

The background of the cover is a complex, abstract artwork. It features a dense network of thin, white, fibrous or thread-like lines that crisscross and overlap. These lines are set against a dark, almost black background, which is punctuated by several bright, circular light sources that create a shimmering, ethereal effect. The overall composition is dynamic and intricate, suggesting a sense of depth and movement.

Art in America

OCTOBER 1998

Judy Pfaff

**3 French
Abstractionists**

Richard Diebenkorn

**Report from
Budapest**

\$5.00 USA

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Art in America

October 1998

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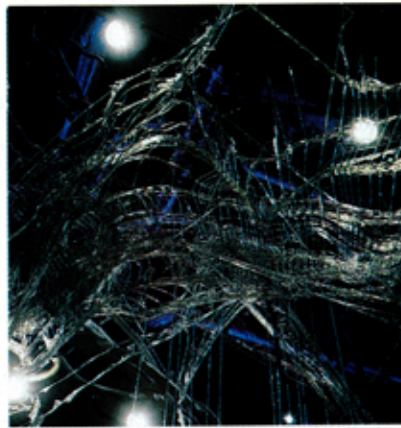
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Cover: Judy Pfaff, *Cielo Requerdo* (detail), 1994, wood, fiber-glass, steel, blue lighting, 30 by 35 by 38 feet; installed at the Columbus Museum of Art. Photo Rob van Erve. See article beginning on page 100.

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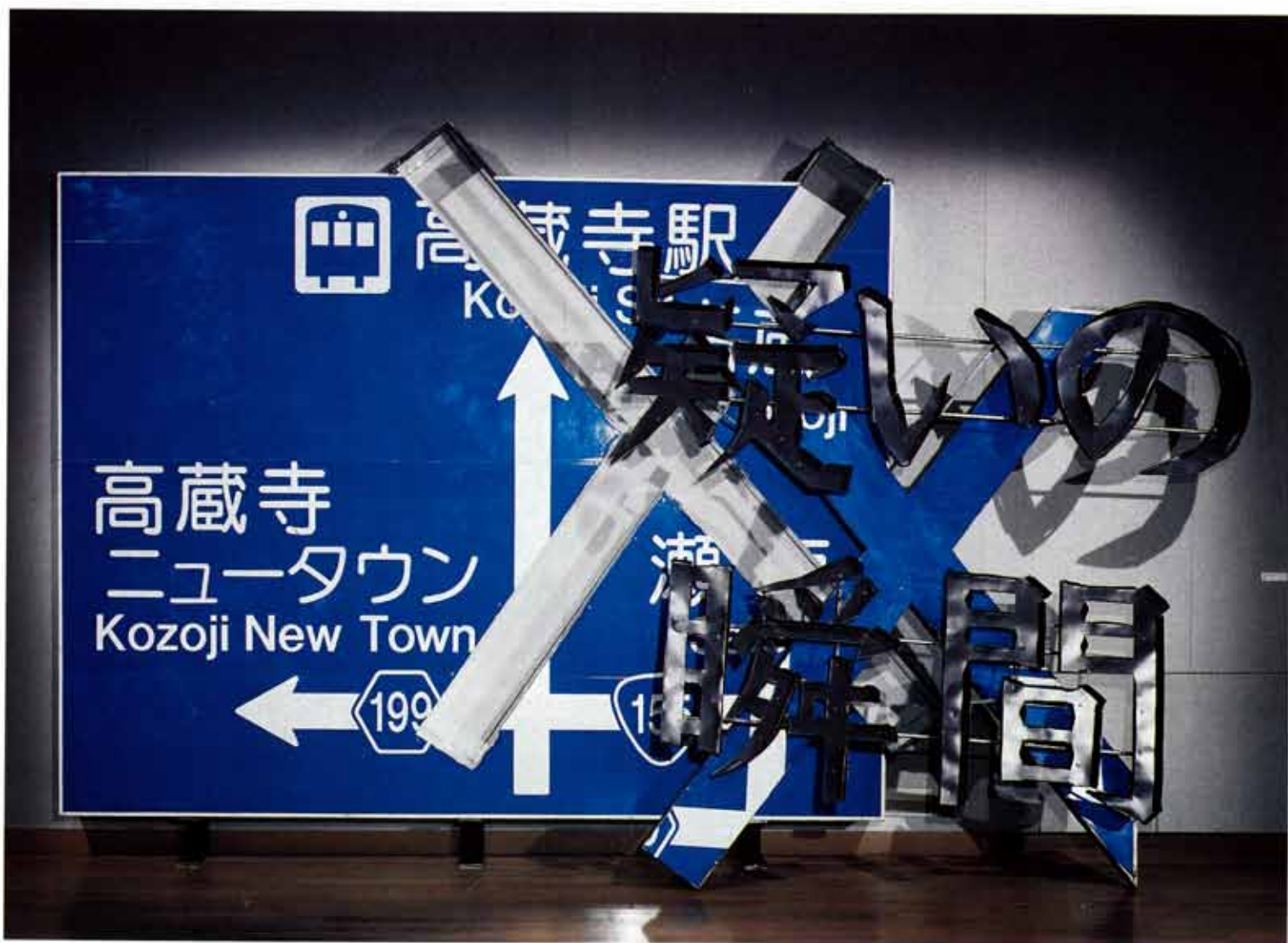


