

**ACCUEIL > FONDS DOCUMENTAIRE > TEXTE SUR LES ARTISTES**

## **ALAIN PAIEMENT. THE WORLD IN THE WORKS**

by Anne-Marie Ninacs

### **Perspectives**

From time to time, however, one should ask oneself where one is (stands): get one's bearings. Not only on one's moods, health problems, ambitions, beliefs and raisons d'être, but also just one's topographical position, and less along the afore-mentioned lines, more in relationship to a place or being one thinks about, or that one will thus begin to think about.  
 Georges Perec<sup>10</sup>

To ask oneself where one is. Where one stands. The double question posed by Perec – surely among those who have actualized the relationship between the manner of writing, indeed describing, space and the ways of inhabiting it with the greatest acuity – also expresses the inextricable link uniting the definition of territory and the mode of existence. Setting itself up as a sort of interface between the two, it poses location as a requirement of any relationship: getting one's bearings, determining "one's topographical position," he says, is always ultimately to ask oneself about one's location in relation to a place, an event, a thing or a being, to place one's day-to-day existence in perspective.

As a visual procedure constructed from a specific place, the eye of the beholder, which defines the elements that surround it in relation to itself, perspective makes this undertaking of individual location explicit: it is a point of view. It is in this light that one must understand the use of perspective in Paiement's work. If the artist gleefully diverts the principles of projection in every way possible, it is less a visual game as such than a means of questioning the rules that tacitly regulate our apprehension of things and our visions of the world. Its recurring presence reveals that for the past nearly twenty years, Paiement's activity has been relentlessly motivated by the will to locate himself. From the Heavens

On a satellite photograph of a spiral of storm clouds, Alain Paiement traced a second spiral based on the Golden Mean and the Fibonacci series. Then, at the Appart' gallery, he transposed the spiral into three dimensions, coiling it within the partitions of the various rooms in such a way that the imbrication of the conch shape was as "perfectly" integrated in the gallery-apartment as the traced outline was in the Golden Rectangle. The visitor, at the end of his circuit guided by the scrolling curve, came upon the retouched photo document and a maquette of the very space where he was standing – this effect of a "figure within a figure" mirroring the spiral (conceptually) one last time, and the play of scale propelling him virtually to places far distant from the gallery-apartment, into the atmosphere.

Apparently driven by an imperious need to know where he is/stands in relation to the universe, Paiement made *Waterdampstrukturen* (*Structures-de-vapeurs-d'eau*) (1985) an experiment in location. In it, the interval between the farthest vantage point (weather satellite pictures are among the most distant views known) and the closest (the exhibition took place not only on terra firma, in a space to our scale, but in an apartment, an everyday setting where we experience our greatest proximities) stays constant. The appearance of such an oscillation is not merely by chance, for Paiement's paintings of the period were largely inspired by the painting-like quality of the planet's surface and articulated entirely by the capacity of the painted surface to evoke, by turns, the world seen close up through a microscope and the most distant views of the universe seen through a telescope. Here, eloquent testimony is found in the cloudy mass in movement, represented on the large spiral with a varied array of materials – rusty sheet metal, scraps of faded blue jeans mounted gridwise, verdigris-speckled copper, paint on paper, straight photographs and others retouched with paint. Once more, the artist uses contradictions that force our situation: it is through the most



Source: © Ninacs, Anne-Marie, *Alain Paiement. Le monde en chantier* (Montreal: Galerie de l'UQAM, 2002), 143 p.

pronounced materiality that he seeks to convey the cloud's intangible movement; it is in the near that he shows us the far; and with the radical shift of the point of view, we are no longer under the sky, but standing in front of it.

"Earth and Sky take form and texture (there) where the substance of one and the other is set in emotion by their proximity,"<sup>11</sup> Paiement wrote in the press release for the installation, reiterating the importance of location and clarifying the fact that, far from amusing himself by triing with plays of opposites, he was seriously searching for dialectic spatialities: it is precisely there – where contradictions are gathered up together, where forms are "intrigued" by one another, where things are set in emotion, as he so splendidly says – that space awakens his interest. Here, clouds will not be the only point of friction between sky and earth: through them – as the title *Water-vapour Structures* indicates – order and disorder, nature and reason, immobility and motion attract each other with equal pull, and the question that will become a leitmotiv in Paiement's artistic process already comes into play: "How to conceive of the world in movement?"

The group of works comprising *Beyond Polders* (1983-1987), created like *Waterdampstructuren* following a long stay in Belgium, has for its subject the polder – land the Dutch and the Belgians reclaimed in the sixteenth century by building dikes and drying the sea. Paiement's particular interest is in a type of circular polder called *meerpold*, made during the seventeenth century by draining inland lakes. "What fascinated him," Jocelyne Lepage reports, "is the dialectic between the form of these lakes, organic forms evoking the cell and the amoeba, onto which the Dutch imposed rational Cartesian structures – grids – to build their towns. It made him think of modern painting."<sup>12</sup>

In Montreal, the former Ekers' Brewery building, which the artist adopted for this project, was entirely invested with his concern for painting and the encounter of natural and cultural systems of ordering the universe. On the two storeys of the abandoned building, Paiement presented a series derived from geographical documents, specifically, aerial views of polders and the hydrosphere taken by weather satellite. These photo documents, plus several generations of pictures based on them and paintings done directly on the walls and floor, combined in a superimposition of painted surface, the painterly nature of the place itself and the surface of the earth. In the process, near and far were once again united. In parallel, the building, the floor plans of the brewery, the geographic documents, the paintings deployed in space and a large square dome<sup>13</sup> all referred directly to the notion of appropriation of space, as had the earlier spiral. Furthermore, as the juxtaposition of maps of polders and floor plans of the brewery showed, Paiement's reappropriation of the old factory unequivocally recalled the towns constructed on the sea bottom by the inhabitants of the Low Countries. Built over a large opening in the second-floor, the dome served as the cornerstone of this rich and complex group, because it linked the two spaces physically while appearing as an architectural version of the pictures and a three-dimensional transcription of a polder, from which its structure was derived.<sup>14</sup> The raging sea painted on the adjacent wall made the dome read like something rising out of the water and the shadows cast by its joists read like canals, structuring the moving and chaotic space of both the aquatic murals and the abandoned venue.

