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VALÉRIE BELIN, GAME OF SIGNS

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Valérie Belin, game of signs

Valérie Belin's Deep Surfaces

Valérie Belin's already considerable body of work becomes increasingly profound as she raises questions not only concerning issues at the heart of today's critical thinking on technological mediations, but even regarding living beings and the illusory effects surrounding their presence and absence in representation.

Of course, in her work one can isolate certain aspects that evoke death and catastrophic occurrences, but to view it exclusively from this narrow angle would mean failing to grasp its complexity and ambiguities. True, there are the bridal dresses laid out in their boxes/coffins, the carcasses of crashed cars, the motors, the sides of beef hanging from hooks, and maybe also the monstrosly muscled body builders, the faces of certain models and transsexuals, and even the flowers that seem to have been reduced to a shadow of their former selves by some nuclear conflagration. Some of these pieces are indeed very much like traditional vanitas with their various iconographic components somewhat dispersed and put through variations in autonomous series. Thus her oeuvre taken as a whole could be considered one vast vanitas whose parts can never quite come together, as if all we could see were a few fragments emerging here and there. From this point of view, Belin's work is an acknowledgement that art today has become nothing but an art of details, or perhaps ruins.

The Living and Its Representation

But at the same time we are immediately struck by the continuity and coherence of this work, and this spurs us to seek its real logic elsewhere. The formal continuity—a sort of “*manière noire*,” with strong contrasts, close-up shots, the attention to grain and light—cannot hide the tensions that give these photos an impact far beyond the iconographic or thematic content by which we might be tempted to classify them. Thus, although the idea that this work is basically characterized by *morbidezza*¹ — a kind of languorous morbidity, or what another critic called “sick grace”— may initially strike us as spot-on, it is just too narrow to capture the essence.

Rather than an “aesthetics of morbidity,” I believe it would be better to see her work as a subtle interrogation, ruthlessly pursued in series after series, of the concept of living beings and the question of their representation. In a short introductory text I wrote about Belin in the publication when she was shortlisted for the Marcel Duchamp prize in 2004, I highlighted, by way of a conclusion, what I believe is the principle question to be revisited in light of her most recent work (especially the portraits of fashion models, masks, clones, packages of potato chips and pallets of discarded computer and electronic components): “What is the living today? And how is it affected by incertitude, metamorphosis and the ‘forces of destruction’?”²

There has already been ample discussion of the “forces of destruction.” But perhaps there hasn’t been enough emphasis on the degree to which this kind of thematic analysis is indissolubly linked with technical considerations. These “technical legitimacies” that Adorno discussed are what constitute the raw material for the representation of the object.³ The object in question, of course, in the series such as the lace dresses, the crashed cars and the body builders, is a marked object, an object that has been through a lot and carries the mark of some sort of violence or of wear. The close-up, the picture plane brought slightly forward, the powerful contrast—all this brings out the object’s castoff future. But the use of medium-sized formats, instead of the view camera used in the most recent series (the models, potato chip packs, computer components) also greatly contributes

¹ This aspect is pretty much covered in Michel Poivert’s excellent essay “*Morbidezza*” in the catalogue *Valérie Belin* for the exhibition at the DA2, Domus Artium 2002, Salamanca (text in English and Spanish).

² *Le Prix Marcel Duchamp 2004* (Valérie Belin, Carole Benzaken, Philippe Cognée, Richard Fauguet, Philippe Ramette), Centre Pompidou, 2005, pp. 6-13.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, “*Sans Paradigme*,” *L’Art et les arts*, texts edited, translated and introduced by Jean Lauxerois, Desclée de Brouwer, 2002, p. 40: “In art, in fact, no content can be present without its manifestation being mediated, and technique is the concept inherent in such mediation. It is there and only there that technical legitimacies are achieved and it is possible to judge if an artwork has meaning or not. It is only in the nerve centers of its constitution—and not in what the artwork in the end wants to say or express—that it is possible to grasp its meaning.” On this subject, see also the whole of Bernard Stiegler’s work, including *De la misère symbolique, 2 - La catastrophe du sensible*, Galilée, 2005. It’s the “nerve center” of Belin’s work that I am trying to get at here, and I have been much aided by my several discussions with the artist, especially on technical issues. I would like to express my gratitude.

to the impact of these photos. The graininess of the large-format prints and the depth of field, even though shallow, obtained by the medium format, contribute to the capture of the energies with which these objects are charged. Graininess and depth of field have a kinetic, almost narrative power (even though this is a minimal "narration" concerning entropy, the slide towards toward death). The representation of the object which is so massively present is accompanied by a spectral resonance obtained through technical choices alone, with the apparent absence of any subjective point of view, of any artificial staging or constructed narrative proposition.

