

Time Crystals by Françoise Le Roux

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A.Stella's studio, November 27th, 2004.

Entering A.Stella's workshop is entering a world where painting is set free from the traditional plane of the canvas, and dares to enter the realm of volume. The works gathered there chart a progression from painting to three dimensional objects, reflecting the evolution of painting in the late 20th century as artists left the surface of the canvas to add objects of everyday life. But the three-dimensional objects in Stella's studio are not commonplace materials—the scrap, ropes or dishes brought to the canvas by Pop'art, New realism, or Supports-surfaces. Stella's objects, as well as the paintings they rise up from, belong to the unchanging and luminous world of geometry.

To begin, the artist creates paintings called géogrammes: a sketch comes first, the drawing of a shape, almost like a written form. The sketch might remain an unfulfilled possibility, or might give birth to a couple of complementary paintings. Each géogramme is the same size and worked out in a precise, methodical way. First, a rectangular canvas is covered with an adhesive sheet, and an incision is made in this sheet following the outlines of the selected written form. The cut away part of the adhesive sheet is then unstuck and transferred to a second canvas, on the spot corresponding exactly to the place it has been torn from on the first one. With a spatula, both canvasses are then covered with many coats of white paint, and the adhesive is taken off. The result is an unusual pair: a painted shape, smooth and shiny, on one canvas is a background, unpolished and grainy, on the other. While the empty background of one is the full shape of the other. Depending upon the viewer's perception, the images can be read as positive or negative space, and in the same painting, the background may become the shape. Several drawings thus materialize, each one having some similarities to a letter («gramma» in ancient Greek). The many possibilities of the alphabets are not exhausted, however, and the process could go on indefinitely, with other shapes, other «grammas».

Moving beyond the géogrammes, A.Stella carries on her work, creating forms she calls plano-grammes, using another medium, paper, and

another process, folding-unfolding. Again, she begins with a sketch that allows her to fix precisely which way the paper will be incised, folded, lifted. The process allows the written form to spread out, and to raise up off the flat sheet, without altering its integrity. At any time, if the articulations of the paper are unfolded and laid flat, the plane surface returns. On one sheet of paper, several written forms line up, forming a «track.» One possibility might be to put several tracks together, and to shape the same written form on a larger scale, offering a comparison of these two figures on different scales, and an opportunity to dream about the relations between macrocosm and microcosm. This fitting-into-each-other way of construction suggests the infinitely great and the infinitesimal.

Moving in yet another direction, Stella's rigorous mathematical inquiry continues. The géogrammes give birth to three-dimensional sculptures she has christened stéréogrammes. The former shapes are still here, but «full» and «empty» now become articulated volumes. Folded, they look like white parallelepipedic boxes. Translate these volumes to the scale used to read maps and plans, and we begin to see them as town shapes.

Early painters wondered how they could represent depth on a two-dimensional surface, and for a long time they had to be crafty to suggest distance or relief. Then, the Renaissance came and artists -- groping at first, more methodical later—succeeded in rendering a full illusion of three-dimensional space. This space, homogeneous, isotropic, infinite, Euclidean, is A.Stella's material. A paradoxical material, for space is not a tangible thing, is not a thing at all. A.Stella makes space perceptible and visible, but not in the way most artists have, from the Quattrocento on. She brings us directly into the Euclidian world, and not only, in an optical way, as a mathematician would when drawing on a blackboard such ideal objects as the straight line, the rectangle or the cube. A. Stella brings us into the Euclidian world in a ce-nesthesis way too—she allows us to sense space.

This is how: bound to the vertical plane of the wall, the canvasses of the géogrammes are parallel

to the potential straight line which would run right through the viewer standing up in front of them, from the top of his skull down to the horizontal plane of the floor. Free from the wall, laid out on the floor, the planogrammes are perpendicular to the vertical body of the same viewer, so that, in order to glance along the surface of this "two and a half dimensional" objects, the viewer feels ready to start flying over them. And even more independent, the stéréogrammes invite him to imagine himself wandering through the white structures of a utopian town.

