

Mapping the performance: Romain Forquy and Philip Lee's "segments"

Although common, photography of performance has been rarely studied. Undoubtedly it is difficult to analyse it without falling into a description of the performance itself although the work of the photographer is sometimes as important as the performer's. Such is the case with Romain Forquy and Philip Lee's new work "segments". The difficulty is to have two artists working together, in different times and intentions, on the same material. To understand this work it is necessary to relocate the history of performance photography in the history of performance itself. In 2005, the exhibition and symposium "After the Act: the (Re) Presentation of performance art" analyzed this thematic. Barbara Clausen then claimed that "contrary to its original nature, performance art, has through the historization of its documentary material become an object and image-based art form. As a trace of a message, this material not only adds to the image archive of art history, but is also part of the ongoing process of the cultural canonization of performance art¹".

Re-presenting performance.

Performance and photography have a linked fate but a different chronology. Performance emerged as a new and experimental practice in the 60s. Grown from Happenings, which is itself an extension of sculpture, performance art is maybe best represented through Jackson Pollock's action painting whose private activities became more and more famous thanks to photographs and films. Photography has become an obligation in a performance like, as David Briers said in *Photography and Performance Art*, "(...) a photographer at one's wedding²". On the other hand, according to Chantal Pontbriand "(...) we could say that performance has changed photography³". Performance artists quickly felt the need of documenting and preserving their performative manifestations. This desire is firstly based on the wish to influence and have a place in art history and secondly to bring their art to a wider audience. The public invited to watch and react with the performer is always limited in its number and, photography and video remain the best mediums for diffusing the work. At the extreme, some artists decided to perform only for the camera, thus completely decimating the presence of the

¹ Barbara Clausen, *After the Act: the (Re) Presentation of Performance Art*, Mumock, 2005, p.7.

² David Briers, « Photography and Performance Art », in *Photography as Performance*, p.43.

³ « (...) on peut dire que la performance a changé la photographie », in Chantal Pontbriand, *Point & shoot : performance et photographie*, préface, Dazibao, Montréal, 2005.

audience, as in Yves Klein's *Leap Into the Void*⁴. Indeed, Klein didn't actually leap into the void but the illusion was created thanks to a photomontage of two pictures. The image gives the appearance of a performance even if it is only a photographic illusion. Claude Cahun too is nowadays considered as a major female performance artist. Following her desire, her famous self-portraits were only shown after her death in 1954. They surprisingly appeared to be elaborate private performances for the camera. It is in this scheme that we can talk about the common experience of the performer Philip Lee and the photographer Romain Forquy. When they met each other a few years ago at the University of Westminster, they quickly began their collaboration. Going through the stages mentioned earlier, Romain Forquy first documented some of Philip Lee's public performances. But with time, as their work together became more intense, they started a real and deep reflection about, on one hand, performing for the camera and, on the other hand, photographing performances. The last series of photographs - topic of this essay - entitled "segments" were taken in a studio without any public. It was only the matter of two artists working with two different mediums; "(...) only a camera put in between two men using different languages⁵".

Matter of times.

Photographing performances includes a matter of time or more precisely of times. The performance is done in direct time: it starts in the past, carries on in the present and ends up in the future. As soon as a performance happens, it is finished. Consequently pictures of performances indicate that direct time is over. Photography - as does video - embodies the limit proper to modern times; "the problematic and contradictory task consists in archiving the present time."⁶ In going further, we could claim that photography will never be a recording of the performance in itself but only a document of a certain "direct time". According to some critics, photographs of performance are mere fossils, vestiges or relics of a past action and will never be able to reproduce the atmosphere. This 'mortuary' vocabulary anticipating the death of performance can be understood if we go back to its roots. Originally, performance art was created in reaction to the "bourgeois" conception of the theatre. An important dialogue

⁴ Yves Klein, *Leap Into the Void*, 1960. 19 octobre : Yves Klein realised « *Le Saut dans le vide* », 3 rue Gentil-Bernard à Fontenay-aux-Roses, the photographs were taken by Harry Shunk and John Kender.

⁵ Romain Forquy, interview, 08/05/2008.

⁶ Mary Ann Doane, « (...) la tâche problématique et contradictoire qui consiste à archiver le présent. », in Rebecca Schneider, *Figés dans le temps réel : la performance, la photographie et les tableaux vivants*, p. 63.

was generated about the idea of authenticity and performance appeared like the best way of producing irreproducible and non-commercial art.

However, photography of performance doesn't pretend anymore to incarnate the performance itself. A notion of play links the photographer to the performer and the former stages the photographs for the viewers. Photography of performance, in this situation, breaks up its documentary stranglehold to move towards dramatization. So on the one hand, photography risks to steal the spirit and break the essence of live performance but on the other hand, in assuming the role of memory and helping the translation of the substance of the message, it embodies the role of an intercessor. In a split second Romain Forquy takes pictures of a man creating a piece of art with his body; the rhythm of this body endlessly moving in opposition to the instantaneity of the camera. And through these images, the photographer makes a place for the body, which never stops testing itself, in the cultural memory. "Good photographs of performance art capture its momentary, 'fugitive' aspect, and have the quality of crime reportage photography or of photographs taken during seances⁷". But the pictures taken and their meanings are a transformed reality and become real "tableaux".

An intimate space.

