

ACT IN LOCATION TO HISTORY<sup>1</sup>*James Kelly*

Here, then, are some of the factors determining the climate of the public world of music. Perhaps we should not have overlooked those pockets of “power” where prizes, awards, and commissions are dispensed, where music is adjudged guilty, not only without the right to be confronted by its accuser, but without the right to be confronted by the accusations. Or those well-meaning souls who exhort the public “just to listen to more contemporary music,” apparently on the theory that familiarity breeds passive acceptance. Or those, often the same well-meaning souls, who remind the composer of his “obligation to the public,” while the public’s obligation to the composer is fulfilled, manifestly, by mere physical presence in the concert hall or before loudspeaker or—more authoritatively—by committing to memory the numbers of phonograph and amplifier models. Or the intricate social world within this musical world where the salon becomes bazaar, and music itself

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this text was published in collaboration with Aurora De Armendi as the handbound letterpress book, *The Lord Took 10,000 of My Sheep*.

becomes an ingredient of verbal canapés for cocktail conversation.

I say all this not to present a picture of a virtuous music in a sinful world, but to point up the problems of a special music in an alien and inapposite world. And so, I dare suggest that the composer would do himself and his music an immediate and eventual service by total, resolute, and voluntary withdrawal from this public world to one of private performance and electronic media, with its very real possibility of complete elimination of the public and social aspects of musical composition. By so doing, the separation between the domains would be defined beyond any possibility of confusion of categories, and the composer would be free to pursue a private life of professional achievement, as opposed to a public life of unprofessional compromise and exhibitionism.<sup>2</sup>

Protest incited during Brooklyn Museum of Art hosted Sensation produced nascent confusion in the lay viewer not as cause of questionable ethics displayed by exhibiting artists, but as cause of an administrative enigma posited in criticisms of Charles Saatchi; and with the opening of the Saatchi gallery: Chelsea (London), such redolent confusion prompting search through my archives for the audio recording transcribed in these pages, I listened to this past which feels now fabricated, producing a clear but fallible memory of my friend Honor and his confused populism. Studied communication through visual mediums founded first upon technique and ballasted by secondary ideation has long been emphasized at the academy over the function of commercial exhibition process and the controlling force of fluctuating collector market. Beyond institution provided exhibition space,

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<sup>2</sup> From "The Composer as Specialist" by Milton Babbitt, published as "Who Cares if You Listen?" in *High Fidelity* Feb. 1958, and later reprinted in Honor's more emphatic translation as "Who Gives Two Fucks?" in *Katalogue* vol. 4, 2002.

neither understanding of curatorial administration nor of operative artist/dealer relationship are given matter of discourse within insularly creative environment, the culturally centralized Chelsea (New York) district operating as paradigm. To this end, district-encouraged naïveté of the young artist to these issues has in the last fifteen years produced a system of cyclic predation, giving rise to vacuous non-art substitute and its referent commodity. As example, I offer the précised account of a “non-artist” whom with I collaborated in evading these marked obstacles through the timely and easily distilled operation of purchased positive review in relation to shifting preference in collector market, predating the currently popular but folly “Chelsea whore” analogy.

Honor kept a daily practice of undocumented happenings while producing two solo drawing exhibitions, [*Untitled*] in 2001 and [*Untitled*] in 2005, both pseudonymously. The first body of work, critically praised while errantly commercial, inspired my service; documenting through audio the world to which much allusion had been made and of which little understanding predominated emerging artists’ assumptions.

Honor disappeared just days prior to installation of his second show causing through associative speculation, each piece to be sold at or above market value before opening, and while this transcription remains as artifact of mere dialogue<sup>3</sup> between Honor and the curator of this second and final show, it is allusion itself to the idea of immaterial, undocumented synthesis of action and solitudinous regard

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3 Recorded Dec. 11, 2004 on micro-cassette at [Gallery], approximately ten minutes after start.

which Honor championed.

I present it now in contrast to calculated manipulation of controlling systems for which both primary speakers may ultimately be remembered. I present this not as “some blotchy business trip,”<sup>4</sup> as Honor would have had it, but as an exemplary moment of truth.

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Curator: I’m stopping you here: a matter of taste not opinion.

Honor: Well, yeah. I mean your opinions form taste—inform your tastes. You know that. You form opinions through different forms of education, experiential or whatever. You know? Whatever! You have the environmental factors like who [*sic*] you surround yourself with. Their ideas will either influence you or you react against them and you just grow and—I mean taste, maybe that’s a bad word to use because it’s not easy to define.

