

I Have Something to Say, But I'm Not Saying It

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✱ In Anticipation...

Art articulates. It is articulated, made of particulate matter. Its particulars matter. Where it starts and when it stops is crucial to its meaning: how it pauses, resumes, divides, combines. In art's skeletal structure, the joints determine where it bends, which way, how far. Meaning's not in the bones, but in the breaks. No one ought to know this better than the musician. Not just the notes, but the rests count (and are counted). Music depends upon the before and after, the in-between, the how long. When John Cage isolates a period of silence and names it by its duration, he is acknowledging (from the obsolete Middle English verb *knowledge*, influenced by the obsolete *acknow* [confess]); he is confessing what the musician knows: that the material of music – sound – is only as good as its articulations, and that these articulations are determined by sound's other: silence.

Articulation is itself articulated. It bends two ways, is double-jointed; *hinged*, as Derrida would say. It is both vertebral and verbal. Derived from the Latin for a *small connecting part*, an articulation is composed of individual articles: short meaningful pieces of a larger enunciation. Both the articulation and the article take and make their meaning from the other. The larger articulation is nothing but the combination, in order, of the smaller articles. While the meaning of each article is constructed and held in place by the sense and

thrust of the articulation. Each thing that *is* gets either a “the” or an “a” – a definite or indefinite article. Every sound is *a/the* sound. But Cage’s famous book is *Silence*, bereft of article – suggesting that this silence is neither articulate nor articulated. Cage means to extract silence from the articulated nature of music. It is articulation he wishes to escape. He wants to elevate silence above music. He wants a silence that is singular, whole, self-possessing, and self-evident. The realm he has in mind for his silence is not the elevated seat of a still-earthbound power: the throne. Even from the throne, proclamations must be articulated. Cage means to locate his silence in an elsewhere that has no need of articles, articulations, or articulateness.

✿ First Articulation

I suspect that when Cage declares “I have nothing to say and I am saying it,” in “Lecture on Nothing,” (Cage, 1973 : 109) he is tapping into that same unarticulated/ inarticulate silence. His declaration has entered the mythological vernacular of the avant-garde. And regardless of Cage’s explicit intentions, the phrase has become an imprimatur of his legacy and legitimacy, with nothing standing in for Cagean silence. But, to be fair, one should start by asking if saying nothing is the same as remaining silent. In 1958, the year before the publication of “Lecture on Nothing,”¹ Samuel Beckett published his *Texts for Nothing*. In the eighth of these, he writes, “I should hear, at every little pause, if it’s the silence I say when I say that only the words break it.” (Beckett, 1995 : 131) Beckett’s silence says, or can, at least, be said. With *4’ 33”*, Cage announces the impossibility of silence: “Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death.” (Cage, 1973 : 8) Yet Cage still pursues silence, hoping that its impossibility is its realization. Like silence, impossibility is unarticulated: it cannot be broken

¹ Cage dates the first performance of “Lecture on Nothing” as “about 1949...at the Artists’ Club on Eighth Street in New York City.” Cage, J. *Silence*, (1973), Wesleyan, CT, Wesleyan University Press, p. ix.

into constituent parts, it cannot be uttered. Silence and impossibility are both absolute. To invoke them in a piece of art, a piece of music, is to invoke the sublime, that unbeautiful category of aesthetic experience that names the unnamable (itself, the name of a Beckett novel from 1953, the year after “Texts for Nothing”).

Cage says nothing. Beckett says silence. Each saying is equally impossible. In being impossible, each saying says. What’s important is *what* gets said in these unsaid sayings. Cage and Beckett, like every artist, articulate a message, while at the same time, delivering the instructions for decoding that message. What the artwork says *about* what it says is just as important as what it says it says. Some artworks can even say something they never say. For Giorgio Agamben, Glenn Gould’s piano playing always includes, and somehow indicates, Gould’s capacity *not* to play. (Agamben, 1993 : 36) Cage claims to initiate the opposite process: having nothing to say, yet saying it. But of course, his actual aims are aligned with what Agamben describes. “Lecture on Nothing,” is, after all, nothing but words, articulated units of lexical meaning. Cage, apparently, is saying *something*. In *Silence*, “Lecture on Nothing” is seventeen pages of something, e.g./i.e., “What silence requires is that I go on talking.” (Cage, 1973 : 109) As Agamben suggests, there’s always a little bit of something’s absence in its presence. How can we know it’s here if we don’t know that it needn’t be? But surely this can be taken too far. So Agamben nominates Gould as one who toggles *par excellence* between yes and no, here and not. One wonders if this is a two-way street: does Gould’s not playing the piano include and indicate his capacity *to* play? When Gould types a letter, do the *Goldberg Variations* haunt the movements of his fingers across the Qwertyan expanse?

What Beckett’s “Text for Nothing #8” says it says and what Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing” says it says seem similar. The same cannot be said for what each

says *about* what it says, about saying silence. Cage means to signify unarticulated silence by articulating it. This articulation comes by way of the piece-by-piece framing of silence via syntagmatic chains of words. One word, another, another. But between each: a space, a gap, a void, a silence. These are composer's tricks. He stretches these silences, from staccato to legato:

“We need not fear these silences.” (Cage, 1973 : 109)

Cage beats these silences like a drum. They are, after all, his instruments. The words are his capacity *not* to play. As he types the words of “Lecture on Nothing,” he plays the silences, the spaces between the typewriter keys. Were it not for the next keystroke, we would not recognize the silence. Beckett says “it’s the end gives the meaning to words.” (Beckett, 1995 : 131) Surely, the same is true of silence. Silence and words make each other mean. Until one disappears, each means.

