



CATHERINE BÉCHARD & SABIN HUDON

La dérive de l'instant
Moments Adrift

**Text for the Béchard-Hudon monographic catalogue,
Oboro, Montreal, 2010**

SOUND SPECTRUM AND SCIENTIFIC THEOLOGY

The work of Catherine Béchard and Sabin Hudon cannot be approached head on: between here and them lies a minefield of good intentions. You must travel a great distance and follow concentric circles and spirals. And at the circumference, at the farthest point, lies a tangential and central idea: does anybody still believe that Harry Potter's success only rests on a pretty face and a tale of innocent friendships?

Let's start over.

The scientific approach is a useful, but limited paradigm. Especially when transformed into a domestic response to rebellious existential tasks. Scientific theology viewed through a Newtonian perspective has become a cure-all which dissolves day-to-day burdens: not to worry, since matter can neither be created nor destroyed. And since quantum paradoxes are hard to integrate into a macroscopic view of existence, we comfortably sit back in a determinist position that allows us to go on as if the Great Clockmaker no longer existed. And yet. Inexorable, Antonin Artaud stated that experimental science is useless since it only examines repeatable experiences, even if we all know that this doesn't exist. Since the said scientific theology has imposed its own industrial, commercial and political Holy Trinity, it has been difficult to think otherwise, and any description of phenomena, even if undeniable, is not welcome if it isn't in step with this train of thought. Governing by yea or nay. The measurable performance. The bipolar logic. The teaching of certainty. All revived by the technological tidal wave, puritanically categorising, quantifying, digitizing everything and anything. Without numbers there is no salvation.

Between you and me

Let's go back 10 years or so and picture this scene taking place in an upscale restaurant. The main course had been cleared away; wine was still flowing more than freely. Conversation had gradually mellowed to intimate confidences: "When my mother died, a veil materialised before my eyes and a shadow rose up to the sky," or "The day before my sister's accident, the sky suddenly became overcast and I felt that something was about to happen." And so on and so forth. At some point, a slightly annoyed guest tried to bring some order to the discussion: "One of the premises of science is to acknowledge that we don't know everything. Therefore, if we view as "natural" scientifically explainable phenomena, we are forced to acknowledge a "supernatural" category, one of unexplainable phenomena." I've been toying with this argument ever since.

Béchard and Hudon?

This might explain why working with sound poses a problem. And closer to us, it might also explain why, when we write catalogues, reviews, art history treatises or funding requests, sound is always relegated to artistic categories that have little kinship with the works themselves. Sound not only resists categorisation, it also remains elusive, despite increasingly sophisticated recording techniques.

Sound? Marcel Duchamp understood it in his *With Hidden Noise*: we must protect ourselves from its "readymade manufacturing". Sound doesn't yield easily to the glitzy analysis of the disciplinary system's uptight representatives; it hooks up neurons that we shouldn't have the bad manners of connecting, wedged between unintelligible music and the unavoidable sham of media arts. "Digitalizing" now makes matters worse by dividing sound into numerically encoded bits and pieces.

"The ear has no eyelid." Really? What do Mercury, the angels, Icarus and Captain America have in common? Yes... but not only that: we know them, even if they don't appear in the big book of reality, because of constant pressure, temperature and volume. We acknowledge them all, even if. And we keep them to ourselves. Whoever publicly admits to hearing voices is deliberately calling for a grand inquisition and a cute little straitjacket, free of charge.

And yet, we are surrounded by talking lions, by men of the cloth preaching that the Red Sea can be parted and water turned into wine with a simple wave of the hand; and the Sirens who sang for Ulysses' children still call out to our own courtesy of Saturday morning cable TV. Ear-splitting noise!

Bécharde and Hudon? Yes, I'm getting there.

"First of all, an object is not real, but a good carrier of what is real."

When a lumberjack chops down a tree, it's easy to predict where it will fall or make a sketch of the axe's cutting edge, but the fact remains that it's the blow that's the most important. As for the blow itself, it screams, cracks, fades away and disappears. Trying to give an account of the blow is getting oneself stuck between the stone of the tree and the hard place of the bark.

