

BROWSING AS DREAMING: WHY I MAKE MUSIC WITH THE WEB

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment

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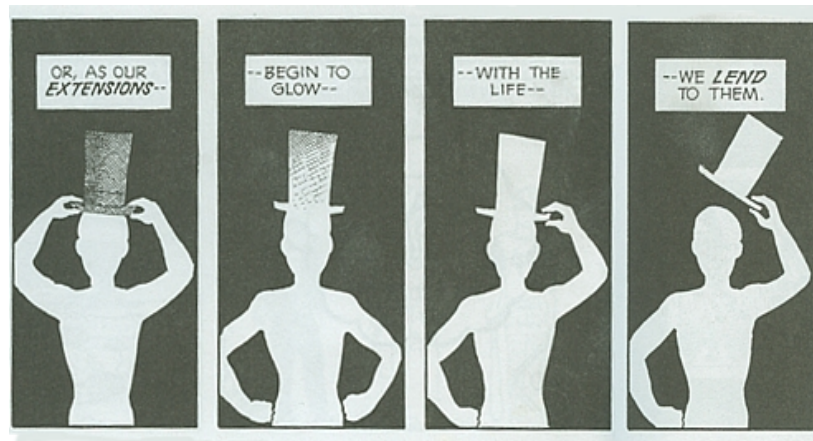
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Chris Brown



*"It is becoming increasingly clear that there is no existing set of conditions on how to begin a work of art. One can begin with practically anything."*

Morton Feldman, "After Modernism"



Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*

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Friends often describe my websites as a sort of "Choose Your Own Adventure" of music. This was always funny to me, because those children's books never crossed my mind when I sat down to make web music for the first time. But that observation cuts to the heart of how the internet functions differently than any other medium. "Choose Your Own Adventure" books were created to be more like real life than normal fiction. The reader makes decisions and suffers consequences. No fictional deaths occur on my websites, but I have intuited from traveling through them that they exist in a space that is a little more like life.

I call my music "web music" because it exists in web browsers and relies on the nature of the web for its completion. It is different than a song played on a guitar that is uploaded to MySpace, though I do occasionally sample from MySpace pages in my performances. No, my music could not exist anywhere else. You could not play it in a CD player or on an acoustic instrument. As much as possible, I try to utilize capacities of the browser itself: hyperlink structure, multimedia relationships, pre-existing internet content, and the ability to run several browsers at once. As artists have previously done with TVs, tapes, records, and CD players, I have in recent years moved towards using the web browser as an instrument for generating content in addition to a medium for displaying it.

My approach to this move, by a mix of necessity and choice, has been different than past media artists. For one, the internet is harder to touch. Christian Marclay could cut a record in half, but I cannot cut my browser in half. A silent record would make

crackling sounds for Marclay, but an empty web browser, no matter how fast I move it around the screen, makes no sound. In addition, the internet is slower than a physical object. Every change involves correspondence through a network that was built to share text, not complex media, so it is a clunky and inefficient instrument for displaying sound and images.

It has been a challenge to exploit the most central properties of the web for musical purposes. It has taken a long journey of interface programming to get to the point where I can interact with my browser kinesthetically, without clicking on it. It makes sense, then, that when people ask me why I make music in such an impractical way, my answer that “My imagination told me to!” is often insufficient.

#### Web Installation : *Ocean*

It was during a cold Montana winter in 2007 that I composed my first piece of music for the web. I did not have many ways to make music in Montana, but I had inherited a copy of Dreamweaver and saw the web as a way of organizing media. My first idea was to put 1000 sound files in a website and let viewers turn them on and off, but that soon gave way to other ideas. I categorized my material into small groups of similar content and gave each group its own webpage and the means to link to other groups. The result was a morphing sonic terrain that was explored by clicking.

Embracing the multimedia nature of the internet, I used pictures as the buttons for sound, and the pictures became structures for the music. A picture of ten lights needed ten sound files and the lights at the top might be clicked on more often. I used photographs of

pointillistic objects—often negative photos of Christmas lights—and used each point as a link to a sound file. Since I made this piece in Montana, where I had access to few instruments, most of the sound material came from sections of CDs that I owned or that I checked out from the Missoula public library.

This was the entire construction of my first piece of music built for the web, *Ocean*. It had four pages, each linking to another, and was originally called *Four Images with Sound, for six voices*. Two pages consisted of drones, one consisted of sparse piano, and one had a collection of noise samples. I dreamed of a website in which many small works, like *Ocean*, would be linked together, sort of how a poem exists in a book of poems. I could make small websites often, and link them to the each other to create a larger collection. At the time, though, I dreamed small: I didn't even have a server to host my website on.

I have often related *Ocean* to Morton Feldman's sentiment that one can begin a piece of art with anything. A friend of mine just made a gorgeous tape piece with only a shortwave radio and the primitive recording program Audacity. They were the only two sound tools he had in his house at the time. Even if you don't have an instrument, or excellent software, you can still make music if you have *any* way to work with sound, even if it is only Dreamweaver.

I cannot explain in any more detail why I made that first piece, but I have since persisted in making web music despite having access to much more practical music tools. Several aspects of the medium have kept me so engaged:



- Each of my pieces is a part of the web, capable of being linked to and combined with other websites.
- The world wide web gives to me without asking for a return, and Lewis Hyde will tell us that an economy of gifts is the most conducive environment for artistic sharing and art creation.
- There is no foundation for this kind of music. Making it has caused me to experience, for the first time, the “anxiety of art” that Morton Feldman famously wrote of: a space of no rules, a constant risk for failure, and a constant reliance on the imagination for the completion of the art.
- Lastly, the web is a multimedia platform in which each medium, filtered through the web, cannot be fully realized or overwhelm our senses because it is sharing space, and I believe this mix of independent media creates sensory tension and stimulates our imaginations.

Feldman once wrote, “My concern at times is nothing more than establishing a series of practical conditions that will enable me to work.”<sup>1</sup> The web, in all its impracticality for musical work, has been that for me: a blank page that accepts my imagination freely and consistently pulls work out of me. Isn't that, after all, the most practical condition for art?

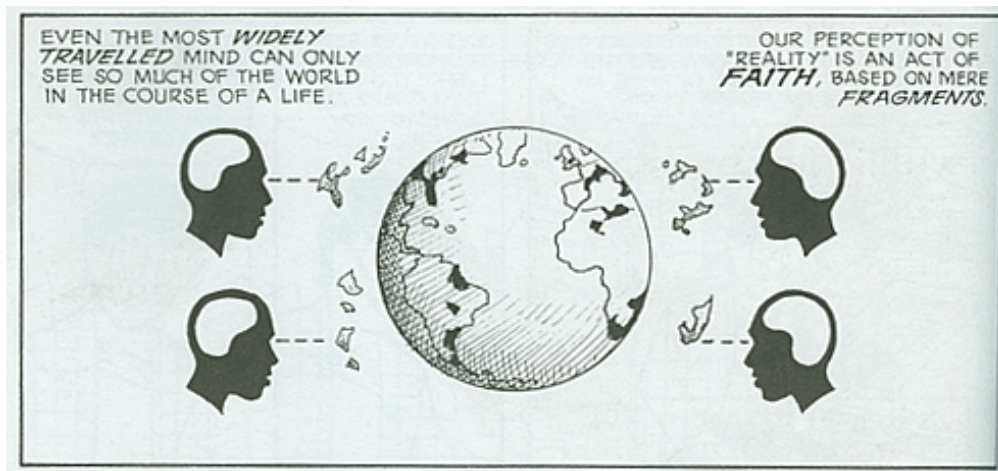
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<sup>1</sup> Morton Feldman, *Essays*, ed. Walter Zimmerman (Kerpen: Beginner Press, 1985) 96.

