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Aesthetic Confluence in Feldman and Rothko

The seeming distance between the height of Abstract Expressionism in the visual arts and musical modernity is, in fact, fallacious. Artists within both of these disciplines, oft conferred, and would regularly attend and support advancements in both disciplines – scholars have named the group “The New York School”. Intelligentsia of the time, initially centered around poet Frank O’Hara, was a continuously evolving web of simultaneous activity and influence. John Cage and Morton Feldman, perhaps the composers most famously participating in this vogue, were quite open about their contributions and position within the movement:

That Cage was an important member of the abstract expressionist community went unsaid in 1948, but it needs emphasizing now. ‘I had,’ he recalled in 1965, ‘in the late ‘40s and the early 50s, been part and parcel of the Artists Club.’ Described as a ‘loose social and aesthetic organization where artists could meet to discuss issues of common interest,’ the club began as the ‘Subjects of the Artist’ school, evolving into ‘Studio 35’ and finally ‘the Club.’¹

The perceived disjunction that audiences today may feel around these artists was clearly the opposite of the level of interaction that the artists experienced during the time. Within the New York School, composers and painters were viewed in a manner best deemed classless – with influences and confluences amongst their shared works. Morton Feldman and Mark Rothko are a

¹ Caroline Jones, “Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego,” *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (1993): 637-638.

prime example of this influence, and the passing of the latter artist led to a sublime confluence between architecture, painting, and music – Rothko’s Chapel and *Rothko Chapel*.

Mark Rothko is one of the most significant, controversial, and influential painters of the 20th century. In 1964 he was asked to provide a set of paintings for a Catholic chapel in Houston; the heads of the project allowed Rothko to have complete control over the creation of the space. Rothko initially seized this opportunity, but amidst the process tragedy struck:

Knowing that Rothko had long desired a place devoted exclusively to his paintings, the [founders] also let him design the space itself. He completed the paintings in 1967 and seemed eager to participate in their installation, even coming involved in the finishing details of the structure. But suddenly Rothko’s life fell apart. He suffered a disabling aneurysm, began drinking heavily, and separated from his wife and five-year old son. These circumstances so deepened Rothko’s naturally gloomy temperament that, fully a year before the chapel was completed, he killed himself in his Manhattan studio.²

This tragedy deeply affected the state of the project – numerous aspects of the chapel changed: it turned from Catholic to interdenominational, and the opening ceremony became a dedicatory ceremony for Rothko. Many were in attendance, including Feldman, who agreed to compose a work in tribute to Rothko. The work was finished a few months later, called *Rothko Chapel*.

Feldman’s connection to Abstract Expressionism and the New York School began years prior through Cage. Cage, as aforementioned, was a prominent member and friend of the visual artists within the New York School. Feldman met with Cage in 1949, and through this meeting, met with “choreographer Merce Cunningham..., art critic Frank O’Hara, and began to frequent Cedar Tavern and the Artist’s Club.”³ Additionally, in 1951, Feldman attended an exhibition centered around the most acclaimed contemporary abstract expressionists – here he grew fond for, and admired in person, paintings by Pollock, de Kooning, and Kline, amongst others. This

² Steven Johnson, “Rothko Chapel and Rothko’s Chapel,” *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 2 (1994): 6.

³ Cristina Santarelli, “From Vision to Sound: Morton Feldman and Abstract Expressionism,” *Music in Art* 38, no. 1-2 (Spring-Fall 2013): 226.

was an immediate artistic shock for Feldman, who grew up surrounded by more evocative movements of the time. Seeing artists distinguish themselves from Cubism and Constructivism assuredly helped push Feldman into new fertile ground – a new period of composition. Cristina Santarelli views these advancements as Feldman’s personal revolution into a new compositional style:

Feldman’s thinking that grew out of this fertile terrain proved decisive for the formulation of a new vocabulary and a new compositional syntax: avoiding facile parallels between color and timbre, design and melody, harmony and rhythm, Feldman developed an aesthetic horizon that can be considered the equivalent of the solutions proposed by the various currents of American abstractionism...in his attempt to renew a musical scene that seemed on the verge of exhaustion.⁴

