
The Theatre of Minimalist Music: Analysing La Monte Young's *Composition 1960 #7*

Cecilia Sun

Musicology has equipped us well to talk about the intricacies of music. From Schenkerian analysis to the latest developments in atonal theory, we have sophisticated tools to untangle complexities in pitch, rhythm and form; methodological models for breaking music down to networks of motivically-related cells; and equally compelling ways in which to piece seemingly disparate parts back together again into a satisfyingly organic whole. But what can techniques developed to mine complicated music for hidden structural connections tell us about something like this:

Figure 1. La Monte Young, *Composition 1960 #7*. Source: Wim Mertens, *American Minimalist Music: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass*, transl. J. Hautekiet (London: Kahn & Averill, 1988 [1980]) 26.



La Monte Young's foundational piece of drone Minimalism comes from the fifteen *Compositions* he wrote in 1960. This series includes works demanding such eccentric concert-hall behaviours as building a fire on stage (*Composition 1960 #2*), releasing butterflies into the performance space (#5), and sitting on stage watching the audience (#6). Yet I would argue that *Composition 1960 #7*, the only one to use musical notation, stands as the most transgressive for precisely that reason. Young could easily have made this another text piece—'Sustain a perfect fifth for a long time'—but the presence of the five-line staff, the treble clef, the B \sharp and F \sharp whole notes (in the composer's hand, no less) seduce us into thinking that this might be a Piece; that is, *Composition 1960 #7* might submit to traditional analysis.

Even the most preliminary attempts to slot Young's *Composition* into any traditional grid of musical understanding, however, immediately run into insurmountable problems. *Composition 1960 #7* has none—and yet at the same time too many—of the characteristics that have come to define the Great Musical Art Object. It undoubtedly exhibits gestalt unity, but isn't a piece that comprises only two notes a little *too* unified? *Composition 1960 #7*'s duration can rival that of any Wagnerian opera or Mahler symphony, but isn't 'for a long time' just a little *too* long? And we usually laud musical autonomy, hailing resistance to commodification as a noble quality of Great Art. But what are we to think about a 'piece' that can be scribbled down on the back of a napkin, a piece that cannot be sold because no one would need to buy a score?

Composition 1960 #7 appears designed first to evoke, and then to thwart, textual analysis. Young's piece contains no motives, let alone motivic development. The blatant simplicity of a solitary perfect fifth makes any attempts at mining *Composition 1960 #7*'s depths for deeply hidden structural truth futile to the point of absurdity. What kinds of analytical insights can we gain from a piece that so aggressively refuses to be 'read'?

In this article, I propose one analytical way into *Composition 1960 #7*. Drawing from the insights of contemporary critics who recognised a significant aesthetic shift in the '60s avant-garde, I argue that Young's piece is best read as act rather than text. Instead of privileging the musical score as the best representation of the musical work, I sketch out a methodological framework within which one can study *Composition 1960 #7* as performance.¹

Learning From Minimalist Art

When attempting to understand this deliberately recalcitrant repertoire, musicologists have often turned to contemporaneous endeavours in the visual arts. After all, minimalist composers and artists worked and socialised together in New York City's avant-garde scene of the 1960s and '70s. Even 'minimal'—the adjective that stuck to this new strand of simple, repetitive, process-driven music—came from the visual arts. In 'The Minimalist Aesthetic in the Plastic Arts and in Music,' music theorist Jonathan Bernard works through the precise formal relationships between minimalism in the two different artistic media in order to develop an analytical method for minimalist music.² Bernard outlines two goals: first, he defends co-opting the label 'minimal' from the visual arts to describe the simple, repetitive, process-driven music of Young, Riley, Reich and Glass; second, he turns to the writings of art critics to discover what music theorists can learn from their counterparts in the visual arts.³ Systematically setting out his argument, Bernard points to three shared minimalist techniques: 1) elimination of chance; 2) emphasis on the surface; and 3) reduction of parts. Bernard largely favours simple mappings of artistic techniques onto the musical. For example, he adduces the shiny and 'non-painterly' appearance of minimalist sculpture to account for the 'limited sound resources' of minimalist

¹ I am not suggesting that the performative is important only in Experimental music. For examples of scholarship that privileges performance in other repertoire, see Carolyn Abbate, 'Music: Drastic or Gnostic?', *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 505–36; Philip Brett, 'Piano Four-hands: Schubert and the Performance of Gay Male Desire,' *19th-Century Music* 21.2 (1997): 148–76; Elisabeth Le Guin, *Boccherini's Body: An Essay in Carnal Musicology* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: U of California Press, 2005).

² Jonathan W. Bernard, 'The Minimalist Aesthetic in the Plastic Arts and in Music,' *Perspectives of New Music* 31.1 (1993): 86–132.

