

INTERVIEW 01



Installation view: *Wappen Field*, 2003-2012. Courtesy of the artist.

Michelle Jaffé with Stephanie Buhmann
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Michelle Jaffé explores concepts of the body and sensory memory. For the past years, her sculptures have been predominantly made of metal and occasionally included multi-media components. All of her works embrace a formal reductiveness that allows for a sense of immediacy and iconic presence. Interested in the intersection of abstraction and representation, Jaffé is focused on establishing architectural spaces that become psychologically charged. This conversation addresses aspects of Jaffé's *Vestment Series* (2000-2012), which investigates clothing as a form of shelter, as well as two recent installations, *Awakening* (2012) and *Wappen Field* (2007-2012). The latter brings together sculpture and sound installation. It is comprised of

12 chrome plated steel helmets, which resemble face guards. Above each, one finds a dedicated speaker, which releases sound directly into the helmets through chrome pipes and provides an immersive audio environment. Vocal recordings, originally created by Ayelet Rose Gottlieb, are algorithmically recomposed, reconstructed and spatialized in SuperCollider as new sonic events by Michelle Jaffé and David Reeder.

Stephanie Buhmann: Michelle, while you have worked in sculpture for years, you recently began to incorporate sound in some of your larger installations. One of them was *Awakening*, in which a dark room sparsely lit by LED lights invited visitors to immerse themselves in an audio display.

Michelle Jaffé: For *Awakening* I recorded everything waking up at dawn at *The Lightning Field* by Walter de Maria in New Mexico. I then presented these recordings in a context that was lit in such a way that I hoped it would encourage people to slow down and listen. Much to my happy surprise, a lot of people stayed for the entire length of the recording, which is over 26 minutes. Some visitors even stayed for a second time.

SB: Would you describe your sound-based pieces as environmental sculpture?

MJ: I do think of sound as being completely sculptural and as being an extension of the field. In daily life, we're always aware of sound behind us or in front of us. We take it very much for granted, but it also holds so much memory for us.

SB: Sound offers a strong emotional connection that is often unconscious.

MJ: Absolutely. I'm interested in the limbic brain. I think we walk around all the time, hearing sounds constantly, but we often don't really zone into it. However, we are certainly aware of it. It lets us know that someone might be running up behind us, or that maybe we should run ourselves. It might alert us to be a little quicker, or that there is a car coming and we should stop and not cross in that moment. It is incredible what sound brings up in our memory.

SB: Would you say that sound defines the body, because it surrounds it and therefore aids in shaping it?

MJ: Exactly. I also think that you experience sound viscerally - you experience it in your body and not just in your head. I'm especially interested in that. You find that in Richard Serra's work, for example. You walk through his sculptures and they offer a physical experience in addition to a visual one.

SB: When did you start working with sound?

MJ: In 2001.

SB: And what brought it on?

MJ: That's a tough question, I'm not entirely sure.

SB: Did life in the city have something to do with it?

MJ: No, I've been here for much longer. I truly don't know why. I think I've always had a really strong oral memory. I remember one night when I was in the kitchen and my husband had the TV on and I immediately recognized the movie. Yet, I had seen that film last when I was maybe six years old. So why did I recognize it? How did I know the soundtrack so well? Maybe that experience jogged me into thinking that maybe this was something I should explore.

SB: I think that sound appeals to one of the senses we are least familiar with, meaning we cannot control nor predict what psychological impact sound has on us. Most of us have experienced a moment when one suddenly falls in love with a song and one doesn't know why. Later, you go back to an old children's song or a folk tune and you realize that it was one of these old, old melody lines that was just kind of brought into something else and now resonates and seduces you anew. The sound memory you were just talking about has an emotional connection. In the case of the TV movie it brought you back to childhood and might be soothing, but sound can also plant fear. Let's talk about *Wappen Field*, a complex installation involving sculpture and sound.

MJ: The idea for this piece goes back to 2003. The original concept only involved one huge helmet with sound and video. Instead of walking into a dark room with those thick curtains to see a film, I thought why not be able to walk into an actual sculpture? Originally, I thought of the helmet as this enormous object and that as soon as you would walk into the room, you would be confronted by it. I envisioned that there would be a video playing inside the helmet, in the place where the eyes would be.

SB: So in some way the viewer would step into the work as the activating brain?

MJ: Only as you walk into the work. The helmet shape would be hugging you with this surround sound. For a long time I was making models to explore these ideas, but I thought that it would be hard to translate them to that scale. Besides questioning how to do that, I also wondered, where this large work could be shown and how it would get paid for. Then, I conceptually brought it to the smaller units of 12 helmets, which you now see in *Wappen Field*. And then in January 2007, I decided I would realize *Wappen Field*.

