

THE GAULOISES BLEUES BY JORDI COLOMER

Ramon Tio Bellido

(catalogue SOME STARS)

FOR THE PAST FIVE OR SIX YEARS, Jordi Colomer's work has consisted essentially of montages and video installations.

At Noisy-le-Sec, Jordi showed *Fuegogratis* and *Anarchitekton*. These apparently different videos were at once contradictory and complementary, as much in their respective contents

as in the rhythmic procedures of the narratives unfolding within them. Without wishing to jump the gun, let us say that I found a fairly assertive metaphorical narrative charge in *Fuegogratis* and a comprehensive disruption of this same narrative occlusion in the other work.

Or rather, to be even more straightforward and transparent in my appraisal, I greatly liked the absence, or dissolution, of any anecdotal story in *Anarchitekton*. You will tell me that this is somewhat contradictory, because in it you can see a character walking along the skylines formed by concrete suburban-type 1970s-style apartment blocks, outside which he holds at arm's length, and waves about, a certified copy of a model of the same rather unsightly architecture, which interferes with some of these tower blocks like a virtual clone, or becomes abstracted therein to the point of actually disappearing in this delightful landscape, depending on the angle and distance of the viewpoint from which you can see the applicant frolicking about.

What is it that so seduced me in this adventure? Many things, probably, starting with a relative familiarity with this body language and this type of action with rituals of street demonstrations and those banners that people brandish in an unwittingly choreographic way; the transgression and freedom authorized by these same processions and marchpasts which, in the end of the day, and whatever their motives may be, all look more or less alike both as a result of their festive and repetitive aspect and because of the relative futility of their factual agitation.

All this was so present and uppermost in my mind—this nonspectacle which is the best because it does not differentiate between the director and the actor—that I suddenly found myself remembering, in a somewhat mind-blowing way, the enthusiasm I had experienced for a film that I had seen when I was a teenager; I don't actually think that I understood a great deal about it, apart from the fact that the avalanche of non-stories, the withdrawal of any informative narrativeness with neither alleged beginnings or endings, had filled me with pleasure and, by the skin of its teeth, put me back on a beam with films, which are not my favourite "seventh art"—far from it!

That film was called *Les Gauloises bleues/The Blue Gauloises*, and I think it was the only finished film ever directed by the critic Michel Corneau, who openly admitted to wanting to undertake a deconstructive and "critical" reading of the all-powerful academicization of films. And it is to some extent with his pretext in mind that I have here decided to undertake the writing of this essay on the work of Jordi Colomer.

More or less all I can remember of *Les Gauloises bleues* is a short scene which takes place towards the middle of the film, which could just as easily come at one end or the other of it. So you see Jean-Pierre Kalfon, then a

young avant-garde “art et essai” –type actor, walk into a kitchen where there is a quiet girl. On to the table, the guy tips a heap of Gauloises packets he was clutching against his body. As they pile up on the waxed tablecloth, they make a deafening, metallic noise, the sort of noise any crane might make unloading crashed cars at a wrecker’s yard...

When you watch that scene, you realize before very long –not to say right away– that this is an extreme, laboured and laborious fiction; then you realize all at once that, in the end of the day, it’s not that different from what happens at any given moment in our most humdrum everyday life, which is made up of an incommensurability of differences and weirdnesses, which we must endlessly put back together, assemble, reglue...

The impact of *Les Gauloises bleues*, in this respect, was colossal, not so much for the incongruous noise –it was only a noise, after all, and an identifiable one at that –as because of the action being played out in it, that outpouring, that accumulation doubling from one pile to another, here first carried and transported, and there piled up and erected. In the final analysis, there can’t be a more human action, something akin to the absurd representation of a labour then transformed into a work, or rather an œuvre.

The unlikely emphasis and the evident exaggeration that this scene might conjure up foundered in the sudden conviction that it might have involved us; by accomplishing such an act, we then potentially became the actors of such pieces of poppycock, because, basically, it is indeed in this kind of constant diversion that we all try our hand, often unwittingly. Better than Monsieur Jourdain, then, the business of *Les Gauloises bleues* made us all become artists/actors, whereas we were, de facto, mere viewers and spectators slumped in screening room armchairs.

