

Xavier BOUSSIRON

An interview with François Piron

FRANÇOIS PIRON

To begin with a little anecdote, when Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux wrote his piece on your work,¹ someone who had read it said to me, “Labelle-Rojoux’s great, he’s actually invented an artist.” They really thought it was a work of fiction.

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

They thought he was talking about an invented artist? Wow.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

A pretty unlikely artist anyway, someone who makes music in the universally accepted song, recording and concert modes without actually being a musician. Arnaud’s analysis gives the impression of performing the squaring of the art/popular culture circle. Bringing music-making into the art field the way you do—not as a specialist form of representation, but as a kind of indeterminacy within the identity of your work—is perplexing. The relationship with popular culture is a longstanding problem in the art context, especially since Pop Art and its two-tiered appropriation of a certain kind of popular culture: an empathy, but at the same time a scholarly and always allegedly critical reading that generated distance and differentiation. By making music you’re involved not only in a detached system of representation, but also directly in culture as spectacle.

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

Using music can look like something underhand, a way of dodging the issue. But my way of functioning has always been more natural than cultural—there’s something pretty pragmatic underlying it. It’s true that when I make music I really do make music. I mean, it’s starting to look like music of a slightly ambiguous kind, one related to muzak or deriving from popular culture. My interest in rock is mostly documentary, with a theory that the 1950s have never really ended. I was never a rocker, even when I tried to play in groups. What’s implicit in picking up on rock and using it in relation to ideas more or less to do with art might seem weird, something a bit treacherous or guileful; but it’s the outcome of ideas that are quite literary—academic, even—and which are about fidelity, with a certain religiousness.

Music in art is something I’ve never been able to imagine as a strategy or a trend. You always start out with options that are a bit doubtful or trivial: there’s a conditioning in art that means there’s always—in art schools, for example—a leaning towards John Cage or the term “sound”. And as soon as you mention rock’n’roll somebody fires back Frank Zappa, because he can be fitted into a profitable post-modern slot that still fits the gravy train we’re riding. By contrast an el cheapo record of German dance music, the kind of threadbare cover

of pseudo-Hawaiian folk stuff you mainly find on racks in service stations, tells you, for example, that it's the Germans who popularised this kind of Hawaiian music. These are things that are just as cultural, exotic, intriguing and charged with meaning as the helicopters that break into the middle of Stockhausen's violin quartet.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

Rock music also carries the implication of an amateurism—as opposed to artistic specialisation, to the leisured classes' image of the learned artist—that is one of the unifying threads of modernism.

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

I'm really intrigued by guys who only ever made a single record, sloppily as a rule, without necessarily any idea of making things evolve. Instead of moving ahead, this kind of thing forges off sideways and inevitably becomes a kind of eccentric gem that completely throws the security men of history. What you've got are little cues that make you think of anthropology or mycology: an outbreak of inventiveness depending on factors like the shade and the humidity level—reaction to context.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

Isn't your interest in music reminiscent of the cabinet of curiosities?

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

No, I don't think so, but it does involve some odd characters. Hasil Adkins, who's getting on for seventy, is a kind of Gaston Chaissac of rock'n'roll. Listening to the radio, he thought it was one guy playing all the instruments, so that's what he did. He played the drums at the same time as the guitar, the nose trumpet and so on. There was a strangely appealing energy that no doubt had to do with his amateurism. Purists think the Sex Pistols went off once they began to learn to play, but even a retarded punk can improve if he keeps on playing the same three chords. And if he lets that improvement happen his inhibitions come to the surface. Does that mean a loss of purity? Purity's never really been an obsession for me. While there's rock on the one hand, there's Enrico Morricone on the other, with all that smooth, endlessly parasymphonic music—inventive and commercial at the same time—coming out of the Italian political context of the

70s, between Aldo Moro and CIA pressures in the depths of the cold war. These things produce antinomies that are pretty strange. Music has never been simply musical. It's the old story: the abstract aspect of music, calling up some emotional thing you can't actually get a handle on and which, as Labelle-Rojoux would put it, seems to have no direct connection with the biographeme in question. Music is supposed to convey something psychoanalytical, something as touching as a mother's love. These are all stances, attitudes, variants and evolutions, with all their accompanying contradictions. We all have our models, mine being mainly guys who are woolly thinkers and a tad uninhibited.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

But your work is essentially in what's called the plastic art field: is this chance or fate?

