

- you" is syntagmatic. The sets "love, hate, adore, despise" or "I, we, he, they" are paradigmatic.
2. On the totalitarian effects of time's unidirectionality see the chapter "The Permanence of Newness and Spaces for Difference."
 3. On conceptualism in general and on Lev Rubinshtein in particular, see in Mikhail Epstein's books: *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995): 29-37, 60-70; *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture* (with Alexander Genis and Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover). (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999): 105-118.
 4. The first publication of all these catalogs was in Russian: Mikhail Epstein, "Karalogi," *Dar. Kul'tura Razii* 1 (1992): 68-71.

Chapter 17

Improvisational Community

Mikhail Epstein

The goal of collective improvisation is to encourage interactions among different disciplinary perspectives, life experiences, and worldviews. It can also be identified with the task Richard Rorty has set for thinkers of the future: "They would be all-purpose intellectuals who were ready to offer a view on pretty much anything, in the hope of making it hang together with everything else."¹ Improvisations might be thought of as metaphysical "assaults" on ordinary things, experiments in creative communication, or exercises in the creation of Rorty's "all-purpose intellectuals."

1. *Creativity and Communication*

The word "improvisation" derives from the Latin "providere" and literally means "unforeseeable." Improvisation opens the unpredictability of creation for the creator himself. Any kind of creativity, however, shares this feature; otherwise, our mental activity would be better characterized as "knowledge," "scholarship," "erudition," "exercise," "training." What is it that makes improvisation different from creativity as such, which to a certain degree is also improvisational?

Typically in creativity the unforeseeable is contained in the mind of the creator himself. Isolation and self-concentration is a precondition for creative self-expression: A person meditates and converses with himself,

therefore, conversations with others become irritating and counterproductive for him.

Quite different is the case in which the unforeseeable is contained in the consciousness of another person, beyond the competence and horizon of the improviser. The topic of improvisation is given to me by somebody else, or it can be also an exchange of topics. Improvisation is a type of creativity that evolves between the poles of the known and unknown, which are contained in *different consciousnesses*. This is why improvisation, as distinct from self-centered creativity, necessarily includes the process of communication: Somebody suggests a topic, unexpected for the improviser, whose task is to elaborate this topic unpredictably for the one who suggested it. Thus, two unpredictabilities arise from the improvisation as the encounter of two consciousnesses. The specificity of improvisation originates in the fact that it is creativity via communication.

But if improvisation is impossible without communication, how does it differ from communication as such? Regular modes of communication presuppose that one interlocutor communicates to another what is already known to him. Even news communicated in such typical situations is news only for the listener but not for the speaker. Typically, communication only reproduces those facts and ideas that existed before and independently of the process of communication. Communication aims to diminish the unknown and to transform it into something known, extending it in a horizontal dimension from one person to another. The psychological value of communication arises from the fact that its participants are united in their thoughts and feelings, and the content of one consciousness is transferred to another.

Although improvisation is impossible without communication, it pursues quite different goals. What is communicated in response to the proposed topic is unknown to the improviser himself. Here the unknown generates something still more unknown. Having received an unpredictable topic, the improviser further elaborates it in an unpredictable way.

Thus, improvisation is distinct from creativity in that it incorporates communication with a different consciousness, and it is distinct from communication in that it includes an act of creativity, the production of something unknown and unforeseeable. Typically, communication with another person distracts from the act of creativity, and vice versa, the act of creativity inhibits or impedes the process of communication. In improvisation, however, creativity and communication reinforce rather than neutralize each other. Improvisation unites creativity and communi-

tion as two vectors transcending one's own consciousness. In creativity, this transcendence acquires a vertical dimension, since it is addressed to a higher plane of oneself, whereas communication operates through horizontal transcendence, relating one individual to another.

