

On the relativity of places

(Emmanuelle's lesson)

Michel Gauthier

‘Take a gold ring. There is a hole in it and that hole is as crucial to the ring as the gold is.’

Alexandre Kojève

Outside or inside. Stationary or moving. In order or in disorder. Seen or seeing. Such pairs of opposites are what Élisabeth Ballet's work seems to construct and develop for itself by activating and bringing them into play. Pinpointing them in their various guises in the two series of linked rooms of the Carré d'Art at Nîmes, on the occasion of the exhibition cleverly titled 'Vie privée' (Private life), and particularly to understand what meaning is to be placed on them both individually and when linked together is the task the pages that follow will be undertaking.

Many works by Élisabeth Ballet are presented as devices marking out an enclosed area: in a word, fences. The form and material may change from one occurrence to another, but the principle behind them remains the same: the sculpture does not so much occupy a space as bar access to a portion of that space, a portion that is left empty. Sculpture here is made to play a different role from its customary one, for here the idea is less about having consistency as a body looking to exist per se as of drawing a demarcation line around a section of space. In other words, this is sculpture that tends to function as a boundary rather than as an object; seeking not so much to fill some part of a place as to divide the place into two parts, one to which access is barred, and a second, quite trivial part in that it appears to serve no other purpose than in not being the other, in being outside the enclosed space.

The 'Vie privée' tour in fact starts with one of these enclosure arrangements, and a highly unusual one at that. *Bande à part* (Band of Outsiders, 2001),¹ as it is called, is presented as a structure of imposing dimensions, made up of an aluminium tubing barrier butted up against a breeze block construction of similar height. The barrier circumscribes a single large space, while the low walls mark out four much smaller areas. However, although this piece takes its title from the Jean-Luc Godard burlesque crime thriller of 1964, unlike that film, it leaves its actors with no hope of walking off with a pile of cash.² All that the barrier and walls are protecting is the vacuity of their interiors. With two rooms further on, *Contrôle 3* (Checkpoint 3, 1996), the artist has set up another of these reserved areas: a large slightly

tinted Plexiglas cover, ensuring at once the perfect visibility and inviolability of an interior that is actually no more than on the floor a layer of sand untouched by human footprint, unlike the sand spread all around, which is soon trampled underfoot as spectators move about looking at this great empty window display.³ While at the Nîmes exhibition *Bande à part* and *Contrôle 3* are the two most obvious instances of the work conceived as pure enclosure, of a notion of sculpture as enclosing emptiness, other pieces offer further evidence of this, each in its own way. When I watch the two videos *Schlüterstrasse* and *Schlüterstrasse, neige* (*Schlüterstrasse, Snow*, 2000), I find myself again confronted with a construction that I cannot enter. Not so much *Bande à part* this time as *Rear Window*:⁴ but the exteriority test remains similar. Likewise, the video pictures from the piece entitled *Vitrines, Paris-Berlin 1996/1997* (*Window Displays, Paris-Berlin 1996/1997*), which show, through glass, hotel lobbies, offices, gymnasias and other more or less clearly identified spaces, lit up but otherwise unoccupied, bring me up against a boundary that can be seen but not passed through, a familiar enough boundary but one which the character, or precisely the characterlessness, of the spaces thus marked out and set apart nevertheless makes somewhat arbitrary and superfluous.

While the two remarkable enclosing pieces *Bande à part* and *Contrôle 3* are enough to highlight the importance of this message – the definition of the work as an enclosure and of sculpture as a boundary – it is a message also conveyed, each in their own way, by further occurrences worth mentioning here; primarily *que l'esprit ajoute* (which the mind adds, 1988), with its wrought-iron railings which start from a wall, and after drawing a curveless shape return to the same wall to close off a space;⁵ but there are also *Corridor* (1994) and *Sculpture verte* (*Green sculpture*, 1997), with plastic strips stretched over their metal frames; and *Cale* (*Wedge or Slipway*, 1996), with its wooden trays on jacks around an empty centre lit up by glaring neon lights; *Delta* (1996), with its three steel barriers of various shapes and sizes; lastly *Boléro* (1999), like a right-angled corridor with both ends sealed, extensible and compressible like an accordion. In this evocation, special treatment must be reserved for *Deux bords* (*Two Edges*, 1993), one of the artist's most astonishing sculptures, on show at Nîmes: an assemblage of nine rings of different diameters, three in steel, four of complex shape in moulded resin, one made up of eight black foam mattresses, and the last one a vibrant ring of grey plastic concealing a fan that keeps it inflated; these rings are impeccably hung from a conspicuous set of wires and straps fastening it to the exhibition room walls and ceiling, and circumscribe a steadfastly inaccessible empty space.

