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# IMPROVISING INSTITUTIONS: ART & ITS INSTITUTIONAL BORDERS

»It's not easy to improvise; it's the most difficult thing to do. Even when one improvises in front of a camera or a microphone, one ventriloquizes, or leaves another to speak in one's place, the schemas and languages that are already there [...]. All the names are already pre-programmed. It's already the names that inhibit our ability to ever really improvise.

One can't say whatever one wants; one is obliged, more or less, to reproduce the stereotypical discourse. And so I believe in improvisation and I fight for improvisation; but always with the belief that it's impossible. And there where there is improvisation, I am not able to see myself; I am blind to myself. [...] It's for others to see. The one who has improvised here, no, I won't ever see him.«  
Jacques Derrida<sup>1</sup>

**Fig. 1:**  
Participants taking part in the «Improvising Institutions» workshop, convened by Jamie Allen and Bernhard Garnichig at the Muthesius Kunsthochschule, January 26, 2019.



## INTRODUCTION

The thoughts and writings that follow began their lives as notes for a talk on the topic and possibility of ‹institutional improvisation› and the equally suppositional and perhaps overly ambitious idea of ‹improvising institutions›. The talk itself was somewhat improvised, delivered at the end of a three-day series of such contributions and interventions. It was the *final* input to a lively and ambitious symposium entitled «Art and Its Borders» («Kunst an den Rändern»). At the grateful invitation of Christiane Kruse, Annika Frye and Ileana Pascalau of Muthesius Kunsthochschule in Kiel, I gave a lecture and, along with collaborator Bernhard Garnicnig, gave a workshop with Muthesius art students on themes related to this talk.

We were there to ask, together, after the «driving force behind a permanent expansion of the concept of art», as well as who it is that is «acting in the interest of the expansion of art», as the event description opines.<sup>2</sup> My response to these questions reflects how embedded and responsive, acculturated and conditioned we all are as actors within our institutional milieus. As we acknowledge the difficulty of metaphors set out by the event organisers — such as the colonial roots in Eurocentricity and growth of notions like ‹expansion› — we also invoked the expansive qualities of the ‹first rule› of improvisation: ‹Yes, and...› This improvisatory rule-of-thumb suggests that interlocutors should always build on what has already been created, said or invoked, and expand on that thinking. It is an attitude of acceptance of *what is*, a mode of inclusive criticality and opening out into possibility; against negation, denial and toward reception, generosity and modulation. As a definition of creativity, an elaboration or embellishment that does not pretend at the production, *ex nihilo*, of novelty, improvisation describes ways of reacting to environments, negotiating the planned and unplanned, it characterises the unprepared and extemporised ways that the borders of art might be expanded. Put in more embattled terms, as media theorist Marshall McLuhan once did, «the artist can show us how to ‹ride with the punch›, instead of ‹taking it on the chin›».<sup>3</sup> Aikido, the Japanese martial art — its name meaning «the way of unifying life energy»<sup>4</sup> — expresses similar orientations. Designed to keep both assailant and defender from injuring themselves, Aikido involves an expansive dialectics, one that is inclusive, incorporative, and reintegrative of bodies, actions and energies. How might we expand the borders of always-institutional and

always-political creativity and art, beyond the circulation of pictures and objects? How might the rubric of improvisation allow us to rethink institutionality, as an improvisatory creative practice?

As Sylvia Plath and Michael Taussig have each taught us, if somewhat grimly, even «dying is an art, like everything else».<sup>5</sup> There is artistry that emerges from even the most prescriptive or seemingly ossified preformatted forms we choose for scholarly discourse, from the formats we take up for communicating research, contextualising and sharing ideas. Formats like lectures, workshops, exhibitions and other institutional, artistic and academic gatherings of people and things, are, it's true, often criticised for being unimaginative, repetitive and constraining. Yet, the instauration of these knowledge practices is accompanied with necessary differences and variation. That these events tend toward regularity helps us to detect this variation, creating opportunities to cultivate and precipitate creative serendipities and improvisational impulses, interruptions and suspensions, held in relief against backgrounds of social tradition, cultural presumption and institutional form. It is for this reason that we should, and hopefully do, extend great gratuities to organisers of even the most standardised or formalised such events, as the effortful and thankless task of composing these frameworks provides the very impetus for certain forms of creativity, certain forms of revelation, rare opportunities for exposition and exposure. These very writings would never have been sketched up and written down had an invitation to Kiel not been extended, had I not been asked to deliver a lecture, not asked to rework this talk into an essay for publication. Likewise, symposia, conferences, roundtables, talks — as much as these are maligned in certain circles and cultures of artists as «extraneous» to the «art making» that is often supposed to be the central, core activity and concern — can also be opportunities for potential interruptions and reinforcements, open to the promise of creative practice. They are activities at the borders of art, as it is presumed to be known through its objects and images. They are activities that are interesting in their proximity to what we might term «institutional practices», approaching the activations of infrastructure and performances of power which constitute institutions.

