

Centers; Dissenters (Music, Religion, and Politics)

By John Rahn

There is a story about the situation of art and music in society that runs something like this:

Once upon a time, music was connected with ritual and religion. As described by René Girard, art embodies both the essential violence of mimetic rivalry and its resolution (or deferral) in societal order through the designation of a scapegoat. In Girard's hypothetical originary scene, a crowd of proto-humans surrounds an object desired by each of them. The potential violence of this periphery is defused, this time, by what constitutes the beginnings of human culture: the selection of an "emissary victim" on whom the violence of the whole group is concentrated serves to establish a community and defer conflict.¹ As Eric Gans describes the scene, "The group of murderers surrounding the body experience[s] a sudden release of tension, their violence spent, and they contemplate the body as the source of this miraculous transformation of violence into peace. The body of the victim thus becomes for Girard the object of 'the first noninstinctive attention,' which turns it into a *sacred* object, the first signifier and the source of all signification."² Jacques Attali has adopted and elaborated the Girardian model for music, asserting that noise, the raw material of music, is violence, and that music is both "threat of death" and "pure order."³ In a variant of Girard's thesis that Gans constructed and applied to music, the violence of the originary scene is deferred by an act of communal designation or reference (the emphasis is on representation rather than the murder of the emissary victim), delaying violence and the appetitive and allowing a moment of contemplation that constitutes the central

¹ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). This description is glossed from John Rahn, "What Is Valuable in Art, and Can Music Still Achieve It?," *Perspectives of New Music* 27, no. 2 (1989): 6–17.

² Eric Gans, "Art and Entertainment," *Perspectives of New Music* 24, no. 1 (1985): 24–37. Quote from p. 31.

³ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1972): 30–31.

object as sacred, partly by virtue of that very deferment of conflict and constitution of community. This model is supposed to underlie Western culture from its beginnings through the Middle Ages, and to persist, perhaps less fundamentally, in later epochs as an important mode of explanation for behavior.⁴

The story continues: As religion was displaced by Reason during the Renaissance and Enlightenment, music and art in general gradually assumed the burden of the Sacred in secular culture. This process flowered at the end of the eighteenth century in a Romanticism that poured the Sacred, or sublime, into Nature, reaffirming a secular kind of mystical or ecstatic experience (and emotion) as against or alongside Reason. Art was the essential medium of that ecstasy, which was (as always) a very personal thing. Art assumed some of the status of religion along with the burden of its transferred experience.

This all was not unconnected to historical developments in economics and science. The creation of a commercial middle class during the Renaissance supported the movement from a centralized religion to Protestant variations and to a Reason that was available to every person and made all things comparable, hence exchangeable, pointing to the commodity; and of course, the beginnings of industrialization in the late eighteenth century created a bourgeoisie for whom Romanticism, had it not existed, would have to have been invented.

Industrialization progressed through a number of stages. Its most important features for art were mass production and the technologies of replication (photography, sound recording, etc.). Eventually, we arrive at the present, "postmodern" culture, where information and replication have changed the face of economics and of society. Television and computer technology, what the French call "infor-

⁴ See Eric Gans, *The End of Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); idem, "Art and Entertainment," *Perspectives of New Music* 24, no. 1 (1985): 24-37; idem, "Mallarmé, Wagner, and the Power of Music," in *Proceedings of the Music and Power Symposium*, ed. John Rahn (Seattle: Center for Creation and Interdisciplinary Study of Music, School of Music, University of Washington, 1991), 86-110; and idem, "The Beginning and End of Esthetic Form," *Perspectives of New Music* 29, no. 2 (1991): 8-21. It is possible to criticize the model as sexist, parochial, and violence-centered, but the model has wide currency in critical circles. It is particularly useful here in that it ties up in one package an origin myth for religion, human culture, and language, and in that it is a theory of the center and periphery that can be used for both religious and political discussion. I believe that my use of this model later in this essay to talk about music does not entail those aspects of it that may give rise to such objections.

matiques," have brought all cultures (including cultures of the past and of most areas of the globe) and all technical information into a web available to and manipulable by anyone. In fact, TV force-feeds much of this information to practically everyone, though the information is filtered through the medium in a way that excludes what is difficult. TV broadcasts a fine spray of surfaces. Multi-national corporations preside over a world in which the nation-state is being pulverized and dissolved in the global triumph of capitalism, and the rise of ethnic loyalties fails to compensate for the massive production of consumers and the fatal attraction of identity in the homogeneous world of the simulacrum. MTV celebrates the rites of the ecstasy of nondifferentiation, dancing to the whip-beats of consumer culture. Depth and individuality have faded away, and high art can no longer motivate itself as the vicar of a universal religious impulse that has etiolated and finally dispersed, even in its bourgeois avatar.

