

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) made from two found-object improvisations, one audio and the other video. This text details the compliant merger of standalone artifacts, preserving their integral spontaneity and provides a non-destructive strategy for the inclusion of live traditional instruments to produce a new work, PGsl. It also touches on the advantages of nonlinear, found instruments in repressing “mirroring” in free improvisation.

Read a related text 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 its 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 map objects or territory—these 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 the artist’s interest in the frame content which may also be of *standalone* strength. The more appealing, the longer the frame may be held with uninteresting frames tending to be shorter and transitional.

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

These mappings may capture all or most of an object(s) as the videographer gathers incrementally its sum—a uniquely gratifying experience. This method of shooting, however, was difficult, even exhausting, producing shaky-camera works to which live improvisations were later added using my nonlinear sculptural instruments. Without

studio editing gear, I filmed these without thought for a specific sound track while focusing on the sensation of “tapping the object(s) percussively”—thus the reference to “percussive video” in the 1990s. During this period, I did not perform handheld found objects, like those from Flat Works ('24), instead capitalizing on the non-linearity of my sculptural instruments often constructed from found objects. When these “percussive” videos and found object improvisations were presented together, the simultaneities between mediums occurred by chance as explored by John Cage and Merce Cunningham in sound and dance.

As my first Sony camera wore out in the late 1990, I upgraded to a digital version lacking this quirky-quick on-off feature, this, in “exchange” for non-destructive digital editing in the comfort of my studio. Even so, the discipline of in-camera editing, a mostly handheld camera thing, was etched into my aesthetic. In 2023, many years later, I restarted making these rhythmic mappings using a 4K digital Sony and adapting to the slow trigger using “handles”.

An advantage of working in-camera was that the editing was complete when the filming was over. Another was that these films were uniquely “pressurized” by the rigor of the shooting process—you could not make a mistake—and yet the spontaneity the process provided verged on that experienced with found object improvisation.

Temporal Elasticity

Absolute silence has an unforeseen advantage in 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*. Even if the

recording space is a bit noisy, like trams in the distance here in Prague, a simple gating routine may be applied for *this absolute silence is the elastic substance used in merging improvisational mediums*. Bits of nothing squished and stretched, within imperceptible limits to where a relational sound object appears unaffected—an obvious but overlooked phenomenon.

In contrast, the elasticity of video is commonly used as moving images have long been sped up, frozen or slowed down. And yet, as in UG, these well used methods were not applied here in preference for “handles”, the added video at the beginning and end of a shot—the padding that comes in the 1/60th of a second frame duration I shoot at. By manually adjusting these handles, it is possible to integrate other temporal mediums, like sound or dance, while completely preserving critical spontaneity in a work. Another example is my recent work for beer can and bottled tidbits "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 traditional prepared-instruments and a little later, my sculptural instruments. At first these were typical short recordings, “simple” but soon evolved into textural snippets and then small works I came to consider 1st Generation Improvs. I collected these within performable “databases” playing them live to produce new electronic works, or 2nd Generation Improvs. If live instruments were then added, they were scored graphically as in my work Caged (1980) or Smith’s Invention (1980).

A description of these Generational Improvisations is presented in the

introduction to UnMirrorables(s)(2025). Other examples of 1st Generation performance databases include The First Book... and The Third Book of Rugged Dances. The Road to Plasy ('07) that was subsequently used in my Mass For Heavy Rail ('09) for recorded sound sculpture and SSAATTBB choir.

Adding Text 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 knitted into a 2nd Generation sound and video improvisation as if almost as spoken.

Unlike scores that simply overlay improvised textures, knitted integrations of live traditional instruments is difficult especially if the goal is to 1) retain the spontaneity of the prerecorded improvised lines, 2) augment unique features of these visual or aural recordings while, perhaps, constructively "interfering" with them, and 3) enabling performance accessibility, playability, of these scored instrument lines. Number 3 here is a tough nut to crack, and most difficult in PGsl because of the nuanced complexity of the 1st and 2nd Generation sound and video improvisations.

As I've already written, I think of the integration of standalone intermedia improvisations as a kind of "knitting process" as the process is manually realized within a video editor and then along side traditional music notation software where the adjustments were translated. For PGsl I used Final Cut Pro and Sibelius (probably irrelevant).

Media Knitting

The stealthy integration of improvised, standalone, temporal mediums, with their micro-nudged adjustments, suggests additional iterative processes. Also, encouraged by developing these "media knitting" tools, I learned it was possible to protect the integrity of source files while creating a new and equally spontaneous special artifact.

