

RAUL A PEÑA-GOMEZ



Delineating the Unseen

*Finding Music
in Graphic Design*

I would like to thank the Graphic Design faculty and my classmates, for their guidance and feedback while completing this book and during my time at UIC.

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The School of Art and Design
College of Architecture and the Arts
University of Illinois at Chicago

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Felipe, tu mundo de cultura siempre fué magia para mí, como lo fué tu presencia.

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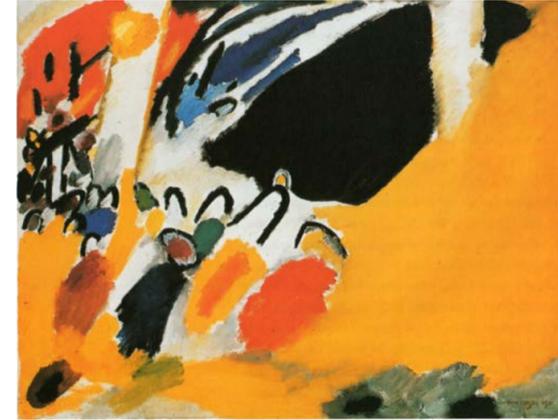
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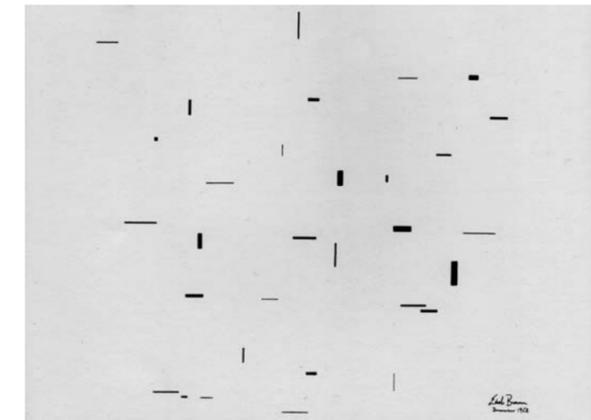
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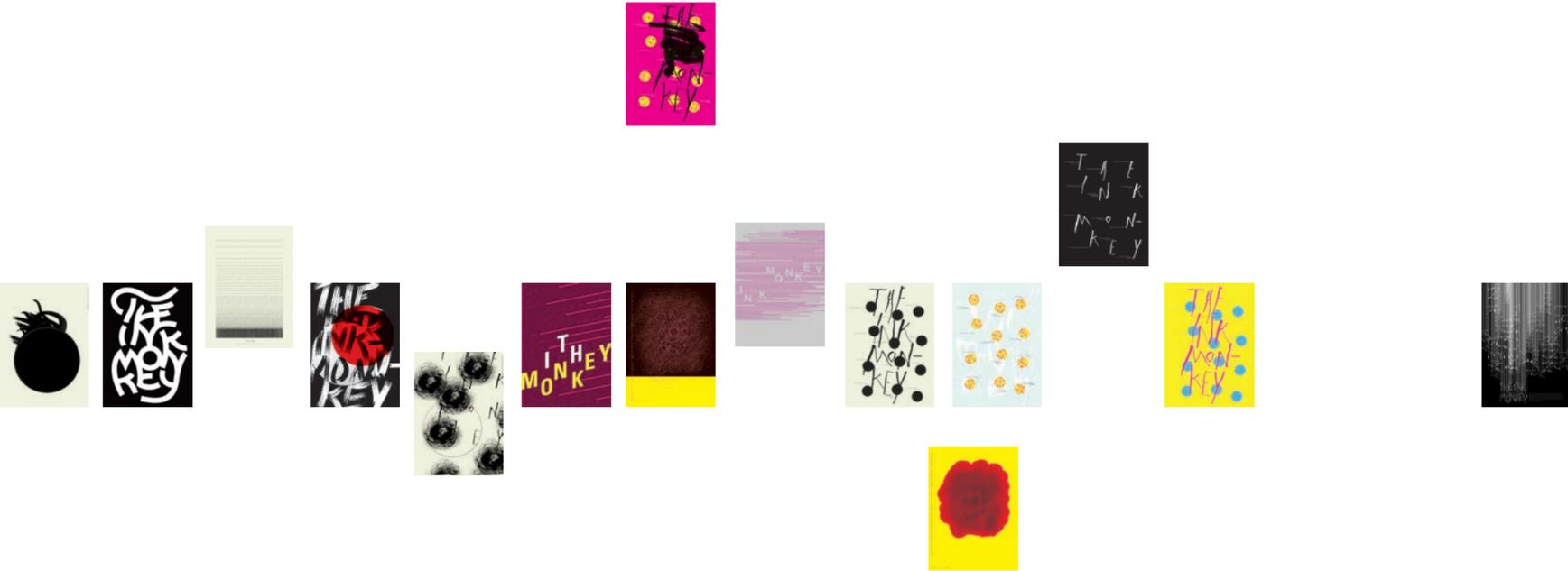
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Prologue

Riding the elevated train one Chicago afternoon, I was thinking about a poster I was working on, concerned with how to represent an aspect of the story I thought to be of importance to my interpretation: the passing of time. As I wondered how could communicate the temporal aspect of the story, I became aware of my surroundings: people speaking, pre-recorded messages on the train speakers, and the many sounds produced by the train itself. I was immersed in the aural experience of my ride home. Something specific caught my attention: rhythm. I could hear the friction of the wheels against the tracks as the train advanced. Because I had just been thinking about the representation of time, I happened to ask myself: what would the aspect of time/duration of my poster sound like? If I were to write music for this poster, what would it be like? If instead of typography I had the sound of words, and I wanted those words to express the passing of time, could the words themselves mark rhythm,

in a way similar to the sound of a clock? As I tried this in my head, I realized there was a problem: one-syllable words could easily work with this idea because of their short pronunciation, but words made of two or more syllables would inevitably break the rhythm.

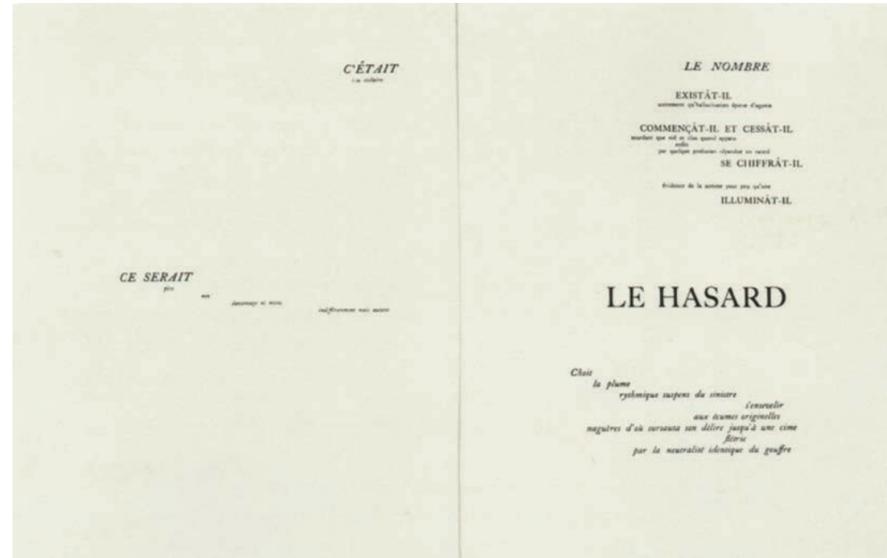
I was about to give up on the idea when it occurred to me that this isn't much different from the problem that songwriters face when working on a melody for a given group of words. Sometimes the words must be changed in ways that render sentences grammatically incorrect; other times words are broken up in strange ways, leaving big "spaces" between syllables, not unlike hyphens at the end of a line of text. With this thought I had found a solution to my problem: I could pronounce syllables instead of words: e-very-sy-lla-ble-re-pre-sents-a-se-cond. Soon I was "composing" different aspects of the poster. What would the moment of most action sound like? Questions about

melody, volume, tension, contrast, etc... came up, and the questions led to quick brain "demos." As I left the train station a few minutes later, I asked myself whether I could have arrived at the word-broken-into-syllables idea had I not started to think about the poster in terms of sound, and my answer was no. Although on a previous poster variation I had tried breaking the text into individual words, my approach had been strictly visual. Words laid out as a list, had seemed to me to "feel" like seconds: pauses between words, emphasized by means of the line breaks, visually established the desired rhythm. When the text was read, however, the rhythm that had worked visually, was broken aurally.

Concepts such as rhythm, tension and harmony are familiar to us as graphic designers. But why do we use this terminology? At what point in history did visual artists and designers begin to use musical analogies in their work,

Stéphane Mallarmé Double-page spread
from *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard*
1897

Paul Klee *Fugue in Red* 1921 Watercolor on
paper Private collection, Switzerland



and why were they motivated to do so? If the shared terminology is one concerned with the formal qualities of media, how has music influenced design formally? Why is music important to visual communication?

Given that much of the relationship between aural and visual communication is rooted in ideas dating back to ancient Greece or even earlier (in his *Ten Books on Architecture*, Vitruvius called for architects to be well versed in music), and the fact that the graphic design field as we know it is much more recent, I have broadened the visual side of the relationship to include painting and, to a lesser extent, architecture. The first part of this study is devoted to an exploration of these ideas. Later, I introduce specific moments of confluence between the two fields and as a result, this paper mirrors the historical evolution of the subject, for although there are examples of music influencing the visual arts prior to the eighteenth century, it is in part due to the advancements made

in music during this period that other artists felt compelled to somehow introduce music into their work.

Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard*, an example of confluence that I introduce in chapter three, shows how visual form, inspired by music, contributed to a new way of experiencing poetry, while at the same time revolutionizing typography: Mallarmé's use of white space and his innovative way of laying type on the page was supposed to engage the reader in a kind of game, intellectual and musical. Claude Debussy once asked permission to set Mallarmé's *Afternoon of a Faun* (1876) to music; Mallarmé responded: "But I thought I had already done that!" (Hollier 796).

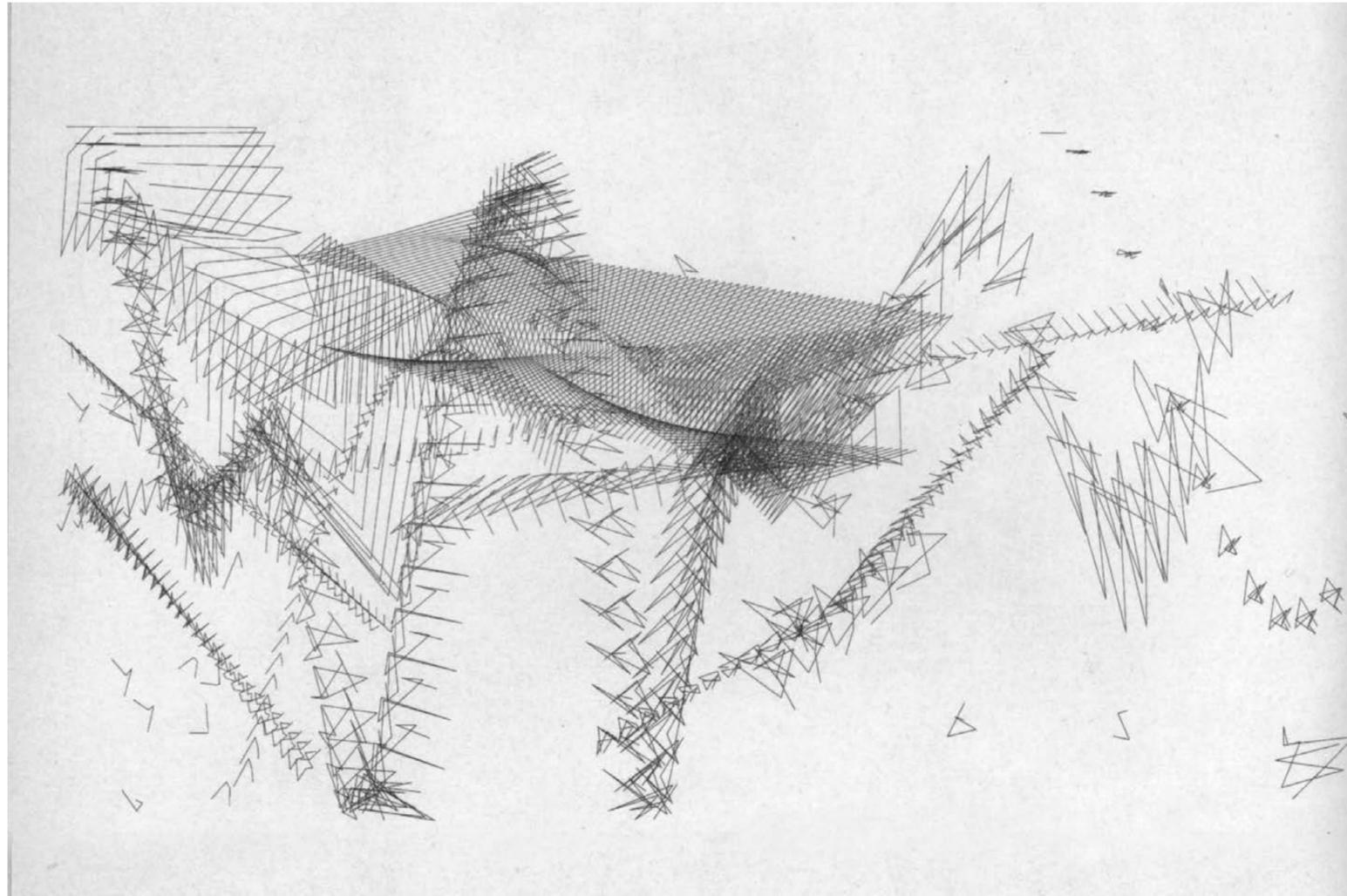
Advancements made in painting from the Romantic period to the early twentieth century helped shape the visual vocabulary of modernism, including that of graphic design. I'll argue that these advancements, from the

intentional use of elements such as color and line to evoke emotion, to the move from representation to abstraction, were in great part influenced by music, in particular music from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

There are examples of music referencing or using visual form. Perhaps one of the earliest is the use of the word "chromatic," which is originally related to color and the reflection of light, to describe a specific music scale. More remarkably, a design solution from the Middle Ages changed the course of music since then: notation. This invention made it possible for composer to communicate their work and preserve it. It is thanks to it that we know what music from that period sounds like. It also speaks to the nature of music as a language: as in the case of spoken language, it can be written and read.

