What music might look like as modern art

Michael Kimmelman July 6, 2005

WASHINGTON — 'Visual Music" is a fine-tuned, highly diverting, deceptively radical exhibition about the relationship of music and modern art, lately arrived here at the Hirshhorn Museum. In its hippy-trippy way, it rewrites a crucial chapter of history.

Its subtitle is "Synaesthesia in Art and Music Since 1900." Aristotle formulated the idea that each of the five senses - smell, taste, touch, hearing and sight - had its own proper and distinct sphere of activity. There were overlaps, he said (movement pertained both to sight and touch), and he speculated that the mysteries of color harmony might have something to do with musical harmony, an idea that would resonate for centuries. Musical harmony, as an expression of geometry, was thought to be useful to the study of art and architecture from the Renaissance on.

But the notion that there was an essential separation among the sensual spheres persisted into the 19th century.

At the same time, reports began to emerge of rare people who said they experienced two sensations simultaneously: They saw colors when they heard sounds, or they heard sounds when they ate something. The condition was called synaesthesia.

It's no coincidence that scientific interest in synaesthesia coincided with the Symbolist movement in Europe, with its stresses on metaphor, allusion and mystery. Synaesthesia was both metaphorical and mysterious. Scientists were puzzled. People who claimed to have it couldn't agree about exactly what they experienced. "To ordinary individuals one of these accounts seems just as wild and lunatic as another but when the account of one seer is submitted to another seer," noted the Victorian psychologist and polymath Sir Francis Galton in 1883, "the latter is scandalized and almost angry at the heresy of the former."

I have come across via the color historian John Gage an amusing account from some years later by the phonologist Roman Jakobson, who studied a multilingual woman with synaesthesia. The woman described to him perceiving colors when she heard consonants and vowels or even whole words:

"As time went on words became simply sounds, differently colored, and the more outstanding one color was, the better it remained in my memory. That is why, on the other hand, I have great difficulty with short English words like jut, jug, lie, lag, etc.; their colors simply run together." Russian, she also told Jakobson, has "a lot of long, black and brown words," while German scientific expressions "are accompanied by a strange, dull yellowish glimmer."

"Visual Music" is full of strange, glimmering yellowish and other colored shapes. What might visual art look like if it were akin to music? That's the question the various artists here asked themselves - a question that goes back to Richard Wagner, the Symbolists' patron saint for his dream of a Gesamtkunstwerk, a universal artwork uniting music and art. Painters like Kandinsky, Frantisek Kupka, Mikhail Matiushin (he was a Russian composer, influenced by Arnold Schönberg, who like Schönberg also painted) and Arthur Dove, with whom "Visual Music" begins, elaborated on Wagner's theme. They painted pictures that claimed to have the condition of music - pure abstractions with occasional shapes that resembled staves, musical notes or violins.

Through the medium of musical metaphor, in other words, synaesthesia gave birth to abstract art.

This is the show's quite radical, if not altogether original, point: that abstraction's history is not just the familiar sequence of isms (Constructivism, Suprematism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism) but also the consequence of a particular idea. The idea is synaesthesia. And its protagonists, while including a few famous names like Kandinsky, were on the whole cultish and now forgotten figures or total outsiders to the art world: They were filmmakers, animators, computer geeks and 1960s psychedelic light show performers.

Blurring high and low, their legacy represented not a corruption or cul-de-sac of traditional modernism but a parallel strand of it, which has made its way, willy-nilly, right up to the present. The show ends with digitally enhanced multimedia works by Jennifer Steinkamp, Jim Hodges and Leo Villareal.