the
creators project

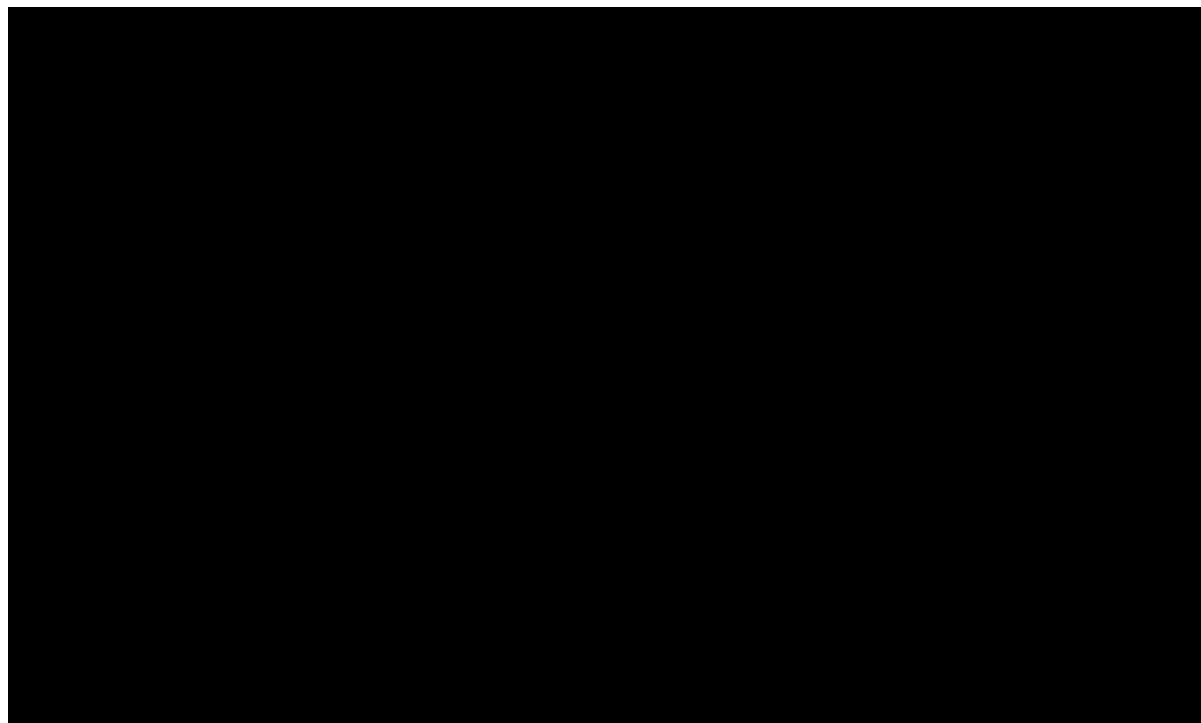# Exploring Scott Snibbe's New App Album For Philip Glass' _*REWORK*, Featuring Beck, Amon Tobin, Nosaj Thing, And More

By Abdullah Saeed — Dec 13 2012

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Minimal music composition has changed a lot since Philip Glass pioneered it decades ago, and the possibilities of sound manipulation for the average person have grown massively. That's what makes his remix album, *REWORK_* such a monument to music. Here's an album that binds generations of producers, from guys like Amon Tobin who were influenced directly by Glass to younger producers like Nosaj Thing who took cues from those he influenced, and there's a thread of sonic texture that remains throughout all the work by varying artists. The precision, restraint, and abstraction that Philip Glass introduced into music composition set a precedent that has remained in tact after all these years, and all these changes that music has undergone.

And the sonic qualities of music aren't all that's changed in that time. The visual elements coupled with music have also evolved since the days of Glass' score for *Koyaanisqatsi*. To accompany each track on the album, interactive design wunderkind Scott Snibbe, the man behind Björk's *Biophilia* app album, created an iOS app that contains interactive visualizations for every track on *REWORK_*. Each piece begins as a simple set of geometric shapes that react wildly to the touch, and evolve into more complex patterns as the songs progress. These are topped off with The Glass Machine,

an instrument consisting of four manipulable circles that allow you to create Glass-like arpeggios in endless combinations.

We spoke with Snibbe and his producer (and wife) Ahna Girshick about the development of the app, as well as a few specifics about the visualizations and The Glass Machine.

You've made a number of musical apps already, both through your own studio and for musicians like Björk and Passion Pit. Is it challenging to find new ways of presenting music in an app form? Are there any methods or models you find yourself coming back to again and again?

