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MORBIDEZZA

VALÉRIE BELIN

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Morbidezza

The iconography of Valérie Belin's photographs is silent. It has that silence that precedes disasters and then follows them. The silence of accidents, the spectacular labyrinths of glass and mirrors, of ceremonies, the bodies and faces where we do not know whether the beings they belonged to are still alive. The absence of any dramatization, the determination not to strive for effect, come together in the production of images without affection. Even with themes, figures and subjects that bring a whole culture of expressiveness with them. What is this ailment which is both contained and exposed? The paradox that runs through all her work makes up its aesthetic purpose but also seems to be tributary to a situation typical of the history of art in the late 20th century. Which history of art has an artist born in France in the mid 60s come up against? Probably one which is paradoxical too. First, the institutionalization of the avant-gardes such as minimalism and conceptual art. Second, the famous "return" of painting and the figuration that, first discreetly and then triumphantly, accompanied photography in its struggle for recognition in the field of contemporary art in the 80s and 90s. I believe that Belin's art is part of that twofold heritage on the basis of which our analysis deals with the product of a formal reductionism and a permanent vitality which makes us see the traces of life in the forms. In the sphere of that dialectic a singular relation with culture springs from the heart of this work. Nothing related to a tradition of counterculture, but rather a relation in which the notion of health –of what would be an existential state of the world and perhaps of art itself– seems to be brought into play.

The first appearance Belin gave her photographic work –when she completed her painting studies at the School of Fine Arts in Bourges in 1987– bears witness to the young artist's great interest in minimalism. That appearance –the negative image of a luminous tube– also affirms the will, which

has never been denied since, to confront the physical qualities of the photograph. A tribute to Dan Flavin in the sense of the inversion of values, but also a choice of a refined vocabulary, reduced to a luminous chemistry, this first work which she has never shown again since may be defined as an incandescence which has taken shape through black and white: like the white incandescence that takes place at the precise instant of the glow of red hot coals. The attempt was too simple to acquire the virtue of an experiment. Nevertheless it was radical enough to be the speculative origin of a photographic work which, since then, has tried to preserve that minimalist eloquence by exploring what could be the reverse (not the opposite) of a literalist art: an organic, biomorphic or mecanomorphic work contained in the strictest of rules. The year after that inaugural work was given over to study. Belin did research at university in the field of art theory and broadened her knowledge of minimalism through an interest in phenomenology. That sensitive approach to artistic production marked by a formal austerity enables her to turn the theme of inspiration around - or at least question it from another point of view. Geometry, series, exploitation of the visual and physical foundations, could the integrity of the lexis of rigour not be passed once again through the filter of imagination? And was photography, its devices and rules —far more, a thousand times more even than its cultural scope— not going to meet that demand? It comes as no surprise that since then Belin has paid such attention to the American artist Tony Smith. Smith's pieces —he is an artist of the expressionist generation of the New York School rather hastily related with the minimalist generation—, black, modular, geometrical, but also allegorical and dynamic works which did not flinch from anthropomorphism or even zoomorphism. Smith, who was as interested in crystallography as in architecture, which Wright understood so well, made his black sculptures resound beyond the theatricality that Michael Fried reproached the minimalists for so severely. Smith countered the gleaming whites of Sol Le Witt's modules, Dan Flavin's radiations, Donald Judd's flashes and Robert Morris's subdued glow, with a form of *terribilità*: a simple expressionism that had renounced the gesture. The titles of some of Smith's major works *Wall*, *Die*, *Marriage*, *We Lost*, *The Snake is Out*, *Amaryllis*— remind us that in the early 60s a work which was the reverse of minimalism spoke of walls and death, of marriage and failure, of fantastic animals and flowers. In many ways, Belin comes from that art in which expressiveness has been petrified into a sculptural form and today it seems that her work goes beyond any iconophobia and proposes something no less terrible, in other words, a form of vitrification of expressiveness in the image. But where Smith makes the evocative power of his titles resound like a thunderclap, forcing the gaze to project improbable metaphors onto black blocks, Belin renounces the use of the title as a weapon from the outset, preferring the evidence of the object and the subject represented: glass, cars, bodybuilders, faces... These are real metaphors which have been turned around because these descriptions, with their burning workmanship, rebuff any attempt to see anything more in them. The imaginative operation then seems exterior, objective

and hallucinatory, strengthened by the monumentality she affirms through the imposing format of the photographs.

The choice of each motif in Belin's series is the product of an intuition which accompanies the human adventure of their execution. But although the artist agrees to explain it, that adventure is not a story provided by the images (the epic of car wrecks, haunting bodybuilders' or transsexuals' communities, etc.). Both objects and beings seem to be immobilized in the pose or, to be more exact, in the dismantling of their form in front of the lens. In that sense we might say that rather than represented they are reproduced. That reproduction must be distinguished from the reproducibility to which the decline of the aura has been attributed since Walter Benjamin. For here photographic reproduction takes on the power of a ceremony. Like the reproductions made by Walker Evans of the primitive sculptures exhibited at the MOMA in New York (1935) or the ones Jacques André Boiffard did for the magazines of his friends Breton and Bataille, or the ones Brassai did of Picasso's sculptures, Belin's use description to seek the magic which art manages to conserve even in the culture of technical reproduction. Her work is established within the narrow, controlled space of reproduction, within the rule she herself imposes on expression. And yet her aesthetic is not that of the archive or the document, an aesthetic inherited from both Sander and Blossfeldt, who conserve the strength of the original use value of the image. Belin's aesthetic is that of reproduction as the principle of subtraction of the author and the event from the theme. Through the ritual of reproduction she reveals a transcendence that relates it to an art of meditation.

