Improvisational Necessity and its After Affects

Sher Doruff

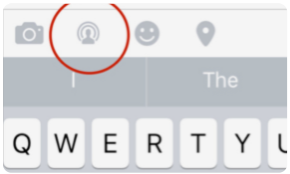
Essay – February 20, 2017

Sher Doruff examines improvisation in the potentially activist use of mobile devices, focusing on the recent 'moving of the squares' that describes Black Lives Matter. Doruff observes that in live-streaming acts of injustice, our real time responses reveal what is most necessary to us. The author brings in Brian Massumi's work on affect, and Fred Moten's and George Lewis's research within the realm of African-American theory, to better understand how, in ensemble, we improvise to seek a justice-to-come, but one we are not willing to wait for.

'Let us not then make the future our project, let us improvise.'
– Fred Moten

'You make clear that affect is before emotion, feeling, and perception. Is there any thing before "affect"? – There is everything before affect: participation.'[1]
– WTF Affect in discussion with Brian Massumi

'[...] improvisation's ubiquity becomes the modality through which performance is articulated.'
– George Lewis



Preambling: Tapping the Live Icon

Arguably, the once weighty decision to mass distribute post-event documentation is increasingly pre-empted by the *in real time in common* sensibility of live-streaming. Since Eric Kluitenberg published his propositional paper on affect space *[onlineopen.org/affect-space]* in March 2015, much has occurred. The concerns and techniques of citizen journalism, instrumentally amplified through social media technologies, affectively proliferate.

Within the relational nexus of somatic and silicon technologies, the degree of spontaneity at play in fingertip gestures opens up an inquiry into embodied preparedness familiar to musicians, actors, dancers and athletes. Unfolding the discourse of improvisation generated through the African-American critical theory of Fred Moten and George Lewis and its resonance with the affective politics of Brian Massumi may point to an iteration of *modes of existence* that speaks to many issues churning in the Technology / Affect / Space (T / A / S) thread in *open!* Like Kluitenberg, I find Massumi's work invaluable in parsing the concerns of the relational dynamics in mediated affective space – in positing propositions for 'thinking-feeling' goings on. Weaving the affective qualities of Massumi's politics with the discourse of Moten and Lewis on improvisation affords an interesting concrescence – one way of teasing out improvisation's preparedness from quotidian action / reaction in the event-space of *something doing*.

The act of improvising as an activist intervention within the generic construct of social media 'virtuosity' is the speculation at hand. It problematizes the performative impulse entangling human / nonhuman agency via the smartphone and the mediated intuition these actions imply. Improvisation is explored in these pages through the lens of African-American theory and practice. For this writer, it's the most vital means of approaching the 'movement of the squares' that is Black Lives Matter. The question that looms between the lines and within the premise of this essay is in a phrase attributed to jazz musician Muhal Richard Abrams: 'Improvisation is a human response to necessity.' This sentiment expounded upon by Moten, Lewis and others underwrites the yes, no or maybe ubiquity of improvisation as a life technique.

So, with the spontaneous and / or / would be habitual gesture of reaching for the smartphone when an exceptional occurrence percolates, this questions stands out: *Does the act of framing a nascent event – perceptually preparing for the unforeseen, the capture of a being there, meet the criteria of improvisation as necessity?*

Enter the Summer of 2016

Notable events in July alone included:

1. 6 July: Shooting incidents caught in the act in the United States. Continuing of the relentless march of damning evidence against police abuse of African Americans. Perhaps no other incident is as tellingly affective as the live-streamed death of Philandro Castile in Minnesota. Captured by his poised girlfriend Diamond Reynolds on Facebook Live, the video feed goes viral immediately.
2. 6 July: Poke mon Go released. Its Situationist uptake an apparent de rive derivative; it is a veritable 'constructed situation'. The urban drift app is troubled by a more ferocious Debordian politics of the spectacle unleashed through Pikachu's presence on a street corner near you.
3. 7 July: Ramsey Orta, the man who took the video of the choking death of Eric Garner by Staten Island police in 2014 takes a plea to drug charges, citing exhaustion from defending his profile to police since the incident.
4. 15 July: The iconic 'Lady in Red' of Gezi Park morphed into the failed coup of July 2016 which saw President Recip Tayyip Erdog an appear on local TV framed by a smartphone screen. The irony of this image has been much noted as Erdog an has notoriously levelled critique at social media technologies. The ease with which the amateur app byLock – supposedly used in the run-up to the coup by dissenters – was easily hacked, enabled Erdog an's salvaged government to arrest thousands. The successes and failures of social media technology as a (dis)organizing tool for whatever side in whatever conflict attracted a plethora of comments, tweets, likes and hacks.

