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“Showing Time”: the Ephemeral Made Sublime

“Showing Time”: cf. Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Esthétique de l'éphémère*, Paris, Galilée, 2003, p. 49.

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"Showing Time": the Ephemeral Made Sublime

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- 1 The less we sustainably build in stone and marble to pass on our built heritage over the centuries, the more the notion of heritage endlessly extends towards the ethereal. "In our nomadic society, ceaselessly transformed by the shifting ubiquitous present time, 'historical heritage' has become some of the media tribe's key expression."¹
- 2 However, despite its considerable extension, the notion of heritage remains clear, as Michel Melot points out. "By consensus, heritage covers everything that we have inherited from past generations and/or want to —or must— pass on to future generations. The advantage of this broad definition is that it applies to both material goods and moral values and is exact in terms of financial, genetic and cultural heritage."²
- 3 The issue of transmission, which is at the heart of the notion of "heritage," is currently confronted with the proliferation of ephemeral works since the sixties, which further increased with the digital era. "Ephemeral heritages": that is an unsettling oxymoron. Indeed, what shall we think of this transformation of the notion of heritage, which now makes it encompass the ephemeral?

Passing on

- 4 If heritage consists of what we wish to pass on, how and why should we make this requirement coincide with a work initially designed to be ephemeral? How to transform what is momentary into heritage, how to make durable what is fleeting, and most importantly, should we do it? Do artists want this transformation? What to think about these fragile works, deliberately exhibited in the public space and doomed to be

destroyed? What to think about digital art, whose constantly evolving, circulating, collaborative and interactive works, remain utterly unstable and prone to endless transformations?

- 5 The digital society archives memorizes everything and yet, artistically speaking, produces but very few stabilized works in a state that we would like to preserve, and whose value is determined by the perfection of their result, as has been the case for centuries. The *work in progress* becomes a magic formula, temporary installations are topical everywhere, the creation process is favored over the production of works.

The creator of works gradually becomes an experience provider, an illusionist, a magician or an effects engineer, objects lose their determined artistic characteristics [...]. Objects, installations and performances become works of art. Intentions, attitudes and concepts become substitutes for works. This does not mean that this is the end of art: this is the end of art as an object.³

- 6 As we are tending to digitize and archive almost everything —the issue of the preservation of these archives, or technical vulnerability of the format, is something we will not tackle in this paper—, artists no longer seek fulfillment. On the contrary, they make temporary artistic proposals that are prone to be constantly transformed, propose collaborative programs whose value is proportional to its appeal to the audience that will appropriate the work through its modifications. Digital art conveys an ideal of sharing, collaboration and collective experimentation.

The digital: heritage without a memory

- 7 In this sense, digital art brings us to the core of what leads to transmission, through the appropriation it induces among internet users and its audience: "To efficiently pass on, one must transform if not convert."⁴ In this respect, it is similar to the notion of heritage, as regards its relation to transmission.
- 8 However, granting a heritage status also implies a form of stabilization, of capitalization. "Artists, as we understand them today, are no longer people who create works, but supreme, transfigured beings, caught in the flow of experiences. A form of experience [...] without ancestry or descent, which is the particularity of a disinherited existence"⁵. Consequently, the prevalent culture of experimentation is confronted with a transmission crisis, especially in the field of digital art.
- 9 This experience of the digital man deprived of ancestry hampers transmission and prevents one from granting a heritage status. In a general way, the digital work is disconnected from the concrete conditions of its elaboration.

The digital activity seems to generate oblivion as quickly as it multiplies texts or other cultural objects and saturates their networks. Its memory capacity, albeit exponentially increasing, would in reality serve an eternal, inconsistent present. What it would gain in width, diversity and speed, it would lose in retrospective depth and above all, in authenticity, for want of remaining rooted in a material genealogy. It would be in contradiction with the very notion of cultural heritage — which would suppose the existence of monumentality or at least traces of this monumentality.⁶

