

## Morton Feldman the Abstract Artist and the Lens of Criticism

Paul Scriver

Final: Music 212 Seminar in Twentieth-Century Music Literature and Theory  
 “The Music of Morton Feldman”  
 Professor David Bernstein

“Music seems to be understood best by its proximity to other music that is more familiar.  
 We do not hear what we hear... only what we remember.”<sup>1</sup>

Morton Feldman was a self-described “well educated autodidact”<sup>2</sup> composer, an avid collector of modern art and sometimes critic of the visual arts (he contributed to *Art News* and *Art in America* and also wrote essays for exhibition catalogues)<sup>3</sup>. His approach to composing was deeply influenced by his associations with the avant-garde of American visual artists in the 1950s. The elimination of symbolism, the simplification of gesture, the avoidance of marked contrasts<sup>4</sup> found even in the earliest iterations of Feldman’s music, owe much to the Abstract Expressionists and more specifically the Color Field artists. By adopting procedures particular to the Abstract Expressionists, he approached the composition of music as those visual artists might have approached painting a canvas. He was in many ways more akin to his peers in the visual art world than he was in to his contemporaries in the music world. Though his lifelong friendship with composer and philosopher of the arts - John Cage was a defining relationship for him, it can be argued that Feldman was more directly preoccupied with the artistic problems that his friends Philip Guston and Mark Rothko were intrigued by, than the musical problems his associate composers were.

Morton Feldman was a quiet maverick. He rarely used new materials (electronics, pre-recorded audio etc...) in his compositions, relying instead on the tried and true mainstay instruments of the Western Art Music cannon: the piano, cello, violin etc... But the manner in which these instruments were employed and the sound world that they present to the listener was unique to Feldman’s style and represent a true departure from the rhetoric of music composition up to that point.

It is tempting to define the art of Morton Feldman by discussing the many contrasts between his approach to music making and those American, “New York School” composers that he is most often associated with; John Cage, Earle Brown and Christian Wolf. Or to expose the even greater differences in approach that he had from his European musical counterparts, most notably Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Though this can be an illuminating practice and is most useful in helping to define what Feldman is *not*, it is more fruitful, I believe, to draw comparisons between Feldman and the artist that he shared the most affinity with – the so called “Abstract Expressionists” painters; Philip Guston, Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Rothko, among others and, at the earlier stages of his career Jackson Pollock.

Evoking Marcel Duchamp’s desire to make “a painting of frequency”, Feldman described his work as “between painting and music”<sup>5</sup>. The purpose of this exercise is to try to refine an understanding of the “in between-ness” of Morton Feldman’s art and to bring to light some of the problems of creation and perception that were the source of Feldman’s fascination with abstract art and the way in which he worked with those problems in his music. I agree with Jonathan W. Bernard’s assertion that “any analytical approach able to afford significant insight into the

\* “Ideas are given. Concepts are given, everything is given. How do you orchestrate it? (...) Instruments are the answer to the cul-de-sac, not ideas.” Morton Feldman Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 191 - 192

workings of (Morton) Feldman's music must rest (on the basis that his) acquaintance with the members of the so-called New York School of (visual) artists and their works influenced most, if not all, of his compositions: not just as a matter of general aesthetic orientation, but from questions of overall form down to the finest details of his score"<sup>6</sup>. Much has been written about Morton Feldman's close relationship with the abstract painters and their effect on his style; I'd like to discuss a slightly different angle; to attempt to place Feldman in the musical continuum, to more accurately define what he contributed to our perceptions about what music is and how his approach contributed to the broadening of perceptions of the function of music.

The scope of this paper will not allow me to cover Feldman's entire career, but I do hope that a discussion of the pioneering approach to analyzing abstract art by visual art critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg and how it relates to Feldman's work will be useful for devising a more appropriate way of analyzing and understanding his music. By discussing some analyses by John P. Welsh (Feldman's piece: Projection 1) and Thomas DeLio (Durations III and Last Pieces no. 2) and contrasting them with Clement Greenberg's critical writings on the Abstract Expressionists, I hope to be able to draw some broad distinctions about Feldman's methods and his approach to composition throughout his career and how it might be more accurately understood by having additional insight through the lens of art criticism. In the course of this discussion we will discover why it is problematic to subject Feldman's music to the analytical "grid" of Western Art Music, and how we might be better served by applying an analytic approach akin to Clement Greenberg's discussions of abstract art to get a greater understanding of Morton Feldman's music.

#### Towards the idea of the "Action Painter" - The influence of critical thinking and art criticism on the New York School

*"Peindre non la chose mais l'effet qu'elle produit" (Don't paint the thing, but the effect that it produces) Stephan Mallarmé*

By the beginning of the 1950s, there was a new movement in the American art world that threatened to do away with earlier concepts of what *art* was and how it was to be viewed. The art critics Clement Greenberg and his younger associate Harold Rosenberg made efforts to define a new approach to looking at, and critiquing modern art. Clement Greenberg wrote frequently about the "flattening out of the canvas" – the move away from representational art to an "Abstract Expressionist" art form that focused the viewer's attention onto the surface of the canvas and away from anything that the artwork might *represent*. He was attempting to discuss a type of art that, by its own abstract nature, defied an easy resort to established aesthetic principles.

