

# DOMINIQUE GONZALEZ-FOERSTER

## public-personal space

Hegel and Marx to Benjamin, Heidegger, Levinas, Panofsky, Bazin, Debord, Beaudrillard, Metz, Deleuze, and Nancy, Kopfschmerz,

Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's work crosses the boundary between sculptural and cinematic deconstructionism. This is significant because it widens the recombinant field beyond that of a more exclusively sculptural discourse. She began work as an artist as a maker of short, minimalistic and oneiric films.

One of her best known series of works are her coloured rooms which take minimalism into dimensions that elaborate upon the deconstructive formulae of post-minimalist art of the 1980s and 90s in which the purism of Minimal Art of the 1960s was deliberately 'contaminated' with colour, decoration and content. But because she is a filmmaker G-F seems to be able to go further by intersecting minimalism with a dream-like atmosphere.

Using minimal props such as an unmade bed a chair some photographs on the wall, a video playing on a small monitor Gonzalez-Foerster adds to the oneiric dimension of her room by referring such traces to an absent human presence.

Another component of Gonzalez-Foerster works is situ-

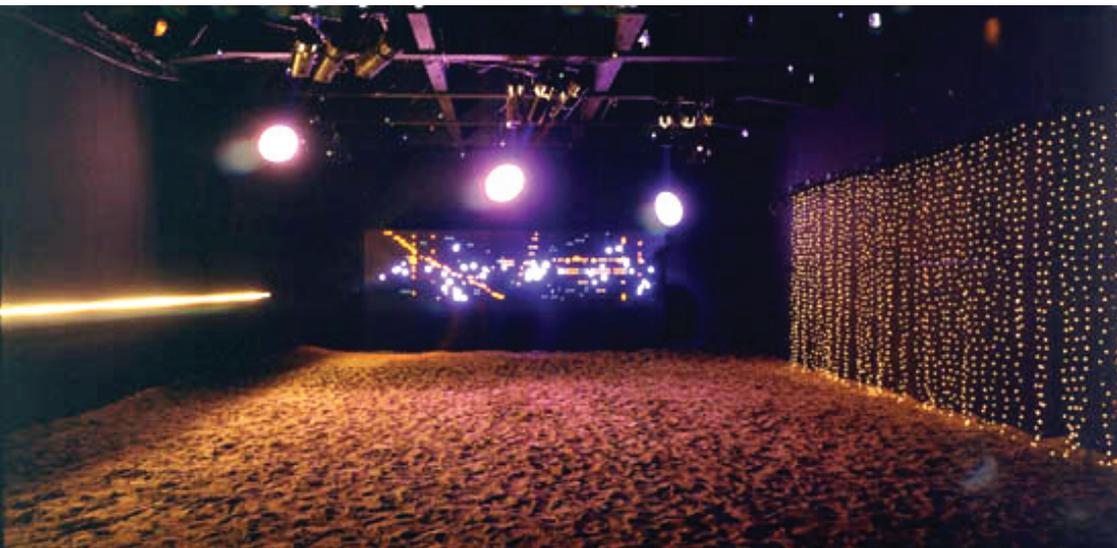




ationist-cinematic inspired interpretation of the strategy of *dérive*. This is evident in the manner in which she uses fragments from her international travels in her work. There appears to be more than touristic bricolage here. In an especially insightful interpretation of this aspect of Gonzalez-Foerster's work Stèphanie Moisdon Trembley notes that when Gonzalez-Foerster uses fragments from her foreign travels she is not 'lovingly contemplating some exotic essence' but is rather:

trying to find how these towns can provide her, quite simply, with a reserve of features which, stored up as part of an invented interplay, enable her to envisage the idea of an analogue system that is entirely separate from hers and ours. What may be aimed for is not other symbols, another metaphysics, another form of wisdom, another quality; rather it is the possibility of a difference, a mutation, a revolution in the property of the sign systems. (Moisdon Trembley 2000: 44)

What is interesting about Moisdon Trembley's interpretation here is its reference to 'mutation' a notion that links Gonzalez-Foerster to what I am referring to here as the recombinant trajectory in contemporary Installationism. Moisdon Trembley's account suggests that Gonzalez-Foerster collects fragments in order to assemble them into something new. Moisdon Trembley's reference, however, to 'a revolution in the property of the sign systems' should not be taken as an expression of the extraordinary newness of Installationism. Moisdon Trembley is actually talking about the strategy of montage which was revolutionary seventy years ago, in 1936, when Walter Benjamin enthused: 'Our taverns and



Cosmodrome

our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second' (Benjamin 1973: §XIII).