The elements which Feldman took from the painters centered around the goals of music. Turning music from a locality into a generality – focusing not only on the individualities of the music making process, but shifting his efforts into making music spatial. Nearly all of the works Feldman composed after he entered the New York School began to become atemporal in rhythm and harmony. There is an absence of purely dialectical musical development – iterative processes work to deny patterns of structural integrity. Silence, especially silence to serve as contrast from dynamic extremes, begins to occupy a central role his music. He clearly took influence from past artists such as Webern, and his close friends such as Cage. In a late interview with Francesco Pellizi, Feldman describes this change in personal dictum – of extending the focus of music:

What I’m trying to do perhaps is to extend the focus in a larger scale, into a larger period of time. I think what I’m doing in a sense is really interested in discovering form anew: you know what form is, as you get into the longer piece? It’s very interested that when harmony started to break down...even for someone like Stravinsky: he himself always said that the reason he got involved with rhythm was almost to compensate for the fact that harmony in a sense was less dependable and less depended on it, harmony was no longer stable. It became much more elliptic in its usage, especially after Wagner.⁵

⁴ Ibid, 227.

⁵ Morton Feldman and Francesco Pellizi, “A Conversation of Music and Art: February 16, 1986,” *Anthropology and Aesthetics* no.59/60 (2011): 368.

This dictum is exemplified in *Rothko Chapel* – as it does not have a significant sense of harmonic progression, but it does maintain precision in structure, as well as a rigorous rhythmic motion that Feldman abstracted from observing the paintings.

When entering the chapel, and looking at Rothko's works, there is a clear demarcation within the paintings that create hierarchy of contrast and focal points. A triptych is the point of origin, and receives the most natural light from an overhead skylight. The triptych also maintains a sense of symmetry, as the middle panel is painted with a slightly lighter purple, while the outer panels share the same darker purple. As the viewer wanders outward, the aura of the paintings starts to darken, literally – darker, blacker, hues supersede the purple that orients the viewer in paintings on the Northwest and Northeast. The culmination and apex of the panels are the West and East triptychs:

The Chapel reaches a dark climax with the nearly identical, predominantly black East and West cruciform triptychs. Here crowding grows disturbingly severe, as the internal rectangles seem to annihilate the oxblood borders, and the triptychs as a whole extend so close to the wall edges that they nearly annihilate the Chapel structure itself.⁶

The triptychs continue to lead backwards, to the final two panels, Southwest and Southeast, which hug the entrance of the chapel. These panels have the most activity, relative to each of the other panels, and also share the light purple from the middle panel of the first triptych. Described as “mountain ranges,” these brushstrokes add movement to the paintings, which at first glance, seem reflective, solemn, immobile, and desolate.⁷ The final South panel, completes the symmetrical bifurcation of the Chapel, and is the slimmest. It is primarily centered around the black on the center of the panel, and is diametrically opposed to the light purple hues in the central North panel. The primary, outward, structure of the Chapel is symmetrical, and split by

⁶ Steven Johnson, “Rothko Chapel,” 13.

⁷ Ibid.

the entrance and where observers enter. Viewers may enter and stand and walk within the paintings, or sit on a bench that sits facing the Northern triptych. Each panel opposes another within an octagon; the center of this octagon is where the skylight is located. There are not recurring motives between panels as much as there are recurring, relatively randomized, streaks of colors – streaks of red occur in the Northeast panel, and also occur in the Southwest panel. The brightness of this red color can be viewed as a contrary mood and evocation to the enveloping darkness of the set – a brief optimism.

Immediately, there is a similarity in the large scale that both Rothko and Feldman wanted to depict in their works, Rothko even commenting to de Menils (the founder of the chapel): “the magnitude, on every level of experience and meaning, of the task in which you have involved me, exceeds all my preconceptions. And it is teaching me to extend myself beyond what I thought was possible for me.”⁸ Feldman was one of the first to be invited to view the panels, and apparently had a profound viewing experience – when he began to compose the work, he would regularly stroll around the chapel in an attempt to inspire his work. The general structure of Feldman’s work has been described by Feldman himself as:

...a longish declamatory opening, a more stationary ‘abstract’ section for chorus and chimes, a motivic interlude for soprano, viola and timpani, and a lyrical ending for viola with vibraphone accompaniment.⁹

Here we approach a dilemma: Feldman seems to have, in a contrary manner, composed a condensed work with a linear structural progression to represent the chapel. The viola melody that he describes near the ending was one that he wrote at 14, and is harmonically modal. There is no clear explanation for the stylistic departure of this work, and the borrowing of materials from his youth, both elements foreign to Feldman’s works written during this time. There are

⁸ Ibid, 15.

