

Peinture contradictoire

« Les corps ne sont pas du plein. Ils écartent, ils donnent lieu. Ce sont des lieux d'existence, ni pleins ni vides, sans dehors ni dedans, sans parties, ni totalité, ni fonctions, ni finalité, une peau diversement pliée, repliée, dépliée, invaginée, orificée, etc.... » Jean-Luc Nancy¹

Luc Andrié (b. 1954 in Pretoria, South Africa) began painting in 1976 but interrupted his artistic career in 1986 in order to direct engaging documentary films, only to return to painting in 1990. After initially basing his paintings on photographic snapshots of objects and interiors, more recently he has increasingly concentrated on figural studies, as in his series of works BRUN (from 2011), SALLE (from 2013), COULEUR (from 2011) and ON (from 2014). Here, the artist presents himself semi-naked, sitting or standing, with clenched fists, hunched upper body and with alternating facial expressions, or simply a facial study on canvas, holding his breath and puffing out his cheeks [fig. 1, « BRUN, arme » fig. 2 « SALLE, mouche »].

BRUN is the result of a study on physical gestures that swing between the various poles of aggression and vulnerability, anger and sadness, dynamism and calm.² On the other hand, SALLE focuses on the self-portrait and caricatures current trends in the human image.³

The artist uses his own body to explore the psychological dimensions of these gestures and facial expressions, yet these depictions do not refer to autobiographical experiences. He analyses physical expression by observing people over long periods of time, documenting specific moments of expressiveness and collects them in order – sometimes with the help of a choreographer – to reconstruct and record them photographically in the studio for later use in his painted studies. His body is the medium for engaging with the social moods he perceives, which manifest themselves in his gestures and facial expressions, and it is simultaneously also representative of the social body itself. Thus Andrié's artistic work does not focus on self-representation, but it is rather a socio-political statement that is performed on and expressed through his own body. The relationship between the foreign body and the individual's own body is of central importance: on the one hand, the artist thus

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, Editions Métailié: Paris 2000, p. 16.

² The clenched fists may reference the German and French phrases "Fäuste im Sack machen / faire le poing dans la poche", indicating a state of powerlessness.

³ Cf. Alberto de Andrés: « [Luc Andrié] révèle du coup l'absurdité et la stupidité de l'humain dans sa prétention à s'emparer de lui-même par l'image et, à travers elle, à s'emparer du monde. [L]es têtes de Luc Andrié impliquent le spectateur dans le dispositif plastique comme leur véritable pendant, l'obligeant à se mesurer à elles », <http://www.espacedam.ch/1720-luc-andrie> (28.07.2015).

includes himself in his social critique and, on the other hand, he is able to encounter the Other in his own body, as the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy describes it: “Bodies are first and foremost always other – just as others are first and foremost always bodies. I will never know my body, I will never know myself in precisely that space where ‘corpus ego’ is an implicit certainty. By contrast, I will always know others as bodies. An Other is a body, because only a body is an Other.”⁴

Nancy does not primarily examine the relationship between the self and society, but rather attempts to reconceptualise the fracture between body and soul as it has been understood ever since Descartes; however, the artist Luc Andrié presents on his own body those things that he notices in society. This dramatisation of everyday experience and realisation is integrated with the “dramaturgical perspective” of the sociologist Erving Goffmann, whose 1959 study of mechanisms in society analysed how individuals assume roles and how social interactions and situations can be considered “performance”.⁵ He argued that roles are not only played in art (such as the theatre and performance art), but also in life, linking the individual with their corresponding social stratum or group. The self is simply an effect of well-played roles and not vice versa.⁶

Goffmann’s work flowed into the Body Art of the 1960s and 1970s and it is the achievements of these decades that the work of Luc Andrié builds on. Artists such as Vito Acconci, Terry Fox or Chris Burden did not shy away from placing themselves in humiliating situations, inflicting pain on themselves or even injuring themselves in their performances, which were sometimes given in front of an audience and sometimes executed in the studio. In giving these performances, they helped to disrupt social role models and normative ideas of what it meant to be a man. According to Amelia Jones, these artists made an important contribution to redefining identity politics (what the subject can mean in society and how and why it achieves that) as well as to redefining the parameters of subjectivity.⁷ The very fact that Vito Acconci repeatedly questioned his masculinity by, for example, covering his body with bite marks or publicly masturbating, emphasises that he continues to occupy a

⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, Diaphanes: Berlin 2003, p. 30.

⁵ See Erving Goffman, *Wir alle spielen Theater. Die Selbstdarstellung im Alltag*, [The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, 1959], Piper: Munich, Zürich 2004.

⁶ See Goffmann 2004 (cf. Fn. 5), p. 231.

⁷ See Amelia Jones, *Body Art. Performing the Subject*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, London 1998, p. 103.

privileged position in comparison to female artists (for it was only in such a position that he could expose himself like that), but also that this privileged position increasingly has to justify itself.

