

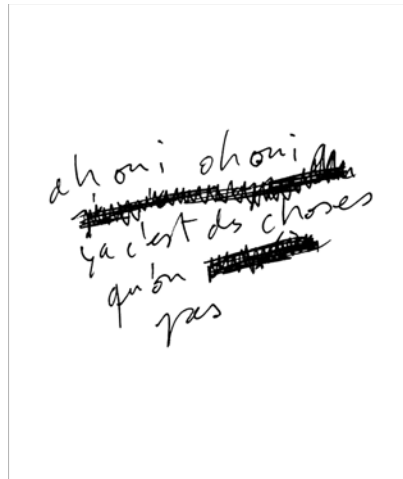
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Le fil conducteur [The Common Thread]

A solo exhibition by Dominique Petitgand

2 December 2017 to 17 January 2018



Le fil conducteur [The Common Thread], 2017, Sound installation with 11 speakers

Églantine Mercader : *Le fil conducteur [The Common Thread]* is your sixth exhibition with gb agency. How do you get the names of the exhibitions, especially this one?

Dominique Petitgand : I don't have any special method for the titles. Sometimes the name of the show comes from the name of a work (then it's easy), sometimes it's a broader title that's linked to several works, but also to the context of the exhibition, to the way of presenting the sound, their relationships, or some feeling I've got about a certain mood or idea. *Le fil conducteur [The Common Thread]* is one of those broader titles (like *L'élément déclencheur [The Blastoff Factor]*, *L'oreille interne [The Inner Ear]*, *Les liens invisibles [The Invisible Links]*) that could almost — and this is just barely a stretch — work for any of my shows, or works. Though with this one there's a special resonance with the electronic aspect to some of the sound that's played (the frequencies, soundwaves, harshness). Transmission cables connect, a wire carrying a current, through floors and walls, linking one place to another.

But a common thread ("le fil conducteur" in french) is the connection driving a story, linking the different points in a narrative. More obscure, not necessarily visible, this thread ensures that even when separated by silence and distance, scattered fragments aren't detached but rather compose the foundation, the very elements of the narrative. And so beware of the extreme irregularity and deconstruction of a work, when there is something below the surface.

ÉM : And yet, it feels like the direction taken by this exhibition is truly different from your others. Though not dispensing with a common thread, possibly through the fact of having an exhibition composed of a single installation?

DP : In 2006 I'd already done a show with a single work (*Quelqu'un par terre [Someone on the Floor]*) at gb agency, though you're right this one is fairly different. The work takes up the entire space — both rooms on the lower level — and it would be impossible to insert anything else (it's important that the setup, with its precise placement and installation of multiple speakers, serve only one work).

The specific arrangement of voice and sounds doesn't allow for room for anything else, either spatially or temporally.

Le fil conducteur is a comprehensive piece, almost all-encompassing.

Another thing that's different about this installation is the concept of assembly that I developed for it. Unlike my other work where I extract fragments from different recordings, here I took a single recording as is (a person speaking to me, ruminating, laughing, telling me things that I knew and things I didn't) and recreated it practically from beginning to end by applying a method of censorship: everything that I would normally have edited or left silent, here I erased it and replaced it with a different sound. Words whose essential I erased (Which essential? The essential that is necessary to understand what's being said), chopped up, dissected, and replaced in the final cut with electronic sounds of equal length, like marouflage, while keeping and making a sound to mark the erasure.

ÉM : I really like the word you said and want to come back to it; that's exactly what it is — censorship. Your work has always displayed a censorship of your own making, that you've sought to apply and observe. And that desire has evolved through your work, and become stronger I think, turning into a kind of erasure that removes quite a lot without turning empty, that remains telling. As if censorship for you is a way to set free sound.

DP : I use the word for several reasons. I know it's usually associated with anti-democratic power, dictators. The word is a bit extreme and I want to be provocative. I'm playing the bad guy who censors. I think that's a recognition of the violence involved in editing. But actually, unlike censorship through power or morality, here it leads to a revelation : everything that was removed, everything that's missing, exposes that little that remains, frames and magnifies the little that got past that gate, through the filter. I think I've always thought that way: making something out of what's left.

I also use the word censorship because the material I work with is basically words, the recording of words, and normally it's just not right to cut someone off, it's wrong to interrupt, it's polite to listen to the end. I don't do that. Unlike my other work, here the erasure isn't hidden, it's clearly heard. So I might as well own up to it.

ÉM : The presentation of words is extremely important for you. If not heard, they are written, displayed on screen for example as is the case with *La lettre vide* [*The Blank Letter*] where the voice is completely unintelligible but a listener clings to words on a screen, a transcript of what's said. Here the words are chopped, devoid of narrative meaning, though there are still noticeable words and phrases. It's taken to the limit and you've created a tension that's disconcerting, if not disturbing at times.

DP : The unintelligible comes in many forms: not understanding what a person says because we don't know the words (something I rarely use, aside from in *La lettre vide*); or another option, we know the words but don't know what the person's talking about, the context, why they're saying what they're saying, or not saying, different levels of the enigma.

