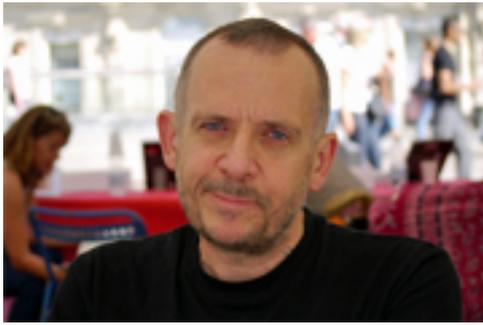


An Encounter with Ralf Marsault



Until January 2014 the Galerie Coullaud & Koulinsky in Paris showed the exhibition *Horpe Area*. It consisted of various works produced and compiled by the exceptional artist Ralf Marsault. We met him in a moment of placidity and poetry.

This is an unforgettable encounter, the encounter with Ralf Marsault, an evocative personality, and the place he resides in and that resides in him is one with him, a wagon fort, a place that inspires him and in which he is creative... The person and the place, in appearance rather "hard-core," contrast a great placidity that guides them.

A sort of nervous impatience

It is a Friday in October 2014, cold but sunny, and we are not really sure where to go. The press officer's only instruction was not to take photographs. His other somewhat strange-sounding and reassuring words inevitably had the opposite effect; not fear, but a sort of nervous impatience. In the farthest corner of Kreuzberg, in a spacious park entirely occupied by various groups of artists we are a bit lost until Ralf Marsault fetches us. His photographic interest in so-called "fringe groups" is known, yet we did not imagine him so close to his research subjects: the cordial voice, gentle eyes and informal address nonetheless could not prevent us from taking a few furtive glances at his tattoos to perhaps read a sign, a story or a destiny.

Ode to creativity and self-help

In his wake we enter a strange camp, one of Berlin's last wagon forts. It was originally a "semi-nomadic" area with a colourful hotchpotch of caravans and other covered wagons of a variety of communities that want to live differently – alternatively, as they like to say today – or consider themselves dropouts. Over time, this area was gradually legalized and has shrunk. The temporary and mobile shelters that housed "outliers" are now permanent structures that have been somewhat beautified with stationary outbuildings. Altogether, however, it is an ode to creativity and self-help and emits the kind of poetic charm that is only found in Berlin. "This place is ruled by the imaginary, the poetry of the space is perceptible here. You perceive something, perhaps a bit in confusion, but full of promise and coalescence. The objects produced here are a rather brutal art form; although structured, they were made from nothing or from recycled materials. Here, you are surrounded by constant flux, constant reinvention; that's why I feel good here," says Ralf Marsault, while he draws us into his "caravan," cosy, pleasant and comfortable, which also houses his studio. So not such a "Robinson Crusoe" as we may have assumed at first glance.

What is horpe?

At the moment, the studio is on a proper hiatus, the works have disappeared and are the body of the upcoming exhibition in Paris: *Horpe Area*, an attempt to carve out a geography of this Horpe culture at the centre of his first photographic works, which at the same time will be the object of a brilliant ethnological hypothesis under the direction of Jean Arlaud. The question immediately comes to mind: What is Horpe? In spite of all our research it was impossible to find a definition... and that was actually already clear! All the better! For far from all manifestness, here we are at the heart of a poetic, fragile and transient system. As we leave, we learn another minor variation on the term "gold-seeker," which contains a lovely idea about these different communities with which Ralf keeps company due to personal liking and "scientific" interest. "Horpe is a scenography of reality, the proposal of dissection, an analysing, anamnesis... I attempt to create situations that make us aware of the complexity of reality. I don't produce works about "outsiders." Of course, I first photographed punks, skinheads and hippies, but that's not it. My work is about that tipping point when nothing is decided. But as threatening as it seems, it's not; the matter is quite complex. You become aware that you cannot caricaturize, schematize; my work is the dissolution of taxonomies. Images are interesting when you perceive that something is happening. This question of the future is a part of Horpe. It is not something fixed, but something that is constantly re-composing itself. A tipping space, a crossroads..."