⁹ Ibid.

contrary opinions on Feldman's inspiration and motivation. The first of these opinions claims Feldman's construction in the work is pragmatic, and is taken by Cristina Santarelli:

the choice of instrumental combination addressed the need to permeate the entire space – an octagon inscribed in a Greek cross, with each of the three sides housing a triptych while the remaining five were decorated with a single painting—obtaining a result similar to that of a recording. The work is divided into sections, alternating passages in declamatory style that much more lyrical and singable; above all, some moments of sheer vibrancy and...transitions that highlight over similarities with the subtle chromatic fluctuations and gradations of shades that characterize Rothko's paintings...¹⁰

This viewpoint prioritizes the form and architecture of the chapel itself. In its octagonal formation, the space has intense reverberation and echo. Feldman, in picking an instrumentation of viola, soprano, choir, percussion, and celesta, has picked instruments that are distinct in timbre, but together resonant. The lone viola, malleable in its ability to blend with the other textures, has the capability of not only accompanying the other voices, but clearly starting and stopping melodic impulses. This comes to great importance within the work itself – each separate portion of the work can be tracked based on the structural role of the viola. Using soprano and chorus is also not surprising – and is perhaps Feldman's way of harkening to not only the spirituality of Rothko's paintings and passing, but the religiosity of the origins of the chapel. William Cain discusses this religiosity from Rothko's perspective, when he reflected on his first visit to the chapel:

Philip Johnson had envisioned a square shape but Rothko, and admirer of octagonal Byzantine churches, had insisted on an octagon as the “environment” for his commissioned paintings and had gotten his way. But the space, while brought close by the height of the paintings, was more open than I had expected. This feeling, however, lasted only for a moment as I faced the paintings. It was not possible to see one of them at a time.¹¹

¹⁰ Cristina Santarelli, “From Vision to Sound,” 233.

¹¹ William E. Cain, “Learning Not to Look: A Visit to the Rothko Chapel,” *Southwest Review* 94, no.2 (2009): 175.

Cain's experiences at the Chapel also reflect the problematic blurred lines of the Chapel – it is impossible to enter the chapel and focus on simply one painting. There is a constant blending between each of the paintings, something again reflected in Feldman's work, and lending credence to Santarelli. Cain's note about Rothko's appreciation of Byzantine churches is also important – again adding support to Feldman's possible homage by employing vocal forces within the work.

Opposed to Santarelli is Steven Johnson, who views Feldman's choices as primarily an emotional reaction to Rothko, Rothko's passing, and Rothko's paintings:

...recognizing the distinctive position of the Chapel paintings in Rothko's career, [Feldman] felt that the music required a stylistic departure of his own. Perhaps the tragic nature of Rothko's death, combined with the awareness—on both Rothko's and Feldman's part—that Abstract Expressionism had run its course, left Feldman with a melancholy that demanded an atypically expressive response. Or, as I suspect, he may have detected the progression of moods in the Chapel and searched for a way to express it musically.¹²

Feldman claimed the work had an autobiographical trajectory – starting in a manner that was more rhetorical, and slowly transgressing into a work with more abstraction, in a manner that mirrored his own career.¹³ Regardless of Feldman's intent, both interpretations of the machinations of the final work are intensely correlated, and show an interdisciplinary confluence, one that can be traced back to Feldman's initial foray into the visual arts, combined with his appreciation for Rothko, and the impact of the architecture of the chapel.

The musical elements of *Rothko Chapel* are characteristic of Feldman's middle and late style, but also representative of the linkage between Feldman's musical aesthetic and Rothko's visual aesthetic. The most uncommon element within this work is the abundant melodicism – an element of musical style not thoroughly explored in Rothko's middle and mature works. An

¹² Steven Johnson, "Rothko Chapel," 16.

