

CHRISTIAN PATRACCHINI

Monograph by Richard Skinner

'Boredom is deep and misterious.' Erik Satie

The audience is waiting. Around 50 people are gathered into a small gallery, lining the white walls, waiting in silence, tense and uncomfortable. There is nothing else in the gallery except a glass of milk on the floor. The date is November 2008 and the location is the Nolia Gallery, just off the Blackfriars Road, London. We are waiting for a performance to be given by Christian Patracchini.

Eventually, he makes an entrance into the gallery space, wearing nothing but a pair of off-white long johns. He is walking backwards, holding a piece of tripe. I know it is a piece of tripe because he has told me so. He stops and turns around, facing the glass of milk. He puts the tripe down and picks up the glass. Putting the glass to his lips, he drinks, but also lets the milk cascade down his front, his long johns and onto the floor. When the glass is empty, he puts it down and walks to a corner of the gallery. We don't know what's going to happen next but, unbeknownst to us, he has already placed a small square mirror there. He picks up the mirror and we notice that it has holes drilled into it for a pair of eyes. Christian puts the mirror to his face, and approaches a member of the audience very slowly, looking at them through the holes. I try to picture what it must be like to be approached like this. As he does so, you must be seeing yourself becoming larger and larger in the mirror, but with Christian's eyes looking at you, not your own. The effect must be very unsettling. I am hoping he won't approach me and, luckily, he doesn't. He gestures that another member should study their neighbour through the mirror and then pass it on for their neighbour to do the same. As they do this, they do so with a sense of bewilderment, and Christian slowly

makes his way out of the gallery. After he has disappeared for a few minutes, it becomes obvious that he is not returning. Nervous clapping starts, then stops, and we all disperse, not sure of what we have just witnessed or been a part of.

'Just wait and something comes.' Christian Boltanski

I have known Christian since 1999, which is when he first arrived in London from Adria. Since then, we have become very close friends, meeting on a regular basis to touch base, exchange ideas and to assess where we are with our work. Our meetings have become a necessary part of our lives. In our discussions, a few issues have repeatedly cropped up, issues that strike at the heart of what it means for Christian, and myself, to be an artist.

Perhaps the most central of these is the degree to which he feels he should or shouldn't ingratiate himself for his work. Christian hasn't shunned opportunities that have come his way, but he has been careful to select only those invitations that he feels will develop and advance his work and his connection to it. Of course, as any artist, he wants people to see his work, but he has never striven for great recognition or financial reward. Quite the opposite, in fact. In this sense, Christian is the best embodiment I know of a person whose life and work are inextricably bound.

And then there are the issues of art itself. 'Maximalism' or minimalism? Showman or observer? This is an area where he and I agree more often than not. On the whole, we share the same sensibilities in our attitudes and approaches to art. We both feel a strong sense that art should be pure. It has to come from the right place, a place deep inside oneself. If you make art to make money, you're finished; your reasons for producing work have to be more personally risky than that. The more you dedicate yourself to your work, regardless of the

reward, the greater the chance of success. If there is no risk on those terms, there is no reward, and what you risk reveals what you value.

Many of the artists that Christian prefers are the same as those that I do: Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein, Iannis Xenakis, John Cage, Fernando Pessoa. Still, silent, simple. The work should, we agree, be as simple as possible - much better to use simple images to convey complex ideas than *vice versa*. Always looking for ways to reduce, not expand. Finding the essence. Christian's work is simplicity itself, which may sound easy to achieve, but it is not. I have seen how much thought, preparation and analysis have gone into a piece by Christian before it is performed. He is a perfectionist and sees no reason to do things differently, and I entirely agree. Of course, this presents problems. Occasionally, Christian has reached an impasse when developing an idea for a piece and has had to change radically or even abandon his original idea. But that is all part of the process. A quotation of Erik Satie's has always resonated very strongly with both of us: 'Boredom is deep and mysterious'. Impasses are thresholds, they are just invitations for you to do better, they are doorways which, when passed through, change utterly the landscape, usually for the better.

'A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.' Franz Kafka

As dedicated as he is to his work, however, I wouldn't be at all surprised if Christian suddenly announced one day that he was going to give up art for good. It is not a given that he will pursue this line of enquiry for the rest of his life, and part of our discussions is to assess continually where we are and how we wish to proceed. Christian is a very organic artist, prone to choices that others would find quixotic, bloody-minded even, but always right, in the end. Of course they are right; he is his own man. I admire and respect him

enormously because such diffidence in the face of our corporate culture takes great courage and commitment. He is unwavering in his determination to find ways of enriching his life and discovering new forms of expression and, regardless of its outcome, that alone should be applauded.