

Space for Experience: On Amelia Bowles' and Nadia Guerroui's *Expanded Impermanence*

Expanded Impermanence is a dialogue between new and recent works by Amelia Bowles and Nadia Guerroui shown in Saturation Point's exhibition space. Although that space may seem sparsely curated, and the works decidedly reductive, the exhibition unfolds its significance slowly. Indeed, the beholder's labour of attention is invited by the artworks on display. Such an invitation is not necessarily an injunction, and such labour need not be a laborious undertaking. Indeed, the exhibition's text references the writings of Gaston Bachelard and, especially, his notion of intimate immensity. Bachelard is an apposite figure here insofar as Bowles' and Guerroui's artworks invite a similar reverie that brings the beholder intimately and closer to their works in all their materiality. And, in permitting that reverie, our attention recognizes the interlacing between space, time, and artwork as crucial to our attentiveness.

Arranged perpendicular to the wall, *Daughters of the Evening* consists of eight panels on the wall. Each panel is upholstered in cotton, with one side painted in a stronger shade of peach pink and the other being pale peach pink. The front edges are almost white and so the beholder sees a conglomerate of alternating lines of white and peach pink. Additional, but not supplemental, to these eight elements is the shadow cast between them, which takes on a subtly peach pink hue; linking each panel; that hue will vary depending on the strength of the daylight from the windows to the right of the work. Because of how the elements constituting this painting is distributed, we cannot stand directly in front and observe only the vertical lines; our lived perspective determines that we will always notice stripes of peach pink, too. And the width of those stripes will vary in thickness according to where we stand.

Hopefully, that is enough of a description to indicate the significance that "the variables of object, light, space, and body"¹ hold for it. Such variables are also pertinent to another of Bowles' inclusions in this exhibition. *Mirage* may, at first, appear a smaller and simpler artwork; a single blue-violet vertical element rather than eight of them. Complications ensue here, too: from a metre or so distance, it is as if there were two shades of blue-violet here upon the frontmost surface instead of a single field of colour. Walking closer, it is evident that we have one canvas atop another, and, shifting to the right and looking from an oblique angle, there is a horizontal pencil line on the edge and minute trace evidence of layers of yellow, orange &

¹ Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2" reprinted in *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: MIT Press, 1994).

brown paint. All this is only possible to notice if we refuse to consider the painting only at a distance. And this is only achievable insofar we are embodied beings sharing a space with the artwork.

As the quotation in the previous paragraph already signposts, we can take these artworks as testifying to the ongoing legacy of Minimalism. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose philosophy underscored corporeality as a vital dimension of phenomenology, was a tremendous influence upon Minimalism in the United States during the 1960s as a whole. That corporeality evinced our experience of art was largely an embodied affair rather than merely a function of vision. Minimalism, generally speaking, sought to endorse and demonstrate Merleau-Ponty's perspective by emphasizing the richness of the beholder's embodiedness in the ongoing experience of art (indeed, the translation in 1962 of his 1945 book *The Phenomenology of Perspective* practically became bedside reading for many a burgeoning Minimalist). Admittedly, not all Minimalists were as enamoured by Merleau-Ponty as Robert Morris was. Donald Judd, for instance, was more intrigued by the real space between non-compositionally arraigned simple elements rather than any phenomenological apperception that the viewer might generate; intrigued by American pragmatist philosophy, Merleau-Ponty barely registered within Judd's cognitive universe.² And, on that score, we might grasp Bowles' horizontally posited series of vertical elements as an extension of Judd's vertically presented horizontal stacked units. Indeed, this contention garners plausibility if we note the similar usage of subtly coloured shadows shared by both Bowles and Judd.

Yet it is important not to construe this kinship in terms of identity; indeed, there is something of a reversal here. Judd avowed that the thought underpinning his works stemmed from painting, even though he did not paint. Bowles' artworks can be apprehended, then, as returning Judd's procedures back to that originary thought of painting. In doing so, any influence from Minimalism in her practice is rerouted via the various explorations of painting that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s within the French art scene. Resisting the School of Paris approach and the dependency upon gestural mark-making, painters such as Simon Hantaï, Daniel Buren, Michel Parmentier, and Christian Bonnefoi carried out a virtually deconstructive operation to

² Yve-Alain Bois has written engagingly on how Judd's artwork engendered phenomenological connotations despite Judd's intentions. See his "The Inflection" reprinted in Annie Ochmanek and Alex Kitnick (eds.), *Donald Judd* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: MIT Press, 2021).

examine painting's "structure."³ One consequence—amid others—was a demonstration of a reserve and withholding proper to painting, so that it would be erroneous to perceive painting's surface as absolute presence, as totally there without remainder. That legacy is extant in Bowles' paintings, whether it be the spacing produced between the canvases of *Daughters of the Evening*, or the relocation of recto and verso in that same work, or the superimposition of one canvas over another there in *Mirage*.

