

RUNNING HEADER: The Accumulation of Effort

The Accumulation of Effort: a collaboration with self

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When doing things to cause myself physical and mental discomfort, I view myself...as an opponent in a kind of game. My other self is not a friend; to the contrary, he is best regarded, in the words of Epictetus, 'as an enemy lying in wait.'

-William Irving, *A Guide to the Good Life*

In the dreamer's dream, the dreamed one awoke.

-Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*

What parts of the self are engaged in creative work? Does the whole self function as one while working to craft a piece of art, or do some parts lift more than others? Do these separate selves engage one another? The process of group collaboration is well documented, where two or more individuals affect one another's process, thinking, style, and in many cases, the entire medium of expression. This effect can bring about profound changes in the work produced and in the life of the collaborator. But what happens in an individual's creative experience? Can one person intentionally collaborate with themselves in any meaningful and transformative way? This paper will investigate the idea that a single individual, working alone, can and does experience a similar internal process as do larger collaborative cohorts, by engaging their inner personae apart from the outer influencing world. In this way, the artist promotes an individuation in themselves via the connection to an intuitive pathway through the collective unconscious, into

the *psyche*. In an effort to elucidate these creative dynamics, this paper will include documentation from experiments designed to highlight not only the process of singular creative effort, but the myriad influences from a depth psychological and Jungian perspective.

Theater of the Self

The presupposition of this experiment rests on the understanding that the inner *image* brings *gnosis*, or that “intuition is the lively, embryonic meaning-desiring quality of the unconscious” (Rowland & Weishaus, 2021, pg. 3). Jesus is quoted as saying it a bit differently; “The whole on high hath part in our dancing. Amen. Whoso danceth not, knoweth not what cometh to pass. Amen” (Thompson, 1996, pg. 83). The author continues,

To understand events, or what comes to pass, one must understand the cosmic dance, that musical and geometrical pattern of movement in Creation. The patterning of all patterns of events is the *logos*. At the summit of human understanding in the Dance, or in the ecstasy of the Unitive state, *mythos*, is no longer a description; it is a performance of Reality.” (pg. 83)

The intention for this project was to identify and isolate the various voices or personae that participate in improvisational creation. However, the unique factor here was to respond solely to the self that had just created. In other words, to try refreshing a viewpoint immediately before responding to the previous attempt. Ultimately, the intention would result in presenting the recorded work in a public forum: in this case, a website. I noted early in the process that, “collaborative work, if it matters at all, serves a higher purpose. It serves the culmination and combination of multiple efforts” (McDevitt, 2021, pg. 2). This was used as a touchstone

throughout the exercise to remain grounded in the structure, and allow hidden forces to attend and affect the art. If archetype is a force of potential patterns residing in the collective unconscious, we can look for their manifestations in the expression of spontaneous creative work (Neumann, 1959, pg. 82). It is our hope that in reaching for expression of *mythos* we may touch this ‘performance of reality,’ if only briefly. This is the archetypal meaning-desiring entity referred to in the phrase, ‘theater of the self.’

Collaborative Framing

To better understand the process of individual collaborative effort, we should examine the structures of collaboration in general. When looking at commonalities of known collaborative circles, Farrell highlights six distinct stages: Formation, rebellion, negotiating, creative work, collective action, and separation (2001, pg. 17). This project encountered a variation of all of these, as well as syzygies of several, which themselves are built upon years of previous experiences in personal and collaborative artistic ventures. As Sawyer points out, our previous creative efforts build, like potential energy in a material object, creative possibilities in ourselves. (2017, pg. 193). This energy was revealed and engaged over the duration of the process.

The structure established for the experiment was simple, at least at the outset: create frames of reference for improvisation: musical and somatic. These were: (a) progress through musical compositions on instruments least familiar to most, and vice versa, on randomly selected themes; (b) create several musical pieces with varying degrees of complexity and structure; (c) use these musical compositions as a soundtrack for movement improvisations, to be filmed and

presented as final documentation. Three of these are published online as reference material accompanying this scholarship.

The initial work of composing was hindered by the process itself. Intending to grab the first thing that arose proved to be unworthy of pursuit. These attempts fell far short of attaining a level of listenability. That is to say, the first self that asked to be let in was the Editor. He was not admitted, but held, as it were, outside the process, with the understanding that his voice would be heard and given permission to express himself as a final arbiter of personal merit. This would be an ongoing struggle in an effort to leave judgement behind and remain true to as honest an interpretation of moments as possible (McDevitt, 2021, pg. 2).

