

Materializing Sound

James Paull

SNO 114

Graphic & Symbolic Notation 1951-2012

Curator: Geoffrey Barnard



A.

In early 1950 an encounter between two composers takes place in the lobby of Carnegie Hall. Each one has been bowled over by the music he has just heard performed, Anton Webern's *Symphonie*, Op 21, and so excused himself from the Rachmaninoff that will follow. One is John Cage, the other Morton Feldman. Cage, now in his late thirties, has established in the post-war years a significant standing as a leading experimental figure, whereas the much younger Feldman is unknown. Quickly forming a friendship, each will profoundly influence the other. Feldman brings into Cage's orbit the young pianist, David Tudor, who will become the most dedicated performer of the older composer's work. Feldman soon moves into the building where Cage shares an apartment with his partner, Merce Cunningham, and immerses himself in small private concerts for writers, artists and musicians that Cage presents. It is here that Feldman shows Cage and Tudor a composition on graph paper in which he has notated pitch in a very general manner indicated by boxes divided into differing ranges. Within such a research domicile can be

found the beginnings of what will soon become an international reaction against the hegemony of musical notation.

The drawings Feldman produced were developed into a series of compositions titled *Projections* and *Intersections*. The grid-like boxes of *Projection II* (1951) indicate what is so distinctive about Feldman's experiments. They display a simple yet intriguing abstract geometry. The diagram's purpose, however, is not strictly aesthetic – what we see is a graph in which time is represented by space. Scores such as these are considered to be the first to experiment with a new type of notation, but it is Cage who quickly becomes the lightning rod in the development of graphic notation for a younger generation of composers and performers, as well as artists and writers.

Cage's trajectory documents the shift towards 'indeterminacy' and there can be little doubt that in this he was profoundly informed by the milieu of younger fellow artists with whom he now conversed, not just Feldman but other young composers like Earle Brown and Christian Wolff, as well as emerging post-war painters like Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. At the same time, Cage's trajectory is a deepening of his already longstanding effort to re-open a modality of musical interpretation by now resistant to the reductive implications for performance brought by conventional musical notation. This effort has its rhetorical beginnings in the mid 1930s when Cage, then a student of composition, expressed frustration with the Western harmonic tradition advocated by his beloved teacher, Arnold Schoenberg. From the early percussion and electronic works of the late 1930s onwards, Cage generated unpredictable sound materials and processes, which includes the use of recording technology for creative rather than reproducing purposes. Such processes expressed an iconoclast's desire to explore what he called 'sounds in themselves', beginning with *First Construction (in Metal)* in 1939 and culminating a decade or so later with works like the *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano, *Music of Changes* and *Williams Mix*. Each of these yield a unique kind of notation for a specific kind of investigation of sound, duration and space: time-structured grids, supplementary grid-like tables of preparations, abstract, almost optically active, zigzagging patterns that visualize exactly where and how magnetic audiotape is cut to produce manifold textures in sound manipulation. But it is his radically reductive score that notates the paradox of silence that proved most influential. In *4'33"*, first realized in

1952 by David Tudor, the pianist sits silently at the piano, raising and closing the instrument's lid to mark three irregularly timed sections.

Writers on post-war music have long held *4'33"* to be arguably the single most provocative work in the post-war era. Notable figures such as Michael Nyman have also recognized the work's equally central influence on musical notation. This influence can be summarized as involving a fundamental shift from a notation that describes what we hear to what we do. A consequence of this shift is that the score is no longer secondary to the composition; rather, the graphic dimension assumes a fundamentally reconfigured importance in the realization of the sound in performance. No one was more alert to the material specificity of the graphic score than Cage, who produced three versions of *4'33"*, each scored in a distinct notational mode that he considered to be equally significant.¹ The original is written on conventional staff notation, while the second version is recognizably a graphic score. It is this second version, in which numerous extended vertical lines on an otherwise-blank page mark the composition's three sections that a pronounced visual resemblance to Rauschenberg's 1951 pure white monochrome *White Paintings* can be noted. Cage himself drew attention to this resemblance stating that his composition was made after seeing his friend's radically reductive paintings and in a state of fear that musical developments now lagged behind those of art.²