## Radical Decentering

### The Structure of Being a Part, Not a Whole

In her essay *On Beauty and Being Just*, aesthetician Elaine Scarry describes the many qualities of beauty and explains why she believes beauty to be an assistant to justice. One of these qualities is what she calls “radical decentering,” the way beauty pulls us out of ourselves for a moment and reminds us that we are not the center of objective experience.<sup>2</sup> Beauty, Scarry says, sends us a short, somatic message that we are not isolated, but part of something else.<sup>3</sup> I moved my art practice to the web for a few reasons, but the longest-lasting has been that the web demonstrates this phenomenon. Whereas a book-bound novel of fiction attempts to exist as one unified whole (something that creates a new world with its first page and destroys that world with its final period), a website is a part of something else.



The musical content of my websites also exist in this paradigm. Instead of playing one composition in one quicktime file, I pull apart my music into multiple mp3 files that

<sup>2</sup> Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 111.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> All illustrations by Scott McCloud.

can overlap, and let them all play independently. In *Brigadoon*, my second piece for the web, each sound file consists of one short piano note every five or six seconds. Instead of giving each voice a contrapuntal melody that could exist on its own, I strip each voice down to a sparseness that is unmusical unless it is paired with other files. No sound file is superior or inferior, instead each is an equal part of the sound. If the sound is a drone, as in parts of *Ocean*, it is a single note and not a full chord. This is similar to how instruments relate in a symphony as opposed to a solo setting. Whereas a solo for cello involves consistent musical activity, a cello's role in a symphony can be much more spare. Traditionally, the mp3's role on the internet has been a solo. My websites treat it more as one instrument in an ensemble. Just as a website is part of the web, not all of it, so each sound file is a part of the music, not all of it.

My websites' long-term structures also exhibit this type of pointillism, not only in the way they exist as part of the web, but in the way they exist as a musical composition in time. Consider a one-hour installation of an object that makes a sound each time you touch it. If this installation receives constant attention, it will create continuous music, or music that is perceived as one piece of music. Stockhausen once said, "Nowadays a silence of ten or twelve seconds is something most composers are terribly afraid of, because the audience would start talking and not listen to the music any more. So the longest silences I have used in my pieces are up to a minute in length."<sup>5</sup> There is a psychological threshold of what we consider to be one piece, as James Tenney analyzed in his essay *Meta+Hodos*. Many people, especially composers, would consider the whole hour of our hypothetical installation to be a continuous musical gesture, similar to a

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5 Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Stockhausen on Music* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1989) 38.

symphony with a lot of silences. For example, you could record the installation in its entirety, and listen to it as a piece of music (albeit a possibly long and boring one). The turning point seems to be when the installation is disassembled, moved, and installed in a different space. Few people, I think, would connect that to the original installation, would consider them as continuous.

When I interact with my websites from two different locations, most people consider my performances to be two pieces of music. But the installation stays in its space permanently. We perceive of it being in different places, so that if I interact with it on one computer, then go home and interact with it on another, it appears that the website is in a different place and therefore my performances are discontinuous. But the website exists on the server—or, more accurately, between the server and me—so I have always considered all interactions with it to be part of the same installation. Its overall structure may better be plotted on a calendar (as I did in *Book of Flowers*) than on a page of staff paper, but I don't consider that detrimental to its *gestalt*. The work stays in its place.

#### Algorithmic Javascript over time : *The Days*

In 2009 I sought to highlight the way that my websites exist over such a long period of time. I composed *The Days*, a website consisting of a 24-hour loop of sound and silence that viewers can add sounds to. Buttons for 35 samples exist on the site, allowing any viewer to click on buttons to add sounds to the loop, sometimes causing old sounds to be overwritten. Other versions of this piece, called *The Hours* and *The Minutes*, were also created in case *The Days* remained too sparse and conceptual.

There is significant artistic precedent for this type of evolving artwork. Allan Kaprow's "environments," spaces you could enter into and change, are perhaps the most accurate precursor to this type of website.<sup>6</sup> Formative to Kaprow were the writings of John Dewey and Alexander Dorner, who tell of Darwin's theory of evolution replacing the Platonic Forms of ancient Greece, and the impact this might have on art. Dewey separates the two approaches into the artistic ideas of "event" and "fact," explaining that "'Event' is the aspect of which comes out of, which proceeds, from a total process, whose other aspect is 'fact,' that which is done, finished (in a relative sense)."<sup>7</sup> What is presented in a performance of Debussy is a fixed fact, a finished entity that holds its emotions and cultural identifications within it. Works by Kaprow and other installation and performance artists lie closer to Dewey's definition of an 'event,' an art experience in which something becomes, something changes.

Dorner also draws from Darwin, pointing to the evolution of the individual wherein there is a simultaneous acting and being acted upon. Dorner writes,

Pragmatism has broken up the traditional opposition between absolute Being and historical Becoming; it has set the formerly static ground of reality in motion. Practical, i.e. change-creating, experience transforms the essence of conceptions. Truth changes itself, it grows... All these artistic disciplines must become energies which transform life itself...<sup>8</sup>

These emerging ideologies, written in 1947, point artists towards installation, an art form that can better facilitate such change. These writings had broad influence, and were prophetic, as Merce Cunningham later wrote, "I think of dance as a constant

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6 Jeff Kelley, *Childsplay: The Art of Allan Kaprow* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 8.

7 John Dewey, "Introduction" *The Way Beyond "Art"* (Brattleboro, VT: E. L. Hildreth & Co., 1947) 9.

8 Alexander Dorner, *The Way Beyond "Art"* (Brattleboro, VT: E. L. Hildreth & Co., 1947) 19.

transformation of life itself,”<sup>9</sup> or as in Robert Barry’s proclamation “Art Work” (1970), which projects a succinct and inspirational synthesis of installation and space inhabitation:

IT IS ALWAYS CHANGING.  
...  
ITS BOUNDARIES ARE NOT FIXED.  
IT AFFECTS OTHER THINGS.  
IT IS AFFECTED BY OTHER THINGS.  
...  
PART OF IT MAY ALSO BE PART OF SOMETHING ELSE.  
SOME OF IT IS FAMILIAR.  
SOME OF IT IS STRANGE.  
KNOWING OF IT CHANGES IT.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Merce Cunningham, *The Dancer and the Dance* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1985) 77.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Barry, “Art Work,” in Larry Urrutia, *Projections: Anti-Materialism* (La Jolla: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1970) n.p.

**Dream Environments**  
Collection and Recombination of Independent Sites

Web Collage : TNS performances

When I came to Mills and wanted to show my websites in a concert setting, I was faced with a problem. If I was to perform with my websites, my original notion that the website could and would be played by an unknowing performer was no longer true. I needed to approach my websites in a fundamentally different way. Instead of being an *unknowing* performer, I would be a *knowing* performer, and this opened up a number of possibilities: I could score events, I could play several browsers simultaneously, and I could use other websites in addition to my own.

I wrote my first piece for this practice in about 30 minutes, though it feels odd to call it writing. I opened up three of my websites—*Ocean*, *Brigadoon* and *Anthem*—in three windows, and improvised a piece by playing five or six sound files from each site. I played through that improvisation a few more times, changing it slightly each time, and wrote down a final version to be performed a few hours later at one of Mills' bi-monthly Thursday Night Specials. In later performances at TNS I would sample from commercial websites: YouTube videos of Arvo Part, Bill Evans, and Kazuo Ohno; 30-second listening samples from Amazon.com of Morton Subotnick, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Steve Reich; MySpace pages of composers Chelsea Leventhal and Matthew Burthner; and individual websites of friends and acquaintances.

