

Memento mori – Remember you will die

on the exhibition 'LXXV Chants de Sirènes' of Radouan Zeghidour

Essay by Kristine MacMichael



'Rupture' 2019 : image Alexander Christie

The etymology of the phrase *memento mori* goes something like this: in ancient Rome, when a victorious general returned from battle, the adoring masses would cheer for him as he drove his chariot down the Via Sacra for his *triumphus* parade. For the entire day, a child would accompany the general, whispering in his ear over and over again: “*Hominem te esse. Memento mori.*” (“You are only a man. Remember you will die”). The role of the *memento mori* chant was to protect the general from vainglory because it is fleeting: one day he too will die. In a similar vein, contemporary visual manifestations of *memento mori* symbols in art remind the viewer that they will one day die; these symbols alert us to the brevity of life and the transience of vanity. The work in Radouan Zeghidour’s current exhibition at Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix, entitled *LXXV Chants de Sirènes*, reminds us, in both whispers and in shouts, that one day we will cease to exist.

Memories of the past and ideas of death abound in Zeghidour’s exhibition. My first inkling that this exhibition forefronts notions of death comes from the exhibition title itself: *LXXV Chants de Sirènes*. It conjures up associations to Homer’s epic tale of *The Odyssey* when the irresistible sirens’ song lured Odysseus’s sailors to the perilous rocky coastlines of Sirenum scopuli. Shipwrecked, the sailors would be overtaken by amnesia and meet their demise.

The objects composing many of Zeghidour’s works are purposefully ephemeral and therefore are designed to slowly decay and disappear. So, in a way, the artwork’s material silently

communicates the exhibition's message about death and memory; the ephemeral materiality symbolises the frailty of both the physical and existential human condition. I am thinking of *Rupture*, a silicone imprint of ancient graffiti left by the 18th century French writer, Nicolas Edme Restif de la Bretonne, on a pillar in Places des Vosges. It reads, '1764 NICOLAS'. Keiko Yamamoto, the founder of Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix, quipped that Restif is "the patron saint of graffiti artists." *Rupture* is not only an indexical trace of the past (the direct imprint of Restif's graffiti) but also contains, within its material structure, the dust and debris that has witnessed the city's history. When Zeghidour removed the silicone from the pillar anchoring the graffiti, most of the dirt and soot that had accumulated in the inscription was lifted off and encased in the silicone material. Thus, the actual physical traces of the past which make up this specific site in Paris is incorporated into the work. *Rupture* exists in the present, but it is made of memory and the past within its ephemeral materiality, its content, and, ultimately, its message.

I also think about time and memory when I approach *Jardin Secret*. The work is composed of a rustic, translucent screen of delicate metal mesh that is situated within a tall, basic support. The screen is divided into three sections and the mesh anchors the objects housed within the work's structure. The metal mesh in the top section contains subtle imprints of floral designs and secures the wax mould of a circular decorative relief sculpture that adorns the side of an old building. The middle section houses a white, fragmented plaster cast of a bas-relief sculpture. The figures appear to be situated within a classical architectural setting and dressed in the attire of the ancient Romans: long, flowing *tunicas*, *pallas*, and *stolas*. The remnants of the word, 'CONCLVSVS', meaning 'enclosed', appears in the bottom right corner.

Both the top and middle sections represent the decline of an ancient civilization. However, the cast we see in this piece is the copy of a copy. What I mean is that this image has its origins in ancient sculpture but was subsequently reproduced in the 19th century, most likely by a student at Beaux-Arts de Paris. So Zeghidour's work houses a reproduction of a reproduction. What does it mean when an artist deliberately reproduces a reproduction? Rochaix said that Zeghidour's work comments on the nostalgia for classical civilisation; what is represented is not a direct copy of the ancient culture, but "the artist is representing the made-up, desired idea of paradise." She found the heart of the work. When an artist copies a copy, the viewer is forced to do the work of memory because any direct link to the past is no longer located in the object itself. *Jardin Secret* highlights a temporal distortion in that both the past and present co-mingle in the same work simultaneously. In this mode of contemporary memory, time becomes ambiguous and therefore polysemic, allowing for a multiplicity of interpretations. Belatedness becomes a characteristic of Zeghidour's work: the past haunting the present. Ancient memories and narratives play a diminished role since they are reconstituted to the demands and desires of the present.

The lower section is intriguing because it juxtaposes those plaster copies of copies alongside a photographic image that symbolises contemporary urban society and culture, and this is the main message behind the exhibition: *memento mori* symbols as harbingers of the inevitable decline of our contemporary society. The metal mesh in the lower section is, again, imprinted with floral and geometric decorative designs as seen in the top section. On either side of a tattered-looking metal sheet, that also shows signs of decay through oxidation, sit two disintegrating plaster casts of ancient sculptures of men's faces. Embedded onto the metal sheet is a colour photograph of an enormous ventilation fan – the industrial architectural that makes up the underbelly of large contemporary cities, such as Paris. *Jardin Secret* equates, through proximity, the remnants of an ancient, dead culture with the imagery of present-day subterranean industrial architecture. The former has already slid into the collective memory of the past whilst the latter is forewarned of its eventual demise.

