

MELIK OHANIAN | CAMERA AUSTRIA | APRIL 2004
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VERSION | ENG

Intermediate images (It's here that we live)

In the space of a year and a half, the artist Melik Onanian (born 1969, he lives in Paris), made a dazzling career debut, initially in France, and then, almost immediately, on the international level, with successive individual exhibitions at the FRAC Languedoc-Roussillon in Montpellier, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris at the time of its opening and the Chantal Crousel gallery, *Art Unlimited* in Basel (2002), the Museum in Progress in Vienna, the Atlanta College of Art (2003), the Berlin Biennial, the Centre pour l'Image Contemporaine in Geneva and the Yvon Lambert gallery in New York (2004). And he will also be taking part in the Sydney Biennial and that of São Paulo, where he is to represent France in 2004. The highly-condensed monograph that appeared in the meantime under the title *Kristale Company* (French-English edition, Orléans, HYX Editions, 2003, 182 pp., co-produced by the Chantal Crousel gallery and FRAC Languedoc-Roussillon) documented most of the works created during the period between the installation *White Wall Travelling* (1997) and *Sign Word Book* (2003), with a seminal text by the critic Jean-Christophe Royoux, "Toward Zero Time or Melik Ohanian's Cinema Against the Grain". It also included nine of the initial images from the *Selected Recordings* series, which were numbered 005 to 077 (and 666!). In parallel with the extraordinary rise to fame of the artist, "in a year and a half, eighty images appeared". The phenomenon intrigued Ohanian himself, who in the previous ten years had avoided using this medium, despite the fact that he was acquainted with it, if only because his father, Rajak Ohanian, was a photographer. And the son cited the father in a singular tribute, using one of the latter's most militant photographs, the emblematic *Closed Today* (1973), for the cover of *Kristal Company*, the first book to be devoted to Melik's work. Since their appearance, small numbers of the *Selected Recordings* have punctuated or added balance to his exhibitions, standing out as a new facet of his activity, or rather integrating into his work as a whole, along with his videos, installations and films, and resonating with them.

The *Selected Recordings* "belong to an unlimited series. Each [one] carries only an identifying number. Each print is unique with an identical large format (124 x 200 cm), unframed and mounted on aluminium. There is neither a geographical nor a time reference to

situate the images." The titles of Ohanian's works are in English; and this one, which is not really translatable into French, indicates only that the images derive, on the one hand, from a recording process, and on the other hand from a selection process; which says something about the approach in which the series originated. But beyond that, no clue is given, either about a subject or the artist's intentions. He says that "in their composition they preserve the spontaneity of their acquisition. I don't hesitate: it's the thing carried off, recorded. Why wait? At the same time, I don't play with the moment. The time scale in which things take place is not that of photography." If some of the journeys he made in connection with different projects, residencies or exhibitions – to England, the US, Iceland, Italy, Germany, Israel, Switzerland, Japan, Armenia, etc. – could suggest places or dates, any attempt to guess them is doomed to failure. These images, like Ohanian's work in general, lie between document and fiction, between the real world and the view of it that is given by contemporary art, between their creator and the spectator. They deliberately say nothing, or almost nothing, about the person who made them, and in any case nothing about his mood, and what's happened to him; or his encounters, and what effect they've had on him. Unlike travel impressions, they preclude any hint of exoticism: they might be seen as notes (just about), but of the most restrained, tight-lipped kind; cold, even, and determined to avoid the unwieldiness of autobiography or emotion; keeping their distance – imposing distance. The material that's delivered is not raw, but doubly chosen (in situ, and at the point when the work's produced). It's made up of flashes, entities, blocks: dotted lines, to be joined up as one chooses.

Melik Ohanian travels. He lives where he goes, spending time with those who reside there, and meeting them – or not. On his return, he doesn't talk much about his trips. He tells no stories: nothing's known about the origins of the images he brings back, or where they come from. We can project onto them what we like, what we are – or stories. These images propose a space, while maintaining their integrity. They have a vacant aspect, an availability that allows everyone to identify with them on an equal footing. They're welcoming. They make the stranger seem close, accessible right away. Documents without desiccation, possible material for fiction: it's to their author that they owe their cinematographic, and not strictly photographic, character. (By a sort of contagion with the rest of Ohanian's work, they could be, and sometimes are, film stills.) But this is a silent, not invasive, character – just a slightly different air that circulates. The fact is that the artist's concern is not to give an account, but to open us up to what he's seen – and we have to trust both his eye and his human experience if we're to find out how faithful he is to those he's frequented, and how respectful he is of the world he brings to us. His images are thresholds. If we want to be there – we are.

