

The background of the entire cover is a photograph of a modern architectural interior, likely a museum or gallery. The space is characterized by a high ceiling with a grid of recessed, glowing blue light strips. A tall, dark, rectangular structure, possibly a staircase or a central column, rises from the floor towards the top of the frame. In the lower foreground, the silhouettes of three people are visible, standing and looking towards the right. The overall color palette is a deep, monochromatic blue.

SCHAULAGER[®]

LAURENZ FOUNDATION

EXHIBITION BROCHURE
ENGLISH

STEVE MCQUEEN

BASS

15.6. — 16.11.2025

Acclaimed British artist and Oscar-winning filmmaker Steve McQueen (b. 1969, London) returns to Schaulager with *Bass* (2024). McQueen is renowned for his feature films as well as film and video installations, to which Schaulager dedicated a major retrospective in 2013. At once immersive and immaterial, the temporary intervention *Bass* is one of McQueen's most abstract works to date and demonstrates the virtuoso staging of light and sound that distinguishes McQueen's artistic practice. *Bass* was co-commissioned by Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager Basel, and Dia Art Foundation in New York.

Deep bass frequencies resound through the space – at times louder, at times softer, reverberating as individual notes or suggesting a melody. Bright riffs alternate with muffled, oscillating vibrations. Schaulager's vast interior is flooded with soundwaves and bathed in colored light that changes slowly, almost imperceptibly, from deep red to ultraviolet, covering the entire spectrum visible to the human eye. The cycle is controlled by over 1,000 LED tubes that were temporarily installed in the place of the architecture's regular ceiling lighting, creating illuminated tracks that traverse the building's five levels and soaring atrium like luminous contour lines. The acoustic epicenter of the installation is a column of subwoofers and speakers weightlessly suspended in the air – a paradoxical image as the impression of lightness contradicts the immense weight of the technology. Bass frequencies and light instantly cast a spell on visitors entering Schaulager, inescapably drawing them into the maelstrom of the experience.



What I love about light and sound is that they are both created through movement and fluidity. They can be molded into any shape, like vapor or a scent; they can sneak into every nook and cranny. I also love the beginning point where something isn't a form as much as it is all-encompassing. >>

Steve McQueen

In 2022, Laurenz Foundation and Dia Art Foundation invited McQueen to design a project that would be shown first in the New York space and then at Schaulager. When the artist walked into the cavernous lower-level space at Dia Beacon, a former Nabisco factory in upstate New York, he made an unexpected decision: instead of producing a film, he would work exclusively with light and sound. McQueen felt that the cellar-like hall devoid of daylight was predestined to accommodate an immersive work that would interact with the architecture of the building where it is shown and, as McQueen says, seep “into every nook and cranny.”



There is a commonality in the bass, the vibration, the reverb, the tone. It seems like a calling, an interplay, a form of communication between scattered people. For me it was a way of bringing a diaspora back together. >>

Steve McQueen

McQueen's intervention builds on basslines. He worked on the composition with the renowned bassist Marcus Miller, who in turn involved four other musicians, each equally known for their virtuosity on their respective bass instruments. Under the direction of McQueen and Miller, the individual musicians came together to create a unique composition. The intergenerational group from the Black diaspora met at Dia Beacon in January 2024 and started improvising, inspired by the cycle of colored light that was already installed. Mamadou Kouyaté's bright, driving rhythms on the traditional bass ngoni are joined by the precise, deep droning sounds of Aston Barrett Jr.'s barely plucked electric bass, while the same instrument in Meshell Ndegeocello's hands yields ethereal textures. They intertwine in the partiture with the clarity of Miller's jazz bass and the sounds created by Laura-Simone Martin plucking and bowing her acoustic upright bass. The recording of the musicians' session was edited in a sound studio and became the score of *Bass*, heard through speakers placed throughout the exhibition space.

McQueen's choice of instrument is not coincidental. Especially in the context of Black history, bass instruments have played a major part in formulating distinctive musical genres and cultural traditions, allowing for the musical articulation of emotions otherwise inexpressible with words. As the foundation of many compositions, low bass frequencies provide stability and depth of harmony that is experienced in an embodied way.

Music and sound are a thread that runs through McQueen's oeuvre. The soundtrack in many of his films enhances their impact by adding a somatic, multisensorial dimension to the visual experience. This is reinforced by the artist's virtuoso command of light and color, the means by which he draws us into the events physically and emotionally, heightening the intensity of the experience even further. In *Bass*, the immediacy of the dynamic ignited by the colored light and sound starts to dissolve entrenched perceptions of time and space. It is as if we had been plunged into a colorful sea of sound where we are engulfed in undulating bass frequencies with deep currents swirling around us.



