

Aural Guidings: The Scores of Ana Carvalho and Live Video's Relation to Sound

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Abstract

If you were to choose to watch live video composer and performer Ana Carvalho's work silent, your brain would be easily guided into a synesthetic experience, assigning sounds to each rhythmic change in color, pace, frame. Her images oscillate...they dance, they breathe.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Aesthetics, Digital Media, Film/Movies/Cinema, Interview, Listening



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If you were to choose to watch live video composer and performer Ana Carvalho's work silent, your brain would be easily guided into a synesthetic experience, assigning sounds to each rhythmic change in color, pace, frame. Her images oscillate...they dance, they breathe. As you experience this, there might be a sense that you have lost your ability to hear the outside world, as these images are clearly attached to, woven with, a part of sound.

There is a history of composers such as [Iannis Xenaxis](#) and [Cornelius Cardew](#) using [graphic scores and notation](#) in place of traditional methods and symbols, as a way to reach a deeper expression through allowing greater interpretation, chance, and improvisation with their musicians. They concentrate more on conveying information on how a work is played, rather than what notes to play when. Carvalho uses the graphic score much in the same way, but also as a method of communication between live audio and live video performances, instructing a dialog between two disciplines that are often side-by-side or leaning on each other, but rarely woven together in the manner I have experienced both as audience, and as an audio composer, with her work.

The following interview has been edited for style.



Maile Colbert: Hi Ana, how are you today? And what are you working on currently?

Ana Carvalho: I am good. I'm working on a performance to present at the solstice, with [Neil Leonard](#), and a text about the possibility of expansion of the mind through performing and fruition of being in an audiovisual performance.

At the moment the performance is still involved into misty possibilities of what we know of each other's work, and what we have been developing individually and talking about. There will be saxophone, electronics, and visuals made of strange landscapes.

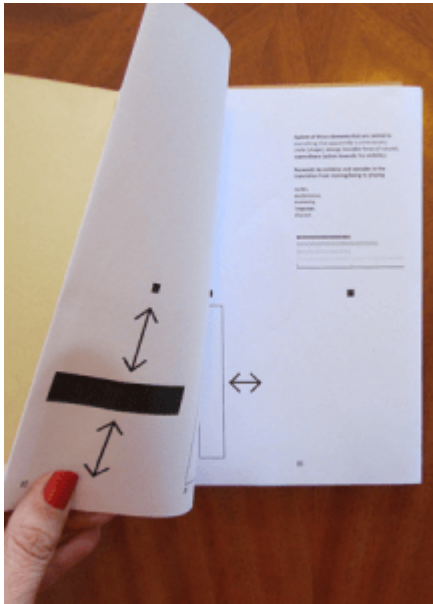
MC: At this stage in the process, when working with a sound maker such as Leonard, how do you think about the images' relationship with the sound?

AC: Images come to be as they appear on the screen in two ways: first there is the introspection about what have I learned from the previous performances, what I want to explore further and what I don't want to repeat. Secondly, there is the encounter with the other person and his or her

work and how do I translate their sound into moving image. At some point my ideas change through the exchange and becomes something else, a visual performance that could only be presented with that sound, with that person, at that place and time.

<https://vimeo.com/63311609>

Regarding the sound in particular, sometimes I propose a structure, or a score, to be followed by sound and image. Other times it is improvised. As I enjoy very much the process, I tend to like to make structures for the performances, which develop along drawings and texts.



MC: Your scores of text and image are quite beautiful, and of course I am personally lucky to both have some of the published ones, and have had a chance to work with them as well.

As a sound maker, I find they have a flow and almost narrative that feels both intentional and intuitive, no matter how abstract. When you make these, how much of a clear idea of how the audio would sound in relation to the images is in your mind? Do your images always or often follow the same score? Do the results surprise you?