Thus endeth the story.⁵ It leaves us in a position to ask the following questions: What can an artist or composer do today? How can a composer situate the sources of her art with respect to her societal matrix, and in particular, with respect to religion and politics? How can art be possible any longer, or, what kind of art is now possible? This essay will explore the area of these questions, rather than attempting to answer them. It will first biopsy the traditions of religion and politics in Western culture, peering through a lens made of two concepts: the center, and dissent.

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The Western tradition of the relation of a person to his cultural matrix, of a citizen to the city, crystallizes out in Greek civilization, and is nowhere better epitomized than in the paradox of Plato and Socrates. I will speak

⁵ It is not a very true story, if only because it oversimplifies so much—for example, "religion" is collapsed into some hypothetical proto-society as model for all societies, ignoring the variety of religious practices in the world over time and geography. However, the storyteller has at least tried not to embody a number of the current faiths about history. The story takes neither the (Marxist) position that economic and material "substrates" determine culture, nor the position that cultural innovation sparks development in material relations, nor the position that musical developments, while determined to some extent by economic ones, nevertheless precede and announce them, nor any position—such as those of Platonism or Marxism or Hegelianism or Liberalism or various religions—about the possible causes of historical change within whatever stream (if any) is deemed the most relevant or master discourse. The story does not even contain any faith in causality as such.

as though "Plato" and "Socrates" could be clearly disentangled from the Dialogues and attributed each to a separate historical person. In fact, although the two personae are indeed useably distinct, it is not possible to know with certainty to what extent they may have coexisted in one or the other historical person, Socrates or Plato.

We know of Socrates through Plato's brilliant and attractive documentation in the Dialogues, yet the two personae are radically distinct when viewed politically. Plato, whose views surface in works such as the *Republic*, is an authoritarian, totalitarian centrist who would so like to control all things for the good that he advocates a genetically controlled secular hierarchy—a sort of Brave Old World—and would exile or regulate music and art as potentially disruptive. Plato's utopian "aristocracy," the rule of the best, is also communist, with community and State control of property, procreation, children, and education.⁶ *Control* above all. Historical societies that have approached Plato's degree of centralism, without attaining its degree of control, include various kinds of theocracies, such as ancient Egypt or pre-Columbian Peru (two water monopolies); the Aztecs and the Nazis (warrior cultures based on human sacrifice); and, perhaps the closest approximation, China during the Cultural Revolution. This is the position of the Center.

Yet it was Plato who has seduced generations of readers with art—his fluid and lucid prose—into utter admiration for Socrates. Socrates the gadfly; Socrates who, if you met him in the street, would ask you uncomfortable questions, and would ask you to question what you took for granted; Socrates who thought and felt *apart from* his role in the city-state; Socrates the sower of contagious dissent, who was executed after conviction in a State trial for blasphemy and corrupting the youth. Socrates who pursued the goal of knowing oneself (*gnothi s'auton*). We may ask: What self? Where is its substance? Whatever it may be, it is a self apart from society's roles, a non-cog in the machine, though Socrates faithfully performed his duties within his society, serving for instance as a foot soldier in the Athenian army. It is a non-reactive and non-political kind of apartness. Socrates is so far from being a rebel, so devoted to duty, honor, country, that he chooses to die in obedience to the State rather than to go into exile. Socrates insists on self-definition, in an almost existentialist way. He is always *looking in*, looking for an "in," what the East Germans called "Innerlichkeit." Even

⁶ Plato's ranking of types of societies is: aristocracy or regency (merit), oligarchy, timocracy (wealth), democracy, tyranny. On the community of wives and children and education, see *Republic* V, 457 and VIII, 543; genetic regulation, III, 415; V, 459; VIII, 546–47. Interestingly, Plato's "government of the best" goes much against the grain of his own society in admitting women to power (V, 451, 455, 456).

if there is nothing in, the project of looking for an in or looking inwards-for-oneself—not to society—is definitive.

