Improvisation, Interactivity and “The Will to Adorn”: The Music and Philosophy of George E. Lewis

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V. Bibliography
North Star Boogaloo for percussion and recorded sound (1996)
I. Biography

- Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (1970s)
- The Kitchen (1980-2)
- IRCAM
- University of California, San Diego (1991-5)
- Columbia University (Edwin H. Case Professor of American Music, 2004-)
Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM)
II. Improvisation
Anthony Braxton, Composition 40B (1976)

Chorus: 🎧

Solo: 🎧
Outline of a Theory of Improvisation

“Following Bourdieu, I want to sketch in outline form some characteristics of an emerging new definition of improvisation. First, one imagines that such a definition would be receptive to both production (doing) and reception (listening) – or rather, would view listening as a form of doing.”

(Lewis, “Mobilitas Animi: Improvising Technologies, Intending Chance” 116)
Listening as Improvisation

“We can understand the experience of listening to music as very close to the experience of the improviser. Listening itself, an improvisative act engaged in by everyone, announces a practice of active engagement with the world, where we sift, interpret, store, and forget, in parallel with action and fundamentally articulated with it.”

(Lewis, “Mobilitas Animi” 113)
Indeterminacy, Intention, and Improvisation

“This definition [of improvisation] would accept and subsume indeterminacy within its purview instead of allowing improvisation to be posed as oppositional to it, accepting the mutually mediating network comprised by intention, improvisation, chance, and difference, and asserting the necessary presence of intentionality in the indeterminate space.”

(Lewis, “Mobilitas Animi” 116)
Composition as Improvisation, Improvisation as Composition

“Second, our new definition [of improvisation] would disrupt the cherished dichotomy between the practices of improvisation and composition, and would accept the importance of both processes and products [...] to any notion of the improvisative, rather than valorizing one over the other [...].”

(Lewis, “Mobilitas Animi” 116)
Improvisation as a Way of Life

“Our new definition would explore the relation of improvisation to local agency, history, contingency, memory, identity, and embodiment, usefully reconnecting supposed purely musical questions with their analogues in similar issues surrounding the practice of everyday life itself.”

(Lewis, “Mobilitas Animi” 116)
Improvisation as a Research Model and as a Basic Human Characteristic

“If we can conclude that improvisation is the ubiquitous practice of everyday life, a primary method of meaning exchange in any interaction, then one should find it to be a crucially important site for both humanistic and scientific study. [...] Improvisation is everywhere, but it is very hard to see – the reason being that improvisation is fundamental to the existence and survival of every human formation, from the individual to the community, through the postnational body to the species itself – as close to universal as contemporary critical method could responsibly entertain.”

(Lewis,” Mobilitas Animi” 108)
Artificial Life 2007

George Lewis Portrait Concert
Artificial Life (2007)
Nov. 12th, 2011
BEGINNING: Enter at the same time as another group, imitating them as closely as possible. Stop playing when the other group does.

END: Enter as soon as possible at the end of another group's playing, attempting to play what they just played as faithfully as possible, for the same duration as the original phrase.

FAR: Imitate the music being played now by the group farthest in physical distance from you. Stop playing when the other group does.

INTERRUPT: Play a very loud, raucous phrase for a maximum of 3 seconds, designed to interrupt another group's playing with a contrasting element.
Notes for Page One

The set of sixteen instructions, represented graphically on a grid, is designed to encourage collective improvisation. The order of performance of the grid instructions is sequential only, vertically and horizontally. Please arrange your performance pathways so that you arrive at the "record" instruction before executing the "playback" instruction. Also, everyone should avoid beginning with the same instruction, and in particular, with those instructions that ask the improvisor to suspend execution pending actions by other players.

Instructions for this page may be performed either by individual ensemble members acting singly, or by dividing the ensemble into a set of sections that will perform their instructions at the same moment. The number of sections is variable, but one may achieve better results if at least four different pathways are active at once.

Any articulation, bowing, instrument, muting, or other effect is encouraged unless an instruction indicates otherwise. Please follow your own group part, and avoid asserting ensembles with other groups or individuals, or initiating call-and-response interactions, unless an instruction asks you to do so.
*Artificial Life* as Electronic Music – Is the Human a Kind of Subjective, Improvising Machine?

“In my electronic music there is always an upfront notion of the machine’s subjectivity. You can’t turn it off, you can’t have it do exactly what you want. But it’s obvious that it [i.e. the computer] is listening, though it doesn’t always imitate what you do. It also contributes things that you want to deal with. [...] In *Artificial Life*, the score is more or less a written out, textualized version of what the process is that these computers go through with music. I’m asking people to follow these processes to create the music”

(Lewis quoted in Seth Colter Walls, “Composer George Lewis Rages with the Machines”)
III. Interactivity
Interactive Composition

“The seventies advent of the new, relatively portable mini- and microcomputers signaled a cultural shift in contemporary music in which improvisative musical practices were being reasserted, if not uncontroversially embraced. These forces led to a new medium that composer Joel Chadabe, one of the earliest pioneers, later called ‘interactive composition.’ The early ‘interactive composing’ instruments ‘made musical decisions as they responded to a performer, introducing the concept of shared symbiotic control of a musical process.’”

