



## But if it's not music, what is it? Defining interstitial artistic practices.

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# **But if it's not music, what is it?**

## **Defining interstitial artistic practices.**

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### Keywords:

Sound art; sound poetry; categories, art worlds; definitions

### Abstract:

We often think of art as structured in art worlds. But what lies between art worlds? Do we find spaces of undefined practices, or are interstitial practices also clearly defined? For this text, we interviewed 11 French artists with sound-based practices who situate themselves in the spaces where music overlaps with the visual arts, instrument building, performance art, and poetry. How do these artists define themselves, given that the available labels do not satisfy them? How do they actually use established categories when they do not want to make their artistic practice conform to them? Three positioning strategies came up recurrently in our interviews: so-called negative, additive, and generic definitional strategies. We show here that each of these definitional strategies implies related artistic choices, which make it possible for these artists to both legitimize their sense of belonging to an interstitial space and to use this belonging as a powerful means to develop a unique identity. Beyond a simple, sometimes superficial, refusal to be labeled, the strategies we identify here appear to be the true markers of “interstitial” artists and their careers within and around art worlds.

### Introduction

We often think of art as structured in art worlds (Becker, 1982). But what lies between art worlds? Do we find spaces of undefined practices, or are interstitial practices also clearly defined? For this text, we interviewed French artists with sound-based practices who situate themselves in the spaces where music overlaps with the visual arts, instrument building, performance art, and poetry. These are artistic practices where centers of gravity are unclear and orbits are irregular. Two factors act as common denominators for our sample: the 11 French artists we interviewed all use sound in their artistic practice<sup>1</sup> (see Table 1), but do not clearly claim to be musicians, or at least have a complex relationship with this label.

Crucially, the fact that ‘sound art’ exists as a category, even if it is difficult to define, does not solve the issue of categorization for artists who use sound but do not want to be seen exclusively as musicians. Artists who fall broadly into this category are still forced to make a certain number of choices to position themselves. The same could be said for the multiple labels

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<sup>1</sup> All interviews were conducted in French, but we have chosen to publish this text in English to give these artists some visibility outside of France, and all translations in this text are our own. See Table 1 for details on these artists.

which have emerged to designate interdisciplinary practices in the 20th and 21st centuries – sound poetry, new media art, and performance art, for example – in large part because this interdisciplinarity is not clearly mirrored at the institutional level. In other words, the existence of a category such as “sound art” does not stabilize artistic practice. Max Neuhaus would be the first to agree:

If there is a valid reason for classifying and naming things in culture, certainly it is for the refinement of distinctions. Aesthetic experience lies in the area of fine distinctions, not the destruction of distinctions for promotion of activities with their least common denominator, in this case sound (Neuhaus 2000).

Sound art, at least in France, does not (yet) have the historical and institutional depth to act as a center of gravity: it is not (yet) a field that can create its own periphery. Its canon is not (yet) developed enough to provide a lexicon of proper nouns that would give artists the ability to situate and describe their practice exclusively in relation to this field. This means that more established disciplines, even though these are themselves ever-shifting constructions, have to do this work.

How, then, do artists position themselves when they belong to a field which is not (yet) a field? How do these artists define themselves, given that the available labels do not satisfy them? How do they actually use established categories when they do not want to make their artistic practice conform to them? To answer these questions, we will closely analyze how these artists position themselves and their works – what interests us is the subjective ways these artists define their practice, and what consequences this has on their career choices. We choose to analyze this discourse and its effects, rather than an analysis of the works of these artists. Three definitional strategies will be investigated in what follows: negative definitions, additive definitions, and generic definitions. These three ways of framing one’s position should not be seen as mutually exclusive, as they were successively or even simultaneously explored by the artists we interviewed. We will show here that each of these definitional strategies implies related artistic choices, which make it possible for these artists to both legitimize their sense of belonging to an interstitial space and to use this belonging as a powerful means to develop a unique identity.

