

GRAVITY AND GRACE by Sylvain Berland (MA Art History)

October 2008, Haugesund: During the collective exhibition *Dynamo-Haugesund 08*, Agnès Btffn presents the project “ÅÅÅ – dive in the Universe”. At the entrance of the Haugesund Billedgalleri Art centre, there is a poster from Abtffn with the following words:

“Welcome for a walk on a bridge in the sunset, at the moment when the horizon rises before the sun, in the evening, an object or a sculpture balancing on the head.”

An odd invitation—one that could be interpreted as an invitation to the mystical experience of contemplating Nature’s sublime beauty, but one that could also be an ironic wink in the direction of Odd Nerdrum. For the last 40 years, the Norwegian artist Nerdrum has positioned himself as the heroic defender of what he calls “kitsch”, an art form that embraces the figurative tradition, intentionally utilizing expressive forms generally dismissed as old fashion sentimentalism by modernist and post modernist art critics. Nerdrum complains today that it has become impossible for artists to attempt to express the beauty of a sunset without exposing themselves to the laughter and bullying of the clergy of contemporary art.

Agnès Btffn examined the “beautiful sunset” as a cliché and as an Icon of Beauty in her 1992 series of paintings, watercolours or photographs, which approached the subject in multiple ways and presented its diverse qualities of otherness. However, while Btffn undeniably toys with a cliché form of beauty in her invitation of to wander together on a bridge at sunset, her use of a precise definition of sunset as “the moment the horizon rises before the sun in the evening” enables the work to transcend the ironic dimension and present an experience which could be characterized as Copernican. Just as Nicolas Copernicus demonstrated that the Earth rotates around the sun and not the opposite, with her narrow specification of the phenomenon “sunset”, Agnès Btffn focuses our awareness of a sunset as a heliocentric symbol, as a simple and pragmatic indicator of the Earth’s movements in our solar system, in the Universe.

By placing the phenomenon into this new perspective, she reverses the ironic role of the sunset as Beauty as Cliché. Having observed sunsets and sunrises for many years, Agnès Btffn’s understanding of those daily wonders has changed. She now invites us to see the sunset as much more than the a bit of scenery with beautiful, changing colours that inspire, far too often, far too pretty works of art. The sunset can be a happening with extraordinary depth: a happening that invites both scientific comprehension and aesthetic contemplation about ourselves, as well as a sensation of being grounded in a dynamic cosmos.

This awareness of being grounded, an awareness of having a concrete existence within the Universe while walking on a bridge and watching the Earth’s movement, is reinforced by the challenge of carrying an object or a sculpture on one’s head.

The phenomenon of there, where the relationship of the movement of the Earth and the sun manifests itself on the horizon as scenery, imposes itself on the here of our bodies carrying the object: the sensation of weight on our heads, the sensitive balancing of the object which forces us to concentrate on our movements and on the sensations that our body, which functions as a pedestal, communicates to us—or rather, the energy that sets in motion an other body. The feeling of being a body permeated with gravity, the vision of a there on the horizon and an objective understanding of the wonder that is the Earth in the solar system combine to create a sensation of being transported in a stream of cosmic dynamism: floating sublimely, an Archimedes’s point between gravity and grace.

Maybe that’s why Agnès Btffn invites us to a bridge, so that we will be suspended between the earthly and the Celestial. Weightless.

This work echoes the idea of suspension present in the work on exhibition in the Otto Johannessen room of the Haugesund Art Centre, which is a room set aside for resting and dedicated to the contemplation of sunlight.

Lying comfortably in white Brazilian hammocks, floating between ground and ceiling, visitors are invited to take their time and experience the rotational movement of the Earth around the sun, while observing sunlight moving slowly over

the floor of the room.

In this same room visitors can view a film that echoes the scenery they have been invited to contemplate on the Hasseløy bridge in Haugesund: the horizon rising before the sun. Agnès Btffn film focuses on the heliocentric by constantly placing the sun in the centre of the image. While the film has the practical function of allowing the public to understand the artist's intentions regardless of the weather or time of day, its primary role is to maintain a continual, dynamic relationship between the various aspects of the "ÅÅÅ – Dive in the Universe" project. In addition to the screening of the film, Btffn has organized a workshop where each visitor can create an object they are encouraged to attempt to balance on their head—in the room, in the streets of Haugesund and towards Hasseløy bridge* at the very moment the sun sets. (*Bakarøybridge, to the residents of Haugesund).

