

ISHQ: A collaborative film and music project – art music and image as an installation, joint art as boundary crossing.

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Abstract

This paper is a reflective response to the process of creating a new installation art music partnership at Griffith University in 2011. The key collaborators were Dr Kim Cunio from the Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University (QCGU), and Dr Louise Harvey from the Griffith Film School (GFS). Both participants are early career academics and established practitioners in their fields, giving the project currency in both the academy and the creative arts. The paper responds to the aesthetics of working collaboratively on a themed installation as well as defining the significance of new artistic collaborations between the participants and their host institutions, the QCGU and GFS. This project follows on from the AUC Crossing Boundaries paper of 2010 (Hitchcock, Cunio, Harvey, Chircop), which documented student led collaborations, and recommended increasing staff collaboration as between key academics.

Keywords

Music, film, Islamic art, animation, 3D, installation, moving image, collaboration.

Part 1: Introduction:

This project follows on from an existing music research project undertaken in 2007. In early 2007 Kim Cunio was approached by the Art Gallery of NSW (AGNSW) who were bringing the Khalili collection of Islamic Art to Australia. This collection is seen as one of the leading collections in the world, remarkable for two reasons. The first is that it constitutes a private holding that is on par with many of the government collections of Islamic countries, the second is that it is held by a Persian (Iranian) Jew, and as such constitutes a living example of cultural tolerance and shared value.

To accompany the collection a series of new musical works were commissioned to illustrate the magnitude of the holdings. They were to respond to the landscape of the desert, a central feature of early Islamic culture, the teachings of Islam contained in a magnificent collection of Q'urans, as well as cultural collections, including the Mongol 'Chronicles of the World' and the Persian 'Shahnama', one of the world's great epic stories. Five pieces of music were installed to accompany the exhibition and a larger CD was produced and manufactured for distribution in both Australia and parts of the Arabic world.

By and large the response to the music was

generous. ABC Radio National broadcast the concert launch to the disc and exhibition, something that presenter Geoff Wood described as taking Cunio's work to another level:

Tonight a cracking concert for you from the Persian and Arabic traditions... Much of the music you'll hear tonight was composed, or arranged, by Sydney-born Kim Cunio who is really in a class of his own when it comes to historically-based musical composition. (Wood, 2009: 1).

John Shand praised *ISHQ* in The Sydney Morning Herald, and David Khalili insisted on buying his own promotional stock as a memento. (Cunio: 2007). The disk also sold very well during the exhibition and a series of public performances were both well attended and critically enjoyed. However as is the case with music projects, particularly thematic releases, once the accompanying exhibition left Australia interest waned, and the disc did not receive an ongoing release. Hence it was decided in 2011 that this project was suitable for a re-exploration to allow the music itself to be the stimulus for new art – to subvert and change the role of installation music in the creative arts.

The structure of the paper is grounded in practice led research. The paper should therefore be judged on the art it describes, for it is primarily concerned with interpreting the process of making a new work of multimedia art for exhibition and identifying any new or emergent knowledge that has taken place. As such it is a action based project with reflection and analysis, a methodology that forms a type of triangulation, allowing the art to be deconstructed, yet still appreciated for what it is, a transient work of beauty intended to inspire others.

Cunio and Harvey have also therefore elected to write in the first person, utilising methods that have achieved some precedence in the English speaking world in recent times. Both contributors have written an exegetical response to their part of the project.

Auto ethnography, as defined by writers such as Carolyn Ellis in *The ethnographic I: a methodological novel about autoethnography* (Ellis: 2004), is a potent methodology for investigating artistic practice and creative work. In addition to formal autoethnography, journaling as detailed by academic and author Stephanie Dowrick inspired the discourse between the practitioners. Dowrick advocates a connection between feeling, writing and reflection in her work *Creative Journal Writing: The Art & Heart*

of *Reflection*, which is also cognizant to the project and its reportage. Dowrick defines the developing skills of journaling in relation to this project:

Skills in observation and mindfulness, the capacity to “vent” effectively and an inspiring method to write freely and with great release and enjoyment. (Dowrick 2009: 1).

