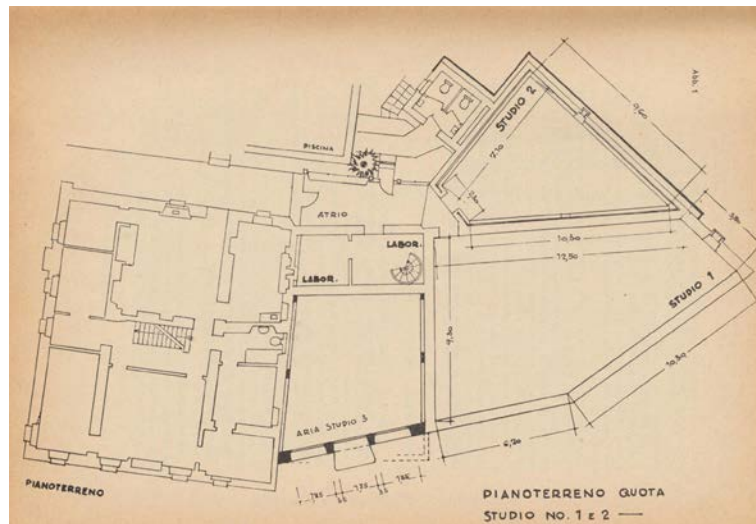


Hermann Scherchen: alles hörbar machen. An introduction
Luca Frei, 2023





Floor plan of the Studio Elettroacustico Sperimentale in Gravesano



Interior of the studio



The 'outdoor auditorium'

Hermann Scherchen: alles hörbar machen. An introduction

Luca Frei

For this presentation, I want to put my research on German conductor Hermann Scherchen into perspective and use it as a point of departure to discuss my way of addressing notions of space, narrative, and making things public. My work on Scherchen began by chance, wondering where it would take me, how much work it would require, and for how long. I knew about him, of course, because he is also my maternal grandfather. Still, my image was more of a collage of family albums and anecdotes, his interpretation of Bach's *Art of Fugue* and the première of Edgard Varèse's *Déserts* that he conducted in Paris in 1954.¹ And, of course, the famous rotating loudspeaker, to which I shall return later.

Born in Berlin in 1891 and died in Florence in 1966, Hermann Scherchen was a musician, publisher, writer, and educator and is widely regarded as a pioneering figure in modern music. He contributed to the development of radio and television technology, addressing the problems of sound recording and transmission. He founded three magazines,² participated in the Bauhaus exhibition³, and conducted world premieres of young or relatively unknown modern composers such as Luigi Nono (1924-1990) and Iannis Xenakis (1922-2001). He directed the world's most prestigious orchestras but also led workers' choirs,⁴ an activity that allowed him to bring music to the people in the streets and public squares outside of concert halls. Scherchen, a committed socialist, left Germany in 1933 when Hitler came to power, installing himself in Switzerland.

His latest venture and the focus of my topic was the establishment of the Experimental Electroacoustic Studio in Gravesano in 1954, which can be seen as the culmination of his lifelong research, a creative island after a peripatetic career across continents, marked by the dramatic events of the First World War, the Second World War and the Cold War.

The decision to focus on the studio and its activities arose partly because it is an area of Scherchen that is still relatively unstructured but also because it allowed me to develop research related to my interest in architectural spaces and narrative environments. In this case, the studio was both the actualisation of an ideal built according to specific technical requirements, a playground for new ideas, a laboratory for research and experimentation, and a meeting place for musicians, engineers, and researchers from all over the world, open to all generations, trends, and musical styles.

“Although in the 20th century, we live within a most vigorous period of specialisation, and today there are claims that this specialisation must further precipitate a breakdown into specific sections of the particular sciences, we witness through records, radio, cinema and television that a synthesis has been simultaneously introduced. That is why I built Gravesano. Then these things that I just mentioned live no longer in specialisation but in a collaboration between electroacoustic engineering, the science of sound, and artistic creation. That was my objective. Thus, the experimental

1 The first performance of the combined orchestral and sound composition on tape was given at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris on 2 December 1954, with Hermann Scherchen conducting and Pierre Henry responsible for the tape part. The performance was part of a concert broadcast by the ORTF, with *Déserts* sandwiched between pieces by Mozart and Tchaikovsky.

2 *Melos* (1920-1934), *Musica Viva* (1936), and the *Gravesaner Blätter* (1955-1966)

3 For the Bauhaus exhibition in 1923, Walter Gropius curated a series of concerts of contemporary music and invited Hermann Scherchen to conduct Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale* and Krenek's *Concerto Grosso No. 1*.

