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John McCracken

A conversation between John Armleder and Daniel Baumann

Daniel Baumann

Daniel Baumann: Andrea Bellini and I were struck by two things. First, the realisation that the "Minimalist" John McCracken is only half or not even the story. He lays claim in particular to a spiritual element, the importance of what he calls the "presence" and reality of extraterrestrial worlds. On the other hand, we understood that this artist has figured in a range of important shows but that there have been very few monographic exhibitions. McCracken is thus known without being known, but neither is he an "artist's artist". What might be the reasons for this? Why does a position, a body of work like his have a harder time breaking through, staking its claim, getting recognised?
John Armleder: I think his œuvre is recognised by lots of people and that in fact he's always been a presence on the art scene.

DB: But most of the time in the context of Minimalism.
JA: He's not the only one in this case; someone like Scott Burton or Larry Bell have been linked to Minimalism. That often happens and there are works that fall in or out of that category. Artists like McCracken come back periodically, a rediscovery every ten years, and it's more or less solid but never complete.

DB: They never reach the position of leader.
JA: No, it's exactly the same thing for artists like Burton or Bell, whose work had to be shown whenever you were talking about Minimalism. Which doesn't mean that people particularly believed in their works in that sense.

DB: They were around without really being discussed.
JA: Exactly, and moreover people didn't think about them through their artwork; rather they saw an example there. So people are always surprised with those artists' output, that beyond the emblematic work there are other developments. In Bell's output the emblematic piece is the glass box with mirrors, in McCracken's it's the *Plank*. It's first of all an icon of that artist, and the way it's treated changes over time. It depends obviously on the users, the viewers.

DB: They are pieces that you can return to more easily, in different contexts.
JA: Take the *Planks*. For a long time people wouldn't accept any *Planks* other than the monochrome ones, in other words, the *Planks* with marbling or coloured in an almost psychedelic way. For them it was unimaginable, such *Planks* didn't represent his work. It seemed like a reading of another artist with respect to McCracken's work. That clearly proves that he is several artists at once, like most artists, moreover.

DB: In terms of what is said, his work has been pigeonholed in Minimalism, by *Artforum*, among other publications, which in the early 1960s was based in San Francisco and Los Angeles. On the other hand, McCracken at the time was already using words like “transcending”, “entityness”, “thingness”, “spiritual essence” and “mental visualization” in talking about his work. The “Minimalist” formal element was his trademark, but that went together with what we might call a “West Coast” attitude. Which meant that his work was harder to place in a history of art dominated by New York and Europe.
JA: I think it really does spring from aWest Coast culture because it has that openness to things other than a formalist Minimalism. There’s the influence of both Robert Irwin and the perception of space that doesn’t spring from optical phenomena but rather points to the spiritual. The first time I met McCracken was in Los Angeles and he wanted to go see the Universal Studios set that he loved. The complete opposite of the European vision of the hardline Minimalist. For him, the “are there UFOs or not” debate didn’t exist, there wasn’t the shadow of a doubt. But there was no mystery either, it was a kind of normality. All the UFO-minded people that I knew in California were like that. No debate, no doubt, rather “So what?”. In John’s work, there is one thing that’s altogether compatible with that, and it’s no accident that in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* there is that monolith, even if it was done independently.

DB: Standing before his work we find ourselves facing very different models of thinking which we suppose are mutually exclusive.
JA: We think that in McCracken’s output, that shouldn’t be the case since there is a very formal side to his work, even formalist, in the European tradition. He uses those forms because they are universal and make it possible to move on to understanding his work from one point or another. For that reason, he’s perfectly capable of producing a *Plank* with spots or lines because that changes absolutely nothing.

DB: In fact his work isn’t Minimalist with a spiritual side; rather, from the 1960s on, it’s both at the same time.
JA: Viewed from a more European mindset, it was a handicap for understanding his work. There wasn’t a single theory with which you could place the work. On the other hand, there was the power of the image, the image of the *Planks*. It was an icon that subverted the other considerations. At the same time, the *Plank* itself had so many formalist issues that you could linger over, including its form, the fact that it was leaning on something, its nature as an object, its weight, texture, but also its finish, the colour, customising automobiles and West Coast culture. You realise that those details aren’t details, they are meaning, sense. Like with the guy who customises his car, each colour has a meaning, there is a reason for choosing this or that colour. Obviously those are effects, but what leads *him* to do it is something else. That is, we have a reductive way of cataloguing the things we see and it’s extremely difficult to envisage something that has a foot in several categories at one and the same time.

DB: ...that are on an equal footing...
JA: ...and indispensable in fact. In McCracken’s work there is a sophistication, not in intellectual or spiritual terms, but in the highly controlled finish, in the polish. And there is a very casual aspect that is very clearly defined by the plank, which is simply posed against the wall.

DB: All that isn’t very authoritarian, unlike Minimalism.

