

Hollybush Gardens, London, UK

If art historian Arthur C. Danto were to physically knock over a piece of work I'd made, I might well take it as a very helpful review. For Benoît Maire, such a situation not only goes some way to describing his elegant working methods, it becomes part of a piece of work in itself. *The Spider Web* (2006) is a video documenting a discussion the French artist had with Danto early last year, and part of an ongoing series with the rather Liam Gillick-esque title 'Elements for a discussion after the end of neon in exhibitions'. The projected image remains blank, save for a very short sentence describing the context of the conversation, leaving the viewer to piece together the rest. The genial Danto patiently begins to pull meaning from what gradually becomes apparent is a small, carefully balanced arrangement of objects in front of him; a mirror, a clock, a book on Ludwig Wittgenstein, and a reproduction of a Veronese painting, which features a spider's web and a sundial. Just as he starts to make connections with *vanitas* painting, Danto accidentally upsets the display and apologetically tries to piece it back together, discovering in the process that Maire has attempted, with the mirror, to make an image of the Wittgenstein book. 'But it is just an image of the book', explains Maire. 'It is not a work it is just something to have a discussion about.' 'And when people come and look at it [...] you'll ask them, what does this mean to you?' ventures Danto. Maire replies: 'Yes perhaps [...] for the moment, I don't really know. I just try something and after we can elaborate ...'

We have to imagine, like listening to a radio play, what these objects actually look like; a reproduction in our imaginations of work already freighted with ideas of doubling and reflection, and delicately woven into the bigger spider's web of ideas that comprised Maire's exhibition 'The Repetition'. Like conversation with a child who has just asked an unanswerable metaphysical question ('Why do we exist, Dad?'), this show was just as gently mind-bending. The nine works, each realized with economical, well-poised echoes of

Benoît Maire
Objet de singe
(Monkey's Object)
2007
Perspex, mirror film,
painted stones
Dimensions variable



Benoît Maire

Arte Povera, could be read as a set of philosophical propositions around ideas of (you guessed it) repetition. I hesitate to use the term 'proposition' as it is loaded with an academic formality that is absent from Maire's work. (I'm suspicious of those that conflate art about philosophy with philosophy itself; art is too imprecise a tool, and that's what's so compelling about it.) Rather, Maire's work operates in an open-ended, discursive realm, oxygenated by a lack of linguistic (and thus academically philosophical) specificity, and shot through with an irrepressible romanticism.

In the centre of the gallery stood *Corner without Object (for Anatole Atlas)* (2007); two large sheets of Perspex, set at right angles, and covered in transparent mirror film, which is reflective but allows you to see through to the other side, like a kind of half-imagined Dan Graham sculpture. Anatole Atlas is the pseudonym for Jean-Louis Lipfert, famous for heckling Jacques Lacan at a conference in 1972. Maire met Atlas one week after having put this sculpture on display at an earlier exhibition, and renamed the work when Atlas told him he was planning on writing a lecture entitled 'The double crossing of the mirror'. Reflection and transparency; Lacan and the mirror stage – as with *The Spider Web*, *Corner without Object* ... works within a series of loose parameters that maintain a lucid yet mutable and provisional level of signification.

Objet de singe (Monkey's Object, 2007) uses similar materials on a much smaller scale. On a window-sill were placed three black stones; two in front of a roughly cut Perspex block, covered, like *Corner without Object* ..., in mirror film, and one behind. The combined reflections of the pebbles form a fourth, ghostly stone that hovers, halo-like, around the rock to the rear of the Perspex – an imperfect reproduction created in the reflective space between 'real' objects. In *Reading Medhi Belhaj Kacem reading Alain Badiou reading Jacques Lacan reading Aristotle reading the sky* (2007) the faces of two primates stare at each other across a wooden shelf; could their blank expressions (or rather, our projection of inscrutability onto them) be understood as some take on the anxiety of influence (more reflections; Lacan influenced Badiou, who, in turn, influenced Kacem)? *Le Matin* (The Morning, 2007) directly addressed the idea of representing the external world. A plastic tube ran from a small funnel fixed outside one of the gallery windows and onto a scrappy sheet of card inside. Rainwater from the funnel trickled onto the card, leaving a dark stain, and dripping onto the floor. Here were the elements replicating themselves as an image; a self-portrait of rain.

If in places Maire had over-egged his ideas – occasionally it felt a little like looking at someone's reading list, rather than artworks – 'The Replication' was, on the whole, a clear and intellectually loose-limbed exhibition; a gentle invitation into a rich discursive world rather than the presentation of an infinitely reflective set of references.

Dan Fox