

Galerie Thomas Bernard

Cortex Athletico

Press release

Trapped again in still life

Artists : Stéphanie Cherpin

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COMMUNIQUE DE PRESSE :

We're not Indians, that's too bad (1)
and the resourceful animals certainly notice
that we're not at home, not reliably,
in the interpreted world.

Rilke, Duino Elegies

Archaism and poïesis

I said above that one must start with inventories. This is only half true. The inventory is actually only the most rational side of a process that involves a general conditioning with the aim of altering the "normal" consciousness in order to understand intuitions. At the end of the day this aspect of the process is the condition of possibility for the sidelong reading / writing already mentioned.

There is foremost a special form of solitude, up to and including among the people who surround her at the moment of fabrication: solitude or desubjectification, erasure of all the habitual determinisms weighing on her (being a woman, being a feminist or not, being young or old, being poor or rich, etc.); and in exchange, there is a liberation of the sensation: being obsessed by the images of the objects, by the emotions related to the music and to the ambiance emitted from the zones which were explored to find the materials in the first place. This radical solitude is prepared in a very practical way: hunger, fatigue, cigarettes, music, and, last but not least, stress. This last one derives from the absence of a plan; because Stéphanie Cherpin does not work with designs, even less with a detailed plan, the realization of which could be delegated to others. At the beginning, there's an interest for one or two objects, and some ideas floating around: the way that, in the Inuit mythologies, bodies and masks split off, connect, on the one hand, and a little wooden house, on the other (Daddy's Little Girl Ain't a Girl No More, 2010). The work, without a plan, will consist in specifying the ideas as much as the materials; in inventing objective links between the ideas and the material. How far these ideas are from any "intention" or any theoretical "message", to which the piece would not bring any more than a flat illustration, one can see that not only in the loathing that the artist experiences in talking about it, but to the fact that the absence of a precise idea (concept, metaphor, theory) plays an important role for her, as a necessary element for the production.

The source material is diverse: an emotion coming from a song, an object, its physical or semantic qualities, a landscape, various memories, etc. The absence of a general plan means a void around which these various elements will turn, faster and faster, as the time necessary to complete the piece is running out, and will come together in a clarified form.

And in practice, it is the work under pressure, with neither preliminary plan, nor preconceived idea, that will

"allow" the stress, the cigarettes, the hunger, the exhaustion, the music becomes more intense, and like the use of the car contributes to building up the particular affective state necessary for the creation: passing through industrial zones, parking lots and drive-ins, the music turned up all the way (and the physical effect produced by the sound on the mind, on the affective state), driving around in circles on the beltways, sometimes for hours, like a dervish, until one is already tired when it is time to work with the materials. The physical weakness that the stress, working under pressure, reinforces, diminishing the appetite and increasing the consumption of cigarettes; the feverishness and urgency that lead her to forget which way to turn, functioning through reflexes, a little like those suffering from hallucinations after the catastrophe, described by W. G. Sebald (2), holding on to the scraps of gesture they still know: their habits, displaced, reveal something about meaning and its collapse in the midst of the broken walls. And the process here is about revealing, through gestures freed from their usual purpose, something of the meaning of things in a potential state of collapse, and of its possible reconstruction as mishmash. One can also think of the bits of language dictated by the Aztecs among the ruins of their civilization, to a few missionaries (3), to the masks and fetishes that integrated the elements of a Catholicism grafted more or less violently on indigenous cultures, of a scientific and technical conception of the world diverted into shamanist cultural productions: it is a localized conditioning of the body in order to be in a state of the world collapsing, to feel it in its impending (or permanent) collapse, to be this world and its downfall.

