

move round you, or do you move round the houses? What does making a house mean? To get big (to grow): this is the house. Making a house means taking into account proportion which is part of biological life. He answered with the curve that expands in relation to the spiral — the mythical spatial formula introduced by Einstein into the calculation of probability in spatial physics.

This is an attempt to reconsider the mythical way. And this is how Ernst Cassirer has defined the mythological way of thinking referred to the origins of human thought:

While the myth sets out to include an organically structured totality and to « understand » it with the means of thought, it is in the habit of looking at this totality as the image of the human body and its organization. Often the form of this representation actually has to include the answer to the question on the mythical origins and thus dominates the entire mythical cosmography and cosmology.

The Architect

Mario Merz's greatest wish is to build a Fibonacci house. Such a house would not be constructed by starting from delimiting external numbers — but rather from the space requirements of those who would use it, expressed through the need to eat, sleep, work and, last but not least, the need for company. To satisfy these necessities the earth must be lifted towards the table and the bed. The reason for which the tables must be as large as possible is also represented by Fibonacci's numeric series whose parts — proportioned according to the golden section — connect space from certain points. One person needs one table for himself; two persons have sufficient space in one table, and so do three; but for a group of five people the table suddenly has to be much bigger. The sequel to the numeric series is directed, at big intervals, towards comprehensive facts. The growth symmetry of a leaf — 1.1.2.3... — is proportionate to the growth of the whole tree. Merz says: « In order to grow, a tree first of all needs time. Two trees need the same length of time but more space ».

Merz has also depicted spatial relations in human action in watercolours connected to each other: starting from the centre of the palm of the hand, he drew the five fingers as bundles of rays spreading rapidly into the external space. This is one of the possible ways of representing the growth spiral that develops proportionally from its centre. Merz's application of the first mathematical series in the symbology of spirals and bundles of rays corresponding to vital phenomena, corresponds to the modern theoretic knowledge of nature which resolves space and time in correlations of pure numbers.

Included among Paul Klee's manuscripts — under the heading « Progressions » — are numerous drawings of constructions in conformity with his maxim of 1924: « From the model image to the primitive image ». Klee says:

... Even the most destitute mind can grasp that the apparent possibility of calculating the relations between different parts and in respect to the totality corresponds to the most occult numeric relations which reside in other artificial and natural organisms. It is equally clear that these numbers have nothing cold about them; they breathe life.

Merz's explanatory installations objectify these indications by Klee, which are bio-logical and make it possible to perceive the proportions of change in existing space. Of these installations only the records, the igloos, the drawings and the paintings remain. Merz considers this disappearance at another level: « The world is a continuum of things and phenomena whose structure appears and disappears ». This is where the axiomatic beauty of his works springs from.

Merz has devoted himself to the theme of tables as the basis of a house ever since his stay in Berlin, in 1972. At the Akademie der Künste in Berlin and at the John Weber Gallery in New York, in 1973, he showed low rectangular tables on the basis of a spiral adapted to the shape of the table and of the room. In the exhibition prior to his departure from Berlin, at the Haus am Lützowplatz in 1974, Merz carried out the addition of rooms that were too small and separated into one large connected room. In the initial problem of not being able to exhibit plastic objects or large paintings in the separate rooms of that old private house, Merz perceived the possibility of showing how the habitation should expand if a large company of 55 persons wished to gather round a table. At the end of a flight of three rooms a little igloo, covered in bits of glass, was constructed; from its centre exploded a triangular table which grew at intervals and reached the room at the opposite end. Seen from the broad end of the table, the little glass igloo looked like a space capable of expanding in contrast with the house. The design drawing of the exhibition showed the potential further development of this installation in the overall space.

Merz believes that the table is the plain and simple portrait of human needs and relations. It brings the earth within reach for eating, drinking and working. The bed, too, is similar. These are anthropological, ethnographic representations, in that « since I am a social being, the table must have sufficiently large measurements for my company ». The most recent formulation of this idea is represented in his paintings of tables. On the huge canvas, 20 m. long and 6 m. high, painted in a farmhouse in Lombardy, the tables are in a proliferation on an imaginary, expanding spiral. The proliferation is related to the perspective of centralized rays, open in the lower part of the painting. This method reverses the vanishing point of the perspective from the centre and opens up the perspective towards the limits of the image. Moving in front of the painting, one gets the impression that the receding lines of the perspective of each table meet in the position of the person looking at them.

