

Improvising Communities Improvising Community

Prof. Eric Lewis, McGill University and ICASP

Onassis Cultural Centre, Athens, Greece, Oct. 8 2011

A few days before I left Canada for Greece, I was listening to the American National Public Radio News. The story concerned the “crisis in the Euro-Zone,” and more specifically Greece. I was of course interested in the story, but I was totally fascinated by the story behind the story, the structures of power it unintentionally revealed. The report concerned a meeting between Angela Merkel and Nicholas Sarkozy, who together declared what the future for Greece should be. An English financial analysis then talked about the Greek situation, suggesting what the EEC should do to stem the crisis. Then, tellingly, the editor of the major German paper Die Zeit was interviewed. He referred disparagingly to Greece, and the Southern European countries more generally, as “Club Med,” and dismissed their ability, even in principle, to solve their own problems, claiming that the present crisis is due to the Southern countries intrinsic inability to spend less than they take in, since such peoples, and so the countries they inhabit, are “happy-go-lucky and carefree.” When this editor was asked to explain to Americans, never the most worldly bunch, the original motivation behind the creation of the EEC and the Euro-Zone, he replied by talking about the need in the late 90s to deflect strong inflationary pressures on the Deutsche Mark.

Greek opinions, any Greek views on their own future, their own interpretation of the problems and possible solutions, well tellingly absent. We heard from Brits, and Americans, and were told by an influential German commentator that, in effect, the Greeks are incapable of even addressing the issues. I could not but think of this all in terms of

musical structures and power. The Greeks were depicted as wild unruly musicians who need a strong conductor to tell them what to do, and who they must blindly follow. The purpose of the EU is to advance the goals and intentions of the composer/conductor, not the performers. The Greeks, and their fellow “Club-Med” members were almost like parodies of improvisers, who need some aims and goals set for them. Reports in the press such as these point graphically towards the need for new models of dialogue and action amongst the EEC. What is needed is a model more in keeping not with a parody of improvisational structures (and in fact one originating out of racist discourses), but on a more subtle understanding of such structures’ potentials. Improvising communities spread responsibility equally, and invest each member with both rights and duties, unlike the hierarchical top-down model that this report described.

The ambiguity in the clause “Improvising Communities” reveals the fact that many communities of improvisers, are, via their improvisatory practices, creating, reconfiguring, questioning, stretching, and problematizing existing community boundaries, identities and grounds of existence—they are communities of improvisers engaged in improvisatory acts of community formation. This evening I want to sketch a small piece of the history of such improvising communities focusing on the practices of contemporary artist’s groups, in particular the visionary collective based here in Greece, Medea Electronique, which I have the honor of being a member of.

*

I want to suggest that ways of relating improvisatory practices to acts of community building can be found from the very beginnings of Greek culture through to the present day. For improvisatory gestures have been at the heart of Greek experiments in community from antiquity

onwards, and, although this is sometimes forgotten, form a crucial part of democratic processes. Let us consider two acts by Solon and Pericles respectively, each of which points towards the importance of improvisation in their visions of Greek society. Aristotle tells us that:

Some people in fact believe that Solon deliberately made the laws indefinite, in order that the final decision might be in the hands of the people Constitutions Ch 9

Like a graphic score or structured improvisation that leaves much open to performer's decisions and autonomy, Solon's laws were purposefully ambiguous and open-ended. They needed to be improvised with, case-by-case, situation by situation. The "legal players," the accused, the accusing, and the jury, needed to interpret together the law to get an outcome, one by no means determined simply by the law itself. Such a view of the law has become mainstream in some quarters, legal theorists such as Gerald Postema view the role of judicial precedent as akin to the ways a given song has been improvised on, with each new legal decision establishing new ways the song might go.

In the same work Aristotle tells us that the main effect of Pericles turning Athens attention towards sea-power was to cause:

...the people to acquire confidence in themselves and consequently to take the constitution more and more into their own hands...

