

Eric Hattan in Conversation with Raphaële Jeune

R: I have the feeling that two contrary tendencies coexist in your work, complementing each other and, in some pieces, coming together. On the one hand, you literally construct an object; you produce a physical mass, which is sometimes architectural. On the other hand, you make changes on the basis of simple, essential acts; you transform part of what the world gives you, without inevitably adding anything to what's there.

E: Yes, a contradiction exists between my pleasure in working the material in order to realize productions which are traditional works and my desire to add nothing and simply move, manipulate, or underline things in order to provoke attention. Actually, I have a problem with the heaviness of material. Why do I need so much material to communicate what I would like to say lightly. Ideas, even if they're heavy ideas, are actually something very light.

R: What do you mean by lightness?

E: It's what flows like good coffee. It can give you so many sensations. I don't know if you can drink ideas, but I love how you can share sensations without having all this physical mass. At the same time, nature is a pile of matter, and you need to see it, to sense it in order to experience sensations. I know it's important to see and touch. If you do nothing but imagine, it's different. I love to touch, to work the material with my hands. But I don't love having to acquire and collect these materials beforehand.

R: Because the mass they represent becomes clear to you when you buy them, transport them?

E: In a sense. Sometimes, when I look at situations in the street, I wonder: what could you still add, everything's already there. You only have to draw attention to what exists. Then I become almost jealous. People do things without realizing it, sometimes much better than if they began to think, to calculate. They act with lightness. And it's this lightness which moves me and which I would like to have in my works. With all the materials I use, I'm afraid of losing it.

R: In actions like "Make Something New From Something Old" or "+/- The Half Life," you work with objects which already exist. Isn't that a certain form of lightness, a simple appeal to the audience's attention?

E: "+/- The Half Life" is a transitional work, containing both of my work's tendencies, which are in fact two approaches to life. In this work, I transferred all the objects surrounding me in my daily life, including those in my studio, into the space at the Helmshaus in Zurich and reorganized them there. I only kept a minimum of clothes for myself. I used the objects as building blocks, as components, aiming to form a composition which would only be finished at the moment of the opening. The process would've been prolonged if the exhibition had begun later, which would've given way to a different composition. But I wanted to formulate a clear structure all the same, a realization which would in some sense be successful. However, a posteriori, I understood that the project's stopping place had been too strong, too clear. At the moment, I wanted to realize something, but at the same time, this act of organizing already existing objects had in it a desire to move them without having that necessarily imply a finished whole. I wasn't fully conscious of this desire.

R: Especially as you moved the things in an intuitive fashion and not with a rational idea for construction whose result you could've imagined in advance. You didn't have an installation plan.

E: True, but at the time, I wasn't in a position to understand that the important thing was the movement, the act. Now, when I watch the video I made during the "montage," the camera's recording has fixed all my actions and gestures in space, and it seems clear to me that the process is essential. That leads to a whole series of questions: when is something finished, when do you have a result destined to be made public, how can one convey a process? With this work, I truly began to question the need to add. This is a false question, for there's always something to add, but not inevitably an object. A transformation can be an addition.

R: An addition of meaning?

E: Yes, and that's the nature of "Make Something New From Something Old." In this work, actually this proposition, I use an advertisement to offer my services to those who would like to have their private environment transformed. I can move each object, even the most hidden and the smallest, in order to modify their daily geography as I please. Thus, I completely disrupt what represents permanence to them, and I cause them to put into question, more or less consciously, each decision they could have made that had led the objects to be where they were before my intervention. Without

fabricating anything, using what's there, I raise a multitude of questions, and the most insignificant things end up taking on meaning.

R: They reveal themselves; they claim their own presence and demand confrontation.

E: Thus, you can imagine the objects looking at you, in the sense in which Rémy Zaugg says: the painting's looking at you.

R: By their strangeness, they become exotic: you produce a stationary voyage for people by modifying the geography of their most intimate universe, which becomes terra incognita.

E: And the voyage is a source of relativity, a concept I find essential. For the voyage provides a great openness and a great freedom of thought. It's the materialization of an ability to change.

R: Like Alice in Wonderland, who, at the time of her successive metamorphoses between being a dwarf and being a giant, at the mercy of the substances she finds and consumes, undergoes a true voyage of initiation and invariably remains open to incredible adventures. And these substances, which her curiosity tells her to swallow although she doesn't even know what their effects will be, actually symbolize the new experiences we're given to live. Relativity is a capacity for recentering and permanent questioning while still attentively considering context. But it's not necessarily true that, taken to an extreme, it turns into indifference.

E: It allows her to return to her decisions, to go in all directions, without docking, all while remaining herself, like a satellite. I work a great deal on the body's relativity with regard to objects and to spaces. The constructions with spyholes are an example: I set up a space you can enter into and also, through a spyhole, see from the outside, provided you've changed your position. Thus, two bodily positions coexist, corresponding to two incompatible perceptions of the constructed space: with the naked eye, I see a caravan around a lamppost; through the spyhole, I can't see the lamppost's base inside the caravan. These two contradictory views of an apparently identical reality derive from two different positions around the same object.