There is nothing haphazard or coincidental about my mention of the screening venue. This auditorium –like place, common to theatres, moviehouses and all the performing arts, which is merely the “black box”– like arrangement of the tiers of the circus or stadium, as introduced during the Renaissance. As a head-on vision, the stage is –despite its depth–a flat image in which the mimetic layers of perspective and reality are incorporated. In its instrumental necessity, it goes without saying that this relationship has been much discussed and deconstructed by our much-loved avantgardes, but it is impressive to see the degree to which it comes forcefully across once again in the ceaseless and reiterative to-ings and fro-ings between the “visual arts” and images in motion. In the treatments which he forces on the particular space of the projection, and starting out from the smithereening of the place of the “prince” whom we become by occupying it as we will, Jordi Colomer emphasizes the impossible dissociation represented by the hybridization of static images and moving images –otherwise put, he stresses the need to pursue the implementation of an ontological, relentless installation which, despite all the semantic a priori of the moment, does not belong to the field of scenography or set design, or, even less, to the arena of dramaturgy. These arrangements of spaces belong intrinsically to something akin to the visual order, to the experimental device formed by the visual syntax in its entity –it belongs, that is, to an event and not to a spectacle.

If it were necessary to check the genesis of Jordi Colomer’s artistic vocabulary, it would be as well to remember the first works which he showed in public, where he made use of various objects, arrayed rather than arranged

with the very obvious purpose of putting them together in order to produce an appearance of déjà-vu, something at once familiar and strange.

Then came the *Pensées*, *Liraelastica*, the *Puces*, *Phrases* and *Opérettes*. Propositions which bolstered the feeling of seeing the introduction of an artistic activity, a reflective line of thought, which did not hide the need to lean dialectically speaking on a retroactive question. In Jordi's case, the paradigm involved, and perceptible in its obviousness, is none other than Le Corbusier's famous *modulor*, discussed and instrumentalized with Loos's ground-breaking teachings on modern architecture. Or how to negotiate the utopian bankruptcy of the *modulor* –which has never been played like an aesthetic clutch in the framework of architecture –and the contamination of the real by the user value, by the experience of a common practice, despite or because of its very differences? Colomer makes reference to the analysis of tattooing in Loos, who defined with this practice– or its abandonment –the separation introduced by modern man between ornament and its use. With modernity, it is actually henceforth function that predominates, and ornamentation has as an indicial value just a somewhat desperate attempt at reconciliation with an original –natural– state, from which we are irremediably divorced. Henceforward, and to drive in the nail of this everyday humdrum and its banality, so dear to current practices, objects can only be symbolically moved in this kind of narrow margin, and their symbolic, or aesthetic, value can only, for all this, be appraised in the contexts in which they are deployed and in the operational traces they release.

Actually, in the commerce of objects and images which is ours today, it is not so much the taxonomy that changes, as the arrangement they are given. Architects of the modern age were keener to build functional, or rational, shells, but as empty as possible so that everyone might arrange them to suit their own taste, depending on the inclinations of their feelings. It is essentially with this permissiveness of the private, which builds its own space of the experienced and the relational, that we have seen the ushering in of the questioning of the specific exhibition space, between the fictitious neutrality of the white box and the over-accumulation of the environment. In this apparently contradictory wavering, what matters above all else is to manufacture a space, a place, sufficiently personalized so that the reference and use it gives rise to are embodied in its obviousness of character, rather than its character of obviousness. A place of life in a way, where the space of liberty that is left –or given– to us is less in the selection that it authorizes us– can we really choose our apartment at time when there is an imperialism of supply and demand?– than in the arrangements, adjustments, and distribution of the indices of our own actions and doings.

