

**Impressions of Africa. Image after the image in the films and drawings of Patricia Dauder  
(in catalogue for solo exhibition at Museu de L'Empordà, Girona, Spain: Feb-April 2008)**

It is always difficult to remember the first time we came across the work of an artist; or even recall how the first direct access to the work was, through a recommendation of his/her name, simply after having seen reproductions of some of the works or after having read an article in some magazine. However, I remember exactly the first time I saw Patricia Dauder's work. It was in a context which is considered by many to be the worst to have the first contact with an artist's work: an art fair, and most precisely Arco in Madrid. In this case, the work in question not only survived the numberless calls for attention imposed by an art fair, fact that may have given birth to a new category of artworks, strictly *context-specific*, represented by pieces which try to monopolize our perception, either by their scale or their spectacularity – but offered, paradoxically, certain relief within the loudness of the pavilions, it caught our attention inviting us to stay. In any case, it made an indelible impression on me, what made me look for more information on the artist who, at that point, was totally unknown to me.

I am referring to *Les Maliens (a script)*, from 2006, a film shot in 16 mm and transferred to DVD, a sort of *low-tech* animation built with drawings which are being formed and erased, in a process, that, as we will see, engages our perceptive apparatus in an extremely peculiar way. The work is about a project whose starting point were the artist's impressions, from television, movies, from some books – never after a direct real experience – of the African continent, more specifically of Mali; we should remember that one of the writings that influenced the most XX century visual arts gathered the impressions of Raymond Roussel on a geography which he never visited, Africa precisely (for this continent represented to the writer the "alter", the absolute otherness). Much has been written, e.g, on the impact that attending the representation of Roussel's play *Impressions of Africa* in 1912, accompanied by Apollinaire and Picabia, exerted on Duchamp. The writer's fascination by the novels of Jules Verne, who located the actions in some of his books in latitudes he did not know by his own experience, is well known.

*Les Maliens (a script)* presents suggested landscapes, vegetation fragments, palm trees, many palm trees – trees which are considered to be the icon of utopia (they were the symbol used by Harald Szeemann in 1979 for the famous exhibition *Monte Verità*<sup>1</sup> catalogue) – vernacular architecture, everything processed in low resolution, accompanied by a very special beat. Patricia Dauder's film reminds of, in a way, specially because of its images spectral nature, the prehistory of cinema, and of the use, mainly in the XIX century, of optical devices which simulated movement. It could be said that it translates perception, and cognition, as essentially temporary processes, dependent on a dynamic amalgam of past and present. Overlapping images, fading and changing drawings, working with the phenomenon of retinal persistence [*afterimage*], the artist introduces temporariness as a component that does not escape observation. It is not because of a nostalgic or fetishistic instinct that the artist films in 16 mm, even knowing that she is an attentive viewer of the experimental cinema of the 60's and 70's. This technology, as opposed to the digital one, allows her to transform film into a visualization of the passing of time. Patricia Dauder aims to produce an experience which is eminently temporary and

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<sup>1</sup> Exhibition opened in 1978 that, for two years, travelled to different countries, namely Switzerland, Austria and Germany. The exhibition presented documents and objects which documented the daily life of a community settled in a mountain near Ascona, that tried to replace modern life by a utopic experience through an intricate mixture of thought currents and political ideals, going from naturism to theosophy, from macrobiotics to anarchism, through different branches of socialism. This community managed to draw in, mainly between 1910 and 1920, nudists, bohemians, sexual libertines, prophets and artists, names such as Hans Harp, Hugo Ball, Paul Klee, Gropius, Albers and Moholy-Nagy among them. See Hans-Joachim Müller, "Utopias", in *Harald Szeemann. Exhibition Maker*, Hatje Cantz, 2006, pp. 60-71.

she knows that to accomplish that it is not enough to use a *time-based* medium: the experience of cinema tells us that films can be understood not as time lived but as time forgotten – we also go to see movies to kill time. A digital technique would be too steady, too stable; it is a graphic technique, not a sensory one. It is also too accurate. This artist needs grain in film, for two main reasons: on one hand, grain guarantees that the observer only has access to an information with gaps, fragmented, that has necessarily to be filled (a subtle way to get us involved with work, avoiding the artifices and ingenuities of imposed interactivities and of *relational aesthetics*); on the other hand, the continuous alterations in the quantity of grain in the image function as constant reminders of the frame to frame change, what reinforces showing the passing of time<sup>2</sup>. All Patricia Dauder's films have a certain rhythm, repetitive, regular, like a heartbeat. This pulse is more apparent, as it occurs in *Película abstracta II* (2005), when there are no recognisable elements that we can relate to a narrative, even if incongruous, but a sequence of drawings (or should I say the same drawing, repeatedly made and unmade?) with tracings and lines that shrink and expand, in a peculiar dialogue with experimental cinema which treated the own film material in such a way that it affected its own physical integrity.

