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Conscious Conversations
An experiential study of improvisation in sound and movement

Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation in the Honors
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By
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Art is a conscious practice. It is a method of live manifestation and a process of creative and individual expression. We perceive art and its meaning both physically and metaphysically through the vessels of body and mind, bridging connections between the abstract and the explicit. Creative process offers a method through which we may open our minds and channel inspirations so that we can explore and manifest greater meaning than ourselves. Art is the connective tissue of consciousness. Art offers truth beyond what we seem to know, and it intrigues us in ways that pull us deeper into the void of being. As it manifests, art is all one mechanism of life.

Knowing that art operates from a place void of distinction, we can recognize opportunities to close the circle on differentiations we have defined—even within art itself. Artistic expression has been categorized into separate entities, defining lines between music, dance, poetry and theatre, among many other self-proclaimed forms. Different channels of creativity are segregated by form, restricted to their world of creative expression. But bringing forms together in free-flowing play illuminates the universal language of creativity and inspires personal creative exploration.

This project operates on two levels of creative conversation: it seeks to diminish those lines through collaborative improvisational explorations between music and dance, and, through a synthesis of research and practice, establishes awareness of the body-mind-spirit relationship in improvisation. By bringing music and dance into one creative space while investigating the conversation between body, mind and spirit, the creative process is altered, freeing expression from form and offering new palettes for play.

“The danger of attempting to capture something of improvisation’s essence and place it on the page is that to capture it is to stop it from being the thing that it is—changeable” (Buckwalter, 3).

Improvisation is an ephemeral phenomenon; it is always moving, always shifting, never settling into one place or one definition. Thus, it is almost counter-intuitive to try to define it within the limitations of written language. Translating the practice of improvisation into words “seems at times to betray the medium itself, for language is linear and improv is not. What is very real and understandable in movement does not necessarily have an equivalent in words” (Blom and Chaplin, ix). Nothing written here serves as a replacement for the experience of the improvisational exploration that took place in this investigation. Rather, consider these analyses as directive landmarks, signposts pointing in a certain direction—a direction that is beyond the words themselves and dictated by naught but the present moment of investigation.

Present exploration offers a spectrum of possibilities for play between forms. In present investigation, the artist at play finds new pathways while reaching into an abundant history of preceding artistic experience. In continuous flow with the present moment, we can explore all that we’ve been, all that we are and all that we can be. Artist and professor Andrea Olsen offers fluid description of the process of improvisational investigation, encompassing presence with play:

Improvisation and choreography have the same challenge: embodied awareness. Through physical and compositional explorations that focus overtly on time, space, and dynamics, the dancer creates freshly in every moment—staying present to what unfolds. Improvising presumes dancing is a thinking process: you are committing to creating the dance, staying honest, not dodging the contradictions, expanding to include complicated truths—holding uncertainty. (67)

With so much at one's fingertips, new discoveries are constantly happening in improvisational practice. There are infinite worlds of expression. Improvisation, then, is an effective means with which one may explore and craft space with another artist.

Music and dance are dynamic partners in improvisation. In artist and writer Stephen Nachmanovitch's words, "every conversation is a form of jazz" (17). A conversation involves two or more parties, engaging with and responding to each other. Conversations between musicians and dancers, through movement and sound rather than speech or written language, yield the same effect as Nachmanovitch proposes here. In a brief, straight-shooting statement, Nachmanovitch legitimizes the connective tissue within which all art forms manifest.

Improvising as one solo entity and improvising in conversation with others are two completely different experiences. When one improvises alone, there is more license to get lost in the moment and to abandon all external focus and intention. There is nothing else that the body is moving on track with but itself. In this investigation, which involves two entities—operating on two different creative channels—there is more in the space to absorb than just the body and its inspiration. In collaborative improvisational conversations, "different forms of improvisation introduce distinct flavors and tastes. You can access each improvisational discipline through a slightly different place in yourself," responding and adapting to the shared space in conversation (Olsen, 67). In no way does this mean that all of that solo experience dissolves; it remains a part of the whole. However, there is a new stimulus now. So not only is the internal inspiration taking place, but also the conversation between two parts, which requires sensitivity to the other in simultaneous action with each part's own exploration. And yet, within all of these

simultaneous stimuli, both parts find common ground on which to stand (Nachmanovitch, 94-95).

