

The early years, or the wanderer's markers

Pierre Courtois has always had a mad love for nature. But his admirer's gaze has always aspired to embrace only the landscape's most measurable horizons. Since early childhood, he has been fascinated by the thousand different ways in which man marks territories. Neither in its -savage state nor as dense forests or virgin territories does nature interest Pierre Courtois. He is a surveyor at heart, in that surveying is essentially the art of partitioning a landscape and measuring up its visual qualities. The Belgian Ardennes, where the artist was born, are no less than a jumble of woods and fields carefully divided up by fence posts. It is therefore man's handprint on nature which has been a constant concern to the artist. This explains a number of recurrent themes in his work: markers, roundels, targets, flags, posts, etc.

In no way whatsoever is his work related to the adventure of unexplored territories. He will go so far as to box a landscape, to better circumscribe it to the limit of rationality. It is a journey through time in which the reader is now invited to participate. Here we will need to go back about forty years, to determine which biographical elements can be used to shine a light on the mysteries of a wanderer who, in his own words, *'is dropping the land markers of his own memory'*. If there is one slogan throughout his art that echoes in our minds it is, as we shall see, that there is no symphony more beautiful than nature falling in step with the measurable.

Pierre Courtois was born on June 5, 1950 in La Roche-en-Ardenne, a small town in the Belgian province of Luxemburg. We have already underlined the extent to which the topography of his birthplace conditioned his vision of the world. In fact, La Roche is as much a space filled with meanders as it is an assortment of neatly divided plots of woodland. After the war, pine trees were planted at various times, and the plots were divided into different types of vegetation: pine, beech, etc., not to mention the pastures which were also partitioned. One can imagine the extent to which this landscape's 'structural' character might have conditioned the vision of the young boy. It explains the highly constructed, intentionally fragmented and peculiarly topographical nature of his early drawings. From the very beginning, we have mentioned Pierre Courtois's aesthetic shock on his first visit to his great-uncle's workshop. In fact, this anecdote was the origin of a 'synaesthetic' experience, which would drive the artist to confuse subtly throughout his career the reading of a landscape with the basic vocabulary of sewing. But another episode linked to the artist's story also explains his fascination with the sewing machine.

The artist's father was a primary school teacher. His mother worked at home and there were six siblings. Throughout his childhood, Pierre Courtois watched his mother sew his sisters' dresses tirelessly. In the house there was even a dedicated room, which all the family called the 'sewing room'. Almost like in a fairy tale, one can easily imagine the mysterious aura surrounding the room and the strong impression it must have made on Pierre Courtois' imagination. Henceforth sewing machines would hold no secrets from him. They were as much confidantes as they would later be inspirational muses. One must admit that Pierre Courtois has always been something of a dreamer. Undoubtedly it was a valuable quality, although it did not ensure academic success. At thirteen he was sent to a Franciscan boarding school at Marche-en-Famenne. But he was ill suited to the study of Latin, and the

only award he was to win among the monks was that of the most disruptive child. On returning to La Roche, his parents oriented him towards what was called 'modern studies' which led to a radical transformation. Pierre Courtois is no lover of literary matters, and has always found mathematics more interesting. In his soul he feels he is a Cartesian, with a passion for logic, numbers, and geometry. This does not prevent him from keeping a deep and subtle sense of irony which will often come to counterbalance the seeming gravity of his works. At sixteen he enrolled in the Institut Saint Luc in Brussels. He completed his final years with flying colours, particularly excelling in drawing.

