

## Humouring Dissent<sup>1</sup>

A: Everyone not knowing where it's all gonna end up.

E: Yeah.

A: Eventually it just goes so fast that people don't know what's going on.

E: Yeah, the speed itself becomes intoxicating.<sup>2</sup>

A: Yeah.

E: That's the idea of never-ending progress, that you just pretend you're coming up with more and more exciting and better things.<sup>3</sup>

A: Which is the perpetuation of the industry...or the industrialization of the arts.

E: Yeah, but the industrialization already happened a while ago.<sup>4</sup>

- 1 Editor's note: This manuscript was found in several tattered fragments in a crow's nest some distance away from Dr Johannes Rosenberg's body. Soiled and stained, it appeared to have been used to wrap some food items, and even after careful reconstruction has missing parts, as evidenced by the multiple unfinished sentences, half-baked thoughts and generally bad grammar. The original manuscript seems to have been some kind of transcription of a conversation between two people, only referred to as 'A' and 'E', who, judging by the nature and content of the conversation, are possibly amateur musicians, a recurring source of inquiry and fascination for Dr Rosenberg. There were copious comments and footnotes accompanying the transcript, curiously enough in a different handwriting to that of Dr Rosenberg. It has been speculated that the author of these footnotes is in fact his distant cousin, Mr Erich von Rosenberg (the von is most certainly a fraudulently adopted nobiliary particle in this case, probably purely to impress high society), a dilettantish socialite and middling violinist (and a one-time associate of infamous literary hoaxer Lord Auch) with whom Johannes was in sporadic contact. The manuscript itself is forensically linked to Dr Rosenberg's through stains that have been proven by chemical analysis to have come from a brand of violin-shaped chocolate pralines that Dr Rosenberg was fond of, the wrappers of which were found in his pockets upon the discovery of his body.
- 2 NOTE (EvR?): The vertigo of the centripetal force that draws culture into an addictive headspin spiralling towards the centre at ever-increasing rotations without ever being able to reach its goal of self-destruction. With each cycle our memory becomes shorter, our grasp becomes weaker, and our senses duller. The culture producer and consumer become fused by an immediacy of economic exchange. There is no more object to be interrogated, only an impression of solicitation, an infantility of identification with an instantly satisfied desire. We, the culture, are like a child who spins around faster and faster until he vomits out of pure ecstasy. (Editor's note: As shown by the incoherence of this note, at least some of the comments scribbled all over this manuscript seem to have been written in some kind of state of altered consciousness, either caused by substance abuse or episodes of clinical psychosis. These notes have been left here in unedited state in order to demonstrate the general confusion reigning over the entire document.)
- 3 NOTE (EvR?): The fetish is not an object anymore, it is a concept of newness. If Duchamp had been a musician, he would have made a fart symphony, not 4'33". Cage's conceptual revolution in music was as disingenous as a used car salesman's paint job on an old banger.
- 4 NOTE (EvR?): The problem with orchestras has always been that the musicians assumed they were members of the middle classes, and had to appear as such, in manners, dress, salary, etc. When orchestras became professionalized and industrialized in the late 19th Century, they should have adopted the same models and divisions of labour as the increasingly successful factories, in order to maintain their relevance in the contemporary world. The main masses of musicians should be dressed in

A: Yeah, I guess for me I was talking more talking about genuine game-changes...genuine ruptures that occurred with a lot of people who died around then, Cage, Feldman, Nancarrow, Messiaen, then 10 years later with Xenakis, Berio, Ligeti...that whole mid-century eruption of very genuine...

E: They were kind of the last dinosaurs in a way, I suppose.

A: Yeah in one sense, but in another sense some people would argue they were like Strauss and Mahler.<sup>5</sup>

E: Boulez is still around, but that generation of the 20s and 30s, they certainly still believed in masterpieces...and in the idea of true masterpieces...progressive, future-oriented masterpieces. I wonder if any composer these days truly believes it. Or rather it feels like: if you believe it, you're already living in the past. It would be hard to have a conversation and genuinely believe something is a masterpiece...I would feel pretty odd having that conversation, but in the 60s they still had that conversation...but that's about stamping the new generation's identity onto the cultural map. It's much more subtle...now the grand narratives are crumbling down.

A: Now it's so stupid...I mean this whole indie-classical thing...pretending Brooklyn is turn-of-the-century Vienna...<sup>6</sup>

E: Now it's just a matter of positioning and contextualisation. History is not a continuum anymore, it's just a bunch of hashtags. that's how it feels. It's a database. So the tradition of classical music is just a database now. People say now when they hear a piece of new music and they like it, they always say it's cinematic...that's the kind of catchphrase for something that touches people.<sup>7</sup>

A: Something correlates with their vision.

