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Already There: Implicit and Explicit Treatments of Movement in Music and Art

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Already There:
Implicit and Explicit Treatments of Movement in Music and Art

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Arts

in

Music

by

Todd Moellenberg

Committee in charge:

Professor Aleck Karis, Chair
Professor János Négyesy
Professor Jann Pasler

2013
The Thesis of Todd Moellenberg is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2013
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Already There:
Implicit and Explicit Treatments of Movement in Music and Art

by

Todd Moellenberg

Master of Arts in Music

University of California, San Diego, 2013

Professor Aleck Karis, Chair

This brief essay acted as program notes to a recital, entitled “Posing Nothing,” given April 12, 2013. The recital juxtaposed performances of scored contemporary music with movement-based improvisation. This essay situates the use of physical movement in my musical performance with artists in other disciplines who use movement as part of their practice, ultimately demonstrating the implicit nature of movement in many artistic fields and how it can be treated explicitly.
Already There:

Implicit and Explicit Treatments of Movement in Music and Art

The most common remarks I receive after a performance, whether as pianist for the Brahms Piano Quintet or in a solo performance of Ligeti piano etudes, concern my straight posture, my gestural tendencies, and how my facial expressions engage with the music. This used to be a source of minor frustration—as if my physical performance was independent of sounds I was making through the instrument, and of my technical facility, preparation, and adherence to the score in realizing those sounds. Instead of interpreting this response as indicating compensation for an otherwise mediocre performance, I began seeing my performance style as a vital embodiment of the music I was making. This opened up a field of exploration, most recently resulting in a solo piano recital entitled “Posing Nothing,” in collaboration with visual artist Matt Savitsky. Savitsky created a set for the UCSD Conrad Prebys Music Center Concert Hall, designed and applied make-up to my face, and actively participated and mediated my rehearsal process by exploring ways to structure improvised movement. My objective in this performance was to quite literally demonstrate the physical nature of my performance as a pianist by juxtaposing works I would ordinarily play—avant-garde music from the 20th and 21st centuries by Chris Dench, Jonathan Harvey, George Benjamin, and Harrison Birtwistle—with movement-based improvisation, interacting with the moveable set pieces Savitsky designed while wearing a nude-colored unitard. Though my
performance style already could be considered intermedial, this recital more explicitly interrogated and isolated both its physical and musical facets. For this paper, I will consider examples of other intermedial migrations, drawing on painting, photography, and dance, in addition to my own project, “Posing Nothing.”

I am guided by several principles Martin Stokes outlined in his essay, “On Musical Cosmopolitanism.” In his discussion of “the new spaces and places of global musical encounter,”¹ Stokes considers musicians and performers who “embrace the music of others, and in doing so, enable musical styles and musical ideas,” finding that it “allows us to think of music as a process in the making of ‘worlds’, rather than a passive reaction to global ‘systems.’”² Furthermore, Stokes states that “‘the musical imagination’ which ‘derives from an age in which ‘absolute’ concert music constituted the cultural ideal...is gone...The musical imagination is something we necessarily have to think of in terms of multi-media technology these days, and the broad cultural prioritization of the visual, the image, the spectacle.”³ Stokes then turns to dance: “we might learn something about the practices of musical cosmopolitanism if we were to take more note of dance.”⁴ In asking, “could music and dance move...according to an interior logic, and not, simply, the logic of social movement and politics?”⁵ Stokes opens the door to exploring how dance, or more broadly, physical movement, can act as a medial

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² Stokes 6.
³ Stokes 10.
⁴ Stokes 14.
⁵ Stokes 14.
subtext to all of the examples I will demonstrate below. Ultimately, many of these questions rest on the possibility of interdisciplinary, or intermedial work in making worlds. This “making of worlds” to Stokes still begs the question: “how is diversity and cultural in-between-ness to be celebrated, without eroding core identities?” In my recital, I took inspiration from Stokes’ question, and yet went beyond it. In embracing other disciplines, I suggested, how is the betweenness in this intermedial work to be celebrated, without eroding core identities? The artists I discuss here uncover intermediality already implicit in their work. They celebrate in-between-ness of discipline by making explicit reference to the role movement plays in the medial interaction of their work. They too inspired my embrace of intermedial practice as a performer in order to create my recital.