Used in a non-orthodox way, the historical media of art make the relations between different realities visual, and visible. Mario Merz shrinks from the idea of reforming the details of the existing social system. Like Beuys, he tends to think in terms of overall dimensions and to take into consideration man's potential in its entirety and of the whole of mankind. Both Merz and Beuys impregnate with materialism and socialism the neo-Platonic notion of drawing which throughout the Renaissance was

understood to mean the ideal image and spiritual sum of empirical experiences. This humanism considers the whole world with its components of political, industrial and scientific power. In Merz's piece written in 1970 in New York, we read:

Genesis: Original space was not saturated with science / Abstract space is not saturated with science / The space we live in is saturated with science.

Utopia / Remove the space we live in from the saturation of science / Talk about space and the quality of future space.

So Merz decided to be an architect and to build his own house, to fit his own reality. The house must fit into reality. The artist Merz contents himself with defining that reality of the house as necessary now. Its necessity today does not need to be proved — for it is in practice. The poetry of art has to be practically concrete in order to enable us to think, imagine and conceive the condition in which one lives and does not die during life.

Marlis Grüterich

Translation: Rodney Stringer

Bill Beckley

by Barbara Radice

« The death of Satan was a tragedy for the imagination. A capital negation destroyed him in his tenement and, with him, many blue phenomena ».

Wallace Stevens

In Beckley's words, the problem since 1968 was in these terms: « Everybody has been washed clean of content, so now it's time to ask: what happens after the bath? ».

The bath had begun with Frank Stella. People were washed clean not only of the passions of abstract expressionism, but also of the tradition of all European geometric painting. « The European geometric painters really strive for what I call relational painting. The basis of their whole idea is balance. You do something in one corner and you balance it with something in the other corner. Now the "new painting" is being characterized as symmetrical... but we use symmetry in a different way. It's non-relational ». And to quote Judd: « All that art (European) is based on systems built beforehand, a priori systems; they express a certain type of thinking and logic... » (1). With Frank Stella the work is almost completely conceptualized before it is done; one-shot decision is taken before starting symmetry and all the rest follows through. His painting refers to the surface, not only physically but primarily inasmuch as it seeks to abolish any reference to anything but what you see.

After Stella others went ahead in different ways. But in all minimal art a single decision is made beforehand, after which everything goes ahead along fixed tracks, with no adjustments based on taste or chance, until the idea is carried out to its logical conclusion.

This was the structure of a certain period. It is not true, of course, that Frank Stella's painting or minimal art lacked content. Nothing is without content. What was washed away in the bath mentioned by Bill Beckley is the direct reference to intuitive connotations, the reflection of an attitude of

mind and soul that cannot be pinned down to a numerical equation; an allusion that reaches beyond the work but upon which the work depends and in this dependence describes itself. Minimalism had played a decisive role in re-establishing the importance of formal structures, but what happened was that after the bath people almost automatically got dressed again. Landscape and the figure were both reintroduced as content with Land and Body art, though only indirectly and unintentionally. In fact, it was not the works themselves as conceived by the artists that raised the issue again, but rather, the misunderstanding caused by the problem of documentation.

Beckley, «the artists were still convinced that they were objectively dealing with their medium (land, body), when they were really working with photographs and writing». Indeed they maintained that the documentation of the work was a secondary aspect, whereas this turned out — at least in practical terms — not to be true at all. The Land artists' works are not the holes in the desert (Heizer), but the photos, projects and diagrams without which, as far as almost everybody else was concerned, the works would have existed only virtually. The sheer scale of certain pieces prevented them from being seen and made known in any other way than through the medium of photography. As Beckley bluntly comments «Heizer might just as well have carved the holes in his icecream, for the scale, when documented, is no larger than an 8 by 10 photograph».

However, this misunderstanding was to prove very fruitful. On the one hand the conceptualists, in upholding that art is the idea (the hole), confined themselves to saying so, without thereby managing to make matters clearer. The dichotomy hole documentation of the hole becomes: idea of the hole I-tell-you-about-it. In both cases what is seen continues to be regarded as secondary, whereas in actual fact it is the work. And yet Judd, in 1964, wrote: «You can think about it for ever, in all sorts of versions, but it's nothing until it is made visible» (2).

