



The new sound tour of the Musée du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris. Interview with Eric de Visscher

Louis Petitjean, Eric de Visscher

Keywords:

Ethnographic Museums, Sound Curation, Multisensoriality, Intangible Heritage.

ABSTRACT:

This article presents an in-depth interview with Eric de Visscher, artistic director of the new sound tour at the *Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac* in Paris. This new museum tour opened to the public in September 2024 and has been entitled “*Les collections ont leur bande-son*” (“the collections have their soundtrack”). Drawing on his experience gained at leading European museums, Eric de Visscher reflects on the challenges, possibilities and benefits of integrating sound into museum spaces.. The discussion traces the project’s development, from preliminary acoustic studies and audience research to curatorial choices, sound design strategies, and ethical issues surrounding the sourcing and dissemination of intangible heritage. Emphasis is placed on sound as a collective, spatial, and scenographic element rather than a traditional audio guide, highlighting its role in mediating objects and reshaping visitor experience. The interview contributes to broader debates on sound, museography, and contemporary exhibition practices.

Questo articolo presenta un’intervista approfondita con Eric de Visscher, direttore artistico del nuovo percorso sonoro del *Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac* di Parigi. Questo nuovo percorso museale è stato aperto al pubblico nel settembre 2024 e ha ricevuto il titolo “*Les collections ont leur bande-son*” (“Le collezioni hanno la loro colonna sonora”). Attingendo all’esperienza maturata presso le principali istituzioni museali europee, Eric de Visscher riflette sulle sfide, le possibilità e i vantaggi dell’integrazione del suono negli spazi museali.. La discussione ripercorre lo sviluppo del progetto, dagli studi acustici preliminari e dalle ricerche sul pubblico alle scelte curatoriali, alle strategie di sound design e alle questioni etiche relative alla provenienza e alla diffusione del patrimonio immateriale. L’accento è posto sul suono come elemento collettivo, spaziale e scenografico piuttosto che come tradizionale audioguida, sottolineandone il ruolo di mediazione degli oggetti e di ridefinizione dell’esperienza dei visitatori. L’intervista contribuisce al più ampio dibattito sul suono, la museografia e le pratiche espositive contemporanee.

Louis Petitjean

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Eric de Visscher

Eric de Visscher is a researcher, curator, artistic director, composer, and former director of Musée de la musique within the Cité de la musique – Philharmonie de Paris. Over the course of his career, he has occupied a range of positions across the fields of music, contemporary art, and has collaborated with major cultural organisations in France and abroad, contributing to the development of exhibitions, artistic programmes, and research initiatives at the intersection of heritage and creation. He is currently Inspecteur de la Création Artistique at the French Ministry of Culture, where he oversees policies related to artistic production and cultural development at a national level.

Opening Picture:

Fig. 1. Eric de Visscher © Palta Studio.

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This interview contributes to broader discussions on the role of sound in museums and the growing importance of sonic experience within contemporary exhibition practices¹. Historically shaped around visual display, ethnographic museums have been said to “colonize by the gaze”² and encounter, more generally, a crisis of identity in the postcolonial world. Alongside a growing recognition of the primacy of indigenous knowledge³ and the reconceptualization of museums as “contact zones”⁴, ethnographic museums have increasingly sought to engage visitors through multisensory approaches, recognizing sound not merely as a supplementary interpretive device, but as a medium capable of reshaping spatial perception, mediating cultural contexts, and transforming relationships between visitors and collections. The integration of sound into museums, especially ethnographic museums, raises a wide range of questions, from curatorial practice to scenography, technological mediation and acoustic design, as well as the ethics of representing cultural and intangible heritage. A preliminary inquiry into the *Musée du Quai Branly*’s attempt to remediate the musical instruments collection was conducted by the author and revealed a complex interplay between artistic practice and the museum⁵.

