

Around the clock

On the biochronological composition “Verstrijken”

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Can we hear when “it” is time? Punctually at birth, our senses are given us. God willing, we hear ourselves upon our first cry. We can immediately see light and dark. We feel, taste, and smell. We orient ourselves in the world, feel sheltered and at the right moment, without any clock. Until the time when we understand the big and little hands and can read the numerals on the face or on the digital display of the clock, and with them a completely abstract idea of time and space enters our life, until then we simply follow natural rhythms and our own melody.

Later, when we are familiar with the clock and its cycle, our experience of rhythm and our own way of experiencing time become two of the most important and individual aspects of our biography. Our early habits in relation to time – for example the rhythm of sleep and wakefulness, pauses to eat, favorite hours – often accompany us throughout our entire life. We don’t always respect them. But at any rate we adjust ourselves, as well as we can, to being a morning person and beginning the day as an “early bird” or to being a night person living as a “night owl”.

As soon as our experience of time begins to grow, we discover the desire to HAVE time. And then the yearning grows to direct for ourselves the course of our days. As does the hope of being able to autonomously “plan” our time. We dream not only of following the clock, but also of filling the time given to us in accordance with our own will. In this way, we gradually try to connect the textures of the various chrono-segments of life with each other. Unfortunately, the words for this are often not very helpful. What distinguishes “over” and “just now”, “soon” and “immediately”? How long does “always” last? And how far away is Christmas?

Later we prefer to describe time in terms of numbers; we have the face of the clock before our eyes, around the clock. Perhaps, in youthful megalomania, we try for awhile to simply ignore time. To disrupt its dictate. We pull all-nighters, sleep away days at a time, turn our back on past and future, and call out to ourselves: “Yesterday and tomorrow? Who cares!” But after the escapades everyone returns to the valid tempo. And even in those in whom a healthy feeling for their own intrinsic time survives, the conflicts between biological rhythms, between the subjective feeling for time and social time scale, seldom diminish in the course of life. Rather, they tend to increase.

For several years, William Engelen has devoted himself to this existential theme – our unavoidable entanglement in a complex and complicated space-time diagram that revolves around the present as source of coordinates. Again and again, his questions about the living relationship between site and time have transformed into working material to be shaped. In the visual area as well as in the area of sound. In his search for answers, he not only posed the artist’s question, “Who am I?” He questioned further: “Who and where am I – here and now? And what is it that I do? And how long do I do something? Where does the concrete day bring me?” And above all, he wanted to know: “What does this life rhythm sound like?”

In the course of his work residency in Quebec, Canada in 2005, he also investigated these questions and began keeping a meticulous book of hours. The first writing exercise on his biorhythms took 32 days. Knowingly or intuitively, he followed the traces of old rituals in which our forefathers consciously indulged in “timeouts” from the customary routine. Logging minutes of the day thus became a kind of boundary-crossing for William Engelen. Up till then he had never in his whole life done anything like keep a diary. Of course, he was aware of his desire for an accustomed, practiced rhythm. In the tact of a moderate alternation between work and rest, gregariousness and time on his own. Now he noted down the specific sequence and sorted his actions and omissions into four categories. He distinguished among sleeping, eating, working, and leisure, categories that seemed to make sense to him. But concretely assigning these categories to actions was not so simple, already because often our everyday actions shade off into each other imperceptibly. There are hardly any crystal clear, abrupt switches.

Let’s simply imagine the problem like this: If an artist sits with friends, eating in a restaurant, and talks about an art exhibition, what category does that fall into? Leisure, eating, or work? In this case, William Engelen decided: this is eating. He also describes the circumstances and formulates the concrete parameters of the respective day: Did I eat alone or with others, was the meal eaten restfully or did I have to wolf it down? Did it taste good, was it perhaps even delicious, or should I forget it again fast and digest it as well as possible?

As a temporary, self-commissioned diarist, he is astonished at the new experience: that every day, for precisely 24 hours, “time” quite naturally simply “i s t h e r e”. But that does not mean by a long shot that we also pay attention to it. It does not mean that we precisely observe the course of things during the specific day, nor that we can describe it accurately. All concepts of time that are in words seem to him to be a vague and flighty result of intellectual processes of comparison and, in that light, to be primarily a matter of agreement.

So after completing his writing days, William Engelen made the next boundary-leaping decision: He wanted to assign a time segment of four seconds to each hour. He not only fragmented the course of the day, he also compressed it to the extreme to improve the possibility of depicting it. Eight hours of sleep thus became a little more than half a minute, a chrono-segment that he

transformed in special “notations”, lined up, and gradually allowed to blossom into a chronological composition titled “Verstrijken”. As the quintessence of his notes, he allowed the stream of described time to pass in 51 minutes and 22 seconds in the form of tone patterns.

A good month of living time was newly narrated in just under an hour, compressed and transformed into Sound Art. Into a solo for violin.

In it, the sequence of time and the rhythm of life were made much more clearly audible than is usual in everyday life. Each day received its very own sound, hour by hour. The instrument’s bow modeled the structure of the day: here a pretty, bright melody, there everything was shaggy and diffuse in accustomed routine. Sometimes the tones were restless, hectic. Or a long squeak followed and then a long stretch played nightward. Sounds grew dark. The piece moved from a bright major to lows tuned to a minor key.

The extraordinary concert for solo violin was performed on November 11, 2005 and demanded from violinist Clemens Merkel of Montreal’s Bozzini Quartet a truly maximum achievement. But he managed it. Intensely concentrated, the soloist played the unusual score of a thoroughly novel, biochronological composition. William Engelen’s biorhythm, the tact of his days and the loops of his nights, had become more than a drawing on paper, a lineature “once around the clock”. Now one could also hear the changes in mood and the rhythm of the course of days. Hour for hour in the same tact. And equally meticulously to the minute. The passage of time was not told in words, and not in numbers, but in tones. And the clock – it alone – provided the tact.

