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Author(s):	Adam Linson
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## **Through the Membrane: Refractions of Modernism in a Medium**

Adam Linson

*[T]he taste bureaucracies of Modern Art cannot grasp the human experience involved in the new action paintings. One work is [deemed] equivalent to another on the basis of resemblances of surface.*

—Harold Rosenberg, “The American action painters”, 1952

### **Introduction**

I

On the surface, the music of Morton Feldman and that of Ornette Coleman seem to have no resemblance, apart from a general association with modernism. Yet in various circumstances, both are cast as standing in an analogical relationship to a definitive force of modernism: the paintings of Jackson Pollock. Before exploring some underlying interconnections more closely, it is worth pointing out that both Feldman’s and Coleman’s historical associations with Pollock and his work – which likely played a role in subsequent formal comparisons – are largely accidental.

Feldman caught an early break with a film of Pollock painting, *Jackson Pollock 51*, produced by Hans Namuth and Paul Falkenberg, who provisionally set it to Balinese gamelan music ahead of the first private screening for the painter (Falkenberg 1980). Pollock objected

that the music ought to convey “Americanness” (ibid., 90), and so his partner, Lee Krasner, sought out composer John Cage to score it; he declined, but recommended Feldman (Revill 1992, 141). Referring to Pollock, Feldman would later say “I realize now how much the musical ideas I had in 1951 paralleled his mode of working” (Feldman 1981, 101).

Feldman’s score to the Pollock film was at the start of his career, and so might be fairly regarded as an outlier in relation to his later works. Still, it marked the beginning of his association with Pollock. As Feldman described, the score aimed to complement directly what he observed of the film’s edits and the painter’s process: “I watched the film, got the exact span of time for each of the sequences - the shots of the studio and the Springs property, the painting on canvas, the two on glass - and then wrote the score as if I were writing music for choreography” (Friedman 1972, 173).

In 1961, Atlantic Records released Coleman’s double-quartet album, *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation*, featuring a cover (and gatefold) image selected not by Coleman, but by the label: Pollock’s 1954 painting, *White Light* (Mandeles 1981). The image was agreeable to Coleman, who remarked to writer Chad Mandeles that Pollock was someone “in the same state I was in—doing what I was doing” (ibid.).

And yet the specific image for the Coleman record was not from what is regarded as Pollock’s improvisatory period but was a later work noted for employing a less spontaneous method. One way to make sense of the label art is to home in on what amounts to (roughly) a gestalt affinity between the later Pollock work and the music on the album (Harrison 2008).

In one case, a complementary parallelism. In the other, a nebulous gestalt affinity. It is between these not quite polar opposites that the present exploration takes place. This essay ranges across various works and statements by Pollock, Feldman, and Coleman, and related ideas, works, and people, drawing on a focal collection of sources from the seemingly bottomless well of available materials. What follows thus remains looser than a conventional linear analysis or exhaustive deep dive into the archives.

## II

Three ‘filters’ will bring into view different aspects of the Pollock-Feldman-Coleman constellation. Through these filters, I aim to tease out what lies between nebulous gestalt

affinity and complementary parallelism as two derivations of mimesis. Are the works of Pollock, Feldman, and Coleman at best two unrelated pairs, rays of superficial resemblance in an open angle with Pollock at the vertex? Do the vastly different surfaces, mediums, materials, and related techniques – not only across visual art and music, but across composed and improvised music – present chasms too great to bridge? I settled only on the filters in advance, with no foregone conclusions either way. I remained open to arriving at an affirmative answer to both questions, but instead landed elsewhere.

The first filter addresses the inception of a work and its realisation *as* a work, the boundaries of where process and product begin and end. There is a rich tradition of thought about the concept of the work, ontologically and historically, that connects with artworks across the visual arts and music (paintings, musical compositions, improvised music).<sup>1</sup> While relevant in the background, the concrete focus here is on the artist's involvement in the material realisation of their works, not the 'work concept' in general.

The second filter opens up more widely onto what might be regarded as the generalised audience member – who the work is *for* in the widest sense. It explores what could be called the matrix of intended audience experiences, as deliberately structured by the artist through the work. At least for the recent past, there is a web of constrained context for such experience: biological basics of embodied perception, current technologies and material culture, and operative social and practical traditions. From these, we can distil a kind of historicised phenomenology describing what can be seen and heard, and how: one no longer hears the beginning of a performance at the end, and one sees the same object differently from close up or far away; but also, a novel or simply unfamiliar complex of ideas exemplified in an object or performance may produce an experience that is not adapted to the relevant context.

