

INTERVIEW JEAN-PIERRE SERGENT WITH NICOLAS SURLAPIERRE | BESANÇON FINE ARTS & ARCHEOLOGY MUSEUM | JUNE 30 2023 | 4 PARTS

Jean-Pierre Sergent talks with Nicolas Surlapierre, the Museum director, about his mural installation: "The Four Pillars Of The Sky" (80 m2) at the Museum of Fine Arts and Archaeology of Besançon. Filmed on June 30, 2022, cameras Lionel Georges and Christine Chatelet.

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Nicolas Surlapierre: Jean-Pierre, I'm quite happy that we're doing a new interview again, we did the last one, I would say almost two years ago. We were in the Conference Room of the Museum where we had presented a series of small, beautiful and erotic serigraphs "Eros Unlimited". We had a discussion that lasted an hour and a half or two hours, I don't remember. And some time later, I had watched the videos and had found, how many elements that were told to me, directly, had escaped me. So, I found it extremely interesting to be able to go back to an interview, even if this evening, it is at your initiative. So, an interview is one of the most difficult exercises with artists, why? Because what is important is not so much the person who is going to ask the questions; but it is to be able to listen to you. To hear you on this work, on this great installation at the Museum of Fine Arts and Archaeology, on which we will come back, this monumental work: "The Four Pillars Of The Sky" that, I think, one sees well, I hope, behind me!

First of all, what I would like to do is to try to start this conversation, because it is also a conversation and that is how we conceived it, through quotations, quotations that you transmitted to me in a very framed, very structured way, and I find it quite fascinating to enter your artistic universe. The first question I'm going to ask you, that I chose among the quotations in the example you gave me; I chose the first quotation I'm going to read. It's an Apache proverb, it's a very short one and I'm going to ask you to react to this Apache proverb, which touched me tremendously and this proverb says : "I'm not here to fit into your world, I'm here to protect mine." I'd like you to respond to either part of that Apache proverb, that aphorism, if you will, maybe explain what you mean to protect in your creation and how you do it? And by what images, by what references, perhaps, you install this protection and what is this type of protection?

Jean-Pierre Sergent : Yes, well, Art is necessarily a fight. I think that all the artists feel it. It is a fight against the stupidity of the World, against the destruction of the World! We try to regenerate the World, we make in some way, rituals of regeneration. We are really like the shamans in the old times and we are also fighting into guerrilla warfare since, necessarily, the materialistic world tries to destroy all creation. Especially nowadays! It is true that we are in a state of resistance (as one could say!) And this Apache proverb is very interesting and absolutely correct, since we are every day into a fight to try to defend the humanistic values, the values of beauty, the values of color, the values of life too! You see, I am not 'Pro-Life', in

quotes, but I am for Life. I think one can feel it very strongly in my paintings because I use a lot of colors, I use a lot of energies and it is really this particular struggle that I wanted to name and present to the public. So whether people can feel it or not is another problem and I think it will probably take some time before people feel the strength or the power of my artwork. But anyhow, it is inherent and consubstantial to Art, it always takes some time for it to be understood...

NS: So, I was interested by this quote, this Apache proverb, because I think that this is one of the functions of Museums, because Museums are not only there to protect collections, to protect people but to accompany, in any case the staff and the visitors but we are also there to protect meanings and that's why I liked this quote, as I really believe, sometimes we don't really know, how the message that will be given, how we will be able to diffuse it... So much the worse if it is lost but sometimes there are things that come back in a strange way; but not necessarily, if I understand what you say, not necessarily at the moment when we expect it the most. That's why I think that this idea of protection of meanings is, I think with you, a little different. Because it is a protection of a universe or even universes, and you used this theme of shaman, which would pass, in a aesthetic way, obviously but also in an almost ritual way, in a ritualistic way, throughout you. So we are in front of this great composition of the "The Four Pillars Of The Sky" I will not ask you a very complex question. I will come back later on what I feel about this large painting, can you explain us a little bit the genesis and then how you conceived this great wall installation and how and why? What is the shape that it took, why always these 105 cm by 105 cm modular units, why the square? All these elements and of course, the motifs; all these elements that are constitutive of the "The Four Pillars Of The Sky"?

JPS: Yes, I started developing this kind of work on Plexiglas in a very organic way in New York where I started by putting together a few small panels on the wall and then finally, in my Brooklyn studio's, I wanted to cover the whole wall. It's these wall installations that fill me up and soothe me somehow. Because it's not that I want to do large scale formats for the sake of doing large formats; as it's always small units added together, that I do on a daily basis. They are always small units that I make on a daily basis, which come together and form what we can call this big mural painting, an artist's universe. And what also interests me is that it is completely heterogeneous. Sometimes there are links because, as I reproduce the images with the medium of screen-printing, I can repeat an image several times but otherwise there are images that have absolutely nothing to do with each other and that creates for me, like that: a dynamic, a chaos, in which I can live. My first references are really the tombs of the ancient Egyptians, because finally, it was the place where the dead could survive for eternity. So it's a bit of a quest for the eternal, somehow, in all modesty and on a daily basis. It's always a work in progress. It's the work itself which is inscribed in the duration, that's it.

NS: By the way, in your *Notes*, because you wrote in several *Notes* and particularly in *Beauty is Energy* where you also evoke this great composition "The Four Pillars Of The Sky". You said that you attacked, in a certain way, rationality. There is something that you attack! Can you be more specific? Because I thought it was a beautiful idea, on this question of rationality? Why I ask you this question, because when the visitors pass in front of the composition, as we have this square format, which is repeated... There is a great stability, we have also the symmetry of the

staircases... The layout looks on the contrary, extremely rational. One feels that it is very mastered plastically and aesthetically, I was going to say. It is also very mastered at the level of the device; and yet, you speak at a given moment of wanting to attack rationality. What do you mean by this: attacking the rationality?

