

Translation

The Musical Works of William Engelen

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The musical works of the visual artist William Engelen are so individualistic that they cannot be placed even on the meanwhile so diverse spectrum of contemporary composing: musicians playing traditional instruments in a park or in different rooms of an apartment. A choir sings; people and birds whistle. Digestive sounds intone from a large pipe, and religious songs form a sound sculpture on a large square. This is music that legitimizes itself less by means of the characteristics of its sound than by a relationship, vary-ing from work to work, between the visual, space, and the acoustic. Its sites of presentation are parks, city squares, mobile phones, silos, and museums. There are musical scores, but they seldom display notes or other signs from a composition system. In the artistic shuttling between visual art, architecture, and music, between exhibition, performance, installation, sculpture, and composition, temporary mixed musical forms -arise whose site-specificity makes them irreproducible.

Historical Preconditions

Visual artists' aim to blow up the boundaries between art and music in order to gain new fields and spaces for creation from the synthesis of the two directions of art is as old as Modernism itself. Again and again, nothing less was at the center than the unification of the incommensurable: the static and the dynamic, being and transience, space (surface) and time – art's polar "states of being" (Gertrude Stein). The synaesthetic color theory of Wassily Kandinsky at the beginning of the 20th century was still more or less a virtual synthesis music and painting, like the cupola project *Mosaïque lumineuse de la coupole du temple* of Ivan Wyschnegradsky, but both still had lasting consequences for the development of both fields of art. For decades, however, the results were limited to visual art and music. It was a long way before a curator at the beginning of the 21st century could write: "Today, sound is a self-evident component, often even an autonomous material, in the various fields of play in visual art. It has encompassed all areas of (visual) artistic expression and production [...]."

The breakthrough for real interpenetrations and networkings of art and music did not come until Fluxus, Performance Art, and Conceptual Art. For the essential preconditions arose within these movements: the autonomy and equality of the arts and their materials as elements creating form, as well as a previously unimaginable expansion of the concept of material itself – for visual art as well as for music. Working on these transgressions of genre boundaries since the 1950s and 1960s were not only such artists as Jackson Pollock, Nam Yun Paik, and Joseph Beuys, but also and essentially musicians like John Cage, La Monte Young, Josef Anton Riedl, and a little later Sound Artists like Max Neuhaus and Bill Fontana. In those decades of the last century, what genre-transcending art – i.e., the concept of art itself is and can be went through extensions that must be called revolutionary. In 1992, Wolf Vostell summed up: "First there was Jackson Pollock, who leaped into the painting and walked around on the picture and painted. Then the room entered into it, in that the canvas that lay on the earth went across all the walls, by means of which a space existed. Later, environments as shaped space, in recourse to Kurt -Schwitters, the Merz Stage, and the Schwitters space in Hanover, that is the totally designed space. If artists use time, they compose; if they use acoustics and music, sounds, etc., then something multi-media arises, a mixed form made of objects, designed space, and – especially in the Happening – human behaviors. So human existence can be the foundation of a composition. One can compose something with tones, with objects, but also with human activity, something that can be reduced, conceptual, or very complex." Noteworthy is that, from Vostell's viewpoint, the point is no longer only artistic materials, but that human activity has come into play as an additional parameter. "The Happening is extremely designed life, life designed by the artist, with participation and – especially – with the participants' responsibility for the performance." With this, art's scope for shaping was opened immensely wide – not only that of tone and sound, but also that of life.

Music in Construction

William Engelen's musical works stand in the tradition of this historical development. Because he "uses" time, he composes; by working with tones and sounds, objects and space, something multi-media arises; because his graphic scores give the musicians a voice in performing the works, he composes with human activity. The starting point is usually everyday situations or, better yet, everyday life. This can mean places like a city garden plot, an untenanted business building in a big city, a concrete wall in a school, or a dusty piano. But it can also be his experience with spaces, I like the conspicuously happily whistling truck driver on the streets of Manhattan; it can be documents of lived life, like diaries or a biography.

