

Accumulations and Wanderings, Interview with Jean-Jacques Lebel (Part 1)

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Chapô

Interview with Jean-Jacques Lebel, a major artist and unrivalled actor and witness of some of the most important artists of the 20th century. His work has an unusual relationship with mobility, addressing it simultaneously as a learning, creating and presenting. **Présentation longue**

As always with Lebel, it is impossible to separate his work from the social and political dimensions. How can we use travel to escape social coercion and forge our own capacity for self-reliance? Why does wandering make possible? How can walking can shape thought and imagination? What uses can we make of mobility? What can we expect from it? How could we be to adopt an artistic approach?

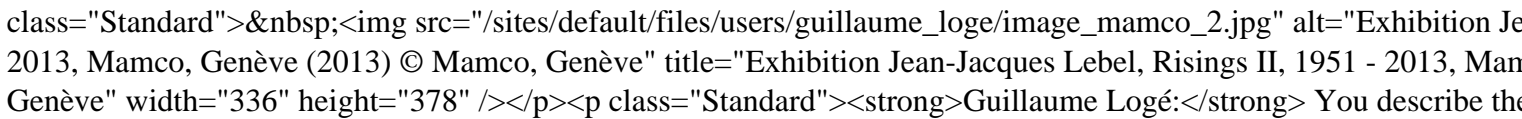
Jean-Jacques Lebel is one the most important artists and a witness to some of the major artistic trends that marked the second half of the 20th century, such as Surrealism. Among the friends with whom he exchanged ideas and/or collaborated were Marcel Duchamp, Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure, William Burroughs, Man Ray, Benjamin Péret, Henri Michaux, Octavio Paz, Edouard Glissant, Guillaume Logé, and a few. With Lebel, lists are often endless. An artistic genius, he is equally at home as a painter, poet, traveler, performance artist, exhibition curator, festival organizer and, again, the list goes on.

We arranged to meet Jean-Jacques Lebel, wandering, so inextricably linked to his art - from the roving of the Beat Generation artists, to the *dérive* in a sense systematized by Guy Debord. We went to meet him so that he could talk to us about his relationship with mobility with thus offering free rein to his own interpretation of it.

The work of Jean-Jacques Lebel is so at the heart of view of art history and thought that we felt it important to include in this article certain remarks that may, at times, address mobility, but that are nonetheless essential for a more profound understanding.

Jean-Jacques Lebel, 1929-2013, with, as background, the exhibition that Geneva's Mamco devoted to him, entitled *Soulevements* (exhibition *Soulevements* organized by the Maison Rouge in Paris in 2009), as well as his creation based on a vast source of visual and audio documents on the Beat Generation artists, put on in four venues simultaneously, in Metz.

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 Exhibition Jean-Jacques Lebel, Risings II, 1951 - 2013, Mamco, Genève

Guillaume Logé: You describe the work of Allen Ginsberg that you're presenting at the moment at the Centre Pompidou Metz and three other venues as "a multimedia environment that is not linear but labyrinthine [...]" and you speak of "offering visitors the choice of images and texts." In the terms you employ and as an art form that you've practiced a great deal, we find collage and mobility, here, seems to be intellectual and sensitive... and at the same time, you ask the visitor to travel physically. In your work, collage in a definitive manner, but rather have created the *possibility* of a collage, or collages in the plural. In the happenings you used to organize, to make their own contribution to the work's production. You created the conditions in which the visitor plays a role. What can you tell us about this meeting of movements, sensitive and physical, both in the work the result of these mobilities?

Jean-Jacques Lebel: It's true, I had enough of hearing the incomplete quotation from Marcel Duchamp, "It is the viewer that makes the painting," a cavalier excuse of the lazy, who plow into the void and sign it. For about forty years (and I remember having talked about it) I have been suggesting that, rather than satisfying a consumerist, "ready-made culture," we should be thinking about practices that *cooperate* in the creation process. We haven't given enough thought to what the work of looking is, not to infantilize them, ordering them to consume "ready-made" art, as happens in galleries and museums, where they are being pushed the "yes" button or the "no" button (Do you like this? Do you dislike this?). That's not *cooperation* and involves a lot of work and effort, a kind of chiasmus. During happenings, we did a great deal of improvising, like a collage in place through collective action. In my retrospective being shown at the MAMCO in Geneva at the moment- as was also at the Maison Rouge - a very large, open cube has been installed, made of four transparent screens. Onto them are projected

