

Eleven Theses on the State of New Music

Michael Pisaro, October, 2004 (revised December, 2006)

Note on the revision: I undertook this text upon the invitation to give a talk at Brooklyn College in the Fall of 2004. Two years later, I found the need to make many changes in the text, due in part to the fact the text was to be published, instead of read aloud, but mostly due to my further reading of Alain Badiou. Though this text is not ultimately a restatement of Badiou's ideas I hope to have distorted his ideas as little as possible when I *do* restate them. This is undoubtedly a work in progress.

These theses take as their starting point my response to a talk French philosopher Alain Badiou gave at the California Institute of the Arts (and elsewhere) in December of 2003. Badiou's lecture was titled "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art." I think that Badiou is the most original thinker to come out of France since the advent of the "Post-Structuralists," and, more importantly, is, unwittingly perhaps, the philosopher par excellence of experimental work in art, politics or science. On first reading his work, I had the experience of finally encountering a philosophy that started to make sense of the revolution many of thought we were involved in, by pursuing the ideas initiated by the experimental tradition, in a way that Cage, for all his talent as a writer had not.

*Badiou is himself a novelist and playwright, and therefore brings more experience to the discussion of art than is typical in recent philosophy (though this combination *is* certainly not unknown, as the examples of Sartre, Adorno and Rousseau, among a few others indicate).*

The first place I saw Badiou's name mentioned was in Deleuze and Guattari's What is Philosophy? (published in 1994), and indeed, Deleuze is another thinker who has been important to the development of my compositional thinking. And although they are near opposites in many ways, it seems that for Badiou himself Deleuze was the most important philosopher of the previous generation and necessary partner (or adversary) in his attempt to found a philosophy based on the "event," (as he attests in his book on Deleuze: The Clamor of Being). There are also Deleuzian overtones in what follows.

For me, at some point in the early 1990's there was no going further without a return to the fundamental premises of art, and of contemporary music, so that's where I'm going to start today. This talk begins with what are, more or less, restatements of or commentaries on ideas found in Badiou's Theses, and moves step by step to a discussion of where I think we are today (or, more humbly, where I am today, besides Brooklyn or California or wherever).

- 1.) One of the only realms where the words "truth" and "ideal" have any active contemporary relevance is in art.

Science and politics, seen from the "revolutionary" point of view, and in comparison with the era that produced Lenin and Einstein, seem to be more on "life support" than alive. And although it's hard to see our own situation as artists all that clearly, I do not think that our time is without hope: in fact, I have the feeling, especially as I think about my colleagues and my students, that we are at the beginning of a new period of adventure.

Perhaps this is a result of the tremendous explosion of formal means seen in the 20th century, which seems, even now, an inexhaustible source of inspiration. Whatever we might differ on, most of us would agree that the 20th century was a time of tremendous formal innovation: where not only the modes of artistic expression, but, just as importantly, the range of formal choices expanded exponentially. This inheritance still plays an important role today in the art that is most alive.

- 2.) Artistic activity is the infinite exploration of an event along the plane of immanence.

In other words, our activity, at its most engaging, is the pursuit of an idea (or a concept, or an aesthetic), faithfully following its consequences, wherever they might lead.

There is no denying that each of the arts is a sensual medium. One question for us, which I will return to below, is where in the process the “idea” comes in. For some it might be a contingent outcome that happens in a listener (Cage, I think, was of this opinion); for others, (Webern, Mallarmé, Badiou) the idea is the end of a process by which the sensual is “subtracted” from the work; for still others, the idea arises as part of a philosophical undertaking, outside of the work (Deleuze, Melville, Feldman); yet another group sees the idea as the content of the work itself (as in the Conceptualists, or perhaps, the Florentine Camerata). However, in every case, there is the belief that works of art, traverse ideas (or are traversed by); that art is a kind of thought, which takes place on an immanent sensory plane. With great works, or groups of works, or especially, with large constellations of works, we have the sense that the subjective space explored is infinite. That is, that the universe it describes cannot be limited in its consequences and ramifications for future work. This may sound very romantic, even “idealistic,” but I make no apologies for thinking this way: this is what I meant when I said at the start that art was one of the only realms in which such thought was still possible.

