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Prospect of Contemporary Aesthetics/Ethics in Electro Acoustic Music World

The human body is an amazing living system intricately designed to survive in its environment. One day a new virus penetrates the body and threatens the stability of the entire system; alarms go off and differentiated lymphocytes (one of the white blood cells) approach the viruses in order to figure out their makeup. Browsing at the speed of light through the enormous data base of previously produced anti-bodies, these lymphocytes find out that they have never before encountered this particular viral strain. Then, quickly the undifferentiated lymphocytes rush to read the genetic code of the unknown virus. Using that information lymphocytes mature and become differentiated, changing their identities so that their genetic code matches the code of the unknown virus. Now, ready for the fierce battle, these new lymphocytes start to multiply as fast as they can. Each new lymphocyte produces a deadly antibody protein which kills the virus, saving the social order of the organism. Concluding the transaction, the lymphocytes memorize this viral genetic code and store it into their data base, in case of eventual need in the future. The ecological day and long term organismic gratification have been won!

On another day, one of the body's delicate parts, a single living cell, no one knows exactly why, turns out to be a self-expressive innovator and changes its social function--decides not to die at all. Therefore, instead of vanishing at the end of its lifetime, it starts to multiply producing more and more innovative siblings. This geometrically progressing, separatistic growth has no concern for the sociable coexistence of its constructive elements. It functions egocentrically and with self indulgence, destroying everything in its path. Cutting and ravaging the other surrounding cells and tissues this anti-social cancer grows until it reaches a point where it can expand no more. At this instance, the delicate social organization of the original system--the human body--is so disturbed that it cannot function as a whole any longer; it has to collapse and die, killing itself and the cancer. The ecological day has been lost!

These two simplified stories from biology deal with two important social concepts--creation and innovation. Creation, as it will be

used in this paper, is holistically concerned and synergetically controlled, while innovation is holistically unrestrained and synergetically adversarial. These processes--an innovative and a creative one--both concerned with novelty, take place at all times in nature; they are the part of the ongoing struggle for existence. At the present moment of scientific development, creation and innovation in nature appear to be unconscious and amoral. However, if we look at creation and innovation as processes that take place in our culture there is potential that they may be applied both consciously and with moral purpose. Humankind can make intentional decisions about creating or innovating within the ecology of its environment.

You may wonder how all this relates to electro-acoustic music in the United States. Let me explain. For the most part of this century contemporary music was driven by the dynamic and progressive ideas of modernism. Electronic music, tightly linked to technology and its development, became one of the biggest proponents of the modernism and musical avant-garde. The question is: Was this avant-garde innovative or creative? There are several ways of looking at this problem. But let me use my biological analogy once more. In both cases mentioned earlier, the changes made within the cells rendered specific responses from the organism. It was not the change or the single action taken by the changed cells that made it into a good or bad choice; it was the complexity of responses generated by the transacting components of the holistic system. Quality does not exist in the cell nor in any singular component of a living system, it is rooted in the transactions between them. Similarly, the artifacts produced by the musical avant-garde and modernism, cannot be analyzed apart from responses made by the environment in which they are presented. If there is to be an evaluation, it has to come from the quality of the transaction which includes not only the musical configuration but also its cultural response as well.

Let me assume that the most common function of music is its attempt to communicate--to present a body of aural information which may be eventually understood by society. How

does that work? Have you ever wondered why a funeral march from China does not sound to western ears like anything even remotely mournful. That happens because the music is sound organized into socially understood patterns. Musical sounds per se are certainly meaningless, because music cannot express anything extramusical, unless the association to which it refers already exists in the minds of the listeners. There is no way to convey any meaning if there is no common redundant ground of socially shared experiences and responses.

