

Art Basel in Miami Beach 2015

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Susan Philipsz: Eavesdropping on the Eisler files

The Turner Prize-winning Scottish artist finds inspiration in the FBI files of the communist composer who spent the 1940s in Hollywood and the Cold War in East Berlin

by ANNY SHAW



Part File Score, a sound installation by the Turner Prize-winning Scottish artist Susan Philipsz, is currently on show at the Margulies Collection in Miami's Wynwood Art District (until 30 April 2016). First exhibited at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin in 2014, the work is due to be installed in January at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, which has also acquired an edition.

The installation is based on film scores by the Austrian composer Hanns Eisler, a supporter of the German Communist Party who left Europe for the US in 1938. After stints in New York and Hollywood, Eisler was investigated for communism and branded "the Karl Marx of music". In 1947, he was forced to leave the US, finally settling in East Berlin, where he wrote the national anthem for the German Democratic Republic. Philipsz's work includes a series of 12 screen prints that incorporate the FBI's files on Eisler.

At the fair, she is represented by Tanya Bonakdar (E6).

The Art Newspaper: Part File Score is about artists who fled Germany for the US in the 1930s. Does the current context give it new meaning?

Susan Philipsz: The work travels to the US easily because its subject travelled to the US, and the most fascinating part of his life was this exile. I am very interested in the generation of German émigré artists who fled Europe and took up residence in either New York or Los Angeles; this work will take on new meaning in the US, especially with the graphic material from the FBI files on Eisler. They show us a lot of the paranoia the state had about communism. That aspect of the work seems a lot closer to home in the US.

Does the work make references to any other émigré artists?

The amazing thing about Hanns Eisler is that he collaborated with so many other legendary directors and writers. My work concentrates on his scores for films because I believe he really was a composer who wanted to bring complex new music to the masses through the film industry.

The composition *Prélude in the Form of a Passacaglia* (1926) was written for Walter Ruttmann's pioneering abstract animation *Opus III* (1924). This was Eisler's first composition for film. There is also a melancholy tenor to some of his other compositions. He wrote *Fourteen Ways to Describe Rain* (1941) for the film *Regen* (1929) by the Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens. This was commissioned as part of a collaboration with Theodor W. Adorno, culminating in their joint publication *Composing for the Films* (1947).

Septet No. 2 (1947) was written for Charlie Chaplin's film *The Circus* (1928). Chaplin commissioned the score because he knew that Eisler was in trouble with the FBI, but sadly, it was never completed, because Eisler was forced to leave the US in 1947. He was the first artist to be treated this way. This was before the Hollywood blacklist and before McCarthy, but his treatment set a pattern that was to be repeated again and again.

Your versions of Eisler's compositions are said to evoke the emotions of loss, exile and return that shaped the composer's life.

The main themes are movement, separation and displacement. The separation of the tones [produced by the instruments] is a physical part of the making of the work, and then the movement of the sound through the space creates an unexpected and discordant aspect. Those themes create an unease that never allows you to settle in one spot in the exhibition space.

Your Turner Prize-winning work consisted solely of sound, but Part File Score also has prints of Eisler's scores layered over pages from his FBI files. And the speakers look like piano keys hanging from the ceiling. How do you decide whether a work is going to be purely sound or partly visual?

It usually depends on the space. If it is very busy visually or has strong defining features, I will try to emphasise that by being more discreet and drawing attention to the architecture. For example, in the Hamburger Bahnhof, there are 12 steel archways that frame the space, and I knew immediately that I could work with 12 tones and the 12 archways. In Miami, we developed a different solution that enables people to experience each tone separately. There is also a set of screen prints to accompany the sound installation. I was so fascinated by the research material that I knew I wanted to work with the FBI files. I decided to superimpose them over Eisler's original sheet music, which would have been written at the same time.

Do you have plans to show the work anywhere else?

Yes. It has been collected by the Hirshhorn Museum and they will install it in January 2016. They are very excited to have the FBI files on the National Mall, especially because you can see its headquarters across from the museum.