

## Formal Metamorphoses

### Julie Portier

#### *The myth of the artist + heads of lettuce*

Since some conventions of methodology are to be expected in a retrospective catalog, it would be appropriate here to examine the artwork from the beginning of Jérémy Laffon's career, in particular his first videos. *Pom Pom salade* (2005) is a performance piece filmed in the late evening during an outdoor music festival, during which the artist, wearing a plastic garbage can over his head, performs a dance inspired by cheerleader choreography, with limited acrobatic ability and equipment—two heads of lettuce that are destroyed during the course of the ritual dance. This spontaneous production, albeit sublimated by slow movements and languorous pop-rock soundtrack, establishes a central motif in the early years of his work, where it remains a dominating critical subject when he is off-camera—that is, the figure of the artist. In the following years, Jérémy Laffon appeared on screen with other attributes: a ping-pong paddle and orange balls, with which he seemed to be occupied full time in setting a personal record of bounces. The video *Ping-Pong Master Player* (2007) follows the dribbling artist all the way to China, where concentration and wrist endurance are boundless. The ball bounces—in the street, on the bus, in the restaurant, in the rickshaw, in the shopping centers, and even in the museums—and all this amid the indifference of Chinese people. The following analysis underscores the relevance of the solitary ping-pong player's actions, and how it neatly condenses many of the themes and aesthetic elements present in Jérémy Laffon's work. It is, first and foremost, a substitution for an athletic or leisure activity requiring an investment equal to its non-productiveness. This, for obvious political reasons, makes this game quite serious—as much so as the lettuce dance. There appears to be something of a taste for repetitive motifs and movements bounded by the laws of weightlessness (admittedly, a fairly complex issue with sculpture). The mischievous suggestion of minimal formalism in an everyday object, the estimation of time in a continuous rhythmic pattern, supported by the production of real music, a certain process of infiltration of reality, even congestion, and the challenging (practicing) of viewer participation, all of this is found in *Ping-Pong Master Player*. But the juggling acts featuring Jérémy Laffon as he left the Beaux-Arts seem to have established a series of postulates as to his choice of profession that is currently thorny to say the least, both socially and intellectually. Then again, the figure of the public entertainer might be only an ironic spectacle for recording a more grave assumption, for it is precisely gravity in all senses of the word that is done away with, by overcoming the risk of falling. If this description of the artist's plan sounds like a defiance of cosmology, it is an extrapolation that is easily inferred from the artist's many allusions to the divine nature of his actions. Take, for example, the series of proto special effects to give him super powers (*Bilan de compétences*, 2007), or the allegories for celestial phenomena using ping pong balls or oranges moved by an escalator (*Symphony 1# opus 9 & 13*, 2005), or irrigating the streets of a devastated town (*Invasione Pacifica*). The artist's action attacks the myth of creative genius, at least what has survived its decline since the end of the other myth of modernity. But at the same time, this rudimentary mechanism begins the reactivation of a legend. This deeply romantic ambiguity is joined to the leitmotiv of Jérémy Laffon's work, in which it is always a matter of artistic abilities and, eventually, for the artist to wonder what he can do. So then, might certain strategies designed to reinforce the artist's aura be used to create a diversion from his real ambitions? For there is no doubt that they far exceed the goal of

becoming a famous artist. Among others, we can name that genuine deception that consisted of retouching old paintings by slipping in epiphanies of the ping pong paddle and its orange ball in the installation *De main en main* (in collaboration with Jérémy Setton). But the use of one raw material used in several different media and on different scales to the point of circulating like a symbol (in the tradition of Buren's stripes, for example) or rather a brand name indicated by its signature material (in the tradition of the firm Placo-platre®, for example) remains the most flagrant process of mythicization in Jérémy Laffon's work. As fate would have it, this has earned him an identity in the art world as "Mr. Lettuce" or "Mr. Chewing Gum," not to mention the wrongs caused by the orange ping pong balls that end up rebelling in the video *Le dernier mot* by hunting the artist in his own territory, the studio, and assailing him by the dozens. This poor Prometheus, overcome by the events that he himself set in motion, does all that he *can*, and that's all that he does as an artist: exhaust all his energy and perfect the technique within the means possible (in this case, a wooden board serving as a paddle) until strength and rhetoric are exhausted.

