

Céleste Boursier-Mougenot

MIRACULOUS LIVING SOUND AND WILD NOISE

By Tina Gelsomini



“My work is meant to unfold as an encounter,” Céleste Boursier-Mougenot tells me in our interview, which took place in February of 2016. The French artist, who is a trained musician and composer, has been creating installations for over two decades—since he left Side One Posthume Théâtre, in 1994, to begin developing his own projects. Since then, he has installed across the globe, represented France at the 2015 Venice Biennale, and is currently represented by galleries across Europe and in the United States. However, as Boursier-Mougenot told me, his earliest installation *d’ici à ici* (1995) was already emblematic of his purpose as an artist. The work, which created an unexpected arrangement out of live sparrows and piano strings, points to Boursier-Mougenot’s romantic exploration of sound and sight through combinations that both intrigue and mystify those who encounter his work. In the years following that first attempt, he would continue to construct audio-visual pieces which confront humans and their inventions with the wonders of the natural world.

In the Contemporary Art Square of the Musée des beaux arts de Montréal, visitors encountered Boursier-Mougenot’s *from here to ear v. 19*. The work transformed the exhibition space into an aviary home to seventy zebra finches. The songbirds’ artificial environment has a sand-covered floor equipped with ten electric guitars, and four bass guitars—their amplifiers sculpturally dispersed throughout the space. The installation also contained upturned symbols, holding food and water, and low grassy shrubs that provided material for nest making. Fiberboard panels installed along the floor guided viewers along a path from one instrument to another.

As the artist

has learned well over the course of his career, incorporating live animals into an installation requires great attention to detail. *From here to ear* is no exception; though this time Boursier-Mougenot insists, “None of these elements have a decorative function.” Each object present has been carefully selected for its acoustic ability or is dictated by the birds’ necessity. Yet once the exacting phase of planning has been completed, and the various components of the installation are in place, the effect of the resulting simplicity is near magical. Boursier-Mougenot describes the first moment in which the birds are introduced to their new habitat: “When one opens the crate in which they have travelled, it is wonderful to see them flit about in the space until they perch on the guitars as if it were perfectly natural.” In *from here to ear*, the finches replace the artist as a composer of the piece. Their act of perching on the neck and strings of the guitars, coupled with their instinctual chirping, creates live music whose ephemeral soundtrack reverberates throughout the gallery.

Though Boursier-Mougenot is an experienced composer, the sounds heard by the viewer are never pre-recorded. To construct the auditory component of the installation, Boursier-Mougenot simply “set[s] up the parameters for the performance to take place”—allowing the piece to unfold in the territory between chance and circumstance. In advance of the exhibition opening, he tunes the instruments and sets up delays on the amplifiers to create an echo effect, much as any musician might do before a live performance. Retaining a fascination and deep understanding of the experimental process, however, Boursier-Mougenot positions himself outside of the performative space. According to the

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© Céleste Boursier-Mougenot. Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.
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FOLLOWING SPREAD:
Photos MMFA, Justine Février



artist, this is why he chooses installation as his practice. As he describes, “It is a bit more remote, based on observing and listening, and flexible enough to evolve.”

