

CAROL BOVE ON EXHIBITING

Erik Wysocan: I thought I would start with a very brief story about a drunken man who helped to change my understanding of your work. At the Whitney Biennial in 2008, you had installed *The Night Sky over New York*, a beautiful star chart piece of hanging bronze elements. An unassuming-looking man somehow made the determination that your installation was meant to be 'interactive' and started swinging the bronze pieces into each other to create sound. At first everyone looked rather taken aback; even the security guards appeared uncertain. I wondered if perhaps this man knew something that the rest of us did not (having not yet realized he was inebriated). Given your interest in the 60s and the corresponding rise of 'participatory art' in that period and the work's resemblance to wind chimes and a number of other factors, it seemed conceivable to me for a moment that, yes, this is a way of understanding your work that may not be so off-base.

In any case, it raises an interesting point about your work. Which is that, while there is clearly a consciousness of issues of display and exhibition, the works seem to address these concerns from an unfixed position – invoking elements of thought from the very period you are researching. That is, there appears to be a careful attention to the difference between a thing being exhibited and a thing being manifested. Could you talk a little bit about how you understand the shift that occurs when a found cultural artefact is reconfigured into 'sculpture', brought into the formal space of the museum or gallery and possibly, in some distant future, returned to a former life of non-art or as artefact?

Carol Bove: 'Identifying the ideas as manifested and displayed is interesting. I think you're right; a sculpture's unfixed identity is a basic point of entry for me. I appreciate having to inhabit mutually exclusive positions like that in art. For instance, an artwork can be repelling for its cheesiness and conservatism and at the same time its elegance will point to the possibility for some kind of heightened experience. It depends on how you look at it. It's not a hybrid; it contains multiple, complete, separate identities.

In considering that 'abduction', i.e. taking an object away from its regular life and bringing it to the gallery, I ask: 'What will the thing add to the exhibition context and what will the exhibition context add to the thing?' Sometimes the answer is that the exhibition context will destroy what's interesting about the thing – if that's the case, I try to enjoy it where I found it, outside of an art context.

Almost everything I make has multiple parts and can be disassembled. Parts are never glued together. This is important to me – it gives the sculptures energy. When they are packed up in a crate I think of them as being off-duty, relaxed. When they are assembled or configured in an exhibition setting they are performing.'

This idea that the work stops performing as art when certain conditions of display aren't met is really interesting. If I remember correctly, this was something that you touched on in *Specific Objects without Specific Form*, the exhibition series on the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, which you participated in as a guest curator. In that show there was something like a staging area where a number of Gonzalez-Torres's pieces were shown 'off-duty' as you've called it – so the work's status as art becomes

contingent on very specific contextual parameters. He had protocols for showing the work – actually called ‘manifestations’ – in which the guidelines for exhibition are detailed. In some ways they seem more important than the objects themselves. Your decision to show some of his work ‘off-duty’ seems to demonstrate this contingent quality. Are these types of rules something that you incorporate into your own work?

‘I thought showing how the trick works actually reveals the magic of Gonzalez-Torres’s work rather than dispelling it. The candy (for example) is a widely available, industrially produced material that hasn’t been physically altered in any way, it has simply been moved to an exhibition space. And that’s all there is to the transformation from material to sculpture.

I’m working on a book of my installation manuals right now. It is a collection of all the installation manuals I made in 2010. The fact of the manual points to the need to take the sculptures apart and to reassemble them. I want to get at the animate quality of the sculptures – that they are not static objects, they are groups of individual parts that assemble into temporary configurations. There aren’t rules the same way as with Gonzalez-Torres. He made flexible parameters that tell you how to make the sculptures from scratch. As an exhibitor you have to fabricate the pieces, so it’s always an approximation of an abstract ideal. With my manuals you learn how to assemble a bunch of auratic objects (i.e. junk) into a sculpture.’

Beyond the configuration of individual pieces, I’m interested in the interoperability of your works as a whole within the space of exhibition – maybe this is the ‘meta-theatre’ you have mentioned in the past?

‘I think this idea is important but I have never satisfactorily addressed it. You are talking about installing artworks into a context or approximating an installation?’

