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JAZZ AND THE CREATIVE FLOW OF COLLABORATIVE GESTURTES

**ANNÄHERUNG UND GRENZÜBERSCHREITUNG: KONVERGENZEN GESTEN VERORTUNGEN
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**DER SONDERBAND DER SCHRIFTENREIHE IST URHEBERRECHTLICH GESCHÜTZT. ALLE RECHTE
BLEIBEN VORBEHALTEN. JEDE VERWERTUNG AUßERHALB DER ENGEN GRENZEN DES URHE-
BERRECHTSGESETZES IST UNZULÄSSIG UND STRAFBAR.**

Jazz and the Creative Flow of Collaborative Gestures

When it comes to the magic word of collaboration, be it in the arts, in business management, or in science, the reference to jazz is immediate (MacDonald/Wilson 2006). This has three reasons: To begin with, jazz is a creative way of collaboration, second, its hierarchy is rather flat (although the vertical component of a band leader or of star soloists is quite a factor) and shows a strong network flow, and third, the mastery of time is a jazz characteristic of primordial relevance to time-critical human dynamics.

Despite this evidence, it is not very clear what rationales and tools may be carried over from collaborative jazz performance to generic collaborative environments. More precisely, it is rather obscure, how the creativity in jazz is related to improvisational collaboration, how the flow experience favors creativity, and how the mastery of musical time could be applied to other areas of collective performance.

In this paper, we will make an attempt to throw light on this evident, but complex phenomenon. We shall do so with a special stress on the gestural level of human expressivity and with the consciousness of the growing importance of gestural categories in the understanding of universals of intelligence and communication, but see (Alunni 2005).

The Jazz model

Before delving into detailed discussion, I should give a short account on my personal collaborative practice as a jazz pianist in the segment of the new free jazz movement following the original free jazz of the seventies and set forth around the last years of the twentieth century by leading musicians of the New York-based scene, such as saxophonists Charles Gayle or Rob Brown, bassist William Parker, or pianist Matthew Shipp, to name just a few of them (Freeman 2001).

My personal experience is that collaboration is strongly determined by a flow experience, where music appears as an immersive environment that includes the musicians not as imperative agents, but as resonance centers of an inspiration that is fed by a dense interplay. In the ideal performance these agents are effectively played by a musical magma of energies and force fields. This is a very different approach from the traditional free jazz, where structures were used to produce energies. Now, the brewing magma emanates structures of attraction and repulsion from the maze of semi-consciousness. This type of music only works if the musicians let themselves float in an intense flow experience akin to the classical *écriture automatique* of the French surrealists and use their undisputable instrumental virtuosity to enable resonant shapes of an overwhelming musical substance.

The new free jazz experience is undeniably best communicated and understood in the context of a live performance. This is due to the fact that the creation of such emergent sounding shapes gains evidence through a rich gestural dance of the musicians' limbs, fingers, and faces as they interact with the instrumental interfaces. This gestural dance is directly understood by a completely naive public, a fact that is testified by a number of successful performances in Bali, Yogyakarta, Seoul, Saltillo, or Mexico City. These spectators had a very direct and unspoiled access to the basic gestural dimensions of the band's performance.

The third extraordinary characteristic of this jazz adventure is the time dimension of the collaborative flow. Jazz is in fact characterized by the mastery of time. In no other music the sovereignty over time is so important as in jazz and in particular in free jazz. This music requires the complete responsibility of one's time actions. The dominant role of gestures is not only the exterior aspect, but the innermost motor of this music. We know that Cecil Taylor, the great innovator of free jazz piano, has described his own approach as the fingers' dance, a first of all gesturally inspired production of sounding movements. This means that the flow of collaboration is an intense experience of gestural ecstasis. It annihilates the distance between the performance action and the musical contents, a relation which is fundamentally opposed to the classical performance of a mentally superimposed score. Such an intimacy with the flow of existence enforces a time experience which could be called penetrating time, the intrusion of

time flow. This mastery of time is more than time control; it is the inner life of time that is opened.

