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GARY HILL













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**Title:**Varèse 360°

**Date:**2009

**Media:**

**Description:**

Two-night performance of the composer Edgard Varèse's complete works, organized and co-produced by Holland Festival, AskolSchönberg, Festival d'Automne à Paris, Southbank Centre London, Salle Pleyel and Radio France.

Dramaturgy and all visual components by Gary Hill, in collaboration with performers Christelle Fillod, George Quasha, Els Van Riel, and Charles Stein, and with costume design by Paulina Wallenberg-Olsson.

*Additional credits listed in 'Notes.'*

"With Varèse 360° and the mixed (multi)-media implications a curious question arises: Why confront some of the most imaginative music ("organized sound") with external concrete images? How did this desire arise? Perhaps it's the mass mind in the age of spectacle—the momentum of which has it that, if there is one or the Other (image or sound), then it's a given there shall be the Other one. Which 1 is the 0? Perhaps Stan Brakhage was on to something when he excluded sound from the vast majority of his films. On the flip side we see that even Varèse himself was not estranged from the confluence of media. He even conceived of Deserts from the beginning as being accompanied by film, which was in fact much later realized—at least a version of it—by the artist Bill Viola.

Now that we are fully multi-mediaized somehow the question begs differently than when Varèse was pushing the limits. Given the current trajectory the logical outcome will be when everyone and everything is skinned with some kind of display device fully covered in moving images. I think of Jacques Ellul's book *The Humiliation of the Word* wherein he discusses the ramifications of television (certainly the multi-media box of all time) and its images taking up our minds and leaving little left for dialogical space. It's as if the images of mind (Imagination) are an endangered species of some kind. Does this built-in desire for multiplexing exist because our eyes are inundated with omnipresent images and we might feel naked without them? Varèse's music rages with images of all kinds, thoughts that spiral and entangle themselves, bend, taper and twist, sometimes tessellating beyond recognition in a continuing process of metamorphosis; it suggests notions of arcane spatial projections that can put one in virtually any kind of imaginary space. Can the big screen flush with fresh "organized light" make a difference that makes a difference? I wonder.

For a moment try to imagine, if it's even possible, experiencing music without images. What is actually happening in the listener's mind? You can answer that. I suspect it is...well, mined differently. Is it the noise of life, drifting in and smoking up our "background" that makes for the difference of experience? Okay, then let's add headphones... but then there are those memories that arise as they do from previous sessions with said same music and again we have that different experience. In all these instances of difference would it have anything to do with the different sets of images that are conjured up? I just can't keep the life out of it and get a good

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picture of the music.

And how do we know what we heard when the next time we hear it, it's different?

Maybe I have this completely backwards. The music is actually the score—a graphic image no less that “organized sound” has been added to and it was multi-media from the very beginning! How do I interpret this synaptical arc from score to sound? Perhaps I could try signing it (as in sign language). Would it be any further away or closer to the music than some image all switched up and cued for a musical attack? An interpretation implies a fixed experience. I suspect interpretation is our usual *modus operandi*—our own self-induced mind control as it were. This is how we work until we wander outside the hall and inside the question. And this is the crux of the problem—if we are too busy interpreting then we are not seeing and listening. If one were to attempt the image/sound conundrum in this context, even if we change the words from “interpret” to words like “correlate” or “counterpoint,” there is still a kind of “this” and “that” of alternating current to be overcome.

It is simply and complexly events unfolding exactly as they do and will, interpreted or not. Whether it's Varèse 360, a live performance one has come to see, or perhaps a more solitary experience—like when the spindle calls, the hand moves in and with an exquisite sense of quivering expectation, eases the needle over and down upon the black curving highway. And what a curve it is, seemingly perfect and never ending. This is where one goes off the road in such extreme slow motion that it's all but unrecognizable save for the last groove--and suddenly the (car)tridge swerves and we're back at the spindle (do you want to hear it again?). Or when the hand-sized disc with the pearlescent surface is fed to the machine and it generates a sequence of “sounds” as it slips the disc exactly in place with its microscopic information smear awaiting the laser's touch of light.

How does one begin to imagine images imaging (intermingling, interrupting, intertextualizing) a complexity of sound that at times seems to swim in deep space but could suddenly appear in a shape-shifted dimension(gone before we can wrap our minds around it), or as a microscopic view of a flea circus of some kind? There is a collision of worlds here and it's still happening—something simultaneously primal and futuristic occurring. This seems to be the pulse that Varèse was deeply in touch with. With so much to excavate from the music of Varèse, one almost wants to say why bother with the possible impossibility or impossible possibility of using external images? Because it's there—and millions of images, metaphors and narratives of things are awakened by this very distinct and invitingly strange language of sound. This music of extreme particulars has all the “images” it needs, and yet since its organized sound must live with other sounds, minds, ears and eyes in actual space containing architectural consequences, listeners of all kinds and with any number of micro events going on, one might as well get in on the action.