In an architecture of twenty-four upright posts, "meridians" that plainly allude to the terrestrial globe present in the installation in several forms, the dome also attested to man's desire to represent by rational means the space where he lives: it seemed to indicate that the distance taken from the territory serves as a metaphor for the distancing implicit in any attempt to rationalize the world. Far from deluding himself as to the objectivity of such an undertaking, however, Paiement always seeks to pinpoint the spots where nature and culture, art and science, topography and painting, past and present, order and chaos meet. In this sense, the temporary architecture overlaid onto this atmospheric setting tends to evoke the fantastic world of a thinker on a binge, simultaneously indulging in architecture, painting, astronomy, geography – in sum, the arts and sciences in general – almost obsessively transcribing the discoveries in one field with the methods of another (to the point where he has incorporated his own place within it), and adding generation upon generation until he has created a group of documents and objects linked together as inextricably as the laws of the universe. Apparently, all that is lacking of the spiral here is its image; Paiement's works will always appear as dazzling assemblages.

*In the Universe*

Among the reproductions supplied by Alain Paiement to aid in the preparation of this essay were two images not of his making, two images that at first seemed to have been included inadvertently, that just ended up in a slide pouch in the course of handling a plethora of photo material. But only at first, for it soon began to appear that these two "strays" were clues the artist provided to help place his work in context. The first of the images is from Johannes Kepler's *Mysterium cosmographicum* (*The Secret of the Universe*, 1596). Plate 3 of that treatise on cosmography represents interlocked geometric forms "showing the dimensions of the spheres of the planets, and their separations according to the five regular geometrical solids."<sup>15</sup> More specifically, the nested spheres represent the five known planets (Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus and Mercury) as well as the Great Sphere (of earth) and the sun, "the unmoving midpoint or centre of the universe," inscribed in a system regulated by the "five regular geometrical solids" – five polyhedrons that, according to Plato, define the natural elements and, thus, represent the geometry of the universe and are associated with the All, with creation in its totality.<sup>16</sup>

Although I must set the analysis of this image aside, even this much information proves enlightening in more than one regard. It already includes the ultimate desire for location, that of man in the cosmos. It suggests Paiement's curiosity about the links uniting all the elements of the universe and his passion for crossbreeding one mode of knowledge with another.<sup>17</sup> But what the plate merging natural facts and human ideals makes particularly visible is the operation by which man constructs these links and modes of knowledge himself. It is not by chance – nor without a certain nostalgia for the era of comprehensive knowledge in which Renaissance intellectuals worked – that the artist lingers over the figures of this pivotal era in rational thought and the evolution of our conceptual apparatus. Beyond Kepler, Paiement's work makes references to Leonardo da Vinci, who among other things illustrated the "five regular geometrical solids," and to Dürer, one of whose engravings inspired the form of *Diamant* (2000). The dome constructed on a square plan in *Beyond Polders* derives from Michelangelo's squaring of the circle and earliest planispheres; the Amphithéâtres, as we will see, are tied directly to geometry, the invention of perspective and the projections devised by Mercator.<sup>18</sup> And in addition, as Renaissance artists did in their day, Paiement incorporates contemporary scientific endeavours. Thus, the image of the solar system would seem to attest to the artist's desire to evaluate his position in relation to a tradition, for did he not say of his own process, in a Renaissance spirit, that his "project has become a quest to understand certain modes of knowledge and, implicitly, an infinite project"?<sup>19</sup> The image of the solar system surely attests to a broader will to situate the practice of art in the field of knowledge. As a result, the "determining a relationship with the world" that he is so keen on takes on an imposing dimension, stepping beyond its territory to encompass the whole world and its history.

Though fascinated by the pursuits of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century intellectuals, Alain Paiement is far from contenting himself with simply imparting a contemporary flavour to their pursuits. Of all *Beyond Polders*'s representations of the earth seen from above, one picture demonstrates this particularly well. It is in fact not the image of our planet it appears to be at first glance, but a strangely inverse moon. In place of the heavenly body's surface, the clouds and sky surrounding it are depicted, which creates a visual paradox that is difficult to extricate oneself from: where the eye believes it sees a solid body – the earth – it is actually looking through a perforation onto the heavens; where it reads a volume, a void has been opened; where it perceives the circle as a hole in the square tarp, the tarp's materiality is accentuated to the point of serving as a lunar surface that has been completely expelled from its structure. Thus turned in upon itself, the image leaves us with an empty feeling not only in the eye, but also in the pit of our stomach: we are no longer there. Deprived of a vanishing point, which mirrors the situation of the viewer before the image, this "moon" profoundly deconstructs our grasp of space and the world and calls for a review of the subject's position beneath the stars.

So doing, *Around Moon* (1984) strikingly heralds the inversions characteristic of a first photographic series. Drawing inspiration from the methods of cartography and transfer, mainly the geographer Mercator's system of planispheric projection, which makes it possible to represent the globe of the earth on a flat surface by dividing it into longitudes and latitudes, the artist set about recording entire interiors by scanning them from a fixed point with his omnidirectional camera. He then covered the exterior of large spheres with them: "Inside university amphitheatres, I take pictures of everything that surrounds me," the artist explains. "I cut them up and assemble them as a spherical panorama, which I invert: as if all that is visible from our point of view were turned inside out like a skin, as if the heavens' vault were drawn on the outside of a globe."<sup>20</sup>

Among the first and most ambitious works in this series of photo-sculptures, *Amphithéâtre Bachelard* (1988) combines in a single object, by conating the amphitheatre and the terrestrial globe,<sup>21</sup> what the previous installations had formulated as a declension of elements: namely, the sum of knowledge and the universe as the ultimate references in any attempt at location. The choice of a lecture hall at the Sorbonne, an emblem of the accumulation of knowledge if ever there was one,<sup>22</sup> is obviously far from random. Here, its vocation is compounded by the sphere, which connotes "the idea of a finite and closed world, the idea of a Totality."<sup>23</sup>

