



19 JANUARY - 25 FEBRUARY 2007

OPENING 18 JANUARY 2007

## GILLES BARBIER

Barbier: Memory

Ever since Gilles Barbier began copying out his famous "Dictionary Pages" with a constant, monk-like dedication, deliberately refusing all invention, exegetes have agreed that the melancholy spirit of his project was best symbolised in the tutelary figures of Bouvard and Pécuchet. But the new elements adduced by these incredible drawings of images and words twisted and tortured by distorting mirrors point us towards another hypothesis.

"With one quick look, you and I perceive three wineglasses on a table; Funes perceived every grape that had been pressed into the wine and all the stalks and tendrils of its vineyard. He knew the forms of the clouds in the southern sky on the morning of April 30, 1882, and he could compare them in his memory with the veins in the marbled binding of a book he had seen only once or with the feathers of spray lifted by an oar on the Río Negro on the even of the Battle of Quebracho. Nor were these memories simple—every visual image was linked to muscular sensations, thermal sensations, and so on. He was able to reconstruct every dream, every daydream he had ever had." Funes became tempted to attribute a name, not only to every object, creature or phenomenon, but to every point of view, to every moment of that reality. He displaced his intelligence, which was feeble, a pure and simple mechanics of memory, beyond that language postulated by Locke, in which every blade of grass, every bird of every species would have its own name. "Funes once contemplated a similar language, but discarded the idea as too general, too ambiguous. The truth was, Funes not only remembered every leaf on every tree in every patch of forest, but every time he had perceived or imagined that leaf." It was difficult for Funes to grasp what a bench seen from behind at dawn on a rainy day had in common with that same bench seen ten years later, from the front, in the summer sun. Likewise, he was always deeply surprised by the reflection of his face in the mirror.

If Gilles Barbier's work has any models, then they are to be found as much in the infinite memory of Funes as they are in the laborious encyclopaedic poetry of Bouvard and Pécuchet. And if we look a little further, we find one or two suggestive details about the life of this Borges character. Funes, His Memory, was published in Buenos Aires in 1942, but the author had contributed a sketch of the story to the journal Sur in 1941. In this version, the protagonist is thrown out of primary school in his youth for having slavishly copied out several chapters complete with their illustrations, their maps, their sketches, their typeface and even their errata. We realise that what others took for an act of slavish copying was in fact the manifestation of an exhaustive and infallible memory. The boy Funes did not copy a journal down to its smallest details: he simply remembered, all the way to the almost invisible weave of its paper.

Gilles Barbier, then, does not copy those Pages de dictionnaire. Rather, each one is a memory, an infinitesimal fragment of a memory capable of recapitulating a life in all its fullness and complexity. These new drawings (Melting Crowd, Melting Town, Melting Labyrinth, Melting Words, etc.), which are like the deformed reflections of that image of Funes, or rather, of his memory, confirm this idea. The work of Gilles Barbier, or all the possible images of an encyclopaedia of memories and visions—but an encyclopaedia of a complete memory, with no notion of shortcut summary or approximation. Work that stands by this will to totality, or to nullity.

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