

### The horizons for a “better vision”

In 1993, Pierre Courtois created an installation in the old Brigittines chapel in Brussels. After its dissolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the building was converted into a space dedicated to multidisciplinary art. But the church's stones convey a silent eloquence. Even in their profane state, they still whisper a quiet psalm. Pierre Courtois' installation, *L'aller vers* (Going to) <sup>(1993)</sup> strangely revives the soul of the site. It also emphasises the vertical aspiration. The artist decided to reintroduce twelve pillars into the chapel, in the form of concrete encasements. The steel framework jutting out of each base implied that the pillars were in a state of perpetual elevation. The nave was framed in wood and iron, symbolising *L'aller vers*. The columns beard hope and invited the viewers to stand up straighter, closer to the stars. The twelve cases symbolised both Christ's apostles and the months of the year, magnifying the sacred and the profane to better punctuate the gaze. Certainly, the whole installation depended on the gaze. The perspectives of the columns delved into the mysteries of the measurable and lead us to meditate on a giant protractor at the end of the nave. Historically, this measuring instrument is linked to religion, with a line on the crown of the protractor traditionally called the 'line of faith' (ligne de foi). As for the gradations on the instruments, they are usually called « limbes », or Limbos. But Pierre Courtois' message went beyond Christian symbolism; to syncretise in an attempt at universality. Instead of a cross at the end of the choir, levelling staff was divided into twelve segments, both as a surveyor's instrument and a builder's tool, measuring the accuracy of angles as well as prayers.

The next year, mirrors were chosen to reflect on. Pierre Courtois turned into a master of illusion with the installation *Clair et clair* (Light and Light) (1994), the first made entirely out of glass. The enchanting artist multiplied perspectives in one of the cellars of the Orval Abbey. To do this, he created a glass flooring five centimetres above the ground. The effect was striking: the domed roof of calcareous rock was reflected in the glass floor. Sinking vertiginously into transparent space, the cellar became a 'chimerical netherworld', like a crystal cabinet out of a tale by Charles Perrault. To the artist, the optical transformation of space evoked both a lake inside a cave and a giant egg. Fundamental matrix on an infinite scale, *Clair et clair* invited us to look beyond the delusions of mirrors. Obviously inspired by the Trappist monastery, the artist chose the site for another installation. Having played with reflections, he then became an architect of light. In *Piège à lumière* (Light Trap) <sup>(1994)</sup>, a luminous marker was placed in the foreground of a series of open vaulted rooms. The artist also placed six successive glass modules around the rooms. In the complex shimmering play of layers of glass, the spectator became the consenting victim of an optical illusion. Facing the installation, only one marker was visible, but at a slightly sideways angle, the neon multiplied infinitely. This *Light Trap* created no less than a horizon for a better vision, with the marker as the eternal hyphen which allows us to see further and more truly.

Also in 1994, Pierre Courtois was invited to exhibit at the Henry Bussière Gallery in Paris. The project was called *Niveau Seine* (Seine Level) <sup>(1994)</sup> and again allowed the artist to explore the theme of the 'neon marker'. Situated in the rue Mazarine, the gallery has a patio with a well in the middle. The water level of the close-by river Seine was of course mentioned. The artist's imagination was sparked by the idea of creating the universal line of the horizon using the river's water level. Having carefully measured the river's water level, Pierre Courtois carefully reproduced it on the walls of the cellars using a line created with a rope. The mark of the line on the stone became a poetic paradox, a light in the shadows, both violent and extremely elegant. On the ground, layers of glass symbolised the water from the well. But Pierre Courtois is a true apostle of measurement and the purpose of the lines of glass was to unite the four luminous markers, forming a perfect square around a central pillar. In the end, measuring reason is the most beautiful measure of all things.

