TECHNOCULTURE

Installation or performance: The art of art making

Episode 17

Full transcript

Guest: Brent Lee [Brent]
Host: Federica Bressan [Federica]

[Federica]: Welcome to a new episode of Technoculture. I'm your host, Federica Bressan, and today my guest is Brent Lee, a Professor of Integrated Media at the School of Creative Arts at Windsor University in Ontario, Canada. He is an expert in sound and time-based art forms. Welcome, Brent.

[Brent]: Hello.

[Federica]: Tell us a little bit about yourself as an artist and then also how you balance your life between being a scholar and a creative artist.

[Brent]: Okay, sure. If I knew how to balance all of those things, I would be way better off, but I try. I was trained as a musician and studied music composition both at McGill University and the University of British Columbia, and for many years that was primarily what I was doing was composing music and teaching, eventually teaching at the university level. Most of my music composition involved technology to some extent, using either, it was either electroacoustic music, or I did a lot of work with the live processing of the sound of acoustic instruments in concert pieces. And eventually I was also interested in improvisation and eventually started a group called the Electric Improv Lab at the University of Windsor with some students and colleagues here who were very interested in improvising, and we would basically freely improvise with different kinds of technology at the same time so we could process the sound or add in found sound and other things like that into the improvisations. And we eventually started working with some visual artists, choreographer, dancers just as a way of expanding what we were doing in terms of the improvisational work. And there were a few

people that we really enjoyed working with, and eventually we started in 2008 a group called the Noiseborder Ensemble, and that group still exists. We still perform. We put on a festival every couple of years, and the group is made up of musicians, composers, sound artists, but also video artists, visual artists of different kinds, and we have often collaborated with guest artists or work... If we're traveling, we'll work with other people as well. And for the last, I would say, I guess ten years now, that's been sort of a major focus for me is work on that, that project, the Noiseborder project. I continue to incorporate that in my teaching, and more recently I've sort of moved over more to the visual arts side of the School of Creative Arts, teaching courses in time-based art, media, sound and media, basically, and I guess continue to do that work. In the last, I guess, three or four years, we've started doing — well, even longer, I guess — but with some more focus on installation art and interactive installations. One of my colleagues in the Noiseborder Ensemble is, name's Sigi Torinus, and she's been doing installation art for decades now, and we had actually collaborated on a couple of her installations some years ago, but now we've been working together for the last few years building new installations, and especially installations that are interactive in nature, meaning either that there's an audience participation or interaction in the installation, or what we're actually more interested in is how musicians might interact with an installation in a more, at a higher level than a typical audience member would. So that's actually what we've been working on. We just presented a new piece called XVitro in our festival this spring, and XVitro is an interactive installation. It runs as an installation with an algorithm made in Max for both the audio and... Actually, the video algorithm, I think, is done in processing, but the piece will run by itself without any interaction, but if someone does interact with the installation, then it will respond to whatever sonic input that performer can offer and create sort of a performance situation within the installation, and we presented that for the first time, yeah, just in May. We're still working on this piece. We're still refining it, and we hope to present it some other places soon.

[Federica]: What comes next really intrigues me, but before we get there, I would like to clarify a term. When you say 'technology', what do you mean, exactly? Because it's not obvious, and if it's not too much to ask, I'd also like to ask you to tell us a little bit about how this term has evolved — actually, well, you know, how technology has evolved since the beginning of your activity with it?

[Brent]: Well, I'm going to date myself a little bit. So when I say 'technology', I was thinking of two — more than two things, I guess, maybe three or four things. First of all, more commonly now, I think of it as computer technology, so it's software, but also it's including electronic instruments or digital instruments that will produce sound not acoustically but through some sort of an algorithm or electronically. It has also meant sensors in some cases. We have, you know, done some projects that involve sort of do-it-yourself electronics where we're actually building circuit boards and using Arduino or something like that to connect them usually into Macs but even just to a computer to be able to do something. Originally, taking, what I was

saying, when I first started working with technology, it was with analog synthesizers. At the university I was attending, we had a big Moog synthesizer that filled an entire room, and so I did several pieces on that, but then even I was still an undergraduate student when MIDI came out and the whole digital synthesizer thing really took off. And so since, I guess, the 1980s — a lot of the pieces I did in the '80s and '90s involved, you know, blackbox synthesizers or audio processors, meaning that it wasn't done with a computer and there's a computer inside inside the black box, but not a laptop computer or a desktop computer, just a piece of equipment, outboard equipment, and gradually in the last, I guess, since maybe 2000 or so, that's evolved more, so that pretty much everything we do now is in software. We obviously use a little bit of hardware, but more and more it's relying on software instruments — maybe some interfaces or controllers or things like that, but mostly it's we're doing things in software. And more recently, I mean, I started programming, writing software in the '90s and continued on with... That was in C, but I've continued on with more developing Max patches since I guess almost 20 years now.

