

## THE AESTHETICS OF SILENCE / SUSAN SONTAG

### I

Every era has to reinvent the project of "spirituality" for itself. (Spirituality = plans, terminologies, ideas of deportment aimed at the resolution of painful structural contradictions inherent in the human situation, at the completion of human consciousness, at transcendence.)

In the modern era, one of the most active metaphors for the spiritual project is "art." The activities of the painter, the musician, the poet, the dancer et al, once they were grouped together under that generic name (a relatively recent move), have proved to be a peculiarly adaptable site on which to stage the formal dramas besetting consciousness, each individual work of art being a more or less astute paradigm for regulating or reconciling these contradictions. Of course, the site needs continual refurbishing. Whatever goal is set

for art eventually proves restrictive, matched against the widest goals of consciousness. Art, itself a form of mystification, endures a succession of crises of demystification; older artistic goals are assailed and, ostensibly, replaced; outgrown maps of consciousness are redrawn. But what supplies all these crises with their energy — an energy held in common, so to speak — is the very unification of numerous, quite disparate activities into a single genus. At the moment at which "art" comes into being, the modern period of art begins. From then forward, any of the activities therein subsumed becomes a profoundly problematic activity, each of whose procedures and, ultimately, whose very right to exist, can be called into question.

Following on the promotion of the arts into "art" comes the leading myth about art, that of the "absoluteness" of the artist's activity. In its first, more unreflective version, this myth considered art as an expression of human consciousness, consciousness seeking to know itself. (The critical principles generated by this myth were fairly easily arrived at: some expressions were more complete, more ennobling, more informative, richer than others.) The later version of the myth posits a more complex, tragic relation of art to consciousness. Denying that art is mere expression, the newer myth, ours, rather relates art to the mind's need or capacity for self-estrangement. Art is no longer understood as consciousness expressing and therefore, implicitly, affirming itself. Art is not consciousness per se, but rather its antidote — evolved from within consciousness itself. (The critical principles generated by this myth were much harder to get at.)

The newer myth, derived from a post-psychological conception of consciousness, installs within the activity of art many of the paradoxes involved in attaining an absolute state of being described by the great religious mystics. As the activity of the mystic must end in a *via negativa*, a

**theology of God's absence, a craving for the cloud of unknowingness beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the "subject" (the "object," the "image"), the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence.**

In the early, linear version of art's relation to consciousness, a struggle was held to exist between the "spiritual" integrity of the creative impulses and the distracting "materiality" of ordinary life, which throws up so many obstacles in the path of authentic sublimation. But the newer version, in which art is part of a dialectical transaction with consciousness, poses a deeper, more frustrating conflict: The "spirit" seeking embodiment in art clashes with the "material" character of art itself. Art is unmasked as gratuitous, and the very concreteness of the artist's tools (and, particularly in the case of language, their historicity) appears as a trap. Practiced in a world furnished with second-hand perceptions, and specifically confounded by the treachery of words, the activity of the artist is cursed with mediacy. **Art becomes the enemy of the artist, for it denies him the realization, the transcendence, he desires.**

**Therefore, art comes to be estimated as something to be overthrown. A new element enters the art-work and becomes constitutive of it: the appeal (tacit or overt) for its own abolition — and, ultimately, for the abolition of art itself.**

## II

The scene changes to an empty room.

Rimbaud has gone to Abyssinia to make his fortune in the slave trade. Wittgenstein has first chosen schoolteaching, then menial work as a hospital orderly. [Duchamp](#) has turned to chess. And, accompanying these exemplary renunciations of a vocation, each man has declared that he considers his

previous achievements in poetry, philosophy, or art as trifling, of no importance.

But the choice of permanent silence doesn't negate their work. On the contrary, it imparts retroactively an added power and authority to what was broken off; disavowal of the work becoming a new source of its validity, a certificate of unchallengeable seriousness. That seriousness consists in not regarding art (or philosophy practiced as an art form: Wittgenstein) as something whose seriousness lasts forever, an "end," a permanent vehicle for spiritual ambition. The truly serious attitude is one that regards art as a "means" to something that can perhaps be achieved only by abandoning art; judged more impatiently, art is a false way or (the word of the Dada artist Jacques Vaché) a stupidity.

Though no longer a confession, art is more than ever a deliverance, an exercise in asceticism. Through it, the artist becomes purified — of himself and, eventually, of his art. The artist (if not art itself) is still engaged in a progress toward "the good." But formerly, the artist's good was mastery of and fulfillment in his art. Now it's suggested that the highest good for the artist is to reach that point where those goals of excellence become insignificant to him, emotionally and ethically, and he is **more satisfied by being silent than by finding a voice in art.** Silence in this sense, as termination, proposes a mood of **ultimacy antithetical to the mood informing the self-conscious artist's traditional serious use of silence: as a zone of meditation, preparation for spiritual ripening, an ordeal which ends in gaining the right to speak.** (Cf. Valéry, Rilke)

**So far as he is serious, the artist is continually tempted to sever the dialogue he has with an audience. Silence is the furthest extension of that reluctance to communicate, that ambivalence about making contact with the audience which is a leading motif of**

**modern art, with its tireless commitment to the "new" and/or the "esoteric"** Silence is the artist's ultimate other-worldly gesture; by silence, he frees himself from servile bondage to the world, which appears as patron, client, audience, antagonist, arbiter, and distorter of his work.

