

# THE RINK GILLES BARBIER

CONVERSATION BETWEEN GILLES BARBIER AND ÉRIC MANGION

FREE



Skating shit, 2008 - Mixed media - 30 x 50 x 80 cm - edition of 3 + 2 AP - Courtesy Galerie GP & N Vallois, Paris

**EM :** Your project is a large skating rink made of opaline, on which small super flat sculptures suggest sliding motions. When describing them you evoke a “choreography for a fall”.

**GB:** Imagine a figure skating scene where each dancer exchanged the skates/ice combination – which enables him to slide – for a great many substances and objects (banana peels, Vaseline, shit, melted cheese, worms...) all of which answer the generic name of *wetting agents*. The gestures and figures of the choreography would thus be performed by the artist solely by skidding and slipping on these wetting agents on a very smooth opaline rink. One can imagine the dislocated state of a body attempting such a programme, but what the “skating rink” really stages is the aspect of the rink after the show, mingled traces of falling and slipping; the precise map of all the space segments where trajectories are broken, curved, or accelerated.

**EM:** And what “artist” would venture upon trying these bold dancing steps?

**GB:** I'm not really thinking of a body, but rather of notions such as disorder, dislocation, searing intensity, physical exercise, mirth...

**EM:** But then why do you say that “The gestures and figures of the choreography would thus be performed by the artist”?

**GB:** Because I don't know anyone else who would do the job.

**EM:** What do these slippery objects really represent? I read in a recent interview that you called them “modules”, and you just named them “wetting agents”. They constantly recur in your work. They appear in many installations, sculptures or drawings.

**GB:** The notion of sliding of course takes us back to a “surf, ski & skate” culture; I approached it and relentlessly practised it from that aspect. However, I know see it more as a way of thinking, a way of lubricating contradictions and gaps, of bringing together the underlying links of a turbulent space. When I place a banana peel between two objects, I do it because the trajectory from the one to the other is neither a straight line nor a walk, much less a gait, it is a broken line, a ricochet, a complicated dance, a swaying walk or a split, a fall. All the wetting agents that I collect and that I supply in the guise of small hyperrealist sculptures are to be understood as interstitial segments between two or more states of a mind that does not function in a direct manner. If one puts all the objects featured on the “skating rink” in the context described above, then “the rink” becomes the space where non linear, non reasonable thought can frolic and dance freely.

**EM:** How can melted or non melted cheese, soup, a worm, a tube of Vaseline, act as “segments between two states of mind”? Is it because of their ability to transform themselves, to slip in between things? Or is it just because of their texture?

**GB:** The *wetting agent* must be slippery, and make the fall or the acceleration easier. But three other properties are dear to me: metamorphosis, perforation and ventilation. They afford me the dream of a permanently mutating space, bearing holes and irrigated, vascular. The choices that I make – whether of objects or materials – answer these specifications. I see them as “intermediaries”; between what is hard and what is soft, what is liquid and what is solid, what is closed and what is open, between the inside and the outside, what is slow and what is quick, what is erect and what is horizontal, what is compact and what is divided... In every direction. However, my aim is not to create an inventory, or an archive. I use *wetting agents* in the same way that bones use cartilage to break in two, in three, or more, if the movement gets complicated.

**EM:** Why are you interested in these states of “permanent mutation”? When you talk about your work you give the feeling of a great chemical bubbling, a soup simmering over a low fire.

**GB:** In a book by Luke Rhinehart published in 1971, *The Dice Man*, two psychoanalysts have the following conversation:

“-If I were to sometimes smoke in one way, and sometimes in another way, and sometimes didn't smoke at all, if I were to change the way that I dress, if I were alternately nervous, serene, ambitious and lazy, lewd, glutton, ascetic – where would my true self be? What would I gain? It is the way in which a man chooses to limit himself that determines who he is. A man without habits, without coherence, who never repeats himself, and therefore never gets bored, is not human. He is crazy.

-And accepting to be vanquished, to be limited, is that mental health?”

**EM:** If I understand you, you had rather depend on chance and probability than on the chemical structure? Unless the two are linked...

