

"Per se" Sound

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ABSTRACT

Many correlations have appeared between music and visual art over the course of time, and not few were those who mastered and practiced both means of expression and founded their creative experience on the said correlations. This study focuses on the visual artists who used such experiences in their work, and also on some cultural contexts in which visual art borrowed some of the cognitive characteristics of music and brought them into its specific field of interest, i.e. the visual language, thus leading to hybrid forms of art, which in time have become new forms of contemporary art, where sound serves as the main operating element.

Keywords

visual art, color, painting, harmony, music, sound, vibration, noise

INTRODUCTION

The means of expression pertaining to visual art and music have become intertwined over the course of time, in close relation with the social contexts in which such manifestations have taken place, with their role and function in a perpetually changing society in which the artist "is permanently designing new ways to adapt and new justifications for the experience" (Eco, 2002). However, these have also depended on the liberties that the artist takes in regards to conventions, dogmatism and constraints, to all the shifts in understanding and significance that have appeared in time as a cultural process, as the authentic artist position themselves in constant contradiction to the "status quo".

The original need for creative manifestation – visual, corporeal, musical - was probably united in a common form of magic symbolism through rituals, motivated by the facilitation of hunting and the insurance of existence under divine permission and protection.

The well-known visual organization of cave paintings in registers (lower and upper), was meant to suggest vertical transcendence, weightlessness.

The detachment and autonomy of artists as actors in the *social game* were attained when the artistic gesture was freed of any practical justification/necessity, when artists no longer needed to transform their experience in meaning. The Renaissance period somehow initiated such a moment, making the artists beings that relied on their own judgement, free to create correlations between their acquired knowledge and the media in which they experimented.

HISTORICAL REPORTS OF MUSIC - VISUAL ART INTERACTION

The humanistic preoccupation for art, allowing the connection with the analytical approach of the ancient times, facilitated this transfer of knowledge from one medium to another, experimenting with the rules of composition in relation to the division of the work area sides, according to some mathematical ratios used in music for dividing the strings. These conclusions were systematized (Bouleau, 1979) by Leon Batista Alberti in his theoretical work entitled *De re edificatoria*, which appeared in Florence in 1485. Here, Alberti explained the musical intervals pleasant to the ear (octave - $1/2$, the perfect fifth - $2/3$, the perfect fourth - $3/4$) which correspond to the division of a string in two, three and four parts. These proportions, called *diapason*, *diapente* and *diatessaron*, were thought to be able to render perfect harmony to any work of art. They could be modified according to logic, for instance they could be doubled or combined if the size of the support and the complexity of the composition asked for it.

These proportions helped place the so-called *key moments* of the composition. For example, in Botticelli's *The birth of Venus*, the sides are virtually divided in 16 equal parts. By joining point 9 from the top with the one on the bottom in reverse, one obtains an oblique line: the main character of the painting is placed according to this line. This is a double diatessaron. The famous *Primavera* is a double diapente. The heroine is placed between divisions 4 and 6 of the painted area, while all the other divisions keep the musical ratio $4/6/9$.

Such compositional structures can be found in Mantegna, Piero della Francesca, Leonardo, Rafael, etc.

Subsequently, the bourgeois evocation and representation became again tributary to order, rigor and certainty, as the case had been in the Middle Ages, adding constraint and excluding exploration.

Florin Maxa notes the fact that painting goes beyond the laws of gravity, it is no longer anchored in the pure physicality of mimetic rendering, so it reaches the symbolic plane, bringing the suggestion of weightlessness with it (the figures, free of all surplus, marked by the synthesis of planes and volumes and not by accident influenced in certain cases by primitive art – float into space), as in the art of Matisse, Chagal, Miró, Klee, Picasso, Wols and, moreover, the art that is completely detached from the object, as in the works of Kandinsky, Malevich, or Mondrian.

With the start of the 20th Century, which grants the artist more and more freedom from the social aspect, the artist does nothing if not break the old rules, cast them aside, and constantly propose new languages and types of expression.

