

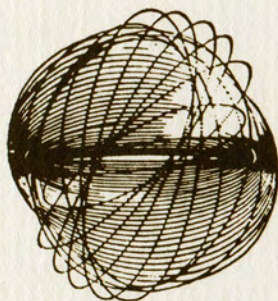
C A T A L O G U E

ROBERT OWEN

TRACE OF A SILENT BELL

TEXT

PAUL GUERIN



1988 - 1989

INSTALLATION



ROBERT OWEN

TEXT
PAUL GUERIN

PALAIS DU RHIN

*22 October - 22 November 1988
Strasbourg*

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CITY GALLERY

*4 October - 4 November 1989
Melbourne*



THE SILENT JOURNEY OF ART

“Le present, la circonstance.”

Georges Braque, *Le jour et la nuit*, 1952.

ISEE, I AM SILENCED, is the title of one of the works realised and exhibited by the Australian artist Robert Owen during his stay in Strasbourg. These words also express accurately the experience of many spectators, whether reticent, surprised, fascinated or enthusiastic, in response to some of his works.

In combining sight and silence, the art of Robert Owen manifests the artist's ability to find, almost in a musical sense, the right tonality, as he derives from a fortuitous handicap (the fact that he cannot speak or understand the French language) the power to create works which test the reality and the limits of the “internationality” of contemporary art.

The extraordinary freedom of movement enjoyed by both artists and art works today – a result of sophisticated cultural and market mechanisms, particularly in the area of catalogue and magazine publishing – has perhaps contributed to making artistic creation more intelligible. Through a complex mixture of *influences* – enrichment, quotations and some disconcerting formal coincidences between the works of artists unknown to each other and separated by space and time – a slow fusion of various singular inventions has been produced, resulting in a strange unity that no longer fits within the





chronological framework of successive styles or conflicting tendencies – nor constitutes an anthology of astounding discoveries. Such unity may seem to imply a transnational availability of forms and concepts and appear to revive the pervasive assumption of the reality of a universal language of art – a common vocabulary and grammar of forms which would give the same value to the transgression as to the observance of the rules and put neologism or lapsus on the same level as the “proper usage.”

However, the attentive and creative silence of Robert Owen confronts this danger of the neutralisation of an art conceived as a “language loaded with references” through his determination never to stifle the truth of his experience – and through the very personal mixture of culture, humour and tenacity he applies to realising the specific constraints of his own situation as a cultural alien.

Trace of a silent bell #2 expands the map of Strasbourg’s historical centre to the dimensions of a vast room. The dense labyrinth of the old inner city becomes a wide and empty grey space, punctuated only by an archipelago of plaques, cut out of black timber, which almost reduce the fervent elevation of the many churches of the city into souvenir shadows, while further veins and ramifications create a fluid network – alive and vibrant as the 14 crimson hearts, inlaid with gold crosses, of the monuments themselves.

The transparency of the concept does not disguise its disconcerting presence, which is effected by the reversal of one’s usual relation to a map. Normally intended to facilitate access to a territory, the map, as amplified by





Owen, creates a forbidding space one hesitates to enter – where the body feels as incongruous, disproportionate and literally *displaced* as the eye that *looks, in silence*, from the opposite wall.

Beyond its concept, the work betrays some further realities that might remain unnoticed by anyone who believes that the “internationalisation” of art and criticism have successfully abolished the tyranny of distance. Owen’s achievement is to have succeeded in reversing, to his own advantage, the various difficulties the traveller experiences in foreign lands by engendering a sense of alienation in his Strasbourg viewers.

Owen’s works communicate in much the same way as a travel diary, in which he notes his particular circumstances – the atmosphere of a certain place, the fluctuations of his own moods – whatever strikes him as remarkable from the point of view of an outsider, locked up in the silence imposed by his choice of artistic creation as rationale for his journey.

The title of another of Owen’s works presented in Strasbourg, *Trace of a silent bell #2 – Saturn in transit*, echoes the title of a group exhibition¹ presented in a neighbouring museum, and elevates, with delicate irony, some footballs covered in gold leaf, lead and blue pigment. The footballs become, in the hands of Owen, representations of the planets, which once used to regulate time – before the calendar became merely a chronology of sporting events.

