

first published in the book 'Move Side Ways' 2004. Le Grand Café. Editions Sept ISBN 2-912688-60-4

Jean-Marc Huitorel is a French art critic, art historian and curator. A regular contributor to ArtPress, Jean-Marc Huitorel is also the author of 'Art contemporain et économie', 'La beauté du geste' and 'Les Règles Du Jeu - Le Peintre Et La Contrainte', plus numerous catalogue essays for artist such as Roderick Buchanan and Rita McBride.

text : **Jean-Marc Huitorel 2004**

### **The analogy of the rock**

Neal Beggs pursues from one work to the next, his plan to endlessly push back the boundaries of the art arena until they disappear altogether. For my part, I maintain that art can only be defined, in any precise way, by its limits and boundaries (when, where and to what point does art exist?). But I also think that these limits and boundaries are never set once and for all, and that what we currently call a work (be it the whole body of work, or one specific item) is, to a fairly large degree, the way each and every artist has to define his or her area of practice both in relation to art itself and in relation to reality. I would add, that among the artists who have made this issue of limits the endless basis of their work, especially since the 1960s and even more so during the 1990s, the most interesting are indisputably those who have ventured as close as possible to the point of rupture, which is the point of fusion, and who have nevertheless managed to maintain the famous recurrent theme, the Rubicon, final outpost before confusion. Which means that in what Neal Beggs has called the "suppression of borders between art and life", I personally see the on-going re-invention of this practise and of these unlikely objects that we call "art". You will by now have understood that this "disagreement" forms the fertile ground of our conversation, and that it sets the tone for the two poles of tension between which this essay will attempt to blaze a trail (open up a path?). I would add that it is my firm conviction that rather than tending to fusion, Neal Beggs above all takes the risk that it will come about naturally and it is this very risk that underpins both his artistic practise in the tangibility of his life and the forms he uses to make it visible. Hence, it is, it seems to me, the issue of translation, taken in the literal and more general sense of equi-valence, which forms the living nub of his œuvre.

Before proceeding any further, it will be as well, for the sake of precision, to clarify that what pinpoints Neal Beggs's work, and what makes it re-cognizable, is what we might call the motif (or the figure, for what is much involved here is the visibility) of climbing; climbing as practise (in this field, the artist has had solid experience and achieved a more than honourable level), and climbing as representational matter or even, as we shall note further on, as life style. For want of a term capable of describing the entirety of Beggs's attitude and praxis, "climbing" should be understood here in a broad sense which, in certain circumstances, may mean all movement, even horizontal, involving clinging to a wall or face, be it natural or man-made, and any movement such as climbing stairs or strolling.

When Neal Beggs talks about doing away with the borderline between art and life, I do not think that this is as an heir to Allan Kaprow. For example, he never gives himself over to what we call, since Kaprow as it so happens, performances. When he makes his way up a "climbing" wall, it is never in front of an audience summoned to the spectacle, and if he manages to scale the wall, it is always with other climbers, visitors or friends, because, at that particular moment, that is what he wants to do. In this respect, "Dead Flat Vertical"

turns out to be one of the most representative pieces in his work. Shown for the first time in Glasgow (Transmission Gallery, 1999, with projections of climbing scenes taken from film classics), it is nowadays on its fifth version (Transpalette, Bourges, 2004). The fourth was installed at the Grand Café in Saint-Nazaire. A wall in marine ply, diagonal, with the holds, in the same material, placed with the intention of making diversely selective routes. Visitors to the exhibition tried their hand at it, as well as certain members of the local climbing club. At times, as he did for "Move Sideways", the route devised at the Zoo Galerie in Nantes (2001), Neal Beggs accompanied them. But his artist's attitudes and gestures are not involved in the fact of being seen climbing, but rather in the simple fact of living a moment of existence, which, in the end of the day, is nothing if not ordinary. Fusion? Who knows? The moment is inscribed in an artistic context. The structure is installed in an art centre, not in a sports centre (logic of the readymade); this structure is also an object related to sporting design, a sculpture... It is also a painting, but we shall return to this point in due course. What happens is that art, here, offers an opportunity of shared experience, and art creates experience –the conditions of a living and perceptible form. And if there is some performative essence in all this, it is in no way the fact of being a performer-cum-artist, but much more an attempt aimed at gaining access to the real (were it not for the wear and tear of words, it would be fitting to talk here of realism), in a specific, revitalized way, the way of art. This confirms, if the need arises, the existence of a dividing line, at times litigious, between art and life, which means that art is a thoroughly singular, not to say impossible, experience. In the exhibition Sportingly Yours (Domaine de Chamarande, 2004), under the title "Five Problems in Art Today", Neal Beggs affixed to five separate trees in the park five huge rectangular panels in marine ply, on which were set climbing holds offering various "climbs". The reference to painting, and more generally to the picture, was in no doubt, but for the artist it was also a matter of making these mini-climbing experiences available to the public (and not only to a public looking for artworks), and this in a region close to Fontainebleau Forest, which has so many climbing sites. On the opening day, evidently concerned with safety matters, the park management set up protective fences around the foot of the trees in such a way as to make the holds inaccessible to the public. Faced with this obstruction, the artist talked things over with the management and with the exhibition curators. Compromises were envisaged by the management, such as the possibility of removing the fences at certain times during which a security guard would be on duty. Neal Beggs preferred to go along with the presence of the fences, while chalking up his disagreement with what he regarded as a form of censorship; he also reckoned that this was a situation to which the very logic of his work might lead, and that it was in any event important to incorporate this dispute in the context of the existence of the work whose political dimension (in the sense of living together and concerted use of public space) was no longer in any doubt here. In other respects, what was at issue? The translation, we were saying, of the forms visible hereby.

