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Improvisation and the Creative Process: Dewey, Collingwood, and the Aesthetics of Spontaneity

Improvisational performance has been neglected by many fields that study creativity and the arts, including both philosophy and psychology. Psychologists, for example, have focused on *product creativity*: activities that result in objective, ostensible products—paintings, sculptures, musical scores—which remain after the creative act is complete. Product creativity generally involves a long period of creative work leading up to the creative product. In contrast, in improvisational performance, the creative process *is* the product; the audience is watching the creative process as it occurs.

My primary research interest is everyday conversation, and I began to study aesthetics and the psychology of creativity after I observed that everyday conversation is creatively improvised—there is no script that guides a conversation. My empirical research has focused on three types of improvised discourse: improvisational theater, children's fantasy play, and everyday conversation.[1] In my theoretical writings, I use these improvisational phenomena to address several issues in contemporary psychology and social theory—the tension between structure and practice, issues of textuality, discourse, structure versus play, and heteroglossia.[2] Thus my theoretical framework has evolved from the empirically grounded attempt to identify and characterize specific interactional mechanisms that are used to create a collective improvisational performance.

In this paper, I will focus on some philosophical implications of my evolving analyses of improvisational group performance. In this discussion, I will make explicit the relationships between improvisational performance and product-oriented arts such as painting, writing, and music composition, by drawing on Dewey's model of "art as experience" and Collingwood's model of "art as language." Improvisational performance is relevant to the empirical study of all creative genres for two central reasons. First, the creative process that goes on in the mind of a creator is generally inaccessible to the researcher, in part because it occurs in fits and starts, over long time periods. But an improvised performance is created in the moment, onstage, and can easily be observed by the researcher. Second, many improvisational performance genres are fundamentally collaborative. Observing this collaboration onstage is relatively straightforward, compared to the difficulties of observing the many forms of collaboration that contribute to the generation of a work of art.

I

In his studio, Picasso is painting free-form, without preconceived image or composition; he is experimenting with colors, forms, and moods. He starts with a figure of a reclining nude—but then loses interest, and the curve of the woman's leg reminds him of a matador's leg as he flies through the air after being gored by a bull—so he paints over the nude and creates an image of a bull and matador. But this leads him to yet another idea; he paints over the bullfight image and begins work on a Mediterranean harbor—with water-skier, bathers in bikinis, and a picturesque hilltop village.

The free-form inspiration continues. Five hours later, Picasso stops and declares that he will have to discard the canvas—it has not worked. But the time was not wasted—he has discovered some new ideas, ideas that have emerged from his interaction with the canvas, ideas that he can use in his next painting. Picasso says, "Now that I begin to see where I'm going with it, I'll take a new canvas and start again."

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	Improvisational creativity	Product creativity
Type of interaction	Immediate (single reception)	Delayed (multiple receptions)
Mediation	Ephemeral signs	Ostensible products
Creative process	Public, collective, coincident with product	Private, individual, distinct from/generates product

Figure 1. Some differences between improvisational and product creativity.

This five-hour improvisation was captured in the Claude Renoir film, *The Mystery of Picasso*, using time-lapse photography.[3] I always show the Picasso film to my students, because it helps to dispel some common myths about artists—that inspiration always precedes execution, that artists never edit their work, that everything that is painted is released to the world. Perhaps these myths arise from our tendency to focus on the *products* of creativity—the finished paintings, sculptures, and musical scores that critics review, that are left for future generations to analyze and interpret. This film gives us a rare opportunity to view, instead, the improvisational *process* of creativity—the real, lived experience of the artist, interacting and improvising in his studio.

Psychologists who study creativity have likewise focused on *product creativity*, creative domains in which products are created over time, with unlimited opportunities for revision by the creator before the product is displayed.[4] Product creativity is found in artistic domains such as sculpture, painting, and musical compositions. This focus in psychology is consistent with the fields of aesthetics and art criticism, which have also tended to focus more on artworks than on the creative process.

Unlike product creativity—which involves a long period of creative work leading up to the creative product—in improvisational creativity, the process *is* the product. For example, a small-group jazz ensemble collaborates onstage spontaneously to create the performance. The performance that results emerges from the musical interactions among multiple band members; there is no director to guide the performance, and no script for the musicians to follow. And in improvisational theater, the actors collectively create an emergent dialogue; like jazz, this process is, in fact, the essence of improvised performance. The purpose is not to generate a product; the performance is the product.[5] In contrast, in product creativity, the artist has an unlimited period of time to contemplate, edit, and revise the work. This creative process, which may be largely invisible to the public, results in a creative product that is then displayed to the audience (see figure 1).[6]

Improvisational performance genres include both musical interaction, such as small-group jazz, and most types of verbal interaction, from loosely structured conversation to more ritualized performance genres. Thus improvisational interaction can be mediated by both linguistic and musical symbols. In improvisational performance, a collective creative process constitutes the creative product: an ephemeral public performance.

Because improvisational creativity is ephemeral, and does not generate a permanent product, it has perhaps been easy to neglect. Although improvisational creativity has not been a subject for aesthetics, it may actually represent a more common, more accessible form of creativity. If one recognizes that all social interactions display improvisational elements, then everyday activities such as conversation become relevant to aesthetics, as both Dewey and Collingwood claimed. Creativity in interactional domains, including teaching, parenting, and mentoring, is recognized to be important to our lives and our culture. Yet in part because it does not generate a product, these improvisational interactions are resistant to aesthetic analysis.

