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Magnus Frederik Clausen in conversation with Michael Schmidt for 'Work' at Claas Reiss

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The exhibition is accompanied by Magnus Frederik Clausen in conversation with Prof. Dr. Michael Schmidt about his current body of work's similarities to music and the relationship between composer, conductor and orchestra, drawing parallels to the musical processes of John Cage, Johann Sebastian Bach or Duke Ellington.

Schmidt is a musicologist and coordinator of the BR-KLASSIK program at Bayerischer Rundfunk and currently teaches at the Munich University of Music and Performing Arts and at the European Graduate School. He is particularly interested in the development and research of multimedia communication of music. His academic activities include numerous publications on music and media topics and he has held lectureships at various institutions in Germany and beyond.

MFC: I am happy to have this talk with you, Michael, and to explore how your musical knowledge connects with my current research on painting. In my eyes, the body of work I am doing at the moment has several similarities with music in the way it is structured. But before going into this, I should probably describe how the paintings are created.

I make the paintings in my studio with the help of different assistants. I start by preparing canvases of various sizes and materials. Some are primed, others not. Then, next to each canvas, I place a specific brush, a specific type of paint and a piece of paper with a given time unit written with a pencil. The time unit could either depict an analogue or a digital clock. I then ask my assistants to translate the clock from the piece of paper to the canvas using the brush and the paint I have previously selected.

In this process I often thought of the papers as a kind of score, since they are not properly a sketch, but rather a piece of information that the assistant has to interpret and recreate on the canvas.

MS: Interesting parallel. There is also an intention of letting go, where you make some crucial choices regarding the painting's creation, but then, in the end, lose control and give free space to the assistant.

MFC: It's a balance between losing and regaining control. During the act of painting, I sometimes give the assistants instructions, such as limiting the time they have to paint, which hand they have to paint with, or the placement and size of the time unit on the canvas. Other times I let them decide it all. I often feel like a conductor before his orchestra and I am intrigued by the relationship between these two parties. Could you please elaborate on that?

MS: In traditional Western art music, the conductor works with a score by a composer, e.g. the *Symphony No. 5* by Beethoven, and an orchestra performs it. The role of the conductor is to realise the composer's vision of the score through his interpretation. Each variation is unique: faster, slower, louder, softer and so on. On the other hand, the space of freedom for the musicians in the orchestra is quite small because they have to follow the conductor's will.

The second case is the solo work, e.g. one of Beethoven's *Piano Sonatas* performed by a pianist. There is no conductor here, and the soloist is free to follow his own interpretation. This is why philosopher Roman Ingarden said that a score is a so-called 'intentional object'. It means that the score contains specific directives, but is open to endless variations as the interpreter must complete it with his ideas or feelings.

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A third case is improvisation in jazz music, where we can have many different settings. One is the soloist improvising on a well-known melody. Another is a trio or quartet improvising together. We can also have a dominant musician like Miles Davis, a kind of a conductor giving his band the primary impulses for improvisation.

MFC: Your last example sounds like the one closest to my process. While I don't claim to be Miles Davis, or Beethoven, for that matter. I have a group of assistants to whom I give specific directives and a certain space for action. Even if the main motive comes from me, at one point I take a step back and let the assistant become a co-creator and allow their impulses to influence the work.

MS: This method makes me think of *Music of Changes* by John Cage from 1951. It's the first work in the history of Western music whose form is exclusively the result of chance operation. The title comes from the Chinese text *I Ching*, also called the "Book of Changes", a symbol system used to identify order in chance events. For Cage, this book became a perfect tool to create chance-controlled compositions: he would ask the book questions about various aspects of the composition, and use the answers to compose. It's a very intuitive solo piano score that gives a lot of space for the performer to be a co-creator.

This is even more valid in Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* from 1957-58, an open modular piece with no conventional rules or restrictions. Cage's intention in this concert was to hold together extreme disparities. Both specific directives and specific freedoms are given to each player, including the pianist and the conductor. The conductor, by his gestures, represents a chronometer of variable speed. The pianist is free to play any elements of his choice, wholly or in part and in any sequence. The orchestral accompaniment may involve any number of players on more or fewer instruments, and a given performance may be extended or shortened in length.

We can say that John Cage is the initiator of a musical process with an open horizon. The final piece contains much more than his own creative expression. In a way, Cage denied not only any construction or method, but also intention and subjectivity.