The critics that admired and seriously considered the Abstract Expressionist's art to be important – especially Clement Greenberg, discerned and insisted that there was a movement away from representative art towards an art that was *itself* the subject. However the importance of the *subject* was, from the earliest days of the Abstract Expressionist movement in the 1940s, a primary topic of discussion. "It was believed — some of the time, anyway, by some of the artists — that a compelling subject would forestall abstraction's descent into wall decoration. There were New York School painters — Mark Rothko prominently among them— who insisted that the only legitimate subject for abstract painting was some mythic or mystical vision of human tragedy, yet few observers of his art could find any hint or suggestion of such a subject in the paintings he actually created. Willem de Kooning, on the other hand, downgraded the very notion that "content" might play an important role in painting—"It's very tiny—very tiny, content," he said—but his own argument was undermined by the series of *Women* paintings that placed him in a direct line of descent from Picasso, for whom a subject had always been crucial. There was never any consensus on the subject of a "subject" in the New York School, nor could there be — for it was in the very nature of Abstract Expressionist painting for each of its practitioners to conduct a radically subjective dialogue with the art of the European modernists they aspired to supplant."<sup>7</sup>

This “radically subjective dialogue” - the idea of self-criticism’s importance to the creative process - was an integral part of the Modernism aesthetic that was altering the manner in which art was being created by artists and viewed by their audiences. There was an emerging tendency among the modernist painters to examine their own process and the results of that process. This was a practice that Clement Greenberg traced back to the philosophy of Kant. Greenberg credited Kant with being the first modernist because he was the first to “criticize the means itself of criticism” he credited the modern artists with continuing this tradition, saying that the “essence of modernism” lay “in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline”<sup>8</sup>. This was the face of the emerging “self consciousness” of modern art. Artists and critics were beginning to be equally interested in the process of making art as they were in the final product. “Art under the modernist spirit, at every point, is self questioning; and this in turn means that art is its own subject and, in the case of painting – the subject of painting was painting. Modernism was a kind of collective inquiry from within”<sup>9</sup>

Robert Motherwell was perhaps more candid than his peers in his statement that “Every intelligent painter carries the whole culture of modern painting in his head. It is his real subject, of which anything he paints is both an homage and a *critique*, and everything he says a gloss.”<sup>10</sup> Certainly this idea that the subject of modern painting and by extension – modern art - was the “whole culture of modern painting” was distasteful to many in the movement who felt that the art that they were creating was uniquely American, that the Abstract Expressionist phenomenon was completely outside of the sphere of European influence. Further, that any hint that their work might be “art for art’s sake” (the idea of art being something outside of life – not intrinsically *part* of the life experience - a then discredited notion) was contrary to the idealized image of themselves as an embattled, existentialist avant-garde.

For Morton Feldman, on the edges of this movement – a de facto outsider as a result of his vocation as a composer and also (paradoxically) an insider in the New York School because of his consuming interest in the world of visual art, this discourse was undoubtedly influential. The Abstract Expressionists represented a new, non-academic intellectualism that Feldman the autodidact found accessible and meaningful. “The young Feldman absorbed the painter’s pregnant ideas. Strongly nationalistic and genuinely proud of the international influence the New York painters enjoyed during the 1950s, he emphasized the uniquely American temper of his efforts”.<sup>11</sup>

By the time that Harold Rosenberg’s essay “The American Action Painters” was published in 1952, the ground was fertile for a kind of *unifying theory* that would remove the necessity to compare the new art with anything outside of itself. A bold stroke; Rosenberg’s statement that “what was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event” was the opening volley in a polemic that released the new American painting from having to *be* anything other than the gesture that created it. His assertion was that the “new American painting is not *pure* art, since the extrusion of the object was not for the sake of the esthetic.” (in other words, not “art for art sake”) *Subject* was no longer an issue of any importance and it was not superseded by form: “The apples weren’t brushed off the table in order to make room for perfect relations of space and color. They had to go in so that nothing would get in the way of the act of painting”. The supremacy of action was final: “what matters always is the revelation contained in the act,” and such mundane matters as “Form, color, composition, drawing are auxiliaries”.<sup>12</sup> This statement made a sensation amongst the New York School artists and their public in that it released the American painters from any duty to reflect or be held accountable to any prior aesthetic – especially a European one. It also effectively took the avant-garde artists of New York out of the continuum of modern art altogether and posited them as original innovators. This was certainly a seductive idea and dovetailed nicely with the ideas that the New York School artists had about them-selves as being embattled artists outside of any mainstream culture.

The seductive quality of Rosenberg’s “Action Painter” as an image for American artists to inhabit, had a far-reaching effect on all the arts. I believe that Feldman, in the early part of his career, was himself seduced by the idea, certainly his critics were. Thomas DeLio in his essay “Last

Pieces #3 (1959)" – an analysis of Feldman's work by the same title – begins his piece by stating that Feldman, by "rejecting the most basic tenets of conventional musical discourse (the image of the maverick outsider looms large in this sentence) ...moved toward a creative stance in which sounds appear to move freely in time and space without the interference of any compositional rhetoric or *a priori* procedures". DeLio certainly seems to be subscribing to the model that Rosenberg proposed of the outsider artist, un-beholden to form, or history, only to the *event* of creation. DeLio goes on to state that "each of (Feldman's) works represent a sensitive transcription of the creative moment" and that "one is often tempted to refer to his compositions not so much as pieces of music but rather as *actions in the process of becoming musical works* (my italics); as examples of one impulse toward the experience of art"<sup>13</sup>

