

On Doxastic: Emmanuelle Villard and the Twenty-First Century's Aesthetic

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Figure 1. *Nice to Meet You*, 2007, mixed media, various sizes, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Nice, France.

The concept of doxastic derives from the ancient Greek term *doxa*, which in Greek antiquity designated popular cultures or even opinions; the latter being specific to the Sophists—those orators whom recent historical-philosophical studies have considered to be vile characters, quick to deceive their interlocutors for the simple pleasure of winning a discussion.

In view of the sources that have come down to us and the interpretations that have been made of it, *doxa* therefore appeared to have been disregarded by philosophers such as Parmenides and Plato, and was thought to be going against all forms of truth—to be understood as absolute, one, and indivisible—and all form of reason. Indeed, we inherited this view and even more so when we think about the fact that Plato was considered and is still considered a pre-Christian; his writings therefore influenced church thinkers, particularly at the time of the creation of universities in Europe.

However, there are illustrious thinkers who belonged to this movement of sophistry against which philosophy would have developed, like Protagoras or Gorgias. If the collective unconscious has made this concept of *doxa* a paragon of lies, thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu or Edmund Husserl have been able to grasp the issues and the interest that are brewing therein—in particular from the point of view of the meaning that one discovers there, ways in which opinions and the system of representations are determined there, far from the sciences.

According to Edmund Husserl, and later Alfred Schütz in *The Phenomenology of the Social World*,¹ *doxa* is a pre-reflexive disposition of knowledge. Husserl calls *doxa* he calls pre-predicative, and it is made up of judgments and implicit expectations that most frequently go from the group to the individual. *Doxa* is a belief, a consciousness of something or an intentional consciousness that Husserl himself does not oppose to science, contrary to the well-known dichotomy of belief and knowledge. Pierre Bourdieu in the *Pascalian Meditations* (1997)² endeavors to reformulate this thought of stereotypy through his discipline, sociology: *doxa* would thus be the common sense at work, at to know that doxastic adherence to the social world is found in dichotomies such as individual and group, objectification and incorporation, sociological determinisms and social practices. *Doxa* in Bourdieu finds communication between individuals and inscribes the social order in each one, while structuring the social world from the inside therefore: “the first experience of the world is that of the *doxa*, adherence to the relationships of order which (...) are taken for granted.”

Doxastic makes possible a dialogue between individuals on the non-established, on the feeling, of which the particularity is to move in the time which itself passes through each one. Doxastic in aesthetics would thus be paradoxical, in that it gives us to understand, without the tools of reason. Thus, this phenomenon, not relating to the analytical or rational order, must be made intelligible within an extrinsic, synthetic relationship.

From the order of practical reason dear to Immanuel Kant, doxastic thus appears as a logic of plausibility, it is true opinion (or to put it in Greek: *alèthès doxa*). We find it in Plato identified with politics, with the fruit of commerce between men within the city, with disciplines if not vile, at least of second order. For want of method and emanating from a form of likelihood, *doxa* as we understand it here, as an aestheticizing concept, is linked to a certain form of aestheticized opinion.

This aesthetic opinion is the starting point of Emmanuelle Villard's work. Her source of inspiration emanates from a certain imposed image, from what femininity is. An image that the artist perceives and questions through her plastic work, in terms of representations and injunctions. It is this ideology that we find in the *doxa*, on what a woman should look like, how she should behave, at work in everything that is likely to emanate from it, namely: advertising, education, toys, social roles, jobs, movies, dramas, and so on.

In short, what we propose here is an aesthetic concept, doxastic, appearing less as a prejudice on the femininity and as the sum of presumptions, various opinions, than as an aesthetic referent, whether it's legitimate or not, coming from common sense and that the artist has decided to question, stretch, inspect, making it her own, questioning it, and so on.

From the moment when mythology, not the artist's personal—here Emmanuelle Villard—but doxastic imposes itself on us, even emanates from it (from this unconscious that we have in common) and has an intrinsic verisimilitude, if not to say, a form of truth in that it speaks of our uses and the interpretation that we make of it, it then acts as a conceptual tool allowing us to understand the origin of the inspiration at work in the artefacts, her *poiesis*.

