Jean-Luc Moulène

Selected press
5 Questions with Jean-Luc Moulène

Text by Emily Steer

French artist Jean-Luc Moulène is notoriously tricky to categorise. But does this sense of ambiguity come from the artist himself, or from the art world's need to pigeonhole? 'My “typical” avoiding of clear distinction and thematic groupings of work always comes from the viewers,' the artist says as his most recent solo exhibition opens at London’s Thomas Dane Gallery, 'from their gratification, and from the administration of art I would say, but not from me.'

Can you tell me a little about the pieces that will be shown at Thomas Dane Gallery?

This exhibition is my fourth presentation at the gallery and it includes floor, table and wall-based work. My work usually originates from a perpetual interrogation of the cannons and typologies of sculpture, photography and drawing. I think objects and images are tools to reveal social or natural phenomena, and my works focus on the relationship between them, the object and the image, but there is also the body – ‘pre-born’ or ‘already-dead’, human and animal, whole and in fragments, declined, allegorical etcetera. The body has always been of great interest for me.

The larger works that will be in the exhibition are related with [pieces shown] in A Slip of the Tongue at the Punta de la Dogana in Venice in 2015. I tended to sever generic English garden sculptures from their context and breach the surface of one figure with the substance of the next. I tried to collapse all narrative, allegorical and material distinctions. To explain myself better, the skulls of a donkey and pig are presented as re-imagined bivalves. There are the sobriety of concrete and stone, intense colours and cumulative objects. For example Vogelles, which comes from a poem by Rimbaud, is an aggregation of plastic objects. Or Fairy Fantasy is made of polyhedral and extruded shapes, and I think challenges the viewer’s intelligibility. I also wanted to explore and experiment with something new, that is why I decided to show also a group of ink drawings and watercolours, a new medium for me.

Does this exhibition follow your typical avoiding of clear distinctions and thematic groupings of work?

I don’t have a typical way in which I act. I’m interested in standard variations but not in being typical. I am always doing group shows alone, because me and we are actually millions... Is it sufficient as an answer? My “typical” avoiding of clear distinction and thematic groupings of work always comes from the viewers, from their gratification, and from the administration of art I would say, but not from me.

You’ve previously said that art can be both poetry or mathematics as it is not language. Do you feel that each piece embodies ‘both sides of the line’, or does your practice tend to ebb and flow between the two?

Art is not language. I think it’s quite easy to understand. Imagine the language on a line, in the middle there would be the language we are using now but because laws, rules and restrictions play a really important role they might change the way we use language. Laws and restrictions, are all language, but not totally formalized. And of course the formulations of the lawyers are closer to mathematics I would say, to reason. On the other side, you can use language more freely. If you go to the two sides of this dream of the language, on the one side you have you have something totally formalized, which is mathematics, and on the other side you have something totally informal which is the creative part. So basically, language is a structure or a tool that you can use and that can be repurposed for different occasions.

This also implies that a poet can be very dangerous for the laws, because he is managing the same words but in a complete different way. And I suppose this is one of the reasons why when there’s a fascist...
power the first people that are put in jails are the poets, because they

 touch precisely on what organizes us, our free language. Art has to be

 aware of this situation of language and of its own situation of not being

 a language. As an artist you have to know that everything comes

 through language, but not everyone keeps this in mind especially

 because between artists there are ways to communicate without

 language.

 I use mathematics because I like it, it’s so formalized that when

 mentally you try to solve something, it’s really creative, because you

 have to find the solution and it’s like walking in the forest. You have to

 go and find, and when you reach the solution it’s pure and there’s

 nothing else than abstraction, it’s pure joy! Very often my pieces are

 done as a bet that I try to win. To win means to find a solution to the

 problem. So you put the problem on the table and work until you find a

 solution to it.

 You have to feel that each piece of art embodies both sides of the line,

 but by being apart. A good work quotes both sides of the line of the

 language, for the viewer, not for the artist. Because there is always one

 who produces and one who receives, so we’re always in this balance.

 You employ a wide range of materials and techniques. Was there one

 medium that first sparked your interest in making art, or have you

 always created in this way?

 Yes I do employ a wide range of materials and techniques and if there’s

 one medium which first sparked my interest, that would be

 photography, because photography is everywhere. But I feel like

 answering that my first medium is photography is not a real answer,

 because photography is everywhere. Photography is the tool for

 curiosity. Through photography you make notes and you understand

 better the social living and how people react to things. Also,

 photography is not an image but has an image inside, just like a good

 painting has an image inside. And images are a mental thing, they have

 nothing to do with figuration, and that’s why mathematics sometimes

 is useful... Even music, no one asks why music is abstract. Everybody

 agrees with the abstraction of it, but not with the abstraction of objects.

 So, yes, I’d say photography because it’s the tool for exploring, making

 documents and being aware of the situation.

 Do you always have a material or medium in mind when you begin to

 develop a work, or do works tend to evolve quite spontaneously?

 I always try not to use the same material or medium more than

 once. The question of materiality has nothing to do with the question of

 medium. They are two different things. Medium is photography, TV,

 cinema. So of course there is material background, but no one

 considers cinema as material. The idea of putting together materials

 and medium is dangerous. Is the medium art? A gallery? or is the

 medium stone? The medium is gallery showing art made of stone.

 The material comes as a solution to the problem. It could be anything,

 any material. But the material has the necessity to link the diverse part

 of what has been observed, and put it together. So it’s not all materials

 that can do everything, there are elements that make the formula work

 and lead to the conclusion of the image which is already there, others

 don’t.

 ‘Jean-Luc Moulène: Larvae and Ghosts’ is showing at

 Thomas Dane Gallery until 28 May. All images courtesy the artist and

 Thomas Dane Gallery, London
An exclusive interview with French artist Jean-Luc Moulène on his new exhibition “Larvae and Ghosts” at Thomas Dane Gallery, London

Voyelles, Paris, 2015

Jean-Luc Moulène’s practice is both clear and opaque. An often loaded mix of subjects, mediums, and contexts that convey his primary concern of the relationship between objects and images. Through metaphors, visual impact and propositions of and around the body Moulène employs his works as tools to reveal the nature and flaws of social and historic phenomena.

Born in Reims in 1955 and based in Paris, Moulène’s work dances around critique. It is suggestive without conveying a decisive point or side and in Larvae & Ghosts, at London’s Thomas Dane Gallery, the artist presents a series of ambiguous sculptures and drawings which continue this act.

The exhibition is his fourth solo presentation at the gallery, having also shown at Dia: Beacon, New York, Musée D’art Moderne de la Ville, Paris and Modern Art Oxford amongst many other locations. Larvae & Ghosts also forms a sort of a prelude to Moulène’s forthcoming exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, where he will present a programme of works considering the protocols of material and space in his practice.
As he prepared for the show’s opening, we spoke to Moulène outside a nearby cafe in London’s St James.

Billie Muraben — Your work has often been about giving concrete existence to mental images, how does that principle apply to this exhibition?

Jean-Luc Moulène — This exhibition is, as always, experimental. I am not trying to produce an effect, I just try to think – and thinking is really abstraction. It’s a process of thinking what might evoke, engage and encourage interpretation. In Larvae & Ghosts I have essentially made some abstract gestures, but applied to figurative objects. The main question is, what is the significance of a cut? What does it mean to fit with someone, fit with a world or a culture. So we took diverse objects, such as garden sculptures, cast skeletons and plastic furniture and made cuts in them in order to make them fit with each other, in a concrete sense.

And in terms of interpretation, I’m sure some people will see the abstraction of the gesture, others will go directly to figuration, or try to interpret in terms of mythology. But all are interesting, because I think that the interest is precisely about concretising the thinking – but not only mine.

Billie Muraben — A lot of the objects are quite loaded, the figure of the woman for example features prominently in the show.

Jean-Luc Moulène — Absolutely. The representation of the woman is very loaded, and complex. There are problems in the evidence that it is often only the man who is dressed in these depictions, as the figure of the intellectual. I am interested in these objects as a means of affecting and challenging historical tradition, not only in art history, it’s important as an artist to take a position and make a political statement.

Billie Muraben — Could you tell me about the title for the show, ‘Larvae & Ghosts’, which hints to the notion of
both the not yet born and the already dead?

Jean-Luc Moulène — [Laughs], Yes, both sides of life. No one knows, but it’s possible that these both sides are only one side? I think of this often because I am at the age where a lot of people die and, you know I don’t remember before I was born, so why remember when I die? Life is so much better than art when it is done well. Art is just something in between. What is interesting to me is life, which is why I consider myself more like a lyricist – I’m interested in love, life and death and the rest is nothing.

Billie Muraben — Your work is often concerned with interrogating the cannons and typologies of artistic tradition, such as sculpture, photography and drawing, can you expand upon that?

Jean-Luc Moulène — You must be contemporary, and create patina for the next century. A problem is that we only have so much available, for example there are not so many colours to choose from, this is a problem for artists.

Billie Muraben — How does the body work as a tool as a negotiation point between text and image?

Jean-Luc Moulène — You know, in France the main culture is literature. Literature, philosophy, language. A lot of words, all the concentration in French culture is around that. And a long time ago, when I was abroad people were telling me that French art was illustrative. And I say, illustrative of what?! Of the French philosophy.
No I thought, I have no need to illustrate, but abroad this was always considered. So I decided 30 years ago to fight that situation and to try to make art out of language. Experimental. It’s really difficult. And that’s why in this show the figurative part has something to do with, not literature, but words.

Art can provoke diverse language, from mathematics which is pure formality to poetry and the long line between the two; taking in Deleuze, administration and common language, all of which I would describe as alienated forms. Poetry, on the other hand is the freedom of words. I am of course influenced by poetry but also by mathematics. A philosopher cannot consider themselves a thinker if they don’t know contemporary mathematics, it contains the complexity of our world.

Billie Muraben — You’ve often questioned what it means to author artwork, could you elaborate on how that is visualized in your work?

Jean-Luc Moulène — Yes, the question of the author. The more I work, the more I think it’s a problem because as an author you are party to laws that authorize you to do things that others cannot. Is that democratic?

Sometimes I think that art as the production of the author is the remain of past centuries, it was a type of symbolisation of power that doesn’t correspond to our lives today. But I suppose I do use my name, I think as a way to pass through to a new status but I don’t know what. Perhaps the artist as researcher, but that is not quite sufficient.

We must shift from these grand masters who were directly infused by God and the sun. I hate that. I am for an art of the little, a common art.

Billie Muraben — Could you tell me about the work decoding Rimbaud’s ‘Les Voyelles’?

Jean-Luc Moulène — This poem is one of the main acts of the millennium, and for a long time it was interpreted through a system of correspondences between color, sound and imagination. But with an old friend who is a poet, we realized this interpretation was no good, the poem is actually totally objective. It is a love poem, describing his mistress from bottom to top – finishing with the eyes and the aura. So I decided to try to consider how the letter exists in public space, and gathered a montage of parts to communicate Les Voyelles as an object.
Billie Muraben — And could you tell me about your plans for the Pompidou exhibition?

They asked me for a retrospective, I said no. I wanted to show only new pieces, so I set it as a retrospective of protocols, previous experiments applied to new objects in materials such as bronze, stone, plastic and concrete.
There is something in contemporary art that is quite strange to me. Slowly we have passed from the work to the exhibition as art work. And this drives a lot of artists to the spectacle as a work, not for me. I wanted to continue to get away from this process so I decided that the show would be a programme. Not a programme of showing, or neither a retrospective but a programme of production. As for any worker. It will look almost like a group show, “me and me, we are millions”, millions of authors.

On view until May 28th, 2016 at Thomas Dane Gallery, 3 & 11 Duke Street St James’s, London.

Text Billie Muraben and photo Sasa Stucin
“The naughty smirk of the vivisectionist”: Jean-Luc Moulène’s Larvae And Ghosts — Reviewed

Eviscerated pigs, light-hearted death threats, and the absurdity of living; Jay Bernard encounters Jean-Luc Moulène at Thomas Dane Gallery…

It’s raining, and someone has just handed me a poem in French:

“A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu : voyelles, / Je dirai quelque jour vos naissances latentes:”

It’s Arthur Rimbaud’s “Voyelles” – “Vowels”. In English:

“Black A, White E, Red I, Green U, Blue O: vowels, / One day I will speak of your secret birth cries:”

It’s a disarming move, handing someone a poem without translation; they’re on the back foot. What if, god forbid, they don’t speak French? How will they unlock the secrets of the art they are about to see? That’s their problem.
And it was mine for about five minutes before I realised that Jean-Luc Moulène’s latest exhibition at the Thomas Dane Gallery (London), Larvae and Ghosts, was taking itself less seriously than I had supposed. The Guardian reported the exhibition as “hilarious”, which feels a little inaccurate, but Moulène’s clearly playing with his practice, or rather, continuing a playful practice; the daubing of colourful, high gloss resin on a plastic chair, as in La Faucheuse, Paris isn’t hilarious exactly – particularly when there is a scythe bolted to its side, dripping purple – but something else. Light-hearted death threat? Or maybe the kind of humour attained after a long stretch in the gulag. There are no belly laughs here, no ha-has, but there is the naughty smirk of the vivisectionist.

“This is an artist who has arranged cauliflowers, sculpted cartilage as well as bronze, presented photography as well as ‘objects’ (never ‘sculptures’)”

This is an artist who has arranged cauliflowers, sculpted cartilage as well as bronze, presented photography as well as “objects” (never “sculptures”), documented a single Parisian tree, and fused a balloon with a human skull. His show Products of Palestine exhibited in the same space in 2007, in which Moulène collected and photographed 58 sanctioned products from the West Bank and occupied territories. Later this year, he will show at the Pompidou, and is expected to interrogate our digital lives, a material even trickier than wood or bone. His work has been described in the words of Antonin Artaud, as a “body without organs” – a cohesive form without an internal, hierarchical structure – and indeed his self-description is as an artist who eschews classification.
are watercolours, whimsically effacing the severances they depict and you might say unremarkable, if humourous, compared to the sculptures they accompany.

These La Faucheuse; Jean-Luc Moulène: Larvae And Ghosts at Thomas Dane Gallery, London, from 15 April to 28 May 2016

So it’s the process of evisceration, rearrangement and discovery that makes Moulène’s latest work interesting. Split over two sites, the first gallery houses drawings of animals spliced together. An ant/mammal (we assume it’s mammalian insofar as it could be anything from a goat to a genuflecting faun), fittingly entitled Mix, messes around with scale, versus Creature in which the cut is less severe – the purple/green ink bleeds into and worries the line where its belly is cleaved, contrasting again with Bubu, a kind of hottentot venus studded with gemstones. In the centre of one room lies two greyish lumps. Animal forms – Donkey, actually – but presented face down, with none of the features to guide you. This piece, in which Moulène casts a donkey skull in concrete then splits it open, has an eerieness and command that undercuts the watercolours; the double-enquiry of skull-casting and skull-preservation, is beautifully succinct and draws you in with simple Bressonian insight.