As all these pieces confirm, Élisabeth Ballet's sculptural activity as such seems primarily to be a statement as a plastic dramatization of the boundary: how to make this demarcation line most effective? The answer, one surmises, very much depends on the circumstances of the exhibition. It can only be a difficult exercise, for by gaining too much existence or consistence, the boundary is liable to be seen no longer for what it is, namely an appliance, but as an object in its own right. The amazing piece *Deux bords* sheds some light on that risk. The spectacular success of that work as a sculpture has a downside: a relative weakening of its quality as a boundary fence. The rings are so intriguing, so physically convincing that one almost forgets the internal space circumscribed thereby. The value of this middle course taken by Élisabeth Ballet's art lies not only in defining the fully accepted difficulty of a singular approach, it lies first and perhaps foremost in its being a kind of sign of the times, which see the work often waver between the status of an art object solely in its own service and the status of an appliance, at the service of an activity for which it only plays an instrumental role.⁶ Be that as it may, one way of avoiding fences becoming mere objects is to vary their shape. For while such variation certainly depends on the context surrounding the birth of the piece and testifies to a praiseworthy desire to experiment, it also meets the need to avert the danger that the undertaking would face were a single enclosure formula to be repeated: the fence would lose its effective power as a boundary and become a mere self-representation. Whether from the standpoint of equivocalness (is it a sculpture or an appliance?) or formal renewal, a piece like *Bande à part* is in fact exemplary on both counts. On the barrier side, it is primarily an appliance; on the wall side, it is more of a sculpture. And moreover, as it passes from one to the other, it takes the demands of this change of form into account.

With 'Vie privée', Élisabeth Ballet's output explores a novel way of elevating the void. Here it is no longer encircled, but raised off the ground. Thus with *La Tristesse des clous* (The Sadness of Nails, 2002), the spectator is faced with a kind of theatre stage, a vast wooden twelve-sided polygon, devoid of anything to suggest a show and with no steps up to it. This podium is again a kind of enclosure since here it is the height that stands in our way, and the drama performance associated with such a structure leads one to think of this sculpture as being an exact staging of the void. For the stage to be mounted on window frames only adds to the scopic register of the piece while creating an element of tension between the structure's upper and lower levels. In denoting the motif of the act of looking, of placing before the eyes, these windows function as a signal of the specifically spectacular dimension of the piece: we are indeed watching a staging, a staging of vacuity. However, by

drawing our gaze towards what is underneath the stage, the windows seem to be indicating that the emptiness above in the footlights may well have its counterpart in the shadows below: and yet there is nothing but the reticular play of frames that quickly become invisible, promptly concealing their subalterns' sadness. The windows under the podium are blind, rather like those of 'Schlüterstrasse', which reveal nothing of the inside beyond them.

But what do these more or less sculptural railings in various guises mean? How are we to understand this operation aimed at enclosing or erecting emptiness? Rendering inaccessible what is an empty space with nothing to protect in it, these railings, this podium are presented as operators of aura, as agents of a sanctuarization, as the instigators of precisely such a separation that this aura presupposes. However, this is done here in a peculiarly intransitive way inasmuch as what is separated and sanctuarized is in fact a void. In so doing, these pieces give us to understand that the work may well be an aura effect rather than the other way round. The void that characterizes these enclosures thus makes it possible to establish the direction of the relationship unambiguously, by making it clear that the imposing of a certain distance, a separation, creates an aura effect that is powerful enough to determine the effect of a work, even though what is being cut off and placed at a distance is empty space. But this empty space is of course only one scenario for reality. In other words, at this period in time, and for anyone with an eye for art, whatever occupies such a closed space will find itself automatically radiating an aura, thus turning it into a work. Which is exactly what happens with *Vitrines*. Through the twofold barrier set up first, in its own way, by the camera lens, and then, more conventionally, by the window of the place being filmed, the spectator, feeling irremediably cut off from the subject of the display, ends up more or less consciously lending whatever is on the other side of the decisive boundary a status normally reserved for a well-formed work. We need look no further to explain the disturbing effect of viewing these images; faced with these inaccessible interiors, I cannot help wanting to look at them in the way I look at an art object. But beyond the window, what does my gaze come to rest on? On anything and everything. On whatever it is possible to find in these more or less disused places, more or less undergoing conversion or having gone quiet in the night, making them strangely inhuman. Only here, the trivial is on the other side of a pane of glass and so, just as the Plexiglas of *Contrôle 3* lends an aura to empty space, these windows do so to these drab things contained in such enclosures, tending to place on them the value of a work. The enclosure as defined in Élisabeth Ballet's sculpture is not protected against the gaze, which encounters emptiness; but it is protected against footsteps. I cannot walk on the ground inside the barrier and the walls of *Bande à part*, nor on that behind the transparent tinted Plexiglas