Spaces that kindle Engelen's imagination are not abstract, architectonic spaces; they are always culturally shaped. Not only the geometrical arrangement of a park in itself and the life culture reflected in it are interesting, but also its diverse, multicultural use (*Partitur Stadtgarten*, 2003). It is not the garden plot that is inspiring, but a bust of Beethoven found there (*Oh Freunde, nicht diese Töne!*, 2004). It was not a blank concrete wall separating two parts of a school that led to a graphic score for singing and speaking (one still waiting for its performance), but pupils and young people's contemporary forms of communication via SMS (*ILD*, 2007). Also inspiring were documents in the form of forty opinions taken from a public discussion of a sensation-causing work by the American artist Walter de Maria for the *documenta 6* in 1977, *The Vertical Earthkilometer*, (*Was halten Sie vom Loch*, 2005), the discovery of a forgotten Dutch philosopher and the timeliness of his writings for religious conflicts in the present (*PpP – pour Pierre Bayle*, 2007), and even diaries given to musicians on commission that are based on their biorhythms (*Verstrijken solo 2005, Verstrijken voor Ensemble 2008*).

Structure, form, content, and the genre of a musical work result from the conditions of the site and the occasion for which it is created: "Most of the works I create are site-dependent. I take a look at the site or there is a theme. I develop a concept out of that,

and whether sound may or should be used is anchored in this site. It suggests the parameters I want to use, and that can also be tone.” Unlike composers, Engelen does not start from a relatively demarcated, autonomous material canon, an artificial system of signs; rather, the parameters of the artistic design result from the respective concrete interrelation between the visual and the acoustic. “Engelen, [...] composes out of visibility,” noted Michael Glasmeier on the basis of the work written for Aachen, - Partitur Stadtgarten. The concept of works like Partitur Stadtgarten resembles what is called “art in construction”, a form of art that enriches everyday life in many ways but that still does not exist for music, despite more than forty years of Sound Art history and an increasing “Verlärmung” (Detlev Ipsen: noisification): the state’s obligation to take a certain percentage of the money put into public buildings and use it for acoustic design. The Director of the Neuer Aachener Kunst-verein, -Susanne Titz, characterized the Partitur Stadtgarten as “a work toward making us experience and be conscious of this public space” and as an “artistic study oriented toward questions of societal structure, social needs, and leisure behavior”.

In this creative relationship between site and sound, the corresponding works by William Engelen resemble Sound Installations. They go beyond that by using instrumentalists, singers, or speakers and often because of the elaboration of scores and their realization as performance. In the interstice between installation and composition, Engelen developed visual-acoustic mixed forms from the perspective and with the imagination of the visual artist. Genre and form are thereby usually the result of the artistic process in the visual-acoustic space, not a predetermined framework. This frame can be familiar forms like environments, sound installations, or concert installations, but also less widespread forms like the landscape concert, Musical Walk, live-recorded improvisation (Aanslag, 2005), or new forms like a concert dance performance in a graphic space (In every single way, 1999). In every case, these are forms synthesized from visual spaces and sometimes human behavior and acoustic sequences.

Sound

William Engelen accepts as sound “everything that enters the ears”, i.e., the entire spectrum of acoustic expressions of life, sounds whether natural, animal, created by humans with instruments or voice, or those of urban life. Either the site he is working for provides him with the sounds, as an indoor swimming pool did in the proposal for the Sound Art Prize Marl 2008, or the specific qualities of the site inspire him to create sounds to add to it. As a visual artist, he regards it as a matter of course to adopt the concept of material that John Cage publicly proclaimed for the first time in 1937 and that, since the middle of the 20th century, has shaken the foundations of music by treating tone, sound, and stillness as equals and giving equal treatment to chance and to composition technique. This was seconded by art movements like Fluxus and Conceptual Art. For Engelen, however, sound is less something “found” than associated material to be shaped. Even in a work like 88 (2004), an environment made of the sounds of a piano tuner and abstract, rainbow-colored wall painting in a 35-meter-high silo seven meters in diameter, the live-recorded sound material is not a chance result; rather, its structure results from the shaping work of tuning the piano, these approaches to the right tone. He seldom uses sounds arising by chance, like a rumbling stomach and diges-tive sounds in Hungry Tunes, a Sound Installation for an untenanted commercial building in Hamburg’s Bergstraße in 2006. But this work provides a good example of the close substantive relationship between occasion and realization, often seasoned with winking humor: an empty, ramshackle building’s hunger for new tenants and users.

