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Mirages of Infinity: the Subjective Theatres of Béatrice Helg

Like the painter, one would expect the writer to be jealous of the photographer. For; unlike the former, who is obliged to *represent* a reality that will always escape her, and the latter, who must always describe, the photographer starts with a *given* that, is simply waiting to be captured by his lens. For him there is no need to reinvent the real, to formulate or imagine it: it is enough for the eye to apprehend it, to frame a particular space at a particular moment, for the work to exist. More than that: this "vision" held for all time on the film and revealed in the darkroom may then be reproduced dozens or even hundreds of times, unlike the unique piece made by the painter. The advent of photography shook the foundations of art, threatening to make description in the novel and figuration in painting obsolete, and to substitute exact objectivity for creative subjectivity, reality for symbol, the series for the singular, and instantaneousness for patiently constructed form.

Now, it so happens that, by positioning itself from the outset as subjective, symbolic and constructed, the art of Béatrice Helg contradicts this rather reductive idea of photography, and does so (can this be a coincidence?) at a time when, by an ironic turn of events, photography itself is threatened by a technological development so dramatic that anyone now can produce photographic images and, by the same digital technology, reproduce them ad infinitum over the Web. Rendered extremely banal by the small-format, decontextualised juxtaposition of the great and the worthless, art photography (from the portrait to the landscape) risks becoming indistinguishable from holiday snaps. And since what we call the real has been universally transformed into spectacle (as Guy Debord prophesied), the claim to capture reality, and social reality in particular, increasingly boils down to photographing individuals who are themselves *putting on a pretence*, acting a part or being unwittingly manipulated. But there are two aspects to every danger. The first shakes and disheartens us; it seems to close off the horizon. The second forces us to

react, and therefore to invent something new. Whenever it is threatened by the exhausting repetition of the same, by perversion or standardisation, whenever new technologies undercut its presuppositions, true art *breaks free* and takes the risk of exploring something else (even if this is to court incomprehension and solitude), or else finds another path back to what has prematurely been dismissed as obsolete (even if this means being criticised for “lacking topical relevance”).

So it was that novelists were forced to imagine another form of “realism” after the invention of photography and then cinema (this is the leap from Flaubert to Proust), and, during the same period, modern painting moved away from the imitation of reality and figuration to invent *impressionism* and abstraction, both of which responded to so-called photographic “objectivity” with a subjective outlook. In the same way, the so-called “*plasticien*” or “artist’s” tendency of the 1980s, which was no doubt a decisive influence on Béatrice Helg, and which seemed to “betray” photography the better to redefine or call it into question (for is not *any image* framed by the eye already a “fabricated image?”), turned away from the instantaneous capture of the real in favour of an almost painterly return to composition and “making.”

However “objective” it may claim to be, art is nothing other than the metamorphosis of a subjectivity (of a singular gaze, perception or experience – collective, as well as individual – of an idea, an emotion, an *intention* or a desire) into forms that can be shared. Of course, these forms change with time, with technology and with the fashions that to some extent influence them, but creative subjectivity is the work’s absolute origin. And, in order to attain transcendent form, it presupposes that *both* the objective and the subjective be transcended. Whatever its subject or degree of abstraction, a painting (any painting) is (also) a window onto the invisible, challenging the beholder’s capacity to imagine and feel. As Pierre Soulages reminds us, “the artwork needs regular attention.” It demands to be contemplated. This is certainly true of Béatrice Helg’s “dream universes,” which come halfway between photograph and icon, or materiality and vision, and which arise from a “strangely divinatory intuition” whose closeness to the revelations of contemporary cosmology have not escaped the notice of the astrophysicist Jean-Pierre Luminet.

In contrast to the postulate of objectivity which often underpins photography, Helg says that she makes “images out of nothing” – or rather (and this is where we

come back to the painter or poet, to whom she ultimately proves to be very close) that, using concrete elements (chosen just the way the sculptor chooses a block of marble) and the effects obtained with light, she *composes* little subjective “theatres” that she will call *Géométrie*, *Transparence* or *Espace-lumière*. Of these she makes a strictly limited number of prints. Rather than simply capturing fragments of the real, or ironically appropriating representations thereof, like other members of her generation, the aim for her, as for the poet, is to “direct her eternal dream” (to adapt Gérard de Nerval’s words) by creating formal equivalents of her visions with this photographic tool that she so consummately masters, and with which she strives to produce images that are “absolute” (quite the opposite of incompleteness).

