

# NOTES ON THE EXHIBITION AND ITS ACTORS

JEAN-MARC POINSOT



*Notes on the exhibition  
and its actors*

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JEAN-MARC POINSOT

# NOTES ON THE EXHIBITION AND ITS ACTORS

Foreword

Lisbeth Rebollo Gonçalves

Introductions

Henry Meyric Hughes  
and Richard Leeman



# Foreword

Lisbeth Rebollo Gonçalves

.....

This volume presents a selection of texts by the French art historian and critic Jean-Marc Poinsoot as part of the series *Art Critics of the World*, co-published with Hermann Editions. The idea of publishing a selection of texts in conjunction with the award of the annual prize to an individual critic for a lifetime's achievement was the initiative of my predecessor, Marek Bartelik. For the inaugural round, the members of the Paraguayan section settled on their peer, Ticio Escobar. The difficulties we encountered with this first publication, however, convinced us of the need to establish some ground rules and guiding principles to give shape to such a fine idea. The chief responsibility for setting up and presiding over an editorial committee to see it through fell to Jean-Marc Poinsoot. Once a suitable maquette, format, and principles for the choice of texts had been agreed upon, the committee went on to publish three further volumes: the South Korean, Lee Yil's, *Dynamics of Expansion and Reduction: Selected Writings on Korean Contemporary Art*; the Slovak critic, Tomáš Štrauss, with *Beyond the Great Divide: Essays on European Avant-gardes from East to West*; and the German, Walter Grasskamp, with *The Angel Vanishes: Profiles in Postmodern Art*. Jean-Marc saw this through with his customary perseverance and rigour, supported by the linguistic skills of Henry Meyric Hughes and the other highly qualified academic editors, who, in the cases of Štrauss and Lee Yil, had to substitute for the recently deceased authors. For his own part, Poinsoot, after building on the initial concept for the series with great panache and establishing a structure and ethical principles that would ensure it would survive and flourish, felt compelled, reluctantly, for reasons of health, to hand over the reins to successors, whilst undertaking as far as possible to keep an eye on its future evolution.

In recognition of our debt to Poinsoot, and in homage to his achievement, the Board decided that the next volume in the series – '*hors série*', as may be – should be devoted to a selection of Poinsoot's own writings, which, whilst already assured of their canonical importance

in the fields of exhibition histories and curatorial studies, deserve to be far more widely known to students and young people outside specialist and Francophone circles. These texts from the past twenty years, which first appeared in French in autumn 2023, have been selected by Poinsoot himself with his customary care and scruples. They touch on subjects that are close to the concerns of all of us, as practising writers and curators seeking to come to terms with the challenges of globalism and the largely uncharted territories opened up by the revolutions in communication and human thought. The overarching theme of the exhibition and its 'actors' (a term borrowed from the late Bruno Latour) could not be more pertinent, for the renewed emphasis it places on 'subaltern' histories and disciplines and boundary-crossing exchanges involving not only the artist and the critic but the public as well, in a constant process of historical review and revision.

We are grateful to Jean-Marc Poinsoot for his generosity, in enabling us to make these important texts available to a new generation of thinkers and reformers, in a language in which many readers will encounter his invigorating commentaries for the first time.

# Introduction

Henry Meyric Hughes

.....

There must be a knack to finding oneself at the right place, at the right time! Add to that the serendipity of ‘taking the trouble to be born’ (Beaumarchais), so as to qualify as an authentic ‘*soixante-huitard*’, and you have the image of a young and somewhat startled-looking Jean-Marc Poinot, standing at the edge of a long table at the opening of one of the most momentous exhibitions of the post-war period: Harald Szeemann’s *Live In Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form. Works – Concepts – Processes – Situations – Information* (to give it its full title), at the Kunsthalle Bern in May 1969. At the time, Poinot was an inquisitive and impressionable second-year student in the art history department at the University of Paris 10 (Nanterre), which had been at the heart of the student unrest the previous year and still suffered the turbulence of its effects. He had spent the vacation acting as a tour guide in the North of Italy and was busy disbursing the hard-won proceeds of his efforts on visiting museums and galleries in the region, when he stumbled almost unprepared into this public manifestation, where nothing seemed to have been fixed in advance, the objects on display, such as they were, ignored or violated the spaces in which they had been developed, and their very appearance seemed to owe more to chance than to design.<sup>1</sup>

