FREE PLAY

Improvisation in Life and Art

STEPHEN NACHMANOVITCH

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Constance Crown, for *Hands* by Rico Lebrun.
Walter Gruen, for *Musica Solar* by Remedios Varo.
Ben Berzinsky, for his photograph of a Carlo Bergonzi violin, c. 1770.
Grateful thanks to the late Arnold Fawcus of the Trianon Press, Paris, for permission to photograph his magnificent William Blake books.
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North Point Press, for excerpt from Wendell Berry's essay, *Poetry and Marriage.*
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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Nachmanovitch, Stephen.
Free play; improvisation in life and art / Stephen Nachmanovitch

p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN: 9781440673085
1. Creation (Literary, artistic, etc.) 2. Improvisation (Music)
I. Title.
BH301.C84N-49303
153.3'5-dc2O CIP

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The Fruits

Paint as you like and die happy.

HENRY MILLER

Acknowledgments

The following are only a few of the many friends and colleagues whose support, criticism, ideas, and other contributions were vital to the creation of this book:

David Lebrun, Ron Fein, Abdul Aziz Said, Yehudi Menuhin, Ellen Dorland, Will McWhinney, Art Ellis, Ben Berzinsky, Jeremy Tarcher, Connie Zweig, Deena Metzger, Ruth Weisberg, Dianna Linden, Lolette Kuby, Linda Galijan, Sanjay Kumar, Jay Hoflman, Jim Bogan, Laura Kuhn, Elisabeth Des Marais.

My friend and teacher, Gregory Bateson, died three years before I began this work, but the power and warmth of his thought have influenced all of this in ways that are incalculable.

I am grateful to the Dorland Mountain Arts Colony, where the ideas here were conceived and sketched out in the composer's cottage in 1983.

This book is dedicated, with love, to my parents.

Prologue: A New Flute

A god can do it. But will you tell me how a man can penetrate through the lyre's strings?

RAINER MARIA RILKE

There is an old Sanskrit word, *lila,* which means play. Richer than our word, it means divine play, the play of creation, destruction, and re-creation, the folding and unfolding of the cosmos. *Lîla,* free and deep, is both the delight and enjoyment of this moment, and the play of God. It also means love.

Lîla may be the simplest thing there is—spontaneous, childish, disarming. But as we grow and experience the complexities of life, it may also be the most difficult and hard-won achievement imaginable, and its coming to fruition is a kind of homecoming to our true selves.

I want to begin with a story. Transcribed from Japanese folk sources,[1] it covers the whole sweep of the journey we will take in these pages. It gives us a taste of the attainment of free play, of the kind of creative breakthrough from which art and originality emerge. It is a tale of a young musician's journey from mere brilliance toward a more genuine artistry, one that emerges unimpeded from the very source of life:

A new flute was invented in China. A Japanese master musician discovered the subtle beauties of its tone and brought it back home, where he gave concerts all around the country. One evening he played with a community of musicians and music lovers who lived in a certain town. At the end of the concert, his name was called. He took out the new flute and played one piece. When he was finished, there was silence in the room for a long moment. Then the voice of the oldest man was heard from the back of the room: "Like a god!"

The next day, as this master was packing to leave, the musicians approached him and asked how long it would take a skilled player to learn the new flute. "Years, " he said. They asked if he would take a pupil, and he agreed. After he left, they decided among themselves to send a young man, a brilliantly talented flutist, sensitive to beauty, diligent and trustworthy. They gave him money for his living expenses and for the master's tuition, and sent him on his way to the capital, where the master

lived.

The student arrived and was accepted by his teacher, who assigned him a single, simple tune. At first he received systematic instruction, but he easily mastered all the technical problems. Now he arrived for his daily lesson, sat down, and played his tune—and all the master could say was, "Something lacking. " The student exerted himself in every possible way; he practiced for endless hours; yet day after day, week after week, all the master said was, "Something lacking. " He begged the master to change the tune, but the master said no. The daily playing, the daily "something lacking" continued for months on end. The student's hope of success and fear of failure became ever magnified, and he swung from agitation to despondency.

Finally the frustration became too much for him. One night he packed his bag and slinked out. He continued to live in the capital city for some time longer, until his money ran dry. He began drinking. Finally, impoverished, he drifted back to his own part of the country. Ashamed to show his face to his former colleagues, he found a hut far out in the countryside. He still possessed his flutes, still played, but found no new inspiration in music. Passing farmers heard him play and sent their children to him for beginner's lessons. He lived this way for years.

