Present Past, Past Present

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Adolfo Bioy Casares is a name known to few outside the denizens of fantastical literature. Acclaimed as "the secret master" by Jorge Luis Borges who strongly promoted his friend's work, Bioy Casares also plays the role of artistic mentor to Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan, even though they were born several generations later. Trained in fine art and medicine respectively they also share a passion for Bioy's compatriots, Borges, and Manuel Puig. Indeed this literary trio constitutes the principal link they acknowledge with their cultural patrimony, for these writers provide this young duo with a maverick lens through which to scrutinize the legacy of situational aesthetics in which they ground their own practice.

In 1969, in what has come to be considered one of the key events heralding institutional critique, Michael Asher built a wall, a thirty six foot partition that divided the gallery of the San Francisco Art Institute into two spaces, and presented the result as his art-work. This premonitory landmark of "situational aesthetics" grew out of a number of pieces Asher had made while a student at the University of California Irvine: focusing on pictorial, painterly and formalist discourses, his works drew on the specific dimensions of the existing architecture together with such incidental features as moldings, in order to determine their dimension, location, color, and material composition.[1] Treating the wall and its context increasingly as his principal subject as he concentrated on probing the specifics of the site Asher was ultimately destined to dispense with the object per se.

Little more than a year earlier, in the winter of 1967-8, Dan Flavin had installed pink and yellow fluorescent lights, each eight feet in length, in a permutational schema that circumscribed all the walls in the largest gallery of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Eschewing his former interest in autonomous art works, exemplified in his series known as the Tatlin monuments, Flavin focused in this show on the interior space considered as a single entity, thereby creating a unified environment. Friend and fellow Minimalist, Donald Judd astutely identified the radical nature of Flavin's contribution when he analyzed the way the diffuse soft peach light, produced by the merging of the two colors, infused the ambient space: "they were interior articulation but not interior structure: they made an interior exostructure", he wrote.[2] Tellingly, neither Judd nor Flavin employed the word "architecture" in their accounts; the spatial envelope, the interior environment, was the focus of this prescient site related installation, the goal of which, in Flavin's words, was to establish "a common sense of keenly realized decoration".[3]

By 1995 when Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan arrived in New York to enroll in the Whitney Museum of Art's Independent Study Program, these various practices had codified into a number of recognized genres. Inscribed in a particular history and set of protocols, institutional critique had institutionalized itself. Site-specific investigations, that engaged with historical, social, physical and material aspects of the venue, had also become routine, even formulaic, under the dubious rubric of "installation art". And theatricality, the focus of Michael Fried's 1967 polemic against the nascent situational aesthetics implicit in Minimalism, had become the governing trope. Rather than a rupture with the pioneering works of the later 1960s, these diverse modes reveled in the options they opened up for participatory and event based modalities. Defined as an interactive engagement based in real time and space, theatricality now encouraged performativity in multiple guises. By contrast, decoration, and its close affiliate décor, was only then beginning to shed its taboo status, as young artists such as Jorge Pardo wrestled with the design of functional and quasi-functional artifacts, from shoes, to base ball bats to furniture; and older artists crossed the threshold into interior design. Pioneering in this regard was Flavin's intervention in Calvin Klein's flagship store on Madison Avenue in New York and his concurrent redesign of the Chiesa Rosa in an outer suburb of Milan, in what proved to be the last two projects he realized before his death in 1996. As issues of display increasingly came to the fore, this long-delayed fulfillment of a crucial aspect of sixties situational aesthetics was accompanied by examinations of its historical dimensions. Memorable in this regard was the monographic exhibition accorded the highly innovative but almost forgotten avatar of Modernist interior and exhibition design, Lilly Reich, in 1999 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Also notable was Mary Anne Staniszewski's groundbreaking study of installation design as an aesthetic medium and cultural practice, "The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installation at the Museum of Modern Art", published to great acclaim in 2001.