To this explicit reference, renewed in its constancy for architecture –Jordi Colomer's training is actually that of an architect and he admits that he never set foot in a school of fine art– would soon be added that of the stage, and more particularly of the theatre. In addition to the fact that it is important to seek a logic in the election of this art of representation which more tangibly incarnates the lived experience by the *liveacting* of players, and the fictional/artificial by the deployment of sets and scenery, Jordi Colomer *claims* to be more interested by the ambience of wings and backstage, where it is easier to check the implementation and construction of the machinery and intrigues which then culminate in the light of the stage. Otherwise put, the way

he sees the theatre, and his relationship with it, are more like the daily experience that you can have in a restaurant, supermarket or café, as it happens, rather than *through* the transactional relationship that forces you to remain within a situation of perception and appreciation, which turns us – simple users issued with tickets to gain admission to these amphitheatres – into spectators looking at the stage, but outside it, needless to add.

To put it another way, let us say that this would be the sole concession that Jordi makes to the stage: becoming a place for actions, interventions and experiences, as can be said of a games room, a playground and those public places where something is perforce woven in the indeterminacy that is a feature of them, somewhere between crossroads, square and fallow land, which are not so much non-places as a-places, where you have to invent everything, more or less without any tangible rules, where things necessarily decant, happen, process by and relate.

So it is with a very explicit logic that Jordi Colomer can use the expression “dilated sculptures” when he talks about his current work. This is a somewhat paradoxical term, first of all, because it lays claim to a praxis confusedly perceived as obsolete or academic – sculpture –, then, because, semantically speaking, dilatation does indeed refer to an idea of movement, but a rather diffuse movement, and one that is uncontrollable because it is accidental.

I think that what Jordi wishes to thus designate is part of the very material and operational description of his work. He needs to build a place of moveable comparisons. *Furniture*, therefore, in every sense of the word: furniture that can be transported and conveyed, and furniture that conveys and transports us, alike.

The first work which saw Jordi Colomer explicitly postulate this duality and deploy it in a verifiable way is still, indisputably, his exhibition titled *Alta Comedia*, in the Tinglado space in Tarragona (Catalunya), in 1993. Within this inordinately large nave, he built three small kiosks all of which both retained their own autonomy and were also a thorough match for each other. The whole thing had more to do with an environment than with an installation – if we are to stay within the artistic terminology – because in the final analysis it was effectively conveyed by a conjunction of elements brought together and ordered, which managed to delimit our behaviour and our movements – in a word, the admittedly diverse and multiple traces which we had to follow to go from one to the other, and vice versa, as in an enclosure that cannot be surmounted.

At the entrance to this building, you could turn round and realize that the inner wall was completely covered with a rather garish pink paint, and that a sketchbook was affixed to it with drawing pins. On the visible page was the head of Pinocchio – Disney-style – drawn with a ballpoint pen. There then followed (sic) a sort of parallelepiped cabin, one side of which had a irreversibly closed door made in it. Leading, or not, to this door were three steps made of chipboard; a partition looking somewhat like a screen, formed by thick sheets of glass mounted in sheets of rough board, the whole thing resting on a stand made of pinewood battens; lastly, a wooden platform, a rectangular room raised up and closed on three sides, access to which was by way of a staircase whose banister was merely the outer edge of the floor. Inside this room, wedged against one of the corners, there were jam jars, packets of rice and a bottle of milk. On closer inspection, you then

remembered having also seen women's shoes and 25-watt bulbs in their boxes, in the interstice left vacant between the floor of the nave and the bottom of the glass screen. These four works were intentionally distinct and separable in the mind of the artist, since they tallied with four precise titles: *Viva Pinocchio*, *Noves Vacances*, *Gran com a casa* and *En Escena*, but their arrangement was anything but fortuitous, introducing as it did a sequence, a narrative perhaps, absolutely logical and homogeneous. The fact remains that it then became possible for everyone to weave and hatch their own *fictional* perception of the work, although, for my own part, I prefer to stick to an observation of this possibility without going any further in its symbolic, subjective or sociological interpretation, for example. What I find interesting in this instance is the material and physical verification that this type of arrangement gives rise to, and the suggestive inventorial power that it acquires. For we find ourselves looking at something which deliberately borders on reality, by way of its concreteness, and which ostensibly swerves away from it as a result of the subtle shifts that take place. If it is undoubtedly evident that this kind of arrangement has an undeniable *interactive* character—it has to be experienced at least physically in order to grasp all the contents—the nature of the referential elements it gives out and the way in which they are arranged come across like the successful prolegomena of the formation of a vocabulary, a glossary, which posits the identification of the discursive and interrogative conditions of the works subsequently undertaken by Colomer. In a way, this is the conjunction of the inventory of a collection of objects/subjects, such as the presence of these clues of day-to-day life represented by boxes of food, light bulbs and shoes; those of the assemblages which have the architectonic appearance of furniture which he has been using for a long time, and which are embellished here by the construction of pseudo-stages and platforms; lastly, their articulation in an animated relationship, by the introduction of a vital movement binding these elements together, and I here stress the notion of animation and not that of narration, which might prompt an unequivocal reading of the sequence of events.

