

## Visual Sounds of the Urban.

### On the Musical Moment in the Work of Frauke Schlitz

Cities have always been an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the arts. Their multiformity, their sounds, their constant change are an expression of human activity of its time. In the city, social structures and behavioral patterns solidify into manifest architectures – thus temporary phenomena are recorded alongside phenomena that develop over decades. As a constantly bubbling melting pot of the Anthropocene, cities combine the historical with the new; what exists is reshaped, reinterpreted, or destroyed and redeveloped.

The city and its form find visual resonance in Frauke Schlitz's drawings, paintings and installations. Observations she makes in cities such as New York, Seoul, Berlin and Stuttgart are transferred into abstract compositions in her artistic practice. Her works trace urban atmospheres without concretely depicting places or scenes. Instead, visual perceptions flow in as the experienced sound of the surroundings, associatively felt.

In 2021 Frauke Schlitz developed the collage works *Passage* and *Many Ways* for her exhibition *Urban Notes*. The artist set complex structures of paper strips of different lengths and widths on large sheets of Hanji paper. Composed of delicate shades of color, the ray-like arrangement of lines creates an exciting dynamic with a complex ambience. The works were created at a time when Frauke Schlitz's studio was located in the center of *Stuttgart 21*, one of the largest construction sites in Europe. Surrounded by impressions of the construction process, she observed on a daily basis the constant shift in stores of reinforcing steel and other building materials and was exposed to the pulsating background noise. This atmosphere shaped her sense of form and color and is channeled into the strict cadences of her paper collages. They are a visual distillation of experienced urban space, a transcript, like the notes of a score. The exhibition venue for which the works on paper were created also significantly influenced these artworks. The listed Gedok building in Stuttgart, designed by the architect Grit Revellio, is one of the outstanding works of post-war modernism. Its clean lines and the delicate color tones of its component parts resonate in the collages.

Just as Piet Mondrian once viewed jazz and New York's orthogonal street grid as typifying the US metropolis and employed them as a starting point for abstract paintings such as *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43), the sound and atmosphere of the experienced city influence Frauke Schlitz's work. The significance of the sounds of cities for the artistic interpretation of the urban was expressed as early as 1927 in Walter Ruttmann's famous silent film *Berlin: Sinfonie der Großstadt*. He conveys the permanent acoustic overstimulation of the city through a dynamic editing technique. Rapid sequences of images of roaring traffic, repetitive labor and evening dancing tangibly transmit the heightened noise level of the metropolis. Ruttmann thus succeeds in capturing the sounds of the city in the silent moving image.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Frauke Schlitz's collages and their powerfully rhythmic composition create a visually resonant atmosphere of spaces and cities. They recreate a feeling, a sound of the urban.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Morat: Sound des Jahrhunderts. Die Sinfonie der Großstadt. Berlin und New York, 2016, available at: <https://www.bpb.de/themen/zeit-kulturgeschichte/sound-des-jahrhunderts/210144/die-sinfonie-der-grossstadt/> [Accessed: 22.09.2023]

Frauke Schlitz's work is realized not only through two-dimensional images, as with *Passage* and *Many Ways*, but also as free-standing sculpture within a space. The observations made during a working scholarship in the megacity Seoul clearly resonate in the fragile-looking sculpture *Another Seoul Thing*. Frauke Schlitz uses materials traditionally found in South Korean architecture. Wooden slats of varying thickness are joined together to form a paravent-like construction of orthogonals. The complex construction is divided by areas of Hanji paper and given rhythmic structure by bars set next to each other at varying intervals. Here, too, experienced urban space and observed architecture are embedded in a work of art, detached from the concrete place of inspiration.

In contrast, the 2023 installation *Notation* references architecture directly. It is an in-situ work that temporarily occupies the monumental tunnel system of Stuttgart 21's construction shell. In her contribution to the transdisciplinary exhibition *Solid Transitions*, Frauke Schlitz introduces her own *Notation* into the space using differently colored wooden slats.<sup>2</sup> In a manner recalling intarsia, she utilizes the mounting rails necessary for the construction work. She thereby emphasizes a practical detail whose narrow metal strips otherwise blend visually with the concrete architecture and are barely visible. Once the mounting rails are noticed, however, their ubiquity in the tunnel system becomes apparent. Following their own logic, they run through the entire space. These rail components become the music sheet for Frauke Schlitz's installation. Her notes are the wooden slats of different lengths and colors, whose rhythmic arrangement makes up the melody of this spatialized score. By means of this *Notation*, the artist shapes the space with color tones and directs the gaze to the characteristic idiosyncrasies of the place: to its overwhelming dimensions, to its monochrome grey, to its still unfinished construction. It is simultaneously a tactile exploration of the place and an invitation to viewers to perceive it precisely. For notation is generally understood as a form of recording created for interpretation, whether through language, dance or music.<sup>3</sup> This openness characterizes Frauke Schlitz's installation and, in the context of *Solid Transitions*, constitutes a welcoming gesture of connection between neighboring artistic contributions, especially dance and song. Although the installation primarily classifies intrinsic aesthetic value as visual art, it unmistakably resonates with the potential for interpretation. In this it is reminiscent of the musical graphics of Earle Brown, whose ink drawing *December 1952* features bars of different lengths and widths distributed across the page, arranged orthogonally to each other. In contrast to Frauke Schlitz, Brown developed his notation explicitly for interpretation by musicians, while simultaneously understanding it as a discrete work and thus contributing to the establishment of musical

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<sup>2</sup> For the exhibition project 'Solid Transitions. Kunst in den Rohbauhallen von Stuttgart 21' (6-8 January 2023), 14 artists were invited to respond to the construction site of the large-scale urban development project 'Stuttgart 21', to question its meaning and to explore the potential of its architectural dimensions. See <https://solid-transitions.de> [accessed: 25.9.2023]

<sup>3</sup> See Angela Lammert, 'Notation oder vom Eigenwert visuellen Denkens in Raum und Zeit' (*Notation or the intrinsic value of visual thinking in space and time*), transcription of the lecture given at the MiED workshop 'Notation as a working and cognitive tool in artistic research', Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, 8-9.6.2021, available at <https://blog.hslu.ch/mied/2022/02/21/notation-oder-vom-eigenwert-visuellen-denkens-in-raum-und-zeit/> [accessed 25.9.2023].

graphics as an autonomous genre.<sup>4</sup> The space drawing *Notation* by Frauke Schlitz is the spatialized development of this visual music. However, the basis of her work is not the blank page, but the existing space and architecture. Her visual composition is an explicit reaction to the space. It is a response to the specifics of what is perceived, as seen in previous installations such as *Response* (2017). Channeling the musical pattern of *call and response* that is especially well-known as an element of Afro-American music, she developed an installation with filigree wall drawing that referenced the vast timber framework of the Galerie im Kornhaus (Kirchheim), and conceptualized the exhibition space as a stage. In 2016, the cramped conditions of the Brooklyn Art Space inspired her to create the spatial drawing *Hiding Place*, in which fine lines open up disconcerting spaces on the walls and create a destabilizing effect for the viewer.

Frauke Schlitz's site-specific installations combine her ongoing interest in overarching urban phenomena with concrete work in and with space. Here, the guidelines of her artistic practice flow together and are carried by the underlying sound of the city.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Earle Brown, 'Notation und Ausführung Neuer Musik', in: Ernst Thomas (ed.), *Notation Neuer Musik* (= Darmstädter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik, 9), Mainz i.a. 1965, p. 76 f.