cover. Conversely, the sand spread around *Contrôle 3* does take my footprints, randomly as I move about. And when the barred area takes on the appearance of a corridor, a passage, the no entry rule takes on extra force. Such is the case with a piece like *Boléro*. The same holds, albeit using a different strategy, for the unusual piece *Wool & Water* (1985–2002):⁷ two versions of a cardboard staircase – steps and banister – cut up into several sections in as many large boxes, also made of cardboard. Here a passage, which is what a staircase is, is barred not because the ends are sealed off, but because it has been taken to pieces and boxed. Seldom has the conditioning of walking and the step been presented in a more explicit form.

In *Vie privée*, moreover, everything is done to remind the spectator of the floor space, i.e. where walking is allowed and where it is not allowed. This exhibition is a kind of drama of the floor for both eye and ear. The track passing under visitors' feet is like that of a film in which the different sculptures are the players. In addition to the dull sand, whether immaculate or trodden underfoot, in the room containing *Contrôle 3*, further sequences are notable for the way in which they tackle the floor. First, the silvery zinc on the back of the false floor turned upside down on which *Bande à part* rests and is reflected. Then, while we are at it, the mat grey floor, pushed back from the wall that gives it its dimensions, floating on the over-polished stone floor tiles and strewn with some of the giant pins of *Olympia* (2000–2002), some of which have round coloured heads – sculptures resulting from the disturbing enlargement of pins used in the studio to fix some paper element⁸ onto a model and which, in their new state, on the floor, appear to be awaiting some unsuspected utilization. Even in the dark room where *Schlüterstrasse* is broadcast, a room that is too narrow to allow any real freedom of movement, spectators are reminded of the floor when the soundtrack gives them to hear someone moving around.

While some of Élisabeth Ballet's sculptures turn the banned footsteps and inaccessibility into the actual test of the work, for others on the contrary, walking about, walking through, becomes their principal mode of operation. One recalls *Cake-walk* (1996),⁹ which comprised a rostrum in plywood painted bright blue, designed and installed so as to occupy the entire surface area of a garden located between a huge disused powder store building and four high enclosure walls. We may also mention the two corridors in *Zip* (1997),¹⁰ their sides covered in translucent but non-transparent plastic, one being open at either end, the other at one end only. Not forgetting of course *BCHN* (1997),¹¹ with its passages partially covered with stretched plastic and red carpet, which the spectator walked around to the rhythm of samples of electronic music.

How should we interpret this alternation? Why do some sculptures prohibit access to the spaces they mark out, while others on the contrary expect their spectator to walk around these spaces? At least two arguments may be put forward in answer to this. First, whether forbidden or encouraged, the footstep is asserted as the major vector of the type of physical experience favoured by Élisabeth Ballet's sculpture. Whether negative or positive, the step is the factor according to which the test of the work is determined as a priority. This is what I am not allowed to enter or into which I may pass. Then, it is probably possible to suggest a deeper reason behind this alternation: in one case, the work I am not allowed to walk in draws attention to itself by the emptiness of the space it circumscribes; in the other, by opening itself up to my deambulation, it merely proposes one of life's more mundane actions, walking. Either there is nothing, no object beyond the fence; or there is only myself who, as the spectator, the subject of the artist's eye, am the very antithesis of the art object. Certainly, the places have been switched round, from the outside to the inside of the enclosure, but whether it is the void or the subject that is highlighted, in neither case is there anything that can claim object status.

