

Improvisation and Artistic Creativity

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1. Introduction

In this paper I suggest that we look to improvisation in the arts in order to understand and explain artistic creativity. Indeed, improvisation can be regarded as a general source as well as an example of artistic creativity, because it “places not the result of creativity, but rather the very conditions of creativity on the stage.” Instead of being anti-artistic in nature, due to its supposed unfinishedness, unpreparedness and inaccuracy, improvisation in performing arts (music, theatre, dance) exemplifies and 'fuels' artistic creativity as such.

My argument will be developed in three steps. I will discuss the concept of creativity in general and in reference to art. Then I will focus my attention on the properties of improvisation and the phenomenology of improvisational art practices. Finally, I will argue that, due to some of its constitutive features, improvisation can be understood as an exemplification of art creativity.

2. Creativity in Life and in the Arts

It is often stressed that creativity is vital for human survival and flourishing. Creative actions enable human beings to cope with their natural and social environment, to solve problems by inventing efficient and valuable solutions that were unforeseeable before their application. Creative behaviour is the hallmark of intelligent life. In this sense creativity is not a prerogative of art. Anyway, in the arts creativity is shown in a very special

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¹ Garry Hagberg, 'Jazz improvisation and ethical interaction', in *Art and Ethical Criticism*, ed. G. Hagberg (Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford, 2008), 259.

way. The importance of art in human life relies to a great extent on the way art experience is a product, a display, a vehicle of creativity.

But what is creativity? What is *art* creativity? And how can it be explained?

2.1. *Rules and Creativity*

According to Berys Gaut “[...] Creativity is a kind of making that produces something which is original”; “has considerable value” (thus it can be held as exemplary²); and “must involve *flair* by the maker”, that is, the production process requires skill because it does not work in a mechanical or in a purely random way.³ The issue is nonetheless controversial. Originality is a quality of an action or of an object, which is new in comparison with other actions or objects. Yet, originality is a matter of degree and *per se* does not automatically imply creativity. Something can have “considerable value”, perhaps because it offers a solution to a certain problem,⁴ and it can be made with flair too, without thereby being creative. Originality, value and flair can be understood as kinds of ‘symptoms’ of creativity (more or less in the same sense as Nelson Goodman speaks about the “symptoms of the aesthetic”),⁵ but not as its sufficient conditions. From the fact that something is original, valuable, and has flair, we cannot conclude that it is necessarily creative, because these features are not sufficient for creativity.

The main problem is precisely that we lack a descriptive explanation of creativity.⁶ It is not possible to explain the grounds or the causes that

² Cf. Berys Gaut, ‘Creativity and Skill’, in *The Idea of Creativity* ed. Michael Krausz, Denis Dutton & Karen Bardsley (Leiden - Boston: Brill), 83-103, here 83-4; Cf. C. R. Hausman, ‘Criteria of Creativity’, in *The Idea of Creativity*, 11.

³ Berys Gaut, ‘Creativity and Imagination’, in *The Creation of Art: New Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 150-1. See also Gaut, ‘Creativity and Skill’, 86. Gaut says “purely” because he wants “to allow a role of serendipity in creation”. Still, he adds, an accidental production must be the outcome of a “skillful exploitation of chance, rather than chance alone”, in order to be creative.

⁴ Cf. Larry Brinkman, ‘Creative Product and Creative Process in Science and Art’, in *The Idea of Creativity*, 32.

⁵ See Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968).

⁶ Cf. Maria Kronfeldner, ‘Zum Begriff der psychologischen Kreativität als Basis einer naturalistische Kreativitätstheorie: eine kompatibilistische Rekonstruktion von Originalität und Spontaneität’, in *Kreativität*, ed. Günther Abel (Berlin: Universitätsverlag

result in sufficient conditions for an act to be creative, because a creative achievement “is not reducible to its elements or conditions”.⁷ There are not recipes for creative achievements. In this sense, creativity appears as a kind of mystery. Artists and scientists frequently report that they do not know how they could achieve their creative outcomes.⁸ Since there are not explicit sets of instructions for the attainment of creative achievements, “the creative thinker will himself be unable to specify, even in a post hoc fashion, precisely how he reached his achievement.”⁹

In fact, an outcome is creative only if it can not be completely traced to previous conditions. Otherwise it would be predictable, not new and not creative.¹⁰ This amounts to saying that an explanation of creativity consisting in providing sufficient conditions for a creative achievement would eliminate creativity. Following Jeffrey Maitland, we can term this the “paradox of creativity”.¹¹

As argued by Larry Briskman the paradox goes like this.¹² If we had some general theory of creativity according to which a particular creativity achievement C was necessary, we could actually deduce the attainment of C. In this way, “we could have creative achievements for the asking” and “this would mean that there would no longer be much point in calling such achievements creative ones.” Given the relevant conditions, every creative achievement would be turned into something to be expected, “But this means not only that there need be no surprises, subjectively speaking, but also that there would be no objective novelty.” Hence, such a theory “would eliminate all the mystery and miraculousness of creativity, but it would also eliminate creativity itself”.

