

MARTIM BRION: REDUCTION AND REPETITION IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET

It is clear that in our moment of technological change, the quantity of data we are confronted with is always increasing. It is not just the amount of data that is changing, it is also the way we receive it: on a smartphone that is usually within arms reach. Image, text, video – content that comes from many different sources (not all of them trustworthy). A lot of contemporary art seeks to reflect this hyper-complexity by mimicking its intensity: video art that is filled with formal excess and sensory overload, installations that are crowded with innumerable objects, paintings that document an almost endless process. To the already noisy cultural sphere, this current of art runs the risk of merely adding more noise.

Martim Brion situates his work in the centre of a very different current of artistic activity. The origins of this current are to be found in modernism, when machines first reached a stage where they directly challenged the place of the artist. It reaches its apogee and clearest expression in minimalism, the moment where the artwork-as-object fully displaced the artwork-as-window. The explosion of the contents of the painting into the

space of the gallery led in quick succession to minimalism, conceptualism and then onto performance and new media work. From a linear historical perspective, the moment of minimalism in its purest form did not last that long, but its discoveries have influenced and underpinned the works of many (perhaps the majority) of artists from that moment on.

Brion's work continues the investigation into the aesthetic potential of a simplified language of colour and form. This investigation is carried out using two distinct approaches: the construction of objects and the recording of photographs. The objects and the photographs are in a dialogue: they approach the same problem or set of interests from two different angles. The objects reflect the desire of the artist to create, to bring a new thing into the world. Starting from the void of empty space, they seek to articulate a language of fundamental forms. They are informed by and embedded in the language of architecture, representing the artwork as an object that is in a mutually complementary relationship with built space. The photographs, on the other hand, show a picture of the artist as observer and discoverer, looking at the world rather than trying to change it. The photographs find a similar formal language in reality to the one that is represented by the sculptures. If the sculptures appear to show themselves as primal, original

objects, then the photographs link their language back to what already exists in reality.

With works such as 'Wavelength' (2016), Brion uses a simplified formal language to question whether it is possible for an artwork to be completely abstract. It is a trio of zig-zag lines mounted one above the other on the wall. Painted in different colours, the work clearly alludes to the formalism of minimalist art and colour field painting. But at the same time, the work also immediately refers to a handrail or similar architectural element. In addition to this, the title alludes to another reading – that the work is a symbol of a wavelength, a scientific measure of the distance over which a wave's shape repeats. It also resembles an abbreviated rendering of a bird, as used in the background of a cartoon. This work exemplifies the way in which as a form becomes more reduced, its interpretative possibilities do not diminish. In fact, as a form is more and more simplified, it tends to connect to more things.

This play with references is something that distinguishes Brion's work from the minimalists, who tried to make an object that was purely abstract. The aim to make something that was devoid of reference began with Kandinsky,

Malevich and Gabo, who worked towards a goal of making non-objective art. Minimalism can be seen as the final stage of this attempt. After this moment, we are aware that there is no such thing as non-objective art, as art will always reflect its maker in one way or another. Brion uses some of the minimalist formal approach, but with a contemporary awareness that nothing is truly abstract. There is another way in which his work is distinct from the minimalists: in his approach to making the work, the object is always hand-made, he stays away from purely industrial techniques. The choice behind things like colour and form is also more subjective than the minimalists, who tried to totally remove the subjectivity of the artist from the work.

Brion's photography depicts situations that are both staged and encountered. But even with the staged images, there is a light touch, a small intervention in reality that sets up a conversation about form, material and light. An example of this is the trilogy of works, 'Racine in P1', 'Racine in P2', and 'Racine in P3'. Here, a small and simple form (two humps, recalling architectural 'scallops') is recorded under different lighting conditions. The images are monochromatic, suggesting an investigation into the tonal effects of light and shadow. This series shows the same differentiation from

minimalism as 'Wavelength'. Namely, that it adopts key minimalist procedures (repetition and reduction) but modulates them with an injection of subjectivity. There is clearly an individual thought process generating these images, they are not the mere reflection of an alienating system. This ambiguity is reflected in their titles. 'Racine in P1, P2 & P3' – the sequential numbering suggests a scientific objectivity, a neutrally labelled sequence of steps in an experiment. Yet there also appears to be a reference to French dramatist Racine, clearly an author belonging to the humanist tradition rather than a scientific or empirical one. The collision of these two elements in the title creates an aspect of mystery – they are cryptic and idiosyncratic¹.

Perhaps here there is an unconscious connection to one of Sol Lewitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art*: "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists."

Although the objects and photographs approach the content of the work from different perspectives, they seem to be identifying something that

¹ In this case, Brion helped me decode the reference: P stands for Proust, and the titles are an allusion to the interest of Proust's narrator in *The Search of Lost Time* in the works of Racine. This reference is reflected in the form of the work: the undulating wave creates a link to theatrical drapes and the space of theatre.

strives for the universal, that crosses boundaries. Modernism's aspirations towards universality have since been criticised and described as illusory. The argument goes that all cultural movements are particular, bound to their time. While this is of course true, the language that Brion employs refers to the lived human experience at its most basic level: how we relate to form, how objects in space alter our experience, how colour can alter perception, how our existence is structured by repetition and difference. In this sense, though formalism cannot lay claim to true universality, it can think about things that an embodied human necessarily has a relation to. In continuing with this line of artistic work, Brion aims to reconnect a human element to the abstract procedure. Through his investigations into object production and photography, he aims at creating a space of aesthetic contemplation, that is an essential but undervalued thing in our world of excessive information.

Tom Saunders, Paris 2019