

LE TEMPS D'UN SOUFFLE

[IN THE SPAN OF A BREATH]

by Olivier Kaepelin

APRIL 26 TO JUNE 28, 2025

GUILLAUME BARTH

ELINA 2015-2025, THE PROMISE TO THE AYMARAS



Elina J+3, 2015, photograph of salt and water sculpture, 300 cm diameter, Bolivia, Elina project, 2013-2015 © Guillaume Barth

Is it necessary to cross nihilism to reach the beauty of the world? (1)

Daniel Dezeuze

I first encountered Guillaume Barth and his work at the Studio National des Arts Contemporains when, in 2021, Alain Fleischer asked me to organize *Panorama*, an exhibition devoted to the work of young artists at Le Fresnoy.

I was deeply impressed by the work of Isabelle Hin, Janina Wagner, Marie Sommer, Faye Formisano and, in particular, Guillaume Barth, whose “experience” is still with me today. Enriched by relationships with earlier works, discussions and, above all, the artist’s own accounts of his research, my approach has continued to deepen. His position, his way of thinking and living, do not encourage me, today, to approach his work through artistic theories or conceptualized argumentative notions.

It’s by following his stories, those of his creations, his travels and his encounters, that I interpret what drives his work. For my part, he played an important role in the title I gave to the Fresnoy exhibition *Par le rêve*, and the words that follow owe a great deal to him: «The more I immerse myself in the projects of these artists, in their work, the more I have the feeling that they are dealing with the activity of mind and body that is dream. Aren’t we made of its stuff? Not the stuff of escape dreams, indulging in the hardware of the marvellous, but of active imaginations responding to a reality that today is worrying, dangerous perhaps... Dreams are concrete thoughts that respond to the state of matter, to the threat of gravity, of the weight of beings and things... A dream, dreams against the tropisms of the age.... With them, as with the Austrian writer Georg Trakl or the American poet Jack Spicer, we need to conceive of another topicality and “settle elsewhere”. Jean-Claude Carrière and Luis Buñuel agreed that dreams are essential because they are the only real victory over time... Time as a calendar, as inertia. Dreams disarm this “time”.



Harvesting flowers, 2018, silver photograph, Khorasan desert, Iran © Guillaume Barth

For me, these phrases are the thread running through Guillaume Barth's work, which always "settles elsewhere". In Le Fresnoy's captivating installation *Crocus Sativus, Fleur du Bonheur*, saffron, the flower of joy, offers us its perpetual growth, thanks to a luminous hologram, at the center of a territory created by a carpet, built by a spiral that we tread on, on which we stretch out. He carried us along in his design, accompanied by the swirls of enchanting Persian music, combining the sounds of the Ney, the Tambûr, the Setâr and the Daf.

Guillaume Barth had sought out this movement, this intense moment of euphoria, in Iran, in the saffron fields, with the growers, then, here, with the weavers and musicians. To hear him recount this search, to experience his journeys in geographical space and in the space of his work, is to reach the meaningful heart of his thought.

The same is true of *Elina*, and its promise to the Aymaras, his new creation that took him ten years to complete, and which he tells us is a new planet whose name is "heir to the Greek *Hélê*, sunburst, and the symbols *Li*, Lithium and *Na*, Sodium, which are the elements of which it is composed".

What is its story, what is its legend? To bring it to life, Guillaume Barth went to Bolivia, to meet a pre-Columbian people, the Aymaras, on the shores of the *Salar d'Uyuni*, a salt lake which, at the start of the rainy season, sees its soil barely covered by long-awaited water. It was here that he witnessed the birth of his planet *Elina*. It was here, as Joachim Montessuis writes, that it took the form of a concrete metaphysical object. This object is not a concrete metaphysical object, for if it is hemispherical, it is only there to metamorphose and become, thanks to the water that reflects it: a globe, a sphere, both material and virtual, made of salt bricks as well as a reflection that, as the "mirror-water" rapidly evaporates, disappears along with the salt edifice it has created. It fades away without cancelling out the presence of its energy. Water, "the focus of its transformation", plays an essential role in the vernacular life of the Aymara people, as well as in the adventure and intimate vision of a man, an artist in search of the genesis of beauty.



