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# Sound Unheard: The Visual Phantasmata

*Negirdimi garsai: vizualinės fantazijos*

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## Abstract

Music notation is full of optical deceptions: sound is pinned down on a piece of paper (more recently on a laptop screen) in the manner of a symbol, a line, a dot, text, numbers, and geometrical shapes. The music score informs us of the direct and intimate relation between sound and space: the visual artifice of linear representation for a multi-linear, multi-planar, spherical audition of sound; the coalescence of the aural with the visual, of the drawn gesture with the musical gesture. While never actually heard on paper, sound finds its representation in geometrical lines, a series of dots traced on a planar space. By delineating or separating segments and contiguities, the musical gesture is transformed into visual, kinesthetic ones. The sound, unseen, is deciphered within a visual act: congealed, translated, and modified according to an ocular perspective, a gestural *élan vital*.

I argue that *translations* occurring between the mediums of music and visual art, between hearing and sight, between acoustic and visual phenomena, are translations that generate new perspectives, uncharted maps, soundographies, and new morphologies. This article investigates the liminal space of these unheard and unseen signs; the locus of their transformations, translations, and genetic recombination; the emplacement, or displacement, of sound and visual gesture; if and how sound is silenced (or enhanced) by its visual representation; if and how, conversely, the visual sign is obliterated (or magnified) by its aural representation.

**Keywords:** phenomenology, emplacement, sound mapping, visual representation, kinesthetic, acoustic communication, aesthetic.

## Anotacija

Muzikos notacijoje gausu optinių apgaulių; garsas popieriaus lape (o pastaruju metu ir nešiojamojo kompiuterio ekrane) užrašomas kaip simbolis, linija, taškas, tekstas, skaičius ar geometrinė figūra. Muzikos partitūra informuoja apie tiesioginį ir intymų garso ir erdvės santykį – vizualinį daugiaplanio, sferinio garso linijinio perteikimo, nupiešto gesto ir muzikinio gesto susiliejimo dirbtinumą. Nors iš tikrųjų niekada negirdimas popieriuje, garsas vaizduojamas geometrinėmis linijomis ar taškų serijomis, išdėstytomis plokščioje erdvėje. Apibrėžiant ar atskiriant segmentus, gretimybes, muzikinis gestas transformuojamas į vizualinį, kinestetinį. Nematomas garsas iššifruojamas per vizualinį veiksmą: sutirštintas, išverčiamas, modifikuojamas pagal akies perspektyvą, gestų *élan vital* (gyvybės jėgą). Drįsčiau teigti, kad *vertimai*, vykstantys tarp muzikos ir vizualiojo meno medijų, klausos ir regos, akustinių ir vizualiųjų reiškinių, yra vertimai, sukuriantys naujas perspektyvas, ne-nubraižytus žemėlapius, garsografijas, naujas morfologijas. Straipsnyje nagrinėjama šių negirdimų ir nematomų ženklų liminalinė erdvė; jų transformacijų, vertimų ir genetinės rekombinacijos vieta; garso ir vaizdo gestų išdėstymas arba perkėlimas: ar ir kaip garsas nutildomas (arba sustiprinamas) per vaizdinę savo reprezentaciją; ar ir kaip, atvirkščiai, regimasis ženklas ištrinamas (arba paryškintas) per garsinę reprezentaciją. **Reikšminiai žodžiai:** fenomenologija, išdėstymas, garšų žemėlapis, vizualinis vaizdavimas, kinestetika, akustinė komunikacija, estetika.

## Introduction

With this article I aim to establish a connection between visual and auditory experiences in the realm of visual art and music. Given this vast field of investigation and its multifarious ramifications, I focus on a few examples taken from the twentieth-century repertoire in music and visual art: behind this choice is an intent to connect artistic outcomes of the early twentieth century in Western art with modern and postmodern philosophical discourses within a phenomenological perspective, which place the body at the center of the experiential process. I will refer to the writings of the Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida, one of the main thinkers of the Kyoto School, a group of Japanese scholars who during the twentieth century discussed and elaborated philosophical ideas from the spiritual and intellectual traditions of East Asia, merging them with philosophical

methods and notions of Western philosophical traditions. With this trajectory in mind, I first introduce a case study, and from there I trace ramifications, flight paths, and offshoots branching out from the main area of investigation.

Before proceeding I need to clarify that I use words such as “translation” and “communication” fully aware that these borrowed terms allude to the concerns and conceptual domain of linguistics, and this seems to imply a close structural affinity between text, music, and visuals. In this respect the Greek composer Iannis Xenakis, in a transcribed conversation with American composer Morton Feldman, remarks that music is not a language, and nothing else can be like language, as the latter is alone in having semantics behind its structure (edited by Gasseling and Nieuwenhuizen 1986: 3).

In this article I consider the use of these words in their linguistic-metaphorical context while maintaining awareness of the dissimilarities between language, music, and



## DREI KLAVIERSTÜCKE

3

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1.

Arnold Schoenberg, Op. 11. Nr. 1.

Piano

Mäßige  $\text{♩}$

*p*

langsam

*rit.*

*p*

viel schneller

*mp*

mit Dämpfung bis  $\diamond$   
(3. Pedal)

Die Tasten tonlos niederdrücken!  
Flag. (a)

langsam

*p*

ohne Ped. .... ohne Ped. ....

The image shows the first page of the musical score for Arnold Schoenberg's 'Drei Klavierstücke, Op. 11, No. 1'. The score is written for piano and consists of four systems of music. The first system begins with a tempo marking 'Mäßige' and a quarter note symbol. The second system includes a 'rit.' (ritardando) marking. The third system is marked 'viel schneller' (much faster) and includes a 'mit Dämpfung bis (3. Pedal)' instruction. The fourth system includes a 'langsam' (slow) marking and a 'Die Tasten tonlos niederdrücken! Flag. (a)' instruction. The score uses various dynamic markings such as piano (p), mezzo-piano (mp), and fortissimo (sf).

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Figure 1. Above: Kandinsky's *Impression III* (1911), Google Arts & Culture, April 7, 2023, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/impression-iii-concert/mgHAXu9viwsUPg?hl=en-GB>; below: Schoenberg's 3 *Klavierstücke*, *Op. 11* (1909), first page of the score.

visual art. I do not intend to flatten the rules and morphological characteristics of language onto the characteristics of music and its notation or otherwise onto visual art and its set of principles. I am only indicating that within the metaphorical implications given by linguistics, “translation” and “communication” can occur between music and visual art, following relational pathways which I will try to delineate in what follows.