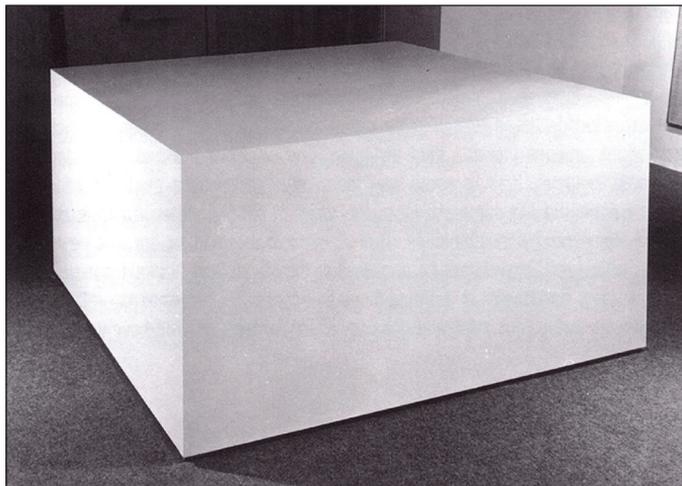
³ Bernard, 'The Minimalist Aesthetic' 87.

music,⁴ and draws a parallel between the methodical and exhaustive process of Sol LeWitt's *All Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes* (1974) and the systematic way Steve Reich composes out 'variations' on a series of eleven chords in *Music for Eighteen Musicians* (1976).⁵

Bernard uses minimalist art to impose music theory's predilection for depth-model analytical techniques onto minimalist music, whose blatant simplicity works against such analytical methods. Instead of a reductive structure, Bernard places minimalist sculptures in the *Ursatz* of minimalist music.⁶ If we dug deeply enough into Reich's *Music for Eighteen Musicians*, Bernard would have us believe that we would find Le Witt's *All Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes*; behind *Einstein on the Beach* is nothing more than an empty Brillo box. Moreover, Bernard uses the supposed emptiness of minimalist art to confirm the emptiness of minimalist music. As Robert Fink has argued, Bernard's approach is trapped in a futile anti-hermeneutic circle in which 'the ascetic formalism of minimalist music simply bounces back off the formalist asceticism of 1960s visual art.'⁷

But as Fink also pointed out, Bernard has been the only American theorist to go beyond 'the music itself' in search of any kind of musical hermeneutics that would work for minimalist music.⁸ Indeed, a Bernard-style comparison to minimalist art can take us further than a purely text-based approach to *Composition 1960 #7*. While La Monte Young was writing perfect-fifth drones, minimalist sculptor (and friend) Robert Morris was gaining notoriety for displaying large boxes and other simple, easily recognizable objects as art. Figure 2 reproduces a typical example: *Untitled* (1966), a 4 × 8 × 8-foot plywood box.

Figure 2. Robert Morris, *Untitled* (1966). Source: Kenneth Baker, *Minimalism: Art of Circumstances* (New York, London & Paris: Abbeville Press, 1988) 70.



⁴ Bernard, 'The Minimalist Aesthetic' 99.

⁵ Bernard, 'The Minimalist Aesthetic' 115.

⁶ For a critique of music theory's analytical depth model, see Robert Fink, 'Going Flat: Post-hierarchical Music Theory and the Musical Surface,' *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: OUP, 1999) 102–37.

⁷ Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2005) 18.

⁸ Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves* 18.

Morris created what he called 'gestalts' or 'unitary forms,' that is, art objects that the eye cannot divide into smaller components:

Characteristic of a gestalt is that once it is established all the information about it, *qua* gestalt, is exhausted. (One does not, for example, seek the gestalt of a gestalt.) Furthermore, once it is established, it does not disintegrate.⁹

In writing B and F \sharp , Young chose a stable interval that provides enough interest without harbouring any desire to resolve to another sonority. (Imagine, for contrast, the effect of octave Bs, or a tritone B and F \flat —held for a long time.)

La Monte Young himself has spoken explicitly of sounds as physical objects. In 'Lecture 1960' Young outlined a new mode of listening: 'I like to get inside of a sound ... I [begin] to feel the parts and motions of the sound more ... I mean getting inside of them to some extent so that we can experience another world.'¹⁰ As I will argue later in this article, Young's explicitly sacred-erotic imagery of a male pilgrim enveloping himself in feminised, anthropomorphic sound would certainly have pleased cultural critic Susan Sontag. (Young's fellow Fluxus member Nam June Paik takes a few more steps down the same path in *Danger Music #5*, during which the performer is instructed to climb up the vagina of a living whale. The piece has never been performed.¹¹)

The kind of listening Young described occurs within the context of a radically re-conceptualised set of relationships between receptive listeners and anthropomorphised sound. In the old mode of listening, Young argued, we force sounds to conform to our whims. Instead, we should allow 'sounds to be sounds ... go to the sounds as they exist and try to experience them for what they are, that is, a different kind of existence—then we may be able to learn something new.'¹² Leaving oneself open to all possible sonic experiences can certainly be liberating and letting sounds be sounds might lead to more interesting places than forcing sounds to conform to music theory's whims. But Young's anti-hermeneutic aesthetic offers little guidance to those wanting to understand this music's meanings. After all, allowing 'sounds to be sounds' is not that different from studying 'the music itself.' If we simply let sounds be sounds, we are right back where we started: confronted with music that works to defy signification.