A new relation to time

- 10 However, the ephemeral taking hold of contemporary creation hints at another relation to time, other than this eternal present of the digital. While heritage can be understood as something to pass on, something that is beyond us and draws a link with duration, the ephemeral is much more difficult to grasp. Are we talking about the instability of a work with regards to its materiality, to the preservation of its original form, to the transformations of the context of its existence and reception? Are we talking about a reality undergone or initiated by the artist? Through its ambiguity, ephemeral creation profoundly questions the certainties we hold about heritage and what it implies as regards our relation to time, the world and especially the trade world.
- 11 Heritage and the ephemeral have coexisted and echoed one another since the 60s. Indeed, the field of heritage has considerably broadened through a typological, chronological and geographical extension of heritage assets, together with the exponential increase in their audience, up to the true worship of historical heritage we are facing nowadays. Throughout the 60s, major artists have chosen to focus on *in-situ* installations, performances, as well as on ephemeral contextual art, going as far as to plan the self-destruction of the work of art.
- 12 In this perspective, Jean Tinguely was a true "entrepreneur of the ephemeral."⁷ The happening called "Homage to New-York" consisted in the self-destruction of a sculpture made up of scrap iron and the most varied objects, resulting in one hell of a racket.

Homage to New York was a sham disaster. I have always considered that the apocalypse had to be a plastic event. I wanted to create a plastic representation of the end of civilization. It was an "ironic suicide" as Duchamp once put it [...] Everything was on fire, just like an ending civilization. Actually, we are at the beginning of a civilization, that of the automated machines. However, unlike the Egyptians, we do not believe that the world we have created will outlive us. We no longer believe in eternity. We are just like any aging human being thinking that they are going to die. Every ancient civilization used to believe in the permanent, but to us permanent means movement. Permanent is synonymous with transformation. That is why I firmly refuse to be pessimistic.⁸
- 13 Jean Tinguely is obsessed with the intertwining of life and death. In the same way, the emergence of land art in the 60s was the result of a strong urge to create ephemeral works that were doomed, either in the short or long term, to be destroyed by natural elements, so that they would undergo the effects of time, which would shape them and wear them out until their destruction. The emphasis on the ephemeral aspect of life — as put to the test of the world— is rightly cited by Nils Udo: "I have seen nature dying and it moved me, from an existential perspective."⁹
- 14 Today, the works of Michel Balzy, who has been referred to as the "visual artist depicting the apocalypse of rots,"¹⁰ are metaphors for frailty, for the passing of time and brevity of life. He works with everyday perishable goods, which he uses to create delicate installations that shrink and wither throughout the exhibitions. He works with live material and "lets it work its way."
- 15 In 2012, as part of the Fall Festival, Swiss artist Urs Fischer placed his wax self-portrait in the chapel of Paris's School of Fine Arts, which gradually deteriorated during the exhibition to end up as a shapeless pile of molten wax. The ephemeral is here, in the

mutation of matter, in derision, self-derision. The act of creation can be summed up in its own destruction, just like life paves the way to death. The ephemeral work is put in the middle of major works pertaining to a heritage that the School of Fine Arts wishes to pass on to its students. However, unlike Saint Teresa by Bernini, whose ecstasy is voluptuously carved in most durable marble's pleats, the energy of Urs Fischer's sculpture is drained away as the burning candle consumes its flesh.

- 16 In this way, in this society where no one believes in life after death anymore, where insecurity reigns over the earth, now more than ever, the ephemeral seduces artists who work with perishable materials, increase the number of temporary installations or exhibit their vulnerable works in the public space. Their intentional confrontation with the ephemeral, acting like an exorcism, arouses the audience's interest.

The ephemeral lingers on: Ernest Pignon-Ernest's work

- 17 Ernest Pignon-Ernest's work is still a reference in terms of the artistic taming of our inevitable and necessary destruction. This is a call to order supported by the audience. Contrary to Bossuet's sermons, which aimed to persuade, Ernest Pignon-Ernest's work moves us and leads us to accept the brevity of our existence.