Name	How they present themselves <sup>2</sup>	Interview date, place, interviewer	Personal website
Frédéric Acquaviva	Composer and sound artist	25.10.2018, Paris, CC and AF	<a href="http://www.frederic-acquaviva.net">http://www.frederic-acquaviva.net</a>
Tarek Atoui	Artist of sound and composer	7.11.2018, Paris, CC	<a href="http://www.kurimanzutto.com/en/artists/tarek-atoui">http://www.kurimanzutto.com/en/artists/tarek-atoui</a>
Charlotte Charbonnel	Artist	13.12.2018, Paris, CC and AF	<a href="http://charlotte-charbonnel.com">charlotte-charbonnel.com</a>
Anne-James Chaton	Maker of sound poetry	14.1.2019, Paris, CC and AF	<a href="https://www.annejameschaton.org/">https://www.annejameschaton.org/</a>
David Christoffel	Poet, composer, radio artist	5.11.2018, Paris, CC and AF	<a href="http://www.dcdb.fr/">http://www.dcdb.fr/</a>
Octave Courtin	Sound artist	27.2.2019, Paris, CC	<a href="https://www.octavecourtin.com/">https://www.octavecourtin.com/</a>
Yann Leguay	Sound artist	26.10.17, Paris, CC	<a href="http://www.phonotopy.org/">http://www.phonotopy.org/</a>

<sup>2</sup> This is how these artists described their practice to us during our interviews – but, of course, as this article intends to show, none of these artists use these labels in a non-reflexive, uncritical manner.

Violaine Lochu	Musician, performer, artist	14.1.2019, Paris, CC and AF	<a href="http://www.violainelochu.fr">www.violainelochu.fr</a>
Thierry Madiot	Artist	14.12.2016 and 12.10.2017, Paris, CC	<a href="http://madiot.free.fr/">http://madiot.free.fr/</a>
Sébastien Roux	Composer	11.6.2019, Baubigny, CC	<a href="http://www.sebastienroux.net/">http://www.sebastienroux.net/</a>
Samon Takahashi	Artist	6.11.2018, Paris, CC and AF	Not interested in having a website

*Table 1: Interviewees. For the interviewers, CC refers to Clément Canonne, AF to Annelies Fryberger.*

## **I. Negative definitions**

To be an ‘interstitial’ artist means, first and foremost, to refuse to be identified with a specific artistic space. This way of presenting oneself and one’s practice, by rejection rather than adherence, is a sign in and of itself of the existence of an interstitial space. It shows that there are artistic identities which can be defined by situating oneself outside other established spaces. In our interviews, it became apparent that these artists all risked being identified with another field, and that they had to take pains to make sure they did not accidentally fall into it. For the purposes of clarity, we are going to call this a “repulsive field” or “repulsive discipline,” as opposed to a center of gravity/attraction. Some examples will clarify this point:

The figure of the singer is precisely what I have to avoid. There’s a piece on the last album where, because of the way Andy played, I’m almost at the limit of singing. But that’s really a limit for me. And, furthermore, I think I would be completely incapable of writing a song. And I don’t know how to sing, either (Anne-James Chaton).

For me, the way to avoid taking the stance of a musician was to create sound objects which were as easy to manipulate as possible. I actually used the medium of sound to further address questions that I had been exploring in my performances (Octave Courtin).

I’m only just starting to be able to say that I can make music, but I really have a problem calling myself a musician (Yann Leguay).

There’s a confusion that makes people think that I’m a poet, and I constantly correct people on that point. Now I don’t know if I’m going to keep correcting them, because I’m a bit sick of it, and if people think what I do is poetry, that’s their problem... [But] it’s not that it’s poetry just because I’m making a book (Frédéric Acquaviva).

These citations show the crucial tipping point in each of these artists’ practices, where a danger of being seen as part of a given established discipline is perceived. This perception leads them to develop a number of strategies to ensure that they will not be seen as part of these repulsive fields. The most obvious among these is to claim incompetence: as above, ‘I am not a musician because I cannot sing’. This means that these artists will often celebrate their status as a non-expert in certain disciplines, which implies that they will explicitly refuse to develop certain technical skills or learn to use technological tools which are commonly associated with certain artistic disciplines.

