

Under the influence

[ART & MUSIC]

EDUCATION RESOURCE - THEMES

INTRODUCTION

Music has a ubiquitous presence in our daily lives. From cinema to supermarket soundtracks, just the hint of a few familiar notes can be a conduit to another time and place, stirring emotions and memories. Throughout history, artists have shown an engagement with interpreting and transmitting the ephemeral nature of sound into the visual. Interactive and engaging, Under the Influence will present the work of a group of contemporary Australian artists for whom engagement with music and sound is integral to their practice.

Artists include: Tony Albert, Eugene Carchesio, The Histrionics, Danius Kesminas, The Kingpins, Isobel Knowles, Slave Pianos, Susan Pickering, David Sequeira, Martin Smith, Madonna Staunton, Soda_Jerk and Ken Thaiday.

Students are encouraged to explore the relationship between music and art by making connections between their knowledge about popular media and their own experiences as creators and audiences.

KEY THEMES:

- Visual Music – representing music through colour
- Art and Music in Australian Indigenous cultures
- Sound Art or Music?
- Appropriation and Sampling
- Collage, assemblage and the found object
- Music video as art

AREAS OF INTEREST TO STUDENTS:

- Popular culture influences on contemporary art
- DJing and Hip Hop and their relationship to collage and assemblage
- How song lyrics can represent who we are at particular moments in our lives
- Hybrid art forms and practices

Visual Music

In the early 20th century artists began to explore the relationship between art and music through colour and abstract forms. A number of artists believed that the emotional intensity of music could inspire a new type of visual art that didn't have to represent reality. These artists viewed music as a pure, abstract art form and they tried to make a visual equivalent.

One way artists did this was by exploring theories of Synaesthesia. In general the term Synaesthesia refers to a mixing of the senses, where the experience of one sense (hearing a sound) evokes the experience of another (seeing a colour). Artists associated with this theory tried to paint the colour of sounds in order to evoke the same emotional reactions as music. These artists often created paintings in direct response to the experience of specific musical compositions. Some artists created colour organs that projected pre-programmed colours as notes were played. The resulting artworks were highly subjective, being based on an individual's perception of the correlation between colours and sounds.

By contrast other artists explored a more structured, mathematical relationship between the musical scale and the colour scale. This resulted in a number of defined systems that could be used to compose a painting. For example Paul Klee devised a system of 'colour chords' by looking at rules for combining musical melodies. Australian artist Roland Wakelin believed that just as musicians use scales to create harmonies, artists could use the colour scale to develop harmonies using hues and tones. While this is accepted as part of colour theory today, at the time it was considered as a radical approach to artistic practice.

- Think about your own experiences listening to music. Does it affect you emotionally, impact on your mood, or suggest colours or imagery? Now consider how you might convey these experiences visually.
- Which artists in this exhibition explore theories of visual music? How have they responded to the aural experience of music to create a visual language? What other mediums and methods could you use to represent sound visually?
- Artists such as Wassily Kandinsky thought it was possible to see colours evoked by music. Do you think this is possible? Discuss with your classmates.
- Choose one of the works in the show and analyse how colour has been used. How does the artist's choice in colour affect the overall tone/ mood of the work?

Appropriation & Sampling

Borrowing elements from existing media to create new work is a common practice in both art and music realms. Within art this is commonly referred to as appropriation and within music, sampling. In the visual arts these borrowed elements can include images, forms or styles from art history or popular culture or materials and techniques from other contexts. It can also refer to the quoting of work by another artist. In music, sampling is the act of taking a portion of pre-recorded music or sound (referred to as a sample) and reusing it in the composition of a new recording. Samples are not limited to musical source material. They can be taken from various media, such as film, television and radio. In most cases the appropriated or sampled section remains unaltered and recognisable as a segment of the original.

Appropriation and sampling grew out of collage and assemblage practices of the early 20th century and the emergence of the cut-up. The invention of the cut-up has been attributed to the Romanian born poet Tristan Tzara who would cut out words from newspapers and other print media and combine them randomly to create new poems. Other proponents of this technique include writer William Burroughs and songwriter Bob Dylan.

These ideas have gone on to inform the contemporary mediums of turntablism and scratch video. Turntablism and scratching is a way of making music that was developed by Disc Jockeys (DJs) in the Bronx during the 1970s. It consists of taking two vinyl records and mixing them back and forth on turntables. The vinyl record, previously a passive consumer object, became the instrument. Scratch video is a similar technique, but uses film-based materials in place of records.

- Consider the issue of originality in art and reflect on how appropriation and sampling from popular images, text and sound, has influenced art. Do you believe that it is still possible to be original? Explain your answer.
- Create your own artwork using appropriation techniques.
- Find an artist in this exhibition who uses appropriation or sampling techniques. Why do you think they have chosen to reuse or reference materials created by other people, rather than make their own from scratch? (And because they are lazy, is not an answer!)

Indigenous Art & Music

The terms 'art' and 'music' are not easily translated concepts between European and Australian Indigenous cultural traditions. In Indigenous traditions art and music perform an important integrated function in the communication of an oral culture. The absence of the written word in their oral culture means that visual imagery and decoration, narration, song, music and dance are intricately combined into an interconnected system of communication, which sustains knowledge and its significance across many generations of an Indigenous community. This process involves an abstract language of visual signs and sound patterns that register the framing and nuance of meaning in particular performances of the body of knowledge known collectively as the Dreaming.

