

Playing the Fold: a conversation between art and music

At a recent performance of William Engelen's *Falten* (2013) as part of "Still Alive," Schenkung Sammlung Hoffmann at the Albertinum in Dresden, an enthusiastic but visibly perplexed audience repeatedly asked, in one way or another, "What is the relationship between the music and the score?" After a series of explanations from the composer as well as further elaborations from the head of the Eklekto Ensemble, Alexandre Babel, numerous listeners contented themselves with simply not understanding. One woman confirmed with some resignation, "I still don't understand but perhaps I don't need to in order to enjoy it," or something to that effect. Her enjoyment could indeed be heard when she continued clapping for an encore after the applause, though her request went unheeded. When it comes to graphic scores, which is what *Falten* essentially are, too much audience enthusiasm might lead to an uncomfortable dilemma. Encores, in the traditional sense, are not always possible. The graphic score is often a singular event; it is played differently each and every time.

It is this unpredictable, if not capricious, nature of the graphic score that confounded the audience at the Albertinum, which is why their reaction should not be attributed to simple philistinism. Though graphic notation finds its roots with Earl Browne and John Cage in the 1950s, one of the most famous examples comes from Cornelius Cardew, who provided no instructions to his *Treatise* (1967). Each musician could interpret the notation-like figures, as he later wrote, "using any media . . . in his [or her] own way."¹ Cardew finally admitted that a successful rendition of *Treatise* required "people who by some fluke have (a) acquired a visual education, (b) escaped a musical education and (c) have nevertheless become musicians."² Later still, the composer did a 180° pivot to question, albeit on political rather than aesthetic grounds, whether "anything can be transformed into anything else."³ In the same essay he writes, "[i]t is truly a laughable situation when you can compose a piece of 'music' without ever having heard or played a note of music."⁴

Cardew's change of heart was not just prompted by his later communist convictions, but points to an instability at the core of what it means to compose and perform sound. How much space can exist between the musician and the notation? Where does authorship lie in the case of a musical performance? What does it mean to be true to a musical tradition when standards, technologies of hearing and musical instruments have changed over time? This instability has long been a part of the visual arts, where issues of authorship, representation and audience involvement have dominated critical discourse and often appear as the subjects of the artworks themselves. The flexibility of visual art is no doubt tied to the fact that it is rarely a form of notation, though graphic scores are often exhibited as drawings. When it comes to the fold as a graphic strategy, however, the history in art, and above all in music, is somewhat sparse. Instead the fold is far more prominent in discussions on architecture where Gilles Deleuze's theorizations on Leibniz and the Baroque dominate. A few examples can be, nevertheless, found here and there. In the visual arts Tauba Auerbach's psychedelically spray-painted *Folds* (2012) come to mind, or Franz Walther Erhard's cloth installations, but it is decidedly Canadian-American artist Dorothea Rockburne who has most consistently explored the logic of the fold. In the field of music, it is Engelen who could be said to pioneer it as a method of composition, though the fold makes earlier, perhaps more ambiguous, appearance in the history of sound. In his experimental film *Ludwig van: Ein Bericht* (1970), Argentinean composer Mauricio Kagel wrapped works from Beethoven around objects to produce a score whose spatiality was played as an additional sonic layer atop the notation. But before we dive deeper into this particular fold, let us look more closely at the works behind the introductory anecdote.

1 Cornelius Cardew, *Treatise Handbook*, London : Hinrichsen Edition Ltd., 1971, p. ix

2 *ibid*, p. xix

3 Cornelius Cardew, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism*, ubuclassics edition, 2004, p. 84

4 *ibid*, 86

What do Engelen's *Falten* look like? At first glance they are intricately folded scores that the composer conceptualizes as architectural models, an association that stems from his early works—models made in the lineage of Dutch forebears like Constant Anton Nieuwenhuys. In the case of *Falten*, the cream-coloured sheets of paper are perched precariously, even flamboyantly like flamingos on one leg, atop stainless steel music stands. The size of the scores is not standardized. Some pages are about a meter long while others are so small and tightly folded that they can barely be read. At the Albertinum, one piece in particular is folded like a bow tie and fastened to a stand hiked too high for a musician of average height to play. Meanwhile other scores hover close to the ground, making the individual works look like idiosyncratic characters or stand-ins for the musicians themselves.

Upon looking closer one sees that the scores are actually drawings wherein each stave-line, each time-marker, is meticulously inscribed by hand. Where the paper folds and swallows the score, the stave disappears, leaving a series of absences cutting through the paper. The paper does not only fold, it also bends and bows, billows and crumples, and in so doing obstructs a linear reading of the timeline. There is, however, no time signature, no treble or bass clef. In fact, there are no notes at all. Instead, the stave is divided into seconds, with each centimetre amounting to a discrete amount of time. Due to the folds, the stave often runs diagonally to meet itself at cross purposes, layers onto itself like a series of stairs or bends into a bridge across the music stand. It quickly becomes apparent that the curve of the paper substitutes for traditional notes. However this brings us to another version of the audience's insistent question: What does it mean to play a fold?