These happenings interweave a variety of tactical responses that generate large-scale affective engagement. Twitter feeds, perhaps the most prevalent form of spontaneous call and response will be sidelined here to focus on the impact of live-streaming. The question at hand returns: Do improvisational techniques have play in the expanded discourse of the 'movement of the squares'? The easy answer is: 'Of course. Improvisation is an everyday response to living life.' But the question begs more study. I hope to assemble in ensemble voices that feel relevant to the ensuing discussion. This essay can only give a glimpse into the poignant density of the texts referenced. The concerns broached here are seminal to the discourse of improvisation and Karen Barad's notion of response-ability: 'Touching is a matter of response. Each of "us" is constituted in response-ability. Each of "us" is constituted as responsible for the other, as the other.' [2]

Improvisation in Ensemble as a Response to Necessity

Many artists and theorists, especially those commenting from the perspective of Black Studies have likened improvisation to life. We can find some of the most provocative thinking on the topics of improvisation, freedom and necessity in the work of African-American artist / theorists Fred Moten and George Lewis. Both, like Abrams, position improvisation as a response to necessity. In a recent interview Moten speaks of improvisation, framed by the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri as 'corresponding to the necessity of paying attention to our history, to the history that we are, the history that we live.' He continues, 'improvisers prepare, they prepare for the unforeseen…' [3] This preparation is an acute attunement, an attentive embodied listening that jazz improvisation requires. [4] Though any inference of mobile technologies as instruments is oblique here, his remarks provide a springboard for further analysis of improvisation as a *practice becoming perception*, [5] 'open to anybody… a practice of active engagement with the world.' [6] Moten and Lewis frame improvisation as generative, collaborative, ensemble totality, [7] techniques and tactics of 'composing *in real time in common* as an explicit social practice.' [8] It's what Moten thinks of as 'an improvisation or anarchronization of the syntax of history and the event.' [9] Improvising through encounters with the world. Their analysis relies on the traditions of African-American music and its colonial history and both are interested in what might be called the expanded field of improvisation, its adisciplinary reach. [10] Their approach to improvisation bares resemblance to the affective hit of Massumi's *worldings*, [11] that feeling of interruption that signals transition, change. Importantly, both Moten and Lewis insist on the improvisatory organization of the 'ensemble' at its most inclusive.

As Moten describes it:

> Because what I'm after is an asystematic, anarchic organizing principle (I note the oxymoron), a notion of totality and (ensemble-)tonality at the conjunction of the pantonal and 'that insistent previousness evading each and every natal occasion.' But wait: the point here is not to make an analogy between the deconstruction of the center and the organization of the jazz ensemble: it's to say that that organization is of totality, of ensemble in general. [12]

Similarly, Lewis describes improvisation:

> […] as exploration, discovery and response to conditions, part of a ubiquitous human practice of real-time analysis, generation, manipulation, exchange, and transformation of meaning, mediated by (among other factors) the body, history, temporality, space, memory, intention, material culture, and diverse methodologies. My claim is that improvisation is fundamental to the existence and survival of every human formation, from the individual to the community, through the postnational body to the species itself. [13]

Just how improvisation, as an ensemble of difference, affects / is affected by ethico-politico-aesthetics in the broadest assertion of 'space' as co-extensive co-existence, is the question at hand in the T / A / S thread. But more questions arise. The transition from affective potential to emotional response, how does that happen? Individuating the singular in the ensemble, how to think-feel that distinction? How do action and reaction reciprocate? How are instinct, intuition and reason enabled in the 'movement of the squares,' in the adrenaline-laced emerging situatedness of the indeterminate? How does a becoming ensemble prepare for the unforeseen?