*Richard Baquié: Le Temps de rien, 1985, steel, copper engraving plates, 10% by 10% by 1% feet.
All photos, unless otherwise noted, were installed at the capMusée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux. Photo © F. Delpech.*

Freeze the Moment

In a career cut short, French sculptor Richard Baquié brought together his twin passions—language and mechanical processes—in works that remind us again and again that time is always running out. A traveling retrospective, currently in Marseilles, provides a rare look at this elusive artist.

BY ANNE ROCHETTE AND WADE SAUNDERS



Instant de doute, 1988, various metals, mirrors, Japanese highway sign, 9' by 9' feet. Collection Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations; on loan at the Musée d'Art Moderne, Saint Etienne. Courtesy Galerie Arlogos, Paris. Photo S. Anzai.

Richard Baquié came to the fore as a young sculptor in the early 1980s. Between his first exhibition in his native Marseilles in 1980 and his death there of cancer at the age of 44 in 1996, he established himself as a key, if elusive, figure in recent French art. Though he was included in the 1986 Guggenheim Museum show "Angles of Vision: French Art Today," as well as the 1987 edition of Documenta, and also had a solo show at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1991, he never became well known outside of France. His relative obscurity may be attributed to at least three circumstances: his resolute attachment to Marseilles, which is off the main circuit of European culture; his reliance on a quite poetic French, sometimes difficult to translate; and his making of large, unwieldy and mechanically temperamental pieces.

The capcMusée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux, working with the mac Galeries Contemporaines des Musées de Marseille, recently organized a comprehensive retrospective of Baquié's work. The cathedral-like capcMusée—built of stone in the 19th century as a warehouse and converted into an art center in 1991—provided a perfect setting for Baquié's large-scale haikus of sheet metal, his cut-up cars and other cranky machines. The installation followed

themes rather than chronology, with smaller pieces and works on paper shown in the side galleries. Although Baquié worked off or on the wall with equal ease, he never seemed particularly interested in sculptural space, preferring the known space of familiar objects or the ambiguous space of signs.

Baquié was a wanderer, a bricoleur whose raw materials were as likely to be words or other artists' works as manufactured goods. He regarded his sculptures as experiments: if the mechanism in a piece worked for a while, that was permanence enough. While Baquié's heirs and the capcMusée have made real efforts to restore and maintain a number of works, such repairs now are complicated by the artist's death and the obsolescence of many of his chosen electrical and mechanical components. A few sculptures remained out of service in the show, and others were run but for brief moments. His sculptures pose an increasingly common conundrum: if they are run, a number of them will sooner or later break down and require repairs, which risk being alterations; if they aren't run, they have already ceased to be the pieces they were. (Billy Klüver addresses this issue with insight in his discussion of the conservation of Rauschenberg's large-scale sculptural works [A.I.A., July '91].)



Sans titre (Nuit blanche), 1977, cutout Letraset type and pencil on paper, 9 by 36 by 1/4 inches. Courtesy Galerie Arlogos.

Throughout Baquié's work, one finds short, almost prescriptive statements that can be seen and read simultaneously; the scale, form and physical makeup of the letters are integral to their meaning.