Indeed the whole exhibition is summarised by Moulène as the “simple” idea of “giving concrete existence to mental images”, and that is patent not only in Donkey but the more grotesque Fairy Fantasy, which is a pig’s head on a body composed of acid-induced geometry and baby hands. The same sickly resin used in La Facheuse, Paris is here again, as it is in La Voyelles, a tricolored, literal structure that corresponds to the coloured vowels in the poem.
– the blue trumpet is O, the lipstick a very lurid I – and they all rest haphazard with a fly at the bottom of the pile lending reality to the conceit, as if it were a vanity.

“The overwhelming feeling I came away with was of someone presenting life as a series of pointed observations about the absurdity of living”

The overwhelming feeling I came away with as I left to enter the next phase of the exhibition a few doors down, was of someone presenting life as a series of ironies, half-jokes and pointed observations about the absurdity of living. The punchline is death, of course, and this lands well as you enter the second gallery: arranged on crisp white napkins are an array of statues that have been spliced together.

I fished for an interesting story as to where these statues came from and, unluckily, they were probably sourced wholesale, but then again that speaks to the joking/not-joking feel of the work. Moulène has very wittily presented a kind of graveyard in which assumptions go to die – the assumption of fluidity, for instance, is gone once you notice the awkwardness of the splice. The statues, all grey and mottled green from age, seem to be fluid, formal trinities: Bending, Indexes, Purple Graces (that resin again, the same nauseating purple as the scythe) all reveal undulate (but decisive) amputations from their original context, and the texture of the inside is like the oaty texture of breast tissue in some, like a cow’s tongue in others. Yet the experience is fleshless and abstracted without feeling arid.

It’s particularly fun to walk around the back of the statues and witness a cemetery of contorting figures whose forms hark back to an older age, but whose embodied material is a composite of old and new: concrete is of ancient origin but latterly made with newer materials such as cement (or, “ciment fondu” as it is known in French, which feels suitably camp). If you want further evidence of Moulène’s refusal of categorical and material expectations, his 2014 New York show Torture Concrete, besides maybe the floor, featured no concrete at all. Donkey, previously alone in the centre of the room, is refigured as Pig, which lays open and eviscerated, off to one side. Poor pig. How funny that it should end up bits of teeth and mandible encased in concrete, on a section of cut cloth, without a proper burial.

I can’t think of a more profound juxtaposition than a live material and a dead one, and Moulene provides this contrasting image with simple ease. Even Cat/Skull manages to feel fresh, largely because the skull element is so disarmingly close to the cat element (which might also be a nod to our indefatigable online cat obsession); the slash in the title is invisible and the ellision serves as a memento mori: remember that you will die / remember to find it funny.

Jay Bernard

See Jean-Luc Moulène: Larvae And Ghosts at Thomas Dane Gallery, London, from 15 April to 28 May 2016
Posted on 03/05/2016 by thedoublenegative
JEAN-LUC MOULÈNE
NO FOTO

NATHALIE DELBARD

Pour parvenir à diffuser des images de presse pour le plupart interdites, Jean-Luc Moulène a articulé, visuellement, les images incriminées aux décisions de justice qui s’y rapportent, de façon à ouvrir l’objet même du litige. Pour autant, ce serait mal comprendre les montages effectués pour NO FOTO (2006) que de les considérer comme une simple bavure à l’égard de la loi ; ce qui s’expose en réalité dans ces doubles pages de magazine recensées par l’artiste, n’est pas tant l’image interdite que le dispositif légal auquel elle est soumise, et le contexte dans lequel il s’exerce. Droit d’auteur, droit au respect de la vie privée, droit à la dignité des personnes ou droit à l’information notament, sont autant de lignes de partage autorisant ou non la divulgation des photographies concernées. La grande singularité de NO FOTO est alors de rendre sensibles ces incohérences juridiques par le biais d’opérations strictement plastiques, un certain agencement formel, occultant éléments du discours ou menaces d’images – tels ces post-it de couleur précisément disposés – pour mieux désigner ce qui fait problème. Le jeu visuel est efficace, il rend explicite, à la fois, le lieu dans l’image où se cristallise la pression juridique et le cadre qui, au-delà, l’organise.

L’impossibilité de donner à voir l’une des photographies de la série des Filles d’Amsterdam (2004) à laquelle s’est confronté Moulène lors de l’exposition Gravedad à Mexico, s’inscrit à sa manière dans le prolongement de NO FOTO, la loi obligeant l’artiste à imaginer un procédé susceptible de dissimuler l’image tout en la maintenant présente (en l’occurrence, un coffrage de bois sur lequel est affiché l’article de référence). La contrainte juridique s’est ainsi vue retournée une nouvelle fois : la photographie censée n’est plus visible sur place (ailleurs toujours), mais elle porte ses propres conditions d’existence à notre attention. En particulier, elle donne à percevoir la loi mexicaine, qui à cet égard, mérite commentaire : aussi similaire à l’article du code pénal français concernant la protection d’un public mineur – on se souvient de ce qui justifiait la pointe à l’égard de l’exposition Pecaditos Inocentes –, elle étend l’interdit à des « personnes incapables de comprendre », supposant une distinction difficilement recevable.

Reste à savoir le véritable motif de la demande de retrait. Si les Filles d’Amsterdam n’ont jusqu’alors connu aucun obstacle à leur présentation, le contexte d’exposition est ici déterminant, au moins de deux plans. Dans le lieu lui-même d’abord, Moulène a installé Erata, un ensemble de palettes de cajettes colorées, qui forment un chemin au bout duquel se tient la figure de la prostitution. Ce n’est donc pas la photographie seule qui dérange, mais son association directe à un contexte de production, qui désigne frontalement une marchandisation des corps en même temps que celle des biens de consommation. Ensuite, lorsque l’on sait que les objets en question ont été produits localement, dans une petite barrière dont la surpopulation favorise la prostitution, on mesure ce qui, bien au-delà des murs du musée, résonne avec Erata – et ce d’autant plus fortement que selon le choix du commissaire, Carmen se révèle être la seule présence humaine parmi les œuvres exposées.

Il en va finalement de même pour les montages de NO FOTO et celui occasionné par Gravedad : la geste artistique vient toucher à travers la loi l’exact endroit où quelque chose de l’organisation sociale se refuse à l’entendement.

CULTURE
Promenade poétique à travers la Création
A Villeneuve-d'Ascq, Marc Donnadieu a conçu une exposition en forme d'oratorio autour de la Genèse

Depuis quelques années, un nouveau genre d'exposition est né et prospère : l'exposition-poème, dans laquelle les œuvres riment entre elles, comme les vers d'un sonnet ou d'un rondeau. La comparaison musicale est aussi juste : exposition-symphonie ou exposition-cantate, selon la taille et la formation de l'orchestre.

Le principe est le suivant : rapprocher des œuvres de natures, de styles et d'époques éloignés, mais qui se répondent, cependant, parce qu'elles ont en commun un motif, une idée ou un sentiment. Il faut, pour le mettre pleinement en pratique, des connaissances diverses et le sens des résonances.

L'un des virtuoses français de l'exercice est Jean de Loisy, auteur de « Maîtres du désordre » au Musée du quai Branly et de « Formes simples » au Centre Pompidou-Metz. « Là où commence le jour », à Villeneuve-d'Ascq (Nord), relève de cette conception, avec Marc Donnadieu pour maître d'œuvre. Celui-ci a pris pour thème rien moins que la Genèse, et les chapitres se succèdent dans le musée au fil des salles, comme se succèdent les airs d'une Création telle celle écrite par le compositeur autrichien Joseph Haydn : le modèle est donc celui de l'oratorio.

Mythologies et cosmologies
Il est interprété par deux formations alternativement ou simultanément. L'une joue sur des instruments anciens : admirables bibles ornées, non moins admirables gravures de Dürer, de Cranach et de maîtres allemands du XVIe siècle, livres des merveilles et recueils d'emblèmes compilés par des savants révéreux qui n'avaient pour la plupart jamais quitté leurs couvents ou leurs villes. Mythologies et cosmologies sont figurées par enluminures et gravures, et l'on découvre même deux œuvres chinoises, un cheval et un daim de bois sculptés, le daim ayant deux rames de corne sur sa tête.

L'autre formation, plus nombreuse, joue sur des instruments modernes : vidéos, photos, transmutations d'objets. Les interprètes sont des artistes de la seconde moitié du XXe siècle ou d'aujourd'hui, occidentaux pour la plupart. Plusieurs appartiennent à l'histoire pour avoir participé à des mouvements reconnus comme Arte Povera (Alighiero Boetti, Giuseppe Penone, Giovanni Anselmo) ou performances (Gina Pane, Chris Burden, Dennis Oppenheim).

D'autres, tout aussi importants, ne relèvent d'aucun apparentement : ainsi en est-il de Jana Sterbak, Claudio Parmiggiani, Pascal Convert ou Jean-Luc Moulène. Ce sont simplement, si l'on ose dire, des artistes de grande qualité, ici présents par des œuvres qui ont quelque rapport avec la Genèse. Sterbak se trouve ainsi dans le cha-

Entre Anciens et Modernes, Marc Donnadieu réussit à rendre manifeste ce qu’ils partagent : des obsessions séculaires, des angoisses aussi humaines et actives au Moyen Âge qu’aujourd’hui – mais aussi le culte païen de la nature et des plaisirs de l’œil et du corps sublimés dans le travail de la matière.

Ce que ces rencontres d’artistes qu’en apparence tout sépare rappellent avec force, c’est d’abord l’intensité de cette jouissance, qu’elle s’exprime vers 1500 ou cinq cents ans plus tard. Tous la cristallisent dans des formes, chacun selon les circonstances dans lesquelles il se trouve créer.

Au long du parcours, cette évidence est rappelée à intervalles réguliers par les tableaux de Laurent Grasso, de la série nommée « Études sur le passé ». Grasso, qui est né en 1972, peint à la manière des Siennais et des Florentins des années 1400, sur fond d’or, avec des minutes de dessin et de couleur dignes d’un contemporain de Gentile da Fabriano ou de Giovanni di Paolo. Il y a naturellement une grande distance et de l’ironie dans cet anachronisme exacerbé. Mais Grasso ne prend pas cependant moins de plaisir à créer – et n’en donne pas moins – que ses lointains prédécesseurs.

PHILIPPE DAGEN

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Jeux de mains, jeux de Villa pour Jean-Luc Moulène

L’exposition à la Villa Médicis du plasticien tout-terrain est parcourue de clins d’œil à l’histoire de l’Académie de France à Rome.

Il y a des années, Jean-Luc Moulène avait sans succès tenté sa chance à la Villa Médicis pour y être pensionnaire. Pas rancunier, l’artiste - qui l’est devenu sur le tard après une carrière d’ingénieur chez Matra - y déploie une exposition pleine d’allusions à l’Académie de France à Rome, à son histoire et aux fantômes qui la peuplent, en premier lieu celui de Balthus, dont l’empreinte picturale remonte à la surface dès la première salle.

Moulène a en effet demandé à une restauratrice d’en badigeonner les murs à l’éponge tel que le directeur de 1961 à 1977 (un record) l’avait fait à l’époque, un peu partout dans ces lieux avant que cet arrière-fond nébuleux ne s’efface avec le temps. Résultat : un bleu azur nuageux sur lequel Moulène accroche un dessin datant lui aussi de 1977, et esquissant une créature dotée d’une deuxième tête entre les jambes. A côté, la sculpture Janus, deux têtes accolées dos-à-dos, si on peut dire, enonce le clou : l’exposition fera des va-et-vient entre le passé et le présent en érigeant le tête-à-queue comme principe moteur bizarre. Du coup, on reste encore dans la première salle avec ce portrait d’un homme nu qui...
semble esquisser un mouvement des bras et des jambes : il a l’air empêtré d’un pantin qui se met en branle. C’est un homme qui pose tout en marchant et vice versa.

**Ciment.** Son pendant féminin se trouve à l’autre bout de l’exposition sous les traits de trois femmes que Moulène fait longuement poser devant sa caméra en un long plan séquence qui révèle discrètement la lassitude des modèles au travail, ces Trois Grâces contemporaines renvoyant par ailleurs au bas-relief homonyme qui orne l’une des façades de la Villa.

A force d’enclencher toutes les manettes à la fois, stop et en avant, en haut et en bas, devant et derrière, Moulène grippe les formes classiques et enraye les rouages académiques de la hiérarchie entre les arts. A l’image de cette pièce qui acoquine trois sculptures en ciment, reproductions bon marché de modèles anciens. Engoncées les unes dans les autres grâce à une technique de frottement qui rabote leur ciment, elles forment un amoncellement noueux et hybrides (humains et animaux) qui rappelle la manière dont s’entasse et se mêle les moulages sans valeur qui encombrent les remises des musées.

Et l’artiste serre le nœud plus fort vers la fin de l’expo, en proposant cet étrange objet «polyédrique résultant de l’intersection d’un cube, d’une sphère et d’un tétraèdre», explique Eric de Chassey, directeur de la Villa. Un casse-tête géométrique obtenu grâce à un logiciel de design graphique, qui porte un titre à la mords-moi-le-nœud : Gnou.

**Baudruches.** L’art de Moulène est donc celui d’un imbroglio généralisé, digne de ces carnavals au cours desquelles hommes et femmes, humbles et puissants, intervertissent leurs costumes. D’où ces Tronches, moulage en négatif de masques trouvés sur les marchés mexicains et figurant des personnalités réelles ou fictives, de Hillary Clinton à Freddy. Ici, les têtes, baudruches grimaçantes, bouffies et grises, gisent à terre comme les restes d’une décapitation. «Il était une fois», un conte délicieusement cruel.
A Rome, Jean-Luc Moulène investit la Villa Médicis et accomplit tout en dépit du "bon sens". Des tête-à-queue et des conflits plus que fertiles.

