Jesper Just
at Palais de Tokyo, Paris

A PATTERN OF DISAPPOINTMENT

Exhibition view of Jesper Just 'Servitudes', Palais de Tokyo, courtesy of the artist, Galerie Perrotin (Paris, New York, Hong Kong) & Anna Lena Films, photo Aurélien Mole

Just when you thought that Palais de Tokyo had finally figured out how best to project multi-channel videos in its cavernous galleries, Jesper Just's eight-screen video installation introduces yet another solution. As daring as 'Servitudes' is innovative, Just's alternative scenario submits spectators to a peculiar path on which they stroll in the dark atop metal scaffolding. As each gallery surrenders to massive projections that effectively erase successive corners and edges, a cascade of servitudes unfolds. However cheerless, bland, or despondent his leading ladies seem, they prompt neither sadness nor pity. Just's stark style can feel as bleak as stereotypical Danish films (consider Carl Theodor Dreyer, serious Dogme 95, or 'Babette's Feast'), yet able amblers will surely endure an emotional roller coaster. 'Servitudes' is not as extreme as Lars von Trier films that stir tears and/or laughter, yet I imagine most visitors experiencing an uneven mix of wonder, confusion, anxiety, dismay, curiosity, indifference, delight, and repulsion.

Despite its not really being a film, one feels tempted to treat 'Servitudes' as a film with eight consecutive acts playing simultaneously, or as a octaptych, an artwork consisting of eight coexisting parts. To experience 'Servitudes' as a film, one must not only follow its consecutive order, but one must accept the prescribed path as merited, otherwise the acts easily scramble. In fact I messed this up, when I entered at the end and got turned around somewhere in the middle. I am thus resigned to viewing 'Servitudes' as an octaptych, a work whose parts are revealed all at once, rather than unfold in time like film.

Of the eight screens, three feature places, including a horizontal video of its interior, a vertical video of piano strings, and a horizontal video featuring an elevator bank. The octaptych's extended environment thus provides a view that captures the skyscraper's uniformity, a second shot that anticipates a later scene, and a third camera focused on the building's function. Of these three fairly monotonous videos, the elevator bank proves the most exciting. Every time an elevator door slides open and one hears the familiar 'ting', one immediately starts (like Pavlov's dog) anticipating, waiting, and then yearning for someone to emerge from the elevator, yet no one does. And thus a third servitude arrives. Even as spectators trained on the elevators accept that it's not real, one strangely grows sadder and sadder. Although no one is visible in the interior shots, one doesn't sense the same loss, perhaps because it doesn't prompt expectation.

The first character one encounters is an adorable lady attempting to eat an ear of corn, outfitted with what look to be robotic prosthetic arms, yet she is not visibly missing any limbs. Since this elaborate device appears extraneous, her corn-eating troubles track a fourth servitude that of being constrained by outlandish fashion or unsustainable desires. One next witnesses a tween vigorously (and apparently incessantly) tapping a handheld stone against the base of a granite-clad building. It's difficult to imagine what she hopes to accomplish, other than to beat out rhythms, attract attention, or annoy passersby. Still, one waits, watches, and wonders, yet her addiction to this compulsive, impractical action never wanes. Pacing back and forth inside a posh high-rise condominium, the first gal seems to be waiting for something to happen, which of course, never does. A pattern of disappointment is emerging here ...

It is at this point (the seventh screen) that one divines the particular New York City skyscraper and realizes why expectation, anxiety, and frustration fill the air. Society's ceaseless attempts to rebuild, recreate, and replace following disasters, manmade or otherwise, are servitudes, indicative of cravings for some irreplaceable, lost past. The last scene captures the rhythmic tapper now deftly playing a baby grand piano; however constrained she is by her real handicap.

To my mind, 'Servitudes' provides a portrait of a particular mindset that is enslaved by its extreme determination to accomplish something grandiose and monumental, because it lacks any understanding of how such an accomplishment might actually achieve its true goals. The action's meaning has become disassociated from the labor, however impressive. I thus leave the question of whether 'Servitudes' is itself in servitude up to subsequent spectators.

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Jesper Just 'Servitudes' until 13 September at Palais de Tokyo, 13, avenue du Président Wilson, Paris, FR. Open Wed-Mon from 12am-12pm. http://palaisdetokyo.com