Under the immediate impact of this unsettling experience, where he was photographed standing beside some of the principal apostles of the new forms of ‘socialised’ art (see p. ...), Poinot immediately scribbled down a brief report on what he had seen, in an effort to make sense of it.

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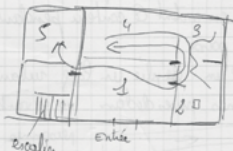
1. Likewise, it was quite by chance, many years later, to his great astonishment, that he discovered this photograph in which he appeared beside some of the apostles of the new forms of ‘socially engaged’ art in the exhaustive catalogue that Germano Celant had published to go with his attempted reconstruction of the 1969 exhibition at the Prada Foundation in Venice, at the time of the 2011 Biennale.

## Le Vainage de l'exposition

### When attitudes become form

Sectes de textes d'introduction en parties dans le catalogue.

#### Exposé

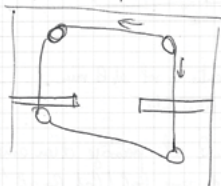


30 cm  
peuvent coller au mur ou au sol  
ou sur une table

- 1 Cordes de plomb entre le sol et le mur.  
Faites sur un mur entier.
- 2 Cordes maîtres au sol passage d'un engagement  
de vos visiteurs du genre 'Bah! Bah! Bah! Bah!'
- 3 Vitres posées contre le mur avec mastic en  
grande quantité et encore molle.  
un verre dans un alif de sain-doux.
- 4 Villages emmêlés - néons - papiers suspendus  
à un fil de nylon au milieu de la pièce toute  
collée au mur - pas de trace d'antenne de fil de fer...

Notes made by the author on his  
return from the opening of *When  
Attitudes Become Form*, 21 March 1969.  
Three small sheets from a loose-leaf  
binder.

- 5 - Sacs contenant des morceaux de tina et  
des cordes des ténis à des jupes.  
Plus de huit fois le sac ont par force avec des  
étiquettes et des inscriptions - Petit à petit les  
artistes en sortent le contenu pendant que la  
foule passe -  
D'un d'un de plus un long ruban avec hauteurs  
personnes prises d'admiration et vient des



personnes  
La foule est immobilisée  
Des jeux se font au  
centre avec les autres  
sacs - un artiste entre  
et se cache dans l'un

d'aise - un critique (cache ses chaussures sous  
une bande de ténis - Un autre artiste s'attache  
avec ce critique par un nouage d'osier



lanières en cuir pour passer  
la tête. Morceau de ténis embourbé  
separant les deux protagonistes

Le jeu continue - au sous sol  
des néons, l'emploi de l'électricité pour ne  
produire aucun effet au vu d'un énorme dispositif  
boute en morceaux de verre et des mastic,  
torches allumées au du sable posé à  
même le sol.  
Vitrine - eau d'eau - paquet de coton -  
Le public prend un morceau de coton, le  
trempe dans l'eau et le fait ainsi adhérer  
à la vitrine

Retour salle 4 -

On mène par force un téléphone avec le  
mode d'emploi obligeant le spectateur à  
répondre lorsqu'il sonne...

Public - Bande de deux artistes, boîtes et costumes -  
une presse mal équipée mais participant au jeu -  
des vieilles dames enthousiastes à l'afin pour  
applaudir - mondaines - des jeunes - Rêves en  
grand nombre du catalogue - Succès éblouissant plus de  
public qu'auraient attendu des habitués

Then, a few days later, he attempted to produce a more polished text that he could distribute to some of his fellow students on his return to Paris, for use as the basis for a group discussion.

