

Three Suppositions

Supposing music is a dishrag—what then?

Imagine, for a moment, that we abandon the idea of art as a series of *important statements to be left to posterity*, and, instead, posit our music as one of those pieces of old tee-shirt you have under the sink to wipe away unwanted stains. What would we have? Something frayed around the edges, whose form changes a little when you tug on it, even though, being of knit fabric, it still retains its essential shape. Something capable of absorbing what it touches, but also able to expel some of it when squeezed. Something useful but rarely valued in proportion to that usefulness. Something that may well have lost its original color, but may also now sport a series of stains that speak of its newfound *raison d'être*. We use a dishrag to wipe away, to soak up, to scrub off, so it is something that appears when we want something else to go away. In short, it is a thing whose presence is intended to create an absence, whose passage seeks to reveal, to uncover, to clear.

Something similar happens with architecture. The unreflecting see it as mere presence: a tower, a façade, a rooster's proud trumpeting echoed in concrete and steel. This weighty presence belies architecture's real use, for its walls and windows, joists and beams are really a means of transforming immateriality, of taking a space that is already there, and turning it into something accessible that can be experienced, lived and used in a different manner. Imagine a chunk of the sky, twenty meters above our heads, higher than the trees, transparent, inaccessible, indistinguishable from all the sky around it. Home only to the wind, a bit of sun, a place for the swallows to hunt their dinner. An architect can turn that chunk of sky into a place for humans to live, he can use his walls and windows to transform the inaccessible sky into lodgings. The space remains, but it has been changed by architecture, which is not so much the walls and floors as the part where there is neither wall nor floor: the space itself.

A friend told me about watching a teacher explain music to children. The teacher said: "Children, music is made with sound. And when there isn't any sound, what is there?" One of the children answered: "time."

Last week, I improvised in trio with Radu Malfatti and Seijiro Murayama. The music was very soft, but most of all, it was filled with silences. The audience was enormously respectful and attentive in its listening. Since then, several people who were there, including some musicians, have asked me what the music was about. They sense that it was quite serious, but they cannot find a way to grasp its conceptual underpinnings. As they expressed their curiosity, I realized they were listening the same way some people look at architecture. They may admire the structure, but they are unaware of *what* it actually *structures*. They look at the walls, but not at the space delimited by them. So, too, our perplexed audience listened to the sounds, but not to the silence—the *time*—being structured by those sounds. They did not grasp that, like architects, we were shaping a bit of the sky, a previously undefined space that our scant and gentle sounds transformed into something to be lived, inhabited, explored and experienced.

Still, this architectural metaphor obliges us to admit that, often, the space we seek to structure is not simply there for the taking. There isn't very much silence in our world anymore, so the music we made was also something of a dishrag, a way to wipe away the clutter and grime that fill our ongoing experience of life, masking any sense of the underlying spaciousness that emerges when silence becomes time. And like a rag, it not only removes, transforms and polishes; it also absorbs. So, bits of conversation from the street, cars passing in the night, a distant siren, were brought into the music, into the space it created, by the permeability of the medium itself. That very space, the time and the listening that helped create it, made those sounds as much a part of the music as anything we, the musicians, could add.

But what of the sounds we actually made? And why, asked my friends, were they almost inaudibly soft? There are many answers, but the most direct one may be: because they *can* be that soft. Consider the solid walls of the palace at Versailles, its gigantic structure, the *fearful symmetry* of its superhuman proportions. This palace *occupies* space like an invading army. Like the trumpeting rooster, it boasts of the power of King and State by making the mere human feel small and powerless. Now consider the Katsura palace in Kyoto, Japan. Its wooden structure around a pond, its delicate walls and Moon-viewing platform speak of another sense of space, time and architecture. If something is being aggrandized here, it is neither the king nor his state, but rather the space itself: the light, the evening air, the Moon reflected in still waters. This is not a castle, and its walls, rather than barriers, are mere definition, suggestions about the space they offer up for consideration and enjoyment.

And who needs more? Every day, we are forced to hear—the muzak in our supermarkets, the roar of traffic, a blaring television in the corner bar where we meet for a beer. So, when we can stop to enjoy some music, why must it be amplified to a degree that makes our ribs vibrate? Instead of a concert that forces us to hear, why not one that *invites us to listen*? Why not make music like the walls of the Katsura, that slide out of sight, inviting us to contemplate this place, and this moment? Who wants to stare at the wall itself?

Europeans visiting North America are often surprised by the number of wooden houses. The explanation is simple. When the first Europeans settled there, the forest was so thick that they had to cut down trees just to make room for a house. So why not make the house directly from the trees they had just cut? So, too, in a forest of sounds, we build our music with what we can cull. The twelve tempered tones may be there, but they are not alone, and they no longer wear the crown that built Versailles. The thumps and scrapes, roars and whistles of everyday life, of decidedly human scale, are the lumber for our evanescent walls, the transparent, translucent and mobile structures we share with our listeners as a way of experiencing the space they momentarily delimit.

Supposing music is a die—what then?

Imagine, for a moment, that we abandon the by-now-mundane association of dice and music with Mozartian and, most of all, Cagean chance composition. What remains?

First, the gesture: the sweeping arm and spreading fingers flinging the tumbling cubes across a long expanse of green velvet. The irregular, clumsy rhythm of cubes trying to roll away their momentum. Was it Piaget who said that infants, playing with a ball, believe it to be an animate object, bouncing and rolling of its own will, fleeing or returning as it sees fit? And do we not assign some similarly anthropomorphic motivation to music's defiant avoidance of entropy? Is there not something reminiscent of music in the dialect between the graceful gesture that launches the dice, and their clumsy rhythms as they roll? Is there not something achingly metaphoric about the choice of a cube—perhaps the most ill-suited form for rolling?

