The Other Side of Nowhere

JAZZ, IMPROVISATION, AND COMMUNITIES IN DIALOGUE

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For Martha and Sheila

without whom . . .

JULIE DAWN SMITH

Playing like a Girl

The Queer Laughter of the Feminist Improvising Group[1]

> Culturally speaking, women have wept a great deal, but once the tears are shed, there will be endless laughter instead. Laughter that breaks out, overflows, a humor no one would expect to find in women—which is nonetheless surely their greatest strength because it's a humor that sees man much further away than he has ever been seen.
> —Hélène Cixous

In Greek mythology there is a story of an old woman named Baubo who, in an effort to help Demeter momentarily forget her grief over the loss of her daughter Persephone, pulled her dress up over her head, exposed her genitals and shouted obscene remarks and dirty jokes.[2] Apparently the distraction worked; accounts of the incident indicate Baubo's indecent gestures and lewd comments caused Demeter to laugh.

Scholars speculate that this obscene spectacle is replicated in a number of terra-cotta statues dated roughly from the fourth century B.C.E. Depicting a collapsed female body that consists of virtually nothing but two orifices, the statues reflect the Greek belief that women possess not one, but two mouths (Carson, "Gender," 72). One mouth is of course the opening to the oral cavity; the other leads to the cavernous depths of the female sex. The anatomical deformity is strangely accentuated by the reversal of the mouths on the figures: that is, the "upper" mouth is situated in the statue's abdomen, the "lower" positioned on the top of her head. As poet and scholar Anne Carson suggests, the representation of Baubo's aural and visual gesture reflects the general confusion surrounding the representation of the female body in a masculinist culture: "This Baubo presents us with one simple chaotic diagram of an outrageously manipulable female identity. The doubling and interchangeability of mouth engenders a creature in whom sex is cancelled out by sound and sound is cancelled out by sex" ("Gender," 76). According to the legend, however, Baubo is in control of the erasure. Her spontaneous and excessive performance strategically utilizes the confusion and mutability associated with the female body in order to disrupt the representation of woman as passive and silent spectacle. Baubo's gesture obscures her upper mouth to make it appear as though her lower mouth is doing all the talking, enacting a strange ventriloquism that throws the voice produced by her vocal folds into the folds of her labia. The shock of Baubo's aural/visual play ruptures the moment of viewing with an unexpected interval—a stutter—that creates a "zone of disruption and destabilization" (Buckley, 60). Laughter and the stutter are sonic twins in this respect, disruptions that linger at the threshold of sense and non-sense. The stutter shatters the silent repetition of the female body, resists fetishization, penetrates the ear with the noise of resistance while it utters profanities that trouble patriarchal space. Perhaps this is why public soundings by women produce a great deal of anxiety: the female body breaks the silent repetition of representation with its stuttering laughter.

Julia Kristeva writes that laughter is a signifying practice, a lifting of inhibitions that is transgressive, transformational, pleasurable, and productive: "Every practice which produces something new (a new device) is a practice of laughter: it obeys laughter's logic and provides the subject of laughter's advantages" (*Revolution*, 225). The practice of laughter destabilizes the boundaries separating the conscious from the unconscious, jumbles the parameters of interior and exterior space, ridicules the isolation of body from mind, and defies the gravitational pull of predictability and repetition. It is a sonic borderline state, a space of psychic excess that generates a "constant calling into question of the psyche and the world" (Kristeva, *Sense*, 19). In other words, laughter is an improvisation.

Baubo's improvisational laugh engenders a sonic and somatic outpouring, an extemporaneous reversal that turns the body inside/out. Her actions exceed specularity; her sounds confound vision and defy anatomical expectations. When Baubo laughs, sound becomes flesh, corporeal play becomes aural display and sexuality is intoned. Baubo's laughter challenges the threshold of intelligibility and normalcy; she utters the limit, the place where the subject is both articulated and annihilated: inside/womb/life merges with outside/abjection/death. Perhaps this is why Demeter doubled over in laughter. She got the joke.

Some might interpret this allegory as a warning: women who improvise in public are in danger of surrendering to the visibility of their sexual

difference by making a spectacle of themselves. Was it appropriate for Demeter to laugh given the circumstances? This is a rhetorical question, of course; there is always a risk involved anytime a woman opens her mouth(s). Baubo's action suggests—as does Demeter's (re)action—that if the female body is always already spectacle by virtue of her difference, then making a spectacle of oneself by improvising that difference is a crucial performance of agency. As a critical reflection on the social order and a pleasurable "interval of potentiality" (Buckley, 60), the laughter of Baubo and Demeter confounds representation, reconfigures spectacle, regenerates subjectivity, and improvises woman.

In his discussion of Baubo, Maurice Olender identifies three aspects associated with spectacle: gesture, desire, and gaze (89). Where and with whom desire is located is key to interpreting the spectacle, as desire mediates the network of power relations that circulate across the positions of spectacle and spectator. It is Baubo's desire to make herself a spectacle that disrupts the one-way gaze of the spectator, a refusal to mirror the "specular logic of the same" that defines the heterosexual voyeur (Moi, 133). In turn Baubo's distraction attracts Demeter—it reminds her of a knowledge that exists in excess of death, forgotten in her moment of grief—and her desire to respond is aroused.

