

DAS SOCKELPROBLEM/ THE PEDESTAL PROBLEM

Where does a sculpture start and where does it end? Since Rodin the answer has been unclear. Today, artists are finding very different solutions to the persistent problem of the pedestal.

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In the spring of 2011 at Vienna Secession, a monumental printing and copying machine was set up and served as the base for a small sculpture resembling a table. The machine produced a brochure entitled 'Book of Plinths/Buch der Sockel', which visitors were invited to take.

Besides an essay by the art critic Francesco Stocchi, the booklet contained pictures of pedestal sculptures, some of which were also on display in the exhibition. These sculptures had in turn been manufactured based on photographs of works by artists such as Constantin Brâncuși and Robert Rauschenberg — works in which the pedestal plays a crucial role. The replicas were no more than approximations of the originals and reduced them to basic forms, so there was no explicit reference to the historic models. By contrast, the copies were doubly present, as objects and printed reproductions; the 'copied pedestals' could in this instance be considered the originals on which the photocopies were based. The Xeroxing machine contributed to this ambiguity: it was not just the support structure but also the producer of a work. Yet unlike the printed brochure, the machine did not show up in the list of works on exhibit; in other words, the machine was part of the exhibition display and exchangeable. Still, the machine presented itself as a massive object, upstaging the works of art properly speaking. But with what legitimacy can a pedestal lay claim to this status?

The configuration, assembled by the Austrian artist Christoph Meier, raises the question of whether a pedestal that literally produces works, rather than merely presenting them, is still a pedestal. And how are we to understand a reproduction that no longer knows an original? What, for that matter, does the relation

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between base and work have to do with the difference between original and copy? And why is it that these issues are currently engaging a generation of artists whose conception of the image has been informed by the Internet and digital imaging processes?

The history of theoretical engagements with the frame ranges from Immanuel Kant to Georg Simmel and Jacques Derrida; the related figure of the pedestal, by contrast, has met with conspicuous silence from philosophy and aesthetics. The frame — generalized as framework — has been reborn in Postmodernism as a theme artists have addressed since the beginnings of institutional critique. Unlike the frame, the base has not attracted comparable attempts to bring it into the present, even though it functions in many respects as the sculptural equivalent of the frame: whereas the frame delimits the picture on the wall and separates it from the wall, the pedestal isolates the object from the space around it. The pedestal creates a base for its object, removes it from the floor and sets it in relation both to the architecture and to the beholder. Like the frame, which is associated with the idea of the picture as a window, the pedestal mediates between the space of representation and the real space. Both frame and pedestal, then, are enframings or devices that create distance, indicate a situation of presentation and initiate aesthetic engagement with what is on display.

In rhetorical terms, however, the pedestal makes an appearance that is more powerful than that of the frame in several regards. On the one hand, by raising the object physically, the pedestal always elevates the object's symbolic status. Witness the history of sculpture in public space: for centuries, statues have been raised on pedestals as others have been toppled. On the other hand, the pedestal maintains a more complex relationship with the space surrounding it than the frame a space out of which the pedestal is supposed to lift its object while being embedded in it. This relationship not only situates the work amid tensions generated by questions of visibility and representation in urban settings; it also makes the pedestal a parameter that merits attention in the perspective of current debates over the politics of the display. Moreover, the pedestal is closely associated with the concept of history (think of the proverbial pedestal of history). As a physical support structure, the pedestal has acquired the implicit ability to illustrate the symbolic basis of an object. Accordingly pedestals have often served as media that established historical references, suggested genealogies or traditional affiliations and articulated hierarchies.

What little literature there is about the more recent history of the pedestal discerns its significance primarily in its disappearance.¹ After its heyday in the monumental art of the late 19th century, which employed bases of sometimes enormous dimensions, aesthetic requirements and issues began to shift around 1900. The academic view that a dedicated space needed to be created for sculpture that it needed to be staged became questionable when the Modernist work claimed its autonomy. What used to be a problem of

design became a structural challenge. At the time, Auguste Rodin and Brâncuși initiated fundamental innovations in sculpture, and part of this process was a revision of the use of pedestals. Rodin closely studied the way setting his figures at different heights changed their effect; as early as 1893, he proposed installing his *Monument aux Bourgeois de Calais* (Monument to the Burghers of Calais, 1895) without a base. However, due to opposition on the part of the officials who commissioned the work, this proposal was not implemented until after his death. Brâncuși, by contrast, treated the base as an integral component of his sculptural programme and allowed the boundary between base and work to become permeable. Modular in design and thus adaptable to different situations of presentation, his bases are stacks of elementary bodies that he also used as furniture; in a few instances, he even declared them to be works in their own right.