Intentionally overlapping websites became my main method for performance

from 2008-2009. I used many sites over and over in different performances, always placing them in new arrangements and contexts. As Feldman was “content to be continually rearranging the same furniture in the same room,”<sup>11</sup> I seem to be most comfortable taking the same websites and fitting them into new patterns, sort of like a puzzle of square pieces that can be recombined into endless new puzzles. My websites work well in this type of performance for the same reason they work as installations: they are capable of being played partially, of being incorporated into something else.

There is a trend in contemporary poetry to fixate on certain words and images in order to form a language of one's own. This technique is similar to instrument building: faced with the acceptance of all sounds, instrument building limits us to only those sounds that the instrument can make; faced with the destruction of poetry's status quo by the surrealists and Beats, poets like Carl Phillips have formed limited vocabularies for themselves in order to maintain a clarified, distilled meaning. His poems in *From The Devotions* (1998) all use certain words and subjects—bee, god, horse, hand, difference, bird, body, sometimes, ascent/descent, reason—in different arrangements and narratives. Each use defines the word a little bit more by placing it in a new context. My web performances are like these poems: rearrangements of the same content and concepts to form new narratives.

Many composers that I admire use metaphors to describe the way they place sound into time, or the way they conceptualize their act of putting notes on paper. Feldman, Keith Rowe, and others use the metaphor of painting. Duchamp once literalized

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<sup>11</sup> Feldman 94.



a metaphor to sculpture in /Sculpture Musicales/ from /The Green Box./ For Iannis Xenakis, it was primarily mathematics. I have just made the analogy to poetry, but there is a much broader metaphor that inspires, and explains to me, my web collage work.

Consider the following dream: You, an old acquaintance, and a friend from middle school are sitting in your current living room. Someone says, “Let’s go home,” and suddenly the three of you are in an airport trying to fly home. In real life you are from California, but in the dream your home is in Michigan.

This story exemplifies what I will call a “dream narrative.” Events progress illogically, transitions are often sudden, and memories are picked from the subconscious regardless of the time they were formed. Web collage, as I perform it, is dreaming. Websites do not connect via their hyperlinks—do not lead logically into one another—instead I present a series of independent bodies and situations that are linked by something unrelated, in this case my internal sense of harmony. In a dream, it is easy to walk between two rooms that are not connected in real life. In my performances, I superimpose websites that are not connected in web space. I am creating, in time, a dream from the internet.

My lack of control over the sound files assists in making these dreams. Samples from Amazon.com are 30 seconds, not three seconds, or half a second, or 20 milliseconds for granular work. In order to keep navigating and keep the pace of the music going, I can’t spend time turning one file on and off quickly. I must let them play for their duration. Since I also cannot “sync up” rhythms, because download lag ruins my ability to time events precisely, each sound file must exist in its own rhythmic space. Each file is

forced to keep its own independence, just as memories in our dreams keep their original character.

This lack of automation fits with my aesthetic, which I inherited second hand, through my old teacher, from the work of Michael Finnissey. The aesthetic is the result of letting many simultaneous streams of music stay independent from each other, coexisting in the same environment. He inherited this concept from John Cage, but uses it to very different effect: musical aesthetics are very much in mind, and the beauty lies in the complexity of the counterpoint.

I do not believe that the internet is a brain, or that it witnesses a dream. Rather, by bringing these independent streams of sound into the same space, I am culling a dream from the internet and showing it to an audience.

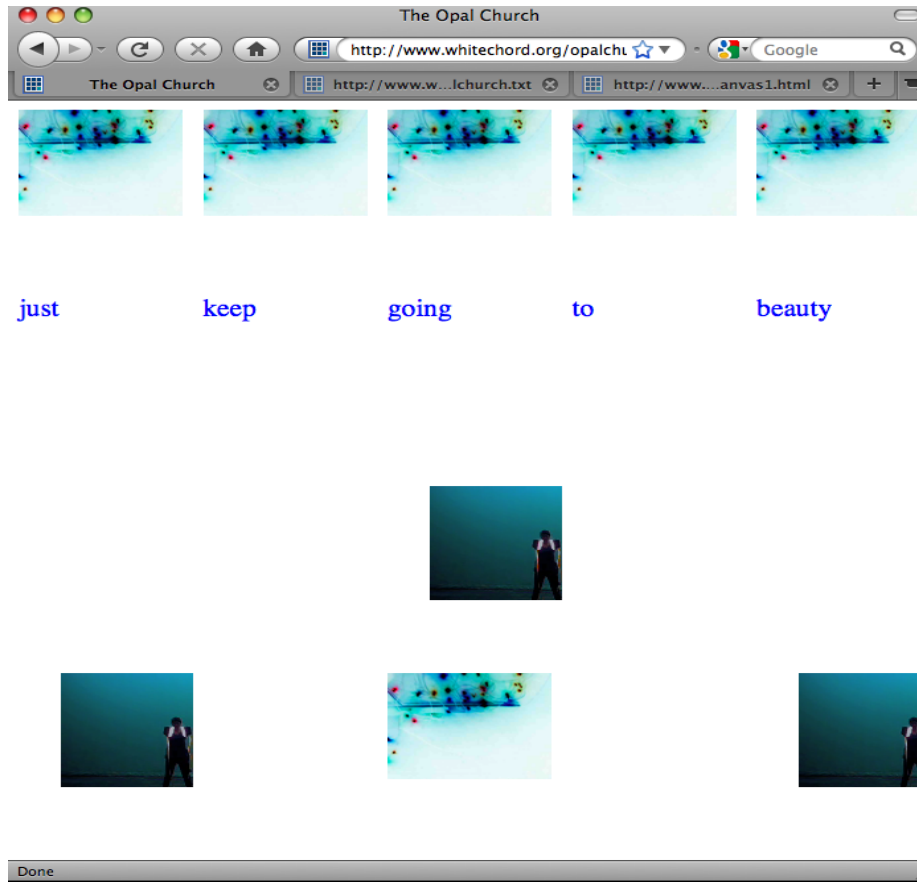
## **A Vessel for Regifting**

Between October 2009 and February 2010, I developed a process for live-updating a website with media content. This is not unusual on the web; when the websites of ESPN and the New York Times show live sports scores, they are using the same technique. But I hoped to use my system to construct and deconstruct entire websites, in order to make my web collage performance more flexible. In addition, I made this system in response to a number of critiques I received that my point-and-click performance method was distracting. I first presented this system with the small piece *Plus6* which showed 16 boxes of sounds and images that could be turned on and off with potentiometers.

### In-Browser Performance : *The Opal Church*

My next piece with the instrument, *The Opal Church*, was created with a much broader scope. The site itself is a grid of empty boxes (“frames”) that can house any content I send to them. My ability to control the site includes adding and subtracting audio, video, text and images to a frame, opening any existing website into a frame, and changing the number and structure of the frames themselves. Since I can upload my own media onto my server, the result of this system is a combination and collage of my own content with existing web content. I tend to use grids of 10 to 20 frames, and make patterns with the media that I am adding to the site. The way I built the system makes the changes in the website visible to anyone who is looking at the site on their own computer.

This makes it a tool for performing media collage “through” the web, in addition to performing live for an audience.



I built the system for *The Opal Church* as a vessel rather than a source of fixed content. It is not an empty, all-accepting glass in the Cage-ian sense; I compose with it quite deliberately. Rather, it is a vessel for media and websites to pass through, not be kept by. It is an exemplar of the artistic process laid out in Lewis Hyde's *The Gift*, a book formative to the way I view internet art.

In *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Lewis Hyde looks at

property rights through the lens of gift giving. He focuses specifically on what we call “Indian giving,” in which gifts are received, held for a time, and then given back to the original owner or passed on to others as a new gift. Hyde believes that this form of giving, common to many pre-colonial tribal societies, strengthens communities because each gift forms a bond between giver and receiver.<sup>12</sup> The material of the gift stays the same, but its history grows, and trust in the community grows, so there is a certain wealth that the gift cycle bestows on the community.

