

“Un-define”
 About
The Family Tree,
 a piece by
 Claudia Triozzi



Claudia Triozzi, *The Family Tree*, 2002. Photo by Olivier Charlot

A text by
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The Family Tree is an object that offers few handles to critical analysis. Not that it is absurd or totally incoherent, for if it were then those tools would be perfectly capable of describing it; rather it deconstructs a number of positions about which readings (and therefore criticism) are in the habit of articulating themselves.

The Family Tree is a work whose structure repeats that of classic performing art (with the separation between stage and auditorium, actors and spectators). It does not redistribute the terms of this set-up, nor are there any formal games here between the laws and codes of one or several given genres, any more than there are modifications in the contractual relations instituted by this set-up between spectators, actors and authors. This show presents two actors or performers who are also its authors: Claudia Triozzi and Xavier Boussiron. They play a dozen or so songs (Triozzi singing, Boussiron on guitar), each of which represents a moment when the two performers enter into or exit a form of relation. Described in these terms, *The Family Tree* sounds as simple as it gets, and yet, throughout the show, spectators must grapple with a difficult question of definition: how to define this piece produced together, how to define the roles and functions per-



formed within it by the two individuals; how to define the content and affects that it conveys. It is as if they had the difficult task of specifying its terms. This problem is essential, for it leads to explorations that are cultural and aesthetic (the nature and form of what is presented, the status of the persons producing it), then dramaturgical and psychological (the construction of a show around the relation between two characters). In *The Family Tree* Triozzi and Boussiron pose this unresolved question of definition with real insistence, as if to unfold it and make it resonate in multiple forms, exploiting its resources so as to reverse its force so that ultimately this reticence becomes a motor, to the point that it governs choices, implies a certain approach in the writing, a dramatic progression and a definition of artistic activity which is, literally, against the current (we really do need to imagine the authors of this show as two salmon swimming against the *mainstream* of current artistic production).

FALSELY OBVIOUS

Of course, the purpose of *The Family Tree* is not to foil art criticism or to argue with its methods or analyses. However, basing ourselves on the way in which this object resists the tools

of criticism (that which would make it possible to provide a sure definition of it), it is possible to establish a hypothesis, that of an aesthetic approach taken by these two artists leading to an attempt at the un-definition of their work. According to this hypothesis, the artistic choices and hypotheses governing the creation of *The Family Tree* deactivate the polarities of the critical function, in the spectator's reading, but also, and above all, in artistic practice itself, thus implicitly contradicting one of the great figures of aesthetic modernism: the artist as hermeneutist.

A reading of *The Family Tree* as a critical undertaking remains a possibility, of course. In it, then, we would detect a variety of forms, depending on the cultural models to which each might be attached, or in relation to which they assert their distance. This show would then be located between recital, cabaret and performance, with its music oscillating between children's rhymes, rock and the café-concert. Indeed, comments such as these have indeed been made and are not without justification. However, they always obscure the singularity of this work in its relation to un-definition, to which they prefer the complexity (now a rather pat term) of a culturally stratified object.

A very appropriate response to this solution of avoidance and facility is to be found in the reduction of practices to a play of cultural categories. Accumulation and displacement thus describe artistic operations, even if, ultimately, these categories repeat the media and genres and their action never goes beyond them, so that practice boils down to a technical exercise or professional skill. This definition of practice as "patchwork" is clearly reflected in the avalanche of terms used to define Triozzi and Boussiron's activities. One need only read the prose devoted to them to see how any kind of terminology seems to suit them, thereby undermining all definition. "Performeuse", "dancer", "woman of the stage", "artist" (she also takes photographs) for Triozzi; pop, light entertainment or avant-garde musician but also performer and artist (he exhibits paintings) for Boussiron. And if we want to do things properly, then for *The Family Tree* we would have to say that they are also to a certain degree actors, cabaret duettists and, to round things off, singer (Triozzi) and accompanist (Boussiron). This plurality itself indicates real confusion: unfortunately, it is taken to justify a perspective in which the artist is a multi-identity "manipulator of signs" and talked up as the latest incarnation of a triumphant postmodernism.

The question of in-definition, which thoroughly informs the practices of Triozzi and Boussiron, can only be revealed, therefore, if we break radically with the two commonplaces that solve its enigma before the issues articulated in its forms and contents have even been grasped.

