

**Béatrice Balcou**

**20.09.2019 - 26.01.2020**

**M Leuven**

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Béatrice Balcou (1976, Tréguier, France) radically challenges the way art is produced, in part by making her own versions of existing artworks. Her artistic approach is atypical: she carefully examines artworks that are not hers, copies them and takes on the role of technician or conservator.

For Balcou an artwork is not a fleeting image that can be quickly identified or consumed, but rather a physical presence that requires our attention and time. Essential for her is the way we look at things and then process that information. The exhibition space becomes a place where the rapid consumption of artworks and culture in general is resisted and opposed.

At M she is bringing together several existing works in one gallery: sculptures, film, drawings and pieces that can be activated during performances. Specially for this exhibition, she made a work entitled *Four pins for René Heyvaert, 2019* based on the work *Untitled, 1974* by René Heyvaert from the Cera collection.

## **Untitled Ceremonies**

In her *Untitled Ceremonies* series, Balcou explores the meaning of the gesture, drawing on her training in visual art and dance, but also on her knowledge of martial arts and Japanese tea rituals. What the gesture symbolizes for her is the importance of touch, feel and movement. Most works of art in collections have a 'score', a sort of handbook or condition report, which sets out how the work can best be conserved and how it should be presented to the public. What interests Balcou are the technical manuals and the learned codes relating to the manipulation of an artwork. From white gloves, special packaging materials and work tools, such as mousse, bubble wrap and silk paper, to the possible archive numbering and installation instructions.

Each *Untitled Ceremony* consists of a series of specific procedures for unpacking the artwork in front of a small group of people. The performances are executed in silence and give the spectator a rare view of an artwork as parts of the work are carefully removed from all the protective material. Consequently, you may well look at the artwork in a different way than if you were to see it in an exhibition. The ceremonies are lengthy, giving the public the time to study the artwork in optimal circumstances rather than just take a cursory, superficial glance. In this series, Balcou is referencing the carefully orchestrated ritual of Japanese tea ceremonies or a state of mind, as in yoga when mind and body are in complete harmony.

### **Placebo Works**

In her meticulous preparation of the ceremonial process, Balcou first makes an accurate copy in wood of the original artwork. These *Placebo Works* serve the same purpose as the wooden swords used in practice sessions in the martial arts: they avoid damaging the original.

All the ceremonies and wooden copies are preceded by intensive preparation and meticulous research. For example, the measurements of the artwork that is to be replicated must be systematically recorded in a process that involves physical contact with the works. The degree of difficulty can vary as, for example, in the case of a work by Bojan Šarčević, consisting of a brittle, irregular branch of a tree. In some cases Balcou draws preparatory sketches – part instrument, part ‘real’ artwork – based on life-size photographs of the original.

Balcou presents her own interpretation of the work, drawing on discussions with the artists of the original works and a study of the instructions for their presentation and conservation. Consequently, the wooden replicas raise the question of similarity and dissimilarity, of the difference between original and copy. At the same time they have gradually acquired an autonomy of their own as independent exhibition pieces. The undivided attention of the viewer is required, given that all the artworks by different artists, each with its own ‘back story’, are reconstructed in the same material, i.e. wood, making them uniform in colour and material.

### **Placebo Prints**

The *Placebo Prints* were originally intended to communicate ceremonies, but have become works in their own right. The photographs feature details of the placebo works, showing to advantage the different types of wood and textures, with their colour, grain structure and surface relief. Though ‘just’ prints, they are so realistic that you might easily mistake them for wood inlay from furniture. The *Placebo Prints* emphasize the essential ambiguity of Béatrice Balcou’s work: they are image and object, image and drawing, form and matter, all at the same time.

## Assistant Pieces

Like the *Placebo Works*, the *Assistant Pieces* series is based on research into existing works of art by other artists. Again executed in wood, the works visualize the often invisible aids used to display them, like a shelf, a nail, a stand or a hanging system. You could say they assist the presentation of the work of another artist. Here the Assistant Pieces are displayed separately from the original artworks, as pieces that remind us of the absence of the originals.

