

Paola Pivi Innumerable

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SHARE, BUT IT'S NOT FAIR is a pretty strange title for an exhibition that puts on show four hundred red and yellow cushions hung from the ceiling, twenty-four bear skins which form a loop in space, more than one million white pearls which spring forth from a painting, nine fountains of colored liquids, innumerable threads of multicolored ribbons photographed, a multitude of miniature vases and chairs transformed into lamps, a print on canvas showing an airplane flying upside-down and transporting a community of individuals busy in their day-to-day activities.

At first sight, the works express nothing but the power and simplicity of forms, the diversity and generosity of colors and the subtlety of the ordering of objects in space. The first perception that predominates in the exhibition SHARE, BUT IT'S NOT FAIR is thus one of visual and aesthetic jubilation.

A specialist of contemporary art, accustomed to cultivating a necessary critical distance from works of art and often demanding from them a form that is, at a minimum, serious and conceptual, could very well misinterpret Paola Pivi's oeuvre in reducing it to a simple strategy of aesthetic seduction.

Yet let us say it right away: the critical dimension of Paola Pivi's works passes through this necessary recognition of the pleasure of viewing. Aesthetic jubilation is at the heart of Paola Pivi's process of creation and subsequent exhibition of works. Whoever seeks to deny or to minimize this experience would miss an important and decisive dimension in the critical reading of Paola Pivi's works. In effect, for the artist, the pleasure of viewing is never a trick for it is that which allows for the visitor to engage in a profoundly subversive approach to the works.

The artist conceives of visual constructions which exemplify the modalities in the enunciation of the subject from within the apparatuses of power. SHARE, BUT IT'S NOT FAIR is thus an exhibition where the jubilatory experience of vision sets in motion a vertiginous swing towards the fantastic by which are activated contradictory relations of scales and numbers, of unexpected confusions of spaces and situations. This seesaw in fact authorizes the return of the repressed, which is to say the consideration of a new, critical look at what makes up our reality, our symbolization of the living.

The stakes are therefore to analyze how Paola Pivi generates visual apparatuses that bring out these jubilatory passages from reality to the fantastic, and then from the fantasy to the real. An important analytical entry to these "seesaws" is the visual strategy of the number: in all of Paola Pivi's works, a unit comes to be added on to another, forming a pair, an ensemble, a group, a collectivity, a mass.... In fact, the

aesthetic experience becomes a veritable experience of the living: autonomy, individuation, massification, a collective experience of sharing — all of these are paths laid out to engage the visitor in a critical reading of the visual apparatuses.

SHARE, BUT IT'S NOT FAIR stretches out over the six storeys of the Rockbund Art Museum. The architecture of the structure, with its vertical elevation offers the artist the complete scope to display on each floor a different installation and thus carry the visitor away in an aesthetic jubilation of numbers, repetition, multicolored swirls, and the inversion of scale.

On the second floor of the museum, four hundred thin, long cushions in elongated forms are forming yellow and red pairs. Hung from the ceiling by invisible threads, they appear to float above the heads of visitors. The impression is that of a density in the collective space but without any heaviness, accentuating the sensation of floating and of movement. In this installation of four hundred cushions, it is the One that prevails: a duo of yellow and red colors form a unit, just as a group of four hundred objects make up a colored unity of vibration and movement. But in the apparatus of Paola Pivi, the unit has nothing to do with massification. On the contrary, the artist visualizes the One by means of the multitude and the innumerable whereby the movement is set off but also whereby the assemblage handles a breach, a gap. Paola Pivi's œuvre questions the One as a fixed and authoritarian block, demonstrating how much, given that a system of thought and action conceives of the One by means of massification, there is looming danger. Paola Pivi's installation resonates with the brilliant observation of the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy who, on the subject of the representation of the body, asserts thus:

Let's start there: what isn't body is mass, or substance in the sense of mass, without extension, without exposition, a point (...) Of the body, there's always a lot. There's always a crowd of bodies; there's never a mass of bodies. Where there's a mass of bodies, there's no more body, and where there's a mass of bodies, there's a mass grave. And this is concentration. (1)

Whether it is a question of four hundred cushions or a duo of zebras, it does therefore seem that Paola Pivi's œuvre revisits the monistic thought that one finds in Western and Eastern philosophies. In the 18th century, the thinker Baruch Spinoza, in opposition to Platonic and Cartesian dualisms, proposed to represent the world as a unique totality whose infinite substance has an infinite number of attributes. In the 20th century, Gilles Deleuze extended the One to multiplicities, asserting a plane of immanence where the entire One is transformed into a permanent extension of other multiplicities, into lines of flight, to mutations, however incongruous, paradoxical, anomalous they may be. Likewise, Paola Pivi's œuvre resonates with Eastern modes of spiritualities such as Buddhism, where the one does not efface the multiplicity, or even Daoism where the world consists of an organic unity where everything is in everything, everything interacts with everything, and everything is the cause and effect of all.

