

Flow

[Flow, exhibition by artist-in-residence Robbin Deyo at La Chambre Blanche in Québec, from May 8th to May 31st, 2009]

There is nothing deeper than skin.
Paul Valéry, *l'Idée fixe*

A continuous flow

To enter and follow. To choose a point of reference – know it will be lost. To circulate, from one wall to the next, to follow an intermittent line, along curves and straightness. The movement could take on the dimensions of a lifetime / if disequilibrium did not hinder us at some point.

This installation by Robbin Deyo first presents itself at the surface. On the walls of *La Chambre Blanche*, regular waves unfurl – like a flag, Henri Michaux would say – one after the other, one above the other. With fluctuating intensity, they unwind and unroll over the walls, creating a vertiginous circling motion that only breaks where architecture “fails”; doors/windows/breathing.

But the line flows: it is up to the eye to reconstruct those spaces left empty, to extend the strands in order to reach the other side. In the middle of the room, a pillar. In a similar way to the surrounding walls’ division of space, its east and west sides are striped with straight lines, while the north and south sides are ribbed by undulating lines.

And the eye begins to see, beyond the surface or, more precisely, within the surface.

A loss takes place, enabling us to forget the referent; following architectural details, these lines, seemingly painted (and indeed, Robbin used a brush to patiently elaborate this double-entry system), unfold in depth, as if it was less about covering the walls than uncovering their internal structure. As if, during her residence at *La Chambre Blanche*, Robbin Deyo did not paint the walls, but rather dug up the building whose structure has been uncovered in order to reveal the strata now emerging from the naked surfaces.

In the windows’ hollow, a crucible of light. A crucible of matter too. An additional dimension is revealed: within the horizontal openings, the lines’ pattern is broken, allowing long solid reds to spread. A window like a cliff, a solid color to be experienced like an outcrop. A point of entry in the stratum.

If *in situ* means to fit into a given, a built structure and its history, then this work switches the equation’s terms around, seizing upon the architecture to embody itself.

[Her head swells, swells, her back bends, warps, frays and flaps as the wind enters the open window.]

Fragments of dimensions

In the project presented at *La Chambre Blanche*, Robbin Deyo ventures into scales she has not used frequently in her work so far: the colonization of the entire gallery space’s dimensions is a new move for the Canadian artist.

New, though, only partly; there had already been, in a previous project (Plein Sud, Longueuil, December 2008), an overflow, a sketch, a few lines laid out. As if the pieces could no longer be contained by their own support, canvas or mould, and that one of them had slipped almost imperceptibly onto the wall. So as, it has been said, to free itself –just for a few lines– from the material and its constraints.

It would be futile here to look for a constraint other than inclination. A considerable constraint, however, that requires the twisting of bodies and tools – at least for the making of the work: tools were multiplied, deployed, the Spirograph took on dimensions that could no longer be fitted back into its colored case from childhood, a small and well-ordered case where were aligned tiny wheels for tiny sheets of paper. This toy, so orderly and so reasonable in the application of the rules of symmetry in the elaboration of complex graphic constructions, was becoming, in Robbin Deyo's hands, the instrument of a fascinatingly unstable propulsion.

Propulsion. The word has an interior, heavy sound (with the exception of the "s" that hits the tongue, while vowels and others send us toward the back of the throat). Nevertheless, this is what we are looking for: "Pro", as in a push forward - the thick red lines could emerge from the same capillary movement as ink rising to the surface of a blotting-paper, as if gushing out of the exuding wall -, and "pulsion", both in the sudden impulse and in the regularity of the repeated movement, both pulsations of the heart – one, brutal, signaling the disruption of its previous state and referring to the emotive heart; the other, biological, the pulsation/pulse repeated and ordinarily regular.

Ordinarily regular. The regularity is in the waves, whose undulations gain in amplitude while ascending and become thinner as they plunge back. Only to swell up again in their next ascent. And so on and so forth. North and South sides.

The curve here is far from unbridled. Quite the contrary, the curve is tamed, regulated, set: in order to give measure to the tracings, the Spirograph is shifted 13 notches at every new curve. Hence the possible imaginary extension: without seeing it, we would easily be able to anticipate the impending inclination, simply by following the regularity of the flow. Hence also, the sense of a possible deregulation. A rule always comprises exceptions, and it cannot be said that a river's apparently calm waters never overflow.

Something could happen that...

[What troubles me is something else.

It is the strange changes, sometimes, all of a sudden.]

And the thick red lines could be different.

Robbin Deyo's previous exhibition was entitled "Les petits bouleversements de la vie" (Life's Little Upsets). Tiny variations, a suite by Bach in F major we are never certain won't turn into D minor: a thickness heavier here, a stroke less curved there, a set of elements more dense up there. It was a project without catastrophe – though the space remained open to disruption. Potentially.

At *La Chambre Blanche*, the fluctuations remain constant. Until further notice, we could say: until the next time.

The evocative aspect of the work remains subtle, though. This piece is not about oneself; self-portrait is out of question, no childhood narrative is told by the reinvention of the Spirograph, and no life story takes place in between these lines.

