

Interview between
Emilie Pitoiset & Raimundas Malašauskas

Raimundas Malašauskas: Could you tell me something about your exhibition at the FRAC Champagne-Ardenne?

Emilie Pitoiset: The exhibition I've come up with, invited by Florence Derieux, at the FRAC Champagne-Ardenne is called *Les actions silencieuses*, and answers many questions about ritual form. Ceremonies are actually only effective in what is special about them, whereas rites usher in repetition and are always related to an action. The ritual is cultural; it makes it possible to describe a real life event through a meta-fiction. Its representation often takes the form of a small organized theatre. The objects introduced are laden with a ritualized context—a story resolved to become the leading players. So *Les actions silencieuses* contains these precepts, because each object fashioned internalizes gestures and postures pending a potential activation. They carry in them the status of “pieces in reserve”. This is a terminology that I appropriate from the live spectacle, “a body in reserve”, defining an inert body on stage which can come to life at any moment. The works produced for the show thus become relics of a past action. The stage and the methodical white cube are also part and parcel of this presentation. A classification of objects at different levels plus more or less restricted movements cast the roles in an insidious way. First off, the objects at hand height stem from an action, while the objects at eye level keep their distance. The most tautological example is *Molding my Hand Thinking About a New Piece* (2013), an assemblage of an imprint of my hand in clay, placed on a bedside table. This old-fashioned piece of furniture is perfectly designed for the hand and the elongated position. It is used to catch, nothing else. Other pieces divert the evidence from its function, like for example *Solo Show* (2013), a canvas resting alone on the show's central set. The painting is stitched onto wood, detached from the wall, and can be looked at back and front. *Les Indiscrets* (2013) is made up of a pair of black leather gloves—objects conceived and created for the hand, if ever there were—which, through the form of the phalanges, mime absence. The work takes shape in withdrawal, like the sweat shirt painting, *Storyteller Costume* (2013), which becomes a costume-character in withdrawal. Lastly, the stingray skin used for *Le Masque* (2013) loses its function at hand height. The titles of the works also act as clues, with the viewer able to project himself into the fiction, while remaining free to interpret the different elements brought together by himself.

RM: When you were talking about movement just now, was this your own movement or the movement of someone else? Or were you talking more generally about changes of position, be they symbolic or physical?

EP: I draw from different repertoires of gestures, especially those of dance and cinema, so as to bring together a set of component parts of the action. I use a time bound up with the live spectacle and a vocabulary peculiar to the “*mise en scène*”, which I transpose to the frozen time of the exhibition. The usual length of a spectacle is transcribed to that of the exhibition, time is suspended. The time change is part of the introduction of the fiction. The first time I had a chance to initiate a choreographic performance was in 2011 with *Handlung (Anodyne)*¹, as part of the show called *Von B nach P*, at Le Confort Moderne, in Poitiers. Six screens were set up on either side of the exhibition room, based on an Albertian perspective. They were considerably larger than their household

dimension, and became monumental. Depending on the place they were put in, you didn't grasp the geometry of the forms, angles and colors in the same way. On opening night, three young, almost identical ballerinas (aged about ten, and about five feet tall, and all dressed the same) made walking movements and small gestures in the space, thus underlining the room's geometric lines. Their physical resemblance upset perception, and you could well think that there were just two of them. It was impossible to see the same thing as the person next to you, with the screens hiding part of the performance. There was very quickly a coming and going. The ceremony ended with them gathering around the stand set in the middle of the installation, precisely where the folding of the garden under glass took place. The three ballerinas thus altered the Albertian perspective, hitherto symmetrical, rule-wise.

Each piece in volume requires finding an economical choreography, a repetition of gestures that then enables me to find a precise and articulated focus to complete the work. This form of writing, which is also called a "phrase" in dance-speak, often corresponds to natural movements, the shifting of weight, the imbalance of the body, to link one movement to another. The same applies when I'm working with photographs and films, the choreographic writing is inherent to the process. *Possibilité de relations réciproques* (2009) stems from the same principle. The work is in abeyance, non-active. A possible combination between each element enables it to stay balanced on the tips. On the other hand, *La Jalousie* (*) (2010), for its part, withstands. This vision apparatus with its precarious equilibrium, whose influence comes from windows with blinds from which you can see out without being seen, triggers a fall. *Une seule erreur* (2009), which is formally akin, is made up of seven old visiting cards arranged like a fan. Here, the action is focused on a principle of erasure of the photographic portraits originally present on each of the cards. The fan shape, and the cascade shape for *La Jalousie*, entails an action that is prolonged, a dynamism close to the aesthetics of the breakdown of movement. The action—here, form—is repeated by developing in space. *Handlung* uses the same writing, because the sheets of the screens unfold, obstruct and extend the gaze.

