

## To incorporate the world

### The Man

It is not very gratifying for an art critic to have to say this, but the fact is undeniable : Jean-Pierre Bertrand is an enigma. He is the enigma of a person who, open, friendly, attentive to his interlocutor, is nevertheless reserved, sharing little of himself ; Jean-Pierre Bertrand listens to you, responds, smiles, jokes, while always keeping a serious face and observing you out of the corner of his eye.

It is the enigma of a body of work that is hard to classify using customary categories of contemporary art and is one of the very rare instances of work that entirely disregards the problematic of the ready-made. Furthermore, although it adopts the rectangular shape and the flatness of painting in order to create rhythmic patterns on the wall with sometimes large, sometimes smaller, red and yellow surfaces, it would be misleading to categorize it within the tradition of painting, even monochromatic painting. Bertrand worked in film and television before venturing, after he had turned thirty in the early 1970s, on creating images and inventing devices for which he could find no other home but galleries and museums of contemporary art. And these works are difficult to classify as photography or as "actions" (as one used to say back then), or even as installations, no doubt because they are too interconnected with one other. Concurrently, Bertrand continued to make short films. Was it his relationship with the animated image that led him to turn time into a governing principle for all his artistic production ? Certainly, he participated in thematic exhibitions, such as the one prefaced by Jean Clair in 1974, entitled *Pour Mémoires* (despite having no affinity with the other participating artists, Boltanski, Gasirowski, Le Gac, Monory, all of whom are more "narrative" in their approach),<sup>1</sup> as well as in other exhibitions which brought together rather abstract artists; but, it must be emphasized, he participated without sharing the heritage of Pollock or of minimalism. The amiable Jean-Pierre Bertrand is not a hermit, but amid the rolling waves of contemporary art, he certainly is a lone sailor.

I must clarify that I am painting this portrait without being able to rely upon the usual sources. Additionally, the artist makes us confront particularly hermetic objects : stacks of closed metal boxes, a metal cube that must be manipulated (but not randomly), sibylline inscriptions on the wall, logical arithmetic propositions evocative of esoteric formulae. More recently, he exhibited large beige surfaces upon which he arranged strips of color according to a seemingly arbitrary order. To borrow from his own words, these works confront us with "the presence of an enigmatic space." Far from providing us with a key, their umbrella title, *Schem*, sounds tautological — referring both to the Greek "schema," which means "figure" (through their presence, these works could well be "figures" in the sense of the French *figure* meaning the human figure or face), and to the Hebrew "shem" which means "name"<sup>2</sup> — and leaves us in the thick of the enigma. And so, the critic in me decides to resort to my own recollections.

In 1987, we were in Lisbon, at the Calouste Gulbekian Foundation, for the presentation of an exhibition entitled *Hors Tendances (Beyond Trends)* which I had organized. In addition to Bertrand, the

other artists represented were Martin Barré, Christian Bonnefoi, Daniel Buren, and François Rouan.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to a common problem, the space was much too large for the number of works that we had to show and the installation proceeded with difficulty... until Jean-Pierre Bertrand intervened. His tall silhouette paced up and down the vast exhibition room. With a simplicity and confidence that I admired, he would designate the places with semaphore-like gestures, grab a painting and relocated it, then move on to the next one. His arms partitioned the space the proportions of which seemed to have been always familiar to him : one might think that he had a sense of space in his blood. The result was perfect : our paintings, although limited in number, managed to *uphold* the entire space. We received high compliments.

Another memory is tied to the same event. Following the opening, the artists were supposed to address the public and answer questions. Bertrand was less at ease than in setting up the exhibition, but he went along with the exercise. As usual, he explained the origin of his works through small details which he transformed into charged signs of destiny, and delivered the story of this destiny in his characteristic tone of calm evidence. His talk certainly was not rational. I was nervous : would the public, unfamiliar with his work, think he was peddling a tall tale, spinning a yarn that issues forth from the story of Robinson Crusoe, simply with a piece of paper soaked in lemon, salt, and honey ? Nothing of the sort. Jean-Pierre Bertrand is also a story-teller — which I was to verify later through reading his texts<sup>4</sup> — and the audience was spellbound.

## Presences

Whether it's through his skilled eye or through his discourse which strives to meet the expectations of his listeners, Jean-Pierre Bertrand fully inhabits the world. This man, whom I described as reserved, is nevertheless able to successfully appropriate space and to establish close and trusting communication with others. I was about to write "communion," since the system of signs he has elaborated is rather mystical, and the narrative which anchors his work borders on the mythical — after all, didn't he entitle one of his exhibitions, *Consubstantially or the Unique Instant* ?<sup>5</sup>

In his atelier, I experienced the same sensation I had in Lisbon. To show me the different pieces of *Shem* (80.31 x 60.43 inches each, i.e. close to human proportions in size), Bertrand was going back and forth and, despite their weight, picked them up by locking his arms around them. In an interview with Didier Morin, he says : "I plunge in with my whole body."<sup>6</sup> I am not the first to take note of the particular rapport that the artist has with his workshop and to be struck by the fact that it's not so much a space where he thinks and creates, but a space which he *inhabits*.<sup>7</sup> He adds : "I go there practically every day. Sometimes I go there just to be there, without producing anything. Only to participate in its existence." When, in turn, I paid him a visit, he explained the process behind the production of *Shem* : he covers rectangles of Plexiglas with "parchment-colored" paint and then cuts out strips which reveal the color applied on the other side of the plate : gold, red, or brown (or, more rarely, it's the entire red "underside" which is left visible). Then the plates are set on a surface which serves as the background, which is also the color of parchment. Rarely is a satisfactory position immediately achieved. The artist then carefully examines these surfaces, testing different arrangements, applying, removing, and reapplying the plates. Depending on the nature of the materials, the manipulation is difficult, almost painful. I understand that before finding the right layout, the one that imposes itself, Jean-Pierre Bertrand becomes immersed in his observation of the space before him. Just as the eye is drawn in by a camera's viewfinder, the artist's entire attention is absorbed and retained by the work in progress, his whole presence in the world becomes concentrated in this face-to-face. Bertrand also points out that the rolls of paper he uses as backgrounds stand 5.4 feet tall when stored upright, giving the impression of a nearly human presence. The rolls of paper share the artist's experience of waiting that I've just evoked. They are the flat-mates of his atelier : less the material medium than silent companions mitigating his solitude.

If one were to measure the influence of the physical environment on the process of creation by the precision with which the artist describes his atelier, one would realize that it is instrumental. In 54, a story published in 1998, Bertrand draws an inventory of fifty-four elements contained in, or describing, an apartment. Reading a few which allude to his works — “fifty-four photographs,” “26 sugar cubes at the periphery of a square”<sup>8</sup> — one understands that this apartment is perhaps the artist’s own and that the relative intensity of light — “obscurity,” “the light of the enlarger” — as well as sounds — “a bus changing gears,” “children shouting” — are noted as objects and elements of the surroundings. When he invokes that apartment long after having left it, again in the interview with Didier Morin, Bertrand also recalls that he was using all of the rooms: “I made lines of lemons that led from the bathroom to the kitchen... The kitchen doubled as a photo lab.”<sup>9</sup>

The visitor to a Jean-Pierre Bertrand exhibition is not a mere spectator. Just as the artist in his atelier, the audience is also subject to the pervading and obsessive power of its environment. In a very beautiful and somewhat silly passage in 54, an element contained within the apartment falls down to the street breaking up the original set. But it soon creates a new set by associating with new elements, and so on. The text speaks of “sets unfolding” as space expands from the street to the avenue, from the avenue to the public square... The works, which are like the chemical precipitate of space from which they were born, become in their turn elements of the environment which the visitor must absorb. The audience has no assigned place but has to circulate from work to work, connect them mentally one to another, for example when they are murals installed sequentially around the room at intervals which appear extremely well thought out.<sup>10</sup> The visitor becomes a dweller in the place, and, like a host, moves from one group of guests to another. The “scattered” order in which the exhibitions are presented (then again, it’s an installation of minuscule formats, 5 x 7.5 inches, that bewilders the gaze) leads the visitor to embark on a quest which simultaneously expands the artist’s work. This quest in turn makes the audience responsive to the slightest sign, that is to say, to the tiniest detail of the works and of their installation.

