

Quote as: Cornelia Lund. "Interview with Camry Ivory." *AV Assemblies. Conversations on Sight and Sound*, edited by Ana Carvalho, Cornelia Lund, Sara Lua Ruíz, Oct. 2026, <https://www.fluctuating-images.de/projects-av-assemblies/>.



Interview with Camry Ivory, Kansas City (Missouri)

Transcript of the interview conducted by Cornelia Lund in the framework of "AV Assemblies. Conversations on Sight and Sound," a project by Ana Carvalho, Cornelia Lund, and Sara Luna Ruíz.
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- Camry, would you like to start by presenting yourself and giving a short description of your work and your relationship to the AV context?

I'm Camry Ivory. I am a visual artist, a visual musician based in Kansas City, Missouri, in the U.S. I developed an instrument called Coloratura, which is essentially musical paintbrushes. They are physical paintbrushes that are connected to a circuit board that sends MIDI signals so you can paint and make music at the same time.

- Now, you have already started to describe a little bit your technical setup, so maybe we could delve a little bit deeper into that?

Sure. I began my artistic journey as a musician, but I wanted a way to be able to visualize my music, or to make it more tactile; and I thought it would be interesting to turn paintbrushes into instruments.

My instrument looks like a bunch of paintbrushes and wires singled together. I have 12 paintbrushes in a set, one for each note in the chromatic musical scale. And they are wired to a circuit board that sends Bluetooth or MIDI signals.

And then, it's capacitive touch: every time a brush touches a conductive surface, it will send a signal to the computer, which is usually running Ableton or other DAWs, and it will generate sound. The paintbrush looks like a regular paintbrush, and you would just use it like you do a regular paintbrush with paint. The only difference is that you have to paint on a conductive

surface. Sometimes I also use water as my conductive surface and do water marbling using analog overhead projectors.

- So, you are working with the chromatic scale. How did you choose which color would go with what (musical) note?

There are a lot of artists and musicians who have been exploring that relationship between color and sounds, or color and musical notes specifically for a while. I latched onto some musicians and artists who were measuring light waves and sound waves.

And I essentially used a formula to synchronize the two. You could basically line up a light wave to a sound wave, and make that connection there. So, I used someone else's scale. It was an artist named Steve Zieverink (<http://www.unit2.us/steve-zieverink.html>), but I have seen other artists and other musicians use similar scales.

What's interesting is that there are therapists, particularly some that are here in the United States that are doing sound therapy. They will play different sound waves to some of their patients, and the patients report seeing colors while they are hearing these sound waves. I asked one of these therapists to send the scale to me. They have been collecting on a large scale, what colors are associated with which sounds. And the resulting scale almost perfectly lined up with the scale that I have been using with light waves and sound waves.

- That is very interesting, because historically, this has been a big discussion, as there is no sure, no one way of linking color and sound, although they are both measurable in waves. Also, with synesthesia, people see different colors. So, one person might see yellow for a specific musical note, and someone else might see blue for the very same note. I think that there has been maybe some sort of agreement that a higher-pitched note would be more yellowish, and maybe not black. But it has never been precise, if you will. So, it's really interesting, that with this therapy, it aligns.

But, to come back to your performance: what you are doing is not the kind of AV performance that one would get by working with a VJ program and short video clips. Yours looks a bit different, and it is also closer to some historical experiments with visual music that worked with painting.

How would you describe your artistic process, if you do a performance, and not just a demonstration of the instrument? How do you prepare, and what is important to you when you work with your instrument?

My favorite way to use my instrument is doing water marbling. I do a type of Suminagashi water marbling, Japanese water marbling, where traditionally, an artist will dip their brush into colored ink or black ink, and then dip it into a tub of water. When the brush touches the water, the ink spreads out into these concentric circles, and then it ebbs and flows throughout the process of creating the image. I use that process when I do my performances.

Because of the electrical nature of the instrument, I have to paint on a conductive surface, which leaves metal or very expensive conductive glass, but water is free, it's very valuable, it's very, very user-friendly.

Also, I am not trained as a visual artist, and so, for me, having a paintbrush in my hand and standing in front of a traditional canvas was very intimidating, because I don't know how to paint. It is just a very intimidating process, right? Thinking about, oh, what am I going to paint? Whereas with Suminagashi, the whole process is having a relationship with the water, and so you just touch your brush to the water, and the piece kind of evolves with you, the same way music evolves.