JA: European and East Coast Minimalists are concerned with radicalism, which is always connected with some show of force. The power of McCracken's works taken together is that they are sui generis, they're hard to call into question. They are spot on, they can't go unnoticed because they are so right.

DB: They're obvious and that lends them that beauty they have. At the same time, they give the impression of being detached. Something similar can be seen in your work, also in how it is perceived.
JA: I see what you mean. Because people think that my work is cultivated, in the sense of culture, they connect it with that idea. That's the reason why in Germany, for instance, I was a *Zitatkünstler*. My takes on earlier things couldn't be innocent; they had to be a reading that was referential, critical, militant, etc. Actually, that has never been the case, but I've always accepted that people did that and I've even made it part of the work. I think that a guy like McCracken thinks the same, even though he sometimes doesn't agree.

After a walk, the conversation picks up again.

DB: I've always thought that art is a space for the freedom of thought, for trying things out. Obviously there is, as in everything else, that constant urge to tidy up, to systematise things.
JA: Right, the idea that things ought to be put to use for one thing and not another. Yet there is absolutely nothing that works like that, if you look at nature. Nevertheless, most cultures do not function based on this permeability of one thing with respect to another. The door isn't left open, people prefer to keep the old order.

DB: Leave the door open? That also characterises your work, and it's one of the reasons why people are troubled by it.
JA: The door is not only open, but I myself don't know where it goes. I'd say I'm not interested in that, but if I did know where it was or how to open it, I would never tell people how to do it. I think things are only interesting if you give others the chance to use their ideas. Basically, that co-opts all ideas and it's perhaps the misunderstanding with its clues that people see – because I lay claim to a certain formalism – it's a runway in the end for landing whatever way you want to. When talking about John McCracken, it's the same thing. It's interesting because there's a strong urge, from our culture and our way of seeing things, to want to limit the meaning, to want to say "This is about that and this is about something else". Fundamentally I don't believe in that at all. It's probably for that reason that I write about art under different family names, which clearly allows you to hold different, even contradictory, opinions. That said, intelligence demands – and this is also completely justifiable – that we manage to put things in order. It's necessary. You can't construct an intelligence without those restrictions. Those things are tools and like all tools, you can change them, use them for something else.

DB: Except that art has always wanted to be art.
JA: Not always, but the users have sanctified that belief. Art, moreover, has never wanted anything at all. It's also true that lots of artists, if not the majority, define what they do. I think nowadays we're in an age when there's no mainstream and so it's much harder to challenge the mainstream. Before, being able to challenge the mainstream was dynamic, but we also have a false view of history. After all, most artists, before going off to study under another artist, were doing the same thing as the artist they were going to study under and afterwards tried to do the same thing only

better. It's a standard we can't accept in our philosophy, which is fairly prudish when you come down to it. You would never tell yourself nowadays, I'm going to study under an artist to know how they do it in order to do it better than them, whereas for centuries artists did only that. Go figure. Perhaps they're still doing that, but it's not that you can imagine or express it literally. It's not in McCracken's studio that you're going to learn to do McCrackens better than him. It's a bit of the misunderstanding that occurred with what people took to be the *Zitatkünstler* in Germany, or what was called Appropriation Art elsewhere. Borrowing things directly yielded a discourse, but I don't think it was the fundamental discourse, to tell the truth. It was a discourse that's been applied to what those artists were doing, because mechanically that's how they were working, but I think the intention was far more interesting. In Sherrie Levine's work, if it existed only to prove that it could also be redone differently or no, what's interesting about that? There wasn't even any need to do it, all you had to do was say it. Nevertheless her work is interesting and important, but I don't know exactly why, or in any case not for one single reason. So, the first thing we know is that the artist doesn't exist, it's the work that exists and it isn't made up of itself but rather of its surroundings, and the people making it up, who cannot help but change all the time.

DB: All the better.
JA: Indeed, what would art be good for otherwise?

DB: You might say that art is good for remaining mentally fit. But afterwards, there is form and its presence, the formal aspect of things, which is pleasing and is connected with very different kinds of reflection. It's very clear in McCracken's work.
JA: It's true, formal beauty even stands in the foreground of his art. His work in and of itself sustains the idea of an intrinsic beauty, whether that's the intention or no, and nothing can completely escape the aesthetic view. A work of art that is a failure from start to finish doesn't exist. That's wishful thinking.

DB: But while a position like McCracken's doesn't make demands, it does have a harder time asserting itself, at every level and therefore in terms of the market, discourse, institutions, etc.
JA: The truly powerful thing in the work of artists like McCracken is that the *Plank* is an object that basically makes no sense, so much so that in some way he has done something that is inescapable and which somehow goes completely beyond him. After that, it gets complicated, because if you redo a McCracken, you redo the *Planks*. In my case, everything could have been done by someone else, before or after me, and probably will be done by someone else. I put no faith whatsoever in the unique gesture, and even for artists who have produced an emblematic object, that doesn't mean that before or afterwards or during, someone else wasn't also doing it. In McCracken's case, you might even say that the *Planks* placed against a wall is so emblematic that any *Planks* placed against a wall makes you think of a McCracken, even if it's without the finish that is peculiar to his works. At heart, all these fixed icons are a linguistic necessity for understanding the world. And everyone is right, moreover, nobody is ever wrong in this. You can complicate the discourse, argue about the differences, but that remains incidental. What's more mysterious and what I've still not figured out is that in some cases you get the impression the piece is a successful one and not in others. So one *Plank* might seem to you more successful than another, which doesn't exclude the possibility that five years down the line it might be the opposite.