I think that Feldman never fully accepted the idea that his music reflected only the event of creating it. Of course Rosenberg's notion that "what goes on the canvas is not a picture, but an event" – or, as DeLio states it with regard to Feldman "his art, the work and the act of creation became indistinguishable"<sup>14</sup> is ultimately unsupportable, perhaps even nonsense. It was an attractive idea though, and it gave the Abstract Expressionist movement "an exciting new dramaturgy in which the artist now emerged as an existential hero and his painting (or composing) was to be seen not as an aesthetic endeavor but as the cynosure of a heroic private action that was not to be judged by aesthetic standards"<sup>15</sup>.

There is evidence to support the notion that the Abstract Expressionists considered Rosenberg's notions fallacious and yet many of them, Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner certainly, and perhaps Feldman, allowed the myth to be perpetuated. Both Krasner and Pollock made statements that allied them to Rosenberg's thinking - in 1960 Krasner stated "I am preoccupied with trying to know myself in order to communicate with others. Painting is not separate from life. It is one, yet her scrawled marginalia on a torn-out copy of "The American Action Painters" indicates Krasner's contempt for the way he made such pronouncements<sup>16</sup>. Through Rosenberg's idea, an opening was created where "every distinction between art and life" had been eliminated. What the new art demanded then of the viewer wasn't art criticism or aesthetic judgment but some existentialist version of psychoanalysis.<sup>17</sup> Through this window, however absurd, the art of the New York School had the opportunity of being experienced by the public on its own terms without need to resort to comparisons drawn from European sources or pre-formed ideas of aesthetics.

#### A confluence of ideas and disciplines: The real activity beyond the fallacy of the American Action Painter

*It is not freedom of choice that is the meaning of the fifties, but the freedom of people to be themselves.*<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the real benefit to Morton Feldman and his contemporaries of this sudden sanctioned freedom from the continuum of art history was the opportunity to work new ideas out in an environment free of the strictures implicitly imposed by the lineage of the European moderns and their disciples in the United States. According to Amy C. Beale, Feldman often idealized the New York art scene of the 1950s stating that artists "were left alone" and –"nobody understood art"<sup>19</sup>. It is evident that in New York in the 1950s, the winds were right for sailing a new, less encumbered course towards an American art of ideas *and* action.

The move towards an art that was unconcerned with anything outside of itself was reflective of a broad trend away from the collectivism of the late nineteen thirties. Many of the artists that Clement Greenberg was writing about, Jackson Pollock among them had worked for the federal government's Works Progress Administration (WPA) and had by extension, been concerned with social causes (his painting style prior to the nineteen forties had been heavily influenced by his mentor Thomas Hart Benton and belonged unequivocally to the "Social Realist" movement). All the more reason that this new, self-conscious art was considered a bold move away from the established status quo.

Greenberg characterized the avant-garde of the late nineteen forties thusly: "It has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at *abstract* or non-objective art-and poetry too. The avant-garde poet or artist tries to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way that nature itself is valid, in the way in which a landscape-not its picture- is aesthetically valid: something *given*, increate, independent of meaning, similar or original. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or part to anything not itself"<sup>20</sup>

Many years after Greenberg's essays on the subject, Morton Feldman's friend, the poet Frank O'Hara echoed Greenberg's assertions in the liner notes he wrote for an LP release on Columbia Records of Feldman's music. Referring to "Intersections III for Piano (1953) He wrote: "Feldman here successfully avoids the symbolic aspect of sound which has so plagued the abstract works of his contemporaries by employing unpredictability reinforced by spontaneity (...) (He) has created a work which exists without references outside itself, (quoting Feldman) *as if you're not listening, but looking at something in nature.*"<sup>21</sup> I perceive a subtlety of understanding in O'Hara's words that is conspicuously absent in the Rosenberg's "Action Painters" essay. An acknowledgement that there is something absolute that exists in the art work, but that it arrives from somewhere other than the artist alone – perhaps a natural order, or even a cultural understanding that makes works by Feldman and some of his contemporaries at once abstract *and* familiar. Still, there remains some of the coy licensure of the "Action Painter" idea in O'Hara's words. Truthfully, the New School painters, composers and poets greatly influenced one another's work, and were, whether they copped to it or not, working partly out of a reaction to the art that they had studied and absorbed in their maturing; Cubism, Surrealism, Serialism, and all the other "isms". Lee Krasner, in a more candid moment, stated that "art comes from art and is influenced by art."<sup>22</sup>

#### Black Mountain College and the hybridization of the New York School

*As I came to know Pollock better – especially from those conversations where he would relate Miichelangelo's drawings or American Indian sand painting to his work – I began to see similar associations that I might explore in my music. I must point out here that the intellectual life of a young New York composer of my generation was one in which you kept your nose glued to the music paper. Wolpe was intimate with many painters and constantly spoke of other things besides music. Varèse, too, was a composer with vast interests in other areas. Unless you came to know creative people in other fields, your own intellectual and artistic development was not the same. How a painter- who walked around the canvas, dipped a stick into a can of paint, and then thrust it a certain way across the canvass – could still talk about Michelangelo was, and still is, baffling to me.*<sup>23</sup>