Other works in this exhibition are also understood as *memento mori* symbols. The simple tin-metal wall-hanging sculpture, entitled *LXXV Chants de Sirènes*, is, by its rectangular geometric shape which comes to a point at the top, reminiscent of traditional memorial shrines. The metal is inscribed with writing and the work's title, *LXXV Chants de Sirènes*. Memorial shrines strongly evoke

collective and personal memory of the dead and the past. The shrine, which also displays oxidation and decay, is embedded with a similar colour photograph as seen in *Jardin Secret*. However, rather than a photograph of contemporary industrial architecture, the photograph in *LXXV Chants de Sirènes* is of the timeworn, derelict tower. The image is arresting because it so powerfully proves that abandonment and the passing of time has allowed a large tree to protrude so unrepentantly out of the building's dilapidated outer shell. The memorial shape of the work's overall structure with the colour photograph embedded in the metal material powerfully points to death, the passing of time, and remembrance of a past which has now been forgotten.

Then there are the marble fragments, entitled *Martys*, that represent archaeological remains that testify to a long-gone civilisation, as well as to anonymous saints who were persecuted and perished for their beliefs. These fragments are displayed in a way that is usually encountered in cultural and antiquities museum displays and exhibitions. This work is about memory of forgotten civilisations; it speaks through the voice of the past but portends death as our future. As those people and cultures were once great, we and our Western culture are great now, but as they are now dead and resigned to the past, one day we will be remembered only through our fragmented remnants. Our art, our architecture, our names, our culture, and our memories follow their footsteps down the path toward death and forgetfulness. *Martys* whispers in our ear: *memento mori*.

The message of death in *Evasion* is more optimistic: out of death springs new life. This work is about resurrection. It is composed of a large copper metal sheet that looks as if it slid down the wall and rests on the floor. Like the metal sheets in *Jardin Secret* and *LXXV Chants de Sirènes*, *Evasion* shows signs of corrosion due its patina of oxidation. On the top half of the sheet is a colour photograph embedded into the metal. The photograph is a still from the video documenting Zeghidour's underground installation, also entitled *Evasion*. The photograph presents what looks like prison bars securing a cavernous cage. In the middle of the photograph, behind the metal bars, hangs a loose canvas which gently sways with the artificial breeze emanating from the underground industrial ventilation system. Zeghidour's video installation of *Evasion* shows a man painting black flowers on the canvases as a way to install a natural landscape in subterranean Paris. The yellow outline echoes the frame of the canvas.

The installation *Evasion* no longer exists, or more precisely, it presumed the work will be destroyed once discovered. But the installation version of *Evasion* represents an important aspect to Zeghidour's artistic practice: the artist searching, for weeks and sometimes months, for hidden, underground, and illicit locations in Paris. These sites are deliberately inaccessible to the public, even though they exist in the heart of subterranean Paris. Zeghidour is, "Driven by a nostalgia for another time, it is in places difficult to access, prohibited to the public, that we can touch the pleasures of loneliness, silence, and isolation. Underground, where no one goes." ¹

In one day, the artist gathers the detritus and materials found at the site to construct the work. Once the work is finished, he documents it through photographs and video footage. These recordings become the only evidence that testifies to the work's existence. In effect, the photographs and videos are the remnants of the original work. But by the time we see these remnants resurrected into subsequent works, the original artwork has already been destroyed; it no longer exists.

Evasion, the one in the current exhibition, recycles the photographic still from the video of the earlier work. So, whilst *Evasion* houses a photographic still from the earlier work that no longer exists – one can think of it as a 'dead' work – the remnants of the earlier work is resurrected in a new version of *Evasion*. I think of Georges Bataille's idea of the General Economy when viewing this artwork. In *The Accursed Share: An Essay on the General Economy*, Bataille put forth the idea that death and destruction are necessary for the growth of new life. He wrote that "Just as in space the trunks and branches of the tree raise the superimposed stages of the foliage to the light, death

¹ <https://radouanzeghidour.com/EVASION>

distributes the passage of the generations over time. It constantly leaves the necessary room for the coming of the newborn, and we are wrong to curse *the one without whom we would not exist.*” *Evasion* comments on hope in the face of death: the resurrection of the dead brought back to life in a new form.

The exhibition also involves Zeghidour’s recent short film entitled *Voyage au bout de la Nuit* (*Journey to the End of the Night*). The film takes its title from the (in)famous novel of 1932 by French writer Louis-Ferdinand Céline. The novel is understood as semi-autobiographical, deeply misanthropic, and soaked in “a sense of failure, acute anxiety, nihilism”, and inertia. Its main themes focus on time and death, both collective and individual, and has “become a mirror image of many in today’s society.”² This description of the novel also applies to Zeghidour’s film. It shows a graffiti artist dressed in black with a balaclava shielding his identity. He walks like a haunting spectre through Paris, observing and absorbing all that surrounds him. Next, we see him sitting at a long table in the dark, lit by candles as he writes ‘to the end’ on a piece of paper ‘**DU BOUT DU BOUT DU BOUT**’ over and over again, endlessly. The vigorous repetition of the phrase communicates a *memento mori* scream more than a whisper.

The film pauses momentarily, then reveals the graffiti artist, still dressed in black, moving swiftly through an empty Paris Metro station. He is carrying an industrial-sized high-pressure spray paint tank and long spray gun. Like the ceaseless reminders of *memento mori* in the general’s ear, the artist writes on the station walls and advertising displays, over and over again, ‘**DU BOUT DU BOUT DU BOUT**’ - the end, the end, the end. We are a witness to him writing about the end, scarring the city in tall, spray-painted letters that shout, ‘**DU BOUT DU BOUT DU BOUT**’. Our journey to the end of the night takes us through the empty Parisian cityscape as we follow the artist vandalising the city with his incessant *memento mori*, foretelling of our unavoidable collective and personal demise.

² Knapp, B., “Reviewed Work: *Journey to the End of the Night* by Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Ralph Manheim”, *The Modern Language Journal*, vol. 67, no. 3 (Autumn, 1983), pp. 284-285. Both quotations are drawn from this review.