The introduction of musical elements into painting, such as score fragments, depiction of musical instruments, musicians, etc., in an oneiric or lyrical way (Matisse, Chagal, Picasso) or for real, as Braque did in his collages, or later Arman in his accumulations of fragments of instruments, has no relevance whatsoever regarding the real communication between the means of expression pertaining to painting and those pertaining to music, except perhaps gaining freedom from the suggestion of sound within the painting and taking it

into the physical, tridimensional space, as an “art object”; however, this happened several decades later.

Until then, we have to focus on Orphism, which appeared at the beginning of the 20th Century. It brought to the table exactly this type of problems – rendering the musicality of tones and volumes in painting, where colours equate the functions of musical sounds. Colour itself was used for producing shapes, while lines that corresponded to the empiric reality and to rationality were eliminated.

For marking the “reading” of the image as if it were a musical composition, the painters who embrace Orphism establish a direct connection between the physical properties of colours and the echoes they awaken in the viewer – the artists break the objects into fragments by repeating the light effects, in order to suggest vibration and sonority.

Robert and Sonia Delaunay, the initiators of this trend, open the road for theoretical principles in modern art that support certain concepts, such as expanding the possibilities for plastic elements to address other sensory organs besides the eyes. It is worth mentioning here the synchromism of some American painters such as Morgan Russel and Stanton McDonald-Wright, who studied the links between colours and light or music.

Wassily Kandinski takes this theoretical approach with musical references a step forward by stating that “colour has a taste, a perfume, a certain sonority” (Kandinski, 1904).

Besides, the fact that he was a very good player of musical instruments is easily seen in his painting and also in the theoretical foundation of the abstraction (presented in his books “Concerning the spiritual in art” and later “Point and line to plane”), where many times he used musical terms and similitudes with music in order to explain/support principles specific for abstractization. In more concrete terms, he freed the colour from the object and eliminated the subordination of colour to the line – in order to allow colours to impart their own sonority and vibration. He also found equivalences between the constituent elements of the composition and the mode of arrangement, using repetition, weightlessness, etc., illustrating the synesthetic elements painting-music.

Thus we learn that the ever-changing environment surrounding people “through the piano keys (objects) always moves the piano strings (the soul) in vibrations”, that in musical representation, light blue resembles a flute, and light blue a cello; as it becomes deeper, it resembles more and more with the wonderful sounds of the double base; in its deepest and most solemn type, the sound of blue is comparable with that of the organ. As it gets even darker, towards black, it is enriched by the company of a sadness that goes beyond the human. [...] Therefore, the lighter its shade, the more it lacks sound: when it becomes white, it reaches the perfect quietness.” (Kandinski, 1904).

The composition in painting borrowed the suggestion of musical movement and choreography, besides the pictorial one given by the chromatic vibration. The simple composition, subordinated to a simple, easy-to-read form, is a “melodic composition”, while the complicated one, comprising more subdivided forms that are in their turn related with each other, together making up a hard-to-read ensemble, is the “symphonic composition”.

These are but a few examples of a very large range of similitudes between the two media with which the artist operates, that reveal the fusion of media (means) which is about to take place in art: time allowed the configuration of an entire vocabulary of common terms, such as rhythm, composition, harmony, tone, dissonance, tonality, sonority, acuity, etc.

Simultaneously, we find the same interest in music (shared also through the friendship between them) in Paul Klee, who, regarding strictly the implications of colour in relation to music, speaks about the chromatic *canon* (another term borrowed from music), which refers to the articulation of primary colours and the ones that they generate in the chromatic circle. In his opinion, the colours contained in the circle do not have a monovocal sound, but they sound like a *trio of voices*. They will resemble a movement of three voices, each of the main points (the three top areas of the primary colours) having a voice – slowly a new voice is raised while another dies away. The secondary colours appear between one peak and another, where two voices totally overlap, but one is fading and the other is growing in intensity.

