

## Flash Art

### Oliver Beer

By Christine Macel, September 15, 2018



Colt Waku 1847 (Offside) (2014).

Courtesy of the Artist  
and Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris

**Christine Macel:** Over the last two years you have had many shows and performances — among others, at MAC Lyon; MoMA PS1, New York; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Fondation Hermès, Tokyo; Centre Pompidou, Paris; and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris. You were trained as a composer, studied art at Oxford and began to exhibit in 2006. You work with space and sound, using frequencies in relationship to architecture in order to create immersive works.

**Oliver Beer:** Often, yes, I use the natural frequencies of architectural spaces. Every space has got its own notes, just like a wine glass or an organ pipe has got its own note. In the series “The Resonance Project” (2007–ongoing) I work with the fact that every space has its own inherent harmonies, and though a simple process I can work with singers to stimulate an architectural space to resonate in exactly the same way that a wine glass resonates. It is a very simple and very beautiful process — the moment where the body enters into unison with the room and the resonance of the room entirely eclipses the voice. But this is only just the starting point: the real question is where do we take it, what kind of music is going to be born out of this unique situation? In the piece I am making right now at the Pompidou, certain notes are present and have been quietly resonating ever since it first opened in 1977. I’m working on the project with Les Cris de Paris, one of the top choral ensembles in France. Now for the first time musicians are revealing the inherent harmonies of the architecture.

**CM:** You positioned singers along the transparent top-floor tunnel of the Centre Pompidou, and one can move around and between them to hear the piece. The possibility of the resonance was already there, but what you do is to reveal the potential of the space. You make audible something that was there already but not perceptible.

**OB:** The title of my last piece, *Diabolus in Musica* (2014), comes from the Latin “the Devil in music,” a historical term given to any two notes creating the interval of a diminished fifth. For centuries religious leaders banned the use of this interval because the dissonance was said to evoke the Devil. Here we have two notes that are completely abstract [he sings] and for centuries they were forbidden to composers. This piece is included in my show at Thaddaeus Ropac where I built a structure, as I have done for *Aural Architecture* (2013) at Villa Arson and for *Rabbit Hole* (2014) at MAC Lyon. You can enter it and whisper the right notes and the space will resonate and sing this interval back to you. It’s strange that a physical space can contain harmonies, and that this abstract sound can be charged with such subjective and superstitious meaning.

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**CM:** You work a lot with perception and emotions, also in reference to specific people. For example, you did this piece, *Oma's Kitchen Floor* (2008), which consists of the stripped kitchen linoleum floor from your grandmother's house. Over the last four decades your Oma made several footmarks, and I think it's a very empathic and emotional work. This is something I feel in many of your pieces. Although the meaning is not always clear, what really comes to the viewer is this "emotional content."

**OB:** After my grandmother died I came to see the linoleum floor of her kitchen like a drawing that she made with her feet, tracing half of her life. And the formal abstraction of the object remained important for me. Like the sculpture *A Road to Nowhere* (2013) — named in reference to a Talking Heads song from my birth year — where the top surface of two train rails taken from the SNCF between Lyon and Marseille are polished to reveal the patina of all these millions of journeys; but ultimately they're just two minimal steel lines leading into the distance.

**CM:** Do you imprint a human presence in your work? Why does your work offer this strong experience? This is not a dry conceptual understanding of music. It's on the one hand written and prepared but on the other very emotional. That's why to me it has such a big response in such short time.

**OB:** I remember as a teenager playing Shostakovich's fifth in an orchestra. In 1937 he was dangerously out of favor with Stalin, and he had to write a symphony to the glory of the Soviet state and in doing so rehabilitate himself politically. He did this and yet somehow he managed to code his political dissent into the music. He had an emotional half-hour standing ovation from the public! This abstract music, in an abstract form, had two simultaneous meanings: one appropriate for the Soviet regime and the other able to evoke the communal pain of the people.

**CM:** This is very specific to you because, I think, you have this deep knowledge of music. When I saw you working with the singers, I understood that you are also a director, a "conductor." It is also very specific to your practice. To me, contrary to what I read, I don't think it has a relationship with relational aesthetics. You are indeed an artist as a producer and a director, but also a composer.

**OB:** Being a composer is an extraordinary position because not only you create the music, you can also choose to what extent you direct it. You collaborate with performers: it's about collective expression. For example I suppose my film *Reanimation 1* (2013) that I made with *Villa Arson in Nice* is like a composition. Five hundred children followed a protocol to turn a sequence from Walt Disney's *Snow White* into a flickering and psychedelic new film. The child becomes the musician, interpreting the score.

**CM:** You also make objects, like *This is a Pipe* (2013), a tobacco pipe cut and immersed in a wall, and also guns, like *British Bulldog* (2014). You did a piece in crystal and gold entitled *Silence is Golden* and a window piece, *Outside-In* (both 2013).

**OB:** At Oxford I was a student adviser for the team of architects designing the new school. They cut through a 3-D model on a screen, and I was entranced: it was like an instant *Matta-Clark*. The pipewas used for decades, and thousands of liters of air and smoke passed through it and yet until now it never revealed its true anatomy. With the *Fondation Hermès* I made the series "Outside-In," windowpanes physically morphed to enter the room and become functioning ear trumpets. They manipulate the frontier between inside and outside.

**CM:** Like in many of your works, I see a deep interaction with the materiality of the world, the body and the environment.

**OB:** To misquote Shakespeare's *King John*: "strong reasons make strong interactions."