

### Improvising Philosophy: Thoughts on Teaching and Ways of Being

Harmony Bench

I teach in the Department of Dance at the Ohio State University, where the majority of our students are engaged in honing their craft as movement artists, whether they ultimately intend to be performers, choreographers, teachers, or all of the above.<sup>1</sup> In Fall 2014, I taught a dance improvisation course, called “Being Here, Being With, Being Together.” I took the opportunity to set up a space in which we might draw out ways that dance improvisation could teach us something more than how to acutely feel sensation and materialize intellection through movement. Or rather, I hoped that through focused engagement with the thinking-feeling and feeling-thinking of dance improvisation, we might also cultivate alternate modes of being and acting in the world.

When this course began, we were coming out of a summer that sank with the weight of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, of Ferguson and #blacklivesmatter, a long summer that seeped into previous months and years to include the likes of Trayvon Martin and Oscar Grant, and persisted into the autumn with John Crawford III and Tamir Rice. That summer reached a crescendo with “Hands up, Don’t shoot,” but it had not yet ended when fall arrived. Perhaps it will never end, because the refrain of fatal racism is not one that invites closure. We therefore used this dance improvisation course to reflect on contemporary political thought regarding life and livability. As Kent de Spain has suggested, dance improvisation acts “not as a vehicle for showmanship but as an entry into an investigation of the relationship of self to the world we inhabit” (2014, 13). What better modality to discern possibilities for living together, and to confront their limits than a dance improvisation course?

A couple of caveats: 1) I am a beginning teacher of improvisation; 2) I have never previously written on dance pedagogy or pedagogical experiments conducted in studio or classroom settings. But this journal, *Performance Matters*, and this special issue on performance and pedagogy, explicitly ask us to consider what matters in teaching performance practices. For me, what matters is the ways movement improvisation allows us to test, experiment with, and play alongside philosophical concepts in arenas carved out for exploration and discovery rather than arenas geared toward artistic or scholarly production per se. While my scholarly work is what I call practice-informed and explicitly not affiliated with the discourses of practice-based research, the language of the latter does reflect my approach to teaching students of dance. As Kim Vincs has observed,

Studio-based research in dance . . . shifts the focus of dance research from the idea that dance is a product, a repository of knowledge or ideas that can be interrogated and interpreted to the notion of dance as a field in which knowledge is produced. . . . Rather than dances being the outcomes of thinking done previously, dances are the actual process of thinking, and this process is the core methodology of studio-based dance research. (2014, 100)

---

**Harmony Bench** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Dance at The Ohio State University. Her writing can be found in such journals as *Dance Research Journal*, *The International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, *Participations*, and *The International Journal of Screendance*, which she co-edits with Simon Ellis. Her book, *Dance as Common: Movement as Belonging in Digital Cultures*, is under contract with the University of Minnesota Press.

Whereas Vincs suggests that dances themselves are processes of thinking, I would suggest that *dancing*, in this case improvised dancing, is where we find thought in process. Such corporeal thinking is not about entraining a body toward a given choreography, but about inhabiting and cultivating habits of mind and body. Such thought draws from both technical knowledge and personal experience to craft ephemeral social relationships in the studio that can rehearse and intervene in the social choreographies that both enable and constrain our performances of everyday life. More to the point, as Randy Martin has argued, dancing is a “kinesthetic practice that puts on display the very conditions through which the body itself is mobilized” (2007, 217–18). How might dance improvisation not only reveal these conditions but also reorient them? How might self-composition at the level of the group or collective foster new social arrangements beyond the space of the classroom? And as we asked over and over in this course, how can we engage dance improvisation as a life practice—which is to say, not only a life-long practice but a practice through which life itself, *bios* and *zoe*, is the focus? What techniques for living might be developed through such a practice of improvisation?<sup>2</sup> As a form of self-fashioning, to what extent is movement improvisation also a *worlding* (Nancy [1996] 2000) and even, perhaps, a “form-of-life” (Agamben [2011] 2013)?

Rather than study dance improvisation independently of political and performance philosophies, keeping each in its respective domain, the members of this course tackled them together over seven weeks. A mixture of undergraduate dance majors and graduate students, fourteen of us in all, moved with Erin Manning (2009), Elizabeth Grosz (2008), Judith Butler (2013), Bernice Johnson Reagon ([1981] 2000), Jacques Rancière ([2008] 2009), and others, with physical practice offering a way to think through the texts—*performing* philosophy, setting it in motion by transforming the texts into scores that structured our movement investigations. Our collective practices were buttressed by weekly private and public practices such that the themes for each week—Freedom, Relationality, Sensation, Solitude, Recognition and Responsibility, and The Productive Non-Coherence of Community—were explored individually, collectively, and publicly. My particular concern as a teacher was exploring what Rachmi Diyah Larasati has described as a somatic experience of inclusion (2013, 12), without that inclusion being predicated on sameness, a common sensibility or sensorium (Rancière, 2010).