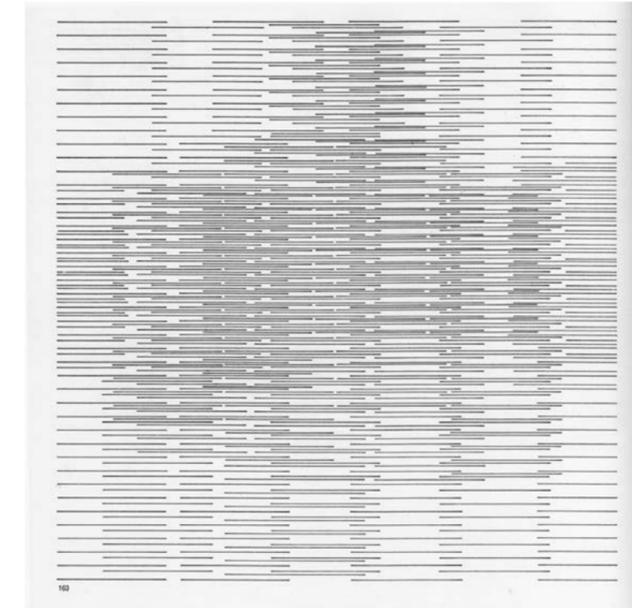
Like typography, music notation was revolutionized during the twentieth century by pioneers like John Cage. Realizing that traditional notation was not

capable of visually communicating their visions, composers looked for new ways to this. Aptly named "graphic notation" this innovation relies on the same basic elements and concepts used by graphic designers (point, line, plane, texture, contrast, scale, etc), and is the second example of confluence that I will discuss. Perhaps as interesting as the aspect of confluence in these examples, is the idea of translation. Here, visual and aural worlds come together to form something different by means of translation, or a multitude of translations. In the case of Mallarmé, the first translation is from thought into poetry, which in itself is musical. A second translation happens as the poetry is represented in two-dimensional space. In the case of graphic notation, the first translation is the act of music composition, the second one being the communication of music by means of visual form.



Herbert Brün *Mutatis Mutandis*
Graphic score 1995

Armin Hofmann Line study from *Graphic Design Manual* 1965



What I described about the poster I am working on is very similar to what happens in these examples. Although my solution to the problem of how to represent the aspect of time in the poster didn't require complex musical knowledge (time and duration aren't necessarily aspects of music,) thinking about it in terms of sound made the difference. Printed words are seen, and as such they can create visual rhythm. When read, however, words work in time. Therefore my idea required two translations: from thought to sound, and from sound to typography.

As a bilingual speaker, sometimes I experience conflict when communicating with someone who also speaks both languages. I wonder whether I should continue to speak English, or if I should instead switch to Spanish, acknowledging that my interlocutor and I share that language. If there are any non-Spanish speaking people with us, this may make me feel insensitive towards them. This is

often resolved through confluence: I can naturally speak Spanglish. It just works! Similarly, I have experienced "vocation antagonism," meaning that, because I'm fluent musically and visually, many times I've been unsure of what language I should speak. This investigation has shown me that graphic design is a kind of Spanglish: a language (visual) that long ago absorbed concepts from another language (musical), and that I am constantly speaking both languages at the same time. My goal now, is to do this consciously.

“Music seemed to have dominated Greek thinking about the nature of humankind, about our moral and emotional constitution and our relationship with the world and the cosmos.”

Peter Vergo *That Divine Order*

Vasily Kandinsky *Orange* 1923 Lithograph
MOMA, New York

Piet Zwart Double-page from NKF 1927–1928
(Dutch Cable Factory) Industrial Catalog



In the nineteenth century, early manifestations of graphic design known as “applied art” appeared as a response to the developments and enormous socio-economic and cultural changes of the times. The new world demanded faster means of communication, and it was up to artists to fulfilled this need, by taking on a variety of roles such as lettering, typesetting and illustration. The posters from the 1890s provide a clear example of this integration of art and industrial production. This very integration and its demand for economy of means is responsible for changes in style of depiction, mainly a move toward simplicity of form. But as in the case of painting, visual communication continued to rely on the imitation of nature, description, and narrative. A couple of decades later, a new visual language emerged as the result of a move away from representation and toward abstraction in painting.

Although the birth of this new language had much to do with the desire of artists like Kandinsky to better express emotion, or a simple need for innovation and experimentation, soon the power of its vocabulary became apparent and was absorbed by artists/designers with social, cultural or political agendas. In his book *Avant Garde Page Design 1900–1950*, Jaroslav Andel writes that “the liberation of signs lies at the very heart of modern visual vocabulary, from its beginnings in painting’s division of colors and brushstrokes to the invention of cinema, as well as a host of twentieth-century art movements and experiments, including Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, Constructivism, and Surrealism.”

This liberation of signs, this doing away with the conventional constraints of narrative and representation, was greatly influenced by a similar liberation carried out by musicians during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1914) Kandinsky writes: “In each [art] manifesta-



tion is the seed of a striving toward the abstract, the non-material... They are finding in Music the best teacher. With few exceptions music has been for some centuries the art which has devoted itself not to the reproduction of natural phenomena, but rather to the expression of the artist’s soul, in musical sound.”

In order to understand the influence of music on the visual arts, it is necessary to go back as far as Ancient Greece, where while relatively little importance was given to painting, “music seemed to have dominated Greek thinking about the nature of humankind, about our moral and emotional constitution and our relationship with the world and the cosmos” (*Vergo Order* 58). It is this early view of music that would mark the dynamics of its relationship to the visual arts through the centuries.

Raphael *The School of Athens* 1509–1510
Fresco Apostolic Palace, Vatican City
Detail: Pythagoras explaining the musical ratios to a pupil.



ANCIENT GREECE: MYTH, MATH AND MUSIC

I. Math

As a culture that developed mathematics, geometry, astronomy and physics, the Greeks highly valued numbers. So when Pythagoras discovered that the main consonances in music corresponded to the ratios of the smallest whole numbers, music was given a special place among the arts and sciences. These correspondences indicated that music possessed an inherent order, one attuned to that of the cosmos. For Pythagoras, the important truths about music were to be found in the harmonious reflection of number. He went as far as dismissing the faculty of hearing as unnecessary and untrustworthy: “having no faith in the human ear, which can suffer change in part through its own nature and in part through external accidents. It can also vary with age.” This radical perspective was criticized by some of his contemporaries, including Aristotle, who regarding the Pythagoreans’ numeral approach to everything, including

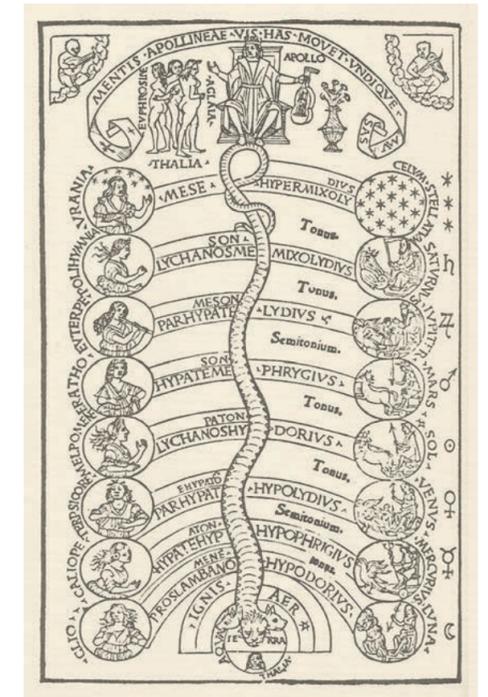
music, had to say: “they collected the correspondences between numbers and harmonies on the one hand and the qualities and parts of the sky and the whole world on the other hand and compared them. And if there as something missing, an artificial glue had to help to produce relations everywhere in the system.” Plato felt similarly, and like Aristotle, he questioned the Pythagoreans’ “inability to explain anything except by numbers” (Vergo *Order* 78).

Nevertheless, the idea that music was governed by precise mathematical laws was a very seductive one, and it contributed to the positioning of music above other disciplines.



Roman artwork *Apollo Kitharoidos* Augustan period Fresco Palatine Hill, Rome

Renaissance engraving depicting the concept of *Music of The Spheres*



A MATTER OF STATUS

II.

Myth

The Myth of Er is an eschatological legend that concludes Plato’s *The Republic* (10.614–10.621). The story includes an account of the cosmos and the afterlife that for many centuries greatly influenced religious, philosophical and scientific thought (wikipedia.org). Here, Plato speaks of the workings of the cosmos and the source of its constant motion not in mathematical, but musical terms: “...There were in all eight whorls, set one within another, with their rims showing above as circles and making up the continuous surface of a single whorl around the shaft, which pierces right through the center of the eight... The spindle is spun upon the knees of Necessity. Up on top of each of the circles rides a Siren, carried around with its revolution, each giving out a single sound, a single tonos; and from these sounds, eight in all, is made a single harmonia. Round about at equal distances are seated others, each on a throne:

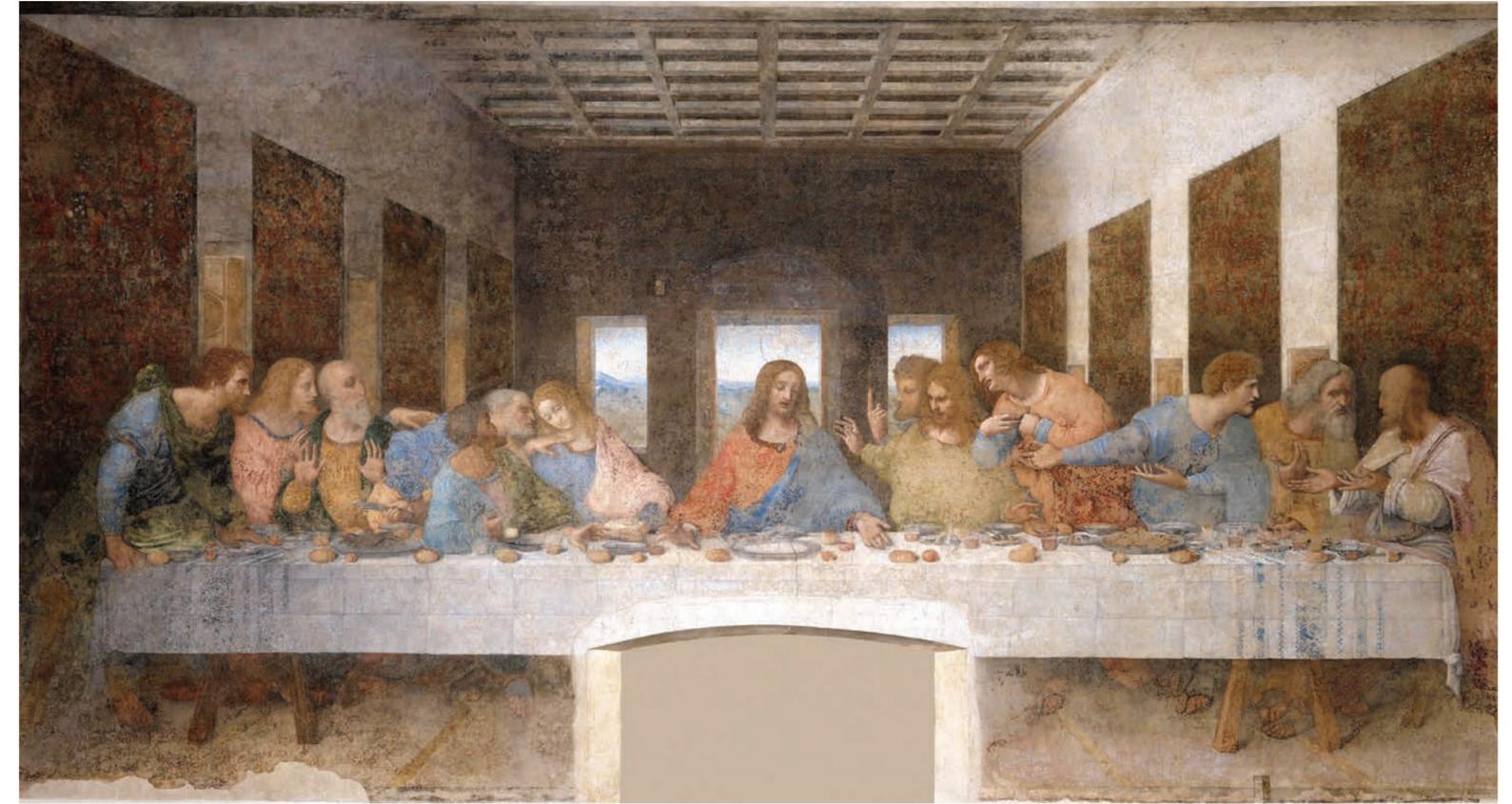
the Fates, daughters of necessity, clothed in white and with garlands on their heads. They are Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos; and they sing to the harmonia of the Sirens, Lachesis of what has been, Clotho of what is, and Atropos of what will be” (Vergo *Order* 82).

For the great thinkers of Ancient Greece, music played a very important role in their efforts to understand the world. The order and sublimity they perceived in it led them to view it in scientific and mythological ways. It is no wonder that it was so highly regarded, by them and by the periods that followed, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.



Sandro Botticelli *A Young Man Being Introduced to the Seven Liberal Arts* 1483–1486
Fresco, detached and mounted on canvas
Musée du Louvre, Paris

Leonardo da Vinci *The Last Supper* 1498
Tempera on gesso, pitch and mastic Convent of Sta. Maria delle Grazie, Milan



MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE VIEWS

I. **The Liberal Arts and Leonardo's Fight**

The fact that at least by the fifth century AD music was included as one of the liberal arts, which denoted the education of a free person (in Latin *liber*, “free,”) is very significant. As Vergo puts it, “in order to grasp what was meant by “liberal” we must go back to classical authors like Seneca who, in identifying what he called the *studia liberalia*, had sought to define those mental pursuits worthy of free men, liberated from any preoccupation with practical use of earning a living. Painting, absent from this list, was not considered a “mental pursuit,” but rather a craft, a labour done for money. That these views dominated throughout the Middle Ages and were inherited by the Renaissance may explain why artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, being also a musician himself, felt compelled to compare the two disciplines, arguing for the positioning of painting at the same level of music.

“Music can only be called the sister of painting, being independent upon hearing, a sense second only to sight... painting excels and surpasses music, because it does not perish as soon as is, which nature, despite her powers, is not able to preserve... Therefore, since you have placed music among the liberal arts, either you must put painting there or else remove music.”

Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519)

Leonardo likens his methods for painting with those used by musicians, making a clear reference to the main consonances, and stating his intention to create his own rules of proportions, in a similar fashion to the established laws of harmony: “I grade the things before the eye as the musician grades...sounds that meet the ear... I shall make my rule of distances... as the musician has done for sounds... he has fixed intervals from tone to tone, has called them first, second, third, fourth, fifth and has thus named, from step to step, the variety of higher and lower tones.” This last passage has been explained by some historians as “farfetched,” while others like Martin Kemp have suggested that Leonardo was merely convincing himself that he was “dealing with a form of visual harmonics in which the perspectivist forms his ‘intervals’ in the way the musician does with his notes” (Vergo *Order* 143–44).

According to an essay in the website for *Universal Leonardo*, a project directed by Martin Kemp and Marina Wallace from the University of the Arts, London, states that “Analysis of the *Last Supper* suggests that Leonardo applied a system of harmonic proportions found in music to the construction of the picture’s architectural space,” with the proportions of tapestries following the ratio 12:6:4:3, and that such proportions “find an analogy in the theory of music,” since “3:4 is the tonal interval of a fourth; 4:6 a fifth and 6:12 and octave, the only intervals considered harmonious by the ancient Greeks” (universalleonardo.org).

In any case, Leonardo’s preoccupation with music’s superiority of status is clear, and it may help to understand why many later painters felt enticed to draw analogies to, or inspiration from, music.



Andrea Palladio *Villa Cornaro at Piombino*
Dese 1552 Venice, Italy

Leon Battista Alberti *Santa Maria Novella*
1470 Florence, Italy



II.

Renaissance Architecture

Thanks to Marcus Vitruvius (c. 75–15 BC) and his *Ten Books on Architecture*, Renaissance architects were better equipped to establish relationships between their profession and the well-established connection between music and mathematics. Beyond stressing that architects should “understand [Music] so that he may have knowledge of the canonical and mathematical theory, and besides be able to tune ballistae, catapultae, and scorpiones to the proper key,” Vitruvius devoted his entire Book V to harmonics. Although recent authors have argued that Vitruvius’ allusions to music were of a practical nature, in the sense that what he was concerned with was the acoustics of buildings, some Renaissance architects interpreted these passages on music as clear evidence of similarities between architecture and music based on harmony. In *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, considered a very influential twentieth-century book on Renaissance

architectural theory, Rudolf Wittkower suggests that Palladio had derived his system of proportions from musical ratios, specifically the numerical relationships established by Pythagoras (the ratio 2/1 is the octave, 3/2 is the fifth, 4/3 is the fourth, and so on). Wittkower points out a number of Renaissance architecture sources which also referred to laws of harmonics, whether directly or indirectly. Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) summoned musical theory to explain the beauty of proportional relationships in his designs (Mitrović 19). In his book *That Divine Order*, Peter Vergo writes that “while Renaissance architects acknowledged that the properly composed work of architecture should embody the same laws of harmony and proportion that were manifested by music, it is now difficult to establish whether these ‘musical’ principles... were ever consistently applied to the design of actual buildings.”

“The concepts *musica mundana* and *harmonia mundi* relied on the assumption that the same relationships which determine musical intervals also determine the movements of stars and, through astrological influences, affect the events on Earth. This kind of belief was widespread through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.”

Branko Mitrović *Andrea Palladio’s Villa Cornaro in Piombino Dese*

If these accounts don’t exactly reveal to what extent musical ratios were actually used by painters or architects, what they do tell us is that the idea, so famously put forward by Pythagoras, that music embodied universal laws, had a profound impact on the way Western culture, from Ancient Greece onwards, viewed Music and the other arts in relationship to each other. In *Andrea Palladio’s Villa Cornaro in Piombino Dese*, Branko Mitrović writes that, while Renaissance architects did not necessarily “refer to musical proportions in order to deduce which proportions should be used, but only in order to explain an already existing practice,” what makes Wittkower’s book so important is that “it described the impact of this kind of belief on Renaissance architectural theory.”

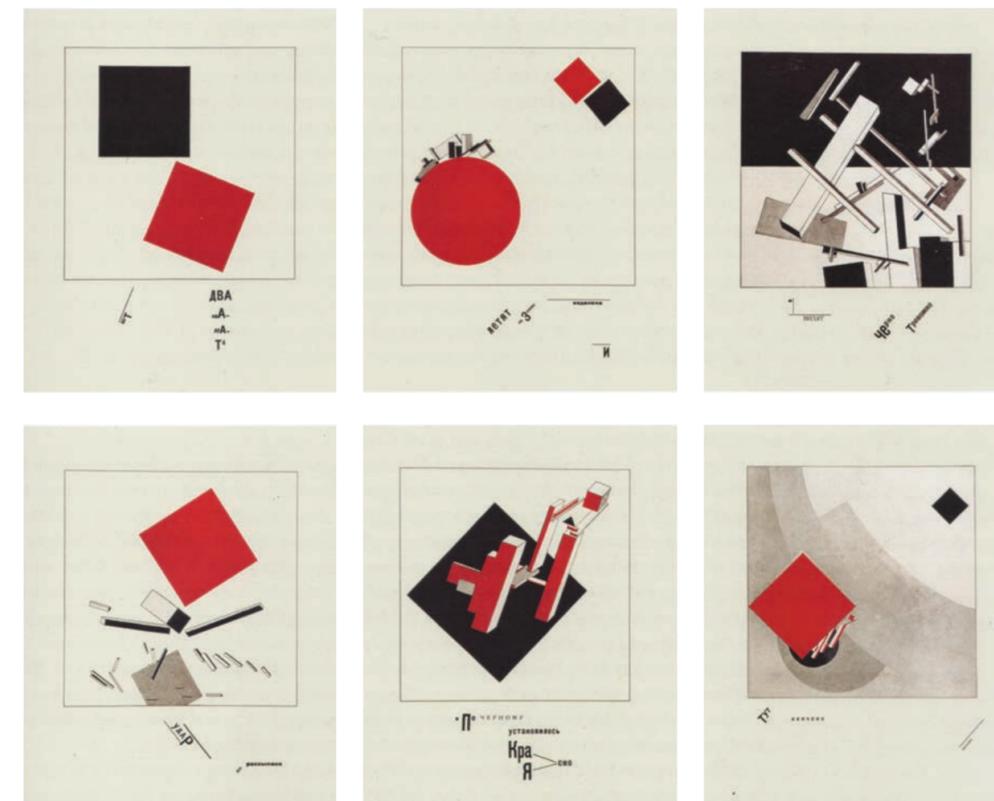
“The Beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object...
the Sublime is to be found in a formless object, so far
as in it, or by occasion of it, boundlessness is represented.”

Immanuel Kant *Critique of Judgment* (1790)



Wassily Kandinsky *Drei Reiter In Rot, Blau Und Schwarz* From his illustrated book *Klänge* (Harmonies) 1913

El Lissitzky Pages from *Suprematicheskii Skaz* *Pro Dva Kvadrata V Shesti Postroikakh* (Suprematist Story about Two Squares in Six Constructions) 1922



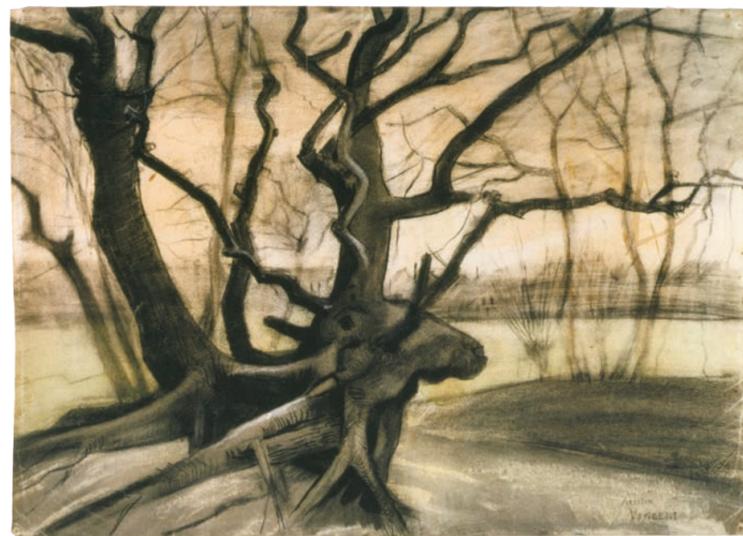
Speaking about music, eighteenth-century French philosopher Denis Diderot once asked: “How can it be that of the three arts that imitate nature, it is the one whose expressions are the more arbitrary and the least precise that speaks most powerfully to the soul? Could it be that, being less concerned with depicting objects, it allows more free play to our imagination?” Diderot’s observation speaks of a crucial moment in music’s history. His assertion about the “arts that imitate nature” reflects the general views on music until then: its main function was to support the descriptive/narrating role of the human voice. Then he points to what later artists and critics, from Romanticism onward, would agree on: that music’s non imitative character, its inherently expressive but abstract nature, was precisely its most significant advantage (Vergo *Order* 127).

The invention of musical notation during the Middle Ages had been the catalyst for rapid changes and developments in Western Music. Because they

didn’t need to be completely remembered in order to be played, compositions became more complex; and the field, which used to be confined to the walls of the Church, became exposed to secular influence. By the Romantic period, roughly the second decade of the eighteenth century through the early nineteenth century, music had not only freed itself from the church, but had also broken previous musical conventions. Dissonance and tension became more prominent and in general music became more expressive. The nineteenth century also brought social, economical and cultural changes that made it possible for artists and musicians to emerge from the control of wealthy patrons, giving them more freedom to develop creatively and learn from each other. It was in this environment that painters, in search of a more expressive and free art form, found in music a role model.

Referring to this time period, composer John Cage once said in an interview that “it was then that music so greatly influenced the visual arts... all the early documents about abstraction, Cubism, and everything, refer to music.” Although the move toward abstraction had much to do with the desire of artists like Kandinsky to express themselves more freely, this new visual vocabulary was later absorbed by artists/designers who wished to communicate specific social, cultural or political messages.

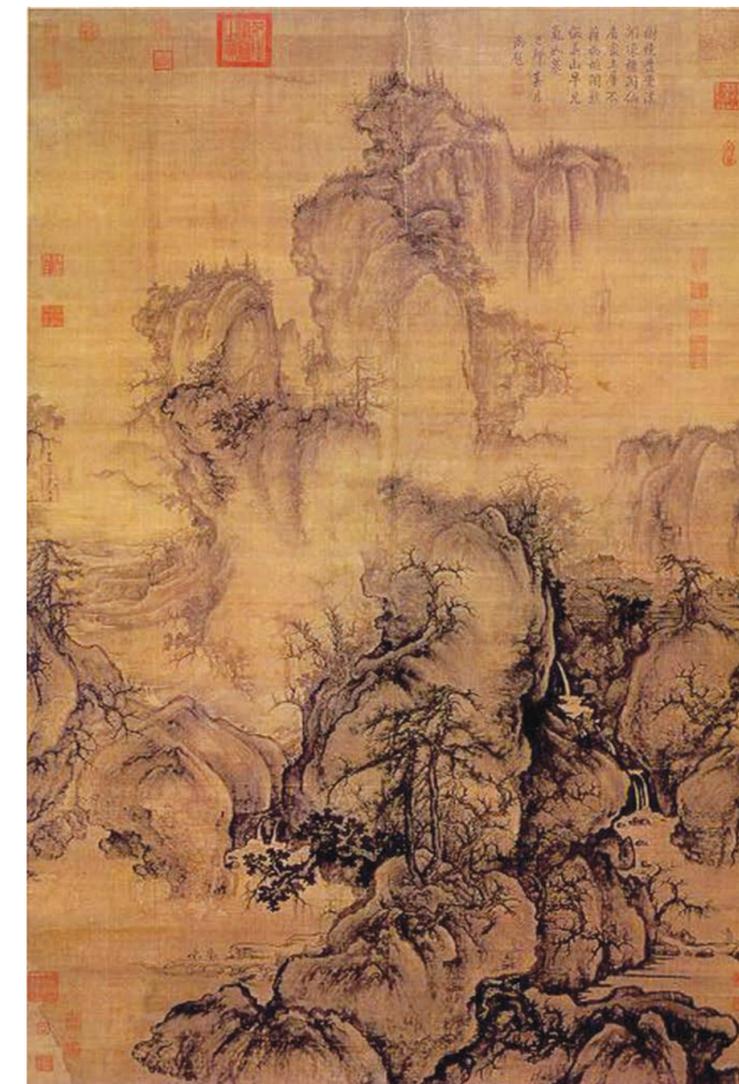
I have identified two aspects of music that, having influenced painting, arguably helped shape graphic design. The first is painting’s move from representation to abstraction. The second one is the idea of the composer as designer: the intention to use the expressive qualities of musical/visual form to convey specific messages; that “conscious composition” that Kandinsky referred to in *Concerning the Spiritual In Art*.



Vincent Van Gogh *Boomwortels (Tree Roots)*
1882 Chalk on paper Kroller-Müller Museum
Otterlo, the Netherlands

Wassily Kandinsky *Motiv aus Improvisation 25*
(Motif from Improvisation 25) 1913 Woodcut

Kuo Hsi (Chinese, ca. 1000–1090)
Early Spring 1072 Hanging scroll National
Palace Museum Taipei, Taiwan



ABSTRACTION: FROM DELACROIX TO KANDINSKY

I. Nothing is Gained by Accuracy

Disillusioned with the rationalism that dominated the Age of Enlightenment and the strict academicism of Neoclassic painting, Romantic artists believed in the validation of emotion, intuition and imagination as authentic sources of aesthetic experience, placing individuality, expressiveness and artistic genius over social and artistic convention. In painting, these ideas were reflected in subject matter and in form. My focus here is on how the use of form by Romantic painters constitutes the beginning of the move from representation to abstraction.

Nineteenth-century musician Claude Debussy once said that he envied painters for being able to “embody their dreams in the freshness of a sketch.” In *The Music of Painting*, Peter Vergo points out the similarity between this remark and Eugène Delacroix’s belief that “three or four lines” are enough to

convey vividly “the whole impression of a pictorial composition.” For an artist concerned with conveying emotion, a sense of sketchiness and vagueness played an important role in his paintings. Constantly attacked by critics who deemed his work “unfinished,” Delacroix believed that “the overall effect created by a picture and the artist’s ability in conveying the impression produced by a particular scene or event to be of far greater significance than any rendering of the details of natural appearances” (*Vergo Music* 67).

