



TELEPATHIC MUSIC

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Imants Tillers

MILBURN

Cover:
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Photo: Imants Tillers

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TELEPATHIC MUSIC

In 1990 in an interview with Evelyn Juers (1) I wrote:

"Although my work process continues to utilise pre-existing images - reproductions from books, catalogues, magazines as it always has, what really interests me is how my paintings engage with the real world. This world includes, for example, my immediate environment, the position of my body within it, the position of the sun, the contents of my mailbox, my idiosyncratic movements through space, my regular commuter's path from home to studio, from studio to home, the dust on the studio floor, the contents of the latest **Flash Art** (one item, perhaps), the flecks of paint on the skirting board, an unsolicited phone call (wrong number). It is the exact interrelationship of these things within each moment that I try to observe. Thus, unlike someone who 'paints from nature' I focus on those subtle aspects of phenomena which others might fail to notice or having noticed find scarcely credible - those unexpected collisions of objects, destinies and events which Carl Jung called 'synchronicities'. I seek (unconsciously) a certain resonance between the contents of a picture (the one I'm working on) and my immediate experiences in my immediate surroundings."

So recently, while researching a short piece **Was it Fluxus Speaking?**, for an exhibition catalogue (2), I came across a reproduction of a work by the Fluxus artist, Robert Filliou (3). His work **Telepathic Music No. 5** 1978 which consisted of 33 music stands reminded me very strongly of my own work **Conversations with the Bride** which I had completed earlier in 1975 and for which I had designed and constructed the 112 stands myself. Since I could not believe that Filliou could have known my work or been influenced by it, I decided to work on a new piece for 1994, using ready-made music stands which could perhaps interrogate this uncanny correspondence, this acausal connection between us. (4)

It was easy to find the support for the work - ie. the music stands. It was far more difficult to find a set of appropriate images for them to carry. I began working with a number of ideas and images including George Maciunas' fluxfilm **End after 9** 1966. This was basically a short 8mm film loop which counted from 1 to 9 and then finished.

While I was trying out this imagery, which I did not feel was entirely satisfactory, I was continually moving the 9 music stands around my studio, in different configurations and different locations. Sometimes they were randomly bunched up, sometimes in a regular configuration, sometimes with blank canvasboards on them, other times without. Sometimes they were placed against the wall, sometimes next to windows, in pride of place or at other times completely hidden from view.

Now it is a peculiar feature of my studio that there is much play of light within it - direct light and light reflected from distant city buildings. This indirect light in particular is unpredictable and comes from unexpected directions at particular times of the year. However it was not this indirect light which came into play on this occasion but rather the direct light. For on one morning, at about 9.30am on the 12th September 1994, the wall adjacent to where the music stands had been left the night before was unexpectedly illuminated with cyphers of light, hieroglyphs, or musical notation - indeed the traces of a telepathic music. Light streaming through the windows at a certain time, a certain place had been reflected off the music stands onto the wall, forming this luminal text - at once banal and mysterious. And it was these momentary traces that I fixed on film and then transcribed onto the hitherto blank but expectant canvasboard panels. What was so surprising and unpredictable in this process was that the body of the music stands themselves should act as the literal receivers and transmitters of light, form and meaning. At this moment could it have been Robert Filliou (who died on 2nd December 1987) shaking hands with me across the gulf of time and agreeing on the outcome of a strangely telepathic interaction?

Imants Tillers
1994

Notes:

- 1) Evelyn Juers, "Imants Tillers: the phenomenon" Part 1, The Adelaide Review, Adelaide, June 1992
- 2) 25 Years of Performance Art in Australia, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, 1994
- 3) Reproduced in "Fluxus: Today and Yesterday", Art and Design, London, 1993, p. 76
- 4) Right at this time, ie. September 1994, Leigh Dayton, the science writer for the Sydney Morning Herald reported on a recent theoretical alternative to Jung's 'acausal connecting principal' (synchronicity). This was the idea of 'backward causation' as expounded by Dr Huw Price, a philosopher at the University of Sydney who specialises in the bizarre and tiny world of quantum mechanics. Dayton writes:

"In a recent issue of the British journal Mind Dr Price says it is high time physicists seriously consider the theory of 'backward causation', the odd and largely disregarded scientific notion that an event in the future can influence the past. According to Dr Price such back-to-the-future style events do indeed occur in the mind-numbingly small world of the atom. Atoms are the chemical building blocks of elements, substances which form the 'everyday' world of rocks, water, air and living things.

