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# The Scratch Orchestra and Visual Arts

Michael Parsons

In his essay "Towards an Ethic of Improvisation," written shortly before the formation of the Scratch Orchestra, Cornelius Cardew said of performances of his graphic score *Treatise* (1963–1966): "Ideally such music should be played by a collection of musical innocents [people who had no formal musical training]"; he continued, "My most rewarding experiences with *Treatise* have come through people who by some fluke have (a) acquired a visual education, (b) escaped a musical education and (c) have nevertheless become musicians, i.e. play music to the full capacity of their beings" [1].

The formation of the Scratch Orchestra in 1969 may be seen as the culmination of Cardew's search for new types of performer, from backgrounds other than that of a classical training. Performances of *Treatise* had taken place in art colleges during the 1960s, and more recent works such as his *Schooltime Compositions* (1967) also offered opportunities for visual as well as musical interpretation. Cardew's own involvement with the visual arts was close: during the 1960s he worked as a graphic designer, his wife Stella was a painter, and his circle of friends and colleagues included conceptual and performance artists such as George Brecht and Robin Page (both teaching at Leeds College of Art in the late 1960s), Mark Boyle, who was working with light projections, the painters Tom Phillips and Noel Forster and many others.

This was a period of far-reaching change and innovation in British art schools. The academic disciplines of life-drawing, figurative composition and illustration and the traditional craft-based skills, which had been central to art education since the mid-nineteenth century, were being challenged by new attitudes and policies that reflected some of the more radical tendencies in twentieth-century art. Leading artist-educators such as Victor Pasmore and Harry Thubron introduced enquiry into fundamental aspects of perception and expression, structure and method, and students were encouraged to experiment freely with materials of all kinds. Boundaries between disciplines were questioned and redefined, and there was a shift from the object-based practices of painting and sculpture to an emphasis on process and context, environmental activity and time-based work in film, sound and performance. These changes began to take effect in the early 1960s following recommendations for the liberalization of art education included in the Coldstream Report [2]; a generation of artists emerged whose work extended into new material and conceptual areas.

## VISUAL INFLUENCES

The breaking down of barriers between different disciplines and the growth of interest among visual artists in sound and performance created a favorable climate for the development of experimental music. Cornelius Cardew, John Tilbury,

David Bedford and other musicians were regular visitors at art colleges in and around London, in Leeds, Liverpool, Maidstone, Falmouth, Portsmouth and elsewhere. They not only performed and discussed the new music but also involved students as active participants in works by John Cage, Christian Wolff, Morton Feldman, Cardew, George Brecht, LaMonte Young, Toshi Ichianagi, Takehisa Kosugi and other Fluxus-related composers. As a result there soon arose an extended network of visually aware performers, for whom the lack of conventional musical training was no obstacle to participation in experimental music; many of these were among the original members of the Scratch Orchestra [3].

Cardew's particular achievement at this time was to bring together visual artists and musicians from diverse backgrounds in situations to which all could contribute equally, regardless of skill or experience, with aural and visual aspects of performance coexisting in heterogeneous juxtaposition and interaction with each other. This diversity is reflected in the Draft Constitution, where Cardew notes: "The word music and its derivatives are here not understood to refer exclusively to sound and related phenomena (hearing, *etc.*). What they do refer to is flexible and depends entirely on the members of the Scratch Orchestra" [4].

## JOHN CAGE AND FLUXUS

The immediate precedent for such an open-ended definition of music can of course be found in Cage's work of the 1950s and 1960s, in his collaborations with Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg and other artists, and in his idea of indeterminacy. His "silent" piece *4'33"* (1952) had demonstrated that silence was not merely the absence of intentional sounds; it created a framework and focus of attention in which the listener is invited to redefine the significance of visual as well as aural aspects of musical performance. It thus opened the way to an area of intermediate activity through which there is no clear separation between seeing and hearing: both are essential aspects of any live performance situa-

## ABSTRACT

The Scratch Orchestra, formed in London in 1969 by Cornelius Cardew, Michael Parsons and Howard Skempton, included visual and performance artists as well as musicians and other participants from diverse backgrounds, many of them without formal training. This article deals primarily with the earlier phase of the orchestra's activity, between 1969 and 1971. It describes the influence of the work of John Cage and Fluxus artists, involving the dissolution of boundaries between sonic and visual elements in performance and the use of everyday materials and activities as artistic resources. It assesses the conflicting impulses of discipline and spontaneity in the work of the Scratch Orchestra and in the parallel activity of the Portsmouth Sinfonia and other related groups. The emergence in the early 1970s of more controlled forms of compositional activity, in reaction against anarchic and libertarian aspects of the Scratch Orchestra's ethos, is also discussed.

