When Attitudes Become Form
Presented by Yves Aupetitallot
16/11/2009 - Auditorium MACBA – 7 pm


Curator: Harald Szeemann

“When Attitudes Become Form (Works, Concepts, Processes, Situations, Information)” appears to lack unity, looks strangely complicated, like a compendium of stories told in the first person singular. We might ask the justifiable question: Are we here concerned with a new edition of Tachisme, with a subjective art, with a reaction against geometry which has reigned supreme in recent years? Certainly, the majority of artists exhibiting here might be seen as part of an artistic development to which the pre-experienced workprocess of Duchamp, the intensity of Pollock’s gesture, and the unity of material, physical exertion and time in the Happenings of the early ‘60s also belong. And yet for some of these
artists the desire to create does not spring from purely visual experiences. It was inevitable that Hippie philosophy, the Rockers, and the use of drugs should eventually affect the position of a younger generation of artists. It is significant that some of the major exhibitors come from the West coast of America, an area particularly open to Eastern influences. Many anti-social ideas, on the one hand the tendency to contemplation, and on the other the celebration of the physical and creative self through action, can be seen at work in this new art. Additional parts of the pattern can be found in Europe: the lack of a real centre has persuaded increasing numbers of artists to remain in their home towns and to work against all the ideas and principles of the society in which they found themselves. Evident at the same time is the desire to break down the ‘triangle in which art operates’ – the studio, gallery, and museum. (...) Noticeable is the absolute freedom in the use of materials, as well as the concern for the physical and chemical properties of the work itself. (...) The major characteristic of today’s art is no longer the articulation of space but of human activity; the activity of the artist has become the dominant theme and content. It is in this way that the title of the present exhibition should be understood (it is a sentence rather than a slogan). Never before has the inner bearing of an artist been turned so directly into a work of art. Naturally enough it has always been the same. Mondrian and Pollock gave form to their inner bearing, but always in terms of the finished product, the autonomous object. The artists represented in this present exhibition are in no way object-makers. On the contrary, they aspire to freedom from the object, and in this way deepen the levels of meaning of the object, reveal the meaning of those levels beyond the object. They want the artistic process itself to remain visible in the end product and in the ‘exhibition’.

Harald Szeemann

“About the exhibition” in the original catalogue of “When Attitudes Become Form”

“Step by step in accord with the artists of his generation [Szeemann] devised new forms of presentation, at the same time expanding the notion of art. The new art of the first twenty years after World War II focused on the question of presenting and experiencing space. One thinks of Pollock, Newman, Kaprow, Serra, Beuys, Nauman, De Maria, Flavin or Judd. The 1969 exhibition When Attitudes Become Form at the Kunsthalle Bern, which laid the ground for Szeemann’s renown as exhibition maker, was so important not least because, unlike other curators, he found a new way to display the new art shown at this exhibition. He endeavoured to reflect the experimental,
gestural attributes of the works in their presentation by getting the artists to work at the exhibition, opening up the display area to the town, and interpreting as a work situation not only the time of setting up the exhibition, but also the exhibition itself. Indeed, some pieces were not installed until after the opening. The works were closely packed. The photos by Balthasar Burkhard and Harry Shunk, taken with Harald Szeemann’s consent and filed in his archives, show that the exhibits were meant to be seen in juxtaposition. The exhibition emphasised the process of its own creation and the temporary nature of the items on show. The museum had been turned into a studio. The sculptures were no longer on white plinths lined up along the walls like beads on a string, but placed confronting each other out in the open, sometimes standing directly on the floor. Harald Szeemann saw the exhibition as a force field and not as a documentary record.”

From the press

“As a matter of fact, the human beings, the visitors to the Kunsthalle Bern are the only works of art to be seen in this exhibition.” Reinhardt Stumm, Basler Nachrichten, 1 April 1969.

Yves Aupetitallot

A historian of modern and contemporary art, curator of exhibitions, art critic, lecturer and author of publications on contemporary art, Yves Aupetitallot has been director of Le Magasin–Centre National d’Art Contemporain de Grenoble since 1996 and has taught at the École des Beaux-Arts de Lyon since 1994. From the mid 1980s to 1990 he directed the Centre d’Art Contemporain in Nevers, the Espace d’Art Contemporain in Saint-Etienne, and the Department of Contemporary Art of the Council of Europe in Antwerp. He conceived and organised the “Projet Unité” in Firminy (1993-94), an exhibition which had considerable impact on the international contemporary art scene. From 2001 to 2006 he worked at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne on the construction of the project for a cantonal museum of modern art. He has organised and edited over a hundred exhibitions and publications. He regularly gives talks in France and abroad (Santiago de Chile, Madrid, Venice being among the most recent). He was made a Knight in the Order of Arts and Letters by Catherine Tasca, Minister of Culture and Communication, on 14 July 2000.

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