

Pascal Haudressy

Pascal Haudressy is a French artist (born in Paris in 1968).

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A question of outlines

About the works of Pascal Haudressy

Pierre Sterckx

Contemporary images—be they in the arts or the media—are for the most part “uncontrolled”; there is always room for the random, the imponderable. Image segment, image relay—it is precisely in this type of image that Pascal Haudressy has immersed himself. His marble sphere sculptures seem not so much to defy gravity (this has already been done, from Phidias to Rodin) as to go through it, to weight it. It is likewise a question of lines. Rodin said that a good sculpture must have infinity. With Haudressy, we go from a multitude of tangled lines to almost random ones. And yet it somehow all “holds” together and has even monumentalized itself. Because all statues of high quality incarnate the Latin verb “stare”; they are either enduring—or nothing. These are not mere marble soap bubbles but, in the words of Pascal, amino acids. That which is chaotic is not this perilous lack of balance but the physiochemical process of generating life itself; a quantum universe where everything is askew. Following Tony Cragg’s brilliant example (the tacit agreement of his structures with those of DNA), Haudressy gives statuary a whole new body—a molecular body of potentialities carrying flows of information, awaiting their realization in “life signs”. Calder and Tinguely have found in Haudressy an heir worthy of their fateful “blunders”.

What has been said about Haudressy’s sculptures goes for his electronic drawings as well; here too is it a question of uncontrolled lines. While the classics want for the perfect form—that of decoration—, we know that, since the advent of modern painting (the big one—the one that changed the collective vision), multiple lines have become the preference. An apple painted by Cézanne, a Giacometti portrait, a Picasso or a Bonnard nude or a combination painting by Rauschenberg all convey these shaky edges. Seurat even went so far as to vaporize the outlines of his figures. With Pascal Haudressy this old problem takes a new turn that now is dependent on the experimental capacities of new pixelized media. He himself speaks of “irregular drawing”. By intentionally upsetting the computer’s inking and immersing it in chaotic calculations it cannot handle, Haudressy has created a new type of contour drawing. With his “hedgehog outline”, thousands of points spring forth from a shape to construct and deconstruct an object’s boundaries ad infinitum—pulsations, frequencies and phases, and no longer measurable surfaces. Haudressy’s drawing (his drawing) is therefore temporal—an electronic graph. It is here that everything changes, and where the 21st century begins.

Supernature

Pascal Haudressy Interviewed by Jérôme Sans

Jérôme Sans: *You really began your career as an artist in 2006, after having spent 12 years as a cultural projects manager for UNESCO, where you worked on a number of projects involving internationally renown artists. How did you make the transition?*

Pascal Haudressy: I started working at UNESCO in 1995 and was working on a project about tolerance (which involved artists like Robert Rauschenberg). I'd never had the feeling that I departed from the theme of art, even when I was doing research parallel to it. Nonetheless this passionate, enriching work admittedly became more and more time-consuming, and I was having a harder and harder time getting things done. Leaving UNESCO in 2006 finally opened a space that allowed me to dedicate myself to it full-time.

J.S.: *Didn't those early years just turn out to be your own personal laboratory for reflection on the changing world with the scientists and intellectuals you met while working there?*

P.H.: It was undoubtedly one of the most enriching experiences of my life. I was lucky enough to meet important people from the art world, the world of politics and the world of science, like Ilya Prigogine (the Nobel Prize chemist), especially during forecasting meetings. It wasn't so much a reflection on the future as an analysis and appraisal of current human systems.

J.S.: *So what was your first piece?*

P.H.: *Codes, Fruits & Parasites*—a piece I've come back to again recently. It's a trinity that can be applied to all systems—biological, mental and mechanical—and that punctuates my work.

J.S.: *What form is it in?*

Using natural elements—branches and fruits—I worked on the notion of coding and mutations using a visual device that combines fruits, parasites and branch totems. The branches are engraved with layers of motifs, like certain minarets in Central Asia. Three types of motifs are used to create the links between the micro world and the macro world—those belonging to the codes of the microcosm (cells, atoms and particles), those belonging to macrocosm (stars and stellar waves) and finally those that come from purely geometrical mathematics, in which I perceive a spiritual and metaphysical dimension. For me, there are strong links between oriental art—especially the ornamental motifs of religious architecture—and the discoveries and representations of the digital in biology and cosmology. Through the mathematics of motif, I attempt to depict a code that combines all of these elements. I don't think I'm looking for syncretism, but rather I'm on the trail of the mystery of a code and what these different representations hint at. The surface of fruits is also a motif—though special this time—chosen from among the three types the sticks form.

