

# When thinking about Luc Ferrari I think about... : notes on aesthetics and music history

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# When thinking about Luc Ferrari I think about...

## Notes on Aesthetics and Music History

Ricardo Eizirik

*In these notes (written and collected between 2011 and 2014), one shall find thoughts and observations related to Ferrari's nonconformist musical aesthetics, his interaction with the machine as well as other arts (especially photography), his scepticism towards postwar "material-oriented" compositional models as well as Western musical institutions. These notes finally can also serve as introductory steps into his less studied later works.*

### NOTE I (INTRODUCTION OR: SEQUEL TO AN ABANDONED HISTORY I)

In recent years, the growing interest and number of publications on Sound Art have started a slow process of opening up the discussion on Luc Ferrari's work beyond *Hétérozygote* (1963–64) and *Presque rien I* (1969–70) and, with it, revealed to which extent his ideas from the late 1960s have expanded further. One aspect (or development) of Luc Ferrari's so called "anecdotal music"<sup>1</sup>, which has received growing attention, is the shift he created from "abstract" compositional handling of recorded sound to a source/context-driven one. Although standard music literature points out Ferrari's break away from Pierre Schaeffer's notion of an ideal *sonic object*<sup>2</sup> in favor of a recognizable sound source, it also tends to underline a reading of these two pieces as a break away from the compositional act itself, thus connecting Ferrari with a 1960s/70s European equivalent of the John Cage-like questioning of the artist's role. Personally, I don't believe you can consider this reading "wrong", especially when taking into account statements made by Luc Ferrari himself following the composition of these pieces<sup>3</sup>. But, as with every story, there are continuations as well as other sides to it...

Other — new — readings (which in the past have been marginalized but, in recent years, have gained attention) emphasize the idea that his pieces of the late 1960s are not at all a stepping away from the compositional act, but the beginning of a new way of thinking it. Instead of composing pieces that

relied heavily on a kind of hermetic internal cohesion, Ferrari started taking the social and autobiographical context of recorded sound into account and formulating his whole compositional process around these contexts. He drifted away from the notion that one should strip the sound bare of its context to be able to listen to the sound itself — "pure" sound — and only then compose with it. Instead, he grew ever more fascinated with the layers of meaning that recorded sound already brought from its context and started incorporating this into his composing.

This reading becomes clearer when considering Ferrari's output of the decades following the 1960s. He does not drift away from the compositional act, he changes its starting/focus point, as well as his own position within it. He refuses, and steps away from, the duality between the two extremes of control: 1. being the composer who determines every compositional step, or 2. being the composer who tries to give away the creative act to chance. Instead, he is the composer who reacts and interacts within the reality he is exposed to and from that, decides if the creative act should be *perceived* as more or less controlled.

### NOTE II

Throughout his career, Luc Ferrari's relationship to recorded material moved gradually away from apparently un-manipulated audio pieces to works in which editing and alienation of

the recorded materials were used to single out an experience<sup>4</sup>. The line between the first anecdotal pieces from the late 1960s and his last works is marked by a constant rethinking of what it means to make a recording and what the consequences are to make use of one in a piece.

A useful metaphor for comprehending Ferrari's understanding and use of recording as well as the "evolution" of his approach to it throughout his *œuvre* is the parallel between the history of (Snapshot) Photography and Ferrari's *praxis*. Like the artistic discourses surrounding Snapshot Photography around the 1950s/60s, Ferrari also highlights<sup>5</sup> the incorporation of, and a reflection on, aspects such as the *documental*, the *amateur* and the *banal* that the increasingly accessible and cheaper audiovisual-recording/reproducing technologies made possible<sup>6</sup>. By including these aspects into his artistic *praxis*, Ferrari also entered the stage into a broader discussion surrounding the use of accessible, cheap and *do-it-yourself* *virer* type technologies that were very much in vogue within the fields of visual arts<sup>7</sup> at the time. The thoughts and reflections on these topics stayed with Ferrari until the end of his career.

