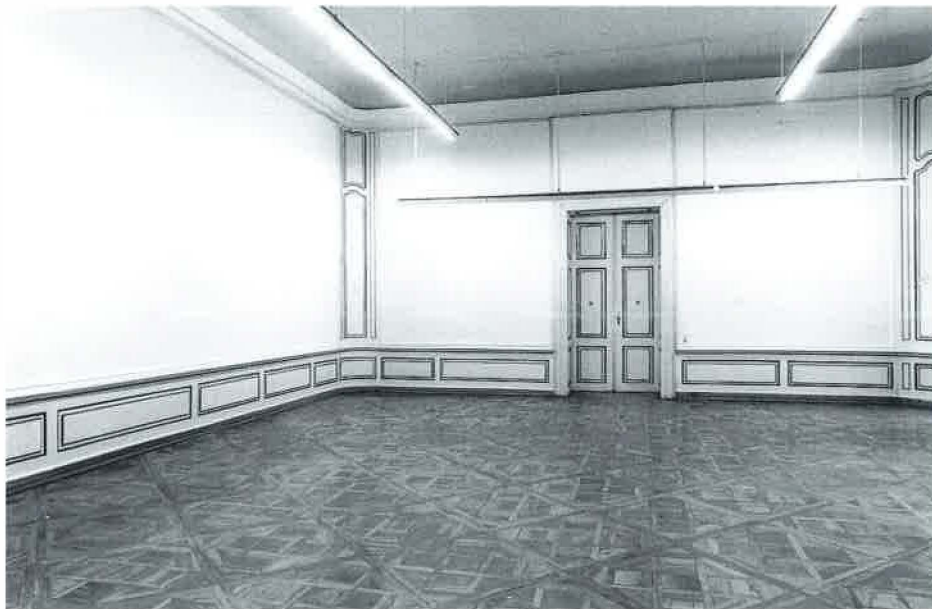


The Trouble We Take for Something That Cannot Even Be Seen

Jan Avgikos

Silent. Dark and vacant. Belonging to another century. A curiosity. Maybe so, but how empty can an interior ever be, even as we enter it and see--what? Apparently nothing? The installation of Rudolf Stingel and Felix Gonzalez-Torres plays in deference to the extravagance of the Palais Herberstein. Don't attitudes and aspirations remain extant through the device of art and architecture, through style and ornamentation? Isn't any construction of space evidence of the plethora of human relations that were at one time transmuted into material form, which informed and were, in turn, informed by interiors that reflected the life that glossed its chambers and passed through its corridors. That which reflects.

Doesn't it also absorb, and radiate in perpetuity? Every touch that once made contact with these surfaces, every nuance of gesture that once found shelter in these galleries, every eye that once traced the filigree of the decorative relief--are those bodies not yet partially present, furnishing this place with a haunting half-life; this place, still animate with the inaudible hum of all the voices and movements ever known to it. And to that infinitesimally expiring and recumbent residue of humanity now comes the luster of our own voices and bodies, which will remain long after we have gone, committed to enter the legion layered and labyrinthine memories possessed by this castle, much as dust continually enters and settles into



permanent residency within its myriad unseen cracks. What party would it be were we all, we its one-time tenants, to materialize at once into the fullness of flesh and blood and conversation to share our observations and secrets across the centuries.

It was a bit too fictional, the idea of a grand costume ball, but she could easily turn it around. Do we imagine space as empty, or as full? That, it would seem, was the investigation proposed by Stingel's carpet and Gonzalez-Torres' curtains. Certainly I might formulate the proposition in terms less fanciful that a party whose guests are earthbound for one night and represent, in ensemble, three centuries in noisy, simultaneous communion. It was a fleeting image that gathered in the ambient darkness of the installation, a momentary projection that filled seeming emptiness. If not the disparate voices of that improbable crew, then whose echo in these galleries where sight and sound are muffled, where



histories of the past and present are spliced together in implausible union? Voices that bounce from the opulence of the Baroque to the kitsch of a couple of plastic beaded curtains and wall-to-wall carpeting question what, exactly, is on display.



Voices that are brought to life by expectations imported into the aesthetic situation, by the moments and memories encountered in light of that experience and in spite of the inordinate darkness through which we must move. Expectations and memories cruise these empty galleries. Empty? Searching, recording, responding, interpreting. Hardly empty at all, given the presence of two contemporary interlopers; the carpeting and curtains, self-consciously installed so as to mark the threshold and the ground of our experience within the context of art.

