

Island's Master

M. Péchalat in Conversation with Raimundas Malašauskas

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Dear M. Jean Péchalat,

Last year I went to Vassivière, France for the first time in my life. The purpose of the trip was a visit to Rosa Barba's exhibition at the Centre International d'Art et du Paysage de l'île de Vassivière. It was a quiet autumn weekend and the time spent in Vassivière happened to be the most beautiful part of it.

We walked the bridge leading from the land to the island in the middle of the lake. After a few minutes we reached the island.

After going up and down the tower, seeing hundreds of metres of film in space and listening to the low-frequencies emanating from the water – all those elements of Rosa's project that you must have seen yourself too, we took a walk around the island with Alexandra Bordes, the curator. I don't remember if we finished the walk, but one thing that struck my mind most was the fact that the island was a recent creation of human hands. It felt we were walking around something that existed there for ages. I was stunned. My whole perception of where we were shifted. I understood that we were standing on top of the little hill that got surrounded by water and became an island some years ago.

This is when Alexandra told me that there is a man living on this island since the time this island was not an island at all. This man, she said, knows the history of the island best, he is older than the island we are in.

You are this man, M. Pechalat, and I am delighted to write this letter to you. You must know this island better than your own life, it is something absolutely unique. I don't know if there is a counterpart of yours somewhere else in the world, another person whose life suddenly became embraced by an island. I am very curious, how does it feel to be a living memory of the place?

Forgive me writing to you in English, it is a language that is easier for me to handle. Nevertheless I would like to engage you in some conversation that could become a part of Rosa Barba's book to be published by the art centre.

I am curious about simple things in no particular order: your life in the island, the life of the island and your shared memory. I am curious about the time the island became the island, about the dreams you have when you sleep in the island, about some scenes and images that you remember in close detail. They say that water has memory too and I am wondering whether you had a chance to witness it. I am curious about those moments that sometimes emerge from our memory in a full detail, for example, that brief moment from many years ago that has never crossed your mindspace for half a century, but suddenly it unfolded in your mind as if happened just two minutes ago. Or perhaps – in two minutes to come: future must be enfolded in the past like water is in water, isn't it?

Also – I am interested in the first image you remember. I've been thinking about the first image one can remember – it may be a true memory or it may be something that wants to be a true memory, but it has a form of an image. To me it is a crocodile in the pages of Lithuanian Soviet Encyclopedia that I happened to open one day when I was a kid. It still can bite.

I believe that you exist and we may have an illuminating conversation, or your story that could be recorded not only in the wind passing through the trees on the island, but also pages of Rosa Barba's book.

The next day we went to Limoges – it was far less exciting than the time-bending moment in Vassivière. I wish we had stayed there longer.

Look forward to talking to you – via other people, directly or through any means you prefer.

With my warmest greetings
Raimundas Malašauskas

- Raimundas I'm very happy to be here and to be able to speak with you. When I came to see Rosa Barba's exhibition on the island, I learnt that someone was living here before the island became an island. I was immediately very interested to talk with that person about the history of the island.
- Péchalat I'm here since 1936. It's been ages! Staying at the same place.
- Alexandra You were born here?
- Péchalat No, I was born in Eymoutiers.
- Alexandra Why did you come to live here?
- Péchalat It was work. I came with my parents who had taken a farm on the island, which wasn't an island then, with no water all around. We continued working for Mrs Pascal. I stayed with her; when the dam was built, she kept me. A lot of people from the flooded villages left. I was on a mountain and I didn't leave, I stayed in Vassivière. I kept working for her until she died and even afterwards. And then the joint local commission in charge of the area came and it took the island. It changed life; it wasn't the same at all. It was very difficult, I don't know how to explain it to you, life was turned upside-down, it was not the same work anymore. We had kept the property, we had the cattle, we had many things. On the other hand, of course, it's saddening to see the water rise. When the dam was completed we were seeing the water rise slowly and we had a lot of invaders, it made the vermin come up: rats, snakes, that the water was bringing them closer. The snakes were passing in the courtyard, you had to see that; it was amazing. We say vermin, but all the hares, the rabbits, every game came here with the snakes and the rats, they came up here and we were invaded.
- Raimundas What was the intention of creating a dam here ?
- Péchalat The dam was built only for electricity then the tourism started. The first to operate in tourism was Leyral with the big boats. At that time there were small sailboats, then he put big ones.
- Raimundas When did they fill the lake?
- Péchalat They started work in 1946 and the lake started to fill in 1949; on Christmas Eve, the dam wasn't completed yet, it was only half finished, but water was not a trouble to work with. The materials were coming through the air. It was like the cable cars you see in the mountains, they were bringing the little carriages that were unloading cement on the dam. Cement, stones, material, all went up like that. From the foot of the dam to the top, everything came by cable car. They were taking the stones from the hills, further that way, above the Bordes; they were picking the stones over there and they were making mortar there and even on the dam. What was really going on, it's that they were taking the carriages over there or in the hills all the same. And it was circling continuously like in the mountain, like at winter sports, well, you see what a cable car is of course.