This intentional incompetence appeared frequently in our interviews. Sébastien Roux used an argument of this type to dismiss the idea that he could be seen as a visual artist, or even a sound artist – the labels that the institutions which finance his work often want to use. Here, he describes an installation he did with designer Olivier Vadrot:

The visual side of it does interest me, but it's really not part of my practice, I really don't know how to do that. For example, for the installation *Succession of timbres with one partial in common*<sup>3</sup> (2016), it was my friend Olivier Vadrot, who is an architect and designer, who made a bench, calculated the dimensions, everything – even the choice of blue for the speakers! (Sébastien Roux).

Symmetrically, Charlotte Charbonnel defends herself against the accusation of being a musician or composer by highlighting the rudimentary nature of the software she uses:

I do a lot of things with Audacity. Before, I used more sophisticated software, but it started to get on my nerves, because at a certain point there were too many windows, too much stuff... for what I wanted to do, that wasn't necessary. [...] And my partner is pretty good with programming with Max-Msp, so when it comes down to it, he helps me a bit as well from time to time... there are things I don't know how to do, or which I'm not interested in doing, and I'm very happy to let someone else do them for me (Charlotte Charbonnel).

We might also note that for these two individuals, there is a difference in how they present their work on their respective websites: Sébastien Roux systematically includes sound files in the presentation of his installations, whereas Charlotte Charbonnel, who does not wish to be seen as a musician, only includes images of her sound installations on her website. But in both cases, these sound installations engage the spectator visually and aurally.

It is striking to observe that this “amateur” or “outsider” relationship to the tools of a repulsive field is even used by some artists as a central part of their artistic singularity. For example:

Actually, I think that when you're a novice in something, you can have a cheeky way of appropriating a medium or technique... you don't have any qualms about doing things which purists wouldn't dare do, to put it simply (Charlotte Charbonnel).

I didn't want to acquire too much technical ability, or be too much of an expert in sound processing, because if I did that, I would risk creating the same... I would erase this strangeness which comes from my own user or processing errors... It's my craftsmanship that creates this kind of strange sound. If ever I got too comfortable with these tools, I would create fewer accidents, and I think that would weaken my writing (Anne-James Chaton).

Thus, the fact of not having certain technical abilities is seen as an advantage – both for the artworks produced and for the way these artists are able to position themselves.

More generally, the artists we interviewed make sure to give their artistic production a sufficient level of ambiguity so that they cannot easily be categorized into the field that could be seen as their “natural” center of gravity. In other words, these artists have to ensure that their work does not meet all of the prototypical criteria that are used to assign artworks to one category or another. This is how we could analyze Anne-James Chaton's refusal to call what he does singing. His performances with the guitarist Andy Moore are indeed dangerously close to the world of music, because of the set-up (voice and guitar), performance spaces (new music scene, improvised music festivals), and the way they are distributed (vinyl singles). In this case, it is precisely the insistence on the spoken word that gives this object a minimal level of ambiguity such that it is not immediately seen to be music. An inverse example is that of performer Violaine Lochu, who makes abundant use of singing in her performances, which themselves have all the appearances of a typical musical performance (execution of a score, precise control of sound and vocal aspects, virtuosity, etc.) – but the spaces in which she performs (most often spaces

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<sup>3</sup> This work can be found here: <http://www.sebastienroux.net/>, in the category “Works” under “Sound Environments/Installations” (consulted 19 November 2019).

dedicated to the visual arts) make it difficult to immediately assign the label ‘music’ to these performances. Furthermore, the idea is to explicitly play with spectator expectations when things are framed in a certain way, by presenting an object or a performance that does not completely comply with these expectations:

“Performance” or “score”, these are words that I use but which aren’t actually quite right. When I talk about a “score”, people expect something specific, but I’m actually constantly thwarting those expectations (Violaine Lochu).