- 3.) An artistic procedure is carried further, not as the strict adherence to a clear code or law, but the way in which discoveries of any kind might be pursued: a process which passes through questioning, hypothesis, experiment, doubt, evaluation, and so on, in an endless cycle—without any assurance (other than intuition and the works themselves) that a particular path is the right one.

For me, and I know for others, the word “experiment” is loaded. For many of us, the word acquired its application to music in the writings of John Cage, where it connotes the pursuit of a music in which the result is unforeseeable. Cage was saying that a crucial element of his work as a composer involved an unknown outcome: something that admitted openly the role of change, chance and contingency. This was an important step forward in the thinking on music: it contained a seed from which, by now, a whole repertoire of music has grown. But I would like to emphasize here that I don’t think this should be understood as just any kind of experiment: it is based on some fundamental choice about the “future” of music (at least in local terms). That is, we are talking about

experiments that are already informed by a foundational decision: where the finitude of the work comes at the end of a process that allows for the contingencies of writing, reading, playing and hearing music to be given full play.

Secondly, I would also emphasize that “doubt” here does not mean self-doubt, but a kind of openness to the actual result of the work — an avoidance of pre-judgment and a preparedness to evaluate the results of the experiment (or wager) in the light of the decision already taken: it is part of the process of remaining “faithful” to the event.

If one were to posit 4’33” as being in the neighborhood of an event (if not an event unto itself)—the question would be how to pursue the consequences of this occurrence along the infinite path of its trajectory. Of course, there are many answers to the question of how this can be, has been, and currently is being pursued. One can remain faithful in a vast diversity of ways, as is demonstrated by the music of Christian Wolff, David Tudor, Morton Feldman, Alvin Lucier, Robert Ashley, James Tenney, George Brecht, LaMonte Young, Max Neuhaus, and many others, right on up to the present day. In retrospect it is the body or corpus of this work that confers the status of “event” on what began with Cage. “Cage” is the name under which this work has continued (and continues).*

* As musicologists and theorists have begun to research the work of Cage and onward, a fundamental contention has been that this work (i.e., this body of work) has a structure, an ever-widening set of working methods, of formal hypotheses, of confirmed and discounted musical results, etc. It is not, in this view (which is also one I uphold), the nihilistic “anything goes” proposition that it is sometimes held to be. The issue, which in part reflects differing views of the inheritance from Schoenberg, is nevertheless at the core of the dispute between Cage and Boulez; a dispute that continues on to the present day.

4.) Any such pursuit must be universal in its address.

This is not the same thing as communicating with an audience. No single audience, certainly not one attending a classical concert, can be taken as representative of the universal.

What are the conditions of this universality?

For Badiou the conditions involve the gradual subtraction of the sensual, in pursuit of an idea. An idea, in its abstraction, by its imperturbable remoteness from the winds of opinion, would in this sense, also, like the constellation of Orion, be available to anyone.

Words like “reflection” and “communication”—words that seem to indicate that art is a kind of “self-reflexivity” or it is something which has as its goal, the delivery of a message are anathema. The idea of a “public” is not the goal of art, it is simply one of the conditions of art. An actual public, even if it only comes down to the artist herself, is a given.

For artists, there can be no true thought if it's clouded by concern for its reception.

- 5.) A genuine artistic creation springs from a rupture (event) from which a truth procedure (the long term evaluation of what an idea is capable of) follows (or might follow).

In Art, things can happen. What is the nature of these “happenings” and what are their consequences? We are not accustomed to naming our profound responses to such happenings as “truths.” This seems, at first, to deny the subjective nature of the experience. One of the great services that Badiou has rendered us, has been to rescue the word truth, and without denying its subjectivity (there are no “universal truths”), affirm its function in our way of working.

When I first encountered the work of Cage (at an outdoor performance in Lincoln center), in New York 24 years ago, I knew something was happening but had no idea how to describe it. What I do know is that this experience has grown in my thinking over the years—something truly happened to me; a contingent, unexpected encounter with a way of thinking for which I had no preparation.

It was, in short, an encounter with the event of Cage. For Badiou the event is a point of excess (or supernumerary) in a (counted) situation. It is, in other words, something that cannot be accounted for by what is “known” at the time: it is invisible to its time. The 1950’s and ‘60’s provided the temporal site for Cage’s work, but that work is in no sense simply an outcome of that time. It was an addition, inconceivable without the work itself.

