

## Improvisation, Posthumanism, and Agency in Art (Gerhard Richter Painting)

Edgar Landgraf

At the end of the introduction to the two-volume *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* (2016), George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut suggest that the next frontier of critical improvisation studies will be its engagement with the posthumanities. They note a number of promising parallels between critical improvisation studies and the posthumanities: both research endeavors cover a wide variety of topic areas, include a diversity of approaches, cherish interdisciplinarity, and have “already begun (and will continue) to bridge the two cultures of science and the humanities” (20). These affinities, Lewis and Piekut contend, will allow critical improvisation studies to make “significant contributions” to the posthumanities. They point specifically toward concepts “like adaptation, self-organization, uncertainty, translation, and emergence,” which figure prominently in the posthumanities, and which “could be profitably viewed through an improvisational squint” (20). This article will take up Lewis and Piekut and explore in more detail affinities between critical improvisation studies and a school of thought within the posthumanities called *critical* (or radical) posthumanism.

Critical posthumanism, which is most closely associated with the work of Stefan Herbrechter and Cary Wolfe, is a theory-oriented, self-reflective strand of posthumanism that conceptually and in its ethos builds on post-structuralist and cybernetic theories. It neither partakes in speculations about how science and technology might alter the human biology, nor does it dream about a dystopian or utopian future dominated by machines, cyborgs, drones, or the like. Instead, critical posthumanism focuses on conceptual issues. It wants to develop

---

**Edgar Landgraf** is Professor of German at Bowling Green State University (Ohio). He received his Ph.D. from The Johns Hopkins University in 1998. His research interests include German literature, aesthetics, and philosophy from the Enlightenment to today as well as critical improvisation studies, performance studies, systems theory and theories of posthumanism. Recent publications include articles on improvisation, Goethe, Kant, Kleist, Nietzsche, DeLillo and Niklas Luhmann. His book *Improvisation as Art: Conceptual Challenges, Historical Perspectives* was published in 2011 with Continuum (reissued as paperback by Bloomsbury in 2014). He is coeditor of the anthology *Posthumanism in the Age of Humanism: Mind, Matter, and the Life Sciences After Kant* (Bloomsbury) and is working on a monograph on *Nietzsche's Posthumanism*.

modes of thinking that break with the patterns, dichotomies, and dead-ends created by the anthropocentrism of the humanist tradition. This puts it in dialogue with critical improvisation studies which has long noted how improvisation challenges traditional conceptions of human agency. I will draw on the German painter Gerhard Richter's approach to painting and his reflection on art to examine how agency in improvisation and art relates to what Pramod Nayar describes as posthumanism's predominant concern: the "*radical decentering of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human*" (Nayar 2).

### Which Posthumanism?

Before turning to the question of agency, however, I want to offer a bird's-eye view of the vast and uneven terrain posthumanism covers. Much like improvisation studies, posthumanism remains a hodgepodge of (often incompatible) theories, concerns, topics, and ideas with equally divergent social, cultural, scientific, ethical, political, and artistic interests. This diversity is a consequence of each field revolving around a broad and multifaceted topic: improvisation can be found in all the arts, is part of everyday life, can invade any structured activity or discipline, and extends even into non-human activities (computer programs, animal behavior, collectives). Posthumanism expands over an equally vast terrain, manifesting itself on multiple planes. It is most visible in its cultural representations, as a topic of literature, movies, computer games, the news, and the entertainment industry; it exists as an acknowledged social phenomenon, a consequence of the pervasiveness of bio-, media-, and digital technologies in contemporary society; and it is the subject of extensive academic and semi-academic publication efforts. What further complicates the terrain is that, unlike the theory-oriented (or theory-averse) schools of thought that dominated academia over the last fifty years, posthumanism has neither developed nor agreed to adopt a particular theoretical framework for itself. This has led to the proliferation of variants of posthumanism—anti-humanism, critical posthumanism, dystopic posthumanism, mediated posthumanism, methodological posthumanism, pan-humanism, radical posthumanism, transhumanism or humanity+, not to mention antecedents in poststructuralist theory, early postmodernism, cybernetics, systems theory, cyborg studies, or outliers such as Object Oriented Ontology. As a consequence, posthumanism today is about as multifaceted as "humanism," the target of its critique.<sup>1</sup>

Posthumanism's lack of theoretical commitment has led to tensions within the field that expose a deep onto-epistemological rift among its various strands.

---

<sup>1</sup> Herbrechter locates the "rhetorical essence" of the prefix 'post' in the fact that "it ambiguates. It plays with supersedence, crisis, deconstruction, regression and progression at once. Its main virtue, if one chooses to take it seriously, is to defamiliarize, detach and surprise" ("Shakespeare" 6).