This focus on categorical ambiguity was certainly one of the strategies that we encountered most in our interviews. Defined, established categories actually become artistic material, and in some ways, that is precisely what unites these artists – the fact of transforming artistic disciplines into material to be manipulated. By moving practices that would have their natural place elsewhere – a musical performance into a gallery, for example – these artists actually address the very nature of how we categorize these practices, and, in so doing, reveal borders and preconceptions that otherwise go unnoticed. They question the human need to create “distinct islands of meaning” (Zerubavel, 1993) in the world surrounding us, and show how these categories are by no means natural, they are purely social constructions.

## **II. Additive definitions**

Being an “interstitial” artist can also mean to situate oneself at the crossroads between different artistic fields and be able to move from one to another. This second definitional strategy means that these artists think of their artistic practice as belonging simultaneously to two artistic fields: in this case, music and one other artistic field, notably the visual arts or poetry. These artists claim “equal” belonging to two fields via their artistic production. The following citations nicely illustrate this strategy:

I like it when the improvisers I work with say, ‘but you’re not [just] a visual artist, you can really play!’ That’s great. Here’s what I say now: artist of sound and composer. Not one without the other (Tarek Atoui).

When I started out, I really tried to position myself in both scenes equally, taking an agnostic stance. I defined myself via [both] fields, meaning [I was] a poet and composer. I didn’t choose, actually... If my first spoken opera had a tape and I played flute with it, it’s because I don’t like the idea of just playing the flute on its own, that’s not a good fit for me; and I also don’t like just being on stage as a poet and nothing else, even though I do end up doing that sometimes (David Christoffel).

It should be obvious that this kind of positioning results, at least partially, in hybrid logics: text and music, for example, are combined in performances of different names – “sound poetry”, “poetry with music”, “spoken opera”, “vocal performance”, etc. – or sculpture and sound are associated in the production of sound installations. Being able to maintain an identity at the crossroads of two distinct art worlds makes it possible to enact a two-fold differentiation strategy – for example, being seen as a poet amongst musicians or a musician amongst poets – which gives these artists unique resources for creating a singular identity.

However, hybridization actually did not take pride of place in the narratives provided by the artists we interviewed, even though all of them have an artistic practice that is hybrid on many levels. There are two main reasons that might explain this. The first is an institutional explanation: “hybrid” productions tend to fall under a parent discipline (for example, opera in music, sound poetry in poetry, sound art in visual arts), and therefore it is not through

hybridization that the “interstitiality” of these artists is manifested. Secondly, under the overarching trend of pluri-/inter-/trans-disciplinarity, the logic of hybridization in fact dominates a large swath of the world of institutional art. Thus, since it is everywhere, it is nowhere – this is not a resource that lies solely in the hands of interstitial artists.

At root, the idea for these artists is not to produce a hybrid artistic object, in the sense that it would blend or juxtapose characteristic properties of distinct art forms. Rather, the idea of this “additive” definitional strategy is to produce *ubiquitous* artistic objects which, because they carry the “right” properties or can be activated in different ways, can simultaneously exist in two (relatively) distinct artistic fields. In our sample, the artistic projects which involved the creation of instruments or sound production devices perfectly illustrate this strategy – and it is revealing that more than half of the 11 artists we interviewed have at one time or another done projects of this type. Octave Courtin’s works involving the production of instruments derived from the model of a bagpipe are exemplary in this respect<sup>4</sup>. Here, he discusses, in a somewhat confused way, how the instrument gives him the possibility to exist simultaneously in different artistic fields:

I would say that it’s more about tinkering, or transforming an instrument... or performances that are really musical, with instruments that are identified as musical instruments, but which ask the kinds of questions we ask in a school for the visual arts, but applying them to music, which can be a bit risky. I had a distinct, strong relationship to the object, to installation, and to performance, which means that my first concern was how things would look... or, in any case, the visual aspect was as clearly identified as the sound (Octave Courtin).

