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Gregg Daniel Miller, Ph.D.
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ggmiller@fastmail.net
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The Power of Free Improvisation and the Communicative Paradigm

Our panel is called “the politics of everyday life,” so please allow me to back into my topic with a bit of my everyday life. As an adjunct professor for the last 22 years, finding work has been touch and go. For two academic years in a row, I didn't get asked to teach, so, somewhat improbably, I became an avant-garde musician.

There were two high points from that period. The first was when my sax/drum duo opened up for the Sun Ra Arkestra.¹ The second high point is perhaps more relevant for the purposes of this essay on the practice of free improvisation. I assembled for two public performances a group called the Big Band at the End of the World, comprised of 16 improvising musicians, an experimental novelist, and a video artist. The standing I had such that I could ask those musicians and artists to participate, and they'd actually say “yes,” was made possible insofar as I had infiltrated their scene, I had become a regular. This goes beyond the “high points” I've mentioned and instead describes an ongoing music scene in Seattle made possible by an institution called the Racer Sessions, which I'll describe in some detail, and use as the kind of exemplary case study which might have something to say to political theory. It took a while for

¹ It was exciting and an honor, though not to overstate the achievement, we were the first of five opening acts.

me to realize that my passage from political theory to freely improvised music might come back the other way. The account I'll give is based on about 35 long-form interviews with participants in the Racer Sessions, participation in the Sessions for 6 years and counting, and a fairly wide exposure to experimental and creative music by attending shows, listening to recordings, studying its history, performing publically, and also writing music reviews for the Free Jazz Blog in an effort to train myself how to write about music.²

a brief history of Racer Sessions³

Fourteen years ago, a group of about 10 or so University of Washington undergraduates,

² I also want to mention the advent of Napster which spurred the streaming revolution in music distribution right down to Bandcamp.com. The digitization of music essentially creates a much larger commons, without which the essentially unknowable because cloistered and pay-walled archive of experimental music would have remained inaccessible to me and most people. We live in a golden age of sorts, where for the most part the vast digital archive of music is just a few clicks away, flattening (though not eliminating) the distributional disparities between popular and unpopular music (which isn't to say that everything has been digitized, nor that it doesn't help to know what you're looking for, since the power of algorithms distorts the search within what otherwise is (potentially) an equal opportunity archive). The debate pitting the virtue of the live event versus interaction with recordings continues. See, for example: David Grubbs, *Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording*. Duke University Press, 2014. There's also the question as to whether a digital archive and virtual engagement comes to dirempt or subvert the solidarity that might emerge from the power of music (or anything, really) in the live event. See: Jonathan Crary, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World*. London and New York: Verso, 2022.

³ The Sessions were recognized in 2018, awarded a Golden Ear award by Earshot Jazz for, in director's John Gilbreath's words, having "created [a] new communit[y] of support and participation where none had previously existed." Its story remains largely untold, appearing as a paragraph in Lynn Darroch's, *Rhythm in the Rain: Jazz in the Pacific Northwest* (Ooligan Press, 2016), and a page in Nate Chinen's *Playing Changes: Jazz for the New Century* (Knopf Doubleday, 2018).

encouraged by one of their professors⁴, started their own free improvisation music session. “You’ve got to make your own scene,” he said. They held a few meetings and wrote a mission statement of sorts [Appendix A]⁵. They wanted the session to be open to the public, all-ages, free, weekly, and two hours long.⁶ A local bar called Café Racer offered them a weekly slot, 8-10 p.m. Sunday nights; thus the Racer Sessions were born. To this point in time, over 13 1/4 years they’ve hosted 562 sessions (including Zoom sessions during the height of the Covid lockdowns), plus annual festivals and a variety of special events, including providing the grant that funded the performance of my Big Band at the End of the World. In that span, some of the regulars have moved away from Seattle, and, adapting the model, have started up offshoots in New York City and Missoula, Montana⁷.

What is the model? Each session opens with a local or touring band or artist playing for anywhere from 20 to 40 minutes, with the rest of the two hours given over to free improvisation informed and shaped by the opening set. For the first few years, the opening artist would put to

⁴ Cuong Vu, himself a fine improviser on trumpet and electronics.

⁵ Appendix B contains somewhat more complete language from a 2014 document.

⁶ An earlier improv. Session which had recently folded at the Blue Moon was often interminable. The two hour limitation was imposed to keep the Session from dragging, and to encourage people to return regularly. The Blue Moon Session was run by two musicians, and when they ran out of steam, it folded. The Racer people had a larger collective running it by design on the theory that duties could be more widely shared. At present (2023), it is largely driven by just one person (Haley Freedlund) with 3 or so minor associates. Although it seems to be going strong, this initial lesson seems to have been lost.

⁷ The Free Sessions in Missoula continue, while the New York City branch is currently on hiatus.

work some very specific technique or practice, and during the open improvisation portion, the first few impromptu groups were encouraged to emulate or otherwise use or explore those techniques. That strong pedagogical impulse has somewhat faded over the years, but the tradition remains that every opening act will, prior to their performance, write up as part of the advertising copy a blog post concerning their artistic practice which attendees are encouraged to read and put to work in their playing. In the transition from the opening act to the open improv session, the headline performers will typically reiterate their guiding ideas which performers in the subsequent improv. portion are free to take up or disregard as they like.