Ahna Girshick: The space of computer-rendered interactive music visualization is virtually limitless, and the app format is ideal because of the intimate touch screen. Björk gave us a copy of the book *Notations 21* by Teresa Sauer after we worked on the abstract musical score for the *Biophilia* app. The book opens your mind to creative non-traditional musical notations, and our favorite ones were the least conventional. We decided to get away from a literal musical notation like we had and focus on conveying the mood through an abstract visualization. Scott and I have also found endless inspiration in the poetic abstract animations of Oskar Fischinger and Len Lye starting from the 1920s and 30s that have this same contrapunctal quality.
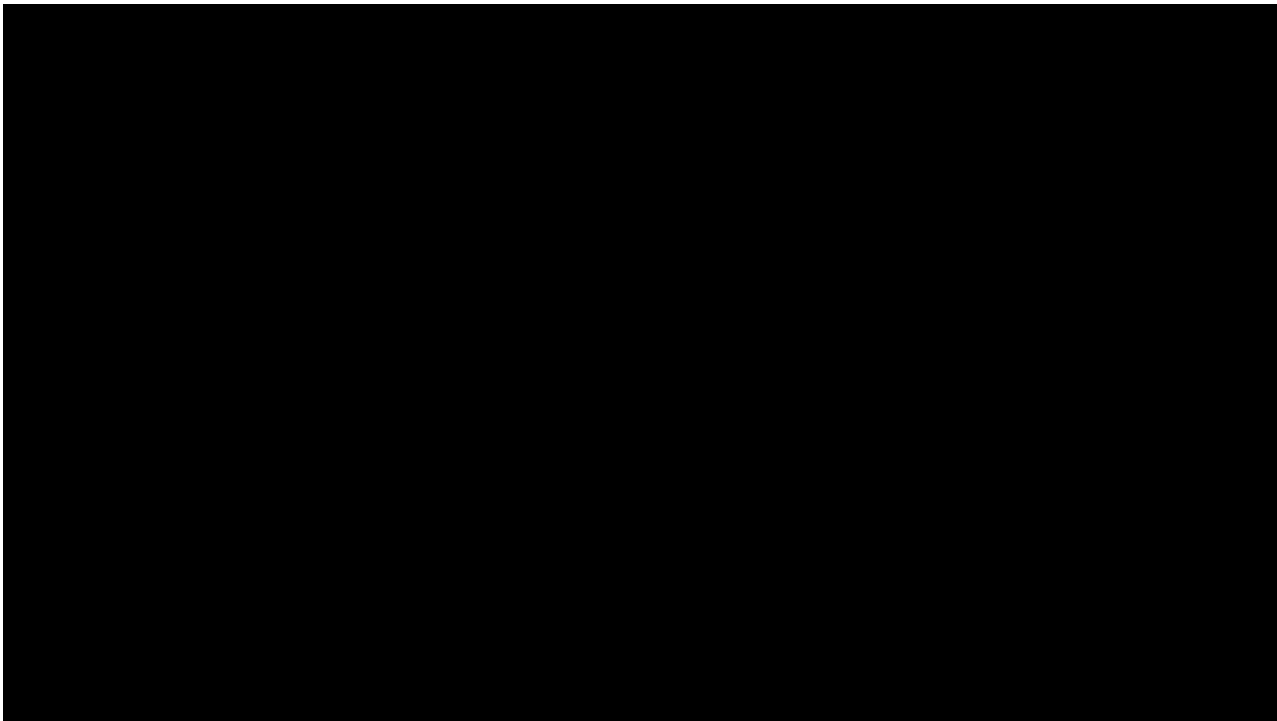
*Our profile on Scott Snibbe.*

How do you feel your style has grown or matured since doing the *Biophilia* apps?

Scott Snibbe: As soon as I got the invitation from Björk to work on *Biophilia*, I knew that I was going to learn a lot from her as an artist, and as one of the world's great collaborators. Working on *Biophilia* opened me up even more to a filmmaking model of interactivity where many great artists on their own are brought together, and you draw on their talents and ideas to form a coherent whole that springs from the director's vision. The core contributors on the project,