The Musical Object versus An Art in Time

Although Bernard wrote his article to demonstrate the shared aesthetics of minimalist art and minimalist music, he acknowledges the basic difference between the two media. Bernard affirms music as an inherently temporal art and insists on its fundamental incompatibility with visual aesthetics.¹³ In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that 'the deficiencies of minimal music—if deficiencies they turn out to be—have arisen from pursuing too far the analogy between

⁹ Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture,' *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1968) 228.

¹⁰ La Monte Young, 'Lecture 1960,' *Selected Writings* (Munich: Heiner Friedrich, 1969).

¹¹ Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 1999 [1974]) 86.

¹² Young, 'Lecture 1960.'

¹³ Bernard, 'Minimalist Aesthetic' 122.

visual and aural art.¹⁴ What Bernard neglects to mention is that this analogy was pursued and constructed by him. Young, Glass and Reich undeniably enjoyed fruitful relationships with minimalist painters and sculptors, but this does not mean that they thought they *were* painters and sculptors. Reich had proclaimed his belief that 'Music Dance Theatre Video and Film are arts in time.'¹⁵ He knew the difference, whereas Bernard, a professional music theorist, continues to adhere to one of his discipline's basic paradigms: that musical works are 'things' whose ontological status is much closer to that of sculpture and painting.

Bernard's formalist conception of minimalist music as sonic object leads him to some bizarre observations. For example, in his discussion of Alvin Lucier's environmental tape piece *I Am Sitting in a Room*, Bernard worries about the open nature of the work—what (if any) logic governs the piece's termination? Which sound-object best represents the piece: is it the fifteen-minute version released with the experimental journal *Source*? Or the version on *Lovely Music* that lasts three times longer? If one could find a room that would produce a three-day-long recording, would that be the best of all? If *I Am Sitting in a Room* (or any number of minimalist pieces of indeterminate and theoretically infinite duration) goes on for too long, would the work's content run the danger of being stretched too thin and eventually vanishing altogether?¹⁶ Worrying about 'correct' versions and the limitation of 'content,' Bernard misses one of the points of Experimental Music. Whatever meaning *I Am Sitting in a Room* possesses inheres in the fifteen-minute recording *and* the forty-five-minute recording *and* in any other performances. Experimental Music's open-endedness does not disperse its content, but rather relocates it amongst a multiplicity of realisations.

Thinking of a musical work as a fixed object is, of course, not unique to Bernard. Patricia Carpenter, in her pioneering essay on 'The Musical Object,' details how her colleagues in music theory have come to view music as a thing. Two broad questions motivate Carpenter's article. How can something she perceives to be as incorporeal as music be made into an object with apparent form? And how did viewing music as object come to be an unquestioned norm in music and music scholarship? Carpenter wrote 'The Musical Object' in 1967 (in New York City, no less, whose musical avant-garde was busily dismantling the very concept), and recognises that her phenomenological inquiry came at a time when experimental composers called into question many of the entrenched notions she was examining.¹⁷

Carpenter sets out three phenomenological conditions under which music can achieve 'objectness.'¹⁸ First, a certain distance must exist between the listener and the musical piece: while the listener is metaphorically 'here,' the piece must be over 'there.' One must be able to 'walk around' the piece.¹⁹ As a result, the listener will perceive the piece as a thing that exists outside of time and independently of any single performance of the work. Second, the object must be a complete entity; that is, listeners must perceive the piece as either a whole, or as part of a whole. Carpenter quotes philosopher Edmund Husserl's view that the first note of

¹⁴ Bernard, 'Minimalist Aesthetic' 125.

¹⁵ Steve Reich, 'Music and Performance (1969–74; 1993),' *Writings on Music: 1965–2000*, ed. Paul Hillier (Oxford: OUP, 2002) 32. Originally published in *Dance Ink* (October 1993).

¹⁶ Bernard, 'Minimalist Aesthetic' 121.

¹⁷ Patricia Carpenter, 'The Musical Object,' *Current Musicology* 5 (1967): 56.

¹⁸ Carpenter, 'Musical Object' 62.

¹⁹ Carpenter, 'Musical Object' 62–64.

a piece of music does not stop until the last has ceased to sound. Even though the piece of music we hear is never actually 'all' there, our music theory classes have taught us to hear it as a whole. Carpenter uses the same word to describe this condition: 'gestalt.'²⁰ Third, the musical object must fit into a categorisation system; it must be a specific, identifiable kind of thing. Listening to a musical object must bring to mind one or more of the musical forms that music scholars have already codified.²¹

Such musical objectification elevates the musical work over the activity of music making. Carpenter acknowledges the significance of this ontological shift:

In our contemporary way of thinking, a piece of music is a specified kind of object, a made thing, a stylistically made thing, and ultimately, an object made for its own sake, a form of being-in-itself. On this view, 'music,' then, becomes the total collection of all its pieces, the imaginary museum of musical works.²²