Through a career spanning institutions such as the *Ircam*⁶, the *Musée de la musique*, the *Victoria & Albert Museum* in London, and more recently the *Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac*, Eric de Visscher has played a significant role in the development of sound-based approaches to museum display. His work bridges musicology, artistic

direction, exhibition-making, and institutional research, offering a unique perspective on how sound can enrich museum visitor experiences, develop new narratives, while also facing new practical challenges⁷. In this conversation, de Visscher reflects on the evolution of his thinking *with* sound and exhibitions, tracing the development of major institutional projects and collaborations that informed his approach. Particular attention is given to his conception and implementation of the *Musée du Quai Branly*’s “sound tour”, a project designed not as a conventional audio guide but as a form of sonic scenography directly integrated into the museum’s architecture and collections. The interview addresses broader issues surrounding sound in museums, including acoustic constraints, audience reception, the role of sound designers, questions of authorship and artistic intervention, and the ethical challenges of sourcing and presenting sound materials in ethnographic contexts. More broadly, it offers insight into the emergence of new forms of expertise dedicated to the sonic dimension of museums and to rethinking the museum as a space not only to be seen, but also to be heard, creating a bridge between practitioners and academics.

Louis Petitjean (LP): *Let us start by going back a little to your institutional background. How did you end up interested in the issue of sound in museums?*

Eric de Visscher (EdV): In 1997, I was called by Ircam to take over as artistic director. There, of course, was the whole aspect of musical creation, as well as research, which has always interested me too, considering my academic background of musicology. That was also the period when we relaunched more collaborations with the *Centre Pompidou*. There was a landmark exhibition called “Le Temps Vite” that took place in 2000, at the *Centre Pompidou*, which was put together by the late Daniel Soutif, who headed then the Pompidou’s cultural development department. There, we did more than just programming music: we really included a musical and sound component in the exhibition, which was still unusual. I left in 2003. Change of management, and I also felt like I wanted to move on a bit. I worked in vocal and choral music, notably with the *Accentus* choir. Then, in 2005, I joined the *Cité de la Musique* in Paris and six months later was appointed director of the museum. And let us say that was obviously the moment when I really started to explore these issues of sound and museums.

LP: *How did your experience at the Cité de la musique expand your reflections on sound and exhibitions?*

EdV: There were three projects on my list when I arrived. One was the implementation of the reorganization of the collections, which we completed between 2006 and 2009. Then there was the temporary exhibition policy. And then the third aspect was also about seeing how the musical instrument, in all its dimensions, including its sound, could be better highlighted.

The exhibition policy always raised the question of how the sound dimension is present, how it can be highlighted, what is appropriate depending on the type of exhibition, the content, the musical genre, the type of audience... When the museum opened in 1997, the display of its permanent collection included a system that was quite innovative and revolutionary at the time, which worked with infrared technology. When you entered a room, there was a sound triggered! But there was also sonic interference, when you moved from one space to another. It generated a kind of sound, a bit like on old radios, where you would switch from one frequency to another and you would get a “shrrrr” ... In the end, this system had to be abandoned, and we opted for a classic audio guide, with people composing numbers to select and listen to sound excerpts.

But I would say that the way visitors experience the museum has not changed that much in the 2009 redesign. There have been changes in the contents of the display cases, there have been models that we have continued to develop, there

have also been architectural changes. But let us say that on the question of sound, we were enriching the experience with many more musical excerpts but not radically changing the mode of diffusion. There was also this idea of live musicians playing instruments directly in the museum, which we were firmly attached to. That is what prompted me to dig a little deeper into these questions and see how they could be developed outside of a dedicated museum.

LP: *You left for London in 2016 to work with the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A). Did you notice a change in the way sound in museums was considered on the other side of the Channel?*

EdV: The V&A was in a period of questioning several aspects of their collection, including their sound and musical instrument collections. They were also trying to revisit certain aspects of their collection through the question of sound. Shortly before I arrived, there was a huge surge of interest around the David Bowie exhibition, which was a remarkable success for the V&A: it opened in London in 2013 and was later shown in ten other cities around the world, including Paris' which I organized and adapted. This led to other exhibitions on more sound- and music-related topics. And that created a dynamic, a reflection on music and sound. How can sound be developed in museums? How can it attract new audiences? How can it revisit the question of the link to objects? How, in relation to other objects, can we think about modes of mediation that involve

sound? It was in this spirit that they asked me to come, as part of their research department, the "V&A Research Institute", which had specific funding to host researchers.

