

Creativity, Labour, and the Politics of Profit in the Improvised Music Field

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Introduction

Improvisation is at once a mundane activity we engage in every day in our social interactions, and a profound one that can result in transformative aesthetic experiences. The everyday aspect of improvisation tends to be overshadowed in Western culture by the more conspicuous improvisatory practices that inform certain artistic fields, such as sketch theatre and jazz.¹ These two art forms are marked as unique by their difference from the scripted dramas and notated scores that undergird the dominant conception of the performing arts in Western culture. The primacy of fixed works in the art field means that despite its ubiquity in everyday life and non-Eurocentric musics, improvisation is discursively constructed as an edgy, radical, and subversive activity.

Although there is no agreement on an ontology of improvisation in either the popular or scholarly domains, recent writings in music studies and the humanities have proposed that the improvisatory practices of jazz and related musics can be applied to contexts outside of the arts to address static, unethical, or otherwise outmoded ways of organizing society.² Of particular importance in this area of study is the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) project, based at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada. ICASP's core hypothesis is that, "musical improvisation is a crucial model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action," and the many research projects it has fostered are based on the argument that

[...]the innovative working models of improvisation developed by creative practitioners have helped to promote a dynamic exchange of cultural forms and to encourage new, socially responsive forms of community building across national, cultural, and artistic boundaries. Improvisation, in short, has much to tell us about the ways in which communities based on such forms are politically and materially pertinent to envisioning and sounding alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. (Heble, par. 2)

This multidisciplinary project has brought scholars from the fields of music, literature, theatre, law, gender studies, health, and philosophy (among others) together with musicians, health care workers, and community organizers, resulting in the production of a substantial amount of compelling work (both textual and performance-based) on the subject of improvisation. ICASP researchers have sought to make connections between improvisatory art practices and the particular domains with which they are concerned, a process which has entailed applying the frame of improvisation to diverse topics such as the decision making processes of judges, corporate responses to environmental disasters, and the development of software for people with disabilities.

A problematic example of this cross-fertilization of ideas is the recent trend in management studies of exploring the value in bringing improvisatory practices traditionally associated with the arts into the business field. Proponents of this idea argue that applying the frame of improvisation—with its attendant discursive associations with individual and collective agency, innovation, and collaboration—to the business field can help organizations develop new products and practices to respond to the shifting demands of the market. ICASP-associated research R. Keith Sawyer writes:

In today's economy, innovations emerge from improvisational teams...In both a jazz group and a successful work team, the members play off of one another, with each person's contributions inspiring the others to raise the bar and think of new ideas. Together, the improvisational team creates a novel emergent product, one that is more responsive to the changing environment... ("Education for Innovation" 43)

Writing in more general terms, but articulating similar goals, management theorist Nancy Adler states: "Given the dramatic changes taking place in society, the economy, and technology, 21st-century organizations need to engage in new, more spontaneous, and more innovative ways of managing" (486). Adler goes on to locate the source for these new ideas in the working methods

of artists: “Designing innovative options requires more than the traditional analytical and decision-making skills taught during the past half century in most MBA programs. Rather, it requires skills that creative artists have used for many years” (489). These two examples are illustrative of how art is discursively constructed as a creative, alternative space to the rigid structures and scripted behaviours of the “real world.” Sawyer makes this distinction clear, conflating the real world with the business environment, and in the process underscoring the authoritarianism of the dominant business model:

I soon learned that only certain kinds of collaboration work in the real world—improvisations that are guided and planned, but in a way that doesn’t kill the power of improvisation to generate unexpected insights... The truth is that, despite the proliferation of advice in the business press, many companies don’t know how to foster creative collaboration. (*Group Genius* xii)

This discursive separation of the imaginary, impractical domain of art from the pragmatic, real world of business is the foundation of these authors’ arguments that the currently dominant model of business organization is inefficient, and managers can benefit from strategies derived from art practices.

