

Everyone's Creative: George E. Lewis and Ubiquitous Improvisation

KWAMI COLEMAN

New York University

This is a response essay to an interview with George E. Lewis, the Edwin H. Case Professor of American Music at Columbia University, conducted by Cara Furman of Teachers College. The essay explores Lewis's thoughts on quotidian creativity and the ubiquity of improvisation, their necessity in academic institutions, and their potentially life-transforming effects for all people.

ART, CREATIVITY, AND THE EVERYDAY

Art is a product of creative thinking. Indeed, for many, making art represents the pinnacle of creative activities. For the observer, it is often art's capacity to transport them and inspire awe, arresting their attention and sparking the imagination, that makes experiencing art a moving and potentially edifying experience. Whether as an object (static or in motion), a sonic or visual phenomenon, ephemeral or preserved for posterity, art is produced—as the etymology of “create” suggests—by the imagination, and the imaginative minds find ways to imprint material things and performances with a constellation of signs and symbols to be experienced, interpreted, and possibly decoded by other imaginative minds (K. Berger, 2000). An artist's craftsmanship (the composition, arrangement, or execution of the artist's work) evinces an acute, technical, and highly personalized creative process, and it is in the measure of the craft that an artist is identified as a creative person. However magical and mysterious the craftwork may appear, its production involves an assessment and negotiation of existent and emergent conditions, which is both planned and occurs in real time, and this process shapes the manner, mode, and means by which artists express their idea(s). Put another way, the creative process behind art is a problem-solving operation; in endeavoring to express themselves, artists find the most effective and impactful way to present their ideas, and enable an experience given the inherent possibilities and limitations of their circumstances. The clever and unique path taken by artists, in their craftsmanship, to transfigure and communicate ideas amid a range of circumstances is owed to their creativity.

If the role that creativity plays in creating art is obvious, its omnipresence in daily life may not be. The transcendent, beguiling effects that art can sometimes have, in addition to a variety of historical and cultural factors, have been the basis of its idolatry and fetishization, particularly in curated, commercial, and academic environments where it is excised from the realm of earthly, interpersonal activities. Additionally, the popular Romantic notion of creativity, where strokes of inspiration are visited upon messianic geniuses impelled, seemingly by prophecy, to create, is still a powerful trope in Western cultures.¹ George Lewis, the Edwin H. Case Professor of American Music at Columbia University, trombonist, composer, intermedia technology artist, and musicologist, makes the case that artists are not the only people with a capacity for creativity, but that anyone endowed with an imagination is creative. This essay is a response to an interview with conducted by Cara Furman of Teachers College in 2010. Here, I “riff” off of Lewis’s thoughts on quotidian creativity and the ubiquity of improvisation, their necessity in academic institutions, and their potentially life-transforming effects for all people. In doing so, my goal is to provide a concise summary of Lewis’s points, highlight the importance of his intervention on the academy’s routine underappreciation of improvisation as an effective research and learning tool, and join him in his advocacy for the elevation of creativity and creative practices in the lives of all people.

Throughout the interview, Lewis advocates for creativity to be reconsidered as a developmental skill that is nurtured and practiced consistently throughout someone’s life. Everyone is creative, Lewis claims, because even the most mundane tasks require some level of problem solving, a task fundamental to artistic production, and it is often the most imaginative solutions that yield the most efficient and successful results. Agency is key to both artistic and a non-artistic creative processes: what artists, who possess a high degree of specialization and/or training, do to realize their ideas in specific projects is the same set of problem solving operations that non-artists perform routinely, dispatched in different, more diverse, and perhaps less concentrated ways. A visual artist who uses her imagination to fill an empty canvas in the expression of an idea is creatively solving a problem under a particular set of conditions; in the same way, planning a trip abroad, parenting, or writing a dissertation requires imaginative thinking to accomplish the tasks at hand to realize abstract plans or ideas.