Philip Lee's work focuses on the representation of male bodies in contemporary society. Each time he has performed naked with organic materials such as clay and coloured pigments spread all over his skin. Unifying his outside envelop in a same colour he can then make participate each single part of his body as independent pieces of equal importance. The monochrome identity allows to give more power and strength to the gestures, to the intentions and to the weight of time. In a similar spirit, Romain Forquy never tried to neatly decompose the body and endlessly blurred its articulations.

This work was only possible in the intimacy of the studio. The two artists had to be very close in space and intensity in order to create such a work. Through photography Romain Forquy freezes the action and transforms the performative act, which takes place in a three-dimensional space, into a two-dimensional image. His photographs are nicks in the real time bringing fiction to the performance. He stops the time and takes the performance out of the infernal cycle of life and death.

⁷ David Briers, « Photography and Performance Art », in *Photography as Performance*, p.44

According to the artist “[his] topic would rather be in the duality exhibitionism/voyeurism. The idea of making a performance only for the camera gaze intensifies either the relationship between the viewer (the photographer) and the exhibitionist (the performer) and of a certain notion of intimacy.⁸” Nevertheless, focusing on the notion of intimacy, it could be claimed that an atmosphere of restraint infuses the series “segments”. Philip Lee’s body is never entirely showed and is hidden behind the different materials used. Playing with the glass, on which Lee leaves body prints, and the clay, Romain Forquy adds different layers to the skin. He seems to cover the performer’s nudity in overlaying filters the first of which is his gaze through the camera. In one of the photographs Philip Lee is lying naked on some paper sheets from above. In between the two artists stands a piece of glass with a print of the body. The position of the photographer is easily imaginable and even sometimes scary. Romain Forquy overlooking Lee only focuses on the higher parts of the body contained between two perpendicular bits of walls and with glass over him. Philip Lee seems to be trapped and all the pictures reflect an intense atmosphere of claustrophobia. Philip Lee’s closed eyes and the neutral expression of his face also highlight claustrophobia. The surprising aspect of this work is that you can, for most of the images, imagine the position of the photographer. This particularity grants a notion of speed and movement to the pictures and so transcribes the action and activity of the performer.

Nevertheless the photographs give way to a certain embarrassment in face of the body. Maybe is it because both artists are men? The relationship differs from the one with a female model and carnal body attractiveness is absent. In his past work “Public Intimacies”, Romain Forquy composed an animated projection made from numerous cameraphone images of his partner, his travels and himself. In showing private moments he invites the viewer to enter his life and reinterpret his own story⁹.

Body landscapes.

Here Romain Forquy transforms Lee’s body into landscapes. For most of these “segments” it is difficult to clearly identify the subject. The viewer’s gaze is lost in the hills and dimples and thanks to this movement starts creating his own narrative. The effect is increased by the difference of texture of the clay, dry or still wet, and the non-presence of the eyes. The body becomes a geographical map with its depressions, vegetation and mud. Using and underlining

⁸ Romain Forquy, interview, 08/05/2008.

⁹ Romain Forquy, *Public Intimacies*, dvd from mobile phone photographs, 2006, <http://www.photocabin.co.uk/>.

the aspects of the different material used these “segments” come close to the notion of painting. Here human beings and nature are only one and in making this artistic choice, the photographer not only treats of male condition but of human condition in general. Here we could refer to the surrealists who loved playing with the photograph shape, melt the images and so created a fetishist blur of sexual identity. We just have to remember Bellmer’s doll, 1938, which was stretched in any kind of positions and showed a mutilated body. The doll had no gender but was the incarnation of humanity with its desires, its drives and weaknesses. In other photographs, Romain Forquy concentrates on the print. Prints are usually understood as the representation of the death of the body. Photography also represents the death of the performance. But going further, prints are the image dawn and incarnate sexual reproduction; a narrow contact by pressure, by penetration even. So there, the photographer gets into intimacy, Philip Lee’s first but also his own and everyone’s. He makes the apology of the formless going towards pure abstraction. And again he focuses on the prints of hairs on the glass. The texture is so dense that we get confused and don’t know if the hair is still inside the clay or absent. The images become psychedelic. We lose our orientation, the subject, we can’t decipher the image of the body. Only Lee’s penis, right in the middle, reframes the work around masculinity and the integration of the male body in our society. It’s the penis again which proves that the print of the body is not a dead one, not a kind of shroud, but rather an alive and powerful one.

Romain Forquy, travelling through a body landscape, becomes in this work an ex voto catcher. According to Georges Didi-Huberman “the ex voto represents somebody’s symptom and prayer: what the donor gives to be modelled in wax, it’s first *where he suffers and where he wants to be transformed*, calmed, healed, converted.¹⁰” In doing that he borrows a kind of religious or forbidden role. He transmits the performer’s sufferings to the public and adds some of his own. He does not only document the performance but integrates it, makes it its own and proposes a personal version of the work. If we want to get to Philip Lee’s naked body, we will have to get through the photographer’s physical and intellectual layers. The clay, the glass, the print are the first obstacles; his interpretation of the performance, his story

¹⁰ « L’ex voto représente le symptôme et la prière de quelqu’un : de que le donateur fait modeler dans la cire, c’est d’abord *là où il souffre et là où il veut être transformé*, apaisé, guéri, converti. », i, Georges Didi-Huberman, Ex-voto : image, organe, temps, Bayard, Paris, 2006, p.47.

are invisible barriers. He metamorphoses the performance, changes its substance, its statute in the same way that Philip Lee went out his normal human being shape.

Romain Forquy transforms the body into an abstract form, leaving our gaze to get lost in his carnal landscapes. And as for any landscape, it's above all an invitation for poetry, a call for contemplation.