

Dominique Petitgand
interview with Pierre Bal-Blanc
by e-mail
2008

for the project *Reversibility* by Pierre Bal-Blanc
Frieze, Art Fair gallery, London, 2008
translated by Dean Inkster

From : Pierre Bal-Blanc
Sent : 19th June 2008
To : Dominique Petitgand

Dear Dominique,

I wish to propose that artists connected to the four galleries affiliated with « The Fair Gallery » choose individual or multiple words together with me, which have the characteristic of revealing process through which they were made.

Following a discussion I would like yo have with each artist, and open to the four galleries, I intend to ask to the authors of the selected works to choose an individual work or several works with me.

The artists will agree that the particular work will be exhibited and then « de-created » (or disassembled) and left in place during the opening of the Frieze Art Fair, or - as an alternative - progressively disassembled during the fair's duration.

The artists will be free to choose the process and the time necessary for the work's return to its material state, if this takes the form of an object. If the work is an idea or a concept, the artist must propose the means of effecting its return to the realm of common language.

In order to attest to the work's return to the physical or symbolic realm, the artists must agree to sign a disclaimer relinquishing their rights as author over the remains of the work or works.

Each artist remains the owner, along with the gallery, of the materials or any other remaining element and of any part that may be due to them in case of a sale.

The galleries are free to sell these materials or elements as such. However, they must not alter the original stated price of the work or works in question.

The eventual buyer must accept, through a written contract, the sale of these materials or elements and can in no circumstances claim ownership of a work or works by any of the exhibiting artists. However, he or she is free to refer to their origin.

From : Dominique Petitgand
Sent : 20th June 2008
To : Pierre Bal-Blanc

Dear Pierre,
thank you for your proposal.

I can reply straight away by saying that I don't wish to take part in your project. Unfortunately I don't relate to its aesthetically, practically or economically.

I deal with the question of distribution in my practice through editions sold in record stores, through the radio and the Internet, and through my sound works in various locations outside the art world. The appropriation of my sentences through the ears of listeners, in their lives (sentences which remain etched in the mind) is also a form of dissemination.

I also work with deconstruction: through interviews, supplementary texts, most recently with *Les pièces manquantes / The missing pieces*, through rares works that have a documentary status, where I return to my collages and put them in perspective by way of commentary (for example, the CD which accompanies the catalogue that I did in 2001 with gb agency).

At times, I feel close to the ideas that you wish to put forward, only I respond to them in my own way, in questioning the medium and context of each of my projects: by creating, each time, a form that asserts its openness, its fragility (ready to fall apart) and silences, as the same time as its tension and its force - and especially in hoping that the path of reversibility and « de-creation » will be, precisely proper to each listener, whether it be the result of listening, intimate experience or the confusion of the listener's thoughts, at the same time that a choice is given to appropriate the work as if it were a favorite song.

Many thanks for thinking of me and I wish you all the best for your wonderful idea.

Best wishes,
dominique

From : Pierre Bal-Blanc
Sent : 28th August 2008
To : Dominique Petitgand

Dear Dominique,

Thank you for taking the time to reply. In an environment that encourages us to click on buttons that activate pre-programmed codes, I know just how difficult it is to focus one's attention in order to write. I was touched by your almost instinctive response, which to my mind testifies less a rejection than to the expression of a profound conviction.

How are the concerns of contemporary artistic practice to be understood when artistic practice is being transformed into an activity governed by the cultural industry? How can one speak of art

in the context of a contemporary art fair that obscures, to the point of forgetting the issues related to artistic practice in favor of others which are raised to the level of international norms?

This mail is not an attempt to get you reconsider your decision, but to confirm your refusal to allow my proposition in itself a contribution to the project. In order to present it in a material form at the stand in the art fair - and, given your choice to remain absent, not without a degree of irony - I would like to invite you to present your publication, *Les pièces manquantes / The missing pieces*, which is a perfect example of both the renunciation you refer to and the reversibility I am proposing.

My proposition will have allowed me to begin a discussion on contemporary music with you, something I have hoped to do for some time. My intention is not to reduce my proposition to an alternative of inclusion or exclusion, nor to a unique form of participation. The project's starting point, reversibility, is a radical idea and I am conscious of the resistance that it may arouse. I intend to keep a record of all the responses it generates.

Your mail is, in itself, a perfect contribution to the situation that I am trying to initiate. When I say initiate, I mean in the sense that I always attempt, in such a case (as in other circumstances), to propose circumstances which aim at being surpassed and are affected by the contributions of those who take part, from the artists to the public itself. I am inspired, for this, by the example of the works of composers like Christian Wolff or Cornelius Cardew, contemporaries of de John Cage:

« We had to liberate ourselves from the direct and peremptory consequences of intention and effect, because the intention would always be our own and would be circumscribed, when so many other forces are evidently in action in the final effect. » Christian Wolff (1).

« Failure exists in relation to goals. Nature has no goals and so can't fail. Humans have goals, and so they have to fail. » Cornelius Cardew (2).

I believe you share these same points of view. Besides, I could just as easily quote from your own writing:

« My works are not staged, in the sense that there is no prior text, project, or intention for which the work would be the realization or the form(...) I respect sound far too much to limit it to anything other than itself(...) I don't rely on an existing language (...) For my works, I invent a syntax, a grammar, a logic (...) For me, nothing is given in advance by a code or conventions ». (3)

I could consider your wish not to participate in the project as a failure, if my goal was to obey a rule of questions and answers, or, quite simply, if I already had an idea of the outcome at the proposal stage. This is not the case and I'm writing this email to clarify some of the reasons.

