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BLACK

VALÉRIE BELIN

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Black

"Islam asserts that on the unappealable day of judgment every perpetrator of the image of a living creature will be raised from the dead with his works, and he will be commanded to bring them to life, and he will fail, and be cast out with them into the fires of punishment. As a child, I felt before large mirrors that same horror of a spectral duplication or multiplication of reality. Their infallible and continuous functioning, their pursuit of my actions, ..."

Jorge Luis Borges, *Los espejos velados*, 1960

Valérie Belin's work glides through some uncertain terrain half-way between Baroque and minimalism, between the unchecked accumulation of reflections and the frozen nakedness of surfaces, between the dramatic quality of the crashed car and the impassivity of metallic still-lives... We could expand this list further, adding more examples of conflicting attitudes, but these should suffice to make it clear that Valérie Belin tries to pursue broad registers, reconciling in her work a series of concepts and attitudes that have traditionally been considered contradictory or even irreconcilable.

We might start by interpreting her work as "contemporary Baroque" landscape (a term we will try to qualify below), but viewed from the distance: a delirious panorama observed with clinical detachment. Purified, "free from accretions"¹, her images nonetheless lead us to a disturbing vision of decorative hypertrophy.

¹ Régis Durand, "La cérémonie des objets", in the catalogue *Valérie Belin*, Actes Sud/Fondation CCF pour la Photographie, Arles, 2000.

Fleshless reflections

The 'mirror' series is characteristic of Valérie Belin's attitude to representation: on the one hand an impenetrable jungle of objects and reflections, of spaces and intervals, a strange place in which the surrealist delirium seems close to being infected by *kitsch*, by the obsessive beauty of decoration; and on the other hand, images at the very limits of representability, where mirrors reflect mirrors in a strict tautological expression; an aesthetic inversion of Robert Morris's *Mirrored Cubes* or what Joseph Kosuth might have called a "reflecting object reflecting a reflecting object". These photographs of mirrors seem to derive their logic from language and from paradox: somewhere between Wittgenstein's tautology and Borges' labyrinth. In their cleanliness and their concision, nonetheless, they always seem closer to Wittgenstein than to Borges. On one occasion, Belin argued: "My photographs are not *kitsch*, even if the objects I photograph are".² Valérie Belin is undaunted by the task of photographing the landslide of ornamental excess and vulgarity: she knows that she is capable of keeping a cool head and a steady hand.

The mirrors were photographed *in situ* in the shops on Murano in the Venice Lagoon. If the accumulation of stimuli from daily life can eventually saturate our retina, spending an entire day in Murano, going in and out of dozens of identical multi-coloured shops, peopled by millions of disorienting reflections, must be considered nothing short of an overdose of the visual, a shock in time which Valérie Belin's *dense* photographs manage to rarefy even further, turning it single-instant impacts.

In these pictures of mirrors our eye is lost in a foreground which, through the overwhelming proliferation of details, appears to extract our sight to the nothing, to blind it in an overabundance of reflections. Mirrors that are inhibited or egoistic in the hypertrophy of their capacity to reflect; they reflect only themselves, in a useless self-referential wasteland. They do not contain the reality, the bodies – the *chair*. French draws a distinction between *chair* and *viande*³, between human flesh (*chair*), the paradigm of pleasure and sin, and the meat of the animals we eat (*viande*). In Valérie Belin's mirrors the *chair*, the human figure is not reflected; the people have fled – or perhaps have

² Interview with the artist by Thierry Heynen, quoted in Liliana Albertazzi, "Espejos, reflejos, espejismos y fotografía", in *Exit*, No. 0, p. 92.

³ Translator's Note: No distinction is drawn in Spanish between "flesh" and "meat", hence the explanation in the original text of the difference between the two French terms.

not yet arrived – while in the butcher’s shops of the Paris market of Rungis the *viande*, the sectioned meat, appears in its grossest materiality, without shape or features: *viands*, the *missing* reflection.