R: Someone with the gift of ubiquity could see that there is a trick. But perception requires movement in order to be complete. This question of relativity brings us back to your attachment to the work's openness. Apparently, you never work from one theme; you develop a phenomenological field, and finally the result always offers itself to a number of interpretations.

E: Yes. At the beginning of a project, I never really know what it will be. I never say to myself that I want to do a piece on such and such a subject. This brings us back to the idea of weight. A work can immediately contain a discourse; it can be verbose and, in a certain sense, static. It gives the observer no chance at all to escape the problematic it serves to support. It prevents thought's fluctuations. In the same way, the content of stories doesn't interest me. I love that stories are there, but I don't want to tell them; I prefer to see them float. Like I love that the attention you give to each thing keeps floating. All the spectators have their own attention, which can suddenly change into its opposite, enrich itself, reverse itself ... It's the same with interpretation. In fact, I believe that a heavy image is an occupied image. A heavy work is a work that has stopped, whose meaning is locked up. Without knowing it, a child constructing something with cubes is doing something light: when it collapses, he starts over, tirelessly. He doesn't feel the need to conserve. Although I wouldn't compare myself with a child, I nevertheless do act in a rather naive way. I never have a clear and synthetic idea about the message I'm sending, through whatever metaphor. In the beginning, my desire to develop a thing is more like an intuition, starting from an existing situation. This intuition is soon called into question, disproved, or confirmed through a whole series of stages of decision and rumination. The piece becomes concrete in my mind, like a mental image; I try to consider the whole, to walk around the work mentally, making choices which will contribute to the realization. Every time, there are numerous little choices I don't always immediately analyze for coherence and significance. Let's go back to the example of the caravan around the lamppost. There, I considered an entire sequence of possible options which influenced the piece's meaning: should the caravan be new or used; should it have a history? Should it be a product of the ex-GDR? Should I put curtains on it; should they be closed or open? How can I choose the site without giving it a political meaning? Should I put it in East Berlin, or in West Berlin near where the galleries are? Around what lamppost? And so on. Finally, you have to deal with the real situation, the street, the traffic, an entire spectrum of unpredictable parameters. Sometimes, I'm not satisfied with the solution I find, which means the image I had was stronger than reality. Or, on the contrary, I deem the realization successful, particularly when factors not reckoned with at the beginning come to reinforce the imagined project. Then the realization is stronger than the

idea. But a fundamental question comes up: how long can one talk about the idea and at what point does it become a matter of realization? I'm very interested in this moment of transition, which moves in an interstice between freedom and fluctuations. With constructed works like "Twin Room," "Ping Pong," "The Fifth," or "Hall" (1996), there's a point of no return. But other works, like "Make Something New From Something Old," which have never actually been realized, and perhaps never will be, with works issuing from this will to lightness, this point isn't reached, and I can always return to my choices.

R: As with the food packages you simply turn inside out, without even gluing them back together afterwards, as if they could return to their initial form at any moment.

E: Yes, the radicality and the lightness of this gesture, which I made one day without thinking about it, which I've repeated often since then, made me truly jubilant. Everything is there, completely open. I love being able to return to the already done. To move things, turn boxes inside out, all that comes from my permanent need to call things into question. In my studio, I endlessly move objects around, sometimes even without realizing it. It's indispensable for me.

R: For that matter, your studio's rather empty.

E: I don't like accumulation; I feel like it encloses me. I lack almost nothing; I never have enough space. I prefer a space where everything's in suspense, where nothing's decided.

R: One thinks of works like "The Room," "The Hallway," "The Bathroom": all are extremely virginal, as if the flannel you use produced a palimpsest on the imaginary walls and the furniture, creating a space where everything's possible. Would you say that empty space contains the virtual?

E: Yes. There, nothing's determined; it's a space which can be filled freely.

R: I would like to compare that with the concept of the frontier, understood as a zone without discourse. The flannel seems to form a frontier which would be an indefinite field, a neutral zone, without yes and without no, between an interior, the world, and an exterior, the object you've covered.

E: Yes, this is quite close to what I think, this zone which is neither the one nor the other but which is still something, a sort of liaison between two poles. Further, it's within this order of ideas that I called one of my pieces "Between," for the air which is between, the compressed air, gliding between two things. But it's an idea I almost cannot talk about.

R: Is it for you a matter of a sort of non-place?

E: No. It's more a place defined precisely by what surrounds it.

R: Geopoliticians are interested in the frontier not for itself, but for the context it's inscribed in, the territories it separates. The cells you make are in fact intermediate spaces: cuts become apparent when one is inside.

E: Yes, they're like blind spaces, free and protected zones around which the world plays. And inside, nothing's defined; everything's open. I give a great deal of importance to the angle of interpretation left by the work, which I want to be maximal. I'm very happy when ten people each perceive a different meaning on the basis of the same work. "Between," for example, has provoked multiple readings: some made reference to the Jews' hiding places during the war, others to the design of the ex-GDR. Still others thought it was necessary to keep the room as a container left intact at the heart of a city in complete transformation. And all these thoughts enrich the work considerably.

