

While at first glance we might think that narrative is the source of Romain Gandolphe's work, on a hike with the artist we discovered that an immoderate love of art history, its temporal paradoxes, and its invisible and forgotten elements have led the way towards a multifaceted and resolutely contemporary body of work.

## From Aporia to Love, via Imaginaries

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'It's a connection I'm making with imaginary numbers. In the sixteenth century, in order to resolve third-degree equations, Gerolamo Cardano invented the principle of numbers that, when multiplied by themselves, become negative. I'm not sure if you know this? But it's impossible.' While walking towards the peak of the Puy de la Vache, despite being inexhaustible, Romain Gandolphe eventually lost his breath. He nevertheless answered my question, all in one go, regarding the influence of his early scientific studies on his artistic work. I believe I effectively perceive a kind of quantum logic in it: when he decides to spend seven days hidden in an exhibition wall without revealing his presence (*Une semaine dans une cimaise*, 2013), is he, like Schrödinger's cat, alive or dead? Are the secrets that he exchanges still secret when they are revealed (*Every Secret Has A Holder*, 2016)? Is it even possible to set out in search of the last tree planted by Joseph Beuys (*A Kind of Tree*, 2018)? In an equation of the third kind, the real number is calculated based on a chimera: the imagination enables a concrete problem to be solved. This special relationship to aporias has been maintained by the artist since his earliest work.

If a single cat can be dead and alive simultaneously, can a single artwork enjoy several states? During his DNSEP,<sup>1</sup> the artist decided to host the jury within a series of empty *white cubes* in which he related the works already completed, as well as those to come. Each room represented a precise temporality that merged as his discourse developed; the present has passed even before we can apprehend it, the past can be reactualized in speech, and the future escapes us (*Du futur au passé*, 2016). In the following years, Gandolphe did not choose between those who report their experiences and those who formulate what they've read or heard. Whereas he previously favoured the former position, he quickly detached himself from any systematism to demonstrate the extent to which artworks are primarily constructed through encounters and exchanges. So he described, facing the camera, the works destined for the walls of a collective exhibition even before it was mounted (*À venir*, 2017) or all the past performances of a festival, according to his memory (*À celles que tu ne verras jamais*, 2018). These stories offer an imperfect narration, brimming with errors, creating an obsolete and fragmentary temporary palimpsest. The spectators become receptors and, according to a very Duchampian logic, become storytellers in turn. They leave their mark on the story – like potters mark the clay vase with their hand.<sup>2</sup> 'After the public has heard my story, they bear the artwork in

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<sup>1</sup> Diplôme national supérieur d'art plastique

<sup>2</sup> See the metaphor by Walter Benjamin, 'Le Raconteur' (1936), trans. M. Renouard, in Nikolaï Leskov, *Le voyageur enchanté*, trans. V. Derély, (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2011), 12.

themselves and can in turn tell it again, to the point of oblivion.’<sup>3</sup> Memory is as much the touchstone of his work as a tool for constituting it: none of his performances are learned by heart. *L’exposition dans ma tête* (2014) took a month to install, the time it took for the artist to establish the markers necessary for improvisation. Like Robert Filliou walking around with artwork-headgear, Gandolphe transports his exhibition with him. This occurs for as long as he remembers it. Forgetting thus also becomes a material: on the wall of La BF15, the artist reproduced a mural by Sol LeWitt based on his memory of it (*Ce qui m’échappe*, 2017). ‘Once the idea of the piece is established in the artist’s mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly. There are many side effects that the artist cannot imagine,’<sup>4</sup> declared LeWitt in 1969. Had he anticipated alterations from memory? In the same exhibition, Romain lays out his office within the space and becomes the scribe of the artworks that are related to him. He reconstitutes a totally subjective history of art in which the artist becomes a listener (*D’autres voix que la mienne*, 2017).<sup>5</sup> Alternative modes of existence are offered to the artworks whose properties and behaviours are thus modified. ‘What if . . . it was no longer us that talked about an artwork but the artwork itself that did the talking?’ ask the authors of *des récits ordinaires*.<sup>6</sup> Is the artist spurred into action by the artworks themselves? Certainly. They make him paint, dance, speak, and listen to the viewers.

‘Contemporary is he who, in the dark night, perceives the light of the stars retreating faster than the speed of light,’ cites Gandolphe from memory as we arrive at the summit of the Puy. According to Giorgio Agamben, what is contemporary is by nature inaccessible. ‘He who truly belongs to his time . . . is the one who does not coincide perfectly with it, nor is suited to its pretensions.’<sup>7</sup> The temporal dissociation of the artist’s work, his stories and reproductions of past works, do not form a mere repetition; they enable invention, opening up new temporalities with a view to grasping the present. In search of the place where Robert Barry liberated particles of gas (*À la recherche*, 2017, *Toujours à la recherche*, 2019), Romain spent more than a month in the Mojave Desert, spread over four years. Past experience becomes a potential future event, based on which history can be rewritten. Today ‘[he is] more interested in what the history of art has rendered invisible, rather than invisible artworks’.<sup>8</sup> So he set off on the trail of a project that he only knows through the text written by Lucy Lippard in 1970, in which she relates an artistic experience near the polar circle, in Inuvik – ‘a deplorable new city belonging to the government and the oil industry,’<sup>9</sup> where the natives of the region have been forced to settle. Gandolphe is gradually undertaking a more emotional and collective transition. With the group Les enfants de Diane, it is no longer in a white shirt that he relates forthcoming artworks, but in a flesh-coloured body suit and high heels [*À venir (drag queen)*, 2019]. Displeased about being the heir of a patriarchal history, he lip synch’s the feminist song by Guerilla Poubelle, his favourite punk band since he was a teenager: ‘*Nous sommes les fils et les filles des sorcières que vous n’avez pas brûlées*’ (We’re the

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<sup>3</sup> Romain Gandolphe, interview with Sarah Fouassier, ‘Ne jouer rien d’autre que moi-même’, *Le Petit Bulletin* n° 899, 22–28 November 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Sol LeWitt, excerpt from ‘Sentences on conceptual art’, *Art-language*, vol 1 no. 1, May 1969, cited by Ghislain Mollet-Viéville, [<http://www.conceptual-art.net/sl.html>], page consulted on 17 October 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Which recalls the brilliant *Inadequate History of Conceptual Art* (1999) by Silvia Kolbowski.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Castera, Yaël Kreplak, Franck Leibovici, *des récits ordinaires* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben, ‘*What is an Apparatus?*’ and *Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503600041-004>

<sup>8</sup> Romain Gandolphe interviewed by Pedro Morais, ‘Redevenir plusieurs’, *Le Quotidien de l’art* no. 1944, 7 May 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Lucy Lippard, ‘Art Within the Arctic Circle’, *The Hudson Review*, winter 1970, vol. XXII, no. 4, 666.

sons and daughters of the witches you weren't able to burn). Seeking to break out of the solitude of this 2020 year and 'recover the collective',<sup>10</sup> love becomes the impetus behind his reappropriation of *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)* (1991) by Félix González Torres. Like Jean Cocteau's Orpheus, he goes through the looking-glass and also dances in spangled shorts, but without a pedestal, projecting his shadow onto the video images of activations of the artwork [*Untitled (To the man in the mirror)*, 2019]. The revelation of the body and emotions invites silence – as though keeping quiet was the most eloquent of speeches.

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<sup>10</sup> As the title of the performance indicates, in which he outlines the limits of his body.