

François Curlet

january 26 – march 18 2007

François Curlet was born in 1967 in Paris and lived in Lyon until he was 22. Since then he has traveled regularly both within France and elsewhere, while maintaining his home base in the city of Brussels. The artistic career of this voluntary exile illustrates his approach: conceptual and analytical on the one hand, but reaching into an investigation of the nonsensical and unconscious on the other. As a successor of both John Knight

and Jef Geys, he offers a unique combination of conceptual art, remnants of Dadaism, Pop art imagery, and a dreamlike quality reminiscent of Situationism. Curlet makes use of a great variety of tools and materials, borrowing ideas from stories, television, economic interactions, and advertising, and adapting these contemporary media forms to concoct pleasingly disturbing results. He modifies



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and transforms his ingredients – objects, signs, or messages – in various ways in order to subvert or nullify their original purposes. In creating these shifts, Curlet freely makes use of a variety of techniques which transmogrify meaning: discontinuity, exaggerated or repeated motifs, deconstruction of visual detail, incongruous juxtapositions, language games, semantic subterfuges. He works at a level of tiny detail, as if by blowing up the ordinary world he could bring an extraordinary one into being. These deliberate discrepancies and slippages are combined with Curlet's meditations on the world of economic activity and modes of production, as he introduces methods more typical of the manufacturing sector into many of his works – such as just-in-time production, assembly-line division of labor, and subcontracting. In 1996 he created and registered the trademark "People Day," which enables him to officially identify all the results of his artistic production and their distribution. Curlet is a master at distorting cultural codes and exposing their potential for play, poetry, and narrative, while subjecting everything to his caustic sense

of humor. Language games form one of the driving forces of his work, as he endlessly disconnects and reconnects objects and their names, bouncing them off each other.

This is how Curlet telescopes actions and realities, operating at once on the visual, economic, and cultural planes. He "remixes" objects and images, demonstrating not only a fantastic imagination and comic irreverence but a genuinely political vision, thus constructing his very own parallel universe, the world as seen by a visitor from outer space.



Coconut, 2002

The Institut d'art contemporain presents a major one-man exhibition by François Curlet, including fifty-four works by the artist created between 1989 and 2006. Is this a juke-box, an encephalogram, or a rebus? The exhibition can be read in many different ways, but any of the interpretations will bring out the magnitude of Curlet's rigorous craft and polysemic richness. François Curlet himself speaks of the "exhibition as juke-box," in the sense of something spaced out over a period of time, composed of elements chosen at random from a predetermined supply of stored materials – as opposed to a sequence of elements which makes sense only in retrospect. Consequently, at the Institut d'art contemporain the organization of the works in the exhibition space is designed to recreate what Curlet calls "daily production zones," spread out over an extensive space, and presented as a series of superimposed partitions. Here Curlet scrutinizes fifteen years of artistic activity as if they formed an encephalogram. The image selected for the invitation to the exhibition – a gouache produced at the age of eighteen, and recently rediscovered in Lyon, representing

Freud with his brain removed – is relevant to this context. The world of psychoanalysis figures significantly among the references which proliferate in Curlet's work. The emptied head of Freud, that iconic figure, is thus to be understood not as a rejection of his mode of thinking but rather as its absorption of the rest of the world. Psychoanalysis has become the stencil of the unconscious, a moving window opening out onto the world around us, onto everyday life and its micro-events. And lastly, visiting the exhibition feels like walking through a three-dimensional rebus. A rebus is basically a series of forms – images, drawings, letters, numbers – which spell a sentence or phrase when read out phonetically. They are, in other words, word games played with images: at first they generate a sort of visual conflict between the disparate elements, then they are gradually decoded by focusing on the formal relations between the images in order to reveal an often surprising solution. The rebus appeals to the spectator because it is playful, comical, and irreverent, and it delights in creating unexpected meanings. Word and image games are ideal for raising questions about the optical

illusions of ordinary vision and promoting an art that emphasizes discrepancy and subversion.

In decoding this giant rebus, the titles of François Curlet's works (which are often portmanteau-words) are especially significant, because they literally activate perception, bringing the visitor into the continuing active relation between the verbal expressions and their visual realization, that is, the interpretive dynamic between what is named (one might say spoken) and what is viewed. The exhibition can thus be experienced as a connected series of distinct, exaggerated signs which reinforce and expand on one another, so multiplying the various possible narrative sequences.