Delacroix’s paintings are said to convey feeling even before the depicted scenes are understood. This can be said to be in part related to that sense of sketchiness, for if the rendering of unnecessary detail is abandoned in favor of expression, the viewer is less invested in contemplating the imitation of reality and becomes more directly affected by the expressivity of color, form and composition. Although introduced to Western painting by the Romantics,

this idea, that a detailed and accurate depiction of the world isn’t necessarily effective in evoking its character, has a much longer history. The earliest existing document on painting from Ancient China deals with this subject. Tsung Ping (Zong aBing; 375–443 AD) a painter and musician whose work and writing were of great influence in the development of Chinese art, “was primarily concerned with how painting might succeed in communicating spiritual truths and the essential character of the depicted subject.” In his old age, Tsung Ping painted from memory, an approach he considered more suited not only to his age, but also to his purpose. In his own words: “Though one might again seek out solitary cliffs, it would be futile, for what more could be added? The essence of spirit, being limitless, resides in forms and responds to species, and truth enters into reflections and traces. One who can truly describe with skill will also truly achieve this.”



Eugène Delacroix *George Sand* 1838 Oil on Canvas Ordrupgaard-Museum, Denmark

Eugène Delacroix *The Lion Hunt* 1855 Oil on canvas Nationalmuseum, Stockholm



II.

Delacroix

Although Delacroix was known to be a consummate music lover who wrote constantly about it and its differences and similarities with painting, it is unclear whether he consciously tried to imitate music. The fact that his paintings have been referred to as musical, may instead have to do with an intuitive understanding, according to which painting, like music “existed beyond the realms of thought by virtue of its imprecision,” and the “worth of both lay in a certain elusive content” (Vergo *Music* 66).

Could we then say that his paintings are musical in the sense that their effect upon the viewer is similar to what Diderot saw in music? That by being “less concerned with depicting objects, it may allow more free play to our imagination”? Perhaps it is this sense of vagueness, coupled with his mastery

of color that prompted Baudelaire to say: “Even at too great a distance to be able to analyze or even comprehend its subject, a picture by Delacroix will already have produced a rich, joyful or melancholy impression upon the soul.” If we consider that this effect is exactly what Kandinsky was going after, we can conclude that the move toward abstraction started with Delacroix.

This idea of a picture producing powerful impression when seen from a distance is entirely relevant in graphic design. Posters, book covers and products on shelves are examples of cases in which color and form are used to draw the reader in. We don’t usually think about this in terms of “impressions upon the soul,” but maybe that is what happens. In abstraction, and in the absence of a discernible subject matter, impressions may have this kind of effect, whether the work is a painting, or a poster.



Wassily Kandinsky *Composition V* 1923
Oil on canvas The private collection, Switzerland

Wassily Kandinsky *Impression III*
(*Concert*) 1911 Oil on canvas Städtische Galerie
im Lenbachhaus, Munich

Kandinsky

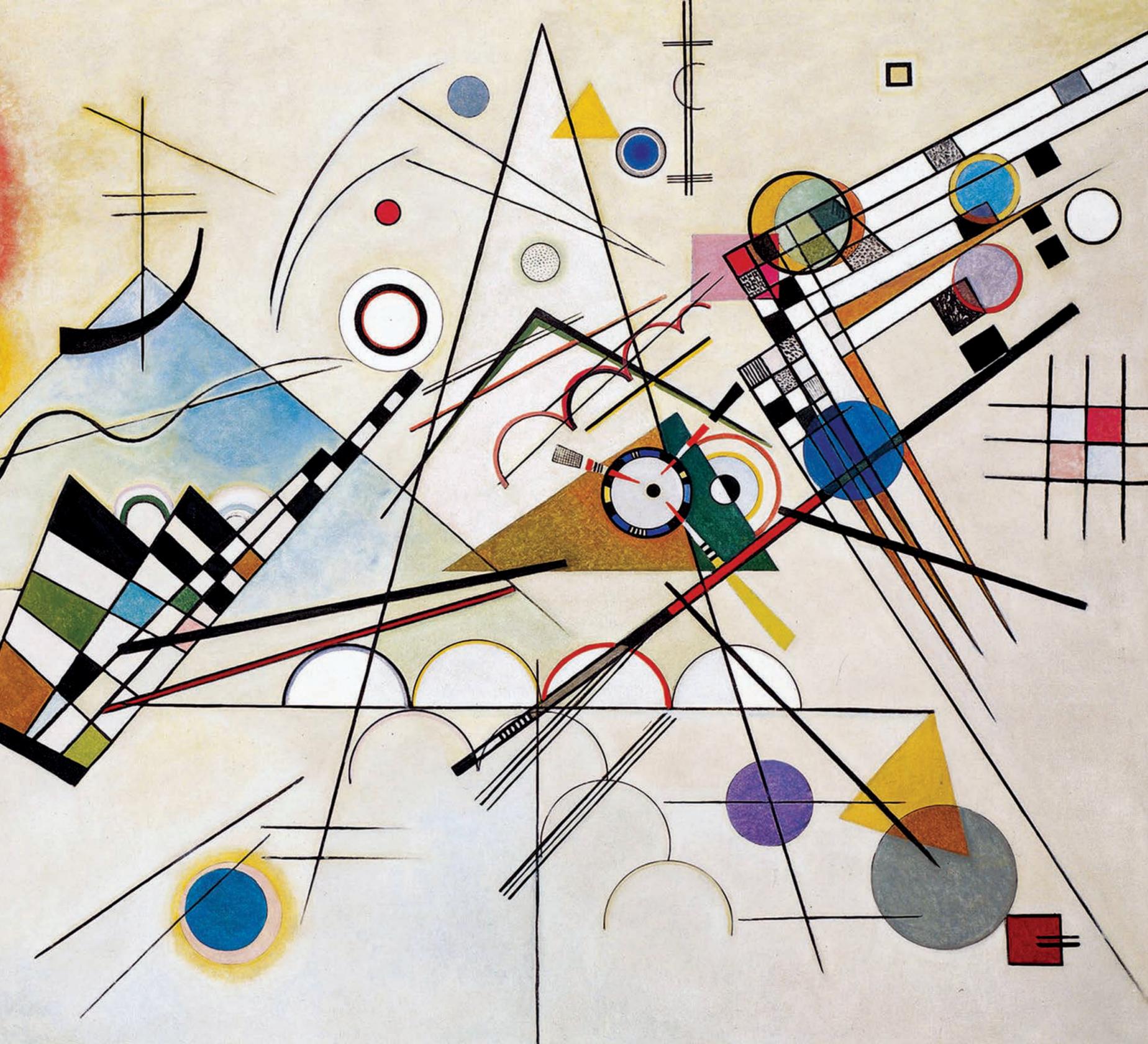
In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky explains that, while shapes exist in and of themselves, colors depend on shape to exist; no matter how irregular, a shape always surrounds any given color, and in this sense shape always affects color in meaning and in appearance. Kandinsky's path toward abstraction is a struggle to liberate color from the confines of shape, and shape from the confines of the objective, natural world. By reducing the influence that recognizable objects have on the meaning of shape and color, his aim is to reveal the true expressive qualities of the pure elements of painting.

From his own writings, we know that this liberation of form was deeply inspired by music. Kandinsky believed that visual form could speak to the soul the way that music does. This Delacroix had also seen a century earlier: "There is an impression that results from a particular juxtaposition of colours,



lights and shades: what one might call the music of painting. Even before knowing what a picture represents... Often, you will find yourself seized by this magical chord; sometimes, even the grandeur of the lines alone can produce the same effect."

That Delacroix mentions line here is interesting, for it brings me to an important aspect of Kandinsky's work and his influence on modern design. After his transition toward abstraction in the first two decades of his work, his paintings became increasingly geometric, and line took on a prominent role. This is the time during which he taught basic design and advanced theory at the Bauhaus. His book *Point and Line To Plane* is a comprehensive study on the expressive qualities of these basic compositional elements.



Wassily Kandinsky *Composition VIII*
1923 Oil on canvas Solomon R. Guggenheim
Museum, New York

El Lissitzky *Beat the Whites with the Red wedge*
1919 Soviet propaganda Lithograph



Although Kandinsky isn't uniquely responsible for the advent of abstraction, he was one of the most, if not the most articulate of its proponents. Unlike others who used abstraction in a decorative manner, Kandinsky was always concerned with the meaning and communicative power of visual form (Vergo *Music* 173–181). From his involvement as a teacher at the Bauhaus, we can infer that he influenced future prominent artists and designers alike. But could his influence on design have started earlier?

When Kandinsky wrote in 1914 that "...we are fast approaching the time of reasoned and conscious composition, when the painter will be proud to declare his work constructive," constructivism as a movement was not yet born. Having originated in Russia around 1919, Constructivism is characterized by purposeful, meaningful and functional use of abstract form. In *Graphic Design:*

A Concise History, author Richard Hollins points out the influence that abstract painting had on the new movement: "armed with the forms of the new abstract painting, [constructivists] set out to demolish the division between art and labour."

As an artist, Kandinsky was concerned with the expression of the artist's soul, and although his ideology differed from those of movements such as Constructivism and Suprematism, his quest for a new visual vocabulary, one that could at the same time evoke emotion and communicate effectively, is of clear significance to the development of modern graphic design.



Nicolas Poussin *Diana and Endymion* Oil on canvas 1630 The Detroit Institute of Arts

Nicolas Poussin *The Four Seasons: Summer, or Ruth and Boaz* 1660–1664 Oil on canvas Louvre, Paris



Nicolas Poussin *Rape of the Sabine Women* Oil on canvas 1637–1638 Louvre, Paris



TO COMPOSE: THE USE OF FORM TO COMMUNICATE

I. Modes & Moods: Poussin and The Music of Ancient Greece

Seventeenth-century artist Nicolas Poussin was one of the most important painters of his time, having influenced later artists such as Jacques-Louis David, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Paul Cézanne and Delacroix. The link to the latter may interestingly have had to do with their mutual admiration for music and its evocative power. A letter that Poussin wrote to his friend and patron Paul Féart de Chantelou has been widely studied by art historians. In the letter, Poussin writes about his plans to “by the end of the year to have painted a subject in the Phrygian mode, that is to say a mode which is violent and furious, very severe and calculated to produce amazement...frightful wars provide subjects suited to this manner.” In the same letter, the painter discusses the Dorian, Lydian, Hypolydian and Ionian modes in relation to painting. Poussin was referring the “Greek modes” (music genres),

which are believed to have been used by the Greeks to convey the character of one subject or another, for the evocation of emotional states, and for communicating messages of moral value (Lockspeiser 146).

Poussin’s intention to paint according to certain modes indicates that the painter understood that emotion could be conveyed by means other than the subject matter and the gesturing of the characters in his pictures. This is in essence what Delacroix referred to when he talked about the “music of a picture” (a realistic scene which, upon reflection, recedes into an underlying, almost indefinable mood). By recognizing the expressive and evocative potential in the elements of painting and consciously composing with them to convey character and emotion, Poussin may have set in motion the move toward abstraction, the liberation of signs and conscious composition which is at the heart of graphic

“The form of each thing is distinguished by the thing’s function and purpose. Some things produce laughter, others terror; these are their forms... Colors in painting are as allurements for persuading the eyes, as the sweetness of meter is to poetry.”

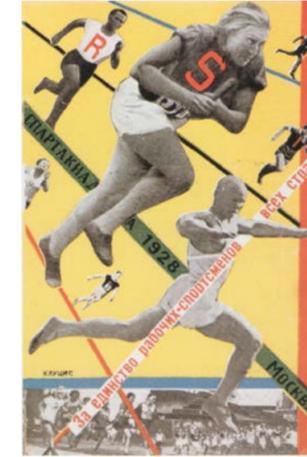
Nicolas Poussin *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin* (1594–1665)

design. A quick look at Poussin’s work demonstrates a great variety of color, line and compositional approaches, even within a short period of time. Versatility and the ability to use form in a way that is both inspired by and elevates subject matter, is highly important to designers. What differentiates Poussin from Delacroix, in my view, is that while Poussin attempted to apply given modes (translated visually as “styles”), which were traditionally thought to have certain qualities capable of evoking specific feelings, Delacroix’s approach was perhaps more intuitive, perhaps even more personal in an emotional sense, which created further distinction between what is denoted by depiction of narrative, and what is connoted by the elements of painting: color and form.



Georges Seurat *La Parade* 1888 Oil on Canvas
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Gustav Klutsis *Spartakiada, Moskau* 1928
Postcards for the All Union Spartakiada Sporting
Event 1928 Lithograph



II.

Richard Wagner and The Leitmotif

Despite his controversial writings on race, which reflected certain views in Germany during the nineteenth century and further perpetuated antisemitism into the twentieth, composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883) was of great significance not only to music, but is known to have had a profound influence on the other arts, including literature and painting. Some of the most prominent figures in nineteenth-century literature such as Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine and Théophile Gautier were heavily inspired by Wagner. Gautier’s daughter, Judith, who had an affair with Wagner, wrote about the times: “What this wonderful genius meant to us it would have been difficult even to make clear to those who were not of us—at that time when only a little group of disciples stood by the master... We had the fanaticism of priests and martyrs, even for the slaying

of our adversaries!” (Magee 49). Twentieth-century writers as important as W. H. Auden, Marcel Proust and Thomas Mann were also influenced by him (wikipedia.org). According to Bryan Magee in *Aspects of Wagner*, “Mann specifically thought of his novels as being constructed as Wagner’s operas and as using Wagner’s methods. The form of his most ambitious work, Joseph, is that of [Wagner’s] *The Ring* not only in that it is a tetralogy but also in that it raises to its highest level the use of leitmotifs in the novel” (Magee 52). In the musical drama of Wagner and his imitators, a Leitmotif is a theme associated throughout the work with a particular person, situation, or sentiment. (oed.com) The term itself comes from the German Leitmotiv, literally meaning “leading motif”, or, perhaps more accurately, “guiding motif.” Usually a short melody, the leitmotif can also be a simple rhythm or a chord progression. In *Wagner’s Ring Cycle and the Greeks*, Daniel H. Foster points out that

Wagner sometimes mixed spatial (visual) and temporal (aural) metaphors to explain how his leitmotifs worked: “The Foreboding is the ray of light which, falling on an object, brings out to vivid truth of show the tint peculiar to that object, and conditioned by its substance: the Remembrance is the garnered tint itself, which the painter borrows from the object, to bestow it on others akin thereto.”