DB: It is indeed hard to choose one *Planks*, they all seem perfect.

JA: That was certainly striking for the *Planks* with marbling, because people told themselves that it wasn't really that, that he was trying to falsify their perception of them. But the "classic" *Planks*, with it shiny polish, eludes all appropriation. It's not of this world almost. It could well be alien.

After a second walk, the conversation picks up once again.

DB: McCracken is quoted in nearly all the catalogues. I was surprised to discover the funny remarks, a certain humour.
JA: There is humour, I find, but you never know if it's seriously thought out as humour and that is rather disconcerting.

DB: His objects display a trace of that, a kind of cocky pleasure.
JA: They have that dominant side where they can land anywhere, but also where people can just as equally ignore them, imagine that they've been left behind or are in transit.

DB: Right, a *Planks* would be at home even in a gymnasium or a pizzeria. It's very easygoing.
JA: And above all it doesn't come along bearing the world, it's without all the baggage meant to explain things, maintains a certain integrity, stays more or less what it is. Of course it is viewed differently in a museum than in a pizzeria, but that remains more or less the same thing, whereas other objects change if you move them. It's that dominant side, it lands, remains what it is, possesses an integrity that is unassailable, inalienable.

DB: And it is complete unto itself, as if self-sufficient and impermeable. It is joyful, very opaque and impermeable.
JA: It doesn't really reveal itself. It's an object and that's what makes you think of the monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. It's an object whose identity is unknown, you don't know what it is. You're forced to believe that it has meaning and at the same time it signifies nothing.

DB: Maybe that's the "presence" that McCracken talks about, a thing that is there, that is striking, unforgettable and expansive, yet doesn't want to explain itself and remains enigmatic.
JA: Moreover, the *Plank* makes it so that nothing is innocent, nothing escapes that, everything is stamped by it.

DB: It's true, a book on a sofa doesn't leave its stamp on the sofa, but a McCracken plank on the wall leaves its stamp on both the space and the objects there. In an exhibition venue, when there are only *Planks*, sometimes I get the impression they cancel each other out.
JA: There is something incongruous and impossible about the *Plank* alone. Like a materialised ghost.

DB: Like a person at a party who doesn't say a word, who is present and quite comfortable but stands off to the side, without any real connection with the others. That person affects the whole room. Like McCracken's *Plank*, those people remain aliens, even if they are very pretty.
JA: It is strange in the etymological sense of the word.

DB: A *Fremdkörper*, as they say in German, a foreign body, but one that stands at the same time as something welcoming.

JA: That is probably one of art's possible positions. The only recognised, perceptible function that people try to lend art is the decorative one. The rest, the functions that are physical, spiritual, cultural and who knows what are basically only excuses.

DB: There's the problem of illustrating philosophical, social or other ideas, whereas the foreign body is simply present, not the illustration.
JA: McCracken's *Planks* are eminently unillustrative.

DB: They reject all illustration. Their presence is a clear and strong one, asserted and beautiful, except that you don't know what it's good for. This is where the *Plank* goes beyond the Minimalist discourse as well. It's both Minimalist and the opposite.
JA: Exactly, because in the Minimalist discourse there is nothing strange–rather a terrifying aspect.

DB: Which doesn't exist in McCracken's work.
JA: You can clearly see the difference between Richard Serra and the objects he sets up and the objects that McCracken poses. Formally, there are real connections but in reality these bodies of work are opposites. Whereas in Serra's work there is the material which is subjected to changes, rust for example, or torsion or some force, in McCracken's you get the impression that the object isn't of this world, time has no hold on it. Even the melted lead underscores the architectonics of the venues. In McCracken's work, the venue, the space is an additional support. The object enjoys complete independence. Its mass, which lends it its economy and rigidity, vanishes. As a result, it is a universal incident.

DB: In that sense then, it's a liberating work of art.We are facing a combination of very different things yet without creating a discourse, in the service of an object that remains foreign.
JA: Maybe it's for that very reason in fact that it hasn't been co-opted by the art system, because McCracken's work creates a rough patch. Not having a rough patch means there is something that won't gel. It's the super-slick aspect of his works, a kind of quicksilver that is simultaneously conceptual, formal and probably spiritual at heart.

DB: You feel the pull exerted by these objects...
JA: ...because they attract and put up a resistance at one and the same time.

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