

# *Sounding Painting*

E.JACKSON

CLAUDIA MOLITOR

NIELS VERMEULEN

FRED FRITH

PIA ACHTERNKAMP (loh)

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## PROPOSITION

Paintings were exchanged with four composers for sound. Each composer agreed to install the work in their domestic space or workplace and create a sound piece with title in response.

## PAINTINGS EXCHANGED

Archetype Painting: niche, series three, four, five and six

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## ALBUM TRACKS

Claudia Molitor

Niels Vermeulen

Fred Frith

Pia Achternkamp (loh)

**Slow Painting** (20:42)

**Garden Shadows** (10:34)

**Surface 1** (13:43)

**Zwei** (12:24)

Album available on [SoundCloud](#)

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## ESSAY

Adam Harper

**Continuity and Change: Reflections on *Sounding Painting***

See pages 2-4 of this document

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## NOTES

*Slow Looking and Deep Listening*

Sounding Painting is part of a body of work that uses exchange to test structures of distribution and recognition. In these works, paintings circulate through multiple modes – encounter, dialogue, writing and sound. Painting becomes a catalyst, a speculative object, a synthesis of interpretation and response. Through this process the painting exists at the nexus of a growing network of collaborators – each contribution adding new layers of complexity and individual insight to the archetype. (For more information see [www.atimeinplace.com](#))

ADAM HARPER

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### Continuity and Change: Reflections on *Sounding Painting*

As art forms, painting and sound tend to be considered separate spheres, and for many reasons—the different senses involved, the ways they're produced and perceived, and the pedagogical and institutional structures that encourage an artist's professional specialisation. But they cannot and should not be so routinely separated. Comparisons of visual and sonic stimuli and the synthesis of the two, together with the other senses and to the extents that audiences are able to receive and process them, are a moment-to-moment condition of navigating the everyday world, not distinct wings in some imagined absolute museum of art. Both art and music history are full of examples of dialogues and associations between the two fields. Whistler named his paintings after musical forms, Kandinsky's abstractions dealt in notions of synaesthesia, Schoenberg left a series of haunting self-portraits, and Bourgeois' painted lines on blank staff paper are playful, bittersweet allegories of free creative possibility upon the a priori grid of one particular system for structuring and actualising music through symbols.

*Sounding Painting* suggests all sorts of possible translations and relationships between painting and sound—none of them, of course, ultimately correct or incorrect. E. Jackson sent me a painting nearly identical to the ones sent to the musicians, and immediately I could see an example of how the separation of sound and painting, on the basis that the former is a time-based medium and the latter isn't, is not as decisive as one might think. Most straightforwardly put, the painting appears as a vertical transition from one colour (one I wanted to call 'cerulean') to another (I was doubtfully mulling over names like 'lemon slice' and 'banana milk' offered by one online colour dictionary). It is a transition across space easily compared to a transition across time, such as one expressed in sound. Indeed, the eye and the mind travel across the painting as an event in time, even if the visual field is presented all at once. In these ways, the painting offers one particular paradox of stasis and change: a tension which variously lies at the heart of virtually all forms of musical grammar.

More intriguingly, on closer inspection this transition is complicated by what could be called 'granularity': the way that the transition is not perfectly even but variable and mottled at roughly the millimetre level and beneath, depending on how the pigment settled and the considerable grain of the paper itself (which makes it minutely, though evidently, a three-dimensional structure). Thus the transition has the appearance of rising smoke, clumped into particles and microcurrents of heated air. Such granularity arises from the minute warp and weft of the medium, and sound has its granularities, too. Sound can be parcelled out into discrete events such as notes, or smaller still, the single oscillations which make up sound waves. Sound media has grain as well, in the ones and zeroes of digital audio, the random electrical noise generated by analogue circuits, or the roughness and accumulated dirt of vinyl surfaces.