C: Or delineate.

H: “There’s no accounting for taste,” you know that saying?

C: Mm-hmm.

H: That’s—that works on so many levels. I mean, I’ve always heard it used referring to class, someone with a certain sophistication and education and appreciation for culture and just everything. [They would use it when] describing someone who is like, “cut-off shorts!” or something like that—with a poster of a Ferrari on their wall and a Jackson Pollock book on their coffee table, pitying the fact that they

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4 A reference to the 24-hour police stakeout of a prominent collector’s home, a scene from Honor’s unproduced 2002 Beverly Hills Cop in New York screenplay, in which Detective Axel Foley investigates Sotheby’s auction house for securities fraud.

don't know enough about art in its broadest context or—it's hard to reconcile the differences between low and high culture because it's so dependent on class and within class: education and that's all—that depends on money, too. So—

C: You're slowly proving my point then.

H: No. This—there's no ego here. I'm just trying to articulate this thought. This is truly untreaded, uncharted waters [*sic*] for me—my water. I just realize how absurd it is to try to defend something so trivial. It wouldn't be important at all, if it weren't for instant judgment of people—

C: Mm.

H: —in seconds, based on appearance and then speech and then career aspirations or like, you aren't you—you're your job. So If you think capitalism's the bane of human existence and then you meet someone [with an advertising job] or like a business major, you instantly assume their value system's different.

C: This is a problem of relational coherency. What I can't help you with, is an admission—

H: It is. I'm just—

C: You try to present your intellect as something less than it is, like the supposed dispassionate irony of my wardrobe. I'm, you've observed, reacting against a norm even if it is by pretense. You could agree to that?

H: Yeah. I know. No. I see what you're saying but you're phrasing it more positive.

C: Because it's nothing to feel shame over.

H: I'm not shamed. I'm feeling something so far from shame. You don't even know.

C: A definite struggle of coherency, though.

H: Yeah. Well, I was saying—I don't know. See, it's not just hipsters or disingenuous art. I don't—I'm in no way romanticizing the idea, I just wish I could not have the luxuries of independence and fortune and was bound by a nine to five job where I had like, the tough but fair boss, you know?—threatened to fire me if I was late again. You see stuff like that in movies, or—you know what I mean?—stuff like that, worrying about a budget instead of worrying about just being a prisoner. It creates this amazing motivational force for new work.

C: Get a job then.

H: It'll never be the same. I'm aware I don't need the job. I don't have real bills and kids that need me selling insurance or washing dishes.

C: That won't always be true.

H: I hope. It would never mean—I would have to undergo some kind of selective amnesia or hypnosis to—

C: Lobotomy.

H: [*laughs*]—to, to really understand the hardships of poverty and ignorance, because you can't fake that. No one can. I mean, even if I work at McDonald's for the rest of my life, buy a doublewide and go to—I don't know like, the worst action movies or—no, Trucker Mania like, monster truck rallies and become comfortable with that lifestyle it will still function as research or just as a performance-based integration of anthropology and art.

C: [*laughs*]

H: What?

C: I'm sorry. Your sincerity is—it's in opposition—

H: I'm starting to think this was a shitty idea.

C: Ok—[*administrative assistant interrupts for twenty seconds, unintelligible*]—I apologize. It's rare. I believe what I'm trying to say is that the logic of this proposal, if it were to be presented as a proposal for either space or print could hardly be alleged ethnography if there is to be no interaction with an audience.

H: It's not about whether it happened. It's meant to function as research.

C: I think you misuse the word, Honor. You may be the common thread in your own practice, but you can't expect this to be considered research in academe if you aren't publishing.

H: But that's it. It's not going to be published. The attention's never been on the physical quality of the work, right? This is not how—if I choose to learn something, attempt to learn something about a certain sect of society or class then that's a revelation on my part, you know?—even through deception—but a truth that's counterfactual rather than supported by evidence that gets elevated up to art because it takes the form of an object. You know?

C: You'd employ deception to study your subject ignoring the possibility that more could be gained by making your intentions known during the process or by showing them— sharing with them your findings after the project has been executed.

H: That effects how people interact with you like an affectation.

C: The ethical debate over exploitation—it is affected as a non-issue. From Boas to

Ruby, this is still true. Even as a participant observer, you need a document—some residue.

