

Interview Annick and Anton Herbert with Philippe Ungar, 2012 / 2013

L'Architecte est absent – répertoire

Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven
November 24, 1984 – January 6, 1985

Many Colored Objects Placed Side by Side – programme

Casino Luxembourg
October 29, 2000 – February 11, 2001

Public Space / Two Audiences – inventaire

Macba, Barcelona
February 8 – May 1, 2006

Inventur, Werke aus der Sammlung Herbert

Kunsthhaus Graz
June 10 – September 3, 2006

L'Architecte est absent – répertoire

Philippe Ungar: How was the first 1984 exhibition of the collection at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven conceived?

Annick Herbert: It resulted from a conversation with director Rudi Fuchs. We were on good terms with him and we visited all of his exhibitions at the Van Abbemuseum. Moreover, several of our works were kept in his museum at that time, so he knew our collection very well. When Rudi proposed the exhibition, he put forward the idea of combining our works with pieces from his collection, which would be chosen by us. It was an extraordinary experience for us. Rudi also came up with the title for the exhibition, *L'Architecte est absent*, a sentence borrowed from the Marcel Broodthaers text *Le Corbeau et le Renard*. The title very clearly underscored the importance of a neutral, anonymous exhibition space. As a subtitle he added *répertoire*, which referred to the fact that when the exhibition took place our collection was still in an early stage.

Anton Herbert: The fact that Rudi gave us the opportunity to choose works from his museum collection was unique; few museum directors would have allowed that. It led to an interesting dialogue with our own collection. We selected works by Max Beckmann, Piet Mondriaan, Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. Nonetheless, there



Rudi Fuchs, exhibition Daniel Buren.
Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1981



Jannis Kounellis, *Fuochi*, 1971 / Bruce Nauman, *One Hundred Live and Die*, 1983 / Gerhard Richter, *1024 Farben in 4 Permutationen*, 1973.
Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1984

were constraints on our freedom, and Rudi made us include his Baselitz, a work we didn't like at all. There was no use in objecting; he was adamant about Baselitz. To him, the work was essential since it represented the vision he was developing for the Van Abbe collection. It resulted in a room with our Weiner and his Baselitz, and we never spoke of it again.

PhU: Did the exhibition change something for you?

AH: The exhibition revealed us as collectors to the outside world and to ourselves as well. Before that, we weren't really aware of the fact that we were acquiring art, and nobody knew our collection. This first exhibition turned us into publicly acknowledged collectors and made the art world discover us as such.

PhU: How did the public receive the exhibition?

AH: We did not concern ourselves with how the public received it. As for Rudi, he was satisfied with the nearly 12,000 visitors who came. The change it brought for us was to see our collection for a first time presented as an entity and made us realise what we had accomplished so far.

AkH: And it made us realise that we were missing certain artists like Robert Ryman.

PhU: I guess Ryman was already part of your imaginary collection.

AH: He was indeed, but after Eindhoven we decided to buy *Agent* (1983) from the Verna Galerie in Zurich.

PhU: The exhibition in Eindhoven reflected the first part of your collection, which focuses on minimal art, conceptual art and *Arte Povera*. What is the connection between these three for you?

AH: There is no connection. All these classifications are formal. To draw a connection between Fabro and Merz, or Anselmo and Paolini, is arbitrary and artificial. It's Germano Celant who grouped them together under the *Arte Povera* label, but that is a purely academic construction. What do artists like Kosuth, Buren and Dibbets; or

Kelley, West and Kippenberger, have in common? To us, it is clear that the artists and their works speak as separate entities. The strength of the collection lies in bringing them together. The further we go on this path, the clearer it becomes that artists are strong individualities and their only connection is the collection. The collector's responsibility and freedom consists in selecting works that will spark a dialogue.

Many Colored Objects Placed Side by Side – programme

Philippe Ungar: In 2000, a second exhibition of the collection took place – this time in Casino Luxembourg. How did this exhibition come about?

Anton Herbert: Enrico Lunghi, the Casino director, had invited us several times already to come speak about the collection, but we always refused. When he asked us a third time, we suggested that an exhibition might better meet his request.

PhU: Why this suggestion?

AH: We preferred showing the collection to lecturing about it. Moreover, we liked the fact that the Casino was a place for research, a kind of laboratory, away from large prestigious exhibition venues like the Centre Pompidou or the Tate Modern. We appreciated the modesty of the place and the fact that it didn't make us feel too pressured.

