

Jan Vercruysse, A Thousand Tombeaux

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In 1987, Jan Vercruysse exhibited the first of the Tombeaux (*Stanza*) which have since constituted the main part of his work. Under this title he has brought together dozens of works of varying appearance—indeed, so diverse are they that one might be tempted to consider this stated community as merely an artificial, theoretically determined collection of disparate works. However, a closer look reveals that this imposing opus is in fact extremely coherent. The work's solidarity cannot be discovered by means of formal analysis, but by considering the place in which they are anchored. While some of the *Tombeaux* are totally closed, opaque, withdrawn, others have numerous openings—but all evidence the same rigorous self-possession and shun anecdote. Some are literally stuck to the wall, others have no support at all—but their chief characteristic is their frontality. They may stand in troubling proximity, or be inaccessible—but their primary dimension is always the elusive distance they institute between themselves and the world. Sometimes their configuration may evoke specific objects (shelves, coat racks, musical instruments), at others they convoke no referent at all—but the *Tombeaux* cannot be reduced to the status of images or simple objects: they are without origin.

Although too short, this descriptive overview clearly indicates that the *Tombeaux* elude any global or particular designation: from one work to the next, each characteristic is countered by its contrary. One cannot either state an explicit and immediate identity which would embrace them all, or state the particular features which might make one of them unique. And yet there definitely is an idea of the *Tombeaux* (as opposed to a genre or a species) which is constituted by and constitutes in equal measure each individual work. This measure is more poetical than aesthetic, more metaphysical than formal. Thus, paradoxically, the *Tombeaux* all belong to a coherent whole while being totally separate and independent from each other.

Abstraction, and in particular its minimalist variety, proved such a success that modernism found it necessary to introduce the notion of autonomy to protect its works from the interference of the environment in which they took place, and to guarantee a permanence which they had lost with the disappearance of illusionism in painting. But autonomy can no more be decreed than it can be built and the architectural model referred to by a number of projects in the sixties turned out to be inapplicable. The abstraction characteristic of minimalist works was bound up

essentially with their objective nature, and in the end led to another form of illusionism, one which was perhaps even more pernicious than what it claimed to transcend. For the problematic which authorizes any form of illusionism, that of the figure against a background, continued to inform the minimalist approach in its attempt to present itself as an alternative to painting and sculpture. Consequently, these 'specific objects' had to annex both real and ideological space by means of monumental arrangements and theoretical protocols.

With the series of *ATOPIES* 1985-1987, Vercruysse's work acquired the means to do without such procedures. The *Atopies* replace the awareness of space with that of non-place, a non-place operative not only in terms of the architectural environment but also with regard to the mediations through which a work is understood—the conceptual and the retinal. They do not use formal tactics to deny the presence of the wall on which they take their place, they simply make it irrelevant, an idle, definitively absent surface. The *Atopies* set themselves apart from the idea that the work need always be an object of contemplation, of identification, of representation. By the radical aporia which they bring forth (a non-place can only manifest itself in a place), they involve their vis-à-vis in the exercise of separation from both topos and logos.

The *Tombeaux* are not dissimilar in this respect, even if they adopt a different approach. One of the most recent exhibitions (Castello di Rivoli contemporary art museum, spring 1992) presented three formally distinctive sets of wind instruments in blue blown glass, works in parallelepiped form made of ceramic and wooden steles. It is unusual for the *Tombeaux* to take the appearance of easily identifiable objects. By being immediately assimilable to figures (unlike most of the other works), they reveal the limits of the ontological nature of the *Tombeaux*, reactivating the question of their non-belonging to space. The relative transparency of their material and their dissemination over the endless walls of the museum, their arrangement in a sequence and the rows of plates (also) in blue glass which acted as counterpoint, all these elements did nothing to obscure the wall but instead reduced it, all the more efficiently, to the role of support. These *Tombeaux* have absolutely no intention of reconstituting music, but they do borrow something of its immanence, a part of its irreducible yet highly concrete abstraction.

For a work to be able to reconcile figure and background in the same moment, it needs not only to be able to do without space, but also for each of its constituent parts to have exactly the same status, so that none of them jut out in any way, appearing as a detail. Once again, these conditions are not of a strictly formal nature: it is the status and not the appearance of the parts which is concerned here. That some of the *Tombeaux* should be constituted by different materials (wood, iron, copper, ceramic, glass, leather), and that their articulation should be so manifest does not call into question the solidarity of the different parts. The question of the whole, of the globality of the work, which in fact corresponds to a totalitarian systematization, is not relevant here. The being here and now of the *Tombeaux*

merges with their being there. Their temporality cannot be displayed in terms of sequence but is unique and indivisible. Whatever their configuration or their position in space, the background of the *Tombeaux* is their own figure.

The rhetorical status particular to the *Tombeaux* means that they avoid metaphor as unequivocally as they do literalness. If there were the slightest chance of their being metaphorical, they would fail to merge figure and background, would stratify and separate in the depth of their opacity or be reduced to the simple illustration of a concept formulated a priori. They would then be a sort of monument, commemorations of loss or grief, simple cenotaphs overlaying the vacuity of being. If they were confined to literality, they would merely be figures without a background, abstract statues, unattached ornaments, objects without use. But the *Tombeaux*, contracted into the dwelling of their own place, are not commemorative in their vocation, nor is their destiny objective. These moments inhabit the out-of-time: they have indeed been raised "in memory of what never existed" as Vercruysse himself put it. They have not been erected in place of something else, they are not by default the substitute for some kind of reality. In other words, they do not represent, and contain nothing other than the principle of their own being-there. They open onto themselves and belong fully to themselves, are deployed in the insistence of the return to the same which effaces any idea of origin. The *Tombeaux* seal the moment where presence and absence coincide. "The figure bears absence and presence, pleasure and displeasure", wrote Pascal. If the content of the *Tombeaux* is their own figure, then that coincidence is unlimited, dominating them totally.

There is another dimension which removes the *Tombeaux* from the domains of metaphor and literalism: their number. An exact count would no doubt stop before the thousand mark, but the repetition of these works within their absolutely separate difference makes such arithmetic pointless. Quantity harbors not ambivalence or reversibility but the infinite multitude of contraries, not differences but the perpetual reiteration of difference. Quantity contains presence and absence in the same moment. As the Romans said of those who died, "Ad plures ire"—they return to the number. These thousand *Tombeaux*, under the reign of number, are the silence of a world that will never exist.

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