Emmanuelle Villard is a French artist (1970-) based in Montpellier, France who works on the subjects of seduction, femininity, and consumerism in sculpture using different artifacts, such as paint, beads, sequins, and fishnets. In Emmanuelle Villard's work there is a reciprocity between her pictorial and object-oriented research. Indeed, in her pictorial and object-oriented work, Villard

¹ Schütz will use Husserl's work on the *doxa* as a sociological interpretation reflecting individual assumptions and structuring our social world.

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Méditations pascaliennes* (Paris: Points, 2003). All translations of French sources are my own.

questions the attraction, both optical and haptic, of the gaze, the carnal and seductive vision to which the representation of the female body in our modern societies is usually lent. Whether in art or in areas considered more trivial, such as that of advertising and marketing, we notice this passage of the feminine from a thinking subject to a purely visual object.

Indeed, Villard is interested in the dual status of the woman's body, this objective subject rendered to the state of things, sometimes even plasticized, siliconized, transformed, on glossy paper or in the flesh itself, in order to correspond to an ideal for smooth, homogeneous and industrial texture. Villard's interest in the way femininity is perceived—a category that is vulgarly described as an aesthetic canon—goes beyond the sphere of reflection only to find itself caught up in the material of its plastic productions.

Thus, under aspects peculiar to painting, which are those of color, of matter, of its agglutinations and landslides, of forms and reliefs, Villard makes her work the place of gaze questioning, interrogating notions of purely visual attraction, seduction of the eye and will to contact, purely plastic representation and superficiality of the gaze.

This aesthetic is the result of an introspective inquiry of the artist, an introspection based on social conventions. She joins the feeling that every woman can have on bodily expectations. The feeling that woman are likely to have as to the question of the importance of the appearance—if not the preponderance.

Through abstract pictorial compositions, borrowing elements peculiar to the so-called sphere of the feminine—sequins, pearls, lace, make-up—the artist plays codes between disciplines, she borrows props that are usually used by hyper femininity (little girls, or even drag queens, such as sequins or pearls) bringing into the noble sphere of painting elements of the vulgar, of the common, which are these components intended for consumerist and more trivial use.

Villard works on the double status of her medium, through the realization of what she calls paintings—objects, which allows her to play on both tables, on the one hand on the aesthetic dimension proper to the pictorial representation and on the other hand, on the will of pure tactile attraction.



Figure 2. From the series *Objets visuels*, 2007-2011, mixed media, various sizes.

The doxastic aesthetic, which we propose to associate with the reasoning on the plastic production of Villard, would be in this sense a particular notion of aesthetics, whose interest would be focused on the apprehension of the beautiful by the common. Therefore necessarily on its reciprocity from one individual to another, forming a community of opinions that would be the

yardstick of an aesthetic based on a synthesis of points of view, close to the Kantian idea of a universality subjective and shareable.³

The common here would be this opinion, even this prejudice of the collective as of the individual—an individual who, according to Kant, places himself in the place of any other when he thinks of the beauty of an object—what is really aesthetic—and necessarily attractive. A true injunction to correspond, doxastic enjoins to conform our perception and our relation to the world of appearance, to others.

The interest of these reflections is to confront a notion—doxastic—presupposing an agreement of sensations, making undoubtedly reference to the Kantian theme and the idea of common sense.⁴ But this in the context of a work, that of Emmanuelle Villard, which is the place of a questioning on the concept of personal mythology⁵. From a subjective relation to the aesthetic one.

Thus, it means to question the validity of the existence of the concept of personal mythology in art, and of putting it in parallel with the idea of doxastic in order to try to understand how one is impregnated with others. In short, what will be discussed in what follows will be Villard's report to the concept of personal mythology.

It means here to question this concept with the idea of a doxastic considered as an important part of an aesthetic, less subjective than it appears. This will allow us to understand how Villard's plastic production is situated within numerous confluences, but also to add an element and not least to the concept of personal mythology, that of doxastic.

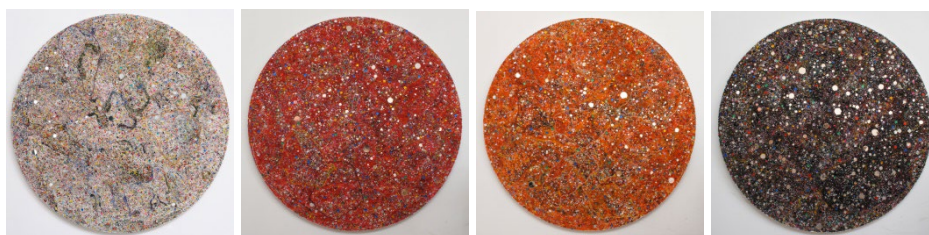


Figure 3. From the series *VEniaiserie*, 2011, mixed media, diam. 150cm.