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tion. Cage's work of the 1950s and 1960s developed from the idea that different kinds of activity could coexist and interpenetrate without interference. A key occasion was that of the "untitled event" that Cage organized in 1952 at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which included live and recorded music, dance, poetry, painting, film and slide projections and a lecture by Cage himself. Each of these independent elements was assigned its own time-bracket within the total duration: Cage provided a rhythmic structure to indicate when and for how long each element was to take place, so that periods of activity and inactivity combined and overlapped in various ways. This event was followed by further works in which Cage reached far beyond conventional definitions of music to include disparate elements of all kinds: in his *Theatre Piece* (1960), for example, performers are asked to select their own repertoires of materials and activities, which are individually programmed (in accordance with the directions of the numerical score) and presented simultaneously to create maximum visual and aural diversity.

Cage's experimental music course at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1958 attracted visual and performance artists and writers such as George Brecht, Allan Kaprow, Al Hansen, Dick Higgins and Jackson MacLow, many of whom became closely associated with Fluxus in the 1960s. Fluxus was an international movement, with interconnected groups of participants in the U.S.A., Germany, France, Japan and elsewhere, involving artists, writers, performers, musicians and others whose work could not easily be categorized within conventional boundaries. It was concerned with (among other things) a kind of art that would merge almost imperceptibly with everyday life: redefining perception of ordinary objects and events, reassessing the value of common materials, activities and situations. There was a prevailing interest in the use of chance, in games, puzzles and paradoxes, in inversions of conventional use and value that owed something to Dada and Surrealism, in particular to the work of Kurt Schwitters, Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp. A work of Ray's, *Object for Destruction* (1932)—also known as *Indestructible Object*—consists of the image of an eye, cut out from a photograph and attached with a paper clip to the arm of a metronome: this seems to prefigure Fluxus with its play of meaning on references to seeing and hearing, its

paradoxical title and its ambiguous status as either object or process (Ray explained that it was the idea that was indestructible, not the object itself, which could be remade any number of times). Another relevant work by Man Ray is his *Cadeau* (1921), a flatiron with a row of tin tacks glued to its surface, perhaps inspired by Erik Satie. Just as the use of everyday objects and materials in the work of visual artists created shifts and transformations of meaning, so in the activities of Cage and Fluxus participants, traditional categories of music, sound and performance were subjected to radical disruption and redefinition.

The Japanese composers Kosugi and Ichihyanagi brought a subtle and elusive quality to their pieces through the displacement of familiar activities. Kosugi's *Anima 7* (1964) states that a chosen action is to be performed "as slowly as possible," and his *Theatre Music* (1964) instructs the performer to "keep walking intently." Ichihyanagi's *Distance* (1962) specifies that instruments are to be placed at least 3 meters away from the performers, who are required to play them from positions high up in the space: the effect is to inhibit the players' control over their instruments and to emphasize the disjunction between visual aspects of their actions and the fragmented sounds that result from this oblique approach to playing technique. The Scratch Orchestra performed this work at the International Students House in London on 9 April 1970, playing instruments by remote control from high platforms with ropes, rods, tubes, missiles and other specially devised equipment.

## BRECHT AND YOUNG

The work of George Brecht and LaMonte Young, both closely associated with New York Fluxus in the early 1960s, was particularly influential in the development of the Scratch Orchestra. Brecht's *Water Yam* (1960–1963) is a large collection of pieces published in New York by George Maciunas in the form of a box containing white cards, each of which carries a visual image or a few words that minimally specify or suggest an object, activity or event of some kind. Some of them refer to musical instruments—*Flute Solo*: "disassembling/assembling"; *Solo for Violin* (or other string instrument): "polishing"; *String Quartet*: "shaking hands." Others are concerned with the timing of chance occurrences (*Three Telephone Events*) or with non-musical sound sources (*Drip Event*, *Comb Mu-*

*sic*). Brecht's pieces operate in an intermediate zone between object and event. Seeing and hearing are equally relevant to their interpretation: they may be realized as performances in any medium or they may be treated purely as observations or mental images. In the 1960s Cardew and Tilbury often included in recitals Brecht's *Incidental Music* (1961), a work that deals with the piano as a physical object rather than as a sound source. Various activities are specified, to be performed in and around the piano; any sound that may arise from this activity is literally "incidental" [5].

In many respects, the all-inclusive spirit of Fluxus can be seen to anticipate that of the Scratch Orchestra: "Artists, anti-artists, non-artists, anartists, the politically committed and the apolitical, poets of non-poetry, non-dancers dancing, doers, undoers, non-doers: Fluxus encompasses opposites" [6].