Then Jordi skipped a step or two, if we may so put it, and started to produce works in which the share taken up by video is the principal one. In a way he felt a need to *present or stagedirect* what had hitherto been confined to delimiting a stage—an enclosure—by way of his sculptures/installations.

The shift from the praxis of a “sculptor/installation artist” to that of a “sculptor/video-maker” occurred with a great deal of programmatic restraint: the artist did not talk about it until the first of these propositions had been completed, for he was as aware as you can get about the challenge and difficulty of the undertaking, not so much, perhaps, because he can be taxed with being an opportunist at a time when everybody, or, in any event, a whole lot of people, were getting involved with video, as with facing the danger of coming a cropper in the *imitation* of an exogenous genre, as epitomized by the performing arts, in particular, and arts involving movement and motion in general. This initial work, *Simo*, was shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art [MACBA] in Barcelona, in the organically potato-shaped space which Richard Meier attached to the rather strict and elegant layout of the building. You gained access to this space by walking along a corridor, chicane-style, and then making your way inside this annex, and you realized that the inside

surface of the wall acted as a screen. In the ambient twilight, you could make out a row of seats arranged against the far wall in a disparate way, and you could in addition see that the inside walls were painted a rather bright red. These details, occurring in the arrangements and settings used by Colomer, lent the room the very *specific* feel and look of an office, converting it into a thoroughly autonomous space, an area apart and all on its own, guiding both our movements and our displacements towards a clearly drawn up goal: going to take a seat.

And as the chairs were all different, you could even believe that you were choosing the most comfortable one, the one with the best design, the one that was least bench-like, or, quite simply, the one that was nearest... in order to realize, in a split second, that you were looking at a screen, at the video projection, and that you were immersed in the sound that went with it. Sound and image, pure movie stuff! What's more... *Simo* turned out to be a kind of ceaseless, frantic ballet, controlled by a baton wielded by a dwarf actress who obsessively piled up heaps of boxes spilling over like so many Russian dolls. It is a kind of hysterical or hallucinogenic set, you choose, which is confined within the arena delimited by a platform of partitions separating an inner space and an outer space. Needless to say, it is possible to interpret to your heart's content the meaning and the intentions of these kinds of excesses, contained de facto within an enclosed space, but, speaking strictly for myself, all I hang on to is the analogical potential of the trade which we carry on with objects, our grasp of them and our management of them, their useful- (or useless-)ness and their necessity, and the instances of behavioural blindness to which they lead us when we persist in filing them away or holding on to them until some later time, but without really knowing why or how, except that they clutter our lives because they are all around us, as close as can be, in our daily life. Here, in any old space where we construct for ourselves a patch of experience, we build a relationship with the –outside– world, which is quite excessive in the deliberately unusual added value that we grant to the distinction of our (non)choices. Back to *Les Gauloises bleues*... what, de facto, are we playing at with the rolling up of the environment, which is not its commentary but just its transcription? Answer, in the guise of experimental continuity, with the following work, that *Eldorado* that sees a blind actor move inside a circular and adjoining space, being pursued by the rotating movement of a camera that illuminates the stage with intermittent flashes and brings out here a pile of plates on a table, there a desk cluttered with knickknacks –in a nutshell, a non-stop record of different and identified objects.

