

Introductory Narrative for Emergent Improvisation

My introduction to Dance was through Improvisation. Back when I was studying at The Philadelphia Dance Academy under Nadia Chilkovsky (later to become the University of the Arts), Nadia offered improvisation classes as one of the central fixtures of our studies. It came out of her work with Isadora Duncan and then, later Martha Graham, but Nadia had her own version, which was really allowing young people to explore their own movement ideas and find their own expressive potential. Very early on, it gave me the permission to be 'myself' in my dancing, which was very powerful and probably the only place that I could be myself growing up. We were given permission to take risks, there were no limits or censors to our explorations in movement, other than not to injure oneself. The work was focused mainly on solo improvisation and not with groups. Nadia was a choreographer, and she made many dance pieces for us where we learned dance phrases to perform. My next big introduction to improvisation was with Judith Dunn at Bennington College during my sophomore year at Bennington. Since I was familiar with dance improvisation, I was so excited to be able to enter this way of dancing again. Judith Dunn and Bill Dixon had their own unique way of exploring improvisation, and it was not only in a solo practice but with ensembles as well. Throughout my entire time as a student, improvisation was essential for me, and my collaboration with percussionist, David Moss and my senior project with Tommy Guralnik, saxophonist were deeply embedded in this work.

When I returned to Bennington College at Judy's suggestion, ten years later, I taught Dance Improvisation for the first time at Bennington. (I had some trial teaching and research with a very talented group of dancers at Castleton State College and Williams College prior), but I started teaching dance improvisation in earnest at Bennington in 1981, while I was also the first person to enter the Masters in Fine Arts graduate program in Dance at Bennington. The Dance Faculty decided to start it once I was there teaching for Judy. I taught with Bill Dixon, and much of it was Judi's approach that I had studied. But now over several years, since I had decided not to pursue a professional career in New York City as a choreographer, I began seriously to investigate improvisational practices in the studio with Bennington dance students. Some of those early students, like Jonathan Kinzel, Hope Clark, DeeDee Dorvillier, and then Lionel

Popkin, Cori Olinghouse, Keith Thompson, Katie Martin, Jaamil Olawale Kosoko and Paul Matteson have gone on to significant careers as choreographers and improvisers, pursuing their own important work.

As I began to teach and explore improvisational practices in the dance studio, very exciting observations opened up for me. My students and I began to notice patterns that would repeat themselves without being premeditated or planned. We began to identify these simple forms as paths, washes, frames, etc. I began to be very interested in why certain structures were chosen by the dancers, recognized by signaling each other, and kept returning without any verbal communication. It became clear that in the conversation about improvisation in the dance world, which was often disparaging, ("if you weren't serious about choreography, you improvised, improvisation had no structure, it was total chaos, dancers did whatever they felt like with no choice, discipline or focus), improvisation was rarely seen as a serious teaching form or a performance form. This is why Judi and Bill's work was so important and groundbreaking, along with Grand Union, and other groups on the West Coast. To be clear, movement and sound improvisation have been ancient practices in many cultures from early history up until the present. It also has a long tradition in African-American dance and music.

But in the Western contemporary modern dance world, it wasn't until the last thirty years that it got much respect in critical circles or taken seriously as a dance performance form. Through my teaching, it was evident that there was a beginner and an advanced performer in improvisation, like in any other dance technique or form. As I began to teach improvisation over several years, I got more and more into the research aspect of the practice and wondered about the nature of structure in general. The first ensemble that I gathered together was called, "Materia Prima" which included Lionel Popkin, Hope Clark, Paul Matteson, Maureen Ellenhorn and Jonathan Kinzel. They were incredible improvisers and performers. There was very little structuring before we performed. We had some ideas and then we tried them out. It was with the second ensemble that structures really started to take shape. During this same time at Bennington College, two significant serendipitous events occurred. I left being the Dean of Faculty to return to teaching improvisation full time, and my office was relocated to the Science Building. The second event

was that the former Bennington College President, Elizabeth Coleman, became a Trustee at the Neurosciences Institute in La Jolla, California. While walking the hallways of Dickinson Science Building, I came into contact with Bruce Weber, an evolutionary biologist and we would strike up conversations about our work. At the same time, Liz Coleman introduced me to a book by Dr. Gerald Edelman, called, "A Universe of Consciousness". In both instances, I became aware that in natural systems, whether they are cellular, neuronal networks, flocks of birds, or swarms of bees, there are self-organizing structures leading to emergent, complex patterns that are improvisational. This was truly eye-opening and an incredible revelation to me. It resonated so deeply with my own experience with dancers in the studio. I asked Bruce to come into the dance studio to observe, to see if my observations were accurate, and he, with excitement, assured me that there was a direct relationship to natural systems and their self-organizing structures. The Edelman reading also profoundly affected me, and I understood what he was describing, even though I had no history in science, neurobiology or evolutionary studies. I was then fortunate enough to meet Dr. Gerald Edelman, Nobel Prize recipient, who invited me for several winters for short residencies at The Neurosciences Institute where I had many in depth discussions with him as well as many other scientists including Anil Seth doing research at the Institute. This is when I began to name the method of this improvisational practice as "Emergent Improvisation". I wanted to distinguish it from other forms of improvisation at this time such as Contact Improvisation, or Improvisation using Scores, from what I was teaching and discovering. It doesn't mean that it was brand new, or that it is any better than any other form of improvisational practice, just that it helped me identify the particular observations that I was making with my students. This led to what is identified in my chapbook, written in collaboration with two of my talented advanced improvisers and performers, Marie Lynn Haas and Emily Climer, as structures and forms in this work. For example, an early structure was named and identified by Maureen Ellenhorn as 'initiator, responder, framer'. At this time, Katie Martin was my student and a very talented improviser and thinker, who helped me develop and identify the work. Later, as you can see in the book and in essays, I identified forms such as "Complex Unison" "The Remembered Present" and "Susan's World". Marie Lynn Haas and Emily Climer developed and named