There were of course various changes between the *Musée de la musique* and the V&A. First, the V&A is a large and "global" museum. It is a museum where music is obviously not the focus. But at the same time, it is a museum that had a history with sound, nonetheless. It was even quite pioneering in the way it presented the musical instruments, as early as the 1960s and 70s, when they had imagined a dispositive that they called a "jukebox"! They also hosted some of the first "early music" concerts on period instruments in London, in relation to their own collection.

LP: *What did your work at the V&A involve?*

EdV: There were two strands to this project. One was the collection of musical instruments, which were a bit neglected and of which few objects were on display, and there was the question of sound mediation. And there was a specific objective, yet delayed by Covid, which was the new storage facility project, eventually opened in 2025.

We did a few test projects in the museum. In 2017, a new entrance to the V&A was opened with new exhibition rooms that remained empty for three months. I suggested designing a sound installation that would allow visitors to discover this space, to perhaps encourage them to stay longer in that space, to change the timing of their visit a little, rather

than just going in and out. It was a project I did with a composer and performer who plays the viola da gamba, called Liam Byrne, who had done some work that was really connected to architecture. And then we did another project that was a little more “traditional”, but it was linked to a display case of Indian instruments, with an artist named Caroline Devine. There, it was created using sounds from the museum’s archives linked to the instruments on display. We also wanted to experiment with transducers, where the display case itself becomes the loudspeaker. This works quite well for museums, and we used it quite a lot afterwards at the *Quai Branly* museum.

Yet, these experiments were not entirely successful. At least, we did not do everything we wanted to achieve. There were obviously constraints and surprises with the Covid crisis, which delayed or abandoned many projects.

LP: *How did the project at the Quai Branly museum take place? Did it directly follow your work at the V&A?*

EdV: In fact, a large part of all this work involved research that I carried out in London, which was then done at the *Quai Branly* rather than at the V&A. The *Quai Branly* museum contacted me when I was still in London. It came from the director of collections at the time, Yves Le Fur, and Christine Drouin, who is the head of the cultural department. The project also coincided with the arrival of the new president, Emmanuel Kasarhérou, who also very quickly endorsed the idea and made it his own. The idea was

that it should be a project supported by the whole museum, a kind of collective project. That is why it took so long, because the idea was really to involve all the teams. So, there were a lot of meetings, not only with the curators, but also the public relations team, the technical teams, the building teams, the audiovisual team—in short, everyone from the museum.

LP: *What were the preliminary steps of the project, before even working on the museography itself?*

EdV: The process started with a kind of audit that I did for them, where I analysed what already existed. Which sound sources were there in the museum? What worked, what did not? And more generally, the building, the musical instrument tower, the garden, how all of that responded acoustically. That led to a series of fifteen proposals. Overall, the museum was quite receptive to my recommendations. And I felt that they wanted to move forward.

There were some things that they launched quite quickly, like the sound artists’ residency program, which started in 2022. This was the first step. The museum had a model of sorts which was the photographers’ residencies, so they took inspiration from it. The partnership with the *Le Fresnoy – Studio national des arts contemporains*, based in Tourcoing, came together quickly as well. And I think they wanted to make their mark quickly, to launch the idea of a “Resonating Museum”. With “La réserve des non-dits” (The Storage of the Unsaid), the first laureate of this residence, the Lebanese artist Youmna Saba,

did a brilliant interpretation of the museum's open storage of musical instruments: this imposing "silo" of instruments, which can be seen at various points within the museum, remains enigmatic for visitors and Saba truly tackled the questions of its invisibility and inaudibility (Fig. 2).

LP: *You mention that the audit included an acoustic inquiry to better understand how sound was diffused and perceived in the museum. How to organise such inquiry and what were the results?*

EdV: One of the recommendations I made in the report was to carry out this acoustic study to find out a little about how the building behaved and reacted. This went beyond just the collections area, because they took acoustic measurements in the exhibition hall, the large exhibition hall downstairs, the reception hall, and various other spaces throughout the museum. Let us say that it confirmed the hypotheses we already had, but it also provided some more precise information on certain points and certain spaces, and it undoubtedly influenced, or at least facilitated, decisions on the placement of loudspeakers and other aspects of the final project.