So the misunderstanding had to be cleared up in some other way and in fact, according to Beckley, it was inevitable that artists would again consciously use content and realise — the minimal lesson was unforgettable — that a structure was needed to support it, so as to avoid getting bogged down again in the dilemmas of action painting.

It was finally recognized that the hole is the content and that its documentation and description is the work. It was only a step from this to the writing of stories, and in fact it was precisely by writing that Beckley succeeded in clarifying the points that were still obscure, of which structure was not the least important. While the sense of what he wanted to communicate grew clearer as the formal problems were gradually dealt with, it finally became obvious that there could be no possibility of a structure established beforehand — as it had been in Minimal art — and that content itself, each time, had to suggest the structure of the piece, or rather, to create its own structural combinations and to materia-

lize by means of a sign-system which might be linguistic or visual.

While searching for clues, for the time being Beckley got round the visual obstacle by writing stories and accompanying them with photos. These images are not exactly illustrations. They don't simply back up the story, but often hint at what might be the content round which the story unfolds, or else at its context. The first story that Beckley recognizes as having an appropriate structure is *The Origin of And*. This is so clearly connected that it looks almost like a lesson in strategy, a systematic treatise on technical expedients, if it were not for the context of the story — obviously and deliberately off-hand — which seems to diminish its importance. For the first time the concept of «chance» also comes into the picture. The idea of multiplicity and seriality, whose origin is described (here, too), the reference to minimalism is clear, is not seen as the consequence of a precise historical-technological or historical-artistic situation, but is instead associated with an improbable accident, with something unforeseeable. Beckley seems less concerned with the causal logic of facts than with the poetic suggestion, the mysterious connection and the constant sliding into doubt.

Another work, which is almost a profession of artistic belief, is *De Kooning*. The story alludes to De Kooning's impatience with formal problems. It stresses the fact that in the 'fifties there were already two streams of abstract expressionism, one of which was more structured; that Beckley personally preferred the latter, and yet... once the furniture, decorations and ornaments have been got out of the way, the story and the image focus on a red stove glowing right in the foreground, with a chair next to it that seems to invite shivering wayfarers to come in and get warm. Here again the references are plain. While the importance of the formal lesson and the riddance of all superfluous sentimental fringes is reiterated, Beckley nevertheless restates that this need not necessarily imply leaving out the stove, which indeed remains the fulcrum of the story.

The first work in which the structure is entrusted to its visual articulation is *Miss Muffet*. The point of departure is the old English nursery-rhyme which tells the story of little Miss Muffet who is sitting quietly «eating her curds and whey» but is frightened away by the arrival of a spider. The first three photos (all of Miss Muffet seated) are placed at a distance of 1 from each other. Next comes the photo of the spider, again at a distance of 1 from the first three, and lastly, three photos of Miss Muffet, placed at 2 4 and 8 measures away from the previous one, respectively. The piece is almost a parody of minimal structure, from which it escapes only on account of content, the spider, which is also the one that determines the serial progression.

If content is what gives the work its structure, it becomes indispensable, in order to talk of structure, to talk about content and the way it is articulated.

The content of a work is never the theme, nor is it, in Beckley's case, the story, but rather, a *Weltanschauung*

generally corresponding to the conceptual structures of an epoch. Apropos this subject (see *Data 16/17, Story Art*). I mentioned that in trying to understand the history of contemporary art I had recently got more help from the history of science than from the history of art, and that via these readings I had grown convinced, to my considerable surprise, that art and science, each on its proper plane, whilst not speaking the same language, shared the same attitudes and preoccupations. With the formulation of the theory of relativity and subsequently with quantum physics, the concepts of space, time and matter completely changed and even the soundness of the concept of causality is now being seriously doubted. Only recently, however, have the implications of these new formulations started to become part of our way of thinking. Getting deeper into the heart of matter means proceeding towards the indistinct. So from the huge variety of living beings one arrives at the DNA, the fundamental biological invariant. Thus at the sub-atomic level objective facts cannot be said to exist, and we are left with statistical data, mere possibilities. Deprived of their consistency objects are called processes, and since a continuous description is no longer possible, the very basis of the principle of cause and effect falls apart. All this does not solely involve an acknowledgement of new discoveries but chiefly means a re-formulation of one's view on the world and a restructuring of relations and connections. The work done by Beckley and others of his generation can be easily referred to this changed vision of the world. It broadcasts the cognizance of a universe no longer nicely laid out into different fixed parts, but fluid and mutable; a world where what we used to call white is white still, but could also be black, or maybe green. It depends. One gets the impression that the data provided are provisional reference-points set forth more as dispositional factors than as objective realities.