When visitors reach the third floor, having walked around a white partition wall that blocks the entrance to the hall, they will see exhibited a perfect loop of twenty-four fake bear hides in brown, white, and black, overlapping one other, covering the walls and the ceiling. From a distance, the visitor can observe what appears to be a

strange and absurd general act of mating: one single animal, the bear, multiplied by twenty-four hides in different colors, seems to reproduce itself in an endless loop. The scene is all the more peculiar in that the loop of copulation gets under way from what could very well be a hunting trophy: the trapper must have preserved the heads of the bears to show off their large open snouts in a last cry of power and pleasure (jouissance). The visitor equally has the possibility to experience the "melting pot " by stretching out on a bench that cuts across the installation in the middle and partaking in the visual experience of the amazing loop.

Entitled *What goes Round – art comes round*, the work functions as a vast allegorical hijacking of the globalized world of art and the economy where all that aspires to multiplicity, to difference, finds itself in fact reduced to an absurd and alienating loop of repetitive identity. The absurdity of the situation uncovers gaps in meaning within the visual experience. The wording of the title "goes/comes round" holds contradictory meanings: going/coming round means not being able to do anything, but going/coming round is also doing something conventional, respectable, and productive. Going/coming round is to repeat unproductive acts but it is also about doing a loop on oneself to find oneself at the same point. In other words, the work aims at globalized identity as the menace of alienation and which creates an annihilation of differences. *What goes round - art comes round* brings to the fore a fantastical and unreal universe founded on the absurd. In the manner of Samuel Beckett's theater, Paola Pivi builds a visual chamber (huis clos) where the restricted space gives a spatial image of the narrowing of existence, since, by their circular displacement in an enclosed space, the bear hides, despite the voraciousness of their faces, end up displaying their dwindling vital forces, and thus their weakening. The closed chamber produced by

Paola therefore plays on the paradoxical forces between exhaustion and the power to act. This fantastical dimension obviously and permanently resonates with the processes of subjectification and socialization.

As visitors to the Rockbund Art Museum continue on to the other side of the wall that supports the installation with the bears, they will discover a large painting hung on the wall, from which more than one million of fake white pearls surge forth: Thank you ocean. The dimensions of what we could call "a painting of pearls" are 230 by 232 cm, with a thickness of about 25 cm. One sole color — white — covers up the totality of the surface in the manner of a sea of crystallized or glazed paint. The power of the absurd is truly at work in this painting: the paint is made of a non-pigment, pearl, and of a non-

color, white; the usual flat and smooth monochrome paint is transformed here into a dense and three-dimensional mass of white pellets. The impression of visual lightness of pearls is at variance with the reality of the weight of the painting, at some 600 kg. With Paola Pivi, the absurd is not insignificant. The absurd is a visual strategy that constructs the critical dimension of the image. The void of the color white, the artifice, and the weight of the pearls act as a mirror to our lives where we seek at any price to give weight and meaning to the order of things.

The core of the exhibition is located on the fourth and fifth storey of the Rockbund Art Museum, with the installation *It's a Cocktail Party*. Nine minimalist steel vats are extended by steel tubes which reach a height of five meters only to bend and then pour out in the tanks nine powerful jets of different liquids: water, red wine, orange juice, black

ink, glycerin, mint syrup, coffee, almond syrup, and cosmetic lotion. The power of the falling liquids crashing into the steel vats generates very impressive visual and acoustic effects: the fluids are transformed into a genuine monochrome flux that shares the ecstatic experience of the pleasure of color. At first sight, the installation can look minimalist from the fact of the steel structures, but the coldness of these minimalist modules is immediately countervailed by the colors, smells, and sounds that emanate from the installation. Each module is visually and spatially distinct from the other, but at the same time the nine modules unite to visualize notions of mixity, interbreeding, mutation, and sharing.

It's a cocktail party is a major work by Paola Pivi for she brings about the masterly collusion between painting, performance, installation, and sculpture, but also because she brilliantly puts into conflict extremely contradictory and paradoxical strata of signification in order to generate an extraordinary opening of the real.