J.S.: *How would you describe your artistic process?*

P.H.: I'm passionate about the era we're living in. We are at an unprecedented historical tipping point, the difference being technological acceleration how it affects our limits. My work talks about these mechanisms, these systems of forces driving us toward a breaking point. That's why I try to create new materials and new pictorial and sculptural poses that relate to our times. When I use new technologies, it's so that I can push them to their breaking point—to collapse—, and then tear them apart and reshape them so that finally I can work them using a classic approach. Then I apply the codes of a more or less classical artistic vocabulary—sculptures and drawings for the most part—to these new textures and materials. I spend my time working on lights, details of color, the subject's position, ratios of volume in space—all those things artists have been doing for a long time.

J.S.: *How do you work? Do you approach your work like a scientist in a laboratory or in a more "classic" way, in a workshop?*

I work these new materials in classic way; each composition, detail, color and shape requires a lot of attention. I try to find a symbiotic relationship between thought and material, between an idea and its realization, almost like an ecosystem whose purpose is founded on the relationship of different interdependent elements and their synergy. It is an approach that is both empirical and intuitive. Today, I still don't see any real antagonism between a scientific approach and an artistic one. In their developmental states, both disciplines attempt to explain or interpret reality—a reality for which, in both case, there is no definitive answer.

J.S.: *Viruses are a recurrent theme in your work—a metaphor for a modern world that vacillates between AIDS and viruses circulating on the internet. Why this insistence on an impending threat?*

P.H.: I did do a series on viruses, but I don't think it's a recurrent theme in my work, except in the sense of the error that works its way into any system. What interests me most today with this whole virus thing is the matrix dimension, its power of transformation—this ability to throw systems out of gear and create new entities. To me, the "virus object" seems less important than its strength.

J.S.: *Genetic modification and cloning are also themes in your work. What body is it—a post-human or supernatural one?*

P.H.: It is a body free of physical constraints and a space-time supra-evolutionary framework—a genetically modified body assisted by nanotechnologies. It's not going to be tomorrow but our current scientific knowledge has already allowed us to double our life expectancy. In addition to this temporal empowerment, this new body has also freed itself of the constraints of space. The internet already offers us a form of ubiquity of information and knowledge. I think that this "post-human" will mark a new era in the evolution of humanity and the departure point for a new relationship with nature. But I don't have the slightest idea what it will be like. I'm not a futurologist. What interests me is the present as the tipping point of our civilization and of relationship to reality, to ourselves and to nature as well.

J.S.: *In a world where the line between virtual and real is becoming increasingly blurred, what is your reality? What does virtual mean today?*

P.H.: To tell you the truth, I don't necessarily see any antagonism between reality and virtuality. Today we are living in an era of hyper-information, which is a subtle combination of material and thought, animate and inanimate, virtual and real. And the history of life—and that of man—is really only about information, when it comes down to it. The simplest cellular systems function based on the principles of the transmission of information. It is these same exchanges of information that enable species' mutation and adaptation. With the internet, we are already in a system of global, instantaneous information.

On the same theme, I love this quote by science fiction writer Philip K. Dick: "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away."

J.S.: *For your digital "paintings" and your sculptures, you sometimes use parts of images of your own body in a more or less allusive way; there is no mention of you in the titles of your works. I also know that you sometimes mix body parts belonging to different people, like veritable digital "grafts". But sometimes the reference to your body is clear. I'm referring specifically to your "self portraits", a series of works in progress that are absolutely spectacular, where the nude body always appears decapitated. What exactly is this about?*

There is a real choreography to this work. What sense do these poses and sometimes violent twists and strains you subject your body have?

P.H.: I wanted to do self portraits and I was working on the idea of a series. The official starting point was kind of a mistake, an anomaly that I immediately took a liking to. Several tries, but also the state I felt I was in, led me to use a slightly systematic and naturalist study with regard to the poses and conditions for capturing the movement I chose. For this project I also worked with a theater actor and a choreographer, as well as engineers. We started by completely exhausting a human body so that we could then put it in the different positions we'd chosen for their expressiveness and diversity. This raw material seemed interesting and rich for its quality of anxiety. Paradoxically, although I initially tried to sketch it, a choreographic dimension connected to the opposition of direction in the body re-emerged from these "primitive" subjects. The fixing of an absolutely real, violent pose twisting or straining created this feeling of choreography.