There is an additional background to this project, briefly introduced in the abstract to this paper. For some time academics at QCGU and GFS have been looking to build a collaborative culture across the student cohort. Such projects take time and the initial decade of this interaction has been spent in developing project related studies between the two institutions and allowing a greater flexibility of course delivery between QCGU and GFS. Two papers have been written in response to this project; with both recommending greater staff collaboration between the two institutions.

Crossing Boundaries: promoting cross-disciplinary projects in four creative arts faculties, published and in the proceedings of the 2010 AUC Create World conference in 2010 focussed on student led projects and the movement of students between institutions. The need to foster emerging student project work was a core finding of the paper.

Regardless of any distinctions between the two however, the workplace opportunities that graduates can expect to move into are still largely project based, with intense pressures to be self-driven, proactive, confident and innovative in recognising and creating opportunity. Professional careers in many music, moving image and gaming related disciplines have long been mobile, transitory, project based and network driven with considerable advantages for those individuals who can cross disciplinary boundaries. (Hitchcock, Cunio, Harvey, Chircop 2010: 2).

The paper also addressed the matching of project related learning to established pedagogy and the manner in which academics facilitated project based collaborations between their students. Most relevant to this paper was an identified need for staff to model the emerging work of students in their own practice.

It is also pertinent that such developments be supported through the provision of staff resources. Possible future directions include the embedding of relevant academics within co-located faculties, having a composer in residence at GFS and a film-maker in residence at QCGU. Such medium term collaborations will allow a greater contest of ideas, practices and exegetical outputs, foster co-located research projects and facilitate project based interfaculty public works. (Hitchcock, Cunio, Harvey & Chircop 2010: 2).

Cunio and Hitchcock extended this investigation

in a paper and presentation for the (INTED), International Technology, Education & Development conference in 2011. In this paper the larger context of higher education in Australia was also addressed, which has altered notions of what constitutes academic life, particularly for creative artists. This paper also responded to the ramifications of full time creative arts workers taking academic positions, something that has taken place since the introduction of practice based doctorates in the mid 1990s.

The challenge for academics within this project has been to stay connected to peer networks and academic associations beyond the scope of their general teaching and learning responsibilities. This is evident in the many creative arts faculties where academics have often moved into their position from project based careers that allow the formation of large and fluid networks, as well as the dissemination of cross discipline creative works. Ironically this connection with industry and creative networks can disappear very quickly within the confines of a full time position, as many academics are simply not able to stay abreast of maintaining professional network connections. (Cunio, Hitchcock 2011:3).

These two papers set the background to this project; two full time academics with extensive creative resumes looking to mirror and extend the culture of project based work in their institutions, while creating a piece of new collaborative art with high aesthetic and production values. A few clear project goals were set between Cunio and Harvey:

- To work at the creative and technical level of current industry practice, and to benchmark the work with industry practitioners.
- To create a work of approximately ten minutes that is capable of physical or virtual installation / performance.
- To give the project achievable and quantifiable performance / exhibition outcomes, and to allow the work to rest firmly in the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) guidelines for creative works.¹
- To have the project exhibited in multiple territories and entered into relevant competitions and awards.²
- To evaluate and document the project in a

¹ ERA is representing a significant shift in the publishing outputs of creative arts academics, allowing working artists to publish and peer review creative works, which are then framed as equivalent to traditional publications.

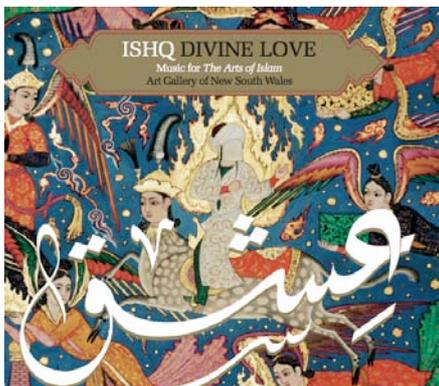
² ISHQ has already been exhibited at the QCGU in September 2011, and at *Shared Visions*, exhibition of fine art by QCA staff, hosted by the The Academy of Art and Design Wroclaw, Poland.

scholarly manner in the fields of technology, screen practice and screen composition.

Part 2: Cunio

Religion and politics have their own languages, but the language of art is universal. (Khalili: 2007).

