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'The Crypt and the Summit' or the Paradoxes of Painting'

Notes on the work of Neal Beggs by Jean-Marc Huitorel 2008-09.

We were quick to assume that the work of Neal Beggs could, in the main, be approached via the theme of climbing, and that the question of medium-specificity under no circumstances offered a relevant line of approach. In light of recent exhibitions in Aalst, Brussels or Château-Gontier, we must, however, conclude that different perspectives are possible; that we are unable to grasp his world in a hurried, one-sided discussion and that we can allow ourselves to take more diversified approaches. This text is not so much intended to reduce Neal Beggs' work to the familiar, but oh so problematic category of painting, but it does aim to exemplify a notorious phenomenon of the present. There are those who see the performing arts in opposition to representational arts, the attitude opposite to the object or the conceptual content opposite the visual perception. I, on the other hand, believe that we need to approach the issue of art and the various forms in which it finds expression in a more open and more complex manner simultaneously. The above title is intended to be mildly provocative and is aimed solely at giving a name to this complexity.

There exist a number of similarities between climbing and drawing (or between climbing and painting in the broadest sense of the word) that I intend to list and analyse here. The first has to do with the relationship between the marker and the surface. In climbing, as in drawing, the marker is a human body; in one case the body is extended with crampons or an ice axe, and in the other with a pencil or brush. In both situations the intention is to indicate a presence on a surface: on the one hand the fragile, fleeting inscription of imprints in a landscape after traversing a cliff face, on the other, the inscription for all eternity on the blank sheet of art. The climber, as well as the draughtsman and painter, maintains a paradoxical relationship with the landscape. The climber frequently turns his back on the landscape while hanging on the rock face, but at the same time is so closely connected with it that he is forced to observe a certain distance every now and then in order to assess the situation; just as a draughtsman would do. Blinding, not to say blindness, is therefore not only the fate of the climber, but most probably also the draughtsman: with reference to one of his works, Dan Shippersides posed the question: "How do people experience the landscape without seeing it?" On the prepared surface, the painter produces something that has nothing, or at least very little to do with the actual landscape, and he achieves this very little thanks to both blindness and observation. In addition, we know that for some the destination is less important than the journey towards it (hence also the idea of the 'beauty of execution'). Sports people, but also artists, are familiar with the idea of the 'performance', albeit (often) with a different interpretation. At this point in the argument it is important to explain how this common term, which can however also refer to erroneous similarities, can be applicable to two different registers, although visual art remains the point of departure. In the late 1940s Pollock adopted dripping and with it he established a new relationship between the canvas and the act of painting itself. The body is then no longer simply regarded as a tool, but is fully engaged in the entire process; the painting is still the ultimate goal, but as the photos and films of Hans Namuth make abundantly clear, from this moment on it takes full account of physical engagement. We must also bear in mind the fact that in the case of Pollock and his friends from the New York school we are talking about abstract expressionism. With Pollock it is obvious that the idea of expressionism is the result of a total engagement of the body, HIS body, for the artistic intention that becomes one with the action ('performing'). As for the meaning of 'abstract', I'm don't really know what it means. Finally, it is indeed the active and perceptible presence of human bodies, upon which not only the anthropométries, but also the monochrome works of Yves Klein are based.

Another crystallization of common ground between climbing and drawing takes place thirty years later, at the start of the 1990s. Matthew Barney came to the fore in the art world, following a sporting career that he was forced to abandon due to an injury. We know of his climbing in the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, filmed behind closed doors: milehigh Threshold: FLIGHT with the ANAL SADISTIC WARRIOR. Less well known perhaps is the fact that Barney also made a large number of drawings on ceilings, while he was climbing. A little later, drawings by the above-mentioned Brit Dan Shippides (Rochers à Fontainebleau), another dedicated climber who transfers his climbing route to paper, would also attest to the numerous similarities between climbing work and 'disegno'.