**GB:** Chemical structures are neither narcissistic nor oedipal. More than anything else they result from millions of years of trials and errors, of chance, of testing, of random mutations, in warm and fertile soups... Until it works, until it stabilises. Nonetheless it is true that I hate the principle of exclusion. I might even say that I hate the principle of choice, and that I found myself on that terrain in complete opposition to Ducham-

pian thought. Why not carry the notion of choice (inasmuch as it determines the artist's identity, and the identity of his work) towards the space of probability; to probably be like this, to probably act like that. Why should one restrain one's power within the limits of self-recognition? Why couldn't we carry through a small idea, though it may be in contradiction with the preceding ideas. According to what principle should I prevent myself from changing, from slipping from one thing to another, from contradicting myself? Or to quote Rhinehart once again, what do I owe anyone that should prevent me from letting the *minor parts* of my artistic assemblage run free. In a world daily described as being multivalent and global, what sense does it make to be stable, coherent, integrated? The narrowness of personality is obsolete. A monome bores me. The idea of spending my whole life stuck in a unique style scares me as much as the idea of being buried alive. There is a whole new field of conceptual questioning to be explored, around the notions of coherence, motif or style, within unstable, probability or combinatory spaces... Literature has already started doing this, and physics, mathematics and computer sciences have long been stating concepts enlarging their definitions. Even identity has come a long way from its ethical stand to an aesthetic device where identities can be swapped, exchanged! Why remain amputated of all these possibilities? Especially since I can sense here a way of steering clear of a modernity endlessly fossilising into

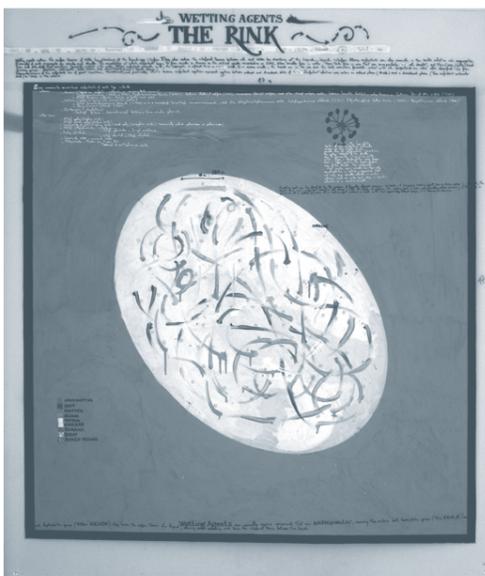
what is “neo”, “post”, “alter”... In this way, a probability or combinatory approach to space affords us a playing field with a huge potential, just like soup, as you rightly commented above.

**EM:** I understand these “unstable, probability or combinatory spaces”. But how can a visual work of art (your work to be specific) give rise to notions whose content precisely escapes the logic of lasting formalisation ?

**GB:** It is precisely the *logic of lasting formalisation* that I am wary of; I am wary of this formal, conceptual or stylistic identity that limits the space of the work of art. I think it is better to work on extending the scope of this *logic*. Today there are too many temptations, too many paradigms, there is too much fluidity, too much information, to aspire to a linear behaviour without self-mutilation. The general shape of a formal work should look like a series of segments crossing, uncrossing, diving in and emerging; the equivalent of Brownian movement. To me it is also the image of a burrow. But making segments cross requires paying particular attention to the trajectories and to the spaces in which they develop. I can't stand the square white architecture which we all know, and within which *formal logic* expresses itself so aptly. I bear it philosophically, but I dream of troglodytes, burrows, origami, of a fractal, mobile, unfoldable architecture... The ballet of wetting agents leaves traces of this fantasy on the skating rink.



Banana Riders, 2009 - Mixed media - 80 x 350 x 150 cm - edition : unique - Courtesy Galerie GP & N Vallois, Paris



Wetting agents, 2009 - Felt pen and gouache on polyester  
140 x 122 cm - Courtesy Galerie GP & N Vallois, Paris

**EM:** When one reads you, one sometimes has the feeling that you are playing with “nonsense”. Yet, as you stated in a recent interview, you seem to prefer dealing with “something”. How does a complex thought process produce something? Can a thought be “visual”?

**GB:** To comprehend what “nonsense” is, you have to imagine an informational sequence for which no reader, translator or decipherer can be found; a limit to understanding. The most obvious illustration of this theoretical “nonsense” can be described as a series of letters randomly come out of a hat, and that cannot be put in any kind of readable order. However, “nonsense” must never be considered to be permanent. There are two good reasons to remain cautious. Firstly, an appropriate reader from somewhere else, from the past or from the future, can always show up. Secondly, this impenetrable sequence of information may be incomplete, it may be illegible because it has been altered. This is enough to place any “nonsense” in the category of what is temporary; seen in this way, “nonsense” is actually a potential “something”.

