Fascinating Rhythm: John Aislandis’ Op Music

The paintings in this show—all belonging to John Aislandis’ “Dislocation” series—live up to their name. A certain procedure of displacement could even be said to constitute their operating principle. Yet exactly what is it that dislocates (or displaces) in these paintings? What, or indeed who, is dislocated by them? Even if this point, and the allure, of these paintings perhaps lie in the fact that we cannot finally answer this question, a consideration of two aspects of Aislandis’ work may enable us to come closer to an understanding of the thread of equivocation that runs through this series. Thinking about the nature of this equivocation in Aislandis’ recent paintings—an equivocation which I would associate with a kind of op music in the work—will also lead us to more general questions regarding current reflections of Op aesthetics in contemporary art and culture, but first let us consider the two aspects specific to Aislandis’ work to which I alluded a moment ago.

The first of these aspects has to do with the impetus for the “Dislocation” paintings. Aislandis has commented that the initial inspiration for this series came from a CD put out by the Zornar electronic music label back in 1990: “Here a disc itself entitled ‘Dislocation’. In the notes on his work, Aislandis points to a kind of cross-over between the musical ‘Dislocations’ to be heard on the Zornar disc and the ‘Dislocation’ which would be the recurrent trait and signature of his paintings of the last four years. It was also in 1998 that Aislandis began work on the series of paintings which he names his “Dislocation paintings.” For Aislandis, it seems, this cross-over makes itself evident in a multiplicity of ways. Just as the musicians featured on the “Dislocations” CD remix one another’s tracks, Aislandis in this series recalls, reimagines and remixes elements drawn from earlier phases of his work. What elements are subject to this remixing? We might think of the ambiguity of figure-ground relationships that was of special interest to Aislandis in his early “Transit Zone” series of 1981-1982 and, also at this time, his wish to break away from formalist approaches to painting. We could also note the move to smaller compositional elements—and thus toward greater pictorial complexity—in the “Refurbishing” works of 1986-1987, a move designed to maximise the effects of optical resonance that these paintings would be able to generate. And, most significantly perhaps, we could think of the “Crosscurrent” series of 1984-1985, for it was at this time that Aislandis began to conceive of his work in terms of its proximity, and indeed its resonance, with electronic music and sound art.