Although the life of Socrates was a basically secular project, there were religious elements: Socrates's "daemon" appeared to him from time to time, immobilizing him during its occupation and by its appearances encouraging his sense of self. But personal daemons were not common among the Greeks, and his was a curiosity to his circle.⁷ Socrates constructed an idea and experience of the contemplative that had no parallel in Greek religions: the Delphic oracle is an anomaly—the Pythoness was the mystic *for all* (so that no one else need be mystical)—and the Eleusinian Mysteries were non-contemplative, organized ritual more akin to Masonic Rites than to, say, Jain or Christian mystical contemplation or to the tradition of "humanist" personal contemplation that sprang from Socrates and endures to this day.

From a centrist perspective, Socrates represents dissent, a "feeling apart from" that separates him from his matrix, even a flight from the center, a *bad seed*. But for Socrates, it is not the center or matrix that determines (as a mold determines what is molded) a dissent-as-reaction, dissent-as-negative. He is not a negative of society. He has made society's norms *irrelevant* in principle to his thoughts, while remaining fully engaged with that society. Socrates as apolitical non-religious dissent; Plato as political "reactionary," Plato-the-center as the negative of dissent, Plato as that which is molded by dissent—control. This is the foundational *Moment*—Hegelian tension—for Western philosophy and "humanism."

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If Socrates and Plato, dissent and reactive centrism, are two sides of one half of the coin, the *symbolon*, the Judeo-Christian tradition provides the other half of the symbol of Western culture. Of course there is a broad parallel between the lives of Jesus and Socrates: Jesus was one with God but, like Socrates, "apart from" society without reacting to it as its negative, and executed for his apartness. (This is the home of the Girardian model.) In the case of Job, we have a complex situation involving God's negative reaction to Job's faith—almost as if God, tempted by Satan, were dissenting from His own worship. The locus is no longer society but faith in God, no longer political but religious, and God's perverse dissent is a negative of Himself.

⁷ Socrates's daemon may have been *petit mal* epilepsy, like Julius Caesar's, the affliction of many another eminent personage. If so, the *petit mal* seems to have been an intense part of their lives, and one which may have been helpful or formative for these people. Any medical description cannot trivialize the experience.

But it is the Fall that is definitive here, rather than the Girardian Jesus or the Case of Job. John Milton, that genius of a culture so occupied by Original Sin, asks the Heavenly Muse to sing

Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste
Brought Death into the world, and all our woe. [*Paradise Lost* I, 1–3]

God, who

from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss
And madest it pregnant. [I, 19–22]

This God describes himself as he orders his Son (*ho logos*) to create the world with a word. He says to His Son:

bid the Deep
Within appointed bounds be Heav'n and Earth,
Boundless the Deep, because I am who fill
Infinite, nor vacuous the space.
Though I uncircumscrib'd myself retire,
And put not forth my goodness, which is free
To act or not, Necessity and Chance
Approach not mee, and what I will is Fate. [VII, 166–73]

A pervasive Center with a singularity in it allowing dissent. The Apple is the power of dissent—as invoked by the Serpent:

O Sacred, Wise, and Wisdom-giving plant,
Mother of Science, Now I feel thy Power
Within me clear, not only to discern
Things in their Causes, but to trace the ways
Of highest Agents, deem'd however wise. [IX, 679–83]

Without this dissent, there would be no human story, no history. Whereas the dissent of Socrates was the mold filled by Plato's Center, here the omnipotent, omnipresent God is the mold, Sin and the Fall its negative, dissent molded by the Center: a double obverse. In each case, dissent takes the form of self-knowledge, *gnothi s'auton*, knowledge of Good and Evil: *autonomy*.

In later Christianity there arises another kind of dissent: faith as self-knowledge. Faith, oneness with God, is dissent, from society and from the Church. The implicit model is Jesus. St. Francis of Assisi, for example, was a troublemaker, a problem for the Church, who could stand over against the Church within the Church because of the inner authority of his faith. Change within the Christian religion has been catalyzed by this kind of dissent-through-faith, this affirmation of autonomy with respect to society and institutions such as the Church, through the individual relation to God. So the question is not Church versus State. These are merely two societal institutions squaring off or relating or even merging. The question is one of the possibility of individual autonomy, giving law to oneself (or taking law directly from God to oneself). The dissenter is "apart from" culture and society and the secular or religious institutions. The opposite of dissent is compliance.