According to this point of view we must describe anew the unruliness of reality, the “nonsensical” aspects of our everyday lives. Not in order to find a hidden meaning, which suggests a universal reader, but in order to invent a possible interpretation, to dream it; this is the purpose of poetry, but it is also the true meaning of art. But complex thought operates precisely around what is unruly, around unstable motifs, multitudes. Indeed it provides tricks that make me think that it can help to “awaken” many of our precious “nonsensical” things.

**EM:** Your work seems to wring out the meaning of things, so as to explore their every possibility. Even the objects on the “skating rink” look exhausted, as if they were ending their run here...

**GB:** I’ve always been embarrassed by this issue of the meaning of things. I don’t see anything extraordinary in it. I’m not a mystic, and I spontaneously link this issue to the notion of use. Obviously inventing a new use for an object changes its meaning, gives it new potential. But I tend to think that this operation produces an effect more like augmenting, amplifying, certainly not like wringing out, or exhausting. Concerning this, who would say that using a knife like a hammer or a scraper, like a wedge or a counterweight, exhausted its possibilities? These alternate uses do not take anything away from the cutting qualifications of the knife. On the other hand, they alter

their purity. And to me, any action that soils or taints the purity of a meaning is, just like a pun, a witty and joyous activity. An activity that makes things more comfortable by loosening the stranglehold of meaning. Furthermore, I would be really sorry if the objects on the skating rink, which I use for surfing, looked exhausted... As such, they are open to trajectories, to figures. Because they are links between a body and a space, they produce a story.

However it’s true that a body submitted to so much gesticulating might get exhausted. I’ve often said that artistic activity should make us spend ourselves in such a way as to leave us exhausted and empty. The skating rink may also provide a place for this. Which might also be the reason why it has the shape of an ellipse.

**EM:** A few months ago you mentioned the desire to start from scratch, or at least to reinterpret the body of work that you’ve produced in the last fifteen years, while at the same time continuing to create new devices and new spaces. Is the “skating rink” part of this logic?

**GB:** This idea has been haunting me from the beginning, and the project is exciting to me in several ways. Considering everything that I have done for fifteen years as a reproducible ensemble and starting to copy it entails an implacable alteration; such an ill-assorted sequence then becomes a motif. At my level, this constitutes a great victory against “nonsense”. Furthermore, as you just reminded us, this operation does not in any way imply the interruption or the death of the original “branch”. In order to illustrate this strange process, you must imagine a tapestry. A craftsman starts composing the first motif on the wall. Before he has done, and while he is still working on it, a second craftsman starts his own copy besides him. Two parameters remain unknown. The size and complexity of the original motif, and the number of craftsmen. The excitement is at its peak if these two parameters tend to be infinite. But, even with a simple calibration, for example a motif the size of a human life and two craftsmen, this device remains exciting enough to attempt it.

During all these years I have carefully prepared the terrain. My entire work is conceived from reproduction techniques such as casts, stencils, ink pads... Objects and drawings are copies. When I manipulate images found on the Internet, I do so according to a perfectly calibrated protocol. I never use my own memories, I interpret as little as possible, I “mechanise” as much as I can, even if this does not always show. I know that it will make the copying phase easier.

As a part of this device, I suppose that the skating rink will have to be reproduced identically, except for one detail. A second skater will also have left some traces, identical to the first, slightly on the side. The second rink will have to be a Dupont-Dupont duo. These small bugs, as we call them in computer science, are unavoidable and frequent when making a copy. They are its expression.

**EM:** There is something profoundly absurd in the work of a copyist, something at once idiotic and Sisyphean. Copying one’s own work can be considered to come from a lack of inspiration. How can you avoid this problem? Unless you consider that inspiration is not one of the main parameters of thought, of your thought in particular...

