

“Stumbling Through: The Pursuit of Error in *Sight Reading*”

by Claire Barliant

Memory, sight, and interpretation are thematically intertwined in Jenny Perlin’s seven-minute, three-channel video installation, *Sight Reading* (2004). *Sight Reading* consists of three projections lined up next to each other on the wall, like a frieze. Each projection shows the same setting: a grand piano in a large, sun-lit room. Sitting at each piano is a classically trained, skilled pianist. Before them is the same piece of music that none have ever seen before: Robert Schumann’s piano concerto in A minor. They begin at the same time, lunging at the piano, unleashing a storm of chords. Then one of them hits a wrong note, barely discernible to the average listener. That pianist’s projection goes black for five seconds. When it returns, it is not at the point where it left off, but five seconds later. The length of the cut coincides with the “real” time of the performance. Each time a pianist makes a mistake, their screen goes black, a ruthless system that throws the trio completely out of synch so that the music eventually devolves into total cacophony.

Perlin’s intervention in the video counters our usual understanding of the purpose of editing: to give an appearance of seamlessness. One is not supposed to notice the skips and breaks. Editing is a process designed to hide errors, not draw attention to them. Each time there is a cut in *Sight Reading* it forbids us to slip into a reverie caused by watching a seemingly flawless performance. The cuts have a dual function: not only do they signal that one of the pianists struck the wrong key, they alert us to our roles as spectators watching a video of a performance. The gesture made by Perlin in the video editing is undeniable evidence of the artist’s hand, and it reminds us that we are watching a recording that has been altered, thereby destroying the fiction that what we are watching is somehow objective, or “true,” because it has been captured by a camera. We not only see the limitations of the medium, we see our own limitations as viewers.

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer theorized that in music, the work of art is in the performance, not the score, which basically functions as a set of directions. *Sight Reading* complicates the question of interpretation. Or rather, it changes it. The question is no longer *what* is a work of art, but *when*? Each time the concerto is performed, it is different. How can we discern the *true* work of art? Is it the musical notation, the performance, or the video documentation? The published score is perfect in contrast with the performances, which are riddled with mistakes. Do the mistakes make the performances more authentic as works of art? Can the score and the performances exist as separate works of art? In a way, these questions don’t matter. In *Sight Reading*, the editing supercedes (aggressively) any of the other works of art—the composition, the performances—taking place in the piece.

Time-based art—which includes both music and video—is intrinsically tied to memory. The audience identifies certain themes that are of central importance to understanding the work; these are built upon and explored as the work develops and expands. Musical or visual cues prompt the audience to anticipate the next movement or event in the work. But the totality is elusive: you can never experience it as a whole, as Proust explains in *Remembrance of Things Past*:

Even after I heard the Sonata through and through, it still remained all but invisible to me, like a monument almost entirely effaced by distance or a hazy mist. This explains the melancholy bound to the knowledge of artworks, and of things that unfold in time. When finally the most secretive part of Vinteuil's Sonata unveiled itself, I had already begun to lose the fleeting trace of what my preference had distinguished, all of it blown away by the forces of listening habit quite beyond my heart's command. Thus, grasping only successively at the beloved moments of this Sonata, I never possessed it as one body: it was like life."¹

Vinteuil's Sonata was *like* life, never to be possessed as one body, because time-based work lives in the moment. As soon as the brain registers something—a scene, a chord—it is a memory. The interruptions in *Sight Reading* don't advance the piece forward in time, not only because they prevent us from hearing the piece progress, but because they have nothing to do with time—they are blanks, voids, gaps in what is otherwise a linear and structured succession of musical notes. The cuts bring us to attention. They remind us that we are *seeing* and participating in a work of art.

Viewing a work of art, or listening to a piece of music, takes us outside of ourselves. "When I listen to music I really love, I see it in my head, it occupies a part of my brain that is reserved for that purpose alone," says Perlin.² "It changes the whole tempo of my body." Perlin, who has been singing in choruses since she was eleven, says that the best part about performing someone else's work is "the sense that I'm disappearing and yet completely present." Whether performing or listening, the feeling of giving in to the work coincides with letting go of any sense of the familiar and relinquishing any certainty about one's place in the world. "Being outside oneself is the positive possibility of being wholly with something else," Gadamer wrote. "This kind of being present is a self-forgetfulness, and to be a spectator consists in giving oneself in self-forgetfulness to what one is watching."³

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¹ Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*. 3 vols. Eds. Pierre Clarac and Andre Ferre. (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 530; quoted in Didier Maleuvre, *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 77.

² Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Jenny Perlin are taken from an interview with the author on December 27, 2004.

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Corporation, 1989), 126.

