Acoustic/Electric
A reflective performance document of an experiment in co-creation

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This submission is intended to provide access for the reader and viewer into the performed moment of the piece Acoustic/Electric. Our hope is that the combination of movement through textual material and streaming video will embody an experience of watching the performance that is useful to and interesting for readers of BST.

This means that we have formatted this article in a way that is out of the ordinary. We envisage the article to be ‘a journey through’, a creative rather than scientific document.

ABSTRACT

This combination of video excerpts and reflective commentary explores the realisation of the 2004 piece Acoustic/Electric, a three-hour long living installation performance, at the Diapason Sound Art Gallery in New York during late 2004. The performance attempted to integrate the design of costuming materials as a full partner in the generation of a piece of extended voice performance in a sound art environment. Through audiovisual material and the presentation of the textual voices of the collaborating artists, we draw the reader into poetic and practical identification with the aesthetic and creative motivations and issues involved with the performance moment.
Acoustic/Electric:
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Yvon Bonenfant
Ali Maclaurin
Introduction: 
Between Costume and Voice

We began making this piece of performance from the premise that – despite years of challenging interventions ranging from extensive experimentation with costume at the Bauhaus to wearable works of contemporary art – costume design in live performance is still primarily relegated to a role of enslavement to performative intentions over which it has little control. This means that its potential to be a full partner in performance composition, and to be a fecund generator of performative actions, is, to our knowledge, still little explored, with the exclusion of some dance and circus performance, and a very small body of researchers concerned with the experiments in the body and performance. What’s more, while the 20th century saw a stream of innovations in the development of scenographic practice and the use of refined and advanced costume designs to enhance the visual experience of performance, costume has been little used to generate the embodied sonic¹.

The practice of extended voice – a practice of vocal sound making that is sung, spoken and vocally danced; a practice whose ‘canon’ is peculiar and interdisciplinary, ranging across music and theatre² - necessitates the exploration of extended, sounded bodies. The term extended voice is used to categorise vocal practices that do not fit within accepted and traditional canons of work. The term is used in both the ‘art’ music worlds and the theatrical worlds, but is more commonly used in reference to ‘art’ music. The extension implied by the term refers largely to the aesthetic and on occasion to the psychophysical. Sounds made might include cries, ululations, variations on Sprechstimme, ‘sound effects’ (New York vocalist Michael Downs, for example, has been known to imitate a chainsaw with stunning ease) and other unexpected or atypical vocal gestures. Similarly to contemporary dance and contemporary theatrical performance, some of these artists work with composed moments or events as their primary vocal stimuli. This is the case with the singer involved in this project, who works particularly with sensation and emotion based stimuli to generate vocal patterns used in his performance. It seemed exciting to us that costuming material might form an

¹ There have obviously been many experiments in the generation of electronic sound out of costume-based stimuli – contact microphones have been used extensively in costuming (a classic example of this might be Laurie Anderson’s 1982 ‘drum suit’). However vocal sound via the interface of the body has been less explored.

² The most well-known extended vocalists of our epoch include such performers as Diamanda Galas, Meredith Monk, the musical ensemble Electric Phoenix, Jaap Blonk, and the Roy Hart Theatre. Their practices vary wildly in terms of their aesthetics and the disciplines within which they categorise themselves, and vary between music, theatre and even dance. There is a strong Eastern European tradition of extending the voice into what might be called ‘hyperemotional’ sound (with Grotowski as pioneer and obvious Artaudian references) within theatre and there also exists a distinct art-musical tradition of extending the voice’s capacities (composers as wide ranging as Bruce, Berio, Feldman, Xenakis, Braxton, Crumb and many others have all attempted to extend the vocabulary of the way the voice is used through scoring for particular vocal effects, for example).
integral part of these stimuli and work with the performer’s body to co-compose the final performed material.

This seed project, therefore, intended to explore and underline issues involved in creating a model of collaboration between these two very distinct forms. This would permit us to explore potentials for engendering conscious hybridity that could stimulate new work. The results of the project were thus intended to serve as a model for further performance making.

In order to best carry you through elements of our process and product that are relevant to experiencing the piece, we have designed a series of interventions for you to read, watch and listen to. This is a kind of accompanied tour through a series of performance moments; some of them recorded live and some of them reconstructed.