Rebecca Solnit writes, “Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That’s where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go” (2005, p. 4). This points to one of the most important components of any collaborative process; letting go of outcomes. We hypothesize that we will arrive somewhere, and would be amiss if we did not establish a goal. If we fix our ambition too narrowly we will likely miss the unintentional, and often more numinous, products of our efforts. This may have been the most difficult part of the entire process: the relinquishing of expectations. And ultimately this proved a failure, of sorts. Early on it became clear that open ended improvisation with no clear intention would create the aural equivalent of muddy paint, achieved by mixing too many colors at random. While this could be dismissed as merely a technical problem, the results generated insights that might not have otherwise been discovered. In particular, the realization that limitations are another layer of meaning imposed on a process, clarified and opened the way

for more purposeful work. Once that layer was reached, the real journey began. This parallels the formation and rebellion stages of the collaborative process.

Perhaps our destination is a feeling rather than a place. But ultimately, the goal of a group effort is to sense when the appropriate consequence is reached. The Chinese notion of *wu-wei* echoes this concept.

The distinguishing feature of *wu-wei* is the absorption of the self into something greater.

That is, whether we emerge from a state of effortlessness and unselfconsciousness feeling energized or enervated probably depends, at least in part, on our values: How does the activity in which we just engaged reflect our larger sense of who we are and what we hold dear? (Slingerland, 2014, pg. 47)

As the project progressed into the negotiation phase, an alignment began between the creator and the internal voices alternately vying for attention. Once the experiment moved into the movement studio, there also emerged a conversation between the new, unfamiliar space, and immediate choices that needed to be made regarding aesthetics: costume, lighting, what music, etc. After only two days in the studio, moving and creating freely from musical improvisations, the process began to uncover real layers of meaning and echoed Slingerland's supposition of how flow reflects the larger sense of internal meaning and values. It was at this stage memories reemerged, as if a fresh wind had blown layers of sand and dust from long buried boxes (McDevitt, 2021, pg. 4). Single elements were instinctively added to the matrix: a chair, simple costume, lighting, and of course, music.

Paula Vogel wrote of the director Anne Bogart,

To watch [her] work with an actor and a chair is to see both the actor and the chair in new ways: not only in the way that the chair is manipulated by the actor, but the way the actor appears to be manipulated by the chair. [She] has the amazing ability in staging through a precise, plastic formalism to estrange the body of the actor while animating the furniture. (Bogart, 1995, pg. 90)

In the autocratic method of directing oneself, there is a disembodiment that must occur: a frequent self-relatedness, or checking-in, as if testing the water before swimming. Often the ideas do not come until the music plays, or the shadow one casts is seen on stage and becomes a new brush with which to paint. All of these factors play in real time and affect each other internally. The above reference is particularly relevant as when I discovered a chair in the space and intuitively placed it on my “stage” to work with. It became a tool I used to focus movement on and around.

A sense of nostalgia and sadness seemed to descend through many of the sessions. These emotions were not negative, but instead contributed a quality of wonder and mystery that echoed experiences of my late teens and early twenties, when, perhaps not coincidentally, my life-long artistic journey really began in earnest. This is of significant importance as a form of recognition of the self: a mirror into the past acknowledging and honoring the groundwork laid for this process to occur. Rollo May (1975) observed the vast polarity at work in the artist and attributed the creative power to the counterpoint between the ‘being’ extant in the work and the

‘non-being’ in the readied state of the artist (pg. 79). I ascribe this latter function as the source of the familiar pangs of reminiscence that marked this process.

May emphasised that the artist’s ability to perceive the internal and external voices requires a “nimbleness,” or “sensitivity” that should not be relegated to mere passiveness (1997, pg. 80). The attention required implies a strength like the harmonic potential of taut piano wires, which vibrate in sympathy to a variety of overtones. The more elements introduced into the matrix, the more overtones produced. Finding the point at which the elements are still distinguishable and satisfy artistic intentions is the heart of the work.

The Results

The experiment yielded eight musical compositions and twelve movement improvisations. Of these, three were chosen and published to represent the process, as they exemplify the ways each work counterpoints the other. In them, there exists a sort of character who emerged from the process itself, and this character took on the role of improviser in my stead.

