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Contextual Practices: Ways of Perceiving (M4X01559)

Written Submission: 1251 words

What Does Music Look Like?

Overview

Group B's intention is to facilitate cross-disciplinary collaborations between visual artists and musicians. To this end we would establish a rolling week-long residency, during which pairs of artists and musicians would be invited to inspire each other in creating new works that exist simultaneously as visual art and music. The twin outcomes from each week's residency might therefore typically be a 'graphic score' and a musical performance of that score.

Background

When the Pere Ubu singer David Thomas told Mojo magazine that he "perceive[d] sound and music

in terms of geometry and perspective” (Thomas, 2017), he was articulating both his synaesthesia and the strangeness many of us experience when our perception of the visual intrudes on that of the aural. Although Einstein (1905) unified the physical phenomena of space and time more than a century ago in his special theory of relativity, our sensory perceptions of their effects seem to run on separate neurological and cognitive tracks, so that any crossover – for example, “hearing” colours or shapes – appears bizarre, psychedelic or simply aberrant.

If, therefore, we concede that the visual arts work predominantly with space and that music is likewise dependent on time, then our group’s thought experiment – of a residency bringing visual and musical practitioners together in collaboration – appears to be an attempt to bridge two fundamentally irreconcilable areas of creative endeavour: a Grand Unified Theory of the arts. Yet, far from being an uncharted Sargasso Sea of the mind, the imagined space between the two disciplines is a crowded shipping lane of ideas, trading back and forth for centuries, so that even the language we use to describe music is frequently visual: from phrases such as ‘tone colour’ to Brian Eno’s characterisation of musical minimalism as “a drift away from narrative and towards landscape” (cited in Ross, 2007 : 517).

The composer John Cage once declared that “we’re involved with seeing now” (quoted in Kostelanetz, 2003 : 107), and later emphasised his point by conducting a work in complete darkness, engendering in the performers a powerful sense of temporal dislocation (Nyman, 1974 : 13). Yet Cage will have known that the intersection of music and spacial dimensions is ancient, dating back to at least the sixth century BCE, when Pythagoras is said to have devised a harmonic sequence based on lengths of string (Huffman, 2014). The critic Walter Pater (1877) famously asserted that “all art constantly aspires to the condition of music”; meanwhile in Russia, Mussorgsky was aspiring in the opposite direction with ‘Pictures at an Exhibition’, inspired by the painter Viktor Hartmann (Latham, 2002). As if taking Pater at his word, the proto-abstractionist Kandinsky attempted to erase the distinction between art and music, seeing colour and form in terms of musical objects (McBurney, 2006), while his contemporary Paul Klee often seemed to hang his drawings on staves and might almost have been anticipating our project with his statement that “art does not represent the visible, but makes visible” (cited in Huggler, 1965).

Much of this synaesthetic chatter was ephemeral and subjective: artists reacting across the divide. A select few may have been interested to know that, to the composer Scriabin, a G major chord was

orange-coloured (McBurney, 2006), but as a semantic blank it rivals Chomsky's notorious "colourless green ideas sleep furiously". From the 1950s, however, composers such as Morton Feldman, Cage, Cornelius Cardew and Krzysztof Penderecki, chafing against the restrictions of traditional musical form, went a step further by dispensing with standard notation and experimenting with so-called graphic scores that were intended for actual performance. Today, many such works exist primarily as relics of mid-century high modernism, but some contemporary composers, such as Jennifer Walshe, still use graphical and textual notation to introduce elements of theatre, linguistics and social commentary into their work (Sheen, 2016).

For many practitioners on both sides, the ineffable lacuna between space-based and time-based arts exerts a strong fascination, and we have every reason to hope that our residency project will result in unique and thought-provoking work.

The Process

We anticipate that, typically, the visual practitioner will create a piece that 'looks across' to her collaborator, who will interpret that work as a graphic score or set of musical instructions. In other words, musical gestures will be visualised in a way that is, if not definitive, then at least intentional. This will not be merely a response to heard sound, but rather the visual creation of music from whole cloth.

The artist's first task is likely to be determining how much, and what, musical information to impart in her score. On a technical level, music exists as a combination of defined elements, such as melody, rhythm, metre, harmony and dynamics. However, it is arguably no less valid to perceive music simply as a succession of sound objects varying in loudness, pitch, timbre and duration. Taking a similar approach to scoring – emphasising contrast, texture, repetition and space at the expense of musical precision or prescription – allows for maximum freedom for both artist and performer and is exemplified by works such as Cilla McQueen's vibrant score for 'Picnic' (2006). It also opens the way for avant-garde works such as Walshe's 'THIS IS WHY PEOPLE O.D. ON PILLS/AND JUMP FROM THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE' (2004) in which performers are explicitly invited to imagine their own works according to loose criteria printed on a T-shirt (d'Heudieres, 2015).