JPS: The structure of my painting is rational and organized (like an organic body), of course, since it has to be shown, it's architected; in order to present it in this architecture, of course, but in this sense of attacking rationality, I mean that we live in a very rational world where it is money that dominates us and enslave us! It's a Franc plus a Franc, an Euro plus an Euro or a Dollar plus a Dollar... That is to say that everything is added all the time and endlessly, like that, and the whole spiritual world has disappeared (the free of charge & generosity). I wanted to quote Andreï Tarkovski who says in this very beautiful book that I am reading *Sculpting in Time*:

"Since the WW2 war, culture has collapsed. In the whole World. And the spiritual world too. [...] Today, more than ever, we must safeguard everything that has a link, however tenuous, with the spiritual." *Sculpting in Time*, Andreï Tarkovski

That is to say, the 'rational' (materialistic) world is always in combat with the spiritual world. Except that now all the churches are closing, it's becoming ruins. So where to find the place of the spiritual? That's kind of our approach as artists; not to save all that, but maybe to try to save the last pieces (the last snippets) of what has lasted for millennia... Because, I feel a certain responsibility to oppose this rational and technological world, which locks us in a crazy speed all the time, which eats up our time to live and to love. And you see, in my work, I speak about immemorial things, I speak about Egyptian rituals, I speak about sexuality which exists since the dawn of time and for everybody; for the animals and for ourselves! I am talking about the wisdom of the Buddha, since the Buddha exists, this wisdom exists. You see, I want to talk about this collective memory; that we can call the collective unconscious. And I think, for example, that if ever the artists disappeared; it is the sentence of the famous German artist who says: "If Art disappeared, the human brain would also disappear", dixit Joseph Beuys.

"Art education is a problem all over the world. Deep down, everyone knows that man cannot live without art. Without art education man would probably wither away after 2000 years without art he would probably lose his brain. We are talking here about an art that gives back life to man directly from an unknown space, but which I try to designate with the term "counter-space" and by asking the question of man's entire existence: How does man come into the world? What are the forces that nourish him?

Art is food for man, January 27 1970, Joseph Beuys

JPS : And I think there we have a true role to play, somewhere, so that the brain does not disappear.

NS: Or that Art does not disappear!

JPS: Yes, but Art is less important than Life, somewhere, yes maybe?

NS: So, it's interesting what you say because I had never asked myself the question, we feel this part of spirituality in your work, or some interest, for what I could call the

spiritual knowledge or or *The spiritual in Art* (Kandinsky) to quote the title of a famous book. But I didn't necessarily associate it with a place, be it a church or a temple. I thought that it could be as well in a sacred hill and finally, I say to myself: how do you consider yourself in relation to a landscape, outside? Because I see you from time to time at the Courbet Museum in Ornans where one can discover the painter Courbet, who is also a great landscape painter and perhaps one of the great landscape painters of the 19th century. What is your relationship with Nature? And is it possible to explain to us this relationship between spirituality and finally observation, I was going to say of the pattern, of the landscape... Because, that's what's interesting in an interview. There are things that we have swept away and then, suddenly, there is an idea that arises... And according to me, this idea that arises is precisely the difference between the interior and the exterior. And I'm really talking very architecturally about the term. You spoke of churches, so here we are in a Museum. But because for me, the spiritual can be in a valley, in a grandiose landscape or even not... where the spiritual can express itself very, very strongly, sometimes one does not know so much, not well; the way in which the spiritual can express itself. Does the exterior have an importance, do the landscapes, the atmospheres, do they have an importance for you? Or is your interest more through vestiges, traces, or through your knowledge of contemporary art of course? Some Vestiges, traces and finally something rather patrimonial in your images stock?

JPS: That's a very good question. What fascinates me is Art, of course, because that's where the sacred remains and endures... And I didn't have any Buddhist training; but when I go canoeing into Nature, I can feel... Firstly, I feel an absolutely neutral space. That is to say that Nature doesn't give a damn about us and somewhere you can bang your head on a rock for hours; and the rock won't talk to you more in any way, if you want! And it's very important, this neutrality... Because we are very pretentious (Men) and we think that we have an importance. But we don't have much importance. Our only importance is to define something sacred and to define it together, and of course, now that Art is selling at exorbitant prices, if a painting sells for 2 or 3 million Euros, it becomes a sacred object in a way. And it is money that makes things sacred. But before, the works or the people had their own sacredness and were integrated into a community through common rituals. And, I have the deep and real impression that our rituals have, for the most part, disappeared. And we're kind of on our own. So, we go back to the point that maybe, nowadays, it's, maybe, artists responsibility to bring everyone together and create the connection between each of us. But it's a bit pretentious, but maybe in front of a Pollock's canvas we can feel this cosmic energy or this sexual energy that he wanted to depict? What is important is that the public can feel an energy. Spirituality it's that! It's to feel an energy that is beyond us, that is transcendental somewhere.

NS: And so, I would like to hear you, not to conclude; but when I am in front of "The Four Pillars Of The Sky", I see something quite well organised, quite structured, a quite stable composition and yet there is something that in spite of the mandalas, in spite of some lotus motifs, in spite of certain motifs that we find often in your Pantheon and that we are beginning to know well and that are almost formal attributes; one may have the feeling that there is absolutely no center? And this is what disturbs me, but in the good sense of the word; in the sense that interests me! I say disturbed not to say interested, the term is a little more common, which disturbs me. One has the impression that one does not know in these "Four Pillars of the