Baquié's close artistic family would include Jean Tinguely, Pier-Paolo Calzolari, Robert Rauschenberg (of the early '60s) and Bill Woodrow. Although Baquié could be funny, especially early on, he may be the most pessimistic of the bunch. His oeuvre is haunted by a sense of failure, which he dramatized with the title of his 1991 retrospective, "Richard Baquié, Constats d'échec," which plays on the ambiguity of the French word "échec," alternately translatable as "failure" or "check" in a chess game. The other important figure for Baquié's work, Marcel Duchamp, is here alluded to, and in fact Baquié spent the better part of two years making *Réplique, sans titre no. 1* (Reply, untitled no. 1), 1991, a full-scale reproduction of Duchamp's *Etant donnés*, but, unlike the original, one we can circumambulate.

Duchamp's art, with its plays on words and mechanical processes, was clearly essential for Baquié, who had a like passion for language, particularly for its ambiguities in representing time and place. Throughout Baquié's work one finds short, almost prescriptive statements—some original, some recycled—which can be seen and read simultaneously; the scale, form and physical makeup of the letters are integral to their meaning. Thus, in *Ici ou là* (Here or There), 1985, each word is carved into the top surface of a separate concrete mass, and these masses are connected by clear plastic tubing to reservoirs and a pump. With the pump running, the letters act as open channels for the

circulating water, and they become more visible. The concrete elements seem placed only provisionally, and moving water can't be said to be either here or there. Writing about his work in English poses a slight dilemma, since translations can be no more than approximations.

The earliest work in the show, *Sans titre (Nuit blanche)*, 1977, was a beautiful small piece comprising three panels, each made of two pieces of paper, one superimposed on the other; in all three panels the letters of a phrase were cut out of the front piece, making visible the underlayer. "Nuit blanche" thus appears as black letters behind a white matte in the first panel, "Matin gris" as gray on gray in the second and "Jour noir" as white on black in the last. The words are rendered with a literalness both funny and sweet, but the weather they forecast is disquieting: in French, "white nights" are sleepless ones, leading to gray mornings and black days.

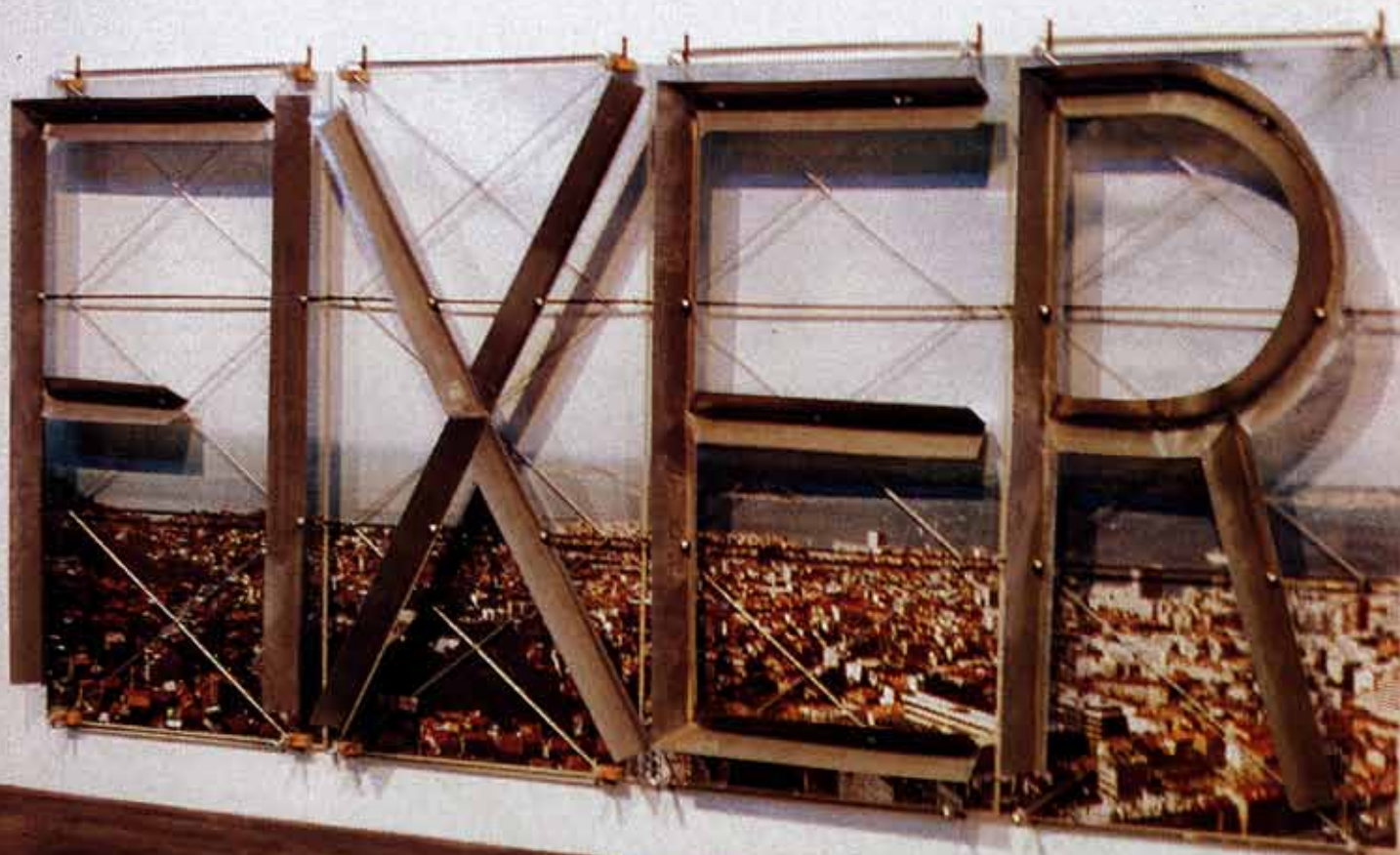
In a 1985 work a 10-foot-high freestanding

