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Improvisation in the in-between: jazz, affect and artistic research

Chris Stover

<SLIDE 2> I'm going to start in an unlikely place for a discussion on jazz and artistic research: Baruch Spinoza's exploration of the nature of bodies and bodily relations in the second book of *Ethics*, a passage sometimes referred to as his "physical interlude." Among other things, Spinoza makes the following claims:

- <SLIDE 3> that the relative movement of a given body is the product of movements of other bodies with which it comes into contact;
- <SLIDE 4> that "all the ways in which a body is affected by another body follow from the nature of the affected body together with the nature of the body affecting it, so that one and the same body may move in various ways in accordance with the various natures of the bodies causing its motion; and, on the other hand, different bodies may be caused to move in different ways by one and the same body."
- <SLIDE 5> that bodies are "united" when an unvarying relation of movement is preserved between them;
- <SLIDE 6> that the unity of this composite body is retained even through "continuous change of component bodies";
- <SLIDE 7> and that a composite individual "can be affected in many ways and yet preserve its nature".

All of this unfolds through Proposition 13 in Book II of *Ethics* <SLIDE 8a>, in the middle of a longer rumination on the nature of mind. Throughout this longer passage we learn that, for Spinoza, mind and body are indeed separate domains, but that <SLIDE 8b> mind is predicated on the body and its actions and affections, and equally important, <SLIDE 8c> on *other* bodies. This is not just embodied cognition in the sense that we think with or through the body. Rather, <SLIDE 8d> thought for Spinoza occurs as a *result* of the movements of actions and affections. Thought always comes later. <SLIDE 8e> Philosopher Henri Bergson theorized this process by locating a pre-cognitive "zone of indetermination," a physiological and temporal gap between a stimulus and one's acting on that stimulus; for Bergson this is the original location of free will—the "beginning of freedom." (For those that have read Bergson, this is the passage in the first chapter of *Matter and Memory* about the purely impulsive *reactions* of so-called 'lower' organisms v. the *actions* of human agents.) Among Bergson's provocative points is that this zone of indetermination is the spacetime within which a next action is constituted, and—as the "beginning of freedom"—it is where passive impingements have the potential to be transformed into voluntary responses. <SLIDE 9-10—animation>

This voluntary action is what philosopher Gilles Deleuze would call <SLIDE 11a> a *selection* or *actualization* of virtual forces. <SLIDE 11b><SLIDE 11c> A body's history of interacting with encountered bodies *attunes* it to be affected in particular ways. <SLIDE 11d> Most important, it

become attuned to be affected by other bodies in certain ways rather than others, to have tendencies to respond within a relatively finite range of possible next actions or passions. To reiterate my original Spinozan point, it is the movement of affect stimulated by encounters with other bodies that contributes to the constitution of one's emergent identity. This is **<SLIDE 11e>** the “continuous change” Spinoza describes, through which an individual identity continues to inhere.

All of this, I believe, is profoundly important for understanding improvised music-making contexts. **<SLIDE 12 with illustration>** For several years now, I have been working within this framework to theorize different aspects of what happens when people make music together. **<SLIDE 13a>** I boil this down to two basic kinds of questions: **<SLIDE 13b>** (1) how can we come to understand how a particular musical performance came to be in the way it came to be, rather than in some other way, and **<SLIDE 13c>** (2) how can we use music-making or what Christopher Small calls *musicking* contexts as little laboratories for better understanding human subjectivity? How do we, on one hand, following Judith Butler **<SLIDE 13d>**, perform our emerging identities, and how, on the other hand, are our subjectivities constituted through the relations we find ourselves in?

