Emergent Improvisation: Practice and Performance

The practice and performance of Emergent Improvisation addresses the nature of improvisation in dance and music. In this context, improvisation is understood to mean the spontaneous creation of integrated sound and movement by performers who are adapting to internal and external stimuli, impulses, and interactions. Ordinarily, we think of order and form as externally imposed, composed, or directed. In this case, however, new kinds of order emerge, not because they are preconceived or designed, but because they are the products of dynamic, self-organizing systems operating in open-ended environments.

This phenomenon—the creation of order from a rich array of self-organizing interactions—is found not only in dance and music, but also, as it turns out, in a wide variety of natural settings when a range of initial conditions gives rise to collective behavior that is both different from and more than the sum of its parts. Like certain art forms, evolution, for example, is decidedly improvisational and emergent, as is the brain function that lies at the heart of what it is to be human.

Emergent forms appear in complex, interconnected systems, where there is enough order and interaction to create recognizable pattern but where the form is open-ended enough to continuously bring in new differentiations and integrations that influence and modify the form. It is by way of these interactions that particular pathways for the development of new material are selected.

In linking the creative work of art-making to the emergent process evident in nature, there is basis for a rich and textured inquiry into how systems come together, transform, and reassemble to create powerful instruments of communication, meaning, and exchange. Emergent Improvisation explores the ways in which natural processes underlie artistic expression along with the possibility that art can help illuminate natural processes.