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Friday's Feast (Les Noces de Vendredi)

Laurent Courtens - (translated from French by Matthew Cunningham)

In the adventure novel *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719, Daniel Defoe recounts the story of a mariner shipwrecked on a desert island. Left to his own devices on an unknown land, with only a few provisions, paltry ammunition, an indispensable Bible, a cat and a dog, bit-by-bit Robinson re-establishes the vital foundations of civilization. Farming, breeding, tools, construction, defence, cartography, navigation...: the domestication process turns the island into a kingdom. The hero's unshakable rationality, sense of action, self-control, love of observation, thirst for knowledge and technical ability enable him not just to survive, but to blossom. And it ensures that the island will soon be ready to integrate people—at least the one who is worthy of being designated, the one who has been conquered...

After twenty years of solitude, the Other appears, the stranger, saved by Robinson from the clutches of Carib natives who land on the island to devour their enemies. Robinson names the survivor Friday. Friday bows at Robinson's feet, and becomes his servant. Robinson civilizes Friday: he teaches him English, navigation techniques, the existence of firearms, the religion in the Book... Above all, he rids him of the taste for that odious food staple: human flesh. He gets him to taste milk, bread and kid meat; Friday learns farming and breeding, the manipulation of tools...

Friday's soul is a kind but hollow one, a void to occupy at the risk of regressing to an original chaos. Like the island, Friday is virgin territory waiting to be filled.

Offence against Rachel

Reading it today, *Robinson Crusoe* seems like the literary—even mythical—matrix of the colonial conquest, just beginning when the novel was published. The island would soon be the world, and Friday would become the indigenous populations, empty shells to fill. Capitalist globalization is the complex and monstrous offshoot of this model that, on the verge of its total fulfilment, is crumbling on every side.

If that still needs to be demonstrated, this is not the place to do so. What is important here is to show how much Eric van Hove's offering to the biennale evinces this disruption of the colonial paradigm that we still rely on globally.

What is it? *D9T (Rachel's Tribute)*: obviously a machine. Yes, an engine, an engine replica. A large one, a strong one. An assertive force of elegance. A turbine converted in the desert. It has a mother-of-pearl geyser, marquetry, mosaics, sculpted stucco, historiated frieze, flashes of copper, enamelled mouldings. Like a shrine, a liturgical play, a precious icon. A concert of gestures and materials: ground bone, beaten metals, carved woods, polished stones, coated clays...

These gestures are the work of some forty Moroccan artists. The nerve centre is Eric Van Hove's studio, which he set up in Marrakech two years ago. He continually mobilizes nine

artisans. Specifically for this piece, he also invited two Indonesian artisans, who contributed to the object's decorations, on its faces, its crowns, its capitals.

The model, duplicated piece by piece, is a Caterpillar C18 engine, the one that powers the D9T, a crawler tractor pushing a front blade carried by articulated arms. A beast! It strips, levels, slides, clears. Scrapes away tons. In the Americas, in Africa, in Asia, for decades it has been the bulldozer of all dangers: cities, dams, railroads, drilling sites, piers. It also cut its way through the First World War, the Second World War, the Vietnam war... Caterpillar technology has accompanied US troops on all of their adventures.

Another troop (notwithstanding...): the Israel Defence Forces have added custom armour plating, wire meshing and machine guns to several D9 devices to raze Palestinian towns, homes and plantations. It was one of these macabre heavy vehicles that, on 16 March 2003, crushed young American activist Rachel Corrie (1979-2003) when she placed herself between the bulldozer and the house of a Palestinian doctor, which the driver had been ordered to raze. The International Solidarity Movement activist died, like others—Palestinians buried under the rubble of their homes¹. “Teddy Bear” is the cathartic creature's nickname in Palestine. A powerful, compact, intractable and blind machine, painted military grey.

Ordeals, exoticisms

(Rachel's Tribute): here is the heart of the beast made-up in mother-of-pearl, corrupted by tenderness. What happened to it? It was eaten alive. Delivered up to the Marrakesh studio, the motor was dissected down to its most fragile bones, studied in its most intricate angles, duplicated to the nearest millimetre. And the muscle-man was divided up entirely, reconstructed with its new textures. Devouring, ingesting, reconstructing: cannibalistic poetic justice, Friday sits down to dinner again. In its juices, its denied knowledge, the firepower of automated technicism, the death of Rachel, sacrificed on the altar of the latest colonial barbarities.

Cultural cannibalism, the metamorphosed engine is the distant echo of the following dark prophecy written in 1928 in Brazil by Oswald de Andrade in his *Cannibalist Manifesto*: “*Cannibalism. Absorption of the sacred enemy. To transform him into a totem. (...) It is the thermometrical scale of the cannibal instinct. Carnal at first, it becomes elective, and creates friendship. When it is affective, it creates love. When it is speculative, it creates science.*”².