These brief examples are taken from works oriented towards managers, CEOs, and business strategists—in other words, those in positions to generate changes within their particular organizations. Throughout, these management theorists urge their readers to look to the arts as a “crucial model” for “envisioning and sounding alternative ways” to do business, yet they neglect to meaningfully address the real world material conditions under which artists work, nor the ethical implications of incorporating the practices of economically marginalized subjects into profit-based enterprises (Heble par 2). For their part, improvisers are very aware of their social and political positions in the neoliberal capitalist system, as exemplified by bassist Barre Phillips:

Sometime around 1975 I made the choice to play improvised music, which I did for social reasons, to take a stance. In the overall scene I think it's important that there is the improvised music experience, next to the commercial use of music. This choice meant finding a way to afford to do it, so we developed a very low budget living situation, where we lived for ten years without a telephone or electricity.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the improvised music fields in London, England, and Toronto, Canada, I will explore the issues raised by this trend in management studies by putting the ideas and experiences of improvisers in dialogue with those of theorists who are looking to the arts for “new...and more innovative ways of managing” (Adler 486).³

Business Unusual: Improvisation under Capitalism

My first direct encounter with the ‘art trend’ in management theory was at an ICASP-sponsored symposium titled “Making the Changes: Ethics and the Improvising Business” in December 2011, where I and my colleagues trombonist Scott Thomson and guitarist Ken Aldcroft were invited to present our perspectives as improvisers. The call for papers for this symposium mirrors the ideas about improvisation and business introduced above, but from an academic rather than managerial standpoint:

In light of the analogous ways in which improvisers and businesses negotiate change, a growing number of management theorists are looking to group musical improvisation as a model for corporate design.... the communitarian ethics that attend to improvisatory performance practice have become increasingly intriguing to corporations of virtually all stripes.

Along with the panel of improvisers, the symposium featured four other speakers, including Keith Sawyer and Nancy Adler, who presented their recent research into creativity, the arts, and management strategies.

As an experienced improviser and ethnomusicologist, I was struck by the absence in the other presentations—and in the articles mentioned above—of a meaningful engagement with

capitalism as the determining frame for the arguments present by these management theorists. Analyzing the power dynamics of capitalism is standard procedure in the humanities, and from my experience most conversations with improvising artists orbit around their commitment to their work despite the minimal financial motivations for doing so. Although there was some discussion of “communitarian ethics” at the symposium and in the writings I explored afterwards, these references were thoroughly embedded in the ideology of capitalism, the ethics and logic of which went largely unquestioned. Therefore, the nods towards ethics made by these “improvising business” representatives appeared to be lip-service at best, and appropriation at worst, for there was no discussion of how artists might share in the wealth generated when their ideas are applied to improving business strategies. I acknowledge that the particular theorists advocating for increased connections between the arts and business are alternative thinkers in the larger, perpetually conservative field of business, but the recurring use of language that abstracts the activity of improvisation from the lives of the people who make it their aesthetic priority speaks to a too-familiar agenda of appropriation-for-profit.⁴ Leaving aside the situationally specific issues raised at this symposium, I will engage with the general ideas presented at this event by developing a response to the question: “What might a meaningful engagement with improvisation by management theorists look like?”

With the framework I have constructed thus far it is necessary to clarify exactly what kinds of business organizations and improvisational practices I am analyzing. On the business side, I am concerned with profit-focused business organizations, as this is the frame within which the writers in question position their arguments. To be fair, Sawyer and Adler do make occasional references to non-profit organizations and public institutions, and Yochai Benkler in his recent book *The Penguin and the Leviathan* speaks to the need to re-evaluate the pay-scales

of CEOs, but the basic language of this literature uses the capitalist frame of commodity production for profit to describe how art practices can help businesses succeed in the free market. Sawyer's description of how the group collaborations that are typical in improvised music can be made operational in a business context is illustrative of the discursive framework of management theory:

[In] many businesses, work teams [could be] tasked not only with efficient execution, but also with creative problem solving or even with developing ideas for new products. Such groups could be videotaped and the interactions could be analyzed to help us better understand how collaboration generates business innovation. ("Distributed Creativity" 91)

Quoting organizational speaker and poet David Whyte in her article "The Arts and Leadership," Adler similarly positions the things managers can learn from artists in terms of competition and commodity production:

[The artist] must rely on the embracing abilities of their imagination to intuit and describe what is as yet a germinating seed in their present time...the present manager must learn the same artistic discipline, they must learn to respond or conceive of something that will move in the same direction in which the world is moving...To wait for all the evidence is to finally recognize it through a competitor's product (Whyte 241–242).