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

It would be ungrateful of me to play the innocent. It's thanks to artists like Murillo, Velázquez, Picabia, Clovis Trouille, Rauschenberg and others that I've acquired a certain musical, and even artistic sense of responsibility. So it's more to do with fate than chance. There's the saying "stupid as a painter", but you can also say "idiotic as a musician", "stingy as a conceptualist" and so on. I fell back on a musical thing solely as a way of solving a problem to do with relating to items of furniture. Gradually this resulted in a kind of fairly visual music, which has always had to do with relating to the art field.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

And did the use of music lead you immediately to thinking about entertainment?

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

No, not straight away, but obviously the issue of performance came up. There's always something about performance that doesn't fit. The definition of performance is that it's as boring as performance—in its economic logic as it relates to entertainment. It speaks very eloquently about entertainment, for it speaks only of what's not there. Entertainment is a kind of superfluous art, and the absence of entertainment in certain performance situations gives rise to theoretical guardrails—the relationship with the audience, whence a certain idea of social interaction—and consequently the question of politics inevitably comes up.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

One of your earliest works is a recording, a disc called *Rien qu'un cœur de poulet* (Chickenhearted)², made up of organ versions of Roy Orbison tunes, with no arrangements or voices. You yourself play the tunes right through, using a single instrument, with the choice of tunes calling attention less to musical structures than to a set of images and a network of connotative associations.

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

I've always had this totally immature, great-creator tendency to do everything myself. What I got into in *Rien qu'un cœur de poulet* had to do with nostalgia, with landmarks from my early teens. The tune steps in like a soft yet dangerous weapon, of the kind narrative can sometimes be.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

By eliminating the supporting arrangements, which always give rise to a progression and a climax, you effect a kind of purification of the music.

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

The fat had to be skimmed off, because the thing was stewing in its own juice the whole time, which is simultaneously agreeable and frustrating. The starting point for *Rien qu'un cœur de poulet* was analytical, there was something to be put back together. What drove me, in a naive, slightly clumsy way, was the idea that I could recreate what was on the tip of my tongue.

I'd like to remind you here of my earlier project, the *Dan Electro Museum* of 1994. Influenced by Glenn Branca and John Zorn's *Cobra*, Romain Rousseau and I began looking into the problems of improvisation. Initially this found us hanging out in New York for three weeks; and three hours before we were due to catch the plane back we went into the only place where you can find guitars easily—a store—to record an improvised session. A year later I was doing a residency at Monflanquin, in southern France, and I listened to my recording for the first time; my idea was to use it as a basic score, even if it was a kind of musical mess with interruptions coming from the guitar salesman—a real Beckettian ambience. We built a one-square-metre studio and used it to add a new layer of improvisation following instruc-

1
"Gueule d'ambiance" in the online review *Synesthésie*.

2
The CD *Rien qu'un cœur de poulet* is available on Xavier Boussiron's Suave label.

tions as specific as “play hard” or “like Mingus”. We were bent on inventing a form of chance that mainly revealed a level of skill which, for the moment, could not go any further. Then all of a sudden we ended up with a Catalan sardana—an invented tradition after twenty minutes of hermetic chaos. And I realised that what was missing from the start was not having come to grips with the accursed—but well-founded—aspect that is oversensitivity and emotion. Music isn’t just a way of frightening your granny. And *Rien qu’un coeur de poulet* was a kind of riposte.