### *Passive Resistance*

But this tenacity, this way of giving body and soul to the uncertain cause of art, is above all used to do nothing, or to do as little as possible (which often demands great effort in organization). *Collection d'assistants potentiels* (2006) might have been the preamble to a postulate: the series of photographs taken in China shows individuals dozing in public places or in their workplace. And this collective torpor does look like an act of dissidence, under an authoritarian regime that depends on the docility of the worker. Meanwhile, not far from the sleepers, Jérémy Laffon was dribbling, which is also an active way of doing nothing, of filling the time but also signaling that at that time, there was nothing to do, and making it widely known, with feigned discretion. For that matter, aren't adolescents the best dribblers in any sport? Thus did Jérémy Laffon get involved in the art field highly conscious of the fact that there is theoretically "nothing to do," and hasn't been for quite some time. Such was the case for Herman Melville's scrivener (*Bartleby*, 1858), who had the wisdom to "prefer not" to do, foreshadowing a century earlier the attitude of an entire swathe of artists of the postmodern era sensibly renouncing demands for novelty at a time when everything has already been done. And under these conditions, there is nothing left to do but fill the time, what Duchamp did best as an artist, that is, by doing something else, like play chess.\* While he tirelessly dribbles, Jérémy Laffon does nothing, constantly. It's an oxymoronic act, an active idleness, since this inaction produces several things, including a sound that is sufficiently annoying to infer an act of protest. Indeed, the "ping! ping! pong!" that slowly but surely attacks the nerves, is no less innocent than the "knock! knock!" of the "woodpeckers" installed in the lower level of the exhibit space at Interface. They are pick axes hitched to a mechanism that activates their hammering when viewers are absent, going against not only exhibit conventions (by planned deception) but also clearly attacking its exhibit space. The subtext of this rhythmic score played by axes on different materials with unique sounds (iron, wood, concrete) is really the deterioration of the exhibit space. Elsewhere, Jérémy Laffon actually set fire to the institution—without departing from the nonchalance of the ping pong player—with the operation *Ping-pong terrorism* (2009), carried out during a residency at a high school. In this piece, the artist explored the plastic and dynamic qualities of flaming ping pong balls (which was at least a way of finally finishing with this signature symbol). While the experiment led to the elaboration of a drawing method that produces surprisingly voluptuous renderings as featured in the series *Rumeur et papillotes*, it cost the artist a formal complaint for smoke bombing, signed by the teaching staff, in the form of a letter displayed with the other documentation on this perfor-

mance. The odor that antagonized the guardians of discipline was not a side effect, but part of the program for the piece. It is the same with the more acceptable scent of chewing gum sticks used since 2009. Reprised at the Pompidou Center in 2014, the tiling of chlorophyll gum (*After school*) filled the entire lower level of the museum with a heady odor. It was the scent of a sickly sweet subversion, and what's more, seemingly innocent by suggesting a children's group art project. Such is the way in which Jérémy Laffon attacks the art space, seeming not to touch it so that some will only see the damage. And the block of ice placed in the Cairn art center is party to this deception. Considering the similarities between Jérémy Laffon's work and Swiss abstractionism, we cannot leave out a reference to the ice sculptures of Olivier Mosset that take the form of Swiss anti-tank weapons that were never put in service (*Toblerone*, 2005). The melting of these defense machines once they are installed in the exhibit space is the pitiful image of defeat implying the defeat of institutional critique, or more broadly of politically committed art. The title of the exhibit enclosing the monumental ice cube, '*Closed Circuit*,' refers to a method of production and to a system of existence in Jérémy Laffon's work, but it also sounds like an expression of weariness with regards to the art world, of a body of brooding and theoretical work, or perhaps of an ossified occupational "system."

### *Reconstruction of myth by hand*

To sum up, Jérémy Laffon has rather punkish tendencies, which are not only expressed by setting fire to school hallways, or by salvaging the carcass of a classic car for an outdoor sculpture that gives electrical shocks to the viewer (*Epileptic Sovereign*). All of his activities contribute towards attacking the myth of creation and its corollaries. So there is indeed a destructive force here, but it is most often translated into a constructive act. The desire to dismantle the basic tenets of aesthetics one at a time is practiced on a construction one stone at a time, or one stick of gum at a time. In this way, structures and entire cities are erected that are Herculean even in the pronunciation of their names, like *Chlorophénylalaninoplastomecanostressrhéologoductilviridiscacosmographigum*. In addition, the same resistance to the creative act that consists of doing nothing also demands a huge investment of intense physical effort involving muscles and neurons, whether in dribbling or chewing (as for the series *Globes*). This paradoxical ratio of activity increases when the claim of idleness is expressed through a challenge in elevation. It is as if the artist, wanting to sidestep the thankless task before him, could find no other solution but to show even greater ambition. For example, or for the allegory, while on mop duty, the artist decides to complete only part of the task; using stencils, he leaves his studio mates with a floor that is only half clean but now has a diamond pattern that improves on its design considerably (*Terrain d'entente*, 2011). And then there is the process of delegation—a theoretical solution to the refusal to commit an expressive act, as well as a way of doing as little as possible—which involves managing an activity on an industrial scale. Through this process, Jérémy Laffon finds himself the foreman of a horde of children (put to work on the pretence of a cultural activity) and the busy monitor of faucets used to fashion sculptures of soap with dripping water (*Productivity, Run Away!*), while a mere herd of goats is employed to use their tongues to hollow out the delicate curves of the *Osselets*.

