



CLEARING

## ***Le Rail***

October 28 – December 18, 2021

This is an exhibition of thirty two flat images and a single model of a train carriage. Taken together, the thirty two images make up a complete depiction of a paper map owned by a single Infrabel employee, a man named Ruben Dewel. Ruben has owned the map since 2009, and has loaned it to the artist for this show. It carries his handmade notes and marginalia in pen and lead pencil. There are overlays of paper where new information has been brought in to obscure the old. For those like Ruben who know how to read it, the map contains a dizzying amount of information. It shows how all of the train lines in the Brussels rail system knit together, where they intersect and where an operator can divert them, what their gauges and their heights are and which parts of the city they cross. A sparkling, dazzling set of possibilities mapped out in a dozen or so colours and a quiver of alien symbols.

What's beautiful about such a map (whatever it means for it to be beautiful) is how it runs up against the limit of just how much complexity can be meaningfully depicted on a page. Even split up like this, into manageable frames of reference, the sheer weight of information it contains is almost psychedelic: a flat model of a vast four-dimensional system, a dense rainbow of possible comings and goings. Viewing it with a head full of memories from a conservatory education, it looks like a graphic score for a piece by Ligeti or Penderecki—enormous schematics to coordinate a battery of musicians or a bank of oscillators. Flat on a page, the map is equally vertiginous. And why not? One of the central drives of avant-garde music, dance, literature and art has always been how to meaningfully depict complexity with modest means, so is it so surprising that a rail schematic would sometimes offer a similar glimpse of the cosmic?

When the first trains started to appear in the UK, the US, and Europe, they literally remapped time around them. Prior to the railroad, time was a local affair, set by each city and town based on their own “high noon”. It was the complexity of coordinating train schedules across entire countries that demanded (and won) the contemporary era of standardised time zones, global time. That is, it wasn't until train timetables that it mattered whether 12 o'clock in London was the same 12 o'clock as in Glasgow. There was even a brief period between the arrival of the railroad and the invention of time zones that single clocks would have multiple hands to track multiple city's times on the one face.

It's hard to overstate the impact the railroad had upon the popular imagination when it arrived. There's a Wikipedia page for “List of Train Songs” with a few thousand published songs since 1828, in dozens of styles, all linked by a fascination for the train. From today's standpoint, the excitement feels quaint and lo-fi, but its undeniably real. Trains were manifest movement and symbols of modernity, in no genre more so than the Delta Blues. The Blues is a communal music expressed through stories of individual people. There's almost always a central figure in the foreground of the song, to give the listener something to hold onto, but any number of singers might borrow the same story or sing the same songs. (The figures are communal characters in this sense, rather than individual identities for the singers). And the train songs share in this trope. For a skilful singer, the entire complexity of the rail system, its remapping of time, its head-rush of approaching modernity, can all be charted onto the human experience of waiting at a train station for a lover, say, or staring at a railroad and dreaming of moving on. I wonder: do those with the train maps sometimes sing the blues too?

She walked down the yard, caught the longest train she seen  
Said, she'd ride and ride “till the blues wear offa me”  
It's two bullyin' freight trains runnin' side by side  
It's two bullyin' freight trains runnin' side by side  
They done stole my rider and I guess they's satisfied

—Spike Driver Blues, Mississippi John Hurt

Text by Henry Andersen.