

**Hans HARTUNG**

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*"I had designed it a little too small" : Abraham Poincheval on spending a week inside a sculpture of himself*

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## 'I had designed it a little too small': Abraham Poincheval on spending a week inside a sculpture of himself

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Last month, in a smart gallery in Paris, the back of a sculpture was removed and a man was lifted out. He looked around, disoriented, as his body slowly unfurled. A doctor rushed to his side and, after inspecting him, announced he was in good health. The crowd cheered. He'd been in there for seven days.

Abraham Poincheval, possibly France's most extreme performance artist, specialises in surreal feats of endurance, often in tight spots. He has lived inside a rock for seven days, and a stuffed bear for 13. For this latest work, *Hartung*, he decided to look at a painting by abstract artist Hans Hartung for seven days straight. He even built a special contraption for it: an aluminium shell of a man sitting on a block, looking down a large square funnel.

"It's my double, done with a 3D scanner," says the 49-year-old, who dresses like a teenager on acid. "We made me slightly bigger so I could enter myself." The block functioned as a sitting pit toilet and, in the figure's arms, there was water and food. "The beginning was very hard," says Poincheval, who struggled both to reach his supplies and get them to his mouth. "I had designed it a little too small."



▲ Forced to look: the sculpture from another direction Photograph: Claire Dorn



▲ Poincheval on the march in western France. Photograph: Fred Tanneau/AFP/Getty Images

The biggest shock, however, was Hartung's work, a square canvas painted in 1989, the last year of the French-German artist's life. "It had a really powerful impact," says Poincheval. He hardly slept the first "chaotic" night, so disturbed was he by Hartung's thick black trails and splashes on iridescent gold and blue. But the next day things settled down. "One starts to find one's place in the sculpture, to find one's bearings and invent gestures that allow you to function." He compares the experience to "a solo crossing of the Atlantic", his

mood veering from calm to anxiety to exhilaration. The painting became a sort of mantra and, to his surprise, was continually in flux. “Things disappeared, others reappeared, colours changed,” he says. “It was always moving, like a real landscape.”

Poincheval has focused on performance from the very beginning of his career. It was cheaper, for starters. “One has a body,” he says, “which is already an amazing thing – a refuge, a means of transport. It receives a lot of information, which it conserves, archives, transcribes.”

Pulling his own shelter, he has climbed in the Alps during all four seasons (*The Thickness of a Mountain*, 2013), walked Brittany wearing the armour of a medieval knight (*The Errant Knight, the Man of Absence*, 2018) and has been a living message in a bottle (*Bottle*, 2015). Slowly the journey became an interior one as he became fascinated by early hermits. Indeed, their efforts make Poincheval seem amateur. Symeon the Stylite, the fifth-century saint, spent 37 years on top of a pillar. “They decided to view the world differently,” he says – it wasn’t so much about withdrawal as a change of perspective. “They were able to give the best account of the world.”

In 2017, Poincheval lived inside a limestone boulder that had space at its centre for him. It was there that he came up with Hartung, having experienced hallucinations that reminded him of the painter’s later exuberant works.



▲ Rock-star artist ... preparing to spend a week inside a boulder. Photograph: Benoit Tessier/Reuters

What effect did his presence, within his creation, have on other visitors looking at Hartung’s work? “They have examined the canvases with much more attention and have interacted with them in a far more lively way,” says Thomas Schlessler, the director of the Hartung-Bergman Foundation, which organised the exhibition. “This performance shows

the power the gaze can exert on a work of art, but also the power the artwork can exert on the gaze.” And they tracked this quite literally: Poincheval’s brain activity was monitored through electrodes on his scalp. Scientists are now analysing the results.

Poincheval felt the power of the gaze especially during Egg, when he sat on a wooden stool in a glass cube for 21 days at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. Beneath the seat of the stool was a transparent compartment for a nest of 11 eggs he intended to incubate, his presence adding the 10 degrees of heat necessary. “I was doing the work that a chicken would do,” he says. “But being a human, it’s a bit more complicated.”

He was astonished to find that people spent the best part of an hour watching him. This dynamic fascinated him: “Where is the relationship between the watcher and the work? And what happens – suddenly, chemically – to produce this magic moment?” Thankfully, Poincheval doesn’t over-intellectualise: while he’s happy talking about the gaze, he’s just as happy to answer questions about the practicalities of defecation. (He generally stores it in a special compartment. I sniffed inside Hartung and it didn’t smell.)



▲ Glass half full ... inside a giant bottle. Photograph: Bertrand Langlois/AFP/Getty Images

On the last few days of Egg, Poincheval became convinced that his experiment had failed and, after an awful night’s sleep, was ready to announce that the eggs wouldn’t hatch. In the morning, a cleaner seemed to confirm this by warning him one of the eggs had a crack. His heart sunk. Then he noticed a little beak poking out. “The chick had fought all night, like me,” he says. On the advice of one of the attendants, whose family kept hens, Poincheval undertook a delicate operation: “I performed a caesarean on the egg.” The rest then hatched and they all went to live with Poincheval’s parents, perfectly completing this exploration of the family unit.

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This summer, the artist is building a refuge on the Saint-Jacques de Compostelle pilgrimage trail in France. From the outside it will look like a giant rock, but the inside will be covered in gold leaf, allowing weary travellers to close their eyes in a gleaming cavern. And next year, Poincheval will encase himself in a beehive, as an exploration of a unit larger than family: society. “The hive is the ideal representation of all societies,” he says, “whether during medieval times, antiquity, the Renaissance, modernity, or monarchy.”

Seeking transcendence in confined situations has had resonance since spring 2020, but Poincheval doesn’t want to draw too many comparisons between his week-long imprisonment and lockdowns. “It’s very different,” he says. “I want this. I have conceived of this idea of being enclosed. That is different from someone who takes the full brunt of it without a say.”