[Federica]: You're also an educator at the academic level, so you're often in touch with young adults and the new generation that learns about this technology and how to use it for creative purposes today. I would like to ask if having been there when media came out makes you an expert of several technological generations in a way that gives you a perspective that is more valuable or just different than that of these people who approach the scene today and take some things for granted — for example, a certain computational power, mobile technology, I would say the internet itself, and in general, ready-made tools and cheap plug-and-play devices.

[Federica]: I don't think it's more valuable. It's different, I have a different perspective on it, but I don't think it's any more valuable. In fact, sometimes it can be a little bit of a detriment because you get used to doing things a certain way, the technology evolves, and because you've been doing it a certain way for a long time and it's working for you, you don't feel the need to follow the newer developments. So I try to, I'm not... But at the same time, I'm not... I'm more interesting in the ideas that I come up with and what's possible, but I'm perfectly well aware that, you know, my students will sometimes come up with ideas that I would not have come up with just because they're sometimes much more on top of the really recent developments and technology and they're more open, they don't have maybe as rigid a view of how things should work with sound and technology, so I don't think it's an advantage. I think it's a bit of a disadvantage. I have to force myself, actually, to stay on top of it.

[Federica]: How true is it that today's scene is dominated by ready-made technology as opposed to DIY, both in terms of software patches and tools and devices?

[Brent]: I think it's a combination of both, and it's really up to the individual artist how they want to approach it. For example, you know, I work with the Noiseborder Ensemble. We have people that are familiar enough with Max to find a patch online and incorporate it into a

piece but really couldn't build it from scratch, we have people that can use a patch but couldn't fix it if there was anything wrong with it, and we have people that could design something from scratch and make it work eventually. And in the end, you know, for us I think it's mostly about the artwork, and however you arrive at the artwork is fine. We do take care that if we are, you know, using someone else's Max patch that we try and credit them and that not only in the patch, but in the performance, we'll say, 'You know, this is based in part on a patch by so-and-so that we found in such-and-such a place,' but I don't think there's any one way to do it, and everybody starts out as a beginner. Some people go further. Some people never really get beyond that, but for a lot of artists they don't need to be experts in Max programming to use Max or to, you know, the... You can use the simpler tools in Max that sort of come with or ready-made patches, and that's fine, but it depends on what your artwork is and where you want to take it.

[Federica]: Sometimes we hear that the more sophisticated building blocks and tools you have available to perform a creative task, the more limited your imagination will be, because instead of having a visionary idea you will look at the abundance of tools in front of you and just think in terms of, 'What can I do with them?' I would like to ask if this is an issue for you, how do you find the balance, and also, how do you think that your students approach this issue?

[Brent]: Yeah, that's possible. I suppose that could be the case with some artists that they might be limited a little way because the tool only, or suggests certain ways of working. One thing with my students that I always tell them the first class when we're starting to work with Ableton Live — which is the workstation that I teach in my sonic arts classes because it's really simple to use and it's, you can use it in live situations, you could also use it for producing recordings. I have a lot of students that are into sort of DJing and music production like that, so it's a good tool for them. And the one thing that Ableton Live has is that it has a default tempo of 120 beats per minute, and so it's amazing how many of the first assignments will come in and they'll be at exactly 120 because no one ever bothered to change the tempo because that was [unclear 00:11:50]. So it's true, you know; your tools do steer you in a certain direction. At the same time, with Max, because the tools are so flexible, you can alter them, and even the ones that are sort of ready-made, you can still tie into them and still, you know, make changes or do something new on top of that, and I think for a lot of people, it's an entry into the world of working with sort of interactivity is to be able to use something that will allow you to do interactive work, even if it steers it in a certain direction — at least as a starting point. And you might... The more you get interested in it and excited about it, you think, 'Well, what if I could do this or what if I could do that?' And not everyone will do that, but that's okay. I don't see that as a problem so much, but I recognize that it's an issue, that, of course, a tool will have an effect on the kind of work that's produced.