Hyde also looks to present day examples to justify his claim: the way a preacher receives the Word and then is moved to testify; the way Alcoholics Anonymous members get sober and promise in turn to mentor an incoming alcoholic. Hyde recommends that if either of these institutions cost money, or dealt in the market economy, they would no longer be able to function.<sup>13</sup> By working in a gift economy, Hyde says, they “appeal to the part of ourselves that is a gift,”<sup>14</sup> meaning the gift of life, something that “we do not get by our own efforts.”<sup>15</sup>

This appeal gives us a sense of purpose, a will to act. In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry explains how perceiving beauty “acquaints us with the mental event of conviction, and so pleasurable a mental state is this that ever afterwards one is willing to labor, struggle, wrestle with the world to locate enduring sources of conviction—to locate what is true.”<sup>16</sup> In both of Hyde's situations, significant labor must be done by the bestowed before they are ready to return the gift: the man who finds God cannot preach

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12 Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1979) 56.

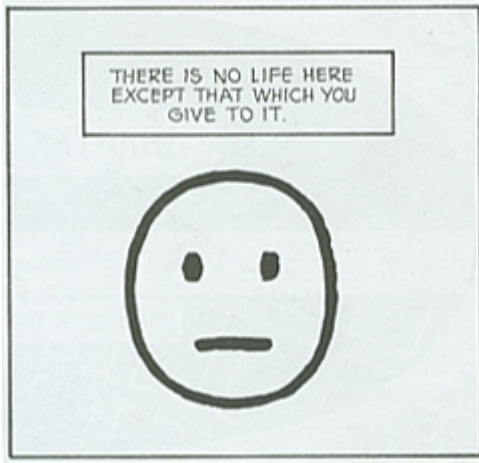
13 Hyde 46.

14 Hyde 47.

15 Hyde xi.

16 Scarry 31.

the next day, nor is a man ready to be a mentor when he himself has only been sober a week.



Through this premise, Hyde likens the gift cycle to the creative process. Hyde believes that the artist should receive his imagination like a gift, labor intensely with what it gives, and then pass the result into the world as a return gift. He further details how the artist receives all experiences as gifts, and how the imagination is not ours but part of a larger environment that provides for our artistic survival. “The salmon are not subject to the will of the Indians; the imagination is not subject to the will of the artist,” he writes. Instead of trying to control the imagination, to attempt ownership of it, Hyde suggests we nourish it by working in *eros*, by passing our work on as gifts.<sup>17</sup>

Hyde's philosophy is a direct defense of artistic borrowing and remixing, though it was written before DJing had become a widespread composition technique, and before electronic remixes were possible. In DJ culture, samples and songs are treated as gifts. They are received, combined with the DJ's imagination, and passed on as a new work. Hyde's thoughts become increasingly important as the internet facilitates widespread media sharing. The internet itself exists as a gift economy. Wikipedia is in a constant state of creation by everyone who has worked on it. We contribute websites to the net, often without asking for anything in return, and as a result we can browse all websites without paying.

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<sup>17</sup> Hyde 55.

In *The Opal Church*, I regift the internet. I acknowledge that I receive it in my daily life as a gift, so I feel compelled to add to it and transfer that combination forward. Through the frames of *The Opal Church*, I work with the internet, distill it, magnify it, and return it back into itself through a new lens. As internet media curator and scholar Steve Dietz theorized, “The 'network museum' will be about the passionate points of view it can connect up, not, primarily, what it owns.”<sup>18</sup> *The Opal Church* is not made of what I own, but is instead an instrument for the revelation of what is already there in combination with what I have given it. To Hyde, it is vital that art exist this way, as “a gift that cannot be given away ceases to be a gift. The spirit of a gift is kept alive by its constant donation.”<sup>19</sup>

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18 Steve Dietz. “Signal or Noise? The Network Museum,” The Art, Technology and Culture Colloquium (February 16, 2000 at University of California, Berkeley).

19 Hyde xiv.

## Smelling the Orange Without Eating It

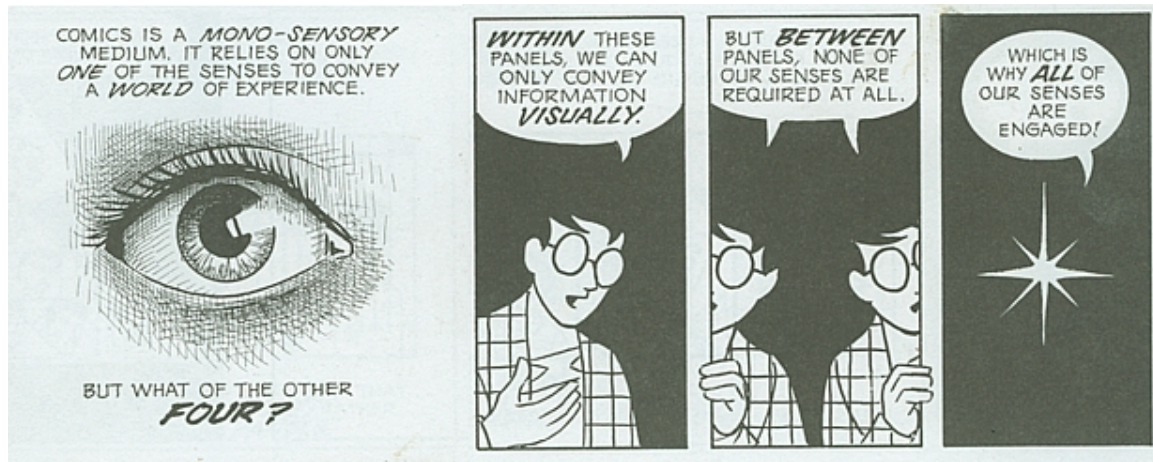
The coexistence of media on the internet creates a unique opportunity for sensory tension in web art. Since I place my art in the context of music, there is more pressure on the audible: silence stands out, and media such as text and silent videos feel strange, as though they are missing something. But I have tried to use this combination of media to articulate a broader tension between the way we perceive different types of media.

Take the beginning of my performance of *The Opal Church*. It begins in silence with an image of a stage, then a YouTube video opens showing a man putting a record of *Oklahoma* on his record player and playing it. The video is deleted and replaced with two sound files, then five sound files, and a series of images. Eventually the images cover the whole screen, replacing the sound files and casting the piece into silence again. In that silence, the words “let everything happen to you” slowly replace the images.

People who see my work have told me it is as though something is there but not there. I once told a friend that I am fascinated by the sensation of smelling an orange but not tasting it, and he told me that concept reminded him of my websites. I believe it is the contrast of small doses of different media that leads to this impression. We are used to experiencing a medium fluidly; we do not own art that plays two minutes of sound, shows us one static image, goes silent while we read a poem, and then starts again, meanwhile asking us to consider it as one piece of art. But the web is full of small doses of media, and combinations of it. My performances try to accentuate this, so that when I perform web collage I consider the dance of the web browsers, the visual quality of the



quicktime music player.



In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud's analysis of comic art, he explains how comic artists use the space between the panels to activate the reader's imagination.<sup>20</sup>

Between panels, when time passes but we are given no new visual information, McCloud believes we fill in the broader sensory gaps. With *The Opal Church* specifically, I have tried to use the space between different types of media to engage the viewer's imagination. This creates a type of media perception that I have never experienced before. How does one say something with sound and no image, and then say the same thing with image and no sound? As other composers debate between dependent or independent counterpoint, I find myself choosing between media with dependent or independent messages.

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<sup>20</sup> McCloud 89.



