

## **Art & Music : Thoughts On Guitar Playing And Painting**

I've always viewed painting and music equally. They are both disciplines that inform one another and deal with similar themes and processes but how can visual art influence the way we play an instrument?

The Scratch Orchestra's Ian Mitchell once said, "art school is like five years of developing your quirk"

British guitarist Keith Rowe had this to say about developing his own style.

*'At art school you have to find out who you are, what is unique about you, what you have to say..*

*You can't take a canvas and paint a Georges Braque, or a Picasso, someone else's paintings.. it's an impossibility. One of the great lessons for me was the professor pointing right into my nose and saying, "Rowe, you cannot paint a Caravaggio. Only Caravaggio can paint Caravaggio." Suddenly trying to play guitar like Jim Hall seemed quite wrong.*

*I probably thought about that for between five and eight years, just constantly reflecting on how to do it, and, in a flash, I found the solution. Look at the American school of painting, Jackson Pollock found a way- he just abandoned the technique of traditional European painting and worked on the floor. How could I abandon the technique? Lay the guitar flat!'*

In order to move forward musically Keith Rowe needed to find a way to reinvent his approach to the guitar that would allow him to understand more about himself and his playing and to do this he drew upon the innovative techniques of the American artists of the 1950's

Rowe was a founder member of the British free improvisation group AMM that led the free music movement during the late 1960's alongside Cornelius Cardew and Christian Wolff. The British experimental scene between 1965 -75 drew heavily on the earlier work of Fluxus and experimental composers like Cage and Boulez but it also began to use electronics and amplification as well as emerging forms of rock music to develop its approach.

John Cage had written that 'sound, in and of itself, could be as important as melody, harmony and rhythm' and this ideology certainly informed the work of minimalist composers such as Robert Ashley and Terry Riley. The idea is also evident in Clement Greenberg's thinking of how Modern art & the Modernist art movement had used art to call attention to art itself and how it acknowledged the existence of the picture plane, the look of

the paint and the shape of the canvas first before discussing any kind of narrative that the picture actually contained.

Artists like Pollock & De Kooning had begun creating images in the 1950's that spoke about the nature of paint and the physical act of painting.

Art critic Harold Rosenberg coined the phrase 'action painting' in an essay he wrote in 1952 in which he described this new style of painting as an arena within which to come to terms with the act of creation and shifted emphasis from the painted object to the struggle itself, with the finished painting being only the physical manifestation of this process.

It can be seen then that both art and music were changing rapidly during the latter half of the 20th century and that both were rejecting the established forms and structures of the art world and the music industry.

If painting could be reduced to a dialogue which was purely about paint, the physical nature of the materials used and the creative process itself then guitar playing could similarly just concern itself with the simple nature and tone of the instruments sound and the physical process of creating noise.

I recently discovered Fred Frith's 1974 album Guitar Solos which has encouraged me to re-examine my own guitar playing.

To record the album Frith had added a second pick up at the 'nut' end of the guitars neck which enabled him to amplify sounds from both ends of the guitar. He then split the freeboard in two with a capo which effectively gave him two guitars that he could play independently with each hand.

Going against convention, Frith placed the guitar on a table top and went on to carve out a place for himself in history for innovation and technique which still has musicians puzzled over 50 years later.

I think that the development of Frith's guitar playing draws parallels with that of Pollock and his drip paint technique in that both artists engaged and improvised with the point of creation from above and they both challenged the traditional notions of how artists were supposed to perform and approach their work.

When instruments such as the guitar or piano are adapted to change their sound they become known as 'prepared'. Wikipedia defines a prepared guitar as an instrument that has had its timbre altered by placing various objects on or between the instrument's strings.

Visual artists can also 'prepare' their materials such as adapting the paint they use by mixing it with other materials or reconsidering the surfaces they paint on and how they actually apply the paint.

A finger plucking a string creates an event of sound in exactly the same way that a hand holding a brush creates an event on canvas. When the decision is made to subvert traditional methods of practice we have the ability to take the art to a different level.

Like Rowe I'm aware that right now I'm also at a particular crossroads regarding my own relationship with the guitar and I'm beginning to feel the need to experiment more with the instrument and make some kind of reinvention for myself. I hope that I may find this new sound not only by engaging with the guitar in a different way but also by examining elements of contemporary art practice that interest me.

An artist's journey can't be allowed to stand still. If I am to keep my work interesting and fresh it is important to continually search for new sounds and approaches to music making and if that involves drawing sources of inspiration from other places then so be it.