When Perlin first conceived of the idea for *Sight Reading*, she considered using Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*. Written in 1961, *War Requiem* is a passionate, defiant piece of music mourning the needless loss of young lives to war. The text intersperses the Latin Mass for the dead with nine poems by the poet Wilfred Owen, who was killed in World War I a week before Armistice.⁴ The tenor begins with these two lines from Owen's poem, "Anthem for Doomed Youth:"

What passing bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

War Requiem was performed in April of 2003 by the Julliard Choral Union at Carnegie Hall in New York City. Perlin sang in the chorus, and recalls that the dress rehearsal took place on April 9th, the day U.S. forces moved into Baghdad. Though she decided to use the piano concerto instead of *War Requiem* for *Sight Reading*, the idea of trauma persisted in her decision to use the Schumann composition. She had previously used that score for her animated film *Schumann* (2002), which began, she writes, "as an attempt to confront my own fears of walking across the Brooklyn Bridge." (By the time she finished the film, her phobia had disappeared.)

Perlin made *Schumann* during a residency with the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, whose studios used to be in the upper floors of the World Trade Center. After 9/11, the LMCC studios moved to temporary quarters in Brooklyn, overlooking the East River. From this vantage point, Perlin had a direct view of the scarred Manhattan skyline. At that time, she became deeply interested in Schumann, who suffered from anxiety for his entire life, and, while writing the concerto, had tremendous doubt about his ability to write for a virtuoso pianist. Drawn to what she calls the "myth" of Schumann, who eventually wound up in an asylum, the dramatic, emotional concerto acquired greater significance for Perlin in our post-9/11 world.

Trauma is the unseen, silent thread underlying *Sight Reading*. It was present when the artist conceived the idea for the piece, having been inspired by Britten's dramatic music, Owen's powerful lyrics, and the war in Iraq. And the idea of trauma is present in the final work, in the abrupt adjournments of each pianist's struggle to play the concerto correctly on the first try.

Indeed, the editing of *Sight Reading* conjures the sudden, incommunicable and unassimilable nature of trauma. "Trauma can be experienced in at least two ways," Avital Ronell writes, "both of which block normal channels

⁴ Retrieved from <http://www.its.caltech.edu/~tan/Britten/britwar.html> on January 5, 2005.

of transmission: as a memory that one cannot integrate into one's own experience, and as a catastrophic knowledge that one cannot communicate to others."⁵ Perlin's decision to "block" or cut the mistakes from view mimics the jarring effect of trauma.

The word "trauma" originally meant a physical wound, cut, or break. The notion of trauma as a psychological disorder can be traced to "railway spine," or whiplash, a common problem in 19th-century Britain. Railway accidents caused some men to be susceptible to hysteria, rendering them unable to work and earn a living. By the century's end, it was widely accepted that a terrible memory buried deep within the psyche could be manifested in physical form. "Instead of the remembering being what affected us," writes Ian Hacking, "it was the forgotten."⁶

There is a curious parallel, worth exploring, between the effects of trauma and experiencing a work of art for the first time, or creating a work of art. Both involve forgetfulness. What purpose does forgetfulness serve, especially when it comes to understanding works of art? We usually privilege knowledge. Vast, certain, undeviating, and accountable: what we know is what provides context, gives meaning, makes connections. Once it has been forgotten, knowledge is useless. It is *unknown*. It has sunk to the deepest and least accessible recesses of our brain, leaving a series of frustratingly empty gaps in its wake. And yet it is often in a state of forgetfulness that we are really able to experience a heightened awareness of the work of art. "Seeing is the act of forgetting the name of the thing one sees," wrote Paul Valéry. Forgetfulness is also essential to *making* a work of art: "Each artist seems thus to be the native of an unknown country," wrote Marcel Proust, "which he himself has forgotten."⁷

The experience of trauma and the experience of art diverge radically from one another, of course. One can only keep up the comparison for so long, until the differences demand to be noticed. They are alike because both theoretically start at the same place: in the forgotten. But the experiences 'end' in completely opposite ways: where trauma deprives us of hope, art restores it. "What rends him from himself at the same time gives him back the whole of his being," wrote Gadamer.⁸

Despite the difficulties encountered by the pianists as they play, all three manage to make it to the end of the concerto. While making the videos, Perlin interviewed the pianists about the act of sight reading. Constance Cooper

⁵ Avital Ronell, "Trauma TV: Twelve Steps Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *Finitude's Score: Essays for the End of the Millennium* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 314.

⁶ Ian Hacking, "Memory Sciences, Memory Politics," *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, Eds. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (New York: Routledge, 1996), 76.

⁷ Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu (Remembrance of Things Past, Vol. II, The Captive)*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Random House, 1932), 558.

⁸ Gadamer, 128.

told the artist that the process of sight reading is automatic. There is no thinking, no “translation,” only action. And rather than regret the mistakes that are made, they become stepping stones toward knowledge, toward agency, because the mistakes offer the player “an awareness of something that’s there.”

We used to say always: ‘second time’s worse.’ It’s almost always true, because you’re concentrating, the second time. It’s a different form of work. You’re no longer sight reading. So you miss the rhythm, or you miss the notes, or whatever, but the fact is that it’s an improvement, because it’s an awareness of something that’s there. It’s a wonderful thing to do, sight reading, and then to go on to work, because it triggers all this knowledge. You’re not just stumbling through even when you’re stumbling through.⁹

⁹ Constance Cooper, interviewed by Jenny Perlin at Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, NY, March 28, 2003.