Although it is often overlooked, the graphic score version of *4'33"* also resembles graphic scores being made by Morton Feldman between 1950 and 1951. However, to suggest a propos that the older composer also lagged behind the younger downplays a more basic point. Feldman was producing his notations while moving within Cage's intermedia orbit and his graph compositions can be understood as responding to the latter's specific interest in developing a spatial notation of time or duration. In *Projections* a minimal series of spaced boxes are employed to specify sounds, register, instrument and duration. What is perhaps most distinctive in these drawings relates to how emblematic they are of the intensely personal, intensely quiet sound-environment that would become synonymous with his signature free-floating musical structures in which no particular sound dominates. By contrast, Cage celebrated in his discovery that by incorporating

¹ To follow this argument, see chapter one, *passim*, Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art*. The MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 2007.

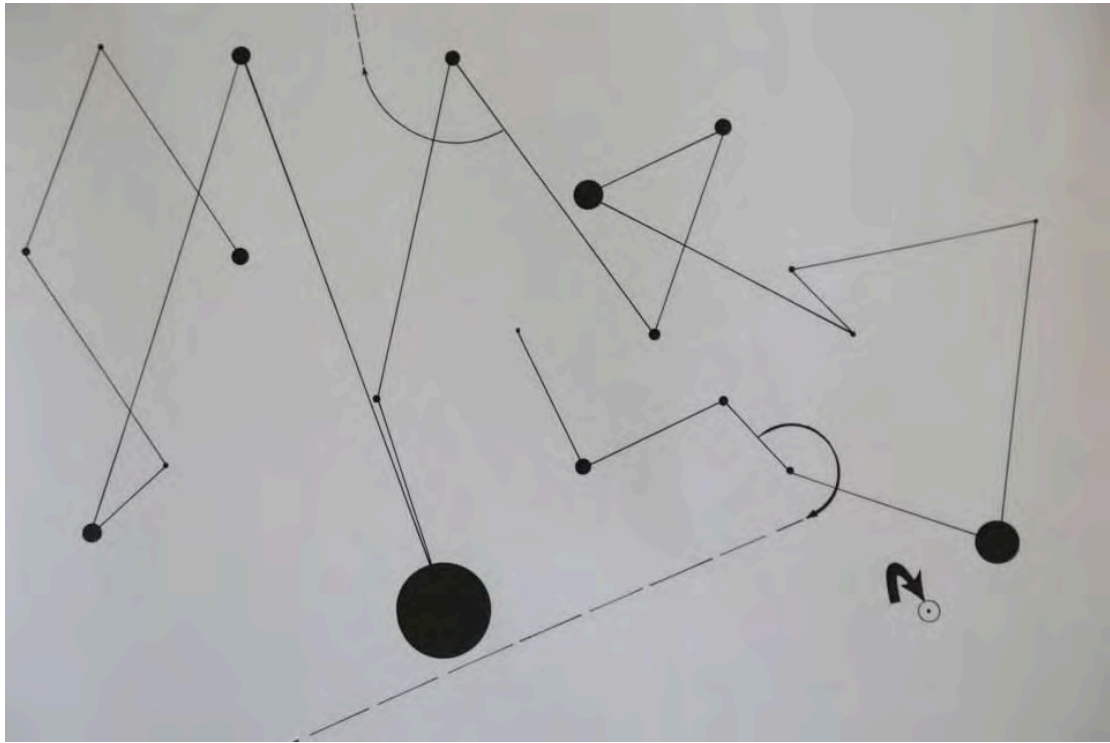
² Branden W. Joseph, 'White on White' in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Autumn, 2000), pp. 107-08

non-musical procedures and non-musical materials he effectively eroded his own compositional agency. In ever-hybridized forms, each of his scores symbolizes an irreverent staging of the extra-musical event that allows for an interpenetration of elements and activities. With the opening up of the musical composition, the 'work' becomes something associated with what lies between schema and unscripted performance. 'Indeterminacy' relates to the emergent tension of a clearly inscribed structure that fixes the musical work, but only incompletely.

