

WILLIAM ENGELEN'S SCORE 32 BPM AND THE TRANS-SENSORY NATURE OF SOUND SCULPTURE

With "32 bpm", William Engelen has created an artwork for the Kunsthalle Mannheim that consists of four formats: from the graphical notation of the score, via the ephemeral performance and the subsequent presentation of the recordings as a video and sound installation in the BOX, to the album with

a booklet in which this text is published. "32 bpm" is a site-specific composition for percussion performed for the first time by the musicians of the Mannheimer Schlagwerk in cooperation with the Mannheim University of Music and Performing Arts.

Engelen's works are based on scores for whose compositions the artist integrates certain characteristics of the venue, objects, or also the musicians. Be it the instrumental interpretation of a park in "Stadtgarten" (2003) for the Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, the performance in a former iron works in "Partitur Belval" (2016) in Luxembourg¹ or playing music as a conversation with a house plant in "Jochen" (2011) — the composition always includes an alienating and cunning element that goes beyond the music and belongs to the artistic concept. Engelen uses the instruments not to reproduce melodies and conventional pieces but as sound sources that make a situation visible and audible. In this respect, Engelen does not work as a musician but as a conceptual artist and composer whose oeuvre builds upon the achievements of New Music and the artistic neo-avant-garde.

For visual art in modernism, the engagement with performance, body and sound is linked to the experiences of music and the performing arts. Only after a long latency period do these experiments make it to contemporary exhibitions. Engelen's piece "32 bpm" is influenced by this background and adds to the transdisciplinarity and trans-sensory nature of the arts. Arnold Schönberg changed the traditional European tonality and paved the way for New Music. Karlheinz Stockhausen

set the standard for the degree of interpretational freedom with "Zyklus, Katalog Nr. 9" for one percussionist (1959). John Cage's composition "4'33'" in three movements with-

out notes from 1952 as well as his organ composition "Organ2/ASAP" from 1985 for piano and 1987 for organ are further reference points between Engelen's work and musical models that deal with the endurance of sound and time.

lines and to keep to the beat of "32 bpm" when playing — call to mind strategies of Conceptual Art as they can be found with Sol LeWitt, for example.

For the percussionists of the Mannheimer Schlagwerk, Engelen specifies a controlled selection of nine instruments that are played to the same beat. Within this formal and temporal specification, the artist allows the self-organization of the sequence, meaning improvisation within the grid of the rule. From the 320 selected dots and the resulting numeral sequence, five ordered sequences with ten one-minute time intervals each can be noted down that structure the piece which lasts fifty minutes. The increasing reduction of the density of the beats from 320 in the first ten minutes to 256, 194, 128, and finally 64 in the subsequent time intervals — thus resulting in the temporal extension of the resonance — lends the performance a meditative character. Fewer and fewer beats resound toward the end of the concert. Pauses, silence and reverberation are perceived more intensely in comparison with the clear and dense sound volume at the beginning of the piece.

"32 bpm" is characterized by a charting of the soundscape through the beats and the intentionally low sequence, comparable to the earlier composition titled "38 bpm" (2016). The frequency is lower than familiar rhythmic sequences and allows one to concentrate on the individual beat and its resonance. The performance of the resonating body,⁴ the museum building, also influences the movements of the audience. In the atrium of the museum, William Engelen installed a sound sculpture on three levels, with eight stations and nine percussion instruments each. The audience can move about in this sound sculpture, via bridges, stairs and the elevator, i.e., in horizontal and vertical lines, to listen to the sounds from different angles. The option of lying on foam mattresses on the floor in the center of the atrium turns out to be particularly intense and meditative. Both movement and repose constitute the sound experience of "32 bpm". The walkable sound sculpture generates

an unusual and unique listening and viewing experience. Site-specific concerts are no rarity in the history of music. They have been held since the Renaissance, and the contemporary composer Rebecca Saunders has

been awarded for her decentral sound sculptures with instrumentalists and vocalists positioned on different levels of the venue.⁵ But with Engelen, the minimalism and the composition oriented towards the sound interval are decisive in guiding one's concentration from listening to the rhythm to seeing and imagining the acoustic space, similar to the way the composer Michel Chion describes the perception of sounds in his

musique concrète. Engelen's piece "32 bpm" also builds upon the effect of "audio-division"⁶ that is not only performed live as

a sound sculpture, but is also exhibited as a video and sound installation in the BOX, the space for experimental art. Engelen's installation engages with "trans-sensory perception"⁷ that unites sonic and visual phenomena. The musicians shown in the video and the music one hears are assembled from separate video and sound recordings. Soloists form an ensemble. The installation creates a context in which the performance can be heard with a surround effect, with the visitors forming a moving center, whether lying on the provided mats or looking and listening from a different perspective. The displayed

score and the composer's instructions refer to the origin of the composition. The artwork is continued in private space, where the album allows the sound installation to be performed again and, depending of

the audio equipment, heard under individual conditions.

