

Archaeologists don't work on the past, which is not any more, but on the past things which remain in the present : monuments, rare and surprising objects, but also and especially vestiges ; that is waste, rests. Although inanimate, these remains are not sluggish : they record and accumulate some memory under the effect of repetition, or more exactly reproduction. It is not some sort of human memory, but much rather a material memory, made of accumulations of changes, overlays of traces, successions of deposits. Becoming stratified, this material memory transmits inheritances, which produce so many effects of transmissions-transformations of forms, creating morphological constraints which are directly affecting the present. Although inanimate, archaeological material is therefore a hybrid, active compound, carrying active memory although historically ended, whose dynamic is no other than that of reiteration<sup>1</sup>.

### “Speaking of Pictures”

Interview between Martina Panelli and Prinz Gholam  
on the occasion of their exhibition at Galerie Jocelyn Wolff, January 2018

MP. Your work demonstrates a great fascination with the past, with images from antiquity and classical remains. Your interventions in sites you chose for your performances during the most recent documenta shows this. How do you explain this interest?

PG. Our work is not nostalgic; nor are we interested in commemoration or celebration of an artistic or historical memory. Through our work, what we strive to bring back into the light is what we could define as the impossibility to build a bridge with the past. Just as with the presentation of archive photographs by Nelly's and Wilhelm von Plüschow, during our work at “Kallimarmaro” (the Panathenaic stadium, the site of the performance, then in the video entitled “Speaking of Pictures – Kallimarmaro” performed for documenta 14 in 2017), what interested us was not only the connection that we wanted to create between these sites and these sources but, also and especially, the difference between them and what they represent. What we try to invoke is something that is inevitably lost yet nevertheless returns to memory. We also like the idea of being able to address a rather distant past and to feel ourselves free in its re-evocation.

MP. I would like to speak about the difference between the project that you took to Kassel and Athens and that you are presenting here in Paris. What distinguishes them?

PG. First of all, the situation is different. Our project at documenta was included in a large, collective exhibition. It was structured in large, partly public, spaces. Here, we must isolate elements so to find new structures within the space of the gallery, which is a heterogeneous and non-neutral space as well. We conceived this exhibition as a presentation of images on different mediums (drawings, photographic archives, videos); an essential aspect resides in our attempt to transform the archives, extrapolate their collective and historical dimension so to offer it in a variety of individual works, ours.

MP. Among the materials you presented at the documenta, some are proposed again in the exhibition here at Galerie Jocelyn Wolff: can you explain how you conceived their “repetition”?

PG. Through the performances while at the documenta, we ourselves embodied, with our bodies and our gestures, specific esthetic codes figures and postures, while here we are making it so that the images speak for themselves, as if they were elements of a new discursive reasoning, a new confrontation of references, and a new form of stratification.

---

1 Extract (resume) of the article by Laurent Olivier, “La répétition dans le processus archéologique”, *Clinique* n° 14, 2017, pp. 172-186.

For example, we have worked with the images of Wilhem von Plüschow<sup>2</sup> and Nelly's<sup>3</sup> (borrowed specifically for the exhibition at Galerie Jocelyn Wolff) while keeping in mind two fundamental ideas: that of contact and that of desire.

The nude photographs by von Plüschow show a kind of osmose between the young bodies and the ancient rocks, as though the sediment limestone entered into contact with the lives of the people who are leaning against the ancient stones. In this way, the images of the ruins do not appear as symbols of a defunct culture: they re-vitalize and even create phantasms, scenes for new stories, new sights in which one could catch the objects of a mobile desire, that of the photographer who created the scene and staged the subjects in the 1890-1900s, and that of ours, which refers to them in the present.

MP. It seems to me that this work of analyzing and structuring traces comes near to that of writing... For that matter, this project is founded on the connecting of different temporalities (antiquity, the years 1890, 1920, and 1930 and the present), different spatialities (ancient archeological sites, their current image and contemporary spaces, like that of the gallery), and, lastly, different medial forms (photography, video, drawing). We evoked archeology, but so to describe your work, perhaps it would be more appropriate to talk about the investigation of a *logos* founded on correspondences, echoes, metaphors, as though art and its language were the fruit of a dialogue and of a contact between subjects and their communicating "strata" (temporal, geological, medial).