Summarizing, it is the gesturally shaped flow through the innards of time, which makes the jazz experience so unique a paradigm for collaboration in the arts, management and science.

Francis Bacon's graph flow

The concept of flow was introduced by the Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and presents a major progress in the understanding of creative collaboration. Csikszentmihalyi describes this existential state as "being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz". Despite its mesmerizing flavor, it is difficult to manage flow on a conceptual level, and also to give it the status of a well-structured or even controlled behavior.

It seems however that the painter Francis Bacon has opened a path to a more rational understanding of flow. In his famous interviews (Sylvester 2001), he states that

"in the way I work I don't in fact know very often what the paint will do, and it does many things which are very much better than I could make it do. (...) What has never yet been analysed is why this particular way of painting is more poignant than illustration. I suppose because it has a life completely of its own. (...) So the artist may be able to open up or rather, should I say, unlock the valves of feeling."

This describes the immersion of the artist in a flow of force fields, which parallels the jazz experience described above and has also been associated with an "autopilot" taking over the control of one's artistic action, a phenomenon also known from Jackson Pollock's action painting.

But what is new and really revolutionary in Bacon's insight is what has provoked a major movement in the present French philosophy, called "pensée diagrammatique" and initiated by Gilles Deleuze's work (1981) on Francis Bacon, and also to some extent by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's treatise (1945) on the gestural incorporation of thought in language. The philosophical point of crystallization is Bacon's statement (Sylvester 1975): "The marks are made, and you survey the thing like you would a sort of graph.

And you see within this graph the possibilities of all types of fact being planted.” Deleuze translated the term “graph” by “diagramme” into French, now a key concept in the ongoing foundational debate on thought and intelligence, but see (Batt 2005) for a representative text.

The novelty of this description is that the flow to which Bacon alludes is shaped as a directed graph, which configures the field flow of artistic creativity. One could view this strategy as the incorporation of a nervous system in the innards of the work of art. The artist’s nervous projections now become visible and create something like a distributed artistic identity, which innervates the work and establishes the potential for Bacon’s “unlocking of valves”. Thereby the creative flow unfolds as a digraphical inner discourse that is turned inside out. Bacon’s gestural approach embeds the artist’s body dynamics in the work of art; it embodies the creative act as a gestural configuration. Such an embodiment generates the poignant contrast to illustration observed by Bacon. Illustration sheds light on something that is already there, whereas gestural graphing creates the object as an externalized part of the artist’s self.

It is however important to understand the concept of a gesture in the way it is viewed by a number of scientists, including the Paris school. In this vein, and following the medieval theologian Hugues de Saint-Victor, one could say that “gestus est motus et figuratio membrorum corporis, ad omnem agendi et habendi modum”.¹ More mathematically stated, a gesture is spanned by a digraph (a directed graph), whose arrows are mapped to a configuration of continuous curves in a topological space. The digraph catches the “figuratio membrorum”, while the parametrization of the curve paraphrases the character of a movement (“motus”) in whatever space. Much as in the Japanese Noh Theater of gestures, Saint-Victor is completely generic as to their possible semantics: Only the mode of action and attitude (“agendi et habendi”) is intended, leaving open any further option of meaning. A gesture is not *a priori* the expressive surface of a semiotic sign. It is an autonomous entity, not a representative *aliquid pro aliquid*.

¹ Gesture is the movement and figuration of the body’s limbs, according to whatever modality of action and attitude.

Jean Cavallès' hypergestures

Bacon's approach is a big step towards the understanding of flow as a shaping of space-time, and of the distributed embedding of the artistic identity in the work of art. But there is one major open question in this approach: How does this innervation of art works enable creativity? The nervous system is not a guarantee for creativity.