Sky", whereas it should be structuring. It should be Four Pillars that, in a certain way, build our relationship to Art, or perhaps even create reference points? While there, on the contrary, one has the impression that one slips constantly, that one can never concentrate in the image; while being at the same time, and it is that which I appreciate... It is to say that there is this aspect, I do not want to say it is an: 'at the same time', but one cannot really completely concentrate in the image and yet: there is this effect! By a repetition of certain motifs that we could call the 'pattern', it is not, by erudition, it is more in the American meaning. I find that the term is more accurate than the 'decorative motif that repeats itself', like a psalmody, almost like in a hypnotic relationship. So there is something of the concentration. And I don't know if it's really a question but in any way; I really find some aspects, to summarize in a rough way, the mandala or the mandala form or the lotus form. That is to say, something that bring us towards a concentration and towards a very, very precise point... And precisely, I have the deep feeling that, in this installation, I find that it is rather marvellous, that we are almost in a world before the discovery that the Earth was round. That is to say, if there are no boundaries and we are in a world that is edgeless, precisely, as we are in a borderless world, one can be scare that if we approach too much the limit of the work; perhaps we can fall. And it is the motif, in a certain way, that we try to find back and sometimes the links too. That we find... The bodies, the straps that allow us to go back to the surface of the image or in any case, to remain on the edge of the world that you are giving us. Because you offer us indeed, I do not know if you propose a cosmogony but in any case, very certainly, you propose a world. That's how I talk about this installation, I'm particularly interested in the execution and staging of your art. this set up of your Art. And I had a very simple question: do you think it is immobile? Are your compositions immobiles or, at the opposite, do you see movement in it? Because I can't decide, that's why I ask you the question.

JPS: Yes, it's a very interesting question, I want to talk about infinity, of course (the perpetual motion)! That is to say that there is absolutely no center at all! You did perfectly understood that. There is no center, it is a coalition, a conglomerate of movements, images and informations; just as in shamanic trances. That is to say that everything slides, everything merges and the times mix, obviously. There is not only one time T; there are several T times! There are 'at the same time' and merged together: Africa, there is Siberia, the Tiger, the Snake, Death and Life... Everything really mixes, it is like what one could name like the New York melting pot. Everything mixes and I think it's very important because it creates another dynamic. You did have pointed that out very correctly: with my Art, I am getting out of the linear time, yes, that's exactly it.

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NS: So perhaps now, to go further, beyond the "Four Pillars Of The Sky", we could now try to move forward and think on what you called in the Notes you gave me: "liberator Art and rescuer Art". With also the part of saving and liberating for the artist and also for the public, because the public does not put the liberation or the salvation, in the same place. You had several quotations, you had proposed a quotation from James Joyce, there is a beautiful quotation from *À rebours*, from Huysmans and then, you had put some notes, notably from your *New York Diary's*,

from your *Notes of New York* and then, I like it because it is very short but in my opinion it would deserve to be developed and it is perhaps the object of this interview. So, you say in these Notes from NY: "beauty is born out of confusion." I would like you to come back to this theme of confusion, or in any case, its relation to beauty?

JPS: Yes, we talked last time about stumbling, I don't know if you remember that, in our last interview?

NS: Yes, I had forgotten the world but it is very beautiful indeed! One day we'll have to stop stumbling, but in that case, we'll be dead!

JPS: Yes, it's certain that Life is always a matter of chance, of coincidences and stumbles. I wrote this little sentence in New York because there is always so much informations and things that happen in this World-City. And also, today, we are constantly overwhelmed by and in information and in this confusion. It is as if there was a kind of iceberg of beauty lost and floating somewhere. Well, maybe beauty exists beyond all these horrors; and Life is still of incredible power and beauty. When we go into Nature and it is untouched, it moves us every time. And when we are in front of animals, it is the same, they do have this vital energy, once again, when it is not damaged. And it is this beauty that I also feel within all the first peoples, before they were exterminated like dogs. So this beauty there... And this confusion, because unfortunately we cannot name beauty, it is true. And then, it is so infinite, I spoke about it before, it is way beyond us. It is something that moves us, that moves the infant to the old man who hears a bird song and smiles!

NS: Yes, what can be retained: it is the multitude of information and that perhaps, the beauty quotes or leaves this multitude; where one does not see anything any more, what one calls besides on Internet: the 'noise' in fact. This brouhaha even insane. It comes out a little bit of freeze-frame almost and to get out of this confusion, of these hundreds, tens, thousands, billions of information that, in a certain way, prevent us perhaps from having a true gaze, prevents us from stopping and understanding, it is a little bit trite, they are clichés but nevertheless; I am struck by the fact that we finally confuse... Communication, information and finally real knowledge, not scholarly knowledge but spiritual knowledge, which is not quite the same thing. So, what is really interesting is that we can see in all this knowledges, because at the same time in your works there is a multitude of images, there is a multitude of references and references of our contemporary time or of the most distant times and maybe even parietal, to the Cave Art. And precisely, by a rather strange system of quotations, you manage to create a coherence and isolate images in order to break up and destroy this overall confusion. Even if, in my opinion, your confusion is not only a defect. It is not you who are confused.

JPS: Of course, yes.

NS: But confusion certainly brings energy, and from this confusion comes energy, because this is an aspect, for the moment, that we haven't mentioned yet, beyond the images and beyond the refinement of your pictures, through the technique of silk-screening, of the way it's very well painted. It is perfect in terms of realization, there is a great technicality. There is energy; there is a confusion but which is put back in

order and well organised. It's like as if you wanted to try to put order into the chaos and how do I go about putting some order in the chaos? And so, that's why I like this quote, which puts in relation beauty and confusion; which, sometimes, oppose each other and sometimes, on the other hand, enhance each other as if; the designers sometimes say: "As if it dressed the form". Dressing the form because otherwise, it would not be nude, but it would be indistinct. Thus, we can get out of the indistinctness. And in the exemplary list that you gave me, I will quote, I have chosen two quotations. I told you I was going to talk about one, but in the end, I think I'll talk about two. The first one, I'm going to read it entirely and I'd like to hear you on this quote, it's taken from *Manières d'être vivant* by Baptiste Morizot who says this:

