

Light music: a project in two sites by Jorge Macchi and Edgardo Rudnitzky

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Jorge Macchi has been making art with glass for a number of years. Glass is reflective if hit by a beam of light, but its predominant qualities are transparency and extreme fragility. We fear glass breaking: if a mirror is shattered, people from many cultures hold the belief that seven years of disgrace will follow. In one occasion, Macchi blew a hammer at a pane of glass and then painstakingly imitated the cracks with a cutter on a second glass sheet: he called his work *Parallel Lives*. Macchi likes making pairs: the marriage of presence and absence, the placing, side by side, of fate and chance, the conviviality, in the making of his works, of conscious actions and automatism.

In *Untitled*, an object from 1993, he covered a pillow with glass, and shattered it patiently section after section, following the pattern of the pillow case, as if a sadistic action could become a decorative gesture. In juxtaposing ideas of fragility and the body through the poetic alliance of the pillow and its broken glass cover, this uncomfortable object seems to evoke the most breathtaking visual associations made by the masters of Surrealism.

In 2003 Macchi collaborated with writer Maria Negroni and musician Edgardo Rudnitzky in the making of the book *Buenos Aires Tour*. Placing a sheet of glass over a map of the city of Buenos Aires he hit the glass, so the produced fractures would become chance itineraries to walk and discover. The three artists walked along the routes given by the smashing of the glass over the map and each of them collected their experience in their respective artistic languages, producing a multidisciplinary record of the city's hidden faces compiled in the form of a book. This uncovered Buenos Aires that can't be found in ordinary tourist guides is according to the artist '...a kind of autobiography,(...) a mirror wherein the choice of a distinct object or sound reflects each of us, via our preferences and through elements of our past.'

For his exhibition at University of Essex gallery, Macchi is pairing again with Berlin-based musician Edgardo Rudnitzky to use sandblasted sheets of glass as support for sound emission and image projections. Their new piece, *The Singers' Room*, especially commissioned for the exhibition, is rooted in a work which Macchi made in 2004, in connection with music: *Canción para tres voces a diferentes profundidades* (Song for three voices at different depths). The piece consisted of three layers of translucent paper mounted on a black background with white empty scores drawn on it. The tracing paper sheets, perforated with

holes at different depths — some through the three layers, some through two layers, and some through just one— revealed the holes/notes in different scales of gray.

Although there was no music related to this work, it was conceived as a song for three voices, each one of them represented on the score by a shade of grey.

The new piece, *The Singers' Room*, reproduces in essence the form of *Canción*...but instead of paper it is made of four layers of glass sheets measuring 160 x 100 cm each and equipped with a device called *whispering windows***.

If for Jorge Macchi glass has a particularly visual quality that suits his imagery, for Edgardo Rudnitzky the employment of the material has different connotations.

GS: Edgardo, tell me more about the choice of materials in *The Singers' Room*

ER: *The Singers' Room* has its roots in two very strong lines contained in my work: one is the idea of the sonic memory of objects, something I had explored in my 1998 installation *Los Restos del Bailongo* (*The Remains of the Ballroom*) and in a number of experiences for theatre.

The other line of thinking is in direct relation with the possible ways to transmit sound, with how to 'show' sound or reproduce it so it reaches the spectator.

These ideas of the sonic memory of objects alongside the possible ways to exhibit sound led me to research sound reproduction systems. In the midst of that search, I came across a system called *whispering windows*, a device that converts the surface of a pane of glass into a speaker. I bought a commercial version of it and started testing it. The glass would speak to me: a kid's dream! Long time ago, I mentioned to Jorge my wish to make a work with suspended 'talking glasses' and a beam of light, but I didn't know what would come out of it.

The visuality of sound

In *The Singers' Room*, a short poem by Uruguayan poet Idea Vilariño entitled *Good Bye* is projected over the four layers of glass, hanging in the gallery at a set distance from each other. Every time the projection of the letters of the poem hit one of the four glass sheets a sound is produced, so light and sound are married in one gesture. The perception of the poem is twofold: one listens to the phonetic of each of the letters sung by women and physically sees the letters that form the words in the poem appearing and disappearing from the four surfaces at different times. This dance of letters produces a sense of erasure conveyed at the same time by the poem itself:

Here

from afar
I erase you.
You are erased.

