

The Clicks of Mindfulness

by Jim Gasperini

Mnemonic Notations VI by Phillip George and Ralph Wayment

An interactive artwork that genuinely never plays the same way twice, **Notations** nevertheless maintains a striking sense of coherence, depth and mystery. A collage of endless circular or spiraling chains by Ralph Weymant based on a series of images by Phillip George, according to the authors sixty-eight billion alternative routes may be followed through its slowly dissolving, shifting patterns. For those who find its aesthetic engaging, the calm progression of its imagery can be pleasantly hypnotic.

At its core the work comprises 360 individual animations, each of which is structured like a maze with many paths and exits. These animations are so scrambled, layered and chained together, however, that it is nearly impossible (not to say pointless) to distinguish where one begins and another ends. Recurring themes fade in and out, in particular the back of a monk-like head (seen in various stages of outline and detail) and a hexagonal structure composed of many smaller hexagons, most of which when clicked will produce some sort of change in the current image. Clicking certain spots may replace certain elements in the picture, switch background and foreground elements, change the colors of an otherwise unchanging pattern, or initiate a slow dissolve into a completely different pattern. Sometimes an element becomes attached to your cursor, so that any movement sets it twisting or merging in and out of the rest. Sometimes you can drag elements around the screen, playing for a while with the compositional elements temporarily at your disposal.

Mnemonic Notations plays with our natural inclination to look for patterns in its shifting chains of imagery, to compare the current floating blue-gray streak hanging over a sandy desert landscape with a similar gray-blue streak seen poking through a transparent hexagon a moment ago, and to try to remember what has changed and what has stayed the same. Wasn't that fan-like element, a moment ago, a kind of menu, so that clicking each of its folds caused a different element of the screen to dissolve away? Well, yes, but now it seems to be a draggable cut-out that can be moved through the warped ear of that seashell-egg-cum-planet thingee there, or atop the paint-splash squiggles there...

For the authors "the ongoing process that constitutes this work emerges from a reflection on the correspondence between mind, memory, our experience of the land and the social constructions of religions and philosophies that have a major impact on humanity's perceptions of the world and consequently on the way that it is remembered." It also references "Buddhist doctrine of creations by causes," which my sources characterize as "among the more abstruse in the metaphysics of Buddhism." Participants need not be able to read that much depth into the work, however, to find the mental exercise it provokes engaging.

It is best to approach this work slowly, patiently, in a meditative mood. At times it offers the illusion of control, convincing you that you are the author of a fluid sequence of ongoing collage. Sometimes it will pause, soliciting your complicity, reminding you of your responsibility to make some movement so that the work will continue. But once you've nudged it into motion, movement continues on the work's terms, not yours. To seek to master its structure is to chase a mirage. Just as you think you've finally grasped the pattern behind its shifting faces, it refuses to do your bidding, everything you think you know dissolves, and you're on to another world that seems to have drawn on all your previous choices but built their consequences anew. On what level of discourse are we traveling?

Mnemonic Notations, as those with long memories have noted, has been evolving for years. Since version I was first exhibited in Japan in 1992, the authors have continuously reworked and modified this single computer file, fixing it from time to time for exhibition at SIGGRAPH and various art exhibitions around the world. Through many of these iterations, the element of sound consisted of a limited number of short clips of a meditative bent (Tibetan monks, Gregorian chants, bells) that played when the participant initiated certain transitions, followed by silence until the participant did something else. By contrast to the infinitely varied possibilities of the imagery, this limited use of sound seemed underdeveloped.

Then the authors began collaborating with sound artist Colin Offord, who has composed and performed original music for the work and expanded the range of sound elements drawn into interactive mix. These now include eerie vocalizations and extensive use of exotic instruments, in particular the digeridoo. There is a special art to creating a sound loop that doesn't drive the audience crazy on the third or fourth hearing, and to composing sound elements that recur like musical themes but which make sense when matched with a deeply varying set of imagery. Offord has done justice to the challenge of the graphic and interactive aspects of **Mnemonic Notations**, deepening and enhancing the experience.

A computer-based art offering infinite combinatorial possibilities has been proposed and attempted before, but often in ways that amount to trivial experiments with the tricks made possible by the machine. **Mnemonic Notations** achieves an infinitely varied work that also manages to imbue its variations with significance and soul.

--Jim Gasperini