

Bennington College • Bennington • Vermont • 05201 • 802:442-5401

July 27, 1976

Dear Mr. Agard,

Richard Tristman asked me several months ago to send you this, but it got lost in a pile of papers. He wanted me to request you to place this program on permanent file in the library as a record of Bill Dixon's concert, which with its program notes represents a venture by two divisions of the college, a rare occurrence in recent years at the college. Thank you.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Camille Paglia". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Camille Paglia

"THIS////is OUR Strategy"

composed by BILL DIXON  
performed by ENSEMBLE IV

guest soloist: JIMMY LYONS  
[alto saxophone]

BENNINGTON COLLEGE, BENNINGTON, Vermont  
May 22, 1976

"THIS////is OUR Strategy"

a composition for ensemble/voices/  
pre-recorded tape/alto saxophone solo/  
six people that move and chorus

"Intelligence and passion; there is no art  
without emotion, no emotion without passion"

Le Corbusier

There is always a pleasure involved in the creation of a new work/so many things have to fall into order/hopefully they will fall into a new order/one that you, the composer will not have allowed yourself to have fallen into previously. There is also much work; time and soul searching concomitant with that pain. The pain of revealing to others what it is that you are in almost fruitless pursuit of. [The whippet and the mechanical rabbit/a man in hopeless pursuit of his own behind or beginning??] What does it all mean or why should it mean anything? Music in the final analysis only expresses music. It is the listener that provides the other things that are supposed to make listening to something an absolute possibility for them. Concerns: rhythm/time: its passage, or for so many, its lack of passage/harmony, that amorphous body of verticality that supposedly is the citidal of western music and then/ the lever of all; the totem pole of life, the structural pillar of all: RHYTHM/ that which we, in our almost psuedo-sophisticated day to day existence seem to sneer at. Dance-music/programmatic-music/absolute music.

The sun comes out and then there are those  
everpresent clouds. The Indians were right.

The sound of the saxophone/the vocal stridency of the alto flute cresting to what is not 'right' for its register according to Piston. The non-flexibility of the trombone/according to the tenants of Forysthe; but didn't Louis say 'all music's gotta be folk music 'cause [he] hadn't heard no horse sing no song'?? The politics of action or the non-politics of non action. We are what we are/we can be no more and can, in a sense, be no less/although there are those among us that try.

So this piece is about all the things that you, the listener, will choose to bring to it. If noise strikes your fancy/then be my guest/if the idea that there is something there that is indeed of substance and compelling; something that will make you both think and feel then we will have touched fingers in the beginnings of a hand clasp. I have not done this piece for you. I have done it for myself as I have all of my work. I could not have done this particular work without the help, patience, anger/at times/ and devotion of all of the players: those that play instruments in the work and those that help me play my ideas verbally to them/either by shouting; cursing; expounding on the unexpoundable and sometimes even letting the tears of both rage and frustration loose. The last ten years have been incredible: the last two have been almost indescribable.

*Bill Dixon* / 1976



The following quotation from Charlie Parker forms the text which is recited during tonight's performance of the new composition by musician-composer Bill Dixon.

"I don't know how I made it through those years. I became bitter, hard, cold. I was always on a panic-- couldn't buy clothes or a good place to live. Finally, on the Coast, I didn't have any place to stay, until somebody put me up in a converted garage. The mental strain was getting worse all the time. What made it worst of all was that nobody understood our kind of music out on the Coast. I can't begin to tell you how I yearned for New York. Finally, I broke down."

"HEAR ME TALKIN' TO YA"  
by Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff

# MEMBERS OF ENSEMBLE IV

Don Kaplan	alto saxophone
Jay Ash	baritone saxophone
John Love	tener saxophone
Stephen Horenstein	tenor saxophone
Adam Fisher	soprano saxophone
Susan Feiner	alto flute
Glynnis Loman	cello
Jim Tifft	trumpet
Arthur Brooks	trumpet
Bill Dixon	trumpet
Jeff Hoyer	trombone
Larry Jacobs	guitar
Dor Ben Ametz	bass guitar
David Warren	fender bass/acoustic bass
John Squires	fender bass
Buddy Booker	fender bass
Henry Letcher	percussion
Jeff Locklin	percussion
Dennis Warren	percussion
John Klink	Percussion
Daniel Lilienstein	voice
Jackie Kramer	voice
Ariel Ashwell	voice
Lisa Sokolov	voice
Robin Wilson	movement person
Kathryn Thomas	movement person
Sara Mathiessen	movement person
Hillel Kraus	movement person
Laurence Andres	movement person
Jimmy Lyons	guest/alto saxophonist
Leslie Winston	piano