This might be the strongest link between Robbin Deyo's work and Op Art, the 1960s art movement that grew out of the will to render, more than the landscape itself, the dynamic

forces that structure it, forces “freed from their descriptive role or function”, as Bridget Riley, one of the movement’s leader, wrote. Shapes and colors here become the visual field’s ultimate identity, and paint transcribes a pure gaze where the artist’s presence is not manifest. Pieces of art with no signature, “landscape-works”, to borrow Deleuze’s expression (*œuvres-paysages*), that can be understood as a collection of structuring features of which the artist is nothing but the conveyor/vector.

In the field of drama, we would speak of Tchekov, his characters so well-drawn that we would be able to imagine them, their presence and flesh, the words that are theirs and that define them in their individuality. In opposition, Beckett and his sexless character-types, the clown – far, very far, from the red-nosed version – is the man with no memory, the character grown out of nothing more – or less – than the forces of life, conveying, yet being possessed by, these same forces. His gestures are the essence. His story, if it exists, can be that of his counterpart, you, me or anybody else.

Robbin Deyo’s work has a name – inscribed at the entrance of *La Chambre Blanche*: “*In situ* residence, *Flow*”. But, from the inside, there remains a possibility for anonymity, for an unnamed story where forces are narrated with neither description nor psychology.

[Then, the forest seemed to grow thicker, the nature of the contact changed //

The forest is the beast.]

From place to (ga)me.

We could wander in this room for a long time. Come in and follow, as was said earlier. Go from one line to the wave that extends from it, but your eyes may get lost.

This is also what is at stake here. Through successive adjustments of focus, from one line to the entire set that comprises it, from the singular to the common –and back –, the eye is constantly looking for balance. To cut out a sky of wax, in a multitude of little pieces of sky made of wax; to create a floral mural through the juxtaposition of a myriad of small pastel flowers made of wax; we find repeatedly in Robbin Deyo’s work this tension between the one and the all, between the unit of a motif and the whole it, in part, composes. In and out, zoom in/zoom out, and find a way to position ourselves inside this exitless setting.

In or out, how to clearly distinguish, though, between what pertains to the interior and what remains external.

[For a long time, he believed to be still walking through the exhausting hot wind that seemed to blow from all sides and would agitate the trees like snakes, in the always immutable twilight, following the trail of blood hardly visible on the ground shaken by a regular tremor – going, on his own, to battle against the beast. (...)Then, the forest seemed to grow thicker, the nature of the contact changed, the caress became measurable (...) He knew he had never run so fast.]

Herakles walks and chases, he chases blindly the abyss within.

[(...) The forest was the beast.]

The monster he is after is the space he treads. This is Nestiade’s final warning to Oedipus, under the fatal attraction of the Labyrinth and its Minotaur: you will not be able to fight it, the monster is already within you.

And how can we not feel this porosity, this sense of unity with the place we enter? Already, we referred to the ambiguous path that leads us to slip from the surface and enter the depth, as if exploring the strata of the building. This confusion does not, however, seem to leave any doubt about the exteriority of the world we enter: if the depth of the lines still remains

undetermined, in both options my steps do set apart the “me” from the observed environment. Nevertheless, the border could be blurred and the place become “me” ... But we now must discuss the red and its various thicknesses.

“The unbounded warmth of red has not the irresponsible appeal of yellow, but rings inwardly with a determined and powerful intensity. It glows in itself, maturely, and does not distribute its vigor aimlessly.”

The words chosen by Kandinsky to describe color elude the field of geometry, for that of pigmentation; he is not using any pictorial vocabulary; this is about energy, maturity, vigor and intensity, the color becomes a vibrant organ of the composition, a moving force. And from there, the painter enters an almost organic description of the range of reds, one sounding like “trumpets, strong, harsh, and ringing”, another “sufficiently strong to keep the colour from flippancy”, and another like “the sad, middle tones of a cello”, to describe, as we would for variations on a theme, the impact of color on bodily things.

If I selected these almost exclusively sound-related images from Kandinsky’s essay, it is not so much because this is the only aspect the painter explores to demonstrate the materiality of color – although it does take a central role in his approach to color –, but when entering the project space of *La Chambre* (originally “*Blanche*”, white), it is obvious that we are dealing with vibrations. And these vibrations could just as well be conveyed by sound.

“When two things meet, they create a vibration in the air / and produce a sound. Attack, decline, uphold, let go./ (...) The sound – trace of existence- is the sign of a visit.” These words left by Mamuro Okuno during his residence at *La Chambre Blanche* last November, resonate with Robbin’s work. Any one body starts to vibrate with the space it crosses; here, it is impossible to come in without vibrating. In the straight lines that cover the east and west-oriented walls, how can we not see musical staves, where the fugue, rather than being recorded between the lines, would be deported to the north and south walls, producing these long waves in which the eye gets so easily lost?

Musical writing, the sound-like texture of these waves, at times seismic and at times radiophonic, depending on the way we understand the space – the way the space comprises us.

To the question of the choice of color which, like a material that we see constructed before our eyes, evolving according to fluctuating desires of color, variable concentrations of pigments, taking on numerous textures, Robbin Deyo answers with this clear gesture of the wrist. Once again, the organic, since it’s from there, according to customary codes, flows life, through streams of blood-colored red. Would the project space, in this way occupied, thus be a transposition of this internal effervescence, like a projection of the flows animating us?

“Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the harmonies, the soul is the piano with many strings.” In this three-fold orchestration, Kandinsky leaves open the fields of interpretation; we must play the game and trust, just like we would do for an author just discovered and of whom we have no expectations:

Come in and follow, because what will resonate is a function of you.

Coline Ellouz