A solitude, thus, of no longer being completely from the world, from this world in any case. Being absent to oneself: being among things, being in empathy with objects. The work of deconstructing the rational mind enables intuitions about the world, and even the objects. Most importantly, it is then about putting oneself in a state such that consciousness is altered: making it suffer in making the body suffer, but also modifying it, making it another, freeing its ability to grasp intuitions as if they were preys, by stripping the gestures and the objects from their usual purposes. This is an ability which the separated mind, the mind that masters the real (through science and technique) cannot actualize: from this point of view the mind is afflicted by a weakness of what Merleau-Ponty justly calls "high-altitude thinking" (*la pensée de survol*). Because here intuition signifies: non conceptual comprehension, the organization of phenomena in a non-representative frame, immediately created by the relationship between a form of life and a given world. The intuition is the grasp, through and in the practice, of a scale of values and of language games which render a world possible. It can thus only be formulated in the practice: a work of art, or a way of life (one and the same thing for some), or even a concept, if one understands concept properly, that is to say like the proper name of an intuition. Its biography is the work in which it enters the scene, its only environment, its biotope. Her works are concepts in this sense: their biotope is not designed; they are the presentation of beings which will be catalysts for intuitions, perhaps allowing the "spectator" to experience it again.

Stéphanie's work is thus very much about an archaism and in a way about a critical archaism. It is critical in the sense that it shows us things our world usually pushes to the margins, such as objects of strict utility which are considered banal or even ugly. The artist conducts a reappraisal of the objects. Her work is critical because it opposes this high-altitude thinking that characterizes our world and the enframing of the real (arrondissement du réel) it involves. It is also critical because it is not naive; or

at least because it must recapture its innocence: this involves a necessity to reconstruct rituals and techniques, to also build them space-times, to the extent that now there is no space socially dedicated to these kinds of fantasies.

There is a need to redo our snake dance, knowing that it is impossible to rely on traditions that have been lost anyway: erased or dead as objects of faith for us : we're not Indians, that's too bad.

The archaism is thus here: back to the arche, to the principle of poïetical production, meaning a special way of being in the present. The artist says what is about the present time. Her work is the demonstration of an intuition concerning its historical stratification, while also being the possibility of an alternative ontology: she shows the becoming-wild of the present. a result, the recourse to a formal and gestural vocabulary inspired by so-called primitive artists is very significant: it is not exoticism, nor even a claim for the legitimacy of long denigrated cultures, but more the shifting of perspective onto our own world: here again, we see an alteration of consciousness.

Being wild, but with what you've got: industrial objects mostly. Then, it becomes clear that all the historic and cultural strata can cross each other according to axes with blurry coordinates, deriving from a still impossible ontology: of the contemporaneousness of the "savages", of Renaissance art and of our time, the common beauty of baroque churches and factories, leisure parks with artificial settings (Bellewaerde in her childhood), etc. In this way, the magical belt of Kinaalik, made from the butt of a rifle, a piece of a seal's flipper, a polar bear's paw, a piece of a sweater having belonged to a white man, etc.: "All these elements, belonging to different worlds, times, different places, combine their forces once attached to the belt of the shaman woman. In her shamanic practice, this woman recreates the unity of the cosmos, which gives her strength, power and efficiency." (4)

There is an assumed inactualness of the artist, since it is about creating a living art, the ability to create forms, to open on a possible world and to accept the accidents of history as a source of meaning, beyond the deadly aspect of reiterating the same references, and more generally about how our world of separation entails forgetting our original condition, that is to say: of our living presence, here, among the other bugs, in a constant relationship with unmastered vital forces.

Objective animism and teratology

Because the world has changed: it has expanded, it became more specific : shifting from a world of approximation to a universe of precision (5). Now, this shift is accomplished by the development of sciences and techniques which increasingly structure the way we apprehend the real. Consequently, this world seem disenchanting to us : myths and religions no longer explain the world. In this "naturalist" (6) ontology, a certain number of conceptual dichotomies determine not only the way we understand phenomena, but also and especially the way we live them: a detached human subject looks at the real, in which objects are placed, in the midst of an infinite expanse. Animals and complex machines are subject to the same scientific and technical mastery. Each object, each gesture is thus placed between these different poles: nature / culture,