In the first of his two brief accounts of the event, Poinsoot tried to make sense of the opening address by the president of the lead sponsor, Philip Morris, seeking to justify his company's (for the time, highly unusual) involvement in an avant-garde event, on the grounds that these activities were not so much an adjunct to his company's business as an 'integral part' of its efforts to promote innovation and experimentation in all fields. What would be the consequences, Poinsoot asks, of a form of patronage that viewed art as research, and research which took the form of games invented by the artist, whose rules would have to be thought up by the public? And what, if all this was being taken as seriously by Philip Morris as the invention of a new filter for their cigarettes – presumably, in the name of what we would nowadays call 'art-washing'? Poinsoot went on to note that, whilst the catalogue presented the usual material and factual information about each artist, there was a total absence of labels or numbering of exhibits, and that works by the same author were scattered or interspersed with each other throughout the available space. This clearly pointed to a 'new cultural site, to be viewed as a site for experimentation: experimentation with materials and forms, as well as experimentation with a new relationship with the public.'

The second document is a separate, mimeographed account of the opening, which focused on a cursory description of the layout of the exhibition, work by work and room by room, though without mentioning the name of a single artist (could Poinsoot himself even afford the catalogue?), but covered a variety of 'works, processes, situations', etc., such as the fat built up in the corner of a room (Joseph Beuys), or the molten lead splashed across the floor and wall (Richard Serra), as well as some of the games played by the artists and even a critic with the puzzled members of the public (Franz Eberhard Walther).<sup>2</sup> Here – plain for all to see, though Poinsoot expressed this differently,

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2. In his notes, he described the scene as follows: 'A gathering of artists, beatniks and people disguised for the occasion, who all joined in the fun and games, as well as some enthusiastic old ladies, to provide applause at the end. "*Mondains*" and young people. A large quantity of catalogues was sold. Stunning success. A greater public than in the past, to judge from what the regulars were saying.'

was an exhibition being used interactively, to generate awareness and entertainment by integrating elements of art with a live audience.

Poinsot was only reminded of the existence of these two disregarded, unpublished texts at the time of selecting work for inclusion in the present anthology. Initially, he set them to one side, as a student effort that fell outside his chosen timeframe, since his intention was to focus on writings and lectures since 2000, against the background of expanding globalisation, monetisation, and mediatisation of different art forms. Only now is it possible to read the full significance into these short accounts of the author's initiation and apprenticeship. Poinsot had already absorbed the lessons of Fluxus, Land Art, Minimalism, Arte Povera, and Conceptualism: now he learned the importance of direct, first-hand experience of the entire circumstances surrounding the creation of an exhibition. Drawing on the ideas of Bruno Latour, he theorised his subject as the exhibition and its 'actors' (see no. 6 in this selection), embracing the entire physical and metaphorical (social, political, cultural, etc.) context in which the artists were enabled to elaborate and develop their ideas. Observing the techniques employed by Szeemann in developing a dialogue with 'his' artists, he was briefly taken with the thought of volunteering to go and work with him for a spell, as his assistant. However, events dictated otherwise, when he was offered a break to go and prepare a section for the 5th Paris Biennale on the new, semi-dematerialised medium of Mail Art (what he preferred to call '*Envois*', or '*Missives*'), which, under the rubric of 'information' might be regarded, with hindsight, as a forerunner of the internet. Soon after that, he decided to prioritise research over curatorship (though he never abandoned the latter) and teaching over artistic practice, whilst focusing intently on the art of exhibition and the exhibition of art. His long years of pilgrimage meant visiting and documenting hundreds of exhibitions in the course of a long career as university teacher, so it comes as no surprise to find that he had personally attended and critiqued many of the most innovative and influential events of their kind, for which ample evidence is provided in this volume (the Paris Biennale, *Westkunst*, *A New Spirit in Painting*, *Zeitgeist*, and successive editions of the Venice Biennale and *Documenta*, for example). Through his teaching, Poinsot has influenced a whole generation of younger teachers and researchers, who are active today, introducing reforms to the curriculum which were pioneering in their time, including probably the first ever course on curatorship or exhibition management in Europe to contain an element of practical

