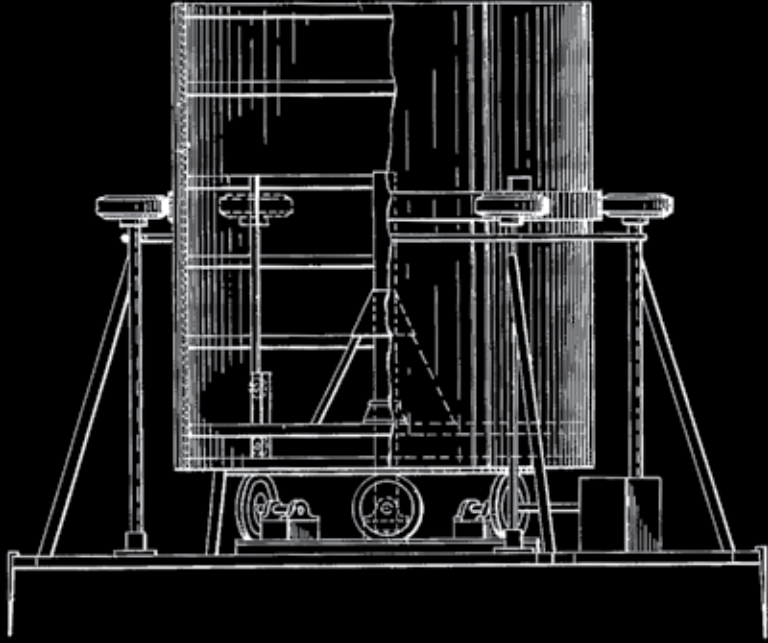


la distinction entre un carthaginois et un hexadecagone  
au subjonctif



schematics of a rotating amusement cylinder, E.W. Hoffmeister,



# la distinction entre un carthaginois et un hexadecagone au subjonctif

the distinction between a carthaginian and a hexadecagon  
in the subjunctive

*In the Perpetual Subjunctive: A Conversation with Sami Ben Larbi and Fionn Meade*

FM: In much of your work you've created architectural spaces or sculptural objects that impose a sensorial deprivation upon willing participants, an isolation that demands reliance on specific senses in order to interact. For instance, *From the Mouth to the Ear and Back* and *Parle Moi, Je t'écoute*—two recent projects—untether listening by re-circuiting who is responding to what, demanding a more attuned listening. A similar challenge 'to respond' and 'correspond' seems to be in all of your work. Can you talk about this focus?

SBL: It started really early on. I was interested in creating an environment that required it to be experienced, not judged immediately. I am very critical of work that requires too much extra information to decipher it. I want interaction because it is the most basic form of communication. The architecture of a space shapes the experience within it. Without this there are too many distractions. I want to control what is and what is not taken into consideration.

promotional image from *Parle Moi, Je t'écoute*. sbl © 2007



FM: In this sense of controlling the constructed interaction, I immediately think of Lygia Clark's *Mascara Sensorial* (Sensorial Hoods) from the 1960s as a precedent for your work, dissolving the prominence of vision into an awareness of the body, a re-privileging of the synaesthetic possibility of direct experience. To put it in other words, Clark engages diversion tactics in order to heighten the interconnectedness of our senses. Does "controlled diversion" resonate with you?

SBL: Controlled yes, diversion not so much. Controlled focus is more like it, but in the end it's the same thing. You're so focused/diverted into what the piece requires of you in terms of interaction that you forget to be critical.

FM: So, the situation suspends criticality and creates a diverting in the sense of "play." For example, I can look at the oddity of the six one-person dining booths in *Parle Moi* for instance and appreciate the sculptural implication of mixed-up communications but the piece requires sitting down

and actually beginning. As with Clark but also like Beckett there's a kind of "let's begin again" sense of play within the confined ambience of a lesson...

SBL: You're right. It does ask the viewer to come along for a ride of some sort. In that sense it is very demanding, because it requires that you be willing to begin again. But the two pieces that you mentioned were failures in the sense that in order to indulge in the diversion you need to know what its properties were. You couldn't just hop on and go. And I don't think there is any lesson in the work other than an awareness of the limits that we impose on ourselves. I have tried in various ways to fight that by changing the rules.

FM: For me, the frustration of a lesson-like environment that denies its end is just the feeling that I've had with your previous works,

a frustration that eventually leads to an emancipated feeling but only when you've given in to the demands of the piece. To change the roles of perception is a kind of emancipation, but also a kind of failure to simply please or satisfy with a "now I get it" moment. But it seems there is an inherent danger to your work for many viewers to want to view the mechanism of the environment as the work.