Neal Beggs couples the elaborate practice of drawing with an ever more clearly evolving use of equally elaborate forms of painting. This comes to the fore in a highly ambitious and relevant manner, certainly with respect to the situation of painting today, in regard to both its spatial and its social consequences.

Five Problems in Art Today can serve as an example of his desire to confront art (in this case painting) with reality. I had invited Neal to think of a project in the framework of the exhibition Sportivement vôtre that Dominique Marche`s and I organized near Paris, on the Domaine de Chamarande. His proposal consisted of five dark-blue, multiplex parallelograms, with climbing grips in different colours, which were arranged to form a climbing route that conformed to the prevailing sporting standards. The title proved all the more prescient due to the shift the artist caused between the two cited realms. He hung the panels from five trees in the park, at a height that invited visitors to use them for climbing practice. In purely visual terms they clearly resembled paintings, which appeared amid the tamed nature of the classical park. Incidentally, in the same region you will find Fontainebleau, with its climbing route, and Barbizon, with the legendary painting academy (Daubigny, Diaz, Rousseau, Millet ...). Everything seemed to be going fine, until an unexpected problem arose. Because of the so-called safety risks to visitor, the estate manager demanded that a safety fence be placed in front of each work, so they could no longer be used and any experimentation was made impossible. We protested; we tried to negotiate, but all to no avail. The fences were staying, that is, we were permitted to remove them, but only at specified times and under strict supervision! So Neal decided to allow the fences remain, concluding that this was the price that must sometimes be paid in order to confront art with reality; while the boundaries are not always particularly clear, in this case they were so clearly defined that there could be no room for discussion! Today when I look at the photos, I think of the Mona Lisa and all the security measures surrounding that painting, to conclude that, at the end of the day, Neal is estimated very highly indeed...

In a previous life, namely during his years studying in Sheffield and later in Glasgow, Neal Beggs was still a painter, by which I mean an artist who painted canvases. The paintings only still exist in photos, which is very unfortunate as they were obviously of high quality. There was a grey monochrome that was simultaneously an austere affirmation of the surface (always the fascination with a benevolent void), but also an artistic non sequitur, the admission of an impasse that justified a search for something else. And indeed, shortly after, he stopped painting on canvas; which did not, however, mean that he gave up his predilection for walls and for covering them, and particularly not the physical contact with the surface. Which traces of painting still remain visible from a distance or nearby in the work that he is known for today?

Maybe we should first look at his photos; because if we are to believe Christian Boltanski, then photography represents journalism, and the rest belongs to painting. Given that Neal's photos are not journalism, I must conclude that this concerns painting! The Photo entitled Jump (1999) is a scarcely concealed reference to Leap into The Void by Yves Klein. It is an approach that we can dwell upon for a while. There is, obviously, the monochrome, but also a shared passion for sport. We know that judo was not simply a sport to Klein (he reached an extremely high level and was only the fourth in Europe at that time). Judo was closely linked to his art and he had blue monochrome works hanging in the hall where he trained.

Another example of the pictorial dimension in Neal Beggs' oeuvre can be found in his maps; not just because of the connection to painting, but also, we presume, to the landscape. The maps, incidentally, attest to a fondness for text in paintings; something that Beggs demonstrated in abundance during his study period, but which these days is

