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NOTA: A MARK OR SIGN

by

CLAIRE KNOB PAUL

Under the Direction of Cheryl Goldsleger

ABSTRACT

“Nota” is a merging language of sound, instruction, and visual elements from the unique experience of performing on a wind instrument. I create improvisational drawings inspired by the nature of improvisational sound, performance, and the reflection of moment making. These works are tied to my interest in the human body and its endless variations. The anthropomorphic nature of these instruments ties closely to the human element of touch and breathing. As a focus for this experience, I create drawings that are inspired by the essence of communicating through touch what I am often trying to communicate through musical performance. The results begin to describe the form of the formless of sound and sound thought.

INDEX WORDS: Language, Sound, Music, Hands, Performance, Bassoon, Art, Drawing

NOTA: A MARK OR SIGN

by

CLAIRE KNOB PAUL

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2009

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2009

NOTA: A MARK OR SIGN

by

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Craig Dongoski

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College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
May 2009

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this body of work to my husband, friend, and comrade in creative endeavors: Doug Paul. Your support and strength helps me to remain true to myself and steady on the rocky path of dreaming. You remind me about our warm hazy summers when I am faced with icy sidewalks, and the sweet simplicity of Evan's joy when I am faced with the weight of gritty conflicts. We may move into days and then years, but we always stay in my heart paddling softly, on calm lakes at sunset.

To my family, thank you for your support, your encouragement, your many babysitting hours, and the continuous phone support sessions. Thank you for always having paper around and a pencil when I was little and not being too upset at my drawing on the walls. Much Love.

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I would also like to thank Craig Dongoski and his quiet encouraging manner in which he maps out galaxies and attacks life with questioning and enthusiasm. His never-ending curiosities spring youthful germinations of possibilities, and his intuition and insight are a gift, which he humbly shares with gusto.

Cheryl Goldsleger for your steady encouragement and consistent manner, I greatly appreciate your guidance and personal dedication to the success of your students. Thank you for the time you made for me in the middle of busy days and long afternoons.

I am sincerely humbled and grateful to the many talented and intelligent souls wondering purposefully around the Art and Humanities building. I am truly thankful that our paths crossed this way.

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1. The Practice of Rehearsal (Introduction)

“In the printed text sound is ambiguous, being dependent on the imaginative faculty of the reader. Sound, moreover, can only be material for the performance and not for the poetry.”¹

The memory of touch, moment, and movement is a powerful way of seeing and inherent to my artistic process. The idea of moment, while inspired by musical training, performance, and sound making is not limited to musicians or compositions. It is recognizable in speech and among awkward silences, in ceremony, in quiet reflection--in rehearsed memories of physical awareness like that of hands on a steering wheel. In any action that has become so rehearsed its presence moves toward a subconscious action. These rehearsed musical actions, as part of my process, are used in working towards moments. Sometimes these rehearsed actions lead only to daydreaming. At other moments, during a more complex physical interaction, such as creating sound or drawing, a rehearsed experience of moment transcends my daily existence. The thousands of times that my left thumb lightly sat on the whisper key of the bassoon, waiting for an electronic split second impulse to press and release this one key, created a subconscious action. An action so rehearsed that it is far down into my fingers--far into the muscles and tendons which rewired parts of my nervous system to react in pure reflex. The muscles in my fingers remember things that I have consciously forgotten. An expanded memory, like an echo that stays with me long after the sound has died out, the memory of my hands touching, moving over, or feeling the keys in a rhythmic passage inspires and informs my work.

There is a connection to the bassoon that is corporeal and intimately intense. To imagine the bassoon's keys, a complex twisting of springs, holes, and wires, as the mental picture I have

of performing on the instrument would be only somewhat accurate for myself. There is a song of language waiting to be released in this rehearsed movement that is so quick and expected one does not need to rationalize with thinking only to experience the meaning of the words, the story, or the song.

