

## Gisèle Vienne: Disturbance in Representation

By Bernard Vouilloux

The French-Austrian artist Gisèle Vienne (b. 1976) has made the stage her primary artistic material. Deceptively theatrical, her pieces function as tableaux or cinematic shots, hybrid representations of what is inexpressible in human relations. An analysis by Bernard Vouilloux, professor of literature and the visual arts at the Sorbonne.

For over a decade, beginning in 2000 with Jean Genet's *Splendid's*, Gisèle Vienne has been building up a fascinating body of work, piece by piece, that is both spellbinding and disturbing. It captivates us for the very reason that it forces us to examine the unclear connection that we maintain with both our fantasies and with the dark part made up of manipulation, domination, and violence that forms interpersonal relationships. To advance along this perilous course, Gisèle Vienne – who sees herself as choreographer, puppeteer, director and visual artist all at once – uses these means of representation as her medium. While she has recently appropriated the more or less defined working methods of the art installation (“Last Spring: A Prequel”, at the 2012 Whitney Biennial in New York), exhibition (“Teenage Hallucination”, as part of the Nouveau Festival at the Pompidou Centre in 2012), and even the book (*40 Portraits, 2003-2008*, published in 2012 by Éditions P.O.L), the venue and format to which she has usually devoted herself since her debut are those of the performing arts.

Although very little is verbalized, works such as *Kindertotenlieder* (2007) and *This Is How You Will Disappear* (2010) are built on the intricate librettos created by Dennis Cooper, the American writer whom Gisèle Vienne has collaborated with since *I Apologize* (2004). The “action” of these underlying stories, far from yielding an unequivocal version, makes available all potentialities. What we are shown seems to conform to rules or laws whose sense eludes us. The subject matter on which each of Gisèle Vienne's productions has been constructed is not unlike what anthropology designates as “myth”, that unrecoverable narrative whose inscrutable – and even contradictory – variations sustain rituals.

With few exceptions, notably *Une belle enfant blonde* (2005) and *Jerk* (2008), the “theatre” of Gisèle Vienne is a laconic one: the spoken word does not really exist there; to the extent that it does occur, it does so in the minimal form of monologue, often murmured, addressed to oneself or to someone who cannot hear, one who is absent or deceased. *Jerk* suggests what would be spoken in Vienne's other shows if it were to be uttered; and at the same time, because it is a narrative, performed by a psychopathic narrator, and containing dialogues

(entirely carried off by the impressive Jonathan Capdevielle), the spoken word of *Jerk* provides access to the underlying framework of the productions conceived by Gisèle Vienne based on the written texts of Dennis Cooper. One should imagine all of Dennis Cooper's sources of inspiration, from another continent and another culture, when he tells stories of beautiful, ambiguous teens brutally tortured, young women manipulated, lovers gone missing, as though commissioned by Sade and Sacher-Masoch (invoked in *Showroomdummies*, 2001-2009), revised by Genet and Bataille, and then reworked by the Robbe-Grilletes with, on the horizon, "Freudian psychology in the light of postmodernism".

Writing that feeds from images of all sorts is itself a powerful trigger of images, whether it be those that develop on the stage or those that the spectator imagines or recombines from what s/he sees and hears, or even from what s/he reads (e.g. the fanzines distributed to the audience at the beginning of *Jerk*, 2008, or at the end of *The Pyre*, 2013). In the work of Gisèle Vienne, however, the image on stage is unique in that it is mobile, its plastic qualities have been highly elaborated, and it is coupled to an almost uninterrupted flow of music (by the duo of KTL). Neither opera nor filmed theatre, but rather dream images, images from silent film, and accompanied by music and spoken word as if from off-stage, from another scene, as it were ... The "theatre" of Gisèle Vienne primarily deals with all that is neither looked at nor listened to, the silent images that haunt us, flooding back onto the stage.

Gisèle Vienne as well as subsequent critical comment on her work have often cited the genre of tableau vivant: onlookers (you, me) assume the poses, the postures, and sometimes the costumes of the painted figures of a familiar scene. Except that there is no original tableau that this can be traced back to, one whose recognition would reassure us. The actors themselves play along, their displacements having the effect of saturating the performance space, of mobilizing all of its dimensions, by a rigorously constructed total environment. All of the body's speeds are utilized: quick staccato dance (in *The Pyre*), quasi-gymnastics (in *This Is How You Will Disappear*), displacements that are fast, slow, or broken down.

But "actor" and "performer" are words that in this case are ill-suited – and not only because most of the figures activate the resources of choreography. In *Jerk*, the mechanism of representation is reduced to its most minimal state: it is enough that the body of the narrator-puppeteer is doubled, that the mute voice that is designated "subject" is bifurcated and reflected off itself. The puppets are the projections of this process of fission. Gisèle Vienne herself has touched on this in her account of how in sixth grade she began to create marionettes and perform with them. The puppets and mannequins point to a more advanced stage of this

process: on the set of *Kindertotenlieder*, the ten motionless silhouettes, with hoods pulled up over their hair, hair falling down over the face, and heads bowed down (a recurring motif, seen again in the series of *40 Portraits*), seem to be those of the young audience at a black metal concert. The final stage is that of living persons who also wear masks. Don't their gestures and movements sometimes seem to be mechanized, whereas, conversely, the animation of the puppets, and even of the mannequins, make them seem alive? The same disturbing thought troubles us when faced with the figures of a tableau vivant, or of wax: the most familiar becomes the most strange. Indeed, under the direction of Gisèle Vienne, there are neither actors or performers nor even people, but figures which are at the same time apparitions, geometrical forms, and rhetorical operations tuned in to the Unconscious. The generalized uncertainty plays on this stage set of simulacra.

The fantasy material set into motion by Gisèle Vienne as by Dennis Cooper takes this uncertainty to a state of additional complexity: the ambiguity of age, between infancy, childhood, adolescence, and post-adolescence. It is also that of gender – for example the young androgynous boys of *Jerk*, in contrast to the powerfully sexual bodies of the female dancer and the trainer in *This Is How You Will Disappear*. But still more disturbing is the uncertainty of the subject itself, above all when it speaks as in *Jerk* or *Last Spring: A Prequel*. On this subject, reduced as we are to conjecture, we can only resort to projections.

“The question of the status of Gisèle Vienne’s pieces – theatre, or spectacle – remains open.”