The accompanying text speaks in a variety of voices. Some of the interventions represent only one of the collaborators, and some of them are written by both. These are interspersed with video samples. Each video sample represents a longer segment of the final performance, which took almost three hours.
WEB PAGE 3:

MOTIVATIONS AND EXCITEMENTS

Ali Maclaurin
Costume

What thrills and intrigues me is the live encounter between the performer and the spectator and how I and my design work fit into that. That is why I began with costume – because it is physically closest to the performer. That is also why I am so often unsatisfied: because costume becomes subjugated to the body as a real thing with limbs and lumps and orifices; because the prosaic nature of costuming tends to work with what the spectator already knows, recognises and is comfortable with. It does this rather than pushing into a space where the spectator may be curious, grasping for something slightly out of reach, needing to feel at a different level from the merely easily recognisable and comfortable. I want the costume to allow an external manifestation of an internal impetus in the same flexible way that a voice or body can. It is made to be moved and used in context. It is not a piece of ‘art’ in itself that exists outside the performance context. I want it expressly made to move and change in context, rather than a finished piece of art with an existence outside the performance space.

Yvon Bonenfant
Voice and live body

I cannot divorce extended voice from my experience of sensation, and therefore I cannot divorce voice from my own skin, the flesh beneath, and the bundles of nerve endings that inhabit these. I cannot divorce my own skin from what covers it, moves around it, and stimulates it. I get excited by the potential of the worn to become a part of my vocal body, flesh yet not flesh, extending. I get excited about the camp in costuming, about the way fabric prolongs and exaggerates the body, and how this happens. The dramatisation of the relationship between skin, hair, body, surface, contact, touch and audience all expand forth from fabric on skin…
Framing, shared values, and generation of material

In 2004, Micah Silver contacted Yvon to ask him to create a performance specifically for the Diapason Gallery in New York City. This gallery is dedicated to innovative practice in sound art. According to Silver, the Gallery’s curatorial choices catered to an audience with set aesthetic values. These prioritised conceptual sound production – usually mediated by digital technology, rarely influenced by elements of dynamic liveness or interactivity, and often ascribing to the values of the ambient in sound, at their core. Silver wanted a change. Our work responded to this request.

This fed into our common preoccupation with the confrontation of complacency. Both of us are interested in, and have pursued, the making of art that sees itself as inviting audiences to transform – sometimes through provocation, and sometimes through manifesting intentions and invitations that are more seductive. Micah, as curator, wanted to bring a piece in that would stir what he perceived to be a complacent audience, an audience with a culture and set of aesthetic values that were somewhat immovable.

In reaction to this agenda, this led us to define between ourselves as devisers a shared vision of délires. By this we mean a kind of fervently playful approach to improvisation and composition. The French concept of délires, contrary to its use in English, is not defined as delirium – rather, it is defined as ‘great agitation caused by the emotions or the passions’ (Petit Larousse, 1984). This kind of agitation generates play which seeks, and often demands, attention. This délires is capable of the ridiculous, yet fervent. This fervency of approach, this light, champagne-bubble quality that is capable of being at once recreational and deeply grounded, capable of deep solemnity but also of playful parody, is shared by us and framed our process.

Also, we are both deeply interested in the dynamics of lived relationship in performance: that is to say, how relationship is cultivated and maintained as a form of experience; and how this experience can be important and powerful. We are not as interested in performative display (although this obviously plays a role in any performance) as we are interested in this felt relationship.

To us, lived relationship means acknowledging that there were many bodies in the room relating to one another. There were our bodies – Yvon as devising performer, Ali as devising costumer. There were the bodies of the audience members. There were the bodies of the intended and real audience. The fabricked body was present – the extended body, the extended skins. Ali’s mimetic body witnessed and imagined as part of devising. Then there were the mimetic bodies we projected upon one another, and the complex associations and images generated by sensation in these bodies.
Finally, our roles as artists existing within specific disciplines framed this process. We were fully aware that we would each be preoccupied with our own domain of practice while attempting to collaborate.