Where a typical jazz jam session features a house band backing familiar standards, with improvisers soloing at appointed moments within a compositional frame, at the Racer Sessions, there is no house band, there are no standards. During the improv. part of a Session, random assemblages of musicians of any instrumentation will occupy the stage to produce extemporaneously a fully improvised piece, after which they re-join the audience, and another random assemblage of performers will occupy the stage to do their thing. A grouping might include flute, bass, and drums, or 3 saxophones and a contrabass clarinet. Another: cello, electric guitar, trombone, trumpet, drums and voice. No tunes are called, no key signatures are given, no chords or chord changes appear unless they arise spontaneously by the players in the moment. In lieu of a house band, there is a drum set, a keyboard, a microphone, and a couple of amplifiers. Anybody can use them. Drummers, bassists, guitarists, vocalists, horn players, synth players, string players, those with homemade instruments, or whatever and whomever wants to occupy the stage can do so and have done so, including at times dancers, voice artists, or improvising spoken word performers. It just depends on who shows up that night, and who is moved to the

stage. The only rule for who can play or how or what they play is that there are no rules, except that's not quite true. And in that gap, between the concept of no rules and whatever actually takes place, something asserts itself, conditioning the freedom they experience and manifest in their collective improvisations.⁸ That's part of the contribution to political theory I'd like to elucidate.

For the improvising musicians,⁹ the focus is not on attending to a pre-conceived tune or model, but on listening to one another and responding in the moment. The ethos, and there is most definitely an ethos, is to be musically generous in a collaborative, non-competitive, collective event. For both musician and audience, creativity is the watchword: nothing played will have been heard before, nor will it sound again.

To make the impression somewhat more vivid, let me describe some of what goes on. Performers get on stage, and when it seems no one else is going to join them, someone starts playing something. A squeak, a long-tone, a pattern, a full-on sonic maelstrom, whatever. Someone else or maybe a few others then start, too, either with or against what that first person did and continues to do. Sometimes there is a patient, searching introduction, people looking to

⁸ The Sessions are remarkable for being open to the public, free, all-ages and intergenerational, and sustained by some of the very best musicians in Seattle, a city full of wonderful musicians. Each session is videoed, and recorded, so players can listen back to what they did and learn from it. For the researcher (or music fan), a sound/video archive exists going back to the beginning.

⁹ Many past and current participants in the Sessions teach music throughout the city, play in a variety of bands and ensembles either incubated at the Sessions or otherwise networked through the Session, and these improvisers make up the musical backbone of the city, filling out the ranks of club dates, session recording artists, theater pit bands, etc. The Racer Sessions are a vital node in the cultural ecology of Seattle. The improvisers also include folks who are far from professional musicians, but find the Sessions an amiable place to play and find community. Some of the regular attendees come to listen, and have never performed on stage.

play the same notes, the same note pattern or rhythmic pattern, the same tempo—or, none of those things. One of the co-founders, Luke Bergman, calls this the “scratch and sniff” period, figuring out in real time what’s going to happen. If there are many sound artists, say five or more musicians on stage, various strategies are used to prevent outright cacophony, unless its cacophony that they decide to go for. Some sounds become background for others, some try to play in a sonic space not already occupied, which might mean not playing most of the time, or it might mean offering emphasis, or providing a secondary storyline. It might involve making sound rather than identifiable pitches or tones. Play high notes because everyone else is playing high notes, or because everyone else is playing low notes. Use or don’t use vibrato. Hold or swallow your notes; play fast or slow, or alternate between the two, scorching or delicately, pile on the density, or keep it spare. Whatever might contribute to the collective sound is right, and if something sounds wrong, adjust to it and redeem it in its wrongness.¹⁰

Bill Dixon, the pioneering, free trumpet player once said that silence is a beautiful thing, so whatever you play better improve on that.¹¹ Not every player at Racer Sessions adheres to that dictum. There are no dictums, and yet, everyone has to be very present and in the moment so that

¹⁰ Gottschalk describes the scene of collective improvisation this way: “How are the musicians listening to one another? To what degree are they responding, overriding, supporting, directing? All these things happen in improvisation, just as they do in conversation” (Jennie Gottschalk, *Experimental Music Since 1970* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 190). Guitar and bass player Joe Morris puts it this way: “free improvisation . . . means that the whole performance is a collective improvisation, and that every player’s contribution is equal in purpose and value at all times. This one performance objective—which is an attempt to make every performance more democratic in practice—is a statement on the utopian ideal of equality in action, which is a core aesthetic value [T]here is usually no group leader and there are no soloists” ((Joe Morris, *Perpetual Frontier: The Properties of Free Music*. Riti Publishing, 2012) 102).

¹¹ . . . in the video accompanying *Bill Dixon with Exploding Star Orchestra*. Thrill Jockey, 2008.

their participation becomes something more, a shared communicative event. That said the music in a certain sense is less important than the participation in it. Chris Icasiano, one of the co-founders of the Sessions, explains:

While the music is important, it's secondary. When you're dealing with the jam session, there are players that are coming from all over the place that are participating, and while we want to strive for the music to be really good, you can't expect it all the time. This has to be a space where they can try things out and to learn, and to get better. . . . What's first to me is that we are an organization that provides a service to the community, and we have a responsibility to do it in a way that is encouraging and uplifting and equitable. We do it under the guise of a free and experimental music series, so in that, we value new music, we value people experimenting, and we value people coming and trying things. (Interview with the author, May 25, 2018)