Hence, the criteria, or the symptoms, of creativity (originality, value, flair) will not enable one to be creative. They will at most “enable one to classify certain actions as creative”,¹³ in retrospect, that is, they serve as

der TU Berlin, vol. 1, 2005), 19-30.

⁷ Carl Hausman, ‘Criteria of Creativity’, in *The Idea of Creativity*, 8.

⁸ Briskman, ‘Creative Product and Creative Process’, 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁰ Cfr. Hausman, ‘Criteria of Creativity’, 10.

¹¹ Jeffrey Maitland, ‘Creativity’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 34 (1976): 397-409.

¹² Briskman, ‘Creative Product and Creative Process’, 19-20.

¹³ David Novitz, ‘Explanation of Creativity’, in *The Idea of Creativity*, 177.

conceptual clarification of actions and the products thereof that, one can judge as original, valuable and accomplished with flair, after they have been made. This amounts to saying that “to adjudge something to be ‘creative’ (...) is to bestow upon it an honorific title, to claim that it deserves to be highly valued for one reason or another”.¹⁴ Creativity seems to be a normative or an evaluative concept rather than a descriptive one. A normative concept expresses a norm, i.e. it says what we have to do for a certain aim. Hence, to be creative is the outcome of a normative judgement which expresses an evaluation about something produced and about the way it is produced.

Then one of the main questions about creativity is how can one concretely act creatively. As David Novitz suggested, “there are indefinitely many ways of being creative”.¹⁵ Empirically, creative acts are realised and performed in a multitude of different ways: there is no mechanism, “no one set of action-guiding principles, responsible for all of them”.¹⁶ Should this mean that creative actions are not based on rules? It would sound very odd. As a matter of fact, our actions seem to depend upon constraints. They are based on rules, conventions, habits. Even if one thinks that one is making something new, what is accomplished is often the result of following other rules, or the same rules in different ways. Hence, following the rules does not preclude creativity: an action can be creative, even if it follows a rule. An action can be described as an application of rules and nevertheless be understood as creative from a normative perspective, games of chess being a classical (Wittgensteinian) example.¹⁷ Creativity does not depend on rules as recipes; rules do not exclude creativity. In other words, rules are conditions of possibility of the fulfilment of actions; yet, they are not the reason of their creativity.

It may be suggested that creativity has to do with the *application* of rules. Hence, an account of the process of “following a rule” may teach us something important about creativity in general and about creativity in the arts, in particular. We have seen that the distinction between those actions that are creative and those that are not creative seems to be normative

¹⁴ Briskman, ‘Creative Product and Creative Process’, 17.

¹⁵ Novitz, ‘Explanation of Creativity’, 176.

¹⁶ Ibid., 178.

¹⁷ Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), § 197.

rather than descriptive, because to judge something as creative means to appraise its special merit as new, exemplary valuable and accomplished with flair. Hence, the question arises as to how the relation between the rule to be followed and the act of following the rule can and should be understood *if* the act is (to be) evaluated as creative. The understanding of this relation may bring us to see the importance of art for the explanation of creativity.

Chomsky's distinction between *rule-based creativity* and *rule changing creativity* is here paramount.¹⁸ According to the first kind of creativity, an almost infinite number of new outcomes can result from a finite set of rules. According to the second the accumulation of individual deviations from the rules can result in the generation of new rules. Following (an interpretation of) Wittgenstein's ideas about the process of rule-following, these two kinds of creativity should not be thought mutually exclusive. In human practices every application of a rule presupposes a rule, but it is not explained on the basis of that rule alone.¹⁹ The understanding and execution of a rule in a process that is governed by the rule is *not* itself governed by the rule. This amounts to saying that following the rule can *change* the rule to various degrees: the application of the rule can transform it to the extent that a new rule is invented. Hence the rule-governed creativity presupposes a rule-changing creativity as its condition of possibility.²⁰

The way a rule is applied in practical life cannot be determined by the rule itself. Moreover, it can vary from case to case. The way the constraints established by a rule are empirically followed cannot be set by the rule: the pertinence of the universal rule to the single case cannot be universally established, but it is invented in every single occurrence of the rule. In thinking, speaking, acting, the general rule is applied “to just the present once-only situation”.²¹ This allows for the possibility of multiple