This vulgarization of the creative act, when it is delegated to a party of goats or to a failure in plumbing, is matched by the use of materials from the most ordinary domains: agriculture (the salt licks as the basis for *Osselets*), household chores (the sponges that form *Paysage étendu*), and most of all our consumerist society, approached on its most common and essential territory, the supermarket. The pallets that form an alarm system in the installation *Sans titre* have previously unloaded their stock of industrial food, among it the

iconic chewing gum. It is therefore complete artifice, from its consistency to its supposedly supremely natural taste (chlorophyll); not even a food but the promise of immediate pleasure rendered tasteless within minutes, of a wartime ersatz that must soon be spit out. In addition to being the privilege of vulgarity when it is chewed too conspicuously, or the symbol of a commercial invasion introduced by saviors, chewing gum is absolute trickery. And it is undoubtedly for this reason that it had to be the material for an art that questions its own integrity.

We can easily see the artist's political reasons for setting his heart on ignoble materials, such as the bar of Marseille soap that puts forward arguments of authenticity at the forefront of a delocalized and manufactured production, that is, made without hands. And the first political act in this place is indeed that of re-appropriation, for the purpose of non-consumption, of pure non-productivity, among other pathways to the sublime. But chewing gum and soap, the scouring sponge and the ping pong ball, are interesting to Jérémy Laffon for their own plastic qualities that it is unnecessary to spell out here except to highlight four common denominators: all of these materials offer basic or geometric shapes (rectangle, cube, sphere), are modular, can be reshaped by altering their physical state, and often have several usable sensory qualities (olfactory or auditory, for example).

So the act of the sculptor who works this material lacking of any nobility is an act without any artistic distinction. When it involves work by hand, it is a patient, expert, precise hand that the wider public (the "non-specialist") ascribes to the artist, but that the "expert" reserves, whether condescendingly or not, for the talents of the craftsman. It is the hand of the model maker who builds miniature temples in his attic, or of the amateur mechanic who builds complicated machines in his garage that have no use at all, with no other ambition than to kill time and escape from solitude—which, when you think about it a little, just might be the noblest of artistic ambitions. There is admittedly a critical attitude in extolling the use of disqualified materials and techniques in contemporary practice. It has nothing to do with a reactionary position, and even less with nostalgia—but that doesn't keep him from appreciating a job well done. We must associate this reinvestment of the hand and this "return to the studio" with the issue of relativizing artistic work and the role of the artist in society by the generation born after the end of the "great narratives," a relativism that would be the necessary condition for revitalization. As such, we must note that the term used to describe these artistic attitudes reconciled with manual labor, *reskilling*, comes from the field of professional retraining. For example, it designates the act of going back to train in cabinet making after university study in order to be better skilled for the job market. But it has also become part of the vocabulary of those who think of new economic models in which the development of expertise promotes productive autonomy. While waiting for such a societal advancement, the "transfer of skills" takes place in the art field, where the reinvestment of the hand is compatible with the deconstruction of the myth of originality initiated at the end of the modern era; even better, it would be its fulfillment. But that isn't all; in this arena of demystification, the era of *reskilling* would allow us to see in the "reconversion" of the act and the material a potential "recharging" of the artist's work, an emotional and sensory recharging but also a political and metaphysical one.

### *Animism and Tectonics*

Jérémy Laffon's installations are recharged in electricity (*Epilectic Sovereign*) and in driving force (hydraulic in *Circuit fermé*). Most of all, they contain the energy expended until exhaustion and channeled by the patience required for their completion. Furthermore, it is always a question of opposing forces in action, of balancing and adjusting tensions, as

when the artist replaces the sticks of chewing gum about to give way with little wooden strips in order to maintain the architectonics of the elliptical constructions named *Reliques*, that they may resist collapse (there we are!). These links between forces are only to be taken figuratively after having recognized here the art of a sculptor, who, from installation to video, pulls from all of the qualities of the materials in use, from their elasticity as much as their sonority.

Recharged in energy, the objects have enough autonomy to take on the artistic work themselves. So it is with the spinning top that draws in ink, with profusion or concision, in the series *Siffler en travaillant*, while providing an alibi for the artist to minimize his involvement, even though his abstaining still put him at risk of a sprain. When “wound up,” the mechanical players might in turn stir up a rebellion, discretely (as does Jérémy Laffon) and at a slow and regular pace like the creaking respiration of the pallets (*Sans titre*), the “knock knock” of the *Pics verts*, and the “plop plop” of the stones dropped into the black water that splashes onto the gallery walls in *Circuit fermé*. In Jérémy Laffon’s art, “it works” by itself, as proven by the jingling of the barely moving tools in the studio (*Symphony # 1 Opus 9 & 13*, 2010); it is always sound that indicates an invisible activity, as when the wood “works” in a house and the listener thinks it is a ghost. The chewing gum temples peel apart to the sound of the humidifier and the block of ice crackles without moving, distilling the rumor of their imminent collapse. While agreeing with the abstention of the act and the adjournment of the artistic event, this method creates new illusions and even animist legends.

