

Béatrice Balcou – Untitled Ceremony #03

by Eva Wittocx

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Art is not about itself but the attention we bring to it.

The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.¹

Marcel Duchamp

In the performance *Untitled Ceremony #03*, which is part of her project *Walk in Beauty*, Béatrice Balcou invites us to contemplate our understanding of time and how we look at things – in particular works of art. As an artist-in-residence at Casino Luxembourg, the artist worked with a group of seven performers, most of whom had no professional experience, to create a quiet ceremony that focused on a work by Bojan Šarčević (which had been borrowed from the collection of Mudam Luxembourg). In a certain way, Balcou stages an encounter between the work and the spectator in the exhibition space. The performances take place twice a week, outside the usual opening hours. On these days Casino Luxembourg is open only to present this performance – which is thus not aimed at the accidental visitor who happens to pass by, but at those who deliberately come to see it.

Balcou goes further than Marcel Duchamp, who at the beginning of the twentieth century claimed that art has to do with the attention the spectator devotes to the work. Duchamp's ready-mades are about what it means to present something within an art context, how the meaning of an object can change, how something acquires value. Balcou, by contrast, is interested in a focused attention that is directed towards the materiality of the work of art and towards viewing behaviour *as such*. In this context, the work of art is not an ephemeral image that must be recognized or consumed quickly – it is a physical materiality.

Most of the works in art collections have their own score, their manual or some document that specifies how the work should be preserved and presented to the public in optimal conditions. Balcou is precisely interested in these codes and in the technical particularities that must be met to handle the work. White gloves, tools and packing materials, photographs and written instructions ... All of these elements are telltale of the attention and the extreme care given to objects and works of art. Whereas in her earlier performances the artist took part herself, on this occasion she has enlisted the help of a group of non-professionals and has delegated the actual performance to people who are not particularly familiar with the visual arts. Because of that, the whole of the codes and behaviour acquires a special dimension.

During her stay in residence, the artist and the performers have worked together with professional staff from Mudam Luxembourg. In *Untitled Ceremony #03*, three actors perform a series of ge-

¹ Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (eds.), *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (Boston (Mass.): Da Capo Press, 1973).

stures to retrieve items from a box and remove carefully the protective wrapping around each item. In the short span of time of *Untitled Ceremony #03*, the spectator is invited to articulate his or her view of art. Equipped with diagrams and instruction leaflets, three persons arrange the items one by one in the showcase destined for the work, the front of which is turned to the public. After a brief moment of shared contemplation, during which the public also discovers the work through the eyes of the performers, the work is returned to its shipping box.

The performance is executed with extreme precision and lasts for forty minutes. The performers do not indulge in presenting a show – they merely focus on presenting the work of art. They exchange only a minimum of words, and when they do, they do so for practical purposes. The lender of the work has advised them with regard to every gesture and every action that involves handling the work, and the performers pay meticulous attention to everything they do. Through this process the spectator learns to appreciate the work more fully, as well as the technical skills that are required for its presentation. In a certain sense, the value of the work increases. At the same time, almost paradoxically, the work is also demystified, for we learn about the installation of the work and its manipulation, about the caution required and the conditions that are prerequisite to make the work possible. Furthermore, the performance takes place in the exhibition space where elements that have to do with its preparation are also visible: there is a wooden copy of the work that was used to practise, and a photograph with traces of fluorescent orange paint that shows how to touch the work when manipulating it. These elements help to contextualise the frailty and value of the work. The silk veils that have been hung also add to the sacred and hidden character of the events that take place in the public glass space. In the course of the performance, all these different – apparently contradictory – aspects create a tension that comes together in a unique fragment of time: the moment we contemplate Bojan Šarčević's sculpture.

A study conducted in various museums has revealed that the public contemplates a work of art on average for between two and seventeen seconds. The average spectator actually spends more time reading the captions and texts on the wall than looking at the works themselves. In his book *How to Use Your Eyes*, James Elkins writes about people who every day of their whole adult life go to the museum to look at just one painting: "You have to listen to it, and think something in response, and look again, and see how the work has changed. You have to believe that you can have an ongoing, evolving relationship with something that is unchanging. Many people might say that is impossible. Looking for a long time is not the usual way people see artworks. The usual interaction with an artwork is a glance or a glimpse or a cursory look. What I have in mind is not just glancing, but looking, staring, gazing, sitting or standing transfixed: forgetting, temporarily, the errands you have to run, or the meeting you're late for, and thinking, living, only inside the work. Falling in love with an artwork, finding that you somehow need it, wanting to return to it, wanting to keep it in your life."²

In *Untitled Ceremony #03*, the performers accompany us in an attentive experience of the work: no cursory, superficial glances – we take the time to contemplate the work in ideal circumstances. During a ceremony that unfolds in absolute serenity the performers lead our glance as if we were living a magical moment. The time we spend in front of the work is stretched and draws us into a different mode of attention. The composure radiated by the three performers plays an essential part here. Their attitude is in fact completely neutral – their practical gestures and actions are not

² James Elkins, "How Long Does it Take to Look at a Painting", in: *The Huffington Post*, 11 August 2010. See also James Elkins, *How to Use Your Eyes*, (New York/London: Routledge, 2000).

coloured by their emotions or the expressions on their face. Balcou refers to a certain “absorption” in the now of the moment. The glance of the performers initiates and completes their actions. Their calm is passed on to the public. The performance makes the public more conscious of things and of themselves, precisely by emphasising the materiality of objects, of works of art, tools, glances, gestures, space, time, the performer and the spectator. The artist refers to the Japanese tea ceremony, with its carefully orchestrated gestures, or to a frame of mind that is related to yoga, a discipline in which body and mind are entirely in harmony.

This attitude is radically different from the one we adopt when we do things routinely or move on automatic pilot. The different levels of consciousness that guide our daily actions are described by Virginia Woolf in her autobiographical text *A Sketch of the Past* (1939). Woolf distinguishes between actions in everyday life that we really experience (*moments of being*) and those we do not experience consciously (*moments of non-being*).³ What makes these actions different is not their nature, but the intensity of the feeling that accompanies them. According to Woolf, the moments we experience intensely make us understand better the essence of life. They open a window onto a much vaster dimension beyond the superficiality of the everyday. It is precisely this sort of experience we get access to during Balcou’s performance: during the ceremony – the encounter between the work and the spectator – we are, for a brief moment, more aware of the here and now.

At a time when everyone is constantly photographing the surroundings and sharing images (and works of art) on Internet and the social media, the focus is in this instance on the object as a physical and material entity. In this performance, Balcou succeeds in exposing so-called hidden situations and making us aware of the specific construction of the work of art. Unlike performances that seek an emphatic link with theatre or dance, Balcou’s new work subscribes to the serenity that is typical of the visual arts. And unlike in the artist’s performances *Untitled Ceremony #01* and *#02*, in this case language – which always fails to translate reality adequately – is banned. *Untitled Ceremony #03* does not tell a story. It is being itself that is inscribed in a temporary, specific fragment of space, of time, of the spectator. In today’s consumer society in which an incessant stream of images sponges on our attention and concentration, the work of Bojan Šarčević, selected among so many other works, becomes – thanks to Béatrice Balcou’s performance – the focus of all attention, the symbol of an instant that tears itself loose from the everyday hustle and bustle of social life.

Translated from the French by Dirk Verbiest

³ “A Sketch of the Past”, in: Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: The Hogarth Press, 1976).