

## Bad Faith

1.

It is hard for me to write this text in these turbulent times of mobilisation. Opposing me are the contradictions we face, Bastien, those we share: what do we want to uphold and defend with art in this system that is so dysfunctional? What can we unsettle in this disorder?

If it isn't strikes against retirement reform, it's something else. We are always unsettled when we have to write, paint, produce, often more than we are unsettling.

In your portfolio you say: "It is quite naturally that I attempt to alleviate my anxiety by deciding to focus on the present." I see this exhibition as a kind of pretext making it possible to take a break.

Resting while, from time to time, creating an exhibition, a text, a programme.

Taking a break from subsistence work too: this exhibition will open at the end of a succession of exhibition setup projects you will have carried out, which have been causing you to miss the demonstrations where we are in the habit of meeting up.

Who can still go on strike in this time of widespread freelancing and subcontracting?

It is in celebration this break that I would like to write this text. Our respites, like this one, are also chances to redistribute tasks and money. You have always done this work, enabling a community to share a grant, a space, and a visibility. That is the story of Palette Terre, a space you set up in your home with Elsa.

You tell the story that at the Beaux-Arts de Paris, you wanted to use the students' kitty to create an exhibition space in your studio, but no one went along with you. Then you moved to the 11<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, where you had an extra room: it could have become a lounge, but it became an exhibition space.

—

2.

As long as I have known them, Bastien and Elsa have hesitated to leave Paris. They are Basque, and in a sense, not living in Basque country means being uprooted. But they played the Paris game for years, to the point of exhaustion. They created an exhibition space in their Hausmann-era apartment (Palette Terre), they integrated into the scene, they know the owners of their neighbourhood cafés...

That period now comes to an end. Bastien and Elsa are leaving Paris to return to their homeland. This exhibition by Bastien Cosson is part of that movement. "I'm erasing that space which has been encumbering me for too long," he writes to explain why he is dumping all the photos on this phone to make a publication out of them.

Yet this exhibition is not a way of taking stock. For Bastien, it is an umpteenth image arrangement attempt. The self-retrospective practice is not noble: it is a practice that some guardians of contemporary art would characterise as vulgar, and that some of its other representatives would find narcissistic. With all due respect to these value judgements, Bastien has that very idiosyncratic way of taking advantage of opportunities to exhibit and show a maximum, or a representative selection, or one sample per period. In this sense, he is writing the history of his own practice, at the same time as he is producing it. That is to say he conceives the showing of his work through the prism of his own perspective, rather than through artificial imitation of good exhibition practices. Bastien Cosson is not looking at himself doing paintings, he is wondering what the fact of creating and exhibiting them corresponds to.

In this sense he defines himself socially as a painter above all. The social performativity of his practice (as an artist and as co-founder of Palette Terre) is therefore a way of replaying the tropes of the "art world", such as the figures of the bohemian artist, the dowdy or trendy gallery owner, the patriarchal curator, etc...

His own bad faith (in the sense of Sartre's paradox: "the one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person, which means that as the deceiver, I have to know the truth hidden from me as the person deceived"—that is to say playing one's own social character) sometimes reveals just how snobbish

and often ridiculous our elitist codes are. This is not to say he does not believe in them: for example, I have always seen Bastien very seriously believe in the Palette Terre's commercial expansion possibilities. But the results of these career experiences are less important than what they enable the people who participate in them to be made to go through.

It is through this prism that I understand the importance of the bodies present in the representation that Bastien has been building over the years out of the exhibitions he creates or organises: the photos he preserves of them, online or in archives, are populated by people (see the image results of a Google search for "Bastien Cosson"). Ultimately, these are placements in situations rather than exhibitions. There is even a visitor counter on the homepage of his website.

—

3.

"Life in close proximity can be uncomfortable, but you will learn solidarity with your fellow corporateers. You will learn to share food and entertainment. By eating, sleeping and shitting discursive activity, ideas will bounce off all your heads morning, noon and night. Get a pet and take turns feeding it. Don't have sex with each other. Above all else, don't romanticize communal life—dress for work every day, keep regular business hours, and learn proper phone manners."

*Corporate Responsibility and the Swine We Are*, Bernadette Corporation, 1997

From another less sociological point of view, Bastien Cosson's practice, in all its components (painting, organising exhibitions, selling works, writing press releases, climbing trucks as a protester, soon opening a self-generated art centre...), is simply conceptual. It is thus in the tradition of the (already-vanished) American scene of the 1990s and 2000s, that of what could be called the "Non-Productive Attitude", to which Reena Spaulings and Merlin Carpenter—close friends of Bastien—belonged.

It is what they did that gave Bastien a real freedom, both cringey and amusing, which Elsa Vettier, speaking of Carpenter, characterises as a practice in which "the work could be anything, made by anyone, shown or smashed to smithereens, necessarily kitsch in its attempt to be political—that Merlin Carpenter, who calls himself a "painter-artist", has been working since the early 1990s. [...] [This] allows him to either paint personalities and ducks with a certain figurative talent, or to exhibit paintings concealed by transport covers; to pick up a paintbrush the night of the opening to cover white canvases with insults against banks and his gallery owner, or to spend the production money on luxury products."