A you said, Gonzalez-Torres’s protocols describe an abstract ideal – perhaps an installation of autonomous pieces also has an ideal. But with a concrete configuration that may only exist for the discreet duration of a show. Does the exhibition itself become the ideal that the individual works retain some relationship to, also after the show ends? Or is there a new role that they enter into once they leave the stage?

‘I really like that question. I don’t exactly know what is the difference between an installation of art and installation art, but they’re a little different. That’s one aspect of the problem, right? Trying to understand this problem was part of my interest in re-staging Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s exhibition *Every Week There is Something Different* (his 1991 show at Andrea Rosen in which he changed the exhibition every week); it was my supposition that he made meaningful connections between works and to the space/exhibition context, but the relationships were not easy to decipher in documentation. One of the galleries at the Beyeler museum, where my version of the Gonzalez-Torres retrospective was exhibited, had a room that would just fit Andrea Rosen’s old space with a few alterations. My belief about Gonzalez-Torres is that he may not have invented the solo show that looks like a group show but that he provided the clearest template for that modality. I thought looking at the original configurations of his works would be interesting – that there would be an added ‘something’ when they were reunited since they were conceived with an exhibition in mind (Gonzalez-Torres didn’t have a studio so he produced artworks for the occasion of their display). The artworks are so meaningfully placed in the space to play off each other and to complicate viewing/interacting; looking at a traditional gelatine silver print, walking through a beaded curtain, eating candy, etc.

You have to adjust your approach to interact with the different pieces. These implied choreographies were designed by him, not random occurrences.

The solo-show-that-looks-like-a-group-show is a close cousin to installation art. The configurations of sculptures and other works comprise an immaterial, unstable non-object... I don't know how to talk about it. I also don't know how to provide instructions to reproduce something like that for my sculptures and I'm not sure if it would even be desirable if I could. The exhibition is the point in the sculpture's life where it's performing with the greatest intensity. This moment has a special status and becomes part of the history of the sculpture and it might not be repeatable.'

Can we go back to the idea of the auratic and what that might mean for modern artefacts? I think it's interesting to reconsider Benjamin's concept of aura today, so when you speak about it in relation to modern artefacts, it could be quite a positive, recuperative idea. Or is it the process of historicization and rarity that reforms the auratic object?

'I just mean presence or fetish-of-the-original. Original status could come from your perception of its history, like you can get an idea of where it's been from physical examination or from documentation of its provenance. This technical language (e.g. physical examination) is just a cover for how I vibe on things to find out if they feel right.'

Is that process of feeling things out the same for the work you've started making in the last few years that is less focused on found objects and more on creating original pieces? These also seem to have that quality that might be called the aura. Which makes me wonder to what degree that quality is invested in the specific history of an artefact and how much of it is part of a shared history that might be communicated by, for lack of a better word, style or sensibility. Do these two types of object function differently for you? Or are they ultimately within the same continuum?

'They are in the same continuum. Style can communicate aura since styles are marked by a historical signature. Design is the manifestation of ideology, and ideology is determined by historical circumstances and all the conditions that go into the creation of a certain mentality and the mass hypnosis we experience as reality.

I think of the constructed pieces I'm making as appropriations, an idea which is admittedly hard to defend. That's where my interest in vagueness comes in. Vagueness has such a bad reputation, but I like vagueness. It's not wishy-washy or imprecise vagueness; it should just be hard to figure out exactly why the forms are familiar.'

Well, maybe 'style' wasn't quite the right word, but, for example, I get a slight sense of melancholy from your art that I can't put my finger on. It may very well be my own subjective relationship to your work, though I wonder if that dislocated feeling points to the possibility of a tenor or tone that 'floats' above the collected pieces. Could this be related to your interest in vagueness as a positive potential?

'I never really thought about it that way but you're probably right. I think about the work as being both tender and brutal so maybe the balance of these qualities is sadness. But it's a lot of other things too, like perverse and silly.

I think of vagueness as a soft and submissive inscrutability. As a viewer you can have your conscious attention held by stylistic riddles, trying to identify stylistic references, while your unconscious mind has a different kind of relationship to the artwork. A psychotherapist I used to see always illustrated the artistic process with the magician tarot card: the magician is manipulating objects on a table, but he is looking somewhere else; the object of his attention is not his intention. There's a similar mechanism at work in viewing art.