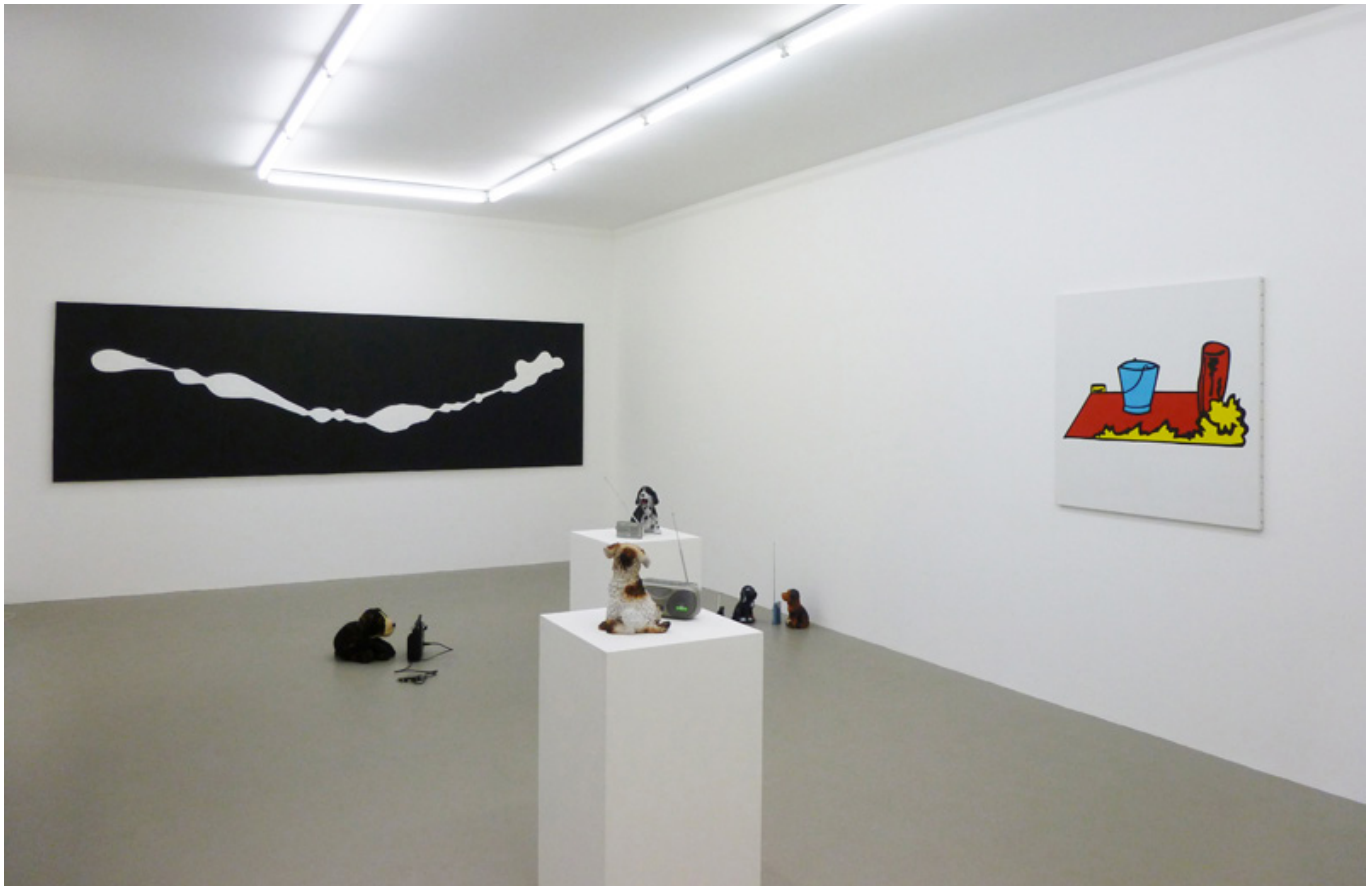
Keith Rowe

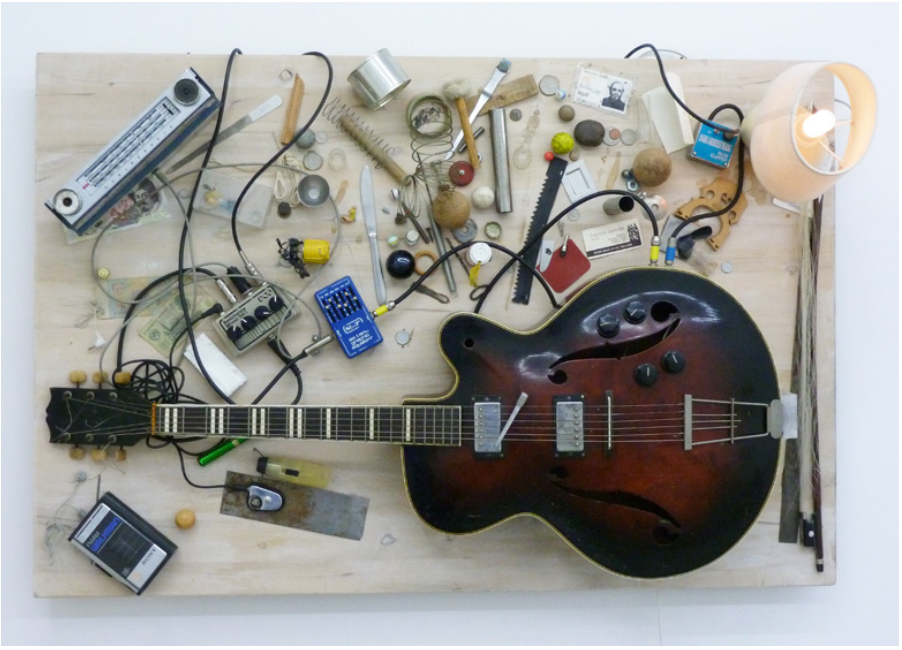
26·06 – 30·07·11

Lüttgenmeijer

Keith Rowe 26/06/2011 – 30/07/2011



Installation view



Guitar Hanging
2006
mixed media
