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REFERENCES

Alain Charre, *Hans-Walter Müller et l'architecture de la disparition*, Paris : Archibooks, 2012, (Crossborders)
Objets en procès / Objects in Progress : après la dématérialisation de l'art / After the Dematerialisation of Art, Genève : Métis Presses, 2012, (Voltiges). Sous la dir. d'Ileana Parvu

EDITOR'S NOTE

Translated from the French by Charles Penwarden

- 1 Judging by their titles, immateriality would seem to be the shared theme of these two books. The first, *Objets en procès : après la dématérialisation de l'art*, clearly indicates the inflection of the notion given in the sub-title. Objects are “in progress.” Derived from a symposium held at Geneva University in 2009, titled *Le Temps d'un écart : sculpture/objet 1950-2009*, this volume brings together a set of reflections on the materiality of the object in its shaping relations to the processes at work in it. The second book, *Hans-Walter Müller et l'architecture de la disparition*, is a study of architect Hans-Walter Müller's inflatable volumes by Alain Charre and, from the outset, affirms the material disappearance of architecture.
- 2 As we know, the notion of dematerialisation was introduced by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler in their inaugural article “The Dematerialization of Art,” published in 1968.¹ In

this instance, the term was used to describe a tendency in the art of the 1960s, “an ultra-conceptual art that emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively.”² Published a few years later, the famous anthology *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*³ assembled a body of works and practices whose heterogeneity is symptomatic of the contours of this notion which, for all the debate, long remained ill-defined.

- 3 This new publication, *Objets en procès : après la dématérialisation de l'art*, helps to clarify a number of the questions raised by a definition that has remained too broad. Even if dematerialisation is considered only obliquely here, it interests the authors because of the “discrepancy introduced between the work and object,”⁴ that gap where “the object has lost its obviousness,” where “its materiality, traversed by processes that test it, constantly needs to be rethought” (p. 20). *Folio*, the intervention by artist Zoë Sheehan Saldaña, explores this temporal and spatial discrepancy in very concrete terms. Her reflection on the material – in this instance, the book – works on the transition from that now lost object, the folded quire or *octavo*, to the inserted sixteen pages of white paper. In the short instructions given at the end of the notebook, the artist invites us to take the *Folio* (and therefore the book) apart in order to reconstitute the initial sheet (the dimensions of which are given). This oscillation between destruction and construction is also present in artist David Robleto’s practice of recycling, as analysed by Dario Gamboni. The material is caught up in the movement from the process of a “de-differentiation” to that of “re-differentiation” – in a dialectic that the author compares to “Aristotelian hylomorphism [...] interpreted here as a back-and-forth movement in which material is pluripotent and can take several different forms in succession” (p. 181). And as the artist intervenes on the very origin of the material, this transformation “can deploy its effects only in the imagination of the viewer, who has no way of checking the veracity of these explanations. What is required from him is a kind of act of faith.” (p. 182).
- 4 When the idea of dematerialisation emerges in the field of art, it contributes to the collapse of the specificities of the medium and of the frontiers defining disciplines, putting the emphasis on process and openness to context. This has real consequences for the work’s spatial and temporal inscription. By occupying urban space – like the *Street Works* (1969-1970) analysed by Anna Dezeuze, who notes a number of “formal typologies” close to everyday life, characteristic of work on the borderline between art and life – artists also aim to escape the artistic institution and the commodification of the artwork. Even if, as Lucy Lippard was quick to acknowledge,⁵ these interventions were soon recuperated by that which they sought to avoid and reintegrated into the circuit. Beyond this point, extending it in light of the institutional critique formulated by the *in situ* or *site specific*, the interesting point indirectly raised by *Objets en procès* concerns the effects of dematerialisation on space. By asking a related question – how do we remember a sculpture? – Penelope Curtis shows how the object, transformed into an image in our memory, loses its “consistency.” But these different displacements also question the links that, at a given moment, connected a sculpture with its site. Among the wide range of examples offered by the curator, *Roman* (2007) by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster sums this up with particular eloquence.
- 5 At another level, the materiality of emptiness also tests space. The case of the monument, whose meaning is rethought here via three projects for public space by Rachel Whiteread, is exemplary. As a result of this artist’s casting process, her monuments are hollow, their interior accessible, and according to Sue Malvern this materiality of voids expresses the refusal of objects to “redeem history, which it is beyond the power of a memorial to do”