- 18 Ernest Pignon-Ernest, guest of the *Cahiers de médiologie*, which headlined *Eternal ephemeral* in August 2013, is ideally placed to tell us how the Neapolitan "ephemeral heritage" was born and lives:

Of course, what first seems ephemeral in my work are the images, the delicate paper I work on [...] all these images of my Neapolitan wanderings (those which question the representations of death produced by the city) were put up during the night of the Thursday to Good Friday. The discovery of these images in the context of Easter "occurred" both on the level of their reception and what they represented (just like the choice of places). I am so focused on "how" these meetings occur that I sometimes feel sorry these images remain, that people get to see them more than once. As I met with people to decide on which paper the artists would use —while everyone was looking for a durable material— I surprised technicians by asking them for a paper that would disintegrate within a few days.¹¹

- 19 He aimed to shed light on the Neapolitan heritage and reveal the memory of its places through a work suddenly put before one's eyes: never forget what we are to see but once. In a certain way, this ephemeral does not give up "playing overtime," to quote Régis Debray's words on transmission. "Even as the image fades away, its presence has changed perspectives, the relation is no longer the same."¹² Transmission here resorts to the power of the ephemeral and sustainability of the memory of a unique experience.
- 20 For all that, shall we refuse to consider all these ephemeral masterpieces as heritage? Just like the highlights of performing arts are made heritage through recordings and adaptations, the memory of Ernest Pignon-Ernest's drawings will live on through transformation. Let us not forget that true transmission implies integration, hence transformation. In this sense, it is a betrayal of the original work. "Admittedly, transmission is a tragedy, as the main characteristic of the medium is to betray the message so as to survive"¹³.
- 21 This may be all the truer nowadays, as artists choose the most delicate materials for their works while wishing for their permanence. Marvel at the ephemeral, at this

suspended time and resist, though you know you are mortal. Fly wings, crystal threads, spiders' silk, dandelion clocks, leaves from a bush: these are the materials Léa Barbazanges —salon de Montrouge 2013— sculpts and creates with. She explains: "I choose a material for its beauty, trite yet remarkable, but also because it reminds us of life's frailty." However, she refuses to mistake the fragile for the ephemeral and stands up for the durability of her works. The choice of the most delicate materials would reveal a desire to resist the ravages of time, to last despite all opposition. If death is lurking, it is not where expected. To forestall fate. Art as anti-fate. Prove our apprehension wrong, contradict appearances, thwart certainties. There is impertinence in drawing out the ephemeral, just like in upsetting the foundations of heritage.

- 22 In fact, it is the historical transition from a culture of objects and permanence to a culture of flows and globalized instabilities that marks the most crucial step.
- 23 Although heritage and the ephemeral have been echoing one another for a long time, the emergence of digital creation has led us to completely reconsider the notion of heritage, in particular not to mistake it for the systematic storage of all data. Saving does not mean integrating into heritage. As well, passing on is not limited to preserving. In the same way, the ephemeral, "outburst of the present,"¹⁴ "crystallized fragment of time,"¹⁵ highlights heritage rather than refuting it.

"Showing time": heritage reflected in the ephemeral

- 24 The ephemeral and its inescapable destruction —planned by the artist— seem to be at odds with our Western idea of art. As Christine Buci-Glucksmann has pointed out, the latter "has long been thought in terms of durability."¹⁶ But now the ephemeral hints at another relation to time. Without denying duration, it makes us grasp the passing of each and every thing, which allows us to comprehend the ultimate passing, i.e. death. The ephemeral "makes us *see* time."
- 25 This expression is here valid in both its figurative and literal meanings, as demonstrated by Klaus Pinter's ephemeral works,¹⁷ especially: *Rebonds, corps pneumatique* (fig. 1) exhibited in the *Panthéon* in 2002; *Collision Berlin-Mitte*, an inflatable installation exhibited in Berlin's *Parochialkirche* in 2005 (fig. 2); and *Le Cocon*, an inflatable sculpture composed of several pieces, exhibited in Cambrai's *chapelle des Jésuites* in 2011 (fig. 3). His transparent inflatable structures let us see elements of the architectural heritage. They reflect and twist the elements of the scenery. Heritage is seen in the disturbing mirror of the ephemeral.