AC: My state of arriving at the point of starting to make a composition is very much the same I described about working with a sound artist towards the presentation of a performance, that is, what do I want to develop further and what I want to leave behind? Then, what is particular to this new situation/performance/collaboration? The composition is a sort of a vehicle that connects process and performance, and that connects sound and image.

The composition is for the two mediums, sound and image, and they are considered in terms of composition as a unity made of two parts. They have to work in a conversational way. Imagine two close friends and how they would be talking to each other. I have in my imagination how it would be ideally two people in that position. That is how sound and image relate on the composition. I think in the most generic terms, more of intensity and flow rather than sonic results. For this reason any musician, with any possible (or invented) instrument, with whichever image or sound database, is able to play a score. It's required though that the performers take time to reflect, that

the composition is understood and incorporated in the way each one plays their instrument. The results are always a surprise.

<https://vimeo.com/63805535>

MC: What inspired you to start working in this way with the scores, and when?

AC: My interest in making compositional scores, and from them documents related to my performance, has been inspired by conceptual and process based art and by my research on documentation of the ephemeral. The focus on the process highlights the need for other representations that are not the finished art object *per se*. These other ways of representation use available media to describe the making and the reflection while making. [Mary Kelly's Post-Partum Document](#) (1973-79) is a very interesting example of what I am describing. She is expressing her feelings, the growing process of a child and an external perspective through visual objects displayed both as an exhibition and in book formats. Within audiovisual practice, I have been researching for the past five years on creative ways to make documents of the process. My attention was directed to composition in music. The influence of the composer Cornelius Cardew has been great, especially his work [Treatise](#) and his idea of directed improvisation. [John Cage](#) was also very important for his structures (in talks, texts and music), the use of the [I Ching](#), and for bringing chance into composition.

<https://youtu.be/JMzIXxlwuCs>

Simultaneously, while studying and reflecting on these and other subjects, I realized that intuitively I make drawings, texts, and take photographs as a way to detach from the everyday and immerse into a creative process which eventually will lead to the concept and content of a performance.



[Systematic Illusion – The Subtle Technique in an Earthquake Detector Construction](#) has been so far the most complex project to include a score, as well as a series of photographs and the performance. It was presented in its complete form just once in the

curatorial project [Decalcomania](#). Organizing these elements as composition, creating a score, and from all this to make little books has been a way of putting into practice my research interests.

A result from the construction of the score has been that the process doesn't stop with one performance, as I then use the same scores to perform with different artists. For example with the score from this project I created the *Earthquake Detector* performance series within which we presented the performance together in São Paulo in 2013 at the event [Arranjos Experimentais](#).

<https://vimeo.com/73002471>

MC: As you speak about your work, I keep thinking about [Robert Bresson's *Notes on Sound*](#) and how most of his notes refer to variations of not letting sound or image take over each other, but to weave them together within the composition. In his *Notes on the Cinematographer*, he also wrote number "10. not to use two violins when one is enough". What might this mean to you in relation to your collaborations?

AC: One very inspiring event in the attempts I make to construct a formal grammar and way for me to address collaborations has been to see the film [Passage Through: A Ritual](#) by Stan Brakhage. The film was [screened at Serralves Museum](#), here in Porto, Portugal, in June 2011. The event addressed the collaboration and improvisation of music in relationship with cinema from the work of the composers [Malcolm Goldstein](#) and [Philip Corner](#) and their music in the film work of [Daïchi Saito](#) and [Stan Brakhage](#).

The most amazing thing in *Passage Through: A Ritual* was to watch such a beautiful film made of an abundance of black screen, that is, an absence of visual form, of light and movement. Each appearance of image was a precious moment. What I learned is that the visual emptiness, and sonic as well, contains information when stimulated through glimpses of image, making the experience of seeing and listening very deep. (In his *Notes*), Bresson sums up this appropriateness of means and complex connections in a simple and clear sentence.

