Organising Sound with Audio Clothes: An interview with Benoit Maubrey

JØRAN RUDI

Norwegian Center for Technology in Music and the Arts (NOTAM), Sandakerveien 24D, bygg F3, 0473 Oslo
Email: joranru@notam02.no

Benoit 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. His artistic practice currently spans site-specific and non-site-specific sound installations, locational and non-locational performances, as well as performed, interactive and non-interactive sound installations, and a comprehensive description of his artistic trajectory is planned for release in 2019: *Benoit Maubrey – Sound Sculptures*. His most well-known ensemble is *The Audio Ballerinas*, wearing tutus with a combination of solar cells, light sensors, samplers, radios, amplifiers and loudspeakers. The ensemble has been performing since its debut in Lille in 1990. Maubrey has developed a huge portfolio of audio ensemble performances on several continents, and an interesting thread of autonomy and critical reflection is running 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 maintained and extended his artistic focus.

JR: You have an interesting artistic background that reaches back to New York and in particular 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 New York I was writing and painting, and I continued with that when I moved to Berlin in 1979. I had good contact with a gallery,[1] and everything was working fine, but I got bored, and developed a serious case of painter's block. I needed something that would fulfil my desire to be creative. And when I happened to be walking through a department store one day, I noticed voices coming from the PA system, and decided that sound was a very interesting medium. Using air to propagate messages.

In West Berlin there were these interesting residency programmes that brought in artists like, for example, John Cage, and West Berlin and New York actually shared the beginnings of the sound art scene.[2] I was lucky to show up in West Berlin; 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 colours on the canvas, making the air vibrate.

Organising sound is clearly interesting to many people, and the sound art scene is getting bigger and bigger, overlapping with noise musicians and the electronics and circuit board scene, as well as music and the fine arts scenes. I consider myself more as a painter than as a musician.

JR: Why do you say painter rather than musician? Do you find that there are differences in how they typically approach audio arts?

BM: Most musicians are content with sitting in closed rooms and working on stages: I need real outdoor space and live environments.

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 worked with PA systems already in place, and allowed the public to participate in these 'sculptures' by sending me cassettes. The cassettes were played as part of the sculptures. The idea was that the outdoor spaces and their character would be changed by the sound. Social participation in outdoor sculptures was a key element in my initial idea, and still is.

However, at a point it started to become difficult to get permission to access the PA systems in public spaces that I wanted to use, and also to install stationary sound sculptures with loudspeakers. This is why I had the idea of building loudspeakers directly into my clothes, because I wouldn't need any permission to wear my clothes in public spaces.

JR: So the performance aspect was born from necessity, or at least from practical considerations?

BM: Yes, and out of frustration, because I wasn't allowed to use public spaces the way I wanted to. The

[1]Maubrey is referring to Bernward Mayer's Gallery 'no name'.
[2]Berlin künstlerprogramm des DAAD. www.berliner-kuenstlerprogramm.de/en/index_en.php (accessed 12 April 2018).

Organised Sound **23**(3): 292–295 © Cambridge University Press, 2018. doi:10.1017/S1355771818000201

notion was probably that artists might do crazy things with the PA systems. But the result was that 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 analogue 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 for new ideas. I wanted to orchestrate the clothes with specific sounds, and would make site- or 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 (Figure 1). The herd would be dressed in animal skin-type suits and dresses and play animal sounds, and because this project had funding, I could get help to develop special amplifiers and speaker units and get better quality than we'd had until then.

This was the first type of 'Audio Uni-form', the clothes were all the same. There were seven performers and the sound tracks were of very high quality. One can think of them 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 (Figure 2), adapting the work clothes of the steel workers as a local uniform. We made recordings in the steel plants so that the group of electroacoustic steelworkers reflected this in the city of Linz. The concept was that the site-specific electroacoustic 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 synchronised, 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 swarm of bees is different from observing the swarm of bees from a distance.

JR: OK, so what we in electroacoustic music speak of as spatialisation is a key element in the movement of your performers?

Figure 1. The Audio Herd.

Figure 2. The Audio Steelworkers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771818000201 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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 spatialisation 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 bicycling, and the tapes we made from this 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' (e.g., 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. Audio uniforms, adapting to a local culture, a certain theme, a certain acoustic.

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 ten-member band would 'invade' bars and so on. Contextually, this fitted 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, making 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 of 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 bicyclists, 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 details in the choreography were created by the sportsmen.

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 fit enough of them 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 had a lot of surface for speakers and solar panels, and circuit boards with digital memory (Figure 3). We built samplers so that the dancers could record and also 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. Essentially dancers are the ideal 'robots' to work with the instruments we made. 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 does the instrument 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.

Figure 3. Detail from an Audio Ballerina tutu.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771818000201 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Another instrument is *The Line*, developed over the course of many years. Basically, the line is a contact microphone mounted on metal or for example 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 '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 (Figure 4). We [I and choreographical 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: I have also a few questions about sound specifically – you're combining sound and movement in a very anarchic manner, letting performers control their sound and movement themselves. From a musical perspective – how do you expect people to approach your works – is the quality of the sound essential, or 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 'get-in' messages and four with 'stay-back' messages. In the actual subway situation, playing back these tapes created absolute confusion among the travellers, and they were forced to think about the situation in a different way from what they were used to.

Figure 4. The Audio Guards.

JR: In addition to the many types of audio uniformed performances, you are also making permanent and semi-permanent installations like *Temple* that you showed at ZKM a few years back. Are there different artistic intentions between those two genres in your work?

BM: For me it is essential to use outdoor spaces, public spaces, and allow people to express themselves through loudspeakers. The installation at ZKM was created for an outdoor space, and people could call it up and talk through it. It was there for one year.

My work with the Audio Ballerinas made me better known as an artist, and that gave me the opportunity to make the immobile audio monuments. I must admit, though, that I feel more fulfilled with the sculptures, since they do exist and continue to do so. I also have a permanent installation on top of a mountain in Japan (*Karaoke Torii*, originally developed as *Shrine* for the Kobe biennial).

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

BM: Yes, and it's also about fantasy – let's change life and not just live it. Let's not go inside and be private. It is also about fantasy – I am an American artist, and I find that American artists are easier with concepts. My wife – Susken Rosenthal – is a European artist and can spend days and weeks working on her concepts before realising them, while for me, the audio performances are more about enjoying the instruments and what you can do with them.

My main performance work remains in the multi-acoustic choreographies in public spaces: the mobility and the site-specific versatility of the electroacoustic clothes and musical instruments that can be integrated in a site-specific way to almost any outdoor situation or topography.

I was recently given some of my mother's correspondence after she died a few years ago, and in one of the letters to a friend, she wrote about me that 'Benoit is now eight years old, he is not all that good in school, and actually I think he is kind of a troublemaker.' She continues to tell her friend that one night she came up to my bedroom and I am sitting at a table writing out on a piece of paper 'I will not disturb the class.' And I am writing this two hundred times. She says to me: 'Oh Benoit, did you make trouble again?' And I say 'No, I am just getting ready for next time!'

That's a good story, and I am still making trouble, but in an artistic kind of way, within a framework and with deliberate orchestration. Using sound as a tool for changing public spaces.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1355771818000201 Published online by Cambridge University Press