



**jean-jacques lebel, *soulèvements***

**curator: Jean de Loisy**

Jean-Jacques Lebel has been exhibiting, writing, editing, coordinating and taking part in collective actions since 1955. First and foremost an artist, he is also an organiser of demonstrations, exhibitions and international festivals, a poet, theorist and political activist. He discovers and conveys. None of the forms his life as an "inspired agitator" has taken can be dissociated from his work as an artist.

*Soulèvements (Insurrections)* at la maison rouge presents each of the facets of this unconventional character. The exhibition endeavours to "reconstruct a psychic mood made of social, artistic, political, sexual, intellectual, collective and individual activities and presented in the form of a barricade, knowing that it can only be transient." (JL).

The seventh showing of a private collection at la maison rouge, *Jean-Jacques Lebel, Soulèvements*, curated with Jean de Loisy, differs radically from previous exhibitions as the works form a collection not in the traditional sense but from an anthropological stance. By combining his own work and works by his friends with objects from every era and civilisation, Lebel's collection becomes a mind in action, materialised in the objects in which it finds sustenance.

Guided by curiosity, friendship and chance, at the homes of his artist, poet and philosopher friends, at flea markets, galleries, auction rooms, museums and, most of all, in life, Lebel's critical eye and mind are on constant alert. Objects, instruments and works have the power to intrigue and he is willingly engulfed by this force, irrespective of their origin, financial value or how famous their creator might be. Jean-Jacques Lebel gleans works "among the chaos of the world to then refound it. This is an aesthetic and ultimately political project," as Dominique Païni rightly observes in the book which la maison rouge has published to coincide with the exhibition.

*Soulèvements* shows installations by Lebel together with some of the works and objects that are a part of his every day. It reveals the scope of his engagements. Each section has a theme and each theme corresponds to one of Lebel's centres of interest or activities. Whether his own creations or collected by him, together these works form a *montrage*, an expression Lebel often uses and which is a compound of the French *montage* meaning a film edit and *montrer* meaning to show. This *montrage* invites visitors to see in a different way, to leave aside ideological presuppositions and look at the everyday anew: to see art as a process and an object of thought.

The outstretched arm of a Lobi votive statuette (Burkina Faso) symbolically marks the entrance to "Lebel's labyrinth." It places the exhibition under the auspices of indigenous art and *la pensée sauvage* (the savage mind), a notion defined by

Claude Levi-Strauss to describe untamed thought that has not been bridled by "asphyxiating culture" and which does not subordinate the creative process to market forces.

### **The art of the barricade**

For Jean-Jacques Lebel, there can be no art without rebellion. *Soulèvements* advocates revolt, insubordination and dissidence as a *modus operandi*.

This section opens with *Parfum de grève générale*, a collage by Lebel, dated 1960. This "smell of a general strike" looks ahead to the uprisings of May '68 in which Lebel was actively involved, as a member of the *Mouvement du 22 mars* and of the *Noir et rouge* anarchist group. The Paris Commune leads us into the exhibition, with references to the anarchists Louise Michel and Ravachol, and to the utopian socialist Charles Fourier who proposed a new order based on cooperation and community. Portraits of these heralds of universal radicalism are hung opposite historical documents, collected by Lebel, and photographs of barricades during the Commune, the Spanish Revolution, and popular uprisings in Paris in 1944 and in May '68, and in Sao Paulo in 2009. The spirit of resistance and civil disobedience is at its height. Lebel sees these barricades as installations. Anonymous, spontaneous, collective and ephemeral, they are a "concentration of protean sculpture [...], a *Merzbau* that descends upon the social landscape."

Whether political, social or artistic, whether a barricade or a performance, Lebel is convinced that collective actions convey a dynamic that far exceeds the sum of the subjective intentions of which they are composed.

These images of barricades, a genealogy of subversive memory, are hung under an installation by Lebel entitled *Montée/Descente André Breton* (Rise/Descent André Breton). Hammers, mallets and gaping handbags resemble an ominous

crowd of insurgents. It forms the threshold to the exhibition; the crossing of the barricade.

