

An exhibition by Philippe Durand
at GUTS, Berlin

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The following conversation between artist Philippe Duand and Guts founders Charlotte Bonjour & Romain Löser took place in August 2024, at Durand's home in Servant, Auvergne and on the shores of le Gour de Tazenat, a volcano lake.

His exhibition *Höhle* at Guts, Berlin (September 21– October 6, 2024) presented his work on the Chauvet cave for the first time in Germany, alongside *les Grilles*, a series of marble pebbles exposed with photosensitive emulsion.

Charlotte Bonjour: It's hard not to think of the know-how and infrastructure that had to be put in place to produce these drawings, such as lighting, scaffolding and so on. The artists who originally painted the cave 35,000 years ago probably didn't have to provide their own sustenance: others provided it for them. In short, this kind of problem points to a reality that artists still face: you need a functioning infrastructure to make art.

Philippe Durand: When I visited the Chauvet cave in the Ardèche region of France, I had a discussion with the cave conservator Marie Bardisa. She explained to me a prevailing theory that the engravings were made by a very small number of people, a group of six or seven, in a fairly short amount of time. The drawings in the cave are done in summer, because in winter there are bears in the caves.

Romain Löser: And you, as an artist who uses photography, a victim of technical progress and a slave to the lens, how do you maintain your creative independence from technology?

PhD: In the 2010s, the advent of the smartphone and social networks completely changed my practice. For a long time, I'd been making work about public spaces, and the human, plant, animal and mineral interactions that make up the city. I liked to observe plants, aging facades and inscriptions, like publicity, graffiti or signage. From the 2010s onwards, photography became a common language. Social networks revealed this greatly.

I changed my approach and started working with multiple exposures and color filters. I sought to produce the opposite of a realistic photograph.

RL: You introduced elements that blur the imitation of reality. This gap opens the door to the poetic, to what we don't know.

PhD: When I started preparing my photography sessions in the Chauvet cave, I asked to work with a flash. The extremely powerful flash is just one ten-thousandth of a second, but it makes it possible to see all the

way into the cave. As for working with color... starting from the principle that everything is in the dark, any light you bring in will influence the way we see.

With photography, you're a prisoner of the moment, but working with multiple exposures and color filters, I had the impression of being on a blank canvas and assembling elements.

ChB: There's a psychedelic aspect too. In his research, archaeologist David Lewis Williams links cave drawings with shamanism. He talks about recurring patterns, made up of dots, dashes, spirals etc., which are common to all shamanic cultures and are linked to altered states of consciousness.

PhD: This shamanic dimension is also my motto: "Dreams are the shortest route between the Aurignacian and us." We can't verbalize it by saying it's the ancestor of painting or cinema, because we're projecting our own culture onto it. In the end, there's one thing that hasn't changed for men, from that time to today, and that's the way we dream, because dreaming is outside our culture.

ChB: Your photographs remind us that, despite technical progress, neurologically speaking we're still the same homo sapiens we were 35,000 years ago.

[...]

ChB: In the book you recommended, *Ce que l'Art Préhistorique dit de nos Origines* (2018), art historian and archaeologist Emmanuel Guy points out that imitation is particularly pronounced in strongly hierarchical epochs. Presumably, the prestige generated by the quality of imitation always serves the interests of an elite. Do the drawings in the Chauvet cave seem illusionistic to you?

PhD: Yes, they do. Werner Herzog filmed for 15 days in the Chauvet cave for his documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010). In the last scene

of his film, he moves a torch in front of the hunting scenes, showing the interaction between the relief of the rock, the drawings and the shadows. Suddenly, the drawings are in motion! You're no longer in a painting referent, but in a properly illusionist referent of movement and life. Given the quality of the drawings, these societies were probably already highly specialized.

RL: And what about these questions of hierarchies? In Guy's opinion, the illusionism of Paleolithic representations would have enabled certain groups to consolidate their power, to reserve hunting territories, privileges and so on.

PhD: Generally speaking, illusionism allows a dominant social minority to consolidate its power. Look at the importance of the media in today's political life: in France, the media decides elections, not party opinions.