Il suffit de parcourir les jardins de la Villa Médicis, jardin à la française par devant, portions sauvages sur la partie latérale, pour se rendre compte que Jean-Luc Moulène est un homme qui sait y voir. Et fait de son environnement la pierre sur laquelle aiguiser son regard tactile. Aussi, ses nouvelles sculptures en ciment aggloméré, dont on avait déjà pu voir certains spécimens à Venise lors de l'exposition orchestrée par Danh Vo ce printemps à la Pointe de la Douane, et que l'on retrouve ici dans une forme plus complexe encore (trois éléments, figure masculine sur figure féminine et faciès animal enchâssé), doivent sans doute beaucoup aux sculptures composites de ces chevaliers, bras croisés en guise de résistance passive, corps en granit et tête en marbre, qui construisent l'arrière-plan du jardin de la Villa. À cette statuaire suturée et donc impure, mais aussi à une technique venue du Mexique, où l'artiste séjourna récemment, qui consiste à fondre, à l'usure, deux corps étrangers par une technique d'abrasion. Pour cette exposition à la Villa Médicis, Eric de Chassey, son directeur, aura su patienter quatre ans, depuis 2011, date à laquelle Moulène s'exporte pour la première fois outre-Atlantique au musée d'art contemporain Dia Beacon. L'idée première était de faire voyager l'exposition. Puis, finalement, faute de place et face à des coûts de transport exorbitants – parce que Moulène n'aime rien tant que de se froter aussi au surplice –, il est apparu évident qu'il fallait faire une "exposition romaine". Comme l'on demande aux résidents de la Villa Médicis de penser un "projet roman".
C’est ce qu’a fait Jean-Luc Moulène, qui réussit, avec la délicatesse et la précision qu’on lui connaît, à croiser ses obsessions avec un certain nombre de sujets directement inspirés par le lieu, des sculptures des jardins don qu’ont l’empreinte toujours palpable de Balhus, directeur mythique de la Villa Médicis de 1961 à 1977.
Ainsi, l’exposition ouvre par une salle bleue entièrement peinte à l’éponge par la restauratrice qui travaille actuellement à la réfection des fresques du peintre à la Villa Médicis de 1961 à 1977. Plus loin, c’est son pendant jaune poudre qui illumine et "rapproche les objets" que l’artiste a commandé.
Dans la deuxième salle, un accrochage très classique reprend les standards de la peinture académique, dans les formats autant que dans les techniques utilisées, avec un ensemble de monocromes vert-de-gris patinés sur un mélange de cuivre et de fonte. Dans la salle jaune, c’est un plâtre taillé qui rappelle l’académisme dix-neuviémiste autant que la passion de l’artiste pour les figures mathématiques. La pièce, posée sur un imposant tronçon de bois brut que l’on imagine tout droit sorti du jardin de la Villa Médicis, s’appelle Gou. Elle est un clin d’œil au programme informatique Rhinoceros, normalement utilisé pour produire ce type d’opérations parfait inaccessibles à l’esprit humain. De même que la série de sculptures sensuelles à cinq branches, réalisées dans le nord de l’Italie, nécessite le concours de machines plus performantes que celles qui ont été créées. Dans la grande montée qui servait autrefois à faire entrer les chevaux, c’est une arme de "tronches" que Jean-Luc Moulène a dépoussière à terre sur des coupures de chantier bleu nuit. Quinze têtes sans corps, en ciment, coulées dans des masques retournés. Si bien que l’on reconnaît à peine, sous ces traits déformés, les contours des personnalités politiques (de Mitt Romney à Hillary Clinton) ou populaires (de Frankenstein à Dark Vador) que l’artiste renvoie ainsi à la longue tradition des masques mortuaires, des gisants mais aussi du carnivale.
Car ces figures monstrueuses disent bien l’opération à l’œuvre dans les pièces tardives de Jean-Luc Moulène, où plane l’ombre du charivari qui signifierait "mal de tête" en grec et évoque cette tradition populaire, née au XIVᵉ siècle, qui consistait à recourir de cris et de sifflets la musique religieuse et l’ordre établi, mais aussi, puisque nous sommes à Rome, celle des Saturnales qui, sous l’Antiquité, célébraient le solstice d’hiver. Au cours de ces fêtes paléennes, l’ordre hiérarchique volait en éclats, ce qui permettait aux esclaves de jouer d’une liberté provisoire et aux maîtres de se dissimuler dans la poussière de ces dernières, de leur toge à laquelle ils préféraient le simple tunique des pauvres. De ce monde à l’envers, Jean-Luc Moulène semble nourrir "l’ensemble de ses productions les plus récentes.
À l’image de ses pièces en verre souillé "tricolores" (mais dont le maille bleu, blanc, rouge laisse place à une déclinaison rose, jaune, vert), véritable prouesse technique réalisée grâce aux efforts conjoints de trois souffleurs de verre, de la taille d’une cage thoracique, elles sont la représentation en creux, ou en négatif, d’une matière a priori impalpable : l’air. Comme ce Janus qui montre en recto-verso Bush père et fils, rappelant le Tête-à-Cul organique que Moulène présente actuellement à Venise, mais également, dans un autre registre, la série des Fêlées d’Amsterdam, où tête et sexe étaient présentés sur un même niveau, faisant ainsi coïncider deux traditions photographiques : judiciaire et pornographique.
Dans cette exposition composée quasi exclusivement de pièces inédites, seul un petit dessin de 1977 permet d’établir une filiation et une persistance dans le travail de Moulène. Intitulé Buba 1er, figure tronquée et primitive, il est, comme l’expliquait Jean-Luc Moulène dans un entretien avec Briony Fer lors de sa rétrospective au Carré d’art de Nîmes, "un mélange d’Ubu roi d’Alfred Jarry et de la reine mythologique Babou qui lève sa robe et dévoile un visage en lieu et place de son sexe, puis se met à danser". Tout s’inverse, conclut l’artiste à l’époque, "le haut vaut le bas et le corps est la plastique de la représentation", avant d’ajouter, comme si l’il n’émettait déjà ce tête-à-queue sous lequel viendraient se placer ses œuvres à venir : "Mon travail est concrètement le lieu de ce conflit." Claire Moulène

Jean-Luc Moulène - Il était une fois jusqu’au 13 septembre à Rome, Villa Médicis, villamedici.it/fr
Stolpersteine aus dem Alltag

Erstmals in Deutschland: Kunstverein zeigt eine Überblicksschau von Jean-Luc Moulène

VON STEPHAN GOHLISCH

جادنونری زیگن سپریمد باقی می‌ماند که از این آثار بنا بر دسترسی به آنها ساخته شده یا می‌توانند نسبت به غیر انسانی بوده باشند. تحقیقات نشان داد که این تخلیه‌های طوری را که در اینجا به آنها نسبت می‌دهیم، نشان می‌دهد که این اثرات علاوه بر همکاری با ما، می‌توانند نسبت به غیر انسانی بوده باشند.

اگر چه این تحقیقات نشان داد که این اثرات علاوه بر همکاری با ما، می‌توانند نسبت به غیر انسانی بوده باشند.

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Jean-Luc Moulène, l’embarras postural

La galerie Greta Meert à Bruxelles expose jusqu’au 5 avril des films rares de l’artiste.

Alexandre Costanzo.


Le dos, redressant un visage ou à la verticale, décrit une sorte de ronde, une danse rotative, dans le film, il n’y aura pas de chaises dans cette salle de sorte qu’on s’arrête le moment devant l’écran avant de s’approcher ou de s’éloigner pour s’immobiliser de nouveau : aux postures des femmes répondent nos intimes passions. Alors si l’œuvre est ainsi vouée à rester dans son intégrité, comme un complément d’objet, un catalogue à chaque fois singulier des différentes figures des gestes et des attitudes, de s’approcher ou de s’éloigner pour s’immobiliser de nouveau aux postures des femmes, elles seront ainsi devenues étrangères, de s’approcher ou de s’éloigner pour s’immobiliser de nouveau.

À l’instar d’une de ses images, on pourrait qualifier les photographies de la série des *Disjonctions* de Jean-Luc Moulène de « paysage culturel français », au sens large, datant des deux dernières décennies du XXe siècle. En effet, toutes ces images ont été prises entre 1984 et 1995, et il n’est pas nécessaire de se pencher sur les cartels pour s’en rendre compte.

Redécouvrir cet ensemble près d’un quart de siècle plus tard en modifie évidemment la perception, non seulement parce qu’il est figé dans le temps, mais aussi parce que l’on ne photographie plus de la même façon aujourd’hui. La photographie a effectué sa mue, s’est allégée de sa minorisation par rapport aux arts plastiques et au champ de l’art contemporain en général. S’il s’agissait, pour ce faire, d’opérer une « déconstruction du langage photographique » en tentant d’en évacuer tout affect et toute vision personnelle, la démonstration est éloquente et se suffit à elle-même.

Le fait que Jean-Luc Moulène, à l’occasion de cette exposition à Bourges qui présente l’intégralité de cette série, ait décidé de figer définitivement ces *Disjonctions* (en en établissant le catalogue raisonné dans la foulée) clôt définitivement un cycle. Elle prend date dans le parcours de l’artiste et, de façon plus générale, dans une histoire de la photographie en France. Son inscription dans le temps lui confère désormais un statut particulier, le témoignage d’un état de la société, au travers d’images d’une époque que l’on a bien de la peine de nos jours à considérer qu’elles aient pu être « les modèles d’une vision critique de l’ordre politique contemporain ». Qu’elles aient contribué à modifier la perception de notre environnement - à l’instar des tenants des « New Topographics », des premiers travaux photographiques de Jean-Marc Bustamante, ou de la mission photographique de la Datar (toutes proportions gardées), pour rester dans le domaine du « paysage » -, nul ne le contestera. Rien à voir ici avec la France de Raymond Depardon.

Il y a dans cette série des *Disjonctions* une unité du regard, du point de vue et donc du cadrage, renforcée par l’homogénéité du format de ces images. Réalisées quasi intégralement en couleurs, elles se gardent bien de basculer dans le syndrome du « tableau photographique » et restent en quelque sorte « à leur place », celle d’un instantané définitif. Cette opération de décantation des images a amené Moulène à finaliser un corpus traitant majoritairement du paysage urbain au sens large, qu’il soit habité ou non. Autrement dit, dans cette série, rares sont les portraits au sens strict et les figures humaines qui y apparaissent sont presque toujours contextualisées.

La lumière est sourde et pesante, comme s’il s’agissait de mettre le doigt, d’appuyer sur une société empeçée (déjà ?) où toute chose paraît trop bien à sa place, comme subissant les contraintes d’une tradition dont l’inertie semble le moteur. Il n’y a guère de mouvement dans les photographies de Moulène, tout a l’air anesthésié, si ce n’est ici un piéton pressant le pas, là une femme se dressant nue dans les dunes.

La force de cette série tient peut-être à ce principe d’équivalence, de mise sur le même pied entre une vue urbaine, une nature morte ou le portrait d’un arbre. Toutes ces images ont un point commun : elles sont d’une extrême densité, leur composition est saturée ; les lignes de fuite sont presque inexistantes, de même que les perspectives. Elles ne renvoient qu’à elles-mêmes et donc à ceux qui prênnent la peine de s’y attarder.


In 2001, the French artist Jean-Luc Moulène took a series of photographs in the Lebanese port city of Sidon, which included portraits of people he met there by chance or through friends. The resulting images were displayed on the crumbling facades of the old souk. Twelve years later, many of them are still there. One portrait in particular, titled Abou Baker, 2001, after its subject, was later borrowed by mourners for the young man’s funeral. For Moulène’s illuminating, inscrutable exhibition at the Beirut Art Center, Abou Baker and another picture from the same series—featuring three bare-chested young men, all tattoos, charm, and tender affection—are placed at the top of an industrial stairwell. They are the only clear link between artist and place. The rest of the show revels in shadows and echoes, which move and multiply among the objects, photographs, drawings, videos, and architectural installations on view.

With forty works arranged into four sections, “Jean-Luc Moulène—Works” loops around the center like a sequence of strange and compelling riddles, from a skull cased in concrete (Arthur, 2010) and a haphazard chunk of plywood (Alexandria Made, 1997) to a suite of ink drawings disguised as monochromatic paintings (4 Bic Drawings, 2013). Categories fall into disarray as Moulène collapses conventional understandings of what constitutes an image, an object, or a mode of communicating the meaning and status of one as the other.

Wrapping around the main hall are two fantastic L-beams—one red, one blue—that bifurcate the space. Produced in Beirut and commissioned for the exhibition, the steel structures, when viewed from above, form two rectangles bolted on top of one another but shifted slightly apart. Together, they are called debrayeur, French for “disengage” but also the word for a clutch pedal, itself an apt metaphor for Moulène’s practice as a mechanism that controls how two things moving at potentially different speeds connect and decouple, if and when needed.
Major solo exhibition of celebrated French artist Jean-Luc Moulène opens at Modern Art Oxford

OXFORD.- Modern Art Oxford presents a major solo exhibition of celebrated French artist Jean-Luc Moulène this month. Featuring a collection of Moulène’s works from the 1990s to the present, it will showcase the artist’s ongoing commitment to exploring the relationship between image and object through a series of glass and bronze sculptures, drawings, photographs and a new film work especially commissioned for the exhibition.

Structured as a ceremony or procession presenting several series of works from the last decade, the exhibition will also feature his celebrated monochromes painted with conventional BIC ballpoint inks: red, green, blue and black, and his extraordinary sculptural knots made from glass and bronze. The cast bronze works are dynamic, twisted objects made by tying knots through clay, marking the interior space of a knot that is usually invisible. In contrast, the glass sculptures are tied lengths of clear blown glass: their transparent, sinuous forms describe a knot and render its structure visible throughout.

Alongside Moulène’s photographic work, manufactured objects are incorporated with drawings and prints celebrating the art of making as fundamental to human activity. The work continually highlights the artist’s interest with anthropology, material cultures of the past, mathematics and geometry. Critically acclaimed for his documentary photography, Moulène’s first comprehensive US exhibition is currently running at Dia Art Foundation, New York.

At Modern Art Oxford he explores the idea of material value and the social conditions in which images and objects are received and transformed. “My work seeks to produce differences through re-examina-

http://www.artdaily.org/index.asp?int_sec=11&int_new=58007#.UkbFh7zkW8V

tion of tradition and theoretical statement. This exhibition reflects my response to all types of possibilities from the last couple of decades while also examining new ideas with the film The Three Graces.” The Three Graces, the film commissioned for the exhibition marks another transition for the artist. Referencing traditional art history, ‘The Three Graces’ originated in Greek Mythology have been depicted countless times in Classical and Renaissance periods, in sculpture, drawing and painting; Moulène transposes the subject to reflect the era of mechanized reproduction, using black and white film as his medium.

Born in 1955 in Reims, France, Jean-Luc Moulène studied Literature and Philosophy at the Sorbonne University where he was awarded his Master’s degree. He went onto train in advertising. Moulène’s work has been exhibited widely over the past two decades.


