

## interview Dominique Petitgand with Guillaume Constantin february 2008

on the occasion of Dominique Petitgand's exhibition *Ce moment d'attente*  
Instants Chavirés / former Bouchoule Brasserie, Montreuil  
5 april - 4 may 2008  
curator: Guillaume Constantin

in book *Dominique Petitgand - Installation (documents)*, MF éditions, Paris, 2009

*Guillaume Constantin : The issue of the presence of visual arts in a place originally dedicated to music is one amongst many that made us feel like inviting you for the project of a sound installation in the former Bouchoule brasserie, the exhibition space of Instants Chavirés. From the outset, your work has found its place at the junction of those elements.*

*Sound, voice, musicality, space and the possibility to "look" are also part of the concert idea ; besides, they can also be found, but quite differently, in the situation of a sound installation. The experience and the listening it entails are closely linked to the space and freedom the visitor has when he is to grasp this moment.*

*In that regard, your work makes me think of sculpture, of a sound architecture which would not only take the space it takes up into account but also the texture of its very materials. Thus, it offers the visitor-listener a "driving experience" ("... inside the piece » as Guillaume Désanges evokes) in which his body matters as much as his ears. Is this something you have on your mind ?*

Dominique Petitgand : Absolutely, and you are right in differentiating the experience of the concert from that of the installation. In a concert, what comes "next" can exist "next to" ; in an installation, you have to move to get access to it : in an installation, two sounds, two phrases – which, in a concert, come one after the other - can be emitted simultaneously and still be set in a different space. During concerts, I offer a linear listening experience, almost in time, while for an installation, what I will offer is a fragmented listening experience.

Each time a visitor moves through an exhibition can be compared to someone moving on in time, and as the listener is provided with movement and motivity, we can almost say that each listener is an agent of the progression of the piece, as if he had a real ascendancy over time, as if he became the keeper, the player of the clock hands (on top of also choosing the beginning, the end and the duration of his listening time according to the moment he enters the installation, the time he dedicates his attention to it, and when he exits it – all parameters which are not individually determined during concerts). And this is the way the story is being built up.

However, what sculpture conjures up is the idea of a dense material, something around which one revolves. While my installations usually do not have a core, they are pierced, fragmented, unfolded in space. We go all over them, we go through them.

The visitor's going to and fro and his standing still are as many figures, as many possible embodiments of the way his listening might progress. A listening act of which he can, at any time, reinvent the direction, the perspective, redefine what is close, far, central, peripheral. The various listening spots can then become as many fragmented approaches of the exhibited work.

*G C: Actually, I evoked sculpture, to go into particulars, not so much for its unescapable monolithic aspect as to stress the fact that it is often part of a set of other sculptures or other kinds of work. In that case, the hanging of those pieces is often thought out in terms of some composition so as to make a global reading possible, a story, without there obligatorily being a centre as you evoke for your installations.*

*What you propose is eventually similar, except for the fact that you make us grasp the places you utilize with our ears.*

*To echo the movements in space your work generates, how do you tackle the space of the former Bouchoule brasserie?*

D P: the space of the former brasserie is huge; however, if it is mainly made up of four parts (a central lobby and three annexes, one being inaccessible to the visitor), to my ears it is as if it were all in one piece. What I mean is that one sound coming from any spot in this space is emitted all over the exhibition and fills up the whole volume.

As I do not want any partition walls and do not wish the parts to be closed onto themselves so they would be impenetrable to what is going on next to them as well as in the distance, all I have to do is play with them so they can get close to each other, far from each other - put them into perspective.

Therefore the installation arranges sound sequences in time, each one involving different spots in the space, some at the opposite end from the others, and connecting various areas, mixing what is close with what is distant. The story is built up through the synchronism that relates the voices and the sounds from a distance and through the surprise and the feeling of telepathy this brings about in the listener, as well as the mysterious agreement being woven between the different parts of the whole.

*G C: Quite precisely these dimensions of the story, of synchronism, of surprise conjure up some strong components of cinema except for the fact that the narrative you organize, somewhat scripted, lacks certain elements, "a failure of memory", and thereby provokes a strained situation where, as you say, a certain mystery pervades. In our discussions, you sent me a short text which would be like a starting framework for this Bouchoule Brasserie project:*

When all of a sudden everything slows down and then stops, there comes silence.

This moment when we wait, alone amongst the others.

And when gradually everything gets back to its place, shakes itself, starts over again, we come close to something which looks like an end.

