

Leaving it to the wind

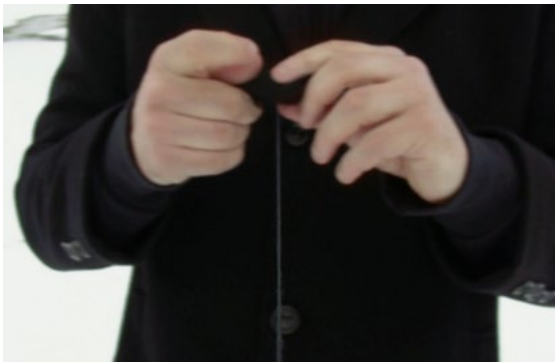
A conversation between Ismaïl Bahri,
Guillaume Désanges and François Piron

GD Your work seems to be distinguished by a refusal to declare a meaning, to such an extent that it is sometimes difficult to know exactly what it is about. It's as if there were an urge to suppress anything that might be too easily understood or be making clear references, in order to leave room for some kind of absolute, or to get rid of any possible cultural, political or social context for your work.

IB My feeling is that I can only work on a small scale, with a focus on very specific things. The way I work basically involves isolating something worth observing from all the ambient noise. This may lead to the experiment being divorced from its original context, but I try to ensure that, rather like in acupuncture, the detail under observation activates the energy it passes through or that passes through it.

FP Other artists produce polysemy by working rhizomatically, or through an accumulation of layers. But the impression I have is that you try to maintain a line of direction; you look for a specific action onto which you can focus attention.

IB I work with repetition. I repeat an experiment to try to unwrap or unfold something that I hadn't predicted. And, more often than not, each new experiment is a reaction to



Dénouement, 2011

previous work. It is like a process of recognition. *Revers*, for example, draws inspiration from the end of *Dénouement* – the last seconds when the character comes up to the camera and you discover his hands doing the work.

FP An unfolding, both literally and figuratively. It is the action you repeat in *Revers*,¹ where you crumple and smooth out pages from magazines until the printing ink is transferred completely from the paper onto your hands. An insistent act, and characteristic of your work. You're tracing a furrow.

IB Yes, I'm not very adventurous. I often draw on things I've already done and try to extend them slightly. Any coherence between the different works arises perhaps out of this energy, which is constantly produced from within. It works its way out from the middle, by degrees, in concentric circles.

GD Your work tends towards a simplification of the apparatus but, in its realisation, on the other hand, it allows reality to complexify things. The fact that you have no clearly defined programme and that you work with the most neutral materials possible, paradoxically, allows the context to become imprinted on the work. The metaphor that comes to mind is a photographic emulsion,

¹ — *Revers*, 2016, series of videos, variable durations, produced for the exhibition *Incorporated!*, Les Ateliers de Rennes – Biennale d'Art Contemporain and La Criée Centre d'Art Contemporain, Rennes, 1 October–11 December 2016, curated by François Piron. A new version of this work was made by Ismaïl Bahri on the occasion of his exhibition at the Jeu de Paume in 2017.

paper with no image on it but onto which an image is gradually printed.

IB Those metaphors of emulsion and exposure interest me. I rarely work with a specific programme; most of the activities and experiments that I engage in are done blindly, without really knowing what I am doing, until something astonishing appears. I try to astonish myself, but such moments rarely occur.

FP Are you saying that there is no notion of control in your work?

IB No, there's a lot. I have a hard time letting go, but I wait for the experiment and the contact with the world of phenomena to reveal something that couldn't have been predicted. In that sense, I don't so much try to express something as ensure that whatever it is 'gets printed'. The sense of detachment comes perhaps from that.

GD You delegate a certain power to the wind, to the light and to



Revers, 2017

chance encounters, in other words to the location, to luck and to accident. In that sense, there is control, but only by default, in the fact of your not seeking to determine the possibilities or the outcome.

