

## INTERVIEW WITH DOMINIQUE PETITGAND BY VANESSA DESCLAUX 2009

On the occasion of "Stutter", exhibition at Tate Modern, London, 2009  
Translated from the French by Vanessa Desclaux

**Vanessa Desclaux:** *"Stutter" is the title of the exhibition at Tate Modern in which you will present your work Quelqu'un par terre (Someone on the ground). Nicholas Cullinan and I do not consider this idea of "stuttering" as strictly related to speech, but more to language in a broader sense and in its visual, musical, gestural and choreographic dimensions. Do you think that this idea of "stuttering" is relevant in relation to your work? To what extent?*

**Dominique Petitgand:** Am I a stuttering artist? I don't know. What I can say is that if I had to be put in a category, I would say that I am among the artists that always make the same thing: I only develop one language, I always come back to the same point of departure, I use the same materials (a limited, contained and re-used ensemble). I persist. I have worked with the same recordings over many years, from the very beginning. And when I make rare new recordings, they take their modest place within this limited yet inexhaustible, and always available whole, without replacing the others.

Moreover, my works exist in different versions. According to the context or mode of diffusion, I re-work the editing, which I deconstruct, go back to and re-order. And this never ends because each new show, with its opportunities and its constraints, provokes these operations of rerun and reformulation. And also, the same sound, word, or fragment of sentence, coming from a flux that I had to interrupt (the isolated fragment from a recording) can be found several times in the same work but also be used in different works, re-assessed according to a new environment.

I interrupt, I stumble, I start again, I repeat, I vary, I undo, I unfold, I re-order.

By analogy, each character (protagonist, narrator or speaker) in my work becomes, through these editing operations, the game, the victim or the agent of these same processes of repetition, stop and variation. Therefore I feel close to this notion of stuttering, which can then be one of the possible metaphors for my own movement patterns (persisting, rejecting, slowing down), and for the characters in my works, stopped in their elocution, inhabited and suspended in the search for the word to pronounce, on the edge of being mute, ready to fall into silence at any moment. This omnipresent silence that precedes and follows each sound, each sentence, and represents a rupture as much as a link, gives to most of my pieces – and particularly *Quelqu'un par terre (Someone on the ground)* - this fragmented aspect, pierced, without a beginning or an end, which allows itself to be heard by snatches, splinters, constantly started again and always changing.

I have talked about me, the narrators, the aspect of my works, so now I can talk about the listener himself. Listening, this mental and physical activity (the listener going through his thoughts and walking in the space), in the way it is triggered and activated during the visit of one of my installations, can be like a certain kind of mental stuttering. To shed some light on this idea, I would like to quote a text from my project *Mes écoutes (My listenings)*:

*ressassement*

I can keep turning over a hundred times in my head the same musical passage to find out where this melody that I am suddenly singing comes from. Starting again, every time at the same place, to try to trigger automatically what follows, getting closer, walking away (playing hide and seek with my memory).

Until it triggers something in my mind, until I finally find it and that the fragment, now emptied of its mystery, finds itself placed back in his original continuity.

Because for the one who stutters, in the end what counts is that the sentence, which is so difficult to say, unfolds, follows its own pace. The words have gone out and follow each other. A line is formed out of an intense fragmentation, a new continuity is revealed.

*VD: I would like to stop on this idea of "silence" (mutism) or rather what you describe as a state "on the edge of silence" of your characters. Is it a state that you also find in your own practice? Do you sometimes feel as an artist on the edge of silence? I understand by that the difficulty of producing a work, and maybe more generally, producing meaning?*

DP: I can respond to this in different ways. I can already say that it is about being "on the edge of silence" and not "right into it". The position on the edge is a position that characterises me. Spatially: on the edge, on the margin, behind the scenes, next to, just in front. Temporally: just before, before falling off, suspended. I have to maintain my works as close as possible to the edge, the edge of the precipice, of fiction, of abstraction, of silence; in order to leave to the listener the initiative to dive in, to take the step forward.

