

Plain - Experiences & Practices [21 Nov 2016]

This file contains additional information for the performance of *Plain*. The text score contains the essential information to perform this work. Feel free to ignore, re-use or get inspired by the content of this file...
(This text is written by Hans Roels.)

General clarifications

A performance of *Plain* – and the rubbing activity – lends itself to focus on *touching* a room or space (and its materials and surfaces). Performers could try to make the audience hear how a specific concert space and its architecture feels.

1. Performance in the reading room of De Singel and the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp

Date: 27 october 2016

Performers: Stijn Saveniers, Adilia Yip, Primož Sukic, Ruben Martinez Orio, Hans Roels, Stefaan Smagghe and Wim Konink.

The reading room of the library in de Singel is a typical library reading room: quiet (people don't talk or only whisper) with tables, seats, a help desk for the librarians and computers to search the library database. During the performance the audience was sitting in the middle of this room on the chairs and tables that are normally used by people consulting the library.



Illustration 1: reading room of De Singel and conservatory (Antwerp)

In general the sustained sounds were produced by

- rubbing on objects (books, chairs, tables, seats,...) with hands, brushes, papers, etc. to produce sustained noises
- moving these objects (dragging/rolling them on the floor) to produce sustained noises
- rubbing with friction mallets (superball mallets, flumi) on the glass of the large windows, tables, floor, bookshelves, etc. to produce sustained tones
- dropping and hitting objects (books, floor, etc.) with all kinds of (percussion) sticks.

Environmental sounds were amplified (with a guitar amp, near to the amplified object), such as the

continuous, soft tone produced by the alarm system at the entrance or the ventilator noise of the library computers. Other local devices (a water boiler for tea, ventilator, moving a trolley for books, etc.) were used to produce continuous noisy sounds or short pitches (the printer, alarm system triggered by a 'secured' book, metal book stands, etc.).

There is a very busy highway just outside the building of de Singel, producing a lot of noise; the doors were opened and closed to produce a sustained noise.



Illustration 3: two performers rubbing on the yellow book case with a friction mallet and on the red seat with a piece of paper



Illustration 4: performer rubbing on top of the book case with a piece of foam

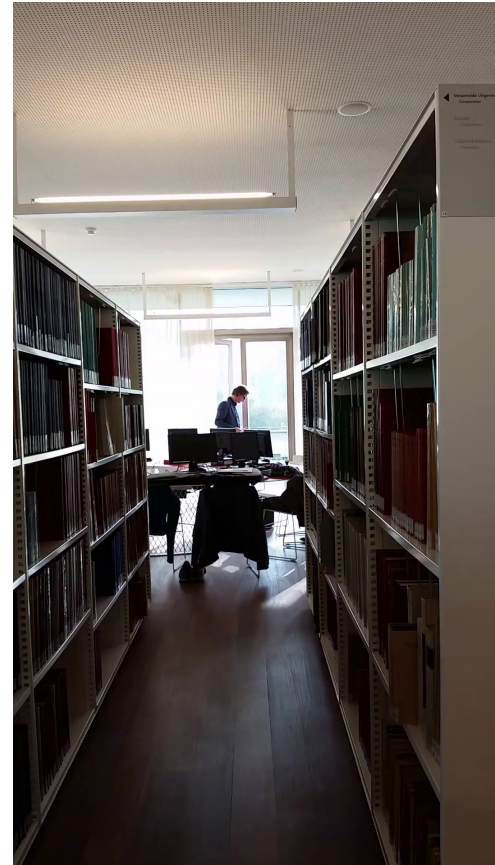


Illustration 2: performer opening the outside door

These are the additional instruments that were used in the performance: vibraphone, glockenspiel, violin (playing from outside the reading room), electric guitar (using the built-in speakers of a laptop as amplification).

The text score that was used for this performance was slightly different from the 'final' Plain score. I adapted the score a few days after the performance. You can find the early version here: www.hansroels.be/plain1-7.pdf

Exploration and rehearsals

Two performers made *an early exploration* at the reading room to observe the character of this place, listen to the environmental sounds and look for objects and devices that could be used for the performance (sustained noises and tones).