Affect's Keywords and the Micropolitical Commotion of the Ensemble

The Keywords for Affect Supplement that concludes Massumi's *The Power at the End of the Economy* (2015) is a useful resource for parsing the machinations of improvisation as practice, for becoming ensemble. In this glossary, terms such as microshock, microperception, pure experience, bare life, tendencies, etc., are addressed and configured in relation to each other. These keywords afford clues towards differentiating affective capacities and entanglements as well as distinguishing process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead's two modes of perception: ***presentational immediacy*** (sensing data) and ***causal efficacy*** (the situated context and temporal continuity of sensation). Moten's paying attention to anarchronized histories while improvising the living of life resonates with this Whiteheadian construct. [14]

A few excerpts from Massumi's glossary:

> **Shock (cut / flow).** [...] In every shift of attention there is an interruption, a momentary cut in the mode of onward deployment of life.
>
> **Affective Politics.** [...] is an art of emitting the interruptive signs, triggering the cues, that attune bodies while activating their capacities differentially.
>
> **Aesthetic Politics.** [...] The aesthetic act [...] prolongs the suspension of the cut, the commotion of interference and resonance, gives it duration, so that it passes the threshold of perceptibility and is consciously felt as potential. [15]

This prolongation of the cut, the being 'in the break' concurs with Moten's explication of black aesthetics in his book of the same title (2003). In a much earlier paper on improvisation and the totalizing event that is *Rodney King* he developed a notion of atemporalized ensemble instigated by the capture on cassette video of the police beating of a black man in Los Angeles in 1991, a precursor to the Diamond Reynolds live-stream video. The observing, listening, improvising public variegates in the complex event that is *Rodney King*: 'rather ensemble – improvisational and anarchronic totality – is given for us here as a possibility in the moment at which we ''linger in the music,'' in which action becomes a possibility to be enacted.' [16]

That *lingering in the music* is compatible with what Moten might now call ***study***, an adisciplinary being with difference that trembles through the 'ecstatic temporality' of ensemble time, anarchronically defying a past / present / future situatedness. It's what Donna Haraway calls 'staying with the trouble'. [17] For Moten this improvising ensemble time resonates with the 'possibility of justice' that is ***not*** constrained by ***a justice to come***. It lingers in the music 'to improvise: to get more than a glimpse, an intimation.' [18]

Flush with Moten's ensemble tonality we visit Massumi's glossary again:

> ***Belonging.*** *In affect, we are never alone. That's because affects in Spinoza's definition are basically ways of connecting, to others and to other situations, of affecting and being affected. They are our angle of participation in processes larger than ourselves. With intensified affect comes a stronger sense of embeddedness in a larger field of life – a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and to other places.* [19]

Marginalizing a justice-to-come emphasizes the deep listening that ensemble time activates; the wit***h***nessing of a felt 'more than' that ***in-forms*** participation. What is at stake in speculating on the affective power of an ***in real time in common*** occurrence modulated through a handheld live-stream may be a form of the organizational improvisation Moten calls for:

> That form is improvisation itself, the political direction through the binary and its internal oscillation in the name of totality which is itself, the improvisation through the opposition of description and prescription, interpretation and change. [20]

Improvising is tasked with belonging, with a lingering. It plays ensemble tonalities through techniques of affective attunement. As it morphs from jamming to live-streaming does it, can it, sound as the music sounds?

