



THE INNER STUDIO

(strategies for retrieving reality in music experience and practice)

A talk for the music department seminar, University of California at San Diego,

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(INTERFACE PART VI)

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[There is an amphitheatrical indoor space. Black mostly, with blackupholstered chairs on blackpainted risers, the chairs rimmed with silvershiny chrome framework. Two midsize video monitors, left and right, a chair center with musicstand and microphone, at flatfloored bottom of the amphitheatrical slope. Large numbers of persons who have entered the amphitheater from both sides fill the left and right thirds of the seatspace—along the video sightlines—leaving the center swath facing the speaker near dead vacant. A video—an interactive documentation of the Barrytown Orchestra in a soundmaking session at home—runs silent on the monitors behind the speaker, for as long as he speaks.]



FOR ME PERSONALLY, this is no gig. I accepted John Silber's invitation to talk here now because there are some things I needed to try to articulate—and they have a lot to do with the issue of a person communicating their personal thoughts or expressing their personal musical ideas in an environment of people they don't know. I imagined and materialized an occasion recently that dealt with this problem in one way—it was a multitextual environment including videotext, slidetext, oral-verbal vocal text, and realtime ensemble musictext, called "The Purposes and Politics of Engaging Strangers". In a way, this, for me, needed to be that sort of occasion also—but instead, I've gotten interested in the idea of trying to articulate for a group of people I mostly don't know some thoughts I've never articulated and really don't know how to articulate, or even whether I can. But one of the points I need to make, if I'm going to come before you in this highly symbolicized configuration, is that I'm not a lecture jock with a prefabricated routine or even a preconceived message. There are some things I want to think about that only make sense to think about in a situation like this. I wrote them down to read to you. That's why I'm here. I hope you have a good reason for being here too.

If I want to understand how to do music, I need to understand why I do music. Or, better, what I'm doing when I'm doing music. What I'm doing, that is, for myself—whether it be the indulgence, or expression, of some peculiarly personal, or interpersonal, energy; or the purposeful, or even conscious, cultivation of my own development, or the pursuit of my own mental health; or, the conditioning in some form or sense of my surrounding environment—however locally or globally I conceptualize it toward some condition in which I anticipate I will feel more at home, more normal, more safe, more sane, or something like that, within it. I have to try to know, accurately and without self-deception, where I'm coming from doing music (or anything, for that matter) so that the direction in which my activities are evolving in relation to music making, music thinking, music talking, music learning, make satisfactory sense in themselves, and, maybe even more poignantly, make satisfactory sense in relation to one another. And from my point of view—and all through, I'm going to be speaking of myself in a concrete sense, not as an abstraction standing for you and me both as well as everyone else, recast into my image—I need urgently to know what I'm doing when I'm doing



what I'm doing, most especially when it involves my primary and deepest-lying personal and interpersonal actions—music—because I need to take responsibility for myself and for my actions, in relation to myself and to my surrounding world of other creatures. I need to be responsible for myself because I am the only one who can be, because without that responsibility being taken by me for me I am psychically in freefall in an empty universe. And that wouldn't be good news for any hope I have of sustaining sanity, of, that is, keeping my focus on the effort to survive, personally.

Why do I think I need to articulate this stuff, why do I need to think about and try to understand what I'm doing when I'm doing what I'm doing? It's an important question, right here and right now, because it involves the issue of me being right here right now talking to you in your room: what am I doing here, and what's in it for you? Unless I'm so narcissistic that I think that everything and anything about me has got to be inordinately fascinating to you—or, unless I'm too crazy to be aware of your place in this transaction or your presence in this your own space—I've got to put together for you and me both how what I talk about handles the distinction of me from all of you, from each of you, and even more especially, of each of you from each other of you. This kind of issue doesn't usually come up in one-on-one conversation—but you know what it's like when someone comes on to you alone like they're talking to a crowd, to a solid mass of collective oneness, whose main characteristic appears to be its reproduction in the huge of the individual personality of the speaker. No moral issue, here—it's just that that effect would utterly defeat my purposes, and if I'm going to risk using the intrinsically absurd situation of me, personally, putting out thoughts to you, collectively, I'd better try to get it right, or at least to keep it straight. And I can't manage to do that, and still worry about being eloquent, or entertaining, at the same time.