I mention that because one of the most crucial parts of Suminagashi is vibration. After you have these concentric circles floating in the water, a traditional Suminagashi artist will either take a fan or use their breath to move the ink around into these patterns. What I started to do is, when I'm done with the piece, I will sing into the water. And when I'm singing, I also have a microphone that is looping my voice. So, I'm able to include my voice into the visual composition the same way I'm adding it to the visual composition in real time, or the music composition.

And, I think, for me, this was a piece that was missing in my audiovisual practice, because sometimes I feel that the two are separate. Yes, I'm using these paintbrushes, I'm making these sounds, you can visually see the output. But if I'm singing during this process, you can hear my voice, but you can't really see the impact, and so, being able to sing, and incorporate my voice into the whole process with this water marbling method is really great. So, long story short, I guess I would say that, because of that, because I have that kind of all-encompassing component of my breath, when I do performances, I leave the audience in a breathing exercise before I begin every performance. For me, it helps calm me down a little bit if I'm ever nervous. But, then, also everybody in a performance space comes to the event, or comes to the venue with their own energy, their own concerns, their own hang-ups and worries. And I found that by having everybody come together in a breathing exercise where we breathe and we sigh together, it helps people release all of their energy, but it also makes them more receptive to the peace and calm of the performance. Water marbling is such a sensitive vibrational practice. I think if anybody has any weird energy, it shows up in the piece. So, I think the breathing helps. I hope that answers your question.

- Yes, absolutely. And it also leads me to ask you about the context in which you perform, because obviously, with water marbling being more of a fragile performance process, it probably won't be a club session. So, what is usually the kind of venue or festival where you would perform?

Mostly in spaces that are open to experimental music. I tend to prefer solo performances, but I have also done some collaborations with other musicians. We have a very vibrant jazz scene or community in Kansas City.

I guess the maybe cheeky answer to your question is: I'll go wherever you invite me.

I have done some interesting sessions where I have performed outside, for example, I did a summer solstice event. I talk so much about vibrations, and I actually didn't sing in that performance at all, because I really had a duet with the wind. The wind was blowing, creating its own vibrational energy. But also, when the sun was setting, there were lots of little bugs that were flying near the lamp of my overhead projector. As if they gave up their lives to be a part of the piece.

The actual music type that I'm creating is more ambient, more spacious and open. That's just a personal choice, because I'm doing a lot of looping, and so I want it to be spacious so I can create room for spontaneity and whatever arises. But I don't want to be background music.

- Your work with Coloratura consists of more than just performances, you also have a more educational side, where you present the instrument to other people and do workshops. Do you still do that?

Yes, this is what I prefer to do with my time. I like to use the device myself, but I find more joy in giving other people the opportunity to use it.

I have a smaller version of Coloratura that just has five paintbrushes, and is tuned to the pentatonic scale because it's user-friendly. It is going to be harmonious instantaneously, you don't have to have any sort of musical background. Another benefit of that is I usually have multiple people playing at the same time. So, if you have four people who are creating sound at the same time and you want it to be educational, it helps to have some guardrails.

With these brushes, I give people free rein.

I explain how I created the instrument, why I created it, and then the goal really is to give them permission to play. I think a lot of times in the music space, and especially the art space, we create something with the expectation that needs to be good, or it needs to look like something, or sound like something, but I think with Coloratura the whole point is just the process. The end result isn't really that important.

The best part, or the most interesting part, is that you are playing with sound and color together and experimenting: What happens if I use these two colors together? What if I decide my next note, or the next brush I pick up, is based on what it sounds like versus what it looks like? And you have this conversation between the person, the paint colors, the musical notes, and then all the other people in the same space who are doing the same thing.

My goal is that people would stop looking at what they're painting and start listening to each other. It's very hard for sighted people to do that. It's much easier for visually impaired people, they make fantastic art with it.

- And we've been briefly talking about it before the interview: You took a next step and made a new version to patent the instrument? What does this step mean for you?

