

## Preface

One day a curious character wearing a hat and a gray coat was searching for the tomb of Maréchal (Marshall) Bessières at the Père Lachaise cemetery. This faithful officer of Napoleon died in Rippach in 1813 while commanding the cavalry of the Imperial Guard. He was knocked dead by a cannonball just before the battle of Lützen.

The man with the hat found the tomb untended, made a few sketches, took some notes and left. I remember seeing him wave his hand, like some magician creating an aura around his black notebook. It was only years later that I understood the importance of fellow travelers.

Conversation in the studio at 163, rue de Charenton, Paris, on 8th November 2007

Anka Ptazkowska: Charles, you're putting me in a rather embarrassing situation, although an amusing one as well, because I have to discuss your work without really knowing it. I have access only to your studio and that's my only experience of it. Here I am and I see things that are sometimes insignificant like these three little bits of tin foil. You tell me: "They're radars. They keep asking me: 'What's this? What's it doing here?'".

Today we live with the conviction that anything and everything can be art. So it's rarer and rarer when contemplating a piece of artwork to be able to ask the question "What is it?".

Charles-Francois Duplain: I live and I work in this studio, in this place. I define it both as a **closed** space and as a close space. In a way it's a stop in my Parisian itinerary. I occupy it as a living space and a place of research where I work in new surroundings with different tools. This situation differs from the way I usually work, which is by public commission. Here, for example, there are drawings on the walls. These drawings form a group of notes and preparatory sketches for an exhibition. I consider these gestures as part of my work. This has become a process. At a certain point, I end up feeling I should save these drawings, and then I make a layout of the walls the way an archaeologist might.

AP: At the same time, there's great clarity and discipline here; in this space I never wonder why something's here and not somewhere else. There is a mysterious but very convincing certainty about it. I've always been fascinated by situations without boundaries, like this place that is both a living space and a working space. But this work isn't confined to results, nothing's on show here. I would appreciate however if the specialists who do the hanging observed the same precision in relation to the space where the works are shown as you do with the space you live in. In fact this space is defined by your work.

CHFD: I discover certain things in this space. I perceive it as much as I appropriate it. When I moved in I realized the studio had no windows. After three hours I said to myself: "Charles, you're living in a box in Paris". And that's fantastic. I welcomed the situation. What you perceived is that underneath the apparent mess there is real organization. It might sound pretentious, but for me it's like breathing. I organize the space in order to create projects. I work out programs a bit like a research unit. At one point, I realized I didn't have to produce projects that require a lot of time, money and energy since the box allowed for a different sort of conception. When you come down to it, I always produce a space. I'd say I transform cogs so they can mesh and finally create movement. I'm always looking for the moment that gives meaning to my work and that often happens after many, many verifications. It's a little like love... Experience has taught me that there are two possibilities. Either it happens in five minutes, or the situation is long and drawn out. When I reflect on these two situations, I realize that there is always a term to them. It can be a time limit or a discipline one imposes on oneself. The exhibit I'm preparing now forces me to extract elements from the box. I wonder about the nature of what I'm going to extract.

AP: The word "extract" is very appropriate in my opinion. Even though this box is a whole – because of its unchangeable nature – one can extract things from it.

CHFD: Even though the things that are extracted can be totally independent of each other.

AP: But it's very different from the classic studio of a painter or a sculptor who makes things that are already being prepared to leave it. The context of the exhibit is present here without touching or denaturing the space, nor the things that are here. At the same time everything is changing here. Little touches, little arrangements, minimal gestures, discreet proof of your presence and your thoughts are being transformed without giving the impression that you're working. It's almost as if you were absent from the studio, which is nevertheless the source of things. It gives the impression of happening on its own. Naturally.

CHFD: For me strictly speaking it's not a production studio. I was born in a valley of the Swiss Jura mountains where it's inconceivable to sit around doing nothing. I'm also profoundly influenced by the history of clockmakers' workshops in the region. Today I uphold the idea that it's possible to do something outside of that tradition and I'm trying to free myself of its weight... even though it holds a certain nostalgia for me. I use the studio as a starting point; just being here gives me a clear conscience. For example I began making drawings on little pieces of paper, drawings of motors, or the decorative patterns of officers' epaulets...and then I discover how they work. I'm making a personal dictionary. I'm incredibly curious, curious about everything, I'm interested in everything but nothing interests me enough to make me become a specialist. On the other hand, what you said about some touches, some gestures, these are always connected to me. You have to know that practically all my works are a kind of self-portrait.

AP: [Maybe it it's not without its importance](#) that your box used to be a photographer's studio.

HFD: It is something important. The encounter with the box, with everything connected to a photographer's darkroom: boxes of files, negatives. In other words living in a box is little like living in a beautiful car: you can never see yourself inside it.