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<SLIDE 14> There was a brief period not long ago—in some ways still very much alive—in which jazz was being considered as a metonym for certain kinds of social interactions conceived more broadly. The premise of these suggestions was that the lively ongoing process of a jazz performance offers a rich, contextually-specific and comparatively finite way of thinking through a certain kind of idealized human interaction; for example, action toward a shared goal through which a real democratic spirit pervades but in which the goal is itself only partially determined; that is, any number of satisfactory outcomes could be imagined. **<SLIDE 15>** Or with more political valence: jazz is the sound of freedom—not only revoicing the emancipatory cry of civil-rights-era black Americans, but perhaps suggesting a micro-societal template for collective action. Jazz's improvised nature is its most celebrated aspect, but its improvisatory movements operate within rather severe constraints; freedom in this context amounts **<SLIDE 16a>** (1) to a creative negotiation with sedimented ideological forces that embodies what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call the “undercommons”, and **<SLIDE 16b>** (2) to a minoritarian redeployment of a major language and a bending of its syntactic and semantic dimensions in previously unimagined ways.

I'd like to take a slightly different tack here, which does not deny any of these possibilities, but which perhaps enriches them by focusing on a few specific aspects of group interaction in jazz. In doing so I'm making this a question for artistic research, which I will formulate as a proper research question that operates within that hyphenated space.

First of all, let's provisionally agree that when jazz musicians play together, they are indeed working toward a shared goal that is itself open-ended within the constraints of certain contexts—**<SLIDE 17>** the tune, the micro-genre, the genealogical attunements of any given collection of participants, the nature of the gig, and so on. This leads to my second suggestion:

<SLIDE 18a> when jazz musicians *are* working together toward that shared, open-ended yet contextually constrained goal, they function as a kind of *composite body* in the sense that I've begun to spell out. They are a composite body to the extent that, as Spinoza suggests, <SLIDE 18b> an 'unvarying relation of movement is preserved between them'. The resonance between Spinoza's characterization and the notion of jazz musicians locking into a shared time-feel is compelling: movement, in this analysis, amounts to a kind of periodic entrainment, a being-together-in-groove. Moreso, we can use this illustration to refine Spinoza's conception, or at least lock onto some of its particular or potential registers, such as thinking about the relation between movement and time.

But also, the unity of the composite body, again quoting Spinoza, <SLIDE 18c> "is retained even through continuous change of component bodies." The component bodies—human and otherwise—are changing through the force of affective impingements that continuously re-infect and reterritorialize them. Here I want to theorize bodies in a more generously variegated way: <SLIDE 19a> the human bodies of interacting participants, of course, but also <SLIDE 19b> prosthetic human-instrument assemblages (hybrid or cyborg bodies), <SLIDE 19c> musical sounds as bodies (lending an overtly material dimension to sound that is often overlooked in sound studies discourse), and <SLIDE 19d> the bodies of spaces and surfaces. Here <SLIDE 20> is a small illustration that shows some aspects of all this.

I find it useful to bring in a recent hybrid word, <SLIDE 21a> *intra-action*, here—this is philosopher and physicist Karen Barad's word for <SLIDE 21b> the diffractive mutual relationality of human and non-human "agents", and it figures in my current research on affect and music-interactive contexts. So for example a musical gesture can be thought of as a body in the sense that it participates affectively in an ongoing context-formation. <SLIDE 21b> As such, it affects the other participants, like the performers who hear it and respond by redirecting in some salient way the performance trajectory they had been on—this is probably obvious. But affect moves doubly <SLIDE 22a>, and we can also say that the gesture itself is affected. It is affected <SLIDE 22b> (1) in the sense that its constellation of actual or potential meanings is taken up differently by different participants, each bringing their own attunement to the proceedings, <SLIDE 22c> (2) in the sense that it diffractively interferes with other ongoing gestures and vice versa, coloring not only how we experience each but how each might potentially be experienced, and <SLIDE 22d> (3) in the sense that some of the affective forces that it encounters "stick" to it, as philosopher Félix Guattari puts it, transforming its own meaning potential even while those meanings are being differentially taken up elsewhere in the ongoing context. This is just a small handful of possible ways of thinking about how affective relations flow between and contribute to the constitution of participating constituents of a composite body.

This leads to a crucial question. What does it mean for an improvised performance to cohere as something like what we might call the unvarying—but somehow also continuously changing—relation of movement of a composite body? This is kind of a background philosophical question, but it also leads to an actual, actionable artistic research question, which is: <SLIDE 23a> How can we study the multidirectional affective interplay at work in an improvised music performance,

in order to learn something concrete about the effects of purposeful interaction on human and non-human participants?