There was also an audience study with a target group that they had invited to wander around the museum without telling them exactly what the purpose of the walk was. Then the museum staff conducted qualitative interviews at the end of the walk, specifically on issues of sound, acoustics, music, what they had heard, not heard, what had interested them, caught their atten-

tion, etc. What came of it is that it is a museum with uneven sound levels, so we really noticed that there were areas of silence, and that these areas of silence were perceived a bit like holes, like voids. There was more of a demand for sound, not necessarily all the time, everywhere, but in any case, sound seemed important to the target group. They did the same study with a similar group, sometime after the opening of the new exhibition. And we find more or less the same kind of observations, where again, they note that there are still differences in the presence of sound, even if there are fewer than before. Their overall assessment is positive.

LP: *Once you started working on the new sound tour, what did you take care of in the first place?*

EdV: I took the role of artistic director, or curator, of the new "Sound tour" of the collections. The preliminary work was about defining the audio content. I worked on two levels of listening: a fairly localized listening, linked to specific objects or display cases, and a more diffuse listening experience, with more ambient and environmental sounds. We started working on this first level in terms of content with the curators of each "heritage unit", as they are called: Africa, Middle East, Asia, Oceania, Americas. We had several meetings with them, where we defined, step by step, where it would be relevant to introduce sound, always in connection with the objects. What was important in this part was that there was both scientific relevance and the technical possibilities that we knew of at the time. Then



Fig. 2:
The introductory
panel of the
installation “La
réserve des non-
dits” by Yumna
Saba © Louis
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there was the issue of the availability of sources, of course, to see if we could find content that was relevant. At that stage, the primary intention of the project, the philosophy behind it, was fairly well decided, as well as some of the sound sources of this first level. Before moving to the

second level, we had to select the sound designers who would realize the project, since they needed to be involved as early as possible in the project.

LP: *How did you choose the sound design team and how have you been working with them?*

EdV: We had to go through a public tender process to select the sound design team. We had to draw up specifications and then all the procedures required for public procurement. Then we put out a call for applications. If I remember correctly, we had five or six applications sent to us. We received four teams, to whom we explained the project in detail and gave a tour of the premises. Following that, they were able to submit their applications, and the company *Narrative* won the bid, for two reasons, in my opinion. We felt that they had very well understood the project in their approach and the team they proposed was quite appealing. There were three sound designers coming from three generations of designers. Luc Martinez, who has been working for quite some time, has done a lot of work in science museums, history museums, and heritage sites. He also comes from the world of electroacoustic music, and I knew him already (Fig. 3). The others are a little younger. Simon Cacheux is both an artist and someone who has worked in the field of industrial sound design. Eventually, Julia Griner had just graduated from the sound design school in Le Mans. So, there were three generations, three perspectives, three points of view. If the team worked well together, there would be real interaction between them. And that is what happened. There was also a good producer, Cécile Cros, the director of *Narrative*, who led the team and made sure that everything went according to schedule. So, from that

point of view, it worked out pretty well.

LP: *How did the collaboration with Thomas Tilly come up?*

EdV: It came at a time when I knew I would have a little less time to work on the project. So, I suggested and asked the museum to bring in an assistant to the curator, and that was Thomas Tilly, who I was interested in and knew a little. I knew his music and some of the things he had done. I found his profile as a composer very interesting, because he works with acoustic and existing sources, field recordings. He is someone who also reflects about recording, microphones, and broadcasting. And then, perhaps a little opportunistically, he is also someone who has a network of sound artists, sound engineers, field recordists, all over the world, which we were able to draw on to enhance this second layer of sound, those environmental and ambient sounds. These sounds really come from that network. People with different profiles, sound artists, people who are like reporters, who work more on the “journalistic” side of sound. But also, people who work within communities and who aim to preserve traces, people who work on the intangible heritage side of things, ethnologists, ethnomusicologists... So, with these different profiles, I thought it was good to be able to call on them. And Thomas helped us a lot with that.



Fig. 3: Luc Martinez at work in the permanent exhibition rooms, Oceanic-Australian section © Eric de Visscher, all rights reserved.