What about artist's boxes of the 1990s? Above all, they were characterised by their heightened degree of abstraction and their complete rejection of the anecdote. The conclusion was similar in the late 1980s, although less radical. This time, the objects' dramaturgy served a sensitive minimalism. The backgrounds were painted and given an obvious plastic quality. Moreover, they were essentially front-oriented. We have already underlined the importance of verticality for Pierre Courtois, through the arrow, the plumb-line, the staircase, etc. In this decade, the 'trajectory' was a source of great inspiration. We

must also note that these boxes often presented some strange affinities. Some of them seemed to recall African and Oceanic art. These analogies are troubling for certain pieces: 903902 <sup>(1990)</sup> and 913601 <sup>(1991)</sup>. But these associations are purely fortuitous. If Pierre Courtois called upon the totem and savage beauties, it was in an attempt at simplicity. The 1990s were marked by a strong affirmation of the 'architectural' quality of these boxes. The objects placed in the cases were often measuring instruments: compasses, rulers, laths, markers etc. The use of the quadrangle was an obvious choice for one who saw infinity as a set square. 'Square' boxes had to appear sooner or later, and so they did in 1992. The next year, oblong boxes would meet the line in a memorable encounter, that of the cord line, the most perfect rectitude.

Pierre Courtois first used the cord technique to repair the roof of his house in Sorinne-la-Longue. The cord, made of cotton and held taut at both ends, is often used by builders, carpenters and gardeners to mark out rigorously straight lines. To the artist, it was a revelation. From 1993 onwards, he freely used the tracing instrument to lash across both the bases of his boxes and the large sewing patterns of his installations. To this end, he used a technique for a Line) <sup>(1996)</sup>. This machine symbolises both the mechanism of feeling and the wheels of memory. The link with Leonardo Da Vinci's is obvious. Among other things, the Italian master made pedometers to measure distance, anemometers to measure speed, and hydrometers to measure humidity in the air. Pierre Courtois has always been openly fascinated by Leonardo's scientific inventions. Point de visée pour un tracé was exhibited in the Verviers museum, on the theme of the wool industry for which the region was famous but which was dismantled in the 1990s. The artist's strange machine celebrated the 'culture of the thread'; including the spinning wheel, the loom, the tapestry, etc. The mechanical device rested on three wheels, its horizontal axis supporting a string which unwound through a complex play of pulleys. This utopian machine unwound a long cord trace, weaving a metaphorical 'Verviers meridian'. The resemblance between this fantastic machinery and medieval war engines is striking: ballista, trebuchet, crossbow, etc. All of Pierre Courtois' machines are, in his own words, 'launch pads'. But there is nothing to conquer other than perhaps our gaze. Like our lives, these machines are hanging by a thread.

The ethics of 'seeing better' found a beautiful ending in 1998 in a monographic exhibition organised by the Maison de la Culture of the city of Namur. The title of the installation was evocative: Cote 163 (Mark 163) (the height of the artist's gaze). The theme of the exhibition was 'the line of the horizon'. The question was whether or not we were at the right eye level to have a better vision. The work titled La ligne d'horizon (The Line of the Horizon) <sup>(1998)</sup> was particularly characteristic. Pierre Courtois reused an old three-footed easel. Instead of a painting, two small glass tiles were placed on it. The use of the easel was both functional and ironic: the painting, which is the purpose of the easel, was nowhere to be seen. Symbolising a medium which the artist had always disliked, the easel was no longer a support for the object to be viewed but an observation point for 'seeing better'. The glass 'painting' became a (double) line of sight, used to see through things (and thus to look with more attention), to adjust the line of vision to one's individual horizon. All of the works presented at the Namur exhibition, such as Calcul de la ligne d'horizon (Calculating the Line of the Horizon) <sup>(1998)</sup> and Le grand rapporteur (The Large Protractor) <sup>(1998)</sup> aimed to adjust our gaze with greater precision, with mirrors, glass or height gages. Discovering one's own horizon is embracing everything and meditating on the insignificance of limits.

In Belgium there is a little village in the province of Namur, along the river Meuse, called Hastière-par-delà (Hastière-Beyond). Pierre Courtois could not help but take an interest in such a name, making an in situ installation with great poetic meaning: Par delà (Over and beyond) <sup>(1998)</sup>. The artist built a walkway out of thin iron sticks, incredibly fragile at first sight but in fact extremely solid. The bridge seemed to be made of bamboo wood and called for reaching beyond all limits. 'Man is a rope over an abyss' wrote Friedrich Nietzsche. He also added 'what is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end.' When we see Pierre Courtois's walkway, we can guess that it is as fragile or as solid as our own hours. This work would also become the most beautiful bridge to the years 2000.

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