

Politics of Participation in Benoît Maubrey's *Speaker Sculptures*

VADIM KEYLIN

vkeylin@cc.au.dk

Aarhus University, Denmark

ABSTRACT: *Speaker Sculptures* is a series of works by Benoît Maubrey, created in 1983–2015. All of them are large-scale architecture-like constructions (often modelled after existing historical buildings or building types) built of recycled loudspeakers. The public could connect to the work by calling a designated number, or using Bluetooth or WiFi technologies, and express themselves freely through the sculpture. In my paper, I investigate the strategies of audience engagement the Maubrey employs and their applicability to the acoustic design of urban spaces. Through their numerous loudspeakers, *Speaker Sculptures* connect the public space to the electronic media, subverting their antagonism and creating a single space of social interactions. This offers a possibility of political presence in public space to those, who are unable to do so in person due to physical or mental disabilities, or other personal circumstances.

KEYWORDS: sound art, sound sculpture, participatory art, participatory culture, augmented reality.

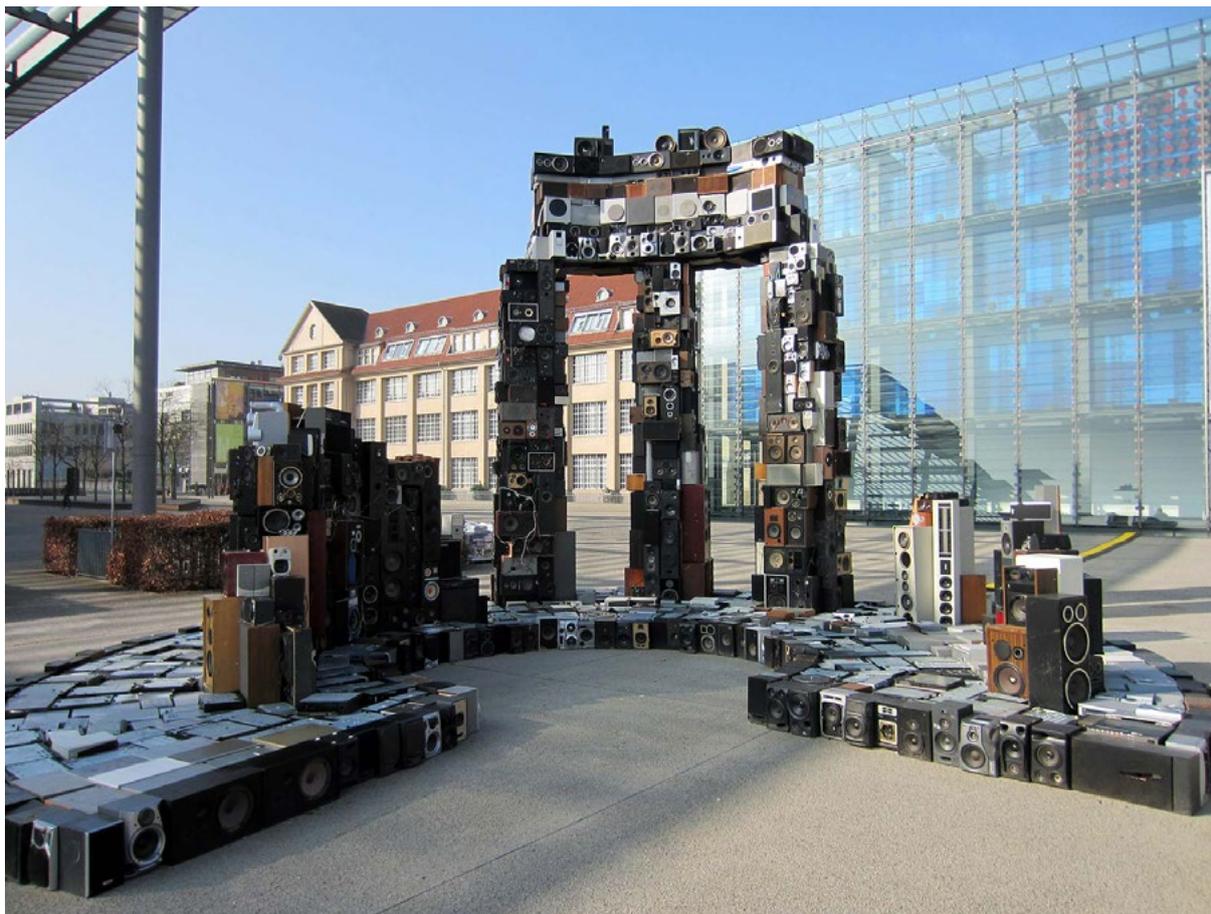


Figure 1. Benoît Maubrey. Temple (2012). Photo courtesy of the artist.