Figure 1: Cover of *ISHQ Divine Love* (Cunio 2007a: 1).³



The music responds to a number of pictures and texts in this collection, the spirit of the whole collection, and indeed even the ethos of the collector. A project like this has to be done in an informed manner, for ISHQ is not just an exploration of the art and music of Islam, but also an exploration of what Islam means in a country like Australia. Islamic music and art have a great history with the West, that is too easily forgotten. (Cunio 2007a: 3).

ISHQ, was more than a commission to me, it was an opportunity to reinvestigate some of the hidden Islamic past of my own family, as many of my family came originally from Baghdad, the home of the Islamic Caliphate for much of the period alluded to in this exhibition. As such it constituted an attempt to reconcile my Jewish religion with my Arabic heritage, a therapeutic process that I immediately identified with.

This was also a practical job, to accompany an exhibition while also making an art music CD, something I responded to in the liner notes for the disc itself.

For the exhibition four spaces have accompanying music. The first is 'The Gathering', a place where people enter the exhibition, and the world of Islam. The second is a central, mystical space where the Call to Prayer is played, where a high ceiling and sparseness give the spiritual feeling of a mosque. The third room houses the Jami' al- Tawarikh (Compendium of Chronicles) which are set to music, and the fourth room contains The Shahnama, the

Book of Kings, the great Persian epic. (Cunio 2007: 3).

Beyond the purely functional a commission such as this includes a responsorial role, to set emotional markers for the exhibition in a manner not dissimilar to film composition. Contemporary installations often mirror and distort our prevailing attitudes towards the major themes of our lives, and a historical installation such as this still comments on society itself.

In addition to this functional role I wished to mirror the beauty and magnificence of the Persian city of Isfahan in this commission. Isfahan is a cultural and spiritual powerhouse, a place where spirituality and aesthetics are combined, where the treasure trove of Persian art is still alive today, as well as being the birth place of David Khalili the owner of the collection. The philosopher Hegel (2011:1) is quoted in the Iran review:

In Persia first arises that light which shines itself and illuminates what is around... The principle of development begins with the history of Persia; this constitutes therefore the beginning of history.

David Khalili (the owner of the collection) has some important light to shed on the style of this art and its potential to be represented in music and film.

In a 2007 lecture he stated that the true genius of early Islam is in how it was able to make so many magnificent secular works and preserve them within a sacred framework. He continued stating that approximately 90% of his collection was secular, something that is surprising given the corresponding sacred monopoly on art exerted by the Christian Church at the same point in time. Much of this is due to the strict forms of representation in Islamic art, that privilege the abstract and the great mathematical insights of medieval scholars of the Caliphates of iconography. I first addressed this in the notes to a 2001 commission, *Tomorrow's Islam*:⁴

Great care is taken in much Islamic art to avoid anthropomorphic representations of God or divinity, which is seen as idolatry, something reinforced by the literal nature of the Q'uran itself. (Cunio 2001: 4).

Although a detailed exposition of the manner of composition, production and research is outside the scope of this paper I feel that the weight of the academic and artistic work is evident in the music. Little things give it away; the mean tuning⁵ of the Persian santour (hammer dulcimer) as played by the Persian master Jamal Rekabi; the perfectly tuned gongs in the opening piece; and the extraordinary

⁴ A two part documentary series made to represent progressive Islamic thinkers, narrated by Geraldine Doogue.

⁵ Mean tuning refers to a tuning scheme in an instrument that is not part of the well tempered system of modern western music, something that is rare in western art music.

³ Painting credits in reference list.

fusion between Persian and Western classicism in the final work of the disc, composed for solo soprano and kemanche (Persian spiked fiddle) orchestra.

Process

Normally I would not have the luxury of selecting music from an existing project and sending it to an animator. 'Normally' I would receive a selection of images or a cut with a brief to write music to, and I would be the one 'fitting in'.

The basis of this process was for me to send the full disc to Dr Harvey with a selection of pieces for her to work with. After a few meetings the creative work was Harvey's. She needed to have complete artistic freedom, to not work simply to a brief, but to explore the themes of this disc, and of Islamic art and culture in general.

