

To the reaches of the impossible...

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At the end of a scorching hot summer when old people died in their thousands because the world had abandoned them, when forests were reduced to cinders because mankind no longer knows what connects him with the earth, after a summer when American peace in Iraq turned cities into no-go areas for women, when... yes, "la France a peur le soir à vingt heures..."¹ as Mickey 3d. sang that summer, I adapted a quotation from Serge Daney: the true response to the terror which information brings to reign is the non-renunciation of pleasure. The pleasure of listening to a concert, swimming, or trying to transform these pages into a space where readers and the artist can meet. The pleasure of writing *for* and not *about* Christelle Familiari...

Part 1

I had brought along books which had for some time been attracting my attention. *Hommes-Machines, Mode d'Emploi* by the writers' collective, Tiquun, was one of them. By chance, the same editor had taken responsibility for publishing *Bon de Commande*² by Christelle Familiari, and these two works formed part of a boxed set entitled *Bug*. Chance is always called upon when human interest is involved. But which human interest, I had still to discover.

On the spot

The Tiquun book is a nervous, lucid, theoretical tract which concludes with a vision as political as it is poetic: man and the community in which he could participate are defined there as a plan that is opening. Although the description of our society sick with desire and bodies is scarcely optimistic,

it nevertheless offers a glimmer of hope on the *bushy* horizon which surrounds us: "The community of the future is a community which will free itself through the body and consequently through the words to say it". This plan echoes that of Christelle Familiari, whose works precisely touch this raw nerve of an age -hers, ours- when the body expropriated of its flesh is experienced as if in exile from desire.

Bon de Commande is a mail order catalogue. In it the reader finds pictures of woollen objects crocheted by the artist for very specific purposes: hoods for lovers, panties for penetration, or masturbation, sleeves for slow dancing, party hoods, etc. The manufactured object, photographed outside its context, has a rather enigmatic, hand-crafted appearance. But examples from the instructions are printed in it along with a contract, stipulating that the purchaser should return a photo showing how they made use of this soft, ergonomically designed knitwear. The book brings together the idea, its creation and purpose and engages both the artist and the purchaser-amateur. The contractual dimension of *Bon de Commande* arouses the consciousness of a desire which does not fade in the commercial exchange. It induces the thought of a third party on whom the desire is focused and which underlies the purchasing act. The request to return a photograph emphasises how the erotic act is about reciprocity ... rather than taking pleasure from an object!

"It"

Most of Christelle Familiari's works refute the *machine-body*, i.e. the body exiled from its desire. She creates devices that play with -and by making use of them can thus reveal- our erotic impulses, in a manner which engages her as much as the spectator-amateur. If, as Léo Ferré clamoured in 1971 "La lucidité se tient dans mon froc!"³, it is aroused in the awareness of a curious relationship between the physical and the psychic, the body and the soul as it used to be called.

An artistic proposition which manages to play on the erotic impulse in the public arena (rather like a forum for debate), *makes you stop and think somehow*, as they used to say in the seventies, and it questions the *you know what... it*, which very often takes place in the dark, and which in this age of AIDS has once again become difficult to talk about. And it's not because the media tell us that words are being exchanged between us...

The community of the future envisaged by Tiqqun will be made up of curiosities, i.e. precisely the people who know how to accomplish a *work of truth* on the relationship between their body and desire, on the quest for their own words. The tension towards this form of truth can in itself create the premisses of a life emanating from a body that has been disincarnated and formatted by medical and advertising discourse. The question Y ponders:

“Do I *want* a relationship with X?” is far more embarrassing (because of what it implies between X and Y), than the fact of finding out whether Y and X fall into the category of French couples with average sex lives, who for the most part make love twice a week! It is not in quantitative terms that one can approach the threshold of desire... in the same way that one can not think about the other and oneself as a single subject. The intentions of chance, which placed the books by Tiqqun and C.F. in my hands, are becoming clearer

