

EMILIE PITOISET

Penumbra and Palimpsest

Before embarking on an introductory discussion about equilibrium, balancing acts and tipping points, Emilie Pitoiset aptly offered me an unstable cane stool next to a scale-model of her allotted space in the FRAC Champagne-Ardenne. Back then, some months before her exhibition ‘Silent Actions’, the tiny white cubes without ceilings were still empty. But although the stage was not yet set, the artist was not short of ideas. “I want the different objects in the exhibition to really feel like they have just been put down after some ritual act”, “I want them to be transformed like a silver spoon which would be just metal unless it was put in your mouth as a baby and treasured as a keepsake”¹ she told me – to paraphrase an hour-long steady flow of conversational thought. No doubt her miniature rendition of rooms in foam-core held together by pins (architectural voodoo) was intended then just as a reminder on the side in her peripheral vision, a symbolic space of future action that can be filled at will or even on a flight of fancy. There is an agreeable Babushka effect of models in studio spaces that in many ways are just as semi-fictional.

Back then, a poster edition for a gallery space with intentionally confused spelling also hung behind us. It was one of her witty on-going series of ‘misunderstanding’ works declaring: ‘WE ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY DAMAGE/ WE CANNOT ACCEPT ANY RESPONSIBILITY / IT’S LIKE RUNNING INTO AN OLD FRIEND’. (There is also another in the series about mythology.) Thus I felt duly warned in advance about what I might read into things, as well as charged to think about how words, objects and images might be transformed in space through art. Incidentally, real exhibition spaces can be just as taunting, fragile and speculative, although possibility-laden as models. Apparently ‘Silent Actions’ is the last show before this FRAC closes for an open-ended period of renovation – offering itself up to an uncertain future dominated by questions of funding and cultural-political alliances. It seems to me that curator Florence Derieux’s decision to show Pitoiset’s work at this juncture might be a pointed and perfect choice, embracing as it does potentialities such as ambiguity, the unforeseen, as well as what has gone on in the wings, out of sight and beyond a given frame.

In the last few years, through multifarious constellations consisting of physical tangibles including: self-made publications, inscribed or rearticulated ‘found’ images, looped film and video fragments, clustered together with sculptures which suggest obscure origins, Pitoiset’s

work offers us hints, traces, insights and opens virtual doors. All of her videos to date for example are rewritten sequences from existing footage whose meanings are totally abstracted from the original narratives and screened as elements on par and in constellations with other mediums. Looking at them puts us firmly in-between thought-things and spatialized thoughts. Take for example, her earlier group of works from 2011 inspired by the story of the champion steeple chaser 'Devon Loch' who mysteriously collapsed only yards from the finish line and victory much to the consternation of his royal owner who famously quipped "Oh That's Racing!"ⁱⁱ. Was it heart failure or just an off-putting phantom shadow on a jump? Perhaps artists, art and viewers, interchangeably, can be such a horse, difficult jump or pesky shadow.

The FRAC's exhibition too offers a field, a *parcours* – art as a series of mental 'obstacles' to negotiate although this time not directly attached to a given narrative. In *Silent Actions* Pitoiset focuses on the transformation of evocative objects and images through the suggestion of undisclosed artistic rituals or secret performances that may or may not have happened. Here the artefacts all have to do with either the hands or the eyes, which for the artist suggest the worlds of action and contemplation respectively. Accordingly, a pair of black leather gloves sewn together for example *Les indiscrets* (2012), don't point the way but may have been worn by unseen owner and then laid to rest in a form recalling a pubic mound. The material and object is the stuff of fetish and fantasy. The work involves the stitching together of two things which anyway ought to be a pair anyhow, but is none the less disquieting for it – probably because of the immobilization the work also suggests. The work lays ready to hand on a cupboard as if just put down.

