

“You were probably standing on the opposite side, near the window, I can’t remember exactly.”

Interview with Diane Der Markarian (EN)

All quotations marked with * are taken from or refer to works that have no English translation, and have therefore been translated by the authors and the translator.

Diane Der Markarian: This exhibition project grew out of a conversation we had about the sensation of “déjà vu”, at once strange and captivating, that every one experiences. The reference to the film *Last Year in Marienbad* by the French film director Alain Resnais (1961), an excerpt of which lends itself to the title of this interview, soon emerged. Many characteristics of the film are to be found in your work: repetition, which is haunting in the film, the “déjà vu” mentioned earlier, the abolition of spatial and temporal boundaries, echoes, fragments, among other aspects. Could you comment on these in relation to your work and to this exhibition?

Sophie Blet : We could also have begun this interview with Krzysztof Kieslowski’s *Double Life of Veronique* (1991) or Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966), each of which explores the story of a double existence, accompanied by the strange sensation of déjà vu, questioning the notion of identity and suggesting the idea of having an other, of a life and its double, of a life and its draft form. It’s also about the potential disappearance of one being into another.

I am thinking here of the Japanese term *Omote*:

*“There’s a definite propensity to conceive of the world as a set of changing and reversible façades (omote) that are changeable and reversible. Omote means both face and mask, the very same and the other.”**

Le sens de l’espace au Japon (The sense of space in Japan)
Augustin Berque with Maurice Sauzet, Arguments, 31/12/1999

For me, this introduces a fluidity between beings and substances, and the way they are represented.

The exhibition features a fragment of a detail from a Vermeer painting in which we see a window with a light gauze veiling it. This detail, which commands all the attention in this painting that explores air and light - and which has already appeared in others of my exhibitions - introduces both openness and doubt. It could be the materialization of the reflection of a window present today, in the exhibition space, and from which our view of the outside is denied, or this opening could reflect something else altogether ; does the window originally painted by Vermeer still reflect something today?

This reflection, this “something” is rendered to us through the fixed form of painting or photography, but is no longer quite the same; it appears different, perhaps distorted as in the way that memory or retinal persistence distort. In the film *Last Year at Marienbad*, the time that elapses between things becomes indiscernible, so inextricable that we are no longer sure whether it is the present time that is passing or the past that is lingering and becoming stratified, nor what an accurate account of the situation might have been. It is as though memories were caught in an infinite, futile loop. I work with this hypothetical space, this doubt and these multi-layered temporalities. They are often alternative temporalities that have been warped; potential, possible or disadjusted ones, that can give rise to the suggestion of time frames to which we do not have access, or no longer have access. I have long been interested in cosmology, and current research suggests that, perhaps, time may not exist, and that our impression of time passing may in reality have to do with our way of looking and perceiving, in the way that cinema, with still images, creates an illusion of continuity, of a beginning and an end.

That is what I have tried to pinpoint in this exhibition - by working on frictions between materials and states (such as wax versus metal, reflection versus object, reflection versus false-reflection...), presenting doubles and false symmetries, with a view to confounding the idea of the uniqueness of things and of a beginning or an end; so as to be able, ultimately to constitute the elements of a transitory scene, of micro-entropies or forms in the making, sometimes on the threshold of existence and perception.

DDM: Choosing an exhibition's title is always a complex exercise, and our case was no exception. We hesitated between two possibilities: Not empty exactly, perhaps just impossible the title of the exhibition, and False reflection. I remember that at the beginning the latter was favored over the former. This coincided with an experience you had in your studio with the wax blades from the series *White shadow* (2022), and I quote: "One morning, upon entering the studio, there was a rather beautiful light above, which cast their negative in shadow. [...] I thought to myself that it could be interesting to work on that too. To work with transparency, reflections, the projection of their shadows, inventing false reflections... Like a 'mise en abyme' of things, where those things, multiplied, could just as well vanish."