MFC: The most exciting aspect of this project for me is the possibility of skipping the action of painting, stepping back, and observing my works being created. This distance gives me a clearer view, free from the sentimental blurriness I sometimes feel when I paint myself. I find it much easier to see whether there is the quality I'm looking for in the painting that is being created in front of me by another person's hand. Sometimes I intervene with new instructions midway and even ask the assistant to wipe the canvas out and do it all again. I guess it can all be traced back to an attempt to dissect the whole painting process.

MS: Or maybe just work within the painting framework in a less limited way? Going back to the parallel with the score, it's worth mentioning that it hasn't always been so fixed and rigid as we know it today. The scores by Johann Sebastian Bach, who is widely considered a master of Western classical art music, are based on specific melodic forms, but the pitch register or even the instrumentation are not given. This means that they can equally be performed by a piano soloist, or a string quartet, or an orchestra: one music piece, many possible outcomes. The same is valid for a lot of Baroque music, where parameters such as time duration and intensity were not so important and therefore not specified on the music sheet.

It was first in the Viennese classical period, when concerts and dancing became a hugely important aspect of life and culture, that musical notation started looking and functioning similarly to how it is now. And in the Twentieth century we come to an almost geometric level of organisation with composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen and his serial music pieces. In this sense, Stockhausen and Cage are two opposite poles: the first is for total control and the second for openness and chance.

MFC: Yes, and there is no right or wrong. It's a matter of becoming aware of the system you work within. With the clock paintings, I realised that I'm not interested in the one-to-one realisation of the paper drawing, but rather in creating a setting where there is space for chance and surprise.

I have also been thinking that my 'score' could be anything else other than time units: it could be a word, an image, a drawing, and the end result would be the same for me. I have even started to explore whether the assistant can become 'me', that is, I instruct one assistant to take my role in conducting the others. Then I leave the studio, and when I come back the following day, there are a lot of paintings I have to sort out: certain ones are finished and ready to be shown, other ones need another round, and so on.

MS: I can see a fundamental aspect at play here: taste. You offer the assistants freedom to operate, but the final word about what is a good painting is yours. You are the judge of your own work...

MFC: Yes. And here lies the most significant difference between the assistants and me. It was difficult for them to accept that one of their paintings got painted over. I had to tell them that it doesn't matter if one of their works isn't finished right away. Some paintings just take longer. The assistant might not have completed the painting today, but they still added something to it that will matter in the end. All information added to the canvas has a say in the final painting.

MS: Nothing disappears. It's a process of transformation, or accumulation, of information.

MFC: Exactly. And because the painting's motive in itself is quite simple, all these layers of information have a considerable weight in why and when the painting eventually is - in my opinion - good and ready to go. Maybe it's precisely because a painting was painted over multiple times that it becomes good, or interests me the most.

MS: What you tell me makes me think of the old painting schools from the Renaissance, with the master that sets the agenda and the apprentices that begin with copying sketches and will end with producing works in their own name.

MFC: What has struck me most about working with assistants for the first time in my career is that I can give them instructions and explain my point of view, but I cannot teach them my taste. So far this has been impossible to capture and formalise.

MS: On the one hand, your way of instructing and supporting the assistants makes me think of Duke Ellington. While he was a brilliant pianist, he generally preferred conducting and regarded the band rather than the piano as his primary instrument. At the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival, picking up on the energy of the solo played by the saxophonist Paul Gonsalves, Ellington began to shout his encouragement to Gonsalves, who ended up playing 27 choruses in a row. I find the same kind of trust and enthusiasm in the collaborative aspect of this project.

On the other hand, you act almost like a sound engineer, balancing and adjusting sound sources and outputs. When a sound engineer is working on a recording, his responsibility doesn't end with the act of recording the performance. Like a sound engineer, you are in charge of editing, mixing and mastering the tracks (the paintings) so they present the best consistency with your own artistic vision.

MFC: I have often thought of this project as an equaliser with many different buttons I can turn on and off. The more buttons I have, the more factors are at play. But I can also decide to switch all buttons off

and only press the one called 'brush size', or 'communication between the assistant and me', and so on. Basically, I make the rules and then decide whether to use them or not!

MS: At the end of the day, your whole project is a quest for an epiphany. Generally, the term refers to scientific breakthroughs or spiritual discoveries, but it can also be used to describe those musical experiences which can provide a sudden realisation of one's fullest potential, almost like an understanding of the heart. Duke Ellington described the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival as his 'second birth'. Maybe you have planted a seed for your artistic epiphany!

(The transcript of the conversation has been reviewed and edited by Copenhagen based curator and writer Paola Paleari and Daniel Graham Loxton)