Though Icasiano, one of the best percussion artists in Seattle, downplays the quality of the music, in my judgment, the music produced is frequently transcendent. Were that not the case, I suspect the Sessions would have petered out years ago. Some of the music that emerges is angst-ridden; some is soothing; sometimes the group finds a vibe and dwells there for a while; sometimes it's about disruption and interruption. Some musicians will push past an obvious ending to force others into developing a new idea, stretching what they thought they were up to. Tones and timbres are used, but often traditional instruments are used in nontraditional ways, or nontraditional, resonant objects are made into instruments to disclose their sonic possibilities. Multi-phonics, split tones, microtones, overblowing, towels wadded into saxophone bells as mutes and pitch crushers, contact microphones on cactus spines, the tweaked feedback of an unplugged instrument cable, string instruments bowed below the bridge through guitar pedals or used strictly for their percussive properties. One interesting performance involved Kaley Lane Eaton who played and sang with electronic effects and had everyone in the audience call one another on their cell phones so that their phones became resonators, picking up the music and bar

noise in the room and re-playing it back through tinny speakers for a very trippy, multiple delay, feedback effect. While that performance had the air of a centralized conductor with the audience as conduits, most performances, and this is important, break with the authoritarian ideal of a composer-composition–performer model (given that performers nonetheless always have tremendous interpretive latitude within this model)¹². Everybody plays, and what’s in play, what is communicated in the play, is the fact that everybody can play, that we can engage in an unpremeditated performance of what we couldn’t have possibly anticipated, that such emergent events are possible together.

In trying to think through the significance of the Racer Sessions, it is firstly perhaps useful to ask, what is this a case of? I don’t think it’s a stretch to think of collective, free improvisation as a case of communicative action, one which might reveal aspects of communicative action that were perhaps hidden or overlooked in Habermas’s accounting of it. My book, *Mimesis and Reason: Habermas’s Political Philosophy* (SUNY, 2011), gives a close reading of Habermas and his sources, interpreting communicative action as a collective, aesthetic event which forms and transforms subjectivities on the basis of the fundamental insight Habermas draws from George Herbert Mead, namely, that every ego has an intersubjective core (not a monadic core), and thus, anticipating a response from others preconditions why, how, and what one might do or say to or with others, in the shadow of the Generalized Other, that sense that they participate in something larger that holds an ethical and moral stance on the process and purposes for which they work

¹²Keith Sawyer, “Musical Performance and Collaboration,” in *The Improvisation Studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts* (Edited by Rebecca Caines and Ajay Heble. London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 96-97.

things out together. This complex is what Mead called “reason.”¹³ Habermas, taking his cue from Arendt’s focus on words and deeds in public, and shifting the Marxian production paradigm from stuff to meaning called it “communicative action” or “communicative rationality.” All of this anticipatory, pantamimetic and creative play as the manner of communication sounds likes collective, free musical improvisation at its best.

Certainly some translation needs to take place, though, between the typical understanding of Habermasian communication and the convergence and co-creation happening in the domain of sound which is deliberately nonconceptual though nonetheless meaningful and making vivid an affectual connection among participants. The meaning being made together and shared is musical, and the connections are real, the reality they are making is real, though ephemeral, and concerns the truth-claim that art makes, however one might construe that.

Several questions arise in trying to think through the translatability of the practice of free improvisation and the noncoercive, fundamentally anarchic core of polymimetic, communicative experience.

Ethos

A first question concerns the place of Habermasian discourse ethics. My aesthetic reading of the experience of Habermasian communicative action served as a corrective to those who charge Habermas with an empty formalism or proceduralism, but it also separates out the moral framework Habermas applies from the mimetic moment of contact in understanding. Habermas

¹³ Gregg Daniel Miller, *Mimesis and Reason* (SUNY, 2011), chapter 3.

hopes that the normative morality (truth, rightness, sincerity)—what he calls “discourse ethics”—surrounding the event of understanding would govern the fundamentally democratic rulelessness or anarchy of communicative action, but it remains just that, contingently a hope, as morality’s guardian role comes prior to or after the action of understanding. We judge before or after, but not inside the experience of collective understanding. Habermas’s communicative reason offered hope in contrast to Adorno and Horkheimer’s “instrumental rationality” (or Weber’s “purposive rationality”) which for them appeared as modernity’s poisoned chalice, its cure and its sickness, its triumph and its downfall, a self-defeating mode for how humans relate to each other, the natural world and their own selves, the snake eating its own damn tail. In the shift from instrumental reason to communicative reason, we gain a source for the collective production of meaning, but, on my account, we lose an internal sense of normative rightness. So for this study we might ask: Can the *democratic, polymimetic and polyphonic practice* of collective, free improvisation help us here to think through an ethics for the practice of communicative action?¹⁴ One path to thinking about music, mimesis and normativity in critical theory has been taken up in an interesting way by Nikolas Kompridis. Kompridis wants to derive or harvest from “Adorno’s concept of mimesis [a] normative ideal that belongs to, or points towards, an enlarged conception

¹⁴ Tyrus Miller, relying on Albrecht Wellmer’s work, too, looks to adventurous music [e.g. Stockhausen] as a way of thinking through and extending Habermasian insights. Miller’s approach is from the position of the listening audience rather than from those performers who listen and play at the same time, participating in a musical event of auditory communicative action. Nonetheless, his interpretation seems congruent with mine in a general sense. Music, he writes, can extend the Habermasian concept of “‘learning processes’ to aesthetic experience—to the non-discursive sonorous intensities of new music [which] . . . underscore[. . .] the bold step beyond Habermas’s discourse-based, rationalistic theory they must make when challenged by a complex aesthetic phenomenon” (“On Albrecht Wellmer: Music and Modernism after Habermas,” in *International Journal of Music* (42:II) 2013, p. 61).

of reason” (“Amidst the Plurality of Voices: Philosophy of Music after Adorno,” in *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* December (8:3) 2003, 173-174). The difficulty of

Kompridis’s task of developing a normative ideal on the basis of a connection between mimesis and reason is in some ways anticipated by how Adorno links together mimesis and music.