Art is dissent. Issues of elitism, "high" or cultivated versus "low" or popular art, mechanisms of patronage and support (by Church or aristocracy or bourgeoisie or State)—all these are basically red herrings. Art is dissent, autonomy, feeling apart from, taking responsibility for one's own foundations, then putting forth that autonomy in an object designed to engage others. Entertainment and folk art are often mere compliance, working within given norms and rules, crafting objects that reaffirm their place and the place of the crafter in an unquestioned regime. The entertainer is not an agent. Autonomy is an Archimedean place to stand, from which an act is possible.

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We have seen that dissent is not necessarily rebellion or violence: Socrates the good citizen, Francis the good Catholic. What is music's relation to violence? Sound is inherently invasive—one cannot turn one's ears away from a sound—but sound is not necessarily violent in itself. Think of soothing noises. The violence music may have, or be, is composed into it. Violent music, the beat, is especially apt for that originary scene. The beat exemplifies the dangerous focus of the periphery on the center and its resolution either in violence or in an act of reference. Music, dance, and ritual all function to celebrate as well as to exemplify that deferral of actual violence through the constitution of a community. Music that has pronounced beats facilitates the coordination of the movements of the crowd in the dance, stamping and jerking, bobbing and weaving together to the beat in kinetic camaraderie. Here is an indifference preserved from mimetic rivalry by the reference of the beat to reference, and to the emissary victim; preserved by the reference of the beat to the moment of sacrifice. Blissful identity in community.

So one of the most violent things a musician can do is to compose music without a beat. With a reduced presence of the beat, music can be construed as reverting to a reference to the moment of the originary scene *prior to* the constitution of religion, language, and community, or to its analog in society; the periphery thus unstructured is prey to violence among its members. From Webern's floating palindromes, to the water-color washes of Boulez (the *maitre sans marteau*), the intricately implicated Milton Byron Babbitt (a beat like a "bush, with frizzled hair implicit" [*Paradise Lost* VII, 323]), some pieces by Ligeti, such as the Cello Concerto, *Volumina*, or *Atmosphères*, some electronic music—these are radical and revolutionary proposals, in that the music to some extent cuts loose from the reassurance of the beat, freeing the crowd from the ritual violence that affirms identity in community, and making possible the renewal of an individuality in nonhierarchical indifference that may dangerously revalidate the original mimetic rivalry. This music at least no longer celebrates the deferral of violence.

The beat is not the whole story. Xenakis's clouds of sounds, especially in stochastic pieces such as *Metastasis* and *Pithoprakta*, are beat-free and decentered, but this music so explicitly embodies crowd violence (which Xenakis has traced to his youth during the civil war in Greece) that it always refers to peace. The Minimalists, especially Philip Glass, conjure away the beat by stroking it to death. Under the surface of a Glass opera, under the superficially sweet tonal sounds and iterated patterns, lies anarchy barely restrained by a neofascist rage for order—compare *Einstein on the Beach*, for example, with the monumental, repetitive architecture of Il Duce's *Esposizione Universale di Roma*.⁸ John Cage shuns syntax as a military metaphor, encouraging a gentle, depersonalized anarchy, approaching anarchy not from the neofascist angle but from a Zen minimalism of the self that eludes structure from without by opening the self.

If in medieval chant we have a free-flowing, beatless art music that is communal, centrist, and nonviolent (because in that culture the emissary victim is consumed daily), in contemporary rock we have a music—mostly a trade rather than an art—decked out with all the trappings of violence and individuality, which slavishly serves identity and the Center, snarling and fawning, aping the gestures of dominance and submission. Black leather and the lash of the backbeat. Watch them dance! This music-commodity

⁸ I am by no means accusing anybody of fascist political convictions; Glass in particular would seem from his libretti to be rather liberal. It is the music in itself that seems to have this character, which is part of the fascination it has for me. For a devastating feminist critique of power relations in Minimalist visual art, see Anna Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *The Arts Magazine* (January 1990): 44–63.

