

Gwendoline Robin in conversation with Tania Nasielski

It began with the object in space, often translucent, playing with volume and light. Gradually the body – her own – took over, becoming more and more mobile, playing with fire, intensifying the light that has never left her and which is her work material. Today Gwendoline Robin associates the object with the body in space to create ever more complex installations and performances, in which object responds to space, movement to fire, light to the sound of the explosion, and in which the artist's body can explore, perform and dance with the danger and the poetry of fire.

There is immediacy in Gwendoline Robin's work; a relationship with the present moment given by the suddenness of the explosion, the very essence of fire, the evanescence of smoke. It confronts us with surprise, fear, danger, relief, and with wonder, too, and humour.

In the past few years, Gwendoline Robin has broadened the spectrum of her performances, collaborating with musician Garrett List, choreographer Marian Del Valle and discursive performer Alexandre Wajnberg, and these multidisciplinary associations have nourished and enriched her language. She performs internationally in festivals of performance, drama and dance, and further explores her dialogue with fire through drawings, installations, video work, books, and the art of movement.

Fire and explosives can be seen as the body and material of your work. You told me that you've always had a firecracker or two in your pocket ever since you were a kid. When did you start using them in your work?

While I was a student, I visited Valencia, where I discovered the festival *Las Fallas*. The city's various guilds each spend the year building a papier mâché sculpture. You see them on display in the public squares if you walk around the city in the early part of March. Then, on 19 March, they set fire to them to celebrate the end of winter. It all goes back to the days when carpenters used to burn their leftover pieces of wood: they built puppet theatres, which they then burned. The tension gradually builds as 19 March approaches. You know that all the sculptures are going to be set alight. You hear explosions all over the city: there's a strong smell of gunpowder. I liked that relationship between a year's worth of work and preparation and the single moment when it all goes up in flames. The experience had a lasting effect on me: I was keen to work with that same relationship – building followed by burning. The tension before the fire, which brings people together around a piece of work, and then bringing that relationship to life for the viewers. You look at sculpture in silence, whereas fireworks are greeted with 'oohs' and 'aahs'. People want to talk about it – they have a less sacral relationship with the work. Having said that, the performance then reintroduces a sacral element. I'm interested by that contradiction. I try to strip out the sacral, but the performance has a ritual element to it. It's to undermine that sense that I like to inject some humour.

Your work is often described as 'pyrotechnics'.

It's a means – a technique – that enables me to create ephemeral moments. I use fireworks to communicate something, but I'm not defined by them. I don't see myself as a pyrotechnician. What I do is performance and sculpture. My performances consist of ephemeral sculptures.

What's your relationship with fire?

When I'm working on a project, the idea gradually takes possession and the object belongs to me. When I set fire to the project, it ceases to be mine: I lose it. It's very important to be able to let go, to relinquish possession. It's as if the project had its own autonomy and has suddenly been restored to life. Because even if the object is damaged by the fire, it is not destroyed but transformed. I cease to have control and the fire takes over. There's also the excitement of knowing the fire is going to create a surprise. And the fear that the performance could go wrong. That fear, mixed with pleasure, is intimately linked to fire.

What about your responsibility?

The question of responsibility in relation to fire is important. There's my own responsibility, for instance. I obviously try to avoid doing any damage. But it does happen sometimes. It's part of the work, and it creates traces and scars that interest me. There are traces and scars on my body, too, and they're part of my life.

There's also the responsibility and attitude of the people in charge of the location: how they view any possible damage. In some places it's accepted, and in others it's not. And then you have the responsibility of the viewers: should they intervene if they see the fire spreading to a particular part of the space or to my clothing? For the most part, people instinctively respect the work and are unwilling to intervene so long as no one is in obvious danger. I find it interesting that they are asking themselves, 'should we intervene or not?' The viewers know there's going to be an explosion. And they also know that I'm in control of the situation.

Are you afraid when you light the fuse?

It's an ambiguous moment. On the one hand, I'm afraid that the fire won't light, and on the other, there's the fear of the unknown: that the fire will get out of control. I'm a naturally anxious person, and paradoxically I create performances to approach and confront danger. I play with the limit between fear and control. In a sense, playing with fire is a way of proving that I'm alive, that I am resisting.

If fire is your material, would it be accurate to say that your body is the medium that carries the performance? That it too is your working material?

