

The Graphics of Herbert Brün: Composition across Boundaries

Herbert Brün was born in Berlin in 1918 and died in Urbana, Illinois in 2000. From 1936 to 1948 he lived in Palestine, where he studied music composition with Stefan Wolpe, Eli Friedman, and Frank Pelleg. His work in the electronic music studios of Paris, Cologne, and Munich during the 1950's led to an interest in the application of computers to music composition and sound synthesis. During Brün's lecture tour of the United States in 1962, the computer-music pioneer Lejaren Hiller invited him to join the faculty of the University of Illinois, where he remained for the rest of his career.

The thirty-one pieces in this show date from 1968 to 1991 and represent a selection from hundreds of extant computer graphics produced by Brün between the late 1960's and the early 1990's. The vast majority of Brün's graphics were executed on the original generation of mechanical plotters introduced by the CALCOMP corporation in the late 1960's. These machines were basically engineering devices intended for the production of high-resolution mechanical drawings and blueprints. They operated by physically moving drafting pens under the computer's control over the surface of the page. In the 1990's, as the old generation of mechanical plotters was being superseded by laser printing technology, the hardware interface to Brün's algorithms was rewritten to accommodate Adobe's PostScript language and a wider range of imaging hardware. But in every case the all-important rules which govern the movement of the pen were invented and programmed directly by Brün. As was the case with his sound synthesis programs, these graphics programs produced quite unforeseeable results within a known range of general possibilities.

Brün literally insisted, and these drawings seem to figuratively cry out for, an aggressive, creative reading. These probabalistic images require the contribution of an interventionist viewer for their completion: a viewer with a willingness to speculate about the nature of that generic range of visual possibilities which Brün's program set out to define; a viewer who can imagine limits, see characteristic patterns, and savor the irony of self-

imposed conundrums; a viewer who finds it interesting to speculate about paths chosen and paths not chosen; and finally, a viewer who feels compelled to reconcile the singular, concrete image which first greeted the eye with all of these subsequent ruminations about the terms of the image's genesis. Brün's ideal viewer will perceive the work not so much in and of itself, but rather as one term in a dialectic of reading and writing, or, in engineering terms, as one component of a well-defined feedback loop. Jacques Derrida's notion of the mental "writing" done in the act of making sense of a text springs to mind here.

Whether Brün's implied invitation to dream of parallel creative universes strikes the viewer as quixotic or essential, rewarding or annoying, historically significant, ahistorical, or merely a footnote in the history of conceptual art, will determine whether these images manage to rise above the level of the clever-but-pedestrian. But our sympathy or lack of sympathy for the manner in which Brün's compositional premises feed back into the act of perceiving his work will also tell us a great deal about *ourselves* and our attitude to recent art history – and, Brün would add, to recent *social* history. Surmounting the clean but rather cool prettiness of these works was never going to be easy, but Brün has provided us with a key, and the key lies in his specification of selected graphics as *compositions for interpreters*.

Among Brün's eight sets of computer graphics, two series, *Mutatis Mutandis* and *Floating Hierarchies*, were explicitly intended to serve as challenges to performers working in any medium to create new structures *by analogy*, or, as Brün invites us in the prefatory notes to the published score of *Mutatis Mutandis*¹:

... the interpreter is asked to construct the structured process by which the interpreter would like to have generated the graphics.

... the interpreter should compose a working model (a score?) of this structure in and for the interpreter's medium, be it sound, movement, language, film, etc., and then perform it.

The interpreter is not asked to *improvise*.

The interpreter is asked *not* to improvise.

The interpreter is asked to *compose*.