Given Dolores Zinny's previous training in fine art, and the rigorous theoretical methodologies that were integral to the pedagogy of the Whitney Program, it is perhaps not surprising that the earliest work of this duo should gravitate to this discourse and, in turn, be received as unproblematically part of that legacy. Yet from the beginning, from the memorable "1/1 fiction", 1997, Zinny and Maidagan's work was distinguished by a ruminative fascination with fictions – with irrealities – as much as with site specificities. The succinct character of this piece, a "wall" that seemed to peel away from its architectural frame simultaneously at all four corners, was soon to become a feature of their work in general. Here it proved critical to the delicate balance between metaphysics and the fantastical. Subsequent works, however, tended to veer in one or other direction. Thus in 2000, an installation at Museo Tamayo in Mexico City, was comprised of a series of thirteen parallel walls of different lengths that divided a gallery into narrow partitions reminiscent of a storage unit for painting. Countering what might initially have been read as a rather bland, or overly familiar instance, of reflexive ideologically driven institutional critique was the fact that each of these walls was pierced by a circular hole whose edges were rimmed in gold. The resulting series of sequentially enlarging spaces was accorded a rationale, of sorts, by the title: "Por donde saltó

el león (Where the lion goes through)", 2000. With this adroit gesture, what would otherwise have been merely enigmatic was transformed into something ineffably fantastical.

Literature occupies a negative position in a high modernist aesthetic, for along with decoration and theatricality it is deemed extraneous to the art-form's quest for self-definition, to its elimination of all but those constituents or qualities integral and exclusive to it as a medium. By their improbable introduction of the imaginary via the vehicle of a literary title Zinny and Maidagan introduced into the trenchant theoretical analyses fundamental to institutional critique something ungrounded and arbitrary. Ostensibly a superfluous supplement, this whimsically gratuitous reference transformed the ends of the walls into the bars of a cage across which the leaping form flickers – at least in the mind's eye – at the same time as it recalled deep-seated memories of circus lions soaring through hoops of fire. As elusive as it is illusory, this phantom image irrevocably destabilized conventional modes of reading in favor of elegiac rumination.

As subsequent works attest subversion in and for itself is not the prevailing agenda in this duo's idiosyncratic reworking of situational aesthetics. Rather it is the vehicle for invocations of a parallel reality, a fantasmatic doubling, which shadows the known and familiar. A constant even obsessive thematic in Bioy Casares' oeuvre, fictive simulacra are usually accompanied by variants on an equally abiding leitmotif, that of solitude and solitariness. Thus although most of Zinny and Maidagan's projects are interpreted under the aegis of institutional critique, such a reading misses their haunting, recursive invocation of a solipsistic world, a haven of inwardness and withdrawal. Sometimes lyrical in tone, more often imbued with a disturbing pathos, it tends in their most recent projects to be generated without recourse to the overtly literary.

A key component of their ambitious project for the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, "Movement in Art", 2000, was the introduction of "secret" or occluded spaces in the guise of three small constructions, each of which was built into a corner of a gallery devoted to presentation of the museum's collection. Wardrobe-like in scale and demeanor, these unobtrusively insinuated "closets" were almost large enough for an adult to enter, but not quite. Contemplation, a kind of imaginative withdrawal, has traditionally formed an essential part of any engagement with a work of art. Here the viewer is teased with the prospect of its physical counterpart, a bodily seclusion, in order to escape that prevailing tendency today to celebrate the publicness of museum visits by stressing their participatory, collective, and communal aspects in place of those private individualized responses once considered de rigeur. In concert with these echoes or reminders of former modes of engaging works of art, Zinny and Maidagan arranged to have the grilles that shield the windows when the institution is closed also lowered during regular visiting hours. This gesture reinforced the separation between indoors and out, sequestering the inner by making visible the security that such systems ensure. At the same time, it transformed the square metal grid so that it functioned like the device landscape artists traditionally used for squaring up a scene: by usurping the role of a time-tested pictorial aid employed to transfer and frame the landscape, the steel lattices transfigured picturesque views of the real into their representational

counterparts. The waterfront glimpsed beyond the confines of the building was mediated so that it read as an image of itself: a fictional vista.