To me, the body at first was just a tool: a support on which I placed my explosives. The more tension and explosions it was subjected to, however, the more I became aware of the reality of the body's presence as such. That presence seems obvious at first, but it actually takes time to build. The more performances you do, the more aware you become of your body's presence. I'm doing a variety of dance, movement and voice training, and I'm also following a course in Nô, to try to deepen my own awareness of the body, in the sense of the rightness of its presence, here and now. Being present without being demonstrative; not performing theatre or dance in order to *show* the viewers something, but just to be there; to make gestures as one does for oneself, and to communicate that presence to the viewers almost in spite of oneself. I was in Berne last October for the Bone IX performance festival. There I had the opportunity to discover older performers, aged between 60 and 80, which was wonderful. Watching them perform, you sense that this is the work of a lifetime. Their very presence was amazingly powerful. They were there with virtually nothing: just the rightness of their movements, their gestures and their bearing.

Where would you place yourself in terms of performance artists who use their bodies, like Marina Abramovic, Gina Pane and Chris Burden? They also play with the limits of fear and danger.

I'm interested in Marina Abramovic's relationship with the body and with danger. As for Chris Burden or Gina Pane, it is a very physical relationship. They go to the limits of pain as an expression of faith in life and in the strength of the body. The element of danger in my work

is offset by a touch of humour or absurdity, whereas in their performances, something more fundamental is going on in terms of limits. Working with pain, endurance and injury used to be important as an artistic approach. Nowadays, it no longer has the same significance. Those people are points of reference, they're obviously the prime movers, but my work is at a distance from theirs. It's lighter in the sense that pain and injury aren't part of my vocabulary, even though my work questions collective fears such as explosions, fire, and the fear of being burned. I create an absurd situation by placing myself in danger, a little like they do. But where they create a transformation through pain or exhaustion, it's the moment of explosion in my work that provokes a change through the release that comes after the tension.

Your body was immobile in your first performances and gradually began to move. How did that come about?

At first, my body was like the objects I used to construct. One of my first performances took place at Espace 251 Nord in Liège, at the invitation of Michael Dans. I'd built a metal structure that supported the papier mâché figure of a female warrior I called 'Gwendorak'. It was a sculpture, connected to me by an explosive fuse. I was wearing a boiler suit with the fuse attached to it. When I set fire to myself, there was an explosion and the flame travelled down the fuse to the sculpture. It too then exploded and burned almost entirely away. It was a moment of transition, because after that I stopped making sculptures and started to focus the explosions on my own body, though always remaining more or less immobile. It was while working with Garrett List that I began to introduce an element of mobility. Sound has duration, which implies movement. Because of that, I started to create sequences in which the body could evolve. That introduced elements of preparation and of choreography – to plan the sequence with Garrett, for instance. I was intrigued by that preparatory work and I began to incorporate it in the performances that followed.

Did that mark a move into choreography?

Perhaps. But then what is choreography, exactly? To me, it's about writing with your body. I try to reduce it to gestures that are natural and necessary to the work; as simple as possible, with no real staging. So far, the preparatory gestures have remained very technical. I'd like to find the freedom to create actions that are less technical and more poetic; incorporating the gestures needed to carry out a movement, but which create a different tension; not invariably linked to the explosion, but rather to the gestures and attitudes of the body. Take the act of pouring a line of black powder over ten metres. It's functional, but it could also become a movement you'd like to observe because of the beauty of the gesture. I'm increasingly coming across performance artists who are helping me to discover a freedom of gesture: actions that aren't useful in the first instance, but which convey a beauty that is an intrinsic part of being human. That's what I'm looking for: something that relates to more than fire alone. If I'm walking on a suspended beam, for instance, and I stretch the whole of my body in a balance to light a fuse placed high up, the movement that results opens up a whole new language.

And that language is what you're searching for?

Yes. It's like a child playing alone who invents languages of its own. It's wonderful, because everything centres on the moment, the instant. That's what happens in some of the performances I've seen: something 'primary', and the freedom to dare do it.

You've told me that you want to avoid 'staging' effects. There's a dramatic tension in your performances, to which the protective suit you wear contributes. How do you work with those elements of costume and staging?

I don't like the rigid aspect of staging a performance. When I talk about *mise en scène*, I'm referring to a more or less open structure, within which I can evolve and orientate myself according to the specific moment. The suit also gives me a structure, a support and a presence. But all it takes is for the flames to spread to some other part of the body or the space and everything changes: I have to be able to get the suit off, to move and to run, if necessary.

