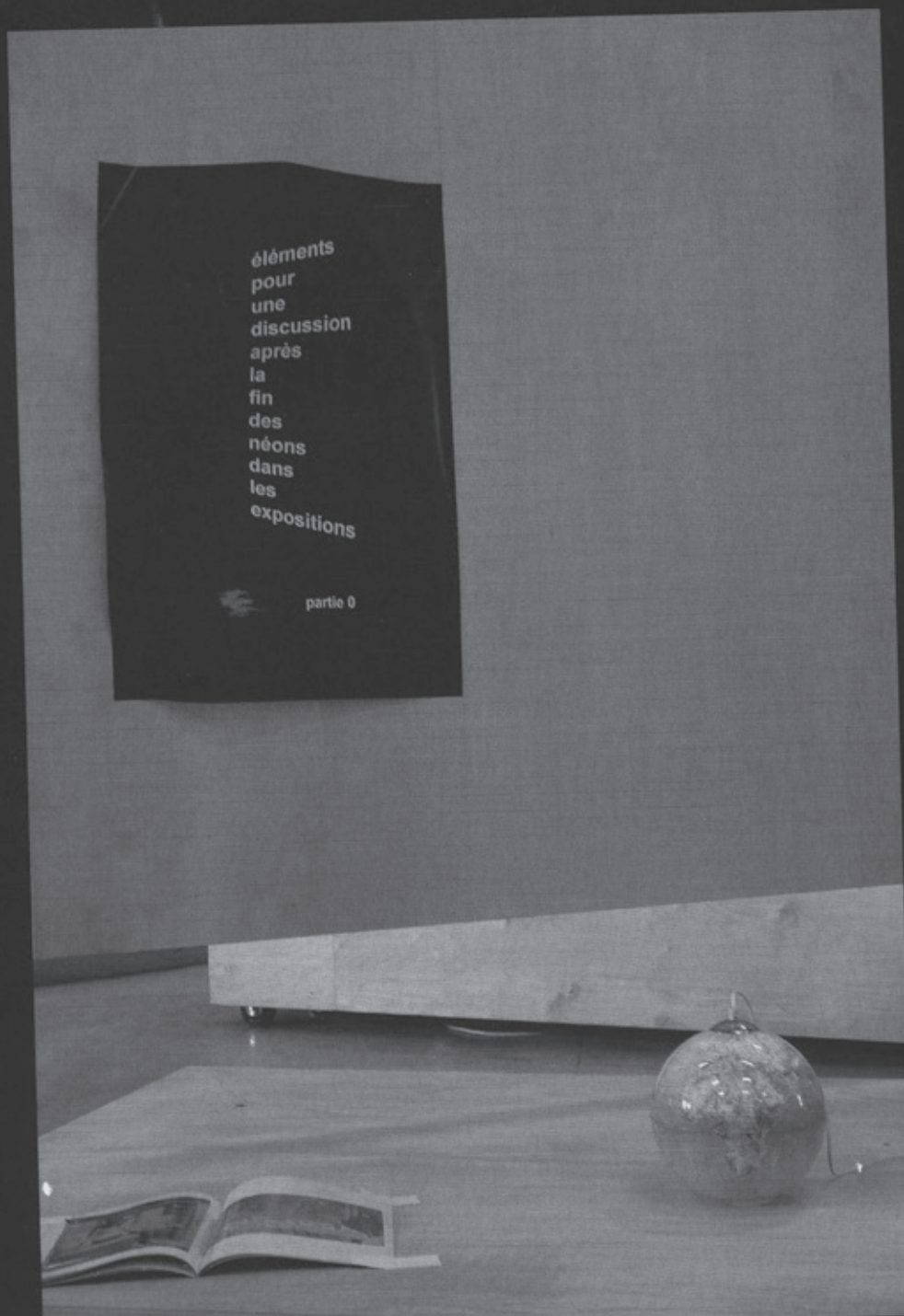


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The Repetition

BENOÎT MAIRE IN CONVERSATION WITH VANESSA DESCLAUX

Benoît Maire is an inhabitant of Paris, where he has become known for art works that develop in collaboration with other artists, philosophers and various fictional characters. His work requires the viewer to spend time inhabiting, in both a physical and mental sense, the disarticulated aesthetic system that he has elaborated. Rather than obsessively looking for an understanding of his philosophical references, Maire's practice demands of the viewer a personal response to the poetics of space, whether this space be the page of a book, the duration of a lecture, an exhibition or display of common objects. Maire's oeuvre ultimately relies on an intuitive and affective process of creation, into which knowledge and cultural references chaotically feed.