lengths. It's called *Les Avatars de Vénus*. Visitors are encouraged to step outside of themselves, and not to themselves with being passive spectators, by wandering in and out of the cube. Depending on their line of vision on the screens, thus producing an infinite number of images through "multiple pileup," or accumulation of the screens. By changing themselves in one place or another and to move, viewers continue to develop the images. They reinvent and rearrange motion, and take possession of it. In this way, the "author" is involved in what Guattari called a "collective arrangement" or "collectively-produced, open work."

Guillaume Logé: This work, *Les Avatars de Vénus* seems to me to be crucial to your work as a whole, and allows us to approach and understand the connection between your work (and, ideally, wandering freely) and the possibility of a nascent regard. Could you tell us a bit more about the origins of this work? (2013) © Mamco, Genève

Jean-Jacques Lebel: *Les Avatars de Vénus* is the product of a very old idea as painting itself - which has preoccupied me my entire life: with an image, whatever it may be, what is the image that will come after? What intellectual movement is this image part of? There are a few painters of genius who have done what came before and what will come next. I'm thinking of some of Titian's or Giorgione's Venuses, or certain works of the 19th century, a static picture, and I've always wanted to "kineticize" the static image and set it in motion. It was computer technology that allowed me to carry out this project. To begin - and for about forty years - during each of my travels, I started collecting (from museums, street, flea markets, libraries, everywhere), picking up and putting in big cardboard boxes images of what seemed to possess a certain *venustas*, or rather one of the many forms of *venustas*. "*Vénusté*" is a word used by the ancients but it's from Ovid: what constitutes the *venustas* (charm or beauty) of Venus? What are the attributes that define her? Love and beauty? There are as many interpretations as there are human beings, depending on culture, country, sex, age, etc. No one will ever agree on what constitutes *venustas*, beauty or love. So I accumulated literally thousands of images and organized them into thirty or so sequences. For example, there's the prehistoric Venus of Willendorf; around her are numerous other images that resemble her, gathered by people like André Breton and Roger Caillois, then, Jean Arp's sculptures, then there's the "Cubist" sequence, the Bettie Page sequence, etc. Once I'd organized these sequences, I asked two IT specialists, who worked for me, to create images of each sequence follow on from each another by constantly morphing into one another. We take two images, superimpose them, and create an anamorphosis through the connective combination of the two. The first image gradually becomes the second, which becomes the next one, etc. You thus establish a movement which travels through and animates the images. The sculptures and drawings move... The interesting thing, it seems to me, is that I have put an end to any kind of hierarchy between different techniques and periods. It was the affinities that were important to me. If a Roman Venus were in a certain position and a Rodin or Otto Dix whose subject had the same posture, I created a connection, a continuity, a flow. All of it jumps across time. The important thing is not the timescale, but composing a sequence. And so you get *Les Avatars de Vénus*, which is a continuous move. You can wander inside and outside. You have a double point of entry - the meditative, immobile position, and the mobile position, who, depending on their viewing perspective and the path they choose, sees different screens and therefore captures different images that has not been pre-programmed. This was my first experience using computing as a tool to reinvent and energize the work. For me, art should come as close as possible to how thought actually functions, thus to the subconscious, which is any kind of idea of transportation, not only amorous but artistic, musical or otherwise. The dictatorship of universal digitalization is what we have to nail us to the ground, and so we have to subvert it, overthrow it and sabotage it. As Nietzsche said, "You must have a will to birth to a dancing star." And that's my policy.

Guillaume Logé: The wandering that you encourage in viewers is part of the work. The spectator's movement crosses with that of the work, whose images constantly appear in groups and simultaneities that create a sense of movement. Wandering is a means of creating one's own perspective and developing one's thought.