There must be a method for collaborating within the nervous maze of a gesture in such a way that the creation of new gestures is enabled. The point is that in Bacon's graphical method, the objects of transfer on the graph's arrows are not specified. What could then be the substance of such movements? The core of an innervative communication must be the ability to understand what the cooperative partner wants to transfer, be it the jazz fellow musician, be it part of the painting, which incites another part to be built, be it the dancer who evokes a counterpart in his or her ballet company. The French philosopher and mathematician Jean Cavallès has pronounced an enlightening insight in the act of comprehension, stating (Cavallès 1938) that "Comprendre est attraper le geste et pouvoir continuer". Comprehension is the transfer of a gesture in order to pursue it, and it is a transfer which is itself a gestural movement: "Attraper" means catching a gesture on the flight, when it is thrown to you.

On the occasion of a session of the IRCAM MaMuX seminar (Séminaire MaMuX 2006), I discussed the concept of a hypergesture and thereby was driven by the French philosopher Charles Alunni to the correct understanding of Cavallès' aphorism: In fact, it appears that Cavallès had in mind a hypergesture, i.e. a gesture of gestures, when drawing that metaphor of transferring gestures for comprehension. In the mathematical theory of gestures (Mazzola/Andreatta 2007), a hypergesture is a mapping from a digraph into a topological space, but that space is not arbitrary, it is itself the space of all gestures of a given type. Such a space is provided with a canonical topology and therefore it is possible to repeat the gestural construction and to consider gestures of gestures of gestures of... *ad infinitum*. Alunni rightly views Cavallès' metaphor as an instance of the hypergesture concept. Understanding means transferring gestures on the level of hypergestures, moving in a maze, networking in a space of gestures.

This is all but astonishing if one recalls the practice of artistic collaboration. A jazz combo at work resembles a big maze of gestures, which are exchanged within the all-embracing group gesture, in that flow which turns the individual virtuosic contributions into a coherent whole. Or a soccer team, whose players will harmonize their individual athletic gestures in a collaborative maze if they want to succeed as a team. The examples are numerous.

Cast net fishing for creative spaces

Cavaillès' idea of a hypergestural nesting in the collaborative architecture is a beautiful perspective onto a landscape of gestural cities and highways. It is straightforward that hypergestures are the conceptual tool for advancing creative artistic collaboration. This is the level of communication. The code of the nervous system is derived from this iterative principle.

Nonetheless, the suggested maze is everything less than obvious. Is it obvious that the transfer of gestures is possible? Aren't there obstacles if collaboration is to be realized among different artistic species? If a dancer has to catch the gesture of a poet, or if an improvising pianist has to catch the gesture of an action painter, is this a trivial task of just connecting two gestures in a common topological space?

No, it is obviously not, since it is one of the characteristics of every artistic field to define its own space of gestures, be it on the level of the involved digraphs, be it on the level of the target spaces. For example, a ballet gesture involves the dancers' bodies and the stage floor, while a violinist's gesture is more specific on the fingers' gestures and their interaction with the violin's strings. Therefore in view of an artistic² collaboration, the hypergestural maze is not a given precondition, is not a well-known standard and even less a component of artistic education, which can be called on demand. The situation is that we are facing a number of specific gestural spaces, of dance, poetry, film, multimedia, music, theater, say, and then, these spaces have to be merged into a

² ...and also a scientific one, which we do not stress here, but which would equally merit more attention on the level of the present gestural discourse.

big hyperspace, where they may be recognized as subspaces for specific gestures.

The definition of such a collaborative hyperspace is by no means automatic. Of course, there are universal mathematical constructions of such spaces, e.g. colimits or similar procedures. But this is not the point here since artistic collaboration is not a universal construction; it must be realized on the very specific nature of its contractors. And it must respect the individual gestural specifications, the concrete works to be integrated and networked with each other. Charles Alunni (2005) is right when separating gestural procedures from the rule-based methodology: “Ce n’est pas la règle qui gouverne l’action diagrammatique, mais l’action qui fait émerger la règle.” The creation of a (hyper) gestural hyperspace is not the result of an automaton, but the emergence of a new machine. Not by case was free jazz more adequately coined “new thing”, they went on creating new ways of making music, not illustrating, not playing the background but the music (as brilliantly stated by saxophonist Ornette Coleman, one of the fathers of free jazz).

