

Nomadic Blue

EVA STEYNEN

K.C. Mayne, translation

Eva Steynen (Antwerpen, 1967) studied film, philosophy and theatre studies. She was co-founder of the collective for experimental film Movie Art Factory (1991-1995), script writer, made short films and did production for film and theatre.

In 2013, after having realized various exhibition projects as a nomadic independent curator in Antwerp, she established the gallery Eva Steynen.Deviation(s) in her parental home. Every project that Eva initiates evolves from her own philosophical enquiry and a curiosity for aspects of the event in the artist's act. So too, this book: it marks her gallery's first one-artist publication.

On a morning in April 1942, in the silence of occupied Paris, a young Jewish woman picks up a book from Paul Valéry. She is a student in philology at the Sorbonne and had asked the poet to write a dedication to her in his latest work. She immediately opens the package that the concierge hands to her. From the inner flap Valéry gently whispers to her: 'Upon waking, so soft the light, and so beautiful this vibrant blue.'¹ The sensitivity that glows through his poetic words deeply moves Héléne, and places a blue filter over the horrific reality of an occupied city. That day, with that moment, with that sensation of intensity and, simultaneously, the urgency of that time in mind, she writes the first pages of her war diary. Two years later, just before her deportation, her words tune into a dark-blue. In 1945 the then-23 year old Héléne Berr died in the extermination camp of Bergen-Belsen...

¹ Héléne Berr, 'Journal' Editions Tallandier Paris, 2008 297 pp, p.3.

That unfathomable blue that surrounds us; that intense blue-ness of a high ceiling that colours our every-day experience. It is a glowing, a 'scattering' of physics, and an enigmatic presence that colours our existence within visual reality. Blue is more than a colour and it seems capable of inhabiting a world of its own, of standing up as a self-sufficient concept. It is more than a realization or a frequency. It is a state of being.

Blue was always strongly present in Marie Julia Bollansée's (video) performances. When she visited the Cappella degli Scrovegni in Padua as a 20 year-old, she became overwhelmed by the sublime intensity of colour of the lapis lazuli with which Giotto had conjured up the blue heavens on the ceiling of the chapel. That intense experience of that 'blue from beyond the sea', became a foundation for how blue would emerge as a trusted fellow traveller in her artistic practice. While initially she still used Ultramarine and Indigo, both in their pure and mixed forms, blue continually evolved into a *Blue*, a protagonist of varying hues on the path of creation. In this, heaven and earth, life and death, are inextricably linked. It is an interweaving of the ancient and of the now.

For Bollansée, blue is no incidental quality of things, but rather a timeless being, that has its own soul, language and impact. It is colour and it is older than human; it is nature. It stems from a pre-verbal age, preceding man's ability to name it, because colour precedes quality and substance. The primacy of perception mutely 'organizes' the way we occupy the world as human beings. Colour is invisible until it reveals itself in that which can be pointed out. Blue is by far the most symbolic and therefore also the most ungraspable. In Bollansée's oeuvre *Blue* appears as a timeless archetype that merges with the ephemeral, the singular, and the visible.

Colour needs light and matter to be able to come into view. We can however perfectly imagine matter without colour and colour without matter - because in the imagination, colour can exist even before it can be pointed out. In the grasping of perception, colour is rather enigmatic and there is always something that escapes us - because in sight colour precedes form. Can colour be present in reality without being anything other than colour, without form and matter? In 1993 Derek Jarman's visual testament 'Blue' (1993) appeared. Having become blind from the consequences of HIV and aware of the impending ending of his life, he showed colour as a pure sensation. Although blue is so present in our daily visible world, Jarman's 'Blue' pulls the carpet from under the notion that the world is visible. He posited enigmatic blue as catharsis; he projected the monochrome Yves Klein Blue as an absent filter that colours our experience. When he was making 'Blue', Jarman could only imagine the colour. From the intensity of the creation and inextricably linked with death, he singularly succeeded in presenting colour as an invisible vibration and a sensitivity that fills visual emptiness.