To support their arguments Sawyer, Adler, and Benkler point to companies such as Apple, Toyota, and Google as examples of organizations that have effectively incorporated ideas from the arts into their business models; these are clearly capitalist success stories, yet each carries significant baggage around questionable labour practices in China, environmental impact, and the manipulation of personal information, respectively. Given the tacit acceptance of capitalist ideals in these examples, my analysis will be directed towards the relationship between art practices and for-profit business models as they function within a capitalist framework.

This interrogation of the appropriation of art practices by the business sector is important because many improvising artists base their work on an anti-capitalist ethos, either explicitly by their involvement in non-profit arts organizations or leftist political movements, or implicitly

through their willingness to invest significant amounts of time and resources into the production of non-profitable music. The improvisers I research work in the area of free improvisation, which is a distinct musical field that emerged in Europe and North America in the 1960s. The basic musical practices of free improvisation involve avoiding the predetermined compositional forms, harmonic progressions, rhythmic schemes, and melodic structures that characterize Western popular, folk, and classical music. Free improvisation is therefore distinctly different from the kind of idiomatic improvisation found in traditional jazz performance practice, as there are fewer restrictions placed on the improvisers, and therefore fewer reference points and familiar musical materials for the listener. This is not the place to engage in the ongoing debate about free improvisation as non-idiomatic or pure, spontaneous expression, but it is important to note that historically this music has been a radical intervention into musical culture for how it privileged improvisation over composition as the fundamental creative act, refocusing the aesthetic experience on process, rather than product. This shift allowed for the discursive positioning of improvisation as an autonomous activity, distinct from the rules and structures of predetermined texts, which in turn created the mutable conceptual frame that has been applied to non-art contexts.

The modernist imperative to avoid duplicating or referencing the musics of the past has put improvisers at odds with the music business, as the dissonance and mutability of their music makes it difficult to commodify and sell. English percussionist Eddie Prévost's description of the socioeconomic context in which improvisers work offers insight into their relationship with the dominant economic system:

[T]he social relations within music-making are enmeshed within the property and consumer relations required in this phase of capitalist society. Most musicians fail to see how it affects the way they make music, and see no other way to work with this market economy. (58)

Elsewhere in his work Prévost states that only musicians who have made “improvisation the aesthetic priority of their creative lives” have mounted an effective resistance to capitalism by pursuing a “communitarian line” (37). Despite the problematic exclusivity of Prévost’s statement, it points to how many improvisers do think deeply about their socioeconomic positions, as demonstrated by percussionist Steve Noble, who has worked as an improviser in London since the early 1980s:

I’m not in this to make money. I’d like to, but the reality is that it doesn’t seem to work unless you can find an income from copyright, which is the backbone of capitalism. You get something that pays you an awful lot because it’s played over and over again. But the very nature of improvising is that you do it live. It’s very hard then to claim a kind of copyright, or royalties from the PRS [Performing Right Society in England].

Noble’s comments reveal an interest in making money from music—unlike Prévost, he does perform in other, more commercial genres with this goal in mind—but his career clearly demonstrates an unwillingness to change his primary aesthetic priorities to suit the demands of the market.

As a final example in this brief survey of the socioeconomic context of free improvisation, English guitarist Derek Bailey brings together Prévost’s theoretical formulation with Noble’s pragmatism in his description of improvised music performances:

The bulk of freely improvised music, certainly its essential part, happens in either unpublicised or, at best, under-publicised circumstances: musician-organised concerts, ad hoc meetings and private performances. In other words, simply in response to music making imperatives. And it’s easy to see that the more conducive the setting is to freely improvised music, the less compatible it is likely to be with the kind of presentation typical of the music business. (141)

This account, from one of the formative figures in free improvisation, demonstrates that improvisers’ prioritizing of aesthetic ideals over the pursuit of financial rewards has generated a small, alternative economy that subsists on the margins of the dominant economy. Although it is too much to claim that all improvisers hold communitarian, anti-capitalist political ideals, most

of them are willing to either subsist or seek the necessary income elsewhere rather than change their music to suit the demands of the open arts market. The non-commercial nature of improvised music enacts an implicit critique of the production-for-profit imperative of capitalism, even if there is no overt political rhetoric in improvisers' work.