The third filter explores the literal and metaphorical placement of the work – in other words, how the work is actively situated in spaces, traditions, and cultural reception contexts. Crucially, this placement is partly an act of the artist, but also exceeds the artist's control to varying extents. Nevertheless, there is something the artist always retains; roughly, the claim to the context in which the work is meant to be experienced. An artist, despite their intentions, cannot control the interpretations of a work. They can however bind the work to intended

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<sup>1</sup> I am thinking in particular of works that in key respects grow out of Nelson Goodman's seminal *Languages of Art* (1969), such as Arthur C. Danto's *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981), Lydia Goehr's *Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (1992), and Brown et al.'s *Jazz and the Philosophy of Art* (2018).

viewing or listening conditions, without which an important aspect of its identity would be lost.

## First filter

### III

One commonality I want to highlight across the three bodies of work is a notion articulated by Feldman (1981), a contrast between ‘development’ and ‘extension’. When composing, he favours the latter over the former. The ‘extension-contra-development’ approach seems to be an equally apt way of describing both *Free Jazz* and Pollock’s “Mural” (1943), for example. Although the contrast between development and extension may be understood formally, it nevertheless speaks to the real-time process by which the work is produced.

Rather than starting from a sketch that contains the promise of total form, to be developed teleologically from proverbial acorn to oak tree, in the cases under consideration here the work comes into being solely with a kind of framing provided by material parameters (canvas size, performance ensemble) and an authorial aesthetic sensibility. This framing guides the work’s unfolding from an initial gestural ‘mark’ (a sound, an application of paint). The accompanying sensibility that sets up the framing also determines within it when to keep going, how to keep going, and when to stop.

From Pollock’s interview with William Wright, late in 1950, broadcast in 1951 on WERI radio in Rhode Island:

WW: [When you start a painting] then, you don’t actually have a preconceived image of a canvas in your mind?

JP: Well, not exactly—no—because it hasn’t been created, you see. Something new—it’s quite different from working, say, from a still life where you set up objects and work directly from them. I do have a general notion of what I’m about and what the results will be.

WW: That does away, entirely, with all preliminary sketches?

JP: Yes, I approach painting in the same sense as one approaches drawing; that is, it's direct. I don't work from drawings, I don't make sketches and drawings and color sketches into a final painting. (Karmel 1999, 22)

A handwritten statement by Pollock, found among his papers and also dated to late in 1950:

*No Sketches*

acceptance of

*what I do—,*

-----

Experience of our age in terms

of painting—not an illustration of—

(but *the equivalent.*)

Concentrated

fluid

(*ibid.*, 24)

Referring to how painting—captures, one might say—‘experience in our age’, the notion of ‘*the equivalent*’ (original emphasis) is doing a lot of work here, as a contrast to ‘illustration’. What we have is both a kind of ‘anti-mimesis’ that arose with modernist non-representational art, but that we might also understand as a ‘new mimesis’ (the theme of this journal issue).

We can further ground the split between equivalence and illustration by turning to Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (Rousseau [1781] 1998), an early reference point for the analogy between painting and music. As Rousseau has it, both painting and music can ‘stir the soul’ only by their capacity to imitate: it is the melodic line that imitates

the impassioned voice to take us beyond mere sound, and it is the painting's depiction, its imitative outline, the *contours* of represented objects, that take us beyond the mere sensation of colour to the touching, expressive, 'life and soul' of art. "Remove those contours from the Painting, the colors will no longer do anything" (ibid., 320). Is it not this sense of absent contours that is precisely what is offered by Pollock's action paintings? A way for colour to 'do something' without illustrative contours?

In a fascinating reading of Rousseau's *Essay*, Derrida ([1967] 1976, 203) notes that in order for the imitative illustration to succeed, the 're-presentation' (of an original source) must at the same time be a 'de-presentation' of it. A depiction stands in relation to what is (or was) present in the world, as a supplement. But if a mimetic artwork can only supplement the corresponding original in the world, he argues, there is a sense in which it is ultimately superfluous. And, on the other hand, if the artwork truly adds to what is or was already present, we are faced with a kind of identity theft, by which the imitation poses a threat to the originality of the source.

In Pollock's hands, this contradiction is avoided by what might be understood as 'pure' presentation that is *equivalent* to something else, without (de)presenting and) representing it in an illustration. In what sense is the presentation 'pure'? "I approach painting in the same sense as one approaches drawing; that is, it's direct." In other words, the 'doing' or the making of the work is at once the 'realising' of the work. The work is not a realisation of a development from an embryonic state, nor is it the colouring in of an outline; it is an extension via actions, gestures, techniques, 'moves'. If there is any mimesis to speak of, it can now be located in a multifaceted homology between the entire work and the world, in which these twinned elements are both understood as an extended materialisation of action.