In recomposing these thoughts, wrought in front of an audience at Muthesius Kunsthochschule, I would also want to bring up and try to retrace elements of ongoing and always important discussions, which sparked, and evolved during the wintery days we spent in Kiel, and thereafter.<sup>6</sup> Under-

standing the self-reflexive nature of my own, somewhat self-assigned, tasks — to deliver a prepared lecture about improvisation and institutions within the frame of the institutional format of a lecture — I would come to press against the edges of the creative practice of institutions which I act in the interest of. This, in ways that involved the organisers and (other) artists present for and to the session, as well as other scholars, researchers and presenters, and the Muthesius Kunsthochschule and its own (creative) institutional practices.

During the talk on the afternoon of Saturday, January 26, 2019, just before the *Ende des Symposiums* (as it was listed in the event programme), I projected behind me a screenshot of the initial email invitation I had received to come to Kiel, to Muthesius Kunsthochschule, to the symposium «Art and Its Borders». Making this unedited and unredacted correspondence between myself and Annika Frye from months before the event public was amongst the gestures I made that day toward rendering legible the creative, institutional practices that constitute the profoundly elaborate and complex, almost miraculous, processes that serve to make any such event possible. I was also, unwittingly, potentially violating European law, in publicly displaying email-correspondence without the consent of all parties. The rather simple point I was trying to make in that moment — delving into a bit of behind-the-scenes correspondence — was merely to emphasise these practices, of institutions, to foreground relationships between scripted and textual memoranda and how these frame and concretise into real, situated events. Any such event, however standard or idiosyncratic, is constituted by small leaps, from imagination to logistics, from language to understanding, from telecommunications to embodied action. And within these leaps, we might consider what opportunities exist for new directions, hold-ups or improvisations.

The email screenshot I showed to the group in Kiel also outlined the economic terms of my visit. It contained the fee and travel arrangements that Muthesius University of Fine Arts and Design had offered me as remuneration for my participation. The outing of this information would become a moment of detent, and interruption, as various groups of participants weighed up the terms of their own engagement with the «Art and Its Borders» event. Registered as immediate consternation during the moments and the workshop which followed, this modest <fee gate> situation I had instigated would very quickly morph into a spectrum of responses and conversations: from degrees of scandal-mongering on social media to reasoned

concern and conversation around the precarious labour of artists, cultural workers and academics. It would appear in hasty write-ups, and subsequent corrections, in the German-language newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and, of course, for a few weeks after our time in Kiel discussion continued ›in the comments‹ within a small online community of concern. The incident provoked a series of institutional and personal reactions, some of which were necessarily extemporised and improvised: the demand for swift critical responses on mediums like Facebook and determination of their appropriateness as an arena for addressing perceived and real asymmetries of institutional power, economic validation and personal responsibility; understanding how to appropriately nuance and contextualise the presumption of and demands for transparency; managing somewhat inappropriately personal guilt, accusation or slander in dealing with the mutual blind spots, responsibilities, difficulties and contradictions that we all project, co-create and expect from institutional power; discovering how best to react to future breakdowns of the structural and tacit inequalities of cultures of art and design wrought through institutional presumption and inertia.

The economic facts worth highlighting are that all travel expenses were paid for all who were involved in the event, for us to come to Kiel and return home. I was reimbursed for this, and was also paid for a closing lecture, as well as a workshop organised with a collaborator. All lecturers were paid for their contributions, *but artists were at the outset not given fees for exhibiting their work*. After the ›fee gate‹ and deliberations described above, the artists were later paid commensurately for their contributions.

My transgression, publicly outing the details of the money I had been offered for my travel and participation — created a small scandal. This impromptu and unauthorised ›leak‹ of normally ›behind the scenes‹ institutional practices poked a small hole in the infrastructure of standardised proceedings, proceedings that are often put in place to make things more transparent and fair, but also inscribe certain inequities. Not having intended any offense or ignominy with my little gesture of reveal, it has been with hope and humility since January 2019 that I've thought back on an unscripted unmasking that demanded of myself and others a series of extra-formal improvisations. For these and for their patience, and any new understandings they may have helped generate, I am grateful. If we have exercised means of examining the processes which compose our institutional formality and formats, and if we have allowed for a small interruption of institutional

proceduralism to teach us how we might once again remake these relations inventively, imaginatively and experimentally, then our shared time in Kiel will have been of great value.<sup>7</sup>

## INSTITUTIONS, INFRASTRUCTURE & IMPROVISATION

Can we identify and bring into play improvisation, as a means of widening practices and concepts through art in their always-institutional settings? This, while understanding that these means can have different ends, ambiguous in both form and effect? The liberal, neo-liberal, avant-garde and experimental deployment of improvisation, as a mode of thinking and doing in art and institutional life, involves gestures that can expand expressive empathy and creative, serendipitous opportunity. But improvisation can also serve as a way of colonising all that surrounds, subsuming difference, flattening distinction, including all life as a ‹ready-made› for our art worlds. Likewise, the sociality of improvisation is always a *demand* made of people. It demands a level of extroversion and public self-awareness that can for some (if not many) be torturous and persecuting, or can force extemporisations that feel worse than regurgitation.

