Eberhard Bosslet

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EUROPEAN SCULPTURE MADE IN USA, John Gibson Gallery, New York, 1988
by DAN CAMERON

European sculpture in the first years of the post-Beuys era has become a minefield strewn with paradox and ambiguity. Not unlike the wave of quasiprimitivist painters spawned from the example of German and Italian painters at the beginning of the decade, the tail end of the '80s gives every indication of ushering in a generation of sculptors who will continue to attract a disproportionate share of critical discourse for years to come. At the same time, the current predominance of sculpture has itself provoked a restless need to examine more closely the premises of contemporary art's capacity for both critical self-awareness and aesthetic resolve.

If forced to isolate the moment when painting's primacy as a psychosocial arena was effectively challenged by the obdurate physicality of three-dimensional form, we would need to return to the politically-charged core of the Arte Povera movement, at which point the limited practice of picture-making was all but banished to the outer fringes of enlightened practice. To experience an artwork fully the spectator was required to step out of the role of connoisseur and into that of the critical or skeptical observer, with the object always standing for a future ruin and gallery spaces representing pockets of intellectual resistance. The ideological charge which the anti-Pop sensibility of the Arte Povera artists introduced into the framework of European sensibility galvanized a generation of radical skeptics who also happen to be brilliant translators of historic precedent into late-industrial vernacular. In particular, the continuing importance of the work of Anselmo, Fabro, Kounellis, Merz and Paolini (sculptors all) lay in their having each evolved since the early '70s far beyond the original premises of Arte Povera, towards a realm of poetic inscription which is frequently more life-affirming than it is socioculturally provocative.

As a generation, the Arte Povera artists represented a definition of European art which was stylistically divorced from the examples of New York and Paris. In parallel fashion, the emergence of a new generation of British sculptors at the beginning of the '80s might be interpreted as a definition of that country's artists as a collective entity apart from the examples of Rome, New York, Berlin and Paris. Unlike these three capitals, England's contribution to the art
of the first half of this century had been predominantly in the area of sculpture, so that the sudden (and as yet unabated) attention given to the generation consisting of Cragg, Deacon, Flanagan, Long and Woodrow can hardly be considered an historically unexpected development. What is worth pointing out, however, is the ease with which a second wave of sculptors Gormley, Houshiary, Kapoor, Wentworth and Wilding has established itself as the preeminent stylistic force of the past two or three years in England, with at least as much resiliency and innate sense of placement as the first wave.

Beuys created art out of everything, so the classification of his non-pictorial work as sculpture belies the fact that his primary investigation was more into the meaning of form than of form itself. If his counterparts in this investigation were Broodthaers, Buren, Klein and Manzoni, none of them were as relentlessly bound to the dialectic of specificity and ephemerality as was Beuys, even though each inherently embraced the surrealist belief in art as a transformative process. Thus, the blunt physical mass of the work of Forg, Knoebel and especially Mucha is a challenge to the viewer to substitute critical impulses for aestheticizing ones. If Mucha places great emphasis on the specificity of site over materials, he has also signaled a reappraisal of the creative act as a generalizing process which directs the anonymous object back into the flow of culture in the form of the only slightly less generic rubric 'art'; the context is changed, but only in the guise of critical distance.

Since 1986, the most successful exhibitions of recent European art "Sondsbeck," "Les Chambres des Amis,"

"Documenta 8" and "Skulture Projekte Munster" have dealt either directly or indirectly with the sculptural enterprise as a social metaphor. The curatorial urge to integrate art into other modes of living can be read as a response to the apparent sanctification of the art-commodity during the past eight years, particularly as this has been manif ested in the New York marketplace. And yet, despite these and other distinctions between the American and European creative temperaments, the visual language spoken today on both sides of the Atlantic is more similar than it has been since the peak years of post-minimalism. In addition, one should consider the frequently overlooked fact that the best art to come out of America between the mid-'60s and the mid-'70s was in the form of sculpture. Aside from the best-known Minimalists (Andre, Judd, Morris), certain Pop-era figures (Artschwager, Oldenburg) and the Earthworks and Conceptual art generation (Acconci, Baldessari, de Maria, Heizer, Oppenheim and Smithson), there were a number of American artists emerging at this time whose appreciation in Europe surpassed that of art audiences in the U.S.: Dan Flavin, Mark di Suvero, Dan Graham, Sol Lewitt, Bruce Nauman and Fred Sandback. By exhibiting regularly and in some cases living in Europe, these artists can be
said to have enjoyed an influence of a younger European generation which surpasses that of certain American painters from this period—like Lichtenstein, Stella and Warhol who were more prone to staying at home and letting their fame take care of the rest.

Whether or not one perceives the current generation of American sculptors like Fischer, Koons, McCollum and Steinbach as being the legitimate heirs to the Pop and Minimal tradition, it is hard to overlook the fact that their art approaches the object-as-method strategy in such a way as to suggest direct parallels with European sculpture. In American hands the sculptural deployment of common objects almost never fails to suggest forbidden pleasures, while within European sculpture it is the key to a system of total consciousness which encompasses practically every aspect of modern thought, and which happens to assign base desire to the lower regions of human signification.

