

SOMEWHERE ELSE

"Elsewhere" provides, for many artists today, a favoured creative context. They set off, travelling back and forth, either producing or installing their works of art outside the places in which they are traditionally made (the studio) or displayed (the gallery). This 14th exhibition at the Espace culturel Louis Vuitton tracks the extraordinary expeditions of 15 such artists. Their approach can be traced back in history to Paul Gauguin, who - as the archetypal travelling artist - naturally has his place in the exhibition, as well as, more recently, to Bas Jan Ader or Giovanni Anselmo, both of whom use physical removal as a source of artistic inspiration. With tragic consequences in the case of Ader: in 1975, the Dutch artist - no stranger to risk - vanished somewhere in the Atlantic, which he had decided to cross in a flimsy and quite inadequate craft "in search of the miraculous".

Characterized by movement, this relocation of artistic endeavour differs from the in situ practices that emerged half a century ago, notably land art. The "expeditionist" artist does not start by implanting his creative output at a fixed geographical point. For him, it is more important to move around, to roam, and his work takes shape through nomadic practice or cultural wandering, so typical of existence in this era of globalization. Travel signifies the encounter with new spaces, with other humans, and the opportunity to reconsider one's own values. One can then represent one's world from another standpoint, from a different, renewed perspective, revitalized by the principle of migration. The confrontation with the "other" space thus becomes all-important. It is as if authentic art can only come into being "somewhere else".

The exhibition *Somewhere Else* presents the work of artists whose approaches are extremely diverse. The nature of the expedition on which each artist embarks may vary significantly. Some travel to hostile environments at the ends of the earth in order to found utopian villages or to find the material for an original flag; others aim to amuse themselves in the mountains or to go hiking underground like moles. Others still plan to construct, amid the vast, lonely expanse of an Asian steppe, a bridge like a sculpture or a jewel. Some expect their expedition to inform them about the state of the world, while others see it as a trial or yet an adventure.

Last but not least, there is the ultimate form of territorial occupation: a voyage into the virtual worlds - the infinite dimensions - generated by digital civilization. The one constant, however, as Dominique Baqué writes in *Histoires d'ailleurs* (Regard, 2006), is that "these journeys - impressive as they may be - are not only of a geographical nature: they also evidence an authentic dialogic of thought with itself, a constant questioning of what is given and accepted".

PRELUDE

Here is always "somewhere else". We learn this from birth, and we cannot help but live with this gap, this inner distance, which we experience sometimes as a wound, sometimes as an exile, arousing in us either a need to be soothed, or a yearning for adventure, and most often both at the same time. Unless we have found the formula that gives our life the straight and narrow appearance of a destiny devoid of surprise.

There was a time when we did not know the limits of our world. But we knew it was finite – that, at least, the Greeks had taught us. However, Nature concealed extraordinary wonders, the number of which baffled our imaginations. The accounts of a handful of travellers gave us some idea of their variety, and so "elsewhere" became the place of a profusion of things in the vague folds of reality, and fable gave shape to our questions, rather than providing proper answers.

Today, the great discoveries, the methodical exploration of the five continents and the "conquest" of space have extended the limits of the world right to the borders of our solar system. Our consciousness of the endless expansion of the universe has stirred in us a terrifying dizziness of the kind Pascal in his day experienced alone. At the same time, and paradoxically, it is as if the world had closed in upon us and our planet had become too small. We now perceive it as a garden for which each of us is responsible.

In this world, we travel through images more surely than on board long-haul flights, however quick these might be. We want "a breath of fresh air", but it is always the same air we breathe, conditioned in the vehicles that transport us, or in the houses that accommodate us and, sometimes, shut us in. We "do" the North Cape or Tasmania, Bali or Tierra del Fuego as we do a hold-up to take what nobody gave us and what we cannot exchange against any sort of reality.

And yet we are not condemned to screens and glossy images. It is the virtue of artists to remind us of this, even when they themselves deal in photography and video. Because art is always "somewhere else" – and never where you expect it. Too much reality makes the world unreal, and images, by flattening perspectives, seem destined to fill the void in order to stop the sensation of dizziness they provoke within us. Let's be realistic, say the reality experts, tapping the smooth, even and hollow surface of the things they are talking about.

Art is unsettling because, by uncovering the asperities and the complexity of the world, it highlights our own singularities, our own solitudes – these things which artists must always confront, whether they sail oceans, cross deserts, climb mountains or work quietly in their studios. Art requires that the artist should imagine reality, the better to perceive it; it demands that the ground should fall away beneath our feet and that our bodies should be lighter than air. And so the exoticism of elsewhere becomes a diversity of sensibility or an "aesthetic of the diverse" which the *exote*, to use Victor Segalen's term, can perceive better than any of us.

Isn't that precisely what the artist is, who has understood that "somewhere else" there is nothing else to see, but that with which we are already familiar, and which we maintain mechanically in its conditions of visibility – or rather invisibility? What we are missing, most of the time, is not the other, but ourselves: doubting our world, and looking for a meaning to life, we sometimes believe we will find it at the other end of the earth, anywhere and almost anyhow. But whoever has truly undertaken this journey – of which art is perhaps the most accomplished form – knows very well that, fundamentally, "elsewhere" is always here, and that others are its closest and most distant face, the first question that makes us want to discover and to construct new worlds.