"Dancing in the ropes, to dodge the dualism of animality as inferior bestiality and superior purity. To open up a still unexplored space: that of the worlds to be invented once we have passed to the other side. To catch a glimpse of them, to give them to be seen, a great breath." *Ways to be Alive*, Baptiste Morizot

JPS: Yes! Well, that's exactly what I do in my work and you said it earlier. That is to say that by mixing all these energies with all this chaos; It's my artist statement and will of working in the chaos in order to reach, precisely, a higher energy. And here, I am going to speak a little bit about Tantrism, because it is not very well known... I am going to try to find the passage:

"Tantrism embraced the existence in its totality, was conscious of the whole universe located in the heart of the human person. All thoughts, all acts, including sexual energy, were channeled towards spiritual development..." *The Snow Leopard*, Peter Matthiessen

As in Tantrism, they work with all the 'shit', in quotes, the body's waste products: they work with sex, death, corpses they work with all that... They are mixing, merging and assimilate all that in order to access spirituality. That's a bit what I do in my work: I work a lot with pornography, which is the ultimate shit of society because the pornographic business is as big as the arms business! It's a huge business worldwide! Here, in this exhibition, there are very few pornographic images but a big part of my work uses pornographic images and therefore it can question the public too; because sexuality and sexual acts were very little shown in Art, a little more in Contemporary Art but we spoke about it very little before. You see! And all that, it boosts from all sides, I have to go to the limits of the World, as we said earlier. To move things a bit. Because, it's true that I'm a little bored... In fact, Western Art bores me a deeply. I'm here to boost, to move things beyond the lines...

NS: Why? What bores you when you go to see an exhibition or in Western Art? What do you find boring? It's not a question of taste but finally, you don't vibrate or you don't feel much interest; even if it's well done, well produced because there are many great artists?

JPS: Well, precisely because it's still on the ropes. I like people who transgress. Pollock, had transgressed. Afterwards, you can also feel a transgression in Giotto or in Cave paintings. But I do not feel it or very little, in paintings... Except, for example in Vermeer, where he transgresses because he painted a space which is infinite (divine), That is to say that he gives us to see an infinite space; there is an infinite

dimension. The colors are right... It's DING! It's something that exists like that! by itself! And through these paintings, you enter another World somewhere. It's the door to another World. Just like when you reach the satori awakening in Japan: BOOM! You didn't understand the World and suddenly you understand it! And so, if it's a painting that just describes me a landscape whatever... For me, it's not enough! It's just monkey's gestures! But fortunately we are each different in front of Art, of course!

NS: And in this quote? It is said as a dualism by Baptiste Morizot? This duality? Because that is present, not necessarily only in the "Four Pillars of the Sky" but in many of your serigraphs: this question of animality and bestiality. I like the fact that he makes, in a certain way, the difference between the animal and the bestiality. Do you feel it? Do you understand it? And do you know how to define it?

JPS: No! I haven't really thought about it. Concerning the animals, I lived for ten years on a farm with horses so I know really what animal sexuality is! The energy, the vitality of the raw body, I know what it is. The insemination of mares, I know what it is. Zola spoke about it very well in his book *The Earth*. This sexual act releases an incredible energy but, to name and differentiate bestiality or animality? Well, these are a bit technical terms, somehow. No, I don't really see any difference. One should read Georges Bataille (*Eroticism*) on this subject matter, yes.

NS: Yes, I'm sure that, just by hearing you, for example, in order to answer the previous question or react to the quote: "Dancing in the ropes", I'm sure that bestiality, it's not that it's something superior but just that it's out of the ropes. Unlike... well, for me. Because, if I had to make a difference with animality, I would be rather in the extreme expression of animality, rather within a ritual, whereas bestiality, it is precisely to escape this ritual. Finally, I feel a difference and I feel that this difference is important. And in particular, it is important not so much to know what is the exact definition of the beast and the animal? What would be the fundamental difference? But more exactly, because we, it is our role, of Historian of Art, Curator of Museum, to try to understand, to protect the meanings and to protect them, it is necessary, at the first place, to find them. And thus in the motives and in particular in the motives of the animals... I remember that you had shown me and I had stopped quite a long time on a representation, however very simple: a serigraphy of a Stag!

JPS: Yes, that's it, the shamanic ithyphallic Stag!

NS: And this Deer, for me, when you showed me this silkscreen; besides, I had looked at several of them and I had constantly come back to this image...

JPS: That's right, yes!

NS: We were not in the representation of animality, as we can see in "L'Hallali du cerf", by Courbet, which is kept in the Museum of Fine Arts and Archaeology in Besançon; but we were really, in bestiality. Because the relationship to representation, according to me, is linked to a ritual. Perhaps even to a priapic or almost sexual ritual. And thus, it violates the simple representation of the animal. And therefore, through this ritual, it enters fully into bestiality. And I find that it is

something which is beautiful, the bestiality; because it is a little bit like during antiquities times, when Greek Gods and Goddesses sent spells on the mortals and the demigods or the demigoddesses. That is to say, we are out of control. And in my opinion, in bestiality, we escape control. This does not mean that, in animality, there is not an incredible force. And especially, as you underlined it, since you observed it in your personal life... There is not an incredible force in the animal, in itself and in particular in its sexuality or in what one can imagine of the animal sexuality. So, I think it's a beautiful nuance, which would deserve to be deepened, to be almost reflected, in a way. And then, I hope it's not by surprise, but I had forgotten that you were quoting a filmmaker who may seem to be at the antipodes of your aesthetic, it is Visconti. You quote Luchino Visconti in a sentence where he reflects, basically, on the aspect of decadence. What is decadence? And also, finally, in his cinema, it is a long reflection. And that's why he gets along so well, not as a friend but with Thomas Mann. That he feels so close to Thomas Mann and in a certain way to his book *Death in Venice*. It's because Thomas Mann understood what decadence was. And what I like, then, I hope that you can make a link with this quotation that you gave me and that you thought about it?