To underscore the importance of this proximity, we should note Aislandis’ continuing engagement with contemporary music and performance—his involvement with the well-known visual and sound art group Clin Analogus, and, specifically, the inclusion of his images (as slide projections, visual “accompaniments”) in sound-arts events and performances situated outside gallery spaces. Let us also think here of a few of the phrases Aislandis uses in his remarks on the Dislocation paintings. For Aislandis, this is a series which looks for a “new vision”, a vision in which harmony and dissonance, order and chaos co-exist, a vision which is able to capture “a fragment of infinity”. Beyond this, however, it is a series which in a certain way sets out to confound the limits of the visual, from this point of view, according to Aislandis, these paintings aim to produce a “sonic resonance”. In these terms, their maker even describes himself as a “sound artist using the medium of painting to create visual soundscapes”. All these considerations seem to point us in the direction of an art that is decidedly hybrid. They seem to signal an approach to art production that does not hold to the specificity of particular media, to a practice that instead moves between the aural and the visual, refusing to see them as separate or discrete. At this point, however, we need to turn to the second of the two aspects of Aislandis’ paintings to which I referred earlier. This second aspect is the rigorous optically of these paintings, their Op discipline, their resolute pictoriality. For us now, the word Op typically calls up the various essays in geometric abstraction undertaken by artists like Victor Vasarely and Bridget Riley in the 1960s, as well as the 1980s re-runs of Op in the work of Philip Taaffe, Walter Robinson and Ross Bleckner. Through their insistent patterning of the picture-surface, all those artists play-games with the viewer’s capacity to see. In Op art, the insistent repetition of pictorial forms or elements is such that there are always too many forms, too much repetition for the viewer to be able to get a rational hold or “grasp” on the different elements that confront them. In other words, the eye finds itself unable to synthesise these parts into a whole and it is this failure that produces the effect of an illusion of movement within the work. Let us note that an interest in opticality and optical effects has long been central to Aislandis’ painting. As far back as 1984, the critic Peter Duggan, writing about paintings from Aislandis’ “Alteration” series of 1983, took his work to reflect a conception of abstract painting as an exclusively visual experience. Duggan in fact remarked on “an almost puritanical discipline” evident in the severe restrictions that Aislandis—then as now—imposed on his pictorial means. Aislandis’ pursuit of optical effects might lead us to side-line the hybrid aspect of his painting that I accorded earlier on. A consideration of this second aspect of his work seems to contradict the synaesthetic ambition of Aislandis’ work—its bid to condense sound and image, its commitment to a certain transactivity of the visual and the auditory. No doubt it would be possible to develop a view of Aislandis’ work as steadfastly ‘pure’ in its optically, never deviating from a chosen, and strictly limited, repertoire of flat, even industrial colours, and a similarly restrained repertory of forms—those endlessly intersecting and replicating arcs, bands and circles. Can we try to reconcile these seemingly contradictory aspects of Aislandis’ work? Let us concede, first of all, that in a certain sense it is impossible to sublimate the claim of a sonic component to the paintings we see in this show. These paintings firmly remain paintings. This does not mean, however, that we should discount the elusive force of an “aesthetic affinity”—the force of an analogical kinship or “clarity”—between sonic or musical experience and visual experience in Aislandis’ case. Rather, we might think of the connections between Aislandis’ pictorial dislocations and those of musical forms like trance or techno not in terms of materials or media but primarily in terms of the work’s structure and its most palpable effects. Let us observe, then, that in the case of Aislandis’ work, as with much contemporary electronics,
we are dealing with an insistent yet always somewhat discrepant repetition—a repetition which effectively acts to disarm the listener’s or viewer’s perceptual apparatus, to disable the body’s mastery (and even, perhaps, to divest this body of the ‘self’ that would serve as the guarantor of such a mastery). Related to this, in both cases we can also see a logic of sampling and remixing prevailing over a desire for presence and origins—for example, over a desire for the ‘real’ sounds of acoustic instruments, or over the ‘nature’ supposedly made evident through painterly gesture or through the subtleties of tone and nuance. Repetition in this sense displaces a logic of presence. It is worth recalling that sixties Op has commonly been regarded as a dead-end ‘moment’ in the unravelling of modernism. What is equally striking, however, is the point that no other ‘moment’ in twentieth-century painting has thrived more than Op in its non-artistic, non-pictorial afterlife, whether this afterlife takes the form of moiré shopping bags, clothing designs, and poster art, or whether it returns in the designs we see on LP and CD covers. It would be interesting (but impossible for us here) to try to trace this paradoxical condition of Op aesthetics—its short-lived moment in the history of painting and the lasting imprint it leaves on so many facets of contemporary culture—back to the amalgam which seems to have given rise to it: namely, a curious mixing of the post-Greenbergian (and somewhat ‘purist’) aesthetics of colour-field painting and the quasi-industrial processes favoured by Pop.

The odd tempo of Op aesthetics—it’s all but instant death in art, its all but infinite revival outside art—leads us to the most decisive point we need to think of here. It is finally the distinctively Op tempo of Aslanidis’ paintings that birds them to music—that is, to an art of time. These paintings are not striking (this is one of the striking things about them). They are not striking but rather complex, mesmerising, entrancing, fascinating. The point is that, whether it is a matter of fascinating a listener, a dancer or a spectator, it always takes time to be fascinated. It is the play of repetition and difference in time that ‘sets the scene’ for the movement (and capture) of fascination that always seems about to unfold in the vicinity of Aslanidis’ paintings. (It is evidently this structured play that the Dislocation series shares with many kinds of music, and also this play—this rhythm of discrepant repetition—that provides the basis of the strange, almost baroque harmonies we might see or feel in front of these paintings.) It is the rhythm of this play that allows the paintings in this show to perform something like op music. And in turn, in time, the manifold effects of this pictorial—yet not simply pictorial—rhythm perhaps turn their beholders, their audience, into the fascinated object of their singular ‘dislocation’.

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