Dropping Pictures

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Is it possible to write about an *oeuvre* whose creative principle is to the development of a constant state of becoming? A form that is sufficiently open as to allow for permeability, encounters and collaborations - but also for solitary strolling, backtracking and bypassing, extension and suspension, acceleration and pause - both reproduction and that crystallization?

To write about a place where a body of works no longer exists? To abandon the claim that one can delimit an artistic production, whose only *raison d'être* is a state of fluidity and mutation?

Jocelyn Cottencin's images represent not what they show, but that which is already outside the field of vision. Still others slacken in a pendulous pause, to the point that there is a narrative breakdown of the reality they supposedly represent.

The artist's works also employ writing where letters mass together, not simply for graphic signification, but in order to produce a plane of consistency composed of joints, ruptures, clumps, splits, twists, etc.

When reflecting on the work of Jocelyn Cottencin, we must consider writing as an act of "letting go", where the words go on to produce others, flux that at certain moments resonates with the work.

Jocelyn Cottencin's graphic work and visual *oeuvre* call into question the sites of power. The act of relinquishing power for empowerment: the power to make, to displace, to cross, to construct. It is at this junction that we glimpse the true political dimension of an aesthetic of becoming. The "abandoning of control" embodies the refusal of the fixity of form, at the same time that it resists all limit setting and territoriality. This aesthetic of becoming is both a political and an artistic *praxis*. Paradoxically, an *oeuvre* of becoming has nothing to do with the influence of one thing upon another, or with openness to everything and nothing. It demands a full and complete commitment to permanent transformation. It requires an extreme vigilance regarding events. It is an act of commitment in itself. A discrete, modest, at times invisible

act—but infinitely subtle, effective and enduring when it is taken on in this spirit of radical receptivity regarding what is "elsewhere".

It is fairly rare to encounter contemporary artists who embark on such a sensitive undertaking, renewing their aesthetic and political base that stems from institutional critique, notably of post-minimalist and conceptual art of the 1970s. Jocelyn Cottencin's work spans these foundational reference points while at the same time avoiding the type of dogma that can be found in many contemporary projects linked with this aesthetic heritage. These include installations that focus to the point of excess on a critique of space—such as the exhibition space, the social sphere, the public forum or simply that of the object. This may produce works that are brilliant in their formal presentation or technically seductive, but they are often empty and tinged with a tired cynicism with respect to social issues — a pseudo-poetics of space that, in the end, is very conservative and bourgeois. The works of Cottencin maintain their affinity with the 1970s critique of art, with substantial wariness regarding the way in which works of art are enunciated and received. They never assume control of space or of the gaze. There is always a fault line, something that breaks away, an escape route that interferes with each piece. This is without a doubt related to another 1960-1970 affiliation to art such as Jonas Mekas's films or the experimental cinema of Stan Brakhage. These are works that find their aesthetic impact and their impressive political resistance in the frenetic workmanship of an impurity of image and text. For Jocelyn Cottencin, it is obviously not a question of repeating the formal processes and materials that are produced by 'accident', or the 'chaos of the image', but rather to set in motion that which fundamentally emerges from an attitude of displacement, an empathy with the living, in the manner that Jonas Mekas stated it:

When one films with a Bolex, it is not held exactly at head-level, but a little bit lower, not exactly at the level of the heart, but a little bit higher...and when you rewind the spring, the camera is given an artificial life...One lives continuously in the Intérieur of the situation, in the temporal continuum, but you film by spurts, as long as the spring allows...one is always in the process of interrupting the reality that one is filming...and taking it up again...(...)

The "displaced person", the exile as voyager. This exists, and is not an abstract concept. The "displaced person" is a reality of today. The level and complexities of contemporary societies give rise to "the displaced person." (...) A displaced person doesn't have a choice, has not

chosen to leave his or her home. A displaced person has been thrown into the world and forced to travel." [1]

Although the work of Jocelyn Cottencin is based on an approach of openings, modulation and transformation, it does not let itself be absorbed or influenced to the point of losing track of itself in an extreme dissolving in exteriority. Just the opposite. Its central axis is to intentionally maintain a constant negotiation between real events and their expansion towards other spaces. It is a form which becomes open because of the generosity of its welcome, but also by its thoroughly rugged form, with its capacity for infiltration, reversal of aesthetic constraints and possibilities.