Hints might be found in the works of Dorothea Rockburne. In *The Brooklyn Rail* writer Matt Farina attributes the artist's early dance training as a contributing factor to her now iconic folding techniques. The connection lies in the body. Farina writes that Rockburne “sought to essentialize the corporeal presence and movement of the viewer within her work.” In describing the folds, he observes that their “shifts and repetitions imply an act to be sustained. The body is activated through folding and unfolding; one can imagine his or her finger and arms manipulating the peaks and valleys of the surfaces.”⁵ Other writers have gone so far as to psychologize Rockburne's folds, which are more often connected to her study of mathematics under Max Dean at Black Mountain College in the 1950s. A.V. Ryan claims that the artist's folds and creases “are the signs of paper’s reflexivity,”⁶ whereas in a 1979 article in *Artforum*, Jeff Perone taps into Freud to liken folds to trauma and the paper as a model for consciousness itself.⁷

Though at times such descriptions can read like intellectualized hyperbole, there is a thread of truth to be found in them. The implication of the body and its reflection in the material can be traced to the fold's eradication of the figure-ground relationship in drawing. Normally even the most abstract of works tend to treat the ground for drawing, i.e. the paper, as the carrier for the work, rather than the work itself. Paper is chosen not as a medium, but for how it supports the medium—for its tooth, its thickness, its absorption. Representation and reality, even if the representation is abstract, are conceptualized in terms of a Cartesian dualism. However, when the paper itself ruptures, as it does in Rockburne's work, the drawing must acknowledge itself as not just a conveyer of visual information, but a body in the world—a body that has been damaged, wrinkled or scarred. The lines on the paper are also changed, if not redrawn, by this rupture. They may point in different directions, overlap and even become darker or lighter depending on the light.

The background as constitutive graphic element is what Rockburne brings to the fore in her early

5 Matthew Farina, “Dorothea Rockburne: Drawing which makes itself,” *The Brooklyn Rail* (November 2013), <https://brooklynrail.org/2013/11/artseen/dorothea-rockburne-drawing-which-makes-itself>, accessed August 5, 2021

6 A.V. Ryan, “Dorothea Rockburne,” *The Brooklyn Rail* (October 2018), <https://brooklynrail.org/2018/10/artseen/Dorothea-Rockburne-1>, accessed August 5, 2021

7 Jeff Perrone, “Working Through, Fold by Fold,” *Artforum* Vol. 17, no. 5 (1979), pp. 44-50

minimal pieces, most specifically her iconic work *Locus* (1972). Unlike Engelen's whimsical structures, what makes the series of folded sheets stand out is their astonishing simplicity. The series of six works on paper measure approximately 100x76 cm each and look like creased blank pages from afar. And yet there is something deliberate and premeditated in the creases that lend them a subtle, quiet sophistication. For example, the direction changes mid-fold. Sometimes a crease starts in the middle of the bottom edge, but veers off at 100° when it reaches the centre. The relief of the crease can also change. Where in one section the paper bulges into a peak, in another, after an intersection with another fold, it dips into a small ravine. These folds cast shadows on the page, but more accurately it feels like they are cast into the page. Closer inspection reveals that these papers are indeed not blank. Rockburne has used thin layers of paint and aquatint to highlight and offset the page's ruptured geometry. In photographs, the the aquatint is immediately visible due to exaggerated contrast, but in actuality, it forms a subtle, hazy layer that complicates surface and ground, shadow and tone.

The individual pages in *Locus* act more as evidence of a gesture or action than a representation. This evidence is literally imprinted in the ground of the work itself. The trace of bodily action is something Rockburne further explored in large carbon paper works that were scored and folded against a wall, thus leaving smudge marks and thick chalky lines around them. In these works the fold reveals itself not only as spatial, but also temporal. If we look at a carbon paper example like *Nesting* (1972), we can see that the piece had to be made in the exhibition space itself. The smudges on the wall become testament to bodily activity and as well as a process of contamination. Dirty walls, whether in a gallery or not, are a sign of use and wear through time. This same vocabulary is present in a folded or wrinkled sheet of paper.