PhU: The Lawrence Weiner work *Many colored objects placed side by side to form a row of many colored objects* was displayed on the Casino's facade. The phrase also functioned as the title of the exhibition. What led to that decision?

AH: The phrase sums up the very spirit of our collection. It invites contemplation on its meaning and reflects the



Anton Herbert and Enrico Lunghi with *12 Jan. 1973* from *On Kawara*. Raas Van Gaverestraat, Ghent, 2000



Façade Casino Luxembourg with the work *Many Colored Objects Placed Side by Side to Form a Row of Many Colored Objects* from Lawrence Weiner, 2000

ongoing dialogue between the artworks. To us, it also defines the way we conceive our work as collectors.

PhU: Why the subtitle *programme*?

AH: *Programme* built on the *répertoire* subtitle in Eindhoven. In Luxembourg, the collection was exhibited on its own; its coherence was evident. With Weiner's phrase for a title – *Many Colored Objects* – we were showing, 16 years later, the programme that had already been suggested in 1984. I remember in particular the entrance hall with *12 Diwans* (1993) by Franz West, which took up the entire ground floor. The first floor was for Kippenberger's *Spiderman* (1996). Mike Kelley was also in the same space with the double drawing *Trickle Down* (1986). Down in the Aquarium was a set of four major Carl Andre pieces: *Henge* (1960), *Lead Square* (1969), *Steel Lead Alloy Square* (1969) and *Voie d'Acier* (1988). At the Casino, the collection had to stand on its own, and it was then that we began to think about the foundation and the idea of opening up the collection to the public. Enrico succeeded in creating a dialogue between spaces and artworks. It was wonderful.

PhU: What was the role of the catalogue?

AH: Yves Gevaert put together the catalogue. It didn't illustrate the collection, but it offered a perspective on the collection. It constituted a work of its own.

PhU: Exhibitions have always functioned as milestones in the development of your collection. What did the exhibition in Luxemburg reveal for you?

AH: It is through the exhibitions that we discover the artworks. The Casino Luxembourg became a family reun-



October 30, 2000. Large 'family reunion' on the occasion of the exhibition *Many Colored Objects...* at the Casino Luxembourg with among others Carl Andre, Roland Augustine, Michael Baldwin, Robert Barry, Christian Bernard, Marie-Puck Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Jean-Marc Bustamante, Gisela Capitain, Herman Daled, Jan Debbaut, Luciano Fabro, Yves Gevaert, Gilbert & George, Maria Gilissen, Marian Goodman, Julian Heynen, Rafael Jablonka, Mike Kelley, Kasper König, Nicholas Logsdail, Lawrence Luhring, Enrico Lunghi, Reinhard Mucha, Suzanne Pagé, Giulio Paolini, Mel Ramsden, Tucci Russo, Wilhelm Schurmann, Thomas Schütte, Pietro Sparta, Vicente Todoli, Niele Toroni, Didier Vermeiren, Lawrence Weiner

ion for us, even though we weren't expecting that at all. My fondest memory was the shoot of the large group photo. The exhibition we did in Eindhoven in 1984 earned us our first recognition as collectors. But it was in Luxembourg that we became aware of the large family the collection and we ourselves were part of – a family of friends, each of whom contributed in their own way. Some through artworks; others through their conversations. It was exceptional. People came from New York, Madrid, London, Paris and Milan; from everywhere. It was a wonderful time.

Annick Herbert: The Casino organised a luncheon out of town, on the river Pétrusse. Everyone was laughing and joking and the afternoon ended in a cheerful disorder that the museum staff wasn't sure how to handle. We later hosted a dinner at the Hotel Cravat, and Enrico Lunghi had reserved rooms in a modest hotel where we all got together for breakfast the next day. It was incredible to see Lawrence Weiner, Giulio Paolini, Joseph Kosuth, Luciano Fabro, Richard Long, Jan Vercruyse, John Baldessari and Daniel Buren all together at the same time.