The reason why most of the musical avant-garde activities have failed to connect and communicate lies in the fact that they fell normatively into a category of musical innovation and not creation. Most of the self-conscious modernist composers do not realize that their problem of producing music is not really musical; it is a problem of a lack of concern about contemporary society and culture as a thinking and responding entity. Again, the artistic value is not by any means inherent in the art product; it is in the process of transaction between the perceiver and the art object that is important. The trends in contemporary music during the last fifty years clearly show that major concerns of those who composed, were focused predominantly on product not response. The prevalent belief that there is some kind of immanent meaning that can be embedded into art objects and magically understood by anyone is false. Thus, in search for this immanent perfection, modernist composers have concentrated on developing innovative compositional techniques and systems, rather than exploring the transactive results of communication with the audiences. They completely neglected this function within the holistic social system and pursued egocentric, technological values and ends.

Music composed for acoustical instruments very quickly exhausted all its spectrum of novel instrumental techniques and special effects, reaching an end where almost nobody paid any special attention to the fact that there were gongs being dipped into the water and violins being played everywhere but not on the strings. On the other hand, electronic music has not reached this dead end because it is closely connected to an avalanche of new technological development, and there is no indication that this trend will not continue into the future. For that reason, electronic music composers will have plenty of "toys" to play with for quite some time, and it will be easy for them to not take time or have patience to address the problem of

music as a medium with a responsibility to communicate with humankind. This is a regrettable condition and it can be changed.

What makes the electronic music world significantly different from the rest of the contemporary music is its relationship with technology-- the key element that puts modernism into overdrive. There is a common misconception that technology is either good or bad; it is the neither one--technology per se is simply neutral. It is neutral in the same fashion the artifacts are neutral. Technology requires human interaction and response in order to be evaluated and fit into categories like "good" or "bad". Lets take a TV set, or television as a medium, and see how it plays when released into reality of cultural interactions. When people watch television for seven hours a day, as Americans do on average, the impact is both complex and interesting. Though, the scope of this paper is not directly related to television, to make a point I would like to address one issue--television and human physiology. There is a high probability that excessive television watching may turn the viewers into "couch potatoes" who minimize their physical activities due to the numerous hours they spend in front of the TV screen. It could be hypothesized that the physical fitness of these people is less than optimal; unless, of course, they watch and actively participate in TV fitness programs. The good aspect of this watching may lie in information obtained; the bad aspect may be that it physiologically undermines the human body. Educated people are fully aware of this problem and therefore may consciously engage in physical exercises on their own to counter the hours passively spent in front of the TV. Again, the problem is not in television--it is how humans choose to, or are lead to respond.

How does all this relate to our electronically driven music adventures, and how does electronic music technology affect the humans that deal with it? We all pretty much know the good sides of the issue, but how about the bad ones. Taking a brief look to institutionally organized electronic music activities, it is obvious where emphasis is heavily placed. The prime interest of everybody appears to be the technical capabilities of esoteric software. The focus is not on cultural response but on the exchange of technological information among electronic music composers. The value of music is commonly measured by the complexity of structural systems and sophistication of equipment used to produce it. The interest is concentrated on how are the electronic music pieces made rather than what kind of response

they generate when released to the public. The question is: Does this focus have the ability to convey and share common life experiences with the public in order to better humans' dwelling within their own bodies? Let me explain.

Hyper-modern culture, exponentially driven by desire for progress via technology, is producing historically unprecedented complexity and contradiction among its structural elements. Building denser and denser data highways hyper-modern people are confronted with a glut of information which forces them to make one of the two choices. A) They can metabiologically cause excessive stress to themselves by attempting a suicidal digest of all incoming data--the amount of information in a single issue of the New York Times contains more data than a person who lived 400 years ago had to process in her entire life, or B) In order to escape this general information overload people resort to a tunnel vision that concentrates on an unbelievably narrow window of highly specialized interests. These individuals are learning more and more about less and less; leaving out of the equation any semblance of an holistic understanding of how their specialty fits into the rest of existence. They soon discover that they are not living their life, their specialty is living them, and the result is an iconoclastic insanity. Neither of these two choices offers an attractive life strategy, but out of sheer informational desperation, more and more people are opting for the second alternative. Of course, these hypermodern specialists have lost touch with the common base of humanity in pursuit of their own unconnected obsessions. T.S. Eliot, in commenting on Dante's Inferno, describes Hell as some place where nothing connects with nothing. Sound familiar? Does this mirror what we are doing in our electronic music world? It really does if we choose to have a hyper-modern lifestyle that aborts all possibility of dwelling sanely within the limitations of the body. Look at the Internet where we are exchanging mostly technical information. How about the electronic music education which focuses mainly on teaching the computer software. Are we losing touch with our common base--music as a service oriented art? It is perfectly right to exchange among ourselves the technical information about the makeup of our music, but in the end--a sound is a sound is a sound. No audience would particularly care to find out all the peculiarities of our highly specialized software, nor would that information bear any significance in their interpretation of our music. Perhaps we should stop making music exclusively for ourselves and look at the world outside our own narrow niche,

