

Toward a Morphology of Presence: The Sound Installations of Thomas DeLio

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ABSTRACT

In music and art, what is traditionally generated is a fixed entity in which materials have been shaped into a unique design prior to contact with the perceiver. While such a design may be affected by the consciousness of the perceiver and the site in which his perception takes place, it is not structurally determined by them.

In the recent sound installations of Thomas DeLio, perceiver and site not only affect the design – they literally determine it. “Presence” – that phenomenological meeting ground between perceiver and site – becomes a shaping force in the creation of structure.

The recent sound installations of Thomas DeLio constitute a remarkable body of works which explore and ultimately call to question many concepts of meaning and structure in music espoused by Western composers of the last three centuries. Carrying on and extending the explorations of such composers and visual artists as John Cage, Alvin Lucier, Robert Irwin and Carl Andre, DeLio works toward understanding and articulating the very act of perception itself. Indeed, in his work the moment of perception becomes the focus of perception. Toward this end, he has created a series of sound/visual installations in which gesture is minimized and structure is exclusively identified with place – with the site of its presentation. These works actively engage the unique perceptual orientation of each viewer/listener and approach a redefinition of the relationship between artwork and the contextual framework in which it is perceived.

One of the first visual artists to carry this perspective into the making of artworks was Robert Irwin. As one striking example, in the early '60's, Irwin created a series of paintings which consist of tiny dots, typically of opposite primary colors, spiralling out from the center of a large, slightly convex canvas. The dots themselves are sufficiently small, particularly with respect to the size of the canvas, that upon first encounter the viewer usually observes simply a plain white canvas. However, as he gazes for a time at the painting it begins to shimmer and a halo of color appears to emerge from, and hover over the surface of the canvas – an effect once likened to a “light pulsing somewhere in the silver white of the canvas.”¹ What is important about the compositional arrangement of the dots is not so much the design which results but rather how that design gradually coalesces within the viewer's perceptual frame to create a particular visual effect. Unlike the pointillist canvases of, say, Seurat, in which the compositional arrangement of dots form painted objects (such as people and trees),

Irwin's objects are the canvases themselves which appear to dematerialize into a haze of color before the viewer's very eyes. As such, all the various elements of composition are employed to create what one might call a "perceptual" rather than a "pictorial" experience.

Further explorations led Irwin to the creation of works in which the environment – the context of visual experience – itself became the object of the viewer's perception. Through carefully considered actions of minimal gesture, Irwin transformed already existing sites in such a way that the focus was placed upon the site itself and not on the compositional arrangements of any objects introduced into that site. In *Scrim Veil – Black Rectangle – Natural Light* (1977, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City), two visual elements were placed in a room: a sheer scrim suspended from the ceiling and a thin rectangle skirting the four walls.² These elements were employed in such a way as to amplify certain qualities already present in the site, rather than to effect a "composition" separate from it. This is not to say that there was a lack of organization or planning involved. Rather, all organization was rooted in the site of the experience. As a result, the viewer was led toward perceptual engagement with the environment rather than with any object or objects within that environment. Irwin seems to strive, in all his installations, toward an arrangement of elements which most evocatively allows the space to become manifest as a presence for the viewer. This is effected not by means of pictorial metaphor or abstract representation but rather through the subtle manipulation of the viewer's direct perceptual experience.

Thomas DeLio brings to his works a similar engagement with the interrelationships between artwork and the contextual framework (physical environment) in which it is experienced. This engagement has been particularly apparent in his recent chamber music and in his sound installations.

In his chamber works (such as *Four Variants*, *Six*, *I-IV*, etc.), gestural projections are minimized, both at the macro- and micro-levels. Each chamber work consists of variously superposed "panels" of sound, each comprising octave duplications of a single pitch-class. The work *Six*, for example, (scored for 3 clarinets, 2 violins and one viola [see score on the following pages]), consists of six pieces or "variants", as they are termed in the score. Each variant is approximately 20-30 seconds in duration and can be performed in any order. There are two sound panels at work throughout *Six*: one consisting of strings only (panel A) and one consisting of clarinets only (panel B). Each panel has a fixed duration which is maintained each time it appears: panel A at 20 seconds in duration and panel B at 8 seconds.

