

# PORTFOLIO

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### JEAN-LUC MOULENE

**THE HIGHLIGHT OF** Moulène's yearlong exhibition (up through December 31) at **Dia Beacon**, in Upstate New York, is *Body, Guyancourt*, October 2011, an extraordinary contraption: a racing vehicle unable to move, a carefully manufactured product with no obvious purpose. Produced in collaboration with automobile giant Renault using 3-D design software, *Body* is indicative of the French artist's inquisitive mind. In his photographs and ever-growing body of objects, Moulène has embraced mathematics, the Louvre's sculpture collection, and the Parisian everyday. He has made work

about Amsterdam's prostitutes and French strikers' memorabilia. When Coline Milliard met him in London, he was about to shoot a film inspired by the Greek myth of the Judgment of Paris. Despite this dizzying array of subjects, the artist's core concerns have changed little since his first photographs from the late 1980s. Moulène tackles the big questions: the nature of image and material, the role of art, and the artist's place in society. His solo exhibition at **Modern Art Oxford** through November 25 includes his film, *The Three Graces*, and his third show at London's **Thomas Dane Gallery** opens November 27.

**CM:** *You have said, "I am interested in producing work that is, in itself, the site of conflict."*

**JLM:** Artworks are not peaceful. The tradition of combining two things and attempting to reconcile them in an artwork is a symbolic position coming from Catholicism, but I prefer to put together the parts of a conflict and let it be visible in the work. I don't try to solve conflict; I try to show it.

**CM:** *Is conflict a starting point?*

**JLM:** No. I live the conflict. The starting point, I think, is revolt.

**CM:** *Against what?*

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**JLM:** Stupidity, hypocrisy, injustice.

**CM:** *Do you see yourself as militant?*

**JLM:** No. Militant means “belonging” to a party. I’m an artist. I’ve been involved with militants. But with groups, it’s always better to just be passing through. They all end up producing new constraints.

**CM:** *With pieces like Objets de Grève (1999–2000), did you feel that you ran the risk of being instrumentalized?*

**JLM:** It was part of the project. I did these images with the idea that they would be reproduced. I think *Objets de Grève* is my most exhibited piece; it has been shown in all kinds of places and in all kinds of formats.

material. If you make a virtual project, even if it’s very critical, it’s fine. But if you make a three-ton piece, you create a problem.

**CM:** *Was this your thinking behind Body?*

**JLM:** Of course. Imagine the price! And someone had to pay for it. When I did the newspaper pieces distributed for free, someone paid for them to be made, but this part was hidden. This is a problem. Now, if I made more newspapers, I would charge one euro. People trust what costs. When it’s free, there’s no value. It’s like with the city. Often you see beautiful things: events, feelings, sensitive things. But the only way to make them interesting is to sacralize them. Art is for that. A lot of readymades are just translating beautiful things from the street into the museum.

**CM:** *Is the way you work with photography also a process of sacralization?*

**JLM:** Of course. But what’s interesting is that photography has almost no weight. Photography is just a circulation of feelings, without the weight of the readymade. It changes things—it’s a system of metamorphosis.

**CM:** *Tell me about the film you are shooting for your exhibition in Oxford.*

**JLM:** It has to do with the old tradition of the Three Graces, from the Judgment of Paris. With the Three Graces, we go back to the notion of conflict. Paris has to choose between three possibilities: power, war, and love. The Graces always look very similar because basically it’s the same woman; it’s a trinity. I’ve been working with the idea of disjunction for a long time. These concepts continue to be alive, and society is becoming

increasingly disjointed. Everything has turned into a vector going its own way. Complexity arises from there, and no one is interested in what is common. To show that, I’m putting together three girls who look very much like each other. In the film, they are standing five feet away from each other, each one acting alone. Their physical resemblance is the only thing they have in common. I tried to highlight the conflict between oneself and the activity of the group.

**CM:** *You’re working on a series of “knot” objects, some in bronze and some in glass.*

**JLM:** First, we have to understand what a knot is. The idea is to produce tools to describe



**Jean-Luc Moulène**

ABOVE: Exhibition view of *Body*, Guyancourt, part of “Opus + One” at Dia Beacon, 2011–12. Aluminum structure, basalt fiber, resins, and paints, 8 x 28 x 11½ ft.