RL: Seen in this light, abstract art would be the art of times of openness and freedom.

We're a long way from the controversy that Georges Bataille must have sparked off in 1955 by comparing Lascaux with the Sistine Chapel, but it's clear that the cave paintings at Lascaux and Chauvet are much more than symbolic representations.

PhD: I have the impression that the Chauvet drawings present the animals in a very sensual way. They seem relevant today because they allow for all kinds of connotations. In a way, these images speak to us. After all these years, they're still accessible. There's something divine about them. 35,000 years ago, the lifespan of a human being was quite short, as the dangers were numerous. Power was not embodied in human beings, but in very large animals. As for Bataille and the Sistine Chapel, it's also an emotional impact. The shock you feel when you see these representations that reach so far back in time.

ChB: Perhaps Bataille intends to provoke those who see the Sistine Chapel as the pinnacle of art. In his text, *Prehistoric Painting Lascaux Or the Birth of Art (1955)*, he's not interested in primitive expression, scribbles or art brut (like Dubuffet, for example). For him, art is all about

controlled, mastered drawing. But here we are caught in the *Whatsartornot* swamp...

RL: ...it's north of *Discours*, south of *Beright* and generally kind of out.

PhD: Absolutely. I'm thinking of that quote from Walter Benjamin, who said that the church doesn't need beautiful images, but it does need images that serve it.

During the Renaissance, representations became autonomous, private and even personal. Until then, the clergy had used art to represent heaven, hell, purgatory and so on. It was all about propaganda, mind control...

RL: I like Benjamin in all this. He too is untranslatable; his imaginative style is often lost in translation. The complex relationship between the intelligible and the sensible, which makes Benjamin's linguistic images so heterogeneous, is sacrificed in favor of an idiom that everyone can understand. This kind of limitation seems to me to be increasingly present.

ChB: I often wonder why images should have only one meaning. Why reduce the image to a simple "vehicle" when it's possible to consider it as a "stage," where all sorts of things can be played out?

PhD: Enter Pierre Bourdieu: he considers the main function of the museum to differentiate between those who go there and those who don't.

[...]

PhD: It's the soul, you see, that capitalism ultimately denies... I told you about Pascal Pique, the founder of the Musée de l'Invisible, and his concept of re-âmage. For animists, everything has a soul: a pebble, a blade of grass, a goat... Then came Christianity, which denied a soul to stones and plants, and then Descartes denied a soul to animals, and today we say that human beings have no soul. So the soul has

disappeared at every stage of Western history. I don't like the idea of dramatic death, of the end of everything, because it opens the door to materialism and therefore to capitalism, whether state or private.

RL: Yes, and the moment you do away with the soul, you authorize violence. For example, we can think of the efforts of the Inquisition to define heretics, or of all the intellectual force that was deployed to contest that the inhabitants of the New World had a soul.

ChB: When I think of the soul, I think of the french term *le sensible*. We're quick to equate the sensible with sensibility, and that's very hard to translate into English or German. In French, the sensible permits intuitive and non-verbal communication for example.

