

In 2004 we read a book by Georges Didi-Huberman *CE QUE NOUS VOYONS, CE QUI NOUS REGARDE*, in preparation, or maybe rather alongside the development of the lecture performance *ERSCHAUERN BEGREIFEN*.

As it is often the case, without having planned it, the book became more and more important as we went along, and has since become one of the central texts for our thinking on aesthetics. The book deals intensively with the emotion of *ERSCHAUERN* – a German term, meaning a sudden shiver of fear or understanding, we found more fitting than any equivalent in French or English.

Didi-Huberman's approach to art analysis is one he describes as *META-PSYCHOLOGY*. To put it simple, the investigation and description of a psychology of reception, which he assumes to be universal for some objects in Western culture. For this text, the artworks he investigates are sculptures, mostly from the period of American minimalism of the late 1950s and 1960s, using the geometrical shape of the palimpsest. In doing so, Didi-Huberman touches of course also on the shape of the cube in minimalist sculpture. Tony Smith's *DIE* is the prototype of this form of sculpture, and Didi-Huberman tells the story of both its conception and making, as well as its reception through the art critic Michael Fried. The two stories are somewhat legendary, part of the mythology of modernism, and the many fierce debates and fundamental misunderstandings it excited. Both tales are also narratives of extraordinary experiences of reception. In fact, both can be called narratives of the sublime, as they describe moments of fundamental irritation, and as we would call it: *ERSCHAUERN*. But we will expand more on that later.

The Psychology dilemma

After having completed two lecture performances with a time interval of no less than 4 years, and having been invited as artistic researchers to the ARTI group at the Hoogeschool voor de Kunsten Amsterdam, we were looking for a theme to take on for a new lecture performance. Originally, we intended to start each lecture performance development from a personal experience of reception, *a narrative of encounter*, as we termed the reception situation. Very early on, it became clear that we would not remain true to this program for any of the lecture performances but the very first one, which was in fact realized before we made this into a program altogether.

Besides very practical and interpersonal reasons, the main one was the very dilemma of all aesthetics of reception: either we center our research on individual reception experiences, and by doing so, move away substantially from the art work and are in danger of generating no generalizable results, or we focus on the artworks and thereby must presuppose an ideal or generic beholder – a concept that has been shattered repeatedly, and I should say, sufficiently, since the 18th century.

The choice then seemed to be for the lesser of two evils. Didi-Huberman for example opted for an art-centered approach. Yet in the term *META-PSYCHOLOGY* the dilemma clearly resonates. Wolfgang Kemp – one of the

doyens of reception theory – also argues for the art centered approach by claiming very pragmatically that in most cases, “all we have is the art work”. In the case of INSIDE THE BLACK CUBE, this “to have” became a central theme. Since we were not willing to decide for either a subjective narrative of reception, or an objectifiable art analysis as starting point for this lecture performance, we ended up with an approach of literary history of perception.

We have decided to take the experience of encounter Michael Fried had written down in his seminal essay ART AND OBJECTHOOD as a focus: “The beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended – and unexacting – relation as subject to the impassive object. In fact, being distanced by such an object is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another person; the experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly – for example, in somewhat darkened rooms – can be strongly, if momentarily, disquieting in just this way.” (Michael Fried: Art and Objecthood. 1967)

Actors and Stages

We argued that, what Fried described in general terminology in his essay, must in fact have been a personal experience of the author. Fried describes the scenery quite precisely and the reactions ascribed to the unknown beholder are vivid.

We started to envision a theatrical scene for ourselves with an imaginary Michael Fried as the protagonist: *the young but none less self confident art critic Michael Fried, possibly in a tweed-jacket and slacks, walks through an exhibition at one of the usual 60's galleries in downtown New York – an occupation Fried is more than accustomed to, it is part of his daily professional practice. He does not particularly like what he sees. Some fashionable kinetic sculptures, Calder look-a-likes of lesser quality, or a soft faucet by an Oldenburg devotee. Fried yawns and fumbles with the exhibition flyer in his hand. He is the only guest at this hour. To get to the next exhibition room, he has to turn around a corner and walk a short alley, just a few steps really. Since the alley has no windows to let the New York afternoon light in and is carelessly lit because it contains no artworks, the space around him becomes dimmer.*

Then Fried enters the next room and stops in his tracks, startled. He faces a black object, roughly his own size, with no distinct marks or texture to its surface, perfectly square, silent, opaque. From the distance he stands and with the reduced lighting it is hard to tell the shape of the object, or whether it is indeed an object. Its surface is so dark, it appears to absorb all the light around it. Like two frames, the blackness of the object and the whiteness of the room complement each other. The blackness might be a hole in the room as well as an object standing in it. After a few seconds, Fried's eyes become accustomed and he of course realizes that what he looks at is not a hole in space and no visual trickery but a material object. But to understand and fully take in this object, Fried has to set into motion, he has to approach the thing, enter in what seems to be its space, its domain. So Fried steps forward, reluctantly. He circles it and once he has been around the first of its sharp

vertical edges, he starts to relax. After the second edge Fried breathes out with relief – so just a metal cube after all. That's what it is. A cube of human height and the same width, executed in black steel, visibly welded together at the edges.

There is a slight feeling of disappointment growing in him, somehow he had expected more. But at the same time he feels relieved as if the thing could have been a threat, and now turned out to be a harmless block of metal. Fried decides to waste no more time on it, and to leave the room as fast as he sees appropriate for a young aspiring art critic.

