

On Taking Shape

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“ When I walk down a street, everything I see demonstrates to me that I am alive. I avoid obstacles. I make decisions about the route I’ll take. I observe what is of interest to me. Sculpture is the outcome of the way I breathe and behave in the street.”

Elisabeth Ballet

In Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Dans le Labyrinthe*¹, a soldier wanders the streets of an unnamed city in the snow, leaving his traces in the constantly replenished white which covers the ground. The furniture of streets and the buildings which surround them dictate his movements, as he moves around lamp-post and through the light they cast, turns corners, steps off the kerb, enters and leaves the buildings. The pattern he inscribes in the snow is thus formed by the structure of the city in which he walks. At its most basic level, the text is a simple, uneventful narrative, but on another, seen from above, as it were, it is a game, with the shapes created by the soldier’s footsteps and the shapes described on his clothes and in his surroundings readable as circle / noughts and crosses dispersed throughout the text or the grid which is the city.

As Robbe-Grillet and the nouveau roman were interested in the abstraction of the narrative, the exploitation of the artificial properties of the novel, so, as a sculptor, Elisabeth Ballet is interested in the abstract capacity of space. It is not simply the dimensions of a space or how we move through it which interests ballet, but how space is established. Her work does not just affect or demand our movement, it implicates us as part of the spaces her works inhabit when we act in them. Like Robbe-Grillet’s soldier who unwittingly leaves shapes in the grid / text for the reader to discern, the person who walks through the city will “write, but cannot read what they write”², the displacement and appropriation of space as we occupy one spot and vacate another being invisible to us as we engage in it. Ballet’s works seeks to provide us with a vantage point on that relationship with space.

How much space we expect to occupy in any situation varies enormously from a crowded elevator to an empty city square, but as we move into any environment we inevitably appropriate an amount of space. This notion of the occupation of space in the broadest sense is something which has been a concern of Vito Acconci’s, who in his early poetry work used the page as a field for movement. *Proximity Piece* (1970)³, whereby he stood just too close to randomly selected visitors to the exhibition every day of its duration, was his way of carving out his space in the exhibition, rather than presenting a physical object.

Another work of this period would like to call to mind is Douglas Heubler’s *Variable piece #4*, Paris France (1970). This work consisted in the artist randomly selecting a point on a map of Paris, marking it in ink, and then going to that exact spot to photograph the site. The exhibited work juxtaposes the marked section of map with the photograph and highlights the vast discrepancy between the index and the icon, the way that no city plan ever truly reveals the nature in volume of the space it indicates⁴. The city seen from above is quite a different place from that which we experience and become part as we move through it. The characteristics of the city site, such as light and shade, the height of buildings, surface materials, how our movement is restricted or ordered and the presence or lack of the other people, noise, traffic, etc. cannot be indicated on any plan but are fundamental to our experience of the city. These qualities are the factors which make us ‘breathe and behave in the street’ in the way

¹ Steve Pile in: *The Body and The City: Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity*, (Routledge, London, 1996)

² The work was part of the exhibition *Software: Information Technology: Its Meaning for Art* at the Jewish Museum in New York. In general, see Vito Acconci: *A Retrospective: 1969-80* Museum of contemporary Art, Chicago, 1980)

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⁴ See Christel Hollevoet, ‘Wandering in the City: Flânerie to Derive and After : The Cognitive Mapping of Urban Space’ in : ‘The Power of the City/The City of Power’ (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1992)

we do.