In 1969 he joined a painter's work shop under the supervision of Camille De Taeye at Saint Luc. It was just after May 1968, and a sense of freedom breezed through art schools. Pierre Courtois did not like easel painting, and to be honest he had little appreciation for oil painting techniques. He was not the only one. A great number of students at the time wanted to explore more audacious and novel paths. Camille De Taeye fostered a generous and open spirit, aware that a good teacher must sometimes hold loose reins to provide the best guidance. Thus in all his years as a painter Pierre Courtois did not paint a single canvas! He prefers by far to work at a drawing table in the company of his companions: rulers, compasses, set-squares, etc. He finds the canvas too rough, or too soft, and can hardly hold a paintbrush. He needs precise instruments like pencils with sharpened lead, thin-nibbed pens, or calibrated Rotring pens. The designer's comfortable position behind a desk suits him far better than standing upright behind an easel. Later he would admit that rejecting the easel was his first gesture of mockery toward the traditional tools of a painter's studio. He would also follow Pierre Carlier Carré's classes with great attention. This teacher, trained in advertising, and with a radically modern vision of art, would open his students' eyes to the multiple meanings of images. It is actually through this connection that Pierre Courtois called several of his works *Relation* (relationship/connection), a term which would be picked up by Jaques Lennep to indicate the principal research concept of the *Cercle d'Art Prospectif* (Prospective Art Circle, abbreviated to CAP).

The first sketches of La Roche landscapes go back to 1969. They are inks on paper, and wander up to the limits of abstraction. Even if the exercise relates more to a preparatory sketch than a complete work, it already shows an ambition to create a descriptive gaze out of distracted vision. The base, a particularly absorbent paper, is prone to small stains, heavily inked lines or exaggerated punctuation. Pierre Courtois' graphic ballet' unveils a series of incredible micro-organisms, which already mark out the topographical explorations to come. In fact, in the following years, mysterious boxes or glass cages would appear in his landscapes. They frame little people, small animals, and more often than not, menhirs. For Pierre Courtois, the box is a polymorphic receptacle for the remnants of memory. But it is also a conceptual reflection on space, and the possibility of a third, fully independent dimension at the heart of the graphic field which is fundamentally two-dimensional. It is a reflection which will later lead to objects actually emerging out of the flat surface to give birth to authentic 'box-paintings'. As for the menhirs, they do not relate to any type of interest in ancient mystics or druidic cults. The menhir being first and foremost an erected stone, it is a marker, even a boundary which delimits space. But as a vertical stone, it is also an augural evocation of the 'ascensional' ethics to which Pierre Courtois would adhere for the rest of his career. A rock is necessarily a compacted block of fossilised memory. From that point on, the remnants of memory would not cease to occupy all aspects of his drawings, boxes or installations. Let us not forget that the menhir also harks back to the archaeological universe

(as does the topographical drawing); a scientific world to which Pierre Courtois would often refer with very serious foolery.

From 1970, Pierre Courtois explored the poetic potential of re-used materials with drawings on used sewing patterns. Here the many windings essentially create an effect of superimposition. The dotted lines delimiting the outlines of a dress or jacket suddenly become the basis for many interpretations. Sometimes they are the imaginary lines delimiting the plots which divide up the countryside; at others they evoke pseudo-scientific diagrams indicating strange geological layers. These drawings call to mind sedimentary sequences set horizontally. The 'archaeological' artist rummages ingeniously through the stratigraphic layering of memories, including his own mother's writing on the sewing patterns. As for the 'rainbow' colours, they are particularly vivid and give a mysterious depth to the field of vision. These drawings strongly recall the block-diagrams of old geographical manuals. Pierre Courtois has always loved old atlases, and created many of his works directly on maps. In creating pen drawings, he begins with the initial motif created by the pattern and then reinvents a landscape which resonates with that of his childhood. The sinuous result recalls the meanders of the Ourthe River; and those with strongly marked out slopes refer to the quarries at Grès in La Roche en Ardenne.

Art history classes did not leave an unforgettable mark on Pierre Courtois' memory. In general he tends to be wary of trends in art. However, of all the artistic movements of the 1970s, Land Art is perhaps that with which he felt most connected. This is most probably due to the extent to which nature becomes as much an imaginative field of exploration as a conceptual one in this movement. Soon recurring images, such as parachutes, would appear in his work. This form, which allows for any time of exploration of volume in space, would be explored several times. One of his teachers, Jean Guireau, once said to him: '*Courtois, when you draw rocks, your rocks fly*'. There is indeed something aerial about Pierre Courtois. One could go so far as to say that the utmost paradox of his art is that it evokes the magic of the sky through its closeness to the earth. Recognising the quality of his work, Camille De Taeye suggested he enter the Belgian Young Painters' Prize. It was in 1972. He entered with little thought of winning, and won the award despite still being a 22-year-old student.