In a series of concerts organized by Cardew at the Commonwealth Institute (London) in April 1967, simultaneous performances were given of pieces by Cage, Brecht and Young: while Cage's *Variations I* was in progress, Robin Page interpreted Brecht's *Two Durations* (1960–1961) ("red, green"), swinging colored lightbulbs on long flexes across the front of the stage, and John Tilbury performed Young's *Piano Piece for David Tudor No. 1* (1960) ("Bring a bale of hay and a bucket of water onto the stage for the piano to eat and drink"), cooking a meal for himself while waiting for the piano's response ("... the piece is over ... after the piano eats or decides not to"). Young's *Poem for tables, chairs, benches, etc., or other sound sources* (1960) featured prominently among the works performed by the Scratch Orchestra in 1969 and 1970. In its original form, friction sounds were to be produced by pulling, pushing or dragging articles of furniture across the floor surface, according to a strictly programmed time-scheme determined by a selection of random numbers. In later versions, as described by Cardew, it developed into "a kind of chamber opera, in which any activity, not necessarily even of a sounding variety, could constitute one strand in the complex weave of the composition. . . ." [7] Another piece of Young's, open equally to visual or musical interpretation, was his *Composition 1960 No. 10* ("Draw a straight line and follow it"), which could be performed as a single long-sustained tone or as any single-minded, undeviating linear activity. These and other Fluxus-related works were accessible to

musically untrained performers, offering a different kind of challenge; they called for alternative skills of inventiveness, ingenuity, practicality and self-discipline, and total commitment to the task at hand in the face of any eventuality (including adverse audience reaction, interruption and even interference).

## MULTIPLICITY— MATERIALITY

The coexistence of diverse strands of aural and visual activity was characteristic of many of the earlier concerts given by the Scratch Orchestra. The resulting multiplicity often has more in common with principles associated with visual arts, such as collage and assemblage, than with traditional musical methods; the complex intermixture of Scratch music, improvisation rites, compositions and fragments of popular classics emphasized the materiality of sound itself rather than the intentions of any single individual or group within the orchestra. Whereas Cage, even in his most radical works of the 1950s and 1960s, still retained the role of composer in controlling the formal outlines (if not the content) of simultaneous layers, the Scratch Orchestra's more collective approach to performance reflected its loose and informal sociability, which was based on mutual respect and tolerance rather than on adherence to any pre-conceived structure or set of rules.

The orchestra took part in a range of environmental events in London between 1969 and 1972, in streets, playgrounds, derelict sites and shopping centers, at Euston Station, on the underground, on Hampstead Heath, Primrose Hill and the Regent's Park boating lake, and in Cornwall, North Wales, Northumbria and in isolated coastal areas and parts of the countryside. In August 1970 a simultaneous exchange took place with the New Zealand branch of the Scratch Orchestra, founded by Philip Dadson, who had been a participant in Cardew's experimental music class at Morley College (1968–1969). The New Zealand group, based in the fine arts department at the University of Auckland, performed an annual open-air drumming event during the early 1970s in the volcanic crater of Mount Eden to mark the summer solstice, and in 1971 Dadson co-coordinated a global event, *Earthworks*, with groups around the world simultaneously observing and recording local conditions to mark the September equi-

nox at the moment of sunrise (N.Z.)/ sunset (U.K.) [8]. This interest in spatial and environmental context and in the characteristics of different locations reveals an affinity with the work of artists such as Walter de Maria, Robert Smithson and Lawrence Weiner in the U.S.A. and Richard Long, Hamish Fulton, Andy Goldsworthy in Britain, whose activities extended far beyond the confines of the gallery or museum. The speculative nature of the Research Project [9] (as described in the Draft Constitution) and the idea of performances based on journeys (real or imaginary) also owe something to the conceptual art of the 1960s.

The first Scratch performance to be based on the Research Project, *Journey of the Isle of Wight Westwards by Iceberg to Tokyo Bay*, was given at Chelsea Town Hall on 15 November 1969. Brecht was living in London at this time and he participated in several Scratch Orchestra events during 1969 and 1970. On this occasion the performance was inspired by a proposal from "Brecht & MacDiarmid Research Associates" for the translocation of land masses by harnessing them to icebergs, the latest in an increasingly ambitious series of "translocation and delivery" projects on which Brecht was working during the 1960s. It represents another aspect of his conceptual imagination, this time on a grand scale, in an area intermediate between practical engineering and pure speculation.

