

The entropy principle

Entropy is commonly referred to as a measure of disorder. That statement seems easier said than ingested, or even digested, if I may risk this metaphor of the creative process. Entropy (from the Greek word *entropê*, transformation) was first defined in the field of thermodynamics as a measure of the gaps found within a system's transformations. It is governed by two principles, conservation and evolution, which explains the irreversibility of certain physical phenomena (the thinning of the ozone layer, the production of shale gas, etc...). Hence, entropy lets us measure the degree of balance or unbalance of a system, whether organic or mechanical. One will forgive me this scientific digression, as I believe, like many others have before me, that this definition has much to do with art in general and particularly with Samuel Coisne's.

In an interview which took place a little over two years ago, the artist described his perception of time in these words: "For me, life is cyclical. History is a sort of coil or spiral. Everything is circular in life, in nature."¹ This observation on the repetitive nature of time contradicts the chronological and linear vision of history, itself modeled on the perception of human life, going continuously from birth to death, and passing through a sort climax around mid-adulthood. In his reflection, more closely inspired from primitive mythologies than modern Western theory, it is the very idea of progress and the prioritization of values associated with it that the artist choses to challenge. Oddly, the image Samuel Coisne uses to illustrate his thoughts is reminiscent of the famous *Spiral Jetty* by American artist Robert Smithson, a chief protagonist and theorist of *Land art*. Fascinated by the concept of creative evolution, as shown by many of his writings, he went as far as identifying, among his contemporaries, the various elements constituting a true aesthetic of entropy.² Although Smithson was rather pessimistic regarding the future of humanity, the fact remains that his use of pure geometric shapes, like other artists of his generation - Donald Judd, Sol Lewitt and Michael Heizer, to name a few - directly derived from Euclidean geometry and the architectural constructions of ancient civilizations - Egyptian, Mayan or Inca pyramids are good examples - shows that, far from fostering a sense of nostalgia tinged with romanticism for ancient *ruins*, he was for the recycling of these shapes through often de-constructive and self-reflexive practices.

Similarly, it can be said that the raw materials Samuel Coisne uses in his works are material or immaterial residues of Western culture and more specifically of products that consumer society has introduced over the last fifty or sixty years. It is in reaction to this sudden honey pot that the artist, like many of us, began to collect, sort, and reuse these materials – paper, wood, broken glass, polystyrene – in installations and objects, which thus acquire a second life. This does not make him an environmental activist or an entrepreneur in sustainable development, having long swapped his idealistic, political and financial aspirations for purely aesthetic considerations. Meanwhile, this does not prevent him from having an opinion on these issues, although judgment is often absent or removed from his works. He prefers to cultivate more poetic and existential themes and images, such as chance, frailty, or even emptiness, through the concatenation of repetitive and almost mechanical (or automatic, to use the Surrealists' language, from whom he borrows a few tropes) gestures that might seem meaningless, but acquire, through reiteration, a meditative character. I am referring to gestures linked to the cutting of maps or bank note, as well as those linked to the act of assembling in the manner of a puzzle, as in the case of broken glass

¹This interview with Samuel Coisne took place on December 7, 2012 in Brussels, as part of the exhibition project *De la lenteur avant tout chose...* (Slowness before anything) organized by Portraits upon abcd's invitation. An excerpt of the interview appeared in the exhibition's journal published by abcd in September 2013. The full text is available on the artist's website: www.samuelcoisne.com

²For more on this topic, read the two articles "Entropy and the New Monuments (1966)" and "Entropy made visible (1973)" in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, ed. Jack Flam, University of California Press.

or mirror constellations, which are similar to mandalas. The artist's patience and concentration, subjected to severe trials, therefore bring to light all this pent-up energy, sublimated in a single gesture. These precise and meticulous actions are in opposition with other, more brutal and even violent ones, such as smashing glass to obtain bits of a starry sky. The artist's energy consumption is thus *measurable* or at least perceptible through the mental picture we have of the act of destruction. In short, Samuel Coisne shows us a kind of organized chaos through his works whose purpose is almost always fixed, either in a posture or by a frame, with the exception of two pieces that happen to be, and this is symbolically interesting, his oldest and most recent.

Discoworld (2008) is a disco ball stripped of some of its attributes to represent a world map on which continents alone have the ability to shine. The apparatus is activated by an engine that makes the globe spin continuously on a central axis, allowing the remaining flakes to reflect the light and project it in the darkness of a room occasionally turned into a sort of outer space. This simultaneously humorous and ironic act gives the audience a good sense, once again, of humanity's self-absorption as it believes to be the only source of intelligence in the universe and yet persists in exhausting its natural resources before it even has the time to revolve completely on its axis. The second piece opposing droop to mobility is *Perpetual flux* (2015), a fountain from which viscous waste oil emanates, produced in collaboration with Lille artist Nicolas Gaillardon. Prefiguring this sculpture, a first version entitled *The source*, with a more classical architecture, showed two superimposed vasks topped with a gold bar, all of which was thoroughly immersed in sticky waste oil. The rebirth symbolism usually associated with this object, as is the case for the Fountain of Youth, is corrupted here by this oil evoking fluid. With their piece *Perpetual flux*, the two artists go a step further: Vanity and greed are thus immortalized in a single piece, of which the pyramid shape is reminiscent of the tomb of pharaohs, who covered themselves in gold, a rot-proof material, to make their journey into eternity. In addition to their similar circular motion, the terrestrial globe and the fountain also share the same origin and end point, confirming the artist's first assertion about life. The art of Samuel Coisne, like entropy, seems to be a good indicator of the order and disorder surrounding us, as he himself says: "These pieces speak of human finitude but there is no drama intended in that. It is rather optimistic, actually. I nevertheless claim no particular religion, I only believe in evolution."³

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Tiberghien

³Interview with S. Coisne, *op.cit.*