Tony Conrad's Response

to *An open letter to La Monte Young and Tony Conrad,* 2000

I was very glad to see Arnold Dreyblatt's open letter, directed to La Monte Young and me, of which (he remarks) an excerpt is to appear in The Wire, September 2000. Dreyblatt speaks from his own perspective, which, as he firmly establishes, is highly privileged - especially as to his "insider" knowledge of the history and record(ing)s pertinent to our discourse, but of course also as to his standing as a "minimalist" composer/performer in his own right. In fact, he makes me acquainted with details of which I have been previously unaware, such as the fact that he was "La Monte's first tape archivist," a project and function that has been veiled from my interested view. I knew at the time that Dreyblatt was working to help Young archive his work, but to read the terms "first" and then also "tape archivist" puts a spin on Dreyblatt's participation that further emphasizes for me the screen behind which La Monte Young has spent decades recostuming his relationship to our work together.

Here, however, I want to leave personalities behind; because Dreyblatt has also, finally and first among the multiple discussants who have been feeding off of this controversy constructed the arena within which a more profitable discussion of musical authorship can begin. In particular, Dreyblatt contextualizes the Dream Music group carefully, within the "Post-Cagean-Fluxus world", as he calls it a world with which he can claim some continuity, both as a student of Woody Vasulka and Paul Sharits, and through his work with Young. This was a "world" in which the notion of the composer was being reshaped most actively among a group of conceptual (avant la lettre) artists that included my friends Henry Flynt, Walter De Maria, Terry Riley, Nam June Paik, Ray Johnson, Jackson MacLow, Simone Forti, Dick Higgins, and even Ding Dong each of whom contributed work to Young's very influential An Anthology. This is to say that our collaborative work was located at the center of a maelstrom of compositional radicalism. The space of our deafening work on Dream Music was a quiet center, in the paradoxical sense that we let other artists' metamusical gestures swirl around us, as we recentered ourselves within the working space of the sound itself.

Dream Music did not announce an abjuration of the Western composer; instead, Dream Music embodied it (though, as Dreyblatt mentions, for my own part I have always been careful to label it with collective intention as "our" music). The sound of Dream Music itself became so very strong as an artistic gesture that there seemed to be no need to couple it with an announcement of its metamusical mechanics. However, the "Post-Cagean-Fluxus world" (within which we were to find ourselves complicit in inaugurating a hegemony of high formalist "minimal" art) was deeply invested in the efficacy of symbolic gesture, and did not always equally take account of what simply was (socially) as much as what was represented (as art). This discrimination, which has much to do with the present difficulties, deserves some close scrutiny.

I will try to clarify the distinction I am aiming for here by comparison with the more recent controversy around "political correctness". This term was constructed by the right as a pejorative for a nonexistent orthodoxy - a supposed doxology of leftist thought - that ironically, at the level of political theory, has almost never until recent times been so richly contested. The classic dogmatism of Soviet Marxism-Leninism, whose shadow the term "political correctness" is intended to cast upon the left, has been unrecognizably shattered and dispersed. There is, however, a less critical, essentialist left that is invoked by the right as its chief target, thereby turning complex

issues of representation and identity into cartoons of mind-control morality. In this guise “political correctness” has been steady in the gunsights of the right, while simultaneously cogent left critiques of essentialist reductivism have been held at bay, since a winning theoretical critique by the left would be seen as providing political support to the right.

In effect, this system has frozen “political correctness” in place within the arts in the U.S. and Canada until recently, meaning that “good art” could be recognized by registering it against the moral scale of “political correctness”. It was for a time impossible even to label this system as a product of the right’s critical forwardness. In this regime, the representation of a position became accepted as political efficacy, without further examination. The questions which the left should have been able to pose - as to the efficacy of these representations within the social system of art, as to the viability of individualist action outside of a politically coherent organizational effort, as to the strategic suitability of the rhetorical tools deployed by individual artists, and as to the aptness of the institutional frameworks within which the works were germinated and distributed - all were largely gagged.

The “aesthetical correctness” of the 1960s was bound up in an analogous system. The binding antitheses were not in that decade political, per se, though they did circulate around a construction of “representation”. The hegemony of “aesthetical correctness” was configured around and within an ideology of “progress” in which specific heroic works and artists were put forward as avatars of the “correct” approach. It was a matter of general understanding and acquiescence during the modernist period that the specific artwork bore a responsibility (and consequently presented the artist’s opportunity) to advance the “progress” of the field as a whole. The heroicization of (certain) artists and works established a powerful force field within which the “importance” of a work could be calculated against a hermetic scale of values, without reference to the work’s extrinsic reception by a public, or by art institutions or critics in general since it was the scale of these values, not the social efficacy of the work, which was at stake.

