

Tom Morton on Xavier Veilhan's *Le Projet Hyperréaliste*

Back to reality

'Photorealism, indeed! One can almost hear Clement Greenberg mumbling in his sleep: "All profoundly original art looks ugly at first ... but there is ugly and there is ugly!" ... Leo Steinberg awakes with a start in the dark of night: "Applaud the destruction of values we still cherish! But surely – not this!" And Harold Rosenberg has a dream in which the chairman of the Museum board of directors says: "Modernism is finished! Call the cops!"

Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (1975)



How easily we forget. How easily a problem (an argument, say, or an ideology or a work of art) becomes, one day, suddenly no problem at all. How easily the cops are called off. How easily their crime reports are blurred by coffee spills and doughnut grease. How easily we forget.

Shown as part of the 2003–4 Lyon Biennale, Xavier Veilhan's *Le Projet Hyperréaliste* (The Hyperrealist Project, 2003) is, like the back of a sofa or a pitch-black oubliette, a place where half-forgotten objects lead strange half-lives. A large free-standing pavilion, it resembles, from the outside

at least, a packing crate of the type used to transport art, made by a technician who's less concerned with meeting shipping deadlines than with meticulous carpentry. Five Photorealist paintings belonging to the Neumann Family Collection (Robert Bechtle's *Roses*, 1973; Robert Cottingham's *Suzanne's*, 1974; Richard Estes' *Canadian Club*, 1974; Ralph Goings' *Blue GMC*, 1969; and Richard McClean's *Dialitz*, 1971) are embedded, backs outward, in its black vinyl and blond wood façade. As with most things normally hidden from view, these paintings' versos are revealing: canvas



crumples imperfectly around the corner of a stretcher, a dealer's mark proclaims provenance, and Cottingham's signature, scrawled in magic marker, seems a little too pleased with its own artlessness.

Taken as a whole, the pavilion's exterior might be interpreted as an essay in hard-nosed reality (all that timber, all those traces of the art market) were it not for the fact that walking around it feels similar, somehow, to walking around the set of a cheap Western and spotting the splints propping up the painted plasterboards that represent the sheriff's office or the saloon. *Le Projet Hyperréaliste* deals, then, with illusion, but it breaks illusion's cardinal rule: it shows you how the trick works before showing you the trick itself.

The interior of Veilhan's pavilion is all smoke and mirrors. Everything here is covered in reflective black vinyl save for the bulbs of a few low-level lamps and the five canvases set, like Martin Kippenberger's 'White Paintings' (1991), into the walls. But while Kippenberger employed this display

Veilhan's project is like the back of a sofa, a place where half-forgotten objects lead strange half-lives.



• *Grotte (The Cave) (detail)* 1998 Mixed media. Dimensions variable



• *Le Rhinocéros (The Rhinoceros)* 1999 Painted polyester resin. 170 x 140 x 415 cm. Installed within *La Forêt (The Forest)* (detail) 1998 Synthetic coating. Dimensions variable

tactic to render his work nearly invisible, Veilhan employs it to make the work of Bechtle et al. dematerialize into pure, pulsating images. From a distance the pieces in the pavilion resemble not so much paintings as projections – an allusion, perhaps, to many Photorealists' use of epidiascopes – and it's only when you press your nose against their picture planes that you realize you're caught up in a complex argument about surfaces and what they might mean.

