

OTTO PIENE & FERNANDO ARRABAL

DANS LA LUMIERE DE LA POESIE ET DU GESTE

by

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In his work at M.I.T. Otto Piene asserted himself as artist, educator, theoretician and philosopher-aesthetic, as "front runner" of the »Sky Art« movement through his sky events and his happenings that resonated in the international art scene. There can be no doubt about the linkages between the group »Zero« and the »Sky Art« launched by Otto Piene; they are self-evident indeed. One can clearly sense in both the creative atmosphere surrounding an artist who has consciously developed and sowed in his wake and throughout his artistic career the concept of a participatory art as an indispensable and vivid art form, as the philosophy and creed of an advanced artistic universe and as a creative, vibrant, poetic and inspiring experience.

Fernando Arrabal in his ten magnificent poems, quite literally, 'plunges' deeply into the very essence of Otto Piene's work, into all the richness and exhaustive complexity of his art and the many pioneering activities that have opened new perspectives and venues for contemporary artistic pursuits. Piene, as precursor of the German avant-garde after WWII, will be remembered as one of the most prolific explorers in the field of light, as the best heir to those exploits already initiated by the Bauhaus, as one who at the same time left his indisputable imprint on many of the new experiences and innovative expressions in the arts. In the luxurious poems of Arrabal Piene is anointed the swallower of light, the explorer of abysses, of volcanoes or miniature cosmoses, thus setting forth the extent of his labyrinthine oeuvre, his explorations of the illusions of light, of fire, of the celestial infinitude, of nothingness, in order to unlock through his creative gesture the cosmic light that allows us to comprehend the unity of history, to understand its internal course as a state of mind and an act of creativity.

Arrabal is quite familiar with Piene's work with fire that he reflects on in his poems. The fire in its poetic and mythic form is luminous and consuming. In its divinatory and symbolic form it takes on a cleansing significance and evokes a spiritual meaning of the extremes between heaven and hell.

The poetic language used by Arrabal is judiciously erudite, echoing an ambitious quest, pursuing a dialogue and aspiring to a liberated gesture capable of decoding and penetrating the sculptural language of Piene that filters and tempers with innate sensitivity, thus facilitating the objective of interpreting the poet's true and immutable essence. The poet wonders about how to translate into poetic language that casual and congruous precision, the promptitude of the sculptural gesture, so wise and so rich at the same time - classicist one might say - timeless and totally liberated, profoundly subtle and of a euphonic pliancy, while always reflecting the modernity of the distinctive Arraballian imprint.

The central motif of these ten poems is the light - that which envelops the mysterious and the intimate - associated by Arrabal with Piene's color scheme in the form of a rainbow. Those brushstrokes reappear

as lightning, as the glittering fire of a burnt canvas, with a magic evoking the dream of a holy rite that turns the bodily into the spiritual, revealing illuminated peaks in an endless ocean, reflecting in the light of the glistening waves the mountains and the epileptic nature in its choreography.

The complicity between the images and words of Piene and Arrabal is self-evident. Arrabal plunges into Piene's emblematic works, while Piene translates through his sculptural gesture the language that inspires Arrabal's poetic cadence. They thus achieve a beautiful poetic-visual entente based on a shared fervor that is responsible for achieving the resounding success of these two parallel artistic experiences.

In his series of eleven lithographs that accompany the poems by Fernando Arrabal, Otto Piene unveils his *modus operandi*. The artist, through a graphic and pictorial gesture, seeks to restore the harmony in the human environment using basic forms, powerful and full of meaning, although he sometimes plays on the complexity of surrealist forms in order to come closer to the Arrabalian spirit.

Piene contemplates Arrabal's poems prior to accompanying them with his clear and simple gestures. He comes back with sparing means of form and color, utilized in just the way the Arrabalian poetic cadence requires. Neither too much nor too little, as the Protestant rigor dictates! That could indeed be one of Piene's artistic and existential creeds, a measure that the artist himself attributes to his work when he affirms: "in order to demonstrate the relevance on which one insists we do disclose the very mental processes in the development of these projects, be they installations, sky events or sculptures..." Thus they appear as a succession of intuitive and profound evidences of his creativity. The sequence exposes a state of mind in which ideas find clear and evident conceptual as well as visual realization.

Manfred Schneckeburger is correct in pointing out that Otto Piene "has transformed the classical canvas into an instrument capable of capturing, structuring and expressing in nuances an immaterial optical energy. But he was at the same time the organizer - or the magician? - of the elements, of fire, air, and light, the rationally calculating organizer who operated circumspectly and methodologically. He became the most exacting artistic strategist who managed the various cross currents involving the new processes allowing for the inclusion of light, smoke and fire in the creative process."⁵

It is exactly that creative continuity that has helped me to discover that extraordinary amplitude and unique character, through close observation throughout our "voyages", at times living in close proximity to both the protagonists of this book, and through our shared adventures beyond those voyages, continents and spaces so diverse. Otto Piene has created these lithographs by drawing directly on the plate without any intermediary, thereby exacting with great precision the cadence and chromatic choices. The luminous transparency, the equilibrium and effluence, and the ontological meditation, provide a new dimension of freshness, playfulness and plasticity, imbued with that breath of silence that the artist religiously maintains during the execution.

The mastery of the lithographic studio of Stephane Guilbaud in Paris, where the edition was printed, has contributed equally to the optimal

result. We have worked with Stephane Guilbaud for many years with exceptional results that confirm his preeminent position in that technique and art form, a position that he retains without question at both the French and European level.

In conclusion, we are fortunate to have had the partnership with Jorg W. Ludwig for this volume. He has provided the translations into English and German, not only of the poems but also of this introductory text, adding to the pleasure that this book may render through the elegant flow of his choices of language and rhythms streaming like water from a fountain. Even the language of Arrabal, who has introduced into his poetic meter an echo of antiquity, when translated here into other languages, keeps flowing like a river that harbors the hue of time. Piene's forms and Arrabal's cadenced prosody are thus kept in an irresistible vertigo.

Paris, June 15th, 2014 (v): 1st Gidouille, 141 of E'P.

1 Historian of art and architecture and Titular Member of the European Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters.

2 Letters of Pliny the Younger, Book I, VII, edited by Garnier Freres, Paris, 1920.

3 Delight Editions, 2014.

4 The Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin and the Deutsche Bank Kunsthalle in Berlin present concurrently from July 16, 2014 two exhibitions of Otto

Piene. Another Otto Piene exhibition is being shown at the Langen Foundation in the context of the Düsseldorf Quadriennale (April -August

2014). The Guggenheim Museum in New York is devoting an exhibition to the Group Zero, beginning October 10, 2014, that will travel to the

Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and to the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin from March 2015.

5 Manfred Schneckenburger, Otto Piene, Bilder und Lichtballett, published in the catalogue of Galerie Schoeller, Düsseldorf, 1987