Like psychology and aesthetics, many per-

formance-oriented fields have neglected improvisation, including folkloristics, ethnomusicology, and musicology. The few treatments that exist have been ethnographic descriptions of musical and verbal performance genres. In music, in addition to a recent focus on jazz,[7] European and American writers have written widely on the Indian *raga*, the Javanese *gamelan*, the Arabic and Turkish *maqam*, the Iranian *dastgah*, and group African drumming. Studies of verbal improvisation are primarily found in the branch of linguistic anthropology called the *ethnography of speaking*.[8] These researchers focus on public verbal performance in a variety of cultures; most of these performance genres incorporate improvisational elements.[9]

In this paper, I will draw on several empirical studies of group verbal improvisation, including improvisational theater actors, ritual verbal performance in a range of cultures, everyday small talk, and children's fantasy play dialogues.[10] When I began my study of creativity during improvisation, I was surprised to discover a complete absence of research on performance creativity—neither improvisation nor scripted theater had been studied by psychologists. So I expanded my search to other disciplines, looking for theoretical models that might help me to understand the process of group improvisation. In a range of theoretical articles, I have drawn on semiotics, folkloristics, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis.[11] Because of my focus on discourse, when I began to study the aesthetics literature, I was drawn to theories that emphasize the communicative, interactional properties of art—primarily those of John Dewey and R. G. Collingwood. Most aestheticians have the same implicit bias as psychologists who study creativity: they focus on culturally valued art forms—the high arts like abstract painting or orchestral composition—to the almost complete neglect of performance.

I will argue here that at the core of both Dewey's and Collingwood's theories is a theory of art as improvisation. By focusing my discussion on improvisation, I will bring out aspects of both theorists that have been neglected in most analyses. Of course, there is a lot in both theorists that I will not be mentioning—this is of necessity a selective reading. But I believe that this focus on improvisation comes close to revealing the essence of both men's theories, and in any case does not misrepresent either.

I will begin by describing improvisational theater performance, and I will identify five important characteristics of improvisation. Then, I will focus on each of these five characteristics in turn, and for each, argue that both Dewey's and Collingwood's theories emphasize exactly that aspect of the aesthetic experience. The focus on improvisation reveals many similarities between these very different philosophers; their theories unite on all five characteristics. And by applying each theory to the concrete case of improvisational theater, we will see where each theory could benefit from elaboration, and suggest some properties of an aesthetic theory that would adequately address improvisational creativity.

There is no extant evidence that Dewey read Collingwood's work, or vice versa. However, the exchange between Croce and Dewey in the late 1940s (in the pages of this journal) seems to suggest a connection, since Collingwood's theory is often associated with Croce.[12] But this debate largely has to do with whether Dewey's theory is an idealist theory—rather than a pragmatist one—and whether Croce has correctly understood Dewey. By focusing on improvisation and communication, my approach in the following leads me down a different path from the traditional Croce-Dewey comparison.

II

In improvisational theater, an ensemble of actors creates a scene onstage, without any prearranged dialogue, with no character assignments, and no plot outline. Everything about the performance is created collectively by the actors, onstage, in front of the audience. The following brief transcript of the first thirty seconds of an improvised theater sketch, which lasted a total of about five minutes, helps to demonstrate the collective and contingent aspects of improvisation.

Four actors stand at the back of the stage. Actor A begins the scene.

(1) (Actor A walks to center stage, pulls up a chair and sits down, miming the action of driving by holding an imaginary steering wheel)
(2) (Actor B walks to A, stands next to him, fishes in pocket for something)
(3) A: On or off?
(4) B: I'm getting on, sir (continues fishing in his pocket)

(5) A: In or out?
(6) B: I'm getting in! I'm getting in!
(7) A: Did I see you tryin' to get in the back door a couple of stops back?
(8) B: Uh ...

Actor A, taking the first turn, is able to act without creative constraints. His initial nonverbal act is to sit in a chair and mime the act of holding a steering wheel. This suggests that he is the driver and is sitting in a vehicle. However, this initial suggestion leaves many possible options for Actor B in turn (2). For example, B could have pulled up a second chair and sat down next to the "driver," and she would have become a passenger in a car. A's initial act does not indicate whether the vehicle is moving or not; it does not indicate the type of vehicle; it does not indicate the role of his character, nor the relationship with any other character. B's act in (2) also leaves many options open for A in turn (3). In (3), for example, A could have addressed B as his friend searching for theater tickets. The range of dramatic options available onstage is practically unlimited: for example, at (2), B could have addressed A as Captain Kirk of *Star Trek*, initiating a television show parody. A's utterance in (3) begins to add more detail to the emerging dramatic frame. "On or off?" would not be an appropriate statement for the driver of a car. It suggests that A is a professional driver of a bus (but also, note, is compatible with A driving a plane, boat, or spaceship). Turn (3) also implies a relationship: B is a paying customer of A.

A few minutes of examination of any improvisational transcript indicates many plausible, dramatically coherent utterances that the actors could have performed at each turn. A combinatorial explosion quickly results in hundreds of potential performances, branching out from each actor's utterance. Improvisational interaction is highly contingent from moment to moment. In spite of this contingency, and the range of options available to the actors at each turn, by (8) the actors have established a reasonably complex drama, a collectively created dramatic frame that will guide the subsequent dialogue. They know that A is a bus driver and that B is a potential passenger. A is getting a little impatient, and B may be a little shifty, perhaps trying to sneak on the bus. In the remainder of the sketch, the actors must retain dramatic coherence with this frame. Of course, each actor's turn will suggest additional details or plot twists; the dramatic frame is always changing, emerging from the acts of all actors.