That musical interpretation had been reopened to allow the unscripted a constitutive standing contrasted with avant-garde developments in Europe. In musical centres such as Paris and Darmstadt serialism was evolving so that the compositional task demanded such exactitude that any process of creativity eliminated the very possibility of interpretation. The interpolation of Cagean indeterminacy thus marks a dialogical moment that interweaves what Cage called 'mistaken identity' within organizational doctrinarism. Karlheinz Stockhausen is an important figure in helping to understand why this rogue identity could be acknowledged in a way that was not simply diplomatic. Stockhausen had pursued in serial principles a belief in total organization, but his interest in the autonomy of sounds as well the pursuit of working processes rather than the work as artifact shared with Cage an interest in developing open forms. Early electronic compositions like *Studie I* and *Studie II* are in this context records of a composer at the crossroads. They are certainly serial attempts to build music from its most elementary components. The latter also marks the first electronic composition to appear in print and its document of ever shifting blocks and lines remains a fascinating visualization of dynamic frequencies.

Cage's thinking was felt in Europe in the immediate post-war years, but it was his and Tudor's visit to Darmstadt in 1958 that proved far-reaching in disseminating innovations in notation and performance methods. European works that soon followed document the impact, most notably those by Stockhausen, Mauricio Kagel and Sylvano Bussotti. Stockhausen's *Zyklus* (1959) is today acknowledged as his masterpiece in graphic creation; it embraces a freedom brought by graphic notation by employing indeterminate signs for indeterminate sounds. In the 1960s Stockhausen worked closely with performance ensembles to produce a range of pieces including *Plus-Minus*, *Prozession* and *Kurzwellen*. In these compositions he sought an almost absolute degree of control in the

performance of his music, but in the singular exploration of sound that, in his words, journey 'to the end of a world', Stockhausen would use skeletal scores creating a performance whereby supervised musicians could choose or discover materials. The use of shortwave radio proved integral to these events allowing each performer not just sound sources, but unpredictable sound sources.



B.

If Stockhausen saw his music in terms that were increasingly endowed with spiritual properties, he shared with Cage the ability in consistently locating an *outside* to the musical artifact. That their thinking displays a centrifugal quality helped open the way for others wanting to explore a relation between the score and performance that could not be determined. It is in this way that the graphic score in all its forms helped transform the fundamental perception of what music could be. The musical score expands into different spheres of thinking and practice to become a residual charting of contrapuntal possibilities. With the dissolving of musical forms, painting and drawing, language, anarchic gamesmanship and recalibrated forms of improvisation become the ground compositional process. Composers such as Christian Wolff respond to this conditional context by providing in their notations sets of instructions consisting largely of suggestions. In a different context 'free improvisation' performance ensembles emerge, such as the Rome-based Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza and the

London-based AMM – all performers intent on shifting music away from the control of composers towards a realm expressive of a radical quest for freedom.³