SEE  
THAT SPACE  
*BETWEEN* THE  
PANELS? THAT'S  
WHAT COMICS  
AFICIONADOS HAVE  
NAMED "*THE  
GUTTER.*"

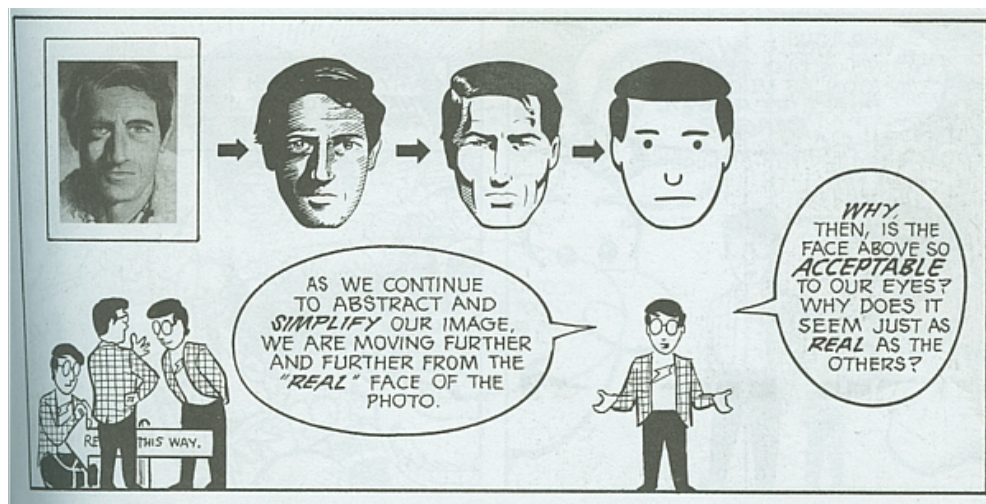
AND DESPITE  
ITS *UNCEREMONIOUS  
TITLE*, THE GUTTER PLAYS  
HOST TO MUCH OF THE *MAGIC*  
AND *MYSTERY* THAT ARE  
AT THE VERY *HEART  
OF COMICS!*



HERE IN  
THE *LIMBO* OF THE  
GUTTER, *HUMAN  
IMAGINATION*  
TAKES TWO SEPARATE  
IMAGES AND *TRANS-  
FORMS* THEM INTO  
A SINGLE  
IDEA.

Considering the comparison, not just the combination, of different media is necessary to this type of work. How have concepts such as abstraction, installation, and site-specificity affected, and adapted to, each of these media differently? Artists are, and have been, comparing media in this way, and it has led to some of the most thought-provoking art of the past 40 years.

Stephen Ratcliffe's book of poetry *Sculpture* is laid out on the page like waves, and often deals with mixing the senses to a point that they become impossible to imagine: "How the name pronounced (A) / starts to register the sound it makes turning inside out, instead of such an object the transparent / body of the person whose presence continues at every moment to be felt."<sup>21</sup> In this passage Ratcliffe gives physical dimension to language, then removes visual dimension from a body while stating that we still witness it other ways.



It is not a coincidence that Maryanne Amacher, one of the first composers to use electronic and spatial networks in her music, considered J.G. Ballard's fantasy *Vermillion*

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Ratcliffe, *Sculpture* (Los Angeles: Littoral Books, 1996) 112.



*Sands* to be one of her most formative influences.<sup>22</sup> Ballard's story creates a sensational landscape in which sound can become physical, and poetry, color, and sculpture can all intertwine:

"Every evening during the summer at Vermillion Sands the insane poems of my beautiful neighbour drifted across the desert to me from Studio 5, The Stars, the broken skeins of coloured tape unravelling in the sand like the threads of a dismembered web. All night they would flutter around the buttresses below the terrace, entwining themselves through the balcony railings, and by morning, before I swept them away, they would hang across the south face of the villa like a vivid cerise bougainvillaea.... For days afterwards I found fragments of the poems everywhere."<sup>23</sup>

This synesthetic description of sound—as colorful, as having physical dimensions—inspires a composer to consider sound as something tangible, not abstract. For Amacher, this incited exploration into telepresence with her series *City Links*, as well as investigations of architecture and sound-wave interaction in *Music for Sound-Joined Rooms*. In my work, this has resulted in making patterns with quicktime players and using images as maps for sound.

Poet G.C. Waldrep claims his latest collection, *Archicembalo*, to be “poetry to be read as music.”<sup>24</sup> Waldrep's method of "composing" is to write as though his words and thoughts are subject to the same laws that govern notes in music: rules of derivation, mathematical relation, and form. “How will the children move and the wind as it brushes up past / Boothbay into Booth Bay and into the river, when or how does a bay / become a river or a river a bay, when I step into it, when I or anyone / steps.”<sup>25</sup> His grammar is full

22 Maryanne Amacher. "Session 5 :: Maryanne Amacher." *SENSESONIC*. July 13, 1999.  
<<http://archive.futuresonic.com/sensesonic/archive/MARYANNE/msg-0001.html>>.

23 J.G. Ballard, *Vermillion Sands* (London: Random House, 1971) 145.

24 G.C. Waldrep, *Archicembalo* (North Adams, MA: Tupelo Press, 2009) left inside flap.

25 Waldrep 13.

of antecedents and consequents, and his use of unanswered or unanswerable questions are deceptive cadences that keep the logic of the story propelling forward. The result is a book that is not music in the way we perceive it, but in the way we process it.

A commonality of these artists is that their work tends to dwell on the space between what is and what is not communicated, perceived, or processed in the work, and sometimes the difference between the two.

## Form or Content

Since the boom of media art in the 1960s and '70s, approaching a new art medium has often meant to make a work about the medium itself. Many times, personal content is replaced with conceptual content and media artifacts. The medium, in a way, becomes the source of all beauty.

Working with the web, I have never felt satisfied to let the web be the message. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud defines six steps of the artistic process, the last two steps being *form*, meaning the medium of the artwork, and *idea*, meaning a philosophy or message that we try to express with the content of the work. McCloud comments that many artists choose between these two steps. They either stop at step five (*form*) or skip straight to step six (*idea*). I witness this often, especially among young composers. Either a work is only an exposition of the medium, in which case it often lacks content and gets boring, or a work is only an attempt at expression without sufficient attention given to the medium it is made in. When I make art, this has traditionally been a constant debate in my head. Do I make the art about itself (the medium is the message) or use it as a tool to express a broader message?

With *The Opal Church*, I tried hard to do both. I did not feel done when I built the empty instrument or when I filled it with 100% pre-existing web media. Instead, I was compelled to add myself to it, or rather, add my imagination to it. Artifacts of the medium are still present—primitive quicktime looping methods, videos that fragment with lag, cheap 8-bit audio, YouTube videos—but their idiosyncrasies are not the exclusive focus

of the work. Instead they color the abstract photographs, rearranged poetry, and composed sound that I used as my content.

I am hardly the center of the work; instead, I have attempted to be in combination with it. I, and my personal messages (messages of color, line, sound aesthetics, etc.) coexist with the peculiarities of the medium in the same way Finnissey's independent voices coexist, or the old-timey records coexist with prepared piano in the works of composer Brian Harnetty. I am receiving the gifts of the medium, adding myself to them, and passing them on.

## **The Anxiety of Art**

“My imagination told me to!”

There is a final reason that I have stuck with web music, and the reason derives partially from a common critique I receive that my medium is too impractical, too new-for-the-sake-of-being-new. There seems to be a common thinking in the art world that while art is impractical—Scott McCloud once writing, “MY ART HAS NO PRACTICAL VALUE WHATSOEVER! But it's IMPORTANT.”<sup>26</sup>—the way we *make* the art should be somehow efficient and reasonable. Composers feel bound by practicality, such as when Feldman wrote that he “was once told of a woman in Paris...who spent her entire life writing music not meant to be heard....I have always envied this woman....her impracticality.”<sup>27</sup> Sound artists, too, are by necessity a practical bunch.