This is the case with *Just a Walk*, a protean and rhizomic artistic work that is generated out of different working methods defined between 2005 and 2007. These include exploratory circuits and residencies ranging from the Scottish highlands to Glasgow, Rennes, San Sebastian, Bilbao, Porto and Lisbon, collective research sessions between artists and curators, as well as works conceived by artists as different as Carla Cruz, Jocelyn Cottencin, Marcel Dinahet and Tiago Guedes. There is also the creation and expansion of an internet site, the accumulation of photographic and video images, and the creation of word sculptures made out of neon or the human body, the contributions of spaces of reflection and exchange. Finally, the work includes journal entries by the art critic and curator Jean-Marc Huitorel, the creation of a solo exhibition at the Criée Contemporary Art Center, and the staging of choreographic piece by Tiago Guedes, with the revealing title of "Diverse Materials".

Diffusion process: challenging the exhibition

Diffusion points to exteriority and the 'thrust towards'...but rather than an exhibit, it reflects a discrete impregnation of spaces and territories. In other words, dissemination scrambles presentations, indexing, proofs and definitions.

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[1] Jonas Mekas, "Le Film-Journal", in *The Avant-Garde Film – A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, P. Adams Sitney, New York: New-York University Press, Anthology Film Archives, 1978.

At La Criée, the *Just a Walk* project unfolds according to a specific system of visibility. Jocelyn Cottencin has designed a presentation that neatly resists the concept of an exhibition that is spatially ostentatious, seductive and spectacular.

The space is, above all, a zone of diffuse elements: luminous emissions and darkened areas, auditory evocations or transmissions, silences, the pairing of photographic images with large pockets of empty space, or the slow flow of a single video sequence. Writing on the exhibition walls allows words to drift to the surface—almost in a state of disintegration—words massing together to create a landscape; or conversely, the creation of a sculpture radiating neon words, imposing in its materiality as much as its powerful lexical dissemination.

In their entirety, these works form a paradoxical environment, i.e. an ensemble that is at once cohesive and fragmented, multi-layered and dispersed.

The other characteristic of *Just a Walk* is that it offers not so much an immersive space as an experience of temporal extensions, where the speed at which the images are presented varies considerably from one work to the next, and in which the strata of visual, auditory and textual materials builds up only in order to dissipate.

The visitor thus negotiates the show by moving back and forth between works or by accepting to "pause" before a work. But more fundamentally, the visitor's progress may be compared to that of a stroll whose goal is one of curiosity regarding the show's fault lines and fissures, i.e. not that which takes place in front of the image, but that which is woven into its margins. That which is between, elsewhere, outside of the frame.

In a way; *Just a Walk* is an artistic work that offers an experience of blindness rather than clairvoyance. Blindness in the sense that the artist refuses the practice of an exhibition as a visual demonstration or textual analysis. Blindness because certain works relinquish their exclusive status as 'visual object' in order to produce multi-sensory expansions. Blindness, finally, because after they have been seen, the works have an impressive power of persistence of vision and generate in the viewer the construction of other mental images.

Diffusion process is also about overlapping — a spilling over where one least expects them.

Thus, in the work *Paysage* (2007), a large luminous lightbox anchored to the gallery's floor displays a photograph of a Scottish highland, a vast arid expanse swept by wind and clouds.

But this is not all. The light that is emitted from the box radiates discretely in the direction of a floating mass on one of the inner walls of the art center. The mass is a mural drawing that has been rendered by the artist in graphite, a drawing sketching out a block in the process of formation, suggesting movement, modulation, a springing up, or, conversely, a fading away. Issued from this mass is the inscription, *Alors, il y a cette île* (*Then there is this island*).

