AN EXPOSITORY JOURNAL OF EXTRACTIONS FROM WILDERNESS:

notes toward an environmental language

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1.

Is my primary responsibility as as composer merely the creation of substantive concepts and structures, or am I responsible for the formation and maintenance of a proper environment for such structures?

Beyond this the question must be asked:

what are the contextual limits for such an environment and of what might appropriate maintenance consist?

I assert that the significance of this question is particularly relevant to discussions addressing the musical acquisition of technology at a time when the sheer immensity of technological resources constrains the survival of living systems in such a way that I must confront the *technological acquisition* of music.

Despite what may be seen as obvious predispositions intrinsic to certain technologies, rendering their function more readily exploitable by industrial and political power structures, it remains a commonly held belief that the user has autonomous responsibility to determine if the signals generated from use of a particular tool are input to or output from a given social context.

But to what extent do I have free choice in either selection of my tools or in what I make with them?

The culture of technology asserts its values with relentless force. It constrains behavior in convention with such values while maintaining the facade of its neutrality. Machines are not neutral

objects, they are vestiges of thought empowered with the force of intent.

Thus, the issue of what is appropriate maintenance begins to occupy a larger context, namely:

the mere creation of structures is not sufficient if either the means for their making or the environment in which they must reside contributes to the negation of those structures.

Additionally I must recognize that all technology is part of a larger structure: *the adaptive whorls of organic energy blossoming into living systems*; and that the dialectic of exploitation surrounding the influence of technology must therefore include the whole of the biotic world.

2.

We reside in a fabric of communication,
the environment's language encoded in the patterns of its living systems.
As our species moves forward with the purposeful extinction
of other forms of life at the current rate of one species per day,
it appears that how we converse with this fabric
has much to do with the continuation of life on this planet.
Whatever understanding we may have of our place among these systems,
it must be directed toward the hope that this earth has spawned us for some other purpose then its own destruction.

3.

Energy from the sun to the earth seems destined to cause an increasingly ordered state in the organization of matter. The compounding of structures of matter into more complex organizations which cannot be described in terms of their simpler components, stops at the level of simple molecules. Living organisms, however, continue this buildup integrating more complex patterns of organization such that molecules become macromolecules, then organelles and finally cells. The rather mysterious processes of evolution continue with the combining of cells into higher organisms. Various terms have been proposed to describe this phenomenon such as *negentropy* or *syntropy*, but what they fundamentally refer to is this innate drive in living organisms toward interaction, growth, and complexity. The *Gaia Hypothesis*, proposed by James Lovelock, theorizes that the biosphere has strategically programmed its evolution for three billion years. The extraordinary implication is that the whole of the biosphere is akin to one incredibly large living organism. Support for such a contention is based upon observations about the Earth's extremely unlikely atmospheric makeup, suggesting that the composition of the atmosphere is

itself a biological construction resulting as a consequence of an immense cybernetic system termed Gaia which seeks optimal conditions for the totality of planetary life.[1] Inherent in the interaction of these systems is the exchange and transformation of communication energy. More precisely this could be termed the transmission of *difference*. The inevitable complex increase in condensation of this energy within societies of higher organisms generates language. What seems evident about the extreme compression of these energies in human languages is that the various realities in which we are engaged are themselves shaped and constrained by language constructs. The mental world does not stop at the boundaries of the flesh, nor is it inside my head. Mind is a compound phenomenon of interacting parts bounded arbitrarily by what I either wish to or am capable of understanding. In other words, mind consists of organism in and of environment. Although I recognize my subjectivity to be inescapable, I am willing to contend that the dimensions of *self* actually consist of a vast interlocking network of eco-mental systems. How much of these larger systems are incorporated into self is a function of my language, determining at what point I limit connection with what appears to be the outer world. If I reduce the dimensions of self to extreme exiguity, I subsequently decrease the interaction with those systems necessary to sustain life.

4.

The act of description is not passive, I speak in the place of what is described and in one sense become its representative. Responsible representation demands accuracy gained through interaction: *listening as expansion of connection within the biotic world.* It is not trivial to assert that when humanity ceases to listen to the voice of wolf or whale, hindering their survival, we help to limit the biosphere's potential reality toward our own destructive short term advantage.

Biologist Gregory Bateson has stated:

> "There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds, and it is characteristic of the system that basic error propagates itself. It branches out like a rooted parasite through the tissues of life, and everything gets into a rather peculiar mess."[2]

The making of creative connections between phenomena involves the disassembling of reality constructs with which I operate in blind assumption. I consist of more than I recognize. Freedom is not just having choice among a set of contrived possibilities, it is fundamentally the expansion of what I do not know, expanding the connection with what I previously thought outside myself. Most current socio-economic systems reward attempts to make social and biotic systems predictable. Predictability is achieved through redundancy introduced as subsequent loss of choice. High predictability yields low information and therefore less freedom. For example, the diversity of the food we currently eat diminishes almost daily. Large corporate takeovers of the patented seed industry has recently put pressure on world governments to centralize the manufacture of seeds in order to guarantee industry profit. Laws have been passed in both the United States and Europe which outlaw certain unpatented plants. The European *Common Catalog* lists all varieties which remain legal to grow, and over a year's time literally hundreds of plants are removed from the list. Stiff

fines are levied against gardeners who attempt to grow these illegal varieties. It has been estimated that these attempts to ensure corporate profits will result in three-quarters of all European vegetable varieties becoming extinct by 1991.[3]

5.

