

Rhona Bitner

In the night of the image

"One enters a dark space, and an image appears."

These are the terms in which Rhona Bitner describes the world of spectacle, which constitutes the main source of material for her work. The first of these was the circus, shown in a long and marvellous series (*Circus* 1991-2001) in which the performers appear against a black ground as tiny, precious figures. Then came *Clowns* (2001) - immense, full-length, frontal portraits of the subjects at rest. Then, finally, the Stage series, shown here, which, starting in 2002, has focused on the empty interiors of theatres, including stages, prosceniums and aprons, curtains, backstage areas, chandeliers, etc.

It all looks very simple. And it is this apparent simplicity, this "dark space" and this image that "appears," that the lines below will consider.

Whether empty or holding a performance, these spaces seem to have been captured in the middle of a secret life, as if the gaze placed upon them were revealing a world that had hitherto been inaccessible, drowned in the babble and pretences of "universal reportage." These images we have before us are still, and apparently uneventful. Rhona Bitner prefers to take up the position of a simple observer, of a spectator seemingly content just to register "what is there." To acquiesce to what is there. But of course, as we well know, nothing is ever simply there, not even in places of spectacle where everything possible is done to ensure that images are offered to the passive - or at least captive - spectator. In some of her statements, the artist has insisted on the "matter-of-factness" of her gaze: the work, she says, is "matter-of-fact, inasmuch as it reflects the considered gaze of a detached observer."¹

The initial function of this concern with neutrality is, of course, a defensive one. It is designed to affirm the work's autonomy, its formal and conceptual integrity, and the refusal to allow its dilution in extraneous considerations. But it also opens up an interesting series of questions about representation, in the various different senses of that word.

There is, first of all, representation in the sense of the show being performed, the one unfolding in the ring of the circus; the one that is about to start, or that has just ended, the one whose memory, too, may still hang about all these theatres whose stages, curtains, chandeliers, etc. are shown in these photos. This show is not the main subject of Bitner's work. At the very most, it is its initial material. But for all that, the artist is not a "detached observer." Or rather, she evinces a strange mixture of detachment and passion. A truly detached observer would no doubt have gone about things differently. In the end, their approach would probably have been more distracted, more garrulous, whereas what we see here is extreme concentration, a desire to go to the heart of the matter and to grasp the spectacle, even in its absence, with a truly Mallarméan rigour. The circus artists are set into a black ground. This could easily have turned them into precious illuminations, but here they retain an exact presence. Where the gaze of a detached observer would no doubt have picked up something of the light and ambient forms, here there is nothing to interfere with these figures which are cut off from the flux that carries them along (the succession of postures and numbers, the *story* of the sequences). Although her intention is quite different, this links Bitner to all those other artists who have probed the magic of performance and the ways of representing it, from the dancing of Loie Fuller filmed by the Studio Lumière, or the flamenco dancer photographed by Man Ray, right up to *Zidane* by Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno.²

In the *Stage* series, the figure and performance as such are absent. All that remains is the place (the stage) and the coded evocation (the curtain, the chandelier, the proscenium) - that which constitutes, in a sense, their aura, like a perfume or the dust from impalpable times, a mixture of proximity and distance, of that which is coming and that which is moving away. The artist draws on the visual resources of the photographic material for her rendering of colour and light, the splendour of the large-format chromogenic print. The apparent detachment of the miniaturist has given way to images that are fraught with a powerful tension, an emotional charge, a mixture of expectation, mystery and perhaps a kind of nostalgia. As if the event had always already taken place, and the only part of it that can subsist is this half-open space that cannot be grasped in

its entirety, this murmur still echoing about the curtains and scenery.

Bitner attempts to capture this quality of presence-absence through the physical materiality of the stage, in a gesture founded on the hypothesis of a displacement: grasping the colours and forms of a space or an object, and through them the experience of which they are the depositories; and conveying to the beholder the consciousness of the totality of that experience, the way a successful metaphor does. This implies a strong belief in the capacity of the medium - subjected to a rigorous protocol - to achieve this displacement (the burden placed upon it extends even further, to the evocation of a myth, in that certain theatres are chosen for the richness of their particular history by virtue of which their name is known to all).

This poses a question, an enigma that many artists have sought to solve: how does one grasp the spirit of place? How does one make perceptible the set of evocations and allusions that are deposited there or that come to mind? Literature can deploy these brilliantly, follow their subtlest ramifications (for example - and to stay in the sphere of performance - this is what Proust does so admirably in the passage where the Narrator goes to the theatre for the first time, when the word "baignoire" triggers the vision of an undersea world, a grotto of aquatic nymphs).³

But what of the image? It has the power to offer, without any descriptive or narrative deployment, a visual equivalent of the mixture of sensations and thoughts that bear in on us. A successful image is one that can both evoke a specific scene or object and condense the sum of affects linked to it.

The viewer addressed here is thus not neutral. On the contrary, he or she is expected to have a particular sensibility, an ability to pick up moments of *irradiation*, moments when a place is decanted into something else, becomes liquid or air. No, the image does not spread out, it does not contaminate what is around it (there is no narrative, except, one might say, the one that would be constituted by an enigmatic quest, from one empty theatre to another), but it has an irrefutable precision that makes it, so to speak, *radiate out* from where it stands. And the sequence of different locations, as brought together in this book, also comes across as so many facets of a single vision. At the junction of a twofold, contradictory yet effectual determination: each perfectly specific place, with its own history and its own *water* (as we say of a precious stone); but also, each as one facet of a unique place, one of the images that this fictive place holds within itself.

The work of the artist consists, precisely, in *imaging* all this. Not with the "last" image spoken of by Beckett, the one signifying the end, fixing on a scene where everything slows and freezes.⁴ Such a vision belongs to the kingdom of the "last image," that of "black silence," "that black nothingness with impossible shadows." There is nothing catastrophic about Rhona Bitner's images (even if they do exude a certain melancholy, but that is something else entirely). The question that they raise is always the same, however: how does one *make an image*, an image that is right? The artist subjects the rich associations cited here (but there are no doubt many that I have missed) to the artisanal rigour of the medium. If there is something minimal in this, then it is here, in this effort to restore to experience a kind of simplicity and immediacy to experience. She achieves this by trusting her working material - the photographic process - and its capacity to capture the richness of shadows and the subtlety of tones.

Régis Durand

¹ In an interview with Barry Schwabsky, *Art Press* 307, December 2004.

² On Man Ray, for example, see Georges Didi-Huberman, "L'espace danse - Etoile de mer Explosante-fixe", *Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, no. 94, winter 2005-2006, p.37-51. A great deal has been published on the representation of spectacle (dance, theatre, sport), though it does not concern us directly here.

³ On this, see what is one of the best studies of "metaphoric ecstasy" and "metonymic contagion", namely, Gérard Genette, "Métonymie chez Proust," in *Figures III*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972, p. 41-63.

⁴ I refer here to Samuel Beckett's short text, *L'image* (Editions de Minuit, 1988): "it's over, it's done, it goes out the stage remains empty a few animals then darkens then goes dark then blue..." (p.17). See also, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, Editions de Minuit, 1958 (1950).