Consequently, improvisation combines the horizontal and vertical modes of transcendence. Through improvisation, the otherness of another person gives an impetus to my creative self-transcendence. It is as if I take the others' positions of expectation and surprise toward myself, and this "unknown in the other" who I am for the others, generates in myself the effort to create this "otherness" that is the aim of improvisation. An encounter with the consciousness of another and the discovery of otherness in one's own consciousness are the two mutually stimulating processes in improvisation.

2. *The Existential Event of Thinking*

The improviser creates something different than what he ever could invent and imagine alone, because he is confronted with an unfamiliar topic that requires immediate elaboration, which mobilizes all of his intellectual potential. This resembles a situation of mortal danger in which a human may develop instantly supernatural capacities that leave him as soon as the danger recedes. The mind attacked by a problem feverishly looks for an escape, for a creative solution, and is quickly mobilized in response to the threat of intellectual failure, blankness, and stupidity. There is no other situation that is intellectually as challenging and stimulating as improvisation. Writing an essay for an exam or participating in a brainstorming session always involves some elements of preparation and preliminary specification among expected tasks and topics (the subject of the university course, the agenda of professional discussion). Only at an improvisational session is the range of possible topics absolutely open, extending to all existing disciplines, discourses, and vocabularies.

Improvising presupposes the ability to apply one's intellectual capacities to any realm of human experience. Everybody knows about frogs, but does anybody give attention and effort to thinking about them, except for zoologists, specializing in amphibians? This is the point: We think that we know, but how can we know if we do not think? The majority of people never exercise their thinking abilities beyond the very narrow field of their specialty (if it requires thinking at all). We may have had a passive, sensual experience of seeing, hearing, or touching frogs, but we do not have the active, intellectual experience of thinking about them,

and therefore, we are not really self-conscious humans in this aspect of our existence: in relation to frogs—or in relation to trees and bees, for that matter. In relation to almost everything in the world.

To think means to conceptualize a certain entity, to define its general and distinctive properties, its place in the world, and its place in our life. What are frogs? Why do they exist? How are they different from toads, lizards, and snakes? How do they feed the human imagination and mythology? Why did they inspire storytellers and Aristophanes? How have they been viewed in the past and in the present? What is their symbolic role in my native and foreign cultures? What is my personal attitude toward these creatures and how do they fit into my picture of the world, relate to my psychology and metaphysics, my fears and fantasies? *We are not fully human if something present in our sensual experience is absent from our intellectual experience. We have to think what we feel and feel what we think, not because these capacities coincide but precisely because they are so different and one cannot substitute for another.*

Thinking is usually regarded as a means to some palpable practical goal: Technological thinking serves to create machines and tools; political thinking: to create effective social institutions, etc. But thinking is a capacity that does not need any external justification because, more than anything else, it makes humans human. The question "Why think?" is ultimately as unanswerable as the questions "Why feel?" "Why breathe?" or "Why live?" The ultimate reward for thinking is thinking itself.

Collective improvisation is one way to immensely expand the realm of the thinkable and to re-live our experience in a conscious, discerning, articulate manner. All things that appear to be familiar, as components of routine knowledge, suddenly become estranged and deautomatized, become targets of inquiry and interrogation, potential objects of intellectual labor.

Improvisation permits not only an estrangement of objects, but also an estrangement of subjects. People whom we may have known for years now for the first time appear in the existential, "liminal" situation of creativity. We do not know who they really are, as at this moment they are equally unfamiliar to themselves. Creativity is the most mysterious and intimate moment in the life of personality, and this makes improvisation a truly existential experiment and revelation about oneself and others. Usually creativity is presented to others in premeditated and generically predetermined forms, as paintings, poems, dances—as results from which the creator has already distanced herself even if she is singing or

acting on the scene. *In improvisation, the mystery of creativity is revealed most intimately and spontaneously, as the self-creation of a personality here and now.*

An improviser encounters an otherness and strangeness in the object of his thought, in the cosubjects of his thinking, and finally, in himself. Therefore, improvisation is not only a social but also an existential event, or, more precisely, the rarest case of *existential sociality*, in which sociality and existentiality do not exclude but presuppose each other. Do we ever think together—not just talk about what we already know, not just socialize, but create a social event of cothinking where each participant is as unknown to others as he is unpredictable to himself?