LEFT: *Quelque Chose Généralisé*, 2007–11, 90 strips of dyed wood with fastenings.

complexity. So back again to the conflict, and to the idea of making visible. Think of chaos: The best way to represent chaos is with a stream of water, a turbulence. If you throw a rope in it, there’s a moment when it’s going to form a figure. It could be a simple circle, or it could be a trefoil or any number of other

figures. Knot theory was created to try to describe the activity of electricity. Nowadays we also use it for biology, weather, all kinds of systems, but it’s just a describing tool.

And my utopia for artworks is to create tools. **CM:** *To make sense of the world?*

**JLM:** Not only to make sense of it. It’s a tool for the mind. When you see a knife on the table, even if it’s not moving it nonetheless cuts the space. The function is inside the form. That’s something I always keep in mind when I make a sculpture or an image. To make the bronze pieces, I use a rope knot that I cover with modeling clay, and then I tighten the knot. The knot creates a form in the clay that I cast using a lost-wax technique. I’m trying to make visible different states of complexity.

**CM:** *How important is it for you to maintain physical contact with your artworks?*

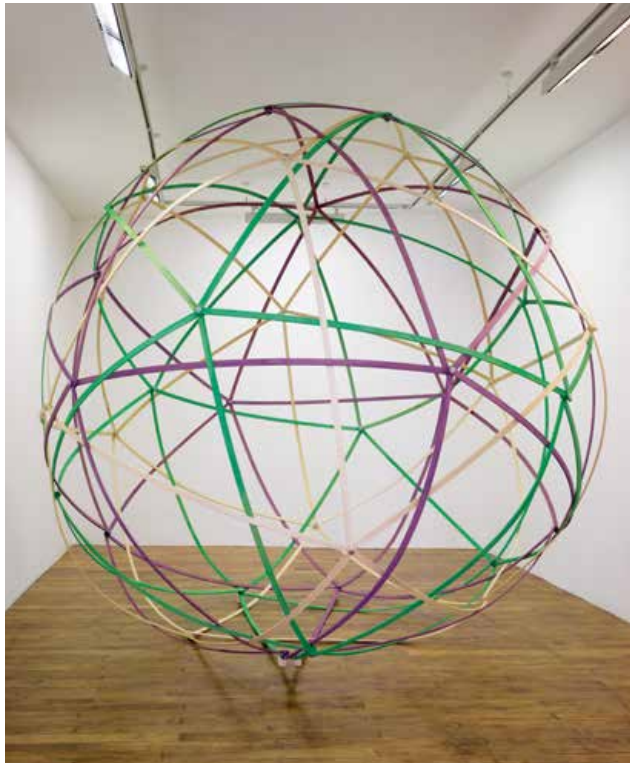
**JLM:** It’s very important, because it’s the only way to know something on a conceptual and sensitive level. That’s why subcontracting the fabrication of a piece can be very dangerous.

**CM:** *How do you experiment?*

**JLM:** Mainly with drawings. I also go through all kinds of models and small constructions, but the main material thing is the drawing—between sign, writing, and surface.

**CM:** *You’ve said that you got involved in the art world “because it was the only way to keep saying no.” Do you still feel this way?*

**JLM:** It’s real. If you say no once, it’s just like a child’s no. But if you make a negation on negation, you produce an affirmation. You have to say no, but when you cut the artwork loose and give it to the public, it becomes an affirmation. If you try to show that this negation is the main activity of the creation, you have to show it as a yes.



But that’s normal. It means that the work lives without me—and works have to take on their own lives. It’s when I cut my link to a work that the public can engage with it.

**CM:** *Several of your pieces were distributed for free—in newspapers, for example. Is the process of dissemination part of the work?*

**JLM:** No, the work is something concrete—the newspaper, not its diffusion. I’m thinking more and more that all these movements that have moved the artwork away from the material and the sacred are really problematic. Nowadays, it’s as if the institutions were making the work. They don’t need artists. And the most annoying thing for them is the

FROM LEFT, JEAN-LUC MOULÈNE; BILL JACOBSON AND GALERIE CHANTAL CROUSEL, PARIS