The chromatic or monochromatic arrows that he uses as stimuli/visual vectors to suggest movement as well as the variation in the chromatic or tonal sonority – measuring the acuity or gravity of the chromatic intensity in relation to the sensation of warmth or coldness, the depth or light that they release in the painted space, will be a leitmotif in Klee's painting.

Paul Klee will expand visual similitudes with the musical repertoire beyond the chromatic and the movement of shapes into space, in what drawing is concerned. Thus, he says that we can perceive rhythm through three senses: first we hear it, then we see it and thirdly we feel it physically – in our muscles.

It is not by coincidence that he talks about the possibilities of the line which stays in an essential relation with musical rhythms; for this, he makes reference to the conductor's baton, which engages the movement of the entire body in space and describes certain measures by drawing into air and separating the space into segments.

Yvone Hasan remarked on certain similitudes (Hasan, 1999) between creating such rhythmical structures theorized by Klee with Alberti's "musical proportions" based on the numbers two, three and their multiples. The difference between them is that, while in Alberti's vision they serve for gauging the proportions of the sides of the painting, with Klee the musical rhythm involves a series of measures included in the composition.

These pioneers of the synesthetic experiences were supported in the kinaesthetic ones - which they were no strangers to, as we have already seen – that took place in the same interdisciplinary space of Bauhaus where they collaborated, by Oskar Schlemmer.



Oskar Schlemmer , *Das triadisches Ballett*/ "Baletul Triadic", 1922

Primarily known for his productions of avant-garde ballet, he is himself an example of multidisciplinary, working at the same time as a painter, sculptor, designer and choreographer. Within Bauhaus, he taught the course "Der Mensch (The human being)". Schlemmer became interested in the possibilities of shapes in space and their relation with the space around them, for example in "Egocentric space delineation" (1924).

Das triadisches Ballett (1922, "Triadic Ballet") – a ballet he choreographed, for which he created also the music and costumes – had three acts, three dancers and three colours (one for each act). The costumes he designed – based on the cylinder, sphere, cone and spiral – were revolutionary, being visibly taken from the volumetric synthesising of the abstract painting.

The synthesis of body movement, music and painting was brought to the stage by Yves Klein, as well, in 1960, when twenty minutes of violin playing were followed by twenty minutes of silence: called "Monotone Symphony", it showed human models - seen as "live brushes" - who used their own bodies to put colour on the surfaces destined for painting. An extremely influential artist, trained as a painter but going beyond that through radical techniques and conceptual gestures, he set the bases for many directions in the art of the '60 - '70.



Yves Klein, „Simfonia monotonă”, 1960

These developments in painting, music, theatre, literature (which was not our focus for the purpose of this paper) etc. throughout the 20th century, including the postmodern period, prove an amazing unity of coherent vision, links, similitudes, interferences that seem to find a correspondent and perfect illustration in the Fluxus movement. A phenomenon of international resonance, Fluxus aimed to accurately reflect “the state of flux in which all arts merge” (Fride-Carrassat, Marcadé, 2004).

Fluxus is self-defined more as a state of mind than as a movement; it wishes to capture the flow of life through fragments of real, of existence as raw material, rather than a certain type of manifestation through a certain medium, thus bringing about a freedom in which all fusions are possible. Often subversive and humorous, born out of the Dada anti-conformism, Fluxus gives birth to a new type of art - non-art: antimusic, antipoetry, nonproduction of artistic objects, etc.

Georges Maciunas, the initiator of this “movement”, said: “the best Fluxus composition tends to become the spirit of the collectivity”.

These theories were tested through experiences such as rendering a musical composition made of various noises produced by each member without trying to reach a common rhythm; when a common rhythm was nevertheless found, by the involuntary gesture of one of the participants, the symphony would come to an end. Things even evolved so far as the practice of *nothingness*, the non-intervention of the artist in the natural beauty of events. And John Cage mentioned in his speech on *nothing*: “I have nothing to say and I am saying it and this is poetry”. “The difference between mundane and nothing special is almost nothing. Art is nothing special – it is poetry” (Mercioiu Popa, 2013)

SOUND - GENERATOR OF "NEW POSSIBILITIES" IN VISUAL ART

The ideas and practices of the composer John Cage laid the foundation for Fluxus, especially through the concept of getting involved in a work of art with no idea about its end and about it being understood as an interactive exchange between the artist and the audience.

