

**... to the preface-
exhibition
(part 2)**

BY JEAN-MAX COLARD

A second, later crisis explains the disappearance of the preface to the exhibition, precisely dated by the writer Michel Butor in the '90s. This phenomenon does not bring along the loss of importance of criticism, but rather increases its presence within exhibition spaces, as a result of the growing importance of communication. In fact, when art is conquered by the culture industry, the “advertising” that the artist receives from the preface has to face competition from other media. There is thus an overwhelming wave of press releases, sometimes written by art critics and recycled by galleries as presentation texts. Within institutions, the multiplying of educational booklets and brochures for the various “publics” means that the responsibility of the introductory text is now taken over by the institution itself and its various departments, from the head curator to the education service. The walls often become a support for introductory texts written by the museum director or the exhibition curator, for artist ‘statements’, but also for other paratexts, such as advertising by the exhibition sponsor, which sometimes come before the curator’s words. Open question: shouldn’t this introductory communication material be included within the preface to the exhibition?

In this way, the paratext expands, and the exhibition appears as a multi-text field in which different levels of exposition compete with each other: the one by the institution or gallery, the even more official one by the minister of culture, the sponsor’s, the one by the artist and maybe by the art critic, the writer or philosopher, all integrated within the communication strategy of the exhibition.

Then there are other forms of modern marketing, such as the audiovisual trailer: heavily influenced by the language of the film industry and the formula of the TV commercial, the trailer testifies, whether we like it or not, a sliding of art into the sphere of the entertainment industry. The great museums like the Guggenheim in New York, the Grand Palais and the Centre Pompidou in Paris are increasingly using this format. Given these conditions, it is not surprising to see how the artists themselves make these strategies their own: instead of letting the press office take care of a particular promotion, they find in the trailer a first means of expression, or even experimentation, an example of short-duration video format. This can be conceptual, as in the case of the artist Benoît Maire, who authored a trailer for his

Weapon exhibition held at the David Roberts Foundation in London: in it we see a young woman looking at images scattered on a table through a strange optical instrument, and two hands that generate electric shocks on a translucent cube. Silent but seductive, basically almost uncommunicative, appearing like a preparatory action for the exhibition of which the artist also presents a few elements at the Cortex Athletico gallery in Paris, the trailer does not actually say much, but it does create an atmosphere and emphasizes the special attention paid to the glance and at the same time to the means.

Furthermore, artists are not alone in being infected by this communication fever. Writers too now prepare or supplement the release of their books with a trailer. It is already a common practice in the context of Anglo-American publishing, in which the “book trailer” is synonymous with best-seller, while it is a rare phenomenon in the French literary world. We must in fact look to more experimental writers such as Jean-Pierre Ostende, author of a trailer for his novel *Et voraces ils couraient dans la nuit* (Gallimard, 2011), Jean-Charles Massera for his book-album *Tunnel of Mondialisation* (Verticales, 2011), or as Patrick Bouvet, whose latest work, *Pulsion Lumière* (Editions de L’Olivier, 2012), is introduced by the aura of a lavish book trailer: these authors have no hesitation in using the forms and formats of show business, and it is not surprising to see them adopt the techniques of cultural marketing for critique purposes.

The preface-exhibition

The analysis of the current situation leads us to reverse our reasoning and consider a final version of the preface to the exhibition: the preface-exhibition. In actual fact, the preface is not necessarily written or spoken, but may actually consist of visual, sound or plastic works.

A ‘preface work’ first: such is the exhibition conceived in January 2013 by Lebanese artist Walid Raad at the Louvre, in the newly opened Pavillon of Islamic Arts⁽¹⁾. Entitled *Préface à une troisième édition* [Preface to a Third Edition], the exhibition was the first stage of a project intended to take place over three consecutive years. For this first event, the artist proposed two installations, both without real objects and thus distinct from the rest of the museum: inside the so-called room of the maquette, the artist suspended in midair models of different international mu-

