

The Emergent Improvisation Project

Interview with Susan Sgorbati

March 29, 2005

Q: What is Emergent Improvisation?

Emergent Improvisation is a process of composing in the moment. By composing, I mean, ordering, structuring, organizing; in this case, movement and sound. It could be applied to systems of all kinds. It's the ordering or structuring of different kinds of forms in the present moment that does not involve an exterior agent or outside director. There are three concepts that are key to Emergent Improvisation, which are self-organization, emergence, and complexity. Self-organization, in this context, means the ordering or structuring of people or entities in a way that I just mentioned—that do not have an outside agent, do not have a choreographer, or do not have a director. The ordering is coming from within the system or within the group of individuals that are making up that particular grouping—they are self-organizing. Emergence is the outcome, the property, or the process by which, through self-organization, some new form, some new ordering, some new pattern, or some new ability arises to move something forward to create another idea. Since this is all within a context of time-based movement, then it's evident that this emergent idea, in a way, is part of something new, versus something in the past. As it's happening in the present, it's creating the potential for something new that was exposed, opened up. The idea of complexity is this whole process. With self-organization to create an emergent form, you're talking about a structuring that is complex, versus chaotic or very ordered. That complexity is at an edge of chaos, where there is enough order to recognize a pattern, but open enough to be adaptable and to bring in new information to create whatever this new property or outcome will be.

Q: How did you come into the work of improvisation within its lineage as a performance form? How did this work emerge into the current practice of Emergent Improvisation?

I went to Bennington College for my undergraduate degree and was a part of the Martha Graham/Jose Limon tradition. At that point, Viola Farber was here teaching Cunningham technique, so I got immersed in the Cunningham form. During that time, Judith Dunn and Bill Dixon came to Bennington my sophomore year from the Judson Church in New York City. Judson Church was kind of a hot bed of avant-garde reaction/rebellion to Cunningham's way of structuring. Judith Dunn was Robert Dunn's wife, and Robert Dunn taught composition at Judson, where all of this activity emerged. So when Judy came up to Bennington with Bill Dixon, the thing that they were experimenting with at the time was the performance of improvisation. That was a pretty radical idea at that point. Not that improvisation in itself was such a radical idea because that was always a part of dancing. But the idea that you would take it seriously as a form for performance was something very radical—that there might be skills involved, that it could be practiced, and that musicians and dancers were working as equals, meaning that

music was not an accompaniment to the dance, and dancing wasn't just an explanation of the music. The idea that they were both running parallel and interacting was a key element to their work.

So I was very influenced; I got very involved with Judy. When I was asked to come back to Bennington, it was to teach her classes in improvisation work. At that time, I was still focusing on the ways that Judy and Bill taught improvisation. I was very influenced by the idea that this was a real form for performance, and that it did involve skill and was very rigorous. That was a very interesting new idea.

Now it's been over twenty years that I've been teaching this form, and I've been teaching it with musicians all along. I taught for many years with Arthur Brooks, who studied with Bill Dixon. I think through the teaching, I began to get more and more interested in my own ideas and the way I would view what was coming out of the groups working in this way. I noticed that there were certain kinds of patterns and forms that kept reappearing. And so about ten years ago, I started to name these recurring patterns— things like 'main event/chorus', 'unison', and 'path'. They were very simple, but they were forms that you kept seeing over and over again when students were improvising.

Then around the early 90's, I had quite a few students who had graduated and were in the professional dance world. So I gathered a group of them together---Hope Clark, Jonathan Kinzel, Lionel Popkin, Paul Matteson. These were all people who had studied with me at one point or another, and I knew they were advanced in these kinds of improvisation skills for performance. I called this group *Materia Prima*. We started to create several structures together for performance, basically as an experiment just to see what would happen. It produced some very, very interesting results. The structures were not about an entire composition at that point; they were still mainly things that were coming into each composition, meaning, again, 'main event/chorus', 'wash', certain kinds of solo material. So they weren't a form unto themselves, but they were elements that contributed to the structuring that we were doing. There was more structure than with what I had experienced with Judy and Bill, which was more organic and coming from within. Basically, I was just beginning to impose some ideas about structuring that would repeat themselves, but it was still really an experimental phase.

