

TIMOTHÉE CALAME

BY ARTHUR FINK

The videos, sculptures and paintings by Timothée Calame (born in 1991, living and working in Marseille) engage with the economic and political mechanisms affecting urban and private spaces—in other words, our living conditions. Calame's work finds expression in the issues affecting cities, such as gentrification and marketing, the constant monitoring of the population, repressive politics, and the social exclusion of the most vulnerable subjects. Between the lines there is often a romantic and melancholic subtext drawing from the history and iconography of left-wing counterculture.

The latest exhibition featuring Timothée Calame at the New York Swiss Institute was a large maze-like structure made of tarpaulin, *The Paperclip Center*, which filled the entire environment and looked like a giant paperclip. The visitor had to cross a series of narrow corridors before reaching the center of the labyrinth, a projection room with a screen and a few chairs. The exterior of the architectural structure built by Calame in the exhibition space was painted in a beige tint that in Marseille is used to paint public buildings, but is also typically used for infrastructural elements such as electrical panels and information panels situated in urban space. A Kafkaian atmosphere permeated the inward-leading paths and the small projection room, evoking disciplinary architecture, long corridors, and public office waiting halls. In fact, the artist also intended the space as a reference to a registration center, where one can watch information and educational videos as a visitor or a candidate.

The walls of the structure are made with tarpaulins that had been previously used to conceal empty business buildings in the center of Marseille. Calame had cut off a few portions and sewn them together to trace the long path of the labyrinth. The material comes from Rue de la République, a street of turbulent history built in the 19th century as part of the Haussmannian reconstruction of Marseille. In an at-

tempt to implement the urban layout concepts of the Second Empire, the ancient settlement, with its proletarian character, was pulled down, and its inhabitants were removed. The city government aimed to establish the bourgeoisie of southern France there. But the Rue de la République continued to be surrounded by poor neighborhoods; therefore, that goal was never reached and the road soon came to be inhabited by the lowest social classes. Only with the beginning of the new millennium there were new attempts to regenerate the area, especially in view of the preparations for 2013, the year when Marseille was the European Capital of Culture, an event that attracted real estate speculators. Vast sections of this lively and culturally heterogeneous street were bought by a number of investors connected with the Lehman Brothers bank.

The 2008 banking collapse brought the regeneration and renovation work on this street to an abrupt halt, and since then many shops have remained empty. To conceal this situation, empty buildings were wrapped in large tarpaulins. The city council specifically invited designers to create sketches to decorate these coverings, in order to give a distinct outfit to each of the empty buildings. The tarpaulins were thus printed with antique motifs, geographic maps, city images, and so on. Over time, they were filled with writings and graffiti. Timothée Calame brought the throw-up graffiti covered tarpaulins, which concealed the failure of real estate speculation, to New York, the very source of the money flow that had given rise to the current urban situation in Marseille. At the same time, the illegal removal of the coverings which had cladded the buildings also involved a change in the social behavior of the street: by removing the tarpaulins, the buildings became once more potentially accessible, empty spaces are visible again and some of them have been squatted. It could be said that Calame's work has given citizens back a space that had been taken away from them by speculation.





Many of Calame's works originate from acts akin to thefts: the artist constantly subtracts objects from his environment to include them in his exhibitions, drawing mainly on what is overlooked or abandoned in public spaces. His sculptures and architectural works are made of material from his personal history, from raids in the urban environment, but also from private spaces and contexts significant for the artist himself. In the exhibition *Broken Thumb*, set up in the Up State exhibition space in Zurich (2014), the artist exhibited an old school coat rack on which he had applied enormous concrete feet; in the solo show *O-TONOMIA* he presented the sculpture of a goose made from his parents' bed, while in the exhibition *Galerie Putsch* (with Emanuel Rossetti), held in the Marbriers 4 space, an old step-ladder led to a dismantled and rebuilt attic that the artist installed inside the gallery and in which he hosted a miniature exhibition. The objects he steals and puts in new semantic correlations recall their original contexts. The environments which the objects come from are moved to the exhibition space and resonate into the environment, such as with the *Empereur* (2016) ready-made, a striped curtain that acts as a partition in the gallery, mimicking the division of spaces typical of the bars in southern countries.

Calame's video and performative production is also the result of raids, of "dérives". In his work titled *Episode 1*, the result of the collaboration with Coralie Rouet, the artist acts as a tourist guide in the streets of Marseille. The figure interpreted by Calame is inspired by the Pulcinella character of the Italian Renaissance Theater (Commedia dell'Arte). Calame is a tear-away wandering around the city, but his guided tour also includes other things: he goes to the barbershop, stands around telling stories partly true, partly invented. Like Pulcinella, he embodies a clumsy clown, crude in his shrewdness. The video documenting the roleplay is made up of improvisations on the city's history and surrounding architecture: in front of a shack he tells of how, at the beginning of the 20th century, Marxists would meet there at night, while at the university campus he launches a stereotypical criticism of modernism. In his improvisations he uses the parlance of a fool, but always with a hint of truth. The guide figure played by Calame

is a fake inhabitant of the city, a character that reflects the cliché of the semi-educated outcast and the poor artist.

Calame's works are not placed in empty space and do not comply with purely aesthetic and formal parameters. They are rather the result of collaborations, explorations and observations within reality that are intertwined to create dense exposures, with installations that affect the atmosphere and have a critical attitude towards the current political and social issues. The figure of the artist himself is very present, not only in the relationship with the materials used in his work, but also through the staging he personally carries out with videos and performances. He thereby appears as a maniac character, immersed in extreme psychic states, roaming in a world disconnected from the codes imposed by moral, lurking on the corners of the streets and observing, shouting, and raving. And, in doing so, he is both acting and he isn't. And in this he is akin to Pulcinella, who Goethe said "that sometimes, on stage, would suddenly seem to completely forget his role as an actor."

Inside and alongside his architectural-structural interventions, sculptures and videos, Calame's exhibitions always feature paintings made by him or his friends, such as Hugo Baud or Alan Schmalz. His paintings depict people, ghosts or everyday objects, they are small in size and have a graphical character. It is as if they expanded the spaces represented by Calame into an imaginary sphere. In the case of the painted faces of the New York exhibition, they seem to expand into the realm of dystopia. Here, images take on a ghostly quality: childish grimaces blend with the mechanical expressions of the faces of politicians, creating a chamber of horrors of today.

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All images: Installation view, Curatorial,
Swiss Institute, New York, 2017. Courtesy: the artist