The sonic exchange of desire between Baubo and Demeter underscores the possibility of an insurgent and noisy female improvisation. It points to the pleasure and the power of transgressive sounding, challenges the silence of repetition and questions the anxiety associated with female "noise." Baubo's perverse voice and Demeter's spontaneous laughter are simultaneously embodied and disembodied: "Sounds that are interstitial, defiant, peculiar at times . . . *queer*, in the most musical sense of the term" (Mockus, 53). As one woman exposes her flesh/voice to the other, a flesh/voice is echoed back. The laughter quells the pain of death and the ache of abjection while it celebrates the sharp tongue, the promise of mutability, the flux of sound. This is an antiphonal exchange—an excessive gesture, a queer laughter—that breaks Demeter's silence, reciprocates Baubo's laugh and resonates with/in both women. The story of Baubo is an improvisational sounding of body politics that as Mary Russo suggests, transforms the spectacle of the female body into active "multivalent, oppositional play" (62).

Fast forward to the 1970s: the legacy of Baubo and Demeter resonates with/in women improvisers, women who choose to make spectacles of themselves by sounding body, sexuality, knowledge, difference, freedom, and experience: "to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter" (Cixous, "Castration," 258). Beginning in 1977 this revolution was sounded with

particular energy in the queer laughter of the Feminist Improvising Group (FIG).

Improvising Freedom

Within the European music community interest in improvisational experimentation had developed more than a decade earlier in the 1960s, piqued by the presence of American expatriate free jazz musicians in Europe, the desire of local improvisers to stretch beyond the structures of idiomatic improvisation toward greater aesthetic freedom, and the disillusionment of improvisers with the growing commodification of music (Bailey, xi–xii; Prévost, 10). Percussionist Eddie Prévost suggests that although for some European improvisers jazz was viewed as a "major artistic and ideological force within the development of a wider-ranging creative improvised music" that continually struggled to "escape the confinement of a white-dominated capitalist culture," it too had begun to solidify "into conventions that became as hard to escape as the unfreedoms of classical or popular musics" (10).

The appeal of freedom in improvisational practices resonated with/in the emerging political climate of the 1960s as improvisers began to discard codified procedures, including those found in jazz improvisation, in favor of experimental practices. These practices were not only concerned with aesthetics but with political, economic, and social matters as well. Irène Schweizer recounts that this politically charged time influenced her decision to stop playing "the changes" and to leave improvisational structures and systems behind: "For me, it was a natural development. We had always played the music of the time. In 1968 a lot of things were happening in Europe. There were student revolutions. Barriers were falling. It seemed natural to want to free yourself" (Hale, 15).

Nathaniel Mackey observes a similar impulse in black music, particularly free jazz, that challenged the dominant culture while striving toward aesthetic, individual, and collective freedom:

> During the sixties, assertions were often made to the effect that jazz groups provided glimpses into the future. What was meant by this was that black music—especially that of the sixties, with its heavy emphasis on individual freedom within a collectively improvised context—proposed a model social order, an ideal, even utopic balance between personal impulse and group demands. (34)

The parallel development of free jazz in the United States and free improvisation in Europe speaks of the ability of freely improvised music to cut across aesthetic boundaries of containment and categorization. James Snead describes this common aesthetic impulse:

The extension of "free jazz," starting in the 1960s, into the technical practice of using the "material" qualities of sound—on the horns, for instance, using overtones, harmonics and subtones—became almost mandatory for the serious jazz musician and paralleled a similar movement on the part of European musicians branching out of the classical tradition. (222)

Although the simultaneous development of a congruent sonic aesthetic linked the practices of free jazz and free improvisation together, it has sometimes obscured the fact that the two were distinct (albeit interrelated) practices grounded in different traditions and communities. Joëlle Léandre explains the differences from a European perspective:

We received free jazz in Europe at the time when Ornette Coleman and all the other players were creating, but free jazz is not free music, free jazz is a Black music too. Free music is, I think, definitely a European music. We have a long history of the music, we have Monteverdi, we have Bartok, we have Stockhausen, it's a long line. . . . I think that this kind of music, free music, is very much a European music, and where different people come from they bring their own ways to it. You know, we have very wonderful jazz musicians in France, but they play the American music, they don't play the European music (laughs) but what I like is all this mixture. (quoted in Vickery, 18)

The suggestion here is that neither free jazz nor free improvisation existed in a vacuum; neither, however, were they completely interchangeable. It is important to recognize that the hybridity and mixing of the practices did not obscure the differences, especially in regard to the intersection of aesthetic freedom with race and class.