Still, in this renunciation of "society," one cannot fail to perceive a highly social gesture. Some of the cues for the artist's eventual liberation from the need to practice his vocation come from observing his fellow artists and measuring himself against them. An exemplary decision of this sort can be made only after the artist has demonstrated that he possesses genius and exercised that genius authoritatively. Having already surpassed his peers, by the standards which he acknowledges, pride has only one place left to go. For, to be a victim of the craving for silence is to be, in still a further sense, superior to everyone else. It suggests that the artist has had the wit to ask more questions than other people, as well as that he possesses stronger nerves and higher standards of excellence. (That the artist can persevere in the interrogation of his art until he or it is exhausted isn't in doubt. As René Char has written, "No bird has the heart to sing in a thicket of questions")

### III

**The exemplary modern artist's choice of silence isn't often carried to this point of final simplification, so that he becomes literally silent. More typically, he continues speaking, but in a manner that his audience can't hear. Most valuable art in our time has been experienced by audiences as a move into silence (or unintelligibility or invisibility or inaudibility); a dismantling of the artist's competence, his responsible sense of vocation — and therefore as an aggression against them.**

**Modern art's chronic habit of displeasing, provoking, or frustrating its audience can be regarded as a limited,**

**vicarious participation in the ideal of silence which has been elevated as a prime standard of seriousness in the contemporary scene.**

But it is also a contradictory form of participation in the ideal of silence. It's contradictory not only because the artist still continues making works of art, but also because the isolation of the work from its audience never lasts. With the passage of time and the intervention of newer, more difficult works, the artist's transgression becomes ingratiating, eventually legitimate. Goethe accused Kleist of having written his plays for an "invisible theatre." But in time the invisible theatre becomes "visible" The ugly and discordant and senseless become "beautiful." The history of art is a sequence of successful transgressions.

The characteristic aim of modern art, to be unacceptable to its audience, can be regarded as the inverse statement of the unacceptability to the artist of the very presence of an audience — in the familiar sense, an assembly of voyeuristic spectators. At least since Nietzsche observed in *The Birth of Tragedy* that an audience of spectators as we know it, those present whom the actors ignore, was unknown to the Greeks, a good deal of contemporary art seems moved by the desire to eliminate the audience from art, an enterprise that often presents itself as an attempt to eliminate "art" altogether. (In favor of "life"?)

Committed to the idea that the power of art is located in its power to negate, the ultimate weapon in the artist's inconsistent war with his audience is to verge closer and closer to silence. The sensory or conceptual gap between the artist and his audience, the space of the missing or ruptured dialogue, can also constitute the grounds for an ascetic affirmation. [Samuel Beckett](#) speaks of "my dream of an art unresentful of its insuperable indigence and too proud for the farce of giving and receiving." But there is no abolishing a minimal transaction, a minimal exchange of gifts, just as there is no

talented and rigorous asceticism that doesn't produce a gain (rather than a loss) in the capacity for pleasure.

And none of the aggressions committed intentionally or inadvertently by modern artists have succeeded in either abolishing the audience or transforming it into something else. (A community engaged in a common activity?) They cannot. As long as art is understood and valued as an "absolute" activity, it will be a separate, elitist one. Elites presuppose masses. So far as the best art defines itself by essentially "priestly" aims, it presupposes and confirms the existence of a relatively passive, never fully initiated, voyeuristic laity which is regularly convoked to watch, listen, read, or hear — and then sent away.

The most that the artist can do is to play with the different terms in this situation vis-a-vis the audience and himself. To analyse the idea of silence is to analyse his various alternatives within this essentially unalterable situation.

#### IV

How literally can the notion of silence be used with respect to art?

**Silence exists as a decision — in the exemplary suicide of the artist (Kleist, Lautreamont), who thereby testifies that he has gone "too far"; and in such model renunciations by the artist of his vocation already cited.**

**Silence also exists** as a punishment — self-punishment, in the exemplary madness of artists (Holderlin, Artaud) who demonstrate that one's very sanity may be the price of trespassing the accepted frontiers of consciousness; and, of course, in penalties (ranging from censorship and physical destruction of art-works to fines, exile, prison for the artist) meted out by "society" for the artist's spiritual nonconformity or for subversion of the group sensibility.

But silence can't exist in a literal sense as the experience of **an audience. It would**

**mean that the spectator was aware of no stimulus or that he was unable to make a response. But this can't happen or be induced programmatically. The non-awareness of any stimulus, the inability to make a response, can result only from a defective presentness on the part of the spectator,** or a misunderstanding of his own reactions (misled by restrictive ideas about what would be a "relevant" response). But so far as any audience consists of sentient beings in a situation, there can be no such thing as having no response at all.

Nor can silence, in its literal state, exist as the property of an art work — even of works like Duchamp's readymades or Cage's 4'33", in which the artist has ostentatiously done no more to satisfy any established criteria of art than set the object in a gallery or situate the performance on a concert stage. There is no neutral surface, no neutral discourse, no neutral theme, no neutral form. Something is neutral only with respect to something else. (An intention? An expectation?) As a property of the work of art itself, silence can exist only in a cooked or nonliteral sense. (Put otherwise: if a work exists at all, its silence is only one element in it.) Instead of raw or achieved silence, one finds various moves in the direction of an ever-receding horizon of silence — moves which, by definition, can't ever be fully consummated. One result is a type of art which many people characterize pejoratively as dumb, depressed, acquiescent, cold. But these privative qualities exist in a context of the artist's objective intention, which is always discernible. To cultivate the metaphoric silence that's suggested by conventionally lifeless subjects (as in much of Pop Art) and to construct "minimal" forms which seem to lack emotional resonance are in themselves vigorous, often tonic choices.

And, finally, even without imputing objective intentions to the **art-work, there remains the inescapable truth about perception: the positivity of all**



experience at every moment of it. As [John Cage](#) has insisted, "there is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound." (Cage has described how, even in a soundless chamber, he still heard at least two things: his heartbeat and the coursing of the blood in his head). Similarly, there is no such thing as empty space. As long as a human eye is looking there is always something to see. To look at something that's "empty" is still to be looking, still to be seeing something — if only the ghosts of one's own expectations. In order to perceive fullness, one must retain an acute sense of the emptiness which marks it off; conversely, in order to perceive emptiness, one must apprehend other zones of the world as full. (In *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice comes upon a shop "that seemed to be full of all manner of curious things — but the oddest part of it all was that whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty, though the others round it were crowded full as they could hold.")

"Silence" never ceases to imply its opposite and to demand on its presence. Just as there can't be "up" without "down" or "left" without "right," so one must acknowledge a surrounding environment of sound or language in order to recognize silence. Not only does silence exist in a world full of speech and other sounds, but any given silence takes its identity as a stretch of time being perforated by sound. (Thus, much of the beauty of Harpo Marx's muteness derives from his being surrounded by manic talkers.)

