

31 January 1992

To: Stuart Levine, Dean  
Bard College

Dear Stuart:

This is a report (much belated, for which I apologize) of the work done under the Released Time grant which I held for the Fall, 1990 semester; it also includes a report on the activities pursued during my sabbatical leave during the Fall, 1991 semester:

This project was a curriculum development project connected with the foundation and formulation of Music Program Zero as a music-learning alternative at Bard College. Since I began teaching music at the college level in 1954, it has been obvious to me that the terms and conditions of both the theory of music and the theory of learning which underlay the conventions of music instruction in our educational culture were unsuitable to the perceptions and purposes which I, personally, and, therefore, presumably, others like me, sustained, both acutely and deeply. These awarenesses, and not any agenda of radicalism or historicism or extra-contextual ideology have engendered the continuous evolution of a feedback process among my creative work, my discursive work, my educational work, and my functioning as a citizen, a person, and an interperson. I believe that my procedures and conceptions are 'scientific', in that they are rigorously examined in a critical and demanding way — it is in fact, in answer to two 'practical' questions that virtually all my development has emerged: the first is, what is the relation between what we are doing and what we say we're doing (e.g., if we are aiming to enhance our own or others' music-creative power or intellectual independence, are the structures we create and execute actually furthering these goals, and what evidence is there in the results which emerge in the form of people's behavior in relation to these issues)? and the second is, what are you doing when you're doing what you're doing — which in this connection I associate with a radical critique of the characteristics of teaching and learning, and with all the activities surrounding the producing and receiving practices of creative expression. Without going into details, I can report that these considerations have led progressively to significant departures from forms of activity

which I found given in the artistic and educational cultures which I inhabited. Naturally, these departures have had multiple consequences, not all of them sought or desired, or desirable, as, naturally, behavior based on an increasingly divergent ontology will produce an increasing social opacity, which in integrated institutionalized social contexts such as schools and professions leads to a sense of conflict and contradiction. But this is not, in fact, implicit, as built in to the perceptions I have about people learning and expressing are the beliefs that 1. different people really do need radically different things at the surface level of education and expression, if not more fundamentally, and these differences do not even sort out into any simple bilateral alternatives; this leads to a socio-political conviction, 2. that the social structure which would be desirable within my ontology would be an implicitly pluralistic one, in which what I passionately advocate would in no way be enforced or enforceable, and that a non-hierarchical co-existence of ontologically incompatible practices, as many as are authentically sustained by actual people, is the only favorable climate for the cultivation of what I, personally, advocate: the teaching situation is such that, if I have the authority to say what I say, then I cannot say anything I need to say, since the sense of what I need someone to know of what I think is antithetical to the idea that I could possibly know what they ought to think; or to learn; or to compose — I know what I advocate along those lines, of course, but —crucially and non-negotiably — for myself alone — that is, after all, precisely the independence which I have demanded for myself, so I must perforce demand it for those I interact with, in any meaningfully communicative role.

This, then is the problem of creating an ‘institutional’ way of facilitating music learning. Another thing I should say is that I don’t know how or even believe that the ideas and practices which we have developed in our local, provincial situations, responding to actual people in specific circumstances, evolving on site, might in any way pertain to other people, elsewhere, in other situations. So I have no applicable ‘theory’ of anything, nor do I believe, as a theorist, in the notion that ‘theory’ (that is, discursive texts) has any intelligible or desirable relation to ‘application’, any more than I can regard a ‘syllabus’ as anything other than a fatally irresponsible failure of structural probity and relevance and energy in a particular learning or thinking or writing situation. So the problem of ‘generalizing’ a ‘program’ (Music Program Zero) is all the more formidable: the instant it is formulated, the formulation is self-destructive, or at the very least, obsolete. Every composer knows that their great new idea, in advance of composing the piece, is bound to be an inappropriate recomposition of their last masterpiece; and ‘fighting the last war’ seems to be the principal available activity of future-projection short of immersion in realtime action. I am

confronted, then, with the problem how to think about what to do, in particular, at what level of relationship to what we do it is relevant to abstract and formulate conceptions and discourse about it. This leads to course and program descriptions and structures such as we have been trying to generate in our program.