Each piece constitutes a different, somewhat static, arrangement of these panels with respect to one another. In pieces 1 and 6, the two panels superpose; in pieces 2 and 4 one follows the other in succession; in pieces 3 and 5 only panel A sounds. Each variant represents different degrees of superposition, from maximal – pieces 1 and 6 – to minimal – pieces 3 and 5. Each piece is in turn separated by 40 to 50 seconds of silence which further obscures the connection

Instrumentation

3 Bb clarinets

2 violins
(2 practice mutes)

1 viola
(1 practice mute)

Instructions

Transposed score.

Whole notes take on
the duration of an
entire measure.

There should be
approximately 40
seconds of silence
between each piece.

Duration: approximately 6 minutes.

J = 60

Bcl. 1 2 3

12 12 12

19^{#0} 19^{#0} 19^{#0}

ppp senza vib.

ppp senza vib.

ppp senza vib.

Vi. 1 2

11 11 11

ppp *prattico muto* senza vib.

ppp *prattico muto* senza vib.

ppp *prattico muto* senza vib.

Vla.

11 11 11

ppp *prattico muto* senza vib.

The image shows a musical score for six staves, arranged vertically. The score is written in a minimalist style, with few notes and many rests. The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 60$ at the beginning. The staves are grouped into three pairs, each with a specific performance instruction:

- Staff 1:** $\text{♩} = 60$, ♩ note, pp senza vib.
- Staff 2:** ♩ note, pp senza vib.
- Staff 3:** ♩ note, pp senza vib.
- Staff 4:** ♩ note, pp practice mute senza vib.
- Staff 5:** ♩ note, pp practice mute senza vib.
- Staff 6:** ♩ note, pp practice mute senza vib.

The notes are mostly quarter notes, and the rests are mostly whole notes. The dynamic marking pp (pianissimo) is used throughout. The instruction "senza vib." (without vibrato) is used for the first three staves, while "practice mute" is used for the last three staves.

Handwritten musical notation on six staves. The notation includes dynamic markings like 'ppp' and 'pp', and performance instructions such as 'Practice mute senza vib.' and 'Practicoe mute senza vib.'.

J=60

The image shows a single five-line musical staff with handwritten notation. The notation is organized into several measures, with some measures containing multiple notes. The notes are written in a cursive, handwritten style. There are several annotations and markings throughout the piece:

- At the beginning, there is a tempo marking: $J=60$.
- Below the first measure, there is a marking: ppp senza vib.
- Below the second measure, there is a marking: ppp senza vib.
- Below the third measure, there is a marking: ppp senza vib.
- Below the fourth measure, there is a marking: ppp senza vib.
- Below the fifth measure, there is a marking: ppp practice mute senza vib.
- Below the sixth measure, there is a marking: ppp practice mute senza vib.
- Below the seventh measure, there is a marking: ppp practice mute senza vib.

The staff is divided into measures by vertical bar lines. Some measures have a $2/4$ time signature written below them. There are also some markings that look like $2/4$ or $3/4$ written above the staff in some measures. The handwriting is somewhat messy and appears to be a working draft or a personal score.

Handwritten musical notation on six staves. The notation includes tempo markings and performance instructions:

- Staff 1: $\text{♩} = 60$
- Staff 2: $\text{♩} = 20$
- Staff 3: $\text{♩} = 20$
- Staff 4: $\text{♩} = 20$
ppp Practice mute
senza vib.
- Staff 5: $\text{♩} = 20$
ppp Practice mute
senza vib.
- Staff 6: $\text{♩} = 20$
ppp Practice mute
senza vib.

The image shows a musical score for three systems of staves. Each system consists of three staves. The first system is marked with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 60$. The second system is marked with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 20$. The third system is also marked with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 20$. The notes are mostly whole notes with stems pointing down. Performance instructions are written below the staves.

$\text{♩} = 60$
ppp
senza vib.

$\text{♩} = 20$
ppp
Practice mute
senza vib.

