

Esther Schipper

ARI BENJAMIN MEYERS
BLACK THOUGHTS
SEPTEMBER 07 - OCTOBER 05, 2013
ESTHER SCHIPPER, BERLIN

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“Serious Immobilities” is performed every Saturday and on Friday, September 20th
by Fernanda Farah, Anouk Froideveaux, Ela Spalding, Jan Terstegen and Thomsen Slowey Merkel

Esther Schipper is pleased to announce the first solo exhibition of Ari Benjamin Meyers at the gallery.

The artist and composer Ari Benjamin Meyers is interested in exploring modes of representation and presentation of music and musical structures in the context of visual art. His conceptual projects and installations often expose inconspicuous yet tangible details of music-making: music scores themselves, forms and arrangements of musical instruments, concert settings, and gestures of performers and conductors. At the same time his compositions and performances seek to challenge the relationship between performer and audience.

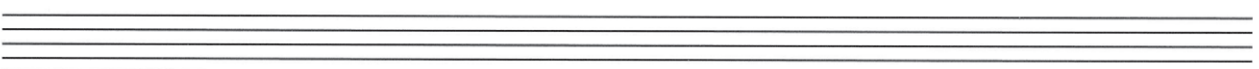
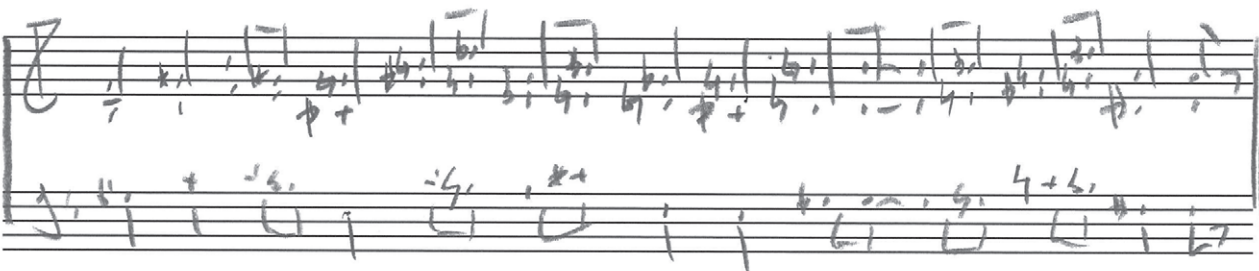
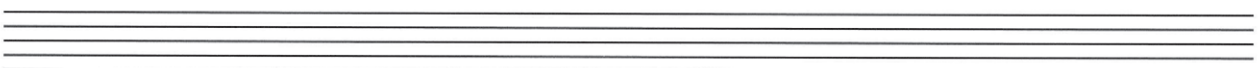
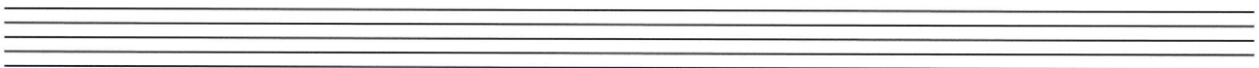
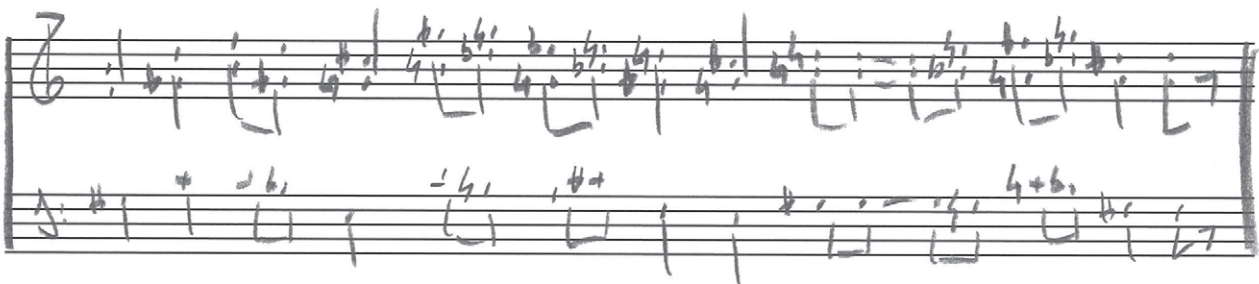
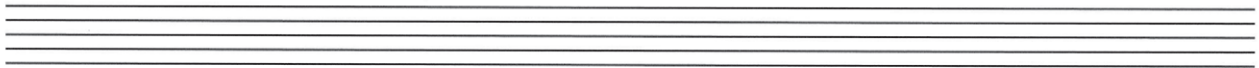
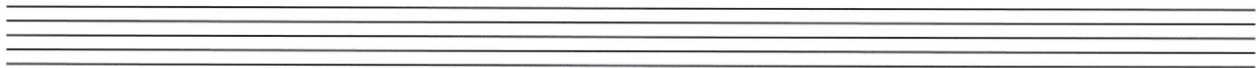
In the exhibition “Black Thoughts” Ari Benjamin Meyers pays tribute to the composer Erik Satie (1866 - 1925). Proposing a series of variations, re-enactments and repetitions, the show questions the concepts of originality and authenticity and the idea of what constitutes a musical performance.