An important catalyst to the inward looking, cross pollinating phenomenon of the New York School in the 1950s was the scene at Black Mountain College in South Carolina at the end of the 1940s and the first half of the 1950s. Founded in 1933, Black Mountain College, by the late forties, under Rector and poet Charles Olson, had become the locus of change in the American avant-garde. Many of the members of the New York avant-garde had first encountered one another there. Composer John Cage, choreographer Merce Cunningham, painters Willem de Kooning, Robert Rauschenberg, and poets Frank O'Hara, Robert Creeley and Olson (who famously declared his desire "to have the human be again a freshness, not merely an echo of whatever it might once have been") had resided at Black Mountain College and at various times during the fifties found themselves in New York. The college prospectus declared a "consistent effort to teach method, not content; to emphasize process - a grammar of the art of living and working in the world". The influence of Black Mountain College was manifest in the New York art scene of the early fifties. The institution acted as a catalyst for American developments away from social realism, representing for the Abstract Expressionists a dialogue between art and the spectrum of human acts.<sup>24</sup>

Morton Feldman was certainly influenced by the ideas brought to New York by the Black Mountain alumnus and the discourse on subject and criticism that was vitally alive in the Abstract

Expressionist community in New York. Feldman had only recently been initiated into the New York avant-garde scene thanks to his fortuitous meeting with John Cage – himself recently returned from Black Mountain College. Feldman became a regular guest at the Eighth Street Artist's Club and drank regularly at the Cedar Tavern with many of the members of the New York avant-garde.<sup>25</sup>

The genesis of Feldman's self-description as an "in-between" composer was a result of one these associations. John Cage introduced Feldman to Robert Rauschenberg in the latter part of 1950. The meeting proved influential on the way that Feldman would approach composition from then on. Feldman purchased the painting "Black Painting" from Rauschenberg for seventeen dollars and some change. The painting was a large canvas with some newspapers glued to it. The whole canvas and the newspapers were painted black. Feldman talked about the painting's effect on his thinking ... "After living with this painting and studying it intensely now and then, I picked up on an *attitude* about *making something* that was absolutely unique to me. To say that *Black Painting* could be relegated to collage simply did not ring true. It was more: it was Rauschenberg's discovery that he wanted *neither life nor art, but something in between*. I then began to compose a music dealing precisely with *in between-ness*: creating a confusion of material and construction, and a fusion of method and application, by concentrating on how they could be directed toward *that which is difficult to categorize*"<sup>26</sup>.

Feldman's characterization of his working habit as a "confusion of material and construction and a fusion of method and application" indicates the degree to which he found himself at home in the milieu of the New York School. Though the statement is characteristically ambiguous, it points to the fusion and confusion of ideas that resulted from the intense amount of discussion and self-analyses that was prevalent in the scene. Feldman's understanding of his own process (and his peer's understanding of their own processes) solidified over the years. In later years, Feldman paraphrased Debussy to illustrate this gradual focusing of understanding (with the help of hindsight) about his own work: "every work of art develops a law. But you don't begin with it. (Debussy) knew it and we all know it, we all know that the way the sounds in every piece intuitively seem to do things. We all know this, but we immediately want conceptualize it"<sup>27</sup>

During the early years of the 1950s it seems that there was a sort of *grace period* where the composers in residence at the Bosa's Mansion and the artists congregating at the Cedar Tavern had an opportunity to try out ideas without concern for their validity to the canon of Western Art.

#### The paradox of the "Action Painter" versus the emerging emphasis on process

*One evening, when I was a newly arrived immigrant at the Cedar Bar, Elaine and Willem De Kooning casually took my arm as they passed and said, "Come over to Clem Greenberg's." ...After a while I found myself listening to Greenberg who was talking about Cézanne. De Kooning showed signs of impatience and seemed to be controlling his anger. He finally broke out with "One more word about Cézanne and I'll punch you in the nose!" Greenberg, very startled had been saying only very intelligent and perceptive things. It was hard for him to understand that what de Kooning resented was his having ideas on the matter at all. "You have no right to talk about Cézanne," de Kooning snapped. "Only I have the right to talk about Cézanne." ...As I left that night I knew who de Kooning was. I didn't feel he was arrogant. I didn't feel he was rude. For me, coming from a background where the emotional life was buried discourse, this kind of vulnerability was like my introduction not only to the art world, but to reality itself. It took me out of my romantic dream of what it was to be an artist, into the reality of it. It also showed me, through Greenberg, that the real philistines are those that most "understand you."<sup>28</sup>*

Another artist that occasionally attended the Cedar Tavern to drink and discuss current problems in the arts was the painter Jackson Pollock who was to become (thanks to the tireless promotion of his wife Lee Krasner and the admiration of Clement Greenberg) the personification of the ideal of the "American Action Painter" and the de-facto poster child for the Abstract Expressionists. (Harold Rosenberg allegedly despised Pollock's work and disliked him as a person, Yet because Pollock was the only painter then at work whose pictorial practice—especially as it was recorded

in the photographs by Hans Namuth—seemed to lend itself to Rosenberg’s existential “action” scenario, he shamelessly exploited Pollock’s notoriety without according him appropriate recognition or even mentioning his name.)<sup>29</sup>

