

Bartleby
or how to materialize your doubt and dematerialize the collection's permanence

Beatrice Josse and Helene Guenin of Frac Lorraine

talk to Aneta Szylak and Hiwa K. [who also made the interrogation drawings]

"Bartleby," said I, in a still gentler tone, "come here; I am not going to ask you to do any thing you would prefer not to do—I simply wish to speak to you."

Herman Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener"

We came to Frac Lorraine to talk about what kind of work they acquire and about new forms of collecting as well as institutional strategies - we being full of doubts and disagreements located in our own cultural formations. Hiwa extrapolated from the Middle East the much questioned Western art discourse that is lured by the seductive power of failure, fighting with limitations of European art education and obsessed with the idea of minimizing artistic production. Seeing my own country's ongoing discussion about public collecting which has been long delayed, is displaced in contemporary production conditions, and formed by investigations of art institutions, its desires, fictions and adventures, I was feeling the load of my organization's collection on my shoulders. We wanted to meet with Beatrice and Helene, not to talk about what they want to do, but what they actually don't do, and find out how they question what is being cherished in cultural policies, which is too often and unavoidably irrelevant to the development of cultural production and its intellectual framing. We came to wonder about the capability of refusal, the luxury of denial and the perversity of resisting accumulation. Just next door to the blockbuster branch of Centre Pompidou about to be built in the city, this small institution rooted in the history of the French Fonds Regional d'Art Contemporain and currently renamed 49 Nord 6 Est, is challenging the question how to collect ephemerally and limit materialization.

Aneta Szylak [A.Sz.]. When approaching Frac Lorraine one notices the fading texts, numbers and names of the artists written on the wall. Upon my first arrival here in late 2004, my immediate understanding was that this is a manifesto of the collection's content, although white letters on a yellowish wall did make me suspicious. But then I learnt that the text is supposed to fade away and the entire gesture and process actually provokes a questioning of the pride of ownership and accumulation...

Beatrice Josse [B.J.]. You probably remember the character in the story by Melville called Bartleby¹. I think his position is quite close to mine. You know you have to do it but actually you prefer you do not have to. In fact it is a challenge too, this struggle between what you are obliged to do and that which you really desire.

Hélène Guenin [H.G.]. Well, on the one hand our idea was to name the list of artists who are represented in the collection in the public space, - with all the risks this carries – and on the other hand, to emphasize that the writing in the whitewash that will gradually disappear from the wall refers to the reversibility of any sign. We manifest both what the Frac was intended to be in its origins and the process of questioning the act of collecting art.

B.J.: The collection is a personal story. You see the choice in it and you see the people who made it. This collection is me. I made it. It is difficult to explain why I am making it in an intuitive sense and am looking for immaterial things and ideas. Maybe women do not like to be too visible, to do things but to not proclaim it to the world. But the collection is not ephemeral...

H.G.: That's a point! It is against your nature, because you prefer ephemeral works, to do projects in the present time, in a specific context and then let them disappear. With the collection you have to face a contradiction: to acquire things, accumulate them.

¹ The story can be found at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Bartleby_the_Scrivener

Aneta Szylak [A.Sz.]. This spirit of contradiction and paradox was obvious in your opening project. People and politicians were waiting for a kind of “Best of” of the collection and you decided to present a project with only performances and new productions!

B.J. Indeed, in “White Spirit”, the opening project for our permanent location [2004], most of the works were performances. For instance one could watch a kissing heterosexual couple, but did not have the right to make any pictures. I love art and I hate it. My gift to the audience is to leave it for their memory, the idea and not an object.

A.Sz.: So this institution is more process-oriented than making a stable, defined statement and it is under ongoing supervision. At the same time, one can also see here the subtle avoidance of the stability so strongly imprinted in the very idea of collection. For today’s curators it is sometimes more legitimate to stick to this fluidity, the instability of re-morphing production rather than to define ourselves in the long-term. But let’s talk a bit about the history of your organization. Newly named 49 Nord 6 Est Frac Lorraine manifests itself through its global location, also visible in the building’s signposting...

