



Jean-Luc Moulène,
Bitte à fruits,
Paris, September
1999, cement,
sand and stones,
72 × 50 × 30cm.
© Jean-Luc Moulène
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Chantal Crousel,
Paris; Thomas Dane,
London and Greta
Meert, Brussels

Previous spread:
*BGB Bleu Gauloises
Bleues — 441*,
Fleury les Aubrais,
Lille, June 2000,
7 × 5 × 2cm.
Collection Fond
National d'Art
Contemporain,
France

Jean-Luc Moulène: A 'Plasticien'

– Caroline Hancock

Particularly since the 1960s, the French language has rather uniquely championed the term 'arts plastiques' ('plastic arts'), a term long-abandoned in other languages and contexts in favour of alternatives like the 'visual' or 'fine arts'. Probably because of this, some artists still define themselves as 'artiste-plasticien' ('plastician'), as opposed to 'artiste-peintre' ('painter') or 'artisan-designer'. The term suggests an emphasis on matter rather than image, and points at artistic activity as an exploration

Caroline Hancock explores Jean-Luc Moulène's analysis of material production via sculpture and photography.

of materials and forms through a variety of modes. Jean-Luc Moulène tends to call himself a 'plasticien', even though photography is the medium for which he first gained recognition in the 1990s. But this choice is not just a matter of French habit – rather, it is a revealing move that suggests not only that image-making is just part of his practice, but that the idea of materials, their manipulation and what they might say about the form of society and the possibility of its transformation is at the core of his work.

Moulène studied *arts plastiques* (and literature) in Paris during the 1970s, after which he worked as an artistic adviser for a branch of the French electronics company Thomson, from 1981 to 1989, and, for a brief period in 1989, in commercial advertising. These early experiences with the fabrication of the imagery of products and brands familiarised him with the specific methodologies used in publicity and communication, and helped him analyse the desired effects of images on the social behaviours of consumers. As a result, his photographs, which span the genres of portraiture, still life, landscape and the street scene, critique the seductive character of conventional

media representation, and the manipulations it allows. Though he prefers his titles to remain untranslated – lest they lose the wordplay and linguistic specificity that is key to his practice – he specifies that many of his photographic works from the last fifteen years are accompanied by contextual information, indicating the date and location of the picture, as a way to make explicit every factor that intervenes in the construction of the images. This information is on occasion heavily nuanced, for example with the title accompanying the series *39 Objets de grève présentés par Jean-Luc Moulène* (1999–2000), which integrates a disclaimer, stating that they are not 'by' Moulène but simply presented or made visible by him. Likewise the names of the photographers of his sculptures or installations is often credited in his captions. (Such concern with authorship or agency reflects his consistently critical standpoint on copyright, reserved rights and originality, which often emerges in his work.) By systematically deploying that level of clarity, each caption emphasises power struggles at work during the making of works of art and post-production, and also pre-empts future confusions, erroneous interpretations or uninformed appropriations of his work. That is, Moulène's interests lie in the full life of the artwork – in the process, on the one hand, that goes from the production to the circulation and reception of the object and its image, and, on the other, in the social conditions in which the artist and the labourer operate in the contemporary world.

Despite this apparent focus on the image as an entry into this discussion, Moulène's artistic practice has also always included traditional, assembled or manufactured sculpture, work with found objects and the production of drawings and prints. Boundaries between disciplines often blur in his work, for example when photographs capture his found objects, combining 'actual work' and 'documentation' in an

almost undifferentiated manner — as the title of the catalogue that accompanied his exhibition at Culturgest in Lisbon in 2007, *Jean-Luc Moulène. opus 1995–2007 / documents 1999–2007*, indicates.¹

This heightened awareness of and experimentation with ideas of reality, plasticity, image and documentation bring his work close to that of the Nouveaux Réalistes — a genealogy he has himself acknowledged. Speaking about '60–72. Douze ans d'art contemporain en France', an exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1972 that showcased the more political, sculptural and site-specific work produced after the heyday of painterly abstraction, he said:

Suddenly, everything was possible. All the materials were available for us to use. It was as if the exhibition was trying to tell us something like: 'Go ahead boys, take over the space and do whatever you want'.²

