Extra City Kunsthal presents ENDWARDS, a project by French artist Jean-Luc Moulène. The exhibition is articulated around three new productions and includes a condensed retrospective, exploring genealogies for the new works and recurrent questions in the artist’s practice. ENDWARDS looks at the coextensive operations that configure Moulène’s objects and images and at the ways in which these intersect time and materiality, erosion and resistance. It shows the connections between “building a body for oneself”, as the artist defines the focal point of his work, and his radical avoidance of a signature style. In sculpture as in photography, Jean-Luc Moulène constructs and documents situations akin to Zeno’s paradoxes, that disunite media, genres and their strictures, or that confuse authorship, delegation and ‘co-production’ — with materials and circumstances.

This guide lists the works presented in the ‘exhibition’ segment of the project. The contents of its double — the

INTRODUCTION

“I recall the passage in Augustine, quoted by Artaud, where Scipio Nasica rather strangely declares that at the time of the plague the theatres had to be destroyed—it’s as if the body had been seized by some new urgency, literally by some new fire, that prevented it from making a scene: with such pressure on the body, there must be no theatrical unity, no scenographic organization.”

– Jean Louis Schefer
As in Holbein’s famous ‘Ambassadors’, anamorphosis is conventionally the coexistence of two perspectives within the same image or picture plane, requiring a readjustment of position between two images, each reducing the other to a smudge of colour or an indistinct shape. In front of that particular painting, the viewer has to choose between the intellectual Vanitas of the protagonists, and the devotional imperative proclaimed by the skull in the foreground. In Moulène’s practice, the question of anamorphosis seems to be recoded via material or temporal coordinates. Can an object be said to have its own point of view, not necessarily identical with that of its maker — like Antonin Artaud’s “hammer without a master”? Can an image or an object belong to — and bring together in its ‘flesh’ — two distinct chronologies, exist as the intersection of histories that take it to different directions? Stated differently, Moulène’s use of disjunction as structuring principle of work brings to mind the notion of the oxymoron, and the detonating force of the paradox. Can we think, and make actual sense, in paradoxes? In its engagement with abrasion and growth, degradation and permanence, value and worthlessness, cutting and mending, acts of withdrawal and a politics of opening up, identity and its refusal, Moulène’s work might function as a compass to navigate the world, the more of the less in the contemporary.

Jean-Luc Moulène describes his work as “one continuous performance”: “My main activity is trying to build my own body. Each of us has a body built through representations, and these representations have to be questioned and criticized”, consciously made one’s own and dismantled. Glimpses of these manoeuvres of appropriation and deconstruction, as much semiotic as they are physical, are spread throughout the exhibition, and can be gathered from other statements by the artist. Moulène describes his photographic work as the gradual formation of an “impersonal diary”, and his sculptural ‘Opus’ as a repeated attempt to create, with exactitude, a non-descript object. The artist’s work takes, or makes, place at the boundaries between the individual assertion of the body and its social formatting; it notes the positions and modalities, the ‘where-from’ and the ‘how’, of a body, neither metaphoric nor precise in the sense of a stable identity, encountering the world. It demarcates the ways in which this body exists both at the margins and in the thick of history.

List of abbreviations:

JLMCC courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris
JLMGM courtesy of the artist and Galerie Greta Meert, Brussels
JLMTD courtesy of the artist and Gallery Thomas Dane, London
Mortar. ‘Usure’ applies this method to three life-size sculptures: through distinctly oriented rotating and swinging motions, a male bust, a female figure and a vulture abrade each other into figurative and temporal appeasement. Somewhere between a collage of antagonistic positions and the metonym (or residue) of a convulsive history, ‘Usure’ cuts across museological and political spaces: it moves from discrete objects, each with its caption and fixed role in narratives of becoming, to collapsed distinctions, breached distances and crossbred figures, both uneasy and still. If these separate bodies come from the storage of a museum, an institution whose art-historical exercise is as much the meticulousness of dating and attribution as it is the writing of a genealogy, of a past from which we desire descent, then which past does the construction, and the spasms and grinding through which it came into being, make present? ‘Usure’, a whole that is not one, employs erosion and attrition as instruments of consolidation, rather than as correlates of vulnerability.

The sculptural assemblage ‘Usure’ references building techniques in pre-Colombian architecture. One explanation for the robustness of megalithic walls such as that of Sacasauman in Cusco, Peru, is that systems of cranes and pulleys, and considerable amounts of physical work, were employed to rub the stones against one another until they became seamlessly joined, making unnecessary the use of mortar. ‘Usure’ applies this method to three life-size sculptures: through distinctly oriented rotating and swinging motions, a male bust, a female figure and a vulture abrade each other into figurative and temporal appeasement. Somewhere between a collage of antagonistic positions and the metonym (or residue) of a convulsive history, ‘Usure’ cuts across museological and political spaces: it moves from discrete objects, each with its caption and fixed role in narratives of becoming, to collapsed distinctions, breached distances and crossbred figures, both uneasy and still. If these separate bodies come from the storage of a museum, an institution whose art-historical exercise is as much the meticulousness of dating and attribution as it is the writing of a genealogy, of a past from which we desire descent, then which past does the construction, and the spasms and grinding through which it came into being, make present? ‘Usure’, a whole that is not one, employs erosion and attrition as instruments of consolidation, rather than as correlates of vulnerability.