training alongside theoretical study and, in 2006, instigating at the National Institute of Art History (INHA) in Paris the first course in France to study the effects of globalisation and multiculturalism in the arts. As if in anticipation of this position, which was prophetic for our own times, he also established the first archives devoted exclusively to contemporary art criticism and a complementary biannual, bilingual journal of art criticism, reviewing the latest productions in that field (and in the exercise of that *métier*) from all over the world. As if in anticipation of our own times of increased localism, he pursued most of these activities away from the centre, from his regional powerhouse at the University of Rennes 2 in Brittany. And it was in Brittany that he established the first Regional Centre for Contemporary Art (FRAC) as a pilot project for the national scheme that from 1982 onwards was rolled out to over twenty other regional centres in France on the initiative of the Ministry of Culture under Jack Lang.<sup>3</sup>

It may not be too fanciful to suggest that the seeds of all this activity over an extended timespan of practically six decades, and of Poinso's single-minded pursuit of multiple objectives, are to be traced back to the turning-point of that exhibition in Bern, which itself marked an emblematic break with the modernist past and a move towards greater artistic freedoms and pluridisciplinarity. The texts assembled in this slender volume are mostly presented for the first time in English, and for the first time make accessible Jean-Marc Poinso's singular thought and critical questioning to a wide circle of new readers.

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3. In the course of his encounters with Bernard Anthonioz at the General Inspectorate in André Malraux's Ministry of Culture in Paris, Poinso learned of the Ministry's plans for cultural decentralisation in France as early as in 1971, one year after they had first been drawn up.

## KUNSTHALLE BERN

Vernissage de l'exposition : "When attitudes become forms."

Pour ouvrir le vernissage quatre orateurs se sont succédés, lisant à peu près les textes qu'ils avaient rédigés pour le catalogue.

En me promenant dans les salles j'ai remarqué particulièrement, dans la première salle, une coulée de plomb sur le sol et le mur, et des lanières de caoutchouc attachées au mur ; un peu partout se trouvaient sur les murs, le sol ou les radiateurs des formes ovoïdes en fibres utilisées dans les éponges à récurer ou bien leur trace peinte. Une corde marine se déroulait sur le sol et un magnétophone passait des enregistrements de balbutiements. Dans une troisième salle des vitres étaient posées contre le mur entourées d'une grande quantité de mastic frais que les spectateurs modélaient ; au milieu de cette salle un néon reposait sur un relief de saindoux. Dans la quatrième salle se trouvaient des grillages emblés, des néons, un poids suspendu à un fil de nylon au milieu de la pièce et à hauteur des têtes ; sur un mur, une toile était collée dans sa partie supérieure, le bas étant accroché sur le sol à un mètre du mur ; dans un coin un tas de sable gris était planté de fil de fer ; dans les angles des petites tas de saindoux. Dans une autre salle se trouvaient des sacs contenant des morceaux de tissu et des cordes destinées à des jeux. Au début, tous les sacs sont par terre, on y lit des inscriptions ; les sacs sont fermés et portent des étiquettes ; le public ne comprend pas. Petit à petit les artistes en sortent le contenu, les spectateurs ne comprennent toujours pas. Puis l'un d'eux défile un long ruban avec l'aide de quatre autres personnes qui rentrent dans des trous aménagés dans ce ruban. Le ruban tendu les piquets se mettent à se balancer ; la foule est immobilisée. D'autres jeux commencent : un artiste se cache par terre dans un grand sac, un critique cache ses chaussures sous une bande de tissu large d'une vingtaine de centimètres ; un autre artiste s'attache avec ce critique par un nouvel élément comprenant deux lanières (pour les passer autour du cou) et un écran de tissu destiné à séparer les deux personnages (ce morceau de tissu est rembourré).