Certain non-musical elements in the disc do provide a template for a project such as this, the sumptuous design of Analeise Cairis, and the ornate calligraphy of Salim Mansour, seen in the luminous, pale gold watermark of much of the disc.

Figure 2: Gold watermark as used in *ISHQ Divine Love* (Cunio 2007b: 1).



Although responding to these cues may sound easy it is not, my experience has been that the more latitude we receive as creative artists the greater the challenge.⁶

Actually working like this is quite refreshing. This project offered the chance to put pieces together and process what is happening on a subtextual level. Although my initial process in the making of this new installation was to listen to the music I had already made I soon realised there was more to do. I had to identify pieces that would lend themselves to a visual narrative and then hand these works over to be re-contextualised, or in other words, hand over my authorship.

⁶ I see this in two ways, the first is the human natural desire for order which battles the desire for creativity. When we can do anything we often do nothing; one of the great paradoxes of modern society and its almost limitless choices that divorces us too often from the outcomes of our actions. This aesthetic is well illustrated in the nonsensical works of the mid 20th Century that find absurdity as a means of expression, Stoppard, Ionesco and Beckett being primary examples.

After this all I have to do was watch the unfolding response and then be ready to respond again if needed. Certain things were agreed upon: How many sections there would be, how many times we would move the project back and forth, and how we would compile the final version.

Compilation and coordination

When Dr Harvey sent the cut of the film to me I was delighted. Too often collaborations have to deal with the added problem of competition, that battle between artists for supremacy in the final artistic product. A great example of this is in the order of key personnel in the credits of discs. This is an area where modesty does not rule, all too often the party with the funding or the greater profile rules. But in this project none of this mattered, Harvey and I were working in a genuinely cooperative manner, looking to build a shared artistic experience.

Upon receipt of the moving image it was clear that Dr Harvey had taken the cues of the music and visual art and made something much more, a living, breathing installation with depth of field and incredible visual detail. After some reflection it was also clear that I needed to respond to this by re editing an audio compilation out of the existing disc for the installation.

This process took some time. As the visuals were fixed I had to edit static music compositions (recordings), to existing cues, while maintaining the feeling of freedom inherent to the work. Accordingly a small number of pieces from the initial commission were edited, making the audio truly different from the initial disc and installation - something that is very important in hindsight. The final product also needed a new name which was suggested by Dr Harvey.

ISHQ, Divine Music for the Animated Imagery of Islam, was opened at the Queensland Conservatorium in September 2011 and now has its own life as a standalone work of art.

Part 3: Harvey

If a person's a static artist and a musician, the chances that he or she will be an animator are much higher, because he's [sic] interested in motion – the whole flux and flow of what's happening. Music is organised in terms of small phrases, bigger phrases, sentences, whole movements and so on. To my mind, animation is the same kind of thing (McLaren in Furniss 1998, p.257).

Background

The *ISHQ* animation project provided an opportunity for me to explore the realm of abstract animation. This

was an area that, as a character⁷ animator, I was relatively unfamiliar with but was excited to try. One of the key ingredients to the successful animation of abstract forms is the musical accompaniment, so it was with enthusiastic delight that I accepted Dr Cunio's proposal to animate his wonderful ISHQ musical work. It soon became clear to me however, that the musical content constituted more than just accompaniment to the animation – it was also the motivator and the narrator. The following contribution to this joint paper represents my experiences in meeting this project brief. This includes the interpretation of the music into visual form, locating suitable animation software for the project, formulating a suitable production strategy, reflecting on the creative output, and responding to this reflection by re-strategising and revising the output as necessary. In so doing, I acknowledge Cunio's assertion that this paper "...is primarily concerned with interpreting the process of making a new work of multimedia art for exhibition and identifying any new or emergent knowledge that has taken place."

Responding to the artistic brief.

The brief I received was to create approximately ten minutes of animation for an installation to be held at QCGU to celebrate the opening of their new foyer on September 6, 2011. The output format had to be compatible for display on widescreen TV monitors. I was given little artistic direction—the main requirement being that the animation should provide a successful visual representation of Dr Kim Cunio's musical works ISHQ: Divine Love.

