

## **Pierre-André Lienhard : Portrait of the Artist as a Space and Time Surveyor.**

« The artist who works with earth, works with time. » Walter de Maria

It is far from all autonomous, regular, and comforting studio production, implanted a *posteriori* in one exhibition venue after another, that Ariane Epars works – not day after day, but from day to day – with an eye to contributing artistically to a specific spatial context. For without an exhibition site, no work can be accomplished, no *œuvre* achieved. Epars interferes in specific fashion with whatever venue she is granted, detecting and underscoring its idiosyncrasies, a certain dimension so commonplace and obvious in terms of everyday usage that it normally goes unnoticed.

Putty, chalk, crushed tiles, clotheslines, soft soap, plaster, used clothes, moving van blankets, floor wax, masking tape, concrete – a *pars pro toto* sampling of materials this artist uses and all of which link up with the household, with house building, and with housekeeping.

In her manner of availing herself of these materials as well, the artist resorts to everyday gestures : *applying* putty to windows with her fingers (thus filtering daylight), *tracing* a network of parallel lines on the floor or wall, *soaking* a floor with liquid soap and *dumping* plaster over it, *cutting up* used clothes and *weaving* their pieces into a rug, *rubbing* a wall with charcoal sticks, *spreading* and *packing flat* earth on a museum floor, separating two spaces by *unrolling* adhesive tape. But the shifting of these gestures from their usual objects of application draws the viewer's attention as much to their nature *per se* as to their final purpose.

Determined by the site's layout, the artist's input is a manner of taking a survey of the context available to her. She proceeds to do so using simple gestures and commonplace materials, but also investing a considerable amount of work. Preliminary trials serve to quantify the material and work hours in terms of a span of – often limited – time, that is the number of days preceding the exhibition's public opening. In this fashion, the artist sets herself a daily task to meet the specific deadline. Day thus follows day in the accomplishment of a sort of private performance, involving the tireless repetition of identical gestures in a veritable race against the clock.

Upon the exhibition's closing day, her work disappears, subsisting solely in the viewer's memory, and in photographic documentation. Each work is as fleeting as each passing day.

There you have, in a nutshell, the main tenets of Ariane Epars's creativity. One facet in particular – especially given the context of the Sydney Biennale, and its central theme of the everyday – merits additional deliberation. Indeed, whenever the matter of the duration of this artist's *œuvre* comes up, attention must be granted beyond the spatial considerations to encompass a distinctive relationship with the temporal. To avoid the pitfalls of attempting, as is so often the case, to define time in general, I shall confine myself here to indicating the three temporal components involved in this artist's work, namely her time (time actually experienced), the work's time (genesis and duration), and finally, the viewer's time (perception and reception). Moreover, I will be focusing on the first two of these components, providing an overview that can be seen as an illustration of the third.

Discussions with Ariane Epars as to the existential difficulties inherent in an artistic stance such as hers, reveal that the problem of time, and of managing it on a daily basis, is in itself far more acute than any material considerations (since there is no product to get out onto the market). Because, in order to work, she depends entirely on the availability of an artistic venue against which to measure herself, the very fact that she chooses to operate in this fashion implies a *de facto* renunciation of maintaining control over her time. She is, of course, as free as anybody to refuse a proposal, but her approach implies that between exhibitions, she has no studio production on which to concentrate. When her plans are long term, the waiting period to which she is reduced gives the impression of stretching time out. Whenever, on the contrary, just a few weeks separate the realization of a project from a deadline, the time to decide on its conception and to plan its realization involves progressively increasing time compression. And when, at last, the moment comes for the project's realization, no time is to be lost. Thought must give way to actually executing the work program, complying with a schedule, accomplishing a determined quantity of gestures, producing portion by daily portion of surface. The time thus experienced takes on a highly dense quality, before lapsing into the sensation of void at that point in time when the work is frozen into an exhibition display. This work process highlights the elasticity of time : the artist alternately experiments with the *slackened* time of project's conception and the *tautened* time of its realization in terms of a precise goal.

This manner of threading time involves a certain degree of anxiety, inasmuch as it admits no possibility of reformulating, redoing or correcting a project. Her approach is comparable to that of a tightrope walker, working without a safety net – somewhat paradoxically, for someone who always seems involved in stitching together a time mesh. And by further analogy, the risk taken lends the artistic gesture the gratuitousness of a gift. In one case, it is a gift of the artist's body delivered of gravity ; in the other, that of the artist's time, delivered from the necessity of providing a consumer product.