At this point Pierre Courtois was already part of the CAP group. Just before that, Jaques Lennep, the movement's theoretician, had come to the Saint Luc workshop in order to create a group dedicated to new research into art. CAP artists found their inspiration in the structuralist theories proposed by Roland Barthes and practiced in Umberto Eco's concept of the 'open work'. In February 1973, Lennep proposed that the group's members centre their work on the concept of 'relation' (relationship/connection). It must be underlined that this term had already been used by Pierre Courtois as the title of several of his works. Indeed, two out of five of the works he submitted to the Belgian Young Painter's Prize were entitled Relation. For Lennep, the work of art is 'relational' because it is a sign of reality and because reality can only exist through its connections and relationships. It is a concept that Pierre Courtois would take quite literally, consciously or unconsciously. Basking in the glow of the prize he had just won, Pierre Courtois found himself invited by Manette Repriels to exhibit in the Vega gallery in Liège. Without a second thought, he invited his CAP friends to exhibit alongside him.

But what is the exact 'relational' function in Pierre Courtois' works? First we must emphasise that it works through multiple associations: colours, shapes, ideas. For instance, **La Bataille des Ardennes (The Battle of Ardennes)** (1972) is a complex montage which places numerous features in relation to one another. It looks like a pseudo-maquette of a landscape seen from a plane. It consists of a sheet of aluminium pistol-sprayed in fluorescent green. The illusion is complete, as we can easily imagine a geographical map in relief. On the right hand side, beneath the aluminium, we see another smaller map showing the stratifications of the land. One can detect numerical curves of each level, and small red pins which in direct topographical relation with the sketch next to them. Above the small map, red capsules enter into a 'chromatic' relation with the pins, indicating hypothetical locations. One should never underestimate the humorous wink beneath Pierre Courtois' smoothly varnished seriousness. Are these capsules pharmaceutical objects, remedies for strategic bombardments?

During this period Pierre Courtois created a series of drawing-collages using diaries and entitled **Course après le temps (Race after time)** (1972). The artist has always been fascinated by the idea of time flowing by, a fascination bordering on anxiety. In a sense, all of his works fight against the oblivion of all of the hours and days which pass us by. The diary is a privileged witness of this impossible struggle. It is a testimony, in 'crossed out numbers', to our passage on Earth and the derisive or futile utility of our actions. But it is also, and most importantly, a map. Pierre Courtois likes to recall that it is the map of the day, and thus one can divide up the day as one divides up a space. Dividing of days and months graphically is exactly like circumscribing land with fence-posts. The stratigraphic element, which is so important to Pierre Courtois, is clearly linked to memory, and thus to the passing of time. In the 1980s he created box paintings in which he would place 'dead' objects, that is to say 'recollections of his walks': birds' skulls, eggs, nests, etc. The work, entitled **Trois chats sauvages (Three Wild Cats)** (1973), mixes techniques of assembling, drawing, and photography. On the upper right corner of the drawing, we see a cat's head. Just beneath it, an ordinance survey map is close to three photographs of woodlands. On the upper left corner, symmetrical to it, three red capsules in packaging hang over a dozen bullets. Beneath them, a drawing of the butt of a shotgun presents us with a configuration which is very similar to that of the ordinance survey map. The piece is interesting because these themes would later play an important role in Pierre Courtois' work. The shotgun and bullets evoke a military atmosphere, whilst the cat's head functions as a 'target'. The red capsules ironically recall potential blood bags.

From 1974, military elements make a thunderous entrance onto Pierre Courtois' work, and not without good reason. Pierre Courtois is a committed antimilitarist. In fact, two motivations pushed the artist to use martial imagery. The first is social criticism, the second is purely artistic. At the time, the artist lived in Marche-en-Famenne. Three farms in the middle of the fields were put under compulsory purchase order by the army to build military bases. Pierre Courtois' drawings were very critical of this cursory order. Tanks aim at 'laughing' cows in the background of maps indicating the site of the compulsory purchase. But alongside the political commitment, the military world also presents us with an iconographic repertoire full of potential. At every possible opportunity, Pierre Courtois would use images of planes, targets, roundels, flags, shotguns etc. After the diary series came the series of military jets: **Procédé de navigation (Navigating Process)** (1974) and **Souvenir de deux Douglas (Memory of two Douglases)** (1975). The artist has always been fascinated by shooting, seeing the landscape

through a telescopic sight with a geometrical black ring and a symmetric cross. As for the trajectory of the bullet, it is as fascinating to the artist as the trajectory of a billiard ball.