Ending this section, Marat's maxim, *la liberté ou la mort*, liberty or death, as dictated by Lebel to Ben during a performance, sets the tone. Lebel can tolerate no half-hearted ideas, no compromise. La maison rouge has given Lebel *carte blanche* and, in doing so, a platform to express without restraint his freedom of thought and speech, his irrepressible desire for *insurrection*.

At the end of the corridor, Shiraga's painting imposes its immediate "physical" presence. A member of the Japanese Gutai movement, founded in 1954, Shiraga invented new means of producing art. This painting results from a bodily confrontation with the pictorial medium, as the canvas is laid on the floor and paint applied with the feet. The purpose is not to transform colour but to give it life through a process of "direct materialisation." Such interaction between art and life is central to Lebel's artistic and political strategies.

### **Visual poetry**

*Soulèvements* is informed by poets and poetry, and by their efforts to "give new meaning to the words of the tribe," as Mallarmé wrote. Even, as Lebel himself says, to "blow up language!". Himself a poet, a publisher of poetry reviews (*Front Unique* from 1955), a translator of Beat Generation poets including Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Gregory Corso, and the creator of nomadic "action poetry" festivals from *La Libre Expression* in 1964 to *Polyphonix* in 1979, Lebel has collected portraits of his favourite poets for many years. Ezra Pound, Charles Baudelaire, William Burroughs, Victor Hugo, Guillaume Apollinaire, Jack Kerouac, Thelonius Monk, Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg and André Breton: their likenesses gather in a mental pantheon.

Lebel is drawn instinctively towards artist-poets whom he describes as "venturing beyond the tracks" and resisting academic classification. Their work, these inherently experimental "laboratory zones," belong neither to literature in the strict sense nor to art. Their logic lies elsewhere and as such they are glossed over by specialists in either field, whether René Char's painted stones or pictorial works by Victor Hugo. Lebel's interest in Hugo goes back over thirty years; he was the subject of two exhibitions which Lebel organised in 1993 and 2000. Hugo's status as a giant of French literature has overshadowed his production as a visual artist, despite the importance of his pictorial works. For Lebel, Hugo's art prefigures action painting. "Pollock and Kooning never imitated Hugo. Their paths intersected, without their realising, a century later." (JLL).

Hung opposite Hugo are other poet-artists, from Charles Baudelaire to Serge Pey's illustrated and inscribed batons by way of Tristan Tzara, Henry Miller, Paul Valery, Guillaume Apollinaire and the poets of the American Beat Generation.

Leading off this group of works are an exceptional ensemble of "exquisite corpses" or picture consequences, a technique invented by the Surrealists. They introduce an element of play; most of all, they echo the "collective assemblages of enunciation," a concept defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari that is central to Lebel's work. First played in 1925, the "exquisite corpse" is a "game of folded paper in which several people compose a sentence or a drawing, each unaware of the preceding contribution or contributions" (*Abridged Dictionary of Surrealism*). It is a subversive form of artistic production as it eliminates harmony of style and signature, both fundamental criteria in the art market, and replaces them with an *egregore*, a "human group whose personality differs from that of the individuals that compose it." (Pierre Mabille). Lebel is drawn to the unpredictable "consequence" of these many-handed (and many-headed) works, and to their ability to free the mind's metaphorical capacity and provoke the

production and projection of images. Lebel himself took part in these collaborative games, illustrated by the "exquisite corpse" he created with Frédéric Pardo, and elsewhere in the exhibition by the drawings and paintings he produced with Wilfredo Lam, Erró, Allen Ginsberg, André Breton, Camilla Adami and Peter Saul.

### **metamorphoses**

The difference between a "hanging" and a *montrage* is clear in the way Jean-Jacques Lebel and Jean de Loisy have chosen to present the works. Objects which would not normally be seen together in museums or books, but which "in [Jean-Jacques Lebel's] mind have the same implications and functioning and which are mutually intensified," are placed side by side. The visitor becomes a part of this construction. As active participants, we must ourselves imagine the links that exist between artists and forms.