3. *Improvisational Communities: Distinctions between Professional And Folkloric Improvisations*

Collective improvisation differs essentially from a traditional public or professional improvisation, which typically takes place in poetic readings or musical concerts and competitions. A professional improviser performs before the audience, which has a purely passive role, and he is opposed to it as an active creator. The audience can participate only in the first moment by setting a topic for improvisation. The act of communication here is incomplete because one of the participants acquires a privileged role and is divided from the audience by the stage. In a collective improvisation, by contrast, each participant enters a reciprocal relationship of questioning and answering with all the others.

The next question is, how does this collective and spontaneous creativity differ from folklore with its oral tradition? In folklore, the performer, as a bearer of mass consciousness, is not separated from his audience; he is one among many singers or storytellers. Improvisation indeed plays an important role in folklore because creativity and communication here have not yet been separated. There is no division between the creation of art and communication through art, between composing and performing: both are enacted in one setting, in one moment of time. This includes what can be called intellectual or philosophical improvisation, such as the dialogues of Socrates: creativity in the process of communication.

The comparison with folklore makes clear that the concert type of improvisation is the result of a disintegration of the initial syncretic creative community. Improvisational community has degenerated into a unidirectional communication from the creator to a passive audience. The professional improvisation, in which the performer is distanced from his

silent audience, is a curious hybrid of ancient folkloric and modern individual creativity. What remains from folklore is the immediate process of creativity amidst people; what persists from individual creativity is separateness from the audience. In Plato's dialogues, it is not only Socrates who improvises but also his interlocutors. This is the prototype of improvisational community that avoids the division into performer and passive audience.

It is important to understand that although the improvisational group resembles a commune, its communality extends only to ideas, not to bodies and property. It is in the sphere of thinking that collectivity is not destructive for individuals. Bodies and things are separated by their own spatial nature; a violation of their boundaries can lead to aggression and violence, as in the communist utopia of the twentieth century. The attempt to extend community to material, sexual, economic aspects of life may lead to those repressive excesses of unification that have engendered some of the most bloody conflicts, wars, and revolutions of modernity. Improvisational community does not confuse these two spheres as was done, for example, in hippie communes where the communality of ideas was extrapolated to include property and sexual relationships. A human being must remain a full master of her body and material possessions, but ideas do not belong to her exclusively since by their very nature they are fluid and nomadic, freely traveling from mind to mind. Collective improvisation aspires to that kind of communality which never oversteps the boundary of what has a potential and propensity for commonness.

Such restrictions on commonality have not only an ethical, but also a historical rationale. In folklore, the same oral tradition is shared by all performers, and a single work of verbal art, impersonal and anonymous, belongs to everybody and to nobody. Such folkloric rites cannot be reproduced now in their original form: Collective improvisations, if they wish to be contemporary, must incorporate—not eliminate—the individual mode of creativity. The aesthetics of communality constitutive of folklore cannot fully prevail over the aesthetics of difference that is constitutive of modern creativity. But these two aesthetics have a potential to interact in such a way that communality accentuates rather than destroys individual differences. The commonness of the topic, the unity of time and place, the equality in the conditions of improvisation serve to emphasize, not to efface individual differences.

At some sessions, different roles are distributed among the participants in advance; for example, one might accentuate heroic aspects of the topic, another, tragic motifs; the third will modify it in a baroque style

the fourth in a romantic key, and so forth. The result of collective improvisation is a "postindividual" community of minds that presupposes highly individual contributions of all participants. Unlike folklore, collective improvisation is not a pre-individual form of creativity; nor is it a solely individual creativity, as in a concert-type performance. Instead, it is transindividual creativity that embraces the diversity of interpretations manifested in individual texts.