Sometimes the visitor is required to follow a designated path, as in 1999, in the French pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Guided through different rooms containing different environments, the visitor would finally reach a footbridge from which a space unfolding in four dimensions could be taken in at a glance: the visitor would raise his head to contemplate the large paintings hanging above the display space, and look straight down to discover the gold-covered ground. Having reached a precise point in his tour, the visitor would be compelled to keep looking around as if his head were a camera manipulated on a tripod.

This increased attention helps to reinforce the extremely tight relationship between the audience and its surroundings: some works provoke identification thanks to their anthropomorphic dimensions and to their material, especially where the latter is “plasmatic,” to use the artist’s own term, that is to say, when it’s red pigment admixed with honey and absorbed by paper. Impregnated with lemon juice (an allusion to the lemon trees discovered by Robinson Crusoe on his island), honey, or, more recently, with Flemish medium which makes it translucent, the paper comes to look like parchment. As a result, it resembles skin. In a photograph of the atelier, one can see some paper attached directly to the wall, unevenly torn and stained with red filaments, so that it resembles an animal skin (the image is also reproduced under the title: *Large Unrolled Honey Paper and Small Catalysts*, 1985). A 1979 piece consists in a column of “54 salt tins containing a man’s weight in salt, according to the standards of elevator loads.” Through its corrosive property, salt slowly, very slowly, corrodes the tins containing it; this is a metaphor for our own life, which ends by wearing out our envelope, as well as an expanded metaphor for time — we die before our column collapses; life fails in its rivalry with art.

This effect of symbiosis, which we may experience in the presence of works of art, corresponds to the profoundly hypnotic effect of films that Jean-Pierre Bertrand has never ceased making. In *Pas-*

*sing Through* (2002), the camera is attached to a yellow cab cruising at night. It rides around continuously, while the camera adjusts distance by alternating between medium shots and a focus on the windshield or on the headlights. And yet, this doesn't help us to see either the driver or the passenger any better, both of whom remain ghostly, and the image ends up dissolving in a yellow blur. Abandoned to their own curiosity, which remains unsatisfied, the audience is also, seemingly interminably, suspended in the uncertainty of time.

In a film made from a montage of several films, *28 to 2 Years Before the Year 2000* (1998), the shots are sequenced through slow crossfades: the figure of Borges, whom Bertrand met in the early 1970s, progressively emerges from a rapid succession of shots of Buenos Aires, before fading in his turn into a stroll through an exhibition by the artist. One image absorbs another, corrodes it, just like lemon juice or honey, or salt are absorbed by paper and modify it in turn, just as the yellow light in *Passing Through* devours the screen, just as the grain of any cinematographic image dematerializes the screen. In the same vein, Jean-Pierre Bertrand justified the fact that some photographs of his works placed under glass reflected the surrounding room creating, in the resulting confusion, images of the interpenetration of the interior space of the work and the space external to it.

## Temporalities

*13 Years Before the Year 2000* is, in my mind, the most fascinating among Jean-Pierre Bertrand's films. A biker filmed in close-up shots explains with great precision how he takes a turn on his motor bike speeding down a road. Absorbed as if in a dream in the remembrance of this moment of pure pleasure, the biker pulls the viewer into his story which he retells and repeats. He says that, on the road, he finds himself in a temporality different from that of car drivers, that he experiences a paradoxical sensation of "reducing time with respect to speed." It becomes clear that beyond the great speed, he experiences the sensation of arrested time.

It is precisely around a question of time — time that seems all the more protracted that its passage takes place outside of the rhythms of the life of society — that Jean-Pierre Bertrand has chosen to locate the origin of his work: the story of Robinson Crusoe, a civilized man forced to live alone, in the same conditions as man at the origins of mankind. Every artistic gesture is a reinvention of the self. Bertrand often recounted the circumstances of his inaugural work. While staying in a room overlooking a natural landscape, he decided to repeatedly photograph Daniel Defoe's work by opening it each time at random and placing it on the window sill. He then developed these photographs, dated 1972, accompanied by the respective extracts arranged according to the pagination of the book to create the impression of successive stages of reading. But this order does not correspond to the chronology of the snapshots. Moreover, in this presentation an attentive observer may perhaps note a few anachronistic elements in the landscape seen through the window. Bertrand noticed later that Robinson Crusoe's age at the moment of leaving the island was 54, and he had taken precisely 54 photos of the open book. Starting from this coincidence, 54 becomes the key cipher for the body of Bertrand's work, whether it's a question of displaying 54 small paintings or composing phrases made up of 54 neon letters (for example, *theskyoverhisheadwilloutdohisbedroomceilingpaintedblue*), or again in the sum of all the ones inscribed on the faces of a cube, providing that one turns it around in such a way so as to never retrace one's steps but arrive from whence one started, etc.

The manipulation of the cube that can be interpreted as a virtual opening on all its sides, and which encloses it in the same fashion, is a perfect illustration of the sense of time that Jean-Pierre Bertrand seeks to create: time both arrested and open onto eternity. One could turn the cube around endlessly, each time coming up with the sum of 54. Already, à propos *54 Days of Robinson Crusoe*, where one chronology conceals another, Jacques Soullillou noted that "'54' designates a *block*, rather than enumeration."<sup>11</sup>

A film showing ice-skaters moving gracefully across a frozen lake : isn't it called *Time Removing* (2003) ? But the most explicit and the most moving film which performs a condensation of time is *Samout and Mutnofret* (1993–2008). While the screen is still black, a very gentle off-screen voice can be heard : "I am speaking tonight through the voice of a man of these times — a man of this town — now — seven years before the end of the second millennium of your common era — May the volume of his voice, in the volume of the space where you are, embody our volume of stone — Tonight I am speaking and I am speaking through his voice..."

Finally, an image appears, that of a museum display case in the department of Egyptian antiquities at the Louvre, then a close-up of a stone face with almond eyes. That's the face of Mutnofret, the wife of Samout, the two fused together into a statuette for so long it seems an eternity. The voice through which Mutnofret tells her own life story, interwoven with descriptions of the circumstances offered to her gaze today, is Jean-Pierre Bertrand's. Besides the voice, the encounter between the effigy of a woman who lived around 1500 BC and the artist, living at the end of the second millennium, is also expressed through their converging gazes : "may the eye of flesh wed the eye of stone [*pierre*] ..." But this encounter is also fostered by the obscurity of the room where the film is screened : "Thus I am able to speak again and now through him... thanks to a viewing device I know nothing about, except that we are before you as images — in a dark hall —."

Isn't allowing the viewer to *merge with*, to forget himself in the fiction of images, the defining trait of cinematographic projection ? Both the story and the very apparatus transmitting it facilitate an understanding of the correspondence established by Jean-Pierre Bertrand's work between the darkness in which we lose our bearings, the impenetrable density of matter, and a suspension of time. To once again borrow Jacques Soullillou's words, all these elements are inseparable. The film concludes with the words : "In the giant city structures — rooms become pitch black — immeasurably large — abnormally distended — Our volume of stone rejoins the entire volume of darkness... The faraway is close and the close is within us — "

Captive to the inertia of the stone, in the museum where she is imprisoned, Mutnofret addresses the centuries to come through the voice of the one who, by virtue of the gaze he rested upon her, transports her into the darkened hall. The parable sums up an approach which I described as caring little for a history of forms because it represents above all a moral position, the right which a man chooses to usurp in order to escape, if only for a moment, from the fate of the human condition : into the nearly empathetic contemplation of a large golden surface, into the confrontation of a column of metal corroded by salt over time that eludes human consciousness, into the fascination exerted by an arithmetic labyrinth.

## Light and shadow

Like Robinson Crusoe, a captive of the island yet with his gaze always turned towards the horizon, the work is made up of paradoxical images of confinement which are turned over or turned around to open up space and catch time unawares. Mutnofret finally allows me to understand the other founding work — the 1972 box which is closed and the interior of which, the artist tells me, is painted black and contains a desiccated lemon, also painted black. Bertrand claims that the interior volume of the box is larger than the volume that it does not occupy. The night abolishes limits.