The third element in this complex, layered project involved Duchamp's "Large Glass", two replicas of which belong to the museum. Zinny and Maidagan proposed exhibiting the second (which normally is kept in storage) in the Old Vicarage, a project space devoted to contemporary art projects that was located adjacent to the main museum building. When this proved impossible they installed "La Boîte en Valise", a multiple Duchamp designed as a compendium in miniature of his key works plus notes. This stand-in was at once an original and an editioned work in contrast to the copy, the facsimile, on view in the Collection galleries, the site of the other two interventions, involving the grilles and "closets". One of the singular features of the Glass is the way it inserts itself seamlessly into its environment: its transparent surface plus its placement directly on the floor ensures that viewers see it in relation to its milieu, its immediate surroundings. By contrast, its iconography is arcane, elliptical and intricate, so that it requires extensive research on the part of the individual spectator who must retreat from what is immediately apprehended in order to mine its elaborate, alchemistic metaphysics. This dialectical interplay between the occluded (the almost inaccessible, the hermetically private) and its opposite, the overtly assimilable (the seamlessly integrated transparent object standing directly in the gallery) becomes analogous to the contrary modes of apprehension proposed through Zinny and Maidagan's tripartite intervention. By grafting onto their physical scripting of the space a literary metaphysic drawn from Duchamp's masterwork based in notions of delay and frustrated desire, they created an unexpected correlation literally and metaphorically between inner and outer realms, between a recursive introspection and an immersive encounter.

By contrast, a commission that led to an intervention in the Royal Library in Brussels set them on a very different course, one which involved excavating the original plans and designs for that space first proposed by the principal architect, Victor Horta. References to the designs that Horta had sketched for that particular section of the building, and to its previous incarnations were inserted and overlaid in a room now stripped of its former function, and emptied for the occasion. A series of discrete gestures effected a deliberate misregistration of past and present. Eliding memories of what had been there with anticipations of future restoration in a poetic misalliance, and it introduced a temporal dislocation within the spatial co-existence.

What is common to these two commissions despite their very different strategies is their focus on spatio-temporal transpositions. Thus architectural restoration may, at times, literally figure as part of the agenda, as occurred in the project that Zinny and Maidagan recently made for the Konsthall in Lund, titled "Semantic Gap", 2003. There, in partnership with the new director, Åsa Nacking, they removed the excresences of decades of modification to reveal a handsome modernist building designed in the 1960s but long burdened by insensitive piecemeal additions. Interpolating details from local vernacular traditions with a respectful adherence to an internationalist modernist idiom, this design is exemplary of their own practice in that those norms which have gradually assumed the status of governing strictures for procedures grounded in situational aesthetics are always subtly leavened with indigenous traits and reflexes. In this

instance, a key element in their conceptualization of the scheme was Borges's story "Three versions of Judas". Its protagonist, an evangelical who lived in Lund speculates on the problematic of the Word made Flesh. As the Word became incarnate, Borges writes, it "passed from ubiquity into space, from eternity into history, from blessedness without limit to mutation and death". In this context, this process becomes a potent metaphor for the transformation of aesthetic (or architectural) concept into material form.[4]

The daadgalerie in Berlin occupies a small apartment, of some 130 square meters, on the upper storey of a former bourgeois villa whose ground floor is now given over to a restaurant, the Café Einstein. Built in 1912 for the silent movie actress Henny Porten who, in 1933 was forced to leave Germany because her husband was Jewish, the residence was declared public property during the Nazi era. In 1978 it was converted to its present use: while the spacious restaurant and café has become a very popular destination, the modest exhibition venue, best suited to solo shows, attracts a limited if relatively specialized audience. Capitalizing on the likelihood most visitors will find themselves alone when viewing their show, titled "Such a Good Cover", 2003, Zinny and Maidagan installed a single continuous "curtain" that sheathes the whole space. Its cool cream expanses open to reveal in its folds gold, yellow, lemon, pink and, occasionally, black stripes. The fact that the seams joining the inner linings of the folds to the main body of fabric project outward coupled with the relative narrowness of the folds themselves creates the strange but insistent impression of being behind the curtain, whose "face" – whose "right side" – is oriented towards the walls.[5] The overriding effect is of being enclosed, of sheltering within a secluded and private arena. What is disturbing is the insistent feeling that this has resulted from the inversion or reversal of normal relations between interior and exterior, inner and outer.