Ever since Bollansée's residency in the metropolis of Mumbai, the blue tarpaulins have become a substantial element in her work. This is coupled with stillness in her own actions. In her installation 'White Matters' here in the gallery, a specific object or memory formed the basis of every video performance. With one pared-down action she creates sculptural imagery that is condensed in the connection with that object. In her recent work that action is distilled into a presence, like an underlying layer that only becomes visible through careful looking and that appears in the light of coloured shapes. The slowness of the movement underlines the action's chronological character. By projecting one movement over another this chronology dissolves into the simultaneity of the one and the other. Different timescales are woven into a new time. Bollansée thus creates a new experience. Her body is no longer that which acts, but it is interwoven as an additional ground in the projected reality, which transforms itself into the here and now.

It is striking how the blue tarpaulins are present everywhere in our society. Some are sporadically unfolded; others are used on a daily basis. They protect and conceal or reveal a state of being. They offer a ground and shelter: small, delimited fields in an all too human pattern. Universal carrying bags which can fit small households. They occur both in large cities and in the countryside. They have become part of human experience.

That human experience has become increasingly urban. Contrary to the last century, in the 21st century the majority of the world population lives in the city. This also changes our way of thinking and being. Where man in the countryside is more sedentary, and has a more delineated path, the urban itinerary is more fickle and nomadic. The countryside directs itself towards visible nature that grows vertically. Urban life is like a rhizome that horizontally extends its roots underground, and stretches out in an unpredictable way. At unexpected times and places it shoots up above ground. Multiplicity, difference and dynamics are its attributes. Urban society is no longer signified by a unified identity, but by a wealth of differentiations and colour nuances.

— The tarpaulins cover the ground, but at the same time they reveal it. Just like the urban differentiations the tarpaulins are variable in their intensity of colour. They touch on the concept of colour as Bollansée understands it: they are beings with a soul of their own, their own life and their own kind of change. Although with their shape and homogeneity they give shape to seeing, there is also always something that escapes through the net of seeing with understanding.

— Bollansée doesn't so much show the ephemerality of the materiality of those tarpaulins, but rather a blue thought and soul with light and colour. Time quickly leaves its trace on the specificity of the synthetic material. The timeless archetype of the colour mixes into the ephemeral, the singular, and the visible.

— Tarpaulin blue does not exist separately from matter, in the sense that it is a state of being of the material. Just as the specific perception of colour is subjective and changeable, the Tarpaulins act like a changeable, blue skin. As such Tarpaulin blue flows out of the boundaries of the specificity of the static unit of colour. Just like the truth, it is not univocal. The subtle nuances of colour of the bright blue *Tarpaulins* vibrate, as it were, along with the rhythm of the communal world of our lived experience.

— That urbanisation was already immanently present in Bollansée's work, but it became exceptionally clear following her residence in and experience of the metropolis of Mumbai. We can view that experience as a caesura in her oeuvre. The emphasis on the connection between human kind and nature shifted towards the anonymity of the human being in a metropolitan framework. In the solo exhibition 'White Matters' (2013) traces of that new perspective increasingly arose. Her 'body', previously the bearer of meaning and colour, became increasingly interwoven with the composition of the image, only to almost completely disappear into it by being absorbed by it. Matter disappears from her work and makes way for the heterogeneity of the event itself in the projected composition. Where previously an object or an event lay at the basis of her (video)performances, now the naked presence of the event itself is caught in the beam. It is an event of light, form, movement and colour, separate from matter.

— The motor of Bollansée's work is the ever-present sensitivity and the strong intensity with which she lives her life. The artist succeeds in giving an almost literal expression to that experience of living in the world, like an alert contemporaneity. It is no longer making visible what is hiding beneath the surface, but a revelation of the layered nature of our time. In time she creates from several layers a new simultaneity in movement and form. She does so in a subtle layering, by revealing and covering, by which various notions of time touch. She is a child of this time of urgency, *with* roots. Tarpaulin blue reveals a contemporary in-between world of invisible threads.

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