

Devrim Bayar & Zoe Gray: Conversation with Béatrice Balcou

Originally printed in the catalogue accompanying Un-Scene III, 2015, published by WIELS, designed by Goda Budvytyte

Devrim Bayar & Zoe Gray: 'Ceremonie' is the term you use to describe the performance that you devise around an existing work of art. Why this particular terminology? What role does the screed play in your practice?

Béatrice Balcou: 'Ceremonie' evokes the enactment of a ritual in front of a small group of people. It's also an implicit reference to chanoyu, the Japanese tea ceremony - whose delicate and deliberate gestures I employ - and the establishment of a specific temporality and space. Through ritual - essentially, the installation of the work - my ceremonies create an ephemeral community around a single object and raise questions about how we look at artworks. They invite us to be more attentive to the work and to our experience of it. During the ceremony, the work becomes sacred at the same time that it is demystified, because we discover the way it is packaged, handled and installed.

DB & ZG: In your ceremonies, you present artworks made by others artist or with the caretakers of the collection. . How do you walk the tightrope between their appreciation, critique, appropriation and instrumentalisation?

BB: With each ceremony, I strike up a dialogue, either with the artist or with the caretakers of the collection. These meetings are important: they not only allow for a better understanding of the work, they also act as a moral contract. During these meetings, the curator, registrar or the artist will teach me how to handle the work, and we also outline together the conditions under which the ceremony is to unfold. I don't think the issues of approbation, critique, appropriation and instrumentalisation necessarily apply, because I don't modify or comment upon the work. I simply present it in another context. It's true that the notion of the author is never explicit in my work, but I like to keep things in movement. Moreover, I'm little troubled by the fact that notions of originality, unity and creativity continue to operate today. It's as if we were holding on to percepts that we learned long ago, and that are perhaps not all that relevant to our present context. In *The Illogic of Kassel*, Enrique Vila-Matas refers to Stanislaw Lem, and in particular to his fictional *History of Bitic Literature*, in which « technical needs require that machines be given periods of rest during which they are free from 'programming instructions', and thus able to 'stutter' and 'mix things haphazardly' ». This « hazardous activity », Vila-Matas continues, « helps them to regenerate, as it were. » I think my ceremonies and the placebo works are to be found in these moments of pause, in these dead moments.

DB & ZG: Time seems to play a very central role in your work. In society addicted to speed and with a seemingly decreasing attention span, your ceremonies oblige the audience to press « pause », to encounter an artwork at a very unusual pace. What effect does this deceleration have on our experience of art?

BB: Yes, my works does orchestrate a deceleration that goes against the « touristic » approach to the museum that has rendered it a site for the consumption of artworks. In order to make this mee-

ting with the art object precious, I inscribe my ceremonies in another temporality: whenever possible, they happen outside of the host institution's regular opening hours, sometimes as early as 8:30 in the morning. Within the ceremonies, we experience multiple temporalities: that of installing the work, that of contemplation, the moments when the work isn't yet completely installed but is nevertheless observed, the moments when we discover the work as it should be shown... Precisely because of this deceleration of the gaze, the ceremonies can be an agreeable moment for some, and a challenge for others. In effect, they demand a gymnastics of the gaze before a work that isn't necessarily to the spectator's taste. Consequently, they invite spectators to position themselves before a work that they might perhaps have ignored altogether in another situation, and for which there is no other mediation than their own gaze.

DB & ZG: You create and exhibit wooden copies of the works of art that you use, which your term « placebos ». The word « placebo » comes from the Latin meaning « I shall please » and in medical terms, a placebo is designed to trick the person taking it. Are your placebos pleasing deceivers?

BB: I prefer « replica » to « copy ». No, the placebo work is not intended to dupe. At its most basic, the placebo is there to facilitate my learning of the gestures necessary for the ceremony. We use it - the performers and myself, I mean - in order to practice and perfect the « right gesture », before working with the original. When the placebo work is shown, it takes on a different status. It goes from being a useful object to being a work of mediation. On the other, its difference from and its supposed neutrality help reveal the materiality of the original, bringing its textures, lustre and transparencies into relief. On the other, it catalyses in itself all the mental images we've made of the original work. It becomes like a phantom sculpture of the original. To me, if the ceremonies invite us to look more closely at a work, the placebos render us aware of the difficulties involved in looking at and memorizing a work. These replicas are all made of the same material, wood, and they render us almost blind. There is no hierarchy between these placebo objects. They all seem to be constructed on the same level, a bit like images online, which, indeed, is one of the ways we look at art today.

DB & ZG: For Un-Scene III, you are creating a new ceremony and placebo inspired by a work from the collection of Herman Daled. How did you select the work and what role did the collector have on this choice?

BB: I choose a work based on the relation it has with the geographical, cultural or institutional context in which it will be shown. I choose it also because of its ability to dialogue with the concept of the ceremony, that is, its ability to shore it up or put it to the test. It usually takes me some time, a few months maybe, to settle on a work. It's a process unto itself, one that is as much intellectual as technical, and one that involves the caretakers of the collection, or the artist. Things happened differently with Herman Daled. When I went to see him, he had already selected a piece for me. Actually, his choice, it seemed to me, was a reaction to the fifth ceremony, which he had attended not long before we met. I insisted on looking at other works in this collection anyway. At the end of our meeting, however, it was clear that he had put his finger on the work most pertinent to a ceremony.

(...)