Faces behind masks, masks behind faces. What connects the different "facialities" embodied in these works? *Flora*, one of the last composite heads by the Mannerist painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo, converses with a portrait of *Dora Maar*, revisited by Antonio Saura in a profane reference to Picasso's painting. The works around them transgress the boundaries between mechanical and living, human, animal and vegetable, past and present, imaginable and visible. An Etoi crest mask with male and female heads stands over Jean Tinguely's imaginary portrait of a "philosopher." Our brain is thus composed of three symmetrical points: it sees a face in a landscape by Apollinaire or in a decorative composition by the mediumistic artist Augustin Lesage, in Erró's *Mecamask* or in the female stomach mask that is used in initiation rituals for young Makonde men (Tanzania-Mozambique).

At the far end of the room, Jean-Jacques Lebel's video installation, *Les Avatars de Vénus*, draws the visitor deep into the question of absolute beauty, the concept of *vénusté* put forward by Pierre Klossowski. This installation echoes the collection of images of Venus which Lebel began forty years ago for his ongoing work *Reliquaire pour un culte de Vénus* (Shrine for Venus Worship), the 24th version of which is also presented here. It uses morphing to show the goddess of love in continual metamorphosis; a condensing of the feminine constant. "Woman as a form endures through different styles and registers of representation, different modes of expression, different levels and qualities of inspiration, from prehistoric Venuses such as the Venus of Willendorf to truckers' pin-ups, from masterpieces by the great painters of the past to sex-shop pornography, from pottery and primitive sculptures to computer-generated images by way of engraving, drawing, photography and film, on every continent, in every culture and in every era. The "woman-form" resists all." (Alain Fleischer). Visitors can wander in and out of the screens, which are hung to form an open cube.

From her corner, Lebel's phantom *Statue of Liberty*, a tribute to Breton and Duchamp, two major artists of the twentieth century whom Lebel knew from childhood, silently watches these transformations.

### **hallucinatory perception**

Hallucinogenic substances came into widespread use among scientific, artistic and literary circles of the mid-nineteenth century. Baudelaire's *Les Paradis artificiels* relates his experiences at the *Club des Hashischins* whose members also included Gautier, Delacroix and Nerval. In the 1950s and 1960s, a number of artists used psychoactive drugs to intensify sensations and reach hallucinatory states where they could "exit themselves and shed social norms and coercive

cultural codes." (JL). Lebel's drawings done under the influence of psilocybine and depictions of hallucinatory states by Bernard Saby and Henri Michaux should be viewed as travelogues of these journeys "beyond the self." The unfocused gaze of Alberto Martini's *Opiomanes* or Picabia's *Têtes transparentes*, which illustrates a text also by Picabia with references to H, portray this bodily projection and inner vision.

More inner visions emerge, without the aid of drugs, from Leonora Carrington's enigmatic scenes and Unica Zürn's automatic drawings. The Surrealists used both these techniques in their exploration of the subconscious. The moving shadows of Isabelle Waldberg's sculpture transform this space into a mental projection that embraces each of the works within.

### **enigma**

Like the "unsmashable core of night" - Breton's description of his relationship with art - enigma is at the heart of this *montrage*. "We must accept that most of the human psyche is unconscious and therefore unexplained, enigmatic and irreducible," says Jean-Jacques Lebel. Each of the works in this section have their own enigma. Whether indigenous, ancient, modern or folk art, they all escape our immediate understanding to instead confront us with the mystery of art. Lebel has assembled these objects as an ethnologist would, viewing them as artefacts from a foreign civilisation whose meaning has yet to be deciphered. *La Chasse à la chouette* (Hunting the Owl), an eighteenth-century allegorical painting, keeps its mystery intact, as does the sacrificial rite taking place inside the twelve houses of the zodiac in Victor Brauner's vast "esoteric" painting.

The nocturnal face of art is shown in Johann Heinrich Füssli's two-sided drawing. The front depicts an ambiguous character holding a knife (probably Lady Macbeth). The reverse side shows an allegoric scene of the artist being sculpted

by the incarnation of his own imagination. Another two-headed figure, this time a small Easter Island statue sculpted from sacred wood (toromiro), looks across to a mantelpiece, on and around which are paintings and sculptures, arranged exactly as they are in Lebel's home. These works are engaged in private conversations beyond space and time; "academic" and "undisciplined" objects weave an enigma with neither beginning nor end from which there can be no way out other than to question reality, to let the mind wander and to admit doubt as to the "veracity" of what the eye beholds.