Jean-François Lyotard insists that “silence is a phrase” (Lyotard, 1988 : xii) and that a phrase will always follow from a prior phrase and demand a subsequent phrase. A phrase is a unit of meaning. It is dictated by its context: what Lyotard calls its “regimen” (for example: “reasoning, knowing, describing, recounting, questioning, showing, ordering, etc.”). (Lyotard, 1988 : xii) It’s silence’s end that gives it meaning. Silence’s end comes in the form of sound, noise, language. Silence, then is always preceded and/or followed by a phrase that is unlikely to be equally silent. “There is no last phrase.” (Lyotard, 1988 : xii) If we have accepted that there will be no final word, we must also realize that there is no such thing as a final silence. If the former is transcendental, so is the latter. If the former is theological, so is the latter. Nor is there an originary silence from which all sound and language emerge. What Jacques Derrida calls *arche-writing* – the always-already potential of writing, of inscription, of marking a surface (the page, the world) with

meaning – not only makes meaning possible; it makes meaninglessness impossible. This potential writing is meaning's condition of possibility. Unavoidable – yet not originary – this inscription, underwrites reasoning, knowing, describing, recounting, questioning, showing, ordering, etc. But there is no silence that precedes this possibility. The *tabula* was never *rasa*.

Given these twin impossibilities – of an originary or a final silence – we must come to terms with silence's ends, its limits: its beginning limit, its ending limit. It's the ends give the meaning to silence. In his introductory remarks to "Lecture on Nothing," Cage writes, "And object is *fact*, not symbol" (Cage, 1973 : 108), again omitting the articles. He concludes these remarks, "Not ideas but facts," echoing other mid-20th century declarations of an anti-Platonic facticity, such as William Carlos Williams's "No ideas / but in things," (Williams, 1969 : 109) and Wallace Stevens's "Not Ideas About The Thing, But The Thing Itself." (Stevens, 1982 : 534) Yet there is an important difference between Cage's poetics (and the philosophical presumptions underlying it) and Williams's and Stevens's. Cage seeks an unarticulated silence-as-fact. This mute in-itselfness pretends to have no need of signs; to be self-evident in its (a)materiality. Williams and Stevens, bend to the inescapable will of signs. Their work is the utterance of utterance, the saying of saying. It is a mistake to think that either poet was a closet phenomenologist. Both look to reattach language to the world. But both know that language cannot be jettisoned. Each poet starts from the premise – as must any poet – that the world is not simply accessed *through* language; it is constructed *by* language. If you kick away the ladder, the house falls down. Stevens writes.

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow.
(Stevens, 1982 : 9)

The mind is not a blank slate upon which the meaningful world inscribes itself. The mind is active in the process of meaning-making, inscribing the world with names, uses, messages. These *inscriptions* are not *descriptions*. They compose the world – that is, the thing we live in, on, and with. Whether there is a world *out there*, waiting for the mind to discover it, hardly matters. To think the world – to “regard” it, as Stevens says – one must do so in, on, and with language. This relation to the amalgam material, “language-world,” is, properly speaking, a poetics. Cage’s a-signifying facts, though poetically rendered in “Lecture on Nothing,” and in many of Cage’s other texts, do not constitute a poetics, but a transcendental onto-theology.

Language, in the broadest sense (words being only the most obvious and oft-used example), allows us to make something in, on, of, and with the world. If I regard the difference between a bird and a box, or between a blackbird and a bluebird, I must do so in language. If I tell you or write to you about the blackbird – as I’m doing now – I must do so in language. If I make a poem or a painting or a game about the blackbird, I must do so in language. Language is the *about* in the previous sentence. Without language, nothing is *about* – nothing means. Without language, we have what Cage calls “facts.”

Something (or nothing) simply *is*. Without language or meaning nothing happens. Nothing does anything. Which is to say: everything does nothing. The dumb, inarticulate fact merely is, in stasis, inviolate, untouched, untouching, unaffected, and ineffectual. The nature of such a state of being is inaccessible to us. We cannot know it. We cannot interact with it. We cannot share it. We cannot experience it. Its *isness* is denied us, because its *is* is not in language or meaning. Which is to say, it does not relate.

Artworks are unique types of *is*. They float in the suspension of the world, without an obligation to stabilize their being or meaning. Artworks are

hinged, they bend, they articulate. Meaning's not in the bones, but in the breaks. Since the *is* of an artwork is unstable, how it articulates what it is becomes more important than it would be with a chair or a dog or photosynthesis or a restaurant. As we've already said, what the artwork says about what it says is just as important as what it says it says.

Elsewhere, I've argued that Cage's *4' 33"* fails to initiate a much-needed self-reflexive, critical, sonic practice (Kim-Cohen, 2009 : 159 - 167). This failure derives not from the work itself, which can, in fact, be read as a critical intervention,² but from the narratives about the piece, its creation, and its motivations, that have gained purchase over the past sixty years. Cage himself is responsible for many of these, sometimes contradictory, narratives. The emphasis of these narratives on silence in Cage's oeuvre and influence elides the critical potential in a work such as *4' 33"*, failing to move beyond the blunt either/or-ism of sound vs. silence. Here, I want to propose a similar failure: "Lecture on Nothing," like *4' 33"*, initiates a practice gravid with critical potential. As perhaps the first explicit lecture-as-performance, "Lecture on Nothing" creates the possibility of a meta-discursive form, capable of saying as much about saying what it says as about what it says. Yet, Cage assiduously declines the opportunity to exercise this latent criticality. Instead, he devotes the majority of the lecture to an internalized commentary on the structure of the lecture itself. This includes more than five numbingly repetitious pages – in the printed text included in *Silence* – and seventeen minutes – in an undated audio recording of Cage delivering the lecture, housed at the John Cage Trust at Bard College – reporting that the talk is getting "nowhere" (presumably, the correlate of the "nothing" of the lecture's title). Cage declares that this getting nowhere "is a pleasure...not irritating." (Cage, 1973 : 118 - 123) He's entitled to his opinion.