An improvised scene is *emergent*, in both the classic coinage of the nineteenth-century philosopher George Henry Lewes, and in the contemporary sense associated with connectionism and distributed cognition.[13] Lewes's concept of "emergence" was widely discussed in the 1920s, largely by evolutionary biologists but also by the pragmatists. In a series of lectures at Berkeley in 1930, G. H. Mead elaborated a pragmatist theory of emergence: "The emergent when it appears is always found to follow from the past, but before it appears, it does not, by definition, follow from the past."[14] Mead was commenting on the *contingency* of improvisational interaction: although a retrospective examination reveals a coherent interaction, each social act provides a range of creative options, any one of which could have resulted in a radically different performance. The emergent was the fundamental analytic category for Mead's philosophy, and the paramount issue for social science. Mead claimed, "It is the task of the philosophy of today to bring into congruence with each other this universality of determination which is the text of modern science, and the emergence of the novel."[15]

III

In this section, I will use five characteristics of improvisation to focus my comparisons between Dewey and Collingwood. The five are: (i) An emphasis on creative process rather than creative product; (ii) An emphasis on creative processes that are problem-finding rather than problem-solving; (iii) The comparison of art to everyday language use; (iv) The importance of collaboration, with fellow artists and with the audience; (v) The role of the ready-made, or cliché, in art.

In the following, I will both introduce and interpret Dewey and Collingwood within this five-characteristic framework. Although in each case, they are developing a theory of *all* art, and specifically of product creativity, both base their aesthetics—even if only implicitly—on a theory of the creative process as improvisation.

i. Emphasizing creative process over product. Those who study the arts have historically tended

to focus on art products, rather than on the processes that generate them. This is true not only of art historians and of psychologists, but also of aestheticians and art critics. Some argue against a consideration of creative process on principle; for example, in arguing against one form of critical intentionalism, Monroe Beardsley argued that understanding the creative process "makes no difference at all," and that he does "not see that this has any bearing upon the value of what [the artist] produces."[16]

However, a few influential art critics have emphasized that artworks cannot be understood without considering process. Clement Greenberg's influential position on modern abstract art was that "the avant-garde imitates the processes of art" rather than imitating nature.[17] The subject of the art is "the disciplines and processes of art and literature themselves."[18] The *processes* of art of a given stage in history are the proper subject of art for the following stage.

The distinction between creative process and resulting product was one of the central themes of American pragmatism. Dewey based his aesthetic theory on the distinction between *art product* and *work of art*: "The *product* of art ... is not the *work* of art."[19] The work of art is a psychological process; it is "active and experienced. It is what the product does, its working" (*AE*, p. 162).

Dewey's theory of art as experience lends itself naturally to an extension to the performing arts and to improvisation.

> In seeing a picture or an edifice, there is the same compression from accumulation in time that there is in hearing music, reading a poem or novel, and seeing a drama enacted. No work of art can be instantaneously perceived because there is then no opportunity for conservation and increase of tension. ... It follows that the separation of rhythm and symmetry from each other and the division of the arts into temporal and spatial is more than misapplied ingenuity. It is based on a principle that is destructive ... of esthetic understanding. (*AE*, pp. 182–183)

Collingwood also made a similar distinction the core of his aesthetic theory: "The painted picture is not the work of art. ... [However,] its production is somehow necessarily connected with the aesthetic activity, that is, with the creation of the imaginative experience which is the work of art."[20] Collingwood also makes a strong claim that the visible, ostensible product is essentially irrelevant to art proper: "A work of art may be completely created when it has been created as a thing whose only place is in the artist's mind" (*PA*, p. 130).

Collingwood's theory is not quite adequate to the phenomenon of staged improvisation, because of his insistence that the real work of art occurs only in the head of the artist. When he mentions live improvisation (in passing), he insists that it is only incidental to real art: "When a man makes up a tune, he may and very often does at the same time hum it or sing it or play it on an instrument. ... he may do these things in public, so that the tune at its very birth becomes public property. ... But all these are accessories of the real work. ... The actual making of the tune is something that goes on in his head, and nowhere else" (*PA*, p. 134). In this insistence, Collingwood is making the same error that he later attributes to "individualistic psychology" (see below); in improvisational theater, the essence of the creative process is social and interactional, and cannot be reduced to the inspiration or mental process of any single actor.

In contrast, Dewey's pragmatist framework leads him to emphasize action in the world, and the practical effects of that action, and for these reasons he does not focus on what is "in the head" of the artist.

ii. Problem-finding and problem-solving. The film of Picasso improvising at his canvas is particularly striking, because most of us never see an artist in action—we only see finished paintings in galleries and museums. But Picasso is not unusual—this improvisational style, called *problem-finding* by creativity researchers, is used by most successful painters, as the psychologists Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi discovered in a ten-year study of Master of Fine Arts students at one of the country's top art schools, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.[21] A "problem-finding" painter is constantly searching for her or his visual problem while painting—improvising a painting rather than executing one. In contrast, a *problem-solving* style involves starting with a relatively detailed plan for a composition and then simply painting it; "problem-solving" because the painter defines a visual problem for herself or himself before starting, with the execution of the painting consisting of "solving" the problem.

An improvisational theater performance is also, of necessity, a problem-finding process—albeit a collective one, akin to a brainstorming session. For comparison, consider a traditional theater performance, perhaps a play by Shakespeare, where the actors start with a script, with memories of past performances by other companies—a long tradition of Shakespearean theater. This type of performance would be at the problem-solving end of the spectrum; whereas in improvisation, the actors have to create everything; the dramatic elements emerge from the dialogue, in a problem-finding process that is collaborative and emergent.

The modern psychological distinction between problem-finding and problem-solving is strikingly similar to Collingwood's distinction between art and craft. In so many words, Collingwood states that a craftsman is problem-solving, whereas an artist is problem-finding:

> [Craft] involves a distinction between planning and execution. The result to be obtained is preconceived or thought out before being arrived at. (*PA*, p. 15)

In contrast:

> Art as such does not imply the distinction between planning and execution (p. 22). ... [The work of art] is something made by the artist, but not made ... by carrying out a preconceived plan, nor by way of realizing the means to a preconceived end. (*PA*, p. 125)

This kind of "making" that is not craft is *creating*. "To create something means to make it non-technically, but yet consciously and voluntarily" (*PA*, p. 128). And creation does not have to be physical or ostensible: "a work of art may be completely created when it has been created as a thing whose only place is in the artist's mind" (*PA*, p. 130); although it is hard to imagine Picasso's beach scene emerging without his interaction with the paints and the canvas.

