

Shannon Novak: Wellington Modulations

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Modulation, Shannon Novak's 16-panel installation in Courtenay Place, takes its title from the idea of a shift or transformation. In acoustic music, this can be as simple as a performer or composition moving from one key to another; in electronic music, it could be the controls of a synthesiser applying different kinds of filters or effects to a sound; and for a painter, it might be the manipulation of pigments to create fluctuations in colour or form. In this project, Novak is interested in the transition from one shape or colour to another, and from a physical experience to one that encompasses virtual or other sensory information.

With *Modulation*, Novak proposes a journey that is physical, digital, and metaphorical, moving between sites or ideas as an exploration of the location of Courtenay Place. Of course, the experience of a traditional exhibition has always involved a degree of interactive motion as viewers move from one work to the next to consider the progression and ideas contained in each, an experience famously described in music in Modest Mussorgsky's 1874 composition *Pictures at an Exhibition*, which has ten musical evocations of paintings and a recurring promenade theme that provides an interlude between the paintings (Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, an important mentor for Novak, in 2003 arranged for painter Philip Trusttum to paint a series of 70 canvases to accompany a pipe organ recital of *Mussorgsky's* suite).

Much of Novak's work explores sensory experience, often through expanded installations that move through exhibition spaces or escape traditional galleries altogether to activate urban and architectural environments. With this suite of works, like others that create links between different physical (and virtual) spaces, there is a series; in this case, eight double-sided light boxes that tilt at alternating angles along Courtenay Place. For viewers to explore the installation of images with their varying forms and colour fields, they must negotiate a path between the panels, moving through in different sequences, each time composing new combinations or sequences of light, colour, and shape.

The individual works themselves contain an enigmatic language of directional arrows, triangles, diagrammatic lines, and circles in different colour combinations. They suggest movement or rhythm, like road-marking or wayfinding signage, or circuit diagrams that describe the flow of energy along a series of paths. For Novak, his works are like musical figures, with shifting notes, keys, and combinations of chords. If we imagine the succession of light boxes to be an abstract musical score, this series of compositional motifs can be interactively 'performed' by viewers in any order, like a piece of music that can be played either forward or backwards as they shift from the front of a panel to its reverse, walking along one side, or weaving prismatically between them, activating different dynamics and chromatic relationships of hue and composition. Each panel changes colour and form with each turn, as if light is bouncing between them or passing through like a prism.

Like Michael Smither, another of Novak's mentors, Novak has developed a formal language that maps colours, shapes, and animated movements to translate the time-based experience of musical progressions. It is an area of exploration that was a significant influence on the development of early abstract painting and experimental animation. Just as composers have

tried to evoke colours or conjure landscapes, artists have attempted to replicate the moods and melodies of song. The intangible quality of sound and music has long been a source of mystery and experimentation, from Whistler's symphonies to Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, to Rauschenberg and Cage's exploration of silence and space. For Pythagorus, the vibrations of sound and harmony held the key to the universe's rhythms; for Kandinsky, Klee, et al., a path into abstraction.

Novak's painterly compositions, with their optical modulations, are drawn from his own experience of synaesthesia – the experience of one sensory response (e.g. the visual impression of sound or shape) triggering associated sensory reactions (colour, smell etc.), such as smelling a word, hearing a shape, or seeing colours in response to sound. The experience of the shapes in an architectural skyline might invoke the sense of sonic vibrations or the impression of aura-like colour fields. Novak has mild shape-sound and colour-sound synaesthesia but, compared to the literal colour-music systems and translations of some artists, he is relatively flexible with his use of colour and form, allowing for subjectivity, also incorporating his impressions of technological or architectural networks, structures and rhythms. In this instance, *Modulation* is Novak's response to the 'energy' of Courtenay Place, which influences his choice of colour, shape, and the scale of the work to create chromatic and compositional relationships for us to engage with in a bodily way. Looking at the area around the light boxes, he has responded to the tessellation of brick tiles (moving in diagonal, vertical, and horizontal directions), signage, road markings, the flow of traffic and people (stop/start/forward/back), the surrounding architecture and infrastructure (lighting, trams), and the trees, air, and atmosphere.

There are also further, hidden layers to locate and explore in some of the works, activated through the digital medium of augmented reality technology. These are made accessible through the increasingly ubiquitous availability of smartphones and other handheld devices that allow us to be constantly connected to the internet wherever we might be. The augmented reality components are triggered by motifs embedded within a circular section in eight of the panels, like a world-within-a-world or a composition within a composition. The shift in scale and the distinctive circular border indicates where the additional interactivity can be found, like the bonus of an 'Easter egg' for those that commit to interacting more deeply with the installation.

Novak describes this as expanding the borders of a given exhibition space (the physical light boxes) to consider the digital space around or associated with the light boxes and other linked physical spaces. He says the light boxes are like the tip of an iceberg; something you see but with a lot more underneath that you don't necessarily see right away. Using augmented reality technology, he's able to bring new dimensions to the light boxes, extending their reach into virtual space where further experiences can be activated. With the advent of consumer electronics and digital technology, sound and video have become materials as accessible as pigment or percussion, triggering a renewed interest in image-sound experiments through the possibilities of new media. Whereas much visual music experiments of the early 20th century relied on a subjective interpretation of one media to another, digital systems have made it possible to intertwine sound and image in various ways through the direct translation of electronic data, allowing objective and precise relationships (although these are still subject to decisions of parameters and form). Examples include Clinton Watkins feeding sound into a video signal (*Landscape Distortions*, 2010) or Billy Apple's work with composer Jonathan

Besser to translate weather data into music and animation (*Severe Tropical Storm 9301 Irma*, 2001-06).

Modulation demonstrates Novak's ongoing interest in the ways we perceive shape, space, colour, rhythm, energy, and sound. Like the Californian 'light and space' artists of the 1960's and 70's, he allows us to experience the often intangible qualities of these experiences, making them visible or audible, or visibly audible. Installed on lightboxes, they have an energy of their own that radiates out into Courtenay Place, increasing their intensity as daylight fades and the surrounding activity levels shift into evening mode. Over the course of the installation, summer will transition into autumn, introducing seasonal modulations as the leaves darken and fall, and our perception of colour adjusts to the fading of summer's warm hazy light. The air becomes crisper and the smell of restaurants takes on the new richness of early evening dining and a growing abundance of heavy coats and woollen scarves. Novak's work encourages us to pause and explore the possibilities of our sensory environment. Through the light boxes and the different layers that can be activated, he builds a more sensitised appreciation of our surroundings and an awareness of the phenomenon of synaesthesia with its potential for creative exploration through (re)connecting the disciplines of visual art, music, and moving image/animation.

Andrew Clifford is the inaugural Director of Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery in West Auckland, formerly known as Lopdell House Gallery. His own research tracks the colliding worlds of contemporary art, performance, and music. He has contributed texts to publications throughout the Asia-Pacific region, including recent essays about John Parker, Yuki Kihara, Bepen Bhana, Phil Dadson, Billy Apple, and a New Zealand history of invented instruments. He is also a trustee for the Audio Foundation, Len Lye Foundation, and CIRCUIT.