What is put out there to hear is lost. This doesn't sit well with capitalism built on the saying "Matter can neither be created nor destroyed". This causes an imbalance in the losses and profits column. Sound glides, screeches, penetrates; it comes from fluids: the ones that stain; the ones that flow; the infectious ones that transfer a part of me to you, even if it means death.

Bécharde and Hudon? That's precisely who I'm talking about.

And Potter, and you: the same... I'm talking about us, just like Bécharde and Hudon. I'm talking about what we'd rather forget [knowing], about what we knowingly choose to ignore.

Bécharde and Hudon: "A string of mechanical movements, of acoustic sequences and sonorous events translate the empirical experience that we unconsciously make of reality." From the work *Free-fall of possibilities*, on their Website. You can't get any clearer than that!

Are we getting there? I warned you: many detours, contortions, twist and turns. It would of course be an easier ride if we were sitting in a train gently following the tracks, but the road travelled by Bécharde and Hudon is winding and undefined. Not a straight line in sight.

Between you and me no. 2

Monster: "If the power of life was to manifest itself within the register of the living by choosing the richness of variety over the uniqueness of order, the monster would cease to be a failure of well-ordered power, but become a witness to absolute power; the one who demonstrates (monere) rather than one who is examined (monstrare)." In other words, a monster isn't an exception to the demonstration of order; he demonstrates that order is an exception.

In this herd-constructed society, individual deliriums are celebrated, but collective wanderings are violently sanctioned. Hail to the occasional black sheep, as long as the herd still washes whiter than white. This is where Bécharde and Hudon's intentions become dangerous, subversive. The artists do not confront this science, the one that only acknowledges the general, with the specific case: they suggest the impalpable, the fleeing, the flight. To this society which refuses to admit that it knows that it doesn't know, they offer cubes whose interiors are bigger than the envelopes. They circumvent the fixed markers that govern the cartography of solid objects in a sonogeographic drift; a shifting that would be branded as psychopathological if it didn't lurk in the underground of artistic exception. And yet, their space ceases to fit into a given topography. It goes beyond. Tennis can serve as a good example: everything inside of the court's baselines is regulated, codified. What goes on beyond these boundaries is refused. Why must we shun what exceeds? Everything outside is rejected. How can it be acknowledged? How can we erect a monument to the fleeting, the impalpable?

"The monument [...] is an attempt at the tangible expression of permanence, or, at the very least, duration."

Bécharde and Hudon take a different path and erect a monument to fundamental entropy. They are unwitting eco-minded artists who don't talk about plants or organic chicken. Instead, they build footbridges between the four cardinal points and a planet slowly deflating itself. Rather than attempting to make a complete list of receivable species, they sketch out a periodic typology of phenomena at the heart of our most ancient myths: I can fly; see through walls; imagine; talk to trees. Further along, I'll have an animal's head, a fish's body. I am invisible. They are invisible. How

can we hear time gliding along the sails of our vessels? How can we conjure up the magic formula allowing us to dream of the stars? How can we build the door of passing time?

Technology also inhabits the Béchard-Hudon maze. It's no coincidence that the emergence of sound recording has marked the renaissance of mysticism (a slight exaggeration: a death certificate had not been issued). When Edison, among others, began working on a device that could be used to speak with the deceased, he opened up an absolute bag of tricks. Up to that time, sound and time were the two faces of the same fatal coin. Edison himself, the father of voice-overs, partook in table-turning séances. At various periods in time, photography was also peopled with ghosts and fleeting evanescent images. But a recording can deceive, kill its bounty, silence its words. It serves as the formalin that allows us to examine the dead animal. A cadaver has its own self-beauty, oozing matter aside, but Béchard and Hudon use another device to summon up sound technology. They cast it as intercessor: I offer, I flow from me to you, I disappear. I'm empty but I was full. You've received, it's in the past, you're changed, but you're now as empty as I was. The traces remain, not the sound. Béchard and Hudon build thresholds. No branches, no blade, only blows.