4 In 1920 Scherchen directed two workers choirs in Berlin (choir *Schubert* and mixed choir *Grand Berlin*).

*electroacoustic studio Gravesano has a great advantage: it is a completely independent conception. That means being free from a higher authority dictating what is allowed to happen and what is not allowed to happen. There are no working hours, no time limits on the use of the equipment, and no discrimination based on nationality, religion, or race. It is rather just – as I would put it – my completely primitive life goal to fill the moment as intensely as possible and everything living that come with that, no matter how it confronts me. Gravesano is entirely private and has no concern for propaganda. Gravesano is a home for those spirits who want to and can exert their influence and – I stress once more – in the most unprejudiced sense.*⁵

These words by Scherchen, which describes his vision behind the establishment of the experimental studio, echoed with a passage from *La soi-disant utopie du centre beaubourg*, a book written by Swiss sociologist Albert Meister⁶ in 1976, which in the mid-2000s inspired me to develop several artistic projects and propositions, as well as readings from excerpts I started to translate from French to English. In 2007, thanks to a commission from Casco, Office for Art, Design and Theory, Utrecht, and the artist's publisher Book Works, London, I was able to publish my translation of the original text for the first time in English, and introduce it to a broader audience.⁷ It was an attempt to revitalize what I thought was a significant cultural treatise and reflect upon my subjective role as an artist in transferring ideas from one cultural framework and era to another. This 'illegal translation' brought attention back to Meister's work. It inspired artists, curators, and designers to make further interpretations⁸ and led to new translations and reprints of the original French and Italian versions.⁹

Written by Meister under the pseudonym of Gustave Affeulpin and coinciding with the inauguration of the Centre Beaubourg in Paris, the fictional story imagined a radical libertarian space of seventy-six storeys beneath the newly erected centerpiece of French Culture, which provided a platform for alternative ways of living, working and creating:

"All these levels are destined for culture," tells the main protagonist during the inauguration of the centre, "for the culture that you will be doing, because I don't have a preconceived idea of culture, nor the power to impose one, and I don't even know what culture really is. Everything in this house, or in this hole – whatever you prefer to call it – must be decided together: what we mean by culture, as well as the contents and methods on how to organize such cultural activities. Obviously, we'll have to expect some chaos in the beginning: it is inevitable. This happens every time there is a desire to do something new, to rethink old problems, and to solve them in a new way. It is, therefore, necessary that anyone who wants to do something come forward, so we can organize ourselves and start working. To make announcements and to communicate, you can use the walls. They are there for that purpose. Regroup yourselves. On every level, there are empty spaces that are illuminated and open 24 hours a day. [...] These premises are public; they belong to everyone. There isn't any control at the entrance. There are no members or non-members [...] until we have made a decision about it. And

5 Hermann Scherchen, *Aus meinem Leben Rußland in jenen Jahren*, Henschelverlag Kunst u. Gesellschaft, Berlin, 1984.

6 Albert Meister (Delémont, 1927- Kyoto, 1982), was a Swiss sociologist. A researcher at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, he was one of the most respected and qualified scholars of theory and self-managed experiments.

7 Luca Frei, *The so-called utopia of the centre beaubourg – An interpretation*, Casco, Office for Art, Design and Theory, Utrecht, and Book Works, London, 2007.

8 See for example the audio walk *So-Called Utopia* (2007) by Celine Condorelli. "An interpretation of Luca Frei's book, *The so-called utopia of the Centre Beaubourg*, itself an interpretation of *La soi-disant utopie du Centre Beaubourg* by Gustave Affeulpin, a pseudonym for Albert Meister's later Italian translation *Sotto il Beaubourg*." <https://celinecondorelli.eu/selected-work/so-called-utopia/>

9 Gustave Affeulpin, *La soi-disant utopie du centre beaubourg*, Editions Entente, Paris, 1976. Albert Meister, *Sotto il Beaubourg*, Edizioni elèuthera, Milano, 2016 - 1st ed. 1988.

to conclude, one last point: there are neither guards nor Police, but no caretakers nor sweepers either. We'll certainly have some problems, but we'll have to find solutions."

* * *

In 1953 Scherchen was living in a villa he rented in Rapallo in Liguria, following an intense and somewhat traumatic period in his life both on a personal and professional level,¹⁰ when he came across an ad in a newspaper regarding the sale of a house in Gravesano, in the Italian part of Switzerland. The house appeared as a refuge, and he quickly settled there with his new wife, the mathematician Pia Andronescu (†1968), and their family. Shortly after, in 1954, The Hermann Scherchen Electroacoustic Experimental Studio in Gravesano was inaugurated under the protectorate of Unesco's International Music Council, with an international conference titled "Music and Electroacoustics." Gravesano was a small village of 350 inhabitants, and one can only imagine how extremely eccentric the whole affair was for the locals.

The studio was one of the few of its kind in Europe, alongside The Groupe de Recherches de Musique Concrète in Paris, the Studio for Electronic Music of the West German Radio in Cologne (1951), and the Studio di Fonologia in Milan (1955), all of them established in connection with public broadcasting radios. What distinguished it further from the studios in Paris, Köln, and Milan, besides being completely independent of any institution, is that Scherchen used his studio to reach an architectural ideal for sound play, recording, and transmission rather than for the actual production of music. In Gravesano, the concept of "neutrality" reigned on multiple levels: politically (supported by UNESCO, the site was beyond any nationality), artistically (outside of any ancient/modern, electronic/concrete music quarrels), and even acoustically. To do this, Scherchen, assisted by architect Enrico Hoeschle, conceived one of the studios as a room with five walls instead of four and a sloping ceiling,¹¹ the shape reminiscing that of a grand piano, albeit with straight instead of curved lines.

