

PATRICK JAVAULT

THE RULES OF HOSPITALITY

When, in heroic times of contemporary art, exhibiting on a large scale alternated between a warehouse or a palace, and by tackling architecture artists could question history, thereby deconstructing representations of economic, industrial or political power, we might say things were almost simple, albeit far from easy. This became more complex once these same artists were invited to exhibit in buildings constructed especially for that purpose, generally showing ignorance or voluntary omission about the best conditions to present works, whatever category they were slated for. Except for very rare exceptions, including both the dialogue an architect might have with the artists (Herzog & de Meuron come quickly to mind) or an architect's willingness to impose his/her vision around the relationship between building and works (bringing to mind Peter Zumthor), there exists a tendency to forget the building's functions in favor of a reinforced affirmation of the architectural gesture, as one usually says. Since the building will be discussed no matter what, it would be a mistake not to make itself heard and

continue to proclaim, “I am a monument”, after the famous drawing. Given large, neutral and open platforms or rooms with oblique walls where light refuses to enter, artists using primary or secondary circuits find themselves confronting a wide diversity of situations about finding answers to numerous challenges and difficulties, much more prominent than when museums of contemporary art didn’t exist. Here it’s not an issue of raising a complaint –that would be uncalled for and discourteous – but simply a reminder of the state of things shaping forms and directions taken by art.

Invited to design an exhibition in the open spaces of the Frac Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur, Eric Hattan accepted the invitation, moving forth in this brand new place like a scout. Neither architectural critic, nor non-architect, he wants to share with us his discoveries and add works produced in other contexts that he knows will resonate with the building, its form and design, with many surprises in store, including its emptiness and/or what’s lacking. It’s not so much a dialogue (a word, in any case nearly outdated) than an attempt at contact and a reflection on the manner exhibited art and inhabiting art converge. This exhibit expands across the building, including where we least expect it, at times even refraining from being an exhibition, in the form of an exploration, of a guided visit during which the artist would impart his astonishment and ideas surfacing en route.

What the artist has set in place within the Frac is a dual perspective around inhabiting and exhibiting, treating the degree one's self is revealed in lifestyles as well as how what, within the art of exhibiting, may be akin to a layout, transforming the neutral or foreign into a familiar world. In the open conception intended by the architect, neighbors of the inhabited building see a part of their lives reflected, moments in their days put in perspective by exhibits produced at the Frac. They themselves benefit from a partial view of said exhibitions, either voluntarily or involuntarily, they're invited to have a look. As a new occupant this season, the artist has chosen to consider the building's architecture as a simple protective envelope and a series of interior spaces to unveil his work. His installations on the walls resemble an encampment, plastic drapes chosen in place of partitions and a garage in sheet metal serving as a black box, the banal experience of a video projection relates memories of movie sessions with the family.

Inhabiting amounts to marking the building with presence, answering to the fractioning of spaces through a demonstration of physical and thematic ties and a voluntary scrambling of distinctions between works, accessories and objects of transition. The exhibition's design, or even better, its development melds with the building, allowing the artist to conceive the said exhibition in a series of stacked narratives. Strings pulled, curtains are drawn to orient our path, rein-

forcing our expectations and focusing our attention, shifting us from the status of exhibition goers (canalized, counted and whose reactions are evaluated in large establishments), to simple visitors (to whom all or almost everything is permitted).

