

FRANK VANDE VEIRE

Something about How a Tuerlinckx Machine Traverses the Exhibition Machine

*I want to comment on limits, also on those between nothing and much, between nothing and everything. —
Joëlle Tuerlinckx*

Stories are nice. They begin, unwind themselves, and end, however "open" that end may be. Life however, is no novel and suffers from a literally unimaginable long-windedness and confusion. Little of what we think, feel, say, or do leads to something. Most of it is lost in the abyss of time. If one were to follow someone—even someone who "knew what he had to do," someone with a so-called consistent life, with a successful career, etc.—from birth till death, in everything he did, even in his inner "stream of consciousness," his life would leave one with the impression of terrible chaos. Even if one can point out a number of lines in someone's life that show a certain regularity or a thoroughgoing development of something, next to them one finds immense quantities of things in such a state of uncertainty that the person's motives and objectives remain totally opaque. And even though each of us has known (scarce) moments when the trifling caboodle that is life all of a sudden seems to fall into place, we must admit that, in comparison with the "ordinary" course of events, such experiences seem unreal and to a large extent obscure. Freud's question "What does woman want?" was in fact a trick used to postpone asking that even more unfathomable question: "What does man want?"

This is not just any old question one can ask about that strange species called mankind. This question is mankind. But, since he is the question, he never dwells upon it, because if he did, he would have to admit that he does not know the answer. Yet if he wishes to be considered as being more or less human by himself as well as by others, he must always look like someone who does know. So he always has some kind of alibi up his sleeve (some noble aim, some "interesting" activity) that he uses to hide, from the world and from himself, that he in fact wants nothing. Man wants absolutely nothing, but this does not prevent him from wanting and even wanting all kinds of everything. And when he is completely at a loss, he would rather want nothing than not want—according to Nietzsche, this would increasingly happen to us—and compared with this nothingness everything else will turn pale.

Man does a lot and one must admit that, in doing so, most of the time he obtains no results at all. He opens and closes a curtain; switches a light on and immediately turns it off again; scrawls on paper, tears it to shreds, crumbles it, forms it into a ball; counts the pieces of dust on a windowsill; spills water on a tabletop . . . Through these superfluous activities, which normally are considered not even worth mentioning, man betrays the fact that he really wants nothing. We often notice this in lapses, in activities with a repetitive, even "compulsive" nature, or in activities that are somehow stopped halfway. Although usually involuntary, such actions reveal a strictly established pattern. They clearly have no aim whatsoever but do not, therefore, create chaos—or, better still, they cause chaos but, in one and the same movement, create order, as if wishing to avert the "nothingness" with which they are nevertheless playing. Shreds of paper will be used to compose strict geometric structures, for instance.

Imagine now that one is not just someone whose hand, with which one does not know what to do, scribbles on a notepad during a boring meeting. Suddenly one says very decidedly: I will bring this hand, which does not know what to do with itself and which everyone is carefully ignoring as if it were something obscene, I will bring this hand to the foreground. I will allow this hand that is fleeing from the nothingness that haunts it, yet can only speak about that nothingness, to stand in full daylight. I will mobilize it deliberately and shamelessly exhibit its nonresults. I will write, draw, outline, and project the "story" of this storyless hand. It is very hard to discover what Joëlle Tuerlinckx is doing because—paradoxically—she is

very consciously doing what she does not know. Or better still: she is attentively busy *ignoring* what she is doing. Why? Because she does not want to do this or that but, wants to show us the general significance of "doing": what one does when one is doing (anything at all). In order to become everyone and no one she must, for a moment, be unaware where she is heading; she must empty her deeds, rid them of those specific motives or objectives with which they might be ascribed. She must act *sans histoire*, without a story that might justify or explain her behavior. She therefore strives after some kind of "historical amnesia." This amnesia is not pure oblivion, nor is it the tabula rasa from which an absolutely autonomous and "original" creation might emerge; this amnesia is her attempt at disappearing as an individual and, through this disappearance, creating the space for a "storehouse" in which "the sum of all constructive and destructive gestures of the entire humanity" is stacked.

I am not referring to the storehouse of all human achievements but that of the unachieved, the fruitless: the reservoir of deeds that have remained in a state of uncertainty and therefore have remained unnoticed—gestures without a story, through which a person rebels, in a speechless, somewhat stupid manner, against the demand to produce anything whatsoever and through which a person remains faithful to his "nothingness," without any belief or conviction. It seems therefore, as if Tuerlinckx "constructs" nothing that does not immediately bend itself back to this "nothingness" and that therefore contains no moment of destruction. Her constellations of "little things," which literally never get off the ground, reflect a well-meant attempt to create order yet simultaneously provide a vision of a landscape following a catastrophe. It seems as if everything still has to begin, still has to find its place. At the same time, everything is no more than a trace, a memory.

Inscribed in Tuerlinckx's constellations is the immense deficit in the economy of life. This deficit is never turned into profit. The loss itself in fact refuses to disappear and is endlessly slowed down. Tuerlinckx presents us with the result of activities that have interrupted themselves, have gotten stuck in themselves, as if the inevitably unsuccessful refusal, the hesitation, the unwillingness to do anything whatsoever that lives in all of us is the only thing to which they owe their existence. Here the inertia of someone or rather of "something" is at work, the force of a kind of machine the most striking feature of which is that it *cannot do nothing*. Yet on the borderline of this nothingness, everything is possible, or, better still, everything appears as pure possibility. All artistic media are present at the embryo *stage* in the manner in which Tuerlinckx brings a whole range of utterly ordinary activities to a halt within themselves and transforms them into empty gesture.