Ahna Girshick as producer with Graham McDermott and David Wicks in creative engineering, weren't just executing a design, but worked creatively (and sometimes painfully) through ideas and revisions as we went, to create forms that complemented an album we all loved. I'm excited to continue moving forward with this filmmaker's model towards interactivity with strong (and sometimes large) teams of highly talented people that make major creative contributions to the project.
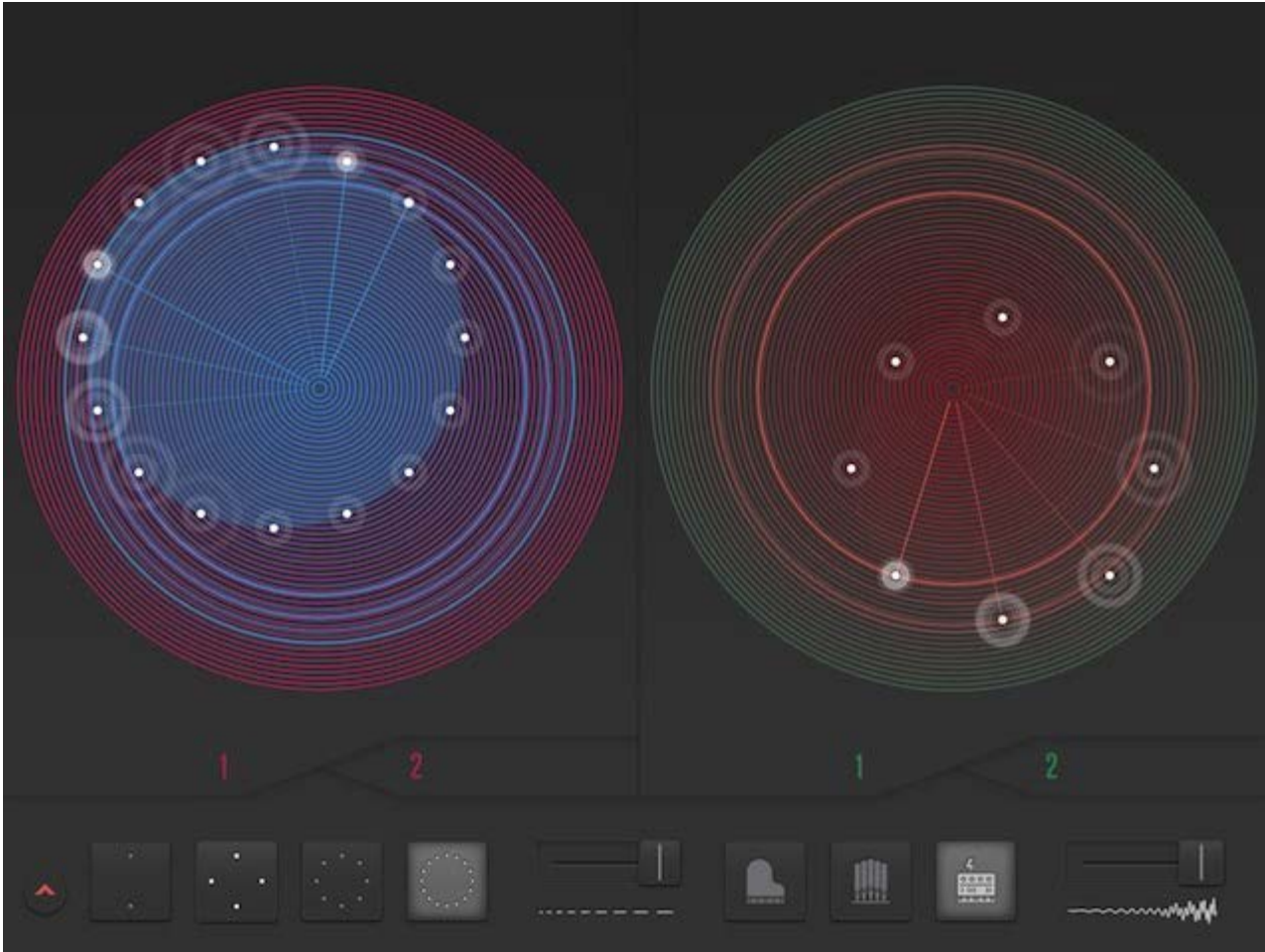

The Glass Machine.

Can you describe the app that allows people to play with some of Glass' musical idioms, as described in the trailer?

Girshick: Philip Glass music has such strong patterns, but their formation can be hard for non-musicians to understand. The Glass Machine, designed by Lukas Girling, allows people to create the musical patterns of 1970s Glass music. Lukas was brilliant at seeing past traditional musical notation which few people understand, and distilling the factors needed to make early-Glass patterns and allowing people that direct visual interaction. The distance from the dots to the center correspond to the notes: Longer lines correspond to higher notes. By moving and pinching the colored arpeggiator discs, one can create an infinitude of combinations of notes and polyrhythms. It took some very subtle tweaking of the scales, timing, and musicality to make this one work, and Trevor Gureckis, Philip Glass' assistant, was very patient and insightful in helping us understand Philip Glass' musical "algorithms."