I don’t do two hours of guitar every day just to keep my hand in; I play concerts, I’m making a record. I use music more than I play it. It’s a way of making art, and I prefer making art to being interested in it.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

Is this why the works that followed were more along the lines of accompaniment, like your pieces for Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster’s installations—slightly subliminal, so to speak?

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

The accompaniment idea was always there, even in *Rien qu’un coeur de poulet*. I was thinking in terms of an additional input, like Satie’s *musique d’ameublement*. It’s not a foreground problem, more like a background entity. This addition inevitably has a depth that takes up a certain amount of space.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

Yes, and sometimes it even spills over completely. But even so, this stance as a performer that you’ve been working on with Sophie Perez and Claudia Triozzi could give the impression that you’re just working as a colourist.

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

Being an accompanist has never bothered me. There’s the idea of being in good company while not always being with the right kind of people. Burt Bacharach—no comparison intended—accompanied Marlene Dietrich right through her final tour. He was in the background, and when you think about what he created later... But I’m not really an accompanist, either, that’s the contradictory thing. What interests me is producing depth, and if you start adapting to the people you’re with and the various contretemps that arise, you can get accumulations that are sometimes pretty opaque. When Claudia asked

me to work with her on what later became *The Family Tree*, my role was clearly one of input, of arranger. As for my relationship with Sophie Perez, it goes beyond the straightforward musical framework and is now a collaboration involving the writing of dialogue, operettas, songs and so on. Often people from the art world who come to see these shows say, “There’s a problem, you’re an artist but you’re not visible enough.” I don’t know exactly what they mean—maybe they’re saying I should put myself more centre-stage. Unfortunately that isn’t always where the action is.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

But when you’re alone on stage you don’t grab the limelight.

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

With *Menace de mort et son orchestre* (“Death Threat and His Orchestra”)³ I’ll be doing things almost differently, this new project being a response to all the people who came to see me in concert and for three quarters of an hour watched something which was even more of a pain in the arse than a classical recital. I was told, “Put in some slides, some image, so that it moves ahead.” So that it’s more reassuring? *Menace* is a response to that, an embodiment of my idea of the music video, of historical reconstruction and entertainment.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

In your concerts with Stéphane Bérard⁴ you could play lying down.

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

We almost did that. The *Donne-moi ton sperme* (“Give Me Your Sperm”) project with Bérard is somewhere between decorative experiment and casual control. I’ve always loved art for that enormous inefficiency, that enormous, edgy distress, that fantasy of efficacy always on the verge of keeling over. Wanting to be in concert as if you were in your living room has a kind of methodological gypsiness about it. When you do a concert the foregrounding is as hieratic as you can get. Afterwards we’re slumped on sofas in the sun while the public has a drink. It’s got nothing to do with any kind of intersubjectivity, it’s a form of hypocritical spectacle.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

It’s one thing to talk about spectacle, another to actually do one.

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

Right, you’re not transcending the spectacle, you’re right there in it.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

In *Menace de mort* you make use of certain repressed forms or motifs from music hall or cabaret or fairground shows: hypnosis and petomania, for example.

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

It’s not a question of lumping everything in together, but of experiencing. Everything can tell us something about spectacle and I want to take the poster image through to the end—including attitude and personal mythmaking. When I see Daniel Buren’s cowboy boots they speak to me about his connection with Mosset and his idea for the Place des Terreaux in Lyon. That’s the dark side. Afterwards come the oompahs, the folklore, the picturesque stuff—all of them the worst ways of serving her majesty Beauty.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

Do you have the impression of having constructed a stance or a personage more or less strategically?

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

At one point I was a kind of gallery opening entertainer. I was invited along when people were hoping for a fun evening, and when I played everyone said, “Shit, you call that entertainment?” The obligatory time frame makes the thing extremely self-determining and weird. And afterwards they tie saucepans to your back bumper to try and pigeonhole you.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

As a flop, for instance?