4. *Why Writing?*

Why is it necessary for improvisation to have a written character? In front of a sheet of paper or a computer screen, a person experiences the full measure of her individual responsibility as a creator. Without writing, improvisation tends to dissolve into conversation, exchange of opinions; that is, pure communication. To be truly creative, communication must incorporate moments of privacy, isolation, and meditation.

The dialectics of these two factors, isolation and communication, is rather complex. Improvisations are conducted in several stages, in which the periods of speech and silence alternate: discussing and choosing the topic, then writing, then reading and discussing again, then (sometimes) jointly writing summaries of the discussions. Thus, creative minds are joined, disjointed, and rejoined in the process of improvisation, which displays the dialectics of individual and collective.

To a certain degree, collective improvisation, as a genre born in Russia, combines the experiences of public eloquence characteristic of the West and silent meditation characteristic of the East. It is writing that solves the dilemma of speech and silence. The silence of writing allows all participants to coexist in one mood, one mode of intellectual activity, while pursuing different interpretations of the same topic. In the community of writing, there is no division into subjects and objects, which is practically inevitable in oral communication. We know how one person's "will to speak" can easily transform an entire community into a submissive audience. Collective writing is a silent communication in which the multidimensional time of speaking (one speaker at a time) submits to the multidimensional space of co-thinking. No one's thought is imposed on another's until these parallel flows of thinking are fully mature, ready to be individually expressed.

Between the rhetorical orientation of Greek antiquity and the Far Eastern system culture of silent meditation is located the Near Eastern love of topics, literacy, and writing, simultaneously silent and self-expressive.

The figure of a scribe and copyist is cherished and even sanctified in "bookish" Judaic, Babylonian, Egyptian, Islamic, Byzantine cultures, a distinct from the Western exaltation of a public orator and the Eastern cult of a silent sage, "Zen master," or "yogi."² In Russia, with its geographical location between Europe and Asia, and with its cultural habits inherited from Byzantium, writing is also traditionally considered the supreme kind of intellectual activity, which may partly explain the preference for writing as it developed in Russian improvisational communities.

Writing is a much more intellectually obligating and binding activity than speaking because its result is immediately fixed. Unlike an oral utterance, the written word becomes "immortal" at the very moment of its birth. Thus the Russian proverb: "What is written by a pen, cannot be cut out by an ax." To write creatively (not pragmatically) in the presence of other people is a rather unusual and apparently uncomfortable occupation, especially as there is no chance to revise or polish the text (except for several minutes of purely technical editing at the end of the session). The presence of other people intensifies the course of thinking; since each word written is the last one, the process itself becomes its own result. The responsibility grows as writing must be completed in the given place and span of time.

An improviser is an intellectual soldier who has to fulfill his duty wherever he finds himself. He does not have the privilege of a general in choosing the place of the battle, the topic for meditation. He must be prepared to engage with any topic, to start an intellectual battle over any circumstance or facet of human experience.

As the acquisition of this nomadic way of thinking, a variety of ideas are spontaneously generated in improvisation that would never occur if participants had been working in the seclusion of their offices and had the support of many books, dictionaries, preliminary notes and plans. Many participants later confessed that improvisation allowed them to break through the stupors and impasses of their thinking and provided germs for subsequent, more substantial scholarly or literary works. Of course, improvisation is not a substitute for the professional work of a writer, scientist, scholar, etc. On the other hand, no other intellectual activity, however fruitful it might be, can substitute for improvisation. Improvisation relates to other avenues of creative thinking as the whole is related to its parts. It integrates not only creativity and communication but also theoretical and artistic genres of creativity, private and public forms of communication.