In that world, sub-particles smaller than the atom itself interact with one another. When they do, says Dr Price, past and future meet. Physicist Dr John Cramer of the University of Washington in Seattle explains that this occurs because just before one sub-particle interacts with another, it sends out an 'offer' to the second sub-particle in the form of an electromagnetic wave. The second sub-particle receives the offering and sends back an electromagnetic wave in reply. In Dr Cramer's view, the first sub-particle exists in the past and the second in the future. The sub-particles shake hands across the gulf of time and agree upon the outcome of the interaction. If the two interacting particles are physically close together, the gulf between past and future is 'incredibly tiny', says Dr Price. But if they are far apart it is huge, possible lasting millions or billions of years."

To the Artist, from an observer, on arrival at 100 Sydney Street, New Farm at 6.18pm on Wednesday, 26th October, 1994 ...

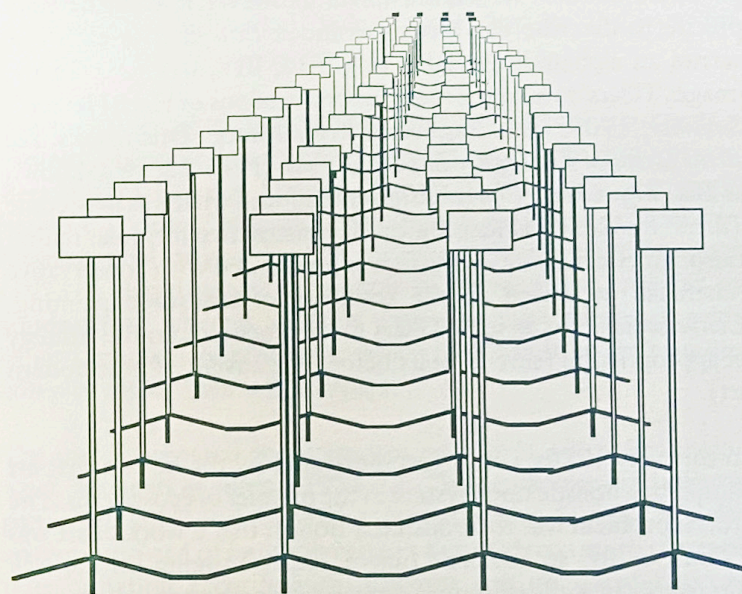
a relentless shrilling mechanical piercing ringing noise ... like a piece of minimalist music, a tortured cacophony negating the silence of **TELEPATHIC MUSIC**, of the dancing music stands, their spirit of solitude and anticipation, the glory of Latvian choral music imagined, the lightness and the dream ...

... however, it was simply the cicadas singing at twilight in the sub-tropical garden below the space housing Imants' installation ...

Barbara Tuckerman
1994

Art and Holism: Imants Tillers'

Conversations with the Bride (1975)



Simplified diagram of the arrangement of the images in *Conversations with the Bride, 1975*, (in the actual installation the stands are connected hexagonally).

Imants Tillers' installation for this exhibition is based on his second major early work *Conversations with the Bride* of 1975 and a 'chance meeting' of this work with a piece entitled *Telepathic Music* by Fluxus artist Robert Filliou. *Telepathic Music* bears remarkable similarities to *Conversations with the Bride*. It consists of a series of music stands with playing cards attached. The date of the Filliou work is 1978, three years after *Conversations*.

The coincidence of *Telepathic Music* with *Conversations* is evident from the above diagram which shows the way in which *Conversations* was arranged. The work consists of 112 stands

(somewhat like Filliou's music stands) arranged in a grid with sufficient space between each stand so that spectators can walk within the array (this is not the case for the Filliou). Each stand carries a postcard sized painted image the back of which is chrome plated aluminium that acts as a mirror. However, it would be more precise to describe the images as index card-like, as each one carries an alphanumeric label (e.g. 01a, 01b, 01c ...). In the images Tillers' montaged manipulated versions of Hans Heysen's *Summer, 1909*, with fragments from Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even, 1915-23*, (also known as *The Large Glass*). *Conversations* introduced what was to become Tillers' fundamental ideological deconstructive formula: radical Euro-American avant-gardism was juxtaposed with conservative Australian art based in the tradition of landscape painting. *Conversations* was as such Tillers first excursion into the strategy of appropriation (several years before the advent of postmodern art).