It is clear that sounding objects produced in this way can be seen as musical instruments in the most traditional sense of the word – they are relatively controllable and capable of producing a set of sufficiently varied sounds. They can therefore be used as such in the music world, solo or in interaction with other musicians. But they also have many other possible ends. According to Tarek Atoui:

The situations that I create [...] use performance and the voice as moments for experimentation, quite literally. They then create knowledge which will lead to the creation of an instrument or a tool, or a process, a set of instructions, things that will generate other performative moments. [...] I see instruments as tools for my pieces. [...] They are not static or silent like in an ethnomusicology or anthropology museum. They are active agents. Of course, they have a certain materiality, sculpturality, a very strong presence, and we might think that the goal of the project was to create an instrument, but that is not in fact the case (Tarek Atoui).

Instruments can be used for sound performances in museum spaces, as long as they are “deinstrumentalized” by the artist’s gestures, or proceduralized in such a way that spectators focus their attention not only on the sound produced, but also on elements such as a critical relationship with the technical object, the choreographic nature of the instrumental gesture, the way the instrument constrains the performer’s body, etc. Instruments can also become sound installations, whether interactive or not, or can be exhibited purely for their visual aspect – as a sculpture or as a material trace of a past performance. Our interviews strongly highlighted the way instruments can surreptitiously allow an artist to move from one domain to another. The instrumental object can hold multiple meanings and be activated in diverse ways, depending on the artist’s intent. Thus, this object can act as a kind of master key which opens the doors of various artistic domains.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, his *Capharnaüm*, which can be both a performance and an installation (<https://www.octavecourtin.com/performance>, consulted 19 November 2019).

However, instruments are not the only way to do this. Performance may be the ubiquitous artistic form par excellence, because it can be made to fit almost any artistic space. For artists who use this form, they have to find the right “balance” and “surface” so that their performances can find their place in the different fields they might address. Thus, Yann Leguay is careful to leave open the possibility of having multiple entry points for his work:

There are many different ways to read this performance [*Unstatic*]. Geeks are fascinated by the purely technical side of things. Then there are people who are less interested in the music and who are surprised by the way I’m using unexpected objects. And some are more interested in the social side of it, the scrapping and resalvaging – using the waste that society produces in a new way, etc.

This kind of work with multiple entry points interests me (Yann Leguay).

*Unstatic* – a performance built around the amplification of sounds made by four spinning hard drives – was indeed presented equally in visual art and concert spaces<sup>5</sup>. Changing spaces like this means that the performance is named differently by the organizers, but the content is absolutely identical: “I get a kick out of doing the same thing in a gallery and in a squat – in one it’s called a performance, in the other, a concert” (Yann Leguay). In the same way, Violaine Lochu was able to present her performance *Babel Babel*<sup>6</sup> several times over the course of just a few days, once in an exhibition on sound poetry at the Palais de Tokyo, then in a radio program on improvised music (*À l’improviste* on France Musique), and finally in an event organized by a visual arts space (Mains d’Oeuvres in Saint-Ouen). This performance, which is an assemblage of vocal improvisation and field recordings of babbling, and which can be performed solo or in a collective, can easily be inserted in one world or another.

This additive, both/and strategy used by these artists is less a question of hybridity than ubiquity – an assemblage of signifying elements that can be differently activated depending on the context. These artists can focus on different layers of their practice depending on the context. They create objects or performances which will be labelled differently in different artistic contexts, even if their content remains identical. In so doing, they push these different artistic worlds to expand in order to include material from other domains, instead of actively questioning the tenants of these contexts, as the negative definitional strategy would have it.

### **III. Generic definitions**

Finding a home in the interstices is also a way to rise to the rank of “just” an artist. The denomination “artist” is first and foremost used, in this case, as a way to step outside existing categories:

“Artist” – I like that because it’s so vast. When you say you’re an “artist”... it bothers people because they don’t know who they’re dealing with exactly. At the same time, it gives you space to develop things a bit further without immediately categorizing or pigeon-holing... with “artist”, everyone sees what they want to see, according to their own referents (Charlotte Charbonnel).

The label “artist” allows these individuals to transcend categories, and, for some, to free themselves from their initial training. This emerged very clearly in our interview with Thierry Madiot, who sees his trajectory as a long process of emancipation from his role as a trombonist to the profession of artist, with a long series of projects that are were increasingly difficult to

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<sup>5</sup> <https://vimeo.com/121717527> (consulted 19 November 2019)..