JPS: Yes, of course!

NS: What I like is what he says, about what decadence is, for him; what he's interested in anyway about decadence is maybe not the definition of decadence; he says: "It's the examination of a sick society":

"I have often been called decadent. I have a very favorable opinion of decadence, as did Thomas Mann, for example. I am imbued with this decadence. What has always interested me is the examination of a sick society." Luchino Visconti

Why you have chosen from dozens of quotes and that you are a very big reader. By the way, it's always a pleasure to come to the workshop because I love looking at your bookshelf. You really read a lot, and your books are annotated! There are bookmarks; the books have lived... Why have you, among these hundreds of quotations, retained, finally, one could say: the examination of this sick society?

JPS: Because I live it daily, of course. Everyone can feel that society is 100% sick; beyond the very beautiful films of Visconti, which are to die for, of course, his films are magnificent! But, I come back to the situation of the animal and then, I will come back to Visconti right away. In his book *Lascaux or the birth of Art*, Georges Bataille said that "The animal is like the human being, only holier." (Apache proverb). That means everything if you want! It means that he is in contact with God with Nature: HE IS IN CONTACT. I close the parenthesis and I come back to Visconti and then Thomas Mann... Of course, I don't know the true history of Visconti but they probably both lived through one or two World Wars... The people and the artists who lived through that; how and what to create after that? It's terrible! There are many artists who refused to create. They decided to speak about this bourgeoisie or aristocracy... And later on, Pasolini, whom I also adore, showed, very well, the disappearance of spirituality through the new ways of life of the bourgeoisie, of the industrialists, of the modes of production... And everything that destroyed the world, that destroyed the animals, that destroyed the wood, the forests, the rivers. And we really must be aware of that destruction. I think that there are filmmakers who have become aware

of this and who were able to, perhaps more at a certain time period, in the seventies, eighties, when, I think that Art, was much more political than today. Except for Terrence Malick, who makes magnificent movies. Nowadays, we don't have any more the firepower of people like Godard or even Fellini, so it's a bit sad. It's true that the preoccupations of those creative years, after the Second World War, are disappearing a bit. We also see it in the Contemporary Art market that doesn't seem having the same concerns. And in this world of entertainment, I get back to decadence, necessarily, if there is 50 % of people who are watching pornography on the Net, we can name that decadence; or not! But it seems anyway, that there is something that we are all missing globally. There is a huge lack. Is this lack spiritual? Is this lack emotional? Where this deep lack come from? I really don't know? But of course in the past, people were a little more grounded and connected. They went to church. The Mayans did their rituals to the Flowers, to the Salt and to the Sun. They didn't live in this great existential void that Sartre spoke about so well. So, this existential (and metaphysical) void, how to fill it again? I really think truly that Art is one of the possible answers and solutions.

NS: So we could think of a form of misery, like we talked about erotic misery? isn't that?

JPS: Absolutely, yes.

NS: Because it's not necessarily an economic misery, in fact, in Visconti's work, it's the very upper middle class; even, in *Louis II, Ludwig, The Twilight of the Gods*, the upper aristocracy! And we could talk about the difference between poverty and misery...

JPS: Yes, and you see in Pasolini's *Theorem*, the rich people are all miserable and indigent.

NS: Miserable, yes.

JPS: Miserable, except for the 'maid' who goes up on her roof at the end of the movie and she meets Jesus. Pasolini said at the time, that it was only the poor people who can still spoke to God. But now, even the 'working class' vote for the National Far Right! So they don't talk to God so much anymore! We are really and deeply FUCKED UP! I don't know, unless we go and live in a convent, we're in deep trouble I think... Ultimately, the solution maybe not to go wandering in the desert and talk to God; but to respect something sacred: the LIVING, yes!

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NS: So, in this part, we'll perhaps orient it and concentrate on some terms as well. It is always through terms that one understand very well; of course, when looking at your artwork and that one enters in a poetic way, almost in a reflective way; I was going to say almost meditative in your work. I would like to read this quotation, because in my opinion, there are terms on which it would be good to comment or to hear you. This quotation is taken from *Moon in a Dewdrop* by Master Dogen Zenji. I am going to read it and I will hear you, on which terms are the most important in this

quotation for you. And I will tell you, according to me, which are the most important terms in the quotation but in my opinion, they may be the same. It's not choosing the terms to choose the themes, but it is choosing the terms, according to your work. Maybe, in another context, you wouldn't be an artist or you would be doing something else... We wouldn't of course, pick the same terms. So I quote:

"But, to understand this clearly, you must have overcome the illusion of the past, present and future. Awakening is transcending Awakening; going to the bottom of the illusion is transcending the illusion and reaching the great Awakening. Either way, you are surrounded either by Awakening or by illusion." *Polishing the moon, cultivating clouds*, Master Dogen Zenji

JPS: Yes I chose this quote, because it speaks of paths of life! Anyway and whatever you do, you're screwed... Whether if you reach enlightenment or not. And often the great spiritual masters say that, whatever you do, it's the path that's important. I have the great luck, the great happiness and the privilege of being an artist. And I know how much I owe to my family, who allowed me to continue this work... And that's it; it doesn't matter what terminology you are using. And I wanted to talk more about this subject... I quote it, it's in my *Besaçon Notes 2021*:

The Hindu māyā in my paintings: "Am I painting a reality of things, an epic and Dionysian version of the human adventure or precisely the māyā: this great mystico-cosmic illusion? Either way, as it says in this sentence: you are surrounded... so maybe, it really doesn't matter what the deeper meaning of the realization is."

Because I often ask myself, when I am alone in my studio looking at my large wall installations: what am I painting really? Do I paint? Yes? Am I a Hindu and painting the illusion? No, but is it possible? Yes... maybe, who knows? Because we, artists, we paint something that does not exist. We paint something fictional and why do I paint this fiction, me, while most other artists paint something totally different? They paint sunflowers or whatever... It's a choice to go into the imaginary realms, maybe? And maybe this imaginary has more strength than reality? That's what I hope anyway.

