

(This essay was originally published in the catalogue "V12 Laraki – Eric van Hove", published by Fendug Press in 2014. <http://www.mottodistribution.com/wholesale/v12-laraki.html> (ISBN 978-9090284941)

## **The Absolute Heart (Le Cœur Absolu)**

*Simon Njami - (translated from French by Matthew Cunningham)*

In the beginning there was nothing. No language, no light, nothing. In the beginning was the sidereal void. A void that we now have trouble imagining, comprehending. A void that would not look like anything else. Not even like the minute preceding birth. Not even like the second after death. And then there was the great cataclysm. The primal chaos. The explosion. The noise. Everything started not with an image, but with a sound: the Big Bang. This, too, is hard to imagine. It is hard for our ears to once again summon that tremendous explosion which only gods would have survived. In the beginning, then, there was the noise. The "la" that was to give the known world its form and content. One "la": an absolute, organic, original note. And then everything started organizing itself around this standard note. In the beginning, because everything that came before was beyond our consciousness, there was rhythm. The immense, ternary breath that organized the universe while composing music. That strange silence, that symphony of another time, which some poets called the music of the stars. A breath. Like a child who has just been born. Like a being who comes into the world and must harmonize with it. Babel was far away. Not just because people did not yet exist, but simply because a somewhat metaphysical unity reigned in the universe. A unity made of subtle distortions, millions of entities that, though free, were all part of this same ineffable design. But perhaps here, now, we can put our finger on God's plan, when he heaped that multitude of languages on mankind like a bad lot, shattering the balance that, if it really was His own work, he himself had created. That harmony had become intolerable to him because it was self-sufficient. And when he brought a case against mankind, in order to justify the miserable life he was preparing for them, there were baseless accusations: humans became proof of the greatest malevolence ever inflicted. Here we find a manifestation of the inordinate pride of an abandoned god whose only urgent task was to remind mankind where the seat of absolute power resided. By constructing that tower, men did not want to reach the realm reserved for the Eternal Father. They did not care to invade his hallowed home. And maybe this is what angered God - the contempt, or at least indifference, with which mankind was suddenly treating him.

I believe that when humans embarked on that utopian venture, what really interested them most was to hear the music of the stars. To sight-read Heaven's perfect arrangement. To achieve absolute knowledge, like Adam and Eve when they were left to their own devices in Eden. They had understood that it was all a matter of rhythm, and that if they managed to bring themselves up to speed on the universe, nothing would be impossible. Maybe eternal life was even within their reach: they wanted to penetrate to the heart of things past and things to come. They felt the need to be a part of the Everything, and to add their solitary voices to the superb choir whose power they foresaw. It is worth noting the two definitions of this word, which covers both Christian church architecture and choral singing. In the West, choirs are located in the western part of the apse, between the crossing of the transept and the eastern part of the apse where the altar is found. In abbeys, it is reserved for monks. In churches, the choir is the part reserved for the clergy. The ecclesiastical body is divided into an upper choir that contains hierarchical dignitaries and a lower choir containing low-ranking clergy, clerics and laypeople, who surround the choir singers, for whom this was once a profession, and who often felt compelled (at least the most senior of them) to take Holy Orders - minor orders like that of the reader, or major orders like those of the subdeacon, deacon or priest.

Here one recognizes the strictness of the Catholic church and all other churches. This obsession with hierarchy, this vertical mindset establishing power relationships between people. The Babel project, as I see it, was precisely about abolishing all forms of verticality and introducing if not equality, then at least a total complementarity and solidarity: a kind of chain within which each person would have his own role, and each role would be indispensable to the collective project. The "choir" that I would particularly like to focus on here designates first and foremost a musical ensemble, an exclusively vocal one, whose members collectively sing the various musical parts intended for this type of group, under the direction of a choirmaster. The choir concept is the opposite of that of set of soloists. In sacred music, choirs, a source of religious musical education, owe their name to the place they traditionally occupy in the church. The members of a choir can be divided into several groups, called sections or voices. These various groups are supposed to interpret different musical parts (soprano, alto, tenor and bass). But again, a vocal choir does not include soloists. That is to say that one should view the singers not individually, but as a group.

As I have said, by building its Tower, mankind was attempting to penetrate to the heart of time; that time which, we are told, is governed by a pair of eyes. And it is through these eyes that time is suddenly embodied and made human. We forgot to give words back their original meaning. We forgot to consider their subtle complexity, the double entendre underlying each of those expressions that, however, we squander to the length of whole sentences. The “heart of time” refers to a precise mechanism that once again introduces us to the notions of rhythm and pulse. The heart is a symbol that has been commonly used since prehistory to represent the center (the heart) of emotional, spiritual, moral or intellectual activity. More concretely, it is a hollow, muscular organ that takes care of blood circulation, using rhythmic contractions to pump it into the body’s blood vessels and cavities. The heart is the “engine”, the circulatory system’s pump.

