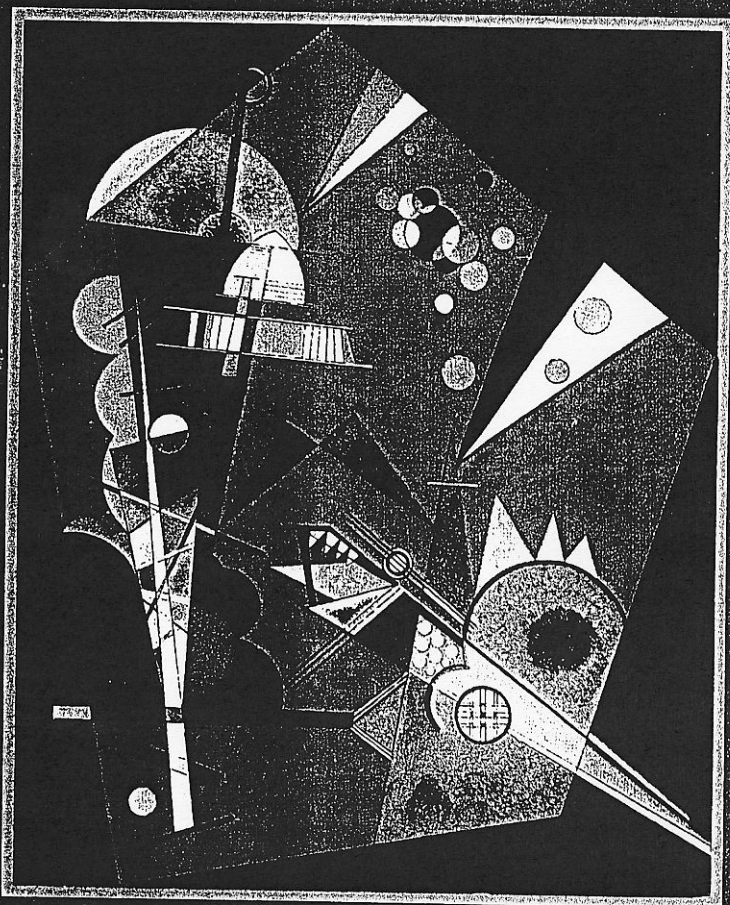


FREE PLAY

*IMPROVISATION
in Life and Art*



by Leonid Michmanovitch

Mind at Play

The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves.

CARL JUNG

Improvisation, composition, writing, painting, theater, invention, all creative acts are forms of play, the starting place of creativity in the human growth cycle, and one of the great primal life functions. Without play, learning and evolution are impossible. Play is the taproot from which original art springs; it is the raw stuff that the artist channels and organizes with all his learning and technique. Technique itself springs from play, because we can acquire technique only by the practice of practice, by persistently experimenting and playing with our tools and testing their limits and resistances. Creative work is play; it is free speculation using the materials of one's chosen form. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves. Artists play with color and space. Musicians play with sound and silence. Eros plays with lovers. Gods play with the universe. Children play with everything they can get their hands on.

Play is ubiquitous among the higher mammals and rampant among monkeys and apes. Among humans, as Johan Huizinga has shown in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, play pervades every facet of our life and has proliferated into all sorts of highly evolved forms, such as ritual, the arts, statecraft, sports, and civilization itself. "But in acknowledging play," writes Huizinga, "you acknowledge mind, for whatever play is, it is not matter."¹²

Play is always a matter of context. It is not what we do, but how we do it. Play cannot be defined, because in play all definitions slither, dance, combine, break apart, and recombine. The mood of play can be impish or supremely solemn. When the most challenging labors are undertaken from the joyous work spirit, they are play. In play we manifest fresh, interactive ways of relating with people, animals, things, ideas, images, ourselves. It flies in the face of social hierarchies. We toss together elements that were formerly separate. Our actions take on novel sequences. To play is to free ourselves from arbitrary restrictions and expand our field of action. Our play fosters richness of response and adaptive flexibility. This is the evolutionary value of play—play makes us flexible. By reinterpreting reality and begetting novelty, we keep from becoming rigid. Play enables us to rearrange our capacities and our very identity so that they can be used in unforeseen ways.

"Play" is different from "game." Play is the free spirit of exploration, doing and being for its own pure joy. Game is an activity defined by a set of rules, like baseball, sonnet, symphony, diplomacy. Play is an attitude, a spirit, a way of doing things, whereas game is a defined activity with rules and a playing field and participants. It is possible to engage in games like baseball or the composing of fugues as play; it is also possible to experience them as *lila* (divine play), or as drudgery, as bids for social prestige, or even as revenge.

Acts are pulled from their normal context into the special context of play. Often we establish a protected setting or play-space, though if we feel free enough we may play even in the face of great danger. The special context is marked by the message "This is play"—a dog wagging its tail, a smile, a shine in our eyes, the doorway to a theater, the dimming of the lights in the concert hall.

