

Valérie Belin and Richard Mosse *Movements*



Movements is a tool designed by DHC/ART – Education to encourage in-depth explorations of key concepts evoked by the works presented in the exhibitions *Valérie Belin: Surface Tension* and *Richard Mosse: The Enclave*. By highlighting these points of conceptual departure through the document *Movements*, inspire dialogue about the exhibition and to encourages visitors to elaborate on the proposed themes with their personal interpretations and reflections. Over time, these *travelling concepts*¹ are subsequently enriched as they inform new contributions to our evolving conversations about art.

Movements also serves as a reminder that an aesthetic experience engages the body - its senses and its movements - as much as the intellect. The body's physical, emotional, and perceptive gestures are intimately linked as we move through the exhibition space and our senses are awakened. The rhythm of our trajectories and changing perspectives also mobilize our vision; images take shape as our memory and imagination are touched by the emerging aesthetic landscape. *Movements* is thus an invitation for the visitor to become immersed - mind and body - into DHC/ART exhibitions, thereby developing a rich and dynamic understanding of the works.

¹ Please note that the on-line series titled *Travelling Concepts* is a complementary reflection to the themes introduced in *Movements*: <http://dhcart.tumblr.com/>

Context *Truth / Deception*



Valérie Belin, *Untitled (mask series)*. 2004. courtesy the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels.

Photography is, at its core, a hybrid medium. A science and an art form, it contains truth and deception at every corner. Valérie Belin and Richard Mosse are not necessarily interested in presenting the world objectively: their photographs are tampered with by their own touch, the viewers' interpretation, and the subjects' sense of self. By questioning the aesthetics of their photographs, this hybrid reality of truth and deception becomes fully charged.

The aesthetics that both Belin and Mosse play with are innately ambiguous – beautiful, but in an unsettling, artificial, excessive way. So much pink, so much plastic. Belin selects her subject matter based on its photogenic potential. She states that she is interested in discovering the truths of her objects.¹ And yet her *Fruit Baskets* have been sprayed with the non-ripening effects of artifice: the fruit is to be admired, not consumed, and appears to be plastic, though is quite real. Meanwhile, her truly plastic *Mannequins* glow with an animated, life-like quality. What is the truth of the fruit? The mannequins?

Mosse's aesthetic choices also challenge the ideas of truth and deception in photography, as he transforms the often hidden conflict in the Congo into a sea of pink. He questions why black and white photography would be considered as closer to the Truth than pink photography.² They are, after all, just colours. He further suggests that “naturalism is no greater claim to veracity than other strategies,” and that his decision to use Aerochrome infrared film is a creative decision that is no more or less truthful than another artist's use of other digital tools.³ In pinkness and plasticity, truth and deception are constantly intertwined.

Are the artists' aesthetic choices (ie Mosse's use of Aerochrome infrared film, and Belin's manner of making the real seem unreal and the unreal seem real) introducing the viewer into a realm of deceit? How can the truth be interpreted in their work?

Does photography ever capture a truth, or is the image necessarily a version of reality?

¹ de Noirmont, J. (2010). *Art & Confrontation*. Retrieved from: <http://www.denoirmont.com/iphone-biographie-artiste-valerie-belin.html>

² Colberg, J. (2010). *Conscientious Extended: A Conversation with Richard Mosse*. Retrieved from: http://www.jmcolberg.com/weblog/extended/archives/a_conversation_with_richard_mosse/.

³ Ibid.

Content *The Body*



Valérie Belin, *Still Life with Mirror*, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris/Brussels.

