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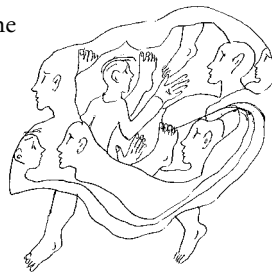
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Multi-mindedness: Manyness in improvisation?

von Franziska Schroeder (or maybe another?), Belfast

(This text was originally conceived as the basis for a casual conversation at the 2018 *exploratorium* symposium. Please note that this text will inform the material for an extended chapter on ‚manyness in improvisation‘ in Alessandro Bertinetto’s edited *Handbook of Philosophy of Musical Improvisation*, forthcoming.)



“In each of us there is a differingness and a manyness and a profusion of ourselves” Fernando Pessoa (or some other person)

At first reflection, the term ‘multi-mindedness’ conjured up notions of many – many people, a crowd even, several people, each with a unique (or maybe not so unique) mind. Also, the term has been gnawing on me as I have been feeling rather uncomfortable with it.

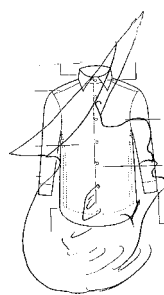
It might have to do with a reluctance to view the “mind” as a separate identity (we know that Descartes was quite happy to endorse the separation of mind and body, of course!). So, if we think of multiple minds, we would expect there to be multiple bodies attached, multiple instruments, multiple thoughts, manifold ideas, actions, and so forth. However, I do not want to think of improvising humans as such disparate or separate categories or layers, of minds attached to bodies or the other way around.

My “mind” then wandered (yes, I am making this distinction in writing myself) to the writings of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, born Fernando António Nogueira Pessoa (June 13, 1888, in Lisbon, Portugal). The reason for this is that Pessoa employed or created (and indeed in some cases became) multiple personae. Throughout his writing life he produced more than seventy such personae. They were not so much pseudonyms, meaning not simply fictitious names to hide Pessoa’s identity; but many poets and writers have argued that we should consider these more akin to *heteronyms* – writers that came from within Pessoa but, that were not him, not simply another name for the same person, but very much a different, a differing person, a *manyness* that he seemed to need in his life. These were personae

that Pessoa created, which appeared to have acted as a way of escaping a life that Pessoa himself was criticising, and a life he often said he was not content living.

Indeed, the multiple personae were kinds of extensions and iterations of himself. Pessoa is known to have claimed that he was the least “real” of them, less substantial, less personal, and less interesting, but easily influenced by these personae. He wrote: “How idyllic life would be... if it were lived by another person.” He insisted that these personae were not him, not just another part of his own personality, but separate from him. “I’m the empty stage where various actors act out various plays,” he said.

I imagine Pessoa as a stage on which others act their lives out! I think of this as an exciting proposal, as an improviser, thinking not so much of my “self”, of my identity that is contributing to an externally occurring musical encounter, but seeing myself more as an offering, a stage onto which others can step, on which others might flourish, on which they might encounter things they would not encounter otherwise; being that person that, as Pessoa said, “breaks her soul into pieces”, enabling others to pick up pieces, to assemble them in ways they see fit. Being that stage, that offering to others to thrive on!

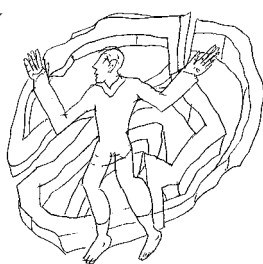


It might be worth considering such an approach which, I believe, Pessoa’s ‘stage metaphor’ suggests.

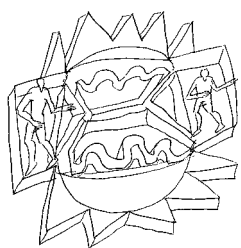
It might be an approach where we resist an emphasis on the intersubjective; resisting the often-glorified notions occurring in improvisation practices of “dialogics”, where improvisation is seen as a bottom-up, egalitarian, non-competing, open, dynamic, and processual interaction between humans. And may I add that this reading of Bakhtin’s notion of dialogics does not fully represent

Bakhtin’s thinking; as his “dialogics” stemmed from thinking of languages as dynamic, relational, and an ongoing re-description of the world around us, and it was not necessarily limited to human to human encounters, as Bakhtin also spoke about individual words and works (well, from a different point of view one might argue that all words and works are human-made, created by humans and are therefore also wrapped up in a human to human exchange).

This means that Bakhtin was not narrowly focusing on human encounters. This focus was only later introduced by social psychologists who applied Bakhtin's idea to the study of human social experience as a way of thinking of a more dynamic alternative to Cartesian monologicality. Sociologist Richard Sennett for example used the idea of “dialogics” to better understand human communication in which dialogic processes involve a way of listening that pays attention to the implicit intentions behind a speaker's actual words. “Dialogics” in that way was used to open up communication, or possibilities of communication, rather than leading to some kind of closure (as in dialectics).



