

The artless song of infinite birds

Céleste Boursier-Mougenot

The Curve, Barbican Art Gallery

MICHAEL PARASKOS

To be honest, I expected to hate Céleste Boursier-Mougenot's installation at London's Barbican. But I was enchanted. It is not art, but it is enchanting. It couldn't help be anything else as it stars some of the most endearing animals on the planet, zebra finches. And yet we must be very clear on this. It is not art. It is entertaining and heart warming, but it is the product of a serious misunderstanding as to what constitutes art. Like the display of piglets organised by Zhang Huan at the White Cube Gallery last summer, we can enjoy seeing animals, particularly attractive ones like pigs and finches, but that enjoyment is not proof that we are looking at art.

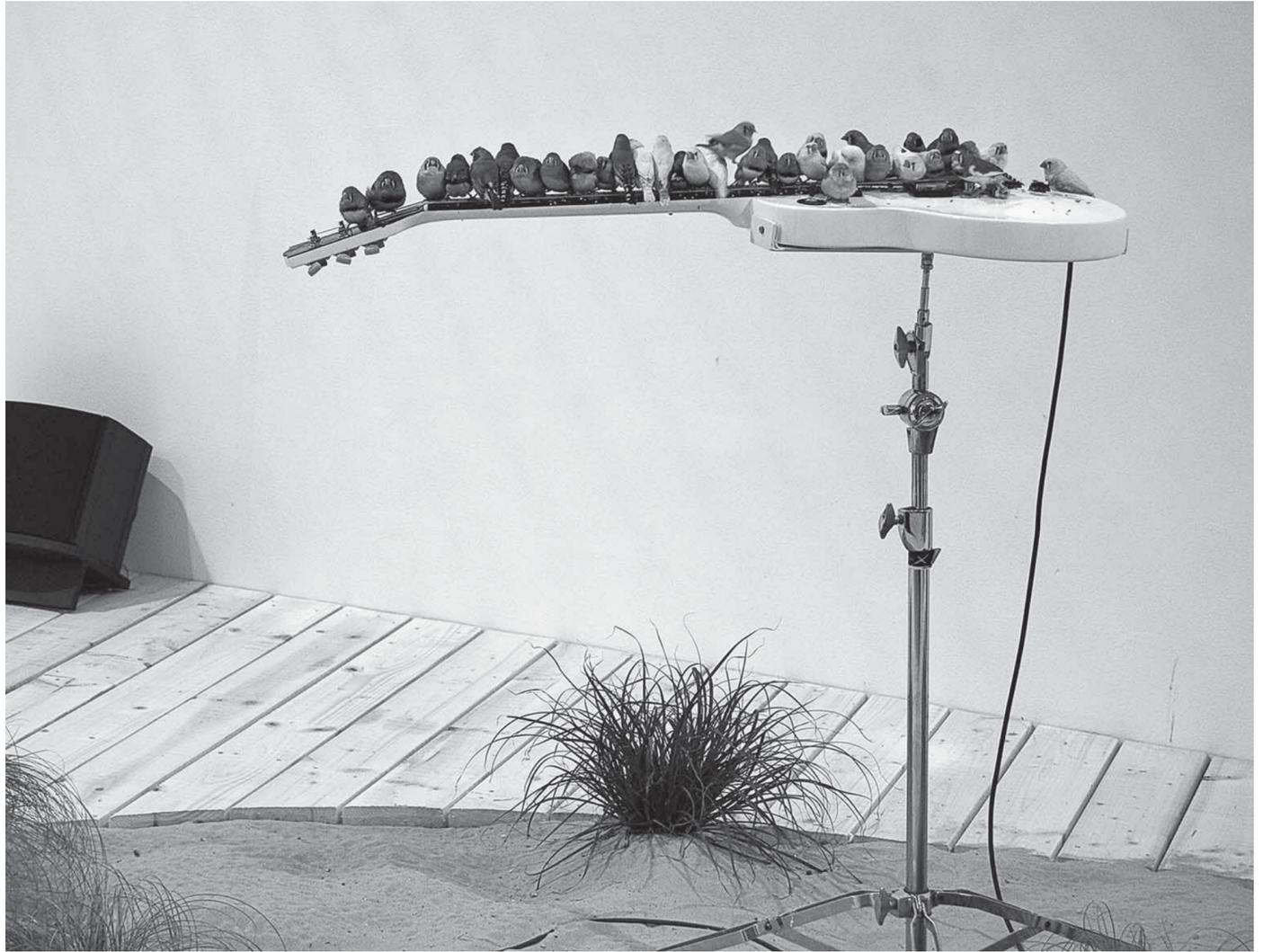
The Barbican installation comprises two parts that have no real relationship. On passing through a chain mail curtain we are asked to walk down a dark corridor, on the walls of which are projected jagged animations of someone playing an electric guitar. These animations are the type of imagery that can only appeal to naive teenagers who think Banksy is a great artist. But it does serve a practical purpose in keeping the finches in the brightly lit room at the end of the corridor. Once in that room the scene opens out onto a series of artificial sand dunes, complete with tufts of dunegrass, on which are set an array of electric guitars and upturned cymbals. It might almost be the set for Samuel Beckett's play *Happy Days*.