My work with the web has convinced me that an impractical medium is not only justified, but that it assists in the creation of art. Think of Cage's indeterminate works in which the performer had to create his own score in addition to learning it and playing it, or his compositions for which he tossed coins hundreds of times instead of simply putting pen to paper. I once saw a wonderful performance art piece in which two people raced on stilts to determine whether or not the race was art. They could have raced on foot, but it was the restriction—the stilts—that made it extraordinary. As with Cage's coin throwing, the restriction that made the art impractical was also the source of its beauty. Feldman says he is concerned with creating a practical situation for him to work, but I think he would consider Cage's coin throwing to be just that. Feldman sought a *stable* set of

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<sup>26</sup> McCloud 169.

<sup>27</sup> Feldman 89.

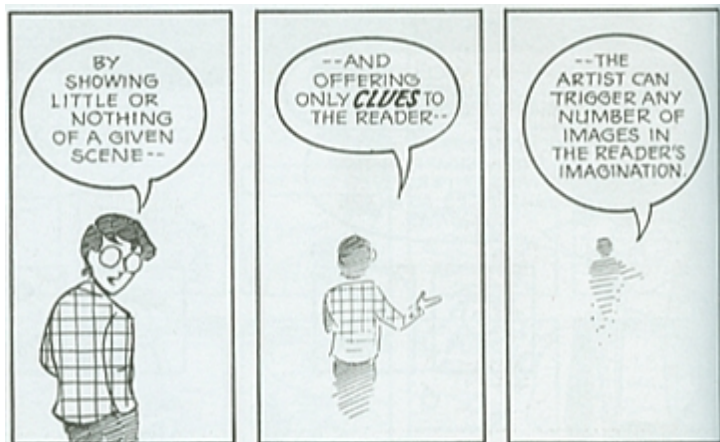


conditions that let him make original art, and I believe the internet is this, for me, now.

I say this on the basis that an impractical medium is only impractical because artists have not yet adapted to it and heightened its ease-of-use. In 20 years, when the web is faster and some form of web music is, perhaps, more common, programs may be developed that make it very easy to do what I am doing. Consider the first works of the League of Automatic Music Composers, who used KIM-1 microprocessors to generate music, to do something other than what they were designed to do. Now we have Max/MSP, a computer program that was designed to make music, but I would argue that its ease often results in music that is less driven. It does not have the same anxiety of art.

Feldman wrote of the anxiety he seeks, the feeling of risk an artist feels when they are making a type of art that is not justified by history. I have never felt this anxiety in any medium other than the web. The artistic benefit of that anxiety outweighs any impracticality of my medium. It

helps me receive gifts. If I read a beautiful passage of poetry, it would be plagiarism for me to rewrite the same passage. If I translate that passage into music, it is allowed. Similarly,



it is not artistically interesting to duplicate a friend's Max patch, but to accomplish the same thing with the internet is allowed, and often beautiful.

This anxiety causes me to rely on my imagination. Just as the naïve, or

“primitive,” artists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—who were untrained and did not herald cubism as many others did—were forced to look to their imaginations for their material, so I feel web artists, without a standard history to look to, must demand more from their imaginations. Using an unstandardized medium makes an artist constantly point their imagination back to itself. It is as though the imagination gives me a website and says, “OK, do something with this,” and I say back to it, “What the hell am I supposed to do with that?” and then it is forced to do more work. I am laboring in its gifts, so it keeps giving.

There is a common Buddhist saying that the best teacher only listens and points the student back to himself. It is important to me, as I develop my imagination, to constantly point it back to itself. Rather than taking one gift and adapting it to what I already know—Max/MSP, for example, or counterpoint—I put it in an impractical, unestablished medium that gives no answers, that lets the gift be itself. Just as Cage once said, when looking out a window, “I just can’t believe I am better than anything out there,” so I feel that way about my imagination.<sup>28</sup> A music such as tonal music, that is known, that has rules, traps my gifts and demands that they adapt to it. It masters them and conforms them to its own identity. The web is different: it is unproven. It has no ego and no stature. I am forming its rules, so its rules adapt to my gifts. As T.S. Eliot wrote in *Four Quartets* “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire/ Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.”<sup>29</sup> Without a heralded history, web music is humble, and receives my gifts endlessly.

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<sup>28</sup> Feldman 92.

<sup>29</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Press, 1943) 27.

## Summary

It is funny to me that my very “new” instrument is actually a program most consider to be mundane. Like Eliot said later in that same collection, “...the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.”<sup>30</sup> Just as I point my imagination back to itself when I compose, so it has pointed me back to something I use everyday—the internet—as its tool.

It is simply the impetus to act, the compulsion to labor that Lewis Hyde and Elaine Scarry document, that has turned my browser into my instrument. As Scott McCloud describes, “our extensions begin to glow with the life we lend to them.”<sup>31</sup> Just as a flute or a guitar is an extension of us, so is the internet. We react to it, it reacts to us. I have given the web my artistic labor, and it has given back, often with websites that make sense, often with visions of websites that are complete mysteries to me.

There are moments in G.C. Waldrep's poetry that diverge from his musical logic. They resemble the moments in Stockhausen's *Gruppen* that break from his complex serial structure and are derived solely from Stockhausen's ear and imagination. Stockhausen's inserts are moments of transcendence, visions from other, logic-less worlds. Like Stockhausen, it is Waldrep's rare visions—landscapes that he inhabits as though he is dreaming them—that give his music its weight. These intuitive visions are transcendental and are his real message: truth, but a truth that is not logical, trustworthy, or proven, instead a fluid truth that stems from an unknown source and which has no system of verification, nor means of recreating itself.

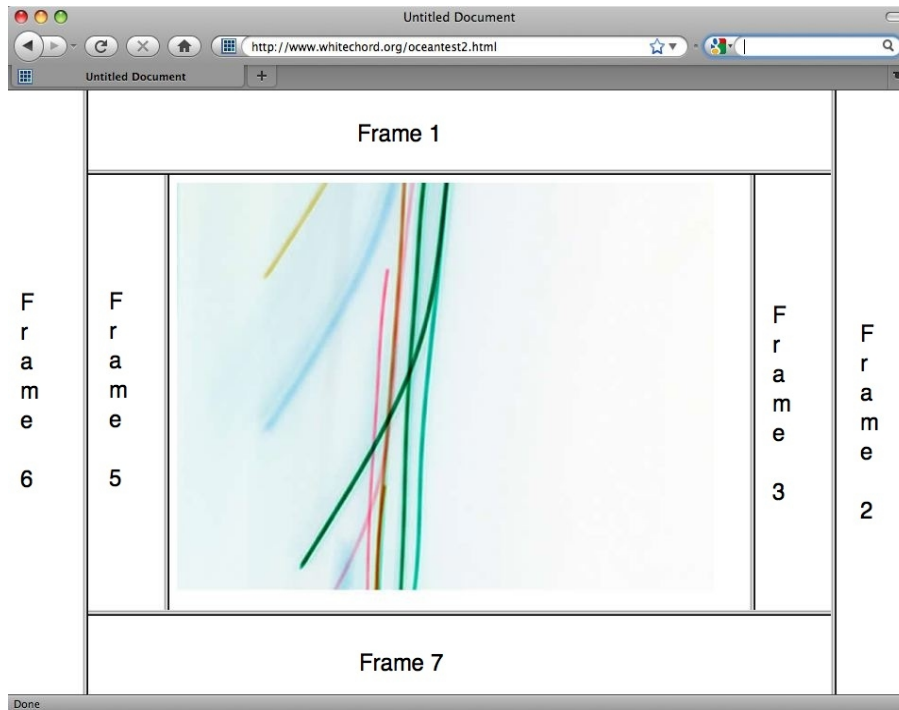
---

<sup>30</sup> Eliot 59.