Feldman recounts his own personal connection to Pollock: “Soon after meeting Rauschenberg I met Jackson Pollock, who asked me to write music about a film about him that had just been completed. I was very pleased about this since it was just the very beginning of my career.”<sup>30</sup> The film that Feldman is referring to is, of course Hans Namuth’s (eventually) famous document of Pollock at work in his studio. “(...)thinking back to that time, I realize now how much the musical ideas I had in 1951 paralleled his mode of working. Pollock placed his canvas on the ground and painted as he walked around it. I put sheets of graph paper on the wall; each sheet framed the same time duration and was, in effect, a visual rhythmic structure. What resembled Pollock was my “allover” approach to the time-canvas. Rather than the usual left-to-right passage across the page, the horizontal squares of the graph paper represented the tempo – with each box equal to a pre-established ictus; and the vertical squares were the instrumentation of the composition”<sup>31</sup> Feldman’s words reflect the preoccupation of the day; the attempt to move art away from a narrative structure and to have it stand on its own terms without reference to any “a-priori” considerations or to the European avant-garde, but they also reveal his personal emphasis on a type of structure that emanates from and is intrinsically relevant to the piece itself.

By the late forties, in many of the New York artist’s work, the departure from symbolism and form was nearly complete. Abstract works of Pollock and others exhibited a “flat surface” – barely a hint of the representational aesthetic of the Cubist influence remained. Simultaneously, issues of scale were appearing. Canvases were becoming larger and by their sheer size, threatening to be something other than “easel paintings”. In his April 1948 essay in the *Partisan Review* entitled “The Crisis of the Easel Picture”, Clement Greenberg addressed this issue: “Monet and Pissaro anticipated (...) a mode of painting now practiced by some of our most *advanced* artists, that threatens the identity of the easel picture at precisely these points: the *decentralized, polyphonic*, all-over picture, which, with a surface knit together of a multiplicity of identical or similar elements, repeats itself without strong variation from one end of the canvas to the other and dispenses, apparently, with beginning, middle, and ending. (...) I have (advisedly) borrowed the term “polyphonic”, for the resemblance in aesthetic method between this new category of easel painting and Schoenberg’s principles of composition is striking(...) Just as Schoenberg makes every element, every voice and note in the composition of equal importance – different but equivalent (Mondrian’s term) – so these painters render every part of the canvas equivalent and they likewise weave the work of art into a tight mesh whose principal of formal unity is contained and recapitulated in every thread so that we find the essence of the whole work in every one of its parts.”<sup>32</sup>

The fact that Greenberg evokes Arnold Schoenberg’s concept of Serialism to discuss Pollock’s and the other Abstract Expressionists “allover” approach to the canvas seems out of place, given the general hostility to all things European in the New York School of this period. However, Greenberg’s reference has validity. The point he is making is about the egalitarian nature of the aesthetic; that surface has a leveling effect. There is no hierarchy of form or subject in the abstract painting. The parallel with Serialism that he draws, paradoxical as it is, brings attention to the emerging idea of the sublimation (sometimes obliteration) of the artist’s role as the arbiter of form. Certainly, Greenberg knew Pollock’s methods and motivations well enough by this point to know that his approach to painting was not the purely gestural, intuitive activity that Hans Namuth’s film and still photos and Harold Rosenberg’s essay would later suggest, but rather a hybridization of motivations. Pollock was well schooled and had at least fifteen years of serious painting under his belt. To evoke the technique of Arnold Schoenberg then, seems a knowing nod to the various methods the Abstract Expressionists used to arrive at their art despite their public embrace of one or another ideal.

Characteristically, Morton Feldman was interested in neither absolute ideal. His own path seem to be right down the middle between the idea of absolute control on the side of the Action Painter

and the Formalist (European) aesthetic of the domination of process over subjective decision making on the artist's behalf. In his own account, he refers to two of his closest friends as the representatives of these seemingly opposing forces both at work in the same school. "...There were two diametrically opposed points of view (that) I had to cope with in those days – one represented by John Cage, the other by Philip Guston. Cage's idea, summed up years later in the words "everything is music," had led him more and more toward a social point of view, less and less toward an artistic one ...Cage gave up art to bring it together with society. Then there was Guston. He was the arch crank. Very little pleased him. Very little satisfied him. Very little was art. Always aware in his own work of the rhetorical nature of the complication, Guston reduces, reduces, building his own Tower of Babel and then destroying it"<sup>33</sup>

An example of how Feldman struggled with these opposing ideals, was his work throughout the 1950s with graph pieces. Feldman's graph pieces, with their indeterminate pitch caused problems for him. He was never quite happy with leaving the choice of pitch to the performer and the indistinct direction of "high, medium, and low" as the only indicator of pitch was an experiment in surface that ultimately proved unsatisfying for him. In 1992, during a recorded interview, Earle Brown related a telling anecdote about Morton Feldman's public struggle with the essentially existential issues of freedom and choice. He recalled a rehearsal where one of Feldman's graph pieces was being played by a chamber ensemble. In the middle of the rehearsal Feldman stood up from his chair and said in a loud voice "I don't like what the violinist is playing" to which the violinist defensively replied "Well it says here to play a note in the high register, so I played a note in the high register..." to which Feldman replied "Play a note that I *like*"<sup>34</sup>. The anecdote not only highlights Feldman's occasionally irascible behavior but his frustration with the effects of indeterminacy. I have the impression that Feldman was intrigued by the processes of chance and indeterminacy that his friend and quasi mentor John Cage was engaged in and was equally inspired by the *idea* of the Action Painter as personified in Pollock and others. The graph pieces were Feldman's *trying on* of these approaches in his own work. The results were ultimately to his liking.

