

Myths and Poetry of emptiness

For several years now, I have been questioning political issues through Art, conducting my researches on these topics always in the light of psychoanalysis and philosophy. As someone born in France from Algerian parents, my childhood, spent between France and Algeria, has led me to feel close to Oriental and Arab philosophy, as well as to Occidental philosophy.

Through the Mediterranean Sea, all the Greek philosophers' knowledge has spread in North Africa and in the Middle East, while the Chinese philosophers, like Lao Tzu, have been known in the Muslim and Arab world through the "Silk Road".

Thinkers like Abu'l-Walid Muhammad ibn Rushd of Cordoue (Averroès) or Abu'Ali al-Husayn ibn 'Abd Allah ibn Sina (Avicenne), for instance, were influenced by both Greek and Chinese philosophers, and sometimes they were even doing translations and commentaries of their texts.

The sentence from Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu: "Man creates things, but Emptiness gives them meaning", raises many things in my way of thinking art.

In Poetry, Calligraphy, Music, Architecture and Philosophy, there are indeed huge similarities in the ways Oriental and Arab people consider emptiness.

This sentence is also, in my opinion, the noblest definition of sculpture, the dialogue between emptiness and fullness governs the grounds for existence ("raison d'être") of which.

But is emptiness only a formal and physical notion ?

Indeed, the more my researches about emptiness have gone on, the more it has become obvious to me, that the society we are leaving in is more and more confronted to it. Our world is more and more socially weak. Despair about the future grows in our minds everyday. Future has never been so elusive.

From an artistic point of view, it can be compared to the emptiness with which reflection can clash, as soon as it asserts its desire to view a future in which it could project itself.

In the same way as artists, like Yves Klein, who showed "le vide" (the void) in 1958 as an otherness in a social context of Algerian war and political doubt (between French 4th and 5th Republic), several artists are confronted directly or not to this question. It is important to mention that, at that time, France is in the middle of a period of transition between the 4th and the 5th Republic. It is also in the middle of the decolonization wars, in Indo-China and in Algeria.

Doubts about the future, sensed at the idea of the emptiness that the loss of colonies would left, on economical, geopolitical and cultural levels, have raised a social anguish.

From a political point of view, I think that, in a way, our age is quite similar to the end of the 50's, when the future was uncertain. At that time, the Cold War, with the nuclear threat, was making any project for the future "barely conceivable".

Nowadays, the end of significant ideologies, socialism as well as capitalism, which have failed in environment, social issues, information, health, justice, etc... leads us to think that the future will be a huge political void. Don't we live in a world, in which politicians, whereas they had promised that economical growth would be back, end up resigning to publicly admit that they are powerless ? Would it be regarding the uncontrollable rise in raw materials' prices, or to regulate the rise in consumer goods' prices that result from it.

The economical reality of our world becomes so important in our everyday life, that it seems that

it progressively make politics disappear from our social life.

Nowadays, any attempt to view the future of our society inevitably faces the emptiness caused by the absence of stable socio-political marks.

In my artistic reflection, I look at this void in two ways. On the one hand, I consider it, through the notion that Michel Foucault calls its “history” or its “archive”, like a political referent. On the other hand, I think, like Edgar Morin, a French sociologist and philosopher, that “our world lives prosaically, whereas it should live poetically”.

From that point, the work “Ghost” (empty casts of women bodies in aluminum foils) has been an important step for my reflexion.

In this installation, the political referent of emptiness, its “history”, coexists with its poetic form. These two aspects of emptiness, political and poetical, exist in a way related to space as well as time. These notions indeed exist through the space contained in and surrounding each sculpture, but they are also linked to the medium’s fragility, which then gives them an ephemeral existence. I use this material – aluminum foil - to make fragile castings of human bodies, which could easily disappear. This fragility of the work therefore presupposes that it will have an ephemeral existence.

