

**‘The integrity of the whole’: *Atelier Brancusi* (Pompidou Centre, Paris, 2007-2010)**

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In *Theatre and Everyday Life* Alan Read identifies how, ‘[s]tepping outside the specifics of theatre temporarily will allow for a sense of where its boundaries might adjoin other practices’ (68). More and more frequently it is at the sites where performance interfaces with other creative and social actions that we find new modes for practice and analysis.

*Atelier Brancusi*, an exhibition showing at the Pompidou Centre in Paris until early 2010, has relevance not only as a visual arts event but also as a document or map of past performative actions. The exhibition reconstructs the ‘atelier’ or studio of the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi in the square outside the main structure of the gallery. The sculptures within this purpose-built environment are apparently displayed within a context representing that in which they were originally created. As visitors, we are told that what is represented within this space is, according to the information plaques within the exhibition, ‘the very site of creation.’

A site is a location where some activity happens, an area with a distinct purpose and so what is immediately invoked is the previous function of the atelier as a practical place of making (“site,” def. *n.*<sup>2</sup>). The archaeological resonance of a site as a place which contains the remnants of past human occupancy elucidates the reconstructed studio as testament to the past activity it housed.

In his own lifetime, Brancusi, as the exhibition leaflet, written by André Avril, describes, ‘was constantly preoccupied by the relation between his sculptures and the space around them’; he believed that works should not be separated from the environment in which they were produced and sought to maintain this connection.

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Within the reconstructed studio, the 'relation' between objects connotes not only a fascination with spatial associations but also with narration, revealing the ways in which the current arrangement of sculptures is a 'relation', or retelling, of the artist's past actions of making and positioning. By arranging the sculptures within his studio, Brancusi draws attention to the ways in which the space around us is something we ourselves create. As the leaflet says, '[t]he studio was an "intermediate" space which Brancusi mentally constructed surrounding his work.'

In *The Shifting Point: Forty years of theatrical exploration 1946-1987*, theatre practitioner Peter Brook expresses that, '[t]he important thing is not space in theory but space as a tool' (149). When the artist is no longer using the studio to facilitate artistic behaviours a certain functionality is removed. If we adopt Brook's designation of space as 'a tool' in relation to the exhibition *Atelier Brancusi*, the instrumentality of the studio space can be seen to shift so that a function of exhibition becomes primary. The furniture and tools with which Brancusi carved his works appear disused, rendered, by abandonment, as sculptural objects.

Within his studio Brancusi sought a concurrency of action and display, a movement away from disorder and dispersal towards, what the exhibition leaflet calls, 'the integrity of the whole.' In this way, the space 'became in its own right a work itself,' within which collections of objects and perspectives form various additional compositions. In a contradictory sense, while multiplying the possible associations between his works, Brancusi sought to control their trajectory and therefore the possible engagements visitors may have with them. When displayed in this context, the 'contiguity,' to employ a term used in the exhibition information, of the objects and processes of creative production point not only to a desired spatial 'unity' but also invoke proximity and connection across time as we as visitors are asked to engage with

a representation of a past and displaced concept of curation.

The biographical information displayed as part of the exhibition is, of course, a contemporary addition, a signifier that what is present is a reconstruction of a relocated space. The wall plaques divide the story of *Atelier Brancusi* into temporal sections relating the different stages in the life of the studio. The title of one such division is 'l'origine de l'atelier' or 'the origin of the studio.' Since origin connotes not only the beginning of an existence but also the source from which something is derived, this reinforces the notion of attempting to reconstruct a (creative) process from the residual objects and domain ("origin," def. *n.* and *adj.*).

In *Being and Time* Heidegger investigates the realities of 'Being' and asserts that:

If we are to understand the problem of Being, our first philosophical step consists in [...] not 'telling a story' - that is to say, in not defining entities by tracing them back to their origin to some other entities [...] Being, as that which is asked about, must be exhibited in a way of its own. (26)

In seeking to explain and represent Brancusi's designated spatial relations, the exhibition curators 'tell the story' of their construction. If we follow Heidegger's argument, for the studio to become an entity in its own right it must be considered only in its current state of exhibition, not as a document or legacy to past events.

My own experience of visiting this space was heavily affected by the presence of the 'story of the studio.' I was, as Marc Augé describes, reading as opposed to seeing the space (98). To attain a new vision of *Atelier Brancusi*, it seems, we need to look at the space between the sculptures rather than at the words describing their history.

'To look at something closely is to imply a thorough analysis, to take a step back is to get an overview of the infinite positions in between' (Read 163). At *Atelier Brancusi* the visitor is constantly asked to take a step back. We cannot enter the space of the studio; our movement is permitted only along glass passages surrounding the

more central studio-gallery. We are restricted to the boundaries of the space, so that our positioning as visitors imposes a limit on the 'positions in between' that we are able to view; only certain perspectives are authorized. *Atelier Brancusi* raises crucial questions of spatial depiction and the documentation of past moments of performance. In order to develop new modes of critical engagement and analysis, it is the liminal spaces between bodies of work, between performance and other practices, that we need to access. It is here that new perspectives and relations can be effected and probed.

**References**

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