

Chicks on Speed are known as the electroclash ensemble active on the global museum circuit with their avant-garde productions. Alexander Murray-Leslie, one of the pillars of the group, talks about her forays into the instrumentalisation of fashion objects as sound elements in performance art.

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During your years at the **Academy of Fine Arts** in **Munich** you created, **Maria Bar**, then **Seppi Bar**, a sort of *clin d'oeil* to the **Cabaret Voltaire** in **Zurich** where Dada artists met. Sound art, is said to have its origins in **Futurism** and **Dadaism**. Do you have a particular interest in that era?

I definitely have an interest in the era of **dada/surrealism/futurism**, in ways that can be actioned in a contemporary sense: like giving a new importance to reinventing ones city and thoughts.

But going back first, predecessors to **Maria Bar** and **Seppi Bar** were Dada-esque **Cabaret Voltaire**, **Fluxus**, **utopian ideas** and the general concept of **kinship** and **collective action**.

I started the bar with **Barbara**, my neighbour, then **Karl Fritsch** my first real boyfriend in Germany joined and we ran it together. The details were so important, you could really tell we both had a background in craft: the white shirts, ties, waistcoats, red lipstick, slicked back hair, the broaches (**Karl** made me an anodised aluminium gold butterfly broach), the lighting, the perspex bar with white lattice work lit from behind, our photocopied flyers and **DJs**. **Barbara** was really into the cabaret thing. I was into **Kraftwerk** and **new wave German music** acts. When I look back it was really the beginnings of setting up the puzzle to putting on a performance.

We ran the bar out of necessity to have a job, to put us all through art school and have fun in **Munich**, which was pretty bourgeois. There wasn't much going on back then, especially since we lived in old army barracks, so we took over the basement and all the other artists living there came along. I curated some of the nights with special **live actions, poetry** or **dress themes**.

The parties we used to do at the **Academy of Fine Arts** had such a big impact on the whole concept and aesthetic of the bar, it was this notion of crafting a **Gesamtkunstwerk** and then going inside it to party with friends.

Where else did you draw inspiration from?

Back then, around 1994, I was obsessed with **Vivien Westwood** and **Malcolm McLaren** and the whole **situationist** thing. I even wanted to go and study with her, so one day I jumped on the train to **Berlin** and headed to the school she was teaching at. I still remember going into the class. I wasn't very fashion conscious. Just black clothes, art student style. The girls in her class were well dressed and I felt really shy and out of place. She said "What do you want"? I replied that I was there for an interview, she said well come in and do it in front of everyone!

Oh my God, there were 50 students. I took out my microscopic earrings and big shopping bags. It was a conceptual anti-consumption, anti-jewellery piece. She just hated it and said I should listen to **Chopin**.

Oh and before I left she said I should do nature studies and then apply again. I thought back then, I should have gone to see **Malcolm** instead. I missed meeting him years later. We were about to perform at **Palais de Tokyo** in 2001, literally walking to the stage and I got a call from

Jean-Charles de Castelbajac, he said: "Alex, I'm at the door and can't get in, I'm with **Malcolm**." He never got in and we never met.

Can you talk to us about **Chicks on Speed's** interest in creating **wearable instruments** in your performance art?

The idea of objectification of sound comes to mind, thinking of sound in the context of the object that created it. In your song titled "We don't play guitars", are you rejecting the conventional objectification of sound and re-appropriating it through your own creations? Why is this process important to you?

Every music movement, except **Norm-core**, has its musical instruments, sound and sub-cultural style, like the voice box or the synthesizers developed by **Dopfer** for **Kraftwerk**, **EMS** synthesizers made by pioneer **Peter Zinovief** or the tape loop machines that **Delia Derbyshire** used in the **BBC studios' radio-phonics** workshop to create the theme song for *Dr. Who*.

The musical instrument is just one link in the chain to define a generation and their musical performances and maybe on an important micro level, to influence the **dramaturgy of a performance**, which for me as a live art performer, is an important element. You need **props** to react to and to **surprise**, creating an element of **novelty**.

I see instrument design as a **craft**. Like the **symbolism** movement, it is made up of many aesthetic layers of objects and settings. The glue that sticks the things together, for us, is **technology**. Though sometimes we use **gaffa tape** too.

In your array of *Objectinstruments* you have created a number of **wearable instruments** including hats, and called in the help of an Italian designer for the creation of a shoe guitar. How do you forge your ideas for the specific instruments?

I see the most important part of Chicks On Speed as being the **textile design** element: core ideas as sketches on fabric. Most of our ideas came and still come from these analogue patterns we created for **screen prints** for our outfits. The rest grew from there (drawn research) and even some of the most **high tech** stuff!

It's also born out of necessity. An instrument needs an outfit and an outfit needs a body, and a body needs a stage, and a stage body needs instruments, new sounds and choreographed playing styles. What next?