This concern over the construction of a space appropriate both for the projection of the video image and the involvement of the onlooker has since been noted on several occasions in the artist's work. And, to remain as close as possible to what concerns us here, it has given rise to four invitations in succession, at the Creux de l'Enfer Art Centre in Thiers, then at La Ferme du Buisson Art Centre in Noisiel, followed by the Grand Café in Saint-Nazaire, and last of all at La Galerie in Noisy-le-Sec. Staying on French terrain, we should add to this list his current exhibition at the Michel Rein gallery in Paris and, last spring, his participation in a group show at the Villa Arson in Nice.

The two exhibitions at Thiers and La Ferme du Buisson were quite alike in terms of their content, but quite distinct in terms of their packaging. To cut a long story short, the masterfully successful adaptation in both venues

consisted in constructing a space of circulation formed by the arrangement of boxes set one next to the other in the empty nave of the Creux de l'Enfer factory, and in deconstructing the "private house" character of the rooms leading into one another and on several floors of La Ferme du Buisson. In both instances, and this can be seen subsequently, the tricks used by Colomer consist, no more no less, in dragging us into a situation where the materialization of the device becomes evident in its character of equipment and tools, the two seeming to be inseparable. It is every bit as important to stop in your tracks to see the image pass by on the screen as it is to position yourself opposite it, to then abstract yourself or free yourself from it, while making a decision about the viewpoint we shall adopt.

And in quite a clever way, but without any surprise either, the spectacle then also unfolds in the room, if I may so put it, by checking the behaviour of other people...

This kind of involvement has been somewhat logically stepped up with the recent works, on at least two occasions, but in a different way.

Les Jumelles [Twins] and *Les Villes [Cities]* actually function with simultaneous projections of two videos, shown face to face and requiring the spectator/actor/onlooker to place himself somewhere –but not necessarily any old where–between these two walls of images. *Les Villes* was shown at the Grand Café in Saint-Nazaire, then at the Villa Arson. As far as *Les Jumelles* is concerned, I only saw this work in Nice, too. In Saint-Nazaire, Jordi built a quite spacious parallelepiped area which was incorporated in the ground floor room, with the rectangle of the floor of this construction pivoting between the small columns punctuating this place. The same referential red paint straightaway differentiated this kiosk and from afar made it possible to see the corner of the access that led right into it. There, on a large screen, you could see a diptych image running past, with, on the right, a pile of cubes very swiftly representing a city with houses on top of one another –the way children make them with their building games– and, on the left, you witnessed the athletic progression of a woman wearing pyjamas going round the front of a building which she was clinging to like some outstanding and foolhardy climber. On the screen opposite, since you obviously turned your gaze towards it, you might at first think you were witnessing the same scene, except that, in waiting for the outcome, you piteously saw the poor woman fall and disappear from sight, after crossing the lower width of the screen. If the moral of the two tales was left up to our feelings (those who want to can feel sorry, others can clap...), what was less authorized was still choosing your perception of it: either one or the other, but never both at the same time, for that was impossible and inconceivable, no matter the gift of ocular ubiquity which you might wish to benefit from for the span of an instant, or the painful stiff neck that might be brought on by the imaginary and illusory contortions which gratified you with a "double view"... In a nutshell, this could create a kind of middling frustration, somewhat relieved by the ironical fatum of the subject, but above all by the approval of its twofold lesson: make or break.

If the truth be told, and in an attempt to be extremely precise and emphatic in the instructions of the device that I also described precisely, this happened to a lesser degree at the Villa Arson, for a very simple, albeit structural reason: this work was exhibited in one of the rooms/alcoves of the School "museum", and one of the screens was propped against one of the walls built to lend