In 1983, Benoît Maubrey started a series of works titled *Speaker Sculptures*. These were large-scale architecture-like constructions built of recycled loudspeakers. Many of them were modelled after existing buildings (Speakers Gate, 2010, a replica of the gateway of a 6th century fortress; Temple, 2012, a recreation of the Delphi Temple ruin) or building types (Audio Igloo, 1997; Shrine, 2015, imitating a Torii Gate), some included parts of existing structures (Speakers Wall, 2011, which featured a piece of Berlin Wall). Most of *Speaker Sculptures* were outfitted with an answering machine, so that the public could call a designated number and express themselves freely through the sculpture. Later works expanded the number of ways the public could interact with the sculptures. For example, *Open Cube* (2013), installed at the Hard Rock Hotel Palm Springs, also allowed connection via Bluetooth technology. *Shrine* had an 8-channel PA system that allowed several people to interact with it simultaneously, both on site and remotely. Additional sounds may include white noise or radio transmitters tuned to random frequencies.

The aim of my paper is to explore the artistic strategy of connecting public and private spaces via acoustic media, realized by Maubrey in his *Speaker Sculptures* project, and its applicability to urban sound design. I want to point out that the object of this discussion is this artistic strategy in general rather than particular artworks, which results in a rather narrow

focus of this paper and disregard for other artistic considerations that define *Speaker Sculptures*. On the other hand, this approach also allows veneering into speculative, hypothetical territory. The focus of my discussion will therefore be the possible effects such a sculpture could have on urban life, should it become a permanent feature of the landscape, which may go beyond what was realized in particular artworks.

The *Speaker Sculptures*' primary feature is that they extend the public space, making it accessible both to those present in it physically, and to those staying at their homes. What is most interesting here is that they do it by the means of electronic media, whose relationships with urban space has been traditionally understood antagonistically. Prior to the mass mediatization of the late 20th century, city streets, parks, cafes etc. were the primary sites of social interactions. However, the electronic media stripped such places of their function. According to Richard Sennett, "electronic communication is one means by which the very idea of public life has been put to an end. The media have vastly increased the store of knowledge social groups have about each other, but have rendered actual contact unnecessary." (Sennett 2002, 282). While the introduction of online participatory media rekindled the need for contact, it now happens outside of physical spaces. (Sennett 2010, 262) Together with growing mobility, this has led to the emergence of what Marc Augé calls "non-places", public spaces that do not facilitate social interactions. These are places one simply passes through, in as quick and uninvolved fashion as possible, on the way from one familiar – essentially private – place to another. (Augé 1995, 77–81)

Sound installations are often used to rejuvenate such "non-places", as art infuses them with the "charisma" they lost and facilitate the public's engagement with them. (Föllmer 1999, 226) However, *Speaker Sculptures* go further than this: they situate the interactions, happening in the electronic media, in the physical urban space, reconciling and merging the two. Maubrey's works subvert the antagonism of the physical public space and the public sphere of media. Instead of "stealing" the functions of public space, electronic media expand and enhance it, facilitating involved social encounters. By arranging loudspeakers in architecture-like forms, the artist makes the technologies "blend in" with the urban space, emphasizing their unity as the space of communication. Through *Speaker Sculptures* the urban space becomes augmented, existing both in physical and virtual planes that become inseparably connected by the social relations that emerge between the participants situated on both ends.

In Hannah Arendt's concept of the public life, any public action is necessarily political – and vice versa, any political action is necessarily public. Political life is the life of the *πόλις*, the city, and therefore happens in its open spaces. (Arendt 1958, 22–78) While for Arendt her approach to political was necessary to extend the notion to include spheres outside of institutionalized politics, her insistence on the publicity made it exclusory as well. Judith Butler in "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance" notes that "[a]ll public assembly is

haunted by the police and the prison. And every public square is defined in part by the population that could not possibly arrive there; either they are detained at the border, or have no freedom of movement and assembly, or are detained or imprisoned". (Butler 2014, 9) The artist Joanna Hevda extend this category of those, whom the equating of the political and the public denies political agency, to people suffering from physical and mental disabilities that prevent them from leaving home. (Hevda 2016) In Arendt's paradigm, political action requires a body to be publically present, however it is often the very same body that prevents one from political action.