SB: *Wappen Field* involves a considerable amount of high technology. How experienced were you when you got started and did you have to bring in a lot of outside help? If so, how did you go about finding it and face the challenge of going from an idea to giving it real form?

MJ: In 2001 I began taking classes at Harvestworks, a digital media arts center. There I took sound classes to get an idea of what would be involved. This was a vast new field and I started going to sound performances three, four nights a week at least. I completely immersed myself. Of course I had already been going to concerts, but I quickly realized that there is a lot more out there. There is a ton of people making sound and performing every night of the week in New York. I signed up for the Max Users Group, which is a midi program, but involves sound in the Max/MSP program. Max had its origins at IRCAM in Paris, which Pierre Boulez started. France has a rich history with Pierre Schaeffer's work in electronic and experimental music and with Miller Puckette, who wrote the early software at IRCAM for what we now know as Max. So, I got involved in that program, which is very complicated and involved. I attended the users group meetings, where members present some of their projects. I really threw myself into that field for years. In 2007 I decided to realize *Wappen Field*. I then wrote a grant to become fiscally sponsored.

SB: Can you describe your process a bit further?

MJ: There were different stages involved. For example, I was trying to figure out how to do these helmets. I knew there were only a few options. I could have taken a flat piece of metal and hand-hammer it, for example. I could also have followed the manufacturing route, in which you make a positive and a negative shaped tool, where the metal is compressed into the desired shape. That process is very expensive and you do that when you are making thousands of something, not when you're making twelve. So, I began to search for something I could cannibalize and then one day I thought of fire extinguishers. I called some companies and one guy, Andy Halasz, the VP of Amerex Corporation, was extremely nice and donated some fire extinguishers to my project. Actually, he sent me a bunch of different options and I chose the shape and size that would work best. He then proceeded to send me eighteen canisters, so I still have six left. I then worked with Igor, with whom I work when working in steel.

SB: Did you work from a drawing or a model?

MJ: First I make models in aluminum and plastic and then make paper patterns. So, I know exactly what the shape and the size are.

SB: The helmets also appeal to our memory. You feel like you know them and yet they seem to spring from this in-between place. Their form conveys something ancient, but their surfaces also give them a futuristic quality. When seen in a group of twelve, the suspended helmets evoke the Terra Cotta Warriors from Xian, among others. Could you talk about the shape of the helmets in particular?

MJ: I wanted to make the shape as simple as possible. In that, it relates to my *Vestment Series*, which is comprised of metal sculptures that reference clothing in its most elemental form. Ideally, I would like these works to be evocative and encourage free association. In regards to the helmets, I thought that the visor would suggest armor without a specific geographic or historic reference. It is really more about the face garment in a way and as such it takes you back and it takes you forward. I have not seen *Battlestar Galactica*, but people have mentioned it when viewing this work. Again, when I talk about the limbic brain, we have this ancient brain and we are these very forward beings, creating extraordinary technologies, and yet we also have this old reptilian brain that brings us to a more primitive state, going back in time.

SB: What made you think of arranging a group of helmets? Was it a sense of community that could overcome the fact that in *Wappen Field* everybody is enveloped by a separate mask and is listening to separate audio? On one hand, the work offers a very individual and isolated experience, on the other hand the group of twelve guarantees a sharable endeavor.

MJ: I think you've hit it on the head. You have the group, you have the collective, but then like you said, when you are in there, you are individual, you are also isolated. You have those two polarities going on at the same time. I was also interested in the collective unconscious. I think that it is currently not a very popular thing as people find it outmoded. But, I do think there are things to do with the group and that we still experience the group. We still experience tribalism on a regular basis.

SB: Do you see *Wappen Field* as a metaphor for contemporary life and new media? How we get increasingly absorbed by our various gadgets, such as computers and smartphones? How we become increasingly isolated in the world? Or is that something that you are not consciously considering and it's just one of the interpretations the work is open to?

MJ: It is probably one of the interpretations it is open to, but the more technology we have, the more we are isolated. You see people, who are out to dinner with each other, but they are not talking. They are doing their own thing, opening up their phone at the table.

SB: I think these devices have made us hyper-aware of rejection. When you are two together or in a larger group and someone uses their phone, you almost need to do the same as a shield. It becomes a protective mask. You don't need to face a lack of eye contact, loss of words. You don't need to feel rejected and you don't feel the isolation because you are suddenly in your own world.

MJ: Exactly, you feel protected by a mask, which covers your body and your mind.

SB: Like a psychic housing for the body and the mind.

MJ: Yes, it's a shelter in a way. Make-up can also be a little piece of armor. It all makes us feel less naked.

