

Missing Piece

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Inside Outside

Here we are, you and I, inside the catalogue. All very normal, for sure. Catalogue activity and museum activity are conjoined on the occasion of an exhibition that is not only bringing together works by Élisabeth Ballet and placing them in the same space and time but also reactivating them. The retrospective is a museographic text that reunites, retains and represents. The retrospective composes with the life of works after they are made, with what has happened to them, in the lighting of display and in the darkness of storage, taking in the vicissitudes of aging, of restoration, of their indexical recording, as written and photographic traces, and the repetition of these: their *imprint*.

So here we are inside the catalogue produced for the exhibition, and yet what we find there is text and images relating to the outside. Or rather, they are *situated* outside the exhibition, yet without being excluded from it. They are projects – realised or unrealised – for social space, beyond the contemporary context of art constituted by the museum, the gallery, the exhibition room, the biennial – in a word, the ‘purpose-made’ institutions. The situations of these projects differ, depending on whether they are ‘art commissions’, defined by their public or private funding, or works commissioned under the ‘artistic 1%’ (a programme in which 1% of the budget for a public structure is spent on an artwork, which artists bid to be commissioned for), or again a Nouveaux Commanditaires initiative. For the latter, the process is set in motion by private individuals, forming an ad-hoc group expressing a ‘need for art’ that will be defined with the help of a cultural mediator, and involving an artist on this shared terrain.

Inside and outside. Why exclude one from the other, when we know that any limit looks onto an outside and an inside, like a skin, like a partition (a picture wall?), like a membrane, one side facing the outside world and the other, the inside world, constituting an interface that separates these two worlds and places them in relation to each other. That is what, for me, lies behind the inclusion of these sculptures from outside – this ‘social sculpture’, to borrow Joseph Beuys’s term – alongside those from inside, from the world of art institutions. They are in contact. Better, sometimes *contact makes them kin*, in a process that is not formal, identifying like with like, but rather material, or even matricial – by contamination, recurrence, displacement, reuse of experiences.

Le dehors et le dedans – the outside and the inside – is the title of the ninth issue of the *Nouvelle Revue de psychanalyse*, published in spring 1974.¹ It contains a seminal text by Didier Anzieu, ‘Le Moi-peau’.² This first formulation of a concept that would inform many other fields, and notably art, considered what was then the great absentee in psychoanalysis: the body, at its limit between inside and outside – the skin. The skin, that frontier where we separate, undo the fusion, where we ‘de-fuse’, as the author writes. A barrier, the skin holds back what is inside but it is not closed to contact or to exchange. The skin is also a surface for imprinting, that is to say, for inscribing and repairing, for confidence and pleasure. The ‘skin-ego’ is an experience of the body’s surface. It is also a psychic representation. ‘For no other psychic reality than the skin-ego does pleasure so obviously found the possibility of thought,’ concludes Anzieu.

This sculptural hypothesis touches on the works of Élisabeth Ballet and her taste ‘for instruments of separation, for screens, filters, partitions, glass panes, curtains’.³ Bi-face dividing bars, ‘on one side the outside and on the other the inside’,⁴ these sculptures mobilise the hardness of physical surfaces in perennial materials, but also the psychic surfaces constituted by the weft of the various sensations she connects, including resources from outside the visual field.

Screen

With their shared etymology, the act of pushing (*pousser*) and the skin (*peaux*), writes Anzieu, are linked from the start in the same sensation of energy. This pellicular energy is deposited and transposed in the weft. Like a skin, the weft is a surface that filters and infuses, a screen and a shimmering, an impulse and a pulsation. For the Nouveaux Commanditaires project at the chapel of Notre-Dame-des-Sans-Logis-et-de-Tout-le-Monde in Noisy-le-Grand, developed at the request of the ATD Quart-Monde association (unrealised), Ballet hung four metal frames, zigzagging over the roof of the chapel, one of them connecting it with the ATD’s family centre a little way away. The hut-shaped chapel, built in 1957 with materials

¹ ‘Le dehors et le dedans’, *Nouvelle Revue de psychanalyse*, no. 9, spring 1974, Paris: Gallimard, 1974, text by Anzieu pp. 195–208.

² Later translated as *The Skin-Ego* (Yale University Press, 1989)–*TRANS*.

³ Élisabeth Ballet, text for *Sur cour*.

