A Vernacular Of Life

'When you will have made him a body without organs,
then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom.'
Antonin Artaud, in 'Selected Writings' (1976)

Rob Voerman's installations introduce an element of life into the art of assemblage. In the context of the current project especially, this element comes into play as architecture: for what situates Voerman's own technique of assemblage in a waste economy of deficit and lack is its clear reference to precarious architecture.

Yet life comes into play first as survival. What language does survival speak? In order to approach the question, one could draw a connection between two exhibitions held at MoMA in the 1960s: 'The Art of Assemblage' (1961) and Bernard Rudofksy's 'Architecture Without Architects' (1964).

'The Art of Assemblage' included works by Joseph Cornell, Picasso and Marcel Duchamp, among others, and has since been discussed in relation to the concept of bricolage, as defined by Claude Levi-Strauss in his seminal book The Savage Mind. Bricolage describes a whole way of operating in the world through trial and error, creative improvisation and collage – a way of operating that has sensuous knowledge at its centre rather than abstract engineering.

Sensuous knowledge describes a way of thinking in images which in turn are inscribed in the body and the nervous system and thus directly connected to the basic motor functions of life. In the past, however, reference to sensuous knowledge has often led to a nostalgic romanticisation and an essentialisation of fictions of otherness. A case in point is 'Architecture without Architects', which cultivated its own powerful fictions of originality, proposing a vernacular architecture that was 'naturally grown' rather than a planned and engineered act of culture. 'Primitivism' in modern art functioned in a similar way – yielding to expressions of desire for authenticity and truth effects. Against this background, what does it mean then, when Voerman refers to precarious, potentially threatened life?

Two explosive issues are thus at work in the installations and sculptures of Rob Voerman: an 'organic' architecture (which is likely to be equated with the 'natural') and a bricolage which is less romanticised but driven by the need to survive. But are his sculptures saying that only the creativity unleashed by the need to survive produces authentic architecture?

Not quite. Rather, the desire for authenticity itself is broken, interlaced with modernist elements, and folded upon itself, thus giving way to a powerful statement about the contemporary relationship of architecture and desire – an architecture as a self-organised field of conflict created by different vectors of power.

References to the architecture of utopian hippie communities, to slums and the utilitarian design of farm buildings are brought together in a single body of work. Rather than exploiting the nexus between survival and the authentic, the desire for the authentic is estranged from itself. As if in a dream (always bordering on a nightmare), the shapes of these installations appear as products of anonymous, individualised labour. But regardless of who might have built them – whether termites, colonisers, slumdwellers or hippie sects – the relationship of the individual vectors or organs to the overall structures remains unclear, precisely because the structures have an uncontrollable life of their own.

This realisation prompts a moment of shock and curiosity. If we see and feel it, the life in these structures mirrors our very own desire for the authentic. There is a specific sense of the uncanny in Voerman's structures – as if at any moment our own thoughts and desires could come to life and present themselves as the inhabitants of the structure, reminding us that we are on some kind of trip.

This trip becomes time-travel, too, as ancient worlds unfold: Voerman explains how he sees ancient principles in contemporary manifestations. Time itself ceases to be linear and tends to materialise in matter, in bodies that regulate flows, structures that organise relations. History thus becomes architecture in motion: structures of space and the surfacing and resurfacing of active

elements, of organs. Is such a body not the planetary body, with no clear distinction between organic and inorganic life?

I wonder whether it is by chance that the art of bricolage often employs ‘cosmic’ forms. This association is suggested not only by Voerman’s structures, but by his conscious and unconscious references too: by Joseph Cornell’s assembled vitrines as much as the forms of the American hippie collectives.

From a sculptural point of view, what is interesting about this reference is the bodily aspect of planets, real or imagined: the surface and the structure of the sphere. The surfaces of the planetary body are relative: they are states of matter in a constant self-organised movement of materialisation and dematerialisation. An organic crystallisation and the organic life of collective bodies thus blur: the shape of materiality becomes synonymous with the collective unconscious.

Voerman’s works thus remind us that architecture is a relational device, a medium which is not merely shaped by (and does not merely shape) concepts and ideas on a conscious level. Rather, the surface and all the contact zones between several surfaces of inhabited spheres are subject to forces of physical and chemical states just as powerful as those vectors that make up our desires – a flow of life and energy that conditions an unconscious material base. In the end, one thing they might say is this: It is in sensuous knowledge that spiritualism and materialism come together.

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