Feldman's struggle with ideas of freedom and control became a central theme in his writings about his process. Feldman's thoughts culled from his unpublished writings indicate the degree to which he struggled with the paradox presented by the confluence of ideas in the New York School. "The irrationality of being and artist is that it's too rational, art is too rational.... Too rational! All this aura of freedom. Yet it is self-evident that art is the antithesis of freedom."<sup>35</sup> Perhaps in reference to Cage's assertion that "everything changed"<sup>†</sup> when Feldman produced the first Projections and presented them to his friend: "I added another link to the chain and they called it freedom"

#### Analyses: the right tools for the job

*"I'm not worried about music, but I'm desperately concerned about my life in art in America. For you see, I don't like it here in America, and want to go back where I came from. I don't want the Left Bank, I don't want an English moor. I want to go back where I came from. Where is it? Any suggestions?"*

*There's something rotten here (...) It's my colleagues. My fellow American composers. The most pedantic, the most boring, ungenerous bunch one can meet on an earth so crowded with the last men that hop and make it smaller and smaller. This earth I mean"<sup>36</sup>*

The difficulty of analyzing Feldman's music arises from the fact that Feldman himself was not able to describe what he was doing in a succinct way until midway through his career. This may

---

<sup>†</sup> Cage's comment is paraphrased. From the discussions between Morton Feldman and John Cage recorded for WBIA radio in the late 1960s



have arisen out of an aversion of self-aggrandizement or simply as a result of his self-described “in between-ness” and the fact that his style required a number of years to evolve and mature.

There is though, another layer to this problem of analysis. It has to do with choosing the correct tools to examine Feldman’s work. The problem can be illustrated by imagining that Clement Greenberg had attempted to analyze or describe in a meaningful way, one of the Abstract Expressionist’s works using an aesthetic criterion appropriate to Cubism. If so, he may have examined the work’s use of volume and the way in which the perspective had been manipulated, the degree of success in distorting the visual plane, the color balance, and perhaps the quality of line employed in the rendering of the objects that the painting explored. Quite obviously little of the criteria just mentioned would be applicable to an abstract painting by Rothko, Guston or Pollock. Instead, Clement Greenberg was obligated to examine the abstract expressionists from a vantage point that took into consideration the subject that the paintings were exploring; the act of painting, the play of light on the canvas, surface, depth the qualities of paint etc. Analyses of these elements by Greenberg yielded decades of exploration and discussion into the *purpose* of art and the nature of perception. Had Greenberg chosen a set of criteria appropriate to representative art to analyze the abstract art, the results of the analysis would have been far less meaningful and would have fallen short of coming to an understanding of the art. His genius then, lay in his adaptability and willingness to consider perspectives hitherto alien to art criticism in order to see the new art.

O’Hara’s words about Feldman’s music come to mind: “If you cannot hear Structures (for string quartet - 1951) I doubt that the score would help”<sup>37</sup>. In the light of Feldman’s own insistence that “notation can have an aspect of role playing, if not on stage then off”<sup>38</sup> O’Hara’s words seem a little disingenuous. Perhaps a little too close to the tone of Rosenberg’s elitism, yet there is a grain of truth in them. Feldman’s music truly is best *experienced* before analyzed. With the benefit of an overview of his career, I feel that it is not too reckless to say that Feldman’s interest lay primarily in the subtle interactions of pitches and the effects of time and its effect on memory and perception. His music is truly abstract and for the most part non-representational in the same way that his peer’s artwork is. His claim that he was an “orchestrator, not a composer” gives emphasis to the importance that Feldman placed on the sound of the piece and not the process of creating it. To attempt to analyze Feldman’s music with its subtle shadings of pitch and its quiet, undifferentiated surface using the same tools that one would employ to analyze a serial composition can be misleading from the very start.

This problem of choosing the wrong tools is the particular reason that I take issue with the methods employed by Thomas DeLio’s method of analyzing Feldman’s Last Pieces #3. O’Hara again: “Feldman’s decision to avoid the serial technique was an instinctive attempt to avoid the clichés of the International School of present-day avant-garde”<sup>39</sup>. Feldman himself discussed the importance of pitch in direct consideration of Schoenberg’s serial technique – “Schoenberg in his harmony book talks about the relationship between pitch and timbre. And he says that timbre is the prince of the domain, that the resulting timbre is to some degree more important than the pitch itself. (...) That’s why I felt that Webern’s subsequent orchestration (...) was somewhat arbitrary. (...) You can’t take a row and give it to a piccolo and then give the other segment to the double bass. You can’t be insensitive to pitches here”<sup>40</sup> And yet DeLio’s opening statement about his approach to analyzing Last Pieces #3 reveals his decision to use 20<sup>th</sup> Century Pitch Theory (devised as a an effective way of analyzing serial music) to decode an underlying structure of the piece. DeLio’s approach assumes that the register of a note is subordinate in importance to the interval between one pitch an another. Feldman had complained about this misreading of the importance of register in an informal talk he gave in Frankfurt; “They (Webern’s accolades) usually associate pitch as tonal music. I don’t you see. In other words something happened to pitch that was terrible. Its like these people who get sex changes. Its as if pitch went to Scandinavia and came back an interval, had a sex change”<sup>41</sup> Yet these proclamations of Feldman’s seem not to affect DeLio’s approach even slightly. “The first five sonorities are remarkable in the numerous ways they reflect the salient feature of the entire composition. Of these five sounds, the first three set off a chain of events which culminate(s) in the fourth. The

fifth and final sonority then returns to the first sound, though somewhat varied (the same two pitch classes are heard, but both in new registers).<sup>42</sup>

