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Benoît Maire

interviewed by Falke Pisano

Benoît Maire: Hello Falke, It is nice to hear from you, now I see your email as the beginning of the interview in a certain way, you ask me two questions which are very important.

Falke Pisano: *The drawing I saw on the French website announcing the Strategic Questions publication, the abstract repetition of lines and the black dot, what is the connection with the interview?*

B.M: At the beginning I was thinking of speaking about the link between the Husserl's phenomenology and the beginning of abstraction, during the same years around 1907-1916. So I did some research in philosophy then in the same time I did some abstract diagrams, it was the beginning of the project, Vanessa [Desclaux] asked for a visual so I decided to give this one, but it was more than one year ago, the project is really different now.

F.P: *And the press release for Liste, the script which seems to be a script for the reading of the exhibition, or a de- and re-construction of the components of the situation of this specific exhibition, what role does this kind of writing play in your work?*

B.M: Yes, perhaps now the press release can be a story about the exhibition, perhaps I want to write a press release disconnected from the exhibition for my next solo show in London, to have the autonomy of the press release as a writing. I don't really like when all is clear, visible, and that you can understand, I like when nobody understands what I'm doing, but it is probably a perverse position, or something which is in relation with the fact I'm young, someone said to me recently that it was a defect of youth... Personally I like when I came to a show, then understand next to nothing, because these kinds of shows stayed in my mind a long time, sometimes I saw really good pieces, and I can say: "this a really good piece", but it did not disturb anything, it is an evident good piece, but I don't really care of it, I prefer bad pieces, or pieces with formal poverty and unresolved problems.

For the press release of the Liste show, you're right, it was a mental reconstitution of signs of the different art-works, and a description of the possible "narrative" of the show, in a way it is interesting to describe a piece or a show, but I prefer to be as a story teller perhaps, more a writer than a formalist, you can describe a show in the same way you describe a movie

F.P: *I am very interested in these two directions: first the drawing because it makes this funny transfer from talking about something quite abstract to an abstract visual representation - and this in art context has its own implications, and second the re-positioning and re-formulating of the elements of a work, through writing a script which at certain points, somehow probably due to its specific propositional nature, seems to be a scenario of meaning, resonating maybe the mechanics at work in an (scripted) interview with a scientist or the incorporation of scientific research - I don't know if I should call it discourse - in art.*

B.M: I agree, I don't know too if we can speak about discourse, but it is not so far away, sometimes my favourite medium is not painting or video, but theory itself, my main medium is theory probably, I used discourse written by me for conferences played by actors in 2004-2005, it was my first pieces of art, now I try to make aesthetics but with others mediums, but if I say that I'm making aesthetics with paintings for example, we can say that my paintings are a discourse taking the form of a painting, it was that in "la couleur Constance Mayer" a series of black paintings.

I'm not sure to understand really the two directions, one is the drawing the other is the re-formulating, can you tell me more about your idea?

F.P: *These two directions I was writing about, not completely clear to myself either, I have to admit, but one has to do with what you mention in the description of the piece: the difficult relationship to formalization, which I understand as something that must be inherent to much of your work due to its grounding in theory - something like the problems and possibilities of considering theory as the main medium. I was just the other day trying to explain to someone that theory (sometimes not even theory I have to say, but thoughts and ideas) is for me material that obtains its form in the place of its application, and that sculptures function in my work as a conjunction in which this material is shaped. At the same time these sculptures-as-bearers-of-theoretical-constructs usually inhabit another construct, a text, which again re-shapes the material on different grounds (grounds that concern mechanics of writing and the implications of the body of the text). This is as far as I got with formalization, I think. What I find interesting about the re-formulating you did in the press release for Liste is that it points towards the question of content and meaning (or content as meaning or meaning as content) in your work. When theory is the medium, then what is the content of the work?*

(from here Benoît Maire answers in French, we are much obliged to Clare Smith for translating)

B.M: When theory is the preferred medium of a work, what is the content of the work?

If you're Modern, the content of the work is the medium itself. If you're not Modern, the content of the work whose medium is theory can be anything you like. Ranging from the classical questions of theory, the sublime, the beautiful to more recent questions like context, performative readings, the notion of temporality. However, what interests me about theory is its affective charge, not its logic. This is where the un-resolvable things that it tries to mask reveal there could be an issue for a practice in which theory is the medium. Sometimes one can also see the logic of theory as something affective - the writings of Wittgenstein for example influence contemporary poets who make logical form an affected form of writing. There is often in Heidegger's concepts, an adolescent anxiety comparable to that found in some paintings. The affects that preside over the conceptual elaboration -that is where I think the subject, the content, can be found.

F.P: *When you re-constitute the signs of works in the way you do in this press release*

mentioned before, you actually replace them by more complex signs, no? It might be a description but one that directs further, that does not direct towards something.