The concern for reserve and spacing is thrown into relief by *Untitled*, which is placed on the floor for the purposes of this exhibition. Freestanding just slightly away from the wall, *Untitled* is resolutely obdurate as regards its material presence. Yet that obduracy does not entail the work lacking ambiguity. On the contrary, it befuddles certainty—is it a painting, a painted sculpture, an object, or even a readymade? The point is not to decide upon a single category, however, but to witness how it shuttles between them. With its somewhat stressed painted surface, a commonality emerges between itself and the immediate environs it resides in, as if it was discovered in the factory and given a new lease of life.

Bowles' interest in phenomenology—inherited, as said, from 1960s Minimalism—is shared by Guerroui, who likewise deploys the beholder's embodiedness as a decisive factor of the artwork's capacity for producing meaning. *Trusted Hands* consists of two rectangular panels of a predominantly white hue. At first glance, perhaps, the panels are identical; but perceptual complications interfere with initial perceptions. Their sanded-back whiteness discloses an under-surface that can either shimmer like copper dust or resemble blue-grey streaks. What chooses between one visual state or the other is the viewer's position vis-à-vis the panels and the way light is reflected. There is often a moment in any engagement with an artwork on display in which the viewer steps closer to analyse how that work produces its effects. Doing so with *Trusted Hands*, however, frustrates that attempt. Moving closer to the panels results in our shadows being cast upon them, and, because of that, the light needed to induce the shimmering is forestalled. It would admittedly be quirky—but hopefully not inapposite—to propose that it is almost as if some kind of Heisenberg uncertainty principle is at work here. We can analyse the surface of the artwork or its effects, but we cannot do both simultaneously.

³ Philip Armstrong and Laura Lisbon offer an exemplary account on the connections and differences between Minimalism and the French scene in their essay "As Painting: Problematics" in Phillip Armstrong, Laura Lisbon and Stephen Melville (eds.), *As Painting: Division and Displacement* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: MIT Press, 2001).

Perhaps one of the easiest to miss works of the show—at least initially—is Guerroui’s *Friction in Plain Sight (London Skyline)*, a square of polyester covering a window, or rather a square pane of glass situated within a large gridded frame of windows. Several of these windows are probably the original distorted glass that obscured exterior views and prevented distractions for those working there, whilst others are plain glass subsequently inserted when whatever need arose. Guerroui’s intervention, perhaps, constitutes the most obviously site-specific intervention; mapped to the specific glass pane, it takes its 1:1 coordinates from the sheer specificity of that location. As its title indicates, looking through it we observe the world outside, sky and buildings. There is a transience here, of course, insofar as the view changes constantly—passing clouds, daylight brightening and dimming, birds flying past. However, we do not simply look *through* this surface; we also look *at* it. Its moiré pattern also possesses its own transience, animated in relation to our physical position, and also changing the view of the outside. Interweaving transparency and opacity, *Friction in Plain Sight (London Skyline)* re-envisages the influential metaphor of the window that Alberti utilized to explain the workings of linear perspective in pictures. And that might suggest that Guerroui’s work exemplifies or displaces a specifically pictorial logic without it being a picture. The Albertian window, though, famously spoke of the *illusionary* depth of a picture upon a materially *flat* surface; yet with the fresco or a flat area as its paradigm, the imagined window it betokens often amounted to site *avoidance* rather than responsiveness. Guerroui therefore reinterprets this Albertian window by emphasizing the specificity of its locale.

One plausible way to specify further what this iteration of Guerroui’s *Friction in Plain Sight* does is to associate it with Marcel Duchamp’s concept of the “infra-thin.” Found amidst his writings and notes, the infra-thin, according to Duchamp, designates the smallest possible interval between two entities (Duchamp’s interest in glass surfaces is perhaps emblematic of this interest, and it is reasonable to comprehend *The Bride Stripped Bare by the Bachelors, even* as an ancestor to Guerroui’s own “delay in glass”). The infra-thin, however, need not be restricted to this particular work by Guerroui. Indeed, the logic of the infra-thin, how it structures a barest and tendentious liminality, underpins all the pieces assembled here in this exhibition, and thereby structures the exhibition itself. Its presence—which is barely the right word, but can be allowed to stand, albeit with qualifications—is quietly detectable in the manner that all the works slowly “flicker” between different phenomenal conditions depending upon where one stands. As said before, the width of peach pink coloured

“bands” in Bowles’ *Daughters of the Evening* vary and change according to our embodied movement in front of the painting. And that experience is true of each artwork in the exhibition, consequently signalling that there is no place for the viewer to position themselves and perceptually receive the artwork in its completeness or via the “presentness” or “candour” given by its “facingness” or “frontality,” as might be standardly comprehended.⁴ There are changes between different states, but the differentness of those states is surprisingly minimal. Infra-thin, one might remark.

As odd as it may sound, I am reminded of a passage in Walter Benjamin’s oft-cited “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproduction.” That passage refers to Georges Duhamel, “who knows nothing” of cinema’s significance, but, luckily, does “know something about its structure” And what he knows is that his thoughts have been replaced by moving images that are constantly interrupted by subsequent images; contemplation in this situation is impossible.⁵ Of course, it is wrong to speak of “moving images” in this case since none of the works here are “images” or literally “moving”; yet there is an unexpected aptness in that reference. There *is* something mobile about the works, and their “flickering” between different states is the hallmark of that. Yet there is a crucial disjunction here that demands mentioning: these “moving images” is the result of human agency, which therefore fundamentally influences the artwork’s temporality as well as guarantees a space for the beholder to contemplate or otherwise experience the work without it overwhelming the beholder’s train of thoughts. That strikes me as an important achievement of the exhibition.

But this idea can be pushed a little further if it is recalled that the ambivalence of Benjamin’s essay can only be fully understood in light of his long standing philosophical interest in the notion of experience. The German language provides two words, *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, both of which can be roughly translated into the

⁴ This sentence amasses a number of key concepts in Michael Fried’s 1967 “Art and Objecthood” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1998); Stanley Cavell’s remarks on Morris Louis in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1979 [1972]); and Fried’s important book *Manet’s Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996) Although I cannot expand this is here, it is worth noting that “candour” in Cavell is a reformatting of “presentness” in Fried, and “facingness” is Fried’s rewording of Cavell’s references to “frontality.” All these terms are, at bottom, in dialogue with Clement Greenberg’s infamous discussion of modernist painting’s orientation towards flatness. And it would be worth further exploring how these terms are reworked in Bowles’ and Guerroui’s works.

⁵ See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in its Age of Technological Reproducibility” in *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*, ed. by Howard Eiland et al, trans. by Edmund Jephcott et al (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2002).

English word experience. Compressing a difficult argument to the strictest essentials, it can be explicated that Benjamin emphasizes the qualitative distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, with the former encapsulating a capacity for experience that is “deep,” “sustained,” and leaves an indelible mark upon one’s subjectivity, while the latter nominates a capacity for experience that is superficial, momentary, and easily forgotten. Benjamin’s essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” unpacks the writings of Baudelaire and Proust as a witnessing to how urbanism, capitalism, and technological developments enact a transition from *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis* as our standard forms of experience. Needing to manage psychologically a faster-paced life with all its distractions, we unconsciously sacrifice our capacity for *Erfahrung* and replace it with *Erlebnis*.⁶ The withering of aura, famously adjudged by Benjamin, is a testament to that sacrifice and gives his essay its equivocality.

Benjamin’s account of technology, perhaps, now feels rather remote from our own present age of the digital twitch in which communication and image become rapid-fire compulsion. Seemingly wrestling with the hyper-acceleration of the contemporary lifeworld, artists such as Olafur Eliasson and blockbuster exhibitions such as *Space Shifters* can be regarded as so many attempts to overturn *Erlebnis* and restore *Erfahrung* through the creation of immersive communal experiences. As sympathetic and intrigued by these endeavours I am, there is nonetheless the underlying concern for me that their works may veer towards and collapse into spectacle. Thoroughly Instagrammable, these attempts for *Erfahrung* regained risk being subverted into reinforcing *Erlebnis*. This detour into Benjamin’s writings of the 1930s and their legacy into the present has hopefully been useful in the context of Bowles’ and Guerroui’s joint exhibition. It provides a yardstick to take measure of their achievement since, in slowing down and inviting attention, their work demonstrates that it is still possible to engender spaces for *Erfahrung*. If we share our time and experience with the artwork, then it will reply in kind.

Matthew Bowman, May 2022.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938 -1940*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Belknap Press/ Harvard University Press, 2003).