- (p. 95). Another reflection on emptiness is offered by Gabriel Orozco's *Socks* (1995), as analysed by Ileana Parvu in its relation to space and photography. These *papier-mâché* casts of the insides of socks, those "balled-up spaces," are a reflection on the "central lack" (Slavoj Žižek) or "emptiness inside things."
- 6 In parallel to the spatial approach, the analyses also take into consideration the relations between objects and processes, following a temporal axis. As Sebastian Egenhofer points out with reference to the objects in Paul McCarthy's performances, "any such reference to an unformed and in a sense uncoded materiality is no longer available to sculpture" (p. 125). Such is the indelible imprint of the society of the spectacle on the fashioning of the object (going as far as our imagination), which can no longer be limited to the role of accessory, nor judged neutral or envisaged in its raw state. As a consequence of this idea, "the materiality of forms and discourses" (p. 125) also becomes significant. In her analysis of Mike Kelley's installation *Test Room* (1999), Sylvie Coëllier shows how, in his references to history and in his research into "the archive of behaviours and sculptural practices" (p. 149) the artist follows a "Foucauldian approach" in which forms become "utterances" (p. 149).
 - 7 Thus, overall, the contributions clearly challenge the idea that dematerialisation necessarily leads to an elimination of the material. In Alain Charre's book this idea is approached from the other side. More generally, in architectural literature, immateriality accompanies dematerialisation as its inevitable corollary. It is thus systematically associated with the vision of an artist – for example, the famous *Air Architecture* designed by Yves Klein with architect Werner Ruhnau in 1957 – even if this reference persists in the form of images.⁶
 - 8 This example is symptomatic of the way the notion of dematerialisation is interpreted in the architectural field. The transfer of this notion from the field of art, which occurred in the 1960s via transdisciplinary practices (going beyond simple studio sharing), has been little studied. Now, to go back to this moment would enable us to look more deeply at the emergence of certain spatialities and to get beyond its rather simplistic application, as in recent developments concerning "digital architecture," where dematerialisation is invoked as an intellectual reference in a way that confuses different time frames (conception and construction). Today, it is still the only reference to process engaged by the information society. While cybernetics do not come within the scope of Ileana Parvu's book, even though this field developed parallel to "conceptual" practices, they do constitute a basic perspective in Alain Charre's, where they account for a considerable part of the discussion.
 - 9 It is indeed in this perspective that the study of Hans-Walter Müller's inflatable architecture is of interest: "Is the general dematerialisation of our present capable of renewing past daring and to see air architecture, from Yves Klein to Hans-Walter Müller, as something more than just a vain dream, as a critical benchmark capable of stimulating the taste for invention while teaching the new generations rigorous operational procedures capable of meeting new needs?" (p. 13).
 - 10 This, then, is the objective: Hans-Walter Müller should be a "reference" for today's architectural experiments, but his work developed "without an initial model and on the margins of modern history" (p. 19). Certainly, inflatable structures have generally been excluded from the "official" history of architecture, if not actually relegated to a parallel history – of contestation,⁷ say, or utopian forms. It is also true that inflatable volumes are paradoxical in relation to the definitions of traditional architecture, in that they reverse

its principles: they are ephemeral, and their disappearance is integrated into their conception. They are light, pliable, transportable, adaptable and unstable.

- 11 A history of these volumes remains to be written, but the method adopted by Alain Charre does not construct a “scientific history.” Rather, it “takes liberties in relation to the history of filiations imposed by a conventional vectorisation,” in order to emphasise “a history of resonances” (p. 19). Taking an avenue opened by Walter Benjamin, that of the “poematic” [*das Gedichtete*], the author asserts an approach from within the work, which “frees it of these historical events in order to follow it alone, at the heart of its internal poetic construction” (p. 22), in its “own indifference to events” (p. 25).
- 12 In line with this approach, three lines organise the book: “The Mechanics of Fluids,” “Ascensional Architecture” and “the Architecture of Time.” These establish the broad perspectives within which Charre lays out his rich resonances, too numerous to be mentioned here. While materiality is linked to the supremacy of “solid mechanics,” then it is immateriality which will dominate, since Müller’s inflatable volumes mark a return to “fluid mechanics.” To immateriality is added lightness, another primary characteristic of these volumes which aspire to flight (even if there is also a reflection on ingenious anchoring systems). Finally, the last aspect insists on the ephemeral temporality of this architecture, which transforms it into an “architectural event,” but also links to it to event-based architecture.
- 13 More specifically, the contours of immateriality raise a number of questions, simply because they pose a number of paradoxes where the art of building is concerned. What of the materiality of the membrane that encloses “the immateriality and lightness of inflatable volumes” (p. 15)? Apart from the fact that is the screen onto which images are projected (the early work, linked to kinetic art, already indicated work on material), this membrane is central to the very definition of the volume. In his study Charre distinguishes between the “simple skin” used by Hans-Walter Müller and the “double skin” that leans towards the rejected category (“solid mechanics”), but the term “inflatable architecture” applies, without distinction, to both uses. The other, more insistent paradox raised by this study is no doubt inherent in the author’s undertaking insofar as, in eliminating discrepancy, notably in the reference to traditional forms, he seeks to articulate a form of thought that is, precisely, the thought of such discrepancies.
- 14 The fact remains that Yves Klein’s project for an *Air Architecture* characterises a series of experiments with alternatives to modernism, which brought forth “architectures of the intensive body,”⁸ putting the emphasis on man’s environment. In this place, the notion of ambience, for example, has spread widely through the fields of art and architecture. It effects a reversal of the material substratum, and could have been pursued here. Its absence from these two recently published books shows how important it is to continue probing at the limits of disciplines, in order to grasp previously unperceived, concealed exchanges between them.

NOTES

1. Lippard, Lucy. Chandler, John. "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art International*, vol. 12, no. 2, Feb. 1968, p. 31-36. Article written in 1967 and reprinted in Lippard, Lucy. *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*, New York: Dutton, 1974, pp. 225-276
2. *Ibid.*, p. 31
3. Lippard, Lucy. *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, New York: Praeger Publishers Inc, 1973.
4. Author's italics, page 11
5. Lippard, Lucy. "Escape Attempts," reprinted in *Six Years*, *op. cit.*, p. vii-xxii
6. The historical conditions and artistic exchanges that contributed to the formulation of Klein's project, and which could inform part of the history of architecture, are not considered, or only very fleetingly.
7. This brings to mind Marc Dessauce's book on the Utopie group, *The Inflatable Moment: Pneumatics and Protest in '68*, Princeton Architectural Press, 1999.
8. Here I quote the title of an article by Frederic Migayrou in which he considers some of the project's close sources. See "Architectures du corps Intensif. Yves Klein : jalons pour une généalogie," *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, no. 96, summer 2006, p. 56-69