

Joseph Bourgois - Beacons

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Exhibition 08/03 – 05/04

di volta in volta
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Visits by appointment
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Press release :

« Beacons » presents a new series of lamps produced by Joseph Bourgois during a month residency. Made from preexisting structural elements, on which Joseph has carried out a series of cuts, perforations, wirings, the lamps take the shape of columns informed by signal lights and urban architecture. Each is part of an installation that attracts the viewer's attention at the various spots where they stand, or hang to the wall. In doing so, they perform a kind of self referencial signal, inviting us to reflect upon the conditions of their autonomy within the space of exhibition. Can we still view them as lamps, if they are to be seen as art ? Conversely, can we still receive their signal as art, if they nonetheless function as lamps ? It is maybe here, in the tension between the banality of an object, a commodity, and what would differ from it, an artwork, that circuits meaning through Joseph Bourgois' installation. Or, as Adorno put it, « as a thing that negates the world of things », in its capacity to appear as a critical subject like thing¹. Yet, it is probably in the irony of such counter appropriation of social functioning, assuming itself a certain rationality, that it best casts light on its own practice.

Somewhere, in the distance, navigates a « cargo that could not be declared because it still lacked a name »², if it does not lie at the bottom of the ocean. « Beacons » might be as ghostly as the signals that flashed from the traffic in the « little universe » of the surrealist Paris of the 20's described by Benjamin. It would rather guide that cargo and the aestheticism it carries away, a century later, since Joseph Bourgois' installation inevitably cuts itself off from everyday applications, qua installation. Even though these lamps illuminate the space of exhibition, they materialize an artwork irreducibly distributed across its different materializations and future instanciations. In that sense theorized by Peter Osborne, after Jeff Wall notably, they are « postconceptual » works. However, Joseph Bourgois' columns not only mimic construction signals or signal lights but embody a principle of construction, as « the building up of an object through a combination of independently pre-existing parts », in a way that is not completely divorced from life. Meaning, not indifferent from the social and historical conditions of their constructed materials, intrinsic to the technologies and division of labour in contemporary societies. This is stressed by the facts that they remain (more or less) functional lamps, undertaken from a utilitarian perspective, polemical in its anti-art stance and ambiguous revival of historical avant-gardes.

1 See Theodor W. Adorno, Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), trans Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997, p. 119 cited in Peter Osborne, *Crisis as Form*, Verso, London, 2022, p. 175.

2 See Walter Benjamin, *Surrealism : The last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia* (1929), in Selected Writings, Volme 2 : 1927-1934, Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 211-2, cited in Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or not at all*, Verso, London, 2019, p. 79. Osborne describes the early XXth century avant-gardes as the « secret cargo » of XIXth century « Art for Art's sake » an its aestheticism (that already contained the complete freedom of relations supposed in the movement of art toward life).

The tension thus arises not only between the artwork and the banality of the mere commodity from which it would have to distinguish itself to appear, but between the conditions of this appearance and the potentials of becoming merely affirmative of such an assumption. In other words, the artwork structurally dialectical relations are always in danger of a reconciliation with « the one and the many » on one hand and the social functionality of discourses on art and the « harmony » they sustain on the other. Joseph Bourgois' columns-lamps-installation critically engages with that issue through an unresolved internal organization. Split, for example, between the self-contained, monadic, « autonomy » of the columns in space, and the space itself they construct, as a space of signal transmission occurring between deterritorialized locations, places, virtual or not, based on communicational constructive technologies rather than solely machinofacture ones. A division though that may only reflect an ambivalence in the definition of the word « *stasis* » in ancient greek, designating columns, pilars, as well as the « *action to stand* » or « *the place where to stand* », then by extension « *the action to take a place where to stand* »³. Or, more broadly, the fact that there is no single place or common world where to stand today in the historical present of globalized communications networks and subsequent loss of indexicality.

Following Osborne, we could say that « Beacons » perform, in a « post-autonomous » way, a social function in the conventional constructivist sense of a communicational functionality⁴. It turns the exhibition into an explicit apparatus of information emission / reception within which, or from which, the viewers can reflect on the logics behind the construction of a signal. The question, nevertheless, remains how to value that signal, when the conditions within which autonomy were to be achieved considered by Osborne have dramatically changed over the last decade. From a rapidly growing interconnectedness and « denationalization » or transnationalisation of capital that lead to a global neoliberalism after the fall of Soviet communism and the opening of China, for which the concept of « contemporaneity » covers the disjunctive temporalization of crisis; to what is now commonly acknowledged as the end of an era of hyperglobalization since the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's war on Ukraine⁵. Whether this is only a plateau in international trade, an actual process of decoupling and deglobalization, or a shift in emphasis toward regionalization as one could argue⁶, how does this geopolitical reality affects the « coming together of different times » that constitutes the contemporary ? How does that change the conditions of a task incumbent upon art to situate itself reflexively within the present ? What are the axes along which its social meanings are to be signaled and plotted today, if the movement accross social spaces that make up the transnational has or is shifting toward a predominant renationalization or reterritorialization ?

Jean Bourgois

3 See Gérard Gréco et al., *Bailly 2020 Hugo Chávez* (2023), Dictionnaire Grec – Français, 2020, p. 2116, <http://gerardgreco.free.fr/spip.php?article52>

4 See Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or not at all*, Verso, London, 2019, p. 161.

5 See Dani Rodrik, *Reimagining the global economic order*, University of Harvard, Cambridge, 2023, « The post-1990s era of hyper-globalization is now commonly acknowledged to have come to an end. The Covid pandemic and Russia's war on Ukraine have relegated global markets to a secondary and at best supporting role behind other national objectives -- public health and national security, in particular. In fact, hyper-globalization had already been in retreat for a while, since the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. The share of trade in world GDP began to decline after 2007, as China's export-GDP ratio plummeted by a remarkable sixteen percentage points. Global value chains stopped spreading. International capital flows never recovered to their pre-2007 heights. And populist politicians openly hostile to globalization became much more powerful in the advanced economies. » <https://drodrik.scholar.harvard.edu/links/reimagining-global-economic-order>

6 See Shannon K. O'Neil, *It's Not Deglobalization, It's Regionalization*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2023, <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/2023/10/26/its-not-deglobalization-its-regionalization/>