Luc Andrié pursues a similar project of challenging masculinity in his series BRUN [fig. 3, « BRUN, voyageur »]. Here, his body emerges from an indistinct background like a murky, earthy apparition that slowly coalesces into a tangible figure. From certain perspectives and depending on the fall of the light, however, this figure also recedes once more, remaining caught in the threshold of a liminal possibility. This effect is, among other things, the result of the painting method and the fact that the artist applied up to one hundred extremely thin layers of paint, a combination that creates a cloudy shifting effect. The painting continuously renews itself in front of our eyes, because the eye is always attempting to penetrate the shadowy colours, just as the viewer attempts in their mind to identify these men, who possess no sign of any social belonging, either in their external attributes or in their clothing. This manner of painting so that physical presence is only hinted at impressionistically contradicts the usual dominant representation of physicality and masculinity. Renewal, transience and dematerialisation are emphasised instead of strength and solidarity. As a painter, Luc Andrié was fascinated with working with the colour brown in BRUN, which has many levels of significance, ranging from earth, nature and motherliness to fascist associations.⁸ He drew all this into his depictions and also into a sensory aesthetic reflection of physicality. The ambiguous gestures of the earnest man and the impenetrable veils of colour suggest an engagement with virility, age and mortality. And although the viewer is aware that – with a few exceptions – the artist himself is the model, it remains unclear who he is, what he must be thinking, feeling or desiring. However hard the viewer tries to apprehend him, this unknown man dissolves in the weft of glazed layers of paintwork. It produces a finely balanced artistic reflection on masculinity between vulnerability and vehemence, which the artist presents as an impenetrable yet fragile conundrum.

In his subsequent series SALLE, COULEURS and ON, the body is fragmented and simultaneously surrounded by other colours and penetrating interplays of light [fig. 4,

⁸ For example, the so-called *Sturmabteilung* (SA) of the German National Socialist Party were known as the “Brown Shirts”.

« vert de gris »]. In ON the artist uses artistic vagueness in order to problematise the increasing escalation of passivity and apathy in society. Here, the plastic indeterminacy of the figures serves to make it appear as if their true identity is subsumed in a quasi-identity as a consumer. Furthermore, the lack of contour and concomitant “tangibility” felt as a person reflects the increasingly widespread passivity and anxiety felt as a citizen [fig. 5, « ON, barques »]. Once again, the artist plays this process out on his own body by assuming appropriate body positions and facial expressions of boredom, dissatisfaction and indifference. More figures emerge, which, as in the theatre, possess metaphorical functions: a Makonde dancer from Mozambique, who stands outside Western consumer culture, functions as a witness for current developments, while the little girl, who blows air into the complex situation with puffed out cheeks, embodies a future generation [fig. 6, « ON, instant]. Her presence raises the question of which social values and cultural achievements will remain in the future. The dancer from the other culture and the child are witnesses who alternately challenge the viewer to give their own testimony or incriminate themselves, while Luc Andrié in his turn embodies the social corpus.

If Luc Andrié’s social criticism were only directed at the level of the subject, his work would remain programmatic art that considers only physical experience to be decisive experience. As a result, it would not be very convincing. His method of painting, which both presents and hides the motif from the viewer’s gaze restores the performative dimension, which has, until now, only been experienced by the artist in his studio when recreating the gestures and expressions. He thus makes it accessible to the viewer as well. The performative aspect is transposed into the act of reception and – as it is activated anew at every viewing – is permanently rooted there. For through the process of concentrated viewing the motif gradually moves into focus out of the indeterminate background and the vagueness, which represents social passivity in ON and SALLE, is re-enacted and made tangible. Luc Andrié practises a political art, on the one hand, by imitating what he believes should be criticised and recorded through performative re-enactment and, on the other hand, in integrating physical elements in his works that are already central to social reality: withdrawal, passivity, unassailability. He thereby fulfils the criteria that the French philosopher Jacques Rancière considers central for political art: it is “political neither due to the messages it conveys nor due to the way in which it represents social

structures, political conflicts or social, ethnic or sexual identities. Art is in the first instance political in that it creates a space-time sensorium by means of which certain modes of the states of togetherness and separateness, inwardness and outwardness, opposition and centrality are determined. [...] It is a specific form of visibility, a change in the relationship between the forms of the sensual and the regimes of assigning meaning, between different speeds, but also and above all between the forms of togetherness and solitude. For before politics becomes the exercising of power or a power struggle, it is the division of a specific space of 'common issues'.”⁹

Luc Andrié honed the sensibility for the division of and access to the “specific space of common issues” in his youth. He grew up as the son of a missionary in Mozambique and experienced the ugly sides of colonialism daily, although he was never a target of it himself. He could not identify with the ruling white classes. This was a determining influence on his critical world view: while at the centre of BRUN man initially stands as a former, vulnerable and weakened power holder in a western, post-feminist society, in COULEUR and ON white man ultimately comes to be the target of derision and criticism as a representative of a western, capitalist, late modern society. Andrié unmasks him, reveals him in his futile struggle to maintain a façade. The painting method is once more responsible for ensuring that these depictions do not succumb to cynicism, pessimism and destruction, for it cloaks as much as it reveals, thereby providing a certain kind of protection. Yet, the execution of this ensures that this protection decreases the longer the viewer gazes, because the details become increasingly clear to the eye. The desire to penetrate the artistic veil also leads us to recognise the figure’s ridiculousness. This dialectic forms the fundamental nature of Luc Andrié’s painting. He constructs an opposition between that which he denounces in others, but which he presents in himself; between the cloaking of the figure and its ruthless unmasking; between sympathy for the laughable effort (in the individual) and its monstrous effects (in society). By propounding social criticism, his art provides resistance. At the same time, his artwork is resistant, because it does not simply illustrate, declaim and finally expose its subject to curious gazes. Instead it reflexively conveys a contradictory aesthetic experience that gets to the heart of the dilemma of contemporary society – that one

⁹ Jacques Rancière, “Die Politik der Kunst und ihre Paradoxien”, in: *ibid.*, *Die Aufteilung des Sinnlichen. Die Politik der Kunst und ihre Paradoxien*, ed. by Maria Muhle, Berlin 2006, pp. 75-100.

both observes it and is a part of it – and additionally gains a new social relevance for painting.