This bulletin was originally delivered as a talk at Stand-Up Comedy in Portland, Oregon, May 16, 2010.

Cover image: *B…*, a shelf by Scott Ponik produced in 2010

(To be spoken)

When I first read from this text a few months ago at a shop in Portland, Oregon, I paused every two or three paragraphs to play an example from the stack of vinyl on the shelf. By the end I'd realized this was a bad idea, but had no idea why until I happened to attend an exhibition of the work of the American composer Robert Ashley shortly afterwards. On display was a transcription of a talk, "The Future of Music," given in 2000 at The University of California in San Diego. Its opening paragraphs explained the problem so precisely that I've stuck them wholesale onto the front end here:

When I started writing this lecture I had the idea that I would interrupt it now and then for a musical example. That was a bad idea, as we all know. I don't know what made me forget. Talk and music don't mix. Different parts of the brain or something. Except in two very special conditions, which we all have experienced, the attention to the details of the voice —whether or not anything interesting is being said—makes us impatient with the music, which is the last thing the lecture needs. The two conditions (just to remind you of what I mean) are: first, the very casual NPR-type introduction to a long piece of music, which sort of eases you into the Vivaldi or whatever; and second, the full-speed ahead DJ on format-pop radio, who tries not to say anything except the ID, the time and the advertisement.

I can't do either of those, because the talk is too long and the examples are too short. When I rehearsed this with the examples for the first time, I could hardly bear the examples, which are actually very short and which I love as music. I was shocked. Then I came to my senses.

So first I will talk, for about two hours, and then I will play about 30 minutes of nine examples [...], with reference to what they were supposed to illustrate in the lecture and with discographical information, in case you should want to pursue them in full.

Most of the lecture is academic, in the real—not bad, I hope—sense of the term. That is, these ideas have been said many times already by people more qualified than I. But, obviously, they are only academic if

you have already heard them. For some people some of the ideas will be new. So I will say them anyway, just in case.

. . .

About six months ago, my friend Scott Ponik asked me to inaugurate this piece of furniture, built to house a temporary reference library whose collection will change according to the dictates of a rotating series of guests. A couple of weeks later, I wrote back that although no particular selection of books had suggested itself, I COULD imagine filling it with the back catalog of Bill Callahan records—including his earlier incarnation as (the band) Smog—to be played more or less on repeat during the allocated period. This would force me into writing the following, which has been rattling around the back of my mind for some time.

There are two things I want to relate. One is relatively simple, dumb even, and mostly withers in explanation. It is the notion that the recordings of Bill Callahan and Smog *somehow sound like what they're about.* I say "recordings" rather than "music" or "songs" because I mean to circumscribe intangibles like "atmosphere," "ambience," or "accidents." In fact, I dimly recall Callahan in a very old interview saying something along the lines of WHEN YOU'VE LISTENED TO AS MANY FALL RECORDS AS I HAVE YOU REALIZE HOW MUCH THE PARTICULAR SOUND IS PART OF THE SONG, which clearly foregrounds the messy contingency of recording.

I'm aware that on the face of it that a "song sounding like what it's about" isn't such a remarkable claim to be making, or is at least an absurdly subjective one. As such, I'll add three points which I hope will suggest that this amounts to something more than a kind of high-minded fan mail, that there's some degree of disinterest and discernment involved. First, what I have in mind certainly doesn't occur in all of Callahan's work, not even the majority of it. Second, when it does, I can't think of any other music that demonstrates it so well. Third, anticipating some kind of counter-argument that any song listened to long enough will automatically start to "sound like what it's about" through sheer force of familiarity, I can confidently assert that this is a precise example of what I DON'T mean. What I'm trying to relate is an immediate, "objective" sense of

concurrency derived from the form of the recording, not the habit of its audience.

So that was the first main aspect, which is really a decoy for the second. This is the notion that a realization of this kind—of *the sound of Bill Callahan*—in one medium (music) can be usefully transposed to another (say, graphic design). And I'm using the word "realization" in order to suggest a kind of internal understanding arrived at independently rather than through anyone else's explication, through empirical evidence rather than abstract supposition. "It dawned on me," you might say, as a kind of secular, everyday epiphany.