<sup>31</sup> McCloud 40.

## Appendix A

### Web Installation : Ocean



```
<html>
  <body>
    
    <map name="m_4voices1">
      <area shape="poly" coords="248,370,255,185,265,76,272,0,277,
        0,266,106,258, 198,255,278,252,369,249,369"
        href="4voices2pianoframes.htm" target="_blank">
      <area shape="poly" coords="161,0,97,84,101,87,169,0,161,0"
        href=".../Media/4voices/210_mixdown02.mp3"
        target="leftFrame1">
      <area shape="poly" coords="237,0,221,39,207,68,187,102,159,142,134,
        176,100,220,99,225,105,223,143,174,182,121,212,76,229,38,245,0,
        237,0" href=".../Media/4voices/735_mixdown02.mp3"
        target="bottomFrame" >
      <area shape="poly" coords="233,79,226,119,222,172,220,203,218,235,214,
        278,212,316,211,346,211,369,214,369,215,313,220,247,226,
```

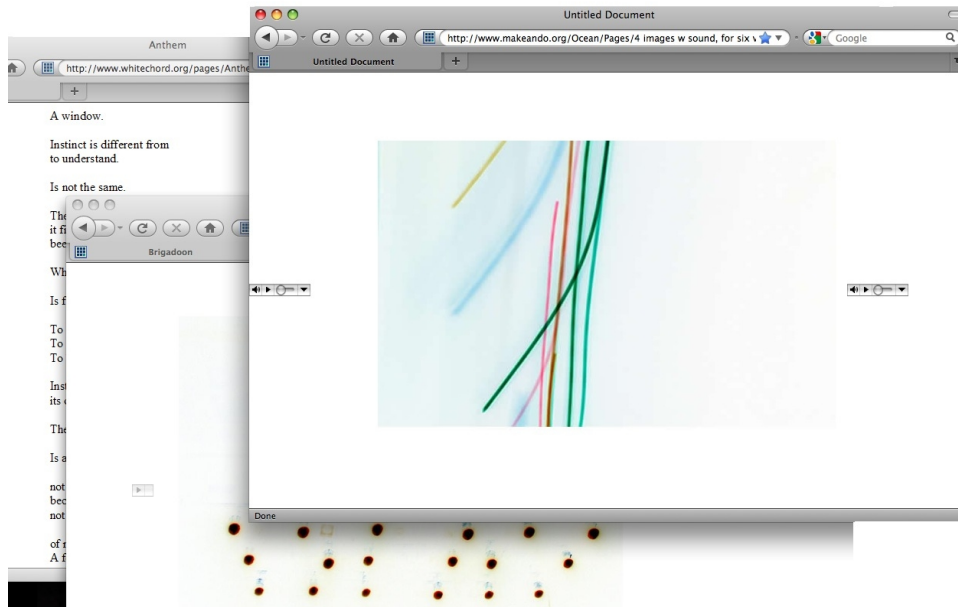
```

181,231,121,237,78,233,79"
href=".../Media/4voices/350_mixdown02.mp3"
target="rightFrame1">
<area shape="poly" coords="138,351,195,278,226,233,252,192,277,137,
292,83,297,42,302,1,297,0,291,56,280,110,275,128,263,159,
249,189,227,225,207,255,178,293,136,347,138,351"
href=".../Media/4voices/550_mixdown02.mp3"
target="leftFrame">
<area shape="poly" coords="263,369,266,369,270,343,273,286,275,233,
283,167,288,124,295,62,286,107,280,158,273,206,270,238,266,
298,263,369" href=".../Media/4voices/630_mixdown01.mp3"
target="rightFrame">
<area shape="poly"
coords="178,370,212,312,226,277,227,272,228,259,218,284,207,
311,175,369,178,370"
href=".../Media/4voices/990_mixdown02.mp3"
target="topFrame">
<area shape="poly" coords="260,0,265,0,250,100,252,60,260,0"
href=".../Media/4voices/990_mixdown02.mp3"
target="topFrame">
<area shape="poly"
coords="221,369,224,369,228,310,233,276,231,273,238,216,244,
157,249,102,255,0,251,0,248,51,244,98,237,176,225,308,221,369"
href=".../Media/4voices/420_mixdown02.mp3"
target="bottomFrame">
</map>
</body>
</html>

```

## Web Collage

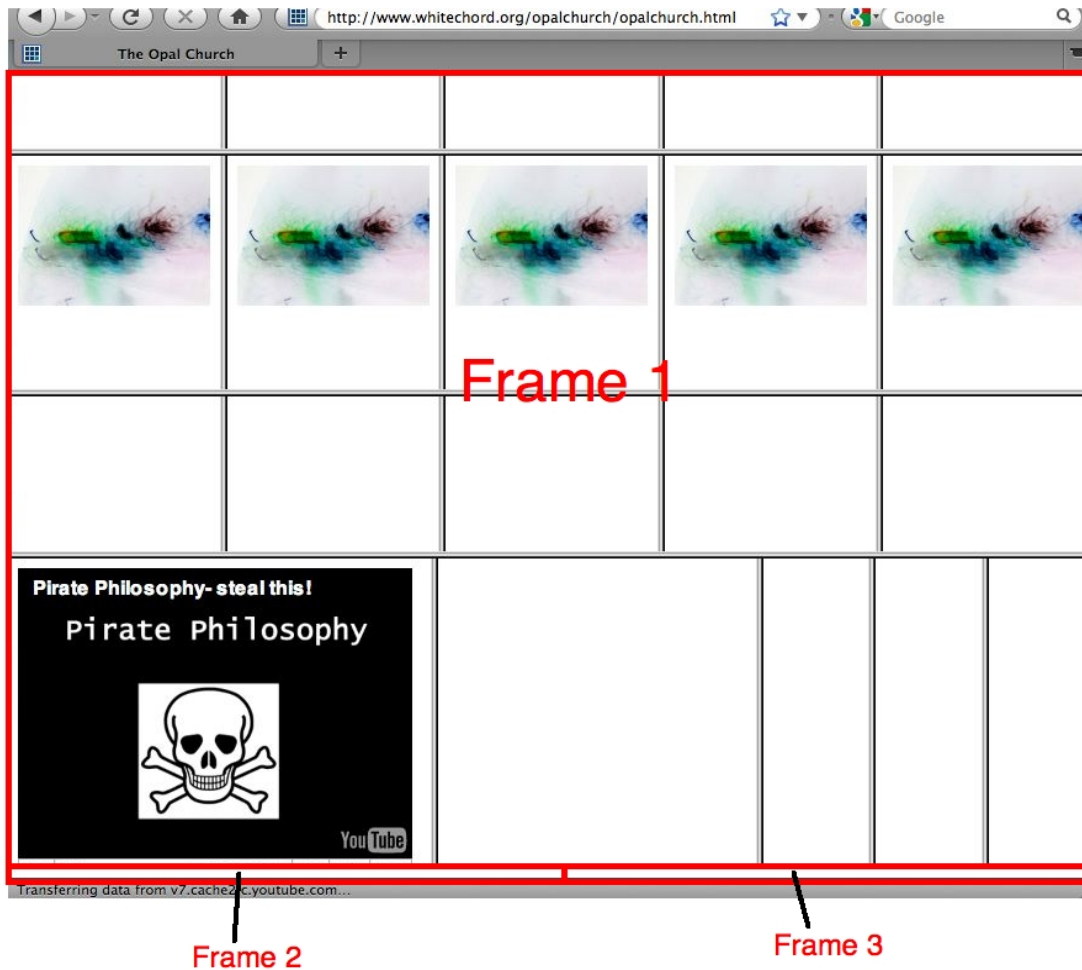
Create sound collage using sounds that you have found on the web in combination with your own web installations.