J.S.: *Animals are a recurrent theme in your work, in pure, idealized forms. What do these transformed creatures represent?*

P.H.: They are myths. I am interested in animals' relationship with us. They connect us with those deeper parts of our psyche—our reptilian brain—, with our atavistic fears pushed to the paroxysm of their expression via cinema. Our fears have been ultra-popularized and oversized—a universal, almost instantaneous meta-myth. At a time when the real has been called into question and is being re-examined by virtual worlds, it is interesting to put this instinctual dimension—so vital to our existence and undoubtedly the very foundations of the systems in which we live—back into perspective.

J.S.: *Is it a commentary on the extension of nature?*

P.H.: It's the extension of nature into the domain of human emotions and the psyche. This process is not without consequences for nature and, in time, our species.

J.S.: *But what role does art play in society, then?*

P.H.: I believe in the idea that a work can influence a person's perspective, thus playing a decisive role in the development of our society.

J.S.: *Your work depicts a world in transformation. What transformations are you talking about?*

P.H.: I am neither a sociologist nor a journalist. What interests me is not the long list of bio-technical-socio-economic changes of which we are observers and occasionally actors, but rather their impact on the way we perceive the world and ourselves.

J.S.: *Electronic drawing seems to be the common thread in your vocabulary. What is your relationship to drawing?*

P.H.: For the electronic drawings, I was trying to develop a new pictorial material that was relative to our times—irregular, mutating, in construction and deconstruction, seeking its own space and new contours. So I threw the computers off track, to create a new texture that is both chaotic and organized. I was mostly interested in accident and error, which then began to appear randomly. This way of appearing and of handling errors creates an organic, biological heartbeat in this moment of struggle between "order and chaos". This tension then dialogues with the video loop, which acts as a frame—but a temporal one. We could almost talk about a motif, or mathematics, that tries to integrate the random and the organic.

J.S.: *Concerning these loops in your perpetual motion pieces, is there any beginning or end?*

P.H.: I favor a meditative relationship with the image, the object. In my childhood room I had Samarkand rugs on the walls. I could spend hours looking at the geometrical organization and end up getting lost in them, traveling inside of them, as though my spirit had been sucked in—trapped even—by the attention and concentration given to the logic of the pattern, letting something else, something fragile and light, roam freely. I undoubtedly try to find this state in certain works of mine, and I'm convinced that any narrative process is an obstacle on this path. There is therefore no beginning and no end, but more like a state of temporal weightlessness. Like for a classic painting, I am not seeking tension related to the unfolding of a linear story, but rather a series of different levels on which a piece can be read.

J.S.: *Contrary to modern materials like digital writing, you regularly use marble for your sculptures. Of what anomaly do you speak?*

P.H.: That of life. For four billion years, the Earth knew no biological life. And suddenly amino acids appeared—the first links of life, the origin of DNA—completely upsetting the system and changing the face of the stellar object. I see the appearance of life as an anomaly, an error in an inanimate system. My work talks about this fundamental split. For more than 2,000 years this tipping point was attributed to a god creator and represented in the form of anthropomorphic marble sculptures.

J.S.: *Your frame of references seems varied and complex.*

P.H.: A mix of classical and popular, eastern and western references that have contributed to the world today. I like cross references—with all their antagonism and paradoxes—for the spaces of uncertainty and freedom they afford me.

J.S.: *What are the next steps in your mental laboratory?*

P.H.: My eastern roots have influenced my work until now without me making explicit reference to them, except occasionally. I am not looking to develop some kind of orientalism. Let's just say that I recently understood the importance of my heritage in my work, and that this shift in my consciousness has invariably had an impact on how I will continue to make these worlds converse. More specifically, I am plan to continue working on the four series I am currently working on, and that I see as four tools for exploration and drilling, – fallible and likely to be thrown off course. As error is an integral part of the process I'm developing, the direction, even when it's been chosen, continues to develop in an organic, fluctuating, unpredictable way.