Take, for example, the work with the turtle and the rabbit.

The turtle is slow and even if «slow is sure», the rabbit runs fast and ought to win the race. In the parallel succession of the photographs, the turtle is in fact left behind, but only within the framing of the photograph (because it is always printed progressively further behind on the photographic paper). The photo with the turtle, however, in the succession, is always moved ahead of the one above it with the hare, so that the two are always nose to nose. Which wins in the end? The rabbit or the turtle? Do they both win or does neither of them win? Perhaps it is not a matter of winning at all. Perhaps every thing has a logic of its own which, incompatible though it may be with another, is not in itself less real and autonomous.

In *Paris Bistrot* (which should be seen in colour), the writing on the sign has a vague pentagonal form, but the reflection of the neon on the wet asphalt of the pavement spreads like a patch of oil into a thousand different colours; and again, the shape of the photo in which the reflection is inscribed is octagonal. The white rectangle in which the octagon is inscribed becomes a square, because it «eats» a bit of black

out of the rectangle above. At times Beckley can be exasperating. In *Car, Window: Fly*, the two photographs of the windows which at first sight seem to be perfectly symmetrical (superimposable), are actually not so because one is open and one is closed. In fact, on the white rectangle near the open window, there is a fly. Very logical! Has the window been left open to let the fly out, or will the fly come in through the open window? Leaving that rectangle white too? These are disquieting questions precisely because they want no answer. In this case too the fly, which represents « chance », or in any case the unexpected, while the car is the context, is what determines the structure of the work. Likewise, in the piece with the broom and the dirt, *Broom*, it is the dust which together determines the apparent symmetry of the work, causing the broom to move from one side to the other, and, at the same time, with its presence denies it.

In some pieces content is organized almost exclusively through colour. In the one with the faucets, a detail of which is reproduced on the cover, the background of the left photo is red (hot water), that of the right hand photo is blue (cold water), and that of the picture with water in the middle is yellow. Warm water? But red and blue make violet, not yellow, don't they??? These pieces are in general the ones with the most direct impact, and also the most elegant, with such dazzling colours (CIBA processing), that at times they shine with their own light. One such work, not shown here, is again in three pieces, with a red, blue and yellow ground, having a rose stem, a violet stem and a stream of falling sugar respectively, with a reference to the popular rhyme « roses are red, violets are blue, sugar is sweet and so are you ». Where the sweetness is incongruously yellow and the « you » on the other hand turns green (blue+yellow) because it is almost a pun.

Although Beckley seems lately to have moved more towards almost exclusively visual pieces, he has not stopped writing stories. Writing almost seems to help him to sort out his ideas — and we have seen how at the beginning everything in fact got started this way.

Beckley's stories have always had a mysterious, unlikely and evasive side to them, but just recently they seem to have advanced further in this direction. His latest manner is, if possible, still more ambiguous; by which I mean that all relationships are systematically kept loose, that they have less cohesion, almost as though they had turned from liquid to gas. The stories have a feeling of wholeness about them, but within the whole the bits and pieces are arranged and broken up again in endless overlapping formations, like crazy soap bubbles or the fragments of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope. The latest stories are puzzles that cannot be solved, for they are already stated as such within their structure. This is not to say that they constitute a closed reality. Rather, by making themselves out to be one of the infinite possibilities, they continually refer to alternative realities. As I was saying earlier, this is an exasperating

aspect of Beckley's work, which keeps on slipping away, refuses to be referred to any logic of before or after, and confines itself to supposing a series of possibilities one of which, perhaps, may ultimately come into effect. What's more, he even says that it doesn't matter which.