Moulène currently lives and works in Paris.
"The Starting Point, I Think, Is Revolt": A Q&A With Artist Jean-Luc Moulène

The highlight of Moulène’s yearlong exhibition (up through December 31) at Dia: Beacon, in Upstate New York, is Body, Guyancourt, October 2011, an extraordinary contraption: a racing vehicle unable to move, a carefully manufactured product with no obvious purpose. Produced in collaboration with automobile giant Renault using 3-D design software, Body is indicative of the French artist’s inquisitive mind. In his photographs and ever-growing body of objects, Moulène has embraced mathematics, the Louvre’s sculpture collection, and the Parisian everyday. He has made work about Amsterdam’s prostitutes and French strikers’ memorabilia. When Coline Milliard met him in London, he was about to shoot a film inspired by the Greek myth of the Judgment of Paris. Despite this dizzying array of subjects, the artist’s core concerns have changed little since his first photographs from the late 1980s. Moulène tackles the big questions: the nature of image and material, the role of art, and the artist’s place in society. His solo exhibition at Modern Art Oxford through November 25 includes his film, The Three Graces, and his third show at London’s Thomas Dane Gallery opens November 22.

CM: You have said, “I am interested in producing work that is, in itself, the site of conflict.”

JLM: Artworks are not peaceful. The tradition of combining two things and attempting to reconcile them in an artwork is a symbolic position coming from Catholicism, but I prefer to put together the parts of a conflict and let it be visible in the work. I don’t try to solve conflict; I try to show it.

CM: Is conflict a starting point?

JLM: No. I live the conflict. The starting point, I think, is revolt.

CM: Against what?

JLM: Stupidity, hypocrisy, injustice.
CM: Do you see yourself as militant?

JLM: No. Militant means “belonging” to a party. I’m an artist. I’ve been involved with militants. But with groups, it’s always better to just be passing through. They all end up producing new constraints.

CM: With pieces like Objets de Grève (1999–2000), did you feel that you ran the risk of being instrumentalized?

JLM: It was part of the project. I did these images with the idea that they would be reproduced. I think Objets de Grève is my most exhibited piece; it has been shown in all kinds of places and in all kinds of formats. But that’s normal. It means that the work lives without me—and works have to take on their own lives. It’s when I cut my link to a work that the public can engage with it.

CM: Several of your pieces were distributed for free—in newspapers, for example. Is the process of dissemination part of the work?

JLM: No, the work is something concrete—the newspaper, not its diffusion. I’m thinking more and more that all these movements that have moved the artwork away from the material and the sacred are really problematic. Nowadays, it’s as if the institutions were making the work. They don’t need artists. And the most annoying thing for them is the material. If you make a virtual project, even if it’s very critical, it’s fine. But if you make a three-ton piece, you create a problem.

CM: Was this your thinking behind Body?

JLM: Of course. Imagine the price! And someone had to pay for it. When I did the newspaper pieces distributed for free, someone paid for them to be made, but this part was hidden. This is a problem. Now, if I made more newspapers, I would charge one euro. People trust what costs. When it’s free, there’s no value. It’s like with the city. Often you see beautiful things: events, feelings, sensitive things. But the only way to make them interesting is to sacralize them. Art is for that. A lot of readymades are just translating beautiful things from the street into the museum.

CM: Is the way you work with photography also a process of sacralization?

JLM: Of course. But what’s interesting is that photography has almost no weight. Photography is just a circulation of feelings, without the weight of the readymade. It changes things—it’s a system of metamorphosis.

CM: Tell me about the film you are shooting for your exhibition in Oxford.

JLM: It has to do with the old tradition of the Three Graces, from the Judgment of Paris. With the Three Graces, we go back to the notion of conflict. Paris has to choose between three possibilities: power, war, and love. The Graces always look very similar because basically it’s the same woman; it’s a trinity. I’ve been working with the idea of disjunction for a long time. These concepts continue to be alive, and society is becoming increasingly disjointed. Everything has turned into a vector going its own way. Complexity arises from there, and no one is interested in what is common. To show that, I’m putting together three girls who look very much like each other. In the film, they are standing five feet away from each other, each one acting alone. Their physical resemblance is the only thing they have in common. I tried to highlight the conflict between oneself and the activity of the group.
CM: You’re working on a series of “knot” objects, some in bronze and some in glass.

JLM: First, we have to understand what a knot is. The idea is to produce tools to describe complexity. So back again to the conflict, and to the idea of making visible. Think of chaos: The best way to represent chaos is with a stream of water, a turbulence. If you throw a rope in it, there’s a moment when it’s going to form a figure. It could be a simple circle, or it could be a trefoil or any number of other figures. Knot theory was created to try to describe the activity of electricity. Nowadays we also use it for biology, weather, all kinds of systems, but it’s just a describing tool. And my utopia for artworks is to create tools.

CM: To make sense of the world?

JLM: Not only to make sense of it. It’s a tool for the mind. When you see a knife on the table, even if it’s not moving it nonetheless cuts the space. The function is inside the form. That’s something I always keep in mind when I make a sculpture or an image. To make the bronze pieces, I use a rope knot that I cover with modeling clay, and then I tighten the knot. The knot creates a form in the clay that I cast using a lost-wax technique. I’m trying to make visible different states of complexity.

CM: How important is it for you to maintain physical contact with your artworks?

JLM: It’s very important, because it’s the only way to know something on a conceptual and sensitive level. That’s why subcontracting the fabrication of a piece can be very dangerous.

CM: How do you experiment?

JLM: Mainly with drawings. I also go through all kinds of models and small constructions, but the main material thing is the drawing—between sign, writing, and surface.

CM: You’ve said that you got involved in the art world “because it was the only way to keep saying no.” Do you still feel this way?

JLM: It’s real. If you say no once, it’s just like a child’s no. But if you make a negation on negation, you produce an affirmation. You have to say no, but when you cut the artwork loose and give it to the public, it becomes an affirmation. If you try to show that this negation is the main activity of the creation, you have to show it as a yes.
In the mid-'90s, the Paris-based artist Jean-Luc Moulène, known for his large-format, sometimes politically inflected photographs, initiated a parallel project consisting of three-dimensional "objects." (Moulène eschews the term "sculpture," with its historical and esthetic entanglements.) Collectively termed "Opus" (1995–), these pieces, now totaling just under 100, are each identified with a title as well as the city, month and year in which the work was fabricated.

The yearlong exhibition "Opus + One," the artist’s first solo exhibition in North America, takes place at two venues. Dia:Beacon offers 37 of the objects, along with Moulène’s urban-photo suite “La Vigie” (2004-11). Meanwhile, Dia’s Dan Flavin Art Institute in Bridgehampton presents newly commissioned works—wall-mounted panels slathered with ink using a palette knife—part of the series “Monochromes/Samples” (2011–).

“La Vigie” (The Lookout Man), which consists of 299 photographs (some black-and-white, some color), documents a type of nuisance vegetation, the Princess Tree, that grows in vacant lots, neglected buildings and cracked sidewalks. One tree Moulène has photographed over the span of seven years stands in the Parisian neighborhood of the Ministry for the Economy, Industry and Employment. Evidence of social changes—including posters and graffiti as well as the installation of antiterrorist barricades—can be detected here and there in the periphery of the images. Nevertheless, Moulène allows the works to speak for themselves. He does nothing to prompt a specific reading, beyond titling the extended series “The Lookout Man”—which may refer either to the tree or to the photographer himself.

Perhaps all that connects “Opus” to Moulène’s other projects is its cumulative nature: the objects accrue over time with no predetermined end. They seem cut off from any overriding narrative, though they can be grouped, after the fact, according to themes (serial process, the body, decay). Most have been installed on white wood tabletops mounted on metal legs. This formal configuration is disrupted occasionally by larger pieces, which sit directly on the floor, as well as by several wall-mounted works and two pieces suspended at eye level.
Moulène’s objects are made, either industrially or by hand, from a wide variety of materials, including bronze, cement, wood, bone, fiberglass, plaster, tobacco and plastic. Most range in scale from hand-held to body-size.

A number consist of interlocking planar forms: Model for Sharing, Paris, December 2007, for example, looks like a hastily slapped together architectural model. Others verge on the abject, such as La tête noire (The Black Head), Paris, January 2007, a brutish, lumpy headlike form with pushed-in features. Head Box, Kitakyushu, October 2004, which hung on the wall, is pristine and minimal, while Bitte à fruits (Fruit Bollard), Paris, September 1999, is a cast-concrete still life of apples set atop a short, crumbling concrete-and-aggregate column. Some works are slightly macabre. Arthur, Paris, August 2010, has the upper portion of a human skull protruding from cast concrete, making the whole work look like an eerie helmet with visor. Mi-tronche (Nonosse) (Half-mug [Bobone]), Paris, September 2010, is a head-shaped concrete cast that has been cut in half to reveal a child-size skull encased within.

Somewhat out of keeping with the other works is Soleil noir (Black Sun), Paris, September 2008, a silent color video of the sun, its small cubelike monitor mounted high overhead on the wall. But the most striking anomaly is Body, Guyancourt, October 2011, a sleek, multicolored aerodynamic form, 28 feet in length, produced from 12 molds with the help of automotive engineers at a Renault factory. Resembling a brightly hued speedboat, the piece seems out of place in terms of material, size and logic, yet it contributes well to the show’s formally open-ended effect. With its great diversity of works, “Opus” is an intense investigation of the formal possibilities of contemporary photography, painting and sculpture.

Photos: (left) view of Jean-Luc Moulène’s exhibition “Opus + One,” 2011-12 (right) view of Moulène’s Body, Guyancourt, October 2011, 8 1/2 by 28 by 11 1/2 feet. Both at Dia:Beacon.
Anaël Pigeat. “Jean-Luc Moulène une œuvre qui fait image,”

Art press N° 388, April 2012, p.39-44.

JEAN-LUC MOULÈNE
une œuvre qui fait image

Anaël Pigeat

Depuis le début des années 1980, les œuvres de Jean-Luc Moulène ont été exposées, entre autres, au musée d’art moderne de la Ville de Paris (1997), à la Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume (2005), au Carré d’art de Nîmes (2009). L’artiste est invité aux États-Unis, à la Fondation Dia. Bien que nourri de culture populaire américaine, rock, punk, cinéma underground, il dit n’avoir jamais eu de fascination pour l’Amérique, ni pour New York, où il s’est rendu pour la première fois afin de préparer l’exposition Opus + One, en outsider.
C’est un geste de résistance. Jean-Luc Moulène emploie que l’on confie son travail comme une image de marque – un sujet qui ne connait pourtant bien, pour avoir, à ses débuts, travaillé dans le département de publicité de Thomson. Une évidence réunirait toutefois ses études : elles sont de l’image mentale, même si l’esthétique de la photographie est saisie dans sa tentative de description du monde. Jean-Luc Moulène cherche à savoir comment l’image fonctionne. Il montre son tour des photographies et des obus fabriqués. Et c’est la complémentarité du sujet qui a été déterminé par l’œuvre est en deux dimensions ou trois (un ordre de la représentation) ou en trois dimensions (l’ordre de la présence, une affirmation politique). Ses œuvres sont conçues comme des outils, d’où leur résistance avec des maquettes.

En réponse à la question « Comment avez-vous commencé ? », Moulène raconte une anecdote de son enfance. Un été, on était sur la plage un concours de châteaux de sable. Le premier prix était un appareil de photo et le second la maquette d’une Dauphine, la voiture Renault des années 1960. Il a été classé premier ex-aequo, mais c’est l’âge de certaines personnes qui ne sont pas de la photo qu’il a répété. Il n’est alors que le petit et le calendre. Toute sa vie, Moulène a fait de la photographie, mais ce pratique consiste en réalité à montrer des maquettes.

**DES IMAGES MENTALE**

Jean-Luc Moulène réalise aussi des objets (il préfère ce terme à celui de sculpture) qui sont une extension de sa pratique photographique. Il donne parfois l’exemple d’un couteau posé sur une table : c’est une image, et pourtant le couteau coupe l’espace en deux. Alors que les photographies de Moulène sont presque toujours figuratives, ses objets le sont parfois non, sans pour autant être abstraits. C’est la notion de « coupe » qui réunit, chez lui, ces techniques diverses, et qui donne à son œuvre toute sa cohérence. La photographie est en elle-même une coupe : elle tranche dans le réel dont elle extrait une vue persélue ou met le regard en avant. Elle contamera à des séquences. La sculpture, de même, consiste à trancher dans la matière, où bien à la repousser. Le cut-up de Burroughs fonctionne de la même manière, comme un mode de connaissance du monde qui permet de faire apparaître ce qui est donné, mais pas forcément visible.

Depuis une dizaine d’années, Jean-Luc Moulène réalise une série d’objets qui, selon ses termes, sont du tissage à l’industrie lourde. Cette vaste gamme visuelle porte le titre d’Opus, comme l’œuvre achevée d’un musicien. En 2009, il a réalisé des sculptures d’Antoine Bourdelle, formant un corps à quatre côtés, co-signé avec le sculpteur à titre posthume. Cette forme rejoint celle de Body qui sera analysée plus loin. Moulène a aussi poncé, avec du papier de verre, le moulage d’un plâtre de Bourdelle représentant une main féminine dont il a redessiné les formes. Virtuellement, sa pièce pourrait loger à l’intérieur de celle de Bourdelle.

Ainsi que jusqu’à présent, Moulène ne s’était intéressé qu’à la banalité du réel, il vient de concevoir, pour la première fois, deux œuvres monumentales qui exploitent le spectaculaire : Body et Body Versus Twizy (récentement exposées dans le jardin des Tuileries). Mais dans notre œuvre de l’après-Débord, ce spectaculaire n’est qu’illusion. Plus ou moins précisément, ces deux objets évoquent de loin la forme d’une voiture, une forme qui se dérobe. Body évoque aussi un corps humainisé, et le corps social des usines et des ouvriers. D’ailleurs une grande partie du matériel qui a servi à la construction se trouve cachée à l’intérieur comme un cheval de Troie. De loin, Body est une masse ovale rayonnant par ses dégradés de couleurs primaires dans lesquels on se perd si l’on s’en approche. Il se compose de feuilles de fibre de basalte assemblées, dont les coudes sont scellées par des machines à la différence de Body Versus Twizy qui a été fait selon des coups déterminés à partir d’un dessin d’automobile. C’est grâce au soutien de la Fondation Renault, qui a répondu à cette occasion sa pratique de commande d’œuvres, que Body et Body Versus Twizy ont été conçues dans les ateliers de recherche automobile de la marque. La surface de Body ressemble à une topographie ir régulière, presque une carte de géographie, mais sans entrée. Cette œuvre est un manifeste sur la manière dont Jean-Luc Moulène conçoit ses expositions, avec des surfaces continues et des cœurs mitoyens qui engendrent des discontinuités.