¹⁸ Cf. Noam Chomsky, *Current issues in linguistic theory* (The Hague: Mouton, 1964); see Fred D'Agostino, 'Chomsky on Creativity', *Synthese* 58 (1958): 85-117; Margaret Drach, 'The Creative Aspect of Chomsky's Use of the Notion of Creativity', *The Philosophical Review* 90 (1981): 44-65

¹⁹ Cf. Emilio Garroni, *Creatività* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2010), 106.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

²¹ Gilbert Ryle, 'Improvisation', *Mind, New Series* 85 (1976): 77. Gilbert Ryle argues also that our thinking and doing works not only as step by step leap-frogging process: [...] “stepless though still innovative thinking is a necessary element even in inferring itself”;

realizability of the rule in the single cases. *Some* of the ways the rule is accomplished can be creative. Yet the rule can not determine the creative qualities of its applications.

No rule can govern its execution. The application of the rule is guided by acts of constructive interpretation in every single case.²² Though the room for freedom in applying the rule (i.e. the rule-changing creativity) varies to a great degree in the different spheres of human life as well as in every single case, and sometimes it is very limited, every single case is a *new* one.

In this sense, a creative process, with its creative outcomes, is such a process which involves skill in its making, but to a great degree it does not only follow rules or routines. In the case of a creative process, the application of the rule requires skill. Skills are not always determined by rules or routines. As Berys Gaut suggests: “Skills are often required to follow routines (...); but one can demonstrate skills in ways other than by following routines (...)”, for example “in knowing how to apply rules”.²³

Not only that. The free deviation from the rule *can* result in a new rule: rules giving norms for practical life arise in practical life and are established by inventive practices. In Robert Brandom's words: “[...] the capacity of individuals to produce novel performances in accord with a set of social practices makes possible novel social practices as well. For as the community becomes capable of novel responses (themselves subject to judgements of appropriateness), new social practices are generated.”²⁴

Therefore, creativity is not simply limited and governed by established rules nor is it only a way to invent more or less new and unexpected ways for following the rules: rather, rules are creatively generated and estab-

a (mechanical) thinking step-by-step (call it a 'leap-frogging process') [...] presupposes the presence of thinkings that are not themselves made up of leap-frogging” (Ibidem, 74).

²² In *Truth and Method* (Eng. Transl. New York: Seabury Press, 1975: Part II, Ch. II, § 2b) Hans-Georg Gadamer draws the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* to the Kantian concept of *reflexive judgment* in order to explain that the application of a rule or a law requires an ‘inventive’ interpretational act, which adapts the rule to the single case. The outcome of this is the variation of the rule in different degrees.

²³ Gaut, ‘Creativity and Skill’, 94.

²⁴ Robert Brandom, ‘Freedom and Constraint by Norms’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 179.

lished in the praxis. We “make up the rules as we go along”.²⁵ Hence creativity is a process involving the construction of rules in praxis.²⁶ As such, it has passive and unconscious as well as active and conscious aspects, and it is the result of experiential backgrounds, inspired spontaneity and a capacity for experimental exploration.

2.2. *Creativity in Art*

All that I briefly explained above is certainly not an exclusive prerogative of art but an important feature of human rational action in general. In any event, it is ordinarily stressed that *art* is a practice, i.e. a sphere of life in which creativity is particularly important. Or better still, *artistic* creativity is so important that it can be regarded as a paradigmatic *exemplification* of creativity *tout court*. Artworks show creativity *at work*.²⁷

Indeed, according to a 'Kantian' way of considering beautiful art, “a work of art must not be produced in accordance with certain rules, but

²⁵ Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 83.

²⁶ Cf. Georg Bertram, ‘Kreativität und Normativität’, in *Kreativität*, ed. Günther Abel ((Universitätsverlag der TU Berlin, vol. 1, 2005), 273-283; Idem, ‘Improvisation und Normativität’, in *Improvisieren*, ed. G. Brandstetter, H.-F. Bormann, A. Matzke (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010). This is not to deny that, as Jerrold Levinson says, “Creativity [...] is sometimes a matter of reconceiving or reinterpreting or reconstruing given constraints, and not always a matter of either remaining inventively within them or entirely abandoning them.” Jerrold Levinson, “Elster on Artistic Creativity”, in Idem, *Contemplating Art*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006): 74.

