

SYNAESTHESIA & ART

Exhibition Series

27.10. – 16.12.2012: Barbara Ryan and Annette Stahmer

25.01. – 10.03.2013: Madi Boyd and Carrie Firman

22.03. – 12.05.2013: Simon Davenport & Carl Rowe and Sergio Maltagliati & Pietro Grossi

31.05. – 21.07.2013: Ditte Lyngkaer Pedersen, Eva-Maria Bolz and Andy Holtin

Synaesthesia – a theoretical introduction

The term "synaesthesia", from the Greek "aisthesis" ("Sensation", "sensory impression") and "syn" ("together") means the experience of two or more sensory impressions at the same time. In most cases it is a visual sensation evoked by auditory stimuli.¹

In history we especially encounter synaesthetic perception in periods such as the Renaissance, Romanticism, 19th century (Rimbaud, Wagner) and the beginning of the 20th century. The avant-garde experimented with the effect of simultaneous stimuli, often with the activating involvement of the audience (Italian Futurism). The Russian artist Vassily Kandinsky especially manifested the synaesthetic phenomenon: he had a synaesthetic predisposition, which connected four senses with each other. He wrote about Moscow as a city landscape that can be described by means of color-tones (he took this as a kind of symphony, a gigantic orchestra leader), where there was a "blue house" or where the snow could sing.² David Hockney has a combined phonetic synaesthesia. In literature Vladimir Nabokov mentions that he along with his mother and his son Dimitri were also synaesthetes. In the field of music was not only Olivier Messiaen or Rimsky-Korsakov synaesthetically gifted, but also Stevie Wonder and Billy Joel, just to name a few; all have the capability to incorporate multiple simultaneous experiences into their art.³

How can one imagine the interrelation between the different sensory impressions? Synaesthesia is often expressed through a combined perception of light, color, sound, touch and smell to individual spatial perception. Music can evoke visual images that form brightness or the literal passage of music.⁴

The phenomenon of synaesthesia has recently once again become current. For instance, the recent international conference in October 2010 at the Center for Literary Research in Berlin where scholars from the United States and Europe in both the humanities and neuroscience came together. Additionally, in contemporary art, there is a strikingly strong interest in the coupling of the senses. This should come as no surprise: our daily life in recent years has been subject to ever more multimedia and multisensory experiences (just think of the latest technologies in the field of communication).⁵

And it is remarkable that the phenomenon of synaesthesia, which has become subject to renewed inquiry in contemporary art and the natural sciences, was so intensively scrutinised exactly a hundred years ago.

Synesthesia - Open Call 2010

In the spring of 2010 Art Laboratory Berlin announced an OPEN CALL on synaesthesia in contemporary art. Our initial question was: How does one understand the phenomenon of synaes-

¹ John E. Harrison: *Synaesthesia. The Strangest Thing*, Oxford 2001.

² Hinderk Emrich: *The World of Synaesthesia*, Synaesthesia and Kinaesthetics, Konferenz am Zentrum für Literaturforschung Berlin, Oktober 2010.

³ Richard Cytowic: *Illuminating What Is Hidden. The Synaesthetic's Creative Mind*. Synaesthesia and Kinaesthetics, Konferenz am Zentrum für Literaturforschung Berlin, Oktober 2010.

⁴ Lawrence E. Marks: *Synaesthesia. Perception and Metaphor*. In: *Aesthetic Illusion*. Berlin 1990.

⁵ Man denke nur an die rasante technologische Entwicklung in den letzten 25 Jahren: Musikvideo (Text, Musik, Farbe), Computer (als „totales“ sensorisches Objekt) und nicht zuletzt neueste Formen von Mobiltelefonen (neben dem Telefonieren auch als Kamera, Musikplayer, Textmaschine, etc. zu nutzen).

thesia at the end of the 20th and early 21st Century? It was and is the concern of Art Laboratory Berlin to grasp the specific impulses of our current complex, synchronous and technologised society on the phenomenon of synaesthesia, with its distinctive form of sensory fluctuation.

A strong response from many artists with notable contributions from around the world shows the great interest in this subject, and can be seen as symptomatic of the relevance of synaesthesia. Art Laboratory Berlin sought out the best proposals from those artists who consciously chose strategies dealing with manifold connections to sensory perception, the interaction between memory and cognition, and links between artistic and scientific disciplines.

SYNAESTHESIA @ Art Laboratory Berlin

In the exhibition **SYNAESTHESIA I: *The Orange Smell of November*** **Barbara Ryan's** installation *It can't be September - it smells like the August of 1985!* shares personal insight into the experience of the artist's own polymodal synaesthesia, which combines time, color and smell. The video is *A ist blau* by **Annette Stahmer** is an intimate portrait of the synaesthetic experience of the artist's mother.

SYNAESTHESIA II presents two young artists working in new media: **Carrie Firman's** uses sensors, light pulses and projections to visualize her own synaesthetic experience combined with simultaneous spatial overlays. **Madi Boyd** has worked with neurologists to realize their work *Points of Perception* - an expansive intermediale installation that assimilates visitors' sensory perceptions. This exhibition will be on view concurrent with the Transmediale in January/ February 2013.

SYNAESTHESIA III presents works by two pairs of artists whose positions on synaesthesia combine an art historical approach (referring to the modern avante garde) with contemporary aspects. The work *A Banquet for Ultra Bankruptcy* by **Simon Davenport** and **Carl Rowe** is inspired by Marinetti's text *La Cucina Futurista* from 1930 and sees itself as a performance connecting food with colors, sounds and smells while alluding to the current financial crisis; the results will then be presented in the exhibition. **Sergio Maltagliati** continues the work of the famous composer **Pietro Grossi**, who was a pioneer in computer-generated music. These works investigate the relationship between sound and color explored a century ago by Kandinsky - now by means of digital media.

The exhibition **SYNAESTHESIA IV** presents three positions by artists who are (grapheme) synaesthetes - **Ditte Lyngkaer Pedersen**, **Eva-Maria Bolz** and **Andy Holtin**. They each use their own mode of expression to examine of their synaesthetic experiences. Ditte Lyngkaer Pedersen has built up an archive of video interviews, presenting different forms of synaesthesia, as well as neurological and other scientific research. Eva-Maria Bolz has developed images, which transmit her own graphemic synaesthesia transforming selected texts (for example, *The Rose and the Nightingale* by Oscar Wilde) into a series of color grids. In his video *Corrections* Andy Holtin undertakes radical steps to adapt the environment to his own perception of color.