Painterly Listening: Musical Ekphrasis, de Kooning's *Untitleds,* and Feldman's *de Kooning*

Trevor James Smith

Texas Society for Music Theory 2023

Abstract

This research explores ways in which paintings by Willem de Kooning may be referenced to analyze style in Morton Feldman's work "de Kooning". The work utilizes the concept of ekphrasis and Conceptual Integration Networks (CINs) to develop an argument for understanding the work through a mode of listening I call "painterly listening", in which the music is experienced as causal to the creation of the visual work for a listener-observer. The work suggests that some abstract reciprocal relationships may necessarily lean on well-established principals in perception, namely gestalt principals of organization, such as figure-ground organization and laws of continuity. Furthermore, the work advocates for an approach to analyzing ekphrastic connections between works that do not directly reference each other but have intertextual connections.

Conceptual Integration Networks

CINs are tools used to visually represent the stages of processing metaphor in an observer's perception. They provide spaces to place descriptions of the information from both artworks, their conceptual similarities, and how they blend to create or reinforce interpretations.

In this work, the conceptual blending takes place between the application of material (paint/sound), use of space, variation in forms, and perception of foreground and background between de Kooning's paintings and Feldman's music.
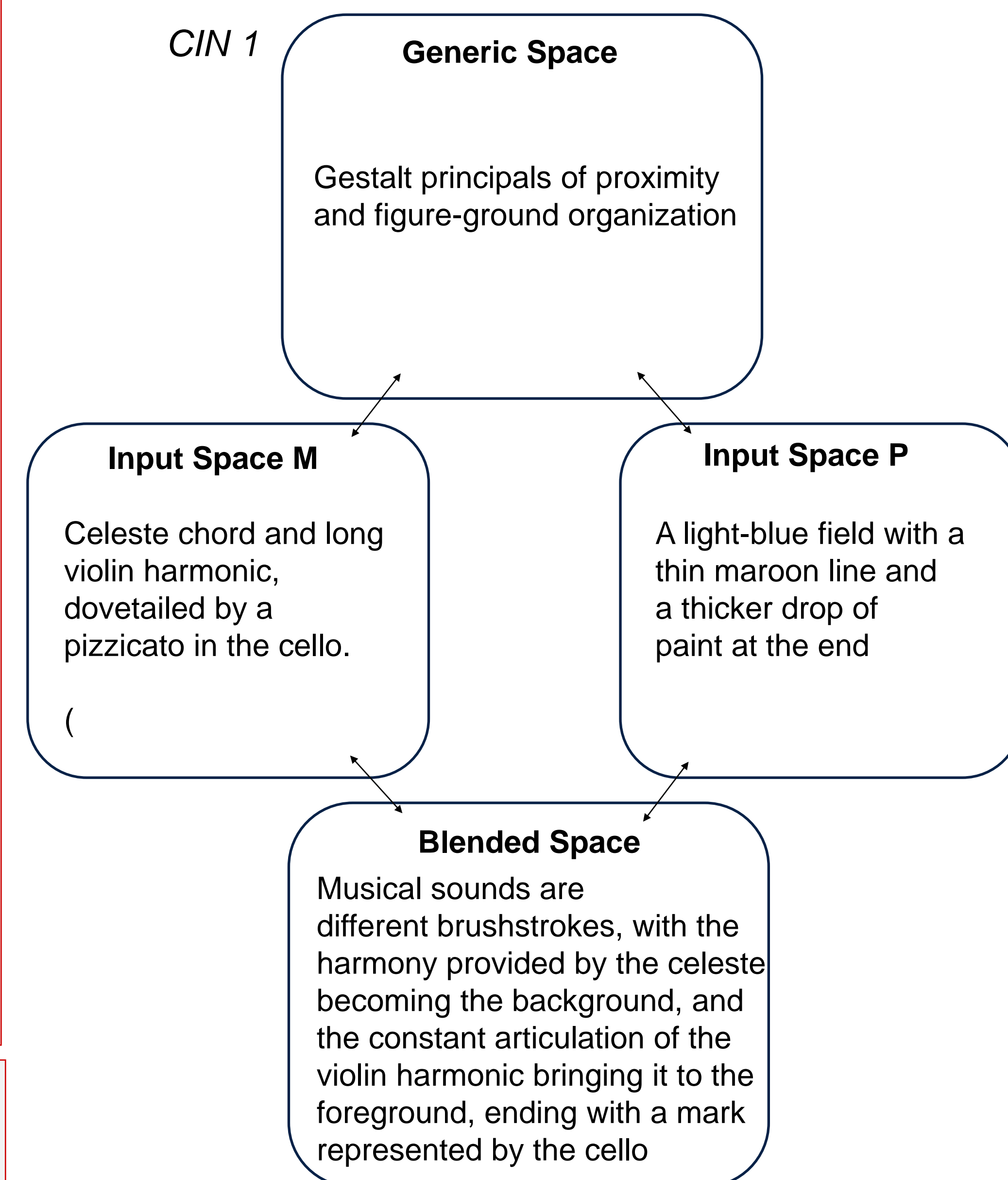
Input Spaces (left and right): A description of the literal information from each artwork is placed. (M for Music, P for Painting)