Human consciousness of nature is itself an event in nature which contributes to its transformation. As consciousness, in the form of culture, folds back upon the biosphere pushing toward civilization, the energy absorbed from the surrounding environment, necessary to sustain the decrease of internal entropy within consciousness, is subsequently excreted not only as waste but as disruption of the surrounding organic systems. This would seemingly result in a consumption of energy exceeding what the environment is capable of sustaining. In other words, there is probably an essential point of equilibrium between the growth rate of civilization and the capability of supporting life systems to supply energy, beyond which breakdown of the total system begins. For example, the *1978 Conservation Biology Conference* predicted the probable end of vertebrate evolution by the turn of the century, including massive extinction of many species.[4] Perhaps the point beyond where equilibrium is maintained is also the point at which redundancy sets in: culture becomes negative feedback generating more waste than knowledge.

Technology is a *culture* which by its overwhelming power either absorbs or eradicates biological, cultural, and linguistic diversity. In view of this, it seems trivial to ask what effect technology has had upon music instead of asking, what of music might remain unaffected? To find such a phenomenon is probably also to absorb it since as a member of such a culture I begin to hear with technological ears. The very choice of whether to use or not use technology to disseminate my ideas has largely been taken away from me. Thus the question remains: do my ideas attempt to disintermediate this cultural redundancy or merely reinforce it? By now it must seem obvious that the naive fascination with new machines is not only trivial but dangerous. The well-worn assertion that technology is neutral, awaiting specific use by good or evil people, is a cliche whose idiocy is only compounded by equating advances in music with advances in machines. It places music in a status similar to mineral resources where

values await the strip-mining mentality of commercialization. International industrialization and the energy consumption which feeds it have unfortunately become synonymous with social evolution. Discussions about technology inevitably link it to notions of progress which demand consumptive and centralized economies. Machines are somehow thought to signify the future while skills derived from living interactively with the biotic environment are thought to represent the past. Technology is not merely the manufacture and use of tools: it is a residue of how we imagine the world into being. It is an environment of symbols against whose institutions we must each day pit our needs or conform to that environment's mechanization. Beyond the residue of our imaginings is the freedom of the yet unknown. At best technology is merely the collective debris upon which we may stand in further imagining; at worst, technology is the refuse within which to bury choice.

6.

Near where I lived is a coastal estuary set aside as a bird refuge.
This estuary lies north of a small group of hills and canyons
covered in the indigenous chapparel
(Southern California coastal scrub).
But surrounding this patch of uninhabited terrain
is the suburban sprawl of Southern California:

condominiums to the east;
private homes to the south;
and Interstate Highway 5 to the west,
with the Pacific Ocean just beyond.

Standing on these hills alone at night,
no matter in what direction I turn,
I see lights flashing:

automobile headlights,
advertising searchlights,
airplanes,
streetlights,
and the eerie glow of television sets in windows.

Close to my feet are living things,
their presence illuminated by these abrupt and disparate bursts
of light.
Everything that struggles for life here must listen continuously,
all day and all night,
to the roar of nearby traffic.
It is beyond my imagination to believe
that what lives here is not changed by all of this;
or not changed by the web of communication network
which surrounds and entangles the biosphere.

It is an interesting activity to try and listen
to what this place has to tell me,
because for all my effort I cannot hear it;

the din of humanity is too loud.
It is a lonely thought that this disconnectedness
has been chosen by us.
Of what shall humanity consist when all that is left to hear
are the sounds of our isolation?

7.

My composition entitled, *MADRIGAL: (The Language of the Environment is Encoded in the Patterns of Its Living Systems),* began with a reticular notion: perhaps each instance of environmental ambience which I prceive is part of a much larger structure, that within the patterns of communication between living organisms there is a larger communication logic which each separate utterance combines with to form an environmental language. To decode a moment of this pattern might generate an appropriate language not only descriptive of a specific place and time, but more precisely a language descriptive of the mentality implicit in this connective instance: a composition of this environment and not merely about it.

The compositional process for *MADRIGAL* entailed the pho-netic transcription of an environmental ambience recording made in the Cuyamaca Mountains of Southern California. One minute of recorded ambience provided the entire source material for the notated score. The transcription procedure involved attempting to bring the ambience into my physiology through both aural sensing and vocal emulation. Compositional organization of this transcription was made according to structural relationships intrinsic to the material itself.

In one sense *MADRIGAL* juxtaposes a *primitive* function of language (namely, to interact with the external environment) with one of the most recent analytical notations for language. Additionally my intention has been to combine multiple descriptions of a particular environment in order to convey: (1) a resonant sense of the richness of information contained in one spatial and temporal location; and (2) to exemplify the notion that most definitions of *wilderness* are

not based upon interaction but are generalized abstractions which may or may not apply to a particular place.

MADRIGAL requires seven vocalists and a two-channel audio tape. The audio tape consists of filtered transformations of the original ambience recording. The score is notated in the International Phonetic Alphabet (American Dialect of English) with additional signs.

NOTES:

1. James E. Lovelock, *GAIA, A New Look At Life on Earth* (Oxford University Press, 1979).

2. Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), p.484.

3. See Cary Fowler, "Sowing the Seeds of Destruction", in *Science for the People* (September / October, 1980), p.8.

4. *Science News*, vol. 114, no.13 (September 23, 1978), p.215.

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