They're obviously not the only ones following this path: all living beings do, whether they like it or not. But these two artists are virtuosos; their exceptionally fine creations are befitting of any goldsmith's work. This is quite surprising since, as we've pointed out, their investigation ground cannot be described as unified geometries. After all, is there anything less wordlike than a string of letters? And yet, it's one of the driving forces of these footbridges built by the two artists, these finely detailed interfaces giving the illusion of an exact science. The mastery of their sophisticated mechanisms inspires trust; we come closer and willingly play ball, we participate, unaware that the bait will bite. Look at these pictures: precisely crafted gears, finely chiselled metals. You simply see artwork, not a sound trap.

And when we least expect it, the world opens up before us. When confronted by these conspiracies, we are helpless, vulnerable. These precision mechanisms mold gases, chew on ethereal matter, produce emptiness. The result: a mere shifting of air and light, at best. A wave of what was, of what has now entered our bodies through our eyes and ears; through our hands and stomach. This work seeps into us by osmosis. Don't look for boundaries: it glides from the exterior to the interior and what was that has become me.

"Computer based technology, individually or in network, is in keeping with 18th century puritanical thinking, organising the world in a functional manner for symbolic purposes."

Let's go back to Artaud and the repetition of unrepeatable experiences. Scientific theology creates an infinitely reproducible order: reassuring, comfortable, and mortal imagery. Do as I do and you'll have what I have, no more no less. Industry promotes this puritanical order by mass producing unlimited (seems likely) quantities of identical objects. The modern city is, in itself, a place of static objects. Nothing changes, but for the well-regulated movement of social climbing and downfall. This city, especially in its North American orthogonality, is presented as a model for Utopia, reproducing itself as far as the eye can see. A tabula rasa, a blank slate cannot fall victim to disaster. And yet.

Béchard and Hudon closely examine these day-to-day occurrences: they burrow into them, in search of our well hidden charms, amulets and totems. Their handicraft is not born from any old software permutation, but from an attentive observation of the theatre of the mundane. A monster isn't an exception to the demonstration of order; it demonstrates that order is an exception. We easily give the artists the right to present the monsters that are born from their imagination, especially if they use antiseptic technologies to restrain them. Béchard and Hudon, in turn, reserve the right to show us the monsters that lurk in our own subconscious.

CASE STUDIES

The Voodoo doll (Au bout du fil, 2003)

Au bout du fil is a microcosm where two metallic cones, kind of dish antennas, amplify the delicate movements of a small ship, a puppet-bow that glides over its own strings. The principle is embodied through the proposed typology. The dagyde must contain things belonging to the targeted person. In this case, no problem, noises of scrapping, wear and tear, hesitation speak to us all. But unlike what the primitive telephone system could lead us to believe, the meta-

phor is not one of a traveling symbol, it lies in the metaphor itself. We are presented with all of the possibilities allowed by the metaphoric process, the frail skiff's size far outweighed by its full-scale counterpart.

The Sorcerer's apprentice (The Voice of things, 2004-2005)

The Voice of things is not a title to be taken lightly. Inanimate objects are filled with life, they speak. Inanimate objects, do you have a soul? Yes, of course, the question is quite unnecessary since we craft them in our own image. And to what objects do we give a voice? Curiously, if the domestic world is teeming with receptacles able to welcome the anima, few of them can lay claim to a family likeness, to an anthropomorphism of sorts. The broom is one of them, the one of November's witches as well as Harry Potter's. The one that sleeps in a corner of the basement. The one belonging to the sorcerer's apprentice.

Take the broom to rub the magic lamp made of paper scribbled with the words of journalists and you'll hear the rustle of the language of Barthes, unhampered by grammatical censorship, first form of fascism responsible for the silencing of non ready made ideas. Roger Caillois: "Now, it is a cause of immediate terror to think that not only individuals find language ready made, but also to make the least word understood, they are forced to sacrifice all the particular, concrete nuances of their personal experiences to the fiduciary meaning that, for better or for worse, has been generally granted to this word. Under these conditions this word merely represents the ideal and abstract common denominator of a growing multiplicity of perceptions and sensations that are often barely differentiated, but that are always infinitely distanced from absolute identity." As in the fable of the Sorcerer's apprentice, it's quite possible that this creation slips out of the control of its creator.