The word has been let loose. The heart is an engine, and an engine is what I intend to speak about here. Not an engine like those we know and use on a daily basis, often without being aware of the system that brings them to life. Our “modern” engine is an aberration of nature. An invention by humans (here is Babel again) designed to help them master their own destiny, to give them the most control over their activities, to abolish time and distances even if we are perfectly aware that if there is one thing we cannot abolish, it’s time. After the steam engine, which was the first engine truly liberated from the forces of nature, the combustion engine arrived in the 19th century, using heat emitted by fuel. It was the one that made the first automobiles possible. And of all engines, it was the one created by Gottlieb Daimler and Wilhelm Maybach that captured Eric van Hove’s interest. In 1886, Gottlieb Daimler invented the internal combustion engine with Wilhelm Maybach, and they subsequently founded the company Daimler Motoren Gesellschaft in 1890. Paul Daimler succeeded his father upon his death in 1900. In 1902, Emil Jellinek, the largest Daimler Motoren Gesellschaft dealer on the French Riviera in the early 20th century, officially and legally registered and protected the commercial brand “Mercedes”, which was his 13-year-old daughter’s nickname. He legally changed his own name to “Emil Jellinek-Mercedes”. In 1909, Mercedes registered the famous three-point star (again the ternary rhythm), to represent the three modes of transport: land, sea and air. The emblem appeared on all of its cars beginning in 1911. In 1923, a Daimler truck with a diesel engine was exhibited at the Berlin auto show.

Mercedes: today a name that inspires dreams, a symbol of power, reliability and solidity. A name linked to a family history in which one can still discern a desire to create a whole, always. A little girl’s nickname (given anecdotally) became such an important symbol that Jellinek

officially appended it to his own birth name. After moving from *mise en abyme* to *mise en abyme*, we have finally arrived at the heart of the artist's project. But this apparent detour through biblical mythology, music, and the history of a German corporation is not the product of chance. It highlights the progression of a utopia whose visible and hidden roots testify to the polysemy contained in this production. First of all, there is a family story, the one that van Hove tells about that stalled pump in Cameroon that his father was responsible for repairing. In this *deus ex machina* who was to arrive too late, I see a positive extension of the construction of the Tower. As if the same will were set in motion. The inhabitants of that remote village were able to adapt themselves to their needs. Because together, with their basic industriousness, they were able to make a complex machine simple: they were able to dominate it. They offer proof that nothing on earth is inaccessible to mankind, if only it takes the trouble to examine the nature of the problems it confronts. In producing his V12 engine, Eric van Hove has drawn upon a series of memories, some of which have, over the years, assumed the role of myths, far removed from the very first V12 engine, developed by German engineer Gottfried Ludwig Dörwald and adopted by the largest engine manufacturers, including (naturally) Mercedes. This promethean project reminds me of how Renaissance artists refused to categorize the various disciplines they dabbled in. They refused to place any barrier between industry, science and the arts. Benvenuto Cellini called himself an artisan while Leonardo da Vinci invented futuristic machines. We can even see modesty in the work of van Hove who, after all, simply wanted to reproduce an engine. But the beauty of the gesture wholly resides in its gratuitousness. This engine is not supposed to activate any machine. As an engine, it serves no purpose. Because its function lies elsewhere; it belongs in the sphere of sharing and sensibility. This engine's only purpose is to produce a metaphorical Babel that brings together all human energy, all know-how, all sensibilities. And this is how it should be understood. Not as a monolithic object, but as a sum. In this addition - which can also be likened to a sharing, and is in this case the true goal to be reached - we find an illustration of Jacques Rancière's words: "While working on the history of the working class, I came to realize that its emancipation did not reflect a transition from ignorance to knowledge, nor the expression of a specific identity or culture, but rather a way of crossing the boundaries that define our identities. All of my work has been focused on this question, which I later named 'the distribution of the sensible', and by which I mean how, in a given space, we organize the perception of our world and relate a sensible

experience to intelligible modes of interpretation.” Jacques Rancière, *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, interviews, op. cit. pp. 572/573.

Here we find ourselves right at the heart of a form of emancipation. Not understood in a political or social spirit, but in its strictly human formulation. To carry out his project, van Hove enlisted the help of a certain number of craftsmen to whom contemporary art was a mystery, a non-event - a world of abstraction that was unintelligible to them. And while working with them, obviously the artist did not ask them to produce art, he asked them to do what they do best. Having annulled this intangible but real boundary between artist and artisan, all that was left for all of them to do was to form a choir that would later produce that strange object. The distribution of the “sensible” is not just a utopia or an ideal, but a reality at work. The outline of a methodology that keeps on operating, no matter what subject is being addressed. It is important to stress the various points raised by Rancière: it is not a question of a transition from ignorance to knowledge, presupposing one person who knows and another who does not, but rather a question of replacing the traditional, ethnocentric, vertical relationship developed by industrial societies with a horizontal relationship that is no longer based on socioeconomic presuppositions, or on notions of superiority and inferiority, but is instead based on criteria that cannot be assessed solely according to the traditional tools of reason and “culture”; they must also be evaluated according to something we all have in common, something that is both very personal and universally common, which is our relationship to the “sensible”. That which Rancière applies to the working class could be broadened to the relationship that governs the various parts of the world. A parallel could easily be drawn between the workers Rancière was interested in and all of the countries that are not members of the G8. The question of the nature of a work of art, at the heart of the V12 project, once again raises the paradigm that contemporary art has been confronting since it came into being. For whom are we making what we’re making? And what criteria should define it? As this medium-transubstantiation process transforms a set of ordinary objects into works of art, whose job is it to sign and authorize their inclusion in a new field? Who will have the final say? The specialist entangled in his criteria, or the creator, that heterogeneous conglomeration that will have participated in the advent of the event? Ultimately, this is not very important. Van Hove succeeds in the impossible gamble of trying to reconcile the irreconcilable. To make art accessible to

