

On Screen

Films & DVDs

Hypothetical Moments: Collaborative Works (1975–1985)

Carol Law & Charles Amirkhanian

Other Minds DVD 2022, 67 mins

As a broadcaster, initially on the Californian radio station KPFA, and as artistic director of Other Minds, a multifaceted organisation devoted to the propagation of innovative music, Charles Amirkhanian has been an enlightened and enabling cultural activist for more than 50 years. As an artist himself, Amirkhanian has also made significant contributions to the intermedia domain of sound poetry, bringing precise intonation and a distinctively West Coast American slant to his polyrhythmic patterning of language.

For more than a decade, starting in the early 1970s, Amirkhanian collaborated fruitfully with Carol Law, a painter, photographer and printmaker who shared his keenness to explore new avenues being opened up at that time by video art and multidisciplinary live performance. *Hypothetical Moments* is a compilation that preserves indicative elements of their work together. Listeners already familiar with the sound of Amirkhanian's compositional work will undoubtedly find this audiovisual documentation illuminating. His performance of "Dreams Freud Dreamed" at the 12th Annual International Sound Poetry Festival in New York in 1980, which can be heard, among other recordings from that event, in the cassette package recently released by Recital, has a calculated flatness that seems at odds with the Freudian theme of the text. This DVD includes a later performance of that same work, with Law's slide projection furnishing evocative imagery and enlivening colour, in counterpoint to Amirkhanian's relatively somnolent delivery, as he sits amid shadows at a table onstage.

Three live presentations are included here, along with nine video works, freshly restored. In 1978, Gregory Battcock still felt it appropriate to open his landmark critical anthology *New Artists Video* with the question, "What is video art?" The answers provided by that book are multiple, sometimes contradictory, and the work that Law and Amirkhanian were

producing during that period are comparably various, inconclusive and exploratory. *History Of Collage*, the opening video, combines cut-up textual fragments from Eddie Wolfram's book of that name with environmental recordings, plus imagery that harks back to Futurism, dada and surrealism while offering a pungent commentary on female representation in contemporary commercial advertising.

Law gained access to an early computer graphics system to concoct the lurid and amusing imagery for *Dog Of Stravinsky*, for which Amirkhanian channelled the bark of a Belgian sheepdog through a vocoder to emulate the harmonic and rhythmic organisation of Stravinsky's early work. A lively sense of humour, and ironic engagement with music's history are also features of *The Real Perpetuum Mobile*, an audio assemblage drawn from an interview with musicologist Nicolas Slonimsky, accompanied with an artfully compiled selection of printed

quotations from his *Lexicon Of Musical Invective*, a compendium of critical bile directed at composers over the centuries.

Other pieces here exemplify Amirkhanian's distinctively Californian take on text-sound composition. So *Maroo*, taking its name from a street in Fresno, finds him savouring the springiness and punch of rhythms lurking within a batch of words, while Law's imagery traces a trajectory from Edenic palm trees to the advent of the military-industrial complex. *Hypothetical Moments* is a welcome record of the collaborative work of these adventurous and complementary artists. Beyond that it is a revealing document of its time, a decade when boundary crossing artworks were providing bold signposts, pointing towards where we are now.

Julian Cowley

Top: image from *History Of Collage* (1981); Bottom: image from *Audience* (1978)