Hence this other example of spilling over: the drawing escapes its own *disegno* condition, i.e. the attempt at a perfect or ideal representation of reality. At first, the drawing is not a line but a shapeless mass. Later, when the drawing takes form, it does so in its unique condition of writing. This writing carries in itself another paradox: it takes on a graphic dimension not only to signal itself, describe and make sense, but rather to display the beginning of the dissemination of a letter or image. In fact, the "root" typeface invented by Jocelyn Cottencin draws the work into a process of proliferation and transformation. Drawing, graphic elements and writing are gathered up in a material quality of "shapelessness" and in a performative act of enunciation, rather than one of description or explanation. Or, how to visualize what lies beneath writing and visual representation.

The utterance itself, "*Alors, il y a cette île*" is in no way an explicit narrative: the opposite of an exotic dictum, it makes an "elsewhere" palpable—an insularity inscribed directly on the art center's building—and at the heart of the visitor's subjective construction. The "elsewhere" takes place *here* and *now*: in the uncertainty of self and the making of art. With Jocelyn Cottencin's phrase, the notion of defined and possessed territoriality falls away, leaving insularity's own properties—which are composed of a positive form of drifting, an openness to otherness, and the passage between inevitably contradictory spaces.

Making an Image, without making...

Intérieur (2007) is a video work that possesses the rare quality of reflecting an image's potential creation, over and above the intentional mastery of conception or composition of form. Over a period of ten minutes, the film unfurls an image of a maritime landscape and an island coming into view. However, the artistic value of *Intérieur* is not to be found in the representation of a landscape, but the availability its shows towards a type of displacement,

which allows for the formation of multiple spaces. *Intérieur* thus creates a work by allowing the image to come into being with its strata, its opacities and its unexpected transformations.

The camera is mounted inside a boat heading for one of the many Scottish isles. Its position is fixed, behind the glass boarding partition, across which run raindrops of lesser and greater intensity, depending on the duration of the crossing. The artist records from the interior of the ship, but everything takes place off the ship, an impressive stratification of the image. First take: the opacity of the video camera lens is matched by the boat's window, a window that is itself blurred by raindrops. Second take: the ocean is less of a horizon line than a material in the process of transformation—at times thick and compact, other times fluid, crossed with ripples and undulating waves. Third take: the fog hides and, over certain stretches, reveals the island in the background, at times merged with the ocean. But in all cases, it prevents any controlled representation of the landscape. A mass as far as the eye can see. Fourth take: then there is this island, that very slowly emerges from the underside of the image, only to then dissolve again in the fog and then to redraw its own outline—an island that seems beyond sight's grasp but at the same time close at hand.

It goes without saying that the filming condenses, overlaps and slackens in the interior of a single fluid image. This form of becoming displaces the landscape, locating it in an heterogeneous and paradoxical duration: 'place' exists precisely in its displacement...

Intérieur is a work whose meaning is clarified by the apt thought of Michel Foucault when he employs the metaphor of a boat in order to discuss a *heterotopia*, i.e. the concept of other spaces:

and if we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens, you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development (I have not been speaking of that today), but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.[2]

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[2] Michel Foucault, "Des espaces autres" (1984) in *Dits et écrits, vol.IV*, Paris : nrf/Gallimard, 1994, p. 762.

Intérieur is a work that transfers territoriality. Although the ship itself is strangely absent from the video, it is nevertheless at the origin of the image's creation. But the boat is also itself, a collective, or even a place of art, an artist, a visitor. The real accomplishment of *Intérieur* is its ability to identify the issue of territory, rather than that of the possession of space or a demonstration of force. It is discrete work, and its effectiveness lies in its ability to allow for infiltration and openness.