As Fried leaves the gallery the situation he has just left behind reappears in his mind. As he walks home, the thing, the black object, and the encounter with it occupies more and more of his thinking. At the same time he becomes more and more irritated. A vague idea that he had been made the victim of a practical joke starts to settle in his head. Could it be that this object somehow got the better of him? Fried feels more and more misused, violated. Something or someone had forced him into a game, he did not want to play and – even worse – did not understand the rules of, and therefore could not control. He feels as if having been caught by theater flood lights, while picking his nose in what he believed to be an unattended moment in some public space. He feels as if he had been dragged on a stage, an actor with no text and no mask to hide behind.

From art criticism to theater and back

There is no indication that such a moment actually happened, other than these few short sentences from ART AND OBJECTHOOD quoted before. And while Fried's reflections on literalism are much more complex than the sentiments we ascribed to our fictional Michael Fried, this little story is an effort to take Fried's analysis and terminology quite literally: "Smith's DIE" Fried writes in retrospect about his own position in ART AND OBJECTHOOD "is a work of almost pure theatricality, depending as it does on enticing the viewer into a kind of indeterminate, open-ended situation of which the hollow steel cube itself is only one ingredient." Like humans, literalist objects can not be understood from a distance, and by means of a single concentrated glance. Instead, they require the beholder to enter into a shared space with the object, leaving his or her safe distant position and let him- or herself be dragged into "a situation – one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder."

In other words, these objects create a stage, a theatrical situation. We could call it a theater for one person, who becomes at the same time actor and audience. What we have tried to do, by telling the story of Michael Fried as a theatrical scene and by then creating a performance based on this story, was to translate Fried's theory back into practice, into theater practice, that could be sensually experienced by an audience. If Fried experienced an "open-ended relationship" between object, beholder and "gallery space", we would try to recreate this open-ended situation, but in a different setting and time. We could therefore call this lecture performance a re-enactment of a performance that took place in a gallery in the mid 1960s with Michael Fried and an object called DIE.

Complexities and Paradoxes

Aesthetics do not lend itself easily to judgment and positioning. The process of the aesthetic encounter is maybe too complex to allow us to dismiss one artistic practice, and praise another one as the only way. I believe, this has proven particularly true for Michael Fried's negative verdict on the minimalist project. While dismissing the whole lot of minimalist sculpture as a step back in the development of art, Fried possibly offered the most creative and most useful terminology for describing and understanding the minimalist approach. It would be hard to say, that Fried was not deeply inspired by the minimalist project, and in retrospect we would say that Fried's text helped the development of a new aesthetics of perception in visual arts and also the minimalist program, instead of crushing it.

In the case of our approach to visual arts, Fried's essay seemed to deliver the very arguments for our own position of aesthetics of perception, while dismissing it at the same time. In opposition to Fried, we do not see the element of theatricality as a distinct feature of minimalist sculpture but as a constant characteristic of all encounters with art at all times. And ART AND OBJECTHOOD can be seen as a key text in the discussion of visual arts as theater. It certainly became that for us anyway. Its dismissal of the theatricality in minimalism helped us to understand why these works were so attractive to us, why thinking about minimalist art opened up such complex questions about our position as beholder and the situation of the encounter.

Minimal art, we can say, makes the situation visible and palpable by a strategy of elimination – elimination of specificity. Yet, as we said, the relationships between aesthetics, poetics and experience are very complex and even paradoxical. While the minimalist artists like Donald Judd and Frank Stella claimed to create “pure” or “specific” objects, devoid of any meaning or representational value, objects that could stand for themselves, they in fact created impure situations, they created theater. Here we can return once more to Didi-Huberman who calls this the “dilemma of the visual”, the impossibility of the objective gaze, the impossibility of the generic object: “D’un côté la prétention de ces objets ou leur tension vers la spécificité formelle, la “littéralité” géométrique de volumes sans équivoques; d’un autre côté, leur irrésistible vocation à une présence obtenue par un jeu – fatalement équivoque – sur les dimensions de l’objet ou sa mise en situation par rapport au spectateur”.

Maybe, seeing itself is creating relationships. Or more pointedly: seeing is theatrical, seeing is impure. Maybe a seeing without longing, a seeing “sub specie aeternitatis” (under the aspect of eternity), as Wittgenstein called for - “as if [the art work] had nothing to do with us, indeed as if it were in its deepest being oblivious or indifferent to our existence” (Michael Fried) - is not possible at all.

- - - - -

Art without object

...

A similar development happens in the early 18th century in theater. The famous Bibiena, family of stage designers, develops a scenic design that abandons the central perspective for more complex, multiperspective arrangements that eventually led to a closed scenery that dismissed the concept of the open fourth wall. In other words, the theater of the barock, when Fernando Galli Bibiena in 1711 replaces the concept of the open fourth wall, and the central perspective by a closed scenery that dismisses the central perspective.

axiom

Ein Paar Gedanken:

- Der Text ist eigentlich sehr persönlich. Im Moment zweifelst du zwischen dem "we" und den "I". Ich würde für den "I" gehen.
- Die Einleitung ist sehr gut, finde ich. Ausser vielleicht, dass du sehr schnell über die Kategorie des Erhabenen weggehst. Ich bin mir nicht sicher, ob der Anfang von the psychology drama als uebergang so wichtig ist.
- Hat Michael Fried je über den Black Cube geschrieben?
- Am Ende von Complexities and Paradoxes folge ich dich nicht mehr? Wohin willst du mit dem Tex? Willst du noch spezifisch über Inside the Black Cube schreiben? Oder eher nicht?
- Ich hoffe, wir finden noch Zeit um darüber zu sprechen.