Adorno writes: “By virtue of its basic material, music is the art in which the prerational, mimetic impulses ineluctably find their voice, even as they enter into a pact with the processes leading to the progressive domination of matter and nature.”¹⁵ One would think that for Adorno, a prerational, mimetic impulse via music could only deliver on producing a moral norm, a moral ideal, at the cost of losing its seductive, disintegrative, ecstatic power.¹⁶ Such is the lesson of the reading of Odysseus given in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: Odysseus can listen to the siren’s song yet remain safely tied to the ship’s mast (so he thinks). The epic scene is an allegory of reason overcoming the irrational, auratic power of music that via mimesis would work to undo Odysseus’s identity, would drown him. At what cost comes the victory of rational control? Identity and self-preservation is bought at the price of neutralizing, of neutering the auratic power of music, that for which life might matter.

Kompridis, though, is well aware of the dialectic of so-called enlightenment in Adorno’s rendering of the mastery of music by rational calculation. In an analytical mode, Kompridis reads out of this tragic-ironic scene a different lesson, that the irrational, mimetic mode of music,

¹⁵ “Some Ideas on the Sociology of Music,” in *Sound Figures* (Trans. by Rodney Livingstone. Stanford University Press, 1999) p. 6). See also: Max Paddison, “Mimesis and the Aesthetics of Musical Expression,” in *Music Analysis* (March-October (29, No. 1/3) 2010, pp. 126-148.

¹⁶ We would then arrive at the same question we often find ourselves with Habermas or Kant: what might motivate people to act morally if moral action itself holds no charm?

the lure of the siren's call, can, behind its back, as it were, offer up to us a normative ideal, that of *receptivity*. Is there not an aspect of receptivity in reason properly understood? On Kompridis's account, without a prior posture of openness built into reason itself, we as reasoning beings would be unable to change our opinions, learn from new experiences, sensitize ourselves and be motivated to act by injustice or the suffering of others. Moreover, Kompridis maintains that

[r]eceptivity is not just internal to reason, it is also a presupposition of reason. It is in this way, then, that the ideal of receptivity contained in the concept of mimesis contributes to a conception of reason that goes well beyond conceptions that reduce reason either to instrumental rationality or to practices of justification ("Amidst," 174)

For Kompridis, a certain openness to the other is built into mimetic experience, and even when that openness goes unrealized in practice, the normative *ideal* of receptive openness persists as a moral potential. We must be "open to openness itself," (*Critique and Disclosure*, 191) for our "cooperative acts of disclosure and receptivity . . . must aim towards producing and reproducing the conditions that enabled the openness." The allure of a mimetic account of reason lies in its presupposition of receptivity; we can cynically close ourselves off to it, but as a normative ideal, in Kompridis's view, it is there nonetheless, perhaps like Socrates's *daemon*.

Though emerging from a reading of the power of music, Kompridis would expand the scope of this moral ideal for mimetic receptivity to characterize reason in any of its applications. He writes,

While it is true that works of art structure the conditions of their receptivity—and here the

concept of material¹⁷ plays an ineliminable role—that structure is mimetically structured. So to the extent that art’s reason is mimetic, it cannot be just art’s reason: the reason in question is no more of a purely aesthetic nature than mimesis is. (“Amidst the Plurality of Voices: Philosophy of Music after Adorno,” 176).

Kompridis wants to read out of the prerational mimetic impulse in music a normative ideal (receptivity) that could provide the ethos not just for aesthetic rationality but for our way of being human more generally. “Receptivity,” he claims, “involves accountability” (208). It is this intuition that perhaps prompts Kompridis to conclude, against Adorno, that, “To be receptive is not to switch off or leave suspended our moral and cognitive powers: instead, they are heightened and made to be dynamic, in a ‘reflective state of judgment’” (*Critique and Disclosure*, 207).¹⁸

When Kompridis folds back his ethical construct of receptivity into the question of a philosophy of music, he suggests that the educative function of receptivity can help us, for example, to overcome the snobbery of a high/low cultural division, as well as open us up to the pluralism of the world’s music rather than thinking, as Adorno did, of European high art music as a broken fragment of a shattered and irreparable, unitary totality (177). There never was a totality, and any art form can be successful or unsuccessful in its own material terms, but also ethically to the degree that it enstages the receptivity which is a precondition of its appearance.

¹⁷ Kompridis is impatient with Adorno’s narrowing of our understanding of the power of art and its development to its materiality, to the twelve-tone row in modern music, for example, and the subsequent working out of sonic possibilities beyond the so-called new music of the 1950s. Kompridis’s irritation stems from his own project to shift our attention away from the art-object *as material* and toward the “ideal” that it presents to us.

¹⁸ Kompridis makes the same claim in his earlier 2003 essay on music: “The stance of receptivity to what lies outside us is not a stance in which our cognitive and moral powers are temporarily put on hold. Quite to the contrary, it is a stance in which our moral and cognitive powers are heightened in a dynamic, not suspended, state of judgment—a state of reflective judgment” (“Amidst the Plurality of Voices: Philosophy of Music after Adorno,” 175).