Dewey also agrees that real art is problem-finding, and that a problem-solving approach will not lead to real art, although this is not so central to his theory: "A rigid predetermination of an end-product ... leads to the turning out of a mechanical or academic product" (*AE*, p. 138). An artwork will only be great if the artist finds a problem during the process of creation: "The unexpected turn, something which the artist himself does not definitely foresee, is a condition of the felicitous quality of a work of art; it saves it from being mechanical" (*AE*, p. 139).

It is not surprising that two very different philosophers would develop a problem-finding theory of art in the 1930s, after several decades of abstract, nonrepresentational painting. As Clement Greenberg observed of artists in the Middle Ages, "Precisely because his content was determined in advance [by commission of a patron] ... the artist was relieved of the necessity to be original and inventive in his 'matter' and could devote all his energy to formal problems."[22] Perhaps only in Greenberg's avant-garde could a problem-finding painter like Picasso become one of the greatest painters; before the onset of abstract art, problem-solving artists were almost certainly more dominant.

Art critics have debated the role of spontaneity in modern art, in part because of this historical and cultural locatedness. The abstract expressionists were famous for their supposedly improvisational painting styles. Harold Rosenberg called them "The American Action Painters" to describe their nondeliberate approach to the canvas—yet Leo Steinberg criticized this term, noting that Kline and de Kooning made their paintings with deliberation, carefully working them toward the appearance of spontaneity. Steinberg hints that there is something distinctly American about this valorization of the problem-finding style: "It appealed once again to the American disdain for art conceived as something too carefully plotted, too cosmetic, too French."[23] In the 1998 book *The Culture of Spontaneity*, Daniel Belgrad also explores and elaborates the cultural and historical locatedness of the post-World War II "impulse to valorize spontaneous improvisation."[24] In this era of cultural studies, no one should be surprised that not only our art, but also our aesthetic theories, are consistent with and emerge from broader cultural values.

iii. Art is like everyday language use. It is important to emphasize that for both Dewey and Collingwood, art is like language only in a certain sense. It is like language as used in everyday social settings—the *pragmatics*, rather than the *syntax*, of language. Collingwood, in particular, goes to great lengths to criticize views of language that, if anything, became more dominant in the ensuing decades. Collingwood argues that art is *not* like the language of the grammarians,

whom he criticizes for focusing on the product, rather than the activity, of speaking, and for dividing language into words and grammatical relations. Collingwood also argues that art is not like the language of the logical positivists, whom he criticizes for analyzing sentences as propositional statements, and analyzing their truth value. Instead, by focusing on language as activity, Collingwood focuses on everyday conversation in social contexts.[25]

Dewey often compares aesthetic experience to everyday conversation: "Acts of social intercourse are works of art" (*AE*, p. 63). They each are interactional, and have a temporal dimension. Dewey writes, "Moliere's character did not know he had been talking prose all his life. So men in general are not aware that they have been exercising an art as long as they have engaged in spoken intercourse with others" (*AE*, p. 240).

Thus the connection with improvisation: In many ways, everyday conversations are also improvised. Especially in casual small talk, we do not speak from a script; our conversation is collectively created, and emerges from the actions of everyone present. In every conversation, we negotiate all of the properties of the dramatic frame—where the conversation will go, what kind of conversation we are having, what our social relationship is, when it will end.[26] In fact, improvisational theater dialogue can best be understood as a special case of everyday conversation.

Collingwood presents a pragmatist, socially contextualized theory of language as *utterance*, as *gesture*, as *act*. His presentation prefigures an important tradition in the late-twentieth-century study of language—the analysis of language use and language function that today includes conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, and the study of language use in cultural context. These contemporary approaches were indirectly influenced by American pragmatism through its social psychological descendant, symbolic interactionism, which took as its object of study social improvisation: "the larger collective form of action that is constituted by the fitting together of the lines of behavior of the separate participants."[27]

When everyday conversation is improvisational, it shares many properties with Dewey's notion of experience. Dewey's theory of the aesthetic experience depends on his characterization of experience as improvisational and yet structured. Dewey defines experience as *interaction* with people or the physical environment: "experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which ... is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication" (*AE*, p. 22).[28]

This is where Dewey meets Collingwood: they both share a communication theory of art. Dewey repeatedly states that communication is the essential property of art: "Because the objects of art are expressive, they communicate. I do not say that communication to others is the intent of an artist. But it is the consequence of his work" (*AE*, p. 104).

Collingwood's theory of art is generally known as an "expression" theory of art. But I think it is more accurately called a communication theory of art, because for Collingwood, *art proper* is that art which "produces in [the audience] ... sensuous-emotional or psychical experiences which, when raised from impressions to ideas by the activity of the spectator's consciousness, are transmuted into a total imaginative experience identical with that of the painter" (*PA*, p. 308). This usage of "experience" is quite compatible with Dewey's.

Both Dewey and Collingwood point out that by calling art a language, they do not want us to make the mistake of privileging verbal or linguistic communication as any kind of ultimate language. Dewey argues that it is a mistake to privilege spoken language, and to think that because art expresses things, those things can be translated into words. "In fact, each art speaks an idiom that conveys what cannot be said in another language and yet remains the same" (*AE*, p. 106). Dewey writes, "Because objects of art are expressive, they are a language. Rather, they are many languages" (*AE*, p. 106). Each art has its own medium, and each one is like a different language, with our spoken language being just another one of the modes of communication. Nonetheless, "Art is the most universal form of language ... it is the most universal and freest form of communication" (*AE*, p. 270).

