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Interviews with **Giancarlo Toniutti** — **David Grubbs** — **Bernhard Günter**

A Discussion of Sound Environments with **Eric La Casa**, **Eric Cordier** & **Olivier Charrier**

A Discussion of Sound Environments

moderated by Olivier Marboeuf
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In our society, noise has long been accepted as part of the price which must be paid for the comfort of modern technology. Not only have we lost our delight of everyday listening, but as a result of acceptance of noise we have created a sound environment which is evermore toxic, steadily desensitizing our sense of hearing and threatening our general state of health and well-being.

Eric Cordier

Eric La Casa

Olivier Charrier

These few words borrowed from Robert Minard (taken from "Sound Environments, music for public space," Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 1993) constitute an interesting angle to approach the topic of sound environments. Our intention here is not to cover all details, constructions and results (which are almost as numerous as the authors), but simply to introduce this concept and to try to bring to light some motivations which underline these works. With this aim, we present two different environments from this art-form: *CHUTE...* from Olivier Charrier and Eric La Casa, and *STELLAR HOLOSÉE* from Eric Cordier. This presentation will be followed by a long dialogue between these three artists on the characteristics of their work.

The principle of sound environment utilizes the concept of space. Musical work is not regarded here as a completed narrative form but as a sound construction which is revealed - in variable proportions following compositions - by its setting in space. The concept of environment returns directly to a certain idea of the place of life. It is a question raised by offering more than a visual or audible spectacle - form related to the coding in the concept of traditional music - a space to be felt, tested, an experience. It is important to note that the idea of environment includes to the time a plastic concept, architectural and sound and also engaging other senses, smell or touch. It is then clear, that the links of transformations between the music and space are reciprocal—the artist being interested in one or the two aspects of this phenomenon.

To avoid the effect of a simple sound diffusion, the device/manner of setting of the sound in space plays an essential part. The processes are rather numerous and Robert Minard notices, for example, the modifications of perception of space relate to the variations of timbre or tone quality of projected music. It is notable that the installation of a device becomes relevant when the number of sound sources and their relationships—topographic, plastic—to space involve the disappearance of the dichotomy between this device and the starting place. Thus a third form, nourished from the two preceding ones, is created: the environment.

With regard to the compositional content of environmental music, it seems difficult to define types of composition. The dominating use of tape loops or very long duration presents—one of the differences with concert music—to scramble the concept of beginning and end. Thus any idea of fixed interpretation—a complete narration—is diminished if not eliminated. Minard insists on the non-narrative character of this music to express the fact that it is not a question to create a listening in the traditional sense of the term but rather, according to him, to put "the accent on our perception of space according to sound."

The observer is often placed at the center of a phenomenon which they "undergo" and on which they have only partial control, variable according to the form of the presented environment. The problem of interactivity is raised in the following discussion.

In a certain manner, the process of environment suggests to the individual a work defying the worship of the object to be interested in the human experience; experience itself becoming too often prone to a worship of possession by the means of video recording.

-Olivier Marboeuf.

STELLAR HOLOSTÉE is a sound installation presented at the Donguy Space of Paris in September, 1993 by Eric Cordier. In the principal room, 88 loudspeakers occupy the walls in a strict alignment. It is above all for an examination of sound that this work brings us together. The music is present in an exploded form: abandonment of the comfort of stereophony for an immersion in the center of the composition. Sonorities come from string instruments and in particular from the hurdy-gurdy. The six tracks of this recording are distributed on the loud speakers which line the walls with fragments of music. The observer is then involved in the life of a universe which is offered for examination but on which they do not have any control. They have, at the same time, access to the entirety of this moving mass and also to many particles which come to them randomly from their evolution in space. Vis-à-vis to a plasticity carried to a minimal degree, the music offers a virtual architecture. Each small group of loudspeakers play the part of confidant, "telling" a sound adventure, fragment of a past in becoming. A smaller room presents a work on the sound mass with a distribution of a great number of loudspeakers per square meter. Dilated, refracted space, this environment is a voyage in the space modeled by the sound.

Within the framework of sound settings in space, some use the term installations and others use environments. Does there exist a fundamental difference between these two names?

Eric Cordier: I think that the term does not have too much importance. I often use the term environment, but, in extreme cases, the people of Donguy Space rather preferred the name "installation." I prefer to speak of environment insofar as the music has so much importance that you find yourself impregnated with it.

