DANCE TO THE MUSIC OF RHYME
(CHRISTIAN ACHENBACH)

Ideas of syncopation and rhythm while usually associated with music are not so very far from painting. As musicians might speak about 'jam sessions' or being 'in the zone', painters similarly often have a feeling of having created a personal rhythmic process within their studio practice. Analogies with early modernism abound wherein painting and the improvisational aspects of the music studio and painter's atelier have always had a special kinship.[1] As music is a time-based practice so too, but in quite another way, are the processes of painting.[2] The distinction being simply that of their differing sensory ambitions, since obviously one pertains to the ear and the other to the eye. Hence a contemporary artist-painter like Christian Achenbach would not seek to suggest that there is a direct simile between his making of marks or brushstrokes, and the musician's composition of notes and chords. Painting is driven by material visual processes while the less immediately tangible aural experiences of sound are obviously immaterial; paint and sound speak to completely different aspects of sensory physiology. The synaesthesia of their relations such as it exists is one that is intuitive and multi-sensory rather than that of simple correspondence.[3] Similarly, to the extent that the visual and the aural senses are linked in some mysterious and non-definable way, painting is also deeply embedded within haptic considerations. In fact essential issues concerning haptic perception (touch is central to studio painting) frame the absolute immediacy of all daily painting processes. Moreover the spatial concerns of painting are clearly very different to those generated by the multi-sensory acoustics of music. What this must suppose therefore is a language

of relational affinity between music and painting, rather than an explicit sense of analogous duality, an extended pictorial commitment and engagement with the poetic imaginary of music as distinct from that of a literal conformity and identification with sound.

When I say that Achenbach's paintings contain qualities of rhythmic expression, I do so to emphasise more than just the fact that he often takes musical themes as his subject matter. And, that he has a great personal affinity with music, since musical instruments appear everywhere in his paintings. It seems that the very essence and material processes of this painter have an intention that wishes to energise both the material force of rhythm and expression through his use of gesture and mark. The making of marks that forms the signature style of a painter are a set of complex inferences that can never be fully defined. But Achenbach is not simply a mark-maker, since his collage and layered approach to painterly composition also show strong affinities to the composition of music. Image contents are brought together and in the process and interactively re-energised. This said the artist also derives a great deal from found art historical, film, and/or popular media sources, all of which interpenetrate his painting compositions at every level. This rhizome-like and non-hierarchical approach to painting forms the basis for the compositional collation of elements in his paintings. An example can be given in a recent painting called *La Danse Suprematisti* (2010), which has structural references to the Suprematism in its title, but also the central armatures of Cubism; the chess or chequerboard in a common motif found in papier collés and in Analytic and Synthetic Cubism. Even the

'danse' of the title has Matisse connections since the French artist's work 'La Danse' (1909-10) was in the famous Sergei Shchukin Collection in Moscow, and both Cubism and Matisse form a background influence on the emergence of the Russian avant garde after 1910. However, this is not that important, for the argument I am suggesting in not that Achenbach is intentionally quoting these sources for their own sake, but that form the very basis or common building bricks of the self-reflexive conditions of painting that exist today. A close examination of the contents of the Achenbach painting shows that it expresses a multiple vocabulary of marks (both flat and expressionist), and that they possess a welter of resonances from Kandinsky-like constellations, to Pop Art and 1960s dance floors. Achenbach's little mouse in the lower foreground merely reflects, perhaps, a witty ironic comment on the self-knowledge required to produce a painting at the present time. The use of iconography today has little do with finding a sources or deriving stylistic influence, but is more about the plethora of visual material possibilities of sources that are constantly mediated and available to painters. The intention and task of a contemporary painter is to establish how those sources can be re-orchestrated anew to derive and create new and highly personal language of painterly expression. This completely undermines the old modernist assertion of a narrow stylistic unity in favour of a fsr reaching visual heterogeneity.

