Free Improvisation and Nothing:

From the Tactics of Escape to a Bastard Science

Richard Scott (Berlin)

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Zusammenfassung.

Der Aufsatz beginnt mit der Beobachtung, dass viele frei improvisierende Musikerinnen und Musiker auf Konzepte von „Nothingness" (dem Nichts) und Nichtidiomatik rekurrieren, und damit die Beschreibung und Darstellung ihrer Arbeit eher verhindern als ermöglichen. Um den taktischen und strategischen Motiven, welche sich hinter diesen Negationsbeschreibungen verbergen könnten, nachzugehen, werden Konzepte und Metaphern von „Nothingness" thematisiert, unter anderem Raum, Leere und Freiheit. Der problematische Gedanke der grundsätzlichen ‚Unmöglichkeit' von Improvisation (Derrida) und ihre Bewertung als ein Modus von Variation (Landgraf) werden kritisch beleuchtet. Eine Reihe von alternativen Konzepten die eher das Potential der Improvisation betonen, neue und unvorhergesehene Formen zu entwickeln (wie die Orientierung an Prozessen, an Mitbestimmung, an (sozialer) Spannung und an Molekularität) werden diskutiert.

Abstract.

Beginning with the observation that many free improvising musicians employ the concepts of nothingness and negation of idiom to avoid rather than facilitate the description or representation of their work, the author considers some tactical and strategic motives for such negations. Concepts and metaphors of nothingness are considered, including space, emptiness and freedom. The problematic concepts of improvisation's "impossibility" (Derrida) and of its identification as a mode of variation (Landgraf) are critically evaluated. A series of alternative concepts are discussed, including itinerancy, co-determination, friction and molecularity, which seek to emphasise improvisation's potential for creating new and unprecedented forms.

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1. Negative Definition and the Non-Idiom

I once had a meeting with a *shakuhachi* master to discuss how I might go about transferring *shakuhachi* technique and the traditional Japanese *honkyoku* repertoire to the soprano saxophone. He was welcoming enough, but not very enthusiastic about my plan, telling me that he considered the only way to really grasp the meaning of the *shakuhachi* flute was to learn to play the instrument and its repertoire, or failing that, simply learn "to listen and to love it." To take aspects of its technique, language or history and transfer them to a different instrument appeared to him to represent a basic misunderstanding of the work itself, which must necessarily falsify what it has to tell us. It is worth recalling the historical affinity of the *shakuhachi* flute with Zen Buddhism and its curious dual functionality within that context. For wandering *komusō* monks in the unstable world of the Edo period, the simple, but heavy bamboo flute was both a tool for immanent religious revelation and a club for self-defence from robbers and bandits. Similarly, the *shakuhachi* master's position strikes me as having two distinct poles: revelation and defence insisting on the immanent nature of the music's content itself, which is irreducible to its history, narrative or analysis while maintaining the continuity and integrity of an essentially oral cultural and artistic tradition. These positions, which are quite difficult to separate, protect the music both from fixity and from change, and leave the musical practice to exist in its own sphere, refuting all other forms of representation, analysis and translation. I believe such tactics have some parallels to those expressed by many free improvising musicians. For guitarist Derek Bailey, for example:

> It really is like sand, you have to make it stick, naturally it doesn't stick, you can just form it and then it's gone and I think that's a great attraction. I think to make it stick is actually a kind of heresy.[1]

Although the relationship of free improvisation to its own traditions may be very different from that of *honkyoku*, we can find in Bailey's statement the idea that the attempt to turn the activity of playing music into something else, to transfer or abstract its molecular, flowing materials into a more solid form – to "make it stick" – is to rob improvisation of its most immanent structures and fluid meanings. In defence of its molecular fluidity free improvisation is often defined by its practitioners more by its undefined qualities, by what it is not, by what it doesn't do and by what it avoids, rather than by its own idiomatic features.

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1   Derek Bailey and Richard Scott, "Interview with Derek Bailey" (1988), http://richard-scott.net/interviews/derek-bailey/ (accessed 18 August 2013), also in Richard Scott, *Noises: Free Music, Improvisation and the Avantgarde: London 1965 to 1990*, PhD diss., London Univ. 1991, p. 281–290, here p. 289.

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> Idiomatic improvisation, by far the most widely used, is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom – such as jazz, flamenco or baroque – and takes its identity and motivation from that idiom. Non-idiomatic improvisation has other concerns and is most usually found in so-called 'free' improvisation and, while it can be highly stylized, is not usually tied to representing an idiomatic identity.[2]

For Bailey, the identity of a musical idiom might be musical or non-musical in nature; it might signify adherence to particular sonic forms and expectations; or the idiom may be taken to represent a kind of fantasy or imagination about a particular kind of music or musician or about its situation in particular historical times and places. Jazz's situation in New Orleans speakeasy in the 1920s or in smoke filled New York jazz clubs in the 1950s being obvious examples of the latter.[3] Despite Bailey's emphasis on the personal nature of non-idiomatic improvised practice, the non-idiom is an important general starting point in thinking about improvisation in general and represents the beginnings of an attempt to develop something like a "global" concept of free improvisation. But the non-idiom may also achieve the opposite effect; rather than positively defining the characteristics of free improvisation, by locating its relationship to a negation of idiom, its meaning is perpetually deferred elsewhere, to an "other," to something else or somewhere else. But if we can only talk about what we are not, then surely we are still very much dependent on external definitions for understanding what we are? Both as a concept and as a tactic, the non-idiom might be charged with being too dependent on exactly what it appears to attempt to negate and the tactic represents free improvisation as little more than a kind of negative counterpoint to idiomatic playing. Even Bailey himself seemed to have abandoned the rigorous distinction of idiomatic and non-idiomatic by the end of his book. But I think the concept of the non-idiomatic, however leaky and uncertain, is also something inevitable and difficult to proceed without. As dissatisfying as the non-idiom is, I would not abandon it completely; for a problematic distinction might well be more useful than no distinction at all.

Another attempt to define a kind of non-idiomatic free improvisation is the phenomenon of *Echtzeitmusik* (or in English, real-time music), the label commonly applied to the musical practices of overlapping scenes of improvising musicians and composers in Berlin since the mid-1990s. *Echtzeitmusik* has been widely used both as a specific label denoting a distinctive, dynamically reduced musical style (cf. "lower case" or "silent") and as a way of delineating a particular local music scene and its wider community. Although the reduced style itself was not at all unique to Berlin or to even to this period of history (many precedents exist, including the British group AMM), the concentration of broadly like-minded musicians based in that city at that moment became an important focus for this international tendency and gave it a powerful sense of direction and identity.

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2   Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, Ashbourne 1980, p. xi–xii.
3   Bailey and Scott, *Interview* (see nt. 1), p. 281–282.

