

A Room for Everybody

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Phong Bui's recent series of installations, including the one this catalogue accompanies, all fall within a subtype of Installation Art that we might as well call Painterly Installation (a subtype including work as varied as that of Jessica Stockholder and Matthew Ritchie's). This subtype contrasts with more determinedly sculptural sorts of installation, typically making less use of color, such as Sarah Sze's accumulations of extended objects, cobbled together from the flotsam and jetsam of our packaging/throwaway culture, that pile up in and extend across the room. Bui's works go to the opposite extreme, closely following the walls around the gallery space. They are largely constructed from the traditional painter's means of line and planes of color on flat supports. Further—and quite unusually for the present day—they are traditional in the artistic history on which they draw. The tradition invoked is that of classic early modernism: it was quite reasonable for one critic to describe Bui's 2001 installation at the Sideshow Gallery as “a leap into a lyrical cubistic composition in three dimensions.”¹

[Illustration: Sideshow piece]

But while Bui's interest in and debt to Cubism is easy to see, and in fact important to his project, the mistake in this way of looking at that project is evident: it's part of the point of Cubist painting that one can't even imagine stepping into it. Among the many things that Cubism was, certainly the denial of the window-in-the-wall effect produced by the painted picture since the Renaissance is central (even the sculptures Picasso made around 1914 are at pains to distinguish between their own reality and that of the objects they depict). Cubism emphasized the material existence of the artwork itself, whose autonomy thus figured the claimed autonomy and power of the artist. Phong Bui is a

modern-traditionalist in making a version of this claim today, but his installations are at the same time an undoing of Cubism: paradoxically, by transforming a real three-dimensional space into a Cubist picture he has taken a step out of the tradition to which he is paying homage.

What I mean can be clarified in relation to some words of Fernand Léger, written in 1925, when he was involved with the self-proclaimed post-Cubist movement of Purism. Léger contrasted the art object proper, whose value is “rigorous in itself, made out of concentration and intensity, antidecorative, the opposite of a wall,” with ornamental art, based on the use of color to illuminate “dead surfaces,” for which “*the volumes were provided by the architecture and the people moving around.*”¹ Léger reserved pure abstraction for this decorative use, a situation in which figuration was provided by the actual people who used a room; it represented artistic work of lower intensity than the production of *tableaux*, objects intended as the focus of visual attention, overriding the space in which they were hung as a demonstration of artistic power. This distinction was, of course, contested by modernist abstractionists, who demanded for their paintings the concentration and intensity accorded to representation.

Between 1925 and today, abstraction has flowed over the boundaries of the picture surface, which itself had expanded by the 1950s to huge canvases that nearly cover the wall. Meanwhile it didn't give up its claim to being the center of interest. But when, as in Phong Bui's installations, the work has become one with the wall, while yet being neither decoration nor mural, the nature of the attention it can ask for and receive must change. For one thing, while Bui's work requires close looking to give up its visual riches, that looking requires not only a moving eye but a moving body. This is not only

because the work occupies the whole gallery, but because the questions it tends to raise—
What is a real projection into space and what just a painted illusion? Is that a drawn line
or a shadow? How does the constructed corner relate to the real corner of the room?--
require walking around if they are to be answered. [**Illustration: Partial View #2 (front
gallery)**]

In particular, the centrality of image characteristic of Cubist painting (and of the
watercolor and collage studies that accompany Bui's installation work) disappears, taking
with it the well-known problem of the corners, where the artist's demand for free
constructive activity runs into the set framework of the support. The closest thing to a
tableau in *Hybrid Carnival for St. Exupéry #2* (installed in the Sarah Bowen Gallery in
August 2005), the free-standing wall parked in the center of the gallery, negated its
seeming independence by a variety of devices: the cord that tied its upper-right corner to
a floor-level projection from the wall to the right; the white strip at its lower edge that,
beginning as something between a framing device and a part of the image, tapered to join
up with the base of that right-hand projection; the echo of its colors and shapes provided
by the image on the wall behind it which, along with the light-path running the length of
the gallery floor that anchored it in the space of the whole room, undid the autonomy
claimed by its square shape and strong design. [**Illustration: Partial View #1, Front
gallery**]