A genuine emptiness, a pure silence, are not feasible — either conceptually or in fact. If only because the art-work exists in a world furnished with many other things, the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence. Silence remains,

inescapably, a form of speech (in many instances, of complaint or indictment) and an element in a dialogue.

## V

Aesthetic programs for a radical reduction of means and effects in art — including the ultimate demand, for the renunciation of art itself — can't be taken at face value, undialectically. These are neither consistent policies for artists nor merely hostile gestures aimed at audiences. Silence and allied ideas (like emptiness, reduction, the "zero degree") are boundary notions with a complex set of uses; leading terms of a particular spiritual and cultural rhetoric.

To describe silence as a rhetorical term is, of course, far from condemning this rhetoric as fraudulent or in bad faith. The truth of myths is never a literal truth. The myths of contemporary art can be evaluated only in terms of the diversity and fruitfulness of their application.

In my opinion, the myths of silence and emptiness are about as nourishing and viable as one could hope to see devised in an "unwholesome" time — which is, of necessity, a time in which "unwholesome" psychic states furnish the energies for most superior work in the arts today. At the same time, one can't deny the pathos of these myths.

This pathos arises from the fact that the idea of silence allows, essentially, only two types of valuable development. Either it is taken to the point of utter self-negation (as art) or else practiced in a form that is heroically, ingeniously inconsistent.

## VI

The art of our time is noisy with appeals for silence.

A coquettish, even cheerful nihilism. One recognizes the imperative of silence, but goes on speaking anyway. Discovering that one has nothing to say, one seeks a way to say that

**Beckett has announced the wish that art would renounce all further projects**

for disturbing matters on "the plane of the feasible," that art would retire, "weary of puny exploits. weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going further along a dreary road." The alternative is an art consisting of "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express." From where does this obligation derive? The very aesthetics of the death wish seems to make of that wish something incorrigibly lively.

Apollinaire says, "J'ai fait des gestes blancs parmi les solitudes." But he is making gestures.

Since the artist can't embrace silence literally and remain an artist, what the rhetoric of silence indicates is a determination to pursue his activity more deviously than ever before. One way is indicated by Breton's notion of the "full margin." The artist is enjoined to devote himself to filling up the periphery of the art-space, leaving the central area of usage blank. Art becomes privative, anemic — as suggested by the title of Duchamp's only effort at film making, "Anemic Cinema," a work from the period 1924-26. Beckett describes the idea of an "impoverished painting." painting which is "authentically fruitless, incapable of any image whatsoever." One of Jerzy Grotowski's manifestoes for his Theatre Laboratory in Poland is called "Plea for a Poor Theatre." But these programs for art's impoverishment must not be understood simply as terroristic admonitions to audiences, but as strategies for improving the audience's experience. The notions of silence, emptiness, reduction, sketch out new prescriptions for looking, hearing, etc. — specifically, either for having a more immediate, sensuous experience of art or for confronting the art work in a more conscious, conceptual way.

Consider the connection between the mandate for a reduction of means and effects in art, whose horizon is silence, and the faculty of attention. For, in one of its aspects, art is a technique for focusing attention, for teaching skills of attention. (While this aspect of art is not peculiar to it — the whole of the human environment might be described in this way, as a pedagogic instrument — it's surely a particular, intensive aspect of works of art.) The history of the arts is the discovery and formulation of a repertory of objects on which to lavish attention; one could trace exactly and in order how the eye of art has panned over our environment, "naming," making its limited selection of things which people then become aware of as significant, pleasurable, complex entities. (As Oscar Wilde pointed out, people didn't see fogs before certain 19th century poets and painters taught them how to; surely, no one saw as much of the variety and subtlety of the human face before the era of the movies.)

Once, the artist's task seemed to be simply that of opening up new areas and objects of attention. That task is still acknowledged, but it has become problematic. The very faculty of attention has come into question, and been subjected to more rigorous standards. As [Jasper Johns](#) has said, "Already it's a great deal to see anything clearly, for we don't see anything clearly."

Perhaps the quality of the attention we bring to bear on something will be better (less contaminated, less distracted) the less we are offered. Furnished with impoverished art, purged by silence, one might then be able to begin to transcend the frustrating selectivity of attention, with its inevitable distortions of experience. Ideally, one should be able to pay attention to everything.

The motion is toward less and less. But never has "less" so ostentatiously advanced itself as "more."

In the light of the current myth, in which art aims to become a "total experience,"

soliciting total attention. the strategies of impoverishment and reduction indicate the most exalted ambition, art could adopt. Underneath what looks like a strenuous modesty, if not actual debility, one may discern an energetic secular blasphemy: the wish to attain the unfettered, unselective, total consciousness of "God."

## VIII

Language seems a privileged metaphor for expressing the mediated character of art-making and the art-work. On the one hand, speech is both an immaterial medium (compared with, say, images) and a human activity with an apparently essential stake in the project of transcendence, of moving beyond the singular and contingent (all words being abstractions, only roughly based on or making reference to concrete particulars). But, on the other hand, language is the most impure, the most contaminated, the most exhausted of all the materials out of which art is made.

This dual character of language — its, abstractness, and its "fallenness" in history — can serve as a microcosm of the unhappy character of the arts today. Art is so far along the labyrinthine pathways of the project of transcendence that it's hard to conceive of it turning back, short of the most drastic and punitive "cultural revolution." Yet at the same time, art is foundering in the debilitating tide of what once seemed the crowning achievement of European thought: secular historical consciousness. In little more than two centuries, the consciousness of history has transformed itself from a liberation, an opening of doors, blessed enlightenment, **into an almost insupportable burden of self-consciousness. It's impossible for the artist to write a word (or render an image or make a gesture) that doesn't remind him of something.** Up to a point, the community and historicity of the artist's means are implicit in the very fact of intersubjectivity: each person is a being-in-a-world. But this normal state of affairs is

felt today (particularly in the arts using language) as an extraordinary, wearying problem.