SB: Yes, the time that objects spend in the studio, settling and going through the experience of living among to the materials and phenomena, is very important to me. This is what leads me to work on spacing, on gaps that I could describe as degrees of existence; tending from the minimum towards nothing or from nothing to the tenuous, the existence of things in their hollows, the negative of things, or their absence, and to think about the way things appear in our perception. The experience you refer to is one of these moments of observation and of a long series of reflections and false-reflections that I try to capture or displace. While a reflection can only exist if the object is present in front of the reflective surface, in one series of false-reflections that I have begun, reflections of my objects and installations are photographed, then reprinted and finally put back but between two panes of glass, offset from the object, which is no longer present, or which is present but configured differently. The false reflection then merges with the present one, continuing to reflect a state of things that no longer exists; holding in place something that ought no longer to be, at once nullifying the wall on which it rests and giving thickness to the present time. For me, it is this possibility, this gap, that lends time a thickness.

It's also the issue of the edge of things, the frame, the representation, the representation of representation. In the title we chose in the end, there is this whole paradox between emptiness, or empty space, which is perhaps not exactly empty, and an emptiness left by the gap between the objects, suggesting a state of things that have been suspended, things that might not be.

DDM: Discussing the title serves to introduce the importance of words and language in your practice. You often refer to the American conceptual artists who were a major influence in the early years of your work, among whom Lawrence Weiner is essential, in particular given his sculptural approach to text. Through reading, the act of utterance opens up the potential meaning contained in the works while allowing their realization. This protocol is significant in relation to your own: although your approach is material, immateriality is very present and allows you to endlessly play with the form and interpretation of your works. The series *Modules-measures (potential spaces)* (2022) is a perfect example. This is exactly what we were interested in experimenting with in the exhibition space.

SB: The radicalism of conceptual artists like Lawrence Weiner, whose language materialized a mental sculpture using text, or Robert Barry, whose series of text-based works *Something that* (such as *Something That Is Next To Nothing* or *Something that needs something else to survive*) greatly influenced my practice in the early years. My practice follows on from this, in the same vein. For me, it was a way of staying with the essential, holding myself on that threshold between the present and the possible, between perceived and mental space, realized and unrealized space. And also the possibility of naming. And in naming to make real, even if that reality is impossible or difficult to comprehend. I have also experimented a lot with gaps in thought and perception, between what we think and what we say, between what we thought we were saying and what we actually say, between what we think we see and what we can say about what we see, and with glitches in language... Moments that seemed to me to be tipping points, in which things, despite their ostensible order, elude us. Then I came to see form as a language in itself. In this I was very much guided by an idea opposite to Lawrence Weiner's, that is, that form could generate a certain language, grammar or sentence. Language is infinite in that it allows us to name absolutely everything, even that which does not exist. Except that for which we have no language. This is what I wanted to approach in the edition *A knife without a blade, for which only the handle is missing* (2022), whose title I stole from Georg Lichtenberg, which traces the contours of a thing from which everything has been removed, yet which retains its outline through its naming.

DDM: In his book *The forms of the visible: An anthropology of figuration* (2021), the French anthropologist Philippe Descola introduces his argument by drawing on the two complementary notions of “form” and “figure”: *«In the origins of the idea of figuration, then, we happily find sedimented this sequence of combinations of the figure-image (the outline, the envelope) and the figure-form (the template), of the visible iconic indication and the invisible prototype that lends it its singularity, and of the ideal world and its actual manifestation.»** Could you clarify your relationship with figuration, which in your practice involves working with forms and objects as a substitute for the human? This ties in with the recent directions that your work began taking during your residency at Huet Repolt in Belgium in 2023, during which you explored the notions of “traces” and “imprints”.

SB: This question of figuration contains, I believe, the relationship with perspective and point of view, which I try to reconsider both in terms of theory - as in the thinking of the Renaissance artists, and in terms of the diffraction of vision and our ways of seeing - an issue that anthropologists are redefining today.