Fig. 1

Klaus Pinter, *Rebonds, corps pneumatique*. Panthéon, Paris, 2002.
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Fig. 2

Klaus Pinter, *Collision Berlin-Mitte*, inflatable installation. Parochialkirche, Berlin, 2005.
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Fig. 3

Klaus Pinter, *Le Cocon*. Inflatable sculpture composed of several pieces. Chapelle des Jésuites, Cambrai, 2011.

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- 26 The extreme promotion of the ephemeral that is made nowadays does not aim at opposing the lightness of the ephemeral and transparency of forms to the weight of the stones' and objects' memory, but at accepting that "the time of forms gives way to the forms of time, time as the fourth dimension of art."¹⁸
- 27 Our objective is to observe how a dialog unfolds with heritage in this context of passion for digital creation, to restore lightness to heritage, prevent memory from "fossilizing," add vibration to an otherwise linear time and introduce frailty and uncertainty into the all too established reality of heritage.
- 28 Indeed, ephemeral art is art above all. If it is true that art is "characterized by its ability to transcend time,"¹⁹ that it is "anti-fate," it constitutes a challenge for the awareness of the ephemeral. This constitutes the initial paradox of ephemeral art, but also its embodied promise of eternity. In this sense, "the eternal ephemeral" in art is a sign of potential "ephemeral heritages" in "a kind of esthetic redemption of life and History, through the extra-temporal time of forms."²⁰ Penone, whose entire work is the expression of his own frailty and demise, makes the ideal of this association perfectly clear: "I wanted the ephemeral to go on and on."
- 29 In this sense, the ephemeral would be
an art of time, which consists in welcoming it, to give in to time (*tempori cedere*), and accept it as it is, as unpredictable as it may be. It is much closer to the search for the interval that is proper to the Japanese *Ma* (gap, interval, void) culture than the mere hedonistic enjoyment of the present time that it implies. Indeed, every passing is fleeting and fragile, which means that embracing an opportunity, in the

way of an "encounter," implies going through time, giving it its rhythm, goads, intensities and disquiets [...]. The ephemeral is not time itself but its vibration made perceptible.²¹

The transparencies of the ephemeral: Klaus Pinter's work

- 30 Therefore, instead of considering the sad side of the ephemeral, we could focus on its positive side which allows us to "see time." Indeed

going through time, grasping it through its traces and levels, either remotely or live, this is in substance one of the main concerns of the 20th century, which was set at once under the sign of time and even of the space-time continuum. As a result, everything has gradually become transparent and diaphanous and the glass culture has become the political and esthetic allegory of both art and architecture, elevated to the rank of symbol of the modern life [...]. Everywhere, transparency resorts to a floating structure by splitting it up into its own bursts of light or in the landscape, thus producing a "negative" of the site. This constitutes a kind of de-territorialization in the field, through which forms multiply and consequently go astray [...]. Admittedly, the omnipresence of glass, mirrors and crystal induces the transparencies of time.²²

- 31 There is no better description of "Klaus Pinter's moving and mutating spheres."²³ Since 1977, his work as a multimedia artist has consisted in innovatively taking over the places of memory which institutions, responsible for the passing on of collective heritage, entrust him with. As soon as 1967, with the establishment in Vienna of the Haus-Rucker-Co group together with two architects, Klaus Pinter proved to be a pioneer in the field of "installations," of the setup of the work —be it virtual— in a given context. This requirement of the creation in context places the work in a suspended, ephemeral time.

- 32 He quickly started to build his first "inflatable" works, of which Yves Kobry rightly and beautifully says that "one has to understand them in the etymological sense of the word, meaning that they are breathed life and soul into, not only because they are the fruits of a thought but also because they 'overfly' and sometimes collide with History and culture. These ephemeral installations [...] are ephemerides of modern times echoing the past."²⁴

- 33 Klaus Pinter's ephemeral works materialize the vibrations of time in the heritage places that host them.