Les images de Jean-Luc Moulène sont peut-être des objets post-photographiques, qui auraient intégré en eux-mêmes un appareil de photo producteur d’images mentales. Selon ses termes, « elles décrivent des choses quelconques avec excès. » Elles ne résolvent pas de conflits, elles ne sauvent rien, mais sont plutôt des espaces de tension dans lesquels s’opposent le visible et l’invisible. L’art n’est pas fait pour éclairer mais pour complexifier le réel. [n°]

11 Vanni Raymond, Jean-Luc Moulène, Opus – One, 2011 (texte de la commissaire de l’exposition).

Jean-Luc Moulène
Né à Reims en 1950.
Il vit et travaille à Paris.
Expositions personnelles récentes / solo shows:
2009 Galerie Pietro Spataro, Chagri Carré d’art, Nîmes
2011 – 2012 Opus – One, Dia Beacon, New York, Dan Flavin Art Institute, Bridgewater, New York,
Décembre 2011 – Décembre 2012
Galerie David Saint Phalle, Mexico
Festival d’Avignon, Château St Louis, Avignon
Galerie Greta Mert, Bruxelles
Jean-Luc Moulène has exhibited widely since the late 1980s, notably at the Paris municipal art museum (MAMVP, 1997), Jeu de Paume (2005) and Carré d’Art in Nîmes (2009). He is now the guest of the Dia Foundation in New York State. Strangely, for a man whose work draws on American popular culture, rock, punk and underground cinema, he claims never to have been fascinated by the U.S., or even New York. In fact he’d never been there before he went out to prepare this show, Opus + One.

Jean-Luc Moulène doesn’t like having an image, a brand image, put on his work. But then brand images are something he knows all about, having started his career in the publicity department of an electronics firm Thomson. Now he resists all that. Still, one thing all his pieces do is “convey an image,” insofar as they are mental images registered and recreated in his attempt to describe the world. Jean-Luc Moulène is interested in taking apart the mechanics of looking. He makes photographs and he makes objects, and it is the complexity of the subject that determines this choice between two dimensions (the realm of representation) or three (presence, political statement). His works are conceived as tools, which is why they often look like maquettes.

MENTAL IMAGES

Asked how he started out as an artist, he evokes a childhood memory, a sandcastle competition held one summer holiday on the beach. The first prize was a camera, the second the model of a Renault Dauphine, a popular car of the early 1960s. Jean-Luc came equal first, but it was the winner who got the camera he had set his heart on. Moulène has taken photographs all his life, but in reality his precise is all about making models. Moulène first became known as a photographer of what everyone at the time was calling “le reel” (the real). In fact, his


**Disjunctions** series, begun in the early 1980s, could be taken as a filter for reading all his work. In mathematics, a disjunction is the union of two sets, minus their intersection. This set of photographs, Moulène creates a similar gap, a sense of displacement which intensifies our perception of the real, while using the sense of what is out of frame to prevent any sense of empathy with the image. *Sans titre* (GTX), Boulevard de la Bastille, Paris, summer 1992, shows a tree stump on the pavement in the foreground and, in the background, a parked gray car. A disjunction of the mobile and the immobile.

In another series, Moulène regularly took photographs of a given location over a sustained period. He has said that his life is like a "long-term performance."(1) as it circumscribes performance to its ritual dimension, which is something that Michel Jeuniaux, with whom he once worked, achieved in exemplary fashion. During a residency in Berlin in 1996–97, Moulène photographed the city while trying to avoid construction and reconstruction sites. As for *Fénétique* (1991–2006), the series of photographs he took in the countryside, with no human figures or dwellings, he speaks of the "great factory" of nature, of a workplace related to movement and wandering.

In other series, such as the *Objets de grève* (objects made by striking workers from 1983), which are photographed like advertisements, often against neutral grounds, shown in natural light, each image is described in a short text. But the classifications here offer only an appearance of order, for they are always disrupted by some image, subject or detail. Speaking of these images, he mentions corporate organization charts, which are constantly being perturbed—that is, the way things progress. He relates these disruptions to the erotic division of our organs. In the *Filles d’Amsterdam* series (2005), to be shown again in the upcoming Triennale at the Palais de Tokyo, he explores questions of identity and pornography. These very explicit photographs of prostitutes were taken in a studio and were given the working (or stage) names of each woman. For his show at the Louvre, which was accompanied by a special free supplement from the newspaper *Le Monde*, Moulène photographed his own imaginary museum, the pictures of a handful of works with accompanying notes by art historians in way of captions, questioning the nature and circulation of images.

Moulène’s work seeks out a zone outside power relations. Now exhibited at the Dia show, he has painted four monochromes on standard-sized stretchers which he chose because they were the ones used by Josef Albers. With their spatial layering, he spread two layers of secret-formula Bic ink—another disruption of the social system—over their prepared surfaces. The resulting red, green, black and blue monochromes with their metallic highlights are not so much an image of literature or art history as of the most ordinary form of writing using a very common ballpoint. These pieces are close to drawing, Moulène’s customary tool for articulating his ideas. Jean-Luc Moulène’s objects—he prefers that word to "sculpture"—extend his photography. He sometimes gives the example of a knife resting on a table: it’s an image, and yet the knife cuts the space in two. Where Moulène’s photographs are nearly always figurative, his objects can be less so. The notion of cutting is what links these different practices and makes his work coherent. Photography itself slices into the real, arresting the viewer. It imposes sequences. Sculpture, likewise, cuts into matter, or forces it into shapes. Gyoen and Burroughs’ practice of the cut-up, too, explores the world by bringing out what was always there but not always visible.
The objects that Moulène has been making for some ten years now range, in his terms, from bricolage to heavy industry. This vast grammar is called Opus, like a compiled musical composition. In 2008 he assembled sculptures by Antoine Bourdelle, forming a body with four backs, and co-signed with the sculptor (posthumously, of course, in the latter’s case). This form is related to Body (on which more below). Moulène also sanded one of Bourdelle’s plaster casts of a young girl, thus re-shaping its forms. It would, theoretically, be possible to fit Moulène’s piece inside Bourdelle’s.

So far Moulène had been interested only in the banality of the real, but now, for the first time, he has made two more spectacular, monumental works: Body and Body Versus Twixt (recently exhibited in the Tuileries gardens). In our post-DaDord world, the spectacular is of course an illusion. These two objects look more or less like cars, but the form is itself elusive. Body is also humancid, evoking the social body of factories and workers. Indeed, much of the material used to make it is hidden inside, like Odysseus and his cohorts in the Trojan Horse. From a distance, Body is an ovoid form radiating primary colors which become less certain as one gets closer. It consists of assembled sheets of basalt fiber, cut by machine. Body Versus Twixt was cut in accordance with the design for a car. In fact, both pieces were made with the support of the Renault Foundation: the auto maker revived its old tradition of commissioning artworks specially for the occasion, and the two works were conceived in its R&D studio. The surface of Body forms an irregular topography, like a geographical map but with no point of entry. The work is a manifesto regarding the way Moulène conceives his exhibitions, with continuous surfaces and median "cuts" engendering discontinuities.

Moulène’s objects could be seen as postphotographic objects which have integrated a camera that produces mental images. "They describe ordinary objects with exactitude," he says. They do not resolve any conflicts, they do not know anything, but are more like spaces of tension in which the visible and invisible are opposed. Art is made not to clarify, but to complicate the real. III

Translation: C. Penwarden

(1) Yann Raymond, Jean-Luc Moulène Opus = One, 2011 (text by the curator).

De haut en bas/from top:
- La Vigne, Paris, 23 June 2005 Cibachrome
  52 x 40 cm “Look-Out” Cibachrome
- Dos, Paris, May 2010 Bronze, 21 x 37,5 x 27,5 cm (Coll. part. France; Ph. Kienelens). "Back"
Jean-Luc Moulène: A ‘Plasticien’

– Caroline Hancock

Particularly since the 1990s, the French language has rather uniquely championed the term ‘arts plastiques’ (‘plastic arts’), a term long-abandoned in other languages and contexts in favour of alternatives like the ‘visual’ or ‘fine arts’. Probably because of this, some artists still define themselves as ‘artiste-plasticien’ (‘plastician’), as opposed to ‘artiste-peintre’ (‘painter’) or ‘artisan-designer’. The term suggests an emphasis on matter rather than image, and points at artistic activity as an exploration of materials and forms through a variety of modes. Jean-Luc Moulène tends to call himself a ‘plasticien’, even though photography is the medium for which he first gained recognition in the 1990s. But this choice is not just a matter of French habit — rather, it is a revealing move that suggests not only that image-making is just part of his practice, but that the idea of materials, their manipulation and what they might say about the forms of society and the possibility of its transformation is at the core of his work.

Moulène studied arts plastiques (and literature) in Paris during the 1970s, after which he worked as an artistic adviser for a branch of the French electronics company Thomson, from 1981 to 1989, and, for a brief period in 1989, in commercial advertising. These early experiences with the fabrication of the imagery of products and brands familiarised him with the specific methodologies used in publicity and communication, and helped him analyse the desired effects of images on the social behaviours of consumers. As a result, his photographs, which span the genres of portraiture, still life, landscape and the street scene, critique the seductive character of conventional media representation, and the manipulations it allows. Though he prefers his titles to remain untranslated — lest they lose the wordplay and linguistic specificity that is key to his practice — he specifies that many of his photographic works from the last fifteen years are accompanied by contextual information, indicating the date and location of the picture, as a way to make explicit every factor that intervenes in the construction of the images. This information is on occasion heavily nuanced, for example with the title accompanying the series 39 Objets de grève présentés par Jean-Luc Moulène (1999–2000), which integrates a disclaimer, stating that they are not ‘by’ Moulène but simply presented or made visible by him. Likewise the names of the photographers of his sculptures or installations is often credited in his captions. (Such concern with authorship or agency reflects his consistently critical standpoint on copyright, reserved rights and originality, which often emerges in his work.) By systematically deploying that level of clarity, each caption emphasises power struggles at work during the making of works of art and post-production, and also pre-empts future re-interpretations, misconstrued interpretations or uninformed appropriations of his work. That is, Moulène’s interests lie in the full life of the artwork — in the process, on the one hand, that goes from the production to the circulation and reception of the object and its image, and, on the other, in the social conditions in which the artist and the labour operate in the contemporary world.

Despite this apparent focus on the image as an entry into this discussion, Moulène’s artistic practice has also always included traditional, assembled or manufactured sculpture, work with found objects and the production of drawings and prints. Boundaries between disciplines often blur in his work, for example when photographs capture his found objects, combining ‘actual work’ and ‘documentation’ in an
almost undifferentiated manner — as the title of the catalogue that accompanied his exhibition at Culturgest in Lisbon in 2007. jean-Luc Moulène, opus 1995—2007 / documents 1999—2007, indicates 1

This heightened awareness of and experimentation with ideas of reality, plasticity, image and documentation bring his work close to that of the Nouveaux Réalistes — a genealogy he has himself acknowledged. Speaking about '80—'92, Douze ans d'art contemporain en France', an exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1972 that showcased the more political, sculptural and site-specific work produced after the heyday of painterly abstraction, he said:

Suddenly, everything was possible. All the materials were available for us to use. It was as if the exhibition were trying to tell us something like: 'Go ahead boys, take over the space and do whatever you want.'

Rather like Nouveau Réaliste Raymond Hains, whose phenomenal photographic output has yet to be fully acknowledged, Moulène is open to chance encounters, making art from street-level reality, and infusing it with both humour and critical rigour — photographically or otherwise. 2 He shares this approach with artists of his generation from other locations, such as Gabriel Orozco, who invited him to exhibit objects within 'The Everyday Altered', the show he curated at the Venice Biennale as part of Francesco Bonami’s 'Dreams and Conflicts' in 2002. 3 Bûche à fruits (Paris, September 1999), a work Moulène presented in that context, provides a concrete ballad with a crumbling top that reveals stones and pebbles resembling, as the title suggests, pieces of fruit, giving the impression of being a sculpted still life. Bleu Gaulois bleus 441 (June 2000), also included in 'The Everyday Altered', is a limited edition (441 copies) of the legendary blue Gauloise cigarette pack without any of the manufacturer's 'fine print' in the design. Again, by recasting a commercial product within an artistic context, like Orozco in his work, Moulène captures and conjures the unexpected and the banal.

But these subtle, fleeting, seemingly unintentional interventions are accompanied by Moulène's oeuvre by a conspicuous, explicit appropriation of art history.

In terms of sculpture, to cite just a few examples, he often refers to Alcoët to Giacometti in his interviews; ancient and classical art is the basis of his project Le Louvre (2005), for which he photographed objects from the museum's collection; and homages to Marcel Duchamp and Bruce Nauman are at play in Cinq concentrés concentriques (Paris, April 2007), a sculpture composed of the five grey polyurethane fingers of a hand that, instead of being attached to the palm, all point to a precise point, where the fingertips touch, composing a figure that is both an axis and a vertex, and suggesting at once conflict, tension, connection, visibility and actuality. Mathematics and geometry are in fact at the core of Moulène’s thinking: abstract, geometrical and scientific forms pervade his work — concentric circles, arcs, plastic basins, pierced found stones, contoured staircase fragments fashioned from scrap-heap material, bronze knots on wire stems — offering an seemingly comprehensive catalogue of articulations of how the world functions (or does not). For example, Boule fixe (sphère de Lisbonne) (Paris, 1 May 2007) looks like an oversized disco ball firmly grounded on the floor, lined with cobblestones from the Portuguese capital instead of mirrors. Recent abstract works utilising plastics like epoxy resin and polyurethane (for example, n Trous Ouvertere Lotos (Paris, May 2009)) are placed on pinheads or tabletops like modular or cellular sculptures or architectural models, inviting us to consider notions such as clamping, knotting, expanding, transparency and density, as well as vanishing axes, grids, intersections, edges.


3 This element of the work of both artists was highlighted by Steven Ratsey, the art critic who coined the name 'Nouveaux Réalistes' in 1960, when he corrected both artists in a group show, 'Cette culture qui vient de la rue!' at the Galerie municipale de Vitré-sur-Sevre in 2000.


Galerie Chantal Crousel


I conceive of them all like objects after a world of photography. Therefore they are not objects in the sense of statuary or sculpture. They are objects linked to the questions of production, representation, post-photography objectivation. As such, photography continues to be the research tool for these objects, even if at the end of the day I don’t propose a print.  

There is something sculptural about most of Moulène’s photographs, as if the objects were about to pop out of the printed surface, ignoring desire in a manner akin to advertising. Some of them could even be argued to be meditations on sculpture or puns on three-dimensionality laid flat. For example, Méduses (São Paulo, 7 April 2009) shows two jelly shoes (‘mécuse’ means jellyfish), placed sole against sole in a manner that resembles the aquatic creature and simultaneously offers a volumetric study of light and shade. A sculptural conceit that would work again in his photographs of chewed gum, which also dwell on the incongruous malleability of the substance and delight in endless permutations of transparency and opacity.