DeLio goes on to reveal some interesting harmonic tendencies in the piece, but to my mind, the whole analytical approach falls short of saying much that is meaningful about the music and Feldman's intent in creating it. I can't help but wonder how it would have been had DeLio done more than give lip service to the factors that motivated Feldman's process as he does in the article's introduction; "...one is often tempted to refer to his compositions not so much as pieces of music but rather as actions becoming musical works". Once that DeLio makes the declaration, little is revealed through the analysis of related pitches to back it up.

Similar problems appear in John P. Welsh's article on Feldman's graph piece Projection 1. It is striking to me, that with all we know about Feldman's distrust of formalism in the early 1950s, that the main thrust of Welsh's article should be to break Projection 1 into segments (not indicated by Feldman in any definite manner) that mimic a more standard musical form. Feldman declared "silence is my substitute for counterpoint. It's nothing against something".<sup>43</sup> Yet Welsh treats the longer pauses of Feldman's music as though they are delineating sections, and then attempts to draw conclusions about an overall form of the piece based on his own divisions. "A study of the re-notated score<sup>‡</sup> reveals that silence is present far more than sound in each of the three performing modes. This strongly suggests that silence is given high regard by Feldman and careful attention must be given to this parameter. Specifically, the composer uses long silences to help delineate Projection 1, the most dramatic of which divides sections V and VI (Welsh's numbering system – not Feldman's). Many shorter silences, though, appear internally. (...)Silences of length four seconds or longer are more rare. These appear to define endings and partitions the work into sections".

Welsh continues his analysis by stating that "The structure of Projection 1 is primarily statistical (!) in nature. Thus, the analysis of the densities of events seems to be the most effective method for discussion this piece. ...Tempo, timbre and density appear to be controlled the most by Feldman; whereas, register, duration and silence are specified with somewhat less precision<sup>§</sup>. Left completely unspecified, to be chosen freely by the performer are pitch, dynamics and articulation."

In the light of statements made by Morton Feldman regarding his coming to a late understanding of his work and how it may have structural features that he was unaware of at the time of the composition, Welsh's discoveries about Projection 1 are perhaps not entirely out of place. However, Feldman's paraphrasing of Debussy<sup>\*\*</sup> points to the possibility that the structure of Projection 1 was not a primary concern of his at the time of its inception, rather that the piece was composed with other considerations in mind and the structure is a by-product that may not be important to an understanding of the work.

The approach that Welsh uses to understand Feldman's Projection 1 is flawed in its intent on superimposing a form of a sort akin to, and derived from narrative tradition on the piece. Welsh's contention that Feldman's implicit intent was to create Projection 1 with the idea of a sectional structure that enhances the musical experience of the piece ignores what Feldman himself stated about the inception of the compositions in the early phase of his career and specifically in the

---

<sup>‡</sup> It concerns me that Welsh felt it necessary to re-notate the score in order to understand it. Of all of Feldman's various styles of notation, it seems that the graph score of Projection 1 most aptly displays in a visually attractive and eminently comprehensible manner all of the elements that Welsh labors to enumerate in his infinitely less elegant re-notation.

<sup>§</sup> This statement is not born out by Feldman's graph score which has a clearly defined duration for each "ictus" with the subdivision of the ictus clearly indicated as rectangles that act exactly as durational notation.

<sup>\*\*</sup> See end note 27

*Projections* series: "...my approach, which was not conscious at the time and only revealed itself many years later, was: work first, study later."<sup>44</sup>

The question that remains after all this analysis is not *what* is there, but rather *why* is it there and *what does it mean* to us listeners of Morton Feldman's music.

#### In summation

If an understanding of Morton Feldman's music is the goal, I posit that the primary tools one should employ to listen to Feldman's music are the same ones that he used in creating it: a sensitivity to pitch, register and timbre, attention to silence and duration and concentration. The questions that remain are the ones that the music itself so eloquently poses – what is the experience of listening and how are we affected by it?