Everything begins or should begin (therefore, it's necessary to feel the attractive pull of a closed curtain, which may seem a paradox) on the lower level where Eric Hattan chose to exhibit the space itself, doubling each prominent or structural element with an authentic replicate. Exhibiting the void has traditionally meant making a statement about a given situation, hoping to reveal a withheld framework to better underline its difference, a difference that the group of historical "Empties" in the exhibit bearing this title (1) ousted precisely by transforming contextual non-interventions into collection pieces. By adopting reduplication and a trompe-l'oeil effect, the artist then shows he has nothing to declare if not that he refuses to submit to a revival of the grand gesture of exhibited emptiness and the history this gesture drags along with it. A curtain of inner tubes seeming penetrable has no other justification than that of orienting the public and calling its attention, attention that then struggles to find its object. However, between these steps, this floor plan determined by the choice of segments, with these columns, ventilation grills and doors –all these elements shaking up a too common vision of a white cube put in art-

ists' hands— there is much to see. Everything appears nearly normal, with a few exceptions, for instance the fact that one of the double doors opens in the opposite direction and has been precisely left ajar, or again, a coat stuck under the base of one of the concrete columns, not to mention these containers submerged in overflowing water drops, attempting to sublimate water damage into flourishingly styled arrangement.

An unexpected encounter with a concrete column can be open to diverse interpretations or narrative outlines. Contrasting one with the other or rather, on the contrary, questioning the circumstances conjoining them, means choosing between sculpture or installation, and in one case or another, this combination shows, with humor tinged in violence, the relationship of body to building. This coat would do well to find its place in a non-existent cloakroom, while the columns do exist, and doubly. The unusual nature of the situation makes us dubious about the crushing load-bearing capacity of this column and said doubt can only then spread to the totality of architectural elements. With such a task of exploration at hand and guided by incredibility, the sound of Tarzan's intermittent cry doesn't seem exaggeratedly out of place. Following the building's logic the visitor is soon faced with the choice of having to descend or mount the stairs; Hattan plays around with the different levels of expectation in an exhibit and what's happening behind the scenes.

Something is going on here with all this sustaining, crushing, dripping, yelling.

As Tarzan's cry allows us to ascertain the sonorous signature of the exhibition space underground, a sad and mundane collection of shoes fills an unexplained void inside the Frac. These pairs of used, albeit stylish shoes are one of the artist's collections, a collection founded on the simple incapacity to throw out what's no longer useful. The shoes use this emptiness under the stairs, pointing to the ephemeral contribution the artist offers to the visitor's comfort in the form of a cloakroom situated nearby. So we can assume that the artist and visitors are on equal ground, and that if the former cannot relinquish his coat for three months under care of the Frac, he nonetheless chooses to consolidate our preoccupations with his own.

With shoes salvaged from annihilation, Eric Hattan has included several works to reconfigure and a few treasures to make his presence known in this place for three consecutive months at least. A clothes line, a collection of shower curtains, televisions, a garage from the workshop's courtyard, a mattress, a collection of exotic chairs, but also a herd's bells, that's it for a short inventory. These objects, often tied to past collections, sometimes tell and sometimes only fill practical and economic demands: separating spaces for a few handfuls of Canadian dollars (the curtains) or again, linked to

others for several euros (the clothes line). With these meager accessories one is allowed to slip away from the real towards the symbolic and imaginary. Hence, the clothes line uniting the exhibition below and above is equally the translation of a possible link between the Frac and the building situated behind, but may also become a liana, holding speakers whence Tarzan's cry bursts forth, leading us directly to the jungle. And what if this plurality of use and meaning was the mere translation of a rough start? At first, Eric Hattan did indeed use his imaginary reflection to offer neighbors the possibility of stringing wash between their balconies and the Frac's façade. For technical reasons, this hook up, true-false gesture of opening was not meant to be. So, there was no other way than having a respectful distance keep this call of exterior architecture at bay. And this Tarzan cry, one of anger and primordial strength in its Hollywood version, might be in the end but a pale imitation, an expression of great frustration, or at least, proof of the difficulty of being.

To this Tarzan, anonymous collective destined to be misunderstood, a series of livestock bells hung from a branch, itself attached on high, echoes in an aleatory and delicate mode. This phony ethnic object is the reminder of an intervention in the framework of an open air exhibit in Milton Keynes, in the countryside outside London. For this occasion the bells were suspended from a tree branch. Having discovered that English sheep didn't wear bells, Eric

Hattan came up with the idea of marrying the music of bells with bleating thanks to the wind. Swiss bells for English sheep, simple terms in themselves loaded with poetics, and that we'd like to believe could lead the breeders of a given place to open up their ears to their own herds, and follow them on an esthetic path. In any event, the bells have been brought to Marseille, giving us the occasion to meditate on the non-negligible cultural differences inside the European space.

