

## Thinking through things

When standing in front of the works of Vanessa Billy one has a sense of familiarity, as they are composed from elements of our quotidian environment. They are nevertheless complex propositions: works that are open while at the same time visual enigmas; they align themselves with a known quantity whilst eluding it too, to speak of it all the better.

In an interview in 2010 Billy said that her artwork allowed her to '*think through things*'. The practice, the transformation of objects and materials and the assembly of images and things are like tools with which to consider our daily activity and our relationship with the world.

### *what things become*

Rooted in her curiosity about everyday materials and banal objects (industrial or domestic), Billy's work is devoted to exploring their potentialities, revealing them in some way by transformation or association. Cement, metal, plastic, clay: she is often interested in raw materials, developing processes of which she is at once both initiator and observer. *Not taught\**: learning from materials is particularly important for the artist, who strives to elude supposed knowledge in order to learn things in a more immediate and experimental manner.

Billy's creative process sometimes necessitates patience and waiting – the time for concrete to set, or for a stain to spread across paper – it unfolds over time, several spans of time running parallel, and it adopts the form of a negotiation between her decisions, her gestures and the behaviour of materials. In effect, she is working not so much with accident or chance, but with what things become.

While her works experience several states during the creative process, they often conserve this evolving facet, sometimes becoming 'living' works. Materials circulate and exchange, certain sculptures almost breathe, others require particular attention, without which they die.

Particle exchanges. It is certainly of some importance that water is a recurrent element in Billy's work: fluid, evasive, temporary and fragile, water is essentially the element of circulation, of porosity, of mixtures and resistances. Stagnating, flowing, floating, mixing, evaporating... the artist's sculptures play with so many states of the material.

In the form of a transitory balance, these works, which often use a great economy of means, tell of the material's own cycles, of the emergence of forms and of their impending future. They also evoke human activity more generally, the function of the body, as well as quotidian acts and uses, and the employment of resources too. *Who shapes what\*\**.

### *Zeitgeist*

The artist considers also the concrete – or rather political – aspects of this almost philosophical impermanence, pointing out our relationships to things and to the environment.

Thus she works with scrap materials, as they reach the end of a cycle of consummation and use; she enables one more play of these pre-existing accidental forms by isolating them or combining them with other forms, so giving them another life, reinserting them in another cycle, that of art. Looking critically at economic cycles, she underlines processes of exchange and the fluctuation of value.

By evoking natural landscapes or phenomena, by referring to the living, Billy also questions the idea of nature. She confronts it with that of the artificial: is this still a relevant opposition, in so far as the majority of materials transformed industrially have a natural origin, while that which one considers natural is produced in an industrial manner? *Natural means something like vegetables*\*\*\*.

In an interstitial zone befitting the current day, one notes a degree of concern in the artist's work in relation to the use of our planet's resources.

Whereas the idea of circulation always leads to a possible future, a transformation to come, mass production creates finished objects, which, once used, become the waste at the cycle's end; objects that no longer change, resistant and irreducible. Materials that, like nuclear waste, we have no choice but to *hide*: scattered in nature, in our everyday universe, like the gases produced by burning petrol, they are present while being ignored, harmful but enjoying the benefit of doubt: we close our eyes, therefore they don't exist. An admission of defeat.

### *position and displacement*

Don't be fooled: if there is a critical and political consciousness in Billy's work, this necessarily happens by way of the poetic, which is the act of doing. Making and making sense, making in order to make sense. Her proposals are never unambiguous, never strident; on the contrary they aim to underline the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the things that surround us, and to make the diversity of this visible, without judgement. They are not driven by evidence, but by suggestion.

Operating according to principles of displacement and connections, the artist creates works in which the elements are in dialogue. Emblematically, her collage practice is a form of meeting; her desk covered in cut-out images (from sources as varied as works on geography or cookery books) the location of striking meetings. The table in the Songs of Maldoror comes to mind...

In this essentially material work, physical and visual, words have an essential role. *Why shapes what*\*\*\*\*: whether one sees a necessary and signifying link between the titles of her works and the object, as per Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*, or rather multiple explorations of usages as per Francis Ponge, it is certain that words are *active* agents for Billy. The title is a discrete element in the composition that places it – she considers the untitled work in her studio not yet *fixed*. Taking place indiscriminately during the creative process, at the outset or further down the line, the title denotes the artist's position in relation to the work, her subjective perception – like a viewpoint for the work – and her intention, while opening up a reading to come.

One can be surprised, sometimes, by the gap between the extremely sober form of a work by Billy and the breadth of thought and image it arouses. Between the word and the thing, between one object and another, between the work and me, a whole system of relationships is generated - never fixed, never obvious and thus always new.

Isaline Vuille, February 2013  
(translation by Aiofe Rosenmeyer)

\* *Not taught*, title of 2011 exhibition at BolteLang, Zurich

\*\* *Who shapes what*, title of 2010 exhibition at Limoncello, London

\*\*\* *Natural means something like vegetables*, title of 2011 exhibition at Christina Wilson Gallery, Copenhagen

\*\*\*\* *Why shapes what*, title of the artist's book realised on the occasion of the exhibition *Who shapes what*, 2010