

Still Life with Musical Instruments

“Verstrijken voor ensemble” as Performance and Installation

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Whoever visited the Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen in Rotterdam in Spring 2008 could marvel at an exhibition displaying musical instruments, music stands, musical scores and other objects connected with playing music. This description might lead one to believe that this show was one of works of still life painting, in particular the genre of still life with musical instruments that many painters cultivated with virtuosity in the 17th century, especially Evaristo Baschenis in Bergamo. Until the 19th century, this genre concentrated on the illusionist reproduction of the bodies of instruments like violins, lutes, or flutes, whereby the musical instruments or musical scores were also allegories for the sense of hearing. The theme of the five senses was part of the standard iconographic repertoire of still life painting. The musical instrument still life was revolutionized around 1910 in the painting of Cubism, especially by Georges Braque. The traditional illusory space was transformed into a flat mode of depiction in which “the materiality of the objects [...]” seemed “transposed into a unified colored substance”. In Braque’s painting “Violin and Pitcher” (1909, Kunstmuseum Basel), the depiction of a nail listing to one side points to painting’s traditional role of illusionistically reproducing bodies, which the painting otherwise gives up in favor of many-faceted splintering in a rhythmic surface pattern. Instead of depicting the instruments that produce music, we see a pictorial structure that seems like the translation of their sound into the visual realm. Braque pushed this procedure further, for example in the “Still Life” (Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf) he created two years later, to become a system of sign-like abbreviations almost reminiscent of the writing of a score.

“In all musical still lifes, scores appear, bringing an important element into the works, namely the sign language of the notes,” writes Siegfried Gohr in the catalog of the 1982 Cubism Exhibition in the Kunsthalle Köln, raising the question whether “the relationship between instrument, sound, and score” served as a model for Braque to develop from these “preconditions for making music” a depiction of the “analogy or discrepancy between object, image, letter, and language”.

In modern art, the investigation of analogies, translations, and transpositions between the various senses replaced to a large extent their allegorical depiction. The attempts of early abstract art to visualize “synaesthesias” were followed by ever riper “exits from the picture” (Laszlo Glozer) into the space and performativeness, in which then the ear was actually given something to hear. William Engelen’s art, which oscillates between visual art, architecture, and music as well as between exhibition, performance, score, and model, is to be seen against the backdrop of this development, which we will explore again later. A system of spatial markings is translated with logical rigor onto various levels of depictions that then produce their respective very own modes of experience. Engelen assigns tones and visual signs to each other, without giving either level hierarchical or genealogical precedence. This is neither the “visualization” of musicality nor “putting music” to a graphic score, but an equal interplay that can be experienced either as a live performance or as a spatial staging in the exhibition rooms.

And a spatial arrangement of real objects in space was offered by the “Still Life With Musical Instruments” in Rotterdam that was not painted in a picture, but presented as a real staging in the room. To see it, one had to enter a separate room placed within the museum. Twenty meters in length, ten broad, and almost four high, it had an oval form. The wooden paneling of its exterior walls recalled an oversized musical instrument, but also created a relationship with the rounded forms of Richard Serra’s large iron sculpture, which was already installed in the museum room.

Here, William Engelen’s Sound Installation “Verstrijken voor ensemble” premiered in January 2008. It is based on nine solo compositions for nine musicians. Each solo piece is a musical version of a diary that each of the musicians kept for a week between June 18 and 24, 2007 at the composer’s request. Each hour of the week corresponds to 8 seconds of music. The musicians are asked to write down exactly what they did on each day of the week, for how long, and why and with what emotions they undertook various activities. Based on these texts, Engelen analyzed and compared their activities, daily routines, and rhythms. To make the day’s rhythm audible as a parameter, a number of different activities were reduced and divided into five categories: sleeping, eating, working, traveling, and leisure. Each of these categories received its specific playing and tone material. The length of the activity or category

determined the length in the composition, the emotion accompanying the activity influenced how it was played. The compositions were recorded individually in the studio with the respective musicians.