NS: Yes, anyhow, what one can feel, also very well, when we look at your great compositions, your installations; it is precisely this way of abolishing the borders by largely using patterns, to abolish the borders between past, present and future. Perhaps this is also what irritates or doesn't matter for you in Contemporary Art? It is not always as simple as that!

JPS: Exactly, yes, it gets out of linear time!

NS: It goes out of time... Finally you don't say to yourself, I'm going to put such and such image; there are some images that are very dated historically, notably the pornographic images, we can see clearly from which aesthetic they come from and almost from which period. But in the end, it is hard to say in which chronological moment of the representation one finds oneself. It is this absence of chronological moment which is particularly intriguing, in my opinion, in your Art. So, if I were to come back to this quote, even if I am not here to talk about myself, I am here to talk about this quote in relation to your work. Of course, so you understood it: the past,

the present, the future; this distinction is not a good one, truly. That's what we understand. It may even be the illusion so, I really like that idea! But I like also the idea of two things: I like the idea of enlightenment, I think it's a beautiful idea. Obviously, because awakening, I'm not going to teach you that; it's also spiritual awakening.

JPS: Of course!

NS: And it's the awakening too, it's a bit old-fashioned today, as an expression, but for my generation, it was the awakening to love, the awakening to sexuality, the awakening to desire... It's something that we learn in a strange way, moreover, that we don't completely understand, even if we had post-Sixties parents who took pleasure in explaining all that! But awakening is something that I like very much; precisely, because it can be written in different ways and then what I like very much in this quote and that I would have liked to understand; it is: "You are surrounded." So, there, it would mean, it's almost a term for guerrilla warfare or war or something that can be violent, that can be religious as well. One can be surrounded by magical powers, sometimes occult and that's what I find interesting and finally, when we read the words, one by one, of this quote, we have the keys to enter also in into your images. That is to say, we could very well imagine that, in this device without a real center, there are still targets, there are still indications. There are still things that are targeted, and I think that's absolutely new. I had not thought about it... I was convinced that it was something completely centripetal; and in reality, at certain times, there is a centrifugal power, because one cannot escape, in a certain way, I don't know what one cannot escape? But there's, in fact, something one can't escape. So, it's all these elements that, in a way, are organised, in these large wall installation the: "Four Pillars of the Sky".

JPS: So you think my painting surrounds, circles and encompasses people?

NS: Well, it all depends on the installation. When it's just installed only on a wall, a little less but anyhow, by the hypnotic process: it takes you somewhere else, so that's a first thing but, there especially in the Museum's staircases, a given moment: imagine if we had a fourth wall! We would really be completely surrounded; and it would be nice to try! We would really be caught in it, we would be surrounded too... I'm going to take an image that is rather silly and I apologize for that. It is a bit like when you are in a trap in the forest, for the game and it falls in. He then has no place to hang on. So, he has to find some places to hang on. We could very well imagine that the images that are behind us, we need to hyper-concentrate, at a point, one need to stop; to think and find the points of attachment. Of course, at the beginning, I look at the installation, in one piece, without trying to isolate the motifs, but at a given moment, in order to be able to circulate within it, to be able to move; I need to find these points of grip. It's this idea of being surrounded. So, the term is a bit violent; in a certain way and from the moment when we have found these reference points, in a certain way, we can reach what we could call, in different ways, the awakening! In the awakening, we are aware that what we see can bring us something, either a change of scenery or an interest for something to which we had never paid attention at, and finally, an interest for something. And it is always what works very well in your installations, in your paintings: it is to lose one's reference points but at a given moment, one is caught up by something, precisely, so as not to be completely lost.

And it is also for that reason that it is not a desperate Art. One don't feel anything desperate!

JPS: It's true, yes!

NS: By the way, while preparing this interview, you talked to me about laughter; we don't talk enough about laughter in Contemporary Art and even in Art altogether. So, I don't know if there is humor, but there is certainly a form of laughter and there is also a form of distance in relation to the images that are given for us to see. And perhaps, in the subjects that we approached, there seems to be a lot of gravity but it has nevertheless, also perhaps also in Contemporary Art, this kind of humor or, I do not know if it is laughter but certainly, there is the presence of the humor. And this presence of the humor, it is, in a certain way, exemplified, for you, in the quotation that you chose by Octavio Paz. You chose a quote from him that I will read. So, Octavio Paz, precisely, who knew perfectly how to mix the great mythologies mainly, the pre-Columbian mythologies that he mixed in a form of texts either poetic, or of prose but with the everyday. With the gestures of the daily life, with the daily life, with the daily positions. And it is also quite singular how, the part of magic, the cosmogony; how the very heritage of a past, a bit mythologized as well, of the pre-Columbian Art, can continue to survive in the simplest gestures and in certain words that he used. But now, I would rather make you react to this quotation and to this question perhaps of the humor or in any case, what allows, the humor as path of access. So I quote: Octavio Paz in this title: *Conjunctions and disjunctions*, he says:

"Neither the phallus nor the ass has a sense of humor. [...]

But the violent ejaculations of the phallus, the convulsions of the vulva and the explosions of the ass erase the smile from our face. Our principles are shaken by the tremor of a psychic shaking as powerful as an earthquake. Shaken by the violence of our sensations and imaginations, we go from seriousness to burst of laughter."

Conjunctions and disjunctions, Octavio Paz

JPS: Yeah, well, that's kind of what I do and would like to do in my paintings. I mean, a lot of times in New York people would laugh a lot while looking at my paintings because I use a lot of texts profoundly obscene, trashy texts: FUCK ME, FILL MY ASS! All stuff like that... Bullshit, profane insanities in a way! But well, here at the Museum, we don't see much of it because we had filtered the images a bit...