Brün offers further suggestions to the interpreter of his graphics in a program note written for a performance of *Mutatis Mutandis*:

These graphics are traces left by a process. Up and down and across the page a few points leapt in small leaps, leaving a mark wherever they alighted. ... The lines do not connect the consecutive marks left by any one leaping point, they do not outline any point's path. The lines do connect, instead, the new marks left by every point after all points' latest leap. The traces of this process emphasize the shape created by all points moving, rather than the outlines followed by each point's leap.²

The almost oppressively uniform, consistently weighted, mechanically plotted lines which form all of Brün's graphics can assume an unexpected vibrancy and a curious, ineffable transparency and strength when they're fed back into the viewer's matrix of questions, doubts, and secret hopes about the processes which spawned them. How might such a severely circumscribed drawing process actually have worked? How would it work in the future? And what, if anything, might this whole compositional/perceptual nugget serve to illuminate as an analogy? As usual, Brün, never at a loss for words, points us to at least one of his intended analogies:

All the different computer programs which generated these graphics are variations on one single theme. The theme is a statement I make about humans and human society, not as they think and act and as it is, but as they could think and act and as it could be. The variations relate to the theme explicitly only by analogy.

The theme, my statement, exists in reality, whether it speaks about a reality or about a possibility. In this sense these graphics are representative art, emphatically an output.

An observer, however, can see any one of the graphics as a theme, and attempt to make statements which reflect, by analogy and *mutatis mutandis*, the theme he sees. In this sense these graphics are, until the observer will have composed his statements, non-representative art, emphatically an input.³

Clement Greenberg's confident but insular posture concerning the creation, perception, and historical necessity of Modern art, articulated only a few years before Brün began his work with computers, suddenly seems like a distant relation with whom one shares common roots but has little left to talk about. Taking Brün at his word, we can imagine ourselves inhabiting a very messy world in which image, performance, and political critique repeatedly collide with variable notions of perception, representation, structure, and the

very meaning of the activity "to compose". This indeed sounds quite Postmodern until one recalls Brün's radically confident endorsement of progressive politics, both in art and in society at large. The plot, if you'll pardon the pun, keeps thickening:

Some successful works of art reflect the problems which maintain the system wherein they are conflicts. Indignantly contrite output of our society. They are successful in that they allow us to see our society, as it is heavily armed against change, under a thin coat of free thought accorded the artists and composers whom it favors.

A few successful works of art reflect the problems which assail the system wherein they are contradictions. Affront as input to our society. They are successful in that they allow us to see our society as if it were also another, different, society and, rather than its future, that of the artists and composers who favor it.⁴

Modernist, Postmodernist, or none-of-the-above? Adjectives will get you nowhere.

At this point the viewer or listener is left with many questions, seductively posed by the composer and rather less attractively paraphrased by the critic. To name just a few:

- *Is there a meaningful sense in which "composition" can be abstracted from the practical requirements and limitations of a specific medium?*
- *Is it necessary to accept the plausibility or efficacy of Brün's linkage of art, composition, perception, and politics? What happens to our appreciation of his images if we accept only part, or none of the deal?*
- *Does insisting on drawing analogies between graphical form, musical form, and the form of our social and political arrangements stretch the meaning of "analogy" to the point where it ceases to serve as anything but a fuzzy metaphor?*
- *Does insisting on drawing such analogies in any way enhance our appreciation of the qualities of a picture? Or of a musical performance?*

- *Haven't serious viewers always, or at least usually, speculated about how an artwork could have been made? Hasn't speculation about how a piece might have, or could have, or should have been made served as one of the foundations of art criticism and the whole form-versus-content debate since the time of Plato and Aristotle?*
- *Can thinking long and hard about a simple process render its traces more affectively and effectively complex?*
- *But what if conceptually subtle art really could change not only the way we see art but also the way we see each other?*
- *On the other hand, what if art really is as politically impotent as received wisdom holds it to be? Are we willing to live with the consequences?*

There are only hypothetical answers to such questions. All that seems certain is that, as we revisit these questions over the years, we shall also have to keep revising our understanding of Brün's art, an art which I suspect will continue to seduce us and try our patience, remaining in turn seductive and opaque, abstract and iconographic, naïve and erudite, political and decorative, both simple and curiously difficult.

*Michael Kowalski
July 27, 2004
New York*

Notes:

¹ Available from Smith Publications, 2617 Gwynndale Ave., Baltimore, MD 21207, or on the Web at: <http://www.smith-publications.com>.

² Herbert Brün, *When Music Resists Meaning: The Major Writings of Herbert Brün*, ed. by Arun Chandra, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), p. 312.

³ Brün, *ibid.*, p. 311.

⁴ Brün, *ibid.*, pp. 234-235.