In other words, art and music only make sense in this tradition when they fulfil their role in this multi-dimensional performance of knowledge. In contemporary Indigenous art the interconnected basis of this tradition is more implied than in the past but remains a fundamental context for cultural expression.

- Imagine that there is no written language. Using only visual signs, symbols and motifs to communicate, make a short story about your day. Swap stories with someone else and see if you can interpret each other's.
- Find works by Indigenous artists in this exhibition. Compare and contrast how art and music function in their works.
- Research the concept of 'songlines' in Indigenous traditions and explain how this represents an interconnected system of communication.

Music as Found Object

Throughout the 20th century artists experimented with the use of everyday objects to create artworks. A number of different terms have been formed to describe these types of artworks including the readymade, objet trouve (found object), collage and assemblage.

The readymade is a concept first introduced by Marcel Duchamp to declare a mass-produced, store-bought object a work of art simply because it had been chosen by an artist and displayed in a gallery. By contrast, collage and assemblage practices employ second-hand materials or 'found objects'. Like the readymade these practices undermine the idea of art as a precious object. However they differ because they are concerned with the history and memories that come with second-hand items.

With the technology available today, collage and assemblage techniques have extended into the digital realm and inspired new genres such as sampling and scratch video. By looking at everyday objects from a creative perspective we begin to notice their beauty. Find a readymade or found object. What are the meanings of the object? What happens when you place it in a new context, as part of an artwork or in a gallery? Make a list of all the things that the object evokes for you. E.g. specific words, memories, music and emotions.

- There have been many critiques about the authorship of art. Do you believe that something can be an artwork if it isn't physically produced by an artist? Discuss your opinion with your classmates.
- Find an artwork in this exhibition that includes a found object. Explain the role and meaning of the object within the work, considering why the artist has chosen to use an existing piece of material rather than make an artwork from traditional media such as paint or bronze.
- Create your own artwork using collage, assemblage or readymade techniques.

Music Videos

On the most simplistic level, contemporary music video's primary function is to join images with music to create an advertisement for the performer. Music videos as we know them today, with their slick production aesthetics, started out in humble beginnings during the 1950s when live performances were filmed and distributed throughout the world to save on costs of touring. It wasn't until the advent of the 24 hour television music channel MTV in 1981 that music videos came into their own. As their popularity rose and demand increased, so too did the sophistication of the medium.

Whilst music video is not characterised by one specific style it can be loosely divided into two categories: performance-based and concept-based. Performance-based videos hark back to music video's origins by presenting the band or artist performing, whilst concept-based videos centre around a theme often derived from the lyrics or mood of the music. There are also cases in which the two intersect.

The appeal of music video can be found in its ability to meld sound and image. Unlike film where sound is used to heighten the drama of the image, in music video sound can become the structuring element. For example, drum beats and guitar riffs are often emphasised through jump cuts and other editing processes. The desired result is to evoke an emotive response in the viewer rather than to inform.

- Choose your current favourite music video. Analyse how the sound and visual elements relate to each other (or not).
- Design an alternative video for your favourite song, using a storyboard technique.
- Think about all of the music videos you have seen. Can you describe different types and genres within the categories of performance-based and concept-based videos? Can you define any categories other than these two?
- Does your interpretation or experience of a song change because of the assistance of a visual medium? Explain your answer to your classmates.

Sound Art

The term sound art refers to a diverse group of practices that challenge traditional notions of music and listening awareness. Traditionally in Western music a composition is based around ideas of harmony, narrative and resolution. In sound art there is a shift of emphasis from the act of creating to the act of listening. Sound art can take different forms such as live or pre-recorded performance and installation.

Early examples of sound art can be observed in the work of the Dadaists and Fluxus happenings. For example Dadaist George Brecht's composition Comb Music consisted of sliding a fingertip up and down the prongs of a hair comb. Another influential figure was John Cage who believed that silence was not the absence of sound but rather the sound that happens aside from the listener's expectations. His most famous composition 4'33" involves a pianist sitting at a piano and not striking a single key for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. The entire piece is composed of silence to change aural perception and highlight that in fact there is never really true silence, for the space of the performance is filled with sound, including the nervous murmurs of the crowd. The listener therefore becomes an active participant in the composition.

This notion opened doors to the idea that music didn't have to be produced by a musical instrument, and that in fact source material is everywhere. The advent of cheaper and portable recording technologies and the computer supported this further, for composers and artists can now record any sounds they find and use them in their compositions.

- Think about the terms noise, sound and music. Explain what you think each term means, and if you think they are the same or different.
- Compare and contrast 2 examples of sound art within this exhibition. How do they differ to 'visual' works?
- Create your own sound work by using materials around you. Decide whether the work would be performed live or played as an installation, and explain your choice.
- Consider John Cage's notion of silence. If silence is not the absence of sound but the sound aside from the audience's expectations, the role of the listener is crucial to the work. If there is no active listener to participate, would silence still have a sound? Debate your answer with your classmates

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