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Rhodri Davies (from London) observed:

> We were playing with silence, exploring a range of quieter dynamics and trying to reduce individual sounds, gestures, material or tempo. The silences between sounds also shaped the music, and we examined a sound closely by framing it with silence. We looked at what happened when a sound stopped, how it stopped, how long the sound would last before it stopped in the music.[4]

Like the non-idiom, the label *Echtzeitmusik* attempted to locate a creative musical space outside other historical or contemporary genres. Burkhart Bains argues that initially the *Echtzeitmusik* scene particularly "an attempt to distinguish itself from the Berlin free improvisation and free jazz circles."[5] So one of the issues that *Echtzeitmusik* perhaps was addressing was how to liberate a form of improvisation from Bailey's own heritage, from an idiomatic set of (non-idiomatic?) musical practices that the musicians felt had become too closely defined, a "free improvisation." This underlines the quandary: improvisation has to escape its own idiomatic history and identity as surely as it needs to escape from other genres. If it is to be "free," then free improvisation needs somehow also to be free from itself. It thereby it contains an innate negation and a certain pull towards a kind of nothingness or no-thingness.

The aspect of negation seems to be an important part of the thinking behind *Echtzeitmusik*. Davies writes of musicians developing a new aesthetic by seeking to avoid "narrative, emotion and expression."[6] Negative concepts such as avoidance, denial, reduction, escape, renunciation, rejection and refusal are all used throughout the self-published volume *Echtzeitmusik* to which many of the musicians contributed texts. And Kai Fagaschinsky and Michael Thieke, for example, not without humour, called their duet *The International Nothing* and released an album entitled *Less Action, Less Excitement, Less Everything*. Robin Hayward concurs that "the avoidance of narrative" and "the quality of staying in one place" were common definitive features of the music of that time.[7] Lucio Capece describes his own work as the "research of constructing no narrative music (no start – no ending – no developments)."[8] But Hayward rejects the term *reductionism* as a way of expressing this desire for less, on the basis that it focus on the means of achieving an aesthetic goal over the goal itself. "It might have been more useful to find a term that described what the music focuses on, rather than the means it may have used for a time to achieve such focus."[9]

The danger, again, is that if musicians can only speak of what they desire to avoid or seek to reduce, they are always fleeing definition and enclosure and we cannot

4   Rhodri Davies, „Berlin London 1997–1999," in: Burkhard Beins et al, *Echtzeitmusik Berlin: selbstbestimmung einer szene/self-defining a scene*, Hofheim 2011, p. 67–77, here p. 71.

5   Beins et al., *Echtzeitmusik* (see nt. 4), p. 39.

6   Davies, *Berlin London* (see nt. 4), p. 70.

7   Robin Hayward, "What's in a Name? The Problematic 'Reductionist' Label", in: Beins et al, *Echtzeitmusik* (see nt. 4), p. 222–227, here p. 223.

8   Lucio Capece, Blog entry, http://www.luciocapece.blogspot.de/ (accessed 21 September 2012).

9   Hayward, *What's in a Name?* (see nt. 7), p. 227.

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define what a new conceptual territory independent of that enclosure might be or what it might manifest. Stuck with mere denial, we hang onto the fences that contain us and never really take flight towards that territory. So instead of what is being denied, a more important question might be what specifically is *affirmed* by these negations?

2. *Improvisation and "Social Power"*

I have described both the non-idiom and the negative definition in general as largely defensive tactics. The improvising musician differentiates the territory and then refuses to name or locate it on the basis of the idea that, as long as it cannot be described, it cannot be invaded or captured. An absence – a not-here, not-now or not-yet – is positioned, which allows us to obscure the content of the activity from further investigation. Because it does not succumb to the noun, negation protects this new space, either by refusing to identify it or by refusing the very possibility of its identification. Derek Bailey remembered the common use of such a tactic from an earlier generation of improvisers:

> So when the old guys – jazz players I mean – used to go, "Well, I just play, man," maybe that was the best possible answer.[10]

By refusing to identify or abstract the activity of playing music to journalistic, academic or biographical discourses, jazz musicians attempted to affirm what they saw as their activity's true nature and importance. Yet "I just play, man" is a disappointingly weak tactic. It suggests more of a defensive refusal to engage in dialogue than any great Zen-like, inexpressible insight into the improviser's art. And it has its political dangers: I *just* play. I am *just* improvising. Not really anything powerful, serious or important to talk about here.... But we should be careful not to mistake this refusal to engage in discourse for shallowness or nihilism. The meaning is perhaps not intended to be "I *just* play," but "I just *play*." And hidden behind "I just *play*," we may already find a trace of the affirmation of resistance to everything that attempts to curtail *just playing*. This position is quite close to the *shakuhachi* master's restrictions on the possible routes to the study or appreciation of *honkyoku*: it is another attempt on the part of musicians themselves to retain control over the meaning and interpretation of their music by refusing all public discursive abstraction of it. For some improvising musicians, this affirmation of non-definition also became a more explicitly political assertion of the value of the indefinable and non-locatable. Trombonist Paul Rutherford, for example, argued:

> Improvisation, by its very nature, should always be in a no man's land, should always be uncategorised. It is one of the areas of music, which, because of the fact it should always be in a con-

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10   Bailey and Scott, *Interview* (see nt. 1), p. 282. I should point out, of course, that far from "just playing," Bailey was a great talker and a fine writer and one of the relatively few free improvising musicians to date to have written an entire book on the subject of improvisation.

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stant state of flux or movement, is non-controllable by either economics or musical establishment ideas.[11]

This musician's use of negation here is of a very different kind from "I just play" or "you can only learn it by doing it," because within the discussion of what happens inside music there is also clearly something *else* to say about what happens "outside" in the world as well. While its uncontrollability may rest on a lack of definition or fixity, improvisation may nevertheless be seen positively as an explicit expression of opposition and disruption to established musical codes and even to the wider "external" political structures those codes appear to represent or express. What happens within the music cannot be defined externally or understood as a production of exterior forces, yet the music has a meaning and even a purpose that resonate beyond itself. So the absences it posits are perhaps something more than mere negations; they are also potential spaces of resistance. Music cannot be reduced to the state of a super-structural expression of sub-structural social forces; rather what happens within the music itself represents a kind of direct engagement with both super-structural and sub-structural forces and indeed begins to question the distinction between the two. The idea that improvisation *itself* presents a kind of direct and innate engagement with social forces is surely in real opposition to the more familiar sociological and crude Marxist reductions that social structures can only be perceived as reflections or representations, and therefore the social meaning of music must always be located elsewhere, outside the activity itself. As DeNora suggests, the sociology of music is often not really about music and may function to deny its potency.

> As sociologists and social theorists turned to music in the twentieth century, it was typically not to take up the topic of music's social power. Instead, music has been posed more remotely, as a medium that "reflects" or otherwise parallels social structure. […] Within the sociology of music, the medium of music was implicitly downgraded; its status shifted, from active ingredient or animating force to inanimate.[12]

Even the more sophisticated amongst the cultural sociologists, for example, Dick Hebdige or Howard S. Becker,[13] have ultimately tended not to attempt to engage directly with music as an activity or as a medium, but rather to interpret music and its creators and consumers on symbolic and reflective levels, for example, as an expression of social identity. But such images of musicians and listeners have little or no relationship with the interiority of the music or with the questions and problems that the music may itself propose.