Perspective and naturalism in Europe defined point of view as always being from a single - human - point of view, and, with linear perspective, from a single position in space. These are issues I am exploring in my work. Through the objects and spaces that I imagine, it's a question of putting forward a certain otherness, of a being that divides itself into many facets, in an attempt to evoke alternative orders of reality. It involves doubting the nature of things. This reminds me of a dialogue between Philippe Descola and Alessandro Pignocchi in *Ethnographies des mondes à venir (Ethnographies of worlds to come*)* (2022) : *«Most of the time, people don't see the same «things» in their environment because the ontological furniture of their worlds is made up of very different «things». An Achuar hunter cannot see a quark because a quark does not exist as a «thing» in anyone's natural environment, and because this particle is only detectable as an indirect signal by means of very complex machinery. [...] This does not mean that quarks do not exist [...]. It only means that, under normal circumstances, the Achuar and the physicist live in different worlds because they are populated by different beings whose existence is based on different ontological premises.»**

But this question of figuration also contains the idea of the mold, the template that is produced in order to bring an object into being, which is very important to me. Firstly because it creates a double that is not the initial object, but only the appearance of that object, which is once again a question of the perspective we have on things. It is the apparition of an aspect, an appearance, a semblance. An outer envelope, but not that which constitutes the thing's interiority – which is often missing.

And, as Philippe Descola puts it, *figura* is *«not only the outward appearance, the visible aspect, but also the embodiment of the abstract template, the imprint of the molded object that subsists implicitly».**

This is what interests me in pattern-making fabric and wax, these moments of drafting, of prototyping the emerging form, which endure and become nothing further. But it also raises questions that interest me about reproduction, about the original form and its copy, revisiting once again the idea of the double. It's also a way of suspending time by creating a double of an object that will become perishable. This was the idea behind *White Shadow* (2022), whose metal blade - evoking the irreversible nature of existence like those in still life paintings – is twinned with a wax blade, wax being the material used for preliminary modeling and for the thing in the process of becoming. The wax blade thus acts as a rebound, as if this finitude could be refuted.

Traces, on the other hand, carry with them the question of what is left, what remains of things over time, what remains of what has been, of which we sometimes know nothing at all or only the barest hint. These are questions that guided my work during my residency at Huet Repolt in Brussels, where I visited the Archaeological Museum several times. There, I worked with leather skins, which once contained an animal, but here became surfaces accommodating metal needles and their wax duplicates. And with pattern-making fabric, this time crumpled, as if marked by the traces of an activity, and which here became the support for lead bags, replicas of bronze bags that I had seen in the Archaeological Museum. I was very touched by these bags, which no longer contained anything and were both too heavy (bronze) and too small (hand-sized) to actually carry anything. So I saw them as the image or archetype of a container, an envelope for things.

These interventions remind me of our need to preserve objects and, in this way, stay connected to the past.

There was also an alcove containing a composition of objects playing with this dialectic of container/content or systems of closing and opening (such as masking tape casts laid on paper, or a sequence of stoppers decomposing from the original to its double and on to its disappearance (glass stoppers, wax stoppers, hollow wax stoppers)). As well as a fake electric cable from the *Interruption space* (2022-...) series, which played out once again the potential energy between these objects, spaces and the beings who pass through them.

DDM: This brings us to the question of the «materiality» of your work: how do you choose the materials you use?

SB: I use materials for both their symbolism and their physical properties. This is what prompted me to work with lead during the residency in Brussels, where archaeological questions emerged in my work. Lead has been used extensively for tombs, particularly because it is a natural anti-septic, and thus carries within the matter of preservation over time and longing for eternity. But it also has the property of being heavy, creating a paradox between the emptiness of the bags and their weight, which distorted the fabric on which they laid. I often use metal in my installations, like copper, which conveys an energy that could circulate in a space, in a body or in a thing as in the *Interruption space* series (2022-...). These are false electric cables that traverse the exhibition space from top to bottom, starting at the ceiling, and which at one point in space taper off, leaving a void before resuming - inverted - and going on to run into the floor. For me, this gap between the two parts suggests an energy which, for a time, no longer circulates, giving rise to the idea of a zone where things topple, tipping over into disappearance, conjuring up images of a discontinuous reality, or moments of non-existence.

This possible discontinuity in time and existence is something I am particularly interested in. The way in which things exist, how they are charged with energy, and then the next moment - vanish.

