



What is, is all there is: Book review – *The Art of Is: Improvising as a Way of Life* by Stephen Nachmanovitch

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Stephen Nachmanovitch published his first book, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (1991), thirty years ago. His new book is a sequence of connected essays, grouped in three parts: Interplay, Thinking as Nature Thinks, and Art and Power. The essays are eclectic, erudite and diverse, yet cohere to form a powerful unity. *Free Play* offered significant insights and has been a continuing source of inspiration for many artists interested in improvisation. *The Art of Is* has a much broader scope: it is ultimately about how to live.

Drawing on decades of improvisational practice, Nachmanovitch reflects on some of the most urgent artistic, political, communal, ecological and

spiritual questions we face. His contention is that an understanding of art rooted in improvisation offers a doorway into understandings we need to acquire (or re-acquire), if, as a species, we are to survive. Though written and published before Covid 19, it speaks urgently to how we might respond to this time. It is a superb and necessary book: wise, profound, accessible and precise.

The subtitle, 'Improvising as a Way of Life', suggests the author's breadth of intention. He is clear that the practice he is drawing from is not only from the world of music, but that he is drawing equally from encounters with spiritual traditions,

especially Buddhism. While in his twenties, Nachmanovitch tells us that he:

met ... a Zen Buddhist priest.....
So began for me a lifelong exploration of the Buddha dharma, the Tao and other traditions East and West that link up to artistic practice. And with a Buddhist perspective, I began to link improvising with the other imps: impermanence and imperfection. (4)

That he refers to both improvisation and the Buddhist perspectives of impermanence and imperfection as 'imps' – small, playful creatures of mischief – is characteristic of the lightness of touch and humour with which he pursues and evolves his arguments. Though the intentions are vast, the tone is playful, witty and self-deprecating.

The heart of Nachmanovitch's argument, linking both spiritual and artistic practice, is that improvisation requires a letting go of preconception, of any sense of 'how things ought to be'. Improvisation

requires us to be present, connected, compassionate towards ourselves and others, playful, curious and, in profound ways, real. It acknowledges that what we can effect lies in this moment, and that the effect we can have is through establishing and cultivating relationship. Outcomes are beyond our control.

Repeatedly, Nachmanovitch returns to the centrality of listening, presence, non-judgement and openness of relationship. The epigraph of the book is from Gregory Bateson, whom Nachmanovitch acknowledges as a mentor and inspiration, and to whom the book is dedicated. Bateson writes: 'It takes two to know one.' This is a foundational perspective suggesting we can only know anything (animate or not), through consideration of its relationship with its context and its 'other'. An ultimate tenet of the book is that knowledge, action, and right-living are relational, not individual.

Nachmanovitch roots his essential hope in a belief in intrinsic human goodness, a belief that human's nature is to relate lovingly not only to each other, but to the entire ecology in which they find themselves. He writes that what he wants to evoke in the 'spirit of this book' is nothing less than 'a creed of love, people to people, people to nature, across time' (203-4).

Early in the book Nachmanovitch modestly suggests that he intends to offer 'glimpses into moments of human contact' (5); however, the journey moves to considerably grander visions. For example, 'Learning to be a better improviser goes hand in hand with learning to be a better human being.' This is because 'both are contingent on communicating with others, remaining open to surprise' (150). At times the tone is that of a manifesto: 'I am here to tell you that the arts are not frosting on life, they aren't an extra little entertaining

piece that you add in when everything else is taken care of. Art is life itself' (220).

The author is unafraid of confronting intellectual perspectives that oppose, dismiss or disregard his passionate advocacy of human renewal:

In this postmodern age we find ourselves enmeshed in civil wars, tribal prejudices that we thought we had outgrown long ago. We can dare to counter the spirit of hate and separation with the romantic view of connectedness. I am calling for a new romanticism. (203-4)

This willingness to use the deep wisdom of diverse practices to challenge the sometimes arid intellectualising of academicized thought, underlines the radicalism of this book. Nachmanovitch advocates a root-and-branch re-imagination of a 'way of Life', through the lens of artistic and spiritual practice, rejecting the mechanistic industrialism and environmental vandalism of late colonial capitalism, and equally rejecting the conceptual intellectualism that is

sometimes offered as an alternative. As such, Nachmanovitch recalls the writing of another great American romantic, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who writes: 'I am awaiting / perpetually and forever / a renaissance of wonder' (1958: 49).

For myself, *Free Play* has repaid many return visits over the years, its insights and wisdom evolving as my own work has changed and matured. *The Art of Is* promises to do the same. The centrality of self-observation and cultivation of an ability to recognise and adapt to the ebb and flow of inner and outer experience, both of which are central to liveness in performance and mindfulness in action, makes this book a powerful contribution to literature on sustainable and healthy ways of living.

This is an urgent and profound book which communicates with huge erudition and a thrilling lightness of tone. Like the master artist he is, Nachmanovitch lets you

smile and tap your toes, while changing the way you see the world:

We live in a world of impermanence, imperfection and improvisation. We need to do some fast reimagining of what human life can look like and be. Even more important, we need to accept the realities of our situation. The arts, sciences, technologies – formats of human relations and ethics that have carried us this far – need to be constantly reexamined and recalibrated in relation to the context that surrounds us, in this time, in this place. (215)

References

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