Justus Köhncke
System als Schönheit
June 28 – August 11, 2012

Opening on Thursday, June 28, 2012
7 p.m. – 9:30 p.m.

Question: This exhibition revolves around a graphic representation of the history of the computer operating system Unix.

JK: The diagram comes from a "Unix History" Website, managed as a hobby by French software developer Éric Lévenéz. Alongside the diagram's charming nerd factor and preciseness, I also liked its purely surface-aesthetic view "from a distance". As Lévenéz is constantly updating the diagram and thus permanently extending the timeline to the right, it is in a perpetual state of change. With its various levels and lines and its arrangement on a temporal axis, the diagram was an ideal candidate for use as a graphic score, just as the pioneers of New Music worked with graphic and illustrative means to break out of the straitjacket of classical notation. Only conversely – here the (if at all) "creative act" consists only in the laying down of rules regarding how the score is to be read and in the technical translation of the graphic information in strict accordance with the set rules into a music synthesis system, while Cage or Stockhausen, for instance, more likely looked for new ways to notate their musical ideas.

How did the transformation into music take place?

It transpired that digital tools were unsuitable for the conversion into musical information. Lévenéz was unfortunately unable to provide us with any tables in "raw data" form, because he has actually been "drawing" the diagram for years on his NeXT workstation(!). Meaning that all events in the diagram labeled with an arrowhead had to be manually entered into the music software.

Yet I can find great pleasure in such mechanical painting-by-numbers activities, precisely because they are so brutally "uncreative" and nonetheless require extreme concentration. Knitting is a similar endeavor: a trance-like flow and mental state can develop after a while, where other thought processes take over in the brain as soon as the primary activity has developed into a kind of automatic loop process.

Its artistic immaculacy also makes this structure beautiful. We could say the structure is unaware of its own aesthetic qualities.

I was indeed delighted by the certain purity the music began to radiate when we were finally able to hear it, a composition in which I am purely a translation module and which is above all determined by numerous other factors – from the way Lévenéz arranges his arrows (which is also based purely on reasons of layout) to, naturally, the actual development of the Unix systems and descendants that today serve, for instance, all Apple devices or Android smartphones. Unix itself is also a very, very beautiful system.

The hi-fi system obviously comes from an earlier age of entertainment technology…

Presenting the music as a one-off steel dubplate on an elevated early 1980s hi-fi system roots the composition in another, fictional world that has absolutely nothing to do with the operating systems that came shortly afterwards.

Interview recorded by Michael Kerkmann
Translation: Jeremy Gaines