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11   Paul Rutherford and Richard Scott, "Interview with Paul Rutherford" (1988), http://richard-scott.net/interviews/paul-rutherford-interview/ (accessed 18. 08. 13), also in Scott, *Noises* (see nt. 1), p. 271–280, here p. 277.

12   Tia DeNora, *After Adorno: Rethinking Mucic Sociology*, Cambridge 2003, p. 2–3.

13   Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London and New York 1978, and Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, New York 1963, Reprint: Simon and Schuster ebook 2008.

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What if the critical or inventive content of improvisation, or any other kind of musical practice, may be conceived, in part at least, as intrinsic rather than extrinsic? DeNora argues that music is a "prosthetic technology," which has its own "social power" quite apart from those social powers that impinge upon it.[14] The meaning of the musical moment does not necessarily lie in its expression of forces external to that moment, much less in its marginal social position or in the cultural identity of its proponents or supporters. It may, for example, derive instead from the material activity that constitutes music-making and from the creative content of this activity itself. Potentially, we might no longer ask how music *manifests* the social or how it might *represent* the political, but instead ask how music itself might contribute to social and political invention, to conflict and innovation.

Improvising musicians in particular seek to operate in areas that are specifically undefined in which "other" possible and illegitimate ideas and structures of collective thought and action might be expressed. In improvisation, sonic structures are proposed, negotiated and ushered into existence, and we can understand these too as social structures: as intimate and (relatively) immediate collective social interactions in which creative power is expressed through collective organisation and decision-making in forms that both players and listeners can directly take part in. If music is understood as a kind of cognition in and of itself rather than merely a reflection or representation of other kinds of cognition, then the contents of free improvisation may be seen, not as representations, but as manifestations of a collective cognitive process, a situated collective process of working out, organizing and shaping difference, power and material, which cannot be located either within the individual or in "society," but resides in their interaction. At least for the duration of the music, different kinds of society with different concepts of power and democracy can be discussed, negotiated, heard and experienced. And not as ideas, but as material practices and processes that, both as players and listeners, we can actually inhabit, experience and directly participate in.[15]

Music may thus become not merely a representation of the past or even of the present, but could reveal to us, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, "the contour, the configuration, the constellation of an event to come."[16] Specifically, free improvisation, owing to its unique attitude to structure and material, may even be perceived as a site of producing new and heretical ideas, emergent concepts and trajectories of thought that cannot necessarily be reduced to pre-existing sociological, political or philosophical formulations, which Attali sees as something like a pre-echo of a virtual future.[17] In improvised music it is possible that we are able to hear not only traces of a world that has not yet come existence, but also some material evidence

14   DeNora, *After Adorno* (see nt. 12), p. 46–47.

15   This idea is discussed by Christopher Small and forms part of his concept "musicking." Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, Middletown (CT) 1988.

16   Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, Columbia Univ. 1996, p. 32–33.

17   Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Minneapolis 1985, p. 133–148.

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that it could exist and even how it could.[18]

3. Empty Man in a Full Space: Becoming Molecular

> An empty space, without characters (or in which the characters themselves show the void) has a fullness in which there is nothing missing.[19]

Nothingness might perhaps be imagined as a blank space; the smooth, unfilled cleanliness of the freshly stretched and primed canvas or the silent expanse of an empty stage. But practitioners of improvisation may well position the idea of space and consider the nature of its potential rather differently. Dancer Julyen Hamilton says, for example:

> If you start in one place and go on knowing what's next, eventually you get to the end, and then you do the end… You go out and there is a space and you know you've got to stand there, so you stand there. That knowledge is partially instant and partially pre-instant. It is pre-instant because you get a gravitational pull that you would like to go there, a kind of intuitive reading balanced with what you need.[20]

So when the improviser walks onto the stage to improvise, everything he needs is already there, immanent in the instant and the virtual "pre-instant." The performance does not begin as he walks onto the stage, and it hardly stops when he leaves – it has always already begun; an improvisation is always in the middle, a fragment of a much greater, indeed ceaseless, body of material with which the improviser connects and by which he allows his body to be affected. He doesn't necessarily need to *invent* anything or to impose anything on the blankness of the stage, because there is no blank empty space patiently awaiting his actions to give it meaning in the first place. Even an empty stage is already a play of forces. The space he walks onto is already full, pregnant with its own plurality of directions and gravities, which are quite apart from, and yet inseparable from, those that may be encapsulated within the body of the performer.

If emptiness (or nothingness) is understood not as a lack, but as a form of completeness, then the role of the improviser is transformed. On the edge of knowledge and form, but not contained by them, he receives, echoes and selects amongst a host of forces and follows the affects and consequences of those choices. The skill or talent of the improviser is not necessarily to be judged by any expression of individual genius or by the expert technique with which he spontaneously weaves a tangible

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18   Brazilian singer-songwriter Caetano Veloso eloquently made a similar point in a BBC interview with Lucy Duran; Veloso felt that Brazilian music had been widely misunderstood, but he pointed out that it could not be understood to *represent* Brazilian society because many problems had been solved in the music, for example, racial inequality and prejudice, that society itself had spectacularly not resolved. This gave the music an active role in society and politics, not merely by keeping a perfected image of that society alive, but by providing compelling artistic, intellectual and material evidence of ways in which change might be possible and desirable. Lucy Duran and Caetano Veloso, Interview, "Caetano Veloso in Concert," BBC Radio 3, Sat 8 December 2007, 15:00.

19   Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, transl. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, Minneapolis 1989, p. 245.

20   *Julyen Hamilton: Dance Improvisation*, Video, London 1995, transcription by the author.

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world into existence upon the stage, but perhaps rather by how completely he can become a channel for those other forces and patterns that are already unfolding and how completely he can allow himself to be carried along by their flows and trajectories without simply becoming submerged and negated by them. He doesn't inhabit or dominate space so much as he expresses his negotiation of it: he collaborates with it, and his authority on the stage is always plural, shared, co-determined. This gives us the distinct idea that improvisation, even solo improvisation, is always a form of co-authorship. Improvising musicians often refer to this kind of co-determination, reporting the experience of sharing responsibility for the music's form, for example, with the music itself, or the sense that the music they are playing is somehow already there, virtual and independent of them, waiting to come into existence: "There are so many forces that you don't even have to play. The music just plays itself; the drums just play themselves sometimes."[21]

Louis Moholo's mentor and colleague, Steve Lacy, who was particularly influenced by both the *Tao Te Ching* and by his teacher Thelonius Monk, often taught that improvisation should be understood and practised as a kind of *following*: "You try to stay out of the way. You try not to lose touch with the music, and let the thing happen. It's not you that does it – it's IT that wants to be done."[22]