(*) ndt: *Jalousie* can be translated by jealousy or Venetian Blind

RM: I can make out little differences, sometimes almost imperceptible, which only appear after the fact, when you think again about what you've seen. It's precisely at that moment that you realize that a part of what you think you've seen in fact comes from your imagination.

EP: The idea is not to rationalize the interpretation; on the contrary, the form must remain free and literary. For the exhibition *Vous arrivez trop tard, Cérémonie*, presented at the Les Eglises contemporary art centre in Chelles in 2012, I started a collaboration with the art critic Jean-Max Colard, a specialist in the New Novel (Nouveau Roman) and in the writer Alain Robbe-Grillet in particular, founder of that literary movement. The invitation consisted in taking part in the writing of an exhibition script which thwarted the usual customs of the ceremony. We invited Catherine Robbe-Grillet to take part in the project, as a consultant. She's a writer and organizes private S&M ceremonies for women, which she then publishes under the pseudonym Jean de Berg². The idea was not to write a new ceremony but rather to orient our collaboration around the ceremony as "form". So it was very important for me to know how Catherine Robbe-Grillet wrote a ceremony, her precision, the choice of objects and their own history. I gradually noticed

that our work process was developing, that she and I only saw fiction through absence, things missing. The irony is that Catherine sees the ceremony through the prism of theatre, but oddly without voices; as far as I'm concerned, it's by way of the choreography, but without bodies. Subsequently, we created a fiction based on Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Maison de Rendez-Vous* ³, keeping only the elements of décor. The invitation warned: "You're late (Vous arrivez trop tard)", even before anything at all had started. Old objects and new wooden furniture were installed and left there. No clue pointed to what might come to pass. Would there be an event? Were we in the process of experiencing it, or had it already happened? No image had been unveiled before the exhibition opened; just a note revealed the first page of the script: "Enigmatic circumstance. Doubt. Based on what scenario? An obstinate narrator tries to re-create what happened that evening. Spectacle."

RM: So you wrote the whole story, before deleting it?

EP: We'd chosen that novella before deconstructing the original book by doing some blue-pencilling, which consists in blacking out certain parts of the text and then mixing the pages, in such a way as to create a new script. So we produced a script publication of the ceremony which was present throughout the exhibition, and helped to perpetuate the mystery, once the show was over. That was how Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote, revolving around a missing part. For example, in *La Jalousie* ⁴, what's involved is quite a simple story between a man and a woman, but you end up realizing that something is not very clear. Who is this person? Who's telling the story? Who's describing the different scenes? Is it another character?

RM: So we're like the narrator, in a state of instability, because we don't exactly know who's recounting what we're following?

EP: Right, the missing character.

RM: Has the script already been performed?

EP: Yes, during the show we had a lot of visitors. But Catherine Robbe-Grillet wanted to re-enact the ceremony as it appeared, with all the elements composing it, and add, palimpsest-like, objects that she herself had composed.

RM: Are you trying to show that the art world can itself be regarded as a ritual, creating its own value system, and way of fetishizing objects?

EP: Yes, absolutely. The art world has ritual forms and projects value systems onto the artwork by lending the fetish-object a particular and at times mystical aura. The fetish incarnates the presence of an absence and refers to something immaterial and

intangible, which can never be possessed or named—the absolute object. Which leaves the work with an incomplete, unfinished status, something fragmentary which is included in a corpus and perpetuates a mythology.

RM: In your view, then, these objects become players in the art world. Is this their ultimate goal? Because things can have many different lives. What happens when they become art world objects? Do you think this is their ultimate goal, or do you think that they can still have other subsequent incarnations?

EP: I call some of my pieces “relics”. For me, they’re static players encompassing the vestiges of a past. It’s often a question of imprint-forms connected with an action, containing within them a gesture, and triggering, in the end of the day, a score of movements. The “relics” have a twofold status: that of performative objects and that of sculpture objects in abeyance in the exhibition context.