I also often use reflective surfaces such as brass or glass, which once again carry ideas around the reflection, the mirage and the double, while at the same time being surfaces I can project onto, allowing me to play with transparency and shimmering, and which in the case of brass can allude to the use of gold, with its long history in art.

These are very solid, tangible materials, but they are counterbalanced by the fragility with which I bring them into being in a given space, confronting them with other materials such as wax, pattern-making fabric and paper, which have quieter, muted, lighter qualities; whose modes of existence are of the order of the tenuous or the scarce.

DDM: And what about color?

SB: Color doesn't feature much in my work, which for a long time was mostly black. It is a color that I particularly liked because it contains the paradox of being both the absence of color and the sum of all colors. It also brings us back to the question of darkness and the unseen. In recent years, I've tended to use white, or off-whites, as materialized in pattern-making fabric or wax. It is my way of suggesting liminal or quasi-immaculate spaces where things don't really exist yet, of being at a rather low intensity where we might sense micro-movements or variations, or observe time at the pace that particles might. I am thinking here of the piece *Maybe it's in-between, in another surface* (2022), which is the projection onto a veil of a copper wire from one of my fake electric cables. We see a rectangle of light projected onto the wall. A tenuous, almost ghostly image, a ripple or slight vibration of which emerges from the background, itself equally vaporous.

We watch this ripple, almost evanesced, as if between two surfaces, which would usually be imperceptible - but with this video loop, the moment, infinitesimal, endures and reiterates itself.

It is a play with transparency, whites or near-whites, and deep blacks. Degrees that seem to me to signal that perhaps perception needs to change scale. Nevertheless, in the series *Looking inside, what outside* (2023-...), I began working with a very vivid color: ultramarine, that reminds us of Giotto's blue; a color that is once again rather paradoxical in its symbolism, evoking both the abyss and the sky.

DDM: Here, it is relevant to refer to the French philosopher, David Lapoujade, whose work inspires your practice: *“With each reality, a cloud of potentialities. Each existence is accompanied by a suggestion or germ of something else, a fragment of a future reality. Beginnings, drafts, stalled intentions that may never come into existence. They appear, disappear, and are transformed as reality changes.”* (*Les existences moindres*, 2017)*. This quote contextualizes “first drafts” and “stalled intentions”: these transitory states, both infinite and indefinite, are at the heart of your practice and it is interesting to examine them in the light of our experience of them. In fact, this relates back to the notion of «perspective» linked to that of «scale» which, in your work, operates on two complementary planes: the horizontal and the vertical.

SB: The cover that encases this publication transcribes a text written by Maxime Matray about my work in 2020 (*And Darkness Is Restored*): *«One enters a room, a very white room, more or less square, stepping into the light without really knowing where one is going...»*. This whiteness, this neutrality or apparent absence, is very important in my work, both as regards the materials and the spaces I work with.

For me, it's a question of conceiving of a space as if populated by potential events, probable beginnings, that emerge from the void and remain, for the most part, imperceptible. Out of this white space we can explore what might be the very beginning of things, and their mutability.

It is a way of seeing reality not as finite, but as surrounded by all its virtualities and shadows, as dimensions of it. The very idea of a preliminary draft form particularly interested me when I started working with wax, which in sculptural tradition (lost-wax process) is used for the first form given to a thing, the preparatory form of an object in the making, whose very nature is to remain unfinished, leaving the scope of possibilities open.

It was this transitory form that I wanted to work on in several projects, where each thing could have its double in wax, like bearing its own ghost. This same quality is characteristic of the pattern: it is both the fundamental structure of the object to come, and a way of creating a zone of reversibility, of sustaining a state of indeterminacy where everything can still unfold and reconfigure.

What really struck me in David Lapoujade's essay on Étienne Souriau's *Different modes of existence* (1943), and particularly in relation to the virtual (as opposed to the actual), was the idea of an existential pluralism which once again reshapes the question of perspective.