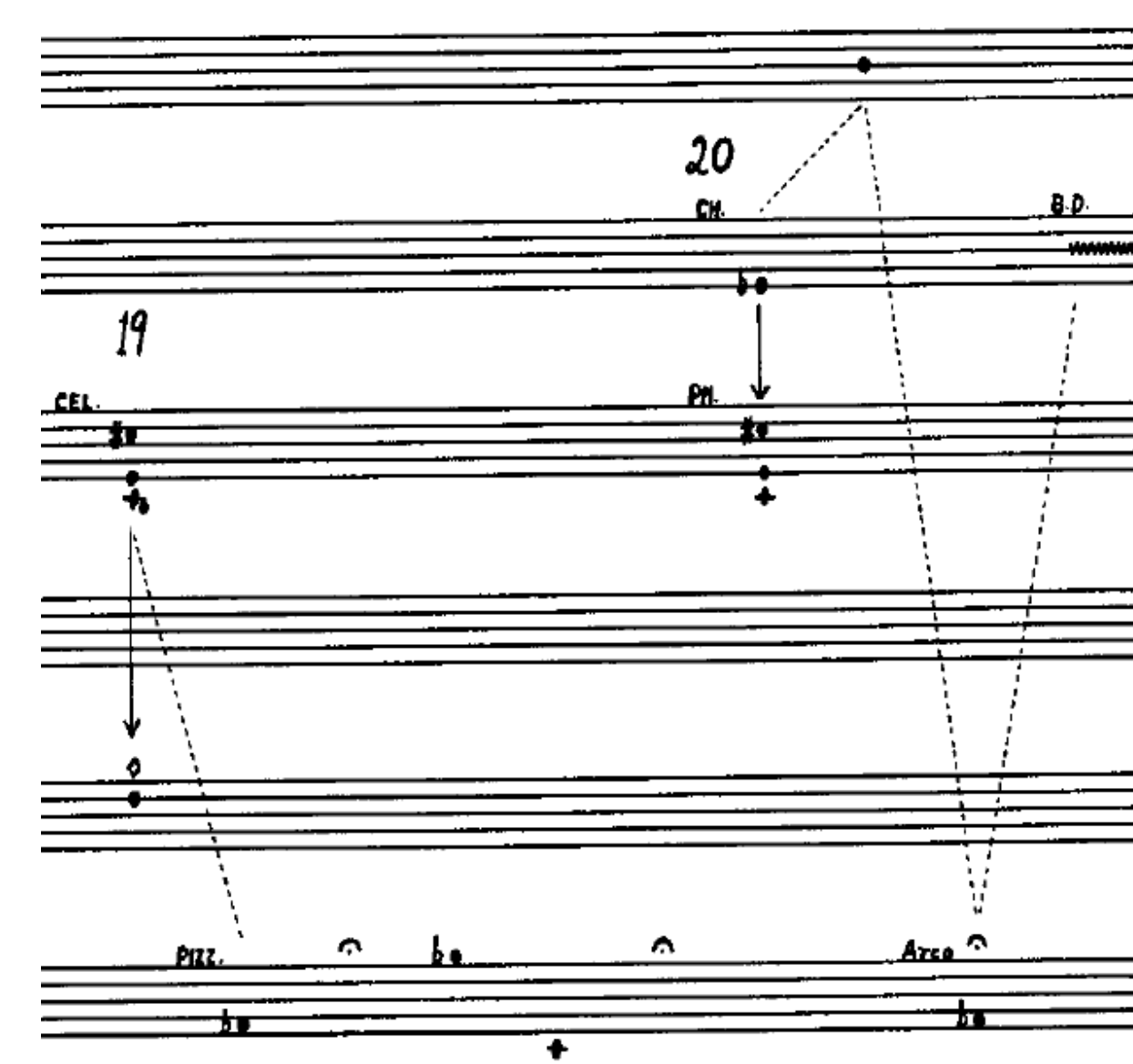**Generic Space** (top): Metaphorical or conceptual similarities between inputs