As Nietzsche said: "Our pre-eminence: we live in the age of comparison, we can verify as has never been verified before." Therefore, "we enjoy differently, we suffer differently: our instinctive activity is to compare an unheard number of things."

Language is experienced not merely as something shared but something corrupted, weighed down by historical accumulation. Thus, for each conscious artist, the creation of a work means dealing with two potentially antagonistic domains of meaning and their relationships. One is his own meaning (or lack of it); the other is the set of second-order meanings which both extend his own language and also encumber, compromise, and adulterate it. The artist ends by choosing between two inherently limiting alternatives. He is forced to take a position that's either servile or insolent: either he flatters or appeases his audience, giving them what they already know, or he commits an aggression against his audience, giving them what they don't want.

**Modern art thus transmits in full the alienation produced by historical consciousness. Whatever the artist does is in (usually conscious) alignment with something else already done, producing a compulsion to be continually rechecking his situation. His own stance with those of his predecessors and contemporaries. Compensating for this ignominious enslavement to history, the artist exalts himself with the dream of a wholly ahistorical, and therefore unalienated, art.**

## IX

Art that is "silent" constitutes one approach to this visionary, ahistorical condition.

Consider the difference between "looking" and "staring." A look is (at least, in part) voluntary; it is also mobile, rising and falling

in intensity as its foci of interest are taken up and then exhausted. A stare has, essentially, the character of a compulsion; it is steady, unmodulated, "fixed."

**Traditional art invites a look. Art that's silent engenders a stare. In silent art, there is (at least in principle) no release from attention, because there has never, in principle, been any soliciting of it. A stare is perhaps as far from history, as close to eternity, as contemporary art can get.**

X

Silence is a metaphor for a cleansed, noninterfering vision, in which one might envisage the making of art-works that are unresponsive before being seen, unviolable in their essential integrity by human scrutiny. The spectator would approach art as he does a landscape. A landscape doesn't demand from the spectator his "understanding," his imputations of significance, his anxieties and sympathies; it demands, rather, his absence, that he not add anything to it. Contemplation, strictly speaking, entails self-forgetfulness on the part of the spectator: an object worthy of contemplation is one which, in effect, annihilates the perceiving subject.

It is to such an ideal plenitude to which the audience can add nothing, analogous to the aesthetic relation to "nature," that a great deal of contemporary art aspires — through various strategies of blandness, of reduction, of deindividuation, of alogicality. In principle, the audience may not even add its thought. All objects, so conceived, are truly full. This is what Cage must mean when, right after explaining that there is no such thing as silence because something is always happening that makes a sound, he says "No one can have an idea once he starts really listening."

Plenitude — experiencing all the space as filled, so that ideas cannot enter — means impenetrability, opaqueness. For a person to **become silent is to become opaque for**

**the other; somebody's silence opens up an array of possibilities for interpreting that silence, for imputing speech to it.**

The ways in which this opaqueness induces anxiety, spiritual vertigo, is the theme of Bergman's *Persona*. The theme is reinforced by the two principal attributions one is invited to make of the actress' deliberate silence. Considered as a decision relating to herself, it is apparently the way she has chosen to give form to the wish for ethical purity; but it is also, as behavior, a means of power, a species of sadism, a virtually inviolable position of strength from which to manipulate and confound her nurse-companion, who is charged with the burden of talking.

But it's possible to conceive of the opaqueness of silence more positively, free from anxiety. For Keats, the silence of the Grecian urn is a locus for spiritual nourishment: "unheard" melodies endure, whereas those that pipe to "the sensual ear" decay. Silence is equated with arresting time ("slow time"). One can stare endlessly at the Grecian urn. Eternity, in the argument of Keats' poem, is the only interesting stimulus to thought and also presents us with the sole occasion for coming to the end of mental activity, which means endless, unanswered questions ("Thou, silent form, cost tease us out of thought/As cloth eternity"), so that one can arrive at a final equation of ideas ("Beauty is truth, truth beauty") which is both absolutely vacuous and completely full. Keats' poem quite logically ends in a statement that will seem, if one hasn't followed his argument, like empty wisdom, like banality. **Time, or history, becomes the medium of definite, determinate thought. The silence of eternity prepares for a thought beyond thought, which must appear from the perspective of traditional thinking and the familiar uses of the mind as no thought at all — though it may rather be an emblem of new, "difficult" thinking.**



Behind the appeals for silence lies the wish for a perceptual and cultural clean slate. And, in its most hortatory and ambitious version, the advocacy of silence expresses a mythic project of total liberation. What's envisaged is nothing less than the liberation of the artist from himself, of art from the particular art work, of art from history, of spirit from matter, of the mind from its perceptual and intellectual limitations.

What a few people know now is that there are ways of thinking that we don't yet know about. Nothing could be more important or precious than that knowledge, however unborn. The sense of urgency, the spiritual restlessness it engenders cannot be appeased. Surely, it's some of that energy which has spilled over into the radical art of this century. Through its advocacy of silence, reduction, etc., art commits an act of violence upon itself, turning art into a species of auto-manipulation, of conjuring — trying to help bring these new ways of thinking to birth.

Silence is a strategy for the transvaluation of art, art itself being the herald of an anticipated radical transvaluation of human values. But the success of this strategy must mean its eventual abandonment, or at least its significant modification.

**Silence is a prophecy, one which the artist's actions can be understood as attempting to fulfill and to reverse.**

**As language always points to its own transcendence in silence, silence always points to its own transcendence — to a speech beyond silence.**

But can the whole enterprise become an act of bad faith if the artist knows this, too?

## XII

A famous quotation: "Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said at all can be said clearly. But not everything that can be thought can be said."

Notice that Wittgenstein, with his scrupulous avoidance of the psychological

issue, doesn't ask why, when, and in what circumstances someone would want to put into words "everything that can be thought" (even if he could), or even to utter (whether clearly or not) "everything that could be said."

### XIII

Of everything that's said, one can ask: why? (Including: why should I say that? And: why should I say anything at all?)

To this I would add the thesis that, strictly speaking, nothing that's said is true. (Though one can be the truth, one can't ever say it.)

