The Landscape Painter

by Golo Föllmer, Berlin

Benoît Maubrey suspected early that life meant trouble. Already at the age of eight he felt it in his bones. The causes are still unclear, it just happened. But as he grew up it got serious: he needed to experience something, wanted to feel life, and that meant doing things differently, breaking through expectations: making trouble simply by realizing his ideas unswervingly, consistently following his impulses and convictions. That's what came through to me most clearly, when I interviewed Maubrey one day in July 2018.

It was clear how unconditionally this attitude had established itself in him: "When I left the US for Germany in 1979 it was like a Kamikaze thing. I thought, if it's do-or-die, better do it in a country like Germany where at least they appreciate art. You have a better chance of surviving." Without knowing why, this feeling, that there's no enjoyment if there's been no trouble, crept into his life. Benoît must provoke! Even today he is still questioning his motives. His art, however, was always focused, crystal clear, bang on the nose!

At a subsequent meeting he expanded on his ideas about interactive sound sculptures which disrupt or rearrange the public sphere, which make people audible and visible, which emphasize the personal amidst the impersonality of urban architecture, and bring people together. He began building the first of these sculptures at the beginning of the 1990s, and since 2010 his worldwide versions of 'Speaker's Corner' have become his main project. In Japan, Egypt, Canada, etc., he has set up monumental sculptures made of hundreds of scrap loudspeakers to be played by passers-by via microphone, telephone and Bluetooth.

The sculptures have their own beauty. The loudspeakers tell of fashions and styles of past decades, of the preferences of social groups and countries, of product fetishism and status, of intimate listening times and exuberant dance evenings. All this is deposited in the electronics Maubrey arranges into

columns and walls. He integrates his loudspeaker sculptures into urban space by giving them architectural forms. The temple of Delphi made of recycled electronics is in itself a provocation, but also a thoughtful reference to cultural tradition. Giving it a voice recalls the temple's oracular function.

The public space is the only meaningful venue for Maubrey's works, which are based on interaction. The Guitar Monkeys, the Audio Ballerinas and dozens of other audio groups came before the loudspeaker sculptures. From the earliest days, the concept of stage was alien to him because of the separation between public and performer.

Maubrey speaks of his life as if it puzzles him. He asks himself, How on earth did I create that? Did I do that or did it just happen? He identifies the turning points, the changes of perspective, the flashes of enlightenment that fell as random thunderbolts from a dark cloud. "That's the greatest thing, all of them are part of the creative process! You have to be free to see and grasp the opportunity. Coincidence became my modus operandi. And sometimes you have to put up with a lot of trouble, or rather, you have to cause a lot of trouble — if you want to get to the edge, if you want to feel life."

When he was eight years old his mother surprised him in his room while he was writing out a hundred times "I must not disturb the class". Mother asked, trouble at school again? No, I'm just getting ready for next time, he answered. It was already clear to him that life meant trouble. "And you don't change," he says today. "I still need to disturb".

When he arrives in Germany, he is a painter. First stop is Munich, where they look at him, irritated, and say: What do you think you're doing here? You belong in West Berlin! All right, then! He goes to Berlin as a painter, finds a soul mate in the owner of the Galerie No Name. Still a painter, he stiffens old clothes and uses them to stamp long canvases with 'group portraits', which he exhibits in public spaces. The process of convincing people to let him use their outdoor spaces for parts of the kilometer-long "Running Painting" has a surprising attraction for him: this is where an exchange of ideas and encounters arises. An important part of the process. Today it is the sometimes months-long search for hundreds of cheap scrap loudspeakers that fascinates

him in a similar way: he goes to the back doors of junk shops, where the unsalable junk piles up. He has to learn how to find scrap in Japan, where they say: "We don't have garbage." Or in north Africa, where there's a lot of garbage, but it's valuable and expensive.

He arrives in Berlin after painting every day for ten years. But suddenly he is bored with painting. He falls victim to Painter's Block, and he treats himself by walking across West Berlin, until he hits the Wall somewhere, and turns around again. He lands in the Bilka market at Bahnhof Zoo, where the next epiphany hits him in the form of a jeans ad booming through loudspeakers: "That's it! Instead of advertising jeans, they should be letting artists use the loudspeaker systems to express themselves. You just have to push something through, through the air, and then the department store becomes a completely different place."

The painter depicts landscape on canvas, and the writer lies for 300 pages, says Maubrey. "It's all about interpretation." He knows what he's talking about, having won the creative writing award from Georgetown University in 1975. But that was back then. Now, it was 1982, and he decided to "paint" right onto the landscape itself, with sound waves. The air, his canvas; the sounds, his colors. He first tried it out in an experiment at the International Congress Center Berlin. Based on that experience he developed a way to get around permission for the use of official speaker systems by embedding his loudspeakers directly in clothing. Audio clothes were born. It was a simple solution, opening the door to surprising and anarchic actions.