#### IV

Coleman's album *Twins* (1971) features an alternate, preceding take of *Free Jazz*, descriptively entitled "First Take". Listening to both takes tells us something about the 'work identity' between them, which is in part problematised by their improvised performance (Brown et al. 2018; for a comparative analysis, see K. Coleman 2021). What becomes clear in the comparison is that the takes are not a realisation of a score in the traditional sense, in the

way that there can be multiple performances of a nineteenth-century classically composed work. Indeed, Coleman “would often eschew notated or dictated parameters in performance and would invite the other musicians to do the same” (ibid., 282).

Moreover, the ‘piece’, as reflected in the two takes, does not exhibit the traditional development of a musical idea. Here, too, we might use ‘extension’ to describe the process of realising the work – a materialisation of actions set into motion within an aesthetic framing. As Stephen Rush puts it, when analysing a different Coleman piece, a given phrase can be understood in relation to “the shape and rhythm of the motive, rather than [as] an attempt to reveal some larger architectonic scheme” (Rush 2017, 15). Across Rush’s analyses of multiple Coleman pieces, he refers to one as comprised of “a freely phrased collection of motives”; for another, that Coleman “rarely departs from just a few motives, and continues to use them as organizational tools”; or that he proceeds to “chop up the motive, repeat it, extend it”; and elsewhere, that the motives are “repeated, modulated, then extended” and so on. (Some of these analytical excerpts concern a piece on the album *Dancing in Your Head*, recorded with the Master Musicians of Joujouka, who will come up again later on.)

Coleman offers some insights into his own thinking about musical properties: “the notes of music are only the extension of *each other*” (ibid.). Along seemingly similar lines, Rousseau states that “a sound carries with it all of its concomitant harmonies, in the relations of strength and interval that they must have among themselves in order to produce the most perfect harmony of this same sound” (Rousseau [1781] 1998, 322). Rush’s formal analyses of Coleman’s music often feature descriptions of tonal ambiguity, self-contradiction, avoidance of key or even “avoidance of any implication of key area”, and not settling in a key (“the entire section could be heard in G minor or Bb major”; “the phrase quickly moves” across several keys; a section is melodically in one key but harmonically supported in another, etc.). This quality also seems to be understood by Rousseau, which becomes clear at the close of this passage: “Harmony may, in certain systems, cooperate ... by linking the succession of sounds through certain laws of modulations, by making the intonations more exact, by providing the ear with reliable evidence of this exactness, by bringing together and determining imperceptible inflections into consonant and linked intervals. But by thus shackling the melody, it deprives it of energy and expression” (ibid.). Indeed, Coleman’s approach resists such shackles.

Ultimately, however, Coleman and Rousseau diverge in their aesthetic values. Rousseau exalts pure melody in “simple unison” as the ultimate imitation of Nature, capturing, expressing, and touching the human soul, “from whence the strength of musical imitations arises” (ibid.). Unison, however, in Coleman’s idiosyncratic usage, takes on a markedly different meaning. In his music, unison describes multiple musicians simultaneously playing different improvised melodies in rhythmic sync. Other related sensibilities are also operative in Coleman’s music, in that it is comprised of a “textural braid of many unique and independent strands of sound in motion. ... [T]he musicians on *Free Jazz* explore unity in plurality and ‘harmony’ by cooperative simultaneity” (K. Coleman, 288).

Kwami Coleman (no relation to Ornette) offers a vital critical analysis of the aesthetic field that *Free Jazz* co-defines and is a part of. He notes of the aural texture of a work such as *Free Jazz* that it “invites an unconventional and invested way of listening, if the many simultaneous musical voices—the multiple subjectivities—in the texture are to be heard” (ibid., 264). This rich aesthetics is suggestive of the sense of ‘new mimesis’ invoked above. Conceptually, the possibility of mirroring goes well beyond superficial affinities between (what might be misjudged as) mere cacophony, on one hand, and the surrounding sociohistorical upheaval and protest, on the other, a mirroring that would be indicative of ‘old’ mimesis.

It is worth pointing out that, at times, identifying this (superficial) affinity is wielded with thinly veiled racial prejudice, as in writings by prominent music critics such as Leonard Feather (ibid.). But even when the perceived affinity is viewed supportively, as a welcome endorsement of the struggle for liberation and equality, it nevertheless suggests a more basic imitation of voice – “melody does in music precisely what [outline] design does in painting; it is melody that indicates the contours and figures” of emotive vocal expression (Rousseau [1781] 1998, 320). This differs significantly from the deeply embedded equivalence between music theoretical and utopian social organisation in Coleman’s music.