What the terrestrial globe and the amphitheatre have in common as well is that both affirm vision as construction, in what they actually are (a maquette and a locus of representation) and in their function (transcription and conception of the world). This affirmation is furthermore explicitly renewed by the use of photography, a constructed gaze that, from this point on in Paiement's work, takes over the place and function of cartography as an endeavour aimed at the rational representation of the world.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, it is assuredly the superimposition of the two universes that most clearly – and relentlessly – calls our constructions into question. Turning space inside out like a globe, the sculpture places us in an untenable position, because it arouses a boundless desire to encompass or enter its space, which eludes us, stands before us like a magic prism and activates our desire to the highest degree at the same time it provokes an insurmountable malaise through its physically overwhelming form and its multiplication of points of view,<sup>25</sup> which refutes our presence, keeps us constantly at a distance and as a result, frustrates all our attempts to reconcile this space with ours, emptied of its substance. Whereupon, we understand that, if it is the issue of situation that is at stake, it is no easy solution that Paiement offers. In this reduced version of the cosmos, we are excluded, expelled, ejected from the ground we stand on; instead, we appear as satellites orbiting in an undefined space, "in the middle of nowhere";<sup>26</sup> this panopticon ignores us more than it shelters us from gazes. As a result, we become paradoxical "subjects" in that we are completely dispersed, an "I both vague and off-centre,"<sup>27</sup> before this sphere that seems an entity in itself.

If the exercise is brilliant and its impact on a level with the fascination that perspective must have exerted when it was first invented, Paiement's inventiveness is most evident in the fact that, unlike Kepler, whose only concern was the regularity of geometrical solids, and Mercator, whose projections are mathematically symmetrical, here the artist has "set his tripod up not on the rostrum or in the centre of the auditorium, but at the back of Bachelard Amphitheatre, directly facing the maître,"<sup>28</sup> which oddly distorts the sphere, gives its tilt the effect of a lack of balance and, contrary to what would be expected in the world of science, calls up a subjective view, the imagination and, indeed, hallucination. If the irregularity of the globe is a means of insisting on the impossibility of a map that does not distort reality and, more broadly, the uniqueness of all points of view,<sup>29</sup> it is also worth noting that, in the world of university professors, the artist has quite intentionally taken his place among the students. To interpret this sphere as an authoritarian representation of knowledge would consequently be to forget, to fail to perceive in its form, the fact that the student's position is much more of a statement about learning as thought in movement, as vision being formed. On *Earth Building Sight*, the subtitle of *Chantier* (1991), suggests the building of vision, juxtaposing it with the actual building site (chantier) of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal that is the object of this work. In addition to being another locus for the stockpiling of knowledge, the museum is a "space where visions are built,"<sup>30</sup> as curator Sylvie Parent points out, using an expression that suggests not only the visual arts exhibited but the ideologies that accompany them as well. Here, it is the modernist "vision" that the visual game sets centre stage. A large white cube, in a room scarcely larger than it is, immediately calls to mind minimalist sculpture and its ideal of self-referentiality, which is, however, rapidly contradicted by its scale and, as with the *Amphithéâtre*, a series of distortions of the "perfect" form: the block, only one corner of which touches the floor, is completely off its axis; the grid that marks out each of its faces in squares creates an ambiguity between academic squaring off, formalist painting and the beams and studs of house walls; one of the cube's edges is torn away, allowing the viewer to see, and even enter, inside; and finally, the sight confronting the viewer who advances within along a wooden plank – the six interior surfaces are covered with vast photographs of the site when it was cluttered with scaffolding and concrete formwork – rivals the vertiginous allure of cycloramas and other trompe-l'oeil devices.

"You might think of the resolutely 'modern' character of the outside as a kind of representation of the institution (the cube's frame in various ways resembles the new museum's exterior), while the inside corresponds to the unfinished part, which, in the

image, appears in a fixed state.”<sup>31</sup> the artist explains, specifying that if this interiority in fact violates the modernist precept of non-theatricality, its main interest lies in activating a strong tension between inside and outside, construction and unfinished state, immobility and movement. Contrary to the sphere that excluded the spectator, *Chantier* (Building Sight) puts him at the very heart of the dialectic, making him the last in a series of nested construction sites, as Sylvie Parent’s enlightening analysis indicates:

The effort required of the spectator is particularly intense since the work’s “Russian doll” arrangement sets him up as the ultimate container of the installation. Like it, relatively fixed in outward appearance, he is inwardly stirred by this experience, something like a construction site in relation to the architecture that results from it. From one container to another, there are misalignments, openings, distortions. To a certain extent, the spectator is asked to experience a rupture with his usual perceptions.<sup>32</sup>

The “hole” in the floor surrounding the foot of the ramp is another visual statement of the central place occupied by the visitor who enters this purview. In addition, it allows one to sense, beneath the image, another, more lugubrious interior, so reminding us that in Paiement’s work, to a much greater extent than has been heretofore emphasized, there is always something happening beneath the surface, a work site is always active in the material. More of this later, but for now, back to museums under construction. Ten years later, Paiement executed a work on the subject of the Centre Georges Pompidou as it underwent renovation. *Diamant* (2000) is to some extent a contraction of *Amphithéâtre Bachelard* and *Chantier*: the museum under construction appears on an immense diamond – a new image of the perfection of form – set at the crossing of two large metal hoops that blend in with the beams of the scaffolding and allow the prism to be turned head over heels, again upsetting our spatial reference points. The two works are also related through the references *Diamant* makes to Dürer’s *Renaissance* (*Diamant*’s form being determined by the polyhedron in the print *Melancholy I*, a summary of the knowledge of its time) and Gordon Matta-Clark’s modernism, which Paiement pays a kind of tribute to here: when the *Beaubourg* was being built, the American artist cut a gigantic cone – *Conical Intersect* – through the common interior walls of the buildings that were going to be razed. Paiement answered that void, which exposed the material, with a solid geometric form, but one that was radically disrupted by its own photographic covering, which hollowed it out visually, denied its materiality and made it look like a collection of irregular angles.

Photographed from an exterior structure, *Diamant*, unlike the two preceding pieces, includes a spectacular panorama of Paris. This feat of visual prowess, which makes Paiement’s work seem more than ever like a wondrous history of the act of looking, is particularly relevant for the way it registers the institution as an organism in transformation within the city, confers upon the city itself the vitality of a new construction site and clearly introduces the question of temporality into the image.

