

Gene Youngblood (1970): *Expanded Cinema*. Studio Vista Limited: London, 293-295.  
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### **Terry Riley: *Music With Balls***

Rarely has the multiplex structure of any film or videotape been so totally integrated as in the transcendental composition *Music With Balls* [...] conceived by Terry Riley and commissioned by the Dilexy Foundation in 1968. It was the work of three men whose separate disciplines meshed in synaesthetic alloy: Terry Riley, composer; Arlo Acton, sculptur; John Coney, video mixer. *Music With Balls* is a dialectical synthesis of nonverbal energies that strikes deep into the inarticulate conscious. It inundates the beholder in megabits of experiential design information, aural, visual, and kinetic. To understand it we must understand its four elements: music, sculpture, cinema, and video.

Riley's music is strongly influenced by the work of LaMonte Young, with whom he is closely associated. Yet it can be said that Riley's music is unique in itself and represents, with the exception of Young, the most vital and refreshing American musical composition of the late twentieth century. While he is seriously involved with the "row" and "stasis" techniques that inform Young's work at a fundamental level, Riley is able to subsume a wide range of musical structures, combining the climax and directionality of Western music with the stasis of eastern modalities. The result is a cyclic precision and a buoyant mathematical randomness.

For *Music With Balls*, Riley pre-recorded four tracks of fourteen-cycle beats with a tenor saxophone and a Vox electric organ. Each beat was assigned a pitch, thus forming a tonal "row" that he played back through oscillators. Various levels of tape delay were possible by starting and stopping one or more of the tracks randomly. In the studio, Riley sat behind a bright, red table, flanked by his tape equipment. Against the recorded, delayed and oscillated time cycles he played rhythmic variations on his saxophone, effectively generating a static yet melodious macrostructure of cycles containing epicycles within epicycles. The music was alternately tense and relaxing, a shimmering trilling universe of aural bubbles penetrated randomly by syncopated wailing crescendi and diminuendi. The overall effect was magical, soothing, hypnotic.

Two stereo speakers were fitted into two of Arlo Acton's giant black spheres that were swung from the studio ceiling on long wires and revolved around the set in diminishing circles, pushed periodically by black-clad girls at either side. Thus the amplification of the cyclic music was itself heard in a physically cyclic fashion as it swirled about the empty space. A smaller chromed sphere was set in pendular motion, like a giant metronome, just above Riley's head. This had a calming, centering effect. This auditory/tactile/kinetic environment was then processed through cinema and video on several levels, all corresponding to the cycle/epicycle mode. Tiny ball bearings suspended from threads were filmed in ultraslow motion with a high-speed camera to make them seem heavy. The resulting film of swinging spheres was made into twelve loops that were then superimposed over one another in all the various combinations and as many levels of multiple-exposure as possible on one master print that

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had been cut into a strip as long as the entire program, twenty-six minutes. This was fed through a film chain as one possible video source.

Two floor cameras shot Riley in wide-angle and close-up, and also focused alternately into a color monitor and a concave mirror. "The mirror gave the entire image a curvature which corresponded to the cyclic nature of the whole piece," Coney explained. "Also it broke the repetition of the circular orbits by making them elliptical. Shooting the color monitor was not done for feedback but simply to achieve an electrified or subaqueous visual patina. A rather blue cast. Also it accentuates the scan-lines which are appropriate to TV, and we used them as a design element. In addition it gave us the ability to have the same picture running synchronously on two different scales. Seeing the image a bit larger on one camera than the other. That produced a very interesting cycle effect, particularly when we dissolved to another image."

The master tape of *Music With Balls* is a fabulously rich mantra of color, sound, and motion. Huge spheres sweep majestically across the screen trailing comets of shimmering ruby, emerald, and amber. Contrapuntal trajectories intersect, pierce, and collide. Keying, debeaming, wipes, and dissolves result in phantasmagoric convolutions of spatial dimensions as Riley is seen in several perspectives at once, in several colors, alternately obscured and revealed on various planes, with each pass of a pendulum. The composition builds from placid serenity to chaotic cacophony to bubbly melodiousness with a mad yet purposive grace. Acoustical space, physical space, and video space become one electronic experience unlike anything the cinema has ever known.