

ON THE COMMUNICATION OF EVENTS

By Pierre Zaoui

From a text about the show *Circumambulation* at the Elizabeth Dee Gallery, June 2007
(translated from the French)

"This morning, I watched the destruction of the world as an attentive spectator, then I got back to work" – Franz Kafka, Journal

What happens when an event occurs, falls upon us, and transforms us? In a sense, almost nothing, because an event is barely ever perceived as an 'event' when it unfolds. It is only in its aftermath that we can attempt to give it significance. But then the event is no longer unfolding, it is already reconstructed, it has already become a fable or a series of established clichés. Events "that move the world enter on dove's feet" Nietzsche remarked in Zarathustra. They are beyond measurement, and perhaps even perception: what defines them in a sense is precisely that nothing occurs and nothing can be seen.

But in a different sense, the event is what upsets us fundamentally, what completely reconfigures our past and our future, what "breaks our history in two" (again Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo*). The paradox is that these two meanings of "event" are not in opposition to one another, they collapse onto each other: everything must seem to repeat itself precisely for something truly singular to occur, and this singularity must repeat itself and foreshadow others to be truly seized as an event. This paradox is, in a sense, the paradox of time that goes by.

What happened on the morning of September 11th in the south of Manhattan? Recent work by Eric Baudelaire is a meditation on the meaning and lack of meaning of this event, on the meaning and lack of meaning of trying to create a trace of it or extract meaning from it in its aftermath, on the linked times of its capture and of its loss. A double necessity to understand this event in terms of what it has left us with, which is to say almost nothing: a Ground Zero that is an empty space, and suffering that is either repressed or expressed but is devoid of images; and at the same time, a necessity to understand this event in terms of what it announces: possibly the daily experience of terrorist violence, where terror borders indifference, where hatred loses its object as it multiplies, where war can no longer be thought of outside of its staged nature, where image is only a witness to what is no longer there.

It is important to be aware of the ambiguity of this double necessity: who can be a witness to what occurred? Who will be able to say "I understand" or even "I did not understand at first, but now I do?" Perhaps an art of contours, a form of artistic practice that focuses on *the areas surrounding*, rather than the thing itself, an art that reveals our impotence at actually seeing: it was before ('Manifest Destiny'¹), or we circled around it but failed to see anything ('Circumambulation'²), or all we saw were images ('The Dreadful Details'³), or we were in fact there that terrible day, we were shown images of the explosion, but we did not understand it, make it our own, because it was embedded in a system of images and the ephemeral time in which they were shown ('Sugar Water'), or, finally, we were only able to grasp the cascading ambiguity that followed, unsure of what is more detestable: the event itself, its commemoration, its dissimulation or its recuperation ('Blind Walls').

Or perhaps no art at all. Maybe no form of artistic expression can grasp the event, or even its contours, its before or its after. Indeed images made before September 11th can no longer be

¹ An earlier body of work photographed in the American West

² A two channel video installation (not on display) from which this show is titled

³ Exhibited at Elizabeth Dee Gallery in the group show *Adrian Piper, Eric Baudelaire, Josephine Meckseper, Wayne Gonzales* in December 2006

seen in the same way in its aftermath (cf. 'Manifest Destiny'), and images made afterwards cannot be seen without those made before, nor those that will continue to be made after the event, despite the event, or next to the event (hence the endless dialogue and repetition of all the war imagery in 'The Dreadful Details'). In this sense, it is important to understand the force of the "we" that emanates from the various devices/practices in Eric Baudelaire's work: it isn't from a singular perspective that he orchestrates the works, neither is it from the perspective of the victim, the witness or the spectator, nor that of the media, the journalist or the artist. Because vision presupposes not a single event visible to a single gaze, but a multiplicity of events that appear to a multiplicity of anonymous gazes. In "Logic of Sense" Deleuze describes the vast "communication of events" in which the "great events" of the world penetrate each other to produce strange resonances with our own affects and private or common traumas, making them "pre-personal and pre-individual."

Eric Baudelaire approaches this "communication" within our image-based society, images from advertising, news media, cell phones, TV series, that connect as they can to the great images of our pictorial tradition, offering us a vision of a plural and anonymous gaze.