<sup>6</sup> She presents two different versions on her website: [http://www.violainelochu.fr/?page\\_id=1845](http://www.violainelochu.fr/?page_id=1845) (consulted 19 November 2019).



include in his field of origin (music). This includes intimate “sound massages”, in which the artist manipulates small objects near (or even inside) the ears of the listener, and which are more similar to primitive psychoanalysis sessions than to concerts for one person<sup>7</sup>, and the construction of 15-meter-long telescopic horns which simply cannot be accommodated by most concert halls:

When I was a trombonist, my space was the concert hall... For a musician, it's the concert... But when you become an artist, it simply explodes [...]. Musician is included in the artist thing, but I could not be just a musician. Because when I find myself in a room with a bunch of trombonists, I'm bored out of my skull (Thierry Madiot).

For Frédéric Acquaviva this takes on a similar flavor:

Music is part of something called art, which is part of life, so I don't want to produce, quite simply, to produce any “thing” – and in particular to produce music. The term “sound art” seems more vague to me [than the term “composer”]. And so, since music is an art, that works for me (Frédéric Acquaviva).

The main strategy for achieving the status of “artist” is to ramp up conceptual thinking so that it transcends individual productions. This does not imply that these artists produce purely conceptual pieces, rather, once they have emancipated themselves from the question of medium, the essence of their work resides in exploring a certain number of “questions” or “ideas” which can be the impetus for multi-layered projects using various mediums at different points along the way. Tarek Atoui's trajectory illustrates this strategy perfectly. In order to understand how he went from the status of a musician (with a practice lying between electroacoustic music and improvisation) to that of an artist represented by three different galleries, we have to recognize the fact that his artistic practice is not about producing performances or installations, but rather about developing concepts which preside over the different production processes. So much so that it is sometimes the concepts themselves, presented as instructions, that are now acquired by galleries and other museum institutions. This is the case of the *Reverse Collection*<sup>8</sup>, a multi-stage project in which Atoui commissioned instrument-builders and sound artists to create new instruments freely inspired by recordings of improvisers playing historical instruments from the collection of Berlin's Dahlem museum:

These instruments, as I see them, are versions of larger ideas or concepts, and they depend heavily on the people who make them, the technological environments of the time, the aesthetic tastes of the moment, but they can change or transform. That's the real potential of this project. It's not just about producing a fixed object. And this piece, now, these instruments, they are being acquired by museums, and they have value as objects, but an important part of my work is to accompany these pieces with instructions, elements that will guarantee that this creative gesture will be repeated. For example, the institution which acquires these instruments, once there's no longer anyone who can repair it, or it is no longer possible to preserve it so that it can be played, the institution can then activate the initial creative gesture and commission a new instrument from a different instrument builder. For this, I specify profiles of instrument builders. They buy a piece which is a script, which includes this object for the time being, which gives it a certain materiality, but which can be substituted for another (Tarek Atoui).

Such projects typically lead to integrative approaches, in that the artistic work consists of exploring a concept by integrating a succession of processes which may result in “works” that

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<sup>7</sup> “I call them “sound massages” because it's not about music, we don't tell people it's music. If I were doing the same thing with a nurse at my side, it would suddenly become much clearer for people!” (Thierry Madiot). See: [http://madiot.free.fr/IMG/pdf/17\\_05\\_messagesmadiot.pdf](http://madiot.free.fr/IMG/pdf/17_05_messagesmadiot.pdf) (consulted 19 November 2019).

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://www.moussepublishing.com/?product=/tarek-atoui-the-reverse-collection-the-reverse-sessions/> (consulted 19 November 2019).

can be exhibited (or performed) in different artistic fields. This integrative approach appears clearly in how Samon Takahashi describes one of his projects:

I did a concert in South Korea, with a group that I put together over there, with people who played noise music and a gayageum player... we played a concert and I did a multi-track recording of it, and then this recording was played in the stairwell of a museum, with a different track on each floor. So, it was a restitution of the concert in an installation version... which matched the space: there were 6 floors, so I had chosen 6 musicians, because I was thinking about the installation before I did the concert, it was premeditated (Samon Takahashi).