CREATIVE PROCESSES

Studies in neuroscience confirm that creativity is a fundamental attribute of human intelligence—a process engineered by the brain and shaped by our material embodiment and sociocultural context. There are many different types of creativity, each involving its unique type of information processing. Boden (2013) identifies three such modes: combinational, exploratory, and transformational, each distinguished by a distinct psychological process, which underscores the inherently diverse and plentiful ways that people can exercise creativity. Invention is key to creativity; Csikszentmihalyi (1996) proposes an evolutionary predisposition to being creative in that individuals who enjoy exploring and inventing are better prepared to survive unpredictable and potentially life-threatening conditions. Csikszentmihalyi describes creativity as a flowing experiential state that is fundamentally enjoyable, where pleasure is derived from being hyper-aware, focused, and engaged in problem-solving operations, and the prospect of accomplishing one's goals overrides any self-judgment or fear of failure. By spontaneously forging a new, unique path through a set of conditions to meet an objective, we feel a deep sense of accomplishment because it is ultimately a process of discovery. Lewis's perspective on the benefits of creativity is largely in agreement with Csikszentmihalyi up to one crucial point: Csikszentmihalyi, Lewis critiques, has a fixed notion of creativity that is based on actions already accepted as good and worthwhile (e.g., painting, ballet, poetry), whereas creativity for Lewis is a means to unlock something radically new and unapologetically idiosyncratic. Speaking from his perspective as an improvising musician and member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), the latent possibilities of creating new bold new sounds and optimized environments where self-expression can have free rein is central to Lewis's philosophy. I will return to the importance of the AACM's progressivist ethos and its role in nurturing and supporting members' diverse creative pursuits later in this essay.

The process of spontaneously creating something in response to a set of conditions, utilizing a preexisting framework or inventing a new one on the spot, is called improvisation. If creativity is a faculty, improvisation is creativity in its immediate application. Improvisation is an experiential phenomenon—we improvise in real time in response to existent conditions, and its immediacy is part of what makes it a complicated and dynamic process. For musicians, Pressing (1998) points out, improvisation involves real-time sensory stimulation and perceptual assessment, event interpretation, decision making, prediction (of others' actions), memory storage and recall, error correction, movement control, and an integration of the

responses into action—the spontaneous creation of musical statements. Moreover, for musicians who may play jazz or jazz-related music, interactions with other musicians and listeners during performances involves creative, split-second decisions that, when the conditions are right, help create an extemporized, inspired, and dynamic collective experience. Iyer (2002) describes musicians' interaction with a sonic, physical, and temporal environment as “embodied cognition,” emphasizing its predominance and historical development in jazz and other African-American music. For non-musicians, improvising a solution to a problem in daily life based on intuition, training, and the circumstances at hand can yield an unexpected and highly successful outcome, and it is precisely for this reason that Lewis underscores the importance of nurturing creativity and improvisational skills in and by all people, especially within colleges and universities purposed with priming students to engage ethically and productively in society. Lewis explains:

I don't see anybody who can survive for a moment, for even an hour . . . without engaging themselves in some sort of unforeseen, unscripted action, which is generally based on an evaluation that is itself [an] improvised recursion. . . . They're always attending to phenomena around them and they're trying to evaluate what's worthy of attention and what's not, based on their needs and the current situation, so that's a fundamentally improvised process . . . (Lewis et al., 2010)

Lewis's point that creativity and improvisation contribute to a dynamic and self-actualized existence takes on a particular currency when contextualized in the disenfranchised and maligned communities of color in his native Chicago, and in Harlem, where Columbia University is situated. Fostering creativity and the skill of improvisation in these communities was a matter of surviving deleterious and discouraging privations, but the AACM is only one example of the edifying and liberating effects a community can have in collectively sponsoring creativity.

CREATIVITY AND ACCESS: GEORGE LEWIS AND THE POWER OF COLLECTIVITY

In the interview, Lewis states:

. . . the thing that holds most people back, I think, in terms of trying to exercise their creativity is [a] lack of information. . . . That information is often dolled out according to the usual strictures of race, gender, etc., so . . . what has to be done then is to find strategic ways to, I don't know, work within and against institutions

to encourage situations in which people are encouraged to be introspective and transform their own self image and . . . that of the world.

Here, Lewis approaches the quandary of how to encourage creativity in people who might not consider themselves capable, or for whom a nurtured creativity has been restricted or denied. This raises the important ethical question of access: If we are all imaginative beings with a capacity for creativity, how can we justify the presence of structural factors that obstruct the development of this innate ability in specific social groups defined by racial, gender, and class differences?

