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Modernist utopia versus postmodern uchrony. If the first term, unlike the second, no longer requires defining, this is because history, to date, has been devoted to seeking its end in space more than in time. This prompts us, right away, to define uchrony as a kind of journey towards a non-existent era towards which, notwithstanding, the human imagination cannot stop itself from "naturally" reaching out. While modernity, taken as a whole, has been fuelled by various sorts of utopia, political and aesthetic alike – planning projects for ideal cities which have all ended up crumbling –, it is worth noting that, in the 1970s, history – as the early avant-gardes had projected it for themselves – triggered a sort of "step backwards," clashing with the idea of systematic progress. A primitive-style facelift, resorting to the vernacular and the anecdotal cult of "individual mythologies," and regarding "attitudes which become forms" as sacred, all were so many counter-cultural (not to say rough-hewn) symptoms of the desire – still, true enough, idealistic – to sidestep historical irreversibility by borrowing the sequence of events "elsewhere." This early intervention, which in a way envisages re-writing history, marked the end of the utopian journey which has led technical and scientific civilisation to the brink of the abyss, and the beginning of the uchronic shift from which the essence of contemporary thought – about doubt and revision – issues.

In tangible terms, this is the stage entrance of fiction and science fiction which would enable the exploration of time to happen. At the turn of the century, when the Cubist utopia was trying to gain access to a hyper-space inspired by the breakthroughs of non-Euclidean geometry and sci-fi novels, it was already introducing a temporal dimension into painting and objects. Sequential chrono-photography, object rotation and stereoscopy were used in particular by Marcel Duchamp to visualize the transition from our flat world to the space of a higher reality. But the spirit behind this latter artist's works, inspired, like the *Grand Verre* (*Large Glass*), by the *Journey to the Land of the Fourth Dimension*, still belonged to a modernist conception of art, intent on symbolically reaching the place of the Sublime. With hindsight, the real alternative to utopia appeared with the re-introduction – the term used for endangered species – of fiction into art. If a "picture" like the *Grand Verre* (*Large Glass*)

already bore a caption explaining the workings of its different parts, it was only from the 1970s on that the mixing of imagery (painting, drawing, photos, etc.) and writing (caption, narrative, documents, etc.) would once more be given pride of place within works visibly marked by the cinematographic language (framing and centering, sequences, editing and montage, etc.). In the United States, this postmodern form was the doing of the Narrative Art that appeared in 1973 in the John Gibson Gallery, at the "Story" exhibition which specifically brought together Bill Beckley, Jean Le Gac, John Baldessari and Peter Hutchinson. This latter, a friend of Robert Smithson, and, like Smithson, an enthusiastic reader of sci-fi novels, had already caught people's eye in the late 1960s by pushing the utopic quest to the limit with his exploration of "extra-terrestrial" sites, and drawing closer to environments that are more or less hostile to human life (oceans, volcanoes, etc.). With these works, that were still linked with the topological (Land Art) but already open to the chronological, we can say that the quest for the sublime reached its three-dimensional limits, and swept into the four-dimensional age of uchrony, where the world ends up destroyed by an environmental disaster, as in Brian Aldiss's novel *Earthworks*.

The loss of place, encompassed by the very term: u-topia, and eventually brought up-to-date by Robert Smithson's catastrophist works to do with entropy and the non-site, is the point of departure of Gauthier Hubert's paintings. Proceeding by way of the utterance of an essentially uchronic hypothesis, he imagines what Belgium might look like today if the Antarctic ice started to melt. Based on this event which, according to the scientists, would raise the sea level by 62 metres or just over 200 feet, the artist develops a make-believe through a series of paintings showing several alterations made to its geographical and cultural landscape. Flanders under floodwater, the Walloon region taking in refugees, football pitches turned into cemeteries, emergency action taken by the army, and the creation of a disaster victims' aid organization all thus become the "motifs" of several "pictures" which make use of the narrative, not to say anecdotal qualities of painting. This is why this latter is visibly no longer seen as a medium falling back on the field of its own "credentials," by doing away (according