² I attempt such a reading in *In The Blink of an Ear*.

As a musician, Cage might have used the performance lecture format to do things that music does not do with ease or simply cannot do. He might have capitalized on the stock-in-trade of language: signification, to undermine the age-old notion of music as a non-signifying form. He might have made a case for an expanded sense of the space music might occupy, a reconfigured stratagem of how it might constitute itself. And, of course, “Lecture on Nothing” does all this – in spite of itself – using the articulations of something to designate nothing, using language to intimate silence. But rather than facing down these aporias in a critical manner, confronting the friction between the articulatedness of language and the singularity of silence, Cage proposes the formula I suggested earlier: that silence’s impossibility is its realization. In circling silence but never landing on it; in stalking nothing, but never capturing it, Cage constructs a negative theology. His implicit claim is that silence and nothing are transcendental and therefore cannot be located in our experience. In a negative theology, this unlocatability serves, perversely, as evidence of the absent terms’ existence. Theologians of various stripes have made similar arguments for god, contending that we, fallible humans, cannot truly understand god’s being. His unknowability (i.e., our ignorance) is the proof of his infallibility, his divinity, and therefore, of his existence. This is the fundamental perversity of faith: that it cannot be *known* in any epistemological sense; that knowledge negates belief. It is also the source of institutional power, as those in charge urge the faithful to obey codes without knowing the source of or reason for those codes.

✧ Second Articulation

In a lecture course taught at the Collège de France in 1977 - 78, Roland Barthes makes a distinction between two types of silence: one, designated by the Latin *silere*, indicates stillness, an empty space of pure contemplation; the other, designated by the Latin, *tacere* (and from which the word “tacet” is

derived), indicates a verbal silence, to keep quiet. “In short, *silere* would refer to a sort of timeless virginity of things, before they are born or after they have disappeared.” (Barthes, 2005 : 21 - 22) Barthes compares this vision of silence to the vision of god proposed by the 17th century German mystic, Jacob Boehme.:

...goodness, purity, liberty, silence, eternal light, without shadows or oppositions, homogeneous, ‘calm and voiceless eternity.’ However, the *silere* of Boehme’s God makes him unknowable, since *silere* in short = preparadigmatic condition, without sign. (Barthes, 2005 : 21 - 22)

Barthes lecture course – published in French as *Le Neutre*, in 2002, and in English as *The Neutral*, in 2005 – concerns the elusive element in communication that evades its operative meaning-making structures. To recall Lyotard, Barthes’ neutral is that which is alien to the phrase regimen in which it appears. In Barthes’ words, it is “that which outplays the paradigm.” (Barthes, 2005 : 6) Barthes’ *paradigm* and Lyotard’s *phrase regimen* function in essentially the same way within each philosopher’s theory of signification. In each case, the term in question designates the network of discursive associations and interests that allows a message to be formulated and transmitted, attaching a signifier to a signified. As Barthes declares, “where there is meaning there is paradigm and where there is paradigm there is meaning.” (Barthes, 2005 : 7) The neutral, then, is a term within the paradigm that cannot be assimilated. It’s interesting to note – in the midst of this philippic on silence – that this is what information theorists call “noise.” But for Barthes – concerned primarily with artistic texts: music, novels, films, pictures – this noise is not to be disregarded. Though the neutral may be extraneous to what the text says it says, it is, in a crucial sense, constitutive of what it says *about* what it says. As Stevens wishes to regard the frost, Barthes wishes to regard the noise, to attend to it. To do so, one must have, to paraphrase Stevens, a mind of noise.

Unsurprisingly then, Barthes denies the inarticulateness of silence. How, for instance, can Boehme know that god is unknowable? This knowledge is indicated, it is signified, by the silence that attends god's unknowability. According to Boehme, god's love

is deeper than any *Thing*, and is as *Nothing* with Respect to All Things, forasmuch as it is not comprehensible by any of them. And because it is *Nothing* respectively, it is therefore free from *All Things*; and is that only Good, which a Man cannot express or utter what it is; there being *Nothing* to which it may be compared, to express it by. (Boehme, web page : unpaginated)

Nothing and silence signify the unsignifiability of that which outplays the paradigm (of god), but in so doing, they signify the unsignifiable. The aporias that Cage dodges in "Lecture on Nothing" – the false dialectic of language and silence, of something and nothing – reassert themselves, and resolve in the recognition that the negative term is always present in the positive; that any effort to indicate the negative as an absence always results in making it present. Silence cannot be silent. As Barthes observes,

What is produced against signs, outside of signs, what is expressly produced so as not to be a sign, is very quickly recuperated as a sign. That's what happens to silence ... silence itself takes on the form of an image, of a "wise," heroic, or Sibylline, more or less Stoic posture. (Barthes, 2005 : 26)

❁ Third Articulation

It's likely that when Robert Morris adopted the performance lecture as an artistic vehicle, he did so in response to Cage. The relationship between the two artists is well documented.³ But, as with much of his work in the 1960s and 70s, Morris reinvests his artistic sources with additional intent and

³ See Morris's letters to Cage in *October*, Vol. 81, (Summer, 1997), pp. 70-79.

