

Mnemosyne's conférence

Throughout the 1980s, Pierre Courtois perfected the notion of the 'box-casket'. At the end of the 1970s the boxes were relatively shallow. The memorial remnants which were attached to them remained quite small. Then the artist felt the need to explore further into the third dimension. These materials, so far contained in narrow oblong containers, were soon placed in 'archaeological display cabinets'. From 1984, they were integrated into 60 centimetre-deep cubic structures. These cubic boxes were more abstract, less narrative, and markedly taller than their predecessors. Moreover, they were troublingly specific. The viewer would be led, if he wished so, to guess at objects preserved through openings in the walls. After all, seeing beyond appearances is seeing substantially better.

Pierre Courtois united the various mysteries of the box deftly. Digging into memories, he knew their ethical value. As a receptacle of forgotten objects, the box keeps the hours, fossilises traces and halos memories. As the artist has highlighted, the box recalls a chest, a wardrobe or a drawer. This reliquary of moments is as much a cabinet of our experiences as it is a testament to the shortness of our existence. Naturally, the relationship with the curiosity cabinet springs to mind. First and foremost, the box is a subconscious chamber of secrets. From 1980, his intimate stories were told through nests and remains, leaves and birds of prey. Later on in the decade, only glass, metal and cloth were invested with the task of deciphering Pandora's enigmas.

Le nœud double (The Double Knot) ⁽¹⁹⁸⁰⁾ is a series of four boxes. In the largest one, a mannequin is mounted on a base which has been carefully decorated with mouldings. A monomaniac attention is paid to the stitches of its knit. In the box next to it, a piece of cloth looks like a net. Is it Arachne's cloth or Penelope's tapestry? Pierre Courtois likes to tangle the connecting 'threads' to make us lose our way. In his work, Ariadne's thread often finds itself imprisoned in Pandora's Box. The box below is the strangest, with a mysterious thread around which writing comes alive. It is a way of telling us that the sewing thread also follows our stream of consciousness. The artist is not afraid of twists and turns, and he never hesitates to create a sense of elliptical vertigo. In this particular case, this strange box contains a snail shell as well as a detailed plan of a spiral staircase. In June 1980, Pierre Courtois installed a giant box at the centre of the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. The box, with similar dimensions to those of a shipping container, was three meters tall and six meters wide. With its six meters of depth, it had the particular feature of being fully penetrable. This major kick in the teeth to the venerable picture-rails of the old museum was no less than an exact replica of the artist's own workshop. People found themselves invited inside by the artist, and could see his drawing table, his arm chairs, his wardrobes and his plants. Visitors could also rummage through his personal letters, sit on the little schoolroom bench or admire the doves in the bird cage. Woollen tangles hung from the ceiling, and a weaving loom also held pride of place in the room. This installation, named Ensembles (Ensembles) ⁽¹⁹⁸⁰⁾ shows that the box is above all a journey into intimacy, where the artist's memories and experiences become walls.

Buzenol ⁽¹⁹⁸¹⁾ is a fundamental work in its particularly complex synthesis of the elements of four years of research. Most above-mentioned elements are regrouped in a single piece of work: boxes, trees, mushrooms clouds, amanitas, birds, staircases, markers, clothes, etc. At the centre stands an oak tree, the tree of the Ardennes par excellence. It is a cosmic bearing of ancient myths and cosmology, the focus around which a universe of connections fans out. Above the tree is a box containing an oil-painted landscape. A plumb line marks the central 'architectural' axis of the oak tree. This vertical axis is the founding theme of the work. The plumb line symbolises verticality, as does the tree. As for the staircase, it bears a strong symbolic reference to the juncture between top and bottom. The work presents us with a striking conceptual dichotomy. In fact, all the elements surrounding the tree evoke either the earth or the sky. Wrens' nests (sky) become mice nests (earth); drawings of parachutes (sky) become photographs of cavities resembling tunnels (earth); and so on. In the top right, a small, highly meticulous drawing depicts a flying machine similar to those by Leonardo Da Vinci. The theme of the bird of prey, which appears several times in Buzenol, will be a dominant feature of the 'nature' boxes that were soon to follow.