During the exhibition in Rotterdam there were two live performances, whereby on opening day four versions were heard in various ensembles. Each musician thereby played the course of his day, without taking the playing of the others into consideration. But this did not lead to a cacophony; rather, an astonishingly self-evident, easily absorbed, and almost harmonious overall impression resulted. On the wall hung the graphic score of the composition, following from left to right the sequence of the week “put to music”. But Engelen’s scores not only serve the musicians as a basis for their performance; at the same time they are drawings to be perceived on their own account and in which a broad spectrum of graphic means of expression is developed. On the one hand, they correspond to the criteria with which Peter Frank defined the term “score”. A score is “an unmoved, (usually, but not necessarily) two-dimensional object whose task is to stimulate and order the production of sound”, and, unlike a register of sound phenomena or a diagram of physical processes, the score is there first, “as a depiction of the composer’s intention and not of a prior performance”. The scores can be “read along” during the performance, but they are also independent of the music that is created on their basis; they can be read out of the boundary area between depiction and script that, since the notation-like abbreviations in Braque’s Cubistic paintings, artists have investigated again and again. The spectrum ranges from Paul Klee’s “Pedagogical Sketchbook” through Cy Twombly to the autonomous symbol language of Matt Mullican; with them, the draftsmanlike quality or what is written out of the motion of the hand recedes in favor of clearly fixed pictograms.

Engelen’s score drawings hang from the wall. On the one hand, their horizontal bands can be read as expansive scores and, on the other hand, almost like a mural, like “ILD”, which he permanently installed at the Anne Frank Gymnasium in Rheinau. Their independent character as drawings emerged more clearly outside of the concerts during the museum’s normal opening hours. The studio recordings of the individual musicians were now played at the same time, whereby each instrument could be heard alone on its own loudspeaker. The loudspeakers were set up in the room in accordance with the positions of the musicians, resulting in a tonal image that corresponded as closely as possible to the impression one would have at a live concert. The instruments, chairs, and music stands used by the musicians were a part of the lastingly traversable installation within the concert room that William Engelen designed especially for this composition.

If one calls “Verstrijken voor ensemble” an installation, one must note the “fine line between an installation of art and installation art”, a differentiation that has always been observable since the rise of the term “installation” in the 1960s, which Claire Bishop’s “Critical History” of “Installation Art” (published in 2005) points out right in its introduction. Is Engelen’s arrangement merely the “installation” of various works in an exhibition room or, going beyond the possibility of physically entering the spatial ensemble, is there an inner consistency present “that insists that you regard this as a singular totality? Installation art therefore differs from traditional media (sculpture, painting, photography, video) in that it addresses the viewer directly as a literal presence in the space. Rather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, installation art presupposes an embodied viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision.” Bishop briefly traces the already almost canonical story of the intentional conception, tied to installation art, of physically experiential spaces. It stretches from El Lissitzky, Schwitters, and Duchamp through the Environments and Happenings of the late 1950s and the minimalist sculpture of the 1960s to the rise of real Installation Art in the 1970s and 1980s and usually ends with the apotheosis of institutionally sanctioned large-scale installations that fill whole museums like the Guggenheim in New York or the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern.

With an art of marking spatial relationships and sensory data, Engelen stands over against the strategy of overwhelming the senses, with which Olafur Eliasson, for example, has great successes today. Instead of following today’s installation art’s tendency to ever more bombastic formats, Engelen’s spatial concepts lead, on the one hand, back to the precise notations of Cubistic musical still lifes and, on the other hand, they make the traversable room seem like a three-dimensional picture. The concert hall, abandoned by the musicians and the audience, thus recalls the restaging of real spaces, like those of a driving school, a supermarket, a television studio, or a composer’s death room, as the Belgian artist Guillaume Bijl has set them up since 1979 in galleries and museums. But, unlike the concert hall set up by William Engelen, Bijl’s rooms have no practical use, and the critical point, which aims simultaneously against the commercialization of societal life and against turning culture into a museum, lies in eliciting the active participation of the recipients.

