

I fell and fell and fell for evermore into the abyss of the sky...
(H. G. Wells, *The First Men In the Moon*, 1901)

HYPER

Denis Darzacq's latest photographic series, *Casques* and *Hyper*, explore the singular and awkward relations between desiring, mobile subjects and restrictive, coercive spaces. They stage a series of tensions, which are caught, like a breath, between divergent forces: nature and culture, the corporeal and the architectonic, global and local, consumption and creation. Deeply theatrical, the photographs are staged in carefully selected settings, in the frame of which Darzacq invites his subjects to pose and perform. There is, however, no digital trickery or photomontage in Darzacq's works: what you see in these images, no matter how improbable or unthinkable, happened. Another tension crackles, then, in Darzacq's photography: between the energies (or rhetoric, perhaps) of art and documentary photography.

Darzacq made the *Casques* series in 2007 during a residency in Thouars, a small town in the Poitou-Charentes region of France. He was struck by the incongruous sight of teenagers wearing oversized, vividly coloured off-road helmets, flying around the streets of this unremarkable, provincial town on their 50cc scooters. Decorated with futuristic logos, vivid graphics and names such as 'Spider' and 'Nitro' bursting with promises of an action-packed life, these aerodynamic helmets with projectile-resistant masks transform their wearers into avatars from a computer game or cartoon superheroes: Power Rangers, Mangas... Ordinary, fragile bodies metamorphose into visually arresting knights of the road.

A form of protection, but also decoration, the helmets allude to journeys off the beaten track, unknown and perilous routes, and high-speed journeys across chaotic landscapes. Of course –and this is the point– these are not the kinds of journey typically made in Thouars. Yet for the young people who wear them, the helmets speak of their desire to create adventure and to be seen; of a resilient, exuberant aspiration to set themselves apart from the tedium and homogeneity of the everyday.

The young scooter riders in Thouars are making their own place in the world, beyond the fast-food chains and supermarkets which are designed to receive and contain them. In this low-density agglomeration, with little access to public transport, we might say also that they are simply demanding the right to be inscribed in, rather than excluded from, the world of global mobility and flows; to be part of what Zygmunt Bauman and others have called the 'kinetic elite'.

In *Hyper*, Darzacq photographs young street dancers performing jumps and leaps in the supermarkets of Rouen and Paris. In these images, the ecstatic and ultimately purposeless movements of these dancing bodies disrupt the disciplined spatial and kinetic order of the supermarket, jamming the routes traced by and for consuming subjects. These are movements for the sake –and pleasure– of movement. As Paul Valéry said in his study of dance, such movements oppose utility and resist subjection to economic conditions: they are their own end¹. The elastic vibrancy of the dancers' bodies is juxtaposed with the orderly shelves and neatly stacked tins; their freedom with the purposive, consuming mobilities sanctioned by the space of the supermarket; their ecstatic, living bodies with the fake, fluorescent, plastic objects on sale.

Captured in mid-movement, suspended in the air, rather like levitating saints, in organic contortions that create an astonishing counterpoint to the harsh lines of the supermarket, the dancers' bodies appear to be in a state of rapturous ek-stasis. The images unfold at the threshold between levitas and gravity. In one photograph, a young man hovers before rows of toilet rolls, producing a ludic tension between the most basic of biological needs and functions and this moment of spiritual transcendence or assumption. In another, a bearded male dancer reminds us both of one of the mourners in El Greco's *Burial of Count Orgasz*, whose eyes are raised to the heavens, where angels await the dead man's soul, but also of a character in a platform video game, as he springs towards a fluorescent strip light against a backdrop of rows and rows of tinned fish. Elsewhere, a young woman flies like Superwoman alongside shelves replete with shampoos and cosmetics that promise (although we are less convinced by them than we are by the flying girl...) to accomplish the most miraculous feats of transformation and rejuvenation upon the body.

In this era of the digital image, when our minds are attuned and open to the possibilities of deceit, Darzacq exposes us anew to the shock of the 'that has been'². Of course, the debate concerning the divisions and overlaps between art and documentary photography now seems rather dated. And yet, in Darzacq's work, it is precisely this tension between what we might call aesthetic regimes that constitutes the politics of his work. The philosopher Jacques Rancière has called a police order one which assigns, like Plato, place, occupation and attitude³. The supermarket, for example, is entirely given over to the activities of selling, purchasing and consuming goods, in accordance with the values and laws of the market economy. For Rancière, politics, on the other hand, is that which perturbs and disrupts the police order, such as a demonstration that blocks a street designed for the circulation of people and goods or, in

1. Paul Valéry, *Degas Danse Dessin*, (Paris : Gallimard, 1998), p. 28.

2. See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Vintage Classics, 1993).

3. Jacques Rancière, 'La Pensée de la politique' in Henri Meschonnic and Shigehiko Hasumi (eds.), *La Modernité après le post-moderne*, (Maisonneuve et Larose, 2002), p. 45.

the case of Darzacq's work, a voluptuous leap in a supermarket aisle. 'The essence of politics is dissensus'⁴. Politics is about imagining other ways of practising and perceiving space, and 'seeing what is not seen, hearing what is not heard, counting what is not counted'⁵. It is, however, a rare exception: 'in the "normal" order of things, there is no politics'⁶.

In the Middle Ages, to evoke a black swan was to allude to the improbability or impossibility of an event, because no such bird had ever been seen.

The discovery of the *Cygnus atratus* – the black swan – in Australia in the seventeenth century caused a seismic shift in the western psyche in terms of what was understood to be possible and impossible⁷. An unimaginable frontier had, it seemed, been crossed. Darzacq's subjects – like Rancière's politics – are such black swans. Beautiful, exceptional and shocking, they not only depart from the 'normal' order, but challenge also our very modes of perception, the regimes of visibility to which we pay so little heed and yet which deeply structure our world and determine the limits of what we believe possible. This disruption is produced by the ontology of the image itself, which is at once inconceivable and real. Valéry writes: 'in the Universe of Dance, there is no place for rest; immobility is something constrained and forced, a state of passage and violence, whereas leaps, points, entrechats and vertiginous rotations are wholly natural modes of being and doing. But in the Ordinary and Common Universe, acts are simply transitions, and all of the energy we sometimes put into them is deployed only to accomplish a certain task'⁸. The same principle can be seen in the work of Darzacq, whose talent – and indeed importance – lie in his extraordinary capacity to persuade us that 'the most uncommon chance events' are indeed wholly probable⁹.

Amanda Crawley Jackson, January 2009 ;

4. Rancière (2002), p. 46.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

6. *Ibid.*

7. See Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (Random House, 2007).

8. Valéry (1998), p. 32.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 33.