In his book, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*, Stephen Nachmanovitch discusses creative practice. Nachmanovitch recognizes the potential for different forms to exist in creative space and time together, as one channel of artistic expression, without distinction between the forms. Nachmanovitch reminds us of the diversity of creative experience, apprising us of the fact that “there is no one idea of creativity that can describe it all. Therefore, in collaborating with others we round up, as in any relationship, an enlarged self, a more versatile creativity” (95).

When Nachmanovitch speaks of “play,” he refers to improvisation. He describes the process as it applies to society, art, and spirituality in equal consideration. In a fluid paragraph, Nachmanovitch composes a formless and yet abundantly full explication of what is at work within the practice:

Play is always a matter of context. It is not what we do, but how we do it. Play cannot be defined, because in play all definitions slither, dance, combine, break apart, and recombine. In play we manifest fresh, interactive ways of relating with people, animals, things, ideas, images, ourselves. It flies in the face of social hierarchies. We toss together elements that were formerly separate... To play is to free ourselves from arbitrary restrictions and expand our field of action. Our play fosters richness of response and adaptive flexibility. This is the evolutionary value of play—play makes us flexible. By reinterpreting reality and begetting novelty, we keep from becoming rigid. Play enables us to rearrange our capacities and our very identity so that they can be used in unforeseen ways. (43)

There is a difference in approach regarding segregation of forms of art and on the contrary, the union and acknowledgment of each form in one creative journey. The purpose of this investigation is to perform the latter. By bringing categorically separate art forms together, a new realm of exploration and discovery emerges through collaboration.

In improvisational collaborations, the conversation between sound and movement is not the only one being had. In the moment of play, there is also a receptive communication that takes place between the body and the mind, allowing raw experiential expression to enrich the present exploration. Moving in the moment, there is an interplay between our thoughts and our actions. The communication that occurs between thought and action is ever present in investigation; it is observable that “we are as much affected in our thinking body by our bodily attitudes as our bodily attitudes are affected in the reflection of our mental and bodily states” (Todd, 294-295).

When considering the relationships between body and mind in improvisation, the experiential study of Body-Mind Centering (BMC) offers grounded insight. BMC is an investigation of the body as it is manifest through the mind. Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, founder of BMC, explains, “the explorer is the mind—our thoughts, feelings, energy, soul, and spirit. Through this journey we are led to an understanding of how the mind is expressed through the body in movement” (1). Body-Mind Centering lays a framework for analyzing the conversation between body and mind in improvisation.

When we open to the present moment, our minds release energy that our bodies translate in space. The sensations we feel and our perceptions of the space of play affect how our bodies move. The body reacts to the mind. Movement is not merely a physical practice; it is an exploration of the interplay between cognitive and physical experience.

In her book, *Sensing, Feeling and Action: The Experiential Anatomy of Body-Mind Centering*, Bainbridge Cohen elaborates:

Our body moves as our mind moves. The qualities of any movement are a manifestation of how mind is expressing through the body at that moment. Changes in movement qualities indicate that the mind has shifted focus in the body. Conversely, when we direct the mind or attention to different areas of the

body and initiate movement from those areas, we change the quality of our movement. So we find that movement can be a way to observe the expression of mind through the body, and it can also be a way to affect changes in the body-mind relationship. (1)

As this conversation moves forward, the language of discourse phases into one that involves concepts of spiritual art and the transcendent potential that creative process offers. In the context of a research paper, some of the ideas that are presented may seem far out or inaccessible to an academic perspective. The process in conversation, however, has been very directly influenced by these ideas. The statements and concepts presented in this paper are inherent to the process at hand as it has developed and as it continues to morph through the spontaneous flow of creative play.

Using the study of Body Mind Centering as a reference point, connections can be established between personal and universal experiences in improvisation and in life. Once a connection between body and mind is established, an experience beyond the physical has been accessed. Being aware of one's own mind brings one out of the world of illusions that the mind creates. Once we are aware of the way our conscious mind works, we can explore the way the universal conscious mind works. We can link our personal lives with the universal experience that we are all living in our own ways. Just as we express our art in different ways, we express life in different ways. And yet, we are all here together exploring the same things. Through artistic process, individuals can begin to understand themselves and find connections with other bodies and minds at work. Our explorations and expressions are a constant cycle of connecting and sharing. In Nachmanovitch's words, "it is in playing and only in playing that the individual is able to be creative and use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self" (50).