A preliminary description, not definition, of the kind of improvisation I am interested in could begin by outlining it as a skill, a method and the kind of activity that to some degree resists theorisation. It is a form of impractical, relational creativity, different from *bricolage* or *improvisiert*, which are oriented toward goals of productivity or novelty that are external to these relations. Improvisation is a means of thinking and acting that is additive and modulative, not subtractive or halting, that leaves all involved parties different, transformed. Improvisation embodies a relationship to time and vitality that is variable and open — *kairotic*, not chronic, that is, expressive of a time and context when conditions are *just right* for something to happen.

If we consider relations to planning, improvisation the way I'd like to address it could be a terminal stage which minimised prognostications into the future, at one end of a spectrum of relational temporal projections that we might sketch thusly: Logistics → planning → strategy → tactics → improvisation. Along this spectrum, each subsequent containment and temporal relation seems to provide a kind of reaction or resistance to the step before, causing an upward ripple. Improvisation resists tactics, tactics inter-

rupt strategy, strategy reacts to planning and planning rubs up against logistical regimes. Improvisation is therefore in no way a transcendent exit, nor is it the same as ‹randomness›, ‹aleatoric› or procedural creative gestures (although these are perhaps potentially means for seeding improvisational activity). In the arts, improvisation sits historically as a subversion of the sanctity and valuation of ‹composition›, to which it is often opposed. There are fairly banal, but still often repeated, arguments stemming from protestant work ethic valuations of creativity — claims that improvisation amounts to ‹just making it up› — that have the effect of devaluing artistic practices which arise in the moment against those that are planned, thought through, thoroughly crafted or structured in advance and externally defined.

Improvisation as we have just outlined is not generally part of how artistic practices address institutions directly — such as Institutional Critique and related work. These are rather structural, or post-structural approaches (which are of course, also structural) that respond to infrastructures that allow art, in some way, to happen. The first and second wave of Institutional Critique work by people like Andrea Fraser, Michael Asher, and Fred Wilson partakes of the modernist gesture of the ‹reveal›, in art as in academia. Infrastructures, to give a recursive description, are those structures that allow structure to exist, and so are frustratingly unscaled, infinitely nested targets for critique. Infrastructural structures can be real and metaphoric, actual and imaginary, static or processual. They are physical: as in the people who clean a public auditorium room before groups of publics enter it, or the work that goes into creating the exhibitions, artworks and events that we often come together to talk through. They are technological, as in the preparatory keyboard tapping that accumulated as I finalised and prepared this text. They are habitual, written into the behaviours of practical, banal belief in things like calendars and clocks, which give to rendezvous and daily rhythms the appearance of proceeding smoothly. They are mythological, developed as customs of belief that we might have toward research, knowledge and art, such as those that cause us to create and participate in things like symposia, conferences, and talks. The nested temporal structures of logistics → planning → strategy → tactics → improvisation gives us a hint as to how and where improvisation might be inserted into such systems and structures.

Institutions of art and art education are established entities, notoriously resistive and persistently unchanging in time. Improvisational strategies would seem to little match the dynamics of these entities. What is



important and impressive in temporal improvisation practices, however, is the wide ranging political, social, organisational and aesthetic relationships and valuations that these techniques have brought up. The 1971 improviser Cornelius Cardew wrote the essay «Towards an Ethic of Improvisation»<sup>8</sup> and numerous other visions for the ways in which society could be reshaped through an improvisatory thinking. George Lewis speaks and writes of the emancipatory relations that drove improvisational impulses in 1960s Chicago through the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians.<sup>9</sup> Lewis has also, for many years, explored the development of improvising machines as a ground for new subject kinds of subject/object relations, as he outlined in his article «Rainbow Family» entry for *Technosphere Magazine* in 2018.<sup>10</sup> Such political agencies can, as with anything, get out of hand or go in the wrong direction — some have pointed to U.S. President Donald Trump's dangerous love of extemporaneous improvisation, for example.<sup>11</sup> I am editing this text during the Spring of 2020, in the midst of lockdowns and self-isolations due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has also been heralded by some as «The Ultimate «Yes, And»» improvisation for communities and cultures.<sup>12</sup>

The technique, approach or style that is improvisation is often mistaken as a forgoing of systems or structures — whereas anyone who improvises will tell you it is precisely a mode of heightened concern with the existence, possibilities and modulation of extant structures. Indeed, George Lewis, again, is a theorist and musician who is fond of speaking about improvisation as an existential skill: If you couldn't improvise you'd never survive a tiger attack, or get across a New York street alive.<sup>13</sup> There are sympathetic perspectives like Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's now famous book that became a managerialist classic, *Flow, The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, which is about the alignment of (self) valuation and skill matching, moments where the challenge before us is near-perfectly matched to how we respond, allowing prepared psyches to loose fuse with the necessity of activities, and fall out of time.<sup>14</sup> Csikszentmihalyi's tack was to analyse how high-performance mental and physical activities like improvising in music could be leveraged for making people more effective, present and efficient. There are also newer works on the grassroots activities of community organisation and the forming of new collectivities, such as the book *Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown — the title of which is a rather attractive generalised description or definition of institutional improvisation. This last book takes up sci-

ence fiction writer Octavia Butler's view of civilization relating to groups as intelligence relates to individuals: «It is a means of combining the intelligence of many to achieve ongoing group adaptation,»<sup>15</sup> writes Butler. These are all sentiments that show us intersections between institutional creativity and the often more immediate-seeming role and technique of improvisation. Deleuze's writings on «instinct» (as an idea we can ally to improvisation and unthought, unconscious creativity) and «institutions» places these two things in relation, not as incompatible concepts or practices aligned to «freedom» and «control» but part of a natural history of human attempts to meet, abstract and organise provisions for desires and needs.<sup>16</sup> «What we call an instinct and what we call an institution essentially designate procedures of satisfaction,» writes Deleuze.<sup>17</sup>