In that regards, the most interesting aspect of *Speaker Sculptures* is that they allow one to be perform in the public space without leaving their home. They do not only merge the physical public space with that of electronic media, but also through their unity connect the public space with a multitude of private spaces. This offers a possibility of political presence that is both embodied and anonymous, thus expanding the reach and scope of possible political activities. Maubrey likens the space created by his sculptures to London's Hyde Park famous for its history of political debates and demonstrations. (Maubrey 2014) Since late 19th century, the Park's Northwestern corner – the so-called Speaker's Corner – holds a reputation of a place where everyone can speak their mind without fear of prosecution. However, unlike Speaker's Corner, *Speaker Sculptures* do not require the speaker to be present in the flesh, but lets her voice be heard from the safety of the private space.

At the same time, a question can be raised whether the presence of the voice in the absence of the body holds enough political weight. In *Speaker Sculptures*, this concern is addressed explicitly by the tangible physicality of the sculpture and its scale. The voice of the distant speaker is given weight by lending it the "body" of the sculpture, which is commensurate with its architectural surroundings. The voice thus becomes one with the space it fills. Moreover, *Speaker Sculptures* make up for the lack of bodily presence with electronic amplification. In any public event, the one with the megaphone is the one with power, as their voice can drown out the other voices. *Speaker Sculptures* give the participants a megaphone the size of a building, empowering those, who are locked out of public discourse by their personal circumstances, to be heard.

On a deeper level, an argument can be made that the speaker's presence in *Speaker Sculptures* is not entirely ephemeral, but embodied. In his analysis of telephone communication, Barthes note that "[t]he order of listening which [it] inaugurates invites the Other to collect his whole body in his voice", (Barthes 1991, 252) which is then transmitted through the cable to the listener, or in case of *Speaker Sculptures* – into the urban space. Media scholar Frances Dyson calls this phenomenon telepresence: while the speaker is not physically on site, their body is present in "the grain of the voice" – tone and cadence of speech, idiosyncratic noises, breath – that is carried through technological channels and made tangible by sound waves. (Dyson 2009) *Speaker Sculptures* provide the caller with the opportunity of remote,

but nevertheless embodied engagement with the space and all who are physically present in it. In other words, they allow one to perform politically – perform in public – without leaving the safety of a private space. The body is present in the voice, but it is absent in the space and therefore cannot be removed from that space, ostracized or harmed. The anonymity of telepresence in a public space makes communication across class, race and gender barriers, that Arendt envisioned, possible (at least to a certain extent), while at the same time not requiring one to forgo one's identity.

Moreover, the audio channels do not discriminate between voice and other sounds. This allows for a new, acousmatic mode of self-presentation in public space that previously has only been possible in electronic media. One's musical preferences are as much a reflection – and a part – of one's identity as visual features, such as fashion and hairstyles. Nevertheless, this part is usually reserved for private spaces – sometimes all too private, like the space of one's head enclosed in headphones. Music in one's headphones serves to dissociate them from the surrounding space, escaping engagement with the strangers and adding to the public space becoming a “non-place”. *Speaker Sculptures* allow the participants to share publically what has usually been shared privately, through mixtapes and online playlists. Music contextualizes the voice in the same way clothing contextualizes the body, thus making a “telepresent” self-presentation as comprehensive as one performed in public space in the flesh.

It is interesting to contrast Arendt's approach to the political to Barthes' understanding of the term “as describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world”. (Barthes 1972, 143) The urban space as a site of human relations has been redefined not in the terms of physical structure of space, but as a structure of relations that form and inhabit it, as “a space of flows” (Castells 2004). Sound being a relational phenomenon (LaBelle 2015, xi–xiii), this relational structure finds a parallel in a certain kind of sociality specific to sound art – one that relies on sound being heard and answered. The agoras of *Speaker Sculptures* act as hubs where relations that form the public space intersect with those happening in the space of electronic communication media, forming a new kind of relational topography that transcends the boundaries of physical space.

