

## abstract

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‘Explosante Fixe’ by Peter Struycken,  
a dynamic colour imagery for a composition by Pierre Boulez

On behalf of the Dutch Pierre Boulez foundation and the Groninger Museum, I commissioned ( fall 2004) the visual artist and colour-specialist Peter Struycken to create a visual analogy to Boulez’s *Explosante Fixe*, for the occasion of the eightieth birthday of the composer.

The piece of music came into being by the *work in progress* principle characteristic of Boulez. It was created in the years 1972, 1985, 1991, 1991- 1994, fully generated by the computer, and electronically adapted by instrumental amplification. The work cannot be performed without direct technical assistance that only can be given by Boulez’s own studio (IRCAM). Struycken’s visual version, in the light of the phased creative process employed by Boulez, has to be interpreted as *the last phase* of the work, after an experimental pre-phase on one screen, shown on 26 June 2006 at the Holland Festival, simultaneously with a live performance of the piece by the Nieuw Ensemble in the Amsterdam Muziekgebouw aan het IJ in collaboration with IRCAM. The five-screen-version and installation in the Groninger Museum Sept 2007- January 2008 made use of the magnificent 1994 registration by the Ensemble Intercontemporain, conducted by the composer himself.

Struycken’s visual construction ‘Explosante Fixe’ is to be considered as the fully logical consequence of the composition; as a pendant of Boulez’s music, inextricably bound to this piece. In *Explosante Fixe*, the morphological principles of the musical structure directly form into visual evocations to the listener: audible movements of tone colours, which are also movements for the eye, or, as Struycken puts it, *in the eye, entoptic*, starting from the fact that the eye also perceives its own structures, differing from one incidence of light to the other, a spectacle which is closely related to what we describe as ‘seeing’, and which is usually reserved to ophthalmic practice. The physical character of Pierre Boulez’s vehemence cannot be expressed more clearly, being sensory in the broadest sense of the word. It also illustrates in which physical way the assimilation process of Peter Struycken’s analogous creation of images has taken place. Boulez also used the term *scanning* with reference to the creation of his music : the idea is that impulses from the retina also drive the composer to sounds.

References to light in descriptions of Boulez’s music are numerous. Microscopic observations, refractions of light, and dispersions of colour accompanying it, are present in the layers of the musical structure, and are evoked by a stimulation of the senses. Boulez does use visual terms, as a matter of course: in referring to *Explosante Fixe* he speaks of the technique of mosaic (mosaic within mosaics, fragmented mosaics) , of coloured cells, germs that lead to a certain theme when joined together, to which layers are added, eventually forming an image together. Without any awareness of the shared basic principles in the creative process, Struycken could not have unveiled the very important qualities of Boulez in *Explosante Fixe*. Since this is the way it should be seen: Struycken *unveils* Boulez.

The dynamic colour imagery of 'Explosante...Fixe' did not come into being through an analysis of the score of Boulez's work but working through the impulses he experienced during a long and intense process of observation and full surrender, a complete familiarization with the sounding forms of a version conducted by the composer himself. This process was a full and passionate identification of Struycken with Boulez through the composition.

Gradually, a structure originated from the listening process, a schematic grip at first, some kind of global map, schedule, chronometry. I personally lent assistance in this phase, helping the artist in coping with the score and the sound. It was a symbolic rendering in which the acoustic form, with all its individual elements and extensions and repetitions was recorded per second, or was registered auditively. This was done to objectify and make manageable the fixed cores and recurrent elements that stick in the memory as possible elements of the visual power of imagination. This led to the first Amsterdam- production for one screen, as mentioned above.

The multiplicity of screens in the Groningen-version enabled Struycken to make the plural dimensionality, the diverse perspectives and the layeredness of the music fan out and bloom in far greater dimensions: 'Explosante'. The musical perspective can in this version unfold to a bottomless visual depth and introspection; moments of intense motionlessness or suggestions of motionlessness. 'Fixe'.

By referring to these moments of standstill, one could also use the term *transcendence* in the literally sense of transcendence of music to image, also on a meta-level of absolute abstraction and transparency. In these moments, to use Boulez's own words the creative moment finally has become fully detached, totally free.