80 x 120 x 28 cm

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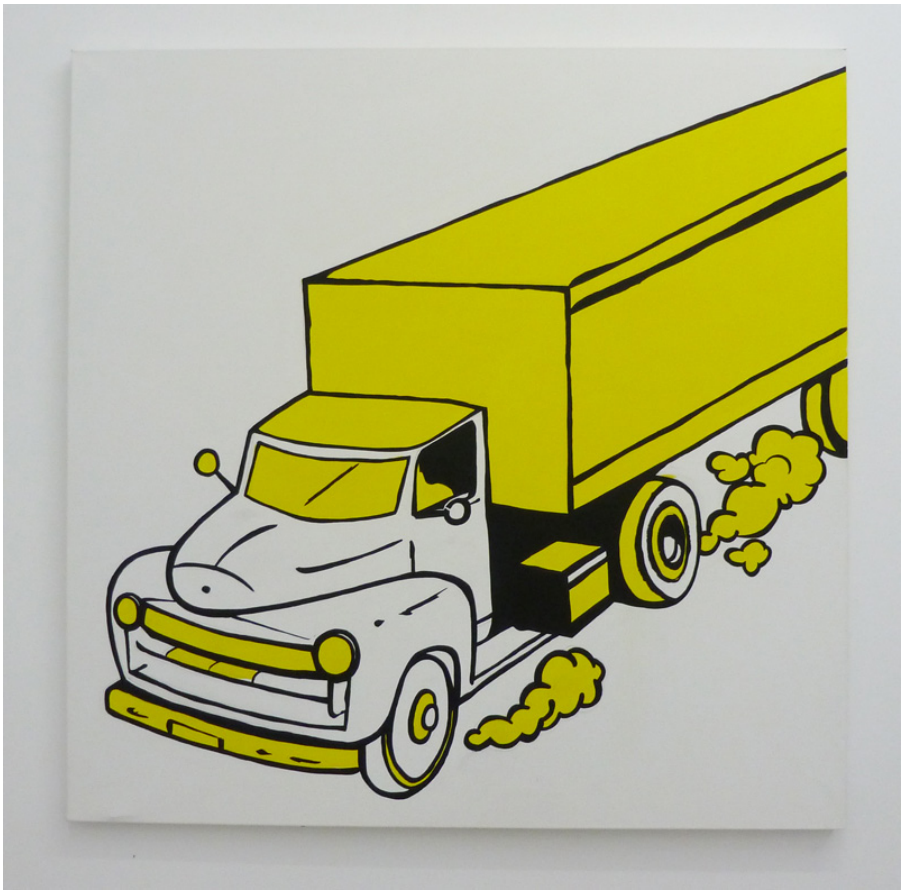
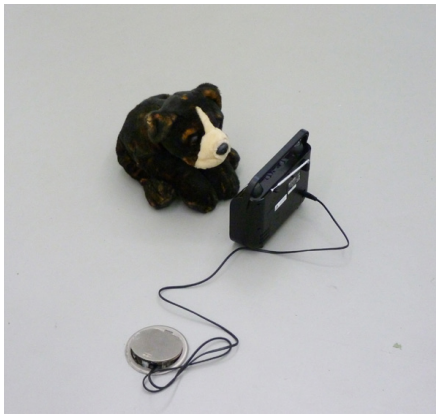
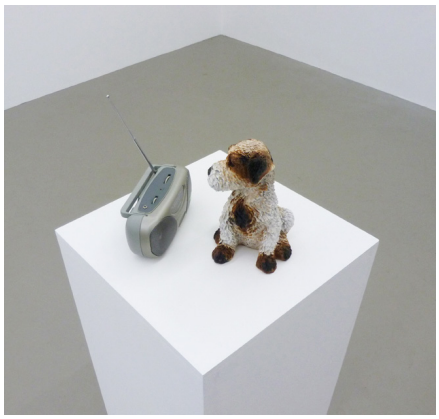
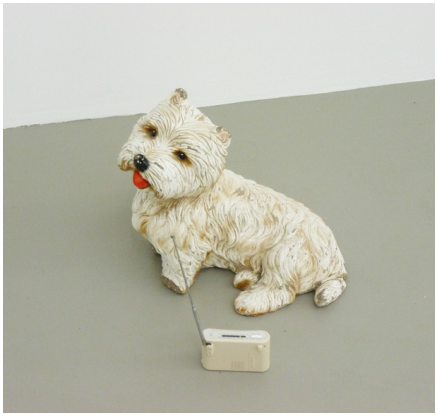


Yellow Truck (Elektra Version)
2002 (original made in 1966)
oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm



Dog and Radio IV-IX
2011 (series started in 2005)
mixed media
dimensions variable