A large set of friction mallets was made and bought before the first rehearsal and given to the performers a week before this rehearsal to try these mallets on all kinds of objects at home.

A graphic score was made, prior to the first rehearsal, to structure the 'improvisation' (see illustration 'Plain I – De Singel – oktober 2016...'). It was based on the classification of pitched and noisy sounds (staccato and sustained).

The *first (two hour) rehearsal* focussed on:

- exploring the possible sustained noisy sounds in the reading room and ensuring that they start and stop abruptly
- creating sustained tones with the friction mallets on objects in the room
- following the graphic score (while performing), searching for sounds or actions that fit into the sections of this score and find recognizable cue sounds or actions at the start of the most important sections.

At the start of the first rehearsal we also divided the room into different zones for each performer to avoid too much movement by the performers.

The *second rehearsal* focussed on:

- 'doubling' sounds: in the first rehearsal some sounds were too soft while *loud* sustained noises were also missing. Thus we focussed on creating the same sound (with the same objects and/or sticks or rubbing triggers) with two or more performers. This produced a louder and more 'surround' sound. For example, opening/closing the large curtains could be performed by three or four players; there were two outside doors that could be opened; a book cover could be rubbed with the same object by two or more players, etc.). Doubling does not mean that an action is necessarily performed homophonically by two or more players. For example, player one can start an action/sound, performers 2 and 3 join a while later and next they all suddenly stop together. Some sounds could also be made louder by performing them faster. For example, instead of moving a book manually on the floor, we attached a ribbon to a book and dragged the book with this ribbon.
- creating more irregular durations of sound and sections and silences
- exploring the possible staccato sounds in the performance space and ensure that they are not dull but have a distinct character (because in the previous rehearsal we had focussed on the sustained noisy and pitched sounds)

In this second rehearsal we also became less strict on the division of the concert space in individual zones to ensure that there was enough interaction between the performers.



Illustration 6: performer rubbing on the side of a book case

Illustration 7: performer suddenly closing a book

Illustration 5: performer dragging a book

Reflection on the concert performance and rehearsal

The reading room of de Singel is rather big and has a lot of corridors in between the bookshelves. Consequently, the performers could not always hear (and see) each other, specifically when they were producing very soft sounds. Consequently they were producing too much sounds (assuming that it was too 'silent') or they could not react enough to each other. In future performances, solutions could be: capturing the sound in the middle of the room (near the audience) and amplifying it through a set of monitor speakers at the edges of the room; or giving one performer in the centre of the room the responsibility to decide on silent and performed sections and next, create two simple signs (for example, black and white) given by this performer and ensure that these signs are visible for all the players (in a way that fits with the character of the performance space).

Before the concert I gave a short introduction, saying amongst other things, that the environmental sounds were part of the performance but during the first minutes people were still walking in and out and these sounds disturbed the performance and made it too 'busy'. Thus it took several minutes before the performance gained its specific character. Before the performance we had decided that the audience would remain seated and not walk around because (too much) walking sounds do not really fit the character of the reading room. So, in the introductory talk I should have added that the audience should behave as they usually do in a reading room and consequently remain (more or less) silent.

Recording

There is a live recording of the concert in the reading room of de Singel (link: www.hansroels.be/plain-27okt16mix.wav). It is a quick and simple recording, it was not made by a professional recording engineer. Four microphones, located at the tables where the audience was seated, were used: a stereo omni couple (Aevox Classic-M stereo MkII) about 40 centimeters apart and two Schoeps MK-5 omni microphones, at the left and right side of the table (approx. 7 meters apart from each other). I left out the first four minutes of the performance because the audience was still entering and the performers weren't fully at ease yet. I applied some basic editing to the recording: I changed the loudness of a few staccato sounds because they were clipping and added a bit of compression to the master track because the difference between the loud, staccato sounds and the soft, sustained ones was very large.

Plain I – De Singel – oktober 2016...