This was a university dance course, so inclusions and exclusions were already implicit in the populations that were invited to participate, yet students brought different styles into our collective practices, with their histories, training, and epistemological frameworks. Classical jazz, release technique, ballet, animation, and a little contact improv: the point was not to reduce our possibilities to the narrow field of gestures we shared in common, it was to manifest a community of movement through what Susan Foster calls “co-motion” (2002, 108), an unruly but accommodating being-together rooted in what Simone Forti describes as an “emotional posture of continual dilation” ([1974] 1998). Open wide. Wider. Now deepen, soften.

\*

Walking, only, to begin. Meandering through the space, discovering it anew at a pace set by each participant. Some rush, verging on a run, while others hesitate or halt. A rhythm emerges, a consensus punctuated by shifts of energy or direction and broken by the irregularity of my own combinations of crutching and hopping along after an Achilles tear added unfamiliar apparatus to this most familiar of preparatory steps—the ritual of walking before an improvisation. A glance, a

gesture, an invitation extended; it is accepted or refused or unnoticed without preference or judgment.

*If we agree to move together, how do we move? What does this “co-motion” look like, as we shift ourselves and the relations between us, manifesting this unruly “we” through collective articulations?* Erin Manning suggests that “when articulation becomes collective, a politics is made palpable whereby what is produced is the potential for divergent series of movements. This is a virtual politics, a politics of the not-yet. . . . politics in the making” (2009, 27). This not-yet, semantically aligned with communities and democracies to-come, is not a future to be realized but a futurity without telos. A politics of the not-yet that produces and gathers within it divergent potentials is nothing other than a practice. Practice is the thing. Practice does not make perfect, it makes potential. Only the doing then, and when the doing is done, it is still not finished. It continues to resound, making other potentials possible, spinning out world after world, “as many worlds as it takes to make a world,” says Jean-Luc Nancy ([1996] 2000, 15).

*If we agree to move together, what kind of world can hold our difference? How can we create a world for being-with, a with-ness that is a witness that authenticates my own and your own being-here, that validates and testifies to our presence, our co-articulation that belongs neither to you nor me, but to us, now. A gaze returned with eyes exploded across a body where eyes become hands become a we shaping mutuality through holding, caring, and support. What kind of voluntary vulnerability is required in this dilated emotional posture—an openness that also opens onto hurt? And when does such exposure become intolerable—too painful to sustain? Nancy argues that “existence is *with*: otherwise nothing exists” ([1996] 2000, 4), yet coexistence is “Always subject to weak and unpleasant connotations, . . . an ‘unsociable sociability’” ([1996] 2000, 43). Coexistence is the social choreography that enables and constrains our Being: the irreducible plurality that offers with-ness as well as withdrawal, compassion as well as cruelty.*

In this course, we were all committed to our coexistence. It is difficult to articulate commitment as an ethical orientation to a practice when commitment has become an aesthetic commodity. Audiences have come to equate commitment, qua performance of sacrificial devotion, with “good dancing,” and young dancers have come to know it as the pinnacle of self-expression. However, commitment as an attitude need not look like commitment as an aesthetic.

Against this backdrop, in this committed albeit temporary community, are a trickster and a novice—one a constant tease, the other uncertain and therefore deliberate in her approach to movement. The novice’s face reveals a cerebral rather than sensory or relational motivation in her movement. She’s talking herself through, like a surgeon before her very first cut. The other playfully provokes her, eliciting a few smiles. Trickster is buoyant, quickly changing levels and directions, peeking over shoulders and through legs. Novice watches trickster closely but remains unflustered by her antics, and trickster does not tire of finding spaces where novice has left room for her to enter. Old man joins them, old in energy, not in age. He rarely leaves the vertical; his legs are always planted deep, leaving his upper body and torso free to sway loosely. With his hands, he recounts forgotten stories in a forgotten tongue. His presence immediately calms trickster, who relaxes into his stolidity. She drapes herself over his shoulders like a wet dress hung over a chair after a romp in the rain. Novice encircles them and then departs. They follow, momentarily tethered to her vector of energy, pulled along behind her until their momentum sends them spinning into new encounters.

Rancière suggests that aesthetic experiences—and here I would suggest that dance improvisers create aesthetic experiences for and amongst themselves rather than outside viewers—offer “a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in and the way in which they are ‘equipped’ to adapt to it” ([2008] 2009, 72). These multiple connections and disconnections create new communities from their alternate sensory distributions. But, like political action, the results of this sensuous reconfiguration and bodily capacitation cannot be foreseen. There is no causal relationship that links aesthetic experiences to specific, predictable effects in governance or social relations. Which is why maintaining a practice of improvisation is not about realizing an idealized community in the future, but of rehearsing and enacting models of communities, worlds upon worlds, in the present.

