

Organizing Sound with Audio Clothes
An interview with Benoît Maubrey
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Abstract

Benoît Maubrey's work with audio art started in Berlin in 1982 with public sound sculptures, and he eventually turned to performative practices with portable audio embedded in clothes and costumes.

Maubrey has developed a huge portfolio of audio ensemble performances on several continents, and an interesting thread of autonomy and critical reflection runs through his oeuvre. The costumes and their technical affordances have changed with new technological developments, and in this interview, Maubrey explains these developments, and how he has both maintained and extended his artistic focus.

JR:

You have an interesting artistic background that reaches back to New York and in particular to West Berlin in the early 1980s. You were originally a writer turned painter before you started working with sound – could you say something about how your ideas for using sound developed?

BM:

In West Berlin in the early eighties there were these interesting residency programs that brought in artists like John Cage; West Berlin and New York actually shared the beginnings of the sound art scene. I was lucky to show up in West Berlin when I did; I could look at other artists who were already working with speakers, learn and exchange. I was looking for something, and thought that sound could be very viable for me as well.

Once I started to work outdoors, meaning 'outside of gallery contexts', I started to feel a lot better about things, and I remember thinking that loudspeakers were like brushes on the outdoor canvas, you could spread your colors on the canvas, making the air vibrate.

Organizing sound is clearly still interesting to many people, and the sound art scene is getting bigger and bigger, overlapping with noise musicians and the electronics and circuit-bending scene, as well as with music and the fine arts scene.

JR:

You started your audio work with stationary sound sculptures, but eventually turned to live performances. Can you say something about why you became interested in the performance aspect of things?

BM:

My main intention was to work outdoors, and not in the gallery spaces. I was working with PA systems that were already in place. The idea was that the character of the outdoor spaces would be changed by the sound.

Social participation was a key element in my initial idea, and still is. I encouraged the public to participate in these sculptures by sending me cassettes. However, at a certain point it started to become difficult to get permission to access public PA systems, and also to install stationary sound sculptures. This is why I had the idea of building loudspeakers directly into my clothes, because I could then invade public spaces without permission. I built mobile sound sculptures by

sewing loudspeakers onto my jackets and inviting my friends to do the same.

We called these "audio jackets" or "audio clothes". We could use public spaces in a logistically simple way without asking permission.

JR:

The technology in your audio costumes has been developing from simple analog to complex digital technology over the course of the last 25 years or

so. Can you describe the goals for this development?

BM:

The first Audio Clothes had portable cassette players, and only played back recorded sound. When the Walkman came along, it was a great help, and we went from ghetto blasters playing cassettes to Walkmen playing cassettes, and as technology was becoming smaller, it opened up things for new ideas. I wanted to orchestrate the clothes with specific sounds, and would make performance-specific recordings of different kinds and perform with them.

There was a contest about sculptures in a public park in Berlin, and I came up with the idea of the Audio Herd. The herd was dressed in animal-skin prints and played animal sounds, and because this project had funding, I was able to develop special amplifiers and speaker units and get better quality than we'd had until then.

This was the first "Audio Uniform": the clothes were all the same. There were seven performers and the sound tracks were of very high quality. One can think of it as a seven-channel composition. When the herd walked through the forest, we would play bird sounds, and in a jungle setting, we would play monkey sounds. I was orchestrating this multi-acoustic group differently depending on the individual spaces. The sounds were site-specific.

JR:

You state somewhere in a recent book manuscript that you think of the sounds as relating to local customs, themes, situations and traditions. Can you explain something about how you are going about achieving this in concrete terms?

BM:

Yes, for example when I was invited by Ars Electronica to create a performance, I decided on the idea of Audio Steelworkers, adapting the work clothes of the steel workers as a local uniform. We made recordings in the steel plants so that the group of electro-acoustic steelworkers reflected this in the city of Linz. The concept was that the site-specific electro-acoustic uniforms would reflect a certain theme from that area or region where the performances took place.

JR:

The Audio Steelworkers from Linz, were they using only pre-recorded sounds?

BM:

Yes, we (Ralf Buron and Hans Peter Kuhn) recorded in the steel mills and made cassettes, and later used them for ten performances around the city of Linz. That was always the concept.

JR:

So when bringing the sound of the steel mills into the city by way of the performers, what was the significance of the performers moving? Does movement have any specific significance, or could you equally well have played the sounds back from stationary speakers?

BM:

The audio group is like an amoeba - I always use the word multi-acoustic –

they all play the same sound but it is not synchronized, it is always changing, for example if you're using a big hammer from the steel mills, it is not only the one hammer, but seven, and that makes a difference. When the performers are walking through areas, the spectators are inside the performance, and the performance is always changing because the performers move. Added to that is the topography, buildings and landscape. So you are working not only with yourself, but you are working the entire surroundings into your performance. And there is also the element of surprise for the spectators, most often they don't expect to be surrounded by these sounds – being inside a sound is different from perceiving the sound from a distance.

JR:

OK, so what we in electro-acoustic music speak of as spatialization is a key element in the movement of your performers?