Le jeu des particules

David Rosenberg

It all started with a stick adorned with geometrical signs, evoking a sceptre or measurement tool as much as a totem or pillar. It is an enigmatic work, at once tribal and modern, ritualistic and linguistic—a nomad object that seems to have the power to travel through different epochs, different places and different cultures.

This work – Pascal Haudressy first piece – which could likewise call to mind Cadere's sticks or certain Land Art works, was taken up and reworked several times until finding its definitive form as well as its title—Codes, Fruits and Parasites. It is now an installation comprised of a collection of tree branches painted in a light color and adorned with finely engraved abstract motifs. Like tall minarets, the sticks are fixed to the wall vertically and spaced at regular intervals. The “fruit” is randomly scattered on the ground, like a shower of tiny meteorites. Again we sense some ancient, native thought infusing in it and diffusing itself all around.

According to the artist, the engraved symbols – like scales or some kind of proto-language based on rhythm, numbers and geometry – refer to the three levels of the being: the atomic/organic world (especially DNA, the common origin of all living matter), that of cosmic space and finally that of symbolic thought embellished with images.

Nature, code and mutation—the first markers of reflection have been laid. The dynamic model of living matter and its fundamental attributes (the ability to reproduce, multiply and transform) serves as a guide and basis for thought on the status and nature of artistic forms. It also serves, as we will see further on, in the quest for and development of new “pictorial material”—a chaotic yet ordered medium in phase with modern images and issues.

In contrast to this totemic “linguistic” work, the artist also in the early stages of a sculpture piece entitled May Be God—a dark, mute, mineral object, a meteorite whose unformed surface allows the ghost of a motif or organized pattern to emerge in certain places. Seemingly inert, forever sealed, it encapsulates the memory of an interminable astral journey. According to recent scientific theory, this was the catalyst for the process that resulted in the appearance of life on earth. For Haudressy, it is above all a metaphor for that disruptive element inherent to all systems, be they organic, psychological or symbolic, a marker that signals and allows for the appearance of new characteristics or potential.

In a completely different register, Shark tackles the question of primordial forms of life from the perspective of the animal figure. The piece is comprised of a shark made of translucent resin and a video projection system, as though the fixed sculpture were casting its undulating shadow on the wall.

Caricaturized by the big screen, made sacred or attributed with miraculous hypothetical virtues according to certain cultures, popular representations of the shark – one of the planet's earliest inhabitants – obviously say a lot more about us than the animal itself. The artist decants these fallacious representations, exploring the deeper levels of the psyche where our atavistic fears related to animality lie.

This trio of works, each constituting a kind of link between nature and technology, distant past and present, and science and myth, form the basis for the work presented here.

The origin of his work: a work on origins

Simply put, the word “origin” here refers above all to a motif—a web of references, ideas and personal experiences inextricably linked to Pascal Haudressy's Tartar origins and his mother's family. Samarkand and Uzbek art serve as a kind of landmark, roots—a spiritual heritage the artist has openly laid claim to.

The forms and artistic language developed in this part of the world, where the gap between east and west, between orthodox religion, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, and between the Arab, Cyrillic, Latin and Turkish alphabets are bridged, were instrumental in shaping his early esthetic background as well as his research today.

Souvenirs: a blue silk bedspread and an Uzbek tapestry decorate a child's room. Delights to the eye: the child often allows himself to be drawn in by the play of the fabric, light and shimmer.

In Samarkand our perspective blurs and deepens upon beholding the intricate architecture and its innumerable ornaments. Everything is of a vibrant fixity; interlacing creates and destroys elusive motifs. Everywhere – on the ground, the walls, the surfaces of the cupolas – one finds a silent, abstract art that hums with words and gives rise to piercing visions. Mosaics prefigure our pixelled images. The fabrics with their moiré sheen and rugs with their overlapping motifs draw our eye in, capturing and animating it with kaleidoscopic movement.

We are in the heart of an abstract, mathematical, spiritual universe founded on rhythm and repetition, where the eye is no longer a departure point from which “images” are governed, but a melting pot in which they form and dissolve.

A hypnotic or meditative geometry—that's how Pascal Haudressy describes what lies at the source of the first series of works presented here. Simply entitled *Organs*, the work is comprised of a series of video loops where each organ – heart, brain and lungs – is represented alone using a specific color – red, blue or green – on a black background. The works can also be combined into diptychs and triptychs. From a pictorial perspective they are reminiscent of medical imagery, but the similarity stops there. With these “drawings,” it is more a question of process, cycle, rhythm, than of anatomical accuracy.

