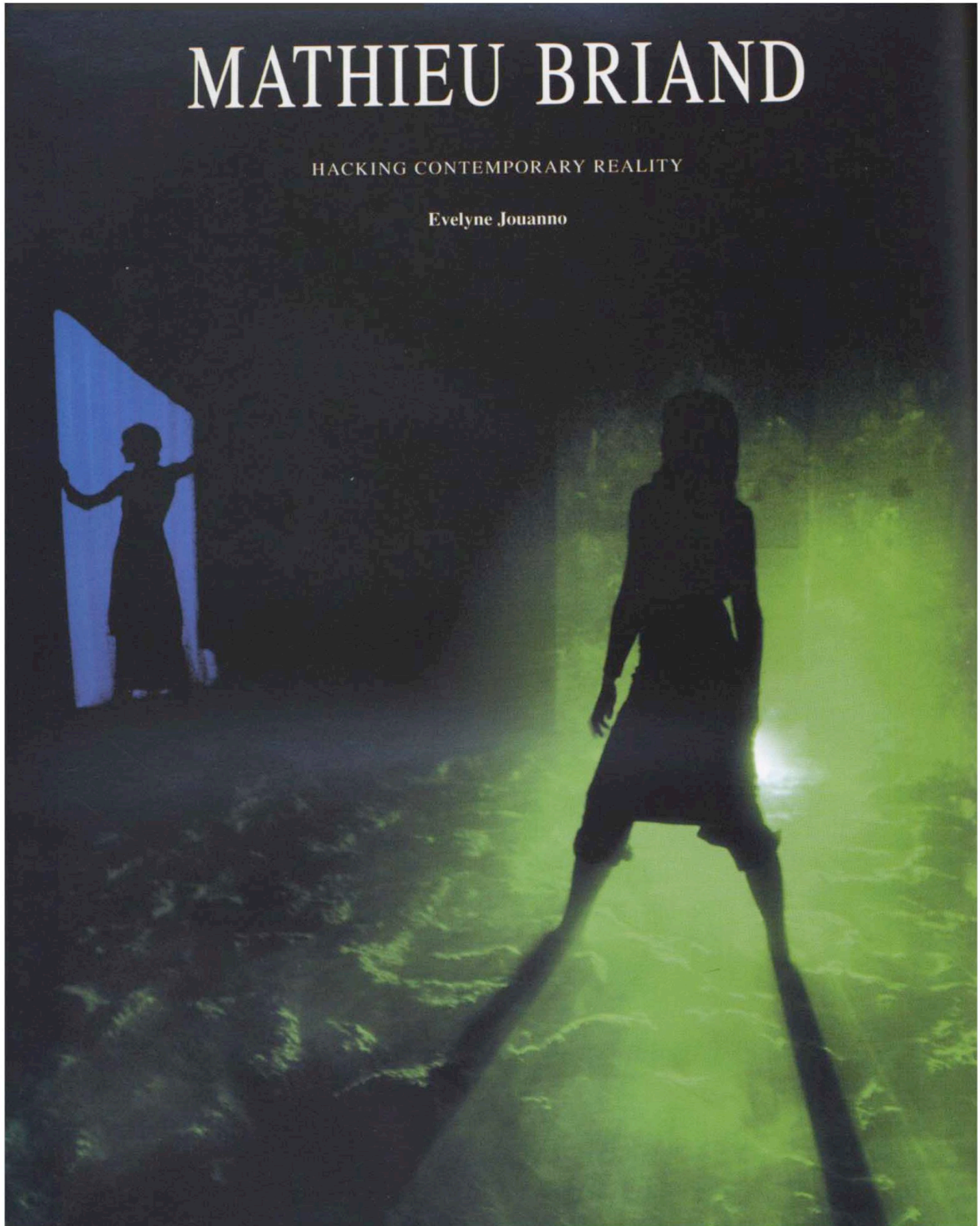


FLASH ART Vol. XXXVII n°238 Oct. 2004

MATHIEU BRIAND

HACKING CONTEMPORARY REALITY

Evelyne Jouanno



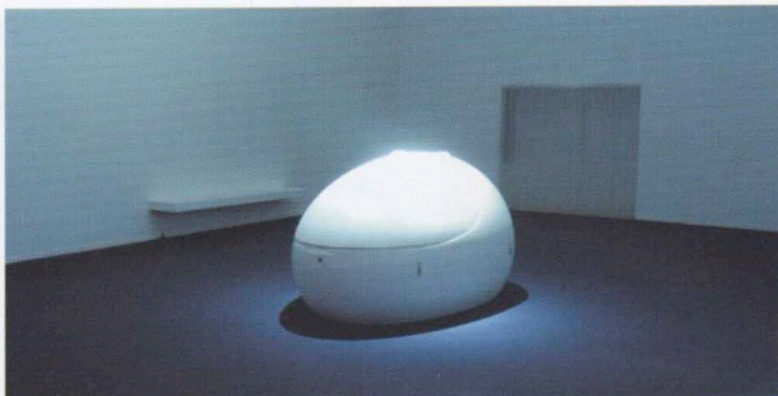
MATHIEU BRIAND is a provocateur. He takes pleasure in challenging our senses, disrupting our habits, bending rules, confounding our relationship to space and objects, turning viewpoints upside-down. In short, he sends the human machine into disarray. By enlisting the collaboration of various specialists, his work reaches into fields as varied as new technology, natural sciences, architecture, music, games, ritual, and phenomenology. After his solo exhibition in two parts — “Le Monde Flottant” (The floating world) and “Derrière le Monde Flottant” (Behind the floating world) — at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris and the Musée Art Contemporain in Lyon (seen by over 50,000 visitors on an appointment-only basis!), he is busy with various multiform projects all over the world, including a commission for a permanent work by the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, due to be unveiled in October. At 32 years of age, Mathieu Briand’s universe is beginning to live up to its true measure.

Evelyne Jouanno: *Let’s start with the last thing first. I saw the exhibition “Derrière le Monde Flottant” at the MAC in Lyon last spring, your largest show to date: 2,500 square meters of space on two floors. The whole body of your work was there, including old and previously unseen pieces. How did you come up with this universe?*

Mathieu Briand: This exhibition is the culmination of a work I started eight years ago. It is a complex ensemble made up of different elements, as when someone uses the term *individuum*: namely, individual, undivided. I wanted to start with division to get to a whole. The relationship between the works can be understood from their titles, but I also reused parts of some pieces to make others. This is why conceptually, aesthetically, or even technically all the works are connected to one another.

EJ: *Within this environment the visitor becomes a ‘generating element’ of the work, which is something that is to be lived rather than seen.*