Le jeu continue au sous-sol. Il y a des néons, des sculptures employant un courant à haute tension pour ne produire aucun effet, une hutte en morceaux de verre et en mastic, des torches allumées sur du sable posé à même le sol. Il y a un ensemble constitué d'une grande vitre d'un seau d'eau et de paquets de coton hydrophile ; le public prend un morceau de coton, le trempe dans l'eau et le fait ainsi adhérer à la vitre. Au milieu de la salle, sur le sol, un téléphone avec un mode d'emploi obligeant le spectateur à répondre lorsqu'il sonne.

Le public est formé d'un groupe d'artistes très hétéroclites, de la presse locale très active dans les jeux, de quelques mondains et de beaucoup de jeunes. Tous ces gens se connaissent ; ils sont très nombreux à avoir le catalogue. Au dire des habitués il y a beaucoup plus de monde que d'habitude.

Hand-outs from  
the opening at the  
Kunsthalle Bern.  
Photocopies. University  
of Nanterre, 1969.

## QUAND LES ATTITUDES DEVIENNENT FORMES

Cette exposition qui s'est ouverte le 22 Mars à la Kunsthalle de Berne a été organisée par Philip Morris, la firme de tabac américain. Son directeur était là pour expliquer quels étaient ses buts. Quatre personnes se sont succédées pour présenter l'exposition. On a posé quelques grands problèmes de l'art contemporain. Entre autres, ceux des rapports de l'avant-garde artistique et des puissances économiques et du public.

John A. Murphy, président de Philip Morris Europe écrit et dit : "Depuis plusieurs années, nous participons au patronage de l'art sous ses formes diverses. Mentionnons par exemple : achat d'œuvres, subventions à de jeunes artistes, présentation d'œuvres marquantes. Ces activités ne sont pas un complément à nos fonctions commerciales, elles en sont partie intégrante. En tant qu'homme d'affaires en accord avec notre temps, nous sommes amenés à soutenir "le nouveau" et l'"expérimental" dans tous les domaines."

Quelles sont les conséquences de ce mécénat et de cette conception de l'art comme recherche ? Si le catalogue présente chaque auteur et ses œuvres, il n'y a aucune étiquette ni aucun numéro dans l'exposition. Les œuvres s'interpénètrent et un artiste va disséminer plusieurs objets dans différentes salles, et non pas dans la même. On se demande aussi ce que veut dire une coulée de plomb sur un mur et sur le sol foulé par tout le monde, ou bien des tas de saindoux pour arrondir les angles de la pièce.

Il n'y a plus d'individualité d'artiste dans la salle d'exposition, mais ils sont là et ils jouent en compagnie des spectateurs avec leurs objets. Qu'est-ce que veut dire ce jeu où n'importe quel bon joueur peut inventer une règle à laquelle l'artiste n'avait pas pensé ? Que sont ces œuvres qui disparaissent sous les pas des visiteurs ou brûlent dans un coin ? Qu'est-ce que cela veut dire que peindre sur les murs des salles d'exposition ? Et tout cela est financé par Philip Morris qui pense que c'est sérieux, aussi sérieux que l'invention d'un nouveau filtre pour ses cigarettes.

Oui, il y a bien là de nouveaux rapports entre l'artiste, le commerçant et le consommateur ; sont-ils viables à plus grande échelle ?

Il y a peut-être un embryon de nouveau lieu culturel considéré comme un lieu d'expérimentation ; expérimentation de matériaux et de formes et aussi expérimentation dans les nouveaux rapports avec le public.

Transcription of Cyclostyled notes for a presentation to students at the University of Nanterre of the vernissage of the exhibition, *When Attitudes Become Form*, 1969. Two sheets.

#### KUNSTHALLE BERN

Opening of the Exhibition, "When Attitudes Become Form".

There were four speakers, who took it in turn more or less to read out the texts they had written for the catalogue.

