

BENJAMIN SEROR

Preliminary Notes for an Ecomuseum for Modern Man

Translated by Alan Eglinton

For most of my public presentations, I try to improvise what I'm going to say. To do so, I prepare myself by writing a text in one go. It contains nearly all of the ideas that I'd like to talk about during the presentation. I then put this text away and leave it as it is until the presentation, to be sure not to remember it. A few days before the presentation, it helps me check that the few connections I want to make do exist and that the paths I intend to take to make them actually lead somewhere. The following notes were written a few days before my presentation during the symposium on Luciano Fabro and his relationship to autonomy. This presentation was intended to be read while wearing the costume from the Stäbetanz or Stick Dance created by Oskar Schlemmer in 1927. The principle of this costume is to add an extension to each of the dancer's limbs. The extension is three times longer than the limb to which it's attached. The result is an oversized body that draws in space the memory of a man three times bigger than usual.

All of the visible world opens strangely up to me
in its complete surreal and mystical dimension.
Oskar Schlemmer

Reality is coming and I feel strange.
Gabriel Delgado

Hello,

Before beginning, I'd like to thank Bernhard Rüdiger and Giovanni Carreri for having brought us together here in the context of this seminar on constructing reality. If I have been invited here today, it's because I had the chance during my studies to participate in a workshop Luciano Fabro held more than two years ago on this theme. I'll try to tell you about this experience. I think if I'd had to tell you about it as soon as it had ended – let's say it's Saturday morning and the week spent with Luciano Fabro has just ended – I would have told you something completely different. Two years have passed and I think I see things differently now. Luciano Fabro had to continually push us. The central question of the

workshop was the definition of our relationship to history. This created tensions amongst many of the students because the question Fabro was asking was not about our general knowledge of history but specifically about what our relationship with our own history was. Of course, we could have talked about the legacy of the troubadour painters from the Lyon region at the beginning of the XIXth century – the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon contains a large selection of their works - and about many other things. Yet, the question was not to determine what we were doing with this legacy but rather how we were creating our own historical perspectives. He found a strange way of formulating this question. We had to imagine what the 2011 Lyon Biennale would look like. Of course, we knew there wouldn't be any troubadour painters presented. Apart from that, we remained silent; his question reduced us to speechlessness. Nevertheless, we were committed to this art school so this 2011 Biennale was the prospect we had to think about. We couldn't avoid it. We had to be able to describe whether there would be more video art or more installation work in this biennale, whether there would be walls, if they would be painted white, if everything would be presented in only one place and if this place would be in the centre of town or on the outskirts. Our silence and vague and imprecise replies earned us many scoldings from Fabro. In answering such a question, one decides on the usefulness of defining one's relationship with history. To be able to reply, you must decide, make choices and redefine certain perspectives. In the particular case of Fabro's question, history couldn't be considered as a legacy or formal repertory. This is how I understand his question now and maybe it would earn me another scolding. However, this attempt not just to discuss history but to try to define how history can be useful, seems to point to one of the artist's specific roles. In other words, I think an artist is in an ideal position to handle all kinds of stories by connecting his or her own personal experience with myths and all sorts of legends in order to talk about a story, and about his or her point of view on the conditions in which the story is created. In order to illustrate this, I'd now like to introduce two figures that interest me because of their deliberate way of linking historical perspectives together. They are two legendary figures from recent history: Gaby Delgado and Ian Curtis. Both were singers in New Wave groups which marked the end of the 70's and particularly the beginning of the 80's. Ian Curtis was the lead singer of Joy Division, one of the pioneering New Wave bands. He tragically passed away in May 1980. Gaby Delgado sings for the group D.A.F., which stands for Deutsch-Amerikanische-Freundschaft. The latter was founded in the German town of Düsseldorf around the same time as Joy Division in 1978. Shortly before killing himself, Ian Curtis wrote one of his most beautiful and saddest songs, entitled Decades. It's a dark song with a synthesizer melody sounding off-key and drowned out by big waves of echoing. In this song, Curtis describes a group of young men he can't reach. In the refrain he sings: "Where have they been, where have they been?". It's as if this group of men are lost and he will never be able to reach them again. He watches them from a distance as though the path that could lead him back to them doesn't exist anymore and each of them had to move forward in parallel. He watches the group move away without realizing that their paths have branched off. From his view point, he watches these ghosts progress and disappear

while he lives on in another world which seems irretrievably separated from theirs. It seems impossible for the two spaces to connect again.