content. In the only available documentation of the piece, *21.3* – a photograph of Morris’s 1964 performance at the Surplus Theater in New York – Morris stands at a podium. His horn-rimmed glasses and trim suit and tie give the impression of a serious, studious professor. Morris was then a fledgling artist, and the title of the performance lecture, *21.3*, is, in fact, the catalogue number of an art history survey course taught by Morris at Hunter College in New York. The text of *21.3* is excerpted, verbatim, from the first chapter of Erwin Panofsky’s *Studies in Iconology*. Originally published in 1939, *Studies in Iconology* “concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art as opposed to their form.” (Panofsky, 1972 : 3) Panofsky identifies three strata of meaning in the work of art. The “primary or natural meaning” is discerned through forms that allow the spectator to see a shape in clay as a human being or a configuration of brush strokes as a bowl of fruit. The “secondary or conventional meaning” connects forms to stories, allowing the spectator to see “that a group of figures seated at a dinner table in a certain arrangement and in certain poses represents the Last Supper.” (Panofsky, 1972 : 6) Panofsky calls this level of meaning the “iconographical.” Lastly, the “intrinsic meaning or content” – the level of meaning central to Panofsky’s method – “is apprehended by ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work.” (Panofsky, 1972 : 7) Panofsky’s schema is pertinent both to Morris’s intentions in the mid-60s and to mine here.

In addition to the photograph of Morris’s 1964 performance, there is a 16mm film of a recreation of the piece, made, with Morris’s participation, in 1993. The film was directed by Babette Mangolte, and also includes three of Morris’s other performance works from the mid-60s.⁴ In Maurice Berger’s

⁴ See Babette Mangolte, *Four Pieces by Morris*, 1993. (The other pieces are *Site*, *Arizona*, and *Waterman Switch*.) (<http://www.babettemangolte.com/film1993.html>, accessed 8 May 2011).

Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s, Morris is described as delivering Panofsky's text in tandem with a tape recording of the lecture. Berger writes that Morris's speech "moves in and out of synchronization" with the recording. (Berger, 1989 : 1) But in *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem*, the catalogue of a 1994 Morris Retrospective at the Guggenheim in New York, Morris is described as lip-synching, albeit in an unsynchronized manner, to his own recording of the lecture. (Calnek, ed., 1994 : 160) The discrepancy between these two accounts is most satisfyingly settled by the Mangolte film, which features the actor, Michael Stella, reprising Morris's performance of the lecture. The film agrees with the Guggenheim account, featuring Stella lip-synching, out of time, to a recording of Morris reading the lecture. The sound of water being poured from a pitcher into a glass miscoincides – to use a verb in the Guggenheim text – with the image of Stella pouring the water. In addition, various gestures, such as the lecturer fingering his collar, removing his glasses, or lifting the pages of his talk, are carefully scripted. Movements that would normally be spontaneous and unconscious are mechanized and raised to the level of hyper-self-consciousness.

Curiously, in both Berger's *Labyrinths* and the Guggenheim catalogue, the same, short passage is quoted from Panofsky's text:

When an acquaintance greets me on the street by removing his hat, what I see from a formal point of view is nothing but the change of certain details within a configuration forming part of the general pattern of color, lines and volumes which constitutes my world of vision. When I identify, as I automatically do, this configuration as an object (gentleman), and the change of detail as an event (hat-removing), I have already overstepped the limits of purely formal perception and entered a first sphere of subject matter or meaning. (Panofsky, 1972 : 3)

Panofsky famously uses the everyday example (in 1939 anyway) of a man doffing his hat, to show that meaning is constructed incrementally from primary formal recognition, to secondary understandings of convention, to the final recognition of the intrinsic attitude of the gesture.

The two texts also agree on Morris's scorn for Panofsky's position. The Guggenheim text argues that "Morris's performance was intended as a subversion of the very notion of [Panofsky's] logic... closing off the very distinction between form and content on which Panofsky's demonstration had depended." (Calnek, ed., 1994 : 160) Berger, for his part, describes *21.3* as a "parody of the art historian." (Berger, 1989 : 4) Coming in the very first pages of his study of Morris's 60s output, Berger situates his analysis of *21.3* as the foundation of his understanding of Morris's work. He argues that Morris's work is "fundamentally theatrical," and that "his theater is one of negation." (Berger, 1989 : 3) In *21.3*, according to Berger, this negation is directed at Panofsky's schema,

In direct contrast to the iconological thinking of Panofsky, Morris's critique of art historical method implies that we must turn not only to the private space of memory and knowledge but to the public space of experience to define our place in the world. (Berger, 1989 : 3 - 4)

There is no doubt that Morris's performance lecture is intended as critique. But to classify it bluntly as a "subversion," a "parody," or a "negation," is to reduce the complexity of Morris's engagement with art history, with Panofsky's text, and with the nascent form of the performance lecture. To call a work of art "critical" is not to insist that it undertake an all-out attack on its subject matter. *21.3* engages *Studies in Iconology* in order to draw out its innovations, its failings, and, most interestingly and importantly, the contradictions it discovers and invents in the elaboration of its argument. Where Cage seeks (unsuccessfully) to reduce the discursivity of his

performance lecture to a murmur meant to indicate silence – Morris courts the meta-discursivity of his text, allowing it to articulate in multiple directions. What it says about what it says is just as important as what it says it says. Its silences are, indeed, articulated.