And yet, even as Carpenter was writing 'The Musical Object,' avant-garde musical techniques and aesthetics were contesting the very position her article investigated. Recognising the challenge of the experimental avant-garde, Carpenter used John Cage's *Variations for Orchestra and Dance* as her example of music that resists being objectified. Juxtaposing *Variations* with Edgar Varèse's *Ionization*, Carpenter acknowledges the latter's revolutionary approach to musical material in its use of an almost exclusively un-pitched percussion ensemble. She argued, however, that *Ionization*, unlike Cage's *Variations*, still exhibits a familiar concept of form. Just as in a Mozart symphony, the listener can grasp onto first and second thematic ideas, climax and release, coda, and so on in Varèse's piece. Despite its exploration of new sounds and timbres, *Ionization* still has a beginning, a middle and an end. Cage's work, on the other hand, despite bearing the old-fashioned title 'Variations,' 'expands the stuff of music.' Carpenter quotes from Cage's notes for a performance of *Variations* in which the composers outlined a self-conscious effort to move music away from object-hood: 'In recent years my musical ideas have continued to move away from object (a composition having a well-defined relationship of parts) into process (non-structured activities, indeterminate in character).'²³

Bernard may have reflexively treated minimalist pieces as objects, but he was studying a repertoire that consciously worked to redefine music as process. After all, Steve Reich called his landmark minimalist manifesto 'Music as a Gradual Process' (1968).²⁴ Michael Nyman made the important distinction between object and process in his classic 1974 text *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*. Modernist composers wrote pieces that prescribed 'a defined *time-object* whose materials, structuring and relationships are calculated and arranged in advance,'²⁵ whereas 'experimental' musicians concerned themselves with setting up situations in which unique, fleeting moments might occur as the result of actions generated by some kind of process.²⁶

²⁰ Carpenter, 'Musical Object' 59.

²¹ Carpenter, 'Musical Object' 64.

²² Carpenter, 'Musical Object' 68.

²³ Carpenter, 'Musical Object' 57.

²⁴ Reich, 'Music and Performance' 34–36.

²⁵ Nyman, *Experimental Music* 4. Emphasis original.

²⁶ Nyman, *Experimental Music* 4, 9.

The Theatre of Minimalist Art

Sculptor Robert Morris's 1966 essay 'Notes on Sculpture' articulates his position on art and objects.²⁷ A quick précis demonstrates how precisely Morris's aesthetic satisfies all three of Carpenter's exactly contemporaneous requirements for the creation of 'objectness' in music: distance from the viewer, integrity as a whole, and recognisable formal identity.²⁸ In justifying his large sculptures, Morris argues that size is crucial to avoiding intimacy.²⁹

But, paradoxically, viewing minimalist art as *just* about the object—valuing the plywood box as a plywood box—contradicts Morris's subtler philosophical argument in 'Notes on Sculpture.' In addition to redefining what constitutes a sculpture, Morris also argued for a different kind of engagement with visual art. By constructing gestalts, Morris strove to shift all the important relationships of a work of art away from those inside the artwork itself and towards those that arise between the sculpture and its beholder. Morris' large geometric works deliberately outline no 'structure,' subsume no 'details' in surface, colour, material, or shape that could float free of the forceful unity of the gestalt; Morris avoids anything that might draw one's attention to any one component that could interact with other such parts.³⁰ The most important relationship minimalist sculptures generate is between the object as a unitary gestalt and the viewers who must walk around the immensity of its size to experience it.³¹ Ironically, the strong, simple and seemingly unalterable unitary shapes do not remain static. Rather, 'it is the viewer who changes the shape constantly by his change in position relative to the work.'³² Although the unitary forms themselves aim for utmost simplicity, the externalised relationships they initiate can be rich and complex. Morris summarised his philosophical position in what has become a classic formulation of reductionist aesthetics: 'Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience. Unitary forms do not reduce relationships. They order them.'³³

Modernist art critic Michael Fried seized upon the interactive aspect of minimalist—or, as he preferred, 'literalist'—art to ground his famous attack on the style.³⁴ According to Fried, minimalist artists, especially Morris and Donald Judd, have betrayed the objective essence of the visual arts by producing sculptures that resembled acts of theatre much more than works of art. Juxtaposing 'art'—modernist painting and sculpture—and 'objecthood'—his own, somewhat confusing label for what fellow art critic Clement Greenberg called 'the condition of non-art,' Fried argued that literalist sculpture exemplifies the aesthetically problematic latter condition.³⁵ The large size and unitary nature of literalist sculptures force the viewer into a relationship with the sculpture in which the art becomes the object, and the beholder the subject. This makes the viewer's interaction with the art an experience *in time*. Literalist art

²⁷ Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture.'

²⁸ Carpenter, 'Musical Object' 62.

²⁹ Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture' 233.

³⁰ Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture' 231–32.

³¹ Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture' 234.

³² Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture' 234.

³³ Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture' 228.

³⁴ Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood,' *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1968).

