

interview Dominique Petitgand with Yvane Chapuis

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translated from the French by Simon Pleasance

Yvane Chapuis is art critic and exhibition curator, she is joint art director of les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers and is also teaching at the University Paris I-Panthéon-Sorbonne.

Yvane Chapuis : *You use several methods to disseminate your work, ranging from CDs to concerts, by way of installations and broadcasts in the dark which have to do with cinema conditions. Does each piece you produce call for a specific method of dissemination/diffusion?*

Dominique Petitgand : No, there are several ways of getting a piece across. On the other hand, a piece may change in terms of how long it lasts and what its format is; the relationship with silence may also be different, depending on the method of diffusion I choose. I'm attaching more and more importance to silence, the nature of silence, and the period of time it lasts. Silence is perceived in different ways based on the listening method. The device of waiting, expectation and surprise varies, depending on whether there are one or more people listening, and whether they are sitting in the dark, or alone and motionless, or in motion in a given space. For each one of my pieces, the variation of the listening arrangement has an effect on the way it is received; it alters its perception and increases the range of its resonance. For example, a particular arrangement will tend to emphasize or enhance the cinematographic or literary dimension of a piece, while another kind of arrangement will make it more musical.

What do you give priority to when you're choosing a particular method of dissemination/diffusion?

The way my work is disseminated/diffused is determined above all by a context. If an event is involved, the diffusion will be a public and collective broadcast; if an exhibition is involved, it'll be an installation. For a given piece, I think about the appropriate listening device--the number of loudspeakers, the way they are positioned, the way the sound plays with the space. In some instances, this can be provided by the venue, and the way people have access to it, and visit it.

Your work regularly appears in places earmarked for the plastic and visual arts. What relationship do you have with the work as object?

I feel more at ease with notions of time, length of time, sequence, way of looking or seeing, on screen and off. It's a vocabulary associated with music and even more so with film. I wander around among this kind of notion. For example, the notion of solid and void tallies with the link that's set up with the silence that follows or precedes a sound fragment. The passage of time is quintessential, and then some, for any perception of my pieces. Space appears as a medium of resonance and listening for those things that develop in time. I'm not involved in static connections, nor in moveable ones, either. It's something mental. The quest for a form has to do with perception, with what happens in the heads of those listening. I don't get the feeling I'm making an object. Rather, I trigger mental perceptions, things to do with reflection, thought, memory and imagination. My work has more to do with the phenomenon than with the object.

Your pieces have on several occasions been described as "imageless film" ; they work like projection motors for the listener. In this sense, they are decidedly anti-spectacular. This anti-spectacularization, associated with the mental activity performed by listening to them, is all the more real because the listener is not always in the presence of a single work but of a series of works, otherwise put, of a work or research that is developing and unfolding. What's more, one of the methods of diffusion you sometimes come up with involves consulting acoustic documentation.

I work on words. I record people talking. My method consists, in a way, in taking people at their word, based on what they say. I more or less steer them, it's a mixture of improvisation and directing actors. The itinerary of a thought, be it the thought of the listener, well ahead of this latter, the thought of the person I'm recording, is the very stuff of my work. From recording to diffusion or broadcasting, it's the same thing coming around. So the place of the listener is already present at the recording. Furthermore, the machines I use are instruments for looking, and, from a technical angle, there's always a certain distance between the mike and the source of the sound. There's always distance and life, space between things.

Could you talk more specifically about this idea whereby the place of the listener is present at the recording?

The place of the listener, needless to say, provides structure for each one of my pieces. The person who's present at the recording is me, special listener, I cut, construct and direct things live, I have an influence on flows.

What's striking, when listening to each of your pieces, is the perception of a spatial construction, based on what's there to hear. This, in particular, is precisely where your work becomes visual. This construction is developed on several levels, there's something akin to an interaction of different spaces and fields or screens, but this does not, strictly speaking, tally with the field or screen/counter-screen/offscreen of film, because the connection between these different spaces is simultaneous. There's a space peculiar to the situation of the recording which incorporates the person who's talking and the person who's listening--you, it just so happens. The listener instantly sizes up this space and, in so doing, probably because he can't see

you, he sizes up the distance separating him from you. And then there's the space or spaces which are developed, which unfold, within what the voice or voices are recounting.

Things are put into perspective. It's this perspectival factor that interests me. My work involves making things perceptible, it's an interplay of distances, and creating distance.

What distinction do you make between somewhat abstract pieces such as La centrifugeuse and Exhalaisons, and other more realist works, which make room for the word?

The difference is created over the presence or otherwise of words, but there's always a human presence, a narrator of either gender who sometimes doesn't say anything. If the person doesn't say anything, you still hear him or her by way of oral noises, an intake of breath, a slight cough. What is exhaled in an unconscious way, which doesn't have anything to do with speech, or language, or expression, just presence. In this sense, the pieces aren't so much abstract as silent. In them, the words aren't there to offer a hint or clue.

The words that you introduce and stage are invariably detached from any kind of social, political, economic and temporal referent. What lies behind this decontextualization?

There are actually words like "CAC 40" or "Dow Jones", and "George Bush", for example, which don't feature in my work. I work with people who are close to me. What I take, in a general way, has to do, I think, above all with what might refer to our bonds of friendship or family. My pieces exist beyond what is actual or topical, and outside the topicalities of people. If my work consists in conjugating different times, today interests me, but what interests me most of all in the present is the indicative present, a tense that signifies "now" and "always".

The itinerary of a thought, which you were talking about just now, that mental space that opens up from the situations that you set up, and which every listener goes on constructing in accordance with his or her own (hi)story, is a phenomenon, an activity, which, I believe, could not take place in the presence of certain words. For in them the listener brings together, convergence-like, a series of references which don't belong to him--they belong to the media. The words you use are free, they authorize every kind of projection. How do you choose the titles of your pieces?

The choice of a title is part of the work I'm very fond of. It always happens once the piece has been finished. The title usually appears under its own steam. When I have to seek it out, this is a job that can be quite lengthy. I realize that the titles, like the words of my pieces, belong to a certain type of vocabulary, and I get the impression that some words will never belong, never be right. I like it when the title is round, and when it looks like a die that can be turned in every direction and topple on to a different side.

What does Exhalaisons mean?

It's what comes out of a body. For, me, with this piece, it was a matter of giving presence to those people who sometimes don't say anything, so it was a question of using the sounds of their bodies, like a breath, or a noise made by their mouth. It's an acoustic vapour that is exhaled, present throughout the exchange but not in any transcription. This piece is part of a line of thinking about the visual arts, like photography and film. It's possible to film a motionless body. You can't record an inert body. In fact you can only record bodies in motion, bodies which are alive. Accordingly, there's a whole raft of things that I shall never be able to broach head-on. The angle of Exhalaisons is this inertia of the body, without proceeding by way of words or a vocabulary describing the inertia.

What lies behind the presence of music in a piece?

Music often takes up the slack where affect has left off. It authorizes a certain type of intellect to take a break. It may tally with a silence, offered up to be heard, and leading to something else. It relaxes the reading. When you read, you sometimes look up, but stay in the same tension. How are you to have the listener still present without having to give him or her new information?

Many of your pieces are presented as little tales. Do you like stories?

They are narratives or tales, because first and foremost they involve words. The people who talk have something behind them, for which they become the narrator. This deferral interests me because this is precisely where things turn into language, where they pass through the filter of a thought that abbreviates them, distances them, and puts them in perspective or highlights them. It's a play of manufacture which is the equivalent of what I do in the editing and recording. The live factor in my pieces is the factor involving a thought that is declared, and a form in the process of being created before our ears.