

INTERVIEW WITH MARJETICA POTRC.

Marjetica Potrc: I thought a lot about the presence of sculpture, and the different ways in which it was treated in minimalism and today. And I thought of Barnett Newman, for instance, who talked about his intention to capture the presence in his paintings. He gave them titles like "Here" and "Now". He was trying to approach his truth, if I may say so, through universality. The same happened to minimalists. It showed in the lack of titles, in the non-presence of the artist's hand, the overall reduction, and consequently, the internationalization of art language. In your work you chose a diametrically different approach. You express yourself through particularity, by giving titles, using different materials and techniques in one sculpture, placing sculptures on the floor, walls and ceiling, etc. Does your approach reflect the fact that we do not believe in a universal truth any more? That we are living in an age of doubt, when consciousness and subconsciousness coexist?

I would question your interpretation of minimal work as relating to universal truth. Frank Stella's wanting to keep the paint as good as it was in the can was to do with something that was literal and not universal. Or Judd's wanting to make work that was like one, two, three, was to do with defeating metaphysics. So, in that sense I think that your question puts two inappropriate things together.

MP: What I meant was the fact that, in minimalism, a certain universal language seemed more important than a particular language, than individuality.

At some point in the 70's I thought that meaning was an issue in relationship to sculpture which had been sidestepped in minimalism. Sidestepped, but not defeated. So that whatever the truth or otherwise of Stella's assertion or Judd's statement (that's just that) the question of meaning was an issue of importance. I began trying to make work which dealt with subjectivity... or with the experiencing individual. Your question implies a sense of universal doubt, which is a substitute for metaphysics. I think that the question of being, for example, is a rhetorical question, one that arises in language. A lot of a certain kind of discourse about sculpture in the 60's was to do with essentialist notions about abstraction. One of the refreshing things about minimal art was that it made those questions about the essential, the essence of things redundant. But the postponement of the question of meaning by avowing literalness was just a postponement. And in the 70's I began to try

and address that question. It was not about identifying the essence of the work with a metaphysical experience like being. I tended to view those metaphysical experiences as being contextual rather than absolute.

MP: I remembered Judd talked about the organic form. He did not see the future of sculpture in the organic form, because it seemed to guarantee the idea of a classical representation, empathy etc. In your work you use the organic form and image or, so to say, the empty image. What led you to start using the organic image and what were you interested in at the time?

Well, there's a formal answer to that question. I began to use non-rectilinear junctures. The notion that the only juncture you can use is a rectilinear one is as constraining as the notion of organic form. And as limiting in the sense of subject matter. The precise point of interest was that if you use a rectilinear juncture, then you always have a problem with corners, whereas if you use a non-rectilinear juncture the problem of corners disappears. And what I was interested in, what I began to look for at some point in the late 70's and early 80's, was a means of construction which allowed me to eliminate corners, because I wanted to make work which was true to a minimal aesthetic, that had some kind of *gestalt*, that was whole in some way. And the circle, for example, seems a more whole form than the square. So, a lot of the work I made in the early 80's used circular or conical sections as their basis, and the elaboration of those has led to a sense of form making that pertains to the organic.

MP: When I saw your exhibition in Arc, in Paris last year, I was very much surprised to see how the sculpture looked autonomous, although it seemed as if it were scattered around the place. It was not geometrically located inside the room. I have never seen a sculpture appear autonomous in this way before in my life, and I think that it was also this roundness that you are talking about that helped with...

Well, the other reason that I began using a relationship to the ground that was curved, was precisely the reason that you stated. I wanted to make a sculpture that was autonomous and separated from the ground, and by having a curved relationship to the ground it ceased to have a gravitational dependence on one place. The object is given a sense of independence as in the pen there, or these cups. It separates the work from the ground, and internalizes the formal relationship to the work and makes the work complete. In fact the relationship of the sculpture to any particular space that I exhibit in is considered and determined. The nature of that determination is not

necessarily the obvious one of the parallelism between the rectilinear space and the rectilinear object. The intention of the installation has almost always been to establish the autonomy of the object, in order to generate a sense of the periphery and interior of the object as being of importance and of intentional significance.

MP: This autonomy of the object in your work is very interesting, because you use image and gestalt, and still one gets the feeling of the lost identity of the object. Today we basically experience our existence with doubt. Could we say that your sculpture corresponds to our experience of the world?

