Helen Ireland’s musical undertones

When reflecting on the interconnections between her visual work and music, Helen Ireland suggested that it would be interesting to think about the music she listens to while working. Listening to music in the studio is a common practice among artists. The way in which, consciously or not, music is absorbed into the creation process is a common element that unites the artists exhibited at Ubicua Gallery. In Ireland’s case, an immediate reference would be Phillip Glass’ chamber music *Glassworks* (1982). While she is not consciously working in response to this music, she sees clear parallels in her pieces. As she well explained, there is:

A shared focus on essential elements and structures, repetition and variation, a sense of time and perception and an emotional resonance. When I look at the score of the opening piece of *Glassworks* I find it beautiful, with its repeated notes and rhythms.

Another important influence that should be mentioned is John Cage’s *All Sound is Music*. According to the artist, one of the most memorable shows she has seen was at Kettle’s Yard Gallery in 2010 entitled ‘Every Day is a Good Day, The Visual Art of John Cage’. John Cage is known for the beauty of his musical scores, which have been exhibited at museums and galleries around the world. Art critic David Sylvester noted that there are specific qualities which “radiate” from Cage’s drawings and prints and that the term “radiate” is highly appropriate

because the supreme quality of these works is how they contain light. At the same time, Cage’s music as I listen seems to be peculiarly analogous to light. All that Cage does seems filled with light. Light and also lightness - for one thing, because of his way of making everything he does look effortless (quoted in Brown et. al. 2010).

Yet Cage’s work is anything but simple. He had endless little questions: how many lines, long or short, which tool to use, which colours, how to locate the marks on the plate or the plates on the page, what template, if any, to use in making them or printing them. According to Cage himself, ‘my choices consist of choosing which questions to ask’ (quoted in Brown et. al. 2010). A choice which brings us to the question of Helen Ireland’s musical undertone at the core of this exhibition.
Theories of correspondences between the visual and sound identify various ways of interaction, including synaesthesia, imaginative representations and analogies, a shared common interest in visual artists influenced by sound and music, the last captured in Hanslick’s words when he explained that

I can paint musically only by analogy, by producing audible impressions dynamically relating to them. In pitch, intensity, tempo, and the rhythm of tones, the ear offers itself a configuration whose impression has that analogy with specific visual perception which different sense modes can attain among themselves. Just as physiologically there is a substituting of one sense for another up to a certain limit, so also aesthetically there is a certain substituting of one sense impression for another. Aesthetically there is in vogue a well-grounded analogy between motion in space and motion in time, between colour, quality, and size of an object

and the pitch, timbre and intensity of tone… (Hanslick 1986: 20).

Thus, music and sound bring a new layer of meaning to the visual creation of space. Ireland said that she finds interesting the process of uncovering the parallels between rhythms of the limited range of routines you use when painting or drawing, and how repetition in certain kinds of music mimics her work or provides patterns of sound that can help us to stay focused. Through the process of making and the use of materials, something occurs that distils the initial starting point. Whether the point of departure is recognisable or non - non-recognisable; ultimately it is the structure, the balance, the edit, the unexplained, the chance and order of finding and discovering visual information. In this sense, with the use of marbling with Indian ink and water, there is an element of chance as you never know how the painting will eventually turn out. You can direct ink and line but it will always be individual and unique and never repeat exactly in the same way, much like our unique musical – often unconscious – perceptions and experiences of surrounding sound.

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References

- Hanslik, E. (1986) On The Musically Beautiful, Indianapolis: Hackett Classics.
- Brown, K.; Sandler, I.; Millar, J.; Wright, L. (2010) *Every Day is a Good Day: The Visual Art of John Cage*, London: Hayward Gallery.