Pericles realized the importance to democracy of *collective* responsibility, like that which group improvisation both offers and demands. By having "the people" and not just the leading families of Athens invested in the primary project of the community, responsibility was shared, and a unified sense of purpose was created. The community that was Athens

was radically reconfigured by this gesture, seemingly to its betterment. A politically invested populous has reason to learn about its own governance, has reason to be concerned with its well-being, and, crucially, feels a sense of solidarity with other members of its community, which can have profound moral, ethical, social and cultural implications. Those who may have been viewed as “other,” no matter how close in proximity they may have been, are now “us”. Modern discourses of multi-culturalism are concerned with just this, attempts to foster common goals and identity, bonds of understanding across ethnic, cultural and other boundaries, without necessarily ignoring or destroying these vectors of difference. Improvisatory gestures and structures are at the heart of democratic institutions and methods.

One of the many things that follow from this is that access to collectives, and the ability to participate in them fully, is part and parcel of the potential for full citizenship and a fully realized self. To the degree that many such communities are based on collaborative art practices, like improvisation, access to the means of entering into such collectives, such communities, should be viewed more as a right than a mere privilege. This is one of the guiding principles behind the adapted use workshop that will take place here on Monday. Allowing physically disabled youth to collectively improvise is to allow them access to a wider community, and so to allow their interests, wants, needs, thoughts, talents, outlooks and opinions to help inform this community. Responsibility, community, citizenship and improvisation are more closely intertwined than they may appear, something Solon knew, and Pericles took advantage off. A fully formed self must enter into improvisational dialogue with communities, and so we must do all we can to make this happen.

Consider the present state of Greece within the EEC, and its relationship to assorted transnational and extra-national financial

institutions. There is, so it appears, and so many Greek citizens seem to feel, a lack of shared responsibility and power to address the problems of the present global financial crisis and Greece's part in it. The problem is by no means Greece's alone, but like an errant trumpet player in an orchestra who has hit a wrong note, it is being chided by many. There is no collective improvisation taking place, or if there is, it is the improvisation of a powerful leader imposing their will on the collective. Some have responded with acts directed, so it seems, towards the destruction of their community. Is such a response a surprise, for once membership in the community is effectively denied, once one is not allowed to improvise with it, then natural bonds of concern, and the moral and ethical obligations that follow, wither away and die. Here at the Onassis Center there has been much attention turned towards this crisis, and the role of the arts in possible solutions. There was, last year, an inaugural lecture series concerning whether or not the Arts are a mere luxury during a time of financial crisis, followed by a series considering the cultural roots of the crisis. This latter series asked, among other things, "Which of the emergent opportunities is worth following up?" I want to suggest improvisational responses may be both suggested by this global crisis, and necessary for its resolution in an ethically responsible manner.

Lest one think it odd to invoke improvisation as a model to explain complex multi-state financial policy, given the presumption of its hyper-rational and preplanned nature, I now will simply draw your attention to the fact that the Chairperson of the Bank of Canada, the most senior financial agent in the country, is profoundly interested in improvisation, and will be the focus of one of my project's events this next Spring. For all the careful planning that such individuals and agencies engage in, for all their short term, middle term, and long term goals, for all their

projections, models, data and experts, everyday they wake up, open the paper or turn on the news, and must, per force, improvise!

In fact interest in improvisational methods and practices comes from what one might think are rather strange quarters. Many in management studies are very interested in improvisation as a way of breaking down traditional top-down hierarchies in business, which tend to stifle innovation and silence corporate criticism. Many of the most successful high-tech companies, such as Apple and Google, are known for their more horizontal structures, where small groups of employees improvise together, and take on collective responsibility for their projects. Corporate campuses are designed to encourage chance encounters between members of varied teams. What has been built into these companies, for better or for worse, is a profound sense of entitlement and corporate faith amongst employees, they feel part of a corporate community as a result of such improvisational gestures.

Perhaps the most exotic and least to be expected example of micro-community building via improvisation issued forth from the U.S. Naval Academy, concerning Navy Seals employed to put out oil-rig fires. This is a very dangerous job, one that had a very high mortality rate, and a very low success rate. The navy had created a massive procedure guide-book that Seals were to follow when attempting to put out such fires. Then a Professor of Naval Management had the idea to throw out the guide book, and entrust small teams of Seals to work closely together as a team, to learn each others strengths and weaknesses, and to improvise when faced with an oil rig fire, to trust in themselves and their fellow Seals to figure out the most effective way to approach the situation, and not to rely on a thick guide-book, like a long symphonic score. This wild plan was instituted, and mortality rates when way down, as success rates went way up.