Collingwood and Dewey both make explicit the implications of their theories: that all language (as they have defined it) is aesthetic. Collingwood emphatically states, "Every utterance and every gesture that each one of us makes is a work of art" (*PA*, p. 285). And Collingwood acknowledges that his theory of art entails that many everyday activities—not only the "high arts"—are aesthetic. As Alan Donagan writes:

"Collingwood's definition entails that you must recognize as works of art, on the one hand, every racy and lively contribution to conversation ... and on the other, every scientific and philosophical treatise."[29] And as Peter Ingram recently observed in this journal, "In engaging in linguistic activities in a creative way, we are all artists. There is no distinction between the 'artist' and the ordinary man."[30]

iv. The importance of collaboration. In improvisational theater, collaboration between actors is an essential aspect of the creative process—no one actor can generate a performance alone; instead, the actors have to rely on the group collectively to generate the scene through dialogue. And a defining feature of improvisational theater is the involvement of the audience—the actors always ask the audience members to shout out suggestions to start each scene, and many groups pause scenes in the middle to ask for audience direction. More fundamentally, like all humor, the actors assume that the audience shares a large body of cultural knowledge and references. In this sense, the audience guides their improvisation.

In a 1968 lecture, Leo Steinberg emphasized the role of the audience in saying, "I suspect that all works of art or stylistic cycles are definable by their built-in idea of the spectator."[31] Collingwood makes a fairly extreme statement that the audience is not only an influence, but should be considered to be a collaborator with the artist:

> The work of artistic creation is not a work performed in any exclusive or complete fashion in the mind of the person whom we call the artist. That idea is a delusion bred of individualistic psychology. ... This activity is a corporate activity belonging not to any one human being but to a community. It is performed not only by the man whom we individualistically call the artist, but partly by all the other artists of whom we speak as "influencing" him, where we really mean collaborating with him. It is performed not only by this corporate body of artists, but (in the case of the arts of performance) by executants ... and ... there must be an audience, whose function is therefore not a merely receptive one, but collaborative too. The artist stands thus in collaborative relations with an entire community. (*PA*, p. 324)

Dewey makes much the same point, claiming that even when an artist is alone, there is a public and social aspect to his creativity: "Even the composition conceived in the head and, therefore, physically private, is public in its significant content, since it is conceived with reference to execution in a product that is perceptible and hence belongs to the common world" (*AE*, p. 51). And Dewey draws on the language metaphor to emphasize this point: "Language exists only when it is listened to as well as spoken. ... Even when the artist works in solitude ... the artist has to become vicariously the receiving audience" (*AE*, p. 106).

For both Dewey and Collingwood, the artist's creation can only be interpreted by reference to the community for which he creates. Collingwood argues that in art proper, the artist is playing a special role for his community: "[The artist] takes it as his business to express not his own private emotions ... but the emotions he shares with his audience. ... What he says will be something that his audience says through his mouth. ... There will thus be something more than mere communication from artist to audience, there will be collaboration between audience and artist" (*PA*, p. 312). This is why Collingwood feels that artistic activity is the property of an entire community, not of an individual creator. "[The artist] undertakes his artistic labor not as a personal effort on his own private behalf, but as a public labor on behalf of the community to which he belongs" (*PA*, p. 315). Dewey also emphasizes that art is a communal process, not an individual or psychological one: "[Art] is not an isolated event confined to the artist and to a person here and there who happens to enjoy the work. In the degree in which art exercises its office, it is also a remaking of the experience of the community in the direction of greater order and unity" (*AE*, p. 81).

Both Dewey and Collingwood emphasize the collaborations between the artist and their audiences, rather than the collaborations between artists that are the essence of improvisational theater. However, Collingwood does acknowledge the importance of collaboration among a community of artists, criticizing the "individualistic theory of authorship" and even recommending that copyright law be changed (*PA*, p. 325), writing, "All artists have modeled their style upon that of others, used subjects that others have used, and treated them as others have treated them already. A work of art so constructed is a work of collaboration" (*PA*, p. 318).[32]

In improvisational theater, collaboration is essential to the performance—it defines the genre. And unlike the rather more abstract form of collaboration discussed by Dewey and Collingwood, improvisational collaboration is undeniably a fundamental part of the creative process, and it can be observed and analyzed.

v. The role of the ready-made in improvisation. All improvisers know that improvisation does not mean that anything goes—improvisation always occurs within a structure, and all improvisers draw on *ready-mades*—short motifs or clichés—as they create their novel performance. Even in the above theater transcript, at line (8) a dramatic frame constrains the future performance, although, of course, the frame was created by the actors rather than imposed by a predetermined plot or script. And the scene requires a great deal of shared cultural knowledge—the two actors use well-known clichés, whether visual (hands on steering wheel) or verbal ("On or off?").

Ready-mades are even more important in jazz improvisation. Some of the most famous jazz improvisers relied on a large repertoire of stock phrases; one of the most creative improvisers of all time, Charlie Parker, drew on a personal repertoire of 100 motifs, each of them between four and ten notes in length.[33] Jazz musicians frequently discuss an internal tension between their own personally developed patterns—called *licks*—and the need to continually innovate at a personal level. Musicians practice and perform the same songs repeatedly, and can often express themselves more effectively when they have a predeveloped set of musical ideas available. However, if this process is carried too far, the improvisational nature of the performance is compromised. Jazz musicians are aware of the tension between the need to develop ideas in advance and the potential for a gradual evolution toward patterned rigidity.[34]

The role of ready-mades is discussed—pejoratively—by both Dewey and Collingwood. Collingwood's contrast between "art proper" and "false art" is based largely on the presence or absence of clichés or ready-mades. These ready-mades already exist: They were created by real artists as part of art proper. But if they are re-used, it becomes false art: "artistic activity does not 'use' a 'ready-made language,' it 'creates' language as it goes along" (*PA*, p. 275). False art simulates art by borrowing and recombining clichés from formerly created real art: "The dead body ... of the aesthetic activity becomes a repertory of materials out of which an activity of a different kind can find means adaptable to its own ends. This non-aesthetic activity ... uses means which were once the living body of art. ... It is not art, but it simulates art" (*PA*, p. 276). Art is false when the creator uses a "ready-made 'language' which consists of a repertoire of clichés to produce states of mind in the persons upon whom these clichés are used" (*PA*, p. 276).