SB: Did you start out as a sculptor?

MJ: No. I moved to New York as a painter and it never even occurred to me that I would be making sculpture. It was through my day jobs that I began to design. Completely by a fluke, I started making hats and I turned around and thought: "*You should not be painting.*" That was it and I never made another painting.

SB: Did you go straight to working with metal?

MJ: Definitely not. In the beginning, I was working in rubber, latex, and wax. I wasn't focused on flat materials either. I never thought that I would work with planar materials, especially in sculpture. It never occurred to me that I would be taking something that was flat and making it volumetric. So, I don't know where that came from and why it has been so persistent. It's surprising to me, carving stone, which I have done, is a wonderful experience. I'm not really keen on showing stone sculpture, because it does not communicate well what I want to say, but it is a great experience.

SB: The process of defining and feeling form slowly.

MJ: Yes, it's beautiful. In the past, I would make these objects, onto which I would paint synthetic latex. In that process, the objects would go away and the shell of this latex became the actual work.

SB: By now, you have spent a decade working in metal and your sculptures have these distinctly smooth surfaces. The *Vestment Series* and *Wappen Field* are very much about the iconic presence and immediate impact of form.

MJ: Except that the material always communicates something. Metal for example has a very specific kind of feeling.

SB: And it seems impenetrable.

MJ: Yes, absolutely. And if the sculptures are chrome they have a different appearance than if they were anodized.

SB: Metal is very concrete and it makes for a clear contrast to the abstraction of sound. Could you describe the audio component of *Wappen Field* and how it was harvested?

MJ: I worked with a composer named Ayelet Rose Gottlieb. She is a vocalist and composer. We talked about this work for a couple years and then we eventually set out to do it. Ayelet composed several compositions, which captured the ideas we talked about. She then found six other vocalists. Including Ayelet there were seven vocalists, who sang these different pieces. Each vocalist was individually mic'd so that I would be able to use the original recordings independently of each other or layer them completely differently.

SB: So is the sound in each helmet different or is it synchronized?

MJ: It's different. I worked with David Reeder, who is a fantastic software artist. We met in 2003 when I was an artist in the computer and music department at Brooklyn College. I asked him if he would work with me on this project and he suggested that we work in SuperCollider rather than in MSP. He wrote all the code for it. In *Wappen Field*, different vocals move from helmet to helmet in different ways and at different times so that nothing will ever repeat itself exactly. The program is reading a library of sound files that I have chosen. They are then re-composed, moving from helmet to helmet. The sound is not randomized but rather thoughtfully and specifically composed with certain parameters.

SB: *Wappen Field* is supposed to be installed in a dark room with the helmets being spot-lit. Do you intend for a visitor to go from helmet to helmet and to experience all of them?

MJ: Ideally, yes, because the sound is always moving. At times, it can sneak up on you. Sometimes the recorded voices are whispering and sometimes there is something really crazy going on.

SB: But the voices always remain abstract?

MJ: Pretty much, yes. Basically, there was not supposed to be any language in this piece, but you know, virtually every vocalist snuck in some words. I included a few. There are a few little language bits that do come in. In general they are meant to be all sounds that every person experiences, whether anguish or pain. They are not meant to be didactic in any way. They are meant to capture states of being that all human beings experience, thrown back in time and forward in time.

SB: Culturally, the voices in the compositions are hard to place. They are open. One has a far Eastern quality, for example. But they all seem to be rooted in pure human emotion.

MJ: One of the vocalists is Japanese. The recording was around the time of the nuclear disaster at Fukushima Daichi and it captures her anguish and pain.

SB: Even though there is no narrative we right away understand this emotion instinctively. In a way you created an elaborate mirror. A place, where one can experience something that ultimately comes from within oneself. A place to be confronted with one's fears, loves, and other extreme emotions.

MJ: Yes, well said.

SB: It's an oral mirror.

MJ: Yes, absolutely.

SB: Let me ask you about the number 12 in *Wappen Field*. Does it imply a seasonal connection, a measure of time?

MJ: I hadn't thought about the seasons, but 12 is an old number. You know, 7, 9, 12, they all have these resonances that are very, very powerful. I don't remember if it was conscious or not how I came to 12. I think I wanted to be able to imply a group and 12 really does do that. There are three months to each season and there is something eternal and primal about it and how it implies a circle. So, yeah all of that is imbedded in there somewhere.

SB: Because of *Wappen Field's* independence of specific cultural references and set time frames, it would be interesting to see different audiences from different generations and cultural backgrounds respond to it. I think that *Wappen Field* would be an ideal work to travel.

MJ: I had always hoped that this piece would travel.

Michelle Jaffé website