## Tôzai

*Tôzai* was filmed during Béatrice Balcou's recent residency at Villa Kujoyama in Kyoto. It is her first ceremony made specially for a film recording. The video is based on a work by Yuki Okumura, which in its turn was inspired by the work of another Japanese artist, Genpei Akasegawa. In 1964 Akasegawa made a sculptural piece which he named Canned Universe. He ate the contents of a tin of crab meat and then removed the paper label and stuck it on the inside of the tin before resealing it. By reversing inside and outside, he sealed the whole universe in the can, as the title of the work tells us.

In 2012 Okumura organized a workshop to which each participant was asked to take along their favourite can of food and use it to make their own version of Canned Universe. Balcou was fascinated by Okumura's reinterpretation of the original and, while in Japan in 2018, she made a ceremony for it. She put together a collection by asking each person taking part in the ceremony to send her their tin by post. With the help of a Japanese tea master, all the tins were laid out according to the rules. 'Tôzai' is the word used to signal the start of a Bunraku performance, the traditional Japanese puppet theatre. In accordance with the Bunraku model, several people are required to operate the puppets for the ceremony. Their bodies are concealed and they harmonize their gestures and rhythms in a choreography for hands.

### **Transformer**

Every Saturday between 14.00 and 16.00 hrs this installation will be operated according to the rules of the Bunraku puppets, with a mediator and a group of between three and five visitors.

Standing on a platform are four oak sculptures, some with handles. Though highly abstract, they nevertheless represent the shape of a head, a torso, a skirt and feet – the various parts of a puppet's body. These 'sculptures at rest' invite the spectators to operate them according to a protocol drawn up by the artist. With the help of the mediators, the sculpture can be assembled and moved by several visitors working together. As in the Japanese Bunraku theatre, three, four or five people work together to form the marionette, synchronizing their rhythmic movements as they do so, and moving and breathing in unison.

### **Stools for an Exhibition Space**

The stools spread out over the exhibition space are usually part of Béatrice Balcou's ceremonies. They create both a physical and mental space and can be used by the spectators, while also showing the presence of the visitors and their movements. The stools serve as an invitation to the spectators to choose a viewing position, rather than dictating set places.

## Biography

Béatrice Balcou (1976, Tréguier, France) lives and works in Brussels. Her recent solo and duo exhibitions include the following: L'Économie des apostrophes at La Ferme du Buisson Center for Contemporary Art in Noisiel (2018), Béatrice Balcou x Yuki Okumura: double suicide at Kumagusuku at Kyoto Art Hostel kumagusuku in Kyoto (2018); Kazuko Miyamoto > Béatrice Balcou in Exilegalerie in Berlin (2017) and in L'Iselp in Brussels (2016); Walk in Beauty at Casino Luxembourg Contemporary Art Forum (2014); Calme, luxe et volupté at Le Quartier Center for Contemporary Art in Quimper (2014); and Chaque chose en son temps at FRAC Franche-Comté in Besançon (2013).

In recent years her work has been shown in various group exhibitions, including Article 132-75 in Kunstverein, Langenhagen (2019), Sculpter (faire à l'atelier) in FRAC Brittany, Rennes (2018), Tes mains dans mes chaussures in La Galerie Contemporary Art Center, Noisy-le-Sec (2017), Un-Scene III in WIELS, Brussels (2015), Plateforme de jeux in Center Pompidou, Paris (2015) and Des choses en plus, des choses and moins in Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2014).

In 2018, together with Yuki Okumura, Balcou was a laureate of the residence organized by the Institut Français at Villa Kujoyama in Kyoto, Japan. The work of Béatrice Balcou is part of the collections of FNAC Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Paris; FRAC Corse, Corte; FRAC Franche-Comté, Besançon and FRAC Ile-de-France, Paris.

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