Rather like Nouveau Réaliste Raymond Hains, whose phenomenal photographic output has yet to be fully acknowledged, Moulène is open to chance encounters, making art from street-level reality, and infusing it with both humour and critical rigour — photographically or otherwise.³ He shares this approach with artists of his generation from other locations, such as Gabriel Orozco, who invited him to exhibit objects within 'The Everyday Altered', the show he curated at the Venice Biennale as part of Francesco Bonami's 'Dreams and Conflicts' in 2003.⁴ *Bitte à fruits* (Paris, September 1999), a work Moulène presented in that context, consists of a concrete bollard with a crumbling top that reveals stones and pebbles resembling, as the title suggests, pieces of fruit, giving the impression of being a sculpted still life. *Bleu Gauloises bleues 441* (June 2000), also included in 'The Everyday Altered', is a limited edition (441 copies) of the legendary blue Gauloises cigarette pack without any

of the manufacturer's 'fine print' in the design. Again, by recasting a commercial product within an artistic context, like Orozco in his work, Moulène captures and conjures the unexpected and the banal.

But these subtle, fleeting, seemingly unintentional interventions are accompanied in Moulène's oeuvre by a conspicuous, explicit appropriation of art history. In terms of sculpture, to cite just a few examples, he often refers to Alberto Giacometti in his interviews; ancient and classical art is the basis of his project *Le Louvre* (2005), for which he photographed objects from the museum's collection; and homages to Marcel Duchamp and Bruce Nauman are at play in *Cinq concentrés concentriques* (Paris, April 2007), a sculpture composed of the five grey polyurethane fingers of a hand that, instead of being attached to the palm, all point to a precise point, where the fingertips touch, composing a figure that is both an axis and a vortex, and suggesting at once conflict, tension, connection, visibility and actuality. Mathematics and geometry are in fact at the core of Moulène's thinking: abstract, geometrical and scientific forms pervade his work — concentric circles, suns, plastic basins, pierced found stones, contorted staircase fragments fashioned from scrap-heap material, bronze knots on wire stems — offering an seemingly comprehensive catalogue of articulations of how the world functions (or does not). For example, *Boule fixe (sphère de Lisbonne)* (Paris, 1 May 2007) looks like an oversize disco ball firmly grounded on the floor, lined with cobblestones from the Portuguese capital instead of mirrors. Recent abstract works utilising plastics like epoxy resin and polyurethane (for example, *n Trous Outremer Rose* (Paris, May 2009)) are placed on plinths or tabletops like modular or cellular sculptures or architectural models, inviting us to consider notions such as clamping, knotting, expanding, transparency and density, as well as vanishing axes, grids, intersections, edges,

Jean-Luc Moulène,
Boule fixe
(*sphère de Lisbonne*),
Paris, 1 May 2007,
polyurethane foam,
epoxy, black
cobblestones
from Lisbon,
diameter 88cm.
© Jean-Luc Moulène
— ADAGP. Courtesy
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Paris; Thomas Dane,
London and Greta
Meert, Brussels

1 See Jean-Luc Moulène, Rosário Sousa Machado, Marc Touitou and Miguel Wandschneider (ed.), *Jean-Luc Moulène. opus 1995–2007 / documents 1999–2007*, Lisbon: Culturgest, 2007.

2 Interview of J.-L. Moulène by Florence Ostende concerning 'The Pompidou Show', *cataloguemagazine.com*, issue 6, March 2011. Available at <http://www.cataloguemagazine.com/contemporary-art/magazine/article/jean-luc-moulene/> (last accessed on 13 June 2011).

3 This element of the work of both artists was highlighted by Pierre Restany, the art critic who coined the name 'Nouveaux Réalistes' in 1960, when he curated both artists in a group show, 'Cette culture qui vient de la rue' ('The Culture that Comes from the Street') at the Galerie municipale de Vitry-sur-Seine in 2000.

4 See Francesco Bonami (ed.), *Dreams and Conflicts: The Viewer's Dictatorship* (exh. cat.), Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 2003, pp. 310–11. Orozco also presented work by Abraham Cruzvillegas, Jimmie Durham, Daniel Guzmán, Damian Ortega and Fernando Ortega.





directions and gaps. The plasticity of the materials is at the core of these exercises. Underneath the undeniable visual quality of the photographs and sculptures, Moulène's interest lies in moulding and manipulating the things that he makes and finds, to the point that they are (or seem to be) no longer how they began.



