

## HUBERT DUPRAT: WHAT YOU DO NOT KNOW

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I recently asked a distinguished English composer friend for his favourite composer of all time: 'Stravinsky', he replied without a moment's hesitation:

He threw everything up in the air, turned everything upside-down, started from scratch, re-thought the old rules. He opened all the doors and windows and let in the air and the light. Everyone working in music is now indebted to him—apart from Schoenberg.

The difference between music and the plastic arts is that almost every classical musician or modern composer has gone through the appropriate channels: school music, a study of notation and *solfège*, harmony and counterpoint, attendance at a conservatoire or an academy, exams and competitions, endless practice.

Practitioners of the plastic arts, on the other hand, are like writers: no formal training is necessary. If many have taken the obligatory route through art school—in the old days this would more likely be an apprenticeship with a professional painter, learning how to paint clouds at dawn, folds in silk, trees at dusk—there are plenty who haven't, at least since the modern movement began in the late nineteenth century. (For the moment I am not including *art brut*, outsider art, which has its own distinctive trajectory.) The list is long and includes some personal favourites such as Odilon Redon, Douanier Rousseau, or Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and other members of Die Brücke, the German expressionist group. This seems an integral part of the great modernist project to explode the old certainties, to sweep away the tired givens, to start from scratch, and to find a new, revolutionary way of seeing the world and making art.

For the modernists, breaking the rules of perspective did not mean having to learn the rules first. In China, students of art spend months copying, say, a Cézanne landscape off a postcard stuck on the studio wall: an extreme version of the old apprenticeship system or the still-life drawing class. It arms them with a superficial skill to flood the market with copies, and perhaps to make a splash by producing 'alternative' art just at the edge of what is permissible in the Chinese system—canny rather than passionate.

Canniness is also a requisite for many in the western art market, distorted by the commercial riches attendant to the star system, and occasionally exploding into the public's consciousness when a state gallery makes an expensive purchase of something everyone feels they could create themselves—the most infamous example being Carl Andre's firebricks, bought by the Tate Gallery in the 1970s. Wealthy investors, persuasive agents, and the absurd prices of contemporary artworks (the result of their 'uniqueness' in a world of mass-manufactured objects) coupled with an ironic, sceptical, and highly theoretical attitude to the act of creation—encouraged by an army of academicians writing, according to Grayson Perry in this year's Reith Lectures, in what sounds like 'badly translated French'—is a breeding ground for the sham. And even the sham can be a valid category since the concept of 'truth' has been philosophically dismantled. Jeff Koons's work might serve as the most extreme example.

Hubert Duprat is not canny in the above sense; he has never 'worked' the system; he hates the art market and believes there is 'too much art' being made (the same might be said of books); he avoids interviews; he is a self-confessed 'dissident', who deliberately avoided living or working in Paris and embraced the provinces. He is refreshingly honest, not only about the extent to which most contemporary art remains 'opaque' to him, but how culturally ignorant he was when he started to work as an artist in the early

1980s. The art magazines he bought in a discount store were mostly from the late 1960s. Apart from the odd provincial exhibition, this was not only his first contact but was also his only contact with the so-called 'contemporary'. The 'new', for him, was already more than ten years old.

In other words, he was (and remains) an autodidact, with a fair dose of the amateur about him. He comes from peasant stock (the word 'peasant'—*paysan*—does not have the same negative connotations in France as it does in Britain, industrialised earlier). He was the first in his family—going back generations—to leave the land, a fact I believe to be crucial to any deeper understanding of his work. He looked at the soil at eighteen and wanted another future. He left the farm to become a teacher, a move familiar to those who read French novels about rural life.