²⁷ Regarding how art creativity works, it is possible to distinguish in general between passive and active creativity. According to Gaut (‘Creativity and Imagination’, 156-7) the first occurs if “the subject is unaware of the creative process, if any, which has occurred to produce the creative outcome”, while the second “occurs when the subject actively searches out various solutions, consciously trying out different approaches, and in the course of this activity comes upon a solution”. According to Schelling's elaboration of Kant's concept of genius in his *Philosophy of Transcendental Idealism*, art can be thought as being a product and an example of both kinds of creativity (passive and active) at the very same time. Art is the product of an unconscious and spontaneous production (Schelling calls it “*Poesie*”) and of a conscious technical production (Schelling calls it “*Kunst*.” in strict sense: cf. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*; Eng. Transl. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978). Art is the dialectical product of conscious and unconscious creative processes, the rules of which are invented in the very process of making.

must itself be a rule”.²⁸ Yet, the “rule” that a beautiful artwork gives or sets for further art is a rather special kind of rule: an exemplary norm or a normative example.²⁹ It is an example of creativity itself. Other artworks should not slavishly imitate the artwork produced, because otherwise they would not be creative outcomes. They should rather follow the *way* the exemplary beautiful artwork became exemplary.

The exemplarity of the creative achievement is not only the result of rule-governed creativity. It requires the rule-changing and rule-generating creativity.³⁰ Clearly, there always are formal and material constraints (traditional conventions, aesthetic styles, cultural backgrounds, technical problems and solutions) that govern the practice of producing a certain artwork (for example, they govern whether a work belongs to an artistic category, a genre etc.). However, the way to cope with and answer to the constraints is free, to the extent that the constraints may also be overstepped by and in their application. In other words, these constraints are not entirely rigid, for artists can revolutionize the artistic category, the genre, etc. in valuable ways.³¹ So artists work within conventions and rules,

²⁸ Paul Guyer, ‘Exemplary Originality: Genius, Universality, and Individuality’, in *The Creation of Art*, 126.

²⁹ I thank Jerrold Levinson for pushing me on this point.

³⁰ According to Margaret Boden (‘Creativity: How Does It Work?’, in *The Idea of Creativity*, ed. Michael Krausz, Denis Dutton & Karen Bardsley (Leiden — Boston: Brill, 2009, 240-242) three kinds of psychological creativity can be distinguished: combinational, exploratory and transformational creativity. Combinational creativity works by generating “unfamiliar (and interesting) combination of familiar ideas”. Exploratory creativity uses “the existing stylistic rules or conventions (...) to generate novel structures (ideas), whose possibility may or may not have been realized before the exploration took place”. Transformational creativity is a kind of exploratory creativity, in which the transformation of rules and conventions is more radical. On my opinion, combinational, exploratory and transformational creativity can be conceived as the psychological processes that lead to change the rules to the extent that new rules can be invented.

³¹ Some of these ways are the ‘hybrid art forms’ which through juxtaposition, synthesis and transformation combine traditional art forms, inventing new ones out of them. According to Jerrold Levinson, hybrid art forms “tend to be *symbols of creativity itself*”, because “to create is typically to reorganize and recombine pre-existing materials into unprecedented wholes. The hybridization of art forms does precisely this, not at the level of single works and their components, but at the level of artistic categories and their antecedents”. Levinson, ‘Hybrid Art Forms’, in J. Levinson, *Music, Art and Metaphysics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 34.

while at the same time modifying them in and through their artworks: the way conventions are applied reshapes those conventions, which might thus be described as continuously in progress (Ellis Benson 2003). In this sense art production shows the dialectical links between the kinds of creativity just considered: artists interact with the members of their cultural communities (whose scope can be extended to mankind as a whole) and work by using in innovative ways sets of culturally and creatively established norms that rule their practice; the ways they follow those norms can lead to changes in those norms; the new norms will govern the ways other artists will work and so on in an on-going inter-subjective (dialogical, collaborative, competitive) task.

Hence a dialectic between constraints and freedom from constraints — or, in Kantian terms, a kind of “free play of intellect and imagination” — is at work in the case of the production of the single artwork as well in its appreciation by means of the faculty of aesthetic judgement. This may occur to such an extent that the rule is valid only for (and embodied in) the single case. A rule which applies to a single case may sound as an oxymoron.³² Indeed this makes sense only if one thinks about the special ‘Kantian’ sense that the term rule can take in the realm of beautiful art. The particular empirical routines that were responsible for the production of the creative work A are not the same of the creative work B, if B is supposed to be a creative work too. If an artist produces the artwork A by following some rules and routines of production, somebody else, who will execute the same rules and routines in the same way, will not achieve something creative, but rather an imitation which is hardly appreciated as creative. The rules can be the same in both cases only to the extent that the artworks produced are both creative artworks, that is, artworks that should be taken as examples of creativity. Yet, the peculiar way each artwork exemplifies creativity is due to its special empirical rules and routines of production. Consequently, one may argue, the artwork's rule or norm holds only for the one single case. Following those very same rules, another artwork will not be creative. The rule tends to collapse into the single artwork, that is, to be, as it were, identical with it.