Assembling "Pouliční Galerie s Interferencí"

"Uličnická Galerie" (UG), was knit together from an improvisational video of a Prague Street Gallery and a found object improv called Beko Bin, part of the "Flat Works" ('24) collection. For this project, however, I experimented with adding traditional instruments to UG in a way that, again, would not detract from the "presence" of the source recording while employing similar knitting methods. The new work would be retitled "Pouliční Galerie s Interferencí", a similar name but one emphasizing the patron interference aspects of UG caught on film. A simple flute and bass drum(s) were thus chosen and from the start of this "test" piece, I determined to keep the scored parts simple yet stylistically befitting. More complex works would follow.

The Process

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 PGsl Score). The video was shot at 60 fps and so I looked for sound event starting points that could be micro nudged within a range 1/60th - 5/60th of a second and then represented as whole, half, quarter, eighth, sixteenth, 32nd

and triplet notes, this, while not impacting perception. All adjustments were made inside the video editor. I did not meddle with contiguous event structures (silence free), the heart of improvisational authenticity, accept to move these in larger chunks and as a group. In the score, these are indicated as long tones, with individual identity allowed to “drop through” to the foreground.

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 stress-free practice, quick learning and accuracy. If the instrumental parts were too complex they may needlessly clash with the fixed parts, become muddled and, perhaps, too difficult to play. The positioning of the parts would emphasize patron interferences in the video (patron 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 slowly moving. A static object could be unobtrusively “mapped” by a turning, twisting, even shaky handheld camera so long as the image was generally centered and focused. A videocamera on a tripod could be used but handheld filming was faster, immediate, and often more effective given these human tendencies. A commercial videographer might find this apostatical, but it worked and I liked the genuineness. I’ve become a diehard fan of the “finesse” and complexity of a shaky camera—especially as I age. Again, as a rule, when the subject is moving, or parts

were in motion, a fixed camera is needed, ideally mounted on a tripod rather than a shoulder on a wall. That said, I’ve done shoots where I deliberately chose a cheap, wobbly tripod too. Ah yes—the avant-garde.

Finickiness In Art

As I’ve written, media knitting is where temporal electronic mediums are combined in a manner nondestructive to the spontaneity of either work. It is a manual process achieved by way of an artifact’s elasticity as sound and visual events are shifted incrementally to create shared synchronicities. By leaving most events unaligned, asynchronous, while exactly linking others, both artifacts retain enough of their standalone individuality while being transformed into the combined artifact.

For two years I have been developing this media knitting method. In the autumn of 2025, I tried adding a traditional instruments to sensibly extend an existing work. As these 2nd Generation pieces were already quite effective, adding a finicky performer unlikely to put in the practice time, was a deterrent. And yet I was curious to learn if it was possible to add instruments without creating a rhythmically impossible-to-play score and destroying the genuine, spontaneous essence of a found object improvised, and standalone work.

Additional Rules for Media Knitting

Detailed editing rules used to generate PGs from UG stipulated that micro edits only be made 1) near existing simultaneities, this protecting the integrity of a file, 2) to utilize the elastic elements mentioned earlier while keeping in mind it was a critical “mistake” to over-link or over-interfere, 3) to adjust tight collections of events at start and end points

leaving the nuanced 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 while treating original data was “sacred” (every event and gesture must be retained), and 6) that only elastic materials, handles and silence, would land on the studio floor. By following these rules, UG was modified without a loss of independence and room for the live instrument was made, a metaphor for everyday living.

In Defense of Over-Considerateness

It is important for artists to stop acting like game show geniuses and to pay closer attention to what their creative rolls. Many talented artists waste their lives and that of the society through disguised imitation, this welcomed commercially and the stuff of kitsch, rather than working at rudimentary, wakeful exploration. This text exposes a process for making a single, personal, transitional work, one that hedges against virtuosity and mirroring in art.

Another 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 also year I discovered the ancient technique of making raku pottery—it having the opposite and a comforting affect. Two and a half years later, in 1973, still a tremendous neophyte, for I was still mispronouncing Edgard Varèse’s last name, I asked my composition teacher at the University of Illinois, Salvatore Martirano, what the deal was after experiencing my first student composition concert. Much of the work

freakishly embarrassed me and I didn’t know why. Sal was unbothered by this as he respectfully, quietly replied that “the final work had 29 B-naturals.” I’d seen him counting something with his fingers.

It took some time before I realized that the element in those student concerts sticking in my craw was an inauthenticity born of one artist imitating another. There were other things too... as these copycats tended to clump, study with the same snobby teachers none of whom could possibly understand the aesthetic of Raku. But rather than wrestle with these chaps, on my good teacher’s advice, I developed systems that hedged against this mirroring while producing events that interested me.

A problem with medium transparency in art, like the perfectly crafted commercial instrument, is that it too easily opens an unencumbered path to fitting in and one’s emotions. DS021026