(Lewis, “Mobilitas Animi” 109)
The Creative Machine

“These features of the new software-driven landscape blurred the boundaries between human and machine music-making and called conventional notions of human identity into question, while establishing a critical space to explore communication not only, or even primarily, between people and machines, but between people and other people. [...] Improvising computer programs – or, more broadly, *creative machines* – both problematize and clarify constructed distinctions between human and machine.”

(Lewis, “Mobilitas Animi” 109)
Interactivity between Creative Machines and Human Improvisers

“In this sense, the improvised musical encounter [of interactive composition] may be seen as a negotiation between musicians, some of whom are people, others not. A program operating in this conceptual space would have the same set of problems as a human musician – problems of behavior, communication, and intersubjectivity. Decisions taken by the computer have consequences for the music that must be taken into account by the human improvisers [...].”

(Lewis, “Mobilitas Animi” 110)
Voyager (2000)
Voyager

“Voyager is a non-hierarchical, interactive musical environment that privileges improvisation. [...] Voyager [...] is described not only as an environment, but as a ‘program,’ a ‘system,’ and a ‘composition’ [...]. In fact, the work can take on aspects of all of these terms simultaneously – considering the conceptual level, the process of creating the software, and the real-time, real-world encounter with the work as performer and listener.”

(Lewis, “Too Many Notes: Computers, Complexity, and Culture in Voyager” 33)
Voyager (Behind the Scenes)

• “The Voyager program is conceived as a set of 64 asynchronously operating single-voice MIDI-controlled ‘players,’ all generating music in real time.”

• “Several different sonic behavior groupings [of these MIDI-controlled players], or ensembles, may be active simultaneously, moving in and out of metric synchronicity.”

• “A lower-level routine parses incoming MIDI data into separate streams for up to two human improvisers, who are either performing on MIDI-equipped keyboards or playing acoustic instruments through ‘pitch followers,’ devices that try to parse the sounds of acoustic instruments into MIDI data streams.”

• “Options [for the computer] include imitating, directly opposing, or ignoring the information coming from the [human] improvisers.”

(Lewis, “Too Many Notes” 34)
IV. The Will to Adorn
Two Perspectives of African-American Identity

“In the longstanding debate over the relation between aesthetics and ideology in black literature, African Americanist critics have deployed the contrasting positions of Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright with their respective emphases on beauty as a cultural value and on the priority of political struggle.”

(Wall, “On Freedom and the Will to Adorn: Debating Aesthetics and/as Ideology in African American Literature” 286)
Richard Wright

“For Wright, the forms of culture had already been fixed, and blacks were shut out of them. [...] The writers’ larger mission was to make [African-American] people realize a meaning in their suffering: for at the moment they began to do so, Wright predicted, ‘the civilization that engenders that suffering is doomed.’ [...] The spare prose and detached descriptions of graphic violence in *Black Boy* deepen the protest against the unrelievably bleak representation of poor black Southerners’ lives.”

(Wall, “On Freedom” 285)
Zora Neale Hurston

“For Hurston cultural forms were not fixed. Her analysis was much more concerned with the process of cultural production than with its products. Consequently, she valorizes adaptability, variety, and dynamic suggestion as foundational principles of black expressive forms from speech to music to dance. In their forced encounter with Western culture, Hurston argued, Africans in America had seized the Europeans’ language and remade it so compellingly that European Americans changed their way of speaking. African American music and dance had likewise transformed the national culture in the 1920s.”

(Wall, “On Freedom” 286)
“Beauty” and “The Will to Adorn”

“The will to adorn is the second most notable characteristic in Negro expression [after drama and mimicry]. Perhaps his idea of ornament does not attempt to meet conventional standards, but it satisfies the soul of its creator. In this respect the American Negro has done wonders to the English language. It has often been stated by etymologists that the Negro has introduced no African words to the language. This is true, but it is equally true that he has made over a great part of the tongue to his liking and has had his revision accepted by the ruling class. No one listening to a Southern white man talk could deny this. [...] The stark, trimmed phrases of the Occident seem too bare for the voluptuous child of the sun, hence the adornment. It arises out of the same impulse as the wearing of jewelry and the making of sculpture – the urge to adorn. [...] Whatever the Negro does of his own volition he embellishes.”

(Hurston, “The Characteristics of Negro Expression” 56ff)
“Adornment” as Creative Embellishment and Re-interpretation

“The Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use. He has modified the language, mode of food preparation, practice of medicine, and most certainly the religion of his new country [...]. Everyone is familiar with the Negro’s modification of the whites’ musical instruments, so that his interpretation has been adopted by the white man himself and then re-interpreted.”

(Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” 63 ).
The Will to Adorn (2011)

Will to Adorn (2011)
World Premiere
Composer Portrait of George Lewis
International Contemporary Ensemble
The title comes from a 1934 Zora Neale Hurston essay, ‘Characteristics of Negro Expression.’ The piece is not meant as any kind of direct homage to Hurston, and the music doesn’t indulge in period quotes or related essentialisms. Rather, what I’m interested in is recursive adornment as a compositional attitude or method that valorizes instability and even breakdown.”

(Lewis, “Guest Post: Lewis on Lewis”)
Bibliography


Walls, Seth Colter. “Composer George Lewis Rages with the Machines in Rare Miller Theater Presentation of His Work.” Politico Beta Website. 11 November 2011. Web. 26 March 2012.