The transfer of territoriality in Jocelyn Cottencin's work is not simply carried out and visualized in the exhibition spaces. Such a space is just one among many—which also include billboards, walls, public buildings, an Internet site, journals, books—that are also conscripted for the task of passing through and taking charge of sites of power. Today, the artistic issue of territoriality is no longer one of positioning oneself in a binary relationship to "in" and "out" spaces. The dichotomous friction between *in/out* was addressed in the 1960s, if then. Institutional critique had already begun to turn its back on it, particularly in the writings and magazine inserts of Dan Graham, or in the architectonic distortions of Michael Asher. The real challenge today is to infiltrate the sites of power that are at times very difficult to identify because they are no longer controlled by an identifiable and exclusive authority. In fact, rather than claiming to possess space, or to oppose it at all costs, it is more relevant to interfere with fragments of spaces in order to infiltrate them—with one part dream and one part questioning: a critical question-raising that is discrete but meaningful.

The specificity of a site and after...

In 2003 Jocelyn Cottencin created a typeface called Floreal. The particularity of this typeface is a proliferating plant motif, where certain holes reveal the appearance of lettering in the background. It was used to create a graphic work, *La consommation d'oxygène est différente d'un individu à l'autre* (*The Consumption of Oxygen is Different from One Person to Another*) (2004). The relevance of the piece's statement may be found in its multiple declensions of diverse materials (chalk, tape, poster), various forms (exposition picture rails, public space walls and billboards) and different locations (galleries, streets, schools). Though its actual

materiality is light, it exerts a powerful force of displacement in the context of the uses of space and territories.

The first installation took place during a monograph show mounted by Frac Bretagne in 2004 at the TNB Gallery. *La consommation d'oxygène est différente d'un individu à l'autre was* displayed using gilt adhesive attached to the white wall of the gallery. It was the first work that welcomed visitors to the exhibition, not in a head-on way, but as if viewed out of the corner of one's eye. The sentence was displayed on the lateral wall next to the visitor's entry to the exhibition space. With this peculiar declaration, the purpose of the wall was no longer that of a partition but rather an interface or switch between the heart of the cultural venue — between the vast glass facade that gives onto a panoramic vista of urban activity outside, and the exhibition, composed of works by the artist, which addressed displacement, pauses, the collective corporeal experience and wandering. *La consommation d'oxygène est différente d'un individu à l'autre* could have been understood by the visitor as a tilting towards empty spaces, like background lettering, floating and indecisive zones. The work had also the ability to serve as an object of auto-criticism regarding the visibility of work in a given space, while at the same time offering the possibility of the experience of a mental space.

The second installation was carried out also in 2004, when Nathalie Travers, under the curatorial auspices of the project *Allotopie*, invited a number of artists to create work in public spaces. Jocelyn Cottencin proposed to write his statement in white chalk on a load-bearing underpass of a railway bridge that was located at a busy car and pedestrian crossroads. In the urban landscape, the train tracks and this underpass are strong architectonic and symbolic elements in the collective use of urban space in Rennes. They signal the north-south axis of the city, the movement from the commercial center towards a slowly transitioning housing zone. There is also the imaginary friction between the names of the cities "Rennes" and "Nantes": this public location is known as "The Nantes Bridge." Anonymous and rather cold, it is nevertheless a public space of intense human activity, one that sees very heavy automobile, train and pedestrian traffic. No one lingers there except drivers stuck in traffic, or pedestrians that cross from the center city to this semi-residential area developed in the 1930s, consisting of bars and the occasional small shop.