Dewey is equally pejorative about clichés: "No genuine work has ever been a repetition of anything that previously existed. There are indeed works that tend to be mere recombinations of elements selected from prior works. But they are academic—that is to say, mechanical—rather than esthetic" (*AE*, p. 288). For Dewey, perception of art only occurs when the perceiver actively, aesthetically, creates her or his own experience. "Otherwise, there is not perception but recognition" (*AE*, p. 52). Recognition usually results from clichés: "In recognition we fall back, as upon a stereotype, upon some previously formed scheme."[35]

The problem here is that, like improvisation, all art relies on ready-mades of one sort or another. The sociologist Howard Becker pointed out that shared *conventions* are always used by artists to aid in communicating with their audience.[36] The creativity researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi makes much the same point when he argues that all creators rely on a *domain*, a shared body of conventions, techniques, and historical knowledge, as they create novel works.[37] Thus Collingwood's standard for art proper is unrealistically high; no one can ever be 100 percent original.

In fact, Collingwood acknowledges this later, saying that all artists have to speak in a language that they learn from the community: "The musician did not invent his scale or his instruments. ... The painter did not invent the idea of painting pictures or the pigments and brushes with which he paints them. ... [Artists] become poets or painters or musicians ... by living in a society where these languages are current" (*PA*, pp. 316–317). The problem is that Collingwood never makes clear where the line is: What counts as using language aesthetically, and what counts as using too much cliché? Still later, Collingwood seems to say that artists should use *more* ready-mades, and should be free to borrow from other artists: "We must

get rid of the conception of artistic ownership. ... If an artist may say nothing except what he has invented by his own sole efforts, it stands to reason he will be poor in ideas" (*PA*, p. 325).

Dewey also acknowledges that every period and culture has conventions, that the shared communal experience of a people is always in the work of art: "Every culture has its own collective individuality. ... this collective individuality leaves its indelible imprint upon the art that is produced" (*AE*, p. 330). And "The subject-matter is charged with meanings that issue from intercourse with a common world. The artist in the freest expression of his own responses is under weighty objective compulsions" (*AE*, p. 306).

Collingwood's distinction between art proper and false art is essentially a distinction between *more improvisational* art and *less improvisational* art. False art is less improvisational because it relies on ready-mades—clichés—as an economic shortcut. Collingwood's theory can thus be extended, by analogy with performance. Performances cannot be dichotomized into "improvisational" and "scripted"; all improvisers draw on ready-mades—short riffs or clichés—as they create their novel performance. Does the repeated use of 100 personal riffs suggest that Charlie Parker's performances were "false art," as Collingwood implies? If we have to exclude Parker—one of the most creative and talented improvisers of this century—from art proper, then what improvisational performance would qualify?

This is an unresolved tension in both Dewey's and Collingwood's aesthetic theories—what is the role of conventions, clichés, and ready-mades? How original is original enough, and how much can be borrowed? A version of either theory that relied on a black-and-white distinction would be brittle and internally inconsistent. Aesthetic theory needs to acknowledge that all art relies on ready-mades to some extent; that, in fact, we should think in terms of a continuum between art proper and false art—between art that relies on no conventions whatsoever, and art that relies on a relatively large number of conventions. This continuum parallels that in performance—the continuum from fully improvised performance, through partially embellished performance, to highly ritualized and scripted performance.

IV

By focusing on improvisational performance, we have identified five common themes in the aesthetic theories of Dewey and Collingwood. Essentially, both philosophers have developed theories of art as improvisation by focusing on creative process, problem-finding, collaboration, and communication. And by identifying the common themes of these two philosophers, we have begun to develop a more elaborate theory of improvisational creativity, or at least we have begun to see how such a theory would have to look.

At the same time, our textual comparison leaves us with several areas that need elaboration, that are not sufficiently addressed by either philosopher, and that the phenomenon of improvisational performance makes especially clear.

i. Process versus product. Despite these many similarities, product creativity is not identical to improvisational performance—after all, it *does* result in a product. The artist has to interact with physical materials and has many opportunities to revise the work, even to discard it entirely upon completion. A theory of product creativity would have to build onto the theory of improvisation, in this direction: To explore if, and how, this edit-and-revise process changes the nature of the work—the "experience," in Dewey's terms. Although the core creative processes may be the same, there are sure to be some differences.

ii. Problem-finding versus problem-solving. At the beginning of an improvisational scene, there is no dramatic frame whatsoever; but within a minute or so, many parameters are already established. At this point, the actors have created a problem for themselves, and they have to spend the rest of the scene solving that problem. In fact, in most creative genres, the creative process is a constant balance between finding a problem and solving that problem, and then finding a new problem during the solving of the last one; Picasso's film is a good example of this constant tension. The theories of Dewey and Collingwood make too sharp a division between the two, seeming to claim that if *any* degree of planning or predetermination is involved, then it is not real art.

iii. Collaboration. The theories of Dewey and Collingwood focus on collaboration between the

artist and the audience, rather than collaboration among a community of artists. Of course, both men believe that all members of a community are artists, and both make explicit claims to this effect—that in truly perceiving a work of art, the perceiver becomes just as much of an artist as the creator of the work.

But this aspect of the theories is not sufficient to explain the constant, spontaneous, immediate communication that results in the collaborative emergence of an improvisational performance. A painter may have an image of the eventual audience while she works, but this is quite different from having a fellow actor saying a line that you never would have expected, and using that line to find new inspiration for where to go next.