The entrance to **Room 1** is signposted by *Western* (2005), a neon sculpture which represents "spaghetti conceptual art," and sets the tone, or shows the flag, for Curlet's ab-use of "pure" conceptual art. It is a perfect precis of his approach. Originating in the form of notes saved as an SMS, it sums up the artist's attitude and his lucid distance from the approach of the generations that preceded him. Whether they are older pieces or new creations, the works shown in this room especially address questions of production, casting a cold eye on consumer culture and the marketing strategies of advertisements in public spaces. The latter are applied ironically to Curlet's own artistic production. Curlet uses and ab-uses the marketing techniques he finds around him, and turns "packaging" into a kind of narrative which designates (and designs) the objects and even the space of the exhibition itself.

Nabisco (1989), for instance, named after a multinational brand, takes up one corner of the exhibition wall. The traditional "white box" of the art space is thus wrapped in an advertising motif.

Moteur (1989) was constructed out of wicker by blind workers, using a mold to define the shape. As with most of Curlet's productions, the actual work was delegated to others. The technological object, the engine, retains only its shape, while its value as a functional object is subverted at once by its material, its craft-based mode of production (basket-weaving), and its producers (the visually impaired).



Witness Screen, 2002

Moteur draws on the idea of the ready-made – an ordinary, commercially produced object turned into a work of art purely through the intention expressed by the artist, Duchamp – but inverts its logic. As with all Curlet's works, the title plays a key role, literally activating the piece. Here it could almost be understood as an imperative, "Motor!" except that it gets nothing moving except perhaps the ironic vacuity of its own presence. This inversion of the status of the object happens again with *Cagette*, an object initially "without qualities" created in marquetry by a cabinetmaker commissioned for the job. *Sea Food* (1994) presents an assembly line in which aluminum beer cans are produced and distributed by the Péchiney packaging company in the USA, and imagines a charitable organization (in this case one providing work for the homeless) subverting a projected IPO.

Finally, the project *Crème de singe* is presented indirectly, in the form of an explanatory notice and a videotape. It was originally created in collaboration with the graphic arts group Donuts for a Printemps store window display in conjunction with the Nuit Blanche in Paris. The project is designed to make it appear that a group of monkeys has found its way into the department store and begun to wander about, and then shows the reactions of the public who were taken in by the remarkably lifelike deception.

In **Room 2**, at the center of the exhibition, *Rorschach Saloon* (1999), whose walls are

hung with wallpaper titled *Stand by* (2000), functions as a key space open physically and symbolically to the rest of the show, giving access to and from every other area. The repeating, symbolically significant images of the Rorschach test have intruded into a décor from a Western movie, producing a hybrid space that is part psychoanalyst's office, part honky-tonk bar. The resulting transactional space, in which observations, confidences, fantasies and feelings can be freely exchanged, pulls the visitors through the looking-glass, encouraging them to leave propriety behind and abandon themselves to a wild new world.

Room 3 displays works manufactured by others to whom Curlet delegated the production, and which introduce a greater degree of extrapolation compared to the previous works (in Room 5). In this room, signs and forms create titles and fonction like figures of speech (*Charlie's Flag*, 2005; *Pieds de biches d'araignées*, 2004), while at the same time texts create images, alluding subtly to Curlet's "Belgianness" (*Projet de loi pour l'Unesco*, 2002). *Charlie's Flag* resurrects Charlie Brown, the chief character in the "Peanuts" comic strip – who here, as a result of Curlet's love of playing with "redeployment," has become a peanut vendor.

Willy Wonka Plus (2005) refers to Willy Wonka, the chief character in Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, first adapted for the cinema in 1971 and remade by Tim Burton in 2005. The

fantastic world of the story is reduced here to a tangible, commercial reality, looking as if it had just been delivered from the factory floor.

Moonwalk (2003), in contrast, takes its inspiration from an urban reality, the street crossing signals familiar to American pedestrians, but sneaks in a new command that is both fantastic (*Walk – on the Moon*) and choreographic (a dance step by Michael Jackson in which he moves backward while giving the impression that he is stepping forward).

Œuf de voiture (American Dino) (2003) has adopted the monochrome cube shape familiar from Minimalist sculpture, but now it has acquired a car's radio antenna and a title which immediately transports it to the realm of "the thing from outer space."