*«We don't have one perspective on the world; on the contrary, it's the world that brings us into one of these perspectives. [...] A being is not closed in on itself; it is unceasingly opened up by the perspectives it generates. Perspectives open up a being, unfolding it, exploring its dimensions and planes, that are by rights innumerable.»**

I also worked with this idea for the installation *Counter-lid, counter-light*, for *L'art dans les chapelles* (2023). I put together my proposal by reflecting on the sensory experience, almost labyrinthine in nature, that I had had visiting this chapel, which, like many chapels, presented me with a singular relationship to time and the physicality of its spaces. As if each time, I had been wandering through a half-mental, half-physical space, where what is present becomes blurred or is but the thing that has already happened, or, on the contrary, is the thing to come. Like incessant detours, folds and hinges in what is.

Isabelle Stengers' research has inspired me in recent years, particularly her book *The Insistence of Possibles. Towards a Speculative Pragmatism* (2017). She reminds us that *«etymologically, the speculator was the one who observes, watches, cultivates the signs of a change in situation, opening themselves to what, in this situation, might be of importance.»* It is a position that I find very beautiful, and a way of intensifying the real, which is firstly possible through thought, and making it material through its multiple bifurcations.

DDM: This connects to the labyrinthine aspect of Resnais's film: these comings and goings which become incessant, at once muddled and clearer. This reveals something primordial about encountering your works: the fact that in order to anchor ourselves, to get our bearings, we must put aside the familiar and accept being disorientated. This may seem contradictory but it is necessary to understand your work. Repetition thus allows you to create a new form by giving your works a performative dimension.

SB : I am trying to create a space that might resemble a border, where we must always tread between the establishment and the dissolution of meaning and the visible. In our daily lives, reference and anchor points seem fairly fixed, there by allowing us to go about our lives with a certain confidence in the stability of things. For me, the exhibition is the place where all this can be turned upside down, where disorientation, the disordered nature of things, vertigo, or roaming around in our understanding can free us from preconceived knowledge and presumed recognition, and simply suggest other ways of interpreting the world.

I am quite interested in these moments when things go off the rails, even just a little.

That is what already interested me about glitches in language and lapses of thought, and what the permanent sense of déjà vu in Alain Resnais's film also brings about: the possibility of misalignment, and ultimately of freedom in what reality can be, of investigating the places where things slip away, surpassing any system of recognition, becoming aberrations.

But it also seems to me to have something to do with forgetting. I was very struck by a film by C. Guerra, *Embrace Of The Serpent* (2015), in which a shaman is duplicated in time, but also in his presence in the world - in the form of a chullachaqui.

*« We all have a chullachaqui.
A being identical to oneself, but empty, hollow.
A chullachaqui has no memories.
He wanders the world, empty.
Like a ghost in time, without time.»**

Excerpt from the dialogue

I found both very beautiful and very powerful this idea that each of us coexists with an image or a hollow version of ourselves, and that the supposedly accomplished, complete and aware one can give way to a form of oblivion or hollow shell in relation to the world in which we live, as if we were constantly wavering between a form of attention and a form of forgetfulness of whose qualities, of our grounding within it, of its nature. This is what Augustin Berque also said about «acosmia», which is a kind of abandonment, a split, humanity's amnesia in the face of the universe we inhabit.

DDM: You describe yourself primarily as a sculptor, however you also use painting as a medium. In the exhibition, you present paintings from the Solve-Coagula series (2021-...), made from inkjet prints and oilpaint images of skies transferred onto brass plates. How do these relate to the rest of your works?

SB: I have always wanted to compose my exhibitions with different levels and orders of reality, from the most abstract, in the mind, to the most concrete, direct and close to us, as images of the sky can be. In this series, I wanted to give substance to a vision of space in strata, in thin slices that can be superimposed, brush against each other and be turned inside out. Here, the images are set in an in-between space, where the surface, showing snags and joins, wavers, from the oily black material to the golden background evoking the infinite space of Pre-Renaissance paintings; causing several contiguous planes to collide and overlap, sometimes duplicating, inverting or overturning them, and suggesting a non-linear texture of time, inhabited by déjà-vu, doubles, latencies and blind spots.

