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Maximum sound level, pulsating heartbeat, shaky floor, Fouad Bouchoucha's work is powerful, no doubt about it. Standing up with a megaphone in front of a totem of loudspeakers, the artist attempted in *Hybridsound* (2008) to mimic transcendental music's frequencies. Designed as a ritual, the performance only lasted half an hour – who could remain immersed in these deafening decibels any longer? With its references to Daft Punk, Heiner Müller's poetry, modified cars and music cognition, Bouchoucha's work doesn't need to call on art history: you'd be better off sticking your head into a sound system to understand it. The efficiency of Bouchoucha's short events brings to mind the Vietcong's hit and run strategy: a blitz attack followed by immediate dispersion into the jungle. In the Grütli theatre in Geneva the powerful humming of bass frequencies seemed to emanate from some impressive scaffolding. An abrasive noise, like an overpowering horn, could be heard on and off, coming from this bony structure adorned with milky neon. The piece was an homage to a poem by Heiner Müller, *Skeleton*, and only lasted twenty minutes – but then again, who could stay any longer?

Bouchoucha has progressively confronted the limits of sound power. Instead of giving in to the infinite escalation, the artist decided, little by little, to shift the focus from the direct creation of sound to its evocation – a project which logically culminated in representations of the potential of sound without using sound itself. What convoluted artistic journey did the artist take to arrive at such a drastic decision? To tackle an obsession, there is nothing like escape.

#### The Musical Mind

Both sculpture and performance, *Hybridsound* encapsulates this progression. For the Pekarnanana Festival in Slovenia, the artist built, together with Yann Gerstberger, a wall of loudspeakers. The design of the sound boxes didn't follow any scientific criteria in order to allow sonic oddities to crop up during the performance. The sculpture's totemic proportions pulled the visitor's gaze upward; they were completely dominated. In tune with his research on music cognition, the artist composed a piece based on traditional transcendental musics from Mongolia, Haïti and Morocco – keeping only the pure frequencies of sounds designed to send you to heaven. The artist admits to have been influenced by John A. Sloboda's *The Musical Mind: the Cognitive Psychology of Music* (1985), a book dealing with music cognition and the way sonic events are transcribed by the brain. *Hybridsound* felt like a ritual ceremony leading to a climax – trance.

Looking at the piece, Bouchoucha quickly realised then that even without any sonic material, *Hybridsound* had something of the energy deployed during the performance: the sculpture could fulfil the same function using only its aesthetic qualities. The heavy basses, the ear-splitting rhythms and simple chords are already in the piece. There's no need to actually hear them, the piece is infused with potential intensity. *Hybridsound*

pictures sonic power without actually using sound. This very real yet verging-on-the-fictional sensation reminded the artist of the industrial drawings he spent years making. ‘We spent all of our time drawing very abstract objects without ever seeing them’, he says. ‘We ended up dreaming their shape, imagining their potential.’

#### Sonic idiosyncrasies

The second stage of Bouchoucha’s artistic journey looked at car modification, an ‘art’ in which the visual effect overtakes the real impact. This tuning sets up fantasised competences never really put into play. Its suggestive power – involving ailerons, flashing lights, large wheels and so on – gives the illusion of speed. It’s not really about how powerful the engine is, but about how much stuff there is around it. In modification, speed, as ungraspable and immaterial as sound, relies on decorative accessories to materialise its efficiency.

The crazy sound systems installed in these cars also contribute to this illusion of speed, while producing sound idiosyncrasies that Bouchoucha finds fascinating. After having meticulously studied the sound system of eight modified cars, the artist organised a performance entitled Exposition collective (2009) in a huge room with columns in Marseilles’ alternative space, the Friche de la Belle de Mai. Doors and boots open, the cars circled the conductor and performed his composition. As in Hybridsound, the car wasn’t a tool used to transmit a sonic signal, but a genuine instrument.

#### Heart failure

Yet Bouchoucha wants to go further and to ditch all the systems of representation associated with sound. Even using a loudspeaker’s membrane is too literal for him. In Percussion (2008), the artist drilled into the concrete foundation slab of a gallery space to make it vibrate like a drum skin. Underneath the slab, the crawl space-turned-sound box let the sound escape through the outside portholes.

Pression acoustique : essai n°1 (2009) embodies the ultimate step in Bouchoucha’s research on the representation of sound: the total absence of sonic matter. ‘Sound was so present in my work’, he says, ‘that I had to find a way to escape, to move up a gear’. The car stuck in a block of concrete takes its inspiration from the SPL (Sound Pressure Level) competitions, where modified cars are equipped with outrageously potent sound systems – the car able to generate the biggest sound pressure level wins. The equipment is so over the top that the steering wheel is occasionally pushed outside the vehicle. It’s actually impossible to get in without risking heart failure; the car turns fatal sound box. Bouchoucha imagined a device able to contain and measure this overflow of sound power. ‘It’s an aesthetic proposition that could also be the winning car in any SPL competition’, he says. If he was to make a second attempt, the artist would completely sink the car into concrete, only leaving a little dial outside – the hand of which would hint at an inhuman pressure, one that only imagination could tackle.

#### Overflow

Since Pression acoustique, Bouchoucha has been developing a repertoire of shapes generated by sound as can be found in some loudspeaker technical handbooks. 1000 K (2010), with its two stacked-up black boxes held together by a strap, looks like a powerful object, but the title doesn’t give away the unit of measure – it could be weight, sound or

speed. This deep sound box is in fact inspired by the graphics drawn by very deep basses – sounds that seem to come directly from earth.

Bouchoucha invents an iconography of sound power without using sound itself, but instead the shape that it can generate. Albeit somewhat opaque, these objects have a roaring power of evocation – one is left to wonder how the artist will manage to go one step further than silence.