

A moment in the Cage
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Elisabeth Ballet's work for kerguéhennec is set in an area of the grounds that is slightly removed from the most obvious itinerary. Here, it offers a particular response to some of the problems that are inevitably raised when art meets 'nature' (even in her tamed version). The domain of these problems is delimited by two words: assimilation and confrontation. Both terms require the artist to take into account the immediate environment in which he or she must operate, and draw conclusions from it, particularly where placement, dimensions and materials are concerned. Experience shows that there is no course here that is especially assured of success. A merger with the landscape invariably invites the attendant risk of (paling into) insignificance. As far as sculptures grotesquely superimposed on their sites are concerned, we lost count ages ago.

The special thing about *Trait pour trait* (Line for Line) is that its geometric aspect, plus its large size and the metal with which it is made, make it hard to pigeon-hole – as one might automatically expect – alongside those antagonistic pieces that clash openly with their sites. Just as it sits in a clearing roughly halfway between two opposite access paths, so the work is equidistant from the two poles which define the interplay between art and nature. Whether you approach it via the wood or by suddenly leaving the water's edge, there is a similar effect of spatial expansion when you come upon this unsuspected expanse of terrain. At first, the sculpture looms slightly blurred by its remoteness. In addition to this effect, its structure includes a great deal of openwork. *Trait pour trait* is thus initially presented as a grey grid, the clarity of whose definition is associated with the quality of the light at any given moment – for light plays a vital part here (because the stainless steel is used in an unchromed, matt state, it nevertheless prevents the sun from turning this grid into a sheer reflection of light). Then, as we get closer, the object reveals that it is perfectly round, and quite sizeable (11.5 metres [40 feet] in diameter and 5 metres [16 ½ feet] high). It is set in the widest part of the clearing, which is some 250 metres [820 feet] long, but it nevertheless fills almost the entire area, leaving just two narrow cleared strips at either side (one barely a metre [3 feet] wide, the other about 3 metres [10 feet] but partly obstructed by trees).

It is quite possible that the circle motif contributes somewhat to the impression given by this piece of an equilibrium between the geometric and the organic. The doubtlessly apocryphal anecdote, peddled by Vasari, comes to mind, where, in response to a papal envoy come to find proof of Giotto's mastery of appearances, and quite sure that there could be no better demonstration, the painter merely drew a perfect circle, freehand. A similar connivance certainly helps to reconcile *Trait pour trait* with the grass, the trees and the sky which all act as its physical backdrop. More specifically still, it is worth noting how, in her work, Elisabeth Ballet underscores a sort of 360-degree plastic thinking. Without delving very far back in time, this was so with *Face-à-main* [Face-to-Hand] (1989), where six wall constructions encircled an impressive and very complex-looking sculpture, which, in fact, was the outcome of the vertical projection and extension of its offshoots. It is also worth noting that for the public square designed by the artist in Condat-sur-Vienne in 1991, she delimited a huge circular area on the ground with pink granite paving stones, on the surface of which she inscribed two concentric figures in white marble. On the surface of the ground, these figures follow the motif of a barrier installed at the top of a small mound.

Barrier, enclosure, openwork – all features whose formal recollection and literal borrowing punctuate Elisabeth Ballet's work. *Trait pour trait* is linked with this sub-set in so much as it inexorably conjures up a cage. And a weird cage, to boot, open on top, and suggesting occupancy by the improbable mix of lion and bird, resulting from the contrast between its size and its proportions (the bars, set 15 centimètres [6 inches] apart, are not quite 1.5 centimètres [0.6 inches] in diameter). The sculpture here is like the ghost of an object whose existence precedes that of the sculpture, but would only be rendered present by means of a considerable diversion (in this sense, *Trait pour trait* is also something that seems to have been *dreamed*). As a variation on the theme of the cube and the box, the importance of which in terms of modern art needs no further mention (and with which it conjugates, echo-like, the no less pregnant- with-meaning theme of the grill or lattice), the cage appears in the work of both Duchamp (*Why not Sneeze Rose Sélavy*, assisted ready-made, 1921) and Giacometti (*Cage*, plaster, 1930, and its wooden version made the following year). In association with Minimalism, and making no claim to sketch any kind of inventory, I shall nevertheless mention – if only for the irony with

which it squares off its motif, so to speak – of Walter de Maria's *Statue of John Cage* (1961), a tallish wooden structure, but one not quite wide enough to accommodate a human body (2.10 metres [7 feet] high and less than 40 centimetres [16 inches] per side, one of the undoubted merits of this piece – whose later stainless steel version made in 1965 is simply titled *Cage* – is that it draws the attention to the paradoxical resonance between the composer's name and his avowed artistic ambition). Lastly, a work like Bruce Nauman's *Double Steel Cage Piece* (1974) – which is like a latticed parallelepiped that can be penetrated, inside which you can venture and go round a second identical-looking, but smaller and less accessible structure – may well help us to understand Élisabeth Ballet's sculpture. For *Trait pour trait* is fitted with a door, incorporated flush with the overall structure of the piece, but which the alert onlooker will have no real trouble locating. Once passed through, this spring-loaded door shuts behind you- a simple gesture enables the apprehensive visitor to see straightaway that it is as easy to get out as it is to get in – and leaves you in an oddly intermediate space, with a visual continuity with the space you were in before (what is more, the ground stays the same), but this space is at the same time separate and removed. The curtain of trees that delimits the clearing along the two long sides now acts as a backdrop to the bars of the cage, and gives the appearance of being their distant model, in a reverse movement to the one that governed the making of *Face-à-main* (whose central feature, from which we then borrow the situation, is, however, called *Modèle*). The to-ing and fro-ing between exterior and interior – between projection and introversion – operated at his leisure by the onlooker, who has put himself within the work, unexpectedly enhances his perception of the place in which he finds himself, and to which he would otherwise certainly only have given very vague attention. It is just a short step from here to thinking that the cage might possess a power of revelation (it is precisely upon such a feeling that Henry James' novella titled *In the Cage* is based). But all it takes is a step in the direction of the outside, leaving *Trait pour trait* behind, for the erratic and fragmentary nature of our experience of the world to reassert its rights straightaway.