Olivier Charrier: For us there is also a will to define, to find the most just word. These two words are already defined in the history of art. We sensed ourselves nearer to environment compared to the work completed by other artists. It is also related to the search for the creation of a space in which the projection of sound is heard and not visible. The loudspeakers are not seen. The sound really emerges from space. We tried to expand possibilities in this direction and not show a device, a sound installation.

Cordier: It is rather coherent but I like the word environment because there is an idea of musical immersion, of some thing in which you bathe.

Eric La Casa: Except that you speak about something which exists only in people's heads. There is not the purely material factor of the things which are related to the sound. Besides your loudspeakers, there is nothing concrete, palpable. In our work, we tried to create a species of reality in a framework which is, at the beginning, a white box, a reality in which one will be able to live. As with a natural environment, one will be able to transform the things, while walking on the gravel or while choosing to remain in the quiet hall. To be sure that while moving in your space, one feels a transformation but there is not a conception of another thing in space only the installation of a loud speaker.

A kind of opposite course exists in your approaches of space. In CHUTE..., one starts from a concrete space which tends towards virtuality due to, in particular, the effects of light, and in STELLAR HOLOSTÉE, one has rather to make with a virtuality which tightens towards concrete space thanks to the sound mass...

Cordier: I do not know. I rather saw an opposition to the level of the sensations. They provide the visual and the sound constitutes a kind of answer while, me, I present sound and all that is installation comes after. There exists a hierarchy. My concern is primarily sound even if there is a figure in the fixing of the loudspeakers. I make a point of saying that I do not give a statute of work of art to all these objects in themselves. I don't adhere with work which tries to magnify the object. It is simply there as a tool. There can be something of aesthetics but I repeat it is not the essence. I am interested especially in sound and I also try to go to see from the side of other directions.

Charrier: We realized that the fact of seeing the sound device also included a behavior on behalf of the visitor. That induces a glance, an attitude. You do not have the same reading of the sound if it came like that in space.

La Casa: On the other hand, I find that Eric worked well because, in fact, he places the reference marks immediately. It is known from where the sound comes and one can then work as an observer. I find that with CHUTE... we did not succeed so well in making the reference marks disappear. We did not want to reveal the source but the holes in the ceiling created, in any event, a presence. We thus didn't escape the fact that people were pushed towards the bottom and looked in the direction of the holes. They were placed in a phase of hearing and not in a position to feel the environment. I think that people were afraid to modify things, of feeling as in an environment, to transform what they saw, what they heard.

You speak about modification or transformation. The status of the observer seems to be different in your work. STELLAR HOLOSTÉE offers more than one point of sight than a transformation...

Cordier: Yes it is true that they work on the modification of sensations. One feels the loss of a visual, sound sensation or a stressing. Me, I am interested in more distinct things, contrasted, while their work is seen perhaps more in a certain continuity. In my case, I do not know if one can speak about transformation but there is an effect of immersion by the large number of speakers and sound sources (eight). There is also an excess which allows you to dissect the sound. You do not have to deal with the usual stereophony as you have at home but to a total sound in which you can go to seek the details of the music.

La Casa: But I find it exists as a status of the object in your work, a historical status related to the loud-speaker. As well as it is to say that it doesn't exist any more, so much is affirmed, but as much, on part of the observer, it always remains there and that involves a particular position in front of this object.

Charrier: When a sound installation is announced, people expect to hear something. That is directly related to the coding in the concert, of the sound diffusion. It is a thing which aggravates me because that creates a priori prejudices which one has of the starting point. One arrives in the place and one seeks because one expects to see loudspeakers which will diffuse the electroacoustic music.

La Casa: It is a little for that that we were interested in the principle of the environment because the piece occurred during a particular time of day and could be compared to the changes of light outside while Eric worked over a time T which was going to repeat. For CHUTE..., it was to occur from 2pm to 8pm, thus the end would not be the same thing as the beginning.

Charrier: We wanted to try to bring back sound work to something natural like the noise of gravel on the ground. People do not ask questions of the source when they walk on stones. They create a sound event. Why is the sound diffusion not considered something very natural like that which appears in the open fields?

La Casa: This caused the frustration of people who arrived too late or too early. Many reproached me for the fact that there was never music. Several composers came, entered the environment because they had heard something by far and waited long enough. Several reproached me for not having understood anything. It is for that why we had specified that it was an environment with durations related to the nature of what is an environment and not a continuous sound projection.

Charrier: It is also a cultural phenomenon. As it is called "sound art," [in French "plasticien sonore"] people wanted to hear. Surely the light was perhaps more obvious as an acquired thing.