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

Being a flop is a gambit for getting people to swallow the thing—sometimes in a facile way. What’s interesting is when a work speaks about itself and its repressed side at the same time.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

And the kitsch pigeonhole? That’s a question worth considering.

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

When I took up Roy Orbison, my idea was to recycle something that was mine. Setting out to



Xavier Boussiron, *Menace de Mort et son Orchestre*, 2004, Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers. Photo by Laurent Friquet

interpret tunes that are totally distinctive with a somewhat trite instrument was an option that could have seemed irreverent at first sight. People often say kitsch when they're faced with some prettily presented quandary. You can bet bad faith's not far away.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

The word for word translation of the titles is no help there, either. And here we should also talk about the titles you give your pieces. There are tunes that seem nothing special, and then you notice that the song is called *Golden Shagatte* ("Golden Shuddup") or *Tiens, tourne-toi* ("Hey, Turn Over");⁵ it's a bit disturbing, and one wonders where you dug up these ideas.

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

The title provides a certain flavour, rather than a meaning.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

Even so, you go beyond the parody stage with the burden of a complete cover version, which

complicates the whole sampling idea. Roughly speaking the sample might be a way of making up for the obscurity of the nostalgia, by only commandeering something that's like a sign, following a photographic rationale: you lift out a small part that creates a sign of belonging, a mode of empathy. It's consensual and thus quite involving.

When one starts on a cover version, the way you did with Roy Orbison, there's a shift of reasoning that makes me think of Gombrowicz's epigraph for his *Possessed*: "Transporting the most up to date contraband on old-fashioned wagons, that's what I like."

That's even more true for the music you're producing today, which generates a number of associations of ideas without being easy to map.

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

The first pieces I did were intended solely to reference the record collection I had at the time. On a single piece I brought together bits of Television, paso doble and the Velvet Underground and the final result was of course indescribable,

no more than an attempt at expression of the worst possible kind: the idea of a personal composition, of an original, free text.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

Is that what you call a repressed reality?

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

To the max. But to get back to Gombrowicz's wagons, *Possessed* is your perfect dime novel, a totally artificially creation full of thrills and surprises—a marvel of illusion and a parody into

3

Menace de mort et son orchestre is directed by Xavier Boussiron, with a cast including Marie-Pierre Brebant, Christophe Salengro and Claudia Triozzi. The work was produced and premiered at the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers on 11-13 December 2003.

4

Stéphane Bérard is an artist. He and Xavier Boussiron recorded the album *Donne-moi ton sperme*, available on the Suave label. They also gave a number of concerts with, for a short period of time, Nathalie Quintane as singer.

5

On the album *Musiques de la carte du tendre* (Suave).

the bargain. My fondness for spectacle comes from ways of doing things that are not always very skilful, plus an obsession with plot. In 1992 my graduation piece at art school was *The Charity Kitchen/La Cuisine de charité*, an installation that drew on the dubious old concept of founding the ideal rock group. It used two flesh and blood characters: Guy Lussier, a neighbour of my family who'd been a jazzy dance drummer in the 50s, and Christophe Dupuis, with whom I worked on the music for the project every Sunday from seven in the morning until one in the afternoon (psychologically this was like playing a competitive sport with a hangover). They were sitting each side of a speaker, with a 1963 German guitar leaning against it upside down and emitting soft little feedback melodies. Above them Eric Bouvel, who was then world accordion champion, represented a heavenly mentor—patron saint of popular art—in the form of an automaton shaking its head in a “no”. The whole thing was a kind of documentary mausoleum saying “Here’s why and how I moved into art.” If you can imagine it, it made you think of an altarpiece, a crucifixion and a foreground thing.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

All the same, it seems to me that this way of seeing things is still at work, especially in your contributions to Sophie Perez’s shows. It’s both spectacle and the image of spectacle. The two are overlaid. These are shows that provide an image. I see a connection here with your interest in the connotative side of music as a vehicle for images that are already media representations. Neither of us knew Roy Orbison; what we know are the record covers, the stage sets—things already a bit blunted and dissociated. This imagery eliminates the pornographic element in spectacle that Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison could trigger, but replaces it with a kind of eroticism. When you’re in concert, for example, it seems to me that you’re not at all trying for an immediate exhibition-style relationship in the pornographic sense; rather, the audience is faced with interlocking images that you catalyse.