The first of these, which stems directly from formal analysis, asserts that artistic practices today exist in a space of total multidisciplinary and finds their new definition on the crossing of frontiers between disciplines. Following

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To avoid having to do this, there is still another card left to play, that of esotericism, which embraces everything that escapes or resists "critical reason" but paradoxically provides one last reason-based argument, since esotericism is nothing more than the negative (the irrational) of this manipulation of signs.

this hypothesis would mean that in *The Family Tree* we emphasised the play of a referent such as cabaret combining the disciplines of singing, music and comedy, pursuing the implications of this into the succession of "tableaux" or numbers on stage, and would then see how "this" cabaret owes as much to performance as to the café-concert, how the stage also functions as an installation, etc. Hybridity would always end up reinforcing disciplinary frameworks.

The second answer, which stems directly from the structural analysis of art ("the artist as manipulator of signs") would see *The Family Tree* as being about a couple of performers assuming the role of go-between, connecting up different worlds and thus appropriating different spaces of representation. This second hypothesis solves the enigma of un-definition by substituting the weight of the context for that of disciplines and emphasising change and the artist's adaptability against the rigidity of technical frameworks and skills. According to his logic of discourse, *The Family Tree* would be a perfect contemporary cultural object, mobile in its traversal of heterogeneous spaces, carried forward by two multitasking authors (actors, musicians, directors, etc.).

In both cases, however, we would be denying the theoretical obstacle and obscuring the actual artistic practice. Un-definition would then become the pretext for over-definition. One can of course understand the critical scandal of no longer being able to attribute an artistic status to artistic things—a capitulation that comes down to giving up the attempt to understand, or an attitude of contempt leading to their denigration—and it would seem that preferring to attribute it whatever the cost is a lesser evil. However, to allow oneself the time for a doubt that makes the space for that intolerable possibility of not being able to grasp and translate them is the only proof that one is really questioning or recasting the categories that enable interpretation.¹ If we follow the work of Claudia Triozzi and Xavier Boussiron, we see that nothing seems less apt than these notions of transdisciplinarity and manipulation of signs. Conversely, we could observe how in their work the public exhibition of the person (in the show) seems to represent a discreet cult of solitude. This expression of singularity in turn engages a stylisation of the self, whether through music-making or through the voice, or through the adoption of certain, almost ritualised modes of behaviour, postures and gestures (this will be discussed more precisely later, but we can already note that the presence of two persons in *The Family Tree* does not constitute a duo and how, conversely, certain objects and personal fetishes play a key role in the piece).

UNDEFINE

The coherence of the work of both Triozzi and Boussiron goes against a received idea in its affirmation that, while situations may change, the practices themselves—providing we simply determine them beyond the level of genre or medium—do not. One of these practices which connects these two artists

is precisely that of definition, or rather, that of "un-definition." The un-definition of what they do and what they represent, the un-definition of the roles and functions they take on, the un-definition of the contents and affects they convey. But then the following still needs to be spelled out: this un-definition definitely does not mean indecision or impression on the part of the artists in relation to what they are doing, but is on the contrary part of the precise definition of a practice, namely, the production of undefined objects, and of a dynamic, because this production shifts and is open to various forms of collaboration. There is no doubt about the kinds of questions addressed by Triozzi and Boussiron, but there is a series of uncertainties, or even a total absence of answers: for this practice offers few handles, since it manifests itself through the idea of sidestepping.

In *The Family Tree*, the work of un-definition is not done through a transferential relation from stage to auditorium, one that would, for example, make the contribution of the spectators part of the unfolding or completion of the show (the sharing of responsibility or authority, calling into crisis the artistic object, as is the way with participative aesthetics). Rather, this work is ontological in nature. It lies in the opacity of an enigma that confronts the spectator, whose problem—if it is a problem—is not to determine his position within a set-up, but to interrogate the logic of its *écriture* in order to produce meaning. For, need we insist, Triozzi and Boussiron's strategy is definitely not to throw anyone off the scent. As we have briefly observed, the conventions of performance are strictly observed here. Indeed, they are even redoubled by the creation of a stage on the stage, since the show takes place in a small stage area delimited by white curtains that restrict the actors' field of action (literally, a box-like space), and also delimits the field of vision of the spectators and their place in the auditorium, since only a small number of seats are available. This last detail is particularly important: for spectators, even before the show begins, it denotes an operation of reduction, applied in this case to space, but, as we will soon see, of vital importance in Triozzi and Boussiron's shared practice. For if the reduction plays on the spatial and temporal levels (which are synonymous with brevity and speed: quick sequences and short situations), it also affects the aesthetic dimension (the simplicity of the writing, the economy of material means and the logical short-cuts, with intuition being the main or even the only agent of the writing). The corollary of this practice of reduction is a practice of amplification, which is equally potent in the activities of the two artists and plays on the same aesthetic, spatial and temporal levels. There is, of course, the electrical amplification of Boussiron's guitar and Triozzi's voice, but also the amplification of gestures and ideas, details and situations, whereby, for example, this reduced stage of *The Family Tree* is at the same time a resonance chamber.