For example, in free improvisation—exercised within a predominately white, male improvising community existing on the margins of avant-garde and mainstream music—the move toward aesthetic freedom was a critique of class structures and power networks embedded in European music and society. Renewed interest in improvisation challenges the marginalization of improvisational practices in European art music that culminated in the nineteenth century, by destabilizing the "dominant procedures through which music is made and consumed, especially in challenging established roles for composers, musicians, and audiences" (Durant, 276). Free improvisation questions how music functions in society, especially in relation to power, to become "a point of counter-identification against systems of control, hierarchy and subordination" (Durant, 270).

African-American explorations of freedom in free jazz similarly critiqued the function of music in relation to power, but did so in the context of racial oppression. Free jazz actively critiqued and resisted racial oppression of the dominant culture within a historical continuum that connected black music to the resistance of slavery and traced its musical roots to Africa:

The music itself describes the political position of Blacks in America just as their position dictates their day-to-day life, the instruments they play and the places where their music can be heard. In the case of African-American music, the fact that the creators are the colonised in a colonialist society, has a vital bearing on the way the music has evolved, how it is regarded by the world at large, and the way in which the artists are treated. (Wilmer, *As Serious* 14)

Neither free improvisation nor free jazz, however, extended their critiques to include the aesthetic, economic, or political liberation of women. For the most part, a practice of freedom that resisted gender oppression and oppression on the basis of sexual difference was excluded from the liberatory impulses of male-dominated improvising communities. The opportunity for freedom in relation to sexual difference, gender, and sexuality for women improvisers was strangely absent from the discourses and practices of both free jazz and free improvisation.

Thus, it is difficult to describe accurately just how integral women's contributions to the development of free improvisation and free jazz were in the early days, as women's participation was limited and remains underdocumented. Chronicles of free improvisation and free jazz from a variety of sources—including Derek Bailey's *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*,[3] John Litweiler's classic book on free jazz, *The Freedom Principle: Jazz After 1958;* the more recent work of Kevin Whitehead in *New Dutch Swing*, documenting the scene in Holland; as well as John Corbett's provocative article, "Ephemera Underscored: Writing Around Free Improvisation" pay little or no attention to the music's female constituents. Perhaps because improvisationally based music struggled from the beginning for recognition, its practices and documents have not always been liberatory, often reduplicating the marginalization and exclusion women face(d) in more mainstream musical structures and in patriarchal society at large.

The particular challenges encountered by women improvisers due to the effects of gender and sex oppression, including the gendering of women's performances and audiences as feminine and/or lacking, are rarely acknowledged. In *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s,* Sherrie Tucker discusses how "stories of devaluation and absence are woven into the familiar rhythms of the popular history books about the Swing Era" (3). As with the majority of women musicians in a variety of genres throughout history, all-women swing bands were either omitted from historical accounts, treated as novelties, or considered inauthentic because they were assumed to lack ability by virtue of their sexual difference. Angela Davis notes a similar masculinist bias in historical and critical accounts of the blues that fail "to take seriously the efforts of women blues musicians and the female reception of their work. As a consequence, the central part played by women

both in the blues and in the history of African-American cultural consciousness is often ignored" (44–45).

In relation to free improvisation Irène Schweizer often acknowledges that although she was the only female instrumentalist on the European scene throughout the 1960s and the early 1970s her contributions are conspicuously absent from historical accounts:

> I had been taking part in the FMP festival during its development in the '60s and '70s, being the only woman on every festival. . . . There was a photo exhibition about all the jazz musicians from FMP festivals from 1968 to 1978, and not one single photo of me even though I took part every second year. (Les Diaboliques)

In contrast, Val Wilmer's classic book *As Serious as Your Life*—as one of the first documents of women's experiences in and around the "new jazz" in African-American communities—is an exception to the masculinist rule of exclusion. Wilmer's approach is twofold: she writes of women's experiences as support systems for their male musician partners and of their struggles as players trying to cope with a male-dominated scene. She pays particular attention to the intersections of race and class with gender and sexual difference, unearthing differences in the experiences and attitudes of both white and black women. Although the focus on women is not the core of Wilmer's project, it is extensive enough to paint an accurate, yet somewhat bleak portrait of women's position in relation to men and improvisation. Wilmer reports that many women gave up their own artistic ambitions to support their men. When they did venture out to play in clubs the reception was often lukewarm, and as Wilmer points out, the skepticism that scrutinized and devalued women's playing is summed up in the comment, "You sound good—for a woman!" (204).