But translation of what? It is perhaps here that Neal Beggs had a hunch about the possibility of crossing the borderline and introducing a fusion or merger, which would not be the deathly confusion of the real and its representation, but rather the establishment of searching analogies, in other words, metaphors, and at times metonymy and synecdoche, to borrow the affected vocabulary of rhetoric. Gathering into one and the same figure what is being pointed to, as well as the finger doing the pointing, is a bit absurd, a bit idiotic as Jean-Yves Jouannais would say, but it works, as we shall attempt to demonstrate.

"Surfaceaction" may be regarded as a counterpart to "Dead Flat Vertical". What is involved in each one of these occurrences is a videographic form (projected or on a monitor) showing the artist wearing boots with crampons and brandishing two ice axes, climbing horizontally on an indoor wall. It is possibly the gallery walls (Goethe Institute, Rome, or Galerie Le Sous-Sol, Paris, for example) or else those of a warehouse, refurbished for the occasion, in other words, lined with a wooden wall as at Saint-Nazaire. The filming is never public and, as we said earlier, does not have the aspect of a performance. The aim here is to produce representational matter, and buff the colours, as used to be said in the language of painters; creating a setting for the artistic gesture. This representation may take place in the actual shooting location (Paris), or in another space, and then projected, for example, on the walls of the Grand Café in Saint-Nazaire. In this sense, Neal Beggs claims his kinship with the Matthew Barney who produced "Blind Perineum" (1991) rather

than with the legacy of Allan Kaprow. More his interest in self-fiction –the sporting image as the equivalent of the painter at work– than any display of his mountaineering talents.

In "Expressway", taking a horizontal climb, he traverses a wall alongside a city motorway in Glasgow. As he gets closer to the camera, the tattoo on his upper arm can be read: 1959, his date of birth. The character is undoubtedly real, and what he presents of himself is a new type of self-portrait. More generally in "Surfaceaction": the painter in his studio, and his total involvement in the act (and what is a picture if not the surface of an action?). This is also his way of re-enacting one of the highlights of modernism, mainly Jackson Pollock's drip painting, immortalized by Hans Namuth's photographs. Robert Smithson produced a somewhat ironical Land Art version in "Asphalt Rundown". At first glance, there is no sarcasm, nor any of that merry mockery that we find, for example, in the work of Jonathan Monk, whom Beggs must have met in Glasgow. And yet... no climb exists without a risk of falling, and in a 1999 photograph, "Contemporary Klein", Beggs proposed a fairly caustic remake of Klein's "Leap into the Void", depicting himself leaping, indisputably, into the void, but also into the comforting arms of a fall softened by mattresses, identical to the ones he would use in "Dead Flat Vertical". Was this a subtle allusion to the tatami mats of Yves Klein, the judoka, which he also was? For me, "Surfaceaction" is a kind of body painting with a very specific working protocol. It is also an acoustic painting, punctuated by the echo of the crampons and ice axes digging into the wall. It is a painting to do with trace but one whose matter, formed by a series of operations that are as complex as they are precise, is relieved of its immediate indicative dimension (the actual marks in the wall), keeping just their double, which has been dematerialized by the video. We are here hoisted to the most elaborate stage of the representation, which, it seems to me, did not emerge from the video as a specific medium, but rather from the painting, from a physical experience of the picture which, in order to happen, uses the means offered him by contemporary attitudes and technologies.

