

**Carsten Stabenow** - Curator and artist, born 1972, studied Communication Design and postgraduate Interdisciplinary Studies in Berlin and has worked freelance as a communication designer and cultural producer. As a member of the Staalplaat Soundsystem he has realised several installations and performed worldwide at festivals and in museums. Carsten Stabenow is the founder of the German Media Art festival garage (1997-2005 together with Gesine Pagels), co-founder of the Berlin art and media production platform DOCK (since 2008 together with Carsten Seiffarth) and initiator and artistic director of Tuned City, a platform which proposes an examination of the relations between architecture and sound <http://www.garage-g.de>, <http://www.dock-berlin.de>, [www.tunedcity.net](http://www.tunedcity.net)

### **Please, tell us something about the origin of „Tuned city“...**

“Tuned city” is a result of diverse activities of the “garage”-Festival that we run from 1997 and for about 10 years in Stralsund. At the beginning it was just a kind of summer studio at the old docklands of the city where we brought together friends, artists and musicians. Space was available endless for free – and the situation was an extension of the Berlin ‘Zwischennutzung’ (inbetween usage) idea of the early 90s. Those days I was also active in the Berlin media art scene around the “transmediale”-Festival and by time, more and more people from that field as well as from experimental electronic music, sound art and experimental radio got interested in our project in Stralsund and joined the activities. We created a laboratory and production situation on the [periphery](#) in which artist could develop new ideas without the pressure of the usual festival business. We focused on questions like mediation of art in public spaces and new kinds of presentation in general. Always important for us was the question of the impact of artistic work in the social context of a city, and in the case of Stralsund as a small town feedback was quite direct readable. “garage” successfully established an international network of artists, collaborators and supporters and the festival was growing year by year. Too big and successful, to be handled by us as a ‘project’, more and more people showed up and “garage” became attractive for curators and scouts. That changed the atmosphere and the festival lost it’s intimacy. That was - apart from the fact that the city developers had other plans with the docklands - the main reason to stop the festival.

“Tuned city” evolved then in cause of two basic interests we have: First, artistic activities in urban spaces. Nowadays, gentrification is on the agenda. But as an artist, you should be clear about the fact, that you are the avant-garde as well as the catalyst of this development. Second, the potential and power of sound in urban spaces. Although sound art is aware of this power, sound artists very rarely work with it regarding social and political topics of urbanity. Sound art is often enough a-political and deals only with phenomenological issues. We wanted to link both, the urban discourse with sound art.

### **The first “tuned city” festival in Berlin, in 2008, referred to crucial theoretical discourses...**

We invited urbanists, architects, musicologists and sound artists to discuss the question: What is the meaning and the potential of sound in an urban environment and in planning processes of a city? “Tuned city” established an interdisciplinary format for discussions about communication models and space strategies for a future urban development. From the beginning we tried to mediate the whole process site-specifically by taking up locally existing discussions and giving them a stage. Theory and practice, lectures and performances worked hand in hand.

### **Rinus van Aalebeck had run a field recording festival, those days...**

Rinus was running this festival already since 2006 and we invited him to curate a performance night for "Tuned city". Field recording was an important topic for us because for the relationship between architecture and sound, listening as such is essential. We realized that it is important to create a basic understanding of acoustics. Among architects as well as urbanists there exists a general ignorance regarding aspects of sound. Thus, field recording and phonography are important tools to create sensitiveness. I for myself have a critical attitude regarding the 'field recording topic' as it has become a fashion. Often enough the playback does neither refer logically to the record situation nor to the material itself. Even if you reproduce a record in a four- or eight-channel-mode you do not reproduce the original space with it. Very rarely a record reanimates an original atmosphere. John Grzinich, a field recording artist, a good friend and our co-producer for "Tuned city" in Estonia, describes field recording as an act of photography, in terms of focus, depth of field etc.. I for myself do favor to snap. I do not focus on the sound quality of a recording but on the quality as a document. The essential question is always a cultural one: What do I intend to identify with field recordings?

Don't get me wrong, field recording can be an effective tool for analysis as well as an essential aspect of artistic expression I'm just a bit annoyed by the inflationary occurrence.