**What was the most challenging remix to make an app for?**

Girshick: We were certainly daunted and humbled by the Beck remix "NYC:73-78," not only because it lasts 22 minutes and apparently includes bits of 80 pieces by Philip Glass, but because it is such a musical masterpiece. With brilliant help from David Wicks and Pete Hawkes, we designed a dynamical system which could capture the complex feeling and moods ranging from light and mellow to dark and energetic.
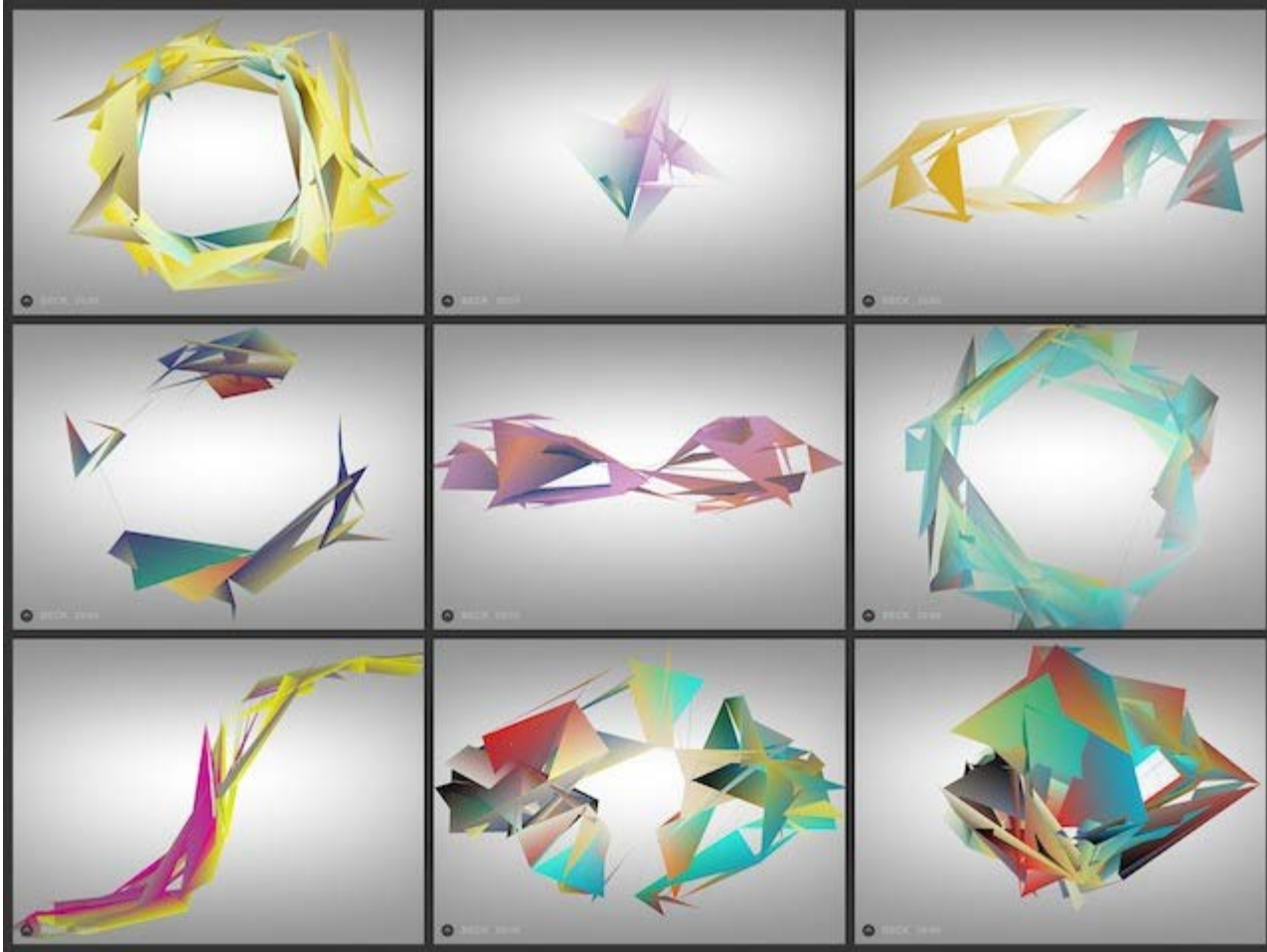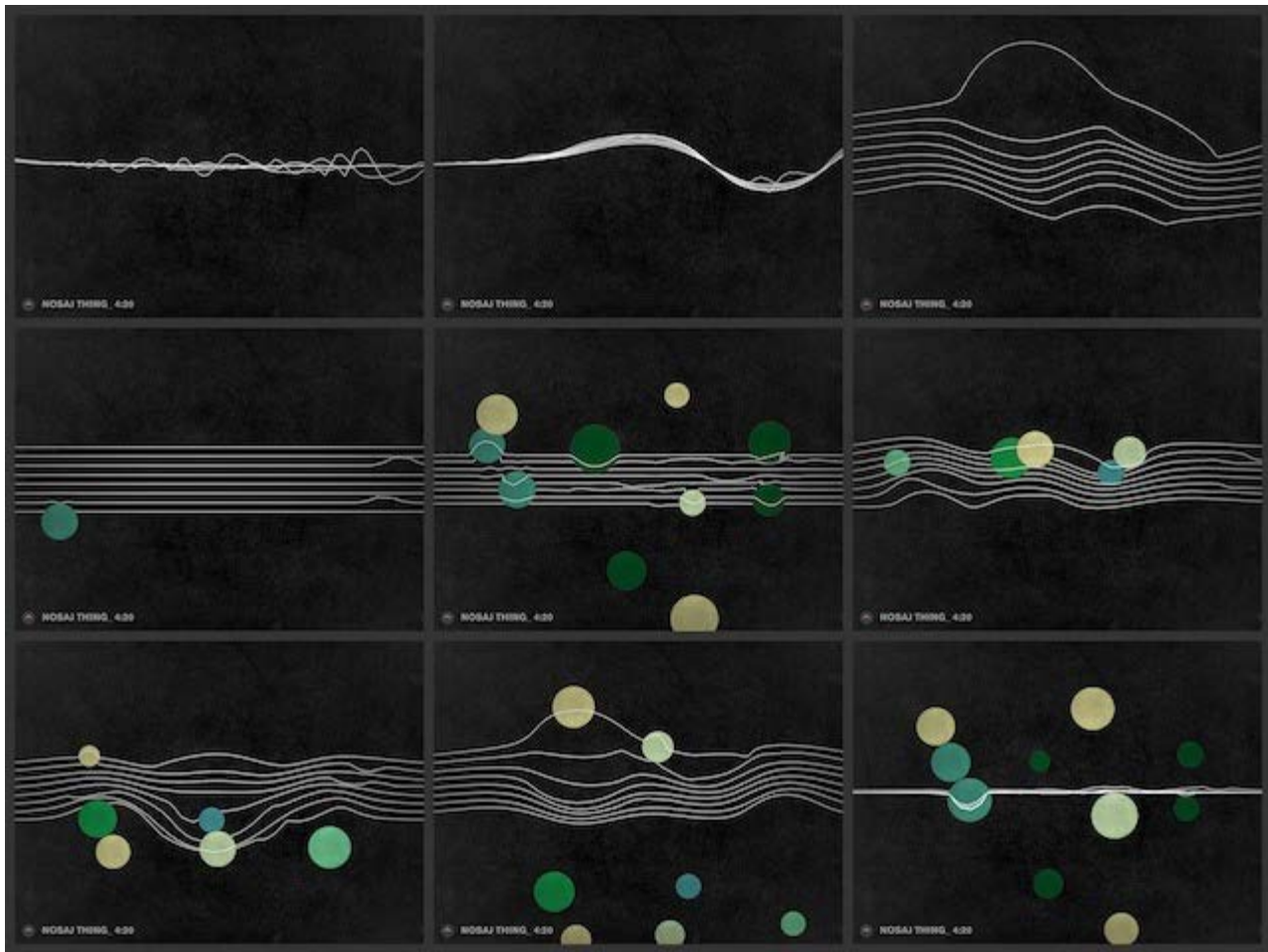

