



Le Présent

Bruno Serralongue feat.

Mégane Brauer
Burn~Août
François Curlet
Suzanne Husky

14 January — 3 March 2024

Opening 14 January 2024, 2 — 6 PM

The courgette

A text by Marie Canet. English translation by Tom Smith.

It was the end of summer. Producers were looking for a sinister location to shoot a scene with zombies. The housing estate was the perfect setting. With Lucie, we wanted to see Brad Pitt save the world. So we tried to pass ourselves off as extras, but it didn't work. To keep our group away, the council had hired a private security company. In response we organised a party: music and a bonfire in the middle of the estate. We danced all night while the industry's casual workers struggled to stage an apocalyptic world threatened by a global pandemic that was supposed to cause total panic...¹ What could be better than an utopian complex that had fallen into abandonment to showcase the world's disasters? Impatience was spreading, but for us, time was on our side, and we embraced it. We had been occupying Heygate Estate for two years already. The vast neo-brutalist complex, located south of the Thames behind Elephant and Castle station, was inaugurated in 1974 to provide pleasant living spaces for low-income residents. Almost twenty years later the city announced its plans to demolish the complex due to the social anxieties that such projects generated. At the centre of the site, designed with 1200 homes, there were large green spaces resembling communal gardens. We gardened there together to delay the destruction of the site. Some put a lot of artistry into it while others became experts in legal action in an attempt to slow down the course of capitalism. Some counted the trees and argued that bats also lived here, providing evidence of the need to preserve these living spaces. Potatoes were growing. We attended public consultations in order to occupy all spaces, especially since some truly relied on these gardens to feed themselves. Our group opposed the planned gentrification of the neighbourhood. We weren't sitting in front of screens commenting on the disaster or taking action to seize power; we had nothing to sell. We were, in fact, an interesting anecdote. A journalist had asked Pablo if he thought we had a chance to win. Sitting in the grass and playing with a vegetable, he had replied with false melancholy and a smile, «We won't beat capitalism with a courgette...»

And this is kind of what is at stake here.

The courgette

The intertwining of time and the means of action to prevent the scheduled destructions.

¹ World War Z, 2013, directed by Marc Forster

At the time I tell this story, similar events are unfolding in the South River forest in Atlanta, in Lützerath, Germany, in Arlon, Belgium, or just nearby in Aubervilliers. The Gardens of Virtues are historical community gardens that allowed for a certain degree of food self-sufficiency, and they are gradually being destroyed. Gardeners are fighting for their courgettes, courgettes in hand, against urban and real estate projects fuelled by the upcoming Olympics. Like Heygate, this event highlights how land and food are expropriated alongside the destruction of cultures, groups, and histories. Social history and the struggle for food sovereignty (and the entire chain of natural interdependency that it is subjected to) are intertwined. No one believes in the myth of the horn of plenty anymore, yet this deceptive image of abundance periodically resurfaces from the ground — simultaneously destroying ecosystems and food chains. Capitalism obviously has an interest in making people believe that its dynamics are endless. It perpetually reinvents the apparatus to reactivate the myth. And others deconstruct it, with supporting evidence.

The artist and activist Suzanne Husky develops variations of the artistic tradition of pastorals from an anti-capitalist perspective. In the series *ZAC* (Commercial Activity Zone), she explores the ideology behind a commercial language often marked by cynicism and aesthetic violence. Using ceramic, she reproduces the gigantic warehouses installed on the outskirts of cities - usually targeted at poor workers - and transforms them into small totems of consumerism. They resemble jewellery boxes adorned with destroyed flowers and with signs bearing names that are just as promising as they are deceptive: Feu Vert, Gémô, Auchan... These French and globalised consumption spaces manage to aesthetically and culturally homogenise various geographical territories. Sleeping in a Formule 1 hotel and not knowing in the morning which city we are in. Compensating for the anxiety of welcoming a newborn at Bébé 9. Accepting to practically participate in the functioning of industries that one morally condemns and preemptively harming the desired baby...

François Curlet similarly explores the vocabularies of capitalism and its absurd or authoritarian visual trends. In 2012, he produced a series of objects recreating the logos of major discount retail brands with Formica furniture purchased from Emmaüs. It results in an arid and pathetic body of works: arid because they reflect the social violence that is constantly imposed on the poorest populations; pathetic because these passive-aggressive art objects duplicate the brutality of the world. In 2016, he paid tribute to the dismantling of the McDonald's in the city of Millau by the Confédération Paysanne led by José Bové and the Syndicat des producteurs de lait de brebis (Sheep Milk Producers Union). The artist takes the logo of the fast-food chain, flips it, turns it into a lyre - an object whose primary function, in mythology, was to support oral transmission... The echo of the peasant uprising against the fast-food giant was global. This historical uprising allowed us to perceive, through the lense of a local protest, the strength and effectiveness of direct action and alter-globalist ethics. It spread like wildfire.

