





→ Capture de sons VLF sur la Baïtlique, 2002, Jean-Pierre Aubé. [Emmanuelle Léonard]





Spaces, landscapes, frontiers
André-Louis Paré

«Unlike others, today's utopia has found its place: the planet itself».
Marc Augé¹

Art and space

In a brief text from 1962, entitled *Art and Space*, Martin Heidegger reaffirms his desire to place the act of philosophy around our relationship with space. In *Being and Time*, his masterpiece from 1927, he underlined the importance of thinking of our relationship with the world in terms of spatiality. But from the fifties onwards, he questioned this existential link that we have with the space considered as the residence of humanity on earth. This is because, for Heidegger, space makes sense in inhabited places. To exist is to inhabit a space. Put another way, residence is the essential feature of the human condition. And it is precisely at the moment that the arts of space incorporate places that the work of art finds its true dimension. As «implementation of truth», its function is to unite and bring things together with the aim of making humanity's stay possible on an inhabitable earth².

We should highlight the fact that these reflections were made at the beginning of the space race between the United States of America and the USSR, at the height of the Cold War. These first voyages around the blue planet, supported by intensive programmes to put satellites and manned craft into orbit, however much they helped scientific knowledge to progress and provided a new

¹ Marc Augé. «Culture et déplacement», *Université de tous les savoirs: L'art et la culture*, vol. 20. Paris, Odile Jacob, 2002, p. 73.

² Although today has seen a «return to space» in contemporary philosophical reflection (see Foucault, Deleuze-Guattari, Sloterdijk, etc.), Heidegger, error excepted, was the first to make space a primordial question for the present. The question of spatiality of the human being is found in paragraphs 22 to 24 of *Être et Temps* (Paris, Gallimard, 1986); the text «Art et Espace» was published in *Questions IV* (Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p. 93-106). Finally, the texts «Bâtir, Habiter, Penser» and «...L'homme habite en poète...» appear in *Essais et Conférences* (Paris, Gallimard, 1958).

dimension to being human in the universe, they were presented, to a greater or lesser extent, within the panorama of an arms race and a struggle to exploit extraterrestrial space. Faced with this urge for domination supported by the scientific-technical community, it was essential for Heidegger to differentiate space considered from a mathematical point of view, based on the scientific revolution, from spaces as areas in which art and its construction, thought and occupation retained familiar associations. However, these places in which our relationship with the earth causes the world to be produced also presuppose the idea of the frontier, which constitutes that of space. From a topographical viewpoint, the frontier traces a line between one's own environment (*chez-soi*) and the outside, here and there, near and far. On the aesthetic plane, the frontier distinguishes the visible from the invisible and turns spaces into landscapes. In this way, as a limit in an inhabited place, the frontier is not merely that beyond which something ends, but that beyond which something takes place and begins to exist. To summarise, by putting his faith in the poetics of space and, more precisely, in a «peasant vision» of territory, the German philosopher responded to the occupation of the Earth as an unquestionable problem of our time.

This philosophical interpretation of art, based on an ontology which also includes poetry as a form of revealing our situation in the world, does not unfortunately seem to offer any perspective for present space. In the context of present-day globalisation, in which the idea of the frontier is in course of mutation, human occupation of our inhabited world cannot, evidently, be satisfied by the mere rooting of the works in a homeland. This interpretation, however much it resists the classical aesthetic which identifies art as a mere activity of representation, does not nevertheless make a commitment to thinking of art as problematisation and experimentation of reality. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind the planetary vision of terrestrial space, which obliges us to otherwise re-evaluate the relationship between art and space. In this regard, two artistic projects have captured our attention. These are *Very Low Frequency (VLF)* by Jean-Pierre Aubé and *Makrolab*, initiated by the Slovenian artist Marko Peljhan.

Space and sound landscapes

Among the numerous explorations of landscape that have accompanied urban development in painting and photography, a list would have to be made of the different

displacements made in natural spaces by Jean-Pierre Aubé and those produced by the Land Artists. However, if the true landscape adventure for the majority of these artists was produced on the natural site, so that the *in situ* conditioning of the territory was solely evoked by a visual documentary, the interventions by Aubé in the urban environment or in the desert are conceived with a view to their installation in a gallery. For example, in 1998, on the occasion of the presentation of *Sédimentation* in Quartier Éphémère (Montreal), the artist collected more than three thousand litres of wastewater directly from the pipelines of the city of Montreal. This recovery was carried out in the same place where the now disappeared River Saint-Pierre used to flow. In the gallery, the viewers were invited to examine the water filtration mechanism and its runoff into an aquarium in which there were fifty goldfish which, one could say, played the role of the landscape³. The artist carried out a similar reclamation action on the *île aux Lièvres*, situated in the Saint Lawrence river. For one week, Aubé installed a self-made wind turbine. Thanks to the strength of the wind, the wind turbine was able to store the energy transformed into electric power. *Prélude à l'isolation (Machine à récupérer le vent)* was to be the title of the installation presented several months later in