⁴ ‘. . . that can be as thin as foil, I’m neither on one side nor the other, I’m in the middle, I’m the partition, I’ve two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that’s what I feel, myself vibrating . . .’ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnameable*, quoted as an epigraph to the article in the *Nouvelle Revue de psychanalyse*, op. cit.

salvaged from a dump by people living in a shelter camp in Noisy, was taken down, moved and reassembled, stone by stone, in 1969. A dynamics of migration and traversal drives the artist's project, with its big metal rectangles conceived as sails. Each sail comprises two screens in plasticised white mesh, loose on one side and tight on the other. Depending on the strength of the sun and the light, the moiré effect of these industrial screens can seem to show landscapes or vibrant clouds, shadows whose transparency also lets through the clutter of the surrounding urban space.

When drawing is treated as a skin, its visual function, to which academic tradition assigned a virtue that was in fact moral, brings about other corporeal sensations. For example, *Sur Cour*, in which a silkscreen is deployed over 'pleated' glass, incorporates the very rhythmic effects of the glass façade of a building at Porte des Lilas in the 20th arrondissement of Paris. Ballet reused the drawing of a tree conceived on the basis of a film shot from a window onto the courtyard of a housing block in Berlin where the naked branches of a chestnut tree (it was winter) created a graphic form against the background of the building on the other side. This 'intermediary' tree, as the artist called it, became (was once again) a pellicle on the façade of the building. And it was therefore this set of pellicular sensations that was literally inscribed on the fine screen deposited on the façade of the building of the Valode and Pistre agency. It was nearly installed, too, within the walls of a police station in Bobigny, for the modernisation of which the artist was consulted in 2002.

By the play of anamorphosis, *Trait pour trait* at the Domaine de Kerguéhennec initially appears as a matt veil troubling perception of the landscape, making it seem to have a grey weft reminiscent of the hatching in engraving. Then other optical sensations emerge. For the screen, whether made of pixels, graphic data or 'the web of relationships that has been established . . . between the speaker and what is spoken', always emerges from the process. Thus the weft of the fabric, its crosswise threads, intersects with the vertical warp: together they form its weave. In her project for the square on the site formerly occupied by the Jarrosson textile mill at Bourg Argental, in the regional natural park of Le Pilat (Nouveaux Commanditaires, under way), the artist conceived a paving design that echoed the weave blocks for a Jacquard loom used to teach apprentice weavers in the mid-19th century. A loom, enriched with various motifs, was literally projected onto the floor. The technical virtuosity of the arrangement of the cobblestones evokes the artist's sense of wonder at the tresses, laces, fringes, garlands, ribbons, knots, buckles and thread, and all the formal resources promised by these productions. As for her project (*Rails* and *Trains de Mots*) for the public square created by covering the railway lines abutting Avenue de France in the 13th arrondissement of Paris,

one of its concerns was to bring back above ground the weave of train lines now hidden by the slab. The idea being that their vibration would be transcribed by engraving. Hypothesis: sculpture as operator of a transition of the powers of language, from what is said to the way it is said: it is form that is the vector of invention and rupture, not content. The weave is exposed and exhibited.

Words

Each sculpture contains words: in the plural, and often numerous. If only the words of their title: *Trait pour trait*; *Cha-Cha-Cha*; *Fabrique*; *Sur Cour*; *Tourne Sol*; *Travelling*; *J'aimerais Qu'il Existe Des Routes*; *Swing*; *Pow Wow*; *Vous Me Direz*. The title is the sign that the work exists; it is its signature, its proper name, its skin-ego. Words also often make up the material of the work itself. The sculpture is the materialisation of words. Very low, standing vertically on the floor, phrases written in typographic characters in yellow sheet steel form borders separating the vegetation from the paving stones that, together, create a little garden laid out between two buildings of the Bercy concerted development zone (ZAC) (*J'aimerais Qu'il Existe Des Routes*, 12th arrondissement of Paris). Amidst the vegetation, plaques enamelled with red also contain words: not the description of the plant represented, but fragments of poems (Georges Perec, Fernando Pessoa, Eugenio d'Ors) in which the landscape, the road, the garden, the place form the springboard for desire or dream. Words, which the plants appear to lean on, also incite the gaze to make a physical action other than entering it: to read is also to follow a path, but when one is on a path, it is also to change speed, to do two things at once (*Je Sublime*, a project in words for Avenue de France in the 13th arrondissement, near the MK2 multiplex). Once again, the physical limit invokes as much the obstacle as the action.⁵ *Travelling* inscribes words on a roundabout. The characters are reflective, lighting fixtures. Bordeaux initiated one of its urban improvements in the particular light cast by a reading done on a return tram journey – both ways because these words in painted steel compose – without interruption between the letters – a palindrome designed to be read from the vehicle going in either direction: SOLE MEDERE PEDE EDE PEREDE MELOS. *Travelling* implies distraction, with the movement of the tram forgotten in reading and/or the

