

The Making of “Pouliční Galerie s Interferencí” for Fixed Video and Sound with Live Flute and Bass Drum(s) by Dan Senn

Introduction

“Pouliční Galerie s Interferencí” (PGsl) is an iterative, experimental work developed from “Uličnická Galerie” (UG) that consists of two standalone, found object improvisations from respective audio and visual mediums. This text details the merger of these, while preserving their integral spontaneity, toward producing the new work (PGsl). It provides a strategy for including live traditional instruments in producing the new work while, again, preserving the spontaneity of the original and touches on the advantages of nonlinear, found instruments in repressing “mirroring” in free improvisation. A related text may be accessed in the form of a faux interview from 2024.

Opacity and Spontaneity in Found Object Improvisation

The spontaneity of improvisations on found objects arises from the awkwardness of the medium, an obvious outgrowth of the object’s intended function. Traditional-commercial instruments are developed to serve the creative demands of a player, composer and audience. The best of these, like a Stradivarius, retains some of its material opacity through it’s aural beauty even if it was created to be transparent, a paradox. In contrast, found objects like a kitchen toaster used as a musical instrument, are opaque as they resist being anything but what they are. Try making toast on a violin. And while found instruments limit traditional improvisatory slickness, the

possibility of a highly nuanced performance arises from its inherent clumsiness, a paradox of another sort.

Standalone Artifacts

A well-recorded improvisation on a found instrument (see “Toustovač Vyjednává”), is engaging enough to “stand alone” (see Toaster improv from Flat Works) without support from a supportive voice or visual medium like dance or video. This may also be the case with a silent “percussive” video.

Since the early 1990s I have produced silent, rhythmic films that rhythmically map objects or territory—these were informed by my experience in still photography and live music improvisation on sculptural instruments (see Still Moving...). The duration of a frame, often videotaped from the shoulder (see Addendum below), is determined by an interest in the frame that also may be of standalone strength. The more appealing, the longer the frame is held with uninteresting frames tending to be transitional and shorter.

In the 1990s, before digital video, these mappings were edited in-camera (see Addendum) and made possible by Sony Hi8 cameras that started-stopped manually within 1/10 of a second, or less, enabling near-live rhythmic coverage of an object. One of these mappings is of two of my children (see “Two Kids On a Stump”).

These rhythmic mappings may take in all or most of an object(s) as the videographer rhythmically, incrementally captures its sum—a perceptually gratifying experience. This method of shooting was difficult, even exhausting, producing shaky-camera works to which live improvisations were added using my nonlinear sculptural instruments.

Without studio editing gear, I shot these without thought for a sound track while concentrating on a sensation of tapping the object(s) percussively—thus my references to “percussive video” in the 1990s. Recorded or live improvisations were added later. During this time, I did not perform handheld found objects, like those from Flat Works ('24), instead capitalizing on the nonlinearity of my sculptural instruments often constructed from found objects. When these “percussive” videos and found object improvs were presented together, the simultaneities between mediums occurred by chance, a concept explored by John Cage and Merce Cunningham in dance.

As my first Sony camera wore out, I upgraded to a digital version lacking this quirky on-off feature, this in exchange for non-destructive digital editing in the studio. Even so, the discipline of in-camera editing, a mostly handheld camera aesthetic, was etched into my aesthetic. In 2023, thirty years later, I restarted making these rhythmic mapping works using a 4K digital Sony while adapting to the slow trigger response.

An advantage of in-camera editing was that a video was completed when the filming was over. These films also seemed “pressurized” by the rigor of the shooting process—you could not make a mistake—and yet the resulting spontaneity verged on that experienced in these cross-disciplinary improvisational experiences.

Temporal Elasticity

Absolute silence was an unforeseen advantage of digital sound recording and editing. In a controlled environment, given the inexpensive, high quality microphones now available, the space between sound gestures/events is dead silence. If the

recording space is a bit noisy, like trams in the distance here in Prague, a gating routine can be applied for *dead silence is the elasticity in merging improvisations* from different medium. Bits of silence can be adjusted, within perceptual limitations, to where the durational spontaneity of a sound object is appears unaffected—an overlooked characteristic.

