

Obstacles

I would like to begin this text by clarifying the kind of relationship that I can have with any artwork; so in this first section I would not particularly focus on Muriel Leray's.

I'm no different than most actors in the world of contemporary art. I have no practice in this world; it would be natural to count me as a simple member of the "audience". That is to say: among the spectators. By opposition, no doubt, to those who are actors of this world. As we know, there is a problem with this spectator/actor opposition: it sets up a sort of division between active and passive people, and passivity favors indifference. This does not do justice to the efforts that artists undertake to bring their creation to life.

These days, some artworks know how to gather a lot of non-artists into the very process of creation, granted: different social actors, workers, technicians, engineers, communities ... but each of these artworks installs a local relationship, with a small circle of people, in a short amount of time.

Most people are rarely welcomed in this type of relationship, and I am no different. For me and for the vast majority of the audience, the relationship to art has not changed much with relational aesthetics: most of the time, we find ourselves in front of an object that does not really listen to us, which would remain inflexible if we tried to change our relationship to it: it gives us an interaction procedure; if we do not follow this procedure, then the object ignores us. This asymmetrical relation has been established a long time ago.

If I accept this observation, I immediately ask myself the following question: how can such an asymmetrical relation become something more interesting than indifference? Because such a miracle can happen; we experience it every now and then.

I have been fascinated by this question for a long time. I am a writer. About ten years ago, I developed the concept of obstacle. Through this concept, I wanted to talk about a type of impact that a work of art can have on a foreign practice; in particular, on a literary practice, of course. A kind of maximum impact: when we are touched by a work to such a point that it radically questions our own choices. Three possibilities are then available to us: 1: stop everything; 2: convert ourselves to the foreign practice; 3: stay inside our own trajectory, but take a radical turn.

I have a canonical example for such an experience: that of the writer O. Cadiot. He opened his writing practice with a kind of literal poetry, collage of grammar books; he met the works of J. Kosuth and L. Weiner, and his page suddenly seemed to him much weaker than the wall of an exhibition. He could have (1) deduced that the fate of his writing practice was to stop, since sculpture replaces it; he could have (2) become a

sculptor, and continue, in a different way, the work he had started in poetry; he chose instead (3) to vary his trajectory as a writer: he used his linguistic inventions in novels.

This is an asymmetrical relationship that is not indifference. It is a maximal impact, though: any artwork does not make us question everything! But the radical nature of this experience sheds some light on more peaceful relationships. The work of another does not always point to an obstacle in ours; sometimes it highlights a simple absence, chosen perhaps, which gives us the opportunity to confirm our choice; when we walk around this absence on our side, it is also a way to put us in relationship with a presence in the other practice, without copying the other presence on our side, or without changing sides, or without generalizing the absence (stop everything).

Thus one can feel in oneself, thanks to another artist, an obstacle or an absence. In the present text, this will be the kind of position I will try to adopt with regard to the artwork *rest, reset* . . . What would it tell me about the limits of my own practice? What does it do specifically, with its own means, that literature cannot do, or that I have chosen to avoid? Which holes in writing does it reveal? What can my writing do with these holes, how can I react to them?

“rest, reset,”

It is therefore a fertile relationship between two heterogeneous intelligences that I am trying to build: my literary practice on the one hand, a sculpture practice on the other. But, precisely, a sculpture by Muriel Leray would often put into play, in itself, a similar relationship, a knot between two different sensitivities and two different sensibilities:

- A literary, poetic logic, would be built around a short text: a sentence, a long title, with a rhythmic and/or fictional work;
- A logic of minimalist sculpture, relying on frames in space, would index rectangular shapes around them, giving relief to utilitarian objects that are rarely seen (electricity meters, heaters, electrical outlets).

And indeed, in the virtual monastery that she designed for the Virtual Dream Center, there are frescoes that provide this first opposition poem/frame; but there is also a second opposition, between the frescoes and the monastery. Indeed, space itself, with its spatialized soundtrack, offers a disjointed experience, following different sensitive laws.

Now it seems to me that the relationship between the frescoes and the monastery comes here to induce the variation of which I spoke earlier: rather than confronting two obstacles that two subjects would indicate to each other, they are tied, more peacefully, around two symmetrical absences.

The experience itself prepares us to pay attention to that aspect. The first thing that can strike us in this monastery is a composition of absences. The video is sometimes cut;

the sounds of crowds and breaths are interrupted; their spatialization makes them fade out when the frescoes become clearly legible, when the depth itself vanishes.