Around this divide, Tamar Sharon recently developed a “Cartography of the Posthuman” (so the title of the second chapter of her *Human Nature in an Age of Biotechnology: The Case for Mediated Posthumanism*). Sharon distinguishes between a dystopic posthumanism and a liberal posthumanism on the one side, and between a radical and a methodological posthumanism on the other side (and adds as a fifth option, her own “mediated posthumanism”<sup>2</sup>). She profiles the rift between both sides in terms of their different attitudes toward the notion of human nature. While dystopic and liberal posthumanism defend notions of human nature—albeit different ones: the former sees technological and biotechnological advances as a threat, the latter posits the same advances have the potential to heal, complete, and expand human capabilities—the other side shares their opposition to such essentializations of human nature. Radical posthumanism, which aligns by and large with Herbrechter’s critical posthumanism,<sup>3</sup> neither defends nor wants to extend human nature, but targets instead the constraints and hierarchies that come with the former’s (and the humanist’s) subjection to an essentialized notion of human nature (see Herbrechter, *Posthumanism*).

Likewise, methodological posthumanism<sup>4</sup> does not rely on an essentialization of human nature, but lacks the political impetus of radical posthumanism. Methodological posthumanism instead aims “to conceptualize analytical frameworks that can better account for the networks and zones of intersection between the human and the non-human” (Sharon 6). “For methodological posthumanists,” Sharon notes, with reference to Bruno Latour, “the prevalence of human/non-human couplings and networks indicates that humans do not necessarily have a monopoly on agency, intentionality or morality, which can be extended to artifacts, as something that is ‘delegated’ to them, or inherently theirs” (Sharon 9). The theoretical landscape is of course more complex than any summary of it. There are plenty of posthumanists who straddle the line or cross back and forth between different strands and sides of the posthumanist divide.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the discussion of this rift has remained a salient feature of writings on posthumanism.

---

<sup>2</sup> Sharon’s mediated posthumanism subscribes to the non-essentializing tendencies of radical and methodological posthumanism, but takes a more pragmatic stance, inquiring about the transformative effects modern bio-technologies have on subjectivity.

<sup>3</sup> Sharon adds Neil Badmington, Anne Balsamo, Rosi Braidotti, Elaine L. Graham, Chris Hables Gray, Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Allucquère Rosanne Stone, and Joanna Zylińska to the list of radical posthumanists.

<sup>4</sup> Sharon includes STS scholarship from Michel Callon and John Law, Bruno Latour, and Andrew Pickering as well as the newer generation of philosophers of technology Don Ihde and Peter-Paul Verbeek in this group.

<sup>5</sup> Rosi Braidotti’s *The Posthuman* (2013), which Lewis and Piekut reference when they characterize the posthumanities as a bridging of the “two cultures of science and the humanities,” offers an example where the rift I am noting here does not separate differ-

If we turn with such a bird's-eye view to critical improvisation studies, we can recognize a similar onto-epistemological rift separating different approaches to the study of improvisation. The rift is less pronounced because of the predominance of one of its sides, namely what in reference to Tamar Sharon we might call "liberal improvisation studies." David Borgo describes this side as scholarship that theorizes "an emancipatory quality to improvisation, to view it as a liberating force in people's lives" (Borgo, "Openness" 113). He adds approaches that "theorize an anticipatory quality to improvisation, to posit improvisation as a form of social practice and project this onto political problems" (ibid.). The dominance of liberal improvisation studies in North America is grounded in improvisation studies' traditional focus on practice, the historical strength of ethnomusicology (partially due to improvisation's long-standing association with jazz), as well as the socio-political mission that has been at the heart of such influential associations within the field as the AACM and the Guelph-based "Improvisation, Community and Social Practice" group with its journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, cultural studies perspectives and discourses, which are often wedded to notions of subjectivity and community, as well as cultural and individual exceptionality, continue to dominate improvisation studies. If we look at the 2015 anthology *The Improvisation Studies Reader. Spontaneous Acts*, edited by Rebecca Caines and Ajay Heble, for example, the majority of the contributions are dedicated to cultural, social, and liberal causes. The above-mentioned *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* ventures further away from this tradition when it notes that, in recent years, improvisation studies increasingly turned away from seeing artistic improvisation as "symbolizing social and political formations." Instead, it finds that "social and political formations themselves improvise, and that improvisation not only enacts such formations directly but also is fundamentally constitutive of them" (13). At the same time, many of the *Handbook's* contributions re-

---

ent strands of posthumanism, but runs right through the work of one of its more visible theoreticians. Braidotti defines posthumanism as the historical moment that marks the end of the opposition between humanism and anti-humanism and traces a different discursive framework; yet the discursive framework she uses in crucial places time and again returns to an anthropocentric viewpoint that reaffirms a normative concept of subjectivity. This is apparent already in her frequent use of first person pronouns but also in her reliance on the need of "at least *some* subject position" (102) with the ability to "autopoietically self-style" (136) in ways that accord with "what we humans truly yearn for" (ibid.). Even if the object of this yearning is subsequently qualified as a desire "to disappear by merging into this generative flow of becoming, the precondition for which is the loss, disappearance and disruption of the atomized, individual self" (ibid.), the argument returns us to a humanist view that asserts an inherent human nature and reaffirms a normative notion of subjectivity.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.criticalimprov.com>

main dedicated to traditional, cultural, ethnological, and political concerns and approaches.