Foster goes on to infer that through the use of painterly metaphors, Wagner “draws attention to the fact that his leitmotifs aim at an almost timeless and non-discursive concision.” And that “to the extent that they aim at capturing essence, through such instantaneous recognition, his leitmotifs may be said to resemble slogans.” In *Opera and Drama*, Wagner claims that our sense of hearing is endowed with both a “faculty for hearing and for seeing.” In defining *Stabreim* (Alliteration in poetry), the composer elaborates that

a “word’s consonants wrap their vowels in a skin that can suggest similarities between disparate words.” He further likens the vowels within the consonants to “inner vital organs,” and explains that while the consonants (skin) appeal to the *eye* of our hearing, the vowels (inner life) correspond to the *ear* of our hearing. As such, vowels appeal to “our inward and more emotional understanding.” Foster adds that given Wagner’s definition of *Stabreim*, one could argue that his Leitmotifs are also made of an outer shell and an inner substance. Melody and rhythm constitute the skin and appeal to our understanding or the *eye* of hearing, while harmony constitutes the inner life of the Leitmotif and appeals to our inner feelings or the *ear* of our hearing (Foster 74–75).

Harmony in music has traditionally been associated with color in the visual arts. If we consider my suggestion that the move toward abstraction, from

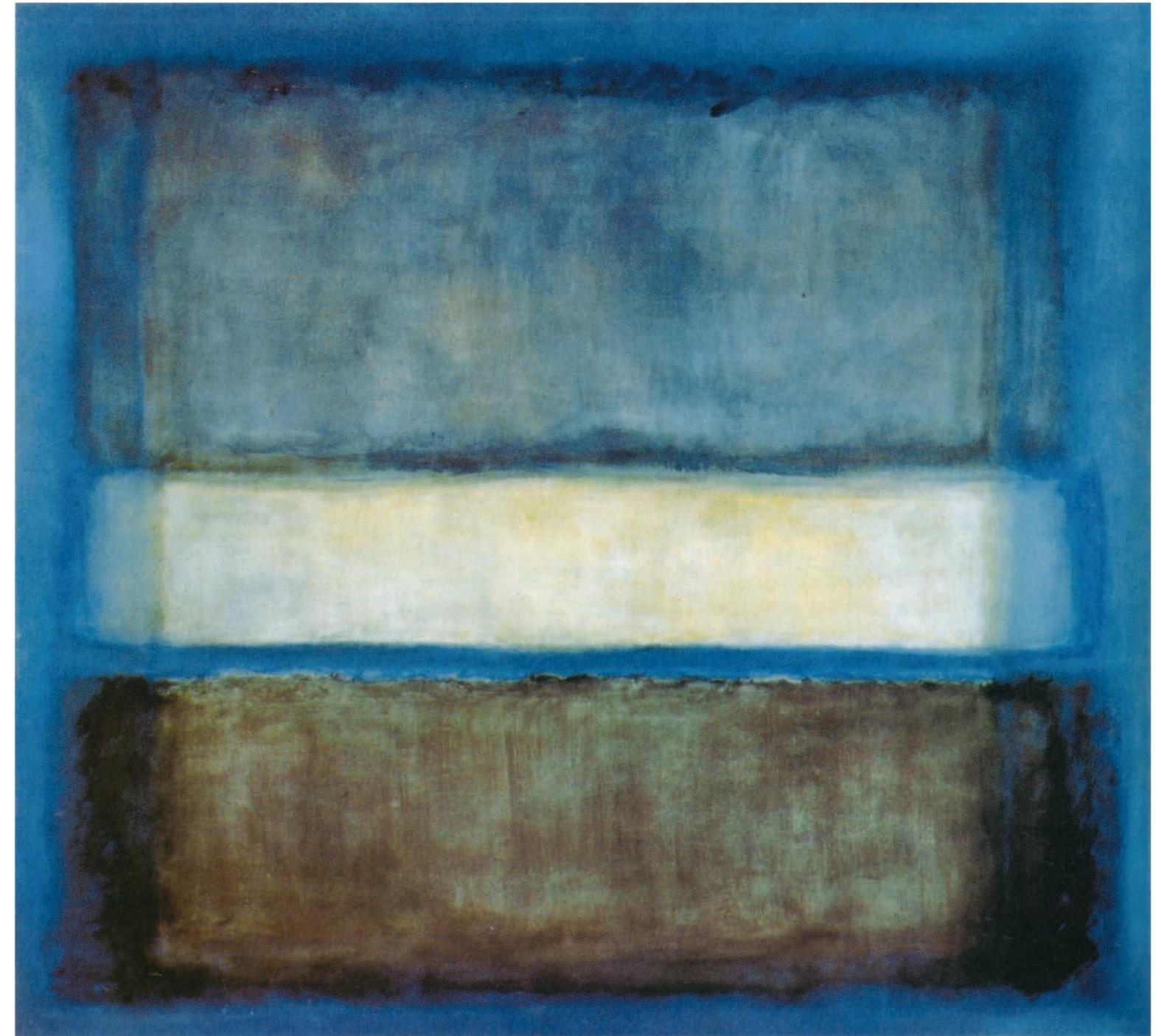


Adolph Gottlieb *Untitled* 1973 Acrylic on Paper
Collection of the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb
Foundation, New York

Jean (Hans) Arp *Configuration* 1951 Lithograph



Mark Rothko *No. 27 (Light Band)* 1954
Oil on Canvas Private collection



Delacroix to Kandinsky, was greatly motivated by a desire to communicate directly to the soul, we can see how, in a sense, this quest was characterized by a progressive liberation of color from the specificity of form. *In Concerning the Spiritual In Art*, Kandinsky explains that while the shape exists in and of itself, color depends on shape in order to exist. No matter how vague or undefined, a shape must contain color. Color does not exist without shape.

This may explain why, in his effort to communicate from spirit to spirit, Kandinsky's use of shape turns progressively from descriptive to suggestive to expressive. Mark Rothko, whose quest and work development resemble Kandinsky's, could be said to have gone as far as is (painterly) possible in the eradication of "shape." His intention was to rid painting of any possible association, description or suggestion that stood as an obstacle between the

painter's and the viewer's souls. If Rothko's aim was to "offer painting as a doorway into purely spiritual realms, making it as immaterial and evocative as music," (artic.edu) Wagner, according to Foster, "argues that opera is a deed of music made visible, an objectification of something usually thought of as intangible." To Wagner, "the ear is depotenced" in the opera house, no longer able to "take in the music intensively." Thus the "music should be able so to inspire the sight that it shall see the music in shapes" (Foster 74). Through color in painting, Rothko tries to appeal to the *ear* of seeing; through structure in music, Wagner appeals to the *eye* of hearing. Rothko searched for intangibility; Wagner wanted to make music tangible. Rothko wants to evoke feeling; Wagner is interested in eliciting understanding. Wagner's Leitmotif serves two purposes: as a way to build structure, it holds compositions together. Through



Gustav Klutsis *We Will Repay the Country's Coal Debt* 1930 Soviet propaganda poster

Georges Seurat *Le chahut* 1889–90 Oil on canvas Kroller-Muller Museum, Otterlo



“In the same way that Leitmotifs in Wagner’s operas communicate specific messages through melody, while evoking emotional complexity through harmony, Seurat’s repetitions and patterns communicate particular messages that are further reinforced, or elaborated upon by the way in which the paintings are “harmonized.”

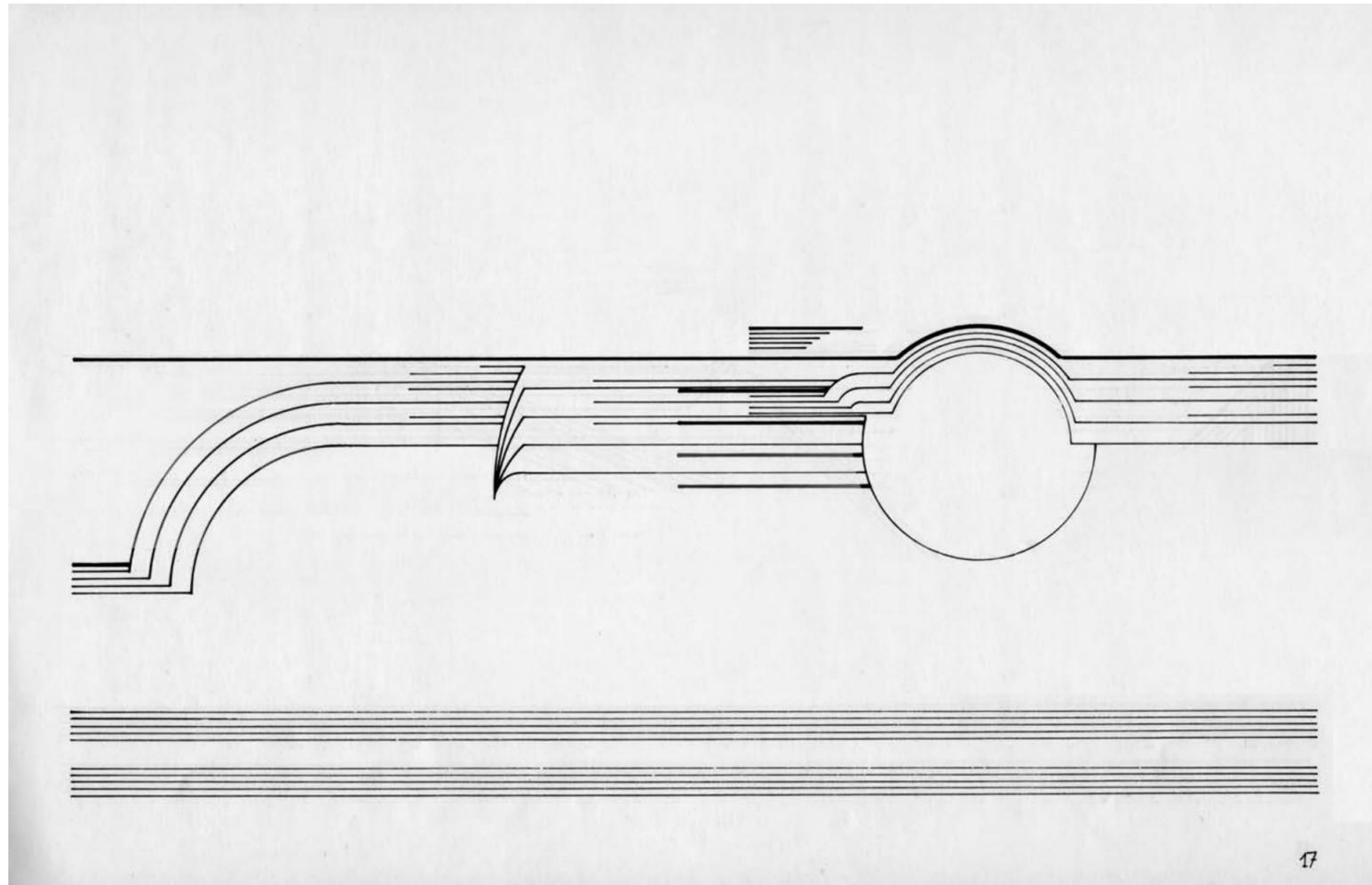
Peter Vergo *The Music of Painting*

specificity of “shape,” concision and repetition, it elicits understanding as it stimulates memory and enables recognition. In the visual arts, structure can be achieved through the use of rhythm and repetition, while shape encourages recognition.

In *The Music of Painting*, Peter Vergo discusses Wagner’s influence on painting offering an interesting example: the use of Leitmotif by Georges Seurat (1859–1891). According to Vergo, the recurrent appearance of specific patterns of movement in many of Seurat’s works could be said to bear the influence of Wagner’s Leitmotif. If Vergo is right in his interpretation, and we were to compare Seurat’s *Le Chahut* with the work of Gustav Klutsis, it is tempting to suggest that Wagner’s Leitmotif made its way into graphic design by way of painting’s influence on Constructivist avant-garde.

“How I envy painters, [Claude Debussy] used to say, who can
embody their dreams in the freshness of a sketch”

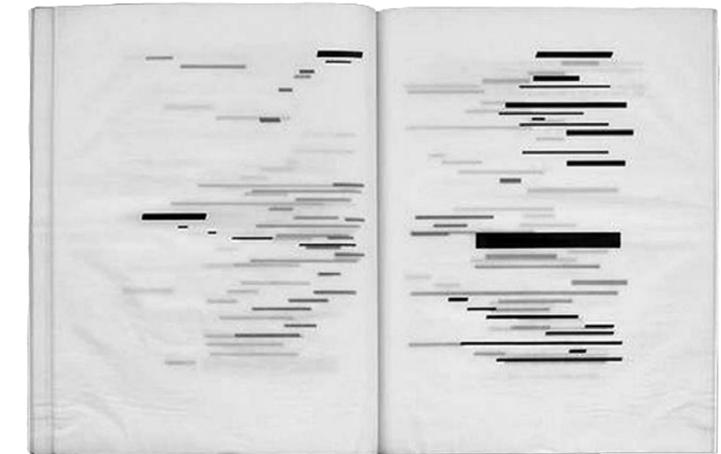
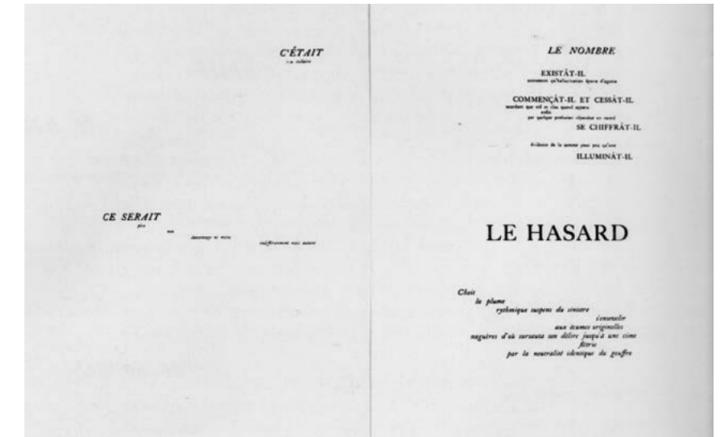
Raymond Bonheur
(19th-Century French Composer)



Cornelius Cardew Page 17 from *Treatise*
1963–67 Graphic score

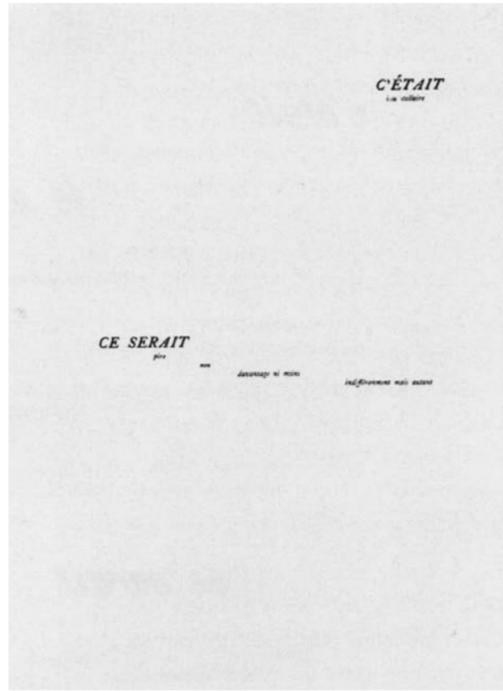
Stéphane Mallarmé double-page spread from
Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard 1897

Marcel Broodthaers *Un Coup de Dés Jamais
N'Abolira Le Hasard* 1969 Adaptation
based on the visual structure of the original book
by Stéphane Mallarmé



We have seen how the development of abstraction, put forward by artists who were influenced by music such as Kandinsky, helped define the visual vocabulary of modernism, graphic design included. Music's impact can be found in modern type, as well. In 1897, Stéphane Mallarmé wrote and designed *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* (“A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance”), a book that introduced radical innovations to poetry, but also to the world of typography.