I wanted to bring that thing which is usually in the background into the foreground and have five bassists. >>

Steve McQueen

The oceanic frequencies, lasting some three hours, interweave time and again with the entire color spectrum presented in a cycle of about thirty minutes. The transitions are so gradual that conscious perception of the changing colors is almost impossible. The colored stream of light looks immaterial and fleeting despite the slow pace of the transition. Even so, the impact is immediate and physical, arousing sensations of warmth or cold, expanding or contracting. This fluidity is disorienting; the work has no beginning or end, no specific vantage point or focus. Orientation and placement are left up to us, the visitors.



***Bass* could travel anywhere because it's about light and sound. It could be an amalgamate, it can morph in any space because it's about light and sound anywhere. >>**

Steve McQueen

Although *Bass* is one of McQueen's most abstract works to date, it is clearly an extension of his ongoing interest in forms of human perception and stories that have been suppressed or forgotten. It is also a tribute to the importance of music as a means of recounting stories, especially ones that have often been ignored, and are given a voice through various bass instruments. Stirring basslines convey a multitude of narratives, inspired, among other things, by the first location of the work. The dark lower-level hall of Dia Beacon with its striking rows of columns reminded McQueen of the hold of the ships that transported untold numbers of people from the African continent to the New World in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade, the so-called Middle Passage. The violent history of the Black diaspora is invoked in the context of the Black Atlantic as a transcultural network between Africa, America, the Caribbean, and Europe. But the illuminated basement also recalled the cellar – the “hole [...] full of light” – to which the unnamed protagonist retreats at the end of Ralph Ellison's celebrated novel *Invisible Man*, 1952. Illuminated by 1,369 light bulbs, this subterranean space becomes a refuge where the protagonist reflects on the paradoxes of being Black in a racist society – permanently marked by stereotypes while simultaneously sinking into invisibility.

The gentle cycle of light in *Bass* evokes the sensation of drifting through an endless succession of hours, or even days, as if suspended in a state that defies conventional notions of time. Accompanied by a throbbing bassline, the colored light could perhaps be associated with the pulsating energy of a nightclub – if not for the fact that every moment unfolds as if in slow motion. The visual and auditory intensity is overwhelming although what we really see or really hear remains elusive. It is as if *Bass* were challenging us to recalibrate our senses and seek reorientation in this universe of light and sound.



Bass is a space to reflect. It's not a mirror. It's a space where things are bouncing off you as a viewer, and you can expand it into something more, because so many things come into your head, the fact that you bring in history, you bring your past into that space, and you are engaged in that moment. >>

Steve McQueen

The presentation of *Bass* at Schaulager differs fundamentally from how the work was shown at its original venue in upstate New York. The references to the Middle Passage and the Black Atlantic still resonate, albeit less pronounced. Unlike at Dia Beacon, at Schaulager, the entire architecture becomes part of the installation, which extends across all five floors of the building. Light and sound had to be recalibrated and adapted to Schaulager's substantially larger volume, where the ground floor and the lowest level measure 4,300 square meters, not to mention the footage of the floors above. *Bass* transforms the interior into a vast auditorium, in which the soundwaves swell and subside like ocean breakers or polyphonic echoes in the mountains. The verticality of the architecture, emphasized by the height of the atrium, stands in contrast to the horizontal orientation, underscored by the ceiling lighting. The juxtaposition heightens the impression of *Bass* as a space whose scale is indefinable, much like the inability to fathom the expanse of the ocean when on the high seas.

FURTHER READING

To learn more about *Bass*, we recommend two publications created on the occasion of the commissioned work for Schaulager and Dia Art Foundation. The first, *Steve McQueen: Bass* (2024), features texts written before the installation was completed. The second, *Steve McQueen: Bass Volume* (2025), focuses on the finished work and includes two new essays, an interview with the artist, and a wide selection of color photographs of the installation.

STEVE McQUEEN: BASS VOLUME

Ed. by Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager Basel, 2025. With an introduction by Isabel Friedli and Elsa Himmer and contributions by Adrienne Brown and Tina M. Campt, and a conversation between Steve McQueen and Solveig Nelson. Design: Irma Boom.

Bilingual edition
(German and English)
50 installation photographs
and 15 reference images
(color and b/w)
160 pages, 27 x 19 cm
39 CHF

STEVE McQUEEN: BASS

Ed. by Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager Basel, and Dia Art Foundation, 2024. With an introduction by Donna De Salvo and contributions by Robert Fink, Paul Gilroy, Tsitsi Ella Jaji, John Keene, Katherine McKittrick, and Christina Sharpe. Design: Irma Boom.

