

From Peep-show to Picture-sampling

by Julien Carbone

The work of Michel Scarpa originates at the heart of a personal paradigm with very marked components such as sex, games and toys or the cinema, all presented with the cynicism specific to the artist's personality. All these themes can be found in the various phases of his creations ; in the first collages composed of images from Playboy magazines or comic strips, in the works comprised of compressed paper bricks, sometimes of monumental size, and in the oversized boxes of cubes. Objects representing characters or symbols which form part of our collective unconscious also bear the deep imprint of this atmosphere which characterizes the work of Michel Scarpa.

As if he were constantly reinventing the rules of his creative game, confronting his own mind-set, confronting himself, he now proposes a new way of presenting his paradigm anchored in the « pornography of the image ». I mean by this, an image which offers itself as a treat for the eyes in the very cynical game of « peeping through the key-hole ». For, as Paul Ardenne reminds us : « *An image of erotic art certainly has many points in common with the peep-show, the apotheosis of strip-tease. In both the latter and the former, one displays what is not ordinarily shown. Even better, it is willingly exhibited to the point of excess, in a hyperbolic register. The peep-show does not offer to my eyes the naked body of a man or woman. Much more than that, it presents to my paralyzed body another body offered like a gift, open and vibrant in all its parts, welcoming and waiting to be taken.* »¹

It is indeed a pornographic image which forms the very basis for these new works. A backcloth composed of a succession of stills, constituting the complete story-line whose end we inevitably know. In this deconstruction of the support provided by film, in which the image is created in multiples of 24, it is reduced to its « story-board » version of one image per scene : the translucent immateriality of the film is preserved thanks to its linear retranscription on a perspex support. The work's physical and metaphorical limits are then subjected to interrogation. Nowadays, a work of art no longer has any pre-defined shape or limits. It permanently reinvents itself, in the intermediary arts, combining several disciplines ; music confronts and allies itself with the plastic arts ; the cinematographic image leaves the darkness of the movie theater for the « white cube » of museums or art-galleries.

The artwork is gradually dissolving to become solely the essence of art : dematerialised, it slips from one environment to another. Has the work of art perhaps gained in fluidity what it has lost in terms of plasticity ?

The material aspect of the artwork, what defines it physically, is comprised of its edges, its surface, its lines, its sheet of paper, its magnetic tape or reel of film. And when we talk about losing or effacing the boundaries which frame the artwork, we're talking about art moving between what is materiel and immaterial. The artist now disposes of a considerable panoply of techniques, some very ancient, which constitute an immense reservoir constantly delved into by artists. The most recent techniques of artistic production such as video, synthesized images, holograms, interactive offerings etc., have had a significant impact, just as technologies have always had an effect on the development of the various art-forms while making deep changes in the societies in which they are deployed. In today's technological context, we can observe certain mutations which represent trends that are present in art.

¹ Ardenne Paul, *L'image corps, Figure de l'humain dans l'art de XXème siècle*, Paris, Editions du Regard, 2001, p.256.

In particular, the change in the artist's relationship to his materials : artworks are lighter, liberating themselves from materials such as wood, marble, stretchers and frames, which served as supports for the work itself, and tending towards a fluid, immaterial, weightless image, the disembodied image of the new media. This change in the artist's relationship with his materials particularly implies a modification of his relationship with time and space. This, in fact, is what is involved in the new works proposed by Michel Scarpa ; in using the computer as a tool, he decorticates by means of « snap-shotting » pornographic films made from the 1930's until the present day, only retaining the main theme of the sexual relationship between a man and woman. These backgrounds are then coupled with a stronger image covering the entirety of the work, proposing a new interpretation linked to our position in space with regard to the work itself. Recognized references such as Manet's « *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* » or the character in the « *Banania* » poster are engulfed in a pictorial reconstruction proposing a reassessment of these « icons ». Like a composer of electronic music might do, the artist recomposes a work which becomes in fact his own, by using a technique adopted in contemporary music, known as « sampling ».

This « sampling » of images, which restructures a new creation, happens to be a direct reflection of concepts created by new technologies, a product of the imagination for combinations, transparency and networking. Such representations bring us back to our unquenched desire for a synoptic vision of reality, calling on notions such as hybridation, ubiquity and compression of spaces and temporalities, leading our minds into a climactic maze.

Then in shattering contrast, the artist places us face-to-face with the portrait of a soldier who died on the battlefield, against a backcloth of physical ecstasy that he never perhaps experienced. In this constant play between distance and proximity, the subtleties of each work that arise from this treatment of the material carry an esthetic force of the most contemporary kind. By using a paradigm which is his alone (sex, games, characters from movies or the culture of images from art, magazines or history), this artist's creative sensitivity challenges emotions which emanate from the most basic instincts of our humanity.