

Bastien Gallet

AN HOUR IN THE LIFE OF ALAIN BUBLEX

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An exhibition would have been the best way to begin. There's no shortage of them, and if they happen to look alike, even to the point of encroaching on each other, each is distinctive too, in the sense of being a work. Which no doubt raises the questions any vaguely conscientious visitor to an Alain Bublex exhibition is going to ask himself. What should he like? Where should the eye come to rest? On the objects showed, one by one, despite sometimes a enormous diversity extending to time-yellowed polaroids, a Triumph in working order, large-format digital prints, architects' renderings, hot dog stands and pseudo-old postcards? On the series, which often run on from one exhibition to another, like the landscape photos with Mount Fuji invariably in the background, or the vector graphics reproductions of missing works – two series whose purpose is different (the first hinging on the invariance of a background, the second on the repetition of a reproduction method), but whose end is the same: the originals become simple variations (sundry ordinary photographs turn into "Mount Fuji landscapes"; works differing in style, period and subject become a series of "computer drawings" on the verbal model of "charcoal drawings")? On the exhibition itself as allegory of photographic practice ("15 Years of Painting" at the CCC in Tours in 2010); of reproducibility ("Mounts Fuji & Other Bridges") at the Vallois Gallery in 2009, which had no qualms about quoting from earlier exhibitions in the same gallery, as if the space needed to remember those who had inhabited it); or of the city *in general* ("Glooscap" of course, but also – since the allegory covers several exhibitions – "Plug-in City", "Plan Voisin", "Project for Giving Lyon Back Its Fogs", "Living 2050" and others I've doubtless forgotten)?

The time of objects

Visiting an Alain Bublex exhibition poses problems of adaptation. But isn't this true of lots of Contemporary Art exhibitions, whether mounted by artists or curators? Bublex isn't the only one to overtax the object, which can be described – if I may generalize to this point – as having been

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of two kinds in the course of the last century: in the first instance as a clue to a process of which it was said to be the trace (and the impossible charting), or in the second as a moment in or a part of a limitless ensemble in its own right (the work as life). Bublex, though, seems to successfully skirt these two tropisms. His objects are in a certain way irreducibly themselves, in the sense that they are not separable from what we might call, to tweak an expression from Marcel Duchamp, the time of the fabrication. This time, while often excessive in terms of the object itself, nonetheless remains equal to the demands the latter makes, or more precisely still, to its size. For Bublex the object is less an index or a part – both ways of devaluing it by subsuming it under broader categories within which its sole possible status is that of an accident – than a stop. This stop can be historically produced (the Fiat 126), in which case it will be shown either that another stop might have been possible (the *Aerofiat*) or that we need to return to a stop never put into effect (the *Meunier-Béraud car*). It can also be deliberately brought about by a pure and simple suspending of activity (*I:24*), a coupling (*Plug-in City (2000)*) or a montage ("*Mounts Fuji & Other Bridges*"). Each time these operations produce one or more objects – the ones you see at the exhibitions – but not without deobjectivising them (which certainly does not mean dematerialising them) at the same time.

True, adding a Bridge or an image of Mount Fuji to these anodyne photographs turns them into landscapes, and maybe even potential postcards – Bublex stops the process before the postcard object actually takes shape – but the effect of the montage is to render visible something other than what the images actually show: their fabrication. Mount Fuji is as much a part of the image as it is the agent that transforms a banal photograph of a street running down to the sea into a typical ideal landscape. Here it's less a matter of gluing images together in the way English Pop Art did, than of coupling pictorial practices or genres (and the diversely colourful worlds they conjure up): in this case amateur photography and the Japanese print. Similarly, when Bublex sets out to build a life-size mo-