H: What about oral historians?

C: That wouldn't be practical, would it?

H: But cell phones—Ok. I'm not even talking about exploitative work. I'm saying why not just let the experience exist in my mind, you know?—just the ephemerality, the ephemerality—

C: Mm-hmm.

H: —of the memory being the only documentation of the experience—shifts for itself— like a magic act in the literal sense of like, sleight of hand.

C: Well. Firstly, the position privileges a kind of autism absent from the artwork while eviscerating its travel, apart from the work tending not to be saleable.

H: But you're dictating. By saying that, you're dictating that all art is catalyzed by participation—that you have to have it to share it for it to be of any kind of value. Why can't something just exist because you want it to? "Make this more authorial," or at least "make this happen now!" Impulse doesn't need to be validated by an audience or that wave of secondary expression. I mean—

C: Dear, you're reducing art to impulse. It's the entire gestation, even years of thought injected into a piece by all parties including the spectator and it can still exist as something deeply personal to you, but hoarding the knowledge of your experience would deprive so many people of their own growth, which itself could not be experienced unless through exposure to your lens or your words—your



provocations. Have you read any of Iqra Meza?

H: Maybe. I don't always remember.

C: She's demonstrated remarkable intellectual care for what I think are closely related concerns. She spoke at Purlieu this year about a kind of speculative epistemology and the points of imbrication between these unresolved modes of inculcation and knowledge production that we're talking about and maintaining the illusion of knowledge—essentially reinforcing the obligation of the artist to make work that is not only conducive to public engagement through both insinuation and scrupulous examination, but also the promotion and reflection of understanding throughout diverse communities—not solely for the sake of this abstruse reification of the aesthetic experience as an agent of Mehrwert. The example you gave of working in service—

H: No, I get it.

C: It's not a selfish thought to have, to think that your ideas should be shared with others. Look at Matthew and Heidi Green, or the Material Guise of Body Given to Time exhibition. Did you see it?

H: I'm familiar with it.<sup>5</sup>

C: Two years past and depending on how forcefully it was presented, the thought could have become propelled by arrogance—even generosity—but never indulgence.

H: I don't even know why we're talking about this. Didn't all curators die in a fire, or something?

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5 “Catalogs are great when they're for shows you have no interest in seeing. Catalog essays, in these instances, become like these recycled fevers. They're so vibrant in their desire to inform you of all the things not present in the work. They're brilliant pieces of writing in that their great task is to inform and position, while their greatest function is to just be forgotten. But when the work is never known in the first place, they become so difficult to forget and so uninformative.” This text is excerpted from “A Porn Map,” a conversation between Susanne Kugel, Letta Kugel and Matthew Lewis, published in *Homes*, 2011.

C: I'm entering this conversation from the position of a curator.

H: I know. But, I mean—are artists even real people? It is indulgent to me to think that what you've made with your hands—it shouldn't necessarily be given to everybody on the earth. That is some guy talking about a NikeTown franchise near his house in an interview and it's indulgent.

C: You're being reductive.

H: There's no humility. "Look at me. I'm clever. I have a voice and if it's not good you're just not smart enough to get it."

C: Dear.

H: It's just—it's gaily insipid fascination with spectacle—false idols, just like, straight Biblical shit. Ugh. I just— I don't know. It's like we're living in the same age as—this is the Roman Empire now at the peak of its decadence, but here in this time we look at life through the portal of representation and don't really live because everything on the internet is actually more alive. And I understand what giving is! Don't you remember the whole gift economy piece!?

C: Yes, and it was successful.

H: I just—some things need to be reserved for private time, you know?—solitary contemplation, to be studied over to really be understood individually. If you give birth, do you just automatically give your baby up for adoption?

C: [*laughs*] Every time you create, you're in labor?

H: Well?

C: I want you to read a book called, *Blatherskite*. You'll enjoy it.

H: Ok. Well, think about it. I mean—

C: Yes, dear. I'm thinking and I would argue the truth in your statement is that cultivation of idea would place its analog with pregnancy, and the execution of the work is the process of labor and then—your baby. It remains yours but it's in the world now, a contributive member of society. Better?

H: Ok. But, I mean everything: pregnancy, birth, life—that's all a part of the creative process then when you as a parent, you know—as artist—die, only then is the work—the child—free to be themselves [sic].

C: You'll leave us instructions to assemble the *E'tant Donnes*, then?

H: Yeah. I'm confident in that.

