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**Age of
Artists**

Interview

**Stephen
Nachmanovitch**



The Interview was conducted by Dirk Dobey (Age of Artists, AoA) on June 9th 2017 in Berlin, Germany.

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Introduction

Stephen Nachmanovitch is a musician, author, computer artist, and educator. He is an improvisational violinist, and writes and teaches about improvisation, creativity, and systems approaches in many fields of activity. Born in 1950, he graduated in 1971 from Harvard and in 1975 from the University of California, where he earned a Ph.D. in the History of Consciousness for an exploration of William Blake. His mentor was the anthropologist and philosopher Gregory Bateson. He has taught and lectured widely in the United States and abroad on creativity and the spiritual underpinnings of art. In the 1970s he was a pioneer in free improvisation on violin, viola and electric violin. Stephen Nachmanovitch is the author of *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. Age of Artists talked to Stephen Nachmanovitch during one of his improvisation seminars in Berlin, Germany.

Interview

AoA: What was your path into the arts?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: We are sitting in an Italian restaurant in Berlin, we are looking at your iPhone which is recording this and which is showing a visual display of sound amplitude. So, we have voice and we visual wiggling of waves., The world of sound and the world of vision are interconnected just on your recorder here. And this is my path into the arts: Noticing that you can say things, that you can do things, you can play and it has an effect on the world., The more you discover and surrender to the fact that the world is interconnected and the senses are all interconnected and that creativity is not just a matter of having an idea where some material object went into your brain and then squeezing it through a pen or a computer but realizing that we are in a state of continuous interaction with the world: That is the pathway into the arts., The arts are the trace. Visible art or the recording of music is the trace of some of the sensory evidence of this awareness that we all have.

AoA: What came first, your violin or this realization?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: The violin.

AoA: How did you find your instrument in the first place?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: I was seven years old and my parents thought it would be nice to play a musical instrument. I saw a violin and I liked it. And I had nice images of music, so I took lessons and I played in orchestras. I knew I was never very good. I was pretty good, but not great. In the world that I was connected to, my only knowledge of music was written down classical music. I heard popular music but I didn't really know anything about it. I got to know the symphonies and the chamber music and the concertos but I assumed that I was going to be a scientist. Probably I was going to be a biologist, and the first thing that I ever published was in the Journal of Protozoology. I was looking through a microscope at one-celled animals and studying their social behavior.

AoA: You are a biologist?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: By education I'm a psychologist but in high school I was going to be a biologist. When I went to undergraduate school I was going to be a biologist but I got quickly tired of the physical sciences. I got interested in the social sciences. I was studying anthropology and psychology. I got my undergraduate degree from Harvard in psychology. So, I played music on the side and it was like a hobby. By the time I graduated from college I had already become extremely interested in play from the point of view of child psychology and animal behavior. I had published articles on play based on looking at films of baby baboons and young children, so I was going to be an academic psychologist.

During my undergrad I met Jerome Bruner who became my mentor. He was in cognitive psychology and child psychology and one day I was looking at the books in his office and I discovered a series of books that were transcripts of conferences from the Macy Foundation. It wasn't the cybernetics ones, it was series of confer-

ences on group process, social psychology and so forth. I randomly opened it and found an 85-page transcript of a conference that was called, "The message: this is play" by Gregory Bateson. I was really impressed by this and wrote something on it, and graduated and went onto grad school.

I went to grad school at Berkeley, but I didn't really fit the department there, so on a friend's recommendation I took a trip to University of California at Santa Cruz. I was walking around the campus there and I ran into Gregory Bateson there walking around on a trail. We became friends and I dropped out of Berkeley and finished my studies at University of California at Santa Cruz. Bateson opened me up to the work of William Blake. And Blake talks about art in such a way that you can't study it, you have to do it. So that fundamentally changed my life.

The year after I finished my PhD I was 24 years old and had never been to Europe and a friend had gotten me a job as a high school English teacher in Switzerland for a year. So I was able to come to work half time and to have an apartment in the middle of Europe and travel around. One of the things that I discovered in Switzerland was listening to jazz which I never knew much about before. Another thing was discovering the structure of Indian music which I'd been interested in. In Geneva, I took tabla lessons; I learned the structure of Indian music and I got to be comfortable with improvised formats of music and art. I had already stopped playing violin because it was too frustrating. A year later I came back to California. At that time I had a neck injury which I was recovering from. I got the idea that I had to play the violin again, which was crazy because it's an instrument that you play holding it against your neck. So, I had to unlearn what I had been taught as a child and relearn how to hold the instrument and to allow it to suspend itself in the air. Eventually, I discovered that I had been playing for months concentrating on *how* I was playing, but I wasn't concentrating on *what* I was playing. I realized that I've been improvising the whole time and I no longer needed composers. That is when I started do-

ing what I do musically. The idea of not needing composers fits in with a lot of other things that were interesting to me from my studies of psychology and anthropology - the notion of the creative process as the connecting of patterns without having a template. So, there was sort of an explosion in my mid-twenties when I discovered improvisation and discovered that I could actually play well.