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del of the Meunier-Béraud, the first sedan minivan in automobile history – handmade just after the Second War by a mechanic and his carpenter brother-in-law, starting with a Citroën convertible (a genuine coupling, that) – he doesn't just settle for never finishing it (which is one of the ways of not objectivising it). In order to never finish it he avails himself of the resources and time frame of the *exhibition* by showing the model at the point its development has reached at the end of the time it took to set it up: the sole time during which he continues with his work of construction, the time frame of the gallery also providing an *analogue* of the vernacular time which was that of the construction of the original. The object on show, which differs in each exhibition by the time it took to set it up – the difference being a temporal one – couples two time frames and so renders them perceptible: the craftsmanly time frame in as far as it is applied to an industrial object and blocks its completion, incompleting and short-circuiting it via industrial development, i.e. in the form of a people mover documented forty years upstream of its fabrication by a car manufacturer; and the artistic-commercial time frame of the gallery, which for obvious economic reasons has to limit the setting-up time. And so Alain Bublex's objects are on several occasions diverse in character, several times different from themselves, and identical at the time of their fabrication: the difference hinging as much on the time frames they bring into play as on the physical realities they couple.

Halfway

This rigorous deobjectivisation is anything but a denial or a devaluing of the object. On the contrary, it lays bare the complex arrangement of ideas, operations and matters the object is. What Bublex makes manifest is the autotelic illusion, the one that governs our relationship with the works as much as with the industrial object. No difference from this point of view between the merchandise gleaming in the store window and the art object as self-proclaimed subject of its own history. Both are no more than outcomes, and these outcomes could have been quite different. The

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contingency of the "finished" is often due to the attentiveness of the finishing touches. Indeed, what is more "perfect" and at the same time more contingent than a model? Obviously I'm thinking here of *I:24*, the unfinished model – stopped during construction – whose stand took as long to fabricate as the model itself would have. The lack of completion of one thing becomes the excess of completion of the other. The "masterpiece" lies in the stand – which monopolises the visible, and our attention – but what sparks our curiosity is the model. The work of art – which with no trace of irony doesn't give a damn about being an artwork – is literally halfway between "masterpiece" (what else would you put on a stand like this one?) and car model, somewhere between Paris and Tokyo (which is said to look like nowhere at all, as a photo shows) when you're doing the trip in a Renault Espace (as in *Wabi sabi Experience*, in progress at this writing). While no interspace, this halfway is certainly a meanwhile, but that's not the important thing. The halfway is space read as the concrete duration the idea needs to expound itself in detail. Not the idea of the model, which at best would be a vague metaphor – the artist putting together his marvellous and imperfect models with gleanings from all over the place – but what it becomes halfway, in the course of a fabrication suddenly stopped the way the official photographer suddenly stops just anywhere to fill his quota. For at the halfway mark the idea is quite different. The model, which we can only think of as finished or in pieces (in its box or on a shelf) thrusts unexpected shapes before our eyes when we stop in time (the moment of stopping being decisive indeed): all those shapes that make possible the *beautiful* shape the car will finally take on, especially by dealing with the technical constraints that dictate the association of this passenger compartment with that curve in the bodywork. Unfinished, the model calls forth a new formal space – that of the shapes that the *beautiful* shape demands – but an unstable, problematical space: these shapes are not space in the same sense as the other one, for they are miscellaneous, still labile, and waiting to be subsumed into the contingency beneath.

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Once successfully through the fabrication, whose tempo must be rigorously controlled, the ideas appear: an idea of art (functioning at the halfway mark) and an idea of form (as degree of stability or cuts in a process, with other cuts causing other forms to surface), and maybe even an idea of the idea (to be subjected to the *sudden stop* test). The question is no longer What is to be done (what work, what idea)? but Where and when to cut? What to couple with what, and how?

Ideas of the fabrication

Marcel Duchamp too had his "idea of the fabrication", but he understood the association of the two terms quite differently. "The idea of the fabrication", a note contained in the "Box of 1914" and reused in the "Green Box" under the title "3 Standard Stops = *Canned Chance*", states the hypothesis governing the *3 Standard Stoppages*¹ of 1913: "If a horizontal thread one meter long falls from the height of one meter onto a horizontal plane, twisting as it pleases, it creates a new image of the unit of length."² As formulated the hypothesis has no second part, the clause after the "if-clause" having been replaced by a simple coordinate clause "If...and" instead of "If...then". The idea maintains the experiment, and thus the fabrication, in the register of the possible. And what we take for the realization of the hypothesis, i.e. the *3 Standard Stop-pages*, is no more than the perceptible figuration of a still pure possibility.

