

"Strictly considered, writing about music is as illogical as singing about economics. All the other arts can be talked about in the terms of ordinary life and experience. A poem, a statue, a painting or a play is a representation of somebody or something, and can be measurably described (the purely æsthetic values aside) by describing what it represents."

—"The Unseen World" by H. K. M., *The New Republic*
(page 63, Vol. 14, Feb. 9, 1918)

Singing

A BLUES IN K

A
manifesto
written
and
designed
by
**Kenneth
FitzGerald**



critical writer is respond to creativity. And setting my mind to it, I can condense everything wrong, and everything right, about doing this into three words. This trinity has bothered me for some time but I had never fully contemplated why until now.

These three words conjure up a ludicrous image ripe for parody: a caricature of Martha Graham prancing and swooning across a bleak brick plaza at the foot of some austere, anonymous steel and glass skyscraper, tulle swirling with every grand, affected, sweeping gesture. Maybe it's an entire troupe capering about like loony fools. Modern dance meets modern design. Cue the laugh track. That's the three words: *dancing about architecture*.

"Writing about music is like dancing about architecture," is the full, familiar formulation of the quip in question. It has no definitive attribution, being contemporarily credited to Steve Martin, Frank Zappa, Laurie Anderson and, most recently, Elvis Costello. There's some evidence that each of them made at least an approximation of the jibe but not for its coinage. The distinctive personalities involved provide affirmation for each claimant—"sounds like something s/he would have said."

Attempts to establish that provenance are ongoing—but likely pointless. In a 2010 Freakonomics blog post on the phrase, Garson O'Toole's quoteinvestigator.com website was credited with unearthing the earliest usage of the exact phrase—in 1979 by actor/comedian/musician Martin Mull. At best, Mull adapted (wittily unwittingly) the *New Republic* construction featured at the beginning of this article. It's the earliest example of the "writing about music" corollary that O'Toole could locate. Mull obviously was going for laughs, where "H.K.M." was simply making an argument.

The many permutations of the phrase over time are evidence that it's a popular diss. You can also dial up a batch of blogs titled with variations on "dancing about architecture," all centered on discussions of music. Each defies their titles as they verbally promenade.

The attraction of the dig is plain. It's a clever, crisp, slightly surreal twist of language, a crowd-pleasing deflation of the stereotypical pretentiousness everyone associates with critical commentary. It's unfortunate that the phrase is so firmly attached to music criticism: It's tailor-made for graphic design. After all, there's likely less patience amongst design practitioners than musicians for deep thought about their activity. Plus there's graphic design's historic association with architecture.

Amusing as the remark is, it's totally phony. Snicker if you want, but it can't stand scrutiny. Of course, at the center of the snark is the notion of the futility of analysis itself. Not only does the wisecrack stick it to the art of writing, the writing's subject suffers collateral damage. Isn't writing a song—about love, language, Montana, revenge and guilt, ventriloquism—as much a performance of building boogie as critiquing it is? To be consistent with the "writing about music" line of thinking, you can't stop at the critic's response to the

art; you must encompass and reject the work as well. (And here, and in all instances going forward, when I mention "art" or "artists," I'm referring collectively to the disciplines of music, fine art and graphic design, along with their respective performers.) Our established creative disciplines—and many of their themes, tropes—seem normal only through tradition, from design to song to ventriloquism. They are regarded as natural because they're so pervasive and established. Take that away, and all expression seems absurd. Talking about love is like daubing paint on fabric to cruelty.

Admittedly, the preponderance of what's in the music press is celebrity reporting (which, if talking to pop stars, can seem like you're talking to architecture). That there's a dearth of affective literature in any creative discipline is a given. However, there are also the exceptions that prove cavorting to constructions can be just as vital as cutting the grooves.

Similarly, graphic designers have an ambiguous relationship with their literature. Pragmatic "how to" articles abound and are happily consumed—as are showcases of and interviews with leading practitioners. A prevailing opinion amongst practitioners, however, is that critical thought should be expressed through and in the work, not in portentous essays ... If you must indulge in it at all.