Eyes focused upward, we discover a space of uncertain identity (a bit more than a corner, less than an exhibition surface); a mattress attached to the ceiling by wooden slates reminds us of heroic gestures in the manner of Arte Povera, at a time when artists had to struggle or defend themselves against institutions offering them an open door. The sculpture is made with a minimum and the presence of a mattress at this height is enough to suggest tension. It's an image from a dream because it's no more natural to see a mattress stuck to the ceiling than a coat slipped beneath a concrete column, though this is a bad dream since such a disposition informs us that this place must be draught-proofed, reinforced or simply protected from a menacing reality.

The narrative accompanying the exhibition also includes others weaving their way into the chairs of Beirut. There

is undeniably nothing banal about the fact that the latter features a Mediterranean crossing. This installation generated for a group exhibit in Beirut referred visitors there back to an image of their city. Chairs, of all sorts in all different states depict as much an image of the Lebanese capital as they compose a place to meet up with the Middle East. Originally they were used by craftsmen, merchants and the jobless, to sit at their doorsteps. Hattan convinced the chair owners to give them to him – and in so doing, one can imagine that the man from Basle had to be inspired with the art of negotiation we traditionally accredit to Middle Eastern people – to form a portrait of their city. Beyond the picturesque of customs, this collection of commercial instruments (in the true sense of the word) opens up a perspective at the crossroads of the esthetic and social. If Eric Hattan doesn't fit into the category of performers, those who find in the performing arts a model to take art still referred to as visual to a greater level, he nevertheless researches, via visual objects or arranged usage, a way to define a meeting point.

Rolls of concrete weighing down the feet of each of the chairs impart them with a sculptural character while suggesting a measure of protection, unless it's a matter of brutally marking the end of part of their object life. Chairs they remain, but embodying the consciousness of a double exile. No need to be an expert on Middle Eastern politics to know

that peace in Lebanon is in a precarious balance and that the way to inhabit the city differently through these seats emits particularly dazzling spark. Already part of the Frac's collection, this installation is in some ways the highlight of the exhibit, marker or crystallization of Eric Hattan's work and an anchoring point in the Mediterranean world. Discovering them at the tail end of the visit, how not to reflect back upon the columns at the bottom floor where the image of the body rubs shoulders with concrete, or a mattress testifies to a toppled world.

Whether used or otherwise, for reasons of conservation, their usage remains pure virtuality; these chairs force us to ponder our condition as spectators and reflect upon our desire to have art teach us the means to step out of art. Sitting on one of them, implies believing we can break free from this condition, but it's also forging a decision and the simplest gesture possible teeming with miles of meaning. Likewise to truly participate it's necessary not only to sit down but to engage in dialogue, imagine conversations deriving from this situation, or even dream up a possible dialogue with those who converse in front of their doors without imagining they artfully inhabit their towns, or again, that they parody different bodies of work (from craftsman to captain of industry), causing a little invention and improvisation to burst out with qualified and codified gesture. Otherwise how to substitute work with work without listening to what rings

behind the first word? (2) But what's reuniting these chairs, besides the artist's decision is a little bit of an opening and undoing common to those who exercise a trade and the idle or retired. By inventing cement prostheses Eric Hattan has added his touch of work to the ready-made, thereby avoiding the arrogant position of the project manager.