"With this structure," he wrote, "I want to try eliminating interferences and stationary waves. I would like to restrict the typical characteristics of a space. The basic idea was so: every space that one finds himself in is an individual – big or small, upholstered or, how we say, bare – only consisting of stripped walls. And this individual carries every sound that exists in the space differently. [...] As a result, it is not possible to have a space suitable for all kinds of music. Only very beautiful types of spaces exist. I would like to have a space that I can deactivate. This can only be achieved as a result of manipulating the reverberations through this peculiar, asymmetrical spatial design and by making the space as echoless as possible."

Gravesano became a residence for scientists, electrical engineers, and musicians, becoming an obligatory rite of passage. The Greek-born composer and architect Iannis Xenakis, a close collaborator of Scherchen, described it as a 'fertile garden where it was beautiful to blossom.'¹²

10 1950 was a crucial, if somewhat disastrous, year for Scherchen in understanding the ultimate and most important of his projects: the electro-acoustic studio in Gravesano. That year Scherchen conducted the Prague Spring Festival. As a result of this performance, he was accused of supporting the communist ideology and regime. Throughout his career, Scherchen saw music as an educational and open-minded tool that transcended political attitudes and alliances. Despite his declarations, a real scandal surrounds him. He was dismissed from his position at Swiss Radio and lost his positions as conductor in Winterthur and Zurich. Also in 1950, his wife, Chinese composer and music educator Xiao Shuxian (1905-1991), left him and returned to China with their children. In the same year, Scherchen's mother died.

11 The floor was made of rough concrete covered with carpets, while the five walls and ceiling are covered with plate resonators functioning as acoustically absorbent caissons.

12 In 1961, Xenakis, on invitation by Scherchen, also sketched an auditorium, similar to the Phillips pavilion designed for Expo '58 World's Fair in Brussels, to be built in Gravesano.

One of the best-known inventions that took place in Gravesano was the rotating loudspeaker or, as Scherchen called it, 'Der aktive Lautsprecher' (the active loudspeaker). Developed by Scherchen and his engineers, it consisted of a large sphere covered with thirty-two loudspeakers that rotated on both horizontal and vertical axes, intending to reduce the effects of the 'directional sound beam' and thus creating a homogenous sound field. The loudspeaker is one of the few remaining objects from the studio and is kept at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, where Scherchen's estate is also located.¹³

In addition to experimenting with acoustic spaces and transmission technologies, Scherchen organised several conferences with titles such as "What is Popular Music?", "Electroacoustic Music in Radio, Film, and Television," "Music and Television, Music and Medicine, Music and Mathematics," to name a few.

The activities of the studio and the results of the experiments, as well as summaries of the conferences, were documented in the *Gravesaner Blätter*, a quarterly musical and scientific journal published by Scherchen between 1955 and 1966 (from 1957 onwards in German and English and with the front cover designed by Le Corbusier). The wide range of topics covered included concert hall acoustics, instrument tuning, recording techniques, loudspeaker systems, equipment maintenance, compositional technique and aesthetics, psychoacoustics, and music sociology. The journal was distributed worldwide along with audio demonstrations called the *Gravesaner Blätter Scientific Record* series, which accompanied the journal at irregular intervals and included sound experiments and demonstrations, as well as new and unreleased compositions recorded at the studio.¹⁴ The journal functioned as an information channel through which the activities of the studio could be communicated to the world and where researchers from all over the world could be published.

* * *

In the summer of 2015, I undertook the task of digitizing all the *Gravesaner Blätter* at the home of Myriam Scherchen, my maternal aunt, who has kept Scherchen's legacy alive by setting up the Scherchen Foundation and the now defunct Tahra Productions record label that she founded with her partner René Trémine (1944-2014).

As the journal is only available in a few libraries and rarely as a complete collection, I felt it necessary to collect all the numbers and make them accessible to a broader and contemporary audience in digital form. In connection with this, a separate index was also compiled to sort out the content and guide the readers through the material. In 2016, the digitized collection was donated to the Akademie der Künste in Berlin and is now fully accessible for the first time through their database.¹⁵

Digitisation was essential to access Scherchen's creative studio and the beginning of a series of projects, exhibitions, and displays from 2015 onwards around his work. Like in the case of Meister's book, Scherchen's studio has provided me with a mental space from which I was able to develop and formulate various artistic proposals, combining research and documentation practice with a more speculative and personalized approach. In both cases, I carried out a form of transfer, from one language to another in the case of Meister and from paper to platform in the case of Scherchen, as a way to provide a point of access to their visions and bring critical attention to their work in a broader context.

13 The loudspeaker was restored and activated during KONTAKTE '17, a festival presented by the Studio for Electro acoustic Music of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin in 2017.

