

Start looking

A conversation between Alexandre Lavet
and Yasmijn Jarram

YJ: Where does your fascination with emptiness originate from?

AL: I do not really know. As a teenager, I used to explore abandoned places in my hometown. In the third year of art school I had to present works for my mid-year exam. Back then, I did not have much time to work in school for different reasons. I decided to present some blank ready-made objects related to art spaces as possibilities for art works. It was titled 'Demain, peut-être' ('Tomorrow, maybe'). There were editions with blank pages, some white Canson sheets pinned to the wall, a prepared Canvas on a chassis and some blank frames. It became clear to me that I was very interested in creating works that refer to concepts like emptiness, the blank and the void. I started to explore specificities of exhibition spaces and 'white cube' ideology, often focusing more on these kinds of questions than on the art works themselves.

One of your earlier works is titled 'The blank page doesn't exist', which seems meaningful in relation to your practice. Could you elaborate?

In French, 'la page blanche' is a syndrome of lacking inspiration. To me, this does not exist. Even in front of a white sheet, without having any ideas, there is still something to find or just to think about the sheet itself. The work with this title is an installation consisting of different types of sculpture, referring to the exhibition space. There were pedestals, frames with glass, tacks on the wall, staples on blank folded paper sheets, a sculpture of an empty space with neons, plinths and a frame leaning against a wall. I wanted them to represent themselves, not serving the functions they are used to. That is why I decided to create these sculptures myself, very precisely and well-shaped. With this title, I insisted on the idea that anything, even without an actual 'work' being present, can be a work of art.

Have you always worked from this rather conceptual approach?

As a teenager, I was more into figuration, letters, logotypes and portrait photography. I think my work started to develop during my second or third year in school. I became interested in non-decorative art works that demand some effort of the viewer. I was searching for new ways to exhibit or make art, rather than creating traditional

sculptures, drawings, paintings and exhibitions. That year, I saw the exhibition 'Voids, a retrospective' in Centre Pompidou in Paris. Although I did not like everything about it, its ideas, feelings and the catalogue were brilliant. Roman Ondák's garden piece in the 2009 Venice Biennale also made a big impression. I did not even realize it was an art work until I was on my way back. That was a very powerful experience to me. Two years later, Maurizio Cattelan took all those pigeons into the exhibition space. It was so uncommon to me, and also dealt with different ways of looking at art and space, as well as forcing visitors to think about these issues.

What is the connection between image and language in your practice? The title seems to be an important part of the work.

I love to play with titles, which can really provide a point of view for the art works. They can add some poetry or feeling, they can contain notions of time or an evocation of another discipline. This last example is present in my series 'Actes', which can be linked to theatre or performance. This is something very important to me, also because I am playing with banal and commonplace objects. Somehow, I feel some kind of empathy or affinity for these forms, so I am trying to share this by giving them a title in that sense. The work contains these ideas, but cannot express them unless I give it a voice.

Many of these titles, such as 'Les oubliés' and 'Souvenir', seem to refer to memory and temporality. Are these important themes for you?

Yes, I am very interested in memory and time. These are two aspects of life that are very important to me. Everything you do, stems from a unique body which is always linked to a moment in life. I want to share these moments in my work. 'Les oubliés' ('The forgotten') consists solely of two graphite sculptures of nails on the floor: one straight, one bended. To me, this everyday image can be beautiful with a pinch of sadness. I want people to view them the way I can, with beauty, love or pity. The title transforms the nails into a couple with some humanity in a tragedy, just like many things that surround us. 'Souvenir' are sculptures of a power socket and light switch from my room in Brussels. I decided to consider them as pieces that could be hid in exhibition spaces. This way, the shape of these objects and the souvenir of moments I share in this space and in my life, are kept as sculptures. I also like to work with the notion of time, because of the sense of history it can provide. For this show, the gallerists and I will

keep the exhibition flyer in our pockets during the exhibition period, resulting in the flyer showing marks of the time spent with its host. There are also paintings that refer to the previous exhibition by Wieske Wester.

It is also a bit absurd. Is humour a relevant aspect of your work? Humour can be found in my works, it is totally up to you which emotion to experience. You can laugh, smile, feel pity or indifference. I do not search for humour while conceiving something, but it is true that I play with the distortion of common notions, which makes it playful or funny. I have faith in the polysemy of art works. Your personal response depends on your past, on everything you have experienced before by reading, working, et cetera.

The exhibition title reminds me of Magritte's 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe'. What does it mean?

It was a sentence I wrote in my phone in 2013. I cannot remember when exactly, but it refers to a specific sensation I experienced that day of my life. It emanates the idea that something familiar can be different, depending on the energy or weather or space surrounding you. By modifying something, a common object can turn into a sensitive piece and spark thoughts, as long as you pay enough attention to it. Magritte could be a good comparison. It also relates to Duchamp's notion of the 'infra-mince' ('ultra-thin'), for example in the connection between his breath and the smell of cigar: 'When tobacco smoke also smells of the mouth that exhales it, the two odours are wedded by infra-mince.' Funnily, the title also refers to the fact that I just quit smoking, so it is actually a good way to speak about memory and the past.

For some of your works, you collected rubbish from the space or put a scribbled piece of paper on the floor. Can these gestures be seen as a reflection on value?

Yes, definitely. My work is not far from the ideas of Arte Povera. This is not a conscious choice, but something I am forced to. It is also part of a 'work economy' I developed throughout the years: it does not require a lot of money, it is easy to bring the works into an exhibition, there is no dedicated space needed to work on them. I like to work with simple materials that can be found anywhere. So yes, in that sense it does refer to the value and the economy of art. But the principal idea

behind these pieces is that you can just think it is rubbish. Once you pay attention to it, you will notice there is much more than simply forgotten things in the space. When you realise the paper on the floor is a drawing, it allows you to reconsider your vision or prejudices. Also, I like the idea of presenting drawings in that unexpected and unfamiliar way.

Is there a personal dimension to your work?

Sure, there is a very personal dimension. I visited many exhibitions and gradually I became more focused on little things composing the space, such as nails, unfilled holes, dust bunnies in a corner, neons with different temperature colours, stains, paint drops, receipts on the floor; rather than the art works on the walls. It is a personal vision that I am trying to share and celebrate. Sometimes, my drawings consist of the receipt of what I have eaten that day. For my new paintings on aluminium, I used Jupiler beer cans because of their link to my personal life in Brussels. Beer cans are participants in many moments of happiness and friendship, but at the same time they are often overlooked. We never remember those cans, although they are the centre of gravity, the focal point in which we were reunited. The sculptures I made, in collaboration with textile designer Marine Peyraud, can be linked to my childhood. When my mother was painting, there were always paint stained rags lying around.

What kind of experience do you want to evoke for visitors?

When you enter the space, it looks empty. However, you will quickly realise something is there. I want people to be attentive to their environment by showing them certain specificities of an art space. Sometimes you will find works, sometimes you will not. This idea of chance really interests me. First, because I personally prefer to walk into an exhibition space and be surprised. Secondly, because I like how one person will see works that another person missed, which creates a personal experience for everyone. It relates to what Carl Andre said about his flat sculptures: 'You can be in the middle of a sculpture and not see it at all, which is perfectly all right. I do not like works of art which are terribly conspicuous. I like works of art which are invisible if you are not looking for them.' I prefer to think of my works as a way to start looking, rather than something you really have to search for.

Yasmijn Jarram is an independent curator and art critic