

# MARIE AERTS, EMPTINESS UNMASKED

## THE «WEARINESS OF THE SELF»

Or four *Portraits* of “The headless man” were created in 2009 by Marie Aerts, in collaboration with Studio Harcourt, Paris. The stamp is instantly recognisable as that of the famous Studio, who have been photographing movie stars in black and white since the 1930s – god-like figures, timeless portraits which embody a perfect and unattainable beauty in the collective imagination. «Harcourt’s subjects gaze elsewhere, at another place. They flagrantly break all communication with the spectator. They keep their distance, having ‘the unique appearance of a remote person’, or, more precisely, of their aura. In a Harcourt portrait, the sitter is unapproachable, inward-looking» (1). The portraits of “The headless man” are in keeping with this Harcourt aesthetic – the anti-naturalistic setting and pose, strong contrasts between dark and light, a halo of light around the subject’s silhouette. But the essence is missing, the sacred face, which, in Marie Aerts’ work, may reveal a fascination for an idealised model. When faced with this figure of a truncated, incomplete human being, squeezed into his suit and tie, empty of identity and personality, a comic and trivial element surfaces. The artificiality of the Harcourt aesthetic accentuates the effect of emptiness, just like the depiction of a being whose aura has been summoned away.

In the video *Trou Noir (Black Hole)*, “The headless man” sits facing us, his hand plunged into his collar, trying to pull out a shapeless form – perhaps hair or fur? – but nothing comes of his attempts, no face is revealed to us.

“The headless man”, created by Marie Aerts, regularly makes an appearance in her performances, videos and photographs. He appears as an empty body – void of identity, of decision, of ambition, of desire; a being with no history, no past and no future; a body which has lost any link with others and with society; an absurd, disjointed body. Standing in front of this uniform model of a generic human being – a product of our contemporary society – every peculiarity, the ability to possess any distinguishing feature seems to have been wiped out, leaving a weakened human, made childlike, tortured by repression and depression. This human being is gripped by terror in the face of a discourse on success, on «more obtains more», on permanent adaptability and interchangeability, paralysed by the «weariness of the self» (2). The photograph of “The headless man” taken by Studio Harcourt contains this paradox, which is already inherent in the photographic style of the Studio. Those who go there to be photographed, stars or unnamed people in a quest for immortality, are they not giving their consent to «assume the same form, to possess the same body, the same skin texture, the same expression...?» (3) The black suit and tie of “The headless man” has nothing reassuring about it – the black emphasises the phenomenon of being consumed, sucked in, forgotten. The uniform-like suit also conjures up the idea of a «gentle» violence, which is a sign of the assimilation and conformism inherent in our society. Here, the man is deprived of his distinguishing characteristics, of his full participation in humanity: thought, perception, emotions have been erased, leaving only a proto-human being, who cannot and does not know how to advance, evolve or exist.

Anxiety surfaces – will this human, emptied of his vital substance, totally disappear? Is he preparing us to say goodbye to the human face forever? Must we sign up to the aesthetics of disappearance, as in Peter Land’s video *The Lake* (1998)? There, we see the artist dressed as a hunter, getting into a boat, his gun in a shoulder strap. Then he turns his gun on the boat, shoots it and punctures the bottom. The boat sinks and the artist sinks with it into the lake – Peter Land «experiences his fall as a counter-balance to the demiurgic models of elevation and suspension» (4).

