

An open letter to La Monte Young and Tony Conrad

Arnold Dreyblatt, 2000

(A Shorter Version has been published in "The Wire", September, 2000)

Numerous journalists, musicians and composers have been asking me to give an opinion on the continuing controversy between La Monte Young and Tony Conrad. The unexpected release of *Day of Niagara* seems only to make a response more pertinent. My reluctance until now is in great part due to my utmost respect for the work of both parties: both of whom has influenced my musical and visual work in countless ways, regardless of how our paths have later diverged.

In the early seventies I was a student at a Media Center in Buffalo, New York where Tony now teaches. My early work in "flicker video" at that time led me directly to Tony Conrad's earlier film experiments in periodic visual structures. In 1974, I became interested in the translation of these structures into sound, and began studies with La Monte in New York. After an intensive year at his loft on Church Street, the atmosphere proved to be too claustrophobic for my tastes, and though I continued on for another year or so as La Monte's first tape archivist, it was clear that I had to stake out my own path.

At that time, I came to be especially interested in the ensemble which immediately follows La Monte's change from saxophone to voice. I found this period to be revolutionary conceptually, and as well exceptionally rich in terms of sonority and timbre. Earlier incarnations of the group had been publicly known and labeled as the *Theater of Eternal Music* and later as *Dream Music*. My interest in Conrad's work led me to look more closely at his input to this ensemble, and I had the impression that the mathematical and acoustic rationalization of harmonic relationships first appears along with his membership in this group. La Monte, who's interest in stasis and sustained pitches was already well established, tended to apply the notational language of European classical music, either in his famous "Trio for Strings" (1958), or in his interest in that famous "blues seventh" that Tony now recognized as the natural 7th harmonic. Furthermore, the infinitely rich timbre of the bowed strings, with the voices mixed "inside" was never again to be equaled. From witnesses who had been present at those performances, I understood the great impression that this ensemble had made.

The later influence of Pandit Pran Nath on La Monte's aesthetic resulted in a mix which focused somewhat on vocal embellishment, developing gradually from the absolute "horizontal" structure investigated years earlier. The revival of concentration on the *Well-Tuned Piano* however beautiful, further moved the center of attention in other directions of which I am not here to judge. Convinced that the tapes of this legendary period might be inaccessible for many years to come, sometime in 1976, at the age of 23, I selected a random tape from the archive (*Day of Niagara*) and made a copy, purely for my own use and without any inkling what historical value this tape would one day have. In the mid 1990's, after not hearing that tape for over twenty years, I passed on a copy to younger colleagues, whose only exposure to a related music had until then been through the few releases by Tony Conrad.

Back in the mid 70's I had attempted to confront Tony with my estimation of that period, and found that he was steadfastly loyal to his former colleague, whatever feelings he might have held privately at the time. During the following decade, Tony's

patience must have run out, and he joined with John Cale in requesting full co-composer status, which has probably made any accommodations on La Monte's part that much more difficult. During our sporadic contact in the 80's and 90's Tony and I informally planned an extensive conversation on these and other subjects which unfortunately never took place. It was by chance that I recently learned about the impending release of *Day of Niagara* by thumbing through a copy of *The Wire* in a German train station, which I recognized as having been derived from a copy of "that tape", which I had unwittingly left in someone's hands. I have often sympathized with Tony's frustration at the difficulty in having access to the tapes on which he appears, yet what can sometimes be seen as a conspiracy, is partially due to La Monte's interest in later periods of what he understands as his own work, periods which La Monte considers to be more "mature".

But how are we now to interpret the controversy which surrounds the release of *Day of Niagara*? I have looked through my collection of public statements by both parties over the years. Tony questions the notion of the role of the composer in a Post-Cagean-Fluxus world, and presents the ensemble as "loose collective" where by "improvising, we eliminated the role of a composer" (Interview, EST). The members felt to be part of "history in the making", as a music had emerged which was clearly greater than any individual collaborator. In my experience, the "locking in tune" within just harmonic relationships between musicians is without doubt an unforgettable experience. Tony clearly identifies with those collective moments as the most important in his life, and he consistently refers to *Dream Music* as "our music", even as early as in a letter which I found from 1965, which was published in "Film Culture" in the Summer of 1966.

La Monte on the other hand, has consistently identified himself as a "composer", either breaking with or functioning within a tradition, whether that of Western Classical music, or the one which he claims to have created. La Monte points out in his most recent response to this situation that, "throughout the known history of composition and improvisation there has always been an interplay between that which was more predetermined and "fixed" and that which was to be determined on the spot during performance...".

One can certainly find a case for improvised activity under the leadership role of a "composer" as an accepted form of compositional activity during the last thirty years - in "serious" music. Yet La Monte finally admits in that same text that the issue of authorship was "in fact, a source of discontent with Conrad and Cale" at the time. For some insight into this period, one might look to the creative atmosphere in the early and mid-sixties. There were many collective endeavors in the theater, art and music world at the time (names such as Julian Beck/Living Theater and Robert Wilson/Byrd Hoffman come to mind). Most of these groups, had at their center a director, composer etc. whose vision and energy provided the focus, and whose name was later associated with the activities of the group. In my work with large ensembles and performance projects over the last twenty years, I certainly know how difficult these issues are to define.

For those of us who cherish the contributions of both parties, recent developments have been doubly painful. We find ourselves confronting two opposing world views, both of which seem valid: one accepting the role of the composer/author in a central

and traditional role, the other presenting a collective model, with a decentralized structure.

La Monte, in a recent response, acknowledges the input of Tony and John Cale as being in “the realms of performing, acoustics, mathematics, and philosophy”, while not in composition. He claims to be “extremely interested in arriving at a fair and just solution...”

Tony has been able to re-introduce *dream music* to a larger and younger audience whose ears have finally been prepared to receive it. The rediscovery of my own work has been made possible indirectly through his efforts. Tony, always conscious of current political and social concerns, is well aware that the production tenets of this younger generation are not as interested in questions of personal authorship as those in the realms of “serious” music. La Monte’s insistence on complete control of his works in all aspects is oriented towards posthumous status, and, while consistent in its obstinacy, this has resulted in a legendary and yet inaccessible aura until recently.

I apologize to La Monte and Marian, for any personal pain the release of an unauthorized tape may have caused, through a youthful misguided act and further negligence. Yet, as a result of this release, steps in defining the issues are now being made, including an invitation towards reconciliation. And while the recording quality of the music certainly leave much to be desired, the attention that the release of *Day of Niagara* has received, might suggest to La Monte a contemporary relevancy which this music may now hold.

Is it not in the interests of all parties that other, perhaps more well-chosen tapes from this period be finally released, with ample notes and packaging? 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 - perhaps coupled with a guaranteed release of more material in a form agreeable to both sides?

Your places in music history are certainly now assured, surely the rhetoric on both sides could be put to better use. It may be naive to be optimistic, yet we are waiting for you.

Arnold Dreyblatt, Berlin, 2000