[Federica]: Sometimes I think that it's unfair to expect of artists who engage with the newest

technologies to always have ideas that challenge or transcend the limitations of the current state of technology, because that's not what defines a good idea, a good artistic idea, that has value. Maybe this obsession with pushing the boundaries is just a fixation of our times. A piano, for example, has 88 keys, and every composer is implicitly asking the question, 'What can I do with those keys,' and if they don't feel the urge to transcend the limitation of the 88 keys, it doesn't mean that the composition won't be of value. So every artist is limited, but inspired and ultimately just confronted with the specifics of his or her instrument.

[Brent]: I totally agree, but that's also the same for a scholarly work as well. If people have been studying certain ideas, certain scholars, certain researchers, certain authors, their thinking will be shaped by what they've read as well and limited in some way by that, or formed — and not sort of limited, but steered, I guess, would be a better word.

[Federica]: That's true. So I guess that owning your own decisions, being aware of your own decisions — basically, responsibility — is the way out of this, because there's nothing wrong with making a composition at 120 BPM with Ableton Live, but it makes a difference whether you chose that or not.

[Brent]: That's all, yeah, that's all you can ask, I guess, is to be a little bit aware of the decisions that you're allowing to be made on your behalf. Examine the assumptions that are built into your thinking.

[Federica]: I can't help thinking, though, that in order to achieve this awareness to make a conscious use of the tools, you need to know how the tools are made. If you know what I mean, you cannot just be the user who pushes buttons and selects items from a drop-down menu that triggers functions that somebody else prepackaged for you. The functions cannot just be black boxes for you. I understand that a case can be made for the fact that you don't need to be a mechanic to be a good driver for a car, so it's, again, a matter of balance probably, but I cannot help thinking that to some extent you need to master your tools in order to make conscious choices.

[Brent]: Sure, but you also have to keep in mind that if you're using, if you're talking about coding, then you're... Are you talking about coding in the service of creating an artwork, in which case it might not matter if the code is original or if it, as long as it accomplishes the purpose that you needed to accomplish, it doesn't necessarily matter if you're borrowing someone else's or using something that comes as part of a package as long as it in a straightforward way accomplishes the purpose you're setting out for. If you're talking about creating an artwork, then, you know, the same pitfalls are there. Are you simply using forms and ideas that other people have used many times over without any originality? Then maybe the concern is more about how the artwork turns out rather than how the code turns out.

[Federica]: Thank you for sharing your thoughts on this. I apologize because during the past questions I have not been asking you about your work, but I'm actually very fascinated by this relationship between creativity and current technology and how we think and how we act, so thank you so much. I found your answers very interesting. I will go back now, though, to your work and what you do and I will say that you were traveling through Europe a few months ago, and Belgium was one of the countries that you visited, and you came to Ghent, so we had a chance to meet, so we had a nice conversation that day. And I have learned something that struck me about your artistic practice, and that is the fact that you produce both installations and performances, but you almost always have different versions of the same piece that can be presented as an installation or a performance. So I'm interested in asking you a bit more about how you approach one and the other, how you define 'one and the other', where is the line, when does an installation in fact become a performance, and vice versa, and how is the process of transitioning, of turning one into the other?

[Brent]: Sure. So I guess, you know, there... I do have an idea of what the difference is between a performance and an installation, but I wouldn't say that this is, you know, a rigorous academic definition. It's more of a shorthand that we used almost in a way to promote a work or an event and to maybe give a prospective audience a sense of what's kind of expected of them. I think the main difference between an installation and a performance for us is that an installation is something that an audience will come and go. Two, they will visit the installation, walk around, stay as long as they want. Performance, though, typically has a beginning and an end, and so that would kind of be the main difference is that installations are sort of whatever duration the audience member decides it's going to be, whereas a performance, we decide the duration, and when people come in, they sit down, they watch the performance. So that creates, of course, issues when you're trying to do performable installations, because if it's both an installation that people can visit but it's also going to be a performance, then we have to figure out, 'Well, how are you going to to promote that, or what should, how do people behave? Should they be sitting there? Should they be wandering around?' And we've tried different things and we're sort of continuing to work on that. The complicated part is, we don't want the audience to feel uncomfortable because they feel like they're behaving in a way that the artist doesn't want them to. Typically, an installation, people come into a room where a work is installed, and I'll maybe use XVitro as an example because we just presented this, but I can maybe draw on some other examples as well, but so in XVitro, there are three plexiglass, they're sort of objects in the shape of windshields that are suspended from the ceiling, so they're hanging at about eye level in the space. Each of them is both a projection or surface so that even though they're translucent, they're encoded in a material that will allow video projection to be retained on the surface of the object, and it will be visible from both sides. You can actually walk around each of these windshields and see what's going on from all of them at the same time. Also, each of the windshields is wired in such a way that it

