Review

The Dissolving of the Line

Musik Installationen Nürnberg 2025 in review

Photo © David Häuser

Under the artistic triumvirate of Marie-Therese Bruglacher, Laure M. Hiendl and Bastian Zimmermann, **Musik Installationen Nürnberg**—in its second edition following a 2022 debut—set out to present music differently: "not as a normal concert, but as an experience in space." But what happens to music when it leaves the concert hall and instead latches onto a disused department store, a defunct bank, or a former Nazi Party rally grounds? How does music interact with space, and how does that change its meaning? What happens when musical form dissolves, leaving no trace of its former linearity, only the pure unfolding of time before us?

In a jam-packed 48 hours at the festival's second weekend—full disclosure, the Musik Installationen Nürnberg covered my travel expenses—I tried to find some answers.

I. THEORIA

View of Nuremberg from the Nuremberg Castle • Photo: **Власенко**, **CC BY-SA 3.0**, via Wikimedia Commons

Nuremberg has a particularly tangled history. It was an important economic and political hub during the time of the Holy Roman Empire, but in the public consciousness the city is more strongly associated with the Nazi regime.

Owing to its imperial legacy, Nuremberg was chosen as the site of the Reich Party Congresses, center stages for Nazi propaganda that drew up to a million attendees each year. The party rally grounds, located southeast of the city center, were designed by the regime's chief architect,

Albert Speer—who, in a crushing act of karma, was later sentenced to 20 years in prison at the Nuremberg trials. The 1935 rally also marked the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws: two deeply antisemitic and racist pieces of legislation that prohibited marriages and sexual relations between Jews and non-Jewish Germans, and restricted Reich citizenship to those of so-called "German or related" blood.

Balancing its darker associations, Nuremberg is also defined by a strong industrial heritage, which can be traced back to its status as a Free Imperial City in medieval times. With a self-governing citizenry, the responsibility for developing and sustaining trade and craftsmanship rested on the people themselves. This tradition of industriousness continued into the 18th and 19th centuries, when the city became home to many familiar names—Siemens, MAN, and Faber-Castell among them—either as founding sites or major operational bases. In 1922, AEG opened a factory in Nuremberg, further strengthening its industrial profile. The Dassler Brothers Shoe Factory, which famously later split into two competing giants of athletic footwear, Adidas and Puma, was founded in 1924 in Herzogenaurach, just 23 kilometers northwest of Nuremberg.

Since then, many of the city's industrial spaces have been left vacant. This, as Hiendl explained to me, was one of the reasons Nuremberg was chosen as the site of the festival back in 2022. Bruglacher also pointed to the city's strong punk and Bauwagen (squatters living in mobile

trailers) subcultures, which were particularly prominent in the final decades of the last century. And while Nuremberg isn't an ostentatiously wealthy city, there was a tangible spirit of self-organization and communal solidarity. Musik Installationen Nürnberg welcomed all kinds of demographics: new music nerds, metalheads, art crowds, families with children and lonely wanderers, young and old.

The locals are no strangers to festivals either, from Die Blaue Nacht and Rock im Park to the Deutsches Chorfest—which overlapped with Musik Installationen Nürnberg and alone **attracted** 115,000 visitors this year. Conveniently for them, the Academy Gallery Nuremberg—where **Caroline Beach**'s wacky performance "In darkness let me dwell" took place, complete with medievalcore aesthetics, fake blood smeared on the windows and a set by Berlin-based black metal band **Lares**—was just a minute's walk from the Chorfest's main site, the market square.

This was exactly the point: to get people, especially locals, to experience familiar places in unfamiliar ways. Musik Installationen Nürnberg was also, as Bruglacher put it, an invitation to enter specific spaces in an open format, as they became "activated through new and experimental music"—which was, by nature, already quite niche. Communicating this to a general audience more used to traditional concert formats was a challenge in itself. She mentioned ticket sales, which proved particularly telling: Why pay for a ticket if you were only staying five minutes? What if you didn't want to commit to an eight-hour performance? Those drifting Deutsches Chorfest visitors—curious but a bit lost—exemplified this tricky dynamic.

The author (wearing a green cap) looking tired at the “Musik Machen Ausstellen” conference, Academy of Fine Arts Nuremberg • Photo © David Häuser

Yet the most important question remains: What defines a *music installation,* rather than a sound installation? Zimmermann, the festival’s third co-curator, offered his perspective. The term, he said, carried a particular kind of tension: “Installations are fixed and open to be observed from many perspectives; music is alive and in motion.” Producing a *music installation* involves bringing together contrasting elements to create a setting where the process of making music can be perceived and experienced across multiple layers and contexts. “Space, time and bodies are open to any negotiation in every project,” he said.