It is also worth noting and linking these ideas to the rise of telecommunications and network technologies, as new globalised infrastructures that simultaneously revealed rhythmic disjunctions between systems that had been protected from improvisatory speeds by systems incongruities and buffers. These have evolved into means and techniques that make it possible and required for people to create and enact institutional voices, also through the requirements of institutional transparency in a digital culture (e.g.: Wikileaks, or the Panama Papers). In a similar way, the Internet has become an excellent mechanism for extemporised interactions *with* institutions; for both individuals demanding immediate answers from institutions, and for institutions being able to demand immediate responses from individuals. Such immediacy, as acceleration of attentional economics, propels improvisation as a contemporary need, or digital life skill, which art schools and creative pedagogy could do better at responding to (e.g.: meme culture and other kinds of rapid image production for social media). For example, an ongoing and collaborative activity that emerged from encounters during our time in Kiel include a «memeclaworldwide» research workshop with Juan Blanco, Mateusz Dworczyk, Karin Ferrari, Bernhard Garnicnig, Susannah E. Haslam and Ramona Kortyka. This group coalesced when an existing student initiative found support through our visit to Muthesius Kunsthochschule. The workshop Bernhard and I did there supported and encouraged the playful and important responses the students were already making to institutional demands, online and off. This is but one example of the potential for immediacy and reactivity, for speaking back, with appropriate and contemporary voices about and with institutions.<sup>18</sup>

For our purposes, ‹institution› should be understood as a verb, as ‹to institute› infers practices that are continuously instantiated through belief and action, and might suggest different relationships to how we can engage with them. One relevant example would be the sense we get from ‹institution› in phrases like ‹the institution of marriage›, which captures the relational yet perpetual nature of institutional forms better than the organisations, such as post offices and museums, which usually come to mind. Phrases like ‹the institution of marriage› also call to mind those things in the world that are produced by love and commitment, desire and intention; performed acts of restoration, inauguration and speech, projection and imagination; things that persist, *hopefully*, against all entropic odds, through time. The philosopher Étienne Souriau uses a word, ‹instauration› — that he used in place of words like invention or creation — which helpfully describes this kind of process or effort of a thing becoming, but needing ever thereafter to be re-instantiated, reinstated and paid attention to.<sup>19</sup>

A particularly interesting question that arises, as we interest ourselves in how improvisation might help modulate practices with and within various cultural institutions, is how and why the demand to improvise arises as necessary for those with *less* power. And how «experimentation and innovation [are] integral to [...] navigating adverse conditions on a daily basis [as] a matter of survival.»<sup>20</sup> It is continuously demanded, in situations of everyday work-life, art-life and play-life, that we improvise around the imposition of power, the constraints of environments and infrastructure and the programming of condition.

## WHAT WATER?

Judging by the number of lines of text written about them, and words spoken on their behalf, it would seem that ‹fish› are a favourite animal of art historians, media scholars and philosophers alike. In 1964, Marshall McLuhan wrote in *Counterblast*: «Today we live invested with an electric information environment that is quite as imperceptible to us as water is to a fish.»<sup>21</sup> inferring that we only ever place one environment inside another one. Siegfried Zielinski's ... *After the Media* exposes the all-over environment of media in terms of a fundamental paradox: «The case of media is [such that] we swim in it like the fish in the ocean, it is essential for us, and for this reason it is ultimately inaccessible to us.»<sup>22</sup> David Foster Wallace, arguably the great-

est American Novelist of his generation, an astute observer and critic of the institutional regimentation of human life, was also a bit of an ichthyologist. A similar fish story frames his 2005 commencement speech to the graduating class at Kenyon College. It is a story of...

[...] two young fish swimming along, [who] happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way. [The older fish] nods at them and says <Morning, boys. How's the water?> And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and says <What the hell is water?><sup>23</sup>

### Wallace continues:

The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. This is the awareness — awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us [...] we have to keep reminding ourselves, over and over: This is water, this is water. Stated as an English sentence, of course, this may seem just a banal platitude, but the fact is that in the day to day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have a life or death importance.<sup>24</sup>