The exhibition is given form by a central plateau in the space, a slightly raised arena which contains and elevates a painting *Solo Show* (2013) upon it. It is too low to be a step or a platform but nevertheless suggests metaphorical another higher level. Combined with the mysterious objects thereon it suggests ritual action and a moment that is meant to occur of some undisclosed importance to the participants. Meanwhile the 'real' white walls fade to the background. Indeed while there are exceptions, to date, the artist's work has often appeared similarly aloof or semi-detached or assertive of independence from the actual particulars of their various architectural surroundings. Thus meaning in her resonant sculpture, still and moving images seems to assert itself from the inside outwards. Sometimes the spatial shift away from is directly signalled. Take for example, the installation *La Perspective Corrigée* (2011) consisting in part of wooden concertinaed walls converging on a point skewed away from the central perspective focal point suggested by the salon mirrored by the symmetrical garden outside in the

work's original setting. Or, suggesting that art should metaphorically support itself, the work *La Jalousie* (2010), composed of multiple panels of thin, sheen plywood splayed out and held up only by their own weight against each other. And finally, in 2012, in a curated group show at Fondation d'Entreprise Ricard, where an ensemble of works were hung to make internal correspondences largely irrespective of their surroundings. They included a sculptural screen of folded dusk sky blue leather produced by craftsmen jointly with the artist alongside reframed spooky found 20th Century photographs of ladies doing gymnastics in their backyards overwritten by lines added by the artist suggesting a score for movement. These works combined to sketched out in an obtuse way what the artist thought of as notes in a visual form for a possible alternative choreography for a dance after the ballet 'Giselle' – even though there was no stage and dancers we only present in the form of mesmerizing 16mm found footage loop of their hands marking out steps as a memory device *La Répétition* (2012).

It is going off on a tangent slightly although also related to the notion of our bodies as inscribed with the past, while we were looking the leather piece *Giselle* (2012), the artist told me it was hard to make because 'skin has a memory' thus its herringbone or zigzag geometric pattern was *à rebours*. But then again tangential thinking is key to Pitoiset's endeavour that often charts contrary vectors that can end up meeting in surprising ways. For example, from this should we draw parallels to art making given the fact that to dance the role of Giselle requires an extreme amount of technical perfection and that character also dies of heart failure and only achieves peace after death? Along the way Pitoiset also told me that a key method for her involves "looking for trouble" that is working out or creating or injection or finding out what provides the trouble in her material, a picture, in the reception the moment(s) of perception. In a related way she also has a classical sculptor's mix of fascination, dread, and sense of pivotal urgency about the questions of balance, the fall and the aftermath in the broadest and also metaphorical senses whether the metaphorical or narrative device for a work involves a horse or a ballerina.

Though Pitoiset's often borderline-abstract work has various ties physical and cultural ties to the real, they are nearly always intentional loosened. Typically she prefers instead to establish or evoke alternative space-time geometries of the liminal, off-limits, always late or just missed, heady and imaginary realms. For her positioned objects and images can act like compasses directing us to other potential dimensions. They become tools of refraction, offering something akin to set of cryptic instructions. It is this aspect that takes centre stage in this new exhibition. The artist observed to me: "I would like that 'Silent Actions' become a temporary story that questions the passage of the object to a ritualized object, how it is charged because of its context and becomes independent of given meanings. The rite serves it and changes its state. It becomes a