The shift from teacher to artist was, if anything, more extraordinary. His ignorance becomes a kind of innocence: his 'great handicap', as he calls it, allowed him to begin with no preconceptions, and to nurture a natural creativity without the nitrogen of artworld calculation. He did not go out and buy oil paints or a block of marble, as it were, but asked himself fundamental questions, the kind of questions that all artists of any integrity have to ask themselves: What is art in an all-inclusive creating culture where everything is permissible, legitimised by the closed, rarefied space of a studio and then a gallery? Where does art end and life begin? So one imagines Duprat flicking through tatty art magazines in the small Pyrenean city of Pau—about as far from Paris as you can get—and feeling an obscure fascination, a very simple, even childlike, desire to do the same thing.

An artist has to have a studio, but he could hardly afford to rent one. And there was something rather affected, perhaps, about the very idea of a studio; it doesn't turn one into an artist. This is memorably evoked in Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, when the murderous and idle Laurent (also from the *paysan* class) decides to become an artist after watching a friend paint a naked female model. He reckons this is easy money, leaving plenty of time to haunt bars and attract mistresses. He rents a large studio but, of course, cannot paint.

Duprat decided to stay with his gloomy apartment in Pau. There he discovered, as if for the first time, the familiar camera obscura effect noted by Leonardo da Vinci: when a tiny aperture in a dark room lets in a thin shaft of light, the world outside is projected (upside-down) on the opposite wall. In my own bedroom, when dawn has found a thin crack in the shutters, I have woken up to clouds shifting vaguely beyond my bed. In Duprat's case, the aperture was a pinhole in the cardboard with which he had blacked out the window.

In his slow exploration of this phenomenon of light projection, we see the entire curve of his career to date: a deep curiosity for natural phenomena; a desire to know how something works and to legitimise his practice by revealing those workings; an alchemical mixture of technical primitivism and modern technology in the eventual decision to take conventional, and high-quality, photographs of the camera obscura's entirely natural 'photographs'; and a certain cultural or even scholarly dimension to the project in its citing of the history of representation.

Typically, the resultant Cibachrome<sup>i</sup> questions that very notion of 'natural': it required a ten-minute exposure time to create the colours, which, for the naked eye, the carefully measured distance between pinhole and wall had diluted to black and white. What status do these colours have, therefore, if they only exist as a result of faint light shifting the camera film's chemicals over time? Unearthly, for certain: the blues are remarkable,

almost Giotto-like. The image is also entirely site-specific: in *L'Atelier ou la montée des images* (1983–85), we see the door in the wall, and the keyhole's speck of white light. Duprat, taken by a modernist concern to go beyond surface and illusion, left the projection in its 'natural' upside-down and reversed state, along with the shadow of the camera and its trigger. But this is also part and parcel of a stated desire to make his work 'democratic' and 'legitimate': people are impressed by how something works, or how complex or 'difficult' it was to make it, even if they have no theoretical or aesthetic understanding of the final effect. Thus a work like Carl Andre's aforementioned *Equivalent VIII* (1966), consisting of a stack of firebricks, and requiring a sophisticated understanding of minimalism and its place in the history of art, is far removed from Duprat's practice.

Everyone can appreciate the extraordinary beauty of these earliest images, where an ordinary wall appears to be 'painted' by light, and the mysteries of day-in-night and a highly poetic suggestiveness arise from the simplest of raw materials. There is not even any 'studio', as such; this was where Duprat dwelt. It even suggests, in a strange way, the '*chambre noire*' of his inner mind, the opaqueness of his understanding, a certain groping quality—even a humility. We might be reminded of Walker Evans's famous comment that photography, with its involvement in time and space, reflects 'swift chance, disarray, wonder, and experiment'.<sup>ii</sup>

Duprat certainly continued to experiment with his own photographic work; for example, by cutting thinly into self-adhesive black paper covering his bay window, imitating the slightly blurred line of light that blazes from a shutter's edge on a hot day in southern France, he created an image that resembles the graphic lushness of a neon sign. His four Cibachrome photographs of 1986–89 use the same technique, inspired by the drawing of an agate stone. The single image is quadrupled, the negative reversed twice to act as a mirror or a kind of butterfly wing, for each of the four compositions. Duprat has pointed out<sup>iii</sup> that this technique was used by classical and Renaissance architects (at Ephesus, or in the marble inlay of San Marco Basilica in Venice, for example), converted by him into a virtual version of these decorative arts,<sup>iv</sup> as well as of the original stone materials, and particularly striking for—in his own words—its 'outrageous, backwards symmetry'.