In the early 1970s Tillers was motivated by the notion that art should be a holistic open system in the manner of ecosystems. The crucial problem was to abolish the notion that a work of art was a single entity, an aesthetic object, either hanging on the wall (preferably in a gilded frame) or standing on a pedestal. In place of the aesthetic object Tillers introduced the self-deconstructing object, the object which is a quasi-self-organising system in a state of constant flux. The spectator interacts with *Conversations* not by standing in front of it but by walking *into* it. *Conversations* was arguably the first *pictorial* work of art where the viewer could walk into the frame—into the screen. Furthermore, Tillers intensified the interactive dimension of the work by the fact that the viewer not only looked at images but also at reflections of images on the mirrored backs of other images. Is it too fanciful to suggest that using the primitive technology available twenty years ago (index cards, music stands and mirrors) Tillers constructed a conceptual precursor of what we now call virtual reality?

Conversations with the Bride, 1975, is Tillers' second major early work, the first being *Moments of Inertia* of 1972-73. In both works Tillers was influenced by his study of Ludwig von Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory (which is associated with

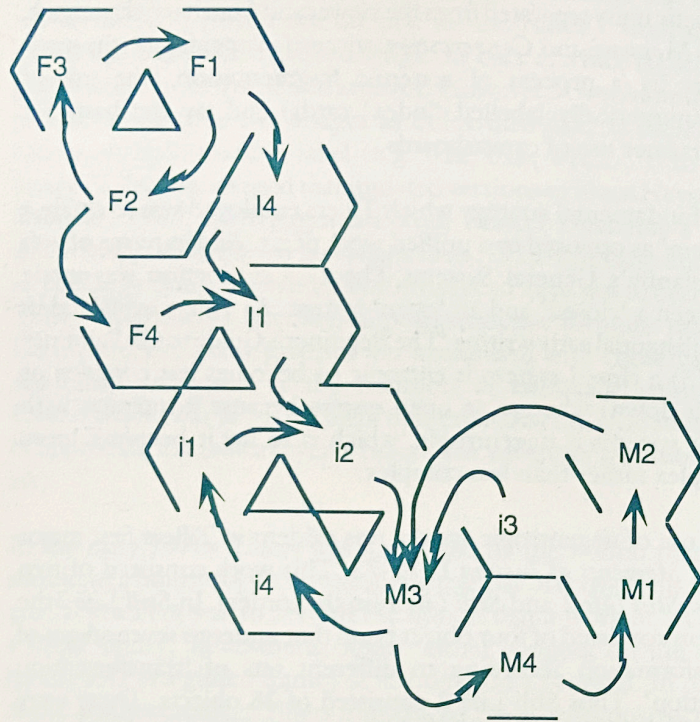
information theory). Tillers explored the notion of holistic systems creating works of art which avoid functioning as a self-contained aesthetic unity separated from the viewer and from its environment. Both *Moments* and *Conversations* succeed in opening up the work of art by a process of systemic fragmentation (the use of alphanumerically labelled 'index' cards) and lay the basis for Tillers later use of canvasboards.

The fundamental strategy which Tillers employed was to create a 'system' as opposed to a unified work of art. And in terms of von Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory a distinction was made between a 'closed' and an 'open' system. As Tillers explained in his substantial early writing 'The Beginner's Guide to Oil Painting' (1973) a closed system is entropic (it becomes less complex or winds down) whereas an open system because it interacts with other systems is negentropic, which is to say it becomes more complex rather than less complex.

The use of negentropic system was evident in Tillers first major work *Moments of Inertia 1972-73*. This work consisted of two parts: *Still Life 2* and *Still Life 1* (in that order). In *Still Life 2* the system consisted of four object types that undergo seven stages of transformation according to different sets of 'transformation function'. Thus *Still Life 2* consisted of 28 objects. These were stored in specially designed cabinet in drawers which were systematically labelled in the manner of an index cabinet (one remembers Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden's *(Index (Model (...)))* 1970, Dale Hickey's *90 White Walls* 1970, and the Art & Language *Index 01* installation, 1972, exhibited at Documenta 5). *Still Life 2* was first exhibited as a cabinet in *Object + Idea, 1973*, at the National Gallery of Victoria and later that year as an installation at Watters Gallery, Sydney. It consists of 'wallpieces', 'floorpieces', standing 'frame' pieces, and wall mounted 'boxes'.

