

Galerie Thomas Bernard

Cortex Athletico

Press release

Landscape

Artists : Rolf Julius

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COMMUNIQUE DE PRESSE :

De rerum natura

In the fifth chapter, Luwuh describes the method of making tea. According to him, the mountain spring is the best, the river water and the spring water come next in the order of excellence.

There are three stages of boiling: the first boil is when the little bubbles like the eye of fishes swim on the surface; the second boil is when the bubbles are like crystal beads rolling in a fountain; the third boil is when the billows surge wildly in the kettle.

The Cake-tea is roasted before the fire until it becomes soft like a baby's arm and is shredded into powder between pieces of fine paper. Salt is put in the first boil, the tea in the second. At the third boil, a dipperful of cold water is poured into the kettle to settle the tea and revive the "youth of the water." Then the beverage was poured into cups and drunk.

Okakura Kakuzo – The Book of Tea

From the art of tea to Roland Barthes's "neutral" figures. From Zen to the sound of stones. From Erik Satie's "furniture music" to the "rooms of stillness". The paths that Rolf Julius' work take seem to spread out in a circular manner, in an almost continuous loop. His research could be defined as an archaeology of contemplation, an art that uses small rituals, ceremonies, encounters and subtractions, to give us time for astonishment – bringing us back to this "active stillness" (to use the artist's terms) that is necessary in order to listen to things. Not extracting the essence of it, or stripping it of its meaning, according to the guidelines of Western metaphysics. But more, as Roland Barthes formulates it when talking about the Zen mind, as an "awakening to the fact, understanding the thing as an event and not as a substance". If reality is an ensemble of facts, a succession of events, art can therefore only blend in with the contingent rhythm of things, leading to a game of permutations at most, that allows it to generate new links with events and create unprecedented paths. But the will to trigger transformation remains nevertheless hidden behind the objective position linked to the observation of reality – the position that looks first and foremost to "receive something that is already there", as Julius puts it.

A 2001 artwork, displayed at the Mattress Factory Museum of Pittsburgh, is emblematic of this art of "camouflage", that of an "artist that blends in with his environment". After having discovered a hibernating bat in the ceiling corner of his workshop, Julius placed a heap of dust in the corner just below the animal and hid one of his small loudspeakers in it. The dense texture of natural sounds of insects and birds that came from the corner seemed to want to accompany the bat's sleep (or maybe prepare for its awakening). It is called Corner piece (bat), a work that shows the essentially in situ approach

of Julius's work, but that also reveals in a way the ambiguity and transitory aspect of his art's status. From a certain point of view, Julius' artworks seem to aspire to a form of fusion with nature. His manner of reducing things to their tiniest element, as if he was looking to capture them through this deconstruction and rebuilding process, seems in fact to suggest an equivalence, a sort of interchangeability between art and nature. Resorting to technology is symptomatic in this way: it is dissected and manipulated with ease, to an infinitesimal level. Julius' method seems to resemble this form of "knowledge of the world that ends in the dissolution of its density" as mentioned by Italo Calvino about Lucretius' theories. A "perception of what is infinitely small, mobile, light".

Nevertheless, to recognise this art as a means to make and undo reality, is to affirm its autonomy and its difference with the world. In other words, it is a posture that updates the typically avant-garde principle that claims that art is capable of formulating new languages, and has a power of transformation and action on reality: "I hope that the lake itself will become musical" is what Julius said about Concert for a frozen lake, one of his "musical actions" carried out in situ on the outskirts of Berlin between 1982 and 1983.

In any case, what remains obvious in the artwork is its tendency to horizontality. A horizontality that creates vanishing points for the spectator's gaze, whilst also "bringing him to glance downward", towards the Earth's surface. The title of a 2008 exhibition, Further Away (Music for the Glance Downward), shows this opening to the horizon, as well as the idea of a glance that is laid upon daily surfaces, horizontal plans of everyday actions: the ground that we walk upon, the table at which we eat, where we work, the shelves on which we place a plant or an object. Based on this will to not introduce forms of verticality between art and life, the "further away" therefore has to be seen less as a suggestion linked to an absence, than as an indicator of an uninterrupted, although ambivalent, link with immanence. This way of occupying the ground, of keeping the roots between Earth and matter intact, reveals a visible genealogy with Arte Povera. But the horizontal axes are also those of a choreographic space. "I am interested in the issues between the body and space", he said, referring to the choreographic quality of his work. Notably during his residency at PS1 in New York in 1983, where his interest in the body developed, and the influence of Merce Cunningham became particularly important on his work.