V

Coleman defines the ‘work’ *Free Jazz* as “a collective improvisation” within an aesthetics that demands a simultaneity of individually creative voices. This has some relevant implications



for the process of realising the work. Specifically, it not only challenged traditional hierarchies between composer and performer, soloist and accompanist, but also introduced new approaches to structuring a work. Doubtless, there is a qualitatively different urgency to Coleman's aesthetic challenge to canonical structure than there is to what could be understood as analogous challenges by Feldman and Pollock. While exploring their similarities, I do not want to suggest the possibility of a meaningful separation between formal and sociohistorical aesthetic dimensions. These dimensions are even intertwined in the problematic valorisations couched as Primitivism – a vehicle by which to supposedly escape predominant European forms and techniques, but one that unavoidably winds up reinforcing colonialist tendencies. This is more than can be tackled here.

Applicable within the present scope, however, K. Coleman (2021) highlights the entanglement of these dimensions in his updated use of the concept of heterophony:

The distinction between heterophony and polyphony in Western musical thought is convoluted and worth clarifying. Polyphony, a pillar of Enlightenment Europe's music thinking and design, carried at every point in its lexical genealogy a directive to collapse and assimilate textural difference to ensure an orderly and cohesive ('organic') design. Such an assimilation was accomplished by establishing a textural hierarchy—a focal point—under which contrasting separate voices could be integrated; the ideals of consonance and clarity in contrapuntal and tonal matrices are consecrated by rules that confer preeminence to a principal textural voice or tonal center. [...]

In post-Enlightenment Germanic musicology, [heterophony] is conceived in contrast to tonal polyphony—the apex of Western musical thinking and design—as a primitive and intuited (i.e., illogical) multivoice texture. The implicit racial chauvinism in this definition is clear ... [it] construes heterophony as an 'unenlightened,' primitive kind of polyphony. ... Contemporary music creators, however, have appropriated the term to mean something different: a decentralized multivoice texture without a principal melody, in which multiple unique voices are sounding simultaneously. ... Improvisational heterophony is a dynamic mesh of sound ... The resulting texture of this amoebic, multivoice sound mass is implicitly nonhierarchical ... [it] accounts for the undulating and opaque sonic density of *Free Jazz*. (ibid., 277-9)

There are surely insidious issues related to Primitivism that could be (and possibly have been) excavated in the works of Feldman and Pollock. My focus here, strained perhaps, is on the concept of extension and decentralised, nonhierarchical texture.

Feldman introduces a discussion of *Why patterns?*, his 1978 composition “consisting of a large variety of patterns”, with the following observation:

I'm being distracted by a small Turkish village rug of white tile patterns in a diagonal repeat of large stars in lighter tones of red, green, and beige. Though ... our appreciation of rugs such as this was enhanced by our exposure to modernistic Western art, still, this 'primitive' rug was conceived at almost the same time that Matisse finished his art training. Everything about [it] ... brings to mind Matisse's mastery of his seesaw balance between movement and stasis. ... There is another Anatolian woven object on my floor, which I refer to as the 'Jasper Johns' rug. It is an arcane checkerboard format, with no apparent systematic color design except for a free use of the rug's colors reiterating its simple pattern. Implied in the glossy pile ... was my first hint that there was something that I could learn, if not apply to my music. (Feldman 1981, 93-94)

He continues with a description of his composition: “The work is notated separately for each instrument and does not coordinate until the last few minutes. ... Material given to each instrument is idiomatically not interchangeable with that of the other instruments” (ibid.). These ideas harbour the suggestion of simultaneous independent voices. “Some of the patterns repeat exactly – others, with slight variations either in their shape or rhythmic placement. At times, a series of different patterns are linked together on a chain and then juxtaposed by simple means” (ibid.). Feldman’s elaboration of his own work bears a striking resemblance to Rush’s analysis of Coleman’s use of motives, discussed above (setting aside obvious fundamental differences in their personal aesthetic, and between improvisational performances and those more constrained by composition). Finally, with respect to structural hierarchy, Feldman, again: “The most interesting aspect for me, composing exclusively with patterns, is that there is not one organizational procedure more advantageous than another, perhaps because no one pattern ever takes precedence over the others” (ibid.).