The fact of pluralism must be acknowledged in any philosophy of art. Cultural pluralism is not the same as cultural relativism; there remains domain specific standards of good and bad music, even as the mimetic receptivity that stands behind any specific production stands to blur, override and surpass any such divisions among ways of musical life.

What are we to make of receptivity as a normative ideal, as both a presupposition of reason and, it would seem, a Kantian, regulative, moral ideal?

It seems to me that Kompridis's *ethos of receptivity* expresses its moral significance best when compared with its opposite: to be unreceptive or closed off in advance to another. Compared, say, to a scene of non-acknowledgment, or a theory of subjectivity without the porosity that receptivity would presuppose, I agree with Kompridis that it surely is more moral to think of an elemental receptivity rather than to presuppose a preemptive incommunicativity. Atomism is not an option. But once we open our ears to the other's song or speech, their words or deeds, their harmonies or dissonances, the weight of a supposed a priori moral receptivity diminishes before the pragmatic theory from Mead as developed into pantomimetic, communicative play under Habermas, namely, that in the experience of taking the attitude of the other one knows better where and how one stands oneself. Mimetic play as enacting receptivity is not the same as answering to a moral ideal of receptivity.

The moral call comes, if it comes, a half second too late. After an initial understanding, we might consider what is said, how it is said, the implications of what is said or not said, the prior and current context which shapes what is said, and any assessment regarding the future

context that might be altered if we were to take up what is said as our own. But to understand any of that, again, we face a kind of mimetic play wherein we experience how any of that sways us; we feel it in its articulate form as reasons—and then, we go about the important moral task of justification, again with the splintering between knowing and judging, including Kompridis’s concern as whether we are honoring the receptivity that enables the scene of understanding in the first place.

In other words, within the mimetic moment of coming to understanding, I agree with Kompridis that we cannot but be receptive to the other—but the moral framework which, in Habermas’s formulation, is a transcendence from within, acts like a fence around that moment, or in Arendt’s formulation, walls around the public within which political power or action might take place. To the degree that Kompridis collapses these two experiences of becoming and judging, he is in fact turning reflective disclosure into a version of Habermasian communicative action which I’m afraid smuggles into mimesis a filtering effect, as if an openness to others is always already morally discerning, that is, contingent. If a supposedly unavoidable, existential receptivity is also contingent on a moral decision regarding what one is willing to be receptive to, then how open is this openness really? I am not arguing against a truly crucial role for moral judgment, just the timing of its place in the process of coming to understanding.¹⁹

¹⁹ Another way to think about this: One might propose that I don’t really understand something until I am able to take a moral position on it, whether I agree, disagree or decide to be agnostic concerning some subject matter or practice in relation to some moral ideal. Yet, when I learn and change my mind, say, shifting from disapproval to approval, my evaluation of the thing or practice has shifted. Do we also say that I understand it differently? It seems to me that this later position wraps up into it both the disapproval I felt, the subsequent approval, and whatever prompted the shift of mentality that permitted this change. In coming to grips with the nature of the thing, such that our disapproval and subsequent approval could apply to the same “thing” or “practice” that our understanding of it exists in some way both as an aspect of our participation in

What this suggests to me is that at this point we might be better off following a clue from philosophical hermeneutics, that the *practice of free improvisation* might give some content to the ethos enacted in communicative action. *Phronēsis plays a role here.* Again: Receptivity is a precondition to collective, free improvisation, but the ethical or moral character of what is said or played remains to be considered. Even were a moral form of receptivity to hover in the cognitive background, it will be revealed to players in an embodied and sonically resonant form. Hence we need to derive the ethical or moral considerations—the Habermasian Generalized Other—from *an interpretation of the musical practice* itself. Because collective, free, musical improvisation is paradigmatically, to use Kompridis’s phrase, “open to openness itself,” it is useful to think through what makes it work, what we might think of as an embodied civility (as opposed to but not explicitly against nor derived from a moral ideal or receptivity)²⁰.

it and in our judgment of it, and yet, stands also apart from those. Thus we have a first-person, a second-person, and a third-person relation *in time* to the thing being judged, and those 3 relations all *slide* in the coming-to-be of a new understanding of and with that thing or practice. It’s for this reason that I accept Kompridis’s account of receptivity as fundamental ground but disagree that contemporaneously it acts as a moral ideal. That latter notion of judging reifies what the first manner of experiencing makes fluid and real such that we have something to make judgements about.

²⁰ When Kompridis offers the possibility that in aesthetic production and reception, our “moral and cognitive powers . . . are heightened and made to be dynamic, in a ‘reflective state of judgment,’” we have here Kompridis simply turning reflective disclosure into Habermasian communicative action where, weakly, Habermas would build into the experience of mimetic role-playing a normative judgment about it. Judgment, I think it’s better to say, is separate from varieties of solidarity, which just means that we, again, judge before and after we act in solidarity; the reflective aspect internal to communicative action or free improvisational music is attuned to experiencing the here and now of creative co-constitution of what we’re doing together, not reflecting against norms like receptivity unless that is the relevant embodied practice. Prepare to act including moral reflection; act in the now; course correct as we go; assess via norms later.

What ethos emerges from the practice of collective, free musical improvisation?