Anthropologists have found "galumphing" to be one of the prime talents that characterize higher life forms.¹³ Ga-

lumphing is the immaculately rambunctious and seemingly inexhaustible play-energy apparent in puppies, kittens, children, baby baboons—and also in young communities and civilizations. Galumphing is the seemingly useless elaboration and ornamentation of activity. It is profligate, excessive, exaggerated, uneconomical. We galumph when we hop instead of walk, when we take the scenic route instead of the efficient one, when we play a game whose rules demand a limitation of our powers, when we are interested in means rather than in ends. We voluntarily create obstacles in our path and then enjoy overcoming them. In the higher animals and in people, it is of supreme evolutionary value.

Galumphing ensures that we remain on the upside of the law of requisite variety. This fundamental law of nature¹⁴ states that a system intended to handle x amount of information must be able to take on at least x different states of being. In photography, for example, if we want to capture three levels of light, we need a camera with at least three apertures or shutter speeds. In music, if we want to transmit three kinds of emotion, we need to be able to draw the bow or blow our breath or strike the keys with at least three kinds of touch—preferably many more. This is what we call “having technique to burn”—having more powerful and flexible means available to us than we need in any given situation. A would-be artist may have the most profound visions, feelings, and insights, but without skill there is no art. The requisite variety that opens up our expressive possibilities comes from practice, play, exercise, exploration, experiment. The effects of nonpractice (or of insufficiently risky practice) are rigidity of heart and body, and an ever-shrinking compass of available variety.

In play, animals, people, or whole societies get to experiment with all sorts of combinations and permutations of body forms, social forms, thought forms, images, and rules

that would not be possible in a world that functions on immediate survival values. A creature that plays is more readily adaptable to changing contexts and conditions. Play as free improvisation sharpens our capacity to deal with a changing world. Humanity, playing through our prolific variety of cultural adaptations, has spread over the whole globe, survived several ice ages, and created stupendous artifacts.

We are taught (by the Book of Ecclesiastes and the second law of thermodynamics) that the world of matter and energy falls in the natural course of things from order into disorder. But life reveals the inherent countercurrent to this tendency, transforming matter and energy into more and more organized patterns through the ongoing game of evolution. This proliferation of variety seems to be self-energizing, self-motivating, and self-enriching, like play itself.

There is a German word, *funktionslust*, which means the pleasure of doing, of producing an effect, as distinct from the pleasure of attaining the effect or having something. Creativity exists in the searching even more than in the finding or being found. We take pleasure in energetic repetition, practice, ritual. As play, the act is its own destination. The focus is on process, not product. Play is intrinsically satisfying. It is not conditioned on anything else. Play, creativity, art, spontaneity, all these experiences are their own rewards and are blocked when we perform for reward or punishment, profit or loss. For this reason, “Man cannot live by bread alone.”¹⁵

Play is without “why.” It is self-existent: We are reminded of the conversation between Moses and God in Exodus: Moses wants to know what to tell the people when they ask who he’s been talking to, who gave the inspiration. God simply says, “I am that I am.” Play is done that it is done.

Like *lila*, or divine creativity, art is a gift, coming from a place of joy, self-discovery, inner knowing. Play, intrinsi-

cally rewarding, doesn't cost anything; as soon as you put a price on it, it becomes, to some extent, not play. Somewhere, therefore, we each have to map for ourselves the tricky questions of money and the artist. This is a difficult issue because artists have to eat, equip themselves, and subsidize years of professional training. Yet the marketplace shifts our art at least to some degree out of the state of free play, and may in some cases contaminate it totally. Professional athletes face the same issues. Certainly they play to a great extent for love of their sport, but issues of money, prestige, and fame introduce a lot of nonplay as well.

In the same way, writing is art only when you adore language itself, when you revel in the play of imagination, not when you regard it as a mere instrumentality for conveying your ideas. The purpose of literary writing is not to "make a point"; it is to provoke imaginative states. These things exist on a continuum, of course; journalism and literature are not cut-and-dried categories, nor are commercial art and expressive or visionary art.

In the myth of the flute player, when he plays for approval, plays for prestige, plays to meet the expectations of his teacher or to avoid shame, there is always something lacking. But when he has nothing to gain and nothing to lose, then he can really *play*.