H.G.: We liked to use the GPS Point of the location as it is both unique and universal. We are not dealing much with the history of building: Hotel Saint-Livier is the oldest building in Metz. Its official history has already been written. We wanted to invent its new history. History is a fiction; the role of the artist/writer is to write fiction. We asked to Thierry Hesse, a French author to invent and re-write it. ²

H.K.: Are you trying to claim a neutral position?

² Thierry Hesse, *Hôtel St-Livier, Roman en 49 Chapitres* + 6. Edition Frac Lorraine, 2003.

B.J.: Doubt is our position. Frac Lorraine will exist just for a short time in the whole time span of the history of the building. It is not here for eternity. Everything is temporary, most of the materials are cheap and everything can be removed. The building can be restored to its earlier state or used for another mission.

H.K.: So what is in brief the history of building? I heard that it was a conservatory?

H.G.: At first it was a house for the aristocracy, then a school for girls and then a place for music till 1994. Every step of the renovation we undertook was a pretext for the intervention of the artist.

B.J.: Kawamata was the first to intervene. He was invited in 1998 for the public space but he wanted to make an installation in the yard. We did it in collaboration with the Synagogue de Delme. The chairs were not only accumulated in the yard of the building but were placed at bus stops on the way to Delme. Kawamata wanted to do something with the courtyard. It was not really my decision. I just wanted him to make a work, which would show the transition of Frac, between being the office with the collection and the experience of working in a public space to a space for art. It was the first time Frac organized something you could actually see [laughs]! For long Frac Lorraine was a collection without a building. Most of our previous projects happened in public spaces, like "Actions Urbaines" in 1996 and 1997 in collaboration with Casino Luxembourg. Most of the projects were not visible, not like impressive installations or a visual statement. With Kawamata people were very impressed. That huge pile of chairs in our courtyard. Some chairs were also located at bus stops in Metz and on the way to Delme. Of course it was also a disappointment for the community, not always fully recognizing these old chairs as "art"³.

³ Tadashi Kawamata, *Les chaises de traverse*, Frac Lorraine, Metz, Synagogue de Delme, 1998.

H.G.: But now they come back to us recollecting memories about this work. It was important, because it was the first impressive large scale installation of contemporary art in Metz. It was quite memorable for its inhabitants and discussed in the media. In 2001 Krijn the Koning also made a spectacular installation for the building that at that time was in danger of collapsing; it was an installation which allowed you to see the space from the inside. The installation filled the courtyard and made way into the halls of the building, painted blue, yellow and red. It gave the feeling of being inside and outside at the same time. It made it possible to look at the building from different angles and stressed the importance of the spectator and the perception⁴.

In 2002 Lara Almarcegui started her work on the architecture itself, following the building site by going through the list and quantities of materials and their final destination; some of them (wood, glass, concrete) were recycled or put out as garbage.⁵

A.Sz.: The story of your installation is quite unique and connected to the artists but also to the public, especially the "Friends of Frac". Could you say a few words about them and the first project you made with those "Friends"?

H.G.: It was a project titled "Scènes de ménage: petits accrochages entre amis" [1998, 2000 and 2001]. It means the work is in your home and it is also a way to describe an argument. At the same time it is something put on display. It is rather idiomatic.

A.Sz.: What was the concept behind the decision?

B.J.: At the time we were lobbying, we had a lot of problems with politicians from the region. It was the only way to prove that people in Metz want Frac, that they want the place for contemporary art. We wanted to show to the public that we had a big collection, yet without walls. It was a way of dealing with the tradition of the Fracs and going

⁴ *Krijn de Koning*, Frac Lorraine, Metz, 2002.