The feasibility of transporting icebergs from the polar regions to supply fresh water to desert areas of the world had apparently been discussed in scientific journals, and Brecht's proposal simply took the idea a stage further. In the year of the first American moon landing it may not have seemed particularly far-fetched, perhaps suggesting an ironic comment on the lavish expenditure of resources for purely spectacular or symbolic effect. The Scratch Orchestra responded with a mixed-media extravaganza of typically divergent aural and visual activities, derived in various obscure ways from the research of individual participants. A collective "splash and drip" painting on a long paper scroll evolved spontaneously in response to the instrumental sounds, in reversal of the usual relationship between music and visual stimulus of a graphic score such as *Treatise*. Brecht himself delivered a lecture on his investigations into certain relevant geographical, oceanographical, sociological, economic and political questions raised by the enterprise.

## "ANY ACTIVITY WHATSOEVER"

Painting as performance had its place as one activity among others, but it enjoyed no privileged status; interaction between sound and visual media took many different forms. In a performance of *Treatise* at Morley College in 1969, Tim Mitchell made a three-dimensional realization of one page of the score in the form of a wooden relief structure: the sounds of nailing, sawing and drilling were his contribution to the music. A Fluxus-like interest in everyday activities, redefined and transposed into the context of performance, was much in evidence. A glance through *Scratch Music and Nature Study Notes* [10] reveals many examples of such activities: standing, sitting, walking, running, jumping, smoking, washing, shaving, haircutting, eating, drinking, sweeping, ball-bouncing, stone-throwing, measuring, counting, inventing and playing games of various kinds—the list could be extended ad infinitum. All these and more were liable to occur in performance. Michael Chant's *Pastoral Symphony*, an abstruse verbal score written in 1969 shortly before the formation of the orchestra, generalized this tendency to the extent of specifying as its material "any activity whatsoever involving two or more persons. . . ." [11]

The *1001 Activities* of the Slippery Merchants, a picaresque sub-group within the orchestra dedicated to evading or subverting all remaining vestiges of musical authority, consisted of a bizarre list of puns, parodies and gags, a comprehensive (and sometimes incomprehensible) *reductio ad absurdum* of performance instructions, e.g. "41 Travel a short distance on knees . . . 44 Funny laugh plus silly walk . . . 71 Throw many things far and wide . . . 79 Insult someone . . . 206 Stamp foot . . . 585 Sing Balls to the Baker, arse against the wall" [12]. Some of these erupted during the *Journey* performance at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, on 23 November 1970 (*Pilgrimage from Scattered Points on the Surface of the Body to the Brain, the Inner Ear, the Heart and the Stomach*), in defiance of more or less conventionally disciplined forms of presentation.

Visual activities and games of various kinds were included by Cardew in the Action Score of paragraph 5 of *The Great Learning* (1969–1970) [13] in an attempt to incorporate and restrain some of the more anarchic tendencies: he described paragraph 5 as representing his own view of the diversity of the orchestra

with its “high level of differentiation of actions and functions.” There is much material of primarily visual interest in paragraph 5, including the Dumb Show, with its repertory of gestures adapted from American Indian sign language, and *Silent Music* (one of seven verbal compositions included in *The Great Learning*, paragraph 5), with its instruction “No sound. Silent and still. Occasionally a movement watched by all, never more than one at a time. Sit in a semicircle like sculptured Pharaohs. . . . Very heavy music.”

Just as “any activity whatsoever” could be included in the category of performance, so any kind of graphic material came to be regarded as a possible form of notation: a look at *Scratch Music* reveals a miscellany of drawings, diagrams, maps, collages, texts, photographs and found objects (even some musical notation) from the notebooks of 16 members of the orchestra, laid out in random juxtaposition to suggest the visual equivalent of a Scratch performance. Anything that could be set down on paper, it seemed, could become part of the all-inclusive and indiscriminate category of “graphic music.” Any kind of text or image came to be regarded as a possible incentive to performance, with rules for interpretation either left completely open, or implicitly suggested, as in Tom Phillips’s *Postcard Compositions* (op. XI): “Buy a postcard. Assume that it depicts the performance of a piece. Deduce the rules of the piece. Perform it” [14].

## EVENTS AND SITUATIONS

Phillips had become involved with experimental music during the 1960s through his association with Cardew and Tilbury; he made frequent allusion in his paintings and drawings to musical processes and materials and developed a variety of oblique approaches to representation through the use of found imagery, text, calligraphy and musical notation. He made graphic scores such as *Four Pieces for John Tilbury* (1966) and *Gapmap* (1968), a drawing consisting of a row of vertical lines at chance-determined intervals: this was done for Brian Eno, then a student at Winchester School of Art, to determine the time-structure of a performance. Phillips’s opera *Irma* (1969) is a graphic score derived from the same source as his “treated” book *A Humument*, in which words and phrases from the text of a Victorian novel are selected and linked

to suggest different meanings and associations, providing a fragmentary libretto with clues for musical and dramatic realization. The discovery of potentially “operatic” situations in this verbal and graphic material shows some affinity with Brecht’s ideas, and although *Irma* was never actually performed by the Scratch Orchestra, it might well have been, since it inhabits a comparable intermediate area in visual and conceptual terms.

