

CEREAL

In this volume, we explore the theme of **process**. We converse with **Faye and Erica Toogood**, discuss garden design with **Luciano Giubbilei**, and perfumery with **Lyn Harris**. We visit the studios of **Stanley Whitney** and **Elliott Smedley**, and travel to the mountains of **Bhutan** and the hills of **Rwanda**.

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ON IMPROVISING

words

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When writing music, a moment occurs where the process of its creation ends, and the composition becomes a finished piece. The harmonies are devised, the melody is perfected. The song can then be pinned down as a recording, like a butterfly in a vitrine, to be enjoyed whenever the listener wishes. But there is another kind of music where this boundary dissolves, where the process of creating and the process of experiencing occur simultaneously, in one unified moment.

I am sitting on yellowed grass under a large, white tent, shaded from the bright afternoon. In front of of me, on a low stage, sits Shabaka Hutchings, his saxophone waiting on a stand by his feet. He pauses, considering each question the audience asks, before responding with a smile, in tones laced with London and Barbadian inflections. After the final question, he stands up. This time, he explains, he is going to play unaccompanied, and completely improvised. He takes off his glasses, picks up his instrument, shuts his eyes firmly, and takes a deep breath.

The notes begin, soft yet quick. He plays without pause, the notes cascading, rising, and receding, like gusts of rain. His cheeks puff as he breathes in through his nose, creating an unbroken stream of air that flows through his body and instrument. He rocks back and forth, snatching for breath in an unceasing, dizzying whirl. Ligaments drum beneath the skin of his forearms, taut as ropes. The saxophone growls and screeches as he approaches a pinnacle — jolting, neck bulging, face reddening — before plummeting back down in an eddy of low tones.

Hutchings later explains that, when improvising, he isn't consciously thinking about what he is playing. Instead, he allows the intuition he has developed over many years of practice to lead him. Sometimes, he is quite unaware of what is happening, and is unable to recall specifics about the performance, even immediately after playing. Neurological studies of the brain conducted during musical improvisation may suggest why. Two parts of the prefrontal cortex exhibit changes in activity. The area responsible for self-monitoring and conscious thought is turned down, while the region for

self-expression and engaging with language is dialled up. In this way, a free flowing tumble of ideas can then proceed, uninhibited. Our brains reach a similar state during sleep. Just like our dreams, the free associations drawn together by improvisation can be hard to recall, existing on that edge of memory that seems to fade the more closely we examine it.

Though Hutchings confesses that circular breathing is not as complicated as people might believe, there is something about the method that interests me beyond its physical mechanics. When we discuss creativity, we often talk about being inspired. Exploring an unfamiliar landscape, reading an interesting book, discovering some yellow lichen glinting in the low sun — all these things might fill us with a sense of excitement, or perhaps an urge to create something. But 'inspire' also means to 'breathe in'. We draw in inspiration, just like we draw in breath.

If 'inspire' means to fill ourselves up with an urge to create, perhaps its opposite, 'expire', should refer to the act of creation itself. In jazz, it's common to describe the performance of an improvised solo as 'blowing'. This is logical enough when the musician in question is a saxophonist or trumpeter, but the phrase is also applied to bassists, guitarists, and pianists. In what way can they be said to be blowing? Perhaps in the sense of the opposite of inspiring. They are creating. They breathe in ideas, then breathe out music. Improvising is as natural as drawing breath. We all think on our feet, go with the flow, and play it by ear. Every conversation we have is a unique combination of words, phrases, and images arranged in a specific form for a particular moment.

Some of my most joyful times have been when improvising — exploring a city for the first time, following a series of impulses to head down a particular street, to check out a specific restaurant, to speak to a new person. Improvisation reminds us to just begin, to not overthink things, and to listen to our intuition. It forces us to inhabit the moment, assuaging the fear of what is to come. It celebrates the unpredictable and the transient. It seeks out surprises rather than avoiding them, and, like life, it is wholly process.