The pyramidal structure of the poem suits the piece: the movement of the concrete lines seems to caress the surface of the sanded stripes on the glass sheets to produce sound. Words and sounds coexist on one surface: Apollinaire's calligrammes, which explored simultaneously the visual and semantic elements of language, come to mind. The letters and words of the poem compose a shape that connects our mind to the subject matter. The visual dimension of writing was extremely important to Apollinaire, and before him to the symbolist Mallarmé. In *The Singers' Room*, and with technology at hand, Macchi and Rudnitzky experiment with a variety of spatial relations and with the possibility of multisensorial readings in a manner close to what Apollinaire proposed in his *Alcools* and *Calligrammes*.

GS: Edgardo, it seems to me that as a musician and sound artist, your work is more defined by an interest in the physical reality of language and the unconventional use of silence and sound —as explored by John Cage— than by performing music in traditional formats. How did you arrive at the idea of using phonetics rather than the sound of words in *The Singer's Room*?

ER: *The Singer's Room* went through several instances and versions until it reached its current shape.

Phonetics is related to what you signal in your question. From the 1950s onwards, and as a consequence of the breakthrough of Concrete music, phonetics came to be valued as stimuli per se, and the signifier began to exist independently from meaning. From that moment on, works employing phonetics have been more and more present.

In my case, I explored it in my work for the theatre, specifically in a play by Federico García Lorca, *Los Amores de Don Perlimplín con Belisa en su Jardín* (*Love of Don Perlimplín and Belisa in the Garden*) which I co-directed. It was an experience of 'phonetic theatre'.

In the case of *The Singers Room*, once we arrived at the idea of successive panes of glass and the search of a poem, phonetics became the expression of those glasses: the emptying of meaning in the expression of sound.

Let the music play

Music has been a companion of the visual for Jorge Macchi throughout the years. Trained as a child to play piano, his artistic endeavour naturally incorporates music and sound to deliver a cross disciplinary poetics grounded

in simplicity and achieved by a remarkable economy of means. There lies the impact of Macchi's work. It is more about the hiatus between the notes, or the invisible emptiness that surrounds, caressing them, all objects, than about form itself.

In 1997, during a residence at Delfina Studios in London, the artist made a work entitled *Incidental Music* which he presented at University of Essex Gallery in 1998. During his London stay, Macchi was especially impressed by the vast array of violent episodes that were published by the British media. Cutting out news from the tabloids describing domestic violence, arson, murder, sexual abuse or infanticide, he set out to construct a music score with the lines of text. The gaps left between those lines became musical notes and a melody was composed out of the void. The music score was presented on the wall –the visuality of music— and a pair of headphones allowed the audience to listen to the incidental music. In the title of this work, the word 'Incidental' was used as a pun: on the one hand because of its roots in violent incidents but also in association with cinema: incidental music is the music that sets the mood in film scenes.

In 2005, Macchi and Rudnitzky represented Argentina at the Venice Biennale with the installation *The Ascension*, a piece for viola da gamba and the sound produced by an acrobat leaping on a trampoline presented at the Oratorio San Filippo Neri. Visually, the piece consisted of a blue trampoline positioned with precision under the ceiling fresco of the baroque building, reproducing the painting of the Ascension of Virgin Mary only in contour. A minimal replica of the painted image, the stretched blue trampoline, deprived of detail but charged with the spirit of the architecture, mirrored the ceiling.

GS: Mirror images and the idea of the double seem to be a recurrent formula in many of your pieces. *Parallel Lives* (1996), *Souvenir of a Night trying to forget you* (1996), even *Doppelgänger* (2004-5) are made of two parts which are identical in shape. I see a number of literary references in the use of that poetic figure: the double permeates the stories written by Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, and more recently, of novelist Paul Auster.

How is that idea of the double manifesting in the new works for Essex?

JM: I don't think that formula is present in these pieces. Both of them are concerned with processes and transformations which do not involve symmetry or reflection. *The Singers' Room* is about the process of construction and destruction of a text by means of light and sound. At the same time, this is a text in which the presence of the YOU is very important. One could even say that that other is oneself, but perhaps that interpretation is too risky. I rather see it like an impossible love story. An impossibility of accomplishment runs in parallel

with the destruction of the text and with the constant displacement that occurs between the projected text and the corresponding sound. The music is composed with the sound of the characters projected in such way that their over imposition only makes the reading more difficult.

In regards to *Twilight*, is a contemplative artwork, almost like a soundscape. Music evolves to noise and at the same time light evolves to darkness; the things we can clearly perceive in the beginning are blurred and disappear in the end of the piece. The original idea emerged simultaneously with the reading of a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, *The Island of the Fay*. In the second part of the story there is a marvellous description of a sunset.