MB: It is this very notion of lived time that concerns me (as opposed to real time, which simply passes and cannot necessarily be lived or experienced). My video installations only use images produced in lived time (unsynchronized images, images recorded with a thermal camera, etc.). In other words, if no one is there, there is no image. The exhibition was conceived like this so that the visitor is always at the heart of a work and no longer just facing an icon. Contemporary art is today dominated by Europe and the United States: in other words, the culture of the spectacle, of the image, of religion — and therefore of the icon. The problem stems from the icon transmitting an image to which the only possible responses are those in which we have been initiated: ritual, prayer, discourse. In fact, the icon is a truth in itself, which we receive as such. Personally, I try to conceive works within which the visitor becomes a receiver-emitter, systems that don’t lead the viewer to a truth or a response, but rather lead to the self, to introspection. The response belongs to oneself, not to anyone else.



From top: SYS*0211sN*01/EsE-AcE.InR-ExR/Mic-EnE*4, 2004; the changing room; SYS*13.TrE*01/SeR\AnU-X, 2004. Opposite: SYS*018.DOE*01/MoE-FTT\SalNor*TaC-LaR, 2004. From the exhibition “Derrière le Monde Flottant” at Musée Art Contemporain, Lyon. Images courtesy of the artist. Photos: Bruno Amsellem.

EJ: *Your titles consist of “SYS*” and “APP*” followed by numbers and slashes, rather like access codes. They seem to be mathematical or even magical formulae.*

MB: Yes, my titles do bring classification to mind, but mystery as well. It is extraordinary to me to be able to enter into a work and discover its magical sides, its secrets, its signs and codes. The code elements of my titles allow me to link the works. When they are laid out in a certain way, they generate meaning that one can unconsciously understand without being able

to explain it. This type of schizophrenia really excites me. To give a concrete example: someone opens a math book and goes through it as though they were reading a novel. In fact it creates other connections in that person’s mind. This is what I am trying to do in my work. I’m trying to branch out into alternative connections in the brain, not just give someone the opportunity to read and understand a given. This is why I work out quite a complex system in my work, allowing the public to feed on that research too, so that they can



SYS*17.ReR*06.PiG-EgN*5*8, 2004. Exhibition view from "Derrière le Monde Flottant" at Musée Art Contemporain, Lyon. Photo: Bruno Amsellem.

apprehend the world differently through new perceptions and dive into the *inframince*.