FERNANDO PRATS

Fernando Prats est un alchimiste laïc. De même que l'artiste chinois Cai Guo-Qiang rénove le genre pictural en utilisant comme pigment la poudre d'artificier pyrotechnique, Prats lui aussi « peint » d'une manière inédite, en recourant, pour sa part, à la fumée. Explication. L'artiste chilien, dans son atelier de Barcelone en Catalogne, exploite en « *nibelung* » contemporain un « fumoir » très particulier. Au moyen de celui-ci, il noircit de fumée charbonneuse des papiers de taille diverse qui vont servir ensuite de toiles.

Prats laisse alors la Nature peindre pour lui. Il dispose ses papiers enfumés dans un coin de paysage, les aléas de la météorologie locale et les spécificités du site – côte marine, zone désertique ou de tremblement de terre... – se chargeant de faire le reste. Le papier se nourrit de la vie naturelle en fonction du site auquel l'artiste le soumet. Il devient l'empreinte d'une activité surhumaine et le palimpseste de la *dunamis*, de la Nature sans cesse en progrès et au travail.

À l'instar d'Yves Klein avec ses *Cosmogonies*, Fernando Prats montre, esthétise et exalte le travail des éléments. Mais le sens conféré à cette métamorphose n'est pas le même. Klein, fait en 1960 le trajet Paris-Cagnes-sur-Mer avec une toile vierge fixée sur le toit de sa Citroën. La part de Nature que recueille ce support exposé au vent, à la pluie et à la poussière est l'expression tout à la fois de cette « Nature moderne » de l'art (Pierre Restany) utilisant dorénavant la technologie, ici l'automobile et d'une absorption de la matière cosmique par un art de vocation, selon Klein, à transmuter et purifier valeurs comme matières.

Fernando Prats est à l'évidence moins idéaliste que Klein le Rosicrucien. S'il joue au sorcier avec les éléments, c'est avant tout pour faire de la Nature son auxiliaire, comme Rembrandt se servait de ses nombreux assistants dans son atelier, en moins directif cependant. Prats donne cette mission à la Nature : exprime-toi. Mais en se faisant le metteur en scène de processus dont l'apparence finale lui échappe.

« L'ailleurs » où officie Fernando Prats, on le pressent, est dès lors sans limite géographique ni de nature (l'artiste fait aussi peindre des pigeons, dont les battements d'ailes sont autant de pinceaux mobiles). La Nature qui peint, ce peut être ces trois gouttes d'eau qui tombent sur une toile disposée à l'aplomb de la gouttière du toit, dehors, juste à côté. C'est la mer et la marée sur une côte, un geyser ou la poussière salée du désert d'Atacama, aussi bien. C'est encore, pour « *Acción Chaitén* », ensemble plastique et documentaire présenté dans le cadre de cette exposition, le travail destructeur du volcan chilien éponyme ayant recouvert de cendres, suite à son éruption le 2 mai 2008, une région entière, aujourd'hui vide d'habitant. Fernando Prats représentera, cette année 2011, le Chili à la Biennale d'art de Venise.

Fernando Prats is a secular alchemist. Just as the Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang has renewed painting with his use of gunpowder as pigment, so Prats also "paints" in an unprecedented manner, with smoke. This requires explanation. In his Barcelona workshop, the Chilean artist operates as a kind of contemporary "*nibelung*", using a very special kind of "smoking room" to blacken pieces of paper of various sizes, which will later serve as canvases.

Prats then allows Nature to paint for him. He arranges his smoke-blackened papers in a corner of the countryside, and lets the vagaries of the local weather and the specificities of the site – be it a coastal area, a desert or an earthquake zone – do the rest. The paper becomes the record of the natural life of the artist's chosen location, the imprint of a superhuman activity and the palimpsest of *dunamis*, the constant work and progress of Nature.

Like Yves Klein and his *Cosmogonies*, Fernando Prats displays, aestheticizes and celebrates the work of the elements. But the meaning given to this transformation is not the same. Klein, you will remember, drove from Paris to Cagnes-sur-Mer in 1960 with a blank canvas fixed to the roof of his Citroën. The imprint of nature left on this material, exposed to wind, rain and dust, was the expression both of the "modern Nature" of art (Pierre Restany), which would henceforth use technology, here the automobile, and of the absorption of cosmic matter by an art whose vocation, according to Klein, was to transmute and purify both values and materials.

Fernando Prats is clearly less idealistic than Klein the Rosicrucian. If he plays sorcerer with the elements, it is first and foremost to make nature his helper, just as Rembrandt used his many assistants in his workshop, though with fewer guidelines. Prats gives this mission to Nature: express yourself. Yet he is the director of processes whose final result escapes him.

The "elsewhere" where Fernando Prats operates is, therefore, without geographical or natural limits (the artist also gets pigeons to paint, the beating of their wings like thousands of tiny brushstrokes). Nature's painting can be three drops of water falling on a canvas placed just outside under the guttering. It can be the sea and the tide on the shore, or a geyser, or the salt-laden dust of the Atacama desert. It can also be, in the case of "*Acción Chaitén*", the series of artistic and documentary works presented here, the destruction wrought by the eponymous Chilean volcano which, when it erupted on 2nd May 2008, covered an entire region with ash, emptying it of its inhabitants. In 2011, Fernando Prats will represent Chile at the Venice Biennale.