In the second part of *Moments of Inertia, Still Life 1*, the 28 objects of *Still Life 2* undergo another stage of what Tillers referred to in 'The Beginner's Guide to Oil Painting' as 'information processing' via a process of 'mapping' one object type onto another to produce 112 objects. It is at this point that the system becomes hypercomplex and negentropic. This complexity is evident in the

diagram Tillers used to illustrate the mapping process:



Tillers' diagram of how the different components of Still Life 1 were 'mapped' onto each other so as to generate new forms

Following on from *Moments*, *Conversations with the Bride* also used 112 objects. The systemic nature of the work is evident in that the images are indexed according to an x-y axis. There are four 'columns' designated a, b, c and d, and twenty eight units in each row. Each image carries an alphanumeric index. An example of the column labelling is: 01a, 01b, 01c, 01d; and an example of the row labelling is: 01a, 02a, 03a, 04a, 05a to 28a. However, as in *Moments* the system is not 'closed' and entropic but open and 'negentropic'.

A crucial feature of both *Moments* and *Conversations* is that no single unit in the work is important in itself, it is only significant

with regard to the whole. This is a basic tenet of General Systems Theory and tends to be referred to now as the principle of 'holism'. Holism stands in opposition to the classical rationalistic scientific approach based on reductionistic analysis (see Davies & Gribbin 1991).

In *Conversations* not only was the work exploded into space enabling the viewer to enter it, but each index card image was itself exploded by Tillers use of discrete contours to delineate the various parts of the image. The use of contour fragmented the images and enabled them to be interpenetrated by other images in the form of image particles or images within images. In a metaphorical sense, the entire repertoire of imagery used in the individual paintings seems to interpenetrates the whole series. For example at one point we see the entire array of images appearing in one image, a process of self-embedding which we now understand is typical of the nonlinear, holistic paradigm evident in postclassical science (e.g. chaos mathematics).

In contemporary terminology *Conversations with the Bride* could be described as a 'hypertext'. This term refers to a random access system of information storage and retrieval.

In this system information is on an electronic version of index cards which can be read either in a linear sequence as in a book or be linked to each other via programmable pathways which can be altered. When the hypertext system is read in a nonlinear manner one crucial characteristic of the system is that any card can be connected to any other card. The nonlinearity of *Conversations* is apparent in a variety of ways. Although the basic grid or 'matrix' is arranged according to a linear x-y coordinates the interaction of the viewer effectively interferes with this and makes the system non-linear. This is further complicated by the fact that Tillers made the back of each image a mirror-like surface which reflects the other images. In *A Companion to Conversations with the Bride* (1978) Tillers discusses the effect of seeing one image reflected on the back of another as 'coupling' and states: "'coupling" enables any of the 112 images to be linked to any other.' (Tillers 1978a, §5/1).

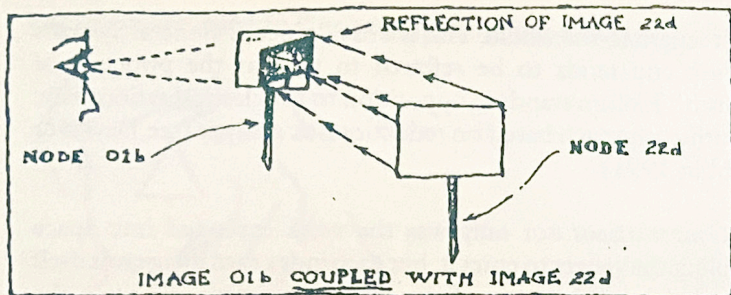
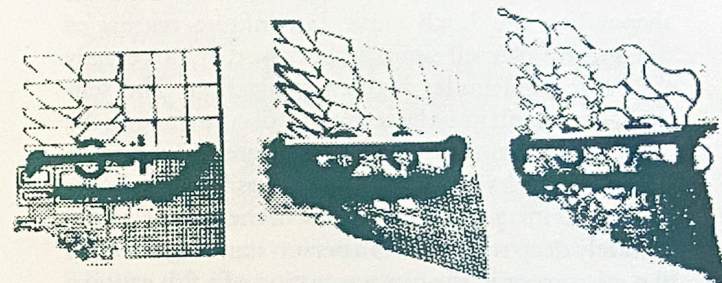


Illustration from *A Companion to Conversations with the Bride*

The nonlinear complexity of *Conversations* is also evident in the fact that apart from interacting the fragmented Heysen's *Summer* with image fragments from *The Large Glass* Tillers also has a repertoire of idiosyncratic sub-images which interpenetrate the 112 main images seemingly at random. One image is visited by a Soviet jet fighter plane, another by a circular table and blackened oil lamps, another by serial nudes carrying a surfboard. There are no flying saucers but one would not be surprised to find one there. Indeed, the image particles seem to interbreed mutate and replicate of their own accord. One could almost believe that this work might self-mutate in the gallery at night so that each time one visited the next morning there would be new image configurations. A contemporary version of *Conversations* might consist of a cybernetic artificial life system wherein image-programs could interbreed and adapt to a changing environment by a process of Darwinian evolution thereby creating new image-forms. Twenty years after *Conversations* this is not science fiction, experiments such as this have already been carried out. (e.g. Karl Sims, Thinking Machines Corporation USA; Jon McCormack in Melbourne; John Frazer, University of Ulster, Northern Ireland).

