

The Tom Johnson Paradox

By [Isaac Schankler](#) on February 20, 2013

Last Friday, composer Tom Johnson kicked off a week-long Los Angeles residency with a concert and [exhibition opening at Art Share](#) in collaboration with [the wulf.](#) . Johnson is generally known for his contributions to minimalist music and mathematics, but this event placed his work in a refreshingly different context, presenting his sketches and drawings as visual art. Some of these were taken from his scores, but many were not. A mural of the composer's

Falling

Thirds with Drum

, drafted by Aspacia Kusulas, greeted visitors at the entrance, and served as an excellent introduction and visual motto for the exhibition as a whole.

The atmosphere in the gallery was informal, with the composer himself wandering through the space and happy to chat about his work with the attendees, pointing out mathematical relationships between seemingly heterogenous pieces. The starkness of the presentation, with letter-sized sheets of paper evenly spaced along blank white walls, served to highlight the variations between the various pieces. Some had an immediately beautiful symmetry, while others looked more like tangled circuit diagrams.

The concert was similarly relaxed, with Johnson first presenting selections from his *Counting Series*, which, he was quick to stress, is a “work in progress.” In these purely verbal pieces, the performers count in various languages and dialects, beginning with simple patterns that soon spiral into dizzying complexity. Johnson performed the first excerpt as a solo before being joined by Michael Winter, Eric KM Clark, Aiden Reynolds, Juli Emmel, and Aspacia Kusulas in various combinations. The third excerpt, based on a Yorkshire dialect, was a particular highlight. Johnson indulged himself in a little vocal “orchestration” here, setting the male and female voices off one another in engaging and clever ways.

Simplicity, complexity, and humor were recurring themes for the evening. When listening to one of Johnson's pieces, it may initially seem almost bewilderingly simple. Sometimes, gradually, a deeper structure becomes clear, and a slow-motion moment can feel like a revelation. At other times, the pattern remains tantalizingly, maddeningly just out of reach. The curious thing about this scenario is that while the pattern is still perceptible, it is "felt" rather than understood. This was certainly the case for me when hearing the the sparse, disjunct falling gestures of *Tilework for Viola*, performed with precision and subtlety by Andrew McIntosh.

Of course, Johnson is cannily aware of how his pieces are perceived, and often exploits this awareness for comic effect, as in the last piece on the program, *Squares*. In this performance, McIntosh's viola phrases were interspersed with Johnson's narration, which describes how the piece was constructed. Far from your typical treatise, the dryly witty narration includes asides directly addressing the audience, pointing out intentional "mistakes" and often anticipating the listener's reaction. "Of course, I don't expect you to understand all of this," he says at one point.

This is perhaps the most curious and intriguing paradox of Johnson's music. While he doesn't necessarily expect to be understood, he hopes that people will put forth the effort to at least grasp a fragment of it. It is essentially a gesture of trust: here is an offering, and you can take it or

leave it. For those who return that trust, Johnson's music can be addictively compelling.