It is important to note that the decision to create improvised music in North America or Europe is a choice born of privilege, based on the relative affluence of Western society. The ability to choose to devote considerable amounts of time to the production of non-commercial art when the majority of people in other parts of the world subsist on severely limited resources reveals the systemic wealth and related social securities that have grown in the West under capitalism. In most cases, then, it can be argued that the marginalization and hardship experienced by improvisers is self-inflicted, as they could choose other musics or activities that, based on the hegemonic narrative of the American Dream, would reward them financially if they worked hard enough. Yet recent developments in North America and Europe, such as the 2008 mortgage crisis, the rise of the Occupy Movement, and the sovereign debt crisis, have revealed the kinds of systemic inequality that underlie neoliberal capitalism. With these events more of the Western citizenry is acknowledging how capitalism is perpetuated by an inequitable, and often unethical, distribution of wealth; this situation negatively effects the quality of life for the majority of people within the system, even while it allows for certain basic securities and comforts that were not available under previous social systems. Therefore, the relative structural wealth that allows some members of Western society to choose to be improvisers does not detract from their ability to critique capitalism, as the dominating profit imperative and the increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of the few makes the basic necessities of life—

such as shelter, food, health care, and time for critical reflection—increasingly expensive for the many.

Managing Theory: Musical Imperatives, Profit Motives, and Marginal Markets

Considering the recent literature on business and the arts, there are certain aspects of improvised music that have parallels in business practice, but in theorizing these connections it is crucial to treat improvisation as a social action, one that is performed by subjects whose individual and collective agency is regulated by particular external forces. To paraphrase sociologist Howard Becker and musicologist Christopher Small, improvisation is not a thing, but something that people do. The decisions people have made over the last six decades to enable their artistic practices have generated contexts—such as the free improvised music and sketch theatre scenes—in which improvisation acquires specific sounds and meanings through local performance conventions, practitioners’ political ideals, and the particular materials (instruments, dramatic narratives) with which improvisers work. It is therefore not a set of generic practices that can be easily shifted into any context and applied to other materials; lifting the frame of improvisation from the music field and applying it to the business field is particularly problematic because of the generally divergent priorities of improvisers and business leaders.

To address in more specific detail the issues that arise when management theorists consider “improvisation as a model for corporate design” I will look at three pillars of the capitalist economic system—competition, labour hierarchies, and the profit imperative—and compare these elements to my experience as a musician and researcher of improvised music. If, as Keith Sawyer argues in *Group Genius*, improvising ensembles offer a model for rethinking how businesses operate, then it is necessary to discuss such ensembles in economic terms, much

as Pierre Bourdieu did in his post-Marxist analyses of art in France. Bourdieu recognized that art is not simply about particular practices and aesthetic objects, but that artists as subjects exist within a “social universe...where there accumulates a particular form of capital and relations of force of a particular type are exerted” (163). As in Bourdieu’s analyses of literature and visual art in France, the particular relations of force exerted upon improvisers in North America and Western Europe are the result of the patterns of production and consumption that characterize modern capitalism. If the artistic practices of improvisers are to be removed from their marginalized “social universe” and placed at the centre of the dominant economic system, then we must account for how these practices will be used, by whom, and to what end.

In the discourse of capitalism, competition is synonymous with innovation. Conservative economists perpetually evoke competition as a necessary element for driving innovation in business. Improvising ensembles also prioritize innovation—as Scott Thomson (2007) notes, the vitality of improvised music depends on an ongoing critical reevaluation of one’s musical materials, and on the constant search for new sounds and musical relationships. Despite this shared priority there is an important distinction in the two spheres, as innovation in business is inherently teleological. The goal of a business, as articulated by Sawyer and Adler, is to produce a new, better product before one’s competition does. Once the shelf life of a particular product is reached, a new product or updated version must be created to keep the company in business. This constant cycle means that some businesses survive while others fold, that finite natural resources are consumed as outdated products are replaced, and that businesses are compelled to act in a self-interested fashion to stay profitable.