It can't be a matter of simply putting images to music like some kind of backdrop, visual wallpaper or eye support, full of itself and meandering through the corruption of visuality. There is the desire but nonetheless a struggle to avoid certain sets of images: environmental, gaseous, amorphous, swirling, compositions with shapes, designs, patterns, the big and meaningful—in general, that which has become music/image clichés. Instead, there has to be a kind of synaptic necessity that tugs, bringing one inside the sound NOW, wrenching us from our givens about the experience of “music.” And surely the images cannot just be on, so to speak. When we see something it can't be taken for granted. The world of sight should be scrutinized



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when under the gaze of such a precise and pointed sound. Perhaps the images play a kind of game of hide and seek with the sound...

My first inclination was to work mostly or even exclusively with computer-generated images. Somehow this seemed to satisfy the ghost of Varèse, mirroring his desire for instruments that did not exist and freeing me up from the point of view of the camera, both literally and figuratively. Now that it's early May, and the exponential fire is burning red hot, making sense is giving way to fleshy images, rugged, broken unwieldy swipes at reality--getting eye level with the everyday occurrences of daily life. Oddly, this somehow gets me further inside the music. The archival spirit awakens too. Tapes from Brazil and the Amazon, Guatemala, Sri Lanka, Poland, unlabeled coasts from unknown places, family happenings, suddenly all is fair game as Ecuatorial, Arcana, Tuning up, Ionizations, Hyperprism, et al sound continuously in the "background" (I must have it backwards again). Emerging concurrently are the surviving computer-generated forms of imagined 'meta-mythological' instruments (or are they logarithmic horns with space age timbres made possible by new composites that mimic the resonant frequencies of pure gold?) and arcane abstractions, at times morphing and transforming with and between the sounds.

But the central driving force that persists and continues to grow is the live element. Strategically placed cameras, automated and hand-held, not focusing on anything in particular, but through extreme close-ups we get momentary glimpses—chair legs, the floor, hands at work, details of instruments (or maybe just the cases stored backstage), architectural detail—images that are transient and vulnerable like butterflies recently hatched and living for only a few fleeting moments.

In light of the performative space that is moving in, staking out its claim to the space between media, I've invited several long time collaborators and new blood as well (Christelle Fillod, George Quasha, Els van Riel and Charles Stein) who will perform as video and text Foleys utilizing live text generation, drawing, live camera operation and the manipulation of special objects – in effect, all creating a cosmology of images. All these image sources will be mixed live with prepared clips appearing on one or more of an array of reconfigurable screens, where audience and performers are on either and/or both sides, being obscured and revealed as the case may be. Similarly to music/sound that is never heard twice, likewise organized light will come and go like nature's waves—"never hear surf music again."

Gary Hill

Seattle / May 9, 2009

### **Spoken Text:**

### **Bibliography:**

*Varèse 360°*. Amsterdam: Holland Festival, 2009. In Dutch, English and French.

*Edgard Varèse / Gary Hill: Edgard Varèse 360°*. Paris: Salle Pleyel, 2009. In French.

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## Exhibition History:

Westergasfabriek Gashouder, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, June 13 – 14, 2009.

Salle Pleyel, Paris, France, October 3 – 4, 2009.

## Notes:

Music: Edgard Varèse

Visuals: Gary Hill

Mise-en-espace: Gary Hill, in collaboration with Pierre Audi

Performers (video and text Foleys): Christelle Fillod, George Quasha, Els van Riel, Charles Stein

Costume Design: Paulina Wallenberg-Olsson

Light design: Glen D'haenens

Image technology: Arnoud Noordegraaf

Sound technology: Jan Panis

Slackline (Amsterdam): Thijs Maartens

Musical Direction: Peter Eötvös

Musical research and arrangements: Prof. Chou Wen-chung

Performed by:

Amsterdam: Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, Cappella Amsterdam, Asko|Schönberg, Anu Komsí (soprano) and Jeannette Landré (flute)

Paris: Orchestra Philharmonique de Radio France, Cappella Amsterdam, Anu Komsí (soprano), Jeannette Landré (flute) and *Dream Interventions*, interpretations of *Un Grand Sommeil Noir* and *Density 21.5* by Bill Frisell (recordings of guitar solos)

Interpretive signing for *Déserts*: Kevin Gallagher