I propose we look at Russian painter Vassily Kandinsky’s *Impression III* (1911) and Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg’s composition *3 Klavierstücke, Op. 11* (1909): this comparison ushers in an evaluation of what transpires between the visual and the musical gesture. Drawing examples taken mainly from *Arnold Schoenberg/Wassily Kandinsky, Letters, Pictures, and Documents* (1984), and Kandinsky’s book *Point and Line to Plane* (first published in 1926), I argue that *translations* that occur between the mediums of music and visual art, between hearing and sight, between acoustic and visual phenomena, generate new perspectives, uncharted maps, soundographies, and new morphologies.

By introducing the artistic exchange between Kandinsky and Schoenberg, based on existing documents available (letters, pictures, and documents), I bring into play other correlations between music and visual art, which appear in the works of British composer Cornelius Cardew and American artist Harry Bertoia. The choice of these two offshoots follows the logic of this article’s investigation into linguistic affinities and synesthetic sensory exploration within the realm of sound and visual stimulations (color, light, shape, rhythm, tone). Cardew’s notational technique in *Treatise* (1963–1967) is a direct response to linguistic implications of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (first published in 1921). By analogy, Bertoia’s *Sonambient* (ca. 1970) sculptures bring into question the sensuous experience of a human body immersed in a specific spatial and acoustic design.

Given these premises, this article investigates the liminal space of these unheard and unseen signs; the locus of their transformations and genetic recombinations; the emplacement, or displacement, of sound and visual gesture; whether and how sound is silenced (or enhanced) by its visual facsimile; and whether and how, conversely, the visual sign is obliterated (or magnified) by its aural facsimile.

### Point and Lines

In his book *Point and Line to Plane*, Kandinsky, by comparing lines and dots arranged on a plane to a Ludwig Van Beethoven score, informs us of the direct and intimate relationship between sound and space. Kandinsky extrapolates a few bars from Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony (1808) and proceeds with a graphical translation of the original

sounds notated on a staff: the painter identifies the geometric point, an invisible and incorporeal thing, whose material form, according to Kandinsky, has been incorporated into writing and its combination of signs (Kandinsky 2016: 25). With the example of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, the Russian painter moves from linguistic signs to musical symbols: by combining and sequencing what Kandinsky calls “tonal points,” he creates an alternative notated score of the symphony which can be envisaged solely by means of points (Kandinsky 2016: 43). Notes become points of different size based on their dynamic marking; long tones with a diminuendo become points with a double tail of converging smaller points; relationships of intervals become spatial relationships in which higher pitches are placed somewhere above the lower pitches on the page; a legato melodic line is substituted by a continuous drawn line whose graphic shape follows the contour and direction of the original Beethoven melody, if we take as given the traditional synesthetic equivalent between linear contour and melodic shape.

It may be observed *in primis* that Kandinsky’s interpretation of the traditional Western notation of Beethoven’s score is not simply an alternative representation of the original written music but rather an integral transformation of it: an entirely different set of symbolic relationships, geometric forces, a different spatial composition. In Kandinsky’s “new” score, the staff, key signature, bars, accidentals, articulation, and rests disappear. What is foregrounded is a space formalized by the presence of points and lines of different size carefully positioned in space to maintain musical relationships of pitch, duration, and dynamics. Here questions and doubts surface. What if the score was written at the outset with this system, rather than the other way around? What if Kandinsky’s graphic notation had been the standard notation of the Western musical tradition? This would have required a totally different approach to the interpretation of music, and it would likely have produced different musical results.

By tracing an equivalence between a series of descending and softening musical notes on the staff and a corresponding number of dots, decreasing in size drawn on a plane, Kandinsky seems to allude to a multitude of conflicting interpretative ideas. Or in the opposite direction, he may be reaching for a Platonic ideal where everything is fixed beforehand: a fixed and perfect map of reading. This is something I will return to later in this article, with a closer look at the spectrum of such interpretations.

In this game of decoding mirrors, sound is evanescent, destitute of its physical, tangible presence: translation within translation, metaphor within metaphor, to paraphrase Chinese linguist Yuen Ren Chao (“if language symbolises ideas, writing is the symbol of symbols”; Chao 1968: 8). Following the wandering path Chao traces for me, I encounter

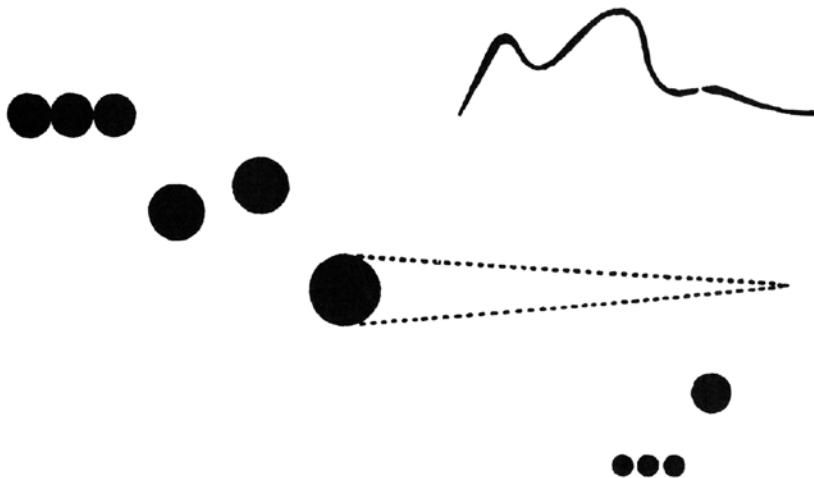


Fig. 11<sup>1</sup>  
 Thema 2 translated into points.

<sup>1</sup> In making these translations, I received the valuable aid of Music Superintendent Franz v. Moesslin and for this I extend to him my heartfelt gratitude.

Figure 2. Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane* (1926 / 2016), fig. 11, p. 45.

the Mexican poet Octavio Paz, who maintains that each work of translation is a form of inventive elaboration of a unique text: translations of translations of translations (Paz 1987: 187). By intensifying Paz's notion, I argue that *translations* which occur between the mediums of music and visual art, between hearing and sight, between acoustic and visual phenomena, are translations that generate new perspectives, uncharted maps, soundographies, and new morphologies.

Here what is questioned is not solely the consistency and intelligibility of a notational system but rather the presence of sound within the limited space of a piece of paper as well as how this presence is evaluated, transformed, encoded, and decoded by the composer and the performer, let alone by an audience. How close to (or far from) the sound itself is the sign on the paper, the symbols employed in music notation? How much interpretation of the sign is arbitrary, potentially

leading to an interpretation different from the composer's intent? No matter how specific the notation might be, there is inevitably a gap between the gesture of tracing symbols on paper and the gesture of making sounds with a musical instrument. A kinetic device with a specific set of options (a pen or a pencil, with its dimension, design, grip, texture, color of line), traded for another kinetic device with its characteristics (the particular design, specifics of sound production, material, weight of the musical instrument).

