

# KETTLE'S YARD

## The Six Senses: Hearing

### An interview with Maxwell Sterling



Maxwell Sterling performing at the opening of *Linderism*. Photo: My Linh Le

Kettle's Yard commissioned Maxwell Sterling to make new sonic works for *Linderism*. The first, *The One Who Benefits In Every Way*, accompanied Linder's intervention in the Kettle's Yard House, the second, *Hacienda Redux*, provided an alternative soundtrack for a new work based on Linder's performance with her band Ludus at the Hacienda nightclub in 1985. In this conversation Maxwell reflects on these commissions and his wider practice.

**Kettle's Yard (KY):** *What did you contribute to Linderism?*

**Maxwell Sterling (MS):** I made sonic contributions to *Linderism*, all of which were collaborative and worked across a sensory network. The two works are titled *Hacienda Redux* and *The One Who Benefits In Every Way*.

Working on the *Hacienda Redux* was an incredibly moving experience; knowing the original video of the Ludus performance intimately. I reworked fragments of the audio into a new soundtrack, some strands remain the same while others have morphed and decayed over time. The result is a kind of audio palimpsest.

Composing *The One Who Benefits in Every Way* was a moving experience too. I am always drawn to narrative as an auditory focal point and working with spoken word always excites me in this way. This work is comprised of voices reciting words for female genitalia in multiple languages. This formed the narrative melody line, which I accompanied with layers of double bass, feedback and processing.

**KY:** *Tell us how you approached composing these works?*

**MS:** The two works allowed me to compose in different ways; reworking the past with *Hacienda Redux* and working with aural archives for *The One Who Benefits In Every Way*. In my practice, time always plays a central part; from tempo to temporality and beyond. Working on *Hacienda Redux* was like time travelling to an era I am familiar with but didn't experience first-hand. This meant I could blur sonic fiction and fact; taking parts of

the original sound and slightly altering them, nudging them from their original starting point. My intention was to disrupt the synchronisation of picture and sound, something that is usually forbidden in traditional film scoring. The decoupling of these two senses allows for new interpretations and experiences.

*The One Who Benefits In Every Way* I approached differently. I thought about how one might orchestrate a chamber ensemble, but how this could be done using spoken word as the melody line. Analysing the voices by word choice, rhythm, cadence and frequency, I began finding room for them all and finding their sonic accompaniments.

**KY:** *What have you learnt from collaborating with artists?*

**MS:** I learn so much from each collaboration. In particular I love the process of establishing a new language with the artist, for instance shared synesthetic qualities such as the sound of 'red' or the hue of a minor tonality.

I worked closely with Tai Shani on her 2019 Virtual Reality work *Tragodia*. I particularly love working with Tai as her work troubles traditional narrative structures. There is no beginning, middle or end. Also, the process is important; informal chat shapes conceptual decisions and vice versa. *Tragodia* really gave me freedom to explore the sonic terrain of Tai's vivid universe. I worked with a few images and renders but was heavily informed by the narrative and dialogue of the characters. Tai's heady mixture of psychedelic imagery and mourning inspired me so much. I relished occupying the weird intersection of spooky/saccharine/sexual/sadness.

**KY:** *What have you learnt from collaborating with Linder?*

**MS:** Linder and I have collaborated since I was 16! I can't even recall how many times we have worked together, but each occasion informs the next. I am so lucky to have the rare chance to work closely with a parent, it

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really is special.

We have such a close knowledge of what each other's interests and tastes are, and a shorthand for our ideas and thinking. Linder's faith in collaborators – particularly in her performances – is inspirational and something I hope to have picked up. There is a great similarity between Linder and Miles Davis in their ability to invite people to perform and then psychically conduct them – transmitting through a shared moment and space.

I think performance is something that the two of us get great excitement from. A lot of our daily practice is solitary, so when we perform and collaborate there is a shift in time, energy and delivery.

**KY:** Can you tell us what it was like performing at Kettle's Yard for the opening of *Linderism*?

**MS:** Performing at Kettle's Yard was a dream. From the architecture, to the history of the building, the audience and the occasion – all of it inspired me. The acoustics of the space are so inviting; there is a mild reverberation that creates a gentle softening of sounds. The performance was also a first for me; blending the instrumentation of double bass with modular synthesiser. My intention was to create a new kind of chamber music that was half-acoustic and half-synthetic. I couldn't have asked for a more responsive audience, everyone seemed to be listening intently.



Maxwell Sterling performing at the opening of *Linderism*. Photo: My Linh Le



Linder, Kenichi Iwasa and Maxwell Sterling performing at *Bower of Bliss: An Improper Architecture*, 2020. Photo: My Linh Le

Maxwell Sterling is a composer for film, television, dance and multi-media. He has collaborated with numerous artists on the sonic aspects of their work, and at Kettle's Yard composed two new sound pieces for *Linderism*, in addition to composing and playing music for Linder's performance *Bower of Bliss: An Improper Architecture* on 14 March 2020.

Sterling released the record *Hollywood Medieval* in 2017, and in 2020 [\*Laced With Rumour: Loud-Speaker Of Truth\*](#) through Ecstatic Recordings. He lives and works in London.