THEORIZING IMPROVISATION

INSTRUCTOR: Professor George E. Lewis

In the 20th Century, improvisation in the contemporary arts has served as a symbol of new models of social organization that foreground agency, history, memory, identity, personality, freedom, embodiment, cultural difference and self-determination. Particularly in the contemporary arts since 1950, issues concerning the nature and practice of improvisation repeatedly emerge, including the role of improvisation in mediating cross-cultural, transnational and cyberspatial (inter)artistic exchanges that produce new conceptions of identity, history and the body, and how improvisation could emerge as a key element in emerging postcolonial forms of aesthetics and cultural production. Improvisation is viewed by many as facilitating direct intervention in political, social, economic and scientific discourses, promoting an awareness of intercultural and transnational discourses. The practice is often viewed as providing an atmosphere for acknowledgments and articulations of difference that employ expressive means in challenging totalizing narratives that seek to reify notions of the role of creative expression in society. The political implications of improvisative activity include an understanding of how improvisation is framed by both dominant and subaltern peoples.

Given the gradual emergence of a new understanding of improvisation as central to the creative arts in the late 20th and early 21st Century, it is especially paradoxical that until recently, the direct study of improvisation has not been an important part of contemporary theorizing in academic music or art practice. Taking advantage of the recent surge in critical literature that addresses improvisation, this seminar, will explore in depth the rapidly growing body of work that addresses practices, theories, histories, and ethnographies of improvisation. The goal of the seminar is to collectively move, via directed reading and discussion, toward the development of new and interdisciplinary critical discourses on improvisation that allow students to engage with the wide range of issues and topics in the emerging area of improvisation studies.

The seminar will explore how improvisation expresses notions of ethnicity, race, nation, class, and gender, as well as how improvisation fosters socialization, enculturation, cultural formation and community development. Other important topics include the place of improvisation in the traditional media of music, dance, and theatre, as well as in new media, sound art, and performance; human-computer interaction; issues of race, gender, and class; creativity studies and the corporate world; cognitive and psychological analyses; debates on improvisation and indeterminacy in diverse contemporary and experimental music scenes; first-person narratives, ethnographies, and theoretical discourses on improvisation; and scholarly modes of theorizing and documenting improvisation, including jazz studies and ethnomusicological studies; and the relationship
between improvisation and the practice of everyday life.

**WEEKLY TOPICS AND REQUIRED READINGS:**

**Week 1: Introduction**

**Week 2: Artists' personal accounts**


**Week 3: Sociology and linguistics**


**Week 4: Psychological approaches**


**Week 5: Ethnomusicological approaches**


**Week 6: Philosophy, Aesthetics, Critical Theory, Literary Theory**


**Week 7: Women's Studies**


Week 8: Methodologies


Week 9: Histories and Politics


**Week 10: Artists as theorists/historians/polemicists**


Rzewski, Frederic, Parma Manifesto (unpublished)


**Week 11: Experimentalisms**


**Week 12:**
Thursday, Nov 25 (no class--Thanksgiving)

**Week 13: Computer interactivity**


Week 14: Conclusion

Resources


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