The latter is a key effect right from the start of Pia Achternkamp's sonic response to the painting. Paired with its use of drum kit and electric guitar—bringing distortion and the byproduct sounds of fingers sliding up its strings—this invites the listener to put the performance in the rock tradition, where expression, transcendence and a certain physical authenticity (however contradictory the combination

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of these may be) is held to be more important than cleanliness and precision. Notably, however, the vinyl crackle is inconsistent, appearing and disappearing throughout, complicating the grounds for hearing the sound as the authentication of a physical medium. What's more, the tiny intimacy of the crackling seems at odds with the reverb applied to the other instruments, creating an ambiguous sense of space: what is close? What is far away? What is at the surface? Where are we? The substance of Achternkamp's piece, though, is probably in the language of emotion and loose synchronicity shared among the parts, which also follows this sense of ambiguity and transition from state to state, rising and falling in hue and tension.

Fred Frith's piece also uses guitar and noise, and with its slow build-up and receding of volume, all made up of individual strums of the strings, it certainly evokes the painting's granular transition. Similarly, the strumming creates a sonic effect more complex than it first appears—along with volume changes among the component parts is a changing sense of foreground and background, and timbre changes, too. Towards the end, the lower frequencies of the strumming are removed, making the guitar strumming seem as if it is disappearing up into the sky and vanishing. And with such focus on the strumming throughout, the ear is invited to parse and unpick the relationships between the pitches of the strings (and the humming overtones arising from them), the noisy elements involved in striking a string, and minute changes in the volume and rhythms of the strumming which provide both interest in granular form and, as in Achternkamp's piece, evidence of human hands in communion with physical objects. The latter is echoed in the other percussive sounds, too, whether drum like or thoroughly indeterminate in origin, like those of an unknown creature living in the unseen spaces of one's house.

The paintings we received, of course, are not just abstraction of form and change, even with their granularities. They are solid artifacts with length, breadth and depth. In fact, the white, wooden frame of the painting is unusually pronounced, 6mm across and projecting forward from the painting by 25mm (for reference, the painting itself is 89mm by 138mm). This gives the whole object the sense of a box, a tray, or a shallow drawer that contains the painting, and the frame almost always causes some part of the painting to fall into shadow, whatever light it is put in. Claudia Molitor's piece is teeming with the lesser known physicalities of musical instruments, and especially the sense of the piano as a box whose interior contains a host of sonic surprises: something that is touched, explored, approached from many angles. Though rich and diverse, Molitor's exploration is tentative and gradual, proceeding in the first half from sparse, percussive sound to increasingly frequent and continuous pitched sounds and ultimately to complicated arrangements between such sounds that reveal the continuum between consonance and dissonance. In many accounts, consonance becomes dissonance because of the 'beating' together of soundwaves that are close together in frequency, which is something that can often be felt in the body of the performer, especially the fingertips. Molitor ends with a wall of noise whose origins are not entirely obvious, but that, rather like the painting, have connotations of rainstorms, water thrown into the air by passing cars, and surf.

Also taking up the piano, Niels Vermeulen's piece begins rather firmly in the vein of minimalist music, or rather, music built from ostinatos that slowly change. This format is an effective demonstration and intensification of music's paradoxes of stasis and change—all the more in this case, since despite

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its repetitious nature, the piece is unexpectedly far-roaming and rich in material, even to the extent that it seems to end in a different musical genre than the one in which it began, going from piano minimalism to experimental indie rock to techno. At the heart of it all and throughout, though, are the same repeating piano notes, like vertebrae repeating to form the spine of a body that changes across its length. This brings to mind another dimension of the *Sounding Painting* project, and it comes from the fact that the musicians and I didn't simply look at the paintings before making our responses but displayed them in our spaces and lived with them as part of the process of influence. As Jackson wrote to me in an email:

*I'm captivated by the idea of how a painting 'holds a space' this is something I'm working with and always thinking about. In complete contrast to a gallery experience I thought it would be an interesting experiment to develop a project where a painting occupies someone's space over time and also consider if it could be a space to work in.*

Intentionally or otherwise, the central piano sonorities of Vermeulen's piece are like the painting, holding the space his music occupies and responds to, persisting in time as further elements build up and fluctuate around it and in turn present the chords in a different light. This occurs both in an immediate way near the start, when chords lower down the piano seem to reharmonise the ostinato, and much later, when new parts are added. By the end of the piece, the piano chords have left the piano itself, and now appear on the synthesiser—both the same and different, the transformation of the central note cluster is complete. My own experiences with the painting were similar, since the painting was an island of continuity amid the turmoil of Covid-19. I took it from one house to the next, in fact, all the while seeing it in different lights and contexts.