Lighting: Peter Clark  
Costumes: Janet Juskovitz

Special thanks to the Divisions of Dance and Drama and to the chorus of voices/Richard Tristman/Camille Paglia and Susan MacGregor

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## ORNITHOLOGY

Charles Parker is the "subject" of tonight's music, but rather in the sense that he possesses it--as past authority may be said to possess and to animate present expression--than in the sense that he has been acquired by it as a kind of sentimental property, a fragment of "culture," its energy withdrawn in the process of convenient retrospection. Bird's word does constitute a brief, moving libretto within Bill Dixon's composition; and, of course, in a larger sense, Bird's copious legacy furnishes the diction and the grammar upon which this work (like every authentic venture of the beleaguered art called black music) draws. But it would be sham to display the legacy with gestures that must defy it, and Bird did not offer himself to his successors as an inert, thought-stilling fetish. (But perhaps it is the mark of the facile artist and the trimming critic to regard him as such, and to reprove the modernists, who have been educated in his cosmopolitan intentions, for their deviationism.) The present work has to do, not with Bird's melodic and rhythmic inventions alone, but with his authority, his formative pressure, which no serious black-musician has been able to resist or willing to resent.

It was the authority of an inspired exegete, a cheerful disposer, but not a depreciator, of the old texts, an interpreter whose astonishing freedoms seemed privileges owed his comprehensive intelligence and which, in any case, were compassionate and not licentious freedoms. Strength is always glad to acknowledge strength. Though Bird was not, of course, the first to suffer the special dejection of his art--that, where most of its patronage was concerned, it bore the name of art solely by a kind of metaphorical courtesy and had, when one came down to it, the prior obligation to please a distracted, and perhaps truculent, public, to add some figurative mirth (or some remote, hypothetical sorrow) to the urbane murmur of the cabaret--he was the first, I think, to understand the proportions of the mistake. The antagonism between art and popularity is inveterate. But "jazz" was taken in its essence to be "popular art," an irrational compound. Bird was the first practitioner of that art to understand what a successful assault upon that irrationality must involve. He saw, with precocious clarity, where blandishment must end and statement begin. He saw that art has little to do even with the graces that sometimes legitimately attend it, let alone with the submissive insipidities that were so often demanded of his. His earliest work already shows evidence that he knew the essence of art to be nothing else than its power to coerce from the language at hand distinctions more exact than the terms of that language were ever meant to yield. And thus redeemed, he made possible the redemption of the liberal art within black music, replacing glibness with discontinuity, easy coherence with adventurous cogency. In effect, he liberated aptitudes, and subordinated artifacts to them. (Black music is not a reifying art; it is given over to another economy.

Bill Dixon's composition about Bird not only asserts, but

demonstrates, its affiliation with him. For it too is an exegesis, a memoration without nostalgia, of the entire historical lexicon of black music, upon which its modernity looks with that incisive gaiety--one part simple love, and another canniness, and one more, perhaps, the intuition that freedom has something to do with the natural perishability of meanings--that unmistakably identifies the authoritative intelligence.

Richard Tristman  
Literature Division



Bill Dixon and Bennington

At this moment of the dedication of an arts building which multiplies many times over the amount of space available in which to practice the various arts at Bennington, it is appropriate to turn our thoughts to a larger issue, never even thought of, much less probingly discussed, in the late unlamented Futures Report: Bennington's connection with a historical phenomenon recently in process of rapid change--the avant-garde.

Bennington is internationally associated with the movement of abstractionism in American art which began in the late forties and which came to full flower in the early fifties. Abstract art is, along with modern dance, the foundation of our reputation as a symbol of the avant-garde. But Bennington has yet to face the implications of the universal acceptance of abstract art, its profitable patronage by the bourgeoisie, and the consequent draining from it of all avant-garde significance, a process which was noted by serious commentators as early as 1959.