La Casa: Yes, it is that. The light being acquired, the place being acquired, one seeks the sound and, once that it was found, one listens.

Charrier: I believe that the problem is that some people do not come to communicate but to take. It makes me think of people who film their kids at the beach. Instead of living the present moment, they anticipate a future happiness with all the security which transports the image. There is this type of need for proof. While we, we tried to offer something to live, to feel.

Cordier: On the other hand, I think that if I had been alone in your installation, I would have felt only one negligible part of the entirety of the sensations. But when another person entered the installation, we became reciprocal actors and that enabled me to be projected in the place.

CHUTE... [A play on words between "Chute" and "Shutt" meaning the fall and silence] is a sound environment resulting from the collaboration between the light artist Olivier Charrier and the sound artist Eric La Casa, presented for two weeks in October, 1993 at E.P.E in Paris.

Upon first entrance, it is the intensity of this luminous locality which surprises. Fine partitions of white veils create translucent and stripped compartments where no significant object provides references. The first step is thus adventurous because one does not go toward anything known, does not suspect anything, does not guess, but is taken in a strange attraction for this luminous pressure. The environment, built around the main well of light of the E.P.E. is dependent and is fashioned from this external luminosity. On the edge of the cube of white fabric, bands of felt create a quiet hall to wait for the sound event, a walk along a quiet pier. In the interior of the cube, on the ground, gravel makes the observer become aware he is in the center of a delicate situation. He "disturbs" the place, transforms it, tastes with his clearness, inquires into the emergence of a sound matter. Cracklings, flows, he soon bathes in the "sound of the light," its inaccessible, phantom presence. The sound composition of CHUTE... tends towards a music of the transitory, its felt body towards a decomposition in the darkness; disappearance registered like a feature of union with the "external I."

Charrier: Yes but I think that this is possible alone and that the problem precisely results in the fact that people need to project themselves to feel something. They are not aware of the existence of their actions alone, of what they produce. What we wanted to do was place the ear between two sound sources, one caused by the gravel when they walked on it and the other projected down from the ceiling of which they did not have any control. It is for this that I urged on Eric to use a very rough sound.

With a 45 minute loop for STELLAR HOLOSTÉE or a longer tape for CHUTE..., you create an illusion of continuity and thus a certain chance in the listening of the observer which does not exist in concert, for example...

Cordier: It seems to me that here is a real convergence in our two works. At Donguy, they wanted to switch off the installation and to start it when people arrived because they had problems with the neighbors. I find that completely inappropriate because what interests me is that people hear the thing distantly, before they have even entered, and they discover this thing which existed before their arrival and continues after their departure.

ERIC LA CASA:
Sound artist, founded La
Legende des Voix (label
of experimental music),
worked since 1991 within
Syllyk, a multi-media
project with the artist
Sylvie Laroche, and has
released CDs under his
own name. 1999 will see
the release of his works
on the labels Digital
Narcis and Povertech.
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La Casa: I also had problems because, twice, I noted that the sound had been turned up. That shows that people are frustrated as soon as the sound volume is not at a desired level.

Cordier: A few moments ago, you spoke to me about perception compared to the length of the tape, as people entered, discovered, then tried to understand. Within the framework of the Donguy Space where it seems to me that people who come are accustomed to see things other than visual arts, I saw people entering, noting that visually they were not satisfied, they were not interested musically or that they did not listen, and they made a turn to the large room and came out at once.

La Casa: It is true that when you see people who make a slalom course to leave in one minute thirty, it is a little hard. One year of work for...

But on the other hand, when someone arrives at time T and goes back at a time T+N, he received a very personal fragment of the environment.

Cordier: The person who enters after they have missed nearly all of it or perceived almost nothing of the entirety is likely to feel very frustrated.

La Casa: But, I find that rather common. They stay one minute or two hours, and leave in an event frustrated. They cannot take all of it along with them but they took along something. Perhaps that it is necessary to return to seize the good moment.

Charrier: There is, in fact, no good moment. You cannot judge the good moment for each person who will come. Each person has their own experience of the environment.

Cordier: I wanted to also react to the term "interactivity" because I think that people start to be conditioned with behaviors of this kind and they come, in general, seeking little "push-button".

things. They are accustomed to a consumer attitude where one has to only ask to obtain an answer which arrives. A common point between our two installations is that they do not function in this manner.

La Casa: In fact things preexist before the arrival of the observer.

Cordier: Yes, it is one of the aspects but there are also things that are necessary to explore before understanding them. That does not function in "On/Off."