The liberal bent of improvisation studies has created rather murky waters when it comes to its reception of posthumanist thought. At least, it often remains unclear on what side of the onto-epistemological divide improvisation studies wants to greet posthumanism. When Lewis and Piekut in the introduction to the *Oxford Handbook on Improvisation* relate improvisation studies to the posthumanities based on the observation that both have begun to bridge “the two cultures of science and the humanities” (20), no indication is given if science is to be used as a tool to destabilize the anthropocentrism of the humanist tradition (the role the cognitive and life sciences play in neocybernetic discourses) or if the turn to science ought to help refine and secure the centrality of the human mind (think, for example, of Jeff Pressing’s work on the neurophysiological preconditions and limits of improvisational doings). Similarly, discussions of the role of technology or the notion of embodiment in improvisation often straddle the two sides of the posthumanist divide. The recent anthology *Negotiated Moments. Improvisation, Sound, And Subjectivity*, edited by Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman, contains a separate section dedicated to issues of “Technology and Embodiment.” Most contributions in this section still show a liberal bent and see technology as external to the human body, as possibly compromising, extending, or replacing the human body.<sup>7</sup> David Borgo’s article in the same section explicitly distances itself from the perceived anti-humanism of posthumanism. Borgo does not want to vilify the human as the posthuman’s Other and he finds in the openness of improvisation an opportunity to celebrate “our fundamental and shared humanity” (Borgo, “Openness” 127). Yet, despite these concerns, Borgo draws on radical as well as methodological strands of posthumanist thought to explore how improvisation profoundly challenges humanist notions of agency and subjectivity.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Jason Robinson contemplates “extensions of the body through telematic prosthesis” (108) and asks if the future might bring “hyperembodiment” where “real (embodied) and virtual (disembodied) bodies” (107) come together. Andrew Dewar, looking at “re-performance” technology, wonders if the “days by which the assumption of the primacy of the human body as indispensable origin and wellspring of musical creativity may very well be numbered—in the binary code of zeros and ones” (143).

<sup>8</sup> In “The Ghost in the Machine,” Borgo draws primarily on Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT) and extended mind theories to find agency at the “nexus of personal, interpersonal, and material factors” (105); while in “Openness from Closure,” Borgo favors Luhmannian system theory as a paradigm to dissolve the unity and authority of the humanist subject / agent.

### Rethinking Action

Studies of improvisation of all stripes note consistently how improvisers lose or forfeit control, authority, and autonomy in ways that are in line with what Nayar describes as posthumanism's "*radical decentering of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human*" (2). This decentering is most apparent in group improvisation, in improvisation that relies on audience responses, and other practices that expose themselves to unplanned, uncontrolled input generated by an external technological, digital, or other source. But even without external irritations, a loss of control, the surrendering of agency is a necessary condition for the possibility of improvisation. The Western expectation for improvisation and for the creation of art to be inventive, original, and unique requires the inclusion of elements that are unplanned, unrehearsed, non-repetitive and that hence must elude the immediate control of the improviser. In this sense, the decentering of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human is part of the very structure of improvisation.

In the opening sentence of the aforementioned article, Borgo describes the decentering of the agent in improvisation in terms of a split between thought and action: "A particular joy of making improvised music is not knowing precisely the relationship between one's thoughts and one's action" ("Openness" 113). Improvisation makes the "agent" aware of his/her loss of authorial control, of his/her actions being more than the execution of a particular intention. I often use the somewhat awkward term "doings" to avoid or at least weaken the insinuation of agency that the term "action" inadvertently carries. Let's linger on the word "action" for a moment. We can understand the surprise (and element of joy) of improvisation better if we look at "action" not as a neutral, descriptive term, but as a heuristic device, an interpretive act, which invokes particular expectations and associations that determine *how* we observe certain happenings. Specifically, the term "action" fulfills two functions: it invokes an agent behind the action, some kind of volition, intention, wanting *why* the action is taken; and it insinuates that the intentions of the agent give meaning, direction, and coherence to the action. Without these two elements, the action would be a mere happening, a movement, an accident, or random event. A rock falling off a mountain in itself does not constitute an action; but if we observe or assume that someone threw the rock at a target down below, then we are entering the realm of litigable action. While the attribution of agency that turns a happening into an action need not be restricted to a person—groups, abstract entities, gods, chimeras will do just as well—the stipulation of an agent, a will and goal behind the deed

seems one of the quickest and most familiar ways for us to attribute meaning and relevance to a happening.<sup>9</sup>

