

Ceremonies, Relics and Props On Béatrice Balcou's Work



Tlön Projects invites curators, artists, authors and thinkers to enter into a dialogue with and develop innovative, noteworthy presentations of works on the basis of their imaginary collection or “museum without walls” at different locations. French artist Béatrice Balcou (1976) will select an as yet unknown work from the collection in the context of a ceremony as well as presenting a series of new works.

Béatrice Balcou's works are well thought-out exercises in attention – that increasingly scarce and yet, oh so precious of human capacities. Over the years, she has developed an oeuvre that purposefully explores the boundaries between art and framework. Since 2013, Balcou has been working on a series entitled *Untitled Ceremonies*, performative actions that take place around an existing artwork from a public or private collection. The work in question is carefully unwrapped and re-packed in the presence of a limited audience as part of a gestural choreography that focuses attention on the work's concrete materiality¹. During Balcou's secular ceremonies the works are declaimed as if they were; they are – temporarily – released from the obscurity of the collection and revealed to an audience. There is phenomenological pleasure to be had from the way the work's meaning is divested of every utility or exchange value solely by *interacting* with it² as well as how it declares its independence from every economic framework before it is returned to storage. The same applies to Balcou's series of *placebo* sculptures (2014 – present), wooden replicas of artworks featured in ceremonies. These wooden objects originally served as substitutes or props for rehearsing the ceremonies, yet have slowly, but surely demanded autonomy.

It is perhaps no coincidence then that interest in rituals has risen markedly in recent years, precisely at the point in time that they threaten to disappear. Historically, rituals and ceremonies have a more religious (< Lat. *religare*, “connecting”) connotation and assign symbolic meaning to objects, words and actions³. They bring individuals together as part of a larger whole and ensure the continuance and handing down of human culture⁴. In a disenchanting society, art is perhaps the final refuge for the sacred, the museum as a temple. Whereas 19th-century museums divested countless religious objects and icons of their aura by secularising them or making them profane and into “merely” artworks⁵, Béatrice Balcou engages in re-ritualising works from art collections. Instead of attempting to graft Balcou's work onto the performance or conceptual art canon, her art only becomes truly graspable through the performative, protocolised nature of daily life.

Within the ritual framework – and the accompanying protocol – the subjective, internal, emotional world is of little to no importance. It is precisely the meticulous execution of an objective protocol that determines the success of a ceremony, thereby registering the individual in the social structure of a community⁶. This is the strength of symbols (< Gr. *syn-ballein*, “bringing together”). Their meaning is very embodied i.e. impossible to ponder free of its bearer or medium. Compare it to the meaning of a poem that cannot be paraphrased without repeating the text step by step. This is why the progress of rituals and ceremonies – a constellation of gestures, words and actions – always has something protocol-driven and solemn about it. As a narrative with no beginning and no end, it has to be experienced in its entirety, without taking shortcuts⁷.

¹ Simultaneously, it is an echo of the often overlooked professional art handling practice.

² “*Gesture* is the name of this intersection between life and art, act and power, general and particular, text and execution. It is a moment of life subtracted from the context of individual biography as well as a moment of art subtracted from the neutrality of aesthetics: it is pure praxis. The gesture is neither use value nor exchange value, neither biographic experience nor impersonal event: it is the other side of the commodity that lets the “crystals of this common social substance” sink into the situation.” Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End. Notes on Politics*, tr. by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1996] 2000: 79.

³ Richard Sennett, *Together. The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2012.

⁴ “Rituals and ceremonies are the genuinely human acts which allow life to appear to be an enchanting, celebratory affair.” Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals. A Topology of the Present*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020: 26.

⁵ Boris Groys, “The Curator as Iconoclast”, *New Approaches in Contemporary Curating*, Spring 2016.

⁶ Byung-Chul Han therefore also refers to rituals as “community without communication”. *Op. cit.*: 1

⁷ “Some of the same outward-turn occurs in ceremonies, whose expressive power stands at the opposite pole from a person lost in the labyrinth of his or her own private feelings. This is one reason why, in performing a ritual, people become so exercised about getting it exactly right, whether it's a question of social etiquette or what version of the Bible to use in church; no matter what you feel, the power of the occasion depends on what you are performing.” Richard Sennett, *Op. cit.*: 140.

Béatrice Balcou's newer works can also be understood from a comparable perspective. We also recognise the symbolic meaning of, for example, relics and icons. In this case their *material* ties play a crucial role in denoting meaning, more so than that of mutual similarity⁸. The seemingly contingent – the unexpected touch, the accidental contact – suddenly becomes essential at a symbolic level. It is this invisible, “magical” tie, its iconic meaning that is often transferred by religious traditions. This element is clearly part of two series Balcou made during *annus horribilis* in 2020 while she was in residence at CIRVA in Marseille. *Porteurs* consists of elongated, glass shrouds that can contain the residues of contemporary artworks or historic artefacts which the artist collected from restorers – only the title provides an inkling of their origins. Balcou ensconces these ostensibly irrelevant remains of the restoration process like relics in transparent capsules that, oddly enough, are reminiscent of relay batons, thereby evoking the concept behind oral traditions. The same material tie is also important in *Containers*, a series of dead insects under a variety of bell jars. Here too, the title betrays more about the work: as it pertains to invertebrates that fed on works of art. Corpses perhaps being the most macabre form of relic, and in this case they fascinate because of what else they contain.

⁸ Roland Breeur & Arnold Burms, *Ik/Zelf. Essays over Identiteit en Zelfbewustzijn*, Leuven: Peeters, 2000: 126.



Container #17 (Hexarthum Exiguum & Rosa da Tivoli), 2020
Insect, glass
ø 5 x 11,8 cm
Photography: Regular Studio



Porteur #14 (Untitled, Laura Lamiel, early work), 2020
Slate powder, glass
ø 3,6 x 30 cm
Photography: Regular Studio



Béatrice Balcou
Untitled Ceremony #16
Assistant: Theodora Jacobs
05.11.2021 – 07.11.2021

Performance times:

05.11.2021 17:00
06.11.2021 14:00 and 17:00
07.11.2021 11:00

A ticket for attending a performance is required.
You can book a ticket on satellite.eventgoose.com.

Curators:

Chris Bestebreurtje and Petra Kuipers

Essay:

Pieter Vermeulen

Translation:

Titus Verheijen

Location:

ROZENSTRAAT – a rose is a rose is a rose
Rozenstraat 59, Amsterdam

Generously supported by:



Thanks to:

Sjoerd Kloosterhuis, Dick Pellegrom, Mari Pitkänen, Madelon van Schie and Maarten Brocades Zaalberg

Special thanks to:

Laurent Fiévet

Tlön Projects'
imaginary collection
includes works
from various private
collections. It
constitutes the point
of departure for Tlön
Projects' Satellite
Programme.

Graphic design:
Sabo Day

Typeface:
Orbis for Tlön
Projects, by Jung-
Lee Type Foundry