

## Lionel Sabatté, **Close Encounters of the Transformative Kind**

I'm writing this text almost 12 months into the global pandemic that changed so much about how many of us live. If there is anything that we might have learned from this pandemic, it would be how much we took our bodies, and maybe each other's bodies for granted, assuming that they were distinct entities, sealed off, self contained, all but completely independent of one another. These assumptions, curiously, if not ironically, took place at a historical moment which only abetted this misunderstanding: a moment in which the self was, perhaps more often than not, mediated through technology, hand-held devices and social media, therefore functioning more as a virtual avatar than a bona fide physical being. Or so we thought. It was as if we had been disembodied by technology, believing ourselves to be safe thanks to it, prophylactically contained within its literal, as in alienating, and imaginary bubble. And at the very height of this moment, of this new social paradigm, the pandemic hit, and our bodies were suddenly restored to us (or maybe we were suddenly restored to our bodies, which we never left), with a vengeance. Not only our bodies, but also each others' bodies and the relatively porous parameters which delimit our anatomies, obliging us to recognize the extent to which we were are all interconnected, as if we were, in the end, one continuous, if roiling body.

Curiously, that thing which newly reunited us, or made us aware of our being united— a virus— is, at least as far as the naked eye is concerned, without form, like air, formless, or, as per Georges Bataille, *l'informe*. Interestingly, much has been made of

the relation of Lionel Sabatté's work to Georges Bataille's theory of the *informe*.<sup>1</sup> In many ways, what Sabatté makes seems like the perfect artistic analogue to Bataille's notion, even if Sabatté is ultimately formalizing formless materials, such as dust. In her text on Sabatté's work, entitled *Poussière*, art critic Léa Bismuth, deftly summarizes Bataille's *l'informe* thus: "...a matter which is without beginning end, undefinable by essence, a raw, non- transformable substance, necessarily organic. In order to illustrate his proposition, Bataille uses the example of spit or rot, thus transgressing every category of thought by calling for a revolt against form as something which is considered to be a coherent whole."<sup>2</sup> It is telling that one of Bataille's oft-cited examples of *l'informe* is spit– that same thing which, aided by air, allows and ensures the circulation of the virus, body to body. As such, the *informe* has a way of always referring back to the body– the primary and ultimate organic form, just as a great deal of Lionel Sabatté's production almost always refers back to the body, if not literally, then by association.

Sabatté's most well known reference to the human body in his work actually uses parts of the human body. This series of works is known as *Printemps* (Spring time). It consists of manufactured blossoms made of dead skin appended to dead branches, as if they were somehow blooming out of the extremities of the expired, uprooted trees. One thinks of Daphne in Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* (1622-25), but in reverse. The blossoms with which the artist festoons the trees are small, floral amalgamations of dead skin variously and painstakingly collected from the offices of

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, *Poussière*, Léa Bismuth (2016) or *Lionel Sabatté par Bernard Ceysson* (2019).

<sup>2</sup> Reference translated by the author.

podiatrists or nail salons. Given the fact that the trees that Sabatté uses are dead, the potentially infernal quality of these works is hard to ignore; they seem as if they would be perfectly and evocatively at ease in the most chthonic of settings, and yet the work elegantly radiates the sense of renewal associated with spring blossoms. It, like most of Sabatté's production, possesses a poignant sense of contradiction, situating it somewhere between the grotesque, even the grotto-esque, as in underworld, and the beautiful. All that said, what makes it especially poignant in the current context is how it literally and visibly intermingles that which the pandemic has demonstrated to be always already intermingled: the human body. Traces of bodies inextricably bound up with traces of other bodies on the dead arboreal body of organic matter brought, if only symbolically, back to life.

Where these works might evoke the indefiniteness of the commingling human body, and therefore the informe, Sabatté's Oxidation works bring to mind the informe through the formal imagery. Perhaps more important than this is the unpredictable quality of transformation which governs (one could even say un-governs) the production of the work. It can be seen as dialectical, or more specifically, as the direct byproduct of contamination, as per Anna Tsing's notion, which she defines as "transformation through encounter."<sup>3</sup> And although Tsing is referring principally to the human encounter, this notion functions as a useful metaphor here through its ultimate unpredictability or incalculability (interestingly, Byung Chul Han takes a similar position, but with regard to human intimacy. Building on the work of Bataille and Hegel, Han