B.M: I don't know, perhaps it's like naming something by pointing your finger at an object; one sees that apple there next to that bowl, and there's a light above it. That's a kind of naming which is a description of the elements, as if to say, these are visually very different things but they are in the same space, both physical and mental. I like it when things are very different in technique and when objects are very far apart; one could even say that it's not the same artist, these are gaps, and since it works through gaps, it's important that they are presented in constellations - just as constellations make sense of the stars in the sky, that one goes with those and it makes sense, even if it makes sense after the fact; there are no real relationships between the stars in the constellations in the sky, but we have to point them out. We need to inhabit that space; so when we talk of "naming" or "pointing to" we move away from formalisation, where things are to be looked at as things in themselves; I'm sure, when you point at something it's to do with language and the works are the leftovers of a language trying to name things. I think that writing was more a way of bringing together disjointed elements, though that might complicate things that isn't really the aim, since it makes you go somewhere else, or further, makes you look for what the pieces have in common. But the main thing is to introduce an enigma, providing clues to the enigma doesn't necessarily mean there's a solution, rather they're signs of the same thing: not the content exactly, but the question that governs the content, having said which I can't word that exactly either way, perhaps because I'm a lazy bugger.

F.P: *How does one describe a movie?*

B.M: It's got something to do with the story, the narration. I like talking of the diegesis of a film, which is to say the elements contained in the film's narrative. Take for example a scene: A woman is talking to a man in a café. Suddenly you hear some sad music in the film, this music accentuates the film's weepy moments, it is extra-diegetic or outside the narrative if it is added to the edit, just to stress the mood but it is part of the narrative if the music is on the radio and a waiter turns it on and then turns it off in the café.

Often you can't tell whether the music is part of the narrative or not: there's music at the start, then the guy turns off the radio. So it could be extra-diegetic but in fact its diegetic - included in the narrative. With exhibitions generally there isn't just one work, but a group of works. In any case, as far as I'm concerned, one can also think about the question of diegesis here. How does one define the narrative space? That's something that interests me more than the subject (content) in itself or the medium. With different works it's about circumscribing a territory; this mental territory is the narrative space: the space in which one can read the exhibition and understand in which historical conceptual space it is engaged in. Perhaps again it's about naming or inscribing. Understanding the narrative space of an exhibition allows the different works it's composed of to be read in a certain direction.

The other possible directions of the works are outside the narrative of this particular exhibition. It's often the context which allows a narrative space to be determined, and the curator's role is to determine the context; once that's done the work has a preferred direction of reading which is the narrative line. When you're invited to take part in a joint exhibition, in general, the question you can pose is "In what narrative space do they want to inscribe my works?"

F.P: *So how do you usually start a work or a series of works? You do research and construct a discourse? On what grounds and how do you set the parameters?*

B.M: At the moment the title is often important, as the title will last for a certain time, like a space, which can contain different projects. It's almost as if I were to make several folders, called for example "le crepuscule des copistes" (the copyist's twilight), "the square in a forest", "la tragédie de l'écran plat" (the tragedy of the flat screen); these three folders, or files, get filled with various things - readings, formal desires (like wanting to work with clay, or to make 3D animations, which gives you time to work with a variety of mediums, always tending towards a formal space and to be eclectic), ideas, etc.

Then the works appear in unfinished forms, until the moment when I show them. When I show them I tell myself they're finished, although sometimes I change them after I've shown them. Next the titles of the folders become the title of the exhibition or the title of several works; sometimes the works cut across the space of a file and then across that of another, which is for example what Sébastien does. Although he belongs more to the file labelled "What is consciousness?" he also passes through the "le crépuscule des copistes", since the fictional nature of his character forms the link with the problem of the repetition of the copyist, the kernel of the "crépuscule des copistes". And then there are always some key themes that go through all the files, for example the end of the story, the twilight of the story, or in another project "après la fin des néons" (after the end of neon light). In this, my working model is no doubt that of a writer, more specifically a writer who wants to write philosophy but whose thinking is too affectually charged to be able to formalise a philosophical system... Actually I think that sometimes it is too strongly an affectual approach that for example prevents Georges Bataille from establishing a philosophical system, something he nonetheless sought to do, his great admiration for Hegel no doubt having something to do with it. Seen like that his work suddenly seems more fragmented but there is a desire for unity, he tries to give coherence to the scattered elements of his work at the end of his life but he can't do it since there are too many holes. In my files there are also holes, or un-thought things and that attracts the other elements revolving around them. So one has to try and make aesthetics with that -like a science, playing at the edges of holes, holes are places where the intellect is not spared from nervousness, for example.