IB Yes, in general I begin by identifying an area to be observed so that the work can develop in it. When the experiment succeeds in picking up something from the surroundings, I start to ask myself what to keep and what to jettison. For example, for *Foyer* I had to film that blank piece of paper for a long time before I got an idea of where the work was taking me.

FP Actually, you say as much in the film: that it is a study of light. But what lies at the heart of the work is what this 'study' involves you in doing, and what it triggers in the environment where you are filming.

IB I spent months focusing on a tiny formal detail of light. At one point, I realised that what was activating the experiment was coming from the surroundings, from the comments prompted by my presence, and which I had failed to pay attention to. In a way, the film came about without my knowledge. It made itself.

GD Given that your intention was to work on the influence of light on shades of white, you could have done it indoors somewhere. But in fact you walked about the streets of Tunis. Was there a hidden intention

in placing this research in that particular context, in placing something abstract in the social field?

FP I think you told me at the time that you were looking for ways to film Tunis.

IB Yes, when I started that 'study', I had a strong urge to film in Tunisia. I was thinking about the light there, with Paul Klee's watercolours particularly in mind. When the voices of the people who had come up to me appeared, it made me realise that their comments, overlaying the light, had something far stronger to say about Tunisia than anything I could have imagined.

GD You are preparing an exhibition at the Jeu de Paume, where you recently took part in the exhibition *Soulèvements*,² and some of your films have been presented at the FID³ and in the Espace Khiasma;⁴ all these spaces are particularly connected with politics in art. It's surely no coincidence that you were invited.

IB On the one hand, I have a real interest in pure form and in phenomena; on the other hand, I'm tempted to go beyond that and to see what

2 — *Soulèvements*, Jeu de Paume, Paris, 18 October 2016–15 January 2017, curated by Georges Didi-Huberman.

3 — FID Marseille, international film festival in Marseille.

4 — Espace Khiasma, Centre d'Art Contemporain in Les Lilas, Paris, devoted to image and narrative, director: Olivier Marboeuf.

is involved at a political and social level. I feel myself torn between the two. I sometimes start my experiments in the middle to see where it takes me. For example, I spent weeks preparing for the shoot of *Revers*, crumpling magazine pages. They were, for the most part, photos to do with fashion or advertising. This obsessive action of softening up and transferring matter eventually brought about a frictional, perhaps even cathartic, relationship with the society in which we live.

FP So intentionality is involved. But I think you're more wary of expressing 'meaning'.

IB Yes, that's certainly true. I have a feeling that this intentional side only exists if it passes through an intercessor, through other energies or intensities that might affect it. These might be the vagaries of the wind, or gravity, the persistence of some material, the passage of a cloud, or the unpredictability of something or someone else coming into the experimental field.

FP Is that an intentional ploy?

IB Let's say that it's a tactic that involves working step by step, depending on the situation. I only feel comfortable working on a small scale, when I can allow myself to let go. And when I manage to place my cursor somewhere between letting go and staying in control, it sometimes leads to a search.



Paul Klee, *St. Germain b. Tunis. Landeinwärts*, 1914

FP Your work displays, or reveals, a vulnerability, at a level that is more physical than intelligible. I particularly see it as a trembling; the trembling of the glass of ink that you carry round the streets in the film *Orientations*, the drop of water that jumps around to the rhythm of the heartbeat in *Ligne*, or the wind vibrating the sheet of paper that covers the camera lens in *Foyer*. The perceptual in your work prevails over the cognitive; there's a tactile quality to the image. In *Revers*, your hands transmit the unpleasant, crunchy, rough feeling of a physically affected body; it is almost painful, and one feels a strange kind of empathy. A sense of vulnerability is clearly at the heart of some of your installations, such as *Coulée douce*. It is the trembling of the wire that makes the spectator aware of the presence of the work in space, because it exists on the edge of invisibility.