$\text{♩} = 20$
ppp
Practice mute
senza vib.

between pieces, underlining their existence as separate. As such, the work explores the varied interactions and balances achieved by the varied placements of the two panels. In this way, one can perceive two elements at work: two sound panels (materials) and six variants (organization of those materials). Each element is essential to the projection of the other. Beyond this projection there is very little. Minimal in terms of gesture and motion, these pieces tend toward a rather extreme "object-like" orientation rarely encountered in Western music. As in the works of certain visual artists such as the painter Ellsworth Kelly, process is purposefully minimized in order to intensify an inherent object-like quality.

In works such as *Six*, performers play on traditional instruments with traditional techniques in a traditional concert-hall setting. Yet the static orientation of the music differs markedly from the quasi-dramatic/gestural musics which have come to be associated with that concert-hall experience. The action of performance is itself minimized nearly to the point of non-action, thus highlighting certain aspects of the contextual framework defined by the traditional concert-hall experience and the influence of that experience upon the creative artist. It is probable that these chamber pieces would be less effective if they were displayed as quasi-electronic installations – as sound objects mounted in some non-performance environment such as an art gallery or museum. For one thing, the subtlety of the instrumental/timbral interrelationships would be compromised. Furthermore, and perhaps more significantly, the contextual displacement would ruin the play between the context of performers in a specific performing environment and the materials and actions with which those materials are performed. The concert-hall existence of these works focuses the listener's experience of these compositions as "objects" rather than as dramatic processes. As a by-product, then, the listener may become conscious of the workings of that environment and the way in which it colors both his perceptions and expectations.³

DeLio's sound/visual installations carry on and vastly extend the explorations of these concert pieces. They are designed to "interact with the various architectural properties of their sites."⁴ Extremely subtle sound and visual combinations are introduced into each site and exist exclusively within that site. All compositional design is derived from the site rather than from any abstract conception designed separately from that site. As such, each installation is a result of the composer's perceptual engagement with that site – an experience which similarly engages the viewer perceptually through direct contact with the site.

DeLio's installations have taken place in such institutions as the Corcoran Gallery and the Baltimore Museum of Art. The latter, which took place on October 27-28, 1984, will be the subject of the remainder of this essay.

Complete documentation for the work is found on the following pages. The space is a large foyer which combines numerous corners of varying angles, and contains one gently curving wall. The installation consists of both sonic and

visual elements. The balcony and one quality. In addition, selected angles a

With respect chosen. Each to different corners corner, the sound others. As one v from one pitch t certain spots, pa corners from wh other pairings connections pos

Such orienta and implied a d Each listener w between things t central focal po direction of his which he was e participated in t

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visual elements. Three speakers placed in separate corners of the site – two in the balcony and one on the floor – emitted extremely soft pitches of near sine-tone quality. In addition, two very fine threads of monofilament were stretched at selected angles across the space.