the Dare-Dare gallery (Montreal). The wind turbine, now fitted horizontally, generated wind, thanks to its blades, which were moved by the accumulators of electrical current.

Contrary to the Land Art artists, for whom, according to some theorists, the desert territory announced, at the moment that the industrial activity accelerated, a return to the earth understood as one of the four essential elements of our world, the two installations by Aubé—exactly like the VLF project which would come later—rather evoked the development of a technological view of the landscape. This was based upon a recuperation of two natural phenomena, which is to say water and wind. Firstly, the artist acted upon the landscape with a camera as a machine designed to record images. Accordingly, in all his installations, a few photographs bear witness to the *in situ* action. But his testimony is no more than a complement to what the viewers can appreciate *in visu*. What Aubé does is to take on, as an artist, the technical part corresponding to this aesthetic transposition of the space, when it takes possession of an extreme experience and converts a supposedly natural phenomenon into an artistic device. Thus, far from praising an ancient land, the artist rather assumes the position of artist-engineer who manipulates the necessary machinery to dominate the

3 For a more detailed reading of *Sédimentation*, allow me to refer to my article which appeared in *parachute*, n° 94 (April, May, June 1999), p. 46-47, and also to the brief treatise *L'art du paysage* which appeared on the occasion of this exhibition (Édition Quartier Éphémère, 1999).

potential power of nature understood as physical energy. In this case, the Earth is no longer considered in terms of its mythical mission as mother earth, but rather as an individual physical phenomenon within the planetary system. The VLF project adheres to this scientific concept of the earth. VLF are very low frequencies than can be tuned into by a receiver designed to capture the sounds produced by the disturbances in the terrestrial magnetosphere. As a planet, the Earth is by no means an inert system. The magnetic field that encircles it, an electrical conductor, suffers constant climatic and electromagnetic fluctuations, such as electrical storms, solar winds and also the polar auroras, borealis or australis. To capture these natural sound phenomena, also called Natural Radio, Aubé initially used technology offered by NASA. However, he soon had to make more powerful antennae in order to capture a greater variety of these heavenly phenomena. Contrary to what the philosopher and mathematician Pascal said, infinite space is far from being silent. The electric universe that surrounds the earth makes cosmic space a sound environment⁴. Aubé was interested in the phenomena coming from the aurora borealis, which were the origin of this project to capture the VLF. To ensure a satisfactory harvest, he travelled to different regions far from the urban

centres of Quebec, Finland and Scotland⁵. Thanks to these expeditions, he accumulated sound documentaries that have subsequently been used to create sound landscapes.

The term sound landscape might seem contradictory. The etymology of the word landscape refers essentially to sight. Additionally, in the history of art, the invention of the landscape came from the study of perspective. On the other hand, when the Land Artists had the experience of the landscape *in situ*, sight, although it continued to be essential for the photo-documentary, was not then the only sense required on the terrain, but one also needed touch and hearing, for example. Elsewhere, the word landscape is often associated with vague inner feelings that, thanks to the imagination, hint at different types of landscapes. All music produces passing aesthetic effects that suggest landscapes that might be called soundscapes. But the performances proposed by Aubé clearly do not refer to this. Thanks to the natural phenomena captured by the VLF receivers, the performances that the artist produces in a gallery preserve the artistic origin of the landscape as «artialisation» of the sound space⁶. Some of these performances are produced with VLF sounds whose origin is the aurora borealis, while others are put together using the capture of sounds from

4 In connection with this, see the article «Electric Readymade» by Raymond Gervais, which appeared in *parachute*, n° 107 (Dossier: Électrosons), p. 32-41.

