

Counting on Fingers

Derek Besant reports on a dynamic and experimental collaboration between two artists working with print and sound.



Collaboration is defined as working in conjunction with another, but it was far more idiosyncratic than that when Vienna print artist Michael Wegerer decided to enter into an experimental cross-disciplinary art process with Austrian music composer, Judith Unterperntinger (alias JUUN). Their paths crossed in 2008 at an interdisciplinary performance in Austria. Both were working in London a year later and without any real project in mind, when they simply began discussing visual art and sound in terms of investigations as translated languages. JUUN works as a composer, pianist and performance artist with a focus on architectures of sociological and urban conditions of form, and Wegerer articulates his objectifications related to landscape sites or public space: together they regard every sculptural object as an investigation into place, history and content. Their different backgrounds create an equation that allows them to take apart different parts of the same proposition.

'Process' is a word that printmaking has been labeled with for decades, and not always with positive associations. But for the visual artist and music composer the very nature of process has enabled them to develop a language of gesture and exchange. As a performance event under the moniker *Piano Sublimation – Object/Sound/Graphic* programmed by the Künstlerhaus as part of Krakow's International Graphics Triennial, Wegerer and JUUN set up a room in the Vienna exhibit which had at its centre an antique grand piano. Their decision was made that the piano would be dismantled, dissected or dismembered over time, and that this process would yield restrictions and conditions that would challenge each of the collaborators in their definitive practices.

After sections of the piano as artifact were sawn in half, unhinged or deconstructed architecturally, the act of actually attempting to play the partial piano was compromised by the consequences of elimination. This allowed for a decreasing limited range of full audio moments to be extracted by the

composer. But this enhanced the visual components that, now separated from the singular sculptural presence of the piano, were rendered free to be re-examined for their own inherent properties as elements that could be used as wooden relief shapes to take prints from.

Deconstructing the music

I've seen three stages of incarnation of *Piano Sublimation*, and in each stage the process offers multiple examples of collaboration for consideration. The piano as a form is gradually disappearing into its parts, being charted like a ship's log as it sinks from surviving viewing recognition; the complication of its elements are becoming almost medical. In an age of sustainability and ecology, there is nothing wasted here. The bones of it are scattered like fallout on the floor in some strange array that you cannot help but try to reassemble visually. What goes with what?

And the sound wave charts are not dissimilar to heartbeat blips on an emergency room monitor. The hoisted dismembered torso of the piano's ribs reads not unlike Francis Bacon's painting of the slaughtered beef carcass, a metaphor for our own disassociations. Musical notations of pitch, interval, time and distance become charts to follow like maps out of the maze. Tendons of wires stretch out like extrusions of the room's interior. Most of us have little knowledge of the separate pieces that go into making a fully functioning piano, although the mechanics of its construction have all the beauty, visceral complexity and DNA mystery of a human body. The spiral circular sections that revolve as ever-decreasing diameters become Art Deco architectural printed designs, as if rediscovered in a lost notebook. But what I find most intriguing is that neither composer nor printmaker has any preconceived idea of what the process will reveal when they have spent all they can muster to find what lies hidden in this migration towards what the piano once was. Now, somewhere between printed sets of parts and cobbled composition abbreviations, there lurks what was once an almost invisible large domestic object, transformed into something we do not readily recognize any longer.

The ensuing documentation of processes began originally to reconstruct elements both audible and visual that appear to become a manual of sorts, but going in the opposite direction of assembly. The graphic possibilities, recording time, labeling of parts, the coalescence and dispersion, and charting data of sounds and shapes started to echo one another as different parts of the same thing.

The geometric shapes out of which a piano is built are made that way to allow for its particular range of sound possibilities. As Wegerer and JUUN continued to explore the dual processes for Künstlerhaus, the gallery began to fill with Wegerer's resulting geometries, 3D sound-graphic patterns and the translation of components, like a phoenix of the transformed piano. Marry to that the sound charts, composition note-taking, demarcations on scrolls of paper, wave length measurement print-outs, the audio itself as it is construed by way of the depleted sound mechanisms: the definitions of process reveal not only the sum of the parts, but a whole other kind of engagement into the heart of both media approaches.

Folding screens reminiscent of Japanese sho-ji are built like sound buffers with the designs printed on paper of the revolutions of dissection in stages, charting the element of time and the visualization of the volume of sound itself. Together, this set of printed images align as a kind of universe of circular measurements like planet and star's paths over time.

Imaging experience

In the past, Wegerer has been no stranger to taking printmaking outside its prescribed boundaries into other possibilities. Holding a computer scanner up over his head, he took impressions of open sky, as well as neon- and fluorescent-lit ceilings, then made serigraphs of the wavelength phenomena the scanner translated these light sources into. Similarly he has scanned mirrors and sheets of glass to create the same as screen prints, unveiling ghosts of these objects with ethereal properties. Inviting the public to make their own marks in a real wooden door, he then pulled a print of the door as a life-size relief woodblock. During a performance where he sat eating at another of his printed objects, a dining table set up in a shop window, he gave out screen printed take-away fast food bags to pedestrians on the street who stopped to look. At the heart of the matter, Wegerer's process directs his response to his surroundings, where the outcome of his investigation yields the imaging through this experience.

Perhaps printmaking balances always on the fulcrum of destruction and rescue due to the very nature of its alchemy. Therefore our ability to stretch process beyond classification has the potential to respond always to the questions arising from the ways artists embrace what lies at the very heart of printmaking, which is that inquisitive delight in investigation. In Wegerer's case it is an affirmation that process is a necessary path of tradition even now in contemporary print practice.

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