*Cindy Sherman and Dressing Up*

Rebecca Schneider, in her chapter of *Performing Remains*, “Still Living,” begins her discussion of artist Cindy Sherman’s work with a confused critique of Sherman by Arthur C. Danto: “While it is perfectly clear that [her] works are photographs...the question has often been raised as to whether she is a photographer. [...] The quality of a print is not something that concerns her, as if she would be glad if the print was on cheap paper and even blurred [...] So she is not a photographer,” later saying that she is “like an astonishing actress.”6 Schneider describes Sherman’s practice as “pos[ing]...for her own camera...in pseudo-film stills that appear to

precede her,” and in later works she “step[s] into oil paintings, sex pictures, and Civil War battlefields that mimic not-quite-precise precedents.”

7 Subsequently, Schneider surmises that Danto’s problem is one of mediality, in that “he can neither see her face (she is not recognizable to him) nor the face of the photographer (because he sees an actress).”

8 The intermediality Schneider then cites in Sherman’s work is “between theatre, film, painting, and photography.”

9 The work therefore is already intermedial in its demonstration of a woman who dresses herself up (painting and theatre) often in filmic scenes (film) to capture an image of herself (photography). Upon viewing her photographs, the viewer traces the movement between Sherman preparing herself for the image her camera will capture, and posing in front of that very camera.

Just as Sherman’s work involves a multiplicity of roles, in her costumed persona as well as in her dual roles of both photographer and model, I performed in a unitard and pseudo-drag make-up, and alternated between the roles of pianist and dancer. My work also engaged with the question of “quality” that is considered in Sherman’s work. My experience with improvised movement began only in the rehearsal process in the months leading up to my recital, whereas I have been studying the piano for almost two decades. My stamina and concentration were put to the test in moving between both modes of performance, and therefore I was less concerned with a completely polished outcome than the celebration of medial betweenness that I could achieve.

7 Schneider 154.
8 Schneider 154.
9 Schneider 156.
Henri Michaux and Tracing Movement

Carrie Noland, in her Migrations chapter, “Miming Signing,” critiques the work of Belgian “poet turned painter” Henri Michaux, focusing on his painting to demonstrate its implicit intermediality. She describes Michaux as an artist “who belonged to a generation of mid-twentieth-century modernists intrigued by prehistoric inscriptions and their seemingly immediate relation to gestural routines,” situating Michaux’s use of intermediality in physical movement.10 In describing Michaux’s poetic works, she demonstrates that physical performance is a unifying medium behind all of his work. In a piece of writing entitled Par des traits, Michaux writes “Gestes plutot que signes,” which Noland translates to “Gestures rather than signs.”11 Noland argues that he demonstrates this concept in his published paintings as well, by “examining meaning’s contours,” quite literally in the contours of invented calligraphic signs which he used as the content of his paintings.12 A poem accompanying the ink drawings of Mouvements serves as another example of discursive writing that seems to describe the kinesthetic richness of his painted symbols. Michaux writes, “Signs / not of rooftops of tunics or of palaces / not of archives and dictionaries of knowledge / but of distortions, violence, perturbation / kinesthetic desire.” Noland extends this idea by stating that his paintings “merely

11 Noland 134.
12 Noland 135.
evince a desire for kinesis, for motility. They are indexical rather than symbolic or
iconic, but only insofar as they register that a movement (the movement that
produced them) has indeed occurred.”¹³ Michaux’s work can therefore be read as an
active blending of media to achieve his goal of inscribing kinesis, traveling from
poetry to painting, and combining the two.

Michaux’s engagement with calligraphy as a concrete trace of movement
works in a similar way to the musical scores I read from and performed during the
recital. George Benjamin’s piece Sortilèges involves a dialogue between extreme
registers of the keyboard, necessitating quickly shifting horizontal movement on the
part of the performer. Jonathan Harvey’s piano and tape piece Tombeau de Messiaen
reaches a saturation point towards its conclusion in which the tape part overwhelms
my own part, despite the highly virtuosic nature of my playing in that moment. This
created a conflict between aural and kinesthetic perception on the part of the viewer.
My performance of Birtwistle’s Harrison’s Clocks rendered audible the complex
layering of different rates of temporal movement. The experience of performing
these pieces, and rendering their effects audible and visible, subsequently informed
the improvisations that came after each piece. For instance, after my performance of
the Benjamin, I found my physical movements to bear the same discontinuity as the
piece’s structure, interrupting a slow extension of my muscles with a collapse onto
the floor before continuing on with a new gesture. Each movement therefore carried
the trace of the movement that preceded it, regardless of the mode in which I was
performing.

