

## VRAI OU FAUX ? AN ARTISTIC QUESTION MARK BEHIND CONTEMPORARY PARADISES OF INNOCENCE

Entering one of the installations that Véronique Bourgoïn has realised in various European cities over the last three years - in Hamburg, Vienna, Arles and Istanbul, with another to follow in Rotterdam in June 2013, one is surrounded by a dreamlike, contemplative situation. Black and white photo wallpapers, extending from the floor nearly to the ceiling, cover the actual rooms of the gallery space in each case, replacing them in trompe-l'oeil manner with views into interiors originating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the epoch of Art Nouveau, times of backward-looking nostalgia - a mood boosted by furnishings in Rococo style, heavy carpets and curtains down to the floor, and with mythological paintings and portraits on the walls. If we were to visit a real, private home from those past eras, e.g. transformed into a museum that is open to the public, we would probably get the sense - feeling either alienated or fascinated - of being transported back, in illusionist fashion, to an epoch that is no longer ours, or at least for the duration of our stay. If we were to hold photos of such rooms in our hands or view them in a book, our voyeuristic or aesthetic curiosity would, in all probability, be able to deal with the photographic image without problems; at most, we would miss the colours if the photos were black and white. The times, today and those in the past, would remain distinctly separate.

However, a completely different situation arises in Véronique Bourgoïn's installations. The photo wallpapers force themselves between us, the viewers, and the real place in which we find ourselves. The trompe-l'oeil not only breaks through the walls on which the photo wallpapers are pasted in an illusionist way; far more, it gives us the sense being there and yet not being there. Like the shock experienced when photography was invented, when the colourless "brush of nature" touched the viewer uncannily with a sense of shadowy, disappearing presence, here we find ourselves transported into a state that affects our relationship to the self. For the trompe-l'oeil articulates not only the tension of a spatially inaccessible distance but simultaneously, due to the black and white, a temporal dimension that poses the disturbing question of our relationship to our own earliest memories. This strange experience is given an additional ironic boost by the photos, images and small objects tacked to the photo wallpapers - like scattered sniper fire, originally from the art world, albeit

with no orientation on the hierarchy of the art market, and from the contemporary trivial sphere. They underline their tangible status as objects with their often highly colourful appearance.

Véronique Bourgoïn has formulated the problem of the disappearing dimension of depth to each of our personal stories, which is connected to the relation of true or false, in an impressive and simultaneously alarming statement: "Vrai ou Faux? la frontière entre l'un et l'autre n'est plus un axe fixe, un axe vertical et vertigineux, que l'art a toujours su transgresser sans filet. Le Vrai et le Faux se confondent dans cette horizontalité sans fin, d'un paysage sans ombre, où la réalité ne s'oppose à rien ni à personne." And so it is not irrelevant that the spaces installed by the artist are salons, i.e. they are interiors. As a medium, these prompt a shift towards the question of the subject's inner axis, the world within us, while the incorporated artworks and current everyday artefacts extend this dimension associatively. "Vrai ou Faux", therefore, is not exhausted in a banal game in which each person can make his or her choice, like the mushrooming calls of this type on Internet sites, weird language which manipulate hit quotas and a sense of belonging by means of "like-it" clicks or the lack of them. Rather, the salons of "Vrai ou Faux" - always conceived in a new way for each specific location - creates situations that touch us, gently and yet firmly questioning our cultural flight from the emotional, threateningly ambiguous vertical axis into the banality of an apparently conflict-free horizontal axis. And so they offer a chance to perceive the strange complicity between the audience and consumers on the one hand and media, advertising, politics and self-instrumentalising science on the other, a soul-selling that is voluntary on all sides: in order to evade, perhaps, the pressure of the self-forgetful, passionate fire of a self-destructive chagrin (leather).