seums; next to them a video, titled *Préface à une quatrième édition* [Preface to a Fourth Edition], showed images, taken from the Louvre's recent photo inventory, of objects on which the artist pasted eastern-inspired decorative elements. Why give this ensemble the title of *Préface à une quatrième édition*? Besides the fact that this was the artist's first work at the Louvre, this title, as often happens in the work of Walid Raad, refers to a project developed on the long-term, a real research. In fact, "for several years," the Louvre explains, "Walid Raad has been interested in the increasing attention paid to the artistic heritage of Islam, both within the reorganization of the extension of the great Western museums, and within the public and new institutional collections that are multiplying in the Middle East, as is currently the case in Qatar or Abu Dhabi, where second premises of the Louvre are being built." This research, which began in 2007, continues with this new event, outlining a universal museum (the Louvre's ideal) in the era of globalization and economic forces shifting to the East. A preface or the anticipatory story of another globalized and Arabicized Louvre under construction in Abu Dhabi, this exhibition is not but a chapter of a deeper and more extensive investigation. The proof of this lies in the fact that the other works or exhibitions in which Walid Raad focuses on this issue have titles that refer also to the different elements of a book-summa: *Index, Preface to the Second Edition, Translator's Introduction, Appendix XVIII*. It is as if the artist were putting together an unpublished and fragmentary encyclopedia on the "history of the Arab world⁽²⁾." Here, exhibitions follow each other in a quest in which the book is both the reference model and the subject of a thorough formal reworking.

From the work we go to the preface exhibition room: for his exhibition entitled *Matières premières* at the Palais de Tokyo in 2012⁽³⁾, the French artist Fabrice Hyber brought together, in a room functioning as an introduction, a set of different works: a few homeopathic paintings on the walls, the sculpture of a cubic meter of lipstick in the middle, but also handwritten inscriptions on canvases and walls, in which the artist composed the "table of raw materials" of his solo exhibition. Here we find the etymological origin of the term "preamble," from the Latin verb *praeambulare*, meaning "to walk in front." This "pre-path" to the exhibition is not a text, but a first

exhibition room. It heralds the works that follow, prepares the audience to experience the physical and climatic conditions that await him, and ultimately serves to reveal the overall design of the artist, who planned his exhibition as a "mental spa." The size of this preparatory room is augmented by the nature of the procedural and incomplete character of the homeopathic paintings, works in their own right but on which Fabrice Hyber implants different projects. Finally, the monochrome painting consisting of a square meter of lipstick and produced when the artist was still a student, is contrasted with a sculpture, placed at the center of the room, made "twenty years later" with the same material. Conceived in this way, this preface in which you can ambulate, "perambulate," leads to a retrospective path into a work that has lost nothing from its relationship with the idea, to its "raw materials," although having gained strength.

A second, powerful example of a preface-exhibition is the one offered by the artist Pierre Huyghe for his great solo exhibition held at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in March 2006, entitled *Celebration Park*⁽⁴⁾. The vernissage and the official opening of the exhibition took place Thursday, March 9th, but were preceded by a *Prologue*, which could be visited the month before, from 2nd to 16th February 2006. Questioning the established conventions of the world of art and dismantling the ordinary temporality of exhibitions, Pierre Huyghe developed an autographic preface exhibition, in which the visitor moved in front of the two, still closed, large doors of the *Celebration Park*. What did this prologue consist of? A series of statements. Large sculptures made with white neon tubes on a black wall, in which an "I" states it has no copyright: *Je ne possède pas le Musée d'art moderne* [I do not own the Museum of Modern Art], *I do not own Snow White* (the Walt Disney film, but also the title of a previous video of Huyghe's⁽⁵⁾). We are faced with the surprising introduction to a work in which an "I" (signifying the artist but not only – it could also be the "I" of Walt Disney himself or any other artist) waives any copyright, at the same time tapping into popular culture and the well-educated (*Je ne possède pas Fictions* [I Own No Fictions] is a reference to Jorge Luis Borges), which do not belong to him nor to others. The legal model of these statements comes from the boundaries of literature and the web. Pierre

Huyghe was in fact inspired by the ‘disclaimers’, i.e. phrases with which the authors of web fanfictions avoid legal problems: creating adventures of their favorite heroes (Batman or Harry Potter, chosen at random from among the thousands of possible examples), projecting them into unexpected, out of the norm stories (as in the case of the recurrent version of a homosexual Batman, in love with his faithful Robin), these fans risk being sued by Hollywood studios. Disclaimers allow them to reject all authority over their inventions and to renounce authorship. By reusing this ruse in a positive and non-defensive way, the prologue of Pierre Huyghe’s *Celebration Park* appears like the manifesto of a copyleft concept of culture.

