

THE SITE OF RUINED INTENTIONS

Les Immatériaux
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
28 March - 15 July, 1985

There is much debate today concerning our post-modern condition. For better or worse the illusion of a single unifying vision of progressive culture has been shattered, and in the wake of this cultural fragmentation there is, as philosopher Jean-François Lyotard said, 'a crisis of legitimation'.

These days there exists both a melancholy surrounding the end of the modern age as well as a feeling of jubilation connected with the appearance of something new. Thus, it can be said that we live today amongst the ruins of the modern present. With the exhibition *'Les Immatériaux'*, conceived as a work of art in itself and as 'a sign that refers to a missing signifier', Jean-François Lyotard attempts to intensify the interrogation and at the same time dramatise the sense of uncertainty of the times.

It is no wonder in such a complex cultural moment that 'Man's anxiety is that he is losing his (so-called) identity as a *human being*'. There are today as many reasons put forward for this decentring of the authority of the (Western, white, male, middle-class) subject as there are warnings about, or analyses of, the effects of this fragmentation. If the modernist-aesthetic, as Frederic Jameson has said, is linked to the 'conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style' then the post-modern (post-structuralist) position explores the notion that 'that kind of individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past; that the old individual or individualist subject is "dead", and that one might even

describe the concept of the unique individual and the theoretical basis of individualism as ideological'.

For Lyotard this weakening in the immediate apprehension of an identity for Man is most clearly visible in the realm of the new technologies of 'computer and electronics technologies' with their new materials, or to be more precise, 'immaterials'. Lyotard suggests that the concept of 'material' is the complement of a subject that masters it in order to attain its own particular ends, in the tradition of modernity of 'becoming the master and the possessor of nature'. However, on greater analysis, objects decompose and make us aware that they can only be objects from a human point of view, that at their structural level they are only a question of complex agglomerates of tiny packets of energy. 'There's no such thing as matter, and the only thing that exists is energy; we no longer have any such thing as materials'. The concept of a stable substance disappears in favour of an *'unstable ensemble of interactions'*.

Thus with 'immaterials' such concepts of Man as author, Man as creator, as well as experience, memory, work, autonomy (or liberty), even 'creation' and, more generally, the radical difference from all that is not Man, are weakened. What is superimposed is the idea of general interaction. Accordingly the exhibition attempts to characterise an

aspect of our contemporary situation associated with the new technological revolution. If the traditional role of the museum has been seen as the presentation of spectacle, claiming legitimisation from clichéd notions of universality in order to justify a thinly disguised concept of (nationalistic) mastery and possession, this exhibition attempts to use the basic presupposition of the theories of communication - *every object is a message*. This leads to five poles: from where, to where, how, by means of what, and concerning what; which allows the 'sites' to be structured in a way that hopefully arouses the visitor's reflection and anxiety about the post-modern condition.

On entering the exhibition the visitor is handed headphones which pick up broadcasts from each of the 'sites' as he moves through them. The broadcasts range from texts by Beckett, Artaud, Proust, Zola to Barthes, Baudrillard, Blanchot to music and various other sound effects. The whole of the top floor of the Pompidou Centre is divided up into 'sites' by a system of grey-metal webbing stretched from floor to ceiling which radiate out from the entrance space in five routes, but which also allow for wanderings in any direction. These 'sites' have titles which range from The Site of the Theatre of the Non-body, The Site of the Second Skin, The Site of the Undiscoverable Surface, The Site of the Unrepresent-



Installation shots. *Les Immatériaux*. Colour slides. Courtesy Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

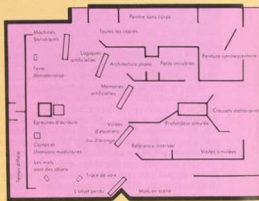


The Site of Possession and Mastery over Nature. Colour slide. Photograph Glyn Banks.

table to The Site of the Pre-cooked or The Site of Simulated Aroma.

An attempt is therefore made to utilise an appropriately fluid and immaterial system for the organisation of space. However, the nature of the Pompidou Centre reads to us, as Baudrillard has pointed out, as a late-modern spectacle in itself, an advertisement for advertising in our consumer society; just as the concepts of 'neutral' grey and fluid space are now encoded as modern style. There is no dialectical opposition between the coding of the exhibition 'sites' and the already codified building. They are, in fact, so in harmony that one must assume it to be deliberate and so for the audience the installation becomes an adventure or (normally anticipated) spectacle which quickly turns to frustration.

This consistency between the installation and its grand site helps to create the overall effect of a trade fair display of the latest in computer-based technology (although there is the constant suspicion that the technology on display is already dated and that already more could have been done). It is again 'Tomorrow's world today', this time given legitimacy by the layering of artistic and literary texts. Thus through the



very careful and somewhat minimal selection of its artistic forefathers, Moholy-Nagy, Takis, Fontana, Morellet, Dan Flavin, Kosuth, Dan Graham, the exhibition quite rightly, although perhaps paradoxically, admits to the fact that the mass media have become the rightful heirs to the activities of the *avant-garde*.

However, through such careful selection a pedigree seems to be established which presents Lyotard here as a neomodernist with almost too much 'faith' in these new technologies. With mass media carrying the mantle of the *avant-garde*, many artists have turned to issues of content, narrative and the persistence of myth in contemporary society; some perhaps as a nostalgia for lost 'origins' but others as a *critique of representation and legitimization*. Far from dramatising our sense of loss, the lack of presence associated with computer technology merely leads to a sense of novelty and boredom, and in concentrating almost solely on these new materials - the 'immaterials' - in an attempt to reveal the 'presence of absence' Lyotard has instead exhibited an absence of presence.

For many, computers are a part of daily life and for them the concept of



Ruins of the Library (1940). Site of the *Labyrinth of Language*. Black and white photograph. National Museum records, London. Photographer unknown.

interaction within the exhibition must have seemed limited to say the least. For others, like myself, who are neither familiar with, nor preoccupied by, new technology, the situation seems to be, as Lyotard himself has said: 'All of us can see that develop-

ment takes place without leading to the realisation of any of these dreams of emancipation. So, today, one no longer feels guilty about being ignorant.'

Art in Ruins