Lewis, in his response to the interviewer's question of how he nurtures creativity, imagination, and innovation in his students and colleagues in Columbia University's structured academic environment, rests his answer on the notion of community. "When you nurture yourselves as a community," Lewis points out, "you are nurturing other people," and in doing so fostering an environment where creativity, on an individual and collective level, is valued and promoted. According to Lewis, educational institutions like universities should be modeled on the AACM, a collective founded in 1965 in Chicago's South Side by pianist and composer Muhal Richard Abrams, pianist Jodie Christian, trumpeter Phil Cohran, and drummer Steve McCall that quickly blossomed in membership. The AACM's inception was in direct response to the dearth of opportunities for black composers and musicians to develop, present, and promote original work. In nurturing its members' inherent autodidacticism, and encouraging individuality, aesthetic diversity, freethinking, and unrestricted self-expression, the AACM sought to circumvent the structural limitations of racism, joblessness, poverty, and an inadequate access to resources imposed upon black musicians in Chicago (Lewis, 2008). Musical experimentation was valued over conventional approaches to composition, and improvisation and creativity exercised in service of original ideas and modes of expression were encouraged. These principles were directed at fostering a musician's innate ability to create by providing an encouraging, altruistic environment where discussions on craft and the workshopping of original work culminated in performances that were supported by the greater community.

Mutual aid organizations like the AACM challenged and resisted the abhorrent and unequal conditions that beset inner-city black and brown communities. The decline of manufacturing in the major urban industrial centers of the North, cities like Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, Baltimore, Newark, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and New York, that began in the late 1950s increased exponentially throughout the 1960s and 1970s, setting forth waves of economic crises that directly affected already disenfranchised

working-class and minority populations. Additionally, offshored labor, advances in automated production, corporate consolidation, and a decline in demand led to massive layoffs for laborers, and livelihoods once sustained by the manufacturing industry quickly unraveled. In these inner cities, joblessness and urban decay affected the quality of life and opportunities for African Americans, Latinos (Puerto Ricans in particular), and immigrants, and blatantly racist institutional practices like redlining, re-zoning, and re-districting funneled resources away from increasingly vulnerable residents and into commercial development and suburbs. Though the cities sought to mitigate these conditions with public-housing and other “urban renewal” projects, efforts like these rarely improved the scarce employment, underfunded schooling, crumbling infrastructure, and the desperation, despair, and violence besetting minority city dwellers (Wilson, 1996).

In this hostile climate, being imaginative and exercising one’s creativity can be nearly impossible, but the AACM and countless other artists strove to improve their condition, materially and spiritually, through their craft. Where experimentation and innovation were integral to a community’s experience, and navigating adverse conditions on a daily basis was a matter of survival, support for experimentation and innovation in music reflected a broader vision for a better and brighter future. Effective problem solving was a crucial part of this initiative in the disparaged black and brown communities of formerly industrial cities like Chicago and New York, and creative thinking and improvisation increased the chances of a successful outcome. Against this backdrop, Lewis’s invitation for a deeper a consideration of the real, life-altering, and life-sustaining benefits that creativity can have in educational institutions like the university, and society more broadly, should be seriously considered. If strategically navigating a difficult set of problems in less-than-ideal conditions (improvisation) is a useful skill for anybody to have, creativity in and outside of the arts should be put at the center of our culture.

FOSTERING CREATIVITY TODAY, CREATING A BETTER TOMORROW

If we truly value creativity as a society, Lewis argues, it must be made a central part of our educational systems. Educational institutions from elementary school to universities, public and private, must prioritize creative thinking and encourage the development of improvisatory skills if their goal is producing critical, ethical, and engaged members of society. In doing so, these institutions are promoting agency, and must be flexible enough to accommodate the agency of a population if there are calls for change. “So authority becomes a problem when trying to nurture any kind

of creativity,” Lewis observes, “because creativity really shouldn’t recognize authority . . . creativity is you bucking . . . or getting around authority”; this problem requires administrations savvy and creative enough to improvise and adapt to the needs of society. Change on this scale is predicated on what Lewis calls “local innovations”—everyday creative acts by individuals that in aggregation have a profound and permanent impact on our collective fortunes. By nurturing a quotidian creativity, one where small ingenuities are just as valuable as grand achievements, and where authority is constantly aligned with consensus, we can better identify problems, envision alternatives, and create a more ideal collective circumstance.

Evidence of the undervaluing of creative thinking can be found in the disappearance of the arts in primary and secondary education. A byproduct of the underfunding of inner city public schools in the 1950s and ’60s, the disintegration of arts education peaked in the 1970s and ’80s. In a 1991 article for *The New York Times* titled “New York Found Failing On Education in the Arts,” J. Berger wrote:

New York City, which prides itself as the world’s cultural capital, is not providing most of its public school children with art and music classes, throwing into doubt whether the city can produce the audiences and performers of the future, a Board of Education task force said yesterday.

The task force found that because of cutbacks over the years, 400 of the 600 public elementary schools do not have art or music teachers and many high schools have too few to meet minimum state requirements.

