

Silence was pleased
interview Dominique Petitgand
by Christophe Gallois
2007

in catalogue Neutre intense
2008

Christophe Gallois: I'd like to start off this interview with some words cited by Roland Barthes in his lectures on *The Neutral*. One of the terms he addresses is silence. He cites, in particular, this excerpt from Maurice Blanchot's *The Infinite Conversation*: "Kafka wondered at what moment and how many times, when eight people are seated within the horizon of a conversation, it is appropriate to speak if one does not wish to be considered silent."^[2] Barthes was interested in this quote for the way in which it delimits a swing zone between silence and speech. According to him, the neutral isn't about unrelenting silence – that would give it the tenor of an affirmation –, but rather locates itself in this indistinct zone between silence and speech. For me, this idea echoes something at the heart of your work: an incessant oscillation between silence and sound, or silence and speech, as if you were

exploring in each of your works the minimum amount of speech required to make sense. How do you envisage this relationship between silence and sound?

Dominique Petitgand: My relationship to silence is pretty simple: between what is and what isn't, between the full and the empty, an object and its absence. In my works, silences function like ruptures, clean and clear, sometimes violent; they're emphasized or used like units. When I edit sound from sound recordings – that is, from flux – the first thing I do to appropriate them is to isolate these sounds by surrounding them with silences. Silence works like a cut. Then during editing, silences unify all these fragments. These montages are new continuities made from heterogeneous fragments, and silences allow you to homogenize the ensemble. In this case, silence works like glue. When you're listening, silences are also pauses, there so that the listener can continue to think about what he just heard before a new sound comes to chase out the first. Silence is used to slow you down, to move at a different pace from the one at which you usually listen to something. Finally, in my installations, silence allows everything outside the work – the space, the context – to exist: it allows for a sort of permeability or a point of contact between the work and its environment. Each silence is, in negative, a frame on what surrounds it, a way of making the work and what is outside the work coexist. My installations don't require an endless and perfectly concentrated attention span; the time it takes to listen to them is somewhat porous and can accept certain outside elements. My silences are points of junction. What I'm talking about here are real silences, when there is strictly no sound at all on the tape. I also work with other forms of silence: relative silences, such as certain recorded silences that might correspond to moments of transition, where the protagonists in the works stop speaking but where you can continue to catch something. Although the

1. John Milton, quoted in Robert Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*, Gallimard, Paris, 1975, p. 59.

2. Roland Barthes, *The Neutral, Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, p. 27.

characters are silent, you nonetheless hear a lot of atmospheric sound: their breathing, some gestures, the noise of the location and the surroundings.

Flattening the Image

CG: A number of your works also use a vocabulary that one could place in this liminal zone between silence and speech. I'm thinking here about the use you make of sounds situated at the margins of the voice, like stutters, unfinished words, breaths, etc. A number of elements that have no definitive sense but which, when coupled with other sound fragments, develop a meaning. This aspect of your work echoes the way in which Robert Bresson thought about his films, conceiving of his shots as "insignificant images" that could transform themselves upon contact with other images. In his *Notes on Cinematography*, he wrote this phrase, "Flatten my images (as if ironing them), without attenuated them."³ And "without attenuating them" is crucial; it goes back to the possibility of a meaning, of an intensity, that emerges in relief, from initially insignificant elements. Bresson also evokes a passage from the film *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*, thirty seconds during which "nothing happens," and then affirms that "in reality, everything happens." In your works, the a priori neutral sounds that you use often play off this type of vividness; silences are perhaps the moments where "everything happens." How, in your work, do you approach the question of the construction of meaning?

DP: The notion of neutrality might come into play here. The idea is to only go half

way, to create an incomplete, oblique form, containing a certain number of gaps at different levels – in the form, in the story. These blank spots, these "insignificant" elements, these ellipses, exist so that the listener can compensate for them with her thoughts. In cinema, the story is not just the sum of what we see on the screen; the image is only the fragment of something else. It can be taken in the most central moment or in the most incidental. The flattening of an image that Bresson talks about, is the minimum necessary so that something can emerge in the mind of each spectator that would be the addition or the multiplication of the given elements. It's a pretty basic idea, but one which, I think, concerns every artist: to think of the work as an arrangement of elements that will ignite a process in which the elements are going to connect and create tension with each other, against each other, upon each other, and develop meaning.

