



Swiss artist Timothée Calame lives in Marseille, right above a schoolyard: “You can hear the kids screaming out in the yard during their spare time, that is, before 8:00, at 10:00, and again at 11:30. And the afternoons are similarly punctuated by regular screaming sessions.” This was the setting for a conversation with the artist about education, control, and leisure—all themes that play an integral part in his production. On the heels of recent solo shows in Paris, New York, and Basel, Calame is preparing a show for the MAMCO in Geneva, scheduled to open in 2018.

LUC CHESSEL

Your most recent series is entitled *Désapprendre* (*Unlearning*) and, notably, it shows panels inspired by the maps used for geography lessons. In general, there is an educational aspect to your work—a dialogue with pedagogy—but one never gets the impression that you will be the one giving the lesson.

TIMOTHÉE CALAME

What inspires me to continue doing art—because I also see a lot of problems with what’s happening beyond it—is the prospect of making each project an occasion to learn something new or to deconstruct something. I would feel bad if all I did was add new things, and I prefer to add objects that tend to undo what we have been taught, all the things that make up this world. We could say that these are fairly negative objects. That may be due to the fact that I need to create fictive conditions for myself during the moment of production. I put myself in the shoes of a student revising his lesson, for example; it’s an opportunity to revisit certain values and some of the elementary forms that have been inculcated into all of us, or into most of us anyway. A chance to put their re-examination back on the agenda.

LC In this way, the “bad student”—through an inversion of values—becomes the instructor. How were your own formative years, your beginnings?

TC Well, it all started at school [*laughs*]. I don’t mean the art academy here, but before that, when I started developing practices to deal with repression at school—ways to retreat into myself, for example, by drawing in class or by doing something else (discreetly and furtively) during class. Then I fell for someone who was studying at the art academy in Geneva, and I went to check it out. I enrolled in the painting department, which was pretty much self-managed at the time; you could slip in and out, meet artists, use the materials available—like the library, the machines, all of that. Meanwhile, me and a few others opened up a space in Geneva called Marbriers 4, and what I really liked about it was the social element: People from the neighborhood would stop by, as well as old failed artists, students, ambitious climbers... dudes who were totally out of it would come by to get wasted and bum around. I left when it took the form of a more traditional off-space, with more hierarchy. When I left the academy, I participated in a group show where I showed a piece



Above - *Publique* installation views at Édouard Montassut, Paris, 2016. Courtesy: the artist and Édouard Montassut, Paris. Photo: Gina Folly
Opposite - *Untitled*, 2014, *Broken Thumb* installation view at Up-State, Zurich, 2014



Above and opposite - *The Paperclip Center*, 2017, *Curriculum*
installation views at Swiss Institute, New York, 2017. Courtesy: the artist

that's sort of like the coat rack that you see in schools, you know, with the little hooks sticking out of it that you have in the changing rooms at a gym, or at the entrance to a classroom. Two feet cast in cement upheld it, that looked like grotesque human feet, the toes almost cartoonish, and the whole thing had an ominous, mocking air about it. It's one of the first pieces I showed, and it opened the way for more invitations.

LC In your shows, there is an extreme mixture of caring and insouciance—even cruelty—towards the spectator.

TC I would love to create environments that are comfortable and practical but that succeed nevertheless in putting you face-to-face with truths, truths that can be quite personal—too bad for you—but that are also common, and that touch on some of the things going on out there. For example, even if this might seem a bit anecdotal: The rails with shirt sleeves in the exhibition, *Publique*, in Paris were inspired by the rails at the exit to the Gare de Lyon, where they're used to control the flow of people waiting for a taxi. This becomes an obstacle for the visitor to the exhibition, a hazing you have to pass through. But I hope to make it so that the work is not a unilateral coercion—an exercise of my lucidity on the spectator—but rather a sharing of things that aren't going all that well. An outrage to be shared. Like in the *Four Perspectives from an Eco-friendly Jail* and the sculpture of the prisoner singing his *Eco-friendly Prison Blues*, which I shown in Basel. I had called it—as a bit of a joke, like a faux subgenre—“narrative-aggressive minimalism.” But the good experiences I've kept of my shows are the ones organized as a circuit, with passages and stops: arranged spaces, with a running (not necessarily linear) thread that allows the spectator to establish a sort of chronology. The desire is to give material that sparks stories in the heads of the visitors, with no attempt to frame or control the effects.