In this case too, the preface is contaminated with other cultural or media models (Internet-user disclaimers for Huyghe, headlines or trailers for Hyber). The original and well-educated model of the preface to the exhibition is thus fused together with other fields, and is an expression of the extremely inter-media state of literature in the contemporary.

Writing the exhibitions

And finally, *Une Préface* [A Preface]: this is the title of an exhibition which opened at the art center Le Plateau in Paris in June 2013. It was organised by two young curators, Elodie Royer and Yoann Gourmel, who regularly use structures from the literary text to design their exhibition projects⁶. In 2011 they had already authored a different *Une Préface* within the exhibition by the artist Mark Geffriaud. It was a ‘performed’ conference involving the interpretation on the spot of a text written before the show. The walls were covered with Post-it notes which highlighted the overlapping relationship of the explanatory text with the artist’s work. The artist Mark Geffriaud had covered the walls of the art center with painted paper showing views and elements of his study: the preface came after this wall-mounted “table of contents.”

The exhibition *Une Préface* in Le Plateau was, instead, a group show, and was also very different contextually, because it was the final event in a series of four consecutive exhibitions entrusted by the director of Le Plateau to Elodie Royer and Yoann Gourmel for the period 2011-2013. Three exhibitions had already taken place, so *Une Préface* was the last stage of this curatorial program. Based on the prin-

ciple that every preface is usually written and, especially, read after the text that it introduces, and inspired by the example of the writer Laurence Sterne who places his preface to *Tristram Shandy* at the twentieth chapter of the third book of his novel, Yoann Gourmel and Elodie Royer put this introductory preface-postface at end. Through the works of different artists on exhibition, the curators highlight a conception of an art which features gestures and attitudes rather than the finished work. The game is further accentuated by a trick: at the entrance of the exhibition space, the two curators entrusted a collective of artists with the task of curating a first exhibition, entitled *Epigraphe à une préface* [Epigraph to a Preface] (which we will discuss in a future article dedicated to the games and the implications of the epigraph). Finally, there is a preface to *Une Préface*: a short narrative text written by the artist and writer Michael Crowe.

The special feature of this preface-exhibition is that it introduces us, although retrospectively, not so much to individual or juxtaposed works of certain artists, but to an entire exhibition program⁷. Through this system and the legitimacy traditionally given to the preface in the literary and artistic field, the two curators explicitly propose themselves as “authors of exhibitions.” As the preface to the exhibition has often been kept away from the physical space devoted to the art works, so the preface-exhibition supposes, opens and establishes an “art of the exhibition” always in search of legitimacy.

Notes

1. Walid Raad, *Préface à la troisième édition*, Musée du Louvre, Paris, January 19 to April 8. Catalogue: Artist’s Edition, Musée du Louvre éditions / Bernard Chauveau éditeur.
2. For this project titled *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, see the website specially created by the artist Walid Raad: <http://www.scratchingonthings.com>.
3. Fabrice Hyber, *Matières premières*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris 28 September 2012 - 14 January 2013.
4. Pierre Huyghe, *Celebration Park*, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris/ARC, Paris, 10 March to 14 May 2006. Prologue, 2 to 16 February 2006.
5. Pierre Huyghe, *Blanche-Neige Lucie* (1996-97), video.
6. They also planned in 2009 a series of three exhibitions imagined as chapters of a future book: *Chapitre I (les situations discrètes)* [Chapter I (The Discrete Situations)], FRAC Pays de la Loire, *Chapitre II (the répétition)* [Chapter I (The Repetition)], Parc de Rentyilly, *Chapitre III (les récits autorisés)* [Chapter III (The Authorized Tales)], FRAC Pays de la Loire.
7. This practice is not entirely surprising: it is more and more frequent, at the opening of a new museum, a new art gallery, or at a change of direction, for an art space to give its first exhibition the function of an introduction to its future schedule.