

The space odyssey

The works of this decade invite us into a new 'space odyssey'. From that moment on, the spaces to be conquered would be imposing. As for the sites in which they were installed, they were sometimes monumental. The exhibition celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the CAP group was a dream opportunity for Pierre Courtois to present a work which synthesised three decades of research. Imposing in size and complex in its resonances, *Nature-couture* (Nature-Sewing) (2002) is a utopian machine set in front of a giant sewing pattern. The background panel alone is two meters tall by seven meters thirty wide. The Maison de la Culture of the city of Namur immediately presented the fabulous device, doubled up as an imposing diorama. Was it an assault engine? Above all, *Nature-couture* led to a consideration on the 'trait d'union' (hyphen). Was it an agricultural tool? It essentially saw and reaped through thirty years of devotion to examining the measurable. But let us linger a moment on the work's title. Is the artist surreptitiously telling us that sewing is intimate even to our nature? A nature whose unpredictable destiny is reached at times in a continual line, and at others in a dotted one? A nature which leaves traces in order to cheat death and sews up seams to ward off solitude? For Pierre Courtois, the stars are like a paper milky way for the pattern of a dress. As for nature in its topographical sense, he can only conceive it as defined by the measurement of acres. The machine exhibited in the Maison de la Culture of the city of Namur was a horse in search for its Troy. The panel at the back contained both fabric and surveying marks. It was as much a giant airplane's wing as the mapping of a terrain. The machine, equipped with a sight, is therefore located at the incredible juncture between earth and sky.

With *L'art de tourner en rond* (The Art of Going Around in Circles) (2002) Pierre Courtois managed to evoke the roundabout without chasing his tail. Physically, it is composed of an old merry-go-round from a scrap metal dealer. The artist transformed it into a giant wheel that turns around indefinitely. On the flat edge of the circle, 150 mini cyclists are in fact condemned to cycle around until the end of time. But the work is misleading. In general, the artist had presented us with works that seemed very serious but were in fact comically foolish. Here this is the exact opposite. The work makes us laugh, but the message is dead serious. The work's true ambition is hidden beneath the faded finery of the comic. *L'art de tourner en rond* presents us with a philosophical debate on the ridiculous nature of habits. For Pierre Courtois, the myth of Sisyphus meets the Tour de France. At the same time, Pierre Courtois reminds us the extent to which the circle has always exercised a strong fascination on our minds. It calls for perfection, movement or the passing of time. It is also an instrument of measure, divided up graphically into 'degrees' or 'minutes'. The work cultivates subtle antinomies: the circle is imposing (six meters in diameter), but the cyclists are ridiculously small. Maybe *L'Art de tourner en rond* also reflects on the power of will. In fact, while 149 white sheep pedal in the same direction, a black one is going the other way. This work and its going around in circles do not lack direction, to say the least.

Mère-nature (Mother Nature) (2005 to 2007) is a large-scale installation project integrated to the rehabilitation of a staircase in the old maternity ward of the province of Namur. The site was to become the new Centre for Topography and Land Management of the Wallonia region. In a way, the change would give the site new 'existence', much like the 'transfigured' objects in Pierre Courtois' boxes. Since it was in that building that his three children were born, emotional memory would inevitably take part in the creation of the project. Moreover, the title: *Mère-nature* and the building's new function (a centre for cartography) are perfectly in line with the artist's aesthetic research and formal vocabulary. We can easily imagine the joy that Pierre Courtois must have felt at the idea of working on a staircase. An archetypal figure par excellence, it has been present in his work from the start. It symbolises the most beautiful scale for measurement. Pierre Courtois particularly enjoys underlining its 'structural' complexity. In this case, the various levels, landings and points of view allow the artist to go deeper

into his 'philosophical' and 'topographical' commitment. Pierre Courtois worked on all four levels of the staircase, which symbolise the four stages of life: childhood, adolescence, maturity and wisdom. There is something almost alchemical in the progression of landings towards the light. Theories of symbols have often associated the staircase with the biblical narrative of 'Jacob's ladder'. Perhaps for this reason, Pierre Courtois placed a twelve meter high ladder at the bottom of his installation, to mark the different levels and landings. The walls of each level are covered with panels bearing strange signal patterns. The codes adorning the walls symbolise water, communication axes, roads or soil composition. The theme of water is fundamental. The artist installed a stainless steel tube to pump water from a basin, into which it flows back naturally. Pierre Courtois also fastened 'vegetation walls' to the empty spaces, with different types of plant depending on the different levels. In parallel to his monumental installations, the artist continued with his 'box-projects'. He also created large sewing patterns in which the corset plays a fundamental role (an element which entered his work for the first time in 1987).

In the installation *Obscure clarté (Obscure Clarity)* (2006), Courtois went back to the easel and the horizon. Twelve easels, placed in the park of the castle of Jehay, guided the viewer's gaze along a long alley lined with trees. But these objects were only there for pretence. The artist replaced the canvases on the easels with square panes of glass which reflected the trees and the sunlight. Ironically, the installation recalled late 19th century Impressionism. Pierre Courtois added arcs to the bottom of the easels to transform them into astronomical glasses. They also looked like compasses, enabling us to see, through glass, how far shade becomes light.

Points de clôture (Points of Closure) (2011) consisted in four installations designed for the gardens of the castle of Seneffe. The unifying theme of these four installations was the shed. Man's role in nature has always fascinated Pierre Courtois, for whom the cadastral division of land and the surveyor's measurement have never ceased to breathe reason and order into the chaos of the world. It so turns out that the garden and terraces of Seneffe naturally emphasise the order of axes and perspectives. Pierre Courtois could not help but appreciate these gardens with square beds perfectly in line with his vision of a 'measured' world. Two installations were placed along the central axis of the gardens. The first was a big red cube which seems to be exploding into space. The artist inserted a polyhedron between four large walls covered with army camouflage nets. From a distance, a circle of vegetation seemed to be protecting the mysteries of the polyhydric disintegration (or expansion). The monumental character of the work was striking. At the end of the gardens, another red cube was suspended in the air on four metal pillars. The artist/magician disintegrated or suspended gigantic volumes in the middle of this garden 'à la française'. The shed is a theme which naturally recalls childhood memories, the shelter, folding in oneself and a box in which secrets are kept. The two large cubes were like Pandora's boxes, exploding or levitating at the will of memories. Outside of the central axis, other closed spaces were explored. Here, in these 'muffled' spaces, the artist placed two more installations made of soft structures of tempered steel. They both resembled dome-shaped shelters. Both in their own spaces while facing one another, they soliloquised freely on the metamorphosis of the shed. The first was flanked by a mosquito net which is blowing in the wind. This piece of cloth was like a bridal veil, a bed sheet or cubes from the other installations. With its central circular peg, the second was conceived like the dome of a yurt. For Asian shamans, the yurt symbolises a cosmic axis which crosses through the worlds. The top of the tent is the point of passage through the universe. In other words, it is the most beautiful 'trait d'union'.

Olivier Duquenne, 2012

Extracted from the monograph *Traits d'union*, Pierre Courtois, Published(Edited) Luc Pire, on 2012