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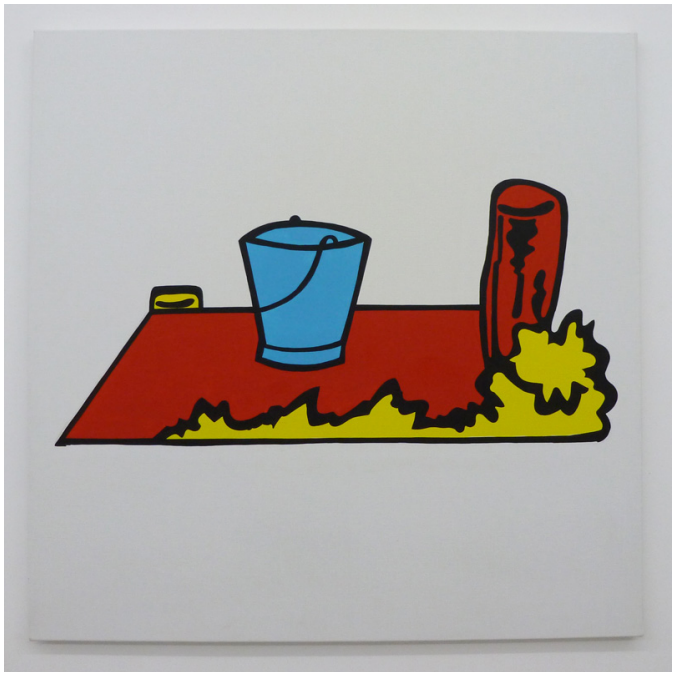
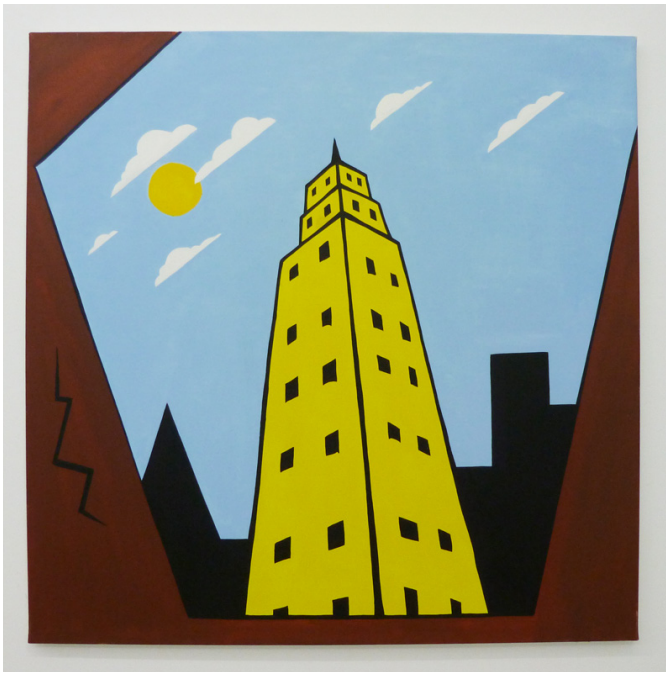
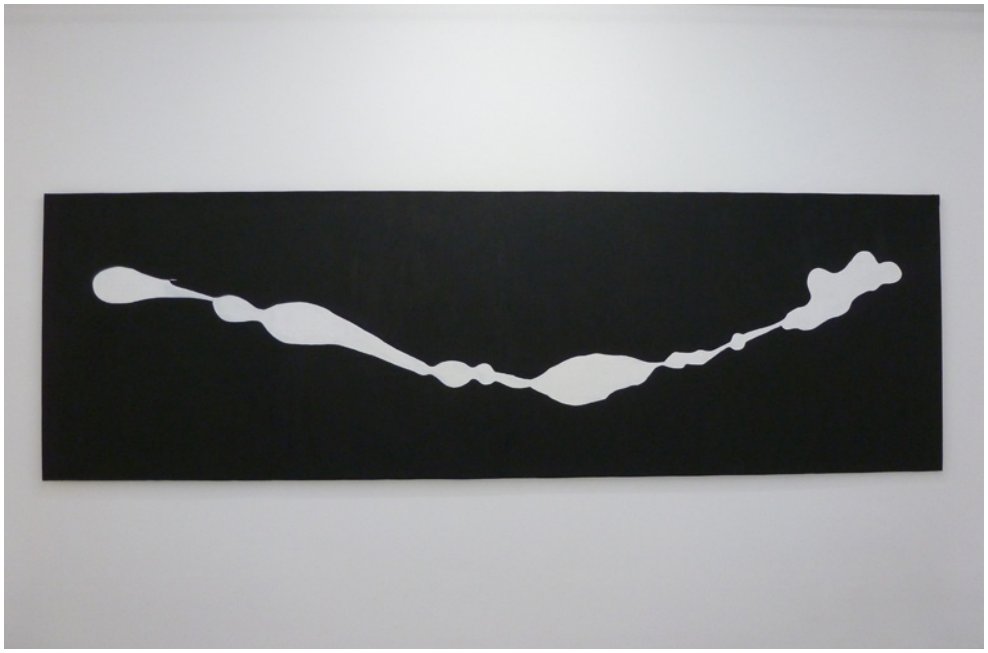