If this is my working research question, then how do I go about (a) fleshing it out into an actionable hypothesis, (b) more important, crafting an experimental design that robustly engages the terms of the question and that does so in an ecologically valid way, without falsifying or eliding the contextual complexity of the music-interactive process, and (c) more important still, doing so in a way that makes the research process itself unfold “as music might” **<SLIDE 23b>**, to follow an entreaty offered by Benjamin Boretz and James Randall a generation ago? Here are a few suggestions for how to proceed:

- (1) **<SLIDE 24a>** Following educational theorist John Law, “working within the mess”—refusing to reduce away the complexity: this means, to the extent possible, gathering my data from the real-life contexts of live performances in venues with audiences and all of the potential issues that might arise. This is absolutely crucial if I am to take seriously the notion that all kinds of bodies participate in the ongoing context-formation.
- (2) **<SLIDE 24b>** But also perform some contexts in a studio environment where we can get clean signals and do some much more accurate measuring—I suggest that this is, to an extent, also ecologically valid if done right, since the recording studio is also a natural habitat for jazz musicians.
- (3) **<SLIDE 24c>** Working from the assumption that we can only study affect through its effects, meaning we begin with an experienced phenomenon and from there back-form an array of more or less plausible conditions. Video and audio recording, transcription and analysis, structured and free ethnographic interviews and phenomenologically-oriented writing and rewriting are some of the tools that can be deployed for this task.
- (4) **<SLIDE 25a>** Working from my own partial, perspectival position as a jazz musician by locating my playing self right in the middle of the action, as one of the affectively attuned prosthetically embodied participants. This also involves carefully engaging my own genealogy to begin to get at the nature of my own affect attunement.
- (5) **<SLIDE 25b>** Transcribe, analyze, measure: work toward getting at the more elusive qualitative differences in degree by engaging the more concrete quantitative differences in kind that we can actually measure and compare. If we continue to cleave to Spinoza’s ontology, these are not separate domains but different modes of material existence.
- (6) **<SLIDE 25c>** A phenomenological tenet: “describe, don’t explain”—resist explanation until a tremendous amount of descriptive evidence is in. And another, practice imaginative variation—continually come back to the same descriptive evidence to see what else is there, and in what other, even novel ways any bit of data can be considered as part of multifaceted whole.
- (7) And responding to my Boretz/Randall entreaty a moment ago, comporting myself though all of this as a jazz musician, developing motifs, riffing on themes, allowing myself to be affected by new contextual redistributions.

So, all of this is to propose a few provocations for thinking further about jazz’s potential as a robust form of artistic research. **<SLIDE 26a>** I’m latching onto a specific kind of artistic

research here, one which considers collective artistic practice as a window into questions that are being asked within the social sciences: not only of subjectivity, interaction, democracy, creativity, and so on, but really nuanced questions about things like:

- <SLIDE 26b> place-making and collective living
- <SLIDE 26c> intersubjectivity
- <SLIDE 26d> neurodiversity
- <SLIDE 26e> politics and aesthetics
- <SLIDE 26f> posthuman ethics

In terms of all of these registers I want to reiterate the metonymic nature of what I'm thinking about here: collective jazz performance as a microcosm of social structures/processes, the stuff of the utopian ascriptions I described earlier. Where jazz becomes important is in its radically *limited* nature. Just a few musicians in any given instance. The quite short time constraint of a single tune or set. The immanent constraints of spaces, instruments, The transcendental constraints of chord progression, micro-style, performance etiquette. The shared genealogical conditions expressed by the fact that many or most participants have listened to the same recordings, learned the same tunes, played in the same kinds of settings, engaged the same kinds of theoretical and pedagogical materials, and on and on. We have here a particularly *agential* kind of homogeneity—not of geography or language, not *quite* of custom or ideology—but of active buying-into of a set of practices and ways of being-in-the-world. <SLIDE 27>