The possibility of anticommunication: an email interview with Herbert Brün

— Lyn Gallacher

Herbert Brün is a Berlin-born composer, who, after spending some time in Israel, found himself at the University of Illinois, where he currently teaches a so-called venerable seminar on experimental composition. Along with Kenneth Gaburo, Brün is considered one of the founders of the school of compositional linguistics. In *Collaboration One* the two composers explore some remarkable points of common interest.[1] The publication of this joint effort is significant because it outlines essential aspects of Brün's extraordinary approach to composition. In the introduction he asks that his computer graphics, entitled *Mutatis Mutandis*, be viewed and interpreted not as a score, nor as a starting point for improvisation. Rather, viewers are called upon to reconstruct their own version of each graphic image and to articulate what process they would have preferred to use to generate these images: their analysis is the composition.

The questions in this interview were sent in bulk and answered, after not too much procrastination, but after careful thought and some frustration, in the order that they were asked.

The quotations in this interview are drawn from Brün's book *My Words and Where I Want Them*.[2]

Computer graphics on p.27 and p.30 are taken from *Mutatis Mutandis*, Herbert Brün and Kenneth Gaburo, *Collaboration One*.
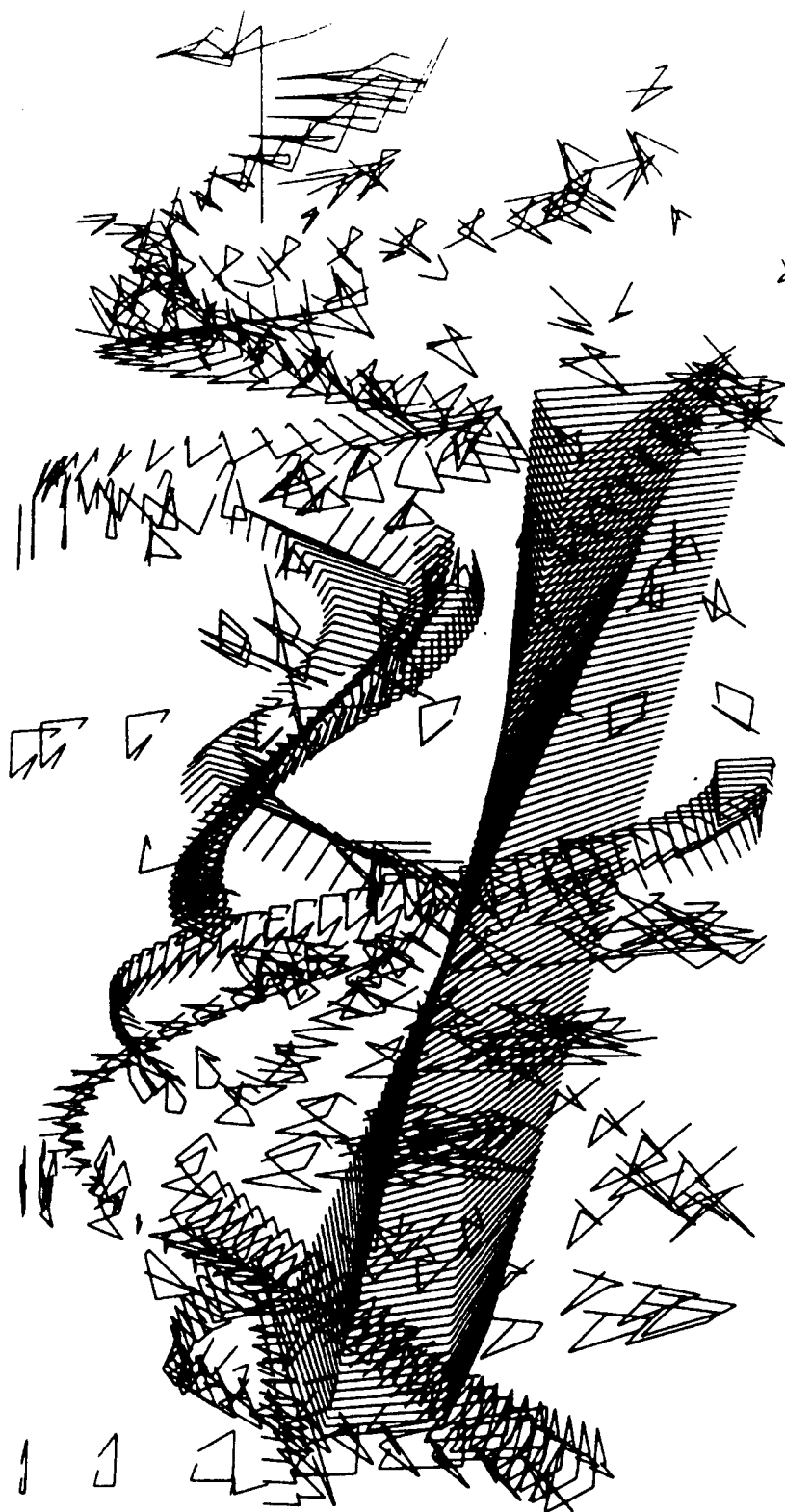
Is the not-yet-conscious[3] music?

