

Michael Hanna, 'Predictable Contact'
By Slavka Sverakova

The colours and sounds of *Predictable Contact*, while allowing me the freedom to play, command the space into orderly transformation. My power of shifting attention from any part to any other part of the installation is both tolerated and controlled by the position and order of projection, the time I spent on each "station" and the rest of the intricacies of the process called perception. Ever since Fechner and Wundt, psychology searched for an answer to the question what determines our perceptions, and how they happen. While Helmholtz came with a bright idea of "likelihood principle", the theory of visual perception took detours between James Gibson's "Bottom-Up" theory (1966) and Richard Gregory's "Top-Down" theory (1972) before being rescued by Ulric Gustav Neisser (1976) by his notion of "Perpetual Cycle".

Hans Juergen Eysenck elaborated this, I paraphrase: visual perception is primarily determined by Bottom-Up process when the optic array is rich and by Top-Down process when it become impoverished. In other words: If the work of art as stimulus of information is high then the need for the contextual information is reduced. And vice versa. So beware of people asking for contextual information when looking at your visual work of art. The resonance cannot be pretended or willed. It is also pointing to the poet's awareness – outside of the science. Charles Baudelaire wrote his *Correspondences*

Nature is a temple whose living colonnades
Breathe forth a mystic speech in fitful sighs;
Man wanders among symbols in those glades
Where all things watch him with familiar eyes.
Like dwindling echoes gathered far away
Into a deep and thronging unison
Huge as the night or as the light of day,
All scents and sounds and colours meet as one

The work consists of 32 microfilms focused on optical perception projected large on the wall, thus outside the normal testing scale.

I include here another translation of Baudelaire to parallel the changes that saturate Hanna's short films.

Nature is a temple where the living pillars
Let go sometimes a blurred speech—
A Forest of symbols passes through a man's reach
And observes him with a familiar regard.
Like the distant echoes that mingle and confound
In a unity of darkness and quiet
Deep as the night, clear as daylight
The perfumes, the colours, the sounds correspond.

Herman Hesse pointed out the benefit of such a leisurely imprisonment in a coloured world:
"I believe what we lack is joy. The ardour that a heightened awareness imparts to life, the conception of life as a happy thing, as a festival... But the high value put upon every minute of time, the idea of

hurry-hurry as the most important objective of living, is unquestionably the most dangerous enemy of joy.”

Michael Hanna adds snippets of music in an accomplished manner, by which I mean that it is both audible parallel to the rhythmic edge of the visual and discreet company not to overwhelm it.

The dizzying energy of the intricate patterns, their verve, evoke attitude of open curiosity that gently traps attention by the projections’ creative engagement. It is alive to the subtlety of individual experience, patterns stay to be recognised, widening awareness.

The installation conjures dignity of losing oneself in the magenta filled air flowing around the projections and holding sounds in several places at once.

The aesthetic experience is anchored in the knowledge how the gallery space is transformed and by what it has been achieved.

While the projections are delineated and in their predestined space/surface, the sounds and the magenta both fill the air, and cross over from one end to another with a dutiful help of the magenta tinted see-through dividing “stud walls” – I don’t know whether it is glass or plastic – I did not touch it. Not knowing feels like freedom.

A set of rules lurk under the visible. It is about visual perceptions and illusions. It is a probable description of visibility and of some of its limits. The flow of patterns is not a subject of correction. It is that joy, addressed by Hesse’s lament.

The audio-visual installation is not perceivable in its entirety from one “picking-up” point. If I walk from one end to the other, the structure of the installation objectively is the same, but I have not that impression. I have multitude of different partial structures depending where I look. If I sit and watch the projection – I can never see all the image at once. This unstable sensory input feels correct at every change – yet the objects remain constant as the chair in the film. Not a startling new truth - it is our daily experience. However, in the case of this kind of art, the instability of the art object is actually born out of strict professional discipline, called in kinder times, masterwork. It demands from the viewer unusual honesty to parallel the clarity of the stimulus. Its insecurity being governed by time spent with it. Hanna modulates data driven perception while lightly highlighting relative brightens, sizes, superimposition, depths of visual field, and duration.

How simple! And easily overlooked if the eye wanders away from the watched screen ... yet, the whole of this work of art tolerates it with an ease of well composed poem. And as the two translations above indicate – the art of the whole must have the same intensity level in its parts. Then you have poetry.

Indeed – I do not think of Hanna’s magic installation as *Predictable Contact* without seeing it as a poetic trap. The one I keep from now on in my memory. It is – strangely enough – life supporting. Like the sea that appeared briefly in the large projection.

Ref:

Gibson JJ.,1966, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual System*

Gregory R.,1974, *Concepts and Mechanisms of Perception*