

Marek Szczęsny: An Art of Exhibition for Daniel Payot

The idea of (modern) art as independent was formulated a long time ago by Lessing in his *Laocoon* (1766). Independent art: art that only obeys its own laws. Art that had got rid of what it was not - that notion of a religious calling. This was the job of a new institution, the museum: the museum, whose actions can *suspend* the things that are not art without actually giving a positive definition of what it is.

There is therefore a sort of museum art which takes on this role of *suspending* things or actively *forgetting* them. Modern and contemporary art is of the museum. And this is the case with Marek Szczęsny's work.

But can 'museum art' radically sidestep the idea of having a higher calling? Meaning by that much more than some social purpose or function, the way it is always said of architecture that it always has a function and therefore then cannot intrinsically be considered art. A higher calling, that is, the ability to make all of its followers believe, to create faith and give a sense of community, of togetherness. In fact, would it not be better to say that 'museum art' brings with it a kind of tension, in both joining the museum and separating itself from it at the same time. Can we not find the proof of this in the very fact that the different 'avant-gardes' have always sought to redefine art (politically, metaphysically etc) for example in the name of community, reconciliation, the struggle against the solitary work like with Mondrian (who wanted to Mondrianize the world!) In this way the last avatar could be the Brechtian slogan about political aesthetics so dear to Walter Benjamin. So, like Daniel Payot, is contemporary art always measured, because each work is a little bit more of an articulation of this sensitivity, which then knots together another part of this togetherness? It's only very modestly by comparison with the great productions of traditional art history though. So unlike traditional art which was all striving for this higher calling, contemporary art would be all against it.

So this 'museum art' would have all the appearance of independence - and it would seem to be because of museums and the value of exhibiting - but at the same time it would need this higher calling, both absent and present, an essential thrust, but a thrust that is also blunted. So he who belongs to the main/central 'museum art' submits to the effects of this active 'forgetting', blunting, to the museum itself, the exhibition; while on the fringes, there is he who from the outset will make of this 'forgetting', the main part of his art. One has followed the 'agenda' (above all Support/Surface), the other never has and so every work is distinct and only takes after itself. One maintains an essential relationship with text (manifestos), the other, not at all discursively, only comes to it at the end of the artist's journey, with the historian or the biographer. It is like that which lies there in the depths, legible in the sediment of the paint but unknown to the artist, laid down bit by bit, like a home reemerging in the 'après-coup'. There would be those who do not mourn the absolute, of figurative art or art as a representation of the absolute, even if it is secularised, or even disenchanting. We would recognise therein those philosophers of the sublime, the sublime as presenting the unrepresentable. But they are

then bound to the written explanations of the artist instead of studying the conditions of museum exhibition, conditions that cannot themselves, render this higher calling of the artist any greater, without turning the exhibition space into a kind of temple. A Mondrian, even if there is a huge revolutionary agenda behind it, is exhibited just like any other work, which is not underpinned, indeed installed in the world, by some promise of addressing itself to humanity. Of Yves Klein's 'Void', exhibited in 1958 at Iris Clert, Roselyne Marsaud Perrodin wrote: 'In simply repainting the walls of the gallery space, Klein indicates his desire to work only the frontal plane, analogous to his work on canvas. He transforms the gallery space of about 20m2 into a workshop and yet avoids painting like a house painter would, keeping to the painterly gestures he reserves for the making of his monochrome works. The wall is like the canvas, a support for the picture plane. And through this parietal work he proposes an opening of space for his monochrome works.' The fact of working in situ is important. In painting in the space for showing, Klein sought to make the brilliant atmosphere of the painting visible, the atmosphere of the artist's studio (L'Aventure Monochrome). So the viewer would be immersed for two or three minutes in a space where the emptiness, which had borne witness to the process of the artist, would make this palpable. "First of all there is nothing, then there is a profound nothing, and then a profound blue."(Lecture at the Sorbonne, 1959). So why did this work, which constituted the whole of the exhibition, need references to the world behind it? The author remembers this: "Klein offers the viewer of the Void a meditative experience, which might also be described as mystical. The influence of Max Heindel's Rosicrucian ideas (Cosmogonie des Rose-Croix) as well as Buddhist literature and Zen philosophy seem to constitute the origins of his concept of the void. Klein is convinced by the mystical thinking of Heindel - space conceived as a free energy, space into which is assimilated life, as a pure spirit.

* * * * *

And then, there are those who like Szczęsny, do not think that the work needs to make a 'body', or give whatever form required to its intended recipients. Those who accept the aesthetic moment, (superficial, in a non-pejorative way), that is our own, which will frame the Mondrian in such a way that it is no longer possible for this condensed, reticulated vision to break free of its banks, to conquer the world both politically and virtually. One can see it, it can be about a certain way of framing, the stakes are just a simple framework of accepting or not the conditions of museum exhibition. To go fundamentally from art to aesthetics.