*G C: I feel like asking you about the part writing plays in your work, generally, for I find that this short text, beyond its written dimension, describes very well what is at stake in your work: we can imagine the voices, the sounds coming to life, the rhythms, and I remember the sound spiral your installation called "Someone on the ground" (shown at gb agency in 2007) created.*

D P: First, I disagree with the use of the word "scripted" (you must do too actually since you say "somewhat") and the comparison with the narrative in cinema depends on what kind of cinema we are talking about. My pieces are not scripted in the sense that there is no text, no project or preliminary intention for which the piece would have a shape, would be the realization. No, if there is to be any text, it is the text that happens after the various recording, listening and editing stages, the text that I can transcribe once the piece is achieved. Therefore, writing comes after or, and that is quite new, next to.

At the periphery of the creation of my pieces, I try to reflect upon what I have already done, upon the way I listen, I write down notes, I comment. But these texts are never a starting point. I respect the sound too much to force it to anything else but what it is per se.

It is quite curious; I say that and at the same time I know that my pieces have a very asserted, arbitrary, conducted form. While recording and editing, I intervene a lot, I do not let the flow of sounds run, I choose angles, I interrupt, I am here, I structure, I somewhat write! But it is just a form of writing, not writing per se. I do not lean on any

existing language. For each one of my pieces, I must reinvent a syntax, a grammar, a logic. Nothing is settled right away thanks to some code or conventions.

I have always wondered what the secret substance of what I do was, what its founding practice could be. For some artists, it is drawing; for others, writing or photography; for some musicians, it can be the long practice of a specific instrument. As for me, I do not know. I know I have always sung, whistled; I always have some tune in my head. I also know that my greatest pleasure is to frame a picture. Besides, I am always jotting down and looking for the best way to word, to formulate a sentence. I have often said that what matters most for me is editing.

*G C : The notions of framing and editing you are talking about do not fail to conjure up sculpture in the way it is constructed (in "formulate", we find the word "form") but also with the idea of a certain artificiality.*

*All your sources are recorded; they are sounds and "voices without a body" (Guillaume Désanges) but still, they are physical, they truly exist. It is much more this distance from the reality, the reproduction, the seemingly natural reconstruction that lead us towards some phantom narrative, that is disruptive because of the text-like and suggestive force of the sound and also the absence of its "original" transmitters.*

*Have you ever imagined an installation where there were no loudspeakers to be seen? Is this something you could find interesting? Or is the sign, the presence of a loudspeaker essential, beside its function, to the reading and grasping of your work?*

*D P :* Even before thinking about showing or hiding a loudspeaker, the issue that matters is where to set it up. And this issue is raised differently whether I am dealing with a voice with or without a text, a noise or a musical atmosphere.

For instance, I can say that I need a voice, a talking voice, to be emitted at ear level. It must appear clearly, as in a close-up. Essentially because we are talking about words, language. If I hid the loudspeaker, the result would mute the voice, muffle it.

As a loudspeaker becomes visible only when we can catch a glimpse of it, I can say that in that specific case of a voice at ear level, even if the loudspeaker were set up right in the middle of a space in broad daylight, it could still remain invisible to the visitor of the exhibition during most of his visit. As long as it is not in his visual field. Before getting to the words, the listening must be covered, with the protagonists of the pieces facing us.

Unlike those strategies to make the loudspeakers appear when it comes to words, I can choose, when I deal with a noise, a musical atmosphere or a voice that does not talk (but which can whistle, hum or shout) – that is when readability is not at stake – to have the loudspeakers set up on the floor, half way up, under a rooftop... I can also have them mounted in a darkened space, have them hidden behind a wall, a door...

Those sounds have a lot to do with the architecture per se, as if they were really part of the walls.

For example, for the exhibition in the former Bouchoule Brasserie, a loudspeaker is set up behind the wall in the back, this very partition you had to have built to reduce the exhibition surface. As this wall does not reach the ceiling, it lets some sound seep through.

The voices that come from this space next door, off-camera so to speak, stammer, harangue, shout, hum. These are cries with no specific words, with no audible language, they are almost music or noises.

I am under the impression that each time, what I look for is to create as many stages, intermediary spaces, levels as possible, through which a listener can access a sound. As many cuttings as possible in his listening.

Then there are the darkened spaces. The one for the installation called "blindness" where we go from light to pitch blackness. The one for "Aloof" where the voices come from behind a door left ajar. A space to which there is no access, the size and nature of which are unknown and which any listener can invent (give himself a figure of it) if he trusts the reverberation and background noise from the voice recording.

This is without mentioning the darkness in my concert-broadcasts, where I need pitch blackness because those listening sessions take place in theatres (concert halls, movie theatres, playhouses) where the audience have gathered and are waiting collectively, and in which the only way I intervene is with sounds.