By raising the issue of sexual politics in free jazz, Wilmer also unearthed the sexual politics of music criticism. She recounts that after writing these passages on women in her book, male critics criticized her for being insufficiently "feminist." She describes her dilemma:

> It was true that I had dwelt on women's supportive role rather than participatory contribution, but as someone pointed out, jazz wasn't exactly a feminist area of endeavor. Many's the time I have wished that I could rewrite that particular part of the book with a more thorough analysis of women's position. It was an intervention, though, and by and large, the response to *As Serious* was positive. (*Mama*, 287–288)

This reflection appears in Wilmer's subsequent book *Mama Said There'd Be Days Like This: My Life in the Jazz World*, a personal history centering on a young girl's passion for jazz that develops into a lifelong commitment to the music. Written from her perspective as a white, lesbian, working-class photojournalist, Wilmer details the complex negotiations required of her to navigate the world of jazz. The result is a superb descriptive journey that

moves the reader through a number of seemingly incommensurable communities simultaneously. The exploration of her complex, shifting selves consistently questions white, heterosexual, middle-class notions of identity, community, and music and demonstrates alternative possibilities of community and care. Similar to Minnie Bruce Pratt's "Identity: Skin Blood Heart," Wilmer rewrites herself "in relation to shifting interpersonal and political contexts" that enable her to construct "a notion of community as inherently unstable and contextual, not based on sameness or essential connections, but offering agency instead of passivity" (de Lauretis, 12–13). This is the vision and possibility of community when the struggle toward freedom recognizes the intersections of sexual difference, gender, and sexuality in addition to race and class, as the basis for improvisational practices.

Playing the Personal Is Political

The impetus to gather a group of women improvisers together into a collective was galvanized by the glaring absence of women improvisers en masse in performance situations. At a musician's union meeting in London, vocalist Maggie Nicols expressed to multi-instrumentalist/composer Lindsay Cooper (Nicols) her desire to explore improvisation with other women. Even with the emergence of a burgeoning "women's music" scene, Cooper and Nicols recognized the glaring absence of women improvisers. As Cooper recounts: "We got talking and we agreed that improvisation had become very important and no women were doing it. And suddenly we thought, well, let's do it! Let's get women together and do it ourselves!" (personal interview).

Involvement in the feminist movement coupled with a strong commitment to class politics and lesbian activism encouraged Nicols and Cooper to commingle the personal and the political within an improvisational context. Although both women performed extensively with men, their experience playing with other women was very limited. Nicols wondered out loud what the experience of playing with women would be like:

> We recognized that women were being excluded and we wanted to just experience what it was like to play with other women. One of the strongest things for me that came out of the Women's Liberation Movement was the recognition of the connection between the personal and the political. So to say for me that it was a personal thing was also political. I wanted to feel the intimacy musically that I felt with women. You know when you hang out with women, that quality of shared experience. How would that translate artistically? (personal interview)

Already an accomplished player by the late 1970s, Lindsay Cooper continues to look back on her choice to play with other women as a crucial move that gave her confidence in her ability as an artist:

It's hard to admit it but it's only now that I realise there were *years* when I felt intimidated by men and the assumptions concerning their abilities. It's actually fantastically liberating to realise I've been through all of that and recovered. This is not to say that one's internal oppression is the only thing to be faced because men can be difficult to work with, but what working with women has done for me is to give me a much stronger sense of myself as a musician. This means that now when I work with men I feel much more *centred*. (Wilmer, "Half," 4)

It was Nicols's approach to improvisation—an openness to inclusivity inspired by the philosophy and practice of her mentor and friend, drummer John Stevens—that initially shaped the Feminist Improvising Group. Nicols envisioned an open and changing pool of women musicians that would bring a wide range of approaches to improvisation, varied experience to technical facility, and stylistic diversity to spontaneous performances. The initial pool of musicians consisted of Cooper, Nicols, Corine Liensol, Georgie Born, and Cathy Williams. Irène Schweizer and Sally Potter joined the Feminist Improvising Group in the spring of 1978, and Annemarie Roelofs, Frankie Armstrong, Angèle Veltmeijer, and Françoise Dupety participated intermittently to form a variety of combinations of up to eight women improvising together in any given performance.[4]

Nicols arranged the first public performance of an entirely female group of improvisers during a Music for Socialism concert at the *Almost Free* in London (Wilmer, *Mama*, 284). When the leaflet advertising the concert appeared, the name of the group was listed as the Feminist Improvising Group, a name neither Nicols nor Cooper had chosen:

We didn't call ourselves the Feminist Improvising Group. We were going to call ourselves the Women's Improvising Group but the promoters of the Music for Socialism event gave us that name! So we grew into it. We actually took it on board. It was very strange that men gave us the name. (Les Diaboliques)

Nicols's suspicion of the feminist label was well founded as in the early days of the movement feminism was, in the words of Teresa de Lauretis, "anchored to the single axis of gender as sexual difference" (10). Second-wave feminism tended to present a singular, unified view of "woman" that ignored the differences that existed *between* women on the basis of sexuality, race, and class. As Nicols suggests: "I was skeptical in regard to the feminist label. Not that I don't consider myself a feminist, but more because of the association with dogmas" (Meier and Landolt, 17).

The feminist label had the potential to polarize the sexual politics already embedded in improvisation and to stigmatize women improvisers even further. Claiming a space for women in improvised music was contentious enough, but how much more contentious would it be for women to claim a feminist space within improvised music? Still, the term "feminist" had its

charm. It was a subversive and powerful moniker that was, as Nicols slyly recounts, eventually adopted by the group: "We took on the challenge and we thought okay, so be it. You want feminism, we'll give you feminism. And we certainly did, scissors and all!" (Les Diaboliques).