Having found anchorage in the Frac's locale, the chairs of Beyrouth is open to other transfers and combinations. See, generally, the artist's work adapts itself poorly to museum policies, or maybe it's those responsible for the collection who find themselves disarmed when confronted with these instable works, lacking protocol of presentation, and requiring their interpretation. When questioned about the chairs of Beyrouth, the artist replies that the total number of exhibited chairs is of little importance, that it mainly depends on the quantity of space available and that it's a free arrangement. Of course it would be preferable if visitors could use them, but if that goes against the rules defining the spirit of preventative conservation, we'd not go so far as to push the limits. Being a contemporary artist is also understanding how to choose contradictions that make us the least uncomfortable. In any case, inviting visitors to be seated (by a pictogram? a text? a sign from mediators?) is to be guilty of the least-excessive transgression, but disallowing it means rendering the work sacred, freezing it as image (among the numerous chairs spanning art over the last fifty years, those

from Beirut come closer to George Brecht's *Events* (3) than to sculpture by Franz West for example). Better then to renounce a query into the indisputable position and let the institution share in the responsibility. Isn't it time to convince oneself that exhibits are collective enterprises partly founded on negotiation and arrangement, encompassing the work of promotion and mediation?

For some time now a series of negative connotations has been associated with the word "retrospective", as if assembling work from different periods (and attempting to provoke themes and main lines from this conjuncture), meant an artist had to more or less play dead. Retrospectives, indeed, but if by chance one of them is successful, we applaud the artist on having resisted retrospective-ness or to have bypassed an eventual trap. In view of this pleasant, generally accepted idea, we could argue that a retrospective is also and above all, a means for an artist to have his/her work interpreted, and redoing or reviving older work also gives them a chance to demand disloyalty to a memory. Thus these works (almost) refrain from being simple oeuvres while proving they can still be useful. Eric Hattan's films capture tiny events, involuntary street performances or slices of non-bravery, which are then shown on old cathode-ray screens, thereby seemingly shedding light on a world where his installations might themselves play a role. The films are a breach in the real, scenes grasping the eye

and we see them as a passerby rather than a spectator. After having heartily insisted on the connection between the exhibition “Habiter l’inhabituel” and the building housing it, we must, at the risk of paradox, also acknowledge that Eric Hattan’s way to set up an exhibition consists of understanding how to forget where he is for a time and to refrain from playing the artist in an exaggerated manner. What’s most difficult in the end, is not recognizing art or artistic effects here and there, but rather successfully cultivating the possibilities of removing oneself from esthetic considerations. It’s vital that, merely in the name of preserving a parcel of utopian horizon, sometimes what the artist touches and invites us to touch along with him, is not, not yet, not quite, no longer, art. Behind the scenes seen on different screens and inside the exhibition as the whole, something is happening and endlessly circulating. Even if the presence of art inside the building is as true and guaranteed as the desire for art which brings us to this very building, this art nonetheless is not giving itself away to the visitor but rather demands that the latter look for it and recognize it, at the risk of missing out. Discovering the *Nachtball* video depicting a soccer match played with a plastic bottle illuminating the dance of the woman scoring, we are wrapped up in the swaying quality between in-play and off-side, reality and the imaginary. The film, made on the sly, doesn’t offer a clear vision of action, but a footballista’s smile and cries show this triumph as

real, or much more so than countless others retransmitted by sports channels. This shaky, approximately framed image is an allegory offered up and like a natural expression of art, a breath of freedom and joy communicated throughout the exhibition, turning round and round again.

Translation: Holly Dye

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(1) "Vides", a retrospective exhibition presented at the Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, in 2009.

(2) In the strict vocabulary of contemporary art, "travail" is often substituted with the word "œuvre" in French. This apparently modest term leaves to the wayside the fact that "travail" is the translation of work in English, abbreviation for "work of art" (never forget that, in this context, the founding texts are in English).

(3) While for Brecht, objects (at least we imagine) are what make events, in Hattan's series, the chairs have an *uneventful* nature, yet a deceptive one; the event is built from the way narrative appears and whispers to us.

ERIC HATTAN was born in Switzerland in 1955. He lives and works in Basle and Paris and had numerous solo and group exhibitions in Europe and overseas. More information on www.hattan.ch

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