

# In Between as a Permanent Status: Milan Adamčiak's Version of Intermedia

Jozef Cseres

**E**ncyclopedias and other information sources present Milan Adamčiak (b. 1946) as a composer, cellist and musicologist; some of them also mention that he is a visual artist. This characterization is correct, as he practices all of these professions, but incomplete and partial, as he was also active as a performer, poet and creator of the acoustic objects, installations and homemade musical instruments. Moreover, it is an inadequate description, as the main features of Adamčiak's personality involve intermediality and interdisciplinarity. Adamčiak's work simply defies conventional classifications and institutional schemes. He always fit better in between—in

between media, codes, sorts, genres, forms, instruments and institutions (Fig. 1).

From 1962 to 1968 he studied cello at the Conservatory of Music in Žilina. After completing his musicology studies at Comenius University in Bratislava in 1973, he worked at the Institute of Musicology of the Slovak Academy of Arts and Sciences on research in contemporary music and its relations to the visual arts. A natural outgrowth of Adamčiak's

## ABSTRACT

Milan Adamčiak is a Slovak composer, cellist and musicologist; creator of acoustic objects, installations and unconventional musical instruments; a performer, visual artist and experimental poet. Traditionally trained but influenced by Cagean and Fluxus poetics, he created from the late 1960s until the mid-1990s a large body of work that transgressed the conventional definitions of art creativity and quickly moved toward the concepts of *opera aperta*, action music and various intermedia forms. At the same time he was experimenting with electronic media, he created several pieces of electroacoustic music and *musique concrète*, but it was primarily *live electronics* that fit the principles of his radical poetics. The author considers Adamčiak's intermedia in the context of philosophical and aesthetic thought, revealing mutual correspondences, apparent as well as hidden.

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Fig. 1. Milan Adamčiak playing a prepared ruined piano during the project *Left Hand of the Universe*, at the Sound Off festival in 1997. (Photo © Michal Murin)

