

or: how she turns minimalism upside down – from head to feet

Softly crunching and slightly irritating it comes along, Monica Bonvicini's work with the cleverly punned title *Plastered*, which she first installed in 1998 at the venerable Vienna Secession. The floor of the exhibition space was covered with plasterboard, and under it, a layer of styrofoam. The floor literally broke apart beneath the visitors' feet – with each step they fell through with a menacingly soft crackle. And so the viewers became unwitting participants. The minimalist methods of a Michael Asher, with whom Bonvicini studied in 1991/92 at the California Institute of the Arts (Cal Arts), were here transformed. Instead of a static perceptual situation controlled by the artist's experiment, visitors had an unpredictable participatory experience, with a high potential for comedy (at the expense of the participants) that in turn deconstructed the sacred act of viewing art. Gallery-goers were even more violently involved in other works by Bonvicini. In March 1998, *A violent, tropical, cyclonic piece of art having wind speeds of or in excess of 75mph* created a furore. A passageway made of plasterboard walls, open to the ceiling above, its walls smoothly plastered at the edges and painted white, was built into the Galerie Mehdi Chouakri. Visibly mounted on the two side walls at somewhat beneath head level, two extremely powerful wind machines were blowing, and visitors had to walk through between them. Not only was the hurricane that these machines unleashed in the smallest of spaces nearly strong enough to knock a person over, the violent racket that went along with it also demanded considerable powers of passive resistance. The force and aggression were especially well received by critics since they came from a woman artist, therefore seeming to literally overturn all the usual associations of feminine meekness. But what was overlooked by all this significance-bestowing seriousness of interpretation was a certain irony that lay in the artist's clandestine – but all the noisier – art historical references. One of these references, to Michael Asher, will here be treated as exemplary.

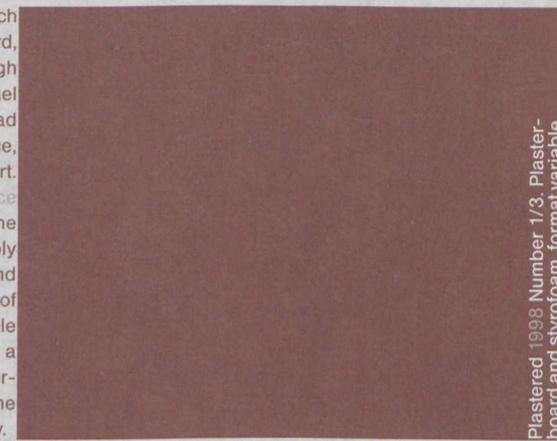
Since 1965, Asher had designed and built several *Air Works* in galleries and museums, among them the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (exhibition *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, 1969). These also involved the construction of spaces made of plasterboard and the use of fans. But here the differences begin and, I think, they prove decisive if we want to understand the nature of Bonvicini's artistic praxis. First, Asher installed the fan in such a way that visitors would not notice it; second, he reduced the airstream to a minimum so that the resulting light draught might also have gone unnoticed. Ideally, the fan was also supposed to operate silently; for technical reasons, this was not yet achieved at the Whitney. Asher himself regarded the work as the most subtle contrast to such expressively solid sculptural pieces as Richard Serra's *House of Cards*.¹ On one hand, therefore, the issue for him was to make an intervention into the space of an art institution, but on the other, this intervention was supposed to remain beneath the visitors' level of awareness and to be as immaterial as possible.

Bonvicini was intensively confronted with Asher's principles and procedures at Cal Arts. Yet the whirlwind she whips up in her wind piece seems to take that approach and consistently turn it into its opposite. However, at least one paradigm of the conceptual approach is carried through, namely the systematic way of proceeding, here is expressed in reversals: from soft to loud, from invisible to not-to-be-overlooked, from immateriality to brutally staged material presence. Yet in its effect, the concept becomes gesture – loud, theatrical, full of itself.

Similar observations can be made when contrasting Bonvicini's *Plastered* with Asher's intervention in Milan's Galleria Toselli in 1973. Asher had all the layers of paint removed from the walls and ceilings of the entire exhibition space, sandblasted it down to the mortar, and showed the cleansed space to the public. Again the differences are significant: with Asher, visitors saw the finished product – an empty, shimmeringly greyish, very still space. Besides the aesthetic element of fascination in the finely-polished bare walls, the work was intended to foster awareness of the conditions of art consumption in the white cube of the gallery through contemplative viewing of the missing white

¹ Michael Asher, *Writings 1973-1983 on Works 1969-1979*, written in collaboration with Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Halifax 1983, p. 8

² Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, in *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 10, 1967, pp. 12-23



Plastered 1998 Number 1/3, Plasterboard and styrofoam, format variable

Work in the exhibition

on the walls. Conversely, Bonvicini appears to allow the procedure, not the result, to exaggerate and coagulate into gesture. In *Plastered*, the exhibition space undergoes a noisy process of metamorphosis, with the visitors functioning as the tool. Asher's situational silencing of the space contrasts with Bonvicini's irritating movement; Asher's stillness with the crackling and cracking of Bonvicini's breaking floor; each step that breaks through disturbs any concentrated perception of the space itself.

Bonvicini's assessment of her year at Cal Arts outlines the conflict. After her painting-centred training at Berlin's Hochschule der Künste, she entered new territory in studying Asher's treatment of space and architecture and encountering his forms of institutional critique. But she also experienced the dogmatic aspect of an approach that had been taught with the same rigour since the 70s. Indeed, she speaks of the 'academy' that aroused her spirit of resistance and her inclination toward polemics. And doesn't her polemical gesture also uncover a gesture that is present in conceptual art, that certain pathos in a rhetoric of the immaterial that, moreover, is cursed by the lack of a sense of humour – the latent Protestantism of this mind art, so to speak?

Bonvicini's installations seem to activate Michael Fried's reproach about minimal art, namely that it is anthropomorphic and theatrical,² and make it keenly and ironically manifest via the gesture's intrusion into the minimalist scenario of object, body, and space. Monica Bonvicini is not concerned with formalistic postulates of purity, or with the application of rigorous post-modern theoretical models to equally rigorous artistic praxis. Nevertheless, Bonvicini's eclectic intelligence has enabled her to absorb the discourses that the art system has incorporated and annexed since the 60s, and to bring them together and transform them through her highly individual code of montage. This involves, on the level of trends and theories, an institutional critique along Asher's lines, the feminist critique of minimal art and architecture, and the artistic categories of context, participation, and appropriation. And so the artist manoeuvres her bumper car of methods, media, and forms through the coordinates of the art system with precisely calculated collisions.