About five years ago, a number of things happened. Bruce Weber, who's an evolutionary biologist, came to Bennington and moved two doors down from my office. Susan Borden, who was a trustee of the College, was very interested in the brain, in terms of her own writing and thinking and was involved with The Neurosciences Institute in La Jolla, CA. I started having conversations and doing projects with both of them, and that opened me up to this whole discovery of complex systems. Historically, this new paradigm of complexity started to emerge probably in the last fifty years, but not until about twenty years ago was there a major discussion in the scientific community. It was a real shift from Newtonian physics, which was a science where things were very pinned down; where things could always be replicated in ways where one would always get the same outcome. In contrast, one of the key elements of complexity was this idea of self-

organization with no outside director that had an outcome of an emergent property. Furthermore, complexity yielded movement as a key component in the interactions of this kind of collective behavior. It began to really hit me that there were parallels between the kind of improvisational work that I'd been doing and these new ways of looking at the world—that there was some deep connection between ordering and structuring. It's not that dance and science are the same, that they can be compared in the sense of cells to human beings dancing around in a space. Rather, there seem to be principles of organizing and structuring that could have profound meaning across disciplines.

In subsequent conversations with Dr. Edelman, who is the director of The Neurosciences Institute and Stuart Kauffman, formerly of the Santa Fe Institute, who is now the director of an institute at the University of Calgary, there was absolute agreement between the two of them that this idea of deep organizing principles across disciplines is something that people are very interested in. There hasn't been too much written about it yet—or thought about in relation to their impact. They're getting studied pretty well within their own discipline, but how they might relate across disciplines is still pretty open. This led me in the last five years to really start thinking about what might be the deep connections between these ordering principles in nature and ordering principles within dance and music improvisation. What kinds of forms might we look at that would inform both? What kind of experiments could be set up to find them? Answering these questions is what I feel like I've been doing with Katie Martin. We've both been really investigating, and it has resulted in three areas: the research, the education, and the practice or performance of what we are now calling Emergent Improvisation, to distinguish it from other forms of improvisation, like Contact or improvisation practices that come out of very different kinds of traditions. Emergent Improvisation is really related to natural systems and how they might inform us.

I also have this idea, which I haven't been able to yet see completely in reality in terms of performance, that when this form is practiced, there is a process that appears very similar to natural selection. I have this idea about forms in dance and music that through a constant, ongoing process of selection combined with a certain kind of rigor amongst the dancers and musicians, certain kinds of forms might emerge that are congruent or structured to create an inherent essence or powerful sense of meaning or order. And that gets into the artistic, aesthetic piece of this. To me, that's a big open question at the moment, but something I'm really interested in.

Q: Describe the kinds of experiences that arise when someone practices Emergent Improvisation.

Katie and I are really investigating now what we call the Solo Practice, which seems fundamental to being able to do this kind of work. You couldn't just walk off the street or be a dancer practiced in other traditions and just be able to start doing this. There is a kind of methodology or practice to it, which we've focused into four areas. These areas articulate the felt experience of actually doing the work. The first area is

embodiment, which is based on already seriously developed practices right now in the Body Mind Centering tradition of the dance world, of the physical therapy world, and of Authentic Movement. Embodiment has to do with tuning oneself to sensory perception and allowing for felt experiences of the body. As Mabel Todd said in her book, *The Thinking Body*, the thinking is felt as experienced through the body, through the physical. And that's where motivation and sensation arise in entering this kind of work. One of the things that embodiment does, which is very similar to meditation, is it describes a practice of attention that brings you into the present moment. All the thinking processes and concerns that you bring into the room, which have to do with memory, with worry, with the future, and with problem solving start to dissolve. You start to eliminate by focusing on the sensory attention of the physical. It doesn't mean that everything just completely disappears, but there's an ability to integrate the other maps of the brain with this idea of a physical sensory reality. It is literally a practice of bringing you into the present moment of attention—a very important aspect to the Solo Practice or performing this kind of work.

The next area is the development of a physical or sonic vocabulary. Again, this marks itself very differently from another kind of tradition, where you would learn a very specific technique and perfect it. In this case, you're perfecting and discovering your own physical and sonic technique. You're taking all of your history and integrating it into an emergent place where vocabulary can continually be discovered, reshuffled, recombined to create this thinking process in the body. The development of this vocabulary is very important because like with any vocabulary, the more diverse it is, the more interesting it is, the more able you are to fine tune, to articulate and express detail and ideas. If it's very simplistic, there's just not as much to investigate. So this particular area creates an endless practice of discovering a greater vocabulary.

The third area is an attention to a spatial environment. This is where you start to really transfer what might be more of an internal process into the space that you're in so that you're really connecting to the external world. This work is not just an internal experience for the participant (the dancer/the musician); its power really lives in its performance. The performance needs to connect to the outside world. The focus needs to go to the outside, and it needs to address location, which is a key element in its connection with science, with adapting to an environment. It's very important that this work, wherever its performed, adapts to its particular environment, as opposed to the work being crafted in any theater space and then just travels and tours. Also in this regard, the dance and music need to really become much more aware of each other. I think this one of those parts in the practice where the collaborative aspect is felt strongest among whatever art forms are collaborating, particularly in this case, dance and music.