Gaby Delgado is much more aggressive. D.A.F.'s style is dryer, much less melancholic than Joy Division's. Gaby Delgado's shouts can sometimes sound like those of a spoilt child. You can hear him say: "I want to live now, very intensely and fully. I really want to get my kicks but it isn't possible". The result is a series of very violent songs in which "I love you" sounds more like someone announcing a forthcoming rape attempt. In one of their most beautiful songs, *Ich und die Wirklichkeit*, from 1982, Delgado belches out the words "Die Wirklichkeit kommt. Die Wirklichkeit kommt. Ich fühle mich so seltsam" which could be translated by "Reality is coming. Reality is coming and I feel strange". Gaby Delgado takes on the role of a prophet. Reality is coming and it will feel strange. We shall be like strangers and shall be unable to recognize it. According to this point of view, Postmodernism is a state which reveals historical reality in such an intense way that no-one is able to perceive it. Somehow, if D.A.F. seem like capricious children, it's because they refuse to take any responsibility for this history they have inherited, yet do not want to be considered as irresponsible. They refuse history's legacy but they have the will to create new foundations. They even truly crave responsibility here and now in the era of reality that Delgado professes but only as of from here and now.

One must remember that all of this took place between the years 1980 and 1982. The backdrop of this story is gloomy and full of pessimism. Cold Wave music plays while the Cold War is taking place. Both of these groups' names refer to the Second World War and its legacy which people are still coping with. Germany is cut in two and Great Britain is engaged in a fierce battle against the Eastern Bloc. The violence of Margaret Thatcher's economic policy and the absurdity of the Berlin wall raise doubts concerning the modern world's political legacy and its outlooks. This is the history that D.A.F. and Joy Division don't want to be part of. Instead of criticizing it or showing its flaws and paradoxes like the punk movement tried to do a few years earlier, Joy Division and D.A.F. cut themselves off from it. They purely and simply refused any legacy and tried to establish a new vocabulary with new instruments and new sounds. They wanted to grow up and create new prospects by themselves. It is because they refused their heritage that nowadays their language seems hard to understand. By refusing all legacies, they left no legacy and created the souvenir of a sombre past. Their shouts seem to have been lost in the night.

I rediscovered a song by a French band of the same era. Pulsar Noir are now completely forgotten. They were a group from Montélimar in the Drôme and they faded into oblivion after 1986, the year their singer passed away. The song is called *Plus de perspective* (No More Perspective) and dates back to 1982. The band's songs were very much influenced by D.A.F. and Joy Division. More particularly, this song describes a dream where human vision is freed from perspective and this vision seems soothing. It is therefore a question of refoundation: in this case, the refoundation of a visual system. On discovering this song, I found it very symptomatic of this era, in that the theme is similar to those of English and

German bands hundreds of miles away from France and in extremely different political contexts. I'm working on re-editing several of this group's songs and, as the quality of the existing recordings is very poor, I'd like to play *Plus de perspective* for you myself.

