

AN INTERVIEW

with Valentine Reymond and Boris Rebetez

This Friday April 11th 2008, the Basel-Geneva express train stops briefly in the industrial town of Moutier. From the platforms overhanging the station it is possible to catch a glimpse, on the other mountainside of the valley, of the Arts Museum where this interview is taking place.

V.R. Collage is or has been very much present in your work. Is that still an important process for you today? How do you see collage? How does it transform the image of the world in your eyes?

B.R. I have been working with collage for almost twelve years, which is still an ongoing process in my work. At first, I would use printed photographs for their formal qualities; the images I was looking for with the help of collage had an inclination for the pictorial. Gradually, my collages, very simple to start with, began to reference the photographic medium rather than painting. They evolved towards a reflection on the photographic and reproducible image.

V.R. Is it a reflection on the ideal image that we find in calendars and in advertising or a reflection on the photographic medium as such?

B.R. It is on the one hand a revelation of our subjective reading of the photographic image, of the deconstruction of a mental process of projection. On the other hand, I am concerned that these images preserve a narrative potential, a subject, and thus that they oscillate between content and absence of content. It is intended to focus on certain aspects of photography.

V.R. A focus on notions of time and of space?

B.R. Yes, I mix up different eras, provenances, qualities of printing and especially of light. I also juxtapose interior and exterior. I am interested to see up to what point our perception – which for close to a century now has been influenced by the media, photography, and film – is tolerant towards what I show.

V.R. Contrast also seems to me to play an important role in your exhibition at the abbey of Bellelay. I am thinking of a contrast in terms of time, of your decision to place objects which

reference modernity in the baroque context of the abbey. Is that a main concern of (the) collage?

B.R. I am seeking out that which is foreign, or strangeness, instead of contrast. My collages create a feeling of strangeness because neither time nor space are identifiable. This is what interested me also in my project for Bellelay: to insert elements in this baroque abbey which in no way fit with its style or era. That of course provokes an anachronism, but I am at the same time striving for these elements to communicate with each other.

The idea of the car came to me quite quickly, because the abbey, which is today desecrated, is a place which has served cults and rituals. The ordinary objects which I placed in this abbey take on another dimension, because of the primary function of the space, without however becoming cult objects. I didn't want to show a current car, nor a real one, but an archetype of the car, which is situated somewhere between the coach and the technology. Something which is still a bit archaic. I discovered a photograph of Le Corbusier driving a very beautiful sports car, a Fiat Balilla, during one of his visits to the Fiat factory in Turin (Lingotto). I reproduced this car at a scale of 1:1, but painted it completely black. It is like a shadow, a reminder of the past. At the same time it is a car, its image or its memory. That is what interests me in my collages and objects. Doing things which resemble what we know, but which become, in a second movement, a bit strange and distant.

V.R. Could this black car also evoke the idea of prototype or of a maquette? You speak of architecture in your work, including in your drawings. How do you position yourself towards an architect? Do you have any affinities with this style of architecture in particular?

B.R. It is not architecture which interests me in the first place but the notion of space. Architecture maybe even more than politics, influences our daily lives. It shapes our living space, and thus also our movements, our ways of sleeping, of living together, of eating, of seeing... A utopia, functionalism, rationalization of modern architecture have shaped our way of life, our mentality. In my artistic work, I reserve myself the right and freedom to deconstruct these things at a reduced scale. I have no pretensions of being an architect. I react to architecture, to urbanism as a citizen or inhabitant, and thus as the consumer of the architecture; not as its conceiver.

V.R. You therefore conceive architecture as a place which shapes our manner of living. You have also dealt a lot with landscape in your collages. Do you consider it according to the same point of view, as a physical and geographical environment which marks us?

B.R. The landscape can be a mark of identity. But it is also, I think, a distanciation towards the environment in which we live. The notion of the image has become fundamental. It has not only codified the city, but also the landscape. I have used images from calendars, advertising, tourism... for my collages because they contain an ideological vision, which is strongly codified. These images of consumption most often represent idealised situations. Collage allows me to dismantle or to inverse some of the mechanisms which compose them and to make open images again. Images which reveal their ambiguity in representing something and negating it at the same time.

V.R. You have chosen a specific title for your exhibition at Bellelay, *La Réception*. This word can have several meanings; it can refer to a socialite evening, or to the front desk at a hotel. What meaning do you give to it? Do you conceive it as the title of a film or of a novel?

B.R. I was mainly thinking of the title of a film, or a play. Like 'Le Bal' (Ettore Scola) or 'La Cérémonie' (Claude Chabrol). In order to find this title, I thought of the exhibition's location. This abbey preserves sediments of its former religious function. I wanted one word which would refer to an act which follows a certain order of things, an event in time, a ritual, such as a reception of heads of state where the red carpet is rolled out, a demonstration of power. But at the same time it is, as you said, a hotel reception. It is also the reception of a message. This title convinced me because it is very open and it reminds me of the title of a film. The exhibition is composed of a certain number of passages, expressed by my sculptures. Like in a church, where the objects are always in the same place, such as the altar or the tabernacle. My sculptures have nothing religious about them, but in this context, they take on another connotation.