¹³ Noland 150.
Shyamala Moorthy and Combining Media

A major concern for Ketu H. Katrak in his article, “The Gestures of Bharata Natyam: Migrating into Diasporic Contemporary Indian Dance,” is in the way meaning is changed as a particular practice of dance is displaced geographically, in this case the classical dance style of Bharata Natyam in its migration to Southern California. The term “dance” in application to this practice is already misleading if understood as monomedia. Katrak cites Narayana Menon’s remarks that “the gestures, or mudras, as they are called, are the essence of Indian dancing. They are a very comprehensive language, and any story or incident or any shades of emotion can be satisfactorily expressed through them.”14 One demonstration of narrative in this dance involves a padam, or a “lyric poem rendered in gesture.”15 A common padam “depicts Radha scolding Krishna, her lover, for his flirtatious behavior with the gopis (milk maids). The gestures, as codified, are both precise and evocative in their representation and depiction of cultural context.”16 Narayana Menon further suggests that Bharata Natyam’s mudras carry “the eloquence of poetry.”17 This is not only an analogical jump. In a padam, “a verbal line is repeated three to four times and is rendered via varied gestures.”18 This medial tie to narrative and poetry,

15 Katrak 218.
16 Katrak 221.
17 Katrak 222.
18 Katrak 222.
however, is obscured in the migration of this dance practice to California. The shared tradition and prescriptive symbolism is undermined by the individualistic practice of Shyamala Moorty, a dancer and resident of southern California, who in her project “Rise,” blends the classical dance tradition with the “Brechtian tradition of political theatre...prob[ing] the arena of communal violence and the genocide of Muslims in the state of Gujarat in India in 2002.”\textsuperscript{19} Another Moorty piece, “Balance of Being,” condenses Bharata Natyam in its use of mudras but “without traditional text or music.”\textsuperscript{20} Moorty draws from a dance practice that is already intermedial in its tie to text and theatrical representation of classical narrative. She then reorganizes these components by breaking gestures from theatrical practice and reattaching it to a different theatrical practice, or altogether condensing the mudras to “the abstract rather than the devotional aspect at the heart of traditional Bharata Natyam.”\textsuperscript{21} Moorty therefore achieves an explicit rendering of this medial interplay after dissecting the varied components implicit in her inherited classical dance practice.

In addition to the implicit sense of movement derived from the musical scores I performed from, I worked as Moorty did to extend kinesis to a more explicit framework. Birtwistle’s piece Harrison’s Clocks contains five distinct movements, each built up on recurring rhythmic figures. While delivering movement-based performances between each movement of the piece, I attempted to recreate the same sequence of movement that I initially improvised. I chose to do this in order to explore how a musical score heavily laden with repetition can inform an

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\item \textsuperscript{19} Katrak 228.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Katrak 228.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Katrak 232.
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improvisation built on repetition. In Chris Dench’s piece *Passing Bells: Night*, I frustrated the audience’s perception of physical movement in my playing by moving a wall in front of the piano bench so that only my feet and hands could be seen from the majority of seats in the hall. These decisions served to highlight the implicit structures involved in the pieces I was playing, in the case of Birtwistle, and the imaginative ways I could play with movement implicit in my playing, in the case of Dench.

*

These examples encourage us to return to my original question: in embracing other disciplines, how is the betweenness in this intermedial work to be celebrated, without eroding core identities? After discovering that my performance practice is already situated between movement and sound, I can avoid any sort of intermedial “erosion.” I can celebrate by bringing the implicit nature of my work to light. I am able to explore the interaction of these two facets in new combinations, in their interaction with other media, and in order to uncover my creative potential as a performer.
Works Cited