While the body of the bassoon is maple, the metal keys, however mechanical, fuse under rehearsed physical movement. There is a seamlessness of those keys that feel like extensions of my body even after I have put the bassoon away. Here is where the idea of touch for me becomes essential in the development of my thesis work. There is no memory for the musician of what it looks like to play a note on the bassoon- unlike the piano or the guitar where one might see the keys or frets pressed down and one's eyes may follow one's fingers and hands- the bassoon is keyed and pressed blindly. One can only go by touch- what it feels like to play. In addition to touch, that of breathing to create sound, creates a meshing of body both by touch and movement that feels very organic. This memory of feeling the keys is still with me when I begin drawing.

The drawings included in my thesis exhibition are a communication of this mental picture of feeling and touch. The hand drawings represent an inclination of sound meeting a visual representation--I describe this memory of feeling in both physical and emotional terms as it merges in synesthetic moments. A sequence of events in these moments could be described this way: sound happens or is created, visual ideas as perceptions to the sound occur in my mind, and then after these moments there is a memory. When I create sound through the physical demands of a wind instrument, then there is a new sense to this sequence- that of touch. This synesthesia of touch, sight, sound, and memory merge in phenomena that become a component of my artistic process.

2. Merging of the Senses (Background/Influences)

Multiple influences inspired the merging of these sensations together in an artwork: the internal synesthetic awareness of performing on the bassoon, the Fluxus movement, a chance encounter with a West African musician, an African Art History class, and a sound research project in a graduate seminar. These sources informed, inspired, questioned, and validated an internal impression of language and meaning that was an origin point for this body of work. I began to bring together the aspects of my musical/sound training with my visual arts/studio based work.

Synesthesia is defined by Adam Rosen as: “Syn-es-the-sia n. Physiol. Sensation produced at a point other than or remote from the point of stimulation, as of a color from hearing a certain sound (fr. Gk, syn = together + aisthesis = to perceive).”² This new perception of the senses is described by Rosen’s synesthesia research website as, “...an involuntary joining in which the real information of one sense is accompanied by a perception in another sense. In addition to being involuntary, this additional perception is regarded by the synesthete as real, often outside the body, instead of imagined in the mind’s eye.”³ This occurrence of one human sense replacing an other frequents my drawings and impulsive thoughts that in further investigations result in artistic works. Rosen’s description of color from sound, is one of the reactions I experience in hearing sound. However since one hears sound in time, this movement of sound inspires works that include the element of color, but also drawings of line, shape, and human anatomy. There is a strong desire in my thesis work to try to explain this experience by making drawings and other works derived from sound. I am thinking of sounds more abstract and the connection of making these sounds with my hands. This communication of ideas though the hands is perhaps more

ordinary, but the language imagined is unclear and closer to representing my internal musical voice.

This drive to create drawings that represent sound (and could be thought of as representative of a synesthetic experience) are referenced by Thomas Y. Levin in his article about sound researchers of the 1930s called, “*Tones from out of Nowhere*”: *Rudolph Pfenninger and the Archaeology of Synthetic Sound*.⁴ Oskar Fischinger, a German early abstract animator, sought to explore this idea of drawing and sound through two films he referred to as *Tonende Ornamente*. The shapes and patterns that were drawn on paper became the sounds that one heard as it was run through the projector. Fischinger called these abstract experiments, “absolute film.” They were some of the first direct connections between a concrete image and a sound that resulted from it. Thus, running the film with Fischinger’s images back through the projector resulted in an unusual method of creating a sound track.⁵

Fischinger’s method of creating a visual sound or the idea that objects had in fact a “corresponding sound, a sort of iconic acoustic signature”⁶ continue to influence my aural explorations in midi sequenced compositions from my drawings. This idea has also prompted me to include remnants of fingering charts, represented by red circles, on these drawings as a sort of “acoustic signature.” An example would be the drawing, “*Fingering*,” See Figure 2.1. When thinking of sound, noise, and the possibility of sound or implied sound, the idea that an imprint of sound can stay with one beyond the moment is one of the themes I explore in my drawings of hands. These hands are the memories I have of sounds/noise I either imagine or create under my fingers.