For Rancière, artistic processes and productions that seek social and political transformation as their proper endpoint misunderstand the nature of both politics and art and can only be a disappointment insofar as they will never be able to deliver on their promises. Instead, Rancière suggests that the link between the domains of aesthetics and politics rests in “a shift from a given sensible world to another sensible world that defines different capacities and incapacities, different forms of tolerance and intolerance. What occurs are processes of dissociation: a break in a relationship between sense and sense—between what is seen and what is thought, what is thought and what is felt. Such breaks can happen anywhere and at any time. But they cannot be calculated” ([2008] 2009, 75). Given that the course came out of an attempt to grapple with the fatal effects of anti-black racism and other considerations of 21st-century precariousness, what is the benefit of distinguishing aesthetics from politics in a course that explicitly brought the two together? In part, it is to recognize the limits of artistic practice as political praxis, but it is also to emphasize the importance of imagining otherwise, or as Augusto Boal has argued, rehearsing revolution ([1974] 1985).

Practitioners bring different agendas to their improvisations (de Spain 2014), and for the purposes of this course, we were interested in exploring improvisation as a life practice. Such a practice is not deployed toward developing set choreography or even for the purpose of performing a process as a quasi-theatrical event, though we all practised in view of others. Instead of these now-common approaches, we engaged dance improvisation as a laboratory for living. That is to say, we wanted to discover ways in which, as a practice, improvisation assists in developing techniques for living,<sup>3</sup> articulating where and how we live, and what kinds of lives we wish to make possible. We developed exercises around seeing and being seen, which included abandoning embarrassment and judgment; corporeal attentiveness, including sensitivity to and awareness of environment; affective and energetic modulation; accommodating, supporting, resisting, and withdrawing from others; and articulating points of difference and commonality without reifying either, which also included interrogations of commitment, persuasion, and compromise. Finally, we investigated ways of finding and making space with and without displacing others.

Examining the social projects to which we voluntarily and involuntarily lend our bodies, we opened ourselves to the investigation of other possible projects—not to dictate their outcome, but to make them available through the very process of our co-motion. Kim Vincs remarks that dancing “bring[s] together a range of ideas, stories and ways of moving to produce a danced subjectivity” (2014, 110). This danced subjectivity is a form-of-life—not in the total collapse of life and law as Agamben describes in his analysis of monastic lives, although many artists disavow any distinction between their life and their work. But in the context of this course, over the span of a short seven weeks, we pursued a microcosmic life-law, a score that demanded continuous exploration into the relation between self and sensory and social worlds, that asked us not only to discover but to invent

worlds predicated on our coexistence, on the knowledge that while it seems that we cannot live together, this is nevertheless our mandate.

In an economic environment that demands rhetorical embellishment of how innovative or transformational every educational experience is, I wish to make only small claims regarding this short course. In pursuing dance improvisation in the context of livability, in developing an improvisatory form-of-life, we did not change the world. But large-scale change is impossible without first imagining worlds upon worlds in which lives, including #blacklives, are livable.

## Notes

A version of this paper was presented as “Improvisation and Philosophy: Being-with, Being-in-common” at the 2015 Performance Philosophy conference in Chicago.

1. PhD students are in the minority compared to those pursuing degrees in creative practice at the graduate and undergraduate levels.
2. Here I differ from Ben Spatz’s recent articulation of technique in *What a Body Can Do* (2015). Though Spatz acknowledges the reciprocal relationship between technique and practice, he emphasizes that technique structures practice. While acknowledging the same in principle, I would prefer to emphasize how techniques emerge from practice.
3. In using the term “technique,” I am not implying adherence to a specific technique of improvisation. Rather, I wish to suggest that dance improvisation can assist in articulating approaches to, methods for, or ways of living.

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio. (2011) 2013. *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*. Translated by Adam Kotsko. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Boal, Augusto. (1974) 1985. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Translated by Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride. New York: Theater Communications Group.
- Butler, Judith, and Athena Athanasiou. 2013. *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. Cambridge: Polity.
- De Spain, Kent. 2014. *Landscape of the Now: A Topography of Movement Improvisation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Forti, Simone. (1974) 1998. *Handbook in Motion*. Hooksett: Cummings Printing.
- Foster, Susan Leigh. 2002. *Dances that Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 2008. *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Larasati, Rachmi Diyah. 2013. *The Dance that Makes You Vanish: Cultural Reconstruction in Post-genocide Indonesia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Manning, Erin. 2009. *RelationScapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Martin, Randy. 2007. *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. (1996) 2000. *Being Singular-Plural*. Translated by Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Spatz, Ben. 2015. *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research*. London: Routledge.
- Rancière, Jacques. (2008) 2009. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London: Verso.

- . 2010. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Translated by Steven Corcoran. London: Continuum.
- Reagon, Bernice Johnson. (1981) 2000. "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century." In *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by Barbara Smith, 343–55. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Vincs, Kim. 2014. "Rhizome/Myzone: A Case Study in Studio-Based Dance Research." In *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Inquiry*, edited by Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, 99–112. London: I. B. Tauris.