One morning there was a knock at his door. It was the oldest past-master from his town, along with the youngest student. They told him that tonight they were going to have a concert, and they had all decided it would not take place without him. With some effort they overcame his feelings of fear and shame, and almost in a trance he picked up a flute and went with them. The concert began. As he waited behind the stage, no one intruded on his inner silence. Finally, at the end of the concert, his name was called. He stepped out onto the stage in his rags. He looked down at his hands, and realized that he had chosen the new flute.

Now he realized that he had nothing to gain and nothing to lose. He sat down and played the same tune he had played so many times for his teacher in the past. When he finished, there was silence for a long moment. Then the voice of the oldest man was heard, speaking softly from the back of the room: "Like a god!"

Introduction

Improvisation, it is a mystery. You can write a book about it, but by the end no one still knows what it is. When I improvise and I'm in good form, I'm like somebody half sleeping. I even forget there are people in front of me. Great improvisers are like priests; they are thinking only of their god.

STÉPHANE GRAPPELLI

I am a musician. One of the things I love best is to give totally improvised concerts on violin and viola. There is something energizing and challenging about being one-to-one with the audience and creating a piece of work that has both the freshness of the fleeting moment and—when everything is working—the structural tautness and symmetry of a living organism. It can be a remarkable and often moving experience in direct communication.

My experience of playing in this way is that "I" am not "doing something"; it's more like following, or taking dictation. This is, of course, a feeling that has been expressed many times by composers, poets, and other artists. There is the story of one of Bach's pupils asking him, "Papa, how do you ever think of so many tunes?" to which Bach replied, "My dear boy, my greatest difficulty is to avoid stepping on them when I get up in the morning." And there is the famous example of Michelangelo's theory of sculpture: The statue is already in the stone, has been in the stone since the beginning of time, and the sculptor's job is to see it and release it by carefully scraping away the excess material. William Blake, in a similar vein, writes of "melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite, which was hid."[2]

This book is about the inner sources of spontaneous creation. It is about where art comes from. I mean art in the widest sense. I have seen an automobile mechanic open the hood of my car and work with that special sensitivity of hand and eye, that deftness and readiness to absorb surprises, that quality of connectedness and wholeness, which we also recognize in a fine pianist, painter, or poet.

This book is directed toward people in any field who want to contact and strengthen their own creative powers. Its purpose is to propagate the understanding, joy, responsibility, and peace that come from the full use of

the human imagination.

The questions we will delve into concern how intuitive music, or inspiration of any kind, arises within us, how it may be blocked, derailed, or obscured by certain unavoidable facts of life, and how it is finally liberated—how *we* are finally liberated—to speak or sing, write or paint, with our own authentic voice. Such questions lead us directly into territory where many religions and philosophies, as well as the actual experience of practicing artists, seem to converge.

What is the Source we tap into when we create? What did the old poets mean when they talked about the muse? Who is she? Where does the play of imagination come from? When are sounds music? When are patterns and colors art? When are words literature? When is instruction teaching? How do we balance structure and spontaneity, discipline and freedom? How does the passion of the artist's life get coded into the artwork? How do we as creators of artwork see to it that the original vision and passion that motivate us get accurately portrayed in our moment-to-moment creative activity? How do we as witnesses of artwork decode or release that passion when the artist is gone and we have only the artwork itself before us, to see and listen to, to remember and accept? How does it feel to fall in love with an instrument and an art?

I began writing this book as an exploration of the inner dimensions of improvisation. I found it inescapably fascinating that the conception, composition, practice, and performance of a piece of music could blossom in a single moment, and come out whole and satisfying. When I first found myself improvising, I felt with great excitement that I was onto something, a kind of spiritual connectedness that went far beyond the scope of music making. At the same time, improvisation extended the scope and relevance of music making until the artificial boundary between art and life disintegrated. I had found a freedom that was both exhilarating and exacting. Looking into the moment of improvisation, I was uncovering patterns related to every kind of creativity; uncovering clues as well to living a life that is self-creating, self-organizing, and authentic. I came to see improvisation as a master key to creativity.