La Casa: As at Yoshi Wada, for example. [Sound artist Yoshi Wada had presented an installation at the Donguy Space a month after Eric Cordier's installation.]

Cordier: In my opinion, it is truer for Gilles Richard. At Yoshi Wada, there is a little of that but it is perverted. For example, its sequences start some-times with silence. Certain people thought that it did not start. Others pressed all the buttons at any speed and the result was in fact a non-result. People who wanted to go quickly are completely misled. For example, when you pressed one of the buttons, a ventilator started which moved the air which activated the bars whose vibration started the sound. If you think a quarter of second about the process, it is obvious that if you press the button, the bars will not start to vibrate directly. There is a certain inertia of the device. Certain people who understood only what they wished could not function within this framework.

The principle of your musical installations rests on a projection from tape opposed to live performance at concerts...

Cordier: Some of the music that I presented in these installations, I like also to hear it in stereo and that would not disturb me to hear it in concert.

Charrier: For me, the problem of sound installations is that too often I have the impression that they only reproduce what one could hear on CD in a gallery. The fact that one listens in a particular place seems not to matter for many events.

The elements of the sound course of the Villette [a sound installation presented by a few composers and sound artists in the gardens of La Villette, one of the most important gardens of Paris], one could listen to them at home; it would be similar. Neither listening, nor the composition seems to take account of the influence of the medium.

La Casa: For the tape that I created, Olivier had insisted on the fact that one did not have to create an additional space unlike Eric's work. The sounds were thus very rough with certain frequencies to insist on the sound presence so much that some matter, a matter which fell, drained away.

Charrier: Tests were made. For example, if one had put a reverb or an echo, one would immediately have sensed a space at the ceiling, imaginary.

La Casa: The principle was really to do something which sticks to a starting space. Unlike Eric, I did not bring a composition but something sufficiently indefinite so that one does not become attached to it. People were not in a position of listening and were not to be there. It was done not to be listened to but more to be heard. It was to be rich but not too much. I believe in a listening where there is already a space created for the listener in the composition. So I decide to leave a place, a space for him. I thus worked on a sound which I made progress but, each time, it was only one and not a whole of things which were going to be spread out in time. People brought much. Thus there was not the concept of composition, acousmatic or other. It was done for the place, that existed for the place and, once the event finished, one didn't speak of these tapes.

Cordier: At my home, the music is not played compared to a particular place and, me, I speak truly of music! There is indeed a difference there. The installation, on the other hand, is reorganized according to the place, knowing that I cannot exceed certain forms of space.

Charrier: These small divergent designs are also related to the differences between the culture of Eric who is a musician and my culture of sculpture/architecture. I draw the sound towards space and not towards the composition. I do not want to offer to people a too important composition which, in my opinion, will kill the status of the environment.

La Casa: It is true that I had rather strict limits of work. I thus worked on the opacity and the texture of the sounds and not on the composition itself, i.e. without any research of events or additional spaces. It was a thing very hard to accept as a composer to make

a thing which would exist only in this place.

Charrier: Because you are used to making CD's! What I wanted to offer to people was sound material. People were to vibrate inside while a composer is used to tell things, to evoke...

Cordier: Not always!

Charrier: Yes, but there is always this thing which remains thanks to the support of the record or the concert. While the goal of our environment was to make a blank slate of all that and to offer the sound like a material, like the light.

La Casa: I also wanted to insert other things in the composition. Not including the sound work, there also exists its relationship with the environment. We built an environment which engaged itself in a general environment. I put a point of honor to put the sound to a certain, exact level because it was going to be constrained at quite precise times. I wanted to play with this ambiguity of an environment which does not exist without another. I did not want to work in optics to create a closed "box" but really a place which coexists with another thing.

Cordier: On my side, my work was organized in two spaces, two different musical cycles. It produced a natural phenomenon when two musical spaces with different intensities produce a third space which results from the addition of both. In the installation of the Donguy Space, twenty minutes of minimal elements on one side was "eaten" by twenty minutes of maximum elements on the other part of the installation. It is a thing to which I held. Like in forest, when an old tree falls, a clearing is formed and young trees can start to grow and retake the place. These are things that you find everywhere. Someone reproached me for hearing nothing in one of the environments. People were frustrated not to be able to hear the separate environments and that does not interest me at all because these separate things had already taken place elsewhere. For example, one of the music pieces had already been presented by itself at Yvetot, six months before. I wanted to present with the same music another kind of work.