Another example might the painting Achenbach has called *Trip Trap* (2010), which as the artist freely admits is related to Duchamp's 'Nude Descending a Staircase' (a trope of modernism), and is a recurrent visual pun

of sorts found in this artist's works, though the figure is not nude and is accompanied by a Surrealist umbrella and handbag.[4] While at the same time the stairs she is descending are like a musical keyboard recalling the fact that images of keyboards and musical bands occur in many of Achenbach's earlier paintings. The repeated presence of musical instruments, drums particularly, expose another aspect of Achenbach's work, namely the the artist was once a drummer, as he puts it 'in a trashy punk band', in his earlier life. And, the relationship between musical background and colour is pronounced in his paintings, but unlike earlier modernist uses in painting it is not used express ideas of synaesthesic harmony so much as visual dissonance. A primary characteristic of punk music is the assertion of aural dissonance, it challenges the ear just as Achenbach's paintings are intended to challenge the eye.[5] Therefore the relational state of the numerous secondary and tertiary colours used by the artist are intentionally dissonant, for they are intended to be conceptual colours of personal choice reflecting his state of mind, rather than simply used as descriptive or traditional associative colours of the eye. In this respect Achenbach reveals himself to be decidedly a very German painter, where colour is used to reflect a state of existing consciousness and not used as a immediately descriptive response to natural world. Colour and its various expressive assertions have a long history in German art, since the Romantic Age greater concentration has been placed upon visual affect rather than natural effect.[6] It follows from Kant's aesthetic principle that art and the artistic consciousness is the product of a unique synthesis of what is actually felt in a state of conscious as a consequence and departure from what is seen.[7] There

is no such thing as an innocent eye, since pre-existent ideas are embedded in consciousness.

To speak of an operative consciousness is to speak of the necessarily interactive relationship between the mind and the world. In Achenbach's case it is born of a highly spontaneous sensory engagement and a simultaneity of immediate experiences, which for the artist it is like living life in 'stereo'. In fact we might argue that it is these stereophonic aspects of painterly process that are so essential to Achenbach paintings, which is to say he incorporates it into his paintings through a sense of there being multiple channels of visual transmission. And, as with nature of stereophony, the colours and marks – along with the compositional sources – come at the viewer from many different directions. Indeed, and in some instances the use of language fails to capture the direct immediacy of the sensory experience, and one is left to retreat into the language of onomatopoeia, where the material elements dance across the surface, splish and splash, splodge and smudge, revealing a highly evocative and sensuous process at work in his paintings. However, this is not to say that the paintings are out of control in any real sense, but like music the synapses operate at such speed as to give a pictorial feeling of sensory disorientation. Yet colour and musical analogies alone do not suffice to explain this intense phenomenon. In a more obvious sense spatial anomalies are also a cause of visual disorientation. Conversely, and in this respect, Achenbach is very controlled painter, since multiple spatial perspectives indicate the use of structure. This works through different juxtapositions of multiple spatial perspectives, but also by using the added

content layers of material superimposition. It is for this reason that we are free to speak of the complex use of collage in the creation of these paintings. It is clearly evident in a painting called *Goodbye Swingtime* (2010), where colour plays little or no part in creating the syncopated effect. This painting is a highly structured visual arrangement. If it appears to the viewer visually frenetic, it does so based on superimposed painterly elements that both compliment and energise its fundamental sense of spatial structure.

While the formal discussion of space and structure brings a more weighty sense to Achenbach's paintings, this is not at the expense of the fact that his paintings are always witty and humorous in other respects. This is also the case when the artist deals explicitly with references to art historical iconography. In a ongoing series of paintings that he calls *Vanitas* the bowls of flowers depicted have little or nothing to do with meditations on life and death in the traditional sense. In fact the flowers have more to do with actual florescence than with floral representation. But again while there is the traditional and structured sense of a bowl placed centrally to the viewer, the flowers themselves appear in a state cacophonous dissolution. There are numerous drips and marks, erasures and over-painted elements common to this artist's processes, florescent effusions, and artificially collaged interventions. It indicates what is essential to the practice of painting today, namely that it is not about painting a bowl of flowers, but about the painting of a painting that just happens to be a bowl of flowers. And by choosing an art historical and archetypal subject, Achenbach is challenging the viewer to think about what it means to paint a painting. In this way he consciously compels

the viewing public to think about the act and affect of painting, to look at what is immediately present and not refer themselves to a symbolic content that can only exist outside the painting.