I retrace my steps back to the example given in the original text of *Point and Line to Plane*, Kandinsky's rendition of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony: before moving on to *Impression III* and Schonberg's 3 *Klavierstücke*, it is important to further investigate and evaluate Kandinsky's intention in musical representation, as this will help us compare the reading of the Russian painter and the Austrian composer's works that inspired it. The original score, Beethoven's own,



goes as follows, an eight-bar rhythmic and melodic development: eighth note rest, eight B-flat notes repeated three times, E-flat half note, F half note, a sustained lower B-flat note for the duration of two whole notes and a half note; while the sustained B-flat is playing, a quarter notes melody placed one octave up from the sustained B-flat, is heard:

B-flat, E-flat, D, E-flat, F, C, C, B-flat

For simplicity, I omit the last two bars of accompaniment an octave lower. Kandinsky's score: point, point, point (same size = B-flat), point, point (of bigger size = E-flat, F), both lower in space compared to the first 3 points; another point (even bigger = B-flat), lower in space compared to the last 2 points; on top of all the aforementioned point, a curved line for the upper melody:

B-flat, E-flat, D, E-flat, F, C, C, B-flat

The Beethoven score focuses on specificity of rhythm, pitch, relationships of intervals and harmony, and accuracy of rhythmic and dynamic markings. Kandinsky's emphasis is on spatial composition, shape specificity, and the relationships generated by these shapes within the given space. The Beethoven score inevitably requires understanding of Western musical notation standards. Kandinsky's interpretation envisions music as spatial relationships, bypassing the original notational system, and maintaining formal musical proportions solely by means of geometric shapes rather than by symbols whose interpretation is specified by a tradition of notation.

This gap, this interstice, is the place of interpretation, the uncharted place of exchange between the physical and conceptual outcome of the sound and visual material. I should clarify here that by interpretation I do not allude only to the duty of the performer in deciphering the score: this is one of the tasks related to interpretation but not the only one, as I will discuss later in this investigation.

If I am reading and playing Kandinsky's version of the Fifth Symphony for the first time without knowing the traditional version of Beethoven, a few things will certainly happen: the pitches will not be the same, and the dynamics tempo, and articulation will be altered; all these features in the painter's score are to be interpreted at the performer's discretion. However, this does not mean that the painterly score has no relationship to the original. It does indeed, but from a different perspective. The contours and direction and overall shape of the notes and melody is maintained; dynamic changes are considered. There is a musical development which is clearly stated, even if in a rather different fashion from the traditional Beethoven score. What I maintain here is that Kandinsky is thinking musically in his visual score and produces a visual music that he composes with shapes and colors.

## Kandinsky and Schoenberg

Let me proceed now to the following step: the encounter between Schoenberg and Kandinsky, a friendship and mutual esteem based on a fertile artistic exchange. In his painting *Impression III*, Kandinsky refers directly to his experience of listening to Schoenberg's *3 Klavierstücke* at a concert held in Munich in 1911.

Here Kandinsky's work is not the outcome of some sort of specific visual artifice of linear representation of a multi-planar, spherical audition of sound: the painting does not represent, rather it complements and amplifies the palette of musical colors with color pigments and gestural strokes on a canvas. Kandinsky operates on a transformative rather than a representational level. Kandinsky's musical interest and inclination is well known, and his research into the pictorial realm is witness to his attempt at adapting musical aspects into the artistic process of painting.

I regard the spatio-temporal intermezzo of communications between the mediums of sound and visuals as the locus for what Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida calls intuitive knowledge. In his *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*, Nishida argues that experience and the rumination regarding experiences are not chronologically differentiated, hence the time of the sensuous experience is synchronous and equal to the time of thinking and evaluating the experience, while the former is still evolving. Intuition, Nishida argues, is a form of knowledge (Nishida 1987: 142). What I maintain here is that Kandinsky, while operating within the medium of painting, has an intuitive understanding of the musical aspects (or analogies) related to gestures, strokes, colors, and space. The more he moves away from the traditional treatment of subject matter of pictorial representation, the more his musical treatment of the visual space emerges.

In the post-Cartesian Western philosophical tradition, intuition is not historically regarded as the logos of knowledge, but I argue, following Nishida's notion, that this form of knowledge is closer to the communication, or the morphological equivalence, that occurs between gestures in diverse mediums, and this is the lieu of osmotic interpenetration within and between. I open a second parenthesis here to elucidate important characteristics of the two mediums and how these characteristics may again relate to Nishida's notion of intuitive knowledge.

The ephemerality of a sonic gesture is strikingly different from the brush strokes of a painting. Sound vibration is a tactile experience, but an intangible one, which vanishes from our perceptual horizon the very moment that the sound is heard. Painting remains tactile in its physical and tangible form – colors and strokes are gestural outcomes congealed into concrete matter. I can touch the painting;



Figure 3. Kandinsky and Schoenberg with their wives Nina and Gertrud, 1927 (np.).

I can experience the different textures and the sensuous feedback provoked by the touch, smell, and sight of it.

Sound and music are tactile in principle (a vibration passing through the skin and captured by the eardrum), but they remain impalpable, unseen. The temporality of the painting congeals with the last stroke made by the painter. It is pinned to an instant in time, and shares with photography a certain ghostly remembrance of time past, a la Barthes. In *Camera Lucida* dated 1980, the French philosopher Roland Barthes discusses photography as a medium in which subjects are always depicted in their past, or as dead – a subject becoming an object, a “micro-version of death,” as if “becoming a spectre” (Barthes 1980: 14). On the contrary, the temporality of music is bound to our presence in the present moment. Sound vanishing and disappearing the very moment the notes are heard and extinguished – music can only be recollected from an experience which is always past, never present. While a painting is present in and of itself, it is, so to speak, static, fixed. Music is in this regard, dynamic, continuously disappearing from our conscious horizon into cogitations of a near-past instant.

The question of temporality seems relevant because the spatial aspect of painting deals with a planar perspectivalization of the sense of sight. Therefore, the tempo of the painter’s stroke deals with a space unfolding around the direction of the gesture of the brush. In music an omni directionality of acoustic experience poses the question of a temporality that unfolds synchronously with the experience of listening and performing.