Feldman wonders how Pollock, “who walked around a canvas, dipped a stick into a can of paint, and then thrust it in a certain way across the canvas – could still talk about Michelangelo, [which] was, and still is, baffling to me” (ibid., 101), and yet Feldman

frequently spoke admirably of Beethoven and other composers of bygone eras. In a similar sense, despite the claims of some critical reviews and analyses, *Free Jazz* is not a protest against or rejection of the jazz tradition (K. Coleman 2021). Notably, Pollock's well-known fandom of twentieth-century African American music apparently encompassed only the pre-bebop era (Hentoff 1999; Harrison 2008). One might presume that bebop and later music of the same tradition was 'baffling' to him.

Of course, they all had training and expertise in their own traditions: for Coleman, this included rhythm-and-blues (as well as bebop); for Feldman, the Western canon of composers (as well as serialism); and for Pollock, classical as well as pre- and proto-modernist painting. Their own work, respectively, was born out of a deep familiarity with the history of their tradition and its techniques, and the inadequacy of those techniques as vehicles for their own aesthetic sensibilities – the hierarchy of perspective and vanishing point in Renaissance painting, and that of melodic development and harmonic order in European art music. A connective tissue of nonhierarchical structures spans their approaches and mediums.

Pollock: "My opinion is that new needs need new techniques. And the modern artists have found new ways and new means of making their statements. It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express this age ... in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. Each age finds its own technique" (Karmel 1999, 20). In part speaking of Pollock, the artist Robert Morris writes that "disengagement with preconceived enduring forms and orders for things is a positive assertion. It is part of the work's refusal to continue estheticizing the form by dealing with it as a prescribed end" (Morris [1968] 1993, 46). This could just as easily refer to Feldman and Coleman.

## Second filter

### VI

Morris again: "Of the Abstract Expressionists, only Pollock was able to recover process and hold on to it as part of the end form of the work" (ibid., 43). Myths aside, Pollock did not listen to music while he painted (Harrison 2008). *Mural* was completed in months, not hours (Perchuk et al. 2017). Interim results were moved from floor to wall, contemplated, returned

to the floor, adjusted with further painting, and so on, in an iterative loop. While these facts may complicate established readings of his work, they do not stand in the way of important aspects of experiencing it. The experience is fundamentally affected by the scale: one cannot see the whole piece and close-up detail at the same time, much as circumstance dictated for the process of painting itself, moving across a large-scale canvas, or in other cases, around its outside edges. Moreover, one cannot escape the drips and splatters that lack the self-effacing touch of a brush stroke. Yet, these were carefully controlled (*ibid.*); Pollock always maintained that he had no interest in ‘accident’.

The details of the painting process remain consistent with the ‘pure presentation’ discussed above, the *equivalence* distinct from illustration. But unlike the first filter, a different kind of equivalence comes into view here, between the making and the experiencing of the work – the work is made in a way such that its making (or an imaginary version of it) can be experienced. Despite the evidence that Pollock’s practice is distinct from improvisation *per se*, it bears a resemblance to the unfolding of a musical improvisation in so far as it calls out the embodied, effortful making of the work. We can hear the performers on *Free Jazz* co-creating the music *as* the realising of the work, in contrast to performing a realised work. (“First Take” drives this home in a manner analogous to the Namuth film of Pollock, a glimpse beyond a purely imaginary process, but one that is not strictly necessary for experiencing the works.)

We can also read Feldman along similar lines as the notion of Coleman’s compositions realised through improvisation, and what could be called the improvisational qualities of Pollock’s painterly process. Feldman states, rather abstractly: “I prefer to think of my work as: *between categories*. Between Time and Space. Between painting and music. Between the music's construction, and its surface” (Feldman [1969] 1988, 5). More concretely, the surfaces of Feldman's and Coleman’s music and Pollock’s paintings seem to point to their own contingency, that they could always be otherwise. And yet, the ‘otherwise’ is not a different way of colouring in an outline, or even a different outline construction. It is a different instance of *constructing* that remains a counterfactual possibility, not a reified construction as a kind of platonic work, that is implicated in the (thereby contingent) surface.

Feldman, again: “In the modulations of Beethoven we do not have his touch, only his logic. It is not enough for us that he *wrote* the music. We need him to sit down at the piano and play it for us. ... Only Beethoven's mind is in his music” (*ibid.*, 4). Neither Pollock’s nor

Coleman's works can fully reside in the mind. They do not rely on a detailed blueprint – even when a motive or framing serves as a starting point. A transcription or visual study can never contain what the work is. While Feldman's works may differ in kind from the others, there still seems to be something in all of them bound up with an embodied unfolding, which for him relates to the process of both composing and performing his pieces.