savage / civilized, scrap / ceremonial objects, life span of the work of art / ritual repetition of the gesture, art / religion, spectator / object, subject / object, etc. At the end of the day, an entirely new episteme is put in place, a historical a priori, or even an archive, determining in addition to the horizon of knowledge (7) the outline of what is. In order to simply appear in the frame of a given ontology, and to be knowable, a thing must belong to at least one of these categories - unless, inexpressible and invisible, it cannot even have a phenomenal existence: "actually, there is nothing before knowledge, because knowledge [. . .] is defined by these combinations of the articulable and the visible proper to each strata, to each historical formation." (8) These are the categories which Stéphanie Cherpin's work shakes up. Because her relationship to the objects contributes to what one could call an objective animism. It is always for her a matter of giving voice to the objects she uses, to manifest their soul: more precisely,

to give voice to the monsters she creates, or finds again, to the objective combinations enabled by the materials. Even *Move on over here, slow it down* which opens the way to the setting, lets one imagine the strange beings that would populate it; would have populated it, maybe. But if the finished pieces can be close to monsters, the elements through which she is making them are not indifferent:

they themselves possess qualities that are usually restricted to subjects (expressivity, nice or unpleasant character, ability to arouse compassion, etc.) Objects-subjects, with which the work of sculpture should feasibly be in contact, in communication: there is empathy, an exchange of affects and of viewpoints. To see the real through the eyes of a railroad tie, a trailer, a bathtub - but in a way that one can see that these "objects" have been emancipated from the usual purpose that was giving them their meaning and existence in our world. Her work enables a giving / rediscovering of the personal qualities that the objects can have, if one displaces the categories structuring our ontology, in order to put oneself in the perspective of an animist ontology, for example. There is an emancipation and mutation of objects.

And yet the monsters created by Stéphanie Cherpin are only the actualization of the personal qualities present from the very beginning in the source objects. Monsters: freaks of nature, deformities, barely viable beings, ready to collapse at any time. This bathtub for example, seems to become a sort of helmet or the head of some kind of giant jellyfish, or a helmet for Titan (*Kabuto*, 2006): distortion of the meaning of familiar objects, which reappear, covered with another layer of meaning. Monsters by deviation.

But the monster is also what is revealed and paradoxically spreads a certain power: the gigantism of her works which are most often just at super-human scale, in order to make one physically feel everything that connects and divides these deformed subjects, overpowering and sickly. Then all the violence the monster is capable of appears, the solitary beast (because as a deviation, it cannot have a fellow creature), and, maybe for that reason, the terrible beast. It is not by chance that Stéphanie loves above all movies in which the solitude and the weakness of the monster appear, but also the destructive power of the deformed thing, manifested in poorly done special effects (the very first keiju eiga-monster movies, Ray Harryhausen films, etc.). Monster by augmentation.

And with the source objects, a whole piece of our world that is usually left behind in the shadow or in the grey indifference finally shows itself: leftovers, scraps, technical objects, non-precious materials, margins of the city and its neon-colored zones, etc. It is thus the apparition of beings which are like the stigmata of a

downgraded real, the slightly shameful memories that our society tries to disguise under the spectacular forms of the merchandise in order to forget the disenchanting world it produced. It is as if the artificial objects, taken up again in the movement of nature, mutated and were starting to organize themselves: to turn into organisms. These beginnings of the living, on the ruins of a world domesticated to the point of putting itself in danger. Our monsters.

Political and ontological critique

One can see it, there is thus a critical level in this work even if -or maybe because - we are very far from a political or activist discourse that might be implemented into the work. Stéphanie is doing ontology with objects, and it is for this reason that she is critical. But, in a gesture that would only have a theoretical interest, it is not only about overcoming the categories and showing, for example, that what we call an object for contemplation (a work of art) is actually what is looking at us, but it is also about giving entrance into a world, an ontology, where these categories are no longer entirely appropriate, about remodeling the connections between the visible and the articulable, between meaning and the perceptible, next to the objects. The sculpture of "savage", beyond the oppositions mentioned above, which alone can give a sense to that world. And as a result, a sculpture that tries to give the intuition of a world which would cut out phenomena from the mass of the perceptible without following the dividing line between nature and culture. These are monsters that overcome the capitalist and industrial production against itself: the revenge of the Indians on the cowboys? or rather on the miners of the Klondike (9).