Examples can be easily multiplied, from architecture and the way in which Frank Gehry operates. He does not create blue-prints, he does not tell the varied construction and crafts persons how to realize his building, but works with them, as equals, to solve often profound design and construction problems. He gives up his role as conductor, and improvises with his team. As a result any number of major construction innovations have been developed by, say concrete manufacturers, and glass makers, because they were not told what to do, or how to do it, but were brought in as equals in the greater project of realizing one of Gehry's designs. Responsibility, community, improvisation and innovation here go hand in hand.

That concepts such as these are closely aligned, and that perhaps improvisation's greatest strength is as a site for such community formation, both in the small (a group of Navy Seals, contractors working on a project) and in the large (constructing identities for whole cultural and ethnic communities), is a guiding principle of ICASP (Improvisation, Community and Social Practice), a major international research project based in Canada, and led by Prof. Ajay Heble of the University of Guelph, that I am a part of. We take as our starting point jazz and related musics of the civil rights period in the U.S. and after, where improvisation was consciously theorized and practiced as a profound method to comment on, undermine, subvert and reconfigure, racial and class driven hierarchies of power and privilege. Many have addressed this history, indeed many associated with ICASP, from Prof. Heble's book *Landing on the Wrong Notes*, Ingrid Monson's *Freedom Sounds*, George Lewis' *Power Stronger Than Itself*, amongst others. I want to focus today on one theoretical way group improvisation helps create community, and then explore how Medea Electronique, based here in Athens, but with an international membership, incorporates improvisation

not only into its art practices, but also as a guiding method to its development as a community.

*

What is it in virtue of that one might identify as a member of a given group or community, be it determined by national, ethnic, religious, cultural, social or other criteria? What makes “a community” just that, and, importantly, what might make it that one *wants* to be identified as a member of a given community? In general community membership is in important ways grounded in the shared history of the members of the community. Such shared historical narratives can be used by the members of a given community to ground their mutual solidarity with each other, or can be imposed from without in manners that may have politically pernicious intent. Nations often rely on such histories to create a sense of nationhood among their citizens. Such collective narratives can be used to bind a people together for the betterment of all, or directed in invidious ways to exclude, ignore, or annihilate.

We *construct* narratives of “our” past, via memory, forgetting, fact and fantasy, and so come to construct our communities. Crucially such narratives themselves, as social constructions, are open to constant revision, and as they are revised, whose collective memories you may share shifts accordingly. I have lived in Canada for the past twenty years, and my transformation into identifying as a Canadian is grounded to a great extent in coming to take as my own the history of Canada and Canadians, to care not just about its narrative content, but to enter into debate about its interpretation, to stake a claim in a given Canadian narrative as being the one “for me”, to interpret and embellish it with a sense of ownership. Such narratives can be shared, and are kept alive, passed on, and constructed, in books, newspapers, classrooms, and on screens and street-corners, with painted canvas, bodily movements, video

images and music. The presentation later this evening is, in a very real sense, a presentation of the collective memory, and so identity, of the community formed so quickly in the past week. As theorists such as Judith Butler have demonstrated, we perform our identities, both literally and figuratively.

Cultural histories form important parts of these community narratives, particularly those of minority peoples, who may no longer have the power or opportunity to effect large scale changes in the majority culture, but can still partake in distinctive local cultural customs.

A crucial ethical reason that our group membership is important is that it fixes whether we have thin or thick (as moral theorists say) relations with someone. Thin relations require merely that both parties be, say, human. One may very well think that certain moral obligations accrue simply upon being so thinly related to someone, say an obligation to save them from drowning, or help them if they are injured or sick. Thick relations are grounded in relations such as blood relative, friend, lover, fellow Brooklynite, and so on, and many of these relations are partially constructed by collective memories and histories. The distinct and more robust moral obligations we may have to those we are thickly related to therefore depend on those with whom we share collective memories and histories, and what these memories and histories are. In so far as improvisation is implicated in communal memory and history formation, it thickens the moral relations one has with one's fellow improvisers.