BM:

Exactly, and that is one of the things that make audio uniforms so fascinating: they will always sound different depending on the spaces you put them in. Another example of this type of spatialization can be the *Audio Cyclists* that I created for “Les Arts Electroniques” in Rennes in 1988. We did an interview with Tour de France-champion Bernard Hinault about cycling, and the tapes we made from that interview were played by the cyclists when they were riding. We took the local culture of amateur cyclists and made races where the cyclists actually choreographed the sound of the composition, according to their “sports qualities” (for example stamina and desire to win). They were all wearing audio tricots, and when you hear recordings they often sound exactly like a swarm of bees.

JR:

I want to go back to technical details a little – did the construction of any of these uniforms involve technical development?

BM:

Yes, for the *Audio Herd*, we learned that we could build in pre-amps in addition to the normal amplifiers we had been using for a long time, and the pre-amps would make it possible to use microphones and talk through the clothes, not only play tapes. This was actually also the basis for the band Guitar Monkeys from the mid-1980s. Basically, the guitars would be fitted with piezo microphones and played through the jackets. This method created a lot of feedback, and the 10-member band would ‘invade’ bars and so on. Contextually, this fit well with the punk scene of the 1980s in Berlin, and we became the house band in a couple of bars.

JR:

Somewhere in your recent manuscript you write that you are making each performer ‘responsible for their own sound’. The Guitar Monkeys is an example of that?

BM:

Yes, and we gained a lot of freedom that way. Each player would pick up a guitar from a pile on a table, drink beer while playing, get up on a table, fall down, continue playing, and make an acoustic detour into the bathroom while still playing, all in the spirit of the time! It was pretty wild.

JR:

But these were choreographed performances, from the sound of it?

BM:

Of course – to me, music is essentially choreographed sound, so this was a composition.

JR:

This makes me curious about whether you place any sort of restrictions on the performers when you construct the timelines in the performances – are there limits? I am thinking now about the cyclists, if we could go back to them for a second, did you choreograph a dramaturgy – should they cycle close together, with distance apart, or with different speeds for example?

BM:

We worked the cassettes into certain sections, like a ten-track tape, one for each of the cyclists. And no, I did not want to interfere with their performance. The only restrictions were in the material on the tapes, and in the route they were following. Their task was to follow the path through the city, and the magic was that the sportsmen created the details in the choreography.

What really made a difference was when we made it possible for performers to use self-generated sounds. We were investigating how solar cells could make the performers non-dependent on batteries, and placed cells on plastic skirts large enough to provide enough energy to drive the amplifiers. A dancer friend happened by when we were developing this and said: “It’s a tutu” – and this was the start of the Audio Ballerinas.

The tutus provided a lot of usable surface for the speakers, solar panels and samplers. The dancers could record and play back their recordings as part of the performances. And we gradually added more features, like looping and pitching, all fully controllable by the dancers. We also added light sensors and radio receivers to further the interaction with the environments they were performing in.

JR:

It seems that your technical development has consistently focused on making the performers autonomous. Has this autonomy changed your own role in the ensemble?

BM:

Dancers are trained very early in their careers to follow a set of rules, and they work with numbers when they dance. They also know more about choreography than I do, so my role now is to create the instruments. And each instrument actually dictates their choreography.

JR:

How do the instruments dictate their choreography? – That’s an interesting view!

BM:

Well, for example the light sensors (*Peepers*) that the dancers wear on their hands are used as light-to-frequency controllers, so that by moving the hands, and opening and closing them, the dancers would change the sound. This makes for a strict choreography.

Another instrument is *The Line*, developed over the course of many years.

Basically, *The Line* is a contact microphone mounted on metal - for example on a garden rake. The rake would be dragged on the ground, and the sounds would come out of the tutus. Here, the rakes are setting terms for the choreography.

JR:

I remember a performance with audio uniforms and umbrellas in Oslo (1993).

The Audio Guards performance was strictly structured along a timeline, opening and closing umbrellas, dragging and tapping them on the pavement, and so on. How detailed were your instructions to the performers? Did your instructions have much to do with what we can call more conventional composition?

BM:

This performance (*Audio Guards*) fits perfectly within my concept of audio uniforms. We (choreographic director: Sygun Schenk) copied the movements of the real palace guards, replaced the guns with umbrellas, and added sound. I wanted the original choreography of the Guards transposed into sound, using microphones in the shoes and on the umbrellas. For me that performance was perfect because I didn't change anything, except add sound to an existing set of movements.

JR:

From a musical perspective, how do you expect people to approach your works: is the quality of the sound essential, or the emphasis on certain aspects of the sound?

BM:

What I am doing is using sound to make people think, it's all very simple. With the *Audio Guards* for example, the listeners are used to how the guards move normally, but being able to "hear" the guards changes everything for the listeners. I am changing the normal appearance of daily life, I want to bring a new perspective and a change in how the reality is perceived. I am not making concerts where you sit down and listen, I am taking existing elements from daily life and making them audible.

I'll mention another example as well – the *Audio Subway Controllers*, where I recorded the commands given by Berlin subway attendants telling passengers to get on and off trains. We made several tapes with these commands (given by 20 different controllers, in order to get different voices and intonations), and equipped three performers with "All aboard" messages and four with "Stay back" messages. In the actual subway situation, playing back these tapes created absolute confusion among the travelers, and they were forced to think about the situation in a different way from what they were used to.

JR:

I sense an element of activism in your performances: they pop up, like street theater, perhaps even invisible theater, and surprise the audience in their environment and make them reflect.

BM:

Yes, and it's also about fantasy.