### **war**

Set horizontally to this section, and symbolically introduced by a Senoufo ritual statue (Burkina Faso), is an installation comprising hundreds of shell cases that were sculpted and engraved by French soldiers in the trenches during the First World War. Lebel came across his first sculpted shell case while browsing in a flea market with André Breton in the 1950s, and has gleaned them here and there ever since. Made by soldiers on both sides, these objects tell of a desperate attempt to find meaning in the midst of horror. They leave behind anonymous traces, voices raised in protest by men "living on borrowed time" as battle raged around them.

Guillaume Apollinaire, who was called up in 1916 and sent to fight in Champagne, wrote about this form of art which occupied the soldiers during their idle moments as they awaited death. In *For Madeleine Alone* he writes "Dawns I admire/Every day o hips so white/A hint of your whiteness/Lies deep in this aluminium/From which we make rings." The objects shown in a separate case are typical of this trench art, and include the ring which Apollinaire made while at the front for his fiancée, Madeleine Pagès.

### **the unseeable**

George Grosz and Otto Dix, both called up for service in 1914, experienced the horrors of war first-hand before revolting and joining the activities of Dada in Berlin. Political drawings of the 1920s denounce a deliquescent society with their depictions of soldiers, bourgeois, businessmen and prostitutes. Already condemned in a 1914 drawing by Abel Pann, antisemitism would, from 1933, have the tragic outcome we know.

Lebel observes how the notion of obscenity, or rather the unseeable, has moved from the erotic to the political field: "Power is, by definition, obscene. Political obscenity permeates events around the world, 24 hours a day. So as to differentiate it from politics, sexual obscenity is labelled ignominious and placed in quarantine, in a specific place named *the unseeable*, where visitors will choose to venture or not." Just as he spoke out against torture practiced by the French army during the Algerian War in the *Anti-procès* demonstration of 1960, here Lebel protests against the torture, mainly sexual abuse, inflicted on Iraqi prisoners of war by American soldiers in the Abu Ghraib prison and elsewhere in 2004. Over forty years separates them, yet the mechanism for producing horror ploughs on. Lebel feels we must be confronted with these images. They are shown with a painting by Blalla Hallman (the self-proclaimed "ambassador of hate") whose reprobation targets as much the Third Reich as the Vatican or capitalism, embodied by the United States. His "black paintings" of the 1990s show Hitler in blasphemous works that combine death-camp scenes with religious and pornographic imagery in order to kill "the nazi in us all." Here, art is philosophy, psychoanalysis and political action.

### **dada stirs up everything**

Dada is provocation par excellence. It is the ultimate *insurrection*. Dismantling borders and boundaries, "Dada stirs up everything!" as the title of one of the

movement's principal manifestos proclaims. Their collective actions, radicalism and breaking down of poetic language have made the Dadaists a reference for Lebel, who describes the *Dada-Messe* in Berlin (1920) and the *Procès de Maurice Barrès* (1921) mock trial as the veritable ancestors of the modern Happening.

"When it comes to revolt, we have no need of ancestors," said André Breton. No ancestors then. But we do need lights to guide us through the darkness. Lebel's collage, *Mon coeur ne bat que pour Picabia* (My Heart Beats Only For Picabia), tells us that Picabia is one of them.

Shown alongside the twelve drawings which Picabia sent to Breton in 1923 for *Littérature* are poems and some extremely rare mecanomorphic drawings. These illustrate the extensive talent of this "funny guy" to whom Lebel has devoted numerous writings and exhibitions since 1975.

The works shown opposite Picabia are a tribute to some of the Dadaists, including his friend Marcel Duchamp whose bottle-holder is hung exactly as it was in the artist's house, above a portrait of Duchamp by his sister, Suzanne Duchamp-Crotti, a photomontage by Hannah Höch and Dadaist documents.

A large display case contains a Hopi helmet mask surrounded by objects of "art sauvage" (Kachina dolls, serpents, fetishes), folk art and works by Lebel's friends (Charles Dreyfus, Takis, Daniel Pommereulle). Together they form a tongue-in-cheek installation in which the different objects appear almost in conversation. An orant figure raises her arms towards an image of Duchamp's *Grand Verre*, scatological figurines go about their business in full view of Rembrandt's *La Pisseuse*; Mickey delights in the obscene spectacle given by his neighbour; archimbolques abound... Beyond the facetious humour, these objects encompass some of the themes in Lebel's ideas and work, such as political contestation, radical criticism of religiosity, eroticism, works on multiple levels and poetic language.