Claudia Triozzi, *The Family Tree*, 2002. Photo by Olivier Charlot

More than to transcend, mock, manipulate or subvert the categories of art and performance, this resonance chamber actually serves to un-define them, that is to say, to neutralise their principle, to freeze them and make that freezing into the possibility of writing. By activating the two operations of reduction and amplification, it is indeed easy to minimise their effects and to saturate their differences. In this sense, *The Family Tree* is the exact opposite of a broadside aimed at the conventions of theatre, concert, dance or performance, a piece that would twist them towards comic or regressive satire or, at the other extreme, make telling play with their codes and modes of representation. It is, quite simply, a show that refuses to name itself as such or, to borrow a famous formula, that "would prefer not to" have to do so—or at least, not to do so using the instruments made available to it by culture. This decision, insofar as it calls into question the status of the work produced could, as we have seen, be based on ontological considerations. But this is not the dimension that Triozzi and Boussiron are interested in. For it very much seems as if, for them, this cultural un-definition of a performance or artistic production is above all a sign of the stage being opened to the work of the intuition.

In art, intuition cannot be quantified on the scale of a post-modern reading. No directly discernible trace of it will be found in this fan pulled wide open between the pertinence of a subtle construction/deconstruction of the forms and its contrary, regression and idiocy, even if it might conceivably run through it. But to recognise the activity of intuition in art and to work with an art of intuition are two very different things. Intuition offers immediate access to the truth and imposes its logic in brief, fragmented forms that may serve as a starting point and motor for a construction by diverting towards terrains where affect, feeling and the unconscious come to serve as goods. The "I would prefer not to define what I do" of this collaboration between Boussiron and Triozzi thus marks the abandonment of a form of authority over the course of events (the one claimed by the different strategies of postmodernist discourse) in favour of a logic whose mechanisms are in fact unknown but that they have decided to believe in and to pursue whatever happens, even if it meant another form of self-exposure.

In art, intuition is opposed to irony: it develops a radically different relation to knowledge. It also stands in opposition to strategies of non-knowledge. The benefit of intuition is not affirmed in the mastery of a language or in the affirmation of reason alone. Intuitions take shortcuts in order to produce truths. They propose a certain immediacy of result, the form of which sometimes needs to be readjusted, a process which may necessitate more long-term work. In *The Family Tree*,^v what is affirmed is a determination to accompany intuition as far as possible, to follow its prolongations rather than to perfect its forms. This is the case with the songs written by Triozzi on scraps of paper, scribbled down and

enriched, and that fully assume the status of scores. Their titles? "Depression", "Castle" and "Wrought Iron". Their words? Logically enough, they are rather like lists: different kinds of castles, different objects in wrought iron, or different members of a family. Of course, these songs and their words in the form of lists are funny, but there is no irony in this, simply the play of intuition taken to its limits, even when this may mean courting ridicule.

