

**MORTON FELDMAN**  
**PATTERNS IN A CHROMATIC FIELD**  
Untitled Composition

Take an object.  
Do something to it.  
Do something else to it  
Do something else to it.<sup>i</sup>

ABCDE  
CBADE  
CBEAE  
DCBCD  
EBADC  
EBABE  
CCAED

order of patterns, page 1, PCF<sup>ii</sup>

3/16, 3/2, 4/16, 3/2, 5/16, 3/2, 6/16, 3/2, 7/16, 3/2, 9/16 / 5/4, 3/16, 5/4, 4/16,  
5/4, 5/16, 5/4, 7/16, 4/4, 9/16, 4/4, 7/16, 4/4, 5/16, 4/4, 3/16, 4/4, 5/16, 3/4, 7/16,  
3/4, 9/16, 3/4, 7/16, 3/4

durations of chords, page 14, PCF<sup>iii</sup>

For before let it before to be before spell to be before to be before to have to be  
to be for before to be tell to be to having held to be to be for before to call to be  
for to be before to till until to be till before to be for before to be until to be for  
before to for to be for before will for before to be shall to be to be for to be for to  
be before still to be will before to be before for to be to be.<sup>iv</sup>

We always say ‘Gertrude Stein’ – she said, ‘In the beginning was the word.  
Then they put two words together, then they made a sentence, then they made a  
paragraph and they forgot the word.’

That’s what it’s all about. What it is. How it is. Patterns in a Chromatic Field.

Do it one way and do it another. Spell it one way, then spell it another way.  
Orchestrade it one way, orchestrade it another way. Use this kind of rhythm and  
then use another kind of rhythm. Do it on a chain one after the other, do it less  
on a chain, do it in a simultaneity. All the possibilities of do it one way and do it  
another, rather than just on a linear situation. It goes in every manifestation:  
have A-B-C-D-E-F one way, D-F-E-A another way. It’s very related to  
serialism, but it’s also very related to medieval disciplines of the Kabbala.

My definition of composition: the right note in the right place with the right instrument!

I wanted sounds to be a metaphor, that they could be as free as a human being might be free, (...) that they should breathe, (...) that you shouldn't know how it's made, that you shouldn't know if there's a system, that you shouldn't know anything about it.

I am interested in getting Time into its unstructured existence. That is, I am interested in how this wild beast lives in the jungle – not in the zoo. I am interested in how Time exists before we put our paws on it – our minds, our imaginations, into it. (...) This was not how to make an object, not how this object exists by way of Time, in Time or about Time, but how this object exists as Time. Time regained. Time as an Image.

### **Time canvass**

Oscar Wilde tells us that a painting can be interpreted in two ways – by its subject or by its surface. (...) My obsession with surface is the subject of my music. In that sense, my compositions are really not ‘compositions’ at all. One might call them time canvasses in which I more or less prime the canvass with an overall hue of music. I have learned that the more one composes or constructs – the more one prevents Time Undisturbed from becoming the controlling metaphor of the music. (...) I prefer to think my work as: between categories: between Time and Space. Between painting and music. Between the music’s construction, and its surface. (...) What if Beethoven went on and on without any element of differentiation. We would then have Time Undisturbed. ‘Time has turned into Space and there will be no more Time,’ intones Samuel Beckett.

### **Pollock (Mondrian, Johns, Rothko, Guston)**

In thinking back to that time, I realize now how much the musical ideas I had in 1951 paralleled his mode of working. Pollock placed his canvass on the ground and painted as he walked around it. I put sheets of graph paper on the wall; each sheet framed the same time duration and was, in effect, a visual rhythmic structure. What resembled Pollock was my ‘all over’ approach to the time-canvass. Rather than the usual left-to-right passage across the page, the horizontal squares of the graph paper represented the tempo - with each box equal to a pre-established ictus; and the vertical squares were the instrumentation of the composition.

### **Grid**

But the initial concept of the grid - Oh, it's like one of those things that you don't know is going to have significance afterwards. I have no idea how it came about. Actually, I was living in the same building as John Cage and he invited me to

dinner. And it wasn't ready yet. John was making wild rice the way most people don't know how it should be made. That is, just waiting for boiling water and then putting new boiling water into the rice and then having another pot boiling and then draining the rice, etc., etc., so we were waiting a long time for the wild rice to be ready. It was while waiting for the wild rice that I just sat down at his desk and picked up a piece of note paper and started to doodle. And what I doodled was a freely drawn page of graph paper - and what emerged were high, middle and low categories. (...) The first piece was *Projection I* for solo cello, which I wrote for the marvelous cellist Seymour Barab. I brought it over and showed him this very primitive notation. It was just again categories of pizzicato sounds, harmonics, and arco and aspects of arco-like ponticello. And then I gave high, middle and low and each box corresponded to a metronome beat. At that time it was 72 which was very slow then. It was endless, the ictus being 72. And then I started to write these pieces. (...) Actually I didn't have any kind of theory and I had no idea what was going to emerge, but if I wasn't waiting for that wild rice, I wouldn't have had those wild ideas.