But just as one can no more reduce a journey to the recounting of some anecdotes, Owen’s installation resists the total identification and interpreta-

tion of its elements. A journey is above all an experience, in the full meaning of the term, and it is in the experience rather than the description that its real truth lies. A scientific hypothesis requires an experiment – the *raison d’être* of Owen’s own experiment is not to be found in the appeal his work makes to the eye – however strange and fascinating that may be – but in its capacity to facilitate the appearance of some phenomenon. In the same way, an artistic installation, beyond the plastic qualities of its elements² (their artistic, biographical or symbolic significance), creates a space and a game in which the artist alternately appears and disappears, and in which the spectator is absorbed or may refuse to enter.

The recurrence, from one room to the next, of a certain number of formal traits (circles, spheres, piles of pigment or glass, together with his paradoxical treatment of the ground surface), and his distinctive palette of colours (blue, gold, bright red and metallic greys), suggest the idea of a personal blazon, unifying what at first appear to be utterly dissimilar works. For instance, the elaborate footballs of *Saturn in transit* form a strange constellation above the Strasbourg of *Trace of a silent bell #2*, under the gaze of the silent eye, although the works remain totally distinct in structure and conception. Such correlations are typical of Owen’s art, as he “writes” – with the same tonal variety Lawrence Sterne displays in *The Sentimental Voyage* – the journal of his experiences abroad.

Few pieces are able to lead the spectator to the threshold of a *contented* silence as successfully as did *Trace of a silent bell*. In a narrow room with high



ceiling and white walls, a brass egg and a tibetan bowl filled with ink are placed along the axis of the room, either side of a circle of luminescent glass surrounded by a delicate rim of blue light.

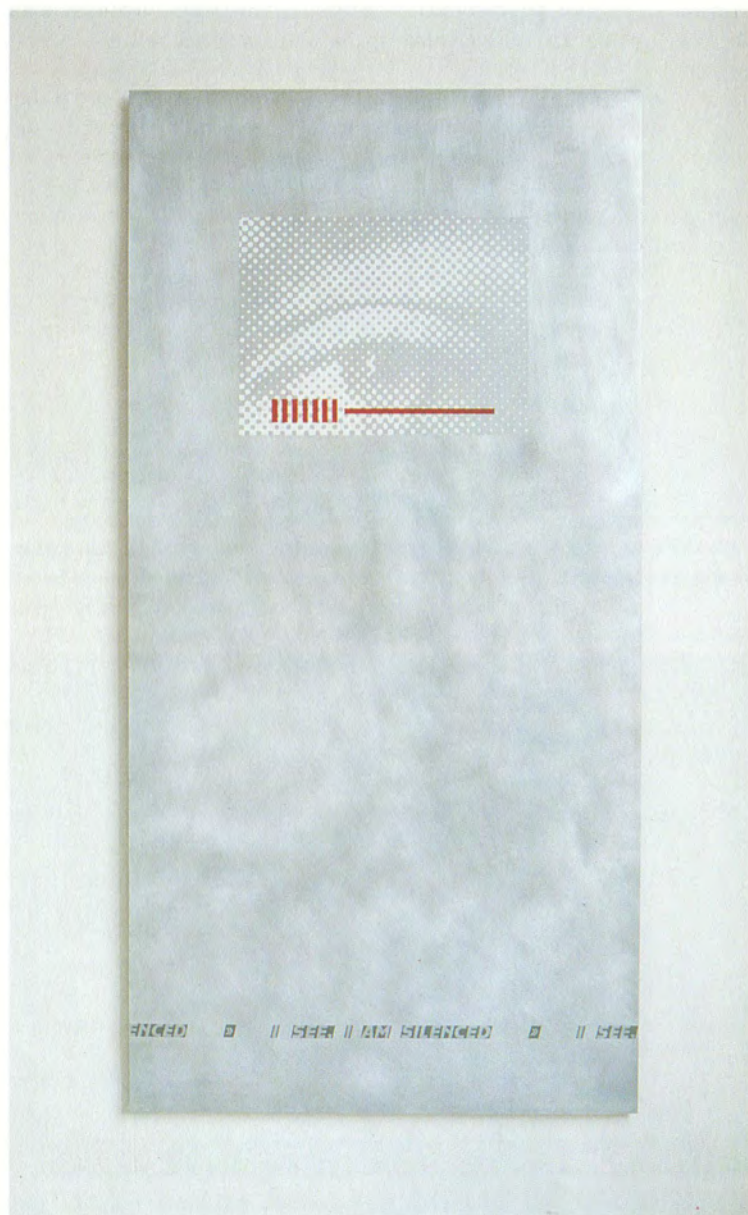
This work, which brings together Eastern and Western elements and experiences, is both rich and meditative. It presents an image of the world economy, in a distorted reflection of the space, on the surface of a precious object. It captures, in a bowl of resonant metal, the longing for an impossible spoken word, and, in the ink, the virtuality of written characters. It also offers, in a pulverised circle of light which seems to burst out of the ground and spray the walls with its bright dust, a fragile miracle, and an example of the power of art to master, more discreetly, but also more humanely than industry or war, the resources of modern technology.