The wall under the Nantes Bridge that Jocelyn Cottencin chose to transform had been previously covered with graffiti and posters announcing concerts and waylaying passerby with political slogans. In the past, covering the wall over with images or texts had to be done rapidly and was competitive: information had to be snappy and the visual impact provocative in order to last a couple of days. Then there was this writing done in chalk, a fragile inscription, easily subjected to a natural or deliberate erasing. Fragile because it intentionally ran the risk of being covered over by future stratus of words and images. But nothing happened for two and a half years. The work took up a long stretch of wall but paradoxically, its presence was discrete, like a murmur of words or leaves, like a white cloud. It also had, like a form of fragile power, to reveal the wall as if anew, in its nudity and materiality, recreating a breathing space where previously there had only been congestion, covering over and frenzies repetitions. From the moment the statement was inscribed, no other graphic element disturbed it until spring 2007. A tacit form of respect, not necessarily towards 'the work' itself, but in the sense that suddenly, the public space had become inhabitable, as if Jocelyn Cottencin's work recognized the space's functional and imaginative capacity, and in return the passersby undertook to cross it in the same spirit. The work was damaged in the spring of 2007 during the presidential campaign — a political slogan covered part of the graphic work. The violence of this slogan led Jocelyn Cottencin to decide to erase and remove the work. The work drew its power from its ability to maintain a bond, and not just that of any old nihilistic reaction.

La consommation d'oxygène est différente d'un individu à l'autre suggests a double critique. The first is to render obsolete the idealistic claim of art to promote in public spaces a meta-temporal and sacred durability of a work or a monument. The work of Cottencin is created in the specificity of a site, daily temporality and a social use of space. This, however, does not keep it from working in the inner spaces of the imagination or from creating a poetry of expanses and temporal distension. The second form of resistance, which perhaps represents its biggest difference with the art of the 1970s, is the way in which it resists a counter-utopia, i.e. the belief that an art work, which takes charge of a specific site, is capable of revealing all the social tensions or political uncertainties of the moment, as well as denouncing, or even resolving them. This type of art ran the risk of being just as dogmatic and utopian as that of idealism, and placing the artwork at the service of ideologies. The great force of Cottencin's

work is to consider the specificity of a site in relation to its daily usage and its political appropriations, and at the same time to stimulate autonomy of negotiation and use of space by those who actually use them. The recognition of this kind of autonomy of vision and construction of space promotes an access to all of the aesthetic and political potentials of territory.

Although the visual elements and slogans usually spread out on this wall generate commercial brouhaha, or are anti-establishment and accusatory regarding ideological systems, Cottencin's work silently points out that control and resistance interact exactly where speech is uttered, in the least significant of our usages of space or forms of communication. As Gilles Deleuze has so aptly observed:

We are becoming societies of control, which no longer function by imprisonment but by constant surveillance and instant communication (...) Perhaps speech and communication are tainted. They are completely saturated with money: not by accident, but by nature. There needs to be a hijacking of speech. To create has always been something other than communicating (...) Belief in the world is what we lack the most; we have absolutely lost the world, we have been dispossessed of it. To believe in the world is also to give rise to events, even little ones, which escape control, or bring into being new space-time, even with reduced surface or volume. It's what you call Pietas. It's in relation to each attempt that the capacity for resistance is judged, as opposed to submission to control. There must be at the same time creation, and people." [3]

The work of Jocelyn Cottencin "believes in the world", and has this capacity to encompass "territories" in order to bring to light space-times which are open to transformation and creation. In this sense *Just a Walk* is a multi-layered, complex project, precisely because it displays as much humility in its relationship to people and territories, as a forceful demand for political vigilance.

Just a Walk: displacements, energies, collaborations, combinations, proliferations

In 2005, La Criée Center of Contemporary Art in Rennes invited Jocelyn Cottencin to conceptualize and carry out a two-year project that addressed concrete circulation and a

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[3] Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparlers*, Paris: Minuit, 1990, p.236, 238, 239.

critique of Western Europe, in particular in relation to the cities that lie along the Atlantic coast like Glasgow, Rennes, San Sebastian, Bilbao, Porto and Lisbon.

The artist responded to this proposal with *Just a Walk*, a project that is the exact opposite of the claim to mark or define the territories of art, or of Europe**.** He immediately launched a double process of research and creation. The first part consisted of an investment of solitary work energy, as well as work with other European artists. This energy took the form of an internet site which grew over time, reflecting various artistic proposals, research sessions carried out in Rennes, encounters which took place during residencies in the European cities listed above, as well as interviews and a journal kept by the art critic Jean-Marc Huitorel. Today, the entire project is a protean whole, rich with its powerful transformation. It outlines a moving territoriality where European topography is not identified according to fixed cultural and global identities, but according to the meeting of individual points of view that question our collective, imaginative and identity constructions.