The freedom of Vermeulen's music contrasts intriguingly with the rigorousness expected of minimalism (or techno, as it becomes), and in fact *Sounding Painting* as a whole cannot be thought of as a systematic project of formal translations between image and sounds. The paintings make interventions in the lives and works of the musicians whose impacts are not easily determined but are adjustments, however slight, in an open and complex system, like the famous image of the storm that results from a chain of events unpredictably set in motion by a butterfly flapping its wings weeks earlier and far away. Indeed, these causes and effects cannot wholly be written about under the assumption of some hermeneutic unlocking of meaning and significance, and this essay should not be considered such. It is just another response, a response to the responses: what I saw, heard, and felt, what I lived with, and how I made sense with it.

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## BIOGRAPHIES

**Pia Achternkamp (loh)** is researching on the borderlands of music, performing arts, language and fine arts – an obscure and yet fruitful landscape as a basis for multi-sensory experience and experimentation. She interrupted her studies of philosophy at Humboldt University Berlin in order to dedicate herself fully to the composition of music and soundscapes for theatre/dance projects. As she had always been curious about the interdependencies in sound, space and movement, Pia is usually playing her music live on stage when working with actors/dancers – this is how her artistic practice transformed towards a point where it became unavoidable to move her own body and explore its performative qualities and potentialities. [www.piaachternkamp.com](http://www.piaachternkamp.com)

**Fred Frith** is a songwriter, composer, multi-instrumentalist (bass, keyboards, violin) and improviser performing mostly on various permutations of the electric and acoustic guitar. Occasionally he uses crude home-made instruments, either of his own invention or in collaboration with his long-time colleague Sudhu Tewari in the band Normal. Fred learned how to compose in rock bands, starting with Henry Cow in 1968. This meant writing for and with people that he knew, and then arriving at the final result through a collective rehearsal process. During the Henry Cow years he fell in love with the recording studio and its endless possibilities. Fred embraces the idea of the 'work' as an unfinished and constantly mutating entity. Collaboration, improvisation, sculpting sound in the studio, and treating composition as an open-ended process remain central to how he makes music.

**Adam Harper** is a musicologist and music critic specialising in historical and contemporary ideas surrounding 'progressive' music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and their technological platforms.

**E. Jackson** makes paintings that engage with sculptural methods and casting techniques. This dialogue with materials and serial production is used to explore repetition, variation and multiple form. Drawing on wide-ranging reference from prehistoric mark making to geometric abstraction, Jackson obscures legacies of image making – producing paintings that are full of erasure, fragmentation, and illegibility. The work explores the unstable boundaries between objects and images, language and interpretation. Jackson is working with the inherited histories of painting to dismantle conventions of representation and identification.

**Claudia Molitor** is a composer, artist and improviser whose work hovers between music and sound art, extending across contemporary art practices, such as video and installation art. Exploring the relationships between listening and other senses as well as embracing collaboration as compositional practice is central to much of her practice.

**Niels Vermeulen** (Utrecht/NL) is a composer-producer of electronic/acoustic music. He uses piano, his voice, vintage synthesizers and a modular system to make music with a strong melodic/harmonic connection, combined with minimalistic rhythms. He likes to collaborate with theatre-makers and visual artists. Besides working solo he is part of synth-rock band Zebra Lasers. You can find his work online ([nielsvermeulen.com](http://nielsvermeulen.com)) or in several (performing) arts spaces.