The space of our body thus meets with Euclidian objects, organic meets with geometric. Faced with these surfaces and volumes, we are brought to feel that our flats, our rooms, those strange boxes in which most people live now, are unacquainted with the natural shapes of the living: plump curves, irregular bends, interlacing blood vessels and a reticulate nervous network. The géogrammes point out the walls, the planogrammes point out the floor, and the stéréogrammes, the town. Not any town, not those unintentional towns where the streets coil up and the houses stick together according to the setting, but a planned town, with its orthogonal lines, the town organized by logic, in which the avenues, the squares and the houses depend on the geometrical order, the checker-board-shaped town built in the New World, the town first made up by Hippodamos, more than twenty five centuries ago, on the Ionian coast, where the rationality was born, where Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, were born. Free from gods, the cosmos opened there to science.

A.Stella's plastic world has something in common with Hippodamos's world: it does not borrow anything, neither from tradition nor from nature. If there are no organic shapes, there are no other natural shapes either, no curves nor curls reminding one of a river, no reminiscences of undulating hills. There are straight lines, parallel or perpendicular, and straight angles never to be found in the wild. No references and no quotations, only an affinity between the Plano-grammes and Minimal Art. The work conjures up the sculptures of Sol Lewitt with its austerity,

lack of color, orthogonality, and modular parallel construction. In addition, we see the same lack of ornamentation, same asceticism and same strictness. For Lewitt, the work, before becoming an object, was an idea. And once the module was planned, the units of his sculptures could be made industrially and put together by other people, according to his instructions. But A.Stella does not confine herself to thinking out shapes (in Greek the word "eidos" means both "shape" and "idea"). She does not entrust a manufacturer with the task of materializing her Planogrammes as perfect machine-made goods. When describing the process to create a planogramme, she insists that mental action is closely connected with the physical action of changing the space of the surface. Once the first module is worked out, and the shape-idea born, there is a lot left to do. By repeating the same movement again and again, her mental concept is expressed as a manual action.

As some other artists resolutely behaved as painting machines, A.Stella turns herself into a kind of mechanic, incising, folding, unfolding, sticking and gathering. Stock is taken of these humdrum movements, for every work, precisely. The PlanoT3 for instance, is made up of 120 tracks, each track consisting of twelve planogrammes; it has 17,280 articulations, which demanded 5,760 vertical cuts, 18,000 horizontal cuts, 2,880 measurements, and 6,120 units to stick together. Producing PlanoT3 took 120 hours.

Over time our understanding of geometry may change, but the objects of Euclidian geometry and the science of space are not constantly evolving like the living, organic world. Being only intelligible ideas, the rectangle and the square do not rot, do not decay, are not worn away. Since Pythagoras, the idea of triangle has not taken one wrinkle. Now, A.Stella gives a body to those objects, at least some of them. Not as a chalked up picture illustrating a mathematical demonstration, not as models of town buildings (yet they might be!) with no other finality than themselves. Here they are, we can see them, smooth and shining and delicate, and they tell us about a rational world, free of temporality,

a world we perceive *sub quodam aeternitatis specie* (under a kind of eternity). A paradox lies in the fact that hours and hours, precisely counted, have been necessary not only to plan but also to produce those géogrammes, planogrammes, and stéréogrammes. But do hours exist differently from geometrical ideas? From an empirical point of view, we perceive only the changes: son becoming father, trees growing, stars moving regularly in the sky or shadow on a sundial, and also the same movements done again and again by the artist building the géogrammes. Time is nothing but the measure of movement, and measuring those cutting and folding movements gives an idea of what we call "time". So, with her own strict method, A.Stella catches this elusive reality, and patiently traps it within the space of geometrical shapes, time crystals.

In this organic world where things rot and people are restless, it is a real joy for the mind to meet such a work, opening out with the bright objectivity, durability and quietness of numbers.

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