

## Inside the Black Cube

The Lecture Performance deals with the dialectics of minimalism in the form of the black cube as it manifests in Tony Smith's sculpture *Die* from 1962. We can say that the historic debate around non-representation in 1960s minimal visual arts in America poses the central argument in this research: Robert Morris and others claimed that minimalist sculptures were pure presence and exempt from representation, while namely art critic Michael Fried criticized these works for not being abstract but instead figurative and highly dependent on the interaction with the observer. For us two questions arose out of this argument:

- 1) How can „pure presence“ be experienced in the encounter with an art work and how can this experience be communicated?
- 2) Borrowing a phrase from Didi-Huberman, why and how does the encounter with such a simple form as the cube unsettle our perception?

Our approach was to start from the experience itself, trying to produce it by means of recreating the artwork, in this case, Tony Smith *Die*. To do this might seem naive seen from a strictly analytical perspective. Yet it was not only an attempt in creating an experience but an attempt in understanding better the logic of the cube. By having a black cube built for us, we did not only learn more about its very technical and formal characteristics, we also performed a reenactment of the original production process hoping to come closer to the idea of pure presence. Investigating presence – so the argument – requires a material object that we can then share the space with in order to experience and experiment with its presence. Therefore the cube had to be built to quite literally perform this research with us. Side by side, so to speak.

We then selected aspects we felt were relevant in our individual reaction to the cube, in the actual encounter as well as in the theoretical discourse. Some of these aspects were of associative nature, some technical, some philosophical or spiritual: absence, presence, darkness, the night, death, inside outside, visibility, idea and object. The three terms that we found to be the most relevant in discussing our experience(s) with the cube were “the night” and “presence” and “absence”. Meanwhile we have come to the understanding, that “void” is in fact a much better term than “absence”. I will explain this a bit later.

The night is certainly a figurative notion – the cube as a figuration of the dark night, like a rectangular piece of thick darkness cut out of the night. Tony Smith himself has reported how he was inspired by the experience of a car ride in a perfectly dark night. Yet the notion of night is not only a significance but also refers to an aesthetic strategy of reducing signification in order to let the presence of the object itself come to the fore. Furthermore, the night creates a common space for observers and object, or in other words, it makes observers and objects meet on a common ground and in an uncertain proximity. Speaking of “the night” in this context therefore is not so much aimed at a significance as it tries to name an experience.

We tried to elaborate this point by starting the performance in a darkened space where the presence of the cube could not be visually grasped. In a second step we related the presence of the cube to the story of an anonymous man sitting in a dark cave. The story was told to the audience through an audio drama, while the cube was presented visually in a playful reversal of inner and outer spaces. This optical reversal was relating directly to Tony Smith's own comment, that the cube's color made “the outside look like the inside”.

Absence and presence can be read in a figurative or associative sense as well as in a strictly descriptive sense. We were however much more interested in these terms as descriptions of qualities than as interpretations – after all presence was what the

minimalist operation proclaimed as its goal. Since presence and absence can be seen as two directions on one scale (or as complementaries) we approached this in a dual manner: on the one hand we tried to create experiences of different levels of visual presence/absence in a dramaturgical chronological order, ranging from barely perceptible to a classic exhibition mode. On the other hand we performed two texts of which one was relating very simply and effectively to the material presence of the object in the (exhibition) space. The other was retrospectively questioning the beforehand made experience with the cube by implying – in a rather loose and associative manner – that the presence of such a cube was in fact questionable.

However, we found the notion of absence to be misleading. For us, the interesting characteristic of the cube, was not that it can be described as none present, as absent, but rather that due to the lack of specificity and significance in its appearance, the cube creates the experience of a void, of a concave, as George Didi-Huberman names it. The dialectic we see at play here is therefore not one between presence and absence, but rather between form and content, expansion and concave.

This notion of void or breach is expressed in a very sensual manner in Gregor Schneider's book on his Black Cube Project. The book is basically an account of the failed project of erecting a black cube of 14 meters in height on a central square in a large European city. The pictures are montages, models of how such a square would look with the presence of a black cube in the middle. What the montages show is mainly a black breach, the impression of a black area that is concealing large portions of the space surrounding them, being aggressive and very still almost peaceful at the same time.