

On Gestalt Concepts in the Music of Oggetto

Examining musical perception through architectures of prägnanz

— Carmelo Pampillonio, 2017

One of the goals of this project was to explore the compositional possibilities of transposing Gestalt concepts of visual perception to music, specifically rhythm. As Gestaltist principles are primarily concerned with the image, putting them into praxis with sound relies almost exclusively on temporality. This began with the deconstruction of rhythm — reformulating and rearranging its fundamental components with the aim of making not rhythms, but pseudo-rhythmic topologies arranged as oblique strata.

To accomplish this in our improvisatory process, we experimented with modulating the proximities between both beats and meters, as well as playing as in-synchrony with each other as possible while consciously remaining out of time altogether. The resulting sonic architectures were characterized by dense asynchronous hockets lacking any hierarchy between beat, pitch, and chronology. Essentially, the project investigates patternicity, and entails reaching pattern discrimination thresholds in listening. It involves the layering of staggered beats, arrhythmic meters, and asynchronous palpitations in such a way that their merging suggests to the listener, on the affective level, a compelling sense of cohesion and continuity. In other words, it kindles within the listener a sonic illusion: the impression that there may be a “whole” and singular rhythmic *prägnanz* — a virtual whole interpreted from the nebulously complex forms. Yet each performer’s layer exerts its own antimagnetism toward the others. The arrangements themselves waver like a pendulum between the magnetic tensions of free improvisation, chance/glitch operations and structure, while remaining at variance to the lot.

On a discrete level, no single layer anchors itself as a center of reference, as each strand unfurls independently as a mere undercurrent to the others. The parts within these sonorous convolutions lack consistency and predictability, yet their fragmentations dovetail in various ways that suggest whole rhythmic patterns, or pockets of rhythmic prosodies. In doing so, this reflects an unconscious process of grouping and information compression employed by the listener. This is Gestaltist affect: the erratic implies organization, a subtle suggestion that chaos isn’t always opposed to order. These virtual wholes, ephemeral and emergent, articulate a poetics of instability; an extended listening practice. Where the Gestalt effect concerns perceiving a whole object/figure before its parts, the implied rhythms are the objects in much of this music.