to modernist dogma) with all impurities in its so-called specific language. In this work, which is no longer aimed at the (utopic) space of painting, but rather explores its (uchronic) fictions, the artist incorporates several attitudes hijacked from art history, in such a way as to better present the alternative universe imagined by him. Driven by a reality that is no longer immediate, but which gradually becomes material as it is dreamed up, the painter who travels in time henceforth leaps, in one and the same pictorial project, from a statistical "picture" to a colour-it-yourself landscape, then to an over-painting. By thus respectively appropriating Conceptual Art, Pop Art and Dada provocation, with the sole aim of advancing his own narrative, Gauthier Hubert becomes, in line with his own formula, the "director" of a (hi)story (of art), which he diverts in order to warp reality and extrapolate from it a new future. What is more, the idea of a painting totally subordinate to fiction is so important for the artist that he has made his own self fictional by giving his notebook the look of a book published in the Gallimard "n.r.f" collection. This imaginary book, titled *Antarctique/Belgique* (*Antarctic/Belgium*), which borrows the numerous intermediary studies for the project, is, furthermore, just one more step towards uchrony. Instead of being just a reader, the painter changes his relationship to the (hi)story by becoming the author of a novel that you write yourself, precisely like one of those Warhol landscapes which is shown to the viewer like a do-it-yourself.

Through his many borrowings from art history, and in particular from the history of painting, Gauthier Hubert essentially pursues the web of his narrative by focusing on his original hypothesis, to wit, the melting ice floes of Antarctica and the "natural" disappearance of linguistic boundaries in Belgium. Starting from the universal language which, for him, constitutes the visual arts, the painter actually ends up merely using the grammar and vocabulary of his medium to de-pict the cultural landscape in which he is developing. This is how the symbolism of the colours, the architectonics of the compositions, the semantics of the titles and the choice of the iconography are all part and parcel of a pictorial treatment which develops a certain number of issues linked with the specific situation of Belgium. We might mention, for example, the lin-

guistic boundary concept which is interpreted by a landscape rendered blurred in order to suggest the impossibility of physically perceiving its political polarisation *Tente d'accueil* (*Reception Tent*), but also the use of pink and blue hues which caption the map of "ancient Belgium," the use of an oval format which refers to the "mirror-picture" of nostalgia, and, further, the recurrence of motifs to do with football, the army, and natural disasters, which conjures up a left-over of national unity. More significant still are the many uses and distortions of the canvas as material that has, within the narration, become the actual metaphor of the habitat and its new style: nomadism. "Pictorial nomadism," we might say, bearing in mind certain trips Gauthier Hubert has made – in Flanders in particular – with the aim of gathering a few old pictures to paint over or hang "in local homes," for as long as it takes to snap a photograph, the series of the *Trois vierges par B. Van Dijck* (*Three virgins by B. Van Dijck*). Inspired by the work of the Flemish master, this painting appears in Gauthier Hubert's novel in the negative form of a stretcher whose canvas has been removed with a Stanley knife, like the burglar carrying off his ill-gotten loot. If this detail is used by fiction like other manipulations illustrating the unfolding of the action, it attests above all to the close link that the artist sets up between the painting and a form of attachment to the ground which he has radically challenged with the hypothesis of his narrative. Throughout the work, several other similar shifts can also be detected: it is the cotton canvas, likened in the painter's mind to the texture of a tent, or a Neoprene tarpaulin – Neoprene being the material used for wetsuits! – which becomes the surface of a "painting" (*La Nouvelle Côte* (*The New Coast*)). It is again the play, too – and with Gauthier Hubert often the word-play – on the motif of the painting that moves from the little village to the tent, and from middle class wall-paper to camouflage design...

Whatever the interpretation of the narrative elements may be, it is always painting which is basically being celebrated, first of all for the universality of its language, then for its capacity to rise up once again from its own ashes. The actions – and as it happens they are uchronic – that Gauthier Hubert carries out, inter alia, on old crusts chosen like so many ready-mades, can

thus be understood as an attempt – one in principle that is successful – to exhume the pictorial category from the oblivion of art history in which this has been pigeonholed since Duchamp. By recycling the strategies of the found object and the demystified artwork, peculiar, it so happens, to Surrealism and Dada, the painter is finally intent upon altering the course of history, by transforming the “primary functions” of painting like any old images cut out from a paper. The fact remains that the alternative history, well removed from the modernist byways of utopia, remains, above all else, a presentation whose writing, moulded by pataphysics and science fiction, is part of a scoffing attitude and a provocative irony

which found its worthiest representatives in Belgium. The inspiration of Gauthier Hubert's iconoclastic and singularly non-conformist project belongs to this gust of madness wafting over areas that acted as maquis for the “subversion of imagery.” In his *Introduction à l'uchronie*, Emmanuel Carrère incidentally stressed the peculiarly intolerable dimension of the person acting on the past: “The stuff of utopia is to alter what is, and at least supply plans for this alteration. This is not unreasonable and it is what people who forge civilizations cling to, in very different ways, as well as people who dream of better civilisations and lay their dreams on paper. The stuff of scandalous uchrony is to alter what has been.”