

LE SON DES CHOSES N°5
BIENVENUE AU CONSEIL D'ADMINISTRATION/
THE SOUND OF
THINGS NO. 5 —
WELCOME TO THE
BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Manuel Coursin and Éric Didry
An interview by
Maud Desseignes

MAUD DESSEIGNES

Le Son des choses n°5 [The Sound of things no. 5] follows a series of performances that involve translating texts using the sound elements that make them up. Could you say a word about how this project came into being?

MANUEL COURSIN

The first appearance of the *Son des choses* was with Alain Michard and Antoine Lengo in 1993. They had proposed as part of “Three Days in May” at the Étoile du Nord a little sketch entitled *Le Goulag* (The Gulag). Seated around a camping kit complete with table and chairs, they dismantled all that equipment, transforming it into sound objects as they went along. There wasn’t any text, just the two protagonists, who would place the objects on the table, manipulate them, then dismantle the table, blow into the tubes...

In 1994 I joined Alain Michard and Antoine Lengo for *Le Son des choses n°2*. We created *Bonjour* from a poem by Mayakovsky. From that stage in the process the working principles behind the *Son des choses* were decided upon, that is, we took out all the existing sound references in the text—and there are lots of things, the train, boat, aeroplane, actions like getting washed, shaving, etc.—then we tried to come up with a score from this sound material whilst fol-



Manuel Coursin & Éric Didry, *Le Son des choses n°5*, 2005, Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers.



lowing the poem's chronology. All of that took place in a fairly simple *mise-en-scène*, just a table where the three of us were seated facing the audience with sound accessories that we fiddled with during our score.

The third *Son des choses* took place in 1997 with Marco Berrettini, Antoine Lengo and me on a sound adaptation of the *Three Little Pigs* tale and yet it was no small amount of work! To conjure up the houses made of straw, wood and brick, we had to imagine a metaphor with clothes, wearing by turns paper and metal... The costumes were covered with mikes; our entire bodies were wired for sound! There still wasn't a single word but we did work in a Robert Wyatt song, "Pigs".

In 1998 we did *Le Son des choses n° 4* with Martine Pisani and Antoine Lengo after the first ten pages of Bram Stoker's novel, *Dracula*. That part of the book tells the story of the student's trip to Dracula's castle. He takes a boat, then a train, then a carriage, crosses numerous countries, everything happens very quickly. We followed the same principle of writing a score based on all the sound events and we tried to keep a certain chronology in the narrative. All the sounds were made with our mouths. There was no handling of objects. We also didn't use any texts, but songs, yes. And finally, nearly four years later, I asked Éric to do no. 5 with me.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

For you, Éric, does this performance fit into the experience you've had directing, as the work of adapting or transmitting a story?

ÉRIC DIDRY

Taking a text and transforming it into sounds, like the work done in interpretation, was new for me. When Manuel made me this offer, I thought of a short story by Peter Handke, "Welcome to the Board of Directors", first simply as an example because it contains quite a range of sound material. Once he had read it, Manuel thought we might be able to work with it. We made a list of the aural material and we started looking for a principle to guide our adap-

tation. It's a rather special piece of fantasy literature, a speech. The narrator addresses the shareholders who are already there or are arriving to take part in a board of directors meeting being held at an abandoned farm. Throughout the story, he welcomes them and reassures them about the company's financial state whilst outside, an increasingly severe snowstorm rages and the farm threatens to come tumbling down around them. Within his address, the narrator tells what happened before the board, either several days earlier or just beforehand, but also what is happening outside as he speaks. He is everywhere, a witness to everything. It's a text that made us ask ourselves lots of questions. We wondered, for example, about the notion of a sound flashback. How were we to go back in time? How were we to translate in sound the figure in the story during that time? Then, little by little, rather naturally, we composed the score we wanted.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

Is that how you included a fanfare, which doesn't exist in the text?

MANUEL COURSIN

Yes, it's a metaphoric liberty we took in order to announce the death of the little girl.

ÉRIC DIDRY

We didn't want the text to be at the centre of our proposed work. We had to make choices in a material that was far too abundant. We had to set things aside, delete, which frees you up and sometimes ideas come which aren't in the text but are connected to it.

MANUEL COURSIN

It's a fairly maze-like text. It constantly jumps back and forth... In a single sentence, the narrator shifts from a present-tense grammar to things that have just taken place or are going to happen. Because it often conjures up one and the same thing whilst talking about it in different tenses, the text is fairly hard to follow in its chronology, which led us moreover to make cer-

tain repetitions... But we didn't always attempt to follow the different grammars he juggles. Above all we strove to write a score that develops a musical or rhythmic interest.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

How did you free yourselves from the text's construction in order to preserve a certain rhythm and narrative timeframe just the same?