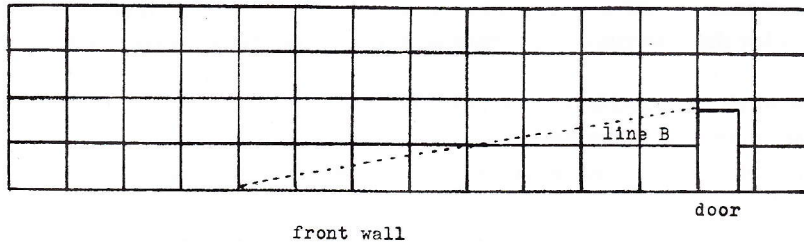
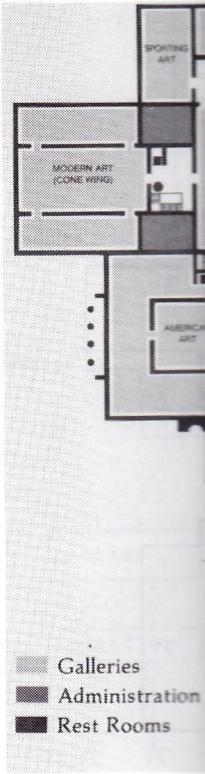
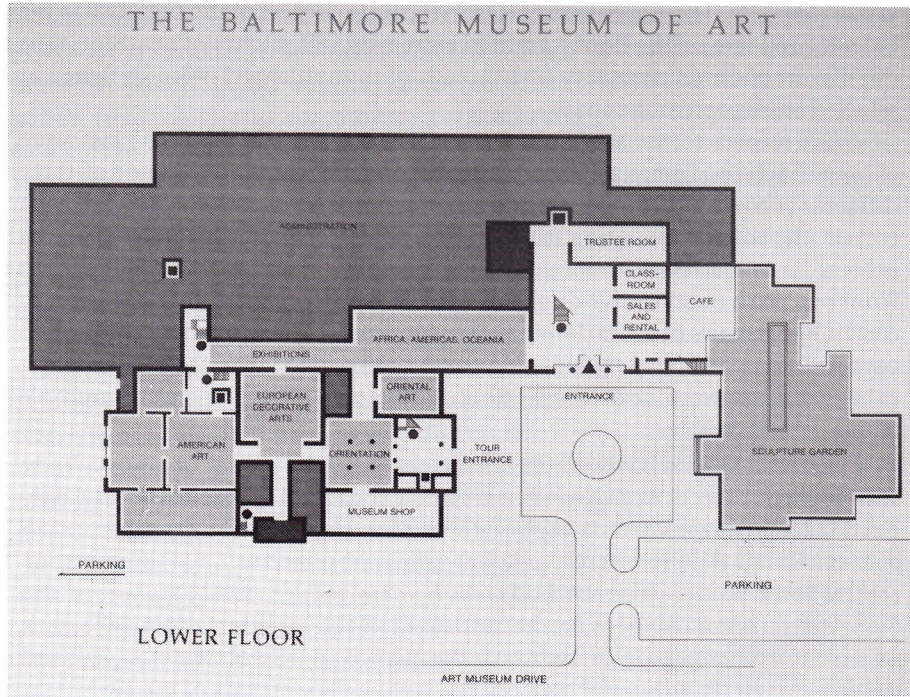
With respect to the sonic elements, three octaves of one pitch class were chosen. Each tone emanated from a speaker which was placed in one of three different corners of the room (see documentation). As one walked toward each corner, the sound emanating from that corner became a little louder than the others. As one walked from one corner to another, one heard a gradual shift from one pitch to an octave duplication of that pitch either higher or lower. In certain spots, pairs of tones dominated suggesting a connection between the two corners from which they emanated. As one continued to move around the space, other pairings were heard suggesting, ultimately, that there were multiple connections possible.

Such orientations involved the movement through space of one's own body and implied a direct engagement with one's corporeal stance within the site. Each listener was invited to explore the notion that it is not the relationship between things that he is perceiving, but rather the relationship of things to one central focal point – his own body. As he changed his bodily stance, or the direction of his movement, so he restructured the auditory experience with which he was engaged. In this way the perceiver actively determined and participated in the structural connections among the elements of the piece.