## VII

Consider a poem printed on a page. It is fixed in place, and yet it is a kind of recipe for experiencing the work that calls out its own difference from prose. Why does the line break *there* and not elsewhere? The poet's decisions when making the poem are also decisions about how it will be experienced. Even in silent contemplation, the poem's layout affects the experience of it. At the same time, the layout affects how the poem is performed, read aloud, experienced through listening.

Now consider how this relates to Feldman's compositions: "Though ... patterns exist in rhythmic shapes articulated by instrumental sounds, they are also in part *notational images* that do not make a direct impact on the ear as we listen. A tumbling of sorts happens in midair between their translation from the page and their execution" (Feldman 1981, 97). The effect is ultimately felt by the performer and in turn the audience.

Brion Gysin, a painter and poet (among other things), describes an experiential effect he produced by permuting words. Applications of this technique would come to be known as the "Permutated Poems". He describes how the idea took shape when he encountered a specific string of words – "I am that I am". Gysin: "I saw the phrase on paper and I thought, 'Ah, it looks a bit like the front of a Greek temple,' only on the condition that I put the biggest word in the middle. So, I'll just change these others around, 'am I,' in the corner of the architrave. And then I realized as soon as I did this, it asked a question. 'I am that, am I?'" (Weiss 1991, 69). Another felt effect.

Referring to Feldman's arrangement of notes and rests in a composition, James Pritchett (2016) writes from a performer's perspective: "How can I explain the psychological difference between this, a two-bar phrase consisting of a pattern and a measure of rest:

[img]

and this, a two-bar phrase consisting of a measure of rest and the same pattern:

[img]

I can't explain it, really, but I do know that I *think* the pattern differently when I put the measure of rest first" (ibid.).

Feldman endeavoured to get the 'recipe' just right: "The patterns that interest me are both concrete and ephemeral, making notation difficult. If notated exactly, they are too stiff; if given the slightest notational leeway, they are too loose" (Feldman 1981, 97). His notational decisions constitute something apart from a disembodied platonic sense of the work (as found in "Beethoven's mind"). They are part of a confrontation with the performer that is experienced *as* a notational decision, latent with implied counterfactuals: he chose to notate it like *this* and not these other ways. Saxophonist Steve Lacy, improviser and composer who worked with Gysin, said that Gysin's reading aloud of his own poems was "very jazzlike, in that he was living it. When he delivers it, he's playing. It's different each time. It's delivered in a free, improvisational manner, and that leeway is written right into it" (Weiss 1991, 76). The page is not the end; the page mediates.

There is a further embodied confrontation between a performance of the work and the audience, tethered to the physical acoustic properties of materials and space. This is clear in Feldman's instructions to performers regarding the timing of sequences, for which one must wait until a sound has partially subsided before continuing: "The gradations of meaning are subtle in each formulation of the instruction—from [continue when the current sound is] 'almost inaudible' to 'toward the end of the decay,' and finally, 'as the preceding sound begins to fade'" (Dohony 2019, 50). Other times his works produce jarringly slight sonic asymmetry ("crippled symmetry", as Feldman put it) and disorienting effects related to the faux repetition of near-identical sound events.

When Gysin cut-up and layered tape recordings of spoken words and sounds, he also played with sonic processes of decay, jarring asymmetry, and disorienting devolutions. The materiality of the cut-ups was paramount to Gysin: "there's an actual treatment of the material as if it were a piece of cloth. The sentence, even the word, becomes a real piece of plastic material that you can cut into . . . [Tristan] Tzara's words out of a hat were simply aleatory, chance" (Weiss 1991, 70). While the use of aleatory or chance 'operations' would come to be regarded as compositional techniques, famously used by Cage, they do not seem to be interchangeable with the sense of technique related to the manipulation of materials. In that

context, chance allows the world to impose itself as it is, bypassing the agency of intervention. Its use embraces the kind of ‘accident’ that did not interest Pollock. (Not entirely incidentally, Gysin was a peripheral figure in the circles of Pollock and Feldman, and was among the few in the caravan when Coleman travelled to meet the Master Musicians of Jajouka.)

Despite the radically different surfaces and constructions among these artists, the aesthetic commonality could be summed up in a phrase: extended shifting and overlapping patterns with emerging textures and rhythms that produce palpable experiential effects. Moreover, for these artists, the effects are never divorced from the source materials. It is as if the works always carry the trace of their own absence, prior to their realisation as works – at which point, effort against resistance was needed to forge the work into existence.