In both of these works there is a play between document and reality: the ‘thing’ and its registration are distinguishable but at the same time permeable, and are given equal weight. Moulène inserts photographs in exhibitions together with sculptures or actual objects, creating disjunctions and or associations that recall the visual games of Documents, the magazine through which Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris and Carl Einstein attempted to offer a common front against positivism, idealism and André Breton’s Surrealism, published in...
Paris from 1929 to 1936. The use value of documentary evidence essential to Documents has echoes in Moulène’s attention to varied modes of presentation — including spatial presentation. Indeed, the *mise en espace* of his photographs could be compared to the practices of Richard Wentworth or Wolfgang Tillmans, and their non-hierarchical, formal and sculptural considerations and investigations.

In 1998, for the exhibition *Tu parles / écoute* (‘You Talk / I Listen’) at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and the Ferne du Buisson near Paris, Moulène was invited to work with the haircare and cosmetic company Shiseido. He directed a series of photographs of two naked female models covered with Shiseido’s Perfect Refining Foundation. The function of this product — to cancel out any facial blemishes — was pushed to the extreme by Moulène, as the foundation was applied to the models’ entire bodies. The resulting images, *We Were Here and There* (1998), are subtly pleasuring and ironic: the women’s bodies are redolent of mediaeval statuary and redundant figures on tombstones, while at the same time Moulène subverts contemporary commercial publicity tactics via their installation as traditional prints within the exhibition and on billboards outside it.

On that occasion both these were turned into objects by means of the image, in other words the transformation is of objects into images and again into objects: at the Louvre’s invitation in 2005, Moulène selected 24 small statuettes, fragments and amulets from different departments of the museum — objects that he considered overlooked in their conventional presentation context (often a large vitrine filled with other artefacts). They were brought to a studio, where he photographed each of them against a plain background, in typical archival or museal fashion. Enlarged to approximately 50 by 40 centimetre photographs, the objects were then exhibited in the museum as flat images, but images combined with an object status; the bare prints, mounted on aluminium, were placed directly on plinths, which were installed in a manner that overemphasised the shadows resulting from the museum’s overhead lighting.

Tracing this movement from object to photograph and back to object, Moulène also published this series as reproductions in a special *Le Monde* newspaper supplement distributed both in the museum and within the regular paper on the day of the opening. Exponentially broadening his audience, Moulène often distributes pamphlets, prints, leaflets and flyers through different channels, or leaves them to be picked up from piles of paper mounds that are objects/sculptures in themselves included in his displays — the image, again, becoming object, and through it, witness to a materiality that might otherwise have been left behind.

Moulène’s systematic questioning of the function and productivity of images has also entailed the analysis, replication and transformation of the mechanisms active in different photographic genres, from advertising to pornography (as in the series *Les Filles d’Amsterdam*, 2005), from investigative or crime scene photography to archiving practices. It could be said that he plays in creating documents material proof or evidence of sociocultural facts and projections. He repeatedly refers to police vocabulary — his exhibition at ARC, Paris in 1997, for example, was titled ‘Deposition’. As suggested by *Cinq concrètes concentrées*, Moulène’s work denounces and points fingers. Notions of scrutiny, enigma, excavation, observation, forensic light and vigilance recur in and around his images and titles, as if they were captured events, peppered with strange clues for varied interpretations.

Moulène says he has been a handyman (‘bricoleur’) since his youth. He talks of working as an assistant carpenter as well as an artist, and maintains that both should be understood as labourers. He sometimes appropriates for himself a qualifier used for Jean-Luc Godard’s ‘technicien libéral’, or ‘libertarian technician’.¹⁰

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Labour-intensive sculpture did not have pride of place in French post-War art and criticism — for example, Robert Filliou made fun of it with his DIY Principe d’équivalence: bien fait, mal fait, pas fait (Equivalence Principle: Well Made, Badly Made, Not Made, 1958), an absurd collection of objects, both crafted and found.

But at a time when work is becoming increasingly dematerialised, Moulène defends making things as fundamental to human activity. His attention for some time now has focused on the preservation and valorisation of objects produced in the context of working-class cultures, in particular that of trade unions and industrial action. The photographic series Objets de grève présents par Jean-Luc Moulène constitutes an invaluable archive of French industry, manufacture and craftsmanship of the Years of Lead, from the 1960s to the 80s, that is dissimilar in spirit to Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane’s Folk Archive (1999–2005), their collection.

At a time when work is becoming increasingly dematerialised, Moulène defends making things as fundamental to human activity.

This interest in the representation of the working class is part of a wider engagement. Moulène has collaborated with, or made reference to, in his work, the French workers’ unions Lutte ouvrière and CGT (Confédération générale du travail). In 2003, he collaborated with Nouvelle Vie Ouvrière to publish a special edition of the Objets de grève series for the CGT’s 47th congress. The arresting use of the colour yellow as a background in some of his photographs (for instance some of the Progrès du Palais-雯 facilities series, 2004–05) or painted on his sculpture and objects (Marche (palais et balançoire), Paris, 1994, and Croix jaune, Paris, 2004–05) presumably refers to the historical use of the colour in syndicalist movements and its regular appearance in bold political communications.

Bridging formal and social contexts, Moulène connects the ‘arrêt du travail’ (stoppage of work) with the ‘arrêt sur image’ (stop-frame or ‘still’).

The notion of work stoppage is a useful metaphor to use in relation to what I do: I stop things, make the image concrete. The idea is simple: if you objectify floating mental images, they no longer float, they become legible. My work has often been about that: giving concrete existence to mental images.11

As if they were calls to action, his object/sculptures function autonomously like dissonant, ethical, potentially empowering ammunition.

The effectiveness of Moulène’s individual works lies in their capacity to occupy space and imagination. In tandem with his focus on arrest and occupation, Moulène also seeks movement, visual clippage and enquiry. The codification of movement through ritual and conventional or unconventional modes of social circulation is deeply ingrained in his practice, probably as a result from his work with French performance artist Michel Jourdain during the late 1970s. Corporeal awareness, exchange and confrontation were central...
to his collaborations with dancer and choreographer Boris Charmatz (for example, "Chante - utiles en apogées, 2006, and Status. Exposition à géométrie variable, 2001–02"). But variable geometry is also at work in his photographs, sculptures, objects and take-away piles of posters and printed papers. Across his whole body of work discontinuities, articulations, instabilities, tensions and release come together to produce a heightened interrogating presence, which translates into installations in which the relationship between work and space (and therefore the institution) is key. In the exhibition ‘Mental Archaeology’ at the Centre d’art contemporain d’Ervy last year, Moulène showed "Riche" (Le Havre, January 2010), a sculpture consisting of a plastic bottle (Moulène began collecting bottles in 2000) sporting a disproportionately large fake diamond cap and sitting atop a precariously tall, narrow plinth. The bottle was partially filled with water, which emphasised the tilt of the floor and, through it, the original function of the space as a cinema. Material relations here suggest, like in Objets du gré, wider social relations.

I am interested in producing work that is, in itself, the site of conflict, that presents existing conflicts in pre-sensitive and therefore sensitive form. From these forms, a detachment and a gap are created and a critical consciousness can occur. 11

Moulène’s forms defy typology, in that they are fabricated from resonances and alterity, preferably nondescript, formless, with no clear usage. His plasticity of choice has ‘potatoïde’ (potato-shaped) qualities — that is to say, his forms are somewhat absurdly undefinable and challenging. 12

He confirms his predilection for this term in interviews such as one regarding the maquette for a body (2007–2011) presented in the ‘Paris-Delhi-Bombay’ exhibition at the Centre Pompidou this year. His recent exhibitions, like the one at the Kabak, which then travelled to Nuremberg Kunstverein, and his solo show at the Carré d’Art in Nîmes in 2009, incite new or different volumetric perceptions against a flattering out in capitalist production, projecting out of the box and beyond the frame. Moulène is now preparing his first US exhibition for Dia: Beacon, opening this autumn, continuing his exploration of political meanings inherent in images and objects and in the production behind them.

‘One should reward anticipation.’ — Jean-Luc Moulène 13

‘When we have decolonised, deconstructed, destroyed the real, there still remains this network of extremely solid metallic threads, a very potent human construction. This is where the work continues. These wires, we take them and we tie them together and new figures are formed, new realities are imagined. Imagination liberates. On this horizon of being, freedom is maximal and potenz approaches possibility. New subjectivities, new fields of action, new syntheses of cooperation can thus be glimpsed.’  — Antonio Negri 14


14 Hans Ulrich Obrist and J.-L. Moulène interviewed Antonio Negri in Italy. An extract from the interview was published in the magazine accompanying the exhibition ‘Voilà! Le monde dans la tête’ at the Musée d’art moderne de la Ville de Paris in 2000 (published by Paris-Modes and Icarus Rapallo).
Jean-Luc Moulène: Photography as Training Manual

— Sophie Berrebi

It is not unusual for one artist to display admiration towards another, but it is more so perhaps when the two are almost contemporaries (give or take a decade) and the appreciation takes the form of a dedication at the beginning of a book. In giving ‘tribute to the work of Jean-Luc Moulène’ on the credit page of Akram Zaatari: Earth of Endless Secrets (2000),1 Akram Zaatari acknowledges the undeniable formal proximity that exists between his photographs showing material evidence related to the stories he presents in his films and installations projects and in the form of a photograph, the folded letters become illegible and the tapes inaudible. For all their clarity of composition, these images show the limits of photographic evidence. As with the work of Jean-Luc Moulène, they underscore the muteness and codification of the image.

If Moulène’s photography seems to offer guidance for Zaatari’s practice, it could be said, in turn, that photography functions as a training manual for Moulène himself, furnishing him with a way of critically looking at and learning from the world. From Moulène’s early acquaintance with the medium in the 1980s to his most recent work, photography, most often practiced in the form of long-term and open-ended series, appears as a means of studying his surroundings, uncovering conventions of seeing as well as economic, social and political networks of production and exchange. Within this practice, the notion of the document, understood in different semantic contexts that include the legal, the scientific and the historical, plays a central part.


Sophie Berrebi elucidates the history of visual culture and typology of skills found in Jean-Luc Moulène’s photography and objects.

Moulène’s photographs of objects set against neutral grounds. More than that, however, and despite tackling different subject matter, Zaatari’s images consider the ambiguousness of the photograph as evidence—a reflection that can be traced back to Moulène’s own experimentations. Rather than the industrially manufactured objects of daily life that commonly turn up in Moulène’s images, Zaatari’s photographs most frequently present objects that bear the marks of the conflicted history of Lebanon, from postcolonialism to intermittent war. A handbag stuffed with letters from a war prisoner, vintage audio and video cassettes, an archive of old photographs and pages from a diary are shown as material traces of the narratives that unfold in such films of Zaatari’s as Al-Sharri Bikhays (All Is Well on the Border, 1997) and Fi Haq al-Boyt (In This House, 2005). But, once they are captured...
specifically to be recorded on camera, from ‘photo-documents’, which amounted to documentation of performances. The phrase ‘constat d’action’ (or ‘certified report of an action’) was the most frequently used term to define the data collected from a performance, likening the documentation to a certificate or an affidavit and conjuring up legal associations. Having once participated in a collective event directed by Journâc, Moulène was asked to record ‘photo-documents’ of several performances. Even in these early works, well aware of the clear categorisations of photography’s role, some of the resulting images, such as Espace du sacré (1985), implicitly acknowledge the blurriness between straightforward recording and staging for the benefit of the camera, and suggest one of the directions that Moulène would follow from the 1990s onwards.

In documents / Journal personnel, the open-ended series that regroups a large number of his photographic works since 1999, Moulène uses again the term ‘document’ to define his own work. But while the term remains a trace of his involvement with body-art documentation, its meaning becomes more complex in his reuse. The series contains pictures made in different geographic locations and belonging to various genres: still life, portraiture, street photography, architectural views and so forth. They include both unstaged, snapshot-like photographs and carefully arranged still lifes. The precise date and location given for each picture offers a connection to the artist’s own life: many images appear to be made in his Paris neighbourhood or in the context of travelling, with a broad diversity of subject matter and geography, and an enigmatic touch. Yet while the series borrows qualities from the diaristic form, documents / Journal personnel presents a selective choice of images. Many linger in one’s mind, conveying a feeling of intimacy and triggering a vague impression of déjà vu that operates on personal and art-historical levels.

Exemplary in this respect is Père Lachaise — Bastille (Paris, 15 September 1998). The picture shows a Parisian bus —

4 Moulène often includes identifying information alongside his titles beyond the traditional date.
Galerie
Chantal Crousel

Moulène argues that most objects now produced can be described as ‘post-photographic’, meaning that they are designed before they are manufactured, and they exist in two-dimensional computer visualisations before emerging as material things.

words in printed letters on the facing page.

The anthropological characteristics of this display are enhanced by the claim of anonymity that accompanies the title of the work, ‘Le Tunnel est anonyme’ (‘The tunnel is anonymous’), and together they give a sociological and an anthropological dimension to the project. How many voices authored these graffiti? What kind of exchange is going on through these injunctions? What does it say about social relations, about hopes and fears and menaces?

The project makes visible, for instance, the tension of the formerly working-class neighbourhood since its gentrification through the impact of a middle class and the development of retail centres (for example, the Frank Gehry building now hosting the French Cinémathèque, on the nearby rue de Bercy). The tunnel photograph’s ability to indirectly reflect this suggests they are less accidental encounters between graffiti and camera than the results of a deliberate investigation over a period of time, in which raw material has been systematically collected and transcribed according to particular rules – those of typography, the graffiti, in other words, has been framed and organised in order to make it legible and interpretable in scientific terms. Though presented as an art project, Moulène’s tunnel leans towards the social sciences, and the work gives credit to his statement: “I operate in the more or less different anthropology, of culture, of sociology, etc.”

The process of showing how documents are produced is not within itself for us of knowledge and ideologies, which shape these images through specific conventions, continues beyond Moulène’s photographic work to inform his sculptural practice. The ‘objects’ (a term he favours over ‘sculpture’) he creates can be seen as direct extensions of his photographs in several ways.

Firstly, Moulène argues that most objects now produced can be described as ‘post-photographic’, meaning that they are designed before they are manufactured, and they therefore exist in two-dimensional computer visualisations before emerging as three-dimensional, material things.