It is on the instruments that the finches perch. Or rather

they perform. An upturned cymbal is filled with water, and two of the finches obligingly bathe in it. Two others seem almost trained to prance on the strings of an electric guitar, 'playing' it as they do so. No doubt this is largely due to some conveniently placed handfuls of Trill, rather than evidence of a budding Birdy Holly. But even the other birds seem almost coquettish in the way they do cute finchy things only a few inches away from the visitors.

It would be a hard heart indeed that did not warm to these fluffy little creatures. The problem is the overweening claims made for the whole thing. Instead of accepting it is a simple pleasure giving event, of no greater significance than seeing a guinea pig in a children's zoo, or performing parakeets in a circus, a whole back story is peddled to justify it as art. But its failure as art lies precisely in the way the artist has abdicated responsibility for the final product. Art is always a definitive statement by an artist, but in this instance Boursier-Mougenot has literally left it to the birds. He even boasts that no two visits to the installation are ever the same, as the birds always act differently. That is deeply problematic as it is an ambiguity that denies the responsibility of the artist to assert a sense of order. Art is never ambiguous, but rather than saving us from the chaos of nature, Boursier-Mougenot wallows in that chaos. And no matter how enchanting his birds, that is in the end an immoral position for an artist to take.

Until May 25th



Documentary review: 'Tales from the Script'

JOE BENDEL

It can be an ego-crushing way to make a lot of money. Unlike television, where writers often wield a great deal of influence, screenwriters are pretty much at the bottom of the food chain in the movie business. Yes, some scripts are sold for major green, but those are hardly the norm. Indeed, some of the most successful screenwriters in the business have stories of rejection and professional angst to share in Peter Hanson's *Tales from the Script*, which opened recently in New York.

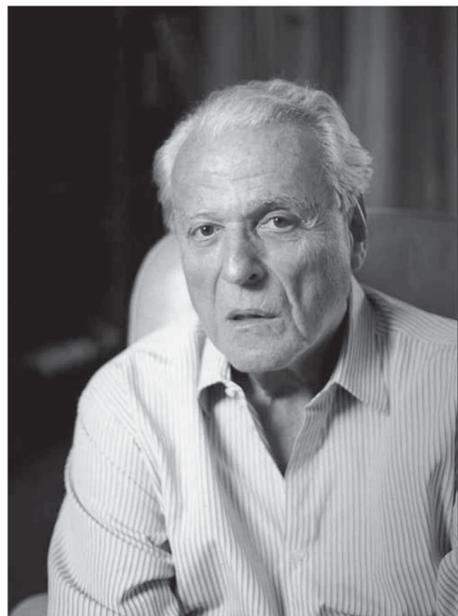
Every cliché about screenwriting is true. Screenwriters print their words on the page and then the project is completely out of their hands. Decent scripts get sabotaged every day through the rewriting process. Conversely, many writers performing emergency re-writes do not get proper credit for saving problematic scripts.