is a loudspeaker, so we're sending sort of a low-freq or low-amplitude signal, there's a little transducer attached to the windshield, and so the windshield vibrates, and the sound actually emanates from the windshield. And in the installation, you can wander around in between. If you put your ear closer to one windshield, you'll hear more of that sound versus another sound, and that's, we... That was fine. We had the installation up and running for a while, but then at a certain point, you know, the performer entered, and as soon as she entered the space, you know, the audience quickly emptied out of the installation space and gravitated towards the edges of the room, and we had set up a few chairs, but pretty much everybody decided to sit down and went and grabbed it there even if there wasn't enough chairs for everyone to sit. And then it became a performance, and the musician had a radio, like a radio microphone, wireless mic, so she could wander around and she could sing and the sound of her voice would then get processed by the installation and would come out through the sounding windshields as well. So it was still built from the same sound because we also used her voice as part of the sonic material that's in the installation, but it sort of adds that extra level to it when she's actually doing it live. Whether or not that's the best situation, I'm not exactly sure, because it's still a little bit awkward to shift from installation to performance, and we're, continue to experiment with these things, but I can't say that we find a really fully satisfactory solution. In a way, it's just easier if it's just an installation or just a performance [unclear 00:21:50] the audience see more comfortable, so maybe the future for us in this way might be not to try to do both or to say, 'This is an installation, and then we're going to have a performance at a certain time and close the installation and then reopen it for the performance.'

[Federica]: You didn't show up empty-handed today for this episode of Technoculture. You shared some audio excerpts from your works with me, and I think that this is a good moment to share with our audience and excerpts from XVitro, which you have just mentioned. XVitro is a work of 2018 created by you, Brent Lee, together with Sigi Torinus, and Meaghen Quinn performing. The excerpt is two minutes long exactly.

[music: XVitro by Brent lee and Sigi Torinus]

[Federica]: Both an installation and a performance can be interactive, so I would like to ask you about interaction in your works. How important is it for you to engage the audience that way, and what are the strategies that you've explored so far to do that?

[Brent]: Sure. So one thing that we found very early on in the Noiseborder Ensemble is that depending which artistic tradition we were coming from, we had different ideas about the nature of what 'interactive' typically meant. For musicians and composers, 'interactive' means that that it's a piece where there's some interaction between the live performer and some sort of a system, typically, you know, a computer system with sound processing or something like that that's developed in Max is the most common one, but people do it in Pure Data or even

build their own systems in some way, but it's definitely between the performer who is an artist and part of the presentation and the piece, whereas the people in our group that are coming from a visual arts tradition have their sense of interactive is always, 'Well, no, this is for the gallery visitor gets to interact with the artwork directly. There's no... It's not a question of interpreting the artwork or doing some performing the artwork for an audience. It's more of a direct relationship between the artwork and the viewer.' And so we've tried... We've done different things, and we have created pieces where they are designed to be interactive for the viewers, for the gallery visitors. I'm trying to think of a couple of examples. One could argue that the installations are often interactive simply because they invite viewers to engage with the space interactively in the sense that they get a different view of the work or a different sense of the work or a different experience of the work depending on how they navigate the space, so just inviting people to walk through, for example, a certain path. We create a work at, in Norway. I guess it was in 20 — I want to say 2015 — at the Kunstmuseet in Ålesund, and it was a version of an installation that was created by Sigi Torinus, my colleague, as well as Andrea Sunder-Plassmann, another collaborator of mine, she's in Germany and based in Berlin. Sigi and Andrea have been actually working on a project for many years that they call Browsing Beauty, and it's always a site-specific project, it's always an installation, but there's often some sort of a performance element or audience interactive element in however they do it, but they make different versions of the piece depending on where it's being produced and the situation and who's there and who's interested in being involved. And in this particular case, they decided that they would... It's a projection-based piece. It was installed in a fairly large space in the gallery, and there were hanging screens, I guess, or fabric screens they created almost... I wouldn't say a maze because it wasn't complicated, but it created pathways through the space, and because of the nature of both the material in the screens and also the quality of the light and the projections being projected on them, the images would be quite sharp on the first screen but would become more diffuse as the light would go through, you know, several screens so it you closer to the back of one side it might be quite a blurred image but there might be something projected from another vantage point that would create a sharper image and so in that case the interaction is just simply people walking through having different experiences and so on, but in other cases, we'll, you know, invite the audience to, for example, play an instrument, make a sound, simply by motion, for example. You can create an [artwork by 00:28:50] if you've got a camera tied to a Max patch, someone moving can basically be part of part of whatever is displayed. I think... So that's mostly the kinds of things we've tried, using either sensors of some kind, including, you know, cameras and microphones, but also motion sensors, light sensors, to track something that's going on in the space, which could easily be an audience member rather than a performer. The issue, though, for us has really become the... There's sort of a limit to what you can expect of an audience member in terms of contributing, in terms of making the work special. One example that I might give is, we have a piece called Subatomic Time which I guess has been... We've done it in different versions in different places over the years. It was first presented, I think, 2010 but for the, I guess, maybe