V.R. Are you always attentive to the exhibition space, even when it is a 'white cube' in the tradition of modernist architecture?

B.R. In any case I allow the space to inspire me. I try to include the spectator in the exhibition. Duchamp said it; it is the exhibition space, the spectator, that make the work of art. But I believe in a certain poetry, in the possibility that something particular can be experienced in an exhibition, of the order of the imagination and emotion. I am looking for a to-and-fro between the fictive and the real. In the second tome of 'Don Quixote' by Cervantes, Don Quixote himself reads the first tome of the novel. It's as if this novel were intruding on reality.

V.R. The image you have chosen for your poster looks as if it is a hybrid, like the exhibition title. Is it a factory or an exhibition hall?

B.R. It is a huge hall which is at the 'Cinquante-naire' in Brussels. A place built during the 19th century as the apology of progress, of industry, of the might of the machine. Today it houses the museum of the automobile and of the army. In order to prepare an exhibition, I work in relation to the space. There is thus always a biotope which puts itself in place, elements which meet each other. I had to go into this museum in order to find documentation on the car that I am exhibiting, and I took several photographs. These images of the museum then attracted me in relation to the exhibition's title, which I chose later. I look to create an environment, a constellation, with all the elements that I encounter.

V.R. So you chose to show as poster a step in the working process?

B.R. Precisely, it is a step in a working process. On the image which I chose for the poster, there are several elements related to the exhibition. A red carpet, in relation to the exhibition title *La Réception*; the staging of this museum; a mix of eras in the architecture of the hall. And on top of that, the spatial dimensions of this hall are reminiscent of the abbey of Bellelay.

V.R. Is it another kind of collage?

B.R. Precisely.

V.R. I would like you to tell me about your sculpture with mirrors, presented at Bellelay. Is it a kind of display case?

B.R. It is a sculpture which is entitled 'Suprême', referring as much to suprematism as to the girl band or to a word which is reasonably well

used in advertising. It is a sculpture which fully integrates in the exhibition space and the spectator by reflecting them. It is, as you say, in a certain way a display case as it does not exist on account of itself; in this case it only presents the space which surrounds it and the spectator. In choosing smoked mirror, I wanted to create a shift with regards to the context. The space reflects and becomes more fictional, more distant.

V.R. You spoke just now of the sacred vocation of the abbey. For me, the display case is reminiscent of this church furniture which you spoke of earlier, and in particular, the altars.

B.R. This connection that you make comes from the context. Anywhere else, it wouldn't work. For my exhibition at the abbey I decided to place isolated objects, like church furniture, which has a specific place. But I did not want to create an altar.

V.R. Does the mirror play a particular role in the perception of this piece?

B.R. In my collages, there is this tension between an image which we enter into, and then we are distantiated by the construction. This then becomes opaque, and we are thrown back upon ourselves. Like in a mirror in which we see the reflection of something which has no space. The mirrors of 'Suprême' reflect the space of the abbey, absorb it and deform it – all the while remaining impermeable to this space.

V.R. Another piece in your exhibition is a strange bird cage. Could it be that you are inspired, as with the car, by a model, or is it a construction, like 'Suprême', which is multi-referential?

B.R. This cage resembles utopic architecture, with complex volumes and lots of facets. It evokes crystalline architectural projects, which have been conceived from the start of the 20th century onwards. It also interested me from the point of view of nature tamed by man, on the same level as zoos or botanical gardens.

V.R. What is strange is that this cage does not have a rational space; its structure seems to explode. It is closer to an organic architecture, of the Frank Gehry variety, than to modernism. This kind of architecture can moreover be inspired by nature.

B.R. Yes, it is this ambivalence which is interesting. This desire to want to imitate nature in the cage structure, all the while with the aim of enclosing a bird. It is even crueller than a simpler cage. And at the same time it is a beautiful structure.

V.R. Is there an illusion in that?

B.R. Yes. In any case, a utopia. This chaos and savageness of the cage remains an image. It is functional mainly by the idea, and definitely less through practice.

V.R. Are you going to put a bird into this cage?

B.R. No, I think that most people would not think it is a cage in the first place. They will see it as a sculpture, and will only discover there is a door in it upon closer inspection, and that it is a functional item. It is the project and image of this object that I wish to show, a cultural object in a certain sense.