In the realm of myths and symbols, the spirit of play is represented by a number of archetypes: the Fool, the Trickster, the Child. The Fool is an ancient tarot image in our culture, number zero in the deck, representing pure potentiality. Sacred clowns and fools appear in the mythologies and traditional poesies of civilizations worldwide, in such figures as the American Indian gods Trickster and Coyote, the Greek Pan, and the clowns and fools of Renaissance Italy, England, and France. The wisdom of the fool is a theme that flows throughout Shakespeare's work. Fools, tricksters, holy

buffoons, and also shamans to some degree, served in a way as muses, channeling the straight talk of the unconscious without the fear or shame that inhibits normal adults. Trickster is untamed, unpredictable, innocent, sometimes destructive, arising from pre-Creation times, galumphing through life unmindful of past or future, good or evil. Always improvising, unmindful of the consequences of his acts, he may be dangerous; his own experiments often blow up in his face or in others'. But because his play is completely free and untrammelled ("For fools rush in where angels fear to tread"¹⁶) he is the creator of culture and, in many myths, the creator of the other gods. He calls all the objects in the world younger brothers, speaking the language of every one of them.¹⁷ Trickster is one of our guardian spirits, keeping alive the childhood of humanity.

The most potent muse of all is our own inner child. The poet, musician, artist continues throughout life to contact this child, the self who still knows how to play. "Whosoever," said Jesus, "does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child shall not enter into it."¹⁸ Improvisation, as playful experiment, is the recovery in each of us of the savage mind, our original child-mind. Psychoanalysts sometimes speak of this recovery as "regression in the service of the ego."¹⁹ But it's not in the service of the ego, it's in the service of the total Self.

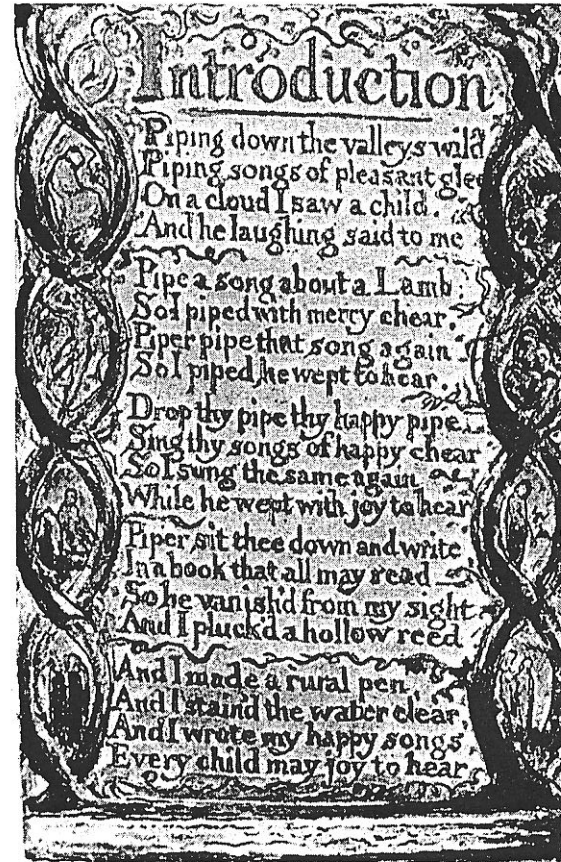


THE FOOL .



Full-blown artistic creativity takes place when a trained and skilled grown-up is able to tap the source of clear, unbroken play-consciousness of the small child within. This consciousness has a particular feel and flow we instinctively recognize. It is "like tossing a ball on swift-flowing water: moment-to-moment nonstop flow."²⁰

A girl riding her bike discovers that the secret of effortless control is balance—continuous adjustment of continuous



change. When she reaches the point of shouting, "Look, Ma, no hands!" she has learned that she can use less and less means to control greater and greater power. She has learned to encounter and consciously play with rhythm, timing, weight, balance, geometry, right- and left-handed coordination. She does this by herself, from her own body. The emotions attendant on such a discovery are fear, delight, pride, disbelief, elation, and a desire to try it again and again.

This is what classically trained musicians feel when they discover that they can play without a score. It is like throwing down a crutch. It may seem somewhat crude to refer to the likes of Beethoven and Bach, who have always sat on the right hand of God, as a crutch. But what we learn from our newly improvising body is that it can be debilitating to depend on the creativity of others. When this creative power that depends on no one else is aroused, there is a release of energy, simplicity, enthusiasm. The word *enthusiasm* is Greek for "filled with *theos*"—filled with God.

When our flute master comes to town, he plays something utterly simple. He has the technique to burn, he can play anything, but he plays something simple, and it is incredibly powerful, godlike play. His student, after years of suffering, finally plays in the same way. The work may hold a lot of tension, a lot of soul, but it is utterly simple.

As we will see in the chapters that follow, it can sometimes be a heartbreaking struggle for us to arrive at a place where we are no longer afraid of the child inside us. We often fear that people won't take us seriously, or that they won't think us qualified enough. For the sake of being accepted, we can forget our source and put on one of the rigid masks of professionalism or conformity that society is continually offering us. The childlike part of us is the part that, like the Fool, simply does and says, without needing to qualify himself or strut his credentials.

Like other manifestations of the Muse, the child is the voice of our own inner knowing. The first language of this knowing is play. In this light, psychiatrist Donald Winnicott came to clarify the aim of psychological healing as "bringing the patient from a state of not being able to play into a state of being able to play. . . . It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self."²¹