2014 we did a version of this piece at a festival in Quebec in Saguenay called the Festival des musiques de création, and they invited us to do this piece at the festival on the first night of the festival, but they wanted us to leave up the piece for the audience to interact with. And maybe if I describe it a little bit it'll make more sense, but the piece is for a solo percussionist. There are seven sections to the piece, and in each section, the percussionist plays different instruments. In most of the sections, the instruments are there... There's either microphones or a camera or a sensor or something mounted to the instrument itself that then those signals are processed, and Sigi and I are actually in a live performance controlling and mixing the video and the audio as the percussionist performs, and we're sort of improvising in some cases, with the percussionist, and in some cases we're just simply making sure everything's working the way it's supposed to work. But what the percussionist is capable of doing after rehearsing a lot, trying a lot, and knowing what's going to be effective, what kinds of gestures, what kinds of movements, we... So that work has evolved into something, I think, aesthetically much more sophisticated than you could expect from someone that just wanders into the installation. And so when we set it up as more of an audience interactive installation, they could still come in and they could, you know, hit a drum, or bang a gong, or play a bongo, or something like that and they would still, they would get the response from the installation, but the musical result and the sort of visual and sonic gestures, they would always be on a pretty low level or a pretty obvious thing. For example, one of the sections of the piece is called [unclear 00:31:40] Bongo and there are several bongo drums set up. Each of them has a microphone attached to it. One is then used to control the amount of red in the video, one the amount of green in the video, one the amount of blue in the video, and another drum is actually used to advance frames of the video, so you could actually, if you play the drum really quickly, the video goes fast, and if you just play it, if you stop playing it, the video stops and you have to sort of advance it by playing the drum. And anybody can do that. You could walk up and hit the drum and if you hit the red drum, the image will become more red. If you hit the green drum, it becomes more green. If you hit the red and green at the same time, it'll become more yellow. And you can advance the video, and it's sort of fun to play with this sort of an interactive toy, because it's a bit surprising that, you know, playing the drum like that will produce an interesting change in the video, but what the percussionist is able to do with it is actually make really interesting sonic and visual gestures out of it because he's rehearsed with it, he's thought about it, we worked on it for a long time. So I think that's more what we're interested in when we think of interactive installations is the kind of things that a trained musician could do or even somebody that's just spent a little bit of time thinking about the possibilities as opposed to setting it up an installation where someone can wander in and just by walking trigger some kind of an event. Not to say that that can't be surprising and fun and interesting, but I think we have a little bit more of a traditional view, perhaps, that for the work that we're trying to make, we also, you know, there's sort of an expressive aspect or a more sophisticated aspect to the performance that we want to bring out.

[Federica]: What I find interesting, what I just brought home from what you said, is that one thing is the user design and the quality of this design, and one thing is the ability to achieve the desired effect easily with no training at all, but there is also a third element — that is, how sophisticated the effect you want to achieve is. And, of course, these three elements are correlated, but regardless of the technology employed, of the interaction strategy, so regardless of how you want to label one of these works, at the end of the day what makes the big difference is how sophisticated the effect you want to achieve is, and more precisely, how sophisticated the aesthetic idea you had in the first place.