An object typical of this ‘post-photographic’ condition is the Py Nant mineral water bottle shaped to evoke flowing water as captured by a camera, which Moulène has taken as subject for a photograph (Bi-Fizz (Paris, 19 September 2007). Images such as Bi-Fizz, along with other still lives from the Documents series, seem to function as research for making his own objects, and indeed several of Moulène’s ‘sculptures’ also result from computerised pre-conceptions, while others are made using special industrial production methods. The latter follow a process reminiscent of the 30 Objets de grève présentés par Jean-Luc Moulène (1999) series that documented specially produced objects by industry workers on strike.

Other works, by contrast, openly oppose industrial finish and production, and are made using manual techniques that include casting (Enfant, 2006 and Burguette, 2005).
Jean-Luc Moulène,
Coin Concentré
Concentrages,
Paris, April 2007,
black polyurethane
elastomers,
18 x 18 x 18cm.
© Jean-Luc Moulène
— ADAGP. Courtesy
Chantal Crousel,
Paris; Iacometti Lane,
London and Greta
Meert, Brussels
In Moulène's work, both theorisation and the means to do it are closely intertwined: just as the photographs contain a history of visual culture, the objects reflect a typology of skills. The photographs obey a similar principle as that which directs the creation of objects: both types of works are documents of the real that reflect on what this reality may be, and how it might be changed, through the artist's practice and the very process of making.

This typology of skills and techniques is suggestive of a 'training manual’ that comes into existence in the very process of making, and which is perceptible in the objects' diversity of polish. At times, the act of making itself seems on show. The strange sculpture Cinq concentrés concentriques (Paris, April 2007), for example, reprises the procedure of disorientation experimented with in Ongles. Here, it is fingers rather than finger-nails that have been submitted to an impossible dislocation. Cast from the artist's five fingers, in black polyurethane elastomer, the fingers are detached from the hand and joined at the tips. Rather than God breathing life into Adam, as in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, and the infinite reproductions of this image, it is the artist's fingers that designate the centre point of finite creation. They suggest manual activity, but their converging position, more importantly, evokes the necessary reflexive quality of an artwork. Instead of pointing outwards, they converge towards a centre. This centripetal quality is a central feature of Moulène's art, and unifies his production beyond its diversity of subject matter and mediums, and his work's sometimes opaque quality. Moulène has said: 'In my view the work is always theoretical art. As for its conditions of existence, it must be reflexive.'

The statement echoes the idea of the theoretical object as defined by Hubert Damisch, for whom it is 'an object that obliges you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it'.

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12 Ibid., p.142.
Sharp, Chris (Essay); Cormack, Emily (Focus); Piron, François (Interview). “Jean-Luc Moulène: Mono”. Kaleidoscope issue 09, winter 2010, pp. 121-147.
Jean-Luc Moulène

Having first achieved recognition for his photography in the late ‘80s, the French, Paris-based artist and his work have since and continue to radically evolve, incorporating a variety of media from drawings to objects, such that his ever-transmogrifying practice is almost impossible to characterize, and remains one of the better-kept secrets of contemporary art today.
“Art is and remains for us a thing of the future.”
—Jean-Pierre Cazin

The composition of a monographic text on an artist, at least for me, is almost always fraught with the fear of failure: failure to fully grasp and convey the complexity and stakes of a given artist’s practice; and, in doing so, misrepresent that artist’s work. Such are the risks you take on as an art writer, and they constitute one of the essential challenges and thrills of writing criticism itself. In contemplating and approaching the practice of Jean-Luc Moulène, however, the fear of not doing his work justice is different. It is not a mere possibility; it is a certainty. I will fail. (There, I said it.) But if this awareness doesn’t discourage me from the undertaking, it is only because I know that my failure is inevitable, and that others before me have failed—beautifully. I might add—and others after me will fail just as surely.

Yet we are not Sisyphean buffoons. Our failures, although sometimes gracious, erudite, and dazzling as others, are reflective of a core quality of Moulène’s work itself. I think that quality is this: the past of his practice is continually in the process of being fluid and sometimes radically modified by the present of his production, and vice-versa. Upon first glance, this may seem superficially true of all art, but it is not. Most artists develop a given identity early on, to which they generally stick thereafter, thus spending the rest of their careers negotiating that identity. Any later variations are perceived as either confirmations (for instance, through a change in scale or attention) or attenuations (more repetitions of early work) of that original identity and the basic concerns that shape it. Total departures in art-making are rarely tolerated, and can, as is generally feared, result in professional suicide. The Paris-based Moulène (born in 1955) has approached the issue of identity differently. Predicated upon disjunctions, discontinuities, and an apparent open-endedness, his practice has been protean almost since the beginning. As such, it is engaged in a continual “becoming.” Hence the impossibility, and subsequent failure of the critique (me), to comprehensively represent what he does.

As might be expected, this continual “becoming” and lack of easily identifiable signature has not served Moulène well in terms of mainstream recognition (despite his on-going international appearances in exhibitions like Documenta in 1997, the São Paulo Bienal in 2002, and the Venice Biennale in 2003). If Moulène remains an artist for initiates and one of France’s best-kept secrets, it is presumably because appreciation of his work resides within a quasi Zen-like paradox: although best viewed in large groupings, the more you see of it, the less you understand. At least initially. My first real exposure to Moulène’s oeuvre came during his 2007 survey at Calgàrtes in Lisbon, Portugal, which featured a broad presentation of photographs and objects. Until around that time, Moulène had been primarily valorized as a photographer who worked in series, beginning in the late 1980s with “Disjunctions” (Disjunctions), skewed straight photography of everyday happenings “Objets de gêne” (Strike objects), photos of objects made by strikers in the late 90s, and the “Filles d’Amsterdam” (Girls of Amsterdam), “Produits de Palestina” (Palestinian products) and “Documents, Le Louvre” — respectively portraits of prostitutes, contraband products, and religious fetishes—toward the middle of the lost decade. Only later was the artist seen as a maker of objects as well, when his objects were included in “The Everyday Altered,” the exhibition organized by Gabriel Orozco for the 50th Venice Biennale. Accordingly, the 2007 Calgàrtes exhibition presented an extensive selection of Moulène’s objects alongside his photos, making no hierarchical distinction between these two apparently distinct aspects of his production, and thus allowing it to flow forth in all its alternatively intriguing and perplexing manner.
Sharp, Chris (Essay); Cormack, Emily (Focus); Piron, François (Interview). “Jean-Luc Moulène: Mono”. Kaleidoscope issue 09, winter 2010, pp. 121-147.
Sharp, Chris (Essay); Cormack, Emily (Focus); Piron, François (Interview). “Jean-Luc Moulène: Mono”. Kaleidoscope issue 09, winter 2010, pp. 121-147.
ing glory. Since then, the artist has continued to surprise and confound with his increasingly variegated ensembles of images and objects, as well as drawings, all of which are often less reminiscent of visual art per se than they are of unseemly artifacts, sociological data, and anthropological anomalies of a cultural and even physical order.

If any one factor could be said to unite the series of photos from the 1980s onward, it would be a preoccupation with questions of circulation. The "Disjunctions" series has often been described as an investigation of what constitutes the most banal categories of photography (still life, portraiture, street scenes, etc.) and how these categories, and what they portray, remain in circulation. Moulène approached the issue by misusing the terms and conventions of those categories to depict a given subject in such a way that was either subtly or directly unacceptable to that category. For example, Untitled (Pont d’Austerlitz, Paris) (1993) offers an ambiguously lyrical portrait of a street person, surrounded by his belongings, gazing at the Pont d’Austerlitz at sunrise. Image Blanche, Paris (1992-05-20), in turn, depicts a double portrait of a wall-eyed mother and her distracted child, finger in mouth, imperfectly framed in the image. In both cases, the discomfort produced by the photos exposes and tests the aesthetic, political, and linguistic parameters as well as the commonplaces that implicitly govern the production and distribution of images.

A natural corollary of Moulène’s investigation of circulation would be the idea of resistance—and this characterizes the whole of his practice, from its very constitution to its methodology to its subject matter. However, the artist is not necessarily interested in resistance as a revolutionary force, or resistance for the sake of resistance, but rather as a force of production and possibility. (Or, to put it another way, “I say No,” Moulène remarked in a recent studio visit, “so the viewer can say Yes.”) Perhaps no other series more literally exemplifies this triad of interests and methods—circulation-resistance-production—than “Objets de grève” (1999–2001). This series consists of 39 photographs of objects (baby shoes, clothes, a watch, maps, etc.) fabricated by strikers while forcibly occupying their workplaces of production. Despite the essentially elegiac character of the series, Moulène shot the signs of resistance as an unassuming inventory of rare objects given a new lease on circulation as images. "Produits de Palestinite" (2002–04), meanwhile, features contraband products from Palestine—bottles of orange water, chewing gum, cigarettes—and photographs them with a dispassionate objectivity on luminous white grounds. The series of images symbolically puts back into circulation items that are otherwise unavailable through international trade.

Finally, Moulène’s most controversial series, “Filles d’Amsterdam” (2005), directly engages his preoccupation with the body: the body as object, as commodity, and the politics of aesthetics that govern depictions of the naked body. These decidedly unsettling photos, taken from above, unconventionally portray female sex workers from Amsterdam on their backs, legs akimbo, with their faces on the same plane as their sex. The blunt parity with which faces and genitals are presented prevents them from becoming pornography to be passively consumed, or pornography tout court, transforming them rather into active sites of conflict between viewer, convention, and image—and thus interrupting the flow by which such goods (images, bodies) normally circulate. In 2005, Moulène was invited to collaborate with the Louvre, the result of which was a newspaper supplement for the newspaper Le Monde. The artist selected a series of 24 ancient religious fetishes and sculptures of primarily polytheistic origin, shot them in natural light (once again, from above), organized them into a chain of association, and put them into circulation outside the museum in the supplement (Moulène had worked in the format of a newspaper supplement numerous times, notably for the São Paulo Bienal in 2002).

So far, so good. Even if, for the sake of brevity, I have had to forsake many crucial nuances of Moulène’s photographic practice, it would seem as if we are dealing with a relatively coherent beast here, with nothing unmanageable or out of the ordinary. And yet were you to walk into “Ce que j’ai (What I have),” Moulène’s 2009 exhibition at Chantal Crousel in Paris, or his 2009 survey at the Carré d’art in Nîmes, or his recent showing at the Crédac in Ivry (none of which feature examples of his well-known photographic series), you would most likely find it hard to believe that you were looking at the same artist. A good example of his radically disjunctive mode of working is his exhibition at Chantal Crousel. Featuring seven abnormal objects of a corporeal or geological nature, a constellation of plinths or tables, two photographs, one video, and six drawings, as well as older works, the exhibition reads like an elegant, idiosyncratic, group show, discreetly saturated with all the perverse corporeality of the poems of E.E. Cummings and the interdisciplinarity of Bataille’s journal Documents.

The effect was one of a strangely collected organization of various banal and teratological phenomena organized around Bataille’s notion of heterology, succinctly defined by Branden W. Joseph as “[...] what remains ‘completely other,’ constitutively unassemblable within general cognitive systems, whether they be advanced philosophical speculation or

ARTIST’S BIO
JEAN-LUC MOULÈNE (b. 1955) is a French artist who lives and works in Paris. He participated in Documenta 5, Kassel, in 1992, and has also shown atCCA, Kitakyushu (2004); Jeu de Paume, Paris (2005); Thomas Dane Gallery, London (2006); Colurgara, Lublin; Galerie Greta Meert, Brussels (2007); Centre d’art Passerelle, Brest (2008); Carré d’art – Musée d’art Contemporain, Nîmes; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris (2009).

CURRENT & FORTHCOMING
JEAN-LUC MOULÈNE’S first solo show in the United States, organized by the Dia Art Foundation, will be on view at the Hispanic Society in New York from October 2011 to June 2012.

FOOTNOTES
MONO: JEAN-LUC MOULÈNE

common sense.". For instance, the sculpture *Os non os* (2009), displayed alone on a table and fashioned out of bones and epoxy paste, looked like a skull with no face, while nearby one encountered *Head Box* (2004), a small green box hung on a wall at average head height (as if to say "insert head here"). Ostensibly an ironic reflection on authoritarian modes of seeing, the work could have also just been a comment on one-point perspective. One particularly captivating photo, *Régulier* (2008), features an empty plastic bottle wedged between two rocks in what appears to be an outdoor setting. Perfectly centered, the unobtrusively evocative container both neatly resists and seems manifestly resigned to its fate as an unsalvageable object. Elsewhere, *Chute d'escalier* (2008) literally "stair leftovers" or, better yet, "stair rind" comprised a dark segment of wooden stairs unevenly reconfigured such that they seemed to wriggle in the middle of the floor. An unlikely grotesque, this improbable bit of bricolage resisted classification with a tenacity that bordered on the obscene. To say it was enthralling says perhaps more about me than does of the object. And yet I am not so sure: for to enthral is to arrest movement, to capture attention, to interrupt, and ultimately to ramify the flow of circulation. To use the adjective "enthralling," however, might also be a bit misleading, as there is no something spectacular about Moullèn’s practice. If it produces fascination, it nevertheless does not disarm intellectually: the resistance at the heart of the work doesn’t break passive consumption. Instead, it invariably produces more questions than it does answers.

Moullèn often speaks about his work in relation to the body, about how his practice is an attempt "to build his own body." While such a notion is linked to the influence on Moullèn of the French performance artist Michel Jourdain and his interest in the body as a site of social and political negotiation, it is also reminiscent of Antonin Artaud and his "body without organs." In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari transform the "body without organs" into a strategy of circulation. They write, "It is not at all a notion, a concept, but a practice, a set of practices. You never reach the body without Organs, you can’t reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit." This is what they describe as "becoming." Nevertheless, that in the Moullèn show, there was a work entitled *Bouclé d’organnes* (Mess of organs, 2008), which consisted of three objects, in addition to a drawing. A wooden display, one of which was a stone resembling a skull, another an amorphous stack of clay with half a set of human teeth jutting out of it, another a piece of dark oak, which resembled a heart. The cumulative effect was as if this empty out were a mode of construction itself.