Improvising Consciousness

The first performance of FIG was preceded by a sort of consciousness-raising rehearsal/workshop in which the players discussed among themselves their feelings and experiences as women. The discussion was a catalyst for the pastiche of sounds and images that found their way into the improvisation:

I spoke about being a mother. Corine spoke about being treated like a child because of her disability, so already we had a mother-child scenario which we started the gig with. The others spoke of their particular personal/political issues as women—appearance, image, etc. We brought kitchen props. It was a sort of prepared spontaneity that was a very powerful, anarchic, humorous beginning. (Nicols)[5]

On stage the women appeared in drag, engaged in role-playing, performed domestic chores, peeled onions, and sprayed perfume. It was a performance Nicols describes as "absolute anarchy":

The people were shocked, because they felt the power that was emerging from the women. We did not do that on purpose. We didn't even realize ourselves what was happening. We improvised, but we improvised our own lives and our biographies. We parodied our situation, perverted our dependencies and threw everything high into the air. (Meier and Landolt, 17–18)

Throwing everything high into the air was, for the Feminist Improvising Group, the improvisation of a "critical method." To use a common cliché of the early feminist movement, it was a way of making their voices heard. On this level FIG approached improvisation as a practice of self-discovery and a process of collective negotiation, politically motivated practices linked to the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s that endeavored to express women's lived experiences. Although now debunked as ineffectual and essentialist (a marker of white, middle-class, radical feminism) the prioritization of gender issues in feminist consciousness-raising groups was both productive—

Consciousness-raising groups affirmed the most dramatic insight of the early women's liberation movement: the personal is political. Individual women shared personal experiences with the aim of rendering explicit the underlying politics shaping women's lives. (Davis, 55)

—and exclusionary:

Because of the complicated racial politics of the 1960s, which defined the women's movement as white, and because of its emphasis on personal micropolitics (often seen as a retreat from the macropolitics of race), black women generally found it difficult to identify with the strategy of consciousness-raising. (Davis, 55)

Teresa de Lauretis points to the substantive contributions of women of color and lesbians to consciousness raising that shifted the emphasis away from the narrowness of "personal micropolitics" toward a transformation of feminism as a "pursuit of consciousness and political practice" (5). This approach to consciousness raising required the recognition of and struggle with multiple dimensions of difference, a struggle that moved beyond the notion of writing the self toward a *re*writing of the self: "a process of struggle and interpretation . . . in relation to a new understanding of community, of history, of culture" (de Lauretis, 18). Consciousness-raising groups could create a space for women to unearth knowledge that was subjugated as a result of oppression on the basis of gender and sexual difference. Practicing improvisation as a form of consciousness raising enabled women to experiment with a variety of power-sharing arrangements, to negotiate leadership, and to reimagine a political practice in which women controlled their own artistic destinies by drawing directly from their lived experiences.[6]

Although FIG's members were predominantly white, so too were they lesbian and working-class, thus the intersections of gender with race, class, and sexuality were important aspects of its improvisations. For Nicols a comprehensive knowledge of these intersections has always informed her improvisations:

I see my music in connection to my political attitude. I am a woman and I identify myself with the worker's movement. That is my social background. In addition I have learned about social privileges and recognize I have privileges as a white woman in our society. I think I wanted to cross boundaries in many ways: social, emotional and in music. That is difficult to convey openly to an audience. That's why you have to be committed to the social environment you are a part of. I mean the political environment as well. You need to know what's going on around you, which political discussions are taking place. (Meier and Landolt, 18)

Being aware of the political environment also meant that the straight members of FIG, if uninitiated in the politics of lesbian sexuality, were soon politicized by their lesbian comrades:

I was not so politically involved in Holland—besides making modern music—but I wasn't lesbian and I think that makes a difference. Talking to Lindsay and Maggie helped me a lot in forming my thinking at that time. And of course that is what was happening when we were touring and doing concerts, they were telling me what was happening, or they were talking over things in London. In that case it was much more political than any men's group who were just interested in playing music. (Roelofs)

FIG performances staged numerous parodies that commented on the aesthetic, political, economic, and social position of women on a number of levels. The mother/child scenario staged between Nicols (a white woman) and Liensol (a black woman) in the inaugural FIG performance (described by Nicols above)—"I was an insane mother while Corine behaved like a child"—can be read not only as a parody of the infantilization of a woman with a disability, but as an indictment of the racial politics of the early feminist movement performed as the oppression of a black woman by an authoritative white woman.[7]

FIG also critiqued whiteness in humorous parodies of middle-class domesticity. The incorporation of everyday domestic "found" objects such as vacuum cleaners, brooms, dustpans, pots and pans, and egg slicers—in Lindsay Cooper's words transforming "the sound's of women's work into a work of women's sounds"—highlighted women's work in the private sphere as well as the subordination of working-class women as domestics (Wilmer, *Mama*, 285). Throughout the performances one or more players could be found sweeping the stage, while others gathered in small ensembles to explore the sonic possibilities of household items.