Randomness or composition?

GS: Edgardo, you worked with Jorge in *The Ascension*, an installation for the last Venice Biennale. How did the composition process take shape in relation to the sound of the acrobat's leap onto the trampoline? Were there elements of randomness and chance allowed to intervene in the sound for *The Ascension*, or the acrobat's moves were choreographed to 'play' a precise set of movements under the direction of the conductor –yourself–, ...as if he were a drummer?

ER: Concerning the acrobat's leap onto the trampoline, I found it to be the intersection between Jorge's work and my own work. The trampoline was the object that Jorge designed, the viola da gamba was the timbre for the installation, but the acrobat's leap was the bridge. When I say the acrobat's leap I mean not only the sound of the trampoline, but also the movement itself, the body going from the trampoline to the fresco.

Of course there were two different situations, the performances and then the installation that remained.

In the live performances the acrobat performed the leaps and the movements and, later, in the installation you only had the recording, you could not see the acrobat.

I tried, through a complex recording done at the same place of the performances, to recover all the sound: not only the sound of the acrobat drumming the trampoline, I tried to preserve all the moves of the object, the breathing of the trampoline, the body on the fabric, every sound that would let us reconstruct in our mind the man jumping onto the trampoline.

There was not room for randomness or chance in *The Ascension* score.

However, there could be some little differences in each version because the trampoline was a very complicated instrument. At the same time, I didn't take the acrobat strictly as a musician but like you say, there was something choreographic and he did 'play' a precise set of movements that were written in the score and conducted. The relationship with the viola da gamba was exactly the same: the mood, the dynamic was different each time.

GS: Jorge, in *Music Box*, a video piece of 2003-4, you employed a new device to connect image and sound: the generation of music by a mechanism that detected the entrance of cars in the video frame. That image reminded me of the views of Avenida Figueroa Alcorta behind the Museum of Fine Art in Buenos Aires, from the footpath bridge that crosses the six lane avenue from side to side. If you stand there, a kind of ballet mécanique of cars seem to slide down the lanes at different speeds. How did the interplay of image and sound work in that piece?

JM: It was exactly at that particular location that I shot the image. I could have employed software to make it, but instead I used a manual method: I built a timetable that determined the exact moment in which each car entered the frame from the upper edge of the screen and I matched the entry of the cars with the sound. The pitch of each sound depends on the position that each car holds in relation to the lane markings on the street, as if they were the lines in a music score. In that manner I worked within a range between D low and G in its highest pitch (eleven notes). After that I edited the image and the sound. In this work the idea of loop is very important. The group of cars that travel through the screen during the minute-long video is the same that comes in after the pause, as if the cars were the protuberances of the cylinder in a music box. That is why the choice of timbre, so characteristic of these mechanisms. I should point out that the group of cars was determined by the minute long duration of the green traffic light.

At firstsite gallery, Macchi and Rudnitzky are presenting another newly commissioned installation: *Twilight*. The glass armonica, a XVIII century instrument made of glass and invented by Benjamin Franklin, will be played in the ballroom at firstsite gallery while a light bulb slides down a stretched wire until it reaches the opposite corner of the room. As the bulb travels across the space, the light will gradually dim, to arrive to a total black out. *Twilight* will produce an effect of *sinaesthesia*: the sound of the glass armonica played live in the ballroom will fade out at the same time as the light source, producing a sensorial identification between light and sound. An erasure in stereo mode.

GS: Edgardo, why did you choose such instrument to perform in *Twilight*?

ER: The idea of employing a glass armonica is twofold. *Twilight* was conceived as a performance, an action which takes place in limited, linear time. This is marked by the light bulb travelling through the room. The sound of the piece was always clear to me but not the way in which it would be produced. If you think of it as a performance, a string quartet, for instance,

would provide ready made information generated by tradition: the quartet refers to itself, one sees it and before it starts playing one has an inner reference of what it will sound like, of the sound of those instruments: this option did not interest me. That is the reason why, in a second instance, I proposed to use a vibraphone and gongs played with a bow, because the relation between the visual aspect of the instrument and its sound would have broken down. It was then when glass appeared as an option. The Singers' Room with its four glasses and the light of the projection, the bulb and its light... the idea of employing the glass armonica took shape. Together with Jorge, we resolved the final format of the piece of music, long after we agreed on the instrument. That is its current structure.

GS: Was it difficult to find a player of glass armonica in England?