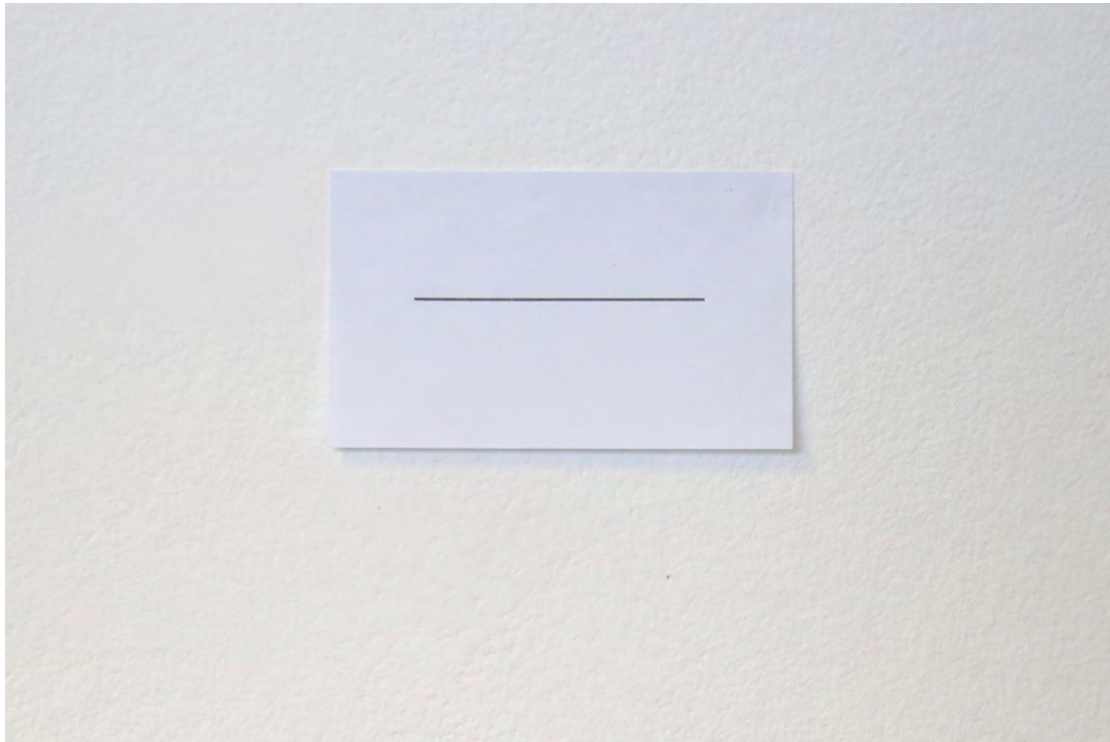
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While Stockhausen and Cage established precedents, they also maintained the role of ‘composer’ in their working aesthetic. In this sense their art represents a centripetal mode of thinking, one that retreats backwards reinforcing the traditionally privileged status of composer. This aspect is evident in the extreme levels of exactitude they expected in performances of their works. Such levels were conveyed in carefully prepared sets of written instructions. These texts remind us that graphic notations are rarely purely or even primarily visual documents, even when visually experienced as self-referential works. Scores almost always come with instructions and, in the case of Cage and Stockhausen, these can be so copiously detailed, or hermetic, that only an exceptionally trained or unique talent such as a David Tudor can possibly realize their intention.

The prominence of the written word in what is ostensibly a musical language serves not merely as a footnote. To return to an earlier point, Cage produced three versions of *4'33"*. The third version of *4'33"* is a text version; its autonomous standing alongside graphic and staff formats records how language qua written instructions and technical details formed an integral means by which experimental notation helped transform the traditional score. But what are the consequences of such a transformation? Perhaps it is that the graphic score should not be considered so much a visual work to be seen as a visual work to be *read*. If it is the relationship to language that informs the design and performance of graphic music, then the importance of this insight was not lost on artists who came to be identified with early Fluxus. In a distinctly post-Cagean move originating with La Monte Young's *Compositions* and then quickly followed in reductive sets of instruction works by George Brecht, Yoko Ono and others, the transformation of language into a visual work facilitates the interpenetration of music, art, language and performance, alongside the merging of art and the everyday in the appropriation of activities, objects and materials within settings based on chance and coincidence. Similarly, written instructions and a range of other linguistic details proved as important

³ For a discussion on the convergence of improvisation, politics and freedom in this period, see Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, Oxford University Press: Oxford New York, 1995, pp. 185-89, 204-06.

to the experiments of conceptual artists whose serial processes incorporated with documentary rigour all the steps towards making the art.



C.

Not all graphic notations worked at a symbolic level, nor were symbols necessarily juxtaposed with (or outweighed by) text. Two of the most eloquent and influential of all graphic scores, by Earle Brown and Cornelius Cardew respectively, are examples of 'pure' forms of notation: two-dimensional visual sheets on which is presented a notational system that eschews any identifiable referent. Brown's *December 1952* came out of the same milieu as early graphic efforts by Feldman and Wolff and reveals his absorption in European non-figurative art and design movements. The exactness of his vertical and horizontal black lines – floating rectangles and dashes in a space where white predominates – suggests that what Brown sought from performers when conducting the piece was a finely wrought balance between hard-edged precision and a meditative spaciousness conducive to free musical improvisation. Cardew's *Treatise* is the work of a different idealism and era. Produced between 1963 and 1967 – a period that saw Cardew immersed in free improvisation – *Treatise* is comprised of 193 pages of graphic design and comes without instructions or key. If Brown's visual aesthetic invokes the paintings of De Stijl or the mobiles of Alexander Calder, then Cardew's visual art of pure notation comes out of the industrial world of graphic design. Typography, the setting of the 'grey

page', a treatment of the notation system by which the graphic aspect assumes dominance are all features of his magnum opus. He himself described his unique contribution to intermedia as a 'cross between a novel, a drawing and a piece of music'.⁴