Still, things that are said can sometimes be helpful — which is what people ordinarily mean when they consider something said to be true. Among its many uses, speech can enlighten, relieve, confuse, exalt, infect, antagonize, gratify, grieve, stun, animate. While language is regularly used to inspire to action, some verbal statements, either written or oral, of a highly stylized kind are themselves used as the performing of an action (as in promising, swearing, bequeathing). Another use of speech, if anything more common than that of provoking actions: speech provokes further speech. But speech can silence, too. This indeed is how it must be; without the polarity of silence, the whole system of language would fail. And beyond its generic function as the dialectical opposite of speech, silence — like speech — has its more specific, less inevitable uses, too.

One use for silence: certifying the absence or renunciation of thought. This use of silence is often employed as a magical or mimetic procedure in repressive social relationships. as in the regulations about speaking to superiors in the Jesuit order and in the disciplining of children. (It should not be confused with the practice of certain monastic disciplines, such as the Trappist order, in which silence is both an ascetic act and a bearing witness to the condition of being perfectly "full.")

Another, apparently opposed, use for silence: certifying the completion of thought. (Karl Jaspers: "He who has the final answers can no longer speak to the other, as he breaks off genuine communication for the sake of what he believes in.")

Still another use for silence: providing time for the continuing or exploring of thought. Notably, speech closes off thought. (Cf., the enterprise of criticism, in which there seems no way for a critic not to assert that a given artist is this, he's that, etc.) But if one decides an issue isn't closed, it's not. This is presumably the rationale behind the voluntary experiments in silence that some contemporary spiritual athletes, like Buckminster Fuller, have undertaken, and the element of wisdom in the otherwise mainly authoritarian, philistine silence of the orthodox Freudian psychoanalyst. Silence keeps things "open."

Still another use for silence: furnishing or aiding speech to attain its maximum integrity or seriousness. **Everyone has experienced how, when punctuated by long silences, words weigh more; they become almost palpable. Or how, when one talks less, one starts feeling more fully one's physical presence in a given space. Silence undermines "bad speech," by which I mean dissociated speech — speech dissociated from the body (and, therefore, from feeling), speech not organically informed by the sensuous presence and concrete particularity of the speaker and of the individual occasion for using language.** Unmoored from the body, speech deteriorates. It becomes false, inane, ignoble, weightless. Silence can inhibit or counteract this tendency, providing a kind of ballast, monitoring and even correcting language when it becomes inauthentic.

Given these perils to the authenticity of language (which doesn't depend on the character of any isolated statement or even group of statements, but on the relation of speaker, speech, and situation), the

hypothetical project of saying clearly "everything that can be said" suggested by Wittgenstein's remarks looks fearfully complicated. (How much time would one have? Would one have to speak quickly?) The philosopher's hypothetical universe of clear speech (which assigns to silence only "that whereof one cannot speak") would seem to be a moralists, or a psychiatrist's, nightmare — at the least, a place no one should lightheartedly enter. Is there anyone who wants to say "everything that could be said"? The psychologically plausible answer would seem to be no. But yes is plausible, too — as a rising ideal of modern culture. Isn't that what many people do want today — to say everything that can be said? But this aim cannot be maintained without inner conflict, in part inspired by the spread of the ideals of psychotherapy, people are yearning to say "everything" (thereby, among other results, further undermining the crumbling distinction between public and private endeavors, between information and secrets). But, in an overpopulated world being connected by global electronic communication and jet travel at a pace too rapid and violent for an organically sound person to assimilate without shock, people are also suffering from a revulsion at any further proliferation of speech and images. Such different factors as the unlimited "technological reproduction" and near-universal diffusion of both printed language and speech as well as images (from "news" to "art objects"), and the degenerations of public language within the realms of politics and advertising and entertainment, have produced, especially among the better educated inhabitants of what sociologists call "modern mass society," a devaluation of language. (I should argue, contrary to McLuhan, that a devaluation of the power and credibility of images has taken place that's no less profound than, and essentially similar to, that afflicting language.) And, as the prestige of language falls, that of silence rises.

I am alluding, at this point, to the sociological context of the contemporary ambivalence toward language. The matter, of course, goes much deeper than this. In addition to the specific sociological determinants that must be counted in, one must recognize the operation of something like a perennial discontent with language that has been formulated in each of the major civilizations of the Orient and Occident, whenever thought reaches a certain high, excruciating order of complexity and spiritual seriousness.

Traditionally, it has been through the religious vocabulary, with its meta-absolutes of "sacred" and "profane," "human" and "divine," that the disaffection with language itself has been charted. In particular, the antecedents of art's dilemmas and strategies are to be found in the radical wing of the mystical tradition. (Cf., among Christian texts, the *Mystica Theologica* of Dionysius the Areopagite, the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*, the writings of Jacob Boehme and Meister Eckhart; and parallels in Zen and Taoist texts and in the writings of the Sufi mystics.) The mystical tradition has always recognized, in Norman Brown's phrase, "the neurotic character of language." (Boehme says the language that Adam spoke was different from all known languages. He calls it "sensual speech," the unmediated expressive instrument of the senses, proper to beings integrally part of sensuous nature — that is, still employed by all the animals except that sick animal, man. This, which Boehme calls the only "natural language," the sole language free from distortion and illusion, is what man will speak again when he recovers paradise.) But in our time, the most striking developments of such ideas have been made by artists (along with certain psychotherapists) rather than by the timid legatees of the religious traditions.

Explicitly in revolt against what is deemed to be the dessicated, categorized life of the ordinary mind, the artist issues his own call

for a revision of language. A good deal of contemporary art is moved by this quest for a consciousness purified of contaminated language and, in some versions, of the distortions produced by conceiving the world exclusively in conventional verbal (in their debased sense, "rational" or "logical") terms. Art itself becomes a kind of counter-violence, seeking to loosen the grip upon consciousness of the habits of lifeless, static verbalization, presenting models of "sensual speech."

If anything, the volume of discontent has been turned up since the arts inherited the problem of language from religious discourse. It's not just that words, ultimately, won't do for the highest aims of consciousness; or even that they get in the way. Art expresses a double discontent. We lack words, and we have too many of them. It reflects a double complaint. Words are crude, and they're also too busy — inviting a hyperactivity of consciousness which is not only dysfunctional, in terms of human capacities of feeling and acting, but which actively deadens the mind and blunts the senses.