In 2004, when Agnès Btffn first took an interest in the balancing of objects on one's head, the collaborative dimension of the project was much less important than it is today. The carrying of an object symbolized the carrying of things like "the others on the other side of the earth", and it questioned the meaning of actions outside of their traditional contexts. The carrying of objects that was not an act of utility raised interesting questions about the feelings involved in the act itself. For Btffn and for the public, who were unused to seeing this type of action in our latitudes, this meant an increased awareness of gravity.

The relationship to the other, the one who "lives on the other face of the Earth" and the spectator, French or Norwegian, was not directly inclusive, but distant, imagined or observed.

The aesthetic dimension of Agnès Btffn's project formed when an invitation was given to the public to wander with objects on their heads, as they did in Flørli, Norway during the summer 2007. But the artist's ethic regarding communication is becoming clearer in Haugesund, where everyone is invited to the workshop to make the objects that will be carried, and where the public walks towards Hasseløy Bridge as a group.

The concept of "together" that grew in the Btffn project is also present in her choice of materials for her new project. Here, the objects she makes to carry hold themselves together without glue or similar means. She creates, for example, more or less spherical shapes by knotting together sheets of newspaper or by plaiting plastic bags. This technical choice expresses Btffn's intention to manifest a harmonious solidarity of the project's component materials, and to create an essential unity appropriate for each individual object and its component materials. Both simple and complex objects are logically organized in ways that seem to animate them with a unifying force. By constructing the object in this way, the artists seems to be using symbols to concretely manifest the gravitational force that binds and organizes the celestial bodies of the Universe.

The attention Agnès Btffn gives to the project "ÅÅÅ-Dive in the Universe" reveals itself in the play of echoes and parallels between the different dimensions of solidarities: solidarity of the component materials, solidarity of the human beings assembled in the action and the contemplation, and solidarity of the celestial bodies in the dynamics of the Universe. Btffn's project seems to function as a synthesis of nest-like structures in which the actions and the plastic elements, when focused upon as a whole, melt into a single dynamic: the "I" of the community.

Inspired by Søren Kirkegaard's theory of the stages of being, one could classify the nest-like structures of the Btffn project into aesthetic, ethical and religious stages: the aesthetic stage being the work with the object to be carried; the ethical stage being the invitation extended to the public to create objects and walk on the bridge together; and the religious stage being the aspiration to a perfect moment and to the sensation of being grounded in the unity of the Universe. The latter is a moment for which perfection depends upon numerous factors that the artist does not control, and which gives the "ÅÅÅ – Dive in the Universe" project the quality of encounters between the otherness of the world, coincidence and time.

In general, Agnès Btffn's artwork shows a structure with aesthetic, ethical and religious stages. The project's idealistic dimension could be viewed as the religious stage of this piece. While Btffn herself has not defined this three-part structure as characteristic of her work, this conceptual tool allows a rendering of the different axes of the artist's research.

Btffn's research orients itself towards an interrogation of a purely aesthetic character when she questions the status of the artwork as object, and the meaning of * the artistic activity itself. This preoccupation characterises the "Sunset"

series, evident in the multiple ways in which she manifests and exposes the subject and plays on the “pretty work of art” as cliché. It is also characterizes her installations, such as “Euforisme” in Stavanger in 1998. Two of the elements in this installation consisted of threads that stretched between cognac-filled glasses on the floor, and silver balloons on which were printed aphorisms. As the art critic Trond Borgen observed, the artistic quality of the installation rested partly upon the gas contained in the balloons and upon the cognac vapours contained in the glasses. Once the gas has escaped the balloons and the cognac vapours have evaporated, the artwork loses one of its essential expressive dimensions. “Euforism” was a commentary on the status of today’s art, which is for many a simple but exhilarating form of entertainment.

The interrogation of the artwork as object, and as a commercial object, is exposed in a more radical way with the performance “Route”, which Agnès Btffn created with a truck full of nothing, between Paris and Oslo, in Stavanger in 2000 and 2001, and along the roads of Denmark. Moving from town to town with a lorry, exploiting the concepts of materialism and large-scale transport that the vehicle evokes, the artist opposes the idea of the “empty” cargo. The artist works within a paradox: a “nothing” cargo is transported to create the performance (work of art), yet the performance, being “nothing”, cannot in reality be transported.