Screen

Christelle Familiari demonstrates a lucidity which demands an equal lucidity from those who enjoy her art. Only in this way can we speak of its *provocative* dimension. Whilst she sings the suggestive song by Juliette Gréco *Déshabillez-moi*⁴, she draws the woollen thread from the dress that has been crocheted for the occasion which covers her nudity and slowly undoes her work in the manner of an accomplished Penelope, to offer to our gazes the expected nakedness... which doesn't happen! *Combinaison avec fermeture-éclair*⁵ envelops the artist who awaits her visitors -one at a time- in an immobile posture, offering them the possibility of a dialogue which will depend on what the person who enters into this curious one-to-one believes he is seeing; *Demande de suçons*⁶ is impressive in the sacrificial dimension of the gift -red dress and matching hood revealing the fragile part between the head and naked shoulders- and in the risk engendered by the passiveness of this waiting body, a risk turned back on the spectator who will take stock of his gesture -a cannibalistic love- if he enters the intimate zone offered here.

Just like the mesh which hides and reveals at the same time, a screen of seduction that lets past just enough to attract our attention whilst not giving away everything, the ambivalence of these works is what strikes us. That which is offered only achieves its meaning if it is refused because *it's not it*: what I give you is not what you think you are going to grab. This *contretemps* which in love could be called a *misunderstanding*, or more poetically a *chimera*, transforms the erotic fantasy into an experience if it stumbles onto the screen, held up to it here by the woman. This moment of blundering can open up the dialogue through that which it brings into question.

Inside

These performance-devices incite a tactile gaze, a gaze which is prolonged by touch, thereby overturning the mainly optical, Albertian erotic tradition, characterised by keeping its spectator at a distance. In fact, in her first installations, Christelle Familiari invested architectural spaces, and already sought a tactile perception of the architectural space through the subconscious hold it produced on the body. *Le mur qui ne sèche pas*⁷ is a distant homage to these original sources.

C.F. likes to say that she emphasises the other-; the other to whom she delegates responsibility in terms of seeing and touching. *Je m'en lave les mains*⁸ is a performance where the artist wears a dress weighed down by reproductions of her breasts, cast in soap. Suspended in pockets crocheted all around her body, each breast is uniquely cast from its own mould. An impertinent, contemporary Demeter figure or neo-fertility goddess: these breasts, sold and duly wrapped up to be taken away, can not nourish eternally. The consu-amateur finds himself in a Cornelian choice: is he going to fetishise the object and behave like a collector, or watch as the object he will soon no longer be able to see gradually melts between his fingers, defined by the compulsive pleasure that he will have of lathering this artist's breast? Tactility is thus direct here, as in the work *Entre*⁹ where C.F., suspended in a huge hand-crocheted bag, again red, waits for the punter like a sea anemone waiting for its prey, gently moving her legs in slow, sideways movements.

Tactility of slugs also, modelled one by one, which covered her hidden-and-revealed body with a knitted blanket under which lay her naked body; a tactility which recurs in the ceramic elements that form *Camouflage*.

The tactility is pursued, but now in the image, when the videos or photographs do not enable us to precisely see the area of flesh recorded and in which the eye becomes engrossed. *T'inquiète pas j'te touchera*¹⁰ pas and *Respirations* for example play skilfully with the vagueness, leaving our imagination free by avoiding any identification.

From the outset, C.F. places her activity in the post-Albertian space of a perspective that 19th and early 20th century painters gradually reversed -the world is looking at me- and formally broke down such that it became possible for man to enter into the painting, which became an environment or a situation directly addressing the public.

Interval

Tactility is just as much a quality of perception as it is a mode of representation of the space in which man moves about. Tactility is therefore a way for us to enter and participate in the world. Tactility is also at the heart of the manufacturing process that runs through the majority of these works and is reminiscent of an essentially feminine traditional craft, which leaves the mind free to wander wherever it so wishes whilst the hands are busily occupied by a totally mechanical task. What type of universe is it therefore, which Christelle Familiari allows to pass through her net?