With an understanding of how personal and universal connections can be bridged through art, the practice of improvisation can exist as a guiding perspective for the experiences we have in life. Nachmanovitch speaks of the free play of the natural world, exemplifying play in life and life in play:

Looking out now, over the ocean, the birds, the vegetation, I see that absolutely everything in nature arises from the power of free play sloshing against the power of limits. The limits may be intricate, subtle and long-lived like the genetic structure of the orange tree before me. But the pattern of the ocean, the pattern of the orange tree or the sea gulls, arises organically; it is a self-organizing pattern. The self-organizing activity arises, slowly changes, suddenly shifts, learns from mistakes, interacts with the ways of its fellows and its environment. These creative processes inherent in nature are called by some people evolution, by others creation. (33)

The principles and concepts applied to improvisation are relevant to any natural phenomenon of life. Freely playing in constant present flow opens up the present moment to the player. Within any moment in life, one can achieve this level of awareness and openness to the possibilities that life contains. Following the Zen philosophy, in present practice, one “enters the situation without expectations on herself or others. She allows each moment to be unique, and with an open mind can perceive the entirety of the moment with clarity. The mind is open—ready for anything” (Demerson, 1).

Through a connection between our life and our creative play, we can unlock a way of understanding our creative practices. We can practice our art with an air of ephemerality; with an acceptance of the impermanence and a respect to the endless potential of every waking moment of the creative process. “Creativity exists in the searching even more than in the finding or being found. We take pleasure in energetic repetition, practice, ritual. As play, the act is its own destination. The focus is on process, not product” (Nachmanovitch, 45). The essence of improvisational exploration is

discovered in these moments of abandon. Being free of the product and rather deeply invested in the process of investigation, the palettes of color, sound, vibration, movement, and stillness—everything is amplified in the moment. Every nook and cranny of the present moment is fully realized when we let go of expectation and attachment. As Nachmanovitch expresses, “the ideal... is moment-to-moment nonstop flow... doing without being too attached to the outcome, because the doing is its own outcome” (19).

In his spiritual and artistic manifesto *The Mission of Art*, Alex Grey walks his readers through a comprehensive exploration of the art of spiritual practice. Grey is a spiritual artist and teacher; he inspires art from the raw spirit and shares his cosmic creations. He channels the universal energy of creativity and experience to express resonant images of life, death, and everything before, after and in between. His paintings, sketches, drawings and sculpted works are a testament to the cosmic web of conscious evolution that we are all a part of.

In discussion of the spiritual presence of art, Grey demonstrates that spiritual art can be crafted through countless processes, some of which involve traditional sacred or religious symbols, and some of which display a personal spiritual expression void of any traditional reference to spiritual evolution (128). Distinctions between religious and spiritual practices, like distinctions between art forms, are needless; each is just another form of expression, another manifestation of devotion. It is all expression in process; none is greater or lesser than the other. Each process is individual, but all are relevant in the same margins of life. Grey presents his readers with the concept that things are not dictated solely by their external value, that there is life and meaning beyond physical

expression, and that “the power of spirit in the artist determines the power of spirit in the work of art, not just the subject matter portrayed in the work” (128-129).

Not all art is spiritual. All art, however, has the potential for spiritual transformation. Practices of conscious contemplation split the space for cosmic energy to permeate intuition and expression. Grey breaks down this concept for those who seek it:

Art can be a spiritual practice. Not all artists consider this to be true, but with the proper motivation and focus, it can be so. A spiritual practice is an activity that enables you to develop the qualities of mental clarity, mindfulness of the moment, wisdom, compassion, and access to revelations of higher mystic states of awareness. A contemplative method, such as yoga or meditation, will stabilize and assist in the progress of spiritual awareness. An artist’s craft can become a contemplative method and his or her creation can provide outward signs of an inner spiritual journey. (207)

Entering into an improvisation is a parallel experience to entering into a meditation. One must be present and aware in the moment to discover through improvisation, just as one must be in order to quiet the mind, empty the self and discover higher states of being in meditation. Playing in creative spaces requires a process of emptying the self, just as with meditation. In order to be fully invested and overtaken by the present moment, in order to play, one must empty the self of association, empty of external boundaries. Improvisation is excavation; improvisation is stepping down onto new ground and sculpting fresh, new, un-trodden pathways. It is a process of letting go of the self, and opening to the energy of the universe, so that one can connect with the universe in creative conversation. This way, the doer can be channeled and expressed through by the creative spirit, so that the conscious universe can come through in conversation with the external experience.