The fall of the myth of the artist—in other words, the death of the author—not only results in the delegation of form to outside factors or to the “course of nature,” but it also gives life to things. This vitality unfurls where society has sounded the retreat, as in the village of Casso in Italy, overcome by a landslide several decades ago. In *Invasione Pacifica*, Casso lives through a new phenomenon, described in the code of a disaster film: a rockslide of oranges from out of nowhere, like invaders whose only objective is to take advantage of the slope, their fall being the sole element of the plot besides their strange coagulation upon arrival as they form a huge orange mass. While the scene refers to drama and the “pitch” seems to come from a B movie, the citrus fruit colors the film with a joyful mood that is expressed with each collective bounce. Here again, the re-appropriation of the territory works through play, like the ping pong player in China or in the art field. It is what remains to be done when there is nothing more to do. The game, even when it consists of descending the slope, releases the vital impulse that alone lets us imagine surviving a catastrophe or keeping calm while awaiting its arrival (the analogy to the artistic context still applies). For the construction games of Jérémy Laffon are like so many warnings against collapse that suddenly occurs in the midst of imperceptible evolution. It is the same with *Trésor de Mexico* and the polar icecap. In fact, the movement of disappearance common to all of Jérémy Laffon’s pieces is not foreign to the awareness of the irreversibility of climactic disturbance, even to the theories that question anthropocentrism. But its conceits offer the spectacle of the annihilation of the world while presenting the attempt to master the course of nature, filling the obstinacy of the artistic act with emotion. Several sculptures result from the taming of entropy; an extravagant machinery is set up for this end in *Circuit fermé*, while other alchemistic experiments seem to exhibit the result, as with the bars of soap tiled like horrifying geological outliers (*Productivity, Run Away! and Freaks*). More generally, the setting up of processes that are tested at an extremely slow pace might be a protest against a rampant production system responsible for the current ecological peril, while the system of attention called for by these pieces encourages the patient appreciation of natural phenomena.

## *The metamorphoses of the rectangular parallelepiped*

From these processes of delayed production emerges the monstrous form, one that complicates the aesthetic emotion, rekindles the passions and ambiguity between desire and repulsion. It would seem that in respecting the heritage of minimal and conceptual art, in swearing by the geometric form and the neutrality of the act, Jérémy Laffon is in search of the formless, when the protocol leads to another form rejected by minimalism: the decorative. The metamorphoses orchestrated by the hand of the do-it-yourselfer or amateur alchemist convert the minimalist form to a baroque one, of which the architectonics of chewing gum melting under infrared lamps are the most eloquent (*Couveuses*). In *Circuit fermé*, the melting of the block of ice has the initial effect of releasing the black band of ink in the upper layer of the mass. Next, the right line releases runs of ink, then lets go in sine curves before daring variations in gray, while the block rounds its edges and sculpts cavities, even allowing itself several zoomorphic stages. The same evolution is produced in *Black Ice Cube drawings*, which repeat the imprint of an inked ice cube until its disappearance, giving a diluted representation of a dilapidated building. Everything is arranged to produce disarray. All of these efforts are in the service of release. If the underlying question remains one of art methods, we need only to see methods of producing a form, an affective form (even tortured), while using the least amount of affect, at least not the type that is passed through the hand. The hand obediently places the stick of chewing gum (or the strip of lead) as indicated onto the grid, and only moves quickly when throwing the dice to obtain the random data to justify an irregular shape. Let us note in passing that the dice used for *Constructions protocolaires aléatoires* are taken from role-play games that consist of moving around squares on a board while pretending to be another character (often endowed with superpowers). To return now to the block of ice, its complete disappearance sets in motion a productive mechanism, in which pure form gives way to a convoluted contraption, driving pulleys that drop stones into barrels filled with black water from the melted ice (another ecological allegory). It would seem that the metamorphosis of the monolith gave birth to pure movement and real music (an a-synchronic “plop plop”), but in a few dives of the stones, another plastic demonstration appears, confirming that this activity is still a machine to produce a form by delegation: the diluted ink splashes onto the white walls of the gallery like an expressionist wash to imprint on them the contradictory moods of the present time in one fragile mark. “I’ve done all that I could,” concludes the artist, wiping his brow.