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NEW YORK

The New York Times

When Visual Artists Make Music

Musical works by Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein and Laurie Anderson all feature in an exhibition in Vienna that explores intersections between two art forms.

By Kimberly Bradley

Oct. 31, 2018



VIENNA — Some artists lead double lives, and an exhibition with that very title at the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna explores the intersections between visual art and musicianship.

On large projection screens suspended at different heights (with sound coming through hanging headphones), the show features clips of painters, sculptors, performance

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artists and conceptualists making music on instruments, as singers, producers or in artist bands. Visitors can move from video to video, plunging into the worlds of early avant-garde music by Yves Klein, performances by Throbbing Gristle; Fluxus artists like Yoko Ono; or slick music videos by contemporary bands like Trabant.

Eva Badura-Triska, an art historian at the museum, which is known as Mumok, who curated “Double Lives,” had the initial idea for it after a conversation several years ago with the Austrian artist Heimo Zobernig. “We talked so much about music because he was involved in it in the 1980s. I hadn’t realized artists making music was such a topic,” she said in a recent interview.

Edek Bartz, a musician and producer based in Vienna, was brought in as a music expert; the two began with the early 20th century. “I frankly didn’t realize that Marcel Duchamp was making music, and he even wrote the most progressive and avant-garde music before he made his readymades,” Ms. Badura-Triska said.

The show divides the music by style and context (including Fluxus, Protest Bands and contemporary), showing only clips and omitting the art objects, although the latter are on view digitally on tablets within the exhibition space. Ms. Badura-Triska said that one thing the artists all had in common was “a conceptual approach.” Some of them made new discoveries, she added. “This show is part of rewriting art history.”

Both curators explained the stories behind the music in this exhibition, which runs through Nov. 11.

Hermann Nitsch, ‘Organ Composition in Four Movements’ (2013)

“I produced the first record Hermann Nitsch ever did,” Mr. Bartz said. “And he always composed music with a score, even if it was quite avant-garde.” Mr. Nitsch, the Austrian spearhead of the Viennese Actionism movement of the 1960s, which focused on scripted performance art often involving provocative bodily functions and fluids, was not classically trained as a musician; his theatrical and musical works have nonetheless included “shouting choirs” and Gregorian chants. “Organ Composition in Four Acts” was composed in 2013 and performed in Mumok’s exhibition spaces in October by the artist, who is now 80.

This article was published on NY Times Oct 31, 2018:

[New York Times Article: When Visual Artists Make Music](#)