The Audio Ballerinas are probably Benoît Maubrey's best-known project. "They look beautiful, people like to look at pretty girls. And the beautiful sight makes it easier to spoon-feed sound art to normal people". In Maubrey's studio in Baitz, the audio-tutus lie on shelves, with tour cases like those of a rock band, in which the special garments still travel today.

They are a long runner, even if they are not always completely understood. His experience with the Audio Ballerinas have made Benoît somewhat cynical. "You may be known as an international artist," he says, "but that doesn't mean people understand what you're doing. The Audio Ballerinas, for

example, also get booked for corporate gala events. A VW manager once commented 'They look very nice, but what's all that noise?' I explained. 'Aha, good, but let's cut the performance short, shall we?' Another time a customer rents four Tutus to play the company jingle, and calls in panic that he can't get the four sound sources synchronized. He can't, of course, because that's part of the artistic concept, multi-acoustics. I suggest that the customer simply switch off three." The situation is saved — the art has won, the customer is satisfied.

Before the Audio Ballerinas there are other audio groups, each with their own special loudspeaker suits. The Guitar Monkeys storm rooms and fill them up to the roof with noise, 10 guitarists, male and female, with wild, invented instruments like sawed-off shotguns, with amplifiers and loudspeakers in their jackets, sometimes standing on the tables, sometimes disappearing. While they keep on drinking their beers.

The Guitar Monkeys' and their irrepressible joy in breaking rules and rigidities are references to rock and punk. But it goes beyond that. Melody and riff are abandoned, only the gesture of liberation through the noise of the screaming guitars remains. The spontaneous actions are unmarketable and the whole freedom is shocking, no half-measures as with punk, which in the hands of the record industry become merchandising.

Maubrey's Larsen Ensemble consists of four musicians, each equipped with individual microphones and PA systems who create complex feedback phenomena. The Larsen Ensemble shares characteristics with the Guitar Monkeys, but focuses on space, on resonance modes. Maubrey is a sound researcher here, forming sound in space. The reference to rock and punk is still there with the feedback, but through the simple choreography of four people with loudspeakers on their backs he builds a bridge to contemporary music, as in Alvin Lucier's experiments with spatial resonances. These two ensembles, Larsen and Guitar Monkeys, are the closest Maubrey's oeuvre comes to music.

Maubrey (who admits he can't read a note) is neither technician, musician, choreographer nor composer – but as an artist working with mobile multi-

acoustic loudspeaker systems, unencumbered by the rules of individual disciplines, he can move freely and relaxedly between the worlds of pop culture and art.

Then there's a long list of his other audio groups: Sounding Steel Workers at the Ars Electronica in Linz, Subway controllers in Berlin, the Audio Herd at the Federal Garden Show, etc. They all interact with their environment, with the people and objects around them, via sound. Benoît works with visual, acoustic and mobile elements in their respective location, integrates them into his concept, and "paints" the landscape with them: physically, visually, acoustically.

The equipment of the audio clothes continues to evolve with regard to the cultural space in which the performance takes place. In the beginning the performers used cassette players. Then they started using microphones and other pickups live. With the addition of cheap circuit-bent samplers from Asia, the Audio Ballerinas could use buttons and sensors to control the loop of the sampler and the pitch of the sound. Where other artists might turn to canvas, stone or color, Maubrey uses modern electronics as the contemporary artists' building material.

In every performance there are references to the daily life of that place, to the human lives lived there and to the everyday common uses of the technology available.

What may otherwise be expressed in public space almost exclusively through the visual display of fashion, style, posture and facial expressions, finds acoustic expression in Maubrey's sculptures. People put themselves audibly in relation to each other. Benoît's sculptures promote peoples' encounters on the basis of their circumstances. In this way, the atomization of people in public space is counteracted. Marc Augé has described how public urban space, for the sake of its functionality as a traffic and trading space, loses its role as a social place and has become a 'non-place'. Only when people do and show personal things there, do public squares become places of significance for individuals and groups, they become socially significant and effective.

In order to activate this function, routine behaviors in public space must be broken through: trouble is needed. Neither the artist nor the users of the sculpture have to state explicitly what their aim is as long as they use the opportunity to express themselves as individuals and/or parts of specific groups. Allowing you, urban dweller, to use Maubrey's sound architecture brings a moment of empowerment: the city belongs to you. Make it yours by playing your music and voicing your sound. We are all landscape painters. The sculpture is not confined to what the artist built, it becomes what the inhabitants of the place do with it: paint their city with sound.