

On earth as it is in heaven

Dust

Not long ago, during one of our conversations, Régis Perray made the following remark: «My relationship with the ground is also linked to my relationship with death». He went on to make some striking revelations about loved ones who came to violent ends, and how the abiding memory of these loved ones is a precious object that merits the most careful attention. Indeed, Régis Perray, more than towards the heavens, despite being in constant touch with the idea he has of them, looks primarily towards the ground, its surface and condition. Furthermore, if his overriding concern - and the essence of his work - consists of cleaning and maintaining floors, this is no doubt because the ground is the resting place of the dead. For example, he spent a great deal of time in the burial grounds of the Polish town of Lublin: namely the Catholic, Jewish, Orthodox and Protestant cemeteries. In one he cleaned the benches, in another he removed rubbish, in the third he brought to light the inscription on the tomb of Marek Kalinovski, and in the fourth he washed an epitaph. It is moreover this particular attention he pays to the deceased - but also to the living, of course - which explains his taste for photography and... for the woman to whom he refers as Saint Mary (she who, in spite of the death of her son, remains amongst the living). Very early on, he photographed the graves of his loved ones, (Chrystèle, Louis-Régis, Thérèse, etc.), which gave rise to the series entitled 12” de la vie de... [12” in the life of...]. Each image is taken with an exposure time of one second, on a film containing twelve photographs. Twelve seconds in the life of the artist, or a sort of autobiographical fragment. He evokes here the Belgian tradition of funeral photograph albums, which record the procession to the cemetery and the burial ceremony with all the participants. The work featured as part of his third year Fine Arts diploma and has never been shown since. In a certain way, he has returned to this theme with a more recent series of photographs, still in progress, called *Ma tombe préférée* [My favourite tomb], which consists of images of places where he would like to be buried. Before each picture, he arranges the chosen spot in a rudimentary fashion by laying a bunch of flowers and a small red candle. These places can be situated in a cemetery, or elsewhere. Whilst doing so, he is thinking of the sea.

At my feet

Art has always favoured verticality and elevation. This is evident in cave drawings, frescoes, wall paintings and statues; but also throughout the history of architecture, with ziggurats, cathedrals and the interminable litany of the towers of Babel. Notwithstanding some notable exceptions, such as the paving stones of Pompeii and other floor mosaics and labyrinths, as we shall see, it was not before the coming of the minimalists and Carl André that the eyes (and feet) were able to appreciate finally the infinite possibilities of floor space. English and American land artists made the ground their field of reference. It is no surprise that one of the subtlest of these artists, and the most melancholic, Robert Smithson, exercised an important influence on the young Régis Perray during his education and training (along with Gordon Matta-Clark, another manipulator of rubble). Subsequently

followed the “installationists” and their environments, which, in many cases, opened the work of art to freedom and wandering. They explored the question of the ground where we place our feet: both human feet and photographic tripods.

In 2002, Régis Perray produced a series of eight images, each photograph measuring 60 x 75cm, entitled *Sur les sols de...* [On the ground of...]. There is, for example, *Sur le sol du terrain vague* [On the ground of a wasteland] or *Sur le sol de la Petite Amazonie* [On the ground of the Petite Amazonie]. We see a banal surface, bereft of all picturesque elements, where the feet of the artist are planted then photographed. This relationship with the ground - an ‘implantation’ as such, (the contrary of ‘taking root’) -, finds a particular echo in ‘Ciel’ [Heaven], one of the entries in his dictionary *Les mots propres* which he has been compiling over the years thanks to his own unique definitions. “HEAVEN. I shall not go to heaven, I want to stay on earth. On the grassy meadows, in the peat of the marshes, in the waters of the Loire and the Atlantic.” It is perhaps in this immanent aspect of Régis Perray’s life and practice, which is also impregnated by the transcendental, that we can find the heart of a work entirely dedicated to the maintenance of the world and the gestures that this implies.