We encounter the phenomenon of the found object more on the level of site and space: as layers of dust that make a disused piano musically interesting or in the selection of concrete sites as “Movements”. of the Partitur Stadtgarten (2003) (Bruchstücke, Augenblick, Wanderwege, Exhibition, Pfeif drauf, Suleika, Wanderwege, Im Friedhof) – along with Verstrijken (2005/2008), one of the most important and extensive musical works in William Engelen’s oeuvre to date. In most of the works, traditional instruments and voices play the central role in sound design. The associated performance extends visual art works by dimensions that are otherwise barred to it: presentation through time and the response of the audience, which is important to Engelen. Audience – and space – are two essential areas in which art opens up to life. But by means of the interplay between graphic score and the performers’ own creative contributions, the sequences of sound seldom follow traditional musical positionings, unless the performers themselves carry them into the music. Engelen regards the learning of these scores as an open process, like that of working up a theater production. The musical sequences are thus not reproductions, but “production processes”, as Dieter Schnebel developed them in connection with his Maulwerke from 1968 on.

Scores

The graphic scores function as an essential agency of mediation between space and time, the visual and the acoustic. They form the matrix for translating spatial experiences into acoustic phenomena. Space, William Engelen said in an interview in 2003, is the element common to all works: space and time and sequences of movements in space. Movement in space is translated into tone. There is always an imagined space, before anything at all is elaborated. As a translation matrix, the scores themselves are an important visual dimension within the musical works. At the same time, the graphic structures ensure that the eventfulness of tone is what primarily creates form.

A good example of the process of translation of space and the visual into music is Engelen’s very first graphic score, Qualcuno è nel giardino for mezzo soprano, clarinet, and accordion from the year 2000; for this reason it will be elucidated at a little greater length here. At the same time, it displays the relations anchored in it between what is musically fixed and variability, and it is thus an indication of why the painter and draftsman, who was once musically active only in rock music, began to use the material of tone at all. For the trio resulted from a loss of the visible – which Engelen compensated for by a translation into musical structures: a scale model of a park with the dimensions 86 x 18 x 2000 centimeters could not be presented at an exhibition in - Milan, so he translated it into an uncomplicatedly transportable graphic score: Qualcuno è nel giardino. A walk through the park in 18 Movements for voice, clarinet and accordion. The clarinet, as a melodic instrument, presents – or translates – the wandering around in this garden and the behavior of the wanderer as musical movement; the accordion, as a harmonic instrument, evokes the spatial forms and structures of the park as tone; and the soprano narrates the story of the wanderer with melodized words and fragments of sentences. The eighteen movements of the score are eighteen segments of the park on eighteen

sheets of paper, depicted as green outlines/ground plans, supplemented with photos from sections of the park model on the opposite side. Into the ground plans, “choreographic lines” are drawn for the tone movements of the clarinetist; words characterize his respective forms of behavior. For the accordion, too, verbal notes designate the character of the respective sites – for example “space under a tree” or “the space opens like a flower and with them the associative space of the implementation in sound. Separately, below this ground plan, are two crates containing line graphics for shaping the singing voice and the text to be sung. Thus, this score determines the instruments, i.e., the number and the timbre of the voices, and the time – each park segment lasts for forty seconds consisting of two sets / boxes of twenty seconds each. Noted graphically, i.e., variably for the musical implementation, are the forms of movement of the lines (tones) and the intervals between motion and pause. The moods in which the piece is to be sung and that change from segment to segment are also verbally determined. Thus, in this example, the pitch, the volume, the concrete melodic sequence, the rhythm, the interplay between expression and character – all the musical factors that give shape – are variable.