The work reproduces at the scale of Extra City’s main hall the intersection of a sphere and an ellipsoid, registering on walls, ceilings, floors and pillars. It makes use of simple gardening techniques—transformed, but not exalted, by volumetric expansion—and echoes Moulène’s long-standing interest in the sinuous dynamic of knots and Borromean rings. Taking possession of the entirety
of the space available to it and theoretically capable of extending its marks beyond it, the work is a homeless drawing and a site-resistant (as opposed to site-specific) visualization: there is no space where the drawing could indeed fit, no space that would not have a reductive effect on its centrifugal accelerations. A model for utopia or for a logical netherworld, eroded by space and picturing an uninhabitable place, ‘Dessin asservi’ is described by the artist as a “tool for looking outside”: a gesture that bridges between the semi-publicness of the gallery and situations that, because of their vastness or because of their secrecy, an art institution cannot accommodate.

This ensemble of graphic and sculptural works pair two preoccupations in Moulène’s recent work: geometric ordering—or, rather, the distance between order and clarity—and the chromatic standardization of BIC ballpoint pen inks. Protected by the law of industrial patent, BIC inks—in their ‘boy’ or ‘girlie’, classical or more exuberant tones—have been used by the artist them to create a series of monochrome paintings. Their impasto reverts the modernist function of the monochrome, which is to arrest vision and to confine its motion to the epiphanic concreteness of the picture plane. The BIC monochromes establish a continuity between the picture plane and all the users of this global brand, their notes and scribbles. While one drawing shown here appears as a grid-like watercolor, the other was sent to Moulène by an unidentified worker in
First Floor

La Vigie, 2011 (The Lookout Man), JLMcc

This is a monumental photographic essay in botanical Situationism, surveying the growth of a particularly resilient weed, Paulownia Tomentosa, in the cracks of sidewalk and concrete buildings in the neighbourhood of the Ministry of Economy, Industry and Employment in Paris. The images reveal an ever-changing landscape of urban gestures, from traces of children’s play to the physical evidence of anti-terrorist vigilance, namely the Vigipirate national security system. While one digital slide projection follows the obstinate infiltration of the plant, the other often pictures the barricades, stanchions and bollards installed to protect national integrity, ‘security and comfort’. A reciprocal gaze appears at times to unite the two screens, pitting against each other the plant’s tenacity and camouflage in hostile environment and a regime of heightened political attention, calibrated to detect and suppress any deviant behaviour and potential threat.

Coin, Paris XII, 15.05.2003 (Corner), JLMcc

Los Pavos, Tlacolula de Matamoros (Mexico), 29.05.2005, JLMcc

Model for Sharing, 2007, JLMcc

“I belong neither to the 99%, nor to the 1%”, Moulène has said in response to the debilitating distinction that was one of the rhetorical props of the Occupy movement. ‘Model for Sharing’ is—in relation to this debate on world economy—a ‘plus gesture’, the thought of an additive possibility, echoed also by the nearby ‘Marche’. Formally, ‘Model for Sharing’ resembles a pie-chart or an architectural maquette for a shelter, yet the work’s central element is a fold, which negates the relevance of such readings. The fold produces an accumulation within the 100% of the surface, a different potentiality in its distribution, a point where resources and ideas multiply through their being-in-common. In the words of Philippe Vergne, “At a time
when the world is imploding in a tension between the 99% and the 1%, Moulène claims his territory (…) in the unthinkable 101%. His mathematics, akin to alchemy, liberates and creates not a bigger space, but an inconceivable space. (…) This ultra-thin addition of 1%, surpassing rational wisdom, constitutes a separate sphere of aesthetics and experience, an exception to the normal order of the sensible, an intricate hole between the sensible and the intelligible, where the mind can get lost and be a mind again.”

RÉGULIÈR, BARNEVILLE, 24.01.2008 (REGULAR), JLMCC

PLAGE RÉGULIÈRE, LOSTROUCH’H, 1.02.2008 (REGULAR BEACH), JLMCC

MAQUETTE FOR ‘PLEASURE DOME’, 2013, JLMGM

The project departs from observations of architectural ruins in Greece—new or old, quasi-mythological or late-capitalist, enshrined as relics or abandoned to the elements. Made of as many minute bricks as will be required by the future construction of a work to measure 3.20 m in diameter, this model of a ruin has an intact dome as inner surface, sheltered on the outside by a jagged, broken geometry of bricks. The two sides of the object articulate, materially and fictionally, preservation and ravage, in a narrative where the contemplative, reconciliatory purpose of the dome contrasts with the inscrutable force that ripped it out from an ampler construction, whose outline or function we can no longer discern. As postscript to the imaginary story
activated by the model, the work is to be immersed in the sea for an undetermined duration: the Pleasure Dome will be finished only once its angular, toothed brickwork will have been polished by the mechanical and chemical impact of the waves. The work reverts the regular purpose of a dome: supporting and redistributing the weight of the building, inviting pious contact with transcendence, turns here into a function of being held and suspended, while metaphoric weightlessness become sheer, threatening gravity. Fractured and preserved, manifesting two markedly different forms of smoothness on its two sides, coproduced by architectural history and documentary observation to the same extent that it is fashioned by nature, prey to tidal rhythms and rescued from them ‘just in time’, the ‘Dome’ appears as an accretion of contradictory movements, and embodies their paradoxical co-presence, or tense co-authorship.

Biography