The problem is that neither Dewey nor Collingwood has developed an adequate theory of communication. Such a theory would include descriptions of how intersubjectivity is achieved through communication, how group behaviors are emergent from individual actions, and the interactional semiotic mechanisms of situated language use. Once such a theory is in place, then perhaps one could make an argument that the nature of the communication between a painter and the museum-goer is the same as that between improvisational actors—and say exactly how it is similar in some ways, and different in others. A sufficient communication theory of art would need to be capable of making these distinctions.

iv. The role of ready-mades. Collingwood, in particular, is overly simplistic on this point. Most jazz musicians cannot imagine the possibility of never playing a phrase or motif that had ever been played before—that is not the way jazz works. Jazz is heavily motif-based, but that does not diminish the creativity of the performers.

In fact, the most overused verbal clichés can still require creativity in use. In the early 1990s, a common cliché was to add the single word "NOT" after a friend's utterance that you thought was patently false. But you cannot insert "NOT" just anywhere; it takes creativity to know when an utterance can appropriately be followed by this single word, and we all recognize it (by laughing) when there has been a particularly creative usage of the cliché. Collingwood's distinction between art and craft cannot be maintained without resolution of this issue.

The focus on improvisational performance suggests some fruitful areas for further study. While not prevalent in Western cultures, cross-cultural study indicates that performance genres employing elements of improvisation are quite common worldwide.[38] The focus in aesthetics and creativity research on product creativity is not surprising, given that our purposes are often to understand the histories of our own creative genres, and to identify and encourage creativity in our own societies. However, aesthetic theories that are restricted to product-oriented domains may be Eurocentric, and seem to imply that oral cultures are somehow less creative, or less respectable, or less deserving of analysis. Theories that claim to be directed at underlying universals in the psychological and social processes of creativity must be cognizant of all manifestations of creativity, including both products and performance.

Both Dewey's and Collingwood's theories suggest that the psychological and social processes operating in improvisational performance and product creativity may be more than superficially similar. Both authors were writing in the same time period in which the Russian psychologist Vygotsky developed his now-influential theories of mind as internalized social interaction (although Vygotsky was not widely available in English until the 1960s). Vygotsky's model of thought as internalized interaction[39] also suggests that the individual artist or scientist always works with an internal mental model of the field and domain processes.[40] Dewey and Collingwood both argue that artists who do not internalize such a model are not likely to generate products judged to be creative.

In addition to its usefulness to aesthetic theory, a focus on improvisation helps us to elaborate on the claim that everyday life is aesthetic—a claim made by both Dewey and Collingwood. Everyday small talk is, of course, a group improvisation, perhaps accounting for Dewey's many conversation metaphors. We all know that many everyday settings involve improvisational interaction and creativity, including teaching, collaborating, parenting, and leadership. In spite of Dewey's strong claims for the aesthetic value of everyday experience, neither psychology nor aesthetics has had much to say about the creativity of everyday life. Many of us have intuitive notions that one teacher may be more creative than another; but how can we explain creative teaching by focusing on products? A view of creative teaching as a set of recorded techniques—prod-

ucts such as curriculum, lesson plans, or weekly goals—is not coincident with our memories of creative teachers, or for that matter creative parents, leaders, or managers. A teacher or a manager who sticks to a predetermined script will be unable to respond effectively to the unique needs of each situation.

In 1940 Clement Greenberg wrote that literature was the "dominant art" of the time, and that avant-garde painting, the "chief victim of literature," was defined by its "revolt against the dominance of literature"—in practice a turn to formalism and away from propositional content.[41] In Greenberg's analysis, the avant-garde turned to music as its model, viewing music as a purely formal art that would allow an escape from literature. If Greenberg were writing today, he would perhaps observe that performance is the dominant art of our time. The visual arts have been heavily influenced by the creative potential of performance art, resulting in installation-specific pieces, or multimedia works that integrate video images or taped sounds. In fact, the critic Michael Kimmelman wrote in 1998, "Art today often seems to aspire to the conditions of theater and film."[42]

Could these two books by Dewey and Collingwood—published four years apart in the 1930s—be partly responsible for the postwar "culture of spontaneity"—Black Mountain and beat poets, bebop musicians, abstract expressionists, modern dance, installation art, the emphasis on composition as process in poetry and prose writing? In fact, the very existence of this special issue is evidence that performance may be taking over the role of "dominant art" that Greenberg once assigned to literature, and I view this as a welcome development, because it suggests that aesthetics will continue to focus on process in addition to product.

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1. R. Keith Sawyer, "Improvisational Creativity: An Analysis of Jazz Performance," *Creativity Research Journal* 5 (1992): 253-263; R. Keith Sawyer, *Pretend Play as Improvisation: Conversation in the Preschool Classroom* (Norwood, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997); R. Keith Sawyer, "Improvisational Theater: An Ethnotheory of Conversational Practice," in *Creativity in Performance*, ed. R. Keith Sawyer (Greenwich, CT: Ablex, 1997).

2. R. Keith Sawyer, "A Developmental Model of Heteroglossic Improvisation in Children's Fantasy Play," *Sociological Studies of Children* 7 (1995); R. Keith Sawyer, "Creativity as Mediated Action: A Comparison of Improvisational Performance and Product Creativity," *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 2 (1995); R. Keith Sawyer, "The Semiotics of Improvisation: The Pragmatics of Musical and Verbal Performance," *Semiotica* 108 (1996).

3. *The Mystery of Picasso*, 1982, MK2 Diffusion and Ines Clouzot.

4. Two recent volumes provide a good survey of this research: M. A. Runco and R. S. Albert, eds., *Theories of Creativity* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990); R. J. Sternberg, ed., *The Nature of Creativity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

5. However, several theater groups use improvisational processes in rehearsal as a way of generating script ideas—including Chicago's Second City, and the British film director Mike Leigh.

6. Figure 1 first appeared in Sawyer, "Creativity as Mediated Action."

7. Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (University of Chicago Press, 1994); Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (University of Chicago Press, 1996); Sawyer, "Improvisational Creativity."