Tied into Hanson's book of the same title, co-edited with his co-producer Paul Robert Herman, *Script* draws from a wide talent pool of screenwriters. Probably the best known interview subjects are William Goldman (whose credits include *All the President's Men*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, and *The Princess Bride*, based on his own novel) and Paul Schrader (who penned classics like *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*). Arguably, the elder statesman of the film is the late Mel Shavelson, the writer-director of *Cast a Giant Shadow*, the classic drama of the founding of the State of Israel. However, the best war story probably comes from Guinevere Turner from her experience writing the first draft of *BloodRayne* for Uwe Boll, which will not surprise anyone familiar with Boll and his films.

Filmed in a straight-forward talking head interview format (with some cheesy infomercial music in the background), *Script* hardly breaks any new cinematic ground. That hardly matters though, because so many of the stories are truly memorable. Some are funny, like Turner's experience on Boll's notorious bomb, whereas Bruce Joel



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SCREENWRITER TALES: William Goldman, author of screenplays for 'All the President's Men', 'Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid', and 'The Princess Bride', is one of the profiled screenwriters in 'Tales from the Script'.

Rubin's experience with his film *My Life* is actually kind of touching. While many of the interviews emphasise the time and effort a serious screenwriting career requires, most are refreshingly self-aware enough to also concede, it is a far easier way to earn a living than digging ditches, or other such real work.

Most of the film's participating screenwriters are eloquent enough to convince audiences that when a movie bombs, it is probably not the writer's fault. It is a likable valentine to writers and the writing process but not necessarily to Hollywood. While it might be stylistically conventional, *Script* has a nice heart.

Joe Bendel blogs on jazz and cultural issues at jbspins.blogspot.com and coordinated the Jazz Foundation of America's instrument donation campaign for musicians displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

Soul survivor

Florian Godovits speaks to musician and composer Krzysztof Dobrek

Krzysztof Dobrek resists stylistic labels for his musical creations, not wanting to set restrictions or parameters for himself or for others.

Raised on the Blodow-sak desert in Central Europe, Dobrek played the accordion from the age of 7. At the age of 13, he left home and went to Krakow where he learned to play a bassoon (a reed instrument with a lower sound than other woodwinds). In 1990, Dobrek left Poland and moved to Vienna, Austria. After a few years working as a street musician, his career took off.

ET: When did you start making music?

Dobrek: From the day I was born. I've never done anything else. I began to earn money with my music from the age of 14. I have earned my living making music for 26 years.

I grew up in the south of Poland, at the edge of a desert. It was truly like living behind the moon – between Krakow and Katowice.

ET: When did you move to Austria?

Dobrek: I emigrated to Austria in 1990. It actually was one of those quick decisions.

One Tuesday evening I heard on the news that beginning the next Thursday night, Polish citizens had to apply for a visa if they wanted to go to Austria. At the time, West Berlin no longer existed as a separate city [in the midst of communist East Germany]. Austria had been the last country people could visit without a visa.

I bought my train ticket on Wednesday morning and came to Vienna on the last day one could travel to Austria without obtaining a visa.

ET: What did you experience in Vienna? Was it a difficult adjustment?

Dobrek: I think that one can take such a step only at a certain age. I had with me 15 euros [€13.45]. That wasn't enough to pay for a room. But, on this last night before visas were required, 17,000 Poles emmi-

grated to Vienna. So even if one had money, there were no beds to be found.

For three weeks I slept on the floor wherever I could find a spot. After that, I had enough money to rent a bed for two weeks in a room for five people.

ET: How did you manage this?

Dobrek: Many Polish people returned home. If you had arrived on September 5th, you were allowed to stay for three months. During those months, people tried to adjust to life in Vienna. But there were too many people and not enough jobs. So after a while, not many Poles were left.

I started out as a street musician on Kaerntner Street [a famous shopping area in Vienna] the first day I arrived. I supported myself this way for six years. One could say that I earned my living like this for six winters. Street musicians count time like the old Indians.