In free, musical improvisation, an ethos emerges from within. Perhaps we can call this “auditory intersubjectivity.” It is not just listening, not just receptivity; we’re talking about listening *while playing and while performing* in public with strangers in front of strangers. As one set of analysts and performers have rendered it :

In free improvisation this openness to listening is elemental. Listening is literally way-finding, an echo-locator, the foundation of information that creates language, communication, and intimacy. (Hannah Reardon-Smith, Louise Denson and Vanessa Tomlinson, “Feministing Free Improvisation,” (in *Tempo* 74 (292) 2020, p. 18)

What is the ethos that permits such intimacy to manifest into sound, or sound into intimacy in public? It is crucial to note that at Racer Sessions, any ethos which stands to govern a group of people on stage is born and reborn with each next random assemblage of performers. From an observers perspective, there might seem to be something consistent at work, and perhaps there is, but from the first and second person’s perspective, what’s going on fundamentally is a learning process in action. While a stock of fairly reliable presuppositions exist, a short list of which I’ll supply, the important thing is that any of them can be violated, and the violation can be rendered back into the musical performance. This is not always successful, but neither is staying in whatever rules the performers might have wrongly presupposed they weren’t to violate.

Some of the emergent rules of civility in place might be summed up in the phrase, “don’t be an asshole”:

1. Don’t play louder than the quietist instrument (unless doing so for the greater good)
2. Don’t belittle anybody musically unless they’re in on it
3. Don’t be too long on stage
4. Don’t go up on stage so many times in an evening that others aren’t given the opening to find their courage
5. Don’t be so inflexible in your playing that everyone else is simply playing along with you

- or off of you
6. Don't play recognizable tunes
 7. No secret deals about what or how to play. Just start and let it happen.

Those are indications of what not to do, but they are typically never said, only indicated musically within the practice of performance. Here is some positive counsel:

1. Play and listen at the same time (and not playing is the same as playing when that's what's called for)
2. Play with intention, even if what you're doing is trying to allow accident to hold sway
3. Play in a way that's inviting to others
4. Ask yourself what's missing or needed sonically in the group concept, and do that if you can, or not
5. Pay attention to what's happening on the stage, mostly with your ears
6. Be willing to forgive and be forgiven (but not always)
7. The music is imperfect; the music is perfect
8. Respect the shared instruments on stage

Note that none of these "rules" suggest what sounds are made. Some like it hot, some like it cool, the trick when on stage is to figure out what the group right here and right now is doing with sound.

One of the beautiful aspects of the Sessions is that although all of these implicit rules apply to playing, they are largely unspoken. They have to be derived by the player. They also work on members in the audience who are perhaps still working up the courage to get up on stage. Plus, any of these implicit rules can be broken at any time, and frequently are. The trick is to musically adjust. If someone is too loud, do we break off, or do we play just as loud or louder, or do we suddenly switch to barely audible tones, perhaps shifting from sound to movement. Do we walk off the stage? Do we try to stare down the player? Do we offer a musical joke of some kind? I have seen all of these maneuvers. Arendtian forgiveness is built into the Session, and

dealing with all levels of playing, different experience levels and capabilities requires tact, generosity of spirit, and the technical skill to address whatever sonic deficiencies stand in need of support. As one of the co-founders, Evan Woodle, said in all sincerity, Racer is a place where we can play bad music. What he meant is that what we're trying to do is to do something other than make music; music here, at least sometimes, is an emergent effect of responsiveness, and what's critical is the responsiveness which takes the shape of sound.²¹

If we take such norms of civility, there to be actualized but also routinely and often deliberately violated as a well-intentioned contribution to the collective sound, we give Kompridis's sense of the presupposition of receptivity some content and perhaps a bit of an edge. To be good and humane to one another might mean overpowering them with saxophone altissimo—at just the right moment, or recovering from having done so at the wrong one in a way which says, “we can go on together.” The Racer Sessions certainly are open to openness, and the community such an orientation engenders.

Adorno was aware of the inclusion of timbre as a material element in music, the substitution of “mellifluous sound” for “a montage of noises,” that is, for sound as such, and the persistent question, “Is that still music?” (370) Without naming collective, free improvisation as a possible solution to the persistent dissolution of authority as means and end, he nonetheless names the dynamic at work: “art rebels against every sort of dependency upon preexisting materials that are reflected in the classification of art according to different art forms and that

²¹ At one recent Session, I was playing the drum kit along with a voice/storyteller improviser. We compared notes afterwards and agreed that, although it took a few minutes to get there, we were eventually “breathing together,” and that felt like success.

resist shaping by the autonomous artist.”²² The “autonomy” of the artist, giving oneself the rule, or in Kant’s formulation of the genius, to create without a rule is, in its strong and isolated sense, put to the side. John Locke’s definition of the King’s prerogative adumbrates Kant’s theory of the genius. Locke says that where no law already governs or where a law unreasonably restricts, the King may act in the absence of law, outside the law, and indeed, against the law, so long as it is for the public good, “for *prerogative is nothing but the power of doing public good without a rule.*”²³ This centralized, privileged, monopoly of acting without a rule, in the condition of rulelessness, of unruliness, of anarchy in politics or art-making gives way before the democratic distribution of that power, such that, with Arendt, power becomes precisely the sharing of that condition of prerogative, of genius.

There is perhaps something internal to but also at the edges of the Racer Sessions, something bordering on the absurd, the acceptance of the absurd in that within each improvised performance and also across a series of performances, it is often fruitless to ask or answer what people were trying to do or what they did do. They are building a sonic world which translates uneasily into any kind of post-play talking or explanation. Adorno refers to the kind of absurdity produced by montage which he says, “amounts to the disruption, and hence the denial, of meaning in works of art through the invasion of fragments of empirical reality that do not abide by the laws of art” (“Art and the Arts,” 385). The absurd can act like an abrasive shock not only

²² “Art and the Arts,” in *Can One Live after Auschwitz?: A Philosophical Reader*. Trans. Henry W. Pickford. Ed. by Rolf Tiedemann. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.[1967], p. 371.