Duchamp's problem, as I see it, is this: How to fabricate ("to can") a possibility without effectuating it? We know his reply: with the aid of chance. Here chance lies in the fall: there can be no knowing exactly what shape each thread, affected by air molecules, will take on once it reaches the floor. The three possibilities, which it only remains to glue onto the mounted strips of canvas with drops of varnish, are thus at the same time pure and effectuated, canned (in a croquet box), indefinitely repeatable (thanks to the three rulers that reproduce the shapes taken on by the threads) and, *ipso facto*, potential producers of infrathin spaces (between the reproduced lines). In other words the idea – that of creating "a new

¹ three threads in a croquet box are attached to strips of canvas mounted on sheets of glass. Each forms a different curve. The curves are reproduced on three rulers with which one can then, at one's leisure, trace a reproduction of the lines created by threads.

² Marcel Duchamp, "3 Standard Stops = *Canned Chance* (1914)", in Pontus Hulten (ed.) "Marcel Duchamp", London, Thames and Hudson, 1993, pp. 32-33.

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image of the unit of length" – must remain possible, hypothetical, while at the same time perceptible. The object does not realise the hypothesis, it simply exposes it as such, in all the potency of its possible resolutions. Which has certain fascinating consequences – such as that of "*brûler toute esthétique*" ("Aesthetics to the Stake")³ – which I cannot go into here.

The problem raised by Alain Bublex, it seems to me, is quite different. Its hypothesis is none other than the actual confrontation of codes with practices, and thus with the accompanying ideas. His projects – inventing some city or other on a real site (*Glooscap*), travelling from Paris to Tokyo in a sedan minivan (*Wabi sabi Experience*), organizing a steel promotion campaign to save the factories in Pittsburgh (*Buy Steel*), working with Samsung on the design of a camera that does not take the photo visible in the viewfinder (*Awareness Box*) – are not hypotheses, but experiments that must be carried out: not to test their relevance *a posteriori*, but because along the way they will lead us elsewhere, bring other possibilities to the surface and give shape to new ideas. Here the idea can only be a result that we must extricate from the irreducible jumble of what the experiment has produced. This is why there is no contradiction for Alain Bublex to maintain ongoing projects (such as fascinating *Projekte auf kleiner Flamme*). You actually have to build a city to get an idea of what's involved, and actually carry out Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin to gauge its consequences (as well as the underlying idea, which was less utopian than it seemed). In this sense Bublex's works possess a certain allegorical dimension. The intelligibility of what is offered us is not to be looked for elsewhere, on some other ideal or symbolic plane: it is exactly the set of what the experiment has produced, but a set whose meaning cannot be totalized. The allegory is the name of the idea of the nowhere-to-be-found total of the work's moments – moments which nonetheless relate its history. To put it another way – a *Benjaminesque* way – the allegory gives rise to such a gap between letter and spirit that it becomes pure exposition, mute sign. If there is any meaning here, it is to be constructed locally and step by step, or else by scanning in the manner of Fredric Ja-

³ see Bastien Gallet, "*Brûler toute esthétique*", in "*In actu. De l'expérimental dans l'art*", les presses du réel/École supérieure d'art d'Annecy, Brussels, 2009, p.65 sqq.

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meson, for whom the allegorical interpretation imposed by some contemporary installations comes across as a "kind of scanning that, moving back and forth across the text, readjusts its terms in constant modification...as a constant movement from one item to another in which each term, as it confronts one of the other three, finds its value and its meaning subtly or not so subtly modified."⁴ But Bublex is more radical or, to express it differently, he has less faith in art than those who fabricate authentic allegories. Aesthetics has long been reduced to ashes, so what's the point of burning it again? Because he invents nothing, but rather collects and aligns end to end, Bublex goes one better than those who labour: in his case it's reality that's allegorical.