³⁵ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' 124–25.

now has duration. Forcing the viewer to walk around the large pieces transforms everything one does and sees into part of the work's objecthood:

Everything counts—not as part of the object, but as part of the situation in which its objecthood is established and on which that objecthood at least partly depends.³⁶

Fried drew attention to sculptor Donald Judd's equation of the despised modernist 'part-by-part' and 'relational' art with anthropomorphism. Judd had dismissed 'subjective' sculptures with disdain: '[a] beam thrusts; a piece of iron follows with a gesture; together they form a naturalistic and anthropomorphic image.'³⁷ Arguing directly against Judd, Fried countered with the claim that the theatrical nature of minimalist sculpture arises in large part from its *own* inherent anthropomorphism. The size that characterises literalist sculpture creates a distance between it and its audience, and Fried postulated that the resultant experience differs little from that of being distanced—or crowded—by the presence of another person.³⁸ Fried bolstered this claim with three pieces of deductive reasoning: first, the size range of literalist sculpture—circumscribed by Tony Smith as smaller than a monument, but bigger than an object—demands the piece be about the size of a surrogate person; second, a human being comes the closest to embodying the unitary and wholistic ideals minimalist artists espouse; and finally, the hollowness that many critics identified in minimalist sculpture implies that the art piece conceals a secret, inner life—that art can have an inside, just like people.³⁹

These arguments against art-as-theatre betray Fried's fear that the 'real' modernist art of the '60s stood in very real danger of being destroyed by theatricality and literalism:

[T]heatre and theatricality are at war today, not simply with modernist painting (or modernist painting and sculpture), but with art as such—and to the extent that the different arts can be described as modernist, with modernist sensibility as such.⁴⁰

Arguing vehemently against theatricality, Fried simultaneously exhorted disciplinary purity. Still embracing mid-century notions of quality in art, Fried aligned modernist aesthetics on the one hand with what he called the 'condition of theater' on the other.⁴¹ Fried believed that art that challenged traditional boundaries between media was simply bad: 'art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre.'⁴² In effect, Fried wanted us to recognise that the real distinction between the music of Elliott Carter and that of John Cage is not that Cage's music participated in some kind of 'final implosive, hugely desirably synthesis' between all forms of art, but that Carter wrote music, whereas Cage produced theatre.⁴³ (Fried pairs Morris Louis and Robert Rauschenberg in the visual arts.) Nothing of aesthetic value can exist between the individual arts—only acting out.⁴⁴

³⁶ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' 127.

³⁷ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' 119.

³⁸ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' 128.

³⁹ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' 128–29.

⁴⁰ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' 139.

⁴¹ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' 141.

⁴² Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' 141.

⁴³ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' 141.

⁴⁴ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' 142.

'Theater' became Fried's catch-all term to designate artistic styles that he deemed too temporal, and thus contrary to the essence of visual art. In place of theatrical art, Fried upheld modernist pieces that viewers can comprehend in an instant. Fried recognised that this 'instant' is not literally an instant, but decided that it was an appropriate description nevertheless because 'at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest.' Directly opposed to the temporal theatricality of literalist sculpture, modernist art embodied a 'continuous presentness.'⁴⁵ Fried echoes Carpenter's description of a musical piece, where listeners—despite music's inherent temporality—hold the first note in their ears until the final notes have stopped sounding. Fried would undoubtedly have been a big fan of the musical object, heralding it as the only way music could be understood *as music*, secure from its inherent temporal tendency towards theatricality. Despite his pronouncement that each art form should be concerned 'with the conventions that constitute their respective essences,' Fried ended up arguing the pressing need for even the temporal art forms to avoid degenerating into theatre: theatre itself must strive to defeat theatricality, and, above all, poetry and music must aspire to the condition of painting and sculpture.⁴⁶

Towards the end of 'Art and Objecthood,' Fried singled out cultural critic Susan Sontag as the purest apologist for the theatrical sensibility he despised. Fried directed his attack towards Sontag's essay collection *Against Interpretation*, quoting an extended passage in which Sontag praised avant-garde art for challenging conventionally drawn boundaries.⁴⁷ It comes as no surprise that Fried had little sympathy for Sontag's views. After all, Fried was a critic of the visual whose modernist ideology favoured Abstract Expressionism, while Sontag was one of the first to write about multimedia cross-disciplinary Happenings.⁴⁸ At around the same time that Fried was lobbying to close the disciplinary border between art and theatre, Sontag celebrated the destruction of all boundaries: between art forms, between art and not-art, and even between the arts and the sciences. In place of these divisions, Sontag argued, the '60s brought everything together in 'one culture.'⁴⁹

Fried had attacked minimalist sculpture because he found it too theatrical. Although he focused his objections on the sculpted pieces' overt temporality, Fried also disliked the ways in which Minimalism drew the viewers' attention away from relationships encoded in the art work, to relationships between the art work and its audience. Likewise, Sontag saw tendencies in '60s avant-garde art—what she christened a 'New Sensibility'—deflecting critical attention away from the work itself. Unlike Fried, Sontag lauded this new development as a positive artistic trend. In outlining her position against interpretation, Sontag was essentially arguing against critics' fetishisation of the artistic "text," and their constant mission to discover internal relationships that might reveal some deep-hidden cultural 'truth.'⁵⁰ Sontag's description of the ideal qualities of the New Sensibility reads like something Robert Morris himself could have

⁴⁵ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' 145–46.

⁴⁶ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' 146.

⁴⁷ Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' 141–42. Fried's comments on Sontag are in footnote 17.

