

## Games of Chance and Role Play

A text by Geneviève Chevalier

“I have forced myself to contradict myself in order to avoid conforming to my own taste.”

– Marcel Duchamp

Certain sculptures, as we contemplate them, require that we call upon our own experience of worldly things: materials we once touched are immediately recognized; the spectator's body, occupying a given volume in the exhibition space, will serve as a point of reference; though, aware of the presentational context, the spectator apprehends what is proffered solely through the knowledge he or she possesses. It goes without saying, one might think. But what if it were completely different? What if the observer were completely ignorant of local customs and conventions? The gaze as innocent as an animal's? Would the spectator's attention, hesitating, suddenly twist and turn, going back and forth from one object to another? Montreal artist Valérie Blass disrupts sculpture's familiar language with a singular formal approach that raises some of the major questions in art, particularly those which concern its history and the ideas that have transcended it.

The exhibition “Dos-à-dos/Face-à-face” brings together a selection of Valérie Blass' recent sculptural productions. Above all, this project enables the occurrence of new “encounters” between the works, revealing the interplay of new equivalencies between forms, textures, and colours. The artist adopts a method that relies, to varying degrees, on chance interventions. She will not rely exclusively on her own imagination for devising concepts and forms. Instead, she develops a haphazard technical process for each of her productions, with surprising and unexpected results that she may or may not consider for inclusion in her work. Often presented in pairs, such forms, which Blass terms “counter-imaginary,” are hard to describe. *Cochon en gris souris* (“pig in mouse grey”) and *Mesurer en pied, en jambe et en queue* (“measured in feet, leg, and tail”)

have both emerged from this process. The forms of the composition are pleasing and sensual, though their meaning escapes us. Viewers want to solve the mystery, and will comb the surface for the least discrepancy of form, rendering, or hue between the two nearly identical yet so different parts. Willingly drawn into this play of equivalencies, the viewers, intrigued, seek to define the abstract though somewhat figurative shapes that are set before them in order to comprehend what they are looking at. These mental gymnastics, so characteristic of Blass' work, are a unique pleasure for those who let themselves be drawn in.

Elsewhere, *Compression et expansion en noir* ("compression and expansion in black") unabashedly reveals the mechanics of the process by which it was created. A first assemblage composed of packing foam wrapped around a workshop stool had obviously served as a mould for the plaster cast placed on a pedestal. The latter, "presenting itself as an abstract sculpture, refers to the former by its pedestal, a block of foam whose colour suggests monumental solidity, but in fact betrays a slight weakening due to the weight of what it is supposed support."<sup>1</sup> Freed of its original materials, the volume of plaster proudly bears its status as sculpture in its own right. This work leads us indirectly to the question of the nature of the work of art as it was raised by Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), the French artist and thinker who had so profound an impact on modern artistic thought. By incorporating everyday objects and materials in his work—some of which may be considered "ugly" (one thinks of the ordinary urinal that was his famous *Fountain* of 1917)—, the artist takes a stance with respect to the work of art: no longer must it aspire to the "beautiful," made precious by "noble" materials. On the contrary, the work of art is rather presented at once as an experience and as an occasion for reflection and dialogue with the spectator, who has a significant role to play.

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1 Jean-Ernest Joos, "Le poids de l'infigurable. À propos du travail de Valérie Blass," *Esse arts + opinions*, no. 55 (fall 2005), 55.

*Comment se tenir* ("how to hold oneself"), *Comment se faire plaisir* ("how to enjoy oneself"), *Comment se tenir debout* ("how to stand"), and *Hirsute* form what one may call the perfect museum scenario for a Blassian universe. Nothing's lacking from what looks an awful lot like a *mise en abyme*: the work as sculpture (*Comment se tenir debout*), the work that stands in as a painting (*Hirsute*), the other as a spectator (*Comment se tenir*), the fourth as work of art (*Comment se faire plaisir*), and the last as design object (*Comment être là*). The grouping suggests an installation, without actually claiming to be one, as each piece bears its own title. No attention is given to the particularities of the site, as is often the case with installations. All that matters here is the venue's disseminatory function. *Comment se faire plaisir*, the video work that completes the set, gives us a sculpture balanced unstably on the corner of the seat of a chair, while *Comment se tenir debout*, with its improbable dimensions, seems to follow in the same vein. On an adjacent wall, *Hirsute* has the look of a minimalist pictorial composition. Its surface is covered in thick, long-piled plush that creates the illusion of a Van Gogh-like impasto. These pieces also raise questions about the manner of their reception. Wholly absorbed in contemplating the video, a Bonobo monkey (in *Comment se tenir*) is seated on a pedestal, alongside a geometric volume (*Comment être là*) that one vaguely associates with an art or design object. Placed next to each other, the two sculptures seem to be riveted by what is happening on the screen. Immediately on entering the exhibition space, spectators become an integral part of the process, also gazing on the proffered objects as they stroll among them; from afar, they would even seem to be part of the exhibit. This is not the first time Blass has shown interest in the gaze, particularly in that of an animal. For her exhibition "Le regard des animaux," presented at Galerie Dare-Dare in 2001, Blass employed living subjects. A collection of abstract forms somewhat resembling minimalist sculpture, this project oscillates between sublimity and mania. In one video, a bald eagle perched in an enclosure is insistently shown a small minimalist sculpture composed of ovoid forms. Nonplussed, and baffled by the nature of the object, the eagle goes through an array of reactions.

The work is activated through the animal's gaze and intervention, thus calling into question the spectator's anthropocentric and disinterested point of view."<sup>2</sup>

The work of Valérie Blass offers a particularly unique exploration of sculpture's contemporary significance. Her recent productions make ever more explicit excursions into the history of the discipline (see, among other works, *Étant donné, le loris sur son socle néo-classique*, or *Cette jeune femme ne sait pas s'habiller*, both produced in 2008). The objects that make up "Dos-à-dos / Face-à-face" transform not just our vision of art, but also our perceptions of reality. The configurations Blass proposes appear to be incomplete, their apparent transformation seemingly suspended between abstraction and figuration. In her exploration of materials, and in the processes that she sets up and from which she generates her sculptures, Blass examines relationships between form and surface. The intelligibility of her pieces rests at least as much on the treatment of the surface as on a plausible suggestion of form. The interplay of equivalencies that one finds in her work, the result of surface manipulations, modelling, or thermoforming, arises from one's meaningful experience of the work. Here, in the to and fro of one's attention as it shifts from one object to the other, are born the contortions of the mind.

### **BIOGRAPHY**

VALÉRIE BLASS lives and work in Montreal. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and a Master of Fine Arts degree both from Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). She is the recipient of numerous grants and prizes including the *Premier prix*, in the department of Visual Arts at UQAM (1995). Her work has been exhibited in solo exhibitions at Montreal galleries and artist-run-centres such as: Parisian Laundry, Galerie Clark, Dare-Dare and Galerie B-312. Her work was presented as part of the Quebec Triennale during the summer of 2008 at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and her sculptures also figure in the collection of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. VALÉRIE BLASS is represented by the Parisian Laundry.

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2 Bernard Schutze, "Valérie Blass : Inverser le regard," *Espace sculpture*, no. 60 (summer 2002), 38.