The last piece of the practice is a focus on the particular. This practice really has to do with the selection process because now that we've got these individual, unique vocabularies, how do we select for a particular ordering, structuring process? The practice of structuring your vocabulary at any given time, why you choose particular gestures, rhythms, spatial configurations, and then how you develop and build on them is a rigorous practice.

Q: How do you know when a structure works within an ensemble? What are the underlying goals of working with these particular Emergent Forms and Composing Structures?

I think this is actually a really important question because one of the things that I've discovered is that not all structures work in this practice. That's why we get into complex systems. It seems to me that only the complex structures are the ones that work because of their self-organizing component. Forms that were led by a choreographer or a director could be very different in this situation than the forms that we're coming across. Therefore, it means that these forms have to have enough inherent rules so that a pattern is recognized and emerges, but not too many rules, or the rules need to be flexible and open enough, that there's space and room for the dancers and musicians to create the potential for the emergent form to happen. So it's been very interesting, trying to find which forms and which rules work.

In these latest two forms, the Complex Unison Form and the Reconstructed Memory Form, what's interesting is that both of them seem to build on simple rules and fundamental elements that we keep refining. For example, the Complex Unison Form could build first from what we're calling the Flocking Form into what might be understood as the Simple Unison Form and then into the Complex Unison Form. Same thing with the Reconstructed Memory Form; an event needs to be created. The rules for that event seem to be very important. This form emerges through a process of coming back to the event as it's recalled. And it is through this process that we see elements of complexity contained within the piece. In these cases, it just so happened that it seems like these forms are building on three kinds of fundamental rules, but I don't think that's probably true for all the forms that are possible in this area. It does seem important though that they have some components of complexity.

The other important aspect to the Emergent Forms and Composing Structures is that each individual musician or dancer needs to have a unique and large enough vocabulary. So that at any given moment, they have access to highly articulated and defined elements or ideas to bring into these very quick-moving windows of opportunity. This represents the problem solving aspect of the selection process of allowing emergence to occur. They also have to have a very practiced sense of attention. If they don't know how to work within an ensemble and recognize a form that's larger than they're own vocabulary, they will continue to distract and pull and literally keep the form from happening. In order for a form to emerge, it has to keep refining itself and discarding what's not useful, just as in selective evolution. With a much more advanced group of dancers and musicians, they're able to recognize what is not useful. They can just bring to the form the form itself and not interfere too much with their own distractions. Which is not to say that it's still not a process of trial and error—it's not like the perfect thing is chosen. But the focus is on the emergence of the form and how it's being built, versus picking elements that are completely outside of what the ensemble is working towards.

Q: What are the results and the larger implications of practicing Emergent Improvisation?

I think the implications for this are really deep on a lot of different levels. One is on a personal level because I believe that the practice of this work actually affirms the uniqueness of each individual, allows them to maximize their own potential, and to actually explore new parts of themselves that weren't necessarily available through other ways of working. It creates possibilities of finding what I call 'location' for a person. A lot of times, problems happen because people do not understand what they want and how they're defining themselves. It seems through this practice, it's all about defining your own potential for expression, and then understanding based on that, where it's located.

There are implications across disciplines on an ensemble level as well. Most of what we're living within is operating on this principle of not having a director. There's a continual selection for the best systems that will adapt to whatever environment is presently surrounding them. To really be able to acknowledge, understand, and then practice this gives you the ability to tune into systems on all levels, whether it is organizational systems, natural systems, etc. This has implications of working in the environment, working with managing institutions, and for whether you create hierarchies. If you have more self-organizing structures, then what roles do leaders play? It's an interesting discussion.

And certainly through this work, you're looking for more open-ended and adaptable solutions for problem solving. Often people feel that their only solution is a yes/no, right/wrong kind of outcome. When you're thinking about this kind of work, where things are self-organized and there are emergent forms arising through an adaptive process, you would quickly say that right/wrong or those kinds of black and white situations are probably pretty rare. It's not that they don't exist, and it's not that they're not important, but there are probably a lot more outcomes that are emergent phenomena. If more people understood and tuned into this and could participate in an ensemble process, probably more efficient, effective ways of organizing things could be found—ways that have the flexibility to also keep changing and adapting with the continual flow of new information.