In painting the experience of making is asynchronous, while the experience of seeing a painting is complete and

self-contained. I am aware of the presence of particular forms of painting (action painting for example) that tend to depart from this distinction. However, by tracing a trajectory that connects Kandinsky’s *Impression III* and Schoenberg’s *3 Klavierstücke*, my intent is to observe general principles of the relationships between these mediums, rather than the exceptions to these principles, and to evaluate the nature and characteristics of the communicative flare between the two artists taken as example here.

I recall again the words of Nishida, who maintains that experience and rumination regarding experience are not chronologically differentiated; that the time of the sensuous experience is synchronous and equal to the time of thinking and evaluating that experience, while the former is still evolving; and finally, that what he calls an intuition of the experience is a form of knowledge (Nishida 1987: 142).

I would argue that the gestural strokes of Kandinsky’s brush on a canvas have an intuitive relationship with the musical knowledge of Schoenberg, which the former artist transforms into a visual and visible matter through the use of colors, shapes, and forms. I maintain that the experience of listening to Schoenberg’s *3 Klavierstücke*, prompted Kandinsky to transform the musical material into the visual matter of *Impression III* through a process of intuitive transformation of musical knowledge.

In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (original edition 1911) Kandinsky discusses his theory of colors, making a formal distinction between three types of painting, which he calls impressions, improvisations, and compositions (Kandinsky 200: 98). Impressions, he says, are based on an external reality that serves as a starting point. Improvisations

and compositions instead depict images emerging from the unconscious – the painting *Impression III*, following Kandinsky's definition, draws inspiration from the concert space of Schoenberg's 3 *Klavierstücke* event. I notice that the musical gesture is followed (in its temporality) by a drawing gesture. Sounds that anticipate and coalesce into colors.

### Cardew and Bertoia

With a fermata I momentarily suspend this investigation into the relationship between Kandinsky and Schoenberg by introducing a work that seems to travel in the opposite direction of meaning-transmission to what operated between *Impression III* and the 3 *Klavierstücke*. Cornelius Cardew's composition *Treatise* (1963–1967) moves from the drawn gesture to musical ones. I consciously desist from drawing further correlations between the work of Kandinsky and Schoenberg, by introducing a third artist (Cardew), who will act as lever between the former two. Cardew's composition *Treatise* has the appearance of a graphic music score where traditional notation is almost completely absent, aside from two five-line musical staves at the bottom of 193 pages that form the totality of the piece. Every individual page is designed with black points and lines, bringing into being geometric shapes of various sizes, and each page is different from the next except for the appearance of the staves at the bottom and a continuous line which appears in the middle of all the pages of the score. Cardew does not accompany the score of *Treatise* with any performance instruction. His explicit intention is to leave the performer to figure out the rules and procedures with which to interpret and perform the music suggested by shapes and lines drawn on the score. This generates music that is never the same twice – every performance is different from the previous or the next one.

When composer Cornelius Cardew's *Treatise* fills hundreds of pages with sophisticated geometric shapes juxtaposed with empty musical staves, it communicates the coalescence of the aural with the visual, of the drawn gesture with the musical gesture. The music notation is full of these optical deceptions; sound is pinned down on a piece of paper (more recently on a laptop screen) in the manner of a symbol, a line, a dot, text, numbers and geometrical shapes.

The score of *Treatise* dramatically poses the question of a relationship between sound, geometric shapes and the symbolic representation of musical gestures. By leaving the musical staves empty at the bottom of the score, Cardew seems to require the performer to find the music and sound somewhere else. The combination of geometrical shapes that constitute the 193 pages of the score demands much more than interpretation from a performer – it requests a

recomposition of unheard musical material, elaboration *ex nihilo* of musical features in a score consisting solely of spatial relationships.

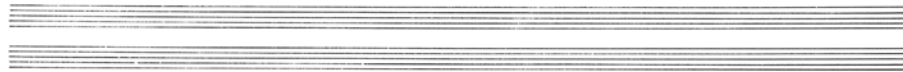
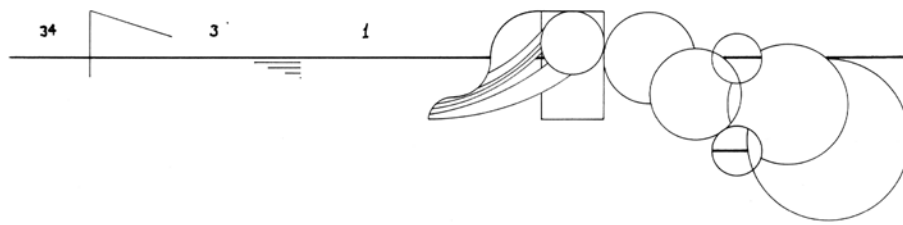
While never actually heard on paper, sound finds its representation in geometrical lines, a series of dots traced on a planar space. By delineating or separating segments, contiguities, the musical gesture is transformed into visual, kinesthetic ones. The sound, unseen, is deciphered within a visual act: congealed, translated, modified according to an ocular perspective, a gestural *élan vital*.

Cardew's proximity to Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is well known. Also well known is that realization of the score of *Treatise* is not unrelated to Wittgenstein's logical propositions, as introduced in his *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein investigates the limits of language, breaking down proposition after proposition, 525 logical statements to ascertain the relationship between language, reality, and science. And the Austrian philosopher's famous sentence at the very end of the *Tractatus* "what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein 2001: 89) seems to resonate as one faces the pages of Cardew's *Treatise*.

The composer questions the limits of (musical) language, the logic underlying any form of notation, the consequence of choices made in any logical interpretation of symbols, gestures, space. Moreover, the 193 pages of drawn propositions collected in the Cardew's score, prompts the player to perform an effort of logic and translation which is often beyond the scope of interpretation of a traditional musical score. While a traditional score allows me straightforwardly to imagine an interpretation of musical material as provided to me by the composer through notated signs within an accepted convention; in *Treatise*, Cardew seems to step back from the usual role of the composer as providing rules and strict directions. A white canvas remains to be filled by the performer before any performance might even be envisioned.

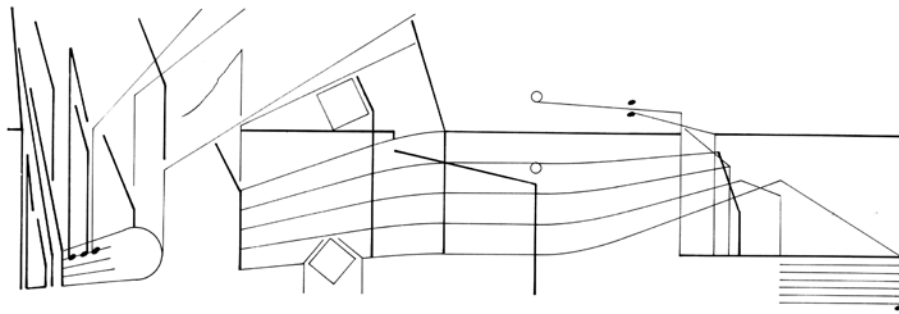
This strategy reminds me of three artists, mentioned here in passing, who resonate with the quest for interpretation, the logic of a given medium and (perhaps) questions of authorship: I am thinking of Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951), Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film* (1965), and Pauline Oliveros's *Sonic Rorschach* (1971, part of her *Sonic Meditations*); all of these explore sensorial experiences akin to spatial and acoustic whiteness (emptiness, nothingness, and/or fullness), and all imply a reflection upon meaning-making that is thrown at the observer, listener, and participant. The artists here seem to pose questions rather than answering any of them.