**Your approach is to link urban planning with sound art and to research sound as an urban practice. Sound has two aspects: the making and the listening. Could you describe a situation you experienced in that people did listen differently for the first time?**

In fact that is what we try all the time, to create situations in which people listen differently. For instance in the performance 'infrasound' by Randy Yau + Scott Arford when many people at the audience realised for the first time that you can hear with your whole body. Or in the performances of Thomas Ankersmit that you can use a saxophone as sensing device and tell a story about the dimensions, physical properties and materials of a space. The same we experienced with Lukas Kühne's Chromatico wich gives you a direct impression of the relation of sound and space, both visually and acoustically. Or less obvious - sometimes when you focus people of a certain fact they normally would not pay attention to, like the occurrence of a phenomenon we discovered during our research in Tallinn - known from the temple of Chichén Itzá in Cancún Mexico. Clapping your hands while approaching the main steps of the temple creates a unique effect, that sounds like a bird chirp. People say that temple was build so in order to communicate with the sacred birds living in the forest close by. The same effect can be heard when approaching Linnahall - a massive architectural relic from the 1980 olympics in Tallinn and ended up as one 'acoustic landmark' during our research. In the moment you can contextualizes something like this, people hear it different and are fascinated to explore things by themself...

**"Tuned city" takes up architecture as sounding reality and sound as space practice. Is this the intersection of urban planning as well as urban identity discourses?**

Yes, this is the basis. There is no sound without space and no space without sound. But space can be understood as a constructed as well as a metaphorical, social or imagined space. Artists like Bernhard Leitner or Maryanne Amacher, to name just a few, created spaces by sound. We have been very surprised every now and then that architects just do not know this potentials. Very seldom sound aspects are incorporated in a planning process (if it's not about a space for music), planners very

often speak about atmospheres or the ephemeral city but the fact that a good part of our sensorium for space is acoustic seems not to play a role. In comparison to that, the film industry is miles ahead in creating artificial sound spaces. But in the meantime there are tools for architects to hear the acoustic of a room in advance. There is a slow evolution of a new holistic thinking.

But even the 'classical' building acoustics is an unloved child for many. With "Tuned city" we raise the question why it is like that and one assumption is that they just do not have to think about it because the acoustic of a space can be improved afterwards – with technical amplification or the use of surface materials for diffusion and absorption. A popular example for this is the plenary hall of the old Bundestag in Bonn which had to be changed with a lot of efforts when the opening ended in an acoustic disaster. One of our aims is to spread knowledge of simple acoustic facts. But this is a long-term process.

Max Neuhaus once said: The sound of a highly frequented motorway has almost the same frequency spectrum and decibel level as the ocean but nobody would like to live close to a motorway. Noise is just an indicator. If you want to avoid it, it is not enough to construct noise barriers but you have to question the whole traffic system. We are interested in noise as a complex cultural phenomenon you can read and decipher. It is absolutely not enough and even dangerous to simplify and to set noise against silence.

**There is one approach to say: Let us listen in a different way. And there is another approach to say: Let us construct in a different way...**

One follows the other. It is about creating sensitiveness at both sides. Sound is a socio-cultural marker that you can read and analyze. We try to link people from both sides of the discourse and to produce and present good examples of collaborations.

**What is the future of "Tuned city"?**

The discussion of the intersection of architecture and sound was caught up by reality here in Berlin during the last years. With "Tuned city" we did not want to establish a kind of institutionalized festival routine but we intend to continue the dialogue and like to link it to urban practice, ideally in different cultural contexts. Tallinn 2011 was the first step into this direction. It would be even more interesting to leave our cultural sphere and to enter spaces where sound has different meanings and functions. E.g. Cairo, the loudest city on earth with an unbelievable rich culture of sounds, where kinds of non-verbal acoustical communication still exist. Imagine the different crafts, the shoe blacker knocking their wooden brush on their benches, the drivers of gas bottles when they announce themselves by beating on the cylinders with metal sticks, or the big markets with their barkers and their melodious screaming tuned to each other, the muezzins crying prayers through flat band horn speakers... There it becomes obvious that sound is more than language, music and result of mechanization.

We are invited to Brussel next year to organize something in collaboration with "Sounds of Europe" and with the local scene of universities, the broadcast and media scene. We always look for local partners to root a discourse locally. And then we are invited to Montevideo (Uruguay) and a couple of other places, but we want to develop things carefully, the topic is too important for us..

Interviewer: Sonja Heyer, born 1965, Germany. She graduated as Musician from the Academy of Music Dresden and as Sociologist and Social Anthropologist from Freie

Universität Berlin. Since then, she works as a musician and artist in Berlin and Mecklenburg. At the moment, she is student of “Sound Studies” at the Universität der Künste Berlin. All works and collaborations at [www.sonjaheyer.de](http://www.sonjaheyer.de)