14 Mp3s of all vinyl records can be found here: <http://keestazelaar.com/share/gravesaner-blatter/>

15 <https://archiv.adk.de/bigobjekt/44596>





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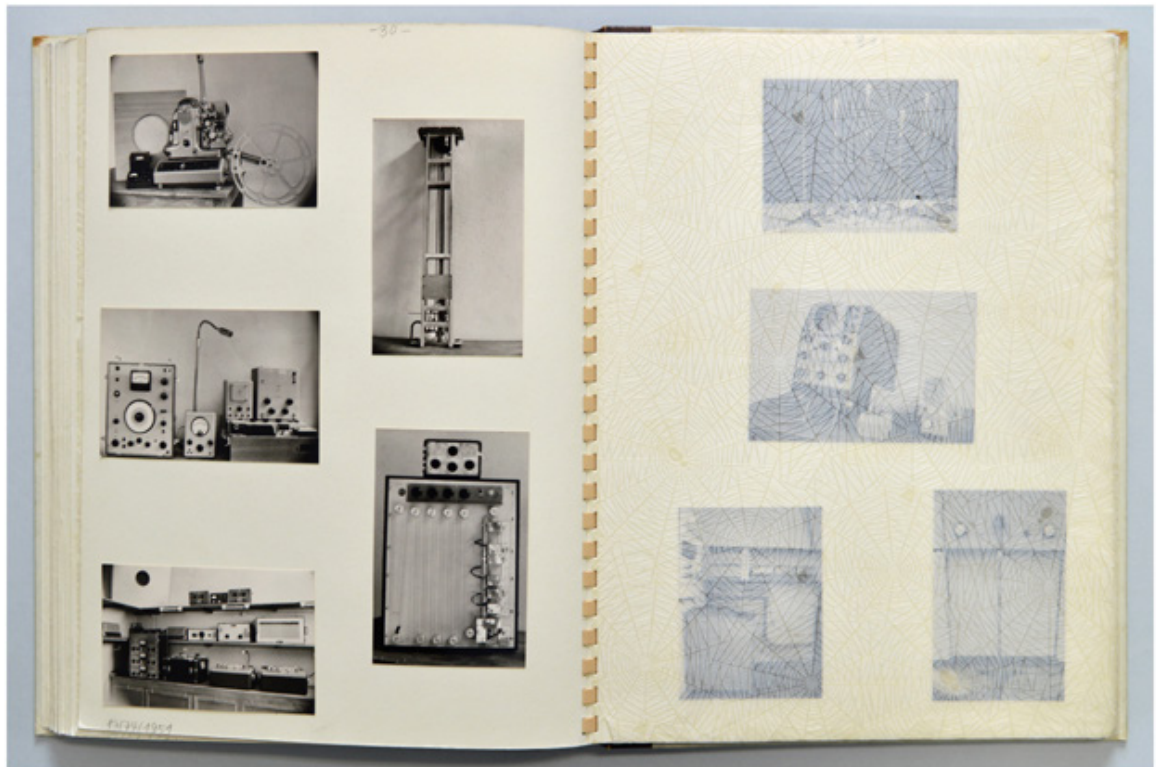