On the scores I make most of the information can be used for both sound and image. On the *Refractive Composition*, the scale of greys is for image. That was its purpose when the score was performed the first time. But if someone decides to play from the score without knowing anything about it beforehand, and lacking this intention (which was relevant when it was made, but afterwards there was the decision to not leave it as a declared instruction), that person can also interpret the same information as sound.

MC: Alchemy has been described as: "...the chemistry of the subtlest kind which allows one to observe extraordinary chemical operations at a more rapid pace; ones that require a long time for nature to produce" ([Paul-Jacques Malouin, *Alchimie*](#)). Looking from a history of cinema, there is a tradition and pattern of picture coming before sound, a hierarchy that is both in process and production. You often feel this as an audience. Your work and collaboration have a quality of sound and image having been born together. Having worked with you using your scores, I was likening it to being given a recipe where you have before you ingredients and suggestions, but there is room for your own improvisations and reading. Perhaps that is where that feeling of both

disciplines coming together in a manner that feels like they are one part of a whole, rather than separate but leaning on each other, comes from.

Is there an alchemical element to this work, or are you seeking one out? And in that regard, are your scores like a recipe?

AC: What I am seeking with my work can relate to alchemy as experiments and attempts in the quest for depth in all things at the point where differences and frontiers become undefined and irrelevant (in communication between beings, in areas of knowledge, between matter and energy). This quest for depth is based on stubborn curiosity towards evolution as a person, and as part of the world. Perhaps there isn't an alchemical element to the work, but rather a connection with alchemy, in the ways scores relate to the experiments as recipes to be shared with others in construction and change. This takes me to another aspect of composition. It is difficult for me to understand live image as just accompaniment to a music performance, and vice versa. This is perhaps central to my composition, and the reason why I am doing it for sound and image, to be able to perform that intertwined.

If we look at compositions as recipes, it aim will be to set the performers in tune with each other in the construction of a performance, to set sound and image in dialogue, and to permit a multisensory experience. I have been trying to get other artists interested in performing my scores. To perform from another artist's score may be very common in music but is unheard of in live visuals. I have as an objective to make a change in that, but for now I perform the scores with sound artists. With the *Earthquake Detector* series I asked sound artists to read from the score and perform with me. So far, I have presented this as performance with [Jeremy Slater](#), [Ben Owen](#), and with you. Because each artist has a very different approach to the score and reads it in its own way, the processes have been very different. For example, Ben Owen made visual reinterpretations of the structure, and you experimented with and without voice (reading of the text in the score), the results are therefore equally different.



<https://youtu.be/YMnUrPM43aM>

MC: Aside from your scores, you could speak about your relationship to the sound you work with, and sound makers you work with, in the live moment of performance?

AC: Looking for a sound artist to work together on a specific piece or to interpret with me a composition comes from a need to transcend my individual perception of the world and to perceive it with others. It is, again, the curiosity to know the world. The only time I made a complete sound piece on my own was for the performance Vista II – Montanha presented last May (as part of Semana Andrómeda, in Maus Hábitos, Porto). Aside from this really interesting experience, each collaboration is different, every process is different, because each musician is a different person with different skills and sees the relationship between sound and image in different ways.

I am very thankful for everything I have learned with each collaboration and all the intensity with each performance but, as always, it's the curiosity and the need to explore new frontiers that makes me move from previous project to next project. It is also the possibilities that intuitively present themselves as challenges and the "what if..." in variations.

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Ana Carvalho is a live video composer and performer, and writes on subjects related to live audiovisual performance. She is a doctor of Communication and Digital Platforms from FLUP (Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto). Her thesis is "Materiality and the Ephemeral: Identity and Performative Audiovisual Arts, its Documentation and Memory Construction." Currently, she holds a position as invited lecturer at the ISMAI (Instituto Universitário da Maia). For more on her work, visit: <http://cargocollective.com/visual-agency/About>.

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Maile Colbert is a multi-media artist with a concentration on sound and video who relocated from Los Angeles, US to Lisbon, Portugal. She is a regular writer for Sounding Out!

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