needs to mass-produce its consumers. It is so effective at this, and at promoting the ecstasy of identity and submission, that there is always the possibility of a backlash. But such impulses of individuality and rebellion—even those of the performers as they are inducted into the system, and even MTV's own self-mocking and autopastiche—are siphoned off into their simulacra and resold to the consumer, reinforcing the instrumentality of the music and its performers, the submission of the consumer, and the dominance of the system that links them. The chant that is packaged for today's popular audience is no doubt partly a soothing "new age" narcotic, partly a renaissance of appreciation for the musical qualities of chant, but would also (at night, so to speak) share with Webern and Boulez an individualizing potential for mass violence, no longer, as it was in its native culture, defused by the Mass. However, we already see the emergence of a totally debased popular-music chant *style* that deflects individualization by Disneyfication.

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These permutations need to be rethought from the perspective of feminist theory. Has violence been gendered? Is violence in fact male, in some sense that is prior to the constructions of gender? If so, would this suffice to condemn violence in all contexts? Can one coherently condemn Beethoven's Ninth for violence while maintaining a posture of approval toward violent rock such as Heavy Metal?⁹ Both promote community by celebrating violence. But in the case of Beethoven, it is a violence of personal struggle against adversity, more intimate, more constructive, and more meaningful than the violence of rock, which is therefore less threatening than Beethoven. Neither is subversive, except that Beethoven's art is dissent, while most rock is compliance. (Not all: think of Jimi Hendrix.) Are such notions as hierarchy, the Center, reference and the symbol as such, and the Lacanian Symbolic all phallogocentric, as many theorists maintain? Is there in music (as I have suggested elsewhere) a way out of the semiotics trap, a way to render irrelevant not only the symbol, the referent, the sign, and signification, but even the theory behind the sig-

⁹ Against Beethoven, see for example Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), particularly the essay "Getting Down Off the Beanstalk," 112–31; for Beethoven and against McClary, see Pieter van den Toorn, "Politics, Feminism, and Contemporary Music Theory," *The Journal of Musicology* 9, no. 3 (1991): 275–99 (especially pp. 285ff.); and replying to van den Toorn, Ruth A. Solie, "What Do Feminists Want? A Reply to Pieter van den Toorn," *The Journal of Musicology* 9, no. 4 (1991): 399–411.

nifier?¹⁰ If this complex is indeed escapable, why should one try to escape? If it is escapable, and if it is desirable to escape it, how can such concepts as the symbol, or hierarchy, be replaced with feminist or alteritive constructions? What would be the criteria guiding such construction—what kinds of structuration are either nongendered or nonmale, and what values might operate during this reconstruction? For example, would dominance give way to anarchy, or to some tribal solid block of interrelatedness, embedding its members like flies in amber? Should violence be courted and recuperated, or avoided entirely, and what consequences would this have for society—without violence, what about order, what about change? Is some kind of individualism possible, or desirable?

Does autonomy imply a “centered subject,” or even a “subject”? Does dissent incorporate center—swallow it—so that there would be a proliferation of individual centers, mini-Mussolinis? Just as Plato in the *Republic* approaches the character of people through the character of the State, then reflects the qualities of each kind of State back into the character of its citizens, so dissent can be recursed into the person. There is a politics of the body and psyche. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have advocated (in the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*) an anti-oedipal indiscipline of schizoanalysis, a nonstructure of the rhizome, the individual as the swarm, the pack, and the machine.¹¹ They will tell you how to make yourself a body without organs—the person as machinic assemblage, nonhierarchized *objets partiels* or desiring intensities which are unlinked by any semiosis, non-totalized.¹² Such partial objects exemplify

the exact criterion of real distinction in Spinoza and Leibniz: they do not depend on one another and do not tolerate any relation of opposition or contradiction among themselves. The absence of all direct links guarantees their common participation in the divine substance. Likewise for the partial objects and the body without organs: the body without organs is substance itself, and the partial objects, the ultimate attributes or elements of substance.¹³

These notions of substance and the Body Without Organs will recall Julia Kristeva’s construction of the “chora,” a primordial flux or cosmic

¹⁰ John Rahn, “Differences,” *Perspectives of New Music* 31, no. 2 (1993): 58–71.