As soon as we pay close attention to those photos we see opening before us a host of paradoxes and reversals that upset the superficial simplicity of the objects represented and the power of the factuality of their representation. The use of a large-format view camera in Belin's recent series seems to produce a contradictory set of effects. On the one hand, the photographed object seems to be magnified, its identity exaggerated somehow, every detail larger than life. But on the other, the shallow depth of field flattens the volume and reduces the object to a surface. Thus the photos of packs of potato chips give no indication of the three dimensionality of these objects, but on the contrary makes them look like posters, like photographs of posters, more exactly, since an attentive eye can make out the screening on the graphic elements shown on the packaging.

Fragile Equilibrium

The photo reveals the surface of the object, it appropriates the object as a surface, which turns out, in this case, to be a mechanical representation, a sort of photo itself, in an infinite concatenation of the chain of representation. In the case of the portraits of models (living or artificial), what the precision of the view camera brings out is the texture of the model's face, her skin, whether real or artificial. The closer you get, the harder it is to distinguish this texture from the grain of the print itself. The real, already marked by incertitude (is this a store window dummy or a living woman?) is confounded with its representation all the way down to its most delicate components. From this point of view, it's worth comparing Belin's model photos with the models featured in a recent ad campaign for a major cosmetics brand. In the latter case, the "women" touting the product are obviously dummies. The disturbing quality here does not arise from uncertainty (you can't usually see these 4 x 3-meter panels from up close, since they're made to be visible from far away, and at any rate the way the image is treated doesn't make it possible to find out more even if it's right in front of your nose). It comes from one of the kind of "transgressive gestures" so beloved by ad agencies, the double subversion of the stereotypical woman as object, once making it literally true,

and a second time turning it around—the woman is no longer treated as an object; rather, the object speaks in its own name and takes the place of the woman. You can't complain about the exploitation of women when clones are doing the talking.

Valérie Belin has been working on these questions linked to the uncertainty of identity and its representations for a long time. This is exemplified in her series of Michael Jackson clones as well as the series of transsexuals and mannequins (living and plastic). What constitutes resemblance to someone (Michael Jackson) or to a gender (the transsexuals)? What distinguishes an ideal face, according to the canons of fashion, from its translation in an inert representation? Is it a matter of distinctive traits or a certain air, of signs—and how are they to be interpreted? Further, does an "original" (the person "him/ herself," a "real" woman, etc.) resemble itself, or is it, on the contrary, the sum of its dissimilarities? Roland Barthes, it will be recalled, wrote that "The Oriental transvestite" actor "does not copy Woman but signifies her."⁴ All these identities are marked and constructed, just like, in the end, the objects in the previous series, but with a more restrained violence and greater subtlety. What is it in these faces, living or artificial, that conveys a desire for total, desperate, pathetic identification? What is it, on the contrary, that conveys a game of signs, "gestures of the idea"? Whereas the faces, by means of plastic surgery, imitation and the smoothing over of differences, tend to become masks, the masks come to life and become faces, their features full of expression. The eyes blaze, the mouths scream and this desire to come to life, to take over from life, an almost painful vital energy, twists these rubber masks, in total contrast to the unwrinkled, smooth and inexpressive visages of the other series.

With the recent series of old computers piled up on pallets, Belin seems to be moving away from these identity issues and turning once again to a direct relationship with the object. The accumulations of computer central processing units and monitors seem like sculptures found in fragile equilibrium from which the artist, so as to get a clearer shot, simply removed the shrinkwrap that held them together. But oddly enough, this apparently rather straightforward protocol is what contributes the most to the effect of an illusion. The qualities of the object, its surface, are magnified and emphasized by the precision of the camera, and the absence of grain gives the prints the precision of a pen and ink drawing. It's as if she simply took surfaces already composed and set into

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, Hill and Wang, 1982, p. 53 (text) and 89 (the following): "The transvestite actor (since the women's roles are played by men) is not a boy made up as a woman, by dint of a thousand nuances, realistic touches, costly simulations, but a pure signifier whose underneath (the truth) is neither clandestine (jealously masked) nor surreptitiously signed (by a waggish wink at the virility of the support, as in Western drag shows, opulent blondes whose trivial hand or huge foot infallibly give the lie to the hormonal bosom): simply absented. The actor, in his face, does not play the woman, or copy her, but only signifies her; if, as Mallarmé says, writing consists of 'gestures of the idea,' transvestism here is the gesture of femininity, not its plagiarism."

rhythm, as if the surfaces themselves were already photographs, so much so that once again the status of the image becomes uncertain, but this time for different reasons. The three-dimensional object, like the packs of potato chips, becomes a simple printed surface, revealing its character as an industrial image and not its existence as an object of consumption. But unlike the potato chips, the details of the image reveal nothing but the surface, in its smallest details, such as the reflections on the metal parts, for example. The surface has no secrets; it is smooth and empty, as inert as a machine reduced to silence. Here the return of the object is radical, with no narrative or violence, simply a self-conscious formalism. What you get is what it (the view camera) sees...

Translated by L-S Torgoff.

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