

Being in a place, picking up on it, hearing it and being on a beam with it

Mo gourmeton: Why have you directed your research - ever since your training as an artist - at floors?

Régis Perray: When I was a student in my second year at the Nantes School of Fine Arts, I sanded a small wooden plank during the paintings classes. When I started the third year, there were big studios with clean white walls (after the degrees people had got the year before), but the floors were very dirty with traces left by several generations of students. So far a year I smoothed my little bit of studio floor with sandpaper. Then, little by little, I realized that my research would be focusing on floors, particularly where their upkeep was concerned (sanding, scraping, washing, shining, polishing...) with simple tools like sponges, sandpaper, brushes... so for considerable periods of time, and often in abandoned, almost vanished places.

MG: Why abandoned almost vanished places? Why such spare tools? What is your relation to the past?

RP: My desire to cat in a place is invariably determined by a powerful emotion. It's true that architectures which no longer have any special functions attract me by their silence, the signs of how they once functioned, and signs of use and presence. I'm not a restorer. Using simple tools, I just sometimes want to give a shine back to materials that are dull and dusty... even if they're in bad shape. This is why my tools are important companions enabling me to respect surfaces. The time my actions take is often determined by the relation that exists between the surface and the use of non-electrical materials making it possible to work fast. The time spent doing things is important for me, it represents a formative, constructive factor; I'm thinking of a definition in my little dictionary: "FAR. Running to go faster, sweeping to go further".

MG: What underlies this desire to restore a bit of floor?

RP: The places I come across often have a lot of past experience in them, traces and deposits. I "dust off" what is no longer visible, the things which, with some upkeep, can often look beautiful, and turn out to be even more of a place of possible occupancy. With a minimum of attention, you can successfully protect magnificent places. I try to experience such places by being active and, above all, always having a relationship with them in which pleasure is quintessential. I've already fled places ill-suited to my development, and places that are sources of such major inconveniences that I can no longer feel at peace in them.

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MG: What types of floors do you get involved with, and how do you choose them? Can any type of floor be suitable, or do you have specific expectations?

RP: It's above all the atmosphere of the place that guides me. I only intervene if the floor is in bad shape, or in some cases dirty. I have a preference for parquet. So I've swept sand from the roads leading to the pyramids at Giza. Sand that comes back day after day, so it's an ephemeral action, and slightly absurd in relation to the desert all round the pyramids. And then it's important for me that each action should be logical and at the same time giving a nod to new avenues. I systematically refuse all proposals where I realize that I'm being incited a bit like a "cleaner". There's no question of me doing anything, especially something that takes time, if it's not going to be a source of pleasure for me.

MG: If I take up your reference to slightly absurd actions, you do in fact share Sisyphus's lack of completion, if not his eternal recommencement. But this is where the comparison stops, it seems to me. You're not attached to a place, and you're always in control of your own movements... How do these organize themselves in relation to the others?

RP: A part of my project is determined in advance and often a long time beforehand. Artistic research is like scientific research: you need distance and an overall vision to work better, but always with your eye and mind open to what is going on. The organization you mention is like an evolution that has to do as much with thinking as with thinking as with the realization of my activities. It is established little between personal projects and the proposals people submit to me.

MG: How are the interferences of your "lay" and "religious" actions enacted, and do they interfere?

RP: Whether the place is religious or not, it's always the place that suggests the nature of the action to me. For example, in the church of Notre Dame du Bon Port in Nantes, above-mentioned, my body takes part in the upkeep of a wooden rosette during my moment of meditation, which differs with each visit. The same skating action in the Museum of Fine Arts in Nantes, in 2000, was carried out 7-8 hours every day for a month and a half, with a lot of movements, changes of pace, and states of mind that were never the same. As a rule, my actions are ritualized by the place, but so are the rhythm, the repetition, and the concentration.

MG: How do you define the rite?

RP: First and foremost it's the expression of personal faith, which isn't religious. It's a bit like a ceremonial used to be in touch with places which have a soul. There's the meeting, then different actions to comply with and present things differently.

MG: What rhythms do you introduce?

RP: Above all, the rhythms of the body which keeps going sometimes for many days, like a sportsman's body. This is why I'm very attentive to the evolution of my work. At times it's best to slow down or take a rest, so as to be effective, or else stay healthy. As often say: art, yes, but life even more.

MG: Your work is at once self-focused and open to things outside. Openness involves collecting and gathering, introspection involves silence and contemplation. How are these two actions combined?

RP: I see my floor research as a synthesis between, on the one hand, the connection with a place, or a country I which I shall; often be active by way of my cleaning interventions, and upkeep... and, on the other, the perception and reflection which prompt me, for example, to write my dictionary or define my forthcoming work. Being in a place, and capturing it, understanding it and coming to an understanding with it is a necessity for working.

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