Visual events linked different occasions and locations: Stefan Szczelkun’s silver disc, first seen against the sky suspended in a rocky cleft in a quarry in Cornwall, reappeared later in a concert performance at Ealing Town Hall, London (1971). Among other pieces of primarily visual interest was Catherine Williams’s *String Games* (1971) [15], for groups of women weaving spatial patterns with continuous lengths of string, passing them from hand to hand and then reversing the process. My own *Walk* (1969) [16], for any number of people walking in a large public space, was performed in the forecourt at Euston Station, London (23 May 1970), and elsewhere; this involved walkers individually criss-crossing the space at different randomly determined speeds, waiting for different lengths of time at chosen points and then setting off in another direction. At Euston this naturally intersected with the activities of *bona fide* travelers as they hurried or waited for their trains. Another version of *Walk* used a wide range of different kinds of walk, suggested by participants: e.g. the John Cleese walk (knee raised to chin level at each step) and the Ghost walk (a military tactic for advancing stealthily through dense jungle).

In addition to more-or-less planned events, there was also a variety of informal activity, often spontaneous and unrecorded, which arose in response to circumstances, crossing formal boundaries and spilling over into everyday life, especially in street performances, as during the *Richmond Journey* in May 1970: walking backwards or crawling through a shopping center, handing out leaves in a supermarket, improvising on underground trains, a tug-of-war, ball game or other impromptu activity. Greg Bright’s *Tools, Tea and Smoke* (performed at Ealing Town Hall in February 1971) specified that the actions of sawing, hammering and smoking were to be rhythmically co-coordinated, while tea-making proceeded independently.

Other pieces by Bright were also unusual for their overtly theatrical character, often requiring formal staging [17]. Another quasi-theatrical venture was a series of *School Raids* (1971), which involved performers in colorful “wig-out” (clown-like) costume making sudden unannounced appearances in school playgrounds, arriving without warning and disappearing equally suddenly, without explanation.

## CHANGING DIRECTION

In the summer of 1971 internal dissension about the orchestra’s role and policy began to emerge, and a “discontent” file was opened, in which members were encouraged to express their disagreements and criticisms. Energies were refocused on building a “Scratch cottage” as part of the International Art Spectrum exhibition at Alexandra Palace, North London, a temporary construction collectively assembled from found materials to a plan by Stefan Szczelkun [18]. It housed the *Refuse Collection* of paintings, collages and assemblages by members of the orchestra and provided an informal space for performance and discussion over a 2-week period in August 1971. The search for a new socially committed role gathered support; members worked collectively on the composition of a Scratch opera, *Sweet FA* [19] (1971–1972), depicting scenes from the orchestra’s clash with police and officials at the Newcastle Civic Centre in July 1971. This marked the transition from a diverse range of anarchist and libertarian attitudes and sympathies to a more specifically political (Maoist) outlook; visual talents were redirected to functional, “agitprop” uses—designing posters, banners and painted backdrops.

## THE PORTSMOUTH CONNECTION

Meanwhile, in the Department of Fine Art at Portsmouth Polytechnic, the new emphasis on diversity in art education gave rise to a unique set of conditions for the development of experimental music [20]. On the initiative of Jeffrey Steele, Maurice Dennis and visiting artists such as Noel Forster and David Saunders, a strong theoretical and administrative basis for the inclusion of music in the Fine Art course was established in 1968. First Ron Geesin, then Gavin Bryars, was appointed lecturer in music, and in 1970 when Bryars moved to Leicester, I took

over his position on a part-time basis. There were regular visits to Portsmouth by Cardew and Tilbury, John White, Christopher Hobbs, Howard Skempton and other members of the Scratch Orchestra. Opportunities for working together on musical projects, offering a marked contrast to individual studio-based painting and sculpture, were seized upon with enthusiasm by an unusually energetic and imaginative group of students. The Portsmouth Sinfonia was formed in May 1970, initially to play Rossini's *William Tell* Overture (then popularized as the theme of the *Lone Ranger* TV series) at an end-of-term entertainment. They were immediately invited to take part in *Beethoven Today*, the Scratch Orchestra's idiosyncratic and provocative celebration of the Beethoven bicentenary at the South Bank in London the following September.

The avowed aim of the Portsmouth Sinfonia was to perform popular classical pieces as accurately as possible with players of limited technical ability and experience. Some of them were complete beginners who acquired second-hand instruments specially to take part in the Sinfonia's performances, learning through trial and error as they went along; their commitment and enthusiasm more than made up for the lack of conventional skills. Technical shortcomings were here turned to positive advantage as an agent of transformation, and processes of deviation and decontrol—long regarded as legitimate in the visual arts (in the works of Pollock, de Kooning, Johns and Rauschenberg, for example)—were transposed into a musical context with unexpected and often hilarious results.