Whenever I have said that Dream Music grew from an assault on the role of the composer in Western music, this has been shorthand for a dual project, an attack on two things that follow directly from the modernist ethos I have described. First, the idealism of what I called the “symbolic gesture” above was to be abandoned. It was no longer to be sufficient to make a symbolic representation, in the mandating form of a verbal or musical score, in order for artistic “progress” to occur. Instead, we would make music directly, entering into the physical realm of sound. Second (and concomitantly), the heroic role of the composer was to be left behind, as the collaborative process of music formation took place collectively from within the living sound itself.

Perhaps the potential for checkmate in this gambit is already obvious, from the distance of the present - though at the time it was difficult for us to perceive our impending shortfall clearly if at all. There was a sense in which our group was not finally able to fully avoid identifying with the command posture of the modernist composer. The most “advanced” avant-garde composers of that highlate modernist period were dedicated to symbolic “progress” in art, and even Dream Music indulged a certain tendency to let our sound function as a supplementation of direct intervention in the larger context of musical culture, if only by limiting our public visibility to the art world (unlike the Velvet Underground). For us, in the end action

replaced statement largely in the sphere of the sound, and not nearly as directly in the sphere of cultural agency.

Thus by 1966, after John Cale had quit the collaboration for the Velvet Underground and I to work in film, Young found himself left with the physical recordings which embodied and remained from the collective process of Dream Music - a residue that had not been “marketed”, and which he found he could only “market” effectively by reinscribing the work within the cultural paradigm of “composition”, however this function might have been displaced from its locus in the Western musical tradition by Young’s Orientalism.

All of this goes to say that in those days the ethos of heroic modernism led many of us into ungovernable personal and professional quandries. A case in point: MH, a young friend of mine in Baltimore in 1959, was so exceptionally fortunate as to take music lessons with a very progressive student of John Cage. From this teacher, MH received the “advanced” notion that the concept of a piece of music was much more significant than its realization in the crudity of notes - so much so, in fact, that one could even leave the physical process of creation behind and work on a purely “Zen” level. MH never, to my knowledge, wrote down a musical piece, but he did create the remarkable solipsistic fantasy that at any moment he might be conceptually teleported to Afghanistan. And recently, more and more, the struggles of many other artists who kept on working as “outsiders”, against the grain of the formalist hegemony, are emerging after decades of suppression and invisibility.

All in all, Dream Music, on the other hand, did not fail to enter itself in the cultural register, and this of course is what makes it an especially captivating object of scrutiny. As for my own part in the aftermath, the more realistic artistic regime of postmodernism brought with it critical tools sufficient to assimilate the disappointing fact that “composing” had persisted as a stable cultural site in spite of our symbolic dismantling. Then, as the music scene began to grow a little more savvy during the 1980s, it appeared possible to me to approach the issue of musical authorship again, but quite differently, by composing Early Minimalism.

There is a second stratum of authorial analysis that bears upon the discussion of Day of Niagara. Since the 1980s, in the wake of modernist art, the market value of ‘composer’ as an entry in the tally of cultural capital has collapsed, and has been replaced almost completely by a legal definition, in which ‘composer’ is simply the entry for ownership of the financial and legal opportunities arising out of a piece of intellectual property. So much has changed in three decades! Contextualized by such legalisms, the urgency of Young’s insistence on authorship displays a clearer (but more unflattering) motivation Without going into that, though, I would only wish to point out that Dreyblatt’s commentary omits this entire range of issues that bear directly on Young’s custodianship of the Dream Music recordings. Thus not unlike others, Dreyblatt proposes, “Could not a verbal formulation be found, which grants a ‘composer’ status to La Monte, in a post-modern, leadership sense, yet grants Conrad and Cale an extensive credit as contributors to overall theory and performance methods applying only to music which was created during a specific period?” The obvious question here is just what “a post-modern, leadership sense” could be, or would offer. Would it cancel the legitimate entitlements of Young’s co-authors (the list of whom, incidentally, should include Marian Zazeela)? Would it satisfy Young’s dual desire, for both legal and traditional authorship? And would it be

appropriate to compromise my critique of authorship, which has perhaps stood as the most solitary and awkward obstacle to Young's foxy negotiation for total legal ownership of the music?

I take Arnold Dreyblatt's contribution as a positive and honest gesture toward reconciliation. At the same time, his first person testimony, as one of a scant handful of auditors of Dream Music tapes not filtered through Young's personal interests, will inevitably steel the resolve - that the music should not be made a victim of the grasping reflexes of its custodian - among those of us who hear, in Day of Niagara, a previously inaudible music, "revolutionary conceptually, and as well exceptionally rich in terms of sonority and timbrethe infinitely rich timbre of the bowed strings, with the voices mixed 'inside' [- a sound that] was never again to be equaled."

Tony Conrad Buffalo, September 2000