

Rudolf Arnheim

The following jottings are neither co-ordinated among themselves nor intended as a systematic evaluation of Miss Carpenter's essay. They are nothing but a few resonances (if it is permissible to resound in the plural) to what impresses me as an unusually substantial and stimulating piece of writing.

I

The work of art as a self-contained entity—a problem not only pertinent but topical. Topical for all the arts because of the present tendency to fuse the various modes of expression in situations or happenings combining the work of the maker and the performer. Is this a return to the origins of art, at which music, dance, and pantomime were inseparable and icons meaningless without the performance they served?

Art severed its roots in physical and social space when it ceased to be a part of the pursuit of life and became a reflection of that life. Daily existence secularized itself aesthetically and art became a segregated professional product. Just as thought is not located in the life it contemplates so the framed painting, the movable statue, the piece of music belong nowhere and everywhere. The aesthetic object had to isolate itself in order to make its new function clear.

To step back and to contemplate is helpful if you can afford it. But when the isolation from your fellow man, from your society, from the objectives of the whole becomes painful, the footlights create anxiety and the frame around the picture must go. Concerts and stage performances are becoming impossible because the average person can no longer sit still. The loss is obvious, the gain doubtful.

Are we returning to the healthy totality of art at its origins? The primitive ritual expressed vital concerns; it was highly organized and required the utmost skill and effort of the dancer, the musician, the carver and the painter. Can we match these standards?

II

Both the visible and the audible world start as undifferentiated environments; but they are hardly "syncretistic"—a term Piaget took from Claparède, who took it from Renan to indicate something "wide and comprehensive but obscure and inaccurate". The mind needs order from the beginning. The early world is simple but not chaotic. At first, a few strong stimuli—a light, a sound—are set off against a textured ground. With increasing articulation, sights and sounds form subwholes of perceptual space.

However, distinction must never outrun continuity; otherwise perceptual space, visual or auditory, goes to pieces. So also in art. In comparison with a Monet, a Giotto may look discontinuous, but it is not an assortment of separate units. The collages of Kurt Schwitters, which looked like accidentally

arrested bits of waste in the Twenties, turn out to be durably composed. Perhaps the bits of sound our ears are trying to assemble these days will fit together tomorrow. Unless they do they are not new music but the denial of art.

III

The eyes see objects while the ears hear action. In the world of sight, pure action, such as lightning, is rare. In music there are really no objects. Objects have substance persisting in time. A piece of music is a self-contained package of pure action. Since the senses of man and animal are geared to action, music as a biological stimulus is much stronger than any visual object.

The form of all action ranges between two extremes: the repetitious uniformity of the heartbeat as against the unique event of a solar eclipse, a birth, a flood. Many speculations of theorists derive the origin of music from bird song because early music has a continuous texture, in which one activity persists. It is a component of prolonged activities, of work, play, ritual, rather than of particular acts. Later, when music detaches itself from these activities it can become background music, it sets a mood as does the color of light in a room. Even then it is still a quality of a situation, not a detached entity within it. Or it moves to the foreground and becomes an action of its own.

IV

There is a close relation between structure and delimitation. Music at psychologically early levels, e.g., that of primitive cultures, has no beginning and no end because of its uniformity. Perhaps the crescendo is the first step beyond: it has a climax and therefore an end. It is the beginning of what one may call event structure. Only through event structure can sound acquire a beginning and an end, i.e., become a self-contained package of action. This, as Miss Carpenter reminds us, is the "piece" of music of our own tradition. When the internal structure loosens, the boundaries begin to dissolve. The music slips back into the social situation from which it came. It oozes into the silence surrounding it or submerges in the noise.

V

The perceptual problem of how a unitary entity can result from a sequence of sensations is not peculiar to music. Every visual object is built up by scanning, and from the deposited arrivals the brain builds a spatial structure. I suspect that musical structure is as spatial as visual structure and that the time sequence inherent in perceived events is translated by the brain into movement in space. A dancer, I have said elsewhere, does not leap from the future into the past but from place to place. Similarly, a sonata as an entity in the mind proceeds from place to place. What we experience as simultaneity depends on what hangs together structurally. Perhaps true succession in time exists only for disconnected events.