It was not surprising to find out later that Patricia Dauder uses drawing almost exclusively in her work; and that she also deals with temporariness in a special way on this medium, the idea of not being able to dissociate process from final result (it is impossible to look at the drawings without noticing the process that initiated them, the time involved in their execution); the method of working with layers, with density, also persists in the drawings, of using accumulation and cancellation simultaneously as visual elements; this process even becomes some kind of "image branding" of her work, a crucial factor to create some visual impact in the works, otherwise, so discreet.

It should not be surprising either, the fact that the artist uses drawing for a work that deals with a somewhat utopical project, referring to a country yet unknown, in a continent that is often associated with certain ideas of paradise, or to potentialities not yet defined. Drawing is always a utopia, or a future promise: because it precedes reality (it is indissolubly bound to the idea of a project, of a plan for future actions), for it is always something not completed, lacking, where some potential can be recognised – someone has said that drawing is the first and best reminder that art is not only an idea, but an action.

Patricia Dauder ended up visiting Mali, producing a new film, to which we will refer later, this time built with images captured from reality. But now, I would like to concentrate in the use of drawing, since she is one of the artists that has better revitalized this medium, giving autonomy to its practise, taking it as a value rather than a mere preparatory study.

In recent times, in fact, drawing has been less and less perceived as secondary, as a preliminary medium and thus dependent on and subordinated to an end result – a painting, a sculpture – that only in retrospect would bring meaning to it. This is due to the fact that artists have shown interest again on some of the qualities that define drawing: the immediacy, the manual work, the narrative tendency, the privileged relationship with mass culture (illustration, comic strips, fanzines, advertising); not to mention the recurrence with what drawing was used by conceptual artists in the 60's and 70's – a heritage that has been re-thought by various contemporary artists – thanks to the easiness with what drawing suggests processes and makes the visualization of instructions, systems and projects feasible. Some even defend the idea that today there is some exhaustion towards *high-tech* and the virtual world, fact

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<sup>2</sup> See Babette Mangolte, "Afterward: A Matter of Time. Analog Versus Digital, the Perennial Question of Shifting Technology and Its Implications for an Experimental Filmmaker's Odyssey", in *Camera Obscura, Camera Lucida. Essays in Honor of Annette Michelson*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003, pp. 261-274.

that may have benefited drawing<sup>3</sup>, whereas others point out the number of artists that have chosen this support as their main expression medium, even if it is not used exclusively, and how this factor has influenced a whole new generation of art students that, taken as an example, have been capable to face drawing seriously<sup>4</sup>. We are referring to names such as Raymond Pettibon, Jim Shaw, Chris Johanson and Dan Perjovschi.

Patricia Dauder's drawings, and maybe here it is where her idiosyncrasy lies, do not share any of the above mentioned features to justify its restoration: they are anti-narrative, rigorous, precise, not having, therefore, a direct relationship with mass culture, comic strips or fanzines. They do not take advantage of the immediacy of drawing, becoming, in terms of process, a physically demanding activity, difficult and struggling: repeating the same – the same line, the same stroke – for a number of times. One after the other. In this sense, her drawings approach, to a great extent, the artistic experiences associated to the art of the 60's and 70's, namely, minimalism and conceptual art. They are drawings that avoid, as we already said, narrative, description. They escape from the idea of composition. They are based in the repetition of actions, of lines. They refuse, in great measure, expression, recurring to a mechanical almost authorless gesture, confronting us, thus, with a fundamental question: *what is gained when a same gesture is repeated?*