- 34 From an esthetic perspective, the presence of transparent, floating forms causes the light to vibrate, which in turn results in "this sparkling, colorful instability," these shimmers, undulations and plays of reflection Christine Buci-Glucksmann mentions as she evokes "the transparencies of the ephemeral [...]. Everywhere, transparency resorts to a floating structure by splitting it up into its own bursts of light [...] thus producing a 'negative' of the site. This constitutes a kind of de-territorialisation in the field, through which forms multiply and consequently go astray [...]."²⁵ This is precisely what we could see and feel in 2002 with *Rebonds*, an ephemeral work ordered to Klaus Pinter for the *Panthéon*.

Globes brushing the ground or nearly weightless, like spatial droplets taking down the scenery of the marvelous cupola —usually hidden from view— reflecting its image on the concave and convex surfaces. Surrounding the globes, inflated curves trace key elements, like arteries surrounding the heart of the architectural space,

lines of a drawing, obviously spontaneously calligraphed, contrast with the petrified geometrical composition of volumes, which seem to try to stop the rebellious globes.²⁶

- 35 Although they are independent, these light, transparent, floating forms make sense only when reflected in the architectural elements of the heritage behind them, just like the fascination they exert through their frailty is increased by the immutability of a protected heritage. These ephemeral forms only pass through places of worship that will stay forever, so as to initiate a contradictory interaction with the historical environment. The huge size of Klaus Pinter's work matches the impressiveness of the place, enhances its sumptuous greatness by multiplying it. Paradoxically, this work is also the less significant one can imagine, for it brings no exogenous element into the place. This is the genius of an artist immersed in heritage, convinced that strong works can be created in heritage places without distorting them and that "making a clean break with the past is the most outmoded, provincial, tacky wish one can make."²⁷
- 36 It is this deep knowledge and affection of the baroque spirit that gave birth to *Collision Berlin-Centre* (2005), a huge semitranslucent sphere levitating in an apse of Berlin's Parochialkirche, the oldest baroque church of the city, stripped by time and war, thus resembling a Romanesque building. This delicate bubble reflecting light and echoing the sobriety of the place contrasts with the weight of the stones steeped in history. "The primary objective of this crystalline object is to enter a contradictory interrelation with its historical environment. Transparency versus opacity. Translucence rather than massive stones or concrete. The weightlessness of Utopia — let us put a capital letter this time— versus the tragic weight of History."²⁸
- 37 The ephemeral images of heritage reflected by Klaus Pinter's moving spheres invite us to reconsider our idea of memory, which is a genuine space for exploration and experimentation. "Memory is not the mere resumption of a past that would deal with itself, just like knowledge does not consist in immediately comprehending a clear and distinct reality that would come and stand before the mirror of conscience. The object of remembrance, just like the object of present knowledge, has nothing to tell and does not even exist unless we make it speak."²⁹ Klaus Pinter takes the risk: "I want my sculpture to absorb the various 'historical speeds' of the building's architecture, so that it 'digests' them before it highlights them through my own writing. This radical change in the situation generates a fascinating spatial context."³⁰ With Klaus Pinter, heritages may indeed become ephemeral.

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2. Michel Melot, "La confusion des monuments," *Les Cahiers de médiologie. Une anthologie* ("Le monument à l'épreuve du patrimoine"), Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2009, p. 612.
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15. Régis Debray, "Relier," *Médium*, Paris, Éditions Babylone, 2004, p. 15.
16. Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Esthétique de l'éphémère*, Paris, Galilée, 2003, p. 13.
17. In an interview given on 19th August 2013, Klaus Pinter approves the label "ephemeral" to qualify his works, as they have always been almost exclusively designed as temporary "contextual" installations, especially the ones mentioned here. However, he is not against the idea of making one of his works durable. There is no bias here, just a statement of facts. The lightness and transparency of his inflatable structures are an obvious expression of the ephemeral.
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ABSTRACTS

Considering what in the notion of heritage —whose expansion and success are now considerable — essentially defines it, namely something that one wishes to pass on, something that stands the test of time, we will question this contemporary passion for the ephemeral expressed by both

artists and their audience. The approach adopted by some of Ernest Pignon-Ernest's and Klaus Pinter's major works will clarify the potential esthetic materialization of the disturbing oxymoron that we are to study, namely "ephemeral heritages."

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Keywords: digital art, ephemeral, heritage, memory, pass on, transience

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