

## ***Subtle subversion: Authorship and agency in Béatrice Balcou's Recent Paintings***

**by Klaus Speidel**

"The agencies of single components of a situation (from light to animals, from artifacts to sounds, from matter to vegetation, from traffic to color, ...) conditions the emergence of all-over and senseful presences."  
(Nikolaus Gansterer & Alex Arteaga)

"Recent Painting #1 (Agnes Martin, dir. Lynne Cooke, edited by Yale University Press, 2012, p. 31) 2023 // Colored inks, rainwater, vinegar, dust, watercolor, wheat starch paste and 100% Kozo Japanese paper on coated wove paper 25,3 x 18,9 cm"

Béatrice Balcou's *Recent paintings* do not, at first sight, appear to be paintings. Yet the odd lists of materials involved in their making seems to exclude that they are merely pages from books. The large-scale reproduction of one of these lists on the lightbox outside Kunstraum Memphis underlines their importance. I suggest that rather than looking at them as part of the work's "paratext" like usually, they are here part of the work itself. Taken together, these factual lists of materials convey ideas about *authorships* and *agencies* - important topics in Balcou's work.

One aspect that first makes the legends unusual is the fact that they do not seem to distinguish between human-made materials such as *wheat starch paste* and natural ones, such as *rainwater* or *dust*. Rather than merely coexisting, they are here also part of a clear timeline with various accidents, events and actions, some of which were intended to counteract the others. By treating all the materials on a par, Balcou ignores the traditional hierarchies in the art-making process where intentional human actions are usually privileged over non-intentional occurrences. While the former are regularly mentioned and discussed in writing, insofar that they are part of the making of a work, the latter are often ignored or only mentioned negatively.

As a deeper analysis reveals, the works on display in the gallery are indeed the result of a complex series of events and actions that took place over relatively long timespans. Balcou's list only includes real materials (not reproduced ones) - and the work with the longest timeline is thus based on a book about Claude Rutault produced in 1981. If we go a step further, including the initial authorship - as we perhaps should, the works based on *Peindre le rien*, a book about William Turner, imply the longest series of events, starting 180 years ago with Turner himself whose actions, I believe, significantly contribute to Balcou's final work. As is evident here, numerous agents and agencies got involved in this process, leading to several ontological shifts affecting the nature of "the work". The list of materials thus hints at a *narrative sequence*, with events and actions that we would not ordinarily treat on a par. The first sequence of events is always linked to the creation of an artwork by artists like William Turner or Agnes Martin, the second sequence is linked to the production of a book, involving multiple agencies. This was later followed by different events further affecting the appearance of the final work, such as: spilling lemonade or tea, or being damaged by water during an accident in the studio of the artist, which lead to the systematic degradation of the books that were present. The last series of events are linked to the restauration by professional restorers and the framing and hanging of the works, which are.

The first ontological shift occurred when the books were degraded, becoming worthless according to ordinary value attributions. At this moment, however, they also acquired a form of uniqueness independent of both their status as commodities resulting from mechanical reproduction and the human agency which the art market tends to reward.

Finally, the ensuing act of restauration and Balcou conferring the status of artworks to them, turned the mass-produced pages into handmade originals, thereby changing their ontological status twice more. Treating the materials used for the restauration on the same level as those that lead to the initial *degradation* - better - *transformation*, implies that the events and agencies are similarly equivalent. This also calls into question more fundamental hierarchies where "cleanliness" is preferred over "dirt" and books are supposed to be without marks of interventions following the initial printing and binding processes. Perhaps it even suggests that the rain or dust are collaborators rather than antagonists in the genesis of the work. Lastly, Balcou's series can be seen as a comment on restauration.

Restauration is a modest science aimed at invisibility. Putting this invisibility on display, Balcou makes it visible and perhaps even suggests a different appreciation of its social status. Thus, one way to see the series is as an homage to authors who - or agencies which - do not necessarily claim this status. The theory of authorship and agency implicit in the work thus recalls Alfred Gell's radical claims in *Art and Agency*. The anthropologist suggests that the "transformation" of the Rokeby Venus by Velazquez when feminist Mary Richardson slashed the painting with a knife brought into existence a new work, namely '*Slashed* Rokeby Venus, the work of a suffragette artist, Mary Richardson (and Velazquez)'. Balcou goes one step further insofar as she also admits non-human co-authors, questioning ordinary ideas of *authorship* and, perhaps, *care*, which usually give precedence to the initial author - and sometimes the more prominent authors - over ensuing or less prominent ones. By treating the rain water and the other materials on a par, Balcou participates in a recent movement of rethinking agency beyond the human, one that is also evidenced in the current research project "Contingent Agencies" by N. Gansterer and A. Arteaga, where the introductory quote originates.