

Re-planned obsolescence

"Watch these wretches squirm around in the factories, watch these powerful men wriggle, bloated in their importance, living a hundred miles per hour. They battle, they run, they prance behind their own lives, and suddenly it stops, with no more reason than it had begun, and the grassroots activist, the pompous CEO, the operetta princess, the child playing hopscotch in the gutters of Beirut, and you, whom I'm thinking of, who pursued your godly calling till the end of your cancer, all of us, each and every one, are eventually reaped by the grinning and foolish sickle of death, and human rights give way to the rights of the maggot."

Pierre Desproges

At the end of the twentieth century, post-industrial society as we know it shifted away from an economy of raw materials and machinery to an economy of information and services. While human beings took center stage in this new configuration, objects, which had until then been the mainstay of industrial society, a marker of success and social status, seem to have lost their luster as they found themselves drowned in a flood of overproduction stripping them of all dignity. Objects, in their fragile, interchangeable and anonymous state, are now abandoned on sidewalks before being piled up in cemeteries of packaging and other debris. Particularly interested in this precarious condition, Samuel Coisne has developed a body of work in which objects, pulled away from their fate, are offered a second life, a new autonomy, while carrying their own critique.

At the crossroads of identities

Between deconstruction and reconstruction, the work of this young Belgian artist evolves around the postmodern poetics of the fragment and the whole, offering new perspectives to these pieces of scrap. Whether they are considered packaging or debris, the elements used in this work certainly belong to the realm of lesser objects, although Samuel Coisne strives to confer new properties upon them so as to "*re-magnify*" them and grant them asserted nobility. In the piece *Goutte d'eau* [Drop of Water] (2009), shreds of destroyed documents are assembled to create a drop hitting a liquid surface: pieces of paper, initially containing handwriting or printed material, are turned into sculptural matter. While the image of the drop reflects the idea of natural perfection, the irregular paper surface, however, catches the eye, and produces a visual oxymoron in which two semantic fields are colliding. By integrating the elements in a system that partially puts them back into play, the creative process touches on the idea of re-use – *spolia* – rather than the strict idea of recycling.

The miniature film sets that Samuel Coisne builds from scrap wood (*Landscapes*, 2012) as well as the shattered glass frames assembled into a cartography made of breakage (*Constellations*, 2012) also result from this operating procedure. While their original function is to protect artwork and contain the viewer's gaze, they are granted an autonomous role here as they become the actual support of representation and deliver an image of a rhizomatous structure. Their status is therefore redefined, and the artist's goal to reveal their previous function – the frames are preserved in their entirety – produces an ambivalent situation: the selected objects, both autonomous and singular, end up floating somewhere between their generic condition and their desire to emerge as the essential components of a work of art. Although the legacy of Duchamp's lesson is palpable here, the anesthesia aspired to by Marcel Duchamp is reversed in the sense that the work, in its re-magnified state, attempts to create a sense of aesthetic delectation. Samuel Coisne's both complex and delicate rhizomatous maps and figures, merely crystallize this desire.

For the love of maps

As Agnes Violeau pointed out¹, the idea of "*deconstructionist poetics*," cherished by the artist, is rooted in the context of specifically postmodern sensibility, which is often linked to the writings of Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, or more rarely, to the media analysis offered by Marshall McLuhan. According to McLuhan, while the industrial age succeeded, through tools and machinery, in prolonging the human body, the arrival of electricity created the consciousness of a rhizomatous world as a metaphorical extension of our nervous system². Samuel Coisne's interest for map forms is certainly the result of this paradigm shift, as the artist mainly focuses on the pictorial representation of networks. *Europe* (2011) shows a paper map of the continent hanging from the ceiling by a thin tie. Pending and on the verge of being torn under its own weight, it serves as a metaphor for a political and economic union, which struggles to find its place and threatens to implode at any moment. The black textile map entitled *Belgium* (2011) conveys this same idea. Although it is common to hear that the country is on the verge of collapsing, Samuel Coisne presents a poetic and delicate piece made of laser cut fabric. More finely worked than lace, the piece is based on the layout of the main thoroughfares running through the territory, and if some of them seem broken, it is only to highlight the importance and fragility of the links connecting the different communities. Symbolizing union, the map can also be seen as a cobweb in which individuals and communities are confined and shall struggle before they wither (*Spider Lace (Brussels)*, 2008).

