

INTERVIEW WITH DOMINIQUE PETITGAND

Dominique Petitgand was born in 1965 in Laxou. He lives and works in Paris, France. Through sound works (CDs, broadcasts, and installations) Dominique Petitgand creates a space and a moment. With the interplay of sound manifestations and montage (using edited and looped bits of conversations, audio elements and silences) Petitgand builds a mentally and physically conjoined space, linking the real, the text, the rhythm, the present and the future.

How did you conceive your installation for the Basel Art Fair?

My work is immaterial and revealed according to location, context and equipment. From the beginning, I've always considered the means of diffusion and reception -in addition to the piece itself- by keeping in mind the existing venue, its limits and possibilities. For the Basel Fair, there is no pre-existing space so I had to start by thinking about creating a structure to build on. Also, an art fair usually only lasts a few days, but my installation pieces are for a public that can take the time to construct their sound event on their own. At a fair there isn't any solitude or time to do that.

For Art Premiere in Basel, the space is shared with another artist. My medium is sound, and when it's associated with an image, there is a tendency toward illustration. Mac Adams' work and mine therefore couldn't share the same space. We had to find a way to create two areas that are independent of each other, while engaging in a dialogue. The first thing was to separate the space so it becomes an environment, one rich enough to encourage a journey, a promenade. The use of space is attractive to me when there are some breaks in the listening time for each visitor, offering several parts, a path and sound, either in several layers, or over several episodes. Therefore I chose to try an L shaped space, a corridor with a left and right side defining two poles. I didn't divide it down the middle to create two linear areas, but instead created two different spaces that are consistent with the diverse expectations each of us has of a work's environment.

I make sound, spoken, musical and silent works. And give them a voice of their own, in different formats: sound installations, public events (like concerts), and publications.

Two stages

I complete my pieces in two stages. The first is recording and editing, a search for the right form and dramatics. Once the sound piece is complete (usually in stereo) I keep it in reserve until it's presented.

The second stage is the exhibition. The context and environment - installation, public sound event, or publication - trigger my choice of format, whether it will be mono, stereo or multitrack, and how the sound will be heard. Then it's a question of opening up the piece, stretching it - like a rubberband - to fit the space it occupies.



Dominique Petitgand, "Mon Possible", (My Best), 2006, Sound installation for 10 speakers, (Le Confort Moderne, Poitiers)

At a given moment, the piece is found in this mental process when something crystallizes in the mind of the listener, built on the elements he's spent the time to take in one by one. It's the recombination of these layers by the listener that makes the work for me, and which might be the idea that matters most in sound installation.

So does the space as you've designed it lead the listener to a particular sound experience?

Yes, moving around allows the listener to find things himself, but also to keep certain ones at a distance. Then there's also the issue of distance between oneself and the sound. Moving closer or away becomes part of the piece. This is different from the idea of creating a sound environment in an area that encloses all the space.

Please describe the installation you've set up here.

Creating the corridor and dividing the space into two poles instigated the use of two speakers for the voices. If I precisely describe the set up for Basel, it's a little like casting a play : there are four speakers, two for the voices and two for the music. The speakers that play the voices don't play

My installations

All my installations are the result of specific thought about locations that they will inhabit. In addition, what I select to diffuse is an adaptation of one of my pre-existing sound pieces (remixed, opened up, redeployed). A sound piece that can be remodified yet again and heard in another context: on disc, at a concert, or even in another installation, according to a different vision.

Approach

Approached through frames and in layers (multiple audio sources, clipped and mixed up sounds in time and space) each piece only permits an understanding of its entirety only after the listener has been able to reconstitute those elements in his mind.

Like a line that's visualized after connecting the dots (the installations with a single voice and silences).

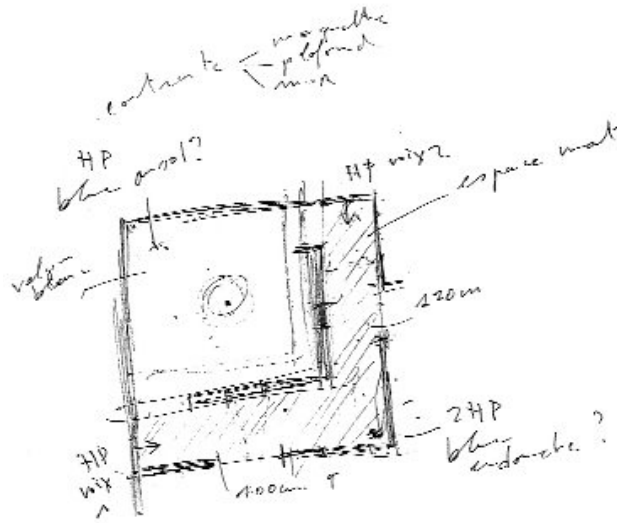
Like a mountain that doesn't show the symmetry of its two slopes except from the top (the installations with two voices or two sounds, one voice and one sound, two opposing elements).