5 In Québec, the artist moved to Lake Batiscan in Laurentides Park, and to an island in the Saint Lawrence river. After he moved to Finland, Lapland to be precise, 250 km north of the Arctic Circle, on Lake Jerisjarvi. Finally, he was in Scotland, on the banks of Loch Ness. For further details, see the website → www.kloud.org

6 The word «artialisation» comes from Montaigne, but has been re-used in art history by Charles Lalo, and underlines the cultural and technical process of the manufacture of the landscape. In connection, see *Court traité du paysage* by Alain Roger, Paris, Gallimard, 1997, p. 16-20.

the immediate environment⁷. *Save the Waves* [2004], for example, presented for the first time in Quartier Éphémère, reversed the process of the VLF giving sound to and amplifying the electromagnetic pollution of the environment.

These gallery exhibitions, composed of state-of-the-art parabolic loudspeakers, hand in hand with highly effective technology, should not however lead us to forget that these exercises in VLF sound capture are sound documents that have, according to the artist, a scientific value⁸. Even when, as documents, they are treated technically and make up only the tiniest fragment of an imperceptible reality, they are still archives that refer to specific phenomena in danger of disappearing. Sooner or later, and it doesn't really matter where we are at the time, the sound space of the planet will become «artificialised» for the sake of diverse military and commercial hertzian telecommunications systems and electromagnetic broadcasts of electrical networks. Due to this, Aubé's VLF project is also ecology of the airwaves. The aim is clearly not to demand rights for nature, as would be done by some environmentalists. In an artistic context, this ecology consists above all in transmitting the memory of the waves by means of documentary work. Even the still almost virgin space of the VLF waves

is reduced, considering the fact that current technology makes the use of VLF waves possible for telecommunications purposes. From this moment on, the ecology of the waves seems to be the hidden side of the global information system, which further accelerates the acceptance by the networks of a «synchronic world» —synchronicity which threatens, within a planetary mobility, the process of individuation⁹.

Space and transnationality

It is within this media sphere of sound space that we find some of the scientific-artistic activities carried out by Makrolab. With the over-riding intention of exploring the electromagnetic spectrum of communications, the actions undertaken by Makrolab take into account the political terrain of the media universe. In all this, the context of their creation should be borne in mind. Conceived in 1994 by Marko Peljhan, the project of a residence-laboratory called Makrolab came about during the war in the former Yugoslavia on the island of KrK, located off the coast of Croatia in the Adriatic Sea¹⁰. In this situation of crisis where artistic creation is almost impossible, it is reasonable to wonder, as the poet Hölderlin once did, about the importance

7 Among the performances that have used VLF sounds-Natural Radio, let us mention the Festival du Nouveau Cinéma et des Nouveaux Médias (Montréal, 2003) and Mains d'Oeuvres (Saint-Ouen, 2004). Of the performances that use VLF sounds of the immediate environment, we would point to the installation *Save the Waves* presented in Quartier Éphémère, and the different versions that have been realised subsequently, mainly in the Mois Multi (Québec, 2005), during the Traffic event organised by the l'Écart Centre (Rouyn - Noranda, 2005), and finally in zkm, Karlsruhe (Germany, 2005).

8 See the interview that the artist gave to Mathias Delplanque in n°18 of *Musica Falsa* (Spring, 2003), also available at the website → www.kloud.org/vlf/entrevue.html

9 Regarding synchronicity, see Peter Sloterdijk, *L'heure du crime et le temps de l'oeuvre d'art*, Paris, Hachettes Littérature, coll. Pluriel, 2001, p. 216-223, and Bernard Stiegler, *Philosopher par accident. Intretiens avec Élie During*, Paris, Galilée, 2004, p. 106-111.

10 See the texts by Marko Peljhan and Brian Holmes → multitudes.samizdat.net/article.php3?id_article=1281

of art in times of suffering. For this reason, when the geo-political frontiers were to be restructured according to ethnical-political-religious alliances, redefining the new nations around local identities, Peljhan, on the *Moon-land of Krk*, worked on the idea of a dwelling of futuristic appearance able to breathe new hope, even revitalising real life, into that which Rimbaud said was outside, which is to say right here, but in a different way. In short, a response had to be made to this disastrous political vision so that communication no longer collapsed under its own weight, imagining different landscapes, «survival refuges», difficult to describe because they are always to come. However, Peljhan was clear about one thing. A founder in 1992 of Projekt Atol, an entity which encouraged the merger of art and new technologies, he considered it important that art should interrogate the world just as it is, with the same instruments used, in the name of a certain knowledge, by those in power.