While it shared much of the general background of the Scratch Orchestra, music at Portsmouth soon developed its own distinctive characteristics, arising from the convergence of several currents of thought and practice in music and visual arts. The presence of Gavin Bryars, recently returned from working in the U.S. with Cage, acted as catalyst: he introduced students to a wide range of new music, including that of Cage, Brecht, Young, Lucier, Ichiyanagi and various Fluxus composers. His own work at this time was largely conceptual and speculative, often deliberately proposing improbable situations and conditions of performance in which results were bound to exceed or fall short of intentions [21]. Jeffrey Steele gave a course of lectures, *System and the Artist*

(1969–1970), in which he discussed formal systems and rule-governed procedures, taking into account how deviations could arise from following through a rational program of decision-making; the “optical” effects that arose in his own paintings in the 1960s, for example, were regarded as interesting side effects rather than intentional results of the use of systems. Noel Forster gave a lecture, “The Painting as a Measure of Its Own Performance” (1970) in which he described ways in which error and deviation from a planned program contributed to the development of his own work. John Tilbury worked with students on pieces from Brecht's *Water Yam*, many of which dealt with visual aspects of musical performance; soon pianos, violins and other instruments, displaced from their customary functions, began to appear as visual objects in films made at Portsmouth. The students became familiar, through Bryars, with Cage's reappropriation of classical material in works such as *HPSCHD* (1967) and with the work of John White, Christopher Hobbs and other English composers who were using found musical material from various sources. Further encouragement, if any were needed, was provided by the section on popular classics in Cardew's Draft Constitution. Exception was taken, however, to the phrase “filling in gaps with improvised variational material”: in performances by the Portsmouth Sinfonia there was no improvisation as such, but always an attempt to play as accurately as possible, given the circumstances; variation arose naturally from differences of ability and from the wide disparity between intentions and results.

The Portsmouth Sinfonia soon outgrew its art-school origins and expanded to include a wide range of artists and musicians including (among others) Brian Eno, Steve Beresford, Michael Nyman and Barry Flanagan. It achieved extensive publicity and a degree of notoriety in a series of concerts in London and elsewhere, culminating in a performance at the Royal Albert Hall on 28 May 1974. Its success owed as much to visual as to musical characteristics: to its colorful and heterogeneous stage presence and air of professional confidence, to the incongruity of the expectations it aroused and to the flamboyance of its conductor John Farley, whose visual flair far outweighed his lack of technical competence and his inability to read a score. Such an enterprise is unthinkable outside the broad context of visual and per-

formance art, in which there is a long history of interest in mistakes, accidents and deviations from recognized structure reaching back to the early years of Dada and Surrealism, to the work of Arp, Schwitters, Picabia and Duchamp, for which there is no exact precedent or parallel in the history of music.

While it was certainly the most widely publicized, the Sinfonia was by no means the only group to emerge from the Department of Fine Art in Portsmouth at this time. There was the Ross and Cromarty Orchestra, formed in 1970 by Ivan Hume Carter to perform pieces of exemplary simplicity for players of elementary technical skill. In 1971 Hume Carter gave a lecture, “Deviations from Conventional Scale Structure” (in the Department of Fine Art at Portsmouth), which was illustrated with performances by Patsie Harrison, an allegedly tone-deaf singer whose wayward sense of pitch and confident delivery for a while provided a rich source of unpredictable melodic variants. This gradually became exhausted, as with practice her control grew more accurate, and the focus of attention shifted from interest in deviations as such to the learning process and its social implications.

## CONFLICTING IMPULSES

The Ross and Cromarty Orchestra was disbanded in 1972 as a result of political tensions and disagreements similar to those that affected the Scratch Orchestra. Hume Carter repudiated his previous involvement with the Sinfonia and other experimental activities, and like Cardew and others turned to writing music intended to serve proletarian interests. Another group made up largely of Portsmouth musicians was the Majorca Orchestra, a chamber ensemble formed in 1972 to play music composed by its members (including James Lampard, Robin Mortimore, Sue Astle, Suzette Worden and David Saunders) and pieces by Ezra Read, an Edwardian composer of popular and educational music [22]. The Majorca Orchestra's sober and undeviating renderings of straightforward melodies, and their refusal in this context of any suggestion of irony or caricature, were in marked contrast to the performances of the Sinfonia, of which they were also members; here their approach emulated the newfound interest in melodic immediacy of pieces such as Skempton's *Waltz* (1970), or John Tilbury's rediscovery of the popular ap-

peal of Albert W. Ketelbey's *Bells across the Meadows* (1921) [23].