In a sense, all art is improvisation. Some improvisations are presented as is, whole and at once; others are "doctored improvisations" that have been revised and restructured over a period of time before the public gets to enjoy the work. A composer who writes on paper is still improvising to

begin with (if "only" mentally), then taking the products of the improvisation and refining and applying technique and theory to them. "Composing," wrote Arnold Schoenberg, "is a slowed-down improvisation; often one cannot write fast enough to keep up with the stream of ideas."[3] Finished artworks that we see and may love deeply are in a sense the relics or traces of a journey that has come and gone. What we reach through improvisation is the feel of the journey itself.

Improvisation is the most natural and widespread form of music making. Up until the last century, it was integral even to our literate musical tradition in the West. Leonardo da Vinci was one of the great pioneers of improvisation on the viola da braccio, and with his friends put on entire operas in which both the poetry and the music were made up on the spot.[4] In Baroque music, the art of playing keyboard instruments from a "figured bass" (an harmonic outline that the player fills in according to the fancy of the moment) resembled the modern jazz musician's art of playing over themes, motifs, or chord changes. In classical times, the cadenzas of violin, piano, and other concertos were meant to be improvised—a chance for the players to put their own creative display into the total artwork. Both Bach and Mozart were renowned as very free, agile, imaginative improvisers, and many stories, both moving and amusing, are attached to their exploits in this field. Beethoven, when he first came to Vienna, became known as an astounding improviser on the piano, and only later as a composer. Here are the reports of two musician-witnesses:

> I fancy that to these improvisations of Beethoven's I owe my most vivid musical impressions. I maintain that unless one has heard him improvise well and quite at ease, one can but imperfectly appreciate the vast scope of his genius.... His tempestuous inspiration poured forth such lovely melodies and harmonies unsought, because, mastered by musical emotion, he gave no thought to the search after effects that might have occurred to him with pen in hand.[5]

> He knew how to make such an impression on every listener that frequently there was not a single dry eye, while many broke out into

> loud sobs: For there was a certain magic in his expression aside from the beauty and originality of his ideas and his genial way of presenting them. When he had concluded an improvisation of this kind, he was capable of breaking out into boisterous laughter.[6]

Unfortunately, tape recorders were not available in those days. So when artists wanted to preserve their music, they had to be as deft with the pen as they were with their instruments. Mozart was perhaps the greatest improviser with pen and paper. He often wrote the fair copies of his scores and parts straight out, inventing the music as fast as the pen would go and hardly ever blotting a line. Beethoven, by contrast, intimately knowing the sounds he wanted, carrying them in his head for years at a time, could only record them on paper by the most laborious and energetic process of sketching, editing, crossing out, rewriting, and refining. His notebooks were a copious mess; through them we are able to trace, step by step, the evolution of his musical thoughts.

The rise of the formal concert hall in the nineteenth century gradually put an end to concert improvisation. The Industrial Age brought with it an excessive emphasis on specialization and professionalism in all fields of living. Most musicians confined themselves to the note-for-note playing of scores written by a handful of composers who somehow had access to the mysterious and godlike creative process. Composition and performance became progressively split from each other, to the detriment of both. Popular and classical forms also became ever more split from each other, again to the detriment of both. The new and the old lost their continuity. We entered a period in which concert goers came to believe that the only good composer was a dead composer.

Improvisation made its reappearance in this century, notably in the field of jazz. Later in the century, Indian music and other improvisational traditions reintroduced musicians to the pleasures of spontaneous creation. Beyond these forms of extemporization on a theme or within a set style, free improvisation and the invention of new and personal styles of art making are coming into their own. Today many artists are joining together in improvisatory chamber ensembles.

There has been a surge of free play as a modus operandi in many other art forms, notably theater and dance, where increasingly improvisation is used not merely as a technique for developing new material in the studio but of presenting totally spontaneous, finished performances for the public.

Visual art has had its tradition of "automatism"; painters such as Wassily Kandinsky, Yves Tanguy, Joan Miró, and Gordon Onslow Ford approached the canvas with no preconceived theme, but allowed the colors and forms to flow of themselves, from the spontaneous and intuitive promptings of the unconscious. In Kandinsky's breakthrough series of paintings called *Improvisations,* which set the stage for much of twentieth-century art, he saw himself tracing spiritual states and transformations as they occurred.

There is in all these forms of expression a unitive experience that is the essence of the creative mystery. The heart of improvisation is the free play of consciousness as it draws, writes, paints, and plays the raw material emerging from the unconscious. Such play entails a certain degree of risk.

