

AURÉLIEN
FROMENT
AND
RYAN
GANDER
AN
INTERVIEW
WITH
FRANÇOIS
PIRON

FRANÇOIS PIRON

Of Any Actual Person, Living or Dead is the result of an invitation from the Laboratoires to work together on an exhibition. This exhibition, whose structure you conceived together, features your individual works, and ends with a piece you made together, signed by both of you and in which it is impossible to say who did what. Further, this piece is a rereading of several works you each made in the past. Tell me how you worked together, and how you each related to the other person's work?

RYAN GANDER

I think we both look at things the same way. Our "practice" is based on the accumulation of little elements leading to something bigger. Just as a Tintin book can spark a series of associations that will contribute to the production of a work, this can also be triggered by what someone else does. I am currently making a piece that integrates a work by another artist, which I bought. That is a little bit different, because it's based more on the idea of appropriation than of collaboration. Collaborating is a very natural process for Aurélien and I, because we're on the same wavelength. This is odd because we've never talked about it; it was never formulated or concretised in any way. It's just something that we do. In the end it hardly matters who



Aurélien Froment, *The Apse, the Bell and the Antelope*, 2005, view of the exhibition at Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers. Photo by Marc Damage

does what, providing the result is incisive and powerful enough to be part of the ensemble. One rather simplistic metaphor—but I'll use it anyway—would be that of the artist as mountaineer: mountaineers try to reach inaccessible peaks, and for them to do so it is vital that they should support each other. They also walk in each other's footsteps, and follow the tracks of earlier, failed ascents. Now that I think about it, they even take the provisions—food, oxygen tanks—that they find on the bodies of mountaineers who died on the way up and failed to reach the peak. I don't think either of us is bothered about knowing where the idea came from; rather, we want to "move forward". But you find these appropriations, these reminiscences everywhere in art. Still, at least we do it actively, as an integral part of our way of working. If you go to the Modern Institute you will see at least a dozen artists with a pseudo-modernist or schoolgirl-rocker aesthetic. Are they aware that, as individuals, they are part of a collective consciousness? I doubt it.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

Speaking of collective consciousness, I'd like to talk about the edition of 100 different postcards that you published. It's a piece that combines a number of your shared interests around ideas

of universality and encyclopaedic knowledge. It reminds me of certain writers and thinkers of the nineteenth century, like Novalis and Leopardi, who planned to make an individual encyclopaedia. Behind the simple observation of everyday signs on these postcards, behind the "loose associations" (as Ryan calls them), behind the humour, the sensibility and the personal memories there is a real exploration, something much more precise than it seems at first. Foremost here is a reflection on our relation to history as individuals. Do you have an overview of the subjects mentioned on these postcards, this accumulation of details that in a sense forms a cartography of your interests?

RYAN GANDER

I wouldn't say that the postcards project is encyclopaedic because it's incomplete. They form an excerpt, a sampling of novelties, of possibilities, of ideas and suggestions. They simply signify possibilities; they are a start, a kind of catalyst for the viewer, but they certainly are not definitive or encyclopaedic. It's true that the room they occupy was designed in such a way as to suggest potential archives—or, at least, to suggest that there might be a way of organising ideas, but once again, we refused to arrange them and left the postcards in boxes, as if contributions from

visitors were necessary. Visitors are by nature lazy; here, they have to put some time into the work in order to get something out of it. I like that idea. Another thing I think it's important to note about that project is that it constructs a kind of contradiction. On one side, it is clear that the postcards appropriate a form that, as we understand, implies a kind of authority supporting the facts—objective information—, but the way they are written is radically at odds with their content. The information is illogical, subjective and sometimes even fictional (a word I hate¹). This contradiction is what separates them from the real world. The fact that they stand on the edge of reality makes me ask questions about the way they stand up within reality. How to

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I found an image the other day on the internet of the scene in the film *Back to the future*. The image shows the main character 'Marty Mcfly' played by Michael J. Fox on stage semi transparent—due to a flaw or consequence of a parallel history that has erased him from reality. It's funny because it articulates some of what Aurelien and I are doing really well, actually in ways better than we do, more

tidily—but with messiness comes surprising readings of course. The point is that I realized that 'fiction' is a bad word to use because it suggests a disbelief. I think we understand and believe our alternative realities very well. They are not fiction, they are alternative realities running parallel to our conscious on. They are 'parallel realities' no?

find out? It would be fantastic to be able to slip them into the rotating stands in the tourist shops around the Pompidou Centre (where it all began, nearly two years ago) and to follow a few of them around, like a little mouse.

AURÉLIEN FROMENT

Of course, there is a kind of mimicry in this work, evoking the encyclopaedias and almanacs we've all looked through at some point. I think that for us it's a reminiscence of that, rather than a real programme that was drawn up and applied. Encyclopaedias and catalogues are fascinating as an effort to provide understanding of the world in a single work. But they are often rendered obsolete by something that undermines the method from within, like a grain of sand suddenly causing the machinery to seize up. And that reflects the contradiction at the heart of a project like this one. Looking for an overall view, a summary, etc. as a way of understanding the things around us may not be very appropriate. Personally, I don't have an overview of the themes in this piece of work. This was implicit in the way we decided to gather the images. Some of them were already there, others were made especially for the project, others were added at the last minute, others were "returned to sender", etc. But it was never our goal to select a hundred themes, whether shared or not. It comes more from the desire to create a space between us and to extend it to the exhibition and to visitors, as something like a potential space for manipulation. I made several attempts during the preparations to organise the selection, but always in vain, because we never thought to set out with a grid, a script or even a method. The index came in after the selection. When you put one image beside another, you cannot prevent a meaning from emerging. Even the alphabetical order indicates a direction to be followed. But when we were thinking about the different ways of getting an overview of the work, we always imagined it being in more than two dimensions. If I hang all the postcards on my bedroom wall, I immediately see other possible ways of organising the series. I can make little packets by category, with elements relating to Games, to Animals, to Typography, to Architecture, to Motifs, etc. But then you have to establish the categories. And there is always something that escapes that kind of classification. If you add subcategories, there's a risk you'll end up with more categories than