In this way, the artist reveals a political sensibility primarily expressed through maps or globes. *Discoworld* (2010) is represented here as a disco ball on which series of juxtaposed mirrors form the 5 continents. This ode to party, which may seem somewhat scanty or ingenuous, bears its own critique: in a society where entertainment has almost become an injunction, does world boil down to a huge globalized *dance floor*? The answer is contained in the activation of the mechanism: once lit, the ball produces an abstract constellation of scattered stars, where each element is detached from the body it belongs to, and ends up isolated. As they struggle to assert their individuality, these bright spots remain identical to each other and ultimately become a critique of the contemporary condition, in which individualism paradoxically encourages the standardization of behaviors and beliefs. Subtly handling contradictions while affirming a taste for the absurd, the work of Samuel Coisne seems to operate entirely on the mechanics of inversion. Whether it addresses Europe, Belgium, or global warming, his work offers an optimistic approach and taste of the absurd that willingly contradict the ambient doom.

Contemporary Vanities

Although self-parody and the absurd are often brandished, in a questionable manner, as eminently Belgian specificities, the artist readily evokes the influence of artists such as Wim Delvoye, Marcel Broodthaers or René Magritte, all known for their humor and impertinence. Ridiculousness, uselessness, and futility comprise the lexicon of these unruly artists, in the same way that they constitute some of the driving force behind Samuel Coisne's work. *No Title* (2010) thus presents itself as an oriental palace made of assembled pieces of scrap Styrofoam, creating an intricately shaped building somewhat reminiscent of the Taj Mahal. Both elegant and ridiculous, this piece plays on the opposition of architectural statements and aims, on the one hand, to desacralize the palatial form, and on the other hand, to remagnify a material generally considered as incidental. Always mindful of the status attributed to the objects he uses, Samuel Coisne offers them a new life, with added dignity and pride, meanwhile simultaneously evoking a secret desire for rebirth, a desire that constitutes one of the pillars of the consumer and entertainment society in which we live today.

It is interesting to note that the rhetoric of the "new beginning" – distilled ad nauseam by reality TV shows, preachers, and other keen *Born Again* televangelists – happens to coincide with a certainly more noble necessity for the recycling of raw materials and objects.

¹ Agnès VIOLEAU, *Samuel Coisne: L'art d'accueillir les restes*, in. Samuel Coisne – La Malterie, Lille, 2011.

² Marshall MCLUHAN, *Pour comprendre les médias*, Paris, Seuil, coll. Points-Essais, 1977.

Everything unfolds as if the desire to be reborn several times in a single life had, for various reasons, colonized both humans and objects, to the extent where we might affirm that we are entangled in a natural, almost inevitable mechanism. From Styrofoam to cardboard, cheap fabric to second-rate frames, Samuel Coisne strives to produce, in a single leap, ample shapes from common and anonymous objects, with the particularity that he does not try to conceal the original nature of the materials he uses. Integrated in flashy devices, these materials actually aim to seduce the viewer, to bestow some nobility on themselves, but the duality they transcribe ends up asserting the vanity of this claim: they cannot entirely escape their condition, they are both majestic and laughable. If the *vanitas* style, appearing in the seventeenth century, was conceived as still lives affirming the ephemeral nature of earthly existence, the work of Samuel Coisne can be seen as a corpus of contemporary *vanitas*, where the fragile and perishable nature of objects reminds us of the futility of consumer society, perhaps even the futility of our own existence, with sly humor, reminiscent of the good words of Pierre Desproges.

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