Disregarded, Ordinary, and Suspect

Tony Feher’s three installations in Marfa operated in a double context. On the one hand is the environment created by Donald Judd, the setting formed by his art and his architectural interventions. On the other is the West Texas landscape of Marfa itself, its heat and its light, the constant encroachment of the desert. Feher addressed both of these contexts in his own distinctive vocabulary.

Feher’s work occupied three distinct locations, and operated quite differently in each of them. The Ice Plant was dominated by two large structures constructed of stacked crates; one a huge wedge of interlocking red plastic drink crates, the other a shockier accumulation of silvery-painted wooden crates. At the Arena, an apparently simple installation of suspended soft drink bottles occupied the space, while translucent blue tape over the windows decisively changed the interior light. In an unnamed space, an abandoned stable on the grounds of the Chinati Foundation property, a number of all-but-ephemeral interventions subtly engaged with the ruined building.

As a young man, Feher remembers, he saw an exhibition of plywood work by Judd, which he found “provocative and disturbing.” And in his early years as an artist Feher worked at a gallery in New York, where he personally installed many of Judd’s works. The installation at the Ice Plant offered perhaps the most evident points of comparison with Judd. The red plastic crates, set in a ninety-degree wedge shape, immediately suggested a number of links between the artists, most notably in the use of inconspicuous, yet omnipresent materials to enliven an otherwise ordinary or suspect space.
of industrially produced materials; stacked, repeated elements; and synthetic color, even if, in Fehrer’s case, both the materials and their color were found, rather than fabricated. The distinction between fabricated and pre-existing (“found”) materials is in any case not necessarily of any great significance here, especially since Fehrer makes no specific reference to the origins of his materials that would introduce a quasi-narrative element to the work. In any case, Judd wrote, “Materials are simply materials—formica, aluminum, cold-rolled steel, Planiglas, red and common brass, and so forth. They are specific. If they are used directly, they are more specific.”

El énfasis en un ángulo preciso de 90 grados en la pieza roja es un reflejo de la predilección de Judd por la forma clara, articulada sin artificios, y más específicamente su primera obra tridimensional, los dos paneles pintados de rojo y unidos en ángulo recto por un tubo de metal (Sin título, 1962). Como observó Judd mismo sobre esta obra: “No tiene realmente interior y exterior, sólo el espacio formado por el ángulo y el espacio más allá de éste”. Se podría decir lo mismo con respecto a la construcción de Fehrer, mucho más grande, que divierte el espacio amplio y alto del Ice House sin encerrar nada —excepto a veces algún observador que se deje envolver por el ángulo.

La pila de cajas pintadas es en cierto modo más convencionalmente escultórica, ya que se levanta del piso y culmina...
La instalación planteaba una especie de interacción con la obra de Judd que no se percibía inmediatamente, pero que en última instancia era más útil, que con la instalación del Ice House. La intención de Judd era exhibir sus propias obras en las paredes de la Arena, un proyecto que no se ha realizado todavía. Lo que queda, entonces, es no sólo un espacio liviano y encantador, sino un espacio lleno de potencialidades. Las botellas con que Feher definió el espacio representan por un momento posible, pero de ninguna manera arbitraria. Sin tocar ni las paredes ni el piso, lo expresó máxima del cometido y respetó por el espacio existente. Reconociendo las cualidades del contexto en que trabajabas, Feher creó algo que serviría de complemento al trabajo realizado por Judd en el edificio. Evitando todo lo que pudiera considerarse convencionalmente escultórico, Feher coge aquí botellas, objetos anterioremente específicos, elementos ideográficos repetidos que pueblan el espacio y permiten que se vea de manera diferente, al tiempo que respetan el ambiente creado tan cuidadosamente por Judd.