Benoît Maire, *Éléments pour une discussion après la fin des néons dans les expositions*, posters, displays, objects, discussions documentées en vidéo, vue d'installation au Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2006.

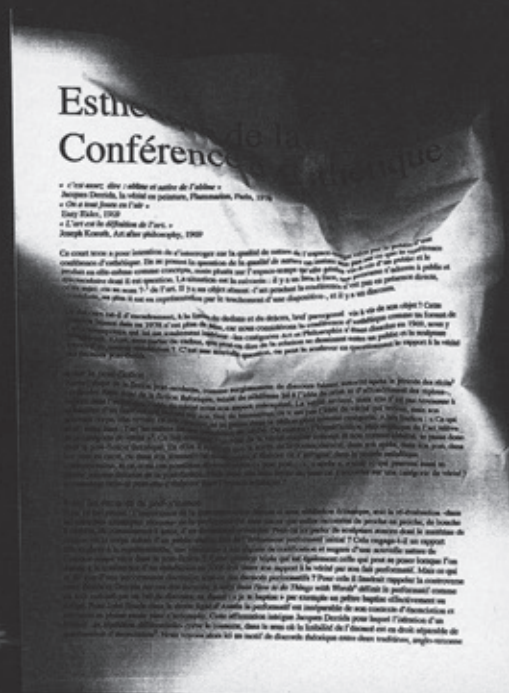
Vanessa Desclaux: Your recent exhibition at Hollybush Gardens, in London, is titled 'The Repetition': it is an idea that is not new in your work, we could even say that this notion is regularly repeated through concepts, fictional or historic characters, or forms that seem to constitute an 'index' and define your visual language. What I designate here as 'language' refers not only to writing but also to speech (as performed language) and more generally to work that involved objects, photographs, videos and so on. Your writing recalls deconstruction in philosophy as it makes its way out of the Structuralist logic of language, acknowledging the excess of signification within language, its lack of logic. I would even describe it as romantic, maybe 'dandy-esque', as it is performative language that produces images and builds a world of chaotic temporality. Could you tell me how your writing links to your visual work? Do you consider these different forms to be different languages or are they different manifestations of the same idea?

Benoît Maire: My general idea is related to aesthetics in the sense of 'aesthetic theory'. It is easy to understand when I do a lecture, and more difficult when I make a painting, but whatever I show, it is always about trying to construct an aesthetic, or an 'aesthetic system'. Yet an aesthetic system is necessarily pierced by unthinkable objects, therefore (if I use a note that I attribute to the conceptual character of Sébastien Planchard) "[i]n aesthetic writings we can often show an image instead of what is in question. An image representing the question." By this I mean that an image is sometimes more relevant than a sentence to pose a problem. Also it seems that I develop a sort of *phoné sunkechymène*, as the ancients say, a confused voice, in which the *arthros*, precisely the articulation, is missing. There is a lack of articulation, which is the inner logic of the different elements of my work: writings, videos, paintings or performances. The only means of articulation left is the repetition (or iteration in the case of the performative), but it is not really an articulation, only an insistence. The different pieces are therefore very often repetitions of the same issues that link to the main question: what is left of a history after the end of history (including its sentimental occurrence)?

VD: When visiting 'The Repetition', one could see the eye of a dog placed quite high up on the entrance wall; a photograph of a sunset in the desert with a sign in the foreground indicating the 'Twilight of the Copyists'; rain, as tears, picked up in a container that runs on the wooden floor; a crumpled poster that announces an event: *Elements for a Discussion After the End of Neons in Exhibitions*; an interview with Arthur Danto that we listen to while watching a flat screen without image. Can you briefly discuss these elements? Are they autonomous or, on the contrary, dependent on the exhibition space?