AoA: This development came out of necessity, but not as a planned effort. More of a coincidence?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: Right.

AoA: And from beginning there was a relationship between music and your scientific background?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: Yes, exactly. "Connecting the dots" is a misguided metaphor because that implies that there are separate dots. That implies that the dots exist. But there are no dots. What is there is the connection. I was always interested in the inter-arts, not seeing art as separate from science and not seeing the arts as separate from each other. Back to your mobile phone: this visual representation [pointing to the equalizer of the recorder application] of the way forming sound and the oscillation of the air as my voice is speaking in this room are the same pattern. One is represented in so-called sound and this pattern is represented in so called computer graphics playing out on your mobile. But it is the same pattern. And neither of those patterns is real by itself. What they both are is expressions of some more inclusive pattern that doesn't have a name but which you can explore by looking at these manifestations. So, I became very interested in visual music.

AoA: What does improvisation mean to you?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: The simplest definition of improvisation as a musician is playing music that is less than five minutes old.

AoA: Is improvisation a synonym for play or is improvisation a form of playing?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: Yes, it's a form of playing. In connection with play, we often think of games, or sports. There is a continuum of play - on one side are games, sports, art forms that have rules, and on the other side there is playing as free play. That's a continuum. You can play a structured game like chess or you can play a structured game like jazz that has a set of rules and a boundary marking the inside and the outside of the game. Yet what is valued is the individuality of the play. The un-replicability of the way the person plays the game.

AoA: You found some patterns and say they can be transferred to other disciplines like business. What are these patterns?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: The understanding that patterns are patterns seems difficult for people. We talk about creating a better economy: *economy* is the same word as *ecology*: they both mean housekeeping. And they both refer to exactly the same thing. And those who would split them apart don't understand how the world works. At the beginning of the interview we were talking about how we live in a completely interconnected world where the information that is available is from billions of years of organic evolution and are shared patterns with the forests and with the animal species, with the weather... That is all the information that we draw upon in improvisation. I'm improvising a piece of music and I have no template, or pattern, or plan. My body, my mind, and the environment and the people that I'm with are the template, the pattern and the plan. The parts of the pattern have been integrated from all time.

AoA: What are those patterns?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: There are geometric patterns like symmetry, segmentation, radial symmetry, sine waves or cycles. Now we are seeing a cycle of history which doesn't look too dissimilar to the cycle of history that proceeded World War II in the 1930's. Cyclical patterns are rhythms. If you press the doorbell on your house it goes buzz. The buzzer has is a little piece of metal that's attracted by a magnet; when it goes up to the magnet it cuts the current and the magnet loses power so it goes down. And when it goes down the current is connected so the magnet goes up. So, it's a cycle of paradox, it's going up and down very rapidly. So that is a rhythm but it's also a cycle. We see cycles in art, we see cycles in history. Some of the cycles are not very pleasant because we are not willing to learn from them.

AoA: So, your definition of patterns is practices of things you do, but also general observations of the world.

Stephen Nachmanovitch: General observations of how the world is interconnected. Seeing the interconnecting - seeing how the table is made, how a piece of music is made, how a company is made.

In the improvisation workshop where we spent the past three days, we were discovering the fundamental pattern that we are all in it together. We are free to engage in the lunacy of making noise and movement together, out of which evolves the possibility of new and interesting music. That is different from traditional performance. In a performance, you are standing up on a stage, you are demonstrating your skill. If you do a good job people will clap and you will be rewarded and then everybody goes home unchanged. Maybe you are a performer and you get good reviews in the newspaper, maybe you are a student and you get good grades. But there is this sense of separation. due to the dividing line of the stage, that separates the person who is performing or people who are performing and the audience. I am really not interested in that any more. I feel that it's too late in history for us to get up and demonstrate skill and then everybody claps and goes away. I am

much more interested in participation where the audience is part of the performance and where we are all in it together in a circle of mutual respect. Today when I stand up either by myself or with partners and give a concert, it always ends with everybody in the audience singing. It never ends with the message that we have the skill and you the audience are consumers.