Plus de perspective

*In my dreams, I look straight ahead,
But there's nothing more to see
And there's nothing to hide.
No more perspective,
Rid at last of the promise of seeing everything.
Of the promise of seeing everything.
There will be nothing to hide,
Everything will be worth seeing.
Everything will be worth seeing.
The space in front of me is a burning line,
In one glance I can see there's nothing to hide behind,
Rid at last of the promise of seeing everything.
Rid at last
Of the promise of seeing everything
And nothing more to hide.
And nothing more to hide.*

Now I'd like to talk about something completely different. As you may have noticed, I'm wearing a costume which isn't very appropriate for the occasion. Or maybe the place doesn't suit the costume. In any case, it's not very practical. It's a costume that Oskar Schlemmer designed in 1928 for a play called *Stäbetanz* (The Stick Dance) (p. 305). Oskar Schlemmer formulated the question about historical perspectives differently. We have been left with a series of pictures related to his work in the Bauhaus, and to his research on the body in space, which appears in his drawings and in the choreographic work he carried out during the 1920's, mainly for his *Triadic Ballet*. Due to political differences with the Bauhaus' new directors, in 1929 he was dismissed from his position as the school's main stage director, which he had taken up since the school had moved to Dessau. After this event, Schlemmer struggled to produce his work. The economic crisis affected him severely and those who had previously supported him turned their back on him. After a last show in 1928, he never had the chance to direct the *Triadic Ballet* again. The Nazi regime prevented him from working after this. Having been advised by former Bauhaus teachers and following Joseph Albers' example, he sent some of his costumes to the MoMA in New York. He was hoping this would prompt the MoMA to invite him to join them, in the same way they had invited Albers. However, the invitation was never sent to him. In 1938, the MoMA showed the costumes in a big Bauhaus show but didn't invite him. Reading the diary Schlemmer kept during the last years of his life, one can sense a feeling of despair. He wrote he was waiting

every day for a letter from the United States which would invite him to flee Germany but he understood the letter would never come. He died in 1943. The costumes stayed in New York, and those he didn't send were stored in Stuttgart. Because of the abrupt interruption of his activity, poor Schlemmer's work wasn't totally finished. Therefore, it remains enigmatic and incomplete. This fact interests me very much, especially because his work deeply influenced the history of dance, performance and of art in general in the XXth century. All the same, his work remains difficult to interpret, in particular because throughout his career, he was divided between drawing and dance. This raises an important question: how can these costumes and all of Oskar Schlemmer's art be considered?

To answer this question partially, I'd like to make a proposition today. I'll show you a few pictures. Most of them show white and empty spaces. Actually, they're empty spaces in museums. The project would be called The Ecomuseum of Modern Man, or the Conservatory of Arts and Traditions of the Living Avant-Garde (p.306-307). The name sounds a bit complicated and maybe it is not quite right yet. However, it raises an important question, because most of the XXth century's founding events are represented by documents which don't really convey their specific quality. I have in mind the smoky ambiance of the Cabaret Voltaire, or the parties amongst friends in New York where the first Fluxus performances took place. How can we recreate the atmospheres which were important for the creation of these acts and which are so poorly documented? The question Fabro seemed to be asking us was how to make the connection between the era we are living in and the point of view of these past and future outlooks. Consequently, his question pushed us to say how we would imagine the future, what image we would convey of our past and especially what tools we would use to picture or imagine the past.

Every weekend, some very good medievalist friends of mine recreate life-sized scenes inspired by the period they're studying. Maybe it doesn't help them understand the part of history they're working on, but they do, undeniably, become conscious of what, for example, feeling cold means. Thus we could imagine meeting up every weekend amongst artists in a museum space left empty for the occasion and recreating performances, historical avant-garde experiments, or New York happenings. This project would allow us to come close to a possible perception of our history's significant moments. The traces of these events create a focal effect and prevent us from reading their many levels.

Actually, what interests me greatly in Schlemmer's work is the porosity he tried to establish between the space of the stage and the space of life. The parties organized at the Bauhaus that were of such importance to him, were opportunities to put into immediate practice some of the results of experiments he'd carried out on the stage of the school's theatre. Therefore, you could ask yourself if the costumes he made were metaphors or tools for living. Having made this Stick Dance costume and wearing it today, I have understood how difficult it is to pass through a doorway and to move about in furnished space and so it's easier for me today to imagine how complicated it must have been to go for a beer with a costume like this one on, at the end of long day of rehearsing.

Thank you for listening.