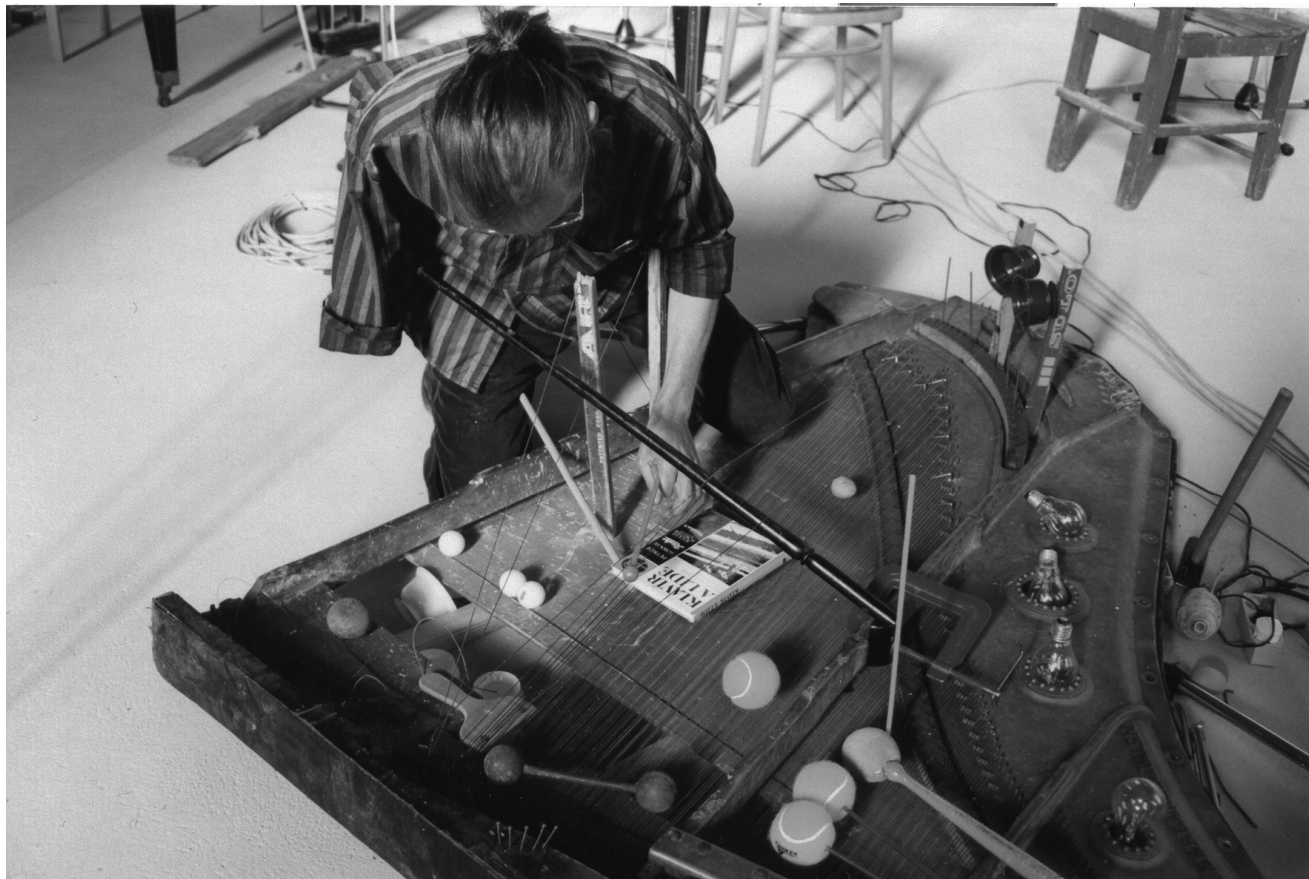




Fig. 2. Transmusic comp. (from left: Peter Machajdík, Milan Adamčiak, Michal Murin and Martin Burlas) performing Adamčiak's piece *Dialogues with Accorddd*. [1990] (Photo © Archive of Michal Murin)

miscellaneous activities that he carried out continuously since the mid-1960s was the ensemble Transmusic comp., which he founded in 1989 and which was fully devoted to unconventional music. Adamčiak crowned his longtime theoretical reflection on and promotion of unconventional music in Slovakia with the Society for Non-conventional Music (SNEH), which he founded in 1990, and the Festival of Intermedia Creativity (FIT), which he organized in Bratislava in 1991 and 1992.

The musical thought of Adamčiak represents, after the post-Weberian poetical starting points (multiserialism, punctualism and other extensions of sound possibilities) of the late 1960s, a radical departure from tradition and a shift to conceptual art, which was a rare attitude in the context of the Slovakian art scene. This development proceeded hand in hand with a thorough deconstruction of “pure” media and the intermedialization of creative activities. In music, open form, broadly conceived sonority, unconventional scores, improvisation and action (here meaning unconventional “performance” emphasizing the gestural and procedural aspects of the sound-making) became symptomatic signs of Adamčiak’s musical thought; these elements contributed to the resulting synergistic form to varying extents, inclining alternately to the more expressive or more minimalist poles. Adamčiak is the author of many electroacoustic and concrete compositions, but live electronics best fit his poetic principles.

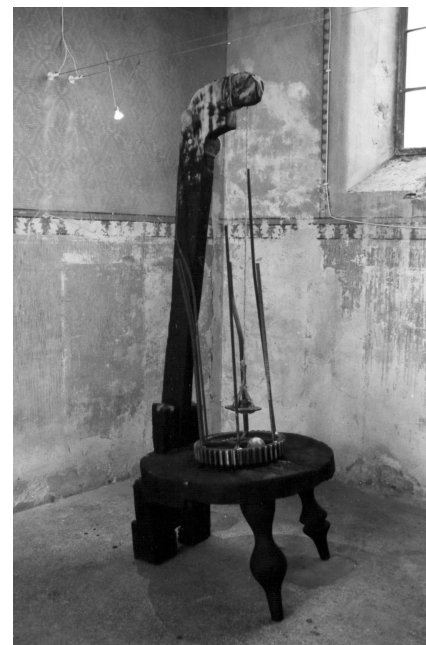
In Transmusic comp., Adamčiak surrounded himself with younger artists (Martin Burlas, Peter Cón, Peter Machajdík, Michal Murin, etc.), and thus an original intermedia avant-garde was born from a poetic merging of two generations. The group based its creative philosophy on the deconstructed fusion of various forms of music and stage action with improvisation and conceptual composing, based on the aleatoricism and sonic interpretation of visual structures. Continuing in different variations until 1996, the group resisted the sterile sonic transparency of the electronic music of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as jazz mannerisms and the stylized expressivity and excessive narratives typical of some performance art. Transmusic comp. offered audiences an authentic art form, based on spontaneous, vital eclecticism. Nevertheless, this was not the textbook postmodern for the sake of postmodernism. Aware of Cage but not knowing Foucault, the group dissolved Adamčiak’s purpose in its collective “unconsciousness.”