As one can observe with Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman or Richard Serra's post-minimalism, Julius assimilates Cage and Cunningham's principles, by hybridizing sculpture with performance and choreographic elements. The decentralized and topographical space of the artwork – like Cage's field situations – invites the spectator's body to move in order to establish orientation points that enables him/her to rethink the cartography. But instead of leading the spectator to the outskirts of the object, of "taking him/her away", towards this space around the artwork like in post-minimalist aesthetics, one finds here that the trajectories are brought closer together: the spectator is attracted to the reduced dimension of the elements that make up his works, to the multiple focal points that form them.

This change of scale, heading towards the infrathin – and not towards the expanded dimension of minimalist sculpture – acts with Julius as an attraction principle. An atomisation of the object,

sometimes a real pulverisation, which attracts the public, pushing them to overcome the normal distance of an object-spectator experience.

The role of sound is decisive in this way: the role of Julius's small music (a term that refers to something inaudible, whilst also suggesting the existence of a sound microcosm that can be discovered when listening closely) is to orchestrate the dynamics of space, modulating the distances and the intervals of the exploration of the artwork. It's through this alternating between sound and silence that the rhythm develops – the pauses having a syntagmatic effect, creating a transition between the senses, insofar as they produce shifts in perception and attention, sometimes accompanied by shifts of the body itself.

If the music defines a plastic space, the measure of this space can only be supplied by the act of listening; unlike the instantaneous aspect of vision, it is in fact a metric defined each time by the distance that is established between the body, the sound sources and their resonances. That is why, in Julius's work, the distinction between the verticality of the gallery walls and the horizontal aspect of the installation is associated with the opposition between passivity and participation: whereas artworks in two dimensions – as he points out – “allow a certain degree of passivity”, installations invite on the other hand to involve oneself in an “understanding process that demands time”, and in which the spectator “must be ready to participate”.

According to Jean-Luc Nancy, sound has the capability to prevail over form, to enlarge it, to give it “breadth, width and a vibration or undulation that drawing just begins to approach”. In Julius's career, initially devoted to photography, the discovery of sound's capability of altering images intervened – like a real epiphany linked to the perception of movement in an image's lines due to sound: “all of a sudden”, he reminds us, “the small curves started to move up and down. They started to dance!” The work in question was *Deichlinie* (1979), an installation in which the juxtaposition of photography and sound in a space allowed him to explore this sound-image combination for the first time.

From then on, he continued to develop over time an audiovisual paradigm, by making the visual side “dance”: sometimes by letting the sound waves draw shapes in the pigments; at other times, by making the eyelids of spectators vibrate with “music for the eyes”; and more often, in a less literal manner, in the multiple enunciations of its language. Nevertheless, even though Julius's work has had a decisive influence on sound practices, it seems difficult to associate a term as specific as “sound art” with an approach that, on the contrary, is interested in dismantling the hierarchies of the senses.

Despite the consistency of his practice's musical aim, Julius's approach remains essentially intermedial. And it is precisely in this organic manner of bringing sound and visual together that he creates one of his distinctive forms: “people should watch and listen to a space,” he observes, “maybe by trying to detect familiarity in something that isn't. Musical forms are well known, as are visual forms like sculpture or painting [...]. It is the combination of forms that are musical and visual at the same time, that creates something new.”

If the ecosystem established by Julius's works appeals to a multiplicity of perceptive zones, is the

Eastern model in itself that invites us to avoid repetition. Once again Roland Barthes is called upon:
“The principle is not to repeat a same substance (flower, colour, etc.), but instead to try and overprint the “features” of different substances (by appealing for example to different senses)”.
That is why, Barthes adds, the pleasure of tea must, for example, “be coupled with the exaltation of the whistling sound of the kettle”. And here we are, back to the art of tea.

Daniele Balit