

BÉATRICE BALCOU

ONE THING AT A TIME

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Frac Franche-Comté,
Besançon

Review by
Florence Cheval

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Installation views by
Yves Petit

[E]ach figure in the painting appeared to exemplify... the state or condition of rapt attention, of being completely occupied or engrossed or (as I prefer to say) absorbed in what he or she is doing, hearing, thinking, feeling.

—Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*

On September 7, 2013, at the FRAC Franche-Comté, the artist Béatrice Balcou (born in France but based in Brussels) opened an “exhibition” entitled *Chaque Chose En Son Temps* (One Thing at a Time). It was a moment, a parenthesis that insinuated itself into the cyclical temporality of the exhibition program of an art center. This moment inscribed itself in the gap between two exhibitions: it lasted four hours, and took place while the one exhibition was being taken down and a new one set up. The space still contained a good many of the pieces that had just been on show, but now they were wrapped and waiting to be shipped, that is, they were abstracted from the gaze.¹ Meanwhile, the registrar, after carefully arranging his tools on the floor, was measuring the space and focused on assembling a piece for the upcoming exhibition.

The exhibition spaces of the FRAC were in a transitory state, and the artists-performers seized that in-between space for a specific timeframe and, in so doing, invited the spectators to explore a space-time that is usually eclipsed. Béatrice Balcou concentrated on tirelessly unwrapping and then wrapping simple wood planks as if each and every plank were an artwork (*Untitled Performance*, 2012). She worked continuously and meticulously. Marie Lund proposed a lecture-performance, performed by a guide-lecturer, about what a Danish architect remembered of a museum project he had conceived, but which had never been built (*The Roof Holding the Walls Together*, 2010). Manon de Boer showed a film of a dancer, Cynthia Loemij, who recalls a choreography while hearing a piece of music by Eugène Ysaÿe (*Dissonant*, 2010). Mark Geffriaud's *La Marée* (2010) invited volunteers to sit in the exhibition spaces and silently read Homer's *Odyssey*. For *Trois ans, trois mois*,

1.
Notably, a work by Robert Breer and several works by Jean-Christophe Norman.



trois jours (2012), Laura Lamiel sat at a desk, her back to the spectator, and drew an infinite number of concentric circles. And Carole Douillard showed her body, dozing on the floor and enveloped in a blanket (*A Sleep*, 2005).

In *Absorption and Theatricality*, Michael Fried turns to the Oxford English Dictionary to define “absorption” as a state that attests to the “entire engrossment or engagement of the mind or faculties”² in certain occupations. Absorption is an engagement so complete that it does not allow for even the least distraction. Fried, following in the footsteps of Diderot’s critical writings, applies that concept to French painting from the mid-eighteenth century. Still, upon closer inspection, it is striking to notice the extent to which the concept of absorption, which Fried applies to painting, is pertinent to the performances that make up *Chaque Chose En Son Temps*.³ The performers all seemed so absorbed in their gestures, or attitudes, that it was as if they were abstracted from the external world. Thus, the volunteers absorbed in their reading of Homer and indifferent to the gaze of the visitors (*La Marée*) remind us of some paintings by Greuze or Chardin. Laura Lamiel, seated at a desk facing the wall as she drew a series of concentric circles, echoes the posture of a Chardin etching, *Jeune dessinateur* (*Young Man Drawing*), in which we only see the draftsman’s back.

This state of absorption goes hand-in-hand with a “resistance to distraction” that manifests itself, for example, in the posture of the reading or drawing bodies in *Chaque Chose En Son Temps*; in the attention that Béatrice Balcou pays to the wood planks she handles; and in the attention with which the registrar of the FRAC assembles an artwork. All of them seem indifferent to the surrounding world: their gaze is trained on the object at hand or on their introspective musings, and thus detached from the deambulations of the visitors. In Manon de Boer’s *Dissonant*, we see a dancer, her eyes closed, entirely engrossed in recalling a choreography. Then the image disappears, and the spectators suddenly find themselves in the position of testing their own memory. The theme of the effort of remembering is closely related to absorption, and returns as well in the recollections of the architect relayed in Marie Lund’s work. Finally, there is sleep, which Fried describes as “an absorptive condition, almost an absorptive activity, in its own right”; in other words, as an activity that stands as an “extreme instance or limiting case” of “the preoccupation with absorption.”⁴ This is fully embodied in Carole Douillard’s *A Sleep*. Interestingly, the state of absorption, far from being limited to activities that are commonly regarded today as “productive,” inscribes itself in a form of temporality that is, *a priori*, unproductive, and whose nature

2.

Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 183n6.

3.

I would like to thank Carole Douillard for drawing my attention to Fried’s book.

4.

Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, pp. 35 and 32, respectively.



is essentially contemplative. Considered through the prism of absorption, *Chaque Chose En Son Temps* indeed represents an exhibition, an exhibition that gathers tableaux vivants, tableaux that both exclude the spectators (since each of the performers is entirely engrossed by the object of his or her attention, and hence indifferent to the surroundings), and include them (since each is invited to wander freely in an exhibition space that is at that moment in a state of transition).

The question of temporality, of a stretched temporality, is fully present here. For Béatrice Balcou, it was a matter of proposing another time to the spectators. Not so much by encouraging us to slow down our actions and to “take our time,” but by rendering manifest and tangible another temporality: the temporality specific to absorption, of an insistent duration, a duration whose resonance would be made perceptible and necessary in fact through the activities of absorption unfolded in that space. The state of sleep embodied by Carole Douillard’s performance could well represent the nucleus of *Chaque Chose En Son Temps*.

Jonathan Crary, in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, shows how sleep has become a key issue of production and consumption, since it still represents one of the rare space-times excluded from the hold of capitalism. For Crary, one of the challenges of the contemporary world is the eradication of sleep, since sleep, from the perspective of production and consumption, is lost time: “The stunning, inconceivable reality is that nothing of value can be extracted” from sleep.⁵ The goal is to construct a world in which people would be continually solicited by myriad occupations and distractions—something akin to our computers, which can switch to “sleep” mode, but are almost never entirely “off.”

The eradication of rest, of sleep, would allow time to be reduced entirely to productive time—and, by the same token, that would lead to the disappearance of any and every absorption, every moment of self-involvement, every return to our interiority (and these “returns” are what give human beings the resources for their reconstitution). The eradication of sleep results in the eradication of cyclical time, of the alternation between night and day, sleep and wakefulness, rest and activity, labor and leisure, public and private life. The title of the show, and indeed the show itself, sounds like a counterpoint to this current predicament: one thing at a time.

5.

Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 11.