Initiated at the Villa d'Arcon, her work is part of the pictorial abstraction, except that her medium does not respond voluntarily to the demand for flatness that painting requires. Indeed,

³ The faculty of aesthetic judgment, a concept we owe to Immanuel Kant, tends to demonstrate that aesthetics does not proceed from an objective principle, from the character of an object. It emanates from subjectivity, from sensations experienced by the subject(s). And it can be universalized because in the judgment of taste a form of sociability is actually played out: when I look at a rose, I accord my judgment with that which would be that of any other, because the interest which takes precedence here is that of get along, get along with others. There is a form of reciprocity between the subjective universality of Kant and the *doxa* (not according to Plato, who rejects it as approaching the probable when he is interested in the True, but more according to Bourdieu's sociology).

⁴ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique de la faculté de juger*, trans. Philonenko Alexis (Paris: Vrin, 2000).

⁵ According to Dr. David Feinstein and Dr. Stanley Krippner, "A personal myth is a constellation of beliefs, feelings, images, and rules—operating largely outside of conscious awareness—that interprets sensations, constructs new explanations, and directs behavior. ...Personal myths speak to the broad concerns of identity (Who am I?), direction (Where am I going?), and purpose (Why am I going there?). For an internal system of images, narratives, and emotions to be called a personal myth, it must address at least one of the core concerns of human existence." David Feinstein and Stanley Krippner, *Personal Mythology* (Santa Rosa, CA: Energy Psychology Press, 2008), 5–6. Personal mythology is used to describe the work of some contemporary artists, such as Louise Bourgeois, working on her childhood on her pieces of art, and Annette Messager.

the objects that the artist puts out have this strangeness; their materiality is understood in a voluntary transversality, between the artistic genres. The interest of its objects—paintings or paint—objects, results in the multiplication of planes; we can turn the object around. It's no longer a picture on the flat surface that the eye sweeps, but a multitude of facets that don't show each other at the same time.

Villard is interested in this practice in order to develop a painting which cannot be completely surrounded by the gaze; these paintings are not easy to see, we have to turn around the artifacts. They are monstrous, accumulating and then dissimulating as we venture to surround the whole object. Once the various facets are more or less surrounded, it necessarily emanates a haptic dimension, there is a desire to touch the objectal paintings that evade the appropriation of the viewer but calls out for contact. What we understand in light of the artist's discourse is that Villard's subjective relationship with her femininity is intruded.

This part of mystery that the paintings and objects preserve are many signs of this woman's body unveiled and put into an abyss, but never given. Her works fully play embody an ambiguous status between painting and painted sculpture, but also between strictly plastic research and real-world metaphor.

Thus, Villard chose the medium of painting first in her career, since it corresponds to a flowing matter that must be taught, representing in her eyes the inability to master everything in general and in life. Indeed, what interests her fundamentally is the subject facing her reality, her environment, her context. Her research may have been considered as strictly pictorial in its beginnings, but as the artist was able to advance, the foundations of her plastic peregrinations were uncovered.



Figure 4. From the exhibition *Peinture, arsenic et vieilles dentelles*, 2014, Galerie Les filles du calvaire, Paris.

If in her younger years, Villard was able to attach herself to the processes of creation, to her rituals, to the analysis of her gestures to the detriment of her personal relationship with her work. It was apparently an unconscious way of creating a distance between painting and herself as a person. This attachment form of plastic work did not come to her straight away, but ended up breaking through in spite of herself, as something necessary. Because it takes a while before giving oneself to art and revealing oneself in it. This practice is also quite recent. We have already observed it with Louise Bourgeois in her childhood memories illustrated by textile installations, like *Pink Days and Blue Days*, and also in her way of representing her mother by a gigantic spider (*Maman*). In this form of practice, the issue of art becomes irremediably crucial for the plastic artist, who delivers a part of herself to it.