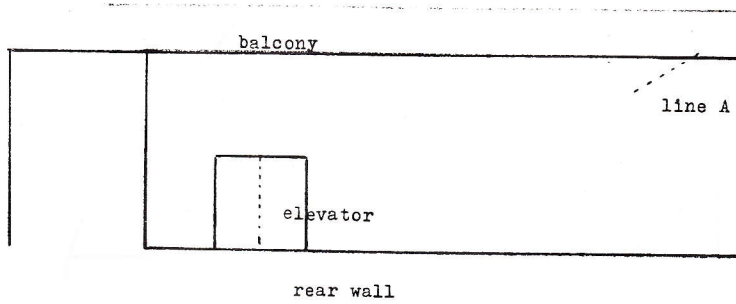
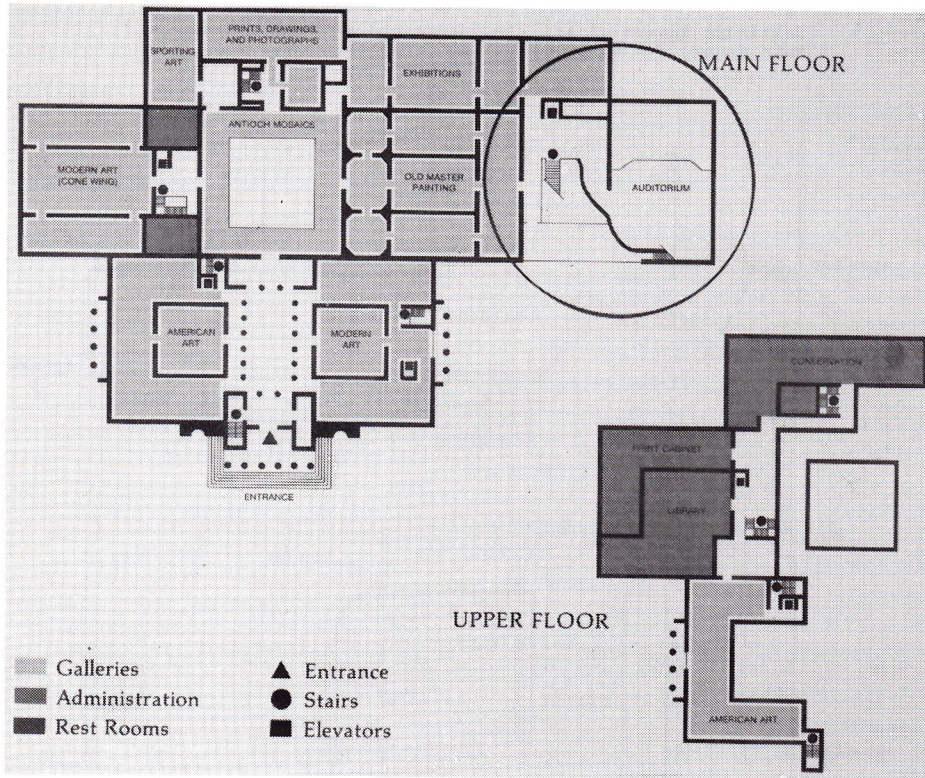
Four factors contributed to the articulation of these sonic elements: the choice of sounds (exact pitches), the precise tuning of octaves, the filtering of the sounds, and the number and placement of speakers. After studying the dimensions of the site, an initial plan was drawn up and, several days prior to the event, different sounds and sound-combinations were tried out resulting in the final choices for the materials of the installation. The specific sounds chosen for the Baltimore site were octave duplications of pitch-class A: A2; A4; A6. This precise pitch-class and its registral spread were chosen for the resonant frequencies they activated in the room.

The three tones were tuned in precise octave relationship to one another. Toward this end the following sound equipment was utilized: a pitch generator which divides a 2 - 240 MHz frequency 13 ways generating 13 tones of a top octave - C7 through C8 (2093.01 to 4186.02 Hz). These subdivisions approximate the equally tempered scale. Each of these tones may be divided down producing as many as eight octave duplications of each tone in the top octave. From these possibilities, three A's – A6, A4, and A2 – were chosen for the Baltimore site. The precise tuning of octaves allowed the tones, on occasion, to coalesce into a single totally unified sound. The absence of beats and other interferences brought the separate tones into sonic alliance with one another.