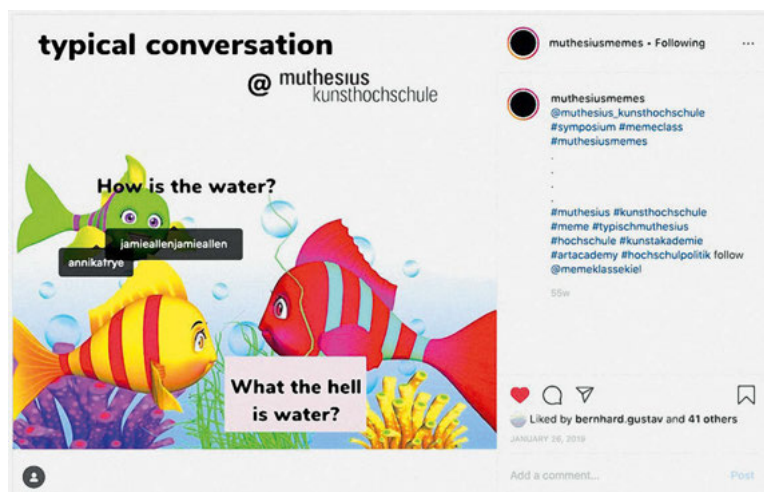


Fig. 2:  
An image posted on January 26, 2019 to the Muthesius Kunsthochschule student-run Instagram account @muthesiusmemes after the lecture from which this essay was derived. The group behind this account further developed an extended, extemporised collaboration with «Improving Institutions» workshop co-host Bernhard Garnicnig on a project entitled «memeclasseworldwide».

The life and death importance Wallace was talking about here is grimly and sadly underscored by the fact that he took his own life, three years after this speech, at the age of 46.

There are, of course, many things that go broadly unnoticed — the air, the atmosphere, the earth, the chairs supporting our butts and the buildings that keep us warm and dry. There are also those things over which we have no conscious physiological control (our hearts beat, our lungs filling with air). The bandwidths of our consciousnesses are pre-programmed with foreground filters. Conditions of possibility recede, so as to lend greater significance to the possibilities themselves, and for us to delight in the *art* in and amongst all other things. Water-awareness, though, lends to aspects of our existence those qualities of artistic awareness and practice that Allan Kaprow highlighted, in one of his *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, in differentiating between artists that get up every morning and make art, and artists that wake up every morning and ask «What is art, anyway?»<sup>25</sup>

It is one of the central functions of experimental arts — improvisation is one of these — to «make people aware of what they know and what they don't know that they know» as William Burroughs has said.<sup>26</sup> Improvisatory gestures lend polyrhythmic, contrapuntal or static qualities to situations that are otherwise monotonic, rote, and scripted by the conservatisms of history, culture and condition. Improvisation reroutes conscious energies toward what is or could be made possible in a given environment or situation, and hence toward that environment itself, and the conditions of possibility which are inscribed there. Awareness of such conditions — awareness of «water» — is a precondition for immanent critique, attempts to create something that either changes these conditions or operationalises them in new ways. The life and death importance of perceiving the waters in which we swim draws its severity from the fact that such awareness allows us to consider how environments, and institutions might be made or remade *otherwise*, more liveable, more equitable, more accessible. As artists, researchers and scholars operating within institutions, what the hell is *our* water? What is it that we know, but don't know that we know?

## IMAGINED & PERFORMED INSTITUTIONS

Institutions — artistic institutions, cultural institutions — are part of a vast array of imaginary tools, mediums and procedures that enable human col-

lectivity in a particular way. Institutions do not exist as singularly physical, geographical, organisationally constituted entities; they instead need to be continuously *instituted* — largely in unnoticed or unexamined ways. Just as poetry interrupts the structure of language, improvisation interrupts illusory temporal rigidity, semblances of rhythmic coherence and perceived procedural smoothness. It is this relationship to the orchestration of time that allows improvisation to expose how institutions have evolved in contemporary life as a harnessing of movement — first as tactics, then as strategy, then as planning and finally as the logistical world under which we live. As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write in *The Undercommons*, «this logistcality will not cohere».<sup>27</sup> To put it another way, institutions are a kind of mass delusion, a collective processual hallucination,<sup>28</sup> existing in time as seemingly predictable, cohesive structures — like an elaborate baroque dance or a monorhythmic trance, not at all just a solid thing. Such *performed* institutions, or institutional performances, as such, if we choose to view them in such a way, might be more readily susceptible to the additive strategies suggested by modes of «yes... and» improvisation.

Imagine what it would be like if everyone at the Muthesius University of Fine Arts and Design, all of a sudden, started showing up 20 minutes late, or *early*, for everything, all day every day? Or, we could consider what happens when people, under relatively dire and serious circumstances, stop believing in, and stop adhering to the regular processual rigidity of law enforcement, banks, post offices or governments. What if we were to stop regularly paying our debts, or stop going to work.

None of this is to make institutionality itself or institutional practices themselves into a default «enemy» that must be subjected to arbitrary or reactionary change, or at all costs avoided. It is both wonderful and necessary, even essential, to organise, to manage, to compose the dances of synchronicity and coordination that go on inside institutions of all kinds. The institution is not always, as Marxists might have it, *just* a means of subjugating underclasses and controlling means of production. Nor are institutions, as Foucauldians might have it, *only* training wheels for habituation and self-governance. Institutions are part of the human need and desire to construct socialities, fulfilled both through systematised as well as abstract means. They are also a ground of potential, the very conditions for the possibility of human collectivity and coordination.