II. PRAXIS

Bastard Assignments — "House" (Friday, 22:33, former department store)

Bastard Assignments — "HOUSE" • Photo © David Häuser

I was tired—a "nine-hour conference on musical 'site switching' and no time for a proper dinner" kind of tired—but I couldn't let it stop me from enjoying the work. Inside a disused department store, "HOUSE," the first-ever durational piece by the quartet **Bastard Assignments**, was just past its halfway point. Time stretched over the next three and a half hours—bringing not only immense joy but also dethroning Morton Feldman's "Violin and String Quartet" as the longest piece I've ever experienced live.

The circular central stage allowed a full 360-degree view of the work. It was divided into four living quarters—bedroom, living room, bathroom and kitchen—each one a temporary host for the group's wacky activities. The balancing act of irony and earnestness structured the whole evening. One moment they were doing a tongue-in-cheek pelvic-thrust dance to the British war

song “Bless ‘Em All”; the next, they were singing a heartfelt piano ballad, its refrain—“it’s a different kind of motion, it’s a different kind of love”—unabashedly leaning into sincerity. Once each activity ended, they moved clockwise to the next room, gliding smoothly through this eternal cycle. After three full loops, they returned to the start—a performance that definitely earned its place under the *music installation* tag. While linearity was not central to the work, the more you watched these quirky punks, the more it drew you in.

The set design, created in collaboration with Rudyard Schmidt, was spectacular and meticulous: exposed bathroom pipes and a neglected bathtub, a mid-century TV set and scattered ring binders, faded Esprit, Lancôme and Dior signage a reminder of the department store’s former glamour. Rather than a house, the old department store slowly became a temporary home—not just for the group, but for me as well. Sometimes I followed the ensemble around, moving from one bean bag to another; other times I stayed put, waiting until they returned to my quarter. Activity shifted into passivity: they pretended to sleep (sometimes to a rather loud low drone); they changed outfits; they sang; they improvised on piano, clarinet, Irish whistles and what looked like the endpiece of a gramophone; they danced; they acted, they slept—rinse and repeat.

Yet within this hypnotic flow, it was hard not to recognize one’s own life, full of both dull and exhilarating moments. Somehow, the group found an immensely captivating way of musicalizing something as habitual as a family living together in a house. The performance ended at 2 a.m.., and Bastard Assignments were received like rockstars.

Anke Eckardt — "Moreth Anhuman," Part 1 (Saturday, 12:57, Dutzendteich lake)

Anke Eckardt — "Moreth Anhuman" • Photo © David Häuser

A lovely senior couple, eager to burn off the sausage they had just eaten, insisted on pedalling me and my newfound composer friend around Dutzendteich lake in a hot pink flamingo paddle boat in a 27-degree (celsius) heat—leaving me feeling slightly sheepish that we weren't the ones doing the work. My premise was twofold: to engage with part one of Anke Eckardt's "Moreth Anhuman," and enjoy a cool breeze while soaking up as much vitamin D as possible. My composer companion kindly held the matching pink umbrella so we didn't burn under the scorching Franconian sun. As we set off, I popped on the headphones, provided by the festival, and scanned the QR code to start the piece.

I was transported into the mind of a flamingo, which my boat purported to represent. (Obviously, the first thing a flamingo does when it sets off for a nice swim is pull up a streaming app to find the right soundtrack.) After listening to Lou Reed's "Perfect Day," Rosalía's "Con Altura" and Bob Marley's "Sun Is Shining," it was time for a radio show that explored the history and economically determined implications of the term "leisure" in the rest

of “Moreth Anhuman,” via Marx, the story of the nearby Nazi rally grounds, and reflections on the internet and social media. Suddenly, a strong smell reached us as two performers on a boat in the middle of the lake burned an unknown substance in a torch, releasing a cloud of beautiful purple smoke tinged with an unpleasant odor. This staged emergency, hinting at ecological harm that could make the lake uninhabitable, prompted our return to the station, bringing the performance to a close.

I wasn’t sure what to make of it. The concept was promising, interweaving themes of human alienation and exploitation with ecology, animal life and Object-Oriented Ontology, and the attention to detail was impressive: color-coordinated boats and umbrellas, different narrations depending on which boat one boarded (a flamingo, duck or swan), with a subtle nod to the intra-species class dynamic. And who wouldn’t want to paddle around for an hour listening to a soundwalk-cum-podcast?

The problem was that it felt too didactic to land as a moving artistic gesture. Although the site carried immense historical weight, the piece only brushed up against this history, and somewhat in a forced way. Perhaps that simplicity was intentional, aimed at being easily digestible for a broad audience. But that raises a recurring motif with *music installations*, supposedly a forward-thinking and socially progressive format: How should they navigate the tension of public accessibility, especially when staged outside traditional venues where a certain kind of prior knowledge is often expected?