*Arts Magazine* published what appears to be the first essay focussed on connections between Pollock’s painting and Coleman’s music, along with that of a few contemporaries. Its author, Mandeles (1981) elaborates what he calls “structural parallels” between the paintings and the music. Drawing on art critic Michael Fried, he describes the achievement of a homogeneous form in Pollock’s paintings that he hears in the music of the free jazz era. But this kind of reading puts us back in the territory of nebulous gestalt affinity between surfaces. As TJ Clark (1999) argues, Fried’s reading of Pollock’s works is a problematic retreat into the formal and optical that misses out on their physical, material, effortful aspects (ibid., 330ff.).

Pure presentation as equivalence – an avoidance of the derepresentation and representation of illustration – presents an embodied, durational process. This is therefore vitally distinct from an instantaneous ‘pure presence’. Recall Pollock: “I approach painting in the same sense as one approaches drawing.” Speaking specifically of the production and reception of duration in the practice of drawing, Pamela M. Lee (1999) notes: “It should be obvious that this kind of duration—this kind of actuality—is not the time of pure presence or presentness. It is not the time of Fried's most privileged works of art, wholly manifest and instantaneous as they are claimed to be. There is no naivete about the fullness or plenitude of this temporal experience. Rather, this [actuality] is recognized as impossible to grasp” (ibid., 35-37). It is the experience of compressed effortful labour against material resistance reified in the finished work.

In the works of Pollock, Feldman, and Coleman, time is embodied action. That is how the work is both made and experienced. As Morris might have it, the work is a *Box with the Sound of its own Making*.<sup>2</sup>

### Third filter

## VIII

Making works that could be exhibited or performed alongside a group of peers who were regarded as the torch bearers of a long-standing tradition – Pollock, Feldman, and Coleman were each doing that. At the same time, they were not just making works that fit with the prevailing conditions of reception. In different ways, they all transformed the conditions of reception for their own art.

The writer Paul Bowles – a former composition student of Aaron Copeland (whom Feldman knew well) – became a significant conduit between Morocco and the New York and Parisian art scenes. Gysin met his future close collaborator William S. Burroughs in Tangier; both came there to see Bowles. It was Bowles who introduced Gysin to the Master Musicians of Joujouka, which eventually led to their Coleman collaboration (with Gysin and Burroughs in attendance).

Bowles recalls a story from New York: “So that people would not be bored waiting for the elevator in her foyer, Peggy [Guggenheim] asked Jackson Pollock to paint gigantic murals to cover the walls of the room. We returned to her house after lunch one afternoon and came upon Pollock, standing among cans of paint, straddling one of the panels, looking down at it intently” (Bowles 1972, 250). The circumstances of the commission are confirmed by Peggy Guggenheim herself: “We spent hours in bars thinking about the décor of our new home. There was a large entrance hall from which an elevator took you upstairs. There was no staircase up to the apartment. ... We were preoccupied for weeks trying to think of fantastic

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase refers to a 1961 artwork by Robert Morris, described as follows: "From inside an otherwise ordinary wooden box emerge the occasional sounds of hammering, sawing, and sanding. These sounds form part of a three-and-a-half-hour recording that Morris created while making the very box in front of us. The audio soundtrack reframes our experience of the work, suggesting an ongoing act of labor, which is interrupted only by the necessity to rest or retrieve more supplies. The work is a manifesto of sorts ... it makes evident the means and methods of its own production" (The Met, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/689665>).



ways of decorating the entrance hall” (Guggenheim [1960] 1979, 295). The significance of this comes into view with TJ Clark’s analysis: “The dread word ‘decorative’ loomed. And Pollock was profoundly in two minds about the complex of problems the word brought in its wake. One side of him seems always to have been looking for a way for art to be ‘background’ (for some reason still the ultimate pejorative!) and not forfeit aesthetic coherence. Peggy Guggenheim’s *Mural*, in that sense, set the parameters for the rest of the decade. It remained a touchstone” (TJ Clark, 358).

While Feldman’s pieces are scarcely what one would call ‘decorative’ in the sense of incidental music, they have some connection to the way TJ Clark describes ‘background’ for Pollock. But not in the sense of background listening either. Instead, it is as if the work carries an in-built challenge to its relation to a conventional environment. With the painting, you can get lost in it, but it can also merge with the space, rather than announce itself as a privileged art object. (Indeed, this is partly what motivated Peggy Guggenheim’s decision to commission Pollock rather than hang something more opulent (Guggenheim [1960] 1979, 295).) By design, a typical sonata, for example, is the complete opposite. One should not get lost in a sonata or the composer has failed. And a sonata is exactly the kind of piece that can exist in “Beethoven’s mind”, for which a performance is nothing other than an idealised piece of art momentarily gracing a room with all the fanfare of a ceremonial entry and exit. If it merges with the space, the composer has failed.