In a French context that is much more modest (even precarious), at the dawn of 2025, what results from such a reappropriation? What is left of conceptual painting, of the diverting of capitalist tools of production in favour of the artistic gesture, of the endangering of the medium in order to contribute to systemic and institutional criticism? This comparison only makes sense if profound differences are found: Bastien does not mix everything, does not place everything on the same level, as those before him did.

He knows that on the one hand, he takes part in *gilet jaune* protests with his activist friends, far from the "Art on Strike" procession; and on the other hand, he does conceptual painting. One does not go without the other, but neither is done to justify the former.

"I paint at the same time, but I can say that being a painter is not enough for me. A big part of my work as an artist consists solely in doing everything to be able to remain one. It is a fragile, jubilant, exhausting privilege." (2023 portfolio)

The reality is that it is an existential question that always dogs him: there is no sense in painting and doing exhibitions, but paradoxically there is nothing better than doing this.

So I understand that it is not a matter of being technically or intellectually unable to do something else, but rather a way of being in the world. Being a painter, as an identity, is a choice that cannot be unmade, even if in a sense, it means becoming humiliated by the position this entails in one's own environment.

"First I failed as a pupil, then as an art student, before failing as a young artist. I felt a lot of frustration being overlooked for prizes and distinctions of every kind when some of my friends were enjoying the success of those young years." (2023 portfolio)

– 4.

One could say that as a relationship with and perspective on the world, being a painter is a gaze. This is how Bastien's perspective is oriented, for better or for worse—the better consisting of that ability never to pass up anything: all images are worth it. This is how the collection presented here was created.

It is sometimes an unsettling perspective, since everything is liable to be represented by his perspective. In the selection of images, it is Bastien and Bastien alone who represents Elsa and Cosma (his daughter).

“In an egotistic frenzy, I'm printing my life in 960 colour pages. I'm revealing something that doesn't interest many people. I'm doing this for myself, Elsa, Cosma, a few friends and, ideally, for painting.” (2023 portfolio)

“It's as if I were a character that we perform together. It's like a roleplay that maintains our relationship, one that takes on an erotic charge. He wants to depict me in order to 'upgrade' our relationship. Of course there is an aesthetisation, a romanticisation of our love relationship. I get the impression that Bastien needs to depict reality to make it exist.

That's a big difference between him and me: I make documentaries in which I try to tell about the world through direct cinema; he needs to intensify everything. It's an intensity that of course hides a certain fear of emptiness. He needs to push things to see how far it can be taken... The only situation he placed me in that didn't like was not when he painted or photographed me, but when he made me paint: then I felt trapped, as if instead of playing with me, he'd played me.”. (Elsa, 2023)

–

5.

“Bastien Cosson's paintings are compulsive. He breaks, cuts, scrapes. He glues, he hide fluorescent for a blue so dark that you find yourself at the bottom of a lake absorbed by unidentified, drowned colours; then he adds sequins, so the canvas retains a semblance of celebration. There's grey, pink, and colours that are scratched and then blackened. Superimposed layers form a crust ready to collapse. His paintings are saturated, they are an endless work-in-progress that stinks of solvent. Roofs of buildings mirroring the cosmos. And once finished, he destroys it and starts the same thing all over again, until the eye is exhausted.” Josquin Gouilly Frossard, 2020

Winter 2019

It's an evening when night descends early. We arrive in Villejuif, where Bastien has a mezzanine studio. Everything is a bit cold, a bit sad, very “bohemian”. Gala and I have come to choose the paintings we will show in the exhibition that opens soon at Treize (March 2019). I couldn't think of any better way to involve a woman in the collective process than to suggest to my friend Gala—herself a painter when she was at the Beaux-Arts, and today an embroideress—to help with that selection of paintings. In hindsight, I don't know if that was suitable, and above all I'm not sure if I placed Gala in a comfortable situation.

We'd decided to look at ALL of the stored paintings. Gala and I try to understand them and then arrange them. There is the big green one. There is the blue and black one. There are several with stripes. Prints of Elsa's neck, marked by the pinpricks of her acupuncturist. There are other photo prints in progress. The whole creates an iconography of a moment, a “hue”, a blog post; we leave not feeling sure of anything. We decide that we will bring it all into the exhibition, in any case.

.

Spring 2023

I returned to that studio. Like last time, there's an enormous stock of canvases piled up on their backs, placed one on top of the other. None of them is made to be the “best”, nor to distinguish itself in order to be chosen as worthy of being shown or sold.

Behind the work table, there is small one made of scraps of leopard fabric, blue, black. It is different from the others, it is “finished” (full, holding up in all corners).

To the side, a large, almost blank beige canvas, with only a few glued stripes. No step in the fabrication process is hidden on those canvases. Transparency is a production aesthetic.

I see the printed, cut-out head of Virgile, my child, on another canvas taken out of storage. I tell myself that these swarming, static compositions standing upright on the walls or tired on the floor, are like a kind of gang loitering in the studio. They could be there eternally, but they too will move out, to a place where, ultimately, they will do the same thing.

Bastien takes care of his paintings and photos as he would take care of a litter of animals or a garden: he looks after them as a whole, to preserve them; for the survival of their function, and for the ecology that is created in the balance between them; for the survival of his work and of the people depicted in it.

Olga Rozenblum

Translate by Matthew Cunningham