5. *The Integrative Mode of Intellectual Activity: Essay and Trance*

Improvisation is an integrative mode of intellectual activity in the same way as the essay is an integrative genre of writing. The products of improvisation usually belong not to purely scholarly or purely artistic genres but to experimentally synthetic, essayistic genres. As I have already indicated, an essay is partly a diary, journal, intimate document; partly a theoretical discourse, treatise, article; partly a short story, anecdote, parable, small fictional narrative. The immediate result of improvisation is a highly associative but structured and conceptualized meditation on a specific topic that unites facticity, generalization, and imagination. An improvisation and an essay are related as the process and result, act and product, but both are integrative in their generic model. *The integration of factuality, conceptualization, and imagery in the essay corresponds to the integration of cognition, communication, and creativity in improvisation.*

As was mentioned in the chapter on the essay, the integrity of this genre is of a post-reflexive quality: The three constituents must be continuously articulated, in distinction from a pre-reflexive mythology, in which image, concept, and fact are presented as a syncretic unity. In the same way, improvisation differentiates its constituents—creativity, communication, and cognition—in contrast with syncretic practices of religious meditation and contemplation, such as Zen. In collective improvisation, the topic is articulated differently from its interpretations; individual approaches are stated clearly, and participants are working separately on their contributions.

Improvisation does share some similarity with various contemplative states, but here the object of intellectual contemplation does not dissolve into an all-embracing absolute. Rather, it is conceived in its absolute uniqueness, through a series of definitions and specifications. The psychological state of an improviser is not completely self-centered and self-enclosed but produces a tangible entity, a system of signs, a text as a part of the external world that is subject to rational evaluation and discussion. Improvisation intensifies the experience of vertical and horizontal *transcendence* inherent in creativity and communication, but nevertheless it is not identical to a *trance* state. Improvisation has nothing to do with sacramental ecstasy, mystical agitation, or quiet resignation, which resist any objectification and analytic judgment. Improvisation is a self-reflective practice that transcends the boundaries of trance itself, making it an object of rational negotiation and communication.

Improvisation relates to trance in the same way as the essay relates to

myth. The essay is the truth of an approximation to myth, not a lie of total coincidence with it. Improvisation is an experience of approximation to trance, not the exaltation of collective ecstasy, or quasi-folkloric community, or a hypnotic and dreamlike state of mind.

6. *Unity: Claims and Disclaimers*

The practice of improvisation raises the socio-epistemological question of how one cohesive whole can be created spontaneously from the multiplicity of individual voices without resorting to the external will of an all-encompassing authority. This inductive "unity from diversity" contrasts with the more typical deductive model in which the author divides himself into separate characters and ideological positions. Both Plato in his philosophical dialogues and Dostoevsky in his polyphonic novels were unitary authors who produced a diversity of voices from the unity of one creative consciousness. The question is, Can voices be united from within, without the anticipating and dictating will of the "transcendental" author?

Only at the peak of the liberal development of individualism and at the threshold of a post-individualist culture can we consciously and cautiously approach this problem. When personality has come to full self-realization, it has no other ways to develop further than to give itself to others. This sacrificial task formulated by Fyodor Dostoevsky as an ethical imperative becomes a methodological principle of improvisation. The goal is to reintegrate oneself in an intellectual community not in its synthetic elementary form that preceded the birth of individuality, but in a fully articulated, synthetic form that issues from the self-transcending of a conscious individuality.

Thus "unity" as the basis of collective improvisation should be understood both deconstructively and constructively. In the very word "unity" we can detect not only its conventional meaning ("oneness, totality") but also the hidden disclaimer "un" which as a root means "one," and as a prefix, the negation or the reversal of the implied action ("undo," "unknown"). Let the word "un-ity" haunt us with this prefix-disclaimer that problematizes the very meaning of unity. Collective improvisation is a small laboratory of such problematic integration that is both the disintegration of primitive, folkloric unities and a prototype of some fluid communities of the future.