Anton Ehrenzweig has described this undifferentiated space as the unconscious memory of the space in which the infant had initially been immersed and in which the artist has the power, through the floating of his consciousness, to immerse himself anew.<sup>12</sup> In that space, boundaries are erased,

contradictions annihilated, time abolished. And it's after the artist has traversed this space, which makes everything possible, that the creative act takes place. Ehrenzweig even likens it to a sort of rebirth : detached from all law, the artist sets his own laws. When Jean-Pierre Bertrand explains the source of his work through the coincidence between the 54 photographs and Robinson's age as the latter returns to civilization, he emphasizes a certain detail : Defoe's book states that Robinson, having landed on the island at the age of 26, leaves it 28 years later. So, if one does the math, it turns out that Defoe was mistaken and that, shipwrecked at the age of 27, Robinson spent 27 years on the island. Concluding, the artist adds : "the beginning of my story" — the birth of his art and, I am tempted to add, his rebirth as an artist — "is an error."

I reflect on Jean-Pierre Bertrand in the "inhabited" solitude of his atelier where, he admits, on occasion, he "feel[s] as if [he] were sinking into the interiority of the place which exerts a hold over [him], to the point that sometimes the idea of going back home seems an insurmountable ordeal."<sup>13</sup> It's not just that he approaches the painted surface "with his whole body"; it's also that in the period of meditation prior to that engagement, he becomes one with the place, with its lighting and its materials, with the objects that are there. The artist becomes like the paper soaked in honey, or like the paper made transparent by the use of Flemish medium : entirely indistinguishable from the space where he is present and which penetrates him. It is only a decision that releases him : the decision which allows him to set a color at a location on the painting, at that very precise spot which could not have been any other. The decision has an absolute character, just as the decision which, forty years ago, made him choose to take the adventure of Robinson Crusoe and the number 54 inscribed therein as a starting point on which to build the body of his work, and to stick to it, completely, despite the error in calendar dates.

## Catherine Millet

Managing Director at Art Press and writer

1 *our Mémoires*, exhibition organized by Jean-Louis Froment and Suzanne Pagé, with the collaboration of Jean Clair. Bordeaux – Paris – La Rochelle – Rennes, 1974.

2 "Dans l'atelier de Jean-Pierre Bertrand," interview with Didier Morin, *Mettay* (September 2010)

3 *Hors Tendances*. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, February–March 1987. The exhibition, originally shown in Florence, was organized by the Association française d'action artistique (Afaa).

4 See, particularly, Jean-Pierre Bertrand. *54*. Paris : Actes Sud, 1998.

5 Picasso Museum of Antibes, April 3–June 13, 2004.

6 Morin, *op. cit.*

7 Besides the interview cited above, Didier Morin also made a film, *Dans l'atelier de Jean-Pierre Bertrand (In the Atelier of Jean-Pierre Bertrand)*, 2010. See also Jeanette Zwingerberger. *Visite d'atelier*. Exhibition catalog, Picasso Museum of Antibes, 2004.

8 Bertrand. *54*, *op. cit.*

9 Morin, *op. cit.*

10 See, e.g., the exhibition catalog, *Arithmétique de la Passion, composition en 4 + 1 suites* [The Arithmetic of the Passion, composition in 4 + 1 episodes]. Galerie de France, 1990. The piece evokes, through its rhythmic use of vertical lines, Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*.

11 Jacques Soullou. "Jean-Pierre Bertrand, solution de continuité." 136 *art press* (May 1989).

12 A. Ehrenzweig, *L'ordre caché de l'art*. Paris : Gallimard, 1967.

13 Morin, *op. cit.*

## The oasis

I watched a radiesthesist move the tip of his copper dowsing rods over a large, unfolded sheet of paper dotted with configurations of points, and with his other hand navigate his pendulum over tiny plates of glass, lain side by side on the paper.

The plates were six in number: two were identical, yellowish ; two others were a deeper shade of carmine red with thick and moist colored matter ; and the last one appeared slightly grainy and dry, white under glass.

The dowser kept rearranging the plates. At a certain point, the pendulum started to swing after the copper rods had come to a stop over a configuration of dots. The little plates began emanating a luminous vibration as if they were suddenly charged by a current of weak intensity.

The dowser told me that the large sheet of paper was a scale reproduction of a desert zone in ancient Egypt, and that the configuration of points corresponded to the location of an oasis, the site of two burial places brought together beneath the shade of a lemon tree.

**Jean-Pierre Bertrand**

1974

## The Daily Memorandum

On December 31, 1971, I took a plane to Buenos Aires ; I was working on a television feature, an episode of the *Archives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century* devoted to Jorge Luis Borges. I arrived on January 1, 1972. The city was strewn with papers that office workers had thrown out of the windows on New Year's Eve.

Borges, seated in the left corner of the sofa, received us on the first floor of the National Library, on Mexico Street. The library was deserted: this time of the year corresponded with summer vacation. I sent my friends in Paris the page from the phonebook with their name on it.

In April 1972, I went to London in order to get in touch with people and screen my film on Borges. I immediately drew a parallel between London and Buenos Aires: the presence of water and the docks had something to do with it. Right away the image of an estuary imposed itself, and then the word "Orenoque" started to roll around in my head. On the plane that was taking me back to Paris I had a vision of a man forsaken on a South American island.

One day when I was out shopping in a department store, I found myself in an elevator and, at the very moment when the lift boy announced the "ground floor" (*rez-de-chaussée*), my eye caught the abbreviation RC on the elevator buttons, and I immediately recognized the initials of Robinson Crusoe. Shortly afterwards I bought the book which I had read before in a children's edition.

In July 1972, I went to the first-floor bedroom at the house in the Black Forest where I used to spend my vacations. It was a dark rectangular room with wood-paneled walls and two windows along the left-hand wall, and a bed at the back of the room. I found the book open as if it had been waiting for me forever, deposited on the window frame, neither quite inside nor really outside. The pages seemed perfectly white, devoid of any writing the way the light reflected off of them.

It was at that moment that I decided to come into that room every day, to take the book in my hands, close it and open it at a random page within the thickness of the volume, set it back down, and photograph the window along with the book. The camera angle would vary from one day to the next, just as the hour of my visit did. The visit would be brief, just a short moment in the day.

Upon my return to Paris I counted fifty-four photos. I arranged them in such a way that, from one image to the next, the quantity of pages on the left-hand side of the book would increase.

In the reorganized continuity of the reopening of the book I thus disregarded the chronology of the dates when the photos were taken to the point that the grass outside the window frame appeared tall or low, the field having been mowed in the course of the 54 days.

Each image was then associated with a day in Crusoe's journal, a short text copied by hand in present indicative, even though the book is written in past tense. While the daily accounts retrace with great authenticity the events and actions on the island, how could Crusoe recall all these days with such exactitude six months after having been shipwrecked, after having organized his shelter, constructed a table, and put a chair together ?

Later on, Crusoe would discover the outlet of a stream which he followed up to a place that "looked like a planted garden," a grove populated by lemon trees, and he quenched<sup>1</sup> his thirst with their juice.

From October 1972 to July 1973, I mailed to some fifty people in the world of art and humanities excerpts from his journal, hand-written in the present indicative, using black ink, similar to those attached to the photos of the window and the book. The postage date would correspond to the date inscribed in the journal: "Nov. 6/ go to work with my table."

The mailings were not regular but they were recognizable by their small green envelope. Sometimes there would be nothing for a week, then three messages together, two days nothing, then another...

Late one March morning of the following year, I became curious to learn Crusoe's age at the time he left the island, and realized that it was the same as the number of days I had spent photographing the book in the shaded room in the Black Forest: 54.

Counting the dates between the arrival and departure, I noted that he remained on the island for 27 years, that is, his age when he was shipwrecked,<sup>2</sup> while Defoe takes the stay to be 28 years (cf. the title of the book).

Defoe-Crusoe's erroneous 26-28 is as authentic as the pivot 27-27 according to the identification of dates in the book, "because there isn't strictly speaking just one, but a multitude of pivot points, namely as many times as I open the book."<sup>3</sup>

## Jean-Pierre Bertrand

1973 - 1986

1 « The green limes that I gathered were not only pleasant to eat, but very wholesome ; and I mixed their juice afterwards with water, which made it very wholesome, and very cool and refreshing. »

Daniel Defoe. *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the Coast of AMERICA, near the Mouth of the Great River of OROONOQUE*. London/New York: Penguin Classics, 1974, p. 114.

2 "September 30, 1659 I came on shore..." ibid. p. 87. "I left the Island, the nineteenth of December in the year 1686," ibid. p. 274.

3 Jacques Soullillou. "Le paradoxe Robinson." in: Jean-Pierre Bertrand, *Consubstantiellement ou l'instant unique*. Exhibition catalog, Picasso Museum of the Antibes (April-June 2004). Paris : musées éditions, 2004.