#### *Facing Time*

To ask yourself where you are, where you stand, is to situate yourself physically, but it is also inevitably to situate yourself in time, which necessarily involves striking a kind of balance, taking stock. Any such attempt at locating brings us face to face with the fact that our point of view, the point where we are, is at every instant relative to the passage of time. We need only remain still and observe the clouds a moment to feel we are, from one instant to the next, now closer to, now farther from the sky.

In the work of Alain Paiement, the visual perspective almost systematically calls for an immersion in time. As we have seen, each of the recurrent round-trips from history (art history and human history) to the most up-to-date reality and back opens a historical perspective. Yet, Paiement’s works are above all unrelenting reminders not only that the earth is round, but that it turns, that it is in continual transformation, that the world is in fact just a huge construction site. If actual scaffolding sometimes appears in the pictures, the way even his most finished works have of remaining in the project stage, of conveying the sense of being a scale model or a plan prefiguring something else, inscribes time as a structural element at the heart of the work: with Paiement, the object is a project. From every angle, whether it is a geographic, mathematical, photographic, luminous, architectural or mental projection, whether one speaks of a plan (in every sense of the word), mapping or perspective, of building site or work in progress, this production – articulated mainly around photography and architecture, projective techniques par excellence – is an intricate web of various procedures of projection and the notion of “project” in the philosophical sense. As a means of defining

vision, constructing the world and structuring time, projection is in this case just as much, indeed above all, constructing the subject in the world.

Some works from the early 1990s are straightforward in raising questions about time and projection. This is particularly true of *Dead on Time (Work in Progress)* (1990), a large spiral structure on which a mapping of the interior of the clock tower in Old Montreal is presented. Here, everything speaks of time: the clock, obviously, but also photography itself, in so far as it captures precise instants; the exposures taken at ten-minute intervals through an entire day; and the changing light that, in the absence of the clock's hands, registers the passing of the hours. Perhaps the clearest visual translation of the irreversible progression of time is the spiral itself, which also strongly alludes to cosmology and immediately ties this contemporary piece to the history of the formation of the world. And in addition, telescoping molecular prehistory and the technological future, Païement used innovative computer techniques that were just gaining momentum when he created the work by pixelizing the photograph, which deconstructs the image down to the limits of visibility, superimposes itself on the unfinished character of the partially exposed structure and suggests an open space in continual transformation. Finally, while unequivocally confirming this progression to infinity, the title *Dead on Time (Work in Progress)* evokes a paradoxical temporality: being on time, it indicates, is a task continually in the works; to inhabit the moment is to get oneself physically entangled in time; to live here and now is to die at every instant. And, besides the clock that implacably marks off the seconds, what probably conveys this with the greatest brilliance is the spectator's strolling around this "spiral of time deployed in space,"<sup>33</sup> a time proper to the experience of sculpture. "With this clock, the question of temporality becomes a leitmotiv in my work," Alain Païement concludes.

The architectural subjects exploited subsequently all have an obvious temporal character, either by being in transformation or by encapsulating change. The photographic constructions are conceived as interpretations of the specific temporality of each building, through both the procedures of mapping and the resulting forms.<sup>34</sup>

This is evident in *Chantier* as well as in *Mapping Continuum* (1994) created a few years later. Representing the Paris Stock Exchange when half the floor was in upheaval during the installation of new transaction and posting equipment, the work again nests different aspects of time like Russian dolls: the time of the Stock Exchange itself, a materialization of the flux of the economy, where everything lasts but an instant; the time of the transformation of the premises; the time of the images captured by the lateral pan of a video camera;<sup>35</sup> and finally, the time of the tall spiral the photographs are attached to, which repeatedly turns in on itself. Like the "continuum" of the title, the way its wooden structure is left exposed in either direction from where the images are placed evokes an infinite process. What we learn from this new shell form meant as a mapping of the world in movement is that, in Païement's oeuvre, continuity is never synonymous with linearity: in the image of the spiral, which unfurls to meet its past and graze its future, continuity would seem to be made up of those little places where the layers of time touch.

Once again clearly superimposing time with the place represented – New York's Times Square – *Sometimes Square* (1994) replaces the spiral with the shape named in the title. Rather than present a spherical scan of the notorious commercial area on a spherical surface, Païement chooses to energetically spread the digitized photographs on planes, pulling them out to the corners of the orthogonal structure like bed sheets and severely distorting them in order to correct the curve, thus creating many fissures in the image, not unlike the tears created by attuning the globe onto a two-dimensional map. Seeking to demonstrate that a photograph is only a piece of information – a concern tied to the imaging technologies then massively on the rise and to the marketing that dominates the space photographed – he also eliminates vanishing points to make it look like a strict surface, an effect reinforced by the thin panels he uses as a support and which, midway between theatrical set and advertising poster, restate the world of appearances in other terms. "The New York square is interpreted as an assemblage of 'ashy' storefronts making up a spectacular scene,"<sup>36</sup> the artist summarizes. "It is as if I were saying the city is an ensemble of streams of information and economic uses that ultimately have no need of you."<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, the question of temporality seems everywhere implicit in this discourse on the consumer society and the world of information. Does stating a position in relation to the transformations of one's era not mean locating oneself in relation to one's time? Still more, it is "from time to time" that we are led by this image, which (as

the juxtaposition of colour and black-and-white photographs makes apparent) combines views of Forty-seventh Street from 1989, others taken between Forty-fourth and Forty-fifth Streets in 1991 and others again taken near Forty-second Street in 1993. A square – and this one in particular – is also a place of passage, circulation, transit and transaction, “an assemblage in continuous transformation, a work site,”<sup>38</sup> all of which is clearly transcribed by the undulating camera scans, the distortions of the image and the temporary nature of the installation, whose visible framework and effects of cropping and montage evoke the idea of a work in progress. As the artist recalls, the installation was “conceived as a test or a laboratory whose unfinished state is intrinsic to its dimension as a ‘project.’”<sup>39</sup>