Jean-Jacques Lebel: This comes from studying Nietzsche and his writing criticizing "a sedentary life." [file:///C:/Users/Guillaume/Documents/SNCF/TEXTES/Interview%20JJ%20Lebel%20-%20Errance%20Beat%20Generation/Carambolages%20et%20d%C3%A9ambulations%20\(version%20anglaise\).docx](file:///C:/Users/Guillaume/Documents/SNCF/TEXTES/Interview%20JJ%20Lebel%20-%20Errance%20Beat%20Generation/Carambolages%20et%20d%C3%A9ambulations%20(version%20anglaise).docx)

He writes that philosophers should walk, wander and move in order to think clearly. This is why he spent so much time walking the mountains in Sils-Maria and around Genoa, for example. Ideas came to him as he walked in the mountains, in Caspar David Friedrich's landscapes or along the Mediterranean coast. I've always followed Nietzsche's advice to the letter. I've also thought about a different kind of wandering, different from Nietzsche, like Henry Miller, for instance, who talks about how he wrote his two very beautiful novels *Black Spring* and *Black Water*. [file:///C:/Users/Guillaume/Documents/SNCF/TEXTES/Interview%20JJ%20Lebel%20-%20Errance%20Beat%20Generation/Carambolages%20et%20d%C3%A9ambulations%20\(version%20anglaise\).docx](file:///C:/Users/Guillaume/Documents/SNCF/TEXTES/Interview%20JJ%20Lebel%20-%20Errance%20Beat%20Generation/Carambolages%20et%20d%C3%A9ambulations%20(version%20anglaise).docx)

walking the streets of the capital. He used to set off in the mornings with a little notepad, and as he wandered he would

various events and eventually, by doing so, he constructed his tale. This practice is not, of course, exclusively Nietzsche's. I believe that the intellectual work of someone who wants to be a "spectator" has to a great many other artists as well. I believe that the intellectual work of someone who wants to be a "spectator" has to a great many other artists as well. I believe that the intellectual work of someone who wants to be a "spectator" has to a great many other artists as well. I believe that the intellectual work of someone who wants to be a "spectator" has to a great many other artists as well.

walking or dancing. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Young were great walkers. Thinking occurs whilst moving. There are they drive - Kerouac and Guattari wrote while "on the road"Guillaume Logé: You yourself have traveled a lot, living in the United States and France and abroad. What's your rapport with this wandering that you talk about? Do you share the same hunger for a p Has this influenced your own work, your way of creating, writing, compiling and collecting? </p><p class="Standard">Jacques Lebel: Of course. Walking - whether it's in the city, the countryside, on the beach or in the mountain absolutely essential. Around 1953, when I was still a boarder at my high school in Meaux, we had a club with Raymond Dufrène, Jean-Philippe Talbot and one or two others. Every Sunday, we would meet up at François' house and had to i some way involved wandering, something that would surprise the others. Raymond Hains was fascinated by the big S makers' shop windows - those giant red demonstration knives, with all the blades automatically opening and then, all o He loved it! We'd cross Paris on foot and stop at different knife-makers' shops. My contribution was to imagine an ex my friends and we'd go to Bercy, for example, where scrap-dealers would be welding with ozone: the smell of ozone - walk a few miles to get to Rue Vieille du Temple, to a shop that sold tea and roasted coffee beans. You could breathe i coffees, it was very refined. Each of us suggested a sensory experience to the four others. There was a lot of wandering got to explore Paris and all its nooks and crannies.</p><p class="Standard">Wandering, once again, is what triggers it Random collage in motion. It's the notion of travel, but which tends to produce the conditions of the intellectual journe the generation that experimented with mescaline and LSD, which ignorant people foolishly called trips, as in journeys. journalist - a bit of a moron – who was interviewing Ginsberg and Corso asked Corso "Do you take drugs?" Corso rep Châteauneuf du Pape!" Our goal was "to get out of our minds." In short, a Rimbaud-inspired "disruption of all the sen absolute otherness and the "loss of the unity of the ego" that, in reality, is nothing but a monotheist fiction. How can w without ingesting hallucinogenic substances? Through works of art that encourage viewers' cooperation and self-man fantasies full of images that we provide them in such a way that they can make what they like of them and use them. T original point, "It is the viewer that makes the painting" or film, or music, or journey -but that implies a re real intellectual and sensory contribution. Without that, nothing happens - they remain at a standstill. </p><p class="Standard"> </p><div><br clear="all" /><hr align="left" size="1" width="33%" /><div><p class="Footr

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reference to Kerouac's celebrated novel On the Road</p></div></div><p>Date de publication
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