emphasis to this place. Just one door further on, at the bend in a corridor in the shape of a cul-de-sac, you gained access to the projection of *Les Jumelles*. Let me say straight out that, to my eye, this is one of Colomer's most accomplished works, possibly because it is one of the most obvious, simple and explicit. We also find ourselves looking at a very similar proposition: two quite large screens, set opposite one another, and projected—in any event for this occasion—into a bare room which is more ordinary than banal, a kind of “white box” complying with the criteria of usual museum display and presentation, even if it was painted red all over, as per the artist's wont. So you settle down in it and, because it is very empty, you sit down with your back against one of the walls which has no images on it. Possibly forewarned by the effect of the double fall of *Les Villes*, you cast an eye on one side more surreptitiously than on the other, then again to the right, then once more to the left... and you suddenly see that the rule of play does not appear to be the same. So, freeze frame, so as to make a full reading of the scene happening there. Backstage. We are inside a set, the set of a lecture hall partly hidden by hanging clothes which act like heavy crimson velvet curtains that cut away one of the edges but which let us see rows of more or less dilapidated chairs. In a sort of speeded-up sequence, or rather a kind of compulsive body language, young girls get dressed and undressed in front of us, they themselves hidden from the audience by the hanging curtains. While, it just so happens, spectators come in, potentially virtual or virtually potential — and here again this is one of the famous morals of his stories which Jordi leaves up to us—, sit themselves down on the nearest tiers, and wait, getting ready for the show to begin, while the two actresses —as virtual as they are potential, etc, etc... —endlessly busy themselves with lengths of fabric, dresses and tutus, and gabardines, while in the hall everyone has left and one of the twins, turned into a cleaner -cum-usherette, comes to fetch the underwear left scattered here, here and everywhere by these distracted spectators, and the twins come out again and start moving about behind the curtain, swapping and putting on clothes which... and the loop reels on, plays out, twists and untwists again, ad nauseam. And because it is thus necessary to look on the other side to see what the film opposite is recounting, and, upon my word, it's the same, but I mean absolutely the same, identical, it is the copy of, the déjà-vu already... but then why did we not see it at the outset, by which we mean at the beginning of the film as we thought we were seeing it in a kind of anticipation, like films with the same name, like the science of a fiction that we thought we could control by turning our eye from right to left, sharpish? So if it is the same, it is enough to turn the eye away to see the sequel of what has just got under way here, and yet no, there is something akin to a tiny delay or else it is too soon. In a word, the timing is off. There is something not quite right, or are we so inattentive or so disenchanting that we no longer know how to see things, so strongly do the images flood in, and we store them with a certain weariness in our daily (tele)visual life?

No, I said as much by way of introduction: it is much simpler than that. The two projections are hardly out of sync, but the lapse is so small that by wanting to contain them together in the eye's back-and-forth, they create a slight disturbance, akin to the jolt of a tired camera...

And it is then that we realize —and this is only logical— that it is we who are holding the famous camera and that the position from which we are coming is

actually just the position of the director, that of the virtual wings –or the potential wings, it all depends once again– from which it films what is going past in front of us, in equally logical layers: the forestage and the auditorium.

Jordi has since produced other works, which I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. In *Noisy* he re-adapted the environmental device formed by a screen and various chairs, and he also arranged a series of “sculptures/sets”, made of cardboard, which he used for the film recordings. These elements/relics had already been the object of a presentation at *Le Creux de l’Enfer* and at *La Ferme du Buisson*, but in a spatial separation, with the alphabet book in question in this instance occupying a single room in order to be so likewise. The most recent work, *Le Dortoir [The Dormitory]*, which films in an upward-downward movement the residents of an apartment sleeping it off after a night of feasting, is intentionally based on the perception of a collection of manufactured objects –from the bed to the chair by way of the chest-of-drawers– which, through their use, waver between reality and representation. It is these same elements which are the object of desires in the salvaging in which the reckless recyclers of *Fuegogratis* are engaged.

Or rather, faced with such an image, our delaying capacity was reduced, limited to that of simple spectator. For me, *Les Jumelles* constitutes the assumption of this limit, for, over and above the event being played out therein, its gearing down and the choices which they impose on us render their reality unlikely without our participation, even if it were likewise limited and fleeting. But by thus summoning us to something other than the simple receptivity and totting up of all the good and bad points of the evaluative signs of the time, this work –as nearly all the works produced by Jordi Colomer– reinstates us quite simply in an experience close to what is lived –and not the commonplace or the everyday! – and sets in motion an egalitarian receptivity in the differences which it sets out. And when it comes down to it, these are not so far removed from our everyday life –and not from life experience in this particular case, for this only ever depends on the attention one pays to the other –akin to those famous *Blue Gauloises* which spill out in a happily laughable hubbub in the political observation of the world which should be ours.