Crosscurrent

Her manual work (crochet and modelling) brings to mind Ariadne's thread (*Déshabillez-moi*), passivity in waiting (the hour-long video *J'me tourne les pouces*¹¹)

or in the repetitive gesture which extends *Le Tapis témoin*¹² at each free moment, and the eroticism connoted by the actions of *La Tailleuse de pipe*¹³, or the closet hedonist in Caen, whilst during a conference, a man -whose expenses are paid on this occasion- seated under the table, works over her cunt. Her universe is reminiscent of the figures of fertility, passivity and sexuality which globally present the qualities of eroticism in female terms.

At the dawn of the 21st century, should we thus still be speaking of Christelle Familiari as a *female artist*? Here is a very strange category, which is all the more weird in that it concerns at least half of humanity! Has the quality of *male artist* ever been evoked for the other half? Is this not a case of sociological hypocrisy? I'll come back to this later...

What exactly is meant when the expression *female artist* comes up in conversation? Generally speaking, there is an inferred foreknowledge of the materials used (wool, thread, organic materials, etc.) and more or less the themes conveyed (the body, domestic activities, sexual aggression, etc.). In critical texts, one often reads about the issue of the *female* identity. I am reminded here of the well researched article by Griselda Pollock *Visions du sexe*, and also of the writings of Laura Cottingham on feminist art. Griselda Pollock tends to show that the woman's identity in art is articulated through a difference presented in negative or privative terms. The woman is defined in it by what she does not have, an approach which echoes orthodox, psychoanalytical discourse from Freud to Lacan. I'm not going to spell it out for you here! Laura Cottingham stands in juxtaposition, as feminist art can only be considered from the angle of refusal of the patriarchal system... which clearly allows it no autonomy!

Womankind?

Of course, our Judeo-Christian heritage scarcely seems to have offered any choice in the possible identifications of what would define *womankind*. Eve the sinner and mother of humanity gave birth to a murderous offspring. Mary cancelled out Eve's sin, but she turns out to be a saint and a virgin. All that is left therefore is the whore Mary Magdalene, who nevertheless repented -on this subject, read the celebratory text by Daniel Arasse, *On n'y voit rien*.

In the early 20th century, Lou Andréas-Salomé noted that there is very little difference between the Madonna and the prostitute, as both involve the gift of self without the slightest possibility of choice. Unless... unless you re-read the Bible with the psychoanalyst Marie Balmary. An in-depth, philological study of the Annunciation enabled her to identify an act of speech by Mary which places her as an *unsubmissive* subject: as a free subject. Mary questions the miracle that is announced to her, "But how can that be, for I know no man?". It is only after having mentioned the need for a third party -the man- forgotten by Eve, that she accepts in the first person -what good translations transcribe as- the birth foretold.

This interpretation moves the question of the woman's identity towards a more open issue-: that of the possibility of becoming a free subject, consequently capable of inviting a relationship with the other, as symbolised by the Holy Spirit which descended upon Mary.

- This is all very well! But what does that mean in practice?

- Well, I'm starting to think that the ways in which eroticism form part of Christelle Familiari's works enables us to go beyond the female artist and identity issues to an open ground cleared by the re-interpretation of the Annunciation by Marie Balmory! This would generate a shift from the issue of sex as a gender, to enable that which leads in creation to becoming authoress of one's work to break through, or put another way, to become the subject of one's words... This is not at all easy in itself and deserves a detour via that which sexuality, the basis of eroticism, brings into play. The need for this new digression will bring us back, as a reward for our patience, to the artist's most recent artistic propositions.

Part 2

Lou Andréas-Salomé's thoughts on eroticism are somewhat disturbing. His style seems to arise from a great wave which gradually carries the reader through the mirror of the psyche. His discourse takes place from the outset in a sexual arena, stopping short of the question of gender, to present us with his initial astonishment when faced with the amorous sexual act. Astonishment when faced with the reality of 'transportation' that was rendered opaque by Eros' meanderings and which very often leave us mere mortals lost for words.

Ars erotica

The paradoxical experience which we undergo in the sexual act is indeed perplexing. There is an even greater sense of being lost as the body is overwhelmed by the intoxicating effect of the encounter with another body, which reveals one to oneself!