Let us give an idea of how such a definition of a hyperspace could be searched for. Artistic collaboration cannot be construed upon declarative or imperative prerequisites, it is neither reasonable, nor in the interest of true collaboration to impose one space, or one type of gestures on other fields of artistic expression. It is also not guaranteed that such a collaborative hypergesture is feasible at all. The search for a hyperspace is an open action towards unknown new frontiers. They cannot be enforced, but must be searched for in a thoroughly sensitive and receptive gesture. We would like to depict this one as a cast net fishing gesture, an opening movement towards unknown and uncertain artistic nutrition. The target of this fishing gesture is quite clear: (Alunni 2005) to define a hyperspace comprising the given art-specific gesture spaces, (Batt 2005) to define a hypergesture on such a space, which connects the given gestures in hyperspace. Such could be the creative process in the collaborative arts.

Adaptive instead of preemptive disciplinarity

Our design of the environment for innervated hypergestural creativity is a constructive and operative approach to collaborative

arts, but we cannot refrain from stressing the basic competence that any collaborator must import to such an enterprise from his/her acquired artistic, scientific or managing discipline(s).

Such a disciplinary education must be implemented either in parallel or, in the ideal case, as a propaedeutic professional formation. A free jazz pianist must above all be a pianist, and a collaborative film director must above all be competent as a film director. There is no way, which leads directly to the collaborative arts from scratch.

Now, the point of a successful collaborative enterprise lies in the style and degree of relativization of one's specific competence. It is fruitless to step into cooperation on the basis of a preconceived specialization. Disciplinarity must be postponed in favor of the cast net fishing gesture towards the radical difference of one's partners.

Does this open approach contradict the above *conditio sine qua non* of a preliminary professional formation? It does not, but the way, this is realized, is problematic. It is our experience that every young (or not yet open-minded) specialist tends to take his/her professional formation, the terminology, methodology, or style of professional gesticulation, very seriously, and this is rightly so. But cooperation also requires a strong commitment to alternative perspectives. Therefore the acquired discipline must be set forth when it comes to an application adapted to this special competence and not in the sense of a preemptive filter of understanding.

This approach positions disciplinarity as a tool for "surgical interventions" when necessary, not whenever possible. One hard test for the adequacy of a disciplinary intervention is the response of one's partners in a collaborative hypergesture, the resonance created from the propagation of a disciplined gesture. It must be possible to transform the essence of one's discipline as a graspable gesture to be comprehended in the spirit of Cavallès.

The topographic tension of artistic collaboration

As described in Mazzola (2002) for music, but with a quite generic application to all types of arts, such human activities and ways of thinking live in a distributed ontological topography, which is spanned by three ontological axes, each having three coordinate

values and thus building what we have coined the “topographic cube”: The first for physical, psychic and symbolic realities, the second for communication, from the poietic to the neutral, and then to the esthetic level, and the third for semiotics, i.e., specified in expressive, signifying, and content layers. Therefore any artistic fact will have a field of such topographic coordinates where it subsists more precisely, it may be smeared over any subset of the twentyseven coordinates on the topographic cube.

Collaborative arts will in general not be confined to one single such position in the three-dimensional topography of the arts. For example, it may happen that the symbolic reality of a poem is hypergesturally connected to a dance production based on the physical level. One may therefore view collaborative arts as a gesture in the topographic cube of artistic ontology. In this perspective, the quality and challenge of collaborative arts enterprises are directly coupled to the tension created from the topographic “distance” of the collaborative partners and instances. The more collaboration departs from the oxymoron of an auto-collaboration, the more will its creative power have to be invoked. The force of the heterogenous is undoubtedly a major motor in the collaborative spirit, a motor which must be alimented by an open cast net gesture towards creativity, but also controlled by the mechanisms of disciplined formation and dedication.

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