SBL: I'm not into pleasing. I think that the desire to understand how things work is deeply ingrained in all of us. We want to know what something does and how. But I want to move past that and not get bogged down with the "wow" factor that sometimes arises from seeing the inner workings of a piece. When I recently showed the film set of this new installation I am making, a lot of people became so fascinated with the mechanisms used, that the content was never discussed. I definitely want to avoid that. There are reasons why I choose certain themes to explore, and that's what I want to discuss.

FM: This desire to avoid the fascination with the "set" or "setting" in your work—which is always so impeccably executed—brings up something I've been wanting to ask regarding your recent use of narrative in the work. You have cast yourself as a kind of "stand-in," to use a film phrase, for the active participant role that takes place in your other works and in so doing the "stand-in" is portrayed in short narrative contexts. I'm thinking specifically of the two pieces referencing film, where you recreate scenes from films by Tsai Ming-Liang and François Truffaut, but also the *mis-en-scene* of the living room installations. How have narrative conceits come up as a new direction in the work?

SBL: I had always been afraid of narratives. They are so universal but also so limiting. There's a beginning, a middle and end. I don't mind the first two. But the end is a turnoff.

Earlier in my work, I asked the viewers to do certain things, as a result viewers often felt that I was looking for a particular response. By employing the viewers' participation, I emasculated their ability to stand back and come to conclusions. Now, I'm still creating situations but I place myself in it so that my intent is less perceived as a manipulation. The newer work is bolder and more willing to risk being the center of attention, or it starts off that way anyway. And then I strip the acted-out identity and make it more anonymous through the characters and specific scenes I choose to play and the way things are displayed. It's me but it could be anybody.

FM: Before getting into the specifics of the newest piece and your portrayal of Truffaut's Antoine Doinel, I remember you told me a story about a moment involving basketball and a physical education class in Paris that seems a relevant and generative link between the sensorial deprivation works and the narrative elements in the new works.



set of the distinction between a cartographic and a hexadecagon, in the subjunctive, Sarah Thompson © 2007

SBL: Yes. My mom was a PE teacher in a school for the blind in the suburbs of Paris for a while. I was young and so I would sometimes go with her to school. One day the kids were getting ready to play basketball, a passion of mine, and to get around the visual requirements of the sport they wrapped a plastic bag around the ball and placed radios on the hoops. Looking back, I think that was really influential in the way I think and see.

FM: That story is so interesting in relation to the way your work tells of limitation and emancipation in a bodily and architectural way. And perhaps this offers a connection to talking of the new piece and your recreation of a crucial scene from Truffaut's film *The 400 Blows*.

In the film, Paris is a stand-in for the city as both a playground for the main character Antoine Doinel to wreak havoc upon, a place to wander through and get in trouble ("les 400 coups" referring as it does to an idiomatic expression of "raising hell") but also a refuge where Antoine turns because of unrest at home. This tension creates a version of the city as "rupture" and "refuge." What was Paris to you growing up? Does the portrayal of Paris that Truffaut offers align with your own experience?

SBL: It was very similar. It was my playground and my teacher. I was away from Paris one year when I was a teenager, back in Tunisia, and I had real trouble adjusting to an environment I could not move around freely in and observe and learn from. It was also equally as hard, unjust and unlucky as Paris in the film. That is why this film has such resonance for me. It is the quintessential French film yet it is really universal. And it also raises the French question, about identity, about integration, which I feel is the real problem for that country. For France and the French, integration is a one-way affair, hence the problem with youth which, as we know, is a long way from being resolved.



FM: Do you foresee using situations from your own life, whether using the sense of *vérité* to capture an "in the present" a la Jean Rouch's documentary concerns (something you see for instance in the formal concerns of an artist like Anri Sala regarding his narrative as Albanian), or do you see your project as constructing memories as "presentness," more in the vein of the filmmakers we've been discussing?

SBL: I'm really open to both the constructed and the real—my real life social identity. In this way, I feel a lot of affinity for the life of Lee Kang-sheng, the main character in Tsai's movies. He is Chinese but he is also French, the same way I could be Chinese while I am also Tunisian. I feel like a citizen of the world and as such I do not feel tied down to a particular location. But at the same time I have a particular history and affinities, so yes the "Carthaginian" in the title of the piece is doomed to surface at some point.