Room 4 includes *Female trouble*, *Vitrine*, and *JJM* (all 1992), which present the visitor with simultaneously optical, physical, and acoustical phenomena, using humor to establish a new conception of the body and identity. "Female trouble" is also the title of one of the first films of John Waters, an American director who radically rejects the norms of aesthetics and good taste. The works exhibited in this room seem to be displayed in the style of an invented ceremonial (staging, ritual gestures, and so on), and the divinity symbolically invoked by François Curlet is surely Divine, the notoriously eccentric cult movie star.

Room 5 displays pieces that are all "home-made" in contrast to those of Room 3, thus showing the kind of work that Curlet can accomplish when he does not hand over the manufacturing to others. Here the private side of his work appears, produced without technical assistance. The word games he is so fond of are especially prominent here, as are the metaphorical excursions which produce different semantic relationships between the title and its visual manifestation. Some examples: *Secret public #2* (1997), whose oxymoronic title names an absurd narrative linking public space and private life (credit card numbers are posted up in the street like public signage). *What* (2000), a tautologous work which writes on a wall the same thing that it pronounces using a set of steel tubes, somewhat evokes the radical inventions of Conceptual art at the end of the 1960s – except that here the word itself and its graphic form, like an anonymous message, drag the work ironically in the direction of uninterpretability.

Immobile (1998) also plays on the back-and-forth dynamic between the literal wording and the plastic form. Curlet extracts items from an encyclopedia of daily life and adumbrates little stories by the use of the most ordinary signs. Numbered tickets (as in "take a number"), which symbolize the most common irritations and frustrations of modern life, are transformed into the leaves of plants. The everyday is combined with the ornamental and the dreamlike,

paradoxically and humorously accentuating the wording of the title.

The metaphor of immobility can be extended to that of fossilization, playing all the while on stylistic or linguistic anachronisms, as in *Surf canadien* (2001), *Accident Island* (2001), or *Make-up* (2000). This room, which brings together some bizarre trophies (*Jumbo*, 2003), also displays Curlet's love of the grotesque and the cartoon (*Non*, 1996; *Ray-Ban*, 1990).

Room 6 has an atmosphere all its own, featuring *Chaquarium* (2003), which presents at once an exotic retreat and the setting for a fairy-tale. A cat, representing the ideal pet for a "cocooner," has been introduced into a space that is, to say the least, unexpected – both as part of a public exhibition and as the home of this particular animal – a full-size aquarium. Like the portmanteau-word that constitutes the title, it stops the artist from following his wild imagination too far afield, by balancing it against his concomitant desire to "cool off" every narrative impulse.

In **Room 7**, Ann Lee's *Witness screen* (2002), shown alongside *Coconut* (2002), creates a strange space in which the domains of the real and the imaginary are subtly interwoven. In another reference to art history, this time from the very recent past, Ann Lee is a manga character whose copyright was bought in 1999 by two artists, Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe. Since then, other artists

have brought this virtual character to life in videos, objects, and installations.