The Tendency to Frame the Nascent Event

Let's trouble the ensemble with the mobile apparatus, with a new instrument. The spontaneous framing of a nascent event is excited by a tendency, riding a wave of felt potential that territorializes an event to come. The impulse, saturated with readiness potential that will grab the phone, select the app / device, tap the button. When live-streaming the movement of the squares, it operates in atemporal, anarchronic superposition as the data territorializes, deterritorializes and reterritorializes. This is Massumi's tendentious intensity, a bodily transition whose 'powers to affect and be affected are addressable by a next event…' [21] The Spinozian reciprocity of affecting and being affected plays out in the decisive fingertip gesture of present futurity that captures and sends event data. The affectively reasoned 'decision' to widely distribute an as yet undigested, microperceived becoming-event is enacted through bodily intensity. Intensity fuelled by belonging to and with an indeterminate unfolding.

In the 'totalizing' occurrence of Reynold's live-stream, her poised demeanour crystalized into a hyper-affective field of not yet emotion, there is much that precedes and in-forms the event. Black Lives Matter comes to matter with astonishing improvisatory preparedness. Like the attuned jazz musician that plays the ensemble situation, Reynolds adapted to the polyrhythms unfolding. Readiness potential. [22] Grabbing her phone, opening Facebook, tapping the 'live' icon, calming her daughter, negotiating with a gun in her face, listening to the moans of her dying boyfriend. How do we, how does she, linger in the music of the *in real time in common*? How does she sound?

> I wanted everyone in the world to know how much [the police] tamper with evidence and how much they manipulate our minds. I wanted it to go viral so that people could determine themselves as to what was right and what was wrong. [23]

In Reynolds's situation, readiness potential comes equipped with a compositional attitude, or at least we might say, a desire to distribute. Distinguishing improvisation from composition has a long, contentious history in the discourse of performance and music studies. Lewis's objection to that binary speaks / ***sounds*** to the intuitive actions of Reynolds. [24] But can the extraordinary example of Reynolds's composure, her improvisation as necessity, be extoled alongside trillions of reactionary tweets, impulsive sextings, selfie promiscuity and other trigger-finger media of mass distribution? Are skilful social media techniques now part of the improvised compositional canon?

How Some Thing Comes to Matter

That the relational dynamics of technology, affect and space are increasingly entangled in events of capital 'P' political, micropolitical and cultural significance is beyond dispute. That mobile technologies and social media continue to play an agential role in public space assemblies, protest and the performance of resistance is also undeniable. That said, the perceptual operations and consequent decision-making by which, through which, these emergent relations unfold is open to constructive speculation. It is perhaps easy to argue that response-ability addressed through a screen-based apparatus is a 'practice becoming perception.'

Being at the ready to frame, to touch, a nascent event may require social media virtuosity, or perhaps, voyeuristic paparazzi skills. Or can we simply call the performance of these skills improvisation?

The proposition that seems to be laying itself out here entails bodily transitions that capture and disseminate media as improvisational compositions; the real-time analysis of intra-active comings-to-matter in the expanded field of public space (analogue and digital). It entails taking a closer look at the nexus of relational dynamics that 'trigger' grabbing the phone, swiping the app, pointing the camera, thumbing the keyboard and, significantly / representationally, pressing the send icon.

And then there is the indeterminate leap of tapping the live icon.

Unpacking the multitasking reflexes induced by smartphone usage might provide a springboard for parsing the two sides of the affect coin concerning mobile technology: the incipient force of the impulse to capture and the actualizing of affect as a distributed product with all its potential exponential effect.

The materialized media in the form of image, moving image, audio, text, attracts variations of affective attunement. Under the umbrella of public space phenomena of shared affect, the contagious distributive attending to of the documentation of an event is most discussed as hits or eyeballs on the viral product. The improvisatory gesture is often neglected in the wake of the reception to output. Diamond Reynolds is an exception to the rule, to the logical appeal of the law of reading or interpreting. She performs the improvisatory as ensemble, as response-ability, as touch, as contact. The apparatus and call to help irrevocably entangled.

The Apparatus and its Worlding

In Moten's 1994 paper on reading Rodney King, he unpacks the conditions and ramifications of the video apparatus on the event. He asks, are the questions that accumulate in Rodney King 'made more complex by virtue of the way in which the event was recorded and disseminated?' We can now contrast the former century's video apparatus with the complex intensities of the live-streaming apparatus, an altogether different technology that conflates process with the distributed product, explodes the improvisation / composition binary.