On one hand, an unknown attention to the minimum detail, to the most subtle differences. On the other hand, the awareness that these drawings belong strictly to the domain of making, as opposed to the idea of communication that today seems to force certain artists to deal with affairs, specific subjects, or even have an agenda. In reality, Patricia Dauder's works are positioned on the side of experience, being eminently performative. Observing her drawings involves, in a way, reconstituting time and ways of execution, like if every one of them would tell the history of its own making. If some of these features approach them to the art of the 60's and 70's, some others prevent them from being manifestations coming from those years: specifically, the importance of the concretization found in them, more specifically the interval between the working plan and the effective execution. The prevention of perceptive pleasures, in a way another of the premises of the art in that period, is neither found in the work of Patricia Dauder; her drawings force, furthermore, certain delay, or time displacement, in terms of reception, never revealing themselves fully at first sight – they underline the idiosyncrasies of the line and the stroke, in particular directions, steps, connections; her drawings use overlapping and transparencies in a fashion that they almost become atmospheric. They are at the same time accurate and physical; they have a quality only almost perfect, only almost impersonal; they move, vibrate, show many variations in the line quality. They live out of tension; between opacities and transparencies, between perspective space and depth suppression, between handcraft and reproducibility, between repetition and deviation, between structural rigour and arbitrary associations.

The drawings generally originate from images culled from various sources, that the artist groups later pinning them on boards, through an associative process that has no exact translatable explanation.

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<sup>3</sup> The case of Georges Negroponte, President of the Drawing Center, in New York, who said recently, on the occasion of the interview given to the drawing special issue of the publication *Contemporary*, that today there is a resonance in young artists in front of everything that is primitive and *low-tech*, that drawing would be more and more relevant among young people ["Drawing Lessons", in *Contemporary*, n° 83, 2006, pp. 14-19]. I just would like to point out that the institution directed by Negroponte, founded in 1977, is known to have re-situated the role of drawing in contemporary art, contributing to give it an identity, as well as correcting some false notions which put this discipline in a lower space in relationship to other media.

<sup>4</sup> This is the thesis of Kate MacFarlane, co-founder of the Drawing Room, in London. See "Drawing Lessons", in *Contemporary*, n° 83, 2006, pp. 14-19.

When I saw those collected figures it seemed to me that I was in front of the pages of a book by W. G. Sebald whose text had been erased. I remember that some of these images were related to astronomy, some others showed helixes, roads, wheels (elements involving rotation movements), some were buildings, others landscapes (some exotic, others apparently showing devastated war sceneries), but all of them contained in themselves, originally or after being cropped by the artist, an intimate relationship with the idea of drawing (relationships among lines, densities, empty and filled spaces) and certain degree of visual ambiguity, even abstraction. In any case, those boards shared one of the most noticeable characteristics found in any of Patricia Dauder's works: a disarming combination of rigour, a refusal for authorial expression, a mechanicity, and, at the same time, a great physical sensory richness, linked to an associative instinct little or not analytical at all. Those images put one next to the other, referred both to an idea of inventory, archive, taxonomy – an attempt to organize facts, occurrences, in fact – and to a fragmented narrative, with voids: poetic, in its ultimate analysis.

The film that the artist produced recently in Mali, *Les Maliens (a film)* is a fascinating confrontation between different times. On one hand it relates directly to a specific past: the drawings done for the previous film *Les Maliens (a script)*, and it almost acts as a confirmation of the theory that states that we travel to encounter not new but predefined images; on the other hand, she goes back again to 16 mm film, once again to obtain a determined pulse, so that the experience of time is not forgotten; finally, with the presentation of a succession of steady sequences, apparently static images (resembling frames) – despite containing the movement of plants, persons in other instances – creates a tension between the temporariness of cinema and photography; between *it is being* (the potentiality of a perpetual present) and *it was*. In reality, the film denounces what certain type of cinema – the one precisely monopolizing our present conception of film – tries to hide at any cost: the immovility, the past<sup>5</sup>.

I perceived on the first contact with her work, that Patricia Dauder, going back to the fair context and to the film of 2006, was very skillful in making temporariness converge; without doubt in establishing tensions between apparent anachronisms and utopias, by mixing futures that were not in the end, with historical pasts and imagined landscapes. Result: a kind of intemporality that makes it difficult to date her works. Films, drawings, archived images can either be from 2003 or 2006, or from the pasts and futures they vindicate. It has never been so relevant to say that the interlocutors of any artist today, who he/she chooses as his/her contemporaries, may not live in the same century, but be from a much earlier time or come from farther latitudes.

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<sup>5</sup> About this question see Laura Mulvey, "Stillness in the Moving Image: Ways of Visualizing Time and Its Passing", in *Saving the Image: Art After Film*, Glasgow: Centre for Contemporary Art, 2003, pp. 78-89.