## DIAMON'D

I spent my childhood in the neighborhoods of a small town where everyone knew one another. I'm the son of a grocer who occupied the largest street corner in the neighborhood, and people always called me by the name that was featured in bold letters over my father's shop.

As for ZED, I've never seen his name in writing ; he was called Z'ED because it's him I want to talk about. Z'EDD carried his head lower than I do for the simple reason that I've always seen him walk on his hands, his feet up in the air. He wore a black hat and dressed in black from feet to fingertips. I've always wondered whether he had grown up like that. Sometimes he could be spotted talking in the street : Z'EDDD would keep his eyes fixed upon the crease in someone's pants at the knee level, and sometimes he would shake his feet sideways. I knew no more about Z'ED once he had disappeared.

My father's replies to my questioning were always vague, and yet they helped confirm my idea that Z'ED, although he had disappeared from the neighborhood, must have still been around somewhere underneath his black hat. A long while afterwards, a powerful thunderstorm passed through the town. I was visiting at one of my uncles' on my mother's side, who, through my father, took over a small fruit and spice store on the other end of the neighborhood. The store exuded a potent smell as if it were scented with pepper, limes, cinnamon, and even brown wrapping paper.

It was pouring rain outside, and my aunt turned off the lights as a precaution. We were motionless in the dark, watching the night fractured by lighting. After a while, the rain stopped. Taking to my heels, I plunged into the night. I had a great distance to cover to get back home. The sidewalk shined, the streets were deserted, and everything was dripping with water. I felt a great sense of freedom, and at the same time my chest was tight with numb anguish.

All the streets looked more or less alike with their shuttered two-or three-story houses. So as my feet were running under me, my head was drafting a map of the city, and these two things were connected. And yet, I had the impression of being under the spell of a mysterious presence with a thousand eyes which controlled the route of my run somewhere high over me. That's what I was thinking when I noticed in the distance something black and shiny as if planted in the wet road. As I approached, there was nothing to help me identify the object in question : a street lamp emitted dim light. At a certain point, and yet still some distance away, I knew all at once that it was Z'ED's hat. It was sitting there, at my feet, a piece of felt sparkling with raindrops. As it was placed flat on the ground, I hesitated to pick it up. The inside of his hat was entirely black and this blackness was shaped as a hat that one could see on the outside.

Water unified all of the felt and as I concentrated on one of its parts, I only had to look elsewhere or to focus my gaze on the thickness of the piece of paper on which I am writing in order to rejoin the blackness of the texture of the felt which was also the blackness of the entire hat and the entire blackness of the hat. It was as if I was entirely in the dark ; but it wasn't really me : rather, it was the thing which brought me to existence and that thing which brought me to existence made me extend my arm, and in the dark a door was pushed open. The outside of the place behind the door was like a large square at twilight, or rather it was like the spectacle of a large town square but it wasn't really a large square. There were houses full of windows, men, women, children, cars that I had already seen and others that I had never seen before. I recognized my father but much younger, my mother probably quite some time before she met my father with her hair all curly and laughing endlessly ; the street corner of the grocery store had changed a lot and it was a bank all in glass. A young blond girl came

up on her bicycle, rode up to me and without noticing me, turned and rode off in another direction ; a man crossed the square from right to left, his hands in his pockets ; a small boy was playing with an empty box. Buses passed by and vanished.

The thing which brought me to existence was drawn to a small, rather narrow shop, stretching vertically, and of an undefined color. The letters over it were not solid ; I could see them only one by one, and I was unable to string them together to read the name of the owner : they would start dancing erratically. The display window was divided into compartments by numerous shelves on which there were placed small metal frames inside of which one could see an image, but when I returned my gaze to one I had already seen, I noted that the small metallic box showed a different image each time, so that it seemed that there was a great quantity of images if I kept shifting my eyes from one to the other. The bottom of the display window was filled with paper objects : rolls of paper ; metal boxes ; pots of honey although I could not see the honey ; containers of salt although I could not see the salt.

Every object possessed a volume which strangely corresponded to its volume of air in the very same place. The display window was perfectly flat, smooth, clean, and transparent, and produced no reflection. If one wanted to touch them, the objects were within reach if one forgot about the pane of glass. However, if one became aware of the glass and considered the objects no longer as objects but as images, no longer individually but as a whole, I was separated from them only by the glass because what I was seeing, on the condition of being at a certain distance from the window, seemed to be on the inside of the pane, the very interior surface of the glass while I could touch the other side on the outside where I stood.

At that distance, the space between metallic objects on the shelves was dark but if I pressed my eyes to the window I could distinguish little by little the interior of the shop which turned out to be much wider than its façade and very deep ; the interior was bathed in very soft light. The walls were covered with brown wallpaper with gold reflections which seemed to both absorb the light and to diffuse it. The carpets were rolled up along the walls and disparate objects were scattered on the floor, here and there, producing a sort of architecture at the floor-level thereby adding volume that intersected somewhere in the space of this place whose depth eluded me. I was unable to separate the objects one from another, other than that I saw hints of tiny towers, bridges, traces of something like roads, hints of tiny houses like those one sees in the countryside.

And in all that space, little by little, a point of powerful light grew bigger and of a great density, and this point of powerful light of great density shone gold, and the gold had an ovoid form, and this ovoid form was the form of a golden lemon, and this golden lemon was glowing. The thing which brought me to existence knew that it was not an image but the lemon itself, and the lemon knew very well that it was not watchable, and the thing which brought me to existence made me close my eyes. And the place where I stood was as if the interior of an eye, a dark globe with moist surface striated with narrow spokes irradiating from the color, and it was the color. The globe resembled an immense cave whose opening was rapidly growing smaller, and this opening resembled a hole, a small hole in the felt, and the felt had the form of raindrops covering Z'E'D's hat.

It was late and I had to get back.

## Music

### or From the crime of Abel to the kiss of Judas by Giotto

If the most important thing in art is putting a spotlight on creation, then the most important thing in creation is "the object" — the "object" which, in its essence, is not an image in itself but a carbon copy of an instance of non-representation. As for the "seen object," it has to do with the eye, and more precisely with the iris and the dark pupil at the point where the curve of the eye is nearly flat and where the rays of the visible spectrum come together. On the one hand, the pupil seems to extend over the whole expanse of the visible field of the "seen object" and over the expanse around the visible field, where the "seen object" is seen as if it were that which surrounded the "seen object"; on the other hand, the "seen object" itself seems to be the iris and the pupil of a giant eye in which, in the end, there is no more seeing and, more radically, no more being. And so the "object" becomes at the same time the union between the "object seen" in the man and "the object" in "the seen man"; the "seen object" thus reveals itself in the rectangular expanse of a sensible surface beneath the thickness of Plexiglas which resembles the transparent cornea and the aqueous humor of a flat eye, or at the surface of papers stacked against the flat surface of the wall.

The paper is recycled, unglued, impregnated with salt, with lemon juice, with honey, developed using graphite or some colored materials and coagulants, or coated with silver bromide, just like another type of paper called photographic paper containing a latent image. Here, the "seen object" is one which is neither opened nor closed, and the appearance of the "seen object" is the neutral place of its appearance — the intimate relation between its surface width and length and the intimate scale of its expanse in the totality of its most secret components discernible to the eye, and all of this in relation to the immediate knowledge of the eye in its apprehension of the surrounding reality.

All these "seen objects" taken together are like a single "seen object" which seems to be reflected in a single eye. This reflection is displaced in front of the curve of the eye: it's as if this imperceptible displacement — where the reflection precedes the eye the way the effect might come before the cause — were the soul of the "object," its "objectness": the endless dance of blood, an infinitesimal red thread rustling in infinite silence.

**Jean-Pierre Bertrand**

1982

## On the icon, or on the meaning of speech

The lemon loses its appearance – it expresses its inner form into the interior of a sheet of paper / the uniformity of the yellow and of the lemon paper.

Salt spills into the paper – comes up to the surface – bleaching it from within as well as from without.

Honey blends with the fibers of the paper. As a result of this mixture, the dampness of the Plexiglas adheres more intimately to the surface.

The metal corners – four points of angled welds – completely embrace the flexible expanse of the Plexiglas.

Salt, lemon, honey are on the outside – there – extending within.

A surface is also the place of darkness against the flatness of the wall – in that enclosure.