- Raimundas It took them three years to prepare the place before water arrived. What was going on between 1946 and 1949?
- Péchalat They were working by hand, there were very few mechanical tools, just some, a lot was done manually. There were 3500 workers at the time.
- Raimundas Was the dam conceived before the Second World War?
- Péchalat No, they started right after, it was trouble in Indochina. The war was just finished when they started because there wasn't enough light, wasn't enough central heating. Now there is forest everywhere, but before it was all heather moor, cattle that we farmed and very little wood, the cattle was farmed in little herds, not large ones like today. There were a lot of crops, rye, oats, potatoes; it was a lot at the time.
- Raimundas How was the electricity provided before the construction of the dam? Did people have electricity at all in their houses?
- Péchalat We used electricity a lot less, we didn't have refrigerators, no washing machine, no television, we had just a little ordinary radio. Otherwise, we had electricity since 1928 or 1929, but not in the countryside. In Eymoutiers, they had because there were small plants on the Vienne; it gave light but not nearly as much as today. Now, we need a lot of power; washing machines, freezers, we had none of that, the meat was in a salting tub not in a refrigerator. The slaughterhouses weren't that important, they were smaller. Everyone had fresh meat in their cellars, it was often turning bad, now with the refrigerators it's cleaner. To launder, it was done by hand, in a fishing hole, anywhere where there was water. Now, we put everything in the machine and it does everything. And for heating, there was coal, wood was very rare. That's why they made lakes but they are too few of them.
- Raimundas Between 1946 and 1949 when the government proposed the people to go somewhere else, how did you decide to stay?
- Péchalat I was on a mountain, the ones down below had to go by force. I was only the one in the water.
- Raimundas Did you live with your parents?
- Péchalat We were four, me and three girls, and then my parents. The girls got married and they left. Me, I didn't marry and I remained.
- Raimundas You decided to stay on the island?
- Péchalat The owner kept it so I did stay.
- Raimundas Weren't you worried to stay in a kind of isolated situation being stranded on a island?
- Péchalat I didn't even think of it. It changed life, pages were turned so to speak, in a way we jumped forward. The harder part was when the lake was drained in 1995, to see all the land barren. Then it was a hard blow to see the land where I lived again. I had the

chance to see that from a helicopter, to explain to them where there had been a bridge, a mill, a church...

Alexandra Before the arrival of the water, did they destroy everything?

Péchalat They demolished everything, the trees, all cut down, the houses, dynamited. You see little pile of stones, they dynamited everything because of the boats. At Vaugelade, the mill was still intact and, in some other place, the church, but I don't remember where, but now the water probably destroyed everything.

The Vaugelade lake communicates with this one now since it was made before the war to protect Limoges. When there was heavy rain, the part of Limoges that is by the river always flooded, so they decided to create this dam; when it wasn't raining they were letting the water go and when the rain was too important they were holding it to protect Limoges.

Raimundas Did you go inside that church before the war?

Péchalat No, never, I don't know the place. Some said that there was a cemetery at the bottom of the lake but it's not true. Vassivière was just a village. The true Vassivière is here.

