

4. OBJECT AND OBJECTHOOD IN POST-MINIMAL SCULPTURE

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Abstract: *In this material, we analyse the way in which a paradigmatic period for the evolution of art and sculpture as we see it today, the years 1960-1970, shaped the contemporary perception of the visual arts, in terms of reconnecting a spiritual approach and the art manifestation and perceptibility. The theme allows a radiographic introspection into the visual expressions, the diversity of materials, techniques, artistic and aesthetic solutions. The main goal is to facilitate the understanding of the mechanisms that led to nowadays perceptions of art (and of sculpture, as the main vehicle of operating with objectual and space). As most of the minimalist and post-minimalist sculpture orientations can be analysed through the perspective of various prominent artists or researchers such as Donald Judd and Hal Foster, we also assist to major shifts in institutionalizing anti-aesthetic or less-traditional art movements.*

Key words: *aesthetics, Avant-Garde, Post-Minimalism, sculpture, visual arts*

1. Introduction

The subject of this research focus on a paradigmatic period for the evolution of art and sculpture as we see it today, a rather controversial social and cultural period, the years 1960-1970. Offering the possibility of a theoretical approach, through the prism of the practitioner, of some important approaches for contemporary sculpture, the theme also allows a foray into a complex period of art history, defined by a wide variety of visual expression solutions, by the diversity of materials and working techniques used to create the object of art, through the unconventional artistic and aesthetic solutions. The main goal was to make a synthesis of existing information, to facilitate the understanding of the mechanisms that led to the reversal of perceptions of art and, implicitly, of sculpture, and their reconstruction towards what we call contemporary art.

Contemporary art can be seen as a path that starts from the takeover and revision of the traditional genres languages, the integration of new types of materials, technologies and mediums and their adaptation to new formalization systems. This, however, presupposes a reconsideration of the relations of significance, starting from the signifier and the referent (Barthes 1985). Thus, starting from language (in linguistic terms), from simple definition to meaning and object itself, we go through conceptualism and Minimalism - the movements that essentially marked the middle of the twentieth century and the contemporary art. This attitude of re-signification was opened from the very first Avant-Garde, with Marcel Duchamp's ready-made, the emergence of the non-artistic object and all its collateral implications, be they of a social, economic, or political and cultural nature.

Avoiding a strictly historiographical account, with hierarchies of already

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established labels of artistic groups or movements, we want to refer to post-minimalist art through a certain particular theme, regarding the re-evaluation of the object and space; that is why we considered it necessary to go through minimalist sculpture with its conceptual implications and, further, we refer only to certain artists with tendencies derived from post-minimalist sculpture, without fully addressing movements like Land Art, Body Art or Arte Povera. All of this is supported by case studies on artists or specific works for the evolution of a movement or for artistic practices, generally offering an attempt to read in another key study of the proposed issue.

2. The form / content metaphor

Viewed from the current point of view of contemporary art, the form-content relationship can be sustained by almost any material approach, it can be sustained in any technique, operated on any object, artistic or industrial product and in any element of the environment, including one's own body. Today's art recalls this phenomenon of widening the meaning of art, not only through technical approaches, but also through openness to all structures of nowadays society, be they social, political, or cultural. All this is related to the main source of communication or the media factor.¹⁸⁹

An important aspect is that now art becomes much more able to attack the mechanisms of social regulation or, at least, to pay attention to them, due to the media factor but also to the theorizing approach that appeared in contemporary art with the first Minimalism and conceptual art forms. Thus, there is the possibility of recording the evolution of the artistic process, from idea to object (this condition is not always necessary, as is the case of conceptual art). We can afford an artistic approach represented by the process itself, the resulting object not being conditioned by finality, in the traditional sense. In this situation, artistic processes have less to do with the application of colours or the structuring of volumes, than with the process of this approach, consisting in discovering the unique and essential qualities that characterize the environment and their use, in their simplest and purest form, as means of art¹⁹⁰. This irreducible search leads to essences and, naturally, to ideas, to an even linguistic definition of the work of art, and sometimes, when this conceptual approach is decided towards a palpable finality, the aesthetics of Minimalism is reached.