Gravesano MUSIK • RAUMGESTALTUNG • ELEKTROAKUSTIK

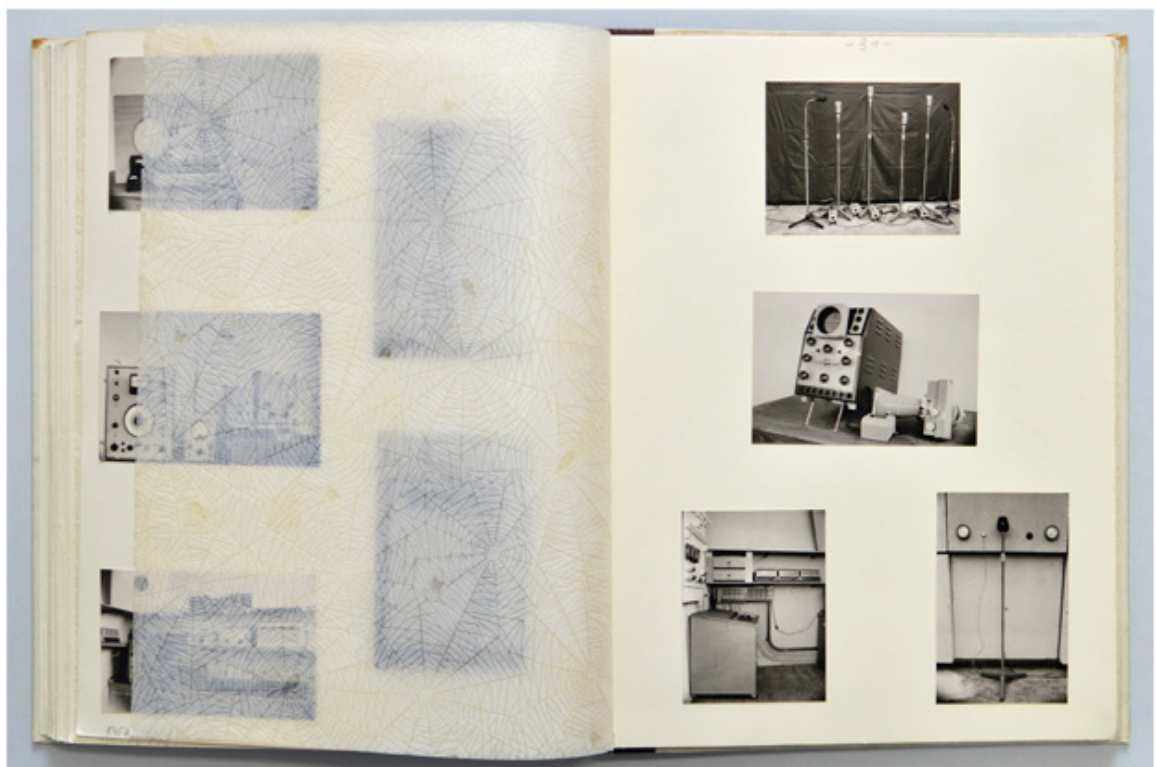


Gravesano Album, 2015

Giclée prints (Photo edition) 24 prints, each 42 x 59,4 cm



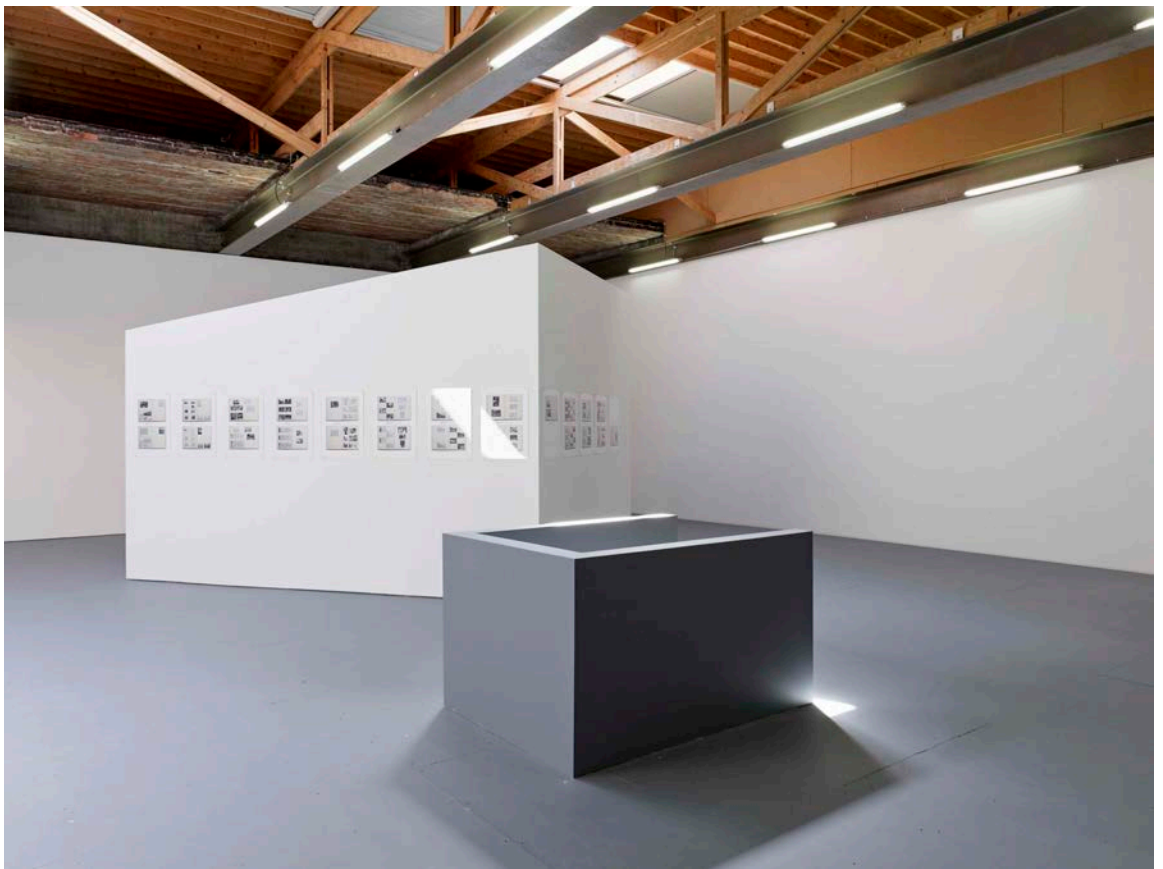
Gravesano MUSIK • RAUMGESTALTUNG • ELEKTROAKUSTIK



Gravesano Album is a photographic reproduction of a family photo album showing the life and the activities of the Experimental Electroacoustic Studio in Gravesano, starting from its construction. I photographed the album using a 35mm camera without a tripod and with natural light at Akademie der Künste in Berlin, which administers Scherchen's archive.



For the *Murmur* exhibition at Netwerk (Aalst, 2017), the reproductions were installed on a five-sided wall structure with a sloping roof, corresponding to the dimensions of the studio on a reduced scale.





Gravesano Studio I, 2015

Painted iron, lacquered plywood 345 x 210 x 12 cm

Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin

December 1, 2015 – January 30, 2016

Photo: Nick Ash

Workers on the Roof, 2015

Digital print on polyester fabric, 220 x 400 cm

Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin

December 1, 2015 – January 30, 2016

Photo: Nick Ash



The banner is an enlargement of a photograph printed on a letterhead that Scherchen used to advertise the studio's construction. The floor installation shows the main studio area on a scale of 1:5, based on a drawing from the period, reproduced in the journal *Gravesaner Blätter*, Nr 1, July 1955. The elements of the structure can be moved, creating new compositions, in homage to the studio's malleability. The installation and banner relate to the interior and exterior of the studio, the carefully designed space, and the surrounding landscape.