We can see this loose, impressionistic style of sound-visualization in the Early Medieval development of neumes, proto-notational squiggles applied to manuscripts of chants as an aide memoire to the singers (Kelly, 2015 : 10). Each neume formally embodies a particular musical gesture or movement without reference to specific pitches or timings, and, when arrayed across the page, project a distinctly modern appearance, at times closely resembling the mark-making of Klee, or Kandinsky's in his musically inspired 'Impression' works.

Neumes and their predecessors, the chironomic notational marks first seen in ancient Palestine and Egypt (Chanan, 1994 : 54), reflect the move across much of the world from pictographic to phonetic writing systems, in which letters, diphthongs and syllables encoded real sounds as visual signs (Kelly, 2015 : 29). Earlier notational systems were purely diagrammatic: fingering charts for Babylonian lutanists pressed into clay (Kelly, 2015 : 18). These distant cousins of modern guitar tablature offer our visual practitioners an alternative approach in which the score consists of mechanical instructions divorced from notions of self-expression and interpretation. Furthermore, their earthy materiality suggests ways in which our residency could be opened up to practitioners in more tactile, craft-based forms. The intrinsic patterning in woven cloth, for example, might lend itself to the notation of rhythmic material. A maker might bring industrial design concepts to bear on creating new musical paradigms, in the same way that the piano keyboard synthesizes Euclidean geometry (Chanan, 1994 : 182), eleventh-century musical theory (Kelly, 2015 : 72) and eighteenth-century advances in horology (Chanan, 1994 : 198), while at the same time embodying an entire set of cultural assumptions around reading and colour.

Unconventional presentations of musical ideas can appear baffling and opaque at first sight. However, open-minded musicians may find that such innovations shift the priorities between composer and performer in intriguing and unpredictable ways, introducing elements of indeterminacy and placing a greater burden of interpretation on the player (Schwartz and Godfrey, 1993 : 395). The challenge for our cross-disciplinary collaborators will be to produce work that communicates across the space-time synapse in a way that is meaningful, novel and, above all, pleasurable.

Illustrations

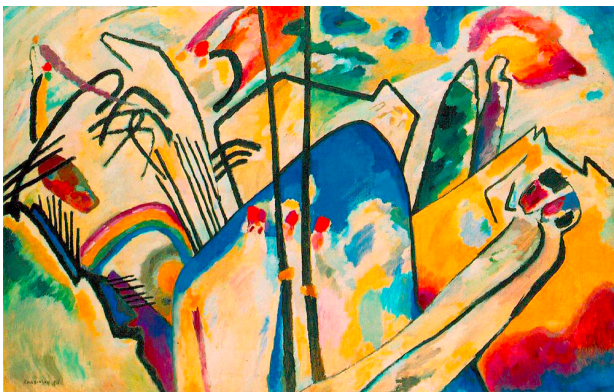


Figure 1: Wassily Kandinsky, 'Impression III (Concert)', (1911)

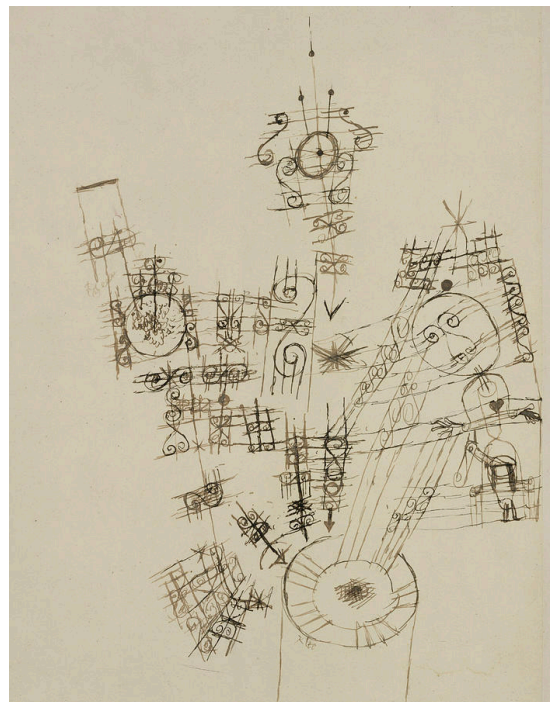


Figure 2: Paul Klee, 'The Last Adventure of the Knight Errant' (1922)