The relationship between plan and volume alluded to in Heubler's work is central to Ballet's practice, with much of her work functioning as a kind of special drawing, full of lines of perspective and planar surfaces. Eric Troncy has discussed the way in which Ballet shares with classical painters an appropriation of space by means of perspective,⁵ specifically in relation to her first exhibition at the Galerie des Archives in Paris in 1990. *Face-à-Main* consisted of 6 small, wall-mounted structures of varying materials and a large, floor-based sculpture of varnished wood positioned in the center of the space. Each of the 6 small structures was titled with a different aspect associated with the process of conceiving and making sculpture: *Moulage* (cast), *Matière* (material), *Point de vue et perspective* (point of view and perspective), *Dessin* (drawing), *Maquette* (maquette) and *Couleur* (colour). They protruded from the walls apparently trying to encompass or appropriate some of the space between the walls and the structure in the centre of the space. This piece, which was 1.8 m high, titled *Modèle* (model), was constructed by the combination of the forms of the 6 small constructions: they dictated its outline. This was not immediately or easily perceived, due to the difference in scale and material. The positioning of the elements meant that a certain movement in the space was prescribed and moving between the central piece and the wall works was conditioned by the heights of the structures, their material composition, form and light. Just as so many city spaces either invite or discourage occupation, the wall-mounted forms implied openness and inclusion (*Moulage*, *Matière* and *Couleur*), showing their internal, finished surfaces to the viewer and the centre of the space, while *Modèle* was obstructive and exclusive: it could not be apprehended in its totality, could not be seen through or over. Drawing attention as much to the perimeter walls of the space, the definition of the gallery as a space apart from the exterior, *Face-à-Main* saw a crucial development in Ballet's work is still prevalent, indeed fundamental, in her practice today. In any given space, be it white cube gallery or public site, Ballet will work 'from words to things, drawing to sculpture, plan to volume, walls to the centre'. This kind of centripetal dynamic was essential to development of *Trait pour Trait* (1993). A 'plan' of this piece, which resulted from the invitation to make a work for an external site at the Domaine de Kerguéhennec, would show a perfect circle inscribed in a clearing surrounded by trees, geometry in the midst of nature. In reality, however, *Trait pour Trait* is a much more complex work. A 5 m high and 11.5 m in diameter steel 'cage' which echoes the trees surrounding the clearing in its verticality and height but does not reflect light due to its matt, steel surface, it has been described as a 'veil', inviting a closer approach to discover its make-up. Perhaps the best illustration of Ballet's intention to 'steal space from the void', *Trait pour Trait* functions like a three-dimensional exercising of the conceptual concerns of a work like Yoko Ono's *Painting to See the Skies* (1961), in that participating in *Trait pour Trait* brings about an altered experience of one's immediate surroundings. Entering the cage 'leaves you in an oddly intermediate space, with a visual continuity with the space you were in before'⁶. It is almost as if it should be possible to look out through the cage and still see oneself in the 'external' space. The method of working from the trees to the centre of the clearing means that the work as it manifests itself sits between what is seen and understood of the site in its original state and the core of the work. Its beauty lies not simply in the placing of geometry in nature, but in the subtle transformation of the viewer's relation to his / her environs achieved upon entering the structure and looking out on the clearing. Ballet talks about her interest in enclosures and how, in her work they are transformed into 'open space with dotted lines'. It is significant that the line is broken: think of windows and doors in architectural plans, of the definition between pedestrian and vehicular routes on city plans. These tend to indicate areas which are differentiated by function, light, surface, but not by solid, opaque, impenetrable uprights. In her works of recent years, Ballet has tended not to produce 'solid' objects. Robert Morris in his *Notes on Sculptures* noted that with large (i.e. greater than human scale) objects it is necessary to keep one's distance in order to take that whole of any one view into one's field vision. Ballet, however, even in such large works as *Trait pour Trait* (5 m high and 11.5 m in diameter) and *Cale* (over 6 m in diameter) manages to draw the viewer close to the sculptures, ensuring the experience, necessary to the work, of proximity with surfaces and

⁵ Eric Troncy, *Face-à-Main* (ex. cat. Galerie des Archives, Paris, 1990)

⁶ Jean-Pierre Criqui, *A moment in the cage*, from : *Trait pour Trait* (Domaine de Kerguéhennec, Locminé, 1993).

materials, the experience of light change on the retina. This she does with a variety of visible, if usually inaccessible, internal spaces. The internal, enclosed space in works like *Cale* (1996) and *Deux Bords* (1993) cannot be entered but, like *Trait pour Trait*, can be better read from close range, at which the experience of the dotted line is also strongest.

Deux Bords at the Galerie des Archives in Paris was an ‘obstacle full of energy’. A series of 9 rings of differing diameters and materials were suspended one above the other in the gallery, the largest of them touching the walls of the space on either side and preventing any access around the sculpture. The rings were all attached to the walls and the ceiling, crucially from their outside edge. Approaching the work and looking through the rings, a void, free of any straps or attachments is visible inside. Just as Stephen Bann has talked about how Antony Gormley ‘humanises retrospectively’ the work of the minimalist sculptors⁷ Ballet similarly uses regular geometric forms but inscribes the viewer’s presence at the heart of her work, primarily through this encouragement to move and relate to the structures presented, rather than in a representation of the human form.

It is important to bear in mind at this point that Ballet’s working process also evinces the relationship between plan and volume as she will often conceive a structure, specify its shape, height, material and finish and have it commercially or professionally produced. This is not a ‘hand’on’ process. She is engaged in an undoubtedly sculptural practice, but not one which is overly concerned with materials, or even form. The root and impetus for work always lies in drawing, where a project and idea quite literally take shape.

Perhaps more than any other of her projects to date, Ballet’s contribution to the exhibition ‘Sugar Hiccup’ at Tramway in Glasgow demonstrates the import of ‘le trait’ in her work. With the walls of the vast space occupied by the other artists in the exhibition (Sam Samore and Richard Wright), Ballet’s work occupied the floor. She exhibited 4 works, 3 of which were made for the exhibition, unifying them by covering the entire floor area with fine, white salt. Photographic documentation of the installation illustrates the extent to which the sculptures appeared like two-dimensional forms floating on the white ground. As substantial as the constructions are, they are pure geometry, a combination of points, lines, curves and surfaces. They hover strangely between being objects and indications of objects, between plan and volume. *Contrôle 3*, a smoky-coloured plexiglass box, recalls one of the earlier constituent sculptures of *Face-à-Main: Dessin* was produced in transparent plexiglass, making the most evident feature of the structure the lines which define each plane, exactly as the shape would be indicated on paper.