The still and moving images of Richard Mosse and Valérie Belin focus on the body as a form of “being in the world.” This perspective offers an alternative to the dominant Cartesian epistemology, which divides the body and the mind, as well as the body and the world. With his concepts *flesh* and *chiasm*, the philosopher of phenomenology Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that the subjective, lived body and the objective world exist not in opposition but are rather passionately intermingled through their shared material existence. An embodiment of this idea can be found in Valérie Belin’s series of photographs *Black Eyed Susan*, where we see a woman’s body, in flesh and blood, being overcome by the forces of petrification. This body is *objectified*, and takes on the composure of a store-window mannequin, thus feeling the malaise of being treated only as an object. We can imagine this statue closely examining the bouquet of flowers placed on the table, its dogged and silent material existence, which brings her back to life. She diffuses, her particles are incorporated into the midst of the flowers which open, close, proliferate. *Black Eyed Susan* becomes *Still Life*, still alive. Then once again she freezes: porcelain doll, immaculate, her hair done, immobile in her coffin, encircled by morbid flowers. Alphonso Lingis has spoken in this respect of “corporeal intentionality” which not only “comprehends the things in the folds of its own flesh” but also “knows itself in the things.”¹

The International Rescue Committee estimates that 5.4 million people have died as a result of the war in eastern Congo. One of the peculiarities of this terrible conflict is its invisibility, its intangibility. In this sense, Richard Mosse reports that after every battle in the region it is difficult to see any trace of it: the Congolese landscape is made up of dense and voracious vegetation which swallows history. One of the things that Mosse, in his immersive film

installation *The Enclave*, thus foregrounds and shows us – but also, in particular, makes us feel – is a spectral force, a presence/absence of bodies affected by war, constantly fleeing, taking refuge, being inflicted with violence, dying. The use of Kodak Aerochrome infrared film contributes to conferring a dreamlike quality on the bodies, objects and landscape. This technology reads the infrared light reflected by the chlorophyll in the vegetation and invisible to the naked eye, such that the blazing, vibrant tones of pink and red saturate the photographic images. And this dreamlike space, spread across six large screens, is far from disembodied and immaterial; on the contrary, it is rooted in the *flesh of the terrain*, with an uncommon physical and visceral intensity. Thus our body, as it wanders through the installation space, is by turns plunged into tall pink grass, nervously following a soldier; swept along and crushed in a crowd holding coffins in their arms; and overrun to the point of nausea by a pink that suddenly explodes and assails us.

Régis Durand argues that the effect of Belin’s images is to bring “the object in question towards us, with a kind of violence and a sense of intrusion, an object that thus appears to enter into our space more than we enter into its space.”² Observe the different photographs in Belin’s exhibition and give your point of view on this idea.

Questioning naturalism as a photojournalism strategy for depicting war, Mosse declares that “war is dreamlike.”³ As seen in his installation *The Enclave*, this atmosphere ardently embraces the visitor. Try to analyse the way in which the sound and the image are fashioned to create this intensely somatic experience.

¹ Sobchack, V. (2004). *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

² Régis Durand, *Valérie Belin, la peau des choses* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2007).

³ Christy Lange, “At the Edge of the Visible,” in John Holten, ed., *A Supplement to The Enclave* (Berlin: Broken Dimanche Press, 2014).

Composition *Medium*



Richard Mosse, *Vintage Violence*, 2011. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Valérie Belin and Richard Mosse employ a myriad of formal strategies that draw on the senses in visceral ways while simultaneously challenging us to look deeper – within the subjects and at our own preconceptions of what is true, present, or real.

While distinct with regard to their approach to context and social commentary, both artists have pursued a critical relationship to their respective mediums. Richard Mosse set out to work reflexively with technology, stating “I...wanted to bring the Kodak to bear on the Kodak. I wanted to examine the medium itself”.¹ For her part, Belin has suggested that “my work is something that takes place beyond the object, and it directly engages with the possibility of the medium”.²

The sheer scale of works in the exhibitions compels visitors to navigate them in relation to the space in which they are exhibited. Where does one look first? Is there enough space to step back to get a full picture? Or is our understanding of what lies before us limited (among other things) by our proximity to it, by a point of view, which, for example, shrinks our sense of physical self, or limits our perception to one detail at a time? For Mosse, the disorienting immersiveness resulting from the scale and structure of the images in the *Enclave* both reflects the fragmented complexities of war and mirrors the shifting human eye as it attempts to process visual information.³ Combined with tight framing and control of light, the enlargement of Belin’s photographs creates what she describes as a confrontation with the viewer that

emphasizes the works’ subjectivity, changes the status of the object, and produces an illusion of volume, a perception of mass - and thus a distinctly sculptural quality as opposed to the flatness more typical of photography.⁴