[Brent]: I think the label does tie in to that because that, going back to your original question, you know, when our percussionist stands up and plays that piece, it's a performance, but when an audience member is wandering around that setup and playing the piece and so on, playing with the different instruments, it's really an installation. I wouldn't think of them as performers in the same sense, so in a way, the label does tie in with the presentation of it. But let me give you another example, because it's not just the technology that's the key to it. It's also the [sense of 00:34:45] sensibilities and the musical or visual sensibilities of the performer. I have an installation that I've installed a couple of times, but only here in Windsor. I haven't done it anywhere else yet. It's a simple piece. It's a three-channel video installation with a live mixing component. Once again, there's an algorithm that's controlling the mix of the source video and the sort of subtle changes in coloration in the source video, and at the same time, in the middle of the space there's a grand piano. The piano lid is open, and inside the piano are several EBows, and an EBow is like a little device that electric guitarists use so that they can create sustained sound so they don't have to pluck the strings. It basically causes the string to vibrate by having electrical current in the EBow. And so in this piece, you know, there are EBows placed on the piano strings when the sustain pedal is forced to be down all the time, so if you place them on the strings carefully, you can actually cause the piano strings to vibrate, and then that sound is recorded and processed in synchrony with at least one of the video installations. In the sort of installation version of it where there's no performance that the sound is continuous, it's very kind of a certain kind of a peaceful, slowly evolving kind of sound. It's a very consonant sound, because if I'm going to choose a chord for these strings, I'm going to choose something that I think goes well with the video. But theoretically, someone else could come in and move those EBows around and create quite a dissonant chord or create other sounds in the piano. It'd be possible, but I don't think as a, sort of, in a way, the composer of the piece or the author of the piece, I don't think I would allow or want to have any kind of sound that's possible to be part of a presentation of that piece. So I'm actually working now on some kind of a score, so if someone else wanted to do it, they would have some choices, perhaps, but within certain possibilities that there's only certain kinds of musical gestures that you could make, certain kinds of harmonies that would be allowed, in order to sort of, I think, retain sort of an identity for the piece that it is focused, in a way, and I really want the sound and the images to go together in a way that I think intuitively works well.

So in that case, it's not just... It's not the technology, because the technology, anybody can manage the technology. I'm not doing anything when I perform that anything different from anybody else could do technically, but it's more just an understanding of harmony and music and what kind of harmony — if you put the EBows on these strings, you're going to get, say, for example, a minor 7th chord. That will probably go well with the installation, but if you just randomly put them on and get a very dissonant sort of atonal chord, that might not work as well.

[Federica]: Why don't we listen to an excerpt of RGBongo, which is taken from Subatomic Time, a piece of 2010, which you've just mentioned, in its version as a performance? This piece was created by you, Brent Lee, together with Sigi Torinus and Nick Papador. The excerpt is about a minute and a half long, and Nick is playing the percussions.

[Music: RGbongo]

[Federica]: These are complex works; music is just one of the elements. I have personally enjoyed this excerpt very much, and also the one we listened to earlier on, so I find the sonic part enjoyable on its own, but, of course, it's meant to be part of a larger system, and the work is meant to be experienced in person directly. Now, for those of us who are not lucky enough to do that, you have some videos online that have some sort of aesthetic quality to them — at least, this is the impression I've had. They try to convey a little bit of the feeling of what it would be like to experience the work directly. Speaking of communicating the experience to other places and in another time, are you concerned with documenting these works with the obvious complexity that comes with it, the challenge, in the short term, and in the long term, therefore, are you concerned with the preservation of these works?

[Brent]: Well, we do face challenges, of course, because, you know, technology evolves. Certain, you know, hardware breaks becomes unavailable, certain software becomes obsolete, or the new version of the software doesn't work the same way as the old version of the software does. So there are... Our attitude, really, in the Noiseborder Ensemble — and I'm not saying this is the attitude of everybody, by any means — but with our attitude, we've really taken sort of the idea that each of our performances is, to some extent at least, occasion-specific and site-specific. So I mentioned the Subatomic Time piece, and it's been a few years now since we performed that piece, but over a period of about five years, I guess, we did it several times in different places, but over those years, we were able to make... First of all, we didn't really run into issues of things not functioning. Within five years, nothing had become so obsolete that we couldn't either build another one (if it was broken, for example, used a sensor; the original one we had was clumsy the way that we soldered it, and so we built another one, and it was better because we were actually better able to build it at that point), but we had no real issues with the software, although every single time there's certain calibrations and things that have to be done to get the software to work properly. But more to the point, we actually