The Guggenheim text identifies a “distinction between form and content” at the heart of Panofsky’s argument. But if one engages in a careful reading of Panofsky, as Morris undoubtedly has, one realizes that Panofsky doesn’t mean to divide form from content, but in fact to consider both in tandem. In fact, Panofsky’s view prefigures, by nearly thirty years, the imbrication of formal components of a work with the social and psychological forces that motivate both their production and reception. When reading Panofsky’s description of concerns of time, place, class, and religious disposition “unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work,” it is not difficult to see a tangible connection to Barthes’ “death of the author,” and, perhaps even more emphatically, to Michel Foucault’s account of the “author function.”⁵ Nor is it much of a stretch to connect Panofsky’s views with the debates that would emerge around Minimalism – notably pertaining to Morris’s own practice – just a few years after the performance of *21.3*. What, after all, does Michael Fried object to most vehemently in Morris’s mirrored cubes, but their theatricality? Fried directs his disgust at the cubes’ apparent desire to transcend their form, or, more accurately, to fold their form into their function so that the question of content is reduced, pragmatically, to the question of what these forms do and what processes they initiate.

Panofsky’s discussion of the gesture of removing one’s hat is a similar folding, wherein neither the physical dimensions of the hat, its shape and color, nor

⁵ See Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author,” in *Image Music Text*. London, Fontana Press, 1977, pp. 142-148; and Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *The Foucault Reader*. New York, Pantheon, 1984, pp. 101-120.

the muscular movements of its wearer, are considered in a semantic vacuum. Instead, these facts are woven into the secondary and intrinsic levels of meaning to yield a gestalt experience that is part perception, part knowledge, part affect, and part something else. The pertinence of Panofsky's schema to both Morris's intentions and to mine, emerges from this something else. The example of removing one's hat is not offered casually. Panofsky sees the artwork functioning as a similar kind of gesture, related to a historically-determined set of actions that both receive and produce meaning in a given situation and for a particular audience. In *21.3*, Morris's scripted gestures – e.g., “finger in collar,” “step left,” “right arm behind back”⁶ – are not, as Berger and the Guggenheim text suggest, intended to put a needle to Panofsky's balloon. It would be a mistake to think that because they are scripted, these gestures become contextless and lose all meaning. Their context may have changed – from the incidental aspects of a scholarly lecture to the intentional choreography of an artistic performance – but still, as always, there is context. And where there is context there is meaning. The meaning of these gestures in this context accrues both with and against Panofsky's exegesis. Rather than negating Panofsky's position, Morris productively complicates it. This act of complication constitutes the critical maneuver of Morris's work. By highlighting the contradictions discovered and invented in the elaboration of its argument, Morris turns Panofsky's text into a fertile ground for rethinking art and art history. Cage, on the other hand, demurs from engaging the complications of having nothing to say and saying it, opting instead for obfuscation and avoidance of the critical issues of his operative aporias.

For Panofsky, in order to understand the gesture of the hat or a work of art in its nuances, one must understand the expanded context in which the

⁶ Legible in an image of the typewritten script for *21.3* in Maurice Berger, *Labyrinths: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s*. New York: Harper & Row, 1989, p. 3.

gesture/work lives. This context is not authored by the artist any more than it is authored by the tipper of the hat. The context is the gesture's *lebenswelt*, its *lifeworld*. Sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, has developed a theory of artistic production predicated on this something else, this relation of the work to the world from which it emerges and in which it operates. Bourdieu names this relation *habitus*:

durable, transposable dispositions, ... principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively "regulated" and "regular" without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor. (Bourdieu, 1990 : 53)

It is absolutely worth noting, as Randal Johnson does in his Editor's Introduction to Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production*, that "Bourdieu first introduced into his theory the notion of habitus... on the occasion of the French edition of Erwin Panofsky's *Architecture gothique et pensée scolastique*." (Johnson, in Bourdieu, 1993 : 5) Although Panofsky does not lean as hard on the term as Bourdieu later does, its original sense and usage is Panofsky's.

As noted earlier, Maurice Berger sees *21.3* as a "critique of art historical method [that] implies that we must turn not only to the private space of memory and knowledge but to the public space of experience to define our place in the world." (Berger, 1989 : 3 - 4) Again, this misreading of Panofsky must be attributed to the critic and not to Morris's engagement with the text. As should be more than clear, even from the brief gloss I've provided here, Panofsky is willing – more willing than many art historians of his generation – to accommodate the "public space of experience" in his account of artistic

meaning-making. That Morris's arrival in the art world comes at a moment of high formalism, should allow us to see a more sympathetic relationship between Morris and Panofsky than either Berger or the Guggenheim text are willing to countenance.

✿ **Fourth Articulation**

Paul Virilio wants to defend silence. He mourns the loss of that dumbstruck moment, when the spectator stands tongue-tied before the luminosity of the canvas. This experience, he complains, has been overridden by what he calls the "audio-visible," the perennial torrent of media sounds and sights that floods our contemporary perceptual field. Virilio condemns the postmodern condition in society and in the arts for being pathologically uncomfortable with silence. For Virilio, remaining silent is not a form of passivity, assent, or capitulation. Rather, silence indicates a form of attention and a holistic (and, as we shall soon see, implicitly holy) receipt of pre-linguistic sensations. In contemporary art, conceptualism's dematerialization has metastasized into what he calls "mutism," an unmitigated negation of the meaningfulness of silent, contemplative perception. "The case instituted against silence, citing the evidence of the works, then ends in out and out condemnation of that profane piety that was still an extension of the piety of bygone sacred art." (Virilio, 2003 : 93) Despite his cosmopolitan, secular intentions, Virilio, too, draws together silence and spirituality.