Single-language edition
(English), 60 double-page
color photographs and
66 reference images (color
and b/w), flatbook, 200 pages
31.5 x 23 x 3.5 cm
49 CHF

ABOUT STEVE MCQUEEN

Over the past two decades, British artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen (b. 1969 in London, lives and works in London and Amsterdam) has acquired an outstanding reputation for his work. Major museums worldwide have devoted exhibitions to his award-winning oeuvre, including Dia Art Foundation (2024), Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan (2022), Tate Modern (2020), the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2017), the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2017), Schaulager (2013), and the Art Institute of Chicago (2012). His project *Year 3* was showcased at Tate Britain in 2019. McQueen received the Turner Prize in 1999, and he represented Great Britain at the Venice Biennale in 2009. In 2014, Harvard University awarded him the W.E.B. Du Bois Medal in Honours of his contribution to African and African American studies and in 2016, he received the Johannes Vermeer Award from the Dutch government. McQueen is the director of five feature films, *Hunger* (2008), *Shame* (2011), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Widows* (2018), and most recently *Blitz* (2024). In 2020, he made *Small Axe*, an anthology of five films about London's West Indian community and, in 2021, *Uprising*, a 3-part documentary with James Rogan, about the New Cross Fire in London in 1981. McQueen won the Oscar for best motion picture for *12 Years a Slave* at the Academy Awards in 2014. He was named an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2002 and a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 2011 for achievements in both the fine arts and filmmaking and was knighted in the 2020 New Year Honours list. Most recently, McQueen and his wife Bianca Stigter were awarded honorary doctorates from the University of Amsterdam for their joint project *Occupied City* (2024). McQueen has been appointed Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University for the 2025/2026 academic year.

Steve McQueen, *Bass*, 2024

LED light and sound, courtesy the artist
Co-commissioned by Laurenz Foundation,
Schaulager Basel and Dia Art Foundation

MUSIC

Concept, producer, and arranger: Steve McQueen
Bandleader, producer, and arranger:
Marcus Miller

COMPOSED AND PERFORMED BY

Steve McQueen, conductor
Marcus Miller, electric bass
Meshell Ndegeocello, electric bass
Aston Barrett Jr., electric bass
Mamadou Kouyaté, bass ngoni
Laura-Simone Martin, upright bass

Recording and sound design: Paolo Brandi
Recording assistant: Jonny Taylor
Video technician and artist assistant:
Sue MacDiarmid

The development and presentation of *Bass* at Dia Beacon was initiated and curated by Donna De Salvo, Senior Adjunct Curator for Special Projects, with Emily Markert (Curatorial Assistant), and Randy Gibson (Manager of Exhibition Technology).

BASS AT SCHAULAGER

Senior Curator: Heidi Naef
Planning and installation: Yvo Hartmann
Communications & PR: Silke Kellner-Mergenthaler
Art education: Andreas Blättler
Publications: Isabel Friedli, Elsa Himmer
Registrar: Nadine Koller
Collection management: Lea Brun, Jasmin Sumpf
Conservation: Marcus Broecker
Technical services and security:
Dario Franco, Tobias Kupferschmid,
Guido Bologna, Daniele Surdo
Library: Stephan E. Hauser
Administration: Gabriella Brancher, Franziska Schmidt

We thank all those who contributed to the presentation of *Bass* at Schaulager. Our special thanks go to Thomas Häfliger.

Exhibition brochure:
Text: Isabel Friedli and Elsa Himmer
Translation: Catherine Schelbert
Design: pitschmann. Kommunikation GmbH
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STEVE MCQUEEN BASS

15 JUNE — 16 NOVEMBER 2025

Co-commissioned by Laurenz Foundation,
Schaulager Basel and Dia Art Foundation

OPENING HOURS

Thursday 12 to 6 p.m.

Saturday and Sunday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Monday to Wednesday and Friday closed

For details of opening hours on public
holidays and during Art Basel, see:

www.schaulager.org

ADMISSIONS

Tickets regular 10 CHF

Tickets reduced 7 CHF

PUBLIC GUIDED TOURS

For information on public and private tours see:

www.schaulager.org

FOR SCHOOLS, COLLEGES, AND UNIVERSITIES

On the occasion of *Bass* by Steve McQueen, we offer an engaging art education program for schools and universities. All visits are accompanied by playful and creative activities. The program (including admission) is free of charge for all schools and universities from Switzerland and abroad.

Registration and contact: www.schaulager.org

EVENTS

To accompany the presentation *Steve McQueen: Bass*, Schaulager offers a diverse program of events, including lectures, talks, and more.

For details of events, see:

www.schaulager.org

For current insights and highlights, follow us
on Instagram: [@schaulagerbasel](https://www.instagram.com/schaulagerbasel)

Cover: Steve McQueen, *Bass*, 2024, LED light and sound

Co-commissioned work by Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager Basel and Dia Art Foundation

15 June – 16 November 2025, Schaulager@ Münchenstein/Basel (Installation view), © Steve McQueen

Photo: Pati Grabowicz

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