**Language is demoted to the status of an event. Something takes place in time, a voice speaking which points to the "before" and to what comes "after" an utterance: silence. Silence, then, is both the precondition of speech, and the result or aim of properly directed speech. On this model, the artist's activity is the creating or establishing of silence; the efficacious art work leaves silence in its wake. Silence, administered by the artist, is part of a program of perceptual and cultural therapy, often on the model of shock therapy rather than persuasion. Even if the artist's medium is words, he can share in this task: language can be employed to check language, to express muteness. Mallarmé thought it was precisely the job of poetry. using words, to clean up our word-clogged reality —**

**by creating silences around things. Art must mount a full-scale attack on language itself, by means of language and its surrogates, on behalf of the standard of silence.**

#### XIV

In the end, the radical critique of consciousness (first delineated by the mystical tradition, now administered by unorthodox psychotherapy and high modernist art) always lays the blame on language. Consciousness, experienced as a burden, is conceived of as the memory of all the words that have ever been said.

Krishnamurti claims that we must give up psychological, as distinct from factual, memory. Otherwise, we keep filling up the new with the old, closing off experience by hooking each experience into the last.

We must destroy continuity (which is insured by psychological memory), by going to the end of each emotion or thought.

And after the end, what supervenes (for a while) is silence.

#### XV

In his 4th Duino Elegy, Rilke gives a metaphoric statement of the problem of language and recommends a procedure for approaching as far toward the horizon of silence as he considers feasible. A prerequisite of "emptying out" is to be able to perceive what one is "full of," what words and mechanical gestures one is stuffed with, like a doll; only then, in polar confrontation with the doll, does the "angel" appear, a figure representing an equally inhuman though "higher" possibility, that of an entirely unmediated, trans-linguistic apprehension. Neither doll nor angel, human beings remain situated within the kingdom of language. But for nature, then things, then other people, then the textures of ordinary life to be experienced from a stance other than the crippled one of mere spectatorship, language must regain its chastity. As Rilke describes it in the 9th Elegy, the redemption of language (which is to say, the redemption

of the world through its interiorization in consciousness) is a long, infinitely arduous task. Human beings are so "fallen" that they must start simply, with the simplest linguistic act: the naming of things. Perhaps no more than this minimal function can be preserved from the general corruption of language. Rilke suggests that language may very well have to remain within a permanent state of reduction. Though perhaps, when this spiritual exercise of confining language to naming is perfected, it may be possible to pass on to other, more ambitious uses of language, no more must be attempted than will allow consciousness to be unestranged from itself.

For Rilke the overcoming of the alienation of consciousness is conceivable; and its means are not, as in the radical myths of the mystics, through transcending language altogether. It is enough, according to Rilke, to cut back drastically the scope and use of language. A tremendous spiritual preparation (the contrary of "alienation") is required for this deceptively simple act of naming: nothing less than the scouring and harmonious sharpening of the senses (the very opposite of such violent projects, with roughly the same end and informed by the same hostility to verbal-rational culture, as "systematically deranging the senses").

Rilke's remedy lies halfway between exploiting the numbness of language as a gross, fully-installed cultural institution and yielding to the suicidal vertigo of pure silence. But this middle ground of reducing language to naming can be claimed in quite another way than his. Contrast the benign nominalism proposed by Rilke (and proposed and practiced by Francis Ponge) with the brutal nominalism adopted by many other artists. **The more familiar recourse of modern art to the aesthetics of the catalogue, the inventory, is not made — as in Rilke — with an eye to "humanizing" things, but rather to confirming their inhumanity, their impersonality, their indifference to and**



separateness from human concerns. (Examples of the "inhumane" preoccupation with naming: Roussel's *Impressions of Africa*: the silk-screen paintings and early films of [Andy Warhol](#); the early novels of [Alain Robbe-Grillet](#), which attempt to confine language to the function of bare physical description and location.)

Rilke and Ponge assume that there are priorities: rich as opposed to vacuous objects, events with a certain allure. (This is the incentive for trying to peel back language, allowing the "things" themselves to speak.) More decisively, they assume that if there are states of false (language-clogged) consciousness, there are also authentic states of consciousness — which it's the function of art to promote. The alternative view denies the traditional hierarchies of interest and meaning, in which some things have more "significance" than others. The distinction between true and false experience, true and false consciousness is also denied: in principle, one should desire to pay attention to everything. It's this view, most elegantly formulated by Cage though one finds its practice everywhere, that leads to the art of the inventory, the catalogue, surfaces; also "chance." The function of art isn't to promote any specific experience, except the state of being open to the multiplicity of experience, which ends in practice by a decided stress on things usually considered trivial or unimportant.

The **attachment of contemporary art to the "minimal" narrative principle of the catalogue or inventory seems almost a parody of the capitalist world-view, in which the environment is atomized into "items" (a category embracing things and persons. works of art and natural organisms), and in which every item is a commodity — that is. a discrete, portable object. There is a general leveling of value promoted in the art of inventory, which is itself only one of the**

**possible approaches to an ideally uninflected discourse.** Traditionally, the effects of an art-work have been unevenly distributed, in order to induce in the audience a certain sequence of experience: first arousing, then manipulating, and eventually fulfilling emotional expectations. What is proposed now is a discourse without emphases in this traditional sense. (Again, the principle of the stare as opposed to the look.)

Such art could also be described as establishing great "distance" (between spectator and art object, between the spectator and his emotions). But, psychologically, distance often is involved with the most intense state of feeling, in which the distance or coolness or impersonality with which something is treated measures the insatiable interest that thing has for us. The distance that a great deal of "anti-humanist" art proposes is actually equivalent to obsession — an aspect of the involvement in "things" of which the "humanist" nominalism of Rilke has no intimation.

## XVI

"There is something strange in the acts of writing and speaking," Novalis wrote in 1799. "The ridiculous and amazing mistake people make is to believe they use words in relation to things. They are unaware of the nature of language — which is to be its own and only concern, making it so fertile and splendid a mystery. When someone talks just for the sake of talking he is saying the most original and truthful thing he can say."