Virilio is right to see this mutism as a political issue, but his proposed cure is more dangerous than the disease. For Virilio, the implications of mutism are apparent in societal mores, in aesthetic agendas, in distributions of power. "The voices of silence have been silenced; what is now regarded as obscene is not so much the image as the sound or, rather, the lack of sound." (Virilio, 2003 : 71) Virilio's response to the noisiness of the world and its institutions is a resolute, steely, silence of resistance.

For if certain works SPEAK, those that SHOUT and SCREAM their pain or hate would soon abolish all dialogue and rule out any form of questioning. The way that pressure from the media audience ensures that crime and pornography never cease dominating AUDIO-VISUAL programmes so much so that our screens have reached saturation point these days, as we all know the bleak dawn of the twentieth century was not only to inaugurate the crisis in figurative representation, but along with it, the crisis in social stability without which representative democracy in turn disappears. (Virilio, 2003 : 91)

Virilio makes a few specious connections here. Firstly, it is difficult to see how silence might act as, or even foster, dialogue or questioning. To refuse to speak or to participate in objectionable activities may be a form of resistance. It may be a form of critique. But the substance of its response is always singular and blunt: an inarticulate, unarticulated abstention. This hardly constitutes dialogue or questioning in any constructive sense. It is also difficult to understand the equivalence Virilio finds between the positive values of silence and figurative representation. It would be easier to equate silence and abstraction.⁷ It is even more difficult to swallow the too-easy correspondence between artistic representation and representative democracy, to say nothing of their contemporaneous crises.

At the turn of the subsequent century – our own – Virilio detects additional portents of this creeping mutism:

On the eve of the new millennium, the aesthetics of disappearance was completed by the aesthetics of absence. From that moment, whoever says nothing consents to cede their 'right to remain silent', their freedom to listen, to a noise-making process that simulates oral expression or conversation. (Virilio, 2003 : 82)

⁷ In fact, Virilio makes this equation elsewhere in the text. See Virilio, p. 94.

Despite the fact that “Lecture on Nothing” is constituted of word upon word upon word, Cage means to conjure the same silent, contemplative perception that Virilio wants to defend. Cage and Virilio seek, not the silence of the work, but the dumbstrucksilence of the spectator; the silence of the powerless before the (all-)powerful. As Douglas Kahn has pointed out, Cage’s project is predicated not on *silence*, the noun, but on *silencing*, the verb.⁸ The danger of this position (which is also Virilio’s), is that if we shout down shouting works, we will not have silence, we will only have silenced. As we have learned via countless examples, including the recent Arab Spring and the controversy involving WikiLeaks, the State will always seek to silence voices that threaten its agenda, but it will not accept silence for itself.

Morris’s elaboration of the performance lecture, does not reduce language to a framing device for a latent, ineffable silence. Instead, *21.3* multiplies the meaning-making capacities of Panofsky’s text, allowing it to speak its own mind, while also performing a series of expansions, revising both singular points and the overall position of the text. Morris presents a work that doesn’t SHOUT or SCREAM (to quote Virilio in his all-caps patois). Rather, he allows language to double and triple itself; its volume remaining constant, while its implications crescendo. Of course, the most useful metaphor for describing this distinction comes from music. Morris’s approach harmonizes Panofsky’s text, revealing the polyphony masquerading as a single voice.

Volume is not problematic in and of itself. It becomes a tool of oppression when it silences other voices. In other words, the problem with one voice enunciating at *forteissimo possibile* is that it obliterates polyphony. But polyphony can be obliterated by other means. The 2010 United States Supreme Court ruling, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, finds

⁸ See Douglas Kahn, *Noise Water Meat*. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1999. (See, in particular, Chapter 6: “John Cage: Silence and Silencing.”)

that corporations have the same free speech rights as individuals. As a result the corporation is free to bring its wealth to bear on political campaigns, monopolizing time and space and elbowing out competing and conflicting (dissonant) voices. Such silencing is facilitated by access to resources: money, media, lobbyists, et al. Just as importantly, it is licensed by recourse to an inaccessible, unquestionable power: god, the law, truth, etc. It may seem counterintuitive to place the state and corporations on the same side of this debate as the Zen, mushroom-collecting, Cage. But each asks us to shut up and listen; to defer to an injunction issued from and by the unknown. Cage's silence may be evidence of little more than Pollyannaish political naiveté. But enlarged and extended in and by the hands of less benevolent figures and institutions, the same position can license an ominous brand of politics.

The critical issue here should not be reduced to one of volume. In "Tympan," the preamble to *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida plays with the double-jointed meaning of *tympanum*: on the one hand, the ear drum, played by the voices and noises of the world; on the other, *tympaniser*, an archaic French verb, meaning *to criticize*, or in Derrida's understanding, to philosophize. (Derrida, 1982 : x) Derrida criticizes the assumptions some are prone to make about the apparent directness of the ear. While it is true that sound waves strike the tympanic membrane of the ear drum, it does not follow that the significant perception of sounds is immediate and unmediated. For Derrida, the identity of any thing is never self-same. The process of meaning can move ever closer to its target, but it can never arrive. The process reaches an impenetrable limit of proximity. Because it is not concrete, but merely epistemological (or, as he calls it, after Hegel, onto-theological), Derrida writes of this limit as a non-limit. The limit of absolute proximity is the process of meaning-in-difference. Sameness and singularity are mute and meaningless. Polyphony and multiplicity are loquacious and fecund.