In this way free improvisation may be understood as individual creativity or free expression, but more as the expression of an individual's collective and molecular relationships with everything that is happening in the moment of performance, and indeed with everything else that affects that moment. Inside and outside, individual and collective, action and context permeate each other and can hardly be differentiated any longer. The "it" and the otherly forces "it" represents are experienced as powers that come from somewhere else, but they are not really external; they cannot ever really be separated from what is "internal" or from the ways in which we perceive them. Freedom is a context that is not a given and is never pure, but something created, earned and disputed. Freedom may be difficult, problematic and contradictory, and it might be constrained at many points. Freedom within improvisation is always limited and defined by its context. Kent De Spain, for example, discusses improvisational creativity, not as an idealised or free-flowing process, but as a pragmatic and "encumbered" process; a "tango" born of an interaction with the specific conditions, circumstances and impediments; an inquisitive interaction with wilful and uncertain exterior forces.[23] Clausewitz's concept of "friction" expresses a similar relationship: "In war everything is uncertain."[24] For Clausewitz, the unpredictable element of friction in war becomes an active and uncontrollable force in the

21   Louis Moholo and Richard Scott, "Interview with Louis Moholo" (1990), in: http://richard-scott.net/interviews/louis-moholo/ (accessed 18 August 2013), also in Scott, *Noises* (see nt. 1), p. 438–451, here p. 446.

22   Steve Lacy and Brian Case, "The Spark, the Gap, the Leap" (Interview), in: *Steve Lacey: Conversations,* ed. Jason Weiss, Durham (NC) 2006, p. 84–96.

23   Kent De Spain, "Improvisation and Intimate Technologies", *Choreographic Practises* 2 (1 February 2012), p. 25–42.

24   Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, transl. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton 1984.

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unpredictable unfolding of actual events on the field of battle. The space inhabited by improvisation is full of similar frictions. The free improviser too inhabits, creates and defends a space within the always-mutating contexts of many broader forces and determinations.[25] Like the guerrilla fighter, the improviser must keep on moving and keep on disappearing, redefining the space, time and goals of an interaction, concerned not with securing and directly controlling a specific, delineated territory, but with keeping the zones and edges of the broader territory uncertain and disputed. Part of the aesthetic of free improvisation may be to retain the fundamental insecurity and porousness of this field and, by doing so, secure an essential condition of improvisation itself, quite apart from any specific form or content it may contain. The improviser fights a war of constant adjustments and attritions, of ambushes, skirmishes and escapes, without any possibility of final victory or an end. This "space" is disputed, momentary and subject to many simultaneous kinds of invasion and definitions, and it can never be securely fixed or decisively "held;" rather it is a space that is partly created by the uncertain act of improvisation itself.

Improvisation in such a context no longer appears as a singular force or action; rather it potentially encompasses the entirety of its own situation, a summation of a complex of forces and determinations of which improvisers themselves are only molecular elements. Such molecularity can perhaps be achieved only by a dislocation from established language and form and presupposes a kind of freedom from, or at least the ability to play with, travel within or reorganize, received structures.

> The molecular has the capacity to make the *elementary* communicate with the *cosmic*: precisely because it effects a dissolution of form that connects the most diverse longitudes and latitudes, the most varied speeds and slowness's, which guarantees a continuum by stretching variation far beyond its formal limits.[26]

This image of the molecular describes the potential for a kind of universal emergent and itinerant connectivity in which the individual molecule becomes a node of overlap and a connection of multiple forces, patterns and currents.

4. Stories, Secrets and Lies

Rian Malan's epitaph, "Nobody can write fast enough to tell a true story," gives the reader a fair warning of the inevitable failure of the *Echtzeitmusik* volume to definitively capture its own subject matter.[27] And we might sympathize with the writer on this fool's errand. Improvisation is a history of fleeting traces. Music is never easy to write about intelligibly, and free improvisation as a practice denotes such a specific and varied set of activities that it is hard to discuss or define as an object of investigation at all. It is certainly hard to make any statement, let alone

25   A similar concept of free improvisation as creating the space it inhabits has been proposed by David Bell, who discusses it in terms of "utopian nomadism." David Bell, *Playing the Future: Improvisation and Nomadic Utopia*, Glasgow 2011.

26   Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis 1987, p. 308.

27   Beins et al, *Echtzeitmusik* (see nt. 4), p. 8.

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generalization, about improvisers and improvisation without quickly being contra-dicted. It is, of course, tremendously difficult to write about any unpredictable activity, especially one that is constantly and consciously redefining itself and that often gives little sign of *wanting* to be written about. The practice itself often appears to actively resist codification, and many of its practitioners may even display a belligerent and subversive attitude towards interpretation and analysis in general. Judging by the numerous recent and forthcoming publications, symposia, and conferences on the subject,[28] writing and talking about improvising appear to be emerging as a minor industry. Should improvising musicians celebrate this as a sign that their art has at last achieved a new level of academic respectability, status and visibility? Or, like the sight of the flags of an invading army of semioticians and deconstructionists appearing over the horizon, should this be a cause of great nervousness and fear as improvising musicians appear increasingly to risk losing control over the definition, commentary on and meaning of their own work? Many musicians may feel that it was better to be more or less ignored, as was long the case in the past. Judging from anecdotal evidence given by many of the improvising musicians I have spoken to over the years, there is a huge gap between the players' experience of improvisation and the academic, musicological and journalistic attempts to describe, organize, rationalize and capture this experience. There is also a great deal of resentment among some of these musicians about these classification attempts.

The dangers of interpretation may well lie closer to home too. At the very beginning of my interview with Derek Bailey, as I was still turning on the tape recorder, the guitarist commented on the general dangers of interpretative and biographical narratives in the musician's interview:

> I think the interview is useless as a source of reliable information [...] the interview has been go-ing on so long and [is] so widely accepted that it becomes more or less a regular part of people's thought; they think about their work in the interview form. So they have the answers lined up, and they have good answers. [...] There are guys who've kind of shifted their aesthetic positions to fit in with their best description. They do something, which is pretty well undefined – because I mean they don't know precisely what they're doing anyway – then they come to talk about it, and they present this edifice about it. [...] Now I actually know a couple of examples of [...] well-known players who seem to me to have somehow shifted their attitude towards music to fit in with this aesthetic they've developed through talking. [...] [I]t is possible to develop a coherent partial view of what you're doing, and it takes over the whole thing.[29]

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28 Conferences and symposia include SEMPRE/CMPCP Perspectives on *Musical Improvisation,* held at Oxford University in September 2012, and *Call Them Improvisers!,* the SARC Sonorities Symposium at the University of Belfast, November 2010. Forthcoming books of essays include the *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, 2 vols., from Cambridge Scholars' Press. Volume 1, edited by George E. Lewis, and volume 2, *Soundweaving: Wirtings on Improvisation*, edited by Franziska Schroeder, are both expected in 2014.