But what is it? Surely musical rhythms are more graceful than tumbling dice, so where is this dialectic? Perhaps it is more in the process than in the product. The initial gesture is not the sound, and the rolling dice are not the rhythms; they are part of the poesis itself. The flinging arm is the drive to make music—an idea of one kind or another, a musical *willing*. About the process of making art, Picasso said: “you have to have an idea of what you are going to do, but it must be a *vague* idea.” And, perhaps, that vagueness is what ensures the elegance of the initial movement. The clumsiness comes in the second stage, when one actually tries to embody the idea, to *flesh it out*, as they say, using a term that casts musical creation as something halfway between the adventures of Dr. Frankenstein and the somewhat more mundane art of fattening pigs for market. The clumsiness comes when one discovers that material has its own specific identity, inalienable and ineluctably previous to what one, as an artist, wants to do with it. So this dialectic, this conflict that emerges when one entreats a cube to roll, is the collision between artistic will and the inevitable entropy, the homely clumsiness, of the object itself.

How, then, do we reach the synthesis promised by our characterization of creative process as dialectics? Perhaps the answer lies in Morton Feldman's explanation of his approach to composition. When Stockhausen asked him what his secret was, Feldman answered: “I don't push the sounds around.” So maybe the clumsiness is not in how the dice roll, but in the will that underlies the apparent grace of flinging them. Perhaps what is truly clumsy is not the physical movement of the dice, but rather the player's unawareness of, or unwillingness to accept something children know automatically: cubes are not designed for rolling, they are for building, for stacking in ever-higher towers, just for the pleasure of laughter when they collapse. Leave the rolling and bouncing to balls.

Or perhaps there *is* no clumsiness. Perhaps the most graceful aspect of all is the artist's own vulnerability, his humble admission: *I want to create a sense of rolling, but I only have cubes...*

Second, there is a question of dependence. The idea of composing with dice is generally offered up as an example of chance, of freeing the composer from his own taste and memory. But, could anything possibly be more deliberate, more characteristic of personal intent than the decision to depend on dice for composing, to erect a painstaking taxonomy of musical parameters subject to this or that configuration of inanimate cubes, coins or yarrow stalks? The gamesman depends on their fortuitous roll for a six, a seven, an eleven. The composer depends on it for any number at all, yet his dependence is equally determinate, if only of the indeterminacy of the outcome. Both fling their dice as an act of will, and both do so in hopes of a

successful outcome. Even when “success” is defined as something deliberately intended *not* to reflect the will of the person throwing the dice.

So, if music were a die, where would gesture and roll converge? How would they manifest? How would the musician’s gesture be reflected in the tumbling sounds that follow? What will occur when the musician decides not to push the sounds around, not to fling them down, but rather to build a tower with them, to accept their teetering ascent, their swaying anticipation of the next cube, their final collapse into entropy?

Supposing music is a mark—what then?

And if music were a mark? A footprint? Willing or unwilling evidence of a presence, definition of territory or proof of existence? Bears claw trees to mark their territory, and birdsong serves the same purpose. Porpoises and bats use sound to identify the confines of the space around them and to locate themselves therein. Similarly, humans bounce their images off mirrors to confirm their continued existence, while hikers and bikers crossing natural areas leave lasting if involuntary marks of their fleeting presence.

But what does music mark? Or is it the mark itself? When a musician enters a space, he listens carefully to its sounds and its resonance. When he plays his first notes there, he makes an evanescent mark, bouncing his sound off the surrounding objects as a way of *knowing*. Like a mirror’s reflection, the returning sound confirms his existence, not as an absolute, but rather as a presence in a specific place and moment: here, now, you sound like *this*. So, with those first sounds, the musician measures both himself and his surroundings. And so the language tells us. *To sound*, in English, can mean to make something resonate, as in: “Sound the alarm!” But it can also mean to probe or fathom, in the sense of the German *ausloten*. For example, “to sound a river.” If the musician is to make his mark, he must first know where and what he is marking, he must test the tools he marks with, he must decide the territory he is to delimit.

But how can sound, that most fleeting, impalpable of phenomena—a mere vibration of something that is not, itself, sound—be a mark? Isn’t a mark something intended to last, to signify the marker’s presence after he, himself, is gone? Perhaps the answer is that sound, per se, cannot mark. But sound is not music, just as music is much more than sound. If music is a mark, or if it, itself, marks, it will not do so as sound, but rather as meaningfulness, as experience. Why *meaningfulness*, rather than the simpler *meaning*? Because we can grasp that something is meaningful, even when we are unable to consciously grasp its meaning. In *On The Nature of the Psyche*, Carl Jung draws an analogy between dreams and art, stating that dreams are for the individual what art is for the collective. And just so, we may have a dream whose meaning escapes us completely, but whose intensity affects us for several days. A dream that works on our psyche, that *marks* us, and is therefore unquestionably *meaningful*, despite the fact that we are completely unable to decipher it in any conscious manner. In that same sense, a musical experience can *mark* us in ways we cannot truly describe, or articulate, verbally. We know we have lived something very intense, something truly meaningful, but we cannot explain it any further.

So music can, and does, mark us. Can it also be a mark? Perhaps each piece of music we make is a mark—part of a larger or longer sequence whose meaning may never be

clear to us quite simply because its scale eludes our perceptual capacity. Perhaps our consecutive improvisations, compositions or performances are like the marks a castaway scratches on the wall of his shelter, a personal calendar, lines standing in for the days that have passed since his shipwreck, until finally, there are no more days to be marked.

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