This latter circumstance is why the work of Armleder, Lavier, Leccia and Staehle all of whom make use of common objects in unaltered state does not refer to the conditions of consumer capitalism with quite the same vengeance as does the current American sculpture. The philosophical state of intervention between aesthetics and social theory which the new European object-sculptors propose is still a rather abstract or purist concept because this work comes out of a social context in which consumerism and vulgarity are not so intrinsically bound up together as they are in America. When Lavier stacks one appliance atop another, it is not the physical fact of his having done so which is intrinsically interesting, but the image which this compounding creates. Like a sentence in which two nouns are run together without modifiers, Lavier's language breaks down the ritual of display because the objects do not flatter one another. Together they make a form, but that form is itself predicated on overlooking each object's functional situation within the world. Hence, with Lavier's work we witness two bluntly real things acting out the possible linguistic conditions for abstraction.

In Leccia's arrangements of objects frequently identical products in pairs, or groups of four the idea of mirroring is connected with stripping away our belief in the object's containment of reality. To have two identical machines performing a job for which only one is needed entails that functionalism as an issue becomes effectively cancelled out. To display multiple versions of an object with their packaging (which the artist has done in recent pieces incorporating humidifiers, cassette players and personal computers) exaggerates the contradiction which is created by their being on display in a gallery in the first place. Thus, while Lavier is interested in the sheer unresponsive mass
which is created by an emasculated machine, Leccia prefers to tangle up the expectations created by a machine in good working order, but estranged from its application in the world.

In some sense, this same effect occurs with Staehle's work, which proposes a contextual blurring between the object as cult-insignia and as episodic event. In particular, Staehle is interested in the use of a kinetic medium to represent the conditions of art-historical time in relation to media-time. As with Bijl's work, Staehle incorporates both the illusion and its decodification at the same moment, thereby thrusting the viewer into the role of anthropologist with regard to observing the cultural conditions that converge together in the effort to create and validate a work of art.

The three artists shown here who do not choose to present the object in a state of unchanged suspension are John Armleder, Guillaume Bijl and INFORMATION FICTION PUBLICITE IFP. Bijl's installation's of

object-replicas suggest a more specific social site than do the works of Staehle, Leccia or Lavier. Halfway between a bazaar and a natural history museum, the artist's reconstruction of so-called neutral display ambience produces a sense of unreality that is not without its capacity for being both seductive and ascerbic at the same time. Because the individual pieces are compelling largely as blanks, an accumulation of them creates a theatricalized experience of subjectivity, a tabula rasa effect in which the viewer is more or less fooled into projecting his or her specific scenario upon the artificially-created site.

In Armleder's juxtaposed hangings of paintings, furniture and props"one is teased with the historical reference to 'nouveau réalisme,' and its attempt to sanctify the object which has already been scarred by human contact. Armleder does not resuscitate his materials so much as infuse them with the oversignification common to the tools of shamanism and the theater. Thereby inhabiting the realms of abstraction and ambience at the same moment, the component parts of a typical Armleder piece seem to contain no situational hierarchy in terms of their placement or selection. In this way, an easy equivalence is achieved between the will to wrest significance from a work of art, and the equally strong impulse to look somewhere else.

In their light-box installations, the two-artist team known as INPORMATION FICTION PUBLICITE IFP further explore the condition of mood-environments as linguistic stage-sets. The universal artistic struggle to achieve the most sublime possible representation of nature is furtively memorialized in their dry architectural scatterings of blue skies and fluffy clouds, lit from behind like cigarette ads at bus stops. As with Staehle, they generate a deliberately self
negating aura that borders on ephemerality, but like Bijl and Lavier they also strive for a solid, concrete blankness which is as physically palpable as it is visually elusive. For IFP the conditions which culture deems appropriate to the contemplation of art are as valid a point of departure for art production as the questions which remain latent to the issues of artistic meaning. In fact, our method of self-preparation on the threshold of art is perhaps the final subtext secreted within their work.

Eberhard Bosslet works in a more constructivist vein, in that his most successful large-scale works are generally in the style of ambitious and potentially durable architectural interventions upon a pre-existing site. Like most of this group, Bosslet recognizes the framing conventions implied by the outer dimensions of a room, but he is more willing to exaggerate and expand on these parameters through his extended chamber-like structures built from fused iron rods, plywood forms and unadorned concrete blocks. His literal approach to gravity suggests Lavier again, but Bosslet's forms have no ascribed identity until he assembles them together, so that he becomes not so much a discoverer of identity as its unveiler.

Seen together, these artists represent the visible tip of a widespread reawakening of sculptural tendencies in Europe in the late '80s, one which is particularly worth noting because of its correspondence to a similar resurgence in the U.S. While it cannot always be said of these artists (or their American counterparts) that they have broken through into uncharted formal or phenomenological territory with their respective attempts to culturally recontextualize mass-produced objects as mute keepers of the social code, it is important to recognize that they have each formulated a vital response to the manmade environment, one which quickly and intentionally disarms itself of the authority to speak exclusively for that which remains of high culture. If the resulting grand parade of rearranged tropes cannot be seen as anything other than an attempt to find out what lies behind the origin of the unique idea as the backbone of the avant-garde, then it can always be explained away as mass-consciousness posing in the garb of museum culture.

It is more likely, however, that the subcritical attempt to disavow the best of this work will eventually prove to be an afterthought to the underlying but ever-impinging awareness that every development in art is accompanied by a change in the way art is understood, and that eventually this idea too shall be done away with. Within the work of these sculptors candor takes the place of invention, thus giving directness and simplicity a chance to be the mirrored surface under which lurks a plethora of far-reaching changes in the way in which we perceive ourselves as subjects perceiving art. Eventually, this too
will Iead to another compounded reflection of avant-garde history as one of a series of mirrors through which universality is bounced off as a signal, only to return in tho form of cohesion, precision and surprise.

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