Moten notes the interplay of two syntactical dimensions that affect reading Rodney King: the syntax of video medium engaging the syntax of deeply embedded American racism. In terms of the video medium that captured the 1991 event:

> [...] the trajectories of these convergences often seem to vanish in the overwhelming flash of light of the videos themselves, as if the individuated syntax of the video replicated itself in the events which the video captures, as if nothing comes before or after the unmediated and uncut signals which contain the visual representations of those beatings. [25]

He continues by addressing the syntax of racism that ignores the very adisciplarity crucial to improvisation:

> The effect of this individuation is that what occurs in their aftermath and as their surroundings, the uprising, is given over to either the realm of the inexplicable, the arbitrary, the savage, the non-intentional or apolitical, or to a range of explanations (the social scientific, the aesthetic, the philosophical) which are all impoverished precisely because of their idiomatic isolation from each other. [26]

The plea for 'the possibility of an understanding and organisation of totality' is clear. Idiomatic difference, a concept and debate central to the discourse of music improvisation, must, if improvisation be necessity, meld into trans-idiomatic expression. Years after writing his Rodney King essay, Moten (with Stefano Harney) addresses this sensibility from the perspective of yet another violent aftermath. The plea for improvisation catalyses in their essay on Michael Brown with renewed intensity:

> Contact improvisation is how we survive genocide. [27]

Techniques of Appropriation and a Conversation

At this point in this essay a certain reticence kicks in. A resistance to co-opting in any way, the techniques of African-American performance and theory as a means to a discursive approach to the affective relationality of technology and space. Especially framed within a predominantly white field of European academic political scrutiny, this is too facile, too appropriative a move. Is any claim to *improvisation as necessity* somehow betrayed by generic usurpation? Though Moten and Lewis open the way forward for inclusive trans-idiomatic, undercommons ensembles, the question of how improvisation is contextualized must be put on the table.

A conversation between musician Vijay Iyer and Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky) in 2009 illuminates the issue. Iyer persistently asks Miller how he feels about framing improv as an activist technique. Sympathetic to *improvisation as necessity* he nonetheless wants to trouble the methodical interleave of improvisation and social change; question whether Abram's definition can account for all the variations of improvisation in everyday life:

> Iyer: So, when we start kicking around this term, 'improvisation,' I want to see how neutral we can be with it. Or else, when we choose to use these kinds of activist or empowering definitions that we're very aware that that's what we're doing. [...] There's a primal level at which we learn how to just be in the world, and then there's another level at which we're responding to conditions that are thrust upon us. [...] The question is how and where we situate power in acts of improvisation. [28]

Spooky continually avoids a direct response but does state when prompted that: 'Improvisation, for me, is much more about looking at music not as music, but as information.' Iyer responds:

> Yeah, and I agree with that. And I think that's where musical improvisation becomes somewhat indistinguishable from improvisation-at-large because [improvisation is] about navigating an informational landscape, whether it's music or not. And perhaps improvised music is something that magnifies [that idea of navigation], in a sense that it seems to be about that process. I would also again argue that everyday life is improvised to such an extent that it becomes invisible. We, in fact, forget that improvisation is the order of things. So, what I want to get at is this: What is it about new digital notions of community that emerge from that same process? Or, how can we read or theorize about digital community, and our new kinds of networked selves?

Is it possible to weigh in on the impulse to capture real-time affective resonance from the perspective of improvisation? The long-time debate in the arts of improvisation's relation to composition, of chance to control, of spontaneity to habit and repetition, facilitates focalizing Kluitenberg's proposition. To return one more to time to Moten's eloquent thinking through of improvisation's affects and effects:

> Improvisation is located at a seemingly unbridgeable chasm between feeling and reflection, disarmament and preparation [...]. But improvisation, in whatever possible excess of representation that inheres in whatever probable deviance of form, always

also operates as a kind of foreshadowing, if not prophetic, description.[29]

A justice-to-come moves from the outline of anarchronistic lingering and stays with the trouble.