In contrast, the elasticity of video is common knowledge as moving images have long been sped up, frozen or slowed down. And yet, in UG, these standard methods were rarely applied in preference for “handles”, the added video, at the beginning and end of a shot. This padding comes in the 1/60th of a second (frame duration), the rate I shoot at. By manually adjusting these handles, it is possible to integrate other temporal mediums while preserving the effect of critical spontaneity. Another example of this is my recent work for beer can and bottled tidbits called “Shuffling for Kiev”.

Generational Improvisations

Early in the 1980s, while working on the Fairlight CMI at the Canberra School of Music in Australia, I sampled prepared traditional instruments and later, my sculptural instruments. These were at first short recordings but soon evolved into textural snippets and then small works I considered 1st Generation Improvs. These were collected within a performance framework, a database, and then played live to produce electronic works, or 2nd Generation Improvs. If live instruments were then added, they were often scored graphically as in my work Caged (1980) or Smith's Invention (1980).

An description of my use of Generational Improvisations is presented in the

introduction to UnMirrorables(s)(2025). Other examples of 1st Generation databases including The First... and The Third Book of Rugged Dances. The Road to Plasy ('07) was then used to composer Mass For Heavy Rail ('09) for large SSAATTBB choir.

Adding Poetry to a Second Generation Work

It is possible to add a printed text to a 2nd Generation Improv as demonstrated in She He We They ('25). Here a poem was embedded into a 2nd Generation improv while timed to appear as if spoken.

Unlike scores that simply overlay improvised textures, tight integration of live traditional instruments is another matter if the goal is to 1) retain the spontaneity of the prerecorded improvised lines, 2) augment characteristics of these visual or aural recordings while, perhaps, constructively "interfering" with them, and 3) enabling performance accessibility of these scored instrument parts. Here, #3, was most difficult in PGs1 because of the nuanced complexity of the 2nd Gen sound and video improvisations, their image nonlinearity and tenacious resistance to kitsch.

I think of the integration of standalone intermedia improvisations as a kind of "knitting process" as it is realized manually within a video editor and then alongside traditional music notation software. For this process I used Final Cut Pro and Sibelius (probably irrelevant).

Media Knitting

The stealthy integration of improvised, standalone, temporal mediums, with its micro-nudged adjustments, suggests other

iterative procedures. As I developed these "media knitting" tools I learned it was possible to protect the integrity of the source files while creating a new and equally spontaneous new work.

Assembling "Poulična Galerie s Interferencí"

"Uličnická Galerie" (UG), was knit together from an improvisational video of a Prague Street Gallery and a found object improv called Boko Bin, part of the "Flat Works" collection. For this project, however, I wanted to add traditional instruments to UG in a way that, again, would not detract from the source work while employing similar knitting methods. The generated work would be retitled "Pouliční Galerie s Interferencí", a similar name but one emphasizing the "interfering" aspects of UG. A flute and bass drum(s) were chosen and from the start of this "test" piece, I determined to keep the scored parts simple yet stylistically integrated.

Within a video editor I analyzed UG where my first decision was to accept the obvious beat of a quarter-note = 60 and a simple 4/4 time signature (see score). The video had been shot at 60 fps and so I looked for event starting points that could be micro nudged within a range 1/60th - 5/60th of a second and represented as whole, half, quarter, eighth, sixteenth, 32nd and triplet notes, this, while not impacting spontaneity-perception. All adjustments were necessarily made inside the video editor. I did not meddle with contiguous event structures, phrases, the heart of improvisational authenticity accept to move these as a group. In the score, these were indicated as long tones, with their details allowed to "drop through".

The scored instrumental parts, i.e. pitch class, octaves and durational parameters were left to in-the-moment decisions—I'd fix these later... Few extended techniques were used enabling a notation that encouraged practice and accuracy. If the instrumental parts were too complex they may needlessly clash stylistically with the fixed parts, become muddled and, perhaps, too difficult to play. The added parts would focus on the patron interferences in the video (the walk-throughs).