AoA: How do you describe your attitude as an artist? What elements come into your mind what matters to you?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: One of the things that I stand for is teaching people that they have a voice; that there are enormous entities out there in our world now in the political and corporate worlds that are trying to tell people that they don't have a voice, that they are consumers or subjects to the government and that their job is to buy, and obey, and consume. And people are often given a new computer you have a choice between clicking a file menu and the edit menu but that actually isn't a choice.

AoA: A mission to allow people to find their self-efficacy?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: Yes. When I was 22 years I was involved in an academic conference on the psychology of play. There was a professor who had been one of the main pioneers in the study of play, Elliott Avedon. He told me that he taught a course on play for his undergraduate and grad students and he told them that the reason what he wanted them to get out of the course was that they could sit at a restaurant and if the wrong food was brought, they had the power to politely send it back. That doesn't sound like play, but he was saying that people recognize that they don't have to submit to the ordinary activities of daily life where somebody is bringing on something that's inappropriate for you and that you can speak up and say: "Take it back, please." I just learned last week that the word "heresy" means choice. That's quite interesting. People can have real choices to create, to associate with people.

AoA: Choice requires responsibility. How do you think you could let people take more responsibility after running through an education system which takes it gradually away?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: I don't have any formulas. I remember I had a high school teacher who taught a philosophy seminar. We would read Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Nietzsche and all those guys as well as contemporary African politics from 1964. He had an interesting practice where we had all these readings of philosophy and then he sat at the table at the beginning of the seminar and he looked around and said: "Books, books, books, ...". What he meant was take your books off the table, have nothing on the table, because now we are going to talk to each other. He assumed that you have read stuff but now is not the time to show off what you've read, now is the time to engage each other eye to eye and talk about it.

AoA: What matters to you more: the process or the product?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: There is no product.

AoA: What is your word for an outcome or output?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: There is no output, there is no outcome. I mean yes, there is a book that you can hold which is a material object. But it's all a process.

AoA: So, what I call product is only a part of the process?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: Yes. It's the outward entity. To quote the Christian catechism, it's the outward and visible sign of the process. In Buddhism, the primary fact is the emptiness of inherent existence, that is how it's usually translated into English. When English speakers hear the word *emptiness* we get all freaked out because we think they are saying nothing exists. Obviously, this table exists and I can bang my head on it and hurt my head. But

the point is that this table came from trees, which came from a sawmill and a forest which has a history. The trees of the forest evolved over a period of billions of years. The sawmill that sawed the planks into boards was made of iron and steel that was mined from the earth and smelted together in a factory by people who had a labor history and who worked for companies that had a story. The table was assembled in another factory and the workers in that factory had their own life stories. Even if it's a generic, ordinary table somebody drew the diagram to design the table. There are screws in the table with their own history. We can go through everything that is in this solid object. Now we are putting our hands on it but I guarantee you that a hundred years from now this table will be either ashes or it will decay. In a hundred years to now we will be dead. The solid table where we put our elbows is a temporary manifestation. It may last for hundreds of years but it's still a temporary manifestation of an enormous network of interrelations and processes. Certainly, the table exists and the table is full of almost infinitely many stories. The only thing the table isn't full of is a separate independent existence. So, it's empty of inherent existence by itself.

AoA: Is this the reason why you say practice is art?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: Yes, practice is art. Think of computers: Just around the corner here I saw there was a computer store that had relicts of old Apple computers that look like dinosaurs now. So, we make these things and it's good that we make them and use them. We can make good use of these computers and we can use these temporary computers to help us to create other temporary things that also might be enjoyable or useful. But if we regard them as the primary thing that's permanent: that's sort of like thinking our bodies are permanent and they're not. So, enjoying the lunacy of the process is the most realistic attitude that you can have and in the course of that lunacy you can create beautiful experiences for other people.

AoA: But an airplane flight shouldn't be improvised?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: Yes, that's right. But I also discovered that *Free Play* was being used in an aviation school in Argentina which seems really odd because as you said a flight plan shouldn't be improvised and if the plane is supposed to get there at 07:30 tomorrow morning you want it to get there. However, for the pilot to get there on time he or she must deal with unforeseen weather, with flocks of birds, with other flying objects, with the moods of the crew, and so on. That's why flying as a supposedly mechanical process is actually highly improvisational. Particularly if unforeseen things happen. Let's say if you and I are improvising a piece of theatre or music together we are here in the room and we are looking at each other's eyes and we are exchanging all the complex information and facial expressions and mood and everything else, so we can improvise together. However, when you're driving a car you are communicating through the momentum and velocity of two large objects. And yet we are able to improvise with those cars.