Parallel to Pessoa's stage metaphor – I see it as a way of moving away from a solipsistic interpretation of being towards an *offering*, – in Gary Peters *The Philosophy of Improvisation*¹ proposes a relationship not between improviser and improviser (between multiple minds), but he thinks about the relationship between improviser and improvisation. Being the stage (the improvisation) itself



as Pessoa had thought of himself for others to step onto. This is a bold move away from idealising improvisation as an egalitarian, bottom-up encounter between humans, and a definite and intended turn from my thinking last year on egoism in improvisation (please refer to my article in *improfil* 2017, p.24-25), where I had urged us improvisers to “take care of ourselves first of all” as a prerequisite for being empathetic. (“*Taking care of oneself*” is also examined by Chris Johnston in his book *The Improvisation Game*, 2006².)

But if we do think this through to an extreme, then art is seen not as expressing the self, but as meaningfully reconfiguring it. Pessoa was a master of reconfiguring the self or, even more so, he was a master of obscuring the self, creating different, many other selves, a profusion of selves (nobody really knew who Pessoa was, including himself).

Art then has to be read more as a situation, a predicament, a (Heideggerian) ‘clearing’, ‘within which the self approaches itself from out of the darkness of misrecognition into the ‘lighted space’ of recognition, as Heidegger and Hegel would understand art.

Improvisation as a stage (not solely as a human to human endeavour), as a way the self approaching itself (or multiple selves), improvisation as multiple selves not necessarily expressing ‘themselves’, but meaningfully reconfiguring themselves – and

through such reconfiguration also possibly moving closer to a “lighted space of recognition”?

I am a big admirer of David Borgo's³ work, and he has always spoken about the power of bottom-up design, of self-organization, something that improvising music makes us aware of. However, his arguments focus on the inter-subjective relations between participants, of improvisation as operating in a network fashion that engages “*all of the participants while distributing the responsibility and empowerment among them*” (Borgo 2005, p. 193).

But if we want to resist a focus on human-to-human (Marcel Cobussen⁴), we might need to look at Pessoa and his profusion of selves.

Pessoa had said: “*I've no idea of myself, not even one that consists of a nonidea of myself. I am a nomadic wanderer through my consciousness.*” He would often agree with some of the theories of his heteronyms but disagree with others, though it is said that they coexisted peacefully, even if some of them criticised Pessoa's work and one of them, Alvaro de Campos, even claiming that Pessoa did not exist! Campos was born in Tavira in 1890 – at the specific time of 1:30 pm; he was a bisexual, unemployed naval engineer who'd studied in Glasgow and was living in Lisbon and it is has been said that he may have been closest to Pessoa's own personality.

Pessoa's way of almost turning himself not into another person, but into aspects of the other, of becoming a word, a paragraph, or a punctuation mark, excites me as an improviser. It allows me to offer myself as a “stage”, for others to step onto and to reflect, but also to question the self (my self, many selves), digging deep into a possible meaning of a “nonidea of self” (Pessoa's term). Looking back at yourself, multiplying yourself, feeling away from yourself, feeling other.

Pessoa speaks about this as almost alienating from “self”:

“*Unceasingly I feel that I was an other, that I felt other, that I thought other,*” Pessoa writes: “*I am a spectator of myself...I created myself, crevasse and echo, by thinking. I multiplied myself, by introspection...I am other even in my way of being.*” “*I am, in large measure, the self same prose I write*”, he confesses. “*I unroll myself in periods and paragraphs, I make myself punctuation marks...I've made myself into the character of a book, a life one reads.*”



³ Borgo, David: *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2005

⁴ Cobussen, Marcel: *The Field of Musical Improvisation*, Leiden University Press, 2017: p. 13-14: Cobussen gives credit to other actants, not only humans. He says that improvisation is “*a complex event in which many actants, many actors, factors, and vectors, both human and non-human, converge and interact*”.

¹ Peters, Gary: *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, The University of Chicago Press, 2009

² Johnston, Chris: *The Improvisation Game. Discovering the Secrets of Spontaneous Performance*, Nick Hern Books, 2006

Being an improviser, creating other improvisers, then critiquing and denying yourself through the others you created; becoming a sound, a phrase (which is closer to Borgo's concept of "What the music wants"), not asking what we as human-to human improvisers aim to play or achieve, but opening up to becoming more like the "stage", the walls that surround us that listen to us play, and asking the question: what does the 'other' (not limited to a human being!) want. Being the self or yourself, playing your "self", questioning that same idea, unrolling yourself into textures, sounds, making yourself a phrase, an articulation, becoming music, becoming improvisation, an improvisation for others to use, to develop but also to question, existing while being non-existent, being a body and nobody, or as Pessoa reflects: "*I am the suburb of a non-existent town, the prolix commentary on a book never written. I am nobody, nobody. I am a character in a novel which remains to be written, and I float, aerial, scattered without ever having been, among the dreams of a creature who did not know how to finish me off.*" (Pessoa, from the posthumously published masterpiece, *The Book of Disquiet*, Allen Lane, New ed. 2001)

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