Perception is not yet or not ever conscious.

In 'a real world'

the analysis of the whole I perceives

is the synthesis of the whole I

registers.

Any further analysis of the whole I

registers

is conjecture conditioned by the initial

analysis.

In composition

the analysis of the whole exposes

the distinct and, now, autonomous

items and processes which composed

the synthesized whole wherein

their distinctions and autonomies

are lost to

its distinction and autonomy.

I always perceives everything and

always registers but preferred segments

of the perceived whole.

In a 'real world'

I registers as synthesis the analysis

I made after perception.

In 'the composed world'

I registers as analysis that which is

part but not all

of the perceived synthesis I made.

Thus, in 'a real world'

I perceives the whole as being its

registered parts.

In 'the composed world' I does not.[4]

Is theology music?

Theology: the scientifically constructed history of all refusals which smothered attempts. In this history, music is a tortured alien.

Is the act of composition therefore utopian?

Composition: if intentionally false now and here, and true then and there, where 'here' is not 'there' and 'then' is not 'now' - could claim to be utopian.

Does music have a line of argument?

Composed music has a line of argument which allows listeners to follow the time of events in correct steps of cognition - which soon after appear to have been steps of error and thereby evoke in the listeners the phenomenon of 'retroactive correction': ALWAYS RIGHT yet only TILL NOW and thus NEVER for long - SO then retards composition the decay of the music.

Does a socially beneficial composition[5] mean that aesthetics are inevitably ethics?

If, as I say, Ethics unites all the criteria which demand from a decision that it add alternatives (increase freedom) and at the same time attenuate the difference between powers (decrease power), - then my composition - which I like - of what I do not like yet and which results in what I'll then hear and see, will teach, yes, teach me its, yes, its aesthetics.

We learn aesthetics from respected traces left by loved composition. I stubbornly refrain from teaching aesthetics in any other way.

{[(pimprovisation peddles pious prayers

to stopmodern typocrisy)]}

How would Kenneth Gaburo have hoped his audience to listen?

Gaburo was Kenneth who never knew yet steadily believed, that if you hear what he listens to, and listen to what he hears, and lend both ears and both eyes to the reports he extracted and quoted and listed and ordered and composed - then you and I might learn how to ask for more attention to perceptivity and demand better choices to become registered.

Compose a program note containing n sentences commenting on a piece of music you wrote.

Mount them on a surface and cover each sentence with opaque peel-off tape.

At each hearing of the piece commented on, let the listener peel off just tape, so that the note grow with the listener's competence together.

When the piece has been heard n times and, thus, n sentences (the complete note) have become visible, let the listener decide, whether an understanding of significant pleasure has been achieved.[6]

Is Compositional Linguistics a system of free thought? Chris Mann says, "Language is the mechanism whereby you understand what I'm thinking better than I do. (Where 'I' is defined by those changes for which I is required.[7])" Is free thought possible?