Robert Bresson, *Au hasard Balthazar*, 1966

IB The use of vulnerability involves the risk of things being too malleable or too confusing. I take great care to do my experiments with precision.

FP Vulnerability is perhaps compensated for, or contradicted by, repetition, which is an instrument of insistence.

IB Repetition is a way of getting everything out of yourself and out of things in order to retain the tiny amount that resists. I try to get to the point where it holds together, but in the hope that, from that point, having persisted, something continues to escape, a vulnerability that is expressed through tremors or vibrations.

GD Vulnerability is also involved in the object that concentrates the action, the instrument of intercession, which is what the glass of ink is, as is the sheet of paper or the string. Like currency or a word in a language, they are just exchange

values that have to be ontologically weak in order to be able to act in a transactional way, to operate as catalysts. We have already mentioned the films of Robert Bresson and Abbas Kiarostami, which often operate on a principle of fragility that nonetheless doesn't preclude precision. By his passivity, Balthazar the donkey⁵ – who is a weak hero – triggers passions around him. The little exercise book, in *Where is My Friend's House?*,⁶ is only a device for things to happen and to be expressed around it. The donkey and the school exercise book are passive intercessors, mediators. Giorgio Agamben wrote a short essay⁷ on the role of 'assistants' in literature: characters without identity, whose function is to translate situations and whose mere presence is in itself a message.

IB The examples of the little school exercise book and Balthazar are perfect. They really encapsulate the idea of choosing a passive, neutral frame of reference that can affect what surrounds it and affect it in turn. It puts me in mind of the word 'instruments', which could be the title of the exhibition I am preparing. The instrument is a thing or an interposed being, capable of engaging with the physical world.

5 — *Au hasard Balthazar*, a 1966 French film directed by Robert Bresson.

6 — *Where is My Friend's House?*, a 1987 film directed by Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami.

7 — Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, Paris, Payot & Rivages, Rivages Poche/Petite Bibliothèque series, 2006.

It makes it possible to act with precision. The instrument is a priori devoid of affect so that it can affect or be affected by whatever it is put in contact with. It is supposed to be neutral in order to create awareness of any differential.

FP I'd like to come back to this question of the connection between vulnerability and politics. There is clearly a horizon of political expectation in your work. To what extent is that vulnerability political? Is it perhaps because you bring out the fragile nature of the real, or a 'trembling' relationship with the external world?

IB I can see that these political expectations do exist. And I'm not going to pretend that my origins don't make some people interpret things as necessarily relating to the Arab world. But I'm wary of that. Perhaps my use of vulnerable situations, or a certain form of abstraction, puts those expectations at a more appropriate distance. It is slightly as if what I'm doing is thinking about the political from its furthestmost poles and trying to preserve more complex layers of meaning.

FP Your work comes at a time when, in the field of contemporary art, the role of the emotions has been redefined in political terms. A few years ago a more intellectual, affirmative dimension was advanced: it was above all a question of reinvesting theories, of legitimising a

certain system of artwork by proving that it could be situated, both theoretically and also, as it were, geographically. I think that it has become possible once again to assign a place to the question of emotion, especially to anxiety, which is perhaps the dominant feeling that your work gives rise to.

Abbas Kiarostami, *Où est la maison de mon ami?*, 1987

GD In addition to that, I also see a discreet way of questioning the transcendence of the author's decision and therefore of the creative act. It reminds me of a discussion with Catherine Malabou,⁸ in the course of which she explained that the 'artistic' decision, that is, the act of deciding, of programming and creating, is a relatively recent idea. In ancient Greece, the artist's urge was not to create, but rather to re-

8 — Discussion between Guillaume Désanges and Catherine Malabou with Benoît Maire on the occasion of Benoît Maire's one-man show *Letre*, at La Verrière, Fondation d'Entreprise Hermès, Brussels, 6 September–18 October 2014, part of the series of exhibitions *Des gestes de la pensée*.

veal an existing beauty – the statue was already present in the stone. The idea was that the artist didn't produce something *ex nihilo*, he recognised it in the raw material and then brought it to light.