Pandora's Box (Babbling/Sounding/Noising Cubes, 2006-2008)

Babbling/sounding/noising cubes brings to mind a familiar object. From childhood on, we discover these ordinary and fabulous toys: a small cylinder letting out the cry of an animal when turned in all directions; metallic parts concealed in a figurine's hollow tummy resonate at the slightest movement... An object within an object, heard but not seen, yet always magical.

In other respects, Pandora's Box is a bottomless well overflowing onto our feet once the bucket up is pulled up. It's abundance punishing the overdemanding. It's the mother of curiosity.

Béchar and Hudon go even further and combine Pandora and word. The Babbling/sounding/noising cubes are relatively inconsequential looking boxes – one might think of little birdhouses – whose inner space apparently endlessly exceeds its exterior walls. We only need to take a cube, shake or turn it, to hear the sounds of an audible landscape. Shake it again and other sounds will form. Unlike your childhood toy, the gesture continually renews, develops, expands the sonorous horizon; it crosses over the wooden boundaries of this little innocuous cube. It's not limited to one sound per face, or one sound per gesture; it's a microcosm – again – that exceeds, an overflowing container.

The voice sponge (The Circulation of Fluids, 2008-2009)

The Circulation of Fluids is a door, or an ear auricle transmitting sound. The work could be loosely compared to a telescope: when we come closer, we can perceive far-off lands. It reminds me of a fable of unknown origins where islanders gathered sea sponges from the beach, pressed them between their fingers and, while slowly releasing their grip, entrusted them with messages. Then, they returned the sponges to the sea. Later on, on another island, someone would pick up the sponge, slowly squeeze it and listen to the voice. This is how they communicated from one island to another.

The shape of the horns clues us that sound is hidden in them, and we naturally come closer to hear messages from afar. But these horns are connected to a main cube by white copper veins, the body of the work acting as a transmission bond. In continuity with the noising cubes: the innocent looking box whose interior is bigger than the envelope.

The walnut plant (Undertones, 2000-2002)

I had the privilege of attending one of Béchard and Hudon's rare live performances. It was held at the Chambre Blanche artist center in Québec City, and I was really curious about what they would propose. I knew that they had mainly done installation works up to then. The event featured objects from their Undertones series.

One of these objects particularly puzzled me. I don't know if it has a name: it's a kind of plant, a hybrid between a burning bush and a carnivorous plant made up of a series of metallic stems topped by mechanically activated walnut shells. Once this device was set in motion, both the "machine" and the artists themselves were fascinating to watch. They exuded confidence, hands extended like two parents encouraging a child to take his first steps, or like someone coxing a genie out of his bottle. The device wasn't really a plant, wasn't really alive, but right on the verge. The small clacking noises produced by the shells were sound amplifications of the small movements relayed from inside a box (again), in this case red, the work's active and secret principle.

In the course of this performance, the artists used other mechanisms, such as a cylinder hanging in cycles over a kind of electric can opener or a machine resembling a high-tech crankshaft cryptographic encoder. Gears turn without gripping, unproductive, only generating waste and excess.

The haunted forest (Free-fall of possibilities, 2009-2010)

The forest embodies a special kind of magical path. It doesn't lead to a fabulous world – it's a complex and hazy place, filled with both the worst (acting like a screen on which our fears are projected) and infinite delights. Haunted forest, enchanted forest. While the animated plant of Undertones was possessed, the magic forest possesses. A third type, the forest of the Free-fall of possibilities aims for emptiness. It feeds on signal failures of Ariadne's life flowing thread. In the words of the artists, "Free-fall of possibilities is meant to be a metaphor for all of the "little deaths" that we mourn throughout our lifetime. The one of language: restrained and unspoken words. The one of gesture: curbed, aborted, interrupted or consciously abandoned impulses. It embodies these apprehensions, these constant tensions produced by an anticipated reality whose dynamics constantly elude us ". The work is what is outside of the code, outside the paradigm, what cannot be named.

The Free-fall of possibilities offers us a peek at a magical vision through the branches hanging in the forest of our memories: we are the silent witnesses of a meeting of invisible characters uneventfully going about their business, careful of not drawing the attention of these fishing spirits, a meeting we were not meant to watch.

Jocelyn Robert
2010