One last space signalling the importance of transformation remains, and that is text. A good many of the jumble of neon signs that crowd the square have been altered in such a way that, once again, the manipulation of the facts is easily detected and, beneath the image, beneath the familiar scene, a disturbing strangeness takes shape: “Howard Johnson” becomes “How Hard My Son”; “Panasonic Slightly Ahead of Our Time” becomes “Paranoiact Just Lately Ahead of Our Time”; “Burger King” changes to “Boring Kill”; “A Chorus Line” and “Martinique Jewellers” are replaced by “A Border Line” and “Many Art Levellers.” These plays on words inserted among the image’s distortions create more than a double meaning: they instigate a profound shift of point of view, the square’s expressionism even giving us the impression at times that we are hallucinating or acceding to a different plane of consciousness. In this sense, if by reducing the entire site to pure surface effect, Paiement intended to make Sometimes Square a counter-example of the genius loci, the jarring encounter of signs with their new messages at once recalls the hiatuses between the occasions when the pictures were shot, recalls the images that overlap, collide, telescope and push to the surface the fact that everything here tends to confirm, if not a guardian spirit, at least a kind of unconsciousness, of the place. Far from incompatible with the artist’s initial intention, this subverted meaning reveals, on the contrary, all the aggressiveness of the brutal and superficial marketing of the world. Taken in its etymological sense of “turned from under,” the word “subverted” also conveys the overall visual confusion and state of psychic disorder the work evokes and thus gives a clear indication of how we should approach these intersections of layers of time.

### Scanning

What can we know of the world? From birth to death, what amount of space can our gaze hope to scan? How many square centimetres of the planet Earth will the soles of our shoes have touched?  
Georges Perec<sup>64</sup>

Pairing what he scans by eye with what he scans by foot, Alain Paiement recently undertook to photograph the ground where he places his feet. “In theory, it’s as simple as in geography,” he explains

you scan the territory photographically from above, from an airplane or a satellite, on the basis of a minimal cartographic division, making certain that the film-plane is always positioned parallel to the surface being photographed. Here, the expanse observed is more immediate. I made images of the ground where I walked.<sup>65</sup>

Meticulously and systematically mapping a patch of sidewalk [Merci, merci], a stretch of beach [Ocean Park] and a bedroom [Phil’s Room], the artist allows us to entertain the idea that it would be conceivable to catalogue the entire planet this way, step by step. If such a utopia is infinitely far from being realized, the ground fragments captured over the past five years have nonetheless produced a large group of images, *Refaire surface*, first exhibited in spring 2001. While alluding to the artist’s prolonged absence from the Montreal scene, the series’ prismatic title primarily designates his method of photographically reconstructing photographed surfaces.<sup>66</sup> It also evokes a return to the pictorial concerns that largely preoccupied Paiement early in his career, a return that is eloquently enhanced by the use of colour and texture and the affirmation of surface throughout this group, as well as by references to the history of painting – from Raphael’s Sistine Madonna to Agnes Martin, by way of Dubuffet and geometric abstraction: “Resurfacing is like seeing anew the primitive geography that for a number of years made me drift away from painting towards architectural photography. To again make [refaire] pictures,”<sup>67</sup> he explains. But the title also refers to photography: the bird’s-eye view severely confining volumes to the thin sheet of photo paper, which turns all relief into surface.

Where the title *Refaire surface* finds its richest meaning, however, is in the telescoping

it suggests. The idea of the collision of planes is explicit in the image of something that, rising from the depths, breaks the water's surface and hurls itself into the air. The accompanying surge again, and here unequivocally, evokes the realm of the psyche, for something that resurfaces most often comes from the dark side, the background, the unconscious. So we are navigating close to the process of filtration that Didi-Huberman associates with the work of memory, as well as the process of irrigation inherent in the polders. Indeed, in the way these recent photographs bring about the interpenetration of bottom and surface, there is not only an obvious formal relationship with Paiement's images of those dried expanses, but more structurally, with the very process of recovering land from the sea: to a certain extent, these new images look like "photographic irrigations" that bring the farthest distant background to the surface, like muddy depths rising through the water. And what the artist said about the Dutch polders, borrowing the words of Claudel, would hold just as true for the new photographs – that they constitute "a attening of all the relief and a total generalization of the view of its surface."<sup>68</sup>

Thus, no more than elsewhere in his production, is the surface here to be conceived of as a simple face: again introducing the duality we have encountered many times, the surface is to be read from below and above simultaneously, as the artist explains, insisting on the dialectic. These photographs are

some more unfinished mappings that combine order and disorder, brought together under a title that implies a return from below, like a submarine emerging after making its approach by periscope. But here, the view is from above. It is no one's gaze, if not God's. We are observers without being there.<sup>69</sup>

At once top and underside, omniscient eye and nonexistent observer, no matter what we do, the image makes our position ungraspable: wherever we stand, the ground is unstable. From here on, the challenge will be to seek to understand the mode of inhabiting suggested by this untenable situation.

#### *Treading the Ground*

In this adventure, the artist's scanning eye comes to rest on all kinds of things encountered at random in his wanderings.<sup>70</sup> A woman in the shower [Above Shower (et toi)], a sandcastle, a child's room [Yo], a mousetrap [Mourir à deux], a rusted out car [R21]: "No famous or monumental places. Just less substantial things, in all."<sup>71</sup> Banal things at first glance, but their shifted position calls upon us to apprehend them completely differently. It seems, in fact, that we know so little how to look that a change of angle (twofold here, for that of the camera is seconded by being hung on the wall) suffices to make a familiar object appear completely new. Each of these images tells us that there is no need of a powerful telescope, no use in turning one's gaze skyward or encompassing the whole earth, so long as we are unable to attentively contemplate our ordinary, everyday surroundings.