With these pieces of the puzzle holding us together in a meaningful bond, we began the work of making.
WEB PAGE 5

(STREAMING VIDEO EXCERPT – SEE DVD CHAPTER 1)
Can the creation of costume be part of an improvisatory process, an active and integral part of the play that is essential to composing work?

Is there an alternative to the ‘try this’, to ‘no, it’s not quite right’, to ‘I’ll take it away and change it’ ‘…and now try this’ approach? This is the traditional approach to costume, which never allows the scenography of costume to change in the moment, only ever between the performances, where the scenographic elements never take part in the changes; they only ever change in relation to them…

Is there a process where the designed element – whether worn or not worn, whether nominally called set or costume, can develop in the moment? Can the design evolve from such a piece of fabric, from its basic elements; colour and size and texture, how it moves and fills the space, how it sounds, how it feels, how it looks as it moves; where the relation to the body is not written into the ‘costume’ but created by the performer as the piece unfolds, where the costume aids the evolution of the piece not just by being but by evolving in performance. I want to find a new way of considering quality in this process, a word so often used to refer to virtuosity, craft skills and order, rather than appropriateness or poetic richness.

Yvon Bonenfant
Voice and live body

The first time we workshop with the silk I am completely stunned. I have worn silk shirts before but I had never held such a huge piece of silk. I look at it and I see a kind of silence – no – not silence, touch. Its sheen makes me want to roll on it. It makes me want to be a real pig.

I become a silk pig, a writhing, self-indulgent, time-wasting pig, as well as a silk broadcaster, disseminator, transmitter. The silk streams like light brushings and sweepings of a second skin. Where is this skin in relation to my body? Nowhere and everywhere; it is outside in its billowing and inside in its stimulation of my senses. This silk is the skin of the infant’s buttocks and cheeks, it is as soft and as delicate and as sensual as the intimacy of the newborn, the curve of the breast, the skin in the small of the crevasse at the juncture of the shoulder girdle and the upper arm. The skin of my forearms went wild with sensation when streaming through and with the white silk. The skin tingles and I want to reach, reach, reach, there is a sensation of streaming into my hands, gentle, light, gorgeous streaming, streaming that is somehow bright but not loud. I feel it and I begin to improvise sound. I realise the silk must be about reaching for me.
Neither of us had calculated for the massage of the eyes. Nor had we calculated for the lostness, the total inundation of the space by a large piece of silk, for the beginning of improvisation, or the way all senses seemed to emerge and work together. We were both surprised by the synaesthetic responses that bloomed into our aesthetic consciousness.

We also discovered that the silk did not mask the transmission of vocal sound, nor did it interfere with breathing. It was possible to be beneath the fabric and sing from within it and project perfectly well. It became a hand at play, a membrane of visible invisibility, a mask that masked no sound, a swaddling without tightness or restriction. The silk floated on air.
Ali:

The silken object, a large rectangular piece of fine white Habotai silk, becomes the costumed body and the performance site as Yvon moves into it and then moves around and in and out of the people present. They themselves walk and move and lie and sit and wander in and out and around as well. I lie down in the space, a designer moving from the safe sidelines of observation to become a participant, a sensator. The sound enters through my body, not through the ears or eyes, or at least not always, or not absolutely. It feels familiar but recognition is always just out of reach .....As I begin to consider costume that works not just for looking at and more, but even for not looking at all, he pulls the silk over me. The silk slides onto and over my body, its smooth caress slowly covering all of me. He whispers, sings, ululates, laughs, cries through the thin membrane between us. The silk allows the most intimate of contact and yet gives protection, prevents self-consciousness.....how strange that something so thin and translucent can make such a difference...... and then suddenly my face uncovers and then the rest of me and I am left feeling exposed and wanting. I sit up, half open my eyes, turn my head, listen, and move. I feel the performance happening around me but am not compelled to watch, to watch, to watch.....I catch movement from the corner of my eyes, I listen, I smell, I taste, I touch, I feel the sound of the costume....hear how it looks...see the feel of it..... touch the smell of the sound...... taste the look of the feel of the sound....