Figure 2.1 Claire Paul, *Fingering*, ink on paper, 11"x30" 2008

Since there is such a strong tie for me to the anthropological keys of the bassoon, I draw the hands in response to this idea. Douglass Kahn describes an expanded view on sound and the ideas of auditory states in *Noise, Water, Meat, A History of Sound in the Arts*.⁷ “Noise can be understood in one sense to be that constant grating sound generated by the movement between the abstract and the empirical. It need not be loud, for it can go unheard even in the most intense communication.”⁸

Kahn’s further explanation of noise includes the silences, absences, and conditions that would resemble noise. “I am interested also in *significant noise* abatement occurring at specific sites known for their noise; in other words, silencing can occur in the midst of a din.”⁹ Khan is discussing the idea of ending or suppressing certain significant noises at certain times, even in the middle of more noise or a condition that would resemble noise. An example is John Cage’s

famous 4' 33", whereby the performer sits quietly at the piano for the length of four minutes and thirty-three seconds. This informs my ideas of sound and silence to mean that creation of sound in my own internal mind has the same significance as an actual auditory sound. The lack of hearing the sounds produced by me in normal auditory states does not reduce their significance as noises. Kahn's ideas of sound still intensely communicating, without an aural representation, supports the experience of drawing these hands, rushing and fumbling around internal sounds.

In my work, the auditory imprint of performing, musical notation, and moment informs and inspires my process. These ideas of sound, noise, lack of noise, conditions of noise, and sound/noise verses absence or silence connect me to my musical background, but propel me forward in conceptual investigation.

3. Exploring Translations and Transpositions (Process/Development in Work)

The translation of these ideas into drawings in my thesis exhibition developed through the study of African Art History. Having visited Ghana for a month long study abroad trip in 2005, in my direct exposure to West African culture, I experienced the merging of the arts that were present in the local culture. Conversations with various musicians, a Palm Wine singer and guitar player Koo Nimo, (a distinguished international musician and Ghana's leading folk musician¹⁰) in particular, helped to strengthen my curiosity to find a personal western counterpart- namely in my own artwork, a reflection of enmeshing genres and ideas. Our conversation was about the merging of dance and musicians. The dancers had personal symbols of the hands and body that were representative of a communication of ideas meant mostly for the musicians who then interpreted their movements in sound. The dancers would then interpret the sound as a continuation of the conversation and this conversation would happen back and forth. For example, the forefinger and thumb of each hand linked together would mean that *we are one*. The musician would see this and then interpret the movement of the dances by creating music that would be upbeat and celebratory. Another movement might mean my mother has passed away. There was a long list of specific communications through the body and hands which Koo Nimo showed to me. I could see how there was not a separation of communication from body, hand, language, and sound. It flowed together in performance.

This flow of artistic practice is present in many cultures around the world, Africa in particular, "For women in the various nomadic societies and among the Mbuti in the forests of central Africa, art is not a profession or hobby. In these societies the process of art is a part of life-all women are artists."¹¹ Creation of artwork is simply part of daily living. My interest in

using these ideas as a source for my expression stems as much from a desire to present work that is a reflection of my daily living; a combination of visual art, sound, and physical awareness fused in practice. Another interesting synergy of the visual representations and sound performance comes from the the Mbuti culture group. This group improvises their music and their bark drawings to create a process of daily living that I find fascinating.

The Mbuti men gather bark in sheets from the trees and bring it to the women of the tribe. The women then create abstracted designs with dark ink on the sheets of bark. “Of the production of bark cloth by Mbuti men, who strip bark from carefully selected trees and pound it with ivory mallets to soften the fibers, leads to a discussion of the decoration of cloth by women. The dyes, made of gardenia juice, charcoal, and other vegetal materials, are painted onto the cloth using twigs or fingers.”¹² The designs have a line quality that is often organized in rows and looks similar to how western cultures record text. These drawings were thought to be made during or somehow parallel to the polyphonic singing. “Thompson also analyzes the principles of Mbuti music, describing how *yeyi* (yodeling) and a variety of choral forms have their corollaries in artistic practices, such as cooperative production of artworks (more than one artist painting on a single piece of cloth).”¹³ This intersection of visual art and music inspired me to attempt the same synthesis and create some sort of fusion with sound and drawing.