Raimundas In 1949, the first day they started putting the water, was it a morning...?

Péchalat The first water came in 1949 for Christmas but it had been already closed for maybe a week. But the day I remember most, it was a day when there was only a little water on the road, people were continuing to go through with their cars and one of them wanted to show off, he missed the road and dived into the water; he was retrieved from the water on Christmas Day.

Raimundas Did you really see the water rise?

Péchalat Yes, it rose continuously. We were seeing the water coming but it wasn't rising very fast, it was rising slowly. We were thinking about it without thinking about it in a way. But it was coming of course. It wasn't rising very fast because it was very hot that year and there was little water and at that time it was only the Maulde. Because there are several rivers alimementing the lake: there is the Vienne that pours out into Servières, up there in Corrèze, and through the tunnel, flows into the Maulde, and then there are other rivers and streams, I don't remember them all, that are poured into it as well.

Raimundas In three days, the water reached everywhere, how was it for you? The landscape has changed immediately, didn't it?

Péchalat Of course, we saw it disappear, the stumps of the cut trees, the water was overflowing them, we couldn't see them anymore. We were happy without being really happy, we didn't know what it was. We had never seen a dam. For this one the people weren't resistant, they were just out of the war, they had suffered so much that it was OK. But afterwards the police was needed to protect the other dam projects, people didn't want to give away the land. I remember a project in Creuse, long

after the war, that the people managed to stop. Today it's only ruined houses there and there are people coming back, but the land still belongs to EDF.

Raimundas Where did the people go to?

Péchalat They went everywhere, to Eymoutiers, to Bujaleuf, I don't know, I lost track of them.

Raimundas Were there many friends you never saw again?

Péchalat There are some that I completely lost, they've gone somewhere in Creuse, in cities. Mostly women, they left after the war, they didn't stay in the country. They were fed up of cultivating when they were growing old and even if they weren't old, and moved to the cities, Paris, Lyon, I lost track of them. Except those who are coming back to visit, who know me, because I don't know them anymore but they're old. It's mostly women that left for the cities, because the work is tiring. It's very hard to be a farmer, that's why they left.

Raimundas So, in the beginning there was no bridge? How were you dealing with it?

Péchalat The bridge was rising with the water. All the EDF works had begun at the same time, everything was done at the same time, there were 3500 workers. The bridge, the dam, the road, everything at the same time.

Alexandra Why did they decide to build the bridge on that side?

Péchalat Because they asked Mrs Pascal, the owner of the castle, if she preferred toward Creuse or toward Haute-Vienne. She preferred toward Beaumont because there was the church, the cemetery.

Raimundas Did you feel that your life has changed with the construction of the dam?

Péchalat Yes, of course, it's a change, a page that turns. But I was less concerned than the owners because I had nothing; but the owners, it was harder for them.

Raimundas What were you doing in the evening before you had a TV?

Péchalat Ah the evenings! It was completely different, we spent the evenings in company. For instance, we were doing like you did today, you would come at my home and the next day we would go to Pierrefitte, Saint-Louis, the Moulin, at friends' and we spent the evening playing cards and grabbing a bite. On weekdays we would stay at home, watching television, we had also a small radio like this one.

Raimundas When did you have a television?

Péchalat A lot later, long after the dam. I couldn't afford it, it was too expensive.

Raimundas Were you going to the movies?