Recognition of the fact that the "closer" someone is to us, the more intimate is the community we share in common, then the thicker are our moral bonds to them, also goes back to Greek antiquity. Stoic moral theory compels us, in so far as we are potentially virtuous agents, to have thick relations with as many people as we can. And it suggests a method

of accomplishing this by considering as many as one can as members of one's most intimate communities. What Solon and Pericles had an inkling of, Chrysippus and other Stoics formalized as part of their political and ethical theorizing via their doctrine of *oikeiosis*.

Such "communities of memory" are morally crucial. And if such communities are constructed by identity fixing stories of our histories, our collective memories, then all such acts of identity construction are morally crucial. For they serve either to "let in" more to the circle of those who one is thickly related to, or exclude one from this circle. Without such shared memories we care for others out of a sense of obligation, we care for those we share such memories with out of a sense of solidarity and closeness. Improvisation is a way to let in more to these circles, a method for achieving the Greek Stoic ideal by collectively constructing group memories and narratives.

And so we see a number of ways in which improvisation, community, identity and the potential for political change are linked. Of particular interest as models for new social configurations are improvisational organizations, such as Medea Electronique, which foster the development of hybrid art forms and trans-art collaborations. For such acts of artistic hybridization often crossing boundaries of genre, language, culture and race, forms communities that are themselves hybrid, and suggest ways of doing so with respect to society at large. To generalize, noting both the possibility of hybridity and its actual presence, may well be a necessary prerequisite for substantive political change towards robust multi-culturalism. Seeing examples of such hybridity that yield aesthetically rich objects, and so aesthetically rich experiences, may well help one see the desirability and rich potential of a more general social multi-culturalism. Inter-art collaborations, like those which Medea

Electronique engender, are models for a more general social multi-culturalism.

The questioning, therefore, of myriad genre-based essentialist beliefs serves to undermine more general social/cultural essentialist assumptions, and both reveals the possibility, and desirability, of more pluralistic systems. To see how the art products of a given community emerge out of a number of distinct histories and discourses is to recognize the hybrid and plural nature of this community. And when these art products are of interest, it suggests that the creation of such hybrid communities is not only possible, but also desirable. There may very well be conflicts when such distinct art-forms attempt to merge, but what matters is not so much the initial encounter, but the final destination.

Improvisation can therefore be seen as exemplifying what Susan Wolf has called an “aesthetics of uncertainty.” By refusing to create permanent art-works with changeless properties, by being open to contingencies, by being willing to reconsider “how it should go,” improvisation, and the communities that both valorize and practice it, are critiquing modes of thought that have assumed assorted objectivities and essentialisms. And does not the present situation we, as global citizens, find ourselves in beg for the shedding of old essentialist and colonialist ways of thought, for a reconsideration of how so many things “must go”, for the suggestion of new ideas from new quarters, for our leaders to admit that they do not have all the answers and that improvisation is called for, and that all interested parties need to join in? In our post-modern age, with both the crises and opportunities that multi-culturalism raise, and the pervasive interweaving of trans-national systems of finance, governance and business, often with unexpected and unpredictable consequences, a true ethical act needs to embrace uncertainty from the start.

This embrace of uncertainty, as an ethical gesture both part of, and suggested by, improvisation, is at the heart of how the Athens based multi-art collective Medea Electronique operates. This is no accident--do not confuse the embrace of uncertainty with chaos or lack of planning--but is a conscious decision on the part of the collective to engage communally and sympathetically with each other in the creation of improvised art. But more interesting still, Medea has run now for the past three years an artists residency, where an international group of artists, for the most part unknown to each other, not only create collective improvisatory art-works, but live improvisationally together for ten days. Rapidly a community is formed, based around the improvisational characteristics of uncertainty, contingency, responsibility and the nurturing of and openness towards identities differing from one's own. Such a community is far from utopian, for as we know utopia is a fictional ideal, but it is a community that forms on its own terms. The collective art that resulted from this residency, bear the hallmarks of the shared experiences and memories of the community the residents have formed, of the negotiation of the identities, needs, interests and potentials of each member, of our transformation of uncertainty, ignorance, and strangeness into art-works that recognize the essentially temporally bound and contingent nature of the agreements and compromises that the works reveal.

