

Press Release

## 'To become like music': late modernist painting, performance and the musical avant-garde, 1945-1965

curated by Chris Townsend

Mary Bauermeister  
Mark Boyle & Joan Hills  
Earle Brown  
Sylvano Bussotti  
Paul Caffell  
John Cage  
Alexander Calder  
Nam June Paik  
Peter Schmidt  
Karlheinz Stockhausen

15 July – 16 August 2008  
Open Tuesday – Saturday, 10am – 6pm

*Private View: Wednesday, 16 July, 6-8pm*

'To Become Like Music' is an exhibition that explores the close relationship between music and painting in the late modernist period, 1945-1965, and examines the consequences for art of that relation. It uses the work of Nam June Paik, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Alexander Calder, Earle Brown and others to look at a period of two decades when painters' engagement with music, and musicians' engagement with the visual arts would transform the languages of both arts.

The exhibition's title comes from the German philosopher Schopenhauer, who suggested that to become like music was the aspiration of every art. For modernist artists, no longer under an obligation to represent the world realistically, that aspiration first became manifest with abstract painting after 1910, especially in the work of Kandinsky. But by the mid century, the world had fundamentally changed and so too had the discourses with which art and music approached it. Modernism's imperative to make its subject out of the very language in which it depicted that world led to an analysis that eventually exhausted the rhetorical forms of representation. As confidence in visual resources ran dry so it became clear that the modified languages of other arts could be employed. One consequence of this is the birth of performance art in the 1960s, especially in movements such as Fluxus, which is seen here in its earliest stages, in the collaborations of Nam June Paik, John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Sylvano Bussotti and others, exhibiting and performing in the atelier of the German painter Mary Bauermeister from the late 1950s on.

The activities of abstract painters were also of particular interest to composers, who by the early 1950s had begun to doubt the capacity of the formal, abstract language of musical scores in much the same way as artists and writers had a few decades before. Avant-garde composers such as the American Earle Brown, inspired by the work of Alexander Calder, began to produce scores that looked more like visual art than conventional notation, and which often reflected close friendships and shared conceptual interests between artists and musicians. If Rauschenberg's 'White Paintings' of the early 1950s became the inspiration for Cage's notorious 4'33", we see here a number of other more expressive projects in which a composer's instructions are transposed into visual effects. Amongst these are two works by the Italian composer Sylvano Bussotti, made in the early 1960s, Cage's score for his *Water Music* (1952), and, in response, Mary Bauermeister's *Malerische Konzeption* (1961), made for Stockhausen.

One consequence of the expanded field of performance and music that follows, especially, from Stockhausen's *Originale* (1961) is the emergence of sound art, first in performance and then, eventually, in installation. 'To Become Like Music' features the work of the important British artist Peter Schmidt (1931-1980) both as a painter and as a performer, experimenting with sound art in live events. These days Schmidt is best remembered as an illustrator of album covers for the British musician Brian Eno, but he was one of the pioneers of sound art, and we are lucky enough to have discovered and restored original tapes of mid 1960s performances. At the same time the exhibition looks at the collaborations of Mark Boyle and Joan Hills in making projections in live performances, alongside Schmidt, and their work with composers such as Cornelius Cardew and Annea Lockwood who had emerged from periods of study in Köln and Darmstadt with a fresh conception of what "classical" music could be, how it could be performed, and what demands it should place upon an audience.

The exhibition closes by looking at the renewed effect of the new music on painting in the 1960s. Where modernist abstraction had often sought to replicate the rhythmical effects of music through pattern, in the wake of Schoenberg and Webern the new emphasis on texture and the 'volatilising' of time, rather than temporal progression, by avant-garde composers led to a new approach to the visual. We see this in the work of two British painters, Schmidt, and Paul Caffell, particularly affected by early innovations in electronic music and, in Caffell's case, by the compositions of Roberto Gerhard and Stockhausen. For Caffell, still working in this vein today, the act of listening precedes the act of painting, and the formal method of composition in one medium becomes a model for another. Gerhard's *Symphony no. 3 (Collages)* is exemplary here; Caffell still speaks fondly of a work, first heard in the early 1960s, whose structural procedures profoundly affected his own, then and now.

'To Become Like Music' is a show that pays attention to a moment in modernism's history that is often neglected as we attend to the new artistic projects of the 1960s as if they emerged ready formed. In this period all of art's languages were open to question and became the subject of experiment and transposition. The exhibition reflects the excitement at the possibility that seemed to present itself to composers and artists alike in the post-war era, that they might remake the very language of their medium.

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Next exhibition at Mummery + Schnelle: Michael Müller, 2. September – 11. October 2008