F3 (Living Chaos) (2001), the main work of this recent group, reconstitutes the residence of a friend of Paiement's. The apartment bordered with streets appears as a private precinct in the middle of the city and immediately reactivates the tension between inside and outside we are now familiar with and that the threshold of any dwelling encapsulates.<sup>72</sup> Here, inside and outside are telescoped most intensely from within. The photograph shows us all the rooms of the dwelling simultaneously, as if the roof had been torn off, setting all the spaces, regardless of function, on the same plane. The great distance the scale places us at and the methodical gaze of the artist position us in relation to the occupant and his "natural habitat" as if we were observing an animal or an insect. Every object becomes another hint towards understanding the owner's manner of inhabiting, his way of occupying space as well as his conception of his site. For the apartment undergoing renovation (one need hardly overemphasize Paiement's choice of the moment to document a place) quickly turns inside out, once more like a glove, to become a materialization of its owner's internal space, with him himself under construction: in the midst of this chaos, the man's calm presence in his white bathtub, a sort of cocoon in this visual jumble, makes the surroundings read like an internal microcosm, the different rooms like zones of a polynuclear psyche, an inhabitable space like an inhabited space. This individual – the only living being in the image and one of the first to appear in the artist's production – would seem to represent not only the chaotic interior, but also, and even more so, the "living chaos" proclaimed in the title: "The house is so much the 'sitter' (hence the inhabitant) and the 'portrait' that the presence of the inhabitant can only be redundant,"<sup>73</sup> according to Marie-Ange Brayer, who has given considerable thought to the subject of the places we

live. She continues:

Human existence is unthinkable without the prior possibility of withdrawing into a separate space. The dwelling (or the "house") is indeed a concrete, empirical reality: but without it, the person who inhabits it would not be what he is. In other words, the "house" is not an object in the face of a subject who makes use of it like a tool.<sup>74</sup>

In the context of Paiement's work (which, taken as a whole shows us that the universe – our ultimate dwelling – is not "an object one uses like a tool" any more than our house is, but a part of the subject that we build), this hodgepodge produced by some internal big bang could also be understood as a metonymy of life and its perpetual construction site. Again, Marie-Ange Brayer:

The house would be the common denominator we can all share, all understand, the conation of origin and destination, the origin of self and the destination towards a consensual otherness in the house, that "designated" threshold between self and world. As if the whole world were just a graspable form of the globe.<sup>75</sup>

To speak of origin and destination, of "conation," in this way also clearly opens the door to the question of time; it points to the basically transformational character of any house,<sup>76</sup> shown here in the everyday setting and the experiences spontaneously associated with it. The "crossing through time" is evoked by the fact that the photographs were taken over a period of four days, which explains why objects move from place to place and appear more than once, while the multiple perspectives and discernable traces of digital collage make it possible to reconstitute the artist's spatial and visual trajectory. And then there is the stairway, whose transparency creates a time loop from which it is hard to extricate oneself. But what probably conveys the temporal nature of the site best of all is the confusion: the interesting thing about the chaos is that there is always something happening in it.

#### *Skimming through Time*

In his most recent work, a mapping of the place where he lives, Alain Paiement takes up the question of site quite literally. What better way to find out "where one is/stands" than to question oneself on the site where one lives one's everyday life. In retrospect, his first bird's-eye views seem like the departure point for a fantastic "zoom in," a long, slow approach that brought the artist from outer space to distant lands and then to his neighbourhood and studio-residence. But even at that, Paiement's apartment is not unconnected to the universe, since he puts it in context, reconstituting the bakery on the ground floor, a portion of the cellar and the roof, some street space and the quiet backyard. By locating it in relation to these things, he creates a microcosm that is deployed in space as gigantic panels one in front of another, as if the building had simply been laid on its side in the gallery.

So, beneath the notion of habitation lies the idea of cohabitation. Beyond its neighbourhood, strictly speaking, Parages (2002) presents the building as an organism in which different functions coexist: the installation, this time on vertical and horizontal axes, simultaneously displays the dwelling's public and private zones, work spaces and rest areas, storage rooms and ornamentation, shadowy nooks and openings onto the world. A host of people hover around the apartment in a flurry of activity – some are preparing bread, cakes and pizzas in the bakery, someone is loading the day's batch of bread for delivery, as pedestrians stroll by on the sidewalk and a rowdy contingent invades the street to celebrate Brazil's World Cup victory. And so, the apartment, an enclave in the middle of the bustling city, actually intensifies the troubling reality of our simultaneous trajectories, for each of the people who figure here has his own dwelling somewhere, each one constructs his own unique existence in parallel to ours, each inhabits his site. If the focal point is the artist's place, indeed the artist himself, as attested by the looks some of the passersby (and a cat) cast towards the camera, the effect of the presence of each of these individuals is to multiply the possible vanishing points, to multiply them so as to include each and every one of the planet's billions of human beings, inasmuch as the figures, tilting off the plane at the street's outside edge, give the image a roundness that relates it to the earth's horizon line and invokes the virtual quest to map all latitudes.

Consequently, what this work orchestrates, even more than space or time, is movement. To associate his own home with the transitory places that have been the object of his investigations since the beginning in itself constitutes a declaration of instability on the part of the artist – which does not contradict the fact of wanting to locate himself. The suspended gestures of the incidental characters show, on the other

hand, that a photograph fixes but a tiny instant in the overlapping trajectories. The images taken over several months that have been patched together into a single one, the intentionally incomplete mapping of the place organized so that it can be grasped only through a montage, this too "leads one to consider the real as a 'modification.'"77 But the most compelling metaphor of life as movement lies in the baking of bread. A quasi-archetypal image of the transformation of elements, of the daily recommencement of everything and of the continuity of human life, the structure of each loaf bears a story of life and death, the essential dialectic of all transformation, which is retold in the ceaseless birth and disappearance of the clouds formed over the roof by the smoke from the ovens.

This large collage, in which all these phenomena cohabit, gives the clearest evidence so far that beneath Paiement's passion about spaces lies an incontestable curiosity for what goes on in them. For him, every place is intrinsically linked to a taking place.

#### *Brush with Death*

The other of the two images "forgotten" by Paiement among the documents he sent me, besides Kepler's cosmography, was a copperplate engraving by Albrecht Dürer. Famous for having generated endless interpretations, *Melancholy I* (1514) represents all the scientific, mathematical and theological preoccupations of the Renaissance and, especially, man's relation to the sum of these endeavours. This print, which induces "a desire ... for an understanding and a conception of the world,"78 has played a role in Paiement's work because, as we have seen, *Diamant* derives from the polyhedron illustrated in it. The shape, which according to Hartmut Böhme belongs primarily "to the world of craftsmanship and technique,"79 could as well be "the remains of a column, the incomplete form of one of the original solids, the construction of an irregular polyhedron or the representation of a crystalline structure."80 Representing in a general manner the "particular expression of aptness for geometric constructions,"81 it refers directly to mental space and is related in that to Paiement's desire to give form to "concretions of thought" through his personal geometry, to thrust outside his head what takes form within it.82 Furthermore, as Böhme recalls, it is essentially the same project that provides the basis of this engraving, which is "an image of thought."83