I conceive of them all like objects after a world of photography. Therefore they are not objects in the sense of statuary or sculpture. They are objects linked to the questions of production, representation, post-photography objectivation. As such, photography continues to be the research tool for these objects, even if at the end of the day I don't propose a print.⁵

There is something sculptural about most of Moulène's photographs, as if the objects were about to pop out of the printed surface, igniting desire in a manner akin to advertising. Some of them could even

be argued to be meditations on sculpture or puns on three-dimensionality laid flat. For example, *Méduses* (São Paulo, 7 April 2002) shows two jelly shoes ('méduse' means jellyfish), placed sole against sole in a manner that resembles the aquatic creature and simultaneously offers a volumetric study of light and shade. A sculptural conceit is at work again in his photographs of chewed gum, which also dwell on the incongruous malleability of the substance and delight in endless permutations of transparency and opacity.

In both of these works there is a play between document and reality: the 'thing' and its registration are distinguishable but at the same time permeable, and are given equal weight. Moulène inserts photographs in exhibitions together with sculptures or actual objects, creating disjunctions and/or associations that recall the visual games of *Documents*, the magazine through which Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris and Carl Einstein attempted to offer a common front against positivism, idealism and André Breton's Surrealism, published in

Jean-Luc Moulène, *Le Monde*, newspaper insert, *Le Louvre*, 2005. Installation view, Musée du Louvre, Paris, 2005. © Jean-Luc Moulène — ADAGP. Courtesy Chantal Crousel, Paris; Thomas Dane, London and Greta Meert, Brussels

- 5 J.-L. Moulène, 'Series Entretiens avec les artistes, Académie de Paris', http://www.ac-paris.fr/portail/jcms/p1_124706/jean-luc-moulene (last accessed on 13 June 2011).
- 6 Sophie Berrebi discussed Moulène's work in relation to *Documents* at 'The Use-Value of Documents: Bataille/Einstein/Leiris', a symposium at the Courtauld Institute, London (23 — 24 June 2006) that accompanied the exhibition 'Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and the Magazine *Documents*' (2006) at the Hayward Gallery, London. The paper, titled 'Jean-Luc Moulène's Dialectical Documents', was subsequently published in *Papers of Surrealism*, issue 7, 2007, and is available at <http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal7/acrobat%20files/articles/Berrebi.pdf> (last accessed on 13 June 2011).

Paris from 1929 to 1930.⁶ The use value of documentary evidence essential to *Documents* has echoes in Moulène's attention to varied modes of presentation — including spatial presentation. Indeed, the *mise en espace* of his photographs could be compared to the practices of Richard Wentworth or Wolfgang Tillmans, and their non-hierarchical, formal and sculptural considerations and installations.

In 1998, for the exhibition 'Tu parles / J'écoute' ('You Talk / I Listen') at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and the Ferme du Buisson near Paris, Moulène was invited to work with the haircare and cosmetic company Shiseido. He directed a series of photographs of two naked female models covered with Shiseido's Perfect Refining Foundation. The function of this product — to cancel out any facial blemishes — was pushed to the extreme by Moulène, as the foundation was applied to the models' entire bodies. The resulting images, *We Were Here and There* (1998), are subtly pleasing and ironic: the women's bodies are redolent of mediaeval statuary and recumbent figures on tombstones,⁷ while at the same time Moulène subverts contemporary commercial publicity tactics via their installation as traditional prints within the exhibition and on billboards outside it.

If on that occasion bodies were turned into objects by means of the image, in other works the transformation is of objects into images and again into objects: at the Louvre's invitation in 2005, Moulène selected 24 small statuettes, fragments and amulets from different departments of the museum — objects that he considered overlooked in their conventional presentation context (often a large vitrine filled with other artefacts). They were brought to a studio, where he photographed each of them against a plain background, in typical archival or museal fashion. Enlarged to approximately 50 by 40 centimetre photographs, the objects were then exhibited in the museum as flat images, but images endowed with an object status: the bare prints, mounted on aluminium, were placed directly on

plinths, which were installed in a manner that overemphasised the shadows resulting from the museum's overhead lighting. Tracing this movement from object to photograph and back to object, Moulène also published this series as reproductions in a special *Le Monde* newspaper supplement distributed both in the museum and within the regular paper on the day of the opening. Exponentially broadening his audience, Moulène often distributes pamphlets, prints, leaflets and flyers through different channels, or leaves them to be picked up from piles (paper mounds that are objects/sculptures in themselves) included in his displays — the image, again, becoming object, and through it, witness to a materiality that might otherwise have left behind.