Eventually he took his working space outside and made of it a '*chambre claire*'. He reconstituted his upside-down room in a gallery, with the planked floor stuck on the ceiling, and then (the right way up) in a peeling prison, his floor melding into the prison's, his door etched into the wall so that sculpture becomes drawing, without volume, or as if the prison space has absorbed the artist's space.

The most radical move came with his use of massive blocks of concrete—concrete being, for Duprat (as daylight and darkness were), an attractively basic material, as free from 'art' references as marble or, say, sandstone are replete with them. But neither is it 'natural' or primordial. Duprat, for all his interest in the natural sciences and the conjunctions he makes between geology, prehistory, chemistry, botany, zoology, physics, and so on, avoids any suggestion that he is an environmental purist or related to Land artists such as Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Long. For him, the distinction between artifice and the natural is something to be, at the very least, questioned. This is clear in his tree trunks scaled all over with brass tacks, or his bejewelled caddis worm, or his refashioned flints, or even in his reconstituted lumps of rock.

In fact, critics have convincingly likened his impulse to the baroque. Both show a love of excess, surface ornament, and glitter; a synthesising of different disciplines; a fascination with reflected light; and a tendency to transform or disguise materials, as in Gian Lorenzo Bernini's obsessive fusion of marble and flesh, or the use of water in his

sculptures. There is also the attraction to a drama of opposites, as in Duprat's marrying, say, of flints and polyurethane foam, or a Neolithic stone axe with fresh clay still in its plastic. And his concern to reveal his own processes might recall the 'painterly' effects in Caravaggio, while a scrupulous attention to context is equally typical of the baroque. They also share a general delight in the obscure, the extravagant, the exotic, especially when steeped in learning—most particularly in the anti-taxonomic baroque *Kunstkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities, with its picturesque disorderliness and fetishistic mania for accumulation obeying quite other priorities than the rational and the scientific, wonder being one of them.

This is why it is interesting to return to the apparent raw simplicity of Duprat's earliest sculptures or installations—categories are already being blurred. On the surfaces of three great blocks of concrete he drew his familiar 'room' motif: door, skirting board and floorboards. The blocks were cut in rectangular forms like slices of cake in a tray, each side remaining part of a continuum of lines, with a strong and ironic, in the context of modernist priorities, sense of receding perspective. The drawn image was both clearly flat and yet three-dimensional, a baroque playing with the viewer's eye similar to Brancusi's fluid games with perspective.

The same motif could be seen when he filled huge rooms in various exhibition spaces with expanses of rough concrete, the surfaces enchantingly reminiscent of evanescent grey smoke or mist or clouds, on which a faint door seems stranded at one end and the lines of skirting boards and planks create a disturbing depth of view. By leaving a tiny gap between the concrete's edges and the walls and floor, he gave the impression that these enormous slabs were laid in, or fitted, or lowered in by crane, which of course was an illusion, as was their solidity; Duprat made certain their hollow shells were just thick enough to sound solid when tapped.

For the Lyon Biennale of 1991, the concrete floor of his designated space appeared to have been picked up, pushed back and tilted high at one end so as to hide the far wall.<sup>v</sup> In the photos of its construction are the dust-masked-and-gloved workers who become ever-present companions to the artist's work over the ensuing years, as do skilled experts in such arcane areas as flint-carving and coral jewellery. In downplaying or annulling the artist's special status, Duprat has claimed 'My hand isn't important, it is equal to everyone else's; it's my thoughts that are important'.<sup>vi</sup>