Photographic practices

Recently Bublex made a thematic return to his early practice of photography, which preceded his artistic debut by several years. The exhibition in 2010 at the Centre for Contemporary Creativity (CCC) in Tours, France, was titled "15 Years of Painting" and brought together examples of all his uses of photography. Much more than a simple retrospective, this was a veritable allegory of contemporary photography and described better than many other exhibitions the constellation that is today's idea of photography: an irreducible diversity of practices, subjects, media, apparatuses, métiers, etc. which one person can sometimes encompass without subsuming them under a single style, genre or technical gambit. This presentation of polaroids and digital prints included the documentary and the artistic, the fake and the real, one-offs and series, the dialogic and the experimental, decisive and retouched moments, chance and *mise-en-scène* – in short, every practical register in the contemporary discipline. But this in itself doesn't make an exhibition, much less an allegory. To grasp what was involved I had to go see, check out the *Triumph* and the *Awareness Box*, stop in the first big room to look at the amateur polaroids from Bublex's time as a designer for Renault. In a way everything's already there in a series of flawlessly banal views ready to serve as supports for ever

⁴ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", Duke University Press, 1990, p. 176.

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more complex operations, but in fact solely intended to put the views on display: to leaf through by stripping back – using ever-different methods, techniques and points of view – the landscape they make visible and they images they are. And it would be enough just to look over your shoulder and see, on the opposite wall, what these pre-art snapshots would become fifteen years down the track: landscapes – indicated as such by the presence of Mount Fuji – and monuments on the verge of vanishing, enveloped by the architectural utopia of *Plug-in City* (2000). Two walls and an entire history of photography.

This history deliberately ignores the fundamental dichotomy – basically responsible for the split in photographic practice – between Daguerre and Bayard: 1839, and the Academy of Science and François Arago against the Academy of Fine Art and Désiré Raoul-Rochette. That is to say, between glass sheet and paper, between focus and fuzziness (or blur). Bublex begins his history upstream of this dichotomy – which he unfailingly ignored, art being for him, among other things, a different way of looking at science (and *doing* science) – in the undefined field of amateur practice. For fifteen years it was – as it still is – the *basso continuo* of his work: both a near inexhaustible source of shapes and materials and a daily log of projects and changes of place. The art of Alain Bublex, of this compulsive, not yet artistic practice, could be described as simply a long, varied modulation.

To the artist-photographer's perennial question (which photographers almost never ask themselves) – how to get free of the document? – artists have responded by overstressing either the commonplace or the expressive. Bublex's answer is: by starting prior to the document, then working through its subjects, forms, techniques and protocols. This is because for him the document is never pure (there always remains the possibility of its documenting nothing) or transparent (it always displays the circumstances of its documentary power). His first real artist's photos were thus fakes, taken by someone else: the possible – but also totally real – *Glooscap* photographer John Vanderpant. And when he sets out to

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document a work – I’m thinking here of those photos of the *Aerofiat* in town, parked between two cars or caught in traffic – the result is strangely like photomontage. Fabricating an impossible car – impossible if you subscribe to the laws of industrial development – is in fact less surprising than seeing it actually running. This is – forgive me the digression – one of the most striking features of Bublex’s prototypes, as distinct, for example, from those of Panamarenko: they work. The *Aerofiat* actually runs – you can test-drive the *Bob Job* (at your own risk, with a test contract that’s a real deterrent) – and the *Awareness Box* actually does take pictures.

As I see it the *Awareness Box* designates the third major figure – after the amateur stuff and working through the document – in his allegory of photography. This apparatus, whose design he worked on with Samsung’s experts in overt contradiction with the demands of the photography industry, is pared down to its optical device: through it the eye sees images the camera cannot photograph. *Contra* most of the theoreticians for whom the chemical operation of recording appearances is the critical moment of the photographic process – which for them clearly references a rationale of the imprint, whether Roland Barthes’ *punctum* or Rosalind Krauss’ concept of indexicality – Bublex makes photography an ocular prosthesis, an eye capable of giving shape and permanence to the gaze. It is the eye, and not the silver salts, that bring visibility, for it is the eye that moves and seeks the point of view, then frames and cuts out what is to be seen in the undefined field of the visible before finally deciding on the decisive moment of the shutter’s opening: this is the time frame that interests Bublex, that of movement and the untimely cut, of the wandering and sudden coupling of an eye with a fragment of space destined to become landscape. This and not the past of bodies imprisoned by silver salts, unless a new stop, a new coupling reintegrates these bodies into duration – a different duration, that of a series, a fictive city or an exhibition. To rediscover that time in what has been gradually reified is one of the great ambitions of his work as an artist.