Special thanks go to the artist William Engelen, the Mannheimer Schlagwerk under the direction of Prof. Dennis Kuhn, and Edition Telemark with Alexander Meyer, who with tireless preparatory work, an overwhelming concert, and the commitment to distributing the album have composed and performed the score "32 bpm" and preserved it for future listeners outside of the museum as well.

Sebastian Baden

¹ Hubertus von Amelnunx, "Cloud Hangers and Bird Song," in: William Engelen. Partitur Belval, album with booklet, ed. by Le Fonds Belval, Belval, Luxembourg 2016, no page numbers.

² Michael Glasmaier, "Pastoralen/Pastorals," in: William Engelen. Partitur, exh. cat. Partitur Stadtgarten, 07/12 – 09/14/2003, Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, ed. by NAK Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, Revolver, Frankfurt am Main 2003, p. 12 – 17; Klang-kunst, ed. by the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Prestel Verlag, Munich, New York 1996; Sonambiente 2006. Klang, Kunst, sound art, ed. by Helga de La Motte-Haber, commissioned by the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Kehrer Verlag Heidelberg, 2006.

³ Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993, p. 7.

⁴ See Joachim Krausse, "Über das Aufführen von Räumen/On Performing Space," in: William Engelen. Partitur, exh. cat. Partitur Stadtgarten, 07/12 – 09/14/2003, Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, ed. by NAK Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, Revolver, Frankfurt am Main 2003, p. 82 – 87.

⁵ Clemens Hauste, "Siemens-Musikpreis. Weiblich, jung, komponierend," in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 01/17/2019; <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buehne-und-konzert/rebecca-saunders-erhaelt-den-siemens-musikpreis-15992053.html> (last accessed 06/07/2019)

⁶ "Rhythmus als transsensorielle Erfahrung. Ein Gespräch von Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus mit Michel Chion," in: Claudia Blümle, Horst Bredekamp, Matthias Bruhn, Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, Yasuhiro Sakamoto (eds.), *Bild – Ton – Rhythmus. Bildwelten des Wissens. Kunsthistorisches Jahrbuch für Bildkritik*, Vol. 10,2 (04/24/2017), p. 7 – 16, 9; see Cynthia F.

Moss, "Painting the world with sounds, perceiving the world from

echoes," in: Blümle et al. (eds.): *Bild-Ton-Rhythmus*, p. 17–24. ⁷ Ibid. p. 12.

Engelen combines New Music and visual thus creating an oeuvre with the most diverse aesthetic and sensory scopes. notation as a drawing is already a work of art that in terms of content and form refers to the composition's context. As an artist, Engelen thus distinguishes himself from other sound artists or composers who also work with cartographic systems and experiment with notations,² such as John

Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, György Ligeti, Cornelius Cardew, or Iannis Xenakis.

Engelen's artistic work is dedicated to the parameters of musical and artistic performance. Bodies, sounds, spaces, rules, aesthetics, and materials become visually and acoustically perceivable in their condensed correlation. The artist demonstrates and stages the rules of art that can be applied to the field of music in such a way that their subtle social and aesthetic order comes to the fore. Just as historical paintings visually captured music performances as an event and social structure, Engelen creates a contemporary image of architecture, society and sound culture. "Sound in its abstraction is by itself semiotically difficult to control, though socially and culturally it is essential to control as it is those of any other form of human expression and communication."³

Hence, Engelen's works render art and music perceivable while highlighting the communicative structures of public space and private fields of action.

Engelen's institutional critique and reflective art that possesses a humorous twist raises one's awareness of the parameters of the work, something which can be sensed

in the performance of "32 bpm" in Mannheim. The architecture of the new museum building offered Engelen a special and unusual resonating body whose acoustic qualities formed the basis of the composition. The score takes up the grid of the museum's architecture which was conceived as a "city

art, The

within the city” and itself refers to the pattern of squares in downtown Mannheim. 32 rows with 32 dots each are structured to form a dot grid of horizontals and verticals with a total of 1,024 dots. The composition of the score is laid out in such a way that the eight percussionists can navigate it individually. Each instrument is attributed a characteristic dot according to its sound volume and resonance, ranging from 3 to 11 mm in diameter. The instruments used are timpani, gong, triangle, crotales, bongo, wood block, mokusho, reyong, and tubular bell — the last one with the longest resonance and thus marked with the largest dot. On a second sheet, numbers from 1 to 9 are arranged in the same grid structure corresponding with the dots of the score. Here, the instruments are attributed discrete signs that are relevant for the subsequent individual notation of the musicians. The horizontally and vertically arranged dots of various sizes and shades drawn with pencil result in a picture reminiscent of Minimal Art and Op Art. The rows of numbers as well as the only two prescribed rules — to linearly connect exactly 320 dots within the grid through horizontal and vertical