Traces of damage point to a lived, temporal experience rather than a hermetic work of art, which is something that performing the fold can not only imply but bring into motion. In his film *Ludwig van*, Mauricio Kagel takes a first step in this direction. First screened in 1970, the film was commissioned by the Westdeutschen Fernsehen (West German Television) in honour of Beethoven's 200th birthday. It is both homage and parody. It uses Beethoven's oeuvre as well as clips from television shows and popular representations of the composer's dramatic brooding face, to create a critical media montage exploring not only his musical legacy, but the evolution of his image over time. Central to the film, in which Kagel collaborated with iconic artists such as Joseph Beuys and Dieter Roth, are questions of musical fidelity, exemplified in a clip from a television debate in *Der Internationale Frühschoppen* that, measured by today's standards, seems like a parody. The theme of the show was, "Wird Beethoven missbraucht?", which translates to "is Beethoven misused?," or, perhaps more fruitfully, "is Beethoven abused?"

Indeed Kagel sets out to discover just how many ways he can productively abuse the legacy of the great composer, though one scene in particular stands out as relevant for the present discussion—Beethoven's music room. Here, a room with a piano is meticulously wallpapered with Beethoven's music. Scores are folded onto and between the piano keys, around the legs of the stool, weaving in and out of the holes of the sheet music holder, over the floor and across every wall. Originally, as noted by Kagel specialist Knut Holtsträter, Jiří Kolář was commissioned to design the room, though he had planned a somewhat more painstaking collage, one in which individual notes would be layered as graphic elements over every surface.⁸ In contrast, Kagel's execution is somewhat simpler. He pasted passages from Beethoven's scores allowing for interrupted readability. As the camera's eye, which Kagel presents as Beethoven's gaze, zooms in on individual portions of the room, a stuttering cacophony of music erupts in correspondence with the notes on the sheet. While the lens moves over the curving music holder, the jumbled melodies are interrupted and scrambled. As the

8 Knut Holtsträter, "Kompositionsweisen in Mauricio Kagels filmischer Arbeit zu Ludwig van, dargestellt an der Handschuhsequenz und dem Musikzimmer," *"Alte" Musik und "Neue" Medien*, Edition: Diskordanzen. Studien zur neueren Musikgeschichte, Vol. 14, eds. J. Arndt, W. Keil, Hildesheim : Georg Olms Verlag, 2003), p. 82-87

camera zooms out, the sound expands into a musical chaos of disorganized notes.

While the fold can be interpreted as a form of collage, as Perrone did in *Artforum* when he identified the crease as a cut, the three-dimensional quality of the fold gives it an important lived, spatial component. In Beethoven's music room, the edges and curves of the space not only decide on the fragmentation of and the pauses within the music, but lend a dimensional quality to the interpretation. Ironically enough, this is far more apparent in the 45 photographs of the room that form the score of *Ludwig van : Hommage von Beethoven*. In the instructions to the piece, Kagel writes that the blurred portions of the score, which are a result of the changing focus on sections that recede or come forward, should be played with increasing or decreasing deviation from the "ordinario tone."⁹ This spatially responsive technique can be interpreted as an attempt to make the sound itself "wrap around" the objects. Moreover, the musician is given the liberty of proceeding through the score according to a spatial logic. As if emulating "Beethoven's gaze" in the film, the musician can play the work in any order he or she pleases, and in any direction the eye wanders across the page. In the interview with Karl Faust accompanying the foreword to the score, Kagel explains that he would rather attend a concert where Beethoven as such would be played, rather than hear select sonatas carefully performed from start to finish. The musician, according to Kagel, should be free to roam through Beethoven's oeuvre so as to perform not the composer's works, but the composer's contribution to contemporary music.¹⁰ This conception of tradition as something folded into the musical consciousness of the present moment is made manifest through *Ludwig van's* spatial logic. Just as the fold implies layers that are seen and unseen, Kagel's spatial montage is an examination of how Beethoven's influence has seeped into the cultural consciousness and layered into something that might not be recognizable to the composer, as embodied in the camera's wandering eye, himself.

Engelen's spatial compositions are also repositories of a musical heritage, though the idea is not bound to any one tradition. For Engelen, the blank staff represents all possible sound—a veritable repertoire of musical experience. At the same time this sound is buckled and folded. As such, it is marked by traces of time and movement. The artist-composer's folds might be thus understood as situated somewhere between Rockburne and Kagel. The difference is that in Kagel's approach the notation retains its representational function, it is simply interrupted and distorted by the folds following the lines of the furniture. In Rockburne the notation, if you will, is embedded into the paper itself. It is then Engelen who goes on to concern himself with how to play it. If, as Farina writes, the finger and arms are invited to manipulate the "peaks and valleys" of the creases, then how can that be done?