G C : *The way you unwind your strategies of appearance and concealment of the loudspeakers describes very well all the nuances of your vocabulary and strangely enough, takes us from light to darkness. Yet, Guillaume Désanges evokes the perception of your pieces as "a very luminous moment", and what strikes me personally is the empathy the voices and sounds you record contain and reproduce thanks to the way you cut and edit. Eventually we are quite far from dark things; things are rather near the living. And even when you aim at exhausting the sounds, when all that is left between the silences are cuts, there still is a presence, a gesture that is there and which has been performed, your gesture.*

*This unwavering character in the work of the artist is being evoked quite smartly by you in "unplugged", from the short anthology called "Les pièces manquantes" ("missing pieces"), when you humbly say that your work would have been impossible if electricity had not been invented. By providing a written answer to this assertion, you thwart this impossibility and because of this, your work does exist. I can imagine then that three hundred years ago you could have been a kind of chronicler, a writer of the echo...*

D P : I am never interested in a thing for what it is; what matters to me are the antagonisms, the opposites, and all the stages in between. You mention empathy; it is your feeling as a listener that makes you say that; personally, I do not favour anything, supposedly. I manipulate sound materials and what I want is to leave everything in suspension. For instance, empathy alone, without cruelty, does go far enough, in my opinion. Each one feeds on the other and I like the listeners to negotiate their way between those two feelings, I want them to doubt all the time. My ways of editing are figures of cruelty: to cut the word, to hide what is essential, none of this is tender.

But I understand what you mean by "near the living": nothing needs be concluded, needs be switched off. And the gesture you talk about ends up being the listening act actually. One that is mine when I make the pieces and when I visit the places, then one which belongs to the listener. Listening, "near the living", always, as an act linking the sounds together and filling the silences.

Listening as a tool, not only for me when I make the pieces but also for the others who are discovering them. It all begins from this point. And with "unplugged", what I talk about is the lack of this tool, the constraint I would find myself in if I had to do something without this tool anyway. For example, a situation where there would be no electricity and in which, deprived of recording or reproduction devices, I would not be able to reproduce concretely what I have perceived myself, being forced therefore to find another means, another mode of representation, a transposition.

It is a question I often ask myself: what if the sound were not the essential? What if I had to do without it? However, I am not saying that I want to start all over again and go back to the images. No, I am just questioning the tool I use.

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## Notes

1. Dominique Petitgand, sound installation for 10, 2008. Private exhibition Instants Chavirés / former Brasserie Bouchoule, Montreuil, 5 april - 4 may 2008. Exhibition organizer : Guillaume Constantin.

2. Guillaume Désanges "Dialogue de sourds (entretien sans réponses avec Dominique Petitgand)" in "Dominique Petitgand, La gorge sèche", catalogue, édition Capécure / à table !, Boulogne-sur-Mer, 2004.

3. Dominique Petitgand, listening session for an audience sitting in the, duration 45 minutes. Instants Chavirés, Montreuil, 11 april 2008.

4. Dominique Petitgand, press release.

5. Dominique Petitgand, "Quelqu'un par terre", sound installation for 7 loudspeakers (subtitled version), 2005 / 2006. Private exhibition gb agency, Paris, 2006 / 2007.
6. Guillaume Désanges "Dialogue de sourds (interview with no answers with Dominique Petitgand)" *in* "Dominique Petitgand, La gorge sèche", catalogue, édition Capécure / à table !, Boulogne-sur-Mer, 2004.
7. Dominique Petitgand, "Il y a, ensuite", sound installation for 4 loudspeakers, 1994 / 2005. Exhibition "Etre présent au monde", Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne collection, MAC/VAL, Vitry-sur-Seine, 2007 / 2008.
8. Dominique Petitgand, "La cécité", sound installation for 5 loudspeakers 1997 / 2006. Exhibition "ON/OFF", FRAC Lorraine, Metz, 2006 / 2007.
9. Dominique Petitgand, "Aloof", sound installation with 2 speakers, 2005 / 2006. Exhibition "découpage ( f l)", e/static > blank, Turin, 2006.
10. Guillaume Désanges "Dialogue de sourds (interview with no answers with Dominique Petitgand)" *in* "Dominique Petitgand, La gorge sèche", catalogue, édition Capécure / à table !, Boulogne-sur-Mer, 2004.
11. Dominique Petitgand, "Les pièces manquantes (The missing pieces)", book, édition Ecole Municipale des Beaux-Arts / Galerie Manet, Gennevilliers, 2007.