Given its singular design and structure, the fabric cloaking the walls and linking the rooms evokes on the one hand precedents in the fine arts, whether installations such as Flavin's "Alternating Pink and Gold" or certain types of painting, and in particular the monumental striped canvases of Barnett Newman (a source of inspiration for Flavin too). The iteration of glowing zips that suture a vast field, a hallmark of both these precedents, enhances the immediacy of the encounter in the here and now. Yet the uncanny feeling of reversal between inside and outside ends by suspending the viewer outside the everyday social milieu, echoes of which reverberate from the bustling café below.

Although overtly pictorial, the curtain is equally plausibly situated in relation to modern décor. And no designer more insistently comes to mind than Lilly Reich, the famed partner (in many projects) of Mies van der Rohe, and teacher at the Berlin Bauhaus in the early 1930s.[6] To the degree that the glowing bands are concealed, turned away, or folded over, and so no longer fully accessible they appear as if in negative, as absences and, once again, suggest a movement backwards in time, a retrospective reverie. The elegiac tone tempers and subdues the initial impact of theatricality, creating in this oasis of sensual pleasure a plangent note, a longing for something no longer problematic, a resolution of the perduring tension between the pictorial and the ornamental in a "keenly realized decoration".[7] That it was possible to be a decorative

artist while remaining in the avant-garde, or better, to be simultaneously a decorative and a fine artist was a question that had challenged and animated Modernist artists from Gauguin and Matisse onwards. Succinct and understated, "Such a Good Cover" also inverts expectations of immersive participation integral to most current forays into situational aesthetics, offering instead a means of dwelling in seclusion in a state of temporal displacement. Here as elsewhere in Zinny and Maidagan's practice, nothing was given beforehand, nothing was determined a priori. The project was conceived in and for this occasion, in response to the circumstances. And yet, as always, it is thoroughly permeated with the spirit of Bioy Casares and his cohorts, with their hallmark 'reasoned imagination' which seamlessly interweaves the fantastical and the metaphysical.

Notes

1 "Situational aesthetics" is a term coined by Benjamin Buchloh in his discussion of Asher's work. Asher's and Flavin's influential in situ works were but two instances of a wide-spread engagement with the variables of site burgeoning in the later sixties. Thus, in Europe, Daniel Buren expanded the context of art's display so as to bring it into the public sphere while in Brazil Helio Oitexica transformed interior environments through wall paintings. Only one direct reference to an artist of this generation, namely Gordon Matta Clark, appears in Zinny and Maidagan's oeuvre. "Variationer / Variations", 2000, takes the form of a painted street sign based on Matta Clark's 1971 Food Restaurant in New York.

2 Donald Judd, "Aspects of Flavin's Work", reprinted in Donald Judd, Complete Writings 1959-1975, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax/New York University Press, New York, 1975, p. 200.

3 Dan Flavin, "some remarks ... excerpts from a spleenish journal", Artforum, December 1966, p. 27.

4 Jorge Luis Borges, "Three Versions of Judas", Ficciones, Grove Press, New York, p.152.

5 In addition to the curtain, a number of drawings were included: sketches for follies, pavilions and related small structures.

6 Zinny and Maidagan were in fact reading MoMA's 1999 Lilly Reich catalogue as they prepared this project.

7 A related work, titled "Curtain Call" made for a group show curated by Carlos Basualdo for the Venice Biennale in 2003, is overtly dramatic: its folds and pleats conventionally oriented, it transformed the site into a theatrical mise-en-scene.