²³ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*. Ed. C.B. Macpherson. Hackett Publishing, 1980 [1690], 87.

within a work, but the way that work speaks to the rest of our everyday lives. Less a “denial” of meaning, absurdity can act as commentary, either as cynicism or as a negation which affirms a longing for a music which would seem out of step in a world we can’t be complacent about. Music as entertainment has its place, but the shock-value of an unconsoling, abrasive or confusing music can also serve as an impetus for action or a model for resistance.²⁴ As Adorno implies at the end of his essay, “Art and the Arts”: Utopia achieved won’t need art. At Racer, a trace of absurdity joyfully bounds the impossibility of the beauty disclosed in the music. That said, 6 years earlier in a similar vein in his essay on “Informal Music,” he writes in a way which could both describe the Racer Sessions and affirm its relevance:

Informal music could augment rhythmic flexibility to a degree as yet undreamt of. In this, as in all other respects, it could be the image of freedom. What the musician longs for, because it would be the fulfilment of music, has not yet proved capable of achievement. Impossible as it has been to discover what music authentically is, it has been no less impossible to bring wholly authentic music into being. It is better to admit this than to bar the way to it by choosing one type or the other and claiming that it embodies the ominously positive musical ideal. Informal music is a little like Kant’s eternal peace. Kant himself though of this as an actual, concrete possibility which is capable of realization and yet is nevertheless just an idea. The aim of every artistic utopia today is to make things in ignorance of what they are.” (“Vers une musique informelle,” in *Quasi Una Fantasia*, 322)

What are the lessons that collective, free improvisation might have for communicative action as it is more typically understood?

There are many possible answers to this question. I will just emphasize a couple:

Risk.

There is a risk every performer takes. Stepping into the unknown. There is potential shame in public, as well as the certainty that it is forgettable and forgivable. And, the risk is shared, and the

²⁴ Music of course can also serve other ends. See: Nancy S. Love, *Trendy Fascism: White Power Music and the Future of Democracy*. SUNY Press, 2016.

sharing of that risk means that if one fails, we all fail to a certain degree, but because there was no specific plan to which we didn't adhere, the failure is of an interesting kind. It is the failure to have produced something that sounded both intentional and unintentional at the same time: we meant to have produced what emerged, even though we could not have intended this. To fail together in an act of constituting a sound world which falls to nothing the moment we exit it is, nonetheless, to have braved the exposure to one another and ourselves, and perhaps we made something beautiful after all, and disclosed something true. The promise that communicative action in its sonic form as acoustic intersubjectivity offers up to its other form as linguistically articulate mimetic play is simply that in trying to reach understanding, one always already has, and that's something.

dissonance and democracy

Anne Norton in *Wild Democracy* (Oxford UP, 2023) writes against the Western canon, explaining that it too frequently aids the wealthy and powerful, fearing the self-rule of the people. Forget Athens, which excluded so many, yet it was a democracy. She writes: "The right of the people to rule themselves has been forged not in the texts of the wise but in the practices of the many. That is the canon we have neglected" (Norton, 157). It's possible that the Racer Sessions signal nothing more and nothing less than what free people can do with their free time, where neither ruling nor being ruled is at issue.

Perhaps Norton might consider the practice of musical improvisation as exemplary, but it would seem otherwise, as she addresses music directly in her chapter on Rousseau's dictum from the 3rd Discourse, that "the voice of the people is the voice of God." The divinity of the people is

in their unity, and it gets expressed in the song of the dispossessed, their songs of hope and fear, transgression and courage. She cites “We shall overcome” as heard by the jailors in Selma and Birmingham. Or, Bella Ciao for the Italian partisans. That’s the voice of the people. Norton writes:

I do not know why the people sing. I know that when they sing, their voices join. They speak, they sing with one voice. When the people sing, their differences are lost in the sea of sound. It does not matter if you sing well or badly, your voice joins with the others in that ocean. Rich and poor, old and young, people of every sex and race sing. They sing as one. Their bodies vibrate to that singing. Their voices come out, join with one another, and as they do the surrounding people feel the sound of those voices near their heart. They speak and they hear in the same moment. They sing and they feel the sound. I know that when the people sing, their bodies carry the common, and yet each one sings. In singing, the solitude of the body is, for a moment, affirmed and overcome. (*Wild Democracy*, 195)

She stresses there the “unity” achieved, that they “sing with one voice,” that “differences are lost in the sea of sound.” As a musician playing on stage with strangers, there are times perhaps of depersonalization, where such images of fusion and loss, de-identification, or what Freud referred to derisively as “oceanic feelings,” come to overwhelm our personality for a time. But I am Jewish, so this sort of dream makes me nervous, and the fact that it’s given in the name of democracy doesn’t ease my fears even though I’m on its side and wish it well. I prefer what Kompridis lauds in the “fact of pluralism” or that Arendt’s existential plurality should be preserved, that it’s the differences even as we sing the same song which make it beautiful. Beautiful dissonance.

Allow me a second coda. One of Racer Sessions’ co-founders, Aaron Otheim ,tells a story from the early days. For one particular session, the musicians were directed to show up at Racer Sessions without their instruments. Otheim reports that the night of “improvisation without

instruments, everybody was really distraught.” It turned into the kind of comedy night where nothing was funny. Eventually, Luke Bergman got everybody together into a humming circle, a “faux-spiritual moment” for 10 minutes, healing from the bad night. At the end of it, Drew says, “So, who wants to fuck me?” Bakhtinian laughter ensued. That brought it all back together.