Unknown Object
2002 (original made in 1966)
oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm



AMM Live in Allentown / Our Apology to Women
2002 (original made in 1994)
oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm



Contact
2009
oil on canvas
125 x 400 cm

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I've never seen a Keith Rowe painting in the flesh. Since the cult of the original is only upheld by rich people who want to keep the meaning of the art they own to themselves, that of course shouldn't keep me from making them mine, gazing abstractedly at the work while following the scrape and rustle coming from my stereo speakers. The music sounds out on its own – the cover paintings seem to offer something of a background in place and time, part picture-book quaint Englishness, part American art between pop and colourfield. It was probably not from the pictures themselves, but through reading interviews with Rowe that I started picking up little messages from between that. I then wrote an article on the artist-curated gallery of his CD covers, reconstructing Rowe's development as a visual artist to satisfy my own curiosity...which has led to the unsuspected suggestion that my text be used to introduce a forthcoming exhibition, where it would have to face of a whole roomful of true Keith Rowe paintings. Just the imagination of those actually existing as objects in "real" life (scare quotes because it's only in a gallery) make my projected perceptions noticeably shift. What I wrote was largely concerned with iconography, which is the element that changes least in the transfer from object to illustration. Right now that won't help me much – because I'm staring at snapshots I have been sent, of the originals propped up on an easel hit by unflattering lamplight, their edges bent in those bulging lines only a cheap digital camera can draw. They look so fresh and uncontained, not at all like packages to recordings whose classical status is being cemented in canon decades after their first appearance. I suddenly have to really see them as paintings, not as clues to ideas behind the work. But how can I do that, when the music already is painting? I turn off Rowe's record The Room*...the music doesn't exactly help me build sentences anyway.*

Music seen as painting...the idea belongs to Rowe's own characterization of his practice. Here's what I found on that, excerpted from my earlier essay: In a 2001 interview for *Paris Transatlantic*, Rowe speaks of his outlook during the student days at Plymouth College of Art, where he was both educated in quasi-academic painting and encouraged to find his own voice: 'I abandoned the canvas and worked on hardboard, using house paint from Woolworth's... In the end my paintings came down to about three colours, which they still are today, I guess. Postbox red. Stripes. Trying to get away from the aesthetics of taste, and from what you were supposed to do.' In music he was still trying to emulate American jazz masters, and the lesson he took away from art school would prove crucial: 'In the painting class I was finding out who I was, making the kind of paintings which were uniquely mine, in a way which was uniquely mine, but with the guitar I was just slavishly copying American guitar players. This was late 1950s, early 1960s.'

If we now fast forward to the cover painting of a yellow truck that Rowe would do for the debut record of the improvisation group he co-founded, *AMMMusic* from 1966, this is hard to reconcile with such ambition of uniqueness – instead, the image also seems derived from distinctly American sources. Many stylistic traits could be found in the art of Roy Lichtenstein. One wouldn't call it a slavish copy, since the strong diagonal is completely unlike the American painter, there's more individuality to the line and Rowe makes no attempt to render his image iconic. Also, if Rowe was following that development since the end of the 1950s it would have been concurrent with Lichtenstein's. (And then I squint hard at the 1967 version of the painting for the new edition of the record on Elektra, which has a wider frame and a more slender black-and-yellow lorry on its white ground, and suddenly remember that Warhol's banana cover for The Velvet Underground was from the same year.) While during those times the impetus would have felt to come mainly from the US, such commonalities are no coincidence. It is not at all the point of the picture to express a uniquely individual artistic voice, but rather to use a popular pictorial language which makes for good communication. The image on the cover speaks immediately. I somehow think of it as 'hitting the ground running': a big ebullient tour truck going straight to Mediterranean places where AMM would enjoy life in the sunset, play stadium shows like the big rock acts of the day and probably sell lots of merchandise. It is a very upbeat painting, and it sort of reads the pop agenda backwards. Where pop had taken the commercial image out of its context, rendering it more meaningful but useless, Rowe, like many a designer of the time, is re-appropriating the style for commercial product (with a fittingly ironic twist, since the music would not be expected to turn over large quantities).