For Benjamin the capacity of film to break reality into fragments that could be put back together in any order (montage) was revolutionary. Today it is not so much revolutionary as the established discourse. Accordingly Gonzalez-Foerster's use of filmic fragments in her situational installations cannot be understood as a revolution. What is original about her work is rather the way in which she intersects an awareness of the discourse of film and video art with an awareness of the legacy of deconstructive sculpture.

Take for example her contribution to Documenta 11 (2002) *Park: A Plan for Escape*. Daniel Birnbaum describes this piece as 'an outdoor cinema equipped with exotic props' that is characterized by a Zen-like emptiness and 'exemption from all meaning' (Birnbaum 2003b). One wonders whether the artists is grateful for the advice that her work is meaningless. Birnbaum's comments are ill-considered because they lose the historical thread that holds the heterogeneity of deconstructive art together. *Park: A Plan for Escape* was a discourse of play: an activity that can be traced back to the Surrealists juxtaposition of distant realities or what Simon Starling has referred to as 'interconnecting the previously unconnected'.

One can also refer to this play as allegorical process (Buchloh 1982; Owens 1984); which is to say a process in which fragments collected from disparate sources are emptied of their original meaning by decontextualization and reassem-

bled in a new context in which new meanings can be ascribed to the fragments according to their interrelationship with each other (their textual configuration) and their relationship with their new context. To suggest that her work is exempt from meaning is not only aestheticist in the mode of the nineteenth century romanticist discourse of *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake) it is also denying the viewer any significant role in the work as an intelligent interpreter. If we turn Birnbaum's interpretation upside-down then we can make more sense of G-F's work because we reach a situation in which the viewer acquires a central role as interpreter, which is typically the situation in allegorical constructions that deliberately avoid self-evident meaning.

Birnbaum notes the Zen-like quality of some of G-F's situational concoctions and it certainly the case that her coloured rooms can express an minimalist asceticism that hovers between an abandoned personal space and the seductive strangeness of a dream. But it is also the case that G-F herself does not speak of these installations in terms of any kind of 'exemption from all meaning'. Quite the opposite she speaks of them in terms of 'narrative' when she notes that:

colour is an entry into a narrative; the colour rooms and the clues they usually contain give a certain number of elements to which the viewer adds what she/he needs to comprehend the work, link those various existing elements. It is not quite like reading, although reading is a possible means of completion; rather it is a way to generate a narrative, therefore emphasizing the importance of interpretation. {in Weil, 1992} [emphasis added]

Gonzalez-Foerster also refers to psycho-analysis but as another form of fiction stemming from a peculiarly nineteenth century mix of empiricism and romanticism. Gonzalez-Foerster's rooms evoke an absent self which is entirely fictive. In that sense the absent self is an empty signifier that the viewer can fill. When the viewer enters one of G-F's rooms she or he becomes akin to an actor who can assume the identity of absent inhabitant. Her rooms then are akin to a story in which there is a blank space that the viewer can assume. One thinks here of the strangeness of Paul Pfeiffer's videos of sporting events in which he erases principle props and actors. Placed in such oneiric circumstances we reflect upon our identity as a species of construct woven out of a web of influences most of which have become distant memories.

One thinks here of Gonzalez-Foerster's *Variante de la cure type* (Stedelijk Museum) the title of which is taken from the post-Freudian poststructuralist psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. The installation consists of a bare-boarded room with a simple office chair and a very basic single bed. The blue walls are covered with photographs that evoke the memories of the solitary soul who is the room's inhabitant. And of course we are invited to take on that soul from a position somewhere between snoop and protagonist within Gonzalez-Foerster's fiction machine.

Similarly in her video *Riyo*, 1999, we are placed in a role that could be described as voyeuristic. We eavesdrop on a telephone conversation between an invisible couple. The only images we see are of buildings in Kyoto at sunset on the bank of the Kamo River between Shijo Bridge and Sanjo

Bridge. The urbanity of the city which could easily be represented as alienating is framed as romantic, emotional, and human. The voyeuristic register of this piece is mitigated by its emotional aspect but more than this it is also the case that the fact we cannot see the couple effectively places the spectator(s) into their shoes. Within G-F's constructions we can, like actors, step onto the stage and then step outside ourself into someone else's skin, in our imagination at least.