⁵ This is how the 'emergency exit' pictogram works in visual language, or at least the one observed by Ballet from a hotel room in London, which she then transposed into a sculptural project to reactivate an English library, *Swiss Library (Spiral Staircase)* which no longer has any practical use. The pictogram is inserted into green plastic film placed above a glass cage and covering its stairs. The commission, which she won, was cancelled for lack of funds, but she reused the pictogram in her sculpture *Leica*.

reading abstracted by the tram in motion. Here, Ballet pursues the hypnotic association of the psychic and the kinetic from avant-garde cinema. One thinks of *Anémic Cinema* by Rose Sélavy (looped optical effects and puns or spoonerisms),⁶ of *L'Emak Bakia* by Man Ray⁷ or the writing of Gertrude Stein, which is also marked by the resistance to meaning meted out by the choreography of the hysterical bodies of the Salpêtrière asylum and by the films of Charlie Chaplin.

Words lend themselves to inventory, to lists: the lists of the goods carried on the covered rails of the 13th arrondissement, or the 65,000 typographic signs comprising their *Train de mots*; the ones that echo noisy words, from 'aboyer' (bark) to 'vocaliser' (vocalise), silently resounding in a sloping frieze over the roofs of the establishment (project under the 1% law for the Anatole France school in Pavillons-sous-Bois); the 310 names of cities, of islands, lakes and archipelagos that populate the map of the world transposed to the site, including the grounds and buildings (but not the gym) of the Collège Amédée Laplace in Créteil: words are engraved on 310 brass medallions screwed to the floor or the paving found on-site (*Collection de sable*, 2012).

Language

Words haunt the silent shells of lost textile industries, and that of the throwing (making the thread, the chenille, the lace by twisting or 'false twisting') done at the Moulinon de Saint Sauveur (Eyrieux-aux-Serres, regional natural park of the Monts d'Ardèche, a Nouveaux Commanditaires project). *Vous me direz* is a sculpture of sounds and words installed in the old station for the local train that passed through (more recently turned into a shed for bins). Now painted blue, it is pierced with an opening onto the landscape. In the noisy atmosphere of the machines that served this activity and were associated with the surrounding landscape, the language of the weavers, of the turbine workers, of the boss who took over the now silent factory reconstruct the actions and expertise of an activity eradicated from the landscape. Voices speak of life around work and the gestures of work, its organisation, its architecture, its cessations, the smell of thread steeped in the grease of the machines and that emerges from

⁶ Marcel Duchamp, *Anémic Cinema*, 1925–1926. B & W film, 35 mm, silent, 8 min. 23 sec. (16 images/second), made with Man Ray and Marc Allégret. Nineteen sequences comprising 10 optical discs and 9 discs with wordplay ('Esquissons les ecchymoses des esquimaux aux mots exquis. L'aspirant habite Javel et moi j'avais l'habite en spirale . . .'). Credit at the end of the film: 'Copyrighted by Rrose Sélavy', 1926.

⁷ Man Ray, *Emak Bakia* (ou 'fiche moi la paix'), cinepoem, 1926.

it dazzling white. These are not processes of domination being related here, but practices of the body, woven in the language of those who talk.

In *Belles Lettres* (an unrealised work) literary language gives form to a project: that of reading in the street, from the pavement, a space that guarantees the human scale and contact of public space. And as the public space of the street is also the place of gendered power relations, which were clearly manifested in the 19th century as a dichotomy between ‘flâneur’ and ‘flâneuse’ (meaning a prostitute), Ballet gave women a good head start. She offered to inscribe women writers’ texts in the street. These are women who lived by their pen. They are also professionals of language who gave their names to seven streets of the renovated Balzac neighbourhood in Vitry-sur-Seine, in homage to Sohane Benziane, a teenage girl who was burned alive there in 2002. *Belles Lettres* draws on the correspondence of Olympe de Gouges, Simone de Beauvoir, Colette, Elsa Triolet, Marguerite Yourcenar, Flora Tristan and Christine de Pisan. Their distinctive ways with language are also made to *co-respond*, responding to each other, and to the letters of Mariamma Bâ and Nadine Abou Zaki (rues Voltaire and Balzac) and Aziz Z. Zahara and Ella Rubinstein. The grids of new buildings on which are hung the enamel plaques in different colours and dimensions where these letters are silkscreened thus become graphic compositions whose typography uses the font ‘Mrs Eaves’: a design by a woman, Suzana Licko, named after a woman, Sarah Eaves. A similar iteration is found in the fact that the publication is by *espace public*.