A poster from the same era, which was later used for the release of a 1968 concert under the title *The Crypt*, shows how Rowe was repeating the same formal concerns. The composition shares the truck's forward thrust, even in an object that should be static, or maybe receive not even static, since the empty speech bubble coming from the transistor radio indicates silence (as owned by John Cage). The radio was one of the tools Rowe started to use at the time, his main instrument being a guitar laid flat on a table. This musical practice would appear much more radical than the painting and, interestingly, in its process much more informed by the history of visual art. Rowe remembers the creative breakthrough as a musician in a 2010 conversation with singer David Sylvian for *Bomb* magazine: 'In the mid-1960s I regarded the electric guitar as an empty white canvas, an object to stare at and imagine: What can I do with this thing? It helped to look at cubist images of guitars and wonder how they would sound. My dissertation was on George Braque's guitars. The sense of liberation that emerged from detaching my grip on the instrument and abandoning its conventional technique was extraordinary. I directly applied the processes of the visual arts to this electric instrument: Pollock's when laying the guitar flat on its back and interacting with its surface; Duchamp's by using found objects such as knives, face fans and cocktail mixers to play it; Rauschenberg's when integrating a radio. Regarding playing as painting offered, almost immediately, a new language for the instrument.'

Lying the guitar flat became a crucial act of liberation from the bodily aspect of the instrument (if not the most phallic then surely the most masturbatory of them all), and it offered limitless possibilities. Much of it was thematic: Rowe filled his guitar table with sound-making objects that he could choose for reasons outside of their musical properties; they would carry iconographical or psychological meaning. Most of all, though, playing became a

gestural act in which the decision-making was close to visual art production – the main, and welcome, difference being that there was no commodity created through the act, but a sound that immediately vanished in time. (Rowe's perspective on contemporary art is mostly on the Americans, and on Pollock regarding gesture. Still let me add that in France in the early 1940s, Jean Fautrier also laid his canvas on a table or the floor, so he could build thick *hautes pâtes* of plaster paint with a palette knife. With those, he modelled pictures of the heads of prisoners shot by the Nazi occupying forces in France. Sometimes I find Rowe's approach closer to the concentrated work of the Frenchman, who used a much smaller amplitude of bodily movement, than to the no less deep but always sweeping gestures of Pollock.)

For the 2006 exhibition *Debris Field* at Bolton Museum and Art Gallery, Rowe transferred the guitar tables into visual art proper. He talks about that in a conversation with Richard Pinnell on the radio programme *Audition* from 14 May 2006: he made three reconstructions of historical guitar tables from the 1960s to the 1990s, building them in a rather generic fashion, so they would represent something typical of the times they represent. He fixed guitars and all appliances and gizmos to the boards and hung them on the wall. When you listen to the artist describing the implications of his work, the detail of reflection is quite fascinating. Every guitar embodies the artist's outlook of the times, every tool he uses to touch or circumvent touching the guitar brings its own set of connotations and every cable of the wiring makes its own psychological connections. The table arrangements do not follow the logic of building an instrument, rather everything is chosen for connotations or even aesthetics. The act of hanging the tables on the walls to Rowe is the closure of a circle which began when he first laid a guitar flat on its back.