⁵ *Cahiers théoriques Ibis*, n°1, Frac Lorraine, Metz 2002 ; n°1 bis, 2003.

beyond it. We let the inhabitants of Metz take work home as a way to show that people here need art. For nobody wanted to help us when we were asking for a building. Another thing was the idea of display, and the influence of the context on that. What is the new public space? Today's role of the private sphere in showing art? In France there are mostly public collections. There is a small number of private collectors especially in this region. It was an educational project: the process of looking, choosing, reading about works, of justifying why they wanted a particular work for their space. What was important was the process of understanding the work, of being able to explain to the public how it came to its space. Everybody taking part in the project had to convince us why they made certain choices and why they did this or that with a particular work.

H.G.: Yes, we did not want to hear something like 'I chose it because it is a beautiful piece'. We wanted reasons and understanding. Not only for ourselves but also toward the public.

A.Sz.: What kind of public were you addressing?

H.G.: The public that was visiting the homes where the work was exhibited. The project took three days. There were maps for tours. People were visiting apartments to see the pieces in a private surrounding. The hosts were supposed to explain why they installed something in this or that way.

A.Sz.: How did you reach these people? How did people know about the project and get involved?

H.G.: It was a group of amateurs of contemporary culture who had already seen the projects in public space, people who had accepted to be friends of Frac.

B.J.: It was our first project involving people. So it was also a gift: a free loan of artwork. There was also a subtle reference to the 1986 project by Jan Hoet 'Chambre d'amis' in Ghent. Artists were commissioned to make interventions in private spaces.

H.G.: It was risky for us all: 200 people coming to every flat, people you do not know and have never seen before. Sometimes whole families came. I guess people like that: not going to the museum or seeing art in public spaces but to enter a private space. I think it was a kind of voyeurism too.

B.J.: We also made it to encourage them to become collectors, to buy art and support the artists. For two people of this group it was a beginning of collecting. It was hard to get back things once you had them. It is the perversity of that gift; the urgency to deal with it.

The project also brought on a new kind of interpretation, especially concerning the photography. The intimate, private decisions behind it were important and often astonishing. They were often subconscious and dealt with family histories. When you work with real people is different than just working with the space.⁶

H.G.: Intimate...

H.K.: Vivid....

B.J.: The stories of people are part of their choices. It is not an innocent process. Their private stories and lives are incorporated into a work in a particular surrounding.

H.G.: It was an unexpected dimension of the project.

⁶ *Scènes de ménages, petits accrochages entre amis*, Frac Lorraine, Metz, 2002.

A.Sz.: What I find important in this project is the redistribution of the collection, whereas institutional collection display is highly controlled, both intellectually and organizationally.

B.J.: To me it was also a reflection about display: how to show art in private and non neutral spaces, in "bourgeois" flats.

H.K.: Are you thinking in terms of a unity of public space and private view?

B.J.: The activities in the public space we were focused on in the beginning had an impact on our thinking about the building. The building is a piece of the art. We wanted to inverse the idea of the public and its position. Not to just display but to make the public do something. What interests us is position of the spectator. For they are active in the public space. In all the exhibitions here they are active.

A.Sz.: Is the public space a promise of active participation?

B.J. In public space you are free to discover without an institutional frame; to see art without explanation. It has a direct impact on the viewer. We had it in mind during the programming of the building. Like the Placebo painting© by Decosterd & Rahm – it has a permanent, invisible impact on the spectator.

H.G.: So according to the project the paint is neutral on the ground floor, the 1st storey is painted with a ginger color and the 2nd with orange blossom. We will continue to use aromatic oil when re-painting.

H.K.: It is a kind of using the imagination and believing rather than the visual senses.

H.G.: Yes and to develop the fictional aspect of contemporary art...

B.J.: ... and to bring ambiguity into the so-called and neutral 'White Cube'. The project by Philippe Rahm is about architecture: not to erect something but to infiltrate.

A.Sz.: Frac is horizontal and it is still attractive... (laughs)

H.G.: We are into thinking beyond principles, conventions, compromises and common ideas about architecture. And we believe that a white cube is not the only space for art. We were not allowed to do everything with the building that we really wanted, but artists we work with are trying to push the limits and to destroy them.