Satie’s composition Vexations (1893) is the departure point for the installation shown in the first room of the gallery. Taking up Satie’s instruction to perform 840 repetitions of the one page-long piece, Ari Benjamin Meyers displays 840 hand-written copies of his own recomposed version of the original titled Vexations 2. The grand piano (The New Empirical (840hz)) standing in the centre of the room has been completely rebuilt and restrung to perform just one tone: A-flat (840 Hz), the single note that was left out of the main theme in the original composition by Satie. The alteration can be discovered only by playing the instrument.

The second space of the gallery features the new composition “Serious Immobilities” by Ari Benjamin Meyers. Composed for female voice, electric guitar and electric bass, the piece is performed live every Saturday throughout the exhibition for the entire duration of the gallery’s opening hours. For the rest of the time the instruments and abandoned props become part of the exhibition display. The title “Serious Immobilities” hides a tongue-in-cheek reference to the instruction that Erik Satie wrote on the original “Vexations” score: “In order to play the theme 840 times in succession, it would be advisable to prepare oneself beforehand, and in the deepest silence, by serious immobilities.”

The exhibition reaches beyond the gallery space through a series of anonymous advertisements that concurrently appear in selected international art press and online portals. The printed phrases, for example, “Do you have black thoughts?” recall Erik Satie’s eccentric habit of publishing absurd announcements in the Parisian press of the time. The recurrence here of the word “black” leads back to the image of the black grand piano standing in the gallery space and to the black lines and notes of the musical notation on display.

Ari Benjamin Meyers, born 1972 in New York, lives and works in Berlin. Trained as a composer and conductor, his work has been increasingly presented in an art context since 2007. In his recent solo projects, exhibitions and compositions, for example “Chamber Music (Vestibule)” Berlinische Galerie (2013-2014) and “Symphony X” (installation version) Springdance Festival (2012), the artist has explored structures that redefine the performative and immaterial nature of music. Meyers has realized numerous projects in collaboration with other artists, among them Tino Sehgal and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster. Projects with Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster include the performances “NY.2022” at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2008), “K.62/K.85” for Performa ‘09, New York and most recently “T.451” for Tensta Konsthall (2012). Further collaborations include “Ghost Recordings” with Sora Kim (2013), „The Fairytale Recordings“ with Saâdane Afif (2011) and “The Breathing Line” (2012) with Anri Sala. Ari Benjamin Meyers was Music Director of the staged group show “Il Tempo del Postino” curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Philippe Parreno (Manchester International Festival, 2007 and Art Basel, 2009).



Ari Benjamin Meyers

Vexations 2, 2013

Graphite pencil on paper

840 sheets of custom-made music paper

Size: overall variable, 31,5 x 24 cm each

Unique
(AM004)



Ari Benjamin Meyers
Vexations 2, 2013
Graphite pencil on paper
840 sheets of custom-made music paper
Size: overall variable, 31,5 x 24 cm each
Unique
(AM004)



Ari Benjamin Meyers
The New Empirical (840hz), 2013
Modified grand piano (Irmeler, Leipzig 1893), custom-made tuning fork
Unique
(AM005)