AoA: This leads to an interesting contradiction that we see very often which is that organizations tend to separate between the creative and the necessary.

Stephen Nachmanovitch: Yes, that's true. I think everybody should be involved at both sides as you describe it.

AoA: In this regard, you also speak of *opposite of tensions*. If you need to be on both sides of a continuum, how can you balance it so that you won't drift into one extreme?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: Every technical field has experiential learning about titrating opposites. You operate a camera and you have light and shadow, a range of apertures and speeds and so on. And all those trade-offs are built into the physical world and they are built into the mathematics so we need to learn those trade-offs. Now even a field like accounting is a manifestation of those

trade-offs in the physical world. The chart of accounts of a company is a map of all the activities that go on. And talking about balancing: The waiter is balancing those plates, so balance means that he is operating a complex series of muscles, bones, tendons, ligaments in constant motion and none of them is separate from the others.

AoA: Do you promote the idea of an equilibrium?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: Equilibrium is constantly moving. If you think equilibrium is a point then you can say: "Here is the zero point where inflows match outflows." He is moving, he is a human body who is in constant motion and if he stopped at any of those points the plates would fall.

AoA: Is time what we need to look at here?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: Many methods of picturing the world don't include time. They don't include the fact that everything changes.

AoA: There is something that some people call Oeuvre, the sum of your creations over the course of your life. Now, we could also say the sum of practices.

Stephen Nachmanovitch: Right, but there isn't a sum of my practices, because many of my practices have already disappeared. Many of the practices that I was skilled at years ago I'm no longer skilled at. And there are things I wasn't skilled at then, but I'm skilled at now. So, it's not like a person is a bag that accumulates skills or practices.

AoA: When improvisation is creating in real time, how does that relate to the linear idea of time as past, present and future.

Stephen Nachmanovitch: I'm not sure what time is (laughing). I simply don't know.

AoA: We found during many of our conversations that artists have a particular understanding of time where past, present and future converge.

Stephen Nachmanovitch: I don't have an explanation for that. I was thinking of William Blake who said, "I see past, present, and future existing before me all at once." He also liked to call himself a prophet and said that a prophet is not predicting the future and saying that this is what happens but he is saying that if you proceed in this way this is what is going to happen. For example, if we continue to pollute the atmosphere with carbon and other substances it is very likely that it will have immense catastrophic consequences and we are beginning to see them now. So that's not predicting the future. You can see cause and effect but that's quite different to postulating a definite future that will proceed on schedule.

AoA: In a business setting people try to eliminate tensions and contradiction. What kind of characteristics should an organization or a social structure have in order to support an artistic approach?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: First, let's stipulate that you cannot eliminate tensions and contradictions, rather we have to participate in them as gracefully as we can. That is where the artistic approach meets the world of business. Second, I want to mention the employee-owned co-op which is a great model to the extent that the employees own the organization and there is no corporate ownership.

AoA: Why is this important?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: First, it is important because everyone has a stake in it and because it doesn't need to get too big. Se-

cond, an organization where everybody knows everybody else's job and has learned at least something about what everyone else does and can help them to do that even if they don't have primary expertise. Everybody can help doing any job. People have to know something about the experience of another person. If there is a purpose to art it's to enable people to understand that you are not going to have 99.9 percent of human experience but you can be included into other people's experience through stories, through films, and through art. And at a much smaller scale just within a company or a school for people to know what the other people know and to know what the other people don't know. And a third thing is to know what you don't know is extraordinary. There is a lesson to be learned from walking through an enormous library and that lesson is that you are walking through knowledge of millions of books that are subjects you will never look at in your life, that you will not get interested in. But to realize that that subject exists and that what you are interested in is a tiny pimple of the total of human knowledge is important for each of us.

AoA: What would you recommend in order to create the space for improvisation to happen in an organization?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: The first thing is: Take a very deep breath and allow yourself some time. And the second thing is to allow people into a physical space that is free where they can talk to each other. And third thing is to allow them space in general so that when they go home. They go home and have their independent lives.

AoA: So, what you are recommending is inefficiency?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: That's correct.

AoA: Thank you very much for the interesting conversation.

Stephen Nachmanovitch: Thank you.