The course of the performance is unpredictable. The beginning is predetermined, but not the end. I'm not interested in the kind of staging in which everything is defined in advance. Because of the danger I have to be myself, I don't act and I don't want to play a role, be a character. When you perform, your relationship with the other changes, there is a distance between you and the other. The suit adds to that distance: at the end of the day, it protects me from both the fire and the viewer. The costume issue is something I think about a lot. How do you get the protection you need without simultaneously creating a 'character'? The protective overalls, headgear and glasses create a kind of astronaut effect. I'd like to change that, to wear more banal clothes. On the other hand, I am interested by the white cloak I wrap around myself to hold the smoke: it brings a poetic presence. You asked me about the body: my awareness of my body and its presence alters my relationship with the costume and the way I wear it. Little by little, I'm choosing when and how I wear it.

What part does humour play in your work?

Danger and irreverence are linked in all my performances. It's a question of deflecting the danger onto something else. Viewers often ask about the connections between my work and the news from abroad – outrages, suicide bombers, war. The element of humour is important in order to break that relationship. I certainly don't claim to be talking about those things; that's not my aim: the reality in which I live here in Belgium is different. To me, explosions relate first and foremost to time – to the present moment. I often hear people laughing after the explosion: laughter is an important release after the tension that came before.

For example?

I exploded some watermelons at Bains de Forest in Brussels. You could take that as a metaphor for a bomb; or for blood, seeing as they were red inside. But at the end of the day, they're still watermelons. The way a mundane piece of fruit can make us imagine something else creates a kind of reality gap. At the 'Danse en vol' festival at the Bissectine – also in Brussels – I tied a rocket to each leg of the chair I was sitting on. The chair obviously couldn't leave the ground that way, but the rockets enabled me to create the *intention* of take-off. As they exploded, they formed a cloud of smoke around the chair, so you could actually imagine it taking to the air...

How important to you are the traces of the work?

It's odd – I'm becoming more interested in what's left behind. Before it was just a matter of documentation: I work on my own, so I film and photograph what I do to see whether I can improve any of the pyrotechnic effects or the presence of my body. Some of those 'test' videos have taken on a different status. Like *Pauvre Gwen*, which started out as a way of testing an idea and ended up as a fully-fledged video that is now screened at festivals. I'm not interested in the traces if they're fabricated in any way. On the other hand, I realised they can sometimes have an importance in their own right. I keep photos or videos of some performances and even some of the boiler suits I was wearing and which still bear the marks of the explosion. I've kept a pair of scorched boots, too: they evoke a sense of presence and absence for me. Once removed, boots retain the presence of the body that wore them. Other traces are linked to the landscape or to the working process. I try things out in the countryside and the photos I take are just as much a trace of that landscape and the

working process as they are of what happens before the spectacular moment of explosion. The same goes for studio photos, because they evoke the experiments, objects that have burned or which are going to burn, the black powder... basically, my universe. Those traces help construct my universe and provide a fuller vision of my work.

You've published some work too, most notably *Les nuits de Gwendoline*, in which fear is defused by humour. Tell me about your written work.

The publications act as reference points. After the period of preparation, the moment of performance is instantaneous. It is transient. When I create a book, by contrast, I live with it for longer. I rework the text and the images. I explore, I revisit what I've done, I work on the layout... There's a duration there that doesn't exist in performance. It also enables the viewers to discover the work in a different way. They can open the book whenever they feel like it. They don't have to be there at the precise moment of the performance.

I wrote *Les nuits de Gwendoline* during a period in my life when I was preoccupied by the fear of death. To get it out of me, I had to produce that book. And humour had to be the dominant element. The other publication, *First Alert*, consists of four cinematographic sequences – images that follow one another like a piece of film. Four actions cut into fixed images that fold out like an accordion.

You recently exhibited a series of drawings. How does drawing fit into your work?

I don't produce a lot of drawings. Some of them are preparatory sketches that act as reminders during the working process. Others are drawings I make after a performance to help me remember specific moments. It's also a way of prolonging that instant. I only draw in order to prepare or to recall performances. It also helps me link back to the studio, which is important. I often rent a studio for those moments in my work that have something restful about them: I'm alone with myself and my work; it's not public like the performance. There's something harsh about 'afterwards': once the moment of the performance has passed and you're alone and disorganised. There's a sense of confusion, you feel bereft. The work of drawing reunites me with myself. Like the photos or videos – or even the writing – it's a way of being alone with the work that enables me to refocus and to gather new ideas. That's what gives the drawings their *raison d'être*, because they weren't originally intended to be shown. I hang them on the wall at home and it's proof that the performance really happened. They're a trace – like the photos and videos – that allow me to stay with the work once the performance is over.