Installation view, Malmö Konsthall, 2020
Photo: Helene Toresdotter





Scherchen Circles

2015

Digital print on Forex, 4 circles, printed on both sides ø 50 cm

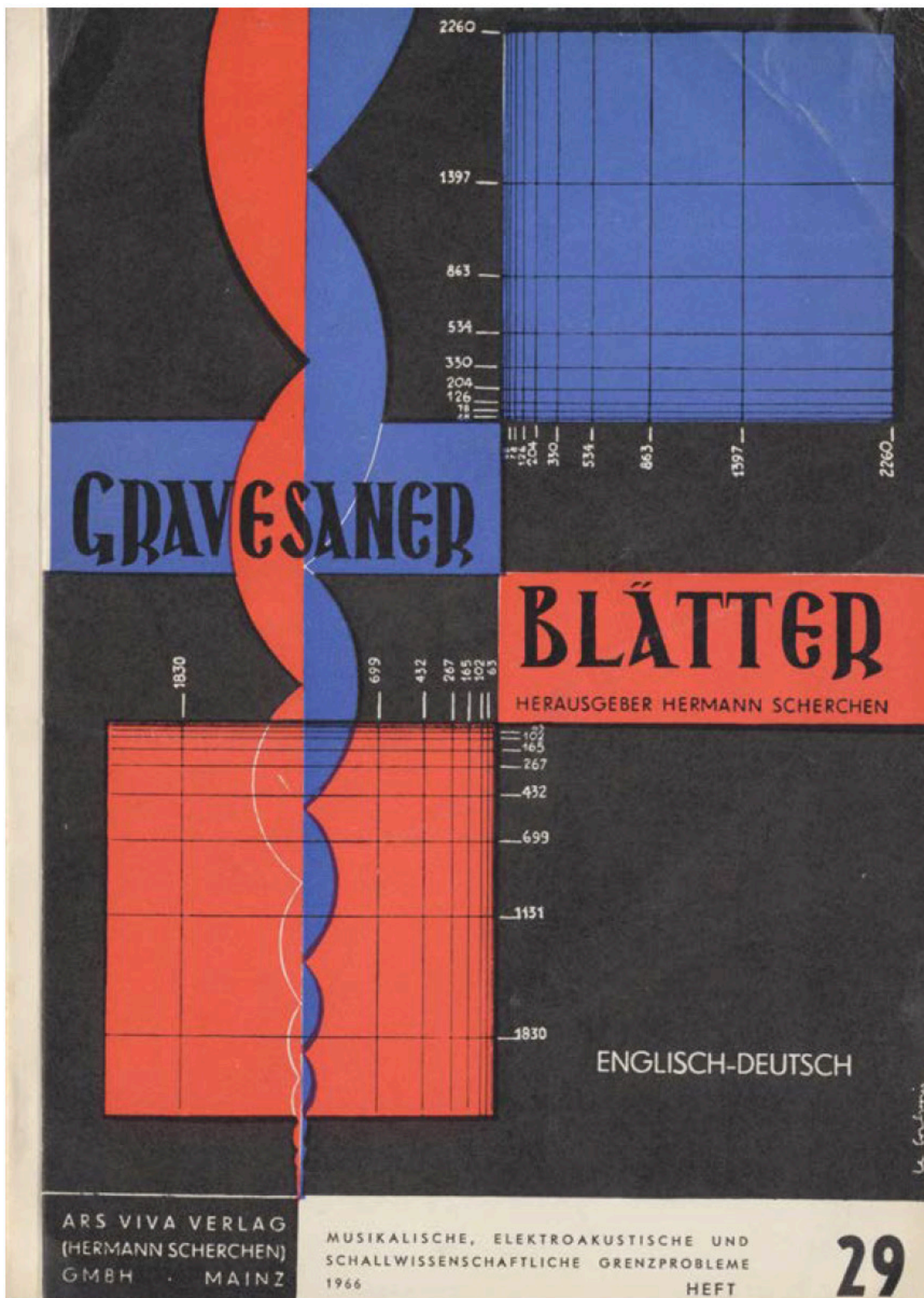
Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin

December 1, 2015 – January 30, 2016

Photo: Nick Ash

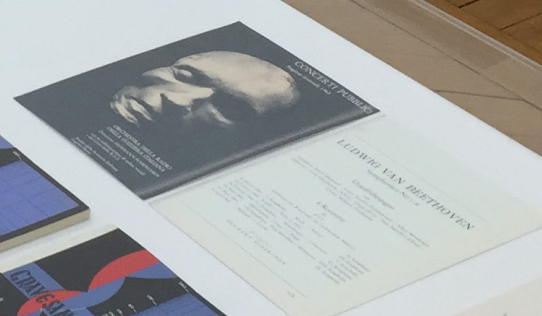
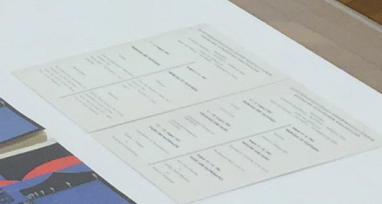
Scherchen Circles consist of four discs hanging from the ceiling. Printed on one side is an image of the rotating loudspeaker ball invented by Hermann Scherchen. The loudspeaker is depicted as stationary and in motion. Printed on the other side is a text from the autobiography *Aus meinem Leben Rußland in jenen Jahren* (1984), where Scherchen describes what prompted him to found the studio and his ideas about it. The text is in the original German, in red, and in the first English translation, in blue (red and blue are also the colours used on the cover of the *Gravesaner Blätter* journal).