We could stay here forever, but, one day, the baby gets too big for the womb. We can both feel it coming.
WEB PAGE 8

STREAMING VIDEO: SEE DVD EXCERPT CHAPTER 2
MORE FROM THE STUDIO

ALI MACLAURIN

- The performer and the piece cross from set into costume, from object into ego. The fabric becomes wig, an extension of the body, a certain wanting to show off and display and not merely share an experience...

- Feeling the connections...between two artists, between the sound and the body, between the body and the costume, between the face and the wig, the senses, memory, making sense, resonance...emotions passing...touching...

- Fear of no words... the power of no words... the need to leave space...the inclination to do too much... the ‘finish’... the look...the feel...

When Yvon suggested using wigs, I was terrified - a wig? You mean something you wear on your head that pretends to be hair, something funny, embarrassing, ludicrous, conspicuous but unmentionable; asking – no – pleading to be invisible but always there?

Now I realise that starting from ‘wig’ not ‘costume’ was crucial to how we worked together, crucial to our common interests....and crucial to the way I carried this role I had, the ‘costume designer’.

YVON BONENFANT

I am no longer a pig of white silk, a reacher, a toucher, or a transmitter of experience. I am a missionary. I emerge from this silk and struggle. In studio I struggle sensuously out of white silk, and then the red and pink and magenta wig emerges. This moment has to happen again. I revel in this ridiculous wig, blazing yet embarrassing. It is so queer. I am out of the white silk closet and my hidden agenda is revealed. I may seem ridiculous but I have something to say. And the acoustic touch of the voice is powerful, playful, goofy, and potent – a whole string of oxymorons. I no longer need to reach; this silk veil is heavy, it drapes critically, it can completely camouflage the body under a Nana Mouskouri part, but it is also a headdress. It is ceremonial, it is nostalgic, it is tye-dyed, and it is goofy. I become serious in it. Seriously goofy.

I will confront these ambient people with pure colour. They will not escape the fire of cranberries in this voice and headdress. Images of spillings flow, images of tides and ebbs, images of rites. I voice them.

Why would this ever end?
When this wigged body character emerged in studio, we felt it almost deserved its own entire ceremonial show. It could not have existed either as mere wig or as mere voice. Here we really achieved a kind of total collaboration… a collaboration which nonetheless pushed us forward into other material.

The Diapason Gallery wanted us to provide a ‘living installation’-style performance, with a duration of three hours or so. It became clear to us that there would be some kind of evolution here – some kind of narrative in the development of this white silk embryo into a person with clear qualities and messages. A narrative of maturation emerged. With it came images of a delightfully playful child turning into a lover of laptops and digital sound, and turning into someone concerned with the ‘cool’ and hip aesthetics implied by this. We felt a trajectory develop. We imagined why one would abandon such delights as this absurd cranberry wig. We also reflected on the gendered nature of this character and what it meant for somebody obviously male – with a standard baritone range (enhanced by extensive use of falsetto) – to embody this trajectory.

What came to us was:

You see, he just couldn’t hack being so damn queer. He wanted to be a real man with his pedal on the metal.

He wanted to be a real man with his hand on the gear shift, on the driving stick, aiming the juices. And these days, you just can’t do that without the hot gadgets. He…wanted… a microphone.

And before you can be a man… well. You do have to be an… adolescent.
There was a huge shift here from active reaching and tactility to an actual embodied character involved with passive attention craving. The body of the performer was suddenly alone, more and more isolated from and cut off from the audience, and yet also took up more and more space. Our bodies as devisers moved out of sync with one another. Gender suddenly mattered.

We knew that we wanted to work with Diapason’s 14-channel sound system – but how exactly? How could this costume exploration follow on to some kind of digital sound experience? One of the obvious solutions was to allow the costume to sound. Following this impulse, we purchased a number of piezo disc contact microphones. These pieces of brass pick up a variety of interesting sounds when colliding against one another or with a body. Ali ‘enwigged’ them. The costumed body suddenly became the voice – a voice, a series of soundings, which could only exist via the shutting down of the organic, embodied voice. The costuming needed to play on its own.

In the costume lab Ali fooled with wire and shape. This person, this wired person, emerged: composed by the wire, the ‘helmet’, the strange wig that this cap became. Somehow, this wire hair became the perfect skateboard teen hairdo. It happened by accident. The wire curled upward in a half-sphere and we each had a similar resonance with it.

