

An Islander in the Garden of Eden

By Sébastien Gokalp

What is it that drives Gilles Barbier to make works compulsively, with seemingly unrelated subjects and no particular technique in mind? It's hard to pin down an artist who represents folly; indeed, understanding Barbier's work seems a fine contradiction in terms. Confusion sets in from the outset, as visitors to his studio ask, "Are there many of you working here?" He proceeds by deconstruction, developing different narrative strategies to create an implausible cosmogony that is nonetheless rooted in reality, drawing on disciplines as diverse as aesthetics, history, psychoanalysis, art history, philosophy, science, comics and economics. These fields, from which he often imports concepts and turns of phrase, enable him to escape the expectations of art, to leave the Duchamp highway. He pushes figuration, mimicry and narrative to their most absurd limits.

After graduating from the Beaux-arts, Barbier, like all artists, was faced with the age-old question that often guides the rest of their production: what to do? What type of production, what school of thought, what aesthetic lineage, what positioning, to affirm what? He finds himself surrounded by tacit imperatives that define the "good" artist: authenticity, coherence, meaning, style, permanence - and define aesthetic, expressionist, conceptual, relational and other possibilities. He then chooses to do everything, in every direction: *I am troubled by a fundamental presupposition that in artistic production (but also in any kind of activity), the decision must proceed by excluding certain options, because this process of exclusion or filtering would contain valid parts of the "self", of the subject who thinks, feels and produces.* ¹

This forced openness involves setting up protocols that generate randomness. He draws on the logics of scientific disciplines, creating a shift: "At that time [1995] I was very concerned with the decision-making processes within the conception and production of works, all the questions that interrogate the most effective way of navigating between the different possibilities that present themselves (and that I now call 'versions') when there is no established program." ²

In 1992, he read Luke Rinehart's *The Dice Man*, in which a psychoanalyst makes all his decisions according to the results of a roll of the dice (raping the neighbor, abruptly changing a patient's therapy, etc.). He then set up the "Game of Life" system, inspired by cybernetics and Conway's cellular automata. This combinatorial system is transposed into more or less precise statements, the genesis of which must be unpredictable or anecdotal: *Inhabiting Painting, Conquer Space, Do something out of anything, Work on Sundays... The Nursing Home*, for example, was born out of a short radio broadcast announcing that Disney was trying to push Mickey

¹ "Interview with Thom Collins", *The Pack of Trans-Schizophrenic Clones*, Les cahiers du musée de l'Abbaye Sainte-Croix, n°91, exhibition catalog, 2000

² Interview with Thom Collins, op. cit.

back into the public domain, hence the statement *Place Super Heroes in bodies the age of their copyrights*. While some of these projects are rapidly disappearing (e.g. *Redoing Comic Book Logos*), others, such as *Methodically Copying a 1966 Larousse Dictionary*, are still in use. This principle makes it possible to create works out of chaos, unpredictable and unlimited in number. Barbier follows the logic developed by Raymond Roussel in *Impressions d'Afrique* : rational statements pushed to the extreme, which he lets develop, “spinning out”, lead to crazy scenes. Gilles Barbier looks for the work without antecedent, without model or reason, unexpected; computer scientists call this kind of unpredictable and unique event a *Garden of Eden*.

Barbier's work takes the form of a network, each piece referring to others, recombining like the turnstiles in *The Black Box*, which generate different spaces at each quarter-turn, yet without any central coherence or programmatic dimension³. Pierre Sterckx thus applies a Deleuzian reading around the concepts of rhizome, den, etc.⁴. Barbier hates the notion of a formatted “approach”, preferring instead that of organic development. His statements are like cells growing from stems, in irregular rhythms and quantities: “I see my work as active cells producing pieces. From time to time, one emerges, another dies out. From these cells, I can develop different versions of the same project; but the cell won't evolve; it's like a machine. Rather, it will mutate. Stylistically - I'd have to define my style first! - I don't evolve; at most, I pile up more and more layers of reading - even if I continue to make works of more immediate reading.”⁵ This metaphor is imbued with his youth spent in Vanuatu, where he continued to go until recently: the landscapes there are in continual evolution, with vegetation growing at an unimaginable speed. Together, they form ecosystems, with each work or group of works feeding off and existing thanks to the others. Over time, the levels of interpretation have multiplied, with his recent works offering an ever-increasing number of possible readings: “the generic program of the work is not an exercise in encryption, nor does it constitute esotericism. No test, no hidden message, no truth, no salvation, no clergy. Art is an absolutely available space that exists and resists only in its use, nor is it an entertaining game of hide-and-seek. However, from time to time, it reaches such a level of complexity, otherness, singularity, strangeness, even simplicity, that it begins to gently and politely resist the obsession with formal reductions, rapid syntheses, the mania for attributing qualities and handing out prizes. It withdraws slowly, losing visibility. It's this resistance that we glimpse in art and that excites our curiosity, it's this resistance that eroticizes our relationship to the work, it's this resistance that encourages us to get out of our heads.”⁶

The splintering of his universe is matched by an obsession with his own image. This identity, constantly displayed and parodied, counterbalances his dissemination. From