often wiped out, as if only the memory thereof is sufficient. Whether in the form of murals (Edelweiss, 2005, Frac Lorraine) or printed maps (Starmaps, an allusion to David Bowie's Starman): Neal Beggs charts mountaintops, in Switzerland or France, by means of dots of light that are reminiscent of nocturnal satellite images of urban areas. With him, though, everything is handmade, consistent with a sincere painter's logic that is likely the result of a painting he made in Sheffield in the late 1990s and which signified a starting point in several respects. His project consisted of attempting to apply a perfect painted surface, with no irregularities, as a kind of reflective surface, which, like the mirrors of Richter would be capable of capturing the reality of the world. Because he was unsuccessful in doing so, he designated every imperfection with a negative number. This game between the ground surface and the codes of linguistic abstraction would later, though it took a few years, serve as a basis for the maps. In addition to the references to the history of the medium (pointillism, the nocturnal skies of Van Gogh, Pollock and the all over) and to certain Contemporary artistic practices (Renaud Auguste-Dormeuil or Willy Doherty), the maps contain at least two types of question. The first concerns external commitments – we know of the productive use of extra-pictorial limitations in the painting of the 20th and early 21st century. The second relates to the presentation and, in this case, the landscape. The reproduction changes from an observation of peaks into a representation of a starry sky. From a process of abstraction (the peaks), we go to the mimetic result, but with an altered point of reference (from the peaks to the stars). From a reality that is intangible, Beggs arrives at visual objects that are indeed representations, but representations of something that cannot be reproduced! True paintings, as a matter of fact. The aporia of the monochrome grey is resolved here in a highly controlled exploration of the ambivalences of the visible.

The most easily traceable examples of painting by Neal Beggs (and of his relationship with painting) can be found in the various versions of Surfaceaction. I shall mention two: one he made in the gallery Le Sous-Sol (Paris, 2002), and another, which he recently made in Network. He made the very first Surfaceaction in the Project Room in Glasgow, in 1998. In an action behind closed doors, the artist climbs the walls of the space following a horizontal route, in front of the camera. The pickaxe and the toes of the shoes mark the surface. The climbing contains a clear reference to Matthew Barney; in the traces on the surface, a hint of the action painting of Jackson Pollock – two references that are far from being arbitrary. The exhibition consists of a video of the action on a monitor, next to the presentation of the walls, which remain in the same state as the artist left them. I remember the version from Le Sous-Sol because after the exhibition Yvon Nouzille, the gallery owner, asked Bernard Brunon, another artist, to restore the walls to their original condition. Bernard Brunon practices his artistic activities via That's Painting, an enterprise he established some 20 years ago in the United States. It is precisely his aim to make the painting of buildings his work as an artist. Together with Neal, he is one of the artists who put the border between art and reality under the greatest pressure.

The latest version of Surfaceaction, which took place in Network, undeniably constitutes an important development in his oeuvre; certainly regarding the thus far visible part of it, but also perhaps for that which the future holds. Neal Beggs, always alert and well informed, anticipates every remark and refers to the floors of Jim Lambie, his colleague in Glasgow, and to the wall paintings of Frank Stella; we could possibly also add the work of Sol LeWitt to the list. But this comparison goes no further than the visual and decorative impact. Neal experimented with eccentric circles for the first time in If Muhammad, initially in an adapted simulation at the entrance of the Frac des Pays de la Loire in Carquefou, but also recently in the gallery Elisa Platteau in Brussels. Starting from every letter on the wall, he draws circles that gradually become more deformed and divergent from their original pattern, to eventually evoke islands or mountainsides, as they would appear from the air. The outline of the letter, in contrast, becomes increasingly abstract, but simultaneously also more... figurative. While the work in Carquefou and Brussels still had a graphical design, in Aalst it takes on a pictorial dimension due to the use of colour. The contours begin at the impact points from the climbing of the wall. In an initial phase, they faithfully follow the holes and the marks of the pickaxe, but as they multiply further, they diverge further; eventually becoming abstract, or at least autonomous, like rolling waves. Naturally there is also the decorative aspect (that incidentally is highly effective), but we find ourselves miles away from Sol LeWitt here, and even further from Lily van der Stokker. The starting point of every form is a hole, a crater, an explosion of enormous force, a bullet hole. The power of reality gives form to the surface. We have to be wary not

to allow ourselves to be tempted by a comparison to the masking of a wound. First of all we must listen to the artist himself, who says that some of the forms that circle around the wounds are reminiscent of the figure in the foreground of *The Scream* by Edvard Munch. Neal Beggs is the opposite of a formalistic artist. An expressionistic painter? Perhaps! A 'gestural' painter? Absolutely!

Jean-Marc Huitorel