Starting from our conception and intention, Ali invented this skull and its sensual extensions that had to be re-interpreted. This meant working with silent voices and sonic hair. For Yvon, working with the eyes suddenly became crucial. Facial expression, the hidden chest, became omnipresent: a kind of shyness compensated for with technology. As the body collapsed inwards and defended its heart, the amplification extended its reach in other directions.

The wired room became an extended prophylactic electronic body that this adolescent boy explored with stunted ecstasy. The voice was also replaced by the face, singing its little song of shy attention seeking. The body replaced the voice as a source of collision – surfaces against which contact microphones, these little electrified skins – could be bounced and sounded. The costume was the voice and Yvon’s body played it.
STUDIO NOTES

Ali: The electric wig felt much easier in design terms, I felt much more in known territory. That made me feel more secure but less excited. I was interested in why it felt easier - was it because I had ‘characters’...and what did I mean by easier... easier to conceive? .... easier to visualise? ... easier to make... easier to look at... easier to accept... easier to think of as successful?

Yvon thinks: easier because technology confers authority. Now we are broadcast. Now we are not acoustic. Now we’ve got the power. Minuscule movements made grandiose in sound: these little movements are made into booming, crackling, a plethora of varied sound by a wig. No matter how unappealing these characters might be, they’ve got the technology. This is obviously an entirely personal take. However, as an extended vocalist I do constantly reflect on sonic amplification of the body and what it means. This adolescent started us down a path which, if followed, would lead to ever more interest in taking up space, in filling it with amplified sound rather than live sound with which one can have a different kind of relationship…

Yet it all became more interesting to us than we had bargained for. The wigs, the head costuming became the focus. Low-fi yet hi-fi, wired and waiting for more juice.

The scene was set for the next state to emerge.
WEB PAGE 14

STREAMING VIDEO – SEE DVD CHAPTER 4
He got his microphone.

- He thinks, I don’t need anybody else, and that’s why I’m so desirable.
- He thinks, I’ve got the tools. Look at my TOOL everybody. Listen to my TOOOOOL. One cool TOOL.
- Voice becomes electric – the body is prolonged, exaggerated by the microphones, the wig, the wiring, the sound design, and the speakers.
- Previously the sound was relatively static, but now digital algorithms make it voyage from place to place in the room. A little bit of delay and other light effects displace its origins. The sound is no longer clearly coming from a given place in the costuming. However, the costuming is still generating all of it.
- The voice returns but it returns in a very particular way – it knows it’s got the microphone and it doesn’t have to work to take up space.
- SO MUCH POWER FROM SO LITTLE EFFORT.

AND UP GOES THE WIG. IT IS E R E C T.

We felt this teen-ager had to grow up – he couldn’t remain shy and retiring, nor could he remain both attention-seeking and self-effacing. Not when he had so many toys, so many ways to make noise, plugged in to the wall and all wired into the system. ‘Where does this personage go?’ we asked ourselves. How could he evolve in this sound art gallery? How would he develop wired to the fourteen channels? The response, with a certain loyalty to our evolving camp/not camp, queer and serious aesthetic, was, of course a headpiece or a wig extension.

The simple vocalisations used here accompanied this man’s physical and artificial attempt to build esteem. The sung and ‘contact mic’d’ material slowly and randomly moved around the space, lasting long enough for the audience to perceive the spatial situation of the amplified sound.

But which came first - the character or the headpiece? This section signalled a clear shift from our preceding collaborative methods. Costume begat the character, and the character begat the costume. We were very certainly no longer working with clear experiential states; in other words, as these bewigged beings matured and flourished into ever more character-like personages, their characteristics resembled those of distortions and exaggerations of known human beings.

As the sound moved, it drew a line through the space. These lines became threads which became the warp and the weft of an emerging, digitally mediated sonic tissue. Audience bodies were increasingly enveloped in this hot polyester, seductive in its clarity, evoking fascination. Fascination,
however, is not contact, and fetish is not love. This sonic fabric emerged by accident and emerged with prophylactics – the tubehead and the microphone allowing for electrically heightened stimulation.