29 Bailey and Scott, *Interview* (see nt. 1), p. 282.

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In the interests of definition, such self-narratives, although constructed exactly in response to the music's own uncertainty, may encourage improvising musicians to turn against the activity of improvisation, leading them to narrow and limit its potential for exploration and experimentation. We might generalize this danger to the more analytical and orderly narratives of musicology and to sociology as well. When we attempt to analyze or interpret improvisation, we always run the risk of transforming the uncertainties inherent in the music itself into a far more defined and fixed description or narrative, which under certain circumstances might come to represent and replace the activity as the primary object of analysis. There is a real danger that such texts easily become mistaken for primary, rather than secondary, sources in the discourse around improvisation, in the same way that what musicians say about what they are doing is somehow taken as representative of what they are actually doing, even by themselves. As Bailey warns, any such "partially coherent view" might not be merely misleading, but could even become the basis for an artist's own understanding and even practice of the form, transforming the uncertain nature of the activity itself into a set of too-well-understood ideas and principles. I think, for example, of the vast distance between Charlie Parker producing flights of inspired and intricately structured saxophone improvisation in performance and the several generations of jazz musicians and students transcribing and analyzing these performances in the cause of developing the harmonic theory that now underpins so much modern jazz practice and education. The theory and the analysis derived from these improvised acts are certainly not false; they are coherent and detailed, and the structured harmonic universe of tensions and resolutions they depict certainly creates a sustainable and communicable musical language. Musical laws and principles can indeed be derived from Parker's oeuvre, but they are very far from the whole truth about what this music was and how and why it was made. These laws inevitably tend to be narrowly linguistic in nature – expressing the music's grammar and vocabulary – but they are not necessarily at all expressive of the forces that actually underpinned these inventions. In particular, the decisive importance of the moment of improvisation is normally either entirely absent from such pedagogical discourses or at best is given only lip service. The problem lies less with the facts of the analysis than with its abstraction from the time and space of the musical events it describes. The "moment itself" and the singular nature of the improvised event are indeed very difficult to contain in any academic or historical discourse. But these are the basic conditions of improvisation, and without confronting or containing them in some way, such a discourse inevitably becomes abstract and, ultimately, false.

It is not just the specific limitations of interpretation and analysis that might mislead us, but possibly the nature of the documentation itself. However complete they may appear to be, documentations and recordings of improvisations can never be complete; something essential is always missing. Although they have the allure of a certain objectivity, these too are "partially coherent views" and easily mistaken for

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actual objects. Abstracted from a "natural" performative logic the structural conclusion of a process might easily be mistaken for its starting point. As Cornelius Cardew and Eddie Prévost put it:

> Documents such as tape recordings of improvisation are essentially empty, as they preserve chiefly the form that something took and give at best an indistinct hint as to the feeling and cannot convey any sense of time and place.[30]

> A recorded improvisation is forever fixed, its routes to be learnt and remembered. This is exactly not the case with the playing and listening situation at the moment an improvisation begins.[31]

We are left with the problem that in improvised music, unlike some other notated or recorded genres, or in such mediums as painting, film, sculpture or literature, there is never really any possibility of a viable *object* of analysis. Improvisation is fundamentally a process, and some important part of its nature simply cannot be abstracted from its condition of being a process. As Artaud referred to with his concept of "cruelty;"[32] the work in some sense *insists* on a particular kind of engagement and refuses to allow us as observers or as participants to escape its own singular space and time.[33]

Through recording, transcription, translation and other modes of abstraction, we are able to create distance between the output of an activity and from the singular moment of its production, and we might perhaps begin to feel as though we get a grip on what improvisation is or what it is about. But as we step back to gain perspective on these emergent expressions, we perhaps also step back from some essential aspect of their "truth." Like the butterfly collector, we can capture and organize and display the object of our interest, but we can do so only on the basis of its death. If we insist on the distance and security that this step back from singularrity enables, perhaps we do so less because it helps us to understand the nature of improvisation and more in order to preserve the structural integrity of our own discourses and disciplines, and in fact to preserve the quality of this distance itself, which our discourses and disciplines depend on for their own survival and legitimacy.

5. An Impossible Music?

In an example of the complex and paradoxical nature of his thinking, Derrida famously found in improvisation something he "believes in" and "supports," but that

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30   Cornelius Cardew, *Treatise Handbook*, London 1971.

31   Edwin Prevost, *No Sound Is Innocent: AMM and the Practice of Self-Invention Meta-Musical Narratives Essays*, London 1997, p. 60.

32   Antonin Artaud, *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag, Berkeley (CA) 1976, p. 215–271.

33   I am referring here, of course, to the Theatre of Cruelty described in *The Theatre and its Double*, in: Artaud, *Selected Writings* (see nt. 32). See also Richard Scott, "Artaud's Snake: Gesture, Time and Play – A Composer's Report on the Use and Development of the WiGi infra-red Wireless Gestural System," in: *Proceedings of The International Computer Music Conference ICMC, University of Huddersfield (UK)*, Michigan Univ. 2011, p. 721–725, http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.bbp2372.2011.143 (accessed: 18.08.2013).

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he nevertheless defined as "impossible."[34] Derrida's idea of impossibility is derived from his concept of *invention*, which he described as an expressive feature of "otherness" or the "beyond;" Patton finds this to be

> [i]nvariably associated with an experience of the impossible in the sense that an invention properly so called would involve the coming about of something which does not belong to the existing order of possibilities.[35]

"Invention" here is not quite meant to indicate a state of complete creative freedom and or what he denotes as "inaugurality." For Derrida, invention is always compromised and mediated by forces other than itself. The inventive is based on creative shifts and interventions, which are made from the starting points of existing language, law or legitimacy. So although invention indicates the emergence of something new it is also a kind of transgression that always remains somehow connected or in dialogue with the older codes that it transgresses. So while Derrida argues that, every invention in its moment of inaugurality, "should make fun of the *statutory*."[36] the affirmation of otherness that its laughter represents can never fully escape the old "statutory" languages and principles that it seeks to negate. Superficially at least, this complex emphasis on the necessary *conditions* of invention might also be read as a denial of the very feasibility of invention, as what is *not* inventive is seen as the only possible framework for interpretation and comprehension for what *is*. Santi and Illetterati explain this as follows:

> If improvisation is transcendence of the rules, those very rules are the condition that enables this transcendence to occur. Indeed, transcendence not only presupposes the rules, but in many respects creates and rises from them as it explores their most hidden potential, fully aware of the constraints they impose and the clashes it will provoke. Once again, the seemingly opposing concepts of "constraints" and "freedom" have the potential to form a strong relationship. Improvisation embodies the ability to move, starting from itself and not from an established rule; this movement, however, creates other rules which are valid only in the specific setting that generates them, though they may be extended and generalized to form a new kind of legitimate behaviour. In other words, improvisation is clearly an expression of freedom that never leaves the boundaries of its world, yet without them it could not even exist.[37]

Landgraf goes further and even argues that Derrida ultimately "rejects" improvisation and "denies credence to improvisation because it appears to be irreconcilable with the structural properties of text:"

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34   Jacques Derrida, *The Last Interview*, Special Edition of *SV (Studio Visit)*, English translation of his last interview, in: *Le Monde* (19.08.2004), ed. Robert Knafo, New York 2004, p. 1–30.