The body is this gangway crossed by the sexual act which connects it to the pulsation of the cosmos. The arch which this liaison describes is the impulse, the boundary concept as Freud wrote, between the physical and the psychic. The impetus which drives the body surmounts the divide which is gradually created, from birth and during the early years, between these two poles. The time for love is the time for forgetting the separation of birth, this traumatic experience when life and death are inseparably linked. Eros fulfils a primary, narcissistic function-: that of leading each of us towards an old, archaic depth before the moment of our birth.

The process which leads a being to speak in the place of their desire, to become the subject of their words, is achieved by means of these primitive depths to which only eroticism provides the key. Sexuality is the privileged entrance. We are born neither man nor woman, but become them. A gradual learning process is required in order to differentiate what is feminine and masculine based on this initially bisexual, archaic basis. The accomplished being fluctuates between the two according to situations.

The acknowledgement of this fundamental ambivalence -*androgyny* according to Elisabeth Badinter- is part of the journey which leads to the identification of the sexual subject: neither object nor natural phenomenon, but a differentiated, free subject. This is the condition required to open up the space for dialogue between I and You.

Sexuality is a form of personal experience at the crux of the physical and the psychic, which embraces our entire relationship with the animal, social and spiritual world.

Tracing back a dynamic situation experienced in the flesh, like the experience of a “web”, where the heart and the body are joined in words, is a perilous exercise. But this is where I identify with Christelle Familiari, for I feel that in the evolution of her work, I can see a journey through this kind of experience.

The end of a cycle

Some of her creations present an ambivalence between the feminine/masculine poles. The form of *Siège bi-place*¹⁴ has a quite androgynous ambiguity. Depending on the state of mind of the person who is looking at it, one can see the parts of a feminine or masculine sex. And her most recent developments display qualities in complete contrast to the initial provocations. After a gestation period with *Camouflage* and *Étendue*¹⁵ (video film), Christelle Familiari clearly manifests signs of aggressiveness. Hence the performance ∞: three hours spent naked from the waist up, under a costume covered with sharp points which connects her immobile body to the sky and the earth, bare footed, anchored on the ground; *Munitions*, grenades made from nylon thread to be placed in the shopping basket were used in the video *Vis-à-vie*¹⁶; *Le Repli*¹⁷ presents an ambiguous body, neither feminine nor masculine, but both depending on the lighting, which is gradually enclosed by spiked rings and metamorphoses into a sort of beast of war which gradually closes in on itself. *À l'affût*¹⁸ displays an androgynous body, squeezed in at the waist in similar rings which the hand caresses or forms, to the disturbing background noise which would lead you to believe in the possible jubilation of the wearer according to the old adage *qui s'y frotte s'y pique*¹⁹! With these latest works, we sense a cycle which is drawing to a close, a cycle in which after playing with feminine schemes, the artist embraces a register with signs of a controlled aggressiveness, judging from the materials used (bobbins, nylon thread, Sellotape and aluminium foil).

Alternating between the demonstration of passive and active qualities, I would say that C. F. accomplishes an initiatory journey which reaches beyond the questions of identity posed by a *female artist*: "... active and passive, beyond roles or even sexual stereotypes created by our age and society, are terms which define the position of the subject in relation to its own desire and its own truth." writes Leslie Kaplan. The past ten years can be seen as stages in a gradual differentiation, on which the practice of her *ars erotica* is founded: an art of conditions which make possible the relationship with the other.

It is certainly not a relationship of a relational aesthetic nature which judging by what it covers is nowadays reminiscent of works that are often phatic, simply reassuring themselves of the presence of the other, when they are not the cause of it that is! The relationship we have here is from the outset presented as the creation of a space of desire, where in language terms an I postulates a You. The creation of such spaces is the only possibility nowadays to escape the publicity-grabbing refrain of bio-powers which take us back to the pleasure principle.

Commitment?

Nowadays, just as in the 1970s, the banner of desire advocates a seditious call... with just one fundamental difference, that the freedom to be won can no longer be taken to be motivated by an increase in the potential for pleasure which was thought should serve as a lever (!!!) to transform the world. "Free love" was the watchword. «Sexual liberation? It's a con» was what Lacan supposedly answered, someone who never missed a trick.