The Dress Stripped of its Brides, Even

Like that *missing* body in the terrifying photographs of brides’ dresses in their packaging, those boxes whose resemblance to coffins is immediately striking. The *Mariée* and the *Morte*: a wedding night with an allusion to a death rattle. In her series on Moroccan brides, however, when the dress has been filled with the bride’s body, everything again seems more banal, less terrible, more pleasant. These are pictures that come close to the concept of the “wedding photo”, but not quite, for there is still something horrific about them that we find it difficult to distinguish. Is it perhaps that sense of loss of the everyday which Freud called the uncanny (*Unheimliche*)?⁴ Or perhaps it is that, surrounded by such a vast frame, overwhelmed by the decoration, the bride ceases to exist as a woman? Perhaps *La Mariée* has not been laid bare by her groom, but has simply disappeared into the mist of the decorative spectacle; been turned into a frame or a pedestal.⁵

These photographs of Moroccan brides show a distance – perhaps even a certain disapproval – between the artist and the motif, but they also display a complicity between the artist and the photographic medium. Wedding photography, an expression of the “zero degree” of photography; making a wedding report, is not in this case an encounter or an exercise in documenting the memorable, but a turn (of the screw) of language: it is entering the lion’s den of banality in order; through distance and sensitivity, to distil a few drops of pure unadulterated beauty, of *form*.

In the series on the boxed dresses, the absence of the body is evident. “The bride’s dress is missing the bride”, writes Liliana Albertazzi in the text quoted above. Expressed in terms of modernist mythology, this would be *The Dress Stripped of its Brides, Even*. The “*mise en nu*” has not revealed a glorious body and has therefore not set in motion the circle of gaze and desire: on the contrary, it has left only a jumble of clothes on the floor, an absence.

⁴ E.T.A. Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, with an introductory essay by Sigmund Freud on the “Uncanny” (*Das Unheimliche*). Spanish translation by L. López Ballesteros y de Torres, Pequeña Biblioteca Calamvs Scriptorivs, Barcelona, Palma de Mallorca, 1979. Jean Clair has written a very interesting study of the relationship between Freud’s concept of *Unheimliche* and metaphysics – cf. Jean Clair, “*Metafísica et Unheimlichkeit*”, in the catalogue *Les Réalismes. 1919-1939*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1980, pp. 26-41.

⁵ Moraza Perez, Juan Luis, *Dispositivos de discontinuidad. Transfiguraciones y formaciones de marcos y pedestales en el arte contemporáneo*. 1993.

Oscars for spilled sweat

Most of us live with our bodies: bodybuilders construct theirs. Bodybuilders seek to extend their bodies, to turn them into sculptures, but –paradoxically- their grandiose gestures of muscular tension make them smaller, turning them into statuettes, trophies, like so many *Oscars*: the ultimate, grossest reduction of the human body to an outline. The spilling of sweat is turned into a coffee-table figurine, and it is from this perspective that the images of isolated objects, of glass or metal from 1993-94 take on a key reference in Belin’s work. In an attitude that might be post-human, pre-human or perhaps even *extra*-human, these body builders, pathetic statues of flesh and veins, appear to stand outside the flesh and veins, the circulation of the blood, the ailments and the pleasures of the *chair*.

Opulence of muscles, unproductive sweat, effort without work; are these bodies, which Belin photographs with undisguised malice, a most meticulous metaphor for the symbolic productivity of modern capitalism? It is a work –not so much that of the photographer as that of the models involved –that is charged with *formalism*. Barefoot sculptures without pedestals, since they themselves – in their accumulated effort in the gymnasium – carry the pedestal that extols and highlights them.⁶ Another paradox: the effort to *build oneself* a body, to escape from the body one has been given, leads to a loss of individuality. A regulated effort makes the muscles uniform. Moreover, why would one look at the faces, given the overwhelming presence of the bodies?

The body builders are beings *in transit* towards some type of muscular heroism, which is *medicalised* to a large extent. They share the transitory nature of the transsexual; changing from man to woman or from display-case statue to walking person.⁷ But bodybuilders are beings in transit who have yet to find where to get off: a transsexual has an ultimate destination – to reach the sex to which he or she longs to belong: a body-builder, constructing his body on the same platform, has no goal or purpose; he makes a transformation without having any destination. More than any other *weak* identity, bodybuilders diffuse their muscular activity in the absence of an arrival point.

But they still lie within the strict terrain of the “human”. The term “posthuman” has generally been used to refer to the presence of prostheses, mechanical elements inside the body, whose

⁶ Valérie Belin herself highlights the sculptural nature of these figures in her interview with Catherine de Smet, “Valérie en el País de las Maravillas”, in *Exit*, No. 0, PP. 100-104.