Another project, Bånsåm, includes a stronger ethical aspect, despite the modelling qualities of its structural shape. Bånsåm is an interactive installation that focuses on communication, exchanges and disputes regarding social issues such as immigration, tolerance, integration etc. Set up in public spaces, such as the hall of the railway station in Stavanger in 2003, the installation presents an intimate inner space shaped by sculpted elements placed in a circle. These plywood elements are the silhouettes of specific people, children and adults, whom Agnès Btffn has encountered. Each element shows two profiles facing each other. In this way they seem to make visible and materialise that which is normally invisible and immaterial: the space in-between two people communicating and sharing ideas. The negative space created by the silhouettes form outlines, concrete prints of existing individuals; and the spaces between silhouettes become the shapes of the encounters. The Bånsåm installation shows the dynamic between the plywood in-betweens and the immateriality of the real encounters between the people who originally participated in the discussions in the heart of Bånsåm.

Another project of ethical dimension is Btffn’s performance “Blocks daggers cutlasses”, a recital and staging of the poem of the same name by Torild Wardenær.

This performance is the polar opposite of the Bånsåm project. In contrast to the spirit of encounters, of meetings and of humanity which characterizes Bånsåm, the poem «Billots dagues coutelas» is comprised of list of weapons and a list of human body parts. Through the act of listing items, the human being loses unity, falls apart and becomes an object, a list of the mechanical parts of a body-machine. The weapons list also evokes the separation, the destruction and the suffering of a body that is no longer a living body but parts. The list of human body parts and the list of weapons are thrown at each other: two lists which leave no room for the soul. During the recitation of the poem, Btffn introduces the nudity and the vulnerability of her own body, as she did at Tou Scene in Stavanger in 2006, exposing the black print of a weapon on her stomach. During the performance, the poem’s enumeration of objects slowly hacks away at mankind’s humanity and by the end, all that remains of humanity is Btffn’s flesh-as-object. The artist’s entire body is an object exposed to the public’s gaze, as scandalous and as obscene as victimization at the hands of inhumane human beings.

The polarity that manifests itself between Bånsåm and the performance “Billots dagues coutelas” is present in many of Agnès Btffn’s projects. The set of contrasts between the dynamic and the static, between the action and the object of embodiment animates most of her works. This is true regardless of the aesthetic considerations involved in its creation, its status or idealistic intentions. To avoid degradation of the artwork into easily digested clichés, Btffn offers the performance, the act and the diversification of an aesthetic form of expression. Btffn opposes the human-turned-object and the fragmentation of the social body with an offer of encounter and communion.

An existential tension passes through all of artwork by Agnès Btffn, who tries to unsettle what is complacent and celebrate vitality, and an awareness of our presence in the world. Btffn invites us to rediscover the path of becoming aware of our relationships to things, our relationship to each other and our relationships to the world. Through a new ritual, she invites us to discover the mystic nature of existence, to engage in mystical experimentation and seek, for ourselves, beyond the established, settled and disembodied dogmas.

As the first gesture of this invitation, the artist gives us her name: Agnès Btffn. According to the civil state, Agnès Btffn’s name is Agnès Braastad-Tiffon.

Braastad-Tiffon is the name of a family well known for the cognac it exports worldwide. “Btffn” is an abbreviation of the names Braastad-Tiffon. But more than a simple abbreviation of a family name, “ Btffn” is form of identification with its own expressive qualities. Btffn is an unpronounceable name, or at least a name that is phonetically odd when compared with the Christian name Agnès. While this Christian name marks a clear identity and a kind of intimacy and friendliness, the surname Btffn marks the opposite: the non-familiarity and the otherness. As a means of identification, Btffn is like the four-syllable “logo” JHWH, which was used because of Jewish prohibition to figure God’s name, Yahweh. Prohibitions do less to show respect to God than to show our incapacity to define, limit, or represent God (or the other way round), because a name in and of itself imprisons, limits, identify, embodies.

By taking advantage of the strangeness that “Btffn” creates in regard to identity, and in contrast to the “social” meaning of the name Braastad-Tiffon, the artist may intend to express a wish to project a personality independent of the identity framework sharply defined in her family. “Btffn” frees the limits and crosses over the borders of the Braastad-Tiffon identity by opening it up to the indeterminable, while Agnès Braastad-Tiffon defines herself as a being with an open and singular destiny within the heart of her family.

However, beyond this psycho-genealogical dimension, “Agnès Btffn” as a means of identification, shows the tension of identity, of the finite, of the infinite, of unpronounceable otherness which characterizes and animates each single being we are. Syntheses between the limited and infinite, we are each icons of the enigmatic world—and it is from a spot within this wide, iconic portal that Agnès Btffn’s work invites us to dive in.