BM: I would like to do the same exhibition again. It would be possible because of the title of the show. In two years time you could see the same exhibition in the same gallery that would again be called 'The Repetition'. It may become understandable because there would have been a precedent, the frame of reference of the exhibition will be the exhibition. There won't be anything to look for outside of it.

VD: In this same exhibition, you have also installed a large sculpture, an angle in Plexiglass realised at a human scale, covered quite hastily with a surface that despite its mirror effect, maintains the transparency of the material. This seems to be quite



Benoît Maire, *Esthétique de la conférence d'esthétique*, texte distribué initialement lors d'un colloque international d'esthétique à LSE, Londres, feuille A4, recto verso, édition illimitée, 2006.

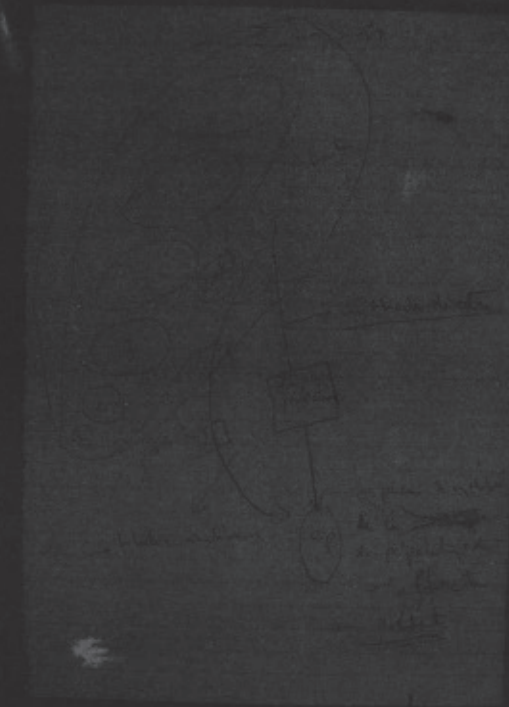
a traditional sculpture in terms of its physical construction. What does this object represent in the larger field of your practice?

BM: It is a corner without object, I believed it was really nothing in itself, however when I met Anatole Atlas (this is the pseudonym of a young Situationist who interrupted Jacques Lacan during his conference in Leuven in 1972) one week after the exhibition, to discuss with him a workshop which I am putting together, he told me that he wanted to make a lecture, the title of which would be *The Double Crossing of the Mirror*. That is how I could provisionally rename this sculpture *Corner Without Object (for Anatole Atlas)*. The sculpture found its raison d'être one week after the opening of the show, but I had an intuition.

VD: At first your work can seem very impenetrable. However, in opposition to Conceptual Art or Minimalism, your practice aims at exploring the affects, the question of an emotional relationship to forms, and the moment when any rational construction of thought slips into the irrational. Is there a contradiction here - an unresolved tension between form and content?

BM: I quite like the affect of incomprehension. But obviously it can upset people. For me, it is common practice.

VD: Writing - through different forms such as the conference, the interview but also the short story or the essay - is always very present in your work - although you present these texts alongside more traditional visual elements such as posters,



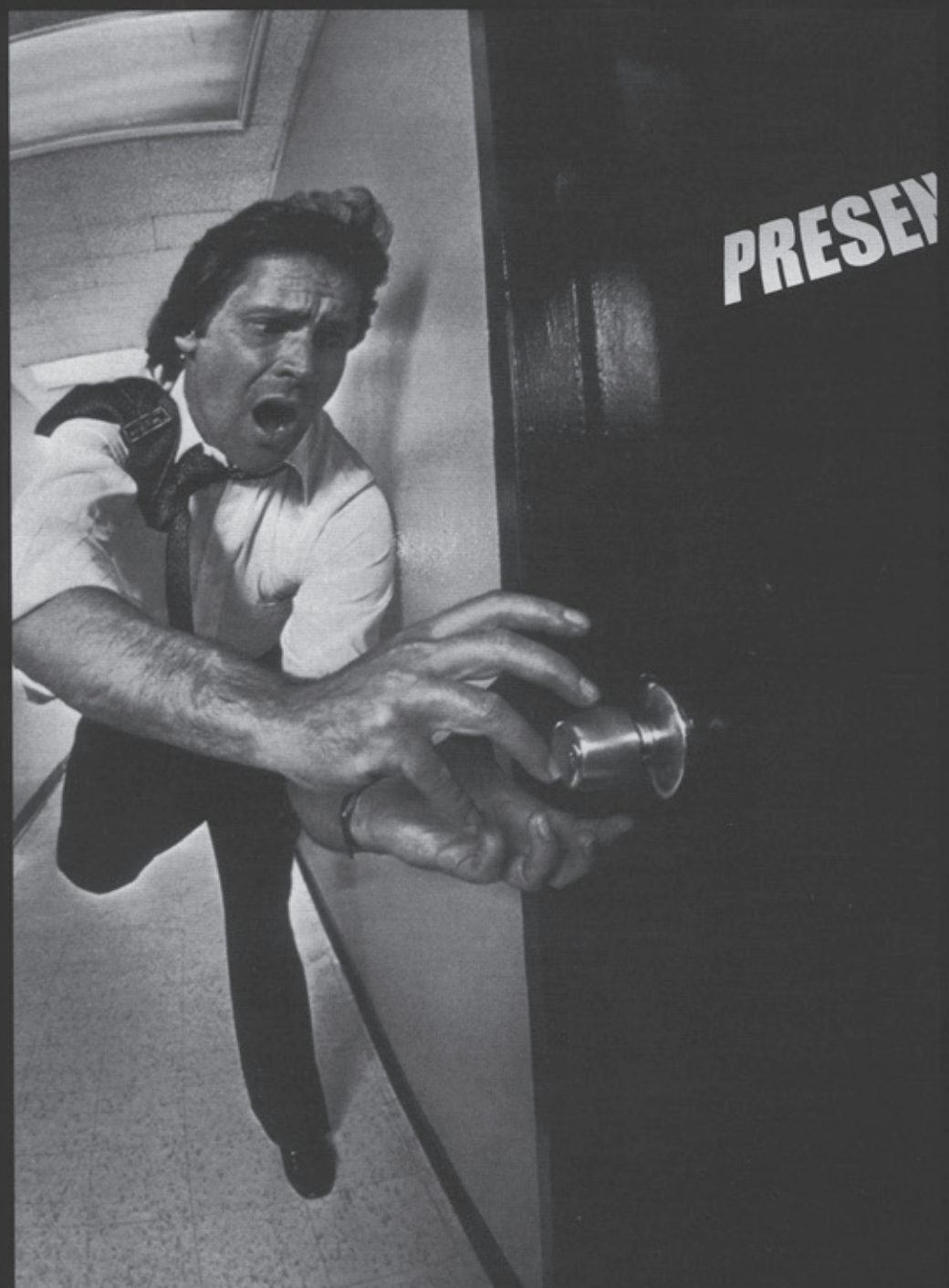
Benoît Maire, *Schéma n°3* (issu de la performance *Meeting Sébastien Planchard*), dessin à l'encre de chine sur papier, photocopie 30 par 42 cm, 2007

videos, photography or installations. Can you account for this particular aspect of your practice?

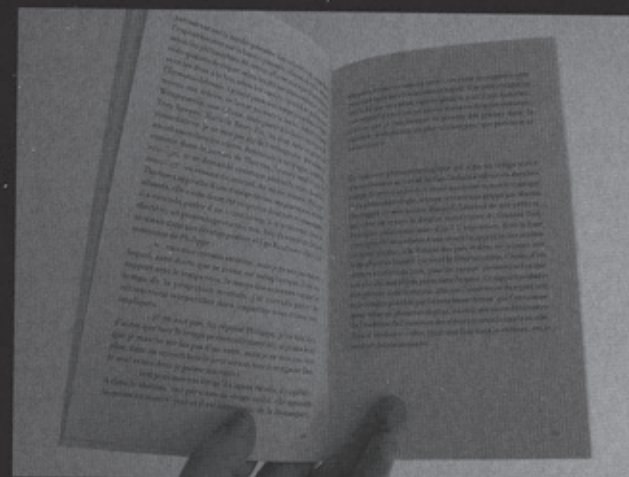
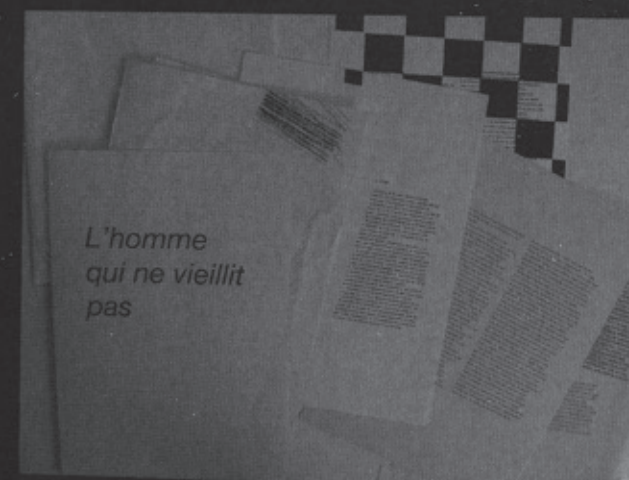
BM: It would take a long time to explain, but it relies on the fact that rather than being obsessed by the idea of œuvre or work, I prefer the status of the document. I like making documents even if these take the form of a painting or a sculpture. An artistic object does not have a function: the end for which it is conceived is precisely without an end. It is therefore the document of a pursuit, which although directed cannot be finalised. It is not an object, only a document bound to an impossible object. I gave a lecture in 2003 that deals with what I call *The Impossible Object*.

VD: Your work simultaneously inhabits different moments of art history and borrows references from other fields of art and science such as cinema, literature, philosophy or even the applied sciences; quoting certain forms and reinterpreting the work of others. I am thinking, in particular, of the forest of Paolo Uccello, the black monochrome in *la Coulure Constance Mayer*, the music of Nietzsche, or the monolith in this new exhibition. These references appear more as traces or memories than appropriations. What roles do these ghost-like elements play in your work?

BM: We are dealing here with the question of inhabitation. I am going to take an example: a series of black monochromes made in 16/9 format with glossy glycerol paint in an exhibition titled 'du gâteau, la coulure Constance Mayer' indexes different things and proposes a few ideas. Firstly, on the invitation card for the exhibition of paintings, I say that "Constance Mayer, the second wife of Pierre Paul Prud'hon slit her throat



Benoît Marie, *Lacune*, Installation view at Galerie Cortex Athlético, Bordeaux, 2006.



Top: Benoit Maire, *Le matin*, détail, 2006.
Medium: Benoit Maire, *New Chaotic Idealism, a conference for a dead man*, ICA London, 2005
Bottom: Benoit Maire, *«Schéma n°3 (issu de la performance Meeting Sébastien Planchard)»*, 2007

but only fragments of the state of a thought whose status is ambiguous. The press release could have been autonomous from the exhibition. It was a link within the signifying chain, without being a work in itself. It is true that we could have considered each work as a signifier, and that there was an attempt to phrase something with all those signifiers, but the problem of articulation (*arthros*) always remains, preventing us from finding a distinct enunciation. It is in that sense that my work is not conceptual, because it does not express itself clearly. I wrote down this quote from Mehdi Bejjaj Kacem: "The affect is clear, but never distinct, while the truth is distinct but never clear". It would be interesting to try and understand conceptual art with this axiom in mind: is it a clear or distinct art? In a recent work, I try to exclude tautology. This work of exclusions is a way to work with the history of conceptual art but not to work in the form of a 'return to'; rather with the view to forget it. It is the meaning of repetition in my exhibition of the same title: trying to see what happens when we try to forget conceptual art and when it comes back as the tune of a song that we cannot do without.

It is worth adding that I have answered your questions while listening on a loop to the song *Tears for Dolly* by Ted Curson. This song is from 1946 and was used as the soundtrack of Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *Theorem* (1968), then also of Vincent Gallo's *The Brown Bunny* (2003). It is obvious that I would have answered differently if I had listened to another or more songs, but I like to repeat the same one for a long time.

1. 'The Repetition', 24 March – 29 April 2007, Hollybush Gardens, London
2. 'What is Consciousness?' by Benoit Maire, part of the ongoing project *Strategic Questions* curated by Gavin Wade, soon to be published by Revolver.