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Peter Soriano's New Direction(s), Galerie Jean Fournier

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Galerie | Jean Fournier

By Raphael Rubinstein – For anyone who has been following Peter Soriano's work since he began showing regularly in the mid 1990s (most frequently in New York and Paris), the recent work in this exhibition will probably come as a substantial surprise. Gone, at least for the moment, is the type of work that Soriano is best known for: colorful biomorphic sculptures made of polyester resin that explore a kind of pop abstraction via eccentric shapes that seem part human body, part tool, part toy, and often flirt with modularity. It was this kind of sculpture that Soriano was working on when he began a 6-month residency at the Atelier Calder in Tourraine, France, in 2004. At a certain point, as the artist tells it, he ran short of funds for the fabrication of large cast-resin sculptures and began experimenting with materials he found close at hand. Embracing contingency, Soriano turned in a different direction. Some of the resulting sculptures were hybrids of old and new, combining readymade materials and (small) cast-resin elements, but eventually recognizing the alterity of his emerging body of work, he eliminated all traces of his former practice.

The works in "The Other Side" rely on a constant set of materials: aluminum tubing (either 1/2 inch or 1 1/2 inch in diameter), steel cable and spray paint. Also consistent is a relationship between sculpture and wall. Actually, the wall is so necessary to these works that it could be included in the list of materials. But if the presence of a wall is constant, it needn't be the same wall. Each time one of these arrangements of metal pipes, steel cable and spray-painted lines and symbols is installed, it is (obviously) connected to a different wall than previously. Depending on the place, ceiling heights change, as do trim, materials (drywall, brick, plaster, etc), corners, distance from doors and windows, etc. Thus, even though the actual hardware is unchanged, a work installed in Soriano's Brooklyn studio is not identical to the same work shown at Lennon Weinberg Gallery in Chelsea, nor at Jean Fournier in Paris. But, as the artist makes clear, these are not site-specific installations. One of the challenges that Soriano has encountered (and brilliantly resolved) is how to make work that is highly dependent on the physical conditions of its space without letting it be determined by those conditions. He has also confronted another question: what happens if the work is installed by someone other than the artist? The presence of these particular challenges is a sign that Soriano's work, once emphatically corporeal, has turned toward the conceptual.

Since the advent of Conceptual art we have known that a set of instructions for making a work of art can, to all intents and purposes, be itself the work of art. Soriano engages the instructional from several angles. Lately, he has begun to write out directions for how his sculptures should be installed. As viewers will immediately notice, there are some variables in each piece. In addition to the fact that the walls of different exhibition spaces are configured differently, the application of the spray paint (done with a can) onto the walls is somewhat loose. It is this issue that the artist addresses in a brief text titled "General Characteristics of Spray Cans and Colors." While offering suggestions to installers such as "Do not stop in the middle of a stroke," he also acknowledges—and accepts—that the marks made by someone else will be different from his, if only because they are not left-handed like himself. He then says something very interesting: "The reason in part I use spray paint is that it has a way of enlarging. . . individuality. I make these marks with the same economy, urgency and clarity as the spray marks one sees on the street made so un-selfconsciously by utility workers."

Indeed, when I first saw these works one of the associations that came quickly to my mind was precisely those spray-painted arrows and words one sees everywhere on the streets and sidewalks in New York, especially these days when the city is in the midst of a building boom. I'm not so sure about the "clarity" of Con Ed street markings however; many of them have an almost hieroglyphic impenetrability, at least to the casual passerby. By contrast, Soriano's marks are easily readable, though not without their own ambiguities. By my count, he uses nine basic signs: arrows, dots, circles, Xs, zigzag cancellation marks, squares or rectangles, brackets, horizontal lines closed off by short verticals on either end (a kind of elongated uppercase H), and the sideways Ts. These can be combined to create a larger graphic lexicon.

Some of the signs seem easy to understand. In *Other Side 13 (Ewil)*, a spray-painted yellow arrow points up from a length of aluminum tubing that projects out from low on a wall. The steel cable stretches from the end of the tube to a point several feet above on the same wall. Thus, the arrow seems to indicate the direction that the cable should take to reach its anchor. But the arrow does not point exactly to the where the cable is anchored. The initial impression of absolute clarity gives way to a realization that we don't really know the sequence of things. Which came first: Tube? Anchor? Arrow? Is the arrow a necessary instruction or a visual (or philosophical) flourish? Another piece, *Other Side 14 (Igny)*, seems less ambiguous. Two cables stretch from the end of a tube to the wall. The shorter one terminates at a green spray-painted X; the other cable (about twice as long) ends at a blue X. Overlaying the green X is a gray zigzag. In the absence of a documentary video, we can reconstruct a scenario about the making the work: first the tube is attached to the wall, then the cable is extended to the green X, which the artist subsequently real-izes is not where he wants it to go to, so he cancels out the green X and paints another X (blue), to which the second cable is extended. *Other Side 18 (Izix)* offers a variation on this with the addition of a right-angle double tube, from which two cables lead in different directions. The terminus of one is a blue dot partially canceled out with a gray zigzag, while the other ends at a blue X. While the sculptures are based on quick sketches that determine the length of the tubing and the location of the first marks, Soriano also uses the wall as a sketchbook, filling it up with a full-scale chronicle of his creative process.