Without delving into details of the *Tractatus*, which are beyond the scope of this article, I am hinting at the meta-linguistic aspect of Cardew's elaboration of the score, which allows me to look back at Kandinsky's *Impression III*,

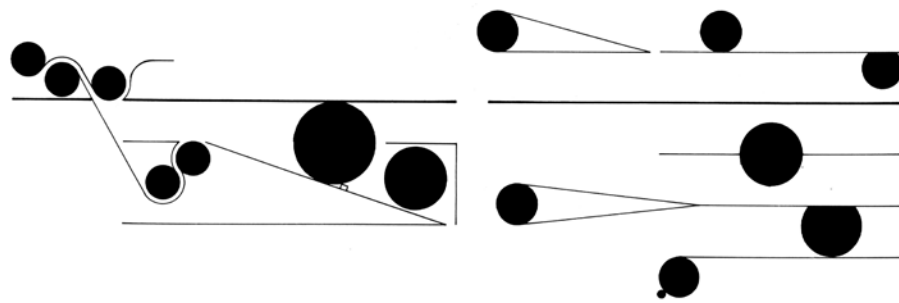


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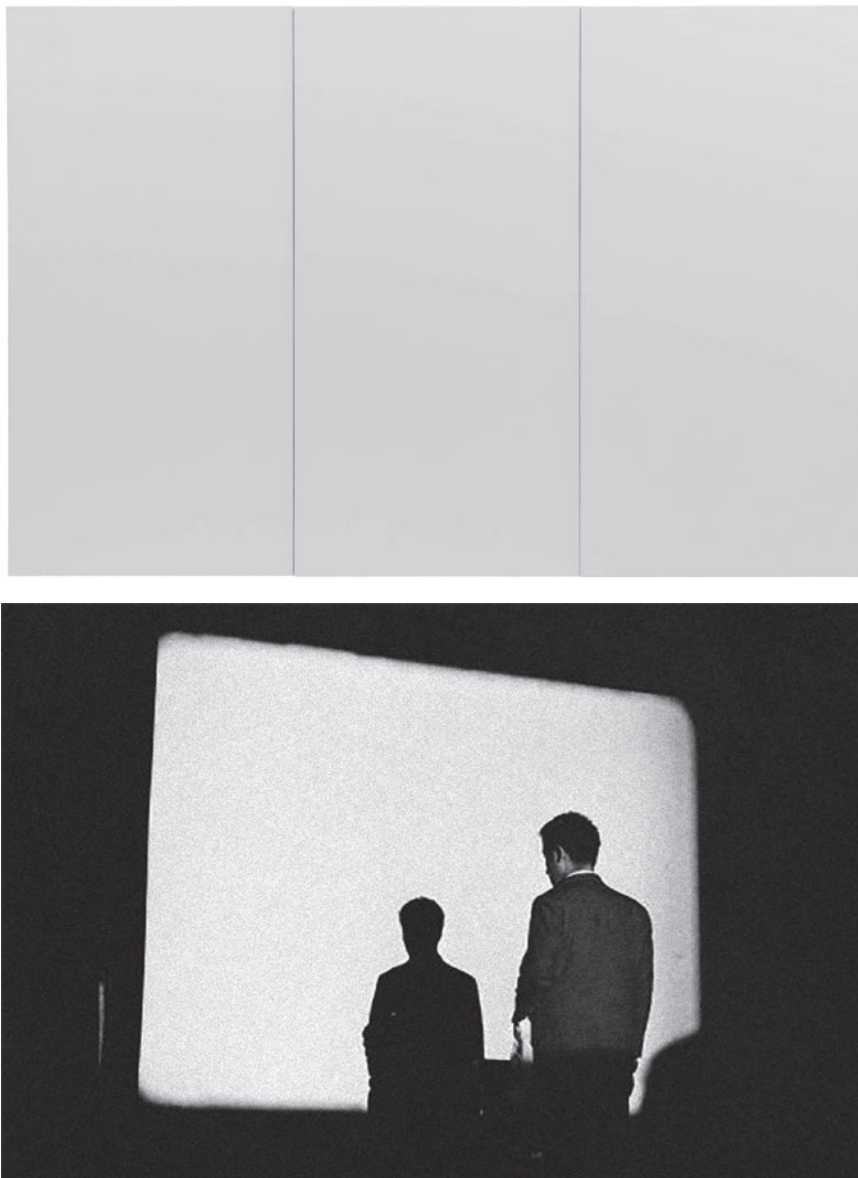
35



131

Figure 4. Cardew's *Treatise* (1967), p. 1, 35, 131.





**Figure 5.** Above: Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, April 7, 2023, <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.308.A-C/>; below: Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film* (1965), Kanal, Centre Pompidou, April 7, 2023, <https://kanal.brussels/fr/evenements/zen-film>.

while at the same time anticipating Harry Bertoia's sound sculptures, the so called *sonambient* sculptures.

Earlier, I introduced the relationship between music and visual art as a form of communication, acting upon a translation which allows modification, transformation, and recombination of morphological matrices. I also introduced Nishida's intuitive knowledge that correlates spatiotemporal perceptive processes to the actual current investigation into the multifarious association of sound and visual gestures.

I am now ready to introduce a last example, from the work of Harry Bertoia and his *sonambient* sculptures. This set of sculptures is a series of objects made mostly with metal rods of different sizes, lengths, and thicknesses, welded

together onto concrete bases or pillars. The design of these objects is clean and simple: a series of metal wires aligned in rows and columns creating squares or rectangular shapes, which spread out from the concrete base at different heights. By gently sweeping the hands across them, the wires resonate with each other, creating waves of sustained sounds which can last for a prolonged period of time.