Borgo's observation about the special joy of improvisation suggests that improvisation intervenes in the attribution process that drives action-oriented modes of thinking. Perhaps more than other activities, improvisation makes the "agent" aware of a loss of authorial control, of one's actions being more than the execution of a particular intention. To look at "action" not as merely representing some independent reality, but instead to view it as a concept that is intricately involved in the construction of what it observes, is not to question its social, legal or moral relevance. Today, it is all but impossible to imagine a society that would abstain from attributing agency to doings, happenings, and events. Yet, as Borgo's statement about the joys of improvisation shows, thinking of doings in terms of "actions" can also be a rather reductive way of looking at—or more precisely, of constructing—happenings, including what is happening in improvisation. To underline the point, let's take as an example a natural event such as hurricane Sandy, which hit New York City in 2012. At the time, a number of religious political hacks turned the event into an "action" by invoking as its agent god's wrath. Others saw climate change as the primary culprit. Yet, for climatologists, the scientific case is more complex. There is no immediate "agent" that would explain the particular event. Climate change might be to blame, but the science does not allow us to establish a direct link between such a complex, global, slowly developing, only statistically measurable, and hard to predict phenomenon and the particular event. I am not trying to deny climate change or defend religious zealots, but want to use the example to show how science requires a more sophisticated, multilayered, self-critical explanation that acknowledges its own limits (a motor for further research). Science is therefore better able to account for the complexity of the issue than the attribution of agency is able to do. From the climatological point of view, attributions of agency appear to be artificial, reductive, and for the most part not very useful (which is not to say that they cannot serve a political function). I want to suggest that we approach posthumanism similarly: it allows us to reject or at least circumvent the reductive scheme which looks for the agent or subject behind the deed. Critical and methodological posthumanism invite us to develop more sophisticated explanatory models that can take into account a multiplicity of limiting and enabling factors, both internal and environmental. They allow us to appreciate dynamics inherent to any complex, self-organizing process.

---

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche in a memorable passage from *On the Genealogy of Morals* points out that the invention of a doer behind the deed is so deeply imbedded into language (a seduction of language) that we need to insert a pronoun for the doer even where there is no referent – as in the German expression "*es blitzt*," literally translated "it lightens" (see book 1, section 13).

### Agency in Art (*Gerhard Richter Painting*)

With this in mind, I want to turn to the question of agency in art. In *Improvisation as Art* I argued that our modern Western understanding of improvisation is indebted to aesthetic categories that take hold in the late eighteenth century and continue to inform our basic understanding of art. In particular, the aesthetics of autonomy's expectations for art to be inventive (original, new, unique) require that art, like improvisation, cannot be fully planned or follow externally prescribed rules. The inventive quality of the artwork or performance, as much as its coherence, hence must emerge in the process of its creation (or performance). This leads to a decentering of the artist, infringing on cherished Enlightenment ideals of agency, autonomy, and of conscious and rational control of one's doings. To rescue agency, eighteenth-century aesthetic discourses develop paradoxical notions of an active unconscious, of unintentional intentions, and other dark drives that guided the creation of art "behind" or beyond the artist's control and understanding. Such opaque drives are also at the heart of the period's conceptions of genius—which are attempts to recuperate the loss of authorial control through the assumption of special talents. Along these lines, Immanuel Kant, for example, defines genius as an "innate mental predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art" (174 [§46]). Kant's definition reveals how the concept of genius gives a modern spin to the ancient religious *topos* of artistic enthusiasm or inspiration.

In my book, I drew on the works of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann in an attempt to break with the anthropocentrism of this tradition and describe the creation of art as self-organizing or "self-programming." With "self-programming," Luhmann portrays a process where the artist, after contingent beginnings, must attune him- or herself to the emerging artwork or the performance, react to the choices that present themselves during and based on the production process until the work or performance achieves a level of saturation or cohesion that invites an end.<sup>10</sup> The decentering of the artist takes place at the level of thought and control: thought goes into what the artist is doing, but there is also the profound sense of *im-provisio*, of not knowing and of not being able to control where the process will lead. The loss of control is a consequence of artist and emerging artwork being entangled in a co-constitutive relationship where the artist is as much an agent as s/he is a recipient for the input or feedback that the emerging artwork or performance offers in the process of its creation.

---

<sup>10</sup> "In this sense, creating a work of art—according to one's capabilities and one's imagination—generates the freedom to make decisions on the basis of which one can continue one's work. The freedoms and necessities one encounters are entirely the products of art itself; they are consequences of decisions made with the work. The 'necessity' of certain consequences one experiences in one's work or in the encounter with an artwork is not imposed by law but results from the fact that one began, and how" (Luhmann 203-4).