With William Engelen, not only the room, but also the performance of a concert seems as if lifted out of the accustomed social context and pushed into another; Joachim Krausse found the fitting formulation for this, calling Engelen's art the "performance of spaces" as early as 2003. The performance room of "Verstrijken voor Ensemble" set up in the museum is a spatial "installation" that displays outward similarities to an ordinary concert hall, but a concert performed in the exhibition is fundamentally subject to parameters of perception that differ from a concert series of New Music, for instance. The actions of the musicians seem to be a site-related performance beyond their instrument playing, and the experiential background with which the listeners/viewers must set their perceptions in relation is based on the tradition of staged live events in visual art. The elementary difference between experiencing a concert and a performance lies in the many actions by John Cage or the early Fluxus activities of Nam June Paik or George Brecht. Perception is directed less toward the performed music than toward the framework conditions, which Cage made programmatically clear with the unplayed piano in "4:33". The ever further pushed penetration of space and performance in the exploration of the boundary area between the visual, the scenic, and the musical leads in the most various forms further, which was prepared in the pictorial notation of the Cubistic musical still life as a score. William Engelen bundles many aspects of this development once again, as if thereby again turning around the process that the Canadian musicologist Murray Schafer described in the 1970s, namely that "the habit of notation of music [...] made possible many ideas and forms of Western music [...] that were adopted by the visual artists and architecture". With Engelen, namely, almost the exact opposite occurs in that he has musical events take place that he subjects to forms of staging and perceptual parameters that come from the visual arts.

A hundred years ago, the Cubists subsumed the forms of objects in scores, so to speak, and thereby "translated" musical spaces as if into visual ones. With William Engelen, such convictions have become a highly complex interplay in which also very simple events of everyday life become the basis for scores that can be performed. And so, in a directly experienceable way, Engelen's art confirms the fact of societal life, also formulated by scientific observers, that to a certain degree social spaces are always also stages upon which people perform their roles. Life is a performance, and when the performance is over, the instruments are strewn about without being played – like in a still life, and the immobility of the still life always pointed to the vanitas idea: that the curtain of life ineluctably falls someday. The most famous curtain of art history is still the one that the ancient painter Parrhasios depicted with such virtuosity that even his colleague Zeuxis was deceived and wanted to push it aside. Parrhasios' curtain was part of the fixed repertoire of the optical illusionary *trompe-l'oeil* still life; with his illusionistically painted nail, Braque reminded us of this, but had something else in mind. In his examinations of the relationship between painting and music, Werner Hofmann writes that if one wants to "relate them to each other well-foundedly", one must "work out the model character of their structures. Only therein are they comparable to each other." This insight, gained through Kandinsky, Cubism, and the music of the Vienna School, could be applied to William Engelen's oeuvre now coming into being almost half a century later, if one more or less struck out "painting" and entered in instead drawing, graphic art, architecture, performance, installation, and other things, which play a role in Engelen's complex investigations of models, structures, transpositions, and translations. Every attempt to pin down his art's identity, to put it into a pigeonhole bearing a label naming what "is" inside, will always fail, like the hare's pursuit of the tortoise. But there are many entrances one can use without knowing in advance precisely where they go. And the door we have taken is called "Still Life With Musical Instruments".

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Siegfried Gohr, Figur und Stilleben in der kubistischen Malerei von -Picasso und Braque, in: Kubismus. Künstler – Themen – Werke – 1907–1920, Ausst. Kat. Josef-Haubrich-Kunsthalle Köln 1982, S. 105–118, hier S. 112

2 Ebd., alle Zitate S. 113

3

Peter Frank, Visuelle Partituren in: Karin von Mauer (Hg.), Der Klang der Bilder. Die Musik in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts, Ausst. Kat. Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, München 1985, S. 444–449, hier S. 444

4 Claire Bishop, Installation Art. A Critical History, London/New York 2005, S. 6

5 Ebd.

6

Vgl. Ludwig Seyfarth, Wirkliche Beteiligung ausgeschlossen. Zur Aktualität und kunsthistorischen Rezeption von Guillaume Bijls Werk, in: Guillaume Bijl, Installatios & Compositions, Ausst. Kat. S.M.A.K. Gent, Köln 2008, S. 353–356

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Siehe Krausses Beitrag in: William Engelen – Partitur, Ausst. Kat. NAK -Aachen, Frankfurt a. M. 2003, S. 83–87

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Murray Schafer, Klang und Krach. Eine Kulturgeschichte des Hörens, Frank-furt/M 1988, S. 164

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Werner Hofmann, Beziehungen zwischen Malerei und Musik (1969), in: ders., Gegenstimmen. Aufsätze zur Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts, Frankfurt/M 1979, S. 82–113, hier S. 84

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