This fragility illustrates, in my opinion, a rupture in the “eternal” notion of the physical existence of the artwork. It then creates a fault in time, which, from a metaphorical point of view, is a temporal void.

“We have killed the future “, Edgar Morin has said.

For several decades, and especially since September 11th, people from many religions, cultures, and races care more than ever about the past. Muslim, Jewish and Christian governments are turning back toward the past to legitimate their current policies. A significant example is given today by some Conservatives, who assert Creationism to explain life on earth, preferring religion, to scientific theories of natural evolution. Why do Human Beings always try to repress their natural behavior?

Edgar Morin also says, about this, that “human life interweaves poetry and prose”. Prose represents the boring activities, but compulsory, like going to work everyday, doing constraining tasks to make a living. Poetry refers to natural things, like eating, making love, sleeping... It is “consumation”, as Georges Bataille used to say.

Foucault’s thought, to which I feel bound through my work, especially when it is about shedding light in my artworks on notions conceivable from an “historical” or even “archeological” point of view, like the one of emptiness, appears to me more and more skeptical, particularly in its capacity to reduce any form of the artwork to a mythological, almost romantic, notion.

In my opinion, the form I show in my installations is always linked to poetry, Man is always naturally prone to. I believe, like the Surrealists, that poetry should not be only written, it must also be lived. It is a breath, a hope in the face of the skepticism of the political referent as an “historical” notion in my artworks, particularly when this notion exists through emptiness. I like the idea that, in my work, but also in life, the poetical nature resists to the prosaic political notion. I believe that poetry, even if often taboo in the political discourse of an artwork like “Ghost”, which expresses itself through its “history”, is bound to it in an extreme relation, in which each

one of these two notions seems to resist the other one.

Let me remind you an anecdote:

When I am in France, in the suburb city where I work, every night as I walk home from my studio, I spend a lot of time watching a crowd of people waiting with empty bags, standing on the street in front of a truck, from which they could receive free food. They could get a container of milk, or butter, or rice, or sugar. They wait in groups, huddled some against the others in the cold, holding empty plastic bags.

One day, after I had looked a long time at an empty bag, left on a public bench by an homeless who had just taken the sugar, the milk and the rice from it, that had been given to him, to sell them to the nearest shop, I have been struck by the traces these foodstuffs had left on the plastic bag. The bag was empty but standing, keeping suggestively the shapes of what he had contained.

The emptiness of these shapes illustrated, in my eyes, with a both political and poetical relevance, the answer to many questions I had for several years.

Where do the boundaries of a political art begin and where do they stop?

Facing this emptiness that spread within and around this bag, in the field of Reality, any artistic, philosophic, or political discourse, the ethics of which would claim to bring any truth about the life of these “without”, would be pure theory, and above all pure mythology.

This emptiness has then appeared to me like the limit of the political intention of the artwork, in the face of the cruel and inevitable social reality, or more precisely the boundary that separates ethics and aesthetic.

The empty space contained in these empty plastic bags was showing a sculptural form, the political meaning of which, through its “history” (the context, the absence, the lack, the frustration...), and the temporal existence (by its ephemeral and fragile nature), have led me to be interested in what was binding them.

With these particular plastic bags, I now make this body movement of “filling and emptying”, to let emptiness take its place back, and telling us how many sources animate it.

Emptiness is foliated with different meanings, but what is important, in these plastic bags, is that it also stands between aesthetic and ethics. And from this separation it creates, a more important thing than these notions will arise, because it separates them as much as it binds them: the experience.

That’s this experience that binds us to the artwork, in space as well as in time, in an obscure, imperceptible, but real way, and only in which poetry can exist. This empty space, which is similar sometimes to a boundary, sometimes to a limit, sometimes to what binds and separates “ethics and aesthetic”, is poetry.

Emptiness is similar to a fault in time, as well as a physical form. This emptiness is a political and metaphysical referent, but it is made, in its fragile, ephemeral and vain experience, of a poetry that is simply similar to Life...

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