There is a new distribution of the sensible then. Rancière (10) applies this concept to the field of social activity and in this way defines what is essential to the political: every act which introduces a new distribution of the perceptible is political. It shows the equality of every speaking being, gives a voice to those who didn't possess it - at the moment when the noisy animal starts to speak; it changes what there is, to see and to hear. From that point of view, Stéphanie Cherpin's work manifests a sort of expansion of the political: at the moment when mutant objects turn into animals and start to talk. Giving a voice to things means, in the literal sense, to give a title that articulates something and reactivates a word (from one of the songs she listened to, in a loop, during her work) by putting it in the mouth of this monster set up in the exhibition space. In the modification of the enunciative context, the object is a possible speaker: the artist already changes the meaning of the lyrics, and forces us to consider the possibility of a speaking relationship with these strange monsters. And through that, enables us to feel that a discourse of objects is possible -lets us hear their voice. But, just as the political act is an act of disagreement, her works seem to follow a discourse but it remains inaudible, incomprehensible. They speak a non-language, an impossible idiom, the non-discourse of which cannot be related to a clearly defined position in our ontology. Trying to listen to these impossible words is to enter into sidelong and fleeting perspectives on our world, the very same that the works seem to actualize through their mute presence. They are impossible and insistent words, insofar as they seem to come to us from the bottom of a permanent ruin, that of the civilizations which, like the civilization spread by industrial capitalism, have over the course of history dominated others -for a while.

In the meantime we can still play in the rubble.

Guillaume CONDELLO

Extract from the text *We're not Indians, that's too bad*,
to be published in the artist monography in 2012

Translation : Pauline Chevalier

- 1- This title is coming from the eponymous album by singer and songwriter Rodolphe Burger, in collaboration with the writer Olivier Cadiot (2000)
- 2 - W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003 (for the English edition).
- 3 - Cf. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, written in 1577(Translation of and Introduction to *Historia General De Las Cosas De La Nueva España*; 12 Volumes in 13 Books), trans. Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O Anderson (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1950-1982). A translation can also be found in Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred*, Berkeley (CA), University of California Press, 1985.
- 4 - B. Saladin d'Anglure, *Être et renaître Inuit, Homme, femme ou chamane ?*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. *Le Langage des contes*, 2006.
- 5 - Cf. A. Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1957 (for the French edition: *Du monde clos à l'univers infini*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. *Tel*, 1988.)
- 6 - Described by P. Descola in *Nature and society: anthropological perspectives*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996 (for the French edition: *Par-delà nature et culture*, Paris, NRF-Gallimard, coll. *Bibliothèque des sciences humaines*, 2005.)
- 7 - Cf. M. Foucault, *The Historical a priori and the Archive?*, *Archeology of knowledge*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002 (For the French edition: *L'a priori historique et l'archive?*, in *Archéologie du savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. *Tel*, 2008.)
- 8 - G. Deleuze, *Topology?*, Foucault, London and New York: Continuum, 1988 (For the French edition: *Topologie?*, in Foucault, Paris, Les éditions de Minuit, coll. *Critique*, 1986).
- 9 - In 1896, important gold deposits were found in this North American region, prompting the famous *gold rush?*, and also causing consequently the development of *Civilization?* infrastructures in these remoted lands?Native Americans from the area saw their way of life significantly modified.
- 10 - Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis, U. of Minnesota Press, 1998 (*La Mésentente*, Paris, Ed. Galilée, coll. *La Philosophie en effet*, 1995.)