LP: All these “field recordists” are meticulously mentioned on the labels. Why was it important to you to source precisely all the sounds broadcasted in the museum? How did you manage to get the legal rights for each diffusion?

EdV: Well, first of all, this is obviously part of the critical thinking that all ethnographic museums must engage in, and are engaging in. It would certainly have been completely illogical not to adopt the same ethics with regard to intangible heritage. It comes with the idea

of ensuring scientific accuracy regarding the provenance of sounds, in line with the objects on display. But also, the unavoidable agreement of the communities concerned and the designation of the people who can be identified as sound recordists (Fig. 4).

There were quite a few aspects that *Narrative* was asked to deal with, including, precisely, this issue of rights management. The museum said that it would not diffuse anything unless it had the paperwork authorising it to do so and needed the proof that the rights had been obtained and paid for. The museum would reimburse the cost of the rights, but *Narrative* would have to negotiate the prices. But it is still a significant investment and may still require work afterwards because rights are negotiated for five years, so they will have to be renegotiated. And then there is also the whole question of content renewal, which may also happen.

LP: *Speaking of which, is the sound tour going to evolve, to include more content, broadcast up-to-date sounds, with other field recordings?*

EdV: There is a centralised control system that then distributes content to the various sources, so it is obviously quite easy to change the content. For the moment, the museum has no intention of doing so in the short term, but the question will certainly arise. And that is one of the things that is easier to manage with sound than with images. Because with images, you have to produce films and documentaries. It is more complicated and more expensive to set up. Screens also age more quickly. After about ten years, the screens are no longer really up to date with what people know, what they have on their smartphones and all that. The equipment to diffuse sound will not change much: speakers are things that last a long time.

LP: *According to you, are these sound pieces diffused in the museum proper works of art?*

EdV: The question of the status of these recordings is still somewhat ambiguous. In any case, as far as the public is concerned, I think they should be shown as works of art. A large part of the sound designers' work has also been to adapt the sources for broadcast. In fact, these sources are almost never raw, and the processing can vary depending on the source. There are cases where it is just a little bit of tidying up, filtering, or things like that. There are cases where they intervened more to really enhance certain frequencies or suppress them. Or there are



Fig. 4: An exhibition label of a field recording from Mali © Louis Petitjean, all rights reserved.

even cases where we mixed diverse sources together! For example, at the beginning, you have these songs by the Solomon Islands paddlers. The initial recording, made in a studio in the 1960s, comes from an ethnomusicologist, Hugo Zemp. First, we cleaned up the recording a bit. Luc Martinez added the sounds of water, paddles and so on. He was as rigorous as possible with the rhythm and had it validated by curators and local people. And then the third phase was really the final mix, which was done on site according to the acoustics of the place. As you see here in the work of sound designers, there are moments when we approach creation.

LP: *How do we think about mediation for this specific kind of art objects? Was there a collective reflection on the labels, or did you write them yourself and had them validated by the museum?*

EdV: Actually, the museum curators wrote the labels. We have them all read, reread, and corrected, with the sound designers, and there are trivial things that we reviewed, we asked for a few corrections. I wrote the texts that are in the entrance to the areas, but they were also rewritten by the museum afterwards. It was an important collaboration on that. We had agreed on a basic outline, what kind of information to include, how to communicate it, and so on. Then, the sound designers provided all the technical elements. And then it was put together by the museum.

The idea was always to make the sound source as clear and perceptible as possible. But it is true that the

sources are vastly different, notably concerning their recording quality... Well, we had to deal with that too, obviously. And that is an aspect that is often overlooked due to a lack of resources and time. Often, in museums, you are told, "Here, I have found a recording of this or that. Let us broadcast it!". But that is not enough. There is work to be done. Sound in museums is part of the scenography, so there is really the question of how the visitor perceives it. And in fact, what we have always tried to do in the case of the *Quai Branly* was not to obscure or obliterate the works, but on the contrary to highlight them.