To hone in more closely on the position and participation of the artist / agent from this (methodological) posthumanist viewpoint, I want to turn to Corinna Belz's 2011 documentary *Gerhard Richter Painting*, which follows the famous artist over an extended period of time. The documentary records his atelier work as well as the preparation of exhibits and it contains a number of Richter's reflections on his approach to painting. While on the surface, Richter's work process might not qualify as improvisational, the documentary captures how the production of art (in the modern Western world) is bound up with improvisation even if practiced in a studio and in the absence of a physically present audience.<sup>11</sup> Early on, the documentary shows Richter's surprise about one of his paintings, which ended up looking quite dark and gloomy despite the initial parameters (bright colors) he had set. As the interviewer notes how much the painting changed, Richter responds: "That's the thing. They do what they want. I planned something quite different, pretty colorful" (5'43"—translations here and subsequently are mine). As in improvisation, the burdon of a work's composition, Richter confirms, lies not on the beginning, but on the step-by-step execution, and on finding an end. Richter suggests that at the beginning, he can "theoretically, practically smear anything he wants" on the canvas. "This first creates a state to which I have to react, which I have to change or destroy. Then it develops on its own, not on its own, but without plan, without reason" (54'20"). Richter rejects concepts of automation or ideas of subconscious or chance composition. The creative process is experienced as following codes that emerge during the work and that create a sense of necessity (or failure) for subsequent choices. "With every step, it becomes more difficult, and I become less and less free, until I reach the point, where there is nothing else to do, where, at my level, nothing is false anymore, then I will stop, then it is good" (55'22").<sup>12</sup>

The film documents what Richter describes, namely the simultaneity of conception and doing that takes the form of an iterative process, a back-and-forth of applying and covering color, using or erasing smears, contemplation and action, where the artist is caught up in a process that is improvisational not only in the sense that its outcome is not planned or otherwise foreseen, but also in terms of the interactions that take place between artist-doer and the emerging painting. The artist does not find himself in the position of a detached, autonomous observer who is in control of his actions. Instead, he must rely on his receptive sensibilities, and perceive the subtle differences, choices, and restrictions

---

<sup>11</sup> Incidentally, the documentary itself, Corinna Belz reveals in an interview with *Filmmaker*, was improvised, both in the sense that there was no written script, no proposal, no defined plan, and with regard to the questions she would ask Richter, which she had to learn to develop spontaneously to get Richter to open up.

<sup>12</sup> For Luhmann, the realization of the artwork ends and the artwork is a "success and novelty" when the "program saturates, as it were, the individual work, tolerating no further productions of the same kind" (202).

that the work comes to offer at various stages of its formation and react to them. Agency here is determined as much by the sensibilities, experience, choices, and surrounding plans (or lack thereof) of the person as by the material, spatial, and temporal constraints s/he faces as it is defined by the work of art's own volition, how it "comes together." This is not to downplay the significance of the artist, his experience, knowledge, skills, etc., but to note the reciprocity of a process that is distorted if centered around the notion of a detached, autonomous, and controlling human agent.

The multiple ways in which this process challenges an anthropocentric perspective is also apparent when Richter decides that a painting is "good" as he reaches "the point, where there is nothing else to do, where, at my level [nach meinem Level], nothing is false anymore" (55'22"). Not only does the painting impose a sense of completion on him, with the disclaimer "at my level" Richter also suggests that "beauty" is not so much restricted to the eye of the beholder, but requires a shared level of expertise. Richter continues and explains that producer and observer are "the same in this regard, they must be able to see when something is good" (ibid.). This "leveling" of artist and viewer intimates that the decentering of the human extends not only to the separation of thought and action, but permeates thought and perception itself. The ability to "see when something is good" suggests a social component entering judgment. In Richter's case, we can assume his judgment reflects years of experience in making and viewing art. In this sense, we might liken experience to the effect language or communication has on thought: just as thought is bound to draw on a medium that is not a person's own, thoughts (and possibly even perception which differentiate by drawing on linguistic distinctions) are never fully owned, authored, authorized, or controlled by the mind that produces them.<sup>13</sup>

Richter reflects on such intrusions of the outside on the inside further when he insists that painting is a "secretive business" (49'). He does not feel comfortable having a camera observe him in his atelier while painting. He even suggests that "painting while being observed is the worst thing possible" (46') as the camera makes him self-conscious to the point of changing how he walks. Yet, the comments—made out of frustration over a "mistake" Richter thought would force him to discard the painting he was working on—are followed by the admission that while painting, he reflects on how the public will react to his works, if their quality will be recognized, mistakes ignored, etc. In other words, although painting might be a secretive business, the public is nevertheless present

---

<sup>13</sup> Derrida shares here with Luhmann an understanding of language and communication respectively as "technologies" that are intricately involved in constituting our humanness while also compromising the idea that this humanness (or what we experience at a given time, in a given culture as our shared humaneness) is naturally given. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida uses this argument specifically to challenge the essentialization of human nature and the subjection of "the animal" it authorizes.

as an internalized observer and arbitrator whose response remains unpredictable. This is to admit that the work in a private studio does not fully escape the structure of the performative. Just as public performers learn how to act more or less naturally on stage or before the camera, the painter who works in the private space of his or her studio cannot completely shut out the sense of being observed.