Luigi Pareyson's theory of art is in this regard very enlightening. Ac-

³² I thank again Jerrold Levinson for pushing me on this point.

According to Pareyson, art is a kind of doing that invents the modalities of doings while doing. The rules of art production are not completely established before their application. The rule is generated, as it were, while generating the artwork, because the conception and the project of the artwork are parts of the production of the individual work and they change during the concrete making of the artwork, due to several facts (the empirical, material, situational, social conditions of the artistic work, the ongoing process of self-evaluation of the partial outcomes of the production, etc.). Consequently, the success of the artistic undertaking cannot be evaluated by comparing the work or the event with a plan arranged in advance or merely judging the way it makes use of well known techniques and styles. The standard of success, i.e. of the perfection of the work, is established by the success itself of the work. This may sound circular. Yet, it is rather *teleological*. The norm artists are guided by is the *ideal* of a ‘perfect’, creative, outcome, which can prove to be right, only by the example of the *real* work generated under its guidance. In other words: the norm proves to be creative only if it will motivate the production of a creative artwork, which, once produced, will be seen as *really* original and exemplary.³³

In this sense the artwork is *unique*, like the rule that it follows while being produced. It is *original*, because it is to a great degree something new and somehow unpredictable.³⁴ In fact the precise outcome of an intentionally creative action can hardly be determined in advance: creativity exceeds our skill to foresee the results of the fulfilment of a plan.³⁵ It is nonetheless an “appropriate and non-random response” to the circumstances of its production, in the context of which its originality can be stated.³⁶ Therefore, creativity can be judged only in retrospect.³⁷ Moreover the creative artwork is *contingent*, and its production involves the risk of failure, because nothing — no plan, no rule — assures its success.

³³ Many thanks to Jerrold Levinson for pushing me on this point. As Jeffrey Maitland argues in this respect, artistic creativity is therefore to be conceived as creative performance rather than as problem-solving. Jeffrey Maitland, ‘Creativity’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34, 1976: 397-409.

³⁴ I share Levinson’s criticism against John Elster’s repudiation of originality as part of artistic value. See Levinson, “Elster on Artistic Creativity”, 60-1.

³⁵ Davide Spati, *Suoni inauditi* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005), 167.

³⁶ D’Agostino, ‘Chomsky on Creativity’, 91.

³⁷ Matthew Rampley, ‘Creativity’, *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 38 (1998): 276.

(The process of its production is not automatic). It is highly *valuable*, not in spite of, but exactly because its success is not sure and appears as a kind of *favour*.³⁸

The perfection of the artwork cannot be judged by comparison with a model of perfection (i.e. with a canon or a rule). The rule is the model only of the process from which only it itself is generated and the perfection of the work can be established only by judging aesthetically the work. The artwork is *perfect*, if the rule of its production is singular to the extent that it coincides with the work.

Hence the artwork is *unrepeatable* and at the same time *exemplary*. It is unrepeatable because, as individual, it can not be subsumed under a determining universal rule. Though other artworks cannot imitate it as product (imitations would be mere copies), it is exemplary not only because it is the standard of production of similar artworks, but mainly because the way it is produced — with flair — invites others to produce artworks while producing the rules of their production: other works can imitate the “operative efficiency of the rule” as a way of doing which is invented in the course of the work-production.³⁹

To sum up: art production generally displays and exemplifies the way human beings act creatively in the context, and within the constraints, of their biological and social environment, because it shows the following: 1. On the one hand our actions are embedded in social practices and natural situations which draw the lines at them, but, on the other hand, those practices and situations are modified by the same actions they govern, limit and constrain; 2. their success is not determined by universal rules, because following rules may imply the invention of rules for the single case. For this reason they can fail; conversely, it is for exactly this reason that they are so valuable if they succeed. But their success is not guaranteed. In this sense art makes us aware of the insecurity of our life and, in so doing, help us to control the anxiety generated by this insecurity.⁴⁰ At the same time, it shows how very valuable is a kind of acting and making that invents its own rules while acting — and is for that reason original and exemplary.

³⁸ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. (Eng. Transl. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), § 5.

³⁹ Luigi Pareyson, *Estetica. Teoria della formatività* (Milano: Bompiani, 1988), 141.

⁴⁰ Garroni, *Creatività*, 174.

I will not pursue this matter further, but will now turn to the next part of the paper.

3. Improvisation: Logic and Phenomenology

The practice of improvisation can teach us something important about art creativity. Art, I have argued, is an exemplification of creativity in general; improvisation, I will now suggest, is an exemplification of art creativity. Actually, improvisation means not only an action accomplished (or the process of accomplishing something) without preparation, but also, and more importantly, the ability of doing something freely either following some rules or changing the rules or both.