Despite the existence of such objects, it is also important to remember that Moullèn issues from a tradition of straight photography: he perceives the street to be his studio, one whose center is inevitably unfixed and therefore continually shifting. Looking back at his past work from the vantage of his present production, I think it becomes clear that his practice is even less stable than it looks, that it is somehow organic and fluid. Although documentary, if anything is essentially registered in his work. It is a set of practices that seek to investigate and push against limits and resist dominant modes and myths of circulation, while nevertheless hinting at the existence of others. Exactly how this will add up or what it will engender is, as the French critic Jean-Pierre Criqui trenchantly observes about Moullèn’s work, a thing of the future—which is to say, it is both the source of a potential alternative future and that which can only be resolved by a time that has yet to come.
Simple portraits of products created in the spirit of protest, the photographs from Moulène’s “Objets de Grève” are acute points of rupture—showing how meaning can be dismantled and realigned without necessarily dramatizing significance.

words by EMILY CORMACK
MONO: JEAN-LUC MOULÈNE

Viewed from above, human activity could be seen as a series of three-dimensional Venn diagrams with each sphere, a system. It is our urge to struggle between them, colliding and dividing as we progress through these sealed spheres within which we rotate. Whether they are biological, semantic, rhythmic, financial, visual, commercial, economic, or ontological, whether imposed or innate, systems are integral to existence. However, it is only when these systems fail, rupture, or spin from their axis that we become aware of their grip.

Within this network of spheres, there can be points of rupture so acute and potent that their effect ripples across the ecosystem, disorienting and displacing objects and processes. In his photographic series "Objets de grève" (Strike Objects), Jean-Luc Moulène articulates these breaking points through photographing objects that have breached the conditions and systems of their own production.

Created by disenfranchised factory workers embroiled in a range of industrial disputes throughout France since the late 19th century, the objects that Moulène photographs in this series were created in the spirit of protest and revolt. To create these objects, the workers commandeered the means of production, diverting the machinery ordinarily used to create commercial products, and re-deploying it as an instrument within the worker’s rebellion. A Manufrance frying pan, for example, was gilded with the words "Employment—Solidarity—Freedom—Justice" to commemorate attempts to preserve jobs at the Manufrance factory in 1984. A packet of Gauloises cigarettes was colored red and printed with the details of the workers’ occupation of the Pailin cigarette factory in defiance of its closure in 1982. In all of the objects that Moulène documents, what was once domestic or utilitarian is transformed into a symbol of industrial agitation and unrest. Through the subtle modification of a pipe, a packet of cigarettes, or a newspaper, these objects shift from belonging within a commercial system of production to operating outside of any sanctioned economic system.

The front page of the International Herald Tribune, Friday 5 June 1987, which comprises one photograph in the series, was printed and distributed with large vacant spaces where photographs should be. These voids give the viewer, the reader, or the casual consumer space to think through the rupture in their daily read. The retoucher, whose hours had been cut, was on strike, and in this work, his revolt becomes emblematic of an increasingly rationalized work place, where hours and benefits are cut, as financial profit is valued over the worker’s well-being. It is through these blocks of silence on the page that consumers are made aware of the mechanics of the systems of production and distribution and their role within them. The subtext of the newspaper’s production and the vast human narratives within it is revealed through erasure. This judder in the usual flow of news and views destabilizes the newspaper’s function, transforming it from a vehicle for daily news into a symbol of protest. Like a vocal inunction, this pause in the layout of the page brings new significance to the meaning of this otherwise everyday object, shifting it from one sphere of meaning to another.

More generally, the objects that Moulène photographs in this series are representative of hot spots within the history of revolution. The objects cluster chronologically around 1948 and 1973–78, corresponding with the close of the Trente Glorieuses in France—when France’s economy grew steadily for thirty years—and the global oil crisis, followed by another spike in the late 1980s when the global financial markets crashed (Black Monday, on 19 October 1987), and again in the early 1990s, coinciding with the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle. They testify to the rebellion and defiance that percolated throughout Europe over the past 150 years, and can be seen to plot a subjective and intimate course through various upheavals and crises in recent history.

Lit by a dead grey light and placed uncompromisingly in the center of the frame, the objects are photographed like evidence. They are presented simply, economically, placed on backgrounds that seem unrelated, without any illusion of pictorial depth. The objects appear to have been found and placed before the camera, recorded for an as-yet-unknown significance. The objects are elevated through documentation, loaded with poignancy, and yet they are completely removed from the energy of their narrative.

Since the industrial revolution, the factory worker has become one of the most well-theorized professions of the 20th century. The treatment, status, and level of agitation experienced by factory workers both subjectively and collectively have come to be seen as indicative of much broader financial and political contexts. Factory workers’ capacity as an active lobbying force has also been recognized and harnessed by numerous artists and theorists. Significant among the more recent commentators on this force is Antonio Negri, whose own activism led to his incarceration for ten years. Negri speaks explicitly of the power of the workers to generate social change in a contemporary setting, “What liberates history, what frees us from slavery, is living work, the capacity of work to oppose capital. And only
Sharp, Chris (Essay); Cormack, Emily (Focus); Piron, François (Interview). “Jean-Luc Moulène: Mono”. Kaleidoscope issue 09, winter 2010, pp. 121-147.
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when this occurs is capital forced to assume democracy. The time has come to put an end to it, once and for all." In "Objets de grève", Moulène focuses precisely on this moment, when the workers have made a break to oppose the forces of capital and to use their work to revolt from it. These points of resistance sound out the depth of wider dissent, and represent the first wave to break on the shore.

There is little doubt that these objects played an important role within various industrial disputes over the past 150 years, they also reflect the changing status of the object in contemporary society. As the forces of neo-liberalism diminish the potency of revolution by co-opting the language of revolutionary activity, we are also faced with the dramatical rise in consumerism. "Objets de grève" reveals how the forces of neo-liberalism, coupled with the resultant rise in rampant consumerism, have depreciated the status of the object as a potential tool during revolution. As Moulène himself has stated, "We're producing fewer strike objects these days. In the 1980s, the product was the dominant mode of communication when a strike needed to be made known, we manufactured objects. Today, spectacle has become the primary mode of communication..." This community of codes has now been replaced by campaigns that are more media-aware, such as culture jamming and web- and social networking. Particular objects that signify revolution and protest in themselves are now comparatively scarce, indicating an increased demonization of rebellion, and enshrining Moulène's objects as momentary roles for an age of protest that has passed.

A small ceramic pipe, for example, from the late 19th century, features three number 8's in relief on its bulb. The three eights refer to the late 19th- and early 20th-century trade unionists' mantra calling for an eight-hour work day, eight hours of leisure, and eight hours of rest. Although Australia and New Zealand passed a law assuring the satisfaction of these demands in the 1890s, France did not legislate this guideline until the Popular Front was elected to government in 1936. This utilitarian pipe therefore bears the stamp of a distant aspiration epitomizing a working class struggle that was not to be resolved for another four decades.

The valorization of an object such as a pipe—from utilitarian object to political symbol and call to arms—transforms its status as a commercial product and embeds it in a new load-bearing rhetoric. In the hands of the factory worker, the objects are shifted between spheres of meaning and their potential is freed for further signification. However, what does it mean for Moulène then to take these objects decades later and momentarily tug them from their resting places (in archives and pockets, and on masterpieces) and reframe them? Collated as a series and presented independent of didactic captions, these photographs take on the formal qualities of documents within an archive. Positioned as such, the archival connotations of "Objets de grève" serve both to revive the object's revolutionary status and simultaneously to dull it, for as with any kind of archive, the energy of the original object is displaced. What was once so fierce, so full of fire is collared and itemized, sunk into the archive, which is, after all, another system, another sphere designed to crum human behavior. While Moulène resuscitates the factory workers' utopian voices for a moment, baring their narratives, opening them for discovery, their stories will fade as the viewer moves past the photograph hung on the gallery wall, just as the archivist's box is slotted back in the vault. And perhaps just as photography captures and freezes the everyday, empowering the photograph only to depict the appearance of things, these objects are only able to reveal a small portion of the actual events that they signify. Like fragments flaking from time, these formerly revolutionary objects, once they are archived within Moulène's "Objets de grève", become mere outlines of their fierce origins, revealing as little of their story as sediment in the rubbish heap of revolution.
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A SERIOUS FARCE

As described in his own words, Moulène’s practice stems from the 1970s notion of art as an enigma—hence the programmatic discontinuity and the constant evasion of realism, leading a descent back toward a sympathetic space.

material collected by FRANÇOIS PIRON
Jean-Luc Moulène continues to be recognized more for his photographic work than for his objects and drawings, which he only began exhibiting a dozen years ago. Some of his pictures are better known than their author, such as his Objets de grève, a photographic inventory of objects manufactured on the assembly line by workers on strike and sold on the black market to help finance their cause, the workers thus re-appropriating their skills and inventing a parallel circulation and economy. Both the economy and the circulation of objects are themes that arise frequently in Moulène’s work. His thinking on the subject of the circulation of images has led him on multiple occasions to occupy the pages of wide-circulation newspapers, such as the Brazilian daily on the economy, Valor, or Le Monde in France, and also to produce numerous publications in collaboration with writers in whom one discerns a kinship with his own practice, which is anchored in the literary legacy of Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille, Alfred Jarry, and René Daumal—writers who have produced a body of work both irreducible and accessible to many fields of knowledge, texts that are at once open to their immediate surroundings and founded on the radical negation of the world as it appears to us. A discussion with Jean-Luc Moulène involves a game of paradoxes, watchwords, and improvisations. Moulène’s rhetorical choreography fashions thought on the tongue and constantly redefines a line of conduct that seeks, above all, to avoid being tied down.

I became interested in art during the 1970s with the practices of body art, or what was called “non-art” or “anti-art.” Photography was important as a record of a performance. I also became aware at that time that I had no to myself on show, or for occupying even a trace of the symbolic position of an artist so that I would be a long-term performer, in the sense that presence is my concern is to authorize rather than to be an author.

Culture consists in the coexistence of the singular and the commonplac in the 1970s at society was undergoing a process of normalization, has nevertheless today become capital, and consequently must be reconsidered.

My notion of art comes from this period of the 1970s, when it was thought work was an enigma to everyone, and not just a secret reserved for a few, and to be open to the whole of human knowledge—ethics, history, to psycho-sociology. The work of art is a focal point of all disciplines; it is shot through
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I am above all discontinuous rather than heterogeneous, and in this discontinuity I find a critical convergence with present-day modes of knowledge, which favor availability to the detriment of experience. I have never thought of my work from the perspective of a coherent whole. I think of my shows as group shows. As Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes said, "Me and me, that is millions!" I am interested in the work without art, rather than the artist without the work. I work on this hypothesis. I make works, but I am "on strike from art," and by the same reasoning, obligated to it.

A good proportion of contemporary art consists in introducing popular practices into a separate world. Art ennobles and celebrates these popular practices. Historically speaking, it was photography that forced art to take up a position: whether to regain the work by introducing the vernacular, or to withdraw from it into the self-sufficiency of radical abstraction. Photography forced the world into art, and the history of its practices is more interesting than the history of its authors, since most of its practices are anonymous. It might even have been considered a form of Outsider Art that had not been identified as such.

For my part, Outsider Art interests me because its productions, its works—if they have an aesthetic and an intentionality—exist prior to being regarded as art. This has to do with my own practice, in the sense that I consider my images and objects as tools, articles of use: practical above all else.

The point of departure of my work consists in images that have had a support in photography. I am not saying that I do photography, but that I make images, in the same way as I make objects, not sculptures, because sculptures are only a typology of objects.

What are the conditions of the work? My criteria are that it should be complete in itself, separate, and that it should bring with it, in such a way as to be plainly visible, all the conditions under which it was produced. But also that it should have a direct link with
what it has been separated from, which is to say, the world. This separation I speak of is not pathological, but liberating. It is in being as impersonal as possible that I try to keep looking at the world. To separate oneself is first and foremost to elude the temptation of realism of moralizing. My wall images play on representation, while my objects play on presence. To go into the sense of impression or expression doesn’t interest me; rather, it is the tension between two that matters to me. A work is an affirmation and, at the same time, a negation. It is a battlefield.

Duchamp said that he didn’t choose his ready-mades, but that his ready-mades chose him. Cartier-Bresson’s “decisive moment” posed the question directly: who decides? In this decision, there is a suggestion of faith: there is even something weirdly divine about it. As far as I avoid believing. In the same way, there is a double manner of thinking in Duchamp: if the ready-made is an additional object in art, it is also an object subtracted from industry.

The project Duchamp took may possibly involve both aspects: to show, in art, that an object has been taken away from the world. But he was very careful to not make this explicit, and this enabled him to avoid making works that bore an ideological stamp.

I do not attempt to control the discourse and analysis of my work: on the contrary I try to surrender all control. Nevertheless, this does not mean that I do this work before having the work invaded by different disciplines. No one discipline can fully encompass a notion of the world, as art, economy or science. In my work, I attempt to cut diagonally through different regimes or separate spheres that divide the world into the areas of economics, politics, and culture. And these diagonal cuts enable me to meet another figure. This kind of diagram helps me a lot. In tracing this figure, I try to strike hard enough for it to produce a swelling on the world. There resides my idea for a work, as well as this idea of separation: a swelling, bearing witness to a blow, situated on the outside of the world, like an exsurgence. One only has to hit hard and up it comes.

I never see the word “project” concerning my work: it is always simply a matter of practice. Becoming aware of your own practice is retrospective. There is no art, and no theory, that comes before practice. It is only when you become aware of your practice that you can begin putting something into form. When the first phase of the practice is of the order of feeling, allowing a return into the area of perception, it is then that a conceptual space
arises through the act of forming. The act of forming is of the order of technique. Academism in painting consisted in finding a proper equivalence between a technique and its subject, and this problem is still present in my own work. Technique does not come first, and yet technique is necessary, closely linked to the problem of the subject that it put in place. To tackle a technique does not imply mastering that technique. Such knowledge does not concern me, except when it becomes a matter of construction, not of discipline.

The difference between art and other fields that require technique resides in its methods: whereas the scientist or the mathematician publishes the results of his experiment, an artist has to produce something that is not merely the result of an experiment, but must also answer the experiment available to others. This means that to create a work, having done the experiment, he has to go back to his sources, and the form created must make it possible to perceive and re-open a sympathetic space. The work consists in a descent back toward sympathetic space, toward the observer.

The form of a work has no stake in the game other than to make experience possible; it is a kind of rhetoric that helps communicate thought. That’s why what is common interests me far more than what is singular. I share something with the other, and that shared something is my playing field.

Thought, to my mind, is an act that forces one out of oneself, not an imposition of personal singularity. This means that I must take into account even what I reject. It is by starting from the center, not the periphery, that one can gain an overall view of what goes on in the world. Photography is an instrument of frontality.

I am often reproached for my seriousness. Whereas I work very seriously to manufacture artefacts (which is, after all, a scam), to savor a dirty trick that hits the right spot. A dirty trick is this admirable, surprising, unexpected, and successful space in which one encounters truth, like a set-up, in fact. I would say that my works lie on the side of serious force rather than grim aridity. My works examine the evidence, which is something really close to imbecility. Robert Filliou and George Brecht are members of my family, and with them I share the aspiration to create works that make me ashamed. The ones that make me most ashamed are, in the long run, the truest.