En el espacio claro y alto de la Arena, el líquido, de un color anaranjado fuerte pero translúcido, tiene una presencia que sobresale con mucho el tamaño relativamente pequeño de cada botella indivisual. "El color es como el material", escribió Feher. "Es de una manera de otra, pero existe con tesón. Su existencia como es el hecho principal, y no lo que pudiera significar, que podría ser nada". El hecho de que al nudo atado al cuello de cada botella la inclinaba un poco en lugar de dejarla vertical, sólo aumentaba su presencia y su verdadera configuración. Como Judd, Feher tiene una conciencia abierta de los valores de las colores, las materias y la translucidez, y le preocupan las relaciones entre los objetos y el espacio que estos ocupan. Ocupada crónicamente al líquido anaranjado, las dos azules que filtra la luz en la Arena enfatiza la cualidad considerada del espacio, intensificando el sentido de que es un espacio contemplativo, separado del mundo exterior. El azul separa definitivamente el espacio interior del paisaje desértico que lo rodea, reafirmando la invitación a la contemplación que caracterizaba ya al recinto. Convierte el espacio interior en espacio desde fuera, luminoso dentro, y el exterior es invisible desde el interior. Destacando así al entorno circundante, las botellas regularmente espacio de definición de la Arena, modesto pero imprescindible.

En este sentido, al igual que sus elementos formales, esta instalación hace
specting the pre-existing context so carefully created by Judd.

In the clear, high space of the Arena, the strong but translucent orange liquid has a presence that far exceeds the relatively small size of each individual bottle. "Color is like material," Judd wrote. "It is one way or another, but it obdurately exists. Its existence as it is is the main fact and not what it might mean, which may be nothing." The fact that the knot laid around the neck of each bottle canted it just off a true vertical only increased its presence and individuality within the grid. Like Judd, Feher is obsessively conscious of the precise values of colors, materials, and translucency. He is equally consumed by the relationships of objects to the space they occupy.

Chromatically opposite to the orange liquid, the blue tape that filters the light in the Arena emphasized the considered quality of the space. It heightened the sense that this is a contemplative space, separated from the world that lies outside its confines. The blue decisively separated the interior space from the desert landscape outside, heightening the invitation to contemplation that the space already possessed. It made the interior space opaque from outside, luminous within, and the exterior invisible from inside. Sealed off in this way from the surrounding environment, the regularly spaced bottles redefined the Arena, modestly but irrevocably.

In this sense as well as in its formal elements, it echoes the installation Feher made at the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul (2003), in which he also used blue tape to filter the light in the basilica, and hung a single bottle of water in the space. While Judd always rejected imitations of overt spirituality in his work, the Arena and the former church share a sense of space as something highly present, meditative but also active and in direct engagement with any who might enter it. As Judd wrote, "Most buildings have no space. Most people are not aware of this absence. They are not bothered by a confusion and a nothingness that is excluded. Of course they don't miss real space and don't desire it. Sometimes when they are traveling they enter a cathedral, recognize space, and thank God instead of the architect... Space is so unknown that the only comparison is to the beliefs of the past." In the abandoned stable in which he also made an installation, Feher was dealing with a totally different kind of space. Almost a ruin, it had never before been used to exhibit art, and it had not been restored or altered by Judd. Barely separated from the outdoors, this stable was well along in the process of returning to the desert. Here Feher made interventions that had none of the classicism of his other work. Here the most ephemeral of materials were put into play, creating a series of almost evanescent tableaux that were unmistakably art, yet also seemed on the point of falling apart or fading away, as they will, in fact, no doubt eventually do. A few bottles partly filled with water hung from the roof, evoking the more formal installation at the Arena, even as great tangles of blue and red plastic filament opposed any regularity. Wild plants grew just outside the unglazed windows and open doors, nacida que la única comparación es con las creencias del pasado." En el establo abandonado en que también hizo una instalación, Feher debía trazar en un espacio totalmente distinto. Como una ruina, el lugar nunca había sido utilizado para excluir obras de arte y no había sido restaurado ni modificado por Judd. Estaba situado en el desierto, y su deterioro pronto lo acabaría por convertir en un pie de leña. Aquí Feher hizo instalaciones que se tiniecen rodeada del clasicismo de sus otras obras. Aquí utilizó los materiales más elígeras, creando una serie de tableaux casi evanescentes que eran indiscutiblemente arte, pero al mismo tiempo parecían a punto de desmoronarse, como sucedería indudablemente con el transcurso del tiempo. Unas plantas crecían confusamente frente a las ventanas y aberturas, recordando la instalación más formal en el Arena.
ways. A pile of glitter on the floor was already beginning to drift and scatter. Outside, yellow plastic shopping bags fluttered around the building. This was a kind of installation that had virtually nothing in common with Judd’s precision and strongly defined sense of form. What was merely hinted at elsewhere—in the crude construction of the silver crates, or in the imperfect verticals of the bottles in the Arena—is here made explicit. In the end, Fehér shows himself resistant to the perfection of fabrication. In the stable, that resistance manifests itself in an overt attraction to entropy, a subject of no interest at all to Judd.