Following the logic of irony would effectively mean putting the emphasis on the discrepancy in *The Family Tree* between what is sung and the status of the artist (*how* does an artist sing?), or between the forms and contents of the different songs in relation to other types of songs, of entertainment, of opera, etc. (*what* does an artist sing?). According to the same dialectical movement, it would focus attention on the friction between what an artist-guitarist plays and the way he plays his own role in a show. In contrast, the logic of intuition says that nothing should be separated; it refers less to a play of forms than to the subject, to the individual through whom it passes (a medium traversed by an intensity). But what are these intuitions made of, what do they apply to and what do they tell us about the individuals who experienced them? These intuitions are applied first of all to artistic forms and contents. These are fragmentary and autonomous, and their whole is greater than the sum of their parts: they are little closed totalities. Songs, which generate stories, and therefore stagings, or a fragmentation of space and time into successive short sequences, implying a very simple placing of the elements that in turn guides the movements of the singer and the musician. The first intuition, then, would be as follows: "there is no art that is not fragmentary". The second, which can be heard immediately with the first song struck up by Triozzi: "one is always multiple". We knew that, what with its various extensions (effect pedals, vibrato, etc.), the electric guitar has always been more than a simple guitar. Now Triozzi's voice adopts the same principle and keeps changing: it is now childlike, now grave, now lyrical, conjuring up models and types that sketch out a family genealogy. "One is always multiple" is understood of course in human terms, and completes the ideas about solitude and singularity mentioned above, which run through all Boussiron and Triozzi's work. The third intuition continues the second: as is fairly explicitly suggested by the two protagonists of the performance, "the guitar is a voice and the voice is an instrument." The fourth intuition: "music is always connected to childhood"; it emerges from memory, even from a detail that has been preserved by memory (a castle, a machine for making chocolate, a wrought iron gate, etc.), which it can very easily trace back. This fourth intuition can be applied to song as much as to the guitar, both being used for their capacities to summon up childhood rhymes. The fifth intuition: "no agreement is possible between subjects". At the very most, we can perhaps help each other to find personal effects. The duo between Triozzi and Boussiron does not exist in itself, or

does so only very fleetingly. Whereas music is seen as an art of being together, here each person plays, not separately (which would be very theatrical), but in his or her own space, for him or herself. The overexposure of the subject is a consequence of this mirror activity. It must be understood in an almost optical sense, as a presence that is too radiant to be really seen (we should not forget in this respect the effect created by the stage set-up, the white curtains, white floor and white clothes in which all we can see are two faces, plus Boussiron's guitar and the pair of shoes worn by Triozzi).

Thus the artistic work of intuition encounters powerful psychological resonance of a rather novel kind. What is manifest in the white sheets and fabric that camouflage the actors—contrary to ghosts—is one big metaphor of the neutrality of un-definition. Emerging from and contrasting with this whiteness are elements of “subjectivisation” which define the artists in the show: faces, hands and objects produce sound (percussion instruments, on the floor, and then microphones and two CD players with their wiring, also on the floor), and, finally, two accessories which are fakes (false stones serving as a seat, a headdress that can also be used as a tunic, made from toy bones for dogs in buffalo skin). Thus a whole aesthetics of amplification is deployed here, one in which the slightest detail becomes salient, the smallest object acquires the allure of a fetish (especially the shoes and the guitar, because they are fetishised by their use), not to mention the guitar and voice, the two main instruments of subjectivisation, which are also amplified. It would therefore suffice to plug in so as to be able to construct something, to produce sound and move ahead a bit. And this leads us to the last intuition: subjects are receptacles that can hold multiple identities: there are models hanging over these empty shells that are bodies. We must pursue these models, since they transform us and give us the chance to exist.

The logic of intuition at work in *The Family Tree* thus focuses on two kinds of mediums. The first is electrical; it traverses the body and the statements by each of the two actors in the show. It is explicitly materialised on the floor by wires; it links up beings and things—the voice, the guitar and the different percussion instruments, the screens showing the video films on the wall, the stage lighting (the electric current of an artistic counter-current—and it confers coherence on the elements in the show, but also, perhaps, on the meeting of Boussiron and Triozzi, and between them, these songs. The ensemble is harmonised by the amplification of each part. The second is constituted by the bodies and consciousnesses of the two actors, and so one must understand the medium in the sense that one uses this term to designate operations of communication between the living and the dead. Multiple voices, phantom presences, reconstituted families, bodies taking on the contours of other bodies. Triozzi and Boussiron are mediums, individuals or subjects inhabited by a set of contradictory intensities. And *The Fam-*

ily Tree is a dance of the dead brought alive by a rhetoric of amplification, a show that celebrates electrical *current* under the aegis of an electrical *consciousness*... and, with this, quite simply, a genuinely alternative form of rock.

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In 2001-2002, Claudia Triozzi developed research at the Laboratoires in collaboration with Xavier Boussiron which resulted in the creation of *The Family Tree*. *The Family Tree*, conceived and performed by Claudia Triozzi. Co-production Le Quartz-Scène nationale de Brest; Rencontres Chorégraphiques en Seine-Saint-Denis, with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Communication-DRAC Île-de-France and the CCN Montpellier-Languedoc-Roussillon.

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