⁷ Régis Durand calls it “mutant identity”; *Op cit.*

proliferation leads us towards a new biological stage, a sort of algorithm or short-cut that accelerates the slow development of evolution. But do these metal-muscled bodies have anything to do with the post human syndrome, with the dreaded frontiers of the *robot*? Probably not. The appearance of these bodies does not derive from an *addition*, not even from an exchange, but rather, at most, from the anomalous *development* of something that already existed in the person's interior.⁸ The muscles they exhibit are only an exceptional enhancement of something they already possessed.

And it is here that we again come up against the *Unheimliche*: the uneasiness these bodies cause us does not derive from some monstrous humankind, but precisely from their natural, biological, nature, from the fact that their hypertrophy is the result of excessive exercise and not mutation; ultimately it derives from our fear of seeing ourselves in their place, of recognising our thighs or our shoulders in those which look so monstrous to us. This feeling of horror in the face of the known is increased when we realise that the least-transformed parts of their bodies are their heads: the metaphor of the "mental gymnasium" is precisely that, a metaphor; because (fortunately) an excess of intellectual exercise causes no visible hypertrophy. Might it not be the union of a "normal" head and its entirely human gaze with a monstrous body – as in some Dadaist collage – that provokes in us the fright of the *Unheimliche*?

Nature morte

Valérie Belin's still-lives, neither cold nor hot, have the merit of ignoring the expressive temperature and of resolutely directing themselves towards a form of peculiar and unprecedented *enunciation*: I stand next to all this, but I keep my distance; I am removed from all this junk, but I long to devour it with my camera lens.

More than bathed in light, these objects appear to be shaken by an electric current which makes the black shine out: *electrography*, more than photography; surges of current more than baths of light... Or perhaps surges of darkness. In some of her photographs, especially in the series of mirrors and the reflecting and translucent objects, what is inscribed on the plate appears to be not so much light as shadow, the surge of darkness. A *skotography* or shadow writing, which replaces the bright daytime photograph.⁹ The artist is aware of this, and it is one of the reasons (there may be others)

⁸ Prosthesis comes from the Greek, *prosthesis*, meaning addition.

⁹ In ancient Greek, the adjective most often used for darkness, in the real and figurative sense, was *skoteinós*. Plutarch used it to refer to the shaded parts of a picture. It comes from *skotos*, meaning *shade*.

she has created her series of heads of black women: it is the darkness of the skin, the shadow more than the light, that impresses the negative and constructs the form.

In recent years, photography has acquired a status which seems to have made certain debates redundant, such as the question of colour versus black and white. Cindy Sherman's tiny *Film Stills*' or the monumental stage machinery of Andreas Gursky have apparently acquired some linguistic equivalence: they suggest that present-day photography has become so *estranged* from reality that the minor question of colour or black and white has become irrelevant. However, in all planes of expression we find emphasis and indifference, passion and apathy. In this regard, Valérie Belin swims against the tide and will always have her detractors because of her condition as a "photographer". Since she first began her artistic career in the early 1990s, she has been closely linked to an extreme language of dark greys and blinding whites. Does the use of black and white in her photographs signify something? Might not her work have inverted Barthes' famous *dictum* against colour, whereby it is black-and white which looks like an undertaker's make-up?¹⁰ What is true is that what Michel Poivert so accurately calls *morbidezza* or "sick grace"¹¹ is also present in Valérie Belin's pictures, both in those which directly allude to the fragmented or disappeared body – the butcher's shops, the brides' dresses in their boxes – and also in those other ones which might initially appear to have nothing to do with such questions, like the mirrors, the *bodybuilders* or the tailors' dummies.

The unlidged eye

Working in series more than in isolated images, Valérie Belin not only arrives to a greater depth or intimacy with certain issues that interest her; she also manages to make the meanings acquire a resonance, to form an echo that runs through them in various directions. For example, the portraits of young women attain a very different dimension if we place them beside the disturbing portraits of the tailors' dummies. In this new series, produced by the Koldo Mitxelena Kulturunea and exhibited for the first time in San Sebastian, Valérie Belin has photographed busts of dummies in shop windows, suitably decked out with make-up and wigs, finally managing to satisfactorily blur the distinction between the living and the inanimate. I use the term "satisfactorily" to stress the fact that the artist is not trying to trigger the confusion of the *trompe l'oeil* or the banal identity of the wax

¹⁰ Roland Barthes wrote in *Camera Lucida*: "(La couleur est un enduit appose ultérieurement sur la vérité originale du Noir-et-Blanc. La Couleur est pour moi un postiche, un fard (tel celui dont on peint des cadavres)" "Colour is a layer spread afterwards on the original truth of black and white. For me, colour is a prosthetic element, a type of makeup (like those they lavish on dead bodies)". *Camera Lucida* [La cámara lúcida. Nota sobre la fotografía]. Spanish translation by Joaquim Sala-Sanahuja, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 1982, p. 144.