*Dialogue ordinaire avec la machine* (1984) exemplifies a piece in which Ferrari explicitly focuses on such aspects. In this piece, it seems, we listen in on the composer (helped by Yannick Gornet) trying to "tame" a machine (possibly a sampler). Relying on the seemingly naive curiosity of the composer and his helper towards this machine, the narrative of the piece constantly builds up to "banal" and somewhat "kitschy" loops and textures produced by the machine, which are then "comically" interrupted (resolved) through some apparent mischief on part of the two humans. Apart from the fact that the piece can be seen as a type of ode to the *do-it-yourself* mentality, it is interesting to note that the placement of the "banal/monotonous" moments — created by the machine right after (and as a consequence of) very intense and chaotic interactions between Luc, Yannick and the machine — gives us about the right amount of time to realise the artificiality of the whole situation. After all it is a composition, it is all constructed, this "dialogue" (as it is presented to us) never took place! Here, I believe, lies one of the finest aspects of Ferrari's art. Not only does he manage to construct an interesting and captivating "storyline" drawing on very strong ideological and aesthetic positions, but he also manages to give the listener enough hints and space to question the situation presented as well as his own role in it. This type of use of compositional discourse can be found in several of Ferrari's pieces dating from the 1970s onwards.

### NOTE III (SEQUEL TO AN ABANDONED HISTORY II)

Two aspects that ended up overclouding the reception of Ferrari's music from the 1970s onwards were the undertone of institutional critique that his artistic *praxis* assumed as well as his distancing himself from a material-oriented research in his composition.



Andy Warhol, "Andre Leon Tally" (late 1970s). "This fascination with nonart and novelty camera technology and vernacular aesthetics is undoubtedly congruous with larger aspects of Warhol's artistic project, specifically the deskillling of the artist and the breaking down of distinctions between high and low culture." Zurmomskis, Catharine, "Snapshot Photography: the lives of images", Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013, p. 195. © The Andy Warhol Foundation of the Visual Arts

By focusing on questions of narrative through the incorporation of recognizable recorded material in his music, Luc Ferrari created a distance to abstract material-oriented compositional research. While institutions and electronic music studios (such as GRM, IRCAM, SWR, etc.) maintained a discourse that promoted the idea of "progress in arts" and advances in technology<sup>8</sup>, Ferrari turned to his field recording experience and reflections on daily life for answers on how to solve problems of narrative in his pieces. By doing so he ended up raising scepticism towards the value of the seemingly unanimous position throughout the central European compositional scenario that focused on the search for "new materials" and "new formal discourses" throughout the 1970s, 80s, 90s and beginnings of 2000s<sup>9</sup>.

As a consequence of his aesthetic position during the late-1960s/early-1970s, he broke away from a major institution (GRM) and (to some extent) from the centralized model of cultural life in France. This, then, increased the usage of cheap, *do-it-yourself* means and technology in his pieces, which was

also a way of questioning the necessity of such institutions and centralized cultural life. It also pushed him to openly question the status quo of such cultural institutions:

"[...] Power governs the places and races of culture just as it governs the places and races of society. With barbed wire. And what is more, by calling that Protection. Of sites, of masterpieces in peril, etc. It is necessary to banalize."<sup>10</sup>

In hindsight, it was only natural to go from this growing scepticism with the (validity of) distinctions between high and low culture to a gradual collaborative approximation with musicians and artists, who had backgrounds other than classical. And it is understandable that people with different backgrounds would feel welcome to collaborate with someone who did not feel constrained or attached by institutionalized thinking and who was genuinely curious about other forms of artistic praxis. These collaborative efforts gained significant proportion during the 1980s/90s and 2000s, going as far as turning Luc Ferrari into a cult figure throughout the more experimental sections of turntable-, techno-, noise- and impro-scenes around the world. These collaborations also had a big impact on his individual artistic process and output, as is observable through the increasing use of sampling and referencing to daily (pop) culture and current events.