An early exploration of this idea began by sitting down with my bassoon and reading musical passages of bassoon exercises. The inward focus of this exercise allowed me to envision the various notes my hands played. Doing away with the sheet music because it became too distracting, I began to improvise and play freely. This connection to the body helped me realize the first three drawings that were tied to these ideas of sound.

These first three drawings were conceived of as musical representations of sound movement; and so, were titled, *Diminuendo*, *Accelerando*, and *Sonata*. I was hoping for improvisational drawings that were quick and immediately reflexive of the act of playing the instrument. For *Diminuendo*, I began with the image of the hand in my mind and then drew the resonant images of hands twisting around each other in a large mass moving into a single fixed fingertip resting on top of the pile. The natural eye movement of the picture would lead the viewer from the bottom of the page to the singular tip of a relaxed finger. A diminuendo in music is similar to a decrescendo, in that the instruction is for the music to gradually get softer, but more poetically a diminuendo or dim., is a dying out of the sound a fading into nothing. This fading is not inherent in the line quality of the drawings, but more an intent for the viewer's eye to mimic the musical direction of diminuendo, so in the experience of viewing thus internally creates one's own soundtrack of sound fading into nothing.

The next two drawings, *Accelerando* and *Sonata*, while conceived in the same vein, were similar in their execution of these two musical ideas. Accelerando is a gradual speeding up of tempo in a musical piece, and while the attempt was made at creating a drawing representative of this sensation, the drive for such a literal translation would prove to be a daunting task and one that resulted in drawings that seemed less than satisfactory. The hands were drawn in similar way to *Diminuendo*, but rushed diagonally across the paper. Since the problem in this drawing was not creating a sense of mass and weight moving to nothing (as in music a Diminuendo), but rather that of speed, the result was a much looser translation of the idea. In the drawing *Accelerando*, the only real difference is in the orientation of the hands on the paper from vertical to diagonal. *Sonata* was the complete abandonment of form into more abstract lines, which may

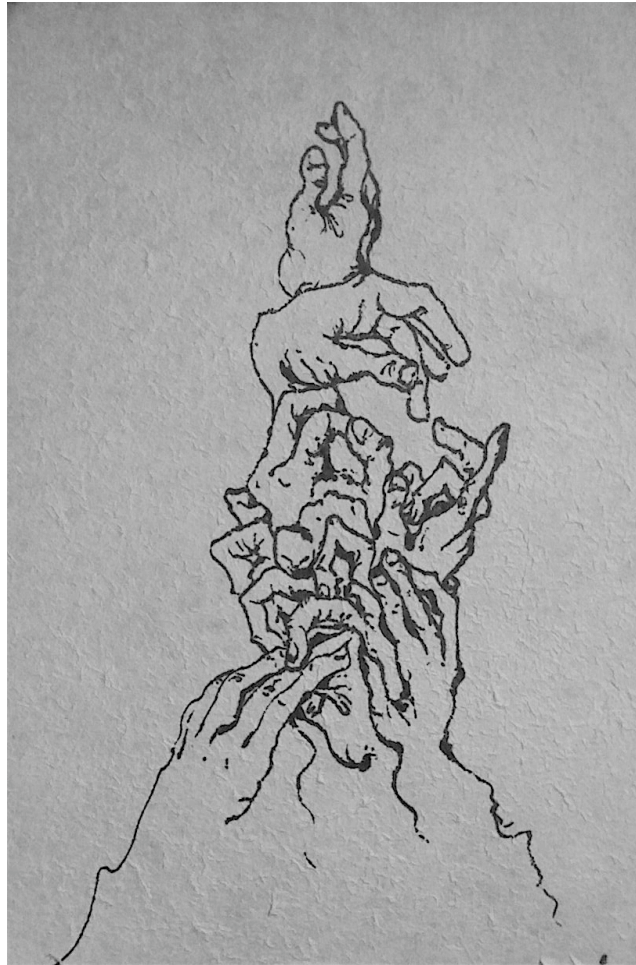


Figure 3.1 Claire Paul, *Diminuendo*, pen on handmade paper, 11"x17" 2006

have better represented the directional line of the music and did not share the qualities of the instrument that the first two drawings had done.