Political and aesthetic struggles are intertwined. The necessity to pursue them simultaneously, confronting difficulties and contradictions, is undoubtedly the complex project faced by the artists featured in this exhibition. The themes revolve around violence, poverty, civic engagement in the fight against widespread precarity, without relinquishing the social and linguistic challenges of beauty. In the collection of texts *Aux Ingrats* (To the Ungrateful), Mégane Brauer describes how public spaces, ostensibly intended for marginalised social groups, are designed against those very margins: wall coverings, benches, plants, communication supports—everything is hostile, conceived to be psychologically destructive over time. The use of primary colours, also present in advertisements for hard discount stores, is a constant, she notes, as if the poor cannot tolerate or comprehend the

ambivalence and complexity of multiple tones. She writes:

«Primary colours are often associated with us, colourblind individuals, as if subtlety eludes us. These raw, bold, simple colours are consciously or unconsciously assigned to us, by someone or something, something silly and mean, like a TF1 news broadcast. And when addressing us visually, in ads, in decors, on posters, it's often the primary colours that resurface, as if our retinas couldn't comprehend the audacity of a pearl grey or the charm of an ashy beige.»

The artist's texts address issues of extreme precarity, social violence, racism, and desire. In the series *Tous les jours* (Everyday, 2023), she creates bead paintings based on advertising images for discount consumer products such as generic multivitamin juice or unbranded, featureless hazelnut spread. The image of the object and its artificial substances, despite being desired like a mirage, appears to fade away.

The artist Bruno Serralongue has invited Suzanne Husky, Mégane Brauer, and François Curlet to participate in the exhibition *Le Présent* (The Present). Similarly, he has invited the activist publishing house Burn~Août to showcase its collections there.

I observe a kind of temporal arc in the selection of the artworks.

It spans from the early 2000s/Millau/José Bové, a megaphone for the initial alter-globalist peasant protests in France, to 2023/Sainte-Soline and the gathering of thousands of people who came to the Deux-Sèvres area to oppose the construction of mega-reservoirs. The event, like the first one, has been widely covered in national and international newspapers. Serralongue participated in the latter demonstrations. He captured photographs on the temporal periphery of the event, on the margins of the spectacular recording of the battle that allowed traditional media to capitalise on the sensationalism of clashes between police and activists. Here, the present would be this moment and this political movement that are deployed over a span of about twenty years, during which activism takes on a large scale in order to thwart the ecocidal projects jointly orchestrated by governments and industries. The present would also be this space-time continuum, on the margins of the action itself, that allows fighters to organise and contemplate political action: as seen in the image titled:

«The present (against the construction of mega-reservoirs), Sainte-Soline, Saturday 25 March 2022»

— a photograph of militant occupation composed like a historical fresco; or as in this other image titled:

«Let's organise, let's meet, discuss, invent, Naturalists of the Lands, Vendée, April 9, 2023.»

— a photograph taken during the preparations of a clandestine action. The images' captions amplify the historical dimension of their relevance and place them in the great tradition of political art. The artist stands on the margins, outside the stereotyped standards that undermine the clarity of political action, its willpower, and sometimes even divert its intention. He supports the actions and documents their organisation. Recently, he started blurring the faces of participants to protect their legal identities. He thus produces documents for the group without compromising its political message, that is, without capitalising on the action or merely offering it up for consumption. Being in the present is also a way of participating in the era, of looking at it face to face without flinching, and finding ways to hinder the perpetual temporality of programmed destruction. Political and aesthetic struggles are indeed linked

because the partisan message must find its own artistic expression in order to resist the ideological codings of state, commercial, and news propaganda. So, when La Nouvelle République, the local newspaper of the Centre region, decided to feature the direct action of the Naturalists of the Lands on its front page, the activists used an image by Bruno Serralongue to publicly illustrate their method and their struggle. On the front page of the newspaper, they are seen wearing masks and boots. The caption reads:

«In Bourdet, naturalists carried out their first pro-biodiversity action in the utmost secrecy. (Photo by Naturalists of the Lands).»

The artist also supported the struggles of the gardeners of the Gardens of Virtues in Aubervilliers. He photographed their tools and barricades made of hay bales, which may seem insignificant in comparison to the urban and financial decisions that govern the organisation of Greater Paris: courgettes... which, despite their apparent docility as domestic and utilitarian objects, can prove to be highly effective. Remember: the project for the mega complex EuropaCity, planned in Val d'Oise, Gonesse, on 280 hectares of fertile agricultural land, has failed. It was supposed to be the largest shopping center in Europe, with cultural venues and amusement parks, including a ski slope. Its opening was scheduled for this year. Ten years of struggle and occupation by the activists, hundreds of expropriations, plants, and lives uprooted, like the cherry tree in Aubervilliers. The photograph that immortalises it is captioned by the artist:

«This cherry tree, at the base of which was attached a sign that read «I am a 30-year-old cherry tree, and I want to live,» was cut down in September 2021 to make way for the construction of a training pool for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, Jardin ouvrier des Vertus, Aubervilliers, June 19, 2021.»

A close shot on the green tree. It is covered with red fruits; it is abundant. It is about time, it is beautiful, and today it is missing.