## Opal Church

### Construction:

There are 3 frames in the actual site. Frame1 is the main view screen, where all the media goes. (Frame1 itself can be filled with a website that consists of several frames, as seen below.) Frame2 is the base, the engine. It is invisible, but it is running a javascript loop that refreshes the data text file in Frame3 and updating the contents of Frame1 based on that data. The engine must be in its own frame because often the entire website in Frame1 is replaced.



*opalchurch.html (Main frameset, encompassing all three frames)*

```
<html>
  <head>
    <title>The Opal Church</title>
    <script type="text/javascript" src="opal.js"></script>
    <link type="text/css" rel="stylesheet" href="opal.css"/>
  </head>
  <frameset rows="99%,1%" frameborder="1">
    <frame name="opalmain" src="3x3.html">
    <frameset cols="90%,5%,5%">
      <frame name="decoy" src="word.html">
      <frame name="base" src="opalbase.html">
      <frame name="txt" src="opalchurch.txt">
    </frameset>
  </frameset>
</html>
```

*opalbase.html (Frame2)*

```
<html>
  <head>
    <title>OpalBase</title>
    <script type="text/javascript" src="opal.js"></script>
    <link type="text/css" rel="stylesheet" href="opal.css"/>
  </head>
  <body onload="init(); timedCount()">
    <script type="text/javascript">

      function openFunc(fileIn,frameIn) {
        parent.opalmain.frames[frameIn].location=fileIn;
      }

      function openSoundFunc(sample,framenum,loop,start,stop) {
        parent.opalmain.frames[framenum].location="blank.jpg";
        parent.opalmain.frames[framenum].document.write("<embed src="
          + sample + " loop=" + loop + " starttime=" + "00:" + start +
          " endtime=" + "00:" + stop + " height='16px'">");
      }

      function openTextFunc(text,framenum) {
        parent.opalmain.frames[framenum].location="blank.jpg";
        parent.opalmain.frames[framenum].document.write("<div id = 'div1'
          style='color:blue;font-size:16pt;'>" + text + "</div>");
      }

      function openVidFunc(sample,framenum,loop,start,stop) {
        parent.opalmain.frames[framenum].location="blank.jpg";
```



```

        parent.opalmain.frames[framenum].document.write("<embed src="
            + sample + " loop=" + loop + " starttime=" + "00:" + start +
            " endtime=" + "00:" + stop + " height='100px' scale='aspect'
            controller='false' volume='0'>");
    }

    function openLoopFunc(sample,framenum) {
        parent.opalmain.frames[framenum].location="blank.jpg";
        parent.opalmain.frames[framenum].document.write("<embed src="
            + sample + " loop='true' starttime='00:04' endtime='00:06'
            height='16px'>");
    }

    function gridFunc(tabNum) {
        if (tabNum==2) {
            parent.opalmain.location="1.html";
        } else if (tabNum==3) {
            parent.opalmain.location="1x2.html";
        } else if (tabNum==4) {
            parent.opalmain.location="2x2.html";
        } else if (tabNum==5) {
            parent.opalmain.location="3x3.html";
        } else if (tabNum==6) {
            parent.opalmain.location="4x1.html";
        } else if (tabNum==7) {
            parent.opalmain.location="4x5.html";
        }
    }

    function refreshTxt() {
        parent.txt.location.reload();
    }

</script>
</body>
</html>

```

*opal.js (Javascript file linked to by Frame2)*

```

xmlHttp = null;
var t;
var w = new Array();
var opalArray;
var macroArray = new Array();
var zz=0;

    function init() {
    }

```

//Looping Ajax Check

```
function timedCount() {  
    t=setTimeout("startRequest(); timedCount();",4000);  
    refreshTxt();  
}
```

```
var dummyArray=new Array();
```

```
function checkRoutine(arrIn) {  
    var i=0;  
    if (arrIn[0]!=undefined) {  
        gridCheck(arrIn);  
        for (i=0;i<60;i=i+3) {  
            var category=i;  
            var file=i+1;  
            var frameNum=i+2;  
            if (arrIn[file]!=dummyArray[file]) {  
                if (arrIn[category]==1) {  
                    openFunc(arrIn[file],arrIn[frameNum]);  
                }  
                else if (arrIn[category]==2) {  
                    openSoundFunc(arrIn[file],arrIn[frameNum],arrIn[60]);  
                }  
                else if (arrIn[category]==3) {  
                    openTextFunc(arrIn[file],arrIn[frameNum]);  
                }  
                else if (arrIn[category]==4) {  
                    openVidFunc(arrIn[file],arrIn[frameNum],arrIn[63],  
                                arrIn[64],arrIn[65]);  
                }  
                else if (arrIn[category]==5) {  
                    openLoopFunc(arrIn[file],arrIn[frameNum]);  
                }  
            }  
            dummyArray[file]=arrIn[file];  
        }  
    }  
}
```

```
function gridCheck(arrIn) {  
    if (arrIn[66]!=undefined) {  
        if (arrIn[66]!=zz) {  
            zz=arrIn[66];  
            gridFunc(zz);  
        }  
    }  
}
```

//AJAX Initiation

```
function getXMLHttp() {
    if (window.XMLHttpRequest) {
        xmlHttp = new XMLHttpRequest();
    } else if (window.ActiveXObject) {
        xmlHttp = new ActiveXObject("Microsoft.XMLHTTP");
    }
}
```

//AJAX Get

```
function startRequest() {
    getXMLHttp();
    if (xmlHttp != null) {
        xmlHttp.onreadystatechange = function () {
            if(xmlHttp.readyState == 4) {
                if(xmlHttp.status == 200) {
                    opalArray = xmlHttp.responseText;
                    w = opalArray.split(" ");
                    checkRoutine(w);
                }
            }
        }
        xmlHttp.open("GET", "opalchurch.txt");
        xmlHttp.send(null);
        refreshTxt();
    }
}
```

*3x3.html (Frame1)*

*<<in this example, word.html is a blank html document>>*

```
<html>
<frameset rows="10%,30%,20%,40%" frameborder="2">
    <frameset cols="20%,20%,20%,20%,20%">
        <frame name="frame1" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
        <frame name="frame2" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
        <frame name="frame3" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
        <frame name="frame4" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
        <frame name="frame5" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
    </frameset>
    <frameset cols="20%,20%,20%,20%,20%">
        <frame name="frame6" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
        <frame name="frame7" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
        <frame name="frame8" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
        <frame name="frame9" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
        <frame name="frame10" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
    </frameset>
</frameset>
```

```
<frameset cols="20%,20%,20%,20%,20%">
    <frame name="frame11" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
    <frame name="frame12" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
    <frame name="frame13" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
    <frame name="frame14" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
    <frame name="frame15" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
</frameset>
<frameset cols="40%,30%,10%,10%,10%">
    <frame name="frame16" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
    <frame name="frame17" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
    <frame name="frame18" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
    <frame name="frame19" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
    <frame name="frame20" src="word.html" scrolling="no">
</frameset>
</frameset>
</html>
```

## Appendix B: List of Illustrations

All illustrations from *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud

| <i>Browsing as<br/>Dreaming</i> |  | <i>Understanding<br/>Comics</i> |
|---------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| Epigraph                        | ...as our extensions begin to glow...                        | 40                              |
| 10                              | ...even the most widely travelled mind...                    | 62                              |
| 22                              | ...there is no life here except that which you give to it... | 59                              |
| 25                              | ...but between panels, none of our senses are required...    | 89                              |
| 26                              | ...the gutter plays host to much of the magic...             | 66                              |
| 27                              | ...as we continue to abstract and simplify our image...      | 29                              |
| 33                              | ...by showing little or nothing of a given scene...          | 86                              |

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