It appears to me that these beckoning, resonating structures result in a syncretic undifferentiation of the temporality of sound and visuals. The sound produced by these structures collapses visual and auditory experience into a form of perceptual participation. By condensing sensorial experience and the ruminations about the unfolding

## Sonic Rorschach

*With a white or random noise generator, flood a darkened room with white noise for thirty minutes or much longer. The band width of the white noise should be as broad as the limits of the audio range. A pre-recorded tape or a mechanical source such as an air compressor may be substituted for the generator, if necessary or desired. All participants should be comfortably seated or lying down for the duration of the meditation. Half way through, introduce one brilliant flash of light or one loud, short pulse. The high intensity flash source could be a photo lamp flash or one pulse of a strobe light. If a sound pulse is substituted for the light flash, it must necessarily be of higher amplitude than the white noise.*

- Variations:**
- a) *Find a natural source of white noise such as a waterfall or the ocean and go there for this meditation.*
  - b) *If the white noise generator is flat, equalize until the source is apparently flat for the human ear.*
  - c) *Do this meditation with a different band width represented in subsequent meditations such as one octave at 5k to 10khz.*

Figure 6. Oliveros's *Sonic Rorschach* n. VI, from *Sonic Meditations* (np.).

experience into an instant of time, Bertoi's work seems to reflect Kitaro Nishida's definition of intuitive knowledge. In Bertoi's *sonambient* sculptures, perceptual knowledge seems to congeal along the pathway of the unfolding experience, synchronously connecting acoustic and visual communication into an intuitive flare, a Bachelardian memento (see also Gaston Bachelard's *Intuition of the Instant* 2013: 29–31).

By being physically immersed in the space containing these resounding structures, my sensorial experience is heightened, and my body is not only part of the space. It becomes itself space and sound, a human body reverberating within and without. On the contrary, I can look at Kandinsky's painting *Impression III* or listen to Schoenberg's 3 *Klavierstücke*, separately, or eventually ignore one or the other. However, I will hardly be able to listen to Bertoi's sonic output without the need to observe the physical structure in action, the texture of the metal rods, the geometries drawn in the air by the rod's swinging, the architectural design shaping the space of the structure; and vice versa – the sculptural structure cannot exist without its sonic counterpart. Here acoustic and visual feedback are given simultaneously. The intertwined relationship between hearing and seeing is demanded more than suggested.

I observe in passing that with Bertoi's *sonambient* sculptures, the quest for the musical score is elegantly bypassed with a work which demands listening rather than reading, audiation instead of any deciphering per symbolic convention. In addition, I notice that Bertoi's *sonambient* concept seems to relate to the notion of "emplacement" as given by anthropologist David Howes. In his introduction to the collected essays *Empire of the Senses*, Howes

emphasizes the recurrence of emplacement as a pivotal term of analysis in relation to the senses. He argues that while "embodiment" alludes to an introspective integration of mind and body, emplacement instead suggests an intertwined relationship of body-mind-environment (Howes 2005: 7).

In the context of this investigation, it seems relevant to observe that Bertoi's work has a unique stance in relation to space. Rather than existing in limbo, the *sonambient* sculptures modify the spatiotemporal environment in which they act. Unlike a score that I can read and perform almost regardless of the space I occupy, unlike a painting that I can look at in a museum, a gallery, or on the Internet (which by adding the latter circumstance, poses questions about the quality of surfaces, or the limited, predetermined ratios of the boxes through which we view the painting, in its frame, within a photograph, or on the screen of an electronic device), Bertoi's *sonambient* sculptures resonate within their space, shaping its temporality, defining the architectural design, even the human bodies nearby. These sculptures are tactile objects that must be touched to resonate. The haptic feedback involved in the gesture of producing the sound is as important as the gesture of a performer in the act of playing a musical instrument.

By touching the *sonambient* sculptures we are the performer, we are in fact the prosthetic extension of a sculpture that needs a human body to resonate: a human body that is also required to hear the sounds of the metal rods swinging, a human body vibrating in the same space and time as Bertoi's resounding objects. The work of the American artist acts as an expansion of the body's emplacement: a space that breathes and lives within the sounds and movements of the *sonambient* sculptures.

### A Circular Path

My trajectory started with the early twentieth century with Kandinsky's *Impression III*, elicited by Schoenberg's *3 Klavierstücke*; this led me to Cardew's mid-twentieth-century *Treatise*, sparked by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*; and I ended with Bertoia's *sonambient* sculptures from about the same time period as the *Treatise*. I now return, on a circular path, to the Russian painter and his friend, the Austrian composer.

I have drawn certain observations and analogies on the subject of music and visual art and their relationship, in the context of modern and postmodern art theory in the west. Looking back now at *Impression III*, I notice the use of color as I experience them: a prominence of yellow, which propagates through the right side of the painting; it is present at the bottom of the canvas moving from right to left, with two other isolated "islands" of yellow pigments around the center of the artist's work and another one isolated on the top left side. Contrasting and interpenetrating with the yellow strokes, two stripes of white cross in two distinct

directions from top to bottom, diagonally, ending in the yellow portion. A last white spot encircles the center of the painting, moving around a large blotch of black. A few more colored "islands" of an irregular oval or circular shape are present under the black and white area at the center of the canvas: aquamarine, turquoise, red, azure, and brown. On the top leftmost area of the painting, I notice a few stripes of black standing against a background of red and blue. On the bottom right, I can isolate two black spots over a greyish-white area, next to the big yellow patch.

Kandinsky, in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, in the chapter dedicated to the "Language of Form and Colour," observes that the combination of geometric forms and colors creates distinct and different perceptual results: something that he calls "vibration of the human soul" (Kandinsky 1946: 46–47).

Kandinsky identifies a general tendency to differentiate warmth or coldness in a color by its inclination towards yellow or blue, respectively. According to the Russian painter, warm colors move towards the observer on a planar surface, while cold colors tend to retreat from the spectator. This



Figures 7. Bertoia's *Sonambient* sculptures (ca. 1970), examples 1, 2. Harry Bertoia Foundation, April 7, 2023, <https://harrybertoi.org/about-bertoia-sonambient/>.

dynamic tension between warm and cold colors that results in movement is of fundamental importance for Kandinsky. He also feels the tendency of a color to be perceived as cold or warm is of fundamental internal importance to the development of any pictorial form.

Kandinsky saw black and white, and the inclination towards light and dark, as another antithetical pair. And again, he feels this involves a movement to and from the observer. However, this movement is more static or rigid as compared to the more dynamic relationship between yellow and blue. Kandinsky felt the four colors of yellow, blue, black, and white form the base of all movements and spatial exchange in pictorial form (Kandinsky 1946: 60).

As I re-read the color palette of *Impression III*, based on the above, I notice that the yellow encompasses the white, and the latter circles the black. Other colors contribute to this main dynamic exchange of space and counterbalance this general scheme, suggesting a direction that spirals toward the center of the canvas, between a long white horizontal stripe and the big black blotch of paint.