All these changes within the phenomenon of art, however, have a precedent because even at the beginning of the last century, art has had a dual character as to what it should communicate: on one hand, it is to forbid its metaphor, subjectivity and all the illusions given by plasticity, which led to a certain hermeticism, as is the case with rationalist directions: Neoplasticism, Purism, De Stijl, Bauhaus, Constructivism and, on the other hand, to try to communicate an experience beyond the language, the subjectivity of the experience or the casual, as in the case of Dada

¹⁸⁹ Jean-Jacques Gleizal discusses the relation between media and communications in his book *Arta și politicul. Eseu despre mediație (Art and politics. Essay on mediation)*, in 1999 (Gleizal 1994, 122)

¹⁹⁰ As explained by Catalin Soreanu in his article *From Media to Mediums of Expression. Visual Art Communication and Meaning* (Soreanu 2020)

and, in part, Surrealism. Naturally, these tendencies interfere due to the conventional and general character at the same time, which is specific to any form of language, be it visual or linguistic.

Historically, the middle of the last century was a heterogeneous and often confusing period, in which artists take over and recreate in various ways the artistic realities with the social ones, to have a stronger impact in confronting the aggressive aspects of industrialization and consumerism, which is based on the common social manipulation. Artistically, in Western culture, abstractionist and expressionist tendencies reappear, combined in Abstract Expressionism, simultaneously with the critical controversies between rationalist and informal tendencies, while Eastern European culture is clearly subordinated to politics, due to totalitarian regimes, ways of expression of the artists are limited by an imposed theme, the only escape being the approaches on symbolic or mythical lines.¹⁹¹

However, it is in this Eastern European culture that we find the fostering roots of approaching spirituality as an artistic background related to the Avant-Garde manifestations from the first part of the XX century, clearly visible in works of Vladimir Tatlin, Alexander Rodchenko, Kazimir Malevich, or Vasily Kandisky¹⁹². The “Eastern spirituality” served as an interconnection of a possible new anti-consumerist point of view in understanding Minimalism, illustrating the complexity of the phenomenon.

3. Temporal “reconnection” and spatial “disconnection”

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the United States, besieged by social protests caused by civil rights movements or the right to social identity, combined with the media coverage of the horrors of the Vietnam War, many artists tried to revitalize the connection between art production and immediate political issues, while denouncing the (already predominant) idea of formalist Modernism, formulated by the American art critic and historian Clement Greenberg. This period is marked by many ruptures and repetitions, so that the idea of the Neo-Avant-Garde is present in the critical texts of many theorists, especially that many European and North American artists appeal to and restore the Avant-garde instruments of 1910-1920, such as collage and assembly, readymade, and monochrome painting, or constructivist sculpture. Apparently, no rule governs this return of these instruments, but there are also reruns that aspire to a critical awareness of both the conventions of fortuitous art and historical conditions (Marquis 2006, 12–13).

The motives and context are somewhat similar, not only to the restoration of the radical integrity of artistic discourse, but also to the challenge of the status of discourse, of ideas that distort its structure and restrict its effectiveness. This approach was not intended to highlight any absolute truth, but rather to clarify implicit strategies that were, in fact “reconnecting” with a “lost” practice for

¹⁹¹ Alexandra Titu, *Experimentul în arta românească după 1960 (The experiment in Romanian art after 1960)*, Meridiane, Bucharest, 2003, pp.13-40

¹⁹² Maria Gough introduces the Russian Constructivism as a solid environment of art spirituality in her 2005 book *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Gough 2005, 21-25)

“disconnection” from a present way of working that is felt to be outdated, misdirected, or oppressive¹⁹³. Theoretically, the first movement (of “reconnection”) is temporal, of ordering and clarifying the assimilations, towards the second (of “disconnection”), which is a spatial movement towards opening new possibilities for the realization of works of art, both in terms of the palpable object as well as the concept.

However, the reruns and repetitions in post-war art are not always so clear historically (contextually) or conceptually compared to the theoretical ideas circulated then. Some of these “recoveries” are fast and noisy, tending to reduce the artistic practices taken to a style or theme that can only be assimilated and not continued, as is often the case with the “found object” in the works of many artists over the '50s and “readymade” in the '60s. On the other hand, some art models seem to independently reappear, such as the various reinventions of monochrome painting of this period (as seen in the work of Robert Rauschenberg, Ellsworth Kelly, Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Ad Reinhardt), while others takeovers are combined in an apparent contradiction, as in the case of the early '60s, when artists such as Dan Flavin and Carl Andre publish works based on the precedents of Marcel Duchamp, Constantin Brâncuși and Vladimir Tatlin or when Donald Judd composes, in a way more or less legitimate, a group of forerunners in the 1965 manifesto text entitled “Specific Objects”.