Visual enlightenment: the eye is cradled by the double movement of the organ itself (the diastole/systole of the heart, inhale/exhale of the lungs or neuronal activity) and that of the constant reconfiguration of the drawings themselves.

Formation, deformation, information: flows of images and the ceaseless calculations that subtend them. A cyclical movement, like that of waves and a vibrant silhouette floating as though in a state of weightlessness.

To produce this new pictorial material, at once chaotic and ordered, Haudressy “throws off” his computer by introducing glitches (electronic failures) and bugs that then bring about uncontrolled changes to the image. Alterations, transformations, deformations—the computer must constantly recalculate the coordinates of each point or pixel. In a perpetually repeating process, the drawing no longer produces a frozen pattern but forms in flux.

This work is somewhat reminiscent of Julie Mehretu's dynamic and fractal approach to drawing used by, of Jorinde Voigt's graphs or Giacometti's “additive” method, which captured the figure not through definite lines but rather a series of overlapping approximations. We might also mention more distance artistic affiliations, like the “Life Forms” software Merce Cunningham used to create his choreographies or OuLiPo's research—prototypes of art that generates changing patterns.

Another series entitled *Tableaux*, inspired by group of paintings that are emblematic of the history of eastern and western painting (Caravaggio's Saint Francis in meditation and Narcissus (the latter whose author is still open to debate), Velasquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X and Mehmet Siyah Kalem's jinn, a genie-like supernatural being) uses this same generative approach. The choice of figures was clearly no accident: that of Narcissus symbolizes the circularity of the gaze, Saint Francis recalls its horizons and disappearance, the Pope infers its coercion through the staging of power and the jinn embodies its supernatural dimension.

In each case, the figure is at rest, animated by only the imperceptible movement of modelled breathing—movements previously recorded on live models using sensitive captors. Movement has, in the most literal sense of the term, been breathed into the images. As the result of their properties and pixel combinations we once again find this polarity—the activity of the subject versus the activity of the medium.

This face-to-face with the painting is another way of deepening Haudressy's paradoxical belief that it is the fixity of images that is illusory, not their "movement." His techniques work to confirm this principle and develop the integrity of its impact both artistically and pictorially.

Particle play

For Haudressy, sculpture is the indissociable counterpart of his experience when it comes to the virtual and immaterial. Like a pendulum, his research in this domain fluctuates between the dimension of body and subjectivity and that of the final substrate of matter (atoms, elementary particles and DNA). There is the body of works in which the artist uses his own body to create figures "in tension" and, at the opposite extreme, a series of marble pieces displaying structures "in balance."

The first series of works uses a quasi-choreographic approach, a blind method whereby Haudressy discovers and experiments with different poses to create "arcs of tension." The gaze gives way to a diffuse feeling, a sensation of corporeality. The entire face is to the point of erasure, as though sucked away by an abysmal force. The face – the self-portrait's *raison d'être* –, its features and its expression disappear and are replaced by extreme "distortion." It is an anamorphosis without response—irreversible; no mirror allows us to recover the absent image. Effort or suffering, all that is left is a tripod body—a curious figure in a curious pose.

The other body of works presented here follows a different approach. They are arborescent structures, complex networks of Carrare marble spheres – all touching one another – spreading out into space. The choice of material is obviously not neutral; it stems from the paradoxical desire to connect with and at the same time to break from a history of religious sculpture and representations of the divine. These spheres are fragments of the DNA molecule. But the marble spheres, their multiple connections, their a-gravitational structure – like an arch or a bridge – offer symbolic plasticity that in fact extends to every scope and every level of the material.

No obvious mechanism or device allows us to understand how this sculpture remains standing. We do not know exactly what holds these planetoids together; we simply feel the force that attracts and unites them.

From the endless game of particles are all aggregates, forms and images born.

This work takes the form of the primordial components of the matter that composes it, as well as assuming that of the sidereal space in which it has been erected. Like us, it is link between multiple dimensions. It is matter-thought, plasticity—a mirror where the minute and immense – the atom and the cosmos – are reflected, like in the dance, music and the architecture of Samarkand.