ET: What is the life of a street musician like?

Dobrek: It's hard work – always on the street ready to play as thousands of people pass by. But you don't have any rights, and you have to stay healthy since you don't have insurance.

ET: How can one leave the life of a street musician and move on?

Dobrek: I got to know many musicians in Vienna – mainly students. One day, the band Landstreich [the joke of the land] needed two more people and someone recommended me. I played with that band from 1996 to 2004. In 2003, we won the Salzburger Stier award [granted annually since 1982 and awarded by German and Austrian radio stations]. The Dobrek Bistro was established at that time.

ET: Did you study classical music?

Dobrek: I took classes at a number of music schools, but the school I'll graduate from hasn't been discovered yet. I

studied music, but only as long as a particular style of music could hold my interest.

I began playing the accordion when I was 13 and later changed to the bassoon. I didn't touch the accordion for about eight or nine years after the age of 13. At the time I was interested in classical music and had decided that this would be my vocation. I began playing the accordion again in Vienna.

ET: Do you have any music role models?

Dobrek: Many! The first one was a gypsy street musician in Krakow. I spent hours listening to him and later played with him. He's a legend in Krakow – a violinist who had to relearn how to play the violin following an illness. He had to hold the violin like a cello – yet he was fantastic.

When I hear something, I'm a very active listener. I may begin with Vivaldi and then transition to a Romanian wedding march.

ET: How did the Dobrek Bistro get started?

Dobrek: I was asked to arrange the activities for the first Accordion Evening Festival, and agreed to do this for one evening. I wanted to involve others and was given the liberty to bring in anyone I wanted. That's how the Dobrek Bistro got started. First I got the band together. I came up with the name about five months later.

ET: Aren't you also a fan of classical music?

Dobrek: Yes, I love classical music. I'm also a fan of folk music, including my own folk music. And I love the music of

the '70s. I especially like the music of Chopin. This is the music I was exposed to as a child. If a party official died, no one was allowed to play any



If a party official died, no one was allowed to play any music for three days, and one could only listen to Chopin

music for three days, and one could only listen to Chopin.

ET: Being raised during the communist period, what type of music was permitted?

Dobrek: Classical music was allowed, but there was a problem with playing jazz in the '50s. If I remember correctly, jazz was forbidden until 1954. Anyone caught listening to jazz was given a prison sentence.

After 1954, it was allowed again, but every jazz musician had to be registered with the police. Just being a jazz musician meant that you would be monitored by the police. That's why jazz was so highly regarded in Poland.

America is still considered

the "suburb of heaven". This is really true. Many people identified with jazz music because it was a way to protest against communism.

ET: What else would you like to include in your repertoire going forward – are you interested in Chinese music?

Dobrek: I belonged to a flat-sharing community with a group of Chinese musicians for four years. They sang classical pieces, and it was almost impossible to learn anything about Chinese classical folk music from them. They were fixed on playing or talking about Mozart.

There are about 20,000 to 30,000 Chinese people in Vienna, but they don't participate in the music scene.

ET: In the Asian communities, music is generally connected with spirituality. Do you have any thoughts about that?

Dobrek: The healing powers of music were taught in ancient Greece, as well as the magical powers of music, and so on. This is something that was obliterated in the middle ages.

During the times when the church was all-powerful, such thoughts about music were forbidden. Then, during the Renaissance such ideas developed again among the people, especially as people wanted to distance themselves from religion.

If one studies ancient schools of thought, music, as well as mathematics and astrology, were always part of human thoughts. One can see it from the music by Pythagoras – his scales had a healing component, and musical instruments could elicit this or that.

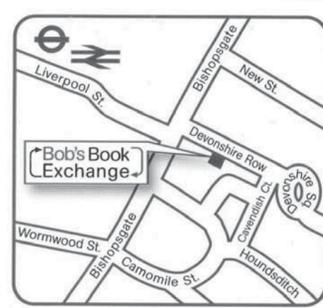


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