In a recent and rare interview, Balthus commented on the extraordinary craftsmanship of a small building located at the rear of his property, an insignificant structure akin to a shed or garage. "The trouble they took for something that could

not even be seen," he remarked. "That is what has been lost. It was lost when workers began selling their time. Or as they say in America, when time became money." The words had stuck in her mind. The comparison was inevitable. The extravagance and splendor of the Baroque. In contrast, the relative aesthetic impoverishment of the Contemporary. No craftsmanship, no talent, no hand, no impressive display. Nothing unique or memorable or virtuous or worthy of record could be claimed as attributes of these mass-produced commodities which, due to nominal designation but through no other factor save for a system of distribution and display, were now afforded the status of art. The carpet and curtains pale in comparison to the assertiveness of the Baroque. In contrast to the aggressively historical and ornamental nature of the interiors, they intentionally recede, holding our attention as nothing more than framing devices. But exactly what, the voices demand to know, is being framed. Have we come to revel in the Baroque or, perhaps, to dwell on a distinction articulated between an efficient economy of means versus willful extravagance. Flipping through the wellthumbed pages of history, the opposition has appeared quite often: the Apollonian and the Dionysian; the Classical and the Anti-Classical; the Modern and the Post-Modern; with the pendulum swing from restraint and reductivism, to "everything at once," and back again, philosophies of art rise and fall. The carpeting and curtains, despite their underwhelming presence on the sidelines, bridle the undulating rhythms and run-away energies of the Baroque and temper us from plunging into its pleasures. No, no touristic appreciation for a long-lost, glorious past has won our attendance, nor

does idle speculation about the fashionable lives and intrigues once dramatized by these splendid surroundings suffice to define our engagement. Those fantasies, after all, might well be symptomatic of a reification of the social order, and more particularly, of class structure, wherein we cast ourselves in the role of the peasants who storm the palace after the revolution and dress up in the emperor's clothes to



dispel the specter of dysostopia. Might we then say, in the wake of this spawned fantasy, whether labor intensive or mass-produced, that one form of tyranny has been substituted for another; whether through property, or labor, or even information, that class structures are indelibly inscribed and perpetually re-enacted; and, whether fully acknowledging it or not, that by virtue of its systems of distribution, display, and consumption, art

is complicit in the imprisoning cycles of late capitalism. In this light, the carpeting and curtains don't seem at all remote from the political economies imbedded in the Baroque.

Whether we opt for a romantic meditation on the disjunction of past and present histories, or a political interpretative structure, the question of what, exactly, is on display has yet to be fully addressed.



The "objecthood" (to borrow Michael Fried's term and introduce its associations with theatricality and subjectivity) of the carpeting and curtains and, additionally, the interiors themselves, remain almost obdurately in place as framing devices, showcasing the space, and returning us to the idea of whether we imagine it as empty, or full, but always in reference to the function of the frame. What is on display, the voices counter, but the concept

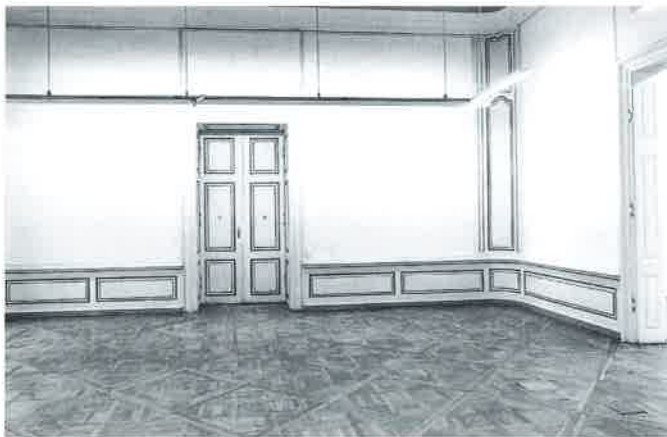
of art itself. She begins to think again about memory, and the imagination, but now in connection to structuring the context of art and to manipulating a series of relations to produce the fullness of meaning. How ironic, even humorous, that the "frame" itself came into focus, but one highly fetishized and ornamented. She could picture it, fuzzy and soft, like the plush pile of the carpeting, and decorated with little plastic beads, like the hanging curtains, all set into motion in a Baroque-styled pattern, like the interiors that framed the space through which she walked, a space now amply attended to by her imagination. Empty or full? Yes or no? She took the initiative to fill it in whatever manner might appeal.