MANUEL COURSIN

Once we had drawn up a list of the materials, we tried to see how these could be arranged chronologically. Some imposed a time on their own; for others, we decided on the length ourselves. For example, the snowstorm, which we interpret solely with our breath and two mikes, is something improvised and not read in a score. We tried to lend as sharp an ear as possible between us in order to succeed in making that storm change over time, and with that, the elapsing time is rather musical. In this sense, most of the timeframes are musical, nothing is imposed by the text.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

Did you choose this short story only for the sonority that is inherent in the text without being sensitive to what it relates and the cynicism it gives off?

ÉRIC DIDRY

I very much like Peter Handke's early texts. One of his first plays, *The Ride Across Lake Constance*, is inspired by a ballad in which a knight who is seeking Lake Constance crosses a frozen expanse. When he asks the way to the lake, he's told that he's just crossed it and this information kills him. The townspeople celebrate his feat but he dies from the terror of imagining afterwards the danger he had been in. "Welcome to the board of directors" is very close to that. The narrator endlessly repeats that the company is doing well financially—that's doubtless the role of the person presiding over a board of directors and it may be true—but the farm is going to collapse on them. It's an absurd situation. We were,

I think, especially aware of the humour of the situation, even if the text in its way denounces the world of business and its indifference, and even if, for example, we were thinking of the struggle of performing arts professionals with respect to the neglect, cynicism and disinformation they have had to face.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

You mention the text but you don't provide the audience with a copy. Is that part of a desire to see each person make his or her interpretation of a story that you only tell with sounds?

MANUEL COURSIN

Yes, especially because people concerned with it can obtain the text either beforehand or after the performance. Announcing that the piece involves a text by Peter Handke drawn from a collection of short stories is also a way for us not to remain in a kind of private work, a piece in a bubble where we would be the only ones to know... It's also a question of playing down the importance of the work's origin and composition. Reading the short story you would realise that the performance is a far cry from the story. Obviously you can find some elements but that's not what's interesting. We drew our inspiration from the text, we looted it for its sound material, but what we offer the eye doesn't reside in our faithfulness to its narrative. We offer the ear a score comprising naturalist sounds that for some may have neither rhyme nor reason. At the same time, we imagine that through the coherence of our gestures and the harmony of the score, people can follow a story that's their very own.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

Technically how did you go about creating those sounds?

MANUEL COURSIN

Le Son des choses isn't dogma but we did impose certain constraints on ourselves. One was to remain in a craftsman-like system of production. We don't try to find solutions via technical means. No computers, no magic stuff! All the actions that engender a sound must be visible. The term craftsman-like means that we do our creating with objects or our own means. For the snowstorm, we worked beforehand with prerecorded winds included on sound-effects records or others that I had recorded myself. Working

from this material, we trained ourselves to produce them with a mike and our breath, found different ways of simulating winds that are warm, cold, strong and so on.

ÉRIC DIDRY

Steps in the snow is probably the sequence in which we tried the greatest number of things, bread that was more or less toasted, melba toast! We did lots of trials before choosing to work with microphone capsules.

MANUEL COURSIN

In the short story, the farm's wooden frame creaks. It's a sound that comes up constantly. The narrator is endlessly reassuring the crowd, saying that it's the farm's framework and not society's that is creaking so. Creaking is a sound that we had produced at Lelabo by destroying a wooden trestle but then the question came up of how to recreate that. We didn't have another trestle to destroy! We then hit on the idea of doing several trials with a nutcracker to create a fairly deep creak.

ÉRIC DIDRY

There's a feeling of menace that runs through the text. We try to provoke that threatening atmosphere without making use of any equipment that is directly threatening. There's a certain disconnection between the sounds produced and the means we employ to produce them. The gesture with the nutcracker is fairly gentle, not at all violent.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

You explained to me that the sound image of the little girl playing with the sled has yet to be recognised by the viewers. Are you disappointed that certain images aren't clearly identified?

MANUEL COURSIN

One of the main things is to know where the work is situated. How are we ready to try and render sounds as best we can? We do not exercise permanent control over what we offer the eye; on the other hand, we must master what we offer the ear, even if that forces us to make absurd gestures. It's really the effort that interests me. Some may find it insane that we go to such lengths to create such subtle sounds, which moreover aren't always meant to recount something. But that's what we really try to stick to. Steps in the snow, for instance, are the effect of

rubbing a piece of cloth with a mike capsule; if we press a bit too much or not enough, that produces a sound that's no longer recognisable at all. So physically we have to concentrate enormously on that action. The humour that can result is really due to the sincere effort to render the sound.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

The attitude you adopt in your performance reminds me of Tacita Dean's video installation *Foley Artist* (1996), in which she shows the processes involved in dubbing films. Whilst on one of the walls of the room a dubbing tape indicates the start and length of the sounds, another projection shows two footsteps editors hard at work: they run on the spot, trample wet paper, rip clothes, plant kisses on their wrists... No film is seen but by carefully listening to the sounds produced by the tricks of the two technicians, the viewer can easily invent a story. Have you drawn inspiration from those sound techniques used in film?

