



XAVIER VEILHAN, *S/T* (Photogram No. 1, 2 & 6), 2002, 19 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 27 $\frac{7}{16}$ " each / (Photogramm Nr. 1, 2 & 6), je 50,5 x 70 cm.

VÉRONIQUE D'AUZAC DE LAMARTINIE

The Logical Work of Xavier Veilhan

The world created in the works of Xavier Veilhan is a happy one. Captured in all their peculiarities, the objects and images found there have sharp outlines, complete forms and an unflinching materiality. Starting with his earliest shows,¹⁾ Xavier Veilhan has offered us a repertoire of well-painted images: a dog's head, an ice cube, a lure, trees, all of them quietly illustrating the lessons of things, didactically accompanying a vocabulary of familiar objects. Elsewhere, his polyester resin animals inflect the equally outstanding and pacifying presence-as-object of a horse, a marmot, a fish, or a penguin as so many truisms about a reality beyond all doubt. In this formal universe, the reality of things seems to take on a reassuring consis-

teny. At first glance, the events captured in their individuality appear to possess the confident fullness of a tangible, defined world that soothes the gaze. Consciousness is comforted by the outwardness and univocity of the material world protecting it from its weaknesses, confusion, and doubt. At second glance, the visual correspondence existing between each element of this universe carries with it a surprising displacement whereby the initial confidence is transformed into a doubting subversion of reason.²⁾

A worthy descendent of Descartes, this palpable world seems in fact to issue from a radical, methodical doubt. Just as the sight of men walking on the street did not guarantee their existence for the philosopher—who asked himself: “But then if I look out of the window... do I see any more than hats and coats, which could conceal automatons?”³⁾—so Xavier Veilhan likewise requires the viewer to infer

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the existence of the things he sees merely from his ability to judge the reality of his perceptions. Whether we are dealing with a dog painted gray and in a rough, neutral manner (UNTITLED, 1993), purposely isolated in the banishment of all detail, thus preventing any aesthetic perception of the subject represented; or with a life-sized sculpture of a horseman of LA GARDE RÉPUBLICAINE (The Republican Guard, 1995) which rejects the boundary between sculpture and monument; silhouette cut outs;⁴⁾ or with a shiny red RHINOCÉROS (1999); a replica of the MODEL T FORD (1999) with the motor running; an artificial environment where the public is immersed in a huge, dark grotto (LA GROTTTE, 1998); or

in a forest both soft and fantastical (LA FORÊT, 1998), Xavier Veilhan questions perception and each time prompts the viewer to embark on a mental journey that links the subject presented with a specific code and framework of interpretation. With each new creation, he hammers our consciousness with the same statement: things conceived clearly and distinctly by thought are easier to know than things grasped by the imagination and the senses, since they are of the same nature as our mind. Knowledge of reality springs from our ability to conceive the things that come out of this reality: "even bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses or the faculty of imagination but by the intellect alone, and ... this

XAVIER VEILHAN, *THE MECHANICS*, 1997, laminated digital ink-jet print mounted on PVC in three parts, 94½ x 130" /
DIE MECHANIKER, digitaler Ink-Jet-Print, laminiert und auf PVC aufgezogen, dreiteilig, 240 x 330 cm.



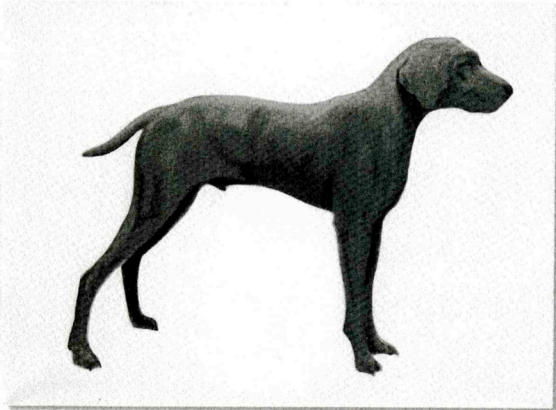
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perception derives not from their being touched or seen but from their being understood.”⁵⁾