IB I feel as if I'm looking for what seems always to have been there. Working is really a journey of reconnaissance. But in my case it would be a matter of going deep into familiar territory rather than to foreign lands. I go looking in primitive, elementary places, where a local would go perhaps. The work taps in on the familiar (the *déjà vu*), a sort of unconscious or common frame of reference. I am thinking, for example, of shadow, fire, projection or gestures that have been performed a thousand times, such as tying, un-reeling, burying, crumpling or winding – gestures that every one of us has performed any number of times. The video *Source* involves something of that order I think. I was trying to discover a *déjà vu* there.

FP For an artist, the question of uniqueness arises. Your work runs a risk with the familiar – the *déjà vu* – in that you present such simple operations that they are likely to disappear and be replaced by the revelation of a phenomenon.

IB Yes, it's a risk.

GD In the collective imagination, since modernity, an artist has had to offer something that does not exist, new ideas. You, on the other hand,

seem to be returning to the Platonic notion that all ideas exist, but have been forgotten; it's just a matter of remembering them. Here again, the fact that you pursue what already exists challenges the authority – in the etymological sense of 'author' or creator – of the artist.

IB I agree. There is this movement that consists in letting things appear, and then acting so to speak as a catalyst. I find that the imperative of uniqueness can inhibit work or the urge to learn. This is something that concerns me as a teacher, for example. It has become a reflex way of thinking. I see clearly that my work involves constantly being host to other people's gestures. I may be wrong, but I'm not sure that this is the case, for example in Far Eastern cultures, where repeating an ancient gesture amounts to refining it rather than revolutionising it at any price. It is very important for me that my work has something 'universal' about it.

FP The word 'universal' is dropped like a bomb.

IB I'm attracted by the Asiatic world and Japan, while at the same time I'm influenced by ancient Greece and by Western philosophy and poetry. I also work a lot in Tunisia, which is very important to me emotionally. I like to go and dig around there, but using as a mediator this universal quality, this algebraic experience, which is vertical and very rudimentary. But the

problem is how to prevent the work being taken over by any one of these points. *Foyer*, for example, involves a socio-political context as much as an examination of simple questions about the pre-cinema: What is a screen? What is a projection? What is a camera? It is a matter of reducing film to its most rudimentary level so that it can be affected by the complexities that will come and confront it – like Bresson's donkey.

FP Jean-Christophe Bailly, in his book *Le Dépaysement*,⁹ makes a distinction between origin and provenance. It is obvious that you prefer the idea of provenance, which involves tracing back the chain of the elements with which one works to the idea of origin, which is static, essential, and functions in a proprietary way. There is something of this in the way you pick apart phenomena, perceptions and the feelings associated with them. The question of the real is not an 'original' relation; it finds nothing.

GD In the art world, there is an old, almost tacit opposition between abstract experimental cinema and documentary cinema. Both genres are political, but there came to be a sort of friction between them, with each side wondering what the point of the other was, and each accusing the other of treason, with suspicions of propaganda on the one side and of formalism and 'art for art's sake' on the other.

Yet both have an ethic, a radical quality that has been forged in a common struggle against the domination of fiction. It seems that your films go beyond that opposition between forms of commitment and commitment to form.

IB I see what you mean. Sometimes people appreciate one part of my work but not the other, although the two form a whole. With *Foyer*, the out-and-out formalists might find the film magnificent but at the same time wonder regretfully what on earth words, for example, are doing on a beautiful white screen. It's funny.

FP You deliberately leave these two polarities of abstraction and documentation in suspense, or rather in tension. I see this as a space for scruples, too; moral scruples that attest to your intention not to betray – or to the necessity of not betraying – this question of provenance.

IB I feel more at ease with the formal pole, which I go for almost instinctively, than with the more social or political pole, which tends to make me suspicious and gives me doubts.