everyone, not theoretically or by taking a populist stance, but through an action that does not set out to superimpose discourse over a tangible reality.

The irony of this modest, brilliant undertaking - to paraphrase Gérard Mermet, host of “Là-bas si j’y suis”, that vaguely anarchistic radio program on France Inter - is that it is reminiscent of the assembly lines of Toulouse (at Airbus) and all other places where pieces manufactured in the four corners of the globe, by people who do not know each other and very often do not speak the same language, are precisely fit together to the nearest millimeter. Van Hove only intervened (during production of course; the concept is a whole other story) as a choirmaster possessing an overall view of the score to be played. And I had the chance to experience the magic of transformation, of that “distribution of the sensible” in action, when visiting the workshop in the Marrakech suburbs where the various pieces of this improbable puzzle were assembled. And I felt particular empathy for the “foreman” as I listened to him talk about the “engine” as if it were one of his children. And about how this unique experience in his life enabled him to better understand not the van Hove project, but van Hove himself, by discovering the different ways he could apply his talent. Babel once again. And that language, which I find so fascinating. That communication, which must constantly be called back into question, through its translations, which are approximate and groping - due to idiom of course, but also due to cultural differences. But one need only spend a moment looking at the story of this artist’s life to understand that his latest work is a sum, in every sense of the word. Like the result of a long meditation that finally reaches its goal. As if the works he had produced up until then had to be considered trials in the purest sense of the word, reflections leading him towards a result whose shape he did not yet know.

And if van Hove’s V12 was produced in Marrakech and nowhere else, this is clearly not a matter of chance. A Belgian by accident, van Hove very quickly understood the need to question the world. To rub shoulders with difference, in order to better understand himself. In Asia, the Middle-East and Africa, he embarked on a search whose object was not ethnographic but ontological. It was not so much difference, strangeness, or what we could call exoticism, that he was attracted to. Quite the contrary. Without being aware of it, he was exploring the polysemy and complex richness of “disparity”: “Although the tension generated by disparity engenders - produces - a certain fertility, difference, by contrast, produces nothing beyond a definition. And yet, this also applies to cultures finding in each other’s respective fertility so many resources, that are not only worth exploring, but that can then be exploited, and they do this no matter what their

place of belonging or origin. Because disparity is explored and exploited.” F. Jullien, *L'écart et l'entre*, Paris, Galilée, 2012, p.37.

Succeeding in abolishing both the place of belonging and the place of origin means achieving a level of freedom that allows us to make Rimbaud's phrase our own: “I is another”. Those fifteen, twenty or thirty hands that contributed to the construction of this engine ultimately only make up one pair. Because the “between” is fertile, and because in this fertilization, all essentialism disappears. And once the object has been assembled, it would be pointless to try and identify the handiwork of this or that person, just as there would be no point in identifying the various sedimentary layers that make up an individual. The assembled object no longer belongs to anyone. It is an answer, or at least an attempt to answer what Ernst Bloch called “the essential question”: the inner question of the Us. And the various experiences that made Eric van Hove the man he is today enabled him to free himself from what François Julien calls the “unthought”: “I call the ‘unthought’ that from which we think and which, by the same token, we do not think. Going to China therefore means leaving the contingency of one's mind, or taking a step back from one's mind, by going through the ordeal of a way of thinking that is external; as well as clarifying the ‘us’ (not only that of ideology, but first and foremost that of language and thought categories) that is always implicitly at work in that ‘I’ which so superbly says: ‘I think...’” Jullien p.20/21.

Therefore, as Daniel Arrasse has suggested, there is nothing to see. In the sense that the eye alone does not enable us to penetrate to the heart of the structure of the creative process. Despite its complex beauty, the engine is not the main thing. It is only the visible manifestation of another story. Of thousands of other stories that, as if by magic, succeeded in becoming one. Ever since the first time Eric van Hove spoke to me about his upcoming work, I sensed that his project was inspired by an effort to take possession of that utopia I attributed to the men who built the Tower of Babel. To reclaim a common language that could be shared by everyone. His engine is like the metaphorical multiple being whose heart can beat at multiple rhythms and pulses. A heart that encompasses all other hearts: an absolute heart.

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