Walking where entry is normally barred is not, however, the only ploy used in the alternation proposed by Élisabeth Ballet's work. After the empty enclosures like *Bande à part* or the stage with no performance of *La Tristesse des Clous*, we now need to turn to a piece like *Des idées* (Ideas, 1988). This is a parallelepipedal structure in aluminium and thick Perspex, wall-mounted at just above head height. The piece, based exactly on a kitchen cooker hood, marks out a space, the very protective space lying underneath it, as defined by the light filtering through the Perspex. No doubt, standing under this hood, the public is in a position to get some ideas notably as to the surrounding space before them. To put it another way, this kind of piece exemplifies one of the major mutations affecting art today, a kind of Copernican revolution in the artistic order whereby the work is no longer so much the thing to be looked at as something that enables the viewer to see that which is not the work.¹² Certainly, I can contemplate this replica hood; it has all the qualities required to pass for a perfectly credible sculpture. But I can also – and probably more appropriately since its position on the wall is a broad hint to do so – stand under it and observe whatever circumstance chances to place before me. At Nîmes, what I am given to see from the shelter of the hood is the empty podium on the window frames. The work as a viewpoint from which to consider the work as an empty enclosure. Thus, in this room, the two versions according to Élisabeth Ballet are illustrated together in synergetic confrontation. But is it not this kind of confrontation already falling into place with *Contrôle 3*, and hence within a single work?

Certainly, the virgin sand is on display under the large glass window, but meanwhile, the Plexiglas is dispensing reflections of the surrounding context – in which I, in fact, play a part. The work as staging of the void that pierces it or as the operator of a viewpoint onto its other, onto that which is not of the same order. Is it not this confrontation of the work as enclosing emptiness and of the work as a viewpoint onto what is outside itself which, in a clearing at the Domaine de Kerguéhennec, takes the form of changing places with *Trait pour trait* (Trait for Trait, 1993)? A circular cage built in matt stainless steel fencing. Wandering along a path in the grounds, the spectator first comes across this metal enclosure encircling empty space, and soon discovers that there is a way into this cage through a discreet door that closes itself behind him. Once inside, there is nothing to do but gaze outside, at the trees, at their trunks like the bars of the cage, the deep grass, the same as that trodden on inside the circular enclosure, the path through the forest leading to the clearing and on which there may now be another visitor arriving, to make an odd opposite number, the very one activated in the *Schlüterstrasse* video. On one side, the eye filming; on the other, that of the exhibitionist watching the camera trained on him. Who is seeing, being seen? Which is the subject, which the object? If one accepts that this film has an emblematic quality, beyond its testifying to a morning and afternoon in Berlin, then what we may see is, as it were, an art in condensed form: I am looking at the enclosure that defines the work and what do I see but another spectator, also engrossed in the pleasures of the scopic urge?

There may be a further link between *Trait pour trait* and *Schlüterstrasse*: trees. In the stainless steel cage, I can see trees and the uprights of the structure, which reproduce its shape and circularity. The camera's eye shows me the front of the building through the branches of a tree. On the walls of the room where *Contrôle 3* is on display at the Carré d'Art, the artist has had large drawings made in black chalk representing that tree – some of them mimicking powerful zoom effects indicating that it is the tree in the film. While the lines easily establish the representation, nevertheless, being deprived of the resource of chromatic differences, they soon appear to the eye as a kind of network or inextricable web which, more so than the pictures in the film, prove an obstacle to one's vision of the enclosure – of the work therefore, if one accepts the suggested equivalence – which is the building opposite. This in-between tree is testimony to the artist's taste for instruments of separation, screens, filters, partitions, windows, curtains¹³ – in a word, boundaries. Élisabeth Ballet's art is literally obsessed with imposing limits, between an outside and an inside, between the work and what is not the work, as we have seen, but also at a broader level, between two particular sections of space, between here and there. It is an art of separation that sometimes succumbs to the temptation

of the hypnotic display of the tool of that separation: the thick curtain of snow falling steadily and noiselessly between my gaze and the front of that Berlin building. However, the tree is just one more screen, it is also the emblem of disorder, a disorder which, whether it be real or imaginary, is the hallmark of the outside world, of the street, that antithesis of the home, the ultimate metaphor of the work. So, having emptied the said home, after now and again placing the spectator in it, the artist is logically inclined to sow disorder. 'Private life' testifies to this temptation to disorder, this desire to display the incomprehensible confusion of what should really be termed public life: with, in addition to the tree, the scatter piece that is *Olympia* and its pins scattered in disorderly fashion on the floor, not just on the thin grey platform but also on a narrow strip of stone left showing in an effective play of inside and outside. And when order does not give way to disorder, it advertises its relativity, with two competing versions of the boxed staircase possible together.