To be precise, Makrolab is a nomadic residence which, since its inauguration in 1997 moves around different countries and continents. From an architectural point of view, it looks like an octagonal mobile home. Raised above the ground upon its tubular legs, the construction is not unlike a latest generation space vehicle. Makrolab is made to be lived in for several weeks or

even months, and is equipped to be fully autonomous with its satellite dishes, its radio antennae, its wind turbine and its solar panels. As a residence, it houses artists passionate about new technologies, scientists and also specialists in media activism. For each stay, from four to eight participants of different nationalities are invited to work in collaboration, based on diverse issues mainly related to ecology. Thus, the main aim of the research carried out during these stays is telecommunications, meteorology, and the migrations of both animals and humans. For example, during the stay that took place on the occasion of the 2003 Venice Biennale, it dealt specifically with the ecology of the radio spectrum, especially related to the pollution caused by sonar of the underwater fauna, as well as an ornithological study, looking at the birds and the airport. According to Peljhan, the different investigations undertaken by the participants in Makrolab should, little by little, enable a better understanding of the natural technological and social workings of our planet, which is increasingly subjected to what Sloterdijk calls the «monstrosity» inherent to our modernity¹¹.

As well as its first version with Mark I stationed in the Lutterberg forest on the fringe of the Documenta X in Kassel in

¹¹ According to Sloterdijk, monstrosity characterises modernity, within which technical development is the cause of our exceptional situation on Earth at the moment of devastation. See *L'heure du crime et le temps de l'oeuvre d'art*, op. cit., p. 205-234.

1997 and its location on the uninhabited island of Campalto in the Venice lagoon, we have also been able to see Makrolab in Slovenia [1999], in Australia [2000], in Scotland [2002], in the ISEA symposium in Helsinki [2004], in South Africa [2004] and, eventually, in Nunavut in the Great Canadian North. Intended for a duration of ten years, this extraordinary artistic project will conclude in 2007, and will be definitively installed in Antarctica, the only transnational continent, as Peljhan reminds us¹². As a vision of the future of our planet, this transnationality stresses a cosmopolitan outlook going back to Ancient Greece. This vision—whose backdrop was the Mediterranean—responded to the need to live beyond the limits of the homeland, and to make the world, the cosmos, the theatre of human activities. But today, one has to be able to distinguish this vision from the supposed cosmopolitanism that promotes globalisation. One should be able to differentiate between the cosmopolitanism whose intention is to unify planetary space through the opening of markets and the cosmopolitanism associated with a policy of pluralism and hospitality, open to the cross-pollination of ideas and willing to share. Associating artists, researchers and net-activists, Makrolab fosters new forms of sociality which, without communication

with the outside, demands a «world citizenship»¹³. Like astronauts in orbit, the inhabitants of Makrolab—the makronauts—live in a situation of isolation, not with the intention of retiring definitively to a separate world, but rather to stimulate the principle of the laboratory as a place for intensive creation.

What is interesting, both for Peljhan and for all the artists interested in the Makrolab adventure, is to achieve mastery of the telecommunications and new media tools. The skills of each as regards free software, networking, wireless technology, etc., clearly enrich the technology available to Makrolab. What is more, the reappropriation of this knowledge by artists enables effective action to be carried out. For Peljhan, it is essential to detour the scientific-technical knowledge away from its role at the service of the military world towards new purposes in the civil sphere. In this respect, the aim is not only to resist in order to create, it is also necessary to convert technology, which is too often honed into projects for the domination of free will, into new possibilities for individual creation. For this reason, according to Peljhan, those non-conformist media activists who work towards revealing the dire effects of the concentration of technical and economic power are welcome in the Makrolab project.

12 «The notion of transnationality is definitively crucial for the planet and a transformed Antarctic could act as a model for our present-future». See the interview with Marko Pejhan at → www.transfert.net/a8q65

13 Regarding world citizenship, see *Empire* by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, Paris, Exils, 2000, p. 480-481.

Therefore, Makrolab as an architectural structure, despite presenting itself under a high-tech guise, decking itself out with state-of-the-art technology, associating itself with organisations that bring together art, design, media and technology (Projekt Atol, Ellipse, Arts Catalyst, Srishti College of Art, Design and Technology), and its complicity with techno-culture, is only concerned with a better occupation of our residence on Earth. In this context, artistic creation cannot be satisfied with a modernist ideal. If «we live», as Peljhan thinks, «in a difficult period», creation cannot take place apart from a will to accept our desire for survival. And this desire for survival cannot be focused other than on our individuality, where the idea of the frontier still comes within the domain of what is possible.