Nachmanovitch speaks of these processes in *Free Play*. He talks of entering into *Samadhi*, the Buddhist expression for “selfless, absorbed concentration” and oneness

with the present moment (52). He speaks of entering into one's *Samadhi* as a gateway to present creativity. By refreshing whole senses of perception, by finding ways to see everything anew, the artist can discover new things in play. By emptying the self, everything is experienced for the first time all over again and,

Mind and sense are arrested for a moment, fully in the experience. Nothing else exists. When we “disappear” in this way, everything around us becomes a surprise, new and fresh. Self and environment unite. Attention and intention fuse. We see things just as we are and they are, yet we are able to guide and direct them to become just the way we want them. This lively and vigorous state of mind is the most favorable to the germination of original work of any kind. (51)

As parallel process, meditation and improvisation require a balance of intention and abandon in order to reach a state of amplified presence. In a discussion about improvisational scores and the work of entering into an improvisation, Nachmanovitch explains this balance. He writes, “in planning we focus attention on the field we are about to enter, then release the plan and discover the reality of time's flow” (21). As one empties the mind and dwells in present awareness, the intention to enter such a state is gradually welded into total abandon. This happens as one becomes more absorbed by the present moment and is in turn able to let go of the intention to be so. This is the definition of an improvisational score: a guide to focus the intention and arc of an improvisation; like focusing a camera lens, but with an additional moment between the focus and the flash; the moment in between, where things get lost in translation and surrender the authority of needing to be accurate or defined. It is not the exact replica that is the goal; it is the present interpretation of the replica—as seen through the creative lens. The essence of improvisation is this moment of abandon: the moment where artist lets go of the self and collides with spirit, allowing creative energy to move through the artist's vessel. This

is the moment of discovery; this is the moment of being in the moment, that in which moments at play come together in spontaneous sensation and action.

The improvisational explorations between musician and dancer that took place within this particular process drew inspiration from the awareness of and possibility for spiritual manifestation in improvisation. Everything that flowed through the art was pulled from the present conversation between sound and movement. Throughout the process it was apparent that the material of play was a mere channel through which to express the ongoing explorations. The process was the essence of the product. The conversations that took place between the artists at work during the investigation and the language that was forged from exploration and discovery vibrated through the final moment of play. As Bainbridge Cohen expresses, “the techniques and principles themselves are not the material—it is more the awareness and understanding of how and when to use them, or how to invent one’s own” (1).

The duration of this project spanned over a four-month period, during which weekly rehearsals and periods of reflection took place. On the contrary, what was presented in testimony to the process lasted no more than 30 minutes. By a long shot, it would have impossible to include everything that was discovered over the length of the process. So in improvisation, what was performed was a coalescence of the present moment and the moments that had been shared and collected over those four months. There was no expectation of preserving anything for longer than the time in which it existed. The final product was an improvisation, a conversation, and a testament to the collective process. The final product was a continuation of the process; a personal spiritual expression of conscious connection between living energies. The spirit of the

work was driven and determined by the creative spirits that dwelled within each artist and within the creative practice as it developed over time.

When considering art as a manifestation of the universal creative spirit that dwells within all of us, there lingers the question of authenticity. How do we express something that exists so deep within us in an outward and tangible way? Grey discusses the bridge between technical form and spiritual investment in art:

If art is a spiritual discipline, then the attitude and approach to the creation of the work is central. The artist cultivates an attitude of prayerful devotion and union with the subject. In order to make holy art, artists let creative spiritual fire work through them. The technique of art needs to become meditation, a way of concentratedly “staying in the moment,” allowing the hum and buzz of distracting thoughts to just arise and dissolve, bringing the concentration ever back to the mystery of art as spirit taking form. (208).

With intention set in the right place, artists can use their tools of technique to craft space for the universal creative spirit to come through the art. By staying attune to the moment while investigating the space with the tools that an artist has collected over time and practice, a connection between the spirit and the body emerges. Artists must abandon themselves and surrender to the craft that is constantly at work. In movement, we must learn “when and how to control [the] body. [The dancer] ought not to regard his body simply for itself. He must transform and cultivate it as an instrument of the dance” (Huxley and Witts, 403). We must realize that it all comes through our vessels, through our bodies and our minds, and that we are not the origin of this creation; creative energy is the origin and it speaks through the channels of creativity that we open our processes to.

