

Daniel Pommereulle. Between The Archer and The Target

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He spluttered with rage at not being able to seize the object.

It seemed to him he reasonably imagined a glass cage. The idea that it could be pointed, sharp and dangerous had not occurred to him. He remembered only in the very distant past that no one had ever taught him that in the uncertainty of art.

Daniel Pommereulle, *Café Sanglant*

My first encounter with his work and his positions didn't happen through catalogs, exhibitions or wandering on the Internet, but rather thanks to Parisian word of mouth on the subject of a film by Eric Rohmer, *La Collectionneuse* (1967). Daniel Pommereulle plays one of the main characters in it: Daniel, a painter turned maker of objects. The film is based on a story that Rohmer had written in the 1950s. He keeps the same structure and adapts it to the time period and characters, shooting it in the summer of 1966 in and around Saint-Tropez. The scenario is minimal, just five or six pages of notes, and is fleshed out by the personalities and vocabulary of the actors: Patrick Bauchau, Haydée Politoff, and Daniel Pommereulle. Rohmer begins by recording conversations between Patrick and Daniel on various subjects ranging from women to painting. The final dialogue is a blend of sentences written by Rohmer, others taken from these recordings, and snippets of their expressions. Adrien (Patrick Bauchau) remains a character created by Rohmer. As for Daniel, he plays himself. When the two friends discuss the quest for nothingness, in bathrobes, one follows the inclination of a fictional character, and the other answers with his own ideas. This discrepancy becomes sometimes visible in the flow of discussions into which Daniel slips positions like those expressed in some of his writings or interviews:

Daniel: An idea is a flash. We only get three or four real ideas in our lives. People who think all the time don't exist. Take the soft watches, for example.

Adrien: Yes, that's it. I'm not looking for anything [...]

This role also enables Pommereulle to model his character on himself, he who denounced the merchandising of artworks and was opposed to the idea of production, and to play the anti-collector, in contrast to his worldly antiques dealer friend, while doing business with him and opposing himself to the contagious



Éric Rohmer,
La collectionneuse,
1967, 90min, still

sensuality of the young Haydée, the tranquil collector of boys. While complying with the vision of the director, he shares with us his frustrations and his scorn for the “poor guy who thinks only about accumulation”: “What is important is elimination; that is, erasing. The idea of collecting goes against the idea of purity.” Certain scenes show us thereby Daniel Pommereulle, enjoying staging himself collapsed on an armchair listening to a Tibetan chant while smoking marijuana, or when he meets the American collector, Sam, interrupting him while he is signing a check for the purchase of a Song dynasty vase, denigrating him: “That’s your collector?” “Can I just tell you? You are completely ridiculous. I don’t like collectors. I can’t stand the sight of them,” “I don’t need to flatter people, especially not those people.”

The most striking cinematographic incarnation of his figure of artist can yet be found in the opening prologue, a scene in which we discover an artist who shows one of his pieces to an art critic, a performance done with the complicit participation of Alain Jouffroy, critic and poet, who ran the art magazine *Opus*. Old friends, they form an almost inseparable duo, which can be evidenced in their numerous collaborations and the countless compliments about Daniel’s practice found in Alain Jouffroy’s writings. At the beginning of the film, they stage their relationship and Alain Jouffroy launches himself into a memorable speech—almost a monologue—on the cruelty of elegance. The speech that they wrote is tinged with numerous references to the French Revolution, mentioning the residents of Versailles who encircle those who give it their all or, Saint Just, underlining the rebel quality of the artist, which can also be understood as a speech foretelling the events of May 1968 soon to come. The scene is shot in the basement of Alain Jouffroy’s home where Daniel Pommereulle lived at the time.



Daniel Pommereulle the artist, Alain Jouffroy the art critic: they are seated around Pommereulle's desk. Alain Jouffroy starts talking about the necessity of pushing oneself to the limit. He amuses Daniel and then turns toward his piece sitting on the table. Gripping the object with a cigarette between his fingers, he turns it in front of the camera, while describing it. He is in complete admiration of the perfection of this piece, a can of paint covered with yellow drippings and surrounded by razor blades. This couldn't be better. Painting, thought, surrounded by razor blades. You can't hold it without getting hurt. As if to demonstrate this, he cuts himself and, bleeding, only interrupts his speech to suck a drop of blood from his finger. A close-up reveals the artist's desk, which we can imagine, like the rest of his presence in the film, to be like a balance between a simulated authenticity and a set design conceived for the film.