For what happens when a radical gesture becomes a convention, when the avant-garde becomes the Academy, when heresy becomes orthodoxy? When motel chains routinely display mass-produced imitations of Jackson Pollock paintings, when color-field paintings are the customary ornamentation of corporate board rooms, when giant office buildings commission an obligatory free-form sculpture for their courtyards, what has happened to the avant-garde message of abstract art? What are the consequences of an avant-garde artist earning \$20,000 per picture?

The alliance of abstract art with privilege, power, and wealth has the gravest implications for the tradition of the avant-garde, and ultimately for Bennington. When an avant-garde artist is acclaimed and feted by the upper-middle class and reaps rich monetary rewards from that association, then it requires a tremendous spiritual asceticism, a punishing moral self-discipline to cleave to the principles of opposition, of dissent which motivate an avant-garde movement in its beginnings.

The danger of success for an avant-garde artist is that he or she may begin to identify with the patron, with the rich and the mighty, the rulers of the world. But the identification of artist and patron is possible only in those rare privileged moments in western history when the artist is one with the public aspirations of his society: classical Athens, Renaissance Florence, Elizabethan London. This is remote indeed from our cultural situation. For the contemporary artist to cease to maintain a critical position in regard to the complacencies and homogeneity of our bourgeois culture, with its characteristic reduction and trivialization of ideas to the level of mass-media newsmagazines, is not only to have surrendered the moral authority of art but, more immediately, to have sold the soul of Bennington to Mammon.



What is the genuine avant-garde? Hilton Kramer (The Age of the Avant-Garde) speaks of the avant-garde as "the critical and increasingly combative conscience of bourgeois civilization." Leo Steinberg ("Contemporary Art") emphasizes "the discomfort to be had from modern art:" "Modern art always projects itself into a twilight zone where no values are fixed. It is always born in anxiety... It seems to me a function of modern art to transmit this anxiety to the spectator... Like Kierkegaard's God, the work molests us with its aggressive absurdity." A truly modern picture "seems arbitrary, cruel, irrational."

Renato Poggioli (The Theory of the Avant-Garde) defines the avant-garde as a "reaction against the modern debasement of art in mass culture and popular art." "The task of avant-gardism is to struggle against articulate public opinion, against traditional and academic culture, against the bourgeois intelligentsia." "If the avant-garde has an etiquette, it consists of perverting and wholly subverting conventional deportment,... 'good manners.'" The avant-garde is a "spirit of hostility and opposition;" its most characteristic mood is one of "alienation."

Harold Rosenberg (Tradition of the New) speaks of the avant-garde as being part of "the revolution against the given, in the self and in the world" which has been central to western culture since the early nineteenth century. In Discovering the Present Rosenberg declares that "the avant-gardes embody the cruelty and tragedy of modern life:" "The stimulation of metaphysical uneasiness is an inevitable effect of avant-garde creations... No work is avant-garde that does not induce uneasiness,... and once the effect of uneasiness is lost the work ceases to be advanced. Thus the painting and sculpture, now in vogue in modern-art museums and international exhibitions, that claim to be avant-garde through their handling of formal problems are disqualified on the grounds of complacency."

Discomfort, anxiety, opposition, alienation, metaphysical uneasiness: where are these essential characteristics of modernism in the abstract art which is associated with Bennington? This style of painting and sculpture, which was revolutionary twenty-five years ago, has become the establishment, embraced by the bourgeoisie, supported by the press, the galleries, the museums. It takes much more courage to be a representationalist today than to be an abstract artist. I do not mean to impugn the validity of abstract art; it is as valid as any other important style in the history of art. I do mean to assert, however, that abstract art is now devoid of avant-garde significance, and that if we are to locate the avant-garde in western culture, we must look elsewhere.

Bennington, to remain true to the highest ideals upon which it was founded, must remain restlessly mobile, constantly challenging each new convention as it becomes an orthodoxy. The mission of the college is to expose the complacencies in every new orthodoxy, even the orthodoxies which it was instrumental in bringing to birth. If Bennington permits itself to be anchored to one particular style in the arts, then as the decades and generations pass, the institution will become calcified, dated, irrelevant, increasingly victimized by nostalgia. The college must not let itself be caught by cultural lag.



Bennington represents not abstract art but perpetual challenges to all prevailing, comfortably settled aesthetic and intellectual systems of belief, and when abstract art has become an orthodoxy, then it is Bennington's duty to seek the avant-garde elsewhere, where it is under continuing attack.