F.P: *You say: "I don't really like it when everything is clear, visible, and that you can understand. [...] I prefer bad pieces, or pieces with formal poverty and unresolved problems." I agree and wonder sometimes why it is so good to not understand. I am very bad at 'reading' art so very often I don't understand a thing, but then also I often don't care. There must be some specific not understanding that is particularly appealing. I was reading Henri Bergson and became quite attached to his notion of intuitive consciousness (or as he puts it, the consciousness is directed to where there is a certain intuition to seize on), maybe that has something to do with it. What is for you the best form of not understanding?*

B.M: For Rainer Maria Rilke "fame is the sum of the misunderstanding that gather around a new name", I can't remember now where I read that. He specifically said "fame" and not success, which is something quite different as the two things have two completely different relationships to time. Success is synchronous with seeing the piece -one can say of an exhibition, when it's on that it is a success-whereas fame or glory comes afterwards, at least a little while afterwards and through debates. If you take this position perhaps it's because of our dominant image of the artist as that of the romantic, the misunderstood creator. A romantic position, a bit obscure, a bit incomprehensible, with serious subjects - but existential. It is our position which no doubt makes us say what we say about our taste for works or exhibitions we don't understand.

F.P: *Going again back to the press release of the Liste show as a mental reconstitution of signs of the different art-works, and a description of the possible "narrative" of the show: What is the advantage of (or: is there an advantage in) describing a possible narrative over narrating a possible content?*

B.M: If you think of an exhibition as a landscape, you can either describe this landscape objectively, seen from the sky, or you can describe a possible path. The way I wrote the press release was probably in between the two options.

What is the advantage of (or: is there an advantage in) describing a possible narrative over narrating a possible content?

I believe more in the question of the subject than in the question of content, that's to say "what it talks about" rather than "what it says". The subject then, "what's being talked about" is, once again, a designation, a pointing of the finger, which is a primordial gesture indispensable for a child discovering the world but not knowing what things are called. The

question of content seems to me to be more objective; I don't think a work has a content, it's not really like an oyster. For Saussure words are oysters, they have envelopes and content, a signifier for a signified, but after Pierre Guyotat for example, or before Joyce, one can't really -in the field of art- consider this theory as valid. So I don't really believe in content, I believe more in strolling through landscapes, stories are more to do with writers. I like it when a visual artist adopts the posture of the writer, that's where I'm coming from at the moment.

F.P: *When you talk about aesthetics, what do you mean exactly? A more visual thing? How do you make visual decisions when you try to give form to a discourse? I think that is one of my biggest problems, I can seldom find reasons for visual decisions. I just don't know what they should be based on.*

B.M: To give form to a discourse one can use mediums linked to theoretical discourses; the form of a conference that I performed, the theoretical text that I used for a conference series in London where I distributed a printed text. Then there's the interview, like the one I did in "éléments pour une discussion après la fin des néons dans les expositions" (elements for a discussion after the end of the neons in exhibitions), when from reading a philosopher I make a display of objects and images which is my visual reading of a chapter or passage by this philosopher and I make use of the display to interview this same philosopher, but I don't ask him questions, as the questions are included in the display. The conferences are played by actors, in "éléments" the philosophers are real, in "Meeting Sébastien Planchard" the character is invented. I'm like a film director making a documentary (with real people) and fiction (with invented characters), and it's the difference between real person and character which is being questioned. I question the difference between *la personne* and *le personnage* (in French) to encounter Godard's problem: "Do we need to be a *personnage* to live as a *personne* ?". So there are obvious forms, which are those of theoretical discourse, but I continuously displace them from their own field of inscription to another space, which is the space of artistic enquiry itself.

So I'm never in a position to give form to a discourse. Strictly speaking, I don't make a discourse and in any case it's never pre-established. My theoretical writings are always full of holes. It's in the sense in which they are full of holes that they have an aesthetic, I think. This aesthetic being the aesthetic of philosophical discourse, which accepts the most incompleteness in how it's elaborated, the one which interests me most.

Finding reasons for visual solutions, that's not something I ever really do. Let's say that one can have a desire to explore a medium, for example at the moment I'm working with clay, meaning I want to work a certain gesture, sculpting with clay isn't a formal decision, it's a longing, a desire, and then by manipulating the clay I see what I can make, fingers, ears, balls and squares in earthenware and porcelain which makes two colours and several figures. And then in the continuation of my essay, "the square in a forest" (which is an account of a mental exhibition) the main question is the tragic chance which is linked to the game of chance. So I say to myself these pieces of clay could be the pieces in a game of chance which I could invent, so then learn how to play *Go*, which takes me several days and then after that I need a plan, so then I make a sculpture in wood, a sort of table with a draughtboard which can then be a sculpture functioning as a piece in a performance in which two people play an invented game and when the time is up (the sandglass can be interpreted by someone letting sand flow through their hands), the sculpture is finished in time for the exhibition of the work while the performance can be interpreted at the private view.