Out of the Blue.
From the provisional to improvisation: strategies for action in an uncertain age

27-29 October 2017 in the HKW - the Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin

The symposium “Out of the Blue” creates the framework for a cross-disciplinary dialogue between art and society. We improvise in all contexts and on all scales: in small, manageable situations (provisional actions in our everyday lives), and with regard to serious, multi-state issues in public contexts and under precarious conditions. The scope is broad, ranging from a stopgap solution to high art forms in music and the visual arts; from preparing/pre-empting (“proviso/providere”) to enhancing/refining (“to improve”).

The use of provisional measures and improvising oscillates between the proverbial “pulling the irons out of the fire” and responding to the will and the opportunity to take a risk, in order to give “the impossible a chance”. There are numerous examples of how people have called into question what appear to be insurmountable framework conditions or a fixed set of beliefs thanks to improvisatory actions and the impulse of “let’s just do it like this for now”, and developed something new and groundbreaking. This applies to the natural sciences and humanities, just as it does to politics, the arts, medicine, psychology, engineering sciences, architecture or social work. The approach, the basis for provisional activity, is therefore a core strategy of creative/artistic work and potentially anchored in human action. We take it as a given that it is present in all disciplines and cultures, and that it can be discussed between or across disciplines. Its nature and evaluation is multifaceted and depends on milieus and cultural contexts.

The aim of the “Out of the Blue” symposium is to draw attention within a trans-disciplinary dialogue to the characteristic features of improvisation or provisional activity, to define them more clearly and to make them visible for everyone in the sense of a generally applicable strategy for action. For this purpose, a dramaturgy develops across three levels of observation, from specific problem-solving to a greater vision or a fundamental attitude of awareness. In this lively exchange, improvisation/work with provisional activities will be presented as a basic strategy of action on all levels of scale. The extent to which this strategy is capable of handling the risky challenges of our age, and furthermore to fundamentally lead to greater awareness and a more careful treatment of our environment as a whole is the subject of debate.

During a three-day event, guests from different academic, artistic and social spheres will give presentations on their approach to issues relating to improvisation. In parallel, workshops and working groups will offer the opportunity to gain inspiration and exchange views. Moving between the plenum and smaller, concentrated groups creates a dynamism, as a result of which constellations and communication can change constantly.
At the symposium, we define three horizons of improvisational activity, which are reflected in three levels of consideration: 1. The level of the specific conditions under which provisional activities arise, and specific forms that they take; 2. The level of the socio-political circumstances which generate insecurity from within the system, whereby people are forced to produce at their peak creative performance in work and life; 3. The level of the expansion of conventional concepts of action through to other notions of situative, environmentally aware and intuitively anticipatory behaviour.

The first level deals with the unexpected special nature of improvisational activity. It is a characteristic of improvisation that the decisions for action required during the course of improvisation, or which precede it, cannot be foreseen: unanticipated decision opportunities and constraints generate a necessity and a pressure to make decisions. The improvisation searches for solutions for unexpectedly complex situations. It succeeds insofar as it leads to an action which is just as specific as the situation may be complicated. If the devil is in the detail, then the person improvising must go into detail. An irreplaceable broken screw, a tiny burst artery, a loud, skewed note, a torn thread... - the success of the whole hangs on the tiniest element. Here, maximum precision is needed when it comes to the fine-tuning. Improvisation lives from pure presence of mind, when everything turns around recognising the fatal error in detail in a matter of a split second and rescuing the situation through microscopically precise activity. In other words, the ability to improvise is a lived art and science of the specific: the specifics of the detail and the specifics of the situation. It is the expression of an intuitive understanding of how critical the tiniest influences can be for the whole, and that activity remains a possibility when suddenly other preconditions dominate and realities abruptly present themselves in a different way than was expected.

However, in just the same way, the overall situation can suddenly develop in an entirely different way than was expected. Nothing is as planned: there is a power cut, nothing works, there is a fundamental misunderstanding of an agreement, no-one has noticed it until the last moment, necessary material is lacking or has the wrong shape or size, the leading instrument has been tuned to the piece in the wrong key, there is no going back, and time is running out. Improvisational activity must now prove its worth under conditions that are unexpected, unclear or volatile - and which, if at all, only become clear during the course of activity. In these moments, a sixth sense is required for what constitutes the altered overall situation as such, and what priorities must thus be set. The process of activity, of improvising, is based on knowledge gained from experience, and at the same time on existing specific problem-solving competence that can be retrieved on an ad hoc basis. It is precisely in the face of crisis or unpredictable situations that humans regain the ability for targeted creativity, thanks to this core strategy - at least in the form of a solution that functions for the moment, and that enables them to influence what subsequently occurs.

Improvisation practice creates a specific knowledge of the special nature of the circumstances and forms of action. This knowledge has its own form of communication: the many stories that one has to
tell with time; stories that reveal the details, situations, surprising twists and turns and solutions. The first part of the symposium is dedicated to these stories and those that can be told from experience.