Frontiers and utopia

Like Makrolab, Aubé's VLF project, associated with an ecology of the airwaves, underlines the exploitation of the sound space which is shaping up to become, via a range of telecommunications systems, the political and military landscape of our planet. For this reason, these two projects are equally open to be adapted to accessible technologies and accept «to make do with

them». But this «making do» is only applied to the technology used as instruments. In this way, for Aubé and Peljhan, technology only acts as an instrument; for them it is a purely instrumental relationship. This relationship, inasmuch as it concerns Aubé, is developed in an essentially artistic context and puts into practice sound performances which act upon the listeners-viewers as so many other «sensation modules»¹⁴. Therefore, his work as technician adapted to that of an artist producing feelings never needs to encounter the scientific world. On the other hand, in the context of Makrolab, taking into account the diverse collaborations and research carried out in relation to ecological question, this meeting often appears to be necessary. However, it should be born in mind that the projects as a whole tend towards adapting technology for creative purposes. Technique, freed from the scientific-technical complex of globalised capitalism, reveals itself as an instrument that allows us to access new types of freedom. This perspective, in which the individual recovers his or her creativity, is where we find what Peljhan calls «future landscapes»¹⁵.

As land cut off by water, the island is a geographical feature that we find both in the artistic career of Aubé and that of Peljhan. Without a doubt, the image of the island entails multiple viewpoints, but

¹⁴ This expression is by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, Paris, Édition de Minuit, 1991, p.158.

¹⁵ See the texts by Marko Peljhan at → multitudes.samizdat.net/article.php3?id_article=1281

from modernity it is above all the archetype of utopia¹⁶. The Makrolab project which emerged on an island refers precisely to a utopia. Clearly, the political utopias of the last century may have left us puzzled as to the meaning of the word, but here it is not a branch of any ideology, but rather of a way of thinking that attempts to re-evaluate the relationship of individuals within the collective. This re-evaluation involves free creation, the capacity for each and everyone to accept their own autonomy. This is the reason why Peljhan talks of isolation/solitude as a creative process of individuation; a process that enables us, as does any thought process that sets out to be critical, to start afresh. Starting afresh is never returning to an origin, but re-establishing the capacity to think, to create. In a political and social context in which information is monopolised, this creative need is by no means an abstract one. So, encouragement is given to the resolute will to understand the technical environment in which the human of the future will have to move: this is the context for social evolution. In this way, isolation is no less than a preliminary condition for the implementation of a «war machine», of a ceaseless struggle to create one's own individuality. Utopia may then be classed as nomadic, as stated by Schérer¹⁷. This utopia makes no claims on a land as its

own; it is, in other words transnational. If the isolation of islands implies withdrawing into oneself due to the sea that separates them from the rest of the world, this should be no more than a minor inconvenience; islands are naturally open to change, to the inner life, to encounters and hybrids of all types. In short, complete individuality is no more than the other face of cosmopolitanism. Alone, the individual is able to move from one territory to another, to pass from one space to another, with the strength of their existence to trace their own frontiers.

More than the VLF project, Makrolab, with its scientific-artistic research and its educational intentions, blurs the principles by which we identify works of art. It renounces the modern aesthetic associated with viewers' receptions of works of art. Apart from the dynamism generated by the exchanges and the relationships established between the different players who are invited to participate, the ultimate aim of Makrolab is above all to inform and transmit a reflection on the creative abilities of each individual in relation to the technical world. In this respect, Makrolab publishes what it does during these stays on its website¹⁸. It invites dialogue through debates, conferences, publications, videos, etc. In this sense, art is not now confined to an exhibition territory recognised and

16 «As a good westerner, nothing less than an island is required in order to begin anew. Desert islands are the archetype of utopia. It is the illusion of a clean slate, or perhaps the proposal of a second beginning. One cannot be a good representative of western civilisation without sharing the demand for a second beginning». See Peter Sloterdijk in his interview with Alain Finkielkraut, *Les battements du monde*, Paris, Éd. Pauvert, p. 160.

17 René Schérer, *L'utopie nomade*, Paris, Séguier, 1996.

18 → www.makrolab.ljudmila.org

officialised by the artistic media; the aim is rather, as has been said at times, a diffuse creativity. Without a shadow of a doubt, art as understood by Makrolab and its founder Marko Peljhan should not be considered as an activity separated from existence. On the contrary, it should be an activity of struggling for existence. After all, the notion of the frontier, as is the case with the vanguard, has a military origin. But the aim here is not to wipe the slate clean, but to face up to the past so that our relationship with space, which is to say our existence, can be compatible with an inhabitable future.