actual elements! You have to move the images around—I think that's what we're looking for, which is what postcard no. 101 suggests to me: you have to deconstruct the work in order to start your own collection.

RYAN GANDER

The work now belongs to the beholder; most importantly... it's now their responsibility, which takes a weight off me. It gives me the feeling that the work has gone beyond its initial frontiers. The claustrophobia I felt about card no. 100 has gone. The work has been transformed into a kind of continuum without limits.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

One aspect of the exhibition that particularly interests me is the way you reactivate the notion of the "open work", not only in terms of interpretation but also in the conception of each of your works and in that of the exhibition as artwork. This notion of the open work recently gave rise to a number of artistic practices that I would describe as "user-friendly", practices that take openness as their starting point and as a given of the work, and thus authorise the beholder to behave freely and to engage in an uncontrolled interpretation of what they have before them. In your exhibition, even if the beholder's behaviour is not actually constrained as such (the basic context is that of the exhibition form), a great deal is nevertheless expected of their involvement, and their expectations and reactions have been anticipated to a considerable degree, or at least you as the authors have counted on them. One of the relations I would like you to talk about is the one you construct between accessibility and inaccessibility, or, in other words, between generosity and frustration, given that you both have your strategies for setting up this relation in your work.

AURÉLIEN FROMENT

The film *The Apse, the Bell and the Antelope*, presented in the second room of the exhibition, is a project that I conceived before the invitation from the Laboratoires, but that clearly needed circumstances like these in order to play the role I wanted to give it. The documentary feel, which is inherent in any film, plays an important role here because we are working from a given reality, that is to say, a set of buildings constructed by several thousand volunteers, and which can be located on a map and, moreover, is subject to

many representations.² The form I gave the exhibition comes from my observation of the site, of some of its characteristics, which I thought were relevant when sketching a portrait of it: the promised incompleteness of the construction, an almost circular temporality and the pedagogical purpose and transmission in play in the monthly workshops and in the discourse of the guides accompanying visitors to the site. So it was a reading of the site that made me take that direction. While the film draws on the very real concretisation of Soleri's project, with Roger Tomalty playing himself and filmed on the actual site, it also considers current and future projects and memories of past events. And all these words "perforate" the backdrop that the guide character is painting. When we were working with Roger at Arcosanti, he himself told us that we were making a science fiction film. Personally, I sometimes had the impression that we were making a documentary film about something that simply doesn't exist. What takes shape in spectators' minds as they watch the film partakes of the construction, if not of the town, then at least of its image. The overall vision then, could be said to come from all these details—what it tells us, what we see and what lingers in spectators' memories. The only overall vision that we get of Arcosanti in the film is the sequence with the drawing of the town: "It's one of the first versions of the project", says Tomalty (and it was precisely this image, and our simultaneous realisation that the project did not exist only in a book, that was the origin of the film). This image, because it was captioned by the guide's spiel, could thus become the plan for the film, and again play a role as matrix for the continuation of the tour. The form of the guided tour thus made it possible to reinstate Soleri's project in its own virtuality, and at the same time to make it into a filmic object.

It is a retro-projection in the sense that the character's discourse takes us back before the construction. It's also a retro-projection in the literal sense, because it goes through the window in the wall in the room. As in the first part of the exhibition, *Cinema Verso*, there is something that

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TV reports, a self-promotion trailer, a fiction (Roger Corman *Nightfall*, 1982), and, of course, a lot of books about architecture, reviews,

website and exhibitions already constitute some of the chapters of the «scattered» history of the Pierre Paolo's project.



Aurélien Froment & Ryan Gander, *Salle Blanche* (White Room), 2005, view of the exhibition at Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers. Photo by Marc Damage

acts as a screen: here it is the vitrine and there it is the discourse. Ryan imagines and makes accessible a space where, usually, half of the projected film, the one that passes through the perforations in the screen, is forgotten. The film that he made becomes the accessory of a kind of diorama that presents the image of a movie theatre, and if people want to go over to the other side, then that's probably a reflex linked to cumulative memories stirred by the screen. I don't know whether or not it's a matter of making our practice accessible—that's generally difficult to measure; it's more a matter of constructing a sequence and getting visitors to apprehend the exhibition through a series of sequences that in this case turn back on each other. If the relation to the movement of visitors was one important element when "writing" the exhibition, the actual duration, dictated by the films—whether secondary or not—remains an indeterminate factor for us. Likewise the combinations made by visitors who decide to take images away with them. For me, the exhibition is constructed didactically, even if it escapes from that in fairly monstrous fashion: rather than sequences, which would imply a narrative or, at least, a shared narrative space, a cinematographic space applied to the exhibition, I prefer to speak,

like the hunchbacked narrator of *Bartleby et compagnie*, of a series of digressions and footnotes to an invisible text.

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