## Rembrandt revisited

*La Pisseuse* (1631), Rembrandt's small etching of a urinating woman, is typical of the everyday or bawdy figures that occur frequently in paintings of the Dutch school. Lebel sees this engraving as the precursor of Picasso's *La Pisseuse* (1965). She reappears as one of the characters in Picasso's play, *Le Désir attrapé par la queue* (Desire Caught by the Tail), which Lebel staged in 1967 in Gassin at the *Festival de la Libre Expression*. Transformed into a life-size sculpture and fountain, *La Pisseuse de Rembrandt* is exposed to all and sundry in the patio, in a deliberate nose-thumbing to "good taste." Lebel reminds anyone who may be shocked that the landmark work of conceptual art, Marcel Duchamp's *Fontaine*, was originally a urinal, transformed by Rose Sélavy.

## happenings

In 1960, Lebel threw a sculpture by his friend Jean Tinguely from a gondola into the Grand Canal in Venice. This was *L'Enterrement de la Chose*, the burial of the thing, which historians agree is the first European Happening. He went on to stage another twenty or so, stopping in 1968 as he felt that he had, partially at least, achieved his objective which was to contribute to the "Dadaisation" of society. Through their insolence and penchant for *la pensée sauvage*, Happenings such as *Pour conjurer l'esprit de catastrophe* (1962), *Déchirex* (1965), *120 minutes dédiées au divin marquis* (1966) and others left their mark on the era. They are depicted in images and extracts shown around the patio.

Posters, flyers, photos and films retrace some of these collective adventures, from the political and poetry review *Front Unique* (1955) to posters for *Polyphonix*, held for the sixtieth time in Paris on 5th to 7th November, 2009. All these events

combine poetry, films, performances, music and visual arts in an endeavour to "tear languages away from their conventional contexts and media."

### **journals of a wanderer**

All his life, Lebel has recorded his travels, interrogations, revolts, adventures, projects, love affairs, correspondences and restless wanderings in journals. Their pages are filled with drawings, paintings and writings, and illustrated with images taken from current events or from the history of art and society. These raw journals, intrinsically immune to censorship, are shown for the first time ever in public at la maison rouge.

"The books of collage are neither sketches nor studies. They are works in their own right, they are final. These objets d'art are heavy with the glut of images and printed words they enclose, shaken by the breath that brings together and superimposes, illuminated by the contrast between the origins of the materials." (Dominique Païni). Lebel's journals are as much for viewing as for reading. They relate his trail of thought, his quest for form and meaning, evolutions of style and artistic fumbblings. They are also a collage of time, as Lebel sets his journals aside to return to them long after. They are without continuity, without chronology. A palimpsest.

### **"be rhizome"**

Rhizome is a botanical term which Deleuze and Guattari turned into a philosophical concept, whereby elements structure themselves not as a subordinating hierarchy but on the contrary as an acentred system where any element can affect or influence another, irrespective of its position. Lebel made this concept his own. Rhizome becomes a trans-historic network, heavy with affects, which connects "artists and their works, all very different, all quite

remarkable, [...] beyond any constraints imposed by aesthetic or teleological considerations, in total disregard of market forces, respecting only the content and modus operandi of the individual works."

*Monument à Félix Guattari* was installed in the Forum at the Centre Pompidou in 1994 for the *Hors Limites. L'art et la vie* exhibition, organised by Jean de Loisy, as a tribute to a "battle comrade" and dear friend. This most unconventional of monuments is presented here in a new form. "The original idea was to make visible and audible the Guattari rhizome, as incarnated by a hundred like-minded companions, colleagues and friends of this important thinker, militant, psychoanalyst and writer who, with Gilles Deleuze, revolutionised political and philosophical thinking with *Anti-Œdipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, along with numerous other works of theory and criticism." (JLL).