The group of work in the stable did, however, make a direct connection between the space of art making and the unrelenting desert environment that surrounds everything in Marfa. Rather than separating from it, in this case, Fehér’s work here accepted the earth and the landscape, and seemed ready to surrender to it. But not quite. Fehér’s work pushes back as well as surrenders. I think of Wallace Stevens’s poem, “Anecdote of the Jar” (1923) although its wilderness is in Tennessee rather than Texas.

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.

Stevens understood how a jar, or a hanging bottle, let’s say, can assert itself in space out of proportion to its scale. And so does Fehér. As he said once, “A jar on the end of a rope is as good as it gets.”

And there is one element of the installation that does touch on one aspect of Judd’s work, despite its apparent contradiction of most of Judd’s principles. That is its collection of interior and exterior space. I quoted Judd earlier as saying of his two wooden panels joined at a right angle by a piece of piping, “There is scarcely an inside and an outside.” This was a theme that he never ceased to develop in his later work, continuing to explore the possibilities of making objects that formed a unified whole, without privileging exterior over interior or vice versa. Fehér’s use of the ruined state of the stable, with its gaping holes open to the outside, or to the inside, suggest a comparable

Pose un frasco en Tennessee
Yredondea, encima de un cerro.
Hizo que el bosque desalojado
Rodeara aquel cerro.

Ellos que llegaron de lejos
Se instalaron, sin ser silvestres.

Stevens comprende cómo un frasco, una botella calucrgente, ¿digamos?, puede imponerse incluso dentro de un espacio mucho más grande. Y Fehér también. Como dice una vez: “Un frasco al final de una soga, no hay nadie mejor.”

Y hay un elemento de la instalación que guarda relación con un aspecto en particular de la obra de Judd, a pesar de que aparentemente contradice la mayoría de los principios de Judd. Se trataba de su combinación de los espacios interior y exterior. Arriba cité a Judd, hablando de su obra en que dos paneles de madera se hallan unidos en ángulo recto por un tubo: “No hay realmente interior y exterior.” Era éste un tema que nunca cesó de desarrollar en su obra posterior, pues continuó explorando las posibilidades de crear objetos que formaban un conjun-
to unificado, sin dar supremacía ni al ex-
terior ni al interior. Eso que hace Fehér de la condición deriva de estables, con sus agujeros que conectan el interior con el exterior, implica un deseo semejante
desire to deny the conventional distinction between interior and exterior. Fehér's work here is of course not similar to Judd's in any formal sense, but there is nonetheless this persistent echo. 

If Fehér's installations do not take "dominion everywhere" like Stevens's jar, they do insist on their presence far more than might at first be apparent. As Fehér has said, "My art may appear fragile but it holds on. It's the triumph of the meek." If the desert seems about to reclaim the stable and all its contents, it is nevertheless also true that Fehér's work inside and around the building begins to recon-textualize even the wild landscape that surrounds it. And his choice of phrase cannot help but resonate with Judd's own desire that his buildings at Marfa be "meek and bold" together.3

And perhaps I could end with a few more of Judd's words, written in 1964 about Roy Lichtenstein's work, yet still relevant, I think, for Fehér as well: "A disregarded, ordinary, and suspect part of life has been made into art, supposedly one of the extraordinary parts of life. This questions both judgments, that of the

ordinaryness of many things and that of the extraordinariness of art."4

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