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

Things aren’t direct, that’s for sure. But in the music there’s still that fundamental feel of immediacy. This eroticism is shot through with subtlety and depth, vulgarity, dreaminess and abstraction, ridiculousness and showing-off, all

at the same time. You were saying this isn’t excessive, but even so there are buildups whose excess has an element of pathos. Nothing to do with the navel-gazing of video-makers busy filming themselves, dreaming of their own pathos and swearing they’re not going to film it even as they’ve got it working just out of frame. Personally, I bring out my basket and in it there’s a pot of good solid pathos. It’s the opposite of something effective, of a definitive form, but I’m going to bring it out and then we’ll see. Hey, looks like inspiration... This could have resulted in some very funny things, I mean things to do with laughing. The gamble would involve being able to reconcile collaboration and rift, but it’s hard to have both together. In this pot there’s no happy ending.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

Nonetheless, I think it’s only a matter of constantly resumed negotiations between the two poles. There’s no such thing as a form that is total alterity, that doesn’t try to appeal to one side or another. And I sense this via your music, which is deliberately appealing but doesn’t settle for its own appeal, and which ultimately produces a strangeness, an unresolvedness...

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

...which stimulates you to resist and give in at the same time. You were talking about pornography just now: there’s a certain kind of production which is like pornography in that it is aimed at an audience that wants to see as much as possible—always more and more.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

There it is a definition of kitsch as a manifestation of the Baroque, in which nothing is invisible, in which everything is made available for visual consumption.

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

There’s no getting away from that. But I’ve never really felt kitschy. A born has-been for sure, outdated and threadbare from the start. In some way more given to ageing than to maturing. I’m a product of the middle class and that’s what I talk about: but not so much about the culture itself as about the cultural milieu, the milieu of the extremely average.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

Speaking of which, in this context your work looks to me like a kind of inventiveness, not in

the great-creator sense but in a more domestic one—a form of everyday eccentricity.

XAVIER BOUSSIRON

For the piece *Le Coup du cric andalou* (“The Andalusian Car-jack Trick”) that I’m currently working on with Sophie Perez, we listened to some interviews with Pierre Molinier. There you have good-natured entertainment of a practically homemade kind, when he talks about turning out dildoes for uptight bourgeois ladies in Bordeaux. Exit art for art’s sake; what’s involved here is the love of art. You’re back to pathos, with intentions emerging from strong, fine feelings. I like the idea—a wacky one, maybe—of being strangely committed, like Molinier, to a kind of Z-grade aesthetic. There the idea of the work is less present than that of the method, the activity. The love of art is knowing that art is no longer possible and yet it continues. There was a time when I watched Michael Snow’s films as if I were watching stuff by Gérard Oury, convinced that I was feeling real pleasure. And that kind of belief is great fun, because while I was watching Michael Snow I would suddenly remember that I had a phone call to make, or that I had to change the tyres on my car...

Xavier Boussiron is a musician and visual artist, associate artist of the Laboratoires d’Aubervilliers in 2003-2004. He lives in Paris (France). *Menace de Mort et son Orchestre*, directed by Xavier Boussiron, shown at the Laboratoires on April 6-7-8, 2004. Production Les Laboratoires d’Aubervilliers, with the support of the DRAC Île-de-France and writing help of the association “Beaumarchais”.



Xavier Bousiron, *The Charity Kitchen*, 1992, Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux.