

"If we try to adopt a more realistic approach to the absolute nothingness of space, we become like those people floating in sensory deprivation chambers, who are disturbed when the only perceptible external reality enters our own minds" J.G. Ballard, 1974

"Take a photo, it will last longer!" John Waters, 1999

A Trip to Nowhere

Alexis Vaillant

In 1999, I looked for Barbara Visser everywhere. Having obtained her telephone number, I left several messages on her answer phone. At that time, we were preparing a workshop with young artists, devoted to television. Five years earlier, she had spent some time in Lithuania, where she appeared in a soap, as the artist Barbora Visser, but this was a vague rumour. We wanted her to come to San Sebastian to talk about her time on the small screen. She never replied to us. Without a doubt she did not exist at that time. We met two years later on the Côte d'Azur in a white convertible and quickly turned the conversation to other matters. In the space of two years, she had become a myth, for which I never would have an explanation. Like an unidentified work, access to this story was not forthcoming. It took a further five years to obtain an "explanation" from its author. Here it is:

"Barbora is a character that originates in a moment of despair. The demand to make a work in a country (Lithuania) in circumstances and in a culture that is virtually impossible to understand by a foreign artist, made me look for a solution that was close to my own world (fiction) and close to my own character (Barbara). The idea to propose to play myself and have the dramatic story synchronized with the actual situation - a Dutch artist in Vilnius to make a work - was in fact a solution to a problem. Barbara had a lot of trouble to be herself though; the cast of Lithuanian stars were not her natural environment, and the question 'how does one play oneself' seems an easy one to answer, but in fact led to an existential crisis. One of the intentions was to blend in with the exotic environment yet confirming the position of the outsider. Another interest was to be an uninvited guest in 80% of the homes in Lithuania who were watching the popular show. The writers of the episode felt it necessary to give Barbora an interpersonal reason to be there (a romance with a doctor), whereas I felt she could have a more marginal existence, someone who was just passing by... One of the most interesting outcomes is that it turned out to be the work seen by the most people (a TV audience) outside of art, and by the fewest inside of art. This made it a piece of conceptual art, since it was not the work itself but rather the idea of the work that people talked about. The tangible result is a photograph on the December page of the 1996 calendar."¹

And I understood why I had the feeling of going nowhere, precisely because I wanted to know. This ghost of a thread, which became an intrigue and then a quest, is, as Piero Manzoni once said, the proof that "there is no art without myth". Thus initiating an ambiguous discourse situated nowhere between truth and lies, this quest represents an open source to our projections and (mis)understandings. An open source with no solution. A jumble, a hybridisation, just like in any important experiment.

From 'déjà vu' to never seen

Yoko is visibly bored in her room at the Amsterdam Hilton. The room is ghostly. On the windows are slogans/memories: 'Hair Peace' and 'Bed Peace'. John is not there – he's dead of course. It's 1993 and Yoko still looks very young behind her enormous sunglasses. Is it Yoko, her picture, a look-alike, a doll? No further explanation. Between dream and hidden drama, the parameters of this situation – which could equally have been captured by a photographer or a camera with a self-timer – grate more than purr since the re-enactment is lethargic. The déjà vu is completely twisted.

When you enter *Ars Futura* in Zurich in 1994 to see a photograph that leads you to understand that the very place where the photo is pinned up, tags for a 'Pollock street' had been made and then deleted, a video of a frenetic dance of love with the walls had been recorded without an audience and without the gallery director being concerned about it, you asked yourself what period you are in: are you too early or too late, has the exhibition gone wrong, been moved or cancelled? In other words, are we capable, today, of forgetting the chronology of events when we visit an exhibition, looking at a work of art or coming across a story that already exists?

A Day in Holland/Holland in a Day is a series that sets tourist clichés and imagery back to back. A couple made up as Japanese tourists take a tour of Holland in a day (a full program in itself), have themselves photographed in their best clothes (total Burberry-look) in front of the country's best known 'sights'. The 'country' in question is Huis Ten Bosch Stad, a theme-park in Japan in which certain urban Dutch landscapes have been meticulously recreated. The tourists blend in with the decor or is it the decor that absorbs them? This combination demonstrates that it's not only all the backgrounds that are interchangeable in the world of the image but also that they themselves interchange, i.e. that the tourist (non)experience offered by Holland and Huis Ten Bosch Stad are identical. The change of scene sold by the "procurers of different experiences"² now has a tourist clone.

Have you ever assessed, when faced with the photo of the famous 'savaged' chair, to what point the image has made it into an 'untouchable'? **Detitled** (2000), literally a series of those with no name, but also those who are destitute and discredited, has become its benchmark. Famous pieces of furniture are photographed in show-house type environments with stag horn ferns, cosy 50's veneer and calfskin rugs; weightless on a white floor in front of a white curtain; in a gallery type atmosphere or that of a workshop with a red brick floor or a bare grey floor, for their part recreating design type shots. These 'unbreakables' fossilized by their images are not unbreakable any more. This proves that they live, age and suffer terrible injuries. It doesn't really matter whether these are caused by a Kalashnikov or Photoshop, whether they are laid bare, have lost their feet or bottoms, whether they are 'leaning' against a wall (like a ballet dancer at the bar); these objects have been photographed in a previously unseen condition. An operation that removes them from the perfect image that had neutralised them, giving them a future anti-life – and all it took was for one Eames to appear broken in two with a slashed footrest, for all Eames to have this in them: their dark side. The fact that this is a series, leads us to believe that these 'uncanny and fetish style' monsters have willingly participated in the casting of their symbolic desecration, a type of occult rite of passage. And, as if to accelerate

the establishment of their 'new image' and to increase its strangeness, their circulation is guaranteed on post cards. This deviant imagery touches the heart of the perfect darkness in which these cult design objects have been hidden. These objects themselves have a soul. Besides BV says that she "is searching to promote a place of confusion... (knowing that it is) more difficult to produce an image that resists interpretation than a shocking or beautiful image"³. This place of confusion is an area of instability, which destabilises the fossilized state in which all objects that have achieved the status of an image find themselves. We need to understand the extent of this in this time of generalised formats, in precisely the same era in which Madonna continually changes her image in order to continue to exist. Examining BV's body of work from this angle, is to measure or to begin to measure, its political impact. If certain objects or situations may have a soul, it can be only materialist, corroded and collapsed. Insofar as it inverts the aura, we could say that the feeling is more science fiction than cosmetic. Logical, as "we are after. After modernism, post-modernism, after post post-modernism. After all neo-movements. In what you described as the realm of the B-series".⁴

Animism & Science Fiction

Every age attempts to construct the past in its own image, either as an ideal, of which the present, in its decline, retains only a few traces (the idea of a golden age), or as a childhood state of blissful innocence on which, little by little, is built the impressive edifice of modernity (the idea of evolution). It appears that the positivist age, which has characterised the recent past - until 1989 for historians and until the year 2000 for advertisers - favoured the notion of evolution. No doubt because evolution always aims to free itself a little more of the illusions and beliefs of the Middle Ages - a dark period, unsettled by magic, uncertainty, animism, the occult and a lack of clarity. From a rationalist point of view, animism represents a derailment. This doctrine, which philosophers adopted from Aristotle, states that the soul is the principle of organic life and thought. It is also a creed or religion that believes that nature is governed by souls or spirits similar to human will. In short, objects have a soul, can live their lives and therefore figure in ours. Works of art are not exempt from this rule, appearing like 'special effects' in a world seen and experienced as an infinite fixed image. This appearance is animist in nature, and everyone is free to accord its importance or not. Since rationalism has historically taken the lead, any animist interpretation operates on a second level. We play at having a life with objects or ideas. However, today, the formats are so fixed that this type of logic upsets their stability. As a result there are moments when things are turned upside down, which is what the best works of art do. In this, they are completely contemporary. A work of art (far from being just an image) is, by definition, available. It is exposed to the most diverse reactions, comments, readings, desires, fantasies, (mis)understandings, until it vanishes, re-emerges, etc. As soon as he has created a work, Maurizio Cattelan says that it no longer belongs to him because he cannot control it. He believes that "a work needs to fight its own battles and define itself" in order to exist. Nevertheless, placing a visual image, so not just an advert or an ego trip, into circulation, in a world that is built on symbols and appearance; a world that is just as artificial and fake as that in *Total Recall*; a world in which "experience passes for a totally created experience, adopting artifice as a constituent dimension of truth"⁵, always produces a special effect. In 2000, a black Eames-chair acquired a special soul. The famous chair

was photographed broken in two. By bringing this new image into circulation, the piece of furniture is lifted out of the design iconography in which it had been neutralised. The new identity leaves its mark on the old one which persists, thereby giving it a materialist soul. This kind of reversal mechanism allows us to believe that any alternative that is individually intelligible to the prevailing representation-regimes, supported by the alliance of the media, the economy and social concerns, will now be effective once it has been slotted into a history that turns it upside down, like a 'special effect'.⁶

