



Above: Manon de Boer, *Dissonant* [stills], 2010.
16 mm color film, 10 minutes 40 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Jan Mot, Brussels.

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Manon de Boer: Between Perception and Sensation

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Manon de Boer: Between Perception and Sensation

The acclaimed Dutch, Brussels-based filmmaker and artist Manon de Boer has crafted a unique and influential cinematic language that has been largely defined by narratives of time and memory, and by the representation of music and performance. An exploration of the character and limitations of portraiture remains central in her films, which variously take writers, modern dancers, experimental composers, and musicians as their subject. The resulting depictions, portrayed through recollections and over time, reveal a complex, nuanced attention to the filmic possibilities of representation, and the aesthetic, sensual experience of image and sound.

While a documentarian strain threads throughout her best-known work, de Boer has in many of her films reconceived the relationship between image and soundtrack to explore how sound can transform cinematic perception. This exhibition—her first

significant solo presentation in the United States—emphasizes her expansive and groundbreaking experimentations in four key works that address her attention to the structures of music. With a focus on performance—and the ways that sound can give a film its form—each portrait amplifies the tension between image and sound, performer and audience, asking the viewer to revisit the process of looking and listening through de Boer's singular interrogation of cinema.

In an installation conceived especially for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, the four works are orchestrated side-by-side. The Dr. Alvin Frank Memorial Performance Space becomes a stage for two of de Boer's films, each exploring perception through articulated use of sound and silence. *Attica* (2008) is the result of a collaboration in which she and several musicians staged a performance of American composer Frederic Rzewski's *Attica* and *Coming Together* (both 1972).

Rzewski wrote these scores as a response to the infamous prison riots in Attica, New York, the year before. Both use spoken word, drawing from the correspondence and account of two prisoners present at the event. The prisoner who survived, out on parole and crossing the Attica town border weeks later, said, "Attica is in front of me." These words are spoken by Rzewski's son, Jan, in de Boer's *Attica*, and as the music assumes a circular structure of euphoric crescendo and resolution, de Boer absorbs the composition's mirrored nature within the spatial dynamics of her black and white film.

In de Boer's most recent film in the exhibition, *Dissonant* (2010), music is heard before the image of a dancer—Cynthia Loemij, a member of the contemporary Belgian dance ensemble Rosas—is seen listening carefully to the two-minute movement from Belgian composer Eugène Ysaÿe's 1923 *Three Sonatas for Violin Solo*. A familiar score she has not yet performed, the dancer takes her first steps only after the music has stopped. Twisting, arcing, and surging through the space, she dances from memory and an internal tempo. The sound of Loemij's footsteps continues even when the screen goes black, and as one hears de Boer changing the roll of film, the viewer trades vision for the pure and physical experience of sound. The cycle repeats, and Loemij dances again, allowing de Boer to amplify these quiet disruptions—the sound of movement across the floor, Loemij's subtle contortions, and the mechanical sounds of the camera off screen.

Distinct ruptures of image and sound in de Boer's musical portraits foreground an intricate play between sound and vision, around performer and audience, and the complexly collaborative dimension of her practice. In these research-intensive works, de Boer invests in the generative possibilities of working with her artistic peers. *Two Times 4'33"* (2007), for example, features the Brussels-based pianist Jean-Luc Fafchamps as he plays John Cage's famed composition, *4'33"* (1952), consisting of the titular amount of silence, twice in front of his audience. Panning her camera slowly across the pianist and crowd, and out into the world beyond the studio, de Boer heightens the palpability of the supposed silence—on film and in the body, as it reverberates through the audience and extends to us off screen.

Music again provides the fundamental structure for *Presto, Perfect Sound*. In 2006, de Boer invited Brussels-based violinist George van Dam to play the fourth movement (Presto) of Béla Bartók's notoriously difficult *Sonata for Solo Violin Sz 117* from 1944. De Boer shot six takes of the full performance using 35 mm stock, out of which she cut and then reconstructed the optimal sound composites to produce a "perfect performance." Reversing the conventional privileging of image over sound, de Boer then synchronized the visual footage to the soundtrack. What we hear is an expertly executed sonata whose visual glitches betray the constructed nature of near perfection.



Above: Manon de Boer, *Attica*, 2008.

16 mm black and white film with sound, 10 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Jan Mot, Brussels.