

Frans van Lent's **Au Grand Pont:**
Ordinary Monumentality

Below me, always below me, is water. I always look at it with lowered eyes. It is like the ground, like a part of the ground, a modification of the ground. It is bright and brilliant, formless and fresh, passive yet persistent in its one vice: gravity; disposing of extraordinary means to satisfy that vice—twisting, piercing, eroding, filtering. (Francis Ponge: *De l'eau*¹)

Plus bas que moi, toujours plus bas que moi se trouve l'eau. C'est toujours les yeux baissés que je la regarde. Comme le sol, comme une partie du sol, comme une modification du sol. Elle est blanche et brillante, informe et fraîche, passive et obstinée dans son seul vice : la pesanteur, disposant de moyens exceptionnels pour satisfaire ce vice : contournant, transperçant, érodant, filtrant.

Water, and the flow of water, makes a relatively regular appearance in Frans van Lent's body of work, which is itself a kind of flow. He seems drawn both to water's dynamic, shifting elusiveness and to its commonplace ubiquity and centrality to our condition as humans. For more than a decade, he has recorded the sound of moving water, stood in it to write, displaced it manually, rearranged it—by appointment—over hundreds of kilometres, or simply stood and stared at it as it flows. However, water is not simply a recurring subject in his work; it is also a medium through which other ideas can be explored: movement; presence; duration; and scale.

In his 2023 work, *Au Grand Pont* ('Near the Big Bridge'), these concerns align productively. We encounter an unseen and unnamed recorder, whom we can take to be Frans van Lent himself, passing along the shallow waters of the river Doux, against the gentle flow of its gravitational inevitability—Ponge's 'vice'—towards the *Grand Pont* of the title. This is a first-person narrative; a literal stream of conscious activity. We hear the protagonist moving through the water and are aware of the manual handling of the camera. There is a human presence in the recorded artefact.

A protagonist in a novel, or in a film, on the run, and especially if pursued by dogs, will often take to water - in the same manner as we see and hear in *Au Grand Pont* - to mask their progress and scent, an act of concealment or distraction. This is as if the medium of water - not the natural medium of support for a human - is capable of rendering the human invisible, odourless, imperceptible. In *Au Grand Pont*. The human protagonist is hidden from our view and is, in a sense, invisible and odourless, yet at the same time emphatically present. That presence is registered through the sounds and images of movement through the water, but also through the physical act of recording that movement.

The work therefore plays with one of the unspoken conventions of documentary capture, that the person undertaking the capture attempts to remove themselves from what is being captured. *Au Grand Pont* subtly disrupts this convention. We hear and otherwise sense the

¹ From: *Water*, Ponge, Francis. *Le parti pris des choses*. Gallimard, 1942.

progress of the partially concealed protagonist through the water. The recording does not simply show us the river; it allows us to register the presence of the person moving through it. This minor breaking of convention, or even tease, allows us as viewers and listeners to be co-present with Frans van Lent in this work, fellow-travellers up the river.

What we encounter in *Au Grand Pont*, then, is not simply a representation of a passage, but a gesture of inclusion, a sharing of something of the experience, and in addition, and importantly, of the condition of what *just happens* and of ordinary things. In his 1942 collection, *Le Parti pris des choses*, the French poet Francis Ponge (1899-1988) developed an idea of 'siding' with things, objects, the ordinary, the unremarked.

In Frans van Lent's *Au Grand Pont*, we can understand and join the artist 'siding' with the ordinary of the river, the rocks and pebbles of the riverbed, the water weeds, the birdsong, and eventually the *grand pont* of the title, an ancient sculptural artefact, but even, in its constructed state, much, much younger than the rocks and pebbles in the river. However, the dressed stone of the bridge and the pebbles share, in Ponge's phrase, "the same enormous ancestor"², an evocation of incomprehensible time and scale.

In this process, the apparently modest passage of *Au Grand Pont* expands. What begins as a person moving through shallow water becomes an evolving encounter with different orders of duration and scale: the immediate, embodied time of the artist's movement; the continuing flow of the river; the human history embodied in the bridge; and the almost unimaginable geological time contained in the stones themselves. In Frans van Lent's act of 'siding' with the river, its substance and everyday conditions, *Au Grand Pont* emerges as work of monumental scale.

Andrew McNiven, October 2026

² From: *The Pebble*, Ponge, Francis. *Le parti pris des choses*. Gallimard, 1942.