

Improvisation in the Visual Arts

Seminar Notes – Anton Bruckner University, Linz

1. Introduction: Creation in Real Time

The inevitable comes along

The work emerged within the framework of the **ProImpro seminar** at the Institute for Jazz and Improvised Music of the Anton Bruckner Private University. The intention was to translate into the field of visual arts a fundamental principle of musical practice: **creation in real time**.

While the act of painting usually takes place outside the public gaze, it is conceived here as a **field of action** in which several elements converge:

- preparation
- experience
- intuition
- immediate decision-making

The work developed from an **open compositional structure**, without a preliminary sketch. The process unfolded “**on the fly**”, through a sequence of decisions taken during the act of execution.

Improvisation is therefore not understood as pure spontaneity, but rather as the **activation of accumulated knowledge in the very moment of practice**.

The creative process unfolds through continuous cycles of:

- construction
- correction
- reduction
- intensification

Each gesture responds to the previous one, turning the work into a **chain of decisions made in real time**.

2. Improvisation and Predictability

The English word **predictability** refers to the condition in which an outcome becomes too expected or obvious.

In improvisational contexts, the challenge is not simply to avoid repetition, but rather to **avoid falling into patterns that are too foreseeable.**

A key challenge in improvisation is therefore to prevent the work from becoming predictable.

In artistic practice this often means:

- breaking expectations
- avoiding the obvious
- creating space for the unexpected

Improvisation becomes most engaging when it **interrupts the anticipated logic and generates surprise.**

3. Neurological and Bodily Perspective

From a neurological and embodied perspective, improvisation raises an essential question:

How does abstract thought communicate with the body?

In other words, how is an idea translated into:

- gesture
- movement
- technique
- color choice
- spatial composition

When painting or drawing, the artist constantly makes decisions such as:

- where to place a form
- how to organize the space
- how foreground and background relate to one another

There is always a tension between:

- **the initial vision**
- **the expected result**
- **the final outcome**

The process therefore involves constant adjustments:

- correcting
- cleaning
- reducing
- expanding

while preserving the original energy of the gesture.

4. The Beginning: Improvisation Like Tango

A useful metaphor is **tango**.

In tango it is often said that **the first step is always wrong**, but it is immediately corrected.

Something similar happens in improvisation.

The first gesture opens a direction, which is then adjusted.

Improvising does not mean acting without thinking. Often it involves **applying strategies that have worked before**, adapting them to a new situation.

The composition therefore develops **in the moment itself**, created **on the fly**.

5. The Difference Between Music and Visual Arts

There is an important difference between music and visual arts.

Musicians improvise **in front of an audience**.

Visual artists, on the other hand, usually work **alone and outside the public eye**.

The creative process of painting, drawing, or sculpting typically takes place in the **studio**.

When painting occurs in real time before an audience, the situation shifts: the creative act becomes **performative**.

6. Infrastructure, Preparation, and Warm-Up

Improvisation does not emerge from nothing.

In order to improvise, an artist needs a **previous infrastructure**, including:

- technical training
- mental preparation
- physical preparation

In a sense, both **body and mind must warm up** before beginning.

This preparation allows the artist to enter a state where the action can continue for extended periods.

In my own practice, only about **20–30% of the time spent in the studio is devoted to the direct production of art.**

The rest of the time is dedicated to:

- preparation
- observation
- reflection
- organizing the working environment

Once the creative process begins, it can unfold in **long sessions** of:

- two hours
- three hours
- sometimes even ten hours continuously

In these moments, a state emerges that resembles:

- meditation
- deep concentration
- a temporary detachment from everyday life.

7. The Creative Ritual

Before beginning, there is often some form of **ritual**.

This ritual helps open a mental space in which the creative process seems to move beyond conscious control.

At that point:

- the subconscious takes the hand
- visions multiply
- new possibilities emerge

The process constantly involves:

- building
- destroying
- correcting
- reducing
- reorganizing

The artwork is not fixed from the beginning; **it is discovered through the process.**

8. Sketch Versus Immediate Creation

This raises an important question:

Is planning the same as improvisation?

Not necessarily.

A completely predetermined composition may limit the emergence of the unexpected.

However, even **interpreting a preconceived idea** can open space for improvisation.

The sculptor **Eduardo Chillida** often spoke about the importance of experience.

For him, artistic creation involved **recognizing and activating accumulated experience in the moment of action.**

Chillida often avoided making detailed sketches, arguing that otherwise **the work would be “born dead.”**

The artwork should emerge in the moment.

The artist must discover:

- how a form bends
- how far a material can be pushed

- when to stop
- when to intervene further.

9. Questions for the Audience

In a seminar context, it can be useful to ask participants questions such as:

- Who here paints or draws?
- Who thinks in colors or spatial images when playing music?
- What do you see when you improvise?
- How do you experience pauses or “non-places” within improvisation?
- How do you approach a new creative space?

Other relevant topics may include:

- **solitude in the creative process**
- **collaboration with other artists**
- conflict avoidance (*conflict shyness*)
- resolving critical situations spontaneously.

10. Improvisation in Art History

Improvisation in twentieth- and twenty-first-century visual art appears in different forms.

Three broad approaches can be identified.

1. Gestural Improvisation

In this approach the artwork emerges directly from the movement of the body.

Example:

Jackson Pollock – Action Painting

Pollock placed the canvas on the floor and dripped or splashed paint onto it.

The painting became a trace of bodily movement.

Other artists associated with this approach include:

- Willem de Kooning

- Franz Kline

This form of painting has often been compared to **jazz improvisation**.

2. Performative Improvisation

Here, **the act of creation itself becomes the artwork**.

Example:

Gutai Group (Japan, 1950s)

- Katsuo Shiraga painted with his feet while suspended above the canvas.
- Saburo Murakami broke through paper screens with his body.

Their aim was to **create something that had never existed before**.

3. Conceptual and Interdisciplinary Improvisation

The **Fluxus movement (1960s–1970s)** introduced another approach.

Artists such as:

- George Brecht
- Nam June Paik

worked with **event scores**—minimal instructions that could be interpreted in multiple ways.

Each realization became a new form of improvisation.

11. Improvisation and Materials

Improvisation may also arise from the behavior of materials themselves.

Example:

David Alfaro Siqueiros

His technique of “**accidental painting**” involved pouring layers of paint with different densities.

The resulting patterns emerged from **physical reactions and chance**.

12. Improvisation in Contemporary Art

Today improvisation appears in many formats:

- live painting
- performative drawing
- interactive installations
- collective drawing sessions
- generative art and AI-based systems

In these contexts improvisation is often not only individual but also **collective and technologically mediated**.

Conclusion

Improvisation in the visual arts does not imply the absence of thought.

Rather, it represents a **balance between preparation and openness**.

The artist works with:

- accumulated experience
- intuition
- bodily awareness
- the capacity for immediate decision-making

The artwork emerges through a process in which **each gesture transforms the possibilities of the next**.

Improvisation therefore means **inhabiting the creative process in real time**.