In other works the semiotics become trickier. In *Other Side 17 (Iona)*, seven cables extend from a single length of aluminum pipe. Each cable ends at a differently colored painted dot, and each of these dots is embellished with one or more different kinds of

marks. Further complicating things, an arcing double-pointed arrow links two of the dots (one of which is circled, the other cancelled out). The ensemble resembles a proliferation of contra-dictory traffic signs that leave the driver in confusion, or perhaps one of Lacan's perversely unhelpful diagrams. There's more than a hint of comedy in Soriano's work, which at times seem to satirize its own clarity.

The spray-painted arrows, dots and cancelings establish a kind of materialist unveiling of how the work came to be. This is, of course, an established modernist device, from the draft and note-laden texts of Francis Ponge to the work of any number of gestural painters. He does not simply include traces of his process in the completed work—the process is the work, its subject, its content, its identity. The work shows us how it was made, and it is also nothing else than the showing of that making.

In the case of Conceptual artists such as Sol LeWitt, the work often exists as a set of instructions but the visual artefact that is realized according to these instructions does not, itself, look instructional. LeWitt's wall drawings do not include the instructions used to make them (though these are sometimes written out on the wall nearby). Soriano's works are thus closer to Mel Bochner's wall drawings that consist of measurements of the walls they span. In both Bochner and Soriano there is a fascination with tautology and an embrace of utilitarian means. But Soriano's works are much messier than Bochner's. When Soriano begins a new work he doesn't know how it will look, where it will go; his process is a process of improvisation. Ultimately he is more involved with the medium of painting than with Conceptual art.

On one level, the components of these works seem to reject any esthetic claims. They are matter-of-fact, executed quickly, with just sufficient means to get the job done. What this tells us is that Soriano is more concerned with relations than with objects; with (as the show's title has it) how one gets from this side to the other side. In these works every element is always pointing toward another element; every tube, every cable, every sign is dependent and interconnected. (The arrow is, of course, the epitome of such pointing; it grabs our attention only to redirect it elsewhere—it is always about a "not here.") Like the "primary words" identified by philosopher Martin Buber the components of these works suggest relationships rather than signify things. Soriano's visual circuitry is also part of what puts these constructions into the realm of painting.

I just said that the elements make no esthetic claims, but this isn't really true. Yes, they are staunchly informational; yes, they use utilitarian means; yes, the artist says they can be executed by anybody—and yet these spray-painted signs and aluminum hardware are filled with echoes of other works of art. The impulsive-looking Xs evoke the gritty mark-making of Antoni Tapies, while also echoing Malcolm Morley's self-cancelling X on his photorealist picture of a South African racetrack; at times the emblematic signs are reminiscent of the flashing neon graphics in Godard's 1960s films; the floating arrows recall motifs in Jannis Kounellis's early paintings; the use of spray paint brings to mind 1970s abstractions by Dan Christensen and Michael Venezia; the employment of off-hand-looking, self-referential marks relates to the conceptual abstractions of Martin Barre; the taut cables might suggest Fred Sandback's string sculptures; the hardware Cady Noland's barrier installations; the bracket signs Lawrence Weiner's graphic use of parentheses. (Speaking of parentheses, the mysterious words in Soriano's titles refer to the RER trains that serve the suburbs of Paris.)

Soriano brings together the mediums of painting and sculpture reduced to their ontological essentials: the spray-painted signs are coded, colored marks on flat surfaces;

the cables and tubes involve positioning objects in three-dimensional space. Then he intertwines them. In a painting, we ask: why is that shape or mark here rather than over there? While in sculpture, we know that a particular element has to be where it is so that the entire structure doesn't collapse. In painting, notions of weight and tension are metaphorical, while in sculpture they are literal. Soriano has yoked together these two types of functions in a play of interdependence. The tubes and cables are present to indicate where the painted marks should go; the painted forms exist to determine the arrangement of the hardware.

In recent years, there have been quite a few artists who have pursued some hybrid practice that would draw equally from painting and sculpture (among Americans, one thinks, for instance, of Jessica Stockholder and James Hyde). What marks Peter Soriano's investigations into the intersection of these two mediums is his radical provisionality. With their visible revisions, bold impermanence and quotidian materials, they come across as three-dimensional sketches toward a possible work—as if the artist didn't want his imagination (or his viewers) to be dragged down by the imposition of a finished masterpiece. They leave open the possibility of other configurations, laying bare the artist's doubts and self-disagreements. Appropriately, they are in place only for the time being, very much like those utility-worker street markings that helped inspire them; and maybe also like them they point to an invisible infrastructure (in this case mental). As provisional configurations, these are not objects with fixed limits and a stable existence. Instead, think of them as tools for consciousness, adaptable to changing circumstances and easily dismantled once their current project is accomplished.

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