---

#### End Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Morton Feldman "Unpublished Writings" (Morton Feldman Papers, Music Library, State University of New York at Buffalo) Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 209

<sup>2</sup> Amy C. Beal "Time canvases: Morton Feldman and the Painters of the New York School" Music and Modern Art p.228

<sup>3</sup> Amy C. Beal "Time canvases: Morton Feldman and the Painters of the New York School" Music and Modern Art p.233

<sup>4</sup> Amy C. Beal "Time canvases: Morton Feldman and the Painters of the New York School" Music and Modern Art p.230

<sup>5</sup> Morton Feldman "Between Categories", The Composer 1 no.2, (Fall 1969), p.76

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan P. Bernard "Feldman's Painters" The New York Schools of Music and Visual Arts p.173

<sup>7</sup> Hilton Kramer "Jackson Pollock & the New York School II" The New Criterion Vol. 17, No. 6, February 1999

<sup>8</sup> Arthur C. Danto "Modernism and Critique of Pure Art" After the End of Art p.67 I have borrowed some of Danto's discussion on the emergence of the new critical style of the 1950s. His sources are Clement Greenberg's essay "Modernist Painting" The Collected Essay and Criticisms 4:85

<sup>9</sup> Arthur C. Danto "Modernism and Critique of Pure Art" After the End of Art p.67

<sup>10</sup> Hilton Kramer "Jackson Pollock & the New York School II" The New Criterion Vol. 17, No. 6, February 1999

<sup>11</sup> Amy C. Beal "Time canvases: Morton Feldman and the Painters of the New York School" Music and Modern Art p.228

<sup>12</sup> Harold Rosenberg "The American Action Painters" 1952

<sup>13</sup> Thomas DeLio "Last Pieces #3 (1959)" The Music of Morton Feldman p.39

<sup>14</sup> Thomas DeLio "Towards an Art of Imminence – Morton Feldman, Durations III no.3" Circumscribing the open Universe p.31

<sup>15</sup> Hilton Kramer "Jackson Pollock & the New York School II" The New Criterion Vol. 17, No. 6, February 1999

<sup>16</sup> Ellen G. Landau Lee Krasner: A Catalogue Raisonne with the assistance of Jeffrey D. Grove Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1995 (her source for the Krasner quote is from Louise Rago, "We Interview Lee Krasner," School Arts, Sept. 1960, p. 32.

- 
- <sup>17</sup> Hilton Kramer "Jackson Pollock & the New York School II" The New Criterion Vol. 17, No. 6, February 1999
- <sup>18</sup> Morton Feldman "Give My Regards to Eighth Street" Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 99
- <sup>19</sup> Amy C. Beal "Time canvases: Morton Feldman and the Painters of the New York School" Music and Modern Art p.229 (Her source for the Feldman quotes is Give My Regards to Eighth Street I tried to find the source of her quotes and was unable to unearth them in my copy of the book – I suspect that she has a different addition than mine)
- <sup>20</sup> Clement Greenberg "Avant-garde and Kitsch" The Collected Essay and Criticisms 1:8
- <sup>21</sup> Frank O'Hara liner notes New Directions in Music 2: Columbia Records ML5403/MS6090
- <sup>22</sup> Ellen G. Landau Lee Krasner: A Catalogue Raisonne (note from Ellen G. Landau:Krasner told this to Dorothy Seckler, interview Nov. 2, 1964 (Krasner Papers, Archives of American Art))
- <sup>23</sup> Morton Feldman "Crippled Symmetry" Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 148
- <sup>24</sup> Michael Hrebeniak "Robert Creeley - Obituary: Black Mountain poet fired by an elemental energy" Tuesday April 5, 2005 The Guardian
- <sup>25</sup> Amy C. Beal "Time canvases: Morton Feldman and the Painters of the New York School" Music and Modern Art p.229
- <sup>26</sup> Morton Feldman "Crippled Symmetry" Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 147
- <sup>27</sup> Morton Feldman "The Future of Local Music" Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 159
- <sup>28</sup> Morton Feldman "Give My Regards to Eighth Street" Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 97 -98
- <sup>29</sup> Hilton Kramer "Jackson Pollock & the New York School II" The New Criterion Vol. 17, No. 6, February 1999
- <sup>30</sup> Morton Feldman "Crippled Symmetry" Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 147
- <sup>31</sup> Morton Feldman "Crippled Symmetry" Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 147
- <sup>32</sup> Clement Greenberg "The Crisis of Easel Painting" The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 2, Arrogant Purpose, 145 – 1949 ed. John O'Brian p.224
- <sup>33</sup> Morton Feldman "Give My Regards to Eighth Street" Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 98 - 99
- <sup>34</sup> Greg Reave "Interview with Earle Brown" 1983 audio from [www.earle-brown.org](http://www.earle-brown.org)
- <sup>35</sup> Morton Feldman "Unpublished Writings" (Morton Feldman Papers, Music Library, State University of New York at Buffalo) Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 210
- <sup>36</sup> Morton Feldman "Unpublished Writings" (Morton Feldman Papers, Music Library, State University of New York at Buffalo) Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 208
- <sup>37</sup> Frank O'Hara liner notes New Directions in Music 2: Columbia Records ML5403/MS6090
- <sup>38</sup> Morton Feldman "Crippled Symmetry" Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 145

---

<sup>39</sup> Frank O'Hara liner notes New Directions in Music 2: Columbia Records ML5403/MS6090

<sup>40</sup> Morton Feldman "The Future of Local Music" Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 160-161

<sup>41</sup> Morton Feldman "The Future of Local Music" Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 161

<sup>42</sup> Thomas DeLio "Last Pieces #3 (1959)" Analytical Investigations p.41

<sup>43</sup> Morton Feldman "The Future of Local Music" Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 180

<sup>44</sup> Morton Feldman "Crippled Symmetry" Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Collected Writings of Morton Feldman page 146