Negentropy, holism and nonlinearity are related to self-referentiality in the postclassical scientific paradigm and it is interesting to note that there is a great deal of self-referentiality

in *Moments of Inertia* and *Conversations*. In *Moments of Inertia* Tillers used an 'image structure type' which he originally generated on a main frame computer (there where no other kind in 1972). Was this one of the first examples of computer art? Tillers went on to complexify this basic 'image structure type' so that it became a representation of all the 28 objects. Tillers depicted this complexified 'image type' on the front of the drawers of the cabinet which held *Still Life 2*



Holistic self-embedded image structure type in *Moments of Inertia*

Drawer 34 (3 = Box object, 4 = fourth step of transformation) shows all the twenty eight elements compiled together. Drawer 36 shows the configuration becoming tilted and drawer 37 shows the transformation of a Euclidean linear geometry into a pseudo-non-Euclidean configuration where the straight lines become curvilinear, or nonlinear. All of the 28 objects in *Still Life 2* had this pattern applied to them in one way or another. As such each object was inscribed with the whole.

In contemporary science the process of cybernetic feedback and its effect of self-embedding is becoming more apparent in the structure of nature. For example, with regard to the phenomenon of light, if one breaks the glass plate on which a holographic photograph is stored each fragment contains the whole image—that is holism. And holism is intimately related to self-referentiality as well as to nonlinearity and self-organising systems. James Gleick notes that the self-organising and infinitely complex geometry of chaos mathematics is produced by nonlinear equations where 'shapes are defined, not by solving an equation once, but by iterating it in a feedback (self-referential) loop.' (Gleick 1988,

According to Tillers, discrete objects in our three-dimensional world may in fact be facets of a single four-dimensional entity. On this basis he argued that Heysen's *Summer* could be a facet of Duchamp's *The Large Glass*. In other words the distance between Australia and Europe becomes irrelevant.

Tillers' obsession with another world or dimension which can affect our own was directly related to the (post)colonial situation of Australian art. This becomes even more evident in his 1982 essay 'Locality Fails'. There Tillers referred to another example of postclassical science, quantum physics. In this essay he uses quantum mechanics to argue that Australian artists do not need to desperately pursue a local identity. He cites 'Bell's Theorem' which applies to subatomic particles and strongly indicates that a local particle can be influenced by another particle at the other side of the universe. In terms of quantum theory there are no particles (one might add, metaphorically, there are no individual works of art or artists) instead there is a holistic and possibly n-dimensional network of energy. In a sense Australia is at the other side of the universe from the Euro-American cultural empire, but Tillers realises that as he paints in his studio his hand and mind could be affected by another artist working across the other side of the world, or perhaps in another dimension (if we accept the quantum theory of parallel universes).

In some of Tillers' canvasboard works an (Arakawa) 'I' (eye) radiates its rays throughout the universe suggesting that it is a node connected with everything else in the network of consciousness. In that sense the 'I' does not exist as an entity but only in terms of its locus within the system—within the net.

Tillers' work is both profoundly antirational and profoundly scientific. Fortunately, this is no longer a contradiction for now with quantum physics, chaos mathematics and cellular automata we have dadascience, surrealscience, postmodernscience. Accordingly art that still follows the modernist path is now somewhat passé. The title of one of Tillers' canvasboard works is *The Death of Minimalism* (artists please note: the funeral is now over, and you could do worse than take a leaf out of the Book—the One Book—of Tillers' antiminimalism). We now seem to be

leaving the patriarchal discourse of Newton and Descartes and entering the era of art as chaos-information, a virtually infinite self-embedded feedback looped, cyberspace. The appalling sanity of the Enlightenment which had its culmination in the mechanistic system of Auschwitz is now hopefully coming to an end.

Graham Coulter-Smith
1994

DETAILS OF WORK

Imants Tillers **Telepathic Music** September 1994

synthetic polymer paint, gouache of 9 double-sided
canvasboards (2: 30x40cm, 1: 40x30cm, 2: 35x27cm,
26x16.5cm and 2: 16.5x26cm)

on 9 K brand music strands, randomly grouped

No. 41 669 - 41 686

dimensions variable