One could also say that an event is a “test” of its time’s capacity for truth, i.e., it’s capacity to pursue the consequences of event along its infinite plane of immanence. If I dare, I would wager that the “truth” of the Cagean event (if it is that) is the “opening” of the world of music to the world of all sound.

This is the way I understand the work of many who were touched by Cage, especially the composers on the list of names I made above; composers who, each in their own way, and with great fidelity, pursued the consequences of what Cage had discovered, and their encounter with it. Their music and writings, by laying out a trajectory and a constellation of works, whose debt to the ideas Cage initiated is clear, more than attest to this.

But because, as Mallarmé has it “dice thrown cannot abolish chance,” one can never rule out contingency. The event of Cage is perhaps not the last event any of us might encounter: if, along the way of pursuing the consequences of the Cagean (or other) truth, something happens, there remains the possibility of another event (which lies, nonetheless, outside of our capacity to create it).

6.) In my estimation there were two (or perhaps three) musical truth procedures in 20th century (Western) music: first, Schoenberg and his circle though Boulez, Nono, Xenakis, Lachenmann and so on; breaking off into Cage, his circle, and those who continue to pursue the experimental direction (time will tell if *this* will have been a real event); and secondly, the music which grows out of the deterritorialization of the Western harmonic system by African-Americans: Jazz (from Armstrong to Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman and Coltrane), Blues (Charley

Patton, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters), Rock'n'Roll (from Presley, to Sam Cooke and Aretha Franklin to the Sex Pistols and the Clash), and so on—wherever this music attacks the *status quo* (a kind of music that, in the capitalist world of “popular” music, is increasingly hard to find).

These are for the two (or three) recognizable sites within music where I can find those things which make me think a “truth procedure” might be (or might have been) underway: A founding event (unforeseeable within its time); the creation of a group of “subjects” to the truth following in the wake of this event; a pursuit of the consequences of the event in its widest implications along an infinite path (i.e., a truth procedure).

There is of course nothing absolute or definitive about my list (even though over the years I have given this a lot of thought). It must be admitted that the process of nominating (or recognizing) events is always open to debate and to verification. As must be clear, I myself am partial above all to one of the procedures (the Experimental), or perhaps two if one sees the Experimental as a continuation of the serial break of the Schoenberg, Berg and Webern.

We test the truths we have encountered in process of making our own work: see how far they can be extended, discover their limits (if they exist): and all of this can be done, I believe, more or less intuitively. (In retrospect, however, it follows a logic of its own devising.)

7.) If the 20th century in music was about the expansion of musical resources (i.e., possible sounds and structures) in the pursuit of the *real*, we are presently in a time where what is required is a kind of “Dedekind cut.”

From Set Theory a Dedekind cut is the set partition of the rational numbers into two nonempty subsets and such that all members of Subset 1 are less than those of Subset 2 and such that Subset 1 has no greatest member. This, in effect, opens an infinitesimal

gap in this space between what lies above and below, with out closing of the infinite numerical space between them.

The Cagean gesture of “opening” that I described above was just one of the consequences of 4’33”. It is interesting that Cage went on, 10 years later, to refine 4’33” with the lesser known, but in my view, equally important, 0’00”.

This new duration (i.e., this new piece) is, as must be obvious, already just such a cut. 4’33”—the duration of a “short piece,” has already been infinitely reduced—to “nothing” (another nothing). Is this contradictory? It is a duration that has no duration, a “disciplined action” to which no attention should be given. The impasse of 4’33” in 1952, gives way, impossibly to a point in 1962 (i.e., 0’00”) that could not have been imagined 10 years previous.

One has to imagine the real effort of thought it must have taken to reach 0’00”—it is anything but an inevitable outcome. Cage’s work might be seen as proceeding (as Deleuze said of Foucault), from one “crisis” to another. This crisis, if it may be so named, is created by the refusal to abandon the premises from which one starts with the necessity of extending one’s ideas, of moving forward (whether that’s understood as “outward” or “inward”).

8.) In this gap created by the cut, it is possible to define hitherto uncounted numbers (i.e., pieces).

Starting from Cage, one might fairly ask whether there exists a number that can effectively cut 0. What one should remember about the Dedekind cut is that it always comes between things that are known to exist. Thus π exists between 3.1415 and 3.1416—and just as importantly, it finds between these numbers an infinite (and infinitely refined) space. A similar kind of cut would be that which, in the later works of Samuel Beckett, is found between prose and poetry.