## DISCIPLINE AND FREEDOM

Within the Scratch Orchestra also, in contrast to the loosely structured character of many of the earlier events, there was an opposing tendency towards more disciplined forms of music-making. For many of the composers involved these tendencies were complementary rather than in conflict with each other; the apparent contradiction between control and freedom gave rise to challenges that were positively stimulating. Cardew had in 1968 organized the first British performances of Terry Riley's *In C* (1964) and LaMonte Young's *Death Chant* (1961), works in which the use of elemental and static musical material and multiple repetition played a dominant role, and these features, alongside graphic and indeterminate notation, were also prominent in parts of *The Great Learning* and in compositions by other members of the orchestra. It was perhaps inevitable that the tendency towards anarchy in some of the early Scratch performances should provoke a counterreaction, and a more controlled and determinate strand of compositional activity soon reasserted itself in the work of John White, Christopher Hobbs, Howard Skempton and myself, Alec Hill, Hugh Shrapnel, Brian Dennis and others. White's "machine" compositions were particularly influential in providing a counterbalance to the increasingly free and improvisatory tendencies in Cardew's own work. The early music of Steve Reich and Philip Glass was becoming known in Britain at this time, and there was a general sense of a return to fundamental musical procedures. The use of repetitive sequences and rhythmic systems is characteristic of much of the music of this period, and it was in this context that a different kind of relationship between composers and visual artists began to emerge.

## SYSTEMS ART AND MUSIC

In 1971 an association was formed with artists of the Systems group, initially as a result of the Portsmouth connection, with Jeffrey Steele and David Saunders, and then with Malcolm Hughes, Jean Spencer, Peter Lowe, Michael Kidner and others. A concert was given in June 1971 at the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol, in which Christopher Hobbs, Michael Nyman, Howard Skempton and I participated, with the *Matrix* exhibition of vi-

sual works by Systems artists, and in 1972 the Promenade Theatre Orchestra (PTO), a group of four composers-performers (Alec Hill, Christopher Hobbs, Hugh Shrapnel and John White) playing their own compositions on reed organs, toy pianos and percussion, performed in association with the Systems exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. At the same time Brian Dennis was writing pieces influenced by the visual symmetry and repetitive patterns of painters such as Robin Denny and Bridget Riley. The use of geometrical forms, modular structures and the incremental progression of linear and spatial elements suggested a close parallel with similar musical processes [24].

The terms of the relationship between composers and artists of the Systems group were quite different from, indeed diametrically opposed to, those of concurrent Fluxus-related tendencies. Instead of involving the use of mixed media and the fusion of visual and musical elements, it was based on a common interest in structural principles. With a few notable exceptions, the artists were not directly involved as performers: collaboration took the form rather of exchanging and comparing ideas in discussions and informal meetings. The search for coherent connections took precedence over the acceptance of chance coincidences and arbitrary juxtapositions, and concerts and exhibitions were organized with related but separate presentations of visual and musical work. The primary concern was now with formal clarity, and from this viewpoint it was considered that, given the difference of medium between visual and musical work, the indiscriminate mixing of incompatible elements could only give rise to confusion. It was found more satisfactory to respect the boundaries of each medium so that correspondences and parallels on the theoretical and structural level could become evident.

While this association with visual artists working in the tradition of European Constructivism arose partly as a reaction to contradictions within the Scratch Orchestra, it soon gained its own momentum and continued to develop independently throughout the 1970s and 1980s. For composers it involved the process of redefining the limits of composition and establishing new structural disciplines. At the time when ideological divisions within the Scratch Orchestra were proving irreconcilable, it helped to provide an implicit critique

of some of its more anarchic tendencies, from a formal and aesthetic rather than from a political point of view.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear in retrospect that experimental music in Britain, as in the United States, has owed much of its distinctive character to the influence and example of developments in the visual arts. The principles of indeterminacy and open form, the use of collage and assemblage, of juxtaposition and simultaneity, the questioning of traditional hierarchies and values, the awareness of space and silence and the emphasis on texture and materiality of sound all reflect a close involvement with visual and spatial concepts. They offer radical alternatives to the conservatism of most other forms of contemporary music, which are still largely tied to narrative models of expressive rhetoric and linear continuity. It was this influx of ideas from outside the musical mainstream that enabled the Scratch Orchestra to break away from traditional notions of order and expression, and to realize briefly its Utopian vision of open enquiry and unfettered exploration, of an all-inclusive form of social music-making and performance, illuminated by the spirit of irreverent humor, discovery and invention.

