

UN TEMPS POUR TOUS

Solo Exhibition - La Box, Galerie d'Art Contemporain de l'ENSA Bourges, 1999

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In general...

the work of Cécile Pitois uses several modes of representation or what could be called reproduction (photography, sculpture, painting, video) which are explored either autonomously or with one complementing another. Language is also a key element. It emphasises or accomplishes the operations of appropriation that run through the artist's oeuvre. While the areas of exploration have grown more various and multiple with time, the theme has remained unified and homogenous: Pitois refers constantly and strictly to the world of animals. Whether as the subject of documentary activity (photographic series, the Portraits Personnalisés and Paysages Particularisés, etc.), as a domesticated form (zoomorphic furniture), as a falsely utilitarian and decorative object (life-size animals made in paraffin wax complete with wick) or as a sacred image (the series of icons), her work treats every aspect and virtually every function commonly attributed to animals.

This recursiveness is in no sense motivated by the desire to examine the idea of nature in the generic, abstract sense of the term. Rather, the artist is interested in the animal universe as one of the great vectors of our collective and individual imagination. Irony as well as visual and textual incongruities denote the will to represent this other part of creation as a mirror image that constantly confronts us with our own selves. From this old arsenal of symbols and social codes, Cécile Pitois invents new combinatory situations. *Regarde* — see the unruly monkey, the pink snails that burn away during the vernissage, the iconic and canonised penguin mother and child—these mises en scène reveal our conventions and mechanisms of surrogacy.

In particular...

for her exhibition at La Box, the artist presented two installations, each in a different register: *Regarde*, consisting of a big round table equipped with headphones for listening to a new sound piece, and *Un temps pour tous*, a piece from the paraffin wax + wick series ¹ (see lexicon) comprising 21 penguins.

Behind this injunctive and, in a way, oxymoronic title, *Regarde* invites us to discover an aural cartography. What we have here is an amusing and incisive survey which intercepts our spontaneous reactions to the spectacle of animals and, above all, chimpanzees, conditioned in their cages at the zoo. Ourselves similarly conditioned as listeners by a set-up redolent of a lecture hall (the place of an intellectual and thus exclusively human activity), we become actors in this simple and effective theatricalisation of complicity. Looks and smiles accompany this shared experience during which a strange imageless documentary transports us into another mental and physical context: the world of family leisure activities, in which the zoo remains a classic, must-see product.

Recorded with a hidden microphone, the sequence of commentaries is nevertheless organised according to an established system of classification. The snatches of dialogue are organised according to theme— aesthetic judgement, family or social integration, etc., but do not follow a narrative order. Against a background of monkey cries alternating with human laughter, the constantly repeated imperative "look" (*Regarde*) triggers exchanges. Now beautiful, now ugly, the anthropoid animal elicits remarks, mockery and all kinds of projections which follow on like a series of suspended aural snapshots. The voices thus play several rounds of this droll and revealing game in which the animals seem to be the living pawns, interchangeable and ready for use. Children's "hellos", exclamations, speculation, verbal idiosyncrasies and the click of the inevitable photo punctuate the proceedings. Taken out of its visual context, speech cleverly shifts events' centre of gravity. It is obvious that what is important here are not the actions but the intentions and thoughts that precede, underpin and direct these actions. And, as with any other game, this fun at the zoo also simulates the relations and strategies at work in life itself. Leisure time brings release. The same things are still at stake, but are temporarily transposed elsewhere. *Regarde* simply offers us telling fragments of the players' psychology, since it is essentially this that makes each game—that is to say, each commentary—different. The subtle ordering of the components of this piece implacably orients our

attention to these tragicomical situations in which the language that mediates our voyeuristic consumption of the animal is merely a thinly disguised way of escaping from our own human saga.

A part of *Un temps pour tous* was originally shown at the Whitechapel Gallery.² In Bourges we had the complete version, with 21 sculptures.

The paraffin wax + wick penguins are set out in the space in such a way as to suggest that they have been walking in a particular direction, and have just been stopped. If the scale and positions are lifelike, these well-known traits of the species' behaviour are deliberately undermined by the presence of figures branching off in different directions: the collective movement is given an unusual twist by the presence of several indecisive or disoriented dreamers.

Like the other pieces in the series, this installation adopts the principle of a work in progress. This artificial penguin microcosm is active throughout the duration of the exhibition, undergoing a slow but very real transformation: the sculptures are lighted just before the vernissage and then burn down in random fashion, individually and distinctively acting out their collective destiny. As the days pass, the crystallised paraffin shells melt into flowing patterns and the animal figures disappear behind the effects of the very material that constitutes them. Only the recumbent penguins remain inactive and intact. Unaffected by the chronometer, they represent the work's anterior existence, like traces of a time before all this began.

The various concrete elements of this piece compose an allegorical scheme, a narrative that shifts from one degree to another without ever settling anywhere. The materials, arrangement, colours and life-size scale, the horizontality and verticality, the processes, figuration and formlessness are the parameters that elaborate its syntax. As Grégoire Müller has remarked, "it is impossible to dissociate the physical properties of a piece from the psychological conditions of its perception." Except that here this perception is subjected to a given duration, the unique and fleeting time of the work. Which makes it irrevocable.

Like a mythography, *Un temps pour tous* draws once again on animal imagery to construct an open tale, a delegated performance in which the real melds with the metaphorical and the condition of the work blurs into that of what it represents.

