

A LAYERED PROCESS: LYRICAL IMPROVISATION

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As an artist bridging influences, practices and histories, I am interested in the expressive development of form through process and in poetics in the broadest sense of the word.



Fig 1. Still from Behaviors 2010, Video Projection for live performance with Gerry Hemingway at Follow the Sound, a jazz and new music festival, deSingel Internaitonal Kuntscampus, Antwerp, Belgium.

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As a young poet turned painter and printmaker, I was always interested in how content shifted as it moved between mediums. While I was enamored with painting and the formal innovations which propelled modernism, I was also concerned that some of the things I wanted to express did not lend themselves to paint. Digital media was not yet on my horizon, but I was surrounded by non-narrative filmmakers who were also grappling with the formal properties of their medium. While I never made films myself, by the time I started to work on the computer, I was already looking for something.

Right after graduate school in the mid 1980s, I entered the emerging world of broadcast and cable graphics and animation and immediately started experimenting with this new medium. It was natural for me to transmute some strong painterly and expressionistic qualities to this canvas. The directness as well as the mutability of the computer made an immediate hit with me, while the ability to work both with multiple images and time became my focus.

As a tool, the computer makes it easy for an artist to work with the same material in different contexts. For me this means moving between stillness and motion, between abstraction and representation, between image and sound, incorporating dance, text and data driven “materiality into my work. The fluid overlap between these sources and processes allows my work to lean in different directions, depending on what it is I am trying to express.

Working in multiple mediums also expands the possibilities for metaphor, not only between sound and image, abstract and representational form, but through new expressions of materiality. The word “brush” now includes the whole body through both photographic sources or data capture. These practices are extensions of basic expressive tendencies.

Because we are inherently multi-sensorial, I experience a strong feeling of materiality and an engagement in my body--a certain energy-- even when I’m working with multiple layers in a complex computer interface. Seeing it means feeling it, whether the tool is code or paint. This orientation toward process and through the body informs so much of what I do.

This is furthered in my collaboration with the musician and composer Gerry Hemingway. We have worked together for almost 20 years and have established a way to dialogue about sound and image which shapes the content of our pieces. Often we work back and forth, moving between multiple layers of sound and image to create a compositional whole. This allows for overlapping correspondences and associations in content.

I am going to be discussing two directions in our latest work -- visual music and lyrical form.

“The Visiting Tank” is a 13-minute piece Gerry wrote as part of a program of Chamber Works, originally performed and recorded for Tzadik Records in 1999. In 2010 I created a visual score, which was projected behind a string quartet at the Kleintheater in Luzern, in a show named “Step Across the Border.” This evolved into a single channel video, an emotive tone poem. It was inspired by the events in the former Yugoslavia, which had left it’s legacy of destruction and devastated so many lives. Gerry composed the music in a kind of narrative format, imagining, in sound, a story about the war from the perspective of the children who survived it.

This piece was a departure from our previous collaborations in that I composed a visual score after the music was written. While it is not necessary for the audience to know these details in order to appreciate the work, both Gerry and I incorporated elements from the countries involved in this conflict. Gerry used parts of the Bosnian and Serbian national anthem in a violin section, and I trolled the Internet for video references. My sources (from UTube) included images of nature and war gleaned from home movies and news. This was the first time I used material from the internet, some of it already poignant, and I feel it’s important to acknowledge that these experiences which moved me so, were not my own.

Our next piece, Behaviors, which is a work in progress, focuses on visual music for live performance. The image score was projected behind Gerry’s performance last year at “Follow the Sound,” a jazz and new music festival at the deSingel International Kuntscampus in Antwerp, and this year at Guilph Jazz Festival in Canada. In this incarnation, we consider the projection as a layer which is positioned between the live music and pre-recorded sound textures which Gerry triggers during the performance. Musical transitions, from continuous transformation to fast changing juxtaposition, form the structure of the sound and image.

While I sometimes curse the limitation of the computer environment, I love the fact that it provides a space for me to try to forge these kinds of connections. Often I feel I am working on a platform as an alchemist, shifting source materials into new amalgamations.

I am interested in the expressive development of form through process and in poetics in the broadest sense of the word. As an artist bridging influences, practices, and history. I believe that it is as important for me to continue to engage the “painter’s eye” as it is to adapt new kinds strategies into my work. I think this creates a dynamic dialogue with the past, allowing for new and even unexpected inspiration. Following these threads wherever they lead is not only “the state of art” today, but it is part of what makes contemporary art practice so interesting and exciting.