FIG used drag to critique and parody the institution of compulsory heterosexuality that existed in society and in various forms of music as well: "To concentrate while singing [Nicols] usually puts her hands over her broken fly. . . . Sally is "sweet" and "demure" in a well-known hetero love song" (Jankowski). This set the stage for role-playing and interactions between members of the group that challenged heteronormative roles causing one reviewer to comment: "On stage, they often touch each other. A lot of 'acts,' 'fights' and hugs ended up on the stage floor tonight" (Jankowski). By violating taboos of musical propriety and masculinist competition that prohibited musicians from touching one another, FIG more than hinted at the possibility of sensuous and sexual relationships between women. The integration of lesbian sexuality into the improvisational text enabled the Feminist Improvising Group to ask, "what gets *lost* when [a woman] and her music are studied in the 'company of men,' and what is recuperated when [a woman] joins 'the company of women?'" (Mockus, 52).

Following this trajectory Irène Schweizer continues to question the assumptions that constructed the world of jazz and improvised music as heterosexual:

Why are so few jazz musicians gay? This question has never been asked. The jazz musician has a totally different image. He has to act macho: to read the notes with one eye and to peek around in the audience for nice women. With improvised music the consciousness of musicians has changed a little bit. There are some emancipated men: George Lewis, Maarten Altena, Lol Coxhill, but gay musicians? Even

if they were gay, they wouldn't be showing it. With some exceptions like Cecil Taylor, but there are not many. (Meier and Landolt, 17)

The decentering of heterosexual interactions that are assumed to exist in and around musical performances and a refusal to "pass" as straight opened possibilities for the improvisation of female sexuality. In effect FIG queered space of improvisational practice. As Nicols explains, "We are not lesbians [on the music scene] by chance. That has something to do with autonomy. . . . The lesbians were pioneers and had to be lesbian" (Meier and Landolt, 18).

Improvising Antiphony

Improvisation served as a site for the negotiation of individuality and collectivity through the multiplicitous interactions of improviser to improviser, improviser to audience, as well as audiences to one another. FIG performances improvised self and community as a feminist consciousness "attained through practices of political and personal displacement across boundaries between sociosexual identities and communities, between bodies and discourses" (de Lauretis, 18). Part of FIG's political and aesthetic program was to institute opportunities for antiphonal exchange between performers and audiences by consciously dismantling the divisions that separated them, a power-sharing tactic that extended well beyond the stage. For FIG member Sally Potter, breaking down the division between the audience and the performer was a political strategy that emerged from an awareness of feminist and class politics:

> Both the specialness ascribed to individual performers and the performer/audience divide itself are seen as unhealthy symptoms of a class divided society, the performer taking an honorary position of power. The strategy then becomes to break down the divide and emphasize participation as a way of saying anyone can do it. (291)

The idea that "anyone can do it" was often unpalatable to improvisers and audience members who valued the display of technical virtuosity as the marker of improvisational competence above all else. Improvising percussionist Eddie Prévost cautions against the tendency he calls "technological elitism," insisting that improvisation requires "dexterity of all kinds (social as well as technical)" (5). For Nicols the ability to integrate dexterity of all kinds into improvisation requires a skill she calls "social virtuosity":

> For me social virtuosity—social skills really—is part of [what it takes] to communicate with an audience and with other musicians. It also involves the social skills used to live your life. How you are in the community and those sorts of things. Being able to have that kind of creative spontaneity in every aspect of your life. (telephone interview)

For Irène Schweizer, reading technical virtuosity through social virtuosity provided an opportunity to redefine improvisation and (re)invent standards:

> It is very important that we all got the chance to play together. But there are also problems: Which musicians are you going to invite? Which are the standards you demand? Technical brilliance? Professionalism? Enthusiasm? Invention? Imagination? I would prefer a mixture of all. That's an important gain of FIG. It defined new standards. Until then these were defined by men. (Meier and Landolt, 18)

In part, inventing new standards meant dispensing with the notion that "men are destined to be the keepers of the musical flame." Val Wilmer describes this reinvention as "moving from total immersion in the lives of men who structured the music" toward an awareness of the "prejudices" women have internalized about their own abilities in an effort "to support women's right to an equal share of the bandstand" (Wilmer, "Half," 4).

Nicols remembers that FIG's challenge to "technological elitism" and fixed notions of "musical competency" was often dismissed by male musicians: "Whether it was the jazz community that said to Irene and me, 'you and Irene are really great but everybody else is crap' or the more progressive rock 'Henry Cow' people [who] would like what Lindsay and Georgie were doing and all that. So, divide and rule." Schweizer came up against similar sentiments:

> Some people asked me: "Why do you play with those women? They can't play and they're no good and you don't have to do that. Why do you play with those women?" It was always difficult for me to explain why, because for me it was just important to play like this in a group of women and to support them.