Innovation in improvised music is substantially different, in that there is no goal for creative, critical thinking other than the intrinsic value of discovering new ways of doing things.

The intentional avoidance of the materials of commercial music means that the profit incentives for innovation in the improvised music field are low, and for the most part few material resources are expended in performances. Perhaps the most important difference, as Steve Noble alludes to in his comments about copyright, is that one is free to use the innovations introduced by other improvisers. Once performed publicly or documented on recordings, new sounds or techniques become accessible to all improvisers—saxophonist Evan Parker’s highly developed circular breathing technique is just one example of how the stylistic innovations of a particular player have become part of the basic vocabulary of improvising saxophonists; Eddie Prévost’s use of string instrument bows and automated toys on cymbals is another. Although these particular techniques are closely associated with specific improvisers (and it should be noted that Parker and Prévost do not claim to have invented them), other improvisers are free to take them up towards the “creation of [their] own musical material and lexicon” (Lewis 83). In this way the improvised music field is a collaborative space, where creativity is driven primarily by the desire to create new aesthetic experiences, despite how the market forces improvisers to compete with each other for the meager financial rewards attached to certain performance and recording opportunities.

On the second pillar of capitalism, profit-focused businesses are shaped by the division of labour between owners and employees, and by the different pay scales related to the various positions within an organization. A typical business may include positions such as manual labourer, sales associate, advertiser, designer, and accountant; at the top of this hierarchy is the owner or CEO, who is responsible for the primary idea generation and deciding how to distribute profits. All the tasks executed by these various positions are necessary for the business to operate, yet the inequalities of compensation for the different kinds of work result in a clear

social hierarchy. An improvising ensemble has its own division of labour that is similar to the business model: there is usually a leader who organizes the performances and recordings, who may write the music and the grant applications, and whose work off the stage generally ensures the continued existence of an ensemble or project. Yet in a performance—at least an ideal one, executed by musicians with similar priorities—the relationships between participants are much more equitable than in a business, as each musician is free to fill any musical role at any time, either leading the ensemble, supporting the other voices, supplying a background texture, or, crucially, not playing at all. Scott Thomson (2007) writes concisely about the shifts in authority and leadership that characterize a successful improvised piece, so there is no need to repeat these details here beyond reiterating his assertion that the labour and responsibility for the quality of an improvised musical performance is shared equally by all involved in the encounter.

This scenario presents many parallels to the creative “work teams” Sawyer proposes, but it is a crucial distinction that an improvising ensemble is not regulated by an external overseer in the way that he suggests is required for the effective harnessing of creative energy in a business environment (“Distributed Creativity” 91). The authoritarianism of current business models is made even more clear by Google Chairman and CEO Dr. Eric Schmidt when he asserts that, “You need to let the artists [in your company] explore and create the next great thing, which they will do reliably if you permit it” (Austin & Devin xvii). In a musical improvisation there is no division between the labour and managerial classes, between those doing the creative work and those who permit and then analyze the work for how it might “generate business innovation” (Sawyer “Distributed Creativity” 91). If a business were to model itself after an improvising ensemble a radical rethinking of corporate design would be required, one that promotes greater

equality between workers and managers, and reifies this equality through a redistribution of the profits generated by work teams.

Wealth distribution is the most significant issue that needs to be addressed in this comparison of businesses and improvising ensembles. Most businesses are structured to reward those in the lower levels with a fixed salary and (for an alarmingly decreasing number of workers) benefits, while the owners, managers, and shareholders are entitled to a much greater percentage of the profit, presumably as compensation for the financial risk they assume in running a business, and as a reward for the creative ideas that brought the business into being in the first place, or that keep it competitive. Historically, business owners invested much of their profit back into the business for research, development, and expansion, but under neoliberalism an increasing percentage of profit has been hoarded by owners, paid out to shareholders located all over the world, or simply spent on luxury items (Stanford 320-323). This trend means that a significant amount of financial capital is being removed from the community where the business is located and where workers live and spend their wages, in favour of growing owners' savings or circulating it in the netherworld of the financial industry in the pursuit of interest returns.

