

Wednesday 11. February 2026

Recap of My Recent Work

For too long I've been working on this test piece "Pouliční Galerie s Interferencí", an upgrade of "Uličnická Galerie", a completed work for video and sound constructed from a "percussive" video and a found sound object improv from "Flat Works" called Beko Bin". About 5'31" in duration. The parts I added were simply written but the methods I used for implanting them in the older work were new, probably innovative, and I wanted to explain the process to myself and to others if possible, not that I have any expectations others would be interested. The new work, PGsl has uncovered problems that will need to be sorted out as technology advances.

The most interesting part of this work has been the way I learned to integrate "standalone" improvisations on found objects that I value so. I have an interest in purposefully "unstable artifacts" harkening back to the early 1970s soon after entering the arts not as composer but as a ceramist studying with Leonard Stach who deeply understood the ancient Japanese process of Raku and was doing what he could to get his students understand it. At the beginning, his explanations went over my head as they were antithetical to a society that seeks to force its will and total control over things manufactured. I vividly remember him exiting his studio into the main ceramics room in the spring of 1972 holding a just thrown tea bowl while wryly saying "It's taken me 20 years to learn how to do this!" I think I was the only person present when he said this—a comment I knew he meant both seriously and humorously as this wet bowl was slightly lop sided and unsmooth. I'm sure I laughed on cue. But it was at that moment precisely when I thought "I must learn to understand what he is talking about! Why is this crooked pot desirable?" And so I worked on it and gradually came to embrace the concept that would eventually overtake my aesthetic. This, mind you, was a couple years before I was at the U of I in graduate school—when Cage's work and ideas being were openly debated. Indeed, when actually introduced to Cage by Ben Johnston, a friend of John's, I deeply understood these concepts and respected them fully.

A problem with an unhindered connection between one's will and an artifact is rarely understood because 1) Since childhood, you've been taught that such efficiency is the highest possible ideal. 2) If the product is praised and monetarily rewarded with lots of menu coming back to the artist, fame is just 'round the corner. 3) It is simple to trivialize the work of those seeking to grow through the purposeful use of awkward materials, the essence of Raku, thus damning oneself to a life of cheap thrills. 4) It justifies a narcissist existence 5) It justifies cruelty. The greater one's skill in this regard, aka the genius path, the less capable an artist is of realizing they are on the "wide path" to nowhere. This is what Len Stach's throw away comment/joke did for me.

Oddly enough, where Stach's example landed did this for me and was inline with advice from Above to do "what was difficult" a year earlier. I told others about this unusual experience, like family members who considered such advice a too strange. Not that I chatted much with them much. Within the elevated intellectual discussions at the U of I during starting I'm 1984, however, Cage was and wasn't understood. When in Europe ten years

later, Cage was openly celebrated but presented red-faced by musicians who mistakenly interpreted his ideas as permission to take off your clothing and hiccup while leaping about. Was so foolish. In Australia, my colleague Sitsky, still alive, was typical as he didn't have an ounce of respect for the man. Back at the U of I, even Ben Johnston considered my work to be "over considerate" and I must admit this criticism got to me.

Back to problems uncovered.

Paper scored notation is pretty wonderful. You all just need to keep the count, use a human conductor if necessary, click-track or a bouncing ball on video... But if you want to integrate instruments performed by humans, with a complex external temporal medium, you must embrace alternatives short of super virtuosic performers who will not likely practice enough anyways and just mess up your work, that is if they look at it. While not mentioned in my recent text "Making PGsl", is an important reason for this new work of mine. First of all, I don't like the sound of most existing art work as it is a mirror of a mirror a mirror of a mirror. A house of mirrors. Terrible. Embarrassing. Second, it is possible to use creative constructs, obstacles, including found instruments functioning doubly as musical scores, in a way that represses this awful mirroring—this producing artifacts pleasing to my eyes, ears, heart and intellect. (That the my work is not pleasing to others is OK. I fully and compassionately understand why. To me, however, such work is exquisite when done right.)