Certainly one should not expect from improvisations those literary masterpieces that are created only by the continuous and sustained effort

of an individual mind. As a rule, improvisations are inferior in their literary or scholarly quality to the output within established genres or disciplines. In the same way, there are no essays comparable in their value and grandeur to the tragedies of Shakespeare, the epics of Homer, or the novels of Dostoevsky. But this is not because the essay is an inferior genre; on the contrary, it integrates the possibilities of other genres: philosophical, historical, fictional. The very range of these possibilities complicates the task of their complete realization because the discrepancy between actual performance and potential perfection is deeper in the essay than in more specific and structured genres. There are perfect fables and sonnets, maybe short stories, but even the best novels impress us mostly with their "colossal failures" (according to William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe was the best novelist of his generation precisely because his failure was greater than that of other authors). To achieve prominence in the essay genre is even more difficult because it is generically so fluid and indeterminate and lacks the strict rules provided by the narrative structure of the novel or by the logical structure of philosophical discourse.

In the same way improvisation does not achieve the depth and breadth of individual creativity, the sincerity of personal communication, or the rigor of scientific research. Both essays and improvisations are forms of cultural potentiality that in every specific case, with each particular effort, remains unfulfilled. Improvisation fails to compare with literature, art, science, scholarship . . . But improvisation combines all these elements that, in their ideal combination, produce a work in the genre of culture itself. There are no words in existing vocabularies to designate a creator of culture. There are artists, writers, scientists, scholars, engineers . . . but at this point culture has not become the site or genre of creativity (we do not count political and financial management of culture, or educational popularization of culture, which themselves are not culturally creative). Such creativity in the genre of culture is the ultimate possibility of transcultural thinking, which finds in collective improvisation its very renarrative experimental model. The deficiencies of improvisational works reflect the unrealized potentials of culture as a whole. The forms of the novel or tragedy, of treatise or monograph are more narrow and definitive than this polyphonic and polysophic orchestra that resonates in the ensembles of co-thinking individuals.

Collective improvisation is a microcosm of cultural activities where speech and silence, writing and reading are articulated in their difference and simultaneously compressed into one time and one place. That is why

the process of improvisation is so intellectually and emotionally intense. The poles of creation and perception, writing and reading, reading and discussing, which in the symbolic system of culture are usually divided, delayed, complexly mediated, separated by years or centuries, are condensed into the several hours of an improvisational session, here and now.

One cannot adequately understand improvisation without being an active participant in it. Reading the texts produced by an improvisational session does not provide a quite adequate impression. The main product of improvisation is the expansion of consciousness that may find its expression in texts written individually months or years after the session. The text, as a fixed result of an improvisational session, is only a way to the goal, which is collective thinking itself, an experience of intellectual brotherhood.

The texts of a given session cannot be regarded as self-sufficient products also because the integral work should be considered the totality of texts produced in the course of the existence of a given improvisational community. One page or one chapter of a novel does not constitute a separate work simply because it was created in one sitting and separated from another by temporal intervals. The improvisational community has its history, which is reflected in the sequence of improvisations that should be read like chapters of one novel. Only with the disintegration of the given community can its work be considered complete.

But the improvisational community can find another fate: Gradually expanding from generation to generation, it may incessantly integrate new individuals, communities, and societies. The collective improvisation can become one of the most creative forms of interaction among the intellectuals of the future. The growth of the Internet makes a collective improvisation that will involve thousands of the most active minds of humanity quite feasible.³

Notes

1. Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism and Philosophy," in *After Philosophy: End of Transformation?* ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 1991): 56.
2. In his influential book *Poetika ramnizanijskoi literatury* (Moscow: Nauka, Glavnaja redaktsiia vostochnoi literatury, 1977), Sergei Averintsev articulates this cultural difference. As opposed to the Western intellectual, who has the luxury of freedom of expression traceable to liberal ancient Greek oratorical modes, a Russian intellectual finds himself in the position of the bent and harried scribe of the ancient Near East, who had to survive political oppression by

delivering his innermost thoughts, not in open speech to his contemporaries, but in writing to an audience in posterity. This accounts for the gravitation of Russian culture, among others in Eastern Christianity, to the "mute word," while Western culture favors oral and visual modes.

3. This is the task and the hope of my next project, the InreInet (Chapter 22).