DDM: In your previous exhibition: *Du muable* (2023) – which is in fact reminiscent of the first idea for the exhibition title, “Faux-reflets” – you introduced a new medium into the exhibition space: the bookcase as an item of furniture and as a stand. But perhaps above all, the bookcase as a library, as a place where disparate elements come together and, assembled in this way create new perspectives and thought experiments: box, receptacle, container-content; mold, plaster, tracing paper: the materials you use and finally, words, language. The library almost amounts to a synthesis of your work.

SB : Yes, *Du muable* (which refers to things whose state is constantly changing) held within it the idea of being the opposite of immutable. This installation is intended as a memory, or as an open archive. It consists of several éléments that to my mind are both on the periphery of the work - that do not really belong in an installation - and at the same time catalyze and nourish it (texts, images, casts, folded papers, publication margins, boxes). It is a system that allows me to create multiple echoes between the conscious work that is determined and completed, and a state of things that is of the order of desire, sometimes unconscious, not quite comprehensible and still unresolved. The bookcase, whether laid out on the floor or in the form of shelves, is a space that could be infinite, in which text and objects can unfold as well as withdraw in to themselves, retreat into their containers, appear in the transparency of a stratum of paper or remain on the surface of a molded box, just as a stream of consciousness would be at a given moment. For me, it is like giving thought an architectural form, in a literary register whose elements coalesce in an ever-evolving apparatus, like an infinite recirculation of things, in the way that intuition and memory function.

I have thought a lot about Marcel Duchamp's *Green Box* (1934), a work that greatly influenced me in this practice of architectural writing. I was fascinated by the idea that perhaps this box and its contents are even more important than the object it is about - *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-1923) - just as thoughts about, trials of, inconclusive attempts at, endeavors to describe, moments of solitude or, on the contrary, lucidity in the face of the work, are part of an activity that counts at least as much as the finished work.

DDM: This new form of installation ties in with your book-making practice, which is also truly a work of synthesis. Could you talk about the importance of text in your practice and in the exhibition space?

SB : Text has always accompanied my visual work. It is often abstract writing whose register is evocative, as much as it attempts to describe and to approach those thresholds of perception or existence that are often at issue in my work. My work is rooted in language and its ability to give shape to reality or what it could be. It's a medium through which I can use language to explore those latent, possible spaces and realities, or their counter part, the negative of something; to try to discern the meaning of the absence or appearance of things and beings. For me, text is in a self-sustaining relationship with form. My sculptures and installations very often infiltrate my texts, just as my texts often allow me to imagine forms. Text is also what feeds into the bookcase piece and the place that can accommodate what doesn't appear in installations. In my latest written work *Like a present projecting its reflection into the possible* (2024), for example, I evoke the idea of a perception that has shifted, or «*Seeing from the liver, or the glial cells, from the bone.*»

DDM: According to the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty: "*The very nature of the visible is to have a lining of the invisible*". One cannot be conceived of without the other; may this exhibition and its accompanying publication offer such an experience to spectators/readers.

SB: I am thinking here of the educator, writer and film-maker Fernand Deligny, whose research fascinated me both for its relationship to language, to the maps and tracings of autistic children's movements (this *TRACING / from before the sign*) that he made with other educators, to different spatio-temporal orders, and to the gaps that can exist between different ways of being in the world: between wander, act, gesture with no purpose and finality, project, intention, and finally by his way of thinking out-of-language and, more broadly, out-of-systems, beyond the categories of the normal.

*«It is as if there were two ocular lenses, not for seeing in relief, but a pair of lenses as the memory has its pair, as though the "one" seeing had a kind of second eye that lingers, looking for what there could possibly be of simply human in nature, even if only fragments, over and above the scripted scene.»**

Camérer #1, first article in a series of 4 on the notion of filming and presenting in cinema.

French version published in *Caméra / Stylo* n°4, September 1983.

To see is probably always to perceive that we are in the process of perceiving, and in this mise-en-abyme, to realize that what is perceived is perhaps something absent, something missing, or something misunderstood.