would alter the piece if we had a new idea that we come up with because of our experience, we had new skills, we were better able to do things, some things that we would do by hand we knew now how to automate, and would make it work better, or some efficiency that we've been able to find because we've done other pieces, we just incorporate it in the new version of the piece. So, you know, in a way, in terms of preserving the work, I guess we're not really concerned so much about preserving our work, except inasmuch as that we will want to present it again, but we know that we will allow ourselves leeway to change the piece as we need to and if something becomes not possible, we'll come up with another solution. The core of that particular piece is, there's a sort of conceptual core around it. There are certain ideas that have sort of governed the way that we do it. It's very much a piece about scale, the very tiny and the very expansive, and there's also a lot of connections between visual and sonic techniques. For example, like say, for example, a panning technique where you can use panning as a camera shot, but you can also use panning as moving an audio signal from one speaker to another, just as for one example. But there's a number of sort of parallels like that that are built into it. Those [don't 00:43:50] become obsolete. Those will need to change. At the same time, there's a set of sonic gestures. Some of it is actually notated in a score and some of which is more improvised but improvised within parameters that we're aware of and that we're consistently reproducing, and those gestures are very much tied to that piece. And so if we were to create a... Even if the interactivity was completely different, I think it would still feel a lot like the same piece if it had those concepts, and that sound, and those projections. I could imagine a non-interactive version of Subatomic Time that we'd still consider that a version of the piece, just a non-interactive one. And for many of our pieces, especially the performance pieces rather than the installation pieces, there is a non interactive-piece where, for example, a live musician can perform the piece with a fixed recording and a fixed video, and that's a version of it, but at the same time there's the interactive version where the live performer interacts with the software, the sound will respond or the video, more likely, will respond to what the live musician is doing. And because it usually takes at least an extra person, sometimes two people, to produce that version of the work, it's less portable. It's also more prone to something going wrong in a performance. So it's okay, you know, for us, either one of them. Either version of a piece is fine, so we're not so worried about what happens in performance. We're not, less worried about what version exactly something is, because I think the audience can get something from it, will get something of the ideas. The sound is still there. The music is still there. It might be different, but it's still there, the visuals are still there. In terms of the long-term preservation, though, that's a little bit more of a challenge. I think in terms of the long-term preservation, we're more concerned about documentation as a preservation strategy rather than trying to, like... And when I say 'documentation', I'm talking about simple audiovisual documentation, making video and audio recordings of the piece. We do, you know, preserve the Max patches, we preserve the hardware as much as we can, but in a way, if we want, you know, people to be able to appreciate the work in 20 years or 30 years or after we're gone, they would probably be appreciating it through by watching a video or listening to an audio recording. That's fine

for me. I don't know that it's so necessary that the work could be mounted in a live situation. Again, for a lot of the multimedia performance pieces, there are fixed versions, so you wouldn't have to worry about the interactivity. I don't know. Maybe there might be some case where there's an installation that we think, 'You know, this is really profound or dramatic or interesting or compelling or whatever to such an extent that we really want to preserve this exactly the way it is and they have it be able to tour from gallery to gallery or have a gallery be able to purchase the work or something like that,' and then we would have to deal with exactly how it will be preserved over time. But right now, our strategy for most of our work is simply to try and get very good multi-camera video documentation, good audio documentation. We also, of course, we write about our work, either, you know, in the conference presentations or just in notes, and that's easy to preserve. So there really isn't much of a preservation challenge. We count on video being preservable and audio being preservable and texts being preservable. I don't, you know... That's easy to transfer from one medium to another going forward, so that's not an issue, but preserving the work to... If we were more attached that the work had to be done this exact way, then it will be more of an issue for us, but for us, it's not so much an issue.

[Federica]: We're going to have another musical break now. We listen to an excerpt of your performable installation called Natural Planes of Separation from 2016. You offered two recordings to me, one of a live performance and one of the installation operating from an algorithm in Max, which is what we're going to listen to right now. The duration of the excerpt is one minute and 30 seconds.

[Music: Natural Planes of Separation]

[Federica]: Video is certainly one of the best ways to pack a lot of information into one document, and you have videos about your works online, as I mentioned earlier. I would like to ask you what your intention was in producing these videos and in sharing them online.