## THE OPACITY OF POWER

The figure of "The headless man" represents the society of contemporary workers, employees and executives in the business and finance worlds. It embodies the fear of the opacity of these worlds, financial transactions, the madness of speculation, and, as a result, forgetting the self. The recent events which have plunged us into worldwide economic crisis have made a very unsettling form of power emerge – an indistinct power, whose face seems almost unidentifiable. A power with complex ramifications, a network of elusive origins, triggering a powerful economic, political and social chaos. This kind of irrational power was shown in its absurdity in a superb film by Michel Deville *Le dossier 51 (File 51)* (1978). Through the medium of the subjective camera, the film shows the mounting of a secret service investigation of a high-ranking civil servant, whose existence is dissected and whose family secrets are revealed by the investigation, leading to his suicide. This character, Dominique Auphal, is reduced to a pile of forms, documents, evaluations and impressions which make up «file 51». Through surveillance, questioning of neighbours and psychological manipulation we see a cold world of anonymous beings, emotionless identical spies with no sense of morality. A dark and frightening crowd emerges which follows its own rules and which holds power over the individual's life or death. We find the idea of a both indistinct and standardised crowd in one of Marie Aerts' projects, where headless men parade with former soldiers. In another video, headless men appear and disappear in a landscape of dunes and we never find out why they are looking for each other. The growth of biopolitics, the fear of control, whether justified or not, the dominance of a utilitarian vision of the human being makes these objectiveless armies even more frightening. This situation intensifies our state of vulnerability. Should docility and obedience be normalised so that each person is diluted a little more in this shapeless crowd, each carrying out the same gesture and the same orders at the same time?

Marie Aerts' scenes show us a naked power, a power which no longer holds any significance, or any purpose, but in which a threatening element resides. In Sylvie Blocher's video *Men in Pink* (2001), the tragedy of the individual separated from hope in an ordinary world is revealed to us. The homosexual choir 'Les caramels fous' perform, one after the other, two songs which marked cultural and political history in the twentieth century: the communist song 'Internationale' and 'Heigh-ho' by the seven dwarfs, from the Walt Disney cartoon 'Snow White', whose tune was inspired by a German military march popular with the Nazis. The choir members, in dark grey suits and black ties, pull pink stockings over their heads and make holes in them by putting their fingers in their mouths, before starting to sing the song of the seven dwarfs. Through the contrast in ideologies of these two songs, there seems to be a definitive division between the men and the significance of the world in which they live, as if everything has become the same. The act of group singing loses its unifying purpose and no longer holds promise for a better future. The individual has dissolved into the crowd, but this crowd no longer has a function.

Marie Aerts' series of full-scale drawings of guns illustrates the culture of firearms in our contemporary society – Kalashnikov, Python handgun, machine gun, assault rifle, etc. – which increasingly appear in a great quantity of images and depictions in cinema, video clips and television series.

Such arms are both products of increasingly sophisticated technology and objects of many kinds of fetishism, for example, when American soldiers named the bombs which they dropped on Japan or Vietnam after female stars. Cinema has the biggest stock of these images, from 1940s *film noir* to Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* or Brian de Palma's *Scarface*.

For example, the male characters in *Scarface* (1983) display regressive values with violence at their heart which appear necessary for survival, they are 'pioneers' of a new type of violence – pioneers who justify violence as proof of passion and ability, as a way of climbing the rungs of a crime-society. The myth of the hunter, the solitary killer, is used as a relentless pursuit towards the destruction of reality, the everyday, the ordinary world of pleasures and pain. The film depicts impromptu 'forces' of order as being aggressive, triumphant, impulsive. Self-indulgence, the idea of one-upmanship, creates utter confusion between fantasy and reality. Self-indulgence itself becomes important – desire is upheld over reason. But Marie Aerts' firearms are also emptied of their substance; their utility, their effectiveness is eliminated, they are truncated because their cylinders have been removed. The ostentatious violence of a firearm and the fetishism which, alas, it holds, are drained from it. There is no desire left, no pleasure, no sadism.

