



François Curlet *Bubble Brain* at Les Bains-Douches, Alençon

If by chance, before taking the present short publication in hand, you happened to search for information on François Curlet and his work, you will have read or heard perhaps, in a more or less straightforward formulation, that the artist excels in the art of *télescopage*. You will certainly won't have seen that on his entry in the Wikipédia (a page so incomplete, so spotty, that it seems to correspond to a strange project in concrete poetry), but rather by going through the texts of his catalogues, exhibition labels, and other press articles. In short, it would be thanks to the significant critical apparatus that has accompanied Curlet's work both in venues dedicated to art and elsewhere for what is now going on several decades. Of course other words regularly come up in what is written about this art,¹ but none other works quite as well as that one does both to indicate what might be akin to a true technical process in art, and to translate the mind that significantly sustains his output.

Originally, however, *télescoper* meant literally "to see far." There is no doubt whatsoever that Curlet "sees far" (on the face of it, less from the point of view of vision than from intellectual skill²). However, it's more the combinatory dimension of the term that is summoned here relative to his practice. This highlights the artist's ability to connect forms or concepts that are obviously quite distant from one another, yet grafting one to the other (a forced action; we need to bear in mind there is an idea of clash and conflict that subsists in the French term) proves to have a fertile power that is rare indeed. This is due not only to the visual effectiveness of these arrangements, which led to, for example, the transformation of a Panton armchair – whose structure of steel lines already looks just like a cooking grate – into an elegant barbecue.³ Or to the verbal ingenuity of his associations, as when Curlet produced a *Taille-pipe-crayon* (2018), a pencil sharpener that borrowed the form of Magritte's famous depiction in *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* while not missing the chance to whet viewers' wit in passing with a "good" pun in French (in English, the title might be awkwardly translated as "peniscil sharpener" or "this pencil sharpener

¹ Let's make a little room here for some of the terms that supposedly best characterize this body of work, i.e., *humor*, *reappropriation*, *disconnect*, *absurdity*... not to mention all the "posts" that contemporary art is crazy about and which serve to particularize its various avatars, i.e., *postdada*, *postfluxus*, *postconceptuel*, etc. Finally, since François Curlet has lived and worked many years in Brussels, it is often stressed that there is something fundamentally *Belgian* in him and his output.

² In this regard, let's take a look at what the authentically Belgian philosopher and ethologist Vinciane Despret has written, "What could I say that he wouldn't have said himself? For that is indeed the problem with him, you can race along the path of commentary as fast as you can, he's already waiting for you further on, without your even being able to understand by what route he got there." "OSSS – objets sans statut stable," *Curlet Crésus & Crusoé*, Musée des Arts Contemporains au Grand-Hornu, Triangle Books, 2018.

³ *Panton BBQ*, 2012.

sucks"). In either case, though, what's in play above all involves the profanation of one imaginary order by another. A way of suspending the authority of a figure, whatever it is, through a grotesque junction.

And so we come to Bubble Brain and Les Bains-Douches in Alençon. In this work of art, which also serves as signage for the venue, the referential pileup occurs on several levels. Each of the three superimposed bubbles, like a soapy liquid flight of fancy referencing the hygienic history of the building, also conjures up the outlines of Jacques Rouxel's famous cartoon birds, the Shadoks – all the more recognizable here in that the form ends in a characteristic V-shaped mop of hair. Covered in "Elephant blue" paint,⁴ unless they are glowing like those at the entrance to the exhibition space, these hollowed out bubbles are also the same that can be seen in comic strips, all hazy just when a thought emerges from the head of a character.

How not to see then in this new "telescoping" a joke thought up by the artist? Bubble Brain: the perfectly contextualized synthesis of a past activity with a present one involving the output and display of the most up-to-date art. When the history of the baths is linked to the intense cerebral agitation of creative types in search of meaning. And let the voice of Claude Piéplu sound loud and clear, the voice that tirelessly accompanied these endlessly pumping birds, which cannot fail to remind us of others, "It is only by pumping that you will achieve anything, and even if you achieve nothing, well then that won't hurt you now, will it!"⁵

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⁴ This detail comes to me via an admission by the artist in a telephone conversation, early 2022.

⁵ *Pourquoi les Shadoks pompent-ils ?* Video viewed on the YouTube page of the INA archives in July 2022.