The structure of *Sonata* became problematic, since I was trying to be quite literal, *Sonata* is a formal layout of the structure of a piece of music and could not be captured in one drawing- rather it would have to be the structure of many drawings as a system. The title before the drawing seemed to make them more narrative and too arbitrary. While this rigidity seems less an impediment to me now, at the time it resulted in my frustration at such an abstract idea with a



Figure 3.2 Claire Paul, *Accelerando*, pen on handmade paper, 11"x17" 2006

concrete task. I stopped working on the hand drawings based on musical ideas and decided to explore more raw formats of sound and drawing as separate works.

While theater, performance, and narrative operas bring sound and the visual together, I felt for my own exploration of the translation of these ideas, at the time I wanted to avoid narrative exploration. I was interested in the physical experience of playing and the immediate response of drawing, so rather than tell a story of the experience, I felt compelled to try and communicate a direct physical response. I continued to concentrate on these ideas in their more raw formats. Creating sound pieces that were contained in themselves and creating drawings that were not linked directly to sound. However, I still needed a reason, a longer dialogue to support



Figure 3.3 Claire Paul, *Sonata* pen on handmade paper, 11"x17" 2006

the purpose of creating this work. As chance would have it, Craig Dongoski's and Matthew Sugarman's graduate seminar focused on alternative histories.

My research project that semester was to present a new history of sound-as a result, it expanded my ideas of music, sound, inherent sound, scores, performance and performance art. It led to explorations of sound art and recording that gave me a dialogue with the visual art world. The idea of combining personal experiences with auditory mediums led to an expanded understanding of the purpose of my drawing and recording sound. This proved a turning point in my life and artwork. As a new understanding of sound, music, performance, and drawing

developed, my desires drifted towards more progressive and experimental impulses. Of particular influence are the ideas and works of John Cage and the Fluxus movement.

John Cage's concerns and directions were inclusive of the sounds of art and life. "The core of Cage's musical practice and philosophy was concentrated on the sound of the world and the interaction of art and life."¹⁴ The idea that silence is human conjecture meant to me that the purpose of any human creation, no matter how seemingly small was significant in its affirmation of life. "There is no such thing as absolute silence."¹⁵ If there is no real silence then, there is constant variety and change, and because of the infinity of those variations one more variation by me would be in line with the universe.

Cage's experience of the soundless chamber led to his ideas about silence and were a direct result of his physical responses to the anatomical workings of his own body. Cage heard his heart, his blood pulsing, and the rushing of the physiological on-goings of the human body. This inspired my gut connection to the corporeal experience, the hands of human touch, and human anatomical being. This impulse to create drawings linked to sound and the physical experience of human existence are a direct connection to this affirmation of life. The Fluxus credo of various artistic pursuits remains refreshing in their approach to play, chance, and the merging of the arts. Play helped me realize the artwork after the experimentation, instead of feeling I needed a solid idea before creating an object. In other words, the freedom of play led me closer to a more direct realization of my intentions. Working without an end result in mind was freedom from the setup of exhausting a cliché. The merging of the everyday with art was similar to the theme I had experienced in Africa. The significance of play gave support to the ideas that emerged from it, and eventually the artwork that followed.

4. Language and Imagination of the Inner Script (Discussion of the Work)

The converging of sound and drawing resulted in works that were representative of a desire to communicate this internal sound language. The format of the 11"x30" drawings completed in ink was derived from a reflection of the shape of the bassoon, namely that it is long and thin. While the actual shape of the bassoon is quite a bit longer in reality, I did not intend these drawings to be limited by literal translation. The format of these 11"x30" drawings begins to create a more cohesive display of various movements when arranged in groups on the wall. Each drawing is derived from a specific moment or feeling of playing on the bassoon and when grouped together begin to form a more literal language. Creating drawing after drawing helps to feed the obsessive nature of my desire to convey this internal dialogue. Drawing, *No. 45* (Figure 4.1), is an example of a sound idea where the lighter movement of notes stretches and melts into more chaotic and quick movements. I hear a glissando type effect when I think of this drawing.