Paradoxically, at this crossroads of the post-war period, the most ambitious artistic endeavours are marked by historical allusions and, at the same time, by a reduction (or sometimes lack) of content. Indeed, this approach to the artist continually offers different and innumerable patterns that are more self-produced (as was later the case with many art object productions in the 1980s) than giving way to a reflective practice, to turn the limitations of these cultural models towards a critical awareness of the historian, of the previous art or of the social. Here, we can find that there is a method in the list of forerunners of Donald Judd¹⁹⁴ (art critic, theorist, painter, and sculptor), especially in the association that can be considered unusual by some, such as the juxtaposition of controversial positions such as Dada/Duchamp with painting by New York School representatives. Because Judd seeks not only to extract a newer way of practicing the artist from these positions, but also to use them as a trump card, in this case from “objectivity” to “specific objects”. This argument, however, is not specific to Judd alone, because most minimalist and conceptualist artists confronted the painterly formalism “painterly peripety” in a similar way (Foster 1996, 231).

These movements involve the return, in the late '50s and early '60s, of two tendencies that can be considered radical in the sense of the above: the Duchamp/Dada readymade and the contingent structures of Russian Constructivism, such as Tatlin's structures or Rodchenko's hanging constructions, both intrinsically reflecting material, form, structure, and at the same time extrinsic,

¹⁹³ Quoting here the American art critic and historian Hal Foster, in his *The Return of the Real* article from *The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Foster 1996, 3)

¹⁹⁴ Donald Judd, *Specific Objects*, article republished in *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Judd 1999, 809-813)

referring to space, light, and context. From a historical point of view, the recourse to Dadaist readymade and constructivist structures has not been so surprising, because no matter how different aesthetically and politically they were, both types of artistic practice challenge in themselves the "bourgeois" principles of art and artist autonomy; firstly, by introducing into the artistic use of common objects from everyday life, also by a certain indifference to the previous, historical aesthetic line, drawn to the object of art, and secondly, by using industrial materials and transformation the function of the artist.¹⁹⁵

For the North American and Western European artists of the period to which we refer, movements such as Dada and Constructivism offered two historical alternatives to the dominant pattern of modernism of that time and the formalism specific to pictorialism, developed by some post-impressionist artists and theoretically crystallized by American art critics and art historians Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. This construction of the modernist model on the intrinsic autonomy largely of the two-dimensional represented by modernist painting, on a line that presupposed only the formality of form and "pure optics"¹⁹⁶, led many dissatisfied artists to two tendencies that sought to overcome this autonomy (according to Hal Foster) "to define the institution of art in an epistemological inquiry into its aesthetic categories and/or to destroy it in an anarchistic attack on its formal conventions, as did Dada, or to transform it according to the materialist practices of a revolutionary society, as did Russian Constructivism - in any case to reposition art in relation not only to mundane space-time, but to social practice" (Foster 1996). Of course, according to the previous Avant-Garde line of associating criticality with the marginal / peripheral and the subversive with the repressive, the attraction to these practices was also facilitated by their neglect or absence from the predominantly formalist vocabulary of Modernism (Krauss 1996).

We believe that an important factor in this argument was the theoretical awareness of these recoveries, because a considerable number of artists who subscribed to minimalist-conceptualist and later post-minimalist tendencies, also studied the previous Avant-Garde on a theoretical level, many of them beginning to practices and art criticism at a distinct level from their modernist forerunners, and here we can recall the early texts of Robert Morris or Robert Smithson. Interestingly, in the United States, this awareness of history has been complicated by the reception of the Avant-Garde through the very institution it most often attacks, namely the museum - and not just any - but even the museum of modern art. Therefore, if the artists of the 1950s recycled, to a large extent, the objectivity and the approaches of the Avant-Garde, the artists of the next decade had to elaborate them critically, because the pressure imposed by this historical awareness

