

Barbara Wien

gallery & art bookshop

Schöneberger Ufer 65 (3rd floor) 10785 Berlin

T +49 30 28 38 53 52 F +49 30 28 38 53 50, Tue – Fri 1–6 pm, Sat 12–6 pm

www.barbarawien.de, bw@barbarawien.de

Emmett Williams

Projects with Ay-O and Yo-Yo Ma

Opening: Friday, February 12, 6–8 pm

Exhibition: February 13 – April 16, 2016

"Thought for the day: just how do you write about your own work?

You can't tell *them* how good you are, wait for them to tell *you*." (1)

Barbara Wien has worked with the US American artist Emmett Williams (1925–2007) since the 1990s.

Now, in 2016, we continue our collaboration with the Estate of Emmett Williams and show drawings and paper works from the 50s and image/text canvases from the 80s. The exhibition also focuses on the collaborative projects between Williams and the Japanese artist Ay-O (* 1931), as well as an event based on a graphic series by Williams, interpreted by the musician Yo-Yo Ma (* 1955). This will be the first time the latter is shown in Berlin with all its components (cello music, Williams' scores and photographs from the performance by anthropologist Robert Gardner (1925–2014)).

Williams is an outstanding writer and artist and it is important to consider both his artistic acts and his written ones. Williams was a founding member of Fluxus and actively contributed to the construction, sharing and conservation of a certain history in Fluxus, including the writing of his memoir *My Life in Flux – and Vice Versa* (2), in which he episodically recounted his artistic career. Williams' humour and light-hearted absurdity is in itself a part of the Fluxus mark. He is a non-historian recounting the history of a non-movement.

Nonetheless, the word Fluxus acts as a label and immediately gives us a precise time frame and a rich imagery, though it is essential to remind ourselves that most of these "Fluxus artists" were doing similar artistic experiments before and after their lives in Fluxus. 1962 saw the first Fluxus event and consequently the movement's European beginning in Wiesbaden (3) where George Maciunas was living and working for the US Air Force. By then, Williams was already a self-defined "poet, visual artist and performer" (4) whose work held the spirit of Fluxus-to-be. While living in Darmstadt in 1957, Williams was involved in a circle of poets, the *Darmstädter Kreis der Konkreten Poesie und des dynamischen Theaters*, along with Claus Bremer and Daniel Spoerri. In 1958, and while the collective was active, he undertook the making of his series *The Book of O*, an extension of his poem *O in motion* (5). In his poem, the letter O, typewritten, is multiplied and meanders around the paper's surface. Similarly, in the works of *The Book of O*, a rubber stamp O has been pushed around on a canvas. Williams explains the process: "The stamps were dipped in paint, then set in motion by hand on canvas. Art paper was placed over the wet images on the canvas, and I used my feet (for lack of better equipment) to press the image from the canvas onto the paper" (6). The titles for each print seem to follow a Rorschach test kind of logic – descriptive but farcical, and decided upon after the act of making. In these works, the letter in question escapes literature's purposes in order to assume the shape of a visual motif. Thereby, the letter presents a narrative by the means of its figuration in a composition, and not anymore as a member of a meaningful word.

One might wonder, why Darmstadt? The *Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik* was founded in Darmstadt in 1946 by Wolfgang Steinecke, from which many attending composers came to be known as the Darmstadt School, united by their experimental approach. Williams attended the concerts in his capacity as the *Features* Editor for the US Army newspaper *The Stars and Stripes*, where he met composers such as Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Bruno Maderna, whose ideas about systems of notation substantially influenced the use of poetry and its performance in his work.

Musical experiences unified these artists and inspired collaborations of all types by the means of performance.

Williams' *Incidental Music for Yo-Yo Ma* is a great illustration of these exchanges. While in artist-in-residence at Leverett House at Harvard University in 1978, he found a Xerox photocopier in the house's hallway. Thus began his series

Generations and Continuities in which he photocopied a paper document, then photocopied the copy of it and so on, until the repetition altered the images so extremely that eventually the copied picture, distorted and enlarged through thousands of electrostatic reproductions becomes a completely different image. From this came *Incidental Music for Yo-Yo Ma* after Williams met Ma, the prodigious cellist, also in residence at Leverett House. Williams began with a blank piece of sheet music for his exaggerated reproduction, and little by little, the straight lines distorted until they turned into a snow of wavy lines and *noise*.