35   Paul Patton, "Future Politics," in: *Between Deleuze and Derrida*, ed. idem and John Potrevi, New York 2003, p. 15–29, here p. 25.

36   Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Vol. 1, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth G. Rottenberg, Stanford (CA) 2007, p. 45.

37   Marina Santi and Luca Illetterati, "Improvisation between Performance Art and Lifeworld," in: *Improvisation: Between Technique and Spontaneity*, ed. Marina Santi, Newcastle on Tyne 2010, p. 1–6, here p. 3.

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> Derrida demonstrates how performativity and really all notions of singularity, originality, or immediacy are always already tied to repetition (otherwise, these notions cannot be communicated, understood, or even recognized). From Derrida's vantage point, then, it is impossible to conceive of improvisation as a doing that would be inventive, original, or immediate in any pure sense.[38]

Furthermore, Landgraf continues:

> The conceptualization of improvisation, then, is concerned not with Otherness but rather with the mechanisms that promote variation and lend stability and connectivity to innovation. From this vantage point, improvisation is not about the absence of rules and structures, nor about the advent of a true Otherness, but rather can be understood as a self-organizing process that relies on and stages the particular constraints that encourage the emergence of something new and inventive.[39]

Proceeding from this idea that invention is not only related to, but "tied" to or "staging" what precedes it, Landgraf seeks to position improvisation within a dynamic social and historical context which in turn emphasizes its relationship to musical structure and external constraint.

> Rather than being the expression of unbridled freedom, improvisation must be seen as a mode of engaging existing structures and constraints.[40]

So while Derrida feigns disbelief in the possibility of the impossible for his own rhetorical ends and plays on its potential for creative ambiguity, Landgraf seeks to limit its scope of improvisation entirely to that of variation on the statutory, rather than leaving a space for any more radical or revisionary outbreak of "otherness." This overemphasis on the inescapability of the historical statutory code directly contradicts Derrida's intentions. For Derrida, deconstructionism was a radical practice ultimately concerned not with demonstrating or maintaining the prevailing statutory context of language, but rather with challenging its domination exactly on the basis of an affirmation of the existence of "a certain experience of the impossible."[41] Caputo elucidates Derrida's concept of "experience" as follows:

> This experience of the impossible is not experience in the "traditional, dusty phenomenological sense" where this means to perceive what appears or presents itself, but rather experience in a deconstructive sense in which "experience" means running up against the limits of the unpresentable and unrepresentable.[42]

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38   Edgar Landgraf, *Improvisations as Art: Conceptual Challenges, Historical Perspectives*, New York 2012, p. 5.

39   Landgraf, *Improvisation as Art* (see nt. 38), p. 5.

40   Landgraf, *Improvisation as Art* (see nt. 38), p. 11.

41   Derrida, *Psyche* (see nt. 36), p. 15.

42   John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion,* Bloomington and Indianapolis 1997, p. 33.

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Thus, far from demonstrating the inevitable primacy of the code or arguing that that invention is an illusion, Derrida's claim is to establish exactly the grounds on which invention can and does occur and in which "the impossible," however momentarily, becomes possible in the form of actual experience. By way of such paradoxes Derrida sought not to deny, but to confirm those moments of unprecedented change or revolution in which "something arrives which exceeds all institution, all power, all juridical-political authority" and develop a philosophical basis for their expression.[43] From this perspective the impossible and the inventive are not only that which precisely cannot be deconstructed, but also are that which deconstruction hoped to leave in its wake.

Ramshaw argues that Derrida's point is less that improvisation in itself is impossible or that he is in any way opposed to it, but rather that absolute inaugurality, a *pure*, wholly unconstrained kind of improvisation which makes no reference to formal borders or historical musical language, is impossible.[44] This idea of the assumed or necessary purity of improvisation, which is the sole basis of the claim for its "impossibility," is for me a jarring and problematic element in Derrida's thought and even more so in Landgraf's appropriation of it. In my view both thinkers use the idea of pure improvisation naïvely in the Platonic sense of a transcendental idea against which improvisation as theoretical concept is judged and found wanting. So of course it is impossible, as all pure ideas are impossible. Like "invention" and "impossibility," this image of purity is effectively an abstract quality imposed on the activity of improvisation by the philosopher and is not necessarily derived from the practice itself. So Derrida's "critique" of improvisation is of interest not so much for revealing the limitations or failure of improvisational practice, with which he hardly engages, but more as a critique of the general limitations of language to recognize and express the experiences of otherness that seem to lie beyond it.

Nor does any demonstration of improvisation's impurity or dependence on precedent, of the kind practiced by Landgraf, consequently make illegitimate its abilities to create the new and unprecedented. By seeing improvisation only in terms of its relationship to its precedents, Landgraf seems willing to perceive improvisation only as a means of variation upon and within such already formulated rules and habits. It is easy to see how he comes to this conclusion, as indeed this is exactly how idiomatic improvisation, for example, as practiced in Hindustani classical music, Flamenco or modern jazz, tends to proceed. As Ramshaw argues, jazz improvisation is always a kind of dialogue and negation with a statutory context.[45] For jazz musicians, even for free jazz musicians, although the detail may be unpredictable, a substantial part of the music's form is indeed likely to be predictable and fairly repetitive. Some vestige of Bailey's idea of the non-idiomatic probably has to be retained if free improvisation

43   Jaques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes, London 2001, p. 54.

44   Sara Ramshaw, "Deconstructin(g) Jazz Improvisation: Derrida and the Law of the Singular Event", in: *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 2 (2006), no. 1, p. 1–19, here p. 8, see also http://www.criticalimprov.com/article/view/81 (accessed 18.8.2013).

45   Ramshaw, *Deconstructin(g) Jazz Improvisation* (see nt. 44), p. 3.

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is not to be misunderstood simply as an ill-behaved variant of jazz. It might be argued that it is exactly this formal predictability that free improvisers seek to challenge. For free improvisers, dependence on Derrida's "statutory" contexts and dependence on theme and variation might be significantly weaker or might function quite differently from jazz musicians or from other, more idiomatic improvisers, who by definition are more closely engaged with maintaining the idiomatic principles of their genres and indeed may positively desire to express those principles musically. For example, it is arguable that much contemporary free improvisation using electronic instruments has little relationship with either existing musical forms or traditional musical languages, even those derived from free improvisation itself. While this is not to say that electroacoustic improvisation does not have precedents (AMM, Musica Elettronica Viva, Hugh Davis, FURT come to mind), to begin an analysis with the unmovable idea that all improvisation is somehow necessarily a reaction to or a negotiation with an existing musical language or dialogue would, in my opinion, a highly prejudicial point from which to proceed. It is arguable that while Derrida's "statutory" context might well exist in all kinds of music-making, its exact expression, its power, and the improviser's personal and collective reactions to it can take very different forms. And by no means need these reactions rest invariably on techniques of variation. If we take variation on statute as an a priori for improvisation studies *by definition* we deny at the outset the very possibility of the personal or the non-idiomatic. We would thus tie our own hands and be unlikely ever to be able to develop a more complex concept of how statutory contexts *might be* and *are* transgressed – regardless of theory – or of the great unpredictability and variety of outcomes that improvised musical activity can create. Indeed, the concept of improvisation *in general* on which the assertions of the domination of context and variation rest is itself not really sustainable. Rather I would argue that improvisation is never one thing, it is always several.