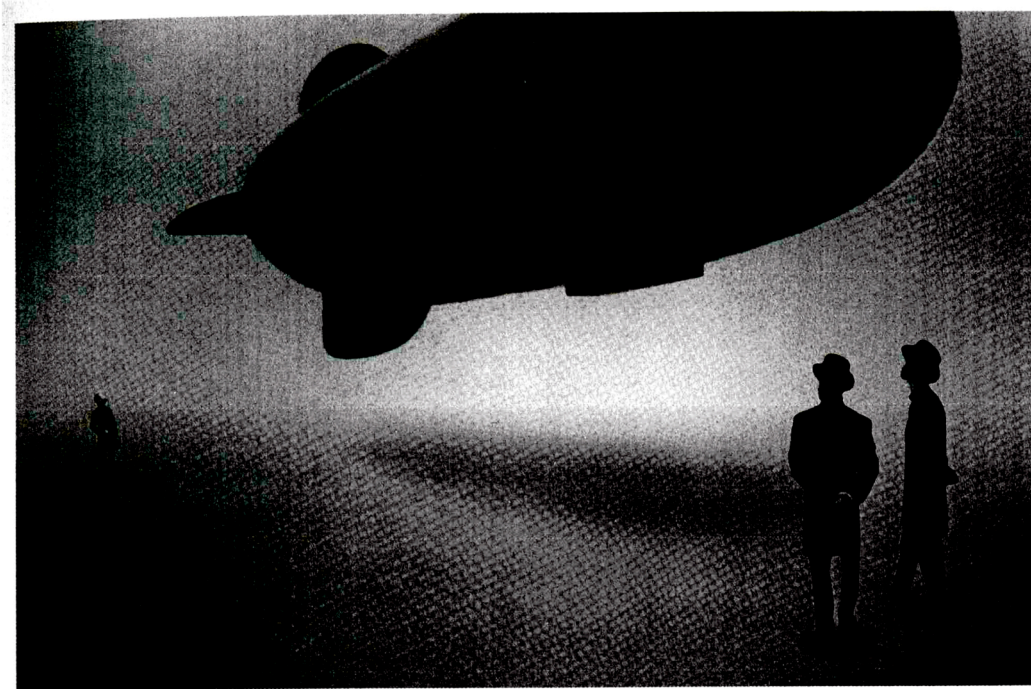
This same natural congruence between mind and image, in which every idea forms, has marked all of Xavier Veilhan’s work since 1988. From this congruence springs the clarity of his method and the radical coherence of his creative variations, whatever the “formal repertoires”⁶⁾ employed. For in recent contemporary art history, the deceptive, timeless simplicity of his works defies classification. His independence from the fashions that cast a furtive shadow on creation, combined with his use of established techniques, exemplifies the tenacity of an authentic, solitary approach. His trajectory springs not from a temporal progression of forms, nor from a stylistic evolution subject to linear causality. For this reason, all attempts at categorizing his work will necessarily fail. First of all, because the artist has chosen traditional and conventional models of representation and opts specifically to use forms in accordance with the effects sought,⁷⁾ delving at whim into a variety of odd supports to produce a fundamental questioning of perception and the knowledge that perception presumes on the part of the viewer. Sec-

ondly, because the specificity of his work has moved from a logic of causality and non-contradiction—in a more “cerebral” approach to the articulation of meaning—to a logic of contradiction and ambivalence.

Indeed, whereas the object-universe of his paintings and sculptures constructs a signifying articulation between things (as referents) and the representation of things (as “signs”) through the use of a creative mode dominated by the “idea” of the work—reminiscent, except for the here primordial material aspect, of more “conceptual” methods—in the opposite fashion, the photographic works,⁸⁾ which bring real beings to the stage, however redundant their illusion of sameness, reverse the logic of a discursive art and push his work over into contradiction and assumed ambivalence. In the first instance, for example, the silhouettes of commemorative monuments cut up into flat black fields and reproduced on the museum walls⁹⁾ spur the viewer to think about the unchangeable flatness of these famous shadows. Starting with the clues given by the composition, the viewer is supposed to mentally reconstruct the interpretative path through a discursive approach in or-



XAVIER VEILHAN, UNTITLED
(THE DOG), 1993, oil on canvas,
25⁷/₈ x 31⁷/₈" /
OHNE TITEL (DER HUND),
Öl auf Leinwand, 65 x 81 cm.



XAVIER VEILHAN, *THE DIRIGIBLE*, 1999, laminated digital ink-jet print mounted on PVC in three parts, 118 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 177 $\frac{1}{8}$ " /
DAS LUFTSCHIFF, digitaler Ink-Jet-Print, laminiert und auf PVC aufgezogen, dreiteilig, 300 x 450 cm.

der to arrive at the idea suggested by the initial concept. Here a questioning of the viewer's perception and the role of his visual memory guide the work.

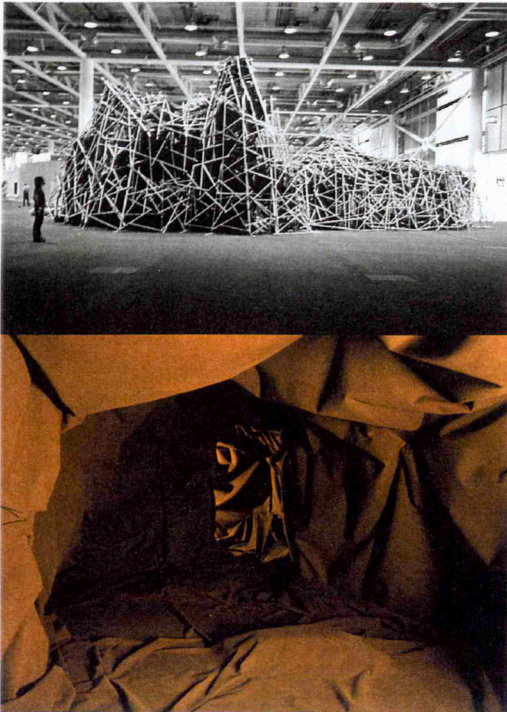
In the second instance, however, the appearance of truth and the impossibility of truth are held together in the image in an imperfect attempt at graphing reality. The photographic series of bearded men dressed in conical white skirts¹⁰) is a convincing example of this simultaneously plausible and utterly inconceivable situation. The same goes for Veilhan's willfully succinct and feverish sketches of reality, dissociated from any legible perspective (*LE DIRIGEABLE* / *The Dirigible*, 1999; *LA TOUR EIFFEL* / *The Eiffel Tower*, 1999). The viewer is placed in an uncomfortable position of belief and doubt, acceptance