In that regard, they can be described in terms of Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics. For Bourriaud art objects in contemporary world have no intrinsic value and serve only as a catalyst for a certain kind of sociality. The true matter of relational art is the system of relations emerging between the participants as a result of this sociality of art. (Bourriaud 2002, 107) *Speaker Sculptures* fit this narrative perfectly. Their impressive gargantuan forms aside, their primary function is precisely to facilitate the social encounters in this newly create augmented space of relations. Thus, another political aspect arises to *Speaker Sculptures*. As Bourriaud puts it, the role of relational art «is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing

real, whatever scale chosen by the artist». (Bourriaud 2002, 13) *Speaker Sculptures* offer new modes of social interaction and connect many private and public spaces into a relational structure, thus providing a means to overcome the atomization of urban life.

However, as far as adopting this strategy to urban acoustic design goes, the downsides of having such sculptures as permanent features of urban space must be considered. Critiquing the concept of public space as open to all, Butler points at its gatekeepers – the police and the authorities – that decide who gets the access. (Butler 2014, 9) In the case of *Speaker Sculptures*, the access to public space is exercised through technological channels, thus making the technologies themselves the gatekeepers. While the volume of one's voice passing through audio channels can exceed manifold that of those physically present, the speaker has no control over it. *Speaker Sculptures* give a lot of power to those who operate the technologies – not only to increase or decrease the volume, but also to disconnect the caller completely. I would speculate that a solution to limit this power might lie in further automation, relying on distributed peer-to-peer computing rather than human factor.

Moreover, the idea of technological expansion of physical public space into virtual one does not account for the accessibility of required technologies, thus putting up a class and income barrier for this kind of political participation. Many of those, whose voices desperately need to be heard, are locked out not only of the public space, but out of communication channels as well, and *Speaker Sculptures* cannot do anything to remedy their situation. Their political effect transcends some barriers but not the others.

Another aspect to be considered is the effect such works have on everyday functioning of the local soundscapes, which can be rather disruptive. Here, a peculiar dialectics emerges. On the one hand, the function of sound art in public spaces is to break the routine of the everyday to force the inhabitants to engage with the space and each other. I.e. it needs to be disruptive to be effective. The same can be said of political actions, such as demonstrations or protests: to be heard one must generate enough noise. On the other hand, demonstrations and sound art projects have an end, while the long-term effect of breaking the established sonic routines is uncertain. The urban ecologies will have to restructure themselves around these new conditions, and not necessarily in the desired way. Changes in urban space always walk a fine line between gentrification and ghettoization, and acoustic design is no different in that regards.

Another metaphor Maubrey uses to describe the participants' interactions with *Speaker Sculptures* is "oral graffiti". (Maubrey 2014) Like city walls provide a canvas for graffiti artists, these sculptures serve as a means for anonymous acoustic self-expression in urban space. And just like graffiti, the result of this self-expression can be as much art as vandalism – often at the same time.

REFERENCES

- Arendt, Hannah.** *The Human Condition*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958.
- Augé, Mark.** *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. New York–London: Verso, 1995.
- Barthes, Roland.** “Myth Today.” In *Mythologies*, selected and translated by Annette Lavers, 109–59. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.
- . *Responsibility of Forms*. Berkeley–Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas.** *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les presses du reel, 2002.
- Butler, Judith.** *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance* (Madrid: Instituto Franklin, 2014). Accessed January 30, 2017, <http://www.institutofranklin.net/sites/default/files/files/Rethinking%20Vulnerability%20and%20Resistance%20Judith%20Butler.pdf>
- Castells, Manuel.** “An Introduction to the Information Age.” In *The Information Society Reader*, edited by Frank Webster, Raimo Blom, Erkki Karvonen, Harri Melin, Kaarle Nordenstreng, and Ensio Puoskari, 138–49. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Dyson, Frances.** *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture*. (Berkeley–Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009). Kindle edition.
- Föllmer, Golo.** “Klangorganisation im öffentlichen Raum.” In *Klangkunst: Tönende Objekte und klingende Räume*, edited by Helga de la Motte-Haber, 191–228. Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1999.
- Hevda, Joanna.** “Sick Woman Theory.” Mack Magazine, January 2016. Accessed February 2, 2017, <http://www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory>.
- Labelle, Brandon.** *Background Noise. Perspectives on Sound Art*, 2nd ed. London–New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Maubrey, Benoît.** “Speaker Sculptures.” Last modified October 2014. Accessed January 25, 2017. <http://www.benoitmaubrey.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/SculpturesOct14.pdf>
- Sennett, Richard.** “The Public Realm.” In *The Blackwell City Reader*, 2nd ed, edited by Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, 261–272. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2010.
- . *The Fall of Public Man*. London: Penguin Books, 2002.