The nomadic path of the salons - never permanently fixed anywhere - is marked by workshops at various different stages, in which the archive of the "Fabrique des Illusions", invited artists and participants getting involved with their own personal experiences and observations all deal with the question "Vrai ou Faux" through discussions and photographic studies. In these workshops, the dissolution of the distinction between vrai ou faux has been disclosed repeatedly. The material results,

supplemented by collections from Véronique Bourgoïn's archive that she has been accumulating for many years, were presented in a "cabinet of curiosities" either integrated into the salon or in a separate location. Here, the world of constant replacement, the sole passion of the economy and its accomplices, a perpetuum mobile for the satisfaction of insinuated or hallucinated wishes in the mask of desire is revealed in a satirical, dramatic fashion - one might also say: an unusual return of the anthropophagy that, in a "Trop de Réalité" as Annie Le Brun calls it in her book of the same title, causes any distinction between vrai ou faux to shatter in a closed circuit of desire. The invisible, perfidious force in the outwardly peaceful zones of our world, the complicity of visible kitsch and - initially invisible - death is supplemented impressively in these cabinets of curiosities, therefore, by schizophrenic zapping through a flickering video wall assembled from the casings of old TV sets, on which an apparently arbitrary sequence of films and videos causes the viewer to experience his own loss of control and concentration. We find ourselves in a new kind of Musée de l'Homme, in which the "antiquated nature of mankind" as investigated by Günter Anders has made astonishing cynical progress, although hardly anyone appears to take offence any more. The 19<sup>th</sup> century doll "Eve future" has not only become the ideal of an artificial human being of either sex liberated from the shame of the impure, physical body in clones, robots, avatars and replicas, turning into the end of human individuality in the idol. Following close behind came humanity's veritable transformation into a doll, as we see from the many walking, talking examples of Barbie and Ken. "Vrai ou Faux ?" - the age of longing for felicitous metamorphoses has turned into an age of mutations, a strange mysterium conjunctionis of human drives and technology.

Véronique Bourgoïn's artistic concept does not stand alone historically; on the contrary, she has a number of historical and artistic allies. She shares with Aby Warburg an interest in Mnemosyne, the muse of memory. All the other muses that aid humanity's productive activities are dependent on her. And although the muses have no direct opponents, the Erinyes or furies can be seen as destroyers of the muses' work, sometimes to the point of memory loss when they take real effect. But one could also view Mnemosyne, the muse of memory, as a figure that accompanies all human activities and experiences emotionally. Nothing is lost, even though it may be suppressed. The vertical axis of which Véronique Bourgoïn speaks is constantly in motion, and her proceedings revolving around "Vrai ou Faux" are challenged by artists in dizzy depth-drilling

"without a net". Aby Warburg had spoken of the "pathos formula of desire" in European history since antiquity, expressed in figures of mythology and the associated narratives. His research is expressed in the archive of his Mnemosyne Atlas: picture plates that ply the range or drifting of motifs in the balance of human emotions. There are brief keywords chosen by Warburg or explanatory essays by his co-workers referring to every thematic field. Warburg saw Nympha as a decisive figure in the re-admission of desire during the Renaissance. However, she was not a one-sided character; the maenadic could break out at any time. She was also an ambiguous figure of desire, therefore. Véronique Bourgoïn's critical diagnosis of the vertical axis of passionate memory's shattering into a non-distinguishable, dull one-and-the-same-thing expresses the end of Mnemosyne in Warburg's sense. But from an artistic vantage point, and in league with the invited artists and workshop participants, she questions this end, and insofar brings about a contemporary transformation of Warburg's undertaking - in order to pull out the carpet from under the thermic, catastrophic split in the ambiguity of desire. The horror of this truth of praxis has not been eradicated; it still exists in the false part of the "trop de réalité", albeit suppressed or made invisible.

But let us make a further comment on the form of the presentation. Warburg's photos were mounted onto panels of black photo paper. In many of her installations Véronique Bourgoïn plays with the light-and-dark of the interior situation, sometimes with dark shadows caused by back-light on the walls. It constitutes a creative involvement of shadows in the embodiment of light and so in the prisoner's conceivable escape from Plato's cave. In the cases of both Aby Warburg and Véronique Bourgoïn one could speak of clear-sighted melancholy: historically clear-sighted with respect to the history of desire that they take up and into which they wish to intervene productively with their work.