Has he himself appropriated these places, these moments? Yes and no. He's decided to retain them, to sign them; and meanwhile he's deprived them of the coordinates that might have helped the spectator to apprehend them... Or perhaps the masking tends to make the spectator more active – it tends to stimulate him, and to give him greater freedom. Unburdened of their context, the images must certainly be able to pass more freely from the artist to the recipient. And indeed Ohanian talks about "projection rather than acquisition: bringing into play all the mental images that people have within themselves about the thing being looked at". This refers to one of his essential positions, since, as he says, he's "never happier than when a person appropriates one of my pieces". The space given to the spectator, in these indeterminate images, has no other purpose than to encourage him to occupy them in his own way. Which is not so simple. A number of contemporary works are intended for certain types of people, and are meant to touch them, to establish a strong relation with them; but it's less common to find an artist so discreet, issuing such a generous invitation.

In the blackness of the night, a green bulb illuminates a sort of stall, out in the open. There are two perpendicular walls with shelves full of foodstuffs and bottles. On the ground there are cases, and the delicate roof is held up by a pole. A light bulb makes a white hole in the centre of the image, but the light produces another effect on dark tarpaulin and level ground. It finds an echo in two other bright points in adjoining spaces; and the whole artificial atmosphere is infused with a yellow halo, a blue gleam, and above all a touch of red that makes the chemical green vibrate. This is a brief description of the elements that make up *SR 032*, which, among other things, can be seen to be remarkably constructed, starting with a luminous progression, a diagonal along which coloured notes appear. I may ponder at length on the whys and wherefores of this green, and come up with various hypotheses (is it late at night or early in the morning; a makeshift canteen or all that remains, all that has ever been there?), or just muse...

I stop before the next image (*SR 058*), with its frontally, and apparently deliberately, formal character. I think I'm looking at a section of wall – a mosaic of chipped, reclaimed tiles, used as such in an arrangement that combines geometry and broken lines; a harmonious gamut of browns, russets, blues, sometimes giving an impression of shards of mirror or glowing light, opening up white-hot breaches. This could bring to mind one of Josef Albers' abstract compositions in the US, so rigorous and jubilant. And suddenly I realise that it might just as easily be a pavement. This decorative plane says much about the "art pauvre", or "art brut" of the person who created it – a gifted craftsman who knows how to use second-rate or second-hand material (no doubt through necessity), and who can conjure effects out of it that go far

beyond its utilitarian value. What this image also says is: someone did that; there's the time of the work in it, as much as that of the people who've walked past it, or on it, without paying it any heed (or, on the contrary, doing so). Including one who was there just as the sun pierced the sky, the foliage of a nearby tree; even this delicate wall.

The third image (*SR 074*) is of water, almost exclusively. Sea or ocean, clouds heavy with rain, or even snow, on the few islets that make one wonder how they can have emerged, how it can be that this water which is everywhere doesn't engulf them. At the same time, the image is blue, from almost-white to almost-black, with just a pink glimmer where the cloud's rent apart, and straight below, on the surface of the waves. From left to right, it's more clear and well-defined, or more indistinct, as though swathed in a fog that makes the outlines undecipherable. At any moment, this landscape could dissolve, tip over into unreality with a loss of bearings; one could go further in the damp cold, darkness, death. Man can be here momentarily; it's not even sure that he can give an image of it; the place throws him down a gauntlet. Far from an oceanic feeling, there's a reminder of dangerous seduction; the risk of this polar, moving, sublime, chilling blue.

The return to civilisation is violent, with a city and its concrete tower blocks (*SR 017*), despite the glimpses of garden, the patches of grass, the few trees stuck at the bottom of a dizzying well photographed from one of the blocks, perhaps from the tenth floor. Farther on, there are some blocks that are less tall. And right at the back there's the green of vague fields, a less hemmed-in habitat or an industrial zone. The regular windows (two squares, one rectangle, one square, one rectangle; then up a level and the same again) of identical flats are differentiated by curtains in bright colours: green, blue, yellow, red. The bare blocks of the opposite wall, unexpectedly grey-pink, have nothing poetic about them. This is, rather, an observation of life in cages for hundreds, thousands of invisible people confined to graceless dwellings from which they can scarcely make out the vivid green of the grass, or even what the weather's like. Still – no conclusion about the destitution or happiness of the inhabitants.

Elsewhere, a tent's been put up somewhere in a desert (*SR 043*). It's the same blue as the azure behind, perched on arid ground that's cracked and inhospitable. This shelter, so precarious – is it occupied? We might suppose that this is a time just after sleep, before heading off once more; in a few moments the packing-up will be done, the refuge will have disappeared; got to get moving again. This could be any desert whatsoever; or even, to fantasise a little, another planet. And why not, one day? As to the person who stopped here – what does he think, what will he do...