Feldman famously spoke of scale, which began to interest him more than form: “Musical forms ... are essentially only methods of arranging material and serve no other function than to aid one’s memory” (Feldman 1981, 92-93). According to him, this insight about scale came to him from the visual arts, with painters such as Pollock and especially Rothko. His interest in scale led to increasingly longer pieces, initially lasting more than an hour and eventually multiple hours. He spoke of how these extended durations change the experience of a piece, because it is no longer mentally containable; instead the work envelopes the listener. “I like the long pieces for the same reason you like Proust—[the reason] is that you don’t drink it, you sip it. And you get into it—just *saturated*, more and more and more” (Feldman 1986).

Transforming the conditions of reception looks very different without the benefits of privilege and patronage. Coleman was situated within the jazz tradition, a performance context profoundly structured by racial and class adversity and social stratification. As

Coleman noted, “the jazz scene [hadn’t] really changed that much since it left the New Orleans warehouses. The nightclub is still built on the same two things: whiskey and [sex]” (Spellman 1966, 139).

A 1963 item from a leading jazz periodical is illuminating: “[Coleman] was interested in talking about his Dec. 21 [1962] concert at New York City’s Town Hall. It could be said that the concert, for which he is assuming all financial risks, including renting the hall, is part of a peculiar jazz problem—Coleman is just not working anywhere and wants to present his music. The event is, in his own words, ‘a concert presentation ... I believe that my music is best heard in this kind of presentation’” (*Down Beat* 1963, 11-12). Why he was “not working anywhere” was in part due to his demands for better pay conditions (Spellman 1966), but that was not the whole story. One group member relayed that two others went out to get engagements that met Coleman’s asking price. When they returned with signed contracts for the full amount, “Ornette still said, I’m not gonna take it” (Litweiler 1992, 103-4).

Coleman sought to transform the conditions of reception in what might be regarded as an external manner. But his moves had a similar effect on the audience experience of the work as moves by Pollock and Feldman related to scale. For all three, moving to an ‘untraditional’ presentation format allowed for a new dynamic between the audience and the work to be established.

## Conclusion

### IX

The first filter drew out a common thread among the protagonists in terms of how they materialised their artworks as part of a practice situated against the current of a tradition. As revealed by the second filter, they in turn directed their practice towards configuring the work to structure the audience's receptive experience. The third filter showed that, to support this structuring, they transformed the context of the work’s reception in different ways.

Another commonality among their works can be gleaned from art critic Michael Brenson’s insightful take on Modernist painting, which applies just as easily to Pollock as it could to Feldman and Coleman: “At its best ... [the artwork] becomes not only a conduit—

from longing to light, muteness to eloquence, everyday life to a spiritual realm—but also a wall. ... Its illuminated coherence encourages people to take refuge inside it. Its capacity to evoke an experience of transcendence allows it to become for many people a release from the world around them. ... What art of such internal pressure can do to only a limited degree is lead outside itself into social and political situations” (Brenson [1995] 2004, 148).

He continues: “No matter how much [an artwork] may be about someone or something outside [itself] ... it always pulls attention back into itself and holds it there” (ibid.). This returns us to the issue of derepresentation and representation in illustration, a superfluous supplement or threat to the original. Modernist ‘aboutness’ at its best certainly threatens the original, as Brenson notes of Cézanne’s Aix-en-Provence: if you visit, it is “almost impossible then to stop seeing” it through the paintings, and through the artists’ eyes (ibid.).

Of course, not all modernists are illustrators. Pollock’s act of painting “as one approaches drawing” does not refer to mimetic lines, but to its directness. Feldman’s sequences of notes are not mimetic lines of melody, but instead emerge from mosaic patterns, process iterations, or direct engagements with the body and the instrument. Coleman’s expressive melodic streams may have something in common with mimetic lines, but they are part of textural weaves that cannot be collapsed into an idealised simple unison.

As different as these artists and their respective works are from one another, the modernist threads that bind them go beyond the surface. Their paintings, compositions, and improvisations invite an attunement to human action, in its embodied, effortful, communicative dimensions and its material consequences. If their works provide refuge, but also facilitate our return with a revitalised perspective – that things could be otherwise – then perhaps they can lead outside themselves to a greater degree, through us.

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or Imitation?,” by Helen A. Harrison, director of the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, and I am grateful to her for making it available online. I also want to thank the editor, Jonathan Impett, for inviting me to contribute on the topic of ‘new mimesis’, which prompted me to return to and further develop my initial version. Special thanks to Michael Brenson for thoughtful and encouraging feedback on the draft manuscript.

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