

Hans Hemmert:
The Invisible Materiality Of Air

Die Heimlichkeit der
Heimat zerstören
Gervinus

Understanding the sculpture of the past has always led to a reflection upon the logic of the monument. At the turn of this century, sculpture gradually began to rid itself of its traditionally representative functions, which were both religious, serving as a cult object, and civil, being a commemorative, symbolic element. Already then, the course set by modern sculpture (Rodin, Brancusi) heralded the development that was to ensue. With the Minimal art of the 1960s, sculpture's space was determined solely by the object's plastic presence, by its three-dimensionality. Its self-referential position excluded any implication that was external to the work itself. Sculpture now presented itself as a situation to be experienced, converting itself into a performative field open to interaction, and engendering a new relationship with its public. Any last flicker of its traditional function was to be definitively extinguished in the concept of "expanded field", theorized by the critic Rosalind Krauss as the new ambit of sculpture at the end of the decade.

Despite the convulsive transformations that traditional artistic categories have undergone over the last thirty years, one essential characteristic of sculpture continues to be the redefinition of the space in which it is placed. This concern is clearly represented in the work of the Berlin-based German artist Hans Hemmert. With subtle but firm perspicacity, his visual investigation into sculptural materials has led him to the uncommon and surprising use of air as a component of his work. Air, latex and the artist himself are the materials used by Hemmert since 1992 for his works with space.

In the large-format slides presented in lightboxes of the series Home-Frame I, the artist is photographed in abstract environments obtained by filling with air a fine membrane of yellow latex inside key places of his everyday life: his home, his car, his studio. Air-filled to bursting point, the latex stretches towards the extremes of the container-space, forming a negative of the latter. The limits of the sculpture open inwards, resulting in an effect exactly inverse to that of traditional sculpture. Our perception of the space changes: we intuit the objects' surfaces (the bed, the windows, cables on the floor), but the objects survive only as back to front traces, as testimonies as much of the objects' presence as of their inaccessibility.

The yellow latex that unifies the contours of the whole environment in a unique and smooth surface creates a closed, hermetic space in which the gaze glides without encountering any points d'appui, any visual pauses. This glide produces a sense of suspension: the coordinates space-time seem to be lifted, the force of gravity annulled. The artist himself – an integral part of the work – seated in a corner or standing at the back seems to be in a precarious balance. His position

in the space could well be modified and this would not surprise us. The frontier separating the real and the unreal becomes ambiguous, the horizon fades away. The noises of everyday life are deadened inside these almost uterine cavities, to where the artist withdraws in a symbiosis between a bubble-shaped ivory tower and a tiny oneiric – even hallucinogenic – room, that permits him to move with his observer towards new perceptive structures.

The sense of familiarity of place vanishes to give way to a new world, the inner mould of the original, to which we are drawn by its clear invitation to the breaking up of the habitual space into a new complex of sensations. However, its appeal is also its horror. Image of void, of nothingness, the space created forces the feeling of insecurity. The objects do not find their place, the fragility of the membrane latently threatens to split. Locus suspectus, where the question about existence itself hovers over the invisible materiality of the air skilfully moulded by the artist. The familiar de-familiarised, the Freudian “Un-heimlich” in which the sinister that which we were once entrusted with knowing and was later stamped out in a subconscious act of elimination.

The search for the void is closely related to an important concern of contemporary sculpture, from Naumann to Whiteread: the negative form. “Already with regards to Moore”, as Hemmert has commented, “I have always observed his work from within the inner spaces through which air passes”. Adopting a process contrary to that of Rachel Whiteread, where the space or object used as a mould is filled and then removed to obtain its negative form, Hemmert empties the inner space, filling it with air. An execution to the letter of Gordon Matta-Clark’s sculptural postulate, “to clear the space”, Hemmert’s sculpture relegates objects beyond the margin, essentializing the space and recreating it in itself. Air thus becomes not only the material but the theme of his sculpture.

In the following series, Home-Frame II, composed of 21 colour photographs, the yellow latex membrane is an outer form that contains “air” and “artist” in its interior. The artist’s relationship with the external is mediated by the great yellow ball in which he is enclosed. His are everyday actions: going up a staircase, tugging on a rope, sitting on a Vespa, embracing his daughter Julie... Despite the simplicity of the actions, his second skin makes him clumsy and slow: each movement, each attempt to hold on to an object is destined to failure, to fall. Its respective titles (“latex-air-artist- adapting to...”) prefigure with ironic resignation the inevitable disaster. As in Baudelaire’s comparison of the poet with the albatross, the prince of the clouds exiled on earth is impeded from walking by his giant wings.

The photographic series Home-Frame II sets the sculptural work in a succession of brief, subtly comic scenes, in relentlessly absurd fragments where the factuality of the image eludes any effect of rhetoric. It is perhaps this vein of refined and conceptual humour, and the precision and immediacy of his plastic language, the drawbridge that Hans Hemmert throws to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of modern sculpture, and which relates him to artists like Tony Cragg, Julian Opie and Mona Hatoum and the denominated “frieze generation”.

Hemmert's images, so conscientious and brilliant, possess a factuality that goes beyond the mere registration of an action. As with Pop art, fact does not become image (the mechanism of the metaphor) but rather it is the image that becomes fact (Barthes).

The acrylic and brilliant colour yellow also recalls Pop art. Hemmert's strongly artificial yellow – always the same throughout the variations – does not hold down any concrete or unique meaning. Its use resembles more the action of opening a door than of forcing one to look through a keyhole. It does not fall into kitsch or invoke nostalgia. The colour of the sun, of gold, of the narcissus, of Judas' robe – they bear no likeness to it. It seems to voluntarily impede emotion. It does not offer its meaning, but it manifests itself as significant, as an open surface for the observer to read into.

Hemmert continues his sculptural investigation into air and latex – and the colour yellow now as a third unifying element – in a third group of works where great sculptures (globes) adapt to the architecture of the exhibition place. For their magnitude and impressiveness, plus a clear anti-monumental attitude that renders meaningless any commemorative connotation, this group of works bears some relation to Serra's Steel Plate Works. Both works play on a sense of insecurity and even danger (the fall, the explosion); both explore the limit of the possibilities of the material used. Yet a fundamental difference divides them: contrary to Serra's sculptures, Hemmert's Air Balloons are light and inherently precarious. Their existence is intrinsically dependent on that of the material used: the light's ultraviolet rays melt the latex. Paradoxes of the material: the light that makes it visible destroys it, the darkness that hides it preserves it. Hemmert does not intend his spatial objects to live on in time. The very nature of their presence points to their absence.

Hemmert's position on art is profoundly conceptual: through new spatial solutions he arrives at a reflection motivated by the formal aspects of his sculptural work. By transforming the familiar, the everyday, he provokes a sense of insecurity with regards to the perceptive habits of our existence and at the same time invites us to reflect on our relationship with the environment. Imposing a presence, an idea, Hemmert achieves by use of the paradox and subtle humour the disorienting and destabilizing effect proper of a certain critical art.

Hans Hemmert: "I consider art as an attitude towards life which offers me the chance to explore the world along new paths and look at in another way; to try time and again to reach that state which allows us to discover the crossroads in our habitual perception in order to go on and choose the other, the unknown path".

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References

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- S. Freud, "Das Unheimliche", Imago 5, 1919.
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R. Barthes, *L'arte, questa vecchia cosa...* in catalogue of the exhibition *Pop Art*, Palazzo Grassi (Venice), Milan: Electa, 1980.