Prehistory

In 1998, at a house in Roubaix (North of France), Lise Viseux and Ronan Le Régent organised the first real Régis Perray exhibition in their gallery, *Derrière le miroir* [Behind the mirror]. Rather than an exhibition, as such, the event took the form of an action, or several actions, and was entitled *Déblayer, jeter, ranger, balayer, curer, laver, astiquer* [Clear out, throw away, tidy up, sweep, scrape, wash, scrub]. In this exhibition we see a paradigm or, at least, a programme for the artist’s work in general. At the bottom of the garden of this former bourgeois house is an out-building that used to be a photographer’s workshop in times gone by. The living room of the house, where exhibitions were usually held, was deliberately left empty so that visitors to the gallery had to cross the empty space to gain access to the garden, where Régis Perray was undertaking his task of tidying and cleaning the former photographic workshop. The title of his work underlines its meticulous progress. The aim? To uncover the oak floorboards and scrub them clean until they shone with their former glory. A series of eighty slides remain today to tell the story of his labour of love. This propensity to take care of the floor dates back to his studies at the School of Fine Arts in Nantes. In his third year, whilst the other students were busy painting, sculpting or engaging in performance art, Perray, for his part, decided to sand down, then wash, each and every one of the floor boards of his work space. Nothing more than this, but all day and every day. This was the work he presented to the jury for his diploma. Around the same time, he took it upon himself to clean the stairs at the entrance to the school, almost as if he were laying out a red carpet. In both cases, he spent all of his time undertaking the one task, with patience and determination. With simple tools and his body in action, the

veritable inscription of his gestures set into practice the basic ingredients of his work as embodied in an attitude; an attitude which, rather than a posture, is no more than his own discreet yet affirmed imprint in relation to his whole relationship with the world.

The following year, in 1999, he travelled to Egypt, with the ambitious goal of sweeping clean the pyramids of Gizeh, from top to bottom. Faced with the physical impossibility of the task, he instead chose to clean up one of the access roads to the site: removing rubbish and sweeping it clean. He also took a photograph of himself standing with a brush in front of the sphinx. A series of photos resulted from this voyage, entitled *Dans le desert il n'y a pas que des pierres* [In the desert there are not only stones]. The series is a tribute to the American artist Duane Michals, who assembled little piles of pebbles to evoke the form of the pyramids and took photographs of them. Rather than pebbles or stones, Régis Parray gathered together a pile of rubbish from the site. This half-collapsed pile was then photographed, in a manner evoking a short story by Italo Calvino in *Invisible Cities*. The artist's visit to Egypt marked the beginning of a veritable marathon journey across the globe (Poland, Kinshasa, Korea, etc. would follow) thereby situating his work in a planetary perspective. Both planetary and existential.

Les mots propres.

Can we say that Régis Parray has set out to clean the world? It makes one shudder to think of the idea. When I point out this to the artist, he takes pains to add: "I am not the cleaner". Bearing in mind the numerous refusals he has given to the various offers he has received to "clean" different places and objects, we are inclined to believe him. We must explain here the nature and the positioning of an artist who proclaims his taste for purity (notwithstanding the awkward connotations he recognises the term is now tarnished with). Alongside his artistic actions, as we have already mentioned, Régis Parray is concurrently working on the compilation of a dictionary, entitled *Les mots propres*, a little autobiographical dictionary from Astiquer to Zen. The entries of the dictionary include: Basin, Broom, Cemetery, Colour («I wasn't a colour, I became white in Kinshasa»), God, Ground, Heaven, Mary, Place, Rug, Words, Workshop, Zen... More than a lexicon, it is a personal dusting down of meanings. In other words, *Les mots propres* is an act of re-appropriation of common terms. It is both an immense task and a very modest enterprise, mirroring his entire work, as we shall see. Because "cleaning", for him, has nothing to do with the military (cleaning the zone) or fascist (eliminating the undesirables) term. Contrary to crazed Nazi dogma (purity of race) or certain neurotic pathologies (a denial of the organic world), "purity" for the artist resides in a wonderful constellation of childhood dreams and in taking care to offer beautiful objects (in the widest sense) to his fellow beings. Indeed, one of the essential roles of the artist, today, is to invent or re-invent usages, including the usage of words. Cleaning means: looking after the little details which embellish the décor, taking care of things, applying a balm.

These are private gestures which, as soon as they are transposed into the public sphere, become almost archetypal figures. They are metaphors, yet do not renounce concrete reality. They are always in praesentia, an experience and an example. I recall that Marguerite Duras said she could never write without having first made her bed. The work of Régis Parray as an artist consists, in a certain way, of preparing the ground for the work of an artist. However, in his case, the aim is expressed in the process.

