

On the Movements and Habits

On the Movements and Habits is Gilles Pegel's most monumental work. It is also the most incarnate.

The work's name is taken from the title of Charles Darwin's article, "On the Movements and Habits of Climbing Plants", published in 1865, in which he described perversion helixes: "A tendril, on the other hand, which has caught a support by its extremity, invariably becomes twisted in one part in one direction, and in another part in the opposite direction; the oppositely turned spires being separated by short straight portions. This curious and symmetrical structure has been noticed by several botanists, but has not been explained. It occurs without exception with all tendrils which, after catching an object, contract spirally, but is of course most conspicuous in the longer tendrils."

So Gilles Pegel elects to talk to us about perversion without any outrageous provocation, without any psychology (which takes the biscuit) and without any tragedy. His communication is subtly developed outside the codes of commercial communication and shock strategy. His point of departure is geometric, rational, and scientific, and in the purest tradition of the positive sciences. And thereby, he provokes the mood of the times, almost imperceptibly and without a whiff of scandal.

The reference to the helix is literal but it fits into a dialectical communication, where the simple does not rule out the complex. Beneath its claimed and displayed simplicity, the artist's research is far-reaching, and his work careful.

Gilles perverts by touch. He works, he sets aside, he re-uses. He lets time work for him and the interval happens naturally. His objects and his obsessions shift and take on meaning with every new context, in a kind of readymade in stages, whose object is its own objects. The theme of the tendril is one running through his oeuvre. He uses it in his early graffiti for technical and aesthetic reasons, and, as he himself has put it, for the sake of easiness, but it re-appears in several works before imposing itself as an independent object. The spiral leaves the walls and the linen canvases and deploys its full force in space, like a fully mature being.

Why this interest in perversion? Because perversion enables us to twist reality and create gaps, draughts in the taut fabric of reality. Because you have to be quite naïve to muddle truth and reality, and forget that the latter is based on artificial and moving structures, and that the categories they create have, on closer inspection, blurred boundaries. And this is where one sees the refinement of the Pegel method: in the guise of rationalism, questioning both rationalism and the questioning thereof. Not being outside, accepting being inside because, in any event, and in one way or another, that's where we are. Gilles goes to the trouble of understanding, assumes what he analyses, and criticizes it from within through little lapses of meanings, forms, processes and scales.

The oeuvre is rooted in the tradition of religious art, where symmetry and circles are attributes of the divine. In this tradition, the circle is a little evocation of the infinite on earth, this latter having a lateral infinity. This "classical" art of the incarnation of the infinite in form culminates in the west with the virtuous spiral of Borromini's Sapienza; that temple of science where the architect symbolically unites sky and earth in an infinite motion between form and void. So the work's form talks to us about infinity and invisibility, and leads us towards something beyond reality. The installation accentuates the relation between sky and earth through the way it is presented. The partly emerged spiral gives the illusion of extending its rings in the ground and, in the end, disappearing, and then being prolonged ad infinitum. This arrangement creates the eruption into reality of a movement with neither beginning nor end, a movement which is perverted in reality, and goes away again. It creates an effect of passage, a succession of porticoes (triumphal arches or church portals) which call us towards this other place, and invite us to listen, in a submissive way, to the void, nothingness, and the invisible within us.

The construction of the spiral's concrete parts is a challenge tossed at matter. This latter would not have been possible without having recourse to the latest available technologies on the market. This is a paradox which Gilles Pegel has fun with. The design of the small silicon model is, when all is said and done, quite simple. Conversely, the transposition of the model into concrete elements is a complex process where the work plays with the limits of the production system. Each concrete part calls for the use of shuttering made of milled wooden panels, based on a digital model. Reality is thus re-created from computer functions so that it can be transposed into another matter, on a different scale. Feeling the motion of the work is also feeling the invisible movements which operate and condition reality. The shuttering is no longer visible, except for its traces. The communication of the numbers and machines has fallen silent. Invisible, they are nevertheless inseparable from the work's motion and take part in its richness, its depth, and its foothold in the world as it is being produced today.

The work condenses the spirit of the times and summons the LTMA students towards somewhere else, beyond the boundaries of the school setting and the world of petty calculations. Will they properly appreciate this present being offered them? Will they gauge the challenges? Will they pick up the call towards life being made by this beached whale's carcass? If there can be no doubt that this monumental and powerful work has already been invited into their teenage memories, nothing is less sure.