

2008 Charles-François Duplain Exhibit – Catalogue text

### **The self-portrait according to CHFD**

Using objects, setups, and attitudes, Charles-François Duplain explores the topic of the self-portrait. Far from being a traditional rendering of a physical appearance, the self-portrait, as interpreted by Duplain, incorporates the dimensions of time, his native region, and even his intellectual affinities.

By focusing on the self-portrait as he uses myriad allusions and references to himself, Duplain could reach the heights of artistic egocentrism. The sense of *me*, already omnipresent in artists, would be supersized in Duplain's interpretation. But his proximity is a sign of his distance. Duplain offers a representation that features more of the image of the artist as a Narcissus figure than of himself.

One of the few works in which he physically appears, *Charles en Charlatan* [*Charles as a Charlatan*] (2006, four-video loop), effectively demonstrates this. Disguised as the lying Pinocchio, as Christ bearing a cross, or as a hussar, he wanders, softly humming *ritornellos*, parodying a self-centredness that lapses into ridiculousness. The image of the artist, a bit of a liar, persuaded to bear the weight of the world on his shoulders and to defend a few noble ideas, ultimately only manages to spin sterily. The image suggests the *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque* (*Portrait of the Artist as a Street Acrobat*), a "laughable epiphany of art and the artist," in the words of Jean Starobinski.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Duplain suggests not only the clownish character of the artistic ego, but also explores the historical and social dimensions of the self-portrait. Using this theme, he presents not only the artist, but also his period.

Thus, in *MM4*, the artist uses his own size in order to create a new approach to the world. A large straight ruler divides the artist's height into new units of measurement, like an innovative type of *mètre-étalon* (standard metre). This base height seems to be all the more important since it is identical to that of Napoleon, who was the same size as Duplain. The ruler bears the word "Dupnapo" – a playful contraction of both names – which suggests an ambiguous meaning: does it refer to the act of duping Napoleon or of being the emperor's dupe? Moreover, this ambiguity lies at the very heart of the artist's perception of Napoleon. Duplain is fascinated by this historic figure, who, in the artist's eyes, is located somewhere between the sublime and the ridiculous. He already created tiny etchings featuring images of the Napoleonic Wars (*Napoléon au Quotidien* [*The Everyday Life of Napoleon*], 1995) right after leaving the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Sion (Sion School of Fine Arts). This fascination, which figures in the artist's affinities with the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ranging from Géricault to Chateaubriand, asks questions that focus on the issue of power. What is left of Napoleon's conquests when they are looked at ironically from a narrow point of view? What is left of the "grandeur" of a famous figure when it is reduced to a simple unit of measurement?

"Dupnapo" is, moreover, not the only new system of calibration suggested in *MM4*. 99 more systems appear alongside it, referring to famous people, both real and fictional, including Jacques Chirac, Honoré de Balzac, and Frankenstein. Each of the 100 rulers placed on the

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Starobinski, *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque* (Geneva: A. Skira, 1970), p. 8.

wall stands out as a distinct system of calibration; indeed, the “Chirac centimetre” is obviously longer than the “Balzac centimetre.” These icons are summed up by a comment on their respective sizes. Their worldviews are ironically reduced to units of measurement. Of course, we need a system of measurement in order to gain a firm command of the world, but this system must be objective and universal. By inventing a plethora of systems, Duplain has created chaos and immoderation. Furthermore, he suggests that our scale of perception of the world is, first and foremost, subjective.

Duplain is familiar with measurements, as he used to take them professionally while working as a civil engineer. He incorporates them into several of his other works, using boundary stakes and flagstones, such as in *Les limites de mon village* [*The Limits of My Village*] (2007), a self-portrait based on his native region. But he also uses them and comments on their temporal dimension. The measurement of time is the focus of *l'Autoportrait bourgeois* [*The Middle-Class Self-Portrait*] (2008). The artist took the green painted walls of a mansard room in the Musée Jurassien des Arts and covered them with crosses inscribed inside squares, the whole representing the days that he has spent on earth. This tally recalls a common practice among prisoners, who have been known to mark off the days spent in prison on the walls of their cells. Duplain himself refers to this practice in a previous work (*37 ans, 1 mois, 20 jours ou l'autoportrait même*, [*37 Years, 1 Month, 20 Days or the Very Self-Portrait*] 2004, created in a cell at the old Delémont Prison). It expresses the ideas of imprisonment and boredom while relating to the absurdity of existence.

This notation of time also suggests the approach adopted by Roman Opalka (born \*1931). Since 1965, Opalka has transcribed the infinite succession of natural numbers on a series of canvases, making the numbers progressively harder to read. Each canvas is therefore simply a small part of a single work that will only be finished when the artist dies or is physically incapable of painting. This radical method of noting down a lifetime contains a spiritual dimension, which, at first glance, seems far removed from the more detached attitude espoused by Duplain. *L'autoportrait bourgeois* seems to be critical of middle-class lifestyles, limited by the very restrictions that they impose upon themselves. Yet it is not without some sense of melancholy and romanticism that the artist associates himself to these feelings of boredom and isolation. Moreover, the chosen system of notation - used by the middle-class residents of Undervelier, Duplain's native municipality, for the woodcutting method - is not innocuous. Decorating the room as if it were a wallpaper pattern, it implies a connection between the value of human life and that of a mere tree trunk that is about to be cut down. Or one that has already been cut down and has become an architectural component, such as the raw wooden pillar supporting the framework of that particular room of the museum.