## References and Notes

1. Cornelius Cardew, "Towards an Ethic of Improvisation" (1968) in *Treatise Handbook* (London: Peters Edition, 1971).
2. *First Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1960).
3. The Scratch Orchestra grew out of Cardew's experimental music class at Morley College (an adult education institute in South London). In addition to musical colleagues and students of Cardew, among them Michael Chant, Christopher Hobbs, Richard Reason, Hugh Shrapnel, Howard Skempton, John Tilbury and John White, and improvisers such as Lou Gare, Eddie Prevost and Keith Rowe, the original membership included many participants from the visual arts: Greg Bright, Psi Ellison, Judith Euren, Carole Finer, David and Diane Jackman, Tim Mitchell, Tom Phillips and Stefan Szczelkun. Among those who joined later were visual and performance artists such as Birgit Burckhardt and Catherine Williams. For its first two years the orchestra flourished as an anarchic and loosely structured collective. In 1971 an ideological group was formed to study Marxist ideas, and after a struggle between opposing "experimental" and "political" factions, the orchestra abandoned experimentalism and devoted itself to specific political aims, in support of the British working class movement and the cause of Irish independence. It finally disbanded in 1974.
4. Cornelius Cardew, "A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution," in *The Musical Times* (June 1969); reprinted in Cornelius Cardew, ed., *Scratch Music* (London: Latimer, 1972).

5. For further information on the work of George Brecht, see Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (London: Studio Vista, 1974); Michael Nyman, "Interview with George Brecht," in *Studio International* (November–December 1976) (*Art and Experimental Music* issue).
6. Unsigned Fluxus manifesto (probably by George Maciunas) in *V TRE 3* (New York: 1964).
7. Cornelius Cardew, "The Sounds of LaMonte Young," in *London Magazine* (April 1967).
8. Philip Dadson, *Earthworks* (1971), in Jim Allen and Wystan Curnow, eds., *Some Recent New Zealand Sculpture and Post-Object Art* (Auckland, New Zealand: Heinemann, 1976).
9. Members of the orchestra were encouraged to keep a record of research into any subjects of their choice; results of this research were to be given "musical realization" (never clearly defined)—insofar as they seemed relevant to themes of performances based on the idea of a journey (as in the following example).
10. Cardew, *Scratch Music* [4]; and Cornelius Cardew, ed., *Nature Study Notes* (London, The Scratch Orchestra, 1969), containing the Scratch Orchestra's collection of "improvisation rites."
11. Michael Chant, *Pastoral Symphony* (1969), verbal score, in Cardew, *Scratch Music* [4]; reprinted in Nyman, *Experimental Music* [5].
12. The complete list of *1001 Activities* appears in Cardew, *Scratch Music* [4].
13. This score was published in *Source, Music of the Avant Garde*, Issue 10 (1972). It is now available from: Matchless Music, 2 Shetlocks Cottages, Matching Tye, Harlow CM17 OQS, U.K.
14. Tom Phillips, *Postcard Compositions*, in Cardew, *Scratch Music* [4].
15. Catherine Williams, *String Games*, in *Scratch Anthology of Compositions*, Cornelius Cardew, ed. (London: Scratch Orchestra, 1971).
16. Michael Parsons, *Walk*, in Nyman, *Experimental Music* [5].
17. Greg Bright, "Tools, Tea and Smoke," in *Visual Anthology*, Gavin Bryars, ed. (London: Experimental Music Catalogue, 1974).
18. A photograph of the Scratch cottage at Alexandra Palace appears on the rear cover of Nyman, *Experimental Music* [5].
19. "Sweet FA" is a well-known British slang expression meaning "nothing much" or "nothing at all."
20. See Jeffrey Steele, "Collaborative Work at Portsmouth," in *Studio International* (November/December 1976).
21. See pieces by Gavin Bryars in Bryars [17].
22. Another group that existed at Portsmouth for a short time (1972–1973) was the Visual Research Ensemble, which performed (mainly) silent pieces, including a *Looking Piece* derived from a passage in Samuel Beckett's novel *Watt*, in which the attempt of a committee to look at itself is frustrated: as each member tries to exchange looks with another, that one is looking at someone else, so that no look is reciprocated; and *Wittgenstein Walk*, in which three performers walking in an open space represent the relative motions of the sun, earth and moon.
23. John Tilbury included music by Ketelbey in a recital at the Purcell Room (9 October 1970) as part of his series *Volo Solo*. Christopher Hobbs, in his program note to this recital, discussed the rediscovery by English experimental musicians of popular music by earlier composers, "satisfying as it does the desire for melody, harmony, nostalgia, all the qualities missing from Boulez, let us say."
24. See Michael Parsons, "Systems in Art and Music," in *The Musical Times* (October 1976).

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