If the respective space and with it the material made available are determinant for the kind of tonal translation, then this must be different for every musical work. Composing becomes Concept Art. That’s why Engelen speaks of composition methods that he developed for works like *Qualcuno è nel giardino*, *Partitur Stadtgarten*, and *Verstrijken*. Their implementation stands in relation to the complexity of the starting situation, which in turn determines the kind of parameters of musical shaping and the kind of translations. In contrast to autonomous composing, here one could speak of a responding or relational composing. Thus, added to the garden-architectural, visual starting point of the *Partitur Stadtgarten* was above all the cultural factor, also as social and individual use of such a facility. This resulted in the decision for the individual movements, *Wanderwege*, *Augenblick*, *Pfeif Drauf*, *Suleika*, *Bruchstücke*, and *Friedhof*, and for their instrumentation, structure, content, and site, as well as the kind of performance. Within each of these movements reigns an openness between graphic score and musical shape similar to that in the “park music”. But what is conspicuous is a more precise fixation of the expected musical results by means of note notations and a corresponding legend for the graphic symbols employed. For the individual movements, in turn, various strategies of translation were developed. Just one example of this: With *Suleika*, Engelen responded to the multicultural use of such a public park. He scored the piece for three voices of women from the Arabic culture, had them sit with the depiction of the score on a cloth he designed, and integrated habits of the public, family picnics of precisely the Arab peoples into the performance: “During the performance, the women should in part sing, then again talk, eat, drink, and then in the next part sing again. Actually, without beginning and end.” The sung text comes from Goethe’s *West-Eastern Divan*, which was first translated into Arabic and then transposed into a phonetic script.

A third example of yet again quite different strategies of translation is finally *Verstrijken*. This work extends Engelen’s composition method of translating visual or cultural givens into musical structures to apply to human patterns of behavior and moods. The source of inspiration is no longer a site or cultural space – although spatial constellations continue to be important for the performance – but diaries, the rhythm of everyday human life, which, however, takes place in concrete spaces. To set down comparable parameters – and thus parameters whose time structure makes them suitable for composition – for the ensemble version (2008), Engelen focused the diaries on the activities of sleeping, eating, working, traveling, and leisure. Here, too, translation became a process of several steps: the musician’s experiences in socio-cultural situations and spaces > translation into language and script > diaries in text form > graphic notation > implementation in “sound, music, and gesture” in collaboration with the musicians > translation of the composition’s concept and form into an audible form as concert performance or Sound Installation. When William Engelen places visual structures, social spaces, and cultural sites, human behavior, and musical implementation into relationship, what results are forms of art that are anchored in life.

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Georg Weckwerth, *Vom Klang der Kunst. Ein Erfahrungsbericht*, in *Positionen. Beiträge zur neuen Musik*, Heft 65 *Klangkunst*, Mühlenbeck 2005, S. 18

2

Wolf Vostell im Gespräch mit Manfred Chobot, *Galerie Inge Becker Köln, Texte*, www.galerie-baecker.de/kuenstler/vostell/vostell_text.HTML, Wien 1992

3 Ebd.

4

In the distinction between space and site, I follow Michel de Certeau in: *Kunst des Handelns*, Berlin 1988, p. 219: “A site is thus a momentary constellation of fixed points. It contains an indication of a possible stability. A space arises when one brings directional vectors, velocity dimensions, and the variability of time into connection. Space is a network of movable elements. In a certain way, it is filled by the entirety of the movements that unfold in it. It is thus a result of activities that give it a direction, make it subject to time, and make it function as an ambiguous unity of conflict programs and contractual agreements.”

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William Engelen im Gespräch mit der Autorin am 29. Mai 2008 in Berlin

6

Michael Glasmeier, *Pastoralen* in: *Katalog William Engelen, Partitur*, Neuer Aachener Kunstverein 2003, S. 15

7

Susanne Titz, *Partitur Stadtgarten* in: *Katalog William Engelen, Partitur*, a.a.O., S. 11

8 Ebd.

9

In: John Cage, *The Future of Music: Credo*, in: ders. *Silence. Lectures and -Writings*, Middletown, Connecticut: Esley University Press 1986 = Vortrag im Rahmen eines Meetings der Kunstgesellschaft von Seattle 1937, Erst-veröffentlichung in den USA 1958

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Vgl. *Breaking the code of the score*, William Engelen, Constanza Macras, Philipp Oswald interviewed by Thomas Wulffen, in:

janus Sound and vision

Nr. 15/2003, S. 44–47

11 William Engelen zu Suleika in: Partitur Stadtgarten, a.a.O., S. 56

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Siehe dazu auch: William Engelen, Verstricken ... die Zeit, die vergeht in: Positionen. Texte zur aktuellen Musik, Alltag, Nr. 76/2008, S. 44–45