

## **Passing By and Being There**

*PAVEL BÜCHLER*

It was the twilight end of a winter day. A couple of nights before, a TV news crew made it into a remote Highland village to film the arrival of a snow plough followed by an ambulance, the A66 over the Pennines was closed and the 0800 from Euston arrived in Glasgow at midnight. Even—and quite against the rationale of its subterranean scheme—the underground had been shut down for two days, as if ‘snow cover’ was just an euphemism for an imperceptible penetration of Frost deep Under the earth’s surface like corrosive salts. But on that evening, the Memory of snow was kept Alive only by the conspicuous dry rectangles on the edge of the road where cars had been parked during the day.

In the gallery (a converted tramshed which still shelters the city’s last stretch of tramway rails), eight tons of food-grade salt had been carefully dispersed in an inch deep layer on the floor, leaving only a strip of bare concrete by the walls. The fine white crystals formed a vastly enlarged reversed image of the evidence of recent weather changes on the road outside frozen in a shimmering stillness and undetermined history by the bright artificial light, inert, and pristine—as if this ‘snow’ had fallen before the building was erected and as if nothing else has happened yet.

I arrived early. Like the Land Surveyor in the opening chapter of *The Castle*, ‘I did not want to miss the chance of a walk through the ‘snow’. Like him—‘a stranger here’, facing this image of a ‘brilliant winter morning’—I was reminded of my (and K’s) native town which I ‘had not seen for such a long time’ and where church towers soar above snow covered roofs ‘with a loftier goal and a clearer meaning than the muddle of everyday life’. But also like in Kafka’s novel, there seemed to be no certainty in familiar appearances, other than the familiarity of strangeness, and no indication of any exterior dimension, except that which is assumed from the logic of incomprehension and which always only waits to be recognised.

How relevant are such first impressions for an understanding of Elisabeth Ballet’s work? Why should my private nostalgic reverie—incited less by the work itself than by the fragile meteorological coincidence—open up any viable possibilities for a reflection on (let alone interpretation of) the ostensibly public intentions of the artist? How can I justify, writing seven months later (at the end of another summer), that it still dominates my recollections of the exhibition? After all, the salt covered the floor was a tactical device for the presentation of a number of autonomous pieces of sculpture rather than a self-contained ‘work’. Its main purpose was the conversion of space into a field of activity.

The potential of space is every sculptor’s concern. But for Elisabeth Ballet it is the abstract capacity of space, rather than its measurable dimensionality, that defines and is defined by her sculpture. The simple geometry of her constructions regulates not just the perception of space but also its denomination? Volumes of sculptural space are marked out as enclosures within a volume of spectacular activity which, in turn, is generated by the presence of the visual and physical demarcation. Despite its formal precision, the demarcation of space is proposed as a matter of provisional qualitative distinction. The sculptural space is confined and structured by the surfaces and edges, sides and faces, of the individual pieces of sculpture but remains open in the sense of being negotiable as an aspect of the social space where things happen. The human scale of the works provides the basic ratio of imaginary interchange. Moving around or between and among the sculptures becomes an act of integration and reclamation. With every step we claim the space that the sculptures ‘occupy’ as the one that we ‘inhabit’ and from every vantage point we ‘take over’ the space that they ‘take up’.

In a few hours, the gallery floor became a maze of footprints. Over the next weeks and months, it turned into a cryptic register of transient activity like the pages of a visitors’ book. The cumulative traces of passing by and being there contrasted with the still undisturbed areas of salt within the sculptural enclosures. In this configuration of design and accident (on this building site of meaning),

space was being remodelled in and by time, invested with the temporalities of 'then' and 'now' within a history of looking.

As it operates in a perceptual time zone of simultaneity of past and present which permits no outside position, Elisabeth Ballet's art resents symbolic interpretation. There are no models and no chance of disclosure. Nothing is concealed in what her sculptures look like—a large honey coloured Perspex 'vitrine', a modular 'doorway' hanging above at a right angle to the floor, a metal 'railing' painted industrial grey, an elevated circular 'walkway', made of a steel frame and floorboards, circumscribing a small rink of cold light—and nothing is suggested beyond formal facts. But in any act of 'reading' the dialectic of resemblance seeks to reassert distance and retrospection (and, at any rate, the invitation to the contemplating mind to participate in the material presence of the work also includes the license to conjure up images of the world outside). Even where all is confined within the space of the work and the time of looking, and where observation is part of bringing the work into being, nothing can stop memory from playing a passing stranger. Salt becomes snow not by visual analogy but by an imaginary spatial and temporal shift of perspective. This also makes it possible for us to recover in our experience of the work's here and now a sense of that which we 'had not seen for such a long time' and which, in those rare moments when the wandering metaphor stumbles upon the determination of precise form, can be suddenly glanced as if for the first time right under our feet.

'Since then, I saw Elisabeth Ballet's gunpowder magazine in Berwick—an island of mid- 18<sup>th</sup> century English military architectural design surrounded by a raised plywood floor painted the chroma-key blue of the Mediterranean sky contained by the perimeter walls; an image resonating with fantasies of flying castles and dreams of south-bound voyages, and quite Shandean in its eccentric ingenuity and 'bowling green' setting.)

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