The cut I imagine making might be visualized as what lies just below and just above “music,” as presently understood. This seems at first like an impossible space in which to operate: below music (nothing but “raw” sound and “silence”) and just above music are the primary materials (i.e., chords, scales, durations, etc.). And yet this is the vicinity in which many of us continue to find things to do.

In this situation one can become preoccupied with questions like whether there is a space between a silence and a simple tone; or the point at which a succession of tones just barely refuses to become a melody.

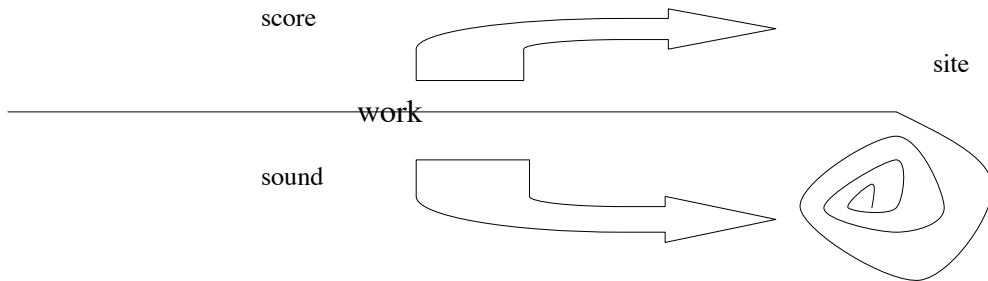
The only way I know to ask these questions is by writing and performing music.

9.) A work is the contact made by the score (or any of the possible kinds of musical structuring) and the sounds (and performers and actions) under the condition of a site.

The nature of musical material cannot be confined to an idealization of the score or of notation, nor is it sound alone. The score is a virtual space of descriptions of occurrences, of their provisional specification. It is also usually the place where the first decisions are made. Sounds are what they are: they have characteristics, qualities; they are, in Deleuze’s terminology “intensities.” They are raw. They do not begin the process of abstraction all on their own; they need a push, and therefore have a relationship to guiding set of instructions and conditions. It may be, as Badiou suggests, that sounds themselves are also virtual in their relation to the score (or the text, the recording, etc.)

As musicians we move from imagined sounds and actions to sounds and actions becoming audible and visible. As Deleuze would say—there is at first no musical “being,” there is only musical “becoming.” What happens (i.e., whatever happens), takes place at the point of contact between these points; it exists properly between them.

The site is *whenever* the work takes place. This fact, however, does not keep the score and sound from following their own trajectories—they do not cancel each other out. In one sense, the site is also part of what takes place.



10.) The power of a performance consists of the disappearance of the work during its duration.

*Music is a disturbance, a ruffling of the air—it is, like Robert Smithson’s **Spiral Jetty** or LaMonte Young’s **Composition 1960 #15 (to Richard Huelsenbeck)**—a whirlpool disappearing in the sea of time. As philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch writes, it is “ineffable,” or, to use other favored terms of that writer: music is somewhere between “Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien.” It will have done nothing but bring temporary sensations into being—it will have had no apparent purpose. The work that was the reason behind the process being set in motion will no longer be audible or visible when it’s done.*

11.) In a singular work, there is a remainder.

Music, a composition, can leave a trace in place of its disappearance. Perhaps no other art accomplishes this duality as powerfully as music. The block of sensations leaves in the best cases an “affect” (as Spinoza/Deleuze define it): that sense, sometimes (I think mistakenly) called “emotion”—but which, whatever it’s called, means to describe the reality that, although we can’t see or hear it anymore, and can’t really describe it, we know that something singular happened.

Like Proust remembering involuntarily something he felt on the road as he passed three trees aligned in a certain, unquantifiable configuration, or like the feeling one can have after a performance of 4'33", that somehow, in some way, the room itself has changed. Or, finally, as Mallarmé, with the elegance of an equation lays things out in his "Un coup de dés"—with the smallest hint (the plume, or perhaps a whirlpool) of the ship which has gone under; and the constellation of the "Master" diagrammed by the stars above, he says "NOTHING // WILL HAVE TAKEN/ PLACE BUT THE PLACE //

EXCEPT / PERHAPS // A CONSTELLATION."