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), and idem, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia Volume 2*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

¹² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, chap. 6, “November 28, 1947: How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs?,” 149–66.

¹³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 309, unnumbered footnote.

egg of the infant psyche, a turbulence of Freudian “drives” not yet subjected to the order of the symbolic, or even to the regime of the posited and therefore of the subject as such, a “place” which fertilizes with its creative anarchy the revolution that is poetic language. Kristeva’s semiotics is of the creative *énonciation* rather than the packaged *énoncé*, and her *chora* is a possible construction of music.¹⁴

Judith Butler’s recent study *Gender Trouble* repudiates the subject and substance by radically historicizing personhood in an austere neo-Foucauldian framework of exoskeletal discourses of power:

when the subject is said to be constituted, that means simply that the subject is a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity [and of gender]. The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; “agency,” then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition.¹⁵

Butler’s attempt “to locate the political in the very signifying practices that establish, regulate, and deregulate identity”¹⁶ relies on signification, which would seem to tie it uncomfortably to some of the discourses she as agent is averting, but does point a way to the possibility of subjectless (but rather musical) agency as a dynamic balancing act (without an actor, the deed without the doer) among a multiplicity of jostling discourses of power, a scene that resonates powerfully with the feeling of “postmodernism.”

Dissent and autonomy may have started life in a world of discourse that produced Plato’s Center as the reaction to them, but the dissent of Socrates, like the act that creates art, depends only on the possibility of agency, of an act that is not compliance. Dissent is not cast in terms of freedom, because determinism is irrelevant to it. If “face” is the surface a person presents to the world, and an “interface” is two or more faces in full or

¹⁴ Julia Kristeva, “La sémiologie: Science critique et/ou critique de la science,” *Théorie d’ensemble* (Paris: Éditions du seuil, 1968); idem, *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Éditions du seuil, 1974); and idem, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 145.

¹⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 147.

partial contact, then "compliance" is the plastering of one face over the surface of the other, more or less completely or tightly adhering to each wrinkle and fold of the other facial surface. A superficial theorist might even say that consciousness is hidden away in the facial fold, sheltered in *le pli* that constitutes it: the face is it.¹⁷ So that one face can, with the cooperation of another, act as a template for it. The consumer in the face of TV: passive compliance as the active revenge of the masses.¹⁸ The extent to which a theory adheres only to surfaces, exports the person to the face in a characteristically postmodern way, is its degree of superficiality, which amounts in the case of postmodernism to superficiality: for example, Butler's notion of agency as eclectic compliance. Even in such an agentless world *sur faces*, agency makes dissent and autonomy possible. The demands of a particular person's discourse may produce a theory of the person that is radically multiple, a theory that also constructs personality as fugitively multiple, as in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, yet without forfeiting agency and dissent: it imports dissent. The idea of an "in" may be problematic, even sexist, and is certainly polar. The idea of a "subject" may be repugnant because of its phallogocentrism; or because of its "substance" (for those who can believe in a subject that has substance); or because of its transparent origin in the subject-object grammar of languages such as Greek, whereas it would be only an interestingly perverse idea within Hawaiian (which has no verbs corresponding to "be" or "have,"¹⁹ and so cannot easily hypostasize a subject-place) or within the predicate

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Paris: Minuit, 1986); and idem, *Le pli* (Paris: Minuit, 1988). See also idem and Felix Guattari, "Faciality," *A Thousand Plateaus*, 167-91.

¹⁸ As I have put it elsewhere: "Why is MTV so popular? Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard 1988) has suggested that 'the masses,' to which each of us belongs (this is not some term of alienation or condescension), have adopted the strategy of the appearance of passivity under the importunities of a media complex which has hypertrophied in an age of 'information,' transforming itself from communication to the hyper-reality of the simulacrum. The territory is the map, which has no other reference; the feigned *is*. Just as strategies of becoming, such as vigorous intellection and the actualization of self, and the whole project of philosophy, resist the demand that we be objects, and thus are a response to oppression and repression, so do strategies of being-object resist (in the middle voice) the demand for speech, for the maximization of production of meaning and participation in an increasingly rapidly changing social milieu of which the media are at once sign and simulacrum. The deceit practiced by the couch potato is its revenge. It is a vegetable *by strategy*." John Rahn, "Repetition," *Contemporary Music Review* 7 (1993): 49-58.