This definition strategy – calling on the generic category of artist – opens the possibility for these individuals to think beyond medium and instead to organize their production around concepts. In this way, they can adopt a *modus operandi* wherein the plasticity of a concept can be expressed in multiple mediums. A given artistic project can therefore have several steps, each of which may (or may not) result in a work which can explore the specificity of a given medium or artistic space. This strategy is different from the additive strategy discussed above, in the sense that these artists are not trying to create artistic objects which might equally find their home in different artistic worlds. Rather, they conceive a global project which includes specific stages, each of which might respond to a specific problem (posed by the artist or by a call for projects, for instance). In other words, their aim is not so much ubiquity as it is integrating different, sometimes incongruous productions into an overarching concept.

## **Conclusion**

Artists in interstitial spaces do not have undefined or undefinable artistic practices – on the contrary, we found that these actors clearly define their practices in relation to strong dichotomies (for example, music vs. visual arts) and articulate their position in these interstices. In this text, we have explicitly avoided terminology of center/periphery or notions of marginality, because this is not, as one could think, a study of artists situating themselves on the margins of the music world or the world of contemporary art. The centers of gravity and repulsive fields were different from one artist to the next and over the course of their careers, but none of our interviewees sang the praises of marginality, or claimed a peripheral position as regards the world of music or the visual arts.

Three positioning strategies came up recurrently in our interviews: so-called negative, additive, and generic definitions. Each of these strategies is associated with specific actions or behaviors which regulate their artistic practices. The first, negative definitions, goes hand in hand with a willful refusal to develop certain skills that predominate in the repulsive discipline and an intentional ambiguity of the objects produced. The second positioning strategy is that of additive definitions, which implies hybridization logics, meant in the sense of creating ubiquitous artistic objects which can simultaneously exist in distinct artistic fields. We used the example of the creation of instruments as a particularly illustrative example of this strategy. Our last strategy – the use of the “artist” label in generic definitions – implies a focus on concept, which artists use to generate multi-level projects using different mediums. These different strategies clarify our initial impetus for this research, which was to see how the label “sound art” is used in practice for defining artistic production by the artists themselves. We quickly realized that this label had not resolved much for the artists we interviewed, and that a much more complex game of interrelations was at play.

We have chosen to focus here on how these artists perceive the works they produce, rather than conducting an analysis of the artworks themselves. We were interested in their subjective meaning for their producers, and how this meaning leads these artists to construct their careers in more practical terms. This focus on the actors over the artworks forces us to reconceptualize interstitial artistic practice, because artworks are always somewhere – they can be multiple in media, approach, or discipline, but at the end of the day, they are instantiated in place(s) with a history which anchor(s) them. Actors, on the other hand, can straddle and move between artistic fields. This means that an artist can develop an interstitial identity, because of their possible mobility, whereas works cannot be interstitial, in the same sense that institutions are not interstitial – their (explicit or implicit) function is precisely to create stable and permanent centers of gravity in order to allow different art worlds to develop.

At a time when omnivorousness is on the tip of our tongues (Bryson, 1996; Peterson and Kern, 1996), and generic “crossovers” are seen positively (Brackett 2016), it is not unusual for artists and consumers of cultural products to refuse to categorize their practices into a single category. We “insist that [our] tastes are unclassifiable” (Brackett, 2016, p. 1). This resistance is typically discussed in relation to genres, but our interviews show that it also applies to artistic forms and the media that are used within them. This shift in interstitiality logics from genre to form is more than just a change in scale: it forces artists to develop new strategies to circumvent both the unavoidable materiality of media and the pull of institutions around which art worlds orbit. Beyond a simple, sometimes superficial, refusal to be labeled, the strategies we identified here – negative, additive, and generic definitional strategies – are the true markers of “interstitial” artists and their careers within and around art worlds.

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