My approach to these problems, as the Released-time project activity, apart from spending a shitload of time thinking heavily about them, has been to offer my input as a visitor on other campuses where music is being practiced, and where there are people who are at least nominally aware of and sensitive to some of the issues I take seriously. Subversion pure and simple is not only outside of my interest, it is positively counterproductive to it — as the perception of my work as subversive by some of my colleagues in the Bard Music Department has dramatized for me in the most painful possible way. I spent several days as a non-role-defined interactor with music-doing groups at Yale (graduate students in composition and theory), U.C.L.A. (“experimental music workshops”), Columbia University (the “Woof” group of cybernetic interactors), Roosevelt, New Jersey (a consortium of social interfacers from Princeton, Columbia, France, and elsewhere). Also, I delivered a major text at the meeting of the Society for Music Theory at Oakland, California, which was essentially a provocation to on-site dialogue on these issues (which it did cause), and I prepared other such texts for relevant interdisciplinary meetings at the University of Washington (on “Music and Power”) and at the University of Calgary, Alberta (“resonant Intervals”), spending in those places much time with those hearers who were drawn to dialogue with me on the strength of my concerns as expressed in those texts. This report is so late that I am able also to include the information that I have extended this research into my sabbatical leave during Fall 1991, which I spent intensely involved as a full-time faculty member of the music department of the University of California, Santa Barbara, experimenting with a radically contextualized, radically interdisciplinary, radically practice-oriented approach to the pursuit of graduate and (somewhat less) undergraduate music studies in that institution — activities which, I should say, were cordially welcomed by that entire music-intellectual community. I expect this connection to continue and be reinforced in future (I have been invited to a number of participatory events involving discourse and performance in the immediate future); and I take it for granted that this kind of interflow (including people visiting both ways) is healthy and beneficial to the Bard community as it customarily perceives itself.

The explicit programmatic output of these investigations falls into two parts: part one is the refinement of tactics and rubrics of what has already been in place, including a healthy

respect for 1. the culture gap which is widening between Music Program Zero and the rest of the music-educational world (although the attitudes I encountered were generally respectful, especially compared to some of what I am accustomed to at home — a benefit which for my personal morale is far from fringe), and 2. the sharp and firm distinction between the philosophical theoretical role of Music Program Zero as a pioneering work of research into the practical epistemology of learning and expressing, and its role as a necessary support structure both for the image of a learning community modelled on an image of the open society, and for the energies abundantly present in the student community for an unconfined variety of artistic activities in an undefined territory of unconstrained media exploration — energies which I support as a good citizen perceiving an appropriate and legitimate claim on my support, rather than as a principal involved in the artifact- and performance-producing practices in question.

A second main programmatic output of my released-time and sabbatical research is a comprehensive and firm belief in the radical and indispensable social and aesthetic restructurings that are implicit in the evolution of cybernetic tools. Far from believing that this technology is placing inordinate pressure on our expressive-interactive customs and habits, I believe now that it in fact has the potential to enable much of what we have been adumbrating in a clumsy way within the shell and under the shadow of our old ways of thinking and organizing our personal and interpersonal work to fulfill itself in clear and definitive and unproblematic forms, which we must begin to employ and develop in our work. The fact is that we need to put tremendous pressure on this technology to cause it to yield up to us the tools we need to realize and discover and activate our neo-social, neo-expressive intuitions, especially in the direction of relocating the meaning of individual identity within expressive and intellectual enterprises, to enable us to function cooperatively so as to use the characteristics of people to their and others' benefit, rather than destructively on the devastatingly wasteful competitive/individualistic model. Brad Garton (a visionary pioneer in the conception and creation of humanized technology and communally oriented creative activity) says that, unlike our traditional artistic colleagues, he considers himself, most favorably and desirably, to be *part* of something, rather than all and everything; his work is a tool for use, rather than a symbolic self-projection for estimation and admiration. We must include this kind of thinking, and the technology that makes it realistic, into our learning and practicing community; indeed, I believe the hour is exceedingly late, and I hope to move in this direction as immediately as possible.

These are a few of the results of these two periods of layout from Bardwork, released time,

and sabbatical. I hope you will have many questions and responses to engage me with, because I hope to engage you and as many other people in this community as possible in addressing these compelling concerns. I appreciate the support the College has offered me in facilitating the process of investigating and thinking, which, as you well imagine and know, will continue unabated even in the absence of explicit supplementary support, as part of doing my job as teacher and person.

So thanks, and please let me hear from you soon on any subjects of mutual interest or concern which I managed to raise in this tirade.

Regards,

Ben Boretz