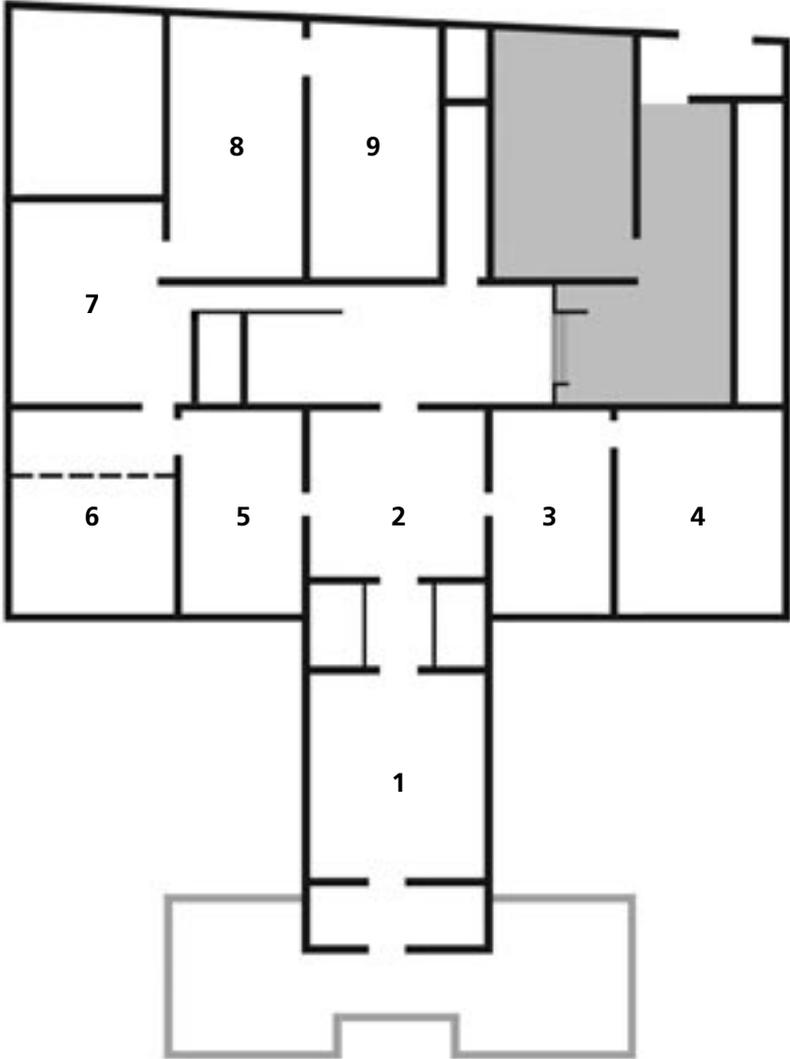
Curlet takes up the question of redeployment again by introducing Ann Lee into a short film. Here she is temporarily identified with the heroine of the film, a woman who has agreed to work for Curlet (the artist turned employer), by interrupting her regular job for a given period and keeping a journal in which she takes on the identity of the character. Ann Lee, a kind of transitional object of contemporary art, can watch herself from the inside of the Coconut: everyone lives in a private bubble... or the diary schedule, as a truly contemporary issue.

Room 8 is dedicated to the grid as a spatial grammar, a concept deployed throughout the exhibition. Thus the colors of the *Harmonia Mundi* series (1995) are repeated on some of the walls of the other rooms: the ochre of series #4 in Room 1, the blue of series #2 in Room 3, the orange of series #3 in Room 5. In the same way, the perforated silkscreen of *Harmonia Mundi #Mini Peplum* (2004) has been slipped into Room 5, and the crisscrossed aluminum bars of *Six Titres* (1991) appear from the start in Room 1. In the *Harmonia Mundi* series, the colors have all been copied from a commercially produced color chart, and its color is in effect what distinguishes each of the frames, which themselves are clearly handmade. The boundaries between advertising and decoration, craft and commerce, and between the modern and

the contemporary, are effaced yet again. From the serious to the comic, through endless permutations of truth and falsehood, the works of François Curlet “advertise” the artificiality of representation, the arbitrariness of point of view, and the peculiarities of art history.

Grille touristique (Baltimore) (1995-2000) is an imitation brochure, with real photographs and text, which features two equally well-known provincial cities. But instead of the photos of picturesque locations that usually fill such brochures, the viewer finds a juxtaposition of banal scenes from the two cities in question. Baltimore is also the place where John Waters lives and where most of his films were made.

Room 9 displays *Fishbone* (1998) in conjunction with *Lens Flair* (2004). Both of these pieces connect a very physical perception, produced either by building materials (steel and styrofoam) or light effects (white light, blinding light), with a spectral effect, a kind of fourth dimension or fragment of an unexplicated story. Curlet here gives a new form to his “bubble,” his mental cocoon/coconut, that of a space of creative latency, inviting the viewer into a waking dream.



Information

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Exhibition January 26 to March 18 2007

Institut d'art contemporain

11 rue Docteur Dolard

69100 Villeurbanne

Getting there Bus number 1

(Cité-Nouveau Musée stop)

Metro line A (République stop)

Close to the Lyon Part-Dieu TGV station

Bicycle loan rack (vélo'v) one minute

on foot

Opening hours Wednesday and Friday,

1 pm to 6 pm

Saturday and Sunday, 1 pm to 7 pm

Thursday, 1 pm to 8 pm

Free guided tours 3 pm Saturday and

Sunday or by appointment

Entrance fee Full rate 4 , reduced rate 2.50

For further information call 04 78 03 47 00

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