Perhaps one of her most ambitious constructions is *Cosmodrome*. Gonzalez-Forster has explained that her intention was to replicate son et lumière (sound and light) works shown at exhibitions in the late nineteenth century. Music was supplied via her collaboration with Jay Jay Johanson. The scene is night and the ground is sand and the lights are festive. One wall is covered in glittering light the opposite with a horizon like strip of light. And then there is the wide screen. It is a strange environment, the sand in particular dislocates it from normalcy. This is like no beach I have seen neither is it a desert, so it must be a species of dream. Moïsson Trembley notes that Gonzalez-Foerster's intention was:

to set up a paradoxical, closed and darkened space that nevertheless is open onto infinity; to bring the spectator inside an object that is immediate (the sensation of sand and darkness) and experimental; to play, ultimately, on numerical rhymes (alignments of the floor and screens/walls, of diodes and sound frequencies). The *Cosmodrome* can thus be seen as a kind of black box, quickly becoming a gateway of perception, a materialization of meaning and thought (Le Consortium 2001)

Nineteenth century dioramas recreated ship wrecks and thunderstorms and were only replaced in popularity by the advent of cinema. But *Cosmodrome* brings the sublime into a post-2001 era. *Cosmodrome* is an elaborate environment but the son et lumière aspect has a duration of only nine minutes (perfect for a 'gallery film') meaning that its strangeness is revealed as a loop, as a construction. Speaking about *Cosmodrome* G-F references the film *Rebel without a Cause*, specifically the planetarium sequence in which a professor speaks of the insignificance of human-kind against the backdrop of a vast universe. She also notes that *Cosmodrome* references 2001: A Space Odyssey and Georges Lucas' first film THX 1138, an outstanding science fiction classic, although less widely known than 2001.

Gonzalez-Foerster also inserts a Manga character, Ann Lee, into the mix in a simultaneous installation *Which Architecture for Mars?* at L'Usine, Dijon. This science-fiction cartoon creature addresses spectators from a video screen: 'You will be all sent towards a place without return, it is a journey towards anywhere'. At another point Ann Lee, states: 'You will disappear in your screens'. Gonzalez-Foerster notes that in this case the digitized human seems to warn of the dangers of the expansion of a virtual world on the real world (Le consortium 2001).

Ann Lee keeps cropping up in Gonzalez Foerster's work and has a great deal to do with her fascination with and deconstructive approach to the medium of film. The source of Ann Lee is the project No Ghost, Just has Shell introduced by Pierre Huygue and Philippe Parreno. Huygue and Parreno bought Ann Lee, for 46,000 yen from a Japanese agency

which sells pre-packaged Manga characters. She was inexpensive, having little character development, being principally designed to be a disposable item in a violent scene. But Huygue and Parreno saved Ann Lee from her unenviable fate and allowed her to become a star in their video works and those of their friends. She has now appeared in many European art videos. Gonzalez-Foerster speaks of Ann Lee's role in *Which Architecture for Mars*:

She speaks in her own language (Japanese) and is divided into halves. The live translation (in English) is a clone of herself. Ann Lee has a very contemporary dimension; she is simultaneously divided into halves, she exists in various languages and she adopts a position that is a little bit apocalyptic. {checkW3consortium, ??}

So she is not utopian (modernist) but a 'little bit dystopian' (post-modernist), and crucially she has undergone significant cultural displacement leading to a more adaptive identity. As with other female artists from Cindy Sherman onwards Gonzalez-Foerster appears to put forward the actor as a paradigm for postmodern identity. And from an evolutionary point of view there is certainly an advantage in being a displaced and therefore culturally more adaptive identity.

The last point leads one's thoughts immediately of the effect of cinema on the postmodern psyche. When one is so cinematically saturated that one begins to reference one's world in terms of the films one has seen then one slowly but surely loses one's grip on both reality and identity and has entered into the space Jean Baudrillard has referred to as

the 'hyperreal' and the 'betrayal of reality by the sign'. One has crossed over from linear rationalism into the nonlinear narrative space wherein dream, memory, fact and fiction become confused. This is the potentially dangerous domain of creative process.

On the other hand it is refreshing that Gonzalez-Foerster avoids Baudrillard's somewhat overbearing dystopianism and refers to Ann Lee instead as 'a little bit apocalyptic' (Le Consortium 2001). Which implies that we shouldn't take our dystopia (or creative quasi-psychosis) too seriously.