His desk, an elegant chaos, is cluttered with notes, magazines, a copy of the art magazine *L'Œil*, ashtrays full of cigarette butts sitting directly on the papers, a partly-drunk bottle of Johnny Walker, an empty water carafe, a book of interviews with Salvador Dali by Alain Bosquet, lighters, boxes of matches, packs of cigarettes, including a pack of Gitanes, rolling papers, odd tennis balls, firecrackers, sunglasses, and his *Objet hors-saisie* lit up by a flowered lamp: "The gap established by elegance with regard to inelegant people is of capital importance because it creates a sort of vacuum around the person." Alain Jouffroy continues to develop his thoughts. He understands the object as a way to recreate this gap of elegance. He concludes that Daniel could very well do without these objects: "You are yourself the can of paint with the razor blades around it like Saint Just was;" "The razor blades are spoken words; it's maybe silence, or maybe also elegance. A certain yellow." Daniel smiles. He is wearing a blue shirt and a yellow tie that matches his can of paint.

I discovered only later that this painting-sculpture was not only a prop in a film. Only a trained eye could have deciphered the signature under the can that appears fleetingly on the screen. An object that cuts your fingers and poses the question of the role of the painter, while reifying the debris of one of his work tools through the value added by the razor blades. A finished work that precedes

the experiments with firecrackers exploded on canvases (*Tableaux à pétards*) and with wire fencing replacing canvases (*Objets oubliés*.) Biographical facts tell us that Daniel Pommereulle supposedly broke his brushes in 1962, after having discovered Marcel Duchamp, and following his return from the war in Algeria, where he witnessed scenes of torture. It is in 1965, under the name the "objecteurs," that Alain Jouffroy brings together Arman, Daniel Spoerri, Daniel Pommereulle, Jean-Pierre Raynaud, and Tetsumi Kudo in Paris in three different galleries: the Jean Larcade Gallery, the Jacqueline Ranson Gallery, and the J Gallery.¹ The exhibition brings together painters who have "given up" painting to make objects and "to go back to the purity of the mental event." Daniel Pommereulle, alone in the Jacqueline Ranson gallery, exhibits his *Objet hors-saisie* amongst installations and enigmatic compositions of objects.

Although this exhibition has become a cult show for the French art scene, few images are in circulation and the original catalog remains difficult to find. The other catalogs on Daniel Pommereulle aren't numerous or widespread either. Today the film *La Collectionneuse*, subtitled in English and Spanish, enables Daniel Pommereulle and his *Objet hors-saisie* to circulate in other ways, and at the rate of its diffusion, or thanks to illegal downloading. It is therefore not insignificant to note that his piece has been re-appropriated in reference to the film twice in the 2000s by overseas artists.

In 2006, in the context of the exhibition "Ical Krbbr prdly prsnts Gart Jas, Jon Klsy, Josf Stra in Portikus," Josef Strau decorates blinking lamps in an experimental way by adding razor blades and a sound installation that takes up Jouffroy and Pommereulle's speech in *La Collectionneuse*. And more recently, in 2013, Carissa Rodriguez, in an exhibition at Front Desk Apparatus, called "La Collectionneuse," produces several copies of *Objet hors-saisie* in an attempt to modernize it by replacing the vulgar can of paint with pastel-colored ceramic pots (objects which were also seen at the last FIAC, lying around on the tables of a stand, threatening to scratch the tactile tablets left there by the gallery owner or potential buyer.)

Daniel Pommereulle subsequently makes a few appearances as an actor with other French directors, which are shorter and more discreet, but still take more or less into account the figure of the artist or his personality. In *Week-end* (1967) by Godard, he plays a revolutionary; in *La Mariée était en noir* (1968) by Truffaut, he is seen at an art opening; and he plays himself in *Les Idoles* (1968) by Marc'O. In *Le Vent de la nuit* (1998) by Philippe Garrel, he plays a fictional artist, with a less flattering image, a more traditional sculptor, Jean, dressed in an austere white work coat, who is not entirely satisfied with his sculpture, just a few minutes before its inauguration in the presence of the mayor. Something is bothering him. He could have cut more deeply into the mass. The sculpture in question has been borrowed or copied from another artist, the Spanish sculptor, Fenosa, which probably facilitates his acting dissatisfied.

1. "Les Objecteurs," December 1965-January 1966

Daniel Pommereulle, *Objet de Prémonition (série)*, 1974-1975
paint bucket, scalpel blades, knife blades, wrinkled lead sheets, plinth, dimensions variable, unique

Fictional constructions amalgamated with occasionally embroidered accounts of his nightlife, his lack of money, his encounter with Marlon Brando or his subversive spirit, a sketchy biography full of holes or clouded by anachronisms², seductive images of the artist published in his catalogs, and subjective objects.