If I don't say "free of" or "free from" but "free to," then free is a variable containing a quantity, the number of alternatives open, available, accessible in moments when I can, must, may, might, wish to, need to, make a decision.

The freedom of a person or situation can be measured by the quantity of alternatives offered to this person or situation at some now and here.

Free thought is one of many "free" "thoughts." Manifesting choice, thought liberates itself from the rules of belief. I know better than you why and how you understand what I think better than I do. -

I is out of your mind.[8]

If, as in a piece like Dust, *the stress is the music rather than the gesture, are composers composing composing, rather than orchestrating listening?*

Yes, if the composer does not "like" it yet - "yet" implying a promise.

What is a context?

Not "what" but "when" is context?!

If the guy I want to move in with is still the guy I want to move in with even after I have moved in with him then he is not the guy I want to have moved in with![9]

Whose responsibility is it to maintain a context where experimental music can survive, the audience or the composer?

When "it" sees and listens for being seen and heard and listened to and stays for more and claims to be needed and wanted and is not necessarily people but can be landscape, furniture, language, dance, weather, animals, mood, ideas, silence... and behaves as if addressed by messages "it" needs and desires to decode - as if they were not only its secret language. Then that, temporarily and by seduced or deductive invasion, turns inside out and becomes that context. Only then! Opportunity rather than responsibility. -
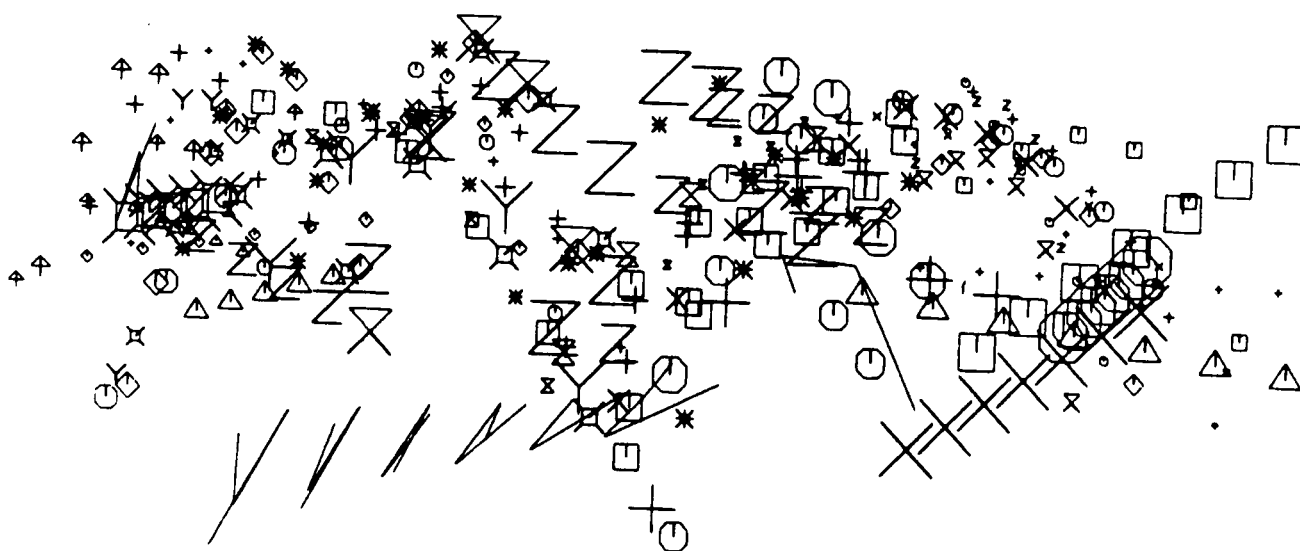
Does it include understanding, interpretation?

> To understand a composition in the light of the past requires but commonplace classification.
>
> To understand the past in the light of a composition requires distinguishing description.
>
> A composition wishes to be understood as being unlike, not as being like, other compositions.
>
> Its initial unintelligibility promises worthwhile events before final communicativity and death.[10]

Is composing a Language for a not yet known context the same thing as anticommunication[11]?