The use of small objects to work emphasizes this direction, pipettes or other accessories have allowed her to protect her work from the intimate, her subjectivity, since they were themselves a form of the intimate of the order of the *poiesis*, of the creation process. Femininity as perceived in the collective unconscious is the same use of small objects, with the delicacy they require.

Her beginnings were fragile. If the artist has been able to hide behind the analysis of gestures and processes, today it's less emphasized. The subject of her work is now elsewhere, more in an exacerbation of aesthetics, in particular with regard to the term itself of aesthetics, wrongly synonymous with the term "beautiful" in everyday language. These prejudices and presuppositions which, as we shall see, are thought to be in a strict and subjective relation to femininity, instead give in to the collective.

There are several series in Villard's work. Numbers of objects painted, of suspensions, that the artist applies to chandeliers—vocabulary that we can't help associate with the decorative. One of these series, called *VEniaiserie*, plays paint codes without having a gram of paint present on the compositions, only acrylic gel sometimes. Acrylic that the artist associates with a substance of the order of the tinsel, the factitious, like the rhinestones, pearls and mirrors that mark out the compositions of this series, in opposition to the oil painting of the great masters.

The universe of the factitious is at the heart of its approach, insofar as it's a truly human activity, which has meaning. This is why it's not surprising to find that Villard never works with natural materials, nor anything precious, such as gold leaf, rubies, or pigments. Her materials and what results are kneaded of falseness, they mimic a certain idea which the artist of reality makes, as that which constitutes the world in a general way.

The evocation of false pretenses, an invitation to go beyond the surface, her paintings openly seduce; they shine and attract the eye. One who looks attentively at these productions, finds his image, his face, in the pieces of mirrors, either frankly reflected or somewhat distorted. These gaze traps, consisting of these small pieces of mirrors, lead the viewer into a game of false pretenses.



Figure 5. From the exhibition *Pleasuredome*, 2006, Galerie Les filles du calvaire gallery, Brussels.

This appeal to the visual and its reverberation, tinsel, opulence, accumulations and other overbites, is a direct reference to the Mannerist period in painting, during which the flesh was generous, the decorative elements ubiquitous and the general appearance somewhat superficial. Villard refers to a sublime preciousness in which the curves of women were highlighted, accentuated

by the presence of balconette, pearls, lace (...) These curves, deformed bodies and lascivious poses, are found in her paintings – objects, with round and opulent forms.

Villard speaks of these paintings as “made up like stolen cars [*maquillé comme une voiture volée*],” an undeniable reference to the artifices of an exacerbated femininity, where interest in the masquerade, the way in which individuals will be made through of appearance, imports if not prime. The artist’s singular and subjective interest in this state of affairs obviously resides in a personal, cultural, somewhat mythological relationship that she shares with the feminine.

We find such similarly intimate and universal evocations in the work of Louise Bourgeois, who recalls the traumas of her childhood, notably in the 1974 play *The Destruction of the Father*. A dark red-colored with intra-uterine atmosphere, punctuated with penises and teats in latex, plaster, wood, cloth, in which Bourgeois exorcises the domination of an authoritarian father and mocker. This, of course, echoes the idea, reiterated by psychoanalysis, that one must kill the father in order to become an adult. At first, the approach is akin to the singular, then to something broader. This approach is found in Villard or Bourgeois, but also Annette Messager who in 1988 created her *Petites effigies*, an installation composed of nineteen stuffed toys each with photos and texts, loaded with memories of her young age. There are thus “frogs – envy”, or other “elephants – pride”, thus personifying some of the feelings that evoke to her childhood.



Figure 6. From the exhibition *Posturale attitude*, 2007, Galerie Les filles de calvaire, Paris.

The term “mythology,” first described as modern of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is mainly due to Roland Barthes⁶, who describes mythology as being a principle of the ideology in which the doxastic is the dogma. Thus, it can describe as belonging to the myth the Citroën DS, the tobacco, the colonial discourse, the oenology (...) Concepts that are seen to be augmented and defined, called daily mythologies, in 1964 at the Museum of Modern Art, during the first consequent exhibition of artists grouped under the aegis of Figuration Narrative, and eight years later, called mythologies by the art critic Harald Szeemann on the occasion of *documenta 5* in Kassel, West Germany in 1972.