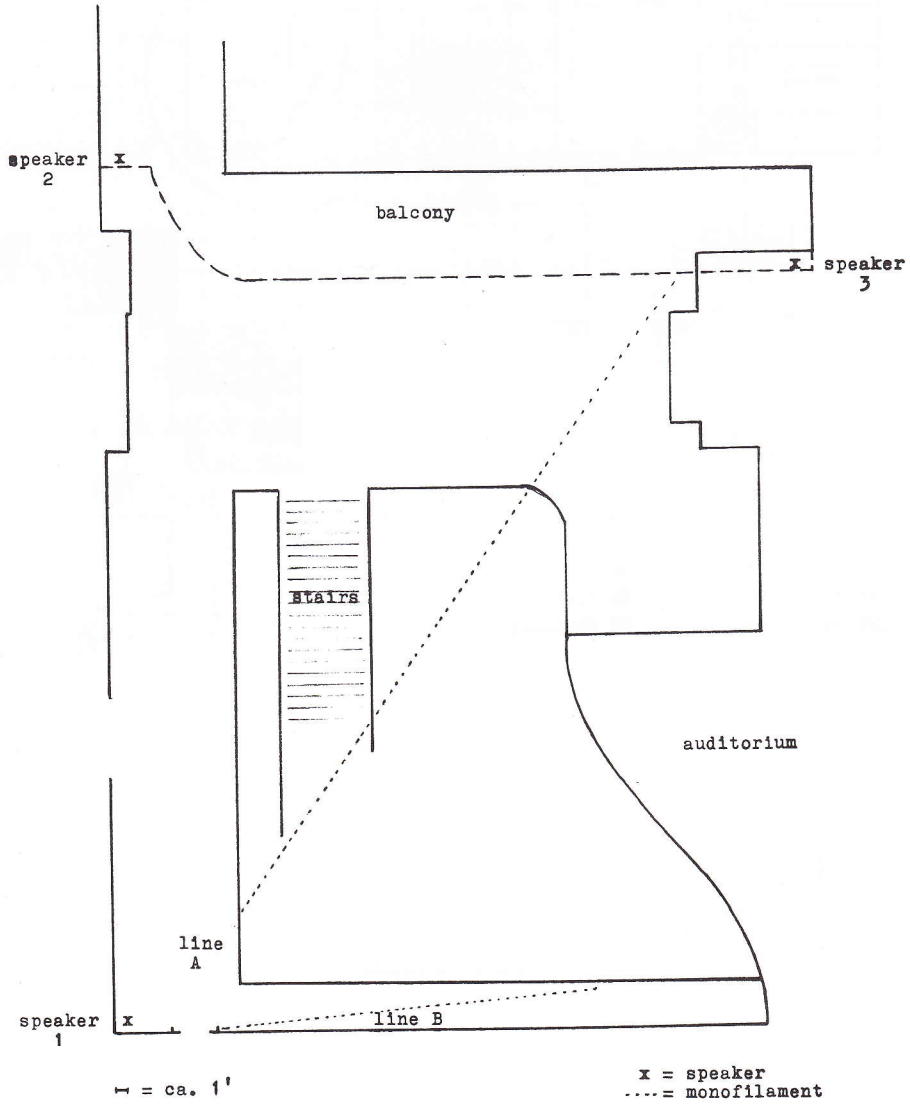
The unique timbre of these tones activated the play of sound within the site. DeLio found that, when multiple pure tones were introduced into a given site, they were perceived as a single fused sound. When multiple complex tones were

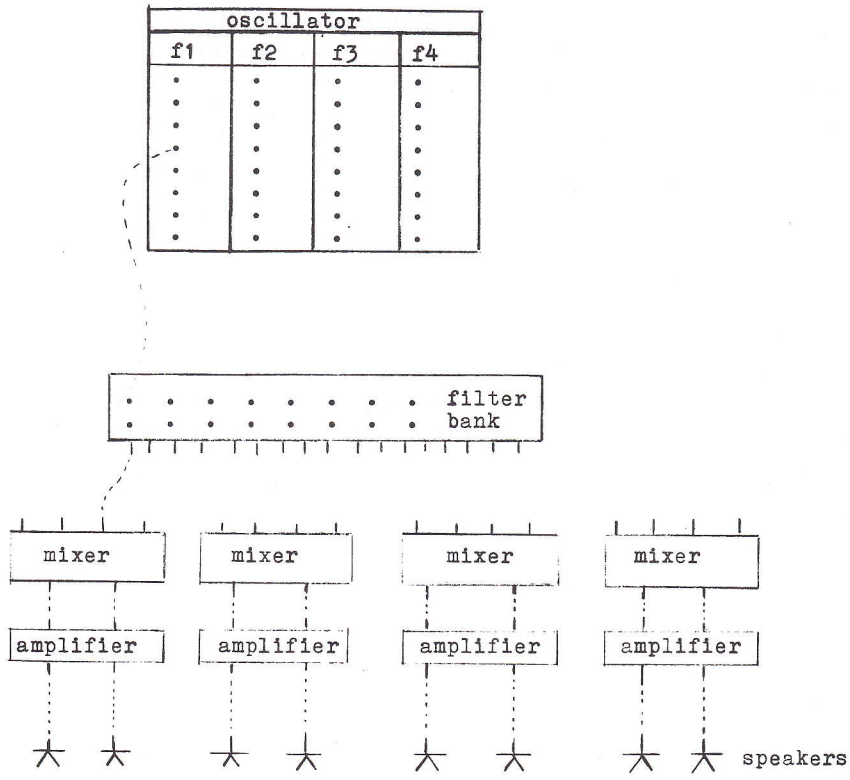


1" = 1'