¹⁹⁵ In connection with these issues, we should also mention the opinion of the American art critic and historian Hal Foster in his 1996 essay *Who's Affraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?* which states that: "Not all readymades are objects of everyday life and although I do not agree with the aestheticized reading of these readymade objects, not all are indifferent. As for Constructivism, the ambitions of industrialization have been thwarted on several levels: as materials, as training, as integration into the process of industrial production (... in the factory) but also as cultural policy." (Foster 1996, p.231, n.8)

¹⁹⁶ Clement Greenberg speaks about „pure opticality“ in his *Modernist Painting* article published in *Art in Modern Culture – an anthology of critical texts* (Greenberg 2006, 308)

did not allow a relaxed approach, nor the working methods, or only a recirculation. This complicated relationship between the interwar and the post-war Avant-Garde, with the questioning of theoretical issues related especially to causality and contextuality, is important for understanding and understanding the artistic phenomenon from the following years to the present day.

An important aspect, crystallized in the diversity of the Neo-Avant-Garde, was the transformation of the anti-aesthetic into the artistic and the institutionalization of approaches or aspects less specific or considered even “sinful” compared to the traditional rigor of the artistic act¹⁹⁷. For example, the new realists and Pop Art (at least in the beginning) tended to give the readymade object an aestheticized treatment, to qualify it as an art object, with obvious orientation to the commercial, because when Jasper Johns poured bronze and painted the two beer cans, he reduced the ambiguity of Duchamp's urinal as a work of art, especially since the chosen work material, bronze, inspired the artist himself. Also, through the accumulations of readymade objects framed in premeditated compositions, Arman does not insert the Duchampian idea of aesthetic indifference, because his assemblages display beyond the banality of the found object or, moreover, the case of Yves Klein's anthropometry, manifestations that, in the opinion to some critics, turned the Dadaist challenge into a rather bourgeois spectacle, but, at the same time, it provokes a tension of the traditional genre of painting, directing gestures towards performativity and action, placing the human body at the forefront of the artistic approach. In this sense, the human body and corporality begin to become a work space in itself, but also an instrument involved in the production of object or event and also studied in its reactions, as, later, is the case of the body art line, happening, performance and push sometimes to the extreme in Viennese Actionism, sometimes defying traditional communication conventions by exploiting the limits of perception and the unconscious functions of the psyche leading to behaviours that can be considered even shocking, such as the actions of feminists like Gina Pane or Marina Abramović's performances.

This phenomenon of mutation and deviation within the traditional and modernist formats also occurs in the case of sculpture, especially due to Minimalism and Post-Minimalism, aiming, first of all, the extension to spaces considered until then without explicit cultural value, such as non-urban space, the peripheral urban space or the extra-urban natural space, spaces that become an interactive framework through installation and intervention, as ways of action adapted to the location (Land Art, Site-Specific). An important role in these artistic approaches, often tributary to the ephemeral, is played by photography and film, which evolve in their own technical and language explorations, but, at the same time, intersect with experiments in Land Art, Body Art, intervention, performance or happening, as a means of archiving and fixing time (German 2018).

Probably the most relevant to the hybridization of the 1960s, between the

¹⁹⁷ According to art critic and historian Peter Bürger, as explained by Johanne Lamoureux in her *Avant-Garde a Historiography of a Critical Concept* article published in *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945* (Lamoureux 2006, 190 -211)

Neo-Avant-Garde spirit and new technologies, is the program of the Fluxus¹⁹⁸ movement, with the emphasis on the temporal dimension, as a defining dimension of the visual arts, through the ironic and unconventional combination of media¹⁹⁹, with experimental predisposition on seemingly divergent directions, but with connections in social, political, and commercial controversies or those between elitist and popular.

4. Alternative approaches to art

The diversity of “displacements and rethinkings of materiality”²⁰⁰ that many artists have highlighted during the artistic process, is one of the most significant changes, as an alternative, in the art of the 60s. These “rethinkings,” which critic and curator Lucy Lippard described at the time as “dematerialization,” involve an exploration of art, especially painting and sculpture, as a process and material, adapted to new coordinates, especially with the introduction of objects and actions from everyday life in art and with the investigation of less tangible means of communication, such as language, but also the documentation of ephemeral actions in daily life (artistic process as a finality). While in the early 60s, this “rethinking” of materiality was often accompanied by a reflection of the polarities between material and immaterial, between form and anti-form, between construction and deconstruction (creation and destruction), the end of the same decade is increasingly marked by the particularities of the material value of the art object.