To bring the radiance into the light

And for the analogy of the original word of gold-seeker: "I seek gold, a draft, an essence... But you don't find much when you search for gold, you have to do an awful lot of hauling, and that is my work; hauling all this sediment about..." To find a gold nugget? "Not really... More to bring the radiance into the light. To find the radiance more than the materiality. I don't do any memory work. The philosopher Jankélévitch writes that the memory is speculative since it piles everything up. What interests me is reminiscence. It is not speculative. It is the evocation of something that cannot really be defined..."

Situations that are like rituals

There is an object that he is still dealing with and that is located at the heart of the system that he is making for the Galerie Coullaud & Koulinsky. This time it is about going further and sketching a geography of this Horpe culture. "I will show still-lives, sculptures... In the scope of this exhibition they speak of geography, a space in which this feeling, this intuition is located. I got inspired by the ethnography and ask myself whether I haven't created a culture. I therefore reveal situations that are like rituals, objects that seem to intervene in myths. I am in the middle of the process of creating a culture..." First of all the deliberate use of the German word *Stilleben* (still-life) rather than the French term *natures mortes* (dead nature). Ralf prefers the term "still-life" due to its positivity, because there is life yet in it... "Even in the remains, the sediment, the ruins, there is still something there, very much like this city of Berlin that was completely rebuilt upon ruins... Of course, we have to die, but flowers can be sown through our remains."

Walter Richter in Sachsenhausen

Also an attempt to form a language, a script with these tiny pumice stones incised like the "petroglyphs of the Mayans." And finally the rituals, filmed after an almost unreal adventure that deeply touched Ralf for many days and that he relates to us poignantly. It educes disquiet in us; we fluctuate between empathy for what is not perceptible, which ends in transporting it via pure reason. After

many years of hesitation, Ralf decides to visit the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, which gained sad fame near Berlin. It is winter and everything is covered in snow. In spite of all his perturbation he is helpless until a sign affects him that shows photos and brief essays about various people affiliated with this camp, both tormentors and victims. He is irritated by the story of Walter Richter who was imprisoned there for "lewd salaciousness" and died a few days after his arrival. His crime? He liked to sometimes transform himself with clothes he made himself of crepe paper. On some photos he is shown dressed this way with a sweet smile on his lips. "I felt a summons that drove me to invent something to remove Walter Richter from his role of victim. I then worked out elements for a performance that was held a few days later near the concentration camp. I improvised a dance... You could perhaps think of something shamanic, but that was not my intention. Instead I felt a form of meditation, I had to help him, and exactly that is always present in my work: I create a plastic system that ensures a passageway even if this may seem a little esoteric..." The performance was filmed and strangely the film exhibits an inexplicable gap, the camera switches off for a split second. And even though Ralf does not draw any conclusions from this technical incident, he nonetheless has the feeling that he fulfilled what he was summoned to do. "What I find interesting is how the reminiscence of a smile brings someone to do something he knew nothing about. This work is the power of reminiscence and that is Horpe!" Horpe!"

There is nothing ugly!

In the warmth, spellbound by Ralf's gentle voice, we begin to feel the power of Horpe and are, after we have come here to his fur-carpeted and amulet-guarded little caravan, no longer the same as we were at the start. "Everything is culture, everything can change, you can reinvent the world, it's possible, but you need courage for it. This work has shown me that you can always mend, build, and you must do it, it is never too late... My work is not about hopelessness, but about the riches and the possibilities of the world. Nothing is made to be thrown away; there are no throwaway people; that's absolutely unacceptable. There is nothing ugly; we must help ourselves to all the beauty on earth!" What else is there to say?

Siham Belkhadir

© Goethe-Institut 2013