Many musicians are fabulously skilled at playing the black dots on the printed page, but mystified by how the dots got there in the first place and apprehensive of playing without dots. Music theory does not help here; it teaches rules of the grammar, but not what to say. When people ask me how to improvise, only a little of what I can say is about music. The real story is about spontaneous expression, and it is therefore a spiritual and a psychological story rather than a story about the technique of one art form or another.

The details of any art form—how to play the violin, how to improvise a raga, how to write English prose, how to make movies, how to teach—are of course particular; each instrument or medium comes with its own language and lore. But there is a kind of metalearning, a metadoing that transfers across styles and forms; and it is that essence that I want to touch on in these pages. While there are certain principles that apply to a particular field, others apply across the board to all fields of creative activity. Any action can be practiced as an art, as a craft, or as drudgery.

How does one learn improvisation? Or any kind of art, for that matter? Or anything at all? It is a contradiction, an oxymoron. Here is the elementary double bind: Go up to someone and say, "Be spontaneous!" Or try letting someone do it to you. We submit ourselves to music, dance, or writing teachers who can criticize or suggest. But underneath it all, what they really ask of us is to "be spontaneous," "be creative." And that, of course, is easier said than done.

How does one learn improvisation? The only answer is to ask another question: What is stopping us? Spontaneous creation comes from our

deepest being and is immaculately and originally ourselves. What we have to express is already with us, is us, so the work of creativity is not a matter of making the material come, but of unblocking the obstacles to its natural flow.

There is, therefore, no way to talk about the creative process without mentioning its opposite: the whole slimy, sticky business of blocks, that unbearable feeling of being stuck, of having nothing to say. This book, one hopes, can serve as a block-buster, a wedge for breaking apart creative blocks. But the process of working on blocks is a subtle one. It would be nice to have an easy set of recipes that we could apply: Seven Steps to Busting Our Blocks. Unfortunately, the creative processes do not work that way. The only way out of the complexity is through it. Ultimately, the only techniques that can help us are those we invent ourselves.

Nor can we talk about *the* creative process, because there are different personality types, and the creative processes of one are not the same as those of another. In the struggle for expression of the self, many selves can be expressed. Each of us must find his or her own way into and through these essential mysteries.

We have a right to create, a right to self-realization and fulfillment. Not everyone is in the business of standing up in front of an audience with no agenda, expecting the muse to arrive. But many people find themselves in similar positions. You may want to master a musical instrument, express yourself in painting, release the novel inside of you. You may be in school, wanting to summon up creativity to write an original dissertation; you may want to make a breakthrough in business, developing some new, unheard-of plan and executing it. You may be a therapist at wit's end over how to treat a client, a political activist searching for a more authentic way to tune people in to what is happening around them. How do you create a new way of managing a sprawling city, or write a piece of legislation to deal with some of the intractably knotty problems of state, nation, or world? How do you invent a new way of talking with your husband or wife or lover?

The literature on creativity is full of tales of breakthrough experiences. These moments come when you let go of some impediment or fear, and *boom*—in whooshes the muse. You feel clarity, power, freedom, as something unforeseeable jumps out of you. The literature of Zen, on which I have drawn heavily because of its deep penetration of the breakthrough experience, abounds with accounts of *kensho* and *satori*—moments of

illumination and moments of total change of heart. There come points in your life when you simply kick the door open. But there is no ultimate breakthrough; what we find in the development of a creative life is an open-ended series of provisional breakthroughs. In this journey there is no endpoint, because it is the journey into the soul.

In my own life, music taught me to listen, not just to sound but to who I am. I discovered the relevance of our many mystical or esoteric traditions to the practical life of art making. "Mysticism" does not refer to cloudy belief systems or to hocus-pocus; it refers to direct and personal spiritual experience, as distinct from organized religion in which one is expected to believe secondhand experiences passed on in sacred books or by teachers or authorities. It is the mystics who bring creativity into religion. The mystic or visionary attitude expands and concretizes art, science, and daily life as well. Do I believe what "the Man" tells me, or am I going to try things out for myself and see what's really true for me?

Our subject is inherently a mystery. It cannot be fully expressed in words, because it concerns the deep preverbal levels of spirit. No kind of linear organization can do justice to this subject; by its nature it does not lie flat on the page. Looking at the creative process is like looking into a crystal: No matter which facet we gaze into, we see all the others reflected. In this book we will look into a number of facets, then keep returning to them from different angles as the view becomes deeper and more complete. These interreflecting themes, the prerequisites of creation, are playfulness, love, concentration, practice, skill, using the power of limits, using the power of mistakes, risk, surrender, patience, courage, and trust.