PG. Yes, our objective is, just that, to make it so that the individual temporalities, the spaces, and the mediums create new entities in the moment, and this, thanks to their meeting. This is what we are striving to demonstrate through the new connections between the material within the space of the gallery. It is a process that effectively conjures up writing; and in this regard, the characteristically "embodied" quality of our earlier works reappear in this exhibition as handwritten traces, produced as commentaries to the photographs and elements in the installation. We underscore here the manner in which this work involving a "sewing" and a connecting develops according to two, apparently diverging perspectives. One focuses on researching a form of continuity between images and eras; the other, in contrast, researches the interferences, superpositions and anachronisms.

MP. Repetition and difference. When we speak of your work, these are two concepts that we cannot set apart from it. It seems to me that this juxtaposition is particularly effective whether we think of your work on video or in a performance...

PG. Yes. Firstly we would like to point out that the work on video has exactly the same importance as the *live performance*. The *live performance*, which leaves room for the incalculable<sup>4</sup> to intervene, transmits a same message in a different or differed way, while the video is a medium that has solid codes and rules. The challenge doesn't just concern the images and the figures that we decide to embody or the unforeseen to which we obligingly confront, but it also concerns the willingness to place ourselves with the framework of the laws that uphold processes involved in the technical production of images. Once the specific positions and the bodies are captured by the camera, the images will be reproduced for viewing one time, a hundred times, a thousand times. Paradoxically, it is this very recurrence of the video, its reflective dimension (think in terms of the *loop* effect) that gives rise to potential interferences, divergences, differences...

MP. One last question: I find that your work with the body, connected to a practice of repetition and to the theme of difference within the repetition reflects a political position. In my opinion, there is a notion essential to framing your art: the notion of "performativity" (as elaborated by Judith Butler<sup>5</sup>). If we follow

2 The originals are kept at the the Institut d'Archéologie classique de l'Université de Strasbourg, Musée Adolf Michaelis.

3 The originals are kept at the Benaki Museum's Photographic Archives's Department, in Athens. The artists thank this institution as well as the organizing committee of documenta for lending the modern prints of these images.

4 Cf. Maite Garbayo Maetzu, « Lo incalculable », *Script*, n°12, may 2013, pp. 4-7. English translation by Chris Sharp (unpublished).

5 On the notion of "performativity" see also Maite Garbayo Maetzu, « Lo incalculable », *op. cit.* "Corporeal acts are fundamentally social acts, implicating my presence among the other and the presence of the other among me. Every body,

this thinking, we can view repetition as an instrument for resisting the reproduction of hegemonic cultural and social standards, all the while setting up instability, precariousness, imperfection as privileged values.

PG. This is an effective comparison especially in terms of our work. Over the years, our way of performing has changed; it evolved. When we embody specific positions, we often feel the sensation of something strange happening, but we are no longer afraid of the public; to the contrary, we try to accentuate these moments. For example, holding a body position is an arduous, sometimes impossible operation; yet it is precisely within the desire to try – sometimes in the exasperation of awkwardness, of otherness, the instability of the sometimes strange character of a situation or a gesture – that we find the means to open the breaches so to accompany the viewers elsewhere, towards a level of deeper thinking.

English translation by Emily Wolff

---

and the acts that construct it, is colonized by systems of culturally naturalized signification, by signs that repeat until they lose the referent of their presumed original. This implies that the performative is as original as the copy that institutes it. The non-existence of an essence, which functions as a reference means that the act, the gesture and the disguise...eventually become masks of nothingness". (...) "Every act reiterates, but this reiteration can continue supporting the discursive systems that materialize bodies, or it can allow for the entry of incomplete or twisted re-materializations, which in each reiteration propose a kind of drift". For these quotations see pp. 5-6.