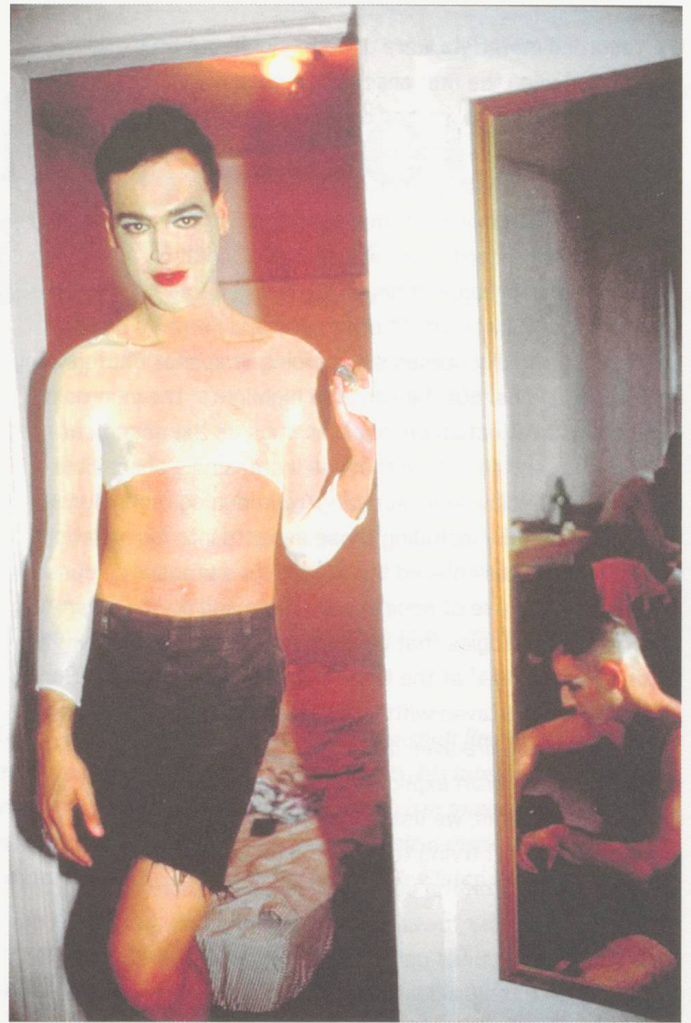
#### NOTE IV

The recording, as the photo, is a reproducible imprint of a given moment in time that has occurred only once<sup>11</sup>.

Following initial projects around the time of *Presque rien ou le lever du jour au bord de la mer* (1969-70) exploring the aspects of documentation of banality, Ferrari started dealing with the question of personal narrative vs. documentation. A slow "transition" during the 1970s and early 1980s happened towards a more personal/reflexive type of exploration of narrative. And one of the more noticeable outcomes of this "transition" was the increasingly active participation of the composer as a "character" in his own compositions. This self-portrayal, which occurred through the simple act of using his own voice in his composition, became one of Ferrari's big focal point from the 1970s onwards.

Almost always being an interlocutor, at times he also assumes the "role" of a *voyeur*, a *guide*, a *tourist*, among others. Of course it is fair to question to which extent these are roles being played or actual facets of his personality, especially given the fact that (going back to the Snapshot Photography metaphor) Ferrari ended up relating a lot of his artistic output from after the 1970s to the exposure of intimacy (as could be said about, for example, the work of photographer Nan Goldin).

Just like with Nan Goldin, many other artists working within the frame of photography from the late 1970s and early 1980s



Nan Goldin, "Jimmy Paulette and Tabboo! undressing", NYC (1991). © Nan Goldin, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

started rethinking the "whys" and "hows" of the portrayal of daily life and routine. A movement away from the more broader/documental vision of social daily life and routine gave way to a more focused search of how intimacy and individuality express themselves in society. Some turned to autobiography, focusing on their own lives as well as the lives of those close to them, while other artists developed strategies to penetrate the intimacy of strangers.

Here again it seems that Ferrari has had a closer dialogue with artistic practices other than music. From the 1970s onwards Ferrari started more and more using his own life as a departing point for his work. Terms like "autobiography", "diary", "intimacy" and "(self-)portrait" started appearing more frequently in his pieces and interviews, as does the presence of his wife and friends<sup>12</sup>. Although there is a very strong focus on the idea of autobiography in Ferrari's work, he constantly shifts the attention away from his persona to depict other people whom he meets<sup>13</sup>. Then again, repeatedly making us realise, as also Nan Goldin does, that the manner in which the other is being depicted may say more about the artist than about the person apparently in focus.



Nan Goldin: "Nan, one month after being battered (1984)". "[Nan Goldin's] use of high contrast, her impulsive compositions, and notably, her early move to color photography at a time (1973) when art photography was still largely synonymous with black and white indicate the cultivation of a self-conscious amateurish or vernacular style, a pleasing sloppiness that combines subtle aesthetic mastery with the appeal of the best off-kilter snapshot from a night of drunken carousing." Zurmomskis, Catharine, "Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images", Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013, p. 246. © Nan Goldin, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

## NOTE V (CONCLUSION?)

Having had an artistic output that branched away from what was expected from a classically trained composer during the second half of the twentieth century... Having collaborated with DJs, visual artists; written and produced for radio, exhibitions, public spaces... Having consistently criticized the institutions and status quo of the artistic milieu which he "belonged" to... All of these aspects (together with a long lasting hold on to "modernist aesthetic values" in the contemporary music community), I believe, kept the reception and discussion of Luc Ferrari (as well as several other composers) to a bare minimum up to the beginning of this century. The increasing interest in Luc Ferrari since the 2000s can be seen as a direct consequence of recent reflections and discussions like the debates on sampling and intellectual authorship, digitalization of and in music, questionings of "high" and "low" culture as well as the increasing incorporation of other arts into contemporary musical life.