³ Eric Mangion, “Gilles Barbier, ambushes in planning”, *The work in program*, CAPC Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, Fage éditions, exhibition catalog, 2005

⁴ Pierre Sterckx, *Gilles Barbier, un Abézédairé dans le désordre*, Les Editions du Regard, 2008

⁵ interview with the author, Marseille, April 26, 2015

⁶ “FIRST AND FOREMOST... A conversation between Jean-Yves Jouannais and Gilles Barbier.” Marseille, 2004, unpublished

his earliest photographic series (*Planqué dans l'atelier - Hidden in the Studio*), 1996, a sort of “Where's Charlie?”, objects arranged in a certain way pointing to his real or supposed presence), the clone is the only recurring element in his work. The question of the double, from Doppelgänger to Greg Egan's *permutation city*, is a way of exploring the question of identity. For Barbier, his own body is the most flexible tool at his disposal. It makes visible time, aging tissue, becoming, duration. These “mini-me's” are clowns rather than clones, death masks or Messerschmidt-style character heads, undermined figurines whose multiplication forms a puzzle. The grimacing bodies and faces, their eyes always closed and turned inwards, with no exchange with the viewer, are pawns that can be moved at will, empty costumed shells, generating different profiles according to their combination. Developing his plastic vocabulary in the 1990s, when the body was excluded from the art world, he recounts the revelation that Paul Thek was for him: “I think the feeling of having your own body invaded by things you can do absolutely nothing about was of the same nature [as mine]. You can probably measure the enormous relief that pieces like *The Tomb of Death of a Hippie*, *Fishman* or the *Technological reliquaries* series. In the latter, as you know, meat, in its rawest form, is encased in increasingly complex Plexiglas boxes, in fragments of armor.”⁷

It occupies the land as archipelagos dot the oceans. Gilles Barbier, the child of Vanuatu, a country absent from the maps of European settlers, lost in liquid immensity, changing its appearance every month according to the seasons and cycles of vegetation, and holding the world record for the country most exposed to climate change, 1750 km from the first major country (Australia), “likes to think of [his work] as a territory made up of deserts, forests and cultivated areas, populated by multiple species of flora and fauna - some symbiotic, others antagonistic - that can copulate, mutate, emerge or disappear.”⁸ His works, independent worlds sometimes light-years apart, are reminiscent of those rocks in the south-east of the world, so different from one another but forming the mesh of a continent.

The temptation is great to read his work in the light of a TV set analysis, his relentless production holding his ego together, counterbalancing his schizophrenic tendencies to splinter, his “impression of having a cloaca instead of a brain, a crop and several ruminant stomachs instead of neurons”⁹. Yet dislocation does not rhyme with psychosis, and his identity rift is not pathological but seminal: “I would like to show very clearly that individuals are the product of a dynamic incoherence [...]. And if an uncomfortable system is forcibly imposed on me, resistant aspects of my self will express themselves in critical or corrosive forms. By using cloning as a metaphor, I can only suggest the potentially resistant or disruptive nature of these different facets. On this basis, I find the question of who I am boring and stupid.”¹⁰ Psychoanalysts beware.

7 Mail to the author, 2014

8 “Interview with Thom Collins”, op. cit.

9 Eric Mangion, “Gilles Barbier, ambushes in planning”, *The work in program*, CAPC Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, Fage éditions, exhibition catalog, 2005

10 “Interview with Thom Collins”, op. cit.

Gilles Barbier systematically chooses the least conformist solution, the one that by definition leads to the uncontrolled, the immature, the unpredictable, the antipodes of propriety, with freedom as the only horizon.

The inappropriateness is first and foremost material. He masters a number of techniques, including resin sculpture, drawing, gouache, photography, installation and even Posca, without favoring any one over the others. He practices molding to excess, a technique that seems easy, requiring no “artistic” know-how, and is therefore discredited. Georges Didi-Huberman has shown how, during the Renaissance, Ghirlandaio, who was constantly experimenting, was criticized for molding faces and draperies from life.¹¹ If the result is always perfect (“as I don't know why I'm doing it, it has to be impeccably done”¹²), of great visual force, the result of numerous stages of production, he himself doesn't like to make things and is above all concerned with setting up production protocols, notably by making molds, scrupulously noting color mixes so that, once the right shade has been found, he can delegate: it's not the making but the reproducible that interests him. This rejection of a skill, a virtuosity (even if a successful casting is in fact very difficult) is reaffirmed by teamwork: once the protocol has been established, it's his assistants who make the copies, “copy the copies”. Paradoxically, if the form is seductive - and Barbier is keen to ensure that anyone, whether a stranger to art or a fervent enthusiast, can be captured by it - it is not the subject of the work. His *Black Drawings*, for example, are at once intimately linked to his daily life, like a newspaper, conceived by him but always produced by his assistants - a machine that works, and which he might even sell, as others sell licenses. Only the pages of the dictionary, which he uses to decompress from heavy work sessions and recharge his batteries, are entirely self-made.