But the print's main reminder to us is that all we will ever produce is mere pebbles, no matter how they may gleam. Dürer's allegory shows us the vanity of any attempt to comprehend the world and the melancholy that inevitably overcomes anyone who ever dreams of scanning its entirety – and each of us must have aspired to it at some time: "The experience of melancholy and the problem of power/knowledge are connected,"84 Böhme explains. It is another way of saying what each of Paiement's works for the past nearly twenty years has been repeating, that life evades any attempt to grasp it and that the hold over it that a photograph offers us the illusion of is no more than the image of our pretensions: "The photographic impression signals the death of the instant it prints," the artist writes. "In vain do we seek to prolong its effect by substituting the printed appearance for eeting reality. In that regard, it always seems like a death announcement."85 And, we might add, like a vanity. It is furthermore remarkable, in the context of this *Melancholy* that calls man to the greatest humbleness, that Böhme completely ignores the sketch of the face "reected" on the polyhedron's surface, a sure allusion to the *vanitas*, and does not relate it to the dejected state of the main figure.

As we have seen, Alain Paiement has been producing such "melancholies" after his own fashion for quite some time. From the spiral of *Waterdampstrukturen* and the ruins of *Beyond Polders* to the scattered remains of *Constellation* (squat) and *Living Pittoresque*, by way of the irreversibility of *Dead on Time* (*Work in Progress*), his works have set before us what eludes us of knowledge, space and time passing. Certain of the images are explicit *memento mori*, for example the disturbing corridor at the heart of the catacombs in *Portes closes* (1996), the moving delicacy of the mouse skeletons in *Mourir à deux* (2001), the painterliness of the completely rusted out car's underside in *R21* (1999) and the accumulation of dead leaves in every corner of *Two Times Tree* (1996-2001), which, in its investigation of depth and fascinating interplay of grids in the scaffolding surrounding the plane tree that appears like a strange protuberance, takes on the gravity of an entombment. But here, death is not a stopping place; it is another figure of excess.

One image that structurally conveys life's ungraspability recurs in the production of Alain Paiement: the cloud. An insubstantial structure in a permanent state of formation and distortion, the cloud is a symbol of what eludes representation and an

incomparable image of movement. Hubert Damisch, who devoted an excellent book to the subject, writes, "The cloud, in the ever-changing variety of its forms, may appear like the support if not the model of all metamorphosis."<sup>86</sup> As an explicit illustration of transformation, of what "takes form beyond," it constitutes in itself an aberration, which makes it a basic metaphor for all that surpasses our ability to apprehend: "The unfocused blur is an optical aberration," Paiement explains. "It is what exceeds the limits of my perception in the immediate experience of what surrounds me, like an unresolved effect in a whole recomposed mentally by the addition of frames that one can never assemble all of into a single point at the same time."<sup>87</sup>

The combination of the cloud and rigorous scientific procedures in his very first images was a way for the artist to manifest his awareness that something was ineluctably going to evade him – and us. Later, working with other forms of "blurring"<sup>88</sup> in a host of works where strict regulation and organic process meet, it is the same principal knowledge that he transmits: it is only in accepting to be thrown over by movement that man can attempt to understand something of the world, it is only on moving terrain that he can think of building, it is only in the recognition of his limits that he can create, as Böhme concludes in reference to Dürer:

If Dürer does not represent Ficino's melancholia generosa, he nonetheless gives a new interpretation of the saturnine genius: in the enlightened mind, a new dignity is revealed in the face of the extent of the questions. It consists not of man's acquiring a privileged status through his participation in the higher powers, but of his becoming aware, through methodical reaction on a world rife with signs, that he is a subject with a limited spirit and creates what he can create in the knowledge of his limits. The message of Melancholy is that we can expect no deliverance from the multiplicity of signs and the limited nature of things. To live without a "cell" and without "armour" is the most difficult way, the way of sorrow.<sup>89</sup>

His vast rooess, wall-less house perhaps best transcribes the mode according to which Alain Paiement inhabits his site. It teaches us we must "dwell in Possibility," without a "cell" or "armour," must forever be squatters in the world and its building sites.

#### Notes

10 Georges Perec, *Espèces d'espaces* (Paris: Galilée, 1974), p. 164.

11 A. Paiement, press release for *Waterdampstrukturen, Appart'* art actuel, Montreal. Emphasis added.

12 Jocelyne Lepage, "Alain Paiement : quand un artiste délègue les pigeons," *La Presse* [Montreal], November 21, 1994. Emphasis added.

13 It is not possible to comment here on Paiement's repeated working with the encounter of the circle and the square, other than to mention how much the small watercolours of the early 1980s, all the representations of the earth (on a square support), the Amphithéâtres and Chantier, in particular, clearly derive from an attraction to basic geometrical shapes.

14 The artist had previously conceived a series of pictures with umbrellas for a support and also planned to work on parachutes, whose shape is clearly related to that of this dome.

15 Johannes Kepler, *The Secret of the Universe*, trans. A. M. Duncan (New York: Abaris, 1981), p. 228.

16 According to Plato, the tetrahedron (pyramid) represents fire; the cube, earth; the octahedron, air; the icosahedron, water; and the dodecahedron, heaven. See Carlo Zammattio, Augusto Marinoni and Anna Maria Brizzio, *Leonardo the Scientist* (New York, Saint Louis and San Francisco: McGraw-Hill, 1980), p. 99.

17 One of the most formative teachings Paiement recalls from his student years is the idea that a great work is one through which the viewer can ultimately accede not only to a knowledge of art, but to knowledge as a whole. (Interview with the artist, June 2002.)

18 The two-dimensional versions Paiement almost always executes of his three-dimensional works makes the significance of this method of projection explicit.

19 A. Paiement, "Aberrations optiques," p. 16.

20 A. Paiement, press release for *Amphithéâtres*, Oboro, Montreal.

21 The sphere pivoting on its axis has exactly the same tilt as the earth (23¼ 5').

22 Christopher Dewdney ("The Description of the World," *Vanguard*, vol. 18, no. 3 [Summer 1989], p. 34) states that Giulio Camillo "constructed an elaborate mnemonic structure in the form of a wooden radial theatre which encoded, in an iconic, symbolic array, an encyclopedia of everything known by humankind up to that time. Amphithéâtre Bachelard is very much in the spirit of that synthesis." In the same spirit, other pieces from this series represent the Grand amphithéâtre at the Sorbonne and the anatomy lesson hall at the University of Padua, which was the first of its kind.