Only salt paper is consubstantial with lemon paper.

The figure frames from within what is around it, between the inside of the black and the outside of the white.

The figure and the white of the wall – the white of the wall and the figure – in the space of interior time.

The surfaces – in the unified expanse of the white of the wall – without measure.

Between two similar sets – the one which comes second is the double of the other and itself.

Simultaneity of the frontal vision of the whole and a sweeping view from left to right of all the figures.

The reality of the thing is then in the realm of the short-circuit and its persistence.

**Jean-Pierre Bertrand**

1987

What I saw on the wall was a set of five small-size frames. One was placed apart from the others, to the left : a small frame surrounding a piece of fine, white, soft-grained emery paper. Depending on my position in front of this frame, shiny specks would sparkle. As for other frames, there were two pairs at a slight distance from each other. I will add, to be more precise, that the distance between the small frame on the left I have just described and the first frame in the first pair was about twice as large as the space separating the two pairs from each other.

The frame to the left of the first pair contained an image. I would describe it as an image rather than a photograph because it seemed so meticulously framed and formed a unified whole with the rest. It was an image of a small boy holding a piece of string arranged into three triangles : two upside-down and one upright. What was striking was the child's intent and direct gaze – as if he were showing you something essential that you must not miss. His glance was very insistent : an immediate gift and a willfulness. The image was slightly clouded over and tinted by the brownish pane placed on top of it. The right portion of the framed image was stained with some red matter which must have been both sufficiently compact and fluid so that dabs smeared against the glass, creating regularly shaped smudges resembling viscous bodies suspended in liquid.

The small frame – if we count from left to right, in the direction of reading – the one on the left in the second pair – is the same as the one I have just described, only with different smudges, creating, however, the same impression of something both compact and floating. The distance between the last two frames was slightly larger than that between the two in the previous pair. As for the last frame on the right, it contained nothing : it was entirely black. Sometime later, when I happened to have some carbon paper in front of me, I spontaneously made a connection between the paper and the small frame. The whole set was placed between two windows with the blinds lowered all the way down, and the room was lit by reflected artificial light directed upwards at the wall.

**Jean-Pierre Bertrand**

1987

Place of a place – a place unlike a place – Place of an expanse – where the place is no longer space to be occupied but the place of an expanse – Not confronted by the space of a place but rather captured – quickly – by and in an expanse – The expanse has to do with pages of a book before it is bound – Pages of a book not to be read but to be there before expounding any idea whatsoever as a whole and at the same time in its inner-most fibers – They have a strong presence and this presence has to do with an old body – the body before the utterance of the writing, and this old body would have traversed all the ages – Primitive pages multiplying where they invent themselves each time : It is the permanence of the present of the emotion in the world that's at stake : The androgyny of the living before any consciousness –

**Jean-Pierre Bertrand**

1985

## The body of the text

*"The book enfolds time, unfolds time, and holds this unfolding in itself as the continuity of a presence in which present, past, and future become actual."*<sup>1</sup>

In perfumery, *concrete* is the name of the solid product of distillation. *Concrete*, Jean-Pierre Bertrand's work, is likewise decanted through concretion to achieve a particularly thick concentration. In any case, contraction sometimes contaminates the artist's expression, which is concise as a spasm when it comes to setting down the violent impact of words. *To conjure the ground, to surface the limits, to plasma the touch, to shield-frame, to syntagm the verb* : some of these neologisms convey the coagulation of fresh paint trapped underneath Plexiglass and the metallic grip framing these surfaces. Inscribed on the wall of a gallery in the early 2000s,<sup>2</sup> the utterances were evocative of prescriptive and impersonal turns of phrases in the conceptual art movement which Jean-Pierre Bertrand would have observed from afar in the early 1970s. Without adopting the analytical options or ironic alternatives of conceptual art, the artist followed a mystical path where exhaustion of meaning does not lead to its invalidation but to its proliferation, and where silence is not a limit but a threshold.

An invented word, *to syntagm*, takes the noun "syntagm," which, in linguistics, designates the combination of two or more words (or morphemes) producing acceptable meaning, and turns it into a verb. In short, it's a minimal signifying cluster whose global meaning is articulated through the difference between distinct units. In the early 1990s, Jean-Pierre Bertrand produced *Syntagmatic Volumes* : sequences of painted panels, installed in a scrupulously calculated order and interspersed with blank spaces. Areas colored in a certain order of distribution, the *Syntagmatic Volumes* are not, however, abstract : they make up formulas or equations of generative syntax founded on "signifying combinations that can always be reformulated."<sup>3</sup> The wall is not a passive surface of an exhibition : on the contrary, it impregnates the formulae by inseminating them with the void necessary for dislodging and the permutation of the terms. Counteracting the solidification of the formula, these blanks introduce the unknown, instability, and dynamism generative of meaning.

Created in the late 2010s, the *Shem* series borrows another term from linguistics — *schema*<sup>4</sup> — which designates an organizational structure, itself organized according to the rules

governing the combination of its constitutive elements. Jean-Pierre Bertrand's *Shems* explore the possible arrangements of twenty-seven elements of predefined forms and locations without exhausting them : according to an invariable partition, the Plexiglas plates brush the surface of the large backgrounds, or are absent from them, and the entire work is unified by the parchment-like color whose name is evocative both of the "reinscribable" manuscript and of a pale complexion. Used sparingly, the horizontal, brown-red, or "deep purple" strips are sometimes covered in scratches. The artist does not intend to exhaust all the possibilities of internal variations, but simply to get a sense of the matrix that presides over all the combinations. There is therefore only one ideal *shem* whose structure informs all possible configurations, according to the logic described by Wittgenstein where, "[i]f [one] know[s] an object [one] also know[s] all its possible occurrences in states of affairs."<sup>5</sup>

Often contracted to initial letters or acronyms, the titles of the artist's works bear witness to a coded or formulary notation, sometimes punctuated by untimely ornaments (apostrophes or exponents). Banking on its significant etymology, *Shem* has relieved itself of certain letters belonging to its French homonym in order to associate itself with the Hebrew "shem," meaning "to name," and deriving probably from the primitive root "suwm" : "to place, order, establish." Accordingly, naming and placing become simultaneous, without either of the actions preceding the other : the emergence of the verb does not predate its inscription. Described by Maurice Blanchot as the structure of the totality of relations and as a relational system of organization, "[t]he book is the *a priori* of knowledge," in which "the prior disposition to write and to read" affirms itself.<sup>6</sup> The *Shems* also seem to be the essential image of a *page layout*, the arrangement of which is not an after-the-event or an afterthought [*un après coup*], but is simultaneous with discourse. Similarly, Jean-Pierre Bertrand's work does not exist prior to its installation, but it also cannot exist fully unless it is installed according to a *justifying* and *justified* order. And, given the artist's profound affinity for the printed medium, the *justification* is first of all the one which, in printing, levels the relationships between pages, lines, interlines, margins, surfaces covered with ink, and blanks.

Blanks are far from insignificant ; they are marks of silence, inscribed on the page to denote the passage from one idea to another. They border the meaning with the transitions necessary for breathing, for memory, and for reinscription. To give a mythical example of their importance : the Torah, written without any punctuation, as a single 304,805 – letter – long word, would be asphyxiated without the rhythmic scansion of the blanks nested in its paragraphs. These interruptions, also known as "passages," might spoil the whole book if their placement or their length are not respected. Bounded in scope but unfathomable in depth, these thresholds are the abyss at the edge of which Jean-Pierre Bertrand likes to maintain an unstable balance. Threshold : it is a term which proves problematic to define, as it is difficult to separate its physical from its metaphysical sense. Speaking of a valley or a mountain, for example, the artist is anxious to know where the slope begins. And with the question about the (slippery) slope comes that of winding where, at the intersection of circular time and curved space, an incessantly unhinged meaning is being contested. Since the 1970s, Jean-Pierre Bertrand has been acquiring rolled-up surfaces of inscription : from film rolls which he manipulates first as an operator<sup>7</sup> in order to make his own films (often in a loop), to large rolls of newsprint paper which he impregnates with salt, honey, or lemon. Far from being definitively mute, these large cylinders of blank paper — so-called "dames blanches" (white ladies) — would have absorbed words in their recycled pulp.<sup>8</sup>

A dynamic of destabilization (of meaning) thus becomes the foundation of the philosophy of the artist fascinated by the unfolding of the text whose appearance and disappearance are simultaneous. A text whose folds alone make possible its unfolding, and its disappearance — its revelation. Once again, the Torah is the most emblematic of scrolls ; its parchment is also supposed to have been treated with specific substances : salt, flour, and a residual of wasp enzyme and tree bark. In order to be read, the scroll must be held with both hands and scanned with sustained attention. However, in order to be understood, the text requires prior expertise in syntax and phonology : because the Torah was originally written without vowels or punctuation, the reader must be able to recognize and vocalize the implicit, missing sonorities. The principle of elision, which literally swallows the body of the text, “regurgitates” only the residues of an undecipherable cryptogram.<sup>9</sup> This is the origin of the vigilant and anti-establishment spirit of Jewish hermeneutics which, when it infects the esoteric tradition of the Kabbalah, borders on paranoia because it desires to *decipher*, word for word and letter for letter, the etymologies, homophonies, and other hidden correspondences.