Creativity is a harmony of opposite tensions, as encapsulated in our opening idea of *lîla,* or divine play. As we ride through the flux of our own creative processes, we hold onto both poles. If we let go of play, our work becomes ponderous and stiff. If we let go of the sacred, our work loses its connection to the ground on which we live.

Knowledge of the creative process cannot substitute for creativity, but it can save us from giving up on creativity when the challenges seem too intimidating and free play seems blocked. If we know that our inevitable setbacks and frustrations are phases of the natural cycle of creative processes, if we know that our obstacles can become our ornaments, we can persevere and bring our desires to fruition. Such perseverance can be a real test, but there are ways through, there are guideposts. And the struggle,

which is guaranteed to take a lifetime, is worth it. It is a struggle that generates incredible pleasure and joy. Every attempt we make is imperfect; yet each one of those imperfect attempts is an occasion for a delight unlike anything else on earth.

The creative process is a spiritual path. This adventure is about us, about the deep self, the composer in all of us, about originality, meaning not that which is all new, but that which is fully and originally ourselves.

The Sources

Inspiration and Time's Flow

He who binds to himself a joy
Doth the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in Eternity's sun rise.

WILLIAM BLAKE

When we think *improvisation,* we tend to think first of improvised music or theater or dance; but beyond their own delights, such art forms are doors into an experience that constitutes the whole of everyday life. We are all improvisers. The most common form of improvisation is ordinary speech. As we talk and listen, we are drawing on a set of building blocks (vocabulary) and rules for combining them (grammar). These have been given to us by our culture. But the sentences we make with them may never have been said before and may never be said again. Every conversation is a form of jazz. The activity of instantaneous creation is as ordinary to us as breathing.

Whether we are creating high art or a meal, we improvise when we move with the flow of time and with our own evolving consciousness, rather than with a preordained script or recipe. In composed or scripted art forms, there are two kinds of time: the moment of inspiration in which a direct intuition of beauty or truth comes to the artist; then the often laborious struggle to hold onto it long enough to get it down on paper or canvas, film or stone. A novelist may have a moment (literally a flash) of insight in which the birth, meaning, and purpose of a new book reveals itself; but it may take years to write it. During that time she must not only keep the thought fresh and clear, she must also eat, live, make money, suffer, enjoy, be a friend, and everything else human beings do. In composed music or theater, moreover, there is yet a third kind of time: besides the moment (or moments) of inspiration and the time it takes to write the score, there is the time of the actual performance. Often the music is not even performed until after the composer's death.

In improvisation, there is only one time: This is what computer people call real time. The time of inspiration, the time of technically structuring

and realizing the music, the time of playing it, and the time of communicating with the audience, as well as ordinary clock time, are all one. Memory and intention (which postulate past and future) and intuition (which indicates the eternal present) are fused. The iron is always hot.

Inspiration, experienced as an instantaneous flash, can be delightful and invigorating and can generate a lifetime of work. Giving birth to a line of poetry brings with it an incredible rush of energy, coherence and clarity, exaltation and exultation. In that moment, beauty is palpable, living. The body feels strong and light. The mind seems to float easily through the world. Emily Dickinson said in this regard that the poem is exterior to time. Improvisation is also called extemporization, meaning both "outside of time" and "from the time."

But this beautiful feeling is not enough. Like many other beauties and joys, it can betray us by appearing in one moment and vanishing in the next. If it is to result in a tangible artwork, or an extended improvisation of any quality, the creative inspiration must be sustained in time. And to do art only for the high feeling of completion and connectedness in the moment of inspiration would be like making love only for the moment of orgasm.

The work of the improviser is, therefore, to stretch out those momentary flashes, extend them until they merge into the activity of daily life. We then begin to experience creativity and the free play of improvisation as one with our ordinary mind and our ordinary activity. The ideal—which we can approach but never fully reach, for we all get stuck from time to time—is moment-to-moment nonstop flow. This is what many of the spiritual traditions refer to when they speak of "chopping wood, carrying water"—bringing into the humdrum activities of daily life the qualities of luminosity, depth, and simplicity-within-complexity that we associate with inspired moments. We can then say, with the Balinese, "We have no art. Everything we do is art." We can lead an active life in the world without being entangled in scripts or rigid expectations: doing without being too attached to the outcome, because the doing is its own outcome.