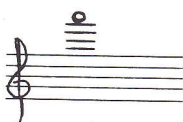



Baltimore Museum of Art
Main Floor, New Wing






Complete System

speaker 1 

speaker 2 

speaker 3 

employed, however, they were perceived as distinctly separate. At the Baltimore site square waves were filtered down to near sine-tones rendering the three tones, from certain vantage points quite separate while, from other vantage points, more unified. These combined qualities of separation and fusion of tones were salient features of the Baltimore installation. As the listener moved around the space, different degrees of separation and fusion were effected. The end result was a sonority which, at certain points in the room, was more fused and, at other points in the room, was more separate.

The visual components of the installation added greater definition to the experience rendered by the auditory ones. As with the sounds, the design of the visual elements was derived entirely from the site. It consisted of two threads of very thin, indeed barely visible monofilaments (4-lb. test, transparent fishing line). The angle of the trajectory of each line was determined by the shape of the single curved wall; the two lines began to inscribe a similar curve in the space at the center of the site. The longer line was stretched out across the space: from the floor, near the front of the site, and up across the entire room to the balcony (see diagrams). The second line ran along most of the front wall which consisted entirely of windows. This line extended from the top of a door on one side of the wall down to the floor approximately 3/4 of the way along the wall. In addition, it angled outward (away from the windows): at the top of the door it was flush with the wall; at the other end, on the floor, it extended out about three feet.

As physical entities, the lines existed within the interior of the space – as opposed to the sound sources which were located in the corners forming the boundaries of the space. As one's eye traced the trajectory of each line, one was transported through the interior of the site, sometimes toward, sometimes away from the curved wall. More often than not, one's gaze was drawn outward toward the boundaries of the site – toward the points of their inception on the walls or toward those points where the two lines appeared to intersect.

This visual motion was further amplified by the play of light on the lines. The extreme thinness and opaqueness of the lines gave them their curious evanescence. As the viewer moved through the space, or as the light streaming through the large windows at the front of the site changed with the time of day, various parts of each line disappeared and then reappeared. Neither thread was ever visible in its entirety from any single vantage point. What one was left with, then, was simply the action of "locating", of fixing upon various perceptual stances.

With both the sonic and visual components of the piece, one was drawn along an infinitude of possible trajectories within the interior of the site. For instance, as the viewer/listener approached the area of one of the speakers, he found himself gradually fixing the source of its sound, approaching a point at which it alone could be heard. However, in attempting to fix upon one sound in this way the listener soon became aware that no single tone could ever be totally isolated – that, while that tone might have become more pronounced in different areas of the space, the fused sound still persisted in the listener's ear. No matter

how one stood, the sound was an isolable entity, a sound either, in the ear. No matter how it was perceived, it was perceived as separate.

Each element of the installation, which never quite ceased to be of focusing. The listener, nor an overri... led, instead, the listener became more... addition, by moving around the installation – one's gaze was placed upon...

"...the similarity of the perceived presence and define each other into... mes the group... an expression of individual...

In his discussion of Merleau-Ponty's "being beneath the actual" experience of temporally singular experience...

"What is it that gradually... others."?

Along similar lines, either second-order fixed entity in design prior to contour registration, perceptual organization, audience perception, different perceptions, perceiver's unaltered (and almost...)

how one stood with respect to the speakers, the identity of that tone as a single isolable entity remained elusive. Yet, similarly, one could not isolate the fused sound either, since the three distinct tones remained ever present in the listener's ear. No matter how one stood in the space, the three tones were heard simultaneously as separate and fused.