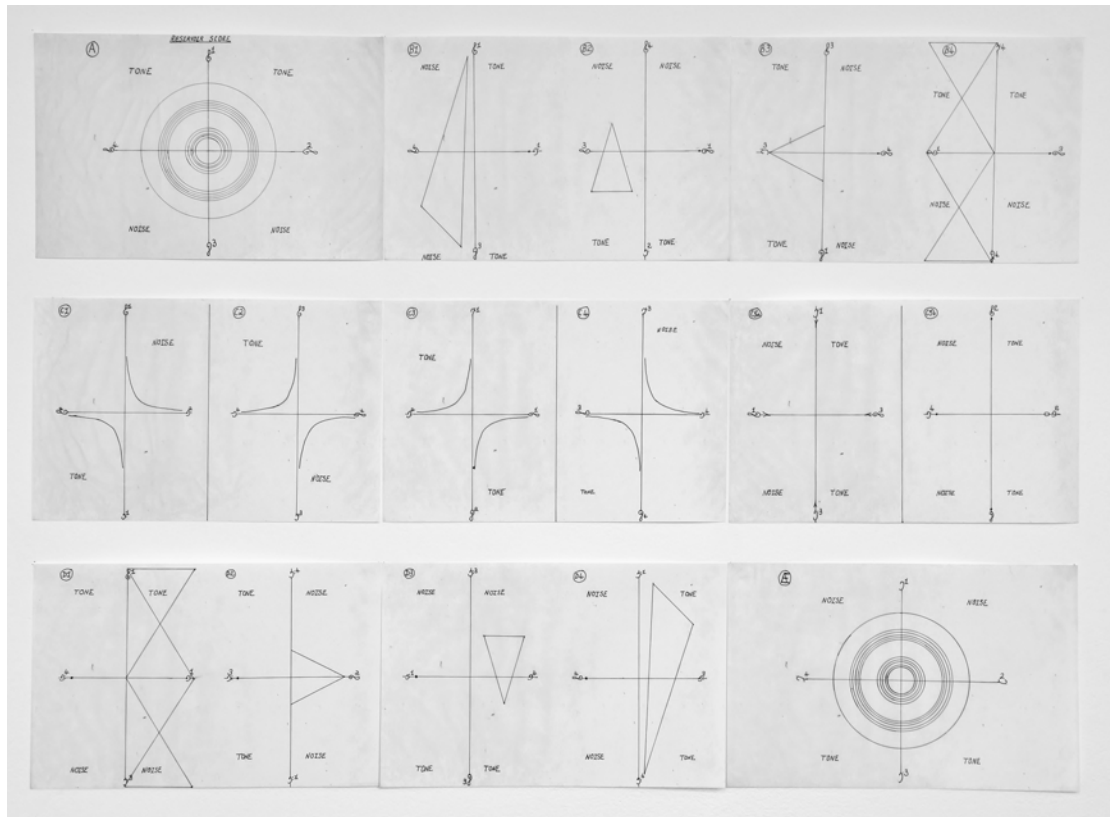
While *Treatise* retains an enigmatic connection to standard notation with its use of the five-stave device in the guise of a persistent visual motif, in performance it bore less of a connection to a musical piece than a Fluxus 'happening'. Brown's score was intended for trained musicians to perform, but *Treatise* requires no musical training or experience for its realization. Cardew believed it could best be 'played by a collection of musical innocents' and his search for this new kind of performer was realized in 1969 with the formation of the Scratch Orchestra. Crucial to the Scratch's democratization of musical experimentalism was its network of working relations with visual artists and art schools in Britain, some of which were undergoing the shift away from the nineteenth-century salon model towards an emphasis on interdisciplinary processes, new media and performance. Cardew had by this stage long absorbed Cage's influence on the development of American avant-garde painters of the mid-century and it is notable that both George Brecht and La Monte Young proved important influences on the direction of the Scratch Orchestra. But the Scratch aesthetic fundamentally differs from either Cage or Fluxus in that the open-ended definition of music in which composition and performance was generated took place in loose social gatherings comprised not only of amateur musicians, artists and writers but people of all backgrounds.⁵ New compositions presented under the rubric of 'Scratch music' saw visual and aural activities continually intermixed with activities that assimilated principles of assemblage and collage.⁶ Compositions tended to be conceptual rather than practical – Tom Phillips's composition *Postcard Compositions, Op XI* (1970) is a celebrated example of how any kind of graphic material could be adopted as a source of notation. So anarchic a milieu with its acceptance of any activity whatever stands in sharp contrast to the avant-gardist's belief in the centrality of the composer. Cardew's involvement with the Scratch Orchestra