Still and all, there is also an undeniably calculated side to Epars's œuvre. As a preliminary to a project, she calculates the material, costs, and time the project is to take. She estimated her work on the walls of the Mirò Foundation in Barcelona (blackening) would take 18 hours of work and 218 charcoal sticks, at the rate of one stick rubbed per square meter. The rug she produced with 35'000 meters of clothesline in the hallway of Lausanne's Ecole Cantonale d'Art was designed to measure 70.5 square meters. Given that it would take 4 hours to knot one square meter, the work would involve 282 work hours or 35 working days. Realizing that she would not have enough time to finish the project in time for the deadline, she took in charge 8 days for herself and hired assistants for the rest.

All of which brings us to the paradox mentioned above : the gratuitousness of the gift of the artist's time is coupled with, on the other hand, a deep desire to master the situation anew, to recapture the initial loss incurred by her chosen approach. Just as for Proust's narrator in his search for lost time, it takes time to recapture time, one must give of one's time to find the way back to oneself. By devoting herself to her work, programming it into segments, accomplishing a predefined daily task, the artist provides herself with the means of measuring time in the sense intended by Piaget. To the latter, the work accomplished and the effort spent are what enable us to experience duration, a process which, in the final analysis, is all that remains available to man in his endeavor to measure the abstraction that is time. This dimension in the work of Ariane Epars reverts to the human condition.

In this line of thinking, it is significant that her artistic intervention on a site often involves rugs, where she knots and crisscrosses threads, be it in weft- or warp-knit, be it in paper, plastic, or fabric. With this artist, as with for example May Ernst and his spinning wheel, we are made to think of « Greek mythology where time is a vital thread that can be cut at any moment » (1). Certainly, who better than Ariane is in a position to know as well that, in no case, must this thread be lost, be allowed to spin out on its own, if we are to avoid the vertiginous flight of time, the melancholy of idleness. Swallowed up by time, this then is our only chance of finding our way out and being disgorged by Cronos/Saturn, a devouring god but one who also protects those who till the soil and those who survey it...

Thus again touching upon the realm of the spatial, I would emphasize that to take into consideration the production time of this artist's œuvre is my personal decision as a viewer on the receiving end. For, *a priori*, the time spent by the artist represents the private part of her approach, whereas the result should be perceived in itself. Nonetheless, at least since the advent of *action painting*, it can be conceded that a work is also the frozen trace of a productive act. The *happening*, actionism, certain representatives of *land art* and conceptual art, equate the production time with the time span of the work itself, leaving as sole trace of the event documentation of the time actually experienced. Time as the central theme of artistic production reached a zenith during the sixties, to such a degree that it seemed impossible to conceive of art in any other terms than « pure creation which we witness by participating in the life of the work » (2). Ariane Epars's time, and that of the viewer's perception of it, can no longer be abstracted from the life of this artist's work which, in like fashion as *land art*, « makes us become aware of time, even if this is always intimately linked to the will to have us become aware of space » (3). The time alone it takes to view the space of a work brings to mind all the different times that make up its life. To take the measure of a work requires its perception in four dimensions. And in the contemporary context of art's dematerialization into a temporal dimension, the radicalism of Ariane Epars – who produces markings to be subsequently erased and never again repeated – makes no concessions whatsoever. Each work represents a slice of life, a biographic landmark, a virtual milestone along the pathway she traces for herself.

(Translation : Margie Mounier)

(1) Michel Baudson, *Le Temps : Marche ou Démarche*, in : Michel Baudson (Dir.), *L'Art et le Temps. Regards sur la quatrième dimension*, Albin Michel, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 1984, p. 216.

(2) Jan Patocka, *L'Art et le Temps*, lecture in French given in Prag in 1966, in : *L'Art et le Temps*, P.O.L., s.l., 1990, p. 364. In an analysis of the relationships between great periods of art and time, Patocka explains how the particularity of contemporary art, taking its source in the 19th-century « concept of subjective art », consists in « conceiving the artist's undertaking in terms of the radical foundation of a concretely experienced sense », thus enabling the intrusion of the everyday.

(3) Margarethe Jochimsen, *Le Temps dans l'art d'aujourd'hui : entre la borne et l'infini*, in : Michel Baudson (Dir.), op.cit. p. 225. A highly interesting review of the three decades during which the theme of time played a central role in contemporary art. In connection with the production time or « stated statement », confer also : Umberto Eco, *Le Temps de l'art*, in : *ibid.*, pp. 77-79.