Mainly two things: Having to patent this device meant that I had to recreate it from scratch. I developed my first version in 2015, 2016, just for fun, and then, several years later, I learned that in order to keep using it without having to deal with the very, very litigious nature of the

United States, I had to, basically, create a new version of Coloratura that was different enough from my original version, which was very frustrating and very harsh, but it gave me the opportunity to make new changes. The original version didn't use MIDI signals, it just used keystrokes, and now it sends MIDI. I have an option where people can choose their own instrument while they are painting. They can cycle through an instrument bank. I added in different textures to the handles, so every brush handle has a different color, but it also has a different texture. So, if you're visually impaired, or you're colorblind, you can't see color, you still have that multi-sensory experience, because maybe the note isn't associated with the color, but now it's associated with the texture.

Now that it is patent pending, this means that, one, I can use the device in person without my lawyer yelling at me and saying, don't show it yet, you can't! But also, it means that, I can potentially, license these or sell these.

I see the value of this, not just as an instrument for me as an artist or musician, but as a tool for creative and therapeutic use. A lot of people have said, that it is so calming and soothing to use. I have used this tool with teachers who work with students who have autism or are on the neurodivergent spectrum, and the way that they say students just lock in and are able to focus or break through and connect is really interesting. So, I want to give my device to the people who can use it to create real change and real beauty in the world.

- That is extremely interesting, and it also leads me to the next question, because initially, when the AV scene had its heyday in the 2000s, it wasn't necessarily the most political of art/music scenes. But your educational work and the approach of wanting to share is per se already political – without carrying a red flag saying, I'm political. Does being political play a role for you and how you situate your work?

Absolutely. I call my work with Coloratura a kind of Trojan Horse. In that it lets me get into spaces because it seems very neutral, right? Not politically radical at all. But the fact that I am a Black woman in the United States, a Black woman in spaces where there aren't a lot of people like me – in the audiovisual space, in art space, the music space, especially the technology and engineering space – I feel that just by being there, it's an act of resistance. Often, it allows me to confront people's preconceived notions, biases, and prejudices. Of course, there are always people who are, mansplaining to me, or making assumptions about things, and I love that just my presence in these spaces is radical. I think it's also important for other underrepresented minorities to see someone like me doing these things, because, again, I'm challenging notions. I did a workshop several years ago, in a town that was, predominantly, Black. And the facilitators of the workshop were white, and they had all these judgments about the children in the workshop. They said, "Oh, they're bad, and they're not going to be on time." And then they came in, and they were amazing, and lovely, and perfect.

And many of them said, "I want to be an inventor when I grow up. I want to be an artist like you when I grow up." And you know, they say the personal is political, so in that space, in the very, very incremental steps that I'm taking in that space, I think, I'm challenging the way that we think about technology and the art space and the music space.

I also feel that what I'm doing is carving out a space between human creativity and artificial creativity. And that it focuses on the process of creation more so than the product, and I think that is what makes our human creative endeavors different than creative endeavors that are incorporating artificial intelligence.

- This is a very interesting way to think about artificial intelligence... and technology, and the related preconceptions and biases in general! How do you feel about the fact that the history of visual music, which is what your work can be regarded as affiliated with, is such a white, Western history? And how do you deal with it?

I'm starting to play around with the notion of expanding the definition of visual music in my own mind. I learned about even the concept of visual music several years after I had started Coloratura. The director of one of our biggest art museums in Kansas City came to my open studio and said, "You need to read this book." She didn't say, that I didn't know what I was doing. It was more like, "Let me open up your world to a vast, history of other artists doing the same thing."

I appreciated it, but I also realized that pretty much every person in that space, or in this particular genre, is white, or comes from a Western background, which doesn't surprise me. When I say I'm trying to expand my idea of visual music, I think back to the concept of, or the origins of abstract art. I think of Kandinsky, whose whole purpose of generating abstract art, or exploring abstract art, was channeling the principles of music. And how it was the more spiritual, less tangible artistic practice. So, essentially, he was just putting an embodiment to music...

Which was novel at the time for visual art. But I think the embodiment of music already exists in another art form, which is dance. If you think about it, dance is just music come to life. You can watch a dance performance, and even if you can't hear the music, you can intuit what kind of music the dancers are dancing to. And so, I think that if we take that method, if we take the viewpoint, that dance is considered visual music – even though it is different, maybe outside of the traditional visual music or AV space – then I think that there is space to incorporate more dance, and to treat it not as an auxiliary, or as an accessory to the music, but something that is fully encompassed.