Moulène's systematic questioning of the function and productivity of images has also entailed the analysis, replication and transformation of the mechanisms active in different photographic genres, from advertising to pornography (as in the series *Les Filles d'Amsterdam*, 2005), from investigative or crime scene photography to archiving practices. It could be said that he plays at creating documents, material proof or evidence of sociocultural facts and projections. He repeatedly refers to police vocabulary — his exhibition at ARC, Paris in 1997, for example, was titled 'Déposition'. As suggested by *Cinq concentrés concentriques*, Moulène's work denounces and points fingers. Notions of scrutiny, enigma, excavation, observation, forensic light and vigilance recur in and around his images and titles, as if they were captured events, peppered with strange clues for varied interpretations.

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Moulène says he has been a handyman ('bricoleur') since his youth.⁸ He talks of working as an assistant carpenter as well as an artist, and maintains that both should be understood as labourers. He sometimes appropriates for himself a qualifier used for Jean-Luc Godard: 'technicien libertaire', or 'libertarian technician'.⁹

7 For this comparison, see Cécile Bourne, 'Jean-Luc Moulène', in *Tu parles, j'écoute. You Talk, I Listen* (exh. cat.), Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1998, pp. 70–73.

8 See interview between Patrick Javault, Jean-Luc Moulène and Daniel Foucard, 'Jean-Luc Moulène / Une photographie polymorphe', *Entretien sur l'art*, Paris: Fondation d'entreprise Ricard, 23 septembre 2010, <http://fondation-entreprise-ricard.com/en/conferences/entretiens/art/moulene/> (last accessed on 2 August 2011).

9 See Raphaël Brunel, 'Jean-Luc Moulène', *02*, Spring 2009, pp. 11–14. www.zerodeux.fr/jean-luc-moulene-par-raphael-brunel (last accessed on 2 August 2011).

Labour-intensive sculpture did not have pride of place in French post-War art and criticism — for example, Robert Filliou made fun of it with his DIY *Principe d'équivalence: bien fait, mal fait, pas fait* (*Equivalence Principle: Well Made, Badly Made, Not Made*, 1968), an absurd collection of objects, both crafted and found.

But at a time when work is becoming increasingly dematerialised, Moulène defends making things as fundamental to human activity. His attention for some time now has focused on the preservation and valorisation of objects produced in the context of working-class cultures, in particular that of trade unions and industrial action. The photographic series *Objets de grève présentés par Jean-Luc Moulène* constitutes an invaluable archive of French industry, manufacture and craftsmanship of the Years of Lead, from the 1960s to the 80s, that is not dissimilar in spirit to Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane's *Folk Archive* (1999–2005), their collection

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of contemporary British popular traditions and culture. The objects themselves are now part of the Archives Nationales du Monde du Travail in Roubaix, in northern France, and the ethnologist and archivist Jean-Charles Leyris has produced a detailed account of each of the forty objects preserved as national industrial heritage.¹⁰ Among those objects is a 'three 8s pipe', carved in France in the late nineteenth century, when the idea of dividing the working day between three teams working for eight hours each was a proud labour claim rather than the normal practice it is today in some countries; also in the collection is the red Gauloises La Pantinoise packet made from 1982 to 1983 by strikers protesting the closure of their tobacco factory in Pantin, in northeast Paris.

This interest in the representation of the working class is part of a wider engagement. Moulène has collaborated with, or made reference to in his work, the French workers' unions Lutte ouvrière and CGT (Confédération générale du travail). In 2003, he collaborated with *Nouvelle Vie Ouvrière* to publish a special edition of the *Objets de grève* series for the CGT's 47th congress. The arresting use of the colour yellow as a background in some of his photographs (for instance some of the *Produits de Palestine* series, 2004–05) or painted on his sculpture and objects (*Marche (palière et balancée)*, Paris, 1994, and *Croix Jaune*, Paris, 2004–05) presumably refers to the historical use of the colour in syndicalist movements and its regular appearance in bold political communications.