and critique, which favors this radical distancing between two attitudes that do not correspond on a logical level. Unlike the preceding works, these images are not without humor, and they foster an unusual narrative turn in the artist's work. The hazy, colorful treatment, the situations depicted, and the originality of their composition allow these new images a visual pleasure that directly follows their aesthetic dimension. This contradictory condition of the possibility of things, their existence, and, at the same time, the impossibility of the hypotheses illustrated (since the faces are all identical) betray a truly imaginary creation worthy of Vico's "fantasia." The artist as demiurge here trifles with all logic and inevitably promotes a malaise: either the gaze opts for a ra-

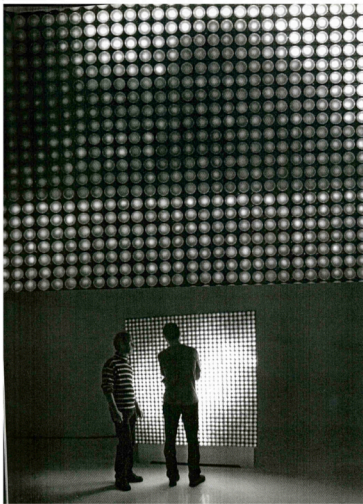
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tional attitude, and in this case, the irritation created by the contradiction of facts culminates in a maximum disorder of thought; or it resolves to ignore all reason and rejects all veracity, and in this latter case, the discomfort of ambivalence leads interpretation into endless pirouettes of uncertainty.

Xavier Veilhan masters two creative dimensions that evolve on opposite planes: that of the implacable logic of literalness and non-contradiction, and that of unreal and ambivalent assumptions. He has



XAVIER VEILHAN, *THE CAVE*, 1998, mural carpeting, wood, and plastic film, dimensions variable, exhibition view, "Art Unlimited," Art '31, Basel / DIE GROTTE, Wandteppich, Holz und Plastikfolie, Größe variabel.



gone from hermetic, willfully inexpressive forms stripped of all subjective dimensions, to open forms that generate a narrative path full of irony and obsolescence. Has there been a break? Historically, not all conversion is meaningful in its trajectory, but it becomes so in terms of its receptive dimension: more playful, this approach prods the imagination and tests the viewer's resistance to accepting the annihilation of reality by the artwork.

Contemporary in his polyvalent vision free of all constraint, Xavier Veilhan travels the art world on his extravagant machines in a state of unsated bulimia, exploring the countless ways of bringing man and the world together. Ambivalent or rational, the artist's gaze roams from one island of logic to another on the facetious register of creation.

(Translated from the French by Stephen Sartarelli)

- 1) The 1988 and 1990 exhibitions at the Fac-Simile gallery, Milan. See exhibition catalogue, *Xavier Veilhan at the Magasin de Grenoble* (Oct. 15, 2000 – Jan. 7, 2001), (Grenoble: Editions du Magasin, Centre National d'Art Contemporain, 2000).
- 2) As in the installation at the Galerie Jennifer Flay in Paris in 1991, where realistic objects ostensibly flaunted unrealistic proportions by being contradictorily juxtaposed (e.g., enormous pigeons compared to a small race-horse, an electrical pylon the same size as road signs); or in L'ÎLE (Parc Saint-Léger at Pougues-les-Eaux, 1991), where a fish is as big as a scooter and a mountain the same size as a dog.
- 3) René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, transl. by John Cottingham (Cambridge: University Press, 1996), p. 21 (Meditation II).
- 4) As in the show at MUHKA of Antwerp in 1993, or in those of the FRAC Aquitaine collection.
- 5) René Descartes, op. cit., p. 22.
- 6) *répertoires formels* in the artist's own words.
- 7) As Veilhan explains: "What matters is always the effect produced rather than the form borrowed." See his conversation with Lionel Bovier and Christophe Chérix in *Xavier Veilhan*, Consortium de Dijon, CCC de Tours, FRAC Languedoc-Roussillon (Geneva: Editions JRP, 1997), p. 14.
- 8) Starting with "Les hommes rouges" (UNTITLED, 1996), L'ARMURE (The Armor, 1997), LA TOUR EIFFEL (1999), LE DIRIGEABLE (The Dirigible, 1999) or the sumptuous panorama LA PLAGE (The Beach, 2000).
- 9) MUHKA, Antwerp, 1993.
- 10) LES MÉCANICIENS (The Mechanics, 1997), LES HALTÉROPHILES (The Weight Lifters, 1997), L'ORATEUR (The Orator, 1998), etc.

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