23 Jacques Doyon, "L'étalement sculptural du photographique," in J. Doyon and Lesley Johnstone, *Photo sculpture* (Montreal and Saint-Jean-Port-Joli: Éditions Artex/Artex Studios d'été de Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, 1991), p. 14.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

25 "The vanishing points of each facet become a single point inside the polyhedron, while the beholder's point of view is multiplied by the number of these facets." (A. Paiement, "Aberrations optiques," p. 15.)

26 *Ibid.*, p.15.

27 A. Paiement, "Approximativement le monde," in *Immédiats : Pierre Antoine – Alain Paiement* (Pau, France: Publications de l'Université de Pau, 1999), unpaginated.

28 Michaël La Chance, "Inversions baroques," *Spirale*, no. 84 (December 1988), p. 4.

29 "Any representation of the globe as a map is marred by distortions of surface, angle and distance, or

- all three at once. Nonetheless, we retain these visions of the world, which definitely present major impediments to carrying out accurate analyses of social and political realities." (Jean Carrière, "Cartographies variables et sémiologie cartographique," in Francine Paul, *Cartographies variables* [Montreal: Galerie de l'UQAM, 1993], p. 12.)
- 30 Sylvie Parent, *Visions 91* (Montreal: Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal, 1993), p. 21.
- 31 A. Paiement, "Aberrations optiques," p. 16.
- 32 S. Parent, *Visions 91*, p. 21.
- 33 Guy Bellavance, "Photo sculpture," *Parachute*, no. 64 (October-December 1991), pp. 50-51.
- 34 A. Paiement, "Aberrations optiques," p. 16.
- 35 A similar pan can be found in a video that juxtaposes scrolling stock quotes from the Toronto Exchange and the artist's pivoting, in the opposite direction, in the middle of the oor. Alternating on two monitors set face to face, the video forces the viewer to turn on an axis, thus echoing the gyrating form of the spiral. The title T.S.E. means both Toronto Stock Exchange and Toronto Still Expands.
- 36 A. Paiement, "Revoir Sometimes Square," in *Sometimes Square* (Quebec City: VU, centre de diffusion et de production de la photographie, 1996), unpaginated.
- 37 "Alain Paiement," interview with Lino Poligato, *Flux News*, no. 14 (November 1997), p. 3.
- 38 A. Paiement, "Revoir Sometimes Square," unpaginated.
- 39 *Ibid.*, unpaginated.
- 64 G. Perec, *Espèces d'espaces*, p. 155.
- 65 A. Paiement, press release for *Refaire surface*, Espace Malraux, Chambéry, France, 2002.
- 66 Translator's note: The French expression *refaire surface*, meaning "to resurface" (rise back to the surface), also suggests "re-surface" (remake or redo a surface).
- 67 A. Paiement, press release for *Refaire surface*.
- 68 Paul Claudel, quoted in the press release for *Beyond Polders*, 1987.
- 69 A. Paiement, press release for *Refaire surface*. "The views were shot methodically, but along the way, I sometimes dallied between strict documentary and unreasoning emotion when faced with a number of photogenic subjects. They were simply there, wherever I happened to be at the time. Without seeking. That's what these images of an apartment, a car, a child and a mouse caught in a trap have in common. Little fragments of my travels."
- 70 *Ibid.*
- 71 *Ibid.*
- 72 "The house is irretrievably a site of binary logic: nomadic/sedentary, private/public, individual/collective, rational/irrational, interior/exterior, haven/disquiet, as if it embodied the impossible reconciliation of opposites, as if the house were a subject impacted between the conscious and the unconscious, avowed and forbidden. The consequence of this binary functioning, this dissociated locus, is to engender a double subject, seeking its identity in a mirror-logic." (Marie-Ange Brayer, "La maison : un modèle en quête de fondation," *Exposé*, vol. 1, no. 3, "La maison" [1997], p. 7.)
- 73 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 74 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 75 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 76 "An anchor of subjectivity, the house is also supported by a factual dimension, for when you say house, you also say experience and passage in time. Its status is in itself transformational." (*Ibid.*, p. 48.)
- 77 G. Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps*, p. 146.
- 78 Hartmut Böhme, *Dürer, Melencolia I : dans le dédale des interprétations*, trans. M.-F. Lesouple and F. Bonnefoy (Paris: Adam Biro, "Un sur Un" series, 1990), p. 5.
- 79 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 80 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 81 "The polyhedron is also present, though figured differently, in Dürer's 1525 Treatise on Measurement, giving instructions for measuring with ruler and compass, where it deals with the semi-regular solids of Archimedes, observations that are invaluable for geometric theory. Thus, this solid, for the very reason that, unlike the sphere, it does not belong among the regular figures, becomes the particular expression of aptness for geometric constructions." (*Ibid.*, p. 22.)
- 82 Interview with the artist, June 2002.
- 83 H. Böhme, *Dürer, Melencolia I*, p. 55.
- 84 *Ibid.*, p. 9. The author further states, "The history of the interpretation of Melancholy must be considered a string of preliminary sketches of meanings that, for want of arriving at a universal significance, wears the features of the melancholy syndrome described by Dürer in this work." (*Ibid.*, p. 8.)
- 85 A. Paiement, "Memento mori, vanités et natures mortes", *Frontières*, vol. 14, no. 2 (Spring 2002), p. 92.
- 86 Hubert Damisch, *Théorie du nuage : pour une histoire de la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p. 38.
- 87 A. Paiement, "Approximativement le monde," unpaginated.
- 88 Consider all the optical "blurring" in both his painting and photographs, as well as the way he works: "I have evolved in between the tradition of architectural photography and a procedure of simply going around on foot, which implies both a constructive rigour and the attitude of a wanderer." (Alain Paiement : *résidence d'artiste à Bruxelles*, p. 4.)
- 89 H. Böhme, *Dürer, Melencolia I*, p. 57.

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