FM: For me, there is an indomitable quality to the “Carthaginian” in the work. Far from being doomed in the negative sense, it surfaces with great strength in the structural acuity of the work, the focus on the discomfiting, the moment of “making strange” to use Roman Jakobson’s phrase regarding the sign, that also liberates the sign into open interpretations of the moment/situation as so beautifully constructed in your work. And here it is not doomed at all, unless you mean fated?

SBL: I don’t mean doomed in the negative sense. I feel it more as something I look to work on when it arises, which is whenever I do something, doomed as in something that I know will happen.

FM: This of course gets to the significance of the title of your piece: *The Distinction Between a Carthaginian and a Hexadecagon: In the Subjunctive* refers to an exchange between Antoine and his teacher just prior to the Rotor ride scene re-created in your present work—where Antoine is liberated, temporarily, from gravity but also his inner and outer turmoil. Can you talk about the title as a framing for the work?



film still from *The 400 Blows* by François Truffaut, 1959

SBL: In the film, the teacher scolds Doinel for not being able to conjugate properly his tag on the wall, of not being able to distinguish between an *alexandrin* and a *décasyllabe*, two types of poetic verse. This moment is the turning point for Doinel. From then on his status goes downhill. My title refers to the dialogue between me, a descendant of Carthage, Tunis, and the Rotor itself, which is a stand-in for Doinel, but also Truffaut and *cinéma vérité*. I made this piece wanting to become Doinel in that instant of liberation, to forget the past and future and reside instead in the subjunctive.

FM: The idea of a perpetual subjunctive relates to the nature of film don't you think? This ability to suspend past and future in the making of film allows a kind of recurrence of the primary questions of one's life. Truffaut discusses film as the art of the double in this sense, an “indirect art that conceals as much as it reveals” or as he once put it in relation to his own life, “I still retain from my childhood a great anxiety, and the movies are bound up with an anxiety, with an idea of something clandestine.”

Can you talk about how this art of the double works for you?

SBL: Film suspends time, as you mentioned, or more precisely it is always in the present, at this moment, forever. When I see Jeanne Moreau in a film these days somewhere I am shocked that she does not look like the way she did in *Jules and Jim*. So making films is in a sense transcending your own mutable identity. I am really interested in this—the ability to constantly relive the moment, either forty years ago or five minutes ago.

FM: So to go back to the new piece there is a double suspension in the scene as the Rotor ride staves off the rule of gravity, but also for Truffaut, enacts the eternally recurrent moment of liberation for his stand-in persona, one that can be returned to over and over



as you say. Indeed, Truffaut did go back to this particular scene in a memory montage in the final chapter of his Antoine Doinel films some twenty years later.

But you are doing something different and more structural from my view as the piece is solely this moment of emancipation recurring over and over without the end "as turnoff" to use your phrase. This connects back to the situations you've created in your environmental pieces but clarifies the structural nature of the work, even in the syntactical title and your idea of a perpetual subjunctive.

From here, do you foresee working on film-based projects in the future that forego any remake quality?

SBL: I do. The remake aspect I think is a way to test the grounds, and I like what I see so far. But it has to be part of a larger structure. I see myself using film to pursue the idea of identity and communication, very basic concepts but as rich in distinctions as the world's populations. To me, film is the perfect medium for it because we all know it, we all know the

mechanics of it, and we all are used to vicariously placing ourselves in a character's shoes.

Also, film has this ability to let the audience appreciate the moment. That is, if it's any good. In a sense, I feel I have been making movies all along, except that before my spectators were also my actors and experienced the work only in the moment of performance. This new piece is a continuation of that, except that the audience watches me going forever on a loop, trying to step outside of myself. There is no end.



installation image from *Layered Tense* at the Page Bond Gallery, 2007. sbl © 2007

Sami Ben Larbi is a French-Tunisian artist currently residing in Richmond, Virginia where he is pursuing his MFA in Sculpture at VCU. Ben Larbi has recently shown at the Page Bond Gallery in Richmond, Lawrimore Project in Seattle and The Off Grounds Gallery, in Charlottesville. His next project will be with Kompact Living Space in Berlin, Germany. He has been a recipient of, among other awards, the Jacob K. Javits Fellowship in 2006 and an Artist Trust Fellowship in 2004.

Fionn Meade is a writer, artist, and curator whose writing has recently appeared in *Bomb Magazine*, *The Phillip Review*, and *NYFA Current* among other publications. He is currently pursuing an MA at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.

Dédié à la mémoire de mon cousin, qui  
nous manque tous, Morgan Parray

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