Each element of the work – both visual and aural – was then a point of focus which never quite came into focus – always forcing one to engage in the process of focusing. The work suggested that there was neither a “correct” perspective, nor an overriding “gestalt” organizing one's experience of that work. One was led, instead, to an awareness of the variability of one's perceptions. Gradually, one became more and more conscious of the very act of perception itself. In addition, by orienting oneself in different ways with respect to the space – by moving around it or remaining stationary, by continually testing out expectations – one strove to locate oneself within the site. Emphasis then was also placed upon one's own presence within the environment of the piece:

“...the simultaneous presence of oneself and the locus of one's experience. As the perceiver becomes conscious of the site, he becomes conscious of his presence as the focus of that site for himself. The perceiver and the perceived define each other as contradictory, yet inseparable boundaries drawing each other into consciousness simultaneously. In these installations the site becomes the ground upon which this reciprocal action occurs.... these works are an expression of the reality that “place” is the focal point between each individual and the world around him.”⁵

In his discussions on the nature of perception, philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty refers to a “primordial” level of experience: one which exists beneath the layers of abstraction which philosophy identifies as our “conceptual” experience.⁶ Yet, he observes that this conceptual experience is not, in fact, temporally separate from the directly perceptual – rather, together they create a singular experience:

“What is given is a route, an experience which gradually clarifies itself, which gradually rectifies itself and proceeds by dialogue with itself and with others.”⁷

Along similar lines, DeLio has discussed the experience of art as, in his terminology, either of “first-order” experience or of “second-order” experience. In second-order experience, the perceiver appropriates (in Heidegger's sense) a fixed entity in which materials have been shaped into a unique configuration or design prior to contact with the perceiver. Such a work maintains its structural contour regardless of the site in which it is experienced, regardless of the perceptual orientation of the audience and regardless even of whether there is an audience present at all. This is not to say that it may not mean different things to different people coming to it from different backgrounds. But, despite each perceiver's unique perspective, the work's organizing principles remain intact and unalterable. They may be given different meanings by different perceivers (and almost certainly will be), but their function will not change vis-a-vis the

language in which they are employed. Thus, in second-order experience, the perceiver does not determine the dialectic of the work. He may interpret its structure, but he never determines it.

In "first-order" experience, on the other hand, the perceiver is quite literally made part of the work. By means of his interaction with the work – his very presence – he becomes a structural determinant of that work's unfolding. In first-order experience, a work is activated only through the presence of the perceiver – it is his presence which defines the art-work. Any sense of separation between viewer and viewed is annihilated – in its place a more symbiotic relationship between subject and object arises. This is not accomplished by intellectual fact alone. The perceiver is invited directly into the experience through a process which itself is molded by that very experience.

Such art suggests the possibility that an object is not necessarily perceived as a closed system but, as "an open inexhaustible system, which we recognize through a certain style of development."⁸ Accordingly, when one observes an object, one perceives it through an infinite number of single perspectives which, at the moment of perception, are threaded together into a whole. In observing any physical object in one's presence, one might know that it is composed of a particular structure – but the totality of that structure may never be perceived directly. Thus, the necessary job of "perceptual synthesis" – of joining the direct perceptual data with a conceptual idea of the totality which that data might present – is one which occurs in the perceiver himself.

It is precisely this process of perceptual synthesis which DeLio's Baltimore installation both isolates and examines. All of its parts are directed toward bringing the viewer to the very edge of his perceptual experience toward making him aware of his own role in that experience. In this, the perceiver is called upon to create the work for himself as guided by the particular contextual framework in which it is experienced. As with the works of Robert Irwin and other leading visual artists, in Thomas DeLio's installations "presence" becomes a shaping force in the creation of structure.

NOTES

1. Walter Hopps quoted by Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, Berkeley, California; University of California Press, 1982, p. 92.
2. Photographic documentation of this work may be seen in Weschler.
3. For a discussion of DeLio's work leading up to these chamber pieces see "A Draft of Shadows" by Wesley York, *Percussion Notes Research Edition*; Volume 22, #3, March 1984.
4. Thomas DeLio, program notes to "Untitled" installation, Baltimore Museum of Art, October 27-28, 1984.
5. Ibid.
6. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty "The Primacy of Perception", *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern University Press, 1964. Also see Weschler, pp. 180-182.
7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, op. cit., p. 21.
8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "An Unpublished Text", *ibid.*, p. 5.



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