It would be difficult to argue against the fact that institutions of art and culture, and particularly those engaged in teaching and research, are becoming in some senses *more institutional*. We could trace the transformation of collective imaginaries when thinking about a school or university over the last 50 or 60 years. For a time (1960s, 1970s), student groups were active and specific communities, identifiable and identified with schools and universities, attached to ways of thinking and acting, a generation or ‹school of thought›. The students of Paris 1968, as a canonical and famed example, became an institutional force with a concise and specific identity, aligned with artistic and liberal arts sensibilities — much of the force of this movement deriving from powerful poetic rhetoric and symbolic imagery, graffitied dictums like «*ne travaillez jamais*» and «*sous les pavés la plage*». Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, industrialised democracies witnessed the proliferation of the phenomenon of the superstar academic — people like Noam Chomsky and Avital Ronel emerged as spokespeople within institutions who also resisted, or wrestled with, institutional cultures and their personal-professional overlaps and dilemmas. They were and are veritable celebrities, almost but not entirely transcending the administrative powers and institutional potentials that their positions and academic tenures subtend. And now, in our current moment, decade and century, which actors in the academy come to mind when we think of who represents the contemporary university, or art school? Most, I think, would answer, «the administration». President, provost, and the higher rankings of administration are now commonly filled by illustrious names — of artists, philosophers, and political and public intellectuals, their comings and goings even covered by the press.<sup>29</sup>

This intensification of interest and power in the administrative, bureaucratic functioning of art schools and educational institutions comes at a time in which we are all more and more preoccupied with classically bureaucratic, institutional processes. It seems as if the more we allow, or are ourselves responsible for, influxes of classically institutional practices into our everyday, artistic, academic or pedagogical circumstances, the more we all collude to downplay the very fact that this is occurring. We say things to one another like, «Well this is just how institutions are, aren't they?», or «That's the art world these days!», throwing our hands up at the number of forms, regulations, inefficiencies and opacities, the lack of support or understanding, the

outright abuses of mandate or power. But throwing our hands in the air leaves us both vulnerable and prostrate. Gestures of complicity and acceptance — not talking to each other about these things — makes cloudy and distant and precludes the possibility that we might modulate, reformulate or reroute them.

I am a researcher, an artist, a designer and a teacher. I spend a lot of my time — like most people I imagine who are reading this — writing and reading emails, messages, communicating, coordinating. I write and co-write documents, proposals and reports, essays, book chapters, curatorial texts and artwork descriptions. I also create objects, media and events, but most of this *also* involves a lot of email coordination, invoices, receipts and forms. This means that mostly what I'm involved in is instituting things — *ad hoc* or temporally delimited things like project teams or collaborative groups, as well as longer-lived things like publishing collectives and research project consortiums. These activities have become a large part of what it means to be an artist or a scholar, a creative knowledge practitioner, today. Think of the number of emails that were sent in order to coordinate something like the publication of this essay. Or the number of messages that were sent, the number of documents and forms filled out, contracts signed, permissions, proposals, order and shipment forms, and proposal documents written that culminate in a public art exhibition. The result of all this typing now collectively composes part of the creative knowledge practices of art, of research and of teaching. They are all, of course, activities that benefit me as an individual, in many ways — through learning, affective and personal connections, through the fomenting of curiosity and 'renewed' ideas, and through opportunities I get to open and grow into, react against, and even *improvise*. But these are also, of course, activities that provide energies and scaffolding, support and reification of the institutions through which these things necessarily take place. (It is here, during the original talk in Kiel from which this text is derived, that I projected an image of the invitation email to the audience in Kiel, thereby invoking institutional improvisations *aplenty*.)

When we interact or participate, especially when we do so out of unthought habit, with or in a given institution, with each step, touch, moment of attention or inattention — with each tacit reiteration of a norm or trope — we are, in a sense, placing a kind of vote — that this is the institution or institutional form that *we want to continue to exist*. What we participate in, even if we react against it, makes us complicit. We are complicit with *these* structures, co-constitutive of each and every social, legal and cultural



structure we involve ourselves with, at the point and moment of each interaction, and in those other creative practices that occupy most of our time. The Artist Placement Group (APG), an inspiring artist-run organisation seeking to refocus art outside the gallery founded in 1966, attached artists to businesses or governmental context for periods of time. One of the APG slogans was, «context is half the work», and bureaucracy, textual communications, online habits and email practices I observe amongst artists might even indicate that to be a too-conservative ratio.<sup>30</sup> David Graeber's question from *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*, is a similar call to context: «Could it be possible to develop a general theory of interpretive labor?» For Graeber, interpretive labour is «the everyday business of social life, [that] consists in trying to decipher the motives and perceptions of other people, systems and institutions.»<sup>31</sup> I would consider «interpretive labor» a kind of precursor to institutional improvisation, or at least of *good improvisation*, which is always, first, the act of *listening to and understanding what is happening already*.