B.J.: "Wall to be destroyed⁷" was a project against architecture. Architecture is the restriction. The idea was to show this, to deal with paradoxical projects and play with the contradictions.

H.G. Like in the project of Jeppe Hein. After a few minutes you can feel that there is something not normal; the wall is moving and the space... You have to leave it, it is the power of the space; it is connected with an authoritarian position. So we reveal the architecture. The position of the viewer always comes first for us.

B.J.: Another project that talks about this is "forever" by Dora Garcia⁸. The public is imprisoned, the surveillance web camera is always on, and the viewer is constantly watched as there is a live stream on the Internet. It is a bit of panopticon.

A.Sz.: Well, this is not that a delicate, innocent project...?

H.K. It is like in aikido, the way you deal with the power. You let it go.

⁷ *Wall to be destroyed*, Frac Lorraine, Metz, 2005 (Monica Bonvicini, Judith Barry, Lida Abdul, Marguerite Duras, Jeppe Hein, ...).

⁸ Dora Garcia, *forever*, 2004. <http://aleph.arts.org/inserts/forever>

B.J.: Yes, by using the energy of the enemy. Dora said, I am still alive and I can look at you, you are my subject, you are in jail.

H.K.: So she escaped from the museum?

B.J. But it is also maintaining the relation between the artist and the institution. There has already been contact for 5 years; she can say whatever she wants about the institution. But the project is forever. She can see whatever we are doing in that room on the first floor. Sometimes artists see themselves as weaker but more often they are the real winners. Artists often do not know how much we are dependent on them, that it is really them who rule. The projects by Hans Schabus (*Emil in White Spirit*, 2004) and Dora are not about argumentation, they are about the senses. It works on different levels. It is not a discussion about history. We can show something with no explanation, so it is not dealing with the history of art, and not about questioning the theory. It is more subversion than destruction. And there is more sensual than intellectual perception. My text for the press was a joke, not an explanation, yet I often write serious texts afterwards.

A.Sz.: If the "serious" text comes later, does it mean that your position is initially like half that of the viewer?

B.J.: I do not always know what I am doing. I do things intuitively and discover new meanings and conceptualize them afterwards. I get new ideas from the work that gets new meanings in the space.

H.G.: "White spirit" was supposed to be about the architecture and it turned out to be about authoritarian space and the coercive, sexual potential of the spaces: the relation between the strong and the weak, the slave and the master.

A.Sz.: This work is part of the collection and representative of the kind of pieces you try to buy: instructions, and contracts, not objects.

B.J.: We have different stories about the collection and about the objects. For me it was a heavy, material collection. It is true and it is a joke. It causes the logistics problems in physical terms. But it had an influence when I started to conceptualize it. It turned out to be a paradox what is typical for my kind of thinking. I like the idea of the ephemeral and collecting. I like the conflict, the going against... I think about the limits of the collection, what are its borders...

H.G.: The limits of the market system for example. We can play with its rules and subvert them.

B.J.: You can buy into the market but not always from the market. I am trying to do things we cannot buy, testing the limits of the capitalist system. Like buying the performance, the works to be reenacted or reactivated. We buy protocols, descriptions, ideas. And women. Until 2000 92% of the collection was by male artists.

H.G.: According to availability of funds and the dynamic of acquisitions we would need two decades to make a change and to reach a balance.

B.J.: It is the Committee who makes the decision; they do not always accept what we want to buy, even our own productions, like Thierry Kuntzel recently. Maybe it is a good thing; otherwise it would perhaps be too strong, too radical. Once, I wanted to have the work of Sophie Calle and almost lost my job, going through a two month period of not working, and having to renegotiate the position. The argument was not about Sophie Calle but about male nudity. It was unacceptable. For me it was a challenge to buy the piece for the collection because there was a lot of female nudity and over-representation

of male artists. I wanted to have a work with male nudity made by female artists. It would be perfect for this collection.