Nachmanovitch says, “the Creative and the Receptive, making and sensing, are a resonant pair, matching and answering each other. Michelangelo, in surrendering to the

archetypal shapes latent in his stone, did not make statues, he released them” (34). When you sculpt a figure, you are shaving away the excess of a shape and structure that already exist in the form. So when you dance, you are carving space to create lines and pathways that were there previously already. And with music, you are cutting the air to find resonances that were lingering there, waiting to be released into sound. As Nachmanovitch speaks of Michelangelo’s works, he speaks in a similar tongue: “He is not just removing apparent surfaces from some external object, he is removing apparent surfaces from the Self, revealing his original nature” (31). In creative investigation, we are allowing space to form through us. We ourselves are not forming; we are merely opening to the present form. We allow creative energy to flow through our bodies so that we may be thrust into the presence of play. Concepts of Zen philosopher Hakuin offer insight to opening in such a way:

Hakuin wrote, ‘If you forget yourself, you become the universe.’ That mysterious fact of surrender, the creative surprise that releases us and opens us up, spontaneously allows something to arise. If we are transparent, with nothing to hide, the gap between language and Being disappears. Then the Muse can speak. (Nachmanovitch, 30)

The play between sound and movement in this investigation found inspiration in many creative channels. Throughout the process, there were moments of writing and speaking, there were moments of creating sound while moving, creating sound through percussion and guitar, and combinations of any and all expressions. Several times, reflections were written and shared. The space that was crafted in each rehearsal was simple and spacious, allowing for whatever was present to manifest. Translations of the experience wove in and out of one another, encompassing physical sensation, cognitive perception, and spiritual perspective in one creative play space. Everything existed

simultaneously; there were no separations between forms of expression. Whatever came through came through, and forms played with one another as they entered and left the space. There were no rules to limit what happened when; if one person felt a percussive inspiration, percussion would come into play. If one felt inspiration in words, words were written or spoken aloud. The canvas was 3-dimensional, malleable, and amorphous. The space moved as we moved, vibrated as we sent and received vibrations. We conversed with one another, but also with the space. We remained always aware of what the space had to offer, whether that was silence, stillness, free-flowing movement, or any number of creative pathways. The present flow that we played with was a meditation in space, time and sound. With sensitive souls, we tuned to the spirit of play as it moved and sounded through us. And when the time came to share what we'd been exploring, we brought together a band of listeners and watchers to witness our play. We shared our explorations and our audience shared their experiences watching.

As artists in present practice, we should share our improvisational discoveries. Art is not just for those who engage in it, it is also for those who witness it. The doing and the seeing are both parts of the experience; two sides of the creative process. In sharing our creative explorations, we can plant inspiration in the minds and souls of others to find their own ways of discovering creative presence. Grey expresses this dimension of art in his own poetic language, posing the question,

Is art merely the fashionable expression of artists' egos and a reflection of the world they live in, or can art become a healing path that reveals the beauty and holiness of our selves and our world, projecting an ideal of what we and our wounded world may become? This is not a dogma for new art, merely a call for art to manifest its power to uplift, inspire, and become a flame of spiritual vision.
(67)

This project is not a closed exploration. This is, if anything, the beginning of an investigative approach that will continue to play and discover through many processes and collaborations. The beautifully ephemeral element of improvisational practice yields no end, no stopping point. Through free-flowing play and creative conversation, the concepts and ideas presented here can be reinvigorated and manifest in endless ways. In Grey's words, "part of the job of creative persons is to challenge traditional habits of thought and behavior and develop new expressions to surprise and reinvigorate the collective mind-set" (131). If we as a community of conscious investigators continue to ask these questions and push the conventional boundaries of our forms of expression, we can keep moving through space and time in revolving evolutions of creative manifestation.

Creative play is a multifaceted, richly fulfilling world of discovery and communication. Creative energy offers light and dynamic perspective to life in and of art. Finding a voice with which to individually express experience and perception is a process that enriches the life of the explorer and the lives of those who witness and learn from these artistic languages. As a means of uniting minds, bodies and souls, art can be a channel of connection and intuitive development. "All of us have come from a unity, an unformed oneness of self with environment, through a very stage-specific process of differentiation until, hopefully, we can begin to reintegrate our differentiated parts and interact with the world from the wholeness of who we are" (Hackney, 12).

By bringing together forms of art and being in present conversation with the universal lattice of creative process, this project seeks to open eager eyes and illuminate the potential for art to manifest as the fabric of connectivity that we as creative

communities can thrive upon. The language of art holds spiritual power to bring people together in wonder of the miracles of our conscious lives, as artists and as a collective consciousness. Art is not meant to be an exclusive craft; it is meant to be shared abundantly with all walks of life and perspective, and to release visions of connection and evolution that we can move through together.

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