Beck's REWORK_ *app.*

Could you give us a brief description of the visual and interactive aspects of the apps for remixes by our Creators Amon Tobin and Nosaj Thing?

Girshick: We were inspired by the cubes Amon Tobin used in *ISAM*, and felt they worked well with the synthetic masculine sounds in his remix. A plane of building blocks on its own feels barren and plain, but through the app it comes to life through movement of the blocks: 3D ripples, cracks, rotations, and explosions. It's hard for me to resist touching this piece because of the way the 3D blocks respond to interaction.
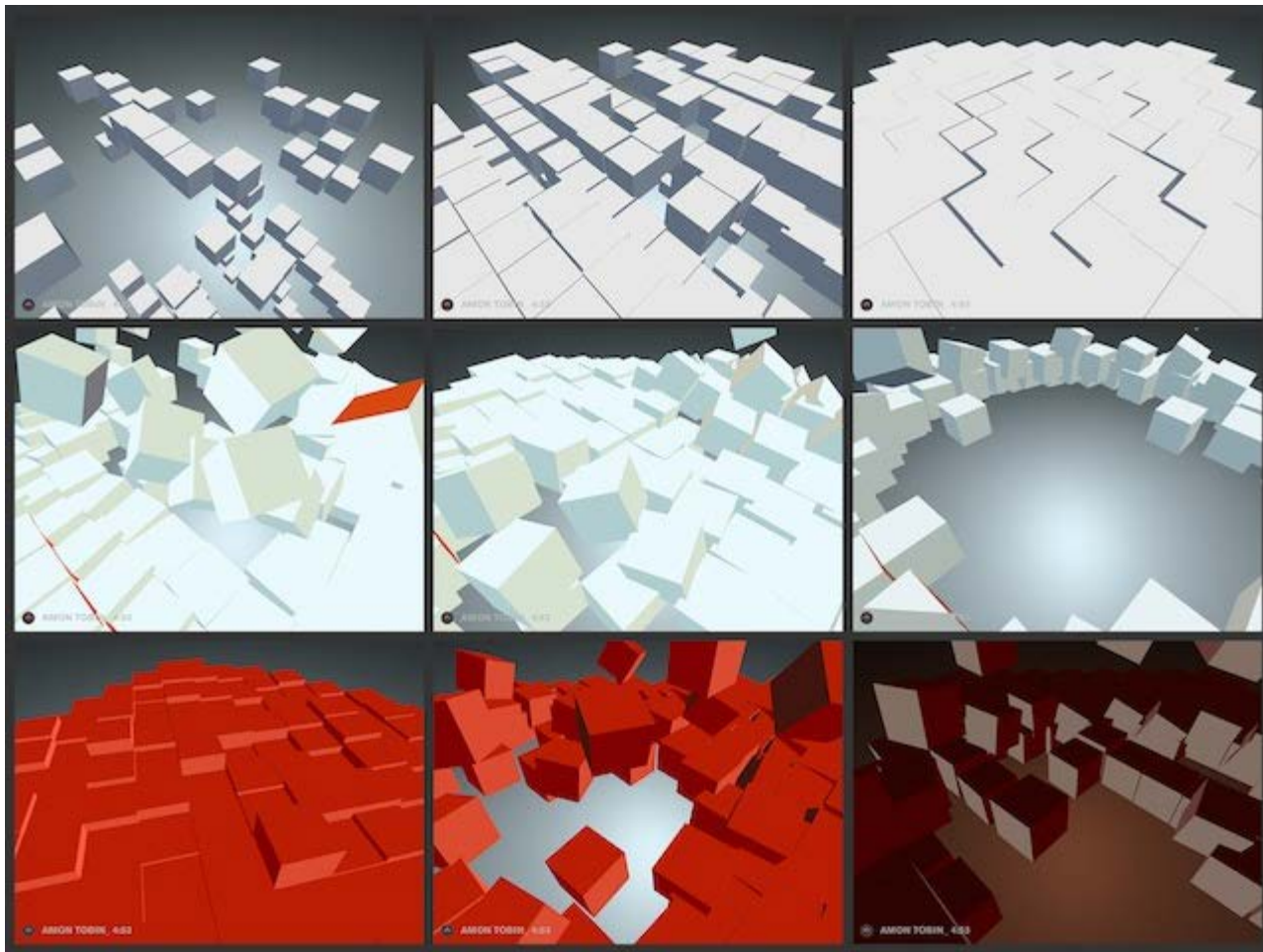
Amon Tobin's REWORK_ *app.*

The Nosaj Thing remix's elegance drove us to see what we could do with a simple set of lines, with the belief that it would be their animated curves and movements through which the viewer would become sensitive to a different dimension of the music. They are at once a metaphor for traveling sound waves, a traditional musical score, or plucked guitar strings, and they are driven by generative algorithms that create complexity out of simple rules, just like music.

Nosaj Thing's REWORK_ *app.*

Scott Snibbe showing Philip Glass the apps.

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