This chapter introduces Mallarmé's work as influence to graphic design and as an example of confluence between design and music. Also discussed here is the graphic score: an alternative to traditional music notation that originated in the mid-twentieth century. In both of these examples, visual and aural worlds come together to complement, inspire, and enrich each other.



Stéphane Mallarmé Single page from *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* 1897

Jan Tschichold Title page for *Typographische Gestaltung* 1932

Filippo Marinetti *In the evening in bed, she re-read the letter from her gunner at the front* Foldout from *Les mots en liberté futuristes* ("Futurist Words-in-Freedom") 1919



STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ'S UN COUP DE DÉS

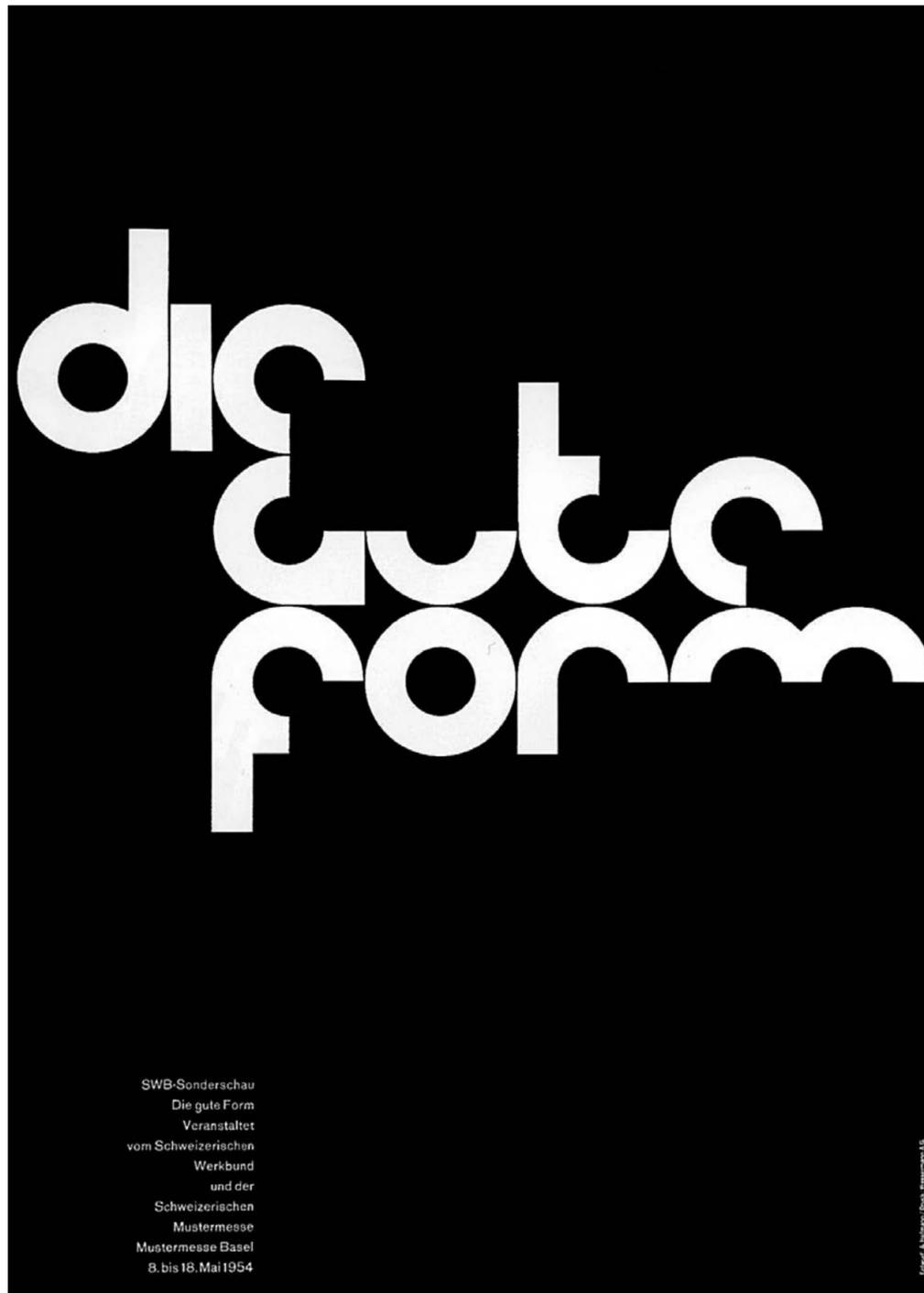
I. **Unlocking Confluence: The printed page as music score**

The written or printed word can be seen and heard. Its presence is visual-spatial and aural-temporal. Before Mallarmé, the aural-temporal aspect (what can be read, in time) dominated written poetry. The visual aspect of words (what can be seen, in space) didn't play an active role. Mallarmé activated the visual side of the equation, unlocking the power inherent in this crossover: as the visual presence was given life, the aural sign became more alive. The resulting confluence increased the potential for meaning in every word and in their relationship with each other (Florence 4). By unlocking the potential for meaning in the visual aspect of words, Mallarmé broke typographic conventions, and he did this intentionally. As Mallarmé himself put it, *Un Coup de Dés* "does not everywhere break with tradition; in its presentation I have in many ways

not pushed it far enough forward to shock, yet far enough to open people's eyes'. He opened people's eyes, indeed, including the eyes of artists and designers. His approach to typography in *Un Coup de Dés*, can easily be said to have defined the role of typography in modern design: that of a vehicle for meaning, with the power to denote and connote. His own account is revealing: "Differences in type used for the major motif, the second and subsidiary ones, dictate their importance when spoken." The white space was "like silence." His deliberate placing of words on the page was meant (designed) to influence the way the poem was read, thereby affecting meaning: "this distance, whereby groups or individual words are mentally separated... seems now to accelerate, now to slow down the movement."

Mallarmé's example was taken by the futurists, who broke more conventions and pushed the expressive power of typography further. Filippo Marinetti's *Zang Tumb Tumb*, a verbal painting of sorts, designed in 1914 as a celebration of the recent Battle of Tripoli, explored visual equivalences of sounds in the shapes and relative sizes of words (Hollis 37–38). In *Un Coup de Dés*, music plays the role of semiosis, producing meaning by activating relationships between words and their individual visual and aural presences (and meanings). It accomplishes this through the movement and rhythm implied by the lines of text, their position on the page, and the space between them. (Florence 4) And of course, musicality is also present in the sounds of the words themselves. But perhaps more interesting is Mallarmé's role as a composer that infuses *Un Coup de Dés* with musicality.

The use of white space, preventing "coherent meaning to take permanent hold, give the poem a recurring tension in the pull between gaps, interruptions and silences, and the promise of coherence" (McCombie 103). Building up of tension, suggestion of resolution and actual resolution (or release), are characteristic elements in the music of Mallarmé's time.



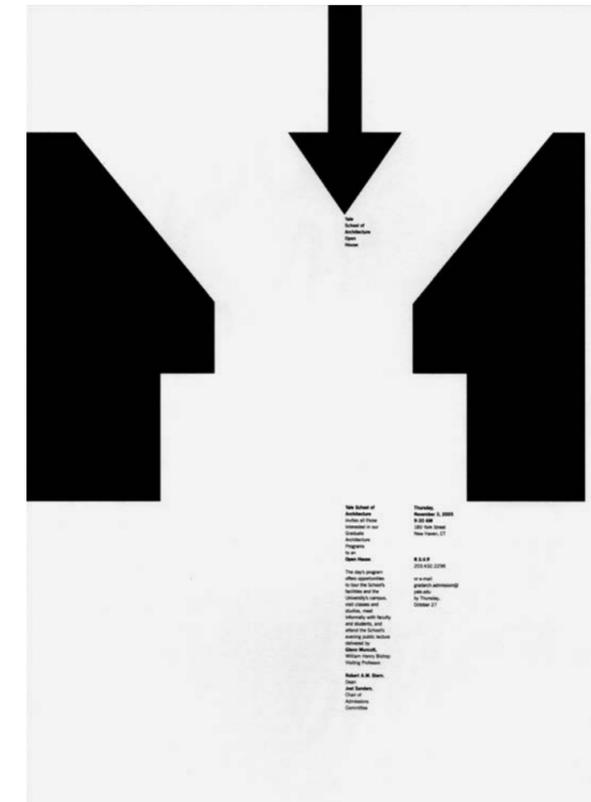
Armin Hofmann *Die Gute Form* 1954 Poster for a design exhibition in Basel, Switzerland

Armin Hofmann *Poster for a Sale* 1962 Herman Miller Collection

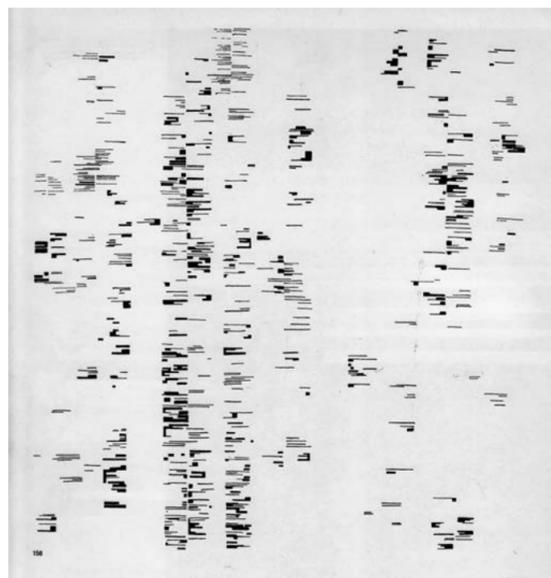
Michael Bierut Yale School of Architecture Open House 2005 Poster

Play And Control: A Designer’s Game

The fact that Mallarmé saw *Un Coup de Dés* as a music score is important, for if the printed poem is a music score, the reader is therefore, a performer. This changes the role of the reader from passive “listener” to active “performer. Even more remarkably is how Mallarmé accomplishes this kind of interactivity: chance, play, challenge. “Play is one of the main ways through which the poem explores the possibilities of reconstructing sense. The game entails risk, fear, uncertainty and pleasure...” (Florence 110). The title itself (“A Throw Of The Dice Can Never Abolish Chance”) implies play, chance and ambiguity. But could the title also be a reference to music? A game called *Musikalisches Würfelspiel* (“musical dice”) was a popular practice among musicians during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These games consisted of a sequence of musical measures, for which each measure had several possible versions, and a proce-



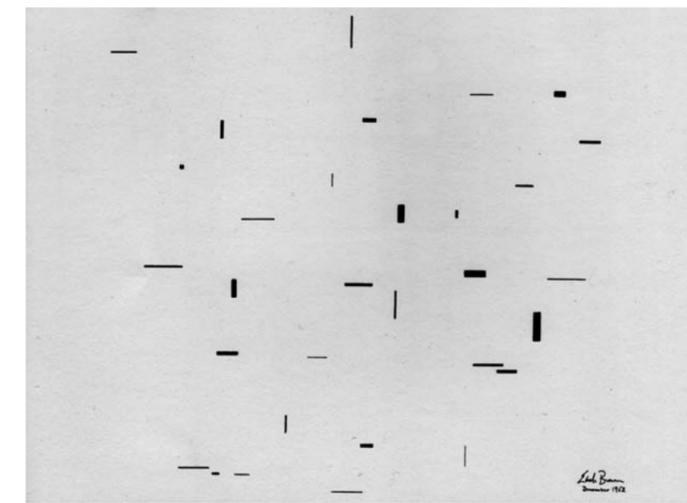
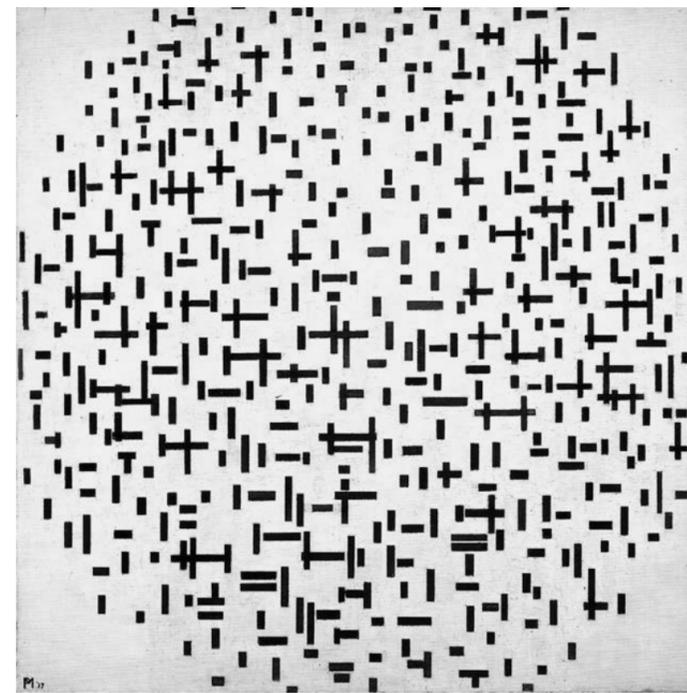
cedure for selecting the precise sequence based on the throwing of a number of dice. In the twentieth century, this game would evolve into a form of music in which “some element of the composition is left to chance, and/or some primary element of a composed work’s realization is left to the determination of its performer(s)”. In *Un Coup de Dés* the reader played an important role in “performing” the music, but the possibilities were limited and controlled by the writer/composer/designer. Could these innovative qualities in *Un Coup de Dés* have influenced design not only typographically, but conceptually as well? This seems plausible: in design, a certain level of ambiguity or element of chance can be very powerful when it comes to engaging the reader. But for a message to be effectively communicated, the possibilities must be limited, the game must be controlled by the designer. In other words, the tension must be resolved.