### **Intersection**

My desire here was not to "compose," but to project sounds into time, free from a compositional rhetoric that had no place here. In order not to involve the performer (i.e., myself) in memory (relationships), and because the sounds no longer had an inherent symbolic shape, I allowed for indeterminacies in regard to pitch. In the *Projections* only register (high, middle or low), time values, and dynamics (soft through-out) were designated. Later in the same year (1951) I wrote *Intersection*. Both these graph pieces designated only whether high, middle or low register of the instrument was to be used within a given time structure. Entrances within this structure, as well as actual pitches and dynamics, were freely chosen by the performer. After several years of writing graph music I began to discover its most important flow. I was not only allowing the sounds to be free – I was also liberating the performer. I had never thought of the graph as an art of improvisation, but more as a totally abstract sonic adventure.

When I first did my early graph music, things had to come in a certain time span. Now it didn't have to come exactly in the beginning of the time span, and as you know it can come anywhere, like crossing a street, that's why I called them *Intersection*, to me time was the distance, metaphorically, between a green light and a red light. It was like traffic, it was a control. So I always controlled the time, but I didn't control the notes. When I started to do my free durational music I controlled the notes but I didn't control the time. So both these ideas meant I had to leave something out.

In *Durations II* I arrive at a more complex style in which each instrument is living out its own individual life in its own individual sound world. In each piece the instruments begin simultaneously, and are then free to choose their

own durations within a given general tempo. The sounds themselves are designated.

### **Crippled Symmetry**

A growing interest in Near and Middle Eastern rugs has made me question notions I previously held on what is symmetrical and what is not. In Anatolian village and nomadic rugs there appears to be considerably less concern with the exact accuracy of the mirror image than in most rug-producing areas. The detail of an Anatolian symmetrical image was never mechanical, but idiomatically drawn. (...) Rugs have prompted me in my recent music to think of a disproportionate symmetry, in which a symmetrically staggered rhythmic series is used: 4:3, 6:5, 8:7, etc., as the point of departure. For my purpose, it ‘contains’ my material more within the metric frame of the measure. What I’m after is somewhat like Mondrian ‘not wanting to paint bouquets, but a single flower at the time.’ (...) The color-scale of most nonurban rugs appears more extensive than it actually is, due to the great variation of shades of the same color (abrash) – a result of the yarn having been dyed in small quantities. As a composer, I respond to this most singular aspect affecting a rug’s coloration and its creation of a micro chromatic overall hue. My music has been influenced mainly by the methods in which color is used on essential musical devices. It has made me question the nature of musical material. What could best be used to accommodate, by equally simple, means, musical color? Patterns.

### **Memory**

We do not hear what we hear... only what we remember. (...) What Western musical forms have become is a paraphrase of memory. But memory could operate otherwise as well. In *Triadic Memories*, a new piano work of mine, (composed just after *Patterns in a chromatic field*) there is a section of different types of chords where each chord is slowly repeated. One chord might be repeated three times, another, seven or eight – depending on how long I felt it should go on. Quite soon into a new chord I would forget the reiterated chord before it. I then reconstructed the entire section: rearranging its earlier progression and changing the number of times a particular chord was repeated. This way of working was a conscious attempt at ‘formalizing’ a disorientation of memory. Chords are heard repeated without any discernible pattern. In this regularity (though there are slight gradations of tempo) there is a suggestion that what we hear is functional and directional, but we soon realize that this is an illusion; a bit like walking the streets of Berlin – where all the buildings look alike, even if they’re not.

### **Patterns**

The most interesting aspect for me, composing exclusively with patterns, is that there is not one organizational procedure more advantageous than another,

perhaps because no one pattern ever takes precedence over the others. The compositional concentration is solely on which pattern should be reiterated and for how long, and on the character of its inevitable change into something else. Repetitive chordal patterns might not progress from one to another, but might occur at irregular time intervals in order to diminish the close-knit aspect of patterning; while the more evident rhythmic patterns might be mottled at certain junctures to obscure their periodicity. For me patterns are really self-contained sound-groupings that enable me to break off without preparation into something else.

### **Modular**

A modular construction could be a basic device for organic development. I use it to see that patterns are ‘complete’ in themselves, and in no need for development – only of extension. My concern is: what is its scale when prolonged, and what is the best method to arrive at it. (...) The patterns that interest me are both concrete and ephemeral, making notation difficult. If notated exactly, they are too stiff; if given the slightest notational leeway, they are too loose. (...) Though these patterns exist in rhythmic shapes articulated by instrumental sounds, they are also in part notational images that do not make a direct impact on the ear as we listen. A tumbling of sorts happens in midair between their translation from the page and their execution. To a great degree, this tumbling occurs in all music – but becomes more compounded in mine, since there is no rhythmic ‘style’, a quality often crucial to the performer’s understanding of how and what to do. I found this just a true in my music of the fifties – where rhythm was not notated, but left to the performer.