ER: When I decided that the instrument for our piece was the glass armonica only one name sprung to my mind, in fact it was not a name —I had forgotten the name— but I remembered perfectly a percussionist and glass armonica player whom I supposed was in England.

I checked it with a colleague and he gave me the name, Alasdair Malloy, a very well known musician, percussionist in the BBC orchestra whom also collaborates with different orchestras and groups, works in film music recordings, in popular music and so on. I only knew him by listening to his work and by watching him play at an MTV Unplugged feature on Björk with whom he played musical glasses. That was in the 1990's.

To me he was the perfect player for Twilight. Why? Because we weren't only looking for a good player technically speaking, we also needed an open mind, somebody who could be part of the project, and I assumed that Alasdair Malloy was the person.

Fortunately, he has become the player of the piece. He also has a great instrument which was specially designed for him, with a long range of notes (three octaves) and an axe that is activated by himself and not by a motor, which gives him more control over the dynamics and expressive possibilities of the instrument.

GS: Twilight is obviously the most theatrical of all your works. Its performative nature links it to The Ascension, but in Twilight the music played in the glass armonica will produce resonances that will complete the composition from the other corner of the room. How will you achieve that?

ER: I can tell you that it was easier to resolve the technical aspect of the piece than to arrive to the concept of that 'movement' of sound from one side to the other of the room.

I'll try to explain the evolution of the piece and then how I achieved that. The

player begins with the complete repertory of notes in his instrument, in this case thirty six notes. The score can use these thirty six notes. Musically said, phrase by phrase, the player sends notes to the other side of the room, then the note that he has sent will not appear in the score any longer. At the same time the notes he has sent come out of a speaker located in the other side of the room. This means that the player loses notes that are added to the speaker. At the end the player has only one note left, the last one, and in the speaker we have a sustained cluster of thirty five notes.

The system is quite simple: I developed a patch for a software named max/msp, which has the ability to sustain the sounds it receives from a microphone infinitely.

The piece is structured in blocks and there are sustained pauses between blocks, during these pauses the player switches a control and sends the note he is playing at that moment to the computer. The patch receives it and sustains it infinitely and with a little delay we begin to hear the sound in the speaker. Later a new sound is added and so on.

GS: Jorge, there are some connections that one can make between these works at a first sight: both use glass, light and sound. But there are also conceptual lines that run through them and make them two parts of a whole. How could you underpin the symbolic or philosophical links between the pieces in both galleries?

JM: Glass is the material of the two pieces: the four layers of glass in the *The Singer's Room* and the instrument and the light bulb in the other piece. The glass produces the sound in both works. The way the light passes through the glasses and casts on the sanded stripes in *The Singer's Room* has a resemblance with the process of electronic filtering of the sounds in *Twilight*. Both the appearance and erasure of the letters and the subject of the poem in *The Singer's Room* are related to the erasure of the music and the image in *Twilight*.

But beyond the formal aspects common to both works we were surprised by the coherence that seems to exist between them. The most important point is without doubt the parallelism produced between the gradual destruction of the image and the development of the music composition. (In fact I think that the text by Idea Vilariño could poetically explain both pieces). In the same way that in *The Singers Room* the over imposition or suppression of sounds accompanies the creation or elimination of the projected text, in *Twilight* the gradual passage from light to darkness is accompanied by the transformation of the music piece by an over imposition of the resonances produced by all the sounds used throughout the composition.

In regards to finding symbolic or philosophical connections between the two pieces, I think that is up to the spectator's wishes. One can produce images and

even explain mechanisms but to try to interpret those images or mechanisms is an impossible task.

GS: It seems like the idea of erasure links both pieces. They both appear to be made of fleeting impressions, composed of short lived images and sounds which disintegrate in time after engaging in unconventional encounters.

In that coherence that you see manifesting between the two works, the parallelism of the gradual destruction of the image and the development of the sound in the same space of time I see a gesture of dissolution.

Do you think that you are tending to a development in your art that involves more absence than presence in terms of objectual qualities? Is, let's say, the shadow more meaningful to you than the object that projects it?

JM: Absence is much more present than the presence itself. Although I am not completely conscious of it, I have been working with this idea for a long time. Maybe this is why I insist. I can't say much more about it. I prefer to keep certain things in my twilight zone. I like what you said: the shadow is more meaningful than the object that projects it.

*The dialogue with both artists that forms part of this text began at Jorge Macchi's studio in Buenos Aires on ** July 18th 2006 and continued on email over the months that followed. commercial name that designates a device which makes sheets of glass sound as speakers.