At a street corner bathed in blond clarity (*SR 029*), slightly dilapidated buildings, a potholed

road, no real footpaths; a small group talking in front of a door; two people seated, elderly, surrounded by younger people; a girl on the balcony above. The silhouettes bring some life to this not-unworthy neighbourhood. In the shadows of the next street, a laconic AC/DC has been painted on a wall, which doesn't precisely date the scene. Where is this, when? But after all, what does it matter? The weather's nice enough for a person to take the sun outside the house, where people talk.

Once again, man disappears – like never yet before. Here (*SR 037*) the space is immense. It could be thought for a moment that the tracks on these elephant-hide grey mountains are signs of human, mechanical transit; this pseudo-Moon has been walked on. But no. Under the blue of the sky, it's much too large, severe – terrible? Curious mixture of the most austere, and softest, grey gravel and gentle slopes, with flat summits and valleys like respites in the overwhelming grandeur. Not a postcard, no; there isn't the flamboyance of the Grand Canyon. But though one may square up to such a spectacle, it will afterwards be time to turn round and leave it as one found it; there's nothing here that could be conquered or known. It's too much – fortunately, there are still territories that are too much.

A dog, a Saint Bernard, sits watching over tin shacks built on waste ground whose sparse, short grass is strewn with litter (*SR 049*). In the distance, trees, habitable buildings – and even one that seems to be fortified, unlike this house of cards whose purpose may be wondered about. Light skies and soft light can accompany the most desolate spot. But the dog shows something else: security, stability; he'll make sure nothing nasty happens. Big body, faithful, devoted, warm and gentle, intelligent; if necessary, he'll defend those who are too weak to defend themselves: those who have only huts that a breath of air would blow away. A reason not to despair.

The *Selected Recordings* offer an alternative, or form a counterpoint, to highly substantial, elaborate, ambitious pieces like *Island of an Island* (1998-2001), *Peripheral Communities* (2002), *Welcome to Hanksville* (2003), or *At Late* (1998), *Coming Soon* and *Freezing Film* (2001), or *The Hand* (2002). Right from the start, Melik Ohanian felt that these images could become a language, a vocabulary to dip into. He talks about "phrasing", even, and "chant". When he places them in exhibitions, they form "gaps" – breathing spaces between more imposing works. But of course they also exist individually; each one has its autonomy – and not just the inaugural one of the Erevan eagle (*SR 005*). So are they "bodies"?

Nicolas Bourriaud, the co-director of the Palais de Tokyo, has recently published a long article on the artist ("Melik Ohanian's Choral Response", *art press*, No. 300, April 2004, pp. 40-45), in which he states, rightly, that his oeuvre can be "seen in terms of the individual's

response to a group, a contemporary rejoinder to those remote stories, like the second tremor that redoubles the initial seism but that is quite distinct, and on a smaller scale. [The works] are shock waves. The individuals or groups that populate Ohanian's work are defined by the rejoinders that they make to their own history. For Ohanian, Being exists only through the presence of an Other, who endows it with form and vitality."

It's very rare for the *Selected Recordings* to be inhabited. Some of them include a figure or figures, but so far only one (*SR 028*) has confronted us with the massive presence of the head and chest of a man with an unreadable expression. Is he drowsy, wounded, or simply absorbed in his thoughts? He looks paradoxically absent.

Jean-Christophe Royoux distinguishes "two types of propositions" in Ohanian's work: "a tougher approach, more closely in touch with social reality [...] and a more meditative, more contemplative approach that lingers on alternative, uninhabited worlds, galactic spaces, spaces that provide a measure for all things and which allow the world's elemental multiplicity to exist in simultaneity – the earth, the sea, the planets, the sky." In a certain way, each is counter-shot of the other. And yet could be suggested that what links them is sometimes more complex; that certain landscapes also express something of the order of the political, for example certain urban territories that are abandoned, or occupied only intermittently, ephemerally. The artist "made the choice of not narrating"; so be it. But in this series – at least for the moment – he has also chosen not to give any image of his encounters; and to hide, or protect, those who live in the worlds whose images he gives. In other words, the economy of the *Selected Recordings* is very specific. As Melik Ohanian's reply to a universe he has ranged over, these mute images call for a response from those who look at them. And they ask to be taken for what they are – intermediaries thanks to which, if we care to, we can state: "It's here that we live."

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Translation: John Doherty