

“DREAM SQUARE”: WHERE WOMEN SOAR

Christine Buci-Glucksmann

Let's imagine a fictional situation that might define a place—the Balzac-Touraine district in Vitry-sur-Seine, which is criss-crossed by streets named after women: Elsa Triolet, Simone de Beauvoir, Olympe de Gouges. Here we come across a strange plaque set into the ground, telling the story of a local resident by the name of Jeannot. He talks about this timeless place, an old sand quarry where locals used to get together to eat, dance and play music. One day, a group of girls arrived. One of them, Léna, broke away from the group and “began an electrifying dance”. Playing with light, “as if by magic, her hands sent rainbows to one another”. The repository of a time both past and present, complete with its own legend, was thus created. You might be lucky enough to see the “tattoo of coloured light” that Jeannot describes, and you might “shake the hand of a friend or a passer-by and share a dream with them”.

This square, which I'd like to call the *Place des rêves* or Dream Square, is the source of the poetic tribute paid by Cécile Pitois to local women—and indeed all women: *La Danseuse de lumière et ses Arcs* (The Dancer and her Bows of Light), a work commissioned by the Vitry-sur-Seine Town Council. A “real fiction”, rooted in meetings, walks and discussions with local residents, gave rise to an artwork—its poetic form and its rituals. It involves looking at a place from an imaginary perspective, as in all Land Art. Places carry within them an emotional map made up of memories, possible futures, traces and signs: a historical and private geography that outlines a kind of territory. “The thought of the trace, unlike the thought of the system, is laid down like a form of wandering that guides us”(1). Using blended timeframes and uncertain layers of events that are constantly under threat, this builds what Edouard Glissant calls a “philosophy of relationships”, a “poetics of diversity” that creates a place to be shared.

So we see a dancer performing a twofold movement: both skyward (she stands on a 7-metre tall green column) and earthward (she revolves in her Indian pink dress, with her eyes and hands facing downwards). Inspired by a photograph of Isadora Duncan dancing by the sea, she is the very image of freedom. She dances *between* sky and earth, the myth of universal womanhood echoing, in contrast, another flight myth: that of Icarus. Defying his father's orders, drunk with freedom, Icarus scorched his wings and fell into the sea. But the dancer does not fall: balanced on one foot, caught up in a spiral, she remains in fragile equilibrium, full of tireless energy. This is the energy of the women of Vitry, in a mixed neighbourhood with schools, a community centre, a mosque...and some painful memories. Here, in this very neighbourhood, a teenager, Sohanne Benziane, was burned alive: a conflict of love and jealousy that ended in unspeakable tragedy. This was the starting point for the protest march undertaken by local women, and the beginning of the movement called *Ni putes Ni soumises* (“neither whores nor doormats”), which has tirelessly fought against all forms of violence against women.

So how can all these layers of memory and all these timeframes be “shared”? How can we suggest the rainbows in Jeannot's story and make the colourful changing light into a story of the present and the future? All dreams—especially the collective dreams that drive a struggling community—are fragile, and it is the fragility of cosmic and human transience that links everything together. The ephemeral (3) is not just an instant or a fragment of time; it is the *passage of time* made tangible and positive. In each hand the dancer holds a prism that breaks up the light and casts it onto the ground, producing dappled shadows and colours that seem to prove Junichiro Tanizaki right when he writes in *In Praise of Shadows* “Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty”. Barely perceptible, the reflected “bows” from the legend are there, more or less

secretively surrounding the circular strip at the bottom of the column on which the dancer stands. This is a place for meeting and sharing. Just like the sculpture, whose starting point is a real place, the viewer is prompted to move in different directions, as if all acts of seeing were accompanied by a counter-perception that gradually reveals the invisible within the visible, the light within the shadow. From that point on, you are *inside* the artwork—you are the artwork, with all its horizons of meaning and of life.

Light will ultimately make its way through the entire area, thanks to a system developed with the help of scientists: prisms set up on lampposts will form a vast “tattoo” of light. Light, with all its cosmic or sacred symbolism, ultimately creates a ritual. It is a ritual of collective practice and of individual and collective memory, ushering in the potential for struggles to come: this murderous sexism, this hatred of others, this barbaric death must never occur again. Instead, let us welcome others; let us make time for them and for the freedom of dreams, in a world eroded and fragmented by inequality and divisiveness.

Fiction, form, and ritual, three themes that are always at play in Cécile Pitois’ work, thus transform a simple square into a Dream Square. This specific temporal framework, with which I became well acquainted in Japan, is always accompanied by something light-footed and airy that acts as a wellspring for dreams. In another work, *Le Refuge des rêves*, stars transform the entrance to a block of council flats into a night sky children might dream of. In *Les nuages sont les racines de notre terre*, following in the footsteps of Novalis, clouds are replete with airily evocative symbolism. And in *7 Minutes of Peace* (2008), the tightrope walker Philippe Petit tiptoed across a wire stretched between the now defunct Twin Towers in New York, making an impossible dream come true. In the end, the idea is always to escape the constraints of urban reality, with its walls and fragmentations, to spark emotion and “dance a dance of life”, like Daniel Larrieu on a steel girder in New York (*Crossing the Line*, 2007). The idea of dancing, so dear to Matisse, is never far away: whirling, weightless bodies taking all kinds of risks, yet alive with the potential for all forms of grace.

With all these metaphors of lightness and flight that always suggest time—fleeting, fragile time captured in an instant—Cécile Pitois develops a poetics that evokes a city open to all kinds of encounters, creating “art-places” alive with a whole range of modulations and expanded timeframes. Like the poetic soaring of the Light-Dancer, made for the residents of the Balzac-Touraine neighbourhood and the people of Vitry. And for me. And for all women:

“These dreams we return to, these re-dreamed dreams that take you back to a house you will never see, a world that is only nocturnal, with its flowers and its light.” Aragon, *Le fou d’Elsa*.

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(1) Edouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation*, Gallimard, 2009.

(2) For the artworks mentioned here, see Cécile Pitois, *Sculptures à souhait/Wishful Sculptures*, Archibooks, 2013.

(3) On the ephemeral, see my book: *Esthétique de l’éphémère*, Galilée, 2003. Christine Buci-Glucksmann