One of Cage’s most famous works is 4’33” (Four minutes thirty-three seconds, 1952), a composition in which the interpreter or interpreters stay absolutely silent on stage for that amount of time, became the symbol of his idea that any sounds or even their absence can be counted as music.

With the help of a little exercise of imagination, Umberto Eco tries to find a logical justification for such an experiment, being convinced that any new structuring introduces an element of order, even in the absence of the harmonic sense which Cage seemingly lacked. (John Cage: An Autobiographical Statement). “Let’s now try to take this imprecision – and this information – beyond the extreme: let’s exasperate the simultaneous presence of all sounds, let’s make the network as dense as possible. We will obtain the white sound, the indiscriminate sum of all frequencies. But the white sound, which should give us the maximum possible information, *does not inform at all anymore*. Our ear is not only missing any indication, but it is not even capable of “choosing” anylonger. It becomes a passive and helpless witness to the show of the original image. Therefore, there is a threshold beyond which the wealth of information becomes “noise”. (...) but the problem of transmitting such a message consists exactly in this: the problem

of giving colour to white noises is the problem of the minimum order that has to be introduced into noise to give it an identity, a minimal spectral form” (Eco, 2002).

“In the comforting unity of the Dao doctrine, each sound is as valuable as all other sounds, every meeting between sounds will be the happiest and the richest in revelations; the listener will have nothing else to do but give up their own culture and get lost in the precision of a regained musical infinite” (Eco, 2002).

Zen principles had an important influence on the American culture at the end of the ‘50s, and Eco believes that they had an impact on Cage, too, because his music has many obvious affinities with the technique of actors of Nô or Kabuki theatres, at least in the very long breaks alternated with musical moments interpreted with maximum precision.

Cage admitted to being influenced by the Zen philosophy. In Nancy, at the end of the ‘30s, he attended one of Wilson Ross’ lectures on Dada and Zen. After that, Zen and Buddhism replaced psychoanalysis for him, but he never practiced these as a religion. Besides, he stated that in everything he did, he always put together written materials, everyday objects, chairs and tables, thus admitting to the Dada influence, more precisely Marcel Duchamp’s influence. At the same time, he confessed that somehow his taste for Zen corresponds with his appreciation of Duchamp, reminding him of the other through the mixture of humour, intransigence and detachment, and also the eroticism.



John Cage "Water walk", 1960

A pivotal moment in Cage’s orientation, according to himself, was the one in which he became the assistant to director Oskar Fischinger, to write the music to one of his films.

The following statement is a revealing one: "Everything in the world has its own spirit which can be released by setting it into vibration."

Growing, together with the life experiences he went through, on the fine line between the music for choreographed performances, film (which allowed him to indirectly tap into music, exactly through its interdisciplinary approach) and visual art – in his youth he chose simultaneous training in music and painting, and during his stay in Europe he had the revelation of simultaneous performance from both visual and auditive perspectives, at a street corner in Sevilla, these two melting into one in his mind in what he called a “total experience”. Cage’s work is a remarkable example for the spirit of his time, of

experimental art, which was being born precisely on the border between medium and domain.

Thus, *Prepared Piano* (1930), considered a song for percussion and piano, came about from the need to transform a piano into a percussion instrument, which happened by introducing some objects between the piano strings.

The series *Imaginary Landscapes* (1939-1952) was based on sounds broadcasted by radio stations (on different frequencies) mixed with small sounds that were amplified and recordings of sinusoidal waves, as well as instrumental sounds (piano and hammered dulcimer).