In his essay, "Elements for a Pictorial Semiology," (2) Louis Marin proposes to consider visual works as a totality constituted of units linked and joined between themselves to form a "meaningful ensemble". He therefore considers painting to be a "large pictorial syntagme" and calls the syntagmatic units that constitute it "figures." (3)

If Louis Marin was very precise in choosing the term "syntagme," he seems to have done so instead and in the place of the term "composition," which is to say, the opposite of a closed structure in which the organization of units aims at displaying a formal homogeneity and linear narration, at identifying an immutable meaning and an artistic style. In effect, if the syntagme is an ensemble

of units (unités), these units are separable or capable of a free association, in contrast to inseparable and permanent units. In fact, for Louis Marin, painting is indeed a constructed structure, but it is also an open area insofar as they are the passages,

ruptures, opacities between the units which constitute and makes this ensemble hold together.

The œuvre of Paola Pivi extends such an understanding of the pictorial act beyond its ontological definition of the flat and colored surface. In effect, composition is abandoned in favor of the act of repetition of a sculptural module of nine units repeated in the exhibition space. The colors are not absorbed into a harmonious composition but they are juxtaposed with one another, with force and radiance, in nine monochromes. On the other hand, Paola Pivi brings forth a radical displacement of the heroic gesture of the artist-painter towards a performative flux of fountains of steel powered by electric motors. The machine seems to have replaced the human hand to produce the figure and the movement, but the result remains ever so bodily and profoundly jubilatory.

Inevitably, the installation *It's a cocktail party* reminds one of Bacchus, the famous character in Roman mythology — the god of wine, of drunkenness, of excess, and of nature. Nevertheless, the bacchanale that Paola Pivi offers us has nothing to do with chaotic debauchery — visually, it is extremely constructed in its relationship to space and to the spectator. Thus the nine fountains of steel are erected vertically in order to generate force in the flow of colored liquids, dividing up the space in nine unitary and repetitive modules to insert a spatial, temporal, visual, acoustic and olfactory relation to the experience of the work. *It's a cocktail party* pushes to the highest degree of efficiency Paola Pivi's visual obsession to stand constantly on the

tightwire between control and non-control in the process of producing the image. The nine units of steel are identical and repeated, but at the same time, they are distinguished radically from one another by the colored and olfactory force, different each and every one. They contain liquids but they are also sometimes incapable of bringing the gush of fluids under control — fluids which spatter the exhibition space, and thus also the visitor.

Between repetition and difference, *It's a cocktail party* brilliantly revisits the observation of Gilles Deleuze's philosophy, according to which "a figure is reproduced, while the concept remains absolutely identical.... However, this is not how artists proceed in reality. They do not juxtapose instances of the figure, but rather each time combine an element of an instance with another element of a following instance. They introduce a disequilibrium into the dynamic process of construction, an instability, dissymmetry or gap of some kind which disappears only in the overall effect." (4)

SHARE, BUT IT'S NOT FAIR resembles a vast, utopian paradox: we all share something but we always fight one another to be able to share. It's a novel contradiction which Paola Pivi invites us to confront ourselves with — all the way to the street. Indeed, a print on canvas extends 126 meters long on Huqiu Road to display a drawing conceived by Paola Pivi and realized by Dylan Horrocks: an airplane flies upside-down, in spite of everything, to shelter a multitude of individuals who are captured in their day-to-day

activities: laundry, prayer, arguments, love, play, family gatherings, sport, and so forth. Pivi and Horrocks have painted a world made of differences and necessary contradictions, a world where individuals sometimes fight

for truth and reason, or simply to savor life. The work is very much distant from pompous theories on globalization. Nevertheless, it is a powerful, critical allegory of our topsy-turvy world, one that is placed in absurd situations which drive beings to gather, to make love, to separate, to take care of one another.

SHARE, BUT IT'S NOT FAIR shows works where visitors will find themselves displaced in a critical and poetic space where the concept of sharing is manifested in a very powerful, aesthetic — but also very fragile — experience, because visitors experience, at each instant of the visual experience, a point of rupture — where the unimaginable possible really and truly comes to life.

(1) Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) [French original: Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (Paris: Editions Métailié), 110].

(2) Louis Marin, “Éléments pour une sémiologie picturale,” *Études sémiologiques, écritures, peintures* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971), 17–43.

(3) *Ibid.*, 24.

(4) Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 19 [French original: Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968 (1993)), 31].