By attributing a numerical value to each letter of the alphabet in order to encode utterances, Marcel Duchamp and Walter Arensberg subverted, while simplifying, one of the mystical techniques in the Kabbalah, called *gematria*.<sup>10</sup> The two accomplices aimed, however, less at a revelation of meaning than a semantic indifference, likely to generate such absurdities as the well-known title *3 ou 4 gouttes de hauteur n'ont rien à faire avec la sauvagerie* (1916).<sup>11</sup> This type of ratiocination, despite its ironic undertones in Duchamp, is partly responsible for the recurring challenge to the credibility of the Kabbalah described, for example by Theodor Adorno, as the “metaphysics of dunces.”<sup>12</sup> Often considered as a superstitious, obscurantist, and heretical aberration, the Kabbalah was also seen as an antidote to shriveled rationalism. Notably, some German Romantics were drawn to it as a reaction to the logic and patterns of pure reason.

In 1988, Jean-Pierre Bertrand came across a translation of the *Tract on Ecstasy* written in the early nineteenth century by Dobh Baer of Lubavitch, whose father, Schnéour Zalman, participated in the rebirth of the mystical tradition in Eastern Europe. Beyond the hermeticism of the text, Jean-Pierre Bertrand perceives the serious nature of the inner workings of the Kabbalah: the extravagance of reasoning that defies logic, even while laying claim to it; the inexhaustible dynamic of dislocation, permutation, and redistribution of words and their meanings; the contradictory task of elucidation whose intelligibility is itself disputable; finally, the point of no return, constantly courted, that separates erudition from madness.<sup>13</sup> The artist assimilates this "conspiratory" logic into a kind of profane syncretism. Spelling out names, enumerating intervals, and measuring spacings, Bertrand adopts the anxiety inherent in that logic. In the *Tract on Ecstasy*, he also comes across a number he had "discovered" in Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*: 54.

Robinson is precisely fifty-four years old when he leaves his island. The number prompts Jean-Pierre Bertrand to try to "get deeper under the skin of reality." Besides its irrefutable specificity — as the only number the difference of which and its mirror image equals the sum of its digits<sup>14</sup> — its uniqueness is confirmed by the Kabbalah: 54 signifies "you will be always on the move"; 45 asks "who? what?"; and 99, their sum, suggests a response, "over here, there where you are right now." The number then symbolizes permanent questioning, conducive of a dialectical interplay rather than ideological confinement. The number 54 recurs throughout Jean-Pierre Bertrand's work in various series of 54 units, 54-letter-long utterances, five- and four-letter-long words. In 1998, the artist engraved each side of an iron-cast die with nine consecutive numbers up to 54. Trying to perform all possible readings by turning the cube from one side to the next, below or to the right, the artist finds ten possible permutations. The ten cubes subsequently engraved have as titles the following 54-letter phrase: *To turn over the six sides of a cube as if turning the pages of a book*. The vagaries of 54 are also exasperating since, in the end, "54 cannot be understood. It is both something and nothing at the same time."<sup>15</sup> *Fucking Letters — Fucking Numbers*.<sup>16</sup>

And yet, 54 is also the title and the theme of a story written by Jean-Pierre Bertrand in the form of a parable which combines searing imagery and the absurd, in the spirit of the German *Witz*, and which revolves, as did *Diamon'D* and *L'oasis* written earlier, around an encrypted configuration that the reader must decode. A trapdoor in the real. The artist describes how the enigmatic Zalman confides in the "solitary man," obsessed with the number 54, the fact that he lives "at the end of a street, or rather at its summit, where it ceases to climb in order to re-descend and narrow [*rétrécir*] towards the horizon."<sup>17</sup> Besides the shaky equilibrium between ascent and decline (humpty dumpty), the anecdote sheds light on the duplicity of Zalman whose Germanic name, literally meaning *man-cipher*, is also the name of the Hassidim Rabbi cited above. An anagram reveals later that "R-É-T-R-É-C-I-R towards the horizon meant R - R-É-C-I-T-E-R close to the one who can hear."<sup>18</sup> Since *rétrécir* contains *re-réciter*, *conter* (telling, recounting) becomes *compter* (counting): inscribed in the very plot of the narrative, the secret is not really hidden but simply mis-arranged. To understand it, one would need to *decipher* the game by re-distributing it.

But this game of numbers and letters is not just a casual pastime. The acronym has nothing to do with the expedient abbreviation, nor the anagram with spoonerism. Rather, the game entails vertiginous associations and a strenuous vigil. Written by Jean-Pierre Bertrand in 1981, *Diamon'D* is "the title of a story that multiplies images which reveal a fiction through the very phenomenon of the printed character."<sup>19</sup> The central character is named after the last letter of the Latin alphabet whose semi-phonetic spelling remains disputable. ZED, Z'E'D, or Z'EDDD, which is pronounced without being written, could well be the inverse of Aleph, the initial letter of the Hebrew alphabet which is written but never uttered. Since the opposites often meet in the artist's work, "z" is less the culmination of the alphabet than the point that precedes its re-beginning. In the same vein, ZED's character has the habit of accomplishing his maneuvers "upside down," walking on his hands like a jester, and his head-covering conceals a particular Aleph. "The inside of his hat was entirely black and this blackness was shaped as a hat that one could see on the outside," enclosing the totality of a familiar reality.

In the hollow of a rock, Jean-Pierre Bertrand is said to have discovered Aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, a silent consonant having foundational properties. Before chiseling down the large rock, the artist first threw it in the direction of a menhir, so that the shadow of the smaller stone would be projected onto the larger one. This intuitive and empirical attempt steered the sunrays whose shadow was to be fixed by a photograph (*The Shadow of a Stone Projected against an Upright Rock*, 1978). Shown in the negative, the light which was revealed by the rock appeared to contain the letter Aleph : never mind the truth of this discovery, it is evocative of the opening of the book of Genesis where Creation is accomplished by the command of the Verb : "And God *said*, Let there be light : and there was light." Hélène Meisel<sup>20</sup> The alphabet that begins with Aleph is seminal, the true "printing master,"<sup>21</sup> by which the whole of the universe is created. In a story likewise entitled "The Aleph," Jorge Luis Borges wondered precisely whether Aleph might not exist equally in the heart of a stone enclosed in one of the pillars of a Cairo mosque, after having seen it, disbelieving, in a cellar in Buenos Aires, within a sphere of brightness containing the totality of the universe : "The Aleph was probably two or three centimeters in diameter, but it contained universal space inside it, with no diminution in size."<sup>22</sup> The contraction mentioned in the introductory paragraphs, in relation to the remarks made by the artist in a flash of inspiration, could in fact be either spatial or verbal. Just as Borges's Aleph extends beyond its contours, Jean-Pierre Bertrand's work struggles for rigorous effort of intensity that overflows it. The artist invokes, as the source of his practice, the foundational discovery of a tin box to which he attributed the property of containing within it a space larger than all space outside it. Its interior walls, painted black, contained a lemon also coated with black lacquer. The fruit — found in a passage in *Robinson Crusoe* where the castaway discovers on the uninhabited island a grove of miraculously "cultivated" lemon trees — becomes omnipresent in Jean-Pierre Bertrand's work. Curiously, only the rind remains of the lemon from the "black box," its pulp having dried up. Contraction and expansion (of the fruit and of the box) : two opposing movements whose contradiction produces a creative "draft of air," similar to the phenomenon by which God would be "contracted" or "withdrawn" in order to allow the world to emerge : the *tzimtzum*.