Moriah Evans — "BANKing" (Saturday, 20:05, former savings bank)

Moriah Evans — "BANKing" • Photo © David Häuser

Thanks to a lovely shawarma, I was an hour late to "BANKing." But this was a festival of *music installations*, after all: the works were *supposed* to be experienced in manifold ways. But the organizers told me I must wait ten minutes before entering. (Is that how installations usually work?) When I finally got in, four dancers (Lizzie Feidelson, Malcolm-x Betts, Cyril Baldy and João dos Santos Martins) were jogging around the room, spitting out fragments of subconscious thought.

The second stage of "BANKing"—a collaborative work by choreographer Moriah Evans, composer **Catherine Lamb** and scenographer Doris Dziersk—took place upstairs, where we were free to roam and explore. A postmodern '70s savings bank became a living microcosm of the piece, animated by Lamb's luminous music and Evans' intrepid choreography. Dziersk's bold visual design struck a vivid contrast with the grey, austere interior of the building.

While not particularly spacious, the upper floor of the building was full of small rooms and halls, like a cosy maze. The dancers moved from room to room, performing solo, in duos, trios and—most excitingly—coming together as one blended force. The dancing suddenly became almost too fearless and daring for the public: vigorous, immediate and right in our faces. Adrenaline flooded my bloodstream.

As the dancers merged into a tangled mass, making their way forcefully down the staircase, the musicians prepared the stage in the centre of the ground-floor hall for the final act. A magical moment occurred when one attendee—surely a trained dancer—joined in, becoming a brief, unexpected fifth member. After causing more delightful havoc among the audience, the dancers finally settled on the floor, turning into "ordinary" listeners, as the musicians slowly found their way towards an ending. It was a shame someone broke the spell with early applause, stopping the music from dissolving fully into silence.

In "BANKing," one could focus on a single element—music, movement, choreography—or be drawn into their interconnection. But most impressive was the work's detailed explorations of the particularities of the space, and the seamless transitions between floors. The open-ended nature of the piece seemed to spark a range of positive responses among the audience, as I discovered from conversations outside. My own response was affirmed by a quote from Moriah Evans on the festival's Instagram page I saw afterwards: "maybe this music installation is a meditation to conduct empathy."

Amir Shpilman — Army of Love (Saturday, 15:20, Luitpoldhain, former Nazi Party rally grounds)

Amir Shpilman — "Army of Love" • Photo © David Häuser

Perhaps the most quietly touching moment of the festival emerged when I convinced co-curator Bastian Zimmermann and his friends to join me in Amir Shpilman's "Army of Love." Situated in the middle of a park as a 24/7 installation, the piece invited a group of at least six to take part in a smartphone-led game. Since there were only five of us, the task was to find one more lonely soul willing to dive into some new music mischief. I approached a massive flock of university students lounging on the grass and sipping cheap radler. Not just one, but three showed interest, and the performance began.

Naturally, it couldn't quite live up to the premiere a week earlier, which brought together as many as 150 people to reflect on ideas of communality in a park with a darkened past. But it still did something. After we played a game of catch, looked into each other's eyes, sang melodies together, the students returned the gesture. They shared their radler and invited us to join a game of **Flunkyball**, a drinking ritual that involves throwing someone's shoe at a bottle.

Music might have been only one element of Shpilman's interactive performance—and certainly played no role in throwing a random piece of footwear—but it brought me in contact with complete strangers. *Music as a social activity* revelled in its full glory.

III. POIESIS

Although I thoroughly enjoyed the program, as Musik Installationen Nürnberg drew to a close, I still didn't have a solid idea of what exactly constituted a *music installation*. The term might have proved messy and slippery—but maybe that's even better?

Maybe what mattered was that each work provoked audiences into rethinking their relationship to sound, space and one another, while occupying its unique place on the "linear composition—open installation" axis. Apart from pushing music outside its traditional venues, it managed to raise more fundamental, or dare I say, *existential* questions: How is time shaped by listening bodies and architecture, as "BANKing" by Moriah Evans convincingly demonstrated? What kinds of musical attention are possible when duration stretches or loops, as in the case of Bastard Assignment's "HOUSE"? What ethical responsibilities come with engaging sites marked by difficult or darker histories? Ultimately: How does one compose not just for instruments, but for environments, attention spans and chance encounters?

In a way, Musik Installationen Nürnberg was not just a festival but a field of research—one that made sense through practice rather than proclamation. In breaking down boundaries of genre and expectation, it quietly demanded that we, as audiences, rewire our own habits of engagement. Perhaps this is what it means, following Baron Munchausen, to pull oneself out of the (new music) swamp by one's own hair. ¶