ERIC CORDIER:
musician and composer,
worked with the groups
Schrams and UNACD as
well as presenting many
installations at galleries
and festivals. An interview
with him will appear in N D
22, and 1999 will see the
release of recordings of his
work on the Povertech,
Selektion, Pottlach and
Sonoris labels.
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The principle even of the installation contains the idea of interference, dependence with respect to external factors or even of the technique.

Cordier: It is another aspect of my installation. There are for example sounds which are not audible, like extreme frequencies which are made to create vibrations in the loudspeakers. From some of these phenomena of great vibration, the loudspeakers induce sounds more than they emit. There was a rather odd event at Donguy because they have certain walls made of plywood and which played the part of a sound box for the vibrating loudspeakers.

OLIVIER CHARRIER:
Artist, worked on light sculptures and town planning projects, carried out Emergence, luminous sound course with Brume and Neither Land NOR Shadows, a space-light within the framework of the experimental audio-visual festival of Arnhem in the Netherlands.

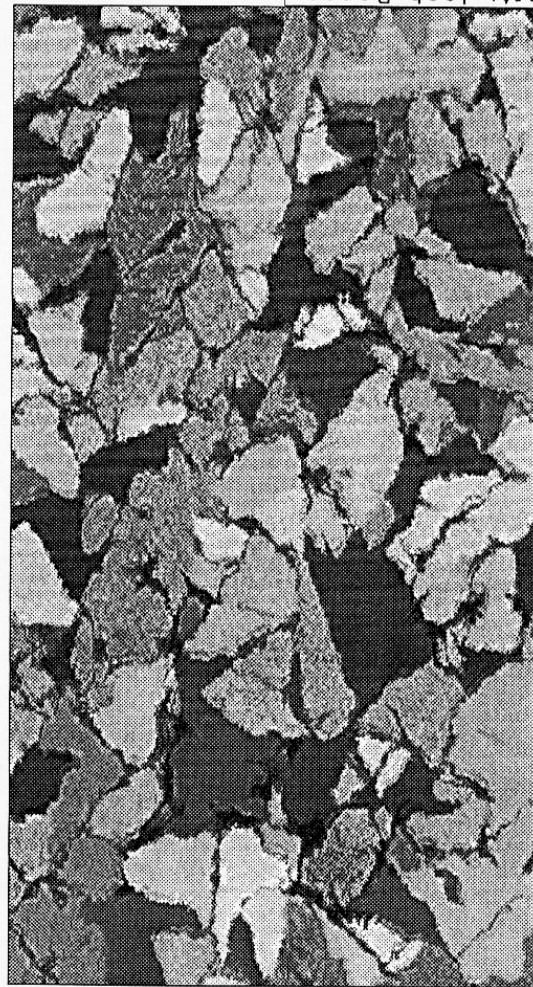
Charrier: It is true that these are things that one really does not control but that one wants to cause.

La Casa: These are the details which create the life of the environment. With *CHUTE...*, we had the impression to be in the center of something. If you left the street to the central core which was the last shaft of light, there was a whole process, a course.

Charrier: As well for a sound phenomenon as light, it would be pretentious to want total control. There are always things which escape to you. When a system is installed, there are always many interferences and, for me, the force of the environment is related to this part of life which comes from outside.

Olivier, compared to your work on the plastic structures, is it the first time that you've worked in collaboration with a musician?

Charrier: No, no. For my first exhibition at the E.P.E in 1991, I had contacted Brume who had composed a tape. I conceived the project as a bluish environment. I installed this project, which was called Emergence, in the cellar and my idea was to work on the evocation of water. Brume thus worked with water noises. It was my first experiment, I clearly did not see what I was thus not well thought-out. I think that with Eric we went much further. There was more dialogue, outward journey-returns, of fusion between the sound and the light, which is not so obvious to manage. We tried to escape the idea of "sound-and-light." That explains a certain abstraction and a will to empty the space of objects, images and to place people in the medium.



Art: Josh Ronsen

The Emergence exhibition recalled a small evolution of my work. The first part presented small blue squares which floated in the half-light. Then there was, in the other rooms, blue volumes which played with a glass plate. There was an effect of dematerialization. One thus passed from the small squares to volumes. Lastly, there was a great space, bathed in blue light, in the last room where people could really penetrate. I thus tried to transcribe the idea of the light like a true space and not like an object or a sign. I wanted the people who were inside the phenomenon and not outside, to turn around, like for a sculpture. I arrived then at the concept of environment.