Ballet also chose to include an earlier work in the exhibition: *Des Idées* (1988), an aluminium and opaque plexiglass structure attached to the wall above head-height. Standing beneath the structure, light is softened and altered, filtered through the plexiglass ‘windows’ on the three exposed sides of the box. Unlike ballet’s other works in ‘Sugar Hiccup’, *Des Idées* does not truly enclose space, but the altered light beneath and within the box effectively delimits an area by its difference. It was borrowed from a group of works, like a reusable component which can slot into but discreetly alter any context into which it is placed, first exhibited at the 1988 Venice Biennial. Titled as a group with a phrase borrowed from Diderot’s ‘Encyclopédie’ – *Des idées que l’esprit ajoute à celles qui sont précisément signifiées par les mots* (Ideas which the mind adds to those which are precisely signified by words) – the 4 works as exhibited in Venice were the first indication of ballet’s interest in the ‘transposition of form into a word’, a process akin to the development from line to three-dimensional structure in space so fundamental to her work. In the context of the tramway exhibition, *Des idées* provided an interesting counterpoint to the more recent *Cale* (1996), which also made use of light in the creation of a space apart. *Cale*, however, could only be experienced ‘from outside’ as it was not possible to enter the circular area described by the raised wooden structure and the 8 strip lights which gave the enclosure its own, independent light source.

The most complex work exhibited at Tramway, *Delta* (1996), consists of three similar painted stainless steel ‘barrier’ structures, each of slightly different heights and a different shape: a curve, a rectangle and a right-angle. The shapes of these enclosures suggest a dictated perimeter, or a specific usage, but they are not encumbered with any imagery. They are not a progression – the positioning of the right-angle ensures they cannot be read as such. What initially seems so familiar as some kind of

⁷ Stephen Bann, *The Raising of Lazarus*, in: Anthony Gormley (ex. cat. Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1994)

pen becomes rather disturbing, inevitably implying some form of containment and control, but remaining completely non-symbolic. They do not stand for anything – they are real space and force a re-assessment of the viewer's relationship to the walls and pillars of the space in which they are sited and of course the salt on which he/she stands. The salt covering recorded the passage of time via movement of visitors to the exhibition, acknowledging the way in which sculpture necessitates the viewer's movement, and became a plan of past encounters. It emphasised the areas of exclusion within each of the works and, like graffiti on city walls gave the excluded a constant presence. But is also enhanced the drawn quality of the exhibition, providing an unbroken, if increasingly marked, surface for sculptures positioned on top of it.

The experience of working with the floor surface in this way was to prove crucial to the development of another 'public' (i.e. non-gallery) commission in the town of Berwick. Now in England, Berwick lies on the border with Scotland, a border which has shifted many times over the centuries, alternately to exclude and include Berwick in one or the other country: it is a border line which could not be more dotted. Ballet was invited to choose a site on the town's ramparts with which to work. The ramparts run around the old town, their main stretch dividing the town from the coast. Walking along them, one is above ground level, often looking over to the roofs of the town. They are characterised by this unusual level, their being covered in grass and the simultaneous perspective they afford on the sea and the town. Ballet chose to work with the long redundant but still intact gunpowder magazine, a small, squat stone building surrounded by a small area of grass which is again contained by high, stone walls. This strange grassed area within the perimeter walls, whose only need for existence must have been as a baffle, to minimise the impact of any explosion in the magazine on the 'outside', is entered through a small door in the perimeter walls, and the magazine itself by ascending 3 steps and going through a heavy copper-clad door, of which there is one at either end of the rectangular building.

Ballet's work, entitled *Cake Walk* (1996), involved the construction of a plywood platform at the eight of the floor inside the magazine, completely covering the small area of grass separating the gunpowder magazine from the perimeter, protective walls. When inside the perimeter walls, but outside the magazine, the walls block everything but the sky from view. Painted a blue which was close to the colour of the sky on a good day, the platform connected the perimeter walls and the building, unified as they were by material (stone) and vertical plane. The horizontal blue plane, like a plinth, made a sculpture of the magazine and managed to convert the solid perimeter walls into a dotted line, drawing attention to all that was visible of and recalling what was remembered of the exterior. After spending a while in the altered space, the colour and feel underfoot of the plywood platform made walking on the grass outside again strange and made one all the more aware of the openness of the position on top of the ramparts. The work exploited the characteristics of the surrounding ramparts: the raised level, the ground cover and the notion of enclosure and protection. The artificial construction of cake walk, in both its intense colour and simple fabrication, truly worked from the walls to the centre and heightened the experience of being in a non-area, a doubly enclosed space carved out of the grassy environs by two stone rectangles.

A simple planar intervention like *Cake Walk* demonstrates Ballet's position between line and space. She is undoubtedly interested in the qualities of drawing, in line, geometry and the use of perspective but her practice is very much a three-dimensional one. As Donald Judd wrote: 'Actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface'⁸ but the way in which that actual space is established is what drives Ballet's practice, how it makes the transition from plan to volume. Her sculptures are forms which invite one into a position through which one seems to slip into an unfamiliar alignment with one's (familiar) surroundings. They do not talk loudly about space, as that is what they are, but they whisper constantly of our presence in any environment.

⁸ In the essay *Specific Objects*, included in: Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959-75* (Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1975)