The absorption of the pedestal into the work — as well as the direct relation between the sculpture and the floor, which was established as acceptable by Brâncuși and Rodin, though no less crucially in the *oeuvres* of Marcel Duchamp and Alberto Giacometti — became a central topic in 1960s and 1970s sculpture. Minimal art in particular radicalized and standardized the achievements of Modernism, either by letting the object virtually coincide with the pedestal (see Robert Morris' cubes) or by altogether abolishing the vertical orientation along with the pedestal (see Carl Andre's «floor pieces»). This reconfiguration of the relationship between the object and the space around it inevitably implied a fundamental change in how the beholder related to the object — an art that systematically eschews the pedestal as a device of vertical distancing an art that shares the ground on which the beholder stands and moreover locates the aesthetic event *between* the object and the beholder — has forfeited its autonomy. This art abandons itself — thus Michael Fried's pertinent criticism of Minimal art — to the contingencies that beset its presentation and perception: the shared floor becomes a stage, the work, theatrical.² Fried's observation would bear consequences but not necessarily as the critic intended. Site specificity, institutional critique and, later on, relational aesthetics — these tendencies and others in the wake of Minimal art effectively work with the theatricality Fried had discerned by putting the focus on categories implicit in it: contextuality, performance and relationality.

As interest shifted to the social and communicative structures that mark and produce works and sites of art, the pedestal and even the material object as a whole receded into the background. We might say that Minimal art staged the last grand appearance, *ex negativo*, of the pedestal to date grand because it was most closely tied to the question of the self-conception of art and amounted to the loss of an autonomy art seemed to have gained only moments before. Yet once the spectre of theatricality no longer frightened anyone — once it became, in an inversion of perspective, a central field of artistic examination — the presence or absence of the pedestal likewise ceased to be a contested issue. For it goes without saying that

Minimal art did not permanently exclude the motif of the pedestal from artistic production, as works by artists such as Isa Genzken, Rachel Harrison, Franz Erhard Walther, Franz West and Heimo Zobernig demonstrate. Only its function has changed: the pedestal is no longer primarily a supporting structure (in physical as well as ideological terms with regard to arts claim to autonomy) but is now more of a rhetorical figure. The pedestal serves as a sign that can invoke this discourse around the relationality of art, around its historical, institutional and receptive situation. 'This "white cube" is an inverted pedestal', as Franz West put it in an interview.³

But how and why do artists of a younger generation engage the pedestal? Christoph Meier is not the only one devoting more attention to the issue. In Oliver Laric's exhibition 'Kopienkritik' (Critique of Copies) at Skulpturhalle Basel during summer 2011, the base was likewise part of a project that turned a critical eye to the relationship between original and copy. Using the extensive collection of plaster casts of Greek and Roman sculptures held by the Skulpturhalle as his point of departure, Laric related contemporary forms of copying to historic techniques. He grouped statues from the collection that strike similar poses together in order to reveal differences amid similarity. He also integrated works of his own into this rearrangement: scattered across the floor were antique heads cast in colourful layers Laric had created using casting moulds from the collection. In addition, selected video works by the artist were on display, each of them a compilation of existing visual material from different media. *Versions* (2010) is a particularly imposing illustration of Laric's vision of an alternative narrative of cultural production: using an immense number of sources, the film drew a line from ancient sculpture to Walt Disney's movies in order to exhibit techniques of appropriation and multiplication as central productive procedures. The individual image is of interest only to the extent that its traces can be pursued through other images, formats and media. What does not change its form, what cannot be translated and adapted, does not write history. In the exhibition, *Versions* was projected onto two plaster casts that served the work as a «base» of sorts. Additional video works by Laric played on monitors that in turn bore plaster statues. In other words, each element of the exhibition had multiple roles to play any image is another's potential base, any signified is at once a signifier.

The works of Nairy Baghramian also study the cast as a technique of the creation of form. *Formage de tête* (Shaping the head, 2011) includes rectangular pieces of silicone resting, like tabletops, on simple metal trestles. Looking at them from above, we realize that the silicone moulds are matrices of sorts, inverted casts created by pouring the malleable mass over a collection of objects that have imprinted their shapes upon the congealed silicone in the form of cuts and shallow and deep indentations; conversely, their shapes might be recreated from the cast in a potentially infinite number of copies. In the absence of a supporting tabletop, the same cuts and indentations, when seen from below, look like shredded and distended material hanging into the space between the trestles. In a peculiar fashion, this feature marks the area where a base

would be located in conventional situations of presentation. Baghramians work *Metzger* (Butcher, 2009) demonstrates the same effect even more directly: a ham-like shape rests on a table construction while various sausage shapes dangle underneath. In both instances, the base becomes manifest as an omission or lacuna of sorts, an absence that directs our gaze away from the works face and to the internal processes that make up the generation of form.

By contrast, Shahryar Nashat engages the principle of the base through a heightening of visibility. At the centre of his video work *Factor Green* (2011) stands a box-like object painted a garish green; this object is shown being used for various purposes, including as a seat and a base, at the Accademia in Venice, before «attaching» itself like a sticky sponge to a painting by Tintoretto. When Nashat presented the work at the Venice Biennale, he placed in front of the projection a series of sculptures resembling museum benches: seating made of travertine or a flashy patterned imitation marble and bases for small sculptures that were themselves nothing other than pedestal-like shapes cast in faux marble. Like the garish green object of *Factor Green*, these bench and pedestal sculptures defy clear classification by appropriating the form and function of useful objects while seeking to charm the beholder as objects of aesthetic contemplation. In Nashat's video work *Plaque (Slab)* (2007), which documents the time-consuming production of a concrete stele rising to a height of more than four metres, the shape of the base similarly becomes the pivotal point for formal translations and transfers of meaning. The work responds to a concert by Glenn Gould recorded for television in 1964; the stage decoration consisted of a row of giant faux-marble steles. Nashat interweaves the footage documenting the production of the concrete stele with stills from the concert recording, creating an unconventional dialogue not only between the corresponding shapes of the steles but also between their different functions and contexts. Nashat's base-object's identify sites of the presentation and perception of art as hubs of significations and desires; appropriation and imitation are legitimate means to fulfill these desires. At the same moment, however, these rhetorics of seduction also signal a sort of temporary vacancy, which the base-objects— staged as objects of desire in their own right — promptly seek to occupy. Overdetermined materials on the one hand, the perfect staging in photography or film on the other hand: both lend these objects a fetish-like quality that, rather than merely referring to structures of desire, calls them to life.

The work of Nina Beier often connects the issue of sculpture to the notion of its loss. In this context, the figure of the base serves not so much to compensate for this vacancy but rather to allow sculpture to play through the scenario of its own disappearance. In *Shelving for Unlocked Matter and Open Problems* (2010), sculpture steps down from its pedestal in order to make room for its own absence and to apply itself to a new purpose. The work consists of a collection of small foundsculptures that serve as supports for glass shelves; the sculptures have been cut to the height required in each instance. Taken as a whole, they form

a sort of shelving system that extends along the wall and into the room, presenting a trimmed-to-size panopticon of the formal vocabularies of 20th-century sculpture. Due to the cuts, various sculptures look as though they had been beheaded or amputated. Beier's work confronts us with a series of inversions and displacements: not only do the shelving and the decorative objects exchange the roles of supporting and supported element; craftsmanship appropriates the aesthetics of high art and becomes a component of a sculptural arrangement that takes the form of furniture. In this context, the figure of the pedestal functions as a sort of hinge that connects different narrative strands without permanently fixing them in place. The history of sculpture, the title suggests, remains an open problem, awaiting each new temporary solution at the intersection between visual art, craft and design.

Although the works of Meier, Laric, Baghramian, Nashat and Beier are highly diverse, their interest in the base seems to spring from a similar motivation. These artists do not strive to achieve the autonomy Modernist art criticism demanded. Nor are they interested in staging a movement that amounts to no more than a perpetual interplay between work and supplement, between text and context, between original and reproduction. In light of the ubiquitous thinking in networks, freely circulating imagery and Postmodern concepts of space, the continual transfer of meaning has become a routine that no longer requires dedicated instruments of mediation. But if the pedestal has ceased to mediate, what functions can it serve? As the works discussed above demonstrate, it can mark a place, a physical site where the fluctuation of meaning is brought into selective focus, where contemporary forms of cultural production and perception encounter traditional techniques. The pedestal serves as a pivot, generating perspectives on the practices of multiplication, translation and reformatting while making these practices amenable to aesthetic negotiation. Its archetypal form and its varied history — as guardian of distance, vehicle of transmigration and indicator of relationalities — render the pedestal a privileged object for situating artistic developments. It is precisely because the history of sculpture continues to be inconceivable without the pedestal that the latter can ensure continuity and call it into question at the same time.

Notes

1. See Jack Burnham, *Sculptures Vanishing Base*, *_Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century_*, Lane, New York, 1968, as well as Albert E. Elsen *The Passing of the Pedestal*, *_Pioneers of Modern Sculpture_*, exh. cat., Hayward Gallery / Arts Council of Great Britain, London, 1973

2. See Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, *_Artforum_* 5, no. 10 (June 1967), pp. 1223

3. Eva Badura-Triska, *Gespräch mit Franz West*, Vienna, March 1994, <http://www.mip.at/attachments/171> (accessed 23 July 2011)

<https://www.frieze.com/article/das-sockelproblem>