¹⁹ Mary Kawena Pukui, Samuel H. Elbert, and Esther T. Mookini, *The Pocket Hawaiian Dictionary* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1975), "Grammar," 253. Imagine a Platonic metaphysics in a language where "Beauty is good" is rendered "Maika`i ka nani," a noun, an article, and a noun, without any copula. See Samuel H. Elbert, *Spoken Hawaiian* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1970), 34.

calculus (in which there are only predicates and variables). Or the idea of the subject may be repugnant because it is captive to what I have called the tradition of "optical separation" from Plato to Hegel to Lacan, a separation bound up with the theory of the sign and signification in language in a way that may or may not be otiose, but to which music is an alternative.²⁰ Dissent and autonomy depend on none of these constructions.

Theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari, Kristeva, and Butler are all dissenters. As theorists, they are artists, "putting forth their autonomy in an object designed to engage others," as I put it above. The work of such contemporary artists in the literature called critical theory, or simply "theory," is exciting and promising partly because, like Marxism and Freudianism, the most effective of the philosophies originating in the nineteenth century, this new work combines theory with praxis. "Theory," especially that which engages the intimate politics of gender, is an intellectual pursuit that involves a way of living one's life. Like religion, and like art, it brings each everyday action and thought into a grand arena in which very complex and subtle structures contend for the quotidian.

Art is part of life. Dissent in art is dissent in life. The autonomy of a composer is also autonomy within music. A composer cannot choose to affirm the musical Center while remaining an artist. The Center in art is its death. The Center is not tradition, any more than the Center is History in society in general. One may choose to affirm tradition, even in a reactionary way, like George Rochberg; this can still be an artistic choice, a perilous act of dissent, based in apartness and autonomy. Every minutest compositional choice that is a choice requires that cool and merciless apartness. The composer who falls too closely and precipitously in love with her work in progress falls prey to sentimentality, convention, automatism—anything but art—and the work dies. The composer's engagement with the work in progress makes it the world of the composer, that grand arena in which very complex and subtle structures contend from moment to moment. Most intimately, it is from this world of the artwork that the composer must dissent while participating in its creation. Assuming for the moment a Lacanian view of the Symbolic, the artist (of any sex) is the father of the work, stepping into an intellectual hyperconsciousness for its creation. Reciprocally, the work is the mother of the artist, a daughter (of any sex) who must wean herself at every continuous suckle, absorbing and being absorbed, but finding autonomy even within total sensuous and sensual involvement.

²⁰ Rahn, "Differences," 63.

Composing music is a way of living one's life. That very intimate apartness from the work while creating the work, the dissent that makes it art, is itself the engagement of the work (and of the artist) with the world. The music is an object available to others in all its *Sichselbstgleichheit*, because apartness is built into it.

Without this engagement between the work and the world, there is no possibility of dissent, of autonomy of the artist within the world, because such dissent is not indifference. It is a difference that requires participation. And for all of us, only such participatory dissent and engaged autonomy between the artist and the world make possible acts of art that move us towards the Center, or away—that, like Circe, bind us ever more closely to compliance, or that accompany our Penelopean autonomy.

ABSTRACT

To explore the question "How can someone create art now?," the essay first sketches a broad historical framework, and continues by peering through a lens made of two concepts: the center, and dissent. It explores the Greek influence (Plato the centrist, Socrates the dissenter; dissent as apartness, the center as control molded by dissent) and Christianity (dissent in Job, the Fall, and St. Francis). Whereas the dissent of Socrates was the mold filled by Plato's Center, in Christianity the omnipotent, omnipresent God is the mold, Sin and the Fall its negative, dissent molded by the Center: a double obverse.

The essay talks about contemporary music and violence: the beat and the originary scene (Boulez), other strategies (Xenakis, Cage); commodification; rock promoting the ecstasy of identity and submission; Disneyfication. It explores feminism on violence; critical theory on the subject; the Deleuzian Body Without Organs and Kristeva's *chora*; and Judith Butler on subjectless agency, signification as a regulated process of repetition. Finally, the essay touches on the relations among dissent, autonomy, agency; superficiality; insignification; theory as praxis as art as life; and intimate apartness built into the *Sichselbstgleichheit* of the work of art.