PhU: In his contribution to the Casino catalogue, Jan Debbaut quotes a 1999 interview in which you assert: "While it is being constituted, it is better for a collection to remain discreet, even hidden. The attention mustn't be distracted by the social aspect. The collector risks, unintentionally and even against his or her own convictions,

being drawn into an ill-suited, false social role." How would you describe a collector's social role?
 AH: Private collectors have no social role. A collector must simply collect; he must devote himself entirely to realising his conviction and not take into account any so-called social role. It's important to remain outside that sphere, which is wholly unrelated to the actual creation of a collection. While a collection is taking form, the col-



installation view, Casino Luxembourg, 2000, with works by Martin Kippenberger and Mike Kelley

lector's sensibilities must be directed *exclusively* at the work of collecting. It's so easy to stray from one's own rigour. What we call the collector's social role is a social label that pushes him forward and forces concessions that influence his original vision. This so-called "social role" is merely a bourgeois, conformist notion. An interesting collection brings together a selection of works by artists who hold an avant-garde view of society. This vision is often obscure, always difficult, and by definition, in opposition to the bourgeois life of ease. Art fairs, society events and jet-set get-togethers are distractions that can quickly suck someone in. The world of authentic art is difficult, *underground*. It has to be discovered. We are living in a time that does not always value research, difficulty and rigour. To stand *apart* is the defining experience of any major collection in the same way that a great artist maintains a distance to protect him or herself from the hold of the times.

PhU: Why did you decide to stop buying works for the collection in 2000?

AkH: We held that we couldn't collect works from artists that were more than one generation removed from our own. One mustn't use the same criteria beyond a certain time period, or one risks losing sight of what is essential. It was also a question of availability. This decision was made in relation to our understanding of the limits to our work as collectors. We believed that we weren't able to understand and acquire contemporary art of a generation beyond that of the one that followed our own.

AH: We started the collection with conceptual and minimalist artists like Carl Andre, Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt. We ended it with Mike Kelley, Franz West, Martin Kippenberger, Heimo Zobernig, Thomas Schütte and Jan Vercruyse. The subjectivity of our collection is clearly delineated. Between the two poles, there are major gaps we still want to fill, such as Sigmar Polke, Dan Flavin, Blinky Palermo, James Lee Byars, Robert Smithson and Claes Oldenburg.

PhU: How do you plan to go about this?

AH: That's where the archive comes in. We fill the gaps not with works, but with documents of these artists. If the opportunity presents itself to acquire documents of James Lee Byars or Blinky Palermo, or to buy a few Oldenburg or Smithson drawings, we will. It deepens the collection within the timeframe that we've assigned ourselves. In that sense, the collection will in principle never be finished, in spite of the utopia of our imaginary collection. Following that same logic, we chose a Weiner work for the title of the first exhibition that will take place at the Herbert Foundation in June 2013, *As if it Could*. The title represents how the collection and the foundation we are putting together are both beyond what we ever imagined would be possible and how, in spite of the challenges, our beliefs always pushed us to keep going. *Répertoire*, *programme*, and *inventaire* have now resulted in *As if it Could*. The foundation, in which the archive will play an important role, was established to give greater depth to the collection.

Public Space / Two Audiences – inventaire

Philippe Ungar: How did the Macba exhibition come about in 2006?

Anton Herbert: We met Manuel Borja-Villel through the CIMAM, of which we were board members as collectors. Rudi Fuchs, who was the CIMAM president at that time, introduced us to one another. In 2003, during a meeting in Barcelona, Manuel Borja-Villel suggested we do an exhibition of the collection at the Macba in Barcelona, which he oversaw. A second venue would be the Kunsthhaus in Graz. I suggested we also include the Palais des Beaux-arts in Brussels with Paul Dujardin, or the Ludwig Museum in Cologne with Kasper König. We needed three exhibition venues. Unfortunately, it didn't work out. Barcelona and Graz, however, were still in the running.

PhU: The exhibition title was drawn from Dan Graham's work – *Public Space, Two Audiences* – with *inventaire* (inventory) as a subtitle.

AH: The title referred to a major idea behind the collection: the tension between public and private. We planned



Jan Debbaut, Peter Pakesch, Kasper König and Manuel Borja-Villel. Raas Van Gaverestraat, Ghent, 2005



Manuel Borja-Villel and Anton Herbert. Macba, 2005

the Macba exhibition around this theme. Manuel Borja-Villiel wanted the museum to exhibit a large part of the collection: the minimal, the conceptual and the *Arte Povera* works, up to our latest acquisitions from Martin Kippenberger, Franz West, Mike Kelley, Thomas Schütte and Jan Vercruyse. He'd reserved the entire museum for it. We offered him 150 works. It took us 18 months to prepare the exhibition. In that sense, it functioned as a partial inventory of our collection after *répertoire* in Eindhoven and *programme* in Luxembourg. Just like with the Luxembourg catalogue, we wanted to create an accompanying publication that was more than just a mere representation of the exhibition. The *Public Space/Two Audiences* catalogue was wonderfully put together by Inge Ketelers and it documented 43 artists in the collection.



installation view, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (Macba), 2006, with works by Didier Vermeiren, Martin Kippenberger, John Baldessari, Mike Kelley and Franz West



maquette of the book *Public Space/Two Audiences – Works and documents from the Herbert Collection – Inventaire*, Raas Van Gaverestraat, Ghent, June 2005

PhU: How did you approach the public/private theme at the Macba?