8. R. Bauman and J. Sherzer, eds., *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974); D. Hymes, "The Ethnography of Speaking," in *Anthropology and Human Behavior*, ed. T. Gladwin and W. C. Sturtevant (Washington: Anthropological Society of Washington, 1962).

9. Despite the recent availability of these ethnographies, most studies of improvisational performance have retained a "compositional" approach to improvised performances, often using techniques developed for the analysis of notated scores or scripts (see note 4 above).

10. Sawyer, "Improvisational Theater"; Sawyer, "The Semiotics of Improvisation"; R. Keith Sawyer, *Creating Conversations: Improvisation in Everyday Discourse* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., forthcoming); Sawyer, *Pretend Play as Improvisation*.

11. Although my presentation here focuses on verbal improvisation, I believe that there are interesting parallels with musical improvisation, which I discuss in Sawyer, "The Semiotics of Improvisation."

12. Benedetto Croce, "On the Aesthetics of Dewey," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 6 (1948): 203–207; John Dewey, "A Comment on the Foregoing Criticisms," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 6 (1948): 207–209. Also see Stephen C. Pepper, "Some Questions on Dewey's Esthetics," in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (Northwestern University Press, 1939); George H. Douglas, "A Reconsideration of the Dewey-Croce Exchange," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 28 (1970): 497–504; Thomas M. Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (SUNY Press, 1987).

13. George Henry Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, vol. II (London: Trubner & Company, 1875), p. 412 passim.

14. G. H. Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present*, ed. Arthur E. Murphy (University of Chicago Press, 1932), p. 2.

15. Ibid., p. 14.

16. Monroe C. Beardsley, "On the Creation of Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 23 (1965): 309.

17. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, vol. 1 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism* (University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 17, originally published in *Partisan Review* 6 (1939): 34–49.

18. Ibid., p. 8.

19. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigree Books, 1934), p. 214. This work will be referred to as *AE* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent citations.

20. R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 305. This work will be referred to as *PA* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent citations. Such interpretations are reminiscent of Marx's descriptions of the relationships between labor activity and the commodity: the commodity is "congealed labor" or "frozen activity." Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 307. In the same way, the art product is congealed aesthetic activity. Dewey's early neo-Hegelianism is well known, and the Croce-Collingwood aesthetic also draws on this tradition.

21. Jacob W. Getzels and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *The Creative Vision* (New York: Wiley, 1976).

22. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," p. 18.

23. Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 62.

24. Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (University of Chicago Press, 1998). Belgrad includes in this aesthetic the Black Mountain and beat poets, bebop musicians, abstract expressionists, and modern dance.

25. Collingwood's "art as language" discussion has not received much attention, even in the recent defense of Collingwood by Aaron Ridley in this journal ("Not Ideal: Collingwood's Expression Theory," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 [1997]: 263–272). But see Garry Hagberg, *Art as Language* (Cornell University Press, 1995). As a language researcher, I was impressed by Collingwood's critique of his contemporaries—the grammarians (*PA*, pp. 254–259) and the logicians (*PA*, pp. 259–268). Collingwood's arguments prefigure the critiques of Chomskian linguistics that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in anthropology and sociolinguistics. And the theory of art presented in Book III displays remarkable overlap with contemporary sociocultural theories of creativity that emerged in psychology only in the 1980s.

26. Sawyer, *Creating Conversations*.

27. Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 70.

28. Although this paper focuses on verbal improvisation, for Dewey, language and music both shared the structure of experience, and music, because of the obvious temporal dimension, was of all the arts the most representative of his aesthetic theory (*AE*, p. 184). Although Dewey does not mention improvisation explicitly (except parenthetically comparing "jazzed music" to movies and comic strips, p. 5), his metaphoric descriptions of experience, often emphasizing rhythm, would seem quite familiar to jazz musicians. For example, "all interactions ... in the whirling flux of change are rhythms. There is ebb and flow ... ordered change" (*AE*, p. 16).

29. Alan Donagan, *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 130. On page 131, Donagan writes that Collingwood did not accept that all discourse was art until after he wrote the earlier *Essay on Philosophical Method*. This was always Croce's point, but Collingwood had earlier rejected it.

30. Peter G. Ingram, "Art, Language, and Community in Collingwood's *Principles of Art*," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 27 (1978): 56.

31. Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, p. 81

32. Although note, Collingwood seems to contradict himself here: earlier he says that the work is done "in the head" of the artist.

33. T. Owens, *Charlie Parker: Techniques of Improvisation*. (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1974). Selected motifs from Owens's dissertation appear in several entries in *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* (London: Macmillan, 1988), including the entries for "Improvisation" and for "Parker, Charlie."

34. Sawyer, "Improvisational Creativity."

35. Greenberg's classic distinction between avant-garde and kitsch stands or falls on the same point: kitsch uses as "raw material" the "fully matured cultural tradition," borrowing "devices, tricks, stratagems, rules of thumb, themes" (Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," p. 12).

36. Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (University of California Press, 1982).

37. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Society, Culture, and Person: A Systems View of Creativity," in *The Nature of Creativity*, ed. Sternberg.

38. Sawyer, "The Semiotics of Improvisation."

39. Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, trans. Alex Kozulin (Harvard University Press, 1978); Lev S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, ed. Michael Cole et al., trans. E. Hanfmann and G. Vakar (1934; reprint, MIT Press, 1986).

40. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and R. Keith Sawyer, "Creative Insight: The Social Dimension of a Solitary Moment," in *The Nature of Insight*, ed. R. J. Sternberg and J. E. Davidson (MIT Press, 1995).

41. Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, p. 28; originally published in *Partisan Review* 7 (1940): 296–310.

42. Michael Kimmelman, "Installation Art Moves In, Moves On," *New York Times*, Sunday, August 9, 1998, section 2, pp. 1, 32.