AP: How about looking at the box from the outside?

CHFD: When one observes the box from the inside, one doesn't ask oneself the same questions as when seen from the outside. What does the artist do shut up in the box, what does he reveal to us? In my work, the question of viewpoint is decisive, but what really interests me is the art of looking, of commenting, of comparing time and space.

AP: Is this laboratory still an artisan's workshop?

CHFD: For me this laboratory is more of a romantic place of dreams where I invent the rules, the laws that obey this space. I have fun defining what happens here in concrete terms, I do frivolous things seriously. I revisit personalities, times gone by, inventions, adventures and expeditions in faraway lands.

AP: This portrait of Napoleon...

CHFD: I recently learned that there has been a book about him published every day since his death. Now that this subject seems exhausted, it's even more amusing to work on it. For me I think it comes partly from my education, I've always heard about French history.

AP: And French literature surely.

CHFD: Yes, I think it forms part of the tradition of Jura separatism, the consequences of the Vienna Congress which sealed the downfall of the first Empire and the destiny of my country.

AP: But this is 19<sup>th</sup> century...

CHFD: I like the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for its aesthetics, but I also draw historical references from it. I think it's probably these two aspects that interest me. It's a period that fascinates me, that motivates me, that serves as a mooring in relation to art. This path is endless. If I go back to my time at [Beaux-Arts](#) (Fine Arts School), I was fascinated by painters like David and Géricault for the way they functioned. I immersed myself increasingly in the literature and in the history [*of that period*]. Napoleon took on greater and greater importance, because he is hated as much as he is admired. Moreover, the historian Elie Faure compared Bonaparte's artistic genius to that of Christ, elevating them both to the rank of Artist. One tends to forget that Napoleon was a man of the Age of Enlightenment, but that he survived the Revolution by surrounding himself with people of the Ancien Régime except for a few dashing generals. His actions increasingly confined him to solitude, until his ultimate isolation at Longwood. I don't identify with this destiny, but rather with what surrounded it, an aesthetic that's incontestable. I compare, I comment, using a distinctive language that I usually draw from the vocabulary of military tradition.

AP: Are these your voyages in time?

CHFD: Yes, there's always this relation to the voyage in time, where I project myself into the past toward the future.

AP: There's Sainte-Hélène, there's the moon.

CHFD: I look for isolated places, isolation in the extreme, confinement.

AP: Yes, isolation. Seeing you in your box one can only imagine so. One cannot easily imagine a place as completely isolated as this. Except for prison. Here, at least you can leave.

CHFD: I tried prison. In real life and several times as an artist. There is no prison worse than the limits we fix for ourselves. One of my visits there consisted of repainting a cell blue and chalking up every day of my life in multiples of five, or 13,555 chalk marks on the walls.

AP: But were you in this prison?

CHFD: Yes.

AP: And you came back every day to make a new mark?

CHFD: No, but in another sense yes, by revisiting my existence every day.

AP: You had to come back every day?

CHFD: Art made it possible.

AP: Yes, thirteen thousand, but in any small group, there are always five, aren't there? It's strange that this conversation keeps coming back to things you've already done.

CHFD: I really spent a night in that prison. Brings us back to the question of isolation and the story of the box. It's the window in the cell that deprives us of freedom. Whereas in the box, the connection with the outside world has disappeared and we can always project ourselves wherever we want. Which is singularly different from a prisoner's obsession with escape. In the box, the measurement of time and space become elastic and allow us to move around differently, a kind of mind-travel. Now I'm preparing a trip-pilgrimage to Sainte-Hélène. Two and a half months to get to an island and two and half months to come back, not really the same thing as going to the Victor Hugo museum one afternoon and coming home in the evening... Going from one space to another and facing isolation through the experience of travel.

AP: And you want to accomplish this without becoming a writer, without doing it through the written word?

CHFD: What interests me is the contemplative dimension of this experience. Spending two months on a boat is boring. One can invent activities and not be bored any more, but at the same time one must not do so. You must be bored in order to feel the passage of time. Time that is disappearing and what approach to take to it. Contemplation is seeing time from another angle. Often I hear "I have no time for that". We're not talking about the same time. Approaching time differently means living another type of time. I think it's connected to questions of space, of measurement, it's a recurrent theme in my work, this idea of measuring things in my own way. One can measure the studio in centimeters. One can also establish another system of measurement, establish and arrange the container and the content from another viewpoint. It's a question of limits. The limits of the box, the limits of art. Everything is extensible like *prison thought*, right to the most formidable of imprisonments in the immeasurable. The wall of the cell is measurable, the time spent there is lived. The marks on the walls of the cell are the evocation of that time, the writing on the walls forms a trace of it.