Idiorhythm

CG: That brings to mind a musician who interests both of us, the American composer Steve Reich. His first works take as a point of departure this type of confrontation, and more precisely the association of different time measures in the same piece of music. *It's Gonna Rain* (1965), for example, is based on the simultaneous play of two identical sound loops going at slightly different speeds. The widening gap between the two recordings creates infinite rhythmic combinations. I also am thinking about *Pendulum Music* (1968) in which a bunch of microphones swing above loud speakers, each swing provoking a Larsen effect that pronounces the singularity of each rhythm, the "idiorhythm" – to use Barthes's neologism – of each *pendulum*.

DP: I am going to make an analogy here between music and narration: what for Reich is purely musical is for me, narrative. In my work, the different time measures

3. Robert Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*, op. cit., p. 23, my translation.

in question are those that the characters experience through their relationship to time or cadence. In a piece like *Fatigue* (1996), this idiorhythm happens in the juxtaposition of a child's voice counting from one to one hundred with a woman's voice discussing the fatigue she feels at certain times. Another example would be *Tôt* (1995), in which the same child speaks about his relationship to the nighttime and daytime, saying "the night, for me, lasts two seconds." During this interstice of two seconds, another woman describes a walk on the beach. What interests me is how one story can overlap with another. Even when there are several voices in my work, there is never dialogue, just an interweaving of several monologues. Their temporalities rub against each other, stacked inside of each other or overlapping. They are parallel worlds, times, time measures, imaginations all cohabiting the same work. And this co-presence takes the form of several sounds with different speeds. It's not about creating a unique element, but, in so far as possible, putting into perspective, developing, opposing and making meaning and music out of all these nuances.

Intention

CG: Another point that I would like to raise is the notion of intention. In a series of notes that you've written, you specify that your works are never the result of a predetermined intention or the desire to address a topic or express an emotion. This type of relationship between the artist and his work is also very important in Reich's music. For example, his use of short clips of speech in *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come Out* is marked by a desire to avoid any musical choice when placing the words on top of a determined melody, but instead to employ the natural musicality of speech. Do you see a link between Reich's use of these voice fragments and your own way of approaching recordings? I believe you're especially interested in his piece *Different Trains* (1988).

DP: What interests me in *Different Trains* is the way Reich uses a musical contour that comes from a fragment of reality, a word: he attempts to transpose non-melodic elements into a tonal or melodic mode. He moves from reality to music by basing it on what one word might contain in terms of melody. That happens through a process of tracing: laying two surfaces and transferring, point by point, the outlines. I used this method, but in reverse, for several pieces, *Quelqu'un par terre* among others: starting from the sound of metal chairs thrown across the floor, I matched the clanging of these chairs with fragments of phrases selected from my recordings. What in Reich becomes a musical motif in my work becomes a spoken motif. I went from noise to speech, whereas he went from speech to music. That corresponds to work based on analogy: moving from one mode to the other, from one language to another, with what that entails in terms of displacements but also in terms of contradictions and potential missteps: a number of delays that generate, I think, poetry. I find it pretty moving, the wish to synchronize, at whatever cost, two things that are by nature opposed, and to accentuate their differences by forcing resemblances. More generally, when I talk about intention, I'm also talking about the fact that in my work, there is initially no wish to express an idea, an emotion, an opinion...

CG: So how then would you define what guides you in creating your works?