Blended Space (bottom): The resulting interpretation of these interactions.

What is Ekphrasis?

Modern analytical usage refers to work-to-work relationships or works that reference other works to reinforce apparent subjects or generate new interpretations.

CIN 1

Generic Space

Gestalt principals of proximity and figure-ground organization

Input Space M

Celeste chord and long violin harmonic, dovetailed by a pizzicato in the cello.

Input Space P

A light-blue field with a thin maroon line and a thicker drop of paint at the end

Blended Space

Musical sounds are different brushstrokes, with the harmony provided by the celeste becoming the background, and the constant articulation of the violin harmonic bringing it to the foreground, ending with a mark represented by the cello

CIN 2

Generic Space

Metaphor for forward motion and arrival

Input Space M

A series of groups made of tones varying in length, articulation, and timbre.

The music ends on a final gesture of three identical tones.

Input Space P

A curved line extends from the bottom of the painting, surrounded by different colored areas, and stops at a focal shape in the middle of the canvas

Blended Space

The painting is a landscape that features a winding path leading towards a focal structure.

Feldman, *de Kooning,* rehearsal numbers 19-20

de Kooning, section of *Untitled XXV*

de Kooning*, Untitled (1958)*

Feldman, *de Kooning,* rehearsal numbers 14-16

Feldman, *de Kooning,* end of rehearsal number 32.

Descriptive vs. Contextual Representation

In conceptual blending, ***descriptive*** representation is an ekphrastic relationship that highlights subject matter that is clearly present in the work, such as the sounds of birdcalls in a musical work written about a painting in which birds are a subject.

Contextual representation is when new meanings or interpretations are created due to the interaction of two artworks.

In this presentation, **the first example is *descriptive* representation**, as both works are highlighting space, foreground/background forms, and texture of the material, apparent elements of their shared style. **The second example is *contextual* representation**, as the new interpretation relies on the interaction of the music and painting and may otherwise be unlikely.

Gestalt Principals of Perceptual Organization

Law of Proximity: When we perceive a collection of objects [or sounds], we will see objects close to each other as forming a group.

Law of Figure-ground: in perceiving a visual [or audio] field, some objects take a prominent role (the figures) while others recede into the background (the ground). The field is thus divided into these two basic parts

Works Cited

Hilewicz, Orit. "Reciprocal Interpretations of Music and Painting: Representation Types in Schuller, Tan, and Davies after Paul Klee." Music Theory Online, 1 Sept. 2018, mtosmt.org/issues/mto.18.24.3/mto.18.24.3.hilewicz.html.

Bernard, Jonathan. 2002. "Feldman's Painters." In The New York Schools of Music and Visual Arts: John Cage, Morton Feldman, Edgard Varèse, Willem de Kooning, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauchenberg, ed. Steven Johnson. Routledge.

Zbikowski, Lawrence M. "The blossoms of 'trockne blumen': Music and text in the early nineteenth century." Music Analysis, vol. 18, no. 3, Oct. 1999, pp. 307–345, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2249.00098.

Feldman, Morton. De Kooning. New York, N.Y.: C.F. Peters Corporation, 1963

De Kooning, Willam. *Untitled XXV*. 1977.

De Kooning, Willam. *Untitled*. 1958.

Soegaard, Mads. "Gestalt Principles of Form Perception." The Interaction Design Foundation, www.interaction-design.org/literature/book/the-glossary-of-human-computer-interaction/gestalt-principles-of-form-perception. Accessed 2 Feb. 2024.