At the other end of the museum, in the basement of the new wing, there are several pillars. Duplain has also used the architecture of a particular location in another work dealing with time and melancholy. His *Autoportrait aux Immortels* [*Self-portrait With the Immortal Ones*] (2008) consists of forty wooden pillars. These imposing colonnades accentuate the area and turn it into a sort of crypt. The artist seems to once again make use of the very old, though now passé, concordance between the typology of a temple and that of a museum. He uses it as the setting for a strange commemoration based on fictitious milestones. Indeed, each pillar bears an epitaph with the name “Charles-François Duplain,” his date of birth (1967), and a different date of death on each pillar. The artist has “made himself die” every year since his entry into this world. And every year, since 2004, he has created a new *Autoportrait aux Immortels*. For this procedure, Duplain does not focus merely upon himself, unlike others such as Roman Opalka. He has enriched his creation by suggesting figures from various

periods, selected in accordance with specific affinities: Orson Welles, Ferdinand Hodler, Jacques Brel, Grégoire de Tours... Far removed from the playful distance evident in *MM4*, Duplain admires these figures from the past who have all made crucial contributions to the human experience. Moreover, he has extended their lifespan by assigning each of them a date of death in 2007, the year in which the work was created. The artist continues to die prematurely, while his reference figures live on until they are suggested. This distortion of time, much like the distortion of units of measurement featured in *MM4*, scrambles the established order of things. The artist uses this confusion to stage the concepts of immortality and extinction in a game of comings and goings that blends the fictions and realities of memory.

As this suggestion of figures who have passed on guarantees them some kind of immortality, *L'Autoportrait aux immortels* combines the artist's self-representation and the issue of monuments. Duplain is well-versed in this issue, as he has produced a number of creations intended for public spaces. Using a contemporary approach, he incorporates the work into its urban and architectural context, producing his work, for instance, with respect to the ground (in collaboration with Yves Tauvel: *Artefact*, Laténium, Neuchâtel, 2001; *75 Pas à Sion* [*75 Steps to Sion*], av. de la Gare, Sion, 2000). But he also comments on the historical dimension of the monument and its political function in other works on display at the Musée Jurassien des Arts. The artist thus emphasises how commemorative statuary is rooted in a social context.

Sometimes the artist – disguised as a hussar – hoists himself onto the empty pedestal of the statue of Charles Fourier, the bronze effigy of the social utopian that was melted down in order to manufacture weapons during the Second World War (*Autoportrait au Socle de Clichy* [*Self-Portrait at the Clichy Pedestal*], 2006). At other times, however, he represents the pedestal of some military statue that has fallen and thus disturbed spirits in the Jura Mountains (*Socle Effiguré* [*Effigurate Pedestal*], 2008); this pedestal seems to re-emerge from the ground like the *Statue of Liberty* in the final scene of the film *The Planet of the Apes*, or, conversely, to sink into oblivion. By dealing with the idea of a deceased monument, Duplain comments on the concept of commemoration by reducing it to absurdity. Unlike Jan Dibbets (born \*1941) who centres his *Hommage à Arago* [*Tribute to Arago*] (1989-1994) around an empty pedestal, Duplain does not suggest that a tribute to a deceased figure celebrity should be renewed. His vision is more critical. Immortality is merely a delusion; glorification is ephemeral. It depends on the powers that be and the values that they want to promote. This was demonstrated by such events as the mass removal of existing sculptures just after the French Revolution and after the Fall of the Iron Curtain.

Duplain takes this idea even further by tackling the issue of the impossible monument, one that has never existed. During one of his strolls through Paris, where he currently lives, he made the following observation after sitting down at the Bar des Templiers on the Rue de Rivoli: "Thence, there wasn't any sort of remarkable monument, but at any moment your imagination might resound with the sharp sound of the guillotine, inspired by that sort of place, which has no reason to be jealous of a curiosity shop and other *Wunderkammer*."<sup>2</sup> With *Non Létal* [*Non-Lethal*] (2008), a wooden gallows, the artist seems to make such observations a reality. He suggests a strange monument that appears to pay tribute to a mechanism of execution that is becoming obsolete. Such a monument does not exist, since commemorative sculptures have previously been reserved for loftier ideals or figures. In addition, the scale

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<sup>2</sup> Charles-François Duplain, "Une Année à Paris, Cité Internationale des Arts, Atelier 1517," in *Jurassica*, no. 20, 2006, p. 45.

chosen by Duplain is smaller than normal, the reverse of the typical principle of monument building. Moreover, the pink colour of his gallows, due to the use of a distemper made with blueberry syrup, lacks seriousness. *Non Létal* is an odd monument that, in some ways, resembles a children's game. Nonetheless, the work still manages to make a trenchant statement because one of the essential functions of monuments in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was their educational value.<sup>3</sup>

By playing on the value, as well as the sizes and temporality of beings and things, Duplain is commenting on our own period and how it is rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, yet with a distance tinged with both humour and melancholy. Above and beyond his social criticism, he is suggesting a mirror that deforms and destabilises. The title of his exhibit at the Musée Jurassien des Arts aptly reflects his stance: *Bedeau - le Monde Selon CHFD ou l'œil d'un contemplatif vacant à des occupations électives à temps perdu* [*Bedeau – The World According to CHFD or The Eye of a Contemplative Idler Who Chooses to Work When He Has Nothing Better To Do*]. Bit by bit, the artist, describing an image similar to Baudelaire's idler, sketches the statuses of artist, celebrity, and power. The self-portrait and the monument are used as a plot in a theatre play where Duplain himself is present only in the background. He keeps appearing and disappearing like an actor upon a stage.

Valentine Reymond

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<sup>3</sup> See June Hargrove, "Les Statues de Paris", in: Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de Mémoire*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), vol. 2, pp. 1855+.