And so we can perhaps understand part of the criticism of contemporary art, in the name of 'modern classicism'. Not all of them wish to return to the art of mark-making, figurative art, and the delights of the 'French palette'.

* * * * *

Marek Szczęsny must rank among those most denuded of such things. What is then the calling of someone whose work is without artifice?

For an aesthetic such as Szczęsny's, the studio is just a technical place where parts are being made (samples, or bits of paper, like at the tailor's before they are stitched together) which will then be placed on top of one another in the exhibition space, to make an ensemble - the picture - which will remain anonymous. We can affirm that - exiled without return towards what Benjamin designated exhibition value - this work

exhibits the conditions of its 'exhibitableness' and leaves no room for myths of expression and interiority.

It's the same way that Buren questions the divide between studio and exhibition space by using an industrial material, anonymous, put together in the exhibition space itself. Szczesny has known the Galerie de Gennevilliers for a long time. The work is pre-fabricated in the studio and then implanted in the gallery following a schema where every element has its place. As the parts are removable, the whole thing is easily transportable, even though here it is (with the exception here of one canvas) all large paper collages.

In many ways, the big paper collages of today at Gennevilliers are not only the truthful expression of the earlier canvases, but in another decisive way, the truthful expression of museum conditions of exhibition. Hence the choice of paper, the most 'everyday', the material of packaging and reprographics. A support without quality. In fact, what canvases really struggle to present, or at least in the horizontal contiguity of the internal elements, is this sense of placing things side by side, belonging to the montage, the work of the picture. With Szczesny, it is as though the placing side-by-side of the collage has actually become a placing layer upon layer in depth. And because it is about removable paper surfaces, the layers of colour do not mingle with one another but hide one another, leaving room for mystery. So Szczesny must be seen as moving through the exhibition space, a 'colour-form' in hand, magnetised by the space, hesitating a little about the final placing of the work, then decisively pinning it down, hanging forms one in front of the other, the edges picking up the lacerations within the work. The montage enables us to see that sometimes, even regrettably, a colour-form is going to obscure an interesting motif, for example a fold or a flap (like Germain Roesz). Yet at the same time, this process is finalised, because the last piece, the one that the others push into the foreground, is, like a jigsaw, the one that draws the whole thing together. It is really necessary to be at the installation and deinstallation of these to be certain about the empty space that needs to exist between the pieces that are hung.

And so we can see that Szczesny is playing with the conventions of museum art: we know his background is constructivism, that little by little he has closed down his cultural references, that he has given up bright colour, fallen back on dark, earth colours, while keeping the big whites. And see him now introducing into his work the basic principle of museum art – the hang. Every group of papers hung is in fact anti-agenda, anti-narrative (this does not come out of some counter-programme but from the motif). There can be no manifesto or address in it. This kind of stratified painting is everything but heroic. The only essential thing, its own heroism, is to rely on itself, which suggests that Szczesny introduces a whole oblique part which threatens to unbalance the whole with its supposed mass. So there is a tension between the threat of gravity and the resistance of the whole. And, as ever, it is the tension that makes the work. So, compared to an avant-garde art that is sustained by an invisible agenda, real substance, in Szczesny's work, all that is invisible is the little bit that is trapped, hidden beneath the panels. If it had a message, it would be finely chopped up by this setting down of things, side by side but with no synthesis provided by language. And in fact, such an aesthetic does not seek out the power of symbolising the world.

* * * * *

One can imagine that the difficulty in practicing this 'activation' (suggested by Goodman) might begin when works are brought together for a certain exhibition space and did not

exist anywhere else, even privately. This is the case with Szczęsny. So the activation cannot be distinguished from the execution, and if our own distinction between art at the centre (the avant-gardes), and art on the fringes, is to have any legitimacy, then we might say that the agenda of the former is valid as 'notation', something which would take them towards the idea of the allographic, whereas the the obvious lack of notation in the latter would keep it on the side of the autographic, and therefore the only true kind of painting, according to Goodman!

The exhibition deserves to be more than just the activation of the work that was already made though. Of course, the exhibition space remains this moment of legitimisation, this trial by fire where the work, which initially has no public, is raised up by it. And this entails gratitude, which de facto leads to the artist, who himself did not exist until this point. But paradoxically, this public has been educated by the work that he has nurtured. Because before, he didn't see it. So in a certain way it is the public who come together, who arise. What kind of formation will this sort of work lead to?
