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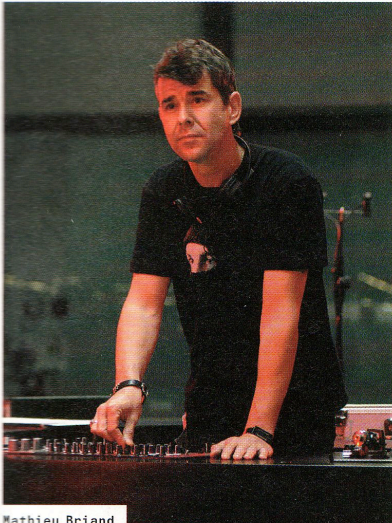
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Cross Platform Sound in other media



Mathieu Briand

A veteran of France's underground rave scene, French artist Mathieu Briand's open systems create new platforms for public participation. Words: Louise Gray

At the east end of the ramp of the Tate Modern's vast Turbine Hall, Mathieu Briand is setting up *SYS*011.Mie>AbE/SoS\ SYS*010-2002*, one of a series of works that the Marseille artist has described as an "installation that explores systems of stimulation, play and perception". Its name is not, warns Briand, a title but a "code of classification". To the uninitiated, *SYS*011.Mie>AbE/SoS\ SYS*010-2002* might look like a giant sound system framed within a whorl of seating made up of gently curved black flightcases, but it's more than the sum of its components. At the centre, there are five turntables, a vinyl-cutting machine and mixing desks with inputs for anyone to plug in their own sound making device, iPod, laptop or keyboard.

A more studied look around the hall reveals a series of large red rings drawn on the walls and floor. Briand himself has a much smaller ring discreetly tattooed on a wrist. Public space, the human body and technology are all linked in Briand's work. They form a continuing multimedia project that focuses on the relationship between the body – in both its sensory capacity and its political construction – and technologies. *SYS*05.ReE*03/SE*1\ MoE*2-4*, an earlier installation staged at Los Angeles's Redcat Gallery, involved four helmets that housed small

cameras linked to display monitors. Visitors to the work would wear the helmets, becoming actors and makers in the ensuing footage that was broadcast to the monitors. Similarly, Briand's *UBIQ: A Mental Odyssey*, described as "a one-year programme in ten chapters" and now at the Galerie Maisonneuve in Paris, is another project about participation and aesthetics. Hence the forbiddingly unfriendly titles that encumber Briand's installations, and hence his humanising of them to a more practical shorthand – *SYS*011.Mie>AbE/SoS\ SYS*010-2002*, a work first commissioned by the Pompidou Centre in Paris as part of their Sonic Process group show in 2002, is referred to as either as *SYS*011* or, more concisely, *The Spiral*.

The complex titles, Briand states, come from a system of classification that he began ten years ago. "You see? System 10 is inside System 11. 'Mie' is music. What does 'AbE' mean? Huh, I don't remember." What is important is a rummage of things – that the titles are concise descriptions of their provenance; an anxiety about the way human identity is increasingly encoded in a slew of digital data; and an interest in symbolic ordering. Briand mentions the number 23 in glancing reference to Spiral Tribe's record label; the red circles suggest



The Spiral installation at Tate Modern



Turntables at the heart of *The Spiral*

the iconography of road signs: as an unfilled circle, you could say that it prohibits nothing.

"This hall is a cathedral of sound," he declares, guiding me to the desk at the centre of *The Spiral*, "but it's also an agora." This reference to the marketplace, the locus of democracy and participation for the citizens of the city-states of ancient Greece, is not without significance. Born in 1972, Briand was in his late teens when the Techno rave scene hit France in the late 1980s in a series of so-called free parties. He became an enthusiastic participant, making links with *Spiral Tribe*, *Mutoid Waste Company* and various other fellow travellers. "For us, it was amazing," he recalls. "People always talked about 1968 and freedom and na-na-na, and then these parties happened and it was just incredible. It was a new culture, a new spirit."

The musical culture of France is very different from that of Britain, Briand points out, and whatever else the post-Acid party scene was in the UK, it was not, on the whole, a political movement. Hedonism rarely translated into action. "I was like everybody on the free party scene," Briand says. "I did some DJing; I did some electronic music because it felt completely natural and the computers and the drum machines were so simple. But my

most important part was to dance and have a discussion with people from all kinds of backgrounds. This was important. Integration between races works completely different in France; these parties were the only places where people from different cultures were coming together. It was a revolution for race relations. Then add the drugs that no one knew much about, and we were totally free, with no culpability. What I liked was this ritual between drugs and music and accessibility, dance and physical action. It brought us a long way."

But *The Spiral* is also an agora. It's fundamentally important, says Briand, that it offers as pure an accessibility as possible. He always stipulates that any museum space that hosts *The Spiral* does so free of charge. As an open system, *The Spiral* posits an antithesis to the tightly centralised French state. If this sounds a product of naive idealism, it isn't. *The Spiral's* music is also weighted with a self-generated sonic genealogy. The sounds that begin the performance come from loops of sound that Briand had burnt onto vinyl at earlier performances. These create, he says, "a matrix of sound, they provide the vocabulary". As the 12"s are played, the sound is mixed and fed into the vinyl cutter, thereby generating another record. That gets played, another

12" is cut, and so the process goes on: it is a constant accumulation of sound, layers and textures. But there is always the possibility of new input. I could turn up and play, say, Abba records. "Why not?" shrugs Briand. "My choice is to propose this freedom, not to police it."

A similar spirit informs the artists who performed with Briand in *The Spiral* the next day. Charlie Dark, si-cut.db, Sarah Washington, Xentos 'Fray' Bentos, The Bug & Spaceape and Radio Active Man were not Briand's choices – and then again, by virtue of a kind of default action, they were. "When the curators asked me to choose artists to work with on this, I said that I didn't want to. My engagement is just to propose. We have the tools that we can use if we want to. It could be classical music, punk, reggae, I don't care. I just want an open system. The only instruction I offered is to choose people who offer very different textures of music and performance."

"*The Spiral* is a liberating thing," Briand says. "You can come in, go out. There are no obligations. You can sit and watch. I am more interested to propose a free space. For me, it is my participation to the spirit of the Techno music and the free parties." □
Mathieu Briand's UBQ: A Mental Odyssey is at Galerie Maisonneuve, Paris, to 5 January 2008