At the risk of repetition: once performance is rejected (and, in most cases, all the same, it is resorted to), we find ourselves right away on the side of representation. To this end, the work of Neal Beggs is made up simply of artefacts: videos, installations, ready-made pieces (sometimes assisted readymades as in the case of the sleeping bag revamped with red sequins), photographs, writings, paintings... The predominant, not to say exclusive, motifs here are climbing and the situations required for it (mountains, rocks, suitable objects), but it is as well to specify the exhibition use made of it by the artist, over and above the participatory installations and projections that we have just described. For example, in hanging arrangements that are very precise despite their apparent off-handedness, we find an (unplugged) electric chain saw, a diving board, a spangled sleeping bag, a miniature formica tent set on a balsa wood cornice which is very elegantly taped to the wall ("Tent on a Ledge", 1997), etc. Each one of these objects works in a metonymic way which doubles the interplay of scale. Each piece points to a broader environment, experience, and culture which, in their turn, illustrate a more general attitude –we might almost say a philosophy. The "Sleeping Bag", 2000 (followed by other versions), for example, clearly shows this teetering quality of a metonymic connection to the mountain expedition, pointing towards a logic of seduction, a sublimation of everyday objects, itself a metaphor that is slightly removed from the art object. Likewise, the diving board ("1,8 m Springboard", 1999) is at the crossroads between the specific object and the visual metaphor of the double movement of rise and fall, that is, the exact antithesis of the specific object. This double contradictory movement, gathered into a single object, forms the main subject of one of the artist's best known sets of photographs: the one already mentioned of the "leap into the void" ("Contemporary Klein", subsequently titled "Jump", 1999), where there is a split second of hesitation between fall and rebound; the one where we see him on the roof of a tower-block in Glasgow, looking down ("Some Kind of Meaning", 2000); and the one, last of all, which shows the artist (apart from his head) standing facing the sea at the very end of a jetty ("Some Kind of Meaning", 2003). These images also illustrate one of the poles of basic alternation which structure Beggs's attitude and forms alike: this fondness for contemplation which acts as a counterpoint to action and movement. Anyone who has been with him when he prepares an exhibition will have inevitably been struck by the lengthy observational pauses he makes –similar, incidentally, to those made by climbers as they look ahead at the possible routes, before attacking the

cliff face. Attraction of peaks, fascination with the void. And invariably this fondness for the fragment, down to the most insignificant little bit that he manages to endow with a strange presence, like this cigarette-paper holder ("Rizla Mountain", 2000). Each piece as exhibition, each exhibition conceived as a work. Making wonderful use of the vertical architecture of the Transpalette Gallery in Bourges, Neal Beggs devised an exhibition in the form (and practice) of a climb: an upward route ending at a large neon star. Everything pointed to the obstacle race, the accessible/inaccessible dialectic, and aspiration towards the up-there/dizziness of the gaping void.

Analogy, metaphor, ratio of scale, shift, equivalence: a crucial part of Neal Beggs's work has to do, as we have noted, with the issue of representation. But in his case we are dealing with a type of representation with many different manifestations cases which may regularly call upon photography, but also summon language. Mountain images are numerous in his work, mountains and simple rocks like the one set slabang in the middle of a field in the Scottish countryside, close to Glasgow, with the artist perched on top of it. Like this eye, as astonished as it is keen, which he casts on these granite blocks which, as in other cities, Saint-Nazaire has placed, either to decorate or to control access. This work echoes the title of the exhibition in the Grand Café: There are no Mountains in Saint-Nazaire. Needless to add, there are indeed no mountains in Saint-Nazaire, but as everywhere else, we find ourselves confronted by the at times sublime, at others absurd idea of the mountain motif. And the granite blocks of this Atlantic port call to mind an older piece produced by the artist, "Mountain" (1998), consisting of a small white cast of a snow-capped peak, placed in the grass.

Another form of representation, also akin to translation, is the transcription. "Corridor" is a piece made in 1999 at the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow. On either side of a long corridor, Neal Beggs patiently inscribed on one side, using adhesive letters, the list of Scottish peaks of more than 3,000 ft (914 m) and, on the other, a list of Glasgow's tower blocks with eight floors or more. The names of the mountains in Gaelic, those of the tower-blocks in English, attest to a certain interest in the issue of language and its link with identity, a concern shared by other artists such as Roderick Buchanan. The list as a form of representation is definitely nothing new, ever since Georges Perec and, where art is concerned, Alighiero Boetti ("The Thousand Longest Rivers in the World", 1979). The contribution made by Neal Beggs resides, in the addition to his inclusion in a tradition of counting (Stanley Brouwn, Roman Opalka), in the idea of programme and the experience that goes with it. The small boxes to be ticked, which follow each name, suggest this notion of project, project of a life, potential experiences lived or to be lived.