At the opening at the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts in 1980, Yo-Yo Ma performed the photocopied score. He began by playing Johann Sebastian Bach's well-known Cello Suites. The experimental composer Ivan Tcherepnin had plugged the cello into an electronic device and could intermittently distort the cello's sound with electronic waves. The sonic jamming of the score into the total disappearance of Bach's suites forced Yo-Yo Ma to continue playing with the help of only his muscle memory, and not from the ear.

In 1966, Williams left Europe and returned to the United States to work as the editor-in-chief of the legendary publishing house *Something Else Press*. Three years later, Ay-O, who was teaching painting at Kentucky University, invited Williams as an artist-in-residence to teach advanced painting, even though he did not consider himself a painter, and even less a teacher. Nevertheless, he accepted and this was the beginning of a very productive friendship. Ay-O participated in Fluxus events and he knew Williams' work – having even performed his *Opera* (1959, written in Darmstadt) before he had even met him. *Hole*, made at Fairleigh Dickinson University in 1968, is perhaps their first collaborative work and a very performative picture. Ay-O printed the word HOLE onto the middle of a piece of paper through which Williams physically punctured a hole.

Ay-O moved from Japan to New York in 1958 and met George Maciunas through Yoko Ono in 1961. There he began using his rainbow pattern, liberally and prolifically, until it became his unofficial trademark and he earned the title *The Rainbow Man*. In 1976, Williams went to Japan for the first time to visit Ay-O where they both conducted a seminar titled *On Humor*. Williams also had an exhibition at the Nantenshi Gallery in Tokyo for which he created his *Letters to Ay-O* (1976/77). He asked Ay-O to translate his appropriation of Gertrude Stein's words "When this you see remember me" (*13 Variations on 6 Words of Gertrude Stein, 1959–65*) into Japanese. In 1979, Ay-O replied with *Letters to Emmett*. In 1997, Ay-O made a Japanese version of Williams' *Genesis* and the year after, the two artists performed it together in Melbourne. Collaboration was crucial to their relationship.

Despite this closeness, the common traits between their two working methods are not entirely obvious. However, humour appears in each artist's work, as does the interest in co-practice as a great strategy to free themselves from the "entanglements of the art establishment" (7). A similar genial gaiety seems to be the only constancy of these two accomplices' vivacious minds.

When I asked Williams' wife, Ann Noël, if Japanese Zen ideals and attitudes had influenced him in any way, she told me, as Williams himself used to say, he believed in a "universal humour", a transcultural complicity, something which has certainly linked the two companions together.

Gauthier Lesturgie

- (1) Emmett Williams, *Schemes and Variations*, Edition Hansjörg Mayer, Stuttgart, 1981, p. 8.
- (2) Emmett Williams, *My Life in Flux – and Vice Versa*, Edition Hansjörg Mayer, Stuttgart, London, 1991. Here we should name the formidable book about George Maciunas collected by Emmett Williams: *Mr. Fluxus: A collective Portrait of George Maciunas (1931–1978)*, ed. by Ann Noël and Emmett Williams, Thames and Hudson, London, 1997.
- (3) *The Fluxus International Festival of Very New Music* in the Städtisches Museum in Wiesbaden, Germany.
- (4) Judith A. Hoffberg, *Interview with Emmett Williams: Fluxus artist extraordinaire*, Umbrella 21, n°01, March 1998.
- (5) *O in motion* was part of *Konkretionen*, his first book of poems published in *Material* n°3, journal printed in Darmstadt by the circle.
- (6) Emmett Williams, citation from the website www.emmett-williams.com.
- (7) Emmett Williams, *My Life in Flux - and Vice Versa*, *op. cit.* p. 32.