I am not trying to superimpose a formal reading of the painting here. Rather I am tracing connections between Kandinsky's notion of "point," his theory of colors, and his sensitivity to music composition, adding this to my perception of the subject matter in *Impression III* and its explicit association with Schoenberg's 3 *Klavierstücke*. I now rope in Cardew's *Treatise* to dialogue with Kandinsky's *Impression III*: it has been said that Cardew's score is more akin to a map to be navigated sonically because of its design governed solely by geometric shapes and lines. Given the premises of Kandinsky's *Impression III*, with its direct implication of the musical material from Schoenberg's composition, I might as well consider his painting a sonic map. By this analogy, more than an equivalence, I could even imagine to "perform" the painting of *Impression III* as a quasi-score of the 3 *Klavierstücke*.

Different translations of the same source material: a traditionally notated score and its counterpart, in pictorial form, as a map of sound probabilities. While such an attempt would radically change the music heard, I cannot but wonder whether this is only a matter of degrees of specificity, rather than a comparison between traditional notation and whatever sits outside it. Following this thought, I foresee a continuum or a spectrum of potential forms of music notation, from the most specific (according to some pre-established parameters) to the least (according to the same set of rules). As a consequence, if parameters change (for example, because of different priorities, evaluations, or musical relationships), my distinction about what is precise and what is not must be revised or may even vanish from my musical horizon.

I went as far as to interpret *Impression III* as a music score, an alternative version of Schoenberg's 3 *Klavierstücke*: my goal is once again to decipher and investigate the liminal space of unheard and unseen signs, traced on a square of paper; the locus of these transformations, translations, and genetic recombinations; and the emplacement, or displacement, of sound and visual gesture. Again, as I asked myself at the beginning of this inquiry, I wanted to know whether and how sound is silenced (or enhanced) by its visual representation and whether and how, conversely, the visual sign is obliterated (or magnified) by its aural representation.

After this excursus into various aspects of the relationship between music and visual art in the initial decades of the twentieth century, is now the time to attempt to trace possible conclusions as well as perhaps further observations and questions for future studies in the field?

The following quote from a letter by Kandinsky's close friend Franz Marc comes to my aid. This was written to August Macke, after having attended the same concert of Schoenberg's music. I will quote it almost in its entirety:

Can you imagine a music in which tonality [...] is completely suspended? I was constantly reminded of Kandinsky's large *Composition*, which also permits no trace of tonality [...] and also of Kandinsky's "jumping spots" in hearing this music, which allows each tone sounded to stand on its own (a kind of *white canvas* between the spots of colour!). Schoenberg proceeds from the principle that the concepts of consonance and dissonance do not exist at all. A so-called dissonance is only a more remote consonance. (Franz Marc, letter dated 14 January 1911; quoted from Hahl-Koch 1984: 136)

A good number of observations stem from the reading of this excerpt from Marc's letter. The comparison of the music of the 3 *Klavierstücke* with Kandinsky's *Composition* (1910–1939): a series of large canvases encompassing the phases of the artist's development of an artistic and musical sensitivity that transcends traditional figurative subject matter. The comparison of tones, from the music heard in Schoenberg's composition, which seem to stand on their own, to "*white canvas* between the spots of colour" (italics in the original) – remember here my previous digression into various forms of spatial whiteness (or emptiness), with the examples of Rauschenberg, Nam June Paik, and Oliveros. Finally, the hypothesis that after the conceptual distinction between consonance and dissonance is removed, this is replaced by a continuum of consonances, distinguished only by proximity or remoteness (dissonance being merely a more remote consonance). Elaborating on this observation, my previous suggestion of a continuum of potential forms of music notation from most to least specific, seems an interesting point of comparison.



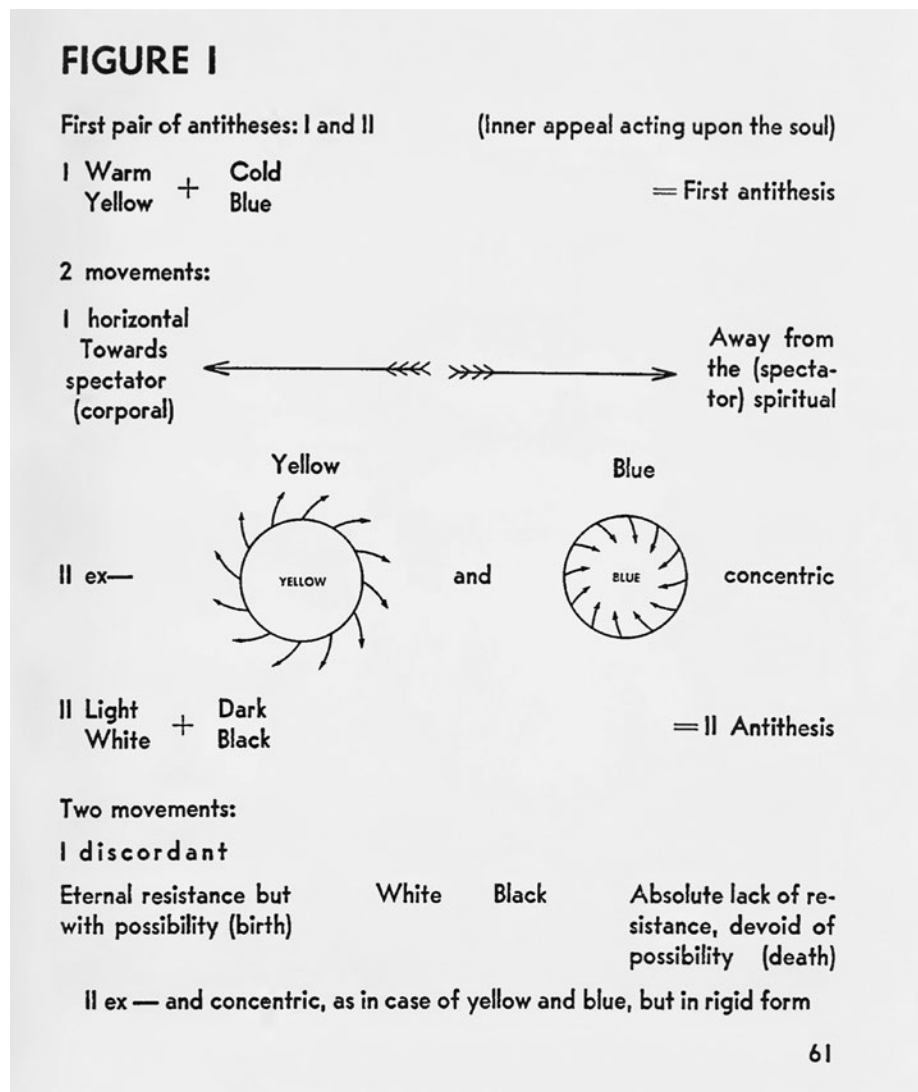


Figure 8. Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1946), Fig. 1 p. 61.