⁴ Cornelius Cardew, 'Wiggly Lines and Wobbly Music' in *Studio International*, Vol. 192, No. 984, (November/December, 1976).

⁵ Michael Parsons, 'The Scratch Orchestra and Visual Arts' in *Leonardo Music Journal*, Vol. 11, (2001), pp. 5-11.

⁶ A selection of such scores (written words, photographs, maps, graphs, diagrams and conventional notation) can be found in *Scratch Music*, edited by Cornelius Cardew, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1972.

lasted only a few years, but together they succeeded in establishing an artistic prototype for all-embracing social inclusiveness.



D.

Cardew was a catalyst for unifying disparate talents. Composer, musician, improviser, educator, activist and graphic artist, his genius rests in part on his skill in distilling hard-edged contemporary experimental modalities through processes that circulated within truly heterogeneous social collectives. He would leave a remarkable imprint on numerous noteworthy figures of his time, not least the Australian composer/performer David Ahern, someone largely forgotten by institutional history. Ahern shared something of Cardew's skill in synthesis and communication. What is most unusual for an Australian composer is that, between 1968 and 1969, he worked with both Stockhausen and Cardew before returning to his home country to put into practice trends such as the graphic notation he had learned and participated in when working in Darmstadt, then in London with Cardew's radical improvisational settings. Ahern's venture into setting up a publically funded electronic studio in Sydney for composers to work in went nowhere, but not before he composed *Journal*, an early experiment in stereo broadcasting in Australia. More successful were the performance ensembles he established in 1970, AZ and Teletopa. The former veered towards the Scratch Orchestra's idea of socially

inclusive music making, while the latter was a highly disciplined collective devoted to a utopian ideal of unpremeditated improvisation that, in Ahern's words, is structured 'only in the moment of its occurrence in the instant of "now".'