H.K.: What is your position on measures of quality?

B.J.: Conceptual, phenomenal, sensual... In the end it is a female artist. Men like objects. Women are about presence. I have a problem with authority in life, in relations and in art. You cannot say it is all true, I say "maybe"...

A.Sz.: Do you deny your authoritarian tradition as somebody who forms the collection?

B.J.: It is a game, rather. I have a strong curatorial stance.

H.G.: Things are imposed but you are free to live it... It is the power of an idea. It is a subject for us.

B.J. – It is a reference to Wittgenstein. Thinking is a power.

H.G.: Invisible, immaterial.

H.G.: What we are trying to do is to push the limits of the collection.

A.Sz.: But this is not what the Frac system was made for?

H.G.: Fracs are becoming more and more like some kind of small museums.

B.J.: It is "The Model". The unique one. We are on the margins of it.⁹

⁹ The Fonds Regional d'Art Contemporain network, with a Frac in each region of France, was set up in 1982 on the initiative of the Culture Ministry to carry out the following missions: to support current creative art., to build

H.G.: It was actually the whole reason for which this system was made. They were supposed to be an alternative to the museum and now they are becoming the same thing. We have to find an alternative.

B.J.: The model of museum is a really old model. We can't accept this anymore. Although it is a model of the EU [laughs]!

A.Sz.: The conditions of artistic production changed, so one has to reflect on that.

B.J.: It can be compared now to cinematography or theater. It is co-production. And in the end there is just the right to show the work.

A.Sz.: So you see the role of Frac as a site of production more than as a space for accumulation?

H.K.: It is then also about boredom? One of my favorite Iranian poets says, that if we could live forever, we would never stop searching for that something we are convinced we once lost.

B.J.: It is a question of memory somehow. We have to update it, refresh it, and preserve things. One way is to become eternal, but it is not possible and not good either. You repeat and repeat and repeat.

H.G.: Also the residencies for art critics have a strong impact on how we deal with the collection. Even the catalogue is the space of production¹⁰.

up a collection locally, to disseminate it and foster public awareness with regard to contemporary art [source: press materials of Frac Lorraine].

¹⁰ *IN/VISIBLE, collection productions Frac Lorraine*. Frac Lorraine, Metz et Jrp Ringier, 2006.

A.Sz.: It started as a conceptualization of a collection on another level...

B.J. The early approach toward collecting: "to accumulate, to conserve" turns into "to own, to claim" (the position of women for example) and today becomes "to own and to destroy". It is the image of now. The titles of our projects such as "White Spirit", "Wall to be destroyed" or "Uchronies and other fictions" clearly refer to this idea. And then it comes to "to own and to doubt". We cannot predict how it is going to be in the future. So we tend to own and to play. It is the criticism of possessing. To play without interpretation. It is a short story, the age of our collection. And now we want to write the story of the collection from different perspectives. The residencies for critics are the critique of our own interpretation. We are the short story within the history of collection. At least if I or somebody else won't stop the collecting.

A.Sz.: Once you said you are fond of having people coming from different native languages. Why was this so important?

H.G.: Our intention is to look at the collection from different cultures, with different possibilities to interpret and to formulate. Every linguistic background offers different possibilities. It is a kind of manifesto, it is a position. The projects written during the residencies are not necessarily realized. They are hypothetical. They are fiction becoming the reality and reality becoming fiction.

B.J.: Like continuing with an idea, with thinking.

A.Sz.: This is what the art institution is about, right? Fiction becoming reality... The frame, the point of reference and definition as well. Is the publication a form of existence, display and the space?

H.G.: So it is a more theoretical book than a catalogue of the collection.

A.Sz.: So you continue to dematerialize the process of art-making!

H.K.: So it is a bit like oral tradition. It is not materialized but exists through repetitive performance.

B.J.: This way it can't disappear because it does not exist in material. Concepts cannot disappear.