As an artist, I often feel on the edge of silence too. I am not talking about my own speech, but I have no problem saying that I don't have the ability to produce works quickly. I need a long time free of other deadlines in order to make my works. When needed, in order to respond to invitations, I would rather show the same work several times. I don't want to be in a situation when I have no choice but make a new piece. And since I started what I do, I have often been in situations when I say to myself: "that's it, now it is over, I have just made my last work." The notion of exhaustion also comes from there. It is the other meaning of exhausting: exhausting a pattern, going back to the same, questioning it again, thinking that, after all, I can try to do with what is left, however small.

I have talked about gestures; another gesture of mine is to subtract. To remove, to remove as much as I can: using only sound, it is already removing the other half of existence, the visual half (temporarily of course: in my installations, there is everything to see, the space itself is revealed in its entirety). I empty spaces, and inside sound itself, I remove the space around the voices, the context of the recordings, the names of people, of places, the dates, the references to what connects me to the characters that I record, and which would keep the listener at a distance.

I put aside, I isolate certain rare fragments of a recording, and I leave out everything else. Each of my installations is the product of radical subtractions and the logic of it all – if I was not stopped by my desire to create narratives and tell stories – would be

to reach the absence of everything, to reach silence. But I cannot do it. Silence is always what links two sounds, it is interrupted, extended while framed. In a similar way, I cannot reach abstraction. I walk towards, turning my back to the real (my point of departure) but this abstraction remains inaccessible. What counts, I think, is this movement towards: the obstinacy of my desire to come closer to it.

In the world of my sound pieces, where everything is speech, when a character is quiet, it means that something unusual is happening. The pieces with voices but without text are my “mute pieces”. A voice, in the foreground, manifests its presence through breathing, sighing, coughing, or other similar noises, and indicates a certain human scale. Something that is not language makes itself heard from the body. The discontinuous presence of the voice signifies: someone is here, something is happening to her, but she is not talking, she is absent. These exhaling sounds are for me a way of evoking inertia – the absence of words as a stop, a refusal, an impediment, or a pause; and as an extension, evoking the disappearance, or just the absence.

The breathing at the beginning of each sentence, at the opening of the mouth, which trigger every single sentence, can only be heard once recorded and then isolated through the editing process, separated from words. This is because the words often have the primary role and first draw our attention; but their absence can reveal what is hidden in our tongue.

VD: I would like to go back to the question of abstraction that you were evoking before. Are you talking about a musical abstraction whose paradigm would be silence? Or are there different levels of abstraction in relation to music that could be possible references in your work? What about the idea of visual abstraction in your practice? As you pointed out, your works give the space to see in a way that *reveals it in its entirety*, but you also organise listening sessions in pitch dark. How are these full and empty spaces, sound and visual abstractions, articulated?

DP: The listening sessions in the dark go somehow against a certain type of usage linked to spaces in theatre, music and cinema. My performances -diffusions – which are events contrary to my installations – take place in places where people usually go to see images or actions (actors or musicians on stage, which I don't do). The dark allows me to propose a different form or idea of the spectacle: the spectacle of the light switched off, of the place that is slowly revealed; each listener isolated among the others, focused on his listening and on his perception of all the details. And the sounds and voices heard, like beacons, which to hang on to.

When I talk about abstraction, I don't refer to a specific discipline, genre, or history. I talk about an abstraction that is not specifically related to sound (and certainly not music), or specifically visual; this abstraction is simply a desire that I cultivate to go as far as possible from my point of departure. The point of departure that I gave to myself: the real, the space and the people around me. And to take a distance from that does not however mean to erase everything since that, in the end, this real, which has been captured, broken up, dissociated, subtracted, is found again through fragments, put at a distance and in perspective.

