

The Water of the Forest Notes around “Semantic Gap”

The exhibition's title suggests a lack of structural concordance. As if there were a distance, though to what is never mentioned, which would influence the meaning of some other term or some other object – that would even influence the very possibility of meaning. It concerns undoubtedly some kind of premonition: one should not expect that the connections between the individual elements included in the exhibition space should have anything to do with concordance. Thus, the starting point is suspicion and doubt. Nothing will be quite what it seems. And this assertion, that above all can be understood as a precaution against the possibility of believing, too quickly and too easily, that which by its very nature has no option but to slink away from language's capacity to denote.

The approach that structured Dolores Zinny's and Juan Maidagan's earlier work implied a restraint on literalness in the architectural space where the artwork was performed, by means of temporary and precise interventions with a semantically complex relationship to the space. Furthermore, they involved the revelation of the ideological nature of the architectural components, which silently and implicitly structured the space where the interventions were carried out. In other words, an attempt was made to present the space as a syntactical device of essentially ideological character. And this was achieved without resorting to discursive means such as text, which is a typical strategy in connection with institutional criticism, as well as a tradition taking up a lot of space in the practice of conceptual art. On the contrary, in their entirety this content would be exposed to light of language with the aid of interventions of a strictly plastic nature. These interventions, these quasi-architectural interventions - these structural hiatuses – would in their silent materiality initiate a series of discursive instances, and thus speak. ‘Silent thought’ is an expression used in relation to Lygia Clark's work, and could just as well be applied to several of Zinny and Maidagan's interventions.

As to ‘Semantic Gap’ the procedure appears in principle straightforward: from an architect's particular work, an individual formal element of putative semiotic character, which is thought to have generated the work, has been isolated. This element is then literally introduced in the syntax of the space in another of the architect's projects. The involvement of this ‘semiotic motor’ in the interior of an ‘architectural phrase’ which is expressed by the same originator, should produce, from a semantic point of view, a critical situation: a lack of sense which can only be compensated for by exposing, casting linguistic light upon, those discourses on which that particular work, that particular building, is based. The result and implication of the action are as complex as the operation is straightforward. A certification of the meaning signifies the lapses organizing social entity into a symbolic space, fixed in a special discourse. It deals with the ideological character of architecture and its invisibility and finally of the architectural character of ideology.

Visitors entering Lund Konsthall – designed by the Swedish architect Klas Anshelm and built in 1957 – will come in immediate contact with the first of Zinny/Maidagan's interventions in space. The word ‘Fontana’ (fountain in Italian) is written on the upper part of the parallelepiped that composes the entrance with its double doors with glass panes. The visitor could eventually come across a fountain on a continued stroll towards the inner yard of Anshelm's post-functionalistic building. But the word “Fontana” associated with the work of Anshelm reminds us that the expression “Fontana di trouble”. An expression that according to Jelena Zetterström (*Offentlig konst i Lund*, 1994) usually was used in reference to another

work by the same architect, realised in collaboration with Arne Jones; the sculpture 'Fontän' from 1969, standing out of use on the campus of Lund Institute of Technology.

The Anshelm 'Fontana' consists of a row of tree-like steel structures of various heights. These support horizontally placed panes of glass over which a continuous stream of water should circulate so that a sequence of cascades is formed. The work – eleven metres high, fifty metres long and twenty metres across – keeps company with the surrounding topography in a way which, under ideal conditions, should contribute to its harmonic integration in the landscape. Each and every element of the steel structures holding up the glass plates resembles a tree, with a sturdy cylindrical steel trunk, out of which protrudes a crown of more slender metal bars. The glass plates are arranged on top of these 'treetops'. In this way, the fountain, when operational, gives the impression of a kind of river in mid-air, flowing between giant metal trees, carefully wending its way between the treetops before pouring down towards the surface of a crystal-clear pond. The Anshelm fountain has never functioned as intended, apparently because of serious miscalculations during construction – amongst other things concerning the thickness of the glass plates, which on a number of occasions proved unable to cope with the water pressure. The result has therefore been a dry fountain, partly concealed in the foliage, which has grown naturally across the area designated for the work. Semi-abandoned and silent – transformed into a paradoxical and non-functional monument.