We should, of course, not ignore that there are important differences between performed and “hidden” modes of composition. Unlike an improvising actor, musician, or performance artist on stage, Richter has the luxury of being able to give his paintings time. In fact, Richter likes to look at his works often for weeks before he makes a final decision about their fate. As one of his assistants explains in the documentary, “they have to stand the test of time, or otherwise they will be painted over” (58’). But this strategy exposes another interesting dimension to his work that challenges the sovereignty, coherence and autonomy of the artist. It points toward the constitutive role the observer plays in defining the “object;” and it recognizes how the observer changes in relation to the painting *qua* his/her exposure to it. Neither side is fixed, but is who or what it is only temporarily and in relation to the other. Each side, painter and painting, changes over time as the environment and context in which they operate change. These changes might be material, concern the light, contrast, atmosphere of the room, or they might be internal, the result of a painting no longer being new to the observer, it being viewed in comparison to different works, or more simply, due to changes in the observer’s mood. The engagement with the image over time mirrors what is more apparent in group improvisation, where it is forced by the existing time constraints, namely a constant re-adjusting of one’s own position and doings vis-à-vis the unexpected input one receives from the other participants or surrounding stimuli.

By conceiving of improvisation and artistic agency as a co-constitutive process, we can escape the anthropocentrism of traditional or psychological notions of agency. Nevertheless, we are confronted with the question of the precise role the improviser or artist, his or her talents, expertise, and special skills play and how they enter and help determine this process. What happens to agency when we insist on a separation between thought and action? How do our doings play into self-organizing processes? In particular, how do improvisers engage conceptual, material, technological, physiological, social or other constraints without or beyond the “guidance” of conscious thought? Rather than draw (again) on the malleable concept of embodiment, which despite its constructivistic heritage is often used as a foundational concept, returning us to bio-physiologically

grounded notions of human nature,<sup>14</sup> I want to address these questions by resuscitating the old and academically no longer fashionable term “instinct.” We can use the academic neglect as an opportunity to highlight aspects of the term that align it with our posthumanist understanding of improvisation. That means first of all to understand instinct not in opposition to conscious thought, but acknowledge, in a Nietzschean sense, that thought, too, is guided by instinct.

Nietzsche’s philosophical anthropology undermines the humanist hierarchy, which puts humans above animals on the account of reason having freed man from its animalistic, i.e. instinctual underpinnings. Secondly, we should highlight how instinct breaks with the anthropocentrism of the humanist tradition by attributing individual behavior to collective traits. Furthermore, for the concept to help us develop a more complex image of the artist’s role in the creative process, we need to see instinct as more than an automatic reflex mechanism. We can draw on the natural sciences to support this point. As Brian Massumi argues in his 2015 article “The Supernormal Animal,” if instinctual behavior was a mere reflex mechanism, it would be highly maladaptive, unable to respond to changes in the environment. Massumi instead suggests that we understand instinct as jump-starting an active process, which he then likens to the “performance of an ‘improvisation’” (7). As “induced improvisation,” Massumi argues, instinct is “formally self-causing.” (ibid.). At stake in Massumi’s re-description of instinct is the precise relationship between external stimuli and the instinctual response. Rather than assume a reflex, and hence an immediate, causal link, Massumi develops an openness-from-closure principle that respects the specificity of the reacting entity while also allowing for variation, surplus responses, and creative adaptations: “The accident-rich environment preys upon the instinctive animal. In answer, animal instinct plays upon the environment—in much the sense a musician plays improvisational variations on a theme” (Massumi 9). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of desire, Massumi continues: “To do justice to the activity of instinct, it is necessary to respect an autonomy of improvised effect with respect to external causation. Instinctive is spontaneously *effective*, in its affective propulsion. It answers external constraint with creative self-variation, pushing beyond the bounds of common measure” (9).