Indeed the end is of such small importance that it is always suggested right the start, as a possibility. The story does not really end a tall, for the simple reason that it has not yet begun. Beckley's stories are all hypotheses. The initial hint that the ending may be a melancholy or a sad or a surprise one is, in effect, a joke played on structure itself; a trick that refers to story's descriptive content, a parable of theory, and not to the real story, which does not exist. The facts succeed one another in a series of incongruous sequences that make some sort of sense only because this incongruity is just what the artist wishes to communicate. Reality is desperately evasive and discontinuous; it slips through your fingers just when you think you've seized it. That is why his work as a whole is a study of nostalgias, one after the other, till the last: « that he should understand » (3).

« I think it's possible for an artist to do the same thing a gynaecologist does everyday, after looking at many vaginas... an evening of candlelight — is it naive to assume that he can become involved with whatever lies beneath a skirt? ». With what lies under the appearances or transparencies of structure?

After Stella and the minimalists, Beckley's work takes on a new depth; the structure which each different piece assumes refers neither to a circumscribed and balanced universe (like the « relational » European abstract art that Stella was alluding to) nor to a conceptual decision made beforehand and subsequently visualized, as in the case of Stella and all minimal art. Though varying from work to work, it always has the constant of asymmetry and incongruity. All Beckley's work resembles an array of precasts, and so in a way, the structure systematizes the a-causal. The apparent symmetry acquires a sense derived from asymmetry and not vice versa. At times, form appears symmetric but is not, because of content, or content seems to suggest a symmetry which is however denied by form. The whole of the new structure is based on this play of relationships and overlappings of form and content, between the form of the photographic paper and the descriptive context. The tension raised by this ambiguity is the balance or the non-balance, of the work almost a challenge to any rigid or definitive classification or statement. In the world of the fixed stars the discontinuous lies in ambush at all sides, not as a rule (it would be the same than stating something definite), but as an ever changing term, a dispositional absolute field that cannot be named.

Barbara Radice

Notes:

(1) « Questions to Stella and Judd » by Bruce Glazer. *Minimal Art, a critical anthology*, Dutton and Co., N.Y. 1968.

(2) *Ibidem*.

(3) Wallace Stevens, *Esthétique du Mal, The Palm at the End of the Mind*, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1972.

Charlemagne Palestine

interview by Tommaso Trini

My tone chemistry years

Yes, I did receive training from a music school, but I didn't enjoy it. I found that I needed much time to think on my own, to re-evaluate, so I was expelled and from then on, I spent most of my time around visual artists. I found that I had to stop even my hands, what you were taught to do with the hands became a detrement. And it was hard for me to learn how not to play in a classical fashion. Now, with my piano pieces, I hardly move my hands horizontally, but the changes that are going on vertically are more complex than in any classical piano work, though horizontally I sometimes never move from a certain small area. That's something you're never taught to do. In classical music you're constantly thinking in a linear, horizontal fashion.

I find that in past music, they dealt with linearity and context and different exploitations of elements, but never went within the sound. I take one element as far as it can go. I've been doing pieces for ten years, that just used the same element, and put it in a million different contexts, a million different energies, constantly exploiting what is inside it.

I was already involved in « multimedia » in the middle sixties. I was interested in electronic music, lights, films, etc. but I found that what they were doing then, was more like a hodge-podge, ... like a patch-work collage, than a well conceived work. I take each element and make it very unified to my conception, whether it be books, sounds, my body, my videotapes, my performances, my perceptions... If I do experiments, it's private. Rather than a musician I consider myself a sound-artist, because I use sound in all kind of manifestations, whether in terms of time, energy, or visual raw material. I don't want to be classified in a way that if tomorrow I come up with a work for a volcano... I can't do it because that's not music. Whatever it is, I'm still going to do it. People find themselves more times fighting the context than doing the work. But I try to make my context very vague so that no matter what I come up with, it's in the context of what I do. That's the important thing... Maybe, after we're all dead, next century, they'll decide what we did and classify it. I leave it for them. It will be their business...

The way it started, is that I saw that the works of the European school, and John Cage, were dealing too much with context and cultural-social elements. Instead I felt almost like a chemist... Nobody seemed to know what a sound would do if it were left alone. So I began to re-evaluate what certain elements would do if you mixed them together... Well, does it create a solid, a liquid, a transparent thing, a translucent thing? So that's how I first began. I thought: I'm not going to make any music, because there are two thousand years of music, and that's enough. I'll just take the sounds, put them together and see what they want to do them-