It is not as if I don't consider your response a failure in relation to one of the aspects of my proposal, as if my position was one of denial. On the contrary, I want to take the opportunity to address together the question of failure and to adopt another approach

towards it. It is sometimes easier to discern the underlying concerns of an artistic practice in the traces of its failures, as you do in your publication *Les pièces manquantes / The missing pieces* for example, than in the results of its accomplishment.

In your interview with Guillaume Constantin, which you did during your sound installation with nine speakers at the Instant Chavirés last April, you said, « Empathy alone, without cruelty, doesn't go far enough, I think, » and you clarify your position concerning the voices and sounds that you record, stating that « My collages are figures of cruelty: cutting into and interrupting speech (couper la parole), hiding the essential, is not a very affectionate action. »

« Cutting into and interrupting speech. » I very much like the idea of summing up your work in the way you reappropriate these words, this injunction with the underlying suggestion that behind its use there is a threat of punishment which you challenge - its is at once beautiful and violent.

I would like to return to the publication edited by the Edouard Manet gallery in Gennevilliers. The pieces you describe in the publication are strongly connected to the notion of reversibility, which I am proposing as an initial idea for The Fair Gallery's stand, and *The missing pieces* could, moreover, very well fit in with the project. The book is subtitled « The sound pieces that I could not or did not want to do, » and you give a precise detail of their circumstances: « Impossibility, renunciation, obstacles, artistic block, inaptitude, conviction. » With each piece, you express either a debt and a dependency on power that is outside of your control (*Unplugged*, for example) or, in the case of *Gare (Station)*, a technical excess or deficiency, a loss on a human scale and an accompanying exhilaration. In the case of *Gare* in particular, the spoken sentence you pronounce - and with previously deafened me - now resonates clearly throughout my body, each time I hear the express train on the platform at the station of Brétigny :

Standing outside, on the edge of the platform, the passage of a train that doesn't stop, and feeling (sensation) that one's head is being cut off.

With the piece, *L'autre chanteur (The other singer)*, you reveal the vacuousness of recording and memory. The piece *A l'autre bout de la rame (On the other end of the train)*, links technology and man - on the one hand, the tendency towards in distinction; on the other, the fragile nature if the capacity to make distinctions. *Chutes (Falls)* ultimately opposes composition and decomposition, without resolving their difference. And finally, *Trouver un trésor (Find a treasure)*, reveals, by default, the path that leads to the freedom of listening.

I would like to cite a passage from Roland Barthes which Dean Inkster quotes in his lovely article on Cornelius Cardew (4), and which fits perfectly with what I have been describing:

« If we are to liberate listening it is not enough simply to begin to speak, as it is often believed. One must allow listening itself to circulate and permute, and thus to undermine the distribution through which dominant modes of tactical and hierarchical speech enforce themselves. No law can oblige the subject to take pleasure where he does not want to go (no matter what the reasons for his

resistance might be), and no law has the power to constrain our listening: the freedom of listening is as necessary as the freedom of speech. This is why this apparently modest notion (of listening) is finally like a little theater where those two modern deities, the one bad the other good, confront each other: power and desire. »(5)

As a proposal for a contemporary art fair - which has a tendency to reduce the results of artistic creation to the production of surplus value and the obligation to take pleasure solely in this closely regulated game - the exhibition *Reversibility* invites the artists to de-create a work and to invert the direction they normally take in their work. I am orientating them in a forbidden direction, not dissimilar to the way you cut up the speech. I have the strong feeling that instigating a rupture with the traditional codes or conventions is necessary « here and now » (at the Frieze Art Fair, in October 2008) in order to reveal the conditions of artistic creation and to liberate listening.

Kinds regards,
Pierre

NB :

I would like to keep your name on the list of artists invited to participate in the exhibition. I would also like to publish our correspondence within this context. As an accompaniment, I would like to present the publication *Les pièces manquantes / The missing pieces*. Many thanks in advance if you could confirm your agreement. I am open to any reaction you may have to this mail.

- (1) Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.50
- (2) Liner notes in *Cardew - The great learning/Bedford - Two Poems* (Deutsche Grammophon 2002).
- (3) Dominique Petitgand, interview with Guillaume Constantin, *Instant Chavirés* (April 2008).
- (4) Dean Inkster, *Cornelius Cardew: From the Great Learning to the Freedom of Listening*, (Valence, France: Ed. ERBA, 2004)
- (5) Roland Barthes « *Listening* », in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), p. 260

From : Dominique Petitgand
Sent : 29th August 2008
To : Pierre Bal-Blanc

Dear Pierre,

I very like your reply, it touches on the issue precisely. I very much like your formula, « I'm bearing in mind your refusal to obey ».

Since I quite agree with what you say, and since one of my preferred conversational modes is (friendly) argument, I don't know for the moment what else to reply other than: yes, I'm happy to participate, following your proposal, in the exhibition *Reversibility* at the Fair Gallery, and to show the book *Les pièces manquantes / The missing pieces*, with the publication of our correspondence (in the form that you feel is best), present at the same time as resistant a little bit ironic (but especially not cynical), and in all cases,
sincerely,
dominique