In 2012, by sliding an opaque surface over the top of a mirror, the artist made an intervention at the Michel Rein gallery which was holding the exhibition of *6 fois shem en 2* (*6 times shem in 2*). In order to elude all interpretation of this act of blotting out, and namely an extremely pompous interpretation of the secret, Jean-Pierre Bertrand topped his own explanation — “obscuring a reflective surface” — with an expeditious “that’s all,” suggesting that it was *nothing* more than that. In a final ambiguity, the expression could equally hint at the *totality* of possibilities.

## Hélène Meisel

Art historian and critic

1 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 423.

2 On the occasion of the exhibition *Jean-Pierre Bertrand, recent works*, November 14, 2002–January 14, 2003, Hervé Bize Gallery, Nancy, France.

3 Julia Kristeva, “L’engendrement de la formule”, 37 *Tel Quel* (1969).

4 In French, the word “schème,” schema, and the Hebrew name “Shem” are homonyms. — Translator’s note.

5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (Routledge, 2001), p. 6, para. 2.0123.

6 Blanchot, *op. cit.*, p. 423.

7 Jean-Pierre Bertrand worked in particular for the program *Archives du XXe siècle* (*Archives of the 20th century*) from 1970 to 1974.

8 “Since the 1970s, Jean-Pierre Bertrand, has worked with recycled paper by giving it the dimension of all the text that is to be found in the pulp.” Denys Zacharopoulos, *Jean-Pierre Bertrand*, Exhibition Catalogue [48th Venice Biennale, French Pavillion, 1999], Paris : Association française d’action artistique (1999), p. 10.

9 “dchffr ctt phrs st l mltr prv d ctt rmrq” ou “Déchiffrer cette phrase est la meilleur preuve de cette remarque” [Bng bl t dcphr ths phrs s th bst prf f ths rmrk, or Being able to decipher this phrase is the best proof of this remark] is the example which Pommier borrows from I.J. Gelb.

10 In Hebrew, numbers are represented by letters of the alphabet. Each word thus has a numerical value derived from the sum of the numbers represented by each letter taken separately, which makes it possible to establish equivalence between different words with the same numerical value.

11 A ready-made by Marcel Duchamp (1916) consisting of a men’s comb and furnished with a title : “three or four drops from above have nothing to do with savagery or barbarism.” For an analysis of this ready-made in relation to cryptography, see John F. Moffit, *Alchemist of the Avant-Garde. The Case of Marcel Duchamp*. Albany : State University of New York Press (2003), pp. 231ff. — Translator’s note.

12 The exact phrase reads : “Occultism is the metaphysics of dunces.” See Theodor Adorno, “Theses against occultism” (no. 151), in : *Minima Moralia*. Trans. E. F. N. Jephcott. London : Verso (2005), p. 241. — Translator’s note.

13 “If a Cervantes scholar were to say : *Don Quixote* begins with two monosyllabic words ending in *n* (*en* and *un*), followed by one word of five letters (*lugar*), two of two letters (*de la*), and one of six (*Mancha*) ; and if he then were to draw conclusions from that, we would immediately assume he was mad. The Bible has been studied in this fashion.” Jorge Luis Borges, “The Kabbalah” in : *Seven Nights*. Trans. Eliot Weinberger. New York : New Directions (2009), p. 98.

14  $54 - 45 = 5 + 4 = 9$

15 Jean-Pierre Bertrand, *54*. Arles : Actes Sud (1998), p.10.

16 Lectures given at the Centre International de la poésie Marseille on May 21, 2010, in the context of the exhibition “De ce qui se fera – De ce qui sera fait” May 21 – June 27, 2010.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

19 Elsewhere, the artist elaborates : “The diamon’D relates to the English word ‘diamond’ which simultaneously means the diamond shape, a lozenge, the figure on playing cards, the baseball field, and in typography the second smallest size of font.”

20 Authorized King James Version, Genesis 1 : 3. — Translator’s note.

21 Vigée Claude, “Borges devant la Kabbale juive. De l’écriture du dieu au silence de l’Aleph,” 4(320) *Revue de littérature comparée* (2006), p. 403.

22 Jorge Luis Borges, “The Aleph,” in *Collected Fictions*. Trans. Andrew Hurley. New York : Penguin (1998), p. 283.

## Untitled

While his left hand his naked thigh against a large yellow lemon to soften it up and squeeze some juice – his thighs start to tremble and twitch until they knock against each other – the two numbers – five and four – stamped in red on two small metallic cubes strapped one to each leg at the level of the knee – move apart and come together depending on the leg movements – at their collision coarse salt strewn on the ground crunches underfoot – his head gently thrown backwards seems to stare upwards at a point in space –

Jean-Pierre Bertrand .

## SHEM

Shem : A text that reads by skipping from phrase to phrase, from passage to passage.  
A shattered equation that spins in place.

A chord, a composition whose sham note is its vital element, the essence of its dynamics, of its movement.

Shem advances, steps back, can't stand still.  
He said: "scheme, schema ?"

Shem : Color, certainly  
Plastic, for sure  
Flayed light, yes  
An incisive cut that grazed the painting.

Shem : The syntax of planes of light in the architecture of the seen object.  
A bas relief nearly as thin as plates of Plexiglas.

He said: "Vermilion red – a gush of blood  
Brown – black blood  
Gold – the transmutation of blood into gold."

Shem : The resonance of brown in red and gold  
of red in gold and brown  
of gold in brown and red.

He said : "In the diversity of formulations, each Shem is unique."

Shem : From one to another, a contaminated space.

Shem : The weight of light, a just balance of luminous masses.

Shem : To see from afar, from the front.

Repeating Shem, he speaks of places, cities, infinitesimal territories.

He said: "I exist in the permanence of my equation."

He said: "I belong to the eyes of the other, to the ubiquity of gaze."

Shem seen, Shem unseen – The obliterated memory of the seen object.

He said: "The formulation of the equation becomes indistinguishable from the flawlessness of its presentation."

He said: "Saying, formulating serves only to say, to formulate about the object."

He said again inquiringly: "So then, red?" – Blood; "Brown?" – Black blood; "Gold?" – Blood aurified.

Repeating Shem, he speaks of places, cities, infinitesimal territories.

He said: "Carbon Black – Phtalocyanine Green – Titanium Dyoxide – Iron Oxide Yellow."

He said: "Mica Coated, Titanium dioxide, Iron Oxide."

Shem: From one to another, from one to others, before or after him – and in this progression, the permanence of an escape.

He writes Shem on a piece of graph paper, a letter per square separated by 5 blank cells.

On the surface, Shem gathers a fine dust, his ally in time.

In – within Shem, color won't fade, preserving its luminous glow.

He said: "Naphthol, Yellow Acrylic, Titanium Dioxide."

Shem: Lit day and night in the light of day by 5500° Kelvin.

Shem is without thought, Shem reasons.

He said: "There is no embodiment in Shem, livid skin drained of blood armed with the wiles of its rebirth."

Shem: The effigy of a foretold death, but also renascence, renascence.

He said: "Frontality, the solitude of frontality, infrathin volumes."

He repeated once more.

Repeating Shem, he speaks of places, cities, infinitesimal territories.

Between two nearly similar Shems, the asynchronism is nearly palpable.

Shem: 4 in one room, 5 in another, and so on, the more I move forward the more it recoils.

In Shem, the perimeter is within, it is enclosed on the inside.

Shem appeals to the real. He provokes it.

Shem is in the expression of his appearance.

Shem is spelled, in a code language, R for red, B for brown, G for gold.

Shem is deposited in the dark night of the eye.

Shem is a play of transparency drowned in the matte effect of a blank.

Shem: From one to another, from one to others, before or after him, and in this progression, the permanence of an escape.

Shem is hand-made, but also a work of fire which gathers together.

Shem is to be read, a book before the letter open flat, without binding, a volume, he said.

He said: "Confronted by Shem, does the eye recognize the law?"

Is Shem a composition, a succession of chords, a drawn-out quaver, a quaver and a semiquaver?

Shem : In the silence of his emergence.

From one Shem to another, the same cuts, the same rips and tears.

Shem : Plasmic charges in the formlessness of the blank.

He said: "What's that ? What's that ?

By way of reply: "The echo, the echo."

He heard : "An echo in triple time, an echo in quadruple time."

Shem : From one to another, from one to others, before or after him – and in this progress, the permanence of an escape.