The current scumbled approach to outline and definition, the use of part-objects or bodies, the sometimes opaque and semi-opaque use of colour, harbours and reflects a sense of immediate vitality in all of Christian Achenbach's new paintings. In this he has drawn heavily on his earlier background in music bands and night clubs, his graffiti and comic-strip drawings, and a dirty sense of 'shabby chic' or 'anti-beauty' that once prevailed in his youthful life.[8] As the paintings now reveal these personal life experiences have been all to the good, for what has emerged over the last few years is a distinct process of visual assimilation and distillation, a clarification of ideas and the emerging mastery of expression. In this way Achenbach has begun to find a vocabulary that is uniquely his own. The wish to be a contemporary painter in the mass-consumer, media-saturated modern age has never been more difficult or complex. In what was once proclaimed to be dead as a medium of expression just forty years ago, contemporary painting has shown that it has an extraordinary ability to re-vivify itself and extend its language.[9] The new generation of contemporary painters are extremely self-knowing, since they are no longer governed by the easy labels of Schools or styles. Influences are polymorphic and various, and the processes of assimilation are synchronous, since visual materials come at the painter from every direction. In such a diffused and fast moving context it is an accomplishment for a painter to find a noticeably singular voice. This is the

achievement of Christian Achenbach, who has managed to create a rhythmic art with its own very personal identity.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The most obvious instance was Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) and Arnold Schoenburg (1874-1951) whose development of 'abstract' art and 'atonal' music were based on series of ideas concerning 'inner resonance' and synaesthesia-related principles of the interchangeable nature of the human senses as regards colour, harmony, and sound; see Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, (1911) London, Dover Publications, 1977. See also, Richard E. Cytowic and David M. Eagelman, *Wednesday is Indigo Blue: Discovering the Brain of Synesthesia (with an afterword by Dmitri Nabokov)*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2009.

[2] Peter Vergo, *The Music of Painting; Music, Modernism and the Visual Arts From the Romanticism to John Cage*, London, Phaidon Press, 2010.

[3] Synaesthesia has a long theoretical history beginning with Gustav Fechner, the father of psychophysics (1871), and Francis Galton (1880s). In recent times the approach has been twofold, either as extended historical analysis, see Kevin T. Dann, *Bright Colors Falsely Seen: Synaesthesia and the Search for Transcendent Knowledge.* Yale University Press, 1998. In contemporary neurology and cognitive studies, Vilayanur S. Ramachandran, *The Emerging Mind: The Reith Lectures*, London, Profile Books, 2008, also *Phantoms in the Brain: Human Nature and the Architecture of the Mind*, New York,Fourth Estate, 1999; and, *The Tell-Tale Brain: Unlocking the Mystery of Human Nature*, London and New York, Heinemann, 2011.

[4] The umbrella is a common motif in Symbolist, Dada, and Surreallist art, and is linked to the idea of the1 bringing together of distant realities, it derives from Isidore Ducasse (1846-70) (pseudonym 'Comte de Lautreament'), one of the greatest heroes of Surrealism, and the prose novel *Le Chants de Maldorors* "beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella!" Many Surrealist artists make reference to umbrellas and sewing machines, most notably, perhaps, Man Ray's wrapped sewing machine called 'L'énigme de Isidore Ducasse' (1920). Max Ernst, Victor Brauner, Óscar Dominguez, Espinoza, André Masson, Joan Miró, Aime Césaire, Roberto Matta, Wolfgang Paalen, Lurt Seligman, Yves Tanguy, and many others have made reference to umbrellas and sewing machines.

[5] Craig O'Hara. *The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise*, San Francisco and Edinburgh, AK Press, 1999.

[6] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, (In German, *Farbenlehre*, 1810) London (1840) 2000. Goethe's psychological theories of colour have almost incalculable influence on German art, and are part of the national consciousness. Their influence on post Romantic art are found from Romanticism through to Blaue Reiter, Expressionism, and in various degrees all subsequent forms of Neo-Expressionism. There is a systematic analysis of the Goethe's colour theories in Wittgenstein's famous text *Remarks on Colour* (In German, *Bemerkungen Über Die Farben* – collected notes found at the time of his death, 1951), Berkeley and London, University of California Press, 1992.

[7] Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was the founding figure of modern German aesthetics who stated "But although all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it arises

from experience." The writings of Kant deal extensively with issues of idea and sensation, and he is considered is the father figure of modern German philosophy.

[8] See, Marie Nipper 'A Dirty Attitude' and Elke Buhr 'The Sound of Painting', in the exhibition catalogue *Christian Achenbach*, Galerie Wendt + Friedmann, Berlin, 2008.

[9] Yves Alain Bois 'Painting: The Task of Mourning', *Painting as Model*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, MIT Press, 1993 pp. 230-244