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UNFORESEEN SPACES

A CONVERSATION WITH MARIE LELOUCHE
Emanuele Quinz

March 12, 2022



May 7, 2022

47 rue de Montmorency - 75003 Paris
Vernissage: Saturday, March 12, from 3pm
Opening hours: Tue-Sat 11am - 7pm

EQ. The exhibition *Unforeseen Spaces* is a continuation of the exploration you made for *Out of Spaces*, presented at *Les Tanneries Art Center*, in Amilly, France. In both projects, birds play a central role. Why did you choose birds?

ML. First of all, I have a personal interest in these animals, whose presence is as identifiable as it is elusive. Bird tweet, and it sing. We sense them when they are nearby, even if we do not see them. This is undoubtedly what makes them be perceived as both explorers and bearers of signs, but also keepers of an elusive mystery. Through their singing and chirping, birds give substance to the places they inhabit, but also to the passing of time. By looking more closely at the studies carried out on the subject of birds, both from an historical and philosophical perspective in Vinciane Despret's work, and from a biological perspective in Jennifer Ackerman's book, we discover, once our anthropocentric framework has been dropped, that the complexity of their behaviours and languages exceeds our expectations. For instance, we know that birds are capable of imitating, but is still not evident why they do it. The Jay is said to imitate the Buzzard's cry in order to scare other species away from its territory and thus make the most of its resources. The male Wavy Parakeets seeks to perfectly imitate the desired female; is this a way of showing her that he understands her? Blackbirds often borrow from surrounding sounds to build their singing, but to what end?

I also wanted to meet people who are in direct touch with birds, such as bird banders and ornithologists, to enrich my imagination and my vocabulary for this project. For example, a zoologist shared with me his research on the relationship that certain African populations have with the Great Indicators: birds and humans work together to collect swarms and honey, developing sound codes to communicate. In conclusion, I would say that my interest in birds can also be explained by the tension between the admiration we may have for them and the relationship of authority we have towards them.

Besides the exhibition *Out of Spaces*, you have published an excerpt of literary fiction written during your residency at the Art Center. What prompted you to write?

This fiction was a bit of a recreation for me. It was not intended to be published, but the poster format developed by *Les Tanneries Art Center* eventually offered it a place. I started writing before starting the residency, with the desire to reflect, to immerse myself into a space where time would no longer be an accounting value, but the object of the daily attention of others - in this case, birds. Looking for a decentralization and listening to what we don't know about them, I started to write. When I discovered *Les Tanneries*, the park, and the glass roof that offers a direct access to the sky and the environment surrounding the building, I thought I could find a way to exacerbate the

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porosity of the spaces by bringing inside the sound of birds present at the park and that these would give the exhibition its rhythm. Thus, inside the exhibition space, the singing and chirping resonate like the echoes of the birds outside. Then, in the virtual reality piece *Unforeseen Spaces*, the viewer comes across large curtains whose movement is motivated by these same sounds captured in real-time. I continued to write in parallel with the development of the sculptures, the images, and the exhibition. The upcoming exhibition fed the fiction and vice versa. Of this fiction, only fragments appear today in the form of a whispered voice in *Unforeseen Spaces*. It is not yet finished. I hope to have the time to continue.

What is striking in your work is the freedom with which you move from one medium to another: from sculpture to VR, from sound to literary fiction. All these supports, these media, but also the disciplines that art history has well defined, appear in your projects as fluid territories to be crossed, to be exceeded, to be overflowed. And these crossings do not take place with the intention of contesting frontiers or to legitimize free zones or discontinuities, but on the contrary, they seem to draw a complex map where all the elements, in their heterogeneity, compose a continuous world, vibrating of analogies and resonances.

Indeed, I imagine my pieces/exhibitions to be composed of layers superimposed in space. The viewer would then pass across the place, but also across these layers. Various factors can lead us to slide from one space to another, to pass from one layer to another: a sensory choice (concentrating on the sound and forgetting about the image for a moment), an instant of reflection motivated by an echo to our fields of references, a formal resonance (sometimes in hollow)... I think of my pieces as complex systems that require paying attention to the interactions between the different elements that compose them, as well as their potential variability. It seems to me that art should set things in motion and not set limits.

This notion of layer - close to the one of stratum - evokes the geological rather than the geographical dimension. By crossing your environments, the space gradually unfolds its layers, revealing new perspectives. In the experience of this crossing, these foldings of space - but also of the image, which is often transferred onto curved, contracted, or folded supports, like the immense curtains in *Out of Spaces* - compose folds and unfoldings of time.

In *Out of Spaces*, images of bird feathers captured by fingers are printed on artificial silk. Placed in space, the fabrics seem to glide over the sculptures, sometimes even over the architecture, without being attached to it, as molts. While embracing the volumes, the folds and the iridescence of the fabric make the reading of the image more complex. Thus, the image escapes its bidimensionality and leads the viewer to explore a stretched temporality. Your question resonates, moreover, with a part of the fiction that is delivered to the spectators in *Unforeseen Spaces* in the form of a whispered voice:

"This coloured envelope did not belong to us. Curl up in it as if to become one in a gentle approach of what remains elusive to us"

"The threads we pull gradually make their images vibrant. We create lines, and landscapes without anchoring »;or

"Their images become tolerable for us when in coloured threads, they serve our works to become fragile wrappings of our families in construction."