So what it is is that I need to think and talk explicitly and consciously about what I'm doing when I'm doing what I'm doing because things going along in unreflective space start to not feel right. Because it feels like just doing what comes up, going for what seems plausible to go for, doesn't work out right—feels like a problem down there where there wasn't supposed to be one. That's the only reason I suppose that I think, because something's not working right in a holistic unselfconscious way; there's a problem that needs to surface, become exteriorized consciously,



identified, understood, responded to. So anything I think about is my problem, right? So what's your interest in it? Well, first of all, despite all the personal, cultural, generational differences between me and any of you, I imagine there are significant things we have in common—maybe these aren't them, in any given case, but my hope is to uncover unknown connections, to mutually identify with kindred spirits who care about the things I care about, so we can think and work and do music for each other's benefit, give each other the support of mutual permission and mutual validation.

OK; here's how I understand what I'm doing, these days, when I'm doing music: my most intense personal need for musical expression I *don't* experience as a need for *self* expression, or even for something felt as “expression” as such. What I do experience is an acute need for rationality—for sanity. For, that is, the verification of the validity of the reality which is intuitive to me. The personally impersonal, the only objectivity available to an individual consciousness. My identity doesn't rest on the constant reflection and re-reflection back to me of images of myself. That way lies non-sanity, really, not just the closure of vanity. My personal expressive identity is the identity of the world I perceive as real. From that emerges the complex web of world-building entities and phenomena which ramifies and stretches and expands torrentially and limitlessly—and includes, crucially, you and your independent reality, as components of my reality. Empathy—the most crucial characteristic of expression in a social context—comes only from a critical operation of sanity from a secure ontological base. It's the only way any kind of altruism, commonality, sharing, loving, and—at the other extreme—arguing, disaffecting, hating, make any sense. To begin with, and to end with, such interpersonal transactions are never really you doing something for or against me, or me doing something for or against you, but always you doing something for or against yourself, me doing something for or against myself. Somewhere in the middle, though, there are other transactions that mediate the ontological issues at the extremes. These transactions reflect the tensions and problems that engender structures and concepts, like: moralities, judgments, codes, forms—things that enable people to perceive and respond to hostile *alien* realities such as threaten to overwhelm and annihilate their own reality—to respond with social-symbolic acts like rejection, condemnation, dismissal, or even submission, rather than by sheer defensive overt violence, by, that is, physical murder. That's how I see music-socializing transactions too. I see every music-doing act by a



socialized person as an act heavily implicated in social energies, processes, and intentions: me doing something for or against me; you doing something for or against you. At the very least, I need to articulate my thoughts out loud among you, to put my music sound out there where others are, to disseminate my articulations of word ideas and music ideas, so that there will be some resonance of my reality, or my ontology, for me to hear coming back at me from within the world I inhabit, too, not just the resonances of everyone else's, or some generalized resonance of everyone's.

But I inhabit that world with you together. And my output, if it has genuine ontological energy, is probably implicitly aggressive—in principle, just because it's mine, not yours—in relation to you. So we have a problem; a mutual problem if mutual survival is what we both want. And we'd better come up with some social structures within which we can try to build a solution. I don't think that the intensely competitive, skill-oriented structures for doing and learning music which have mostly been institutionalized in our culture are going to help us deal with the problem of mutually wasting each other, because the problem arises precisely in a competitive form: each of us seems to need all the psychic world-space there is; and, therefore, we need to devour and subsume everyone else's space within our own. That's what our conventional structures mostly promote in fact; and I don't know about you, but that is the principal killer of personal and social-expressive value and sanity for me, in my world, as I experience it. And if what you want to be doing when you're doing music is anything like what I want it to be, you're also going to need to evolve some different kinds of music-doing structures, and even to invent some different kinds of music.

One reason for that necessity is in a sense historical: I don't believe that, at this point in our culture-time, the practice of high-art music is anymore believable or even available as an alternative way of expressive life, as a way of actively resisting participation in, and reinforcement of, the collectivizing and commoditizing structures of mainstream culture. What it seems to be these days is just flat a tool of mainstream capitalist culture providing leisure-time entertainment for the conspicuously acquisitive. It used to seem—I mean when I was your age—that there were actually gaps in the institutional structures, legitimate possibilities of countercultural resistance, built into the principles of the institutional structures themselves. And it seemed that, explicitly, it was in particular



high art, along with serious intellectual activity, which bore within their natures both the implication and the responsibility of such resistance—even if in practice that implication seemed not always to be realized or the responsibility fulfilled. It seemed back then that what you called “art” was precisely something whose very identity implied resistance to personal repression and rejection of social oppression—that it was its very superposition of the ever-threatening, ever-present backdrop of oppression and repression that made it be, in fact, “art.” That it was that quality of defiant persistence in the face of the overpowering institutional counterforce that gave high-art music its sharpest expressive significance, its edge and depth and intensity—not some admirable exhibition of athletic skills, or of some elusive genetic “talent,” or the ability to construct and control monster complexities of structure or texture.