“It is now possible for a student to go through the 12 grades of school and not receive instruction from trained music and art teachers,” the group report said.

Berger attributes the shortfall to the city’s decades-long fiscal problems that prompted massive teacher layoffs that most negatively affected music and art classes. At fault is the city government, according to Berger, for its neglect of the merits of creative training and squandering of the city’s artistic talent. The article closes with a statement by Beth Lief, the Executive Director of the Fund for New York City Public Education, who remarks that the long absence of art and music classes “deprived some children of stimuli that can heighten their enthusiasm for more academic subjects.”

The most striking aspect of Berger’s article is how closely it resembles current debates on curriculum design and the role of the arts in education. The headline for an article published by *The New York Times* on April 7, 2014, reads “Arts Education Lacking in Low-Income Areas of New York

City, Report Says,” while an opinion piece in the November 23, 2013, issue announces “The Arts Make You Smart,” applauding the stronger critical thinking skills developed in students chosen by lottery to visit the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas. Central to the critique of the disappearance of art education in the schools is the claim that the arts promote critical thinking skills and, consequently, better test scores. Missing in this discourse, however, are the benefits of developed creativity in our day-to-day survival and well-being, which includes school performance, professional interactions, and interpersonal relationships. Creativity is not only a means for proficiency in reading, writing, math, and science—an added advantage in a competitive world; it is also a fundamental skill with wide-ranging applications. Nurturing creativity against the odds and improvising solutions to seemingly insurmountable challenges requires the support of a community, with the payoff being a self-actualized, multifaceted, multi-talented, and empowered collective.

The interview concludes with Lewis saying:

I don’t have much to say about imagination except that I can certainly see a need for more of it in our society, but it also comes down to having enough information and also having [an] attitude and atmosphere in which you give yourself the freedom . . . where you allow yourself to imagine. People don’t feel allowed to imagine, so maybe that [can have] some strange pedagogical implication where you allow things to occur, or you encourage things to occur, or you don’t block them from occurring.

Here, Lewis has identified a problem, and the solution requires imaginative thinking and real-time action. We all can nurture creativity in each other, and, in the course of assessing our collective condition and finding solutions, our institutions should be able to adapt along with us, navigating the changes like an improvising musician. In valuing creativity as a society, and dispelling stagnant and outdated notions of what innovation and success look like, we will inculcate a more autodidactic and *sui generis* impulse that can be applied at home, in school, at the desk, on stage, in the office, on canvas, and elsewhere. More importantly, we will be empowered as individuals to express our desires and follow our own path. Self-actualization and coalition work are central tenets of the AACM and they, like other artists, and like everybody else, are insistently envisioning and in the process of creating, in real time, a world that does not yet but will soon exist.

NOTE

1. See Nicholas Cook's (2006) essay on the epistemological pitfalls of academic music theory, where the fetishizing of creative geniuses and their works inform a prevailing aesthetic value system that cleaves creation from its relationship to lived experience and social relations, both of which endow music with meaning.

REFERENCES

- Berger, J. (1991, February 14). New York found failing on education in the arts. *The New York Times*, p. B1.
- Berger, K. (2000). *A theory of art*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Boden, M. A. (2013). Creativity as neuroscientific mystery. In O. Vartanian, A. S. Bristol, & J. C. Kaufman (Eds.), *Neuroscience of creativity* (pp. 3–18). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Cook, N. (2006). Playing God: Creativity, analysis, and aesthetic inclusion. In I. Deliège & G. A. Wiggins (Eds.), *Musical creativity: Multidisciplinary research in theory and practice* (pp. 9–24). Hove, England, & New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996). *Creativity: Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Iyer, V. (2002). Embodied mind, situated cognition, and expressive microtiming in African-American music. *Music Perception*, 19(3), 387–414.
- Kisida, B., Greene, J. P., & Bowen, D. H. (2013, November 23). Art makes you smart. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/24/opinion/sunday/art-makes-you-smart.html>
- Lewis, G. E. (2008). *A power stronger than itself: The AACM and American experimental music*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Pressing, J. (1998). Psychological constraints on improvisational expertise and communication. In B. Nettl & M. Russell (Ed.), *The course of performance: Studies in the world of musical improvisation*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, J. (1996). *When work disappears: The new world of the urban poor*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Yee, V. (2014, April 7). Arts education lacking in low-income areas of New York City, report says. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/07/nyregion/arts-education-lacking-in-low-income-areas-of-new-york-city-report-says.html>

KWAMI COLEMAN is Assistant Professor and Faculty Fellow at New York University.