steel scaffold supports metal letters that spell out the laconic expression "LE TEMPS DE RIEN," which is also the title of the piece. The four letters of "RIEN" occupy the lower two-thirds of the rectangle created by the placement of the words. The letters are made from copper engraving plates originally used to print packaging for frozen shrimp and cane sugar. On a real billboard the message would likely be a funny advertising tease, but here, with all else stripped away, the message becomes a forbidding "moment of nothing," which is no moment at all.

In the stark *Fixer* (1994), the 6½-foot-high sheet metal letters of "FIXER" are supported by a crisscross of thin cables in front of a panoramic black-and-white photograph of Marseilles. The verb French "fixer" means both to immobilize living beings, events or memories and to focus one's eyes on a particular sight. Here it functions as a spatial and a temporal injunction: to fix the artist's native city, endowing it with a measure of eternity,

Réplique, sans titre no. 1: Etant donnés: 1 La chute d'eau 2 Le gaz d'éclairage, 1991, mixed mediums, 8½ by 6½ by 14 feet. Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lyon. Photo © F. Delpech.





Fixer, 1994, color photograph, sheet iron, linen, Plexiglas, metal armature, 6' by 13' by 1/2 feet. Courtesy Galerie Arlogos.

but also to keep it at bay, behind a steel grid. In *Fixer l'instant* (1992), one leg of a large upright X constructed of steel and mirrors pierces a white café table, while the other leg cuts through a folding chair. In the crotch of the X, two rows of red letters, spelling out the title, are skewered on motorized axles and spin rapidly; the phrase remains legible despite being in perpetual motion, thus mocking its own implied imperative. Both works are emblematic of Baqué's ability to open a space within language, meshing visual elements and words so as to let new meanings coalesce. And in both, as in many other works, Baqué seems to attempt, somewhat desperately, to freeze the flow of time.

For a few years, around 1985, Baqué used language a bit more conventionally, stringing together sentences or fragmentary phrases to open the possibility of narration, if not of autobiography. Several pieces can thus be considered as articulated texts, involving time and intimate references as well as more philosophical or poetic statements. One of the

most impressive of these works is *Epsilon* (1986). In this large tripartite sculpture, a badly charred and rusted Renault 16, a French family car of the '70s, supports a crude rack displaying a longish text, the uneven letters of which have been roughly cut from the car's body at various places. (Before deciding to attend art school in his mid-20s, Baqué worked as a driving-school instructor, an experience which may partly account for his ambivalence toward automobiles.)