Each member of the group added to the collective work his own imagination and experience from other projects, mixing them into a multilateral dialog in a vital flow of musical theater. Individual inputs were transposed, overlaid, rearranged and fused in unforeseen relations. Sometimes the results had a sharp, more composed shape, as in *Dialogues With Accorddd* (the title is linguistic gameplay referring to chord [in Slovak “akord”] and accordion) by Adamčiak (Fig. 2) or in *String Trio* by Machajdík;

at other times there were more precisely coordinated theatrical actions, as in the case of Adamčiak’s *Office Concerto*. Often the open form was suddenly obstructed, the improvisation was purposefully manipulated, the composed passages were dissolved into free improvisation, the uncompromising experiments were replaced by conventional techniques, the broadly conceived sonorities were reduced by the limitations of homemade and readymade instruments and unconventional sound sources—it all happened in a mutual ataractic interaction between performers and environment. Sometimes, as in the collective piece *String Room*, the environment had not a spiritual but a material character. The group’s varied cast offered equal performance possibilities to musicians and non-musicians. However, visual artists best used this opportunity meaningfully: In the hands of musicians, wood sculptures and objects by Juraj Meliš were transformed into musical instruments; Juraj Bartusz materialized his “second” prints (the prints that were made live within a few seconds) during a concert, accenting the acoustic traces of the production process; Peter Strassner made acoustic objects in response to Adamčiak’s commission (Fig. 3).

The avant-garde poetics of Transmusic comp. was not resigned to the heritage of the past. Dialogue with traditions of various kinds and origins was evident through various symbols and symptoms, but the amount of transparency and stylization would change. Their poetics was

Fig. 3. Milan Adamčiak/Ján Kodoň/Peter Strassner, *Sound Object, op. 706*, mixed media, 1996. (Photo © Michal Murin)