FP It's a constant search for point of view, the right distance, sharpness; it's all about establishing where you are. You constantly move from abstraction to action, then to reality, as if moving between different focal points.

9 – Jean-Christophe Bailly, *Le Dépaysement. Voyages en France*, Paris, Seuil, 2011.

IB Yes, that's what's going on in *Orientalisms* and in *Foyer*. Both films show an attempt to adapt optically and physically to the space that is crossed. You get a good sense of the energy and the work that was saved because of that search for the right distance. And in both cases, passers-by put words on the film as it works itself out.

FP One of the passers-by in *Foyer* mentions the colour of your skin and tells you that you are not completely Tunisian, because you're too white, whereas he and the others are black and have been burned by life.

GD Then along comes that unexpected metaphor, when someone wonders where you place yourself culturally on the colour spectrum, while you are in the process of filming shades of white. It was probably not intentional on your part, but there is an editing effect that connects the formal programme to the social context.

IB In *Foyer*, I was hoping to make contact with the real through a film about shades of colour. The initial questioning was very simple and slightly Aristotelian: how could I make a street film by capturing shades of colour? How could I capture the variations of light on a white surface? How could I record the tiny variations in a breath of wind? And then I gradually realised that the meaning of a particular word changed according to which shade of white it was placed on. All

these variations affected one another mutually to activate the actual mechanics of the film. In the end, the piece of paper became a kind of instrument measuring the differential between a form of white abstraction and the raw realities of the street.

GD Would you say that the idea of shades lies at the heart of all your work?

IB Yes, it's possible.

FP There are notions of transfer, impregnation and revelation in your work.

IB The idea of shades interests me, because it supposes an absence of break, a continuity that might refer to the primary nature of film. I realised that I was trying to film things that might add up to a film, that is to say, things captured in a process of transformation, a process of development through small differences. It might be a fragment of a newspaper unrolling, an image that is weakened, string being wound up and showing all the degrees of the transformation of a line into a ball of string, and so on. Shades and nuances become kinetic in themselves.

FP The word 'universal', which you used just now, is not self-evident nowadays. It presupposes a kind of equality of perception, a suggestion that everyone could be at an equal distance from a given proposition. Do you take it on

board, the question of universality? Is it intended?

IB Intended, yes. The fact that I use raw elements and experiences from the familiar phenomenal world helps preserve an equal distance from what is being observed. And in this sense, it is important for me that the element that I focus on relates to the proximal space of the viewer. But what seems to me to be a problem lies less in that than in the way in which the experiences are transmitted and shown. It is here that something troubles me and makes me doubt. Transmitting the experience is what I find hard, because I often have difficulty in jettisoning the superfluous. Sometimes it is charged with aesthetic intensity or a desire for control that can weaken the universal character of the filmed experience. The ideal for me would be to achieve a proper distance, to reach a point where the universal character of the experience affects the transmission of that same experience.

GD There is an unfortunate tension around the word 'universal', and I think we really should reclaim it, because it is not exclusive. The universal does not in itself preclude particularism. The problem is universalism, that is to say, the fact of thinking of the universal as a universal. In *Foyer*, the way those young men talk shows that there is something universal in the reception of art – somewhere between incredulity and an attempt at analysis.

FP It creates a connection, without producing a break.

GD On the contrary, it produces a continuous relationship between a spectator, for example here in Paris, and those Tunisian protagonists of the film, who, confronted like us with your colour experiment, have provided us with a commentary, via the camera, that matches our own thoughts and observations. You alone are the guarantor of this bond, because culturally you stand between the two realities. And thanks to your agency, one realises that there may be differences of degree in the way the work is received, but not in its nature. Once again, it's a matter of shades and nuance: our relationship to this political reality suddenly emerges as a matter of tone, with no gaps and no breaks.

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Translated from the French
by Jeremy Harrison