

## **Je me souviens (I Remember)**

In *L'art même* #63, 4th quarter 2014.

### **Exhibition Lucile Bertrand *Tu te souviens ? (Do You Remember?)***

Maison des Arts de Schaerbeek, Brussels, Belgium – 20/09 > 30/10/2014

In his book *I Remember*, Georges Perec recalls the small unessential and intangible things that one forgets, as « they don't count enough to be part of History, nor to find their place in the Memoirs of Statesmen, mountaineers, or legendary figures »<sup>1</sup>. On the contrary, some homicides, rapes and even genocides can happen unseen with not a scrap retained by History. In 2014, year of commemoration of the First World War, there are many manifestations that bring to light the ferocity of the confrontations that caused more deaths and wounded than any other past war. It is this (res)urgence of memory that Lucile Bertrand deals with throughout her exposition entitled *Do You Remember?* at the Maison des Arts de Schaerbeek.

Contrary to certain contemporary artists who revolt against the abuse of power and who denounce despotism while submitting the spectator to an emotional discharge as unpleasant as moralizing, Lucile Bertrand acts gently. Thus, as the artist readily admits, she confides having: « my head in the clouds and my feet in the war ». Her talent for poetizing reality, perhaps to render it more acceptable, or less brutal, shows itself in the way she views space, and how she invests it with small strokes, discreet and yet effective. For the occasion of her exposition at the Maison des Arts de Schaerbeek, her inspiration founded on the early nineteenth century bourgeois architecture of the building, Lucile Bertrand proposes four installations, each in adequacy with the function of a room. Thus the dining room becomes the setting for a post-colonial « tea-time », with Belgium's history as its background, surrounding a porcelain cup having belonged to one of the manor's previous owners. The beige salon, as to it, serves as a support to the unfolding of an artist's book, consisting of newspaper clippings, linked together by the red thread of violence. The black and white prints have been hand-colored by the artist; the accordion-book unfolds itself in front of the console tables in the manner of a virtual frontier. The toile de Jouy that normally covers the pink sitting room's walls has been recovered with fuchsia cotton satin, upon which the artist has drawn piles of corpses, forming an un-interrupted frieze. At the feet of the grand piano, sandbags are accumulated, as if the sitting room had been temporarily confiscated and occupied by an army. But the keystone of the installation is without a doubt the video, projected in the library, that pays tribute to the poets and authors of South Africa, Cambodia, Greece, Syria, or Russia, to name a few, who suffered the throes of war and censorship.

### **Amnesia and blindness**

In *Rage*, while editing archives of current events of the 50's and 60's, Pasolini denounces the normality of present times. How can one evoke the past without being blinkered, asks the director. For him, normality is this catastrophe that prowls

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Perec, *I Remember*, Godine, 2014

about without our knowledge, and that has installed itself between WWI and WWII, with the arrival of the medias and the masses' consumerism. Against this suffocating banality, the poet revolts, enrages. He wants to denounce this state of urgency by the bias of visual rhymes and a dialectical editing. Lucile Bertrand's video opens with the explicative note written by Pasolini. One can well feel that through this editing process, she borrows some of his anger and his despair.

In *Amnesia*, it's less about a pathology that temporarily or definitely loses sight of the past than that of voluntary forgetfulness, negation. The individuals who appear on screen are not professional actors, they are simple readers, each reciting excerpts of texts chosen by the artist, each in their own language. They bear witness through a message for which they are not answerable but that they in any case transmit with their own voice. They appear from the rear, in the shadow, facing unwinding images. Anonymous, their names and faces are not unveiled, neither before nor after being asked by a voice « off »: « Do you remember? » Thus described, the method reminds one of that of a cross-examination, minus the nervous strain and the violence. But the video's « split screen » device rapidly thwarts the setup. On the right side of the screen, a dancer waits. To each question and to each negative answer following, she falls, as though a rope linking her to the ceiling just broke. Then, she picks herself up with difficulty, each time slower and slower. These successive collapses evoke in a metaphoric way the emotional rises and falls that victims of wars or aggressions undergo, and finds its echo in the words of poets and authors having themselves suffered the same wrongdoings. *Do You Remember?* thus proceeds not only from a set of references and citations, but also and above all, is an injunction to remember, despite the pain. Suddenly the image of a snow-covered forest appears, its trees numbered in red, accompanied by a poem by Chalamov. The captivating image stamps one's imagination and resonates. *To stand, in the shadow / of the stigmata in the air*<sup>2</sup>, wrote Paul Celan, like a faint glimmer of hope; then, in 1970, he committed suicide.

Through these superimpositions of texts and images Lucile Bertrand asks this question: « And we, in other circumstances, would we also be capable of becoming monsters? » One knows Hannah Arendt's answer, formulated following the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, in a text that provoked a scandal, called « A Report on the Banality of Evil ». The philosopher postulates that each and any person, thinking they are doing their duty, can follow given orders while ceasing to reflect upon the consequences of their acts. Even if our daily acts lead us to forgetfulness, it is indeed the artist's role to be a (re)awakener of consciousness.

### **Septembre Tiberghien**

Translated by Toby Gemperle Gilbert

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Celan, *Breathturn*, Green Integer, 2006.