What makes work interesting like UG and PGsl? I've determined that it is something we call "spontaneity". A "chaste" product absent of cliches. One guided by unaffiliated intentions like making toast well and as cheaply as possible. And what is this spontaneity made of? Choices not guided by mirroring. (Now, I must add that it is possible to trivialize a found object improvisation by playing it with traditional percussion mallets in a traditional way or by over-rehearsing the object or forming an ensemble of Toaster Players of Jefferson County.) Irregular rhythms. Incidental pitch relationships if any. Paradoxically, because the options are so very limited, the absence of alternatives raises modalities to the top of the list—modality being defined as a limited amount of options to which a hierarchy is applied. For example, when performing Flat Works, and especially while playing a thin pot lid on top of a metal clothes drying rack I unimaginatively named "Drying Rack & Lid, 5'43", a bluesy piece emerged absolutely connected, in a most cliches manner, to my past. Is this breaking a Holy rule? No, but for another unwritten rule I have. When improvising on nonlinear objects or my sculptural instruments, an acknowledged confrontational relationship is assumed [as has always been the case since the very beginning of this work and that is, short using percussion mallets, and over-rehearsing (just some tapping around and then setting record levels)] where my *will* reenters the fray as I do what I can to tame the resistance of this awkward object. To totally make it subservient if possible. But in all instances, this is not fully possible as I am paradoxically charmed by the object itself which takes hold of me while guiding me to a place I had never before imagined. Even in this particular Flat Works improv, I had no idea this blues piece was waiting for me when it suddenly appeared and took over! Is this my mirror-memory co-opting the performance? Is it an unfortunate lapse? It didn't feel this way, quite the opposite, as if these to found objects just wanted to dance and take over the improvisation. Yes, I was obviously, completely, involved but more as a willing, doofus participant. For sure, the elements of anthropomorphism are here and quite profound, don't

you think! But this shows the dueling relationship that is established with found object improvisation. A kind of relationship that is diametrically at odds with “broad path” geniuses where instruments must be transparent, vehicle sublimated to the virtuosity of the performer. Such a wretched cultural affair!

Back to how nice paper scored notation is.

In working out how to take two truly free improvs on found instruments, one visual and the other aural, (I’ve just put on fingerless gloves in this cold room) knitting them nondestructively to retain their essential spontaneity, I needed to isolate the “elasticity” in both mediums—dead silence and visual padding (handles). With this in hand, I had for the first time created the possibility for a true 2nd Generation Improvisation from two 1st Generation Improvisations. You might quibble with the use of “2nd Gen” here as there was no realtime improv involved. But even in the 1st Gen improvs I made some minute editing alterations that have had little effect on this spontaneity especially effecting stereo location, eliminating the sound of a passing tram... When merging, knitting, these two 1st Gen Improvs together, I’ve laid one improv over the other and in “editing time” taken near simultaneities and lined them up perfectly, each a knitted (attachment) point, this process having realtime aspects of its own. And so “2nd Generation” is correct! And once you start numbering processes, like 1st and 2nd, you unavoidably project what a 3rd Generation might look like and *this* is where the bigger problems are encountered with instrumental scoring.

To look at the score pdf of PGsl, this a reference document, the work looks pathetically easy, even ridiculous. And yet for PGsl to be performed well it must be played perfectly with the synchronized video score that is conducted either externally by a human or from within the video using a marching green line as offered by Sibelius. As the instrumental parts must be perfectly synched with the otherwise complex video and aural parts, the score video and the projected video must be exactly together, this possible using simple the QuickTime software on a Mac. As there are three possible instrumental lines, flute and two bass drum parts, and the parts are easy, a composite video score was used with the flute playing a score off the main computer and the percussion, the same score, mirrored on an iPad. Problem solved. But what happens in the case, say, of a string quartet that you may want to break into to solo parts? Where it would be advantageous to have four dedicated scores presented on September devices? Tablets (iPads) are getting larger, computers faster and for all I know something already exists that can four green line conducted and discrete parts all in synch along with a visual projection. Mind you, the scores do not need to be in the highest resolution either.

This is a problem uncovered with PGsl. The old fashioned paper score will not do for such works as a conductor interferes visually with the projected images. Absolute synchronization is essential and the parts must not be too complex. As I learned in making PGsl, it’s simpler parts amidst the complex rhythms of the projected and prerecorded appear equally nuanced. I may have overcome certain problems with my knitting methods, but this is a pretty big bugaboo. Technology. And I must admit, I’ve been so consumed with getting this far, I’ve not researched online whether technology like this already exists. Even if it has, is it Bluetooth

based? Does it need special hardware and software? Would the cost be prohibitive? The score screens would need to be fairly large. Black and white is fine.

For my next project I would like to do a similar project for 2-3 traditional instruments using composite scores again but not quite so simple. An incremental step up. A longer work of about 8-10 minutes. DS