The fourth and last figure in this counter-history could be des-

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cribed as that of the personae, whose regular succession seems to follow the gradual slope of ever more obvious intervention in and on the visible. There was the amateur, then the art photographer of *Glooscap*, the traveller-explorer (a mix of Maxime Du Camp and Auguste Salzman), the landscape artist – and finally the official photographer. The one who gets around the landscape in an official, red and white-striped car, performing an activity free of all function: taking photos. *Sudden stops*: you stop and you take photos, and if sometimes you reproduce them, the result is other series, places you've already surveyed, landscapes captured by other cameras.

Constructing

The last persona is not solely photographic (in fact, none of them is, strictly speaking). It ranges over all the activities, from time to time reaping their harvest, reconciling in a broader project or bringing together in an exhibition what the others have come up with. This persona is not that of the curator, even if "being a curator" is sometimes part of the role; the persona is more that of the constructor in the Brechtian sense: "A photo of the Krupp factory or the AEG tells us almost nothing about these institutions. Reality proper has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relationships, the factory, let's say, no longer reveals these relationships. Therefore something has actually to be constructed, something artificial, some- thing [fabricated]".⁵ Art can't behave as though history, too, did not modify reality – as, for example, when it displays itself in the camera: in order not to miss out on the real it must construct and demystify, which amounts, as Benjamin adds shortly after quoting Brecht, to doing advertising for what presents itself as reality. Bublex's question is a little different for, almost eighty years later, the times have changed again: What does it mean to be a constructor when the real in its entirety comes across as a fabrication?

Alain Bublex has answered this question often; in fact he has done nothing else since he became an artist, notably by constructing the city.

⁵ Walter Benjamin quoting Bertold Brecht in "A Little History of Photography", in Sean Carney, "Brecht and Critical Theory", Routledge, 2006, p. 59.

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Constructing the city means fabricating a relationship between fiction and reality, document and invention, true and false, generic and singular, utopia and the everyday. Bublex has reflected on – and modulated – this relationship continuously and in different ways. His first city, *Glooscap*, envisages it as a mix, a slight, almost indiscernible *hybridisation*: a city simultaneously fictive and plausible, generic and borrowing its features from North American cities, invented from scratch and built on a real site: its emblem is that Indian voice recounting the legend of the god Glooscap over a backdrop of a freeway filmed at night through a foggy, rain-coated windshield. The second (*Plug-in City (2000)* and *Plan Voisin*) envisages it as the combining in the same fictive space of the real city with utopia: which produces the two figures of envelopment – Archigram's cells and the Case Study Houses site huts, clinging in proliferating bunches to Paris's monuments – and of saturation: government departments and Paris retailers piling up around the beltway. The third figure, the exhibition "*Danger Be Damned*" held at the Montpellier School of Art early in 2010, envisages it as the insertion of generic urban situations into the real city: a series of arrangements of urban items – including a homeless person's hut, two motor scooters on their stands, a waffle stall, bulky domestic trash and a gutted car – lined up along the street outside the gallery. Constructing the city means thinking this relationship through. By doing this in a number of possible ways, varying his terms and conditions, and finally effecting a tryout somewhere in a real urban location, Alain Bublex untangles some of the textures – ideal and perceptible, concrete and fictive – that make up a city. True, everything is fabricated, but that also means that we can unglue everything and, under the separated interweavings, add some fabrication of our own: reshuffle then glue back together the bits of reality, of utopia, of absurd projects and fog-cloaked landscapes we've seen countless times without ever wearying of them.