The end of the avant-garde tolled the bell for artists who held on to the wild dream of wishing to change the world by attacking it head on. From these final heroic battles, the earth works of some Americans remain amongst the few last reference points for more current artistic endeavours, but without a number of their conceptual preoccupations (the cult of the document, for example, which Parray mistrusts). In the mid-1980s and above all during the 90s, artists developed strategies founded on guile and infiltration. At first glance, this approach seems subtler, however the pretence of being smarter than the others, than their predecessors, remained. We won't be fooled again... In fact, this lingering arrogance, even cynicism, is a weakness of a number of so-called 'relational' artworks. Régis Parray belongs to the next generation, which emerged at the very end of the 1990s. His preoccupations, like those of some of his peers, lie elsewhere. For instance, there has not been a strict return to the object, as such. We could cite here the work of Didier Courbot, who repairs park benches or waters the plants in urban flowerbeds. The uses and appropriation of objects, rather than the highlighting of their forms, are characterised by a sense of modesty, or even poverty, as reflected in the texts of Robert Walser, whose work has been so beautifully praised by Jean-Jacques Rullier. The discretion of these artists is to be understood within the framework of, firstly, a lucid and reasonable political action, something which reminds us of Voltaire's injunction in *Candide*, as practiced by Lara Almarcegui («we must take care of our garden») and, secondly, within a reworking of the artistic gesture. These two characteristics are inseparable from each other, as we will now attempt to demonstrate.

An exemplary gesture

What one could call the 'political responsibility' of the artist today, which does not differ fundamentally from that of any and every citizen, resides perhaps in the exemplary dimension of his or her actions. What do we mean by this? Van Gogh at the vanguard of modernity, then Yves Klein, Agnes Martin, Lygia Clark, Christian Boltanski, Gilles Mahé, to quote only a few and not wishing to drown our young artist amidst such comparisons, all managed to translate the singularity of their existence into forms accessible by others. Vasari, indeed, already suggested as much: the life of the artist needs to be exemplary. Not in the sense of having a moral standing or being led by good motives, but rather in the sense of being the vehicle of an image. Being the image. After all, "Art is what makes life more interesting than art", as Robert Filliou said in his classic

definition of the idea. The art of Régis Perray cannot be disassociated from his life. A Polaroid snap from 1977 shows him, as a child, holding a broom in the kitchen. Later, in 1998, he made regular visits to the Notre-Dame du Bon Port church in Nantes in order to engage in a kind of private prayer, the peculiar form of which consisted of polishing - with a rectangle of wool beneath each foot - the rosette on the floor of the church. It is a small step to one of his latest interventions, where he spent seven days in Amiens cathedral, during opening hours, in a wandering quest encompassing the whole of the labyrinth situated on the floor of the central nave of the building. Thanks to his sincerity, Régis was able to convince the archbishop of the cathedral, despite initial reticence. The artist is a wanderer, a pilgrim, and his walk through life can be situated within the world of art or, moreover, as part of a religious experience. The gesture, in this case of walking along the cathedral labyrinth, embodies an inherent responsibility, whether religious or otherwise. Is this gesture so different to Caravaggio painting the Emmaus pilgrims, or Jackson Pollock showing Hans Namuth his idea of the bodily struggle of coming to terms with the canvas? The art of Régis Perray goes hand in hand with his life, or, more precisely, confers a particular angle to certain moments of his life and, in every case, goes beyond his life. He describes this notion as "updating the story of one's own life, then to go beyond it and try to constitute a real work". It is through his gestures, in their specificity, that he accomplishes the aim of "going beyond".

We may think that the idea of style has gone out of fashion, yet it is undeniable that many artists have looked to blur the lines of identification in terms of the definition of their work according to this criterion. Indeed, many contemporary artists seek to avoid structural classification by using a variety of different techniques. The gesture, on the other hand, no doubt because it has no pretension to being a criterion of evaluation or classification, has conserved, in my view, the whole of its operational efficacy. Indeed, I am convinced that whilst we cannot reduce a work of art to a given unique and immediately recognisable style, we can, on a case-by-case basis, identify and study the gesture (or gestures) making up the foundation of the work. In some of these cases, particularly in the case of Régis Perray, the gesture takes on the role of a motif. The gesture, therefore, is to action what the motif is to representation. Let us underline here that Perray's actions are different from performances, in the sense that they are not destined de facto to be presented to an audience (even when the actions take place in a public place), and that they are inscribed in a movement of reiteration and in the context of a duration compatible with the work in hand and not with that of a performance.

Régis Perray's gestures can be defined therefore, to a large extent, by cleaning. Rather than adding, he takes away. What appears at the end of the operation is the fruit of a subtraction. By removing dust, dirt and old layers of life, the floorboards reveal their original glory. Yet his gestures are also a form of sculpture (not painting), in the original and literal sense of the word, that is to say: carving and excavation. In this

