

## Céleste Boursier-Mougenot : *révolutions*, French Pavilion

56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, 2015

Review by Nicola Rae for OTTICA TV

Slight vibrations in the branches of two trees outside the French Pavilion suggest that they are subject to imperceptible motions or tremors. Traversing the ground gradually, this noticeable but uncanny movement intrigues. Inside the Pavilion a single tree hovers slightly above the ground and glides more easily about the space in a revolving motion. Its context is changed by this classical setting that is open to the vagaries of the weather. Trailing tree roots trace fine lines in the earth dropped by the entropic actions of the slowly disintegrating root ball. This gradual shedding of material is constantly swept away by attentive staff. The hum of technology is perceptible as a sonic presence that invites further investigation.

Representing France in the 56th Venice Biennale, Céleste Boursier-Mougenot's new work *révolutions*, or 'experiment for transHumUs/ the *révolutions project*', consists of three Scots Pines that revolve both inside and outside the French Pavilion. The agency of the trees is governed by variations in the amount of sap flow within the trees, recorded and activated by digital micro-controllers. Boursier-Mougenot uses low-voltage electrical currents to make trees move, creating 'landscapes and soundscapes that allow for a different experience of time and space' as 'a renewed way of listening, looking and sensing' (Boursier-Mougenot, 2015).

The curator, Emma Lavigne, perceives the sited-ness of this work in the classically-designed French Pavilion within the Giardini, as alluding to the 'follies of the romantic parks of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century'(Lavigne, 2015). She also describes 'the choreographic alchemy of three trees moving in time with their metabolism, variations in their sap flow and their sensitivity to light and shade': and how this has become a 'theatre of an apparition' as an 'experimental ecosystem'. Yet in an interview in New York during 2015, Boursier-Mougenot describes his interest in challenging architecture as boundary (not just physical but also national), in turning space inside out, inviting the garden inside'. However, Lavigne does acknowledge that Boursier-Mougenot's intention is to 'commandeer systems used for controlling living beings and their movements' (Lavigne, 2015), allowing a more political interpretation to emerge from the double-meaning alluded to in his title, *révolutions*. He also states that he is less interested in representing France, than with creating a soundscape that 'can lead to a new form of listening...that may have individual but also social implications' (Boursier-Mougenot, 2015).

Boursier-Mougenot's work has been of great interest to me for many years. Initially experiencing *from here to ear* in 2010, this work included a flock of zebra finches electing to sound or 'play' electric guitars through landing on their strings within the Curve gallery, Barbican London during 2010. This work initiated questions about who could or should enjoy playing instruments. Although there was concern about the zebra finches being enclosed in confined gallery spaces, a restriction on the number of visitors allowed entry reduced their stress levels. It was Boursier-Mougenot's view that it was not about 'seeing the birds in an enclosed space' but 'about the birds having space' (Boursier-Mougenot, 2014). By only using birds that had been raised in captivity, questions were raised in relation to ideas of freedom, enclosure and the finches' territorialisation of the space and objects.

Having studied as a musician at the Ecole de Musique, Boursier-Mougenot's perception that he was not very accomplished as a musician through being dyslexic meant that he had to 'invent his own methods for playing music' (Boursier-Mougenot, 2014). When a gallerist visited his house and heard the sound of birds playing percussion through tapping on small metal dishes, the idea for *from here to ear* was developed. The electric guitars were not conventional instruments but utilised tuned strings and chords that were activated when the finches landed on the strings. His first installation of *from here to ear* was in 1995, and each version has different characteristics due to the size and scale of each gallery space in various countries. He stated that *from here to ear* was 'a device, a plan' and that it was 'impossible for humans to play' (Boursier-Mougenot, 2014).

Boursier-Mougenot (2014) has said that what interested him was going 'beyond the human form but not always in a technical way' and that his main interest was in 'human imagination, not about technical ability', when discussing *from here to ear*. Yet it is his development of the technical aspects of *revolutions* that are fascinating in my view, and give a conceptual strength and political relevance that is an indispensable part of this intriguing installation.

## References

- ArtReview (2015) 'The Venice Questionnaire 2015 #1: Céleste Boursier-Mougenot'. *ArtReview.com*. April 7 [Online]. Available at: [https://artreview.com/previews/2015\\_venice\\_1\\_celeste\\_boursier-mougenot/](https://artreview.com/previews/2015_venice_1_celeste_boursier-mougenot/) ( Accessed: 10 June 2015 ).
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