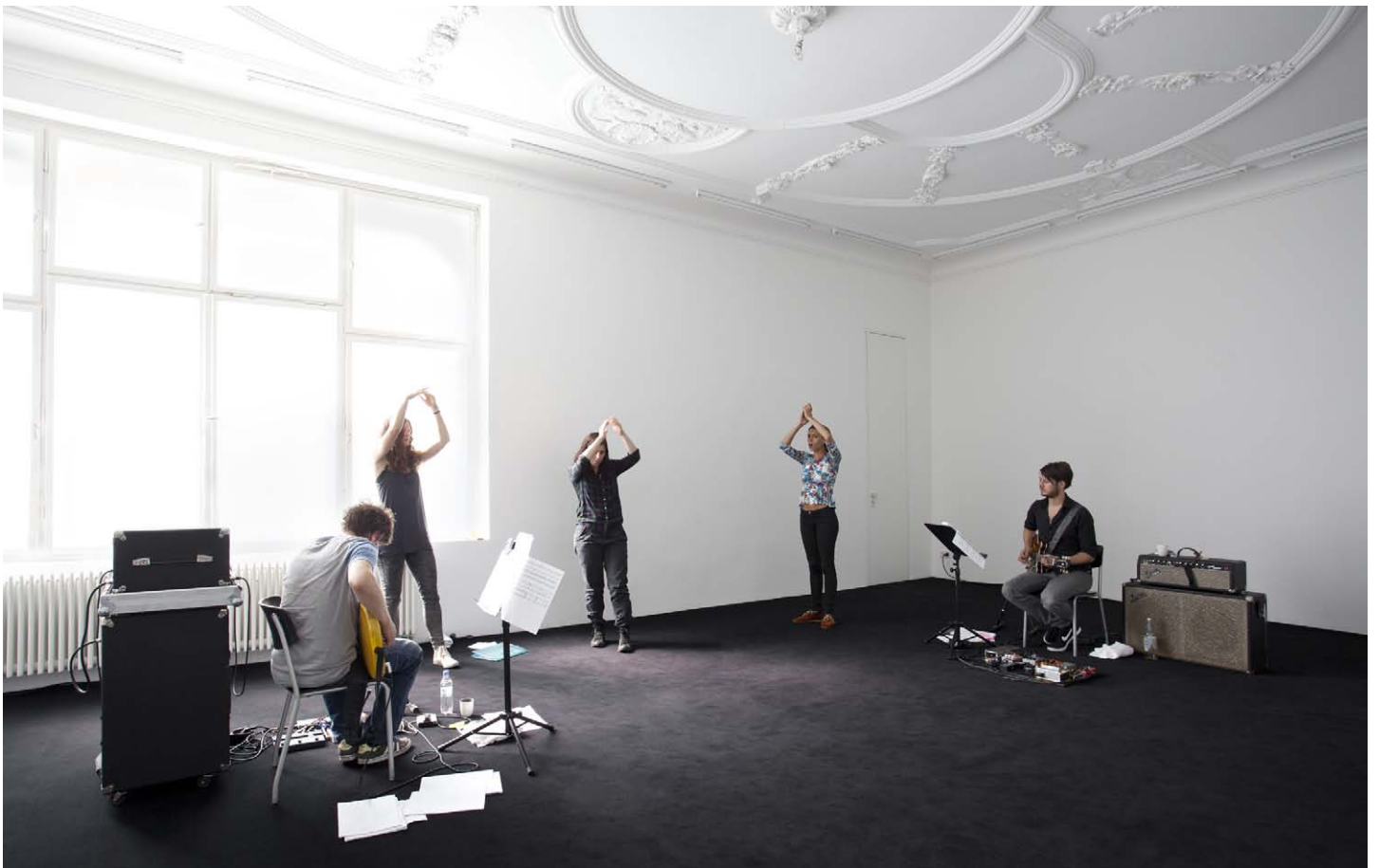


Ari Benjamin Meyers

The New Empirical (840hz), 2013

Modified grand piano (Irmeler, Leipzig 1893), custom-made tuning fork

Unique
(AM005)



Ari Benjamin Meyers

Serious Immobilities, 2013

Performance Composition for electric guitar, electric bass and female voice

Duration variable

Unique
(AM006)



Ari Benjamin Meyers

Serious Immobilities, 2013

Performance Composition for electric guitar, electric bass and female voice

Duration variable

Unique
(AM006)



Ari Benjamin Meyers

Do you have black thoughts?, Tell me about it afterwards.and Specialist in Funeral Marches, 2013

Advertisement

Variable

Unique

(AM007)

Do you have
black thoughts?

Do you have
black thoughts?

A burning sensation in your stomach?
Run to where the dancing classes are held.

Tell me about it afterwards.

Specialist in Funeral Marches

Requiems, Masses arranged for all occasions.
We will deal with any necessary harmonic repairs.
Rapid transformation of symphonies, quartets, etc. etc.
The most difficult pieces arranged for one finger.
Subtlety within reach of everyone.
Sonatas reduced, reharmonized.
Our music comes with guaranteed playability.

No more incomprehensible compositions.

Ari Benjamin Meyers

Do you have black thoughts?, Tell me about it afterwards.and Specialist in Funeral Marches, 2013

Advertisement

Variable

Unique

(AM007)

Everyone will tell you that I am not a musician. That is correct.
Erik Satie

Ari Benjamin Meyers will tell you that he is not a sound artist. And that is correct. It follows that his exhibition *Black Thoughts* includes no sound art. There are no sculptures emitting probing beats, nor hidden speakers sending plangent echoes through the gallery. Instead we hear many notes and see many more scores, yet these are not quite traditional music either. Meyers will tell you that we understand music chiefly in terms of its content and can get too caught up in how it sounds and if it sounds new. That seems correct. We do tend to fetishise the execution and the quality of music while expecting newness from pop songs, even from interpretations of classics.