Beneath a revolving heart that bristles with symbolic objects such as an African fetish, and surmounted by a bed that recalls his work as a psychoanalyst, Guattari's car has been transformed, by Lebel, into a curious receptacle. Exhaust pipes sprout from the engine, replaced by one of Guattari's books, like so many agitating thoughts. Fragments of "sound poetry" snatched from the streets are attached to them. Guattari observes us from inside the car, where psychotropic plants are growing. Two televisions show films by François Pain: one features interviews with Guattari and the other shows scenes from events that took place when the *Monument* was first presented at Beaubourg. As in 1994, the installation will be the site of two "collective assemblages of enunciation," on October 29th 2009 and January 14th 2010, when many of the friends and personalities who were close to Guattari will reactivate his work and thinking.

The works hung around the *Monument* are by Lebel's "clan." Many were exchanged with his artist friends and bear personal inscriptions on the front or back. Peter Saul, Erró and Esther Ferrer share one wall, united by their criticism of

the capitalist system. Other works recall Happenings (Allan Kaprow, Yoko Ono, Wolf Vostell, Carolee Schneeman, Tetsumi Kudo, Camilla Adami) Fluxus (Robert Filliou, Ben Patterson, Nam June Paik) and other friendships (Raymond Hains, Orlan, Frédéric Pardo, Carmen Calvo, Daniel Pommereulle) that have kept this rhizome alive.

Lebel often remarks that "artistic action is congenitally collective." The four-handed work he produced with Erró, Saul and Adami suggests how "mechanical violence" persists and, more than forty years after the *Grand tableau collectif antifasciste*, created at the time of the Algerian War, reminds us that artists have a duty to denounce this violence.

### **Eros, first of all the gods devised**

This verse from the pre-Socratic poet Parmenides set the tone for the vast *Jardin d'Eros* exhibition which Lebel devised and produced at Barcelona's Palau de la Virreina in 1999. Echoes of this garden can be felt in this section, which is devoted to the eminently erotic nature of the gaze, defined as an unconscious "scopic" impulse, and which is essential to the production, transmission and circulation of any work of art. Anything hidden or revealed by the visual arts, anything that is the object of inhibition or exhibition, sometimes both at once, needs the input of the *regardeur*, the *looker* who, as Duchamp rightly observed, "makes the painting" just as much as the painter. It is the often arduous task of looking that transforms the *see-er* into someone who is *see-ing*, and which opens up the too-often neglected fantasy worlds of Magritte, Picasso, Molinier, Masson, Grosz, Picabia, Monory or Dix. Here, anonymous folk art is set alongside the works and masterworks of art's acknowledged "greats."

In counterpoint, Lebel's *Reliquaire pour un culte de Vénus* spreads over one wall. Over twenty versions of this vast installation, each different, have been shown

over the past fifteen years in museums, art centres and galleries across Europe. Drawing from the same sources as *Les Avatars de Vénus*, it again raises the enigma of absolute beauty through the ages and in different cultures. This time, however, "[...] each spectator builds his or her own desiring or demented strategy according to the direction they give their gaze." (JL).

### **Artaud's "nerve meter"**

A homage to Antonin Artaud was staged in 2005 in Düsseldorf and Milan. It featured an installation in which Lebel imagines the ward in the Rodez psychiatric hospital where, in 1943, Artaud was subjected to over 50 electroshock treatments. Their violence, akin to torture, was such that they broke a vertebra in Artaud's neck.

The documents shown here retrace the life of Antonin Artaud, author, theorist with *The Theatre and Its Double* (which revolutionised theatre direction, acting and scenic language), stage and screen actor, and artist. Rejected during his lifetime, confined to a psychiatric hospital for nine years, censored, he is now admired by artists, poets and philosophers who see in him a model for revolt and the refusal to "fall in line" with an imposed aesthetic or therapy.

Photographs from the 1920s show an attractive young man, acting in films directed by Abel Gance or Carl Theodor Dreyer. In Denise Colomb's photographs, taken shortly after Artaud was released from hospital, the emaciated face of this "man suicided by society" becomes a mask of pain, a roar: "the organic scream of man."

Traduit du français par Sandra Petch Traductions

All quotes by Jean-Jacques Lebel (JL) are taken from the interview with Jean de Loisy in the exhibition catalogue, jointly published by Fage Éditions and la maison rouge.