From the very outset (the vertical plumb line of the 1983 *Perpendiculum I*, for example, or the two bricks of *Géométrie II* in 1985, which irresistibly remind me of Morandi), Helg’s work has had an immediately recognisable “tone” which evokes, on one side, architecture (the precision of lines and contrasts, the subtle interweaving of verticals, horizontals and diagonals, as well as the layering of levels and materials) and, on the other, metaphysical solitude. The suggestiveness of the objects (both static and vibrant), the resonance of the empty space around them (which has expanded over the years, with the photographer’s growing, increasingly dazzling mastery), but also the immaterial lightness of the marvellous *Esprits froissés* and the force of attraction – like the pull of black holes – of the *Intrusions* series, are evidence of a *second* dimension that it would be tempting to describe as spiritual where one not loath to put a name on something that eludes both the sacred and religion, tending to substitute itself for them by the use of light, space and transparency. Or also symbols, as in *Labyrinthe* (1991), which, in an image that is itself comprised of an infinite series of layers, interweaves two chiastically arranged staircases and a ladder standing on some kind of podium or stage from which a third staircase descends further towards an invisible depth. Now, we know that, from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* to Platonism, from Jacob’s Ladder in *Genesis* to the Prophet Muhammad’s ladder, and also in Buddhism, Hinduism and shamanism, the ladder symbolises the degrees of the soul’s spiritual ascent. And when the narrator of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is about to reach his goal, in canto 21 of *Paradiso*, what he comes to is a ladder. Here, however, this object that in a religious context connects humanity to transcendence, leads only to emptiness... *Labyrinthe* exudes an

atmosphere of abandon and at the same time an intellectual and allegorical dimension that, for me (and in spite of the absence of human figures) irresistibly evokes Dürer's *Melencholia*.

While from the beginning Helg has always combined the powerful individuality of her art and her determination to "construct an *oeuvre*" by building her cathedral of light, stone by stone, with an extreme authority, as well perhaps, as a degree of pride, or an absolute desire for mastery, it seems to me that she has also shown a measureless modesty which, in the 1980s, manifested itself in the somewhat conventional form of the mask (in the fine composition entitled *Entretiens d'Atelier III*), and then became much more subtle, and indeed invisible. There is in the abyssal silence and abstraction of her compositions, in this absolute refusal of self-representation, of self-staging (at a time, precisely, when everybody is putting themselves in their work, and especially many women photographers and artists who forcefully – and with a conscious narcissism – claimed their right to expression and desire), there is, in this almost Jansenist exclusion of the human figure since 1985, and also in the effect of the theatricalisation of spaces and objects, which at times are even separated from us by a transparent wall, something like a fierce reserve that will permit no anecdote, no self-disclosure (unless a very indirect one, as suggested by the mirror in *Sans Titre*, 1990), and no slacking off. What can be perceived of the artist's spiritual rigour is manifested precisely through this absence of subject, this bareness or throbbing of emptiness, around the objects, which makes them exist on their own, facing us, and in the degree to which each composition suggests something of the "mental vision" that inspired it, and therefore the subjectivity and imagination of this person who, for all the distancing devices, really is there in her work.

For in spite of what I have just defined as empty space and *abstraction* (in the etymological sense of what has been extracted by the mind from its context, its material reality, and raised to the status of idea, or chimera), the dominant impression is above all one of *presence*. This is due in the first place to the materials used as supports for the image (which are generally easy to recognise): glass, (crumpled) paper, plexiglas, or bits of rusty metal. And it is due to the fact that these are simply the support for something else that is expressed through them and that, undeniably, evokes the human element.

So it is that some of the photographs (notably the imposing *Crépuscule XI*, 2005) give the impression that we are seeing a deserted stage that a fleeting presence – Hamlet’s ghost or a faceless shadow of the unconscious – has just abandoned. And in the moving series of *Esprits froissés*, made ten years ago – where she perhaps comes closest to the human figure – some of these “crumpled spirits” suggest, perhaps, a woman’s body (*Esprits froissés II, III and VII*), or a dancer, or a playful angel. Not that this prevented Jean-Pierre Luminet from picking up on a resemblance to the new representations of the universe that he was in the process of elaborating, and that he calls “crumpled space”! For such is the multiplicity of readings made possible by these “machines for reverie” (in that respect the photographs are like poems).