R: They make and unmake it, again this freedom ...

E: And actually, everything's much simpler. In the beginning, I'm only preoccupied by the creation of an intimate, minimal space which engenders a relationship to the body, but which never yields a discourse. In this sense, the work's openness leaves a lot of space for the virtual, to a multitude of potential becomings.

R: More clearly still, insofar as, as you said, it hasn't been realized, "Make Something New From Something Old" is a virtual work.

E: In fact, nothing exists of it but a text, in the form of a small advertisement, in which I offer my services, and an action which is only imagined by people who find it interesting but who haven't gone so far as to let me do it. Of course, I've also imagined it myself, mentally exploring what the consequences could've been. For example, one person, after careful consideration, refused at the last moment to give me the key to her private apartment, for she'd mentally anticipated finding traces of me everywhere, which she didn't feel ready for. Finally, I'm very interested in this result. This suspended, imagined state is also valid, and I'm not sure whether I'll have to realize the project someday. More and more, I ask myself whether it's necessary to realize works with materials -- which have the weight I talked about -- and I'm looking for ways to communicate what I want to say in a

different form than the traditional work. How can I show the inside-out boxes? Would one exhibit be the most adequate means?

R: Outside of language, which cannot be the artist's only tool, what would you envisage as an alternative? How can you account for a desire, an intuition, or an idea without occupying the terrain of language or of the image? At least to sweat ...

E: Yes, I'm in the middle of an exhibit, I'm sweating, it's my work! Surely, it's not for me to talk, but for people like yourself. For the artist, there are certain means of remaining in lightness, for example, the immateriality of odor. In Fribourg, for the exhibit "Bathing Cabins," I recently realized a work which was a perfume. Each time someone opened the cabin door, "Obsession" was sprayed into the interior. There was nothing else; I wanted to fill this empty space with the immaterial.

R: Especially as odor generally has a very strong and very subjective provocative power.

E: Yes, which makes even more responses possible. At the same time, if I continue to realize constructions (or, more simply, sculptures), it's that I consider them steps on the stairs. They're fixed objects, like horizontal things, but also springboards, supports for reflection. And this reflection would be the step's vertical part, a progression. Starting from the pieces, I can rediscover a floating level. For me, this invokes certain works linked to process: the picture of Dorian Gray evolving in relation to a human life, or the canvases by the Swiss artist Felix Müller from the beginning of the eighties, canvases he repainted every day for months. In our society, it's the realizations which count ...

R: ... and which glut the museums.

E: In contemporary art, the problem is that many works stay at the level of the sketch, as if it were impossible to go all the way to the end. This for lack of a vision of the whole, certainly. The works are fragments, there's no longer the masterpiece. We think that if we modify a work, it disappears and gives way to a new work. Now, for Oscar Wilde, as for Müller, or also Bruno Jakob, with his Invisible Paintings (realized with water), what counts is metamorphosis, ephemerality.

R: The palimpsest, too.

E: Yes, knowing that all the layers form one single work which is in permanent becoming, even if they're no longer independently visible.

R: This brings us to the ephemeral movement of artists in public space, or in daily life, which doesn't necessarily engender the production of an object which is visible or identifiable as art, but does form part of life and the memory of a place.

E: This question preoccupies me. This "immaterial" tendency in my work, which is opposed to the material realization of a work, can appear anywhere and at any time. It's a question of attention given to the things surrounding me. But I also believe that this tendency is intimately linked to ephemerality. A form can appear which is so light you sometimes don't know if it's art. Thus, I have to take a double irritation into consideration: the irritation of the public, which asks itself about the work's value as a proposition, and mine, because I don't know if this helps the world progress. I dearly love walking in the city without a preconceived goal, encountering situations. At what point does that become part of my work as an artist? It enriches my life, but it doesn't produce anything visible. I think sometimes of the title of Milan Kundera's novel, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being."

R: It's a lightness which doesn't respect the world's heaviness, which, in the world's eyes, is too casual.

E: Is this lightness only bearable in a world like ours? Am I getting at something, or am I just a dreamer who loves walking? It's true I'd like to try to make others sensitive to extremely small things.

R: To make them pay attention?

E: Yes, because I'm persuaded that if you pay more attention to certain things, that could change the world. But in order to be able to trigger this availability of the gaze and of the mind, it's necessary to find starting points, to show the way. Afterwards, you ask yourself, about everything: is it art?

R: Where's the response, where's the point of recognition?

E: I don't know. And finally, it might not be important. What counts is paying attention, letting situations touch you, interrogating yourself, and finally changing yourself. The only goal is to be sensitive, to invent a meaning for a thing whose presence isn't clearly defined as that of a work.

R: In this context, where do you locate the notion of artistic intention?

E: Everywhere ... but it's true that if you don't end up with a realization clearly recognizable as coming from an artistic intention, you're out of order.