⁴⁸ Susan Sontag, 'Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition,' *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1966) 265–77.

⁴⁹ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1966) 294–304.

⁵⁰ Sontag, *Against Interpretation* 13–23.

penned: 'works of art whose surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can be ... just what it is.'⁵¹

How was one to talk about these radically reductive artworks, works whose primary aim was to confound interpreters? Sontag herself advocated a new kind of criticism based on external relationships between a work of art and its audience. Towards the end of her essay, Sontag outlined one more interpretive sin—'interpretation takes the sensory experiences of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there.' Recovering our senses is one of the most urgent tasks of criticism: '[w]e must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more ... [t]he function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*.'⁵² Sontag closes with this call to arms: '[i]n place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.'⁵³

The erotic is, of course, about sensations, but it is also about relationships, that is, who does what to whom, or with whom, or without whom. Both Sontag's erotics and Fried's theatricality point away from art as object towards art as an activity that orders the experience of its audience. How ironic, in this light, that Jonathan Bernard assumes minimalist musical works are art-objects—a status Fried programmatically denied to minimalist sculpture—when he analogises them to the physical 'objects' of minimalist art. Bernard does not reference Sontag, but he certainly read Fried because he used 'Art and Objecthood' to condemn what he perceived to be minimalist music's arbitrary nature and 'deficiency of content.'⁵⁴ Bernard even recognised that the act of viewing becomes a part of the meaning of minimalist art, but then immediately turned this around to further damn Minimalism. 'This dependence upon the beholder,' he wrote, 'turned out to be a coin with an opposite side: being included also meant being controlled, coerced.'⁵⁵ Had he taken seriously Fried's diagnosis of the interactive aspects of minimalist art as theatre, Bernard might have wondered whether the art that seemed to him the perfect embodiment of a coercive musical objectivity was really more about a kind of inclusive performance. Could minimalist music, like minimalist art, be more about external rather than internal—that is, social rather than formal—relationships? Minimalism in the visual arts ultimately discloses itself as theatre and not the creation of 'instantaneous' art objects. Thus they come closer to our common-sense idea of music as performance in time than to the reified musical objects constructed by formalist music theory. At the same time that music theory was enshrining instructions for musical performance as objects, avant-garde sculpture was turning objects into theatrical performance. Of what use is reading minimal music as an extreme and analytically problematic object when minimalist sculpture itself has already been transformed into theatrical performance?

Performing in the Theatre of Minimalist Music

If Robert Morris is indeed correct, and simplicity of form does not equate simplicity of experience, what implications do his insights have for the study of minimalist music? Viewing

⁵¹ Sontag, *Against Interpretation* 21. Ellipses original.

⁵² Sontag, *Against Interpretation* 23. Emphasis original.

⁵³ Sontag, *Against Interpretation* 23.

⁵⁴ Bernard, 'Minimalist Aesthetic' 115, 121.

⁵⁵ Bernard, 'Minimalist Aesthetic' 118.

Composition 1960 #7 as an object—either musical or artistic—does not prove particularly illuminating. In fact, most histories of minimalist music take interest in this piece not so much because what it is, what it might make one do or feel, or what it might mean, but in what it led to. *Composition 1960 #7* usually makes an appearance in discussions of twentieth-century music only as a bridge between Young's earlier Fluxus career and his later interest in long-held tones.⁵⁶

What if we treat *Composition 1960 #7* not as a piece, but as a Happening; not as a musical object, but as a theatrical performance. La Monte Young's perfect fifth becomes an actor's challenge to fixed notions of musical role-playing. While most people acknowledge that the activities performed, training needed, and pleasure derived from, in, or with music differ to a greater or lesser degree from person to person, we have only three parts for people involved in live performances to play. Henry Flynt, one of Young's Fluxus cohorts, identifies the division of labour as:

- a) The author of the score, the composer.
- b) Those who realise the score, the performers.
- c) Those who witness the performance—usually from massed seating.⁵⁷

As Flynt pointed out, experimental compositions challenge such distinctions. These roles, which have tended over time to become ever more differentiated, collapse in the course of *Composition 1960 #7*.

Obviously those playing the B and the F \sharp are the performers, but can doing something that displays such little virtuosity and uses next to none of the skills one usually associates with 'musician' count as performance? And what about La Monte Young? As evidenced by the holograph score reproduced at the beginning of this article, Young wrote the piece, but does writing out something so simple count as 'composition'? Is the fifth tempered or in just intonation? Does it matter that Young notated the perfect fifth on the B below middle C? Would it be the same to play a perfect fifth on another B? Or perhaps G and D? If the ontological status of this piece is in such flux, can we still call Young 'composer'? The role of listeners seems most clearly delimited—they listen. But how does this listening experience compare with, say, the one offered by Beethoven's Ninth Symphony? Which piece is 'harder' to listen to? If *Composition 1960 #7* is really 'minimal,' and thus in some sense about external relationships, does this more active, one might even argue creative, listening role make the listener also a performer? Or perhaps a composer? If the 'piece' is so intertwined with its various audiences, can we even speak of one entity that constitutes La Monte Young's *Composition 1960 #7*? Minimalist art's theatricality was played out in viewers' engagement with the sculptures. In minimalist music, both listeners and performers can participate in shaping the meaning of the performance.