Things can get ever quieter, but there is no absolute quiet; no silence. Cage has admitted as much. So what is at issue, again, is not the volume of the work or the world. Cage's silent listening is a passive listening. And silent passivity seems more likely than prolix activity "to abolish all dialogue," as Virilio fears, "and rule out any form of questioning." (Virilio, 2003 : 91)

❁ Fifth Articulation

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, people have been assembling at the north east corner of London's Hyde Park to air their opinions about religion, government, economics, and society. Individuals reputed to have mounted their soapbox at what is known as "Speaker's Corner" include Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, George Orwell, Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah, and William Morris. A great many lesser lights, ranters and ravers, pontificators and would-be-pontiffs, have also offered harangues and homilies at the site. The six and a half minute video, *Everything You've Heard Is Wrong*, witnesses London-based artist, Carey Young, arriving at Speaker's Corner, ascending a small stepladder, and delivering a lecture. Amidst the usual clamor of Sunday orators, Young, dressed in a conservative pantsuit, a stack of index cards in hand, begins,

Hello, my name is Carey Young and ... I'd like to teach you about presentation skills. (Young, 1999 : 23 seconds)

Young stands just outside the perimeter of a crowd of fifty or more, gathered around a man dressed in white robes and headdress. We can't hear what the man is saying. He is gesticulating broadly in an apparent effort to provoke his audience. In contrast, Young offers a banal, business-style tutorial, isolating three things to keep in mind when giving a speech or presentation: "who is your audience..., what is your message, and how do you come across as a speaker." (Young, 1999 : 6 minutes, 5 seconds) At first, Young fails to

attract a crowd. But over the course of her six minute address, small gatherings assemble and disperse. One man, in a dark coat and sunglasses, attends to the entire performance.

To say that *Everything You've Heard Is Wrong* is about public speaking would be to woefully underreport the breadth of its meaning. As with Morris's *21.3*, Young's performance lecture multiplies the significance of its ostensible text. What it says about what it says is just as important as what it says it says. The meta-discursivity in play in the form of the performance lecture is a meta-harmony. By *performing* the lecture, rather than simply delivering it, Young extends its boundaries, multiplies its valences, complicates its meanings. By presenting it at Speaker's Corner, she implicates the text and her actions in the history of free speech in Britain and in Western democracies. Young's address problematizes the models of corporate communication that dominate exchanges of contemporary information and inflect the way we relate to each other in the contexts of business, law, and commerce, but also in academia, in the arts, and even at home. In *Everything You've Heard Is Wrong*, these bureaucratized communication strategies are pitted against the anarchic history of Speaker's Corner. The holy man in the background of Young's video is the perfect ballast for her dry, platitudinous, demonstration. Although his message is not audible in the video, he seems to be zealously engaging his audience, aiming to persuade them of the error of their ways, and, no doubt, of the efficacy of his own prescriptions. His investment in his message is bodily: his torso twisting from side to side, his arms always in motion, he leans into the crowd, points at them, beseeches them. Meanwhile, in the foreground, Young is the picture of corporate comportment, natty, contained, prepared, and lacking even a whiff of the evangelist's fervor in her measured disquisition.

The energy of *Everything You've Heard Is Wrong* is generated not by an inherent fundamentalism. That would merely appeal to another manifestation of the absolute proximity deconstructed by Derrida. Young's work engages competing rhetorical modalities, not to champion one over the other, but to set them against each other; generating a productive friction, a fertile harmony. She situates this confrontation in a location renowned for its history as a marketplace of ideas and as a protected zone of free speech. According to Young, Speaker's Corner also projects a communication model beyond its nineteenth century origins into the twenty-first century. Her web site declares, "the site is a model for the sort of free speech supposedly so central to the 'information age'." (Young : www.careyyoung.com/past/everything.html) *Everything You've Heard Is Wrong* extends its critique of communication beyond the format of the lecture, beyond performance. It asks us to conceive of the temporary communities of interested listeners at Speaker's Corner as a model for the decentralized, nodal dissemination of information. Every speaker is a blog, every listener an IP address. The modalities on display at Speaker's Corner and in *Everything You've Heard Is Wrong*, offer disparate templates for crowd sourcing, social networking, and distance learning. Young's corporatized intervention into the wild information West of emergent networking represents the bureaucratization of a relatively unregulated arena of communication. Recently, Young's prognosticative projections have come home to roost, as the open source model of the internet faces increasingly vehement challenges from neo-con think tanks such as the Cato Institute, the Goldwater Institute, and the Ayn Rand Institute, and from corporations such as AT&T. The allegory invoked by *Everything You've Heard Is Wrong* is one of net neutrality vs. the so-called "free" market, of the populace vs. the powerful.

In this allegory, volume is a red herring. The critical questions facing the dissemination of information – via art, the internet, corporate or governmental communications – are questions of centralization and access; that is, of singularity vs. multiplicity. If the spheres of messaging are open and available; if use, space, and time are distributed equally and without consideration of ability to pay, then the question reverts to one of meaning. Some have suggested that the underlying issue is one of visibility. The information-age illusion of total access, transparency, and the 24-hour news cycle blinds us to the reality that our field of vision is already curtailed by those with the top secret codes, the demographic statistics, and the market share.⁹ In a recent *Artforum* essay, art historian, Pamela M. Lee investigates artworks that engage classified documents, redaction, and “black sites” (such as secret prisons and military bases). She writes,

The secret is itself an ideological contrivance; its withholding – its *visible* withholding – is as critical to its power as whatever content we might imagine it conceals. Thus the secret paradoxically possesses something like an *appearance* – an aesthetics, if you like. (Lee, 2011 : 223)

But the significance of information is not visual. When a government apparatchik marks a document “for your eyes only,” eyes are not really the main concern. What the official is concerned about is mouths and ears. Withholding information is *not* as powerful as its content. If it were, there would be no point in withholding it. If the content and its withholding were equally powerful, the economic calculus would dictate that it is easier to simply release the information than to exert any effort withholding it. Information is *only* withheld when its content is more powerful than withholding it. That is the definition of a secret. (In magic tricks and publicity stunts, the powerful information is that there is no secret. This is

⁹ For one particularly influential instance of this, see Jacques Rancière’s thinking on the “distribution of the sensible,” in his *Politics of Aesthetics*. London and New York: Continuum 2006; and *The Future of the Image*. London: Verso, 2009.

information of a negative value. But it is not not information.) Regardless the positive or negative charge of the information, merely seeing the information is not the issue. Hearing it speak is what matters. Withholding information is not a matter of invisibility, but of silence.