relic, a vestige of the past.” For the artist evoking the world of rituals allows for physical acts with consequence linked to meta-fictions, logic, repetition and sense beyond a specific language or culture. In this exhibition the objects are all halved or partial – *La Doublure (The Body Double, 2013)* half a suit hangs on a wrack, the dried skin *Le Masque (The Mask, 2013)* of a shark suggests a thinking face behind it. The objects function by summoning the missing in our imaginations. The artist’s growing interest in rites of passage and the performance orientated thinking that involves in an art context has grown steadily since her project *Vous arrivez trop tard, Cérémonie. (You arrived too late, ceremony. 2010)*. This exhibition of staged chairs and other relic-like objects in a former part Romanesque part-Gothic church opened up the potential of working with what might be termed the performativity of sculpture and performative documentation.ⁱⁱⁱ Accompanying the show was an artist’s publication consisting in part of a new text constructed by partially blacking out sections of a quote from Alain Robbe-Grillet’s novel ‘La Maison De Rendez-Vous’ (The House of Assigantion, 1965). Here and elsewhere Pitoiset’s work acknowledges visual art’s sister worlds and disciplines of cultural theory, film, dance, literature, philosophy, history writing but never understands itself merely in the role of a faithful translator. They undoubtedly share concerns, but in Pitoiset’s hands art must have its own distinctive means and chart its own course, even one involving penumbra and palimpsest. Robbe-Grillet (1957-2008), a central figure of the *nouveau roman* movement has been an indirect source of inspiration for the artist for sometime particularly with respect to stylistic experiments with non-linear narratives and his emphasis on objects over protagonists. *Vous arrivez trop tard, Cérémonie.* also involved the considerable twist that his wife Catherine Robbe-Grillet, an iconic figure and writer in her own right, was engaged as a ‘consultant’ for the exhibition. Drawing on her thought developed in her SM erotic writing and praxis as a dominatrix, through conversations with the matriarch, the artist sharpened her sense of the power of ritual, its codes and narrative phases and the place and meaning of objects in it.

This implicit interest in performance and sexuality beyond a hetero-normative idea of femininity places Pitoiset’s interest in a feminist lineage including the likes of Joan Jonas, for example her *Mirror Pieces* (1968–71), which also included props or costume elements, and Gina Pane. ‘Silent Actions’ however doesn’t place the artist’s own body or an alter-ego in the centre of the action. Instead things and images are left to suggest – not to speak for themselves in an animistic way but rather to evoke an array of potentially gone before or what may be to come. The viewer enters an arrangement analogous to a narrative device of a potentially dangerous love triangle with the artist and her work – each must right their own story entailing images and objects as odd reminders. What should take place on the grey field? What is inside the bedside table? Who

owns these things? Is the painted garment cult fashion or a work of art? Does the shark skin bode a blind threat? During the opening of the exhibition a woman appears with a black painted hand and the other half of the suit – a form of easily missed completion perhaps that actually only wraps an enigma in an enigma. This performance thus remains also only a part, in a balance act with the objects. For the artist the objects as relics and traces suggesting performance following the thought of art historian Philip Auslander are also ‘performances’ in their own right. Pitoiset is aware of the consequence of such openness observing to me that perhaps then: “the climax is an event that one only realizes in retrospect.” With all this in mind the artist took time to explain a linguistic dilemma: just what might be the right term to apply to her current approach to exhibition making. Is it an installation, or a sculptural offshoot of a happening or a situation? Can there be a performance without performers or visible performance? Just what she asked, does one call: “a *tableau vivant* without the *vivant*?”

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ⁱ All quotation from the artist in this essay are taken from conversations and emails between the artist and the author in November- December 2012.

ⁱⁱ Article in The Guardian (March 24, 1956) *Devon Loch joins the great failures*. In Modern use "To do a Devon Loch" is a metaphor now used in modern day sports and otherwise to explain the sudden, last-minute failure of teams or a sportsman to complete an expected victory.

ⁱⁱⁱ See two key texts the artist provided me with from her preparatory research: Raphael Gyga ‘*Horcuxes of Art or the Curse of the Performative – On Rituals, Rites and Relics in Contemporary Art*’, in *Between Zones, On the Representation of the Performative and the Notation of Movement*, published by Migros Museum für gegenwartskunst Zürich, JRP Ringier, 2010.
Philip Auslander, *The Performativity of Performance Documentation*, in *A Journal of Performance and Art*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (PAJ 84), Pages 1-10 2006 - MIT Press.