C: Have another beer.

H: No. This tastes like an old man.

C: [laughs] I'll inform my brewer.

H: There you go! Right there. I mean we all have our interests and our own specialized knowledge even the seemingly undereducated—like, provincial minds—at least by the standards of the well-fed.

C: Mm-hmm. Up to a point, I wouldn't argue against the theory of specialization, but that's exactly the axiom I'm debating with you: the importance of sharing your experience.

H: Ok. You lie.

C: Excuse me?

H: I mean, you've like, knowingly told the occasional lie, and probably you've

told—you've said things that weren't completely true, that you wouldn't necessarily consider lying.

C: No. I know when I'm lying.

H: Oh my god. Ok. I'm just trying to say that—I mean rationalizing a certain behavior or action is a form of lying, right? In a way. I'm saying—ok. So what am I saying?

C: I'm a liar.

H: *[laughs]*

C: I know you have a point because I have to be leaving very soon.

H: Yes. Just this thing. Ok. By lying, you're making a conscious decision to keep something for yourself. You've just denied someone else information—the truth—whatever you want to call it, since that hinges so much on perception anyway.

C: I'm—

H: And you can't say that this is different, because it's really not. It's not, because look—you can't say that art in the broadest definition is supposed to show humanity to itself while still having to be shared to be considered valuable, you know?—because humans don't always share shit. “That's not art if no one can see it, or criticize it. That's just a hobby,” or that it's fucking outsider art, because it wasn't presented as part of this marginal world of critical analysis—not even, just judgment—like, treating back rent as it's own currency. To me, that's what's perverse, looking at something that was created in a moment of purity by a human mind and hands as inferior—you're smiling. I'm wrong?

C: Probably. Yours is an observation often neglected in these kinds of discussions, Honor, usually because the solution precludes even the possibility of art, but art for me is not therapy—in the sense that I’m not getting well. I make exhibitions. But, you—when philosophizing like this—have to first understand the distinction made between art in the kind of polyseme—the context you’re speaking of and the exclusivity of the gallery world, and its favored definition.

H: I do. That’s my point. It shouldn’t be that way.

C: [*laughs*] Well, that’s—that may be true, but it’s a recursive system, and I choose not to believe you’d be so naïve. There is no record of a society in which power was equally distributed, and so it is with aesthetic judgment of works—determining whether or not art, even in the most utilitarian definition is in those—and I know it’s frustrating—those ineffable terms, good or bad. So when ruffling your feathers—

H: Yeah. I know what you’re saying. “Try not to be so agitated.”

C: When you think through these issues, Honor, be cognizant not only of your agitation but its etiology. Remember that there are millions now living who share a similar opinion, real people as you put it, who seek out the artist as sage or alchemist or as a guide, either under an institutional umbrella or through less defined spaces and initiatives. Take comfort in that, before you rush to challenge what you feel to be these injustices—the antiseptic nature of the gallery and the rhetoric of purity incumbent on the creative act. Make work about that and not feigned cannibalism or working at McDonald’s. Your passions and curiosities don’t really reside

there, it seems.

H: I'm still interested in those things. I mean me and him [*sic*] were just talking about this. I guess I just need the proper forum to present my ideas.

C: You can't choose your audience. Don't be a fascist. [*laughs*]

H: Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

C: That's not meant to be insulting. Americans, I think, are mostly like rats. You're overly sensitive, but you remain apathetic. That is why you still have representation here.

H: Huh. What did [Gallerist] say about sleeping here?

C: [*laughs*] No. [Gallerist's] gotten rid of his phone. It will have to wait. So the fifteenth—that should be sufficient time.

H: Yes. Super sufficient. [*sound of moving chairs*]

C: Good! I'm excited about this! Don't hesitate to be in contact with [Assistant]—[*unintelligible*—becoming sallow. Drink water. Drink plenty of water. And you have everything you need?

James: Yes. Thank you so much, [Curator]. It was a pleasure meeting you.

C: [*sound of departing footsteps*] Don't neglect the defamation clause. Bye, kids.

H: Can you cut it now?

J: Yeah.

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6 One evening after listening to John McCallum's abandoned music cues for *Surf Nazis Must Die*, *Honor* and I stayed up all night talking about metonymy in the Bible and whether or not the 1971 musical *Godspell* could be restaged as the site of Derrida and Searle's debate over iterability and meaning in speech acts. When the sun came up, we went to sleep.