In theatrical mask work, the actor “shoes” a mask and embodies the characteristics the face suggests, or in some cases, demands. Body must communicate what the face cannot express. In doing so many spectators report seeing the mask appear to change its expressions even though they know the features are fixed and static. After trying several other options, I chose a very simple mask: a pair of glasses. This choice offered a way to move through my own identity and express a part of it through a medium I had not used in quite a while. There was a measure of

safety afforded by the choice. I could now be free to express anything, as I was no longer entirely myself. It also gave the movement a specific character on which to identify.

The clown is showing up a bit...the regard, the hyperbolic eye/gesture, the glasses. They make it easier to move, somehow. Without them I find I'm self-conscious and the ego looms large, full of expectation. With the mini mask I disappear and can make the right shape at the right time. Even though it colors the experience, it also frees the creative spirit. (McDevitt, 2021, pg. 4)

Similarly, after some experimentation, lighting placements, the choice of set pieces, and music were all honed down to the bare minimum: three lights, a chair, and a rug.

The rug, for instance, created a simple structure: stay on the rug. The space itself also limited the choices into very specific domains. The studio was small, and for a tall performer, controlled movements were necessary to avoid hitting the ceiling. Instead of becoming limitations, these parameters were used to inform the choices and guide the improvisation. As Nachmanovitch (1990) states,

The selections we *have* made affect the selections we *will* make. A blank canvas or piece of paper is without form, and voice but a single mark on it sets up a definite world and poses an infinite series of creative problems. (pg. 103)

Improvisation I, which is set to an original composition, is lyrical in form. The previous improvisations revealed significant shadows on the floor and walls which became puppets with

which to play in subsequent improvisations. *Improvisation II*, while also lyric, switches the format to respond to found musical compositions. This and *Improvisation III* have significantly distinct flavors apart from the first. While still improvisations, they serve to balance the totality of movement responses and provide controls for deeper insight into the process.

The identifiable aspects of personae were primarily shadow and anima. In particular, shadow can be seen relating to outer stimuli in the piece *Improvisation III*, where frenetic music creates a fractured and disjointed dialogue with self, resulting in severe movement and violent outbursts. In contrast, the soft, feminine movements summoned by the music in *Improvisation I* are explorations more in concert with the anima, even though, ironically, there is a literal shadow playing a key role in the movement. There are more varied explanations that a longer examination might uncover, but these voices seemed to be the loudest and most resonant in the work. Ultimately, the entire journey, from inception to completion, revealed incredible depth of potential for individuation. As from a harvest, there are gleanings of rich and valuable content that, if cultivated, will serve much broader purposes.

The separation phase began when the studio was emptied and the pieces completed. At this point the door was opened to the Editor, who, perhaps properly chastened, took a seat and offered his opinions, as always, informed by cultural norms and expectations. Jung also observed, regarding the permanence of the unconscious,

When something vanishes from consciousness it does not dissolve into thin air or cease to exist, any more than a car disappearing round a corner becomes non-existent...We find the same thing with sensation...the decrease of attention causes its apparent disappearance. (1990, pg. 76)

Once the experiment ended and my attention moved, these conjured spirits lingered, then vanished, contributing to a lightness of being and a generally renewed sense of purpose and moment.

Conclusion

Jung pointed out that art is a kind of creative rearrangement, rather than received broadcast, as it were. He uses the metaphor of a plant using the artist as a medium of growth (1978, pg. 72). The experiment of this effort sought to favor the conditions for that plant to germinate. By creating a safe space, (formation, rebellion,) in which the vulnerable seed can express its potential, (negotiation, creative work) several roots took hold and sprouts developed. Were further cultivation possible, these would become full-fledged works that could convey more permanently informative content (collective action) and potentially transform an audience.

The continued layering of improvisation provoked several transformations, giving voice to hidden aspects of my persona. In his chapter on Jung, Fertel (2015) invokes Annie Dillard's desire to "live like a weasel," bringing the emphasis on living "the perfect freedom of single necessity" (pg. 368). This elegantly describes the alignment between purpose and action in this experiment. The process of becoming, re-membering, literally coming back to the self, was the

embodied experience of this exercise. This recognition allows rediscovery and exploration of new possibilities and inner landscapes of mythic image, exactly the process of individuation.

Hillman (2014) theorized that beauty is irrevocably intertwined with soul, and thus where beauty appears so does the animus mundi (pg. 37). In which case, there were true moments where these experiences seemed to touch the soul of the world and in doing so, received its touch in return.

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