Addendum

Camera Stability

In the early 1990s, I noticed that an unstable—or moving—camera was tolerated by viewers, provided the subject was still or barely moving. A static object could be effectively “mapped” by a turning, twisting, shaky handheld camera so long as the image was focus. A videocamera on a tripod might work but handheld filming was faster, more immediate, and often more effective. A professional might find this approach apostatical, but it worked and I liked the effect. In fact, I'm a fan of the finesse and complexity of a shaky camera—especially as I age. When the subject is moving, or parts of it are in motion, a stable camera is needed, ideally mounted on a tripod. That said, I've done shoots where I deliberately chose a cheap, wobbly tripod. Ah yes—the avant-garde.

Alchemy and Finickiness In Art

Again, media knitting is where separate electronic mediums are combined in a manner nondestructive to the spontaneity of either work. It is a manual process achieved by way of a standalone artifact's elasticity, that is, as sound and visual events are

shifted incrementally, by micro-seconds, to create shared linear time occurrences (simultaneities). By leaving most events unaligned and while exactly linking others, all of this done manually within a video editor, both artifacts retain their individuality and spontaneous strength while being transformed into a powerful combined artifact.

For two years I have been developing this manual media knitting method. In the autumn of 2025, I tried adding a traditional musical instruments to logically extend one of these works. As these originating works were already successful, adding a finicky performer who was unlikely to put in the practice time, deterred this experiment. And yet I was curious to learn if it was possible to do this without creating a rhythmically impossible-to-play score as the spontaneity of a well-knitted standalone work was destroyed. I wasn't sure it was possible.

Additional Rules for Media Knitting

Detailed editing rules used to generate PGsI from UG stipulate that micro edits only be made 1) near existing simultaneities, this protecting the standalone spontaneity of each file, 2) to elastic elements mentioned earlier while keeping mind it was a “mistake” to over-link or over-interfere, 3) to adjust phrases at start and end points leaving the nuanced and complex inner events intact, 4) to prevent any one edit from drastically altering the file alignment of the two media files, 5) to never add or extract sound or basic images from a standalone file, except for these elastic elements, treating original data was “sacred” (every event and gesture must be retained), and 6) that only elastic materials land on the studio floor. By following these rules, UG media files were linked without a

loss of their critical independence, a metaphor for everyday living.

A Defense of Over-Considerateness

More now than than ever before, is important for artists to stop acting like game show geniuses and to pay closer attention to what they are doing. Many talented artists waste their lives and that of the society through imitation, the ugly stuff of kitsch, rather than working at rudimentary exploration. This essay is an example of a conscious process exposed for a single, personal work, one that hedges against this shame. Know what you are doing. It's implications for the future. To, at a minimum, shun mirroring and the trap of virtuosity.

A Problem of Transparency

In 1971, not long after I emerged into the art world after a smash up on the road to Damascus, I realized that certain work, especially in the musical arts, made me uneasy. This was the year I also discovered the ancient technique of making raku pottery—having the opposite effect. Two and a half years later, still a tremendous neophyte, for I was still mispronouncing Edgard Varèse's last name, I asked my composition teacher at the University of Illinois what the deal was after experiencing

my first student composition concert. He was unbothered by the concert as he quietly replied that "the final work had 29 B-naturals." I'd seen him counting something with his fingers. It took awhile to I realize that the element in new music sticking in my craw was "mirroring", a form of inauthenticity born from imitating the work of others. An ugly, greedy competitiveness I had detested since childhood. There were other clues too as such artists tended to group together, studied with teachers all of whom disliked those who understood the advantage of raku principles. Rather than wrestle with these folks, on my good teacher's advice, I developed systems that hedged against this inauthenticity, and to produce events that interested me. My teacher, Sal Martirano, was pleased. In 1974, this was an easy path to take at the U of I, and later in Chicago, and Canberra, Australia... there were always others like me. By the 1990s, this was more difficult and by, say, 2010, a near impossibility. These days, here in Prague, a lovely place to live, I find good things here and there and sometimes in my kitchen.

A problem with transparency in art, like the perfectly crafted instrument, is that it too easily opens an unencumbered path to one's emotions. DS020526