Bridging formal and social concerns, Moulène connects the 'arrêt du travail' ('stoppage of work') with the 'arrêt sur image' ('stop-frame' or 'still'):

The notion of work stoppage is a useful metaphor to use in relation to what I do: I stop things, make the image concrete. The idea is simple: if you objectify floating mental images, they no longer float, they become legible. My work has often been about that: giving concrete existence to mental images.¹¹

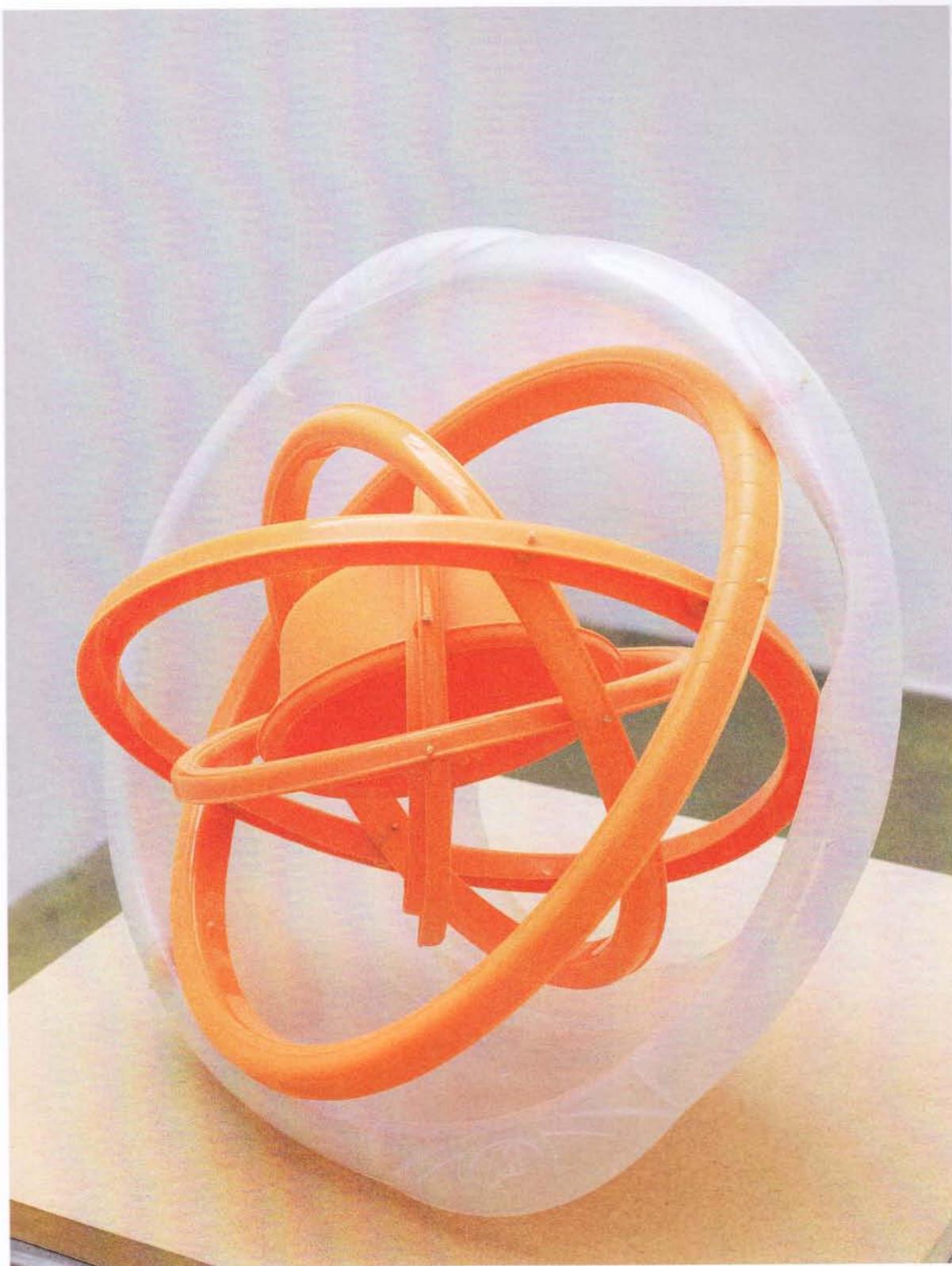
As if they were calls to action, his object/sculptures function autonomously like dissonant, ethical, potentially empowering ammunition.