George Alexander has written of Owen's art:

He has understood the major historical events of this century – like the de facto transfer of the basis of art from matter to understanding, craft to concept, signified to signifier. At the same time he is deeply entangled in the experience of materials and the materiality of experience: its colours, its textures, its overlay of times, (ecstatic and historical), its labyrinths, its losses and enigmas.

By insisting upon its “internationality”, contemporary art seems to have made it necessary, at least for some time now, to borrow terms from philosophy and science to deal with the new forms created and with their relationship with the world. By contrast Paul Valéry has described poetry as a





sustained hesitation between sound and sense. Owen's installations, with their elusive titles and often complex spatial plays, manage, with rare power, to establish just such a poetic interplay between presence and significance. It could well be that pleasure and intelligibility are born together on this fragile border. As viewers we remain suspended, each time anew, on the threshold of his works – questioned here by the image of a city presented as desert, grey like an incoming storm, fascinated there by a brightness flowing from a hidden source, and captivated by the gravity of these simple forms from which life and light are born.

In a not so distant past, crossing frontiers often led to situations which could be summed up in one brutal formula; *Veni, vidi, vici*. With Robert Owen we discover the discriminating generosity of an art which whispers; *I see, I am silenced, I create*.

Paul Guerin

NOVEMBER 1988

1. *Saturne en Europe, Regard sur en modernité*. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Ancienne Douane and Musée de L'Oeuvre Notre-Dame. 17 December – 4 December 1988. Work and installations by Keifer, Boltanski, G. Merz, Beuys, Kounellis, Sarkis, Collin-Thiebaut, Huber, Parmiggiani, Finlay and Broodthaers.

2. The disappointment experienced by those who only give a rapid and impatient look at this type of work is a perfect illustration of the oriental proverb: *When the finger points to the moon, the fool looks at the finger...*

ROBERT OWEN

1937, Sydney

Lives in Melbourne

Monograph: *Tranists*

Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery 1988

CATALOGUE

PAGE 3: *Trace of a Silent Bell #3*

acrylic, wood and pigment

6000 x 9000 overall

PAGE 4: Detail

Tibetan bowl, ink, jasmine oil

PAGE 5: *Trace of a Silent Bell*

Tibetan bowl, ink, jasmine oil, glass bronze egg and light

3000 x 5000 x 2000

PAGES 6–7: *Trace of a Silent Bell #2*

proposal for 'Saturn in Europe'

PAGE 8: Detail

steel, football, gold leaf

230 x 300 x 350

PAGE 9: *Trace of a Silent Bell #2 (Saturn in Transit)*

steel, football, acrylic, lead and gold leaf

230 x 300 x 350 x 1200 overall

PAGE 10: *I see, I am silenced*

silkscreen on zinc

200 x 100

NOT ILLUSTRATED:

Seeds of destruction

steel, wood and glass crystals

20 x 102 x 117

CONCEPTION

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