Like a building that doesn't reveal its floorplan until it's been drawn (the pieces with several voices).

Others

When I record people who I know or am close to, I want to explore their extreme otherness. Putting a face on that otherness, reluctantly revealed by what touches us the most.

Concentrating on all the possible differences. Between the other and me, between oneself and oneself. Between thought and words, between words and the voice.



Dominique Petitgand, sketch of installation, Art Premiere, Art 39 Basel, 2008

music or any other sound. In addition, the location of the speakers - the height and placement - aren't the same for those that play voices and those that play music because it's also about creating an architectural and human relationship. The voices, played at ear height are spoken points in space, placed like a totem or a statue. Meanwhile other kinds of sound make up the volumes, sound fields, and environments that emanate from the walls and ceilings - from the architecture itself.

What audio elements make up the installation ?

This installation brings together three categories of sound works. First are the "mono" or "solo" elements which are the pieces with a single voice. These are the starting point for all of my work : a single voice interrupted by silences, monologues, voices as dots. The most exemplary are "Quant-à-soi" (Aloof) or "Le sens de la mesure" (Sense of proportion). They were initially played on a single speaker like a pendulum in a room, like clocks suggesting a continuous presence in a broken line. Lately I've wanted to multiply the sources of a single voice in a single space. Instead of putting it everywhere at the same time, I wanted to cut up the phrases into fragments and spread them across different points, scattering them, undoing the unity in time

and space that the visitor has to recreate during his visit.

At Basel these "mono" voices will be split into two poles, which itself brings an otherness into play. As if there are two people speaking with the same voice which overlaps. Thus we have different forms of otherness : one voice is the twin of the other, or its shadow, or a commentary, or its copycat.

The second group of works uses two voices played on two speakers that perform dual character sketches. Each piece invents elements of non-dialogue : what two voices can do together when discharging the dialogue, a way of inventing new forms of relations between two voices or two people. For example, one voice can be the twin of the other, dominate the other or comment on the other. They can also give different angles on the same story.



Dominique Petitgand, "Mon Possible", (My Best), 2006, Sound installation for 10 speakers, (Le Confort Moderne, Poitiers)

The third category includes both voice and music, going beyond alternating between one and the other. Music is a resting point, it creates hollows to which the voices respond and can be considered either a cohort or a conductor. The game between voice and music never ends. Each piece invents new forms where voices and music expose themselves to each other.

Turning point

When the listener most strongly has a feeling of sudden loss. The precise instant of the turning point, passing from the familiar to the suddenly unsettled, when he says "I am lost."

But above all, don't let that impression endure. The listener will lose his way, stop hearing, flap around, might become bored.

During every moment of listening, it's about creating in the listener that feeling of the turning point, keeping him on the threshold, on the edge.

Language

A trip abroad validated my intuition that I can't record anyone with whom I don't totally share their language.

The musicality of the voices ? Maybe, but knowing the precise meaning of the words is essential in order for me to remove what I want while editing.

Starting by understanding to master the terms and mechanisms of the enigma I am making, the ambivalences, and the outermost echos of each word.

A discourse in which I don't know the language turns into music, but only for me. Not for the listeners who know the language.

Translations

My work is in French, and for non-francophone countries I prefer to make translations, either oral or visual bilingual versions.

The oral translations—inserting a voice into the holes of the narration, a parrot once removed from the French voice—are done in an indirect style: she said, she repeated, she wonders... They become commentary, arbitrary, subjective, and aren't definitive (a translation done one day doesn't stop a different one from being done another).

The translations are done after, they are incidental additions (in the context of a public presentation) and are specific (to each piece).