A large circle has been removed from the right-front passenger door in *Epsilon* to become the main part of a wall element placed nearby. The text cut out from this panel reads "rien juste la mémoire de la lumière" (nothing but the memory of light). The hole left in the front door now houses a powerful fan, which periodically blows through the car, violently rattling it. The car faces a human-height billboard made of a panel of corrugated aluminum cut to form the word "ZERO." The cleanness and coolness with which "zero" is rendered stand in sharp contrast to the cata-

strophic condition of the car. *Epsilon* mixes violence and sentimentality, motion and stasis.

In the 1984 *Autrefois il prenait souvent le train pour travestir son inquiétude en lassitude* (In days gone by, he often took the train to disguise his anxiety as lassitude), a window and part of the wall of a train car have been cut out and made into a proscenium. The sky-blue fragment of the train is connected through a black rubber bellows to an unlikely second compartment roughly made of white corrugated metal and steel screen set atop the wheels of a luggage cart. The work resembles both a section of a train and a giant view camera. Words pass quickly across an LED sign set inside, so that one has to read, as if they were the passing landscape, such sibylline dicta as (translating from the French) "the words get lost . . . often they are but the projection of your own seduction . . . the world belongs to me and escapes me." *Autrefois . . .* is a surprisingly elegant sculpture despite its

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Baquié

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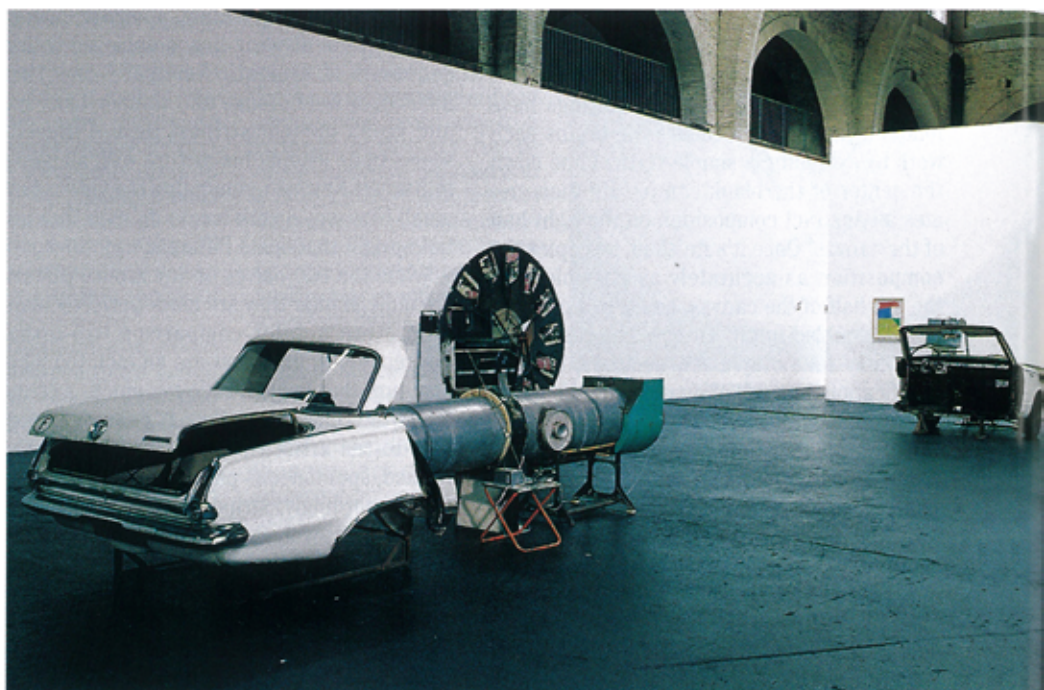
somewhat casual-seeming execution; the work's humor and formal rhythm balance out its nostalgia. Baquié was rare in his ability to use language as one material among others, creating trains of words and references.

Baquié once said, "We think more when we travel. I want my work to displace people." He had a real interest in geography and its corollary of displacement, both physical and mental. Conveyances—cars, airplanes, trains, buses and even a moped—appear in many of his sculptures; he repeatedly uses fans, pumps, refrigeration units or vacuum cleaners, as though each work should create its own climate. In Baquié's sculptures, things are both themselves and metaphors for the possibilities they may bring forth.