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<sup>3</sup> The Mushroom at the End of the World, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2015) Pg 28 Later, she writes, "Encounters are, by their nature, indeterminate; we are unpredictably transformed." Pg 46

characterizes the erotic encounter with the Other as incalculably transformative<sup>4</sup>). This series of works consists of the application of chemicals to the surfaces of sheets of steel and metal, the interaction of which creates complex and abstract imagery whose formal qualities are very much of an event-based nature. At times, the resultant imagery might look geological, while at others it brings to mind Chinese landscape paintings, it also could be read like the traces of some sort of shock, as if sustaining a blast of electricity. One of course also thinks about Andy Warhol's Piss and Oxidation paintings from the late 70s. Warhol's works were not painted on steel or metal, but on actual canvas covered with metallic powders mixed with acrylic medium and water, upon which human urine was applied while the metallic pigments were still wet. Contamination in the case of Warhol's works becomes more literal— and so does the latent erotic encounter at the heart of if not Tsing's notion, then certainly that of Byung Chul Han (which is transformative). All that said, if Sabatté is guilty of such thinking, it is perhaps only by association (with Warhol). The metaphorical value of autonomy, which lurks at the heart of Western post-war painting discourse and is crucial to Sabatté's method of producing these works, might be more to the point here. This in so far as Sabatte's process mimics, at least in the first part of his process, the relative autonomy which became so important to abstraction in the second part of the 20th century. In the event or procedure-based abstraction of everyone from Jackson Pollack and Willem deKooning in the US to Simon Hantaï or Marc Devade in France, paint is vouchsafed something of a will and desires of its own, ultimately doing, to a certain degree, what it wants. After the chemicals have done their work, Sabatté is known to

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<sup>4</sup> See *The Agony of Eros*, Byung Chul Han (trans Erik Butler), Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2017.

intervene with oil paint, elaborating and emphasizing certain features of the organic conjunction of materials. Still in such a scenario, the artist assumes an altogether less authoritarian position in the art making process, but rather facilitates the conditions in which a transformative encounter (between the artist, paint and canvas) might take place.

Questions of the informe, the encounter and the body all converge in a Sabatté's series of works on paper, *Quelque part entre le poussin et l'œuf au plat* (2020). The fruit of an encounter, these drawings are made in part on selection of pieces of paper which issue from the studio of one of Lionel Sabatté's favorite artists, the recently deceased Pierette Bloch, an artist known for her reductively *tachiste* approach to picture making.<sup>5</sup> These slight but richly evocative drawings consist of turmeric mixed into an acrylic medium which is dabbed onto paper. And while they might alternatively resemble chickens or the amorphous contents of a broken egg, they are also bring to mind body fluids, specifically, semen. Upon first glance, the association may seem tenuous, but closely considered, it is not a question of what came first, the chicken or the egg, but actually the semen *and* the egg. What is more, one thinks inevitably of Duchamp's "Paysage Fautif" (1946). Located in the the Museum of Modern Art in Toyama, Japan, this secret work consists of seminal fluid on black satin. It was surreptitiously featured in a deluxe edition of "La Boîte en Valise" (1935–41) that Duchamp gave to the Brazilian artist Maria Martins, his long time lover and model for the nude figure in "Etant donnés," (1946–66). That Duchamp's precedent is also on a black support is perhaps

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<sup>5</sup> Exactly how Sabatté came by these pieces of paper resembles more the picaresque coincidence-driven stuff of fiction than reality, and involved meeting a man on a bus who just happened to be the former assistant of the admired Bloch, and who, after befriending Sabatté, gave him a stack of unused paper from Bloch's studio.

just another happy coincidence, but this can't help but underscore the fact if Sabatté's works, akin to Duchamp's, are not exactly *billet doux*, then they are the byproduct of an engineered and highly symbolic encounter between himself and another artist.

This symbolic conflation of beings is literalized in the artists' series of sculptures *Humains mêlés* (2020? 21?). These uncanny and haunting objects consists of two deformed bodies, so to speak, fused inextricably into one another. Thanks to their heads, or rather busts, they are identifiable as human, but virtually any resemblance basically ends there. For the rest of their "bodies", which are made of scrap metal, rebar, concrete and pigment, look more like a vertical tumble of roots, or at best, a tangled cascade of viscera, than anything recognizably human. This non human, nay quasi sci-fi quality, is aggravated by the towering height of the intermingled figures. If their rough hewn, knobby surfaces and their exaggerated verticality is reminiscent of post war sculptors such as Giacometti, then their phantasmagoric character brings to mind the work of Thomas Schutte. Either way, they, akin to the artist's *Printemps*, seem best suited to the most fantastical vistas of hell. And yet, they do not seem particularly tortured or anguished. On the contrary, they radiate a kind of casual nobility, even a grace, as if they were perfectly at ease in their freakish synthesis. Perhaps this is because their commingling and transformation is all but complete. Finally, indissolubly conjoined, they can relax and revel in the latent truth of their conjunction, no matter how monstrous it might seem. These are but some of the contradictions and paradoxes, which seem to come directly from life, that finely animate Lionel Sabatté's artistic production.