---

overalls of durable materials that can be easily cleaned, there should be a small number of foremen who maintain order and productivity during rehearsals and concerts and are recognised by their more dignified dress and loud voices, and the entire operation should be overseen by the floor manager, who wears a suit and is naturally remunerated accordingly, etc etc. And just as most industries have now been transferred to countries with cheap labour costs, orchestras must do the same, in order to remain competitive in today's world. We cannot afford to have orchestral music played by first-world musicians, who demand ever-increasing salaries and better working conditions, especially when they essentially manufacture products that have become more or less obsolete, and haven't been modernised for a Century or so. No other industry can afford such an anachronistic modus operandi or product range; why should the creative industries be an exception?

5 NOTE (EvR?): The upheavals and revolutions of modernism were, in hindsight, like changing the brand of one's car, not a new form of transport. Those who yearn for the lost potency of modernist revolutions and their purity of vision are like the car owner who will continue to sit in his vehicle each morning even after the last drops of petrol have long been sucked up from the ground and evaporated into the atmosphere.

6 NOTE (EvR?): Music has a lot to learn from Jeff Koons' marriage to Cicciolina. Music has to become more pornographic to survive. It needs to marry the obscenity of the image.

7 NOTE (EvR?): Because music itself could never have the same effect on people as visual images, it can never have the magnetic power of the visual fetish.

E: Yeah, and of course soundtracks are usually made in a database way where a director...

A: Yes, well soundtracks are just a ripoff of the most seductive techniques of concert hall composers...

E: Yeah, exactly.

A: ...To assist narrative.

E: Mm...yeah, kind of reifies abstract musical ideas and pretends they have a fixed emotional content.

A: Yeah...and that relationship is solidified through its constant hammering or stapling to certain images.<sup>8</sup>

E: Yeah, and let's face it, films for 99% of the population are the only place they're going to hear classical music...<sup>9</sup>

A: And orchestra!

E: Yeah, and orchestra...but I'm even thinking simply the classics of the modern canon. So for those people...those certain works will always etched in their mind as being related to a certain pictorial image.

A: So what you were saying before about future-based masterpieces...

E: Yeah, well, the idea that you're creating for the future...which is the idea that you're seeing yourself as a historical being.

A: Right.

E: You're seeing the obituaries....

A: Photographs of your own funeral...

---

8 NOTE (EvR?): Which means that they do start to have fixed emotional content, just as words gain meaning through a stable relationship between a signifier and signified. Music lost the battle, it became servant to the image, repeating it (badly) like a pirate's parrot.

9 NOTE (EvR?): Once movies took off in the early 20th Century, music might as well have just put its hands up in the air and surrendered, like a good old baddie from a Western when confronted by the inevitability of the moral superiority of the hero. It was immediately obvious that something as abstract as pure sound could never compete with the tantalising magic of moving image. Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk transformed into a visually driven industry of the fetish (spreading its contagion outwards from the screen into the 'real lives' of its stars), where sound played an ever-decreasing role until it became merely the emotional wallpaper furnishing the main event. Satie has his champions in movie producers, not in 60s avant-garde music.

E: Yeah, and indexes in future books with your name on it.

A: Yeah, but people do that already now in Wikipedia.

E: Yeah, sure.

A: The Ben Frost Wikipedia is quite amusing.

E: Yeah, sure...but even Xenakis may have understood history in that way. In their own presence, in their own continuum it would've made sense, but it doesn't anymore 'cause the whole idea of being cited these days is Wikipedia, and anyone can be cited on Wikipedia. The old authority has broken down in that sense...the arbiters of who is of historical significance...that's all disappeared.

A: Has it disappeared or is it that no one really cares? i don't think you can say it has completely disappeared in that you can still sell a bunch of concert tickets for Mahler 3 conducted by Dudamel, and it's sold out 3 nights in a row.

E: Yeah I mean, people will still proudly be conservative.

A: Oh yes.<sup>10</sup>

E: It's that funny thing where a lot of people who see themselves as progressive in terms of like left-leaning, socially conscious, with this idea that art is a civilising...or that art is a necessary internal critique of society and a civilizing factor, and produce artworks, or consume artworks which are seen as kind of a critique of the current consumer society. They're actually the new conservatives, they're the people who want to see an ossified status quo from post-World War 2.<sup>11</sup>

A: Because it's such a neat positioning, and it's so easy to navigate, to position oneself and ignore all contradictions.