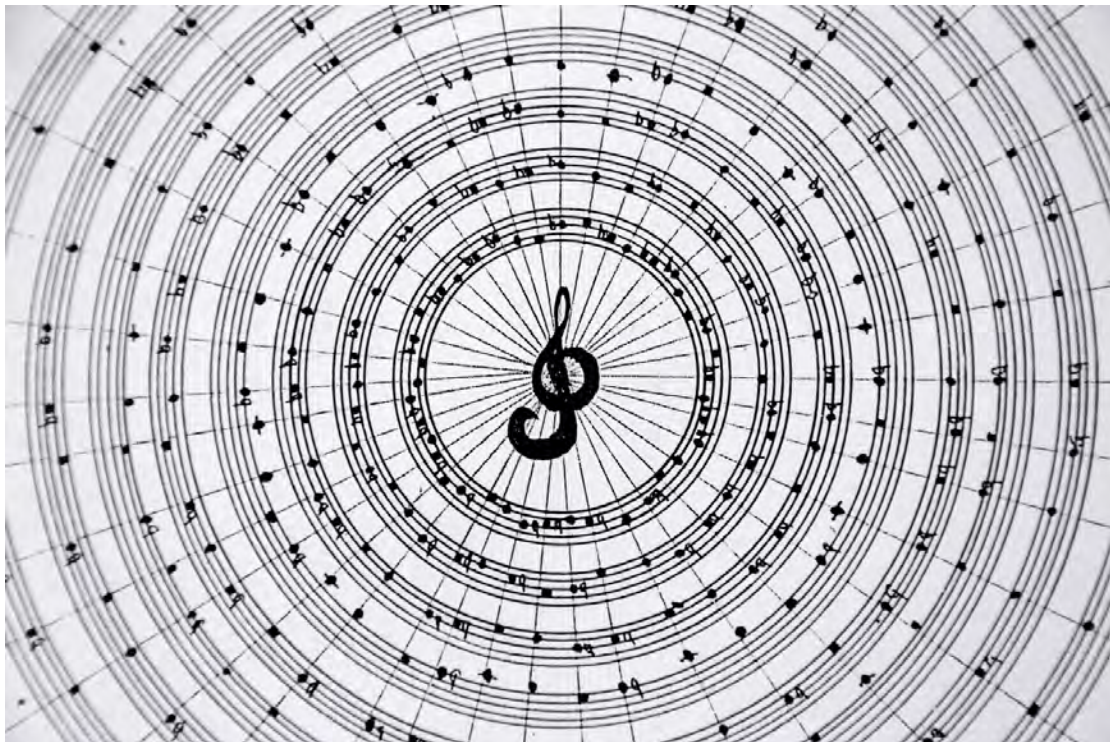
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Much of what has been explored in the above historical sketch informed the exhibition 'SNO 114: Graphic & Symbolic Notation 1951-2012' recently held at Sydney Non-Objective (SNO) Gallery in the inner-western Sydney suburb of Marrickville. Although strictly accurate, the chronology is somewhat misleading as all but one of the thirty-odd scores on display were produced before the end of 1971. The exhibition thus documents a largely bygone genre, whose significance can be summarized along the following lines: that across two decades of extraordinary heterogeneity there emerged an international language that successfully challenged the hegemony of staff notation by reinstating the interpreter as an active, indeed equal participant in the musical process. Just as importantly, the language by which balance between composer and interpreter was established escaped the stifling modes of ideological determinism evident in early post-war trends, such as the avant-garde movement of serialism and technological developments in electronics like *musique concrete*. By deepening an identifiably post-Cagean aesthetic, compositional processes became open-ended, allowing for interventions that enabled the musically untrained to participate in the making of musical events. Not dissimilar to the notion of the 'expanded field' in relation to sculpture, graphic scores help enable music to migrate into different fields of creativity such as language, media and painting.⁷

It is easy to dwell on the kind of artistic indulgences that might result from anarchic situations cultivated by an ensemble like the Scratch Orchestra. It is also inherently problematic that by the end of the 1960s graphic scores represented a kind of orthodoxy. Scores had become aesthetic objects in their own right; their enigmatic abstractionism exemplifying what Cardew would look back on with a somewhat jaundiced eye as a 'disease of notation'. But cynicism downplays the point that although in some circumstances scores transcended their pragmatic purpose to become works suited to display in the white cube, they more typically stood in relational terms, that is, as visual

⁷ The term 'expanded field' is a reference to the influential thesis proposed by Rosalind Krauss

and aural conduits from the artwork to the world. In part this latter aspect relates to the economics of graphic music. If, as Cardew observed, it was the efforts of various music publishers that helped make graphic music a genre, success depended on how readily the score circulated in the form of a published book or score.⁸ In effect, it was the publisher copy rather than original artwork that was to become the foundation for broader cultural dissemination. Although unintended, this was a point strikingly evident at SNO, for not only were all of the works on display in fact reproductions, the vast majority of these were reproduced from music publisher copies, not original scores.



E.