These absences also mark fractures between the frescoes and the virtual monastery. Noise is out of reach for frescoes; they cannot quite reach our ears. But more importantly we are confronted with two different qualities of silence. A specialized silence, temporalized, which arises in the monastery by successive surprises, with the silence caused by an interruption; and a timeless silence in frescoes, related to the capacity of abstraction in spoken languages, here suggesting a kind of noble poverty in virtual worlds: money is not entangled with existence for our avatar and his/her world (“and nothing of value was lost” would make us aware of this fact).

On the literary side, it would remind us another fracture. In each poetic work, we have a choice: we can enter the text by reading it aloud, or by watching it on the surface of the page. I do not think there is one nobler option than the other, but the same work cannot really hold both simultaneously. Most of my works would favor the page, often to allow two disjointed logics to develop (typically, mathematics and fiction), and to let the reader take the time he needs to understand them (especially for mathematics, which would often force us to slow down our reading, or to go back). *rest, reset*, then tells me that I am missing the noise and the interruptions, that I am on the side of the frescoes; that it is then by its power of abstraction that the writing may put itself in relation to the noise of the corridor (and thus may shed new light on its silences). Therefore, this artwork would help me complement my literary proposal; it would invite me to build an oral reading from a text written for the page according to its fertile principle of composing absences: such a reading which would be articulated around the silences, the absences (of the side of the written text as on the side of the reading aloud). In my case, being faithful to *rest, reset*, would simply mean exploring this possibility.

This is a first step towards the artwork that I am offered, from my place as a writer. It is based on a fairly basic opposition (oral/written). I gave it as a kind of basic example. But there is something else. Certainly, the temporal geometry of the work reveals itself in the spatialization of the sound. But there is another geometry in the frescoes, which opposes that of the monastery. This geometry creates a temporal dynamism that is well known in painting: dynamism of the *moment before*. It's about to fall, it's the moment just before it falls, it's a moment frozen in an imbalance. This time, it is on the side of the virtual monastery that the timeless expresses itself: the cutting of light above the doors recalls the windows drawn in the frescoes, except that it is stable, that it will not fall. Once again, two opposites who get in touch: stability of light, a moment before the fall on the frescoes.

And what do the frescoes tell us? “We watched buildings fall on top of people”. Inside this sentence there is a first tension at work, between the choice of words (watch rather than see) and that of the tense (simple past rather than past progressive), a tension which is based on the distinction between an event considered as a whole (perfective) and an event envisaged from within its unfolding (imperfective). But also, in contrast to drawing, the text can suggest the capacity of language to distinguish between two types of temporality: the one in which fictional events appear distant, past (e.g., past perfect) and that where we live past events as if they were current (e.g., preterit, narrative

present). These distinctions do not exist for drawing; but here, what we see in the fresco is the temporality of another fall, which bypasses the accomplished and the current, to create a fiction of a moment before, always on the edge of falling, a promise that never fulfilled, never current: a near future, very close, so close that it touches us, that it does not stop touching us. The inability to distinguish between the accomplished and the current becomes the (affirmative) power of a conjunction: a point where these modalities of time merge as in a crisis.

A second time, I can ask myself this question: being a writer, how can I be faithful to this temporal sensation, knowing that I do not have the same means as drawing? What are my own powers? I want to be tied to this pictorial beauty, which is at first inaccessible to me; How do I do?

I have a specific answer to this question; it will not make sense for all practices, but it may inspire other responses. For my part, if I am jealous of this *instant before*, and of the timeless virtual lights, and their composition, it makes me want to develop new temporal aspects inside the literary space, and to seek an extended sequence of the tenses.

What the moment aspect of the fresco says is that the simultaneous holding of two opposite aspects (accomplished/current) creates a temporal aspect of its own. That does not surprise me; on the literary side, we know that myths already made this leap over a contradiction, and drew from it a thought of difference and similarity. C. Levi-Strauss has even shown how, in a paradoxical metamorphosis, we sometimes recognized the absence of a foreign mythical figure, a figure that another tribe maintained on their side: see, for instance, his article *Bird to Bird*. Metamorphosis held an impossible place to link two neighboring but singular mythologies in a process of common thought.

It seems to me that this mechanism can be used today to extend the expressiveness of grammatical tenses. Moreover, it can be thought that a similar mechanism has given stability to the narrative present: what is a narrative present, if not (roughly) a present tense that pretends to be a simple past? And one could do the same type of analysis on the tense that J. Rancière called *plus-que-présent*: a temporal aspect by which historians give, to a singular destiny, the value of a representative example inside a given era. This tense is a present that pretends to be a past progressive...

It seems to me that most aspectual transformations are largely unexplored. There is a kind of contemporary hegemony of the present tense, it must be symptomatic of some impasse. I hope that my exploration will allow me to figure this out. I do not say more about my fancies, because we must now return to the work we are talking about.