E: Well, it seems like common sense to see society as healthy when it's balanced by social

---

10 NOTE (EvR?): We must remember that orchestras themselves are essentially made up of professional amateurs, who by and large have very conservative taste in music and culture in general. Any new music is at the mercy of their execution, invariably poor, as these skilled charlatans cannot comprehend why they should torture themselves with living in the present rather functioning as the secretaries of the great masters of history, copying their notes night after night like a poor neurotic suffering from some kind of disorder.

11 NOTE (EvR?): Think of El Sistema (which even in name sounds suspiciously fascist), which appeals just to that kind of liberal humanist thinking, but really just espouses a very specific, Eurocentric idea of discipline and hierarchy (cloaked in the disguise of good taste and beauty) and overlays it on communities who are already victims of numerous waves of colonialism. It is curious that only Western classical music seems to have this power of lifting people from their misery and poverty. It doesn't seem to have occurred to the cultural missionaries to encourage people to find their own music in their own roots, in their own communities, in stories that deal with their own reality, rather than setting up an aspirational game and an advertisement for the supposed civilising effect of one type of music, the music of the aristocrats of the Western World. El Sistema is an experiment that finds exactly what it sets out to find in a particular, and then uses these findings to justify a universal.

welfare and education, and culture that acts as both a stamp of identity and a healthy critique of your own position. But of course the Sydney Biennale showed that thing for what it is...you know, the internal critique system doesn't work. The internal critique idea of contemporary culture is only valued when the critique is done in a way that abstracts it enough so that no one understands it, so you can aestheticize your critique of society. But if it becomes a real critique you get kicked out of the establishment.

A: If you *actually* upset things.

E: Yeah, because let's face it, the establishment itself will ostracize any element it actually fears or thinks might create a rupture, but it will tolerate things up till that point. Like the Lachemann opera we saw is a perfect example.

A: Right.

E: It's easy to be a socialist in your ivory tower, or in academia. It's that thing that you make a work which is aesthetically seen as progressive, but...

A: Ultimately it's framed.

E: Yeah.

A: Into the same forum, and the same hierarchy...

E: Yeah, exactly. The ideology behind is...

A: Yes the ideology is fucked, but what about the sound?

E: Well, that's the thing...

A: I mean, is it impossible to listen to it, while that ideology is going on? Is that your problem?

E: I guess so. You can never listen to anything in a pure way obviously. There's always some kind of ideology lurking behind the notes. You can't help it. There's always a context and the context is always ideology.

A: Erm...

E: It's even...you know, like a lot of protest movements are seen to be radical, or artworks which are seen to be radical, are essentially very conservative. They often want to go back to a time before the need for that protest. At least more often it seems like it's that way, at least these days.<sup>12</sup>

---

12 NOTE (EvR?): Radicalism is of course now commodified, it's one accepted category of consumerism. Avant-gardism is a form of nostalgia for a time when the new was somehow newer and truer. The obsession with originality belongs in the same category of vain attempts at finding a new position in a dimensionless space.

A: I think it's even weirder when the protest becomes commodified. Like Ai Wei Wei for example, or even some elements of the Occupy stuff provides a very flattering context for certain celebrities to appear socially conscious or involved.<sup>13</sup>

E: These days it happens as soon as something becomes idealized as a possible meme, or going viral...It becomes commodified by its very virtue of becoming a voice in the discussion. Which means that, at the very moment you see the hand pop up from the fucking ocean of shit, it gets dragged down straight away. That whole thing of the Arab Spring being the first revolution spread through social media...

A: It's complete myth making, manufactured in San Francisco. People wanted to sell this networking tool as a kind of politically potent force. The thing is, you see these revolutions happen again and again, and no matter how they start, they always fucking fail. Its like you talking about the hand rising from the sea of shit getting dragged back down...that's always happened.

E: Essentially because once something becomes genuinely threatening, it'll get pulled back into the fold by....

A: The *actual* power.

E: Yeah, exactly...so the dissent gets humoured for a while, until it starts to actually upset the balance. I guess that's the pessimist version of the possibility of social upheaval and social critique, but ultimately we just go back home and see whether we have any new Facebook friends.

A: And hope that we can find our iPhone charger.

E: That's right.

---

13 NOTE (EvR?): We have learnt to outsource protest by experiencing it vicariously through sanitised and accepted forms of sacrifice, that of other, less valuable humans, who suffer in order for us to prove our humanity. We participate in revolutions by following a twitter feed. We engage in radical social action by liking a Facebook page. We collaborate with artists by contributing to crowdfunding ventures. We critique culture by living without irony.