



cat. 16

There was / then

(voice 1) There are the flags flying /
 (voice 2) And then? / (voice 1) there's a boat
 on the beach / (voice 2) and then? /
 (voice 1) there are people drying
 themselves on the sea wall / (voice 2)
 and then? / (voice 1) there's a woman
 drying, drying her laundry / (voice 2) oh? /
 (voice 1) suits on the ground, a little torn,
 some seaweed / (voice 2) and then? /
 (voice 1) there's another woman buying
 suits or I don't know what / (voice 2)
 and then? / (voice 1) and a store that has,
 where they sell books, videos / (voice 2)
 and then? / (voice 1) there's a house,
 there's a woman peeling potatoes /
 (voice 2) oh yeah? / (voice 1) there are,
 in the house, some frames / (voice 2)
 and then? / (voice 1) there are people
 watching / (voice 2) and then? / (voice 1)
 oh, the skeleton, there's a skeleton,
 there's a... / (voice 2) how's that? / (voice 1)
 ...some... / (voice 2) huh? / (voice 1) there
 are flowers / (voice 2) and then? / (voice 1)
 there are guitars, there are / (voice 2)
 and then? / (voice 1) there are lots of, lots
 of people / (voice 2) and then? / (voice 1)
 there's a small boat above them / (voice 2)
 oh? / (voice 1) and there's a small, a kind of
 little island in the sea / (voice 2) oh? /
 (voice 1) and, and that's it / (voice 2) wait,
 I don't remember afterwards.

Translation from the French: Chet Wiener

space that opens onto the exterior, offering possible interaction with the landscape.

While both exert strong attraction, the narration and the music call on different modes of audio, visual and spatial perception that lead to another potential space, a narrative hypothesis. *Satellite Blue Palace* is like a film with no need for images.

Dominique Petitgand designs and produces sound pieces that come in different forms: installations, listening sessions in darkened rooms, and CDs. His work is essentially sound-based, he records words, cuts and fragments them, and then reconfigures them to create other relationships between the voices, which are themselves intercut with music, noises or, sometimes, silence. Editing sound is like constructing memory: it structures a new syntax by forging a continuity from fragments, a loose continuity made flexible by its location outside of real time, always marked by its ambiguity between the principle of reality and its projection into fiction.

There was / then (1994/2005) [cat. 16] is a two-voice piece (with a beginning and an end, even though it is edited into a loop and functions through its own repetition. A first voice, that of a child, draws a sort of sound portrait of a landscape composed of small snatches of descriptions, strangely laid down like little memories placed end to end; this is the “there was” of the piece. A woman’s voice is interspersed between the fragments, in the moments of silence, repeating the word “then,” seeming to force the child’s memory to manifest itself in words. These two utterances, themselves intermittent and superposed on a musical background, cross paths without ever meeting or answering each other, as if no longer knowing what the memories correspond to. Orchestrated in the editing process, their dialogue is already, in and of itself, a meditation on the movement of memory.

The piece closes on these words: “I don’t remember afterwards.”

The process of memory is in many respects similar to the way in which Petitgand’s sound works produce narrative atmospheres without necessarily being narratives themselves. These works tell stories, but stories so discontinuous, fragmented and broken up that they are on the brink of disintegrating and losing the capacity to be told. The fragments of story float outside of time, where the narrative depends almost exclusively on the presence of the word. It is a bit like a dream, which is no doubt the most difficult narrative space to grasp by reason of its apparent lack of coherence and temporal referents. Even so, the narrativity works, because each isolated voice tells and evokes something, an atmosphere, a sensation. In narrative terms, Petitgand’s sound pieces raise a very interesting problem through their reference to memory, remembrance and dreams. As admirably described by the author Antonio Tabucchi, it is impossible to reconstruct unconscious time in a real narrative time, just as the emotion and feeling specific to each dream are lost when we seek to inscribe them in reality.³³ To say just what *There was / then* or any of this artist’s pieces [fig. 1, m, n, pp. 55-57] recounts would be intrinsically impossible. However, the narrative space is open to eventual reconstruction, one can pursue and prolong the different pieces by appending one’s own stories, childhood memories for instance, and by including one’s perception of the immediate environment. Sound, by virtue of its properties, has the capacity to create an acoustic image that produces this effect of immediacy. *There was / then* plays on the crossover from audio to visual by ceaselessly engaging our sense of sight with oral descriptions delivered by the child.

It follows that this sound piece, and no doubt all of Dominique Petitgand’s work, does not resonate with everyone in the same way.

Each experience is singular, varying from person to person, and individual perception differs depending on whether the listener is alone or sharing a space with others. Petitgand attaches particular importance to the listening apparatus, to the way in which the sounds cohabit and construct a space. For the presentation of *There was / then* at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, the sound is broken down to emanate from distinct sources, circulating from one loudspeaker to another and punctuating the two large public staircases. The voices thus construct a space deployed on several levels, acting in relation to each other to create a play of sound symmetry and dissymmetry in response to the architectural symmetry of the staircases. We move about in a listening space where the presence of sound produces the effect of surprise. The sounds have an immediate presence because they no longer refer to anything real, and because the words are decontextualized. They seem to spring from nowhere, accentuating a sense of proximity and apprehension.

Su-Mei Tse's works are not fundamentally narrative. However, her handling of sound, music and image shares many similarities with that of the other artists presented here, probing time, anticipation, suspension. Tse's interest in music is an extension of her classical training as a cellist, and it finds new echoes in her visual art production, which questions defined and predetermined structures and explores temporality, silence and sound. The idea of doing something new with music and of conceiving sound as a field of experimentation has given rise to several works in which the artist appears playing the cello. In the video *The Marionette* (1999) [fig. o, p. 58], for instance, the puppet-like strings attached to limbs make it impossible to control her instrument. Being continually impeded, her body and movements create a new composition involuntarily defined by

constraint and hindrance, rather than by precision and perfection.

The Echo (2003) [cat. 17] follows on with this sound and image work. Tiny in a vast mountain landscape with a luminous meadow foreground, a cellist in a red dress (the artist) sits on a stool, back turned to the viewer. Pared down and almost abstract, the image appears to be static. The sound is also reduced to one of its simplest expressions: the echo, which produces the work's sonority through resonance. A single musical phrase is played over and over, and the entire music track is composed on this repetition, in back-and-forth movements of sound. A certain attention is required to perceive this sound effect and to notice that, very gradually, the mountains are also answering like an echo, with minute, calm, unexpected and barely perceptible changes of tone. It is like a kind of "de-conditioning," to borrow the metaphor used by Su-Mei Tse when she presented this video for the first time, in Venice.³⁴

The Echo is specially situated in the exhibition. The artist wanted to install it so that the sound would resonate in the space without the source being precisely identifiable. Her aim was to treat the echo like a distant reference and allow it to continue, to resonate, to spread out and prolong itself beyond the resonance of sound to the power of imagination. In terms of both sound and image, this piece functions by discontinuity and interval, the rhythm is slow, almost suspended, and everything becomes a matter of time, expectation and anticipation.

Penelope, The Return (2003) [cat. 18] is a more literally silent work that suggests a story recontextualized and updated to emphasize silence, anticipation, the will to measure and contain time, or better still,

like Penelope, to suspend it. For that is what Penelope does, she draw out time to the point of giving form to expectancy. To suspend the flight of time, each night she unravels her day's weaving. A skein of red wool set on a table between two chairs points to this strategy, which Penelope developed to escape the insistent entreaties of the suitors gathered in Ulysses' palace. In addition, the installation is visually arranged like a waiting room.



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