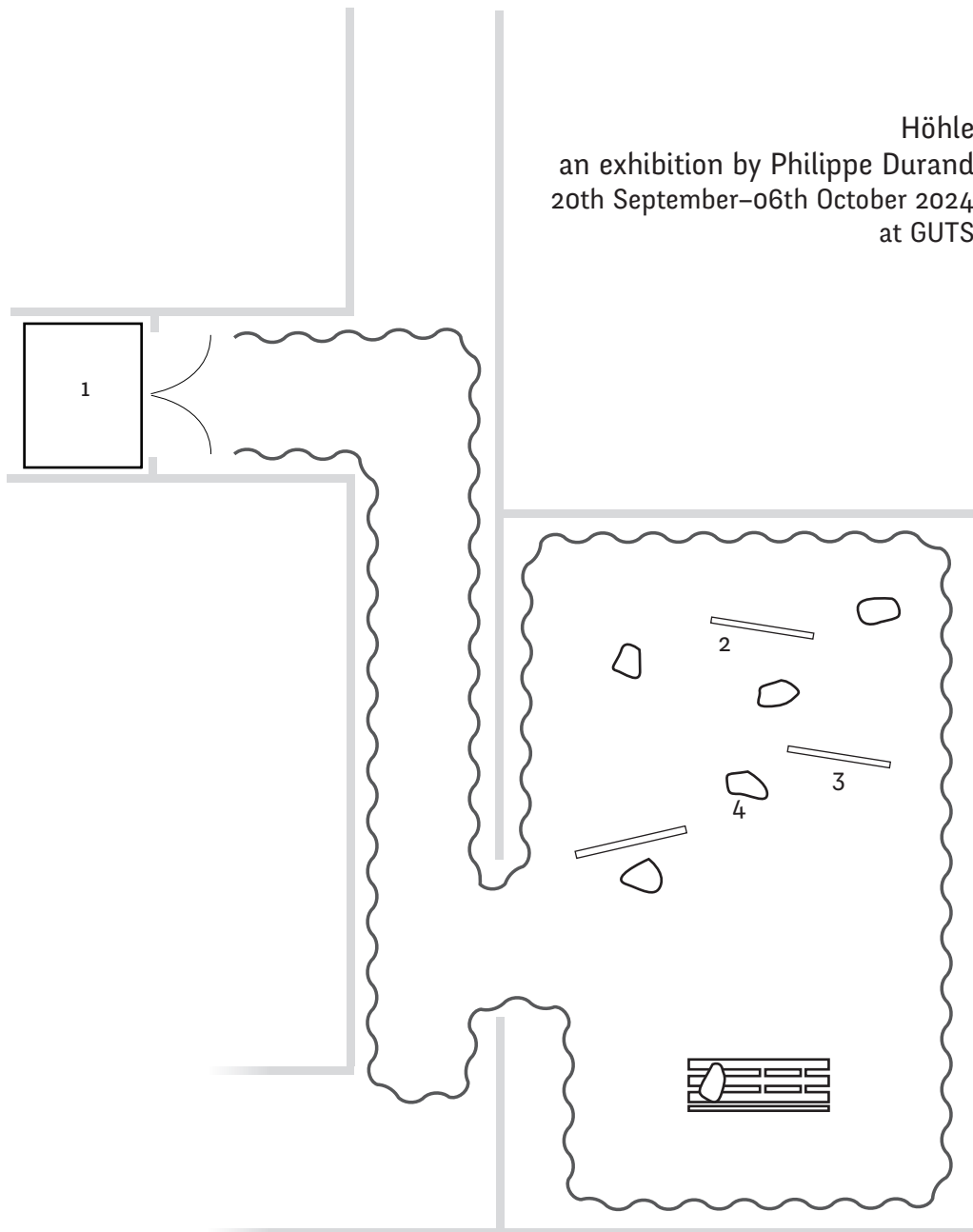
RL: It's also about energies and things you can feel. The sensible gives access to a mode of knowledge that we don't care about because it requires time and attention, two elements that are hard to monetize. You can't approach the sensible without the attention that comes from touch and love.

PhD: That's right. What's done harm in this business of the sensible is the reception of Marcel Duchamp into the art world. Since Duchamp and a shortened interpretation of the ready-made, many people think that the artist must be able to explain everything, that he's very intelligent.

RL: Yes, even if Duchamp didn't necessarily want to harm the sensible, this mystification of intellectual strategy persists, and takes up a lot of space.

PhD: Yes, in spite of himself, it's a misinterpretation of his ideas.

Höhle
an exhibition by Philippe Durand
20th September–06th October 2024
at GUTS



- 1 Chauvet (elevator), print on blueback paper, 2024
- 2 Chauvet (point-paume), impression 2.5 Ricoh, 2022
- 3 Chauvet (hibou), impression 2.5 Ricoh, 2022
- 4 Grilles, photographic emulsion on marble pebbles, 2021