way, on a disused car park in the district of Malakoff on the outskirts of Nantes, his gesture of excavation consists of removing the tarmac to reveal the soil underneath. Perray's gestures require only very few rudimentary tools. One of these often comes to the fore and could be said to represent them all: the broom. In 2004, he crossed the city of Kinshasa on foot (a dangerous endeavour, particularly for a white man), pulling a broom behind him (La Balade du balai). [Walking the broom]. Comparisons can be made, in differing circumstances, with the intensity of wandering embarked upon by Francis Alÿs as he crossed Mexico City pushing in front of him a melting block of ice. The broom or brush is also akin to an eye that searches and reveals, not unlike André Cadere's stick. Thus, in many ways, it resembles a camera - picking up and analysing elements - like an eye that looks towards the ground. Régis Perray collects brooms in action thanks to photography and video, as well as making visual recordings of other types of cleaning processes (recently including steamrollers). He photographs mops and carpets hanging from windows or hooks. Yet sometimes cleaning consists not of uncovering, but rather of covering. In the following example, this paradoxical gesture of cleaning corresponds very appropriately to ideas of political responsibility. In Poland, Régis Perray was stopped in his tracks by a piece of neo-Nazi graffiti carrying the slogan "Gas the Jews". He reacted to this inscription in the most derisory and most suitable of fashions, by bombarding it with snowballs. Faced with another Nazi symbol, the swastika this time, he opted for the more classic remedy of cleaning by scratching and then rubbing away. Indeed, in both cases, the artistic gesture follows in the purest of traditions of painting, whereby covering means discovering and uncovering means covering. In 2002, Régis Perray went to the very ends of the logic of his (artistic) gesture in the form of a video of his endeavours: Patinage artistique au Musée des beaux-arts de Nantes [Figure skating in the Nantes Museum of Fine Arts]. For a whole month and a half, during the opening hours of the museum, every day except Tuesday, the artist polished the floors by skating barefoot on woollen pads. The delightful literality of the title of the work should not be taken lightly. He affirms thereby, as in the majority of his actions, an eminently sporty - even heroic - dimension to the work; namely that by the sole efforts of his bodily commitment, he can make the hallowed halls of the history of art shine anew. To help train himself for the task, he created a small section of flooring (Patinoire portative) [Portable skating rink], in a form reminiscent of a pedestal for a statue, or perhaps a podium for Olympic athletes. In the very image of the discipline itself.

Rock of dust

At times, derisory gestures make people smile, or laugh perhaps. This has never been the case for me. Otherwise, Prince Myshkin, in his struggles, would be nothing other than a comedian, as some of his entourage were tempted to think. Nevertheless, we here touch upon a very sensitive point in the work of Régis Perray. For example, it cannot be seen as a simple quirk of fate that his fellow artist from Nantes, Pierrick Sorin, has always shown a keen interest in the work of the young Perray. I have, on many an occasion, insisted on the tragic, if not profoundly absurd,

nature of Sorin's films, which cannot be reduced to the mere burlesque. Indeed, the reference to Camus, and *The Stranger* in particular, springs to mind. Whether comic or not, burlesque or tragic, these alternatives are unfounded. It is in the ambivalence, in the tipping zones between these categories, that the interest is produced. What counts is the intense feeling of life that emanates from the gestures and situations on display, and every spectator is free to judge them on merit. As far as Régis Perray is concerned, I believe that naivety is not so much in his work itself, but rather in the propensity to find it naïve.

The absurd, Camus showed, can be seen by Sisyphus exhausting himself pushing the ever-descending rock up the hill. In this effort without end we have the image of the human condition, an infinite reiteration. On a similar basis, in Perray's work we often come across another gesture, not so far removed from the action of cleaning, namely: the action of moving. Cleaning is also in effect the moving away of that which is not desired. The artist did so by removing rubbish from the old Jewish cemetery in Lublin or from around the Gizeh pyramids. But the gesture can take on much more important proportions. In order to prepare the moving of the dune of Pilat and the archaeological digs at Saqqara, Régis Perray trained himself in the context of a collective exhibition in 2000, at the Confort Moderne in Poitiers (Centre d'entraînement pour retourner au Pilat et à Saqqara) [Training centre for the return to Pilat and Saqqara]. Armed with a spade and two buckets, he undertook the task of transporting 30 metric tonnes of sand from outside to inside the arts centre, then from one room to the other, amidst the works by the other artists on show. The undertaking lasted 45 days, seven hours a day. A task, which in the cold light of reality could be considered absurd, suddenly embodies the notion of the absolute when placed in the context of art. A kind of 'readymade' in reverse. The experiment without end becomes a pure action, both a metaphor of art and a performance within itself, almost a gesture that creates its own frame. From this perspective, the duration of the action becomes the very image of time, and time becomes the image. What counts, above all, is time. Time spent, the time of art superimposed on the time of life, time repeating itself, like a ritual, forevermore. It is an act therefore, perhaps an act of senseless love ("To love is to act" wrote Victor Hugo at the end of *Things Seen*). There can be no doubt: "We must imagine Sisyphus happy".

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