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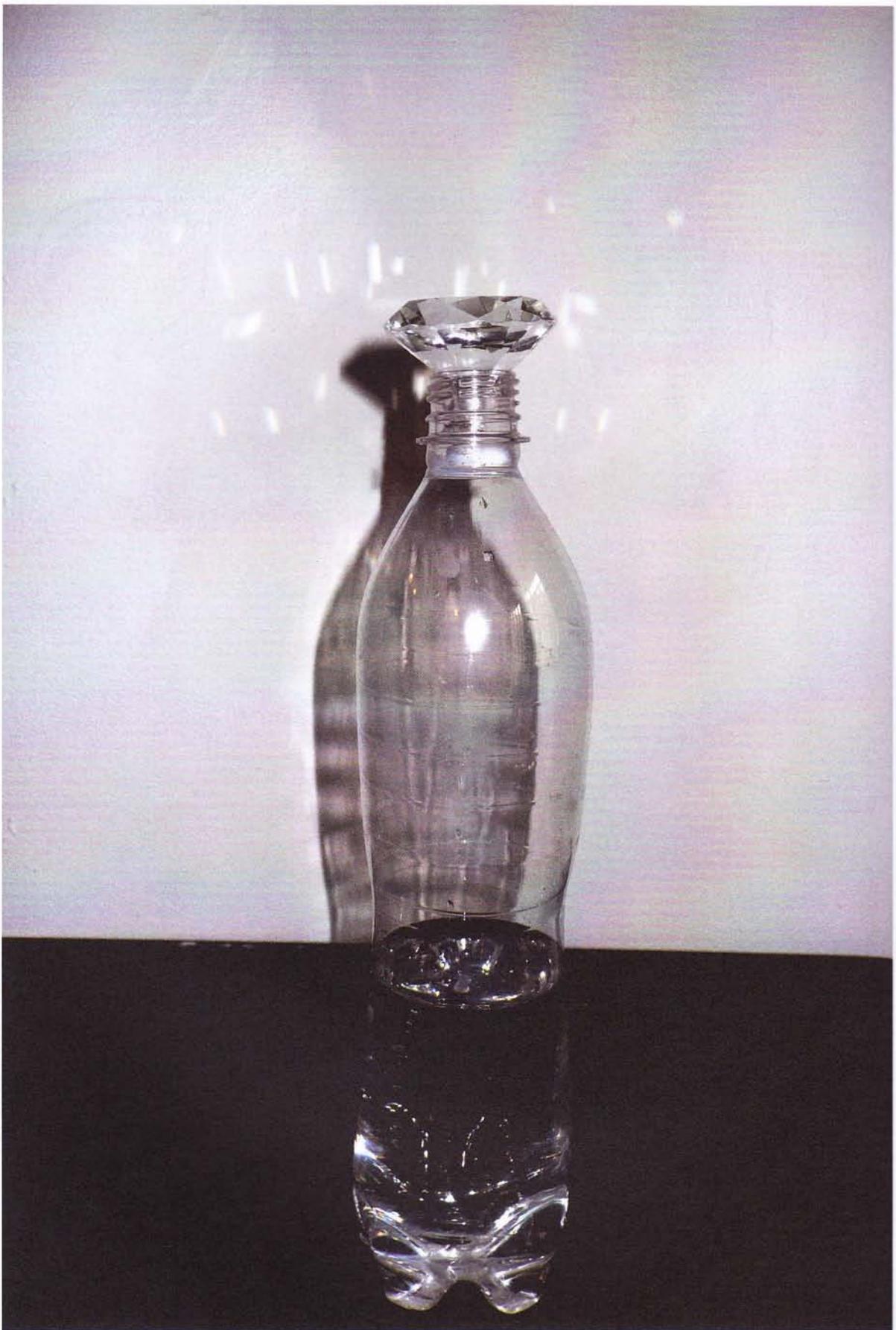
The effectiveness of Moulène's individual works lies in their capacity to occupy space and imagination. In tandem with his focus on arrest and occupation, Moulène also seeks movement, visual slippage and enquiry. The codification of movement through ritual and conventional or unconventional modes of social circulation is deeply ingrained in his practice, probably as a result from his work with French performance artist Michel Journiac during the late 1970s. Corporeal awareness, exchange and confrontation were central

10 Jean-Charles Leyris, 'Objets de grève, un patrimoine militant', *In Situ*, no.8, March 2007, http://www.insitu.culture.fr/article.xsp?numero=8&id_article=leyris-0 (last accessed on 13 June 2011).