In a chapter entitled, "Secrecy and Silence," in her book *The Quest for Voice: Music, Politics, and the Limits of Philosophy*, Lydia Goehr notes the human urge to get "beyond a specific condition, the sense that one can reach for something that presently is not so or does not exist." (Goehr, 1998 : 27) She goes on to say that philosophy has traditionally divided itself into two camps. One ignores the something that doesn't presently exist, believing it is beyond the ken of philosophy and knowability. The other camp sees the excluded something as the product of a dialectic. "They have allowed that one can acknowledge, account for, or point to the value of that which is excluded through an account of that which is included." (Goehr, 1998 : 29) The former camp dismisses silence outright. The latter engages it through its others: noise and language. Lyotard, Barthes, and Derrida are clearly members of this camp. Morris and Young are engaged with this position in their performance lectures.

The critical question is whether this dialectics devolves into a negative theology. Derrida, notably, has been accused of promoting a kind of negative theology with his notion of the *trace*. In *Of Grammatology*, the trace is proposed as a solution for a problem dogging Western philosophy from its inception: namely the tendency to pursue the chain of un-transcendental, material reason back to an X that has no name, no dimension; an entity that escapes description or knowing. But critics complained that the trace is itself such an entity. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes, "The trace itself does not exist. (To exist is to be, to be an entity, a being-present...)" (Derrida, 1976 : 167) But Derrida quickly clarified his position and defended himself against

the accusation that he proffered a negative theology. Elaborating on the term *differance* – one of many terms (like trace) that Derrida swaps in and out, indicating the condition he cannot name – he writes, it is not,

because our language has not yet found or received this *name*, or because we would have to seek it in another language, outside the finite system of our own. It is rather because there is no *name* for it at all – not even the name of essence or Being, not even that of “*différance*,” which is not a name, which is not a pure nominal unity, and unceasingly dislocates itself in a chain of differing and deferring substitutions. (Derrida, 1982 : 26)

The unnamed/unnameable is not an *it* that lies beyond the reach of our knowledge. It is, as Richard Rorty puts it, “the situation which the dialectical philosopher starts from.” (Rorty, 1978-79 : 320) For Derrida, as for Lyotard, Barthes, Morris and Young, a dialectical engagement with work and world acknowledges the condition of any saying: that it cannot say the *it* at the heart of it and yet can say something about what it says; something not explicitly said. The silence they court is not silence as an unavailable *it*, but silence as an unavoidable condition of thinking and doing.

Cage’s position is less certain. But if we return to the idea that his position is concerned with *silencing*, the verb, and not, in the final analysis, with *silence*, the noun, we realize that he is not attending to a philosophical problem, but offering a spiritual prescription. The line of demarcation between the philosophical and the spiritual is the line of demarcation between immanence and transcendence. To offload the source of meaning to an absent other whose power is predicated on its absence, is spiritual. To take responsibility for meaning; to locate it within available, affectable power structures is philosophical. In “Lecture on Nothing,” Cage simply emphasizes a silence of reception, what his Zen brethren might call a “quiet mind.” This is self-help disguised as aesthetics. As readers and listeners, however, we are free to

discover the philosophical implications of Cage's work, the meaning that emerges when his compositions and texts are contextualized within the socio-political conditions of their creation and reception. We are entitled to hear the meta-discursivity, the meta-harmony, that emerges as the work bows against the world; as its singular voice fissures to reveal the inevitable polyphony at its heart. We are obligated to discover the discrete, component parts constituting that which poses as unarticulated, self-confirming, and whole.

✿ ...Post Hoc

Articulation happens. The artist has two choices: to acknowledge and work with it and its prosaic tethers; or to deny it and to both pursue and promise the unattainable. Goehr suggests that the latter position entails “a conservative commitment to something like an Invisible Hand or Natural Law.” (Goehr, 1998 : 44) In other words, to offload the source of meaning from the work and its world to an elsewhere/elsewhen is to abdicate responsibility for the implications of the work and the world. Goehr asks, “Have we had to put our faith in some kind of spiritual guidance or authority of tradition by taking our own human, rational, experiential, or epistemological limits too seriously?” (Goehr, 1998 : 44) Morris and Young answer this question not by taking these limits less seriously, but by seriously confronting their contradictions, antagonisms, and frictions; by seeing the complexities of rationality, experience and knowledge as productive of meaning. One might go so far as to say that these complexities are the only sources of meaning. Complexity constitutes the paradigm.

Goehr calls for a philosophy engaged in “the critical exposure of conflicts and problems in a practice that its authoritative determinations conceal.” (Goehr, 1998 : 44 - 45) And there's no reason such a mandate should be applicable only to philosophy. In art and music, in shopping and eating, in socializing and supposing, we should remain critically vigilant. Invisible hands and

natural laws are false gods, just as “true” gods are false gods. There is no singular source, no singular purpose, no singular plan. Everything is that and that and that and that. Everything is articulated.

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