I was not so far away, because this artwork certainly invites us to open our expression of time. Consider the poster that Muriel Leray issued on the same occasion. This poster gives another temporal expression: one experiences a time in three moments (first, the pictorial perception of two almost twin words, “rest”, “reset”, then the appearance of a minimal difference when read, i.e. the letter e, then back to the drawing with a line that touches the two r’s and binds them to the frame).

The poster responds to the call of the virtual monastery, using its own means; moved by our experience, we can do the same thing on our side. I already said how I would respond. In these times when we are lacking communities, it is not so bad to declare publicly what we bind ourselves to. To conclude, I would like to make a first step on this road.

I wrote something like a prose poem which, by its exploration of an aspect of the French *imparfait* tense, would like to articulate itself with *rest, reset* . I would invite you to refer to this version first if you can read French. You will then find an English version below. The work is a bit different in this version, it is not quite a word-for-word translation...

And here is the reason. The original version is based on two characteristics of French grammar. First, the aspectual opposition *global/sécant* is, in French, directly mapped to the grammatical opposition *passé simple/imparfait*; this opposition is fairly similar to the opposition *simple/progressive*, so there would be a direct translation. But the point of the French version is precisely to revisit this opposition and make a third term appear, which would roughly be an aspect that would fit to Nietzsche's experience of eternal return; to do so, and this would be my second point, the text uses *imparfait* as a two-face tense, relying implicitly on its second value: the habitual aspect. Sure, this aspect exists in English as well, but it is not usually expressed with past progressive. It is more naturally expressed with the modal verb *would*, the construction *used to* or the time-unspecific *will*. The thing is, the poem would not work without a two-face protagonist; this is only natural, considering that its gear is mythological in the sense of C.Levi-Strauss: it tries to fertilize a contradiction (*global/sécant*) with a third term that works as a mediation, and yet creates a rupture.

Instead of an imperfect mapping, I chose here to try and redo a similar operation in English—this is the kind of fundamental transformation that a myth would have to deal with when it crosses a language barrier, if you trust C.Levi-Strauss. To that effect, I relied on another two-face construct: the modal verb *would*, which can either express the habitual aspect or the conditional mood. This would work, I think, because *would* could be opposed to *might* on the conditional side, and to *will* on the habitual side; then because *might* or *will* can drag an idea of potential energy that *would* is unable to express. But I am no native English speaker, so I'd be happy to discuss this with experts.

I'm no native English speaker, but I have to speak English every day on my workplace. Any worker in a foreign country would invent himself his own version of the foreign language; so I would consider this one as my own English-based creole.

“I might live”

I might live alone in a room furnished with simplicity. The scene might have been clearly outlined in my memory. It will have been a close past, very close. The carpet might almost go under the bed, and it might wear the shadow of the crumpled sheets.

There might be no remarkable catastrophe in this type of moment, ever. The sheet might fold imperceptibly under gravity. The bodies might fall everywhere.

Yet, at that time, the fabric would make a v or a y. And this moment would keep on, would come back constantly. My heart would make one beat. Had I been stretching, my pulse would be steady. Despite the fatigue. The sheet would react, it would beat once. The patterns on the carpet might not have reacted to the pulse, never. It wouldn't be insomnia yet, and soon I might read 11:00 on my alarm clock.

I used to spend similar nights. If the curtain might sometimes waver at the window, slightly, this thrill of the air would disappear by itself, and would have no effect in the end: the moonlight would seem to freeze the landscape. The reflection on the wall used to be homogeneous, certainly cold, almost sweet. Stability might appear with disturbing clarity, but this clarity would show up on other occasions, and this moment would not be singular.

At the bottom, the carpet would touch the plinth; I could see the angle made by the two planes, in spite of the half-light, and I would have made myself familiar with the defaults of each line.

That's how I would often fall on them. I will want to stretch my legs; I would be about to get up. I would straighten my head, and the white halo on the wall would catch my attention. The movement would cause the mattress to sag. This sensation would be more striking, considering that we might miss the small variation. But even when we would notice it ... it would be part of a much larger equilibrium, and the universal calm would be manifesting itself. In my opinion, it used to be this calm that we would sometimes take, during the day, for a difficulty, and even for some resistance to our actions.

But in the end, you see, I might doubt that it was very new, and the inert world would seem to me as enigmatic as before, no more, no less. The various incidents which used to strike us constituted, undoubtedly, only asperities. Nothing would seem to change substantially—for as long as I might remember. The fantastic scenes would simply be repeated.