Both artists employ transformative techniques relating back to an energy that render visible - literally and metaphorically - something which lies beyond perception. For Mosse, the infrared film, in reacting to the light spectrum of the landscape that is undetectable to the naked eye, creates saturated pinks that reference the hidden devastation of armed conflict. For Belin, proximity to the subject and high contrasts have sought to capture the energy emanating from a given object or moment... what she describes in her later work as the ‘potentialities’ of a subject.⁵

Mosse and Belin engage in a meta-reflection on film and photography. How does this engagement translate in Mosse’s The Enclave and Belin’s series? Name examples of reflexive work in other mediums.

Richard Mosse suggests that photography doesn’t have a “mainline to the emotions that film tends to have”.⁶ Do you agree? How do Belin’s series compare to The Enclave in light of this statement? With regard to affect, what is the interplay between the medium and the subject matter?

¹ Colberg, J. (2010). *Conscientious Extended: A Conversation with Richard Mosse*. Retrieved from: http://jmcclberg.com/weblog/extended/archives/a_conversation_with_richard_mosse/

² Herschdorfer, N. (2007). *Valérie Belin*. Steidl, Göttingen, Paris.

³ Colberg, J. (2010). *Conscientious Extended: A Conversation with Richard Mosse*. Retrieved from: http://jmcclberg.com/weblog/extended/archives/a_conversation_with_richard_mosse/

⁴ Herschdorfer, N. (2007). *Valérie Belin*. Steidl, Göttingen, Paris.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Lange, C. (2014). *At the Edge of the Visible*. In Holten, J. (Ed.), *A Supplement to The Enclave*. Berlin: Broken Dimanche Press.

Consideration *Celluloid Film*



Richard Mosse, *Love is the Drug*, 2012. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

The arrival of celluloid photographic roll film in the 1880s brought about an upheaval in amateur photography: it was now possible for the mass public to consume images by producing them rather than by merely looking at them. Paradoxically, celluloid film, at the same time as it opened the door to the “democratization” of the medium in its everyday uses, became an essential tool for professional photographers, and in particular photojournalists, always more eager to find techniques that would facilitate their movements and let them focus on capturing pictures rather than on developing them. Ease of use now became the watchword in photography. With celluloid film stock, photography was about to cover every possible surface: advertising billboards, books, newspapers, screens, bulletin boards, the walls of houses and museums.

While it has become commonplace to remark that our era glorifies the surface (and the superficial), celluloid film offers an equally cogent metaphor of contemporary experience, one which evacuates some of the more negative connotations associated with the surface. Whereas the surface is a solid barrier, celluloid suggests the porosity of a membrane or skin. This suggests that there is potentially something else to be seen behind the photograph, a field of possibilities we can penetrate but which can also penetrate us – an idea Barthes touched on when he spoke, in *Camera Lucida*, of photography’s *punctum*.

In Belin’s work, celluloid is understood as one of the membranes of consumer society, as epidermis in a vernacular sense: it is the wax on the fruit in a fruit basket, the layer of paint on photographed masks, the oil applied to the skin of body-builders, the transparent flowers superimposed on portraits of women, and the thin film wrapping used for a potato chip bag – and the grease the chips in turn leave on your fingers. In Mosse’s work, Aerochrome film is clearly used in the image creation process, but it also acts as a kind of skin between the

viewer and the photograph, putting a gloss on what is seen at the same time as it emphasizes the suffering concealed behind the image.

What does the use of celluloid film bring to mind for you? Do you have memories around silver gelatin photography practices?

The unquestionable slowness imposed by the use of analogue techniques in Mosse’s work and Belin’s meticulous studio photographs go against the current need for the hyper accelerated production and circulation of photographs in today’s day and age. While both amateur and professional photographers are charged today with the task of feeding a media system with a greater and greater thirst for content, these two artists defend a kind of slow photography. What for you are the ideal spaces in which to promote a more enlightened view of photography, to take the time to really look at photographs?



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