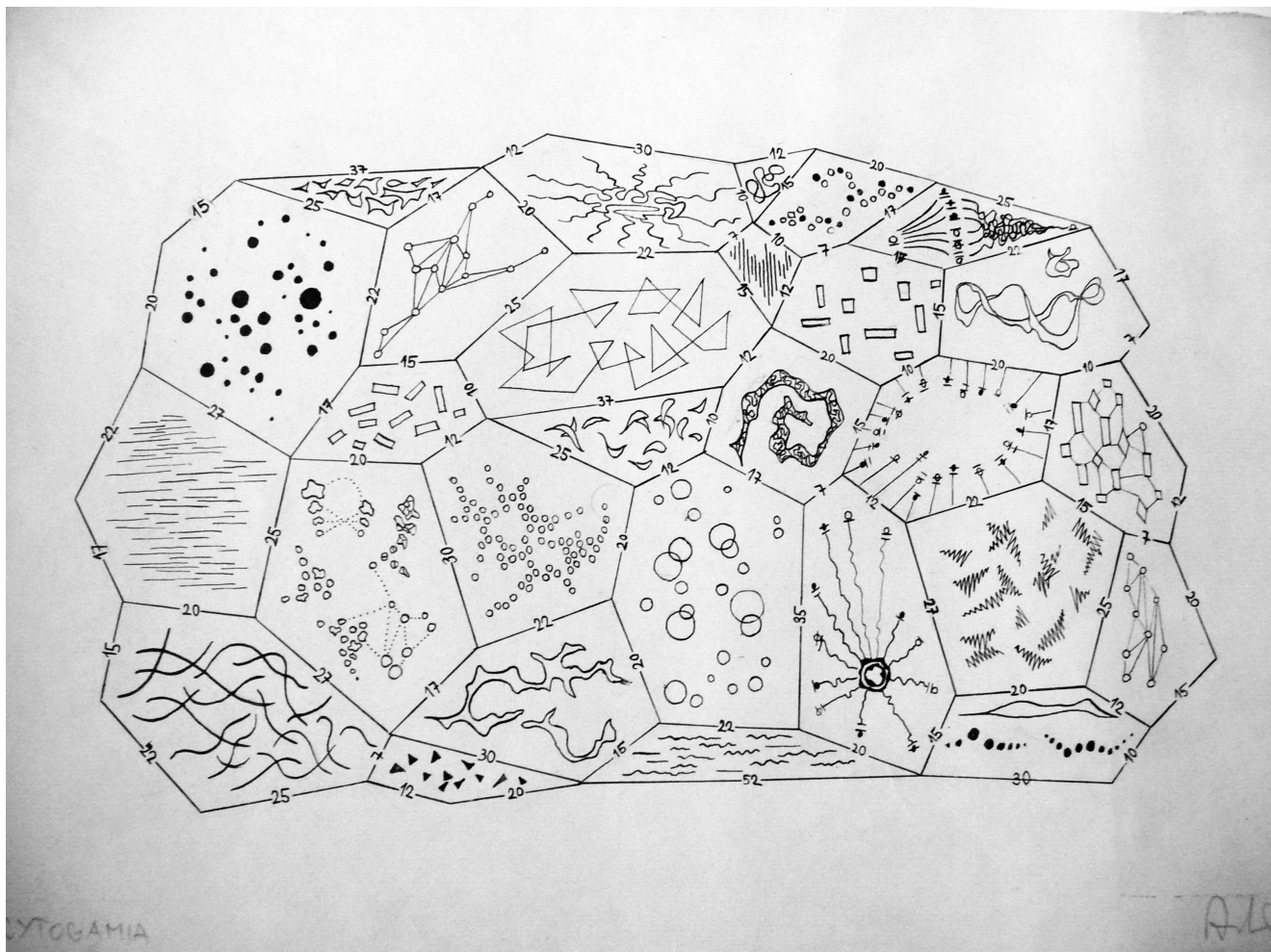


Fig. 4. Milan Adamčiak, *Cytogamia*, visual score, 1996. (Photo © Jozef Cseres)

radical, but at the same time liberal, revising rather than negating. Even in its most aggressive excesses (e.g. when breaking a violin, burning gramophone records) their work took into consideration contextual relations when establishing new ones. They openly avowed direct influences (Kagel, Cage, Fluxus and even Slovakian folk music), never hiding or camouflaging them.

The repertoire of the ensemble is open; it accents predominantly the works by members and partners of Transmusic comp.: fusion projects of various types of music, aleatory and improvisational concepts, instrumental theater, projects with unconventional sound sources, audio art, etc. The ensemble, performing with a cast of 2–*n* members, is open to other activities and partnership collaboration with the assumption of tolerance, creative verve and seriousness of presentation.

So wrote Adamčiak and Peter Machajdík in the founding document of the ensemble [1].

From the late 1960s on, Adamčiak tested the possibilities of unconven-

tional applications of traditional instruments—mostly with his cello. Later he experimented with non-musical sound sources and constructed his own instruments. Adamčiak-the-creator is a true Lévi-Straussian *bricoleur*; his train of thought and working algorithm had to operate in a limited space and to be satisfied within a limited set of means. In this framework he needed to cultivate the ability to reorganize signs and to recontextualize the related meanings. The bricolages therefore reflect the unpredictability of the results; that is why they are so attractive and magical. Their symbolism is arbitrary and rigorous at the same time. The arbitrariness is due to his imagination; the rigor is a result of the above-mentioned material, technical and functional limitations. The creative efficiency of Adamčiak's acoustic objects and of the whole ensemble's performance is apparent in performance. Quite clear also is their functional-pragmatic nature as conditioned by the material specifics of found objects as well as by the compositional possibilities of sound-making

with them. Adamčiak found Cagean-Partchian musical possibilities all around—hidden in a metal beer-bottle cap, a wooden sheep-cheese firkin, a cowbell, a rustic axe, an ancient Hussite mace and a sewing machine. Adamčiak breathed new cultural contexts into found objects, resulting in his pine-tree-phone (*borofón*) and the Transmusician sound installation-environment "string room." Similar things can be said of Adamčiak's visual and instructive scores—often they do not graphically fix tones in a conventional way, nor contain any clear instructions to lead to concrete sounds (Fig. 4).

The members of Transmusic comp. did not strictly follow Adamčiak's scores. They relied on invention, empiricism and intuition, and accepted the use of chance in the works. Spontaneously uniting their individual expressions, they caught Adamčiak's lawless chaos in more or less organized structure. When the situation required it, they ignored convention and explored new possibilities; at their best they were also able to stop and follow their own ways.

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