Fortunate indeed are those artistic disciplines which have managed to escape the fate of abstract art, which has been turned by the upper-middle class into decor. Modern dance, for example, because it is pure movement, because it is not a commodity which can be purchased by the rich and displayed in a Park Avenue apartment, has managed to remain untainted by this historical process. In this sense avant-garde music has also been fortunate, for it too has escaped, by virtue of the temporal nature of its medium, the proprietorship of the "collector."

Bill Dixon is a genuinely avant-garde artist. His music cannot provide a chic, discreet backdrop to a cocktail party, in the manner of an expensive abstract painting; it cannot be used, like chamber music, as an elegant accompaniment to a dinner party; it cannot serve as dance music at a college weekend. It is not recreational; it is not easy listening. His music does not flatter or soothe the listener; it extends no jovial invitation to Gemutlichkeit; it contains no reassuring message of the essential goodness of bourgeois society. It does not endorse the sentiments of easy optimism regarding the nature of society, progress, or human psychology which are the inheritance of classical liberalism. This music abrades, challenges, disorients.

There is no consolation here; those who seek assurance of a principle of benevolence pervading the universe will not find it in Bill Dixon's music. For the tradition of black music of which he is an advanced exponent, the reality of experience is suffering, pain, sacrifice, bitterness, anger. In the urgency of this black music at its most intense we find an untamed energy, a violence of emotion and expression; we find all the resistant opacity of modernism, the modernism which abstract art has lost. The black music which is practiced at Bennington is still unabsorbed by the bourgeoisie, for it is too raw, savage, unnerving; it possesses too much enriching estrangement, too much "metaphysical uneasiness."

The value in Bill Dixon for Bennington is that, as an artist and as a man, he is still, philosophically, psychologically, on the edge; there has been no relaxation, no surrender to the safe and the settled. He is a man still in inward ferment, still searching, still developing; he is commanding, "difficult." His music is often ferociously abstract, stern, austere.

Bill Dixon's centrality to Bennington became suddenly clear in recent months when his discipline was attacked, by virtue of being ignored, by the formulators of the Bennington Summers program, who were largely persons outside of the college community. When his music was dispensed with because it was not "marketable," excluded because it was not "central," not palatable to general taste, Bill Dixon's uncompromising artistic commitment was made visible to those of us in other divisions of the college. The attempts which were made to



disparage him were the means by which it became starkly apparent that, culturally, Bill represents everything which Bennington is sworn to support, everything which Bennington is internationally famous for fostering and protecting.

That Bill Dixon has resisted the monetary rewards of mass acceptance, that he has refused to bow to fashion, that he practices an aesthetic which can be assaulted, misunderstood, isolated in this way is good news for Bennington College, for the existence of such a discipline here, in the wake of the widespread death of the avant-garde, means that Bennington's radical credentials are, at least in one area, still intact; it is one of our few remaining strongholds of avant-garde "authenticity." Without a beleaguered art to nurture, Bennington would lose a good deal of its raison d'etre.

In these recent months many of us at Bennington were shocked to be made to realize how frail are the means by which black culture is able to defend itself, how near are the hucksters and the hustlers, how inevitable the cycle of exploitation. And although it is the moral obligation of the successful artist to maintain a spiritual detachment from success and to be vigilant in the protection of still-struggling avant-garde artists, what apathy, what indifference there was in the face of the usurpation of the right of artistic self-determination at Bennington. How low in the list of priorities were aesthetic principles as opposed to considerations of decorum, "civility," tranquility. But Bennington is Bennington only when it is full of tension, ardor, and spiritual fire.

As we inaugurate our new arts building, let us meditate upon the meaning of Bennington College. If we are too hypnotized by past triumphs, we will be unable to produce future triumphs, and Bennington's prestige will not survive into the twenty-first century. Let us be motivated by a renewed resolution and commitment to the boldness, independence, and uniqueness which have made Bennington renowned. At this moment in the history of the college the Black Music Division is central to the identity of Bennington, for we may find here all of the old avant-garde integrity, defiance, and power. As we listen tonight to the stunningly beautiful and authoritative opening movement of Bill Dixon's piece, it will not be difficult to honor him.

Camille A. Paglia  
Literature Division