making and performing practices that involve conscious, reflective and pre-cognized decision-making. Finally, one may wonder whether there is such a thing as *sotto voce* understood as "secret improvisation" or whether relying on one's performative practice, habits, entrainment, and expertise is really the typically improvisatory aspects of expressivity or style in performance rather than full-blooded improvisation (see p. 6).
- 4 In terms of the book's structure, sometimes the case studies lead and the theoretical connections follow, sometimes it's the other way around, but this loose tethering is a tethering nonetheless. Thus, in terms of the structure of the book, theory first and then how that theory applies to actual performances that Peters has witnessed firsthand, this mode of philosophy does have idiomatic precedent.¹ One of the particular strengths of this book for the student of improvisation is the large number of case studies of professional musicians, some of which describe Peters' phenomenological experiences of being an audience member in literary terms. When describing a solo improvisation by Jimi Hendrix on July 6, 1968, for example, Peters recalls:
- ...at this moment Jimi simply stood, solitary and stationary to one side of the stage in semi-shadow. He neither said nor did anything except play. In truth, he didn't even play; he simply allowed his guitar to resonate and emit a slowly increasing howl of such despairing intensity that the druggy love-in that had been so happily unfolding all day in the Bedfordshire sunshine suddenly became as trivial as its tinkling bells and faux Buddhist chanting. (p. 171)
- 5 There is something about this description that captures the total attention that a virtuoso solo performance commands, and the power of live performance (whether or not it indeed was an improvisation) to change the color and tone and feel of the space around it. This sort of case study description, then, goes a long way towards giving the reader some of the aesthetic rewards of improvisation even while largely declining to discuss these rewards in terms of aesthetic properties or value or other theoretical terms familiar to aesthetic philosophers.
- 6 If this book is an improvisation rather than *about* improvisation, as Peters claims, the question then becomes: What kind of improvisation is it? Throughout the book Peters canvasses a variety of theories on improvisation but throughout he criticizes what he calls "the dominant view" of improvisation, which he claims is something that prioritizes novelty and eschews the role that habit plays in the improviser's performance (see p. 114). He opts instead for avant-garde guitarist Derek Bailey's categories of improvisation

and for what he believes are the improvisation-relevant themes in the work of continental philosophers such as (in no particular order) Badiou, Deleuze, Derrida, Nancy, Ricouer, Heidegger, Arendt, Kant, Nietzsche and Hegel, artist-theorists such as Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, and John Cage, musicians/performance artists such as Lol Coxhill, the Del McCoury Band, Arnold Schoenberg, Jimi Hendrix, Miles Davis, and Cyndi Lauper, and improvisational dancers/choreographers Jurij Konjar and Steve Paxton. I've decided here (against Peters' rules for the sort of ironic free improvisation that resists *decision*) that this improvisational book fits within the category of what Bailey would call, via Peters, "fixed non-idiomatic improvisation," which Peters describes as a search for an alternative form of comprehensibility (p. 84). It is not fully "idiomatic improvisation" because there is as yet no fully formed idiom (that I know of) for the sort of improvisational experimentation funded or inspired by philosophic theory that Peters' methodology provides (see p. 77). Neither does it wander between idioms so it is not "unfixed idiomatic improvisation" (p. 81).

- 7 Now that this book has been categorized as a particular type of improvisation the question then becomes whether or not *qua* that kind of improvisation (a fixed non-idiomatic improvisation) it is a good one. To determine that begs the question of what would make this fixed non-idiomatic improvisation "good" rather than "bad" or "meh" on the interpretive terms of its own category. Here we bump up against the problem that the other constituents of this category upon which Peters relies are artistic rather than theoretical. However, this does not seem to be a work of art – the most likely candidate (perhaps) being a work of literature. There are clues throughout the book that this book is, in fact, not a work of literary improvisation like a poem or play or work of fiction but is instead a kind of improvisational philosophical work that does have idiomatic precedent in live lectures and presentations but less so in written philosophical texts that have been revised and edited in some way. Peters acknowledges that this book took place over many years and in many sittings, that he agonized over it, and that he incorporated editors' and reviewers' comments, and these disclosures seem to deprive the book of the live "flow" that characterizes so much of improvisational practice in the arts. Further, it raises the worry that Peters does not have enough practice and expertise in this new idiom to perform it with ease. This deprives the book of aesthetic qualities of elegance, grace, control, immediacy, and lyricism that improvisations, even rough and raw ones, often have.
- 8 If I am right that this is more philosophical than literary or artistic (even granting Peters' point that it is not philosophy proper) then what it should do, to be good quasi-philosophy on at least one common view of the special virtues of philosophy, is leave us with some enriched sense of the subject upon which it is philosophizing. The question is thus whether this written lecture-demonstration of fixed non-idiomatic philosophical improvisation enriches our comprehension of what its subject – improvisation – is and can be.
- 9 In the penultimate page of his conclusion, Peters offers yet another self-conscious disclaimer, saying that "I have singularly *failed* to find a way to the source, essence, origin, or even meaning of improvisation: I have simply improvised in the hope that the distance between the 'situation' thereby created and the absent 'site' of the event of improvisation is at least brought to life – becomes a live rather than dead space" (p. 245). The irony of this conclusion, and Peters has conceded that this is a deeply ironic book, is that his book is entirely successful at what it fails to do (see p. 32 on irony). Indeed, irony

is a hallmark of the kind of improvisation exemplified by Lol Coxhill (according to Peters), a musician who was often hailed as a comedian for the way he set up improvisational situations and juxtapositions. What this means is that it does, in showing the reader what the limits of improvisation are to achieve philosophical ends, convey something essential about the nature of improvisational practices in a way that no strictly philosophical treatise could. In that way it does, ironically, succeed in its (non-)philosophical intent.

NOTES

1. For a more traditionally structured and presented philosophical treatise on improvisation that may be more accessible to those readers who would prefer to read within the idiom of the philosophic discipline I highly recommend Peters' 2009 book, *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, Chicago University Press, 2009.

AUTHORS

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Aili Bresnahan is a former lawyer and professional-level ballet dancer who earned her PhD in philosophy from Temple University in 2012 under the supervision of Joseph Margolis. In her current position she is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Dayton in Ohio, USA. Her primary area of specialization is in the philosophy of art, particularly dance and performance practice. She is the author of "The Philosophy of Dance" entry of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and her work appears in the *Dance Research Journal*, *Philosophy Compass*, the *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology*, the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, and various books on aesthetics, temporal experience, and dance. Currently, she is working on a monograph on the philosophy of dance performing. She is also the founder and moderator of the DancePhilosophers Google group, an interdisciplinary network of scholars and practitioners who are interested in dance philosophy broadly construed. For more on her work and current projects see www.artistsmatter.com.