A work like ***La mise en boîte (Set in a box)*** (1975) shows comical absurdity at various levels. A cosmonaut in a suit is covered with pockets curiously made of blue denim. The space voyager sees himself in direct connection with the giant overhanging denim pocket. With Pierre Courtois, visual jokes can be found everywhere. For example the mannequins piled up in a cage on the right visibly evoke the 'setting in a box' of the title. Below, a photograph of the surface of the moon traced with small crosses (common to this type of photograph) reminds us of the stitches of the giant jeans pocket. On the left, a highly ambiguous image evokes both a motorway and a stretch of cloth, or even a signpost. The title of this collage-drawing is particularly prophetic. 'Setting in a box' would soon become Pierre Courtois' most productive and monomaniac activity. On the other hand, the texts sprinkled throughout his works are only important from a graphic perspective.

Placing too much importance on their 'meaning' will surely lead us to fall into the trap which had been set in the box! From 1975, various plants began to germinate in his compositions, with radishes and cacti reinforcing the incongruous and ironic nature of his work. The vegetal world leads the way to new 'relational' possibilities. Radishes levitate above slag heaps, cacti flirt with needle distributors and lettuces embody a new visual ethics. As for mushrooms, as we shall see, they are another story.

From 1976 Pierre Courtois paints small oil landscapes which he then inserts into collage-drawings, in a late (and particularly perverted) honeymoon with painting. During that same year, the 'explosive' mushroom cloud appeared into his work. In ***Examen positif (Positive Examination)*** (1976), a nuclear explosion is seen through a 'sight'. It is almost as if the spectator himself has decided to fire, and is responsible for the global deflagration. At the centre of the collage-drawing, real midges are held between plates of glass. Ironically, the work evokes the ancient Vanities and the debates on the inanity of human ambition. In other words, man is but a fly to other men, or even more radically, 'Who cares, flies outlive us'. Right at the bottom, an oil painting shows us a signpost warning us of potential danger. The meaning of the circular sign only appears through the relational connections with the death of the insects and the morbid circularity of the 'sight'. Pierre Courtois even created a series of collages in which mushroom clouds mingle with those (more peaceful) found in gardens. In ***Les thallophytes (The Thallophytes)*** (1977) for example, the forest amanitas become 'formal' relatives of three photographs of nuclear explosions. As Pierre Courtois had a cousin who worked for the army's meteorology office, he could get maps and use them in his works. These meteorological maps would become mysterious sky charts scattered with multi-coloured parachutes or red and white markers.

1978 saw representations of human figures appearing in the artist's collage-drawings. Before that, there were very few human representations in his work. There is only one drawing of a pop-art female nude, and another of a tiny horseman. Therefore, we understand the importance of a work like ***Articulation (Articulation)*** (1978) in which the main spectator is a woman in a safari jacket. At the time, Pierre Courtois was very interested in this type of clothing, which gave more freedom and autonomy to women. What strikes us as important here is the conceptual relationship between the cloth, the item of clothing and the human body's articulation. The clothing becomes a skin, a hide or a topographical horizon.

Also in 1978 the concept of the box first emerged, and this was an event of truly capital importance. The boxes which Pierre Courtois created at the end of the 1970s were not big, but allowed for small objects: pencils, gravel, ears of wheat, fragments of brick, photographs, religious images, mini wooden structures, etc. Before exploring this aspect in greater detail in the next chapter, let us finish with the artist's own words. He is best placed to recount the mysteries of Pandora: *'The box meets images of the chest, the wardrobe, the drawer... I like that it encloses forgotten memories and becomes a source of reverie.'*

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