Appendix A: *Racer Sessions mission statement, or, possibly a draft (undated, circa 2010)*

We collectively organize weekly sessions for new, experimental music. The purpose is to give musicians of all ages and backgrounds the opportunity to interact and inspire each other, while establishing a community-accessible home for our music, which would otherwise only exist in classrooms, basements, outer space etc.

- o Curators should aim to not only present a strong piece/concept/idea for the initial presentation, but also strive to expand and shape the direction of the improvisation session with some form of their concept. Both the presentation and the improvisations are under the responsibility of the curator.
- o Curators should be a clear and obvious leader for the improv session in whatever way they see fit for their concept. This is to avoid ambiguity within the improvisations and ensure that every session is unique and educational.
- o Since the sessions are intended to be for the audience as much as the participating musicians, Curators should be certain to communicate concepts to attending audience members.
- o Curators should write a post of whatever length they feel appropriate, which will give insight to session-goers about what the week's sessions will entail. Posts can include whatever information/musings/ramblings the curator desires.

Appendix B: *Racer Sessions boiler plate welcome, 2014*

Seattle record label Table & Chairs organizes weekly sessions that explore composition and improvisation. The Racer Sessions takes place promptly at 8:00 and lasts until 10:00 every Sunday evening.

Our mission is to give musicians of all backgrounds and ages the opportunity to interact with and inspire one another, while establishing a community-accessible home for this music, which might otherwise only exist in classrooms, basements, outer space, etc.

What Happens

Every Sunday at Café Racer, a different musician or group curates the Racer Sessions, performing original music and giving a short, spoken explanation of their creative process. Afterwards, a jam session takes place, often based on the concepts and approaches outlined in the curator's presentation.

The Racer Sessions' musical focus is primarily centered on improvisation—particularly free or collective improv—and frequently incorporates the aesthetic and techniques of avant-garde jazz and classical music. However, we firmly believe that, as the name suggests, free improvisation should not be limited to any particular style, creed or approach, and we warmly welcome musicians of any persuasion to share their voice.

How to Participate

During the jam session, groups spontaneously form in the room to the side of the stage. There is no sign-up process, though on occasion, the curator may take a more active role in organizing groups. If you'd like to play, please make yourself known to a group or to the curator (or anyone who looks like they know what's going on).

To prepare for each session, we recommend that everyone reads our weekly blog, which features a post from the upcoming session's curator on the process of creating his or her piece, as well as recommended listening, approaches or meditations to prepare you for the jam session.

Every curator presentation and jam session is recorded and documented on the Racer Sessions website. To listen back to previous sessions, visit the Curator's page.

If you are interested in curating a session, please contact raceressions@gmail.com.

Come on By!

We recommend arriving at least fifteen minutes in advance to get a good seat, grab a drink or some food, and to say "howdy!" to folks. Also, be sure to check out the Table & Chairs' merch table, which contains physical copies of albums by our growing roster of artists. See you there!

Appendix C: *excerpts from interviews:*

Chris Icasiano (percussion, Racer co-founder): “At the Racer Sessions, the improvisations that I consider to be successful are ones where everyone is listening to each other and sensitive to what other players are doing. . . . It’s not about the individual, it’s about what the group can do on the whole.”

Lori Goldston (cello): It’s not about “playing over changes faster. . . . [It’s about] people’s collective and individual psychic states and their relationships, the quality of engagement with the instrument, and the quality of engagement with the music—[in ‘free’ music] you can explore those questions and those questions are on the table. . . . It’s like, how do you walk down the sidewalk with other people and not hit them?”

John Gilbreath (Earshot): “Racer Sessions makes me think about a time when I was in Seattle in the mid-1960s. . . . that spirit of acceptance and improvisation, that kind of willingness of all of us when we’re young to think we’re inventing a world. . . . It’s that spirit, it’s a magical spirit, it’s a spirit that going to a place like Racer can remind us of, that place where we all create is a place that’s outside of or separate from workaday lives . . . it’s absolutely medicinal to have places like that to go and just take the fence down around our imaginations or expectations.”

Don Berman (percussion): On improvisation: “Ideally for me . . . , it’d be nice if when it’s done, we go, “What the hell was that, and where’d that come from? ‘Cuz I like to feel it’s coming through me. But you can’t always rub the sticks together to make that [happen]. So the first thing I do, I sit there, and if somebody plays, I just wait a second, and then I just kinda start moving. I don’t really listen to myself You have to give yourself permission to get totally concentrated on what you’re doing and play it with intention, whether it’s slow, sparse, fast, soft, loud – really play it.”

Greg Campbell (percussion): “One thing I stress with my students: Your job is to find sounds. ”

Haley Freedlund (trombone, Racer curator): “The [Racer] community is accessible from both sides, to people who have that history of repertoire and jazz education, that come from that strong background of learning and the history of jazz, the rhetoric and whathaveyou, and I think that it’s also approachable from the other side, people who know their way around an instrument somewhat, or they understand the sounds an instrument could make so they go into it more texturally and exploratively. . . . The free music community is sort of like a safe haven.”

Neil Welch (saxophone, Racer co-founder): “We have literally over the years all worked individually to do as much as we can to check any ego, to walk up there and feel like you can collaborate with a person who performs at any level, and be accepting and okay with them. Personally, that’s been a revolutionary thing for me as a human. Musically, it’s opened me up to all kinds of shit. I haven’t come across any other scene that’s been able to do something like that.”