There is no one way to improvise, one way to so form a community, and Medea has experimented with assorted models. Let me compare how the first and second residency unfolded to demonstrate the varied, and at times opposed, ways in which improvising communities can improvise community, which reduce to different ways of approaching uncertainty and identity.

I want to stress that these are but two of the many ways that a diverse group can interact and come to form a community, each has its advantages and pitfalls, and what might be effective at one time, in one place, with one group, may fail miserably in a different context. Uncertainty is a constant companion! The first year the residency began with a group meeting to discuss what each member of the collective thought improvisation is, and how they saw their interests fitting into a single collective project to be presented some ten days later in Athens at the intimate and sympathetic Dance Studio Kinitiras. It was clear from the start that everyone realized that this was a fantastically short period of time for a group of relative strangers to conceive, implement and prepare a professional multi-media performance. And so such a meeting early on seemed a natural thing to have. What quickly emerged was that each resident not only had their own notion of what they wanted to accomplish and add to the collective, but that there was little agreement concerning what improvisation is, and how individuals artistic visions could, or should, be integrated into a single presentation. In retrospect this makes perfect sense, since no one yet knew of the identities of the other members of the collective. It is one thing to negotiate with “the other,” another thing altogether to negotiate with the unknown. In this sense there was not yet any community, there were no shared memories and experiences, and so no basis for each member to know how to relate to the others. Inevitably those members who already had interpersonal relations, or had particularly strong personalities, constructed an initial vision for the collective—a goal or telos for the group to aim for, a point we could all focus on in our attempt to form a community.

This was, and is, an effective gambit. The initial artificiality of having a group of diverse artists, from assorted countries, working in varied media, spanning a wide range of age and experience, was

addressed by agreeing on a common purpose, a single way to proceed. We now knew what to do next, how to begin. The big question was this—was this initial goal, this decision made as much *for* the collective as *by* the collective, but a method to get the ball rolling, so to speak, or an actual fixed aim of the residency? Had we decided something to try, a snippet of melody to play around with, or written a whole score, now to be followed, each member with their own predetermined part?

It became clear that there were a range of opinions about this, and that what was a good way to initially focus the group, and allow them to learn about each others interests and artistic visions, what was really an initial invitation for each resident to present their identity, was thought by others to have been a decision, once made, to be followed. This created some tensions. As individual residents came to understand each other there was a desire to revisit the question of what it was we were trying to accomplish. Residents now felt a greater sense of responsibility for the whole project, as they came to share experiences and art with each other. In the end we realized that the initial plan was just that, merely a template for moving forward, to reference Wittgenstein, a ladder to climb up, and then throw out. Once we had formed a community, facilitated to a great extent by the initial plan, we were in a position to communally create a work, to each take responsibility, and to integrate our identities into a communal identity, that both respected individuality, while creating a group identity. In the end we presented a single, seamless performance, parts of which, for those who knew, bore the hallmarks of individual residents' artistic visions, while other parts were more the product of the group identity, and others, improvised live, were the product of instantaneous negotiations. The event was a success, we had improvised a solution to the problem of how to quickly form a community, but that solution, by its very nature, had us directly confront our initial divergent

expectations, experiences and ideas. In a sense we had tried immediately to drive away uncertainty, and uncertainty threatened to destroyed us.

As a result of this experience there was a tacit understanding amongst the returning residents for the second year that a different method would be attempted. While we again needed to produce a well crafted performance in but ten days, we would allow uncertainty to linger around longer, to allow it to in a sense become a member of the residency, and so have our communal identity emerge in more fluid and unexpected ways.

This second year there was little if any pre-planning, the focus was on setting up a socially congenial atmosphere. We met, and socialized, with little if any talk of projects, timelines or methods to get collaborative work going. By about the third day some of the organizers of the residency quite rightly started to worry, “Is anything happening, is any art being planned or created?” Soon it became clear that there was no need to worry. Groups of residences of varied sizes were forming bonds of trust and friendships that soon issued forth with collaborations beginning from *an already established* mutual understanding and respect. Residents who might otherwise not have collaborated together, based on working in distinct media, or due to having very different conceptions of collaborative work, or not sharing a common language, found ways to work together, and the desire to do so, based on shared social experiences and the rapid development of friendships. For example, a group of residents who spent time together on the roof, late at night, staring at the stars, decided to use this experience to create a structured improvisation with a graphic score of the sky at night. A musician quietly playing on the balcony would be joined by a dancer, and soon a singer, which would attract a video artist, all being recorded by a sound artist, and viola!, a work was born. By day four the residency was a bustle of activity. And