the “Recall Form”. As time went on, the research became fuller, and Bruce Weber introduced me to the great scientist and “Father of Complex Systems” Stuart Kauffman. Stuart came to Bennington to give a talk, and came into the dance studio with the dancers and myself. He changed the way that I thought about this work. He helped me understand the underlying structuring principles of self-organizing systems, and the kinds of metaphorical thinking that he named, ‘order for free’ and ‘the adjacent possible’. He invited me to a Salon of scientists, artists, and free thinkers when he was in residence at the University of Vermont where we discussed the many aspects of complex systems and their applications. He introduced me to very intelligent people in the U.S. Military, specifically Counter Intelligence who were very interested in improvisational structures, particularly related to Special Forces. I began to see the wide ranging applications of emergent improvisation and how the ideas crossed many disciplines and areas of study.

I was then given a grant from the National Performance Network to tour this work. This second group of improvisers: Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, Cori Olinghouse, Katie Martin, Nicole Pope, Zornitsa Stoyanova, Carson Efird, Lionel Popkin and Keith Thompson were also amazing dancers, performers and improvisers. Part of the tour was performing at The Neuroscience Institute for the scientists and at The New England Complex Systems Institute annual conference under Dr. Yaneer Bar Yam, for a large wide-ranging group of scientists and for US. Navy officers. Jake Meginsky, a musician, composer and film maker, was directly involved in identifying the forms that were performed during this tour, understanding the nature of this composing in music and along with Sean Mattio and John Truscinski, performed at all of the venues on the tour. During this time, I was encouraged to write a series of essays on emergent improvisation that resulted in encouragement from Lisa Nelson to write a book, which she edited in 2012-13 called “Emergent Improvisation: Where Dance Meets Science in Spontaneous Composition”. This also resulted in a website: www.emergentimprovisation.org

I always thought one of the best Dance Films I had ever seen was “Beach Birds for Camera”. This was a film of a Merce Cunningham piece by Elliot Caplan. I still don’t remember how Elliot and I met, but we started to have a conversation over several years about improvisation and how it might be filmed. This resulted in Elliot

creating the film, “Emergent Forms”. The dancers in this film are Katie Martin, Marie Lynn Haas, Emily Climer, Lydia Chrisman, Finn Murphy, Nikolas Tsocanos, Joe Poulson, Cori Olinghouse, Zornitsa Stoyonova, Tony Orroco, Nicole Daunic and Leah Morrison. Elliot was very interested in how this form of improvisation could be filmed in ways that reflected its structuring principles and its relationship to natural systems.

“A school of fish, a herd of elephants, a flock of birds, a swarm of bees, a brood of hens, a colony of ants, a bevy of beauties, an exaltation of larks, (Lipton) these are all examples of groups of living things. The phrasing suggests that these living things are collaborating in some way. They are in relationship with each other. Their collective behavior is not without meaning. We can discern order in this seeming chaos of groupings.

A pod of seals, a kindle of kittens, a gam of whales, a wedge of swans, a shoal of bass, a bouquet of pheasants, a gaggle of geese, a parliament of owls, (Lipton) more groupings whose terms are less known, but easily imagined in motion, shifting the landscape they inhabit, without a leader who maps out their destinations, but through an intricate self-organization, creates an essential ensemble.

These groupings in motion are an example of a kind of organic structuring that I have named “emergent improvisation”. To date, my work in the practice and performance of Emergent Improvisation has focused on improvisation in dance and music ensembles. 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 center 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 processes evident in nature, we find a 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.

Living things in our environment everywhere are revealing to us the profound depths of structuring processes. Whether it is human anatomical systems, animal migration patterns, insect ensembles, plant morphology, or cellular development, there are hundreds of thousands of forms that have refined themselves over centuries of motion, adapting to their surroundings. What connects them if there is no pre-defined choreography? Who determines the sequence and the arrangements? Who do they follow? Why do they form patterns? Why are their formations so beautiful?" published in **The Bakery, Berlin, Germany. Essay: "Order for Free: Emergent Improvisation as a System for Composition and Communication"** by Susan Sgorbati from *Idea in Action*, a collection of essays, 2012.