A walk, following your intuitive promptings, down the streets of a foreign city holds rewards far beyond a planned tour of the tried and tested. Such a walk is totally different from random drifting. Leaving your eyes and ears wide open, you allow your likes and dislikes, your conscious and unconscious desires and irritations, your irrational hunches, to guide you

will happen a day or a moment in advance. The unexpected awaits us at every turn and every breath. The future is a vast, perpetually regenerated mystery, and the more we live and know, the greater the mystery. When we drop the blinders of our preconceptions, we are virtually propelled by every circumstance into the present time and the present mind: the moment, the whole moment, and nothing but the moment. This is the state of mind taught and strengthened by improvisation, a state of mind in which the here and now is not some trendy idea but a matter of life and death, upon which we can learn to reliably depend. We can depend on the world being a perpetual surprise in perpetual motion. And a perpetual invitation to create.

Good jazz players have innumerable tricks they can fall back on whenever they get stuck. But to be an improviser you have to leave these tricks behind, go out on a limb and take risks, perhaps occasionally fall flat on your face. In fact, what audiences love most is for you to go ahead and fall. Then they get to see how you manage to pick yourself up and put the world back together again.

A creative life is risky business. To follow your own course, not patterned on parents, peers, or institutions, involves a delicate balance of tradition and personal freedom, a delicate balance of sticking to your guns and remaining open to change. While on some dimensions living a normal life, you are nevertheless a pioneer, venturing into new territory, breaking away from the molds and models that inhibit the heart's desire, creating life as it goes. Being, acting, creating in the moment without props and supports, without security, can be supreme play, and it can also be frightening, the very opposite of play. Stepping into the unknown can lead to delight, poetry, invention, humor, lifetime friendships, self-realization, and occasionally a great creative breakthrough. Stepping into the unknown can also lead to failure, disappointment, rejection, sickness, or death.

In creative work we play undisguisedly with the fleetingness of our life, with some awareness of our own death. Listen to Mozart's later music—you hear all its lightness, energy, transparency, and good humor, yet you also hear the breath of ghosts blowing through it. Death and life came to be that close for him. It was the completeness and intensity with which both primal forces met and fused in him, and his freedom to play with those forces, that made Mozart the supreme artist he was.

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Every moment is precious, precisely because it *is* ephemeral and cannot be duplicated, retrieved, or captured. We think of precious things as those to be hoarded or preserved. In the performing arts we want to record the beautiful, unexpected performance, so we schedule a rematch for the camera. Indeed, many great performances have been recorded, and we are glad to have them. But I think the greatest performances always elude the camera, the tape recorder, the pen. They happen in the middle of the night when the musician plays for one special friend under the moonlight, they happen in the dress rehearsal just before the play opens. The fact that improvisation vanishes makes us appreciate that every moment of life is unique—a kiss, a sunset, a dance, a joke. None will ever recur in quite the same way. Each happens only once in the history of the universe.

The Vehicle

> *There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening, that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost.*
>
> MARTHA GRAHAM

Each piece of music we play, each dance, each drawing, each episode of life, reflects our own mind back at us, complete with all its imperfections, exactly as it is. In improvisation, we are especially aware of this reflective quality: Since we cannot go backward in time, there is no crossing out, editing, fixing, retouching, or regretting. In this respect, spontaneous music resembles Oriental calligraphy or ink painting. That watery gray-black ink on the brush, sliding over thin, fragile paper, does not allow a single mark or line to be erased or retraced. The painter-calligrapher must treat space as though it were time. The single-minded impulse from belly to shoulder to hand to brush to paper leaves its once-and-for-all trace, a unique moment forever frozen on paper. And the peculiarities and imperfections, which are there for all to see, are the mark of the calligrapher's original nature. The minute particulars of body, speech, mind, and movement are what we call *style,* the vehicle through which self moves and manifests itself.

The essence of style is this: We have something in us, about us; it can be called many things, but for now let's call it our original nature. We are born with our original nature, but on top of that, as we grow up, we accommodate to the patterns and habits of our culture, family, physical environment, and the daily business of the life we have taken on. What we are taught solidifies as "reality." Our persona, the mask we show the world, develops out of our experience and training, step by step from infancy to adulthood. We construct our world through the actions of perception, learning, and expectation. We construct our "self" through the same actions of perception, learning, and expectation. World and self interlock and match each other, step by step and shape by shape. If the two constructions, self and world, mesh, we grow from child to adult, becoming "normally adjusted individuals." If they do not mesh so well, we may experience