

**Face-à-Main**  
*ERIC TRONCY*

Elisabeth Ballet's sculptural intention seems at first to reside in her attempt to "steal space from the void", although her aim is not to build or to invest space at all cost but rather to surround or encircle it. Freed from those conventions of realisation, which would interfere with their perception and mislead the spectator into the deceptive illusion of style, material sophistication or debate, each sculpture implicitly states its intention to capture.

The marks of filiations', consciously reiterated from one piece to the next, are conspicuously absent here, as is any notion of evolution or chronology. This simple intention to designate the space occupied is achieved in the context of rigorous constraints, which condemn the concept of a genre as the affirmation of personality from the outset. The underlying hypothesis of the production of forms without qualities indicates, among other things, the artist's affirmed desire to dismiss any reading of the work, which would depend on formal logic.

Thus, a door and its frame are suspended from the ceiling parallel to the ground, high enough so that one may walk beneath them. Considered ordinarily as a symbol of passage or transition, the explicit statement of the physical separation of two different sites, the door loses its traditional identity. It is simply a drawing in space – perspective lines and planar surfaces. In short, pure geometry.

"Emmanuelle" investigates the principle of an aleatory and complex line in which the upwards elevation of the ground plane, (by means of wooden supports), produces a curiously hermetic form which strenuously resists any interpretation of nature or style. It manifests no desire for logic, no tendency to indulge in the exaltation of materials or colours, nor any will to define a precise space – an "inside" or an "outside". Neither limit nor passage, it depends on no model or tradition, does not describe or relate anything, does not seek to affirm or to decry. Neither a fragment nor a whole, it seems only to encourage the movement of the eye between the line on the ground and the line in space which constitute this sinuous, meandering curve, to the point that the very question of the space which is dispossessed seems to disappear through its own contemplation.

It seems apparent that Elisabeth Ballet's sculptural practice may best be defined by what it is not, in a space, which is strictly delineated by its own rules rather than by any predetermined logic of production or critical system put forward as a foundation of the work. Her sculptures do not conceal any narrative attempt, and if one felt the necessity to identify a source for them, this endeavour would doubtless be more fruitful were one to look to the example of classical painters, precisely in the concern they demonstrate to appropriate space by means of perspective, to replace the image of the void with the image of the volume that fills it by means of a geometrical tool.

"Jeanne" is clearly put forward as an exercise in pure geometry – in some ways very close to the principle of *anamorphous*. Relating the experience of frontal vision to the innate assumption of lateral space, it has neither front nor side, depth nor width, or rather each one of these characteristics is equally and simultaneously all of the others. Its unique volume is hollow and pierced with holes. Its form ends abruptly in an unexpected and summary addition: a metal rectangle with a section of one of its edges missing, replaced by a ladle-like form which closes the rectangle.

"Jeanne" is, moreover, something of an *sible* at first glance. Ordinarily the predominant importance given to form is tempered by its direct and immediate affirmation. Moving around the works, there are no surprises or discoveries. The forms have nothing to hide and the volumes have no other purpose than to occupy space. Here, once again, one might evoke the experience of painting where what is represented is immediately and entirely visible.

"Par les mots"<sup>1</sup> is the elevation in space of a drawing of an interlocked circle and trapezoid to a height where the spectator must look down into it. The principle of a drawing developed in three dimensions

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<sup>1</sup> See catalogue of the Venice Biennale, 1988.

short circuits the dangers of the notion that something may exist beyond that which is immediately visible. Sometimes, therefore, Elisabeth Ballet's sculptures seem to be simply frameworks "that the mind adds". Through the use of this third dimension, the precise and instantaneous quality of vision is no longer applied to a surface but to a space.

When one considers the problem posed by the occupation of space by means of a volume, the question of scale is inevitable. Tony Smith's remarks about the criteria that determined the choice of the final dimensions of "Die" are well known. The contemplation of a sculpture presupposes that the spectator is engaged in a direct and confrontational size relationship with it. "It is obvious, yet important, to take note of the fact that things smaller than ourselves are seen differently than things larger. The quality of intimacy is attached to an object in a fairly direct proportion as its size diminishes in relation to oneself" (Robert Morris). Recent history has found yet another pitfall for small-scale works: the tendency to consider them as [maquettes](#) of larger works yet to be made, or alternatively as directly resulting from these. For her exhibition at the Galerie des Archives, Elisabeth Ballet has clearly formulated her intention to create small-scale works which do not relate to the concept of an "object" or "[maquette](#)" in any way, but which, on the contrary, demand to be considered as autonomous and completed propositions in their own right.

Six small works using various different materials are hung on the gallery walls at different heights. Each piece corresponds to a detail of the large sculpture installed in the [center](#) of the gallery space, a work whose particularly complex contour makes any attempt to memorize its form impossible. Its height (1.80m.) prevents the spectator from seeing its highest point, and thus its plan when viewed from above: the space has appropriated its quality as drawing. This central sculpture could in some ways be viewed as the matrix of the mural works, were it not posterior to them having been developed precisely from the addition of their forms. The parts precede the whole, the matrix succeeds its own mould, and the elaboration of individual identities determines the common denominator.

Each wall piece is situated exactly opposite its corresponding section in the central sculpture although this device does not imply the notion of fragmentation or explosion since all the exterior faces are not treated. Rather, it relates the exhibition space to the presence of its own limits (the walls), leading the spectator once again from an abstract concept to its geometrical definition. The memory's retention of each details, understood in a single glance, permits the mental construction of the central form which, in the process, loses its mystery thus undermining the notion of a volume has necessarily closed.

More than anything else, these small sculptures, open to the exterior, affirm their [pictorial frontality](#). The front surface of "Couleur", covered with yellow paint, forms a concave creating a play of shadow and contrast. Other visual fields, notably the back of the construction, are left untouched. Colour is primarily a planar consideration. "Dessin", a volume constructed in transparent Plexiglas, paradoxically reintegrates the realm of drawing. Despite its projections and hollows only the lines traced by the different fields are distinguishable.

The choice of materials for all works results entirely from the interface between the imperatives of fabrication and the artist's sculptural intention. Plexiglas is used for its transparency, other materials for their neutral aspect...

The conclusion that this exhibition could in some ways be considered an "inventory" is erroneous, above all because each piece is not exclusive of the others. As the "flattening out" of a volume which they confront physically, the details acquire total autonomy. Together they exhaust the possibilities offered by a form which they literally empty of all substance. To the idea of a repertory they oppose that of dispersion.

Freed from the imperatives of taste and signature, Elisabeth Ballet's sculptures attain a state of neutrality independent of any particular category. Over and above its intention to "steal space from the void", her work sets out to produce the conditions necessary in order to surpass mathematical considerations and achieve transcendence, just as if one were to contemplate a classical painting having forgotten the most elementary notions of iconography.

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