Fontana Mix (1958) is based on a series of audio tapes with concrete noises and electronic sounds, as well as transparent cards that, when overlapped, give a graph for the random selection of electronic sounds for which afterwards they set the points where the lines drawn by chance meet; put on paper, these result in a sound sequence determined by a logic of the imponderable.

Roaratorio (1979) is an electronic composition with thousands of words found in James Joyce's "Finnegan's Wake", an Irish Circus, (radio tracks) for electronic cassettes and folk musicians.

All these experiments of interference among media and of technological interactivity anticipate the more and more focused preoccupation of visual arts for sound over the next decades. Sound in and of itself became a means of expression in visual art, once sound art and sound installations were created.

CONTEMPORARY MODALITIES OF THE SOUND UTILIZATION IN VISUAL ART

In the tradition of the Italian futurist Luigi Russolo, who in 1913 launched his manifesto "Art of Noises", Cage wrote in 1937 that the use of sound for making music would continue and develop until music was obtained through electronic instruments which would make any sound possible in music (Shanken, 2009). In the meantime, this has been proved possible.

Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik intertwined music and sculpture, performance and video, tore apart conventions and created new sounds, images and experiments. One such example is the action "TV Cello", one of the first in their collaboration, in which the body of the cello was replaced by a number of TV screens of different sizes which reproduced the shape of the instrument, and the musical interpretation was fused with TV transmissions in which the interpreter herself could be seen.

Under Cage's direct influence, the composer Paik introduced the term *Music-Electronic Television*, the name of his first exhibition. He initially combined the music of "prepared piano" (using Cage's technique) with screens, using magnets to distort the images. In a work dated 1963, *Participation TV*, an integrated microphone replied to the ambient sound.

Gary Hill is considered one of the founding artists of video-art, based on his installations with one broadcasting channel and the video and audio equipment from the '70s and the

'80s. His art explores the physicality of language, at the level of electronic sound, and its incorporation at the language/text level in videos and installations.

Initially, "language" did not particularly mean "words" for him, but rather the experience of speaking that appeared within the electronic space (certain sounds "resembled human voices closely"), which he called "electronic linguistics" (at first in a transitory way in non-verbal works, 1977). Subsequently, the verbal language enters this electronic focus in a co-performative way, as an intensification of the dialog with and within the medium, but with a new and unprecedented linguistic power, with its own poetics.

Anri Sala explores the historical and political realities through music and physical encounters.

In this year's edition of the Venice Biennale, "VIVA ARTE VIVA", where he was invited to take part, he appeared with a similar frequency between pairs of terms such as time and space, man and machine. Entitled "All of a Tremble (Encounter 1)", the work presents an encounter of two types of wall printing of over 100 years. Sala found the two original materials – signifying the passing from artisanal crafts to mechanised industrial mass production – and combined them to establish a tension between two worlds. In addition, the wallpaper-printing cylinder rotates on a comb with more than 160 reeds and functions as a music box, with inflexions of both the east and West. Here, Sala draws again attention to the tension between man and machine; between the audience and their relation with music; between time and understanding society from a historical perspective.

Yuko Mohry Yuko Mohri's innovations in *new media* and *sound art* are delicate balancing acts. Using mundane objects, such as rubber boots, bicycle wheels, umbrellas and light bulbs, Mohri's seemingly random installations explore ideas of energy and force while investigating gravity, magnetism and light. Through "perceiving the hidden energy which is usually ignored", Mohri's work reunites image, sound and the narrative and questions the way in which nature and non-nature could have a relationship.

With these few chronological examples that take us through time up to the present day, I intended to draw a sketchy image of what has become of this new and surprising form of art that was born at the meeting point of painting and music – the use of sound (which carries a multitude of specificities already) initially synthesised by the curator of the exhibition entitled "Sound/Art" (1983, New York), William Hellerman, as "hearing is another form of seeing", mirroring the first attempts to use musicality/sonority in painting, based on the correspondence between our means of perception – seeing involves also hearing.

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