One of the experiences that I think there is in relationship to my work, is a confusion of identity between the fact that the autonomy of the sculpture addresses you the same way as another person addresses you, but equally there are also points where one identifies very closely with the sculpture, and therefore interiorizes it. So one's perceptual relationship to the sculpture veers between autonomy and empathy, and the equivocation between those two states establishes both for the spectator and for the sculpture a particular kind of conversation. Yes, the question of identity is raised, but the sculpture doesn't only raise the question of identity for the spectator, the spectator also raises the question of identity for the sculpture and that's not the

MP: You put the title in between.

... yes, that would be quite a good way of putting it, yes, I think the title does fall in between the sculpture and the spectator.

MP: The way it functions in the case of the sculpture "Out of his Own Mouth". I had the impression as if the sculpture were shelled from the mouth.

Yes.

Dusan Zidar: I am more familiar with Newman's texts than your work, since unfortunately I did not have the opportunity to come face to face with many of your works. So, if I may use an expression of Michael Newman's, 'language of sculpture', what would you say the term 'language of sculpture' means to you today, and what is the relation between the sculpture, language and autopoetics?

I don't actually think there is a language of sculpture. Tucker used the phrase 'language of sculpture' and his definition was very simple: subject to gravity

and revealed by light. The problem that I've always had with that notion is that it implies syntax and grammar, and I don't think that such a thing exists in relationship to sculpture. I think there are stylistic solutions to particular problems, but I don't think there is a grammar and syntax, or that anything we utter in the text of sculpture is language in that kind of way. So, I can't take responsibility for that particular phrase.

DZ: This is very important to me, because I have often heard the term 'language of sculpture', and I do not know what the English sculptors mean by it. You said it is connected with grammar and syntax.

The phrase I think actually arose particularly in relation to Anthony Caro when it was noticed that elements in Caros' sculpture were disposed about the floor in such a way that one could view the gaps in between as being akin to syntax. So there was a construction which was almost like sentence construction, but in a written sense rather than in a verbal sense, being pursued in the sculpture. To make a meaningful sense of that phrase one could perhaps say that the language of sculpture is object making. But actually that means nothing, it doesn't get you anywhere in terms of analysis.

DZ: Narrative belongs originally to literature, to the unfolding of time. Lessing forbade narration in sculpture, because a sculpture seems to exist in arrested movement. In your work narration is evidently presented in titles. How does a sculpture itself evoke narration?

Well, Lessing didn't forbid narration, in "The Laocoon", for example, he raised the suggestion that there were points in narrative at which it was possible to guess, both the past and the future, so that it was like a cartoon strip compressed into one frame. And, so what he was raising was the question of condensation of time in the sculpture, the condensation of narrative time in sculpture. Narrative was a subject of my concern, when I was a student. I was very interested in the relationship of narrative to sculpture, and subsequently I've thought that the question of time in relation to sculpture is an important question. My use of repetitive techniques is a means of embedding time in the sculpture, of congealing time in the sculpture, and allowing a narrative a literal time to emerge. So there is literal time congealed in the sculpture. I don't think of myself as a particularly narrative artist. One could for example think of Woodrow's work as being narrative. The question of time is an issue which occupies me. But I don't think that was your question.

DZ: Yes, but I'd like you to tell me more about the problem of time in this context.

The first question that Marjetica asked me was about es-sentialism. In Michael Fried's text, for example, "Art and Objecthood", he actually opposes a notion of literal time with a notion of the present. He states in the end present-ness is grace. So therefore there is an implicit sense in which the present moment is identified with a sense of the absolute. The suspension of time implies an experience of being, an experience of fundamental order, a being outside of time, etc. I think my interest in narrative in the early 70's was to do with trying to puzzle out the relationship to time. The work I did in the early 70's was to do with postponing the final moment, when the sculpture was finished, and tended to be exhibited as a series of preparatory stages rather than as the end product. In retrospect I think of that as being a means to challenge or defeat, or to question the notion of essence, in relationship to the sculpture, and try to establish it on some basis of real experience or real time. The use of repetitive techniques and the use of layering and also the use of screws, have seemed to me to be very mechanical and mundane ways of marking time. Both in establishing for the viewer that this thing that you're looking at took a long time to make, but also in the sense of the screws marking the way in which you perceive the edge. And in the sense of the laminas allowing an almost organic experience of growth to emerge as well as other analogies with ripples on a pond or geological sediments. All those things have been things that I wanted to emerge without wanting them to be glorified, so I tended to keep them on a fairly ordinary level, in order to expose the work to the viewers' experience of time.