Railings

When they appear, railings foil the screen. Halfway along the sequence, *Trait pour trait* suddenly becomes what it is: a perfectly circular length of railing, obstructing passage into the clearing where it is placed, closed. *Tourne sol* is also a railing, inscribed in a new development around the town hall in Poitiers, where it performs the function of separating the building in the street from the garden. But that is where the railing part ends, because this is a ‘deviant’⁸ grille: in passing alongside the ramp leading to the garden, these railings in light metal not only lean but also go from a height of 4.4 metres to one of 2 metres, bestowing a sensation of acceleration and instability on the strata of the land that they espouse. Far from reassuring and enclosing, they ‘proclaim a dysfunctional relation with their

⁸ Marie Muracciole, *Attirance fatale (underground)*, presentational text for *Tourne sol*.

surroundings'.⁹ Sculpture regains the upper hand, simultaneously producing and undermining a functional use – railing and derailing in the same movement.

This paradoxical injunction defines a limit state also occupied by several other Ballet projects. The regular swards of lawn installed in front of the former asylum building that is now home to the Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles in Caen are thus twisted from their orthogonality by the vertical structure of steel railings, the diagonal of which imparts a dynamism to the obligatory framing. It is important of course, that the notion of outside and inside should be topped by a borderline structure. Likewise, in her project for a sculpture park in Cologne, Ballet conceived two railings intersecting diagonally, a big X with two doors inscribed in them to regulate entry and exit as well as their sculptural regime.

Motifs

The horizontal pattern of *Cha-Cha-Cha* laid out on the ground unifies the multidirectional cacophony of urban trajectories – cars, pedestrians, trains – coming together at the Pot d'Étain crossroads in Pont-Audemer. Made of granite slabs, spread out like a carpet over an area of 3,000 square metres, it is an extreme blow-up of all the details of a lace pattern. The white granite paving draws the circumvolutions of the motif, standing out against black granite. This ability to establish a silence, or at least a pause, in the hubbub of the city and its users is delegated to the motif. In 2009, on the departmental road that runs through the centre of Maisonneuve, a village in Ardèche, with its never-ending traffic of cars and lorries, Ballet met with the locals and came up with several actions 'on the motif'. Apart from getting rid of the central line along the road, thereby making the drive a little more erratic and hazardous and therefore inciting drivers to slow down, she also proposed a signal for each pedestrian crossing consisting of a motif in several shades of concrete or paving stone: transom, chequering, bars perpendicular to the road or repetition of parallel lines. Each network of lines composing signage on the ground would have constituted the pattern of a new relation between pedestrians and vehicles. Hypothesis: the motif as sculpture of a score of *Silence* that intensifies listening.

Here, it is hard not to evoke Élisabeth Ballet's frozen representation of a boom operator in moulded resin for *Bump Piece*. This was made order to complement and reorient the 17th-century statues by Guillaume Coustou and Antoine Coysevox that, in keeping with Ballet's instructions, had been removed from the wall and repositioned in the Louvre's Cour Marly.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

By its posture and gesture, it indicated that there was something to listen to. As if the silence of the backs of the marble sculpture contained figures of speech that needed to be deciphered.

Road, Route, ribbon, bobbin

Turn around. Settle in a place, make one's way. A train of words (*Train de mots*). A *Travelling* shot. An unreeling of speech. A motif carpeting the ground. In Condat-sur-Vienne in Nouvelle-Aquitaine (Limousin), *Un trou dans le sol* (a hole in the ground) wound around a little marsh and its grasses, its circular extent, marquetried with paving stones, encompassing a small mound placed there like the convex consequence of a hole dug beside it. The bit of white gating atop the hillock appears as the vertically-raised three-dimensional extension of the regular marks laid out horizontally on the ground and appearing in the blocks of pink granite: two continuous, circular lines in blocks of white marble, punctuated at right angles by regular strokes marking an outside and an inside but with no indication as to which is the inside and which the outside. This reversibility of spaces recalls the palindromic effect mentioned above, like the poetics of the road and the ribbon, which have no beginning or end, for then the road would be terminated and the ribbon would run out. On the contrary, like the bobbin and the game that goes with it, these elements of displacement embodied by the sculpture help to accept disappearance and return, even if this means 'awakening the memory of an object not seen before'.¹⁰ A sculptural hypothesis.

¹⁰ E. T. A. Hoffman, *The Sandman* (1817), from the French translation quoted in *Nouvelle Revue de psychanalyse*, op.cit., p. 36.