It's ironic that the smarter musicians recycle "dancing about architecture." The remark's nuance and wit is beyond most pop stars. And it's given that there's plenty of writing incapable of matching the subtlety of the art it attempts to describe. Still, I've always been averse to the comment simply as an enthusiast for the arts—and reading about and discussing them. (Having status as a line-dancer in my own right doesn't play into my response.)

Grousing about bad press is understandable. But tearing down the entire communal, generative experience of art is overkill. If anyone needs and benefits from architectural dancing, it's musicians of the kind who'll fuss about dancing to architecture. Further, it's often alleged that merely *talking* about music is a pointless activity. How

could any art survive such prohibition on conversation? That artists might idealize a passive, indiscriminating audience seems the antithesis of the creative contract.

For all their drollery, the total eight words in question comprise perhaps the most nihilistic assertion ever uttered about the creative experience. However, it provides a service by negatively engaging essential truths about creativity in all its forms. By denying the effectual possibility of discourse, the phrase ultimately affirms its import. Yes, writing about music is like dancing about architecture. So what?

The phrase's central flaw is ridiculing the act of crossing one discipline's boundary to illuminate another. This is observably contrary to most musicians' practice—and creatives in all the arts.

Creativity is often, maybe always, a process of directed, simple synesthesia. This is the psychological term for the state in which stimuli is cross-sensed: hearing color or tasting touch. Usually, it's the result of physical trauma. The late neurologist Oliver Sacks described the common music/color inversion in the chapter "The Key of Clear Green" for his 2007 book *Musophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*. The malady has been a

constant fascination for people in many imaginative disciplines. Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud wrote poems about the synesthetic experience—works that heavily influenced musicians such as Patti Smith. Creativity manifests and experiments in the realm of the senses, so any phenomenon, especially a deranging one, is of interest—and possible utility.

Creativity and culture may be regarded as activities where reality is subjected to metaphor, to a deliberate scrambling of the senses. The process is an acknowledgement that experience cannot be contained by its host medium—you might need to paint a picture to celebrate words, and vice versa. Every physical means possible to the body may need to be called to the task in a figurative pageant.

If taken literally, "dancing about architecture" suggests that music can truly be only about music—possibly only instrumentals. In reality, as soon as language permitted, lyrics were set to song. Instrumental music has long been inspired by and titled for people, places, emotions, actions and events. According to Anne Kilmer, professor of Assyriology at the University of California, the oldest known song dates from 1,400 B.C. and is a hymn to Nikal, the moon god's wife. (Shall we fear the wrath of her husband, Sin—"Feroocious bull, whose horn is thick, whose legs are perfected"—for our presumption?)

If we're prohibited from dancing to architecture, our culture becomes entirely insular and self-referential—if we have one at all. Silence must descend, poetry purged from our pages, if cross-art connections are prohibited.

In a commercially determined culture, art is a product, and artists must place fearsome, legally enforced claims on their "intellectual property." Poor reviews and inept commentaries threaten more than artists' pride. Livelihoods are at stake. This is felt sharply amongst graphic designers, who regard most design writing as PR. While fine artists and musicians dissemble about their relationship with consumer culture, graphic design crafts daily Valentines.

Practically, art must be regarded as a discrete possession with clearly delineated boundaries. Closing out any discussion of art also limits the event to the artist-supplied circumstance. Upon conclusion, the curtain closes swiftly and firmly, and the audience is ushered out, securely gagged.

This possibility is untenable and contrary to history. And it's a foolish, self-defeating action. Countless works in all media are creative homages and progeny of a precursor—more so in our contemporary, sampling era. In fact, criticism itself may be considered a long-standing sampling activity in culture. Discourse selects elements from the artwork to construct a new work. The specific sampling analogy would be a usage of nonmusical elements in a composition. While less common, this form of sampling is established and widespread.