I can't be alone in sensing certain technical equivalences across disciplines. Consider the grammar of a hard cut versus a soft fade in both music and film; regardless of the medium, don't they formally "mean the same thing"? This is an obvious example, but I somewhat less obviously correlate this particular "meaning" with a *hard* color made of solid ink versus a *soft* equivalent made by the halftone process in which dots are layered on top of each other to produce an aggregate color. (There's some kind of ethical implication here, which has to do with that hard meaning real and that soft meaning fake that I'm not entirely comfortable with. But it's tangential; all I really want to point to—or reminisce about—are those moments when such correspondences hint at a general understructure of qualities and values.) Later, perhaps, such correspondences in art more broadly reveal themselves to extend across other domains, such as mathematics and science. And I'd like to think that the payoff for realizing and assimilating these values is—ideally—manifest as a kind of practical philosophy, or in mundane terms, ways to approach the complicated business of living.

That sounds vague and flighty, I know, so here's a more concrete and grounded example. Recently my good friend and collaborator David Reinfurt delivered a talk which comprised three parts, each a condensed story of a man and his lasting contribution to his field: William James's conception of Pragmatic (as opposed to Rationalist) philosophy, Kurt Gödel's Naïve (as opposed to Axiomatic) approach to mathematics, and Paul R. Halmos's Naïve (as opposed to Axiomatic) approach to logic. David admits at the beginning of the talk that he has just enough grasp

of the essentials of each case to be able to walk an audience through them, and by the end it's clear that despite hopping disciplines and skirting around some quite complex propositions, each example articulates the same fundamental idea, which is that the ongoing process of ATTEMPTING to understand, though never quite understanding completely, is ABSOLUTELY PRODUCTIVE. This is what I mean by a practical philosophy. Another is the pragmatic or "naïve" investment in empirical evidence and hard facts as opposed to abstract supposition and soft beliefs.

Over the past decade or so, I've wondered why when trying to teach classes in art schools (and usually, again, in graphic design) my circle of friends and I have, like David, regularly drawn on examples from other fields, particularly literature, film and fine art. Examples off the top of my head include considering the gamut of style through James Joyce's encyclopedia of literary rhetoric, *Ulysses*; the differences in translation from novel to film apparent in the old and new film versions of *Lolita*, and both of course in relation to Nabokov's original novel; or the various self-imposed aesthetic quandaries and pan-media solutions of Richard Hamilton's art over the past half century. Why do such examples seem more pertinent and useful than equivalents from graphic design itself? I think primarily because they're not weighed down by the baggage of investment—meaning all those reflex tendencies and prejudices that naturally accumulate through entrenchment in whatever your base discipline might be. You have nothing to lose. Your relationship to this outside work is as a person rather than as a graphic designer (or artist or director or architect), as a reader or member of the audience rather than as an insider or professional. You approach the thing as stuff of the world rather than the "design world" or "art world," and because you see it more readily for what it is rather than, say, what it ISN'T, it seems more definite, less ambiguous, and so, in turn, more instructive. As a tool for teaching its easier to relate, and to relate TO.

This isn't to make a case for resisting the depth of a specific discipline, of its history and theory or any contemporary discourse, only to promote the advantages of a wider reach. The argument is half-full, not half-empty, and runs like this: the more culturally cosmopolitan you are, the broader your awareness of other ways of doing things, presumably the

less parochial and more ANSWERABLE your own approach and work become. Furthermore, the comprehension of how a particular quality operates across disciplines (like the grammar of the hard cut described above) brings that quality into sharper focus. Or rather, it adds extra dimensions, affords you a more cubist, HAPTIC impression of values that are often difficult to express in plain language. Study of other things is good, because it macrocosms everything—if you understand things on the walls of other areas, you can identify how they relate to things on the walls of your own. Everything's connected and relative and there's no microcosm, really.

Then again, perhaps what I'm trying to get across about other subjects IS particular to graphic design, or at least becomes particularly acute when trying to teach it, because a piece of writing compared to, say, a page layout (whether material or digital) is always going to be fundamentally more TENABLE. An argument for how or why a record cover or signage system or timetable or book cover or web page or identity WORKS is always going to be less plausible to me than an equivalent judgement in literature, because of the simple fact that language is easier to pin down, the common values are more discernible and fixed, less woolly and subjective. For example, *this text is convincing because its argument is well-ordered, with relevant and demonstrative examples put across in a friendly tone devoid of jargon or excess.* Certainly since the preoccupations of graphic design have drifted over the past half-century from solving problems to creating identities—from a hard to a soft science—it runs more on subjective justification than objective consensus. It's like a discipline without the discipline of another discipline.