Within these phenomena with new forms of materiality, corporality (Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman), social or political (Arte Povera, Joseph Beuys) come to be identified. These alternative approaches to art that could disrupt or short-circuit, at least temporarily, institutional, or commercial structures, risked mimicking existing forms of capitalism while artists took managerial or organizational positions. For some artists, performance or intervention has replaced object production and opened new spaces of freedom and protest, from simple exercises to direct political action (the case of Vietnam War’s protests), street interventions, or involvement in ideological circuits of mass-media or capitalist consumerism.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, other conceptions appear, about space and reality, which combine unconventionalism with traditional structures and vice versa. Thus, if Jeff Koons “Rabbit” seems to be typical of the '80s (an explosive period in art), Damien Hirst's “The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living” (1990) (glass, steel, silicone, and shark in 5% formaldehyde solution), would symbolize the new decade. In a different way from the detailed and accurate description of Katharina Fritsch's elephant or Jeff Koons' rabbit translation into another material, Damien Hirst makes his shark an expression of the concept of time that is diametrically opposed to short life and

¹⁹⁸ The German Fluxus movement was started in 1961 by a group of American and European artists: George Maciunas, Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell. Joseph Beuys and John Cage also had regular collaborations with Fluxus. (Soreanu 2018)

¹⁹⁹ For example, Wolf Vostell created the first television screen environments in the 1960s, and in the 1970s conducted an anti-film experiment in which he used a goat as a selector and operator of images, in the horns of which he attached a video camera. (Weibel 2016)

²⁰⁰ As presented by Briony Fer in the article *Objects beyond objecthood*, published in *Oxford Art Journal* (Fer 1999, 27-36)

rapid change, which influences the artistic approach in contemporary art (O'Grady 2020). This piece preserves the concept of time that transcends the development of civilization and at the same time Damien Hirst's shark carcass restores before his eyes a shape that is both aesthetically impressive and a strong expression of danger and fascination. The temporal dimension of this piece is also deduced from the title of the paper. The timelessness of the subject, the monumentality, and the concept of form - all implying a representative structure of twentieth-century art - seem to be calculated to stand, at least for the present time as a valid expression of the space.²⁰¹

5. Conclusions

One of the essential links between the heterogeneous artistic practices of the 60's and 70's was the recurring equation between the boundaries of art and the limits imposed by authority, whether this authority was represented by the business or administrative environment, the ideological line of the state and institutions, the “straitjacket” of the conventional social norms or, ultimately, the authority of the patriarchal system denounced by the feminist movement. Emancipation, liberation, spontaneity, freedom /revolt were notions that were found both in the texts published by artists and critics, as well as in the art forms, conventional, practiced in the public space; criticism of the dominant discourse, formalized / institutionalized, awareness and encouragement of dissent, were common goals of many artists of that period.

As we have seen, between 1960 and 1970, the relationship between art and politics was often implicit, having an essential role in the general level of beliefs, attitudes, or states and only towards the end of this decade artists had to face with immediate political decisions. Artists and critics have reacted differently, with some clearly accepting the boundaries between their work as artists and their political beliefs, while for others the demarcation between politics and art is almost impossible. Therefore, for many art historians and critics, the question has been whether and for how long those works escaped the machinations of a novelty-hungry art market and the speed of institutionalizing artistic movements in the second half of the twentieth century (Dezeuze 2006).

Finally, perhaps a more appropriate question would be, how can artistic practices provide effective models for the interaction between the public and the object of art, or even between people? Does Minimalism or Post-Minimalism offer an alternative solution of social organization or the foundation of a different understanding of art? While considering Minimalism as a “spirituality of inner peace”, based on the social and artistic involvement (Dopierała 2017), the importance of the 1960s is obvious, still providing inspiration sources for contemporary art. From this perspective, examining the role of spirituality in Post-Minimalism while tracing the nature of “Eastern spirituality”, reveals different forms and ideas whose interpretation is rather universal, while engaging new

²⁰¹ Other examples can be obtained from the work of the author with the students from the Sculpture specialization from the “George Enescu” National University of the Arts, sampled in the exhibitions from Aparte Gallery, as detailed in the exhibitions catalogue from 2020 (Gheorghe, et al. 2020).

meanings in understanding the object and space relations.

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