Criticism, however, isn't usually awarded standing as an artform in its own right. It's regarded as—and frequently adopts the position of—being *outside* of creative activity, a commentary upon it. Style and skill are desirable in commentators, yet discourse has secondary, subservient status to the art. A critic can more often be likened to a parasite, or a barnacle, on the body of art. If an artist is charitable, elevation to symbiote status is possible. And this is only the formal practice of art dialogue. Colloquial criticism is just someone talking smack.

Squelching discussion is potentially hazardous economically for artists, far more than poor reviews. In reality, artists, musicians and designers are striving to generate buzz about themselves and their work. But with potential reward,

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Underlying this is the certainty that art is a generative experience, not a passive one. The potency of an artwork is in its ability to provoke response, whether verbal, written or inspired—in the same medium or in another. Discussion extends the artwork beyond its physical, chronological boundaries. This extension links it with other works, forming the complex web of associations that is culture. The network of culture is always active, dynamic, transcending the individual works.

Our relationship to art can change under this conception. The art takes precedence over the artists and an independent presence. The artist is the custodian, the medium, for art.

My first encounter with this notion as it pertains to music was from guitarist Robert Fripp, in a 1981 joint interview with the late Joe Strummer of The Clash: "Sometimes—and this is only a theory—I think that music needs a musician to play it. That the music itself is alive, but you have to be out there to know it. And at that point it may be possible that the music is waiting to be played. So it needs a musician." (*Musician*, No. 33, June 1981).

Fripp is an idealistic but pragmatic musician who has spoken out frequently and passionately about musicians' legal and moral rights to their work. His term for one aspect of his performing—"Soundscapes"—is pure dancing about architecture. Reflexively, I am opposed to a conception of an abstraction as an entity one serves, whether it is "rock and roll," "art" or "graphic design." However, Fripp links his idea to a generous, communal experience that promotes and enriches public experience.

Music also needs an audience, as does all art. Might art also perform the audience? The compulsion to witness creativity, to further sustain it through discourse, might be as profound as the creative impulse. Fan is an abbreviation of fanatic. That people bearing witness to art might struggle, stammer, thrash about, stumble over boundaries—all to describe the enormity and allure of the experience—should draw no indictment. The expression can only be as driven and occasionally messy as the art that compelled it.

The intensity of reaction to visual art, music and literature is storied within and across each of those mediums. My special interest is graphic design. Can the same be said for writing about that? If anything, graphic design's status as a prosaic activity makes it eminently discussable. Writing about graphic design is like ... writing about graphic design. The challenge is making it strange.

"H.K.M." probably would add graphic design (had the practice existed then as we now know it) to the list of things that "can be measurably described (the purely aesthetic values aside) by describing what it represents." Today's graphic designers likely would agree. Graphic design is the ultimate representer. The "dancing about architecture" prohibition wouldn't seem to apply. The discipline's prosaic status is

lauded within the design field and enforced within its professional literature.

However, H.K.M.'s representation of the arts is naïve and historically mistaken. As far as painting goes, he was probably thinking more Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema than Kazimir Malevich. Writing in 1918, abstract art was just starting out and would soon definitively demolish H.K.M.'s conception of painting. The other disciplines named above were similarly straying from descriptiveness.

And while realism and representation predominated prior to the early 20th century, matters weren't as apparent as thought. Impressionism, for instance, had

already twisted representation into eccentric areas that transcended literality. An enormity of meaning is lost if you say that Monet was documenting Rouen Cathedral and leave it at that. Some light fantastic is obligatory in your text to fully impart the painter's own fantastic light.

The inadequacy of literal readings extends further back in history. For centuries, paintings have contained complex symbolism and iconography. Simply detailing the apparent account presented in a painting would overlook crucial meanings. Secondary narratives of contemporary times are woven throughout ostensibly religious stories.

Art history has prosaically documented various symbolologies—no fancy stepping required. Yet artists utilized the symbolization as conduits to the ineffable—to revelation. Overall, the paintings themselves are examples of dancing about architecture. As are the poems, plays, statues ... and graphic designs.