I guess the best thing I could do is give an example of my dream project. I mentioned before that with Coloratura, I have to paint on a conductive surface in order for the circuit board to trigger any sound. The human body is conductive. But my goal is to have a project where there is a painter, and there is a dancer, or multiple painters, multiple dancers, and the painters paint on the dancers' bodies to generate the music. And then, as the music generates, the dancers will dance to the music that is being generated on their bodies. But because they are moving around, that changes how the painters will paint, which changes the music they'll make. It is this feedback loop, and I think, just another way to create this sound-image relation, as a visual, tangible connection. I mention all of that because in non-Western spaces, particularly in the Black community, the African diaspora, dance is such a huge, important part of our culture; and maybe it's not seen as visual music traditionally, but I think it absolutely is.

- This absolutely sounds like a project that I want to see, so you have to realize it!

I want to see it, too!

- Before we conclude, let me ask you another question: Are there any artists, influences, even books that are important to you, or that you would like to recommend?

The artists that inspired me to keep doing what I'm doing, is Rita Blitt (<https://ritablitt.com/>). She was based in Kansas City and is now in the Bay Area in California.

She is an abstract artist, and she calls her practice, or her process, dancing with her hands, which kind of plays back to what I was mentioning before. She did this really interesting, short film or short documentary called *Caught in Paint* (2003), where she collaborated with choreographers.

And she had them dance behind a glass pane, and as they danced and jumped and twirled, she would use her paper, her brushstrokes to capture their bodies in motion.

I had long admired her work, and I actually got a chance to meet her a couple of years ago, and her approach to music and art really changed the way I think about it. It really is this fluid conversation.

Sometimes, when I experience audiovisual art, I feel subconsciously that the artist has a bias, that they are prioritizing one over the other. Which also makes sense. You have to start somewhere. But I'm trying to rid myself of that bias. As a musician, I start thinking about the music, and then the visuals come later, but I'm trying to really challenge that notion and have this more, fluid relationship between the two, where the music will influence the visuals in real time and back and forth. So, Rita Blitt was the first artist that I really saw that had that sense of surrender and was cultivating a really organic relationship between the two. So, she's one of my favorite artists. And then there is this huge book on visual music. That was the game changer.¹

But to answer your question: I feel a bit like an island in the work that I'm doing, which is why it was so great to connect with you at the [Sound/Image] conference [in Greenwich in 2025] and to find other people working in this space. Where I am geographically, there aren't a lot of people in this space. But there are more and more coming, so I'm always open to connecting with people, obviously outside of Midwestern United States.

- Well, it's not one of the traditional hubs of AV performance...

But I absolutely don't want to discount some of the artists here. There are people that are doing really interesting things with their AV work. I think I'm a bit of an outsider, because a lot of my practice is still analog. I'm not really using a screen. The screen I'm using is really just an

¹ This refers to the catalog of the exhibition *Visual Music* organized by MOCA LA and the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C.: Kerry Brougher, Jeremy Strick, Ari Wiseman, Judith Zilczer (eds., 2005). *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music since 1900*. London: Thames and Hudson.

overhead projector. There are no pixels, there is no programming. So, I often struggle to find people who understand what I'm trying to do, and that the analog art of what I do is the point. It is not that I'm not using an overhead projector because I don't know how to use a digital projector. It's an intentional choice.

And, as we move more and more towards technology and can do more and more really great things with different equipment, it's exciting, but it also makes me want to lean more into the analog space and nurture and cultivate that kind of magic and beauty there.

- Yes, and although, in the AV scene, people have always been fond of trying out the latest tech gadgets, all the analog media have never completely disappeared. So, there is a community out there for this approach, too.

Would you like to say something in conclusion?

That's a good question. I think for whoever has found this particular interview: I would like to say thank you for your interest in this beautiful and weird and wonderful creative genre. We need more people who believe in it, and understand it, and appreciate it, but who are curious to learn more. I think, as technology continues to improve and improve and improve and scale and scale and scale, it is very tempting to want to try to keep up with the latest process or the latest piece of equipment. But, ultimately, what made me want to create Coloratura is trying to add some humanity to the work that I do. So, it can't be automated, it can't be digitized. What I'm doing is all about how a person makes a decision. I make a decision in the moment about color and sound. And I don't think that needs to translate to every person's artistic practice, but I would encourage everyone to think about more ways to incorporate humanity, whether the physical body or just the abstract concept of humanity – there are different ways to include it in your practice.