NS: We were very cautious!

JPS: The informations... But it is to create surely, an aesthetic shock and a reaction of the public, so that people laugh and lose their certainties and preconceptions! It's precisely, what Octavio Paz said very well in this paragraph, is that, at the moment when we laugh, we lose control of everything and we enter another reality. Exactly as in sexuality, about which Bataille (in *Eroticism*) speaks very well. For example, when a really well-dressed rich bourgeois woman makes love, during the sexual act, she enters into animality and becomes like a bitch. It is the same connection to animality of which we spoke earlier! It is very true, that all my work claims and states an animality. In its greatest magnificence, in its almost, infinite and cosmic dimension, yes! That's it, to reintegrate the World and reintegrate Life, yes, yes! And Octavio Paz, I have read... I cannot say that I have read all his work, because he has

written a lot, but I liked very much the book *The Critique of the Pyramid* where he talks about the cultures of Latin America and he also wrote a very beautiful book *In light of India*. So it should be reread and thought about. Here, he also speaks in the same book that we quoted, it is a small chapter that I will read, it is titled:

"Eve and prajñâpâramitâ

The oppositions between Tantrism and Protestantism are of the type light and shadow, heat and cold, white and black. Both grapple with the insoluble conflict between body and mind (emptiness for the Buddhist) and both resolve it through exaggeration." *Conjunctions and disjunctions*, Octavio Paz

(The same as in my painting.) Because my work is an exaggerated work, I go beyond what one can imagine. It is not in the grotesque like Félicien Rops, James Ensor or other artists of this kind... But I want, in a way, to exaggerate Life, of course! To pay homage to it!

NS: By the way, you're not, because I've never thought there was caricature in your work, even if sometimes you take images that are caricatural, because they are extracts, in fact, of a kind of erotic misery or lack of imagination, on which you rework and on which you add filters; filters of images, filters of beliefs, filters of rituals, and it's true that when one look at your works, it's amazing what you're saying there: that in New York, we laugh in front of your works, while here; I don't say that we cry, we don't cry at all. But we see it with a lot of seriousness!

JPS: Yes, in fact, the relationship to Art is totally different.

NS: Completely different! And it's also interesting, what you say about how laughter would finally cause a loss of control: at the end ultimately, the superego would be swept away by laughter.

JPS: Yes: BANG! Destroyed with a bazooka!

NS: Maybe that's why Freud was so interested in puns, of course in slips of the tongue and then often in the spoonerisms that can bring about laughter, and that's an aspect that I hadn't grasped in your work. This violence of laughter, this jolt, which finally prevents you from doing anything else but laughing. That is to say that in the place of laughter, you can only do that. You can only do laughter, because it is absolutely frightening to be seized by a giggle and often in situations that would require the greatest seriousness. So, that's what I think, but it's maybe because laughter is the last of what remains of sacred violence or of certain myths that would be reactivated in this way... Or of animality, as you said, more than bestiality; that would come back to the surface and show that finally and sometimes, it can be good, I don't know in what sense, but to be dissipated! To have a form of dissipation. And what we also find in Octavio Paz, it is this relation that he makes constantly between... Less the time besides, it is less the time that interests him, that the space. It is the question that the only way; and what we find, moreover in "The Four Pillars of the Sky" and in many of your compositions... The only way to overcome this temporal chain between: present, past and future, it is precisely the displacement in the space. not in the linear space or perhaps? But above all, a spatial conception of the image. The image, does not have a background, it is that which is interesting

because, almost all passes through the filters. There are some filters and through these few filters, it creates this space and this very fine understanding of the image, which leads to these beliefs, to these repertoires. To what we could name, a metaphysical aesthetics in a refreshed sense and not in a dramatic sense. That is to say that it is perhaps what is changing; it is that in your work, on the contrary, one would have a metaphysical aesthetic which finally would have humor! A form of humor and a form of distance.

JPS: Yes

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JPS: So, in this last part, I wanted to present some children's drawings that I had found on Twitter, which are really beautiful; here, it's a little seven-year-old girl, the Twitter account is: Earthly Education, I'm going to read it in English since it's written in English:

"Dear 2045, I don't think we are going to survive. If you end up hearing this story, I just want to say I am sorry! I will try taking care of the Earth."

Well, you all get it and I'll do a subtitled translation. But you can feel that this little kid is ashamed of what is happening to our Mother Earth, as the Native Americans say so well. She feels responsible and she doesn't think that she will live until 2045, which is not that far away, because she is seven years old and she doesn't think that she will live until thirty. So I wanted to pay homage to her, because ultimately, Art does exist somehow; but, it is not necessarily the artists who make Art only, it is also the children of seven years. We created nowadays these structures: Museums, Galleries, Contemporary Arts Centers, Schools of Art, art Fairs, Art Market and so on. where only the artists can create and show Art; but today, there are many artists who do not create any more Art but who are making only business! And here is a drawing by Dasha, which is in the metro of Kharkiv.

NS: In Ukraine.

JPS: Yes, in Ukraine and so she describes her situation in the subway, which we all saw on TV. They live in the metro; there are bombs falling over them... And there are these two Ukrainian flags and we see her here, very small, playing with her little brother?

NS: Yes, that's her brother because I think she's there; she's watching in the subway.

JPS: Yes, you're right, that's her brother and there's a tent with their sleeping bags... And what such a sad reality today, to be back once more into a war in Europe again. So congratulation to her and maybe, if she can survive (let's hope so!), she will become an important artist of 21st century, that's it.

NS: Then you chose this one too, which is very beautiful, yes, accurately!