Either to be on the outside of an enclosure, walk round it, subjected to the single test of that limit since the inaccessible centre is vacant. Or to be on the inside of the enclosure, there to exercise one's steps or to obtain a viewpoint over the public life on the outside, its little nothings, its disorder. In the invitation to such an alternation, in the handling of this always possible changing of places, there lies a dream – the dreamlike quality of certain pieces, like those Magrittean puddles of cedar on the floor and the green mural décor from which they appear to have been taken,¹⁴ therefore comes as no surprise – the dream of an age when art and non art might be perfectly interchangeable, on the one condition, however, that a boundary be crossed. Not therefore the fusional dream of a time when art and life would be the same thing, but of one when, on meeting on either side of the boundary separating and distinguishing them, art and life might exchange roles. For that is the paradox we need to be aware of: while doubting the existence of any ontological difference between art and life, the art of Élisabeth Ballet remains an art of separation. There is probably nothing to distinguish the section of space enclosed inside a barrier and the section around it, nevertheless, the spectator can choose to stand on one or other side of that barrier. One piece that offers a magnificent embodiment of this permutability of places is *Emmanuelle* (1988): a slender wooden fence that follows a sinuous course and, while marking out an inside and an outside, yet does not close in on itself. This means that I can readily pass from one side of this slim balustrade to the other. This leaves me a choice of what to leave alone, what to grant at least a few moments of private life.

1. This piece was shown, in 2001, with somewhat different materials, at a similarly named exhibition at Matt's Gallery (London).
2. To recall the story of *Bande à part*: two friends make the acquaintance of a young woman who tells them about a hoard of cash an old lady has stashed away. They decide to lay hands on it but things go badly wrong when the old lady and one of the robbers die. The other embarks for South America to start a new life with the girl.
3. *Contrôle 3* was presented for the first time in 1996, at the Tramway in Glasgow, at the 'Sugar Hiccup' exhibition, along with three other pieces, *Delta*, *Cale* and *Des idées*. The artist covered the exhibition room floor with a deep layer of fine, pure white salt.
4. To recap the plot of *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954): a photographer confined to his home with his leg in plaster idly watches the windows of the building across the courtyard. He soon becomes convinced that one of his neighbours across the way has killed his wife. Events subsequently prove him right and in the end the murderer, realising he has been unmasked, crosses the courtyard to try and push the reporter out of the window, but he fends him off by flashing his camera at him, finally getting off with no more than another broken leg. Of course, the *Schlüterstrasse* device cannot but refer to the Hitchcock film. But since, in Berlin, the neighbour across the way is an exhibitionist and not a murderer as in New York, nothing actually happens. One final remark on the subject of references to motion pictures, we note that the 'Vie privée' exhibition shares its title with a Louis Malle film dating from 1961, in which a young movie actress forfeits her private life. In the final scene we see the unfortunate star on a rooftop being dazzled by a flash and falling into the void.
5. This piece was one of four shown by the artist, in 1988, at the Venice Biennale. The three others were *Des idées* (Ideas), *celles qui sont précisément signifiées* (to those who are precisely signified) and *par les mots* (in words). The four titles together made up a sentence as the exhibition title: ideas that the mind adds to those precisely signified in words.
6. I have proposed an approach to this phenomenon on the basis of a piece by Xavier Veilhan, *Le Feu*, in 'Hestia et Hermès', *Les Cahiers du Musée National d'art moderne* no. 77, autumn 2001, Centre Pompidou, pp. 56–59.
7. This piece reuses and transforms a 1985 sculpture, *16 caisses +1* (16 boxes +1).
8. The 'Night Roofline' exhibition, held at the Le Creux de l'Enfer (Thiers) and Le Parvis (Pau) art centres in 1999, had several pieces on show (*Pièces détachées BCHN*, *Fabrique I*, *Fabrique II* and *Ça m'intéresse*) tackling the question of the model and therefore of scale. No doubt this transfer of the concept, from words to the work, and from the work to its scale model in the studio is one useful angle from which to examine Élisabeth Ballet's work.
9. This sculpture was produced as part of the 'Ramparts Project' exhibition at Berwick-on-Tweed, England, in 1996.
10. This was produced at the Offenes Kulturhaus at Linz, Austria, in 1997.
11. This work was designed for the exhibition of the same name at l'Arc, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, in 1997.
12. I have also referred to this 'Copernican revolution' in my article 'Les intransitifs (sur quelques pièces de Veit Stratmann)', *Art Présence* no. 40, October–December 2001, pp. 18–30.
13. Thus, at the Centre National de la Photographie (Paris), in 2000, for the 'Entrée dans la cour' exhibition, along the walls of one room Élisabeth Ballet placed net curtains.

14. *Taille douce* (Line engraving, 2002).

Translated by John Lee

Essay published for the first time in the exhibition catalogue *Élisabeth Ballet, Vie Privée* (Carré d'Art-Musée d'Art Contemporain, Nîmes, January 2002).