The veritable problem of such a communication is therefore that of time. When time contracts, it is the singular point of a unique event that becomes visible, contraction of all events, event-zero, primordial field, ground zero. When time expands, all events reference each other: spectacular and daily events, advertisement and reality, distant wars on terrorism and ordinary riots in the Parisian suburbs (as in 'Sugar Water') ; or September 11th and the battle of Anghiari by Leonardo da Vinci (like the two videos of a circular ambulation around Ground Zero in the video diptych 'Circumambulation' installed with an excerpt of Leonardo's journals on how to paint a battle). Or in the same vein, the Iraq war and Goya's 3 of May 1808, and Manet's Execution of Maximilian from 1867 (referenced in 'The Dreadful Details'). Or in yet a different vein, the graffiti laid on top of the frame of photographs representing angular buildings and seemingly interrupted architecture in Paris, buildings that seen from the side appear as mere façades, and that Roger Caillois, in "Learnings of Paris," thought to be inhabited by phantoms (the 'Blind Walls' series).

But the idea of "phantoms" goes beyond this series of works, it is in a sense an expression of this expansion of the time of events that resembles a haunting silence. An obsession is which all rings false, all seems false, badly articulated, confused, in the manner of false film cuts in Nouvelle Vague cinema, but also in the manner of segments that are poorly made, poorly conceived, on nightly TV news shows. Where are the phantoms? In the folly of images that dissolve into one another until everything becomes indistinguishable? Or in the folly of men creating fabricated relationships between a war in Iraq and September 11th, between the urban riots in France and the war in Iraq, between advertisement and news merchandising of very real corpses?

There are no longer two times in our society of globalized imagery, the time of the instant (photography) and the time of movement (video), but a single time, the time of the event, which contracts and expands and must be reflected upon in the hope of escaping its haunting. Eric Baudelaire's work can therefore be seen as an art of living the event of one city, New York, which has become the event of an entire world, and the time of an entire world. Whether we are in Wyoming ('Manifest Destiny'), in Iraq ('The Dreadful Details'), or in a pseudo Iraq (the production of the image was set in Hollywood), or in Paris ('Blind Walls' series), or precisely nowhere (the subway station in the film 'Sugar Water' is named "Porte d'Erewhon," an anagram of nowhere borrowed from Samuel Butler's novel about an island where time has stalled), we find ourselves brought back to New York and at the time of his question: what happened on September 11th?

With the last lines of Caillois' book on Paris in mind, this show *Circumambulation* could easily have been titled *Learnings of New York*:

"A rapid voyage through a city isn't enough to sow a lingering memory of a city: the memory must become inseparable from the self by a slow discovery that enriches an entire lifetime."

On the works in this show:

‘Sugar Water’: Awaiting the Time-Image

Henri Bergson, who didn't care much for cinema, wrote in "Creative Evolution" that in order to have an authentic intuition of duration, one had to experience it, and he took the example of sugar in a glass of water. The lesson seemed clear: "I must wait for the sugar to dissolve;" it is in the experience of vision and waiting, when my duration blends with that of the world, that the intuition of a moving reality emerges. But how does one learn to wait in a modern world that seems to be a constant flux of continuous images, yet never ceases to extract stopped images, obsessive images, and then projects these fixed images into what seems to be a perpetual cycle? "Sugar Water" can in a sense be seen as a vast metaphor of the days that followed September 11th experienced like a challenge to Bergson's edict: the same fixed images, almost like advertisements, constantly cycling in the very heart of our daily lives, until they produce a perfect misunderstanding: we wait to see the moment where the car explodes, while the "real people" in the film (for the most part) simply await the metro and don't see anything at all. But it can also be read as something else entirely: the daily nature of violence, of advertising, devoid of subject, void of significance, with the same PA announcements and the same barely audible song that create the rhythm of the sound track, in a cycle that mirrors the sequence of images overlapping on top of the blue monochrome of a billboard frame. How does the time spent waiting for the next image to reveal itself become something else than a repetitive old tune? Here, a sort of portrait of the artist as a billposter.

‘Blind Walls’: An Unbearable Ambiguity

In the end, the meaning of an event's *time* is its appalling, unbearable ambiguity. We would like to see it in the present, we would like to seize its "decisive moment" in the manner that Lessing describes the Laocoon, yet we find ourselves stuck in images from the past that continue to haunt our present. We would like "not to judge, not to hate, not to mock, but only see and understand" like Spinoza, but we see nothing, and an unconscious hatred seems to underlie every image. In a way, the series of tags on the surface of framed photographs of "phantom" Parisian buildings function as a form of catharsis. Who is the author? Who is the subject and what is the object of this discontent? A survivor of the events that unfolded on what is now ground zero? Or on the contrary somebody supportive of the terrorists aims? An average citizen of the world who cannot stand that the world's time was suddenly set back to zero by the time of a single city? Or perhaps also the artist himself, forever marked by an event which he seeks to comprehend, to make his own, but which will never be his own, and yet will never let him go.