Just a Walk brings together diverse artistic proposals such as *Vocabulario*, a collaborative work between the Lisbon choreographer Tiago Guedes and Jocelyn Cottencin, whose goal is the creation of topo-graphics arising from bodies and letters. The camera filmed from above the active choreography in the performative utterance of an alphabet made from bodies and clothing. Exhibited on a series of monitors, the emergent letters created a continual formation-deformation of signs. These have the appearance of being totally autonomous from each other, while at the same time being intimately linked. On the other hand, their visualization never results in the crystallization of a word in which transparency of meaning dominates. It is rather an incessant wave-like movement that attempts the uttering of a letter or word, with its meaning and its inevitable disappearance. Speech always escapes us. The body, in its movement and its energy, is inevitably resistant to control. The space is what happens in its usage and its necessary mental projection. *Vocabulario* uses bodies and letters to visualize exactly how much the exploration of territory does not make find embodiment in the occupation of a space, but rather in that place where escape, shifts, links and possible splits take place.

There are also videos and photographs by Marcel Dinahet, forceful works which headily record those places that mark the passage or separation between countries and people.

Bridges, for example, are an obvious form of architecture that speaks to European territoriality, and which poses questions regarding connection and exclusion. Subject to intense human usage, the bridges that are situated along borders, such as between France and Spain, are locations where x individual and collective histories are played out. The frank way that Marcel Dinahet films the unbroken stream of bodies and automobiles constructs and sculpts a materiality of space while continuously preparing openings toward otherness and foreignness. The artist has also produced magnificent videos of European coasts, in particular coastal jetties, against which waves continuously break, leaving here and there traces of human passage. These videos of costal regions do not at all reduce the subject to a romantic landscape. In particular they allow one to grasp how coastal Europe, this Atlantic arc, confronts and opens onto that which is no longer really a question of borders, but a vast coastal area, which gives rise to imaginary upheavals, political spaces connected, for example, to immigration between Africa and Europe, or descents into other dreamt-of territories.

Just a Walk is also composed of hundreds of images gathered by Jocelyn Cottencin in the process of his travels along the European Atlantic coastline. As the title of the project indicates, to simply walk is to investigate unknown trajectories, as opposed to linear routes, thereby better leaving open the possibility for unexpected and productive encounters. It is also about agreeing to abandon the habits of movement and work rituals that sometimes limit too restrictive border spaces.

What surfaces in the photographs and videos resulting from this walk are unconventional images, i.e. images that supposedly document a place, but contain something quite different. The artist's openness to exterior events is not enough to create typical documentary or fictional material. Behind concrete, banal situations—a sleeping face, a suspended step, a group of people wandering in the sand—there is a sense of floating and suspension that sets reality against itself to the benefit of a poetics of spaces in the process of becoming/unfolding. A critical position emerges from behind the slowness of a movement, or around the contour of a form, a position that resists all forms of facile seduction, and therefore all claim to truth and authoritarian power. With regard to the works of Jocelyn Cottencin, it would be useless to

delimit locations, plot a geography, mark off a path. What is at the heart of this creative process is the abandonment of a mastery of vision in exchange for a driven approach to create images that already contain "a different elsewhere" than they show. This is where the real artistic risk lies.

And what if in the end territory is nothing other than a story of belief, a necessary utopia?

The desire for movement generated by the *Just a Walk* project is not about the desire to encounter the other merely in order to define a uniform and ideal territory. *Just a Walk* is a project where friction, difference and contradiction all have their place. To provoke encounters and an opening is a real engagement towards and with the other. It is about taking the risk of experiencing tension and rupture but also construction and what is possible.

Translation Mark Carlson