In your previous works, you have worked on packaging and, more in general, on surfaces that envelop and protect bodies or objects, and which are at the same time covered with images that expose themselves to the eye. The packaging appears as an image made of skin - or, conversely, as a skin turned into image. Does this relationship of continuity and discontinuity, of reversibility and confrontation between surfaces, between the image - flat, inert, always virtual - and the skin - vibrating, always material - (and here I am also thinking of the plumage of the birds in *Out of Spaces*), indicates the ubiquity of the image or, on the contrary, the persistence of the materiality of the living?

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My interest in packaging was twofold. It offers each consumer the experience of a first volume that often fades away in favor of the image that covers it, and then that of a second volume, the object it contains. It seemed to me that the potential of packaging, of this image/object relationship, of a volume that proposes itself as a sequence object from folded to unfolded and vice versa, offered an interesting creative place. My proposals contained no promise: no object contained in the sculptures, but a focus on the relationships that could distribute in the space.

This interest in images/volumes, volumes/images is evident when I use three-dimensional scans. These photographic volumes appear to us without any thickness, without density, but as a coloured ensemble whose the coordinates create surfaces. In *Blind Sculpture* (2018), three-dimensional scans float to meet a white form in the center of the space. These colourful skins never manage to embrace the latter, but together they form a sculpture in perpetual creation.

Despite this, I have the impression that the term "sculpture" retains a central position - in the description of the works: although they employ various plastic elements, they are often referred to as "sculptures" rather than installations or environments. I am thinking in particular of the significance in your career of the founding series of *Instantaneous Sculptures* (2014).

Indeed, it seems to me that the classical discipline to which I feel the closest is sculpture, and this is one of the questions that motivates my Phd work. I could explain this through my commitment to artistic experiences in space, which strongly engage our proprioception,- from sculpture to architecture, to mixed reality or virtual reality. I could also say that, by turning around one same point but varying my distance from the object, I seem to be able to perceive the depth that links me to the sculpture. Or by talking about a kind spatial scenario that can unfold around it. I think that in the end, it is not so much the sculptural object that interests me, but the experiences it can provide. Thus, I work on my pieces without feeling obliged to respond to the canons that would make them look like sculptures.

The objects that inhabit the exhibition space of *Out of Spaces* and *Unforeseen Spaces* have ambiguous, and suggestive shapes. They evoke flying machines placed on the ground, like Leonardo da Vinci's fantastic machines, but also the skeletons of huge unknown animals.

These sculptures revealed themselves to me during the creative process. At first, I wanted to place volumes of zinc on the floor, taking up the motifs of roofs. I imagined them as shared forms, as objects of mediation between birds and humans. While I was working on these sculptures, building what would serve as a structure, identifying motifs that already seemed to me to play a formal echo with the plumage, I immediately realized that the zinc roofing was not necessary and that this wooden skeleton was more eloquent. This framework, which recalled an imaginary world of its own and evoked part of our relationship with birds through the history of the first flying objects, was much more relevant. These human-sized volumes, which are at the same time cages, perches, prostheses, and prototypes, invite to a projection of the spectator's body and allow imaginary movements of unwinding and swinging. Moreover, they also find a place in *Unforeseen Spaces*, where they become, among other things, small objects that can be seized, small cages without birds that unleash cries and songs.

As we explore the space of the exhibition, unfolding the different layers of images and narratives, we come to realize that the birds are truly playing a role in the work. Beyond the objects, the experience extends into the space-time deployed by media supports - such as the VR headset, sound broadcasting - which add further layers to the environment that the work itself constructs.

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Technology, instead of taking something away from nature, seems to increase and enhance the space of action of the living.

Indeed, the technological tools that we dispose of today allow us to invite the living to settle in spaces built for humans without harming it. In this exhibition, we hear the birds that inhabit the Art Center in real-time, without having to put them in a cage. Thanks to the virtual reality headset, they animate the objects that make them "tele-present" to us. I do not think that technology moves us away from the living. There are just bad uses of it, which we have to change. The distance set by the media between the human and the horizon of the living can become positive if it settles close to our senses. It can become a source of creation.

*Emanuele Quinz is an art and design historian. He is a lecturer at the University of Paris 8 and an associate researcher at EnsadLab, École nationale supérieure des Arts décoratifs. His research explores the convergences between disciplines in contemporary artistic practices: from visual arts to music, from dance to design. Among his publications: *Le cercle invisible* (Presses du réel, 2015), *Strange Design* (ed., with J. Dautrety, it:éditions, 2014) and *Le comportement des choses* (ed., Presses du réel, 2021).