DP: I am part of a category of artists that use recording tools: everything comes from a recording. You could say that my work always begins in a secondary moment, after

something has already taken place, in its aftermath. My recordings are not scripted or prepared in advance. I conduct my interviews without predicting or hoping to obtain some precise result. That might come from the fact that each time I hoped for a result, it never happened. I'm not working in such a way that the form would be the materialization of an idea that preceded its creation, like cinematographers who work from scripts. In my work, the text itself only happens at the end, once the recording, the listening, the fragmentation, the editing and mixing are done. I work backwards.

Repetition

CG: One final shared point I see between Reich's music and some of your works is the relationship to repetition, or more precisely to the way in which a repeated motif stresses the experience of the listener, emphasizing listening and its fluctuations. In Reich's writings, there is a passage where he describes the physical and spatial effect that happened when he listened to the repetition of a sound motif, a motif that went on to become the base of *It's Gonna Rain*: "the sensation I had in my head was that the sound moved over my left ear, down to my left shoulder, down my left arm, down my leg, out across the floor...and then it started going the other way and came back together in the center of my head."⁴ Without so much being based on a sensory experience, certain of your works play with the repetition of a motif in order to disorient the auditor.

DP: I use two kinds of repetition: on one hand, identical sound elements mechanically repeated, and on the other, sequences during

which the people on the recording themselves repeated the same thing several times, allowing for natural variations, the occasional change of a word or an intonation. Works like *Les Symptômes* (2001) or *Épuisement* (1998-2002), which center around a well-determined subject, develop this vertiginous effect of repetition in the form of a spiral: a repetition where the point of departure is displaced every time. That produces an even greater disorientation where you no longer know if the sound is really repeated or not; you no longer know if you've already heard the same thing or if it's slightly different. All of that helps to constantly activate the mind of the listener, to keep him on his toes, on the threshold of trouble: to find this destabilizing moment where the listener says to himself, "Now, I'm lost." In order for him to get lost, but not so that he remains that way, there needs to be something familiar in reach: something constantly there to restore familiarity, and then to topple him back into the unknown. Repetition is one of the ways to produce this toppling.

Neutral

CG: Many of your works use a list form: different kinds of enumerations that are a priori impersonal, objective descriptions of situations or schedules. Despite their systematic character, these lists seem to deploy initially contradictory elements: stories, even emotions.

DP: The list is what's arbitrary in the story, a sort of play on the violence contained by the form. Indeed I think that it is a factor of emotion, even if this emotion is paradoxically oblique or obstructed at first. This could be related to the way in which Bresson envisioned the creation of emotion: in the spectator's mind, and not in the content of the image or the sound.

All my work consists in moving towards a form of neutrality and abstraction. This

4. Steve Reich, *Writings on Music, 1965-2000*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2002, p. 21.

by pursuit is present in the course of my recordings, in my practice of fragmentation, through my edits and my installations. The key is, through all these actions, to preserve as much as possible the richness and the polysemy of sounds and words, all the histories and stories contained in a fragment of reality, the teem of possible stories. I need to make the frames close in around a single element and neutralize all the rest, all that isn't the thing itself. I thus consider seeking neutrality itself as an action. In any case, my objective is not to attain neutrality. I simply work with this pursuit as I would with tape or a hammer. It is a tool or a movement, but not an end in itself. I have the impression that often, when we talk about the neutral in art, we think about it in terms of an objective, a vision of the world. No – using the neutral and its multiple forms like a tool is like operating, or investigating an idea without striving for finality, quite simply because the neutral, in itself, does not exist.

69

–
Dominique Petitgand is an artist. He lives and works in Paris. He realizes sound pieces, which are presented as installations, listening seances and published recordings. His recent solo exhibitions include : *Installation pour 9 haut-parleurs*, Les Instants Chavirés, Montreuil, 2008 ; *Les Liens invisibles*, galerie Edouard Manet, Gennevilliers, 2007 ; *Quelqu'un par terre*, gb agency, Paris, 2007. His disks *Le Bout de la langue* (2006), *Le Point de côté* (2002), and *Le Sens de la mesure* (1999), were published by the label Ici, d'ailleurs.

–
This interview was held in August 2007 in Pantin.