But retroactively, I can now see that even back then our high-art music was ultimately compromised in its ostensibly individualistic, countercultural message by the fact that it always internalized, in its very sonic and aesthetic and *physical* structure, the principle—and the intention—of hegemony: expressive value equals moral virtue equals personal superiority equals the right to dominance, at least symbolically. That ultimately counter-countercultural message was carried equally by high-art and frankly commoditized music, by traditionally crafted music, esoteric intellectual modernist music, outrageously irreverent funky avant-garde music. And when in the sixties the valorous individualist stance of high art was unmasked as an elitist scam—as, that is, a snobwise road to gross hegemony—that not only cleared the ground for the legitimation of everyone’s music, it also destroyed the psychic foundation—false, as it proved—which the image of high-art composition had provided, for an expressive musical practice based on an intense quest for the particular and the authentic, as not only indispensable personal values, but as possible social values as well.

If we could separate the counter-elitist insights of sixties culture from its hegemonic legacy which took the form of the universalization of commerce and of commercial values, that could give us some real benefits in the task of putting together new structures for the mobilization of musical practice to articulate and confront the predicaments of our contemporary lives. We could, for example, greatly profit from the structure of the rock band as a medium, detaching it if possible (though maybe it’s not possible) from its embedding in the culture of



commoditization and mass-unitized response. The reduction of the elevated imagery of “composer”, “virtuoso”, “maestro”, “expert”; the recognition of the participatory relevance of actually present listeners on actually happening occasions—an adaptation of a deep aspect of black blues culture into the terms of modern urban life—the irreverence toward such symbolic intra-musical etiquettes as: stylistic purity, sonic elegance, or any other kind of surface hygiene, in favor of a radical expressive pragmatism going for nasty, or whatever could be deployed to get the point right—the modern relevance of modern instruments played by modern-looking people in modern styles of stance, movement, and idioms of address, and maybe even the escalation of the reference-volume level of music to approximate and maybe cope with what’s coming at people from the everyday world they live in—take away the surface-musical invariants of “rock ‘n’ roll” that only provide the instant recognition that maybe is essential only to commoditization, substitute the possibility of not even knowing what kind of music you’re going to make until you discover what’s materializing out of your necessities, open up all the possible configurations of people in which music might be meaningfully made, exchanged, experienced, and you might have a revolutionary sociomusical tool available if you have purposes for which it might be valuable. I think the realtime improvisational soundmaking and allmedia textmaking sessions, from solitary meditations to multiperson interactions, exemplified by the INTER/PLAY cassette documents, are a direct exploitation of benefits made available by the structure and sensibility of the rock medium—having, actually, almost nothing directly to do with the surface particulars of rock music itself—though we in no way rule out any of those particulars from the range of musicmaking possibility.

Now from what I’ve said up to here, you might have inferred that reality is what I perceive and look for in music. And reality is what I want to retrieve from it. Reality from reality. That’s my musical intuition. And my lifelong music practices have focussed on that issue: What’s really going on here, below the bullshit: that’s been the urgent question I’m forever straining to get hold of. Bullshit’s the main enemy, music’s the main resource to see through it with, to penetrate beneath it, to give me a shot at functioning at a more believable level, in touch with my own base nature. What’s that base nature? Not likely I could claim any authority of rigor, so as to give you an assured answer. But I need to take a crack at some view of that issue so I can think about it. And I think Ludwig Wittgenstein understood that the more rigorous a discourse, the tighter



the web that it weaves, the more likely it is that the universe it covers like a blanket would fit on the head of a pin. I think that's how come a lot of discourse these days, at the entropic endstage of an age for which rigor and techno chops have become the leading metaphors, can only talk about texts, among texts. But rigorous discourse, and purely intertextual discourse, are going to squeeze out a lot of the swarm of details, particulars, insights, issues, that are indispensable and compelling to think about and talk about and do something about. So I'm going to talk nonrigorously and nonintertextually, more in the spirit of Sigmund Freud than in the manner of Jacques Derrida, more by introspection than by detached objectification, about the circumstances of our existential predicament.