Interestingly, Graeber references the ways that women in patriarchal cultures have been and are forced to listen to men, forced to learn and adjust to the whims and wants of fragile masculine, dominator psyches. Women and others have been forced to respond and be at the ready when masculine spasms of authority or desire emerge and radically change the situation or environment. There is an adage that has recently reached near-*meme* status online, told to me recently by an art student in Canada. It is: «Tyranny is the deliberate removal of nuance». The inverse of this phrase also seems like a straightforward derivation of «interpretive labour». That is, people who live through autocratic, arbitrary and imperious conditions, no matter how severe, become *students of nuance*. Further proof of this relation may lie in the fact that the original phrase — «Tyranny is the deliberate removal of nuance» — is attributed to documentary filmmaker Albert Maysles, whose own sensitive and subtle film essays seem designed to *reassert* nuance.<sup>32</sup>

The improviser, composer, trombone player, computer programmer and ethnographer George Lewis' «Rainbow Family» essay is about improvising with machines, but it's not just about that. I'll quote him at length, to preserve the nuances of his thoughts on this:

[We understand] that the experience of listening is an improvisative act, engaged in by everyone, that amounts to an expression of agency, judg-

ment, and choice, conducted in a condition of indeterminacy. Immersing ourselves conceptually in this improvisative assemblage allows us to recognize our vulnerability as listeners, even as we practice active engagement with the world. If the subaltern cannot speak, he or she is obliged to listen, and acts of listening and responding inevitably place us in a condition of momentary sub-alterity, whatever our designated social, racial, gender, or class position. Indeterminacy, often posed musically since John Cage as separable from improvisation, becomes instead an aspect of everyday life that is addressed improvisatively.<sup>33</sup>

For those of us working with art schools and universities, these ideas could be applied to, or account for, those many moments of ambiguity and consternation when some seemingly arbitrary process or procedure is put in place, when a confusing email is circulated, when a new directive is rumoured but never initiated, when a supervisor or advisor lashes out unexpectedly, or when an unkind phrase is overheard in a stairwell... There is a concerned <we> that is left collectively listening but confused, even openly traumatised. This, if we listen with George Lewis, is a condition of momentary sub-alterity, or subjugated otherness, a position of *having* to listen-to, to learn-about, and to study the workings of those who oblige us to listen, and then oblige us to respond, to their often ambiguous utterances. George's own awareness of this condition is well honed. I'm reminded of a Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra session that George Lewis <conducted> and in which I was playing experimental electronics. An imposing figure to say the least amongst a relatively shy, deep-listening improviser grouping from Scotland, George kind of ran around the stage pointing at people, not-so-quietly imploring people: «Play something!» «Now you! You — play something!»

Graeber's term of interpretational labour points to the fact that this call-and-response we are called into is actual, real effort — it is time and attention consuming *work*, subalterns training in the art of responding to calls of power. Subalterns are compelled and conditioned to listen, constantly, to interpret quickly, to attempt to understand deeply, and to respond sensitively. It is an inverse form of care for the intentions and possibilities of this or that leader, mandate, system, aim or goal, projected upon those required to respond and react. There are similarities and connections between this characterisation of listening-and-learning as improvisation in the resilience strategies of oppressed or displaced intersectional identities,

addressed by Black Study scholars. Moten and Harney, whose *Undercommons* book has massively influenced the study and critique of cultural institutions in the past few years, sketch institutional labour and subaltern listening as the general condition of the <call> and the <demand>. They ask what makes it possible to muster new orientations or abilities to answer (or not answer) these calls in alternate ways. Morten and Harney reference this special study of listening as *improvisation*, and how it arises from a need to dis-harmoniously respond to the demands of institutionality, also as a kind of inverse, or perverse, care and concern for those who would impose systems of power, control and hierarchy, or oppression. They cite Afro-pessimist Frank B. Wilderson III, who «teaches us, the improvisational imperative is, therefore, <to stay in the hold of the ship, despite my fantasies of flight>». <sup>34</sup> And within such holds, under such hierarchies, the call to respond is described in *The Undercommons* also as a call to improvise:

I think the call, in the way I would understand it, the call, as in the call and response, the response is already there before the call goes out. You're already in something. You are already in it [...] What's more, the call is always a call to dis-order and this disorder or wildness shows up in many places: in jazz, in improvisation, in noise. <sup>35</sup>

Graeber is inspired by black feminist studies scholar and poet bell hooks, who inspired the whole idea of a general theory of interpretive labor (and who chooses not to capitalise her name):

Although there has never been any official body of black people in the United States who have gathered as anthropologists and/or ethnographers to study whiteness, black folks have, from slavery on, shared in conversations with one another <special> knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people. [...] For years black domestic servants, working in white homes, acted as informants who brought knowledge back to segregated communities — details, facts, psychoanalytic readings of the white <Other>. <sup>36</sup>

With every deference and all respect and commitment to honour to those who have endured the violent and horribly threatening circumstances of patriarchy and colonialism, we may all find in these interpretations and

actions of listening, learning and improvisation, hope and inspiration for dealing with always patriarchal and colonial institutions, and for developing different kinds of responses to them.

#### PLAY SOMETHING!

The idea that we demand improvisation from those less empowered than us is, or should be, a disconcerting thought for people who take up the honours of teaching, giving lectures or hosting workshops. The people we can safely assume are in some way ‹in charge› of things — presidents, institute directors, heads of department, teachers — as well as the systems and initiatives they put in place — are, under normal circumstances, necessarily *less aware* of those they affect than *those they affect are aware of them*. Those ‹in charge› are, by a structural irony of hierarchy and its natural, numerical asymmetry, much less practiced and adept at listening, study and improvisation, in the ways just described. To prove this, we just need to think, for a moment, about how many individual minds, neural circuits and thought-energies are, every day, situated on, studying and reacting to the dictums, desires and whims of *the boss*, or the President of an art academy, or of a teacher in a classroom.