A photo taken in the 1960s³ shows him working on a painting on the floor, a cigarette in hand, with sunglasses on—an original accessory to be wearing when making a painting—which could possibly protect himself from the bewitching effect of his *Spirales*, and which give this image of the artist in his studio an almost glamorous aspect.

Elusive in character, his exhibitions, regulated by the masterful control of his entrances and exits, intensify the event-like feel. The ultimate scandal remains without a doubt his exhibition of the *Objets de tentation* at the Mathias Fels Gallery in 1966. He arrives on the evening of the opening with a little attaché case for installing kits of different drugs, along with a quote by Max Stirner defining the notion of ownership. Syringes, razor blades, teaspoons, matches, burning alcohol, soaked blotters, heroine, opium, hallucinogens in pill form are sitting on marble tables next to utensils used for consuming narcotics, rolling papers, marijuana, and flasks full of pills set up on a Rolling Stones record. The different substances and accessories disappear over the course of the exhibition, leaving the viewer to intoxicate him/herself with an aesthetic transcendence, a buffet that offers the occasion to experience the rituals of a counter-culture, that makes reference to his own drug-taking habits and his lifestyle. His magnificent book, *Café Sanglant*, which gathers together certain texts and aphorisms of his, is named after a drink made of “coffee mixed with red table wine that was once served at bar openings,” an allusion to his assiduous patronage of bistros.

I was finally able to see a large number of Daniel Pommereulle’s pieces in the somewhat dusty and run-down Museum of Fine Arts of Valenciennes. The exhibition, which has participated in the current re-emergence of the artist⁴, doesn’t pretend in any way to be a retrospective, but is nevertheless representative of his later work, pieces made between 1974 and 1988, assembled with the help of the Christophe Gaillard Gallery (which represents Daniel Pommereulle’s estate.)

In the main hall, a stele 70 inches tall, devoid of inscription, stands in the middle of the permanent collection, which features the sculptures of Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux. Made of blocks of yellow glass that are shattered before being glued and set, the whole work gives the impression of being an energy sensor, of an occult inspiration, straight out of a science fiction movie set. In spite of its strong force of attraction, we can’t help noticing that it is sitting on a low stand that has a double function: informing us about the work and demarcating the distance tolerated in order to appreciate it. However, we learn that this

2. Alain Jouffroy, *De l'individualisme révolutionnaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 229-238.

3. Daniel Pommereulle: *L'utopie des voyageurs*, cat. exp. (Dole/Belfort: Musée des Beaux-arts/ Musée d'art et d'histoire, 1991), 24-25.

4. Between the publication of a catalogue in December 2013 and a book to be published by Multiple editions in 2015.



Daniel Pommereulle, *Objets de Tentation*, 1966, drug paraphernalia displayed on vinyl album *The Rolling Stones Out of Our Heads* (1965), installation view at the gallery Mathias Fels, Paris, October 1966

yellow tinted glass is a so-called atomic glass, in reference to the glass used in atomic factories to protect workers from radiation. This reveals the industrial production aspect of the materials. The rest of the exhibition is confined to the narrow room indicated by a glass panel as being that of the twentieth century. At the entrance, an interview filmed in 1995 is shown on a flat screen carelessly screwed into the wall. Daniel is facing the camera in this extract from the film *L'Aventure de l'objet*, and going over his artistic career. In the background, a slideshow of several of his pieces completes the exhibition.

Pastels done with rapid strokes dating from 1984, hung in the corner, somewhat contradict the suggestion that he quit painting in 1962. Then come two of his *Brûlures de ciel* (1978), framed, two sheets of paper superimposed: a blue sheet of paper on top of a yellow one. The top piece of paper is burned in several places. The burns, which could be mistaken for cigarette burns, reveal the color of the paper below and we see, as if by hallucination, a starry sky. A certain yellow and blue that he considers to be the colors of elegance⁵⁵ may also echo the code of his clothing in the prologue.

5. Sally Shafto, *Zanzibar: les films Zanzibar et les dandys de mai 1968* (Paris: Editions Paris Expérimental, coll. Classiques de l'Avant-Garde, 2007), 39.

Then my distracted eyes are drawn toward the scintillation of scalpels. A large can of paint which has been turned upside down, covered with blue drippings, bristling with scalpels blades turned outward and crowned with knife blades, assaults the eye. It looks like a reflection of the *Objet hors-saisie* done ten years earlier: “That’s a painting, eh? The thought—ouch!—the razor blades—I’m bleeding”. It’s hard to forget Alain Jouffroy’s words that resonate here. A second upside-down can of paint accentuated with only a crumpled sheet of lead poses no threat. These two *Objet(s) de Prémonition* are part of a series of about ten other objects, which take a can of paint as their starting point, and that vary in color, through the addition and arrangement of knife blades, fishing hooks, or surgical instruments. (The entire set had been presented in the exhibition “Huitièmement, qu’est-ce que la cruauté?” at the Beaubourg Gallery in 1975. The objects were practically sitting on the floor, placed on low copper stands a few centimeters high, installed with mirror panels behind the objects.⁶) Between the two, there was another murderous piece from an earlier series (one of the two models of the *Monument aux Vivants*, (1976)) made of steel blades and fishing hooks stuck in lead.