The impact of Luc Ferrari's output in today's music is still far from being thoroughly discussed.

- 1 "Abstraction-based instrumental music makes it hard to set up a narrative. If there is one, it's concealed, based on form and structure. [...] When I started working with electronic sounds around 1958, I realized that I had the possibility of initiating a dialogue between the abstract and the concrete. With the early experiments in musique concrète, we would take sounds from the studios, sounds from various instruments — piano, bits of metal, etc. — and treat them as if they were notes. As soon as I walked out of the studio with the microphone and the tape recorder, the sounds I would capture came from another reality. That led to the unexpected discovery of the social. I listened to all these elements that I had collected outdoors, and I thought these sounds developed a discourse that had something to do with narration. There was no name for this kind of music in the early 1960s, so I said: that's anecdotal music." Ferrari, Luc, in Caux, Jacqueline, *almost nothing with Luc Ferrari: Interviews with texts and imaginary autobiographies* by Luc Ferrari, Berlin: Errand Bodies Press, 2012, p. 129.
- 2 "Pierre Schaeffer's acousmatic project outlined in his *Traité des objets musicaux: essai interdisciplines*, written in 1966, seeks to produce 'objets sonores' (sonic objects) whose source remains unheard. This technological reduction of recorded sound finds its equivalent in the idea of 'reduced listening': a listening that focuses on the sound itself rather than as musical element or as referent to a visual phenomenon." Vogelín, Salomé, *Listening to noise and silence: towards a philosophy of sound art*, New York: Continuum, 2011, p. 169.
- 3 "...these things, which I call *The Presque Rien* because they are lacking development and completely static, because really almost nothing happens musically, are more reproductions than productions..." Ferrari, Luc in Hansjörg Pauli, *Für wen komponieren Sie eigentlich?*, Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 1971, p. 58.
- 4 What you hear is no longer a representation of an event/situation, but the author's own subjective view on it.
- 5 Luc Ferrari starts dealing with these themes in a more open manner especially in the late 1960s and 1970s.
- 6 During 1968/69, Ferrari's years as *animateur musical* at the *Maison de la Culture* in Amiens, he worked extensively in disseminating the idea of the audio snapshot: a low-fi, amateur (documental?) recording of a given landscape and/or situation with very little or no editing. Ferrari himself used *Preque rien I* as an example for (or exhortation to) this practice. (To read more about this period and its importance in Ferrari's output, see: Drott, Eric, *The politics of "Presque rien"*, in *Sound Commitments: Avant-garde Music and the Sixties*, New York: OUP, 2009.)
- 7 These topics were central during the 1950s/60s to discussions on institutional critique, aestheticisation of the banal and decentralisation of cultural poles. They were also polarising aspects among several artist groups such as the Situationist International, Nouveau Réalisme, Andy Warhol and the Factory, etc.
- 8 Technological advances were in this case aimed to aid composers find and develop new abstract material and structural decisions.
- 9 It is worth mentioning that these ideological positions, which were very strongly linked to "high-modernist" tendencies and positivistic ideas of progress applied to the arts, were also heavily promoted by the main institutions, festivals and university music departments in central Europe during that same time.
- 10 Ferrari, Luc, in Lemery, Denys, "Luc Ferrari: Entretien avec un jeune compositeur non-conformiste..." in *Actuel 12* (1970), p. 16. Translation in Drott, Eric, *Music and the elusive revolution: cultural politics and political culture in France 1961-1981*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, p. 224.
- 11 "[...] What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially." Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida* (tr. Howard, Richard), London: Vintage, 1993, p. 4.
- 12 The comparison with Nan Goldin here is only in the sense that neither she nor Luc Ferrari did simply document their lives. They developed highly individual voices inside mediums notably associated with "anonymous"/ functional documentation (snapshot photography: Nan Goldin; audio recordings: Luc Ferrari). It should also be noted that the lives (and lifestyles) being portrayed by both artists could not be more different.
- 13 There are several pieces by Ferrari which resulted from recordings and interviews he made with strangers during travels. Most notably *Presque rien n°2, ainsi continue la nuit dans ma tête multiple* (1977), *L'escalier des aveugles* (1991) and *Far-West News* (1998-99).