The question then became: where would a guy like this go? Well, probably, on……..
We let this process reach its inevitable apogee. We had set the ball rolling, and all that was left to do was: AMPLIFY.

This final character – this domineering psychopath of sound – seemed but the logical conclusion to the evolution of this being. He took on a life and a force of his own. Fed by the wig, by the sound system, by amplification, by every available energy of the performer, and by us as devisers, the monster we created came home to roost. He made his nest in a sound art gallery only he could love in the way he did.

With him, electronic algorithms moved the sound around the room in a wild way, and what’s more, the sound was loaded with effects. The computer was programmed to increase the intensity, the randomness, the degree of sonic effect, and the volume of the sound over a twenty minute period for this person to reach his hideous climax. His headpiece tube ejaculates wires. He can never get enough.

The sound created a new textile, one that chafes and grates, one filled with invisible pins pricking against the skin, one that pinches in places and slaps in others. One that embodies force is at the same time absurd. The next sound could come from anywhere and be as distorted as anything – but the body is still behind its microphone and, as with any torturing fabric, the body of the performer loses interest and the bodies of the audience switch off. We have taken this voiced wigged body to its extreme.

There is so much sound there could be no sound. It is like standing in the middle of ten freeways.

And so, to compare this extreme with another, we return to white silk.
WEB PAGE 18

STREAMING VIDEO – SEE DVD CHAPTER 6
And so the cycle was complete. The raucous sound disappeared; the over-amplification, the inundation with digital effects, the sensory overload, and the domineering yell-song all collapsed. The wired wigs fell to the ground in a sweaty heap, and the performer’s body returned to indulgence in the white silk. It was given to the audience to feel. It was sung on, beneath, around and through, tenderly.

Here had been a kind of silky acoustic, and here had been a version (admittedly, a dystopic one) of electric.
COMMENTARY: IN CONCLUSION

In drawing you through moments of this performance, and through highlighting particular aspects of process and product, we hope to have taken you on a journey through this act of creating and realising performance that reveals, both poetically and concretely, some of the preoccupations, questions and future directions that emerge from this work.

An attempt to generate this performance together requires that we make an attempt to see, feel, and hear from a kind of (temporarily) shared body. It also requires that the technologies used: costume, amplification, and multi-channel sound system integrate with these bodies. We have explored a beginning to developing these skills between voice, costume, and mediation. We have attempted to think of costuming as a flowing, improvisatory soundscape.

Obviously, with our emphasis on délire, this piece is by no means a definitive and logical statement on the nature of ambient sound art. Rather, it is a piece that integrates a queer and clown-like drive toward a kind of camping up of acousticity and electricity in sound.

As a continued exploration of these practices and ideas, we have embarked on a second phase of work, reading costume as a performance score. Fecund possibilities in terms of generating innovative costume-vocal material were opened up by the project and we continue to pursue them.

You will note that we have made some clear choices here. We have used video footage that is re-performed in order that you might see the body, gesture, and posture up close. We have attempted to create commentary that enriches the streaming video – itself a thin substitute for liveness - to transmit elements of process and results. We can only represent where we’ve been. We also have taken you on journey that is poetic rather than scientific, and what you might take from this process will, of course, be utterly subjective.

Subjectivity as acoustic, and subjectivity as electric.

We would like to thank the following people for their contributions to the making of this project:

Micah Silver – co-curator of the Diapason Gallery
Rees Archibald – sound designer for the Diapason show
Peter Jacobs – videographer of post-show corporealties
Yvon Bonenfant

Yvon Bonenfant is Lecturer in Performing Arts at the University of Winchester, with an interest in the relationship between somatics, the felt self, and performance. He specialises in extended voice, the body and bioemotional activism. He collaborated with Geraldine Morita and Tunnel Works (Montréal) 1993-98, and since then, has performed solo in Canada, the US, the UK and Portugal.

Ali Maclaurin

Ali Maclaurin is Lecturer in Costume Design at Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh. Her particular research interests are in examining the creative and collaborative processes within and between individuals involved in making performance. As a stage designer and teacher she has practised for over twenty years particularly in physical theatre and young people's work.