No. Not when I am asked about it. I intend anticommunication to experiment in and during a well known context with a not yet known "language."

Nevertheless, are both a challenge to the referentiality of words?

Yes, when I am asked, whether a composed language can by experimentation and maliciously playful teasing seed and nurse a yet unknown or, better, unnoticed context which might appear to nest, or to be nested by, the initial context, and thus rather celebrates the challenge to the referentiality of words.

> By way of Definitions I tell my partner not only what is but also what could be the case.
>
> By way of Declarations I tell my partner not only what he could do but also what he actually does.
>
> Since things not only are what is said about them but also what is done to and with them, the universe of definition derides declarations so that the universe of declaration may lack definition.
>
> Def makes Dec pay penance for Def's deeds. Dec knows how Def did it, but question whether Def did it or not, is corrupted into the question of innocence: whether Dec, and thus anyone, can know it or not.[12]

If "Things is what's said about them, or else!"[13], what happens when we can't speak?

"things is what is said about them" is only the case when we speak and when we are heard (at least by ourselves).

If "a language lost is a language found"[14], and a language found is a language lost, are we stuck?

Even if we can neither speak nor hear: This has never yet stopped anyone from doing it, preferably to others. So we speak. And as long as we speak we suffer social reality which always kindly adjusts to our cooing or indignant

speaking which always adjusts to our beckoning or shrugging or fingerpointing reality which thus is just ours as we are its - if you call that "stuck" then I shiver at the thought that you might change your mood and call it "at last flexibility mobile!" In the social domain things IS what is said about them: please, please heed your neighbours' grammar torturing language so that it may murder you in their innocence. And while I'm at it: Don't let me get away with it either!! (see postface, I mean of course stopface).

I never wrote "found." I wrote "gained." A language. - As long as there are sentences, words will mean what makes the sentence "true." A language gained trains words in supporting the sentence. A language lost trains sentences to confirm the inherited meanings of its words.

What happens to words?

Words always mean what they say. They do not often say what we mean?

How do we know this if they speak for themselves??

Anticommunication attempts to turn self-righteous words into friends not tools or weapons, but rather tearfully smiling players participating in our noisy sentence-coached and sentence-conducted ensemble.

A Commonplace For Holydays.

They could not understand it.

So they simply agreed,

that they did not understand,

and that "it" was neither plausible

nor really understandable.[15]

Notes
[1] *Collaboration One* is the combination of computer graphics by Herbert Brün, *Mutatis Mutandis* and a linguistic composition by Kenneth Gaburo, *The Beauty of Irrelevant Music* (La Jolla, California: Lingua Press, 1976).
[2] H. Brün, *My Words and Where I Want Them* 2nd ed. (London: Princelet Editions, 1990).
[3] The 'not-yet-conscious' arises in the writings of Ernst Bloch. See particularly E. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).
[4] Brün, *My Words*, para.61 B.
[5] Socially beneficial information processing is discussed by Brün in *Technology and the Composer* which appears in the book accompanying the Brün box set, *Compositions* (Champaign, Illinois: Non Sequitur Records, 1983). It was also picked up by Marianne Brün at the 1984 meeting of the American Society of Cybernetics, who set up a workshop calling for a Socially Beneficial Information Processor. One result of this workshop was Chris Mann's *The Box*.
[6] Brün, *My Words*, para.190.
[7] On reading this transcript, Chris Mann noted that 'Where "I" is defined by those changes for which I is required' is actually a paraphrase of a statement made by Herbert Brün.
[8] Brün, *My Words*, para.264.
[9] Brün, *My Words*, para.184.
[10] Brün, *My Words*, para.337.
[11] Anticommunication is another Brünnian concept. See H. Brün, 'Drawing Distinctions Links Contradictions', *Perspectives of New Music* 12 (Fall/Winter 1973), pp.29-39.
[12] Brün, *My Words*, para.341.
[13] Brün, *My Words*, para.342.
[14] Listen to H. Brün, *Futility 1964*, included in *Compositions*.
[15] Brün, *My Words*, para.281.