Whatever other topics or ‹content› we might try and bring to the fore, the most concerned and thoughtful students, ‹around the watercooler› or at the coffee machine, will spend most of their time studying *their teachers*, interpreting *the institution*. They will mostly be researching the socio-technical institutional constructions ‹above them› who demand of them that they respond, who demand their improvisations. It is apparent then, that these are the actors in creative institutional cultures who are improvisatively poised, trained, and listening.

The pre-occupations we have with these institutions, that are various and precarious as actual occupations most of the time, could, as Lorde, Lewis, Moten and Harney suggest, precipitate responses that are thoughtfully improvisatory — dis-ordered and noisy — admittance of more energetic possibility and the careful re-imposition of nuance that staves off tyranny, and creates openings for change in institutional practices, environments and habits. We are hindered, perhaps, by our lack of practice at, or unwillingness to ‹improvise upward›, or at least horizontally. Perhaps what we need is to make better, more frequent improvisatory demands of one another, repeatedly and often: «Hey you, PLAY SOMETHING!»

If improvisation, as we have outlined, develops as a response to the call or demand of imposed structures — as responses to power and imposed temporalities — what can we develop as improvisational tactics, strategies, as concerted or expressive, personal responses to planning and logistics? How this demand is made, who it comes from, and what kind of emergent strategies could we help another to practice, such that we are more ready for those opportune, kairotic instants where expression and desire can erupt. In *that* moment. We all have our responsibilities, and most of the time an *ability to respond*; opportunities turn at least some part of our attentions and care toward asking the obvious yet under-asked question: How do these infrastructures of contemporary creative practices and cultural production work, how are they working on us, how do they cause us to work on each other? How might we all work otherwise? If these questions seem too obvious to waste time discussing, I would ask you, as Foster Wallace did, to think about fish and water, and to bracket for just a few more minutes your scepticism about the value of interrogating the totally obvious.

- 1 J. Derrida, when asked to extemporise on <love> in the 2002 interview film *Derrida*, 2002, directed by Kirby Dick / Amy Ziering Kofman, New York, NY: Zeitgeist Films / Jane Doe Films.
- 2 Cf. <https://muthesius-kunsthochschule.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/kunst-an-den-raendern-programm.pdf> (23 April 2020).
- 3 McLuhan 1964, p. 66.
- 4 Saotome 1989, p. 222.
- 5 Taussig 2001, p. 1.
- 6 I am grateful for the close readings, attentions, care and suggestions given by Bernhard Garnicnig and Annika Frye in formulating the accounts in this essay relating to our time in Kiel.
- 7 In this vein, following the workshop portion of our visit, collaborator Bernhard Garnicnig would go on to develop the ongoing @memeclaworldwide project with students and artists from Kiel. See <http://www.memeclaworldwi.de/> and <https://www.instagram.com/mcww.club/>.
- 8 Cardew 1971.
- 9 Lewis 2008.
- 10 Lewis 2018.
- 11 Graham 2017.
- 12 Oliphant 2020.
- 13 Coleman 2015, p. 6.
- 14 Csikszentmihalyi 2014.
- 15 Butler 2012, p. 81.
- 16 Deleuze 2004.
- 17 Deleuze 2004, p. 19.
- 18 Garnicnig 2019.
- 19 Latour 2011.
- 20 Coleman 2015, p. 6.
- 21 McLuhan 1969, p. 14.
- 22 Zielinski 2006, p. 33.
- 23 Wallace 2009, p. 5.
- 24 Wallace 2009, p. 26.
- 25 Kaprow 1993, p. 54.
- 26 Burroughs 1999, p. 162.
- 27 Harney / Moten 2013, p. 92.
- 28 Yuval Harari gives an account of corporate institutions as «figment[s] of our collective imagination» (Harari 2014) and Bernhard Garnicnig often uses the phrase «consensus hallucination» to describe this same idea.
- 29 See, for example: Hüffer 2018.
- 30 Eleeey 2007.
- 31 Graeber 2015, p. 34.
- 32 Cf. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/3274788-tyranny-is-the-deliberate-removal-of-nuance> (24 April 2020).
- 33 Lewis 2018, n.p.
- 34 Harney / Moten 2013, p. 94.
- 35 Harney / Moten 2013, p. 7.
- 36 hooks 2010, p. 38.

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#### List of Images

- 1 Participants taking part in the «Improvising Institutions» workshop, convened by Jamie Allen and Bernhard Garnicnig at the Muthesius Kunsthochschule, January 26, 2019. Photo by Bernhard Garnicnig, 2019.
- 2 An image posted on January 26, 2019 to the Muthesius Kunsthochschule student-run Instagram account @muthesiusmemes after the lecture from which this essay was derived. The group behind this account further developed an extended, extemporised collaboration with «Improvising Institutions» workshop co-host Bernhard Garnicnig on a project entitled «memeclaworldwide». Image citation from: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BtGOCuxAZ56/> (23 April 2020).