In his book on ontology of artworks, David Davies distinguishes between *pure improvisation*, *improvisational interpretation* and *improvisational composition*. Leaving aside the third kind of improvisation which I consider misleading, let's take a look on the first two kinds.⁴¹ Pure improvisation is, according to Davies, a performative act that invents everything on the spot, Keith Jarrett's *The Köln Concert* being the exemplary case. Interpretative improvisation is, on the contrary, a performing event constructed upon some background (a known song like a *jazz standard*, a set of chords, instructions of any kind, aesthetic conventions, artistic traditions, technical rules, etc.), the way in which jazz musicians play on repeated harmonic changes being the exemplary case.

I will adopt David Davis' distinction, but I will interpret it differently. I argue that in a strict sense there empirically are no pure improvisations, but only improvisational interpretations i.e. improvisations on something that is somehow (in a broad sense) 'interpreted' (there is no *creation ex nihilo*). Phenomenologically, improvisations are always located in contexts, are somehow rule-governed, are based on intersubjectively shared conventions. In this sense also free improvisations like the one performed in *The Köln Concert* are not 'pure' improvisation. The notion of pure improvisation can be anyway useful as heuristic tool for searching a logical definition of improvisation. Empirically, it can be considered a '*Grenzbegriff*' in a Kantian sense. Logically, it offers a way to understand the specific constitutive kernel of every improvisation, i.e. of improvisation *as*

⁴¹ David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 225-229.

such.

3.1. Logic of Improvisation

By definition improvisation in the arts has two main properties.

- a) *Processuality*. Improvisations are processes in an essential sense. What matters is mainly the process, not the product of the process.
- b) *Coincidence between creation and performance*. Improvisations are a special kind of processes, in which the creative (inventive, ideational) activity and the performing activity not only occur at the same time, but are the one and same generative occurrence.

Hence *an improvisation is a process that unfolds while being invented*. In improvisation the creative process is not completed in a work that subsists temporally or logically before the execution of the performing act. On the contrary, in improvisation, the focus of attention is the process of creating, that is, of inventing while performing. Listeners and onlookers experience the process-like character of on-going and developing actions that are ephemeral, irreversible, unrepeatable events.

Improvisations standardly do not result in works which can be executed over and over again. In improvisation, the goal of the artistic production and the target of the aesthetic attention is the dynamical activity of inventing while performing here and now. It is an event which comes and goes and that is perceived during its creation, i.e. *in fieri*. It arises, is developed, while being aesthetically experienced, and then it disappears (though it can be kept in memory or stored by audio-visual media).

Unlike in composed works, in artistic improvisation the creativity is performative and vice versa, the performance is creative. The creative process and its product occur at the same time.⁴² The creative process is the target of aesthetic attention. Indeed if aesthetic attention is directed to the performing act, it is necessarily directed also to the creative process, due to the fact that the two processes are one.⁴³ That is why the way in which an improvisational process will unfold is unforeseeable (*improviso* means properly: not foreseen) and surprising. Before being performed

⁴² Davide Sparti, *Il corpo sonoro* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007), 122.

⁴³ Cf. R. Keith Sawyer, 'Improvisation and the Creative Process: Dewey, Collingwood, and the Aesthetics of Spontaneity', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58 (2000): 149-150; Garry Hagberg 'Jazz improvisation and ethical interaction', 259.

what will be performed is unknown and unknowable, because it will exist only through and thanks to the performance. Or better still: *it is* the performance.

To summarize, improvisation can be defined as a process in which the invention is performed while the performance is invented. A subset of other properties ensues from the coincidence of creational and performing process.

Irreversibility: The creative process cannot be corrected after its end, as it were from the outside. Any correction of the creative process is part of the process.⁴⁴

Situationality: Improvisation is a process that occurs here and now and vanishes while it is occurring. I see no good reason for claiming, that it could be understood as a *token* of a pre-existing *type*, as Philip Alperson seems to think.⁴⁵

Singularity: There are not and cannot be two identical improvisations. The identity of two or more improvisational events is logically ruled out, because their concrete spatiotemporal conditions are parts of their beings. Copies, imitations, repetitions are by definition not improvisations.⁴⁶

Self-construction (autopoiesis) and self-reference. In an improvisation process the subsequent acts affect and implement the significance of those acts that have been performed before. In the course of the improvisation continual *feedback loops* occur, in virtue of which what has already happened becomes the interpretative frame of the following actions. The subsequent actions retrospectively affect the meaning

⁴⁴ One can give another direction to the process, but what is done is done. Erasures and “*pentimenti*” are not possible. Cf. Gabriele Tomasi, ‘On the Spontaneity of Jazz Improvisation’, in *Improvisation. Between Technique and Spontaneity*, ed. Marina Santi (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2010): 85; Paisley Livingston, ‘Pentimento’, in *The Creation of Art*, ed. Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingston (New York: Cambridge University Press 2003), 95. Anyway, during the unfolding of the performance, the meaning of a part of the process occurred before may (even radically) change by virtue of what follows. The past events cannot be changed, but they may be differently interpreted due to a new situation that re-orientates our interpretation of them.