From 1982 on, Pierre Courtois mostly created 'boxes' devoted to the world of nature. One can sense the importance given to the vegetal realm as well as to birds of prey. These boxes are mainly characterised by their highly compartmentalised nature. Openings on their sides give a different point of view of the inside, multiplying the optical complexity of the works. *La Buse piégée sur un piquet* (Buzzard Caught on a Fence Post) ⁽¹⁹⁸²⁾ focuses on the bird of prey. For the artist, the bird of prey embodies the concept of verticality in more than one sense. These birds mark and hunt vertically. They are also at the top of the food chain. At the centre of the box, one can see bones of birds overhanging two buzzards' eggs. On either side of the remains, an oil painting shows one red marker, one white marker and a drawing of a bird of prey. The museum-like character of these works, created from wine cases, is obvious. All the 'nature' boxes created in 1982 remind us of the archaeological displays in a museum of natural history. At a philosophical level, they are a reflexion on life and death as well as on the passing of time.

In *Lecture verticale* (Vertical Reading) ⁽¹⁹⁸²⁾ a bird's skull dominates the box's various compartments. Undeniably, there is something 'sacred' about this work. A veil has been placed over the skull. At the centre of the box a plumb line puts the whole ensemble into place. It starts at the veil at the top of the box, goes down past a small geographical map and finally arrives at a mini pyramid at the bottom. The pyramid emphasises the esoteric nature of the composition. Again we find the leitmotif of eggs of birds of prey on the left. On the right, a photograph of a parachutist evokes the aerial universe, whilst a field mouse's nest (containing the bird's prey!) refers to the underground. We have highlighted that the plumb line crosses a geographical map. In fact, the line across the map goes right through Sorinne-la-Longue, in the province of Namur. Pierre Courtois had never paid any attention to this detail. By a stroke of luck or the hand of destiny, it is the precise location where he would choose to buy an old farm two years later.

In 1984 the boxes underwent a radical change. There was no more direct reference to nature, the birds of prey fly off and the eggs and nests were nowhere to be seen. Suspended, as if weightless, and defying both gravity and reason, they interrupt our contemplative reflection. Boxes made of glass, suspended in between the tree trunks make from almost transparent woodpeckers' nests, in which eggs from other birds nest. This comedy of nature is no more than a reflection of the ineluctable finitude and evolution of things. The forest, the tree and the nest are no more than common sites of the *momento mori*.

The aerial sculpture *Le grand vol* (The Great Flight) ⁽¹⁹⁸⁹⁾ is of a similar register, in which sublimation and strangeness are joint sources of fascination. The work was created with tightly stretched pieces of military tarpaulin. The unusual material appealed to the artist because of its natural connection to cloth; the corset, the trace and the surface. This strange bat suspended in the air could also suggest the flight of a bird of prey. The aerial aspect is fundamental to Pierre Courtois, and even on ground level his art points to the stars. The outside of the sculpture also reminds of the Renaissance treaties, in which mechanics and biology were appropriated to give birth mad utopias. It is probably for this reason that *Le grand vol* is so similar to Leonardo Da Vinci's famous flying machine. For the artist, this sculpture symbolises the 'liberated' content of his boxes. As such, it creates a synthesis of all the systems of correspondence found in his preceding boxes. Emancipated to the very limit, freed from any frame, the sculpture throws itself into the air like a hyphen (a *trait d'union*) between the earth and the sky.

In the second half of the 1980s, the farm at Sorinne-la-Longue began to take a more important place in the artist's work. It would soon reach a point where it became inseparable from his creations. It is as though the soul of the house pushed the man to experience the mysteries of its stones, as if it had led him towards the quivers of its walls and the secrets of its gardens. From that moment, Pierre Courtois' boxes would become increasingly 'totemic'.

From 1986 there ceased to be titles, and gathered many objects from the house and its direct surroundings. The artist nursed an almost religious devotion to the spirit of the place. It is in the Sorinne farm that he presented his big projecting device, *La grande arbalète* (The Great Crossbow) ⁽¹⁹⁸⁹⁾. Made of steel, wood and glass, the crossbow is endowed with a shooting system which is aimed at itself. It is

medieval heraldry, with the magic of lights and a structure that peacefully cuts open the beautiful siege of the impossible. The memory of the site would never disappear from Pierre Courtois' art. The title of his installation *Archéologie d'un lieu* (Archeology of a Site) ⁽¹⁹⁸⁹⁾ is obvious proof of this. The artist reused an old 19th century milestone (found on the farm) to place it in connection to a peculiarly elaborate structure of ropes. The reference to an excavation site is obvious. The stone, which symbolises measurement in the work, is placed on top of an excavated pillar. Once again the work shows the artist's particular taste for surveying sites and conserving hours. In 1989, the boxes became much taller. The effect was spectacular, with some of them reaching twenty meters. The painted bases give these cases an especially disturbing aesthetic quality. The materials are visibly reaching towards perfection. But before becoming perfect squares, the boxes have to go through numerous adventures.

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