⁵⁶ For example, see Kyle Gann, *American Music in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997) 189; Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass*, transl. J. Hautekiet (London: Kahn & Averill, 1983 [1980]) 26; Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1993) 52; Richard Toop, 'Expanding Horizons: The International Avant-garde, 1962–75,' *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Anthony Pople (Cambridge: CUP, 2004) 466.

⁵⁷ Henry Flynt, 'La Monte Young in New York, 1960–62,' *Sound and Light: La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela*, ed. William Duckworth and Richard Fleming (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1996) 83.

Even if we wanted to, what structure is there to reify in Young's long drone? Carpenter argues that one of the characteristics of a musical object is the ability of its listeners to hold an idealised version in their mind, something that stands completely independent of any one rendition.⁵⁸ What constitutes the 'object' of study here? What, precisely, is *Composition 1960 #7*?

Young has given us precious few clues as to what a 'genuine instance' of his work might sound like *in performance*. A group playing bowed viols, led by Fluxus founder George Maciunas and including Yoko Ono, Jackson MacLow and Toshi Ichiyangi, performed the world premiere in Maciunas's New York gallery in July 1961, but the score specifies no instrumentation or dynamics. Young has subsequently expended much creative energy exploring alternate tuning and temperaments, but he did not specify what kind of perfect fifth he wanted in the score of *Composition 1960 #7*. A large brass band playing a *fortissimo* fifth in equal-temperament would present a different enough experience from a choir softly humming the same notes in a perfect tuning to allow one to deny that the two performances are of 'the same' piece. In a period of five months, English experimental composer Cornelius Cardew directed three separate performances with ensembles as diverse as bowed banjo, five guitars, cello, violin and piano (Leeds City Art Gallery, February 1966); cello, accordion and harmonium (American Artists Centre, Paris, 1 April 1966); and bowed amplified sitar, amplified cello, contrabass, violin, harmonium, cello and grand organ (Royal Albert Hall, 18 June 1966).⁵⁹

And what about the injunction that the notes are 'to be held for a long time'? The world premiere took three uninterrupted hours; the 1962 performance Young directed, where *Composition 1960 #7* filled the other half of the concert in which he presented the New York premiere his *String Trio*, lasted an hour (roughly the same length as the *Trio*); on 11 May 1963, Young, Marian Zazeela, Tony Conrad and other string players presented a five-hour continuous performance at the Hardware Poets Playhouse.⁶⁰

Just like Morris's large cubes and boxes, the striking reductiveness of Young's bare fifth forces all meaningful relationships from those within 'the music itself' out to external ones between the piece and its participants. Morris's sculptures were less about the plywood box and all about how the changing space between the box and its viewers. Likewise, *Composition 1960 #7* is not so much about a lone perfect fifth, but about how listeners relate to the drone. Unquestionably, the expectations one brings to this La Monte Young piece, the ways in which they are thwarted, and the reasons behind our discomfort (or pleasure) provide far more interesting subjects for exploration than anything the solitary perfect fifth might encode. Seen as object, *Composition 1960 #7* holds limited interest—at best a stepping stone, at worst an amusing curiosity—but taken as a performance ritual, it becomes rich and complex.

What are we to make of this most familiar of intervals now that it is on display—for a long time—alone? A perfect fifth, defamiliarised, can be extraordinarily unsettling: is it a tonic?

⁵⁸ Carpenter, 'Musical Object' 64.

⁵⁹ February 1966, Leeds City Art Gallery, Leeds, England; 1 April 1966, American Artists Centre, Boulevard Raspail, Paris, France; 18 June 1977, Royal Albert Hall, London, England. <http://diapasongallery.org/archive/01_06_20.html>, accessed 12 February 2007.

⁶⁰ 'Partial List of Performances of *Composition 1960 #7*.' <http://diapasongallery.org/archive/01_06_20.html>, accessed 12 February 2007.

Or a dominant waiting to resolve? Is this fifth all there is? Is this really the entire piece? The title offers no help. Listeners often rely on titles to structure expectations and experience, but calling a piece by a generic name too broad to be useful ('Composition'), the date it was written ('1960'), and its place within a series ('#7') is about as illuminating as the minimalist sculptor's favourite designation—*Untitled*.

I have performed a three-minute version of *Composition 1960 #7* (on a synthesiser with the sound turned up) as part of a lecture-demonstration; the audience's discomfort was palpable by the time the piece ended. Evidently for some, three minutes can sound like a 'long time.' Colleagues who heard a talk I delivered on this subject, with the B and F \sharp held quietly on an electric keyboard in the background, report varying experiences from a satisfying sense of peace to an overwhelming urge to try anything to stop that noise; one listener played mental intonational games, trying to add various thirds and sevenths to the perfect fifth (thus anticipating the actual development of Young's music.) True to Morris's formulation, the relationships between *Composition 1960 #7* and my audience provided much more interesting than any that one can find within the piece.