⁴⁵ Philip Alperson, ‘On Musical Improvisation’. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. 43 (1984), 17-29.

⁴⁶ Sparti, *Il corpo sonoro*, 133.

of what is already performed, because they offer a new context for their interpretation.⁴⁷ Hence an improvisation is a self-referential and autopoietical event, because it is generated and unfolded, as it were, from the inside.⁴⁸

3.2. *Phenomenology of Improvisation*

The features I have just outlined provide us with a logical frame for the definition of art improvisation as such. Empirically considered, no improvisation is really a *creatio ex nihilo*.⁴⁹ Improvisations are never realized, as it were, in the pure state. There is always a background upon which improvisation will take place.⁵⁰ In an improvisation, pre-existing forms and materials are worked out in new ways (are 'interpreted'). Explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious rules, conventions, instructions, abilities, habits, styles, patterns guide the improvisational performing process, which anyway occurs not only *in virtue of* these contextual constraints, but also *against* and *in spite of* them. The self-constructed freely - spontaneous internal context of improvisation unfolds itself in the frame of this already available and readymade (external?) context which 'governs' and at the same time 'fuels' the 'inventing while performing and vice versa' process that subverts these constraints while it inventively feeds itself with them.

Hence the improvisational event should be thought of as dialectical. Its occurrence results from the clash between contrary elements: preparation and invention, planning and surprise, structure and process, legality

⁴⁷ Garry Hagberg, 'Jazz Improvisation: A Mimetic Art?', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* (2006): 469-485; Davide Sparti, *Suoni inauditi* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005); Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Asthetik des Performativen* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2004).

⁴⁸ In 'Improvisation und Normativität', Georg Bertram elaborates on the normative aspects of this kind of self-reference)

⁴⁹ Cf. Philip Alperson, 'On Musical Improvisation'; L. B. Brown, 'Musical Works, Improvisation, and the Principle of Continuity', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996): 353-369; Idem, 'Feeling my way': Jazz Improvisation and its Vicissitudes — A Plea for Imperfection', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58 (2000): 113-123; Gabriele Tomasi, 'On the Spontaneity of Jazz Improvisation', in *Improvisation. Between technique and Spontaneity*, ed. Marina Santi (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2010), 77-102.

⁵⁰ Cf. Carl Dahlhaus, 'Was heißt Improvisation?', in *Improvisation und neue Musik*, ed. R. Brinkmann (Mainz-London-New York-Tokio: Schott, 1979), 9-23.

and spontaneity.⁵¹ The pure improvisational element is to be found in the second term of each of these oppositional concept-couples; but it can be realized empirically only through the encounter with its respective opposite.

Already worked and shaped materials are re-worked and re-shaped (transformed) in several ways during the improvisational process. Every process takes place in — and carries forward — a cultural practice (which becomes a tradition), while transforming and sometimes revolutionizing it. In particular and rare cases the novelty introduced imposes itself as new convention, new rule, new code:⁵² it becomes *exemplary*.

The creativity of art improvisation is in this sense a good combination of *rule-based* and *rule-changing creativity*. Hence, in a broad sense, improvisation is an on-going process that unfolds itself through several performing acts in interactive and dialogical ways. This interactive dialogue happens synchronically, in and through a collective improvisational performance, and diachronically, in the historical development and transformation of cultural heritages (styles, techniques and habits). This perfectly mirrors the way creativity can be experienced in everyday life and specifies the way creativity is generally at work in art.

The improvisational art practices are of different kinds: the soloist's flight and the collective interaction on the stage (with the broad-spectrum of different possibilities: variation on a theme, improvisation on a plot or a sequence of chords, free improvisation as it were without instructions, etc.); the on-going development of artistic personalities (in virtue of their reciprocal influences at a certain time; or thanks to the choice to follow a certain tradition over time); the self-transformations of art genres through different artworks and art events.⁵³

As such, like every interaction in our everyday life, art improvisational processes can be more or less traditional or innovative. Indeed *every im-*

⁵¹ Tord Gustavsen, 'The Dialectical Eroticism of Improvisation', in *Improvisation. Between technique and Spontaneity*, ed. Marina Santi (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2010), 7-51.