Novalis' statement may help explain something that at first seems paradoxical: that the age of the widespread advocacy of art's silence should also contain an increasing number of works of art that babble. Verbosity and repetitiveness is a particularly noticeable tendency in the temporal arts of prose, fiction, music, film, and dance, many of which appear to cultivate a kind of ontological stammer — facilitated by their refusal to heed the

incentives for a clean, anti-redundant discourse supplied by linear, beginning-middle-and-end construction. But actually, there's no contradiction. For the contemporary appeal for silence has never indicated merely a hostile dismissal of language. It also signifies a very high estimate of language — of its powers, of its past health, and of the current dangers it poses to a free consciousness. From this intense and ambivalent valuation proceeds the impulse for a discourse that appears both irrespressible (and, in principle, interminable) and strangely inarticulate, painfully reduced. One even senses the outlines of a subliminal rationale — discernible in the fictions of Stein, [Burroughs](#), and Beckett — that it might be possible to out-talk language, or to talk oneself into silence.

This is an odd and not very promising strategy, one might think, in the light of what results might reasonably be anticipated from it. But perhaps not so odd, after all, when one observes how often the aesthetic of silence appears hand in hand with a barely controlled abhorrence of the void.

Accommodating these two contrary impulses may produce the need to fill up all the spaces with objects of slight emotional weight or with even, large areas of barely modulated color or evenly-detailed objects, or to spin a discourse with as few possible inflections, emotive variations, and risings and failings of emphasis. These procedures seem analogous to the behavior of an obsessional neurotic warding off a danger. The acts of such a person must be repeated in the identical form, because the danger remains the same; and they must be repeated endlessly, because the danger never seems to go away. But the emotional fires feeding the art discourse analogous to obsessionalism may be turned down so low one can almost forget they're there. Then all that's left to the ear is a kind of steady hum or drone. What's left to the eye is the neat filling of a space with things, or, more

accurately, the patient transcription of the surface detail of things.

**On this view, the "silence" of things, images, and words is a prerequisite for their proliferation. Were they endowed with a more potent. individual charge, each of the various elements of the artwork would claim more psychic space and then their total number might have to be reduced.**

## **XVII**

**Sometimes the accusation against language is not directed against all of language but only against the written word. Thus Tristan Tzara urged the burning of all books and libraries to bring about a new era of oral legends. And McLuhan, as everyone knows, makes the sharpest distinction between written language (which exists in "visual space") and oral speech (which exists in "auditory space"), praising the psychic and cultural advantages of the latter as the basis for sensibility.**

**If written language is singled out as the culprit, what will be sought is not so much the reduction as the metamorphosis of language into something looser, more intuitive, less organized and inflected, nonlinear (in McLuhan's terminology) and — noticeably — more verbose. But of course, it is just these qualities that characterize many of the great prose narratives written in our time. Joyce, Stein, Gadda, Laura Riding, Beckett, and Burroughs employ a language whose norms and energies come from oral speech, with its circular repetitive movements and essentially first person voice.**

**"Speaking for the sake of speaking is the formula of deliverance," Novalis said. (Deliverance from what? From speaking? From art?)**

**I should argue that Novalis has succinctly described the proper**

approach of the writer to language, and offered the basic criterion for literature as an art. But whether oral speech is the privileged model for the speech of literature as an art is a question that remains undecided.

#### XVIII

A corollary of the growth of this conception of art's language as autonomous and self-sufficient (and, in the end, self-reflective) is a decline in "meaning," as traditionally sought in works of art. "Speaking for the sake of speaking" forces us to relocate the meaning of linguistic or para-linguistic statements. We are led to abandon meaning (in the sense of references to entities outside the art work) as the criterion for the language of art in favor of "use." (Wittgenstein's famous thesis, "the meaning is the use," can be, should be, rigorously applied to art.)

"Meaning" partially or totally converted into "use" is the secret behind the widespread strategy of literalness, a major development of the aesthetics of silence. A variant on this: hidden literality, exemplified by such different writers as Kafka and Beckett. The narratives of Kafka and Beckett seem puzzling because they appear to invite the reader to ascribe high-powered symbolic and allegorical meanings to them and, at the same time, repel such ascriptions. The truth is that their language, when it is examined, discloses no more than what it literally means. The power of their language derives precisely from the fact that the meaning is so bare.

The effect of such bareness is often a kind of anxiety — like the anxiety one feels when familiar things aren't in their place or playing their accustomed role. One may be made as anxious by unexpected literalness as by the Surrealists' "disturbing" objects and unexpected scale and condition of objects conjoined in an imaginary landscape.

Whatever is wholly mysterious is at once both psychically relieving and anxiety provoking. (A perfect machine for agitating this pair of contrary emotions: the Bosch drawing in a Dutch museum that shows trees furnished with two ears at the sides of their trunks, as if they were listening to the forest, while the forest floor is strewn with eyes.) Before a fully conscious work of art, one feels something like the mixture of anxiety, detachment, pruriency, and relief a physically sound person feels when he glimpses an amputee. Beckett speaks favorably of a work of art which would be a "Total object, complete with missing parts, instead of partial object. Question of degree."

Exactly what a totality is, what constitutes completeness in art (or anything else) is precisely the problem. That problem is, in principle, an unresolvable one. The fact is, that whatever way a work of art is, it could have been — could be — different. The necessity of these parts in this order is never a given state; it is conferred. The refusal to admit this essential contingency (or openness) is what inspires the audience's will to confirm the closedness of a work of art by interpreting it, and what creates the feeling common among reflective artists and critics that the artwork is always somehow in arrears of or inadequate to its "subject."

But unless one is committed to the idea that art "expresses" something, these procedures and attitudes are far from inevitable.