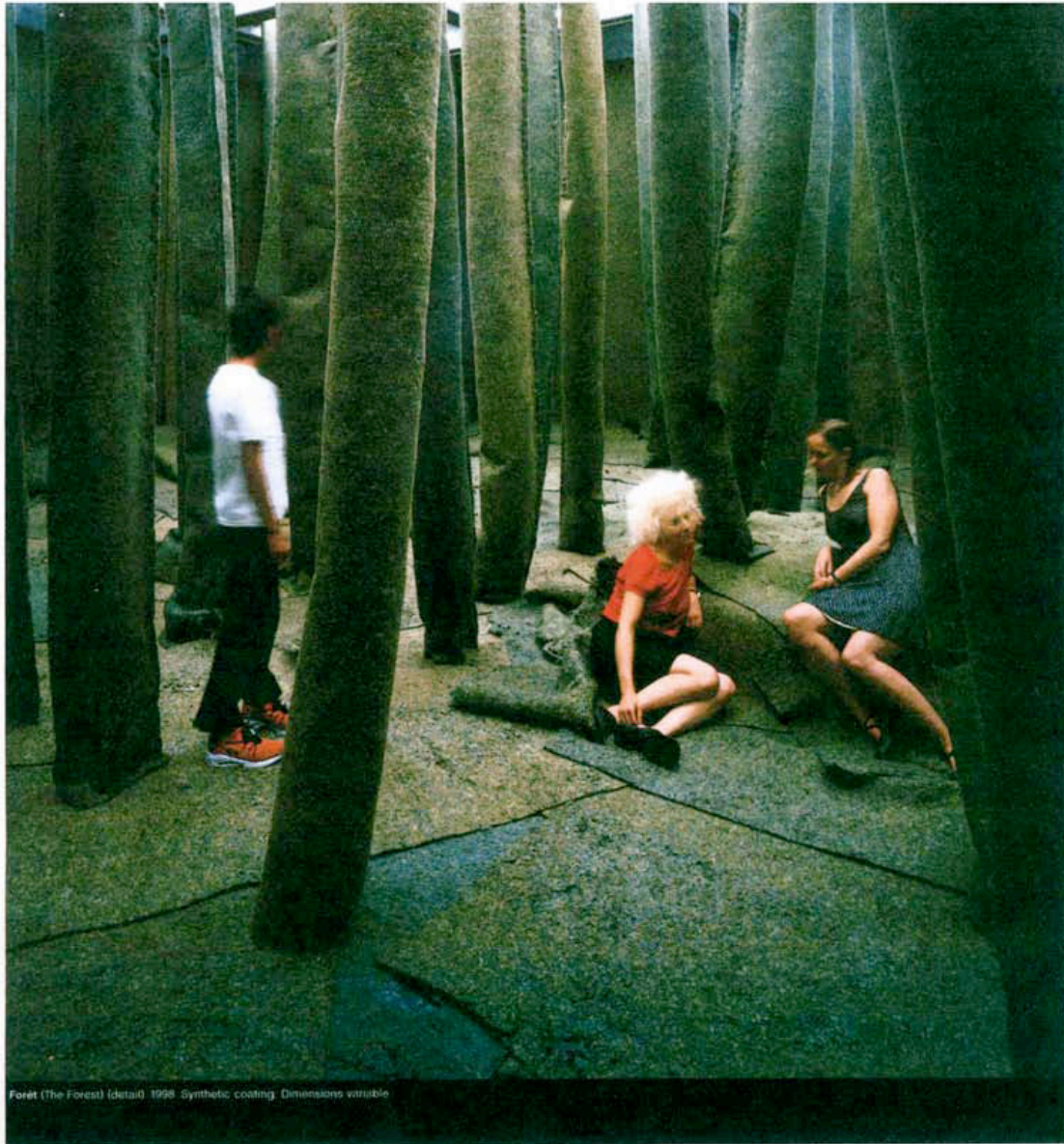
Painterly flatness, of course, and its attendant lack of affect, was viewed by many 1970s critics as Photorealism's only virtue: a saving grace that allowed it to be an art about 'photo systems' rather than virtuosity or the sticky, kitschy stuff of everyday life. What, then, to make of the works Veilhan selected for the pavilion, with their imperfect plains, their ruptures and their screens? The artist has said that 'As soon as I started to look at [Photorealist painting], I realized that I was more interested in the oil-painted, rather than the airbrushed, works. I cannot exactly explain why, but I feel that the paintings

I chose are in the tradition of Velázquez, Manet and Warhol, with a certain generosity and strength.' This is a heretical position, and one that precipitates further heresies, not least that of taking Photorealist paintings at face value (Bechtle's *Roses*, say, as a piece about the suburban good life, or McClean's *Dialitz* as a piece about the rewards of really making a marriage work). In any other context this would be untenable; ironies in the works and the world see to that. However, in Veilhan's pavilion (a place in which Photorealist paintings, as he has said, 'appear both like the pinnacle of illusion and the only solid surface you can count on') literalism makes a certain kind of sense. In a cold black void we make grabs at whatever handholds we can.

A number of Veilhan's earlier works point, a little obliquely, towards *Le Projet Hyperréaliste*. Take *La Grotte (The Cave, 1998)*, a dimly lit walk-in environment made from spools of carpeting that provide a rough approximation of a cavern. Frankly, it's not much like a cavern at all (where a

cavern is cold and damp, *La Grotte* is dry; where visitors to a cavern risk grazed shins, visitors to *La Grotte* risk only the ire of the gallery guards). What Veilhan is interested in here is not verisimilitude, and certainly not simulation, but giving viewers just enough information, just enough 'cavern-ness', for them to fill in the perceptual gaps from their experiences and prejudices and access a level of reality that's part fact, part their own fiction.

'Just enough' is a concept that governs much of Veilhan's oeuvre. We see it in play in the exterior of his pavilion, in *La Forêt (The Forest, 1998)*, an arboreal pendant piece to *La Grotte*, and in *Le Rhinocéros (The Rhinoceros, 1999)*, a pared-down resin sculpture of a slump-bellied, slightly bewildered beast painted a booming fire-engine red. The piece doesn't so much portray the Platonic form of the rhino as its prototype, or its corrupted copy. Perhaps this is for the best. Perfect simulacra, after all, tell us nothing about the nature of reality (how can they, when we can't distinguish them from the real thing?).



Forêt (The Forest) (detail) 1998. Synthetic coating. Dimensions variable.

Veilhan's work demonstrates, it's the ill-cooked stuff of mistakes, misjudgments and absences that helps us negotiate what we mean by 'truth'.

Le Projet Hyperréaliste is an oubliette, yet it is also a black box recorder. It remembers a moment in the history of art, parallel to Conceptualism and Minimalism, that has been, while not completely forgot-

ten, downgraded to the status of a faintly regrettable footnote. Veilhan's pavilion (with its inversions, its revisionist erotics) does something to put that right. More importantly, it makes use of Photorealism's failings to speak, very poetically, about how we picture our world. On my first visit to *Le Projet Hyperréaliste* the piece was newly installed. It was beautiful (the paint-

ings looked like apparitions or interplanetary storms), but I felt there was something missing. On my second visit I realized what it was. The pavilion's floor, previously a deep black, was now dappled with grey, dusty footprints. Like an up-close glimpse of Bechtle's or Estes' brushwork, they were the impress of the real that every fiction, however frictionless, needs.