Along that line, I would say something like this: it seems that it is our primal nature to be suspended, permanently for life, between powerful but irreconcilable contradictories. Primally, our pendulum of innerness swings between the extremes of each of our bi-polarities. From which issues violence, our innate violence. Following René Girard, I would say that violence is ritualized, made symbolic, to regiment society, enabling a human collective to form, evolving a culture. But at the personal level, in a post-physical-survival world, collectivized culture, symbolic ritualization, itself becomes a problematic, not a resource. In such a cultural environment, creativity, understood simply as such, individuates the process of ritualizing violence. Creativity is, for us, at present, the most powerful tool we have to use in striving to harmonize being among our contradictories. Though futility seems to be ultimately our fate—existence is, evidently, a deficit operation—we still have to deal with being alive: it is, precisely, what it is we have, to deal with, and what we need in order to survive as far as we can survive is what we call our sanity.

Different people have different ways of dealing, musically or otherwise, with their reality/existence problem. A long time ago I would have felt that a valuable outcome of my ideas would be that they would be appropriated widely by other people—not necessarily in my name, but at least on their own account (I wasn't so aware of the hegemonic activism implicit in this aspiration). But now I believe—with no sense of retreat, but more a sense of advance from that old place—that the main value of my ideas is rather to create a space within which I, perhaps, can survive, alongside of everyone else working out their survival in their own ways. Survival and sanity make a lot more sense as aspirations to cultivate for my mental health than do hegemony or dominance. Not just that



hegemony is not required for the value and significance of my music and my ideas—it is positively counterproductive to their value and significance in a world I can imagine surviving in, where my example is an example of being responsible for myself, for working out my own issues and strategies, not a model for what issues should be worked out by everyone else, and with what strategies. I have two friends, with whom I've interacted in soundmaking sessions, to our perceived mutual gratification. But each of these people approaches the problem of harmonizing existence and experience in a radically different way, radically different from my desire to retrieve reality from reality, and radically different from one another. The young one's way is to derive transcendent fantasy from grungy reality: everywhere he goes in the world, he experiences the ordinary or extraordinary data of experience fully and meaningfully as an imaginary life of an imagined creature in a transcendental world. No accident that he adheres to religious practices which stem from the perception that the external senseworld is illusory, and which posit another world, unsensible except through strenuous detachment, discipline, and visioning, as real. The older one creates an intense reality of his own for himself, creates himself as himself in intense real experience, out of a white-hot processing of grungy bits of fantasy material: in a cleared-out hermetic space, mostly contained within the space of his own house, transactions with a sound, a thought, an image, a dog, a teddybear, become transformed into deep and transcendent realities, can create experience to be experienced as and by who he, himself as himself, really is. For me, it's different. I come into every situation in my own name, on my own account, as my actual normal self, as myself experiencing sound, experiencing you, as yourself, and discovering with you what, unexpectedly, we each can really be, and what we can actually be for one another.

The crucial point is that as far as I am concerned there is no way that their habits are not as right for them, as rational and demanding of acknowledgment and support, as mine are for me. Nor does any of our ways have anything implicitly to do with energies of hegemony, or selling anything within commodity culture. Moreover, the medium of interactive soundmaking sessions seems to enable all three of us, concurrently and interactively, to pursue our divergent agendas in mutual harmony and even with mutual support. This is the most acute and particular principle I have taken to guide my activities as a maker of social structures for music doing, thinking, and learning. It is the main guiding principle of Music Program Zero, our program of holistic music study at Bard College.



It precludes judgment. It precludes predetermination of content, style, and direction of energy flow. It precludes hierarchization of persons and the enforcement of authority or status. When I ask what kind of a world I want to live in, and how my music, and what kind of music it is, relates to and contributes to building some kind of a world, I know clearly that I should be using particular rather than universal pronouns, first person and second person singular and plural: me, you, us. For the sense I am making, if I am going to make any sense, depends crucially on exactly who—what real, individual persons, that is—I am directly implicating in my attention, and addressing with my thoughts.

I end with a videotape, which documents one recent configuration of sociotextual occasionmaking structure:

Though it happened in a public place, it wasn't a performance.

There is no composer.

What it is is a setup for an occasion of interaction: four people given a stimulus space for realtime painting, a way of responding to, interacting with, listening to, some sound on tape. The initial tapesound is a solo session done on piano in my house, thinking about and imaging Sarah Vaughan right after I heard she had died.

The videotape was made at Bowling Green State University in Ohio last week; three of the people painting are from Bard College (members of the Bard Composers' Ensemble); one is a student (Paul Winkler), one is an alumna (Penny Hyde), one is a professor (Chuck Stein); the other painter is an art therapist who works in Bowling Green (Carroll Weaver).