

## INTRODUCING: Athanasios Argianas

Athanasios Argianas's *Proposal for a Lyrical Machine (rounds)* is a beautiful, almost mathematical piece of music: interlocking variations on a single, serpentine motif circling endlessly around smoothly rising and falling chords. At least that's what I hear, or half-hear, when I look at it. For *Proposal* is actually a sculpture, an entirely silent one. A shiny, black, Möbius strip-like loop climbing from a circular base, its curvilinear geometry strung with criss-crossing filaments, Naum Gabo-style, it's one of a flow of "machine" artworks—making music in the viewer's head—that the Athens-born, London-based artist has created since his graduation from Goldsmiths' College, in London, in 2005. The resultant imagined composition is one's own, as Argianas surely intends. Though there's plenty of both modernism and music in his art, he's far from being a throwback to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Wassily Kandinsky et al gamely sought to represent specific sonic experiences in art. Instead, Argianas is interested in exploiting the gaps and consonances created when one form is translated into another; and, furthermore, in upgrading the ostensibly passive viewer to navigator, interpreter, and—to an extent—co-author.

Visitors to his 2007 show at Max Wigram Gallery, London, "Mimicking, Falling and Falling," for example, had to negotiate a welter of registers and references. As often in Argianas's work, a neo-Constructivist aesthetic dominated, though one tintured with other cultural allusions. There was the screen-like, room-dividing *Il Pleut*, a wonky wooden grid whose variably angled crossbars are strung with shredded copies of the eponymous Apollinaire poem from 1918—in the text of which words are arranged like raindrops. Argianas is

fascinated by linguistic arrangements, such as calligrams, that can be entered at any point; more broadly, he's interested in examining how we record and decode data. So it fit that these angled lines approximated alien music on a surreal stave, and met other approaches to music in the gallery. *Song Machine*, a wooden sculpture resembling a book's fanned-out pages, featured wooden capitals diversely spelling out fragments of the phrase "WE WILL FALL". If this was a song, it was a round. Similarly circular in form and musical structure, a transparent seven-inch record played *Music for Four Imagined Theremins Part II* (by the artist, who was conservatory-trained in Greece and now has a parallel career making predominantly electronic music under the name Gavouna)—a whistling quartet mimicking the sound of the 1930s-era musical instrument that is, notably, controlled by movements of the hands in space.

This grouping lacked a specific center, or, rather, worked with a handful of centers. Each object set up cultural inferences and references—modernist experiments with activating spatiality, for instance—picked up elsewhere, like a new vocalist taking up a round's refrain, though how the connections played out wasn't circumscribed. There was one other significant element in this exhibition: a series of "Braid Paintings," rear views of a woman's coiled hairdo made in an academic style, the direction of the brush's movement 'creating' the tightly spiraling form of the hairs themselves. This idea of *direction*—metonymic for a practice predicated on letting the viewer approach it from multiple angles—threads subtly through Argianas's work; glimpsing it within his slanted poetics is part of the pleasure.

Consider, for example, "Things Living in the Studio Imagined

Late at Night,” a 2005 painting series wherein pairs of grasshoppers crawl upon imaginary pseudo-Modernist geometrical sculptures. These insects, which use their antennae to steer through space (a link back to Theremins, Argianas suggests), are always positioned at 90° angles to each other, like an organic compass, or ad-hoc axis. The paintings, and all the others he has made since, are made in artificial light, subdued in hue but rich in cyans and magentas: a “nocturnal” palette suggestive of events occurring after dark. This, in the context of Argianas’ interest in directionality, is significant: it infers a contrariwise movement, towards a species of loose, unbounded “night thinking” opposed to the stultifying rationality that might prevail during the day.

Argianas frequently makes artworks that both concretize this roaming, ungoverned thought and inspire it. *Consonants as Noise* (2007), for instance, is a pair of rocklike casts of crumpled aluminum foil, differently colored copper, verdigris, and silver, clamped in callipers, and exhibited at a 90° angle from each other—viewing them like this, you’d never guess that these iridescent lumps are identical. The form itself comes from an oscilloscope reading—a device for visualizing waveforms—and represents in three dimensions a ‘noise’ waveform (i.e. one from which no pitch can be discerned). The callipers, like Argianas’ grasshoppers—miniature sculptures of which appear upon them—represent an attempt at negotiation of formlessness; emblems, even, of the interpretative process itself.

Even if one doesn’t mentally conjure the thick rush of noise that might create such an oscilloscope reading, such works still help clarify how Argianas is shifting the terms of the artwork towards the idea of a proposal or contingent generator. It’s no accident that his

productions often resemble furniture—a recent show at Cell Projects, London, featured five fragile, table-like structures with images upon them—they’re there to be used, and a background to cognitive play. Slyly, his art is also a pragmatic system of self-perpetuation. When I visit Argianas in his East London studio, on his desk are several small, painted sculptures: narrow, stacked polyhedrons, like miniature space-age totem poles. These, he says, are translations of the musical canon in his Max Wigram show into measures of weight. And, indeed, it’s possible to see the rising canon form in them—and to feel the brain stretching at the idea of what music might “weigh.”

Beyond such readings, though, trying to pin down Argianas’s evolving, experiential, dynamic system may well be a fool’s errand. One can only point to its characteristics: an endless mutability in which sound and language are rendered into objects (and vice versa), and the very process of reception becomes, via compounded allusions to the idea of directionality, part of the work’s content. The systems are specific, but their involutions are many, their upshots utterly unscientific: e.g., once Argianas’s notion of what a canon might ‘look’ like has been filtered through his subjectivity, and tilted by the objects he exhibits it alongside, it then meets your curiosity—which might extend to wondering what this particular object *sounds* like. It’s a gymnasium for the brain; and there is, of course, a bigger picture here: an approach to art-making that decenters the maker without dissolving into hazy open-endedness—a territory between the structured and the airy that Argianas is making his own.

At one point in our conversation, he mentions an anecdote referred to by John Cage, regarding how a beautiful human profile ought also to make a beautiful waveform. Here’s something else the

American composer once said, when asked in a 1966 interview to characterize the distinction between his compositional approach and that of Mahler, Bruckner, et al: “I’m not making a machine. I’m making something more like weather.” Meaning: an open system, full of jostling fronts. Take a step towards synthesis—use machines to make weather, and let each viewer be their own meteorologist—and you have the art of Athanasios Argianas.

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