Two years later, there was a consistent continuation of the artistic setting. Back in his chosen home, Berlin, William Engelen asked nine musicians to write the same kind of “time minutes” for him, for one week. The assignment sounded quite simple: Each person is to describe the sequence of his own time. Again, each should try to move within very clearly distinguishable categories: working, eating, sleeping, traveling. And don’t forget leisure. Not until the end would one see whether and the degree to which the courses of the musicians’ days synchronized and how clearly the rhythm of these days could be made audible.

It was a fascinating and risky experiment. All in all, it may have been closer to an ephemeral group performance than to a work of Concept Art with a strictly calculable outcome. The musicians agreed. They kept diaries. But of course the results of the week’s minutes differed as much as did the instruments they played. How else could it have been? Everyone looked at his own watch. Each kept minutes as accurately as possible, but experienced the time in accordance with his own feelings. Even the starting times of their common rehearsals rarely corresponded. In this way, the perception of time, the respective content and timbre of experienced events, was reflected and expressed differently. William Engelen received notes of epic length and telegrammatic short reports like those from an experimental laboratory. In accordance with the musicians’ nature and sensibility, the reports also varied widely in clarity and accuracy. And yet they became the best working basis for the new work “Verstrijken voor Ensemble”, which premiered in the Museum Bojmans van Beuningen.

In Spring 2008, this work was performed in Berlin. This time only three musicians played an intimate little salon music version. The instruments were not played in the museum, nor in a special installation. The performance came close to and under the skin of its listeners, played in a family-style context in an apartment in Prenzlauer Berg district. The violins could be heard in the kitchen; the clarinet resounded in the salon; the cellist played in the library. Sometimes the musicians exchanged places. Of course the audience was in motion; only a few stood still. One wandered about through the rooms, was not simply in fixed places but en route in quiet steps.

Although this time there were only three musicians who interpreted their diaries in accordance with William Engelen’s scores, there were good and very audible dissonances and equally surprising effects of simultaneity. Contradictory harmonies characterized the segments in the morning, for example, when the musicians met to rehearse. Travel segments began at the same moment, but were experienced completely differently. Allegro, non troppo, legato. Thus, in the clarinetist’s mealtimes, listeners heard very typical tongue pizzicati or crescendi of increasing pleasure, from hungry to satisfied. Sometimes the nights sounded poorly slept. Or as if indifferently accepted. Or simply restful. Or they were joyfully vibrant, and more happened than one dared to dream. Or the melody notations repeated an entry that tremeloeled with complaints of insomnia and bad dreams.

In the colored drawings with temporal sequences, the diaries were transformed into scores for the performance. William Engelen does not write notes in the conventional sense in these scores. But his compositional notes are extremely exact and precise, in terms of the tones’ pitch, their length, whether major or minor, whether they were to be played on a precise second or whether there was room for improvisation. It’s all in the scores. There is a glossary that interprets, attributes, and explains the exact signs. Consequently, the musicians play the rhythm and sequence of their days precisely as they described it in their diaries. Each orchestrates his own tact, and yet each tone combines with the surroundings in a common sound.

It’s a fantastic experience that this accord offers us. How does it sound at 10:41 p.m. when it says in the diary, “... the day now fades away”? Lacking energy and restless, or satisfied and fulfilled? How should one imagine “satisfied” or “delicious” in sound? What tact applies to the commentary “animated company”. Or when a musician wrote in his diary “Traveling – but somehow under stress from appointments”, how does he interpret that musically? This is precisely what one hears in “Verstrijken”!

The research approach for this unusual method of composition ultimately panned out wonderfully, as both the performances and the drawings in the scores prove. The success lies not least in the musicians’ quality of musical interpretation and performance – and in the staging of the work of art, thanks to which “Verstrijken” provides us listeners a strange and extremely rare listening experience.

Do we ultimately ask ourselves how audibly the rhythms of our modern life harmonize? How good living together can sound? Or how dreary it can be? How aggressive being against each other can be? This is all sound and can be heard. Once more, it becomes audible how rarely the harmonies of social synchronicity are distributed. There is a good reason why television viewers sit as if euphoriated in front of the tube or at a “public viewing”, when three-quarters of all possible television viewers experience the same international match at the same moment with the same dedication and a similar interest in the play at a semi-final. And if a goal is scored, everyone joins in a jubilation of millions.

But such moments are the exception. Our everyday experience sounds different. Many are personally isolated, lost in the biggest crowds, in the middle of an externally hyper-simultaneously networked society. In which anything always goes, with everyone and everywhere. So it seems. Because we can be reached, in almost every place. We eat – incidentally. And sleep – sometime. One can turn the night into day, inform oneself globally, watch TV in the car, follow one’s computer with live streaming in the train, listen to the radio while walking, telephone from one continent to another, somewhere at the side of the road under an open sky. But in the end, we suffer psychological jetlag. That difference between a virtual informational glut of the senses and an unquenchable hunger for experience in real time and frenzied yearning for a natural life tact.

With his chronological composition, William Engelen took on our wish for this give form to the “here and now” as the reflection of wakeful presence. As a visual art, he draws time. As a Sound Artist, he translated the processes into scores. As an Action Artist, he compressed the action and brought it to performance. And as an ensemble player, he let the presence of his musicians fuse into one great, mighty, common sound. In all harmony and with all contradictions. Because that’s the way life ticks.