A dry fountain of irresolute iron trees – the glass panes were removed at some appropriate time – forms a remarkably eloquent symbol whose purpose was, in principle, to symbolise the Lund Institute of Technology. This is an institution evidently linked with the modern project and its irrational confidence in instrumental reason and its possibilities. The fountain's literality, in its battered negativity, becomes an eloquent reminder of contradictions in modernism and, at the same time, of the semantic unpredictability that is usually characteristic of signs – their capacity to transform themselves into the reverse of their significance. Technological progress, capable of rivalling, conquering and overcoming nature, even in its own terms. Hence maybe the strained 'naturalism' in the tree-like structure of the fountain – unmasking itself as powerless *in extremis*. A kind of impotence that even affects the presumed capacity to entirely appropriate a specific system of signs, and thus express stable and durable meanings. The dumb fountain is the silent reverse of a collection of ruptured signs with no other signification than its own unfulfilled condition. When contemplating pictures of the fountain in its present condition, the 'water of the forest' is guessed as in negative; there is the substance, which is flowing, transparent, clear and distant, through semantic gaps, through remnants of a universe of deserted signs, now without meaning.

The /tree/ is obviously much more than meets the eye. Traditional theses in architecture insist on giving the tree a foundational position in the history of the discipline. The first constructions as such have a tree structure as a model. In this context the signifier /tree/ denotes the exact moment when nature is reified by means of a techno-scientific discourse intending to outdo it – through the instrumental use of reason. Anshelm's fontana-tree is thus symbolic in two senses. It is not only a symbol for the Institute of Technology and what it represents. It is also an archetypical form for man's habitation as a science of space. Thus it is a privileged symbol for the Institute's presumed intention of contributing to the distribution and development of instrumental knowledge.

In order to embody the quasi-architectural, Zinny and Maidagan have chosen two- and three-dimensional interventions in the space of Lund Konsthall. The result is nothing but a stylised

version of that particular tree. Their real intention is to represent or, rather, to set the signifier /tree/ itself in action. Therefore it invades the exhibition space without adding any further elements of value and is later seen as repeated coloured silhouettes on the walls in the rear gallery. Finally the /tree/ is reduced to its purest signic state, to a synthetic self-representation, by its literality, extreme as well as unstable, treetop and trunk being exposed to an anamorphic process that reduces the /tree/ to a silhouette in negative, a cutting from language.

In the universe of multivalent signs that characterize the artworks of Zinny and Maidagan, the signifier /fontana/, could even imply a veiled autobiographical allusion to Lucio Fontana, the Italian-Argentinean artist - also born in the city of Rosario. His monochrome canvases, cut through, vertically, would be destined to signify a climax in the development of Modernism. It is possible to allege that the 'cutting' in Fontana's canvases is just as multivalent. It seems to contain a conquest of the space of representation simultaneously with the embodiment of a kind of meta-representation of the very gesture of cutting. Cutting the canvas thus literally slices open a strictly virtual dimension in painting, and rather than signifying the inauguration of a specific space, it gives a glimpse of perception into a space beyond.

Instability in the semantic gap which refers to the exhibition title is at this point put at stake: with a slit in the canvas opening up the virtuality of space, with an architectonic sign as a result of an interruption in the constructive syntax, with a virtual cascade signalling the limitations of the techno-science discourse. 'Semantic Gap' comments on a group of signs, plastic as well as linguistic, and their nature in relation to a certain architectural and historic context. Above all, Zinny and Maidagan seem to suggest that the history of meanings is at stake in a semiotic space. And that the successes and failures of modernity seem to be reflected in the non-identical character of signs, in their inexorable foundering.

In 'Three versions of Judas'', a short story by the Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges, the professor from Lund, Nils Runeberg makes a cruel reinterpretation of the meaning of the Gospels. He maintains Judas to be divine, and proves that the signifiers' signifier - divinity - is not necessarily eternal and not equal to itself. An excess of belief in his own logic leads the professor to the contradiction of contradictions, and thus to nonsense. Comically but fatally, in this intervention by Zinny and Maidagan, Runeberg and Anshelm receive a remarkable resemblance.

Notes

Although, in the preliminary versions of Zinny's and Maidagan's installation, the word "fontana" appeared in the location described above, the artists decided, finally, on the English version of the term, "fountain". Evidently, the use of the signifier "fountain" has a clearly denotative aspect in relation to the specific architectural particularities of the Konsthall. And even though the reference to Anshelm's "fontänsulptur" survives the change, any allusion to the Italian Argentine artist Lucio Fontana becomes more problematic. Nevertheless, this possibility remains inscribed in the text, as a kind of "ruin". The question is, then, to point out, archeologically, the pertinence of a relationship between linguistic and plastic signs that may shed light on certain aspects of the artists' thought.