6. Improvisation as Itinerant Science

Deleuze and Guattari distinguish what they call "itinerant" science, which they counterpose to patterned, striated or "royal" scientific practices:

> A distinction must be made between two types of science, or scientific procedures: one consists in "reproducing," the other in following. The first involves reproduction, iteration and reiteration: the other, involving itineration, is the sum of itinerant, ambulant sciences [...] *following is not at all the same as reproducing*, and one never follows in order to reproduce. The ideal of reproduction, deduction, or induction is part of royal science, in all times and in all places, and treats differences of time and place as so many variables, the constant form of which is extracted precisely by the law.[46]

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46   Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (see nt. 26),p. 372.

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The royal and itinerant sciences are not absolute concepts, but rather interdependent tendencies. The beginnings of interpretation and of a royal science are surely always present, even in the itinerant moment, at the same time as the itinerant nags, pesters and threatens to disrupt the ambitions to certainty and organisation held by the royal. One difference between them is temporal. Ruth Zapora teaches: "Improvisation is like walking backwards. You can see where you've been but you can't see where you are going."[47] Such a glance backward represents a very different articulation of time from that which engages with the immediate present and projects forward. Paul Klee's description of his creative process in making an artwork also describes an example of such a twin articulation:

> Taking a leap past the dead point (of inertia), here is the first act of movement. (Line). After a brief pause to catch our breath… (Interrupted or line broken at several points) we look back and see how far we have already travelled. (Counter movement). We picture following the path hither and thither. (Bundle of lines). A river obstructs the path, we use a boat. (Wave movement). Upstream, there would have been a bridge. (Row of arches). On the other side we meet a like-minded spirit, who also wants to go where greater knowledge can be found. United in joy at first (convergence), differences gradually set in (independent execution of two lines). Some excitement on both sides. (Expression energy and psyche of the line). We cross a fallow field (surface, crossed by lines), then a dense forest. He (the other traveller) loses his way, seeks, and once even describes the motion of a running dog. I too have lost some of my composure […]. Soon we reach our quarters. Before falling asleep, some things will return as memories.[48]

Although his text is mainly concerned with the emergent, itinerant aspect, Klee does not ignore the reterritorializing, "royal" aspect. There is no itinerary, no forward glance or destination and the flight itself is only a moment, yet his journey is part of a circulation and of a far greater rhythm. "We look back" and "some things will return as memories." Klee shows that the structured organisation of these sensations begins only at the point of arrival, not as a predicate for the journey. The journey can in some sense be known, but it is known only at the points of rest or arrival. His painting called the *Angelus Novus* seems to contain a similar theme, the angelic figure facing forward, but the eyes are turning towards the past. Kleist made a similar distinction in the form of a dualism between action and reflection:

> Reflection, or thinking something over, finds its proper moment *after* rather than *before* an act. If it comes into play prior to it, or in the very moment of decision, it seems only to confuse, to obstruct and to repress the power to act, which flows from the glorious wellspring of our feelings; contrariwise, it is afterwards, when the action is already performed, that the end for which reflection was intended is best attained: namely, to make us aware of what was faulty and weak in the action, so that we may adjust our feeling for similar cases in future.[49]

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47 Ruth Zapora, *Action Theater: The Improvisation of Presence*, Berkeley (CA) 1995, p. 54.

48 *Paul Klee: Selected by Genius, 1917–1933*, with essays by Roland Doschka et al., ed. idem, Munich and New York 2001, p. 19.

49 *An Abyss Deep Enough: Letters of Heinrich von Kleist, with a Selection of Essays and Anecdotes*, ed. Philip B. Miller, New York 1982, p. 217.

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When we improvise, we depart from a place we did not necessarily make or choose; we travel through a terrain, and we encounter forces which we also did not make or choose and whose energies and detail we can barely begin to control. From the interaction of all these forces a process of formation of different densities, articulations, events and structures unfolds, and this is already the beginning of form and the "royal". When we "look back," we remember, we compose, and what we make is always in some kind of collaboration between our initial desire or intent, the friction of external events and forces and this retrospective glance, which may be more or less powerful, more or less significant. There is no reason why the journey can be understood only or primarily as a variation of that which precedes it. Along with repetition and variation the journey of improvisation surely also contains the possibility of more radical disjunctions: of flights, escapes and affirmations of the unknown. There are also, as Derrida puts it, "experiences" that cannot be translated because they put us in connection with forces that we do not know how to represent and that can perhaps only be understood from the retrospective glance of the future. But instead of repeating his error of conceiving of improvisation as pure or impossible or, in Deleuze and Guattari's parlance, a complete deterritorialization (remembering that they regard the purely deterritorialized event as "unliveable")[50], we might more helpfully consider improvisation as a complex activity that contains both the itinerant and the royal and includes the molecular processes of joining the dots, sensing attractions and repulsion between proximate molecules, seeing them take on trajectories and vectors, making lines, following lines, feeling them cross, interact, combine, depart and dissolve and thereby create form. Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of the itinerant and the molecular demonstrate that even if we always remain in some kind of relationship to what they describe as the "molar" (which, while it is not interchangeable with Derrida's notion of the "statutory" has some parallel). The relationship between the freely associative molecular and the sedimented organisational principles of the molar demarcates an interdependence and division of function rather than a particular direction of causality; each creates the other and is destroyed by the other. The activity of the molecular is ultimately not an expression variation, language, genre or idiom or any other statutory function, but of situated interactions and relationships whose contents and expressions may be drawn from the microscopic interactions of a vast and highly unpredictable variety of sources. These include the molar, the legal, the linguistic and the "royal", but need not be limited by them or defined by them. In such a way Deleuze and Guattari develop concepts of creativity, and indeed, spaces for the creative and inventive, which Derrida's concepts such as otherness and inaugurality suggest and indicate yet never really explore.

Klee's "loss of composure" may be understood as one such molecular moment in which we find ourselves experiencing a loss of orientation in a flux between states:

50   Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy* (see nt. 16), p. 156.

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neither in one place nor the other, but in multiple places, in an illegitimate state wherein history and language no longer offer a guide to what is possible or meaningful or provide us with adequate tools with which to interpret. This moment of discomposure is perhaps identical to Derrida's concept of "experience", the moment when we witness the limits of the representable and exactly through witnessing the conditionality of these limits, we have the momentarily possibility to glimpse at what might lie beyond them.