One can understand this concept of personal or individual mythology, as the expression of the intimate, an aesthetic of self, sometimes also of the daily, conferring on the universal. That is to say, the influence of *doxa*, generally minimized in the definition of the concept of these mythologies (in the modern sense), should be considered with interest—interest in the subjective experience of the real, which is found in Villard’s work.

If by the 1960s artists were considered by the intensity of their subjectivity to make a universal feeling emerge, this was not the case after that. The minimalists, for example, went so far as to erase the artist from his production by granting the primacy of the project rather than its

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Points, 2014), 217n4.

execution by an author, erasing at the same time all trace of signature. Conceptual art, on the other hand, has attached itself to the theme of reflection in its generalities, to the detriment of the nominal.

It's undoubtedly this taste of the anonymous which has prompted many artists to reinvest in the field of individuality, to go towards the subjective and the autobiographical. In this way, we find a number of narratives presented in the form of art, in keeping with Jean-François Lyotard's idea that the collective, which was structured by the great myths, is well and truly finished and now leaves room for self-narration, a sign of the transition to the postmodern era.

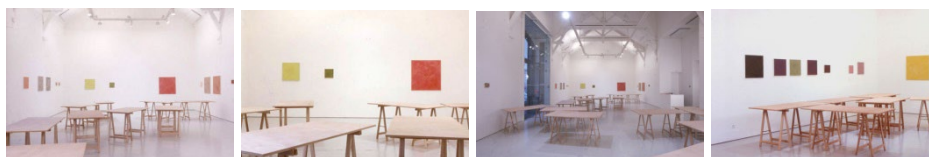


Figure 7. From the exhibition *Emmanuelle Villard*, 2002, La Criée Center for Contemporary Art, Rennes, France.

Thus, and according to Lyotard, it would be the subjective that would provide the myths necessary for the identity of the collectivity. There would thus be a correspondence between the subjective and the collective, from the individual to the mass, and the concomitant elaboration of common myths. What is more clearly understood by Barthes, who explains in his *Mythologies*⁷, is that the process of modern mythology aims at a collective reappropriation of reality by means of a narrativization of the everyday.

The material for the construction of collective narratives is that of the real, passed by the prism of the individual, Barthes develops what Paul Ardenne calls the “aestheticization of existence.”⁸ The artist disseminates an intimate relation to the world, as Villard has seen, painting her singular vision of femininity, as the artificial itself, and the factitious. According to Barthes, the myth drawn from the singularity of the artist “is a depoliticized word [...], [it] does not deny things, its function is on the contrary to speak of it; it purifies them, innocents them, founds them in nature and eternity, gives them a clarity which is not that of explanation, but that of observation.”⁹

The doxastic is the result of a disinvestment by the artist and her uniqueness, which once exposed through this common material that is intimacy, falls into the collective, thus transmitting an image illuminating the world of its meanings. Walter Benjamin, in his text entitled *The Storyteller*¹⁰, agrees in this sense and explains that “the art of storytelling is losing itself. It's increasingly rare to meet people who can tell a story. It's as if we had been deprived of a faculty which seemed to us inalienable, the most assured of all: the faculty of exchanging experiences.”

This was raised by Lyotard, who deplored the absence of dialogue between art and its viewer, and by association the absence of links. What is not the case with this art proper to personal mythologies that continually dialogues with the collective, in a clean exchange where doxastic and

⁷ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 217n4.

⁸ Paul Ardenne, Pascal Beausse, and Laurent Goumarre, *Pratiques contemporaines – L'art comme expérience* (Paris:Dis voir, 1999), 19.

⁹ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 217n4.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Le conteur. Réflexions sur l'œuvre de Nicolas Leskov,” in *Œuvres III*, trans. Maurice de Gandillac and Pierre Rusch (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 114-51.

intimate atmosphere mix. At Villard, it's an exhibition of the sense conferred on the intimate, dialoguing with the collective opinion that no one has in common and exchanges with others as regards the feminine.

To question the concept of personal mythology, it is possible to account for the importance of the influence of doxasticism on the work of the artist in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in general, and here especially in Villard, as regards her relation to the feminine. Rethinking the concept of personal mythology is essential in view of the importance that the *doxa* occupies in the minds of both *quidam* and artists. Thus, this a priori purely subjective artistic concept has its basis in the collective, nourishes and enriches it.

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