[Brent]: The videos that we put online, the sort of clips, they're definitely meant to give people an idea of what the work is about. The primary purpose of putting them there is whether... Two. One is that so if people, if we're talking like we are today about the work, someone can go and watch it and look it up or I can say, 'Oh, yeah, we're talking about this. You can go check out, you know, our Vimeo page or our web page or whatever and actually understand what we've done in the past.' And it's also, you know, if we're proposing a work to a festival or something like that for some event, we can then use it as like part of an application material. You can link to, 'Well, here's what the video is like.' And certainly we put effort into making the video. We don't just set up a camera and turn it on and then turn it off at the end. We use multiple cameras, and we set it up. We try and give a sense of what the experience is to be at the performance, to see the performance. We edit them carefully. We have... Either we do it ourselves or we have, you know, students that are research assistants that will help us

with that, and mostly they're visual artists and they will spend the time making good video for us. So they serve multiple things. It's not... With installations, that's more what it is. With the video pieces that are performances, typically we don't want to post the whole version of the video on because we want to be able to present it either in a gallery or in a performance, and so we're more likely just to put a clip up to give people a sense of it. We do have, in most cases, sort of full-length. For example, the Subatomic Time, we've got clips from different sections. We actually have kind of a collage clip that was created by a couple of our research assistants who are artists themselves which included other things, and it was kind of an interesting take on that piece, but we also... There was a filmmaker that made like a 45-minute documentary about that piece. There are even two versions of that film. There's one where she interviews us during, at different points in it, and there's one that's just a performance, a film with the whole performance from beginning to end. And it's a 45-minute film. We haven't posted that anywhere because, again, that might be screened in a festival or something like that. So with the clips, it's those three things. One is showing people what we've done. One is for proposing new projects, new presentations, and then the third is... Also is... So the third idea is that the clip is there to give you a sense of it without actually putting the whole thing online.

[Federica]: Are you often a performer in your own works when there's live music?

[Brent]: Yes. I play the saxophone, so I actually have a whole project called the Homstal project, which is just me playing usually the saxophone (sometimes [I'll 00:53:00] play another instrument) and then I make all the video and I make all the Max patches and everything myself, but that is... I perform... I can do a whole set of those pieces. Those are multimedia performance pieces. Those aren't installation pieces, but I'm performing those, for sure.

[Federica]: Earlier on in this interview, you mentioned improvisation. I normally think of jazz when somebody says 'improvisation'. Not only, I know, but for the most part, I think of that. I would like to ask if you see a parallel or a difference — and which one — between jazz improvisation and improvisation with traditional instruments, but also, for example, electroacoustic instruments or laptops.

[Brent]: That's a complicated question because depends on what your definition of jazz is. I think when people typically think of jazz, they think of sort of classic jazz, which has become more of a performance tradition rather than a creative tradition, even though, of course, there's tremendous creativity involved in improvising, but if you're providing in the style of Miles Davis or John Coltrane or something like that, it's really, it's more of a performance tradition. And the way jazz is typically taught, at least in North American universities, is, you're learning to play like the great masters, play it in the same way that you learn to play the piano like great masters of the piano repertoire, you know, played. Whereas, you know — there's also, of course, there's new jazz being created that's not, doesn't sound like, you know,

post-bop of the 1950s and '60s. And in that situation, it's very hard to say, you know, where does sort of, you know, where does the improvisation and where does the composition begin. And I would say for the kind of improvising that I'm doing, it's influenced, deeply influenced by jazz, but I don't know if I would call it jazz. I like, there's a quote by Jan Garbarek, who's a Norwegian [saxophonist 00:55:09] who started out definitely as a more traditional jazz player very heavily influenced by Coltrane, and he played that kind of music for years, but he evolved, he's evolved in, you know, very different style of music now very influenced by Norwegian folk music. I read an interview with him that he said that, you know, he doesn't know that he would call what he does now jazz, but he knows that he wouldn't be able to do it except that he started out as a jazz musician. So I kind of think the same way about a lot of my work. I was, you know, classically trained as a composer. I did play some jazz, but, you know, not at a high level. So it's influenced by it, but I don't know that I would call it jazz.

[Federica]: I would like to thank you for taking the time to be on Technoculture. We would like to bring this episode to a close by sharing another excerpt from one of your works. This is called Nabo, it's from 2015, and this is a soundtrack that you made for the installation of Sigi Torinus and Andrea Sunder-Plassmann. The excerpt is two minutes and a half long, and I thank you again very much for being with us.

[Brent]: It was a pleasure talking to you.

[Music]

[Federica]: Thank you for listening to Technoculture. Check out more episodes at technoculture-podcast.com, or visit our Facebook page @technoculturepodcast and our Twitter account, hashtag Technoculturepodcast.