7. Illegitimacy, Discomposure... and the Promise of Listening

> Let us abandon the separation of method from subject matter. Method is not something to be applied to an object in a fixed, unvarying manner. Instead, method should adapt itself to its object and legitimate itself by the light it sheds on it.[51]

The spectre of nothingness still hovers over us in the shape of an artistic practice that seems to have very few definitive features and whose products, such as they are, seem to exist at the very edges of definition or readability. In an old article in which he considers the challenge of the postmodern project to traditional sociology, Hebdige commented that "a sociology of the Sublime is, after all, impossible," and faced with a choice, he apparently turns away from the unspeakable and chooses the lesser and more contained ambitions of his discipline.[52] But what might it mean, as Adorno recommended, to attempt instead to adapt our methods and ourselves to our "object," however impossible and non-objective that object might be, and therefore try to legitimate our methods, not from the point of view of a received method or statutory context, but from the internal structures and consequences of the object itself? How can we find ways to discuss the conditions, the situation and the consequences of the impossibility of the sublime and the unprecedented without diminishing or denying them simply because they resist identification or are merely intellectually inconvenient? I think these are fundamental questions for improvisation research. We must ask not what sense improvisation makes, or look for its causes or explanations, but learn to listen to what it has to tell us.

To achieve such a listening we perhaps need to learn, as Klee reports, to leave behind the security of knowing what we are doing, why we are doing it or when we will arrive; as these become methodological questions whose true forms and answers can emerge only from the molecular connections that are created within the process of enquiry itself and cannot be revealed at the outset. Such an approach may be far from methodical and represents an entirely different strategy from that of distance, objectivity or Kantian aestheticism. Instead of holding our object at a safe distance, I imagine the aim of improvisation research being to enter, to merge, to allow ourselves to be affected and changed and ultimately to convert the energies of the

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51 Theodor W. Adorno, *Some Ideas on the Sociology of Music, in:* idem, *Sound Figures*, Stanford (CA) 1999, p. 1–14.

52 Hebdige, *Subculture* (see nt. 13).

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material we study into new forms. Remembering DeNora's hope for a musical socio-logy rather than a sociology of music and Derrida's dream to give his own texts "the condition of musicality,"[53] we might do better to take improvisation as a model *for* the inventive (rather than a variation *of* the inventive) and allow its "social power" (DeNora) to shape our own thinking and methodology. Experience, as Derrida uses the concept, may be interpreted as a certain kind of listening, almost an acousmatic mode, in that we are listening to something whose sources may be unknown or obscured or at least not fully revealed or formulated. In this, we do not *rest* on experience, but we do *rely* upon it, and we invite it into the heart of our enquiry in the full knowledge that it must change us. I imagine, for example, a kind of listening which could learn to follow and adapt to its object in such a way that the profusion of lines, meters, layers and densities that result might come to express and resemble the complexity, singularity and polymorphous nature of free improvisation itself. But to recognize what we hear and experience, we might first need to learn how to experience events that we have not previously defined or conceived. To do that perhaps we need to have a certain naïveté and openness to the possibility that something as amorphous and ambiguous as sound pressure waves modulating through the air around us and exciting our eardrums might actually have something profound to tell us about the world and ourselves, something that we don't already know, that perhaps we won't be able to learn in any other way and which we cannot reduce to things we have learned from other disciplines.

The *shakuhachi* master's advice to me implied that it is only by learning to play or to listen that we can go beyond our ideas about music and enable ourselves to engage with it more directly on its own terms and in its own language. In the end I think he was right: music contains certain kinds of organisation that cannot simply be reduced to a relationship to precedent and cannot easily be extracted and translated into any other kinds of legitimating narrative. But that does not mean we have to accept Hebdige's conclusion of impossibility. There are other possibilities to which I think Adorno alludes that could amount to something more like a transduction of the energies of our object than a translation of them. Critical and reflective listening and understanding the potential for otherness and for new kinds of experience within improvisation may reveal new forces, energies, interactions and paradoxes at work within its practice, which musicians are intimately familiar with, whether or not they know how to verbalize that familiarity, but which current academic disci-plines and models of thought and enquiry may have barely begun to comprehend or recognize, let alone interpret, organize or rationalize. The nature and motion of a force that crosses a boundary is, of course, harder to recognize than the boundary itself, and it is possible that we can conceive of the force only in terms of its impact on that boundary. Yet to reduce a dynamic, living force merely to its effects on that which does not move or live seems to me tantamount to misrepresentation.

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53   Ramshaw, *Deconstructin(g) Jazz Improvisation* (see nt. 44), p. 5.

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If we are serious about discovering and expressing the real nature and significance of improvisation and about expressing and even celebrating its illegitimacy and inconvenience, then we may well need to risk making fools of ourselves by trying to invent some riskier, messier and more experimental tools than our disciplines might readily offer. The specific tools and concepts we need to transduce, decode and describe these musical forms of thinking are perhaps still to be invented and discovered; and the questions they create still need to be formulated. Much of music's power has always seemed inaudible to sociology and musicology and yet we know it is there because we sense its existence from listening and experience. I believe that the study of improvisation calls not so much for a method, but for such a space to listen and out of this space a wide variety of experimental, non-idiomatic and illegitimate approaches could emerge: not so much multidisciplinary as anti-disciplinary, a kind of bastard science, whose lineage might be multifarious, fuzzy and indistinct, but for which the sublime, the deterritorialized, the inventive and the impossible are exactly the central questions. While I have no fixed image to propose of what form such an ill-shapen field of study should take, it seems to me that Bailey is in many ways correct to emphasise the "personal" aspect of improvisation over the concept of improvisation as general and somehow agreed-upon activity.[54] Nevertheless, it is also important that the researchers in such a discipline do not make the mistake of focusing too much on individuals and their biographies, as the music is clearly so intimately bound up with the broader collective life of the interactions which take place within groups, scenes and communities.[55] Bailey's warnings about the "coherent partial view" notwithstanding, the *primary* secondary sources in this investigation are the perceptions and experiences of the musicians and listeners themselves, and it is difficult to imagine where else we could begin. Of course, attempting to capture the dynamic and the complexity of these social practices as they are expressed musically is itself an inventive, creative and therefore a messy business, without safety nets and fraught with the ever-present likelihood of failure, collapse and incomprehensibility. But that is exactly the condition of the subject matter of our investigation, and it is a condition we need to learn to listen to and understand. The uncertain conditions on which free improvisation constructs line, sense, form and experience – as a consequence of our attempt to adapt to it – compels us to embrace its failure, insecurity and uncertainty as our own. I believe the aspect of reflexivity represented by this embrace might prove at least as important an aspect of our work and of the experience of engaging in research as any conclusions that we might ultimately draw from it.

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54   Bailey, *Improvisation* (see nt. 2), p. 2.
55   The interview approach Simon Rose uses in his phenomenological analysis of free improvisation is one example of how this balance between the personal and the individual might be explored. The research is based on very personal perceptions yet are presented anonymously. Simon Rose, *Improvisation, Music and Learning: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*, PhD diss., Glasgow Caledonian Univ. 2012.