Historically and aesthetically, a superior concept of reproduction enables an approach to the objective and descriptive character of Belin's works. Just as their anchorage in a minimalist aesthetic allows us to understand in what way photography here is placed at the service of an expressiveness contained in formal rigour, thus disconnected from the old romantic idea of self-expression, in favour of a metaphorical asceticism. In that way the formal radicalness that springs from the tradition of the image of reproduction achieves the conditions of a modern aesthetic crowned by the arrangement in series. Belin's series are not conceptual: they are never repetitions of the same thing (standardization) but variations on a theme. The works are always autonomous, they converse with their variants both within the exhibition space and in the book space, but they are not interdependent: neither in narrative nor discursive mode, not even in reiterative mode. It is rather a collection of "cases", of forms, of objects and figures. Whereas the protocol of photographing prevents any expression by the artist in the sense of a photographic "style", within the rigid universe of their presentation –and in what it represents socially and philosophically– the themes impose an expressive charge that is sometimes barely contained by the form. Indeed, Belin's aesthetic is set in

that internal dialectic of the images - the struggle between the openly expressive potential of the themes and the observance of the formal rule. The distancing from herself, that withdrawal by the author, even her disappearance, is apparently satisfied through that breath between expression and coercion that acts on her. For that reason the work is not free. Or rather, the lack of freedom is at the heart of the work.

In that sense, might Belin's work not be an orphan of the conceptual tradition? In it nothing seems to have been inherited from the metaphorical and critical register of the conceptual uses of photography. It is true that —albeit arbitrarily— we could connect her earliest work, a photograph of a fluorescent tube, with the film stills in which Bruce Nauman manipulates a neon light in front of the lens (*Manipulating a Fluorescent Tube*, 1969). But whereas the American artist is founding the identity of the "true artist" again on the basis of analytical philosophy and at the time of "the death of the author" (Barthes, 1968) the body becomes the experimental instrument par excellence, the young French artist's concerns bear witness to a different relation with the spectator. Nauman's play on presence-absence in the 60s —for which the photograph showing him in the private space of his studio was so useful to stand in for his absence before the spectator— yields its place to an inflexible withdrawal. A withdrawal marked by the coercion of expressiveness, made material by the ritual of reproduction, which the silence of the title strengthens by even refusing language, and by the perspectives condemned by their absence, that withdrawal, endorsed by the photographic workmanship and the incandescence of the values, leaves the meaning vacant. Nevertheless, that vacancy of meaning relegates the critical perspective while unquestionably strengthening the imaginative part. However much of an orphan of photoconceptualism it may be, Belin's work nevertheless resounds with the distant echo of the phrase Nauman had inscribed on the spiral of a fluorescent tube, *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (1967).

Since any one of the themes is enough to saturate its own critical connotation (social, political, even religious), it cannot be the instrument of a discourse. The car, animal, robot or human carcasses, the adornments of historical lace or the traditional Moroccan wedding dresses, the appearance of glass and iron, faces and genders, inanimate or metamorphosed, Belin's whole repertoire is a sample of a phenomenology of social material. What we feel through the retinal experience of what covers and shelters us, hides us or clothes us, carcasses, ornaments and appearance form the triad of an optical and social unconscious. How can it be that a work directed in this way can tackle subjects so openly related to the human condition while managing to reject any naturalism and detaching itself from the critical tradition? It is probably able to do so because its task is to reveal "mystical" truths. The instrument of this work looks like an X-ray, a metaphor the artist often uses, because it translates

both the formal appearances of the photographs -obtaining values by revelation through light– and, perhaps less consciously, because it sounds out the health of the social body. Rather than a revelation pronounced in messianic tones, which was the form actually adopted to a large extent by conceptual art, this is a survey report. Is art –as the epitaph on the pediment of a famous work by Louise Bourgeois affirms– the guaranty of sanity?

And so the question remains: what is the relation between Belin’s art and culture? Aware that there is a paradoxical history of contemporary art, it avoids any irony or postmodern critical approach. The recourse to the photographic medium takes the shape of a rejection of the cultural practice of photography. And yet the transsexuals, the constructed bodies of the musclemen, the remains of cars or the carcasses in butchers’ shops and the brides’ dresses seem to redirect the condition of art to the attire of the social condition, illuminated by the light of the living dead. That is when the brilliance of black reveals the substance of a morbid aesthetic. Morbidity, despite its first syllable, is not death; it refers to sickness. And so this may be a sick relation with culture described by the delicate treatment of flesh, the very definition of sickly grace: morbidezza.

Translated from French by Caplletra.

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