Developing a production strategy

The main challenge in this instance was to generate the animation within the twelve-week production window. Character animators can produce around 25 – 30 seconds of animation per 50-hour week. At ten minutes long, this production contained 600 seconds or 15000 frames of animation. That required a completion rate of 50 seconds per week in order to meet the deadline. Considering that I also needed to carry out my full-time duties as a lecturer, this level of animation output would not be possible for me to achieve. That meant that I had to devise an alternative strategy to generate animation more rapidly. Character animation was therefore discarded as a production methodology and other semi-automated approaches were considered.

Computer-generated animation is rarely ever generated entirely by computer—the hand of the animator is still present to a significant degree. However, the level of input of the animator can be minimised where procedural forms of animation are utilised. Essentially, procedural animation requires the animator to set the parameters of a number of variables at certain key frames, and then the computer calculates the values of these variables over time between these key frames. This is referred to as 'in-betweening'. The type of visual output where procedural animation really shines is in abstract, non-figurative forms. There are many, many software programs available to produce this kind of animation. The next step was to locate the ones that were affordable, accessible, relatively easy to learn and operate, and which would produce the kind of imagery which would suit the production. This meant that a certain amount of time needed to be invested in research and experimentation. I investigated the potential of software that was already available to me and which I was familiar with. These were:

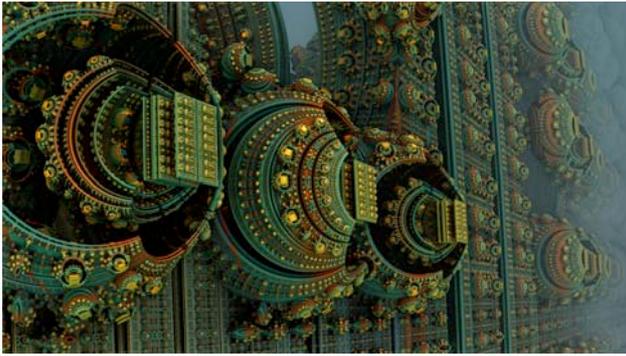
- Adobe After Effects
- Autodesk Maya
- Adobe Flash

I also investigated the production methods of other notable artists who create animation intended to accompany music. Primarily these were Esteban Diacono (Diacono 2011) and Kenneth Huff (Huff 2010)

Fortuitously, I had recently been involved in an artistic project where I was required to produce still images for exhibition, which had led me to the discovery of fractal-generating software. Fractal software has been around for a good number of years, and its more common forms of deep-image zooming of Mandelbrot sets would be familiar to most readers. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find that over the last several years, fractal software had been quietly progressing to a new level of technical capability, and now it is possible to generate animation of fractals in three dimensions (3D). Additionally, whilst browsing through a number of fractal art galleries, I was astounded to observe that some of these fractal images had a distinctly Islamic-art 'feel' to them, sharing a number of visual characteristics with the geometric forms of Middle Eastern art and architecture. However the real selling-point for me was that many of these programs were free.

Figure 3: still image from *ISHQ, Divine Music for the Animated Imagery of Islam*. This is a 3D render of a Julia Supercube, generated from the software program *Mandelbulb*.

⁷ Bringing an inanimate object to apparent life is a subcategory of animation known as character animation. Character animation distinguishes itself because it involves breathing life, rather than mere movement, into humans, animals, creatures, and other living or non-living things. Adding the illusion of life to an otherwise inanimate object or creature involves giving it personality, emotion, motivation, and reactions (Cantor & Valencia 2004 pp. 311-313).



Developing a ‘story’ to animate

In most abstract animation there is little or no narrative present. As Furniss (1998, p.252) explains:

In abstract animation, there are no characters with which to identify, there is no diegesis to transport the viewer to a different time and place and, when the animation is over, the viewer does not have a complete ‘understanding’ of its meaning as he or she would with a closed narrative structure.

Character animators, however, are familiar with animated storytelling, and as such I felt more comfortable working to a fairly loose narrative with which to motivate the visuals and to act as the string to connect the visuals in a relatively linear way. My desire was to create harmony within the work, and avoid creating a disjointed collection of disparate images. In response to this, I invented the idea of a ‘soul’s journey’ to act as the story focus, where the work followed the journey of the human soul’s circular evolution through its genesis as a spark of life in the heavens, its birth and journey through an earthly life and the distractions of earthly desires, its descent into the underworld and its deliverance into the afterlife as it arrives ‘home’ once again.