DZ: You accepted the literal objectness and at the same time you accepted the metaphor. Would you say that the metaphor makes a sculpture out of an object?

The metaphor is a very interesting relationship. Possibly it does, yes. Not necessarily, but possibly.

DZ: Are you interested in the problem of the metaphor in the view of Barnett Newman's term 'sublime'? Do you think there exists a relationship between these two?

Well, I think metaphor is a relationship where two concepts, things or two objects are brought together, and the conjunction of the two enables you to see the one in terms of the other. To say a room's like a drum, enables you to

see a drum like a room and a room like a drum, and what drops out of the metaphor is something else, is a third thing. I talked a lot about metaphor in the early 80's and I was talking about a threefold relationship between image, object and material, which allowed each of those things to be seen in terms of the other, and without there being any kind of fixed relationship between the three. Isn't sublime another way of describing metaphysical experience? That really is a problem, because one does have experiences that seem to be profound. Even if we pursue those experiences in reflection, you find yourself pursuing a series of ever increasingly vague categories. Until you find yourself taking on board all sorts of metaphysical notions to which you're in a more rational frame of mind extremely averse. The experience in looking at art is often an experience when you are at a loss to know what to do, at a loss to know what you're really thinking. My experience of looking at art does cause me problems, and my experience of making art does cause me problems, because it does raise questions about the authenticity of my experience, which I can't really very easily explain. In a sense my making sculptures is means of questioning my experiences, as it is for most artists, and I think that the ground of that question does have to do with authenticity. But I don't think that I'm transmitting enlightenment to other people. That's not why I make art.

DZ: In building your sculptures you use screws and rivets as a means of fabrication. This reminds me of the relationship between a sculpture and the functionalism of a machine, or would you say that it points to something different?

Well, I think there are a number of answers to that. If functionalism were an issue, then I wouldn't use screws. Because we are living in 1990. I'd use another system of fixing. There is an act of manufacture that is taking place and that act of manufacture is expressed really better by acts of a hand than by other forms. I've mentioned time as being an issue of importance. I also think that the difference between the head and the point of the screw is an interesting difference, between the inside and the outside of an object, and it allows possibilities for reversion with the inside to the outside of an object by convention, which are interesting. There also is a means of transgressing the skin, and by direction, mark what is the inside, what is the outside. Certainly there is a sense of pattern, a sense of patterning, on the surface, where the surface is enjoyed or revealed by decoration. And there is the additional fact that there is an excess. By overuse they cease to be the means of fixing and become a material, which they are. Yes, initially one starts to screw things together purely for functional reasons, because it seems like a simple solution.

After a while one's anxieties about whether or not in fact A is joined to B, really, leads you to put more in than you thought necessary. In order to fit A to B there is a kind of idealized notion of the practical or the notion of fit. So as an artist one might idealize certain mundane activities, because they seem to be so perfect. A fits B, and there are no problems, so you might have that as a notion of perfection. When applied to the things that you're making, you find that the 'A fits B' isn't quite as watertight or as precise as you had imagined, so you want to increase the area of surface contact, or want to stress that A and B are physically joined. And so you add additional elements to that, and in doing that you start to realize that the redundancy created by the additional elements is introducing another factor, aside from the idealized practicality that you had in mind to begin with. And that in itself has something to say, something that can be pursued. Your original question was about functionalism. I don't think it's quite functionalism. I think it's idealizing the notion of do-it-yourself, of dumb practicality, of simple-minded practicality. It's not functionalism on a grand scale, it's kind of domestic functionalism, being able to think of putting something together in the same way as most of the ordinary objects one comes across in one's life are. They aren't subject to the same kind of rigorous inspection the sculpture is, but nevertheless, in one's mind they seem to be perfectly able to do their jobs and do it. And therefore the way they are put together seems to be somehow ideal. So, when you come to put a sculpture together, you idealize that means of putting it together, and attempt to incorporate it into the sculpture in order to ground the sculpture in physical reality, and not to remove it from it. However, something always intervenes. Things just don't fit together the way you had imagined them to do. The screw doesn't go in the hole that you had imagined might fit the screw. So those are the things that really cause one to start elaborating. There are subsequent questions which arise, of the sort that you raised, but I think that the original reason for elaboration has to do, in my case anyway, with idealization of a certain notion of practicality.