Such devices, suggesting if not demanding that we move through the exhibition
space, link Bui's constructions to earlier installations (*avant la lettre*) like El Lissitzky's
Proun Space of 1923 and similar efforts by artists of the de Stijl group. These
installations, along with actual architectural projects, were meant as more than artworks

in the conventional sense. They were intended as models of new possibilities of social life opened up by modernity, and aimed both to teach the visitor walking through them the modes of vision and feeling required for the realization of these possibilities and to exemplify the architecture of the future, in which visual art would acquire the material force of real implements of life. As it turned out, the control over lived space demanded by these artists was rejected, not only by society at large but even by sympathetic art lovers (Piet Mondrian's follower Cesar Domela designed an apartment for himself on de Stijl principles, only to conclude that one "can't really live in a painting"ⁱⁱ). More generally, it would be hard for an artist today to imagine having the power to shape consciousness and social reality that some modernist painters and architects once believed they had.

This is not because art seems less socially relevant than it once did but because it has come to occupy a larger place in society than ever before, deeply involved with the economy and the academy as well as the state, central to middle-class leisure while remaining important as a signifier of elite status. The thousands of artists yearly receiving university degrees can hardly see themselves either as a band of outsiders or as the secret holders of the keys to the future. Art seems more clearly what it has always been: a part of social production, shaped by the social totality within which artists strives to find their places. Installation has come into its own in this situation as a form strikingly responding to present-day conditions of art-loving, in which the solitary aesthete absorbed by the isolated object has been displaced by the crowds in the museum and the stream of visitors flowing through the galleries on a weekend, combining attentiveness, distraction, and a readiness for sociability when acquaintances meet.

In this context, Phong Bui's homage to modernist form is of a piece with his attraction to earlier modes of cultural sociability. In an interview discussing his deep involvement with the monthly publication *The Brooklyn Rail*, he invoked as a model the political and literary milieu of New York in the 1930s and the art community associated with the so-called New York School in the 1950s. "The notion of creating an intellectual community is something that I was always attracted to, and some of the books I read ... gave me a certain nostalgic feeling." Bui takes as basic his belief that "the arts play an important ... role in ... the evolution of a progressive society."ⁱⁱⁱ If this is so, what is more natural than for artists to band together with like-minded others to explore the possible directions in which to develop their work? Bui's nostalgia for the avant-garde culture of the past directly enters his work: the darkest planes in *Hybrid Carnival* are covered with colored dots spelling out the names of artists and writers from the past with whom he feels a kinship along with those of everyone who has contributed to the *Rail*.

But just as today's conditions of artistic production and consumption make it impossible to simply return to early-modernist practices, so the particular kind of cultural community that flourished in the past can inspire but not be realized in the present.

Partisan Review, cited by Bui as an inspiration, sold 3,500 copies in 1941; *The Brooklyn Rail* distributes 15,000 copies of each issue, and has more than that number of daily hits on its web site. Here too we see the increase of scale characteristic of late modernism. Bui speaks of his publication in Beuysian terms as a "social sculpture." Why not use the same terms for his installations? The utilization of elements of a once-hermetic style to make an object-space that both attests to the artist's connection to a gigantic number of people and offers an experience of color, wit, and beauty to any stranger who comes

along demonstrates as well as anything the social meaningfulness the most abstract art can have.

¹ James Kalm, “Phong Bui @ Sideshow Gallery,” *NY Arts*, February 2002, p. 83.

ⁱ Fernand Léger, “The Machine Aesthetic: Geometric Order and Truth,” in *Functions of Painting* (New York: Viking, 1973), pp. 63, 64.

ⁱⁱ Cit. Nancy J. Troy, *The de Stijl Environment* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), p. 164.

ⁱⁱⁱ Do Le Anhdao, “The Brooklyn Rail’s Phong Bui,” *nha*, October 2004, p. 119.