11 'Entretiens avec Régis Durand', *Jean-Luc Moulène. Document 1*, Paris: Jeu de Paume, 2005, p.10. Translation the author's.



Jean-Luc Moulène,
Mondex, Paris, March
2006, plastic basins,
diameter 42cm.
© Jean-Luc Moulène
— ADAGP. Courtesy
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London and Greta
Meert, Brussels



Jean-Luc Moulène
Riche, Le Havre,
January 2010,
reduced plastic
bottle, water,
fake diamond top,
diameter 7cm,
height 32cm.
© Jean-Luc Moulène
— ADAGP. Courtesy
Chantal Crousel,
Paris; Thomas Dane,
London and Greta
Meert, Brussels

to his collaborations with dancer and choreographer Boris Charmatz (for example, *Ouvrée — artistes en alpages*, 2000, and *Statuts. Exposition à géométrie variable*, 2001–02). But variable geometry is also at work in his photographs, sculptures, objects and take-away piles of posters and printed papers. Across his whole body of work discontinuities, articulations, instabilities, tensions and release come together to produce a heightened interrogating presence, which translates into installations in which the relationship between work and space (and therefore the institution) is key. In the exhibition 'Mental Archaeology' at the Centre d'art contemporain d'Ivry last year, Moulène showed *Riche* (Le Havre, January 2010), a sculpture consisting of a plastic bottle (Moulène began collecting bottles in 2000) sporting a disproportionately large fake-diamond cap and sitting atop a precariously tall, narrow plinth. The bottle was partially filled with water, which emphasised the tilt of the floor and, through it, the original function of the space as a cinema. Material relations here suggest, like in *Objets de grève*, wider social relations.

*I am interested in producing work that is, in itself, the site of conflict, that presents existing conflicts in pre-sensitive and therefore sensitive form. From these forms, a detachment and a gap are created and a critical consciousness can occur.*¹²

Moulène's forms defy typology, in that they are fabricated from resemblances and alterity, preferably nondescript, formless, with no clear usage. His plasticity of choice has 'patatoïde' (potato-shaped) qualities — that is to say, his forms are somewhat absurdly undefinable and challenging.¹³ He confirms his predilection for this term in interviews such as one regarding the maquette for a body (2007–2011) presented in the 'Paris-Delhi-Bombay' exhibition at the Centre Pompidou this

year. His recent exhibitions, like the one at the Crédac, which then travelled to Nuremberg Kunstverein, and his solo show at the Carré d'Art in Nîmes in 2009, incite new or different volumetric perceptions against a flattening out in capitalist production, projecting out of the box and beyond the frame. Moulène is now preparing his first US exhibition for Dia: Beacon, opening this autumn, continuing his exploration of political meanings inherent in images and objects and in the production behind them.

'One should reward anticipation.'
— Jean-Luc Moulène¹⁴

'When we have decorticated, deconstructed, destroyed the real, there still remains this network of extremely solid metallic threads, a very potent human construction. This is where the work continues. These wires, we take them and we tie them together: new figures are formed, new realities are imagined. Imagination liberates. On this horizon of being, freedom is maximal, and *potenza* approaches possibility. New subjectivities, new fields of action, new syntheses of cooperation can thus be glimpsed.' — Antonio Negri¹⁵

12 J.-L. Moulène quoted in *Mental Archaeology: Matti Braun, Thea Djordjadze, Jean-Luc Moulène* (exhibition leaflet), Ivry-sur-Seine: Centre d'art contemporain d'Ivry — le Crédac, 2010, p.39. Translation the author's.

13 See 'Études pour Body', interview with Jean-Luc Moulène recorded on the occasion of the exhibition 'Paris-Bombay-Delhi', Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2011: http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xj5okc_paris-delhi-bombay-jean-luc-moulene_creation (last accessed on 2 August 2011).

14 Hans Ulrich Obrist and J.-L. Moulène interviewed Antonio Negri in Italy. An extract from the interview was published in the magazine accompanying the exhibition 'Voilà: Le Monde dans la tête' at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris in 2000 (published by Paris-Musées and Les Inrockuptibles).

15 Antonio Negri, *Art & Multitude*, Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2009; English edition, trans. Ed Emery, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011, pp.36–37.