Armin Hofmann Line study from *Graphic Design Manual* 1965

Piet Mondrian *Composition in Lines* 1917
Oil on Canvas Kroller-Muller Museum, Otterlo

Earl Brown Single page from *December*
Graphic score 1952



THE GRAPHIC SCORE

I. Taking back the liberated sign

During an interview in 1985, John Cage spoke of Mallarmé’s influence: “I’ve always felt very close to Mallarmé... I often think of him... one has the feeling of space in which a variety of things can be present.” Cage was referring to Mallarmé’s introduction of chance and the variety of possibilities as elements of composition. And he adds: “the same thing was expressed by that empty painting, that white painting of Bob Rauschenberg... the white paintings came first and my silent piece came afterwards. And Mallarmé preceded both. For Cage, Rauschenberg’s “White Paintings,” rather than blank, are “hypersensitive screens,” where lights, shadows and particles register, composing the canvas (Kostelanetz 188).

An observation by Elizabeth McCombie in *Mallarmé and Debussy: Unheard Music, Unseen Text*, helps explain the nature of Mallarmé’s influence:

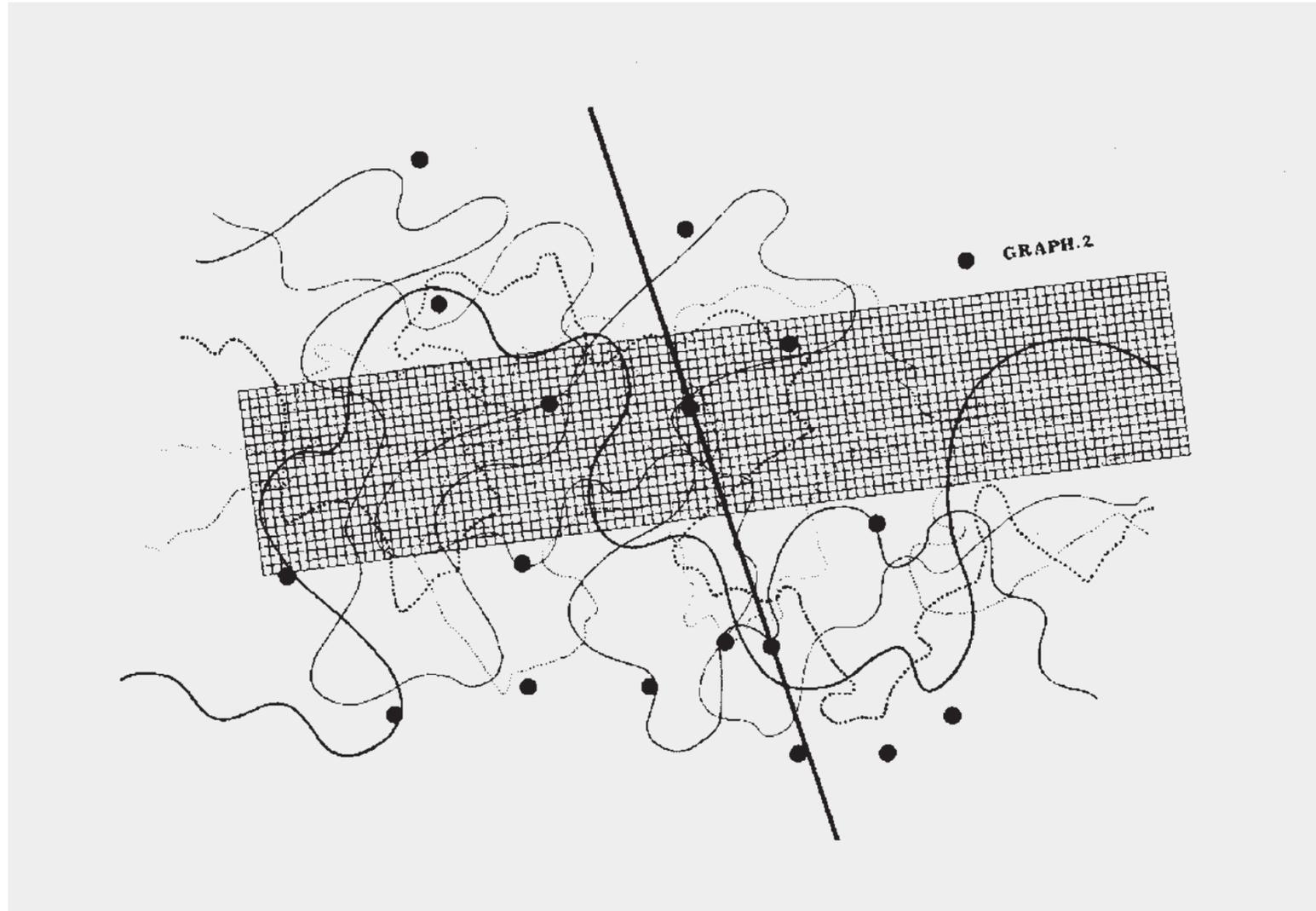
“the role of music for Mallarmé (unlike in Wagner) is not to provide language with an emotional immediacy or suggestiveness... Mallarmé refuses to locate poetic origins in the imagination or in a conventional poetic unconscious. His view of poetic alterity attributes the austere beauty of the ideal work to the word, leading to the separation of the author and the work,” adding that “the rhythm of impersonality weaves a lacework of meaning, over which the poet presides, connecting the strands in a web.”

Cage views sound the way Mallarmé views words. “Throw of the dice,” which is a literal throw of words and invites the reader to “weave” meaning, is a precursor to Cage’s use of silence in his famous 4’33”¹: the composer provides the blank canvas (time), the audience is supposed to allow the sounds in their environment to constitute the work. As with Mallarmé, there’s a separa-

tion between the author and the work. Ideas like these radically changed music and the role of the composer. If *Musikalisches Würfelspiel*, or “music dice” had been a game during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by the first half of the twentieth century and in the hands of experimental composers, it had evolved into radical new ways of composing music. But how could these composers communicate such unorthodox compositions to performers?

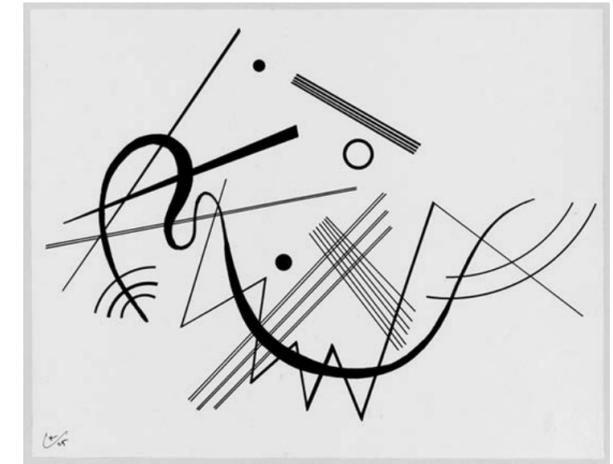
In the same way that Mallarmé’s throw of dice required innovations in typography, the new experimental music required new forms. Just as *Un Coup De Dés* wouldn’t have worked if it had been set in conventional verse form, traditional musical notation wasn’t well equipped to effectively communicate

the ideas of experimental composers to performers. The invention of the graphic score was supposed to address this need. Inspired by music, painting had achieved abstraction during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Painters had liberated color and form from their subjugation to the natural world. No longer concerned with representation, they explored the communicative power of the elements at their disposal: point, line, shape and color. Later in the century, painters would take this liberation further. In 1951, Robert Rauschenberg created his “White Paintings” with the intention of “reducing painting to its most essential nature” (guggenheimcollection.org). At this point, painting begins to influence music: although John Cage had previously conceived the idea of a silence piece, it wasn’t until he saw Rauschenberg’s White Paintings that he decided to compose 4’33”.



John Cage *Fontana Mix* 1958 Graphic score

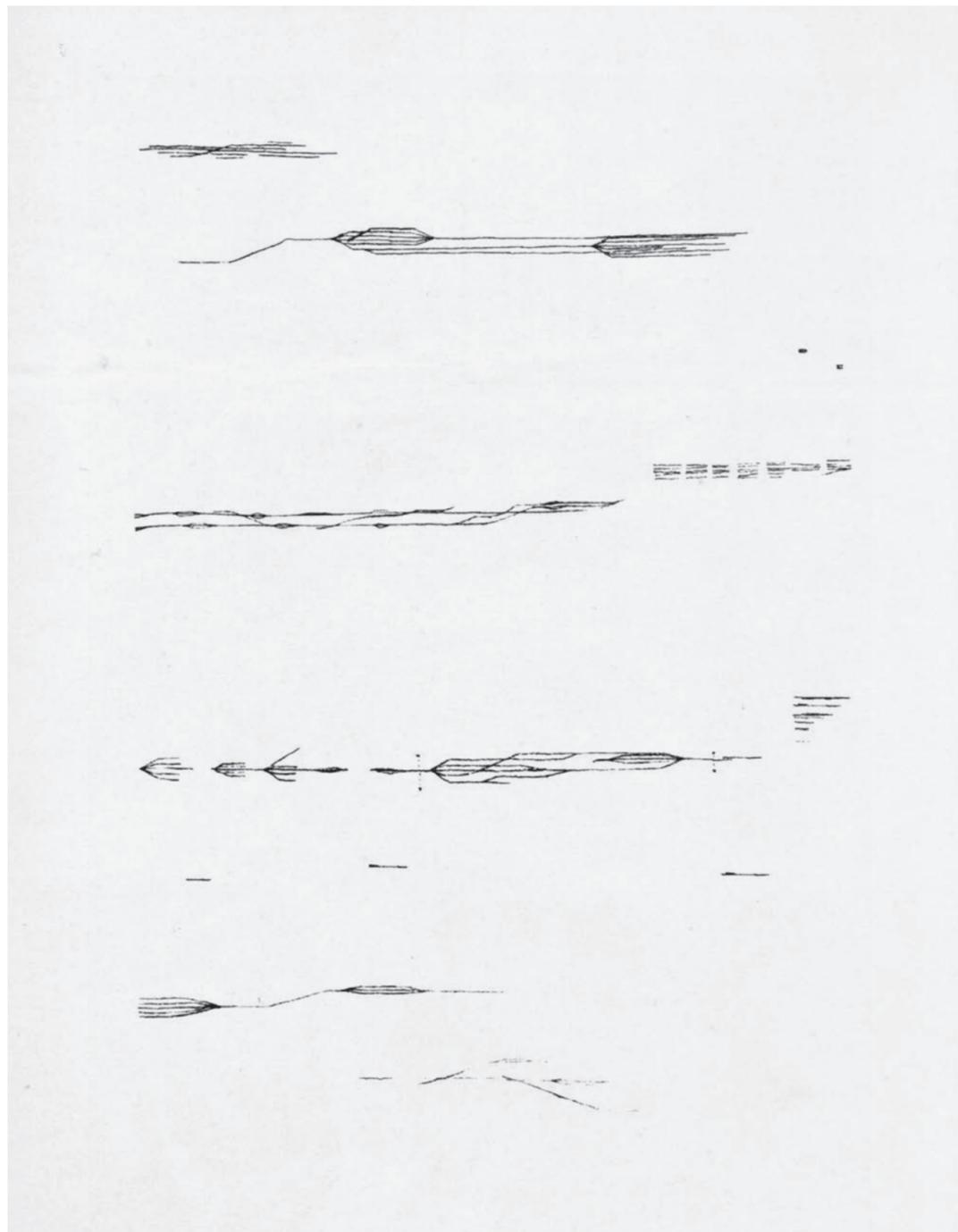
Wassily Kandinsky *Diagram 17: Line*
From *Point and Line to Plane* (1965)



“It was then [at the turn of the century] that music so greatly influenced the visual arts as to be the excuse for the turn toward abstraction... All the manifestos spoke of music as having already accomplished this that was now being done in painting. I think that much of what is being done since 1950 in music is a response to this [change in the visual arts] which was the response to music, and that the dialogue continued...”

John Cage *Conversing with Cage*
(Richard Kostelanetz)

Inspired by painting, musicians sought liberation from conventional elements in music such as tonality, harmony, the concepts of consonance and dissonance, even musical notes themselves. It isn't surprising then, that notation needed to be reinvented. The graphic scores of the 1950s and 1960s are a solution to this new need, but they also constitute a confluence of visual and aural languages. The similarities, in terms of visual vocabulary, between these graphic scores and the work of artists like Kandinsky and Mondrian, are obvious and striking.