A weaving of contradiction is already evident—the idea of concrete being 'temporary', for instance, or of weight versus weightlessness, or even of the material versus the spiritual: matter versus spirit. Duprat is a voracious reader, and his recent discovery of two books by Patrick Leigh Fermor, *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water*—the former in a translation by my own translator, Guillaume Villeneuve—prompted him to a startling suggestion: 'The major part of my earliest works might be considered as an offering (*offrande*) or gift, the gift of youth, and that the very form of these structures might even have something of the altar about it.'<sup>vii</sup>

The concrete phase exhausted, he started from scratch once again. As he recently explained it, with reference to *Cassé-Collé* (Broken-Bonded), his great broken and re-glued limestone boulders from the early 1990s, full of enigmatic power: 'I wanted to begin again with simple, silly gestures; even I had become too complex, technically-speaking. So I said to myself: no technique!'<sup>viii</sup> The fact that he was also fascinated by the formal energy of the reconstituted form—inspired by visits to the dustier galleries in civic museums (he is an expert on Roman ceramics) and the archaeologist's practice of recreating a core flint from its knapped flakes—seems almost secondary.

I have described these earliest works at length because they seem, in a remarkable way, not only to leap fully formed into the category of mature creations, but also (as already suggested) to act as a kind of key to understanding Duprat's oeuvre as a whole. In a startling extension of the works in concrete, he would redraw their lines in space as exotic marquetry on sheets of stained plywood: the marquetry using inlaid tortoiseshell, pewter, boxwood, ivory, fish scales from the South China Sea . . . his room in provincial Pau welcoming precious materials from countries the world over, those essential and even banal measurements designated in thin lines of absolute simplicity, as if pencilled from light. The plywood loses its thinness, paradoxically, in an illusion of depth, while a certain material depth is required for the inlay—absurdly thin in itself.

Illusion is also there in the later, enchanting *A la fois, la racine et le fruit* (Both root and fruit, 1997–98), a strangely looped branch seemingly covered in nailed-on ivory—an ancient technique of decoration. In fact, the ivory is glued-on cow's bone.

And what to make of *Les Bêtes* (Beasts, 1992–99), a work that took seven years to complete and which picks up the theme of light's natural qualities, evident in his first works? Duprat combined that most ephemeral of performances—shadow play—with that most ancient of materials—flint—in a work that melds the simplest of gestures with the hardest. Making animal silhouettes with your bare hands is something we learn as children: to carve (rather than knap) flint is extremely hard, as it is almost as fissile as glass. But there is a further dimension: recent finds of Ice Age sculptures suggest that prehistoric people constructed small mobiles that created complex shadows on the cave wall as they moved or spun in cave draughts. This year, Jean Jacques Lefrère and Bertrand David, in *La plus vieille énigme de l'Humanité*,<sup>ix</sup> have suggested that the famous 'realistic' cave paintings of Lascaux, Chauvet and other cave sites, seen as among the first ever artworks<sup>x</sup> and of an astonishing level of accomplishment,<sup>xi</sup> were no more than outlines of silhouettes thrown by small carvings of animals placed in front of an oil lamp. The authors—neither of them prehistorians—point out that most of the paintings are in profile and look very similar, and many lack eyes or other internal details, conforming to outline drawings. They frequently overlap each other, creating a mass of animals of different sizes, which would be very hard to draw without some sort of guide.

While being drawn to the theory because of its suggestion of projection, Duprat also found it 'very troubling',<sup>xii</sup> presumably because its convincing simplicity questions not only the professionalism (or perhaps the imagination) of the specialist prehistorians, but also the extent of prehistoric humanity's artistic genius,<sup>xiii</sup> albeit suggesting a remarkable capacity to solve problems—something we sense in many artists, not least Duprat. *Les Bêtes* is therefore more than a whimsical visual pun. It plays with notions that lie at the heart of artistic endeavour: a childlike impulse to play, above all, but also a desire to make sense of a complex reality by 'imitating' it, controlling it, perhaps even honouring it.