AH: As soon as visitors entered the exhibition, they were welcomed by Franz West's *12 Diwans* and then by Dan Graham's *Public Spaces, Two audiences*. Macba certainly gave us cause to think about the role of private foundations in relation to public institutions. Everything

at the Barcelona exhibition was incredibly organised and structured. It functioned on a wholly different scale from the small family get-together in Luxembourg.

Annick Herbert: Barcelona was indeed a turning point. From 2000 to 2006, from Luxembourg to Barcelona; what changed was that we were no longer in control of what was happening. We went from an exhibition put together among friends to a publicised and politicised exhibition for the general public. The scale changed.

Our collection had effectively entered the public arena. AH: We felt we'd stepped onto the political and media scene. In Barcelona, our friends Lawrence Weiner and John Baldessari were standing three steps behind us, after the mayor. In Luxembourg, the artists stood in the front row next to us. We realised we'd arrived onto a scene that escaped us completely.

PhU: So, once the collection went public, a feeling of a dispossession arose, and you began thinking about establishing the foundation?

AkH: Yes, the Barcelona exhibition opened our eyes to the pressures of current tensions in contemporary art. We realised our collection had become public and that it had lost the intimate dimension with which it began.

AH: We wanted to guard ourselves against the financial and political issues that rule the art world. We became aware of the need to protect ourselves and decided to rethink our approach to being collectors.

PhU: Barcelona also marked a turning point in that you became aware of the importance of documents and archives.

AH: Yes, we realised that, in spite of the full subtitle, *works and documents from the Herbert collection*; our archive was too absent from the exhibition. We became aware of the lack of documents to illustrate the coherence of the works in the collection. It gave us the opportunity to discover that our archive was an essential part of the collection. That awareness was most certainly a revelation that arose from the Barcelona experience.

Inventur, Werke aus der Sammlung Herbert

Philippe Ungar: On June 10, 2006 the exhibition of the collection opened in Graz. You are both concerned with the neutrality of exhibition spaces, yet the Kunsthaus in Graz is anything but neutral. The presence of the architects is felt strongly there.

Anton Herbert: The Kunsthaus is indeed not a neutral architectural space. Peter Pakesch, who runs the Kunsthaus, suggested we exhibit in Graz. We were all standing on the bridge across the Kunsthaus, when he asked us, “do you accept or not?” We didn’t hesitate. Peter looked at us and said, “really?” We replied, “of course!” We had already seen Sol LeWitt’s *Wall* exhibition at the Kunsthaus in 2004. If Sol LeWitt was able to create a masterpiece in that building, how could we refuse? It is also important to note that we have always chosen our exhibition venues based on our faith in the people behind them. After the Macba, we needed a challenge. We were afraid that we had ventured too far into a traditional museum system, one that would absorb us. In Graz, we entered a world of Austrian chaos.

Annick Herbert: The Macba museum organisation was also hierarchical. Making changes to something required a lot of signatures. Graz, on the other hand, was run by a small, highly creative team. Every morning, everyone could come with new suggestions or ideas. Making changes and trying out things was easy. The Macba exhibition was a museum exhibition. Graz was more creative, more in the Luxembourg spirit. There was that same familial and effervescent mood.



billboard in the streets of Graz, 2006

AH: Apart from the Kunsthaus’ strong architectural statement, the actual interior exhibition spaces are entirely open. The two levels are accessible by escalator, are without interior partitions and surrounded by curved walls. Peter suggested we ask the artist Heimo Zobernig to structure the exhibition. He’s the one who came up with



installation view, Kunsthaus Graz, 2006. Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1984 / Bruce Nauman, *Sex and Death*, 1985

very interesting spatial solutions and who had the works hung on temporary chipboard walls. It resulted in a surprisingly creative exhibition, completely different from the one in Barcelona. Only two-thirds of the Macba selection was presented in Graz. We placed Donald Judd next to Franz West, Mike Kelley and Thomas Schütte. The result was an extraordinary exhibition that showed the power of the works in our collection and the way they can adapt to different settings. To us, it raised the notion of neutrality to a whole other level.