As mentioned, in the improvised music field many musicians take on leadership roles that might be compared to the positions of managers and owners in the business field. However, in my experience these musicians, despite the extra work they put into a project, tend to distribute their profits evenly amongst all the participants, sometimes even losing money to ensure that their fellow musicians make a decent wage. Along with this general egalitarian ethos, much of the profit that improvisers make from their music is reinvested in their immediate community through producing new recordings, renting performance and rehearsal venues, studying with a mentor, or going out to hear new music. As Barre Phillips suggests, the profit motive for most

improvisers seems to be based on the pursuit of artistic sustainability, which means organizing their lives to ensure the “improvised music experience” remains available alongside the “commercial use of music.” Therefore, most improvisers live materially modest lives, doing whatever work they need to do to pay their bills while preserving enough time to create improvised music.

Improvisers’ values around sharing innovations, equitable divisions of labour, and artistic sustainability is clearly at odds with basic capitalist principles of profit, expansion, and wealth distribution. As citizens living in the real world improvisers are subject to the “relations of force” exerted by capitalism, yet their actions and basic working principles demonstrate considerable resourcefulness around carving out a space for their music within the field of cultural production (Bourdieu 163).

Towards an Ethics of Business in the Age of Improvisation

With these specific examples in mind I return to the general question of what an ethical cross-fertilization of ideas between improvising artists and management theorists might entail. The very idea of success in capitalist society is measured in profits and market share, and workers are evaluated on their ability to navigate a system that we are all encouraged to believe rewards those who work hard enough. Considering the brief examples above, a meaningful engagement with the model of social organization presented by an improvising ensemble would require management theorists to contemplate an entirely different set of ideological and organizational priorities, and be prepared to undertake, in Eddie Prévost words, significant hierarchical realignment.

For their part, few improvisers I have spoken with argue that they are entitled to support from public or private funding agencies; they recognize that there are more pressing social concerns that need tending to, and that arts support is just one piece of the social puzzle. Rather, they speak to the need to reform the capitalist system so that the considerable wealth of the world might be redistributed in such a way that social security is increased and the cost of living reduced, thus making critical artistic work more feasible. This framing of improvisers' desires aligns with economist Jim Stanford's model for economic reform, which is based on a crucial pillar of capitalism that has declined under the neoliberal agenda: investment. Stanford argues that if corporations, governments, and wealthy individuals invest a larger proportion of their profits into institutions that generate income for working people—rather than hoarding their profits in pursuit of interest payouts, distributing it far and wide to shareholders, or spending it on huge bonuses for CEOs—then more of the considerable wealth of the world would circulate to more of the world's people (320-323). In this scenario, businesses would spend more on research and development of ethical and environmentally sustainable products, and workers would have more money to spend, which by extension would generate increased tax revenue that could be transformed into essential social services. Since the mortgage crisis of 2008 and the related financial downturn across other industries, many economists from both the left and right have attributed the slow economic recovery to a decline in corporate investment, as business leaders are sitting on their profits out of fear of being caught short in the next crisis. This self-perpetuating cycle means that much of the world's wealth is tied up in the banks or financial markets, where it serves the needs of the already wealthy and doesn't trickle down to the rest.

As illustrated in the previous section, improvisers and other artists seem implicitly aware of the importance of investment and equitable wealth distribution, as they tend to share their

profits equally amongst the participants, and reinvest what they can in making new art. In this way much of the income improvising musicians get from their art practice—from either performances, government grants, or sales of recordings—gets circulated through the local community, rather than exported elsewhere via the global financial markets. It is significant also that musicians share not only financial capital, but the symbolic capital of information and professional resources, such as contacts for performance venues and media outlets that support improvised music, ideas for developing new projects, and advice on pursuing public arts funding opportunities. This cycle of continual reinvestment based on the desire for collective artistic sustainability presents a challenge to the competitive, expansionist business model that has thrived under neoliberal capitalism.