RM: What words would you use to describe your work?

EP: I like talking about “tableau vivant⁵ sans le vivant” or “living picture without the living”. What I mean by this is living in the sense of living, or live, spectacle. The exhibition *Les actions silencieuses* at the FRAC Champagne-Ardenne is constructed like a living picture, where the imminence of movements is frozen in postures each suggesting a gesture or an absent body. The composition is precise, each object is a pantomime actor keeping a position. The choreographed postures form a set of gestures which in no instance call for responding to the usual uses of the stage, or being acted “for real”. The exhibition is the result of this re-creation, of a fictional arrangement questioning ritual form.

RM: You’ve also used the term “fiction”. What does fiction represent for you?

EP: The way exhibitions unfold is written beforehand. The spaces of contained actions are made material through pieces which each contain the vestiges of an action produced off-screen, either past or in the offing. The spectators themselves take part in this construct; their eyes and their movements are oriented. As in film, the characters are fashioned as the plot moves forward. Each show is a new chapter, and all the ingredients of the story form a body of works, a mythology. This is why, when I’m developing a show, I talk about “writing”.

TM: Can you say a bit more on that?

EP: Let’s take *Giselle* as an example, a work inspired by the eponymous ballet, produced at Klemm’s Gallery in Berlin in 2012. The *Giselle* spectacle was created in 1841 in Paris and marked choreographic history by the presence of pantomimes within a ballet with

architecture movements. As far as I'm concerned, *Giselle* was an exhibition-cum-installation, whose components were based on the incarnation of the romantic heroine, by way of the décor. The installation was made up of a pleated leather screen which obstructed the gaze and got the spectator to negotiate that obstacle, get around it. Behind, a composition of a choreographic score made from anonymous photographs was revealed. On which was inscribed the point of balance of each position. Equilibrium, the "centre" as it is called in choreography, is a concept essential to movement. The shift or swing was part of the presentation of missing woman and spectacle.

A bit before that, in June 2011, I'd had the exhibition *Devon Loch* at the Zoo Galerie in Nantes. That project returned to the story of a famous race horse that had belonged to the Queen Mother. Devon Loch had a memorable fall during the final of the Grand National steeplechase in 1956. Just 50 yards from the finish. The real reasons for its sudden and spectacular fall have never been established. It was supposedly due to the cramps, or the shadow cast by the jump which might have disturbed the horse. So I imagined a re-creation of the scene of the fall based on fragmentary elements, thus shifting the news item towards a fictional reality. Carrying on my research around elements of rupture in relation to the events and their narratives, I developed the anecdote in the manner of a crime novel. I re-created the fall, based on *The Ghost Jump Theory*⁶, with the unavoidable elements of a narrative, the fact (the race), the relic (the shadow) and the rupture (the fall).

RM: When do you decide things are over? At what stage?

EP: In the exhibition venue, this often happens just when I'm starting to arrange the works. At that particular moment, the pieces become independent. It often creates a gap between the familiarity that I can have with the pieces in the studio and the same pieces once they're installed in the exhibition venue.

1-*Handlung*, in German, means act and action, but also event, plot and fiction. The term, which is not easy to translate into French, is also a philosophy. It is used to define, in the *act*, what is or is not part of the *action*.

2-Jean de Berg, *Cérémonies de femme*, Éditions Grasset, Paris, 1985

3-Alain Robbe-Grillet, *La Maison de Rendez-vous*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1965

4-Alain Robbe-Grillet, *La Jalousie*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1957

5 -Le *tableau vivant* is a term that originated in the early 19th century. It describes a composition made by a group of people, often in costumes, who re-enact scenes from painting, literature and sculpture in frozen positions. It questions the relation to the image and performativity, mimésis and representation.

6-"The press published pictures of Devon Loch with his hind feet on the ground and his forelegs in the air. [...] A lot was made of the fact that the horse collapsed by the wing of the water jump [...] The real answer to the ghost jump is Devon Loch himself. [...] Heart failure, ghost jump, cramp, and a shock wave of sound may still not include the real cause of Devon Loch's fall, and in this tantalising mystery there is no Sherlock Holmes to unravel its elementariness on the last page. What happened to Devon Loch is Devon

Loch's secret, and I doubt if he even remembers it now". Francis Dick, *The Sport of Queens*, Michael Joseph Editions, London, 1957, p. 236-237.