Fried was spot on when he read minimalist sculpture as theatre. Robert Morris has gone down in art history as a leading minimalist sculptor, a canonical exponent of 'art as object,' and a creator of forbidding geometric gestalts. But when Morris met La Monte Young, they both moved in the same theatrical circles. Morris was married to dancer and choreographer Simone Forti and he initially produced his large cubes and boxes as props for the Judson Dance Theater, an avant-garde dance collective they both belonged to in New York. Well before Morris started exhibiting his creations as stark sculptures, he performed his art. In *Box with the Sound of its Own Making*, his first sculpture from 1961, he embedded a tape recorder that played the sounds of the hammering and sawing that created the 12 × 12 × 12-inch box. Another work from the same year blurs the line between sculpture and theatre even more. A 6½ × 6½ × 2-foot grey plywood box stands alone on stage as 'performer' for three and a half minutes, before opening up to reveal the artist himself; Morris posed motionless for another three and a half minutes before the curtain fell.⁶¹ Morris's art moved away from objects towards the increasingly ephemeral, culminating in *Steam Cloud* (1969), in which the artist simply released a cloud of steam. His austere pronouncements notwithstanding, Morris's work was always and everywhere theatrical.

Although the idea that music is inherently a performative art form resistant to reification may seem intuitive to outsiders, Carpenter's formulation of music as an object has, if anything, become even more firmly entrenched in the three and a half decades since she published 'The Musical Object.' At the end of the twentieth century, music's reification has reached such a stage that reinstating music as an activity has now become subversive and revolutionary scholarly intervention. For example, Christopher Small's *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, in which he argues that we should be talking about musicking as an activity rather than music as a thing, carries a back-cover testimonial announcing that Small 'strikes at the heart of traditional studies of Western music.'⁶²

⁶¹ Kenneth Baker, *Minimalism: Art of Circumstances* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988) 68.

⁶² Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan UP, 1998).

As recently as the early 1990s, Jonathan Bernard could end his article asking whether Minimalism would endure as worthwhile art.⁶³ The indisputably positive response to Bernard's question has come with a concomitant move to elevate the repertoire. As Minimalism has become increasingly gentrified, scholars have turned away from the music as dynamic and contingent performance events to focus on reified, timeless scores. In his introduction to *Four Musical Minimalists*, Keith Potter openly stated that one of the main goals of his book is to give minimalist compositions the formalist scrutiny they have never had, but certainly 'deserve.'⁶⁴ As a result, Potter's book includes a wealth of musical examples. Even when faced with a tape piece like Young's *Day of The Antler* (1965), Potter preferred to analyse the experience with reference to a notated 'score.' (Young only produced the written document because the traditional Guggenheim Foundation demanded a score as part of the application process for its fellowships.⁶⁵)

Earlier I claimed that the experimental nature of *Composition 1960 #7*, its inherent performativity, calls into question La Monte Young's desire to be seen as a traditional composer of musical objects. In recent years, Young has worked actively in warding off his own erstwhile challenge, clinging more and more fiercely to the notion that his works *are* composed objects. Even with an irredeemably open piece like *Composition 1960 #7*, Young claims that he now prefers 'highly refined' performances, prepared under his direct supervision, using musicians he has collaborated with over the many intervening years.⁶⁶

Tony Conrad, Young's one-time fellow actor in the Theater of Eternal Music, continues to feud with Young over the rights to release hundreds of hours of taped performances they generated together before Conrad left the group in 1965. The struggle between musical object and process, between music and musicking, lies at the heart of their fight. Conrad believes that the musicking they produced—the result of group improvisation—cannot be 'owned,' whereas Young wants to assert his rights as composer of music to control the dissemination of the group's performances. In 1990, Conrad picketed a concert by La Monte Young after Young insisted all members of the Theater of Eternal Music sign papers recognising his role as the sole composer. Conrad listed seven complaints on his picket sign, including his belief that the Theater of Eternal Music was 'collaboratively founded—and was so named to deny the Eurocentric historical / progressive teleology then represented by the designation, composer.' By claiming sole ownership of what Conrad views as joint improvisations, Young was responsible for the 'artistic demolition of this body of work.'⁶⁷

By hanging onto the fixed musical object, musicologists must also shoulder some responsibility for the demolition of this repertoire's roots as a performative art. Just as Robert Morris's sculptures were once literally props for theatre, experimental scores are fundamentally only props for performance. Instead of rushing to enshrine experimental pieces into its own 'imaginary museum,' we should return them to the street of theatre.

⁶³ Bernard, 'Minimalist Aesthetic' 125.

⁶⁴ Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000) xi.

⁶⁵ Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists* 74–75.

⁶⁶ Diapason, Gallery for Sound and Intermedia. 20 June 2001: *Composition 1960 #7* by La Monte Young. <http://diapasongallery.org/archive/01_06_20.html>, accessed 12 February 2007.

⁶⁷ Brian Duguid, interview with Tony Conrad, June 1996. <<http://media.hyperreal.org/zines/est/intervs/conrad.html>>, accessed 12 February 2007.