The second level focuses on the social and political conditions of improvisational activity. Here, the aim is to examine the conditions of provisional states or provisional solutions, as well as to question the very conditions that enforce improvisation. Restrictive political or economic framework conditions, and a lack of time, materials and means, can produce highly imaginative creative processes; provisional solutions are frequently created under difficult or even constraining conditions: urgent problems must be resolved when there is a lack of any clear overview and a limited degree of self-effectiveness. At the beginning here is the decision to accept the conditions instead of powerlessly succumbing to the circumstances. The desire for the “correct” solution cannot be the starting point of the activity in this moment; instead, the question arises of what is possible. In this ability of humans to liberate themselves from constrictive emergency situations thanks to creative abilities is however now also being recognised as a potential that can be exploited at great profit. People who are required to improvise learn how to work quickly and efficiently. They give their all, become creative and invent new means in order to make a virtue of their necessity. In a state of emergency, results orientation takes top priority. Those improvising are willing to use any means available to improve their situation. People who feel secure in their jobs and lives do not think in this way. During the 1960s, the pioneers of neoliberalism at the University of Chicago identified the sense of calm that prevailed under regulated working and living conditions as being a problem for the economy: feelings of security undermine productivity. Their recommendation: the de-regulation of the economy and the de-securing of living conditions increases growth: axe one job, force three people to do the work of four, and they will achieve five times as much. The state of emergency becomes the norm, the compulsion for creative improvisation a permanent necessity. Societies the world over have been and still are being restructured in accordance with this principle.

Is praise for improvisation therefore losing its innocence? Can improvisation be valid as an expression of freedom of action when enforced improvisation dominates the everyday lives of deregulated societies? Or does the misery of today make it all the more essential to make it clear how the creative force of improvisational activity differs from the creativity needed to survive that is extorted by the system? This question is one of urgent importance, since the political climate is turning. It is precisely those who have brought the extorted population into this plight who are now presenting themselves as their saviours. They portray themselves as strong men and preach nationalism. In so doing, they create the illusion of social cohesion in societies which were de facto destroyed when their social capital was made redundant through deregulation.

In contrast to the fatal attraction of the authoritarian, a vociferous commitment to politics is called for which recognises the volatile nature of the political element. In other words: is clever politics (precisely in critical moments) ever anything other than a high form of the art of improvisation? How can
good diplomacy be described other than as conscious improvisation in the settlement of conflicts of interest and the negotiation of social agreements - on the streets and in parliament alike? Does not the provisional precisely offer a chance of testing and expanding the margins of the system - perhaps re-shaping them as part of a social experiment, in order to reach transitional, provisional or even subversive solutions which create the potential for connection and in turn might be effective as a new starting point? Provisional results can provide proof of what is possible as self-created facts, and thus become argumentatively and politically effective, particularly by dismantling impediments and breaking open situations that have become rigidly stuck. The second part of the symposium deals with the contexts in which the socio-political dimension of improvisational activity can currently be described. The attempt to understand the political potential of free creative forces in a new way is accompanied by critical analysis.

At the third level of consideration, we focus on the aspect of the anticipatory concern that is an inherent aspect of working with provisional activities and improvisation (providere = foresee). The pure presence of mind required in improvisation trains a type of sixth sense: it is necessary to immerse oneself sufficiently deeply in the processes that are currently unfolding in order to intuitively anticipate what will happen next. Improvisational activity lives from feeling one's way into the environment. It requires 360-degree awareness, since everything can suddenly become of decisive importance. This is where artistic improvisation, in music or dance, for example, is the same as the passing game in team sports, any kind of social highly aware activity, anticipatory action in cases of disaster, and not least also touches on the fundamental principle of Eastern philosophies of action. The theoretician Jane Bennett correctly points out that the concept of chi has always expressed that which needs to be developed today: a sense of how one accumulates the power to act arising from environmental processes. The philosopher Rosi Braidotti expressly demands that in light of such an expanded understanding of activity, the supposed special place of humans on the world’s stage should be questioned. Understanding the power to act as emerging from the deep interplay between the actor and their environment means to think in post-human terms. If the power to act comes from the environment itself, all factors and forces that determine this environment must also be understood as being actors. In the theatre of world events, all these factors play an equal role to that of human activity. In a similar context, the feminist philosopher of science Karen Barad suggests the term agential realism. Even at a sub-atomic level, she argues, all essential processes occur in a constant interplay. Forces are not so much interdependent, but rather “respond” to each other in a continuous “ping-pong”. By analogy, Barad translates the term responsibility into response-ability. According to her view, the power of realistic activity is, in awareness of the entanglement of the actors in environmental forces, to train oneself in responsive activity which knows how to chime in with the “ping-pong” of the world. Against the background of this speculative expansion of the horizon of the philosophy of action, the third part of the symposium asks the following questions: Does the experience of improvisational activity already harbour knowledge in itself, which we would do well to fully unfold today, in the crisis of anthropocentric
concepts of activity? How can a culture of improvisation contribute towards validating qualities and skills in society in which care for others is inherently present, and which acknowledges that environmental forces have their own voice?