EJ: *Inframince, definitely, but also 'controlled schizophrenia,' this formula that you have invented to explain your creative reasoning.*

MB: To me, controlled schizophrenia (which I also call temporary mental migration) is to be able, as *individuum*, to divide oneself and pass through the other side of the mirror. The universe in Lyon was this other world, a parallel world. In Japan, the "floating world" (Ukiyo-e) designates the night life, the one of pleasures, and drugs too. In Lyon, the museum was conceived as a ritualistic journey set out in three stages: the discovery (thus movements in the talcum powder illuminated by a green laser), the initiation (as with the swimming pool), and action (the helmets, the trampoline, etc). Moreover, our visitors were asked to undertake the journey in bare feet, something which, in our society, involves an enormous effort.

Actually, contemporary society cannot accept this world because it has lost its shamans. What is left is a locomotive without any driver. Personally I was part of the techno movement at the beginning of the '90s — right at the start — and was therefore able to take part in a return of the shamans. For those of us who were born in an artificial world, without nature, it was a revolution. These shamans took us suddenly back to the world of nature via technology without, at the same time, giving us an ethic. I am interested in this mixture of genres. Controlled schizophrenia is similar, the acceptance that different, apparently opposing elements can connect. In the past I worked with carrier pigeons that had electronic chips attached to their feet. Today it is easier to send a message discreetly by carrier pigeon than on the Internet, at least as far as confidentiality is concerned. So the ideal is to couple an electronic message with a pigeon. I love

mixing these two times, two ways, 'three' eras. I have also worked a lot with particle accelerators. The theory of supersymmetry ('SuSy') is fascinating. The hypothesis is that by putting opposite particles in relation to each other it is possible to form 'the All.' It is possible to envision this phenomenon taking place during an encounter with another culture, or simply with 'the Other.' But to meet the Others, one must project oneself. And to go further in the encounter, one must control this projection. Temporary mental migration is about being able to project oneself without turning one's nature on its back, without having to choose between one's origin and the projection one is heading for. My audio-video helmets (SYS*05.ReE*03/ SE*/MoE*2), for example, allow people to project themselves into another place and enter into a space-time with another person without needing to know where they are nor the role they would be required to play. Our usual sense references are perturbed, but it is this destabilization that allows us to discover new things. This is the emission/reception that I'm talking about.

EJ: *Did you come up with the bunkers project (APP*010), the temporary living units set up around the globe that enable one to 'teleport,' in order to bring this possibility out of the art context and into a more human scale?*

MB: Exactly. This is a temporary living unit that aesthetically and technically resembles a military bunker. I commissioned the architect Rudy Ricciotti to design it. The aim is to place nine of these bunkers all over the globe. All are identical and linked both virtually and analogically so that they enable a person to move between these different geographical points in such a way that the departure and arrival times are the same: a kind of teleportation rendered possible. The bunker is one of the few examples of world-wide

architecture, and in one stroke this enormity becomes transparent, because in the collective unconscious it disappears. This proves that it is not enough to bury something to make it disappear; connections made in the brain can lead to the same result.

EJ: *But I don't think that you chose this type of structure only for these reasons. Doesn't your project, and indeed the rest of your work, hide some kind of warrior strategy, a homeopathic type? Treating disease with micro-doses of itself?*

MB: It is true that my work often refers to things used by the army. The difference, however, is that everything is diverted. As an artist, I cannot say that I live in a beautiful world, that everything is fine. At its worst, if there is a war on I trust the army. No, I do not make arms. However, I do want to know what the army uses. In times of peace, I am an artist and play my role; and in times of war I am also able to take action. Because I work with thermal cameras and electronic material, everything can be revised. To go back to the bunker: when I was invited to the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2000, I distributed 4,000 detailed plans of it. 4,000 people are therefore able to build the bunker. I am interested in the distribution of possible systems. My struggle is primarily a spiritual and mental struggle, which could become physical if absolutely necessary.

EJ: *At the end of October you are leaving France to live abroad. Why did you decide to do this?*

MB: If I may be brief: I'm not leaving. I am going into exile. ■

(Translated from French by Rosemary McKisack)

Evelyne Jouanno is a curator and critic based in Paris.