

# Colby



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## Last Page

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# CAN YOU SEE A SOUND?

## REFLECTIONS ON A LIBERAL ARTS EXPERIENCE

Chairs were arranged in an infinity symbol, with strings of yarn wrapping around pillars and the balconies above LoPo in Cotter Union. Thin tapestries hung below the ceiling, as if to reflect the open space of the room and to suggest sounds traveling in increasing intensity and volume—like a crescendo.

Can you picture it? Hear it? Feel it?

This spring I was asked by Associate Professor of Music Steven Nuss to participate in an exhibition and performance project with visiting sculptor Nickolus Meisel. Meisel, a professor at Washington State University, primarily works to transform spaces that we don't conventionally think of as artistic locations. For this particular project, Meisel collaborated with an original composition by music major Luke Martin '14, using Martin's original composition as an inspiration to physically transform the LoPo space.

A sculptor, a composer, and me—a double major in neurophilosophy (my interdisciplinary major) and German studies with a minor in anthropology. I hope for a career in business. So what was I doing there? Read on.

The performance began with an invitation from Meisel. The audience spent a minute absorbing and memorizing their environment, then closed their eyes and drew, without lifting their pencils, as much as they could remember. Next, the composition—a



*Abacadabra; when the eye listens, an exhibition and performance project involving visiting sculptor Nickolus Meisel, Professor Steven Nuss, Luke Martin '14, and others.*

highly abstract piece of strange and often nonmelodic sounds, including a field recording of a noisy crowd of people—was played. We then initiated and repeated a cycle of live instrumentals and speeches three times over. The improvisational nature of this performance meant that each cycle was different in subtle ways. We explored themes such as synesthesia, the concurrent experience of multiple sensations. We also introduced the concept of body empathy. Here, your awareness of your own body affects how you interpret others' bodies, and vice versa.



PHOTOS BY NICKOLUS MEISEL

Remember, Professor Nuss belongs to the Music Department, Professor Meisel to an art department. My interests (neurophilosophy, German, anthropology) served as a reminder that one's education, academic or not, should not be segregated into separate disciplines; we can always put different ideas into a meaningful dialogue.

In truth, this wasn't just about art and music, but something more. Phenomena such as synesthesia and body empathy do not belong solely to the art and music domains. In neuroscience, we might ask how our nervous systems inform and are informed by synesthesia or body awareness. Philosophically, synesthesia makes us question how we interpret and create metaphors, which are such a fundamental part of our language and communications. The capacity to be empathetic to other bodies—to other *people*—creates a conversation between knowledge and communication; how can we know what others say? Anthropologically, what do our specific cultural biases say about how we perceive and what we could perceive on a sensorial level?

My studies at Colby, then, somehow found a place to converge alongside equally eclectic disciplines. I don't profess that everyone got the same insights out of this event, but that's precisely why it and similar occurrences at Colby are such an important part of student life. Every person has individual experiences and ideas, and Colby should be and is a meeting ground for discourse among these individuals. What you get out of it is precisely what you make of it.

That Friday afternoon, we made a lot.

*To see more pictures, videos, and information about the project, visit [squeakmeisel.com](http://squeakmeisel.com)*