I think there's a big misconception about musical instrument design. Many instruments mimic past classical instruments, their sounds, forms of expression and playing methods. But that doesn't make sense to me. We need to see each new song as a blank canvas requiring its own tool for **mark making**.

The *Objectinstruments* are like the 'red thread;' that ties the chapters together in the live performance, one part of the all-encompassing artwork to create a profound experience. More so, as these are functioning sounding appendages. They're not fakes. We use them to compose with and there's a lot of technical processes that go into making a functioning **interface** for musical expression.

Our *Objectinstruments* are designed without preconception, out of necessity to write and record a new song, to generate new sounds and find new ways of playing that haven't been tested before. Maybe you need to do a headstand and play with your hands and feet at the same time, or five people have to play to generate

one collaborative minimal sound.

It's about **colliding preconceptions**, making mistakes and trying stuff out. It can take years before an instrument works on its own and then on stage. I've been working on **sounding footwear** in Chicks On Speed since 2006 and it's a bit of an obsession. There's always something to do in a more is more kind of way.

So does that mean that sounding footwear was also created without preconception? An accidental obsession of sorts? It just seems to me to convey a very powerful image, as a woman especially, the idea of a high-heeled sounding shoe. It can feel like a sort of feminist manifesto.

Not completely without preconception, as Melissa and I knew we needed some sort of *spectacle-ism* playing musical instruments (body centric sounding apparatus) on stage.

When we perform, our energy flows to the audience. Looking into a laptop will fall immediately into the pop construct. We needed instruments like guitars that we could do big gestural solos with, while being contrary to the phallic male modes of guitar solos, solos that can be read from off stage. So the obvious thing for me was to take everyday fashion objects and *upcycle* them. I call it **hacking fashion**. By hacking into the feminized ready-made idea of the shoe there's a **re-contextualisation** going on. But also a redistribution of power.

The high-heeled shoe becomes a **feminist** tool to create with, in a **live-art** context. An apparatus that comes with its own set of rules and affordances, opposite to the standard grey Zara shoe, that I bought that day.

The transformation of the shoe is minimal as I didn't want to lose its previous meaning. I needed the old meaning to be present, in order to create the new **critical** costume and **subvert** its original meaning.

Another big reason for me to take fast fashion and turn it into something useful is the obvious **fashion activist** potential. I'm really against this sort of unethical fashion production. I'm speaking about H&M, Zara and the Inditex Group, Primark-who tells its customers to consume responsibly?! WTF?!

I have to be honest though. I have a size 43.5 foot, I've been deprived the experience of a young girl and the **shoe fetish** thing. I was never part of that. I wore mens shoes at age 9. I was always angry that society and its mainly male designers wouldn't accept women with bigger feet. SIZE LARGE is written inside the first high-heeled shoe guitar. It's a proud statement. That was Mel's idea, she knew I had a sort of shoe envy going on and made me feel ok with my big feet.

So a high-heeled, sound-making shoe transcends its role as an objectinstrument, and becomes a tool for feminist activism ?

In visual culture high heels are heavily loaded with **gender specific power relations**. Of course, there's the self-objectification, in reference to the idea of a dominant male gaze. So, yes, there's an element of **feminist manifesto** embedded in the shoes, in the style of The Slits singing Typical Girls in unison, which led to the beginnings of RIOT Grrl. It's that sort of feminism in motion with its tentacles everywhere effecting social transformation. I feel like it's so in flux. It's difficult to say: "This is my manifesto that goes with this shoe apparatus". It's about the moment. Who's wearing them and how? Sure, instructional performance is part of this,

influenced by Fluxus pieces like Grafis, where it's up to the wearer to react and embody the shoes and express a performing identity.

Can you describe the development of the sounding footwear in more detail?

There's the analogue High Heeled Shoe Guitar we created in 2007 where you put a stereo jack into the heel for amplification via a guitar amplifier and the e-Shoe from 2012 that was made with shoemaker Max Kibardin. This one has an arduino and wireless system of communication built into the plateau of the shoe.

My later inventions were built on the knowledge gained from my experiences of performing with the first two shoes, their pros and cons.

With my current shoe, which is **computer enhanced**, I tried to perfect our first shoe experiments into something with more functionalities as a musical instrument and a visually beautiful object to wear.

The movement associated with the playing of the instrument is also very important. That's a big part of it. Each individual performer walks and moves in shoes differently. So how can I amplify these personal acoustic traits? How can we experiment with the shoes to see how they **affect movement**, and how can this be acoustically represented through sound synthesis and parameter mapping?

I'm working with a **trans-aerial dancer** now. It makes more sense to get momentum with the type of sensors I'm using and their sound mappings. Each sensor is collecting a different kind of movement data or spatial location data.