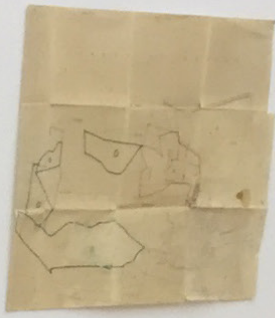


Cover of *Gravesaner Blätter*, Volume 29, 1966. Cover design by Le Corbusier.

Right: display of the *Gravesaner Blätter* and demonstration records, Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin
December 1, 2015 – January 30, 2016









Cover of *Musica Viva*, no 1, 1936. Cover design by Max Bill.



Musica Viva Spreads

Quilts, 9 unique pieces

120 × 160 cm

Photo: Alessandro Zambianchi

Musica Viva Spreads consists of nine quilts, the abstract composition of which is based on the graphic layout of nine double pages of the first issue of the journal *Musica Viva*. *Musica Viva* is a music journal founded by Hermann Scherchen in Brussels in 1936. This publishing project aimed to create an alternative platform and support system for new music that could not thrive in Nazi Germany, which Scherchen left in a sign of protest in 1933.

With every article printed in four languages (English, French, German, and Italian), the internationalism of *Musica Viva* was present on every page. “The question of language is obliterated in the whole world of culture,” read one review of the time, “and the magazine can be appreciated by everyone.” However, this utopian impulse made the magazine expensive to produce, lasting only three issues.

For *Musica Viva Spreads*, I assigned a color to each language—orange for English, green for French, red for German, and blue for Italian—and created colored fields based on how the text flows across the double pages. The quilting technique gives the works the quality of being an image to be contemplated, but also something functional. The quilts can be arranged individually or joined together to form a large area or hung on the wall or from the ceiling.





**FOREIGNERS,
PLEASE DON'T
LEAVE US
ALONE WITH
THE DANES!**

Installation view, Tensta Konsthall, 2019
Photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger

Installation view, Malmö Konstmuseum, 2019
Photo: Helene Toresdotter







**“EVERYTHING WAS
TO BE DONE. ALL
THE ADVENTURES
ARE STILL THERE.”**

Image: Photo Beaubourg, Paris, before the construction of the Centre Georges Pompidou.
Text: interview by Kodwo Eshun from "A Speculative Dialogue with Geert Lovink" an interview between Kodwo Eshun and Geert Lovink, published in Online Magazine 'Perspektiv', <http://www.netart.be/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2007/07/eshun-lovink.pdf>

This is the first work produced in connection with my interest in Swiss sociologist Albert Meister's book *La soi-disant utopie du centre beaubourg* (1976). The upper part of the work shows a photo of the Beaubourg plateau in Paris, used as a parking lot before the Centre Georges Pompidou was built. The lower part reads an emancipatory quote by writer and artist Kodwo Eshun from an interview with Geert Lovink in 2000. Since 2003 the work has been presented in various forms, such as a poster, postcard, and banner.

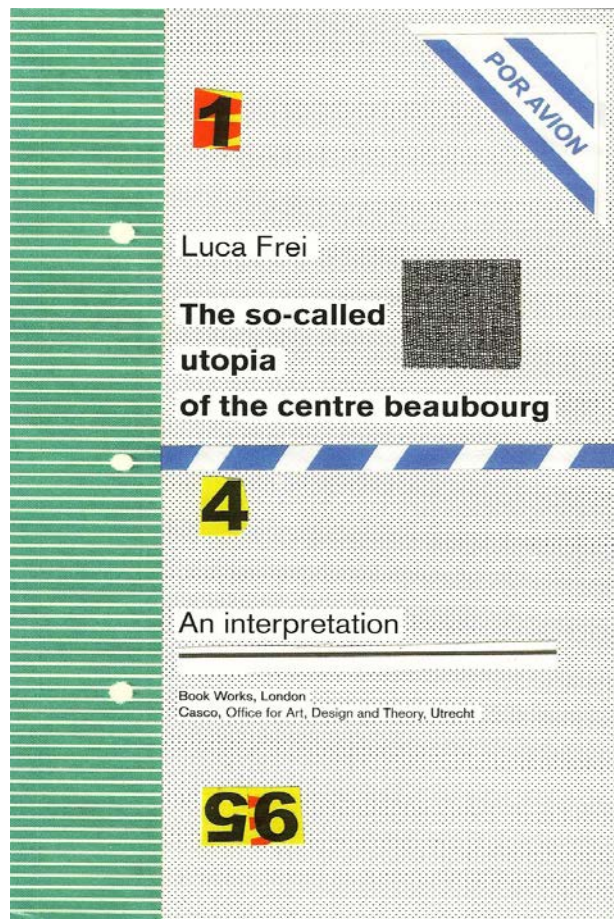


Juggler and Untitled (Paris action), 2004, continued my interest in the Centre Pompidou and its underground counterculture chronicled by Meister in his book. In both works, the colour codes of the Centre's architecture - green for plumbing, blue for climate control, yellow for electrical wires, and red for circulation elements and safety - are reinterpreted as props. As balls thrown in the air in the balancing act of a juggler and as dyed worker's overalls for a day-long performance taking place in the streets of Paris.



Cubitus (2005) is a modular library structure inspired by a photograph of the Centre Pompidou children's library that I found in the museum's 1982 activity report. The installation was commissioned by Casco, a nonprofit public art institution based in Utrecht, to display self-published publications and fanzines and host a series of events examining experimental approaches to the making and distributing works by artists outside the commercial mainstream.