It is important that these tables are reconstructions, not historical documents, so the work speaks of memory as Rowe intends...but, still, maybe the art context is so much more over-determined than even a complete chart of all connotations within the works could ever be; without having seen the pieces I still have to imagine that submitting them to a situation where they have no choice but be self-sufficient works of art might do them more harm than good. Let me quote the only review I found online, from one Kay Carson: 'Musician Keith Rowe's *Guitar Retrospective* is a delightful piece designed to bring a wistful, nostalgic smile to the lips. Each of his three old instruments comes with its own scattered entourage, providing a social commentary of the era... This is a quirky and touching homage to his beloved discipline.' That's (unintentionally) harsh, but not completely unfair, and especially the fact that one could listen to sound samples from the respective eras on headphones must have given this a touch of an improvised music hall of fame display...

Let me interrupt my earlier (by a couple of months) self here: measuring this exhibition I haven't seen against the one I've yet to see, in which there will be only one of those reconstructed tables on the wall, that from the 1960s, it's immediately obvious how much better the thing must work in a context where its main task is not to embody its creator's memory of what it once might have meant and add historical perspective, but to tell the viewer something about the artist, about how he is wired, making all art in the room resonate with imagined sound from that hollowbody on the wall. It puts the painterly practice of playing the guitar table into the visual art equation... As listeners, we would not really need to know about that practice at all, because it carries a baggage that rather spoils the idea of music as the pure medium whose condition all art aspires to. The practice has perhaps become most fruitful in Rowe's most ambitious project over the last years, The Room*:*

As a first realization of a long ongoing process, *The Room* is not just about spaces or more specifically a space of performance, it is also about the act of listening itself. In his *Audition* interview, Rowe explains how it can be important to not listen in a musical situation, a central aspect of his practice: 'Not being afraid...not being dogmatic. Challenge the overemphasis of what listening is about. What does it mean? Listening can stop you from being in the room. Not listening in order to be in that place at that time.' All the implications of this strategy would lead too far from a discussion of the artistic strategy; but it is interesting to keep in mind that Rowe made the recordings at home in his own room over a time, and that although he has engaged with the project for many years, the resulting tracks sound completely in the moment and allow for obviously spontaneous accidents.

In a post on the internet forum I Hate Music from 3 February 2009, Rowe speaks about the determinedness of every sound detail in his solo music, starting from an earlier recording: 'Perhaps one might see a theme running through *Harsh* which was about the invisibility of harshness (sewn into our jeans trainers t-shirts etc TV quiz show colours...), *The Room* (traces and whispers of process are overtaken by blankness and silence, in these spaces important transactions take place, absorption of a single mood, a contemplative aura)... My inspiration for disguise is of course along with Duchamp, is Rothko, to what extent do the Seagram Murals leak information about the Laurentian library in Florence and Michelangelo?'

That last question goes back to Mark Rothko himself, who felt that impressions of Michelangelo's cramped vestibule, especially the blind, walled-up windows, were behind his Seagram murals, his darkest cycle before the Rothko Chapel. (The painter engaging with a room by listening to his memory of another room. Which of course is like an invitation to Rowe.) On 1 June 2007, some months after recording the music to The Room*, Rowe played Rothko Chapel and there used a catalogue essay by Barbara Novak and Brian O'Doherty on Rothko's dark paintings as a guideline for his own engagement with the space, keeping in mind the artist's legendary anxious stare at his own work (an attempt to discover the resonance of his paintings that often lasted unbroken over a considerable time, if it didn't fall flat altogether). Interpretative phrases extracted from the essay served Rowe as a score of sorts: 'Faith vs void / experience of darkness...paradoxical insights / repainting / eyes become dark adapted / classical "answering" on opposing walls / disclosure and withdrawal...' (quote and all information from an e-mail by the artist). It is maybe not the score-like quality of*

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these extractions from the text that most characterizes the strategy, instead the whole situation of an engagement with the room is like acting out a set of performance instructions that might carry the bottom line: within the chapel, play back the interpretation of the art to the art itself and explore the self-consciousness of the room (of the performer and of the open-minded listener within the space they help define).