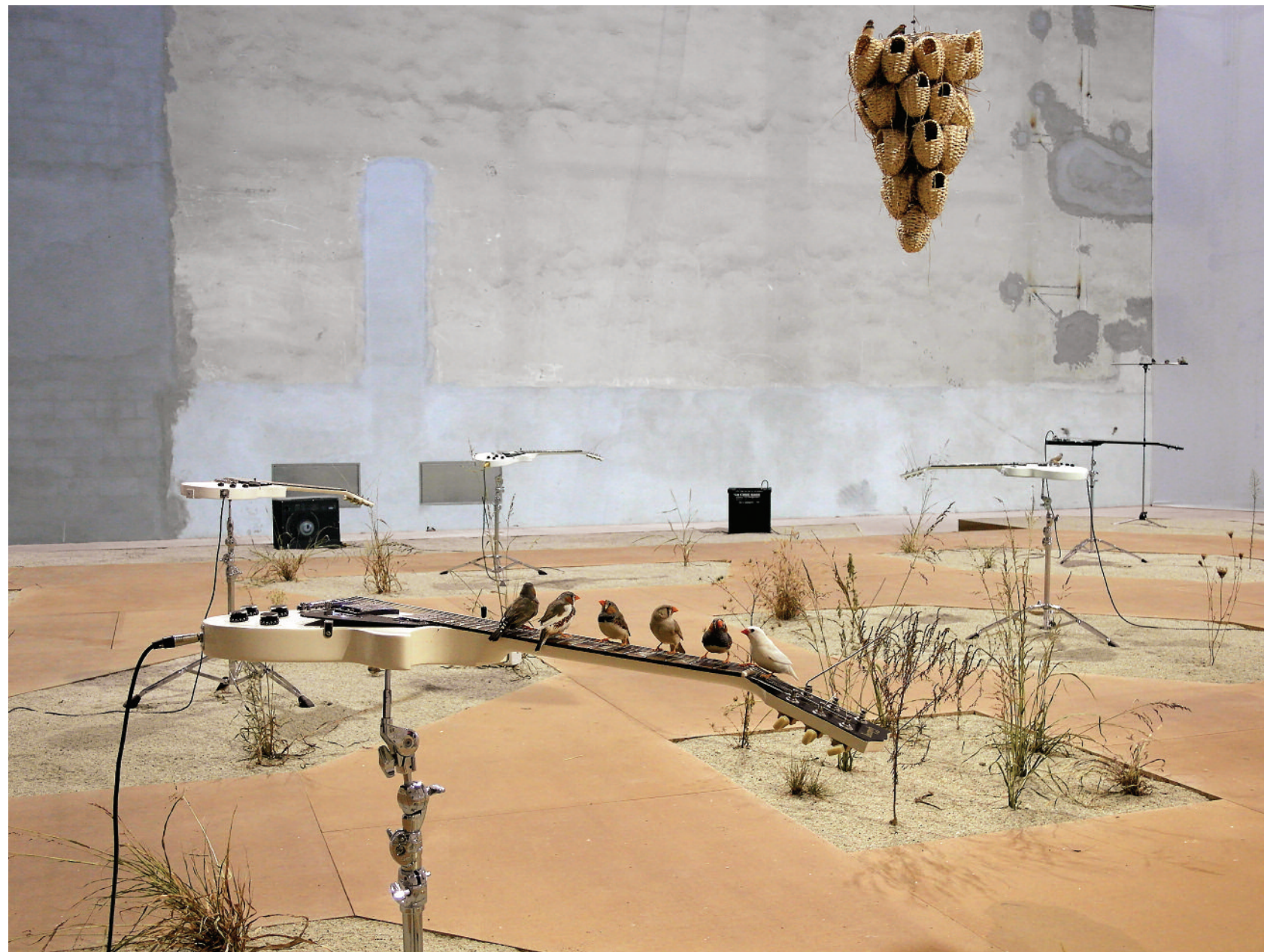
Indeed, the work on display at the Musée des beaux arts de Montréal is the nineteenth installation in a series that the artist refers to as “a work in progress.” Each time an edition of *from here to ear* is installed in a new location, it evolves depending on the parameters and capacity of the space—largely adapted to the materials that can be locally sourced, the context of the space, and the involvement of the organizers. It also adapts according to what Boursier-

Mougenot has discovered in previous iterations, such as the fact that the birds are less likely to perch on a guitar placed near an entrance.

However, in all of these variations, the viewer’s experience remains at the core of each installation. “A visitor’s presence and movement,” Boursier-Mougenot notes, is integrated into the work “at the earliest stages of conception of a piece.” By gently guiding the visitor along a pathway, yet leaving them free enough to pause, turn back, or push forward, the artist creates what he calls an “open choreography that foregrounds the beauty of [their] presence.” For Boursier-Mougenot,

a work is incomplete without the visitor’s presence, whose encounter with his enchanted creations is the driving force behind his practice. The very notion of beauty becomes wider standing in the open space of *from here to ear*, whose bare-bones aesthetic and overt mechanics expose miraculous living sound and wild noise.

BELOW:
Céleste Boursier-Mougenot (born in 1961)
View of the installation *from here to ear (v.15)* at the Hangar Bicocca, Milan, 2011 © Céleste Boursier-Mougenot. Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



Interviews