¹³ Ibid.

element of organicism in musical development is also present – and is most clear in the melodies presented to the viola. There is a clear, linear, trajectory between each of the gestures introduced:

Each phrase presents a broad arch, in which initial material—constrained and compressed spatially—yields to more expansive gestures, which in turn yield to still more expansive gestures, finally culminating with an event that, reversing direction, serves both to climax the phrase and release its accumulated tension. The first phrase... [starts in] the timpani and leads to a pair of ascending two-note figures in the viola. The melody then broadens into a three-note gesture, which Feldman immediately repeats with a new pitch and a still wider profile.¹⁴

This expansive means of composition is directly comparable to the approach of Rothko – Rothko’s gestural incorporation within the chapel initially starts with his palettes of color. The temporal nature of Feldman’s work is, thus, comparable to the viewer’s gaze within. As the viewer moves between panels, slow development is seen in the intensification of color. Gestures are introduced in a harsh manner, with spurs of brighter color being split amongst a variety of panel to introduce gestural continuity. Rothko’s fundamental approach is recast, within and as a different medium. The slow generative means of composition may also doubly reflect the composer’s intention to permeate the space of the chapel – by slowly layering elements, and introducing the largest gestures from the smallest spaces, there is a permanent sonic clarity as well as an intention to focus on ensemble:

Feldman...was even more influenced by the shape of the form of the chapel, aiming to permeate the whole space of the building with his music, thus creating a much more intimate listening experience than that of the concert hall, bringing sound, art and architecture inexorably together.¹⁵

This interdisciplinary confluence is Feldman’s realization after Rothko’s passing: by subsuming all of the influences of his artistic upbringing, he was not only able to memorialize Rothko and Rothko’s intentionality, but create a static reflection on the surrounding space.

¹⁴ Ibid, 18.

¹⁵ John Wheatley, “The Sound of Architecture,” *Tempo* 61, no. 242 (2007): 13.

There are numerous practical considerations Feldman applies to his work that further link it to the architecture of the chapel – namely his control and deployment of the chorus. He instructs the chorus to be placed antiphonally within the chapel (or wherever the work is being performed). Keeping in mind that the listeners will be in the middle of this arrangement, Feldman’s intention was to make the listener fall into the sound created, in other words, become active participants in the arrangement. This was in keeping with the spirit of the chapel, which Feldman himself commented on:

The total rhythm of the paintings as Rothko arranged them created an unbroken continuity. While it was possible with the paintings to reiterate color and scale and still retain dramatic interest, I felt that the music called for a series of highly contrasted merging sections. I envisioned an immobile procession not unlike the friezes on Greek temples.¹⁶

Casting music within rigid sections, or at least clear sections, was against Feldman’s traditional and explored aesthetic. The compromise that is achieved within the final work is responsorial, and takes advantage of abundant contrast. Each section of the work is individuated and heavily contrasting in order to depict stasis and immobility. Steven Johnson summarizes:

The contrasting units of *Rothko Chapel*, then, resemble Rothko’s sequence of panels. Feldman’s “panels” achieve identity through peculiar combinations of harmony, textural density, instrumental timbre, and thematic material. The third section, for example, stands apart because of its prevailing monophonic texture, its nearly exclusive attention to the soprano and viola, and because Feldman limits the range of motivic material for both of these instruments. The fourth section is distinguished by the vibraphone ostinato and the diatonic Hebrew tune.¹⁷

Feldman aimed to force intertextuality through the structuring of his work, replicating Rothko’s panels with discrete clarity. Listeners may not be aware of this linked structure while experiencing the work, but both experiences share a static continuity. When walking through the chapel, experiencing the panels will be a slow-moving but congruent experience. Rothko’s

¹⁶ Steven Johnson, “Rothko Chapel,” 30.

¹⁷ Ibid, 31.

control over the instrumentation, as well as the musical elements of the work, help replicate this experience sonically. In many ways, Feldman's experience puts listeners directly into the feeling of the paintings, forcing listeners to reckon and understand Feldman and Rothko's shared emotional space.

Morton Feldman and Mark Rothko were not only pioneers within their respective mediums, but prime examples of confluence within their mediums of art. Feldman's *Rothko Chapel* was not only memorialized response to Rothko's Chapel, but a culmination of Feldman's desire to accurately make art represent combined, static, totality. His resulting work was clearly based in a thorough understanding of the architecture of the chapel, the progression and meaning of Rothko's panels, and a desire to cast listeners within the reflective mood of the work. There is sharp contrast in the treatment within Rothko and Feldman's work – Rothko using dark hues, sharp rectangles, and severity, while Feldman used linear, flowering continuity – but Feldman's desire to work between and through both styles created a powerful and deeply personal reflection on the continuous influence visual artists had on composers of his time. From Feldman's contribution, all artists within all disciplines are forced to understand shared empathy and shared experience.

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