No. 40 (Figure 4.2), is another example of the feeling of various deforming disjointed movements as a sound of quick jaunty expressions that would be physically difficult for the performer. A multitude of staccato notes would be in *No. 50* (Figure 4.3). I intended this drawing to represent the short separated pops of a passage where the thumbs would be in constant movement.

In conjunction with the 11"x30" variations, I explored drawing with compressed charcoal in larger formats. These expanded drawings (about 96"x 60") began as a way to more physically interact with the act of drawing, (like the act of making sound/music), and possibly explore an



Figure 4.1 Claire Paul, *No. 45*, ink on paper, 11"x30" 2008



Figure 4.2 Claire Paul, *No. 40*, ink on paper, 11"x30" 2008



Figure 4.3 Claire Paul, *No. 50*, ink on paper, 11"x30" 2008

idea in a longer format. These drawings also challenged me to think of more complex formal considerations with charcoal as an impermanent medium and the possibilities of its erasure and fading into the paper surface. While these drawings are longer in their completion, they still maintain an expressive quality in their execution. I intend these drawings to become more subjective in their language, as they are more fluid and more emotional in their exploration.

See Figure 4.4. *No. 50, (Spiral)* is a longer drawing completed by listening to a recorded improvisation of my own playing and then, because of the large format of the paper,



Figure 4.4 Claire Paul, *No.50 (Spiral)*, charcoal on paper, 8'x3' 2008

allowing myself to react more physically with the act of drawing the hands in response to the sound. I intend these large drawings to explore the more emotional side of listening to the sound/music and they are more subjective in their realization.

The scroll drawings, Figure 4.5, are a variation of the original 11"x30" drawings and were inspired by the orientation of the paper being directly opposite to the vertical panels of the singular drawings. Drawn in charcoal these scrolls are displayed unrolled and propose to be a reflection of a longer moment. The viewer must walk along the scrolls to see the passage of time reflected in the length of the scroll and so would experience a more continuous unfolding of a changing drawing and visual representation of sound. The charcoal drawings produce a more lyrical quality to the line work and thus indicate a subjectivity of the original idea represented in ink.

The paintings mean to be a synesthetic divergent and a more massive exploration of the sound itself. The watercolor, *B Minor Cloud*, Figure 4.6, intends to expand the idea of color and sound into a form of many sounds like a struck chord of a pipe organ or a full orchestra. This is in contrast to the pen drawings which have more linear and singular sound points, such as one instrument playing one note at a time. The watercolors are an examination of more formal elements of paint and color and continue to create new inquiry into larger works expanding on these ideas.



Figure 4.5 Claire Paul, *Scroll Sonata*, charcoal on rice paper, 12"x50' 2008-2009



Figure 4.6 Claire Paul, *B Minor Cloud*, watercolor, graphite on paper, 9"x12" 2008

5. Conclusion

“Silence can be derived from the idleness of an instrument or from the object status of the accouterments of music; thus, any sheet music or instrument becomes music in potentia, or the corpse of music that has lived its life.”¹⁶

In conclusion, I hope to achieve a kind of synergy of sound and its visual incarnation where one feeds and also reflects the other. Multiple influences inspired the merging of these sensations together in an artwork: The internal synesthetic awareness of performing on the bassoon, the Fluxus movement, a chance encounter with a West African musician and an African Art History class, and a sound research project in a graduate seminar. These explorations informed, inspired, questioned, and validated an internal impression of language and meaning that influenced this body of work. These works were a response to impulses, play, obsessions, and a desire to communicate the passing of moments.

The merging of instrument to performer is a specific direction that I explored in the drawings of hands. I believe the universal nature of depicting the hand opens the work for broader interpretation and I do not intend these works to speak only of my direct experience as a musician. I find that with continued prodding, my impulses and desires to communicate a direct feeling of the human body are not limited to music alone, but seem to reach further into a personal fascination with emotion and physical anatomy. These drawings of sound are a glimpse into the moment of my own life and like many artists, I create them as part of a continuing journey to better understand myself.

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