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Stories and Rumours

When reflecting on a new project to be presented at the Maison d'Art Bernard Anthonioz (MABA) as part of the Jeu de Paume's Satellite programme, it was the rumours, deviations and side stories that drew Tamar Guimarães and Kasper Akhøj's attention. The fact that the house and its gardens' future were perhaps saved on the grounds of the presence of someone (Antoine Watteau) who had never been there immediately appealed to them and thus became the starting point of the work they would develop specially for that context.

Their earlier individual works are already indicative of a methodology, which focuses on projects that involve working with particular stories somehow hidden in the writing of history. Such minor apparently anecdotal events gained new and fascinating meanings when revived and considered within an artistic context. This was the case of Kasper Akhøj's *Untitled (Schindler/Gray)*, 2006, in which he explored the history of two early Modernist houses: Eileen Gray's Villa E.1027 in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France (1926-1929), and Rudolph M. Schindler's Kings Road House in Hollywood, California (1921-1922), which had in common the fact that both were the first houses these architects built for themselves. Using a circular narrative, Akhøj related the ways in which the two houses' pasts converged and diverged through combining archival imagery related to the Schindler's house with new photographs produced by the artist at Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici's Villa in France.

Akhøj's *Untitled (Schindler/Gray)* evokes the private house as space for new sociability and it is precisely that which links it to Tamar Guimarães' *Canoas*, 2010, a short film depicting a cocktail party at Casa das Canoas, a house which the architect Oscar Niemeyer built for himself in Rio de Janeiro in the early 1950s. The house played an important role in the cultural life of Rio at the time. Through the staging of a party, Guimarães constructs a sort of "echo-chamber" in which she is able to tackle a series of issues that relate to that historical period connecting it to the context of present-day Brazil. Through the use of the past and the distance that it entails to the present, she was able to reflect upon issues that were then and are still now infused in Brazilian culture, such as the general mood of optimism that was present then and which resonates now; the way in which the country is seen as an erotic paradise; and how Modernist architecture was in most cases a luxury item for the wealthy and its contrast to the reality of the servant classes.

In *The Last Days of Watteau*, the two artists continue their *modus operandi*, collaborating for the first time to create the main work in the exhibition conceived specially for the MABA. Through the staging of a party, they intended to engage with an array of themes – or maybe they are just rumours – that encircle the history of the Maison. Their aim was not to recount or re-stage history, but to bring into the discussion a series of events that appear to have shaped the house and its mythologies. The exhibition's title, "The Afterlife (of names and things)", is in a way a very direct and, at the same time, a very poetic allusion to this. They wished to reflect on the cultural, social and historical residues left floating in the air of time. It is not about the reconstruction of historical facts but about how names and events are employed, how they change, corrode, become opaque, take on new meanings, are misunderstood or, perhaps, understood again, anew.

In the final sequence of Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Zabriskie Point*, the main character, Daria, imagines the house of her lover/boss exploding. The scene starts by showing the explosion from various angles but at a certain moment

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Antonioni focuses on the explosion of random household items that fly in slow motion through the air. Things become displaced, out of context and because of that gain new meanings, or at least are seen differently. The artists have a similar intent in creating the new piece shown at the MABA: to slow down time, to take out of context, to tell a different story.

Le Dernier Jour de Watteau is the title of a novel by Edmond Pilon from 1921, which the two artists came across during their research and which inspired the title of the new work, *The Last Days of Watteau*. The name of Watteau (and not the painter himself) is a main character in the work. The reference to Watteau (and the suggestion of the story of his death implied in the novel's title, as well as that of the work) arises from an anecdote about the site of the current MABA. Its last private owners were the sisters Jeanne and Madeleine Smith. In the early 1900s Madeleine and her husband, the medieval historian Pierre Champion, conceived a story to back an intense lobbying campaign to save their gardens from a road construction project. In order to assert the house's value for historical heritage, they claimed that the painter Antoine Watteau had died there in 1721. Watteau seems to have indeed died in Nogent-sur-Marne but a few doors down from the Smiths' residence. Their campaign was successful and the road construction project abandoned in 1909.

Other stories have also been incorporated in the house's legends, such as the relation between Carl Dreyer and Pierre Champion. The latter was the historical advisor for Dreyer's film *The Passion of Jeanne d'Arc* (1928). The original trial manuscripts, which are mentioned at the start of Dreyer's film as being "one of the most extraordinary documents in the history of the world", were said to have belonged to Champion's library, a rumour that has never been confirmed.

The cinematography of Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* is saturated with close ups dramatically lit like masks. And masks also play an important role in Guimarães and Akhøj's work: firstly, through the idea of the masquerade, which was pivotal in the pictorial genre invented by Watteau called *fêtes galantes*, and, secondly, through a collection of fake African masks left as a bequest to the MABA.

Although Watteau's *fêtes galantes* are traditionally seen as scenes of bucolic and idyllic charm, suffused with an air of theatricality, Guimarães and Akhøj's allude to an understanding of Watteau that sees his work less as enchanting and more as having engaged with his contemporaries about matters of political, social and cultural consequence. The *fêtes galantes* are models of social behaviour and should be understood not as 18th-century pursuits but as a node in time in 400 years of history of Western self-fashioning and codes of behaviour, which still speak of privilege and power and shape the formation of subjectivities and personal relationships.

The American art historian Thomas Crow argues that "Watteau's *fêtes galantes* were a kind of painting distinguished by a self-conscious artificiality and that it was this artificiality that allowed a 'realistic' depiction of its subjects"¹ and Nicholas Mirzoeff proposes that "Watteau's paintings embody a changing discourse about seduction and that challenge traditional assumptions about gender, visual pleasure and performativity."²

Artificiality and performance are obviously also at play when one speaks about masks and particularly about African

¹ Quoted in Julie Anne Plax, *Watteau and the Cultural Politics of Eighteenth-Century France*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 136.
² Id. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

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masks. They are symbols of status and of role-play. Since its inception, the Fondation Nationale des Arts Graphiques et Plastiques has managed both the MABA and a retirement home next door. This nursing home was set up specifically for artists whose belongings sometimes melded into the items collected in the library and its basement. Amongst them is an extensive set of carved African masks, added to the collection when its owner, a resident at the nursing home, died there. In 2008, a Paris-based dealer examined the masks and found them to be “fake”. There is little information on the masks, on their owner and, in particular, on how this collection came about that could explain or justify their origins and the extraordinary fact of all being fake.

The performativity of the self, embodied in the masks, together with ideas of self-fashioning, self-control and liberation, which were very much at play in the *fêtes galantes*, are taken on in *The Last Days of Watteau*. By employing the visual and conceptual strategy of a party as the starting point, Guimarães and Akhøj are able to escape from an ordinary storytelling method in order to engage with several subplots simultaneously. The complexity of the script also implies that a large amount of their research will reside in subtexts, as much could not be directly represented. In the new work, a mixing of facts in fiction occurs, as well as coincidence and chance, most sustained by months of intensive research. The artists think through history and through the archive, but avoid them at the same time. They use the names, the things that are left in flux, they continue to spread rumours, as if it was a sort of a blurring of history, making it not so straightforward but much more circular and subjective.

Jacques Derrida affirms that rumours' ruling principle is that of contamination. One story contaminates another; one image spills to the next one, and so it carries on far beyond the life of “victims” of the rumour. It continues through its afterlife. Rumours also stimulate new stories, new narratives and consequently allow for the coexistence of different points of view and for multiple (and sometimes contradictory) understandings that go beyond conventions of truth and factuality into the realm of subjectivity and affects.