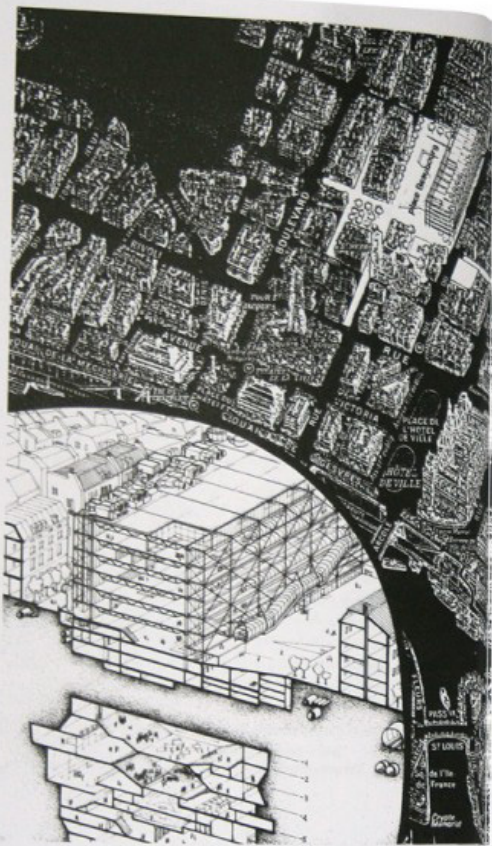




The so-called utopia of the centre beaubourg – An interpretation, Casco, Office for Art, Design and Theory, Utrecht, and Book Works, London, 2007.

Appearing under the pseudonym Gustave Affeulpin in 1976, and coinciding with the inauguration of the Centre Beaubourg in Paris, Albert Meister's fictional text *La soi-disant utopie du centre Beaubourg* imagines a radical libertarian space submerged beneath the newly erected center-piece of French Culture. In a world turned upside down, the seventy-six storeys submerged beneath the official centre for culture provide a platform for alternative modes of work and creation. Reporting, in sometimes humorous, sometimes more poetic language, and with tongue firmly in cheek, the narrator recounts the vacillations of free organisation in a satire that never takes its eye off the main target: state-sponsored culture. This is the first translation and publication of *La soi-disant utopie du centre Beaubourg* in English, a project that I have undertaken as an attempt to both revitalise a significant cultural treatise incorporating many elements of Meister's sociological thinking and to reflect upon my subjective role of the artist in transferring ideas from one cultural framework and era to another.

Next spread: Reading of *The so-called utopia of the centre beaubourg – An interpretation* in the four translated languages (Italian, French, English, Spanish) accompanied by live soundscapes with saxophone, percussion, and electronics. With students from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Visual Arts, Copenhagen, 2018.



Ten years have passed since the Centre Beaubourg was inaugurated, and still everyone asks me to give my account of the experience which, at best, has been considered a utopia, but more often an attempt to sabotage our culture, a threat to the fundamental values of our society... Re-reading the newspapers of that time, the sarcasm of the ones on the right and the annoyed scepticism of the ones on the left, remembering the interventions of the parliamentarians, demanding for the orgies and the sacrilege to be stopped, remembering the offended academics and the outraged Parents, remembering the outcry of the bishops and the bitterness of the censors, the put-downs of the grammatologists and of the crumpled etceteras. But don't worry, I do not intend to come back on these subjects

are benevolent and unaware of the Organisation and of Domination. We'll never have to dream of the decline of the State because we'll avoid its birth. Of course, here there's often chaos, mess, total lack of organisation, we lose time, we lose track, we waste energy, we become impatient: but this is the price to pay for freedom, for autonomy, for preventing strong personalities impose themselves upon us, becoming authorities behind whom we can hide ourselves, look for protection. Bosses, fathers, Baden-Powells (the grandfather, not the guitarist) cannot come here.

1981: the presidential campaign is in full swing. As always, the subjects get excited about electing their new masters. Candidate of the unified left, M. Mitterrand has declared that among all the prioritised priorities he'll give priority to public transport.

Our painters are increasingly getting into the habit of working on unmovable surfaces such as walls, or with ephemera. Once the work is completed the piece is photographed and the original painted over or destroyed after which everyone can use the photographs or reproduce at will. The collectives have quickly settled the issue of the rights of authorship that proceed from the sales of the photographs and other kinds of reproductions, because it's inevitable that they enter the market system. What do we care if the Predators get rich, what else can they do? As for us, our only interest is that of creation and of the passion that generates the works and not the opposite. Of course, among us there are still painters who work part-time in their studios in the external world, but there's no point asking them to abandon everything at once.



I nostri pittori vanno sempre più prendendo l'abitudine di lavorare su supporti inamovibili, tipo i muri ad esempio, oppure su supporti effimeri. In tal caso, una volta terminata l'opera, essa viene fotografata e l'originale imbrattato o distrutto una volta che ognuno abbia avuto modo di fotografarlo o di riprodurlo a proprio agio... Per noi, l'unico interesse è la creazione e la passione che nasce dalle opere, ben più importante che la sorte che avranno dopo che son state create.
(A. Meister, Sotto il Beaubourg, Ed. Sutherland ed.)