A dream studio, 2014, Elina project © François Klein

We're not talking Land Art or environmental art here, but vital forms expressing the quest for a beneficial flow, which he offers us here as a story of water and light, as suggested by this poem by Rûmî, where history is like water:

*[...] A feeling of fullness sometimes arises spontaneously
But it usually takes a bit of work for it to appear.
Beauty envelops us from all sides, but more often than not
we have to walk through a garden to recognize it.*

*The body itself is a screen, which both protects
and partially reveals the light
Water, stories, the body, everything we do,
are all mediums who at the same time
hide and show what is hidden.*

*Study all this and enjoy being washed in this way
by a secret that sometimes you'll know
and sometimes not (2)*



Concert for a New Forest, July 3, 2021, Full HD video still, duration 36 min 27 sec, filmed in the shared garden in Sélestat, score from summer 2017 performed by Neus Estarella composed by Thibault Bru, Images montage Fernando Colin Roque, Guillaume Barth, 2016-2023 © Guillaume Barth

Guillaume Barth's adventures are those of flows that carry him in search of a secret, his own as well as that of elements that take him from one person to "the other" like the Amerindian he saw in his dreams before recognizing him in his wanderings in Canada... Elements that take him from human beings to the trees in Sélestat's *Baumschule* woods, with which he talks, or from one site to another, such as the Salar lake where *Elina* is born, whose arrival he has sensed. Guillaume Barth is a visionary artist. Like Bruce Chatwin, he's on the *songlines*.

I've mentioned dreaming, which is one of our daily thought processes, but let's also talk about premonition, hallucination or revelation, which Guillaume Barth, in very concrete terms, "trusts". They enable him to extricate himself from the alienating ways of the world. Albert Ayler is a composer, a jazz musician and the author, with Mary Maria, of an unforgettable piece *Music is the healing force of the universe*, which I hear today, contemplating *Elina*, a lyrical source of balance and healing. Through her posture in the world, her power of concentration, her impermanence, the rhythm of her "appearance-disappearance", she becomes part of our imagination and the elusive present of our memory.

In this space-time
For an instant,
this essential beat of the universe.

Geopolitics tells us that this region of South America, with its rich subsoil containing lithium, an alkaline, silvery-white metal used in industry and pharmaceuticals, will become a key deposit for the new economy and all its technological tools.

Guillaume Barth's *Elina*, created with the knowledge of the Aymaras Indians, is first and foremost "elsewhere". It reveals an unequalled richness, that of a spirituality nourished by the infinite capacity of matter to change and regenerate itself. Through nature, no doubt, but above all through art, she is in search of what happens, of "what comes", of the event that welcomes us into the heart of a birth principle.

Everything is new and new again.

Guillaume Barth shares the reality of this state. He lives it, and that's why, rather than a bookish aesthetic, we need to follow this artist's adventures. I see proof of this in the fact that his gallery director, Véronique Jaeger, decided to make the journey with him, to his explorations, to the *Salar d'Uyuni*, in order to understand them.

Guillaume Barth's journeys must be followed, step by step, and the thread that links them. In the *Baumschule*, the nursery, the new forest he has created, it's good to join in the breathing, conversations and movements of the trees, and of living beings from different kingdoms.

Like the Chinese artist Liu Shangying, he invites us to work with "the earth": the earth that can be dug up and stirred by any man in the countryside, perhaps in the universe. He invites them to take part in the sowing, which is, above all, that of the artist inviting this "earth" to take part in his creation. It's not just a geology to be drilled, a plane to be cultivated where flora grows, but as the German Romantic poet Novalis put it, it's a plane of the spirit that embraces this nature to slowly generate a work, mental and physical, where this song of the earth, through art, invents the world. It then confers upon him the subtraction of seasons and time, thanks to which his creation appears in a new space. A creation, in search of its name, as vast as the cosmos, living "in the span of a breath".

Olivier Kaepelin



The Tahua reunion, 2025, Project Elina, the promise to the Aymaras © François Klein