JPS: This photo that I'll show in the video of course, it shows us precisely what Art

should be; that is to say, but we don't know for sure if it's a photo that was staged or not? So, it's a little street kid in India who left his little soaps out of the picture. And this represents the Sacred. In another word, the person who created this drawing, with chalk, designed this enclosed, inclusive space where the kid feels good and Within which he can sleep peacefully and were he is protected. And it is this protective and wombish function of Art that we need to rediscover. This little drawing is magnificent, it's like a kind of Santa Claus or grandmother. It's a generous character that welcomes him and in which he can sleep peacefully without having nightmares... And then, you wanted to come to the last part?

NS: Yes, I wanted to come to the last part that you titled... already, I would like you to react to two things, first to the title of this part that you titled: "Overcoming death or paradoxical thinking." Why this title? What does it mean? Also to hear you; you had put three quotations, well two plus a Note and I had retained a quotation from Alexandra David-Néel who says this in *Mystics and Magicians of Tibet*:

"These monks here will never defeat death, because they believe in death."

What does that mean to you? What is the resonance that this quote produces? How can you relate it, because we are here to talk about your production of your Art, your artwork. How can you relate it to your creation?

JPS: Yes... Actually, in my work it is always: construction-destruction! And Life is also: construction-destruction, construction-destruction, endlessly! And way beyond that, Man has always needed to believe in something. It is precisely the monks who do not succeed in overcoming death; because they did believe in death! It is because they saw it too closely and for example; we have been talking about it before, in some tantric rituals, sometimes they even go as far as eating corpses, the flesh of the dead... To surpass themselves, to go beyond their mortal conditions. How to make this superhuman overcoming? To access this transcendence? I think that language and thought are barriers to entering the Elsewhere. Because in this Elsewhere there is no more nomination, obviously. Since some monks name Death, they can no longer go beyond it. And I add to the quote: "It is the same for Art: to overcome Art, one must never, yes, never, never again, believe in it!" *Notes from Besançon 2022*. Because it is true that we artists, when we are trained a bit into the Schools of Fine Arts etc., we believe in Art, we believe in Matisse and all those great countless artists... But somewhere, you have to fuck them, you have to get out of the established patterns of thinking, otherwise you can't do anything! It is for your survival! And anyway, it is something very violent to be an artist. It is really necessary to destroy all these frames established, because if not, one could only paint flowers and all bullshit like that! Other way you don't get out of the frame, once again. I impose this violence on myself and I think that, somewhere, people encounter this violence in my work and it is undoubtedly that which disturbs them. Because I push things a bit far... Yes, it's true that I have to push the barriers; of course! I do transgress, I MUST TRANSGRESS!

NS: Well, I don't understand the quote in quite the same way, because for me, when Alexandra David-Néel says: "These monks will not defeat death, because they believe in death", I would add that in reality, these monks are no longer fighting, in my opinion. What she is also saying, and this is what can be very beautiful, is that

there is no fight. From the moment you believe in death, in fact I hear acceptance.

JPS: Yes, maybe, yes!

NS: In this quote, there is a form of acceptance and precisely, that would be very close to what we called earlier: the enlightenment and to accept like that... The finitude, because, I don't know if they think that life ends with death, probably not, for the mystics and the magicians of Tibet but certainly, there is this idea of acceptance. It's amazing, because I don't read in this quote revolt but on the opposite, a very great wisdom of not wanting to fight...

JPS: Oh yes, to be submitted to Karma?

NS: No, it is not a question of submission, it is on the contrary much stronger than that. Because there is no submission. It is not because you accept that you are submissive, on the contrary. It's like these great movements of Queens, because I think of Berenice: she knows that he doesn't love her enough, for Titus to simply give up all the Roman Empire. And simply knowing and telling the other person that you know; that's incredibly powerful!

JPS: Yes, I understand, yes!

NS: From the moment that the other person knows, that we know, if I may say so, without playing endless games with words... That's what's strong! And so, one can accept everything because we have the conscience, we do it in conscience. And that's it, that is to say that they accept death. Also because perhaps they believe in reincarnation; in the Tibetan, Hindu and Buddhist religions... So, these are those Life-Death cycles and I find it rather haughty as an idea, to be able to defy death in a certain way, precisely by impassibility. It is this impassivity that I feel, in the quote of Alexandra David-Néel. And, are you interested in representations of death, which is not quite the same thing as being interested in Death? As you are interested by the Cosmic, by the Sacred, by representations of sexuality etc. I was going to say from Cave Art almost to the images diffused nowadays on the Internet... Does this question of death, represented by the image, interest you? Do you think about it? When you choose this work of Gustave Doré, which could be a representation of the afterlife. What can you tell us about it because, I believe that you, in your personal life, have come close to the afterlife and that you have had this experience?

JPS: Yes, absolutely, I came across this beautiful engraving by Gustave Doré that represents exactly what one lives when we have a near-death experience. That is to say that they are concentric circles (a vortex of energy sucks us in) with which we enter the Tunnel of Light and then we arrive at the center of the Light. Thus, we dissolve into Light. Gustave Doré illustrated this very well in this print, he says that they are angels (who are carrying the soul of the dead in the otherworld); and I also have seen the souls of the dead leaving the Earth and entering like that; in this energy Vortex. And I must say that it is quite impressive. Well, that's debatable. Some scientists say that it is the brain that sends these images in order to remove the fear of a person at the moment of death (with chemical molecules such as DMT dimethyltryptamine). I think this scenario really exists. Since I had experienced it, I think it does exist. Then is there something in the light or not? Where do we

dissolve? What is the journey of the soul after that? Does the soul travel? Does it disappear completely? Jean-Claude Carrière, whom I appreciated very much, said that he thought there was nothing after death. But anyhow, perhaps this particular moment when you enter the Light is, anyway, a fantastic moment! I have often used this spiritual experience and made drawings from it that I sometimes use in my work. And of course I am also very interested in mysticism, but it requires a discipline that I don't have. But I do have the discipline to be an artist and I create every day that I can!

NS: Thank you!

JPS: Thank you very much Nicolas, it was very nice talking to you, thank you very much to all of you.