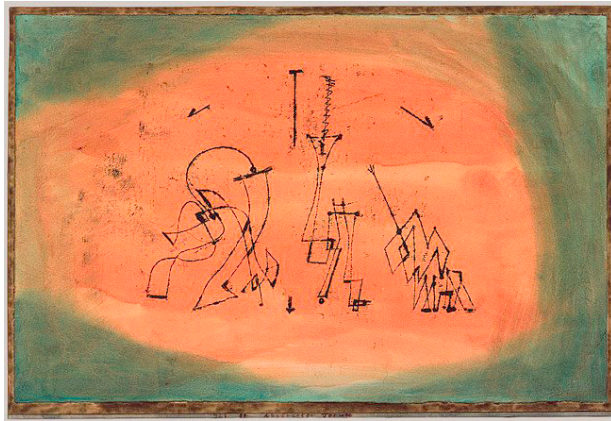


Figure 3: Paul Klee, 'Abstract Trio' (1923)

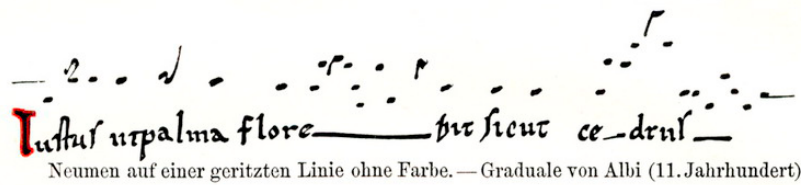


Figure 4: Neumes



Figure 5: Cilla McQueen, 'Picnic' (2006)

THIS IS WHY PEOPLE O.D. ON PILLS /AND JUMP FROM THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE

This piece is performed by 1-10 performers performing on any instruments (including vocal). Each performer prepares and practices their own individual 'path' according to the directions given below. The piece consists of the performance of these 'paths'.

If the piece is performed by a soloist, it should be a minimum duration of 5 minutes long, and is called 'THIS IS WHY PEOPLE O.D. ON PILLS'.

If the piece is performed by a group, the group should agree on a performance duration (minimum 10 minutes). Each member of the group's path should be a minimum duration of 5 minutes long, and a performer can begin/end their path anywhere within the chosen performance duration. A performance by a group is called 'I AND JUMP FROM THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE'.

Directions:

1. Learn to skateboard, however primitively. Re-learn your body's weight, muscles, bones, geometry, abilities, flash-points, aliveness. Meditate on pressure, torque, weight, movement, air, light, space, lines. Focus minutely on surface, micro-surface, bumps, cracks, debris, concrete, asphalt, granite, marble, plastic, wood, gradients, slopes, verticals, the architectural qualities of what you skate on, the 'wallness of wall'. See, smell, hear, feel, how your body relates to the board and through it to space. Try to learn or at least attempt a few tricks.
2. Augment this experience by watching skaters, visiting skateparks, viewing skateboard photos, videos, looking at skating magazines, books, films, websites. Try to understand and absorb what you see with your body, internalizing these ways of achieving speed, height, weightlessness, skating the paths virtually with full attention.
3. Examine and meditate on optimum skating environments, either real or imagined, taking in the macro- and micro-structure of these environments. Go for a walk and imagine being able to skate everything you see – streets, roads, walls, trees, curbs, planters, slopes, gardens, bins, lamp-posts, footpaths, bushes, cars, signs, window-sills, ramps, shopping trolleys, pools, slides, bollards, roofs, benches, cows, hand-rails, fences, edges, lips, steps, drains, ditches, rims, gutters. Contemplate the ability of skate-boarding to articulate space, find new paths through architecture, fresh uses for it, notice and exploit visible/invisible relationships.
4. Compose an imaginary path you would like to skate. This path should push and force you to limits, be rich, beautiful, complicated and stylish, and incorporate some tricks. The path is limited only by your imagination. Internalise this path, skate and inhabit it in terms of body, space and time. Feel space moving around you as you articulate your lines, intersecting, crossing, glancing, spinning away, grabbing at movements and air, smells and sounds.
5. Choose a pitch on your instrument. Skate your imagined path on this pitch. (You may choose to skate the path in slow-motion.) Every micro-detail of the pitch (tuning, timbre, dynamic, envelope, consistency, colour, texture, weight, feel, pressure, clarity, strength) should correspond absolutely to the experience of skating the path in your head. Pay attention to every minute detail, the micro-cartography of the path you are skating, the tiny shifts in muscle, weight, speed, direction. Carve through air in long, sweeping paths with the sound you produce. Reveal and inhabit new spaces, smooth new lines.

MILKER Corp. 2004

Pictures from upper left: ddbw/ner/fo-hands, like aerial performed by its creator (Ben Goffard, picture taken by James Castaldi); photo of Christine Wale; Abraham, on C&K Skateparks; unknown female, picture taken by Captain; Martin Wagner, Mark Gonzales grinds a handrail, photographer unknown. File taken from 'Weightless Again' on YouTube (Nov 1998) by The Handcuffs Family

Figure 6: Jennifer Walshe, 'THIS IS WHY PEOPLE O.D. ON PILLS/AND JUMP FROM THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE' (2004)

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