LA RÉCEPTION,

invitation to a spatial-temporal polyphony:
Verticality and horizontality

« Everything develops at the same time. Beginnings and endings walk in parallel to one another. (...). My vision is no doubt more catastrophic, but not in the apocalyptic sense, but rather in the sense of a revolution or a mutation of things. And this mutation is due to acceleration: we are trying to go faster and faster... »
Jean Baudrillard, extract from *Fatal Strategies*

If Boris Rebetez can be said to be making photographic collages or assemblages which conjugate improbable situations in a remarkable way, it is because we are living in an era of juxtaposition and simultaneity, which couples that which is nearby and distant at an ever accelerating speed. The world seeks and finds itself at the crossroads of many varied and changeable paths; at the middle of such a network, that spreads out its vast web, these space(s) intersect with time and retrace and connect to the nerve lines of history. Boris Rebetez stages this history in a constellation of historicising elements, related to symbols of power and authority – the church, the automobile, Le Corbusier and prison. And if history and geography are revisited in the exhibition entitled *La Réception*, the relationship to time and its verticality is of capital importance.

Would Boris Rebetez not seek to analyse, like a phenomenologist, the spectator's faculty of perception, or lack of perception, of their relationship to the world in time? Which consciousness to give to the world? Would the present here not be interpreted by its absence, or by the non-functionality of models and archetypes, thus fictively plunging the spectator into a universe which is quite differently other?

Verticality and temporality

In the face of the décor of Bellelay abbey – stuccoed by the school of Wessobrunn (1713) – *La Réception* confronts a charged space, to which the artist adds and clashes with various levels of temporality: celestial time (the sacred scenes of the church), temporality measured by mechanics (the reconstituted Fiat automobile), the temporality of the human body (the spectator), cosmic time (day and night), and imaginary time (the virtual). The concept of this 'hetero

chronology', as Boris Groys or Deleuze and Guattari designated it, simultaneously causes various different zones to co-exist. What's more, the baroque elements spill into the space and invade it, suggesting a new heterogeneous verticality. Their presence echoes the Enlightenment, illuminated by the metaphoric sheen of knowledge, the teachings of the past, and open to innovation and reason. Thwarting and augmenting this outdated exuberance, the artist operates in temporal layers and, like a surgeon, dissects them whilst articulating his work around modernist symbols of the avant-garde. For the church of Bellelay, he re-made a Fiat, driven in 1934 by Le Corbusier during his visit to the factory of the same name in Turin. The automobile, a model, here remains paradoxically immobilised and unoccupied. Le Corbusier has gone; the photograph from that era is the sole witness to this event. It seems to become the symbol of a postmodernist simulacrum, emptied of its essence and velocity.

In the same way the 'birdcage', like a modeled prison, is stripped of its functionality. Incarceration paradoxically appears disincarnate. Its condition is palpably open and floats in the space. If it is reminiscent of the geodesic shapes of Buckminster Fuller, it seems strangely abandoned, sacrificed even, evoking little more than a progressive fascination for the era of universal exhibitions.

Space and horizontality

Whether one considers his assemblages in real, three-dimensional space, or his photographic collages in which spaces – be they public, private, interior, exterior, sacred or profane spaces – are telescoped; all these zones end up imbricating themselves in the real. They tell a fragmentary narrative, a sort of simulacrum supplanted by its own fictional powers. Moreover, 'in the age of mechanical reproduction', this notion of an original work or authentic event fades, making way for a gap, a rupture the spectator seeks to infiltrate. He explores the fault line and its possible relationships which he connects. The real is thus painstakingly dissected and magnified. He simulates a game of simulacra which demand a re-update, not only of our contemporary vision but also our modes of thought. The artist becomes a stage-director; he reinterprets our contemporaneity, distances it and puts it aside in a heterogeneous space and temporality. The collages and gouaches too, juxtaposing constructivist elements with inks

and diluted washes of varying intensities, each in turn assemble photographic fragments or mirroring and reflective elements. They reaffirm this taste for an era which is at odds with its conventions.

Nevertheless, some questions remain. Where have these ideas of progress gone, of the break with the past, and of political commitment? Would the relationship to classicism, and then from modernism to postmodernism, not depend more on the desire for autonomous art which would invalidate the linearity of modernity? Just like postmodernity, incidentally, it would thus emphasise a discontinuous horizontality which is played along fault lines and the explosion of local and temporal references, echoing the fragmentation of society and the individual. Here, too, history innovates less than it repeats itself.

Spatial-temporal polyphony

Boris Rebetez's oeuvre maintains transhistorical relationships with contemporary art, classical art and more closely with modern art, where the process of public staging is of central importance. He no longer seems to paradoxically respond to the call of the grand idealised histories of modernity. The world is testing itself; the 20th century has known major reversals. And if the changes seem to mark the end of a hegemonic power, the artist's role is precisely to give a common meaning to our society. *La Réception* by Boris Rebetez offers a more committed conception in the 'profanation' of the space, the church of Bellelay. In so doing he reinstates it to common use. And if he likes to dive into culture, it is because he stages the present world, declining its historical cycles clashing against each other, and which he simultaneously understands. He places the real in a field of tension, and realises it, becoming its mediator. It is perhaps also like an orchestra conductor that he invites us to experience an improbable spatial-temporal polyphony.

Sarah Zürcher
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