Clear-sighted melancholy become form, however, also connects Véronique Bourgoïn's work with Marcel Broodthaers and his fictive "Musée de l'art Moderne, département des Aigles". Broodthaers also accumulated archives - of eagles, for example - actually his museum's only département, played through in a variety of sections. "O Mélancolie / aigre château des Aigles", his haiku-like conceit, describes the individually obdurate melancholy that he believes many artists share with what is known less colourfully among ordinary people today as "depression". It is clear that an artist can only frame what he knows from his own experience in such a conceit, although

rather than cultivate it, he forces it into his artistic work as “porteur d’ombre”; this stems from the realisation that such a disposition hopes to escape the ambiguity of desire through Narcissistic substitute satisfaction.

Beyond this, however, there is another commonality between Véronique Bourgoïn and Marcel Broodthaers: the linkage of the 19<sup>th</sup> with the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or respectively - on the horizon of the advance of a culture of “décor” for Broodthaers at most - with the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Broodthaers wanted to pull out the carpet from under any affirmation of modern, contemporary art since the 60s as the conscience of the avant-garde, which was suddenly expected to prove itself a cultural-historical timeline in opposition to 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois historicism. In his view, modernism had long been continuing what was the truth behind the historicism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a - veiling - “décor” of conditions. Therefore, he believed art was just as much entangled in a dangerous game with power - the eagle. This was to prove true, if we think back to the media instrumentalisation of art as a cultural masking of conditions and as a successor to the standard ideas, e.g. dish-washer to millionaire careers in the first half of the - particularly American - economy. Broodthaers spoke of “un monde en danger”, and all his situations - as he called his art spaces to avoid the term installation, which he found suspect - revolved around this theme. Incidentally, “raumgreifende Installation” (space-consuming installation), as the Germans say, uses a language that awakens sensitive memories. Broodthaers would certainly rediscover Véronique Bourgoïn’s investigation into the abandonment of the axis of painful memories in favour of an opportunistic tolerance of everything and everyone as a prognosis in his own artistic questioning, and no doubt comment on it with his black, essentially optimistic humour.

As I see it, Jean-Luc Godard’s “Histoire(s) du Cinéma” should also be included in these affinities to the Mnemosyne. This work on the philosophy of aesthetic history also follows a principle of archiving - film sequences, fragments from poetry and literature, philosophy, musical sequences, as well as the insertion of stills: images from the history of painting and sculpture, concentrating on the modern French 19<sup>th</sup> century but also with references back to Goya and images from the Renaissance, even extending as far back as a capital relief from early Romanesque French art. The

many stories do not lead to a single history, and perhaps this is where we find the - if you like - productive anarchic dimension of this sequence of videos. Godard diagnoses the end of cinema as a social form, for it has been ousted by its enemies TV and video. However, video technology allows him to generate an incredible associative mixture of artistic and documentary materials, almost amounting to an invocation not to relinquish the hopes of a reflective encounter with one’s own longing – even in face of the catastrophic turnover of wishes and events in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

At the presentation of his “Histoire(s) du Cinéma” in Cannes in 1997 Godard pulled a piece of paper from his jacket pocket, on which he had noted down a sentence taken from a newspaper. It was a quote from the recently deceased American avant-garde filmmaker, Hollis Frampton. He read this out, and the gist of it was: every artistic epoch designs an idea of a better future from memories of the past. Here, Godard was describing his own project as well. But it is also possible to refer to Véronique Bourgoïn’s project in this way. Even in the fetishist fake of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we can still recognise a trace of the ambiguous “vrai” in the conflict of desires that accompanied romantic historicism. Only with the longed for “faux”, a one-dimensional farewell to any kind of ambivalence, are we driven to the current paradise of innocence, like the storm issuing forth from there and catching as an eddy in the wings of the angel of history, so preventing him from gathering up the debris of history and reassembling it in the way Walter Benjamin had described. The wings of the spirit from Véronique Bourgoïn’s series of gouache works “La dame de Clelles”, which is secretly woven into the presentation of the salon, droop with knowing melancholy. But with his clothes decorated in the diamonds of a clown and his white armoured henchman, this is also appears as a discreet, humorous reference to the twin clowns, the puckish and the melancholy, although their roles have been reversed. And so it is no wonder that “La Dame de Clelles” appears as a discreet pointer to the muse Mnemosyne, characterised by melancholy but keen attentiveness.

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