These three pieces are safely placed on white pedestals of standard dimensions rising from a platform. Daniel Pommereulle’s potentially dangerous pieces enable us to see the choices of communication, arrangement, and design made by the institutions to ensure that no viewer is hurt. On the side, two little jagged-looking glass columns of extreme beauty resembling models for other steles capture light and combine colored glass with different properties. The multiple angles and cutting edges are enhanced by the warning: “Sharp object, please do not touch.” It is true that it would be pointless to dirty the walls with bloodstains as the result of an awkward movement.

This exhibition is in fact here to discreetly accompany another larger exhibition on the Vikings in the Frank Empire taking place at the same time in the museum. The Vikings are mentioned as being one of Daniel Pommereulle’s favorite subjects in the press release and a recent text by one of his friends⁷ (Pommereulle admired the Viking combats in the movies.) Indeed, certain of the late ninth-century swords in the Great Civilizations hall next door relate to the blades in his pieces. His vision resurfaces in the cutting aspect of the discoveries of an archaeological vestige north of the Loire. This is a point that could have been equated with the weapons of other civilizations, with the obsidian arrows of our ancestors, with an exhibition on the gladiators, or more recent instruments of torture. The question may be posed about this explicitly programmed connection, an excuse which is nevertheless a valid one for reuniting the works of a little-exhibited artist who is still not well known even in France. What emerges are works like potential weapons affronting the spectator. And if the harassment of the senses is admittedly insistent; it’s the bleeding of the *cosa mentale* that he attempts to accomplish.

6. Cf. Lucas Hees (ed.), *Pour Daniel Pommereulle* (Paris: Editions Impeccables, 2013), 86-88.

7. Henri-Alexis Baatsch, “De Daniel Pommereulle, j’ai eu deux approches...”, in Lucas Hees (ed), *ibid*, 24.

In an interview published in 1991, Anne Tronche observes that Pommereulle’s glass sculptures provide a logical continuation to his *Objets de Prémonition*, to which Daniel answers: “Jean Christophe Bailly also told me that in 1986. He said, ‘It’s incredible! You always do the same thing.’ I can assure you, that’s the biggest compliment I’ve ever been given.”

Translated from French by Patricia Chen

Rain Over Water

Sam Pulitzer

“Hans Christian Lotz”
David Lewis, New York
March 3– April 12, 2015

If I were to pin a topic onto Hans-Christian Lotz’s artistic output, exemplified by his recent exhibition at David Lewis Gallery, it would be that of the informatization of aesthetic space as an apparatus for contemporary art.

The artist’s on-going work, *Rain Over Water*, expresses this handily, appearing on-screen as a nowadays painting might, yet comprised most notably of solar panels, pig brains (or their metallic facsimiles), informatically coded strips of copper alongside a few instances of other, near-imperceptible errata like the amputated limbs of a cockroach. The title of the series, evoking perhaps a corner of a Constable painting that happens to feature a stream, finds a certain pictorial resonance as the organic contents vacuum sealed onto these panels appear as if rain drops frozen upon impact with a pooled surface witnessed from the zenith vantage point that could be exaggerated to that of a satellite’s electric eye. Silkscreened black for this iteration, the pictorial suggestiveness of these paneled works swap out the deliberately banal white of earlier versions, a white heavily reminiscent of their visual space, to the architectural void that serves as ground for both the visualization of a commercial artwork’s exhibition and transmission (galleries that resemble websites and vice versa), in favor of an image more suited to my understanding of the top-down vantage point implied by these works’ title: the noirish glisten of a rain-drizzled asphalt street.

Arrayed flushly, eight in all, filling the entire wall that spans the gallery’s entrance to its premiere exhibition space, *Rain Over Water* invites visitor movement to animate its sparse offerings of cybernetic gore into the shower-motion of its title. The work is read by eyes and feet alike in sequential fashion, becoming the exhibition’s introductory passage, establishing a Poe-like atmosphere of a rain-flecked, midnight dreary (black solar panels for an absent sun?) punningly adapted to the informatic’s most operational schemes, the cognitive. These are brains after all and, most notably, brains that lack a press release (the show has