

VALLOIS

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OPENING

Thursday
15 March
6pm to 9pm

/
16
March
-
21
April
2018
/

33

rue de Seine

Julien berthier

JULIEN BERTHIER

MARTIN KERSELS

DISC-O-GRAPHS (DISQUES-O-GRAPHIQUES)

FRANÇOIS DUFRÊNE

MOT NU MENTAL

When François Dufrêne, barely sixteen years old, joined the letterist movement shortly after its foundation in 1946, Martin Kersels had not yet been born. Dufrêne had only known Paris, the throes of war, and the lives and consciences that it tore apart. France was finding it hard to come to terms with the dark times of occupation, and it can be felt in the art that followed it: morose and existential. A grave art and a "white", muted poetry. Kersels was born in 1960, in the midst of the California Dream. It is a well-known story: emancipation was everywhere in 1960s California.

On paper, there appears to be no connection between these two artists, who emerged in extremely different contexts. And yet, at the end of the war, Dufrêne and his letterist friends were the first to explode the European academic torpor. In 1952, he produced the film *Tambours du jugement premier* (First Judgement Drums). Without a film reel and without a projection, the action took place in the theatre. This film was certainly the first French post-war happening. In 1952, he was also one of the cofounders of the review *Le Soulèvement de la Jeunesse*, an ebullient preface to May 1968. The letterists were also among the first to deal openly with homosexuality, prostitution, drugs through their psychotropic frenzies, or exploited minorities through their support of Algerian rebels. They too made great strides in emancipation. But their story is much less well-known, "secret", as Grail Marcus wrote of them.

Dufrêne was a poet, resolutely a poet. Anyone who knew him remembers a formidable onstage presence, with his famous *Scream-rhythms*, oral performances with dislocated semantics. He became a plastic artist after meeting, and then being mentored by, Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé, which allowed him to further explore his letterist experiments by becoming a "poster artist". But Dufrêne exhibited his posters stuck on backwards, calling them *DOS*, *DESSOUS* or *ENVERS* (back, underside, behind).



Love Story / Love Stinks (detail), 2018

This subterfuge gave a unique patina to his canvases, reversing the meaning and the readings of the words on the posters, in the form, as he put it himself, of "rearranged scraps". A concrete and upside-down poetry.

Martin Kersels is not a poet. But he is also an exceptional performer, who began in 1984 to play with the constraints of his cumbersome body. His sculptures or creations are often pretexts for producing all kinds of actions, like *Rickety*, (2007), a scene entirely made up of "old battered furniture". As for *Orchestra for the idiots*, (2005), it is an installation of about twenty sculpted objects made of a motley collection of elements, "at arms' reach"; activated, they produce a bruitist concert, a "stupid concert" for which the artist is the sole conductor. Kersels does not work on the underside, but instead truly turns things upside-down, like his *Tumble Room*, (2001), a full-size replica of a tidy little girl's room, which actually turns over on itself, until the total destruction of all its furnishings.

For his exhibition at the George-Philippe and Nathalie Vallois gallery, Kersels is showing his *Disc-o-graphs* (*Disques-o-Graphiques*); diverse objects made by arranging parts of furniture and pop music record covers. In the other rooms, a piece by Dufrêne from 1964 decomposes into distinct letters (the founding principal of letterism) the word *MOT-NU-MENTAL* from backward posters. Out of these two ensembles emerges a game of associations of shapes and images, all an exercise in superpositions. There is also a feeling of obsolescence, a desire to make something out of the old, to retrieve what can still exist. There is nothing digital in any of this, as though the 50s and 60s of the previous century met by separate paths. But there is above all a desire to bring together two crucial and outstanding artists, who ceaselessly "turn the tables", as one would say to shake the codes of propriety. The word "monumental" sticks to them, both literally and figuratively.



Mot Nu Mental (détail), 1964

Eric Mangion