Abstraction, it is also saying that I am not led by documentary concerns (such as restitution, portrait, evocation, information), but by desires of forms, figures, “dispositifs”, or rules. One example: my mathematical mind, geometry and algebra. Algebra. All my works are groups of numbers. Directly: several works present counts and accounts (*Fatigue (Exhaustion)*,  $1/2/3$ ,  $1/79$ ,  $6+1$ ), and without talking about the

figure of the list, of enumeration, which I often manipulate. Indirectly: the elements in presence, divisions in parts, sub-ensembles, measurements, and duration of silences. Numbers that I manipulate intuitively, sensitively (but totally without mysticism). There is also geometry: plans, lines, and points. The question of distances and directions – in my work, centripetal is opposed to centrifugal.

VD: You also stress the idea of subtraction. This brings me back to another text that is key in relation to the question of stuttering: “The Rustle of Language” by Roland Barthes. Barthes defines speech as something irreversible, which one cannot erase or cancel, and which one cannot subtract to, but only add to. For Barthes, it is in that sense that speech therefore stutters (or stammers). On the contrary, you anchor your work in subtraction, and it is through this operation of subtraction in the words of your characters that you reveal the inherent stuttering of speech. To the term “stammering” Barthes opposes the term “rustle” of language, which designates an ideal functioning of language, which he compares to the musicality that is produced by the good functioning of a machine. In this dualism that he describes, we see implicitly the opposition between music and noise. In your work these oppositions seem no longer impossible to reconcile; on the contrary, I think you deconstruct these dualisms...

DP: To respond to this question of dualism, in the installation *Quelqu'un par terre* (*Someone on the ground*), which is deployed in various spaces, fragments of sound of chairs falling hide fragments of voices. The visitor has to move from a first space towards a second space in order to hear the voices. In the ear of the listener, this phenomenon takes place: a metallic chair that falls down in scansion on the ground triggers a litany of spoken words. And it is the action of moving around of the visitor that makes him discover one after the other of the two parts of the binary sound/language. A mobility that leaves the listener free to choose his position for listening: one side, the other, or in between. To put together the two elements (sound and spoken words), I have used synchronicity and a strong formal resemblance. Each sound of the chair falling is associated to a sentence that has exactly the same duration, the same rhythm, the same structure: “ta-ta-ta-ta” = “quelqu'un par terre”, “ta-ta-ta” = “t'in-quiete-pas”, “ta-ta-ta-ta-ta” = “tout-est-ou-bli-e”, thus creating a succession of sequences with two facets. I have to pinpoint that I recorded all the sounds independently from one another, without looking for sameness. The mimicry is only effective through a very precise choice of fragments and an operation of editing, a pairing that is dissociated during the installation.

The two spaces and the sound system used for each of the sound highlight this dissociation. In the first space, large, open, with a strong resonance, four loud speakers hung on the walls broadcast the sounds of chairs falling; in the second space, narrow, muffled, only one loud speaker on a plinth broadcast the voices. A new dualism appears in relation to the visitor's perception: on one hand, a field of sound that surrounds him; on the other hand, a localised point, from which he can go closer or walk away. The strong resonance of the first space produces an echo, sound double that expands each sound of chairs falling and resonates in silence. This is what the visitor continues to hear once he has walked away from that space. And when he gets closer to the voices, this echo, through a game of synchronicity, becomes the echo of the spoken words, associated to them like a projected shadow.

The installation stages a third sound, situated in a third space, slightly separate: the sound of the wind. The wind, recorded on a stormy day, dodges inside the house,

under doors, and makes the architecture sing. Differently to the two other sounds, this sound is continuous, it is not interrupted by silences; it fluctuates and worms its way into the space. One potential synthesis of *Quelqu'un par terre* (*Someone on the ground*): a talking chair, sentences falling down, the wind singing.

I finally think of other dissociations: in the installation, the presence of translation (in English) of the spoken words (in French) in the form of subtitles on a small video screen, forces the listener to shift their focus from sound to something visual, from a practice of listening to a practice of reading. The sentences go from one tongue to another, from oral communication to a written one.