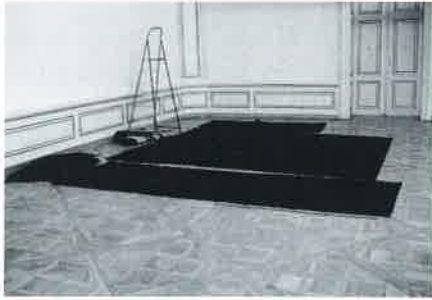
Rarely do we compose critical texts or write histories as though they were fiction. Yet, how heavily we rely upon the imagination in order to perceive the world and to select from the many potential realities available to us, an image of the present that will sustain concepts of reason, rationality, and truth. Its artistic merit aside, insofar as it pertains to the analytical and philosophical, fiction constitutes a transgression. She was entering the ideological space of art as concept, thinking about transgression, and remembering something that Felix had once said about making "Conceptual Art in drag." Much in the work of both Stingel and Gonzalez-Torres prompts reflection on transgressing conventional aesthetic standards, and Balthus' remark, again, came to mind. "They took the trouble for something that could not even be seen." No need for nostalgia, she thought, for in a far more literal respect we, too, take the trouble for something that cannot be seen. In his readymades, Duchamp concretely privileged the conceptual over the visual, as did artists of '60s and early '70s, whose

works were discussed under the polemic rubric of "dematerialization"; and at present, the supposed oppositon of the conceptual and visual is back on the table for discussion. Without doubt, the visual, in all its Modernist connotations with quality, craftsmanship, and uniqueness, is downplayed in Stingel's carpeting and Gonzalez-Torres' curtains, both of which are similar if not identical to those on "display" and procurable in any number of retail stores through America and Europe. While not fully disengaged from concepts of authenticity and originality-- it's still a "Stingel" carpet, still a "Gonzalez-Torres" curtain--a fruitful ambiguity is introduced wherin we acknowledge the functional relations between objects and their status as art, as arbitrarily assigned and maintained by recognition of their existence within an art context.

Some would have it that we look straight through the surrogate object in order to see the concept of art. This idea, resonate now

with investigations and rhetoric of past decades, constitutes perhaps too great a transgression, for it fails to account for the physicality of art; for the body's desire, as an object, to define itself in relation to other objects, to other bodies. As much as Stingel's carpeting and Gonzalez-Torres' curtain seem forever to be sliding back into a framing position and to allude to every circumstance other than their own visual properties, we are literally in touch with these objects. In installation at the Neue Galerie, visual encounter with the work must be followed by physical engagement. We must grasp the curtain's beaded strands, penetrating its surface with a hand, a shoulder, a hip, a thigh, little crystal-like beads tinkling and showering around our flesh. Every prescribed step of the way, we feel the carpeting, its softness, its bounce, its resiliency. Defining as they do, and quite specifically so, the threshold and ground of our experience of art, tactile involvement is prerequisite but occurs so incidentally





the function of the senses had not been displaced to a conceptual dimension. All those moments and memories, the bodies whose presence she somehow felt and imagined as fictions prompted by such lush interiors. She laughed again in recognition that they were her own, and that her body was always already way ahead of her, racing to embrace the glittering tesserae, to feel the carpet's soft pile. Playing catch-up, as only it could, her imagination had translated her experience into memory--memories that seemed so alive as to describe some improbable party where all her selves might meet, if for only one night, to share their secrets in the darkness.

that it may well go undetected. All the while the carpets and curtains are supposedly pointing beyond themselves, they are in secret and sensual correspondence with our body, silently telling it how much it knows, and how slow the imagination is to play catch up to the sophistication of its senses. She laughed, feeling like she had been seduced in her sleep by two lovers at once. Even though the carpet and curtains weren't as wildly or breathtakingly attractive as the palace's interiors, when she had encountered them in other circumstances and, yes, here too, she had always thought them handsome, in a working-class way. She had always liked gathering those beads up in her hands and feeling their weight fall against her body. Every time she saw the field of carpet stretching luxuriously beneath her, she had rushed to sink into it. I don't know that she figured it out at first, or recognized what attraction they held for her. But she now suspected they had individually conspired, however slightly, to prolong the suspense and to reveal only after she had been wooed and won, that