Music is different again, of course, and all this is way too dry to reasonably apply. But I'm not interested in making some relative case for the theory and practice of music informing each other. My pointing out that Callahan's recordings *sound like what they're about* is just an easier, more immediate way of talking about something I'd reasonably want to try and put across as a design teacher: of form and content informing each other, of SYMBIOSIS. And ultimately, in fact, to transcend the dichotomy altogether, as Susan Sontag does in her seminal 1964 essay "On Style." "Form and content informing each other" is distinct from the simple cause-and-effect of the more famous catchphrase "Form follows function,"

not least because in Callahan's case it seems as likely that the music preceded the words as the other way round.[1]

To my ears, this is particularly clear on the albums *Wild Love* and *Red Apple Falls*, released from some strange place between the more clearly classifiable poles of early low-fi and later country. Take the opening tracks of these two records: without wanting to labor the point, all I'm getting at is the fact that "Bathysphere" *somehow sounds like* it's being pumped out of a bell jar at the bottom of an ocean, and that "The Morning Paper" *somehow sounds like* it's Sunday, and barely awake. And most of all, I defy anyone to listen to "Lazy Rain" from 2001's *Rain On Lens* and deny that it *somehow sounds like* rain. I don't mean that you can hear something a little like the pitter-patter of water on the pavement. I mean that the weird press of its accumulated sound TRANSLATES THE TOTAL GESTALT OF rain.

One more note on subjectivity. By now, it should be blindingly apparent that everyone else has examples that are as pertinent for them as Callahan is for me, but perhaps less so that this personal pertinence is precisely what turns them into a tool for teaching, because realized deeply enough—or "felt"—to be passed on with conviction. The teaching of Jacques Rancière's *Ignorant Schoolmaster* is founded on the single principle that *everything is in everything.* A set of footprints on a beach are a language: their shape is the same as your own feet, therefore they must be human; their size and the distance between them relative to your own suggests that human's approximate age; their placement reveals the direction they went, and so on. Any THING can be taken as a starting point, which automatically becomes a talking (or thinking) point; by talking (or thinking) you relate that thing to other things, and by relating to other things you gain insight, i.e., learn.

In the words of the original Ignorant Schoolmaster, Joseph Jacotot, "The problem is to reveal an intelligence to itself. ANYTHING can be used … a prayer or a song that the child or ignorant one knows by heart. There is always something the ignorant one knows that can be used as a point of comparison, something to which a new thing to be learned can be related."

We all know people who are better theorists than practitioners, or vice versa. Something that's always fascinated me about Jean-Luc Godard's work during the 1960s is how he was at the same time and without hierarchy both a penetrating critic AND vanguard director. Where we might more readily expect the films of such an outspoken writer to be crippled by self-consciousness or an obsession with technicalities, somehow they're the opposite: childlike in their compulsion and exuberance. In this way, Godard helped me comprehend—or realize—the word "praxis": theory informed by practice and vice versa.

Finally, Scott himself pointed out a convenient shortcut to all I've been trying to say, writing to tell me he'd just understood what I was getting at while listening to the end of "Too Many Birds" from *Sometimes I Wish We Were An Eagle* which—when listened to rather than read—amounts to a kind of extra-dimensional concrete poetry. It practices what it preaches:

If
If you
If you could
If you could only
If you could only stop.
If you could only stop your
If you could only stop your heart
If you could only stop your heart beat
If you could only stop your heart beat for one
If you could only stop your heart beat for one heart
If you could only stop your heart beat for one heart beat

*

1. In his portrait of Callahan, "No Depression," in *The New Yorker*, April 18 2011, Sasha Frere-Jones noted: "Callahan, it turns out, is spare with words because they are the same as time."

– Smog, "Bathysphere" on *Wild Love* (Drag City, 1995)
– Smog, "The Morning Paper" on *Red Apple Falls* (Drag City, 1997)
– Smog, "Lazy Rain" on *Rain on Lens* (Drag City, 2001)
– Bill Callahan, "Too Many Birds" on *Sometimes I Wish We Were an Eagle* (Drag City, 2009)