**GB:** You’re right, the notion of inspiration leaves me blank. A body of work such as mine is organised into productive machines. I feel more need for discipline, for organisation and slowing down, than for muses. A copy in itself is a productive machine. I understand that this device stems from an illustrious genealogy which stretches from the monks to downloading programs,

including Bouvard and Pécuchet. And my intention is that it become, according to the situation, either memory, technology, or idiocy. The keys to these various interpretations having by the way been widely discussed. However, copying as I imagine it and as I intend continuing to use it in my own work, remains more comparable to a biological duplication process. Naturally, here also given pieces of information (or genotypes) are duplicated. But I’m not interested in this moment of the duplication process, although it is necessary. On the other hand, what becomes of the double (the phenotype), the way that it reacts in an unavoidably new context, all the consequences and interactions with its environment, are at the heart of my work process. I never have qualms. The double either dies, or remains stable when confronted to the original. But if it mutates, if it evolves in a different manner, then a new productive machine is born; an unthinkable situation, an idea from outside the head. Something which, in the theory of cellular robots, is called: a *Garden of Eden Configuration*. And perfecting productive machines capable of generating ideas and forms from outside my head is definitely one of the few notions that lie at the heart of my work.

**GILLES BARBIER**  
is born in 1965, in Vanuatu (News Hebrides). He lives and works in Marseille.  
[www.galerie-vallois.com/fr/artistes/barbier/](http://www.galerie-vallois.com/fr/artistes/barbier/)

**ÉRIC MANGION**  
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La Mégamaquette II, 2006/2008 - Mixed media - varia dimensions - Courtesy Galerie GP & N Vallois, Paris

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#### PRACTICAL INFORMATIONS

Exhibitions open from June 26th to October 18th  
14 - 18 PM every day, 14 - 19 PM during July and August  
Closed on tuesdays. Free entrance

#### Access

By tramway – station Le Ray  
By bus n°4 and n°7 – station Deux avenues  
By car : from promenade des Anglais follow boulevard Gambetta  
then boulevard de Cessole  
Via the A8 motorway, exit at Nice nord

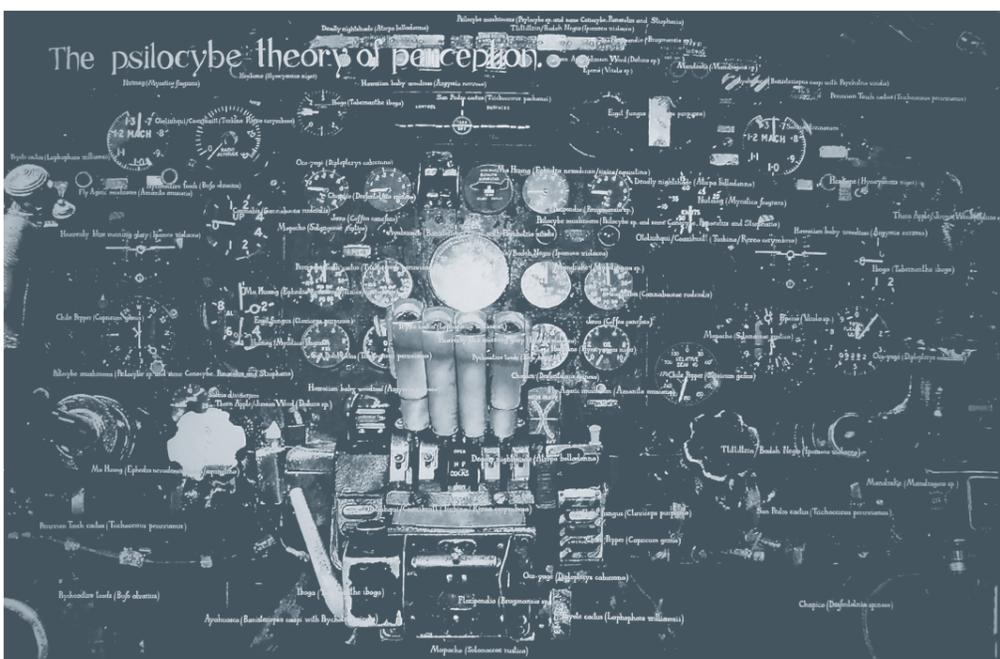
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**villa arson**  
nice

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The Psilocybe theory of perception, 2009 - Felt pen and gouache on polyester - 123 x 190 cm - Courtesy Galerie GP & N Vallois, Paris

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This exhibition takes part of the event PLEIN SOLEIL/ART CENTERS SUMMER 2009. More informations on [www.flowersway.com/pleinsoleil2009](http://www.flowersway.com/pleinsoleil2009).

**PLEIN SOLEIL**  
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