LP: *I had a quick question about the famous art installation by Charles Sandison, The River, set up in 2010. For the first time in 15 years, there is something that echoes it. Was it crucial for you to do something with that river?*

EdV: We felt that it was important to create a continuity with this visual work and, at the same time, make the visitor aware of the sonic dimension that he or she will encounter later in the actual spaces. Sandison's piece projects words from many different languages on the floor; we projected into space, with highly directional speakers, spoken words also in various idioms. Honestly, for me, it is not finished yet and we plan to rework it a little. It works in some circumstances, but less so in others: when a school group is climbing the ramp, I do not think they hear much.

From a more general perspective, the issue of volume and noise levels is always complex in this type

of space. We just have to accept the idea that the effectiveness of the system is variable. There are areas that may not work well when there are a lot of people, but they will work well at other times. Just as it is harder to see works of art when there are lots of people at an exhibition than when you are alone, the same applies to sound. But we are less accepting of this, or at least we are less used to it. So, what is also important to mention is that one of the project's prerequisites was to avoid overly frequent repetitions of the same sound sources, opting instead for trigger systems and multiple excerpts from the same source which can be triggered on the same spot. When a visitor comes back to a certain place, he will not hear the same excerpt. Because we know that these repetitions can also be very tiring, when the sound presence becomes irritating... For visitors *and* museum staff!

LP: *Therefore, a reflection on sound is always also a reflection on space. And for this, it is the kind of thing you can only really assess in situ. Did you wander around and do your own tests?*

EdV: I would say that we are always a bit empirical. We also need to accept the idea that adjustments can be made along the way, that the project is not completely finalized at the opening. We have already spent quite a few nights finalizing all the settings before the opening. We also did visits with the public, because obviously, it is different.

In the museum, you are in a large space and yet it is full of little nooks and crannies, spaces, and different

ceiling heights. There are all these smaller spaces on the side, called "boxes", each of which is different, and we have not used them all yet, so we can still use others if we want to. So there too, it was a challenge for the sound designers, because there are many spaces that converge and blend together, so sound interference can be a significant problem. At the same time, it also offered many acoustic possibilities with differentiated spaces, more than a traditional museum, where you would have a succession of rooms that are more or less identical or at least with fairly similar characteristics. Here, they were able to play around a bit.

Hence the importance of having studied this particular architecture in detail and designing sound systems that are appropriate for these spaces. Because from the onset, I had thought that this soundscape should be heard through speakers and not headphones, so as to create a collective experience. This involves using diverse types of loudspeakers, adapted to space and content. Sometimes we used those transducers that I mentioned earlier, and which cause materials or walls to vibrate. The question of the height of the loudspeakers also arises, depending on the type of source. For instance, we have tried to place speakers in the air for airborne sounds. For sounds from the ground or water, we will have them placed on the ground. Anthropogenic sounds are normally at human height. But then there are the constraints of the venue and the installations and so on, which meant that sometimes we had to place them a little higher. But we still tried to play around with that too.

LP: *Why was the project named like this? How is it different from a traditional renewal of audio guide contents?*

EdV: I would say that our project is a bit difficult to name. When conceiving the project, I called it the “Resonant Museum” (*Le musée résonnant*). In the end, the communications department produced a poster campaign, with the slogan “The collections have their own soundtrack” (*Les collections ont leur bande-son*) (Fig. 5). The term “soundtrack” is somewhat misleading and refers too much to cinema, but I would say that even the term “sound tour” is not really appropriate for me. Because “sound tour” suggests the idea of a guided journey with stations, or points where you stop. Whereas for me, initially, it was really more about soundscapes, or sound scenography... The idea was really also to blend in with the scenography, to be as unobtrusive as possible visually; Jean Nouvel, the architect of the building and the museum design thought of it as a “territory to be discovered”, and I really wanted to accompany this concept, whatever it means. To me, it was important to conceive a space in which we are guided by sound, but also a little bit by our own wanderings, rather than by a treasure hunt.

But often, the public has specific expectations when we talk about audio guides, for example. And I remember we often had these discussions at the *Musée de la musique*. Visitors, at least the average or regular visitor, expect to be guided by the audio. I remember that for certain exhibitions, we had imagined audio guides that were a little more,

perhaps poetic, or a little more creative, let us say. And I had strong reservations from the public services department, who said: “no, people will be lost. They expect to be given a clear explanation of what is going on”. And I think that is also a bit of the case with the sound tour. There are expectations in that regard, and they may be disappointed, because even though there are labels, not everything is obvious; there are things you discover little by little as you wander around. These surprise effects interested me very much.