LC Would you call that fiction?

TC Fiction is the occasion to gives false clues, rather than to amass facts, re-transcribe them, and then put them in a museum or sell them. With some foresight, you can protect facts and things by deforming them ever so slightly. To protect them, and to relish the pleasure that it is to interpret them.

LC At the Swiss Institute show in New York, there was a piece called *The Paperclip Center*. It's a large, paperclip-shaped sculpture, made using large swathes of recuperated tarpaulin, that formed a space within the space. What is their story?

TC The tarpaulins in question had been hung on the Rue de la République, in Marseille. Ateimi, a subsidiary of Lehman Brothers, was one of the main advocates for giving that street a makeover. But it's been a real shitshow, with nothing happening there for years now and everything pretty much left abandoned. My idea was to take down this material—these huge pieces of tarpaulin that had been used to cover over the empty spaces—and to return them to their sender, to take them back to the land of Lehman Brothers.

LC How did you get it down? Did you have to do it under cover of darkness, or in disguise?

TC No. I just went and took them down one morning. Only one person bothered to ask me a question: “Oh, you're changing that? That was great!” The paperclip is a strip, sixty meters long and folded in on itself, made out of these pieces, all of different sizes, of tarpaulin. One side is covered with ads for future shops, fake situations that had been printed on the material and which hid the empty spaces behind it: a fishmonger, etc., with life-size people in it, which created a really bizarre *mise-en-abyme*. The other side was done by young digital or multimedia artists, and was part of a project called *Marseille 3013*—futurist interpretations of the city, very computer art. It's trendy today to talk about “the artist as curator,” and I must say I find that bit of joke, as are all status symbols. And so, in a slightly mocking way, I told myself that I was curating, that I was selecting the best pieces of tarpaulin to show. I liked miming that behavior.

LC Inside, one could see the video *Épisode 1*, filmed with the artist Coralie Rouet, in which you play the main character.

TC The large sculpture was conceived like a professional orientation center, a place that you emerge from with an idea for a profession. While filming the video, Coralie and I discussed the character of Pulcinella, who interested us. We eventually strayed from that, but what did stay from those discussions—other than the name of the character—was the idea of vocations, of professional versatility: He can become everything he wants, and at once too. We follow this character through a series of places in Marseille, different urban areas and architectural complexes, like the Luminy campus that you see at the beginning. There, I reinvented the history of the place. For example, standing in front of a snack bar built in the 1980s, I describe how this snack bar is where Marxist students held their meetings, and that, by comparison, May '68 was basically child's play! And so on, improvising all the time. Later on, we walk in front of a business school, and I say that I studied there, etc. It's a sort of fictive psycho-geographic *derive*, very sarcastic, that works with the paperclip-shaped sculpture. Both have a “critique of urbanism” dimension to them.

LC Does the critique pass through this comic, burlesque character?