If you think of an old school vinyl spinning and each rotation is like a locked groove, pole dance is a little like that, like playing back looped dance moves and in the case of pole, it's highly precise and takes great stamina and training.

It is an academic or intellectual approach to music, intersecting with fashion. One generally expects these areas to touch on the emotional and irrational. Then again we are talking about performance art and music as a form of activism. You chose to touch on the topic of gender activism, why is that? How did you come across Marla Bendini?

Recently, while I was an artist resident at NTU, Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, I was walking down the street in Singapore and saw a sign for a pole dance studio; I went up but the owner wasn't really into my sounding shoe. She did say I could try pole myself. I immediately enrolled in classes and started that night. I'm into sports, but this was probably the hardest thing I've ever attempted and I realised I'd probably need two years to do it in a convincing way.

So I was on the look out for a pole dancer, but I knew I didn't want to work with a woman. It's too close to the voyeuristic sexy thing and the sex industry. I wanted to break that, confuse perceptions of pole. I had heard about the tradition of trans in Singapore, as it used to be the pioneering place to go to for sex changes in the 1970s, until it was uprooted to Bangkok. It's well known that the Singaporean dictatorship tried to split up the trans community at that time, moving them to different areas of the city, and marginalising them.

I really wanted to work with a trans pole dancer and

bring a new voice to their struggle in Singapore. I mean Marla told me "my body is illegal in Singapore". She gets followed and watched a lot and most of all silenced. I haven't spoken about it yet, but actually whilst I was working with Marla, we were censored twice. It was really weird. I've never experienced that in my art making career to be told to take something out, or that we can't use a certain image as it's against government policy.

In an interview, Darsie Alexander, the chief curator of the Walker Art Center, which has an extensive sound art collection, said, talking about John Cage's work, that "Cage's was a very pure approach to sound. It didn't have to refer to anything, it didn't have to tell a story, it didn't have to reach a crescendo—sound was its own medium,"

With FOOTwerk you have chosen to tell Marla Bendini's story, and her experience as a transgender pole-dancer. But given your interest in live-works of art, isn't part of the experience also rooted in spontaneity? So not necessarily telling a story but taking part in the creation of an experience, that of "sound as its own medium" as Alexander says?

I find the whole notion of John Cage's *silence* an interesting dialogue as a symptom of oppression and like the writings of Calva Pratt, these shoes make Marla loud and the whole pole thing becomes almost irritating at times and so intense you want to go away. It was so confronting for some people in Singapore, but then at the same time people stayed. They understood its beauty. More art-experienced viewers understood it's a remixing of popular culture via politically charged expressions of

the body and shoes. For me the piece is now complete with Marla performing the shoes. My short film FOOTwerk successfully provides Marla Bendini, a trans-artist and the art of pole a new voice via sonnified streams of data, contra to forms of silence.

Whose work do you find compelling in the realm of performance art, or as a matter of fact any of the other fields you touch on. Do you find any affinity with the likes of Hussain Chalayan who also have a very conceptual approach to fashion. His last show featured models whose clothes dissolved under a flow of water.

I like Singapore artist Daniel Kok's work very much; he's into all sorts of bondage stuff. Elisa Jackson is doing very interesting work; she's from the Philippines.

Of course Hussain Chalayan is a guru, the first person to really integrate wearable tech into garments and fashion performance in a way that's not gimmicky and kitsch. I hope one day we can share some intense explorations together. That's a bit of a dream of mine.

Though that said, there are a lot of really good people that he's working with. I have a problem with fashion designers always being the end of the chain and this sort of solo genius. It doesn't exist. It's about the collaborations and the people making the stuff, who input a lot in the development of these pieces. Coding is a craft and making mistakes in code also leads to very interesting design decisions.

It's like with my shoes, there's a lot of people and universities involved. It was the same when we worked with Karl Lagerfeld. It wasn't him alone that did our cover photo for fashion rules. He had this phenomenal

group of talented people, probably the best I've ever worked with from hair and make up to music producers, photographers, lights etc. And that was just a photo shoot. It's the people behind the scenes that make it all happen, really. Though Karl is a genius, I admit!

With the availability of I pads at your shows and the creation of apps you encourage live interaction with your audience, blurring the lines between the active performer and the passive consumer, and thus allowing your audience to engage in the process of creation. Given your embrace of the digital revolution, what are your hopes for the future in the technological space?

I think tangible electronics floating around our bodies, so we don't have to look down at a silly watch on our wrists or smart phones in our hands that change our posture and make us ape-like. The Internet of things, virtual reality, mixed reality, augmented reality, cognitive telepathy, all mixed up. That's going to be an interesting time. No more screens. And I'd like to be able to change the colour of my dress when my mood changes. Oh and shoes too!



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