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Musical Strokes: Calligraphic Performance as Gesture and Sound

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abstract

Coming from a background of 'enactive' experimentation with technological music performance, this inquiry attempts to address the questions of musicality in calligraphic gestures. To investigate this, a first pilot study was carried out that evaluated the usability of motion-capture techniques, and serves to develop a form of staging and musical composition. The link between calligraphy gesture and sound is established by capturing stroke movements technically and connecting them to digital sound processes. The sounds follow and express directly the brushing gestures of the performers; the calligraphers take on a double role as musical performers. How can we come to understand the calligraphic gesture as a manifestation of universal movement and gesture prototypes? How can we understand calligraphy from a different perspective than the traditional art of writing in a culturally anchored practice?

What do Music and Calligraphy have in common? To the western string player, the calligrapher's stroke with brush and ink evokes the bowing of the instrument. Both calligraphy and instrumental play produce traces of gestures, be it on silk or in sound: brush and bow, wood and hair, minute contact with and without tension, and flow and control. Coming from a background of 'enactive' experimentation with technological music performance, this inquiry attempts to address the questions of 'musicality' and physical trajectories in calligraphic gestures. When witnessing the Biface-Graphy performance by Lia Wei and Zhang Qiang the parallels between a sound phrase and a stroke become evident; This inspires the investigation into combining gesture in calligraphy with sounding 'Gestures'.

We suspect that the musicality of calligraphy gets expressed through the rhythms, phrasings, as well as the responses in 'polyphonic' stroke gestures. On a more fundamental level they seem to originate in the kinaesthetic patterns and movement forms that the calligraphers express through their gestures. Writing and painting strokes serves as a conduit for physical expression, be it in traditional calligraphy or contemporary forms of post-calligraphic performance.

When looking at ink-strokes and painting from this perspective, a number of questions come the foreground: How can we come to understand the calligraphic gesture as a manifestation of universal movement and gesture prototypes? How can we understand calligraphy from a different perspective than the traditional art of writing in a culturally anchored practice? Can we therefore perceive the calligraphic gesture as a mode of physical expression that affects both performer and viewer in a sub-personal, physical way? Do calligraphic strokes and trajectories express and address a pre-cultural, non-discursive, embodied level of perception? How then, do the cultural, the perceptual and the corporeal levels influence each-other?

In a conventional interdisciplinary encounter between calligraphy and music, both disciplines are performed by the artists in a parallel. In this configuration, the link is established by capturing stroke movements technically and connecting them to digital sound processes. The sounds follow and express directly the brushing gestures of the performers; the calligraphers/performers take on a double role as musical as well as inking performers. This

connection creates a novel mixed form, which has the potential to bring to the surface the inherently underlying movement- and gesture-dynamics.

For the live-performance of calligraphy linked to sounds, it is necessary to implement a technical process that allows the connection of brush-strokes to sounds. To investigate this method, a first pilot study was carried out to evaluate the usability of motion-capture techniques, and to begin the development of a form of staging and musical composition. This experiment with short exemplary performances was carried out under laboratory conditions and already produced a first sketch.

Working with these materials as starting point produced first results that indicate the way forward, with promising potential for our research interests in both the artistic and research domains.

In addition to investigating the link between ink-strokes and sound, this collaboration addresses further urgent issues of a different nature: Does the juxtaposition and fusion of two cultures, two disciplines, and two specific artistic practices lend itself to generating a field of understanding of an underlying common dimension? How can we communicate when mixing our practices? And can we thus circumvent the misunderstandings and misapprehensions that generally permeate cross-cultural encounters?

These questions will become central when the project goes into the next phase, when Bi-Face Graphy performance augmented with sound will be held both in the Chinese and European context. The outcome of these future experiments will provide ample new materials for reflection and investigation.

Without having definitive answers to these issues, the beginning of this collaborative endeavour demonstrates the potential of this approach. It clearly offers new avenues for the exploration of combining calligraphy and its gestures with sound.