One might interject to say that *Falten* can be sufficiently explained through the history of graphic scores. It lies in the nature of graphic scores, after all, to be concerned with the sonic fringes of musical notation. These fringes are not only to be found with the incorporation of electronic sounds and non-musical instruments, which easily challenge the limits of pre-existing notation, but also with the expanded use of traditional instruments. American composer Samuel Pluta puts it succinctly when he notes that traditional notation "displays a hierarchy where the notes and rhythms of sound are given priority," while graphic scores can privilege other qualities like "tone color[sic], playing technique, and shaping."¹¹ Nevertheless, what makes the fold literally "stick out" as a graphic score is precisely its topology, and its existence as embodied notation as opposed to acting as the carrier of sound.

For Engelen's compositions the consequences of this are, metaphorically and literally speaking, two-fold. First, in the terms of visual art, the works are sculptures. They are exhibited without

9 Mauricio Kagel, *Ludwig Van : Hommage Von Beethoven*, London : Universal Ed., 1970, p. v

10 *ibid.*

11 Theresa Sauer, ed., *Notations 21*, New York : Mark Batty Publisher, 2009, p. 178

sound, though they continue to signify sound. As objects, they function as a score as well as a stage-set for the musicians, who perform among them, or weave their way between them. As mentioned earlier, some are placed at heights that do not allow for adequate “reading,” and as such, they can appear as performers themselves.

Second, the spatiality of the fold suggests a different kind of movement. In his instructions to the musicians, Engelen asks them to imagine the score as an architectural space through which they are walking. This means that each individual piece is simultaneously a type of choreography wherein the musician is invited to approach the notation and her instrument as Engelen approaches his drawing—tactilely. The bow of the paper might mirror the swipe of the arm or the angle at which the violin is played, a slope might indicate the intensity of a movement, a series of tiny steps is a gradual constriction. The folds of the paper might be read in the folding of the musician's body, though to what extent this is done is up to the performer, and many of these decisions, as Alexandre Babel noted at the Albertinum, are made in conversation and negotiation with the composer. Nevertheless, once the composer is gone, the score will remain, and if it is no longer a window into a prescribed auditory experience, then perhaps it is a model for a dynamic material relationship between musician and instrument. It is an invitation to become aware of the instrument's geometric structure, its keys, its screws, its taken-for-granted underbelly.

Since no one has the requisite training to read a fold, this explanation might imply a democratizing or emancipatory impulse that parallels the freedom, if not the sound, of ad hoc garage bands and late night jams. Lending credence to this impression is Engelen's lack of musical training. However, in its execution, his score relies on a deep familiarity between musician and instrument, something that can only be attained with years of experience. As already mentioned, the blank stave represents all possible sound and is therefore only as rich as the musician's relationship with her instrument. The more intimate this bond, the closer the instrument comes to being an extension of the musician's body, the better the result. The folds in the score are intended to insert an element of alienation into this relationship. As a result the instrument, like the score, should become an Other, or a foreign territory. In the case of the Albertinum concert, this idea was realized in an absurdly slapstick way. A musician picked up a bow and a large crumpled piece of paper, i.e. the score, and played it. In this literal actualization of “Werktreue” or “true rendition,” the “peaks and valleys of the surfaces”¹² were indeed manipulated in a new way. The embodied fold is thus less representation and more of a dance, with the sound as its trace.

Jeff Perrone notes that Rockburne often spoke about her folds in reference to the self. He quotes from an interview where the artist explains that when looking at her work, she must come to grips with *who* she is. Through the fold, writes Perrone, Rockburne discovers “the previously hidden Other in herself as a subject rendered as an object of self-contemplation in her materials.” He continues: the fold “[represses] something, absent[s] it, in order to concentrate on—to make present under questioning—an other.” This description can also be applied to Kagel's portrait of Beethoven, which, as already mentioned, was filmed through the eyes of the composer himself. As if time were folding in on itself, Beethoven encounters himself through his own materials 200 years after his birth. For Engelen, the reflexive materiality of the score becomes othered through the fold, which in turn is a prompt for the musician to discover the hidden “folds” of her instrument.

The fold, then, is not a figure in a drawing, an image, or a note in a score but, to finally turn to Deleuze, an “operative function”¹³ that, he writes in reference to Heidegger, “endlessly unfolds and folds over from each of its two sides, and that unfolds the one only by refolding the other, in a coextensive unveiling and veiling of Being, of presence and withdrawal of being.”¹⁴ This operation

12 Matthew Farina, “Dorothea Rockburne: Drawing which makes itself”

13 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*, New York : continuum books, 2006, p. 3

14 *ibid.* p. 33-34

thus escapes definition and invites movement and change, which is what Rockburne's folds as traces intimated as she coaxed the viewer into imagined tactility, what Kagel playfully pointed to in his folding of space and time in film and what Engelen, in a play on his visual art background, “draws out” from the musicians with whom he works.