The danger in this debate is that management theorists' suggestions about harnessing the power of the arts might be used by business strategists to further obfuscate the wealth divide and social injustices perpetuated by many of the world's big companies. Eddie Prévost points out that historically capitalism has easily absorbed the aspects of artists' work that benefit the profit imperative, and rejected those that encourage critical engagement with social issues:

Artists who have a political agenda are generally working around the edges of the societies in which they live, sniping, trying to outrage and morally undermine the general cultural hegemony...in the longer term we can note that the best of these creative outbursts are usually absorbed into the very system they allegedly opposed. (55)

In a comment that demonstrates an awareness of the dangers of appropriation and obfuscation Prévost raises, Benkler states: “[F]raming a practice or system as collaborative, or as a ‘community’ may encourage cooperation for a while, [but] if that claim isn’t authentic and believable the cooperation won’t last” (212). To avoid merely paying lip-service to ethical issues and perpetuating capitalism’s ongoing appropriation of ideas derived from subaltern communities, management theorists must not just study how artists work and what motivates

them, but be prepared to propose a model that encourages employers to shift their priorities towards doing things that are worth workers' labour and emotional investment, and to adjust their profit distribution accordingly.

Conclusion:

Management theorists surely recognize that the dominant economic system is reaching the breaking point—our consumption of natural resources is not sustainable, and the systemic inequality of wealth distribution under neoliberal capitalism is resulting in civic unrest not just in chronically impoverished and disadvantaged nations, but across the structurally wealthy countries of North America and Europe. It is little surprise then that business strategists are looking for alternative models to address the kinds of inefficiencies and employee dissatisfaction that arise when cuts to social securities coincide with an increase in the costs of living for the average citizen. This situation is even more untenable whenever it is revealed how much profit CEOs and corporations take home each year. Under these conditions, a meaningful engagement with improvisation—as it is practiced by citizens who in varying degrees actively resist the ideological framework upon which management studies is based—will require nothing less than theorizing how to restructure capitalism to allow for the kinds of cooperation, innovation, profit sharing, and non-hierarchical labour structures that characterize the improvised music field.

Even as I affirm the notion that improvisation offers the possibility of a radical social intervention, it is clear from the history of jazz and free improvisation that despite musicians' best intentions, improvised music itself can do little to change the world directly. As Alan Stanbridge argues, such claims “impose...on specific forms of contemporary music an extra-musical agenda and socially transformative role that they—on their own—are poorly equipped to

address or enact” (10). What improvisers have done, however, is construct a parallel social system that operates on different, more communitarian organizational principles than the currently dominant business model. Although improvisers as citizens must make a living selling their labour and ideas on the open market like everyone else, they do so with the intention of conserving enough time and resources to create non-commercial aesthetic experiences, which they sell to curious listeners at a rate far below any real world market value. If management theorists are prepared to look beyond the surface activities of improvising ensembles, beyond the notion of harvesting creative practices to transplant into more profitable soil, they might see a model of social interaction that points towards the possibility of a more democratic, egalitarian society than the one currently perpetuated by the managers and business leaders they are addressing.

Notes

¹ Sociologist Howard Becker offers a compelling analysis of improvisation and everyday life in an interview conducted by Elizabeth Jackson (2010).

² For examples, see Adams (2010), Fischlin and Heble (2004), MacDonald (2011), Oliveros, and Ramshaw (2010).

³ The appeal of the arts to management theorists seems to stem from the possibility of harnessing the curiosity and belief in the intrinsic value of their work most artists share—with the limited financial motivations for most improvisers, why else would they persist in creating improvised music? Management theorists’ efforts to engender in employees a belief in the intrinsic value of corporate work is disingenuous at best in an environment where the pursuit of profit continually trumps sustainability and social responsibility, and where workers know that the profit gleaned from their labour is inequitably concentrated at the top of the social hierarchy.

⁴ The very structure of the symposium affirmed the hegemonic position of business in our society, for the four other speakers were granted forty-five minutes each to get their points across while the three improvisers had ten minutes apiece. If the purpose of putting management theorists and improvising artists in the same room was to encourage “ethical dialogue,” surely assigning the voices of power and privilege so much more airtime than the artists makes achieving this goal difficult.

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