

Traces on the Farther Side

a music visualization in real time

Co-Directors: Andrew Lucia and Wendy Steiner

Traces on the Farther Side (2011) is a real-time music visualization in which a contemporary composition not only sounds but generates markings in an ongoing digital projection. It raises a host of issues concerning the limits of media and the conditions of perception in art, creating new meanings for synesthesia and the Gesamtkunstwerk.

The music is a 16-minute work by Frances White entitled *A flower on the farther side* (2010), commissioned and performed by the New York viola da gamba consort, Parthenia. Delicate and otherworldly, White's piece alludes to the chant, *Alleluia, o virga mediatrix*, by the medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen. The piece is highly experimental, using the idea of a cantus firmus within the context of a track of pre-recorded viol chords and wind sounds, and four viol lines set in innovative melodic and rhythmic structures.

Steiner and Lucia designed *Traces* to accompany both live and recorded performances of *A flower on the farther side* by Parthenia. The visualization assigns each of the five instrumental sources to a designated panel in the projection, the five panels delineated in black and joined, as in a room screen. As the music plays, the five sound sources generate marks on their respective panels, each beginning at an asymmetrical center, diverging from it seemingly randomly, returning to the center, and continuing in this fashion until the piece ends. The electronic line appears in the middle panel and, mimicking the steadiness of a *cantus firmus*, is not permitted to exceed that space. The four viol lines, in contrast, frequently breach the confines of their panels, interacting unexpectedly. The pigmentation and position of the marks vary according to the pitch and volume of the sounds in real time. As the music continues, the field fills with marks in ever-changing relationships, and the resulting imagery is abstract, though suggestive of flowers, bushes, maps, starry skies, painted screens, and so forth.

No two runs of *Traces* can be the same. This is true not only in live realizations, where the sound inputs will naturally vary from performance to performance. But even runs of the same recordings will differ. As a result, *Traces* would make an effective gallery installation. The visualization would play continuously, with the final frame in each run saved and printed out on paper (or even woven as cloth on a digital loom). A curator would mount the printouts in the gallery, until by the end of the installation the walls would be covered in images, no two exactly alike.

A final frame is attached here as an example.