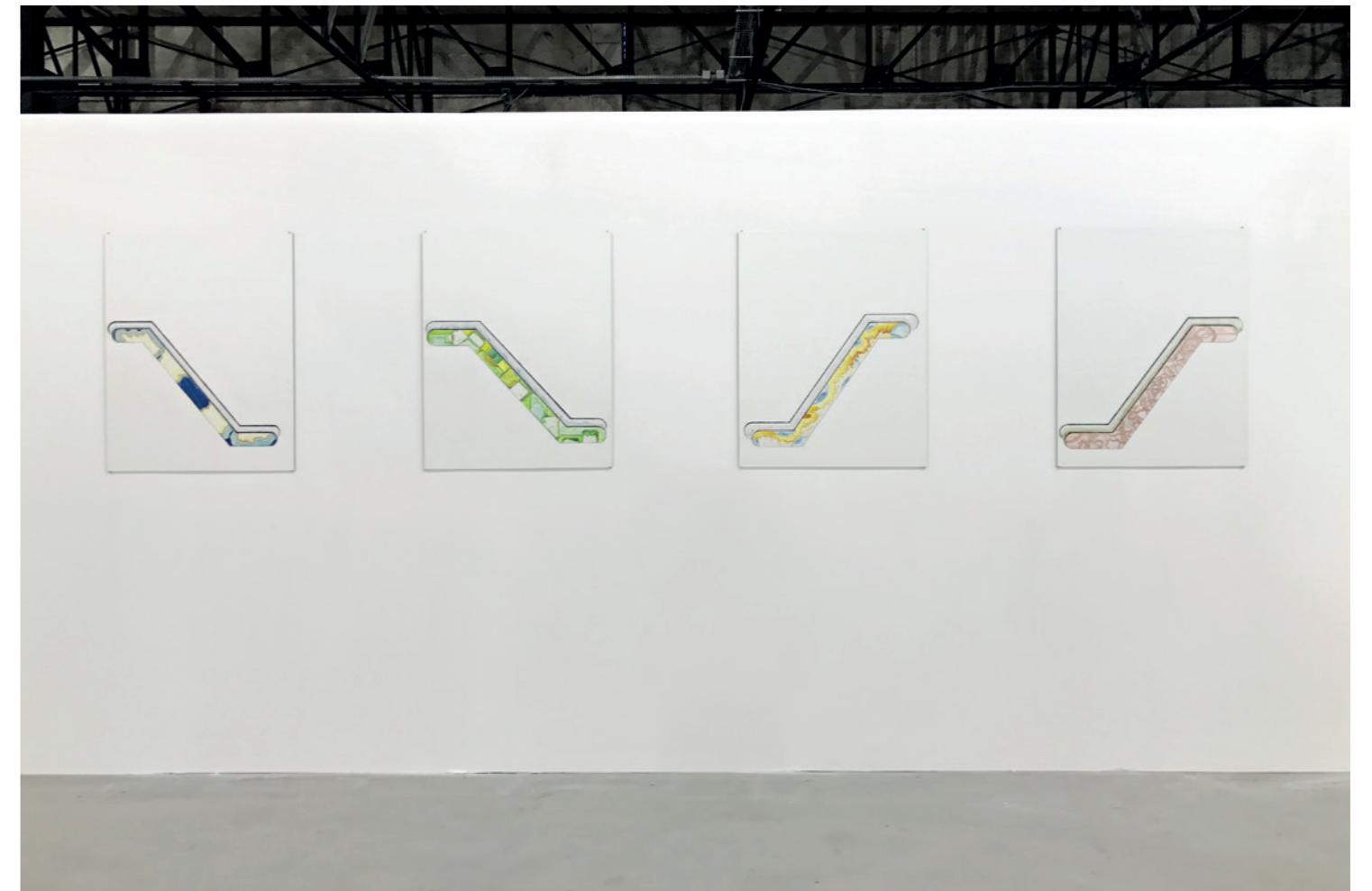
TC Yes, he's a sort of guide, like a tour guide who takes you around a city. He's a commentator and a buffoon who flirts with madness but who also transmits a good deal of truth and lucidity, albeit in a totally disarticulated manner with, periodically, some personal, emotional moments. It ends on a note of slightly confined intimacy: He cooks himself dinner in his kitchen. It's a schizophrenic scene in which he becomes his mother, who calls to him, “Pulcinella, it's ready!” A super tender and hysterical dialogue in which I do both voices, relaying a practice that I like quite well and that I use in videos and performances—bad acting, the gesture of acting a bit coarsely, in a very codified, but also improvised, manner.

LC Is this character you, a sort of self-portrait of the artist?

TC No, it's not me, but someone else, someone who could be an artist, and who could likewise relinquish the status of artist to become someone else. He's a *flâneur*.

LC If you were to do something else, what would that be?

TC I don't know. Live with people... I am aware that it is a practice that isolates you, all the more so when things become concrete, when you're “in,” let's say, or when they're “going your way.” This cuts you off a bit, not from what's happening, but from other people. It's a bit sad, even if there are moments when this isolation puts you in contact with something else, brings you out. And those moments are sumptuous.



Timothée Calame (1991 in Geneva, Switzerland) lives and works in Marseille, France. Recent solo exhibitions include Curriculum, Swiss Institute, New York, (2017); *Publique*, Édouard Montassut, Paris, (2017); Spring, Weiss/Falk, Basel, (2016).

Désapprendre, 2017, installation view at Édouard Montassut's booth at ART-O-RAMA, Marseille, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Édouard Montassut, Paris

Luc Chessel (1991) writes on film for the French newspaper *Libération*.

Four Perspectives from an Eco-friendly Jail, 2017; *Inmate*, 2017. Installation view at Weiss Falk's booth at LISTE, Basel, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Weiss Falk, Basel. Photo: Gina Folly