Or can all of this be considered as a commemoration? Something is being "drawn" or "painted," but with adhesive tape, confetti, balls of paper, etc.; here and there, things stand upright, yet they do not deserve to be called "sculptures"; projections are being made, but no image or film can be seen, theater curtains open and close . . . various different media are briefly indicated without being actually used. All that appears are "extracts," "samples" of them, as if each artistic activity is reflected in a kind of parodic miniature of itself before it is actually exercised. Because we find ourselves at a zero point of art, all modernist procedures are reviewed in miniaturized form: pure line, pure color, primary material, *objet trouvé*. Tuerlinckx crosses or steps through a space as if she were a memory machine that memorized and virtualized all imaginable artistic gestures.

Tuerlinckx is not just trying to escape from existing exhibition requirements through explicit opposition or by means of that ironic distance of which insiders to contemporary art are so fond. On the contrary, she "embraces" these requirements. She wants to know "what the walls have to say"; what is going on generally in museum and exhibition spaces. She likes to slide into the story that slumbers in each space, even though it does its very best to look "neutral," which then inevitably awakens certain expectations for each work that is given a place there. Of course, she does not simply fulfill these expectations, nor does she turn fully

against them. She does something mud) more estranging. She signifies, even oversignifies, the question raised by the (physical and institutional) space. She does not take possession of the space but repeats it time and again, lets its structure enter into all articulations of the work itself.

In display cases, we can see balls of paper or photographs other work or of the building's windows and roof, the entrance hall, the office, the lighting, the exhibition poster, the invitation, etc. Slide and film projectors and episcopes throw empty light surfaces onto the wall or project a deformed enlargement of the near-nothingness of a minuscule layer of paint applied to a slide. The touching, slightly clumsy care with which worthless objects such as balls of paper, rags, confetti, and other items are arranged in unsteady formations or depots—as if to form mini-exhibitions—time and again reflects the pure and empty act of displaying. Adhesive tape or lines of paper shreds mark the shape of walls and windows and, like the carpets and plastic floor cloths, outline spaces where something can be seen, even if it is often no more than the spaces themselves. "Rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu" ("Nothing will have taken place, except the place"). According to Tuerlinckx, "art" apparently has nothing better to do than introduce a minimal shift in the always impure, busy, talkative void of the exhibition space, a shift that nevertheless changes everything.

Each separate element or "ensemble" reflects, in its own manner, the whole happening that the exhibition is or would like to be. Each part comprises the whole. Such a consequent and obstinate tautology leaves nothing unaffected. Because the exhibitiv act is not just considered as an obvious given but is foregrounded on each occasion, whatever is exhibited becomes rarefied. When Tuerlinckx shows us a box wrapped in gold paper or a cube made of styrofoam, they are not minimalist objects confronting us with the absolute evidence of their presence. These objects are more like allegories of dreamed presences; more particularly they allegorize the desire of art institutions to present "real presences," to give them to the spectators as a "present." Tuerlinckx is not reticent about this desire but, on the other hand, does not go out of her way to place her "artistic personality" in the balance. She takes this longing upon herself, accepts it as hers, deciphers it, and hands it back to the institutional space: she sows the space with signs of its desire to make some space available for the "real thing." The space seems to say the same thing wherever we look: "Attention! Here it is being shown, here it has been selected, shaped, grown, kneaded, recomposed ... for you."

Exactly this ironic overidentification with the rhetoric of space—ironic, without being facetious or distant—prevents the rhetoric from being *filled in*. Stripped of its substance, it no longer yields any effect and can only repeat itself in a void, like a machine that can only reproduce itself. Within the rhythm of this reproduction, which yields no product worthy of the name, Tuerlinckx opens up the void that sets the "exhibition machine" in motion, a void that it ignores time and again because of its longing to make space for the "arts."

Tuerlinckx's relationship with the exhibition machine is of the same tender and lucid nature as her relationship with all human activity. She is only interested in the latter to the extent that it is interrupted and loses itself in a gesture that yields nothing but simultaneously, being afraid of this nothingness, slides over it to weave a pattern, structure, or constellation across it. Similarly, the artist only affirms the data of an exhibition if the act of exhibiting can suspend itself for a moment, i.e., when that curious demand for something like art and the longing to show art are reflected back upon themselves. Such a reflection only discloses the irreparable want from which this demand and this longing arise and upon which they inevitably remain focused. This want can never be uncovered just like that; it can only be endlessly bypassed by all kinds of things that seem to owe their existence merely to a suspension of the process of their disappearance.

"We need art in order not to go to ground because of the truth"—i.e., we need an in order to learn to accept or even in order to learn to enjoy. But what obscure enjoyment is this? That

the thing that we wish to see reappear time and again is *nothing* and that, therefore, what we do actually see is always too much. Tuerlinckx does not annihilate this "surplus"—this is what we live from—but by emphasizing it, by an overt strategy of proliferation and acceleration, she allows the commotion to silence itself so that it can manifest itself as the echo of an unheard void. The little balls arranged meticulously on squares of a kitchen towel only attract our attention because this towel—the stage on which the balls are presented—has a hole that no mending job will ever be able to hide. They tell us about nothing but that tear from which they try to divert our attention with their pretty colors, though, on closer examination, each carries a trace of it in the shape of a small hole . . .

Translated from the Flemish by Catherine Thys

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