For Roelofs, the lack of support from men was disheartening but also suspect:

> We were eight people, some of whom were good players and some of whom weren't so experienced but were politically very right and in terms of improvising picked up nice things. [FIG] was more like a sort of workshop where people of all different kinds of levels attended. That could certainly be heard but, I don't know, maybe we could have hoped for more support from the men's side. [They could have said] well, just keep on going. But mostly the men said it's no good. I definitely think it's not only the musical level they were talking about. I think it was felt as a threat for a lot of men to just see so many women on stage.

Nicols, Schweizer, and Roelofs agree that the criticism received from men (often communicated indirectly) was frequently imbalanced and rarely constructive:

> The critics were never medium, it was always high calling our work very interesting stuff or it was absolutely low, the deepest saying, how can a festival have these women? . . . I think Lindsay and Maggie would certainly agree that the feeling we sometimes felt when the critics were criticizing us was very denigrating. They

would say, these *women*, not these musicians, these *women*, argh, eight women on stage, oh god what's happening, get some men out there! (Roelofs)

One incident that stands out in the minds of all of the FIG members I interviewed was their performance at the Total Music Meeting in Berlin in 1979 and the response of the well-known avant-garde musician Alexander von Schlippenbach. Nicols describes what happened as she remembers it:

He came up to us before the gig and he was kissing our hands. Now, we did a phenomenal gig there. I mean it was phenomenal. It was mad, it was anarchic. It was a mixture of grace and clumsiness—the audience loved it. Then we found out from [the organizer's partner] that Alex had gone to him and complained about us being there, saying that he could have found loads of men that would have played a lot better, that we couldn't play our instruments. I mean this included Irene and Annemarie and Lindsay and myself! And it was the hypocrisy of that. [Later] Lindsay and I went to a women's festival in the same place and we went into the gents toilets and wrote graffiti all over the gents toilets: "Watch out Alex von Schlippenbach, we've got our scissors ready." You know, we graffitied the gents toilets [laughs]. And it was only just recently that I started speaking to him again because I thought I've got to let it go. He probably doesn't even realize this.

The extent to which readings of FIG performances were effected by gender and sexual difference is difficult to assess or dissect. Was there a masculinist musical gaze/ear operative here? Did the disavowed gender anxiety—related to the spectacle of so many unsupervised and unpredictable women on the stage—(re)surface in the accusations of technical incompetence, lack of speed, and fluency? Guitarist Eugene Chadbourne, who also played at the 1979 Total Music Meeting, speculates that gendered style as well as sexual difference factored into the critical assessment of FIG's performances, although these were not the sole criteria:

My impression at the time was that the cool, in-crowd clique at the Total Music Meeting in Berlin wasn't into anything that was outside of what they were doing. . . . This was my main experience with FIG because the festival went on over four nights and I think each group played three or four times. I was playing with the Japanese trumpeter Toshinori Kondo and our music was not well liked by either this in-crowd of older players or the audience. The lack of support for FIG must obviously extend beyond the boundaries of that group into the entire area of women musicians. . . . I am sure the lack of men on stage made some men feel excluded. Then I guess the next step is they listen to the music or watch what is going on with an attitude, like let's see them prove themselves.[8]

At the most fundamental level, male improvisers regularly excluded women from their groups, and even if the exclusion was inadvertent, it was also blatant. This meant that the mere presence of FIG as an exclusively female group stirred controversy in the improvising community. The extreme reactions to FIG performances raised questions about the level of anxiety attached to the "exclusion" of men from FIG, the general lack of support for women improvisers, the heteronormative reading of improvisation, and the

severity of critical response. The spectacle of women improvising without men tended to overshadow the improvisations themselves and obscure how the performances were received:

It's amazing the number of men that were saying, "Why are there no men?" And yet nobody had ever dreamed to think of asking why there were men only [in groups]. They'd say, well, there are just no women around. There's a kind of weird, twisted logic whereby men think it's not deliberate, we haven't deliberately excluded women. And that's even more insidious because they just haven't thought about it. At least we thought about it. (Nicols, personal interview)

FIG demonstrated that free improvisation was not free of masculinist tendencies, heterosexual expectations, or immune to gender anxieties. Although not all practices in improvisation reinforced the normative performance of gender, sexual difference, and sexuality it is clear that the position and participation of queer and straight women in the development and deployment of improvisational practices and codes was, and to a great extent still is, tentative at best.

Nor was FIG immune to criticisms from feminist audiences purportedly supportive of "women's music."[9] The dogmatic feminist gaze that criticized FIG for being too virtuosic and abstract—interpreted as macho posturing and elitism—at times plagued them. Val Wilmer recalls one of several frustrating incidents when the collective was performing at Drill Hall in London as part of a newly organized Women's Festival:

The Drill Hall concert left many women at a loss. It was a freewheeling, improvised piece, played by forthright musicians who obviously knew their instruments. But the "free music" idiom was unknown to most of the audience, and the unease and uncertainty were expressed about whether, being so "inaccessible," theirs was an elitist concept. It was bitterly frustrating for the musicians involved to be rejected in this way. Most of them had a history of struggle against male refusal to allow them a place on the bandstand. Now, having shown that not only could they play their instruments but were equipped to handle the most demanding of concepts, they were under attack from the quarter where they most needed friends. (*Mama*, 285)

There were, of course, many favorable reactions to FIG improvisations by both women and men that attended the concerts. FIG was able to introduce feminist politics to a largely uninitiated group of men as well as introduce free improvisation to a largely uninitiated group of women. Nicols cites FIG as an influence on the improvisational group "Alterations," while Cooper recalls reactions from a woman artist working in another medium: "I remember one gig FIG did and a friend of mine that I was working on a film with said: 'I don't know what on earth you're doing but I like it.' And I thought well, that really is all you need to say."