Duprat did not carve the flint, of course, but gave close instructions to a flint knapper, who then took many years to master the technique required. The artist is not bothered by the fact that he rarely carries out the later work himself, insisting only on being present among the hard-hatted, safety-goggled workers. Solving problems is his forte, given his penchant for setting himself challenges. Nevertheless, he claims, 'I don't do anything with a sense of pleasure. Everything's complicated; it's all a real sufferance. But if I don't do it, then it's worse.'<sup>xiv</sup>

At the same conference at which he made that remark, a student asked him for his influences. I was expecting a few contemporary names to keep the crowds happy: Rachel Whiteread, perhaps? Joseph Beuys? The currently fashionable *Kunstkammer* aesthetic?

The Surrealist Roger Caillois for the works involving polished pebbles? A sprinkling of conceptual artists using solid materials, such as Edward Ruscha? What about the early process art of Richard Serra, or his later monumental pieces constructed from heterogeneous materials? Come to think of it, he might have cast a glance towards Damien Hirst, despite the latter's apparent cynicism: there is something of Duprat's own down-to-earthness in Hirst's comment that 'Painting is so poetic, while sculpture is more logical and scientific and makes you worry about gravity'. Duprat's reply was surprising and bold, given he was addressing students who are expected to cite their influences throughout their art-school career: 'I'm not aware of my influences', he said. 'I'm not really inspired by art.' When, afterwards, I suggested that there was a touch of outsider art in his production—the obsessive side, the use of unlikely materials, the deliberate ignoring of his contemporaries—he did not deny it. But he added that he 'detested' *art brut* as such—not the works themselves, but the turning of something strictly private and amateur, and often purely 'therapeutic', into an art movement with all the usual accretions of 'value', both monetary and aesthetic, and its shift into the rarefied spaces of galleries, museums and biennale pavilions, never mind its current imitative adoption by 'insider' artists. The chief connection with *art brut* was the 'hysteria' integral to his work, he said, but otherwise they were worlds apart, separated most of all by the rigour and extreme sophistication of his own creation. 'My work is very melancholic, however', he added—an element often found, of course, in the disparate, far 'messier' productions of outsiders.

I thought then of Rembrandt's famous statement: 'Practise what you know, and it will help to make clear what you do not know'. Duprat started his career with this kind of modesty, deciding that he knew nothing at all, in fact. So he let the light into his room through a pinhole and allowed it to do the work for him. All he had to do was capture it. But how? In this first tentative probing of nature's possibilities, involving, as it turned out, some quite unnatural processes using chemicals and artificial fabrics, we have Hubert Duprat's artistic endeavour in larval form, spinning its own glorious (and possibly protective) cocoon every bit as suggestively as his caddis worms in their glittering aquariums.

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## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Cibachrome is now known as Ilfochrome, a wet darkroom printing process that gives exceptional depth and luminosity to the image.
- <sup>ii</sup> Review in *Hound and Horn*, no. 5, October–December 1931.
- <sup>iii</sup> Email to Adam Thorpe, 29 October 2013.
- <sup>iv</sup> 'One of the most insulting words you can call an artwork is *decorative* . . . I think it's a very noble thing to be decorative.' Grayson Perry, second Reith Lecture, 26 October 2013.
- <sup>v</sup> *Les Figures de Lyon* (1991).
- <sup>vi</sup> Conference, Ecole des Beaux Arts de Nîmes, 11 October 2013.
- <sup>vii</sup> Email to Adam Thorpe, 15 October 2013.
- <sup>viii</sup> Conference, Ecole des Beaux Arts de Nîmes.
- <sup>ix</sup> Jean Jacques Lefrère and Bertrand David, *La plus vieille énigme de l'Humanité*, Fayard, Paris, 2013.
- <sup>x</sup> Chauvet's paintings have been dated to circa 34,000 BCE.
- <sup>xi</sup> Picasso emerged from Lascaux with the remark that 'We have discovered nothing'.
- <sup>xii</sup> Email to Adam Thorpe, 1 November 2013.
- <sup>xiii</sup> There is, of course, a genius fully surviving in the way the outlines are 'blocked in' to resemble animal flesh and musculature.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Conference, Ecole des Beaux Arts de Nîmes.