Devouring, knowing, loving: it is not about hating the C18, taking an axe to it, but rather dismantling it—lovingly, methodically—in order to reconstruct it. “*It is common knowledge,*” wrote Lévi-Strauss, “*that the artist is both something of a scientist and of a 'bricoleur'. By his craftsmanship he constructs a material object which is also an object of knowledge*”³.

And what is there to know? The object to dismantle, first of all. A stranger which requires that one become a stranger. To become an “exoticist”, Segalen says, to embrace exoticism, in the

¹ See Nick Dearden and Joe Zacune, “Caterpillar: Making a Killing in Palestine?”, 2005, <https://electronicintifada.net> and Center for Constitutional Rights, “Corrie et al. v. Caterpillar”, 2007, <https://ccrjustice.org/>

² Translated from the Portuguese by Leslie Bary. See <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20119601>

³ Claude Lévi-Strauss [trans. by George Weidenfeld], *Savage Mind*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1966.

sense of “*the perception of Diversity*”, of “*the knowledge that something is other than one’s self*”. And this exercise, imposed in this case on the artisans applying their art to a mechanism foreign to their art, “*is not that kaleidoscopic vision of the tourist or of the mediocre spectator, but the forceful and curious reaction to a shock felt by someone of strong individuality in response to some object whose distance from oneself he alone can perceive and savor.*” “*Exoticism,*” Segalen points out, “*is therefore not an adaptation to something; it is not the perfect comprehension of something outside one’s self that one has managed to embrace fully, but the keen and immediate perception of an eternal incomprehensibility*”⁴.

In short, knowing it is strange, but still knowing how its workings work, screw by screw, belt by cylinder head. Also, knowing one’s ability to remake said workings, to experience oneself in its recomposition.

The great work

Most of the artisans working in Eric Van Hove’s studio took part in the artist’s initial undertaking in Morocco: the replica of a Mercedes V12 engine, leading to the creation, in 2012, of the masterpiece *V12 Laraki*, combining the efforts of over fifty artisans, weaving the fabric of a potential revival of crafts in the Kingdom⁵. This experiment led to the creation of the studio, dedicated to developing its methods and operations, backed up by copies of mechanical scraps from the Marrakesh dump. On those occasions, knowledge becomes more refined, the “style” gets defined, strokes of inspiration—whether technical, aesthetic or decorative—multiply.

But there was still the need for a “great work”, an opportunity to combine all of this, to mobilize the studio around a shared production. It was the C18 that presented itself as a challenge, lever of a masterful formulation. Like a masterpiece of companionship, a beautiful work. Furthermore, it was a matter of summoning other materials into the process, other practices.

Mother-of-pearl from Java, wood from Congo, wood from Brazil, marbles, gypsums, malachite...: diversifying the substances, nuancing the colours, broadening the origins. The thirst for exoticism (in Segalen’s sense), Friday can no longer control his appetite. He invites us to his table: here are X and Y. One makes the mother-of-pearl, the other carves the bone, paints the steel face. They are Indonesian. They have been summoned for the jewels. They have been summoned to put the finishing touches on the structure built by the studio. They bring their own science, their technical skill, combining them in the studio, integrating their choreographies, their chants, into the choir that is searching for its harmonies. In the concert of hammers and sanders, they sing an ode. If we are hammering, if we are sanding, it is not to generate products, but to ensure the perpetuation of the world, to make an offering, to become part of the continuity of a Gesture. To ensure the survival of the gods, who are in this world, because they are in our gestures, because they are our gestures. For this reason, at the crown of the motor there is a representation of the *Ramayana*, the Sanskrit epic poem that tells of the battle between Good and Evil, between harmony and devastation, between the visible and invisible, construction and destruction...

⁴ Victor Segalen [trans. by Yael Rachel Schlick], *Essay on Exoticism: An Aesthetics of Diversity*, Duke University Press, Montpellier, 1978.

⁵ Fendug Press (éd.), *Eric van Hove. V12 Laraki*, Marrakech, 2014.

Dualities haunt this engine, which is obviously alive, invested with contrary, disparate powers, temporarily combining the heterogeneity and hesitations of the world in the mechanics of its articulations.

And the joy felt at the sight of it, the pleasure of experiencing its mass and scrutinising its details, stem from that delight obtained through works of art as miniatures, Lévi-Strauss suggests. In this case it is a functional miniature of a mechanical power and of what it represents. A condensation of historical and social relations, of political events, of punishments and dominations.

Miniatures, Lévi-Strauss explains, “*are ‘man made’ and, what is more, made by hand. They are therefore not just projections or passive homologues of the object: they constitute a real experiment with it. Now the model being an artefact, it is possible to understand how it is made and this understanding of the method of construction adds a supplementary dimension*”⁶.

A supplementary dimension? One that should be experienced. That can be dismantled and reconfigured, that should not be eternally frozen, set, fixed in the blind coldness of its workings. That is evolving if we take the trouble to carve it up to get to know its workings. If we wouldn't mind, without too much delay, taking our seats at the dinner table...

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⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *op. cit.*