If harmonic relationships can be dissolved into a spectrum where only one element may be considered, say consonance, varying from “stronger” to “weaker,” I can similarly think of tight or loose notational directions, moving from the most sophisticated Western notation system, to a looser, more conceptual system of points and lines per Kandinsky and Cardew. In both cases (the harmonic and the graphical notational system), the similarities prevail in respect to the distinctions between them, creating a continuum of gradations or shades. As if there is an interpenetration of one chosen element (consonance, point, colors), acting across a spectrum of possible gestures (compositional, physical, in time and space).

As the extreme opposites on this spectrum, I could have on one side a score so highly elaborated, so detailed, that it leaves little or no room for interpretation of either visual or musical material, and on the opposite side a score

so receptive, abstract, and formalized with pure geometric forms, shapes, and colors (as per Kandinsky's basic notion) that it opens up a multitude of musical possibilities in sound and visual dimensions, a sort of *uchronian* map. Charles Renouvier's *Uchronie* (originally published in 1876) is a map of stochastic futurabilities of the immediate past. The term and the concept of *uchronia* is similar to alternate history, but *uchronic* times are placed in some unspecified point before current times, and they are occasionally evocative of a fictional universe. *Uchronia* therefore refers to hypothetical time periods of the real world, in antithesis to altogether-fictional universes or lands. Paraphrasing Renouvier's notion, Cardew's *Treatise* is close to a *uchronian* map: a window opening up multiple universes. All the other possibilities in the spectrum of notational sophistication would fall in-between.

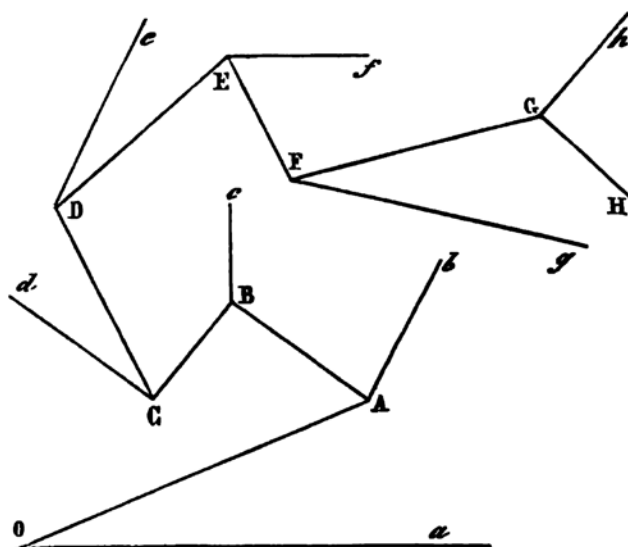


Figure 9. Renouvier's *uchronian* map (1876), from *Cartographies of Time*, 2012, p. 23.

## Conclusions

At the outset of this article, I maintained that *translations* that occur between the mediums of music and visual art, between hearing and sight, and between acoustic and visual phenomena are translations that generate new perspectives, uncharted maps, soundographies, and new morphologies. At the conclusions of this enquiry, I am trying to disentangle some of these nodes and potential directions of interpretation.

By examining the triad, Kandinsky – Schoenberg – Cardew, I have followed a path, back and forth, between a canvas painted from a piece of music (3 *Klavierstücke* > *Impression III*), and music sketched from a drawing (*Treatise* > musical performance). By proceeding in such a way, I have investigated the continuum of notation systems and harmonic relationships discussed above. It should be noted that rhythmic aspects of notation have been neglected. While I do consider the matter of rhythm to be of fundamental importance, I felt that within the scope of this article, a preliminary investigation of the visual and musical aspects mentioned throughout this research, constitutes a sound base and springboard for further exploration and deeper enquiry.

While I understand that my examples are limited, somewhat idiosyncratic, and capricious, my intention is to provide flight paths, rhizomatic entries for further investigation, and Deleuzian entrails. I also want to provoke questions about the relationship of music and visual art – questions that can hardly be answered *in toto* but nevertheless can, and perhaps should, be examined and discussed.

In conclusion, I hope my brief intrusion into the intertwined relationship between music and visual art can generate deeper inquiry into the liminal spaces revealed by this rather broad preliminary examination.

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## Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojami XX a. pradžios rusų tapytojo Vasilijaus Kandinskio „Impresija III“ ir austrų kompozitoriaus Arnoldo Schönbergo „Trys kūriniai klavyriui“ (3 *Klavierstücke*). Lyginti šiuos du menininkus pradedama tyrinėjant Kandinskio veikalus „Taškas ir linija plokštumoje“ ir „Apie dvasingumą mene“. Toliau vertinami kitų menininkų kūriniai, kurie turi bendrų bruožų su Kandinskio ir Schönbergo kūriniais: XX a. vid. Corneliaus Cardew partitūra „Traktatas“, įkvėpta Ludwigo Wittgensteino „Loginio filosofinio traktato“ (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*), ir amerikiečių menininko Harry'io Bertoios sonambientinės skulptūros, sukurtos maždaug tuo pačiu laikotarpiu kaip ir „Traktatas“. Straipsnyje nustatomos linijinio vaizdavimo vizualinės išmonės ir daigialinijinio, daigiaplanio, sferinio

garso klausymo sąsajos; analizuojama sudėtingų geometriinių formų sugretinimas su tuščiomis muzikinėmis penklinėmis Cardew „Traktate“; Kandinskio muzikinių gestų ir formų plėtojimas tapybos srityje; garsinio ir vizualinio, piešto ir muzikinio gesto susilieėjimas.

Straipsnyje pateikiami įžvalgų dėl *vertimų*, vykstančių tarp muzikos ir vizualiojo meno medijų, klausos ir regos, akustinių ir vizualinių reiškinių: manoma, kad šie vertimai tarp medijų sukuria naujas perspektyvas, nenubraižytus žemėlapius, garsografijas, naujas morfologijas. Galiausiai straipsnyje atkreipiamas dėmesys į galimą garso ir vaizdo tarpusavio santykį: ar ir kaip garsas yra nutildomas (arba sustiprinamas) per savo vaizdinę reprezentaciją; ar ir kaip, atvirkščiai, regimasis ženklas ištrinamas (arba paryšklinamas) per garsinę reprezentaciją.

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