As for the works in *Black Thoughts* – all from 2013 – *Serious Immobilities* is not a recording. That is indisputable. An electric guitarist and a bass player as well as three singers enact the composition every Saturday for the duration of the gallery's opening hours. Yet this live work is not a concert because it has no clear start and end, nor linear progression. While the composition has ten modules, each can last anywhere from 10 minutes to over an hour because the players are free to decide what sections they would like to repeat and how often. It is entirely possible that they will not reach the final module on a particular Saturday, nor move beyond the first one. These decisions are made spontaneously and imparted with casual gestures, like pointing, nodding, even walking away. Each module is marked by a simple choreography, from clapping to lying down. That said, the work is not quite a performance, nor a dance because there is no clear stage, nor strict division between the players and those who come upon them. As the players move around the gallery space, the visitors may join them to shift from passive to active listening: clap, lie down, sing, hum, be nervous, tap their feet, wonder what will come next, walk away.

What about *Vexations 2*? That is not the original *Vexations*, which Satie composed in 1893 after an affair with the fellow French artist Suzanne Valadon (allegedly his first, greatest and last love). In French, "vexation" means insult and unpleasantness; humiliation and rebuff are synonyms. To make his condition even clearer, Satie instructed every future pianist to play this one-page score 840 times successively. No one knows why he chose the number 840, but the piece could last 18 to 28 hours as no tempo is indicated. Meyers followed neither Satie's destiny, composition or instructions – at least not to a t. Instead he composed his own melody of minimalist tristesse. And instead of playing his score 840 times, he wrote it out so many times. That task is not taking 18 to 28 hours but much longer, as he can be glimpsed during the exhibition quietly penning the last dozen-odd copies at a desk set up in the gallery's alcove.

The New Empirical is not a grand piano. It's likely difficult to see how that could be correct. Large, looming and freshly laquered, the instrument has the appearance of a well-kept grand. In fact, it's an Irmler, built in Leipzig in 1893 (the same year as *Vexations*). But Meyers had the strings radically rewired so that all of the keys play A-flat only (the one pitch that happens to be missing from *Vexations*). The octave changes across the keyboard, but the pitch does not, so every score would sound similar, were the piano to be played. Meyers added a special tuning fork in A-flat (which happens to measure 840 Hz, the number of times *Vexations* and *Vexations 2* are reprised, respectively, as sound and as pencil on paper).

If all of these disclaimers are correct – no sound art, no traditional music, no recording, no concert, no performance... not even a grand piano – then who is Meyers and what the heck is he doing? Although Meyers trained as a composer and conductor, he seems closer to an ontologist. While echoing Satie, the artist wants to question what music is and could be as an experience. For the music industry and many listeners, the answer has been limited: either performances or recordings. For John Cage, the answer seemed to culminate in 4'33" (1952), although this piece still focuses on the content of music, albeit negated to produce the newness of the occasional sounds of the audience surrounding the performers' silence. Yet Meyers wants to explore the nature of music instead of simply writing more of it to perform and to record (or not to perform, as in Cage's response).

Meyers's work could be called "non-aural music", a corollary to Marcel Duchamp's non-retinal art, which breaks from concerts and recordings in the way that readymades departed from traditional sculpture and painting. As a mass medium, music knows few other formats than concerts and recordings, except of course for music videos and marketing. The artistry of musicians tends to be concentrated, if not restricted, to their music because, beyond the live performance, the listeners now decide how, when and where their music will be heard. With *Black Thoughts*, Meyers turns music into art in order to seek other methods of expression and reception.

Thus *Serious Immobilities* is a situational and social composition, closer to the collective, participatory role of music in oral societies, where music is fully integrated into daily life along with poems and singing – and not set apart from everyday experiences in concerts executed by specialists and listened to raptly by a politely mute audience, stifling coughs and sniffles. Note that Meyers's singers are not classically-trained, much like many visitors, which further erodes the separation between concert and audience. *Vexations 2* challenges the idea that the execution of a score lies only in its performance by musicians, over and over again. Here, the composer himself “plays” out every note in his mind and with his hand while offering another physical embodiment of the score.

The *New Empirical* returns to the end of a century dominated by the piano, only to handicap the keyboard. Just as Meyers chooses to copy his score by hand instead of printing, photocopying and digitally sharing it, the artist frustrates the piano as yet another method of reproducing a score. On this keyboard, a pianist can still perform any score since the keys themselves have not been altered. Every score will sound different – distinct from its old original self – and yet pretty much the same as every other score played on this piano. On these keys, the history of music shifts from an endless repetition of compositions in concerts and recordings to the eternal return of music itself, which is reiterated as a pressing question in *A-flat*. And that is correct.

Dr. Jennifer Allen is a critic living in Berlin.

IMPRESSUM

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