

## COLLECTIVE CREATION: THREE GENRES OF IMPROVISATION

[Maura Donohue](#) | June 20, 2016 |

Performance Mix recently completed its [30th Anniversary season](#). For this year's festival, Karen Bernard brought events back to its first venue, Henry Street Settlement/Abrons Arts Center and invited guest curators for certain programs. Earlier this month I [interviewed Miriam Ginestier](#), curator of the June 8th EDGY NYC + MTL program. On Saturday June 11th, David Garland, Roxane Butterfly, Tim O'Donnell and Sarah Young curated *Three Genres of Improvisation* in music, tap and contact improvisation.

"Since I don't know what will happen, I thought I might document it." Garland casually introduces the evening with these practical words, but it leads to a rumination on the problematics of performed group improvisations. Once a performance work exists outside the boundaries of a prior creative choreographic or musical process of invention, reconstruction, repetition and execution but inhabits the realm of instantaneous composition or improvography (thank you, Gregory Hines), are there agreed rules of viewership? The enticement is that no one knows what will happen in an improvisation. This is why, as a creative methodology and a life practice, it's so vital. Not knowing outcomes and moving forward is the game of living. Being responsive and observant makes for evolutionary prowess. However, in concert performance, the process and practice can be overrun by the resulting product. At least, from the watcher's place. We cannot share in the embodied experiences of the participants and, in knowing I would write something, complicated the notion of documentation. In the end, can a sound recording effectively document the lived experience of the makers and the viewers? Could my scribblings effectively respond to the resulting work? Was The Work the work or just the working?

The press release posits questions about whether improvisation really exists. *How much is scored, how much planned, and how much just set free?* From the outside, we don't know the answers. We can approach our viewership as essential for the participants heightened focus or performative choices. Without audience, it is simply a jam and not a performance. But, in a publicly executed collective creation, an extensive negotiation of attention and authority must occur. How much do the participants owe viewers and their fellow artists in compositional decisions? How do we decide to start? With all due respect for the *Anarchy of Silence* unleashed by John Cage, in music, we still expect a sound to let us know we have begun.

*Spontaneous Connections: Improvised Music*



David Garland and Anais Maviel

And, once Garland offered his first note, I found myself listening for the negotiation of volume and pitch once vocalist and percussionist Anais Maviel joined him. What does it mean to work with? How often is the choice made to follow? And when does counterpoint simply become working against rather than in conjunction. How do collaborating artists without long histories make bold choices AND communal decisions instantaneously. In movement, what might be loud? Is downstage loud? Large gesture or fast movement or, again, counterpoint. We know loud when we hear it and many times it was clear that certain performers were more engaged in their individual offering than in sharing, so while writing and listening for blended sounds and complimentary interactions, I wondered at what point does the soundscape become more than a presentation of instantaneous process? What do we want to do in the absence of satisfying product. Is dissonance welcomed when it is unplanned. At an experimental concert, I would take it in with a belief in the compositional need. In an improvisational performance, I read it as inability to listen to one's partners. Garland shifts to prepared acoustic guitar and inside the tonal and plucking duet, I count the group at 3 instruments and 2 humans. Was Maviel choosing anything in her output in relation to Garland or how much? How could we, on the outside, know. Do we care? Should we? We are watching. We are documenting with both eyes and ears, and see him looking to her. See him orienting his body to hers. So, there is an implication that he is an attentive collaborator. Does that matter? Or is our duty as documentation components simply to take in what occurs in time as it is. Does the spontaneous composition component of an improvisation hold heavier importance in performance? The duet Maviel is having with herself is clearly interconnected, and Garland's sound situates it contemporarily, sonically, and electronically. Something is collectively creating itself.



Roxanne Butterfly joins

Then, [Roxanne Butterfly](#) enters with a moving body and the percussion of her tap shoes. I close my eyes in wonder as to whether I would listen to this as a recorded piece of music. Interdisciplinary improvisations are intercultural exchanges. There are vocabularies and values inherent to forms. Historically, music and dance have shared compositional components. In fact, composers have driven (or dictated) major codified choreographic rules. We can blame Louis Horst for matching choreography to existing musical structures in the time of Miss Ruth and Martha. And, we can thank Robert Ellis Dunn (a la John Cage) for helping untie sound (and drama) from movement in the days of Judson Church. So, when a dancer is a musician there is a bilingual speaker participating. They physicalized effort through space comes into play along with the rhythmic aspects of tap. But, all players are in bodies that are working and present onstage. The physical responsibility to listen is equally shared regardless of native artistic medium. Eventually, when Butterfly slows, removes her shoes and brings her bare feet to the floor microphone, we hear an obvious call and response pattern. I wonder briefly about reactionary versus responsive environments. Early scholarship on interactive art work acknowledged that we were primarily experiencing reactive technologies. There needs to be a circular exchange or an evolving exchange to be considered interactive. If it is simply a constant back and forth, we are in a reactive environment. However, from our perspective the explicitly reactive response points at attempted communication. We can hear and see a clear conversation occur. It isn't accompaniment, but exchange.

*Raising the Hoof: Tap*



Max Pollak and Jennifer Vincent

In tap, group discourse can easily become cacophony. But, when tap artists are cooking, the riffs are the hottest jazz and when Max Pollak joins the scene, the sweetest rumba. For the 2nd Genre's presentation, bassist Jennifer Vincent performs the role of official musician, or perhaps more accurately, non-dancing performer while Butterfly, Pollak, Hillary-Marie and Jane Goldberg offer various tap induced acts. Pollak holds down Butterfly's fluttering and light explosiveness. It's fast and tight at the top and slow and deep on the bottom. Pollak sings and claps and when Vincent adds a foot clave to the sonic mix, the state dinner and formal statements have ended and the party begins minus only mojitos for the loyal viewers. Goldberg regales us with bits of tap history and her experiences on ashrams. She threatens to take her clothes off and the act is a winding and whimsical verbal improvisation score better known as storytelling. When Hillary-Marie enters, she maintains a physical proximity with Vincent which visually connects her to the bass and makes the exchange reciprocal in attention and focus. The shared labor of constructing sound simultaneously is apparent and allows Vincent's prowess to be more than fodder for excellent accompaniment. Both are listening with intention, and so, with my eyes closed I can hear in the stillness and see in the silence their tuning in. There is a clear conversation. She offers, the other responds, she responds to what the other offered, but have built into her response an accumulation of their previous exchange. They are not in sequential monologues sent forth in staggered patterns, or overlapping like a Woody Allen script, they are in communion.

## Contact Improvisation



Bradley Ellis

Reviewing a CI performance feels like an inverse of the CI ethos. Its practice is its point. Performance offers a heightened container, perhaps an increased presence of adrenaline in the body, but in holding it as an exploratory form, I myself ambivalent again about needing to document what occurred with any kind of assessment or appraisal. What are the qualifiers for today? Would time in contact serve as effective signifier for deeper connection, or successful weight sharing and soft landings represent virtuosic accomplishment, will poignantly formed tableaux and appropriate distribution of labor among the sexes allow me to gauge whether it was a successful performance? Does successful endeavor equal sophisticated work of art? I can easily state that I enjoyed it. Multi-instrumentalist composer Rob Flax infuses the space with both languid and persistent tones, creating a resonant chamber within which Patrick Crowley, Bradley Ellis, Elise Knudson, Tim O'Donnell, and Sarah Young play. We are offered softness in the joints, pliable movers, light diversions and interdependence, compositional structure, use of time and space, enjoyment of others and poignant tableaux against the wall. The dance unfolded and refolded. Held and blossomed into being. It happened. There were all there, then. And, so were we.