

Eustache or the *tic de l'ours***Text by Paul Bernard, curator, Mamco, Geneva**

The “tic de l'ours¹” refers to a behavioral disturbance which affects horses, manifesting itself, for the animal, in an incessant movement of the head from left to right—much like those small plastic dogs that can be found in the rear window of cars. In the novel *Kosmas oder Vom Berge des Nordens* by Arno Schmidt, the Greek farmer Anatolios reveals a curious remedy to treat a suffering horse: he carefully traces a vertical line “the width of a hand” right in front of the animal’s face. “The horse hesitated; interrupted its movements; turned its head toward us in a questioning manner: ? wanted to continue its tic – it didn’t work! It pointed its ears forward, exhaled, scraped at the ground: tail lifted: oh yes, it didn’t work any longer!!” Carried out correctly, the most elementary geometry is enough to calm the ardour of a confused animal; moreover, this has been confirmed by numerous prescriptions like this one to hypnotise a chicken or to tame the frenzy of a hyperactive child.

Transplanted to the realm of art, this folk remedy is doubly interesting. To begin with, let’s suppose this type of experiment could reveal the formation of a certain type of relationship between, let’s say, wild expressivity and radical abstraction. To put it simply, imagine that a Jackson Pollock and a Barnett Newman of similar dimensions, when facing one another, could neutralise their respective force fields. Secondly, one way to restrict lateral movement is through an ascending line. It’s as if the confrontation of the animal with the line could provoke a kind of point of equilibrium, like the bubble inside of a level searching for stability, or, to remain within the domain of art, like two basketballs floating in water, in the dead center of an aquarium.

This rule of remedy through the confrontation of contradictory elements in search of equilibrium seems to traverse a good portion of the oeuvre of Denis Savary; whether it be inherent in the works themselves or produced through the hanging of his exhibitions. Here are a few examples in no particular order from recent exhibitions: *Oyvind*, an Eskimo doll made of leather, is hypnotised by the optical disruptions of the film *Cannelé*; *Tunnels*, a massive piece made of gabions with cardinal openings shares an exhibition space with *Gloria*, a succession of table napkins presented above eye level; the three bronze masks that make up *Loup eye Stromboli*, a nude-landscape made of rubber; the gigantic elephantsque coconuts of *Maldoror* appear in a forest of motorised plants, in front of a colored grid; *Le Must*, a still image of a deserted nightclub with flashing strobe lights fascinates *Alma* and *Fernando*, two hirsute stuffed dolls. Then there’s the hot air balloon carrying an orchestra project, the city on wheels maneuvering around a spider-like marionette, the portable whales observed by Japanese-inspired signage. Frozen observers and floating dancers appear throughout.

¹ Literally “the bear tic” is one of the equine stable vices and known as weaving in English.

“Eustache,” Denis Savary’s exhibition at Xippas gallery, also relies on a therapy of opposites. Starting with its title, the exhibition associates itself with the figure of an auteur cinema filmmaker whose masterpiece, *The Mother and the Whore*, is full of insoluble contradictions. On one side of the gallery lies a pack of sleeping dogs. Their hunched figures evoke piles of stones, a gathering of clouds – heavy non-forms crouched down, as if indifferent to the outside world. Each form has a kite associated to it; whose light shapes, ready to rise, have a rigid structure and a symmetry that one can’t help associating with a whole segment of hard edge abstraction, while their transparency recalls certain stained-glass windows. This formal opposition is doubled by a semantic opposite. If the image of a sleeping dog evokes a calm and warm interior, the kite references outdoor activities and windy afternoons. The stack or pile and the window, shapelessness and concreteness, phlegmatic folds and tensed fabric: the space that is cohabited here would be one of a thwarted weightlessness, a weak gravity, of an unstable surface. A space lacking boundaries, somewhere between domestic interior and the great outdoors, much like the “scalped” dollhouses the artist has shown interest in.

We could content ourselves with this semiotic interpretation of the work and continue to finger the rosary of contradictory meanings, further speculating on this “unstable equilibrium,” to use a rather cliché expression. However, that would cause us to miss out on another, fundamental part of the work of Denis Savary, clues to which are given by the title and image chosen for the exhibition invitation: a taste for double narrative threads.

“Eustache” was the occasion to talk about the filmmaker however, Denis Savary chose the title more specifically for its quality of being the first name of a real-life dog. For the artist, Eustache the dog is interchangeable with the adopted stray dog baptised Stupid by John Fante in his eponymous novel. A clumsy Akita of unusual dimensions, “practically a bear,” big sleeper, sexually obsessed, whose extravagance electrifies Fante: “he could alleviate pain, bandage the wounds of my interminable days, of my poverty-stricken childhood, of my desperate youth, of my compromised future.” This indifferent animal who, while benefiting from all the advantages of domesticity despite refusing its proprieties, appears to be the best remedy for the depression that overcomes the writer.

The image featured on the exhibition invitation gives some insight as to the origin of the kites. The image, dating from 1898, is of one of the trial runs of pioneer aviator Ferdinand Ferber taking off from Rue Castle on some sort of paraglider. The engineer continued his trials in Geneva, using different prototypes. Among his notes the following account from October 1899 was found:



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1—*Jump from a height of 1,50 m. Result: some pressure is felt, but not enough.*

2—*Jump from the top of a ladder. Result: no pressure is felt; the wings don't engage. Thumb gets pinched.*

3—*Descent from hill towards the Rhône however, as there is no wind in this direction, no result.*

4—*Trial by horse, flown as a kite. Note that the object is an excellent kite.*

5—*Jump from the top of a gymnastic pole: no result.*

Denis Savary had already borrowed these few phrases for inscription onto a wall. Again, we encounter the same search for the adequate height, the wish to circumvent the laws of gravity. Most of all what is revealed are the little domestic fiascos that accompany any obsessive search (*thumb gets pinched*). Through this narrative telescoping, Fante and Ferber, the cantankerous writer and the obstinate engineer, are of mutual aid to one another. The promise of flight and tranquil indifference fix the scene of their meeting, briefly putting off their failures, their downfall.

In view of these structural and narrative considerations, I'd like to end on a more general note. Recently, a friend who was describing Denis's work to me said they were like theater props without a stage. The relationship the artist has with the theater and marionettes has often been cited, as well as the burlesque aspect of his work. Dogs and kites, Fante and Ferber very obviously have a substantial comic potential. However, this comedic combination is of a very singular kind. It bases itself on objects and postures much more than on language or performance. It is a suspended, silent, stifled, dulled sort of comedy that recalls silent Surrealist films or a comic strip with no dialogue. This is a kind of comedy whose downfall would be endlessly put off, constructing through figures, decors and objects, its own universe, its own physical laws, its own remedies.

Paul Bernard
Curator, Mamco, Geneva