in order to understand where we came from, and where and how, we want to go. What is the prospect of achieving this important task?

The promise of postmodernism lies in the possibility of culture arriving at the hyperconscious state, where creative wisdom begins to replace innovative cleverness. Holistic, environmentally- concerned creation must take precedence over separatistic, self-expression; and both/and continuums have to become a priority over either/or polarities. Does this task emerge to be utopian and impossible to achieve? Recently, I have seen a TV commercial advertising computers made by DIGITAL; their slogan stated: "Man has an increasing appetite for more and more." I guess they are right assuming that humans only follow their instinct for instant gratification. Postmodern hyperconsciousness, which demands a disciplined slow down, is as difficult to attain as it is to convince the public of the importance of appetite control and staying on a healthy diet. So, what do we-- composers of electro acoustic music--have to do? Slow down and make sure that the amount of time we spend on figuring out new software, is accompanied by an equal amount of time spent studying philosophy and aesthetics, not only in the field of music but equally in the other arts and sciences. This slow down does not necessarily mean a quantitative change but rather a qualitative one. On the contrary, the amount of work we may be required to perform can actually increase; what would change is the focus of our investigation. We should not be attempting to bite off a single piece of innovative information that cannot be chewed up and carefully digested. More time ought to be spent studying and understanding the transaction between our music and its social environment. We have to broadly educate ourselves about the various aspects of our own and other cultures, if we want to convey and share common experiences. Without this mutual understanding no communication is possible. Only connect... the rest is silence.

Finally, let me propose some of the postmodern strategies to use in achieving this communication. One of the most important general characteristics of postmodern musical configurations is the new use of old music. The musical information already known and previously digested by public, is presented again in new constellations. Postmodernists regard the unassimilated past as, as much a partner in musical creation, as the yet to be explored future. Therefore, postmodernism has no absolute canon related to proportion and beauty; it regards all historical styles and strategies as equally viable options in solving contextual aesthetic problems.

By eclectically selecting, not only from the past, but also from the diverse non-western worlds of music; by collapsing the differences among high, middle, and low cultures--postmodernism produces fresh and interesting musical constellations. This collage of divergent cultural levels may often carry more than one possible interpretative meaning; these meanings are double coded and are configurations fraught with potential for parody, pastiche, and irony. When combined, all these characteristics invariably produce products that are disjunct and discontinuous--but not similar to a disjunctness and discontinuity often associated with musical avant-garde. If there is a single negative point about the avant-garde in music--then it is the use of discontinuity and disjunctness without any historical or compositional reflexivity. The musical avant-garde has been obsessed with one unconnected novelty after another, never going back and reevaluating what has gone before in relation to what is going on now. Being aware of this perceptual problem postmodernists repeatedly use reflexivity as one of the most important features in their work and their compositions. This reflective concern also requires the postmodern electronic music composer to extensively study the ideational redundancies embedded in her culture. More importantly, she has to find ways of clearly explaining to her audience the intentions of her musical compositions and the necessity of engaging the designated public in musical disjunctness with an active reflective perception. No reflexivity in the contemporary composer's cultural matrix, or no reflexive intentions and intellect in her contemporary listener--no connection, and no music!