when we had a “show and tell” of the emerging projects, others wanted to contribute to them since it was clear that they had emerged out of a shared sense of camaraderie and fun. Who does not want to join an emerging community that seems to be focused, enjoyable and creative? We easily found ways to conjoin projects, and where this was not deemed to be aesthetically necessary, we did not worry that distinct projects would somehow signal a lack of collaboration, for we knew we had formed a community, and were comfortable and confident with our collective decisions, even when the decision was not to create a work with the participation of every member.

This second residency had embraced uncertainty from the start, and used it, the random gatherings of residents, the unpredictable results of chance encounters during star-lit nights, to focus our artistic creation. We formed community in a more natural, if haphazard way, and upon returning to Athens for the performances we were, if anything, ill prepared for the relative and unavoidable chaos of trying to run a two-day event featuring a large number of creative Greek artists’ collectives. The solidarity we had formed so quickly as a group was threatened, in a sense, by having to modify our performance desires to fit in with the needs of others. Perhaps we had formed too rigid a community too quickly!

One thing we learned from both of these residencies, and it is a message that speaks both to social and artistic collectivities, both to how to live and how to improvise, is that conflict, in and of itself, might be desirable and unavoidable, since it is both the product of difference, and the fabric for the negotiation of difference. It is not conflict per se that is bad, but *unresolved* conflict. The setting of goals and aims for a collective that does not yet have a strong enough sense of its own identity so as to generate them themselves, may be necessary, but it may be equally necessary to go on to jettison and reject these goals, once

community is formed. One must be open to uncertainty, and the changing needs, wants and desires of emerging communities. Here one is reminded of John Coltrane's response to the question: "What is your relationship to music theory?" to which he replied, "You must learn it all, then throw it out."

It is still too early to distill what we have learnt from this third residency. In many ways we chose a middle ground between the planning of the first, and the freedom of the second. But one incident stands out, precisely concerning conflict and resolution. The sonic experiments of the ISE are often extreme, with respect to both pitch and volume. By its very nature, sound is difficult to escape from, and one evening the sounds produced by the ensemble were received by a member of the residency as, well, destructive to their personal sense of self and art. The resultant conflict, while short and sharp, did effect a change, indeed more than one, in both the sonic and social interactions that followed. Regardless of individual residency member's personal opinions concerning the legitimacy or truth of the opinion concerning music that was aired, it was respected for the sake of the community. While cause and effect is difficult to discern, the ISE jams that followed, via their new sense of the urgency for greater control, were aesthetically richer. One of the projects to be presented later this evening arose out of this conflict. Conflict resolution was here built into the very fabric of the art produced. While there may very well be debates about this episode to have on another day, the ethical response by the collective was real and immediate.

On this note I wish to end. There may be a message here for how to approach large social crises. One needs to be aware of old solutions, but also needs to start afresh with this knowledge at hand. For economic crises require improvisational responses. To improvise is often to agree

to disagree, to subsume the self into a collective without annihilating either.

The current crisis can be an opportunity for like-minded artists' collectives to work together, to improvise together, and so to model what such collectivity might bring about when expanded more generally to the populace. Perhaps the events of this weekend, here at the Onassis centre, can be a start, a model, for artistic activism, in the spirit of Solon, and Socrates, Pericles and Chyrsippus, towards a new, inclusive, participatory Greek community self-determined, self-aware, and ready to flexibly, improvisationally, articulate its own needs, and act creatively upon them.

For extreme times often suggest seemingly extreme measures. In another time, and another place, but a similar situation, Franklin D. Roosevelt staked his claim to become President of the United States on the following bold statement:

The country needs and, unless I mistake its temper, the country demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it: If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something. The millions who are in want will not stand by silently forever while the things to satisfy their needs are within easy reach. Oglethorpe University Commencement

Address 22 May 1932

This too is Medea Electronique's message. Wouldn't it be wonderful if Greek society were to improvise a collective and ethically sound solution to the present crisis, to respond with improvised music to the madness.