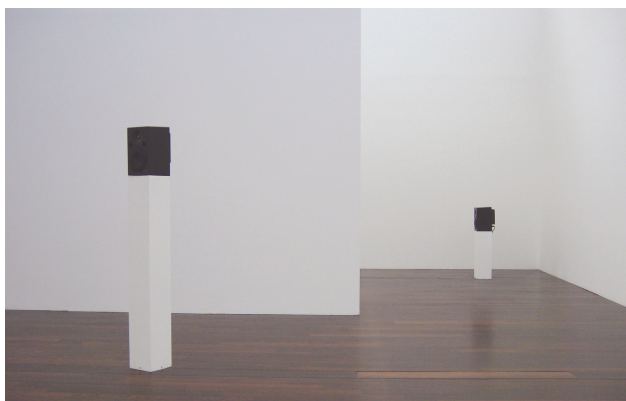
Subtitles

Assembled during the edit, this co-presence of languages establishes a relationship between two expressions. Certain pieces that already have this binary tension as their basis aren't disposed to the addition of a third voice. That's when I make a bilingual version with subtitles.

Reading of the printed words happens on another level and doesn't alter the audio event, leaving the sound untouched.

There is spatial distance. The subtitles appear on a small screen discreetly placed in a corner or off to the side and can be observed later - they can be read or ignored.

Musicality and getting the meaning of the words expanding over a progressive and multiple encounter.



Dominique Petitgand, "Il y a, ensuite", (There was then), 1994 / 2005, Sound installation for 4 speakers, (MACVAL - Museum of contemporary art, Vity-Sur-Seine)

How are those three kinds of elements related in your installation ?

For Basel like in every exhibition the question is the continuity between works. Each show recreates a new continuity of fragments just as each piece is already a continuity of its fragments. There is a plot(s) to be built, with interruptions, pauses, developments among different voices, different textes or different musical moments. The challenge for me is to create a tension, and the tension is what the listener hears. And to do it in a way that he never loses the story line. In the installation I try to threaten this tension that both « scatters » and unifies the elements. That makes the listener responsible for reconstructing the possible narrative/s. There is a kind of mission, even if the experience is varied. It's not a puzzle, there's no solution to find, rather there are multiple possibilities for hearing.

Let's go back to the « creation » of your sound pieces. How do you record them ?

I don't ask the people I record to tell me something specific or to repeat things they've already told me. It's not a documentary. It's a subjective recording of people who agreed to help me by being recorded, without a plan, without preparation or even a subject. I don't have any "professional" relationship to the people I record. They are people for whom the recordings don't have any implications : they don't have something specific to say, or an opinion or testimony to give. Therefore, it's essentially descriptive : an attempt to deconstruct the word that does away with the pathos and drama. During the editing, after exclusions and separations created with silence, the text recovers a dramatic effect. All my work involves building continuity in a single phrase from fragments - from elements that were originally separate.

How important are visual elements in your installations ?

The visual aspect is the result of logical decisions taken in regard to the work itself. There are issues which concern light, the walls, the floors or the ceiling. But I only bring sound elements, speakers, and maybe a screen for subtitles to a location that already exists with its own light and rooms, etc. My thinking is binary: a space that's faded or bright, open or closed, lights on or off, carpet or not, etc. But these aren't additions, they're decisions taken with regard to what's already there.

Like Mac Adams' work, yours has a distinct relationship to cinema. Would you expand a little on that ?

I have the feeling that Mac Adams' relationship to cinema is more explicit because I think his imaginative universe is one that is also found there. My work evolves in a more detached atmosphere. When speaking about cinema in regard to my work, it's more a question of method : editing, cutting, and fragmentation, etc. My method is more tied to cinema as a means of expression rather than its collection of rules and conventions.

Interview by Elodie Royer & Yoann Gourmel, Paris, May 2008

someone on the ground

we panic a lot
and don't really know
what to do

Dominique Petitgand, "Quelqu'un par terre",
(Someone On The Ground), 2005, subtitles

Neutral

The color of carpets and stands, the visibility of cables, the levels of light are often difficult to choose. Only one thing is certain: to visually tend toward the neutral.

Stories

My narratives aren't « images » for the listener, who is excluded by them (like an image would exclude the viewer by keeping its distance). To the contrary, they set off a thoughtful and suggestive process that assimilates the listener. Every word, every sound, like a hand that literally pulls in the listener.

Texts in the margins are excerpts from "Notes for catalogue" by Dominique Petitgand, 2007

All texts are translated from French by Miles Hankin