Overall, the Feminist Improvising Group did play in a number of women's festivals—the Stockholm Women's Music Festival, the Copen-

hagen International Women's Music Festival—and to a majority of all-women audiences:

> Women, who did come because we were women, trusted us because we were women, and through that started listening to the music. I know that because of that experience a lot of women went on to listen to the whole spectrum of improvised music, not just women's music. So in a way we were ambassadors for the music as well. And I love the way—I'm being ironic here—women are not seen as an important audience. (Nicols, personal interview)

In these performances FIG applied their skills of social and technical virtuosity, improvising issues particular to women from complex sociopolitical, economic, and aesthetic perspectives: "By treating improvisation not as an isolated artifact but as something springing directly from women's experience, the musicians drew women into their music who might not otherwise be concerned with the concept of free improvisation" (Wilmer, "Feminist").

The opportunity to play for women audiences became an opportunity to reconfigure the relationship between spectacle and spectator apart from the typical scenario of masculine desire that constructed improvised music as heterosexual, positioned women musicians as spectacles for the masculine gaze and/or assumed that women on and off the bandstand were either wives, girlfriends, or groupies. Instead, improvising on their own terms was a chance for women to foreground *their* bodies and *their* sounds for the pleasure of other women. If women in the audience were not particularly fluent in deciphering the codes of free improvisation, their fluency with the all-too-familiar tropes of the female body and women's precarious position to sound and spectacle was indeed proficient. FIG's improvisations were attuned to the facility of the audience to play with and against the political codes of race, gender, sexuality, and class as well as their facility to play with the aesthetic codes of improvisation. For FIG playing was a sonic negotiation of eroticism, resistance, liberation, joy, pleasure, power, and agency, a mulitlayered call and response between individual improvisers and a community of listeners.

FIG was instrumental in encouraging listeners/interpreters to negotiate the work from a queer perspective, opening a space for the listener who responds to the laughter of women with her own improvised laughter. In other words, the spectacle of the Feminist Improvising Group was a queer sounding that demanded queer listening, an antiphonal and erotic playing by ear that heard pleasure and desire in the strange resonances and sonic exchanges of women's embodied, lived experience. There is a moment during a FIG performance recorded live at the Stockholm Women's Music Festival, in which the audience spontaneously responds to the screams,

wails, and instrumental flurries of the players on stage with their own shrieks and ululations. The players pay attention to this response and reciprocate with/in a cacophony of sound: the flesh/voice of Baubo echoed in Demeter's laugh. The pleasure and pain heard in the disruptive stutters of Baubo and Demeter are heard again in the performances of the Feminist Improvising Group. The insurgent, noisy, female spectacle performed in ancient Greece is (re)played in the queer laughter of women improvisers, the improvised laughter of queer women.

Notes

1. See Young and Poynton.
2. For a comprehensive discussion of Baubo that includes the dating and significance of the statues attributed to this story, see Olender, "Aspects of Baubo" and accompanying plates.
3. A number of women I interviewed were bewildered by Bailey's omission of women improvisers from this project.
4. Instrumentation was as follows: Lindsay Cooper (bassoon, oboe, soprano sax); Maggie Nicols (voice, piano); Corine Liensol (trumpet); Georgie Born (bass, cello); Cathy Williams (voice); Irène Schweizer (piano); Sally Potter (voice, alto sax); Annemarie Roelofs (trombone, violin); Frankie Armstrong (voice); Angele Veltmeijer (flute, tenor, soprano and alto sax); Francoise Dupety (guitar).
5. The source of this excerpt is an informal written correspondence with Nicols that was not part of the formal interviews: used with permission.
6. Thanks to Becki Ross for this insight and for providing a perspective on the heterosexism and racism that pervaded many consciousness-raising groups of the time.
7. The scenario described to me by Nicols also appears in Meier and Landolt: "I was a mother and on stage there was a gap between me as a mother and as a performer. Corine was in a peculiar situation, she wanted to work on her music—she had played the piano and the violin since she was four years old—but she lost the function of her arm in a car accident. So she started to play the trumpet. She changed so much and threw everything she knew about composed music overboard. In addition she went through constant pain. . . . All of this was raw material for our show" (18).
8. Elsewhere in the interview Chadbourne refers to the prevailing FMP style as "old-school macho."
9. See Tucker for a discussion of the differences between the political and aesthetic attitudes of women who played in the "all-girl" swing bands of the 1940s and second-wave feminists who discovered their music in the late 1970s.

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