I want to extend Massumi’s model of instinct to the improvisational doings of the artist, but draw on systems theory rather than on Deleuze’s and Guattari’s concept of desire. Systems theory in the Luhmannian vein suggests that the closure and internally derived complexity of the system determines its openness, the scope with which a system will recognize and be able to react to its environment through self-variation (think as an example of the complex self-variations

---

<sup>14</sup> For ways to unpack the term “embodiment” along systems theoretical lines that can account for physiological stabilities without having to essentialize such stabilities, see my article “Form and Event” as well as the conclusion to *Improvisation as Art*.

that take place in the visual cortex of the brain, offering highly differentiated data that can be synthesized into a mental image that allows complex coordination with one's physical environment). Borgo uses the openness-from-closure principle in this sense, to describe how human interactions with technology—his example is KaiBorg—can form systems where the “organism becomes one part of elaborate feedback mechanisms and the cybernetic, in turn, incorporates the sophistication of the organic into its system” (*Openness* 118). I want to broaden this model and apply it to our understanding of the creative process itself (with or without the involvement of machines). This means to understand the interaction between artist and emerging artwork *together* as a closed system that reacts through creative self-variation to the material (mixing of colors, use of squeegees, variation of canvases, the artist's skills, and so on), mental (the artist's perception, experience, sensibilities), and social (changing expectations for art) environments.

Conceived as a system, the artist finds him or herself not in the position of an outside observer and autonomous agent who would fully oversee and control his or her doings, but as one (important) part of an evolving, co-constitutive process. Following this neocybernetically informed posthumanist paradigm, we should not see the artist-person as a system in itself, but like any human or higher organism, as the site where multiple systems—physiological, nervous, psychic, social—intersect and interact. This approach does not get rid or reduce the importance of the individual artist or make him or her replaceable; much the opposite, it allows us to account in more detail for the multiple ways in which the physical presence of the artist matters. Viewed as the intersection of various systems, the artist-person will add multiple sensibilities—physiological, sensual, intellectual, etc.—to the co-constitutive system, increasing the scope and variability of the creative system. To think of the improviser's doings as multilayered, variable, and instinctual in this way allows us to include experience and expertise in the creative process on multiple levels, account for an artist's multiple sensibilities, without having to assume detachment and authorial control. Accordingly, this approach will not lead us away, but back to the material and physical conditions of improvisation, by inviting a more careful examination of the enabling and limiting factors that different art forms, different forms of interaction (e.g. technologically enhanced networking possibilities), work with different media and different materials, and so on put on the improviser and that will require and help develop different sets of skills.

### **The Case For Radical and Methodological Improvisation Studies**

In conclusion, I want to return briefly to David Borgo's concern about whether posthumanism vilifies the human as the posthuman's Other and thereby neglects the opportunity to celebrate “our fundamental and shared humanity” (“Open-

ness" 127). What is gained by a critique of liberal improvisation studies and its anthropocentrism? What is at stake ethically and politically? What are the prospects of promoting instead a "radical" and "methodological" improvisation studies? I want to draw on Cary Wolfe's writing, which brings together neocybernetic methodology with poststructuralist skepticism, e.g. when he identifies Jacques Derrida and Niklas Luhmann as two theorists who realized how "the nature of thought itself must change if it is to be posthumanist" (Wolfe, *Posthumanism* xvi). Wolfe's work, with its heavy investment in animal and disability rights, shows how a departure from humanism need not be politically conservative, apolitical, or worse, promote inhumane practices or ideas. It means, however, to question humanist notions of a detached, knowing, and autonomous subject, of linear agency, control, and mastery, and other modes of thinking that help sustain the political and cultural hegemonies of the humanist tradition even where they pursue such worthy goals as the promotion of inclusiveness, pluralism, diversity, and so on. As Wolfe points out, on the account of its liberal values, critical posthumanism does not "set out to repudiate humanism but merely to articulate how many of its admirable ambitions and values (charity, kindness, etc.) are undermined by the conceptual frameworks used to make good on them" ("All Too Human" 572). At issue is the liberal "penchant for the sort of 'pluralism' that extends the sphere of consideration to previously marginalized groups without in the least destabilizing or throwing into question the schema of the human who undertakes such pluralization" ("All Too Human" 568). This agenda, he argues, referencing Tilottama Rajan, could easily be "appropriated for the ideological work of the neoliberal order, in which capitalist globalization gets repackaged as pluralism and attention to difference" ("All Too Human" 568, and see Rajan 69).

My hope is that as improvisation studies enters the varied terrain of posthumanism, it will advance its own strands of radical and methodological improvisation studies. Rather than continue to subscribe to a normative ideal of "the human," which carries on its back the politically dangerous notion of the "inhuman," improvisation studies is uniquely positioned to emphasize human/non-human couplings, networks, and other modes of interagency that show, as Sharon put it, how humans do not necessarily have a monopoly on agency, intentionality or morality. Improvisation studies is uniquely positioned to question the anthropocentrism of the humanist tradition and associated hierarchies and exclusionary tendencies and to make inroads into destabilizing schemas of a detached, normative, controlled and controlling subject-agent. Political action is limited by the constraints it faces within the social setting it hopes to affect. If we promote models and sensibilities critical of humanism's anthropocentric conceit, we can change the modes of thinking and the institutions they sustain. In this way, radical and methodological improvisation studies can contribute to the con-

tinued and necessary critique of the hierarchies, inequalities, exclusionary tendencies, and inhumaneness of contemporary society.