MANUEL COURSIN

I'm very interested in that but unfortunately it's a craft that offers no easy way in. Film sound-effects engineers work in a bubble. They're not at all associated with the shoot nor do they know how the sounds they've produced will be mixed later on. They get involved only at particular moments, following the order list of effects that describes how the scenes are to be outfitted. I get lots of inspiration from what I imagine that craft to be but unfortunately I don't know the tricks. Despite everything it remains a fundamental reference in *Le Son des choses*. Our actions are actually very near to what sound engineers do when they create the sound décor of a film. From what little I know, they admit there's a certain absurdity to the situation. We could very well place ourselves as filmless sound engineers!

MAUD DESSEIGNES

Most of the sounds you create are very 'realistic', even illustrative (the ringing phone, the soup). Have you sought to produce 'abstract' sounds in order to translate atmospheres or moods?

MANUEL COURSIN

Le Son des choses n°5, much more than the four earlier pieces, raised for us questions about representation and the visible. We nevertheless

realised that we were occasionally going too far into representing psychologically the storyteller or the people who are described. For us it was a very easy thing to shift from one state to another. At one point, the sound we were producing concerned the peasant family that was preparing for the board meeting, then a few seconds later, we'd find ourselves in the shoes of businessmen going up the hill to reach the farm. But we realised that it was easy for the audience to assimilate that psychological representation and we brought things back to a neutrality of the vision and of what we were representing.

As for rendering atmospheres, we wondered about how to create a cold atmosphere since the action takes place during a snowstorm. Amongst other things, we tried to create that atmosphere by attempting to go from very cold to very warm simply through the sound ambience. But those kinds of avenues overwhelmed us very quickly. They were very complicated to pull off technically and made us lose the thread in our score. It's hard to deviate from pure narrative. The fanfare, for instance. In the text an accident occurs, a little girl is run over by a car. To get this accident in sound, we conjured up the sound of the automobile, the sound of the little girl playing with her sled right up to the sound of the thud and the laughter of the child that disappears... It's a fairly realistic transcription which attempts to be as close to things as possible. But for what comes after, in order to have fun with the space—because that's also one of our interests in *Le Son des choses*, putting sounds in space—I wanted that fanfare, which is actually a funeral march and is absolutely not in the story. It was a question of making the audience hear this funeral march but from “afar”. So it was necessary to find a stratagem to create the far-off in order to render the sound image of a burial, of death.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

Do you think in the end that your actions, which force you to be actors, musicians and technicians all that the same time, generate confusion for the viewer?

ÉRIC DIDRY

It's hard to speak for the viewer. We are looking to interpret a score. This score leads us to produce sounds that are related to different characters in the story. We make transformations. But we aren't looking to play these characters. Similarly,

between us there is a certain play but it's sound and physical play, not psychological. At one point in the work, we tried to shorten the transitions between the different sequences and there we felt we were becoming more 'theatrical'.

MANUEL COURSIN

As soon as we attempt to link things together, we create connections between the different sound objects. The inventory offers less psychology and emphasises rather the effort made to produce things that often appear small, absurd or futile. The very fact of trying to link the actions lends them a certain rhythm. That often yields fairly beautiful sound images. However, another effect of that is to create a desire for narrative and, for the audience, to relate more than is needed. If in seeing us the audience gets the impression we are trying to relate something visual, that's our mistake. When we come across as actors, that is not the best place we should be. It should always be the action that provokes the sound, even if that forces us to do things that are a bit odd, scurry around on stage, run from one loud speaker to another.

MAUD DESSEIGNES

You've done important work on space, through your actions (which lead you to take over all of the room's dimensions), the sets (which also serve as sound sources), and the multipoint broadcasting of sound in the environment. On the other hand, you haven't played with light at all. Is that so you hide nothing and expose the creative process as such in order to heighten people's listening?

ÉRIC DIDRY

Yes. To show the work as it is being executed. We would have liked to perform in daylight, especially here at the Laboratoires, with the glass roof, we would have liked the light to be outside light. Given that we were performing in the evening, we did a fairly simple full-up lighting without any effects.

MANUEL COURSIN

For *Le Son des choses* on the Mayakovsky poem and the one on *Dracula*, Cathy Olive did the lighting. That was in fact the result of a proposal she made. That being said, it was fairly simple. On the Mayakovsky poem, our scores as well as all the objects and accessories were set out on tables. A light on a reflector gave the impression

that it was the scores that were lighting us. For *Dracula*, the play of light was limited to three paraffin lamps, which created a nearly absolute half-light. With this new episode, we wanted to get into the sounds in detail. For a lack of material, but also because I had no desire to, I didn't wonder about the image. Above all I would like a very neutral image. *Le Son des choses n°5* is with full-up lighting in order to light what one doesn't generally see.

Manuel Coursin is a sound artist. He lives in Paris (France).
Eric Didry is a stage director. He lives in Paris (France).
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