

Gábor ATTALAI

RED-Y MADE / DIALOGUE / LEWIS BALTZ

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Red-y makes constitute an immensely significant group of works within Gábor Attalai's oeuvre. The basic idea of the series, which he began in 1972, comes from a play on words: by altering the way Marcel Duchamp's "readymade" was written, the artist created a new form of artwork which uniquely combines Duchampian questions with Yves Klein's monochromy, Barnett Newman's colour field painting and the political associations linked to the colour red in the Eastern Block during the era. In the individual works which make up the series, Attalai covers objects and reproductions – sometimes even portions of buildings (stairwells, windows) or natural formations (rocks, glaciers) – with the colour red. In addition to interpreting it as an acerbic reference to the all-encompassing, all-enveloping ideology associated with the colour red, the gesture can also be regarded as a theoretical reflection on the nature of art. Attalai seeks the possible endpoints of painting and sculpture. In these works, he examines whether it is possible to make an object disappear by painting over it, by creating a red colour field. As the artist himself put it in several of his written works, describing his train of thought which led him to the concept of Red-y makes: "One day I realized that 'readymade' (which, according to Duchamp, signifies the end of sculpture) sounds exactly the same as 'red-y made', which I refer to as the end of painting: if we take any object and cover it with a colour, then the object must disappear under that colour, just as the canvas disappears under *The Night Watch*". In a text originally written in English, Attalai states: "When you choose an idea or something you see to depict on canvas, it will become a painting. When you choose an idea or something you see to create from stone, metal, clay, PVC and so on, it will become a sculpture. If you choose an object and declare it art, it becomes a readymade. When you paint a readymade red, it becomes a red-y made. Every red-y made is the state of the object's end. The objects disappear under the red paint like the canvas disappears under the brushstrokes of the painter."* Just as the Duchampian readymade can be considered the endpoint of not only sculpture but of a possible conception of art, so can Attalai's Red-y makes be regarded as signifying the elimination of Duchampian readymades, and thus endpoints of the endpoint.

Reproductions – photos of artists and works of art – found in magazines often constitute the subject of Attalai Red-y makes. Under his red surfaces, one can vaguely spot works by Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol and John Baldessari, among others, as if they were reckonings, so to speak, about the iconic artists and artworks of the recent past. The colour red usually becomes saturated with various additional meanings: in association with a reproduction of Warhol's Mao portrait, it can be read as a political reference, while, painted over an archival photo of Kazimir Malevich, it calls to mind the Eastern European traditions of constructivism. The red veil that covers these images – in addition to pointing to the (art) historical and political contexts attached to the colour, as well as to a rethinking of the concepts of art and readymades – may also allude to the artist's unique position. During the 1970s, Attalai, living in a relatively isolated world, sought to collect information – primarily via post – about the phenomena related to contemporary art as well as to the art of the recent past. It is almost as if the images vaguely showing through the semi-translucent red veil also alluded to the artist's means of acquiring information.

"My generation operated with its sights directed at the West", pondered the artist, who entered the international art world of his era by utilizing the postal service: he enclosed his conceptual works in envelopes and sent them to his peers living in the West, requesting information about the phenomena of contemporary art. He established correspondences with such artists as Robert Indiana, Jasper Johns, John Chamberlain, Ed Ruscha, Lawrence Weiner, Carolee Schneemann, Sol LeWitt, Christo, Hanne Darboven, Richard Long, John Baldessari, Carl Andre, Robert Morris, Eva Hesse, Gilbert & George, Anthony Caro, Robert Filliou, Claude Viallat, Joseph Kosuth, Dennis Oppenheim, and others. Letters written by all of the aforementioned artists can be found in Attalai's archives. On occasion, they also sent him publications and artworks.

Thus it is not only Attalai's conceptual art that awaits rediscovery; an in-depth examination of his extraordinarily extensive network of international connections may also yield revelatory results for research on the Hungarian neo-avantgarde. The exhibition at the Vintage Gallery showcases a selection of Attalai's Red-y makes that "paint over" other artists' works, while also exploring a concrete case involving more direct dialoguing with fellow artists in the form of postal correspondence. Attalai's written exchange with significant American photographer Lewis Baltz, along with the accompanying Baltz photographs, offer a fascinating example of these dialogues across borders and continents, which comprised an important part of – and oftentimes served as catalysts for – Attalai's activities. In the context of the oeuvre of Gábor Attalai – an artist who was simultaneously present in various official and unofficial public platforms, and who, living in Hungary (in a state of internal exile, as it were) managed to build a significantly extensive network of international contacts – new light might be shed on certain aspects of the art history of 1960s and 1970s as pertaining to both Hungary and East-Central Europe.

Dávid Fehér

*Minor modifications were introduced to the original English by the translator of this text.