This story and the limitations and possibilities of the chosen software imposed a creative framework from which to construct an appropriate artistic response. This framework helped to shape, evolve and also limit the project’s visual scope. This addressed the dilemma that Dr Cunio has earlier pointed out – that the more latitude we receive as creative artists the greater the challenge.

Developing creative ideas and responding to the music

In creating animated content that was reminiscent of the art of Islam, it was necessary to be mindful and respectful of any cultural and religious sensitivities surrounding the representation of this art. Preserving the integrity and dignity of any original artwork contained in the animation was vital. The avoidance of figurative representations in Islamic art forms and

the prevalence of geometric forms provided another influencing factor in the creative framework that developed. Fortunately, procedural forms of animation lend themselves particularly well to the generation and animation of geometric imagery and also of fractals, as we have seen.

The music was of course another primary factor in the development of the visuals. The renowned abstract animator John Witney explains the relationship between music and animation succinctly:

You would not ask if a musical composition is driven by a piano or by a violin – I think of the aural and the visual as two voices, so at one moment a sound pattern inspires a graphics pattern and at the next moment it’s vice versa (in Furniss, 1998, p.258).

Witney’s statement outlines the process that I intuitively employed during the production phase. Dr Cunio allowed me to animate any of the musical tracks from *ISHQ: Divine Love* that I wanted, suggesting that I choose the ones that I found to be most visually inspiring. When listening to the music, I was variously emotionally transported through feelings of calm, mystery, grandeur, happiness, gloom, hope, urgency, quiet and so forth. Beauchamp explains that music contains innate elements that elicit universal emotional responses from audiences and that the pairing of music with image has the ability to elicit and direct our emotional responses. My job was to identify the emotional content in the music and represent it via animated imagery.

Reflecting, evaluating and revising

The animation production process involved some experimentation. Typically the process involved creating a rough, low-resolution render of a piece of animation and then placing it into the editing software along with the music that had inspired it to see if the combination of the audio and visual was successful. In other words, did it feel right together? If not, I’d try combining the render with another of the music tracks, or a different section of the same track to see if this combination was more effective.

I also sought out the opinions of my peers, who (among other helpful suggestions) reminded me not to bombard audiences with busy and apparently unrelated imagery and to vary the overall pacing to create spaces where the audience could relax a little.

Technical problems and solutions

During this production journey I encountered a number of technical challenges. Learning how to use the fractal software programs effectively was one of the greatest challenges. Most of these programs are

created by enthusiasts, and so there is little formal documentation or instruction published on how to use these programs. However, I was supported in this regard by the generosity of spirit present in the online communities of fractal enthusiasts, who freely shared their hard-won knowledge of these programs via video and written tutorials.

Part 3: Reflections

Cunio: Despite the business of education which is prominent in the academic cycle there is something intensely satisfying about making a new work of art in the academy. It is a given that we have to examine ourselves, our motivation and the logistics of time in order to make anything work in this environment. I am delighted that Dr Harvey and I have responded to the suggestions of the earlier research documented in this paper, by taking the step towards a professional / academic co production, a phrase that I do not use lightly. It is difficult to work artistically and write exegetically at the same time, and this skill will be the basis for much of the creative work of the emerging generation of academics who will reject traditional publication models as well as the assumption that creative practice must come second for an academic in a creative arts faculty. I am delighted with the outcome and hope that it will lead to many more such projects.

Harvey: The idea of lifelong learning is intrinsic to the world of academia and also to the animation industry. Through participation in collaborative projects such as *ISHQ: Divine Music for the Animated Imagery of Islam*, it is possible for practitioners such as myself to maintain the currency of their vocational knowledge. Fortunately, in addition to these very pragmatic outcomes, I experienced other, more intangible benefits, not least of which was the satisfaction of being given the opportunity to manifest my own visual interpretation of Dr Cunio's compelling musical creations. I now have a greater understanding of Furniss' (1998) assertion that the production of abstract animation is often closely aligned to the animator's search for understanding of the self and the mysteries of life on a universal level.

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