## XIX

**This tenacious concept of art as "expression" is what gives rise to one common, but dubious, version of the notion of silence, which invokes the idea of "the ineffable." The theory supposes that the province of art is "the beautiful," which implies effects of unspeakableness, indescribability, ineffability. Indeed, the search to express the inexpressible is taken as the very criterion of art; and sometimes,**

**for instance, in several essays of Valéry, becomes the occasion for a strict — and to my mind untenable — distinction between prose literature and poetry. It is from this basis that Valéry advanced his famous argument (repeated in a quite different context by Sartre) that the novel is not, strictly speaking, an art form at all. His reason is that since the aim of prose is to communicate, the use of language in prose is perfectly straightforward. Poetry, being an art, should have quite different aims: to express an experience which is essentially ineffable; using language to express muteness.** In contrast to prose writers, poets are engaged in subverting their own instrument: and seeking to pass beyond it.

Insofar as this theory assumes that art is concerned with Beauty, it isn't very interesting. (Modern aesthetics is crippled by its dependence upon this essentially vacant concept. As if art were "about" beauty, as science is "about" truth!) But even if the theory dispenses with the notion of Beauty, there is still a more serious objection to be made. The view that the expression of the ineffable is an eternal function of poetry (considered as a paradigm of all the arts) is naively unhistorical. While surely a perennial category of consciousness, the ineffable has certainly not always made its home in the arts. Its traditional shelter was in religious discourse and, secondarily (cf. the 7th Epistle of Plato), in philosophy. The fact that contemporary artists are concerned with silence — and, therefore, in one extension, with the ineffable — must be understood historically, as a consequence of the prevailing myth of the "absoluteness" of art to which I've referred throughout the present argument. The value placed on silence doesn't arise by virtue of the nature of art, but is derived from the contemporary ascription of certain "absolute" qualities to the art object and to the activity of the artist.

The extent to which art is involved with the ineffable is something more specific, as well as contemporary: art, in the modern conception, is always connected with systematic transgressions of a formal sort. The systematic violation of older formal conventions practiced by modern artists gives their work a certain aura of the unspeakable — for instance, as the audience uneasily senses the negative presence of what else could be, but isn't being, said; and as any "statement" made in an aggressively new or difficult form tends to seem equivocal or merely vacant. But these features of ineffability must not be acknowledged at the expense of one's awareness of the positivity of the work of art. Contemporary art, no matter how much it's defined itself by a taste for negation, can still be analyzed as a set of assertions, of a formal kind.

For instance, each work of art gives us a form or paradigm or model of knowing something, an epistemology. But viewed as a spiritual project, a vehicle of aspirations toward an absolute, what any work of art supplies is a specific model for meta-social or meta-ethical tact, a standard of decorum. Each art-work indicates the unity of certain preferences about what can and cannot be said (or represented). At the same time that it may make a tacit proposal for upsetting previously consecrated rulings on what can be said (or represented), it issues its own set of limits.

## XX

Two styles in which silence is advocated: loud and soft.

The loud style is a function of the unstable antithesis of "plenum" and "void." Notoriously, the sensuous, ecstatic, translinguistic apprehension of the plenum can collapse in a terrible, almost instantaneous plunge into the void of negative silence. With all its awareness of risk-taking (the hazards of spiritual nausea, even of madness), this advocacy of silence tends to be frenetic, and overgeneralizing. It is also frequently apocalyptic, and must



endure the indignity of all apocalyptic thinking: namely, to prophecy the end, to see the day come, to outlive it, and then to set a new date for the incineration of consciousness and the definitive pollution of language and exhaustion of the possibilities of art-discourse.

The other way of talking about silence is more cautious. Basically, it presents itself as an extension of a main feature of traditional classicism: the concern with modes of propriety, with standards of seemliness. Silence is only "reticence" stepped up to the nth degree. Of course, in the translation of this concern from the matrix of traditional classical art, the tone has changed — from didactic seriousness to ironic open-mindedness. But while the clamorous style of proclaiming the rhetoric of silence may seem more passionate, more subdued advocates (like Cage, Johns) are saying something equally drastic. They are reacting to the same idea of art's absolute aspirations (by programmatic disavowals of art); they share the same disdain for the "meanings" established by bourgeois rationalist culture, indeed for culture itself in the familiar sense. But what is voiced by the Futurists, some of the [Dada](#) artists, and Burroughs as a harsh despair and perverse vision of apocalypse, is no less serious for being proclaimed in a polite voice and as a sequence of playful affirmation. Indeed, it could be argued that silence is likely to remain a viable notion for modern art and consciousness only so far as it's deployed with a considerable, near systematic irony.

It is in the nature of all spiritual projects to tend to consume themselves — exhausting their own sense, the very meaning of the terms in which they are couched. (Which is why "spirituality" must be continually reinvented.) All genuinely ultimate projects of consciousness eventually become projects for the unravelling of thought itself.

Certainly, art conceived as a spiritual project is no exception. As an abstracted and fragmented replica of the positive nihilism

expounded by the radical religious myths, the serious art of our time has moved increasingly toward the most excruciating inflections of consciousness. Conceivably, irony is the only feasible counterweight to this grave use of art, as the arena for the ordeal of consciousness. The present prospect is that artists will go on abolishing art, only to resurrect it in a more retracted version. As long as art bears up under the pressure of chronic interrogation, it would seem a good thing that some of the questions have a certain playful quality.

But this prospect depends, perhaps, on the viability of irony itself.

From Socrates forward, there are countless witnesses to the value of irony for the private individual: as a complex, serious method of seeking and holding one's truth, and as a method of saving one's sanity. But as irony becomes the good taste of what is, after all, an essentially collective activity — the making of art — it may prove less serviceable.

One need not speak as categorically as Nietzsche, who thought the spread of irony throughout a culture always signified the floodtide of decadence and the approaching end of that culture's vitality and powers. In the post-political, electronically connected cosmopolis in which all serious modern artists have taken out premature citizenship, certain organic connections between culture and "thinking" (and art is certainly now, mainly, a form of thinking) may have been broken, so that Nietzsche's diagnosis no longer applies. Still, there remains a question as to how far the resources of irony can be stretched. It seems unlikely that the possibilities of continually undermining one's assumptions can go on unfolding indefinitely into the future, without being eventually checked by despair or by a laugh that leaves one without any breath at all.

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