Chiyoko Szlavnic *Untitled* 2004

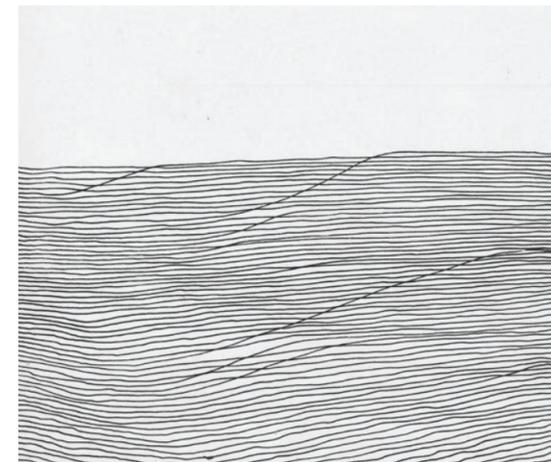
Graphic score

Chiyoko Szlavnic *Nightscape* 2010

Graphic score

Brian Schorn *Nebula* 2002 Graphic score

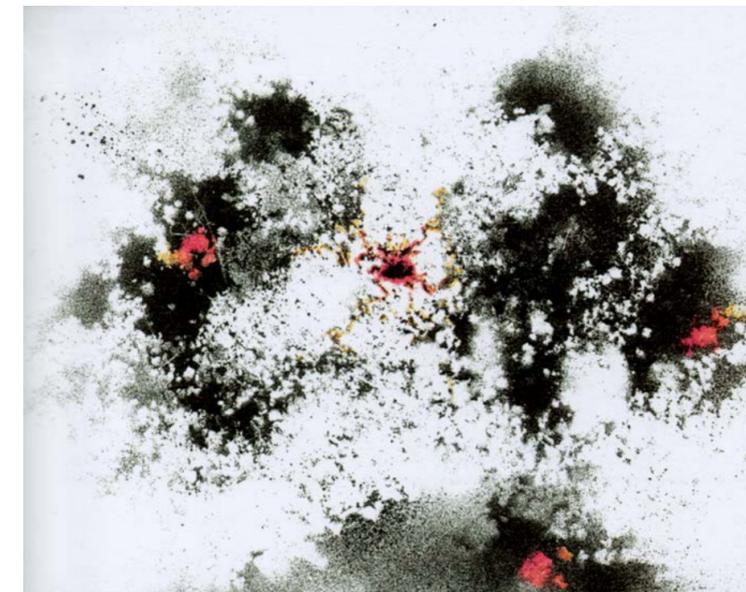
for three instruments



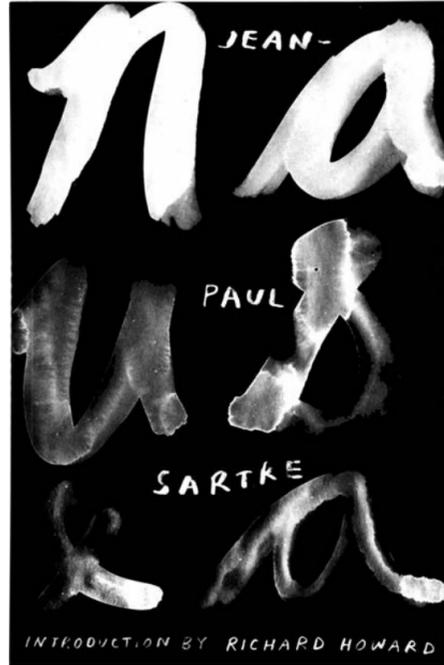
Loose Translation, Permanent Confluence

A century after nineteenth-century French composer Claude Debussy expressed envy toward painters for their ability to quickly sketch out their ideas, a few lines being enough to capture their vision, another composer named Chiyoko Szlavnic found a way to incorporate the power of the sketch into her process of composition. Her experience beautifully articulates the idea of confluence between aural and visual worlds and provides me with a powerful example as I begin exploring my own forms of confluence:

“Around the year 2003 I began drawing forms with a pencil in an artist’s sketchbook, drawings that attempted to capture—to graphically represent—some sounds I was “hearing” in my imagination. This type of “capturing fleeting sounds” would often happen late at night, while lying in bed, wondering and worrying about any given composition I happened to be working on. In the



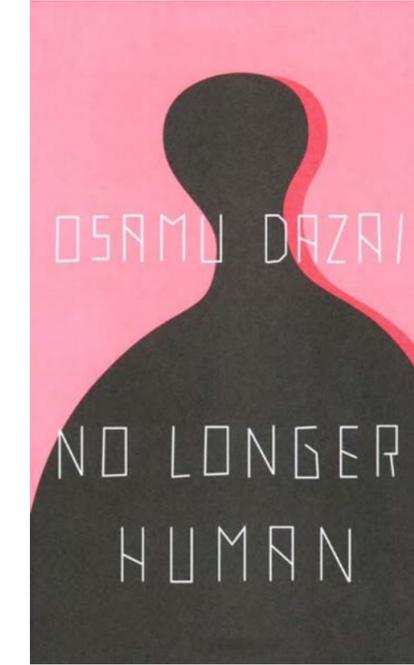
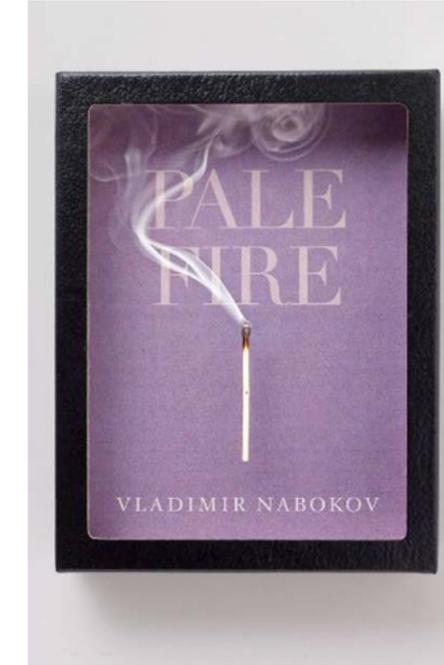
old days, I would scribble down rhythms and gestures, or rush to the piano to confirm the pitches I was imagining. Now, I let the fleeting presence of music in the mind have more freedom to take shape on a blank white page. I have been using such drawings as the primary basis for my compositions since 2004. I translate them into pitch and duration, using traditional notation. The strange beauty of each drawing inspires the music that results. The drawing itself, however, is also a result of imagining the instruments for which I am composing... The process feels very natural, it is very liberating. And there is an aleatoric aspect to the translation process, which is also liberating.”



Rodrigo Corral Book cover for *Nausea* (Jean-Paul Sartre) Illustrator: Leanne Shapton 1999

Stephen Doyle Book cover for *Pale Fire* (Vladimir Nabokov) Art director: John Gall 1989

Rodrigo Corral Book cover for *No Longer Human* (Osamu Dazai) 1999



Epilogue

In an effort to defend their craft as an art of equal worth as that of music, Renaissance painters tried to argue the advantages of painting over music. One common statement was that painting doesn't depend on time to be fully enjoyed, that it is perceived all at once, in its full "glory." This isn't entirely true, for one isn't really able to fully appreciate visual works of art in one single instant. It usually takes time to "read" the different elements in order to understand the work. However, an impression is created upon the viewer much faster. An impression is independent from understanding, it elicits feeling. Isn't this what we do when we give a poster that element of impact? In order to draw the viewer in, a feeling is elicited before a message is conveyed. The poster must be felt before it is understood. To do this successfully is to dominate the realm of images: the world of form and color in space. But we also work in the realm of

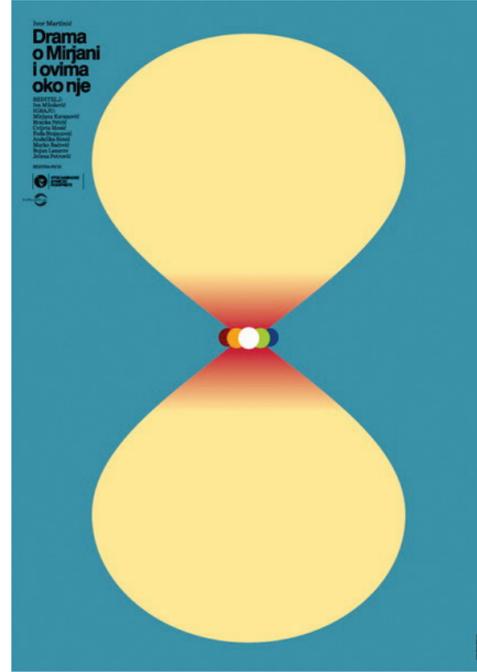
time. Images and text are understood in time. Depending on the assignment, time can be used to speed up or slow down the reading. When understanding enhances feeling and feeling facilitates understanding, there's memorable, effective communication. The printed word is read by the viewer, and as it is read it produces sound in the reader's mind. Sound exists in time. The graphic designer works with space and with time. As El Lissitzky put it: "Today we have two dimensions for the word. As a sound it is a function of time, and as a representation it is a function of space."

Whether through our ears or within our mind, words are always heard; they constitute sound. As musicians do with notes and pitches, poets turn words into music. By infusing space with temporal qualities, Mallarmé expanded poetry's musicality within the printed page. Similarly, painters brought music to their pictures. From Poussin to Kandinsky, their admiration for inher-

ent expressiveness and communicative power of music led them to develop a language of form and color capable of reaching the human soul as directly as music did. In the search for a more "musical" art, visual artists "liberated" the elements of painting (color, line and form); and gave them order through rhythm, contrast, repetition, tension and harmony. This "liberation of signs" constitutes the visual vocabulary of modernism, a language that is the foundation of graphic design education to this day. It seems surprising then that music and art/design are usually very distant from each other on university campuses and that music isn't much more than an occasional metaphor in design classrooms. I wonder if concepts such as tension, or the function of rhythm and repetition wouldn't make more sense to students if they were first explained musically. In turn, musicians could benefit from a basic design

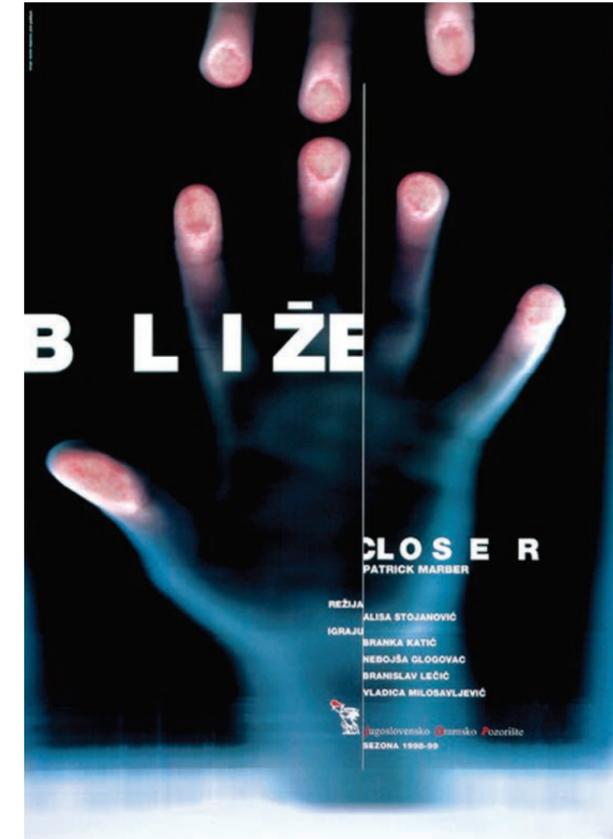


Slavimir Stojanovic *It Had to Be That Way*
Theater poster 2010



Slavimir Stojanovic *Drama about Mirjana and those around her*
Theater poster 2010

Slavimir Stojanovic *Closer*
Theater poster 1999



course. The ability to abstract and to think in visual form could help students put their visions down quickly, as in the case of Chiyoko Szlavncics (see p. 57), or help them to explore composition beyond the confines of traditional notation, as in the case of John Cage.

We tend to dislike work that is “too literal.” But why is literal bad? Is it because, as the ancient Chinese artist Tsung Ping implied, nothing is gained by accuracy of depiction? Is it because, as Denis Diderot suggested about music, being less concerned with the depiction of objects, it allows more free play to our imagination? “Literal” is to us what representation was to nineteenth and twentieth-century painters. To be literal is to present things as they are, to re-present. Artists moved away from this because they needed to add something with their art, they wanted to interpret, to express and communicate,

not to re-present. They learned this from music. As Kandinsky had writes: “In each [art] manifestation is the seed of a striving toward the abstract, the non-material... They are finding in Music the best teacher. With few exceptions music has been for some centuries the art which has devoted itself not to the reproduction of natural phenomena, but rather to the expression of the artist’s soul, in musical sound.” It would seem that the task of the designer, every time he/she faces an assignment, mirrors the move from representation to abstraction in the history of painting: The designer must not represent, but to deconstruct, interpret and develop a unique vocabulary and finally, compose.

Back to the train ride anecdote, the idea of breaking up the text by syllables so as to imitate the clicking of a clock was a successful one. Although the reading of syllables happens faster than the passing of seconds, the reader is effectively forced to slow down, which emphasizes the sense of anticipation that

is both an aspect of the story being told and the manner in which the writer tells it. The vertical arrangement of the type, which echoes the verticality of the page, emphasizes the pauses between syllables, and it contributes to that the feeling of anticipation by appearing particularly long. Finally, it gives the poster a sense of “Asianness,” which is appropriate to the story. What I have done with the typography is to activate the two dimensions of the word that El Lizzitsky spoke of: “as a sound, it is a function of time, and as a representation it is a function of space.” It also works as music score, similar to the way that Mallarmé’s *Un Coup De Dés* does. It engages the reader in his/her reading/performance of the words. In addition to typography, the poster has a graphic element that some have found difficult to understand, but which I have defended nevertheless. By the time it came about, I had internalized the story to the point that I had a

feeling for it. It wasn’t just thinking anymore, it was also feeling, and I consciously set out to find visual form to express it. Instead of strings, frets and the hollow wooden body, I had a mouse, a keyboard and a screen. Instead of tones I had shapes, colors. After hours of failed, unmemorable attempts, I was suddenly staring at something that left me speechless. “It embodies everything,” I thought. Not only did it resonate with my vision, but it revealed more. It has been hard to describe it because it doesn’t offer a description. Like music, it is mysterious and ineffable.

Poster for "The Ink Monkey" by Wang Tai-Hai
(1791) from *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (Jorge
Luis Borges)

“There should be no separation between spontaneous work with an emotional tone and work directed by the intellect. Both are supplementary to each other and must be regarded as intimately connected. Discipline and freedom are thus to be seen as elements of equal weight, each partaking of the other.”

Armin Hofmann
Graphic Design Manual (1965)

Audiences respond rationally, but also irrationally. Graphic design should evoke feeling and elicit understanding. Like Wagner’s interpretation of *Stabreim*, works of graphic design are made of a shell/skin that appeals to the *eye* (of seeing), which elicits understanding, and an inner life that appeals to the *ear* (of seeing), which evokes feeling. As Kandinsky points out, color cannot exist without shape. Color is harmony, inner life. Shape is rhythm, structure, skin. In metaphorical terms, communicating visually in a “musical way” requires giving proper shape to color, and providing harmony with solid structure. Shape and structure, however, should not suffocate inner life. If color depends on shape to exist, skin depends on inner life to *move*.



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