'What I do on guitar is itself a heavily disguised painting,' Rowe puts it in that same e-mail, and one might wonder why he insists on calling his practice that, when it might more obviously be termed a kind of performance art. I think it is painting because all conceptual background feeds into an expression by gesture. Rowe's paintings on the other hand are in fact more driven by ideas than gestures; they add what can be expressed through imagery (iconography, but also the facts of it being a painting). This can take place on a quite hermetic meta-level beyond the unsuspecting viewer, or it can, when coupled with a piece of music, be an invitation to the listener to let thematic concerns in on the listening experience. The CD cover to The Room *on the outside shows a painting of a blue colour field separated by a black line from a green colour field beneath, an (empty) landscape (format) stretched over three fold-out panels. When you open the package, you get the same composition in dark Rothko reds, the darkly self-burning inside to the somewhat dim colour pastures (that have an amusingly ambiguous relation to the words of the title). If we take both paintings together with the title as part of the musical object, things start to become readable. The Rothko reference is obvious, his artistic involvement in a room brings a heavy baggage of discourse, and our knowledge of his frame of mind at the time of his Seagram paintings helps set a sombre mood which seems to relate to the starkness of the sounds on the CD. (Which is something I else might have tried to explain away: much avant-garde music would seem in a lousy mood to the naive ear, but as a connoisseur I neutralize that because it's art, I disconnect my listening from certain emotions...except when my kids are around and the passive-aggressive behaviour of the sounds can become intolerable.) The cover paintings open that whole discourse for the music, and it can become fruitful to follow the exercise and explore the connections between the room one is in/moves through for listening, the imaginary room the music was recorded in and one's memories or imaginations of the Rothko Chapel and the Laurentian library (and now I seem to suddenly remember how I was once herded through the Michelangelo vestibule: tourists spilling over the voluminous stairs whose swelling forms are shoeboxed into narrow confines, but our barely containable masses made them seem appropriate in proportion). These are paintings about how an abstract painting can be coded with distinct levels of meaning. Paintings with self-conscious brushstrokes trying out how it is to be colourfield paintings. Which, since there is no way to get rid of subtext anyway, makes them paintings pure and simple.*

The central piece of the exhibition that I have yet to see will be a four-metre-wide painting in black tones with an elongated white drip wiggling horizontally through it. I haven't a digital image of that one, but it is from the same series as the cover of the CD Contact *by Rowe and Sachiko M from 2009...which I quietly dropped in my essay on Rowe's art because I had no handle. I always see in it a sort of cartoon image of a sperm ghost taking flight (which means I win the Rorschach test, but do not have anything else to offer). When I give up and ask the artist what the hell it all means, he kindly suggests a few readings he does not at all place above anyone else's reading, because it is a painting and it will have to be seen. I'm struck by one suggestion he makes, though, that does seem more valuable to him than the others, where he sees the drip as 'the architecture of a musical phrase, that Mozart and we (now) share this same exquisite architecture. I can read this drip as a phrase from the opening of the Adagio K488 (Curzon playing).' I frankly wouldn't be able to tell a drip by Curzon from a splash by Horowitz if it poked me in the eye, but the precision of the association does suggest something apart from synesthetic experience (at this cue, though, think of Rowe's duo with video artist Kjell Bjørgeengen, where both feed into each other's circuits – synesthetics inscribed into the schematic of their set-up, an exploration that avoids the esoteric tendencies of the genre). Rather, it is again about a gesture fixed in time and space, performed (by Mozart/Curzon) in music, translated into objective form in the painting.*

And then there is that objective form resisting interpretation as the topic of another painting in the exhibition, The Unknown Object, *painted with hard edges despite its unknowability, and rendered unknowable by painting.*

Lutz Eitel

(The earlier essay appeared in *Eartrip* vol 6, which you can download for free at eartripmagazine.blogspot.com.

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