Because my works are the focus of projection, they have to do with what isn't said, what's hidden, missing, and verge on the unintelligible. For *Le fil conducteur* that's even more the case. Words are the starting point, and speaking is the primary material of my work, but beyond that, there is always the presence, a human presence, a person speaking to us, while speaking to themselves. It is this presence that must first be expressed, conveyed in a space. And the way it's presented (orally or written, from a single speaker or from many, in the foreground of one room or hidden in another) is one of the essential aesthetic aspects of the installation, giving it its form, its character.

At times that presence depends on words, at others not (in the case of mute works using breath, respiration, chirps or whistles), at times barely intelligible. It depends on the work, the editing approach and the system of cutting — whether it's done by phrase, word, syllable, or breath. I'm able to work at all of these different levels and types of unintelligibility.

The key was always knowing precisely what I could remove and what I could leave from the original words. Ever since my

first works, one thing was certain: I wanted to delete proper nouns, place names, dates, any connection to specific events or circumstances, anything that created context, that could provide references or particulars to the words. And also omitting any beginning, middle or end of a story, going as deep as possible. These eliminations are what made it possible to test the limits of fiction, and to explore forms of abstraction.

With *La lettre vide* [*The Blank Letter*] I began a new method of editing, which I continued with *Le fil conducteur* [*The Common Thread*]: here erasure happens one word at a time, and the process of arbitrary fragmentation is in full view. What's left afloat from the censorship, from this shipwreck, are scraps and beginnings of sentences, bones of a story, mini vocal signals, a few pronouns, verbs and some clues to time. And the recurring question: "What are they talking about?"

ÉM : But also: "What am I talking about?"

DP : For sure, in my pieces, the people speaking say "I" (obvious examples include the works *Je marche* [*I walk*], *Je parle* [*I speak*], *Je descends* [*I go down*], *Je m'en vais* [*I leave*], *Je m'endors* [*I go to sleep*], and of course *Je* [*I*]). And this "I" is moveable, circulating among several voices (like multiple incarnations of a single word), yet also passing from the person speaking to the listener (who can take on adopt the first person character as their own). In addition to these "I" there are also some "you" ("you know what I mean?") because each word addresses someone. The "you" said to me during the recording and that I convey by revealing my presence to an entirely new listener.

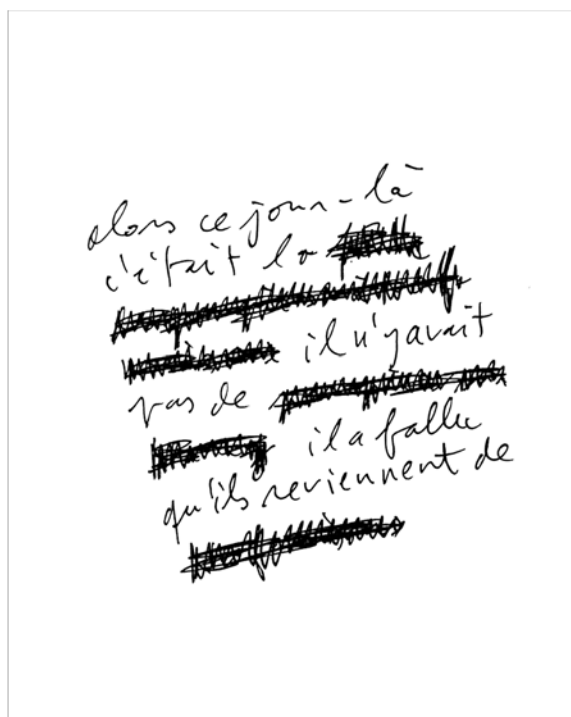
ÉM : That's also what's happening in the silent piece *Mes écoutes* [*My Listenings*] where it's about you and your relationship to listening, to sounds, but the text refers us back to ourselves and to our own way of listening, and we become the "I." *Mes écoutes* [*My Listenings*] is its own kind of work, in that in this case it's me, Dominique, who wrote the text (which therefore isn't the result of editing from recordings of others interviewed by me and speaking to me) and who says "I". Those are my memories, my actions, my notes. But I made every effort — which is what every person who writes does I think — to make the "I" as open as possible, the most accessible, for others to relate to it. A neutral stand. I tried as much as possible to achieve neutrality while keeping as much feeling as I could and striving to precisely describe each state of listening. And also by talking more about perception and reception than about the sounds themselves, more about the effect than the cause. So it's often about the space, distance, the path and the time that a sound takes to reach the ears, to reach consciousness.

Compared to works with sound, my texts (on paper or a screen) allow for a more direct transfer of the "I" since there's no voice, no otherness to filter, which in the event of the oral would defer the transfer.

Anyone who listens can relate to the character, but that happens after the first step of the meeting, a meeting with its own character, its own way of speaking, sound, pace, emphasis, a significant oral presence.

Interview by Églantine Mercader with Dominique Petitgand

November 2017



list of works mentioned by Dominique Petitgand:

Le fil conducteur [The Common Thread], sound installation for 11 speakers, 2017

La lettre vide [The Blank Letter], sound installation for 2 speakers and text-video, 2017

Mes écoutes [My Listenings], 152 texts, paper version, 2004/2017

Quelqu'un par terre [Someone on the Floor], sound installation for 7 speakers, 2007

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