That these were reproductions in no way diminished the graphic qualities of works on display. Nor were the works inconsistent with SNO's interest in interrogating the nature of Australian and international non-figurative art. One can only randomly select some of the exhibition's innumerable visual highlights. John's Cage's 1958 masterpiece, *Aria*, was always going to be one of these: 20 pages of wavy coloured lines denoting different singing styles and 16 black squares denoting 'non-musical' sounds with words in Russian, Armenian, French, Italian and English. Two 15-page excerpts meant *Treatise* was well represented, the quality of Cardew's graphic artistry suggested in the score's consistently extra-musical dimension. Alongside further works by Cage, Feldman and Wolff, a

⁸ Cornelius Cardew, op cit.

number of representative scores by Stockhausen featured prominently. Considerable space was also devoted to less familiar composers. Robert Ashley's *in memoriam...* *CRAZY HORSE* (*symphony*) notates the score in the form of a circle with 64 numbered radii, while John Mizelle's *Radial Energy I* (1967) is an animated essay suggestive of geometrical abstraction. Toshi Ichiyanagi's *Sapporo* (1962) employs a geometrism that is more delicately pointillist; like Ichiyanagi, Allan Bryant's *Pitch Out* (1967) balances symbolic notation with pure graphics, while his abstraction is closer to the palette of a painter. La Monte Young's *Composition 1960 #9* was a valuable inclusion, representing the most compressed example of pure notation with the drawing of a straight line on a white page. But perhaps it was Ahern's *Journal* that most fascinated: designed as a plan for action that could be realized in both studio and live performance, the 9-page score employs a simple yet effective sequence of horizontal and vertical lines that form a table dividing 'tone' and noise'. When seen in its entirety, *Journal* reveals a conceptual artist employing fully-fledged serial processes to help change our awareness of what are music, performance and drawing.

A quickly assembled exhibition, there were some regrettable omissions from the display, no more so than that most hypnotic of scores, the pivotal *December 1952*. One also observed in the absence of women a lost opportunity to reflect on scores by artists and other members of the Scratch Orchestra, such as Carole Finer, Catherine Williams and Stella Cardew. More problematically, by privileging ostensible strengths, namely a spectrum of richly enigmatic graphic qualities, the exhibition highlighted the visual aura of the scores at the expense of examining their underlying historical interrelationship with language. The paradoxical display of the third (textual) version of *4'33"* as opposed to the graphic version only drew attention to a privileging of the visual.



F.

SNO 114 should best be appreciated as a preliminary investigation of an important historical moment in which the space between structure and formlessness assumed historical significance, helping to generate new artistic forms while voicing what remain important utopian aspirations. For this curator Geoffrey Barnard has given us much to ponder. A friend of Cage and once close working colleague of Ahern, Barnard has both a deep scholarly knowledge of his subject as well as a working knowledge of experimental improvisation. Not only can he draw on extraordinarily rich reservoirs of anecdotal history, his research has played an important role in keeping Ahern's legacy alive. Something of both was evident in two hypnotic, and, at times, ear-splitting performances that bookended the exhibition, bringing together a younger generation of performers, most notably saxophonist Jim Denley. Each was a realization of an exhibited score by Ahern and Barnard respectively, and each in its own way said much about how graphic scores helped create a new kind of musician. Ahern's *Stereo/Mono* (1971) is evidence of a composer rapidly moving away from composition per se towards a sound production attuned to the telepathic awareness needed for improvisation in the moment of the 'now'. Barnard's *In Memoriam John Blades* (2012) channelled the dead and in more ways than one: the use of shortwave radio evincing both Stockhausen and Cage, while the score with its geometric use of grid-lines to symbolize duration acknowledges the influence of Feldman.

SNO 114 provides further evidence of a recent curatorial focus that has been alert to exploring Australian, regional and international forms of non-objective art through an array of convergences with new media and philosophical forms, as well as socially and institutionally inscribed narratives. Intriguingly polyvocal, the outcome is one that further calibrates the emergent relational aesthetic in contemporary Australian art practices, while illuminating Wittgenstein's enigmatic aphorism that 'an expression has meaning only in the stream of life.'



G.

Photo Credits

- A. Morton Feldman and John Cage, video, SNO Gallery, Sydney, April 2015.
- B. John Mizelle *Radial Energy I*, 1967.
- C. La Monte Young *Composition 1960 #9*, 1960.
- D. David Ahern *Journal*, 1969.
- E. Terry Riley *Keyboard Study #2*, 1967.
- F. (Left to right) Peter Farrar, Geoffrey Barnard and Jim Denley performing *In Memoriam John Blades* at SNO Gallery, 25 April 2015.
- G. David Ahern *Stereo/Mono*, 1971.

Photos: Seva Vlaskine