## A BODY TRANSFORMED?

"The headless man" is a being whose lack of definition is also a strength. In the end it is an intermediary state of being human which Marie Aerts presents for us to see, the promise of possible transformation, of re-enchantment. In the video *Faux départ (False Start)*, against the soundtrack of an athletics championship, the headless man cannot get off the starting line of a race. In another video he expels a strange, thick smoke, which is perhaps a sign of transformation, of a vital substance which can finally be prepared for another use, enabling him to find himself once again. The artist is very interested in Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theories on power and representation of the body, especially in *Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (5). And we could speculate that there is in her work, which primarily uses performance and the tradition of Body Art, a possible revival of, and a support for, *the Body without Organs (Corps sans Organes)*. *The Body without Organs* does not refer to the physical or psychological body of an individual. It should rather be considered as the idea of a body, which synthesises different states – physical and psychological qualities, both of which bring a form of resistance to the phenomena of socialisation at work in our society. In her exhibition at Studio Harcourt Marie Aerts also presents this body through stuffed animals (moles, stone martens, crows, those considered to be pests or a threat) whose heads are sucked inside their bodies.

All in all, it is a new type of body that Marie Aerts is attempting to construct, a body which defends itself and resists, as opposed to the 'body' of the individual or that of modern society, standardised, sterilised, divided up, dissected, analysed, attacked by biopolitics and fascist threats of all kinds. A body of multiple and perhaps contradictory identities, whose vocation would be to escape fixed, rigid and definitive classification. A body which gets carried away and loses control of its own representation, a union of dense conflicting dynamics: life and death, repulsion and attraction, production and anti-production, functioning and malfunctioning...

In contemporary art, numerous manifestations of this body can be identified, perhaps, for example Alain Séchas' *Le mannequin* (1985), where we are confronted with a foam rubber dummy wearing a suit, legs in the air, head plunged into a plastic bucket full of plaster. This is not only a desperate vision of the social phenomena outlined above, the expression of a panic-stricken fear when faced with society, the dissolution of the individual into an absurd nothingness, but rather it is a way of representing the human being in the space between chaos and order, between suicidal temptation and desire for life, between playfulness and seriousness. The *One Minute Sculptures* (1997-98) by Erwin Wurm – creations portraying meaningless gestures by different people in banal or incongruous settings, but which their bodies are capable of achieving – could also be considered as formalisations of *Bodies without Organs*.

Instructions command someone to wear their whole wardrobe at the same time, to put their feet in a bucket for five minutes. A man bends himself along a wall, his invisible head squeezed against it, another person is wedged standing up between two mattresses, yet another balances flower pots on his forearms... All these games, played with a confined human body, resulting sometimes in burlesque effects, create an oscillation, a permanent tension between functioning and malfunctioning, rigidity and movement, order and chaos, because «you never reach the *Body without Organs*, you cannot reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit» (6). Maintaining this tension creates resistance to all forms of control, including, perhaps, resistance to the «weariness of the self» in all its forms.

Marie Aerts erodes the representation of the human body in similar terms: dislocating the headless man's body heralds a new human being, who will no longer obey the rules of submission or of fear. This body, which is indistinct and transformed, is a mirror image of today's idea of power, and resists its unceasing destructive chaos.

### Alice Laguarda

Philosopher and architect, Alice Laguarda is an art and architecture critic. Working for various specialist publications (art press, Art présence, IN/EX, Revue d'esthétique, among others), the author of several works on contemporary architecture, she created and edited the monthly journal *Parpaings* published by Jean-Michel Place from 1999 to 2002. She is professor of aesthetics at the Caen Ecole Supérieure des Arts et Médias.

Last published work: *Projections constructives*, a group publication overseen by Sophie Auger, Onde Centre d'art contemporaine, published by it, Vélizy-Villacoublay, 2009.

### Notes

(1) and (3) Dominique Baqué, *Visages. Du masque grec à la greffe du visage*, Paris: Editions du Regard, 2007.

(2) Alain Ehrenberg, *La fatigue d'être soi. Dépression et société*, Paris: Odile Jacob, 2000. Published in English: *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009.

(4) Françoise Parfait, catalogue *Collection nouveaux médias - installations*, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 2007.

(5) *Capitalisme et schizophrénie. 1 - L'Anti-Oedipe*, 1972; 2 - *Mille plateaux*, 1980, Paris: Editions de Minuit.

(6) Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980.