While related to a venerable tradition of cultural transcriptions of our relations with the animal kingdom, Pitois's work also reflects the current return of the bestiary as a theme for art.³ This revival can probably be put down to a concern with the identity crisis affecting Western societies rather than to some universal and mystified concept of the natural world. In most cases here, nature functions as an anamorphosis giving a particular angle on situations within our own community rather than telling us about flora and fauna. Reflected and emergent from the background of a popular culture that recuperates, uses and consumes ancient symbolic residues that have been detached from their original meaning, what these artistic approaches address is primarily the individual or social behaviour that characterise our increasingly complex, even uneasy relations with the living world, the real world.

It is in this context that Cécile Pitois works to overturn the stereotypes that permit us to identify, condemn or celebrate—and in any case to gratuitously evacuate and exorcise—our human condition through that of animals. For, at the end of the day, "Faut pas prendre les animaux pour des cons": dumb beasts they may be, but not that dumb.⁴

1 This series has developed considerably from one recent exhibition to the next: "Trafalgar Square or a Souvenir of London"; CCC La Vitrine, 1998 and the opening of the Ecole Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Tours, 1999.

2 Whitechapel Gallery Open, London, 1996.

3 Other artists who work on various kinds of animal themes include Katharina Fritsch, Damien Hirst, Mike Kelley, Annette Messager, Stephan Balkenhol, José Burki, Wim Delvoye, Rosemarie Trockel and Carsten Höller.

4 I refer to the phrase "Faut pas prendre les animaux pour des cons" presented on sticky-backed lettering in the exhibition at CCC La Vitrine, 1998.

Animal (s)

Palmipeds, fowls, herbivores...

No matter what. Use the animal to speak about the human. The story of an eternal conflation. Human comedy and animal fables. Converging dramaturgies. Co-resonating. Infinitely so. Surfing categories, pages, cages. A broad field. Zoological, mythological, iconographic, and also to do with identity.

Animals, then. Statuary, generic and universal. Prolific and joyous. Numerous, posturing, social. Species stereotypes. Scale 1:1. Respecting the canons. No doubt.

They are on stage. Figurines, ciphers, figurative in turn. Well behaved and capricious. Tamed and unpredictable. Inert and animated.

They are images. Alienated and inalienable. Archetypes and precarious. That is their paradox. Which is indeed indelible. And also our own.

Colour

Bold, dirty, luminous, dull.

"Cultural" colours. Chemical ingredients, refreshing cordials, succulent sorbets, souvenir trinkets, gadgets, plastic toys. A whole chromatic world, the paradise of the perfect cheapskate consumer. Colour card covering everything that is immediately, easily and freely available.

But also unflattering, indefinable, anonymous colours. The spectrum of the street, washing machine accidents, industrial waste, litter from a night on the town. Dark, monastic, deep.

They mix together arbitrarily, as in life.

Space

As is. Available, neutral.

Exhibition or other space. Appropriate it without touching. Just a phase in their migration. Spread, arrange, build a "space" in space. Positioning and relation of volumes. Minimalist precision or ritual gesture. Always, marking out a territory.

Territory of the coming event. That's where it's happening. When the action happens, this space becomes a place.

Gesture

Modest, repetitive, meticulous and attentive.

Concentrating on the act of making, on know-how. Go slowly. Procedures to be respected and others to be invented. Ant-like thoroughness (like a worker bee?). Days of watching. Mixing, moulding, scraping... It's over and another's under way. Produce, create, bring into being. Irreducible action. The work of patience.

Then everything changes. Catalysing gesture. Incendiary and sacrificial. Life cycle. Don't misunderstand. It's all the same in the end. A gesture so that, once again, everything is possible.

Light

In flames; of flames.

Light, colour and energy. Suggestive and airy. Like curling smoke. Bewitching, furtive and quivering. Like a rising, magnetic aura. It moves forward, hollows out space. Devouring light. Indifferent and seductive. Beautiful and fatal, inevitably.

Material

CaH_{2n+2}, liquid or brittle. Parum affinis. Another of those 19th-century German concoctions.

It interests us here in candle form. Translucent or opaque. Crystalline or amorphous. Never mind its dubious chemical behaviour. Once under control, solidified, it can wait. Changeless and static. Decorative and festive. Its illuminating evolutions punctuate space, parties, moods. From the initial forms to the candle ends at the end, a whole series of nonchalant, random, playful metamorphoses.

Number

3,7,21

$3+3+1=7$

$3+3+3+3+3+3+3=21$

$3 \times 7 = 21$, $7 \times 3 = 21$ k $2+1=3$ and start all over again.

Numbered appearances and packaging. Basic principle. Simple, unchanging calculations; as true as arithmetic. The basis of school, lunar, agrarian, Trinitarian, weekly existence.

Time

Exactly, time and the linear, irreversible, additive conception of time.

Manage it carefully. As if there were an objective. What? Set calendar, fixed dates. Measurable exhibition time. A tiny parcel of catalogued time: year, months, days, hours, minutes, seconds.

After that it's time within time. A mise en scène of its components. Before, during, after. Physical reality and its metaphor. Face to face. The time of appearance, transformation, passage. And there we lose ourselves in chronologies. Artistic, biological, historical, metaphysical chronology? We can no longer tell, and so much the better.

Title

At once humorous, hermeneutical and tautological.

When exactly does it enter the frame? Is it there at the beginning, does it emerge in the making, does it come at the end? All scenarios are possible. But it doesn't matter much. It is present, operational, considerable. Whether it involves puns, linguistic allusions or simple names, it enounces, designates and orients. And yet... Behind this affirmative tone a slight note of hesitancy emerges. A fragment of doubt. An interstitial element conducive to irony. Between two functions, two levels, two (several) interpretations. Part of the work, and itself raising questions. Inevitably so.