Sher Doruff is as a transdisciplinary artist, writer and theorist. She supervises 3rd cycle / PhD artist researchers at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy of Art and Design and the DAS Graduate School and DAS Choreography in Amsterdam. She is a member of several editorial boards including the *Journal of Artistic Research.*

Footnotes

1. See wtfaffect.com.
2. Karen Barad, 'On touching – The inhuman that therefore I am,' *differences* 23, no. 3 (2012): 215.
3. See Fred Moten on the Odyssey of Improvisation, http://jazzstudiesonline.org/resource/fred-moten-odyssey-improvisation.
4. From the perspective of neuroscience, preparedness is measured by readiness potential or *bereitschaftspotential*. The infamous Libet half-second delay separating pre-motor brain activity from the perceived volitional event contributes to the debate over the exigencies of free will or free won't, beyond the scope of this essay.
5. 'In the phrase "practice becomes perception," emphasis should be retained on the word "practice." A "corrective" function is not one that imposes a "correctness" on an activity from without. A corrective works immanently to a process to tweak it along from within.' Brian Massumi, *The Power at the End of the Economy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 106.
6. See George Lewis, lecture, Columbia University, New York, 2011, youtube.com.
7. For Moten 'totality' weighs in as an adisciplinarity that challenges idiomatic discursive boundaries as well as a convergence of social / political forces and structures.
8. 'And to improvise, where one composes in *real time in common*, is where one is discomposed in real time. One fades. So I think maybe the difference is between composing in real time in common – as an explicit social practice – and that illusorily solitary practice of remixing and reorganizing, which is, you know, a different modality of sociality that occurs remotely and in ways that are based on a certain kind, or a certain sense, of space-time separation.' See 'An Interview with Fred Moten: Part 1' by Adam Fitzgerald, *Literary Hub*, 5 August 2015, lithub.com.
9. Fred Moten, 'Music against the Law of Reading the Future and "Rodney King,"' T*he Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 27, no. 1, 'The Future of the Profession,' special issue (spring, 1994): 51–64.
10. See George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
11. 'But in the instant of the affective hit, there is no content yet. All there is the affective quality, coinciding with the feeling of the interruption, and of the coming transition. That affective quality is all there is to the world in that instant. It takes over life, fills the world, for an immeasurable instant of shock.' Massumi, *The Power*, 108.
12. Moten, 'Music against the Law of Reading the Future and "Rodney King,"' 55.
13. George Lewis, 'Improvising Tomorrow's Bodies: The Politics of Transduction,' *e-misférica* 4, no. 2 (2007), 'Body Matters / Corpografías,' special issue, hemi.nyu.edu.
14. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 121–122.
15. Massumi, *The Power*, 107–110.
16. Moten, 'Music against the Law of Reading the Future and "Rodney King,"' 60.
17. See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble (*Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
18. Ibid., 61.
19. Massumi, *The Power*, 110.
20. Moten, 'Music against the Law of Reading the Future and "Rodney King,"' 61.
21. Massumi, *The Power*, 103.
22. '[…] an energized state of readiness potential that is structured in a fashion homologous to the subject's affective state […] ready and "responsive," poised […] for what may come, in a state of brinking agitation.' Ibid., 11.
23. See buzzfeed.com.

24. 'The double-star binary opposition between improvisation and composition continues to deform many discussions, constituting something of a cultural halfway house, symbolizing Western culture's confrontation with postcolonial challenges to its own presumption of pre-eminence.' Lewis, 'Improvising Tomorrow's Bodies.'
25. Moten, 'Music against the Law of Reading the Future and "Rodney King,"' 58.
26. Ibid.
27. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, 'Michael Brown,' *boundary 2* 42, no. 4 (2015): 87.
28. See Vijay Iyer and Paul Miller, 'Improvising Digital Culture: A Conversation,' *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation* 5, no. 1 (2009).
29. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis, MA: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 63–64.

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