According to Tiqqun, "It is therefore no longer about becoming a *militant, rebel* or *revolutionary*: one first has to be free in order to be able to become whatever". Free? That is to say the subject whose words well up from the very flesh of its body, towards its desire which is the condition for the relationship between an I and a You, the condition for a future community in a present experienced as an opening onto what is possible. C.F.'s journey is similar to Tiqqun's commitment towards this real freedom, anchored in the form of life of an incarnate word.

In art terms, it speaks of the end of the progressive vision of a new world of the future, a position still being defended by François Pluchart with regard to body art in 1974. C.F.'s art is not committed in the sense of the avant-gardes. If it is critical, it is in the manner of poetry, since postulating a universe which marks out the stages of the assumption of a free subject, it demonstrates that it is plausible for everyone to escape their instrumentalisation into manipulable, consumable, dissectable, quantifiable objects.

Promise

By anchoring the plan of a work in the *I-You* relationship, a space is opened up which is in itself subversive, where no empirical, usable knowledge,

in terms of an experiment *on* or even *with* is possible. *That world is not made up of things*. The promise of such a plan could be seen in the first self portrait in 1995, where the gesture of the right hand pressed against the temple in the form of a gun is explained by the title: *Je tue je*²⁰. The action described consists of releasing I from Me to enable the You to appear. The start of a community, *I-You*, passes through the body which has found its words. By testing her limits, Christelle Familiari has journeyed to the reaches of what is possible.

Her journey can be seen as the surpassing of the question of identity, the primary narcissistic figure, to become expression of desire for another speaking being. And I love the political opening which this creates, not optimistic for sure, but of the only possible lucidity after the fall of the Berlin Wall...

- 1 Literally 'France is afraid at eight in the evening', time of the main TV news broadcast • 2 Order Form
- 3 «Lucidity is waiting in my trousers!» • 4 «Undress me» • 5 Zip-up overalls • 6 Asking for lovebites
- 7 The wall which will not dry • 8 I wash my hands of it • 9 Between / Come in •10 Don't worry, I won't touch you
- 11 I twiddle my thumbs •12 The corroborating carpet •13 The pole smoker •14 Seat with two places •15 Spread out
- 16 Encounter with life •17 The recess •18 On the lookout
- 19 Literally «-if you touch it you'll get stung-», you'll get what you deserve. •20 I kill I

By order of appearance in the text

- _Mickey 3d, *La France a peur* in the album *Mistigri Torture*, 1999 mickey 3d/p box
- _Leslie Kaplan, *Les Outils*, POL, 2003, p.23
- _Tiqqun, *Hommes-Machines, Mode d'emploi*, Michel Baveray éditeur, Nantes 1999
- _Christelle Familiari, *Bon de commande*, Michel Baveray éditeur, 1999
- _L'Épongistes Robic.Roesz
- _Léo Ferré, *La Solitude* in the album *La mémoire et la mer*, Barclay, 1973
- _D.H.Lawrence, *Pornographie et obscénité*, Mille et une Nuits, 2001
- _Lacan, *Encore, Le Séminaire livre XX*, Seuil, 1975
- _Griselda Pollock, *Visions du sexe in Où en est l'interprétation de l'art contemporain?*, ENSBA, 2000
- _Laura Cottingham, *Are you experienced? Le féminisme, l'art et le corps politique*, in *L'art au corps, le corps exposé de Man Ray à nos jours*, Musées de Marseille, RMN, 1996
- _Daniel Arasse, *La Toison de Madeleine* in *On n'y voit rien*, Denoël, 2000
- _Marie Balmary, *La Divine Origine, Dieu n'a pas créé l'homme*, Livre de Poche, biblio Essais, 1993
- _Lou Andréas-Salomé, *Éros*, Minuit, 1984
- _Lou Andréas-Salomé, *Lettre ouverte à Freud*, Points Seuil, 1994
- _Elisabeth Badinter, *XY*, Livre de Poche, 1992
- _Martin Buber, *Je et Tu*, Aubier, 1969
- _Leslie Kaplan, *Les Outils*, POL 2003, p.180
- _François Pluchart, *L'Art corporel*, ed. Rodolphe Stadler, 1974