From A – Z I do C-A-B-F. It’s all constructed, so I could place anything against anything else and it would seem normal because the design of that little module is perfect. (...) I work very module-ly, I don’t work in a continuity? I work module-ly. And many times I like to work module-ly because then I turn it around. (...) I am very interested also in retrograde. And I have pieces where I don’t repeat the tones retrograde, but I repeat the whole module retrograde.

### **Stasis**

Stasis, as utilized in painting, is not traditionally part of the apparatus of music. Music can achieve aspects of immobility, or the illusion of it. The degrees of stasis, found in a Rothko or a Guston, where perhaps the most significant elements that I brought to my music from painting. For me, stasis, scale, pattern have put the whole question of symmetry and asymmetry in abeyance.

I still use a grid. But now the grid encompasses conventional notation. The reason my music is notated is I wanted to keep control of the silence, when you hear it, you have no idea rhythmically how complicated that is on paper. It’s floating. On paper it looks as though it’s rhythm. It’s not. It’s duration.

What I picked up from painting is what every art student knows. And it's called the picture plane. I'm trying to balance, a kind of coexistence between the chromatic field and those notes selected from the chromatic field that are not in the chromatic series. And I'm involved like a painter, involved with gradations within the chromatic world. And the reason I do this is to have the ear make those trips. Back and forth, and it gets more and more saturated. But I work very much like a painter, insofar as I'm watching the phenomena and I'm thickening and I'm thinning and I'm working in that way and just watching what it needs. I mean I have the skill to hear it. I don't know what the skill is to think it, I was never involved with the skills to think it. I'm the only one that works that way. But it's like Rothko, just a question of keeping that tension or that stasis. You find it in Matisse, the whole idea of stasis. That's the word. I'm involved in stasis. It's frozen, at the same time it's vibrating.

A	C
B	D
C	A
D	B

### **Reiteration**

So essentially I am working with three notes and of course we have to use the other notes. But the other notes are like shadows of the basic notes. So then all I have to decide is where I'm going to start on the three notes, chromatic, you know. After a few years I added another one. (...) You can either do two things with music, you can be involved with variation, which in simply terms means only vary it, or you could be in repetitions? Reiterative. What my work is, is a synthesis between variation and repetition. (...) I am interested in music where the variation is so discreet, I would have the same thing come back again, but I would just add one note. Or I have to come back and I take out two notes. And I would vary the notes and keep the pulse, very subtle. (...) In other words I'm not creating music, it's already there, and I have this conversation with the material, you see.

My music is handmade. So I'm like a tailor. I make my buttonholes by hand. The suit fits better.

What I'm really trying to say is this: instead of the twelve-tone as a concept. I'm involved with all the 88 notes. I have a big, big world there. (...) Everything I do, I feel is essentially not mine. Everything is a found object. I mean, I didn't invent the major 6th. I didn't invent a minor 7th. When I hear these things going, how I use them. Watching these found objects. Everything is a found object. Even something that I do invent is a found object.

Now how I work is this way, especially for the past twelve years, and it's not original. There are many, many people who work this way, but in other fields. Samuel Beckett, not in everything he does, but in a lot of things he does. He would write something in English, translate it into French, then translate that thought back into the English that conveys that thought. And I know he keeps on doing it. He wrote something for me in 1977, and I got it. I'm reading it. There's something peculiar. I can't catch it. Finally I see that every line is really the same thought said in another way. And yet the continuity acts as if something else is happening. Nothing else is happening. What you're doing in an almost Proustian way is getting deeper and deeper saturated into the thought. What I do then is, I translate, say something, into a pitchy situation. And then I do it where it's more intervallic, and I take the suggestions of that back into another kind of pitchyness - not the original pitchyness, and so forth, and so on. Always retranslating and then saying, now let's do it with another kind of focus. The word here is focus.

For me sound was the hero, and it still is. I feel that I am subservient. I feel that I listen to my sounds, and I do what they tell me, not what I tell them. Because I owe my life to these sounds. Right? They gave me a life.

If I can annoy you with another bon mot. Degas, you know, spent too much of his time writing sonnets. So he meets Mallarmé on the street, and Mallarmé says, 'How are the sonnets going?' And Degas says, 'I don't have any ideas.' Mallarmé says, 'You don't write poetry with ideas. You write it with words.' European, you know, Mallarmé.

Are there any questions?

MF

Texts fragments from Morton Feldman, *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, Edited by B. H. Friedman, Exact Change, 2000 and *Morton Feldman says: selected interviews and lectures 1964-1987*, Edited by Chris Villars, Hyphen Press, London (2006).

Compiled by Arne Deforce, June 15th 2008

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<sup>i</sup> Jasper Johns, sketchbook notes, interviews, the museum of modern art, New York, 1996

<sup>ii</sup> Order of patterns, page 1, patterns in a chromatic field, universal edition, 1981

<sup>iii</sup> Durations of chords, page 14, patterns in a chromatic field, universal edition, 1981

<sup>iv</sup> Gertrude Stein, Patriarchal Poetry 1927, [www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s\\_z/stein/stein.htm](http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s_z/stein/stein.htm)