Graphic design is ready for an unrepentantly absurd, tangential literary indulgence. Similar to the dance/architecture pairing, there needs to be a linkage that's equally incongruous—and evocative. For me, that association has been design/music. Writing about graphic design is, for me, an exercise of *stinging the surface*.

Graphic design is usually considered an accompanist discipline, a backing for the content. In this context, the lyrics carry the substance. The claim is—even with the design field—that here is where meaning truly resides; the words tell you what the song is "about." Design is regarded as instrumental: It holds no content of its own. Just as our visual proclivity is toward representation, our auditory preference is toward vocalizing. Still, instrumental music has been

At the same time, there are the musics of the audience, their invented melodies and halting, improvised performances. On one hand, formal graphic design doubts these airs, while cycling them back into proper compositions with the other.

But it's the professional sounds of graphic design that fill the concert halls, a massed chorus dispersed throughout the world, harmonizing on ballads of

people, places, possessions, participation, passions and—always—more. All pitch perfect ... by which I mean destined for the garbage.

What are the songs of the surface? For the lyrics, there is the magnificence of typefaces that embody words and compel associations and sensations. Fonts are visual *madeleines*, acting surreptitiously when wielded by sophisticates and laypeople alike. Their ubiquity compounds their stealth as they spell out ideals in their forms.

There are the plangent profundities of a multitude of graphic marks: rules, curves, patterns, shapes, sigils. Hues assign humors, coloring these elements, and the expanses amongst them. There is the symphony of a book, the album of a magazine. The sequencing and pacing of turned pages is no less a composition of movements and variations than is chamber music.

The aspects of graphic design can magnify or nullify our interpretations of text and image. The arrangements of graphic elements on a page, their juxtaposition, can release storehouses of ideas, affect beliefs on how we should manage our body politic, how we relate to and operate our technology, and interpret reality itself. That's worthy of a pop song at least—or, more appropriately, an orgy of operas.

H.K.M. proposes that it's contra-rational to sing about economics, infamously the "dismal science." Too often, graphic design is made into the dismal art, overdetermined by commercial concerns. H.K.M.'s problem is being wrapped up about the illogic when discussing the ineffable. Much of, maybe all, creativity is extra-logical. But our modern era expects "measurable description"—or silence.

This isn't to say that design writing shouldn't be exacting—just the opposite. It's to hope for writing that's adventurous and expansive when articulating graphic design, writing that will trample boundaries gladly to celebrate it, just as design scatters across page, screen and space.

Design demands a disciplinary transubstantiation to fully portray its deceptive apparency, its manifold semblances. To talk about graphic design—in voice and written word—is to perform slight-readings from a different kind of sheet music.

If you know the score, please play, and sing along. ■

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surface

historically stirring and substantive. Beethoven isn't panned for his lack of librettos. On their own, the melodies hold sway. Design is instrumental: It creates a context for the content—it generates the *desire* to hear the words—and becomes content in its own right.

Indicting graphic design as an activity preoccupied with surface is a charged charge. While a simple truth, to designers it's a frequent slur decrying an alleged obscuring of an underlying emptiness. Yet the surface for design resembles that of our body. Like skin, or the paper upon which graphic design is often performed, design itself is a cultural membrane composed of multiple layers. Its fine depths emblemize subtle strata of meaning.

The songs of graphic design are diverse, encompassing all styles, from folk immediacy to industrial impersonality. In its most popular expressions, graphic design is a 2D musical staged daily on myriad platforms. Stock companies perform most of the shows, while many others are amateur hours, occasionally enlivened by the participants' verve but plagued by flubbed lines ("did anyone think to proofread this?") and cardboard sets ("here's a marker and a pizza box lid, go crazy").

Grabbing the headlines and attention, however, are the big budget Broadway extravaganzas. Whatever the quality, we suspend our disbelief as characters unrelentingly croon tunes with the oddest subject matter—often extolling the virtues of some humdrum product or service.