¹¹ Michel Poivert, *Morbidezza*, unpublished text.

figures of the Musée Grévin. Rather, she seeks to illuminate that intermediary space, that undefined place which contemporaneity is increasingly reducing.

And since we have already mentioned the syndrome of the “post human”, popularised by Jeffrey Deitch¹², it might also be worth pointing out that in this new series, Belin comes close to the imaginative post-romantic, that tradition which, beginning with E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “Ophelia” and Villiers de L’Isle-Adam’s “Eva Futura”, was to culminate in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*. And she thus appears to distance herself from the *cyborgs* and other apostles of the “over-coming” of biology.

But, returning to the theme of this series, and the series of young white women: what brand of identity do they contribute *vis-à-vis* the famous portraits of young people of both sexes by Thomas Ruff and other German neo-documentalists? In my opinion, more than in the pictures themselves the answer lies in the figurative and thematic context of the series. In other words, the value and significance of these young women’s face – inexpressive, authoritatively frontal but absolutely individualised – is specified in relationship with the dummies, in that correspondence between flesh and wood, both covered with a dense layer of make-up, between the hair and the wig, between the human gaze and the glassy gaze. And this correspondence is established especially because Belin *forces* both terms, humanising the dummies as far as possible and mechanising the women, until she manages to supersede this effect of *Unheimliche* we have mentioned. This strategy of approximation can be seen in the respective treatment of the flesh-and-blood women and the dummies, on the other hand, the shots are “artistically” foreshortened and the lighting dramatically highlights certain features. The size of the heads, although subtle, also marks a difference; the woman is closer, in a descriptive foreground, whereas the statue stands somewhat removed, offering a flash of art with that distance.

Valérie Belin’s work appears to be woven in a cumulus of malicious associations. The portraits of young women are part of the sequence of portraits of transsexuals, dummies and bodybuilders. By placing all this material together we can see how the artist is concerned with developing a map of fugitive identities, transitory beings and the fringes of identity.

The dummies are disturbing by their proximity to the human but also as metaphors of inhumanity; yet the photographs of young women, despite portraying common faces, also awaken in the spectator an indefinable sense of mistrust. What is it caused by, if everything appears to be correct?

¹² Deitch, Jeffrey. *Post human* / by Jeffrey Deitch; design, Dan Friedman. Pully/Lausanne : FAE musée d’art contemporain ; Rivoli [Italy] : Castello di Rivoli ; Athens : Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art ; Hamburg : Deichtorhallen Hamburg ; New York : North American distribution, DAP/Distributed Art Publishers, c1992.

They are young, neither children nor mature women, presumably French (in other words compatriots of the artist). They are neither very good-looking nor very ugly and do not wear clothes that would allow us to situate them in any specific bracket of the population. In short, they are perfectly *normal*. The answer again lies in the exercise of a slight *forcing* which appears to be characteristic of Belin's work. Rather than normal young people, these faces describe the paradigm of normality itself. Might it not be their very commonplaceness we find so disturbing? Before it was the "abnormality" of the bulging muscles that provoked that feeling of unease; now it is the plain normality of common faces. Valérie Belin might well be described as an artist who explores the exceptional in all its aspects, while we spectators must resign ourselves to – and reflect on – our narrow mentality, which mistrusts the limits.

We have already mentioned Marcel Duchamp in passing. Perhaps this would be a good point to quote his theory of indifference, that elegant and precise method he used to decide which objects were eligible to become ready-mades and which were not. Duchamp wrote: "I want to make it clear that the choice of these "Ready-mades" was never dictated by aesthetic delectation. The choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference with a total absence of good or bad taste... a complete anaesthesia, in fact". I imagine Valérie Belin walking around Paris looking for faces whose difference is their indifference, normal faces to be "immortalised" by art, with an attitude very close to that of Duchamp when, in November 1914, he looked in the window of the *Bazaar de l'Hôtel de Ville* in Paris and wondered whether that commonplace bottle rack was suited to become a work of art.

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