⁵² Cf. Bertram, 'Kreativität und Normativität'; Brandom, 'Freedom and Constraint by Norms'.

⁵³ See Bruce Ellis Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) for this broad concept of improvisation.

provisational process involves as such a certain risk. Its outcome is always somehow adventurous, unpredictable and exposed to mistakes and to the risk of a complete failure. The ability to tackle this risk effectively is part of the measure of its success in everyday life as well as in the arts.

4. *Improvisation as Exemplary of Creativity*

A certain degree of risk is a general characteristic of human actions. Human actions are not (completely) automatic processes and can fail. Though the risks may be slight or unlikely, because one decides or has to go an easy or a well known or even a very fixed and predetermined way, if one acts, one acts more or less *freely*. Hence, the way one copes with constraints, the way one follows the rule, has as such at least the possibility to be to some degree creative. Moreover, sometimes one *must* be creative to solve problems in social, biological, environmental situations that cannot be faced by applying tested patterns and techniques.

We have seen that art is *paradigmatically* and *intentionally* creative. Every artistic accomplishment *invents*, to some extent, the rules of the procedures required to cope with problems of different kind, that arise in virtue of cultural and technical constraints placed upon the process. Not only that: the artist *chooses* to make something original, or to make something in an original manner, or both. The success of the process of art production is not granted; but *if* the process turns out to be successful it really is a unique, original and valuable achievement. Hence, the concept of perfection in art should not be grounded on the idea of formal correspondence with a plan or a rule, but rather on the idea that in art success is achieved by inventing fruitful ways of acting while and by acting, through and in spite of the risks involved in this kind of praxis and in virtue as well in spite of the constraints upon which to a certain degree the action depends.

Yet, the readiness and the skill to take risks by undertaking problem-finding, rather than merely problem-solving, activities — those that invent the ways of acting while acting — are the core of (artistic) improvisation in a strict sense (as an *ex tempore* performance) as well as in a broad sense (as the process of continuously shaping and re-shaping cultural practices through and alongside the single particular products). Therefore impro-

visation may be understood as *exemplification of artistic creativity* in the Goodmanian sense of exemplification, according to which what a symbol exemplifies must apply to it.⁵⁴ Improvisation is a symbol of artistic creativity *in acto*, that puts on the stage the characteristic and 'symptomatic' features of creative behaviour. It is artistic creativity at work, or still better: as work in progress, as *enérgeia*, rather than 'frozen' in fixed and finished *ergoi*. Improvisation shows *how* artistic creativity unfolds by shaping and reshaping procedures, traditions, styles, genres; by following and inventing rules of acting; by failing and succeeding; by accomplishing fairly — *if* it succeeds — something new, valuable, unrepeatable, unexpected. It shows every successful achievement as a 'lucky' and 'perfect' outcome and exemplification of the limited human being's practical capacity to determine for himself his action in his biological and cultural conditions. Artistic creativity exemplifies creativity as such; then improvisation, in relation to human creativity in general, is a kind of double exemplification: the exemplification of an exemplification.

5. Conclusion

Art improvisation is the kind of activity that possesses creativity and refers to creativity, because it is a symbol of creativity that displays creativity as the invention of the ways of doing something by and while doing that something. Moreover, improvisation shows creativity in action. It shows that — in art, as in life — failures and mistakes can be turned into chances for original and unpredictable achievements, or they can remain simple failures and mistakes. The outcomes of creative endeavours are displayed while they are being thought out, i.e. while decisions are made about following, changing and inventing rules, making something that turns out to be, at least partially, original, valuable and accomplished with flair. Improvisation puts creativity on the stage.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Goodman, *Languages of Art*.

⁵⁵ This paper originated as a talk given at the XVI Colloquium 2010 in Evian, *Art* (12-17 July 2010), and, in a slightly different version, at the 3th ESA Conference 2011 in Grenoble (April 2011). For helpful discussion and comments on earlier drafts I thank all the participants and especially: Georg Bertram, Robin Celikates, Christoph Ladou, David Lauer, Élise Marrou, Maria José Alcaraz, Anke Haarmann, Claire Pagès, Ingrid Vendrell Ferran, David Nowell-Smith, Catrin Misselhorn, Alberto Frigo, Alberto Marti-

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nengo, Jennifer McMahon, Salvador Rubio Marco). Special gratitude to Jerrold Levinson, Paolo Calvino and Andrew Huddleston for reading the text and giving me precious suggestions. The mistakes in this paper are obviously mine, not theirs. This paper has been possible thanks to the financial support from the research project FFI2008-00750/FISO *Emoción y valor moral en el arte* (Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation).

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