In Helg’s most recent works (2000–2009) I am struck by both the melancholy connotations of the titles (*Crépuscule I - XVII*, or *Profondeurs I-X*) and the solitude of the objects – the thought of raised stelae often comes to mind – that occupy the visual field, like an unanswered question in the void (in the *Esprits froissés* series, for example, only no. *XII* shows *two* figures flying; in all the others there is only one). I am also struck by the growing autonomy of these objects. Something lofty, independent and proud, and almost sacred (by virtue of both the centrality of the figures, their monumentality, and the light that sometimes they exude and that sometimes shines through them) that emanates from these perfect *mise-en-scènes* in which nothing is left to chance, and which exert a mysterious power on those who contemplate them. A power, first of all, to question – the power of the abyss, for every profound question points in that direction. And then the power of seduction, of course, for beauty, which contemporary art so often neglects in favour of its opposite, or for triviality, is very much *the* goal here. And finally, the power of revelation, since each of these “pictures” (which are often on a great scale: one meter thirty by more than one meter for *Crépuscule XVI*, *Eveil VIII* and *Profondeurs VII*) opens onto an infinity.

This dimension of infinity, of the epiphanous manifestation of objects, is suggested mainly by the use of artificial lighting, at which the photographer is a past master. Nothing could be done without that: the miracle of each appearance (including that of the block of abyssal black which bars a series of compositions from 2003 entitled either *Présence* or *Intrusion*) is due only to the incredibly controlled quantity of light directed at the background which forms the “theatre” and at the

object(s) forming the core of these compositions. Looking at the original print – and not its “reduction” flattened by the reproduction (especially in the case of *Verre de lumière IV* and *Crépuscule XVII*) – we quite literally lose ourselves in the almost aquatic depth of a fabulous image to which no painting or landscape photograph could ever be compared. It is as if we were looking down into the sea and, in its depths, under the shimmering ripples made by the setting sun on the surface, making out the dark colours of the rocks and seaweed. I don’t know how all this is explained by technical skill, but the illusion is so effective that here the false, the image *created* by artifice, surpasses any reproduction of the real.

However – for we still have to show how, for all its manifest aspiration to “classical” beauty, balance and completeness, Helg’s art fully belongs to the consciousness of our age, and not another one – we should note that the favoured material of all the big compositions, and even more markedly so since the late 1990s, is *rusted* metal, which implies another kind of relation to the real than pure abstraction, or than the choice of marble. Rust makes the metal it corrodes *fragile*. It makes it porous and friable, depriving it of solidity and, unless the corrosive process is halted and “fixed,” leads inevitably to disintegration. It thus has an irreversible destructive effect on objects, and evokes the sphere of wear, finiteness and death.

This aspect of Helg’s art has been little noted before now, but I think it is related to her disquieting *Labyrinthe*, to the melancholy of her *Crépuscules* or the big black shadows that loom in the background of several of her compositions, and even to the translucent layerings of *Transparence III*, which seem to conjure up a limbo, a state between life and death, appearance and disappearance... But then how could work so haunted by the contradiction between light and darkness, so deeply informed by the desire for absolute and the aspiration to beauty or transparency, how could it not operate, too, in the vicinity of death - even if only to sublimate it, to dissolve it in art?

It is in the nature of light to “lead beyond the limits,” observes theatre director Claude Régy, who is quoted by the photographer in *A la lumière de l’ombre*, a monograph on her work published in 2006. This “beyond,” which may mean nothingness and death (or the eternity promised to believers), may just as well evoke the limitlessness of art, or that “unknown” which Baudelaire and Rimbaud hoped would bring the revelation of the *new*.

This limitlessness that guides poets is also, I believe, the aspiration of Béatrice Helg's constantly creative work, which may – we cannot tell – lead to a spiritual reality, a supreme illusion (just as possibly the illusion of our world), or to the last word of an inner mystery which escapes us, and which no doubt constitutes the work's intimate secret.

In *Avant-scène*, a work started in 2008 and taken up again in 2010, we see for the first time, against the usual metal background, a white rostrum photographed at the La Grange park in Geneva, where it was used for outdoor summer shows. This *real* stage superimposes its contingency over the fabricated set, and its technical reality over dream. Should this be taken as indicating a new direction, one that will gradually break free of the baroque mirages of illusion and take on board the reality of the contemporary world, by organising the clash of realism and the imaginary within the image? We shall see what comes next. But that, like any authentic creative enterprise, is unpredictable.

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