LP: *Michail Zisiou advocates for the creation of the position of “soundscape designer–museumologist”⁸ who would be integrated in museums to develop an acoustic approach to the collections. Would you agree with him?*

EdV: Well, what we are already seeing is that there is a whole body of expertise that is starting to develop, specialised in sound design suited to museums. It is something quite recent; it started maybe ten or fifteen years ago. The *Centre Pompidou* was quite a pioneer in this respect. A sound designer named Gérard Chiron, who unfortunately passed away, really started doing interesting things with sound around 2000, for certain exhibitions, but not only: he introduced sound in the access ramp, for example. It is a skill that is both technical, obviously, but also, it needs adaptation to the content. So new skills are developing, that is for sure, and they are allowing us to move away a little from the exclusively visual focus, especially in art museums. Perhaps less so in history museums and science museums,



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which have in fact often been pioneers, or at least precursors, in the use of sound.

I do not know exactly what the right term would be. Is it a “sound scenographer”? Is it a “sound museogra-

pher”? It is the link between content and the tools that allow to highlight it in an exhibition or museum space. We can see that museums that are developing this sound presence are becoming more and more common,

Fig. 5: “Les collections ont leur bande-son”, promotional poster © Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.

Louis Petitjean, Eric de Visscher

The new sound tour of the Musée du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris. Interview with Eric de Visscher

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and we can say that yes, there is a need for skills. There is a need for these technical skills, which is for sure, and we can see that they are starting to appear. It is more difficult to have them in-house, like at the *Musée de la musique*, because museums do not always have the means to employ them. At the *Quai Branly* museum, we were lucky to have an audiovisual department that was already used to working with sound in exhibitions.

The problem is that often, the question of sound comes *afterwards*. In many exhibitions, we think that it would be nice to have sound, but the spaces were not designed for it... Whereas I really think that for any museum project, if we believe that sound should be included, we need to think about it from the outset. For me, that is an absolute rule, because it has a major impact on the scenography and, of course, on the connection with the other works.

LP: *What advice would you give to an ethnographic institution developing an audio tour, especially regarding how to avoid sensationalism or the exoticisation of spaces and people?*

EdV: This is an issue that some of the museum's curators were quite concerned about. Indeed, there was a risk of "essentialization". We tried to avoid it by being as rigorous as possible in terms of the origin of the sounds and sources, so we can say that it really fits with how these environments, these populations, these communities, are like today. All these recordings, apart from a few older ethnographic recordings, are also what is happening today, in

terms of the natural environment, which means that we can also have, from time to time, urban environments, machines, voices... I thought it was important to have the presence of the voice, acknowledging human presence and language. That is also how we tried to avoid clichés a little bit.

I have always avoided the word "immersion", because for me, it has a very artificial meaning today. In fact, yes, we are always immersed in some way, but we are never surrounded by ten loudspeakers. I mean, when we are outside, there are distant sounds, nearby sounds, sounds that we hear. We have to play on all these subtleties of sound, and sometimes also the absence of sound, and I think that's part of the system too. It is not at all a question of putting sound everywhere all the time. It is essential to treat the sound in such a way as to create, sometimes even unconsciously, a kind of distancing from that sound. The sound is never broadcasted raw but there is always a little bit of intervention on it. This is precisely designed to create distance. There are moments, for example, in the section about Borneo, where there are sounds of forests and birds, but if you listen carefully, they are always slightly processed with sound granularization. These are quite subtle things, but they help to avoid these pitfalls, because there are obviously some.

Endnotes:

- 1 See Bubaris 2014; Rich 2017; Wynne 2021.
- 2 Classen, Howes 2020, p. 200.
- 3 Krmpotich 2019.
- 4 Clifford 1997.
- 5 Petitjean 2025.
- 6 The Ircam (Institut de recherche et coordination acoustique/musique) was founded by Pierre Boulez in 1977 and is affiliated to the Centre Pompidou.
- 7 Candela, de Visscher 2023.
- 8 Zisiou 2011.

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