From transcription to translation there is just one short step, which the artist made with a key piece. Shown for the first time in Saint-Nazaire in 2003, "Mount Analogue" is a disconcerting work, very representative of the challenges of Beggs's oeuvre. Intrigued by René Daumal's novel of the same title, and having been unable to get a copy of the English version (which does exist) which would have given him access, albeit imperfectly, to the text, the artist had the idea of getting a computer programme to cut down to size the task of translation, where upon painstakingly refined the rough translation to obtain an acceptable tale. But when one reads the text the impossibility of seeing the mysterious mountain in its entirety, and a fortiori to come up with a translation becomes immediately apparent: "For a mountain to be able to play the role of Mount Analogue [...] its peak must be inaccessible, but its base accessible to human beings as nature has made them." And he knew this all too well, of course. But what better figure of the unrepresentable than the impossible analogy, the metaphor thus being the sole, if imperfect, but all the same respectable way of linking up two entities, with a view to producing meaning. A meaning which hardly says any more about each of the two elements thus compared, apart from the possible exception of this bond. Beggs's piece is formed by two PCs, set on the floor, one showing the French text, the other the attempted English translation. He envisages showing, in the future, this work as a cinema style projection. Among the members of the expedition to the mountain which is the subject of the novel, we find Judith Pancake, "painter of high mountains", a figure for whom, in some respects, Neal Beggs provides a

contemporary equivalent. Daumal's novel is a strange piece of writing which was left unfinished when the author died in 1944. The alleged analogy of these worlds finds a strange echo in the two levels of reading constantly suggested between the feverish initiatory quest and the slight distance that the manifestations ceaselessly take from it. This kind of barely perceptible wit and this discrepancy also underpin Neal Beggs's work. Because, one suspects, climbing and all the mountain figures (or their metaphorical equivalents) bring on an analogical relation whose manifestation does not appear quite so clearly before the visitor's eyes. Climbing, a metaphor? Yes, but what of? What does the art of the expedition lead to (or hide?) (if not the expedition of art)? In a very funny and enlightening text written by the artist about his piece "Dead Flat Vertical", Neal Beggs makes this surprising confession that I will translate somewhat loosely as follows: "I never was a young artist". Actually, before attending art schools in Sheffield and Glasgow, he lived other lives, and by the time he got his degrees, he was approaching forty. The then current generation of Glasgow artists (Douglas Gordon, Roderick Buchanan, Ross Sinclair, Christine Borland, etc.), some years younger than Beggs, were already well recognized internationally, when our "climber" was embarking on his career. The climb to the peaks, in view of this basic handicap, thus comes across as even more uncertain and hazardous. But with a stout heart nothing is impossible, and Beggs makes the climb the actual object and the tool of his own ascent.

Few artists achieve such a happy duplication, few manage to set themselves up as a self-metaphor without giving in to the traps of bitter self-mockery. And if Neal Beggs manages this endless duplication or *mise en abyme* to this point, it is precisely because he does not play the part of a public entertainer, and because over and above this amiable figure of the artist's ascent, it is a way of living that he lays claim to a life style. And the distance, solemn and joyous, which wells up from the image of the climber and the fascination with the peaks, is the tone adopted by this painstaking daydreamer who can then, without fear of ridicule, refer to Camus's "Myth of Sisyphus". I cannot resist the pleasure of here transcribing the words of a notably unfashionable philosopher, for they tally as closely as you can get with this possible second element of the analogy at work in Neal Beggs's oeuvre. "His contempt for the gods, his hatred of death and his passion for life all earned him this inexpressible agony where the whole being is used to accomplish nothing." Further on: "Likewise, when the absurd man contemplates his torment, he silences all the idols. In the world suddenly rendered silent again, the thousand and one faint voices of the earth are heard." And last of all: "Each one of the grains of this stone, each mineral shard of this mountain full of night, forms a world all on its own. The struggle itself toward the summits is enough to fill a man's heart. We must imagine Sisyphus happy." To this paradoxical reading of these lines by Albert Camus, I say to myself that, essentially, Neal Beggs has his reasons for wanting to do away with the borderline between art and life, for in his case, and once the setting has been clearly and lucidly made, along with the rules, and the tools of representation and translation, what is indeed involved is one and the same project. Perforce unfinishable.

Jean-Marc Huitorel 2004.