Shem : From one day to the next, in the same place, in the presence of the same.

In the room, he kept repeating "An engram, an engram," and he did it without knowing why.

Shem : A free zone ? Free from what it declares, an orthogonal declaration.

Shem : The triple time of the thudding of blood, the dual time of man, and the other time, messianic time.

Shem : Cross my mind, leave no prints.

Shem : A heraldic emblem ? A coat of arms, a crusade ?

Around the world, a year of cross-exchange, a crusading year on a quest for ?

Shem : Naphthol Crimson, Arylide Yellow, Dioxide Violet Deep

A dispersed army where each Shem is a member of that army dispersed around the world ?

Every Shem obeys the spirit of the same model, an unformulated model.

He said : "Shem is beautiful."

He added: "Shem is of great beauty."

Confronted with the energies Gold Brown Red, he kept repeating in a low voice : "Nourish, nourish."

He walked from one Shem to another.

He said : "Everything happens, everything is finished in the permanence of the flight, in its reversal."

He said: "Shem, what is my subject ?"

He heard : "My name."

He said : "If the subject is indistinguishable from the object, and the object remains the object, it's off subject", "What happens to the unseen object ?"

"What happens between the seen object and the unseen object ?"

"A disaster," he said.

**Jean-Pierre Bertrand**

2012

## Passageways

### on the films of Jean-Pierre Bertrand

Jean-Pierre Bertrand was trained as a cinematographer which led him, in the 1960s and 1970s, to work as a cameraman for film and television. Starting in the early 1970s, parallel to his work as a mixed media artist, he was making art shorts in 16 mm and Super-8 format which were similar to sketchbooks. These films were composed of repetitive and serial images which, as such, depicted the cinematographic experience while developing at the same time an investigation of time and chance. Thus, they fall into the category of structural and post-minimal film which was being developed at the time in North America.

Take two silent black-and-white self-portraits shot in 16mm, in 1974. In *Expressions* the artist applies make-up to his face in thick lines which highlight and accentuate the contours of his brows and of his lips. He photographs himself three times, mimicking the three distinct emotions : joy, indifference, and sadness — perhaps in memory of Nadar's mid-nineteenth-century photographs of the expressive pathos of the mime Debureau, dressed in Pierrot's costume, his face painted white, and wearing a skullcap. Each of the three portraits is reproduced thirty-three times on slides arranged at random in a slide carousel. The slides were projected over the artist's face while a mirror mounted next to the projector made it possible for him to see the projected image, bearing a distinct expression, which he would immediately try to mimic. A camera, set up to the left of the mirror and over the projector, would register the slide show which gradually accelerated : following a morbid and painful scenario, the artist's face — caught in the coercive mechanism of the camera, the slide projector, and the mirror which tear him apart three times over — is no longer able to catch up with its deserted mask, leaving only empty traits : a recording of the phenomenon of expression without expressivity. This brings to mind Andy Warhol's late portraits in which the surface layer of paint seems to dissociate itself from the structure of the face, color acting as makeup, transforming society portraits into *Vanitas*. Again in 1974, Jean-Pierre Bertrand filmed *Face* where one finds the dilation of time, the exploration of thresholds separating movement from the immobility characteristic of Warhol's Screen Tests. For seven seconds the artist films his own face with a static camera and using a somewhat low-angle shot, with his eyes wide open. The shot is then reproduced over fifty times until it fills up six minutes. An image excerpted from the film is then reproduced to extend for a duration of six minutes. Presented alternately, the two series reveal the imperceptible vibration between the two types of images and,

through that vibration, show the passage not from movement to immobility, but within a uniformly immobile state of image, from animate to inanimate.

The same alternation of states, the same force of inertia can be seen at work in a geometric and ludic way in *Balance Ball*: thrown by an invisible hand into an empty room, a multicolored ball purchased at a stand in the Jardin du Luxembourg bounces randomly within the field of vision, then rolls around before coming to a stop. There is nothing to distinguish between the moving image and the static image: the striped ball rests on the hardwood floor as if it were the image of an inert planet immobilized in the cosmic vacuum. If they rely on the invariable, fixed character of the frame, Jean-Pierre Bertrand's films also dispense with reverse angles: they are constructed on the principle of doing away with vis-à-vis, with the invisible, or with elsewhere. The image functions as a real space without exteriority, and yet the outside of the frame opens up within the frame itself as it is defined as a place.

The frame is a universe, or rather the shadow of a universe, and it provides the space where the reflection of that universe can be constructed: like the *khora*, the Platonic "receptacle," the reflection establishes the spatio-temporal conditions necessary for the production of an ephemeral, anodyne, and often unintelligible event whose properties will be activated by the film and which will give the event its specific visibility. *Pot de fleurs* (*Flower Pot*) is undoubtedly the most transparent manifestation of this Platonic dimension which crops up in Jean-Pierre Bertrand's work: a net curtain lifted haphazardly by the wind covers and uncovers a flower pot sitting outside on a balcony, the presence and intensity of which depend on the movement of the fabric. When the curtain falls back over the window frame, the flower pot can be seen through the netting, devoid of its color, that is, of its reality. The shadow of a second plant fleetingly substitutes for the real plant before the latter resurfaces again in the full intensity of its unveiling, showing the flutter between the appearance of the shadow of the thing and the appearance of the thing itself, first in shades of grey, then in the radiance of its real colors. The space of grey recurs in *Outside* — it becomes the color of otherworldliness which is accessible only by means of a reflection. Through a window looking out onto an expanse of leaden sea, the camera executes a series of choppy zooms in a movement of compulsive exteriorization that never ends. The frame is configured by the rectangle of that window through which the camera points towards the limitless elsewhere without ever being engulfed by it. This brings to mind Franz Kafka writing in his diary on June 19, 1916: "Forget everything. Open the windows. Clear the room. The wind blows through it. You see only its emptiness, you search in every corner and don't find yourself."<sup>1</sup>

Jean-Pierre Bertrand's films raise the question of thresholds, as well as that of passage, of crossing — *Passing Through*: a seven-second-long shot from Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* runs in a loop. The camera follows a yellow cab as it crosses the Brooklyn Bridge; in the course of this transitional shot, suspended in the story like a bridge over the East River, the frame gradually narrows, and the shot becomes a surface of unstable color with blurry contours, until the figures become exhausted and change into shadows: the taxi is a psychopomp vehicle inside of which the driver and the passenger, swept away on an interminable journey, lost in a linear labyrinth, seem to replay *ad infinitum* the preamble to Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Nosferatu* ("And when he had crossed the bridge the

phantoms came to meet him"), which, in the end, is perhaps the preamble to all films, the sign of the passage to figurability, an operation of metempsychosis.

A rite of passage is also at the heart of *13 Years Before the Year 2000*: a man who is seated before a glass of brandy in the recesses of a pub, his back against a mirror, tirelessly reenacts within the frame an imaginary turn executed at 105 mph on his Ducati. He leans to the side, off screen, straightens up, repeats the same gestures, and in the way he describes the infinite lightness of the ride and the fragility of the traction it is hard not to hear an allegory of the migration of souls endowed with an existence that will never end: the image becomes a track along which the human body races, reenacting the intoxication of this turn by tirelessly redrawing its perfect curve within the cropped image, which is also the field of speech.

Finally, *Playing Dice* reveals perhaps the indecipherable formula of this metaphor of passage: duplicated and projected back to back with a delay of a few seconds, the film shows, using a still shot, a mirror set upright in a space covered with black fabric. In front of the mirror a hand keeps throwing dice. Rolling to a stop, the white cubes studded with black dots, in which Jean-Pierre Bertrand said he saw tiny death's heads,<sup>2</sup> affirm the ineluctable character of time and the necessity of chance until a new throw reverses that proof in order to affirm, on the contrary, the chance of necessity. But the film is not just a *memento mori*: an image of an image, the mirror duplicates the dice without allowing us to distinguish between the real and the reflection, thereby forming even more complex combinations of numbers — it is an allegory of time and of representation.

### Philippe-Alain Michaud

Curator of the Film Collection  
at the National Museum of Modern Art, Centre Georges Pompidou

<sup>1</sup> Franz Kafka. *The Diaries 1910–1923*. Trans. Joseph Kresh, Martin Greenberg, with Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1975, p. 362.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Pierre Bertrand. 54. Arles: Actes Sud, 1998, p. 36.