Several rather humorous pieces from the early '80s make use of toylike airplanes, some constructed of cut-up tin cans, others of glued-together plastic bags. Small fans blow on the metal planes or inflate the plastic ones. In *Situation du vent IV* (Wind Conditions IV), 1983, a clumsy passenger jet successively inflates and deflates, like a satyric phoenix. Three years later, as success gave Baquié access to bigger toys and spaces, he dismembered a Caravelle jet about to be scrapped and made several works out of large and small portions of the plane.

Baquié had no qualms about cutting up, slicing or quartering once mobile devices, as if the loss of a function, such as transport, called for a compensatory violence. In "Amore mio" (1985), he deconstructed a white Plymouth Valiant into four works titled and placed according to the four cardinal points, adding various devices to each section of the car. The hood of the car bears a concrete slab on which the words "Amore mio" have been deeply inscribed; water continually flows down from a cistern, courses through the letters connected in the concrete and is pumped back up, like blood in the body. The passenger-side doors support a large arrow-shaped form covered with functioning refrigeration coils and ice—water in a cold and immobile state. Another door is used to fashion a sort of kinescope: a large disk with 13 inset images spins, and the images are stroboscopically illuminated at the moment they appear centered in the car window. The result is a very brief and ambiguous movie in which a pink car moves jerkily about.

In the fourth of the works that make up "Amore mio," a long round duct extends forward from the rear seat and trunk. Two speakers—one attached to the car's original radio, the other to a tape deck—project their



View of "Amore mio," a four-part installation, 1985, showing Plymouth nord (foreground), trunk section of a Plymouth Valiant with speakers, round duct, fan, $\frac{4}{4}$ by $15\frac{1}{2}$ by $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet and Plymouth sud (in background), Valiant front end with various metals, tar, concrete, $\frac{4}{4}$ by $6\frac{1}{2}$ by $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet. Collection mac Galeries Contemporaines des Musées de Marseille. Photo © F. Delpech.

sound into the tube but are largely drowned out by the noise of a large fan blowing back down the conduit toward the trunk. Overall, "Amore mio" hints at prior violence and continuing emergency. It is as though the car has been dismembered and its parts put on life-support, each system evoking an aspect or potentiality of the deconstructed whole. "Amore mio" is a journey, taking us through the compass points and through moods varyingly expectant, sad, romantic, joyous.

Starting in the late '80s, Baquié traveled widely for group exhibitions and frequently located his works geographically, using maps in many pieces, as well as aerial photographs, snapshots of city scenes and street signs. In the aptly named *Instant de doute* (Instant of Doubt), 1988, he cut a human-size X out of a large blue-and-white Japanese highway sign complete with destinations in both Japanese and English script, road numbers and the international symbol for a train station. The X, placed in front of the sign, supports two lines of fabricated metal ideograms, which render the title in Japanese. While the original sign was perfectly functional for its intended audience, it has now become an icon of disorientation, embodying a measure of the artist's self-irony on the perils of being invited to work abroad, where the language, even the signage, is wholly foreign.

Location, if not orientation, is at stake in the 1989 *Nulle part est un endroit* (Nowhere is a Place). These words, fabricated in steel, are arranged in three rows of roughly even

length; directly in front of them is a structure of doubled rods connecting rings, which together suggest routes marked out on a map. Fragments of black-and-white photographs depicting urban night scenes are placed behind pieces of broken glass and then set between the rods and the letters. The message is defiant, since we habitually take "nowhere" to be a vacuity, and topical, as the battle between the capital and the provinces has been an ongoing saga in France. The places depicted in the photographs are without visible inhabitants or signs of life; here an "endroit" becomes but one shard among others, all barren and uneasily linked together.

Were Richard Baquié alive today, we might also value these works for what they presaged; as it was, the capcMusée exhibition seemed a fitting elegy, his sculptures suffused with an intelligence always ready to disregard its own accomplishments. He titled a 1985 work *Que reste-t-il de ce que l'on a pensé et non dit?* What remains of things thought but not said—or, in every artist's life, of works imagined but not made? □

"Richard Baquié: Retrospective 1952-1996" debuted at the capcMusée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux [June 27-Sept. 28, 1997] and is now on view at the mac Galeries Contemporaines des Musées de Marseille [May 19-Sept. 27, 1998], which collaborated in curating the show. A 142-page illustrated catalogue, with essays by Henry-Claude Cousseau, Bernard Blistène and Michel Enrici, accompanied the exhibition.

Authors: Anne Rochette and Wade Saunders are artists who also write about art.