Walking through the exhibition, I especially noticed that in the first room some molten lead had been splashed on the wall and the floor, and some strips of rubber had been attached to the wall; more or less everywhere there were the ovoid forms of sponge saucepan scourers, or paint traces of their outlines. A ship's hawser lay unfurled across the floor and a tape recorder emitted some murmuring sounds. In the third room, some sheets of glass were propped against the wall and surrounded with large quantities of mastic that some of the spectators were kneading into different shapes; in the middle of this room was a neon light resting on a heap of fat moulded into a relief. In the fourth room were some tangled wire mesh, some neons, and a weight hung on nylon thread at head level; and there was also a piece of canvas, whose top had been glued to the upper part of the wall and bottom section stuck down to the floor, one metre out from the wall. In a corner, some iron rods had been planted into pile of grey sand; there were some small heaps of fat in the corners. In another room there were some sacks containing some pieces of material and some skipping ropes. At first, all the sacks lie closed on the floor, and they bear inscriptions that the public does not understand. Little by little, the artists pull out the contents, but the public still does not understand. Then one of the artists undoes a long strip of material with the help of four other people who insert themselves into some pre-prepared holes. Once the material is stretched tight, the stakes holding it up begin to wobble, and the crowd freezes. Other games are started up now: an artist hides in a large sack on the ground, a critic hides his shoes beneath a strip of material twenty or so centimetres wide; another artist attaches himself to the critic with a new element composed of two lanyards designed for passing around a person's neck and a screen of material for separating the two individuals (the material is well padded).

The games continue in the basement, where there are neon sculptures employing a high-tension current to no noticeable effect, a hut constructed out of broken shards of glass held together with mastic and some firebrands laid out flat on the sand on the floor. There is an ensemble composed of a large sheet of glass, a bucket of water and some packets of cotton wool: members of the public pick up pieces of the cotton wool and dip them into the water, so that they adhere to the panes of glass. A telephone sits on the floor in the middle of the room and constantly rings, so that spectators feel obliged to lift up the receiver and reply all the time.

The public is made up of a very heterogeneous group of artists, representatives of the local press, who take a very active part in the games, a sprinkling of quite worldly people, and many young people .... Everyone knows everyone else; many of the people are holding catalogues; and according to the regulars this is a far larger crowd than usual.

#### WHEN ATTITUDES BECOME FORM

This exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern, which opened on 22 March, 1969, was organised by the American tobacco company, Philip Morris. The company's European director was there to explain what its aims were. He was followed by four other speakers, each of whom, in turn, gave a presentation of the exhibition. They weighed up a number of important problems relating to contemporary art. Among these were the relations between the artistic avant-garde, economic forces, and the public.

John A. Murphy, the president of Philip Morris Europe, had written and repeated in his address: 'For several years now we have been taking part in sponsoring a number of different art forms. Here I should mention, for example, the acquisition of works, grants to young artists and the presentation of outstanding works. These activities are not simply a complement to our commercial activities – they are integral to them! As business people in tune with our times, we feel the need to support the 'new' and the 'experimental' in all fields.'

What are the consequences of sponsoring this concept of art as research? The catalogue does, indeed, present each artist and their work, but there are no labels in the exhibition, and there is no system of numbering works. Instead, the works interpenetrate each other, and some artists even spread out their work over several rooms, instead of the same one. One might also ask what a stream of molten lead splattered on the wall and floor and walked all over by the crowd is meant to signify, or what mounds of fat are doing, rounding out the corners of a room.

There are no signs of the artist's individual touch in the exhibition rooms, but the artists are there all right and are playing with the objects along with the public. What is the meaning of these games, in which any good player can invent their own rules, unlike anything the artists might have thought up? What are these works that disappear under the visitors' feet or burn away in a corner? What does it mean to paint on the walls of the exhibition spaces? ... And all this is financed by Philip Morris, who think that it is serious – even as serious as the invention of a new filter tip for cigarettes.

Yes, there are indeed new relations between the artist, the dealer, and the consumer; are they viable on a larger scale?

Perhaps, this is the embryo of a new type of cultural encounter, like a new terrain for experimenting with forms and material, as well as a new relationship with the public.