His extraordinary energy and productivity are a source of concern. The transgressors often employ light means, of recording more than embodying, as if ultimately an attitude of opposition should retain a casual or light-hearted form. Hirschhorn scotches, Labelle-Rojoux doodles, Duyckaerts performs, and so on. Barbier, on the other hand, insists, puts in the effort, molds, accumulates, assembles, designs large-format devices for his installations, thinks about the durability of his resin sculptures, pays attention to detail. It's hard not to take seriously what appears to be the product of anarchic freedom.

Then there's the thematic impropriety. Barbier practices literal figuration, narration, autofiction and humor, fields that modernity had set aside. Prolix, an unparalleled narrator, a storyteller, each of his sculptures could be described as much as seen. Since the 1970s, there have been a few returns to individual mythologies, embodied therapies, a postmodernism built on the particular, the local, figuration; but in a spirit of revenge and with irony against formal dogmatism. Rather than opposing himself, Barbier follows in the footsteps of late-nineteenth-century movements and artists such as the “Arts Incohérents”, the “Hydropathes”, Alfonse Allais (*Voltaire's Skull as a Child*), Alfred Jarry's *Surmâle* or the often politely ignored Duchamp of

¹¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'empreinte par contact*, les éditions de Minuit, 199x.

¹² Interview with the author, op. cit.

spoonerisms. He interweaves the *low* and the *high* without it being possible to separate them, seducing and repelling. His “*Feasts*” generate unease, between the attraction of perfectly reproduced food and the rejection of this resin abundance. If society is one of consumption, he himself is on the side of production. While his more rapidly recognized peers were developing a “relational” art, rethinking the exhibition and the relationship with the viewer, Barbier was reaffirming the object, the installation, in its provocative dimension, anchored in reality.

The inappropriateness is referential. Barbier draws on comics, potty humor (*Fart Organ*, 1996, *The Drunkard*, 2000), science fiction, the popular dictionary (not the *Littré*, but the *Larousse illustré*), not in a spirit of transgression or pop, but out of adherence to and recognition of these elements of a broader culture in which he grew up. And he's the only one: artists who cite comics (Asterix feasts, Rahan, Marvel comics) or TV, the two main image sources of the 1970s-1990s, are rare; and the last ambitious exhibition on art and science fiction dates back to 1967 (by Harald Szeeman, who presented it at the 1999 Venice Biennale). However, if Barbier's works refer to popular forms, he also draws on numerous literary and philosophical references: Alfred Jarry, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf; the schizo-analysis of Deleuze and Guattari, Debord (psychogeography, which gives him psychobiography). Extracting what corresponds to him, or using it as a runway, he asserts: “I can even say that what is produced (and here I'm talking about my entire production) is basically nothing more than an illustration of the text. Or perhaps, more precisely, in a bizarre twist, the text is the illumination. Text is omnipresent (a habit ... born while he was away at boarding school), from phylacteries to dictionary pages and *black drawings*, from his writings to his endless analyses of his own work. He conceives language in the space that exchange, conservation and the spoken word generate.

It adds a layer of complexity to the work, proposing interpretations while drifting towards nonsense, as in Gombrowicz's *Cosmos*, in which “we never know whether a situation is constructed or fortuitous. Meaning is trapped between two possibilities, held in suspension.”¹³

The impropriety is positional. Barbier claims the status of a “wanker”, one who does nothing but look after himself, or indulges in unproductive pursuits such as copying the dictionary. Duchamp proclaimed “I'd rather breathe than work”, assuming the posture of a dandy, his hands always impeccable. Beckett embodied the absurd in the repetition of sterile actions, like Molloy transferring pebbles from one pocket to another. Barbier doesn't have the same elegance or existential pretension: on the contrary, he drags art into the shallows, not to transcend the human, but to underline its lowly organic dimension. King's buffoon, Père Ubu, Informe according to Bataille, Idiot according to Jean-Yves Jouannais, he is part of a long history of the artist playing the fool to reveal the contradictions of the world without hindrance. His casualness is coupled with an immense workaholic, conceiving his production as a long-term performance.

The inappropriateness is communicational. He wants his works to be accessible to all, sometimes to an embarrassing degree. He acknowledges the “pornoisation” of the

world, “a dramatic reduction in the range of stimuli we can experience, and the gap between them, so as to constitute a single, consummatory mega-stimulus”. He defines his work using a term coined by Philippe Marion in 1991, “mediagnic”, which “enables us to measure an image's penetration of the mass media”, as exemplified by *Old Lady with Tattoos* (2002). Yet, on closer inspection, his works are often contaminated by disruptive elements: the small white architectures of his *feasts*; the banana peels dotting his spaces; his clones always have their eyes closed, death masks on repeat. The desire to catch the eye is counterbalanced by the anxiety of being reduced to a single reading.

Each of Barbier's pieces is a particular experience, sometimes disturbing, always striking. Refusing to be pigeonholed, refusing to respect codes, straddling the divide between the formal and the programmatic, the nonsensical and the sophisticated, Barbier's work resists all normative interpretation. Proof, if proof were needed, that Art, to be essential, must above all disturb, and above all disturb itself.