## Works Cited

- Borgo, David. "The Ghost in the Music, Or the Perspective of an Improvising Ant." *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* Vol 1. Ed. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, 91-111. New York: Oxford UP, 2016. Print.
- . "Openness from Closure. The Puzzle of Interagency in Improvised Music and a Neurocybernetic Solution." *Negotiated Moments. Improvisation, Sound, And Subjectivity*. Ed. Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman, p.113-130. Durham / London: Duke UP, 2016. Print.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press 2013. Print.
- Caines, Rebecca and Ajay Heble (eds). *The Improvisation Studies Reader. Spontaneous Acts*. London / New York: Routledge, 2015. Print.
- Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation. Open Journal Systems*. Web. 15 Jan. 2017.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Ed. Marie-Louise Mallet. Trans. David Wills. New York: Fordham UP, 2008. Print.
- Dewar, Andrew Raffo. "Mediating the Improvising Body. Art Tatum's Postmodern Performance in a Posthuman World." *Negotiated Moments. Improvisation, Sound, And Subjectivity*. Ed. Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman, p.131-144. Durham / London: Duke UP, 2016. Print.
- Gerhard Richter Painting*. Dir. Corinna Belz. Zero One Film, 2011. Instant Video.
- Herbrechter Stefan. *Posthumanism. A Critical Analysis*. London / New Delhi / New York / Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2013. Print.
- Herbrechter, Stefan. "Shakespeare 'after' Shakespeare." *Posthumanist Shakespeares*. Ed. Stefan Herbrechter and A. Callus. London / New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012. Print.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Transl. Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987. Print.
- Landgraf, Edgar. *Improvisation as Art. Conceptual Challenges, Historical Perspectives*. New York / London: Continuum, 2011; New York / London / New Delhi / Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2014. Print.
- . "Improvisation: Form and Event—A Spencer-Brownian Calculation." *Emergence and Embodiment. New Essays on Second-Order Systems Theory*. Ed. Bruce Clarke and Mark Hansen, 179-204. Durham, N.C. / London: Duke University Press, 2009. Print.
- Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford / New York: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
- Lewis, George E. and Benjamin Piekut. "Introduction: On Critical Improvisation Studies." *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* Vol 1. Ed. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, 1-35. New York: Oxford UP, 2016. Print

- Luhmann, Niklas. *Art as a Social System*. Transl. Eva M. Knodt. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000. Print.
- Massumi, Brian. "The Supernormal Animal." *The Nonhuman Turn*. Ed. Richard Grusin, 1-17. Minnesota / London: Minnesota UP, 2015. Print.
- Nayar, Pramod K. *Posthumanism*. Malden, MA: Polity, 2014. Print.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Basic Writings by Nietzsche*. Transl. and ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Modern Library, 1992. Print.
- Pressing, Jeff. "Improvisation. Methods and Models." *Generative Processes in Music: The Psychology of Performance, Improvisation, and Composition*. Ed. John A. Sloboda, 129-178. Oxford / New York: Clarendon and Oxford UP, 2000. Print.
- Rajan, Tilottama. "In the Wake of Cultural Studies: Globalization, Theory, and the University." *Diacritics* 31.3 (Fall 2001): 67-88. Print.
- Robinson, Jason. "The Networked Body. Physicality, Embodiment, And Latency in Multisite Performance." *Negotiated Moments. Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity*. Ed. Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman, p.91-112. Durham / London: Duke UP, 2016. Print.
- Sharon, Tamar. *Human Nature in an Age of Biotechnology: The Case for Mediated Posthumanism*. Philosophy of Engineering and Technology 14. Dordrecht / Heidelberg / New York / London: Springer, 2014. Print.
- Siddall, Gillian and Ellen Waterman (eds). *Negotiated Moments. Improvisation, Sound, And Subjectivity*. Durham / London: Duke UP, 2016. Print.
- Smith, Damon. "Corinna Belz, Gerhard Richter Painting." Interview. *Filmmaker Magazine* March 2012. Web. <http://filmmakermagazine.com/42670-corinna-belz-gerhard-richter-painting/#.WRH6Q1Ivk0o> (accessed May 9, 2017).
- Wolfe, Cary. *What is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis / London: U of Minnesota Press, 2010. Print.
- . "Human, All Too Human: 'Animal Studies' and the Humanities." *PMLA* 124.2 (March 2009): 564-575. Print.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike International 4.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA