

Detritus from (or a Meditation on) Content, Context, and Art

*Prelude*¹

A different paper preceded this one. The thesis of that paper was that formal and ritual changes effected by an artwork are at their core political. Towards an exploration of the particular aesthetic and political implications of that position I employed the metaphor of ‘vagrancy’. This employment allowed me to migrate between disciplines and argue by analogy, a useful allowance in the context of the normalizing and depoliticizing disciplinarization of the arts (in western institutions, especially). ‘Vagrancy’ related to the body of that paper in a loosely analogous way to Butler’s relation of gender and the human body; it was “the repeated stylization of the body [of the paper], a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal[ed] over time to produce the appearance of substance” (*Butler Reader*, 91). That paper appeared to be substantially ‘vagrant’, then, even as it performed untenable philosophical reductions from the fixed monolithic frame of an assumed Real.

The previous paper ‘failed’ in the way that every dialectic fails:² the very thing that constituted its core flipped into its inverse. In this case, the inversion occurred first on the site of the vagrant/fixed binary, so that vagrancy seeped into the very essence of the paper, undermining its most provisional (vagrant) claims by reversing them into fixed Truth statements. This process simultaneously pushed the (previously invisible) fixed assumptions on which these claims rested to the surface of vagrancy. From this first inversion followed multiples of others, the most

¹ This *Prelude* functions to simultaneously present and elaborate the ideas of the essay in a way that is less formally narrative than the ‘text’ proper. The *Prelude* is both inside and outside of the text proper, contributing to its content and form without ‘developing’ either. As such, the *Prelude* serves to contextualize the forthcoming text while also marking itself as an independent entity in its own right. In turn, the presence of the text which follows the *Prelude* relieves the *Prelude* of its responsibility for formal development. In this sense, this particular prelude functions in the same manner as most preludes found in ‘western art music’ (see Bach’s Cello Suite No.1, for example).

² Conceptually, ‘failure’ and ‘dialectic’ are coextensive. That is, there is no ‘failure’ without the dialectic possibility of ‘success’, and there is no teleology (the ‘end-game’ of dialectics) without the possibility of failure.

extensive of which was the disintegration (whether through ecstatic multiplication or an internal aporia, it is not clear) of a context/content distinction. This current paper is a farriginous meditation on this disintegration. It is not an attack on Enlightenment thinking; such an attack would be impossible because that battle has already been waged and won. Rather, this paper represents the soldiers' wading through the wreckage of what was the battlefield, recounting stories from the battle even as they pursue the impossible task of 'cleaning things up'. The paper inhabits and is inhabited by this landscape, and if, periodically, a critique emerges, it is nothing but an indeterminate side-effect of this cohabitation. Perhaps this is too gloomy, though. Perhaps I, as soldier, have been too jaded by the violence of creating this paper to be able to celebrate its completion. Perhaps what has finally emerged in this second paper can be trumpeted as having the (non)form of a nomadic multiplicity, a rhizomatic (non)structure of meditations that are not organized into a single Meditation. However...

Much of my work as an artist has been an exploration of the relationship between context and content, between figure and ground. Naturally, the categories themselves are problematic - almost to the point of being useless, but not quite. Certainly, context and content dialectically oppose one another, and are therefore also inextricable from one another. One could think of this opposition, with Baudrillard, as simulation. In the case of music, for example, the simulated tension between music and performance, between the composition and its realization, serves to mask the fact that there is no tension, that they are equidistant from a reality that is not Real, but only a simulacra. They are the map that precedes the territory – *precession of the simulacra*” (Baudrillard, 169). This context/content ‘tension’, which is most evident in ‘experimental’ works that transgress traditional performance paradigms, is a simulation that masks the absence of the Art on which it is predicated.

I would *like* to say, in this paper, that the formal and ritual changes effected in an artwork are at their core political, but I cannot. And yet, I have not been alone in my artistic exploration of this opposition of content and context, or even particularly maverick. In fact, one could reasonably propose a study of post-1945 performances, musical and otherwise, using this relationship as a framework. Conceptual art, installation, site-specificity, and historically based movements such as ‘neo-classicism’, would all easily fall under this umbrella. Similarly, the cultural landscape that emerged in the early nineties, marked by the twin figures of the DJ and the programmer, was born from artists “selecting cultural objects and inserting them into new contexts” (*Postproduction*, 13). Indeed, major theoretical movements such as the considerations of space, performativity, reception studies, gender studies, and critical cultural theory in general would also intersect with this study. However, this is not the study I am presenting here. Here I would simply *like* to say that the formal and ritual changes effected in artworks are at their core political. Alas, though, I cannot.

The technological developments of the 20th Century did not culminate in the anticipated emancipation that they suggested, but instead “combined with advances in ‘reason’ to make it that much easier to exploit the south of the planet earth, blindly replace human labour by machines, and set up more and more sophisticated subjugation techniques, all through a general rationalization of the production process. So the modern emancipation plan has been substituted by countless forms of melancholy.”

(*Relational*, 12)

Nicolas Bourriaud argues that given the present-day cultural restriction of inter-human relations enacted by this culture of specious efficiency, “contemporary art is developing a political project when it endeavors to move into the relational realm” (*Ibid.*, 17). Bourriaud is discussing a specific set of artistic practices which take “as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent space”, but he is also positing the more general idea that “the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary

and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real” (*Relational*, 13). For Bourriaud, the work of art represents a social *interstice*; it is harmonious with the overall system, but simultaneously suggests other trading possibilities; over and above its mercantile nature and its semantic value, it eludes the capitalist economic framework by being removed from profit (Ibid., 16). By extension, then, the work of art that does not endeavor to move into the relational realm is either not developing a political project or developing an entirely different political project.

Here we can view Bourriaud’s thought in relation to that of Theodor Adorno in its positing of a ‘truth value’ in the realm of the social.³ Specifically thinking about music, Adorno presents Truth in music as “a matter of being true to the real condition of social relations in society” (*AOM*, 136)⁴, and music that ignores the current age of “antagonistic and alienating social relations [deals] in dreams and illusions, not in truth” (Ibid.). Adorno’s analyses of mid-twentieth Century music frequently criticizes Music for being constructed such that it “no longer recognizes history” (Ibid., 172), a condition which he identifies and interprets through the lens of Marxist commodity analysis. “Music, with all the attributes of the ethereal and sublime which are generously accorded it, serves in America today as an advertisement for commodities which one must acquire in order to be able to hear music” (*Fetish*, 38). Although Bourriaud insists on the possibility of art eluding the capitalist framework, his conception of Art remains socially determined by an assumed Real, and is thus situated within the schematics of Adorno’s thought. As such, Bourriaud fails to escape the double-bind at which Adorno arrives more than three decades earlier, the limitation of dialectics. Although Adorno recognizes “the difficulty of

³ Unlike Adorno, Bourriaud does not discuss ‘truth’ in art. However, we can perceive the presence of an unacknowledged Truth in his unproblematised presentation of the Real – Bourriaud’s unspoken Truth is one of ‘relations’ on the socio-material plane. We see this in his claim that, rather than speaking from the abstraction of a philosopher or the convictions of the critic, he is simply “describing what appears around [him]” (*Postproduction*, 12).

⁴ ‘AOM’ refers to *Adorno on Music* (see ‘Works Cited’).

mounting an effective critique of Enlightenment thinking while using a language shaped by such thinking” (*AOM*, 170), he nonetheless feels secure in the conclusion that “music divides between music that accepts commodity status and commodification and submits to the manipulative power of collective forces, and self-reflective music which resists those forces. In reality, both are impotent, the former because it is a lackey of the culture industry; the latter because it is an exile with no appreciable impact on anything” (*Ibid.*, 179). Bourriaud’s ‘social interstice’ simply occupies the second possibility in Adorno’s landscape of uncompleted nihilism, embodying the impossibility of resistance from within the logic that constitutes the oppressive machine of the culture industry.

Interlude

Consider, for the moment, John Cage’s famous ‘silent piece’ 4’33. To read this piece as using silence to unmask the performance context is to miss the point. One sees this (mis)reading implied in the retelling of the “legend [...] that at the world premiere, the singing of birds was heard from the forest outside, through the open windows of the hall” (*Discourse*, 43). The emphasis on this ‘legend’ is not only irrelevant, but actually serves to normalize the technological developments embodied in the piece. It is not true that Cage is telling us that Music “*is* the noise made by the audience” (*Ibid.*, my emphasis), but rather that Cage is saying that the noise made by the audience is a part of Music. As such, the noise made by the audience is indistinguishable from Music, whose (non)origins it shares, so that the context/content dichotomy is effaced.⁵

One could follow Baudrillard, though, to see the organized sound that is typical of Music as opposing silence in order to mask the fact that neither silence nor organized

⁵ This mode of critique is common, with one notable example being Derrida’s demonstration that Levi-Strauss designation of a ‘universal incest taboo’ is dependent on an opposition of nature and culture (*Signature*)

sound really exist anymore, and that they cannot be distinguished. Here, Music is the simulated tension of sound and silence, masking the fact that the Music on which this dichotomy is predicated no longer exists. *Precession of the simulacra*. Cage's own perspective on silence, which he repeatedly states does not exist (even completely sealed from the outside world, one still hears the two distinct frequencies of an active nervous system and blood circulating), seems to coincide in character with this analysis. Rather than silence as an empty void from which sound emerges, then, we have the impossibility of silence masked by simulation⁶, with this impossible silence itself a simulacra masking the absence of Music, on so on. It is worth noting, though, that this series of simulations does not *trickle down* to an impossible Real, but rather describes a hypersaturated surface through which bubbles of the impossible Real continually emerge. This distinction captures the social inertia of Baudrillard's philosophy, as opposed to the fundamentally generative character of, for example, Zizek's 'kernel' that lies *underneath* symbolic fantasy. There is no sign-system in Baudrillard.

Regardless, we have in 4'33" a statement of context and content not as opposed or complicit with one another, but as identical. The 'legendary birds' at the first performance of 4'33" did not grace the performance as angels from above, lending it the musicality of nature, but instead were always insinuated in the presence of the performance with which they were self-identical. In this sense, Cage's work suggests McLuhan's acoustic space, where figures cannot be extracted from their ground.⁷ After 4'33", then, works that oppose context and content can now be seen as *explicitly* politicized in the direction of visual space.

⁶ Alternatively, one could consider silence as the impossible Other of sound, a conflicted Other that nonetheless generates the continuum that makes sound possible.

⁷ Indeed, Cage felt a deep affinity with 'Eastern philosophy', which McLuhan associated strongly with acoustic space.

We see at the (absent) centre of Bourriaud's relational aesthetic an assumed existence and formation of the Real. This Real behaves analogously to the Real described by Zizek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Here, through his reading of Lacan, Zizek presents the Real as an 'impossible Thing' that nonetheless exists at the (non)centre of the unconscious as "some strange traumatic element which cannot be [integrated] into the symbolic order" (*Sublime*, 133). This Thing is fundamentally generative, necessitating the construction of a 'Fantasy' that allows the "subject to come to terms with this traumatic kernel" (Ibid.). This Fantasy can (and should) be 'gone through' – a feat accomplished not through its symbolic interpretation but through the "experience of the fact that the fantasy-object [...] is merely filling out a [...] void in the Other" (Ibid.). The analogy between Zizek's Thing and Bourriaud's politico-aesthetic theory is found on the site of Bourriaud's claim to an artist's cultural and political agency. That is, we see at the heart of Bourriaud's theory a call for action (or, at the very least, support for action already taken) to "challenge passive culture, composed of merchandise and consumers, [with] art that functions as an active agent" (*Postproduction*, 20). To this end, we are invited through Bourriaud's thought to posit Culture as Thing and capitalist exploitation, materialized in the 'static' (i.e. 'nonrelational') art object, as the Fantasy that must be 'gone through'. As in Zizek, going through this Fantasy does not lend us unfettered access to Culture (the Thing), though, because as an impossible noncentre it can only ever be perceived through its effects. What emerges, then, is a circular and paradoxical agency, where the cultural environment that defines the need for, and type of, artistic action is itself defined by this action. One can only cease this infinite logical regression by "putting an arbitrary stop to (the always) revolving causality" (*Selected*, 177), that is by assuming an original unified Culture (even if it is unified around the mirror of split subjectivity). It may be true, as Bourriaud claims, that the relational or

postproductive artwork “participates in a culture of use and activity [by functioning] as the temporary terminal of a network of interconnected elements” (*Postproduction*, 19), but it is only at the cost of denying the contemporary landscape of completed nihilism that this participation can paradoxically assume the possibility of political agency that conditions its instigation.

Resigned for the moment to remaining within the play of simulation (accepting its parameters but nonetheless` acting from our fictional subjectivity), we may also remain with Zizek a moment longer to consider Music. Does not Music, as an abstract concept, fill the criteria of Zizek’s kernel? Is it not the Other that can never be reached but can always be felt? This moves towards an explanation of why we hear Cage’s music as Music (and as ‘Cage’s’, for that matter) – in their fixity and unity, these identifications act as fantasies covering the impossible truth of music (“enjoy your symptom”). This position gets at the perennial problem of music: that “music has nothing but mediations to show.” Antoine Hennion has argued that "in the case of the visual arts, the materiality of the works, even and especially if challenged by the artists, has allowed a debate to take place about the social production and reception of art. Music is in the reverse situation: its object is elusive; on the one hand social interpretations just take it as the expression of a social group (ethnic trance, rock concert), on the other hand aesthetic studies treat it as a nonverbal language of immediacy. Music has nothing but mediations to show: instruments, musicians, scores, stages, records. The works are not "already there," faced with differences in taste also "already there," overdetermined by the social. They always have to be played again" (*Mediation*, 83). It is from this perspective that we can begin to clarify why medium is so strongly at issue in music. More generally, and more radically, this perspective situates Music as an implicit critique of Bourriaud’s material conception of Art, undermining it from within.

Although Bourriaud's implied conception of the Real is highly problematic, it is worth considering what is allowed by his adoption of this position. These allowances are anticipated in the philosophy of Marshall McLuhan, who put forward the claim that all artifacts may be represented by four laws of media that are 'scientific' in that they are testable, universally applicable, and yield repeatable results.⁸ The laws stem from the belief that "each of man's artifacts is in fact a kind of word, a metaphor that translates experience from one form into another." (*Laws*, 3) This statement (of McLuhan's) is true regardless of whether one considers as artifacts things of hardware nature, such as tables and chairs, or things of software nature, such as ideas and prepositions. The premise of these laws, which is also found in their content, is that all of man's artifacts, as metaphors, are extensions of the physical human body or the mind (Ibid., 93). Considered in McLuhan's tetrad form, any artifact is seen to be not neutral or passive, but an active logos or utterance of the human mind or body that transforms the user and his ground (Ibid., 99). We can see McLuhan in Bourriaud (intuitively or intentionally), then, and understand that Bourriaud is considering formal and ritual changes in an artwork as *technological* extensions of the human body. These extensions are always political in a certain sense, with the politics in this case being an allowance for consideration of the 'unexposed'. In contrast, this ethical consideration is not allowed by Baudrillard's hypervisible (although, Baudrillard's writing can be seen as performing a lament for its loss), where everything is exposed on a surface that itself can only ever move towards inertia.

⁸ These laws are framed as questions and are structured such that as a tetrad they can be applied in any order. The questions are:

- What does the artifact enhance or intensify or make possible or accelerate?
- What is pushed aside or obsolesced by the new 'organ'?
- What older, previously obsolesced ground is brought back and inheres in the new form?
- When pushed to the limits of its potential, the new form will tend to reverse what had been its original characteristics. What is the reversal potential of the new form?

(*Laws*, 99)

Bourriaud's analyses (and Zizek's Thing) intersect with the contemporary problematization of considering power in terms of anti-culture, as a voice against the norm.⁹ This modality is one that has been researched exhaustively under the rubric of Race Theory, with scholars almost unanimously agreeing that, in the West, "whiteness often goes unnamed and unexamined because it has been uncritically and unthinkingly adopted as the norm throughout (North American) society." (*White*, 2) One of many examples of this phenomenon is the difficulty many whites have recalling when they first noticed that they were white. Whiteness was, for them, unremarkable. On the contrary, nonwhites can often clearly recall when they started noticing their difference. The very fact of language such as 'white' and 'nonwhite' points to whiteness as an invisible centre of socio-cultural considerations of race, a potent idea when one considers that racial categories are now generally acknowledged as being mobile constructs. 'Whiteness', then, is predominantly *achieved* through social advancement, rather than *received* through genetics.

This point was illustrated to me one night as I read a "Value Tale" to my stepdaughter. In the book, published in the early 1970's, the middle-class protagonist buys an old house in an inner-city neighbourhood and proceeds to offer help to her new neighbours in various ways. At one point, she opens the door at the knocking of two small children, who are illustrated in the book with a dark shade of brown, the colour that we might see an East Indian child depicted today. The narrative reads that "by the deep brown colour of their skin, (the protagonist) immediately knew that the children were (...) Italian." (!!!) Of course, this was only one generation after the massive Italian immigration to North America, so Italians and the Italian culture had not yet acquired social prestige or the wealth salient to it. Though my father's skin is the same colour as my own, his classmates did not consider him, as an Italian immigrant, to be

⁹ Baudrillard's cosmology does not exclude this consideration, but it cannot directly address it.

‘white’, the only race that has ever been assigned to me. Of course, the mobility of race is rarely culturally acknowledged because once a culture is identified as white it no longer conceives of itself in terms of race. It is the privileged and unexamined invisible norm.¹⁰

For McLuhan, this may have been understood as a simple play between figure and ground. Seen in visual space, race is static in that it represents a figure isolated on an invisible ground. Pushed to its extreme, though, this stasis can reverse into slippage and homogeneity, where ‘whiteness’ becomes a mobile category. The distinctions are lost because they are considered as absolutes rather than as relations. More radically, though – thinking beyond the possibility of ethics - Baudrillard’s cosmology shows us that this slippage only serves to mask the absence of race itself. Interestingly, this perspective yields a momentary intersection with the social considerations of Race Theory described above, where ‘whiteness’ is now generally acknowledged as a mobile construct that is achieved through social advancement. In this way, material race does not exist within sociology, just as it does not exist for Baudrillard. From a sociological perspective, though, race functions as a *dissimulation* of power or privilege (i.e., it masks them) as opposed to a simulation of a non-existent Real. With this dissimulation emerges the Other of western metaphysics in order to justify the construction of race, thus pitting the gaping aporia of sociology against Baudrillard’s hypersaturated surface.

I have not digressed. In considering the underlying politics of race sociologically, we can articulate the ground for a politics of unacknowledged and unexamined privilege, of an ‘invisible centre.’ Returning to the *social* politics of contemporary art, we can see how works that are not developing a relational aesthetic are not exempt from socio-political analysis, but are instead forming this unacknowledged centre. This is the unstated corollary to Bourriaud’s aesthetics, and what I so much would have liked to say in this paper. These works, that represent the body

¹⁰ Of course, the *Value Tales* themselves must be seen as a normalizing project, universalizing specific Western liberal values.

of any canon, are presenting a political project focused on subjugation of those not included in the circle of privilege. The canon itself is a simulacra, though - a canon without history.

For a moment, consider an anecdote (that is not an ‘interlude’). A university educator who frequently uses music in her lesson plans added a caveat to a point she was making by saying that she was “not a musician, and (didn’t) know much about music, although (she) does love it.” This comment is of a type frequently heard, and points to the way in which the dominant (institutional) musical paradigm reasserts cultural hierarchies. One of the central tenets of this paradigm is the privileging of a structural understanding of music over an understanding of the various functionalities of music. Although the professor had understood the *effects* of music in her classroom, and had honed her presentation of it to increase and shape these effects within the complex system of her classroom, she automatically subjugated this knowledge to that of the composer or creator who created the systems *within* the musical object, and to the field of music scholarship. In this way, Music is taken to be an autonomous object *containing* complex systems, as opposed to being a multiplicity that is *acting* as part of a complex system. It is seen in McLuhan’s visual space, a space that is “imagined as a neutral container: static, linear, continuous, and connected” (*Laws*, 21). A pursuit of the ramifications of this privileging shows that its corollary is a privileging of classical (or academic) music, where the study of musical structure and grammar is most developed.¹¹

Interlude

¹¹ As an aside to this aside (vagrancy creeps further in), it is worth mentioning that within the field of academic music, Suzanne Cusick points out that a similar model is played out in the naming of “the music itself” as a kind of aestheticized sound, a perspective which she points out “omits and/or deligitimatizes practical music-making, perpetuating the omission of women’s work in the study of music.” (*Gender*, 492). Cusick situates her arguments in the work of Judith Butler, particularly in the latter’s conception of gender as performing *upon* the subject (as opposed to being a performance by the subject).

It is understood today that “there are no forms in nature, in the wild state, as it is our gaze that creates these, by cutting them out from the depth of the visible. (...) What was yesterday regarded as formless or ‘informal’ is no longer these things today” (*Relational*, 21). “Each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth” (*Ibid.*, 22). In this context, it is interesting to consider photography. There are numerous ways to present a photo such that it is not understood as art (advertising, family photos, etc.). To me, this is what makes this medium exciting: the art objects (the photos) are only understood as such when they are activated as such. This is different than a violin, for example. The moment one hears or sees a violin one immediately places it within the musical canon that one constantly carries along with oneself. The violin, as an object, is Music. At the risk of sounding glib, it is worth noting that this also means that the violin must work very hard to actually ‘music’ (as a verb), to actually be musical and present the threefold viewpoint of the aesthetic, the historical, and the social that characterizes relational art. It can only present itself as Music or mediate ‘musicing’.

There is ubiquitous photography that plays with the line between art and function, or art and craft, or art and not art. “The ‘everyday’ now turns out to be a much more fertile terrain than ‘pop culture’, which is a form that only exists in contrast to ‘high culture, through it and for it’” (*Ibid.*, 47). This can and has often been seen as an emancipatory process. However, in using gallery settings or stages to show the hidden beauty that we pass by in our day-to-day life, a (hierarchical) distinction is created between art and life. This may in fact accomplish the opposite of what it has set out to do by situating Art such that we may continue to live our lives in a way that entirely

neglects instances of art or ‘arting’. I am interested in seeing photographs that integrate their context, make the gallery invisible, make us see art as function rather than the reverse. Such photographs exist in opposition to “the authoritarian version of art where any work is nothing other than a ‘sum of judgments’, both historical and aesthetic, stated by the artist in the act of its production” (*Relational.*, 22). Of course, the moment that the gallery disappears, with it goes the possibility of Art.

We can perceive a parallel logic between the power of the academic musician and that attributed to the alphabet by McLuhan, which he claims is “the hidden ground of visual space” (*Laws*, 22). “The alphabet’s great power of abstraction is that of translating into itself (as an abstract, unmodified/unmodifying container) the sound-systems of other languages” (*Ibid.*, 19). This same paradigm is played out in the musical arena, where the *academic* musician occupies a position of dominance because he (and I choose that pronoun intentionally) is capable of reproducing the structures and grammars of other musical genres. The same is not true of other genres, which are not generated from the structural and grammatical model that they are ultimately evaluated within, and which are not similarly capable of capturing the structures and grammars of academic music, or of other genres. To value these structures and grammars, then, is to value an abstract idea of music as independent of the body. The structures of Indian classical music, for example, can be notated using Western notation, but this neglects the rich pedagogical systems of learning that are traditional and, indeed, salient to that musical tradition. Thus, in notating Indian Classical music there is an implicit naming of that music as a product, rather than as a cultural process, a naming which may be contrary in character to that given by most of Indian Classical music's practitioners, and certainly contrary to its instructors. This is a visual understanding of Music; Music as a separate, containable entity. It is also crucial to recognize, that to privilege a structural and grammatical understanding of Music is to reify the

value systems of western academic musicians, who are overwhelmingly upper-class-heterosexual-white-males. By extension, accepting this notion of “knowing about” Music limits the value of other musics to derivation, and reinforces the privilege of the dominant culture, who have always known how to 'capitalize' on product(ivity).

For McLuhan, “the spatial character of reality (is) the four-dimensionality of the field (as represented in the tetrad). There is no ‘empty’ space. There is no space without a field” (*Laws*, 41). The ‘content’ and ‘context’ of an artwork can only be separated by the insinuation into space of an interval that divides them. In McLuhan’s terms, this space is ‘visual’, connecting the concepts of context and content in order to contain them.¹² In fact, logical connection is always “a metaphor for containment. The consequent has to be implied in its antecedent” (*Ibid.*, 20). This formal static containment is one of the primary properties of visual space, a space that is also a container of continuity, connectedness, linearity, and homogeneity.¹³

In all visual spaces, to become part of a seemingly fluid culture one must first excel in the value systems set by a fixed dominant group. Our discussion of ‘musical knowledge’, then, is a different playing out of the same mechanisms limned in Sharon Donna McIvor’s discussion of the situation of Aboriginal women in Canada. For those women, they must be deemed “Aboriginal” by the federal government in order to be granted their inherent right to self-government, but they are often forced to give up their human rights around issues of gender in order to be considered Aboriginal by the “Aborigines”, who are a predetermined group, created independent of gender equity laws (*Self Government*, 167). Thus, the Aboriginal women’s rights are conditional both as women and as Aboriginals, and one exclusion begets another until there is no access to power. Similarly, (though not precisely the same) though music is almost

¹² We see a similar containment in the “split self” of the psycho-analytic tradition.

¹³ It should be noted that Derrida corrects McLuhan’s erroneous tracing of the origins of visual space to the phonetic alphabet (through its dissociation of the perceptual senses) with his concept of ‘arché-writing’, a writing that is present even in the speech of non-literate cultures.

universally accepted as a central cultural feature, most of the population of North America cannot identify themselves as “musicians”, just as the professor previously discussed did not. Thus, one of the central products of the culture, and one of the central defining agents of the culture, is not engaged with, or by, most of the population that it alleges to represent and affect.

The ethical gridlock begat by the conditional access to power in these examples is a direct result of embracing a paradigm that conceives of text and context as being in stable opposition to one another. Such binaries “create a ‘hierarchy and an order of subordination’” (*Margins*, 329) that “promotes a compartmentalization of [...] research, dividing the synchronic analysis of internal structure from the diachronic narratives of history” (*Decentering*, 55). It is in this context that McLuhan critiques the specialist knowledge of visual space as specious and self-determining.

In contrast, McLuhan’s “acoustic space is always penetrated by tactility and the other senses; it is spherical, discontinuous, non-homogeneous, resonant, and dynamic; it is a space of flux where figure and ground rub against and transform each other” (*Laws*, 33). One can see acoustic sensibilities in the artistic developments of the early twentieth century, and it is doubtless this space that Bourriaud is (paradoxically) attempting to isolate through relational aesthetics. As McLuhan has pointed out, for example, Cubism attempts to present objects as they are *known* rather than as they are seen from a single perspective, and Le Corbusier’s architecture shows an interpenetration of inner and outer space, discarding absolute identities. In music, McLuhan points to Schoenberg’s abandonment of the visual structures of tonality in favour of the multi-locationism of atonality. Atonality in music is understood to represent an attempt towards the “abandonment of the ‘central key,’ that is, the abandonment of a single perspective or organizing frame to which to relate other figures in an abstract way” (*Ibid.*, 52).

From this perspective we can understand that ‘modernist music’¹⁴ may not have been a visual space *movement*, even though in contemporary culture its accoutrements have crystallized into a visual space aesthetic. The essence of the modernist musical movement can only be understood in terms of the cultural and disciplinary boundaries that were transgressed through the use of then-contemporary compositional techniques, rather than through a specialized abstract study of the techniques themselves. Like poststructuralism, 20th Century musical formalism was a theorizing of limits. Just as ‘race’ is a mobile and relative construct, so too are the symptoms of modernism polyvalent indicators. “Forms are *developed*, one from another (...). When the aesthetic discussion evolves, the status of form evolves along with it, and through it” (*Relational*, 21). “We can only extend modernity to advantage by going beyond the struggles it has bequeathed us. In our postindustrial societies, the most pressing thing is no longer the emancipation of individuals, but the freeing-up of inter-human communications, the dimensional emancipation of existence” (Ibid., 60). In acoustic space, it is not so much the elements as the intervals or discontinuous residue between them that give form or configuration (*Laws*, 35). In this space, what happens when a new work of art is created is something that “happens simultaneously to all works of art that preceded it” (Ibid., 47).

In a similar manner, one can see acoustic sensibilities deeply embedded in many technological artworks. The technologies of computers act, on the social plane, as extensions of our central nervous system, rather than extending our limbs in the manner of older technologies. The resulting enhancements are metaphorical and relative, rather than literal and static. “The contemporary (art) image (made possible through computer technology) is typified by its generative power; it is no longer a trace (or ‘retroactive’), but a programme (‘active’)” (*Relational*, 70). Multimedia works often aim to present objects as they are known, rather than as

¹⁴ That is, ‘high formalism’.

they are viewed from a single perspective, by offering numerous simultaneous representations of a reality. Similarly, interactive artworks strive to incorporate viewers into a relationship with the work that allows for an individualized experience of the piece.¹⁵ But a moment of caution is necessary if we think back to the lessons of musical modernism. Features that evoke acoustic sensibilities in one setting may function as static figures in another. An interactive work may operate like a relational device containing a certain degree of randomness, or like a machine provoking and managing individual and group encounters (*Relational*, 30). It is from this perspective that the emancipatory language of the technological artwork has emerged. A computer does not carry the enormously rooted history that, for example, a violin does, and thereby appears to offer immediate access to novel performance paradigms. In the absence of disciplinary history and its rituals, the mode of presentation enacted by the work is emphasized because it is chosen rather than assumed. The politics are visible.¹⁶ These choices are made both in terms of content and context, leaving the technological artwork positioned to enact the political reality of its choosing, or rather, enact multiple political realities between which it fluidly moves. “For today’s artist, the issue no longer resides in broadening the boundaries of art (as in the redefining of art in the conceptual works of the 1960’s), but in experiencing art’s capacities of resistance within the overall social arena” (*Ibid.*, 31). As the ground of this resistance broadens to include the overall social arena, the artwork’s original aesthetic integrity is strengthened. Or so the story goes.

¹⁵ It is also in this sense that many technological artworks lay claim to interdisciplinarity.

¹⁶ In a sense, the corollary to Baudrillard’s claim that “there is no longer “any scope for interpretation, except for all interpretations at once” (*Selected*, 258) is that if anything is political then everything is political. While Baudrillard shows that this perspective destines interpretation to meaninglessness, ‘visibility’ as it is used here can be understood as a site for constructing ethics on the social plane - a continuum built on the conceptual conflation of ethics and politics. Emphatically, then, ‘visibility’ should not be understood as determining the *existence* of politics, but as a possibility of ethics within the political spectrum (or vice versa, since the two spectrums are conflated).

Interlude

Outside was an ‘interactive’ installation created by William Brent (UCSD) and myself using the texts from various lectures given at *Collision 2006*. Prior to the installation of the work, all of the included texts were read and recorded as audio, and subsequently ‘cut’ into smaller segments ranging in length from one sentence to two paragraphs. During *Outside*’s residency (as an installation), these recordings were cycled through sequentially, sounded from a small speaker. If an audience member was interested in a topic or theme being discussed in the recorded audio at a particular time, they simply spoke the word ‘interest’ into the microphone and a related segment from one of the other recorded texts was articulated. In this way, the predefined segments formed an interconnected discursive network. The ‘cuts’ between segments were inaudible.

Physically, *Outside* occupied approximately 5’ of space in a mid-size room for three days. The technology used consisted of a Macintosh computer, a small speaker, an audio interface, a microphone with stand, and accompanying cables. With the exception of the microphone and stand, these objects were all housed in small boxes wrapped in white paper inscribed with the featured texts. The sound levels were such that the text was clearly audible within a 10’ radius, and so were not loud or dominant.

Outside was designed to be considered on two levels. First, the foreground, by which is meant that aspect of the piece that could be apprehended by an individual through direct interaction with it over a relatively short period of time. Second, the background, by which is meant elements of the work which unfolded over longer periods of time, and which were inevitable. This inevitability was a crucial distinction, as it represented the nesting logic of the work, or its structure. In *Outside*, we tried to enact a conflict of identity in the work between its foreground and its background. On one

hand, the foreground was fluid, playful, and interactive. In contrast, the background structure was rigid and monolithic. Through this conflict of identity in the work (and of the work) there emerged a tension of interpretation. In particular, the foreground level could generally be considered within the terms of antiformalist relational discourse, while the background level generally adhered to formalist principles of the autonomous (musical) artwork. The site of interpretive crisis enacted in *Outside* was the codependence of these mutually exclusive interpretive strategies; the foreground level depended on the background in order to maintain its political agency, and the background depended on the foreground to answer the criticisms around authorship that it referenced. Through this codependence, the division between foreground and background was simultaneously deemed necessary and impossible. *Outside* was a paradoxical work, then, which simultaneously presented itself as a sovereign artwork and as an interactive and co-dependent one, fulfilling neither role.

One way that *Outside* called attention to this crisis of identity was through its failure to be ‘successfully’ interactive. The simplest example of this was the temporal lag between audience action and the technology’s response in *Outside*, a lag that was exaggerated by the imperceptibility of the response when it finally did happen. This violated one of the central tenets of successful interaction, causing the audience to question whether the installation was functioning properly and preventing their immersion in the constructed environment. Since *Outside* presented itself as an interactive work, this violation impeded the clarity of its reception.

In another way, *Outside*’s interpretation as a multi-vocal artwork, where authorship is dispersed throughout the authors of the presented texts and the audience members who interact with the texts, was severely limited by the prescribed relational network of

the texts, where what constituted ‘related’ material was the strongest dictator of what material would be presented. Since these relationships were all determined beforehand independent of the audience’ interaction, the result was disguised authorial control. In *Outside*, the disguise was not successful because the texts being used were highly personal to many of the audience members. The resulting possibility of recognizing the disguise (without being able to remove it) analogued the power exercised by the invisible author in many multi-vocal and interactive works where cultural, historical, and material differences can remain unexamined or hidden as a result of a text’s multi-vocality. Although a text may include multiple voices that would seem to allow readers to form their own interpretations, they are still staged by authors who select different voices in order to make a point or create an impression. Here then again, *Outside* paradoxically relied for its ‘meaning’ on an interpretive strategy that it could not support.

Even within the provisional social space of Bourriaud’s (problematically) assumed Real, it is clear that works presented under the rubric of interactivity are sometimes no more interactive than translating and following instructions written in a recently-learned language. Here what is deemed interactive may simply be rule recognition. Further, subversive modes of presentation may evolve over time into specialized knowledge in the form of technological fetishism. This tendency is observed by Bourriaud, who remarks that the

“main effects of the computer revolution are visible today among artists who do not use computers. On the other hand, those who produce so-called ‘computer-graphic’ images by manipulating synthetic fractals and images, usually fall into the trap of illustration. [...] The influence of technology on the art that is its contemporary is wielded within limits circumscribed by this latter between the real and the imaginary. [...] Art’s function consists in reversing the authority of technology in order to make ways of thinking, living, and seeing creative. [...] The stack of papers placed in a gallery by Felix Gonzales-Torres may have a stronger technological aesthetic (and politics) than a work that uses computers to manipulate sound from a stage.”

(*Relational*, 68- 69)

I have already suggested how the socio-politics of this perspective are problematized by Baudrillard's philosophy. However, even if we choose not to accept Baudrillard's perspective – perhaps because we are not willing (or lack the courage) to take seriously the transvaluation of values and the ensuing exile of ethics, or perhaps because we cling to a facticity of the body – the opposition of context and content (or ‘art and culture’ or ‘technology and technology’, etc.) at the centre of Bourriaud's aesthetics remains problematic. One mode of this problem can be traced through Derrida's deconstruction of Rousseau's opposition of speech and song in the *Essay on The Origins of Language*. In the *Essay*, Rousseau argues that language, dictated by ‘need’, preceded music, which emerged from language born out of ‘passion’ (*Grammatology*, 195). Derrida shows that Rousseau uses the notion of ‘imitation’ in service of this claim, “to mark the difference between speech and song” (*Ibid.*, 196). However, this ‘imitation’ is ambiguous because it reconciles the necessity of marking the “difference between the systems of vocal intervals and musical intervals” (*Ibid.*) with a conception of the song as emerging exclusively from the ‘original voice’. Thus, Rousseau's Nature must be “exceeded, but also rejoined. We must return to it, but without annulling the difference” (*Ibid.*, 197). In this way, nature is paradoxically defined as both the unity of the imitation and that which is imitated, so that the “modification [of becoming song] becomes one with the substance that it modifies” (*Ibid.*, 198). From this paradox, Derrida is able to recast what Rousseau sees as the ‘degeneration of music’ as simply a description of its provisional separation from language, a separation that has always already begun. This separation (necessitated by discourse) “operates at once as opening and menace, principle of life and death” (*Ibid.*) so that the “growth of music, the desolating separation of song and speech, has the form of writing as a ‘dangerous supplement’” (*Ibid.*, 199).

In order to recognize the impact of this parallelism with language, one must understand that Derrida's philosophy functions as rhetoric, rather than Truth. In this philosophy-as-writing, writing is something that "carries within itself the trace of a perennial alterity: the structure of the psyche, the structure of the sign. [...] Writing is the name of the structure always already inhabited by the trace" (Spivak in *Grammatology*, xxxix). The fissure within the origin that necessitates the appearance of the dangerous supplement (imitation), then, is the necessity of interval, the harsh law of spacing. Spacing is the fall and supplement of song, the accidental consequence (leading to its ruin) and the condition of its coming into being (*Grammatology*, 200). "Spacing insinuates into presence an interval which not only separates the different times of speech and of song but also the represented from the representer" (Ibid., 203).

Reconsidering Adorno's woeful postion (where art either colludes with capitalist domination or is doomed to irrelevance), perhaps the best response is to accept the relegation of Art to obscurity so that moments of art may emerge. Is it possible to resist reducing (in the full sense of the word) Art to discourse? It has been said of Cage that he "makes 'ready-made' music, in which anything is acceptable in the quest for absolute freedom" (*Discourse*, 53), but this statement does him a tremendous injustice. Cage is not searching for acceptability any more than, for example, Derrida is appealing for an acceptance of writing. Acceptance is irrelevant, Cage is instead aligning his music with a situation of disorganization. Just as 'presence' becomes a central notion for Derrida with respect to writing, so too do 'silence' and 'noise' become key components in Cage's musical alignments (or compositions). These musings hint towards a different conception of relational aesthetics, one that is closer to a Deleuzian model. Certainly, in his frequent use of the term 'program', Bourriaud is invoking the Deleuzian perspective where artist's goal should be to remove everything (Fantasy, significances and subjectifications as a whole) in order to leave behind only the 'body without organs' (*Thousand*, 151). Does the

relational artwork, as a work that is a “formal arrangement that generates relationships between people [or that is] born of a social process” (*Postproduction*, 33), form ‘alliances’ that resist ‘organization’? In itself, perhaps. However, we see in the writing of Bourriaud a conception of Culture as collectively ‘evolving’ towards political goals rather than aligning in lines of flight. Relational artworks (and their artists) who participate in the ‘project’ of this evolution (captured in its ensuing aestheticization) do so collectively and with intention, rather than as singular ‘plateaus’ of ‘pure intensities’.¹⁷ In place of a ‘fusional multiplicity’, then, Bourriaud describes an “opposition of One and the multiple” (*Thousand*, 155), implicitly reducing Art to culture by naming the latter as the origin of the former. Reading Bourriaud as Deleuzian not only proves untenable but actually exposes -in the very possibility of considering it in this way, in Bourriaud’s own insistent manacling of his theories in the language of Deleuze and Guattari – Bourriaud’s organization of the multiple, his taming of it, even as he praises its multiplicity.

Here I would simply have *liked* to say that the formal and ritual changes effected by an artwork are at their core political. And yet I cannot, except perhaps under erasure. Can one put an entire statement, an entire thesis, under ‘erasure’? It seems that doing so would prevent the second sense of ‘play’ that is central to deconstruction, the sense that imagines play within a mechanism. Derrida’s ethics is always dependent on this sense of ‘freeplay’, this contingency, acknowledging that it is always relative to a centre without which the notion of a structure “represents the unthinkable itself” (*Structure*). Perhaps ‘*prevention*’ of play is not the right description, though, perhaps it is just the opposite; a situation where the ‘play’ accelerates to such an extent that it can no longer be redefined, recaptured, into the mechanism that Derrida requires (if only provisionally). This is an interesting situation of Derrida as a cosmological thinker who refuses his cosmology for a flawed and contingent ethics, but also as a social thinker

¹⁷ This ‘collectivity’ is also emphasized in Bourriaud’s curating practice.

who refuses his sociality for an incomplete cosmology. Derrida as ecology, in Luhmann's sense,¹⁸ perhaps.

The limit of Derrida's contribution is that he pulls back from 'completed' nihilism, refusing to think past it. What emerges from this limitation, though, is Derrida as embodying singularity, embodying the struggles and communicative restrictions of that position. His thought is both polyvalent and non-valent - in essence, this is the position of this essay itself: a meditation on art and culture that oscillates so quickly between the social and the cosmological that the distinction between the two disappears. And yet, in the absence of anything else, this essay continually attempts and fails to orient itself towards an ethics, a theory of action. This is not a triumphant position, or even an acceptable one, but persists nonetheless.

Postlude

If I have done anything in this paper other than trace the wreckage of a particular instance of dialectic thinking (my own), such was not my intention. I would like to advocate for something – politically, artistically, intellectually – but am instead paralyzed with indecision, the positive insights of any thought or action always already negated by the paradox that inhabits, surrounds, or *is* the thought or action itself.¹⁹ And yet, perhaps the deep waves of melancholic intensity, the shivers of insecurity, that have come about with the writing of this paper - which was a very difficult and painful task that I nonetheless *chose* for myself - may serve as a form of masochism that provides a "way of constituting a body without organs and bringing forth a plane of consistency of desire" (*Thousand*, 155). If this is so, though, it is a possibility that can only be

¹⁸ "Ecology has to do with a complexity that is not a system because it is not regulated by a system/environment difference of its own" (*Social*, 31).

¹⁹ In its *statement*, this paralysis could be understood as reducing the 'visibility' of the politics *contained* in this paper, situating it outside of a consideration of its ethics. In its embodiment in the paper (its being written), though, the paralysis can be understood as increasing the visibility of the politics of the paper itself (not just its 'content'). In this reading, the paper assumes is situated on an ethico-political continuum, although this situation is paradoxical.

included here as a ‘postlude’, inside and outside of the text’s formal composition. It is not *believed* and inhabited, as Deleuze and Guattari would have it be, but simply floats above (beside or underneath, the metaphor is not important) the desolate landscape of pain and insecurity that is the carnage left behind by its *becoming* multiplicity. Deprived access to the ‘body without organs’ that has taken flight from this paper, then, the reader herself is left behind to sift through the bloody detritus of torn-off limbs and gouged-out eyes that litters this mapping of a territory that has ceased to exist, in search of agency.

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