Maison Grégoire is a private residence in Brussels. In *Maison Grégoire 118%* we move on to the world of image fabrication. The photographic scene is as follows: a woman is posing in a doorway that opens on to a terrace. The following photo shows a man advancing down a corridor inside the house (near the office) and coming across the woman posing in another doorway. He looks enormous and she looks tiny. The scenario turns into a slightly bizarre demonstration: once sitting in a Barcelona chair designed by Mies Van der Rohe, he appears really small. Here, the true-false dialectic typical of image-trickery (from retouching to virtualisation) poses another question: will we adapt our visual codes to future technology or will we continue to move from one scale to another in order to configure the extent of our personal and collective histories?

Scripted spaces

Blurring the boundary between subject and object demonstrates that "men cannot find the truth, they create it like they create their history, and it repays them well"⁷. When in 1994, a black Citroën crosses the woods at full speed to the sound of the title music of *Black Beauty* - a TV series which made every child cry in the 1970s - this type of trickery is the matter. The layouts, framing and duration are respected, but an XM replaces the 'black prince'. The soundtrack for this series awakens the unconscious fan that slumbers in all of us. The déjà vu effect becomes more refined, it becomes a 'psychological déjà vu', which turns out to be a "first"⁸, because the image is totally new. This revival therefore has the distinctive feature of also derailing the memory that we had of the subject, at the very moment when it resurfaces in our lives by means of the music. And the fact that the horse has become a car literally shows that this horse is going nowhere and we with it. We experience the exercise of re-remembering, imposed on us by XM, as a performance. A psychological performance asking whether, now that we know that channel hopping is to keep in our memories and that to remember is to forget, going nowhere is reassuring to us - or not.

2050, final date of the future. All media flip out. Yet, none of them recognise that when you "take a photo, you are never taking a picture of the present but of the future"⁹. The photographic tableaux and videos by BV disturb the certainties generated by the world of the image. Their irony is devastating. In *Philippa*, three women, as if speeded-up, move from one room to another in the former residence of Philippa Van Loon, while calling her name. The echo of their call recalls the place where she once lived, which summons up her spirit. As we float through the cloud of her spirit, it is not her past we are dealing with but her future, a future which "is a better key to the present than the past" as Ballard wrote in 1971; an animist future in which, "what you see depends on what you are looking for" (BV)¹⁰.

¹ E-mail correspondence with the artist, June 2006.

² Victor Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme, pour une esthétique du divers*, Paris, le livre de poche, 1999. (*Essay on exoticism, in favour of a diverse aesthetic*)

³ in: Maxime Matray, "La position du touriste couché", in: *Le Monde appartient à ceux qui se lèvent tôt*, Nice, Villa Arson, 2002. (*The position of the sleeping tourist" in The world belongs to early risers*)

⁴ in: "Che fare?", a discussion between John Armleder, Cristina Farwood and Parker Williams, *Never Say Never*, Zurich, Offizin, 1996.

⁵ Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, *Pop philosophie*, interviews with Philippe Nacif, Paris, Denoël, 2005, p. 396.

⁶ In *The Vatican to Vegas, A History of Special Effects*, New York & London, The new Press, 2004, Norman Klein analyses the seduction of special effects and establishes a parallel between our history and the development of special effects, from Baroque architecture to the casinos of Las Vegas. In 'scripted' spaces that we must physically cross, our spirit lives through an "exercise of fantasy", being both the "site and process of imagination". "By decoding scripted space, we learn how power was brokered between the classes in the form of a special effect."(p. 11)

⁷ Paul Veyne, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes? Essai sur l'imagination constituante*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1983. (*Did the Greeks believe their own myths? An essay on the constituent imagination*)

⁸ Paolo Virno, *Miracle, Virtuosit  et "d j  vu"*,  ditions de l' clat, 1996, p. 14. (*Miracle, Virtuosity and "d j  vu"*)

⁹ William Burroughs, "Old photographer", *The Burroughs File*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1984, p. 122.

¹⁰ E-mail correspondence with the artist, June 2006.