- Péchalat To go to the movies you needed to go to Eymoutiers, it was too far, 15 kilometres of walking. Afterward, it started in Beaumont but it wasn't large. Now it's easy, you take the car, you go far, you go to the movies in Limoges even if, in fact, you don't go. At Eymoutiers, there are some who go because there is a movie every week, I believe. Before there weren't any cars like it is now, cars were extremely rare.
- Raimundas What was your favourite movie?
- Péchalat The movies, I don't remember them all.
- Raimundas Earlier, you said something about the moment when the animals, the vermin arrived on the island? What happened exactly?
- Péchalat It's the water that brought the beasts, the snakes and the rats closer. The rats were the most annoying, they were eating potatoes in the fields, grain; we had to poison them because they were too many. The rats weren't nasty but snakes were. Even a rat can bite but they can't kill but the snakes on the other hand, they were killing the animals, biting people.
- Raimundas But snakes are good to kill the rats?
- Péchalat Yes, they were eating them but not all, there were too many. And then I was afraid of the snakes. There were asps, adders, grass snakes, it's said that grass snakes are harmless but there is still venom anyhow. I saw a woman drop dead, many were bitten. I saw this woman fall, she was holding handfuls of wheat, you had to tie it manually, and when she reached out the snake struck and she died. When the doctor came, she was dead. When you're bitten you keep the memory. In the past, there were healers, but it was a long time ago; when you were bitten by a snake, I don't know what he was doing, I was never told, but he was performing some kind of secret thing that I don't know about but you were cured. It's a time that is older than I am, that I didn't know. But if you weren't going to see this person, you'd die.
- Raimundas Why were the people choosing the healer and not the doctor?
- Péchalat Because doctors couldn't do anything, there were no injections at that time, it's an older time.
- Alexandra There is a small island called "The snakes' island"?
- Péchalat The name was given to look nice. There were snakes on all seven islands, the larger the island, the larger the number of snakes.
- Raimundas Where did the snakes go to?
- Péchalat They are gone but some are still there. I killed one on my doorstep last year, in summer, I missed it the first time but the second time I got it because I don't like them near the houses. But I saw an asp coming in, here under the table, but it's my fault really, it was summer, I was watching TV and suddenly I saw a shadow and said "What is it?" It was an asp, it came listening to the TV, here, under the table. But they are few now, they have dispersed again.

- Raimundas Does the lake freeze sometimes?
- Péchalat Yes, I walked across in the ice that was 40 centimetres thick in 1954 and it was minus 27°Celsius, it made a nice flooring. When the lake was filling it didn't make noise, but when it was coming down, when the ice was breaking, it made a noise at night, it was like thunder, we were hearing cracks ... it was formidable. This year, the frost, was thin like a sheet of paper.
- Raimundas Do you remember when the art centre was built?
- Péchalat Yes there were discussions about it but I can't remember which year it all started and yet I worked on the construction site, for the sculptures, to bring equipment.
- Raimundas When the art centre came, did you think that more exciting things were going to happen on the island?
- Péchalat I can't say, those things are above my reach, it's beyond me. It's kind of peculiar, the art centre. They do unbelievable things. It's another life that's beyond me.
- Raimundas Do you see the exhibitions?
- Péchalat Usually, each of them.
- Raimundas Did you ever get bored living here on the island?
- Péchalat For the moment, I'm feeling down, but you've got to live with it. I don't have a car to go out anymore, I rolled over. I had the accident in Pierrefitte, after the village, in broad daylight, I fell asleep and I bumped the embankment and the car tipped over. I didn't have a scratch but the car is broken. Me, I could have cured myself but the car is no more. They revoked my licence, because of the accident and because I'm too old, but I'm going to try finding another one. Nobody was hurt but they don't want to insure me anymore.
- Raimundas You should be taking a helicopter again!?... At that time, when you were in the helicopter, what was it like?
- Péchalat Nothing. I was happy, it was good to see the land I once knew, because the lake, it's 1000 hectares, that's quite a trip, it lasted over an hour, I was happy. It's a nice ride for me. Every place, every bridge, road, everything... It was like being on the moon, the soil had dried, there were cracks like in the desert, big enough to put your hand inside, barren, no more greenery, nothing left but stumps and crushed houses. Of course, it's kind of sad but for the one who knew the place, who used to live there, to see all the recesses, I know I'll never see it like that again.
- Raimundas What is the greatest depth of the lake?
- Péchalat It's by the dam obviously; the dam, all included, is 37,80 metres up to the top but the water is about 30 metres. At the dam, it's the deepest.

Raimundas Are there many people coming to see you like us today to talk with you about the history of the island?

Péchalat Yes, there were a lot, but fewer now. It's less interesting or not at all, maybe. In the past, many came. Sometimes, it lasted all day long.

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Image by Mirza Bim. Courtesy of the Artist.